On Girls, Guys, and Squad Cars

by QuillHeart

Summary

Lupin, Zenigata, and a skeleton crew of cops are snowed in at the ER over Christmas, and it's bringing back a lot of bad memories for everyone. Thanks to the failed heist that nearly got Lupin killed and a redhead from Zenigata's past, it's also turning into a game of Clue—except, the murder hasn't quite happened yet. Zenigata might be able to clear Lupin of a terrorist bombing and get them out alive, but only if the mystery of the thief's dramatic flashbacks (and his crime) can be solved in time. Unfortunately, Lupin isn't making it easy....

Notes

Tiny Fandom is Tiny, but I'm happy to be a part. This is my first Lupin fic, and also the first thing I've ever successfully written in first-person, oddly enough. O.o; Who knew?

Despite the summary, the chapters go between both Zenigata and Lupin's pov. The first is from Zenigata's.

I set out to write fluff. The story had other ideas.
Addition and Subtraction

We had him. We goddamn had him. I wanted to scream in glee. And I did, a few times, through the megaphone, and a cheer went up from the boys in blue that weren’t off running down diversions and Jigen. The energy of my fellow law enforcement men and women was incredible, and the media too; for once, I felt the whole world knew I was the hero in this escapade.

As I ducked into the squad car and resolutely slammed the door—that thick, reassuring clunk far too cathartic—I wondered if this was what it was like to be the quarterback on a Superbowl team. The whole world cheering with me, hailing down shouts of congratulations and screams of ‘go go go’ while the flash of paparazzi cameras lit up the night like a sea of stars.

That’s what the helicopter blades had felt like, while I was running across that rooftop—the pulse of a crowd’s heartbeat, as it waited to see if the runner could catch the hailmary pass.

I had been the runner then; and Lupin, the flying ball, launched to great heights, great hopes. He was certainly fast enough. If I could just intercept him and hold him close long enough, the game would be won for all to see....

But when that bomb had gone off, not only had the pass been dropped, it had disappeared in a gulf of dragon flame that lit up the night.

I buckled the seatbelt, sighed the ragged edges of adrenaline out and lit a cigarette. I was used to this sort of thrill-shock, but the shakes were worse these days in their aftermath. Age was catching up with me, it seemed; I had to admit, the skin on the back of my hands was a little thinner than it had been in years past. Today, though, the issue of concern was more the fresh burns and the melted hair on the back of them.

The engine thrummed to life; a local crew made up my ferry men tonight. Head on the back of the seat, I chanced a look out the window—snow, gently falling, dyed blue in the French street lights. A forest of bodies flanking the car, doing damage control, their backs wrapped in shadow. Beyond them, everything disappeared into black, as if it didn’t exist at all—save for flicker of the fire. A raging inferno was burning a medieval townhome, eating the guts that hadn’t already collapsed. There was no saving the building; all that remained at this point was a few pillars and slabs and a two-story pile of rubble where a five-story building should have been. Its ominous, looming skeleton disappeared in and out of thick black smoke while eruptions of flame burned up the sides of its neighbors, occasionally illuminating the police. To the side, firefighters were rushing in.

With a grunt, I tipped my hat down and tapped on the plexiglass. In a moment, we were off.

There was a beautiful cigar and bottle of whiskey waiting for me back in the chief’s office, but that would have to wait. Before or after the paperwork, though, that was the big question; only the mood of the office would dictate that, and this wouldn’t help. Collateral damage...how many lives had this cost? How many was it going to cost, before the fire was out? I would have stayed to assist —this kind of fire could easily take over the entire neighborhood—but I had to admit that I was more useful elsewhere.

_Dammit, Lupin...._

Still, this was years of work coming together. _Years._ Tonight and well into next week, the ones that were left were going to celebrate like there was no tomorrow. What a Christmas present, indeed.
I crossed my arms as the flash of press cameras went by; no doubt more than a few of them would catch a scowl instead of the smile they were hoping for.

As we left the alley and got onto the road, I acknowledged that this was where the truly hard part began. Lupin was the slipperiest cat alive, and worse, there was never any shortage of people around that wouldn’t have minded relieving some frustration on him, deserved or simply for prestige. Lupin himself rarely helped such matters, what with his penchant for poking tigers.

He could take some bruising, I assumed—he wasn’t that prissy of a man, despite the Italian shoes—but there were probably broken bones in his future that I would prefer to protect him from for as long as I could, on my honor in the job.

Not to mention the fact that Jigen was still out there. Assuming he wasn’t caught tonight, and we could keep the pressure on enough to keep him on the run, he’d be forced to duck into a safe house and wait out a few days. However, while Jigen was not the flashy type, he was dependable to a fault, and a mob hitman too. He knew how to hide in the truest sense of the game and also how to show up out of nowhere as a one-man death squad. Finding him before he left town or came for us had to be my focus once Lupin was processed.

There was every chance he could reappear as we drove: in a helicopter and a sniper rifle if we took the freeway, or a motorcycle and a magnum if we went through the streets. So despite the reenforced steel carriage and bulletproof glass, I was not easy, not by a long shot. It wasn’t Jigen’s style, instant-reply ambushes, but still, it was Lupin’s, and Jigen worked for Lupin. He was an extremely dangerous individual, and seemed to lose some balance whenever he and Lupin were apart. However, he also had standing orders from Lupin not to kill me—I assumed that was still in place, anyway—so putting the thief and me together in close quarters was actually our best defense at the moment against Jigen’s available tactics.

It was imperative to catch Lupin’s accomplices, though; no doubt he had some sort of contingency plan left with them for every prison in the world, should he end up in it. And it probably involved the first few days there, or transfers, which would be soon to come; Interpol had some impressive prison facilities attached, particularly to avoid outside contact, but this was Lupin’s gang we were talking about... they took down security systems for fun.

It was as I was mulling this over that we reached the halfway mark of the journey. The main drag of the seaside town was empty, thanks to the time of night and the police barricades further afield, but the lights of the town glittered on above us, warm and—for once—with all their treasures safe.

Our car’s route didn’t involve waiting for traffic lights, as it made us sitting ducks, but we also didn’t have the sirens on—just the flashers, though at this time of night it was hardly necessary. The moon was out over the water, and now, away from that hellish fire, what could be seen out the far passenger window was the heavy darkness of water stretching out to the horizon, topped by streaks of silver repeating endlessly into the distance, like a runway for the nearly full moon setting above. It seemed the snow hadn’t quite reached the sea yet, or perhaps was being held back by it—the air currents from the water forcing it to hover right at the edge of land and sea. It was an odd thing: Snow, graceful and soap-sud like, on one side of the car, with a clear moon and a glittering sea on the other.

A shift of clothing, and moan from the seat beside me.

The slender stick of a man was leaning against the side of the other door, tucked in via seatbelt, cuff, and chain. He moaned something about “everything hurts” in two different languages at once, dipping his head with a heavy groan that was rife with mental confusion—it had that unusual undulating quality that indicated it wasn’t a fully conscious noise.
Then, suddenly, my prisoner popped wide awake and promptly banged his head on the doorframe.

“Careful now,” I said around my cigarette, taking it out of my mouth for clarity’s sake. When Lupin started to struggle blindly, I added, “’S just a seatbelt, take it easy, you’re not gonna die.”

As I continued to expound upon the subject in calm, dry tones, the man’s hummingbird breathing slowed; his wild black eyes regained some composure, though everything else was still a mess.

“Oh!” he acknowledged abruptly. And then: “...Oh.”

There was a definite air of excitement to the first, and gloom to the second.

It was truly amazing that this man was a successful confidence artist when he needed to be; he couldn’t possibly have a poker face of any worth at all.

A pause came next in the Lupin’s Facial Expression Show, in which he was totally still and his eyes glazed over—either about to pass out or thinking very hard about something. But then, a conclusion apparently arrived at, he blinked hard and started looking around the squad car again, rather confused. “What happ—AHG?”

It wasn’t seeing me that caused the strangled cry of alarm, or suddenly realizing I was even there for the first time; it was how I was sitting, or rather, what I was holding as I did so.

I had my standard-issue handgun casually tucked under my folded arms, finger loosely and pleasantly resting on the side of the trigger casing. The barrel pointed directly at the thick part of his gut.

I followed his eyes down to the piece with a musing hum, then shrugged. “Good to see you know what this is for. You took a nasty tumble; wasn’t sure you were gonna remember me or anything else when you woke up.”

“But a silencer, really?” Lupin gulped. Looked like he still had his words all right—though his voice was tight and rasping.

“Doesn’t burn me if I have to use it, that way.” I took a drag on the cigarette, and then flipped him a coy grin. “Besides, it would be so loud, in a cramped little space like this. And so much less splatter this way....”

I smirked, and Lupin, looking a little sick, just rolled his eyes with a sigh that sounded like he wanted everything to disappear. He stared at his feet with a groan.

The thief was not, by any stretch of the imagination, in the best shape—nor were his clothes. The right half of his jacked was burned to a ragged cinder, and his clean white shirt had turned half black. His trousers were covered in mud where they weren’t scraped and showing gashes in his legs. However, that paled compared to the amount of dust that was all over him; he looked more like an earthquake building-collapse victim than anything else. His hair, too, was covered in grey powder in a tangle between a Jew fro and the worst hat-head ever and just ended up looking tumble-weed esque. Still, his youthful face shone through, and all the streaks of dried blood, soot, and concrete dust caked on his cheeks just made his dark eyes—the only clean bit of his face—shine that much more vividly.

But he did not look at me; no doubt, he was either thinking over his life choices or how to escape to get them back. I left him to it; he wasn’t going anywhere.

It was as I was considering the poor shmuck who had to clean out the squad car’s interior after this ride that Lupin seemed to come out of his stupor a little more and notice his restraints for the first
time; he twisted his wrists and inspected the chains.

It was so easy to tell that he was intelligent; even with the fog of head trauma around the edges of his focus, the gears were visibly whirling as he looked the setup over in the streaking blue lamplights. The thief had heavy-duty shackles on his wrists like out of the middle ages, and twenty-pound chain between them that linked to a bolt in the roof of the car. After the frown of concentration ended, Lupin fingered the bolt with a long arm and murmured, “Damn, what do you people do if one of these cars goes in the water? Your prisoners would die.”

“I think that’s the point, really,” I returned, deadpan. Lupin raised an eyebrow at me, but was smirking queerly anyway—probably his defensive reaction to looking sick again, when he realized I wasn’t going to play his game.

“I see,” the man managed softly, “little less money, little more paperwork. It evens out, huh?” He rubbed his head—or tried to, at least, before discovering he had to maneuver oddly to get it done. For a while after the clink of the chains turned into a gentle sway with the motion of the car, the thief just left his head between his knees.

Though I watched his hands carefully, it seemed he was just sitting there with his eyes closed. He was probably in pain; already I could see a deep bruise forming on the back of his neck in a rather suspicious shape.

The blue lights of the city went by, stroking the four of us in and out of darkness as it infiltrated the windows. The sea outside was ever present, along with the hum of the road. I checked the time; only a few more minutes to our destination. Unfortunately, this town was fairly big, and its roads, while mostly deserted, were far from direct.

“God, my head hurts,” came the hiss from the other side of the car. For the first time, his voice was sharp; he finally sounded like he was talking to me, rather than to himself. It seemed he was coming around fully. “What happened?”

“No matter how much you bitch, I’m not letting you out of those cuffs,” I threw back, feigning disinterest. Still, after a sidelong glance, I offered, “What do you remember?”

“You’re a real piece of work...” Lupin grumbled half-heartedly, opening his eye a crack to glare.

“Yeah, yeah,” I rolled my eyes and settled in. If he was well enough to complain, he was well enough to be interrogated. “Well?”

His mouth twisted down in thought and his eyes closed again. I thought he was going to whine, but instead, he simply took a deep breath, massaging his browline with a heavy hand. “Running...I think. Yeah, and some lights...the helicopter lights. Running. That’s about it.”

Lupin paused at that, frowning even though his eyes were still closed. It was mostly lost in the whine of the road, but his breath sounded a little off; sharpening my ears, I could tell it was shallow, and rasped a bit. He winced every time he inhaled fully, and his right hand pressed into one spot in his head decidedly. His arms were held in tight against his body too, like he wanted to hold that too, though the cuffs didn’t allow it. “Did I fall or something?”

I shrugged and kicked back. I’d been chasing after him on the flat roof top of that townhome-turned-apartment building, and just as Lupin, ahead of me, was about to jump to another—

“You fucked up, that’s what.”

That eye reappeared, more angry this time. It matched how I felt, so I had absolutely no sympathy
for it.

“One of your bombs blew a little too close and too soon, far as I can tell. Whole roof collapsed, you
got caught up in the blast and fell right off the damn path.” I glanced out the window, hand over
my mouth. “Almost hung yourself too, you little shit.”

“What?” Lupin hissed incredulously. “How?” His hands slid off his head and touched at his throat
awkwardly when the last word cracked; he swallowed hard, and seemed to realize for the first time
that something there was off.

Slowly, I came to side-eye him. “Telephone wires and attic junk.”

I’d always wondered what it would look like when Lupin’s luck ran out. I had assumed it would
look like a man in an expensive sport coat lying face-down eating pavement and spitting insults
with a black eye, with me or someone else zealously handcuffing him. Or maybe—maybe—a
jealous lover with a vial of poison or a shotgun.

Instead, it had been scary as shit, watching a man’s black silhouette be illuminated, and then
swallowed up by, the hellish light of a raging fireball. And then, when it had passed, there being
nothing left—no building, no man. Just my outstretched hand, and a space where a man had been.
And the look in his eye at it happened....

But outside my thoughts, my prisoner stared at me, smudged and dirtied face scrunched up in

The image flashed through my mind: throwing myself forward through the flames, stumbling back
at the suddenly-appearing edge of the remaining structure; trying to stay upright as three other
bombs went off in a quick succession. The heat and light roaring upward, stealing my breath.
Looking down and seeing—

It was my turn to scrunch up in distaste. “You could have picked a better place to die.”

The whistle of the road hummed in the space between us, filling the car, and slowly absorbed the
sound of the conflagration in my mind. The blue lights of the road strobed over us, alternating
between cloying black and attentive blue.

Lupin laugh’s cut through the air.

I whipped my gaze over to him, but under the scrutiny, he just laughed harder, eyes a little
apologetic. “You have to admit pops, it’s pretty good.”

He hugged his sides—as much as he could with the cuffs, anyway—and laughed in between hisses
From telephone wire.”

“Your unlucky days are shit,” I added, to push aside the rising feeling of frustration. By now, the
back of the car was drowned out in the sound of the prisoner laughing, and the deputy in the front
passenger seat gave us a queer look over his shoulder. Looking at Lupin like that—covered in
white like a bad impression of a ghost, cut and singed and burned, and still a free spirit laughing
uncontrollably—I had to admit the ludicrousness of it all, as well as the futility of trying to control
him.

Gently, I maneuvered my handgun between my knees so that I wouldn’t accidentally fire it if ended
up chuckling too. A grin was growing at the side of my mouth, though I hated myself for it.
Lupin’s ridiculous laugh was infectious. It just was.

“TV cameras caught it all too,” I continued wryly, trying for cruelty to stamp down the mirth. “There’s gonna be pictures of you ‘hanging’ for years. Think we might put it on the wall.”

“Oh, shit, really?” But Lupin’s face just split into a grin in between the laughs, and his giggle pitched higher. “Oh God, that’s good. Jigen’s never going to let me live this down. Ever.” He started swearing jovially in different languages, several of which I was unfamiliar with. “I’m gonna need to buy the poor guy some roses, Jesus, I must have scared him half to death!”

Not that the man would have been able to see through all the smoke and flame, though Lupin clearly didn’t remember it, or he wouldn’t be laughing. Still, I must have been eyeing the thief suspiciously, because he waved me off. “Oh, don’t look like that! I could always comp his bullets for a year. Y’know, whatever. Jigen’s just a guy you gotta romance a little.”

At my resulting flinch, Lupin cackled anew, and doubled over for a good minute or two.

By the end of it, he was completely out of breath, crying, and muttering “ow, ow...” while holding different parts of him in turn.

“Shit,” the spindly thief continued good-naturedly, wiping at his eyes and gasping for air as he leaned against the cool window. “No wonder I can’t hardly breathe. A goddamned noose of telephone wire.” He shook his head, still coming off the giddy high. “Inspector, if you lot ever hang me, please do it with telephone wire.”

There was a beat of silence, filled by my heart sinking.

_Goddammit, stop that. You’re not supposed to care like that._

I would have punched my heart if I could have. But after a moment, I unclenched my hand, and tried to force calm through instead.

_No, it’s okay to care. Just not to believe you can save them from themselves._

The sound of the street rolled along and another half dozen streaks of blue zipped by, flinging Lupin and his range of emotions in and out of the darkness.

“I hope they don’t hang you, Lupin. I really do.”

The thief didn’t look at me, though; he was gazing out the window. When there was darkness, I couldn’t see a damn thing but his outline against the water beyond. And yet, when the street lights flashed over them, Lupin’s eyes were slowly losing their glitter.

A few more beats passed before he said, solemnly, “...Where is Jigen, by the way?”

I leaned back in the seat loosely, considering the ceiling. “He’s not dead as far as I know, if that’s what you mean.”

Lupin sighed in relief, audibly—and visibly. With some interest, I watched his shoulders rise and fall against the view of the water. “Good to know,” Lupin offered, turning his face away fully.

Another few pulses of blue, and I was struck by how small his shoulders looked, even with the shoulderpads of his jacket.

“Probably feels the same way about you right now, you know.”
“And you, Zenigata?” Lupin asked, turning to me suddenly. “How do you feel about me right now?”

There was...something, in his eyes, when they had the light. Smart, piercing eyes, usually so jovial and shallow, were completely open windows to his soul for a split second. They looked...lost? Afraid? No... craving.

It was so unexpected I hadn’t processed the shift before they went half lidded and hard, commandeered into aiding a forced smirk.

I raised an eyebrow, considering him for another second, trying to figure out who had been taken captive underneath that ridiculous sex-pistol exterior that was half burned and covered in bruises. “I think you look like shit and a lot of goddamned paperwork, ’s how I feel. Oh, and a hundred-dollar bottle of aged scotch whiskey. You look like that too, courtesy of the commissioner.”

Lupin snorted once, mouth twisting down in an attempt to bite down a smile. But, apparently satisfied, he returned his gaze out the window without comment, onto the dark sea and its peaceful silver waves.

Even in chains, he managed to be graceful, somehow.

No wonder the ladies’re into him.

I found myself looking at my hand again, and the thinning skin. And then the burns...

Why a kid, full of youth and brains and with his whole life ahead of him, would fall to this.... And so near the holidays, no less?

I stubbed out my cigarette in a grunt and, bringing my hand back to rest on my thigh, closed my fist.

I was going to pin his balls to the wall for all this, when I got the numbers. The rage would be back then, no doubt. But...not right now. There was hardly enough room to beat him around, anyway, and besides: witnesses.

After a bit of watching his back and gleaning no further insights, I grunted and lit another cigarette, drawing it from an exterior coat pocket. A flame of orange and red ignited against the pulse of the dark and the blue, and left a small cinder of red between them to hold off the night.

“I’ve always liked the sea at night,” Lupin muttered suddenly, voice soft, if ripped up from the trials of the last few hours. “This is a nice ride, Pops.”

“Here.” I handed over the newly lit stick, and when Lupin looked over he gave a happy chirp, bending to take it. It said something about us, that I didn’t use it as an attempt to smash Lupin’s head into something, and Lupin didn’t even worry about the possibility—and vice versa.

The young man sighed after the first drag hit his lungs; I watched his profile, and then lingered on the back of my fingers, considering the momentary touch of skin to his lips. Given the mood lighting we had, it struck me if this wasn’t something close to what Lupin’s lovers saw of him. What Jigen saw in him, perhaps, on quiet nights alone together, staking out job sites.

“Lupin,” I began, flexing my admittedly meaty hand, which was covered with scars and worn from guns and batons alike. “How many women have you slept with, would you say?”

“What?” Lupin sputtered around the cigarette, confused. He nearly swallowed the paper, and his
thick eyebrows tipped down. But, with effort, he shrugged himself back on track, albeit a little less animatedly than he normally would, given his injuries. The thief leaned back and, all gangly legs trying to find room, tipped his head onto the headrest, rearranging the cigarette in his mouth, hands-free.

_Dextrous lips. Goddamn._ That was what I got from that.

Along with Lupin’s good (well at least, better) looks, dextrous lips and fingers were something I could never compete with, not at my age, anyway. I liked to think my technique could be referred to as ‘steady and determined’, at least, though, when playing the field.

Though maybe that was the problem? I didn’t know anymore. The things I’d been brought up with hardly mattered these days. I shouldn’t have to think about being obsolete before sixty, but here I was anyway.

“Well?” I pressed, resting my elbows on my knees and folding my hands over the back of my handgun.

“Hold on Pops, I’m doing math.”

I nearly kicked the seat in front of me as I lurched forward. “Math?!”

But Lupin’s innocent gaze was focused on the ceiling, peering into his thoughts with scrutiny. “I mean...probably about...three hundred?” his voice lowered to a whisper, unsure. “Three-fifty maybe...?”

“THREE—” I roared so loud that the deputy in the passenger seat checked back with alarm. I coughed and waved my hand at him; Lupin, smartly, just sat there nonchalantly, watching me. “And you’re how old?” I spat.

“What?” Lupin asked, youthful features genuinely perplexed. “I’m twenty-eight and that’s no where near dad’s record. No where near.” He glanced back at me, almost embarrassedly. “I’m not tryin’ to be my dad, you know.... Oh, I shouldn't have mentioned my a--”

“How?” I continued, ignoring his response. I pulled forward to the edge of what my seatbelt would allow.

“I...uh...?” Lupin shrunk back against the car door, feet up, a little like he was readying to be attacked. A couple seconds ticked by, in which I stared Lupin down while breathing hard, Lupin licked his lips unsurely, and the deputy watched us both with an incredulous stare through the plexiglass, shotgun in hand.

“...You looking for girl advice, Pops?” Lupin hedged, glancing at the deputy, who was definitely giving us the “how much can I let my boss get away with before I have to stop him” look. But never off his feet for long, the thief looked back at me with his trademark grin. “Cuz I mean, I can give it to you, but ‘s not a ‘to-the-station’ length of conversation....”

That was when the car finally stopped. In that ridiculous position, Lupin tipped his head down to give our visitor a loopy grin. A uniformed man in his early twenties looked through the glass with a high-powered flashlight, the beam zipping by me and hitting Lupin’s splayed legs.

That was when the car finally stopped. In that ridiculous position, Lupin tipped his head down to give our visitor a loopy grin. A uniformed man in his early twenties looked through the glass with a high-powered flashlight, the beam zipping by me and hitting Lupin’s splayed legs.

I rolled my eyes and tipped my hat down. Our driver rolled down the window, exchanged a few words and handed the man ID. He was a booth guard, and in just a few moments—just long enough for cool air to seep into the car and give me goosebumps—the gate in front of us opened. The car went through, and Lupin and I both put our heads together to look at the scenery ahead.
through the front window.

At the end of a long promenade, there were lights. Lots of lights. And not just from buildings.

“Shit, how did they get let in here?” I hissed.

Lupin grinned at the swarm of lights that littered the way ahead. There was a decent-sized gathering of people on the stairs of the four-story building we were aiming for on the far side of the lawn.

It was paparazzi. But at least it wasn’t Jigen.

Still, this was a mess in and of itself, with definite complications. I sighed.

“Hahaha, oh good, the welcoming committee’s here!” Lupin declared with delight, sliding back to sit properly, albeit with a few hisses. He turned to me excitedly, which was an odd thing, considering there were chains four inches in front of his face, all the way up to the ceiling. “I was afraid it wouldn’t be much since it’s like, three in the morning. Pops, how’s my hair look?”

“Like a bomb hit you.” The car came to a halt, Lupin’s side of it facing the stairs and the press. After checking beyond his window at the lights descending upon the car and nodding to our driver and my deputy, I gave the thief my best unimpressed look. Lupin’s child-like happiness crashed off his face in a way that was incredibly satisfying. A little bit of concrete dust slid down his bangs to punctuate the sentiment.

I might have felt a little bad at that. But only a little. The littlest little bit.

“Okay, make you a deal,” Lupin said, quickly rebounding with a bright smile and far more energy than he had up till now, to the point that he was practically effervescent. It reminded me a bit of an extremely happy puppy, and I backed away in annoyance, wondering in the back of my mind if his performance till now had all been an act.

But Lupin, bright-eyed and giddy, leaned in to follow me, not letting me finish the thought. “You fix me up to either look really vicious or real nice,” he chirped with a pearly-toothed smile, “and I’ll tell you how to get girls as soon as your paperwork’s done, okay?”

My previous thought disappeared like smoke, replaced with a most vicious hope. I immediately dragged him closer, finger-combing his hair. “Done.”

He giggled under my hands, and maybe it was just the unusual sensation of having the kinetic warmth of another human’s skin under my hands that did it, but for a second, I was suddenly reminded of one of the rare times when I’d been tasked with taking my daughter to school. She was six years old, and neither of us could find her hair brush. Her mother had been furious once she found out what had transpired, but Toshiko had been beside herself with the attention as I combed through her hair with my fingers and talked her through how cute she was, and how proud of her I was. “You’re the best, Pops. I knew I could count on you.”

His voice, despite its usual bullshit words, lacked its usual bullshit tone. I scowled down at him.

You are such an odd creature.

Under my hands, pliant and peaceful, he smiled faintly, eyes closed.

How does something like you even exist in this ugly world?
“Shut up,” I snapped.

“Aww, you know you love me.” There was the bullshit tone.

And yet, it was hard to hate. “Don’t push your luck.”

“I don’t push my luck, Pops. It pushes me.” Dark eyes glittered up from between my hands. “Don’t you know that by now?”

Startled, I paused with my hands drawn back a little. He took it as his cue to sit up. He passed through my hands and straightened with a breath; he hissed badly, but bit it back in the end.

Lupin suddenly seemed as tall as he truly was, or even more so; his head nearly hit the top of the little European squad car. He turned to the window, and when he looked back, he was smiling, hard and determined. “Where are we?”

The driver tapped on the glass with a knuckle. I undid my seatbelt and nodded at them, before undoing Lupin’s. He let me, patiently, but I left the chains locked up to the bolt at the top of the car. The deputy would get it after I got out, from a button on the dash.

“The navy hospital, obviously,” I said, undoing the silencer on my gun and holstering the rest. “Where else can we house you that has cells and a full medical team?”

He frowned, checked back, and then stared at me, all composure gone. The human was back, and the god of thieves, gone to whatever cloud he slept on when he wasn’t possessing people.

And then, a light dawned on the man named Lupin’s face. He grinned, a terrible, ruthless, and utterly delighted grin. “So you prefer a man in uniform, eh?”

I might have fainted then, had I been the one that had lost blood that evening.

Or threatened to beat him to death, if he hadn’t.
Ahh, Lupin. As intelligent as he is insufferable.

Hair halfway decent, I was to be paraded up the stairs through the field of camera lights and flashing bulbs that marked our arrival. Who knew how they found us, but someone must have tipped them off to get a Christmas bonus. Regardless, it was always a thrill, this: the world’s eyes watching me. Wondering who I was, what I’d do next. What I was all about, and how they could get a little bit closer to me.

But they’d never know. Not really. No one did, not even Jigen—though he came damn close through sheer force of will and time spent devoted to the cause. Though, in the same turn, Zenigata was probably a very close second.

The only difference was, Zenigata had accomplished it through thought experiments and detective work, alongside a few chance meetings in alleyways and on rooftops. His superpowers really were just as remarkable as they were creepy.

The bolt that held my bonds to the ceiling suddenly retracted into the top; it popped with a *shunk*, and the chains fell down in a clatter over my knees. In the front passenger seat, the blond deputy exited the car, his hand sliding off a switch next to the glove compartment as he did so. He was the last cop to leave the vehicle.

I put on a predatory smile and waited for my door to open.

The swarm outside was thick this time, on the other side of that door—nearly a hundred people crushed together to form a writhing black mass. Bodies pressed together; microphones bobbed at chest level; and camera lenses, held on shoulders, occasionally caught the light above and shot it back. They were half covered in snow, shoulders and caps white fleece.

The building that loomed behind them was an ancient, U-shaped monstrosity made of brick and stone, with at least two stories’ worth of stairs leading up to the entrance—those stairs also covered in about an inch of snow where the herd hadn’t trampled it to puddles.

A dangerous place to get in a fight, slush-covered stairs.

Further up, the entrance was on the third floor, set in the middle of the U. A pair of thick, dark, wooden doors sat below a pointed Greek portico; under that, a single frosted lamp glowed, once a beacon in the night to weary third-shifters. However, since this was now a government compound—it probably had started as some sort of customs office 500 years ago, given the shape of the windows and the materials used—there were floodlights along the wings of the U, lighting up the stairs in between them like a prison yard, much closer to *Metropolis* than *The Jungle*.

*Note to self: Don’t escape out the front doors. You will be summarily shot.*

It was the middle of the night, nothing but the dark sea of grass and ghosts of skeletal of trees around us, so the veritable temple of stairs that lead upward was a lone bastion of activity. Awash
in the high-density light from high above, with everything else fading to black, it created an effect that was as kingly as it was chilling.

But if I was afraid of spotlights, I wouldn’t announce my crimes beforehand. No indeed: this was simply the curtain rising on act two, and my place center stage awaited.

Lesser men—and those with greater enemies—would be afraid of a gathering like this. I grew up in France; I knew what riots were like. I also grew up in the underworld; I knew what an anonymous crowd and a knife could accomplish.

The cops knew it too, but luckily, Zenigata was not the type to sell me out to the lights. At least, I hoped that had not changed.

I checked the nearest ring of people I could see. Men and women in business suits, hair a little wild from the wind and the mosh pit-like scuffle. Cops in well-trimmed black and yellow, their backs to me, trying to hold the host back. A couple of navy men doing the same—probably the hospital’s night guards. Behind them, a thick row of cameramen in their ninja gear.

Aside from the front line of uniforms, those were the ones I had to be especially careful of—a merc could hide damn near anything in a cameraman’s casual but bulky outfit, and within seconds could blend into the street life in the event of a chase; you’d never find them. An incredible range of projectile weapons could be hidden behind a fake camera lens too, or even just as an attachment to one. I could be dead in less than ten steps—probably five if they were impatient—and never know it. That was especially true given how much my head hurt at the moment; there were still little stars prickling in front of my eyes here and there, though I wasn’t sure if half of them were snowflakes.

Regardless, as it stood, the chances were that I’d miss the sign to duck. And with the stairs the way they were, even if I managed it....

Jigen would be pissed though, to say the least, if someone knocked me off, and surely they knew that. It didn’t save me every time, but I didn’t cultivate an image in the underground as someone who kept twisted monsters for nothing.

Not to mention that Jigen stood to inherit more money than he could ever drink once I died (though he didn’t actually know that), which he could use immediately towards his revenge. Surely they knew I had deep pockets, a vast imagination, and nothing to use it on but my crew, my women, and destroying things?

Still, there was only so much I could do on my own at this very moment. I simply had to put my faith in Lady Luck and the police.

I’d long ago proven the hypothesis that Lady Luck loved me. The police, on the other hand....

The cop with the shotgun was on the far side of the car—away from the press—his back to the glass, guarding our backs and, if he knew what he was doing, looking for Jigen in a window across the wide black expanse. It really was a beautiful setup for a sniper; I wished I could have shown it to my dear partner; he would have loved it, right after he laughed at the irony of it.

Meanwhile, the deputy—the blond guy—and Zenigata pushed their way to either side of my door with admirable military crispness. The inspector was on my right; the rookie on the left. Pops pulled the door open, and with a smirk, I finally stretched my long legs out.

I made my white carpet debut to a cascade of heavy clicks and a flurry of flashes—only to have one
of my legs buckle out from under me. The instant I put weight on it, a stab zinged up my thigh and into the base of my spine.

It wasn’t like a gunshot. It wasn’t. It wasn’t.

Zenigata’s thick hand was at my arm in an instant; he had been going for it anyway, but a strong grip hauled me up by my bicep. I looked around hastily; no one was on the ground ducking, so clearly there hadn’t been a gunshot that I’d just lost in the moment. But it also likely wasn’t a wound from a silencer. It didn’t hurt like that.

Zenigata and I exchanged a glance for a second, me bewildered and him frowning—first concerned for me, then concerned for a trick. The first one was terribly heartwarming, but naturally, a lot shorter.

I couldn’t blame him. In all honesty, it was smart of him. It was part of what made him such a good cop.

I put weight on my leg, testing it, checking around again shortly for anyone that wanted to take advantage of the opportunity. My leg did not like that; a stab wrapped in an ache radiated across the outside of my right thigh and kept me from finishing my sweep of the left side of the crowd, out from around the deputy’s arm. I thought I felt a bit of something warm bloom into the lightweight compression armor I had on underneath my clothing, but I couldn’t be sure; it could have just been the warmth of the ache receding.

Still, I looked down at my leg, then back at Zenigata, perplexed. It was just a burning stab slashing across the outside of my thigh, like a muscle cramp, but worse. It didn’t feel like flesh had rent. And yet, my right leg didn’t want to hold any weight at all.

What the hell, Leg? You broken? Coulda spoken up sooner!

The Inspector had a hold of my arm, his body close against mine—and my hands were encased in a clusterfuck of chains not unlike a tangle of Christmas lights anyway—so I couldn’t very well start prodding around while the world stood there waiting on us.

Well, I could, but that wouldn’t look attractive on the morning news.

Still, there was no sign of a wound, at least as could be seen in the night and the close quarters, and that question was on both of our faces as we looked at each other for answers. But then again, my slacks were black, and so were the shadows.

“Problem?” Zenigata asked lowly, through shouts of Inspector!, Lupin!, and cries for a word in six different languages.

His gaze caught mine, and held it. It was never good to let him get hold of you like that; the man had a way of unwinding whomever he was looking at with his sharp, dark eyes, and I was no exception when he put his mind to it.

Still, as we stood there, he managed to block out the worries of the world. He was half a head shorter than I was, but through his bulldog presence, as he was staring at me with that focused scrutiny, I knew I didn’t have to worry about anything—he would have shoved me down and been bulldozing the crowd if I did. At least, that was what it felt like, to be held under his narrowed black eyes, their hard edge like cold steel.

Still, this was not the kind of scene I’d planned on. If I had been bleeding to death, I would have by now; I would also have been in an ambulance, not a squad car. So, I sucked in a deep breath
through my nose and gritted my teeth, snowflakes falling onto my eyelashes as I tipped my head back. The sounds had just been cameras. Cameras.

“I’ll be fine.”

The pained set of my jaw must have encroached into my eyes, because Pops glared up at me, leaning in with his chin out and a soft growl going—his way of warning—only to turn away sharply, readjusting his hat. The flashbulbs went off at that; the light made my head burst like a kaleidoscope of razor blades and I winced, turning away.

Undeterred, Zenigata pulled me forward, not even looking at me. But his grip wasn’t sharp, and his lead was smooth, even up the slick granite stairs. He was a professional at this; I had to be, too.

“March,” he muttered.

I knew the drill; I could do it in my sleep. And in this situation, I had to rely on that. To coy or not to coy, though, that was the question.

My head was in a daze, interrupted only by sharp pains from here or there about my body, though the whole affair was also, blissfully, muted a bit by how tired I was. The camera flashes, too, bounced off the thick clumps of falling snow, making the world look like a disco ball’s revenge.

It wasn’t exactly the best mood for playing with the press, and if we were alone, I wouldn’t have bothered; I probably would have been complaining mightily instead. But as I caught the eye of a female reporter, desperate for a look, a touch, a scoop, her chestnut hair falling slightly out of place to get to me, I couldn’t help but smile, broken parts be damned.

This was my stage, and the show had to go on. That was the Lupin family style. We were performers, more than anything; circus masters of public imagination.

There were women out there that needed to know a man like me existed; children, who needed to know there were options in life beyond what they were told; and men, who wanted to know what it looked like when you followed your skills to their fullest extent.

The cuffs were not an issue to my image, nor even was being detained—that was nothing, and it showed in situations like these. And that was the first step to fascination.

With effort, I followed that enthralled feeling to my core and slipped on the loose, fluid persona that came so naturally anymore. Even if I had to limp up the stairs while doing it, the cameras got their self-assured master thief whose eyes glittered like the diamonds he stole.

And Pops, at my side, held my weight the entire way, playing perfectly the dignity of the uniform.

* * *

The double doors opened outward, courtesy of the deputy; the driver, now with the shotgun, stayed outside guarding our backs; and Zenigata guided me inside. The lights of the press faded away with their shouts, and with a whoosh and a thunk, we were inside, cut off from the outside world. Snow pooled around my ankles, along with the last breath of cold.

So this is to be the landscape called “capture.”

It...was slightly different than I was expecting.
There was one officer waiting for us at the reception desk. One.

And twelve men with rifles.

I stopped at that—just dead stopped two feet inside the door—looking the situation over with reflexes that had saved my life before. They were navy men, young ones, spread out in a fan behind the reception desk, flanking out to either side. The rifles were standard issue and most likely loaded—not some color guard show—and were held diagonally across their chests. It was a display of strength, though medium on the scale of aggression; the other options being slung over the shoulder nonchalantly and pointing directly at me. So: They were ready to fire at a moment’s notice if they had to, but...

Rifles? Indoors? It was absurd. And for me? They knew I wasn’t armed. Plus...the nurse attendant and the cop were both at the reception desk in the middle of the formation between me and them—they’d become casualties if they fired.

Unless, of course, they were in on it and ducked at the last moment.

Hesitantly, I turned my head to Zenigata, who was still standing next to me. He was looking the situation over as well, with narrowed eyes.

“Well...this is more Russian of a welcome than I expected,” I hedged, mouth dry.

“I know,” he muttered so that only I could hear. But then he shrugged, rolling his eyes with a long-suffering sigh. “Rifles indoors. I told them to bring bayonets and hunting knives.”

I couldn’t tell if he was kidding or not. He probably was, but the ice lump in my stomach didn’t alleviate. He still hadn’t addressed whether or not they were actually going to shoot me.

“You didn’t say anything about a firing squad,” I pressed, trying to sound chipper.

The inspector finally looked over at me and flashed a catty grin. “Cold feet?”

I opened my mouth, then shut it. There was no good place to go from there, even if I had finally determined he was kidding.

“C’mon.” He pulled me forward. “Let’s not keep the ladies waiting.”

It was then I realized that the cop waiting for us was female, too. She was shorter and had a thicker build, going up to about my shoulder. She was middle aged, with short red hair, nearly brown, curled around her cheeks and no farther. She was leaning back against the counter just in front of a fake plant, and had both hands on her belt, the nicely festooned articles of subjugation spreading out underneath short fingers with red painted nails.

Interesting.

The bright, plastic fern behind her head, superimposed behind her like a feathered cap, was one of the few bright spots to the room beyond her nails and hair. The room itself was that inexorable Institutional Cream color of lead paint that coated the insides of any post-1880 government building I’d ever set foot in. Paint chips and hotel artwork matched the budget that had renovated the beautiful old relic with expediency in mind sometime in the 1950s, clearly dropping its fifteen foot ceiling to ten, and leaving duct work in strange places that popped out here and there.

The room itself was rectangular, with the front door on one of the long sides. To my back left, there was a small waiting area with cushioned chairs that looked old and painfully stiff; to the back right,
an alcove for coats that had a potted Ficus and a Cthulian jade plant against the window. An
overstuffed ashtray, beside the plants or perhaps protecting them, sat underneath a painting of a
field of sheep or other such fluffy farm animal.

It was a little odd it wasn’t some picture of maritime life, but I shrugged it off. Military men were
not known for being great curators of art. Some group of newbie officers had probably looted it
from a cheap hotel at some point twenty years ago as a prank.

Or, maybe some long-ago administrator had painted it from his farm. Something.

Dragging myself away from that mystery, I checked to either side. Identical hallways, facing each
other, stood to either side of the curved reception desk, on the short ends of the room. Old wood-
and-pane-glass doors shut them both off. It looked like they just went to offices, one of which was
remarkably dark. Pitch black, in fact, aside from the massive, floor-to-ceiling window at the end
that burned through the dark like a religious epiphany. The faraway window was metal and glass
grid, with a decorative half-circle at the top. Orange light spilled in from beyond it, leaving an eerie
black hallway with a glow of scrollwork far within.

I narrowed my eyes. The pattern wasn’t just decorative; it was interrupted regularly, like there were
thick bars that hadn’t originally been there. We were forty-five feet up; a regular police station,
even a city prison, wouldn’t bother doing that.

And yet, to the lobby’s rear, a wall-to-wall bank of modern, rectangular windows overlooked the
harbor. It would have been a great view, if not for the human blockade of soldiers around us. Still,
the twinkling smatter of lights far across the water—at least what I could see in between arms and
elbows—was calming.

*Bulletproof glass?*

Reaching the desk, Zenigata let me go like it was some great inconvenience, and I likewise sighed
and draped myself across the counter with an accompanying clatter of chains. If he wasn’t worried,
I guess I shouldn’t have been, either.

The standing reception desk was a tall one; it went all the way up to the middle of my chest, at least
on this side of it. The backside appeared to have a sitting-level counter with three office chairs
behind it.

I gave the soldiers a quick eye. They were eyeing me back, but trying not to; that was a decent
enough place to be in their regard, I supposed—given, of course, that they weren’t giving me the
shifty eye because they had been told to do something dramatic. It didn’t seem like it, though. They
just looked pissed off for having to be awake this late at night—or maybe, in the case of a couple
that looked a little rosy-cheeked, pissed off for having to interrupt their card games to come work.

I spied their insignias. This was French navy, so the simplest of the simple to discern, having
learned it first. They looked like first and second lieutenants, or the equivalent—new officers, the
grunts of the world. Yup, I’d made enemies of the peons tonight.

*Note to self: bring medium-grade booze or better as part of escape.*

With a sigh, I took my forehead off the counter and put my chin in my hand, and slunk my weight
to the left. The stabbing pains in my leg and head subsided in a rush, and another sigh, a more
sincere one, escaped without warning. Oh well. So they knew I was hurt. Maybe it would keep
them from thinking I could take more.
I leaned my elbow on an empty part of the counter, near the pen cup and the female officer, and waited.

It wasn’t two seconds before my body decided to fall asleep. Fuck.

I forced my eyes open with a start, only to find the attendant looking me over with a clinical eye from behind the counter. She was facing Zenigata, but her head was turned to me. When our eyes met, I smiled reflexively and winked. “Hi, darlin’.”

She snorted and rolled her eyes, and went back to Pops.

The administrator was tall and thin and probably in her early forties. Her long face was still youthful enough to lack anything more than crow’s feet and frown lines, but clearly old enough to have zero to do with roving males. I peered over the edge of the counter, telling my aching abs to shut the hell up at the maneuver and just wait for the prize.

The woman wore her uniform like it was armor keeping her tightly-held morals in, and her blond hair was pinned up in a severe bun. But her outfit, tight because it was an administrative one, accentuated her curves in all the right places. She was also wearing a pencil skirt and leggings in the winter, which went with her rather taller than necessary high heels. All good tidings in my book.

**Ah, a woman in uniform....Sweet as they are sharp.**

Thinking about it made all the pain disappear as I slid back to a normal resting position on the counter. Endorphins—and pretty women—really were amazing.

Zenigata, however, was staring at me now, and with great intensity. It was...angry? No...warning. A school principal’s warning.

He had a clipboard with forms in front of him, his forearms on the counter. When he reached toward me, I held my ground obstinately—even though his hand was huge in my vision as it came near. As his thick fingers reached behind my ear, I could feel the heat of them and the tickle against my sideburns...and then a loud rattle of plastic and metal that stabbed into my head.

“Oh, stop it,” Zenigata demanded, as if he hadn’t been secretly hoping for the utterly pathetic flinch I let out at the noise.

Something colorful passed by my face. It was a pen, I realized a beat later, the fake flower attached to its top brushing my eyebrows. It forced my eyes to close, and my nose to tickle. I grinned.

“You touch anything, and I mean anything...” he continued.

Before I could stop myself, I laid my index finger on his arm, depressing the fabric of his overcoat just enough for him to feel it.

I realized what I’d done right about the time he realized he’d have to do something about it. The weathered Inspector stared down at his bicep, and then, oh so slowly, lifted his face to stare me down with remarkable hatred. I pulled my hand back to hang at my side, trying not to smile nervously as I wiggled my fingers free of the feeling of doom. I was not successful.

Luckily, my nervous smile was mousey and dumb, so it tended to get me out of more trouble than it started.

The soldiers were watching us. The administrator shifted on her feet, eyes darting between me and
Zenigata, readying to tackle Pops over the counter if she needed to. At my side, my hand curled into a fist.

In his right hand, which was raised to strike with its elbow on the counter, Zenigata was holding his newfound pen like a knife ready to stab. Gaze never leaving my face, never blinking, he clicked the pen like he was itching for a gun hammer.

“You’re going to pay for that,” was all he said before going back to his paperwork.

Crisis averted, I blew my hair out of my eyes with a thick breath. My heart was still working awfully hard.

_God, Lupin, what did Jigen say about getting your tiger-poking act together._

Zenigata scratched at the forms with his entire attention. That was odd; normally he reserved at least a quarter of his brain to paying attention to my slippery fingers. While he was the type for dotting his Is and crossing his Ts, he was not the type to let it absorb him, and the grim frown he had was something to behold; it could have lit something ablaze.

I peered at what he was writing. It couldn’t be made out from this angle, especially since his roman handwriting was truly terrible, but it was nothing more than simple intake form junk. Still, it crossed my mind how offensive to culture his Japanese script had to be. It made me suddenly sorry for his original coworkers, not to mention his secretary.

Come to think of it, though, was he from a time when all the secretaries were male? That had to be a fight to witness.

With nothing else to see, I turned to the woman who had been standing silently at my back this whole time, not six inches away. At the moment, she was just looking at the front door, bored but strong, her arms crossed purposefully and her back against the counter. She was wearing the standard Interpol-administration black dress shirt, but from the waist down it was field gear. She was definitely in her forties, too old to be a beat cop, but wearing the associated materials with admirable poise and familiarity anyway.

_An enigma, wrapped in a mystery, this whole place...._ I gave her a quick up-down.

Noticing the look, she threw me an annoyed glare, barely even moving to do it. It sent a little shiver of excitement down my spine. Her eyes were a lovely smokey-green, and the spirit behind them was wisened and strong—and a perfect challenge.

“If you think you’re going to hit on me in handcuffs, you’ve got another thing coming to you,” she replied, dry.

_Oh ho._ I grinned, and leaned a little closer. My voice lowered, and I whispered into her hair: “If you were trying to dissuade me from liking you, you just failed.”

Suddenly, the world shifted. I hit the floor in a tangle of limbs and chains and noise, and spots swam in front of my vision like I was breathing them. Grasping at the counter only made it worse; I landed badly on my side, right where it had been hurting in the car, and the chains and cuffs fell on top of my soft spots with enough force to take a noticeable amount of my breath away.

But more importantly, a spot just above my right ankle was smarting badly, and determined to stab at me tenaciously. Even after a few long tries of squeezing my eyes shut, it barely ebbed, and the tensing muscles up and down my body caused a nasty feedback loop.
I cursed, and when I got my head together enough, looked up first at the officer, and then at Zenigata. On the floor within kicking distance, too in pain to see, what not really where you wanted to be when surrounded by cops, no matter how well you knew one of them.

The woman just looked at me with a cool gaze, eyebrows raised. She turned away, with an air of, *Oh, look at that.*

I shot Pops a questioning glare. He was unsympathetic. “Told you,” he said, and went back to his paperwork.

Grumbling, I rubbed at the tender, raging spot just above my ankle. He’d kicked my feet out from under me. *Asshole.*

The nurse appeared over the counter then, looked at me, and then gave Zenigata a scowl. That helped my mood a little bit, at least. Pretty women to my rescue, my favorite. Except for me to Jigen’s rescue. Or maybe Jigen shooting things out of a moving car’s windows.

_Ah, Jigen._ A little flush of warmth flew over me at the thought. *Taking my pain away as usual. Good man, even in musing._

“Officer...,” the blonde above me warned.

“I won’t do it again unless he makes me,” was his airy answer.

She frowned, gave me an _Are you all right?_ look, and after a moment of pleading with her with my eyes, she disappeared.

But I didn’t hear her come around. Instead, all I got was Zenigata glancing at me. “You going to get up sometime today?”

So _that_ was how it was going to be.

“Goddammit...” I grumbled for show. I held my ribs first, easing out the sharp pain and ache there. When I had first landed, I could barely breathe and the swimmers were thick in my vision, but it was coming back quickly. I looked up at Zenigata for confirmation that he wasn’t going to kick me again, but no such luck; he just filled out his forms.

With a sigh, I rubbed the new bruise on my leg, and slowly stood with a tisk. It was a climb, and there was no good way to do it when my pulling muscles seared and my pushing muscles stabbed, and only one leg to do it on. I didn’t like to whine if I really had a reason to—that lacked style and charisma—but this was quickly pushing me to my limits. If something wasn’t broken, even hairline, I’d be astounded. My head liked to amplify whatever pulse I had all around my cranium, which didn’t help, either, and now on top of it I was dizzy too. I was pretty sure the wound in my leg, whatever it was, was seeping a little bit of something warm every time I flexed it too hard.

The navy squad, by the by, was snickering.

*Chances of getting shot: Lower.*

*Chances of getting a rifle butt to the stomach at some point hence: Higher.*

*Thanks, Pops.*

“I know it’s Christmas...,” I began when I finally reclaimed the counter and wrapped myself over it, full frontal, my hand in my hair and palm pushed into my forehead to stop the throbbing. “But
where’re the other cops?”

I could use a different one.

Zenigata paused. He looked over at me with unusual austerity. His jaw clenched on one side, and his eyebrow raised slightly with it. “The fire.”

I frowned. “What fire?”

Admittedly, the only thing I could remember was helicopter lights, the sound of the blades’ heavy beat, and then...waking up in a squad car. A lot could have happened in that time. Hell, anything could have happened, really. Apparently something had, other than the near strangling and, apparently, falling off the roof, which I really shouldn’t have survived, and certainly not able to walk. I’d have to ask him about that, when we got some alone time.

Pops snorted and shook his head almost violently, in dismissal. “The one from your bombs.”

“Yeah, about that—”

He handed over the forms with a sharp slap of the clipboard onto the counter, causing everyone to flinch. “Marti,” he barked. “You got the facilities ready?”

“Yessir,” the woman said. For the first time, I realized her voice was low, but not unpleasant. There was also an Italian tinge to her French.

I felt good for being able to note that, startled and dizzy as I was.

“Good.” Zenigata nodded to the nurse, saluted to the soldiers, and yanked me forward. I yelped and groaned, nearly stumbling over him and limping the rest of the way once I caught up. At our backs, the sound of saluting men rang out.

“Pops, Pops, what’s with the rough treatment?” I whined.

“Shut up.” His hand tightened on my arm, painfully so.

I looked back at the policewoman following us, but she had nothing. There were people you could read like a book despite never having a conversation with them, but she wasn’t one of them. It’d take a few turns of the dial to crack that safe.

The deputy, following along behind us, and the shotgun-toting driver a few steps behind him too now that he was back from whatever he’d been doing, trailed along as well, one a rookie with no sense of anything, and one almost mercenary with his grim.

With no other option, I sighed inwardly and let Zenigata guide me down door number one—the hallway to the right, the one that was full of light. Identical doors spread down and down it, not unlike the uniformity of cells, just without the courtesy of bars.

I really hope you were kidding about that firing squad thing.
Chapter Notes

In which the OCs have their day.

Another Lupin chapter. True to form, he didn't want to alternate fairly with Zenigata.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was as we were halfway down the hall that one of us started buzzing.

Since I was hobbling anyway, I stopped, forcing everyone else to. The guard watched me coolly; Marti patted herself down with both hands. The deputy and Zenigata both dug in their pockets with their free one.

It was the Inspector that came up the winner. He held up a flip phone, with a little lucky-cat charm on the end. It looked like an old one he’d borrowed from somebody; they’d probably let him use it while he was here.

“Ooh, Pops, you got a phone these days? Well done."

Not even bothering to respond to that, he nailed me with a look, held up a finger at my nose, and commanded like I was a bad pet: “No.”

I raised an eyebrow. Well fine, don’t play then. I shrugged theatrically in dismissal, despite the effort and breath-holding it took.

The roll of my head on my shoulders, incidentally, landed my gaze on the deputy. He was peering at me side-eye, like I was the older brother who always got in trouble.

What, you too? Go ahead and play that game, rookie. I’ll win.

Still, his posturing done, the leader of our little cohort looked at his phone’s exterior screen. “Marti. I’ve gotta take this,” he gruffed. “Since we’re here anyway, want to fingerprint ‘im while I do this?”

Do this? That sounded unusually heavy.

I looked at “Marti,” but she wasn’t looking at me. “Yessir.”

“Chief?” Zenigata said, putting the phone to his ear and stalking off, trenchcoat waving. He disappeared into a room, all but slamming the door shut.

As I gazed after him, concerned, I found Marti had turned to me. When she saw me looking, she put her hands on her hips and cracked a wide grin, her eyes twinkling. That little jolt that always accompanied frisky redheads looking at me went through me again, and I swallowed thickly. From this angle, I could see a smattering of freckles over her cheeks and nose, half lost to age lines and a tan. It would be a lie to say I didn’t want to investigate them a little.

“Ready to get those grabby hands of yours all over something hard and warm?” she teased.
I raised my eyebrows in surprise, then as my thoughts began to turn, lowered one drastically; the journey of dubious looks ended when I bit my lip, the matching eyebrow coming down to complete the heavy frown.

“Oh don’t look like that, it’ll be fun.” She laughed melodically and waved the deputy forward. I was not reassured.

Suddenly, the door behinds us opened with a rattle. “Wait wait wait,” Zenigata announced, reappearing with an irritated wave of his hand, thoughts clearly stuck in his head. His phone was gone, probably left on a desk in the room.

We turned to him like a bunch of ostriches. He stormed over to me, grabbed my left arm, and two quick clicks, a *shunk*, and a snap later, one of my wrists was free.

One of the deputy’s wasn’t.

I peered at the manacles wordlessly, then at him. Then we both looked at Zenigata.

“No,” he commanded again, that finger raised at my face. He whirled on his heel and left us. The door closed a little more quietly this time.

Marti looked the impressed side of thoughtful. The guard I didn’t bother with. The deputy, though, looked like he’d just realized his date was a dud.

“Well,” I said, raising my hand that was now shackled to his with a grin, “Let it be known that I would have at least bought you dinner first.”

* * *

It was more than a little baffling that they actually wanted to *work* at three AM, rather than just throw me in with some morphine and the doctors, and frankly, irritating that I had to stand there for it with an ache growing up my back. Along with my leg, there was a massive sore spot just under one of my ribs. It protested loudly any time I used the muscles near it, and competed for attention with the inexplicable injury to my leg (though both would get beaten down by my head’s throbbing when I turned too fast). My ribs probably weren’t broken all the way through, since I could still breathe without feeling a need to plead for sedation, but I honestly had no idea.

Speaking of breathing, the rope burns around my throat, too, were hardly healthy, and though it wasn’t a huge problem, I could tell the inside of my throat was scratchy and mildly swollen, making it hard to swallow and my breath a little wheezing. It’d be raw as hell and stay that way for a few days, whenever I woke up after my next long sleep. Until then, though, I either needed to guzzle water or talk my head off to keep it from tightening up. I was getting neither.

It had been nearly fifteen minutes; what the hell was Pops on the phone for that took that long? And the rest of them...

*Somebody wants to see the sunrise,* I sighed as I stood in front of the fingerprinting machine, weight on my uninjured leg. The fingertips on my right hand were warm; the chore had just concluded on the first hand, and now we had to wait for it to process.

Beyond the injuries, every few minutes I was shivering from exhaustion and lack of a good meal; I hadn’t eaten in about twelve hours. My reasoning skills were growing fuzzy around the edges, which was never a good place to be, if you were me...let alone me surrounded by cops with nothing better to do than pay attention to me.
It was currently now about four in the morning, give or take, in a tiny, windowless, rectangular room populated with three bodies, two machines, and the morgue-like hum of a single fluorescent light tube. The fingerprinting machine itself was on one wall, and its terminal, connected to the network, was against the adjacent. Though I could only see the back of it, the monitor looked suspiciously like it sported Windows 98.

We were going to be here for a while, and there were definitely no chairs, and worse, nothing to look at. There were a few paint chips and cracks in the walls, and only a few suspicious stains to contemplate.

But beyond that, I was left with only the room’s inhabitants. One of them was myself, of course; another was the deputy who had been in the car. He was extremely tall—half a head taller than me or more—and also extremely Scandinavian. Probably Finnish or Norwegian, given the snow-pale skin, close-cropped cornsilk hair and Husky-blue eyes. Though the set of his jaw and bulk of his chest looked particularly Swedish; I’d have to ask him.

He looked no older than twenty-five, though, and less battle-worn than anyone else—his soul seemed light, and so did the wear on his skin; you could tell he smiled more than he frowned, though at the moment he was alert, more than a little overtly—like a true rookie. He had a couple years’ experience on the job, I’d wager, but not much more than that. I had to take pity on the guy: Most likely, Zenigata had commandeered him unexpectedly on the way back and now he was taking his duty to make me his shadow a little too seriously.

Still, when our hands brushed together, he never pulled away. I couldn’t tell if he just didn’t mind that sort of thing, or was more skilled than I thought. Regardless, he had upper body muscles indicative of some sort of winter sport, so no doubt he felt he could snap me like a twig if needed. He probably could.

The crowded room’s other occupant was the policewoman from before, Marti. She had one hand on her hip and one on the mouse of the stand-up desk’s ancient computer.

Did that mouse not even have a flywheel? Lord have mercy, it was going to be a long night. Morning. Whichever.

Regardless, her face was weathered from the years, but still seemed rather jovial at the eyes, when you got past the cloud that all government workers seemed to have there—and the spectacular “fuck off” look reserved especially for me (when she wasn’t giving me a man-eating grin). Forget “unlocking a safe”; she was dynamite waiting to be lit.

Though maybe all that was just for strange men. She was Italian, after all.

Outside the room, just beyond the door frame, the car’s driver was there too, a mercenary-looking man leaning against the wall in a steadfast pose not unlike Jigen’s. Except that this guy had muscles that could have bench-pressed Jigen and me combined, with substantial room left over for Deputy Ken here at my side.

Which, honestly, meant the guy was not far off from all of Jigen’s crazy exes.

Though why he had been our driver, of all things.... That was a mystery I hadn’t quite put my finger on yet.

It would be a lie to say I was not particularly reassured by Zenigata’s choice of people and his sudden absence. But that was probably the point.
It always made me the slightest bit nervous when he left me anywhere but a cell; I didn’t really expect him to leave me with pernicious types, but I also didn’t expect him to know who was who in a strange city, or even have much control over it, especially with a skeleton crew like this when a calamity like me struck over a holiday.

Moreover, after his grim gaze and higher-than-average tension—and now his long absence—I was not nearly assured that all was well.

Still, here I was, bored out of my mind and being fingerprinted as I tried not to stand on a probably broken leg. International police work at its finest.

I looked to Marti. Now that she was behind a screen, she looked as doldrum as I felt, but with decidedly less enthusiasm involved.

Click click. Clickety-click-click, type-type.

No doubt about it, this was the boring part of booking, and having Zenigata to pester would have made this considerably better, though it was below his paygrade.

Making matters worse, this was also, generally, the part where you were forced to be nice and submissive for expediency’s sake—unless you got lucky, in the form of a cop who was zero percent afraid of you and happy for some charming blue-collar conversation.

Marti might have been that. Unfortunately, we’d gone through fingerprinting one entire hand at 64-bit speed without her saying a damn thing. I was starting to wonder if the Hallway Incident had been a freak accident.

As for the others... Government workers were known for having no shred of happiness left to their souls, and cops were notorious for having no sense of humor. Combining all that made my regular fallback of humor in these situations a far cry for help—though there was always listening to life stories and complaining loudly.

Furthermore, while Interpol at least was made up of the smart cookies that livened up the interaction, it did not make life easier when their grasp of English or French did not extend to jokes. Still, my body was one giant ball of aches now that I had been relatively still for a while, and my mind was trying to force me to go to sleep, too. So I desperately needed something to keep me going; God help me, I was stuck with a desk jockey cop, a rookie, and a bruiser to do it with—a double, maybe even triple, whammy.

I was running scenarios through my head about how to break the ice and to whom and in which language when the woman, bless her, did it for me.

“So you’re the notorious ‘gentleman thief’ I’ve heard so much about,” she began from behind the desk.

I brightened, flashing a cheesy grin.

*Maybe this won’t be torture after all!*

“Yup, that’s me!”

“Well, hot stuff, keep cooperating like this and I won’t have to beat your ass.” She smirked over the computer, but it was friendly.
“Oh, be still my beating heart,” I laughed, only to lose it in a groan. That spot on my side, about the size of a hand print, twinged when my abs tightened, swallowing up the happiness of mental stimulation by overwhelming me with the screaming complaint it lobbed.

Marti raised an eyebrow at me, but I waved her off with a hand.

Still, it would have been nice, at the moment, to have Zenigata here to bitch at, to guilt him into taking me somewhere with medical equipment and people who knew how to use it. At least, if he could get over whatever bee was in his bonnet.

Was he really that mad I’d been caught? Or the way it had happened? Or the fact that I was hurt?

Or was it the Ominous Phone Business?

Honestly, it could have been anything, and I hadn’t gotten past the spines enough to figure out if I was handling a rose bush, a porcupine, or a medieval spike trap.

The woman—her name tag read Martelli—was not helping the situation by typing slowly.

Sloooooowly.

“You get paid by the hour, don’t you,” I complained.

“What did I just say about beating your ass,” she tossed back, not missing a beat, not even looking at me. It was a wry statement.

I grinned, all care of Pops forgotten.

“How do you spell your name,” she prompted, raising her chin.

“A-r-s-e-n-e L-u-p-i-n, ” I supplied, saying the letters with their Italian names. “The Third. And the first ‘e’ has an accent over it.”

She entered them rhythmically and then muttered, “Hmm. Trying to impress me are you?” She raised her chin; I was pretty sure her hand came up too, behind the screen, in the inveritable Italian gesture of fuck off that accompanied cat calls, simply because it was so ingrained. Still, it was half-hearted. “I heard you liked the ladies, but really now. I’m twice your age. <Don’t you have standards?>”

She threw the last part at me in quickly-strung Italian, glancing once at the deputy after she did. I followed her eyes; the blond watched the exchange curiously. He didn’t understand, but he wasn’t jumping in to stop it. We could be discussing bribes for all he knew.

Finally armed with a weapon, I smirked and lowered my voice to one more suited to hitting on people in the shadows and close quarters of a lounge-bar. “Of course I have standards. How could you think you don’t pass, mon cheri?”

She snorted, then looked down, scrutinizing my feet of all things. “So you’re more than the price of your shoes. Hm.” She disappeared behind the computer again. “Might be something more to you after all.”

“Oh ho...”

I took a step forward, ready to lean on the desk, but the deputy jerked me back. After hissing at the pain that laced through my side, I shot him a scowl.
Thanks to Pops, we were now a bastardized three legged race, my right arm to his left. He’d pulled me back by that.

“Telli, he bothering you?” he asked, putting a warning hand on my shoulder.

_Telli? So Zenigata calls her something else, huh...?

“No, it’s fine, Christof.”

“Christof?” I parroted, rolling my shoulder to get his hand off. After the second try, he squeezed my lat tight; I yelped, body rising up into his hand, which just made me string together a hiss of curses and “ow”s.

He smiled like a true dick and patted my shoulder before moving off. “Good prisoner,” he corrected, patronizingly. I at least had the satisfaction of a thick accent accompanying it.

“Yeah yeah.” I grumbled and rubbed my shoulder—only to stop halfway through because my side did not like that, and the wrong leg was functioning for the maneuver anyway.

“Let me guess,” I said, dry, trying to place his heavy accent. _“Finnish?”_

_“Norwegian.”_ He grinned, like he was used to getting the question—and enjoyed the notoriety. It was something I could relate to, so I couldn’t fault him for it. Though it was annoying that he was getting me to like him, even if just a little bit.

“Ah,” I replied, purposefully noncommittal to throw him off my trail. I pulled out the few words of that language I knew; it was rusty, to say the least, but being tired made it easier to find the files of my mind, and not care if I threw them into the air during the search, too. _“That your last name?”_

_“No. Bjornson.”_ He pushed his shoulders back at that a little, proudly.

I nodded, with a smirk. _“Not bad, far as those names go.”_ I lifted my chin. _“Completely pronounceable.”_

_“I know,”_ the man grinned back, toothy and warm. His eyes narrowed and he smirked, looking down at me. _“By the way, your accent sucks.”_

“Hah!” So that was his key. “Well, last time I was there, my tour guide didn’t do a lot of _proper_ talking...” I wiggled my hips and winked, only to turn my back on him for the policewoman’s work. While the Norwegian mountain sputtered, the Italian boulder scoffed, bored.

“You all... If we want to discuss people we’ve banged, I can go on about dick lengths and ballsacks all day if you really want me to.”

My brain did what could charitably be called “breaking” at that, the last part of me to give up the ghost. Christof was a victim of the assault too, apparently, from the sound of his sputter. I swear I heard the guard shift too.

But in the end, I just laughed out loud, though I had to hold my side to do it...and then my head. I hissed a short lament at the dagger thrusts digging into my side for having to do so.

Martelli raised an eyebrow at me, over the keyboard. “You okay there?”

I winced and, with some effort, straightened up and took a breath. When I spoke, all pretense had gone, sadly enough. “I’ll be fine. Thank you though.”
“Suit yourself.” Her eyes lingered for just a moment, before she shrugged. “You start bleeding or something, tell somebody. Last thing we need is a lawsuit from you.”

I nodded, pressing into my side and wincing again, trying to figure out what was wrong, other than a particularly deep bruise.

*What I wouldn’t give for some of Jigen’s mothering right now...* He had the best chicken soup. And warm hands...

“You really do look like shit you know,” Christof said behind me, so helpfully.

“I feel like it.” After a few breaths through my nose, I took a last deep drag on the filtered air to float my head up to a normal position. “Is it more like, ‘surprised you’re still standing’ shit or ‘wow, glad I’m not you,’ shit?”

“If I’m honest?” Christof asked.

My face split into a grin at that, and I eyed him, darkly. “Yes?”

“I’d say...” He narrowed his eyes, and looked me up and down. When his eyes met mine again, they held a devious glimmer. He lifted his hand, and mine, to show the chain between them. “It’s more like, ‘What the hell happened to you, why did you let that man catch you banging his wife? I told you to stop that months ago,’ shit.”

That...

My face contorted together as I bit down on a laugh, but it didn’t much keep the tremors from rattling my sore spots. This time, however, the pain was worth it. “Ah well, thanks. That’s me and Zenigata to a T!”

That threw him, and the look on his face was so, so sweet. It made me laugh harder, which was a really bad idea, but I did not care. *Refused* to care. I laughed until I was so dizzy that I actually tumbled into him.

Christof caught me, but with a look of surprise like he expected me to have stabbed him with something.

Which was fair, really. But still. It hurt a little.

Everything was tense for a second, including the guard’s gaze into the room. My eyes were closed tight; my head pounded so much it was hard to breathe, suddenly. I groaned, and left my head against the deputy’s chest.

The man’s large hands came down around my arms, warm, and slowly righted me. Eventually, the stars disintegrated enough for me to see. “You okay there, buddy?” he asked politely.

I shook my head slightly, gingerly pressing my free hand into the spot where the throb constantly emanated from, and took a few steadying breaths. Prickles of light flickered to life, only to phase out again. “Just dizzy.” I glanced around the room quickly. “S-sorry. Long night, I guess.” I forced out a smile. I had no idea if it looked right or not.

I really wished they had some chairs in here. Maybe it really was torture, after all. Chair-withholding torture, the most subtle and pernicious kind available to administrators.

“All right, all right, Mr. Lupin, control yourself,” Martelli said, coming back over and drawing me
back to the fingerprint scanner, her computer work finally done loading. “Christof is an innocent lad, you'll corrupt him, laying all over him like that.”

Christof came as well, given that we were tied together, and stayed just to my side, his hand coming near the machine when mine did.

“You work the drunks a lot, don’t you,” I replied, sheepishly, staring at the tangle of hands.

“Back when I was at Venice Central, yes.” She said, pulling my left hand’s thumb down onto the scanner. “Now hold still please.”

I did as I was told, though my mouth was the exception. “Hoo, drunks with boats. There’s gotta be some good stories there.”

Her green eyes narrowed, and a smile curled up as she held my wrist down with one hand and hit the button with another. “Ohh, there are, there are,” she said, rolling my finger. “Stick around long enough, I might tell you some of them.”

As light came to the scanner, so did warmth reappear under my fingertip, and I considered my view once again with a small smile. Martelli was pretty muscular, all told. I wouldn’t really want to get in a fight with her—she was like a large bowling ball. Or a small armchair. Either way, it would not end well. “Is that where you’re from? Venice?”

“No, not at all. I’m actually from a smaller town, up north.” She rattled off a name, and my attention perked up.

“Oh, I’ve been there,” I said, peppy. It was a mountainside town that overlooked a long valley. Green fields spread out between mountains until the distant sea, and the houses clung to the hills with that particular Italian country charm of tan stone and red roofs, with flower boxes in the windows. “Lovely little place on the way to Switzerland. There’s a beautiful tree in the park right outside the café...”

She paused, looking up at me. The flourescents, ugly-makers as they were, lit the pigments of her eyes with an almost metallic shine. It was beautiful. “You mean Verchella’s?”

“It specializes in cream-based snacks with the coffee, right? And there’s this beautiful blond that works there”—she glared at me, but I looked at the ceiling innocently—“who’s married.”

“Married?” Her hand lifted off of mine. “Donnatella got married? When?”

Beside us, Christof raised an eyebrow. I could see it on the way to my view of the ceiling.

I flicked my gaze back down to Martelli. “Two-year anniversary last year?” I said, and then, with a wicked smile: “I hear she imported him from Greece.”

“A Greek! No?!?”

“Mm hm. Nice man, far too interested in who sits where at the shop, particularly the men.” I ticked an eyebrow, smirking. She just shook her head, going back to her machine. “We got in a wrestling match. Naked. For honor.”

Then we’d all gone to the Turkish bath with Jigen, and well. Jigen had been a happy man. I’d just been bruised for a week.

Then again, Jigen was half a sadist when you got him going and I was more than half a masochist,
so really, the complaints had been noted and then filed directly into the hotel fireplace.

“Oh for fuck’s sake...” Marti scoffed, though I wasn’t sure about which part. “I really might need to phone home one of these days.”

“Or visit,” I suggested, wiggling my fingers for her. “They were nice, I’m sure they’d be happy to see you again.”

I winked, and Martelli huffed.

*Note: Leave Martelli flowers when escaping. Send to Verchella’s.*

“Anyway,” I continued with a cheesy smile, “What was your specialty in Venice?”

“Smuggling,” she said, clicking a button and plucking up my next finger. She wiped the scanner, then guided my pointer down. Her hands were lukewarm, but sure of themselves and somewhat gentle, too. Considerate, maybe, was the right word. It was a nice feeling.

Smuggling, though—I whistled at her response, impressed. Apparently *that* was something I could still do without making my body hate me: whistling. “How’d you end up doing this, then?”

“What, Interpol?”

“No, fingerprinting. Throw the wrong dignitary into the canals? Or the right one, maybe?”

“Nope, just overtime.” She smirked, clicking the button as she eyed me. “Ain’t got anybody at home to enjoy the time with, so I might as well make more towards vacation.”

I tilted my head, sympathetic. “Really?”

“Yeah,” she said, as my finger warmed and rolled under the scanner. She stared down at the work. “Was lucky enough to have two husbands. One was a drunk that killed himself with it; the other killed someone else with it. The end.”

There was a beat, in which I blinked hard. When I looked at him, Christof shrugged. I looked between the two of them a couple times, then, defeated, offered, “Well, I guess that’s about what I can expect from the Christmas Eve crowd.”

While she went for my middle finger, I glanced over my shoulder at Christof: “You?”

He shrugged, and tried to cross his arms, only to realize it wouldn’t work. “Overtime,” he said, putting his free hand on his hip, nose in the air. “Though I’m here to buy a girl a ring. The first girl.”

Well, at least that explained why he was the local Norwegian cop in France.

“Let’s hope she doesn’t drink,” I said automatically.

*Fuck, tigers. Stop it!*

But Christof only glanced aside at his temporary partner, dry. “Right?”

*Ah hah. Still got it.* I grinned. *Jigen doesn’t know what he’s talking about.*

Renewed, I cooed up at the blond, verbally ribbing him. “How long have you known her?”
“Long enough that you can’t tempt her,” Chrisof retorted immediately, bland.

“So you both know my tastes, huh?” I chuckled, turning back to the task ahead. My hand had been released, and we were waiting for the ring finger scan. Good old, dutiful ring finger, so under-appreciated.

“I always like coming to visit Interpol folks, albeit off-site this time. So many interesting people,” I said. “You though, you’re dangerous,” I quipped to Martelli, offering my hand up again.

She grinned, not even looking at me, and it was indeed a scary thing. “Why, thank you. We do pride ourselves on these things.”

And then she slapped my ass.

Sensation zinged up my spine, and I hissed with the effort of forcing it down again. “Police brutality,” I mock-shrieked, the chains clinking softly as Christof’s arm raised to follow mine as it clenched up to my chest. I barely managed to keep my messed up leg from being a casualty of the effort.

So that’s how she got stuck fingerprinting people.

“I think you mean <sexual harassment>,” the deputy chuckled, into my hair. His last two words were a complete trainwreck of syllables, but it wasn’t hard to guess what they meant. He put his hand on my shoulder to hold me still, in a grip that wasn’t entirely regulation, and the accompanying smirk was entirely unapologetic.

Both of them?! The voice in my head squeaked the words out, as Christof’s shadow fell over me, along with his heat and cologne.

It wasn’t that I was afraid, exactly. But this was not what I’d had in mind when I worried about being left alone with them. In fact, I was starting to wonder if I was hallucinating.

Christmas Eve skeleton crew my ass... This was Zenigata’s special payback for me hitting on him to make him uncomfortable last time we met, wasn’t it? Handsy cops. Goddamn handsy cops.

Ohhh, he was going to hear about this.

“Oh, you’re going to pull the language card on me now, huh?” There was more than one way to play this game though, presuming I’d judged these two right. Missile number one: fired.

“You gotta learn proper words sometime,” Christof threw back with mirth, though thankfully releasing my shoulder. Seemed he wasn’t going to go in for the kill after all. Maybe he was just fucking with me for hitting on Martelli. That was probably it, actually. I sighed inwardly relief.

“You’ve been spending too much time around Zenigata,” I pouted with a raised eyebrow, rubbing my wrists and turning away from him.

“First time I’ve met ‘im.” Christof shrugged.

“Wish I could spend more time with him.”

I whipped my head around, but immediately regretted it; I wobbled into Christof. He seemed to have the drill down now, though, and simply pushed me back up.

Still, I would not be dissuaded from chasing this clue. Maybe this was the thrill Zenigata got so
often from his work.

“Oh?”

“I mean, he ain’t got two licks of sense about most things, but...” She stopped, prevented herself from glancing at me, and then quickly went back to her computer, leaving me and Christof there without even finishing the scan of my last two fingers.

Well, I’ll be...

“Say...” I drawled after a moment of watching her hide behind the computer, turning to the deputy to give her some space. “What do you have in the Netherlands that’s so bad you can get promoted to Interpol to chase it?”

The man eyed me, then looked like he was actually considering it thoughtfully. “Finance mostly—international fraud. But there’s also human trafficking, drugs...the usual.”

“So how’d you get stuck guarding me?” I asked, genuinely curious. “I mean, aside from being handsy. You always work with the out-of-towners?”

He shrugged. “I was just messing with you.” He pointed at me, loosely. “But I will fuck you up if you keep hitting on Telli.”

“She was the one who slapped my—”

“I don’t need your help you know,” came her voice, though she didn’t reveal herself from behind the screen. “I can beat him up myself. I’ll enjoy it. He’s a stick.”

We both watched the space where her head should have been, neither of us buying the rough tone. I forewent the obligatory “you like sticks, huh,” joke, thinking it might save me from an early grave. Or undue ravaging.

* Tiger poking avoidance: First rank achieved! Jigen would be so proud. Goemon too, really. Even Fujiko would be impressed enough to make a derisive comment.

When our gazes each returned to the other, Christof just raised his eyebrows pointedly and ran his thumb over his nails, turning his hand over to make a show of looking over his sizeable knuckles in full view of my face. “But anyway. The regular guy’s on vacation.”

“Ah.” I nodded.

“Besides,” Christof said, his large hand suddenly coming down on my shoulder, but this time more friendly, “This is a good story to tell my lady, hm? Not often world-class criminals come through my fingers.”

I grinned, with a smile that curled up my face with a fury. “Did you mean to put it that way? Because I mean, I think there’s a line and it starts after Martelli here.”

* Spoke too soon. Jigen will be severely disappointed. Goemon would scoff. Fujiko would cheer. I resolved not to tell them about it. Except maybe Fujiko.

Would Christof hit me though? Would he?

Already in too deep to stop, I winked at him, ready to duck. Men generally hated being winked at by other men enough to dislodge the offender’s tooth. But the deputy’s eyes simply widened, his
face reddened, and he lifted his hand to hide the blush with a cross between a groan and a hiss.

*Ah-hah. Still got it. Suck it, Jigen.*

“Boys, what did I say?” the woman called, her hands on her hips, apparently back to normal now that the pressure was off her.

I laughed, only to bend into a stabbing pain in my side and head with a moan.

Martelli turned slightly to me while the computer processed the most recent addition. She poked me in the side where my free hand was ministering. “Ow,” I replied.

“You’ll need to get that looked at.”

“I figure we’ll see it soon enough in the bright, sallow ‘searchlights’,” I smiled, a bit apologetically. “You gonna be there for that too...” I was looking at her as I said it, until the last moment, “Christof? You are just so handsome, I would be beside myself and all a-twitter if you did.”

He rolled his eyes. Martelli laughed.

“You better watch out, Mr. Lupin. He looks nice on the outside, but he’s a beast. He played hockey.”

*Note to self: upgrade flowers to chocolate and fine alcohol.*

This was the best booking conversation I’d probably ever had. Though nothing beat that time the cops in Fargo, North Dakota confiscated my booze and we all got drunk, and I walked right out of the office after winning strip poker.

Suddenly feeling lighter, I said with a grin and some vigor, “You know what, Ms. Martelli, you’re getting an extra bottle of champagne on New Year’s.”

“Careful now, don’t want to add bribery to your impressive list of charges,” she said dryly, though there was a slight smirk on her face.

“Oh, so it finally connected to the Internet, did it?”

She came over, taking up my hand again. Her hands were small; she had to use both just to accomplish it. But when she spread my fingers, she paused over my ring finger for a second, rubbing the swirl of skin over the first joint’s knuckle thoughtfully. “Not married, eh?”

I grinned, warm satisfaction sweeping over me at the thought of seeing a law enforcement professional distracted out of robot mode. “Nope.”

“Tell me you don’t live at your mom’s house,” she drawled, setting my finger down on the scanner.

“Hah! No, no, never,” I smiled at the thought, warm all over. Italian men were notorious for living with their mothers post-thirty and then demanding the same treatment by their wives, if they ever managed to find one. “My mom was a nice lady, but she wouldn’t appreciate a hideout in her living room.”

That little apartment a long time ago, tinged with rosy light and a beautiful woman’s smile....

—Covered in my crew and the mess we always made. It was a cringe-worthy image.
“She the type to visit you in prison?”

The happy images of that apartment and its owner fell away, the rosy light shuttered to black. A memory of my grandfather bloomed in its place like a storm cloud: Him telling me I didn’t live there anymore, while his hand tightened on mine, as if it could ward away the feelings. But whether that was for him or for me...

I frowned as Marti took my last finger up. The pause lingered while she did the reading, but even after I got my hand back, I was quiet. She had asked it as an aside, but it had hit like a ton of bricks.

Zenigata liked to lecture me about law and justice, in between vehement bouts of spitting in my face in glorious glee that was all part of our competitive back and forth, but I hadn’t been expecting this—a middle-aged woman caring about me enough to ask after the support group I was to have while in the prison system.

The squat woman with hard lines on her face and a soft look in her eyes gazed up at me, apparently genuinely interested.

I found myself biting my lip as I rubbed my hand—the one shackled to Christof. “She won’t be coming,” I offered simply. And then, with a lump in my throat, “I’m afraid she can’t.”

*Please don’t ask any more questions.*

I had come prepared to bitch and lie and obfuscate my head off about my plans and friends, but not at all prepared to discuss my mother. Zenigata never asked about it. He had the decency not to.

To my surprise, the woman’s hand rested on my elbow for a moment, through the holes singed into the fabric. “Well, that’s too bad,” she said gently with a pat. She switched the scanner off and went over to the computer terminal, making a few clicks. “You’re charming enough to visit, for a louse.”

I chuckled, despite it all, though it was tinged with a heavy heart. “...Thanks.”

Before I could say anything else, the door—already open as it was—was knocked upon, and the Inspector poked his head in, looking, somehow, even more grim than before.

All three of us turned to him, though each with a slightly different version of “save me” on their face.

“God, you look good in chains,” he said with zest and suddenly broke into the breathless, gloating smile I’d expected all this time, giving me an up-down. “I’ve dreamed of just this sort of thing.”

Whilst covered in dust and dried blood, looking like I’d just come out of a warzone?

Oh, well...yes, that made sense. I supposed I’d just answered my own question.

Still, I was not one to miss an opportunity like this, memory lane be damned. Life was for living. Mom had taught me that, if nothing else. So had Grandpop.

As if winding up for the swing, I set my shoulders and tipped my head back. My eyebrows dipped dubiously and with a half-smirk and a coy tone, I forced my voice to have one decent show tonight: “...I won’t tell anyone you just said that, if you get me two aspirin.”

Pops’s eyes widened, and his face suddenly reddened.

“And I won’t tell anyone you gave him it, if you do,” Martelli said without even looking up, and
for a moment, I wanted to kiss her.

_Upgrade Marti’s present to whatever she damn well wants. Maybe a yacht and a month long vacation on it. —New husband? Boyfriend? Boytoy? ...Moi?_

Everyone looked at Christof then. He would be the deal breaker.

But his blue eyes looked between us all for a second, and then stared at the ceiling in resignation. “I didn’t hear nothin’, I didn’t see nothin’.”

I grinned. _So that’s how you get promoted to Interpol from Norway._

Chapter End Notes

Ten points for using "whilst" in a sentence unironically.
Division

Chapter Notes

The perspective switches for the last scene of this chapter. Also note the new tags.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So that’s how it is,” came the voice of the town’s police commissioner over the phone. I’d gotten through the chewing-out from my boss (which ended in a congratulations), and now I was “liaising” with the local honcho.

He was the type of man to mask a threat with a smile, to hint and offer bribes so subtle you’d almost miss them—until you met an offer you couldn’t refuse in an alley one night from one of his off-the-books associates because you’d played dumb too long for his liking. Currently, my task was to suss out what level of threat I was getting via only his voice.

“I know he’s got warrants in every country in the world, but we’d sure like first crack at him.”

My free hand tapped the edge of the table. The old phone, cradled against my ear, was doing an admirable job but in danger of being thrown across the room when I was done. I tried to ignore the ever-increasing sting on the back of my hands from the burns—and my ever-increasing rage.

The room was dark; it was just someone’s office with a large, dark desk and a single window at the end. Books lined one side, and left the space feeling closed-in and oddly quiet. The window’s mini-blinds were only half shuttered, so fiery orange from the lights outside came in, burning stripes over my hand like tiger print.

Whether I was the predator or the prey, though, would be decided by the end of this phone call.

“Unless it was someone else’s doing,” I offered back, smoothly.

“How would that be?” he asked, a genuine touch of surprise to his otherwise condescending voice. The shock was not at the concept itself, however. It was at the fact that I even thought of fingering someone else. This guy was good, but I was better. He was about to find that out the hard way.

I changed positions, so that my back was leaned against the desk, as it would be if I was actually talking to him in person. “You’d be surprised how often his schemes bring something else to light,” I offered, with a tone of authority.

“Well, that may be, but in the mean time...” Here, he sighed theatrically. “The media’s run with what we’ve got on the surface, and it’s stirring people up. You know I’m always on the side of the truth, no matter how unpalatable it may be to one’s personal tastes. I’ve heard you’re fond of him...” He let that sit for a second longer than necessary. “Alive. I wouldn’t want anything to jeopardize that.”

I gritted my teeth, but managed to sound disinterested. “I wouldn’t be here if I let a little thing like false hope in human goodness get to me.” I switched ears with the phone. “There are winners and losers in every game. I prefer to be on the side of the winners. In this day and age, that happens to be the law.”
A soft noise came from the other end of the line, which I assumed was a smirk from the tone of it. “You’re a good man, Zenigata.” It wasn’t a compliment.

“I try to be.” I shrugged, and tried to make that get through the phone with my tone. “Are you?”

Maybe it was too early to show that I knew his cards. Still, I was not in the mood to be pushed around. He needed to know that I knew his angle; that dissuaded most of them, the ones that were in it just because the opportunity presented itself.

On the other hand, if he was determined, he just might take the light tone I’d said it with as an invitation.

The answer came too quickly, and far too smooth. “Surely you jest.”

So that was how it was going to be. “Try me.”

“Inspector, what are you getting at? I can’t find it through your tone of unfounded insinuation.”

“Mm-hm. Then don’t think you’re taking my prisoner away from me.” My free hand dropped into my pocket, fingerling the lighter and flicking the cap open and closed. “He’s got preceding warrants in every country on Earth just abouts, and most of them, like this one, have signed treaties about this. So that everybody’s got a far shake at him, he’s nobody’s but ours. Feel free to try him in absentia, but he’s leaving with me, terrorism charges or no.”

There was not much that could be said to that. The silence was tense for exactly that reason.

“Fair enough,” he responded finally, in grim displeasure, and I sighed inwardly in relief. “But there is one thing I need you to get out of him, before you do.” The calm politician was back, quickly slipping into something darker. “For the locals. So that I can give my people something.”

If I had a phone chord, I’d be curling my finger through it. As it was, I leaned back, free hand bracing on the desk. “I hear you.”

“Good man.” Favor crept into his voice. Good. I didn’t want to be shot tonight.

Still, it made me want to punch something. I was nobody’s dog.

He related what he was hoping for, all the while my frown deepened. Still, when I spoke again, it was light.

“How quick do you want it?” I asked. “And hard? I know some of your people have been hurt by all this. And your reputation too.”

“Oh, as you deem necessary,” he returned airily. “I trust you know how to get results, otherwise you wouldn’t be ‘around’ like you are, as you say.”

I chuckled, but it wasn’t because of the joke. It was an audacious thing to say. People in this town thought they owned the world, apparently. Still, the chortle seemed to satisfy him.

“I’ll get it out of him,” I replied, equally as light. “Don’t worry ‘bout a thing, Commissioner.”

“Good to know you’re still one of us.”

I rolled my eyes and suppressed a shudder. I didn’t say anything; let him think what he wanted from it. When the silence made itself known, he continued: “I’ll leave you to your work, then. Oh, and by the way—I’m glad you’ve gotten a chance to visit our little town. You might stay awhile,
“Call when you’re ready to transfer the prisoner. An escort will be sent along with. Goodnight.”

“Good morning.”

I flipped the phone closed and slammed my free hand down on the table. For a while, I just leaned there, watching the bookcase mindlessly, the fist with the phone in it covering my mouth.

“If you could find a way for us to take him off your hands until, say, oh, New Year’s...”

Finally, the central heat came on, and the noise pushed me to move. I turned my gaze to the window, but I found little solace there. Flakes of snow drifted over the bifurcated view, heavier than before.

Two hours to sunrise.

This is going to be bad.

* * *

It wasn’t that I thought Lupin had set out to kill civilians, or even hold them hostage; there was simply no evidence to refute the assumption.

And that was always what did good men in: it was just too damn easy to believe a man was bad, and too hard to believe a man was good, even when the evidence stared you in the face.

I would need to get the story out of him, and details. Many, many, iron-clad details that I could investigate before someone else got there.

I had hope that perhaps the civilian destruction part of this wasn’t his doing. That look in his eye as the flame had swept over him.... It had certainly been surprise. But of what?

His plan going awry? Or of something happening that wasn’t part of the plan at all?

Still, if that had been the case, I would have suspected him to say something about that, by now. But maybe he was just waiting until we were alone? I’d definitely have to give him that chance, and soon, or I’d lose mine to protect the both of us.

It was not that Arséne Lupin III was a particularly law-abiding man, obviously. But he was moral, in his own way. A way that tended more toward Robin Hood than Genghis Khan; while he did tend toward the bigger and brighter, it was highly unlike him to just blow shit up, especially stuff that could get innocent people killed.

And yet, despite all that, a little voice in the back of my mind wondered.

Wondered if today was the day he’d sprouted black wings. Gotten in with the local organized crime like his father had taught him to, and done work for them for a place to belong.

Or if it was simply the day he’d snapped and just didn’t care about the means to the end anymore.

Criminals all turned bad eventually, no matter how good they started. Absolute power corrupted absolutely, and constant fear of predation only sped up that poison. Such was the Siren song of crime, and when it came to Sirens, Lupin showed his mortal side most severely.

I eyed him as he drank the contents of a paper water cup to wash down the pills I’d brought him. There was nothing particularly sinister-looking about him at the moment; just the typical mental
sharpness, always looking for a way to weasel itself into your heart.

Before I’d arrived, I’d taken a couple of painkillers myself, gathering them from the nurse’s station in the lobby; I made sure to get him the kind that lowered swelling, not that I’d thought he’d thank me. I’d also taken a moment to talk to each of the guys in the armed guard, now loitering about in the lobby playing cards, waiting for orders. The only one that seemed like he could be in the Commissioner’s pocket was the leader, naturally.

That hadn’t helped my mood. I’d told them to stay there until I called for them, which would be never.

Lupin eyed me back over his own hand as he drank, but musingly. The staring contest inevitably left me the winner when he had to tip his head all the way back, but my prize was terrible: I got a very good look at the rope mark around his neck. It sent a light shiver down my spine, involuntarily. There were just certain things the brain understood to be telltale signs of mortality, and it didn’t like them.

I certainly didn’t like them on him.

Lupin handed back the cup, which Marti succinctly pitched into the trash. I checked his shirt sleeves shortly to make sure he hadn’t managed to pocket something since I’d left, singed and melted and half-there as they were. It was unlikely, but still, they didn’t call him a master for nothing.

During the ordeal, he complained and joked in turns, and I threatened him half-heartedly. But by the end of it, I was so frazzled with thoughts of what had happened over the phone and dealing with his onslaught of questions about said phone calls that I simply ordered him to shut up. He pursed his lips at me, half sulking, half contemplating.

I ignored it.

“Well, now that that bit of blackmail’s over, let’s go,” I ordered, and pulled him out into the hall. As much as I liked Lupin—he was certainly the most jovial of life passengers—I had to remind myself that he was my prisoner. P-r-i-s-o-n-e-r. Criminal. Bad guy.

And that the local authorities wanted him tenderized and on a spit if they could manage it, for some reason that had nothing to do with the carnage he’d caused. The civilian carnage, anyway.

Or, quite possibly, wanted him drowned at the bottom of the sea.

We walked to the end of the quiet corridor, the thief to my right, Christof to his right, with Marti in the lead and our guard behind us. Christof seemed to be doing a decent job of holding Lupin’s weight when he limped, so that was good.

Come to think of it though, I didn’t even know the guard’s name. I should probably get around to that soon.

Lupin, for once, was quiet. We were all tired, no doubt, but that wasn’t what was causing it. He was glancing at me furtively every few steps, cataloging a different part of my posture each time. A normal person would think he was preparing to attack, if they even noticed it. But I knew better: He wasn’t that stupid. He was concerned about me.

Which he should be, honestly. I just didn’t have the energy to bother grumbling back at him.

My heart just felt heavy. How was I going to dig him out of this?
How was I going to dig myself out of this?

I could do it, but not when I was this tired. And only if backup came when I needed it.

That was where the anger came. It was frustration, rearing its ugly head. And the question: Why?

*Why did you do it this way?*

*And why did you have to be stupid enough to get caught in a town like this?*

The numbers my boss at Interpol had given me were not pretty. It felt, oddly enough, like I’d been betrayed, if all of this had in fact been Lupin's doing. And even if it hadn’t—*you should have been good enough not to get setup like this.*

It was a ridiculous thought—Lupin owed me nothing; he was a criminal. But this wasn’t the man I’d been fighting with, toe to toe, off and on for so many years. I felt tarnished, just being near him.

Still, perhaps I could keep him from falling all the way to hell, if I kept him locked in purgatory for a little while. And smacked him around a bit. Could I get him to repent, and somehow make this better?

The line of my mouth was certainly grim enough to cause him worry. That was probably what was doing it, actually.

Still, Lupin’s response to feeling uncomfortable was to poke at the thing making him uncomfortable. It was going to be hard not to explode on him, but I hoped I could make it. There were people watching, after all.

I glanced at Marti’s back before me, her curls bobbing along as we walked.

Important people.

As we approached the large, barred window at the end of the hall, I discovered it was actually about fifteen feet high, and ten feet wide. It dwarfed all of us together, and it was an eerie tombstone indeed: it was wrought iron and pane glass, and had once been beautiful, a symmetrical latticework of delicate iron roses and their leaves spreading along the base and up its sides. But thick bars crisscrossed it now, about a foot away from the glass on the inside, leaving the pattern obscured.

The glass itself was thin, warped in places and frosted in others from age. Still, burning red-orange light, from a security light high on the window well outside, spilled into the hallway. On the other side, heavy snowflakes fell fast and furious without a sound, disappearing into black void. It made me oddly tense.

It was snowing so hard that the patterns on the floor were disorienting to walk through, due to their shadows.

When I looked over at Lupin again, I found him no longer glancing at me. Instead, he was gazing down at the flowing pattern of falling snow and crisscrossing bars on the floor, lost in thought as we walked. The light was so bright that his legs disappeared in the tapestry.

Well, at least he was being quiet and low-maintenance; it did happen on occasion, either when he
was upset or tired. If he was smart, he’d keep silent and stay that way, like a good prisoner flanked by cops. It’d be easier on all of us. It wasn’t like I had a home to go back to today—even if the situation wasn’t hot—but I would still appreciate not having to use every ounce of energy I had to deal with him.

But no one had ever accused Lupin of being smart. Intelligent, yes. Brilliant, even. But smart—no. He lacked almost all the kinds of common sense that existed. Asking him to stay quiet and complacent was like asking for a miracle and a unicorn too.

The window was the top of a T intersection of hallways, and stretched into the arms of the T, it was so wide. When we rounded the corner, it was to discover that the lights weren’t on in the cross hallway, which was lovely. There was nothing to either side of us but blackness, interspersed by melting squares of orange painted on the walls to the left by an even spacing of small windows along the right. That linear degradation ended in a white emergency exit light for a stairwell in the distance beyond. Meanwhile, the ornate, looming behemoth of a window flanked our backs.

I guess the gal at the desk didn’t think I was going to go this way.

Everyone seemed to notice at the same time how dangerous of a situation it was. Lupin slowed, and we all looked around. I looked at him; but he seemed as nervous as the rest. So he probably hadn’t planned anything for this moment, then. Well, it was my job to set the tone then, and keep the troops calm.

“Damn, don’t they have any light switches around here?” I grumbled, more boldly than necessary, and hoping it wasn’t the last thing I ever said, because what a waste that would be. I at least deserved something poetic, if not heroic.

I looked back over my shoulder, but it didn’t seem like the navy goon squad was ambushing us either.

“Want me to look for one?” Marti asked, unperturbed.

“Nah...,” I finished after a skeptical moment. “We’re where we need to be, anyway.”

Indeed, the elevator was literally at the corner, which left us with plenty of light courtesy of the rose-etched window. I detached from Lupin and hit the button.

As we waited, sitting within the pool of devilish light it cast, the guard was shifting on his feet, looking around sharply; Christof was eyeing Lupin, seeing as how he couldn’t get away from him, but also like he was deciding how to get him to duck without breaking him if need be; and Marti was holding Lupin’s arm in my place, staunchly refusing to give in to the atmosphere. I supervised, back to the wall next to the button panel, listening for sounds of danger over the hum of the elevator coils.

But nothing happened. In fact, the most interesting thing to change was Lupin.

He was silhouetted against the massive window, looking out it almost forlornly. He was a thin figure of complete black against a field of bright red-orange, sharply crisscrossed by black rods and fast-flowing dots that were a gradient from white to black. At first I thought it was because he was expecting something, but it wasn’t that. His posture was deflated, even defeated; his thoughts were a million miles away. Next to him, the roses scrolled up gracefully, like they could caress him should he just move a little closer.

*Prison, maybe?*
I narrowed my eyes, tracing the line of his. No...

His gaze was focused on the window itself...and its iron welding. Welding that was haphazard and quickly done, and painted over a dozen times in thick globs. The beautiful filigree ironwork scaling the sides of the window was heavily obscured by the quilt of somewhat uneven checkered squares the pipe-bars made; it was a shame, really.

Just like his life.

But that was not the point. The original glass was pretty thin. It was definitely a window you could jump out of, once you got past the bars. Which he could, given his joint shifting abilities.

...If you didn’t mind breaking something on the landing. Something like your head.

“I know what you’re doing,” I said to him.

“Oh?” His eyes drifted over to me, one lit stark orange, the other lost to the dark. “And what am I doing?”

There was none of the usual playfulness to his tone, or even his gaze; there was nothing there but cold. The god of thieves was back, and ready to consume.

Goosebumps rose on my arms, but I forced it down, hiding it in the pretense of shifting my stance. “Planning your escape.”

His mouth cracked into a mirthless grin, bloody light pulling around his lips and teeth until half his smile was lit in a streak that faded to black in the middle of his face, the shining gash hanging underneath his one orange eye. “Maybe.” His voice was still rasping badly, but only made the whisper of it eerier.

That was the face of a man that not only went against the local mafia, but commanded his men to slaughter them all if they crossed him.

The elevator dinged to announce its arrival. I lifted off the wall, glad for the excuse to look away. Something wasn’t right about this. Any of this.

“‘Maybe’?” I asked, feigning disinterest.

“You’ll just have to wait and see, I suppose.” A satisfied smirk accompanied his shrug; I could hear it on his breath.

Marti entered, then Lupin, prompting Christof to follow him. Even bound and shackled, he disappeared from view with a grace like he owned the place. Something about the flip of light on his jacket as he disappeared inside irritated me.

And then I realized it: He was still managing to strut.

“You’re some piece of work,” I snapped, following them in and placing one hand on either side of the doorway. “Do you even know what kinda trouble you’re in?”

Lupin stood in the back of the car with his head bowed and eyes closed, his hands held loosely in front of him. His response was to raise his eyebrows once, shortly, and tick his shoulder slightly. He didn’t even bother opening his eyes.

What the hell had happened to his perky attitude from two minutes ago? Where had all this
disrespect come from?

“You look at me when I’m talking to you,” I commanded.

His eyes flicked open, but the look he fixed me with, head bowed, was not a kind one. “Or what.”

Marti’s eyebrows raised in surprise. Christof rolled his eyes, ready to whack him one.

“What the hell’s going on with you?” I demanded, nose scrunched up. I didn’t really want Christof to beat the hell out of him, but I suspected he would if I told him to.

I also didn’t want something of his to come through that window and attack me while I was distracted by my own rage.

Furthermore, I didn’t want to beat the hell out of him, but even I had my limits.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Lupin asked, cold. He tipped his head back, and gazed down his nose at me.

“Mad? At me?”

“What the hell do you think you’re doing here? I’m doing here?!” I roared, diving in after him and scooping up Lupin by what remained of his shredded collar with both fists and shaking him.

“You’re in enough trouble as it is; I don’t need more of your bullshit!”

He didn’t react, and his ragdoll act just made me more annoyed; I was likely to start splitting lips. Cursing, I let him go with a hard shove against the wall; he slid around into the corner, where Christof caught him and—fuck it all—sheltered him bodily like he would some scared little sister.

I whipped around to Marti, fuming. She just evaded my eyes by looking to the guard.

He was still standing in the hall, framed by the window. He looked between us, looked at the shotgun in his hands, and announced, “I’ll take the stairs.”

“Yeah, you do that,” I snapped, crossing my arms anew and throwing myself into the corner adjacent to Lupin and Christof’s, the one behind Marti-at-the-button-panel. I stared at the floor, annoyed at myself, at everything, cursing silently to myself and trying not to punch something.

“What floor?” Marti asked, professional.

“Basement.”

Everyone fell quiet at that. But she clicked the button, nonchalant as always. Mostly. But she wasn’t yet giving me the “Zeni are you all right” look. Well, maybe she was. I wasn’t looking. I was too busy scowling, brim of my hat covering my eyes.

_This goddamned town...._

There was nothing more inhospitable than a firing squad at your back and no where to run but the sea.

The door closed, and we started to descend. I glared at Lupin. He glanced away quickly and ended up glaring at the door, surly.

I realized my fist was clenching when the skin on the back of it started stinging angrily. Both hands were, really, but this set them off to match my temper.
“What is your problem?” I demanded.

His shoulder ticked, and his jaw clenched so tightly it could have crushed something.

“Pops.” Lupin's look could cut glass, and his tone wasn’t far off. “What in the world was that phone call about?”

“You want to ask me that now?”

Dark eyes flicked over to me, ready to stab something. “Yes.”

He couldn’t have known. He didn’t know a damn thing about anything. Because he refused to ever learn that consequences always caught up to you eventually, when you were Icarus.

In a flash, the side of my fist connected with the metal wall next to me, right at shoulder level. Everyone jumped, and the metallic smack reverberated through the car.

I couldn’t look at him. I wouldn’t.

Am I Daedalus, or the birds whose feathers he plucked to make his wings?

“You.”

In a moment, the elevator stopped, and the door opened. I practically threw myself out of it, I was in such a hurry to excuse myself from the whole situation. “This way,” I demanded, not even bothering to look back.

* * *

“Oh,” I said, when we had arrived at our destination. “I see.”

I had my head tipped back, giving Zenigata and the rest a wonderful view of the rope burn around my neck, no doubt well on its way to turning yellowish-purple. At least the pills were helping the internal swelling go down. Still, my eyes tracked slowly across the letters above the door, thinking about the new knuckle marks on my clavicle.

Showers.

“Easier for the doctors,” Pops replied, flatly. It was amazing he was even still talking to me. He turned to Martelli. “Could you rummage up a dressing gown, please?”

His tone was decidedly softer than before, and so was his posture. It was probably his way of apologizing for what happened in the elevator without actually being able to, in front of a prisoner. Still, there was a tremor of tension belying it all. He might still snap again—and so might I. I needed to be careful.

I had cracked the mystery of this place, and the answer had not been good.

It had been very, very bad, in fact.

I really shouldn’t have blamed Pops. But I wanted to. I desperately, desperately needed to blame someone other than myself. Which was not a good look on me, but it was all I had, when memories of the past overwhelmed me, body and soul. If I had gone one sentence farther explaining how I felt and I why, we would’ve have a much different outcome in that elevator.

I had to use his absence to deflect the conversation or else I would have snapped completely.
So he was pissed. The alternative was a lot worse. I counted it a victory.

“Sure,” Marti nodded at Zenigata, then headed off. Apparently she wasn’t moved by our outburst much at all, or if she was, she hid it well. I had to apologize to her at some point, but I wasn’t in the mood to figure it out at the moment. Or even capable of it. The emotional ticks were still coursing through me; I looked around for something in the present to occupy my attention that wouldn’t mind the looks emanating from me that could kill fluffy creatures and small children.

This floor looked to be utility rooms, which meant: uniform storage; laundry, if wasn’t done in one of the other buildings; locker and sleeping rooms; and probably the big machines that were too heavy to put on higher floors, if they had them. Knowing that didn’t alleviate the effect of the creepy lighting down the long, windowless hallways, though.

Or the whisper in the back of my mind about handsy cops.

We were at the head of a T intersection of hallways, identical to the one upstairs, except this time sans windows. No matter the direction I looked, there was nothing but round pin lights recessed into the ceiling, shining down sickly yellow cones on otherwise dark spaces. Some of them weren’t working. One, illuminating the stairs’s entrance at one of the arms of the T, was blinking.

Right out of Silent Hill, this. Where the hell did Zenigata find this place, the first listing in the phone book?

All it needed was one of the army-surplus steel doors from seventy years ago lining the walls to be stained with copious blood splatter, punctuated by a marionette-like janitor down the hall, and we’d be all set. Christof was about as tall as Pyramid Head, sans metal hat, and had a habit of standing right in my blind spot.

Good times in Lupin’s life: not this.

*Merry Christmas, self.*

“Sure you aren’t taking me in here to kill me?”

“Yes.” Then, a beat later: “Why, you going to try something?”

“Can’t think of what it’d be,” I replied, completely serious. Places like this, the authority had the upper hand. They had all the aces. The best I could rummage up wouldn’t even be a face card. More like a five.

And since we were in the basement...yeah, it’d be a pair of twos at best.

Oh: And Zenigata was pissed. Well fuck it, I was screwed. Time to start flipping tables.

I turned to track where Martelli went for the uniforms, trying not to jostle my injuries. But before she could achieve her destination, our guard returned to us from the stairs. Zenigata immediately went about checking if he was really him, and I lost sight of her in the darkness.

“Stand guard out here,” Pops told the man when he was satisfied. Zenigata gave Marti’s lost figure a long, careful gaze, and then, to me, commanded: “In.”

He clasped the back of my neck roughly and steered me in the open door. Tiny tiles clicked under our shoes, and Christof, of course, came with us, a step behind. Luckily, he hadn’t said anything about the whole affair yet—or done anything—but I couldn’t trust that to last. Whatever goodwill I’d earned upstairs I’d thrown right out the window.
Fuck, that damn window.

I shut my eyes, trying to force out the thoughts, the memories.

Two, three stacks of lockers in, the Inspector pushed me into a U-shaped dressing space between walls of tall grey lockers. There was a wooden bench to one side, smoothed by years of use.

Finally, somewhere to sit. It looked like heaven, and I might have audibly sighed in relief.

But Christof didn’t budge. I was two feet short of my prize. I’m pretty sure I whined in response, high in my injured throat.

Behind me, Zenigata undid the manacle that connected to the deputy, finally freeing us from each other. The weight of the falling chains knocked me off balance, but I just used it as an excuse to collapse into the bench. Which was a mistake, given my injuries, but I didn’t care. I could finally sit. Sweet rest fell over my limbs, and just as quickly clawed over my mind.

“Hang out over there for a while. Where I can’t see you,” Zenigata said. When I checked, I found him standing with his arms folded, his feet set apart, and Christof frowning at him. Zenigata just lifted his chin at him in response, scowling back.

“I won’t kill him,” he finally added with a sigh and an eyeroll.

My Norwegian lovebird sighed and turned away with a, “Don’t get me fired.” He gave me a short look of mixed feeling, which seemed to have a *Scream if you need me* written into it.

Well, that was something, I supposed.

Within seconds, he was gone, presumably waiting one row over. I hoped he hadn’t disappeared completely, though really, the fact that I was worrying that about Zenigata had me more concerned than anything else.

Pops grumbled some platitude unintelligible from a distance to the man as he left, and then scowled at me. I stared back, expectantly, trying not to let my gut sink. I’d fucked up. Badly.

*Goddamned memories.*

“Is this the part where I get naked and...don’t get beat up?” I asked, hopeful. My voice shook slightly, betraying me, but I told myself it was just the swelling.

“You wanted that, you should have planned your day a little differently.”

I studied his gaze, but it was shuttered. I sighed and lifted a hand in dismissal, only to wince through the movement. Maybe I had been wrong about still having Zenigata’s protection. Well, if he was going to beat me up, he sure as hell better believe he’d be telling me why after. Even if that reason was ‘why don’t you ever fucking behave.’ “Fine.”

Still, this was an occupational hazard between us from time to time, when something external was going on, but I certainly didn’t appreciate it regardless. I had a feeling this might have something to do with that phone call, whatever else I’d done. I guess we’d find out by how hard he hit me and what he asked me after.

Regardless, he knew how to keep me from losing teeth, at least, and my spleen. *That* I appreciated.

I held out my arms, wrists together. I bowed my head, trying to indicate compliance. He sighed too,
put-upon, and came over to my side in a few short steps.

When his hand landed upon my head, I tried not to flinch.

And yet—

—his palm rested flat on my head, warm, solid, and heavy.

I opened my eyes, focused on my bloodied, dirtied, and shackled wrists in front of me. I could still see straight, which was the biggest shock to my reeling mind; it wasn’t quite able to process that I was unharmed, and what’s more, being given care.

I didn’t look up. I really didn’t want to see what was on his face. I wasn’t sure I’d be able to deal with it.

His hand slid down my neck, down my arm, and came to rest on my fist. He knelt down on one knee, and scooped up my hands in both of his.

I ended up staring right into his eyes, under the brim of his wide hat, unable to look away.

“What are you so angry about?” he whispered, eyes searching my face.

The whole turn of events shook me so badly that I jerked backward at his words, and even desperately trying to hold still, a shiver went through my entire body. He had to have felt it, but his response was just to hold my hands tighter, pressing them together between his.

His mouth ticked down, and a massive spasm went through one of my arms in response. Warmth spread across my face like a cresting wave, and a moment after came the emotions, freed from their cage. I couldn’t stop them.

No, no no no...

A moment later came the memories, lancing through my consciousness from every direction, as they conquered neural pathways one by one and set up blockades so nothing else could get out or in. Memories of a place much like this one burst to life, threatening to take me back to that time and that place if I looked at them, let them hook themselves into me. But they forced themselves in front of my eyes, like an interrogator’s crime scene photographs, and there was no where else to turn.

Screaming my head off, pleading with him to come back—

In the real world, Zenigata’s unwavering kindness was not helping things. It just made me feel like a child again.

I can’t breathe.

He was reminding me of my mother.

“Hey, hey, it’s all right—” he soothed, one hand detaching from mine, only to grasp my forearm tightly.

The heat across my face reached a critical point and when I blinked, jerking from the shakes as I was, two tears forced their way out of my eyes. I held desperately still, refusing to acknowledged them.

Meanwhile, the spasms were quickly growing worse, causing gasps of pain to ricochet around my
body along with it. It was the only way I was holding onto sanity, and I welcomed it; I let it consume my limbs so that my mind could be even the smallest bit free.

_Tears just happen at times like this,_ I told myself, concentrating on logic. It’d been a long time since it’d last occurred, but I knew the drill: this meant the _shaking_, the _emotions_, the _memories_—that they were almost over...unless I gave into it fully.

Then there’d be a hell of a lot more where that came from, and we didn’t have that kind of time.

We didn’t have that kind of _relationship_, Zenigata and me.

Only Jigen.

_Jigen..._

For a moment, complete calm came over my mind, and I found my voice in a tiny gap of blue sky that was just as quickly swallowed up again by the hurricane.

“I can’t tell you,” I whispered back, strained, desperately wishing him to understand. If I had to explain it, if I had to give it the power of voicing it, there’d be no telling when I’d come back, if ever.

His brow tipped down, concerned. A moment later, he lifted a hand, reaching toward my face. I pulled back, but it just kept coming. “Hey now,” he coaxed. “What’s going on in that brilliant mind of yours?”

The gentle tone and its compliment accomplished the opposite of its mission. It unwound me even further, and I twitched again, bodily. Another upwelling of emotion came immediately after, heating my skin like it was on fire, and more stupid tears appeared, unbidden. They were thick and fat and streamed down my face like it was a race, one on the heels of the next, and were no doubt as ugly as they were impossible to control. Why was he so good at getting under my skin when he had to? When he didn't even _mean_ to?

When his thumb reached my cheek, I startled involuntarily and forced my eyes shut; I stayed like that, mindless and tense and still, praying this was all just a bad dream because I never wanted him to see this; because I thought I was _over_ this. Ignorant to my wishes, he tenderly stroked the pad of his thumb over the tears and their tracks, wiping them gently, but firmly, away.

It was the last thing I wanted him to do.

And yet, it was calming, and so, so warm.

Slowly, slowly the knot in my stomach unwound, and I squeezed back the hand that still held mine.

“Please don’t ask any more questions,” I pleaded.

“I can’t promise that,” he replied, apologetically.

“It has nothing to do with today,” I offered, a little stronger from his touch, hoping it would give him enough of a hint to sate his curiosity. I opened my eyes and stared up at the ceiling, taking a deep breath.

It was passing, somehow, as I forced air into my lungs. The tremors, deep in the muscle, were still jerking my legs every few seconds, but his warmth was smoothing them, steadily replacing the cold with something safe and whole. My head was clearer; the fog of physical pain stabbing at me
from the inside, the fog that trapped me in the dark of the past, was gone, revealing a sky which I could easily navigate. I could breathe again—control my thoughts again—if I just kept staring at the nondescript ceiling, letting the memories flow out through my eyes.

This was not like the ceilings they had there, and that...was helping.

“If you’re certain,” Pops replied, kindly. And then, with some authority: “Just don’t take it out on me, anymore.”

“Yes,” I sighed, not quite getting out the “sir” I’d planned. My voice sounded more like an ill wind than a human tone, rasping as it was at this angle. I hoped he didn’t fault me for it. I tried again: “I won’t.”

“Good. Now. I need to ask you something else. Something important.” His hands returned to mine, and clasped them both individually. There was something desperate in the way he held them, and I looked down at him.

He looked pained.

“Why’d you do it?” he asked, softly.

It felt like an eternity before my mouth opened. My voice was barely there. “Do what?”

“Kill people. Innocent people.” His face twisted. “Collateral damage? That’s not like you, Lupin.”

His eyes were pleading with me. All of him was. My natural instinct was to lie my way out of this, whatever “this” was, but there was nothing to lie about. And I was too tired to piece together what he was even referencing. A couple more tears blinked out, the last, and I wiped at them with my sleeve. When I was done, I set my hand back down on top of his, because there was no where else to put it, really. I didn’t try to comfort him, though. I wasn’t any good at it, without my humor. So I just left it on his knuckles, folded up.

He wouldn’t let me go, though. He flipped our hands around, covering mine again with an almost playful swipe of acknowledgment with his thumb. He smiled at me weakly, hoping. Prompting.

I just stared back at him, brow creased with confusion.

It all must have looked guilty as hell, because his black eyes flickered back and forth across mine, and then he sighed, dropping his forehead onto the back of his hands. Mine, under his, fell to rest on my knees under the weight, and for a moment we just existed connected like that, him silent, the solid pressure of his head on my legs, and my mind blank at the surrealism of it all.

Zenigata had warm hands, the way Jigen did. They were soft and worn. And they held me with a kindness that lived in a similar place to his.

I’d hurt him, somehow, beyond just disrespecting him. But what had... how did... what was...

<“I can’t...I can’t get you out of this, this time,”> he whispered, in Japanese. His hands tightened over mine.

I opened my mouth, then shut it. “Pops, I...”

But nothing else came.

Slowly, I slipped my unchained hand out from under his. I had to shake his off and give it a pat to
stay him.

Freed, my hand hovered in the air.

I swallowed hard, and decided.

My hand slid under his hat. I pushed his thick hair back through my fingers, and settled my palm on his scalp. He looked up, very nearly teary-eyed, but I just held my hand there, ignoring the sweat under the hat line.

Do I feel warm to you, too?

<"I think you need to tell me what this is about, Inspector."

Chapter End Notes

Poor Lupin.... Poor Pops....

I'm fascinated by what pushes a character to cry, and with Lupin, who's never shed a tear in the entire franchise as far as I'm aware, it's a particularly attractive topic for me to explore. While it's somewhat outside of the realm of canon, I hope the writing proved believable here.

I also hope you were as moved by it as I was.

Not only did I delete three alternative scenes of almost 7,000 words (the whole length of the chapter itself as it now stands) to get this right, but this chapter got inside of me and held me emotional hostage for a straight week until I got it into a format I liked. (Oh, the things we do for the love...and the ones that bring it.)
So, before we get to more story, I want to tell you all about something fun:

There is a new live-action weekly cop drama on in the States, on the ABC network I think, called "The Catch." It airs every Thursday evening. It's basically a live-action Lupin, if the show moved extremely slowly and had no explosions and the characters were stiff. Boring, I know. But it's only the second episode: it might get better. There's supposed to be a fight scene in Ep 3.

Now, it's not actually a Lupin franchise show. But it really, really feels like it, and it's super satisfying to watch it imagining the crew as the Lupin characters.

It poses the question, "What is the story of The One? What happens when, in his late 40s, this international master art thief and con man finally meets the woman that makes him want to retire to the straight and quiet life--and what if she happens to be a private detective?" (One who specializes in art theft, no less!)

It's actually a great premise, but that's part of what makes me think it's based on someone's fanfic (also the fact that the show's written by a woman. Because we all know women are the big fanfic offenders here). Too, the Fujiko stand-in, Margot, not only has the only female name ending in an O-sound in the entire English language, but also has a habit off killing all the main character's other flames out of, we are left to assume, jealousy disguised as protection. Which is actually fascinating because of the mind games it involves--the idea of Lupin the Golden Goose, held hostage in his thief role even after he wants to quit by the pressures of the others around him. And the Zenigata character (who is named "Dao," which is another Asian religion like "Zen"), is a creeper on the PI character, which is unnecessary but also intense.

However, I make it sound way better than it is, so far at least. I wouldn't be able to watch it without imagining the crew as the Lupin characters. But when you do, it's a grand old time. *grin*

And now--back to the story!

I stood, securing my hat back into place with a swipe of my hand through my hair, but the ghost of Lupin’s hand still tingled there, even under the feel of the fabric.

And yet, how quickly the soul in the young man’s eyes faded and flickered out as he looked at me, extinguished for the sake of hearing a tale that he presumed would lead him to violence.

*Red heart, black hands...And what color wings?*

I looked back down at him, but there was nothing to see there; he was just rubbing his hands together, anxiously, staring at the ground.

I sighed and stared at the ceiling. That all...had been a moment and a half, and highly outside
regulation. But it had been worth it. I felt like a bridge had been built. Maybe just a footbridge that’d be washed away with the next flood, but maybe, just maybe, it’d been something a little more permanent than that. One could only hope.

Now, I just needed to play this right, and I might actually get my answers. Lupin’s emotions turned on a dime, the way high-functioning people’s tended to, so I had to use the opportunity to the fullest.

But as I went to take my first step away, weight attached to my side.

I thought I was being attacked at first, but, looking down with my heart in my throat, I found the thief wrapped around me, his head turned aside and his cheek pressed into my abs, which was where our height difference put him when he was sitting down. Goddammit, if you were just fucking with me—

But Lupin’s dark, furry head (albeit still painted with dust), didn’t move other than that. I could see his eyelashes from this angle, and while I couldn’t see his eyes, there was just something...calm and plaintive about his posture. He blinked once, slowly, breath equally as long.

“What...are you doing?” I asked, hoping no one came by to bare witness to this...whatever this was. “Monstrosity of affection,” maybe?

Despite my hopes, it was a while before he answered.

“...I like the way your coat smells.”

Well...that was...weird. And also wishful thinking if not a flat-out lie: It smelled like burnt ashes, concrete dust, and blood, just like he did.

But, whatever, I wasn’t being attacked, and wishful thinking or not, scent helped snap people get out of mental ruts, so I’d allow it, I guess? I was really too tired to think of anything much further than that.

Except...Lupin’s traveling hands turned my attention back on. The weight of his clasped hands was slowly sliding down my side, onto my belt. It reminded me that I had a lot of things in my coat and under it that could kill someone. Including his gun. His hands were resting on top of a couple such items.

“Hey. Keep your hands where I can feel them.”

He chuckled lightly, genuinely amused, but it was soft and short-lived. However, he did comply, and shifted a bit.

He still didn’t move, however. And, I noticed, he was trembling a little.

“So...what are we doing here,” I muttered, awkwardly. Are you casing me, or...what?

Or are you going to start crying again? Please don’t let it be that.

It was really hard to watch women cry. It was even worse to watch grown men do it. Especially ones that felt like your—

“Just give me a minute,” Lupin replied, softly, looking out at nothing. After a moment, he explained: “You comfort me.”
“I—” My mind wouldn’t produce any more words. “What?”

“I...” It seemed Lupin had the same trouble getting his words out of his throat. “I’ll tell you someday, okay, Pops?” he whispered.

I sighed, rolling my eyes, but still found myself settling my hand on his head anyway, slowly petting down the side of it. Dust and ash came off in my hands, sprinkling the floor.

He was warm, and solid, and for once, in a place where I could keep him safe from the world.

It felt...good. Steadying, was perhaps the right word for it. Maybe that was what he was getting out of it too, in which case I’d definitely allow it.

Don’t think you can change them, but it is okay to care....

“It’ll be okay, you know,” I whispered kindly. “Even if you end up in max sec. I’ll visit you.”

“It’s not that.”

He sounded tired and miserable. “Then what is it?” I asked back, genuinely curious. I rested my hand on his shoulder, to comfort him.

“Just bad memories.” He nuzzled his head into my coat. “Very bad ones.”

I opened my mouth to follow up on that, but it was that exact moment that Marti came around the corner, clothes in her hands. She hadn’t made a single sound on approach. Apparently she was a special-ops ninja administrator these days.

Marti looked at Lupin, looked at me, and then turned right around and left.

My mouth opened, and closed, and then my face turned bright red as I reached out after her. “W-wait...it’s not...no...”

But she was already long gone, and Lupin’s weight kept me from chasing after her, even as I took a step that direction.

“I think I like that woman,” Lupin said for me, sitting up slightly. He was watching where she’d disappeared to, eyes twinkling, though his hands were still laced around my far hip. “Where’d you get her?”

We shared a look, me down at him in what had to be alarm, and him up at me with sparkling audacity. It was too weird to even process.

I snorted and pushed him away with a hand to the face. He chuckled and detached from me (albeit also with a groan and a wince and a touch to his side); when he got his breath, he took took a moment to rub the grease, and the remainder of the tears, off. Behind us, I could hear Marti and Christof whispering heatedly to each other, but I couldn’t tell what about.

Christof probably hadn’t stopped her approach because he wanted the intel; hell, they may have even been in on it together, if he’d caught her first and asked her to because he was concerned about Lupin’s safety. Marti was the type to check up on prisoners if she thought they needed it, no matter the physical or political situation. It was part of what made her such a wonderful partner: she was strong and moral, and wasn’t afraid of anything. At least, not anymore....

“Nowhere you need concern yourself with,” I replied to Lupin gruffly, when I determined I
couldn’t make anything out of the conversation.

“If you say so,” he replied smugly, scratching at his stubble and looking away with a smirk.

When he saw me glaring, he ran a hand over his hair and offered, hesitantly, “Ah-Anyway... Um...Sorry about that. Or, maybe, ‘thank you’? I try to keep it under better control than that....”

“Keep what under control?”

Startled, Lupin suddenly looked up into my eyes, lost and young. But perhaps realizing he’d done so, he just as quickly looked back down, hiding his gaze from view. He didn’t say anything, just kept his head turned down and his hands rubbing together nervously, no doubt hoping I’d go away and leave it alone.

That man again...the good one. He was in there, somewhere.

I’d hoped I’d given him a look that was equally as honest for his efforts, but maybe I hadn’t, given that response.

Not wanting him to start freaking out again, I sighed and I drew his shackled hand toward me by the wrist, making sure I was gentle about it. When he saw what I was doing, he seemed to calm somewhat.

“Things happen,” I shrugged, producing the manacle’s key from one of my myriad pockets. I wasn’t sure if I was talking about the breakdown or the hugging—or if he had been—but it didn’t really matter. “Next time, if it’s a choice between crying and screaming, just tell me, okay? Whatever it is. And I’m not saying that just because I’m arresting you. You can tell me anything, all right?”

There were plenty of interrogators that loved to use the “I care about your emotional well being” tactic, and then turn it right around on the prisoner as soon as it was convenient; hell, a lot of them even used it on vics to get what they needed, often by means of their cock. Lupin was well familiar with the tactic; it was part of why, rightly so, he didn’t trust a cop as far as he could throw them. But I hoped he knew by now that I was being honest when I said it.

The restraint opened with a thick clunk of the locking mechanism and a tinkling cascade of chain as I drew the setup away. Lupin took a breath at the freedom, rubbing his sore skin. It was pink with irritation, and red raw in a couple of places, particularly around the edge lines of the cuffs. His other arm, despite being liberated sooner, wasn’t much better. It sucked to see, but I wouldn’t have to do it if he didn’t insist on breaking out of every pair of modern cuffs that existed, and at a moment’s notice, no less.

I tapped him on the head lightly. He ducked the touch, but with his usual complaints, so I figured he was back to normal, or near enough. It was an incredible relief, really, to see him that way.

“However,” I said, shoving my hands in my pockets with a scowl and finally getting to put the few steps of distance in between us that I’d wanted, “I am a cop. Somebody makes somebody else cry, I fix it.” Here, I hesitated, but decided to take the gamble anyway: “Even if it was a long time ago.”

It was a stupid and audacious thing to say to a grown man, and I felt properly dumb for it, but I thought I heard a smile to his tone, when he let out a huff through his nose. “...Suppose so.”

...The gamble paid off. I grinned, inwardly.

And yet, when I looked back at him, his smile had fallen, and there was sadness in his eyes. “This
is a cold case, Pops. One whose main suspect is already dead. You can’t win this one. There’s no justice to be had. For anyone.” He held his hair, on either side of his head, like he was the most wretched creature in the world, before he snapped out of it and slid his hands down his face, to rest between his legs.

“Then you don’t know anything about justice,” I replied softly, when he looked up at me. “Because there’s always you.”

He smiled again, weakly, though it looked like he didn’t want to. He just went back to staring at the floor. “If you say so.”

“I know so.”

“Pops...” He rubbed the back of his neck and whined, like he expected me to start spouting the International Policeman’s Motto at him. “You’re embarrassing me.”

“I really don’t care, child.” I went to the edge of the row of lockers and leaned around them. “Ahem.”

Christof, a few feet away, looked at me abruptly. He was leaned back against the lockers, arms crossed and head down studiously; Marti had one of the lockers open and was, I suspected, putting her ear against the far wall of it, spying on us. Quickly, Christof patted her on the belt, to get her to look up.

“Oh! Ah! Hi!” she announced, slamming the door shut and smoothing down her clothes perkily, even touching at her hair. “What can I do for you, Inspector.”

It really was precious the way she turned twenty again when she was caught red-handed. And how bright red her face turned, under the freckles. I wouldn’t mind a wife like that, one who did that every time I caught her hand in the cookie jar. Or elsewhere...

“Could you give us a minute?”

A few moments later, we were alone, or alone enough. They’d gone to the door with the guard, but the two of them would be listening in—and possibly creeping up—on us regardless. You didn’t interrogate a prisoner in the showers, so they had to wonder what, exactly, we were doing.

It was smart of them to. I just hoped Marti didn’t think I was trying to make out with him, given what she’d seen. I thought she knew me better than that, but, well, it’d been a while, and she did love reading checkout-lane novellas with bodice-ripper covers, the bawdier the better.

With a huff, I came to stand opposite Lupin, my back against the lockers and my hand in my pockets. One foot leaned against the lockers’ kickboard, too, and my head tipped down with a frown. It was a relaxed pose, but we both knew better. My prisoner, sitting on the bench not three feet away, looked up at me expectantly.

<“So,> Lupin began with a breath, all business, all previous woes apparently set aside or forgotten. His elbows rested on his knees and his hands clasped loosely between his legs, he really did have the air of a budding mafia boss, ready to conference. It reminded me of my undercover days, and I couldn’t decide if I appreciated the motivation of it or hated what it reminded me of. <“Talk to me. What’s got you so worked up, Inspector? I know it’s something important, otherwise
"you wouldn’t be so pissed off.”

His Japanese was flawless, gentleman-gangster speak as it was. He really was good at impressing me and depressing me in turns.

I wanted to be mad at him. I desperately wanted to; I promised myself I would when the time came, and I’d made that promise less than two hours ago. But with everything, I just felt depressed. I stared at the wall and muttered uncomfortably, "Twenty-three.”

When he didn’t say anything, I looked back at him, but his blank expression didn’t much change. "Twenty-three what.”

I couldn’t tell if he was honestly mind-addled still or playing coy to fish information out of me. He looked expectant, though, waiting for orders, so I gave it to him straight. We owed each other that much, at least. "Dead.”

"Twenty—?!” he hissed, so vehemently that he sucked in a breath afterward and wrapped an arm around his torso with a groan. The other hand pressed into the side of his head, and he wobbled with obvious dizziness.

I really did need to get him to the doctors soon. The fact that he was still uneven more than an hour after being dug out of rubble was a bad sign, possibly worse than I’d thought. Actually, probably worse than we’d all initially suspected, me and the—admittedly untrained—others that had thrown him into the squad car just to get him away from the fire and us away from the swarm of press. When he’d woken up, perfectly communicative, I figured he was fine, but...

Still, his grimace turned into a determined frown at the floor, and then schooled into a lack of any emotion at all, besides annoyance. "Fuck.”

“Didn’t go as planned, I take it?” I queried back, this time in French. Though his Japanese swears were properly impressive, this was hardly something that needed to be kept from Christof and Marti, who were no doubt listening in somehow. Christof, in particular, had Internal Affairs written all over him, so it was probably a good idea not to give him too much undeserved ammo.

“Obviously,” Lupin said, taking the cue. He looked to the side, glowering.

So you won’t deny having done it?

I snorted, itching to hit something again, or to shake him until he understood his predicament. I fisted my hands in my pockets, then took a deep breath and crossed my arms, just for something to do with myself. “While we’re talking: Strip.”

He gave me the eye, but complied quickly enough with a grumbled Yessir. He went to work pulling off his jacket—more angrily than necessary—and immediately cringed. The thief slowed, but got it done, a fire smoldering in his eyes.

It was hard not to feel bad for him; he really did look like hell. But this much genuine emotion from Lupin meant that he still trusted me, and also that something was up. His mind was clearly going about something, and probably not me, given the fact that he was glaring at the cracks between the tile like he wanted to murder them. He wasn’t shy about sending those sorts of challenges when he wanted to level them at someone, as evidenced by the incident in the elevator.

Lupin was halfway through taking off his jacket—not an easy maneuver, apparently, given his injuries—when he said, low and serious, “The building collapse, right?”
I clenched my jaw against the images that flashed through my mind. “Yes.”

When I saw the world again, unblinking black eyes held my gaze, with an unreadable interest. When he opened his mouth, he’d switched back to Japanese. <“Nothing else?”>

I raised an eyebrow at that. <“Nothing else. Why.”>

He shook his head with a snort, then tossed his jacket over to the side, farther along the bench. He started at his tie. “How troublesome.”

That was an obfuscation if I’d ever heard one, or at least, a time-stall. I was about to prompt him for more when he unexpectedly continued, tone quiet while he stared down at his fingers: “When I get out of here.... Someone’s gonna have a date with my gun.”

He didn’t sound happy about it. And the fact that he dropped back into French meant he wanted said someone to know, should they happen to be listening.

“You think that’s happening?” I barked back.

He rolled his eyes and shrugged, like a teenager.

“Regardless,” I continued, deciding to let it go, <“Any idea who?”>

Someone I need to protect from you? Or the other way around...?

<“Not yet,”> he responded, terse. He didn’t sound like he was lying. Instead, he seemed particularly exasperated at the idea, like a parent who had to once again yell at their kid to stop doing something remarkably stupid.

So one of his crew? Or a local contractor?

No... There was no way this place could be bugged, at least not for us, since none of us had known we were coming here before two hours ago. If he’d slipped back into French... And he knew Christof and Marti were there... Someone connected to the police, then?

But Christof was as straight-laced as they came, and Marti wasn’t crooked. Perhaps Lupin hadn’t assumed that, though. Perhaps Lupin had a reason not to...?

No. I was getting off-topic. I shook my head, and shuffled the idea away to the “later, if ever” pile.<“Anyway,”> I continued sharply, <“Because of all this, they’re making rumblings of putting terrorism charges on it, which if you’ll recall, now allows the police to make you disappear for a while without having to answer to anyone during or after. And anyway, even if they did, the public would probably help lynch you, the way the media’s spinning it. And with that shit you pulled on the stairs...”>

<“What, nearly falling on my face? Or the smiling? You mean the smiling, don’t you. When has a terrorist smiled at cameras?”> Lupin snorted back with an eyeroll. <‘And anyway, we’re in France. The police can hold me for forty-eight hours without anyone knowing a damn thing. The only thing holding off that is my wonderful screen presence and the fact that you’re h—oh.”>

He paused as he flung his tie to land on his jacket, his hand hovering in the air for a moment. <“That’s why you’re still here, isn’t it. You’re not afraid of me running off. You’re drawing things out here so that time’ll expire and you can take me directly to Interpol, aren’t you.”> He smiled, wickedly, eyes suddenly alight again. <“Oh, you’re a good man, Inspector.”>
"Don’t give me that,“ I snapped back, waving a hand and making his smile falter. Keeping him from running off was exactly why I was here, but the problem was that I also needed to do that, collect evidence, and man a task force tracking down his accomplices. If I had to protect him from my own people too, we were quickly running up on the impossible. "Now do you understand a little better the predicament you’re in? The only reason I can even get away with that is the holiday slog. If it weren’t for the time and the day, there would already be people here trying to spirit you away, and I can’t protect you from everyone. Who the hell did you piss off here, Lupin?"

God, I sounded like Jigen. It was good we weren’t doing this in a language anyone would understand. Except...that actually made it worse, didn’t it?

Sigh. I didn’t really want to tell him that I’d been threatened too; it wasn’t professional for several reasons, and furthermore, I didn’t think we were at that critical of a stage yet. Hopefully, we would never be, and it would turn out to be a case of me simply expecting the worst out of people. Still, I definitely needed to call my boss back and do some careful poking and hinting, as soon as I got the chance.

"Like I said, I don’t quite know yet." Lupin’s gaze slid to the side thoughtfully, darkly, before he suddenly returned to his clothing, hiding his face from view as he went for his shirt buttons. "How much time d’you figure I’ve got to find out?..."

His voice was light, which made me think he had some inkling that, at this rate, I’d have to beat out of him. I took a deep breath, held it, and didn’t sigh it out until I shrugged in frustration. "You have about a day, when they transfer you, lest I can stop that from happening."

If they were going to shoot me too, that’d be the time to do it—just drive us both to a place we couldn’t get out of, or execute us both in the backseat. I had to make sure I prevented them from having that opportunity, but doing it in a way that didn’t leave Lupin vulnerable would be the problem. As for the other thing... "The evidence has until the snow stops or the sun rises, I suspect."

He whistled, lowly. "Then you’d better get on it."

"And where would you suggest I start?" I shot back at him, irritated. 

*Furthermore, how do you suggest I discover it, if I have to spend my time bodily protecting you?—Marti? I’m not getting Marti into this, not on your life. Christof? He’s a sugar packet, he’ll melt in the snow. *

...And he may be in someone’s pocket?

"The dead," Lupin replied, not even bothering to look up. "Isn’t that where you’re are always supposed to start?"

*What are you getting at? He sounded incredibly, rage-inducing flippant, but that in and of itself could have been a clue. I eyed him as he worked, trying to piece it out from his posture, but there wasn’t a lot to see beyond pain. He got the last button undone and shirked out of his shredded dress shirt. There was a layer of black underneath, I noticed—spandex or armor, I couldn’t tell from here. Both were ripped and torn, covered in dust and tiny fragments, despite all the layers he had over it; he was just that battered. *

Idiot thief; why did he always insist on playing with cartels and mobs and shit that was just plain out of his league? Hell, that was out of the league of 90% of the world’s law enforcement? Jigen at his side or not, did he really think almost dying every time he went to work was a quality way to
use his life for society?

There was no reason for him to get into any of this; being a thief was one of the things you did when you didn’t want to get involved in any of the dark stuff. It happened, sometimes, key word being sometimes: Thieves were the low rung of the organized crime totem pole and often got pushed around and used as disposable messengers when their time came; even for independent ones, all cops knew stories of “The thief who finally stole from the wrong guy and ended up in the river.” They were so numerous it was practically in the manual. But thievery was white collar crime at the end of the day, particularly art theft; why did he always insist on digging into the cracks in the walls underneath the paintings?

Lupin was remarkable for the fact that he had gone solo and risen above a thief’s usual place on the pecking order, and yet, here he was again, in the thick of it, pretending he could take on the world with a crew of three other people plus or minus some locals, if not just by himself.

It was horrible, watching him try to fly that close to the sun. Did have no respect for any of us? Did he even know how much he made me worry at night? Did he?

Completely unaware of my mental tirade, Lupin diligently dug under his belt line for the hem of the top of the tight fabric—apparently it was a shirt, not a jumpsuit—but when he was about halfway up his torso with it he just hunched over and groaned, arms curling inward and hands falling slightly.

He very well could have been faking it. But the look on his face, and the groan, and the lack of breathing with the stillness after, indicated it was unlikely. Maybe a rib was broken. I’d certainly heaved him up hard enough for that, when he was hanging.

Still, it just made me more frustrated with him.

“I hate to ask,” he said, after another try that ended in breathing hard. “But could you...?”

He looked up with a good-natured, if pained, smile, feigning normalcy. But I wasn’t giving him that kind of ammo for his next inexplicable round of flirtatious razzing, and I certainly wasn’t falling for it if it was a trick.

“Christof,” I called crisply, and the deputy came around the lockers in two quick steps.

So he had been listening in. I found myself smiling a little, a dark leer, and he turned a little green.

“Yes?”

“Help this idiot out of his clothes.”

* * *

What was revealed on my upper half was not pretty.

There were dozens of scrapes and lacerations, including several that were inches long in a parallel cluster on my right side, like I’d raked over glass shards or metal fencing. They weren’t particularly deep, but there was enough dust, dirt, and grit in them to keep a doctor occupied for hours digging out every last piece before putting in stitches. Maybe Zenigata really did know what
he was doing: a shower would make this much, much better, albeit it’d be a shower of unending pain.

Sometimes, I didn’t know if this man loved me or hated me.

Now that my skin was open to the air, I could feel several things wrong with my back. Scratches and bruises, all the way down, lit up in my brain, especially between the shoulder blades. Without the compression suit, even if the cuts and scrapes had tentatively scabbed over, they’d open up again with too much movement, the threshold for which was probably quite low. If I threw a single punch or overextended from a fall, I’d be bleeding fast and furiously in several different places, ripping the fragile natural patches open.

There were some minor burns, too, on one arm, where fire had apparently eaten through the sleeve of my jacket. The black fabric underneath had more or less melted, but the burns, luckily, didn’t look too harsh; they were the kind that a good dose of ointment and a few weeks under a patch could cure—luckily. It had done its job, the armor. Though, now that the burns were open to the air, too, they were going to ramp up their pain levels real fast. Good of a reason as any to hurry up this whole apparently-not-getting-beaten-up emotional-bait-and-switch affair.

But it was that place on my left side, along my last couple of ribs and just under, that was the greatest curiosity. There was indeed a deep red patch there, the skin so tenderized that the bruise was seeping blood on its own when I moved. Not a lot, but enough to be disconcerting.

And the shape of it...

I put my left hand over it, as if holding a stitch in my side after running. The splay of palm and fingers matched up decidedly with the pattern of bruising and clean flesh.

But it didn’t fit my fingers specifically. These had been shorter, thicker, the palm wider.

I curled my hand away slowly, avoiding looking at Zenigata.

Christof, meanwhile, was poking his fingers through the open parts of the compression shirt. He whistled. “How did you even survive this?”

“Beats me,” I said, going for my belt with a forced smile, shaking my head out of its previous thoughts. “Angels or devils, I suppose.”

Ones named Koichi.

Pops snorted, and Christof chuckled. I went to work on my shoes. The one was easy enough to get off, but the other...I had to pluck the shoelaces with the toes of my other foot and just shove the shoe and sock off with the ball of my foot. I was not about to bend down like that, and my right leg, with the loudly complaining wound of all this time, was certainly not lifting up to meet my hands.

The two policemen just stared at my dextrous feet like it was a sideshow.

Well, the show must go on, I supposed.

Though it took some time to stand, it was rather exciting to be getting naked in front of two stone-faced men, one to my side and one to my front, who could beat me to death at a moment’s notice if they felt like it, and probably get away with it. The thrill-seeking part of my mind really was a strange place.

Was this was Jigen’s love life was like, before he met me? I had to wonder.
After a few quick movements, my trousers came off swiftly enough, minus that spot on my leg where they decided to stick. That...wasn’t a good sign.

Still, I stepped out of them and left someone else to deal with them. What remained on my person was nothing but black leggings. They were a special kind of compression fabric that was especially absorbent of blood, and thereby able to help wounds clot better. Unlike the shirt, it wouldn’t stop bullets, and it was lousy against knives, but it had its uses over a traditional jumpsuit.

They were going to be the hardest part to get off, and I stared at the situation for a second, arm on a locker, plotting my course. Just shifting around to get off my slacks had been full of aches and pains from top to bottom; even now, as I stood there, that spot on my leg was griping at me just as hard as my head was, the two throbbing in time. I covered my hand over my leg to tamp down the pain.

It felt wet.

That...wasn’t good.

Slowly, I pulled my hand away—only to stare at it.

Before anyone in the audience could say anything, I looked up, wide-eyed, showing my palm to Zenigata. From heel to fingertip, my hand sported a fresh dusting of dark red. It wasn’t so saturated that my hand came away with wet spots, but it definitely had been bleeding recently, and a decent amount.

I looked down at the black fabric and turned my head slightly. That area of my thigh held a reddish sheen, compared to the blue on the rest of the fabric. An area the size of my entire hand.

Still, I seemed to take the news better than Pops did. He just paled and looked like his stomach had fallen out, imagination running overtime, either speculating on the injury itself or the chewing-out he’d get for letting it go untreated for so long once a doctor found out about it. I, on the other hand, just hissed, closed my hand into a fist, and patted the soft side of it against my forehead a few times, mentally chiding myself for not checking up on it sooner. I’d kind of forgotten about it, once I started shooting the shit with Marti and Christof, and then it had been too dark to bother.

I really didn’t want to see what was under there, but I guess I had to. With a defeated sigh, I plunked myself down onto the ancient wooden bench. I tipped my head back against the lockers with a listless thunk.

“You got a scissors?” I asked, looking over at Pops without turning my head.

Zenigata gave me a confused look. “Of course not.”

“Knife?”

His head jerked back at that.

I rolled my head back and forth against the metal, reassuring. Just sitting still like this made me feel every ounce of exhaustion, and when I spoke, my voice reflected the lack of energy too. “Just cut this stuff off of me. It’ll be the quickest way.”

The Inspector gave me a distrustful look for a moment, no doubt going through potential tricks I could pull. I turned my hands out, a shrug of tired helplessness. My leg’s fucked up, what do you want me to do? He seemed to get it, then.
Zenigata tipped his head to Christof. “See what you can find.”

He nodded with a soft yessir and headed off. There was the sound of him speaking to Marti, and then, in a moment, two sets of feet heading off. The sound of the heat turning on became our only watcher.

I just closed my eyes with a sigh. The air going through the ducts hummed along, precious white noise. It was far too easy to fall asleep here, and the dark space I drifted into was saccharine.

“You really do look like hell, you know,” Zenigata’s voice said, startling me back to consciousness, even without opening my eyes. I heard his arms cross, the soft shift of his familiar raincoat. It was a little chilly in here, despite the radiator heat, but for some reason, I couldn’t really feel it, bare-chested as I was. I was so tired I was going numb.

“Been getting that a lot today,” I replied, dry. I didn’t open my eyes.

“Hmph.”

I almost smiled. That noise meant that, apparently, he’d been wanting some sort of update on how I was feeling. That was nice of him, but I didn’t have much to impart that he couldn’t see. In fact...he probably had more information about my condition than I did.

“So...what exactly happened to land me in this shape?”

Zenigata took a deep breath through his nose, then sighed it out audibly. It was a while before he spoke. In the silence, I opened my eyes with some effort, and turned my head over to him, hoping it would prompt him. I could feel my hair sticking to the locker in the path my head had taken, thanks to static electricity.

With that, the wounds, and the dark circles that were no doubt under my eyes by now, I must have looked utterly ravaged. I hoped that explained the look in his eye. Otherwise, I had cancer and didn’t know it.

He looked away, crossing his legs as he leaned against the lockers. When he spoke, it was more descriptive than he usually was, probably the way he composed his police reports—but it was distant, more a replaying of tape than a conversation. “You were running. A bomb went off, somewhere toward building’s front. The whole building collapsed, right in front of me.” He made an airy motion with his hand, indicating how suddenly it all disappeared, I suspected. Then he returned his hand to its place against his chest in a formation of strictly folded arms, and turned his head back down, mouth grim. He eyed a place somewhere near my knees.

“I went to the edge of the building, but all I could see was fire, and smoke. The heat burned my face.” He turned his head, scratching absentmindedly at half a missing sideburn to show it to me. “The bomb blew out the top two floors, but as I looked into the cavity it made, a couple of other floors collapsed. It’s...”

He paused there, and I knew what he was wondering: How many people did I just sit back and helplessly watch die, right then?

“...I don’t know if you’ve been around something like that,” he continued, rhetorically, lifting his gaze. “But at first, after the world stops shaking, there are no screams. Just the hiss of gas and water pipes that have broken, the growl of cascading rubble as it shifts. Sounds of human degradation you never hear any other time—broken furniture, plates, weird things breaking and snapping in half and you’re pretty sure all of it can kill you if enough of it goes. Girders creaking.
It’s the sounds of imminent demise, all around you. You know you’re in the dragon’s mouth, about to be swallowed up, but you know you can’t run away fast enough to bother trying to escape. It’s haunting.”

He shuddered it off, and I frowned. I wanted to tell him I was sorry, or some other comfort, but it wouldn’t have worked. He would have just barked at me that he was doing his job, and I shouldn’t have been doing something so stupid in the first place. And he’d be right.

Still, the kind, heavy gentility of his hand on my head a moment ago....It’d been something, to offer him, I liked to think.

Zenigata continued, shaking his head as he considered his memory. “And then the screams come. Hollow, horrible things. You’re in the monster’s stomach with all the other victims. The voices pop up below you like hell springs, and shoot through the air over you at the same time, like some kind of twisted bird cry.” His hand made the motion, but quickly returned it to his chest. His eyebrows turned down. “Anyway. I tried to track where you had landed, but...it wasn’t much use, the whole thing was in shambles, big clefs of concrete encapsulated in stone piles. I thought you had to be burned to a crisp or in pieces.”

I opened my mouth, but before I could speak, the sound of footsteps made itself known. I looked toward the hallway, and Zenigata did a moment later.

Christof appeared with a pair of scissors, and handed them to the Inspector. Marti was behind him, folded hospital gown and pair of shoes in her hands.

“Oh good,” I muttered. “The only thing better than prison fashion.”

“Enjoy it while it lasts,” Zenigata muttered reflexively back. Neither of us had the exact right energy for our words, and Marti, bless her, eyed us for a second, confused and concerned.

Women were so damned perceptive. Lovely, challenging things, them. Especially the short ones.

“I tried to get you the right size,” she offered with a smile, to break whatever pall hung over us. Most definitely, especially the short ones.

But the thought of what was yet to come only made me more tired. “Thanks,” I offered honestly, before tipping my head back and closing my eyes to let them work. Zenigata and Marti came over, and Christof stood guard.

“Sit on your hands,” the Inspector instructed me. I did as was told, and soon, cold metal slid up against my ankle. Compression fabric popped away by inches, and my flesh felt like it could breathe again. I wore the stuff for various reasons, not the least of which was running fast and quickly changing between disguises. But it also kept wounds together, scrapes to a minimum, and soaked up blood. This reveal was just going to be bad. I was not looking forward to the coagulated blood underneath it.

The motions of the six inches of sharpened metal was quick and professional, and since they were taking a course up the outside of my leg, I didn’t even get any instinctive warning bells. Good man, Zenigata, good man.

When he got to the painful mystery-spot on my leg, the fabric didn’t readily free itself, even when cut. I slid open an eye.

Pops was crouched on one knee, and had already moved over to my other leg. Marti was sitting
next to me and leaning over me on the right, slowly peeling the fabric back with a clinical touch. Most of it was stuck good.

“Yup, this’ll definitely need stitches,” she said. “Assuming we can get this off.”

“I’m just worried there’ll be a bone sticking out,” I muttered, honestly.

At my left, Zenigata sighed, exasperated. “If you thought it was that bad, why didn’t you tell someone?”

“You’re the cop, you should be able to tell when I’m that busted?”

“I’m not an EMT, you gotta tell me these things.”

His voice was rising in decibel and temperature, quickly achieving his best “unprepared father on an outing with children” impression. I had the compulsion to pet his head soothingly at that, but his preemptive placement of my hands stopped me. Damn.

Probably for my own good though. I didn’t want to know what Zenigata could do with scissors.

“Oh!” Marti exclaimed with interest, not unlike I was a lab rat that had created an unexpected but potentially prized result. “What’s...”

Zenigata and I both leaned over under her shadow, in the space between her head and her hands, to figure out what she’d found. She asked for the scissors and Pops handed them over; in a quick few seconds, she’d cut around what wouldn’t give. I was left with a patch vaguely half-circle shaped, at least six inches long. Just looking at the shape of it from my vantage point, I decided it was a deep stab wound, probably of something that had gone right through the side of my leg. That was why the flesh hadn’t felt sliced with the compression fabric on it, but also hadn’t been able to take any weight—the clothing had been holding it together, with only a single small hole in the fabric.

Marti poked at it.

Blindly, I jerked and growled through my teeth, and knocked my head into her shoulder for good measure, pain and light zipping through my everything.

“Hold still...” she muttered absently, still studious. Zenigata put his hand on my shoulder from where he crouched, holding me against the locker, and more carefully this time, Marti tapped over the fabric with a fingernail.

I couldn’t feel it, except for the throb further down.

“Feel that?” she asked. “There’s something stuck in there.”

“Fuck,” I swore, wishing I had worse curses. So that’s what it was. “I hope it’s not rebar.”

Tetanus shots were the worst. Not to mention, metal in your damn leg. Seemed Jigen was going to have another scar to kiss, when he was down there.

“We’ll have to see.”

She stood and looked at her partners. I just hung my head and shivered the last pulses of pain out of my leg and eyes, concentrating on breathing.

“There’s always amputation,” Zenigata offered, peppy.
I took a deep breath, not even wanting to adequately process that. At least we were back to normal, it seemed. “Not funny, old man.”

Pops patted my shoulder and stood. “I don’t want you on that any more than you have to be. Get yourself together, rinse off, and we’ll take you to the med staff as planned.” He turned to Christof. “Would you be willing to let them know about this?”

“Me?” He asked, looking at Marti. “Isn’t regulation...?”

Zenigata shook his head. “She’s got med experience. I want to keep her here, now that we know we’ve got this situation on our hands.”

He nodded, apparently convinced. “Yessir. Shall I come back when I’m done?”

“Sure, why not. Ask them if they need anything from you first.”

He nodded again, saluted, and walked off.

It was five in the morning. I didn’t have the energy for that kind of crispness. But maybe he was used to living where they got twenty hours of darkness some parts of the year and could power through anything, any time. Maybe he worked the night shift regularly. Hell if I knew.

I had closed my eyes without realizing it, and the back of Zenigata’s hand tapped at my cheek. I jerked upright. “No sleeping yet. You wanna take off your drawers or not?”

It was an honest question. I sighed, and pulled myself into a proper sitting position, only half awake. “Sure, why not.” When I had to wear armor or compression gear, it made more sense to wear briefs. If I had worn my normal boxers, they’d have been shredded along with my leg. So, no sense in cutting these off too, if they were still working. Besides, sharpened objects that near your jewels was just asking for trouble, no matter who wielded them.

It took a bit, but I shimmied out of my underwear, trying to avoid my leg wound as much as possible. Only a little bit of blood got on them.

I folded them neatly and tossed them onto the little pile of hospital clothes.

When I sat back, hands clasped loosely and politely over my crotch because that was where hands naturally landed up when you leaned back like that, I noticed that both of them were looking.

It wasn’t like overt-staring looking. It was just curious-glimpse-and-hoping-to-get-away-with-it looking.

And while Marti was most definitely looking there, Zenigata, I noticed, was looking at my chest hair.

Which was absurd and amusing and invigorating all at once, and I pushed my shoulders back a little. It made them a ridiculous pair, side-by-side like that, and a smirk pulled across my face, fast and deep. Zenigata coughed and looked away politely, at the ceiling; I caught Marti’s eye and held it, eyes glimmering. She didn’t look away.

“I know. Shapely, right?” I opened up my hands.

She laughed and covered her mouth. Pops groaned, and hid his eyes with a hand. He gave up on the fiasco entirely and turned away to find something else to do with his attention.
Serves you right, I thought, amused, at his retreating back.

“That’s one word for it, I suppose,” Marti offered with a smirk in the mean time, and held out her hand to me.

Satisfied, I took it and pulled.

No one in the room noticed that it would have been a perfect opportunity for her to attack me, let alone her—and I rather liked it that way. It was nice to be able to trust someone, once in a while.

“Well, now that you’ve seen all of what I have to offer, let’s get this over with,” I muttered, and, with one leg, the side of a locker, and her, I managed to get myself standing.

Immediately, my head spun, the floor felt closer than it should have, and tipping towards me. But Marti was there, coming up against my side, an arm wrapped around my naked back. I had to hold still for a moment just to get my bearings and force the room to stop swirling, but she let me, offering gentle words of encouragement and soothing.

She was looking at my face with some concern, however. I shrugged and put my arm on her shoulder for a brace, since she was there, and stood as tall. She was just the right height for it.

“Hope you don’t mind.”

“I’ll do it—” Zenigata attempted to interject.

“No, no, it’s fine. Isn’t it, Mr. Lupin.” Marti waved him off, her talking-to-drunks motherly voice back. “Let’s see if we can find you some shampoo.”

I smiled, but my voice was tired. “If anyone asks, just tell them I stole it.”

“I don’t think anyone’s going to mind you borrowing their soap,” she replied, kindly. “There’s this thing called borrowing, you know? Stealing isn’t the answer to everything.”

“Sure it is. Hearts...salaries...soap...Pops...”

“Since when?” he called halfheartedly.

Marti patted my back patronizingly, but I didn’t mind. As we slowly hobbled our way down the corridor of lockers, she motioned for Zenigata to pick up the clothes and come; his cheeks pined up but he quickly did as told.

Aww, poor pops. He has it bad.

Wait.

Wait...

Since when had he...

Ohhhh.

A smile spread across my face, slow and steady.

That was why she was here.

Suddenly, all the clues clicked into place. The familiarity with which they spoke to each other. The lack of tension between them, even when he yelled at me.
They’d known each other for a long time.

Add in the fact that she and Pops had spoken about me at length enough for her to mull me over in her free time....

She’d probably volunteered to come here. *Ohhhhhhhhh.*

*Tricky, tricky.*

The only question was, did Pops know how he himself felt? How she felt?

The jury was still out on that one. He was kind of like the cop version of a nerd—he could only understand the highly obscure and convoluted. Things like feelings of affection were too obvious to be real to him, most times. I glanced over my shoulder at him, but he was engrossed in his work, not looking at either of us. Domestic and totally, completely whipped.

*Perrrrfect.* I was quickly growing far too fond of this woman, and for none of the usual reasons. Well, minus the freckles. That was a usual reason. And the curls—

“And anyway,” Marti continued, redirecting my attention, “how bad of a cop would I be, if you stole something out from under me like that?”

With how she had treated me, it was only a matter of time before she made a move on Pops. She was too straightforward to let him off the hook. I grinned.

*“Hahaha...ow.”*
This chapter is a little over 10,000 words--a third of the size of the fic up to this point--and it is All. One. Scene.

You will definitely need to put your thinking caps on for this chapter. It's...thick.

That said, it is so hard to keep Marti and Zenigata from kissing, you guys. So hard.

The water turned on with a squeak, and I took a seat on the bench that ran though the middle of the room. There were eight shower stalls in all, four on each long wall of the room. This was the end of the maze, and there was only one way out or in. Great place to secretly murder somebody, but at least we were in a defensible position.

But that was police work—you win some, you lose some, but you come heavily armed and fight tooth and nail where it counts to win the war.

I put my chin in my hand and sighed, one leg crossed over the other. Marti sat next to me, coming down with a clatter of her belt’s many bits and pieces, some heavy, some not.

Across from us, Lupin was buck naked and showering. He couldn’t hear us from this distance over the water, and every once in a while, he was whistling some old, perky French tune. Knowing him, it was probably some local one from his bottomless pit of a mind’s repertoire, hoping for an audience, but neither of us knew the reference.

Truly, prisoner handling could get a lot worse—I’d certainly had to keep an eye on people as they pissed before—but it couldn’t get much more boring. There was literally nothing he could steal right now but the fixtures, and there was no where to put those that wouldn’t be lethal; so, thank Kanon, for once, I didn’t have to keep an eye on him at every moment.

I could almost hear Lupin’s voice in my head: Well, at least there’s a view, right? And then, a moment later, the seductive glint of his eyes as he turned away flashed through my vision.

I groaned and rubbed my eyes. That last time we’d crossed paths, ugh.... So much razzing and flirtatious mindfuckery.

I hadn’t realized it until I’d sat down, but I was damn tired. The ridiculous roaming thoughts were sign enough, but the desire to fall asleep sitting up was sliding over me like tender hands, and it was hard to keep my eyes open, all of a sudden. Every time I blinked, they tried to stay shut and lure me into a date with the floor tiles.

The soft white noise of the shower didn’t help, nor did the warm, wet air. Or Marti, sitting next to me. Her presence had a way of relaxing me.

Though, the fact that Lupin’s body was covered in fresh lacerations was off-putting enough to keep me somewhat focused, if I stared at it. He had patches of red on both sides of his torso, one bruises, one scratches; several deep cuts on his limbs and back, and a cacophony of bruises, not to mention
whatever was under his hair that none of us had yet seen.

Which, now that it was wet and the gel was coming out of it, was longer than I thought and...running red.

There really was an alarming amount of red streaming down his thighs and ankles into the drain, which was quickly getting surrounded by rocks and pebbles that had been hitching a ride in and on his cuts. I told myself it was thinned blood, that it wasn’t as bad as it looked, but still, it had been a bad oversight on our part and couldn’t have been comfortable. It was impressive he’d even kept standing without complaining about it for the last two hours.

All covered in bubbles, Lupin’s posture had relaxed significantly, but he was still favoring his non-injured leg quite a bit, understandably, and his back was a mess. Many of his bruises had had enough time to turn purple, and the thin line of the rope burn just under his jaw, all around his throat, was particularly grizzly to look at. And with how much it was hurting him—judging by how slowly he was going despite gnashing his teeth—it was going to take him a while to get all the grit out of his body. After checking my watch and determining it was near five in the goddamned morning, I sighed and resigned myself to having a view.

*Soon, Koichi. Soon, you can sleep.*

Luckily, Marti was also there, and she was a much preferable vista.

As she sat down, her leg touched mine, warm and solid. I politely scooted away, but didn’t have energy for much more than about six inches. Still, when I looked at her, she smiled.

I looked away, a little flutter in my heart.

I *must* have been tired, if I was letting that get to me. Women didn’t normally give me that friendly of a smile, that *inviting* of a smile, unless they wanted something from me. Something ill-advised and illegal in most places. I had to be imagining it; there was no reason she’d give it to me.

Unless...she really meant it. There was always that reason.

Except...not on the job. That was ridiculous. *I had* to be imagining it. I was just hopeful. Just remembering the past.

Besides, I told myself: I was Japanese, and while it’d been many years since I’d been back for any length of time, certain social conventions were still hard for me to pin down. Marti, herself, was an Italian living in France, so it was extra hard. Was she angry? Was she happy? Was she scolding me in French, Italian, or English? Sometimes they were all the same thing, all at once.

I quickly searched for something else to set my eyes on other than Marti’s smiling face and bouncy auburn locks, but even so, her voice followed me, light and musing.

“He’s something, isn’t he.”

Her tone was almost wondering.

*You used to say that about me,* I grumbled to myself, a little more sourly than was reasonable.

Wanting to nip that in the bud, both from her and me, I grunted, every ounce of my lack of impressed-ness showing through. “If you say so.”
“He’s injured all over, but he hasn’t complained a bit,” she persisted, despite my efforts. “He really is as incredible as you say he is.”

I glanced over at her. “Don’t tell me you’re falling for his charms.” There was a tiny sore spot that thrummed in my chest, saying it aloud, and when I spoke again, my voice was extra tough, unfortunately. “Trust me, they’re not real.”

“Please, he’s not my type.” She waved her hand, face crinkling. I smiled a little, at that. It always made her freckles dance. Plus, though I never liked to use my work voice on her, she didn’t ever seem to mind it when it happened. Tough Italian woman, good stock—and yet, forgiving too. A rare find. “And he’s way too young!” she went on, animated. “He could be my child for Chrissake, if I’d made some bad life decisions early on! Surely you see that.”

My eyebrows raised themselves, thoughtful. Come to think of it, she did have a child, one from early on in her first marriage. An adult son she was mostly estranged with, one she hadn’t been able to keep from going bad despite her best efforts, what with the influence of both her husbands.

He was a little younger than Lupin, if I recalled correctly—about 24 now? He’d taken off as soon as he could and was married to some mail-order bride, constantly moving around Europe, putting on airs and, I suspected, running scams or otherwise being a scourge on the local social services. There was a chance he’d still come around, but I think we both doubted it.

There were more families than not who had That Kind of relative. It was just a shame it was Marti who was the first point of contact, because she had tried damn hard to give him everything she could, as a single working mother. I’d tried to help her out with it at the end of her last marriage, but maybe I’d just made it worse, in the end, when I’d had to leave.

Whether her son had been emotionally broken at some point and never fixed, or just took after her first husband too much, she’d never really said. And since I hadn’t met him in person (and his files hadn’t been too fleshed out), I couldn’t make a decision, either. But if I ever met him, Alessandro Martelli, he’d get a damn good lesson in respecting one’s mother. One he would not soon forget.

“But you know, I wouldn’t say his shows aren’t genuine,” Marti added, green eyes gazing at Lupin. “They’re just thin.”

Ah? ...Thin?

I looked at him, tilting my head. He was rinsing out his hair with deft, decisive scrubbing. Good: He wasn’t wasting any time. Though, he was probably tired too, in all honestly; the hot water could only be making that worse.

But thinking on her comment, it was true: Lupin threw out personality traits like they were going out of style, when he wanted to create deflection. Even when he wasn’t pushed against a wall, he was a chameleon, acting a different part for each person he met. In that sense, everything he did was a veneer. A lot of times, he did it for fun, just to see what would happen, apparently because he felt there was nothing better he could be doing but test and razz people. In short, he lived on the surface of things.

It must have been an exhausting way to live, and really, a little sad too, for how lonely it had to be, because it preempted ever making deep connections with anyone. He was like a wind; he moved from person to person, either caressing cheeks or blowing down houses, and never lasting long. But when you unraveled him, when you got him to finally stop, was there anything left?

I’d certainly tried to find it, but I didn’t think I’d actually uncovered it. Or, it was possible that I’d
seen it, but not recognized it because, in contrast to a tornado, still air was easy to miss. Air, by itself, was invisible. You could only feel it when it went cold or got heated up.

“How do you figure,” I asked, curious what her observations would be.

Marti shrugged, leaning back on her hands. “He means everything he says; that’s real. His trick is how he says it; that’s how he manipulates people, right? The delivery and the timing. He doesn’t necessarily want you to act on the things he throws out there, but they’re all true, so if you do, ‘Ey, why not?’ He’s ‘the distraction’ role in poker, yeah?”

I considered it for a moment. It was hard to believe the beaten, skinny, monkey-faced little stick in front of me could be such a manipulator, but more traditionally masculine men had the freedom to be direct. It really begged the question of what environment he’d grown up in, that he’d been pushed to use every ounce of wit possible to survive, and what kind of person he was to like that.

Still, I nodded at her idea. “Suppose so.”

She nodded too, satisfied.

I considered the prisoner again, this time scrubbing his arms, dancing around and probably cursing every time he let the heavy stream of water directly on any given wound.

People like me and Marti, we didn’t see him when he was being himself, the human. Locked up, being interrogated, committing a crime: We saw him when he was on stage; even now, though we weren’t talking to him, he knew we were watching him, and so, he wasn’t letting his guard down.

I liked to think I’d seen the real him a time or two, like in the squad car today, or the breakdown a few moments ago. But even still, the latter had been a broken little someone, living in his heart and stuck somewhere in the past. It wasn’t exactly him; it was him in a crisis, him from years ago, bubbling up to the surface. So, all in all, what I had uncovered wasn’t worth much in the grand scheme of things. Even then, it could all be misdirection, and in the case of the squad car, I was sure some of it had been.

My impression was that what I got more often than not from Lupin was either some “crisis mode”—like when we were both being chased by bullets—which wasn’t a fair representation, or the “sweet and loveable” mask he’d concocted for himself when he wanted to take people off their guard; it was not real in the slightest, even though it was a role he played. But, in the sense that it was a role he played consistently, it was real enough: It was who he wanted to be around me, and that was who I saw. If it held up under pressure, was there a point in getting underneath it?

Would it be cruel to peel those layers back, and expose what was underneath...?

Like it or not, I knew Lupin the Third, Thief. I knew him professionally, more or less; we were a perverse sort of “work friends.” I did not know Lupin the Third, 28-year-old Parisian with a complicated family background.

I knew the young man who ached for a performance worthy of his skills, who would go to incredible ends just to create them. The man who wouldn’t shoot if he didn’t have to, who would go out of his way to protect a cop he liked and felt was worth keeping in the world. I knew the Lupin who lusted after women for no apparent reason other than the twisted appeal of trying to upend their disinterest, and constantly got in trouble for it.

I did not know Lupin the Third, young man and vulnerable human being, who was afraid of settling down and so went for women that never would; the man who cried when someone died
and what he cried about. I didn’t know the Lupin who looked up at the skies at night as a child, who was such a prodigious art talent that he could forge a Leonardo by the age of twenty and yet for some reason decided it was more worth his time to steal them instead.

You could say that I knew him like I knew my pocketwatch: I knew its quirks and how to wind it. I even generally knew the configuration of things inside. But I had never cracked it open; I didn’t know whether the cogs were brass or steel. When it inevitably broke, I could poke around but I wouldn’t know how to fix it. I only knew the technician to take it to, which in this case, was his bodyguard-turned-lover.

It wasn’t like the other people in his life knew him much better, either. When he was working with his comrades, he was also on stage. I suspected Jigen knew the real him, as much as anyone could, given how often they stuck around together even outside of jobs. But someone like Lupin...he brought people to himself through his performances, and what bacon he could bring home. That was a stipulation of the profession: you stopped producing, you stopped having friends, save one or two that had truly become family. But even then, if they were still working and you weren’t, you may just have to be dead to them if the right person asked, family or not. You may have to become dead, and they would be the ones to make that happen. That was just the way it went, and he certainly knew that.

Lupin had met all of his crew on the clock. Even with them, he was their leader, so he was probably putting on some persona, the way a king, mob boss, or company president had to. The Lupin that existed all by himself, who came out after-hours and only when he was all alone, working on a forgery of some sort or hoping for a date from the pretty girl across the room...who was that?

I had suspicions and plenty of observations, enough to understand him as a functioning human being, but I really didn’t know the voices that haunted his inner workings. He didn’t want anyone to know.

In fact, it begged the question of whether or not he knew. He spent so much time being someone else, reacting to others, and embodying his job, did he even know who he was, when his job was stripped away from him?

I doubted there was such a person. So did it even matter, really?

...Only if you were the type that liked getting other people’s psyches in your hands, tearing them to shreds, and planting your boot there—just because you wanted to control them, to own them.

And I wasn’t that type of man. So here I was, ever on the outside, chasing the tornado while simultaneously hoping it didn’t blow down the next house down the road.

Which was absurd, in its concept. Tornadoes were unpredictable and changed paths in a moment, and even people trying to catch them stayed well away; I was more like a shaman, trying to calm the raging god back into blue sky.

But when there was blue sky, I had nothing to do, which...left a strange little feeling in my chest, to admit. Was I the kind of man that couldn’t be happy with peace? The kind of man that watched the skies, waiting for a storm that I knew would drown the unsuspecting? I didn’t think so, but...was he like that, too, on the other side of the clouds?

I’d have to think about that, later.

“The thing you have to remember about him,” I added, catching Marti’s attention, “is that, most
times, he hasn’t decided what he wants to do, until you react to him. He’d be just as happy to tickle the tiger, as get it into a rage.” I spread my hand out. “It’s like his entire life is just saying ‘pick a card’ and reacting to that.”

That was one of the ways he was eerily godlike, in the pagan sense: humanity was his plaything, made to delight him; and society, regimes, hopes, dreams: they were his to make reality or topple. With just a touch, he set boulders rolling down hills, careening into castles and people alike. All you had to do was look in his eyes and you’d realize he wasn’t like the rest of us—humanity, human society; he simply didn’t get held down by the chains the rest of us did. It didn’t mean there weren’t chains on him. But where we crawled on the muddy earth, he flew in the sky. He didn’t even know how to crawl; he’d started off with wings and simply learned how to use them.

And that extraordinary soul, the light of which shone in his eyes constantly, was enough to entrance the uninitiated at a single glance, particularly young women. His magnetism was palpable exactly because he existed outside of all of us, looking in curiously and shuffling things around with a power that was natural to him and complete chaos to most others; most people could see that instinctively, somehow, in his eyes, and were drawn to that spark.

A pragmatic approach would call him childish, lacking an understanding of control and consequence. But really, he was perfectly in control of his skills, and readily sharpened them. He also understood the consequences, as much as any twenty-eight-year-old could. He just decided to dance around on the top of life, rather than slog through the crowds, and he was magic at it. It was...kind of nymph-like, almost.

Marti tipped her head, mulling it over. “What a way to live. I wonder if he’s afraid of anything?”

I looked at her for a moment, then Lupin, chewing on my next words. “He cried, earlier,” I said, hesitant. “When you were getting the gown. That was why he was...uh, hugging me, I’d guess you’d call it.”

“What?” She turned to me, impressed. “What was he crying about? And yes, I knew it wasn’t anything inappropriate. I pegged him for a huggy drunk from the moment I first saw him all over the counter like that.” She snickered.

“Good.” I snorted a chuckle too. “But...: Something from upstairs set him off. I don’t know what it was. This place, maybe. Or something someone said? I don’t know. But he actually cried. And then when I was nice to him about it, he started crying more. He couldn’t even control it.”

She looked over my eyes, and then back at him. “Wow,” she whispered. “I never would have guessed he had it in him. And on such short notice, too.... Maybe he was just shaken up about almost getting killed, and it just came out all of a sudden, when you two were alone and safe?”

That might have been what left him vulnerable enough to let it all slip out, but... “It wasn’t like...normal, when you cry,” I replied, at a loss for how to describe it. I’d had to comfort vics and soldiers and family members, and even a score of perps, through their tears, but it never got easier to talk about in any meaningful way, even if it was with someone I didn’t feel a need to be tough around all the time.

“He got all angry, like you saw, and then when I was kind to him, I guess it surprised him, because he started shaking,” I continued. “And not like a little quiver; more like spasms, really, first in one place, then all over.”

Marti nodded at me, thoughtful, and I decided I might as well keep going, if she was willing to listen, and my hands were already gesturing. “His eyes got all far away, and then, it just started
pouring out of him, the tears. For a while, I don’t think he even noticed it. It was the weirdest thing, he just talked right through it, in and out of going blank and stiff. It was almost like watching two different people in the same body, switching back and forth. I thought he was just trying to suck it up, but...it didn’t feel like that. He knows me, if he wanted to cry, he’d just up and do it and then play it off after.”

“I can’t tell you. Please don’t ask any more questions.”

It sounded like a child who’d done something life-alteringly bad and couldn’t tell his parents about it, for fear of being disowned.

Add in the fact that he refused to admit he hadn’t killed those people...

“Sounds like he was having some kind of panic attack,” Marti suggested, suddenly. “Was that why he was hugging you?”

“Ah?” Now that she mentioned it, that may well have been why he’d held onto me, for a bit. Large-scale physical stimulation of a nonviolent variety, like full-body hugs or wrapping in blankets, tended to calm people down who were in shock, something about flooding the nervous system with positive stimulation to redirect the brain away from thinking it was dying. But the fact that he knew to do that....

One of these episodes had happened before, and probably several times. He hadn’t been kidding about that.

“Except...,” Marti continued, crossing her arms with a worried frown, “that blank stare’s a little fishy. Man, I wish I’d seen it. What did he say at the time? You don’t suppose he might have been having flashbacks with it, too?”

“...Said it was something to do with the past,” I admitted, which shot my “getting forced into bombing something” theory all to hell. “But he doesn’t seem that broken,” I tacked on quickly, not sure if I was defending him or my own pride. It didn’t make me feel good, but a not insignificant part of me wanted her to know I wasn’t just chasing a broken weirdo for a third of my professional life and acting like he was the most amazing thing in the world. I wanted to be Superman, not Batman, in her eyes.

“You don’t have to be broken, or even overtly dysfunctional, to have flashbacks,” she replied, looking out at nothing and rubbing her chin. “It’s just a little tiny part of your brain, from some moment in time, failing to integrate its experiences with the rest of the soul and malfunctioning. And every once in a while, it comes back to the surface.

“It seems to correlate to situations that made the mind feel like it wasn’t safe in its own body, like a near-death experience or a rape—basically anything that took a person’s physical autonomy away from them. And it’s significantly worsened if that also happened to be a situation where the person’s understanding of the world and their place in it shifted because of the event, in a way that also couldn’t be reconciled, like rape by someone you trusted or the violent death of a friend in front of you. You were in the army, right?”

“Yeah.” I frowned, at that, but she wasn’t saying it to dredge up the past.

“You saw it plenty then, huh?”

“Yeah.” It wasn’t a particularly pleasant time of my life, but I’d seen said “malfunctions.” Luckily, I’d gotten out without any particular trauma. But the other guys... sometimes, you had no idea it
was happening to them at all; with others, it was big and obvious and violent, and could last over an hour, with people replaying every line of a battle in their minds or able to carry on entire conversations with you, plus or minus thinking you were someone else, somewhere else.

The former, though, the quiet kind—they just slowly changed, over time, withdrawing after having episodes of everything from confusion to nightmares to irritability. And one day, you’d just find them with a bullet in their head, or having drunk themselves to death.

It really made me wonder which one Lupin was.

“New research is calling it a moral injury, but I think that’s only half right,” Marti added, the hand on her chin floating out into the air to illustrate her points. “I honestly think it’s a malfunction of two different processes fighting for dominance. One, of the brain’s imprinting a fear of something from a traumatic event—the near-death experience part. The other, of trying to block out something completely that didn’t fit your view of the world, or your understanding of yourself—that’s the ethical part. Those two processes are both very powerful, but they don’t fit together. So they get in the way, one trying to erase, one trying to remember. The one that’s trying to remember is trying to learn from the event, but there’s nothing good to learn; it destroys more and more of the person’s foundations, their identity, with its “lesson.” So, then, the person tries to forget. But because the normal brain tries to integrate the memories and emotions, while both of these lower parts of the brain are fighting, the person, the consciousness, gets scared, because they can’t control anything. So everything just trainwrecks, all the time. And if it goes on long enough, it breaks people into bits.”

“How do you stop it, though?” I asked.

“No one knows,” Marti frowned, apologetic, and I just ended up swallowing hard. “It’s one of the great mental health mysteries of our time.”

My mouth was suddenly dry. “N-no pressure, then, huh.”

“You just have to break the cycle, somehow. And I think, from what I’ve seen...you have to go back in time,” she offered, turning to me with a sad but kind smile. I tried to smile back, but it didn’t end up working. “That broken bit of mind, that little block of memory screaming loudly, is from a specific time, and you have to address that. You have to let it become one with the rest.” She made a motion of pinching a cube between her fingers, and inserting it back on an imaginary shelf.

“Unfortunately, that means they have to relive the moment, and then, at just the right time in their mental process, you swoop in and give them some new truth to hold onto where they had none before. Show them something they don’t have to be afraid of, instead what they’d “figured out” themselves that’s hurting them, like that they don’t matter or they’re powerless to save others. You have to overwrite the old memories, somehow, and break the spiral of the two sides fighting; it’s kind of like you’re in a dream and you walk the right-hand fork of the road time and time again, even though it hurts you, but then, one day, the lefthand path opens, and you walk it instead, and then you stop having that dream, or the dream finally advances.

“I mean, in mild cases, talk-therapy can do it. For some people, they just go about their lives and one day, it all unravels under the surface without them knowing, because, by getting new experiences, they’ve already built a new platform of understanding, of identity, from which to draw their understanding of themselves, and it just sort of heals over on its own with a little bit of distance. But the really tough cases.... I just don’t know. It’s like they’re drowning in a patch of quicksand on that road and they can’t pull themselves out, or they’re down in a dry well and need a ladder. The sufferer has to be willing to go to dark places and accept hard truths, like that their
friend died and they couldn't do anything, or that they maybe really shouldn't have gone alone with that guy, but then you, the practitioner, have to put some other truth in there instead, like that the friend still lives on in you, or that it was still that asshole's responsibility not to hurt you. Someone else has to build them a ladder, but they have to be willing to climb up it, you know? The first rule of mental health practice is that you can't help someone that doesn't want it, and many people are too broken, too afraid, too deep in their crisis, to want it. But in Lupin's case, it seems that cycle-breaking truth, his ladder, was kindness in the face of all this. Kindness from you.”

I opened my mouth, then shut it. Marti smiled, green eyes fond, and looked upon our prisoner again.

“Seems Lupin’s case is pretty mild though, if that is what it is—which it might not be, this is all speculation. I can’t say for sure, so don’t get all worried about it. Still, I wonder if whatever startled him so bad was something to do with cops?” Her tone turned sharply; it was a mother’s tone, protective, ready to read the riot act to someone to defend her cubs.

“I think it’s farther back than that.” I muttered. The Lupin I knew, Lupin the adult, wouldn’t cry about something some cop did to him, no matter what it was. He’d just exact some sort of revenge on them. This had to have been something from a time when he actually used to be emotionally vulnerable enough to get scared.

Unless it was someone else it had happened to, and he’d been powerless to stop it. That could certainly traumatize adult Lupin.

The man who cries when someone dies.... The Lupin I didn’t know....

“I’ve never seen him like that before, and he’s been arrested a couple of times,” I added, thinking out loud.

Then again, I’d never arrested him around Christmas, had I?... Maybe the image of the falling snow itself, beyond that old window, had set him off? He did tend to prefer beaches to skiing getaways, though I always thought that was just for the tits and ass.

“Has he ever hugged you before? Like that?”

I sputtered at the mental whiplash, feeling the telltale signs of redness. It didn’t help that, in my native language, “hugging” was a euphemism for getting laid. “Aughk...No. No? Why?”

Without turning her head, Marti glanced back at me, grinning. “You’re getting through to him.”

I snorted and crossed my arms, turning sharply away. “I doubt that.”

I eyed Lupin. He had sat down, so that he could scrub better while keeping warm, presumably.

“Hey!” I barked, just to keep him on his toes. “What’re you doing over there!”

“Conserving energy!” he called merrily over his shoulder. “Not my fault you don’t have a bathtub!”

I rolled my eyes. Proof of concept: good. After what we’d been talking about, it was a huge relief just to see him be normal. I had to remember that, even if Lupin’s hard shell was cracked, it was only a hairline fracture. Beside me, Marti chuckled.

After a moment, I turned my head to her, returning to our conversation. “But that all aside, there’s another thing about Lupin you should know.”
“Oh?” she asked, leaning away so that she could get a better look at me.

“He’s not a fully formed person. Thinking he’s a mature individual would be giving him too much credit. Dangerously so.”

“Well of course,” she replied serenely. “You don’t have to grow up, you don’t.” We both looked back at him, then. All he was missing was a rubber duck. “So what do you think he’s running from?”

“Running from?”

“What he’s afraid of,” she explained. “That he can’t go straight?”

“Why do you think it’s fear?” I asked. That was the one thing I could give Lupin credit for, as an adult: he wanted to live a certain way, and he did it, consciously. He also took care of his people, as much as he could. And I fell into the category, for whatever reason, for better or for worse. It was certainly a chapter for the memoirs, at least (or the grandkids, should I ever get some).

But as far as Lupin, it was also a great point in his favor, and part of why I thought he could be a lot more than he was in life, even if he insisted he was The Best at his profession (which he was, as far as the guild of “foolish, overt thieves” went).

Then again, Lupin would say that there wasn’t any more that a man needed to be than good to other men, dedicated to his craft, and fantastic to his women. We tended to agree on that, even if we weren’t batting perfect scores.

“Men are always afraid of something,” Marti replied, mysteriously. She wasn’t looking at me. She was smiling just a little, bittersweet, at a place far away on the floor. “Women are too, of course, but it manifests differently.”

I frowned at her, not sure if I wanted to talk about her or him now.

But Marti shot me a grin, suddenly. “Ten bucks says his dad made him cry.”

“Marti!” I gasped, scandalized.

“What? You want to help him, don’t you?” She smirked. “You’ll have to figure out what triggered him so hard he cried, if you want to.” She crossed her arms, and slung one leg over the other with a flip of her hair. “The best way to get criminals to repent is to make them feel.”

She had worked in a prison, at some point in her early career, so certainly she knew. On the other hand, she was the type to break people’s psyches apart, when she thought there was a value to it. She had a talent for it, which luckily, she kept well-controlled and only used on perps and guys who dumped the women in her neighborhood in a bad way.

That was her interrogation technique: get close, rip people’s barriers to shreds, then hold them lovingly and direct them right into her lair. It was really very Stockholm-Syndrome-y, but also quite possibly Catholic Mother Instincts turned up way too high? Still, the day the woman had made me “good cop,” it had been something to see.

Sigh.

Not that I thought she’d manage it, but Lupin did have a weakness for women, and freckles. I’d have to get to him before she did.
“...Fifteen says it was something about his mother,” I offered, refusing to look anywhere but my feet.

She giggled menacingly and clapped me on the back. “There’s the spirit.”

“Such poor taste. And at Christmas...” I sighed, shaking my head.

“You don’t even celebrate Christmas.”

“I do too,” I muttered. “It just has nothing to do with Jesus.”

She broke into a good-humored smile. Her eyes sparkled with something tired but fond, and I found myself smiling back, most of my fear for Lupin alleviated.

“Well, you know I’m more Lawful Neutral than you are.” She chuckled, semi-apologetic, and looked away. “Besides. Isn’t your Christmas haunted by the ghost of the past? I bet his is.” She rubbed at the back of her neck.

“Hm.” I looked out at the man, who was now inspecting that spot on his leg that was the source of so much trouble. Apparently the fabric, wet and warm, had softened enough that it had come off, and he was cleaning it.

I turned away, not needing to see that much blood. I doubted Lupin had that much sadness around the holidays; his father had died in the spring, though I wasn’t sure about his grandfather or mother. Though, maybe Marti was referring to the sadness of lacking his father’s presence growing up? Or just the fact that he didn’t have family anymore, at all, with whom to celebrate?

Still, I doubted Lupin was the type of adult that let the weight of old traditions and their people get to him; he was the type to make new ones that suited him with the people he had. He tended to lay low around December even when there was a really good opportunity for a heist; which made me suspect that he went visiting for the holidays, either his crew or old flames. Unless he decided the best present he could give them was a heist.

Sure, you could make the argument that he didn’t want to pull off a job when it was too easy, as the end-of-year holidays tended to make things. But he actually didn’t stand on ceremony like that; if things were easy, then he’d just make less of a deal out of them—he was an opportunist as much as any criminal. He didn’t even announce every crime he did; only the big ones, the ones he wanted an audience for. He’d be completely insane otherwise, beyond just terrible at business, which he most certainly wasn’t. (Excepting Fujiko.)

One could also make the argument that he was the type of criminal that believed stealing at Christmas was distasteful, because it made the common man sad. Which it was—tacky and distasteful—but that wouldn’t stop him. He just wouldn’t steal from the common people.

But maybe, just maybe, Lupin didn’t pursue Christmas heists generally speaking because he was trying to cover up something else, that took precedent in his mind. Something personal, that distracted from his ability to work. Some old thing...

Though that begged the question, What the hell is he doing here then, this year, in this town?

“Start with the dead”...

I turned to Marti. She was looking away; I could only see the back of her head.

One of her husbands had died around the holidays, hadn’t it been? The one that drank himself to
death? I thought that was why she was here: to have something to do that could keep her from thinking about that.

Suddenly, I realized the “I bet his Christmas is haunted by ghosts” had been tacked on.

For a few moments, there was nothing but the sound of the water going between us, bouncing around the hollow room. The air was hot and steamy, and felt thick in my lungs. My heart was beating harder than it needed to, just to cool me down.

“Marti...”

She wouldn’t look at me.

“As far as I know, he was raised by his grandfather,” I began, quietly, hoping it’d give her something else to think about. I returned to a regular sitting position, hands folded between my knees and looking at my entwined fingers. “There are no records of it, at least no ones that aren’t forged. From what I can gather, his father knocked up some woman and never much acknowledged them.”

At some point, clearly, Lupin the Second and Third had gotten together, since the younger Lupin had been there when his father died. If you believed the reports, which I never did entirely, it was an assassination by one of his father’s rivals, upon word that his father was trying to get his syndicate back up and running after being deported back to France. It was a situation Lupin had nothing to do with, despite being there, so on the surface it wasn’t some revenge thing. Honestly, the going story was that Lupin was trying to get in with the family business and had been caught up in the trouble, and then, with no family left, had just set out on his own to play the merry thief.

Which didn’t make a lot of sense, seeing as how he had to have inherited a ton of squirreled away goods from his grandfather and father, if not his mother too, though I knew nothing about her or her wealth status. Maybe they’d all been broke though, every last one of them, and he couldn’t get to his father’s secret accounts that even the FBI couldn’t track down. It was possible; hell, it would have been poetic.

Still, when Lupin the Third had tried to get in with his father, had the Second appreciated that? Had he deplored it? There was really no explanation of how they’d felt towards each other at the point of his death or any point prior; the organization was so thoroughly obliterated in the aftermath of that train bombing that there was no one left to spill the beans on the subject, every member dead or scattered to the winds with assumed names, Lupin the Third included. “I’ve never asked him about it.”

It had never seemed relevant to inquire about it; it was just ancient history, with no pertinence to my cases or Lupin’s currents antics. Besides, you didn’t just go around looking for sad things in people’s childhoods, if you respected them at all.

Lupin did like to brag about his grandfather on occasion, though, so that was how I knew what little I did about that, beyond the old police files that linked Lupin II to the originator of the name. That had certainly been a trail and a half to follow at the beginning of my career on the Lupin II taskforce, when I’d been making the Third’s original profile: That winding road had been full of misspellings in several different languages on two continents and then some.

“Well that explains a few things...” Marti said, looking over her shoulder at me, and then turning fully. When she spoke, her voice was soft. “Was he at least a nice man, his grandfather?”

I smiled for her, hoping it would brighten her mood a bit. “As far as I can tell, yes. He’s deceased
now, though.”

Her eyes turned down. “The good ones always are.”

I gave her a second, but when I glanced over, she was smiling faintly, gazing down at nothing in particular.

And yet, as she did so, her hand crept forward, to lay over my fingers.

She looked away. I coughed and pulled my hand away, reflexively.

I regretted it immediately.

We were on the clock. But we were also alone on the clock, except for a man in a shower a few feet away. A man who was really, really not going to care, let alone tell anyone.

Marti didn’t move. She was letting me have control of the moment. So, after a second, I set my hand back down, over hers, steady and reassuring. I looked away as well, the opposite direction that she was.

“His death may be the reason Lupin here started stealing professionally,” I continued, a little more gruffly than necessary just to get the heat out of my face, even though I petted Marti’s fingers with my thumb gently at the same time. “Either to follow the man’s memory, or to eat.”

As far as I knew, they’d never committed a major heist together, so he’d probably passed away before Lupin was very old. Old enough that Lupin had internalized the family mythos and decided to carry it out for his own sake, but not so late that they’d been able to do it together. If he’d died when Lupin was fairly young still, say before his father died, that would explain why he ended up around his father at all.

“In this day and age...to teach a kid to pull off heists.” Marti shook her head, but she squeezed my fingers a tiny bit, playful. “It’s surprising, really. Don’t mafia dons always want their kids to be senators or something?”

“That’s just it,” I replied, turning back with some enthusiasm, only to find her looking at me too, just as bright. I took up her hand, holding it between both of mine. “His grandfather, back in the day, married into the French ex-aristocracy, apparently for love. But since the family disowned her for it and was broke anyway—and the fact that he had no other skills but thievery—he went from petty theft to bigger scores, since he now had access to everyone’s treasures, as well as intrigues with which to blackmail them, via social engagements and business dealings. Lupin’s father, the Second, decided that line of work was too unreliable or too old-fashioned and ended up a mob boss in America, setting up his own syndicate when he ventured out on his own.” I gestured out to the side, to the bubble-covered nudist. “Lupin the Third here is the first one to live in the open and not hide what he does, so to speak. His father’s the senator. Lupin’s the movie star of the family.”

She chuckled, running her hand over her mouth. “Wow. What a crew.”

“Mmhm.”

We both looked over at Lupin, but he was simply whistling and scrubbing as he sat. I looked back at Marti, and she looked back at me, eyes twinkling. And then she looked down at our hands, smiling.

I immediately went bright red and pulled my hand back. “Ah...ah.” I coughed, turning frontwards and wiping my sweaty palms on my trouser legs. “Sorry. That was unprofessional of me.”
“I like the unprofessional you.”

I whipped my head around, but she had turned away too, politely settling her hands in her lap. She glanced at me, trying not to smile in a way that was both demure and precious and made me want to do certain things that the manual certainly forbade in the locker room.

But before that thought could go any farther, luckily, she pushed back her shoulders, cleared her throat, and lifted her head, saying, “It really is a wonder he’s not more of a prick. Or a scumbag.”

Taking the cue, we both looked at him. Still sitting down, he was finally working over the bottom parts of his last leg, with particular intensity and his contortionist powers.

“Thus my fascination.” I shrugged, tilting my head with a thoughtful frown, trying to switch over to logic and Lupin to get away from Marti and fluttery.

True, small-time syndicate guys weren’t all horrible people, at least at first, but they were inevitably corrupt and twisted about their views on the value of life. Lupin was neither, yet, though I definitely saw signs of it—deeper, darker signs, each subsequent time I met him. “Somehow, he ended up having a good soul in there. Was the grandfather’s doing, probably. Or his mother. I don’t know a damn thing about her. No one does, ‘cept Lupin over there, and he’s not running his mouth on that one.”

Marti nodded, studiously.

The fact that Lupin knew Japanese as well as he did told me she’d been around for a while, but there were no records of her anywhere. Lupin didn’t even have a birth certificate, or if he did, both him and his mother were listed under different names. “Arséné Lupin” was most likely not his real name, especially given that his father wasn’t around in his early life; it may have been his father’s real name, but even that was questionable—I was under the impression that Lupin’s father and grandfather had been functionally estranged, so why would he keep the name when he emigrated to the States? I suspected that he’d been born with some normal name and started using Lupin II as his alias, at the time of his immigration, just to piss off his old man.

The surname “Lupin,” or “wolf,” was certainly a working name his grandfather had adopted when he appeared onto the scene as a thief, so it wasn’t possible to track down his original real name, either, one that could be running through the family without any of us knowing about it.

Though, if Lupin had admitted that he was twenty-eight... it was a place to start. He was right that he shouldn’t have mentioned that.

“I wonder if that’s why he does it,” Marti said suddenly from beside me, softly.

“Hm?”

“Steal things. Is it because of his absent father, or the one that was there?”

“Mmn,” I murmured. “I don’t think he’s that encumbered by his baggage. I think he just finds it fun. He’s got a smart mind and decided this was the way to use it that fit his personal image of his own destiny within the milieu.”

*His image of his own destiny...*

“A moral injury,” where you took a hit to your understanding of the world and your place in it.... “Compounded by a feeling of helplessness and a near-death experience,” one from a long time ago.... With a death that maybe happened to someone else—
“Huh,” Marti said. “So it’s just a job to him?”

—So someone he was related to, then? His grandfather? No; if that were the case, he would’ve given up thieving. His father? He’d died in the spring, in a place full of greenery. That wouldn’t have triggered him into a flashback here and now. Which left...

His mother.

“Zeni?”

Or an old love, maybe...? That could be traumatic too, if some underworld goon got to her to get to him....

“Earth to Zenigata-san.”

It would also explain why he never lets himself get close to women.

A push came at my bicep, and my gaze shifted sideways, along with my head.

“Ah, uh. Sorry, just stuck in a thought.” I shook my head, shuffling it all away for later. When I looked back at her, what she’d said finally sunk in, and I ended up staring at her, a warmth creeping into my chest and a fond smile blooming across my face, the worries of Lupin drifting away into the sounds of the artificial rain. “Aww, you called me ‘-san’.”

“Of course,” she said, head tipped back proudly, only to suddenly shift to side-eyeing me self-consciously. “That’s right, right? Or am I supposed to call you keibu? I can never remember how it goes,” she sighed, exasperated.

My smile grew, and I leaned toward her, weight on one hand, the other gesturing with a point as I instructed her intently. “We’re work friends from different departments, so ‘-san’ is fine between us. But if other people are around, because I have seniority, it’s ‘-keibu,’ my official title. It’s like me calling you ‘Officer’ and you calling me ‘Inspector,’ whereas normally we’re just ‘Martelli’ and ‘Zenigata.’” I smiled.

“Ah, right, okay,” she said, staring studiously at the floor, arms crossed. “I think I get it.” She touched at her neck, then her hair, and then swirled a finger through a curl, thoughtful.

I leaned forward on my hand unconsciously, drawn toward that gesture. God, if only I could have gotten this woman to call me ‘Anata’....

“Ah...Zeni?” Marti asked, green eyes bright beneath her dark red locks as she looked up at me. She leaned back a bit, unsure.

Or maybe even, ‘Sempai’....

“Yes?” I husked, shadow falling over her.

“Um...Your eyes are twinkling.”

“Yes.” There was a little voice in my head that said that wasn’t a very polite thing to say, but I was also vaguely aware that I was too tired to care. Or change course. I was just falling into her eyes, and memories of them.

But then, her pretty green eyes narrowed, dark and unforgiving. “Are you daydreaming about that sempai thing again?” she demanded.
I coughed and quickly sat up straight, arms crossed. “N-no.... Of course not,” I muttered, crossing my arms and my legs, though I wasn’t sure if it was for my sake or Marti’s. I glanced over at her, just one eye open a crack, but she was giving me a man-eating smirk.

“I never said that was a bad thing.” That finger had dropped from her hair and was swirling slowly on her thigh.

I looked away from that trouble, quickly, but ended up looking at Lupin, unfortunately. He was watching us.

*Should I leave you two alone, or...?* he mouthed at me.

“Shut up, Lupin,” I snapped, and he quickly turned away, whistling innocently.

Marti, meanwhile, made a noise of curiosity and called to him, her Italian accent coming in strong: “What, you wanna watch or something?” It wasn’t as aggressive of a gesture as I would have liked it to be. It was practically inviting, in fact.

I hid my red-hot face in my hands and sighed, then rubbed my eyes for good measure.

*Sharks on every side of me....*

God, I was tired. We all were, otherwise this wouldn’t be happening. I was pretty sure Lupin was legally inebriated at the very least, and I, for one, was quickly approaching that as well, given how close I’d come to sweeping up Marti in my arms, then and there.

Get a hold of yourself, Koichi.

“Um, wh-what was your question, again?”

Marti chuckled, crossed her legs, and looked out at Lupin. She didn’t seem phased at all; her toothy grin, in fact, was quite to the contrary. The tilt of her head, as she shook her hair in Lupin’s direction, was even a little flirtatious. “I asked you if all of this life of thievery was ‘just a job’ to our suspect over there.”

“Ah...well.” I followed her gaze to him, trying to focus on things about Lupin’s scrawny, hairy, bony frame that would switch my hormones off. He wasn’t looking at us any more, at least, but that didn’t help much.

“Right, so,” I continued, rubbing the last bit of tension from between my eyes and looking up with a deep breath, hoping those twinkling green eyes were getting back their business sense too, “he doesn’t do it out of a sense of moral obligation, I don’t think. But I don’t think it’s just a job to him, either. He finds it fun. My honest impression is that his life is punctuated by bits of thievery to keep it interesting, because mankind itself just isn’t enough.”

Marti scoffed. “God.”

That seemed to be enough to get her back on track. Good.

“Right? There’s a reason he’s described as ‘appearing like a god and disappearing like a devil’ by the papers. The older he gets, the more I think he embodies that.” I turned to the thief. “Ey, Lupin!” I hollered.
“Yessir!” he called back promptly.

“How would you describe yourself?”

“Ladies’ man who can get women out of their clothes as fast as he can crack a safe.” He didn’t even look up to say it. Though he swayed a little at the force of shouting and touched at his head again to steady himself.

I narrowed my eyes at that, but he went right on showering. I quickly returned to Marti, hand raised. “There’s your answer.”

She just grimaced at the same time as she laughed. “Oh I see.”

Hard to rattle the soul, when that’s your impression of yourself. It left me wondering, once again, what was the real him, and what was not. What was the heart of the storm, and what was its debris.

The woman looked upon Lupin then, like I was, and it was more chagrined pity than anything else.

“He’s really very simple, in some respects,” I added, noticing her gaze. “Just a kid with too much money, too much talent, and no one tell him no.”

“Jeez, you’d think he could be curing cancer or something,” she sighed. “With the way you say it.”

“Probably,” I admitted. “He writes code and engineers shit like you wouldn’t believe. He’s methodical and practices with the devotion of an international athlete. And, I might add, he’s got artistic skill enough to forge government seals and documents, money-printing plates, and classical paintings. When you think about the things he could be doing with himself, it’s just upsetting.”

“A bit of a throwback, really.”

Lupin turned around then; sitting with one leg crossed and one leg out, letting the water hit his back to deal with the final scratches there. It was hardly the look of a genius, as he tried to figure out a way to get his back soapy within the limitations of his injuries.

I tipped my head. “How do you figure?”

“Renaissance Man,” she replied easily, a finger in the air. “If what you say is true, he could have been Da Vinci.”

I looked at him again, assessing. Maybe that was the look of a genius. Archimedes in the bathtub: an idiot on the outside, genius on the inside. It wouldn’t be the first time.

“Inventor, tinkerer, artist,” she continued dreamily. “A man who is the architect of new systems by breaking old ones. Or maybe a Daedalus. The greatest inventor of antiquity, supposedly....”

I frowned, tone dropping decidedly as I narrowed my eyes at him. “No, he’s Icarus.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You know that myth, huh?”

“Mmmh.”

But her surprise turned into a smirk. “So you’re Daddy Daedalus?”

My palm ended up against my forehead. Marti laughed and patted my knee, fond. “A lot of people tell the story as Icarus burning up when he got too close to the sun. But you know, Icarus also got in trouble when he flew too close to the sea too.”
“Mn?”

“It means that, if a person doesn’t strive to achieve at least a little bit, they’ll sink just as fast, and drown in the heavy inexorable ocean of God’s tears that are all around us. Talented people especially.” She nodded, gesturing with her hands to illustrate the ocean via the tiny hexagonal floor tiles of red, white, and blue—the colors of the French flag. “The ancient Greeks thought that the sea was Zeus’s tears, you know.”

I found myself considering her metaphorical floor, and then Lupin himself. It might be true. Without something to do to occupy his mind, something as complicated and multi-faceted as large-scale thievery, he might just shrivel up and die, body, mind, and soul. So his fate was to explode like a nova, or drown in the sea, unless he could keep flying forever.

Great. That only reiterated the feeling in my heart that I had to get to him, somehow. I couldn’t imagine him doing this when he was eighty, though I could imagine him trying and failing spectacularly and breaking his neck.

I’d much rather see him and Jigen, long retired and, god forbid, having done something legitimate for work for the rest of their lives, be the decrepit old coots sitting around the public square of some little Italian town, telling the kids their tall tales every day under the shade of an old olive tree, and absolutely no one believing them. The worst thing they’d get up to, in that scenario, was peskily uncovering the truth of local gossip and occasional grave robbing. I’d be long dead, but I wouldn’t have to be haunting anyone or rolling over in my grave, which was the important thing.

Now, what he’d probably end up doing in that scenario was teaching every last urchin in the town to be a sneak-thief and corrupting the whole place for generations. I would roll over in my grave, at that. Hell, I’d haunt my descendants until they got over there, if I had any, or maybe a long-lost nephew or cousin if I could manage to track one down. But at least Lupin and Jigen wouldn't be dying an early death. That was what mattered.

“I think it’s pretty neat,” Marti continued at my side, tone just as wondering it had been when the conversation started. “I’ve never had a prisoner who could forge his own wings, before.”

“Are you sure you aren’t falling for him?” I sighed.

“Yes, yes I’m quite sure, Sempai.”

The look she gave me twinkled a bit too much. I blushed and looked away, rubbing the back of my neck. “I didn’t know you had such a romantic streak, Marti,” I managed to stutter out.

“Eh. I don’t get to let it out, at work. But I read things. I write them.”

“Yeah? Like what?”

She licked her lips and leaned in a little closer; I drew in, just as near, coaxed by her encouraging smile. When I was just six inches away, her voice dropped, shy, and she leaned in the last few inches, until her lips were against my ear. Her breath tickled my sideburns, and it was everything I could do not to just grab her by the shoulders reflexively. “Would you believe me if I said y—”

There was a thunk at my foot. I looked down immediately, almost hitting her in the nose with my forehead. She reeled with a cry, touching at her face just to make sure everything was in-tact.

There was a bar of soap at my foot.

A wet one, full of bubbles.
I shot a glare over at the shower stall, ready to curse Lupin out for whatever smart thing he was about to mouth off, but what I found there was the farthest thing from what I was expecting.

He was lying on the floor on his side, half in the spray and half out, the top of his head facing towards us. His black hair swept along the tile, his limbs laid out around him, the hand that had held the soap now empty and gently curled. In the water’s spray, he was utterly still.

Marti and I looked at each other, not a foot of distance between us, and then back at the—apparently—unconscious prisoner.

“Oh,” she said, surprised.

“Is this a trick?” I asked.

Chapter End Notes

For those who don't know, "Anata" is a word in Japanese for "you" that is used, these days, almost exclusively as a term of endearment between couples that means something akin to "dear" or "my beloved." Zenigata's basically saying "I wish I could have married her."

"Sempai" is part of a pair of terms--"Sempai" and "Kohai"--which are suffixes (that can also be used as stand-alone nouns) meaning, loosely, "upperclassman" and "lowerclassman," respectively. It's a kink for many, and in the working world (ie, outside of the school setting), it's much like daydreaming about one's boss or military superior would be in the western world.

I can't wait for him to call her "Marti-kun"... he hee. Can you even imagine? <3 I watch too many cop shows.

Anyway, I threw all that in there for the cuteness, hope it proved amusing.

(Also: Ten points to you if you caught "The Godfather" movie reference. <3)
Probability I

Chapter Notes

So far, the chapters have been in the form of self-contained theses, almost: they looked at one aspect of a character or their personality, and we get to watch that play out. But now, with the plot taking over more and the characters established, the feel of the story's going to change a bit. I will try to keep the character study flavor within the action/adventure tone, but I hope you find the plot material just as exciting as I do!

The perspectives switch back and forth in this chapter a lot. In case you didn't notice it already, wherever there's three asterisks (***), that means the perspective has changed. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Warm light, bright and white, streaming over me... The scent of fresh summer air, ripe with pollen, caressing my skin.... And in my ears, two sets of giggling voices, one a woman's, one a child's.

I open my eyes, and the white fades away just a bit. Enough to see a woman with straight, thick, shoulder-length dark hair, tucking it behind her ear as she smiles down at me, my little hand in hers. A field of giant sunflowers towers over us as they dance in the breeze, as if to mark the boundary between my world and the bright, cloudless blue of eternity.

“A—”

As she speaks my name, a butterfly drifts before her mouth, and I cannot make out the remaining syllables.

It is a butterfly of pure, white light; a trail of shimmer slides off its wings like a comet. I follow it with my eyes, but when I look back at her, there is nothing. There is no one.

Only white, growing in intensity, and it hurts.

Light was shining in my eyes. Bright light, sweeping back and forth.

“Agn...” I moaned, swatting at it.

The light flew away like a UFO, and in its place came a haloed image of a middle-aged woman with beautiful green eyes, fading into living color from a wash of white.

She was saying something, but I couldn’t quite tell what. Her mouth was moving, but I couldn’t hear it. I felt like I was floating in space, with no sense of time or place or touch.

Groaning—I could hear that, though it was like it was underwater—I turned my head. I found a familiar set of khakis and their patent leather cop-shoes, and followed them up to the rest of the Inspector. He was sitting on a wooden-slat bench, looming over me with interest, a bit like he was staring at a puzzle he needed to solve.
This man, at least, I could identify no matter what state I was in. He needed no explanation for his presence, either, so my mind didn’t reach for it, which was nice. But that gaze of his...

“Did you shoot me?” I rasped. My tongue felt thick, and I wondered if I was slurring. The look on Zenigata’s face made me wonder all the harder; it was knit with concern.

“No,” he said hesitantly, looking aside. I followed his gaze, back to the woman. I thought she might have been touching my face; her hand came away from my vision, very close to my eyes. She might have turned my head for me, so that she could inspect it further.

Name...name...what was her name... M...Mar...Marvel...Marlie....

The light came back, and I winced, complaining loudly. Or at least, what I hoped was loudly. Its owner deserved it; I wanted to bite that damn light; it burned, directly into my cranium.

Well, I guess I could feel something now. There was that blessing...ish.

The woman’s face, too, was quickly turning into a frown in between that pin light’s assaults, and her light freckles contracted into a different pattern from the crinkling wrinkles. I thought I smiled at the dancing dots that had nothing to do with my blurry vision, but the gesture might not have made it out of my mind.

“You passed out from...something, rather unexpectedly,” she offered, following up on Zenigata’s reply. I could hear her now, pretty well, but it still felt a little distant. I must have hit my head...?

“Can you tell me where you are?” she asked, pulling the light away.


She wasn’t buying it. “Can you tell me your name?”

I stared at her, glaring into my memory. I came up with mine, but that wasn’t what I wanted. What was her name? Martelle...Martel...Mart... “Marti!”

“No, that’s my name,” she corrected. “What’s yours?”

“Ah—” I was halfway through it when I realized it was the wrong name. I paused in the middle, and swiftly played it off. “Ahkg,” I coughed. “Ahr...Arséne.” I smiled, perky. “Ladies’ man.”

At that, Marti sighed and sat back on her heels, putting the light back in her pocket. “Well, he’s got that down, at least.”

“The world would end if we ever forgot it,” Pops muttered into his hand. He was resting his chin in his palm, one leg crossed over his knee and one hand holding his foot in place by the ankle. He looked at his watch. “How long do you want to give it?”

“Five minutes and he should be fine.”

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and searched my memory. Little lights swam across my vision, even when it was supposed to be black. I remembered scrubbing at the gash along my left ankle, then trying to get into the wounds on my back... And then...

I had been sitting down. When I turned around with my back to the spray, not having to contort around, I finally relaxed, but it had still felt like all the blood was rushing to my head anyway.
Lights swam in front of my eyes, like a school of fish in the sea suddenly turning and flashing the sun, and then I’d closed my eyes and gotten really dizzy from my body trying to put me to sleep too fast and...and then I was here.

“Got it,” I said to myself, which caused three sets of eyes to peer down at me.

Wait, three...?

Toward the top of my vision, a blond head and extremely light blue eyes hovered in the air. “Oh,” I noted. “Hi, Christo.”

“Hi buddy,” he replied gently, accent warbling.

I smiled at him, though I wasn’t sure how well it actually appeared. He disappeared from view for a moment, then came to sit on his heels on my free side, beside Mari. His police gear shifted and clattered softly against itself and the floor. “You gave us quite a scare,” he said, though his elbows rested on his thighs and his hands hung down between his knees with a certain ease. So, then, even if I’d hit my head on the way down, I wasn’t dying. Good.

“Sorry...” I scrunched my eyes shut; I did feel horrendously tired, with a thick cloud of cotton balls around the edge of my mind, though the rest of it seemed to be coming back to me. “I think I fell asleep. Prob’ly just the warm water, is all.”

I grunted and made the effort to sit up. I managed to kind of get on my side, but my body felt like lead, so I just gave up and returned to my back. The tile was cool, so the stings from my wounds—oh right, I had those—quickly stopped from the pressure my weight put on them.

I sighed, looking up through the field of bored-slash-concerned-looking cop faces, hoping none of the fragile scabs had ripped open on the way down. Jigen and Fujiko had, if I counted right, saved me from at least two near-drownings each from similar situations in bathtubs and showers after violent pursuits—particularly the ones involving shrapnel. I should probably get that checked out some day, that phenomenon.

I attempted to push myself up again, out of sheer persistent need not to make my guests lean over me like I was a corpse at a viewing, but about halfway up, that pain in my left side made me stop with a groan and a hiss.

It was like I was being stabbed with something, every time I moved it. I cursed, holding that bruised—and gently weeping—spot tenderly. “I think that rib’s finally fractured.”

“You did fall on that side,” Zenigata acknowledged.

I sighed and shook my head, returning to the floor. Oh floor, my love and my bane. At least, like this, the floor supported my existence, rather than broke it. It was nice and warm in here, too, so I wasn’t too cold.

Struggle finally finished, I lay there, breathing hard. No matter how much I breathed, I didn’t feel like I had any air. The little prickles before my eyes kept coming, and they were taking longer than normal to evaporate. “I really do feel lightheaded.” I pressed my palm over an eye, trying to blink out the lights shining in the other one. Waking up from unconsciousness, the brain did always take a minute to reorient its sense of time and space, but this was ridiculous. It was like I’d fallen from a roof.

“Look at me.” Before I could, Zenigata’s thick hand had reached down and cupped my chin. He turned my face gently, and I found I couldn’t help but stare back, a little incredulous—and totally
helpless. His hands were gentle and careful, despite how ham-fisted one would think he was at first glance. I could smell his cologne, too, or the faint traces that were left of it after a 20-hour day. 
Pine.

“You’re pretty pale,” Pops grunted, releasing me. “Get yourself together, and I’ll get you something to eat.”

I sparked to life at the thought, and my eyes no doubt shone too. “Reallyyyyy?”

“Yes, really,” Zenigata sighed, rolling his eyes and sighing like caring was such an inconvenience.

“Pops you’re the best,” I replied, dreamily. My mouth was even watering.

“Don’t get too excited. Nothing but a vending machine’s open this late. Early.” He eyed the ceiling in thought, then me suspiciously, above his folded arms. “When was the last time you ate?”

He accused me of it like an annoyed wife would her serial offender husband (or Jigen would), and my grin may have finally made it onto my face.

“What time is it?” I asked, tiredly, through the smile.

“‘Bout five.”

“Sixteen hours ago.”

Zenigata cursed, shaking his head left and right, and Marti tipped her head back, sighing. “That explains that, then,” she said.

“What?” I whined. “You guys’re probably ‘bout the same...?”

“I beat a muffin out of one of the navy boys upstairs,” Zenigata said, dry, and Marti chimed in: “I had dinner at ten. PM.”

“I brought lunch,” Scout Leader Christof said, taking over for the adults and poking me in a clean spot on my abs. “But you’re a stick. Hummingbirds need to eat every hour or they die.”

I stared at his finger, then him. “Then it’s good I’m not one?”

“Still,” Zenigata added, rolling his head on his shoulders until his gaze came to rest on me. “You have a higher metabolism than anyone I know, and you’re fucked up, losing blood, and who the hell knows what else—head trauma? I don’t know. You can’t just not eat, you’ll pass out. You’re not a kid anymore, you gotta take care of yourself, Lupin.”

He was getting more annoyed as he listed off the woes. I couldn’t help but feel a fondness, at that.

“Well, you’re right,” I agreed, haughty, which threw him. He let a haaah? of surprise, but I’d already looked away. I looked down into my lap, in fact, and it was then that I realized I was still naked.

I’d...been having this whole conversation naked, and they hadn’t even cared. Wow. They really were professionals—minus that “looking” earlier. Which, really, was understandable. Humans were curious creatures, and social hierarchy demanded certain answers.

Though, it was probably more that Marti was the professional, Pops was used to it by now, and Christof...
Christof was Scandinavian, and really just didn’t mind.

I sighed. Hopefully no one minded that my ballsack was purple and unevenly swollen, either. I’d probably end up pissing blood, next time that particular bodily function happened, which was never fun.

But, new to the landscape, there was a bandage around my right thigh, over that one omnipresent wound and the thing sticking out of it. My stomach dropped, remembering it, and I swallowed hard. Once the cloth of my armor suit had warmed under the water and the coagulated blood had loosened, it’d revealed a thin, twisted swatch of shining silver metal dug deep into the flesh, and about an inch and a half of it sticking out of my leg, wrapped around the skin.

Right. Fuck. That was going to be unpleasant. We had to get that out before it turned into toxic shock or something. Best not dawdle. Still, I didn’t feel quite ready enough to stand, yet. Give it another minute, and I’d be good, if I could ever feel like I was getting air. So I needed to stall for time, just a bit.

“Did you do this?” I asked, to no one in particular, touching at the white gauze. It was speckled with red like a hoard of blooming mushrooms, but it wasn’t currently bleeding, I didn’t think. It was a start.

It was Marti who answered. She sounded a little proud. “Yes.”

“How long was I out for?” I asked, looking up to her without lifting my head. But she didn’t seem perturbed. She shrugged, in fact. “Just a few minutes.”

“Aww, Marti. You shouldn’t have.” I shot her a happy smile. “Thanks, babe.”

“Oh please,” she snorted in response, chuckling. Eventually, she put her forehead in her palm and shook it with a chagrined smile.

“What, you never gotten picked up by naked men before? Not even on a beach? I’m sure you’ve got a great bod.”

She laughed, sharply, a remark in the negative. Christof whapped me in the shoulder with the back of his hand. Zenigata cleared his throat, warningly.

I glanced at Christof, then eyed the Inspector; the former glared at me, and the latter, the one actually capable of making me squirm with only his eyes, refused to look at me.

A smile pulling at my mouth, I asked, “Tell me you didn’t finish my scrub for me while I was helpless? All you beautiful people...”

Pops did that thing where his eyes went blank for a second because he was refusing to even process the statement. He put his head in his hand and rubbed his brow line. Marti just chuckled. Christof, however, looked thoughtful. Christof.

Fuckin’ communal Scandinavians....

“Don’t throw your weird fantasies on us,” Pops grumbled, massaging his forehead. Marti looked like she wanted to pat his back with a “there there.”

Victory won, I decided it was probably time to get up. I gave the command to my body to lift my arm, but it didn’t really do anything.
“This...this might take a while.”

“Christof? C’mere,” I said.

* * *

“What can you tell me about the victims?” I asked into the phone, leaning against the wall. I was standing across the hall from an outpatient exam room on the ground floor, watching the goings-on inside through its open door. Marti was talking to the nurses, who were poking and prodding at Lupin, who was in turn sitting on one of those weirdly hard yet supposedly brown-leather-covered exam beds from the previous century, or possibly even before. The two nurses, in their pretty white-skirted outfits and stockings (because the French still liked those kinds of things), were on either side of him, conducting mental cognition tests and giving me a great view of their rear seam lines.

Lupin, for once, was doing a better job of keeping his hands to himself than my mind was with keeping on track (I was only human, after all), but from the looks of it, he was still lapping up the attention and laying on the charm pretty thick—his smirk wide and smarmy, his eyes attentive, the flow of his hands and shoulders loose and smooth as he spoke. From the women (and Christof), I heard exasperated sighs at least once a minute.

In fact... One of his hands was coming very close to copping a feel of the woman nearest me; as I watched, his hand, inexplicably, settled on her hip and slowly tapped along as it slid down. Meanwhile, his other was on the shoulder of the woman kneeling down to inspect the wound in his thigh.

“Hey, wait just one sec for me,” I said into the receiver. While the man on the other end was shuffling around, I marched the few feet across the hall, put the phone against my shoulder, and barked, “Hey!”

Everyone jumped and looked at me. Lupin, especially, leaned around the nurse a moment after everyone else, eyebrows raised. He knew he was in trouble, the little rat. I glared at him.

“Hands,” I warned, using my free one to point at the appendage of Lupin’s that was on the woman’s waist. Lupin looked at it, then lifted it with a cheesy, sheepish grin at me.

But I didn’t let him off the hook there. I directed my finger to the side, and like a shadow, Lupin’s hand followed my direction, if hesitantly. Up into the air, over to the side, and then—down.

Down onto Christof’s knee.

The deputy and the suspect looked at each other in equal amounts of confusion, as if neither had realized the other was so close and were now regretting it. When they looked at me, each with equally dubious looks (though of slightly different flavor), I turned to Christof and said, “It is now your job to make sure his hands stay on his thighs. And in the case of the injured one, it is to stay on you. Got it?”

Lupin was in his manacles again, but there was about a foot and a half of play between them. If he’d wanted to, with people bending down and distracted all around him, he could definitely have garroted somebody with them.

When Christof opened his mouth, still perplexed, I added, “You don’t want to know what he can
do with a scalpel, should he decide to lift one from somebody’s pocket.”

That seemed to shut them up. As well as put them all on edge. Luckily, Marti saved the mood:

“You wouldn’t do that, would you, Mr. Lupin?” she asked, with a charming voice and utterly frigid smile. “You just have no self control with ladies’ curvy parts at five AM.”

Lupin opened his mouth, then shut it. Mentally, I did the same. That frozen smile and warning tone... I think I’d seen it on Fujiko before. And my ex-wife. That was more trouble than I needed.

I turned around and went back to the phone, returning to the hallway. “Jacques, you there?”

“Yeah.”

I settled my shoulder against the brick unceremoniously, one arm wrapped around my ribs and my right—the one with the phone—resting on that. I turned to the left, so that the phone and my hand covered up my mouth, lest Lupin decide to lip read. I could have gone to a more private setting, but I wanted to keep track of things just a little longer, in case something decided to go pear-shaped.

“Sorry about that. Prisoner’s a little punch-drunk and causing trouble; none of us have slept.”

There was a soft chuckle on the other side of the line, a nerdy scientist’s one. “Ah, well. That happens. Guess you’re used to sergeant hours, huh?”

“Something like that,” I sighed. “Sorry to make you work the graveyard shift, and leading up to a holiday, no less.”

“Eh, I get called up to do emergency work every once in a while. Every time there’s an event with a lot of casualties, they want us here working as fast as we can to identify the bodies. I’m used to it, and glad to help. You’re just lucky this town has a coroner. Most rural provinces have one for the whole area, and he or she might be on vacation right now.”

“Ugh,” I grunted. That was lucky, in a way. “Why aren’t you, by the way?”

“We have two, and we switch off who gets which holiday each year.” I could almost hear the middle aged man’s shrug. “So you get me. But, these ladies deserve to get home, after all. Even though that just makes the hard part come all the sooner for you guys. Sorry to give you that. I’d much rather have a quiet night here with these girls than have the morning with their families. No offense to them, but living people are tough.”

“Mmm,” I agreed into the phone. This was a giant mess and just thinking about the searchlights that would have been brought in—reflecting off first the charred remains of the building and then the snow—so that crews could work all through the night, made my stomach turn, a bit. I hadn’t even gotten to the part about contacting all the family members, in my heart’s scenarios. “You think there’s a good percentage of the bodies being found?”

“Some. The fire’s been put out, far as I’ve heard, and they’ve gotten about five in-tact bodies here. The most recent EMTs left a few minutes ago, and they said they weren’t expecting any more unless they came in pieces. Pretty full house, really, for this little facility, even like that.”

I winced, and I must have made a noise with it, because he said, “Ah, sorry.”

Coroners... I sighed. “It’s fine. Anyway, are there any early characteristics I should know about?”

“Well, it’ll take a long time to know for sure, but so far they indeed appear to have died of the crush injuries, at least, not the fire. And none of them saw it coming. Bed clothes, most of them.
Some of them with curlers in their hair and toothbrushes in their mouths. They went quick but hard. I don’t suspect any kind of fowl play beforehand. But...

“But?” I tilted my head as a woman passed by, a silver tray in her hands. I stopped her with a silent wave; I gave her and the medical tools a cursory once-over, but their only crime was that they were particularly wicked-looking and Lupin would be earning his keep from whatever they were going to do to him. I nodded at her and she nodded back, and like that, I was alone again.

“Oh, another lovely lady for me,” Lupin’s voice came in softly, muffled through the doorway.

“Do you ever give it a rest?” Chistof sighed.

“She’s working, why shouldn’t I?” Lupin replied.

“Working on what, your pickup technique?”

“Obviously?”

I rubbed my eyes and pinched my brow together so hard it hurt. I had to have gained several wrinkles from tonight, easily.

“But, so far, it’s all women,” came the voice on the other end of the phone. “Different races, ethnicities, but all similar ages. All between fifteen and twenty-five. I’m sure it’s not a problem if they all came from one apartment or something, but was this a dorm of some sort?”

I frowned. I had no idea if there was a college around here or not. “Or an apartment that rented just to women, maybe? That’s not unusual, is it? Around here?”

“I don’t know that part of town that well. But since they’re all different ethnicities, it’s sort of weird, isn’t it? They couldn’t have been related.”

Hmmmm... “I see. Well, thanks for that. Any news yet on a file of who’s expected to have been in the building?”

“Not yet, but I’ll call you when it comes in, if you’d like.”

I smiled. Finally, someone who wasn’t making me pull their teeth to get some cooperation out of them. “That’d be great, thank you.”

“No problem. You got clearance for it?”

As in, at this very moment? “Sure do.”

“All right. I’ll get it over to your phone when it comes in.”

“Actually, this isn’t a smartphone. Could you send it to email? And, if you have pics of the vics that are there, I’d appreciate that too, tremendously.”

“Absolutely. What’s the address?”

I rattled it off for him. After a moment, he repeated it back, and everything was set. “All right, thanks. Do it right when we get off the phone here, if you could. Need to get this started as fast as I can.”

“Oh? I thought you had the suspect?”
“I do,” I replied crisply. “But he isn’t copping to anything, yet. Some pics might help jog his memory.”

“Ah. Well. How’s he doing, anyway? Feisty then, I take it?”

“As much as you can be, having been dug out of rubble,” I admitted, a little uncomfortably, wondering where he was going with this. I could trust him, I assumed—I’d worked with him on a case or two, years before—but there was no way to be sure.

“Curious, that he’s the one still alive, and all of the innocents died.”

That was where it was going. Dammit, Lupin....

But instead of being bitter or angry or threatening, Jacques’s voice was simply resigned. “That’s always how it works with drunk driving accidents, too.”

* * *

About thirty minutes after my shower’s rough ending, I was clothed in a hospital gown and sitting on a ridiculously uncomfortable bed, trying to keep the lights out of my eyes—nurse-owned or otherwise. My head was bowed, with my hands resting on the back of it with interlaced fingers, while my elbows rested heavily on my knees. My hair had dried but even in the thin garments I was warm overall, seated next to the radiator as I was. The meds Pops had given me a while ago had helped the throbbing go down a little, too, so even seated like that, I was able to think more loudly than my pulse pounded, if just barely.

It was something, at least.

The room was an old one, and small, maybe fifteen by fifteen feet. It wasn’t the actual ER, which surprised me, but maybe they wanted to keep me away from the regulars if they could help it; that wouldn’t be odd, particularly if they didn’t have a segregated inmate facilities’ section. The comings and goings of a full ER offered ample opportunity to escape, especially given my methods—which Zenigata had certainly learned the hard way.

The room, though, was standard doctor’s office fare, albeit old. It had an exam bed, the really old, traditional kind, which I was sitting on; and there was a row of old, but cared-for cabinets along one wall, with a sink. A small rectangular window, maybe four feet high, was a few feet to the right of the foot of the bed; in between it and the cabinets sat two wooden chairs, which normally would have been for parents or consultations or something.

The parade of nurses had come and gone, and through the doorway, I had seen Zenigata call someone while out in the hall. From his casual lean as he did it, it was no doubt one of his cop buddies, somewhere else in the booking process. He seemed fairly relaxed about it, which was good, but his expression only grew more grim as he talked. I wasn’t looking forward to that, when it inevitably came back around at me.

For now, though, Christof was sitting in one of the chairs, our driver-guard was at the door, Zenigata was gone for food, and Marti was at my back, also on the bed. It would have almost been like a little girls’ hair-braiding party, if it weren’t for the fact that Marti was braiding not my luscious locks, but the skin on my back.
It was just creepy enough of a situation to keep me from falling asleep sitting up. I wasn’t quite sure why she was doing it, rather than the nurses, but maybe it was just caution against Fujiko being one of the nurses and my own handsiness. Still, if she could do it well enough, why not? I liked her fine, and “This one time I was getting stitched up by a redheaded Italian woman in the middle of a snowstorm” was a great way to start a story.

Marti, crossed legs against the back of my hips as she sat, was currently testing out the efficacy of the topical anaesthetic on the next section of my back, after the first leg of stitches had been completed. I couldn’t feel any of what she was doing when she was sewing, but looking at the work had proved morbidly fascinating, so here I was, occasionally trying to look back as we waited for the newest round of skin to go numb. Apparently, I had more than one laceration back there that required stitches, which was pretty lucky, as much as it sucked—any deeper, and whatever had caused them could very well have impaled me instead.

“You mind if I make a call to my girlfriend?” Christof asked Marti, from where he sat. With Zenigata gone for food and the guard still functioning fine, Christof was just milling about with nothing to do, and probably in danger of falling asleep, if his yawn was any indication. Seemed that once he’d sat down, it’d finally caught up with him, too. “Since I’m going to be late coming home, I’d like to tell her that I didn’t die last night, now the sun’s up.” He wiggled his phone in the air.

“Sure,” Marti replied, business-like. “Go wild. Once we get the suspect locked up, you might be able to go home, provided you turn in the paperwork on time. You should ask the Inspector, when he comes back.”

She didn’t even look up, pulling at a long string of self-degenerative stitching thread instead. The knot went down the chord where she wanted it, and she snipped it with a pair of tiny scissors. When she was done, she flashed him a quick business-like smile over my rather green stare at her work; Christof nodded. “Thanks, Telli.”

“No problem.”

He walked a few feet away, into the hall, and was soon chattering away just around the edge of the door. Seemed his woman’d picked up.

They exchanged a few ridiculously saccharine lines and trilling noises, and Marti and I, almost in tandem, shook our heads and decided not to listen in any farther.

“Hard to listen to, sometimes, isn’t it?” I asked, turning to her.

“He’s a good kid,” she replied, by way of explanation.

She threaded a new needle, and instructed me to turn around. The ties of the gown pulled apart—the top one anyway—and she pushed the fabric off my shoulders. It caught on my biceps, including the new stitches there. I was sure I looked like a romance novel cover, at least whatever the male version of that was.

She apparently started poking around on my skin, because she asked, “Feel that?”

*This isn’t helping that image.*

“Not a bit.”

“All right then, good. Here we go...”
Presumably, she started sewing, evaporating my developing fantasy.

“Why does he call you Telli and Zenigata call you Marti, if you don’t mind me asking?” I asked after a bit, feeling like I needed to be doing something to keep from imagining what she was doing.

Behind me, the woman made a noncommittal noise. “In France, I am ‘Telli.’ In Italy, I am ‘Marti.’ Not a lot to it.”

So they really had known each other a long time. And they’d met in Italy.... Curious. What had Zenigata done in Italy, before he met me? I wasn’t sure I knew.

“Oh, no, I missed you too, my lilac,” Christof’s voice came through, a few feet away. “But snowbear’s had a cool night, let me tell you....”

I sighed, hoping to bleach that from my mind. “Martelli... Sorry about... earlier. What happened in the elevator.”

I normally wouldn’t bother apologizing, but I wanted these guys on my side as much as I could, and this could prove critical to that, if they hadn’t let me off the hook already.

Especially if something else set off the memories in the future. In this place, it was entirely possible; I was really looking forward to getting out of here, even if Pops made it sound like my life would be hell after. Hell from idiots, I could stand. Hell of my own mind, that was slightly different.

“It happens,” Marti replied, dry.

I took a deep breath, only belatedly realizing it’d interrupt her sewing. Regardless, seemed she’d let me off the hook. Good. Onto step two:

“About... Pops’s reaction. I don’t normally mean to rile him up that much, and I think something else is going on with him, putting pressure on him. I want you to know, he’s a nice guy, he wouldn’t actually throw a punch at someone, unless someone was in danger.”

Which, really, indicated that I was in danger, now that I thought about it. Fuck. Had I just admitted that to her? Double fuck. Or... maybe good thing? Possibly, if it forced Zenigata to let her in on the situation, and she was clean....

I felt a little tug at my skin, an inch or two to the side from where one of the lacerations was. It was her fingertips, laying down on the skin. Still, it was fairly gentle. “Oh, I know. I know him better than you, probably.”

I tried to turn back to look at her, but she intercepted me and pushed my head back forward, to a lovely view of the cabinets that asked be taken out and shot for their poor sense of taste. “Tell me about that,” I rattled off instead. “Did you... work together, at some point?”

There was no reason to suspect she wasn’t clean, especially if she was working so closely with Pops. My radar certainly indicated her as exactly what she seemed. But still, I got the impression they hadn’t seen each other in a while. A lot could happen, in even the span of a month or two, when it came to pressure from corruption.

And when it came to the value of selling out me. I could be worth an entire life’s wages, and that was just for handing me over. Getting info out of me, leaving me dead... I could be worth any number of free passes, and that could be hard to ignore, for all but the most righteous of people.
“You want ancient history, huh?” she asked, though it was a bit musing.

“Is it that ancient?” I asked, honestly. “You seem pretty...close.”

There was the sound of something metallic setting down on the steel tray beside us, and she sighed. “Is it that obvious...?”

“No...But I’m not so bad at putting clues together, myself.” I grinned, hoping it got into my voice.

“Well...all right,” she muttered, looking off toward Christof. He trilled a couple more ridiculous sentiments, at the end of which she shook out her head and asked, “Feel that?”

“Nope.” I chuckled. “Which one are you working on now?”

“The one on the left.”

“B2.”

“What?”

“Did I sink your battleship?”

“Oh my god,” she scoffed. I felt a prickle in my nervous system somewhere, but the sensation was muted and orphaned. Seemed she’d poked it a little hard, in her exasperation. “Soooo....”

“All right, all right, you insufferable information sponge. What story do you want—how we first met, the stakeout where we both got naked, or our work history, or what.”

My body flashed with heat, and I tried to turn back around again, but she just pushed me back again, this time by the shoulder. “Careful now. This is a real needle and that is your lung under here.”

“Can we start with one and get to the others?” I asked, excited, completely oblivious to the warning.

She scoffed; I could hear the smirk in it. “Depends. I think you only have time for one before the Inspector gets back, so I think you need to pick one.”

Ahh, man... “The second one. Definitely. And if he gets back, we can just talk in Italian.”

“He knows a little, you know,” she teased.

“Oh, not the words I’m gonna ask you.” I grinned, wickedly. “Though...I’m pretty sure he knows just enough to get entirely the wrong impression and go after me, if I end up asking you about certain things.”

“If you say so. I’ll take that bet.” The sound of materials clinking, of thread zipping. The feel of flesh depressing under her cool fingers, as she held down the skin with one hand before spearing it. “Well, I’m a woman of my word, so: story two. We were both on a stakeout, at a romantic overlook above a river that happened to be getting a bunch of bodies dumped in it around that time. It was a cold, dark night, and we couldn’t turn on the heat because someone would notice the car was on, right? We were in an old one, the type where the headlights would automatically come on if the car was on. Because we had to pretend to be a couple on lover’s lane, we were in one of those old VW vans with the shag pad in the big open back, right...”
I nodded, entranced.

“Aaaand we were waiting for this suspect to finally show. We’d been on this spot for like two hours, with nothing to do, because we’d come as part of a last-minute hunch and didn't even bring any books. So the night goes on, and it's just us with hours to go.... We had all this lovely space we weren't using, and I was so cold, and you know the Inspector’s hands are so warm...”

I nodded further, encouraging. Yes, yes, and—

“And so he made me some noodles, of course. But you know, he tried to pass them to me in this old-fashioned Japanese way, while I tried to stand up and take it, and so we ended up with scalding ramen over both of us. It was a mad flurry to take off our clothes, and we ended up driving back to the station without the perp, while in our underwear. The end.”

“What?! That can’t be the end. Marti, that can’t be the end,” I pleaded.

“It’s all the end you need to know about.” She smirked, proudly.

I wailed at her, but she wasn’t buying it. “I never said anything happened between us. You decided that on your own. Hook, line, and sinker... You have such a small-time mind for such a bit-time name. You really are just the price of your shoes. And oh look, Christof’s coming back. No more story time.”

“Nooooo.”

But in the face of my dismay, she threw me a bone: she leaned forward and whispered in my ear, with a hand on my bare shoulder and in a voice that was far too seductive for a cop, “Though I did get to wear his raincoat, with nothing underneath it....”

The scene Christof came back to was me blushing horribly as I stared at nothing. He eyed me, then Martelli, and shrugged.

“How’s the lady friend?” Marti asked, like nothing at all had happened.

“Fine. She said she missed me last night.”

“Awww,” Marti and I teased in unison.

“Want to see a picture?” he asked me, smiling proudly.

“Sure,” I said, and he handed me his phone.

Seemed we were on good terms. I hadn’t had to worry about a thing with him.

You are such a boyscout and I love you.

“How’s it coming?” Christof asked Marti, leaning over her head to inspect my back.

“Oh fine, fine...” They started in on the pleasantries, all care of me forgotten, while I looked at the picture on the phone in the address book. It was a delicate-featured dark-haired girl, about Christof’s age. She smiled sweetly, in summer sun by a lake somewhere.

It was something I simply couldn’t ignore. Or rather, someone.

I pulled the phone in against me, and hit the text feature.
“You know,” I spelled out, saying my message aloud and waiting to see how long it would take him to catch me while he was in the middle of talking to Marti, “Christof is a really nice guy. If he asks you to marry him sometime soon...”

Christof did what I could only assume was a double-take, and then reached down for his phone, over my shoulder, with a “Hey!”

But I pulled it away from him, off to the side, and his hand landed in my crotch while Marti shouted at him to stop messing her up. That moment of recoil on his part was enough to give me the advantage I needed. “Consider saying...”

As he watched me, horror on his face and me grinning wide, I hit send. “...‘Yes’.”

His blue eyes were bigger than a cow’s. I handed him back his phone with a toss of my head, letting Marti get back to her work.

“That was supposed to be a secret, you idiot!” he shouted over my head, frantically pulling the phone to him and looking over what it said. He started typing furiously, no doubt some iteration of Ignore that, it was the perp—oh wait how can I tell her I let him have my phone?!

He looked up right about as he got to that point, face red with desperation.

“If she doesn’t know it’s coming, you’re doing it wrong,” I replied, smoothly.

There was no way in the world he’d hit me, with string coming out of my back and Marti practically attached to me with scissors in her hands. But he definitely had a very strong urge to strangle me.

Note to self: Buy Christof and soon-to-be Fiancée a really nice trip somewhere.

“It’s true,” Marti said dryly, coming to the rescue without missing a stitch. “I was surprised both times and still said yes for some dumb reason and look how that turned out.”

Christof was on the verge of tears. Or strangling me. Hard to tell. Possibly both.

“Sit, Chris,” Marti commanded. “Mr. Lupin, that wasn’t a very nice thing to do.”

“I wanted to be more honest with my feelings,” I replied. “And that feeling was that I wanted to do something nice for the man, other than give him overtime.”

Christof sighed and fell into the chair at the foot of the bed. “Don’t do me any more favors,” he pointed at me, but really just looked exhausted, and put his head in his hands, despondently.

“Too late,” I quipped.

“Whaaat?” he groaned, pleading for mercy.

“I’ve made up my mind, got at least two more planned. Here’s one—”

“Please no,” he muttered.

“Behave,” Marti added to me.

—Tell her I thought she was particularly lovely and was quite jealous. I’ll even text it out for you.”
Christof’s mouth stopped in mid-word formation, and then he smirked, one side of his mouth twitching back involuntarily. “...I see.”

“She’ll be all over you tonight. All over.” I winked at him, and he just blushed and looked away, chin in his hand.

“Meanwhile,” I continued, “Martelli was just telling me about her sex life with Zenigata.”

The skin on my back pulled, largely.

“I was not!” she screeched.

* * *

There was a bank of vending machines one floor up from the exam rooms and in the far wing of the hospital. It had taken about five minutes to walk here, and now I stood, staring more at the shadow of falling snow that draped over the machines’ display than the choices that were listed there.

The windows, behind me, were a quarter-covered in snow. A gentle arc from one corner of the window to about a foot up it sat against the glass, a snowy beach in miniature.

I wonder if we’re snowed in yet?

That could be helpful, if the Commissioner had decided to “take care of us” somehow. On the other hand, it could also be very bad, if that person was already here.

After a bit, I sighed and fished the change out of my pocket. No use dying on an empty stomach.

The heavy slip of coins down the chute and a few button clicks later, the various bits fell down, and it was as I was bending over to pick them up that I heard the sound of a woman’s heels.

The hallway I was in was dark; at this time of night, up here on a floor that was mostly offices, only the light of the machines themselves was on, beyond the lounge that was a dozen feet or so to my right. The building’s main, open-air staircase was at one end of that lounge, so while it was lit well enough, I was mostly in the dark, as were the hallways to either side of the lounge, including the one I was in. The footsteps, however, seemed to be coming from the staircase.

I slid back against the wall, and waited.

They were fairly light steps, quick and rhythmic, and made no attempt to hide their presence. A woman, then, most likely.

The echo of heels reached a crescendo and a blond woman in a navy blue uniform appeared, wearing bright white heels. I recognized her almost immediately—it was the administrator, from when we’d come in.

That didn’t mean I was off the hook, but when I stepped out and she waved at me, I relaxed, a bit.

“Inspector, there you are,” she said as she came up to me. “I’ve got news.”

“Oh?” I asked, pretending to be interested in that as I eyed her, making sure she’s wasn’t Fujiko in
disguise. But the eyes are all wrong, and so was the voice. It was Nadia, no doubt about it, for better or for worse. She hadn’t much liked me after that stunt with Lupin at the desk.

“Yes.” She dug through her front right pocket and tossed a coin in the healthy-snacks machine. She jabbed at a button and picked up the energy bar that fell out. “We’re getting sent home early, because of the snow.”

“What?” I hissed.

She gave me a brief, if sympathetic, look. “I know. Seems you’ll have to find somewhere else to house your prisoner for a while, unless you want to stay here with him. Too bad, too, I know it’s extra paperwork for you.”

I shrugged. It wasn’t the paperwork I was worried about. “Where’d this order come from?” I asked, bending down to pick up the remaining foodstuffs I’d left in another machine.

“No where special. Just base command. There’s at least six more inches of snow coming this morning, so they’re calling a snow day. Since it’s a holiday anyway, all base activities are now cancelled, and non-essential personnel can head home. That means me, and the docs.”

I frowned, arranging the plastic packages in different pockets. The hospital of this base wasn’t operated like normal; though it was staffed by military, it was a dayjob, not a commission. So it could definitely be depopulated. Still...

“You don’t have anyone else here that has to stay on? No patients that need overnight care?”

She shook her head. “This is basically a ‘student health’ hospital for the base. We do some teaching and research, but that’s mostly mental health, not things that require inpatient care or daily monitoring of experiments. Overall, it’s pretty sleepy here. We have an ER for base activities that go bad and coast guard missions, but everyone in town knows that on holidays, we aren’t open.”

I took a breath and sighed it out. Granola bar now secured in her pocket, she nodded her head toward the stairs, and I followed her.

“You’re pretty lucky, though,” she went on, as we crossed the lounge. “There’s normally no one within the gates on Christmas but the base boys, and even most of them go on leave. Hardly any of the officers are here right now, either. Even the maintenance staff leaves. But Doctor Le Blanc heard about what was happening and came in to help out. He thought they might be bringing some of the casualties from the fire here, so I told him it’d be fine for him to come in and see. It turns out that didn’t happen, though, so I feel bad, but without him phoning in and volunteering, there’d be nobody here qualified to deal with your patient’s leg. So that’s a good thing.”

“Le Blanc?” I asked. Who was that? “Haven’t heard of him, haven’t seen him. Where’s he been all this time?”

“He’s around. He got here a little after you did. He’s talking with the machine techs right now, I think, getting ready for that X-ray and such you wanted.”

Ah. I grunted an assent. I’d definitely need to talk to him, and clear him for work around Lupin, just in case. “Do you know what his clearance level is?”

“Oh. He’s a civilian. But I think it’s...level three?”

Not very high, but high enough for a contractor. “Why’s he here but not a navy guy?”
“You know, I don’t know. He worked here when I got here. But he’s an older gentleman. He comes in to teach a few days a week, so I just assumed he was retired from a military career.”

Nadia ran her hand along the marble staircase’s railing as she went. The wood was old, the varnish discolored, but her white-painted nails popped out against it regardless. “You may want to look into getting your prisoner transferred sooner rather than later, though, like during the scans. I’m not sure who’s staying on with this snow, and now... You may get snowed in, too, so if something goes wrong, even with Doctor Le Blanc, I’m not sure help could arrive.”

Under our feet, the stairs bowed, worn away from so many years of use; I had to take care to make sure I didn’t trip. “Won’t the base’s streets get plowed soon?”

“Sure, eventually, but on Christmas? Why bother? All the guys have to do is get to the cafeteria and back.” When we got to the main floor, with the military men still milling about and her desk just beyond them, I let her go forward, and she passed by with a quick thanks.

“How much longer you think we’ve got to get out?” I asked, following her to the desk. She was quick, even with the heels.

“If you’re still here by noon, you’ll be stuck here over Christmas, I’m thinking. It’s falling pretty hard, out there.”

I checked my watch. Five forty-five.

She turned to the boys in blue, half of whom were asleep in the chairs. “You guys heading out soon?”

“As soon as orders come down from the top that we can,” said the captain of the crew, who smiled tiredly as he leaned against the back of one of the chairs that his buddy was collapsed in. He had brown hair, cropped close around his face, but a fair complexion. His youthful green eyes held mine a moment longer than necessary before he spoke. “I was having such a good poker game, before I got called up to spend my night in these chairs.”

“Well, you make them look good, so don’t complain,” I barked back. “Far as I’m concerned, you can all leave. My squad’s got this.”

His smile grew, but he looked only more weary. “If only I took orders from you. I’d be more than happy to.”

* * *

As Marti worked on the last open wound on my back, I was leaned forward, the top of the thin cotton hospital gown in my hands. Pops was in the hallway, having reappeared only to get chewed out by the cadre of nurses.

I sighed; the novelty of his pain had worn off, and now I just wanted to be fed. They’d stopped him ten feet from the door with all of the food he had visibly bulging in his pockets. I wanted to just yell at him to lob it at me, pass it to me like an American football, but I really didn’t have the energy. I was dizzy and my stomach felt cavernous; the two together drained my voice away. So here I sat, waffling between gnawing my arm off and collapsing, little spots drifting before my eyes here and there while my entire body ached—save the parts Marti had anesthetized.
“There, all done,” the redhead announced behind me, perky. She tapped my shoulder, and I sighed.

“How do you still have this much energy?” I groused. “You didn’t Christmas Tree my back, did you?”

“If you’re asking me if I decorated you with the stitches more than normal, no, I didn’t, and I’m this awake because I’m past the point of no return,” she said, looking around me with a happy smile as I half turned to her. “Besides. Nothing like a little morning sadism on the perp to wake up the senses, right?”

“You’re...you’re joking, right?”

“Of course,” she said, in a way that I didn’t really believe. She held up the scissors. “Snip snip.”

Apparently, she had hit slap-happy stage, finally. I wasn’t sure I wanted to see what Christof’s was like. They definitely didn’t want to see mine; I’d end up on the floor somehow, no doubt unpleasantly. I didn’t need to break anything else.

“Well, if we’re done, could you grab me whatever food Pops has? I’ll teach you how to pickpocket, if it means I get it faster.”

She laughed, but it was then, finally, that Zenigata got his last scolding and was released. He rubbed at his hair and sighed, while Christof appeared from beside him, pushing a folded-up wheelchair. As the deputy went about setting it up, Zenigata came over to me and Marti, his hands on his hips, surveying the both of us.

And me in particular.

I was leaned forward, while I held the gown in front of me and my bare chest. With Marti at my back, putting away her tools, and me looking up innocently at the Inspector, head tilted back at a ridiculous angle, the man no doubt had a view he wouldn’t soon forget.

Zenigata grinned and held up his hands, making a picture frame out of them. One of his eyes peered through it, down at me.

“Now, if only the genders were reversed, this would be perfect.”

“You are so weird,” I groused in disgust, mostly because I wished the food would hurry up.

“Don’t throw your weird fantasies on us,’ Inspector.’”

Pops coughed, but then shrugged and scratched his stubble, unfortunately stepping just far enough away that my slinking hand couldn’t reach his nearest pockets. I wasn’t sure if he’d seen it, or just was that used to putting a proximity barrier around me, but I cursed in my head.

“Been subjected to too many of Marti's bodice rippers over the years, I suppose,” he said, thoughtful.

“Don't blame this on me,” she replied quickly.

“You know, I have dressed up as a pretty convincing woman,” I rallied, though why I thought that would get my dignity back, and in front of this crowd, even I couldn’t really explain. “Unlike you,” I added to Zenigata.

Ah, there it was: while maybe not dignified, there was dominance to be won and lost in the zingers. Always.
Doing something between a snort and a cough, the Inspector hastily turned away. Christof paused in his efforts at all this, watching the two of us with shifty eyes.

“Oh...?” Marti whispered, leaning in so only I could hear. "We may have to exchange more stories."

Yesss, I crowed in my head.

Patently refusing to address this any farther, Zenigata doled out the food he brought—packaged muffins and croissants, energy drinks and juice cans. Some went to Marti, some to Christof, and even a few to our guard; meanwhile, the rest that went unpicked, he put back in his pockets. His giving hands never made their way around to me.

I wheedled, at that.

“I talked to the docs,” he said, succinctly, clearly anticipating this. “In case they need to do surgery on your leg, they don’t want you to eat or drink anything, lest they have to knock you out.”

“I thought the whole point was so I wouldn’t conk out?” I complained, with a defeated moan at the end. My stomach rumbled at me, like an earthquake, and little prickles washed out my vision, with the force of my words. I rubbed at my eyes, but that hardly helped them go away.

On the other side of me, Zenigata shrugged, unapologetic. "They also want to get a CAT scan of your head, since you passed out, and all your dizziness and head pain. And one of your leg, too. They're not sure how deep the piece goes. Could be pretty close to a couple of important things. Bones, veins, the usual."

I grimaced, pushing down the flutter of nerves in my stomach as I stared at my leg, which had a purple towel draped over it so that I wouldn’t obsess over it. I wasn’t scared of blood; I’d been shot and patched up quick and dirty plenty of times on someone's couch. But it was the waiting for it that was sickening. And just...leg wounds. Ugh. They were always a bitch, no matter what. They bled like crazy, they didn't stop bleeding easily, they kept you from running away...

I eyed Zenigata. "So, basically, you're saying they chewed you out for letting me walk around on it."

"I did not say that."

I glanced at the wheelchair beside us, which Christof had managed to get unfolded and was now sitting in. He came alert when he saw me looking at him. "That doesn't mean it's not true," I said.

"Well, I...," Zenigata admitted, refusing to look at me.

“Hee hee.”

But to my giggle, Marti, behind me, sighed a trouble sigh.

I made a curious noise back at her. Had the slap-happy worn off to grouchy? Or pass-outy? "Babe? What's wrong?"

A weight rested on my back, in the parts of it I could still feel. Ah...?

Her hands came around my shoulders, pulling them back slightly. "Breathe," she commanded, in a whisper, as the side of her head settled against one side of my back.
I tried not to look at Pops, but it happened anyway. He wasn't angry, though, or possessive: he was frowning, curious. I guess this was a thing she did...? Was she checking my breathing or something?

Staring anywhere but him, I did as was told, chest expanding, lifting the weight of her head while her grip held me in place.

Her hands were nothing like Fujiko's. They were so much kinder and worn. Attentive and connected, with just the touch itself. Fujiko, on the other hand, had to talk to you to distract you into thinking she was paying any attention to your body at all, rather than just using it. But Marti, she was a natural; there was an energy to her touch, an intelligence to her interest, that somehow was also highly calming. I couldn't tell exactly what she was discerning from this all, but it was definitely something far-reaching.

After a few breaths, I was finally released. She sighed and sat up, bundled all her tools to the side, and slid off the bed. Standing, she turned to me, looking genuinely stern for the first time. I swallowed.

"Seems you're healthy at the moment, but if they're serious, you're very, very lucky."

So she was taking my vitals, somehow? Interesting. I wouldn't have pegged her as a woman interested in holistic stuff. But I kind of wanted to know that technique, for the next time I ran into Fujiko. Hell, it could even impress Jigen, too, if I felt like it.

"My astrological sign," I quipped.

She raised an eyebrow, momentarily taken aback. "Your astrological sign is luck?"

"Yeah. Don't you play Elder Scrolls?"

Zenigata snorted. She grimaced, but it was accompanied by a friendly smile. “I’m more a D & D girl, myself.”

“Oh! Well in that case, my dump stat is luck. I can reroll up to five times.”

“Christ,” she muttered.

“I think the DM rolled a hundred on a multi-chart event today,” Zenigata said, completely deadpan, crossing his arms. “What’d you roll to counter that? A sixteen, with five dice? Five D-20 dice?”

I stared back at him, mouth agape. Off to the side, so did Christof.

The image of Pops and Marti, somewhere in Italy, probably legitimately in some old ruin, as they sat around a table with dice and cards and a bunch of their coworkers, Marti’s bodice rippers and Pops’s historical dramas stacked on a table for when someone’s turn was taking too long....

And then, them whisking off into those star-lit ruins afterwards, giggling and humming, hand in hand, making an adventure tale of their own with passionate hands....

I cleared my throat, and sat up straighter. “Clearly, I rolled a ninety because I’m awesome, and you came up with the extra ten. Plus you had a squadcar item bonus so like, we totally did fine, right? And you also had your magic coat equipped for my sanity check afterwards, so all’s good yeah?”

The way Pops’s eyes bulged, part surprise and part because he realized I understood his brand of nerdspeak and he was processing what I’d said, was absolutely incredible.
Meanwhile, Christof snorted and chuckled. *Jock.*

"Anyway," Marti continued, her tone unusually serious and her finger pointing. "Take it easy from now on. No more fucking around. No combat rolls. Nothing that needs a sanity check. You stay in the base, you don’t touch anything, you don’t drop anything, you are potentially one hit point away from bleeding to death because you dropped a screwdriver on your foot. You sit in the fucking rocking chair and read that book I gave you. Got me?"

I shrunk down, a little. "Yes, ma’am."

*But what if the book she sticks we with is a bodice ripper?*

*Well, worse fates, I suppose...* Unless I failed the sanity check for the boring parts or the saving rolls when my blood pressure went up too high from the naughty bits.

Before I could verbalize that, she turned to Zenigata. "I'm gonna hit the john. Be back in a bit. Christof?"

"What?" the Nord asked, confused, coming to his feet.

For a second, I thought she was going to ask him if he wanted to come too. "You need a smoke break?"

"No? I don't—"

"Well I do. Come protect me or something."

"You don’t smoke eith—"

I whapped Christof in the leg with the back of my hand, lazily. He looked down at me, and I tipped my head at him. "Mom wants you to leave dad and big brother alone for a bit."

"Broth—?" he squeaked, only to look at Zenigata. "Dad?"

"Just go." I made a shooing motion at him. "I'll be fine, kid."

He looked at Pops, but the Inspector just nodded, brim of his hat down.

The two of us—Pops and I—watched them go quietly, and I silently mourned the loss of foodstuff that had gone with them. Especially since the guard, through the door, was chugging an energy drink, a coy smile on the side of his face from our chat.

Once they were gone and it was only us plus guard, Zenigata turned to me, arms crossed. But before he could say anything out of the grim line of his mouth, I bounced around excitedly at him, beating him to the punch:

"Is your paperwork done yet?"

He leveled me a withering glare and squared his shoulders. "It’s been half an hour. How would it be done."

"Well, get it done, because I’m really itching to give you some girl advice."

He sighed, presumably because he thought the quickest way to deal with me would be to humor me. "And what would that be, praytell? If it’s about the nerd stuff—"
“No, no.” I grinned and beckoned him near.

He leaned in, after a moment, and I pulled him down by the back of the neck, closer and closer, until he could practically feel my lips against his ear.

I opened my mouth and whispered, in a tone that ended up sounding a lot like an excited child with a secret: “If Marti asks you on a date...say yes.”

He sputtered, reeling up like a fisherman’s lure.

“It’s—it’s not like that!”

I gave him a smarmy smirk, returning my hands to my lap. “If that’s what you really think, Pops, then you should quit your job, because you’re no good at it anymore.”

“Shut up,” he managed. “It’s not...it’s not like that.”

“Oh?” I threw back at him, skeptically. He opened his mouth, then shut it, with nothing more than a grunt getting out and his cheeks pinking up a bit.

I just chuckled and sat back on the bed’s hard as hell pillow, crossing my arms. “She was telling me about how you two first met,” I went on, rolling the dice anew.

Abruptly, Zenigata’s tone changed. He looked down at me, hands in his pockets, posture suddenly reserved. “She told you that?” he asked, quietly.

It wasn’t a happy story, then?

“Mm. Parts of it,” I added the last bit in to hedge the bet, but I kept my voice musing even though overall it had dropped in tone to match his somber one. “And I was wondering what your side of it was.”

“Well. If she didn’t tell you the whole thing, I think I’ll let it be her story to tell,” he muttered, turning toward the door, as if longing for her back.

Damn!

“But, I will say this.” He rubbed at his eyes and yawned. “Her son’s an asshole that makes you look like a godsend in comparison.”

“R...really?”

“Mmn. Basically the exact opposite of Christof in every way except the height.”

For some reason, I smiled.

Our little family was getting bigger.

“Lupin, before we do anything else, I need to ask you something,” Zenigata began, resting his hand on the side of the open door and cutting off any other warm sentiments that would have passed through my lips. He seemed oddly serious, but like he was trying to hide it. “And I need you to tell me the truth.”
..."Did I sink your battleship?"
"Threshold Potential" refers to the amount of energy a neural cell needs before it can fire, and "Action Potential" is the overall pattern of its firing and recharging. See here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Threshold_potential

There's a really lovely song that I've been using to write this chapter. It's called "Arashi no Ato de" by Galileo Galilei, and goes with the anime Typhoon Noruda, which looks pretty swank, if you're into Miyazaki-style feel-good movies. (Which I know you are if you're here, don't lie.)

This chapter was so long, I decided to split it up into two! Because no one needs a fifty-page chapter (double-spaced). Not all in one scene and displayed on one scrolling screen, anyway. So you get two chapters this week. Lucky you!

For you serial readers, if you happen to find something you want to comment on both, go for it <3

I shut the door to the room and beckoned the thief down into one of the uncomfortable chairs that were omnipresent in places like this. “Take a seat.”

He gave the door a glance, but either accepted the request at face value or gave up any early attempt to resist it. As he obediently shuffled off the exam bed and skittered into the chair, I pulled the matching one around and whirled it to face him.

The room was fairly small, probably no bigger than an American bedroom (or a European living room); it had barely fit all five people in it from before, what with the furniture. With just the two of us, though, facing each other like this, it felt much more like a gambling den’s elite poker table than a medical room, the sink to the side for washing off the blood of kills rather than healing; the sallow lights above buzzing with heavy, omnipresent mechanics, rather than simple government cost-cutting.

I pulled up my trouser legs and sat heavily, saving the crisp creases—not that it mattered much, since I was covered in smudges and dirt, much like Lupin’s face had been before he showered.

In the seat across from me, the thief started off with his hands clasped together, his forearms resting on his knees and the chain of the cuffs between his legs, but when he saw me taking my own forward-leaning position, because of the space constraints, he sat back, elbows on the armrests and hands against his diaphragm, fingers interlaced. I suspected he would have crossed his legs, if he could have done it without further injuring himself.

In the end, what looked back at me was the dark eyes of the underworld boss, the man’s posture relaxed while his attention was anything but.

Suddenly, being two feet away from him seemed like a very bad idea, but I refused to give into that. The investigative instinct within me was often far stronger than the one to caution, and it was time to use it—though I had not come into the room expecting to need either, and the appearance of
the hardened professional threw me, a little bit.

“Yes?” Lupin purred darkly, head tilted to the side with narrowed eyes.

His posture was telling me not to make a move on him, though his voice was not entirely uninviting.

I raised an eyebrow, mildly shocked that he was trying to intimidate me. He was expecting something from me that required that hard of a front?

“Don’t you know me better than that?” I asked sharply, before I could think of anything smarter. “What’s with that face?”

Lupin’s eyebrows lifted, and he blinked several times, just as surprised as I was.

Just like that, the spell was broken, and I was back to dealing with the spindly little thief.

I frowned and found myself glaring at him, chasing that surprise in his features until I could catch it my hands and crack it open—metaphorically speaking, of course.

Lupin stared back at me from where he sat, somewhat alarmed. He wasn’t giving away anything, however—he was holding my gaze, not caught by it. He was waiting to jump, but not sure which direction he would need to leap. Simply staring at him longer was not going to help; I needed to make a move.

But I didn’t want him to freak out on me like earlier, so I sighed, and looked around the room. It was quiet in here, with only us.

Was I simply giving off way too hard of an atmosphere because I was exhausted? That could be it. Though...as I looked around, I realized the implications of us being alone together. I thought it would be a comfort, but suddenly, the room’s slightly dripping faucet felt like raking claws. The sharp edge of the counters, no longer institutional and old but easy to smash a skull into. And on and on, each thing I looked at. Krav Maga could go wild in here, not to mention all the utensils that were no doubt in the drawers. The fact that it was close-in made it even better for that.

I suppose it could have been that, making him edgy.

Though, that in and of itself was a bit of a surprise. Did Lupin really have more reason to be afraid of me at this moment than I was of him? He was practically an acrobat, when you got down to it, and fast too; in close quarters, even with my superior strength, he’d no doubt win. As well, it wasn’t a far stretch to imagine he had a far higher command of whatever happened to be lying around as a deadly weapon than I did. Hell, even his chains had the potential to disarm me of my pistol and then suffocated me, if he did it right—which was, once again, easier in a closed space.

Though, I did have the gun, didn’t I. And the hospital staff, just a door away. Maybe that was what he was thinking of.

Except...

Lupin, himself, was certainly looking worse for wear. Now that he was clean, he didn’t look as ethereal and ghastly, but the dust, even with dried blood, had been covering up the extent of the wounds. The hospital gown, admittedly, hid a lot, but he looked far too thin under it, and the dark circles under his eyes made him look a bit like a cancer patient. With his leg (which I really felt bad about forcing him to walk around on, now that we knew there was something goddamn in it), his extensive stitches, a couple of burn-covering patches, and the bruising that covered half his
body or more, maybe he was just hurting a lot more than I’d suspected, and was suddenly, finally, acutely aware of his own mortality.

Admittedly, the hunger, nicotine withdrawal, and exhaustion could all be making him moody, too—though that hadn’t seemed to matter this much five minutes ago, when Marti and Christof were around.

Still, whatever the cause of his undulating mood, it made me wonder what the hell he’d been through in the past, that he associated “getting left alone with an investigator following being fixed up” with “aggressively fighting for initial dominance to stave off physical attack.” I’d tried to sound non-threatening, hadn’t I? Hadn’t I?

I scowled at him, hard.

Where the hell have you been getting yourself arrested?

“You’re going to lop off my leg, aren’t you,” Lupin said, completely serious.

My train of thought derailed with incredible speed.

“What?” I hissed, eyes squeezing shut. “No! They’re gonna scan it. It’s a perfectly good leg, keep it. That’s what you’re so worried about?”

Lupin’s eyes widened, but I didn’t give him time to speak any more nonsense. “I was kidding about that before, you fool,” I grumbled, emphasizing my annoyance by slapping my hand down on the armrest with a huff. My chin ended up in that hand, and I crossed my legs, leaning diagonally in the chair and glaring at no place in particular along the nearest wall. “Though it would make you a little easier to deal with, shit.”

“Ah...oh,” he muttered, running a hand through his hair, still rather grim-looking. “If you knew how many places still did that—off the books—you probably wouldn’t joke about it in a situation like this, is all.”

My face immediately twisted into an alarmed frown of its own accord, demanding answers.

But the little weasel smiled and wiggled his fingers. “Still got all my pieces, though.” He followed it up with a wink.

I wasn’t sure if I should be disgusted or gladdened.

“I know this is France, but...” I sighed, putting my face in my hand and rubbing my forehead. How did getting information out of this man-child always end up spinning between tragedy and farce at breakneck speeds? How was it that, sometimes, I couldn’t even tell the difference, let alone how to counter it? I’m supposed to be better than this. “...This isn’t the fifteen-hundreds.”

“Grandpa lost a toe for some reason or another related to a crime,” Lupin replied, a bit tense. When I looked up, he was eyeing me skeptically. “But...you aren’t here because you’re going to knock me out, are you...?”

“No?” I sighed and took off my hat, running my hand through my hair. Not in the next five minutes, anyway. “Look, this is about your crime, moron. Now, we can do this the easy way or the hard way, so shut up and listen.”

Why he thought he had to be afraid of being alone with me, I had no idea, and it irritated me. Hadn’t I done enough to show I was trustworthy here, and in his life in general? Didn’t he know by
now I was the only person on this side of the law that he could reliably trust?

I left the fedora over my left hand, spinning it loosely, hoping that and a tired smile would placate his jumpy nerves—and ease my temper. Men were protective of their hats. If they were going to rough someone up, the hat would be put far out of harm’s way. And keeping it in my hands, therefore, forced me to look for solutions other than slapping him.

Apparently that gave off exactly the wrong tone to a gangster, though, because Lupin looked at the hat for a moment, then me, eyes flicking back and forth over mine suspiciously.

“You’re about to make me an offer I can’t refuse, aren’t you.”

“What? No. For fuck’s sake, calm down,” I snorted and whapped him over the head with my hat before I leaned a forearm along my chair’s spine. I took a breath and sighed it out, sitting back and crossing my legs at the knee and putting the hat atop the highest one. “And didn’t I just tell you to shut up?”

Lupin grinned, a smile I did not believe in the slightest, and ran his hand over his hair to get it back into place. “Whoops.”

“I need something from you,” I began, ignoring his antics, “And I need you to tell me the truth about it, whatever that truth may be. So what I meant was that you could do this being paranoid and stubborn and an idiot, like you are now, or you could just save us both some trouble and be a good caged canary and sing. I know it’s against your sense of professionalism, but just do me a fucking favor for once and be straight with me for the next five minutes. It is five thirty in the morning, I don’t want to be awake any more than you do, so let’s get this over with and get out of here.”

“Oh,” he muttered, rubbing his hand over his mouth thoughtfully. “But see, that’s why you sound so suspicious. You sound like you’re going to beat the hell out of me if I don’t give it to you.” He pointed a finger my direction, idly, like he might do to tell someone he was all-in on a poker hand. “And it’s all over your body language.”

“Well, I wasn’t planning on it, but you’re starting to make me want to,” I admitted. Wait...that didn’t help, did it.

Lupin was looking at me with a defeated, if dubious look, that was pretty much the same thought as mine, only written on his face.

I glowered at him for a bit, until I got bored and rolled my eyes, putting my hat back on my head. If he wanted the Inspector back, fine. “I’m really not here to twist your arm. I just need to fill in a blank. One blank.” And I am far too tired to deal with little issues like body language.

Lupin looked away and continued to rub his stubble, thinking.

It was far more thoughtful of a look than the situation called for.

Suddenly, I realized what all this was. He wasn’t afraid, exactly, or even so tired he was emotional volatile. The entire conversation heretofore had been subterfuge, deflection. He’d been throwing my attention this way and that to see what he could get out of me and get me off balance.

But in the end, he’d only succeeded in making me frustrated with him—which was a stupid thing to do, so either the stakes were really high, or he was just as tired as I was and barely thinking straight. “Why are you being this cagey?” I demanded, not wanting to have to think about it any more.
He didn’t answer me; he merely continued to look at the wall with the cabinets, distantly. At the sink, specifically, old and porcelain and patina cracked as it was.

What in the world did he think I was going to ask him for? Something he couldn’t give me, clearly, but which he then expected I would force out of him? If that were the case, he was giving me far too much credit as a medical-implement-wielding torturer.

But if that something was about the bombings, then maybe.... Was it something he couldn’t tell me, or wouldn’t? Something he didn’t want me to see—or felt it would endanger someone to speak up about...?

I looked at him then, really looked at him—the young man, fine-featured and dark haired as he leaned gracefully to the side, touches of Asian accents to his features. His hair, even cropped fairly short, was a slightly redder shade than Mediterranean black was; a little thicker, too, and straight, without any of the Turkish or Roman wave—though it was a bit fluffy, which had always made me think there was Jewish ancestry in his family somewhere. His lashes were similarly thick, dark spokes, and though he didn’t have anything particularly Asian about his other facial features, there was just a sort of softness about it, a tinge to it, maybe you could call it, that spoke to genes that had mixed together, rather than an umpteenth generation of local stock, which always tended to make the most obvious facial structures even more pronounced.

I saw the thief, as well, though—the man with delicate bones that made his wrists thin and his fingers even thinner, all of which he used to for picking locks and escaping cuffs (and, if you believed him, getting women out of their clothes). His chin sat cupped in one of those skilled hands now, in its palm, his long fingers curled gently around his thin-lipped mouth.

Above them, his dark, intelligent eyes—a smokey sort of green-blue that looked black unless the light was shining on them—gazed distantly at nothing, lost in some faraway thought like a melancholy poet would look at the sea.

“Lupin,” I sighed, calm seeping into my tired muscles, my tired bones, and coming out as quietly aggrieved. “Don’t you know by now I’m not here to hurt you?”

“Don’t you know by now that anyone can be bought, if the price is right?” he whispered through his hand. “A price like Marti?”

But just as I was about to get my hackles raised at that, he glanced at me, dark eyes so intensely guilty that somehow I ended up feeling bad.

“What the hell are you on about?” I snapped. Marti...?

But he wasn’t looking at me; he was back to staring at the sink, and was starting to drape over the chair like a wet rag.

The heat had turned off, and in the silence, the air felt stifling. As Lupin watched it—and I, by extension—the faucet dripped once more, the single droplet splattering into the porcelain basin with a surprisingly sharp explosion; it might as well have been a bullet, for how it shot a jolt through me.

It made goosebumps raise on my arms, but Lupin went totally unaltered by it—in fact, it looked like he hadn’t even heard it.

“Why now?” he answered to my question, voice pensive. “Why here?”

“Why does that matter?” I demanded. He wasn’t really talking to me; it was a rhetorical question,
but I wasn’t about to let him get away with all this. “I haven’t gone crooked on you, I promise. Neither has she.”

He sighed, listless.

Was that bothering him? The fact that I was simply deviating from the normal procedure, and it seemed that unsafe? It was possible, but that didn’t seem like something that would bother him. The ability to think on his feet was practically in his MO. And really, he kind of delighted in it. It was just the kind of chaos he loved creating and navigating.

So what was all this? Did he just feel cornered? Honestly? Or did he know something....

“What’s got you thinking I did?” I asked, suspiciously.

Lupin uncurled and reached out toward the sink. I thought he was going to go for the leaky faucet, but after a moment I realized he couldn’t reach it without getting up, and he wasn’t making any attempt to.

Instead, his finger hooked around a drawer handle, the one with the scalpels in it.

“Hey, hey, what are you—!” I shouted in a panic, reaching for his arm.

Just as I landed my hand around his forearm, the drawer made a clacking sound. It had failed to open.

“It’s locked,” Lupin clarified for me, though he still sounded a bit like he was talking to himself. I took my hand off him and sat back in my chair, though I wasn’t sure it was a good idea. I had a bad feeling about this, roiling in my gut. He hadn’t actually responded to my touch, and I’d grabbed him hard enough to leave a momentary dent in his skin.

The last time he’d gotten that faraway look in his eyes and refused to look at me....

“They’re all locked,” he continued, going for one, then the next, then the next, each one making a slightly louder sound than the one before it, as were the words as he spoke alongside it. “Locked, locked, locked. And you know why they are?”

He went completely still, as he stared at nothing. I couldn’t see his face, so twisted around as he was.

His voice came, softly: “Because this is a mental hospital, isn’t it.”

A shiver went down my back. I opened my mouth, only to shut it, suddenly too confused to return his anger. “What’s that matter?”

“That’s why the picture in the lobby was of sheep, not ships,” he continued lowly, coming to sit straight in the chair once more. But he wasn’t looking at me; he was glaring at the floor and ticking points off on his fingers and quite clearly talking to himself. His good leg bounced, uneasily.

“That’s why there’re bars on windows that are fifty feet up, and why the lights are off at night. That’s why there’s only one hardass attendant but she was willing to tackle you when you hit me.” Every word came faster than the last, and suddenly, his head snapped up to nail me with a venomous glare. “You brought me to a goddamned mental institution.”

He accused me of it like it was some egregious sin.

“And?” I was honestly confused. Was he mad because he couldn’t get out of a padded cell? Was he
afraid I was going to admit him, or something? That’d be a stupid thing to do, and an inaccurate thing to do, regardless. Lupin wasn’t crazy; he was crafty.

“You lied!” he cried suddenly, casting forward with his arms out, which caused me to jump backwards and upend the chair as I stood, quickly putting several feet of distance between us. But even as my heart raced and my hand landed on my weapon, he didn’t follow me; nor did his gaze. He put his head in his hands and all but growled, “You told me this was a Navy hospital!”

My hand lifted from my baton, and hovered in the air, halfway out to him. My coat fluttered closed at my side.

What the hell was all this?

He wasn’t saying it with the normal range of emotions you could attribute to being shocked at being lied to (which I hadn’t). He was saying it like somebody was going to die and he had to stop it.

A few feet away from me, a distance that may have been well an ocean for how far away it felt, my prisoner shivered, hunched over in a ball in a way that couldn’t have been good for the stitches in his back—or his leg. Or his tension, which was coiling through him like a snake. He was breathing shallow and fast; his hands clenching into fists on his head.

He was panicking.

But why? And how did I stop it?

I might just have to tackle him, at this rate.

“Lupin, calm down,” I said, which was the dumbest thing I could have possibly said, but nothing else was coming to mind.

“What did you do with my mother!” he screamed up at me. The ball he was in exploded, every limb unfolding.

His head tipped back until his throat was taught to the breaking point; he ripped his hands away from his head, fingers bent in claws. His face was red and tears, out of nowhere, streaked down the sides of his cheeks. His voice even cracked; he was legitimately screaming at me at the top of his lungs.

What the hell is—

“You always do this to me, Dad! Why do you always lie to me!”

His hands came out in front of him with animated gestures; they clawed through the air so dramatically, palms up, that at first I totally missed what he’d said.

“Dad”?

That look in his eye—wild and crazed, like he was being hunted. The cast of his body, bending forward without regard for any of the pain he’d been hobbled with up to this point. The muscles in his neck straining until the cuts on it broke open. His breath, hyperventilating.

He wasn’t here.

He wasn’t on some distant shore, either.
He was ten years ago, at the very least.

I desperately wanted to yell at him to calm down, or maybe hug him, but the former never actually worked on anyone and the latter didn’t work on him, generally speaking. There was always slapping some sense into him, but I felt like I might not get my hand back, at this point, if what I thought was happening was really going on.

We were far past the point of a few touches, a few kind words, saving this situation.

I looked around desperately, but there was nothing, really, that could help me. There was only me, this room, a bunch of deadly implements, and Lupin.

Lupin....

He glared up at me, desperate and enraged and breathing hard, face so red the green in his eyes was vivid. He was still sitting, but I wasn’t sure how much longer that would last. I had to think of something, now.

What could get through to Lupin. Not the Lupin I didn’t know, but the one I did....

Something deep, beyond that surface-level facade.

Something that had stayed constant in his life, in his tales and our encounters; something that would calm him down, snap him out of a terrible moment—

It came to me like a lightning bolt, inspired by the dark of his tortured eyes.


“Jigen?”

He blinked so hard he visibly jerked back by multiple inches, as if he had been slapped. When he spoke again, his voice was lighter, confused. “Why are we talking about Jigen?”

The door knocked, loud and firm, at the same time it swung open with a clatter and a whoosh. I checked behind me, heart in my throat, just to make sure we weren’t about to be shot—or Lupin about to be tackled. He’d been through enough today; screaming at me or not, having a breakdown or not, that could damage his body irreparably, and I didn’t want that.

“What’s going on in here?” Marti’s sharp voice demanded, the thunder to my lightning. Christof was right behind her, ready to tackle someone. Me, possibly. Possibly Lupin too, though I was in his way for that.

I knew she would see the situation for what it was, or close enough; so before I could even meet Marti’s eyes, I swung my attention back to the prisoner. I’d left one hand out in front of me—in Lupin’s direction—which may or may not have been about to be bitten, or stabbed, or who knew what the hell else.

But when I went back to the thief, everything about him was different. He was turned in Marti’s direction but totally, unnaturally still, like he was a turned-off machine. His hands held in the air where he’d left them upon her arrival, in a position that couldn’t have been easy to hold, what with the weight of the chains. While there was light in his eyes, it was like the information they were receiving wasn’t transmitting anywhere. It wasn’t glassy-eyed, and it wasn’t a far-away look of thought, either. It was just...blank.
And then, he looked up. Notably, there was a delay of a second before he did anything else. And then he sat up straight and looked around, each glance a little more sharp. He fixed on Marti, then Christof, and then finally on me.

There was no guilt in that look, nor sadness. No fear of reprimand; no shame. It was simply the blank side of confused.

And it lasted several seconds, without blinking.

“Lu...pin?” I asked, hesitantly. He was just staring at nothing, again, so I repeated his name, more forcefully this time. He blinked and came back alive, it seemed, looking at me with a question on his face, like he didn’t know where he was.

Then his gaze flicked around to everyone else, similarly concerned. “Why are we...all staring at each other?”

The other lawmen and I looked at each other, and then back at him. His posture seemed to have returned to normal; it was like his personality had taken a hot minute to flow back into his limbs, but his face wasn’t even red now, which was odd—normally it would take a lot longer than that to calm that capillary reaction and the emotions associated with it. But it was like they’d been chipped right off him.

“Are you...all right...?” I asked, unable to really find my voice.

It took him a moment, but then Lupin blinked and said, “Other than the stitches?”

“Dio mio,” Marti whispered behind my head, in Italian. I didn’t know much, but I knew that at least. “He doesn’t remember what just happened, does he?”

“Didn’t you guys just leave?” Lupin continued to Marti and Christof, in a voice that was light and simple, like he hadn’t just been screaming his already raw throat bloody. In fact, it was like it hadn’t even happened at all; as if his body had reset itself, just like with his reddened face suddenly being pale again. “Did you forget something?”

It was like it had all happened to someone else entirely, and he turned to me, innocently.

I’d seen this before. A long time ago in a war....

A little shiver went up my spine at the same time that my stomach fell, and I swallowed hard.

“I...think I need to speak with you for a moment, Marti.” I said, my legs suddenly a bit wobbly. “Christof, stay here with him for a second. Don’t...do anything.”

I had taken exactly one step when I had a thought strike me, and I gripped his shoulder as he made to pass by me. “No—Actually: Keep him happy, like you were before I got back here.”

Christof nodded and, having heard Marti, took the cue for what it was. “Hey buddy,” he said to get Lupin’s attention, coming over and, a bit hesitantly, wrapping an arm around his shoulders and squeezing where his hand landed. Apparently, Lupin still wasn’t processing quite well enough for my comment to get into his head, because he was still just sitting there, a bit like a doll, until Christof made his presence known.

“Hey.” Lupin replied, like he hadn’t just been clawing at the sky—or wondering where the hell he was. He tilted his head back to look up at the deputy. “What’s with the hug?”
Christof slowly released his arm with an awkward smile.

“What’s wrong,” Lupin chirped, perplexed but perky, looking at the hand and then up at the deputy. “Did I fall asleep on my feet?”

“Kind of,” Christof acknowledged.

“Oh...Oh! Well, what the hell d’you wake me for? I take it we’re going somewhere? Maybe to some more lovely ladies?” He beamed, happily.

It was a strange thing to see him happy all of a sudden, and I felt horrible for realizing that.

But Christof pushed through, good man that he was. His voice wasn’t even shaky, the way I knew mine would be; nor did his hand falter, when he patted Lupin’s shoulder. “You would like that, wouldn’t you.”

“Sure would.”

As they bantered on, I looked at Marti. She looked at me, and set a hand on my arm. We stepped out together, but it wasn’t easy. Every step suddenly felt treacherous.

The guard caught my eye—wanting orders—and I nodded my head at him to hang out with Christof. He acknowledged that and went in, leaving the gun against the wall. He drew the door shut behind him—which I had to catch and prop back open. If I’d learned anything from this, it was that Lupin didn’t like being caged in that little room. The man let me have the door, without even looking back.

“What did you do with my mother”—“Dad”? 

“I think I owe you ten Euros,” I said to Marti. “And I think you owe me fifteen.”

“What?” Marti asked me, perplexed. “Oh, the bet. You figured it out already?”

She looked up at me, intrigued.

That’s what you’re surprised about?

“N-nothing...Um. Later. Right now...” I sighed and rubbed my hand through my hair at my temple, upending my hat a bit.

“...A price like Marti?”

The words rang through my head, and stuck out, farther than anything else. The worst part was, I could already tell I was losing the progression of what had happened, losing the clues—everything but that. I was so tired, everything was jumbling up as I tried to pinpoint the most important facts. And my heart was still racing, too.

I really was getting too old for this—prisoner control.

And yet the image of Lupin, screaming at me in anguish or anger or whatever the hell it was, burned into my retinas even as I rubbed my eyes....

This is exactly what I need in my fucking day.

“God, I don’t even know where to start,” I muttered to Marti.
“It’s okay. Let’s talk over here.” She drew me aside, across the hall, into the shelter of a fake potted plant.

Resigned, I let her warm, practiced hands guide me away.

*Why do I feel like I just watched Icarus fall into the sea?*
Chapter Summary

Another 10,000-word chapter. This time, in which Zenigata starts talking about Lupin, and ends up thinking about Jigen....

Chapter Notes

There's a couple of places here where Zenigata thinks of masculinity (and queer relationships) in rather traditional ways. This will be addressed more later. Please forgive him for now. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Following her lead, we were soon leaning against the nearest wall that wasn’t connected to the room, me with my arms crossed and her with her hand on her hip, the both of us facing each other not two feet apart.

There was one little light on above our heads, creating a half-circle on the floor around us, which must have been an ominous sight from an outsider’s point of view. This hallway was lit dimly (though actually lit), and the light of the overhead lamp rained down on us, brighter than the other spots. We were alone in the hall, as far as the eye could see; the nurses had headed out, back to whatever stations required them. Which, in a way, was lucky, and in a way, was not.

I was very glad my prisoner hadn’t gotten tackled, or hurt anyone. But, while I was still a little too stunned to feel it, I recognized, distantly, that in a few minutes, once the mild shock had worn off, I would be ashamed that anyone but me had seen it. Not the least of which reason was because it was Lupin. He was supposed to be better than that.

And frankly, so was I.

I wasn’t supposed to be break people.

I found myself looking over at the thief, who was twittering animatedly at the guard and Christof in turn. Seemed they’d both found places to lean, one to either side of him—places that put them in the way of anything theoretically dangerous, but which also offered a chance to grab him if he made a run for the door. Still, he looked happy enough. Aware enough.

You weren’t supposed to be one of the crazy ones.

I shifted and scratched my fingers over my arms, where they rested, and eventually cleared my throat with a grunt. “Sorry you had to see that,” I muttered at the ground.

“Don’t be,” Marti said, voice calm and non-judgmental as always. Relief flooded over me, though I wasn’t sure why. Perhaps the adrenaline was just wearing off, but something about her steady presence, her warm voice, helped calm my nerves and release a knot in my stomach I didn’t even
know I had.

That, and knowing I hadn’t lost her considerations, maybe.

“And...” Marti admitted, “I suppose I should say, ‘sorry to barge in on you.’” She looked at the ground too, and tapped a toe on the tile before looking up to me, eyes squinting hesitantly. Her curls’ highlights burned red under the light, and it shone against her pale cheeks like fire. “But it sounded like someone needed help, and I wasn’t sure who, and I didn’t want the guy with the gun going in first....”

“It’s fine,” I admitted, shaking my head. That was really just so very her, and it made me smile, a bit, despite it all. “I’m just glad you were still around. I probably could have calmed him down, but I think your appearance did it faster. And you never know. I’m just glad you weren’t a bunch of nurses who’d want to put it on a record. So thank you.”

We both knew what would happen if a prisoner was labeled mentally unstable, and in a place like this, it was a short trip. Which would have taken him out of my custody and smack into the Commissioner’s, if he really did have his claws in the local military like I thought he did—though Marti didn’t know that, yet. But at least she didn’t think I was trying to assault my prisoner somehow, or that he was trying to attack me, the moment we were alone. I’d hate to have her think that about either of us.

Marti just nodded, and for a bit, I mirrored her gesture in silence. After a time, she looked through the open door with our colleagues, the light above us illuminating the concern in her green eyes decidedly. In the exam room, Christof was now standing in front of Lupin, gesturing about something as he entertained him. I couldn’t see Lupin from around him, but it seemed he wasn’t causing trouble, at least, which was a relief.

“Why don’t you start by telling me what happened in there,” Marti’s clinical voice offered, gently, redirecting my attention.

It wasn’t an unexpected approach, and I was grateful for it, even if it would have felt like a reprimand on any other occasion. I outranked her, but she had a way of making me forget that (as administrators often did). Still, if what I thought just happened really happened, then I needed her help more than she needed mine, and I was more than willing to cooperate.

“So...,” I began, hesitantly collecting my thoughts, “I sat him down and tried to get him to cough up something about the case.”

She raised an eyebrow, and I quickly amended, “Not like that! But I think he thought it was going to be like that, so he was throwing my attention every which way. But then in the middle of it, I thought he was just being moody, but he started going on about vaguely nonsensical things. I thought it was just more of his distraction technique, but, he pointed out the drawers in there and started going on about how this must have been a mental hospital because they were locked, and all this other stuff he’d noticed.”

She whistled. “He figured that out, huh.”

I shrugged. “I guess. He was pointing out things even from the lobby, so I guess he’d been thinking about it for a while, and he was mad.”

Marti’s cupid’s bow lips pursed into a thin line. “Poor thing. He must have been cataloging different things all this time, and he just snapped, all of a sudden.”
Maybe so....

I nodded; that all seemed believable enough, what with the stress of thinking I was going to cut off his leg or something. None of these seemed like the concerns I’d associate with hearing from Lupin, though, which niggled at the back of my mind.

“So, just before you came in, right, he mentions all this, acts like I’ve betrayed him, hunkers down with his hands over his head, all shivering like before in the basement, right.... And then he just looks up at me and shouts, ‘What did you do with my mother.’”

Marti’s face twisted into confusion that matched how I felt about that statement, one eyebrow raised to comical levels.

“Right?” I queried. “That was what he was shouting about.”

“His mother? I thought you said he doesn’t talk about his mother.”

“He doesn’t.”

Her mouth turned into an O, and after a beat, she said, gravely, “Oh.”

“Exactly.”

“So up until this point I thought he was normal, if a bit moody, but then this happens. So, at this point, I still wasn’t quite sure what was going on, but he looked like he was about to attack me. He looked like he could’ve broken every tendon in his body with how tight he was. But before I could do anything, or say anything more, he says, ‘Why do you always do this, Dad, why do you always lie to me?’”

Marti’s face made that O-shape again, but smaller, and her head tilted to the side as she squinted. “Dad?”

I nodded, grim. “Very strange.” I sighed, and shifted my weight a little. “So by then I knew something weird was happening, and I didn’t want to break him apart by tackling him, and I knew shouting wouldn’t help. So I invoked the name of Jigen and that snapped him out of it, I think. That, and you coming in.” I smiled at her a bit, momentarily. “Marti to the rescue, as usual.”

She grinned. “Marti to the rescue.”

I looked down into her eyes, the warmth of memory lane fluttering through my chest, despite it all—or maybe because of it all. A refuge, from the dark storylines of our lives, in the arms of someone bright and warm a long time ago.

From the look on her face, the looseness of her posture, she was feeling it too.

A shout of laughter came from the room, and we both looked aside. Lupin was laughing, clutching at his stomach while grimacing in between giggles, and Christof, now in a slightly different position, was raising his arm like a bodybuilder.

“So, from that story, I can assume that what we were fearing just happened?” Marti sighed, turning back to me with a tight-lipped frown.

“I think so...” I offered, honestly more disappointed than angry. “I think he just had a substantial flashback of some kind. Bigger than I’ve seen from anyone in years, though. And never from him.”
And that was a weirdly scary thought. I knew why, of course: If you couldn’t trust someone to continuously be in their right mind, you couldn’t trust them not to flip out and attack you at any moment.

That was an instinctual enough gut reaction. But there was another thought on my mind, that came on its heels: That this wasn’t the Lupin I knew.

The Lupin I followed was an incredible man. One who could reach for the stars, who walked over the top of life and laughed things off. He was a leader of men and a lover of women. He wasn’t broken like this. He wasn’t timid or trapped, like this. And certainly not by his own mind.

...He was a soul that flew close to the sun. Not one that sank and sputtered until it drowned.

There was also the fact that, in Japan, no one talked about things like this. I wouldn’t even know how to discuss it, and probably wouldn’t be doing so now, if it hadn’t been for my years abroad.

“How did I not know about this?” I hissed, staring off into the room again. “Shouldn’t I have known about this?”

That was what was eating at me most of all. Pride.

But if I was honest with myself, there was another bit, too. A part of myself I wasn’t supposed to be letting out to my prisoners: compassion.

I could feel it—that fixer part of me—welling up to the surface like a hot spring. Though maybe that was so strong just because I was so tired.

You can’t expect to fix them, but it’s all right to show that you care.

“People can get very good at hiding things like this,” Marti offered, following my gaze. “Especially ones that shapeshift for a living. I’d expect no less. You’ve seen the dark stuff successful men hide.”

I frowned, thinking. It was possible. But this was still Lupin the Third we were talking about. That couldn’t have been it. It couldn’t. You couldn’t be a world-class criminal if you had a problem like this...could you?

“Though...in all honesty, it could be a trick,” I added to Marti. “For what, though, I don’t know.” I lifted my hat and ran my hand through my hair with a shaky sigh. “I’m sorry. I didn’t want you to see something like that, out of him.”

Not that I’d known there was even something like that to see, if it were real.

And if he were faking it, I thought he’d behave. For her, if not for me.

But who could have faked that? It had all the signs I knew of, and probably some I didn’t.

Except...Lupin could fake anything. And if he wanted to get out of giving me information, this was a good way to do it; I had, in fact, just left without what I’d come for, and now that I was realizing that, I felt both angry and sheepish, and wanting to march back in there, sit his ass down and make him talk, no matter what it took.

But he wouldn’t have mentioned his parents, if it were a ruse; that would open up a line of questioning he didn’t want.
...Unless he heard us talking in the shower, and this was his way of getting back at me. Which was a decided possibility, now that I was thinking about it.

But I thought he hadn’t been able to hear us, and that wasn’t a subjective idea; that was a fact.

On the other hand...

"Don’t you know anyone can be bought?"

He knew. He knew, somehow, what was going on behind the scenes, or was sorely expecting it and had guessed it correctly.

So this was all a diversion?

I frowned, and posed the question to Marti.

“I mean, it could be...,” she admitted, “But it didn’t seem like it. And if what happened in the basement was just a softer expression of this, or even a precursor, do you really think what happened in the locker room was a lie? Whatever it was that went between you two?”

That...was a distinct possibility, wasn’t it, that the two emotional outbursts were connected. I bit my lip, considering her question, then shook my head. I didn’t think that—the stuff in the locker room—had been a show; his emotions seemed genuine, both then and now. And even Lupin wouldn’t stoop that low, to twist that part of our relationship to his advantage.

...Would he?

*Red heart, black wings...and what color hands?*

He’d made me think he was dead before, and used it. If you could do that to someone, you could use their emotional attachment to you for anything.

And yet...

His arms around my waist, the complacency of that connection...

“*You comfort me.*”

...That hadn’t been a lie, at all.

And that crying... That was real, too. His ruses, even the long cons and elaborate traps that used your own nature against you, never involved him being vulnerable. He was always the aggressor in them; he never gave up his A-type personality, his ego, no matter who he pretended to be. And this was not that.

As I had lain my hand down on the crown of his head and stroked over his hair, comforting him, the warmth in my chest that had created.... The warmth I had in my chest just a few moments ago, from *wanting to fix him*....

Was it simply that I didn’t want this to be a ploy? That I needed it to not be, and that was exactly what he was counting on?

I sighed, and rubbed my hands over my face, briskly. “I’m too tired for this, Marti.” The thoughts were tumbling about my head, and I couldn’t tell which to give more weight, or even why. I needed to sleep for a week to get my head straight, at this rate. My limbs were even starting to feel a little numb, what with the adrenaline leaving. “What do you think? You’re the clinician here.”
When I let my hands fall, I recognized, belatedly, that I had a miserable frown on my face.

But the woman below me sighed from where she leaned against the wall, and gave me a pitying smile.

And then she unfolded her crossed arms, and touched my cheek with her right hand.

Her fingers were cold, but it felt good, with how hot my face felt. And the kindness in it couldn’t be ignored. I closed my eyes, and let it filter in.

“Don’t blame yourself,” she said, gently. “But don’t blame him, either. It’ll be okay. If it’s a lie, we’ll be on the watch for it, and get him back for it. But if it’s not, then he doesn’t even know what just happened, but we can help him.”

Tenderly, her thumb stroked my cheekbone, and for a few blissful moments, I let myself get lost in it.

*The bare arms of a woman, holding tight to me, as we laid in bed together one grey Sunday morning. Her snuggled against my side, her head on my chest, and my arm over her, instinctively protective....*

The heat came on, clinking around in the walls like a harpy, and I figured I’d better get back to work.

“How...how do you figure?” I asked, opening my eyes against my wishes. My voice turned hatefully small. “You said this sort of thing can’t be fixed.”

But I was met with a view of a beautiful woman, red hair shining against a dark night, green eyes bright even if her gestures were muted. “We can stop it from happening again. And then we can try to figure out what the root of this black weed within him is. And then, we can be there for him, if he lets us, as he prunes it down and eventually yanks it out.”

She gave me one last caress of her thumb, and then her hand fluttered back to her, to be enfolded in crossed arms. Marti nodded her head in Lupin’s direction, then looked down at her feet, toeing the ground as she leaned. “We both agree he just had a flashback of some sort, yes?” Her voice was a little more stern this time.

I took a breath, and sighed. I suppose I had to pick a direction to take this sub-investigation, didn’t I?

It was true that Lupin had been acting a little strange, but...that was also his MO when he wanted something. Except...what had he gotten from this except putting us all on edge and himself almost tased?

It wasn’t that his plans weren’t obscure at first, but this just seemed...completely illogical, which wasn’t his style. Sure, he tended to send his plots into motion right when you least expected it, but—and I hated to admit it—I might actually have to take this at face value, which went against the cardinal rule of dealing with Lupin. I sighed.

“*I suspect so, yes.***”

“*Do you know what it’s about, then?***”

I shook my head, running my hand over my mouth. “*You mean other than his father, apparently? And his mother? I don’t know. He’s never done anything like this, before, at least not in front of*
me. And there’s no record of it, either, with anyone else.”

She nodded. “So, physically, what do you think was the trigger? Since you’re not his father or his mother.”

_I better not be reminding him of his father._ I’d kick his ass for that.

_However. The way we’d been sitting together.... The way the mob boss came out of him, all of a sudden...._ 

That very well could have been it.

_Motherfucker._

“I think I might have reminded him of his father, actually,” I said, suddenly. But that didn’t make a lot of sense—there was plenty of opportunity for that, other times in our encounters, and this had never happened. So...

“So...it’s something about here, in particular, that’s overwhelming him,” Marti replied, when I voiced that.

“Or the time of year,” I added. “Or maybe both. Oh—wait.” I held up my finger, looking into my thoughts. “Right before he started speaking nonsense, he got all riled up listing off things about why he thought this was a mental institution, right, like I told you? A bunch of little things. So maybe it was...those?”

Marti narrowed her eyes. “What were they, exactly?”

“Uh...The bars on the windows, for one,” I began, staring at the ceiling, trying to recall them. “A painting in the lobby? The locked medical cabinets in there.” I gestured to the exam room beside us, and then over my shoulder. “Even Nadia, at the front desk.”

“Nadia,” Marti said, blinking in confusion.

“Yeah. He mentioned how it was weird that she was so stern to a cop, basically.”

“Huh. You know...all that detail.... It sounds like it’s from someone who’s used to being _in_ an institution.” She looked up at me, critically. “You don’t think...?”

Even though the pit of my stomach dropped a bit, I shook my head decidedly. “It’s not 1920. How would he even end up in one?”

She shrugged, raising an eyebrow and a hand to match it. “Other than some con gone wrong? If he’s having this bad of flashbacks, maybe he had a problem as a teenager...?”

I frowned. He _did_ say he “hadn’t had a problem with it for a long time”.... And the way he’d been speaking—the diction he’d been using; the sheer emotion of his outbursts...

And that “so what” from the elevator, even. I knew there had been something weird about that, at the time, and now...

It could all be explained if he had been flashing back to some time in his teens. Or even earlier; mouthing off like that to an authority figure you were mad at sounded more like a fourteen-, maybe sixteen-year-old Lupin, tops.

“He even mentioned rats, though...which clearly aren’t here,” I told her. “So, something about the
dilapidation of the place itself?"

That... didn’t give me a good feeling, no matter what scenario we could apply it to.

Marti bit her lip and took a breath, apparently feeling the same. She ticked her head, frowning. “That all is a good start. But what does it mean.” She looked up at me again, as if simply glaring at me could somehow make the answers appear; she was oddly close to angry. “Parents. Mental institution that’s falling apart. So a childhood thing?”

I shrugged back against those fiery emerald eyes as they nailed me with the power of her protective mother thoughts, feeling rather helpless against both her and the implication of the words. “Could have been? If we assume he really thought I was his father for a second, it had to have been at least eight years ago; that was when the man died, so presumably it was before that. And it could have been far earlier, why not? I know zero about his mother. She could still be alive, for all I know.”

Though...

"What did you do with my mother!"

Fifty-fifty chance, that meant Why is she dead, versus Where did you ship her off to.

But if this was an old mental hospital, and that was what was setting him off.... Maybe Lupin the Second had shut her up in one, and she was still around somewhere with half a mind? That could have traumatized a kid. And been a serious issue to an adult. Especially if Lupin had spent some years living with her while she was in an addled mental state, but before she was tucked away.

I suddenly got an image of him living on the streets of Paris, picking pockets to support him and his disabled mother. It wasn’t totally impossible in this day and age; and it would explain some things, about Lupin. Would explain why he never talked about it, for one.

Outside my thoughts, Marti nodded, frowning. “Looks like he’s in too bad of shape to ask him, unfortunately.” She made a growling noise, then kicked the baseboard. “Fuck.”

“He never talks about his father, or his mother,” I offered, looking around at the ceiling and the fake potted plants, as if they could help me divine and answer. “I’ve never had an inkling that he’d have a problem with a place like this, either. No records of him being in one, no records of him being even near one. He’s never mentioned it, and we’ve never encountered it in passing. And I really didn’t think, you know, that this place would have a feel. Like, ERs are ERs, right? That was my thought.”

First his leg, and then the facilities. I was zero for two tonight. Zero for three if you counted the whole building explosion, though keeping him alive had to count for something.

But the rest of the casualties were a definite minus as well. So what was I batting in that case, minus twenty-five? Godammit.

“Hmm.” Marti’s lips twisted into a tight, thoughtful line. “It’s a good line of inquiry, but I’m not sure how we’re going to keep it from happening again, at this rate.”

I tilted my head at that, shifting my stance a little. In the room, Lupin and Christof were chattering pleasantly while the guard leaned back against the counter, his arms crossed and a toothy grin on his face. The conversation was something about hockey, by the looks of it, with lots of muscle-flexing by the deputy, silent amusement by the guard, and laughing from the thief. Well, at least he wasn’t going to immediately relapse, which was a blessing.
“What makes you think he wasn’t just faking it?” I queried. “Sorry, but I have to ask. This is Lupin we’re talking about.”

Marti nodded, tapping the fingers on her hip. Wait, were her nails painted? I couldn’t tell what color they were in the low light, but they were definitely, definitely painted.

For me?

No, no. That was a stupid thought. Women did those sorts of things. They just did.

“You saw how he paused for a second, multiple times?” she was saying. “And he was just totally still, like he wasn’t even there? Normally, if you’re emotionally distraught, you move around. Even if you’re so angry you go still, you still have ticks. You jerk your head. You blink. You **breathe**. When he started looking around, he didn’t even blink. He didn’t move at all. And that’s because the lower brain is taking over, like you’re sleepwalking.

“Meanwhile, the rest of your brain is trying desperately to shuffle away the monster that escaped its cage, and trying to make up some memory quickly so that when the normal consciousness comes back, it is handed a script that makes sense.” She motioned her hand though the air, a bit like a butterfly flitting around.

“The helper brain has to shuffle away all the memories it just made along with the personality that made them,” Marti continued. “It’s kind of like...you know, one actor upstages another to the point that the first one is pushed entirely off stage. That guy doesn’t know what he couldn’t see, so he doesn’t know what happened when he wasn’t there—but he still needs the play to make sense somehow, when he comes back. Otherwise, everything falls apart even more.”

I nodded. **Improv.**

**Guess this answers the question of which type of flashbacks he has.**

I knew how this worked, more or less, and it wasn’t that I didn’t believe in the phenomenon itself; it was more who it was coming from—*that* I’d never expected. And even though I really didn’t want to admit it, it did kind of fit.

I **did** expect him to be able to fake it, however, but if Marti believed it, it was probably true; even when I couldn’t trust my eyes, she had more experience in medical disciplines than I did, and I figured I could trust hers.

And when I’d been in the moment of it, I’d gotten that eerie feeling, that came from being around someone who just wasn’t all there. I shuddered, rubbing at my neck at the memory.

*This just isn’t my Lupin.* I had the thought again. I couldn’t help it. A little ball of anxiety settled in my chest; a fear. But a fear of what...?

“If you ask him...I bet he’s totally blanked out that entire conversation you were having,” Marti whispered, following my gaze to Lupin, though luckily, not to my thoughts alongside him. “I don’t think it was a lie. I’ve seen it before. You can’t fake something like that. You just know, in your gut. You know?”

“Yeah...” I gritted my teeth, forcing myself to focus on solutions. “You see it in the prisons?”

“Yeah.” Her lips pursed. The prison systems in Italy that she’d worked in early in her career were not particularly hospitable places and apparently a lot of the women had had emotional problems, not the least of which was from the people that got them into crime in the first place. Still, that was
how she’d gotten into the law enforcement sector to begin with.

“Normally I would like to know the prisoner more before making a diagnosis,” she went on, “but...give it a few minutes, and by the end of us talking here, he’s going to remember even less. He might not even remember anything about you coming back with food, or maybe even getting his stitches. He’ll think he does, but if you asked him to inspect it, it would be full of inaccuracies.”

I nodded.

“But don’t ask him, it’ll just upset him,” she amended, hastily, giving me a bit of a smile despite the preemptive reprimand. “I can do it, if you think it’d be worthwhile to investigate.”

“It might.” I smiled back, but it fell a moment later. Her freckles held no magic, this time, and I sighed and looked back in the room. Lupin was telling a story now, something about one of Jigen’s exes, probably, given the muscles he was illustrating on himself, about whomever he was imitating. “Unfortunately, I don’t even know where it started...”

“Sometimes you can’t know,” Marti said. “But it seems his self-control is deteriorating, which is what we should really worry about. He’s frightened something bad is going to happen, unconsciously, so we have to reassure that unconscious brain, somehow. Or just get him some sleep. That could even be it, you know?”

My jaw tightened and I narrowed my eyes. *Aren’t I supposed to be the one that reassures you, Lupin? My presence?*

Though, I suppose I hunted him down and foiled a fair number of his plans, so maybe I was not so synonymous with “safety and tranquility” as I’d hoped.

“Yeah, but if we don’t know what it is that’s setting him off, or what he’s afraid of happening...?”

She frowned. “Well, what do we know?”

I shook my head. “We know he’s been having some sort of emotional episode that ranges from mood swings to freezing up and crying to full-on flashbacks complete with speaking. We know it has something to do with his parents, possibly together, possibly not—assuming it’s not some superimposing trick of the mind. We know it’s something about the building or the situation that’s setting him off. Particularly the building. He doesn’t seem to be very fond of this place.” I motioned around. “The old feel of it, particularly as emanating from the fixtures. The windows, the doors, the drawers and the furniture...so maybe the overall dilapidation of it?

“If you add in the thing from downstairs, as to the actual onset of the event...”

The image of him gazing at the cabinets appeared in my mind, vividly. The way his hand curled out to the drawers, and the hollowness in his stare, despite his seeming single-minded determination...

The way he hadn’t flinched at the sound of the sink’s drip, or at me touching him.

It had already had him, then. Or near enough to matter.

And what had lead up to that? Him getting edgy and feeling in danger. And then, just gracefully staring off into space with a hollow look in his eye.

*That* was the moment. *That* was the one thing that didn’t fit. There was agitation on either side, but that—that was the interruption of the circuit, the calm in the middle of the storm. The one piece
that didn’t work the way it was supposed to.

I didn’t think anything of it at the time, because he had still been responding to me fairly accurately, but what if that was when it started, and slowly, it overwhelmed him?

What had he been staring at, then? It was possible it was something in his thoughts that did it, but...

The drawers, the handles. The sink, and its leaking faucet.

...The sink. That sink, crackled porcelain with the ring of rust around the drain. He’d been staring at it, hadn’t he?

“...He just...seems to do this pensive melancholy thing with a faraway stare, and then all of a sudden, bam, he’s back in this old place in his mind. It creeps up, he keeps talking, but somewhere in those words, he gets lost. I guess....”

As Marti nodded along, another thought struck me: The way Lupin had suddenly withdrawn the last time, just before getting on the elevator. The way he’d been staring at that window, wistful and faraway, and then gotten angry and agitated after....

That had to have been the same thing.

But that time, somehow, he’d managed to mostly stave it off. He’d gotten angry at me in the same way, but had deflected it up until he started tearing up when we were alone, which would have been a fair number of minutes. He’d kept it all, somehow, from taking over his mind.

That meant he had a release valve, after a fashion, that he knew how to work. The very thought filled me with hope—only for it to turn to guilt, heavy in my chest.

Because that also meant that, this time around, I hadn’t let him have access to that mechanism, or it had tripped a lot faster, before he even realized it. And then when he had finally broken open...

“It seems that his ladder was kindness in the face of all this. Kindness from you.”

...Treating him compassionately—and incredibly intimately—had been what had stopped it; what had turned it from an oncoming flashback into the much safer sobbing.

"I can’t tell you. Please don’t ask any more questions."

But this time, I’d just gone on pressing him. Letting him press himself. Fuck.

“I suspect he doesn’t seem to see the triggers coming, but he has the ability to deal with the emotional release, if he does manage to catch it. And, I think, sudden compassion can break him out of it, if it’s starting to onset.”

Whether that worked for anyone other than me, though... Especially if it was something to do with his father, maybe the fact that it was me may have been the only reason it worked—because that was what he’d hoped for from a male authority figure, but never gotten.

That...wasn’t a thought I liked, either. But it would certainly explain a few things.

It also left me with a tingle of pride, a shiver of the implication of what I meant—or could mean—to him, person to person.

“...But,” I continued, “It can be aggravated by questioning him about it, though he won’t say what the nature of that line of questioning is. Could be pressing him for details of what’s going on, let
alone what’s causing it. He doesn’t want to talk about it if he doesn’t have to.”

“So we have almost nothing,” she replied. “Except that our prisoner seems to be having flashbacks with violent outbursts, and maybe, ‘keep to modern-looking parts of the building.’”

“Basically.” I pursed my lips. “But this wasn’t exactly violent. He was angry, and loud, but he wasn’t attacking me.”

“Yet,” Marti said, grim. “D’you suppose that’s only because he couldn’t move very well?”

My natural instinct to defend my prisoners kicked up at that, because I knew what would happen if someone got labeled a “violent” inmate, let alone “uncontrollable” and “mentally unstable.” And that was only what would happen per protocol. What would happen off the books was even more unpalatable.

“I don’t think so. He was moving around plenty. He just didn’t want to attack me.” The way he had been clawing at his head, and shivering too…. “He was scared, I think, in that flashback. Not violent.”

And if he’d thought I was his father... There might very well be a reason for that.

His father was not a nice man. But I had hoped that being his son might have offered Lupin some protection from that.

That hope seemed very thin, now.

“We also don’t know what this past traumatic event is related to,” Marti continued. “Other than his parents, which might not even be accurate; it could be a disjointed association. And yet, we can’t ask anyone, because both of those people are unavailable, as are all their associates...I assume? Not that they would even talk, regardless.”

“Mm.” I nodded. “So there’s not much that can be done about it at the moment, I guess. Except...”

Hadn’t Jigen worked for his father, for a while?

“What is it?” Marti asked, head tilting, eyebrows pinched together sharply.

I shook my head. “I just thought, Jigen—Lupin’s associate, his lover—worked for his father for a bit. But I don’t think they knew each other, then. Otherwise why would they be together? How could they be?”

“Yeah...” Marti nodded. “Not that he’s available to talk to, either. He isn’t going to come help us figure this out just because we called him.”

That was certainly true. But...

He was around New York about the time Lupin was in his teens. So he might know something, heard the scuttlebutt. He would have been young at the time, but you didn’t work in the underworld in a town as close-knit as New York and not hear about some boss repeatedly devastating his only kid enough to cause something like this.

“Unless it’s an unhealthy, fucked-up relationship the two of them have,” Marti added. “Do you know, at all?”

For a moment, just a moment, my heart lodged in my throat, and I looked back at Lupin. He was
smiling jovially, wiping tears from his eyes and touching at different parts of him that hurt. It didn’t take much for my mind to fill in the blank, and illustrate all the bruises on him as coming from a fist.

*No, that’s stupid. He’s not some battered wife. He’s not one of the girls that end up at the station on a nightly basis.*

Except, when had I *ever* known a criminal with a decent love life? And the poor homosexual vics that came in, they had it even worse...

But still, that wouldn’t be it, would it? Lupin was fearless. He wouldn’t keep around a romantic partner that intimidated him, or hurt him. He wouldn’t even go after one.

Though there was Fujiko. That was less healthy than some emotionally dependent teenagers I’d seen.

And all the random women. That wasn’t healthy, either. Socially acceptable most of the time maybe, but you didn’t do that sort of thing for years on end unless there was something wrong with you. Something like an inability to attach to people properly—or a fear of it. Sure, some people were genuinely just interested in sowing their oats and touring the world of flesh after trying other options, but even *that* had underlying reasons 95% of the time.

Now, Lupin *did* have the type of career where he couldn’t really take women with him, or even trust to go back to one if he did like her; the chances of her being on someone’s payroll after meeting him were just too high. Which, honestly, at this point spoke to the fact that his career was more important to him than love and a family, which was reasonable at his age. But given what I knew about him, I suspected it was partly because he couldn’t let himself *give it up*. And why not?—Because he didn’t believe, deep down, that love would bring him anything. That longterm love was *available*.

At a higher level of thinking about it, it was an example of Freud’s theory of satisfaction: people needed one of two things to be satisfied in life—Work, or Love. If you had both, you were just riding the clouds (and were probably in great shape to successfully raise kids to be self-loving individuals, which explained why my marriage failed).

If you had neither, you dysfunctioned, became unstable, and died an early death one way or another if you couldn’t fix it—by your own hands or someone else’s when you inevitably caused trouble.

If you had *one* of the two elements, though, you could be satisfied with things when you lived on your own, and it would keep you going. Though work would not, generally speaking, keep you going if you were in a loveless relationship, and love would not keep you going if you *hated* your job in a way that made you hate yourself—they cancelled each other out and you ended up in the “had neither” category level of dysfunction.

In Lupin’s case, it was obviously work that was keeping him going, and he got whatever baseline of affection and personal attention he needed from the arms of random strangers over the years. One about every two weeks from the time he was sixteen, if you took to heart the number he’d given me earlier.

At a lower level of thinking about it, it was simply possible that he'd never learned *how* to connect to other people in a lasting way. He seemed to have empathy, definitely, which was a great bit in his favor. But he didn't seem to be able to trust them in any lasting fashion. I'd always assumed that was just because of his job, and he was a practical professional willing to make that sacrifice;
but looking at it from this angle, I had to wonder if it wasn't because something--or multiple somethings--had happened in his childhood that made him unable to.

I’d seen his type more often than not, flowing through the station doors, although he was a more white-collar variety, and therefore, a little more functional in polite society. But as Marti has said, CEOs and politicians tended to hide some pretty intense problems. Lupin was probably no different, in that respect; his father certainly hadn't been.

It was reasonable, at this point in his life, to assume Lupin was a criminal because he couldn't fit in to the daylight world. It was also reasonable, given his father, to consider that he may have been lacking something essential to believing he could. I had always assumed it was because he didn't want to; he found it square and boring and he was not a cog in the machine. But what if it was because he was the type that had never believed he could get anything better, deep down?

At the end of the day, a police station’s waiting room was a tale of the spectrum of love: either people who had none of it—the perpetrators—or people who had more than was reasonable, who ended up crying interminably—the victims’s families. And in between, the victims themselves, who had it, only to have it stolen from them.

Typical perps, lifelong criminals of some variety or another, were people who lacked love to begin with, generally from childhood (which was honestly not their fault). Crimes of passion resembled the vic patten, but were the same as the regular perps at the end of the day: that was people who thought they’d had love stolen from them, and found themselves with what they considered to be an irreparable hole because of it. People who had thought they’d had love all their lives, but didn’t actually, and when what they had did leave them, they flipped out upon finding nothing but a black hole beneath the floorboards.

Of course, there was the difference between self-love and love from others in the equation as well, but they worked together to create resiliency of human spirit. You needed the former—self-love—to accept the latter—love from others. Though you also needed to latter to ever get the former, so if, for instance, you had a loveless family life growing up, you were kind of screwed, unless you were remarkably resilient and lucky and learned self-love some other way, like through books, friends, a teacher, or a great lover that decided you were going to be their project.

It was a natural selection thing, really: Human beings were evolved enough that they needed self-love to survive, and love from others to thrive (because human beings were communal creatures at the end of the day). If you could get a second chance at a family--a family of your own choice, as it was called--you had a shot at filling in those holes your original family left you with. But most people didn't have the determination, the awareness, or the luck to do it. They either missed the chance or fumbled the ball, and ended up dying early or being career criminals--and either way, they perpetuated the problems on the next generation.

However, a lot of people managed to generate a sense of self-love through work, if they were old enough, because it offered a pseudo-love replacement: people's admiration. But the lack of one's ability to self-love, the lack of that emotional and physical security, caused or allowed the great many abusive relationships that existed, as well as pretty much all crime and a good percentage of suicides as well. (Which, to be honest, was a crime in most places.)

And usually, when it came to the relationships, it was the girl that knew she didn’t have that love and went looking, only to get hurt by a guy that either didn’t know any better or lacked it too, and thus turned to emotional manipulation and physical control to get his sense of external love and validation from an “unending,” on-demand source. But, honestly, such a scenario was a poisoned well that left the victim broken and the abuser’s heart a black void; neither could be fulfilled that
way. —Which was why abusers cheated more often than not even after having an emotional slave to make them feel good about themselves.

So in that scenario, was Lupin the woman? Or the man?

I think he liked to think he was “the man” in his relationships, but I really, really doubted that, from the way he acted. He may well have been the horny one, but he was certainly not the man, by any stretch of the imagination.

Not that women didn’t abuse men, too; they certainly did. But it happened in a slightly different way: usually from control of young men, from the time they were preteens. Women’s predation on men tended to start at a younger age, when they were boys—and more easy to control. Which also meant it happened incestuously more than the other form, too, but...that was getting into tangential territory.

Unless we were talking about potential problems with Lupin’s mother and father. Fuck.

I rubbed my temples, sighing hard. Mental institutions. Wasn’t that one of the main reasons women got sent to mental institutions back in the day? Sexual abuse? Either to shut them up about it or because it broke them? And then, more often than not, it happened there too? And if we were talking the actually mentally disabled, it certainly wasn’t limited to female inmates.

Lupin, though. That wouldn’t be Lupin’s problem. He was way more confident with his body than that would allow. Think, think....

Lupin fit into the perpetrator mold of my station theory, albeit in a white collar sense. So he wasn’t a monster about his damage; he wasn’t one of those guys that came into the station strung out on meth just having murdered somebody after living on the streets for a year because he hated himself. Whether the thief loved himself or not I didn’t know (he certainly loved his ego and his work), but the argument could be made that he had at least some functioning amount of self-acceptance, and so his manifestation was somewhere in the middle of the spectrum: he simply didn’t attach to his flings, though he appreciated them as people. And while he helped people out here and there, rather than picking a single group to help and a stable life to do it in (like his family or a charity or his community), he spent his life wandering around. He didn’t have to be damaged to do that, either, if you went with my “bored and talented” theory. But, presumably, even with that, he was searching for something.


The Lupin I don’t know.... What sort of weaknesses does he have?

Jigen, admittedly, could just be one of the few friends Lupin managed to keep, a comrade-in-arms. But on the other hand, Jigen had proved a frightening individual all the times I’d ever seen him.

He was a hit man, which you didn’t become if there wasn’t something pretty damn off about you and your upbringing from the get-go. And he was the best of the best, and particular too. His contracts always had clauses to let him walk off when he wanted, to do what he wanted. That spoke of a moral man. But also, more likely, one that thought highly of himself and didn’t want to be pushed around.

He was a true professional of organized crime; he took things like honor, job completion, and silence very seriously, and had the skills and self control to do it, by all accounts. But high-strung people like that also tended to be unable to deal with their feelings well.
Jigen had also killed more people than I could readily count—and probably three times as many as I would ever know about. When the hard, dirty work came, Jigen was your man, and understandably, people tried to keep him happy. He was used to that sort of treatment.

So put a man like that and Lupin together, and what did you get...?

On the one hand, Lupin was Jigen’s boss. On the outside, he was the leader of the two, and controlled the contracts. Jigen probably took that pretty seriously.

As the boss, Lupin also had no qualms about offing people that were a danger to him. However, he didn’t tend to be the one that did it; he just gave the orders, as far as I was aware.

Given that Lupin was such a loner, one who’d probably never even had a long term relationship outside of his high school years, would he even know what to do, if he finally trusted a lover, and they turned on him?

And on top of it, if it was the guy that did his hits for him.... What, exactly, would he do? Run away, I’d assume, and confront him if that didn’t work. But Jigen had as extensive of a network of underground contacts as Lupin did, and a lot of times, Lupin needed that to succeed, which would complicate a lot of things if the slippery little thief ended up with an ex that was persistent in tracking him down.

And when it came to relationships, people got weird. They got to be the exact opposite of how they normally acted, actually. Something about the amity-enmity complex, which said you treated the people in your inner circle the exact opposite way that you treated people in your outer circle. And, likewise, you treated other people the opposite of how you treated yourself.

So if Lupin’s natural tendency was to float about and not take anything seriously.... He would take things too seriously, and stick around too long?

Like with Fujiko.

And if Jigen normally was loyal to a fault (to those that earned it) but abandoned those that didn’t meet his standards.... He’d just leave, wouldn’t he? Unless he was acting the opposite of normal. Then he’d stick around too long, too, probably, and demand acts that gained his respect, with the threat of leaving?

An image flashed through my mind, of a dark night in a dark bedroom, after Lupin and Jigen had been drinking too much. The two men were just silhouettes, and there was no sound, but every idea was sharp.

Jigen stood cast forward, with his fist looped around Lupin's tie and using it to yank his lover forward. Lupin, on his knees, trying to talk him down, while the black shape of the hit man held that massive, omnipresent gun in his other hand as he shouted.

Augh. I rubbed at my face. That's stupid, stop it. Stop it! They wouldn't be like that.

But the image kept playing, perhaps because I was so tired. The thief pulls his thin Walther, makes a threat, rallying his confidence--but inevitably, wouldn't be able to go through with it, even as he pushed it against Jigen's side. Because this was the only man he trusted, so what was he going to do, shoot him?

And Jigen knows that. So he pushes the gun away, pistol-whips Lupin with his own, hard enough to knock him over. He tosses the heavy revolver aside, onto the bed, and follows Lupin to the floor, grabbing him by the lapels and pinning him to the floor as he chokes on the blood from his
That was when the sound came in to the reverie. The I'm sorrys, the stops, the why do you make me do this to you and the you should know betters. All the pitiful sobs, and the angry shouts and growls.

I'd seen a lot worse, to be honest. Such a scenario was honestly just another Tuesday afternoon in some precincts, regardless of whether or not it was a call to the scene of a domestic or a homicide. That was the constant story in precincts where there were just too many loveless people caged together, who had been forced too close to each other for too long.

And then morning dawned in my mental scenario, because there came the whispers of I'm sorry, I won't do it again, from a deep voice, and a hope that it would be true, from a silent one.

As the images and sounds faded from my mind, I looked over at Lupin, who was smiling and laughing and pointing, even as he held his side with one arm.

He did seem to have all his teeth.

I sighed and scrubbed at my face. I didn’t have enough information to profile like this, let alone the logic capacity this late. The thing that really confused me was how Lupin got from three hundred and fifty anonymous women to Jigen, a man, and someone he knew personally. That was what made me wonder about the legitimacy of the relationship, and was the whole reason I was even entertaining this. That, and the fact that Jigen was a lot older than him, and that whole thing about thieves being the bottom of the totem pole.

When you added in Jigen's typical love of bodybuilder types, as Lupin told it, it worried me even more. The criminal world was not an easy one, nor was the gay one. If Jigen was used to dating, and dealing with, men who could physically overpower him (and then came after him with large guns when he tried to break up), if he was suddenly in the opposite place in the relationship, would he carry that pattern over to how he treated his lover? It was possible. Far too possible, in fact.

There was also the fact that Lupin apparently liked to pursue everyone he worked with. It spoke to one of three things: immaturity, true libertine-ism, or a pathological sense of loneliness.

Lupin liked to flirt with anyone and everyone; he did it like it was going out of style. It was, in fact, his default mode of interaction, now that I was thinking about it. And there was only one reason anyone developed that: to cover up a sense of powerlessness, about something or another.

It wasn't like flirting was bad or unhealthy; far from it. But when it was literally your only way of interacting comfortably, that meant something else was going on. For some, it was because they had been pursued from a young age, and it was their deflection—that would be the beautiful women or the really delicate gay men. For others, it was because they'd been damaged in some way, and were using it to empower themselves; that would be the sex-worker or sexual abuse victim angle, generally speaking. But for others, the majority of others...it was because they'd been neglected, and it was the only way they could get any attention from the world, once they hit a certain age.

It was usually the people that laughed all the time, to cover up something sad in their lives. Because flirting was the adult's version of easy laughter, one typically flowed into the other as you got older. And, if you were lonely, flirting's natural conclusion solved that problem, too, so it was a behavior a lot of people ended up using to prop themselves up with.

Now, if Lupin's romantic interludes with his crew was just immaturity, that was Lupin's disaster to be on others. Being a free-spirit and finding others like him spoke to Lupin either being lucky and
finding his true home crowd, or possibly coercing people into things he shouldn't have--the latter could explain why he had no longterm relationships of merit, though I'd never heard of anyone having a falling out with him because of that. But the last one... That was the one that bothered me. Because that indicated other people taking advantage of him, and him letting them. Him seeking it out.

While any of the three seemed plausible enough, and I would have gone with number two before tonight, a little dark place in my heart leaned towards the last one after seeing all this. One that was swelling with every second I thought about it.

The battered Lupin in my mind reappeared, just for a moment. Lying on the floor on his back, face bloodied and bruised, staring up at nothing hollowly as his abuser finally left him be with a grunt and a drunken shove. Shattered glass and abandoned liquor around him, blood droplets spattered and smeared thinly on the hardwood as he lay there, motionless.

And then, after a moment, a smile creeping onto his face.

I worried about the last option because I knew that taking advantage was what Fujiko did to him. It was what he gladly let all kinds of women do to him, out of some sense of gentility that he liked. But I had always felt that was playing with fire, being walked all over like that--and I think, somewhere, he recognized that, and that was why he liked it. A mild self-destructive urge, embedded within the excitement of outmaneuvering others. The others he was supposed to be getting close to and loving.

Give me a good time.

Give me a challenge.

Treat me like I know I'm meant to be treated.

It wasn't that much of a leap.

If Lupin's parents had somehow done something, or been involved in something, that got Lupin as messed up as I saw him a few minutes ago, what would he have imprinted about how a romantic partner was supposed to treat him? If I could figure out his relationships, I might be able to reverse-engineer the answer to his past, or at least get on the right track.

So now that he was with men...? With Jigen...?

How did he fit into all of this? Was his current lover just more self-destruction, an even stronger variety that he was all too happy to take, or had he finally found someone to steady him, the rudder that sailed the ship?

I'd never thought of Jigen that way—as just another unhealthy bond of Lupin's—but maybe I should have.

But, that said, why would his name snap Lupin out of a stress-induced flashback, if that were the case? Jigen had to be something he associated with kindness, wasn't it? And Lupin always spoke of being fond of the man, in almost lovey-dovey tones; that Lupin took care of him. And in recent years, that Lupin loved him.

But how often had I heard that, from women whose men were the trash of the human race?

I tisked. The answer would have to come from what Jigen was like on the inside. What he wanted out of life, and what he did when he felt like he wasn't getting it. (Drink, apparently, was the
Beyond that, I had no answer. I’d never actually arrested him. Nor even had a conversation with him. I’d met him in passing a few times, on the way to Lupin, but never anything that hadn’t ended in a gunfight after a few words, if any.

I’d never much asked Lupin about him, either, though he was happy to chat about him when he was bored, if only to make me twitch with gratuitous explanations of his gay life. Maybe I could pursue that line of questioning, though, when he calmed down. He wouldn’t expect why I was doing it—though if it was in fact something contentious, it could set him off again, right?

It was hard to tell. I had Jigen's criminal file, and the descriptions of him from people who had worked with, gained after they’d gotten arrested—but none of them said anything very nice. Admittedly, they were not good people, but when a bad guy says a worse guy is horrible, that means something. They did have a reason to be ungenerous towards him, given that he usually got away and they didn’t, but still. They would call him a pansy for that, not a nightmare:

Lazy, by some accounts. And by others: Territorial, prideful.

Dark and moody. Drinks a lot. Can shoot a falling quarter at fifty yards.

Passive-aggressive. Takes a while to anger, though it’s a quiet anger, and you won’t see it coming once he does snap.

No way to get him back on you good side, except to beat him in a fight.

That didn't leave me with a good feeling. It blew aside all my hopes, in fact, and was no doubt part of the reason my imagination was working so hard to make me remember all this.

Another image flashed into my mind, this time a stylized Halloween-style animation. Two silhouetted figures faced each other, backlit by an ominous amber the color of Jigen's scotch. On the left, a boy-child with unruly hair and a short tie, and on the right, a thin man in a suit and hat. The man smiles a piper's smile, bent down as he is, and puts his hat on the kid. Slowly, as he begins to step backward, he draws the kid closer and closer by the tie, hand over hand. At first, the child smiles back and skips merrily to him, but soon he's struggling just to keep up with the pace. There is no background of mention, but it's obvious a great distance, and long time, is going by, and quickly.

The kid grows, a year of his life per step they take in this dance. His tie gets longer and longer with him, until it's the length of a rope, coiling out behind the suited man. The boy grows into an adult, and the speed of their steps intensifies, until the kid is as big as the man. Until they're both standing straight, and the man in the suit is working his hands furiously just to pick up the rest of the rope's slack.

But when the boy is grown and they get to the end of the rope's growth too, the smiling man pulls the now young-man near, takes back his hat, and then twirls the newly-minted adult to the right of the stage—to where he used to be. He loops the rope-tie around and around the young man's throat as he spins around under his direction, blissfully dizzy.

And then, when they hit the beat where the dance would normally end, one lover dipped desperately in the other's arms, the man with the hat instead tosses the free end of the rope off-screen overhead, over an unseen bar. When it comes back down, when his dance partner is coming in for a kiss with a smile, he yanks it.
His partner is left dangling, struggling, ripples of shiver-lines going up and down his body like a stereowave. Two little white dots appear in its face, innocent eyes of surprise and exclamation, looking around, cartoonishly, for help, as the figure's arms claw at its throat and the rope in a way that is not cartoonish at all.

But the man with the hat only yanks the rope harder, and ties the end around an imaginary post.

He lights a cigarette as the struggling continues, looks back a couple of times and checks his watch. Kicks the young man once.

When the struggling slows, he is satisfied. He pulls down the brim of his hat to cover where his eyes would be, and walks away off-screen in the direction the boy had come from.

The only silhouette left sways in the breeze, the whites of its eyes closed forever, gone back to black.

If Jigen had been there when Lupin was a kid, and on the off chance they’d interacted at the same time this mess broke Lupin’s soul apart, not only would I take a hard look at the hit man as a cradle robber, but also at the fact that maybe something about Jigen’s very presence now was able to keep Lupin in a relationship with him. Either because it was a connection to a family he’d loved and lost...or to a family that had hurt him, that he couldn’t quite ever manage to pull himself away from.

...Jesus, Lupin, what are you doing with your life.

I hadn’t thought he was that kind of guy, to fall prey to that, but then again, I’d seen him cry twice tonight. What I knew about him apparently meant very little.

If he really did hit on everything that moved because he was insecure and lonely....

“Zeni?” Marti asked, touching my arm. "Earth to Zenigata-san?"

“Ah...ah, sorry. What was your question?"

“What kind of relationship you think Jigen and Lupin have. If it’s healthy.”

“Ah. Uh, sorry,” I muttered, sheepishly, shuffling the thoughts away. I’d done that thing again, where I’d just spaced out and ignored someone while I was thinking. “I don’t know. Suppose we could ask him, at some point; he might enjoy bragging about it.”

It might keep those horrible images from springing up in my mind like dandelions, too.

“Ask Jigen?” she asked, perplexed.

“Ah...no. Lupin. About Jigen. And their relationship.”

“Oh. Yeah.” She gazed into the room. “But we’d have to arrest Jigen first before he can shed light on this situation with Lupin’s flashbacks. And I don’t think that’s happening any time soon.”

“Probably.”

“Probably?” She raised her eyebrows. “There’s movement toward that end?”

“Oh, no—I’m just certain Lupin has a way to contact him, is all, if we let him.”

She narrowed her eyes, giving me the Don’t you dare and soon giving the potted plant the Why
must you thwart me. “If only he weren’t a wanted man. We could just call him down here.”

I laughed at that, for some reason, possibly because I was a little slap-happy. Though, perhaps it was just the idea of Jigen waltzing into a place like this, in his suit and his swagger, and picking up his lover with an easy rap on the front desk with his knuckles and a “Hey, I hear you called”....

1920 wouldn’t mind that at all.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Mental health is hard.”

Marti met my statement with a sigh. “Why are criminals always so complicated? Even when they’re so stupid?”

“Hey, he’s smart.”

A grin pulled at one side of her face. “Ish.”

I shook my head with a short smile, trying to empty it of thoughts of Lupin’s love life until later, and back to the task at hand. It was getting far too hard for me sort out which was which, at this point; I really did need to sleep. “So from here, I guess we just keep calm and carry on,” I admitted. “And hope we can keep hold of the prisoner’s sanity until I can get him out of here.”

...Right into the arms of the Commissioner. Arg.

“And hope he can keep a hold of it, too,” Marti added. She crossed her arms and scowled, voice suddenly clinical.

“Yes,” I replied, darkly.

Of course I wanted Lupin’s sanity in place for normalcy’s sake, but as things stood, I couldn’t protect Lupin if I couldn’t depend on him to dodge bullets. Tonight, the next few days—I needed him to be no ordinary prisoner; to keep his eyes sharp even as he sat tight and quiet. But if this kept up...not only could I not save him from the Commissioner’s goons, should they decide to show, but he might just take us down with him—either at the time, or beforehand. “Let’s hope this was the last time.”

“Let’s,” she sighed. “One must always have faith in one’s prisoner, after all.”

I tilted my head, surprised out of my rainstorm of thoughts. “What do you mean?”

She lifted her hands in a shrug. “If you don’t believe that they can get better, they won’t. Simple as that. We must be strong for them, when they can’t believe in themselves, or how will they ever climb the ladder we’re holding?”

Wish I could have ‘believed’ him into reforming, but I knew what she meant—their minds, their hearts. It was a sweet sentiment. And she would know, given her work history.

I got another image in my head, abruptly, of the beat-up Lupin of the first reverie, sitting in front of a sunny window overlooking the Mediterranean, a book in his lap as he lounged on a windowbox in his socks and pajamas. Some imaginary person, bathed in light, sat across from him, their legs intertwined. They smiled at each other, as the salty breeze blew in, and a couple of small children ran around. There was an I love you on Lupin’s lips, as he smiled with crow’s feet around his dark eyes.

Suddenly, Marti smiled a little at me--a little like the one I’d just been imagining, despite
everything—and her tone softened to match. She touched my elbow momentarily. “I’m glad you
didn’t hurt him, though. That would have just made it worse.”

"Why would I have hurt him?" I asked, too stunned by the switch to say much else.

"Because some people don't understand mental health, is all," Marti replied, with a smile. "But
you did good."

I smiled back, just a tick. “Well, I try.”

Her eyes sparkled at me as she pushed off the wall, but it quickly dissipated when she looked over
Lupin’s way, and her mouth turned down. “Well, just pretend nothing happened, and see how it
goes. Tell him the place is decommissioned, if it comes up—which half of it is, really, and the rest
is an outpatient place anyway. I know you don’t like to lie, but lie. Lie very strongly. For your
prisoner’s sake.”

I chuckled, chagrined. “You know me so well, Marti.”

“I try,” she replied with a wink.

I couldn’t argue with that. It was too platonic of a wink for me to get worked up by it, but it still
made a little fond spot of camaraderie bloom in my chest, despite it all. I tipped my hat to her. It
was a good of a plan as any.

“Well, then.” Marti nodded to me, looking for permission to join the others.

“I’ll be a minute. I need a smoke, after all this, and then I can debrief the others about it. See if you
can get a little more out of him in the meantime, to sort out this mess. You’re definitely the one that
can do it without causing a repeat.” I waved my hand, grumbling. “Apparently I remind him too
much of his father.”

It was an odd thing to say, and it disgusted me, given what I knew about the man. No doubt that
was part of why I regretted it the moment I said it aloud in the presence of someone else.

But Marti just smiled at me warmly. “Then he has poor taste. Because you’re much nicer than
anyone who would hurt him enough to cause that.”

That was when the blush crept over my face.

“But maybe, try not to intimidate him so much, next time you need to ask him something?”

“I...um...” The blush deepened, to actual red.

“It’s okay. I know you’re the good guy here.” She leaned up on her tip-toes and kissed my cheek.

My eyes widened, and everything about me froze—but not because I was cold. Not at all.

Marti left me to with a pat on the chest, smiling slightly. I watched her back, that warm feeling
draining from my face into the rest of me.

“Oh, and the muffin was good,” she said, waving at me with a definitely non-platonic wink before
she disappeared inside the room.

Muffins....

With my face burning an unruly shade of scarlet, I couldn’t help but smile (albeit hidden quickly
behind my hand), letting the feelings flow over me. Flow over my memories, and light the tiny candles that were my hopes and dreams.

They lived somewhere deep down, and I wouldn’t let them out beyond the lantern glass, but why force it to be a cold, barren place, when there was a beautiful, kind woman who’d smile that brightly at you, even just over pastries?

Maybe I had hit one pitch right tonight.

I turned away and shoved my hands in my pockets nervously, shuffling around a packaged croissant for my lighter. My fingers smoothed over it, itching for a smoke, and I stepped out of the light—so no one could see my face, or at least, not as much.

Marti, for her part, quickly rejoined Christof and Lupin and the steady omnipresence of our little group’s guard; the two lawmen nodded at her and then the thief, by all appearances, lobbed her a joke and she scolded him for it. But he accepted the criticism good-naturedly.

I was just about to turn away when Lupin glanced over her shoulder at me, looking concerned. Concerned like a child wondering why their parent wasn’t coming to dinner.

Before that look could take root in me, I whirled on my heel and headed for the stairway at the end of the hall.

“Lupin the Third, what you do to me,” I muttered, pulling out my pack of cigarettes and tapping it against my palm as I walked. I shook my head, drew out one of the smokes, and put it between my lips. “But praise be the name of Jigen Daisuke.”

*Even if I have to kick his ass the next time I see him.*

Chapter End Notes

*Finally,* a kiss! If even a teeny tiny one.... <3

And, in case you didn't know, "Muffin" (long form of "muff") is American slang for a woman's lower pubic hair, ie, to give a person your muffin = sex. Thus why Zenigata is blushing.
Kinetic Energy

Chapter Summary

In which we get to hear Marti’s side of things (!), and learn a little bit about why Zenigata does what he does.

Chapter Notes

First of all: Wow! 500 hits! Thank you so much, guys. I don't think I've ever gotten that on a long fic before. Too, the last two chapters had 120 hits! Judging by the numbers, there's between 20 and 40 of you reading this regularly, so either your ranks have swelled (!), lots of you have been reading the chapters multiple times, or you're checking back frequently for updates. Whatever the reason, that's all pretty cool!

This week's chapter is a little late because of a few things, including real life stress, and the fact that I had to take this week off of life just to deal with that. But I spent the time, once the stressor was past, working on stuff later in the story. (I've been writing about 20k words a week on this thing, can you believe it?) The good news is, I now know what tone the current part of the story needs to progress.

The bad news is, I'm going to be out of town all next week at Book Expo, so I won't have time to write, let alone post, a chapter. But I will try.

Even more good news, the next chapter is enormous and there's so much great stuff happening in further chapters to come, you'll love them once they get posted.

Also of note--I was getting bored with this chapter, so I decided to re-write it from Marti's pov, and it turned out awesome.

There were a few things I knew about Lupin the Third. Some I’d read, some I’d heard, and the rest, I got from interacting with him—even if it had only been a few hours.

The first thing I’d noticed about him was just as Zenigata had said—he wasn’t a normal person.

He was exceptional.

From the moment he’d come strutting in the doors of this facility, only to stop, look around, and then remark to the cop next to him—that took guts. One would think he owned that officer, like he was some high-profile politician, but once he’d taken that tumble off the counter and just gotten back up with a grunt and a grumble, I learned something else:

He was quite comfortable with being in custody, and knew what to expect.

He was also thoughtful, beneath it all.

He knew when to stop, and when he could push, no matter the person, disparity between them, or
circumstance. That told me he had been a fairly fearless kid, one that had gotten beat up in (or run away from) back alleys a lot to learn to walk those boundaries—like a gymnast on a balance beam. One that was suspended a lethal height off the ground.

And yet, he was still very young, all told. He was probably just now accepting his own skin, or having an existential crisis about everything up to this point in preparation for the looming three-zero.

I didn’t think I’d see that play out here, but it might definitely influence what was going on: For instance, he never really let you touch the troubles that mattered, but would happily invite you along for his joy rides. Demanded it, even.

Furthermore, as he’d gone through the booking process, he’d joked around. Not because he needed it, but just because he was bored.

He treated his arresting officers like human beings—and human beings he liked. Maybe it was part of a longterm ploy to curry favor—it probably was—or an effort toward social dominance, but that was more of a side effect than the point. He was jovial mostly just because his natural charisma and intelligence couldn’t stop coming through.

And it had entertained me.

Despite being young and occasionally crass and stupid, he was well-traveled, and had a strong memory for people and how he felt about them. He knew my old village. He knew half of the tiny enclaves in Europe personally (given his rap sheet), and apparently, the interesting, storied people in each one by name.

He appreciated art, given that he forged and stole choice pieces, just as well as he appreciated places and, I suspected, the food in them, given the number of times I’d been told someone had stumbled across him at fancy local cafés enjoying the morning air.

I didn’t have enough to go on yet, but all this made me suspect he was a romantic, too, and that was why he played at being a scuzzball lady’s man: because the truth was just too close to home. He liked the finer things in life, but wouldn’t tell anyone just how much he liked them, because that would be uncool and too sissy among his mafia friends.

However, he still had the panache to dress flamboyantly, and wanted you to play with him. He probably could have fit into fifteenth century Venice, masks and all, fantastically.

And he was smart. Oh, was he smart. Aside from all the tales, you could see it in his eyes, in the few moments that he was distracted or in which he just didn’t care that you saw—because the point was far more important to arrive at.

I could appreciate that.

You could also see it in his sadness, when he was clinging to a man I loved.

Which made me love that man more.

Lupin was a leader, too, albeit of a small, unusual outfit, one that was as closed-off as it was loosely-knit.

The only connection between his gang’s members was him. He was the lynchpin. And yet he wore flaming red suit jackets and wing-tipped shoes.
He also wasn’t bad looking, and decently equipped. (Though he was far too young and frivolous to ever be my type.)

He was good at what he did, and phenomenal in pushing the boundaries of his profession. There were systems all over the world that were engineered just to avoid him. Avoid his insatiable, tinkering mind. His energetic soul, his thirsty hands, and his clever heart.

Truth be told, that was the kind of man everyone wanted to know—a golden boy, and in this case, the golden boy of crime. Though I’d worry about where he’d been, if he ever tried to share a night with me.

But everywhere he went, he made friends. Probably far more than he made enemies. You could see it in the smile lines on his face.

He’d even befriended the lead investigator that was after him, after a fashion, and now he was worming his way into even me.

What in the world was this man doing being a criminal?

The criminal world did not need a golden boy. It did not need another Bonnie and Clyde, another Jesse James. It did not need anyone to make it romantic, and in this day and age, there were plenty of other things to choose if you wanted to live that high-class lifestyle and still be a crook.

Like a banker.

Or a movie star.

A CEO.

A Fashion model.

A Programmer.

Even a gigolo.

So why in the world would you be a thief? Didn’t he know thieves and con artists always got killed, in the end?

At the end of the day, the man before me was a little bit Cassanova, a little bit Robin Hood, a little bit Sherlock Holmes.

And like the famous detective, he had some significant problems emanating from his endless maze of a mind.

Problems I was here to solve.

As I went back to the exam room with my marching orders, I realized, weirdly enough, there was one last thing I’d noticed about him:

He and Christof were getting on like brothers.

I wonder if he has any siblings?

If we knew nothing about his mother, and very little about his father, it was possible he knew very little about them, and thus could have siblings he’d never even met.
On the flip side, he could have a dozen siblings that we’d never met, but that he still sent money home to every week.

That could go a long way to understanding him, if I could get that story.

A long way towards healing him.

“And so, that’s how my brother lost this tooth and I became curling champion at the ripe age of twenty-two,” Christof concluded as I walked into the exam room, shoving his fingertip up his lip and deforming his face in a way that, while ridiculous, at least made the patient laugh.

They really acted like close-knit farm-boy brothers, somehow. The whole incident with Christof’s phone came to mind, vividly.

Clinician’s Notes: Lupin the Third decides who he likes and dislikes quickly, and tenders out the according favors immediately, zealously, and without exception, even to recipient’s dismay. He fervently believes his own actions will do good for others in the end, to the point that any short term discomfort is negligible.

But.

He never lets his guard down entirely.

And so, while he knows he’s causing others trouble, the things he messes with are only, as he calculates it, surface level.

I couldn’t tell yet what it was, but there was something he was holding back, with me. With all of us. Maybe it was a plan of escape, or simply that he didn’t want to get entirely attached to cops. But as he looked toward me for a moment, there was a dark glitter in his eyes, that he quickly turned away to let cool. He smiled quietly at the wall, scratching at his cheek.

There had been a moment of something in there, and it wasn’t just embarrassment. It was something calculating.

Something like checking on the status of who he’d managed to get relaxed enough to let their guard down, and who he hadn’t.

But whether or not it had to do with his outburst, that was yet to be determined.

Well, two can play at that game.

Christof’s raised elbow blocked my path, and when he realized that, he coughed awkwardly and straightened up, out of my way. I outranked him, so he sure as hell better move out of my way. I smiled pleasantly at them both, coming in front of Lupin.

The patient, meanwhile, was sitting in the same chair as earlier, still smiling jovially, with a lightness to him that didn’t fit a lifelong criminal, let alone someone who’d just gone through a flashback episode. Those things tended to leave people drained, but maybe because he was so tired, he either didn’t notice and popped right out the other end to manic, or somehow had managed to get REM-style syncopated brain waves out of the process, which happened when you cried, if even briefly.

“Men,” I said by way of greeting, nodding in turn at my two companions. I turned to Lupin, and couldn’t help but grin. “Boy.”
If Lupin reminded me of anything, it was old-fashioned American card-sharps and carnival ushers. Womanizing was the veneer to fit in with the guys after work, some half-hearted ploy at society’s definition of masculinity to tell himself and others that needed to know that he was normal enough—when what he really wanted was to be a peacock and fit in with the freaks.

In part, because they were more interesting: they were colorful flowers, just like he was, and unique specimens of a world he loved so much. But really, it was because they were just more in line with what he was, what he’d experienced socially and emotionally from being so far to one side of the intelligence scale. When he sat around a table drinking and smoking and playing poker late at night, it was their stories he understood. That he’d lived. That he could empathize with.

And maybe, even, help.

Presumably, Lupin was the type to let anyone he knew was trustworthy in on the secret of his outlander self-identity—because it wasn’t much of a secret—but the greater depths of it could be earned, though gaining his trust and respect through good ol’ fashioned, trial-by-fire deeds.

But again, he’d never give it all up, to anyone.

That was his dichotomy: *I’ll show you everything you don’t want to see, quick as a lick, but I won’t ever trust you with what I really want to show you.*

His fast-running compliments, figuring out what could draw people in—that was the job, and he was good at it, because that was what he spent his entire life doing, in one facet or another, day in, day out, hour by hour, minute by minute.

Meanwhile, the ever more flashy tricks to distract people, the sleight of hand, the flamboyance—that was the fun.

*That* was him.

He loved being on stage. Being seen.

And there was a little (well, a big but buried) part of me that had always liked being on stage, too. The part that brought me to stand on tree stumps as a child and pretended to tame lions and tigers, unicorns and dragons, from the neighborhood’s cats, dogs, rabbits, and chickens. The part that no one in my village accepted, and neither did my husbands, when it inevitably upstaged both their personality and their patriarchy.

That seemed to be the part of me this man stoked:

The part that said “fuck the patriarchy.”

It was dangerous.

But a little part of me said: *Why not?*

I could tame this dragon, and I’d enjoy it.

It certainly kept my Christmas Eve interesting.

At my joke, the youthful patient grinned back at me, ready as always to hit the ball back. “Hey now, I can do plenty of filthy things with these hands they’ve never even dreamed of.”

He held up his hands, chains and all, and wiggled his fingers.
Clinician’s Note: He has no shame.

Addendum: It’s oddly charming.

Zenigata had often mentioned that Lupin was a bit like a sleeping, well, wolf. He could play. He had a habit of chasing the moon. And he could bare his fangs to protect or to savage. So it was better to be on his good side.

And that, strikingly, he had a habit of finding, and liking, good people who had bad reputations, no matter what side of the law they were on.

“He’s a good guy,” Zenigata had mentioned one morning at my house. “It’s just that he’s...”

“A criminal?” I prompted, when he didn’t finish, staring down into his newly-poured coffee as it settled.

“No...” he muttered thoughtfully, narrowing his eyes. The steam curled like a fern, reaching for his face like I had the night before. “...A vigilante.”

He tipped his head back, and slurped a sip of the black stuff. “So he has some weird ideas about the rule of law,” he finished.

I raised an eyebrow, interested, raising the spatula as I cooked an egg-filled breakfast. “Think he fancies himself a shadow king?”

“I think his father did,” he replied easily, shrugging. “I think he thinks he’s Robin Hood. As kids do, you know.”

“So why are you going after Robin Hood? Don’t you have more important things to do?”

“Nope.” He set the coffee mug down, and smiled at me, his hands coming to rest on his thigh, one over the other, as he sat on the edge of my kitchen counter.

It was the first western trait he’d developed since he’d gotten to Europe—sitting on surfaces that were for hands. I loved it—the way his coat draped as he did it, the view I got of his sexy shoulders, and the masculine and intimate way he folded his hands on his leg.

When I’d teased him about it, though (since it was sort of sexy and there wasn’t any other way to bring it up that was kosher), he just smirked and admitted, “Well, I’ve always been a bit of a rebel. That’s why I’m here.”

And then he leaned over and kissed me.

“Aww, come on now, I’m perfectly fun company in a bathtub,” Lupin replied lightly, voice pitching up, but the last words falling off into distraction as he looked around my side.

I wasn’t sure what it was, but something about Lupin also reminded me of my son.

It wasn’t wishful thinking, or motherly empathy. It was something about him.

Maybe it was the way that, every once in a while, he looked totally lost without someone to hold onto. It kept setting off memories of Alessi’s younger years, when his father would yell and then storm away from us, and my boy would cling to my legs for help.

Following Lupin’s line of sight, I found the Inspector. He was still out in the hall; he hadn’t left yet. But in that moment, their eyes met and he scowled and turned away, briskly striding out of
view. Back in front of me, Lupin’s smile had fallen, and I eyed it, before he looked up to me for directions and I had to pretend to be a disinterested jerk cop, rather than someone scrutinizing him for all his secrets—and someone trying to forget my own memories.

Clinician’s Note: Lupin the Third seeks out Inspector Zenigata’s presence for comfort.

...Because he knows he’s a tenacious, straightlaced cop?

Or because there’s some understanding between them?

I was absolutely certain I hadn’t heard all the stories, especially not among the ones that mattered. Zenigata trusted me with a lot, but just like any other man, he had trouble trusting his darkest thoughts to someone who wasn’t his best drinking buddy.

And I suspected his best drinking buddies were his barstool and his glass.

“Where’s he going?” Lupin asked me, concerned, as Zeni disappeared from view.

“Smoke break,” I replied succinctly, taking Lupin gently by the biceps and guiding his attention to me. “Don’t worry about it. He’ll be back soon.”

“Aww, wish he’d take me with.” He patted his clothes down, normally where a smoker’s pack would be, only to remember what he was wearing and huff. “Damn...”

“Let me see your hand,” I said, and held my palm out to him.

He frowned momentarily, but soon enough set his left in mine, chains clinking slightly.

Calloused fingers, nicked with scars. Nails cut short, but not nibbled off. Long, slender fingers, but with strong tendons and large knuckles; they hovered just over mine, shaking noticeably, uncontrollably. They were spread out slightly, like an instrumentalist’s were trained to be.

“Piano, or violin?” I asked, supporting his palm with the tips of my fingers. His hand bent downward slightly from my action, though own digits stayed in the air. This way, I could see how much he was shaking while removing the cuffs’ weight from the equation.

He frowned much deeper and longer at that, and his jaw tightened a little. A not small crease appeared between his eyebrows: a man who thought a lot. Frowned a lot. Given the fine scars on his hands, probably over projects and puzzles, more than emotions.

“...Both. Why?”

I smiled coolly, appreciative. “No reason. Just curious.” His shaking continued, and not much less.

“Yeah, you’ve got a good tremor going,” I said, taking his hand and rubbing it with my own. His hand was cold, despite how warm it was in here. “Give me your other hand.”

“It’s ‘cuz I’m hungry,” he lamented, though he did as he was told. I pressed his two hands together, and, sandwiched between mine, compared the difference in temperature. His right hand was warm, which meant it had decent circulation still. At least one was working properly. He had to have been all sorts of messed up from the fall he’d taken before he’d gotten here.

“That side”—I nodded to his left as I warmed up his hands—“is the one you keep holding, yes?”

He looked at it shortly, and then nodded. “Yeah.”
“All right, give me a sec,” I replied, readying myself. I let his hands go, and rubbed my own together briskly. “I need to see something.”

Lupin’s eyes widened as I came around him and guided him to sit forward a bit, starting to probe the muscles on either side of his spine. But he said nothing; while tense, he let me do as I pleased without complaint. It couldn’t have been an easy situation, what with bruiser #1 and #2 on either side of him, but I had my arm across his front, holding onto his shoulder.

That was another thing about him: He was rather physically trusting, all told, though I couldn’t tell if it was something about me specifically, the fact that I was a woman, or something about the situation.

As I worked, silently, his hands came up, one cold, one warm, and held onto my forearm. It wasn’t a desperate grip. But it was a stronger one than it needed to be, to hold up his weight.

*Clinician’s Note: He finds physical connection comforting, and seeks it out when he can.*

His muscles were inflamed in a couple of telling spots. And the vertebrae weren’t at the right angles, either, a couple of them. I was sure his neck was messed up too, given that ugly bruise around his neck, but that was something that needed X-rays to really figure out.

He probably had other broken bones too, that I shouldn’t be messing with, but he was barely mobile as it was, and this could certainly help—and was best not to let go too long. Once they tried to set anything broken, it’d be six weeks before anyone could do this again.

“That thing you were doing earlier,” Lupin asked, hesitantly, through a wince or two as I hit a sore spot. “What was that?”

I prodded at the base of a particularly inflamed muscle. “That hurt?”

“Yeah...”

“A lot?”

“Fairly stabbing, yes.”

“That thing I did earlier, as you so eloquently describe it...” I laid my hand on his back, palm flat above a particular vertebrae about halfway down. “Here, arch your back, right about here.”

I poked him a little higher than the spot I wanted, and he managed it, though it took him a few breaths and hisses.

“That was a couple of things. Okay, I’m going to twist you around, bare with me and try to relax.”

I put my knee up on the chair, against the nearer part of his back—the safe part. Then held his far shoulder. With my other hand—the same hand as the raised leg—I slowly, carefully guided his body to turn, as far as it would go.

My mobile hand held part of his side, just above where my knee was. His entire body was tight now; he’d turned his torso as far as he could, and it wasn’t near as limber as he—or anyone else—should be. The muscles were clearly in pain, in spasm, and didn’t want to listen to directions, let alone me.

He really did have a high threshold for pain, and he tolerated it well, even when others were giving it to him.
A few feet away, the guys were staring at this whole affair with interest, but I wasn’t about to comment on it, and if they knew better, neither were they. But I did want to get this done before someone else came back. Poor Zenigata would have a cow, seeing me twisted over his Lupin like this. First because of me, and then because of thinking Lupin was getting murdered.

“You gotta breathe. Relax this. This.” I poked at the muscle I needed to get loose.

“Working on it,” he ground out, clearly concentrating. One breath, two.... He’d done this before, it seemed. “Just don’t break m—auh!”

Crickle-pop!

“You were supposed to wait until I was done telling you not to do that!” he yelped at me, gasping several times and shivering. I released him carefully, and guided him to sit up straight.

“But then you’d see it coming,” I reminded him. “That was pretty out of whack. Give it a minute, though, and you’ll feel a lot better.”

He gave me a petulant frown and crossed his arms sullenly. “I’ve heard that before.”

Wait. Was that... a gay sex joke?

“In regards to what?” I asked, slowly, raising an eyebrow and crossing my own arms.

“Shady fucking doctors, what else?” he grumbled. Seeing my posture, he unfolded and instead rubbed at his back where my knee had been.

Oh. Not fun times, then.

“Well, cheer up.” I patted him on the shoulder and took a step back, to give him some space. “And that thing before, I was taking your blood pressure. Listening to your heart beat. Feeling that...uh, what would you call it in French? Life-force? Electric field, I guess it is?”

“What?” Christof and the guard sputtered at the same time.

Way to be helpful, you rubes.

“You know. Like when you hug a tree, you can tell it’s alive?” I asked them back.

Christof frowned, like I was crazy.

Ugh.

“What? Aren’t you Norwegian? You believe in gnomes and fairies and things, right?”

“Well sure,” Christof said, a little embarrassed and trying not to look at the guard, who was the only man in the room bigger than he was. “But I don’t hug trees. That’s Finland.”

Well, at least he’s being honest.

“Okay,” I offered with a sigh, trying again. “So, it’s like when you hold a baby in your arms and can tell if it’s healthy or not from the way it responds.”

I rocked my arms together, but they both just stared at me blankly.
Apparently neither of them has kids.

Before my colleagues could say anything else, it was Lupin who replied, saving us from further charade. “Ah, I see. That’s cool. I’ve never met anyone who could do that, before. Met a lot of people who claimed they could, though.” He rubbed at his head, only to remember he had stitches there now and pull his hand away with a hiss of reprimand at himself.

He rubbed his fingers together, getting the goo off them, and it was quite clear they were more dexterous than most people’s—looser and more limber and used to working deft and fast. I had to whistle inwardly, at that. There was a reason I wasn’t a surgeon.

Regardless, Lupin wouldn’t be able to feel the skin where he’d gotten stitches for several hours yet, but that didn’t mean the pieces around them didn’t itch. Or that the underlying headache had gone away. I hoped the head scan would find nothing else problematic about that.


He grinned up at me through his lashes, his hand still on his head, and winked. “I bet you’re good in bed too, huh?”

“Oh stop,” I sighed, rolling my eyes.

He just chuckled, sighing happily at the end.

That was another thing about Lupin—I never felt threatened by him. Even though he would flirt ridiculously at me, I never felt pursued, either. It was the line-walking thing he could do, and this was a prime example.

I never felt afraid of him, either, but that was more because of the fact that I weighed more than him. I knew his type, and it did not impress me towards fear: He was the idea man. In any other organization, he would have been the squirrely little dog-robber, or maybe even the messenger. They had attack skills of about 4, when the average was 12. It was hard to be afraid of scrawny, slick-talking punks like that, whose strongest battle skill was “flee” or, at best, “call friends.”

I could understand being attracted to a man like that, too—if they had the right temperament and were willing to look at me for me. But afraid? No.

His friends, though, that was a different story. This Jigen character, I was pretty sure my first response to staring him down in a dark alley would be “duck and roll around a corner.”

But what even would the point of that be? Apparently he could draw and shoot in less that a second? There’d be literally no point. I’d better come up with something cool to do, instead, and hope the boss was feeling talkative right behind him. “Seduce” or “Solicit”, while also skills of mine, clearly weren’t going to work on him, either.

But Lupin by himself, eh. He’d talk me to death before he could lay a hand on me. I had a hand-to-hand attack value of at least 14, and I knew how to make those dice give me a good roll.

Either way, at the moment—and most moments—Lupin had a brightness to his dark eyes as he smiled. Combined with his straight teeth, what he flashed at me now was one of those patented Good Guy Smiles that only showed up in movie stars and charlatans.

That kind of man—an angelically pretty one—was something I’d never get, so I didn’t bother trying, and that was part of why I was totally immune to this one’s come-ons. (Not that he was that pretty all the time. Just when he smiled like that. Ugh. He had to have practiced that. Double ugh.)
Even when I was young and good-looking, I’d never been *that* good looking. And growing up as a village girl in Italy, even though the red hair got me plenty of attention, any man that looked that good was always too good to be true. He was either a crook, or he wanted you to be his slave.

Which, in my book, was just another kind of crook. One that was, sadly, legal.

“Think you can get in that?” I asked, pointing to wheelchair Christof had brought in a while ago.

It was only two feet away from him, but Lupin eyed the task and sighed. “If I must.”

“What, you don’t like wheelchairs? I promise you’re still cool.”

“Oh no, I am perfectly happy to use someone else’s tax dollars to pay for a checkered chauffeur.” After a bit of calculation, he began to raise himself via his hands and his good leg. “It’s just my leg, is all.” He winced as he said it and hissed out a long breath. Gingerly, he set its weight on the floor, just so he didn’t have to find a way to hold it up with its own injured muscles.

I held an arm out for him.

He took it, not thinking twice about it.

His grip was strong, but only as taught as necessary.

I guided him over and down, carefully matching his steps and holding his weight. He was pretty light now, but if he decided to pass out, he’d be *real* heavy, real fast. And if that thing in his leg really was that deep, he could very honestly die if he knocked it just the right way; I had to be prepared to catch him so that didn’t happen.

“Oh wow, my ribs do feel better,” he announced beyond my thoughts. “It’s like I can breathe again....”

“See? Good ol’ Marti’s gonna fix you right up.” I patted his arm.

“You’re not old,” he replied, tone distracted and oddly gentle. He wasn’t even looking at me, but rather, down at the task at hand. “My grandfather was *old*. You’re pretty, and I think everyone in this room can see that.”

Apparently “pretty” was an age to him, or maybe a life stage, but I didn’t mind that.

I couldn’t say why exactly, but even as I publicly blushed and hated it, I had to admit: I liked him.

I liked this patient and I wanted him to get better.

As he settled into the wheelchair, his hand lingered in mine for a just a moment. Our gazes connected, and he muttered a *thanks* no one else could hear. Then he looked down to settle his chains in his lap, neatly arranged, but not before having squeezed my hand lightly.

Before I could say anything, he tossed his head back and announced for all to hear: “Ready when you are, captain.”

The thief named Lupin was, for that moment, just another young medical patient beaming up at me.

And I smiled back at him.

I was starting to think I liked him so much because, for some inexplicable reason, he already
trusted me.

You’re a good person. I could hear Zeni’s soft voice saying it, in the cool dark of one particular night. He had lain in the sheets, his head propped up on a hand, and touched at my cheek. “Don’t you know that?”

I looked away quickly, and touched at my hair.

Lupin’s gaze followed mine, but found nothing but a wall. “Marti...?” he queried, softly.

“It’s nothing,” I replied, flashing him my own bright smile. “Ready to go?”

His eyes told me he didn’t believe anything I said, but then in a flash it was gone, replaced by a charming smile. “Of course, fair maiden!”

“Oh, shut up.”

“Don’t you have anything better to do than go after Robin Hood?” I asked Zenigata.

“Nope.” The coffee mug clinked as it set down on the counter top. As my houseguest leaned in, soft brown eyes flicking back and forth intently, carefully, checking for permission, he whispered onto my lips: “I’d much rather get Robin Hood on my side.”

A tender kiss.

The strong arms of a man.

And the gentle tug of apron strings, unwinding in kind hands.

That had been my life, once.
You know how, in the Sims, when your sim would get so lonely they’d imagine a friend to talk to them in order to provide them with enough social points to continue functioning? Yeah, Lupin’s got some of that going on.... (Except it's not a giant bunny, it's Jigen.)

Chapter Notes

1) Book Expo was great! It was a tough, tiring time logistically, but I replenished my love of my industry and the people in it, and got lots of new authors signed up for my business! :) Go go Gadget Start-up Business! Thanks for all the well-wishes, everyone.

2) I got a chapter out this week! Woo hoo!

3) I was mistaken about this next chapter being long. Instead, it's become several chapters! Don't know if yay?

4) My effect/affect skill is weak. I apologize in advance for that. Feel free to point out typos and such. :)

5) I swear there are legitimate, in-story reasons for the insinuations in this chapter that will be addressed in a responsible, satisfying manner. Reasons that aren’t just fanfic stereotypes. Okay? Okay.

6) More stuff from Marti's POV! :3

7) Oh! And this week's song is "Don't Let Me Down" by The Chainsmokers, ft. Daya.

Law enforcement was referred to as a “when” business.

It wasn’t “If” something happened. It was “When.”

It wasn’t if you got shot. It was when.

It wasn’t if you saw something that rattled you. It was when.

And we all knew this. We all operated accordingly, and so did our systems. Whether you were a beat cop, a goalie, or security guard, it was when, not if. The only other career path that was like that was on-duty soldiers, and maybe people who worked at mental institutions and hospitals.

Which explained why it was so hard for law enforcement professionals to have families. That sort of mindset, that sort of learned and sharply-trained survival instinct, wasn’t something you could
turn off at night just because you wanted to. Some people could manage it to some degree, the very
strong or very lucky ones, but even with them, as soon as it came to disciplining a kid, or an
accidentally shattered glass—you were back there, on the street, on the cell bloc, in the field.

So, in a way, I knew what was going on in Lupin’s mind. Something had made him think he was
going to die, once upon a time, something that had shattered his view of the world or his own sense
identity, and now something here was reminding him of that. It was just a matter of what that
“something” had been.

Obviously, he had knitted himself back together since then, but at the moment, the fabric was
wearing thin.

As he sat before me, all smiles, I contemplated it: A young thief, always joking and happy. I didn’t
know if he’d grown up poor or wealthy, in a whole family or a broken one. But it didn’t really
matter—such trauma could be anything. The typical offenders were rape and molestation; violence
on the victim or around them; severe neglect; or emotional abuse over an extended period of time,
typically six months or more. Those things didn’t discriminate between rich and poor, a home or a
street corner, men or women.

Though, knowing his circumstances could help narrow it down. It would then assist in
understanding why it effected him so much.

It was also important, however, not to rush to conclusions. It was easy to assume the worst—
because everyone had heard stories of it—but people in desperate need of help tended to
manipulate things, *because* they were in such desperate need. They might downplay it, to float a
fragile sense of self-confidence; or overplay it, in the hopes that it would generate greater sympathy
and help offered to them.

For some patients, this manipulation happened purposefully, but for others, it wasn’t a conscious
effort. They simply weren’t in a place where they could make good, logical decisions, and ended
up hurting themselves or other people because of it.

There was also the danger that a patient who started on the up-and-up might fall into emotional
manipulation in order to avoid having to get better completely. A caregiver’s kindnesses were so
much better to a drowning man than where he had been that staying in the proverbial life raft was
enough (and much easier). The ocean, while deadly, was put at bay; meanwhile, land, with all its
intricacies of people, animals, and societies, was terrifying. So long as the raft stayed inflated, why
put in the effort to paddle to almost certain death there?

So, it was important to establish a trusting relationship with the patient, one that established that
they could trust you enough to guide them onto land, and successful living thereafter, as well. A lot
of the problems of patient-counselor connection from the past century came from the idea that help
was only offered when you were in gravest danger mentally or physically, so if you were in a good
place, you got nothing—which would inevitably lead to you falling off the boat and back into the
sea, the next time a big wave came by. People understood that implicitly, so, once again, why ever
try to be truly okay, if your helper’s idea of “okay” wasn’t really sustainable for you?

It wasn’t their fault really—in an adult’s emotional crisis, their brain legitimately thought they
were in danger of dying, either because of the situation itself (and what it would lead to, as they
had come to understand it, like “someone acting displeased equals beating equals near-death”); or
because the brain was afraid of the person themself going out of control and hurting themselves
because they couldn’t deal with the feelings they were having (which was a legitimate worry at
times, but it only ever worsened the problem, since the unconscious mind was afraid of the
conscious one, and vice versa).
It was an incredible thing to suffer through, one that people who’d never experienced it weren’t capable of understanding. Fear of your own self, of the world to such an extent.... While it started in the mind, it became a tremendous amount of physical pain because of the chemical complications. But because it was mental pain, no one on the outside could hold down the wound and keep it from bleeding. There was no help available, as the sufferer saw it.

So, it was only natural that people who were emotionally despondent would try to manipulate you one way or another, if you alleviated their pain even a little bit. For most, it wasn’t because they were bad people; they were just scared. Often, they were more scared of the emotions they couldn’t understand, and thereby, what they couldn’t trust about themselves, rather than the actual event that had caused the trauma.

But Lupin.... Manipulation was his job. Would it even be possible to get the truth out of him?

I had to believe so. He wasn’t pathological; he really did want to connect with people, he just couldn’t let himself do so very deeply, for one reason or another. His job, if you believed Zenigata.

The evidence I’d seen pointed that way as well. So far, Lupin was pretty truthful with everything he said, but it was all lightweight stuff—nothing deep. Nothing that hurt him, or me. So, when I finally stumbled on something that he wouldn’t open up about... that would be the truth. That would be the line of inquiry to follow, as a practitioner.

He couldn’t blow off everything. There had to be something sacred to him, something that would trip him up. And that, he would be silent about, and run away from.

Now, how was I going to establish a respectful, trusting relationship with this young man, such that he would open up to me to help him? One where I earned the right, as a practitioner and human being, to see what hurts he had inside?

This was a slightly odd scenario, admittedly. People had to admit they needed help before they could be helped. I could give a patient all the kindnesses in the world—anyone could—but if they weren’t ready for help, it’d either bounce off in the end, or they would lash out and hurt me back.

Sometimes, you could tell a total stranger your deepest secrets, because they just had the right non-judgmental feel to them, and you were never going to see them again. But I knew who Lupin was, and I was tied to Zenigata too. So that means was out.

Now, when a patient was admitted to a facility—either a hospital when something bad had happened, or a mental health facility for any reason—there was an implicit understanding of who the authority was, which helped put pressure on the patients to admit they had a problem and needed help. In that past, you needed the clinician’s approval to leave, even if you were there against your will, which was part of how the travesties of modern mental health’s early days happened at the beginning of the 20th Century.

Another typical technique from that era that I hated was the clinician’s attempt to establish dominance by they themselves manipulating their patients in ways familiar to the patient. If you had the type of patient who was used to being hurt in order to then be emotionally receptive (some version of the classic “beat you up then tell you I’m sorry and I love you”), you could follow that pattern to get them to do what you wanted, but that only “helped” in the short term. That was just a means of control, not of healing; a way that established you as another person like all the other abusers, and as soon as they could, the patient would make a break for it, emotionally or physically (and often both).

It was essential that I avoided any of my patient’s triggers, but also any of the unhealthy
relationship styles that were behind his flashbacks in the first place. Without any patient history at all—or family members to scrutinize—it was like navigating a mine field by moonlight. The only thing I had to go on were his physical responses; I couldn’t even trust his mouth to tell the truth.

If the patient was admitted for treatment voluntarily and was cooperative, obviously life was easier. But Lupin was neither seeking help to a problem nor being admitted involuntarily. (Nor even, really, admitting there was a problem.) He was just here, causing trouble.

So my first order of business was to determine if he knew what was happening.

Then, to get his history of it.

And after that, make a judgement on what could be done about it, both short term and long term, based on how cooperative he might be.

So how to get that trust established?

It wasn’t the sort of thing you could really generate in a day, and if you did, that was rather telling in and of itself, and never for good reasons—it meant some kind of desperation. So maybe I could slip it in to the jokes?

I could see that going really wrong: I trusted you on a superficial level, until you started mining for info. Now I can’t trust you even on a surface level, because every interaction might be a trap.

Hrm. Did I need to instruct Zenigata on how to do it? I know he’d asked me to assess Lupin, but teaching Zeni how might be the easiest way. They had a deep relationship, it seemed, on both sides—but also a respectful one. Maybe just as professionals, if not as people....

I did think that Lupin respected Zeni as a person, given some stories I’d heard about the thief saving the man’s life—as well as the way Lupin interacted with him here: playful, careful, deferring to his authority even when he didn’t have to.

Zeni, too, respected Lupin as a young man of principals in a hard world, though he was always frustrated that Lupin chose that world when there were better options, given the principals he had. And even though neither of them would ever admit it, there was some professional admiration between the two. Zeni would smile, just a little, into his coffee as he described Lupin’s ingenuity; and Lupin, apparently, found his Inspector respectable and trustworthy enough when in uniform to convene with him (like in the lobby), and literally hold onto him for a sense of security.

So...think like a guy. Think like those guys. The way I’d seen them interacting; the values they had....

Maybe I could be straightforward, and appeal to his sense of professionalism...? Maybe use the “loveable little redhead” bit to butter the toast...?

Hmm. Maybe.... But if I did that and it didn’t work, then he’d know to watch out for it....

Still, Lupin was a clever guy. He’d probably pick up on my attempts regardless. And if he didn’t want to tell me something, he wouldn’t. In any event, that was his human right—his patient’s right—to keep information to himself, and I had to respect that. So... I had to make him want to give it up to me.

But how....

* * *
As I sat in the wheelchair, Officer Martelli smiled down at me, bouncy red curls perky at the sides of her round cheeks. Her green eyes were tired but still glittering like the crystals of snow outside the window as they flashed in the floodlights, and she held her hands on her hips in typical Marti fashion. I couldn’t resist smiling back at her, and that was even before she pointed at my new ride and said:

“Think you can drive it yourself? I’ll soapbox race you if we can find another one.”

I giggled at that, a little harder than I should have. Even so, Marti managed to come around the furniture and get behind me, soon pushing us out of the room. Behind us, the guard followed suit, picking up his gun along the way, and Christof clicked off the light.

“Don’t they always tell you not to do that—race the wheelchairs?” I chuckled as we entered the hall and settled in for the long journey. I rather wished the purple hand towel over my leg’s wound was a blanket; then I could just burrito myself in it and sleep. This hallway was pretty much in “mood lighting,” so it wouldn’t have been hard. “Aren’t cops supposed to obey the rules?”

“More or less,” Marti tossed back, mirth to her voice. I could almost imagine her conspiratorial smile, as she leaned down over me, and her hair brushed at my head. “But they only tell kids all that, cuz kids don’t know how to stop before they hit something. All I see here is wide-open derby track.”

It was true—there was nothing up or down the hallway but open space, closed doors, and the occasional potted plant. No people, no furniture, no poorly placed bits of electric chord—and the hallway was wide. It was the main thoroughfare of the building, running through both wings on every floor, so it was only natural it’d be about six people wide.

“Ah hah. Clever.” I grinned up at my driver, toothy. My voice pitched up, light and playful. “Have you ever considered a life of crime, Ms. Martelli? You might be good at it~”

“Nah, the health benefits are crap,” she replied curtly, though she smiled at my efforts and I smiled back at her. “But I think I’ve read a book or two about that sort of thing, and I liked it well enough.” She patted me on the shoulder. “You could clean up, writing those. I hear romance novelists make tons of money, and yours would even be true.”

“Hah!” I muttered, oddly amused by that idea—and the idea of getting Jigen to act them out for me for inspiration.

Ah, Jigen.... What I wouldn’t do for his arms draping over me right now, his warmth making all the aches go away. Nuzzling his beard into my neck as we lay on a couch together, his hands wandering...all just to make me laugh and squirm.

Truly, the sacrifices I made for work.

“But I don’t kiss and tell, sadly for you.”

“I wouldn’t mind hearing about that, myself,” came Christof’s voice. “If a little bit of admiration would change your mind.”

Beside us, the deputy was walking, matching our slow pace. He was looking down at me, side eye, and smirked when we made eye contact.

Oh yes, you know all about this couch daydream don’t you, Rookie.

“So do you want to hear about the stuff I’ve done with guys, or the stuff with girls?” I purred at
him, with a dark wink.

He honest to God stumbled at that: tripped on his own feet and almost ran into a door with no small amount of clatter to accompany it.

“You do have remarkable lats,” I added to him, helpfully, as I wheeled by him and he hugged the doorframe to get his balance with a groan.

Marti didn’t pause our motorcade at this turn of events, but she definitely watched him and made a noise between a laugh and a sigh.

“So you do sleep with men,” she said, quietly, when the guard went to help Christof and we continued on out of easy earshot.

“Mm?” I looked up at her, twisting around a bit to do it, looking her up and down. The reflective tone of her voice, the emphasis on the one particular word do, was troublesome. Someone had told her, or she’d heard about it, somehow. Did she know about Jigen...? Or just suspect it in general...?


“That’s good of you,” she said with a polite smile, “but that’s not what I asked.”

This...was starting to feel dangerous.

But then again, I was so tired parts of my mind were falling asleep on me; I could tell from the way I stumbled through some of my words here and there, and different emotions were either failing to rise to the occasion or were rising a bit too fast and clear.

Still, Marti was Italian. That meant she was probably Roman Catholic, or had been raised that way. What I sensed was probably just an impending lecture of some sort, though it would put a damper on our budding relationship.

“Well, sure. Don’t you?” I tipped my head up at her, innocently. And then I smirked, going on the offensive. “That in my file?”

“No, actually.”

But Marti was not looking at me. She was watching Christof, and with a sigh, finally decided to stop. Her voice was distracted, and distant. I raised an eyebrow, twisting around fully to see her better. It felt oddly a lot like chasing her attention, and that was a hook I always ended up gutting myself on, unfortunately. A little more and I’d be putty in this pretty woman’s hands.

I realized that, but there was not much I could do about it, given how tired I was. I just wanted attention from someone lovely. Dang it.

“Really?” I chirped at her. “Why not?”

She put one hand on her hip, and tapped her red-painted nails on the rubber-coated handlebar. “Are you going to be all right over there?” she called to Christof.

He, meanwhile, was holding his forehead, and then his nose. “Yeah. I think I...” He twisted the top of his nose a bit, though there was no blood streaming from it—probably just to get the stinging feeling off of it. “I’m just kinda dizzy from being tired.” He glanced up at her through his hands, blue eyes bright surrounded by a blush of red. “S-sorry ma’am.”
Marti rolled her eyes, but shrugged in the end. “Well, get on with it. We haven’t got all day.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The commander was highly unimpressed by this, but, as they got themselves together, Marti suddenly put her chin in her hand, resting her elbow on the free handlebar. As she looked at me, her eyes turned tired and fond, and not a little bit fascinated. “Tell me more,” she said.

I opened my mouth, then shut it, feeling the tingle of blush moving over my nose. Half turned around in the chair as I was to face her, I felt oddly trapped in that moment, like a kid who’d done something wrong. “Well, I...?”

“When’d you start sleeping with men.”

That was a weird question. “Um...”

*What are you, some kind of perv?* It was a weird thought to lob at Marti, but it came nonetheless, along with all its warning bells.

But her eyebrows raised, encouraging, and a small smile accompanied it. “Don’t tell me you’re getting shy *now*.”

My face did the exact opposite—I frowned, and my mouth ticked down. I realized, belatedly, that my hands were gripping the armrests a little too hard. I flexed them, though that didn’t abate the tension in my gut much, and they just ended up going back to doing what they had been before, this time with my jaw clenched to accompany it.

—A *dark alley, with nothing but the light from the faraway street to break up the cold, cloudy night’s darkness. Two large, sweaty hands on my shoulders, guiding me down to my knees....*—

“That’s...kind of a hard question to answer, honestly.”

One eyebrow quirked down at me, mildly. “How come?” she asked, gently. There was concern in that gesture, carefully concealed.

I... I knew what that was: I thought she’d just been interested in more of my exotic tales, but oh no, this was something far more dangerous. Far more official.

When did Marti turn into a social worker? I thought she was a cop. But maybe she was a plant—someone in disguise.

Oh, *fuck* that. *I am not falling for that.*

*I like you Marti, but this is not a conversation we need to have.*

And certainly not in some random hallway, with stooge one and stooge two doing a dance in the corner of my vision.

...Though that would be the definition of my life, wouldn’t it. Jigen would just laugh at that, and tell me to get it over with, and stop being a baby that was afraid of their own feelings.

She’s a chick, he would say. *You like chicks. Why not trust ‘er a little? Chicks love little lost puppies with sad stories.*

*Seems she likes you,* my own mental voice added, unhelpfully.
Mentally, I kicked my own voice, wherever the hell it had come from.

*Shove it, both of you. I don’t want to tell this story in a fucking hallway! And certainly to little or no effect.*

*Fine,* Mental-Jigen sighed, rolling his eyes.

I licked my lips, rallying what dredges of intimidation I had left at this hour, and ticked an eyebrow at my watchful officer with a smirk that turned a little more snakelike than it probably needed to. “I think a better question is, ‘How come it’s not in my file?’ You never did answer that.”

Marti looked back at me, coolly, a finger tapping over her lips thoughtfully. “You know, I’m not obligated to.”

*Fuck.*

Seemed my intimidation hadn’t worked.

I frowned at her, with a frustrated huff.

*Now will you believe me?* my mental-Jigen asked me.

*Shut up.*

*Ohhh, look what’s happening now,* he challenged.

...Seemed my intimidation hadn’t worked, to the point that there was now a tiny bit of mirth to the way Marti was looking at me, growing with each second that she watched me.

*You can’t make me crack, lady. Never never never. Not even Pops can get it that easy.*

But to my surprise, Marti’s smile fell, and a beat later she said: “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you with all this. I thought you liked talking about your sexual adventures, and I’d just get some more bragging. I never had any at a young age, so... Well. Not any nice ones.”

“Ahh...” I blinked at her, more than a little shocked. She wasn’t supposed to apologize. Cops didn’t do that. It went against the protocols for establishing respect hierarchies with suspects and inmates, let alone the general human sensibility of power dynamics.

Not the mention the *rest* of what she’d just said. Holy shit.

She was opening herself up to a lot of crap for this, both from me and what I could do with that information. If I got uppity she might have to squash down my rebellion, painfully for both of us. That was, if I was the type to not see this gesture for what it was—trust—and instead run away with it, interpreting it as weakness on her part.

I’d better not disrespect that offer she was making to me, or the honesty she’d just given me.

I swallowed, and nodded. “It...it’s okay. Th-thank you.”

She smiled a little, and I stared at my lap like a teenager.

*See?* Mental-Jigen added, kicking back in a living room set that had appeared. His ankles were crossed on the coffee table, his arms behind his head, and a cigarette lazily in his mouth. *Chicks like you. They just want to hug you.*
He tilted his head back luxuriously, sighing.

And you like trusting them when they do, he added.

Oh, shush you. I like trusting you. You don’t spill secrets. You’d die for them, actually. Which, while I appreciate, you need to stop doing, actually. Not that it matters, because you’re just an imagination in my head, but still. Stop that! No dying for me!

He shrugged again, pulling the cigarette out of his mouth for a languid moment to blow smoke rings. She works with Pops and Pops likes her. You really think she’s gonna sell you out?

...Maybe to Pops, I pouted.

He made a thoughtful noise. Probably. I hear parents like to talk to each other about their kids.

Oh shut up!

Mental-Jigen smirked and returned the cigarette to his mouth, but this time, his countenance shifted. Quiet descended on him, and he purposefully held his hand over his jaw, obscuring half his face. He didn’t look at me (not that he had been, this whole while, but this time was different. I could feel he was trying not to, and it was hard for him). Would it really be so bad if he found out?

But I don’t...want him to. He doesn’t know that me. He doesn’t need to.

But if he did. Would you die?

...No. Of course not.

Would you break?

...Maybe. I might cry. I could see it now: breaking down and sobbing in front of him because of all the stupid feelings. And then...when it was all said and done, feeling a little...lighter.

Would that be so bad? Mental-Jigen asked.

Meanwhile, Zenigata would...

I couldn’t really envision it. I didn’t know what he’d do, exactly. Maybe just be sad too, and hold me, pulling me against his chest with some sort of platitude. But what could he really do, in the end? He didn’t know about this sort of stuff. And anyway, it was years ago.

And yet, I heard his voice: “I’m a cop. I make people feel better. Even if it was a long time ago.”

Pops doesn’t mind it when you cry, apparently, Mental-Jigen continued, after this thought had fluttered by; he had clearly heard it, but he just waved his cigarette as he moved the conversation on. Makes him all mushy and fatherly, seems like. Who knew he had it in him.

And had it reserved for you, my own mental voice added for my benefit. It was coming from a little radio on the coffee table next to Jigen’s feet.

I slammed my hand down on that radio, shutting it off. I stood in front of Jigen, finally materializing myself a body in this scenario, only to use it to make a gesture for him to leave-off. “That is exactly what I need. Go away, would you? Before this gets any dumber and Marti thinks I’m actually crazy.”

Mental-Jigen looked up at me with one earnest, honest eye, tilting his head back so I could see it
from under his hat. I hated it when he did that—well, real Jigen, anyway—seeing real emotion on
him was the most beautiful, precious thing, but also a weapon when he wanted it to be.

It was asking me: *Are you sure you want to be left alone?*

I could never understand how that man, even in my mind, was full of so many second chances.

*“I’m not falling for that. Go away. Am I even awake anymore?”*

Mental-Jigen tipped his head back down and shrugged with a soft grunt, his mouth tugging into a
grim, dissatisfied line. He stubbed out his cigarette and stood, suddenly taller than me, and only a
couple of inches away. After a moment, I stepped back, and let him have his space. He didn’t
follow after me.

Instead, he pulled down his hat—large hand deftly tugging it from the top, not the brim like most
people would. It was a careful gesture, one of austerity and self-confidence from a man who had all
the time in the world and used it to take care of his things the proper way; a gesture that always
made my heart beat a little faster, despite the passive-aggressive nature that birthed it. The way it
set his shoulders, maybe; the way his whole body just turned into a gun: thrilling and dangerous
and dark, but only deadly when you set it off.

He turned away, and with slow, slinking steps disappeared into the murky darkness that was this
fantasy’s backdrop. *Call me if you need me.*

And yet, for some reason, even as I smiled at the thought of him and his familiar shape, I felt sad at
those words.

At my own goddamned mind gently chastising me.

Back in the real world, my stomach growled, and I put my head in my hands with a sigh.
Apparently I was still awake, just lost in my thoughts, which had reached near-hallucination levels.

Tonight was just so weird. What was *happening* to me?

—*“It’ll be okay,” he said, with his hand on my head. “Just do what I tell you. I’ll show you
how.”*—

There were just too many memories, welling up, and this place was unleashing them all.

As Marti watched me with some interest, I scrubbed at my face, with a frustrated growl. *Get it
together, Lupin.*

*This damn place....*

Why couldn’t Zenigata just come *back*, and then I could pretend everything was *normal*?

But it wouldn’t be, would it. All the deaths, the truth of which waited for me outside these walls....
I knew Zenigata was trying very hard to avoid it, but he might not look at me the same, after all of
this was said and done.

It wasn’t that I was *scared* to lose his considerations, or even him in my life. But his dogged
pursuits added an element of surprise to my heists that, while annoying at times, stroked my ego
and made me feel a little less...alone. A little more...*understood* as an artist, I guess you could say.
It would suck if Pops got the wrong impression and started coming after me because he legitimatley thought I was a menace that needed to be locked up, rather than just because I stole shit from important assholes that paid his bosses’ bills.

Marti took a moment to look at Christof and then back at me, as I twitched in different directions, frustrated with myself. “Lupin,” she said with a sigh, touching at my shoulder, to unfold me a bit. “I don’t really know the reason myself, that he didn’t put that information in. But if I had to guess, I’d say it’s probably because the Inspector doesn’t want it to be there.”

Rather than relief, what hit me as I looked out from under my hands was hurt. Deep down, like an arrow’s lance shoving into my chest. It was stupid and I hated it, once I recognized it for what it was, and it took genuine effort not to prod at my chest.

Need me to come back? Mental-Jigen’s voice asked, from the darkness.

No!

And yet, my hands still curled up at my sternum, because I wasn’t sure what else to do with them. The hands Zenigata had shackled, heavy and painful.

I gazed at my bare hands for a moment, pale things that they were. Long, skilled fingers delicately curled, capable of so much...and yet what did they have to show for it, really, when it came to people? All I could see, for a moment, was the white gauze peaking out from underneath the manacles, that Marti had wrapped kindly a few minutes ago.

I felt very small, all of a sudden, stuck in this chair, in this hallway, in this building, in this heist’s fallout with nothing but cops, prison guards, and corrupt assholes staring down my future.

“He doesn’t approve?” I muttered, hating how bitter I sounded.

I fixed my gaze on Marti, fiercely, having completely lost control of my expression, of my emotions. It was an accusation I lobbed at her, probably something between pouting and venom, but, typical Marti, she wasn’t phased by it.

In fact, she seemed to be looking at me for answers, for some reason.

Frustrated with myself and mildly confused by my feelings and what was happening, I tuned back around front, dug myself in, and crossed my arm with a tight huff. My biceps, sore as they were from getting thrown around in the mythical avalanche of concrete and their burns, felt properly big and masculine and strong a that, and I used it to tell myself my walls were perfectly high, and so was my dignity.

“I don’t think it’s that,” she replied.

“And what do you think?”

It was a stupid thing to ask and I was being dumb but I wanted her to hurt me, if she was going to. Go ahead and get it out, if you’re going to judge me for who I love.

The world is hard enough, without knives in my heart.

If I could have kicked something, I would have. Probably myself. I was letting far too many words go, that were far too close to the truth. And it wasn’t like I even wanted to. I just had a weakness, sometimes, for telling people exactly how I felt when I was tired, and I was apparently so tired I had exactly one inhibition left, which I was using desperately to keep myself angry rather than honest.
Breathe Lupin, breathe. Jigen’s words—real Jigen’s words—echoed in my head, and I added my typical late-night throwing-a-fit-at-someone counteractive track: You’re better than this, just breathe. You can be in control of this situation, of yourself.

The truth is something you collect, not something you give away.

“I think your secret’s safe with me,” Marti replied, over my head. “Though I don’t think it should have to be a secret.”

That...

Was rather enlightened, for an Italian.

Somewhere in my mind, Mental-Jigen was peaking around a corner, his mouth in that comical O of surprise that real-Jigen had a habit of doing, just before he became delighted about something.

But to my own feelings, Marti’s words were nice, too, if I wanted to admit it. The little proverbial rain cloud above my head started to dissipate, though I grudgingly held onto it and squeezed out a few more raindrops. It zapped out a few imaginary lightening bolts, into my hands, as evidenced by my emotions giving me one last zing of angry prickling.

“I would also like to hear about it sometime.” Marti’s voice turned chipper again. “It sounds like you’ve found someone you like.”

At that, the little rain cloud dissipated entirely, leaving my hands empty.

But when I opened them, I found a little rainbow inside.

A smile ticked at my lips. “Thanks...Marti.”

“You’re welcome.”

Inside my mind, Mental-Jigen smirked, and tipped his hat down again. The little radio played a pleasant tune, cartoonish music notes floating out of it.

“You know I’m always up for more love stories,” Marti added, the sunshine above my head. “And you’re currently my favorite prisoner.”

“I’m currently your only prisoner,” I muttered, attempting a smile.

“Details, details,” she replied, airily.

We looked at each other, and the smile she gave me made me blush a little, stupidly.

I was so weak to freckles.

“You’re cute when you get all red like that,” she teased.

“Nooo,” I muttered, pushing my hands against my cheeks. “You’re not supposed to say that.”

“Hee hee.”

My eyes widened, real shock replacing the mock. “Did you just giggle?”

Did I just see a forty-some-year-old Italian woman giggle?
She shrugged, coy. “I’ve got a few in me a day, for certain men I like.”

I blushed even more at that, half because of me, but mostly because of what it made imagine about her and Zenigata.

She smiled down at me, friendly, though her tone was conspiratorial, and she winked at me.

I was about to quip back something back when I was interrupted by the stooges. To the side, Christof and the guard’s footsteps clumped over, and without a word, Marti started back up the chauffeur service.

Left alone with my thoughts, I found it a little easier to be honest with myself, and I was glad for the wind of logic and clarity that reappeared. I knew Pops twitched whenever I talked about sleeping with men, but I thought that was mostly because of his generation, not because he actually worried about it or minded it. He never seemed bothered when I told him I loved a man; in fact, he seemed fond of it, whenever I did. And it seemed Marti was even more comfortable with it than him.

Which wasn’t unusual, really, given that she was a woman. She was used to a world in which men equaled unwanted sexual advances, where Pops wasn’t. The social power structure shift embedded in the idea of men together didn’t make her squirm as much, didn’t affect her as much; and in fact, probably made the world better for her, day to day.

“So why...do you think he didn’t write it in?” I muttered, hoping an easy answer would fall out of the sky at me, though I didn’t expect it.

I liked Marti, and she seemed to have a near magical ability to cheer me up even when I was aching and stabbing all over (like now), but like most people, she would probably avoid the truth when the time came for it.

And yet, as we wheeled along, her kindly voice whispered into my ear: “I suspect he wants to protect you.”

I found myself smiling at that, just a little.

“Just as I do,” she finished.

That...was interesting. It wasn’t often other people connected to me as fast as I did to them.

“You?” I asked, interested, tilting my head back, and no doubt giving her a good view of the rope burn around my neck. “From what?”

Marti shrugged. “Anything he can’t.” She winked at me, and whispered: “Savvy?”

I grinned at her, and settled back in, a little lighter, a little easier, than before, as we faced the road ahead. “I get you, Captain.”

In my head, Jigen smirked, head tipped down so that was all I could see of his face. He whistled a jaunty tune as he leaned against a post, arms crossed.

See? he asked. Chicks dig you. And so does Pops.

Oh, shut up.
It took nearly 30,000 words to get Lupin out of that room.
Valence Shell (Icarus I)

Chapter Summary

Valence Shell: A ring layer around the nucleus of an atom, in which the electrons orbit. Each concentric layer of valence has room for more electrons, and atoms bond together by sharing electrons.

"Noble" elements naturally have all their valence shell spaces full, so they don't bond with others. But some atoms have lots of open spaces, and easily bond, only to split apart again if conditions change....

Chapter Notes

I know nothing about Lupin's dad except what's on this wikia page: http://lupin.wikia.com/wiki/Lupin_II . But he looks like a mean man, doesn't he? And especially a mean drunk. I apologize if this goes counter to actual canon evidence in a way that is heinously uninformed. I'm just making stuff up at this point.

(Also, wow, Lupin you did NOT inherit your father's forehead. Unless the man's hair already started to recede in that picture...)

Similarly, I hear tell that there's a dubiously-canonical backstory chapter of the manga where Fujiko's father looks suspiciously like Zenigata. Whether or not it's really a helpful idea for this story, I loved it, took it, and ran with it. (Because really, why not?)

We all have Trelobita to thank for making me not even think twice about adding in the sexy stuff.

When I had first run into Pops, he had been undercover. He was helping my father reorganize himself in France, and I’d thought he was the scum of the earth. He made no bones about the fact that he was a dirty cop who’d gotten busted and yet still needed a paycheck, and didn’t mind how he got it.

But because he was another Japanese ex-pat, he reminded me of my mother, by association and a few intangible aspects of his personality. It made him the perfect welcome mat on which to land, while I investigated my mother’s disappearance and its connection to my father.

It was a doorstep which, I now realize in hindsight, was as welcoming as it had been because he truly wasn’t who he had presented himself to be.

He protected me from my father’s displeasure somewhat (a lot), especially when I first showed up —giving me info on jobs I had to do for the man to prove my mettle; info that was suspiciously missing from the dossier for said jobs that was, you know, essential to me surviving the job.

Things Zenigata said he knew because he’d worked with X or Y place because of being a cop
previously. Things that, obvious to me now, he’d either stuck his neck out to discover or nearly blown his cover to reveal he knew.

Later, our relationship had morphed from two guys regularly meeting in a bar to chat about life and exchange files into something, in my father’s wording, that came down to, “Go learn to be more Japanese or something with someone who actually wants you, you son of a bitch.”

He had meant every aspect of this remark unironically.

But “Corruptigata” and I hung around together fairly frequently, given all the maneuvers we both had to do to stay dry under my father’s ripped syndicate umbrella. If I admitted the truth, he was more like a father to me than the one I actually had, but I didn’t know the difference at the time, until it was too late.

And then I had met Fujiko.

—A warm night in summer dark, a ceiling fan moving slowly above our heads in the old Alphabet City apartment. A beautiful woman leaning over me, taboo in so many ways: older, more experienced, another man’s. My father’s.

Yet here she was, sitting in my lap and pressing her heavy breasts into my chest as she looked into my eyes. Her hair spilling down on my head and shoulders, as her hands smoothed down my neck and she rocked on my lap.

“Is this really all right?” I asked, hoarsely. I licked my lips, even though my hands trembled on the soft curve of her hourglass hips: A little bit nervous, a little bit excited, a little bit afraid—and wanting—to die for such a chance.

I had a feeling this was some sort of trick, some sort of trap—it had to be, my father wouldn’t share and he’d be more than happy to rip my balls off for something like this—and yet.

Something in her eyes. In the way she shivered against me. The way her hands squeezed at me, a little nervously too. The way she’d been trying to get me alone, all these weeks, and now had finally managed to slip away with an entire night of freedom before her. Before us.

“Of course it’s all right. I’m not anyone’s property.” But after this bold announcement, her voice dropped to a shy one, and she kissed me. “But he makes me out to be his.”

I kissed her back; no need to respond otherwise. It was delicate at first, nothing like I expected it to be, though it held a nervousness, a shyness, I knew all too well from girls in my teenage years. I ran a hand up her back, kind and soothing.

But she turned hungry all too soon, and the woman, suddenly a vixen, pushed at my shoulders until I was flat in the sheets. The ceiling fan spun lazily behind her head, like a crown of rotating feathers.

Soft brown eyes burned into me.

“The truth is, I’d much rather be yours.”

She ground down on me, hard, and I hissed. My hands gripped her sides, and didn’t let her stop.

“Darling, if you keep doing that, I’ll be yours.”—

She was my father’s mistress at the time, even though she was basically my age plus two or three
years. As I understood it now, she had been there to uncover and steal whatever assets he’d
squirreled away and leave him out to dry if at all possible. I mean, I hated the man, but that was
pretty damn cold.

And dangerous.

Not that I meant that in a “please don’t do it” way. Hardly. It was more a, “Baby that’s hot,
remember to throw a flare if you need me, see you at 11” way.

Regardless, I asked her some years later and found out that in the day-to-day during this long con,
she was perfectly happy to steal whatever his budding empire allowed her to provided she got to
wear it, and he was happy to let her do both. He appreciated how she looked on his arm, and she
appreciated how she looked in his spotlight.

I, in the middle of all that, was this illegitimate, mixed-race punk son who’d shown up out of
nowhere; a twenty-one-year-old kid capable of “nothing more” than thievery. Fujiko was willing to
use a submachine gun. I wasn’t. Ergo, I was not only useless, but a failure in every way.

And, if we were honest, I think my father was a little bit racist. He thought people of other races
were perfectly good to use, especially the women, but there was a place for them. And it wasn’t
inheriting the family name.

If I had been particularly Asian-looking, my father probably would have disowned me without a
second thought.

Really, I had been a little more Japanese-esque as a kid, so maybe that explained what he’d done
when I was younger....

Still, this was why Zenigata was always on the fringes of the organization, ever working his way
in. He acted just as racist back, which worked oddly well though I particularly despised it and had
to act like I didn’t; Fujiko, meanwhile, was the boss’s treasure in every way and was kept behind
closed doors unless she was in use for something other than my father’s body.

Zenigata wasn’t able to meet her in the day-to-day, otherwise she would have recognized him; but
that was just where he wanted to be—collecting intel on the organization for the cops at large, and
waiting for a party, a meeting—whatever he judged the right moment to be—in order to confront
Fujiko face-to-face for his own work. And Fujiko was exactly where she wanted to be, as well:
behind several barriers, on a pedestal, watching everyone as potential prey.

Meanwhile, me....

Well, it didn’t matter what I was doing.

What mattered was that once I’d gotten in with Fujiko, Zenigata was all too happy to spend more
time with me, and encourage our relationship. Little did I know who she was to him, otherwise I
never would have pursued it.

To this day, I am absolutely certain he was waiting for the moment he could hold me hostage to get
to her. He was hoping, really hoping, that she’d be that kind of girl, and I’d be such a scumbag that
he wouldn’t mind doing it.

Little did he know, it was me that was the romantic one, not her.

He’d certainly found that out the hard way.
Fujiko had learned a few things about the Lupin line the hard way, as well. (And no, not like *that*. Though there was also a lot of *that*, from both father and son, of course. Which, not going to lie, I did ask her about how we compared in various ways and liked the answers I got.)

Still, I think when Fujiko had first gotten involved with my father, she’d thought he was 70-some-years-old and washed up, but sitting on a pile of assets. She’d been very wrong about both of those things, and got in too deep pretty damn fast. Her ivory tower turned into a canary cage faster than she could blink.

So then came me, some months into her captivity, the savior to all that. The successor to the empire who fancied himself a dark horse, the gentleman professional her age who treated a woman right—not right only on the surface, like his father.

The good-looking young buck who just wanted love and to stake out his place in the world.

It was a beautiful fairy tale, and I fell for her telling of it. Hook, line, and sinker.

But, just like Zenigata, I knew not to trust any of them as far as I could throw them (despite knowing this, I couldn’t quite ever sober up to her). So in the end, she thought I fell for it, but I hadn’t, but I still couldn’t quite let it go. Once the game was up, the play remained; we ended up creating new roles for ourselves half a dozen times as we each grappled for power over the other in what acts remained, with lots of frustrated sex, emotional confusion, and deadly situations as we sprinted toward the finish line, away from the burning building that was our romance and the world it existed in.

Though...after this whole charade of me in my father’s organization had gone on for about a year, it became hard to tell the difference between the con and the truth, for all of us.

For all the playing, the jockeying, the danger that was real and the fiction that we’d invented, the feelings Zenigata, Fujiko, and I had developed for each other were real.

At the end of the day, the only thing that was fake was the world those feelings existed within. A transitory reality; a sand sculpture meant to wash away into the dunes, as soon as the wind turned right.

But one that had been there, nonetheless. One that had been painstakingly crafted.

At the end of it, when everything had all fallen apart, I could honestly say I had a fondness and admiration for Fujiko’s bombastic existence that would never leave my heart; she made me see stars just thinking of her. If I was the god of thieves, as Pops liked to call me, then she was the Venus to my Mercury. And no one can resist Venus.

Venus, however, can resist everyone but Mars, and shines so brightly she can burn you to a crisp if you hang around her too long.

Fujiko and I had fun every time we met up, but we weren’t good for each other’s realities; we never would be.

We could make beautiful fiction, but that was all it would be.

As soon as reality set in, there was crying and screaming and throwing things involved—including people in front of busses. It happened on both sides, and I hated it; I hated the *me* that I turned into, those times.

But it was what it was, and that was all we would be.
In the flames that marked the end of my father’s empire, Fujiko had run away into the night and left me behind, as thieves do. I couldn’t blame her for it; it was work. That was our reality.

And even though the feelings I had for her—that we had for each other—were real enough, they were an unhealthy mess, based on what we both were missing, but could never have. It was based on how we wanted to hurt and be hurt. And we both knew that; at the time, we simply had nothing more attractive to do but each other.

But Pops....

His fiction was a man who couldn’t get too close to me. However, his reality was something far different. Something far more vibrant, serene, and for the both of us—mostly healthy.

Unlike Fujiko, Pops had come to my side, through a literal fire and the proverbial hellstorm after, to save me.

And he hadn’t let me go since.

Except for that one time in the hospital, after my father died.

That one time I couldn’t forgive him for, that colored everything I thought I knew about us.

As my human-powered motorcade neared the end of the hall, more barred windows came into view, and I sighed, looking for something else to occupy my mind than all the memories swirling around in it.

“In your romance novels, Marti, do the women always get the guy?” Arms folded against my chest, I tapped my fingers on my biceps idly and tilted my head back at her, curious.

But this time, Marti’s response, typically so mousy and cheerful, didn’t include a smile. There was something hollow in those green irises, normally so brightly shining. As the wheels of my ride creaked along, she shrugged, eyes on the road. “Well, in the happy-ending ones.”

“‘Happy ending ones’?” Romance novels were categorized by ones that ended well and ones that didn’t? Hell, why would anyone read the bummer ones?

“Well, sure. There’s more realistic ones, but why would I need those?”

“That was my thought too.”

“Oh...,” she murmured. “Reality has a habit of sucking. At least when it comes to me and romance.”

She didn’t say it in a way that asked for sympathy, but something about how the mirth had bled out of her voice, the way her lips twitched down just slightly, the heavy weight she leaned on the arms of the chair—it stung me.

Two husbands...

One that had died, and one that was probably in prison somewhere. Beyond the regular troubles that came with that, because she was also a cop, both had to be horrifying and demoralizing. The one, potentially career-ending.
Actually.

Maybe that was why she was in France now.

In France with a different name....

So is he locked up, or is he after her, and she’s hiding?...

“But yes, I know it’s stupid,” Marti continued on with a bit more zest, not noticing or not caring about my wide-eyed silence, “but the woman always catches her man. Because he admits she’s more important than his career.” She tossed her hair back, suddenly beaming. “It’s quite nice, you could take a page from that book.”

I raised an eyebrow. Don’t you mean Zenigata?

Though, maybe... Maybe Zenigata had to stay away from her, if she was hiding....

Beside us, Christof snorted, a soft noise that saved me from stating this out loud.

“Isn’t that your actual life situation though?” I lobbed at him.

“Oh, that wasn’t a noise of derision,” Christof replied, chuckling nervously and taking a step away from us as he walked, so he was just out of arm’s reach of me. “At least, not at you guys.”

At yourself, huh?

Marti and I both found ourselves smiling at him, devilishly; our faces, with smirks, were jaded mirrors of each other and Christof eyed us both with some alarm. Maybe it was just because it was hard to see someone who was a walking fairy tale when you couldn’t have your own, but we both no doubt looked a little predatory.

I did have to admit, it was hard not to scoff at the idea of formulaic happily ever after stories one after another, because they weren’t realistic. But still, I had seen, and lived, more than a few romantic tales in my life, and I tried to be one to my lovers, as well. It was easy to understand the need behind it—wanting to be more important than anything else, to someone.

I couldn’t decide, though, if it was worse to have the ability to go after those sorts of fairy tales and fail, like I did, or not to have the freedom to pursue those desires at all, like Marti must have been....

Though how Jigen and I had met, and come together.... That was a dark fairy tale, but one nonetheless. A tale of love between two vagabonds surrounded by evil kings, played out over more than a decade.

—Splayed on a couch on my back, the gaze of the ceiling interrupted by him. The black shape of a tall man, looming over me. Not like the ones in the past, but a sweet shadow, warm and whispering and gentle. His hand sliding up my thigh, the definition of the word caress—which I realized I did not know, until that very moment.

A gesture especially careful, given what I knew he did with those hands to survive.

I was highly aware of the feel of my legs spread open and sitting on his thighs, feeling hypersensitive and electric and warmed at every point of contact, even though both of us were still in our clothes and nothing had happened yet but a lot of kissing, holding, and hoping.
My heart was racing, and I couldn’t hear any of the nice things he was saying, as he touched at me tenderly in the night, reassuring.

If Fujiko had been Venus, this was Hades: King of the Underworld. Dark and feared and a shadow ever looming at the back of one’s consciousness. And yet, when he was in front of you, he was remarkably gentle and kind. A force that fit into the night like he owned it (because he did). One that welcomed you into his realm with capable arms and the utmost reverence.—

“How did you meet your lady friend, Chirstof?” I asked, idly, to smooth over the atmosphere, and to get my mind from going too far down that sweet, dark rabbit hole. The memories in the moment were good, but they could very well set me off-kilter on a night like tonight, because of the other things around it.

“She was visiting friends from college and came to our hockey game,” Christof began. “It was just a neighborhood team, nothing serious. My friends, her friends, a night on the town... one thing lead to another, and then we were by the ocean watching the sun set at midnight, talking about life and things for hours.”

“And being farther south, apparently,” I muttered.

“Hah. That did come up. Buuuut...” Christof’s eyes glittered as he hung on the word. “I showed her the magic of the Norwegian sun and how we keep warm until it comes around again.”

My face split into a delighted grin. E hee hee. “Oh you dog. I’m proud.”

“I was a total snowy gentleman,” he replied.

Was that a muscle flex? Oh ho.... Still, the toothy, pearly Good Guy grin more than made up for it.

“I’m very lucky Jigen isn’t here.”

“Mm? Why?” Christof asked me, a little alarmed. Apparently he’d been filled in on the man at least enough to know what he did for a living.

I licked my lips and bit down on the bottom one, an eyebrow ticking up uncontrollably as I smiled. “Because he’d like you.”

Christof sputtered but didn’t fall into a wall this time; he just hid his face in his hand and turned as red as a beet. Behind us, Marti laughed. The guard coughed.

“You are quite the catch,” Marti agreed, teasing Christof, and just a tiny bit admiring. “She’s a lucky woman, one who’s made a smart choice.”

Christof smiled sheepishly and scratched at his cheek. There was a tiny hint of blush still to him as he looked off.

“Anyway, please continue,” I encouraged, happy to hear Marti happy again.

“R-Right,” he coughed, squaring his shoulders and putting his hands on his hips to facilitate puffing out his chest as he strode. “Well, we kept in touch and that was all there is to it, really. She’s an art student, very beautiful. Makes jewelry and does metal sculpture. So it doesn’t really make a lot of sense for her to be where it was too cold to work for half a year, plus her family and customers are here in France. So we talked about it, and I followed her. Firefighters are pretty exportable. A few short classes and there you are, all up to speed.” He lifted an arm and flexed it. “And nobody in France has arms like me.”
“...Wait.” I looked him up and down. “You’re a firefighter?”

“Yes?”

“You’re wearing a police uniform though.” His jacket was, anyway. Underneath seemed more of administrative dress clothes, but still. They were serious about not wearing things beyond your rank, especially in emergency situations like me.

“Oh...this? They gave it to me so that I wouldn’t get kicked out from the police line.”

“Then... what exactly are you doing here?”

“I’m a deputy fire investigator, and you’re known for using explosives and such,” he said, as if that were obvious. “And tonight I’m an honorary deputy criminal investigator too, for Zenigata. Until he dismisses me.”

We stared at each other.

“What?” he asked.

My mind was broken, and utterly blank. “What, exactly, is your title then, Marti?” I turned around in the chair, and she stopped, presumably because I was wiggling and throwing off her balance.

“I’m an administrator.”

“Of what though?”

She held out her hand, like there was something wrong with me. “I’m a liaison for the Italian prison system for people who speak English and French.”

I looked between her and Christof multiple times. “But you’re wearing beat cop gear!”

She shrugged. “I know how?”

“Is your gun even real?”

“You will see I do not have a gun, and neither does the deputy. They are both tasers.”

I opened my mouth, only to shut it and frown at their police belts. How had I missed that?

But inspection revealed it to be true.

With an indignant huff, I sat back properly in the chair and crossed my arms. “How did you all even get here, then?” I was honestly perplexed, and I did not like to be vexed.

Zenigata was from Interpol: he didn’t have the authority to arrest me, even in France. Even the highest-level Interpol executives, under the UN treaty, didn’t have the ability to make arrests, in part to protect them in unfriendly territory. So Zenigata, zealous as he was, always did this extralegal citizen-arrest thing to cuff me, and then got some local guy who drove his car to do the actual arrest and booking of me, a fact which I loved to rib him about, endlessly. So if Marti and Christof were a part of that outfit, too, who was the arresting officer here? Nameless Guard? That didn’t seem right....

I glanced over at him, but he was just standing against the wall with a massive gun as he always was, looking mercenary. He wasn’t wearing anybody's colors, just black. And with a five o’ clock shadow, he looked even worse than normal.
Still, I wasn’t about to bring this up to anyone, if they didn’t remember it on their own.

As Marti started our little caravan up again, Christof looked askance, again like I was an idiot, albeit whatever the Norweigan term for that was. Probably something about moss and rocks.

“Um...you did kind of announce your crime two weeks beforehand. And it doesn’t take two weeks to get from Lyon to here. I mean, maybe if you’re skiing....”

“What I mean is—”

“Our desks are next to each other,” Marti interrupted, leaning down a bit to make sure I caught her tone. “Our departments are adjacent on the floor and we happen to be in the overlap row.”

It was very easy to imagine them at the coffee machine every morning, before Marti got to making her calls. I could see her now: yelling into the phone in Italian on a regular basis while Christof cowered, hiding behind large binders of images, only to soothe her with strange and mysterious low-cal moss treats.

“And when you said you were showing up two days before Christmas and the call went out for ‘who wants to join up with the thankless, hopeless Lupin task force?’, naturally not a lot of hands were raised,” Marti continued. “But I thought, ‘hey, I haven’t seen my nice little Japanese man in a while,’ and I knew Chris needed the hours, so when he was promised he’d get home before Christmas with a ring for New Year’s, there it was.”

I blinked at her for a bit. “Huh.”

She smirked back. “Yeah, ‘huh’.”

“You just bring people together I guess,” Christof added.

That was true enough. But...

“‘My little...Japanese man’?” I quoted.

Marti’s eyebrows pinched together and she held out her arm, theatrically. “My little, hardworking, Japanese man who cries when I cook for him like it was his last meal and takes his ancestors as seriously as we do Jesus... Just think about it. We would be such a cute old couple together. Me with the little babushka bonnet and him with his adorably skinny old Japanese man thing...”

I tipped my head at that. Them being old. I hadn’t really considered it, before. But it was coming, wasn’t it? It came for everyone.

And where would I be then? Where will they be? If Marti was on the run from somebody and Zenigata was poor as desert soil and neither were in their native lands, it might well be adorable, but it wouldn’t be easy for them. Especially if neither of their children were around, and they didn’t have the fulfillment of grandchildren, either.

Still...

“Marti...you do know you’re speaking out loud, right?” I asked.

She opened her eyes and her hand hovered in the air; her eyes made a half circle in thought, and eventually landed on me momentarily. “Oh...um. Of course. Of course.”

I smirked, uncontrollably. “Heh...I believe you.”
Marti blushed and pretended nothing at all had happened.

We continued along, all four of us, but the silence was an inviting one.

“...Where do you want to live, when you retire?” I asked gently.

“I’ve always been a fan of the Campania coast. But if it were both of us...”

There was a long pause, in which I was sure Marti was blushing as she drove, but I gave her privacy, and let the silence go on. I looked at Christof, but he just shrugged and then watched her, thoughtful. Perhaps he was thinking of old age and retirement, too.

I didn’t think our guide was going to speak, but eventually Marti added, “Well, the only languages we have in common are French and English...so, unfortunately, probably here.”

“Is France so bad for you?” I asked, tipping my head back. Hearing that always made me sad; France had treated me so well. It was my homeland, after all, and I loved every bit of it.

“No... It’s just... Neither of us own any land here, and we probably won’t be able to. Plus, he complains about the sushi being terrible.”

“Oh.” I chuckled a little, at the last bit. “There’s always the old French colonies in Southeast Asia. Actually...hey. If you wanted to, where would you live, ideally?”

“You know...” she sighed, mouth curling up into a fond smile. “He’s from the coast, and I’m from the mountains. I’m from the mainland, and he’s from an island nation. So I don’t know.” She lifted a hand to curl at her hair, but stopped herself halfway through, for need of control of the wheelchair. “I’ve never asked him about where he’d want to retire, let alone live.”

Marti looked between me and Christof, and then stared at the ground. “And it’s not like we’re together or anything anyway.”

Her voice was quiet.

“Want me to fix that for you?” I asked, with complete seriousness.

She raised an eyebrow at that, and even Christof was curious.

“How?” she asked, voice still small.

I shrugged, and lifted my hands for her to see. “These things work wonders, you know.” I didn’t have any ideas at the moment, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t capable. I winked at her, just to punctuate the sentiment.

She smiled, a bit chagrined. “I have a better idea. You give up crime.”

“What?” I groused. “You can’t ask me to do that. And how would it help, anyway?”

Even if I was gone, he’d just work himself half to death on some other case, wouldn’t he?

Unless she was there, maybe. But how would me being out of the picture leave room for her in particular?

“He won’t retire until you give up this life of thievery,” she explained, easily, like I should already know this.
I chirped back at her, curious. “Why that though? Wouldn’t it do if I was behind bars or dead?”

Honestly, if I keeled over tonight and they demanded Christof deal with it, they could probably get married tomorrow.

“Don’t say that!” Marti swore, with a vehemence and sense of alarm that made me jump slightly. It was definitely the tone of “how could you accidentally curse your own family!” that came from superstitious people from tiny towns in Mediterranean countries. “You know what would happen to him if you died? He’d be devastated!”

The force of this declaration was so strong that she actually stopped the caravan entirely to direct it at me.

“Devastated?” I frowned, a little unsure as to why we were no longer moving. “Isn’t that a little strong of a word...?”

“No!”

“But...why?”

“Are you serious?!?”

“Um...” I slunk down in the chair.

Christof whacked me in the shoulder. “You really know nothing.”

“Oh, like you know more. You said you’ve never even met the man.”

“Marti talks about him all the time.”

“She does?” Now that was an interesting thought—

“Mr. Lupin. Come now,” she huffed, sharply, her accent getting thicker as her words switched a little closer to Italian mannerisms. “You know how much time he’s put into chasing you?”

I blinked up at her, wary of the Italian typhoon that appeared to be blowing in. “…About as much as a full-time job requires...?”

“Oh, far more than that!” she snapped back. Seemed the gale had hit the shore. “He worries about you at night, you know that?!”

“About who I’m gonna rob...?”

“About whose got you tied up and beaten in their basement!”

“That’s a sick fantasy.”

“Not like that!”

“Anyway...it’s all just because he’s got nothing else to do, right...?”

Marti sighed, and I felt bad about it, realizing it was incidentally an insult to her. But she only shook her head, mostly exasperated, but a fair amount disappointed.

“Have you really never thought about it? Why he’s so tenacious about it?”
I raised an eyebrow, pushing away the stirrings of guilt with familiar petulance. “Besides Japanese tendencies? Why bother? It’s not like knowing is going to get him to stop chasing me.”

She narrowed her eyes at me, like a mother chastising a child. “No, but if you know his reasons, maybe he’ll do something that’ll make you want to stop.”

I was properly chastised, but I refused to admit it, so I put my nose in the air and replied: “Hah! I doubt it.”

Marti slammed down the brake on the nearest wheel. While I scrabbled for safety, it took her three brisk steps to get in front of me, her hands on he hips. I, obviously, had nowhere to go, and Christof was hemming me in to the side, anyway.

I stared at the middle-aged woman, not sure if I was about to get brutalized by a cop or lectured by an Italian. Or both.

I chanced a glance at Christof. He looked equally worried—and like he’d seen this before and was really wishing for paperwork to hide behind.

Probably both, then.

“You know who his daughter is, right?” Marti demanded, as I, resigned, looked back at her.

I nodded, forgoing any smart remarks as this green-eyed dragon stared me down, given the content of the answer. I glanced at Christof, but he just looked confused.

I’d have to be careful here, then.

“Yes...?” I mumbled at Marti.

...Fujiko.

“And you know how he first got on your trail?”

“Yeah.”

...Through looking for her.

“And you know how you were dating for a while?”

“...Yeah?”

...I think I know where this is going.

“And once she disappeared into the wind, why did he keep on your trail and not hers?”

There was a thought coming to the forefront of my mind, and I didn’t want to allow it to voice itself. A thought about him, her, and me; a hospital in Monaco; and the word family.

—Lying in a hospital bed, too messed up to speak. There was a tube down my throat and I couldn’t move, as far as I was aware. And yet I was awake, for some hellacious reason, and I could feel. God, the things I could feel, that refused to be silenced. Pieces I didn’t even know I had, bruised and burned, even though I was doped up on the highest dose of everything.

And an older Japanese man at the side of the bed, picking up my hand, holding it tightly in his. I couldn’t see him; my eyes weren’t working right in the bright lights, even if I could have somehow
managed to move my head. I just knew it was him, somehow, from the blurry colors and the shape of his hand; from his voice, even though everything sounded distant.

“I need to tell you something. There was an explosion, and the train you were on derailed...”—

“...Because I’m easier to follow?” I hedged instead.

She shook her head slowly, eyes never leaving me, not blinking; it was oddly ominous.

“Um... I don’t... follow.”

Shying away from that look, I tore my gaze away and onto Christof. But he was just looking at me with the “don’t do it, don’t make mom mad at you again” look.

When I looked back at Marti, she instructed: “Yes you do know.”

And then she went around behind me, flipped up the break, and continued on, much faster than before.

After the initial acceleration lurch, I chanced an alarmed reply: “Marti?”

But there was nothing but silence.

“Marti, you can’t stop there. Marti. Martelli. Ma’am?!—

“I can’t give you all your answers, you know. Just think about it.”

It wasn’t an angry voice she was using, but her tone was definitely stern. Child: meet discipline.

So when her red curls brushed against my cheek and she whispered in my ear in dark, slick Italian, I definitely flinched: <“And when you get it, repent. And reform. Or I will never get my man the way I want him.”—>

—That warm, thick hand, clasping, stroking mine. A voice I now knew to be a cop’s, trying to reassure me. “Your father’s dead. And there are still men after you. But I’m going to stay here, and protect you. So hold on, okay?”—

<“Oh, Marti,”> I replied in an equal whisper, never to be outdone. <“If you can get him off my trail for even a night, I will buy you the wedding cake.”>

<“...Buy me the dress, and you’ve got a deal.”>

_God, I like you._

She patted me on the shoulder and stood up straight. I grinned, and steepled my fingers together, wiggling them menacingly. <“Deal, my dear. Deal. Tell me, do you prefer Prada or Versacci?”>

<“Oooh, nice choices,”> Marti all but whistled. <“Maybe I should blackmail you into a house on the coast, next.”>

<“No taxes on a dress,”> I grinned. <“But I’ll throw in the heels and jewels, how’s that?”>

<“Oooh—but they can’t be stolen though,”> she lamented. _Genuinely_ honestly _lamented_.

<“I could...steal them and return them before they knew they were gone...?”> I asked, trying not to smile.
<“Oh...,”> she muttered, intrigued, glancing at Christof guiltily and then down at me again, intent. <“You can do that?”> she whispered, impressed.

<“Sure can.”> I chuckled, and made a show of cracking my knuckles. <“Trust me, they don’t check very often.”>

She shook her head, sighing. <“Wow. Rich people.”>

<“I know, right?”>

She smiled, but pointed her finger at me. <“But honestly, don’t steal anything for me. Get a real job and then buy it for me.”>

<“Aww, but that’s so boring! And sales tax is such a bitch—”>

“What do you two keep whispering in Italian?” Christof asked, interrupting us, and giving me in a particular an accusatory glare for my tone.

“We’re talking about your dick,” I promptly replied.

“No we’re not!!”
Inverted Axis

Chapter Summary

I guess I wrote you a poem or something?
Who knew this would be such a multi-faceted work! <3

Can you feel the foreshadowing? /mwahaha

Chapter Notes

This week's song (for all three aforementioned chapters): "Justin Timberlake - Can't Stop the Feeling"

This chapter might feel like it ends abruptly because I split this chapter into three. (THREEEEEE....)

100 points if you get that joke. (Hint: it's a homestuck parody video based on a different youtube video)

You get two chapters this week!

We all have secrets.
Big ones, little ones.
Ones about ourselves;
Ones featuring others.
Ones hiding what has been done to us,
and what we have done to others.
About things we’ve broken,
and things we’ve birthed.
Things that hold us hostage,
and things we’ve left behind.

Sometimes,
our secrets are emotions:
They ache to be released
in someone else’s arms.
Other times,
our secrets are
people themselves.
Even places
have secrets
of their own,
waiting
to be found.
Some secrets can topple you.
Some secrets can topple *empires*.
Yet some are to be whispered and forgotten,
While others take root in you and grow.
Some of them nourish you, while others only strangle.

Some secrets are given to us,
While others are taken away against our will.
Some themselves are secrets,
Since no one knows we hold them.

There are sad secrets:
Heartbreak; death.
We all have them.
There are happy secrets too:
Love, aspiration, affirmation.
Not all of us have those.

Each secret holds a story,
and sometimes a saga;
but pointless is each without a context.
For, you see, every secret has the potential to be Pandora’s Box, to somebody.
The thing about secrets is:
They are moored within the heart.

But what type of song that heart plays is dependent on the type of secrets within it.

Just like a safe, each heart has a lock that can be picked—
By tools;
By combination;
By raw force.

The quality of a secret therefore varies based on the method used to obtain it. The very best thieves are the ones who steal what they want when they want without anyone being the wiser. Years and years may go by, if done right, before the theft itself is discovered.

But the trail to those secrets—those hopes and dreams and tragedies—is often lost when someone dies.

...And that was when you needed to be a detective.

The good thing was, I had one of the very best in the world at my beck and call—not that I was too shabby either. But on the off chance that I needed another set of eyes (another set of access codes), he was there. And even a few times when I didn’t need him, the gods saw fit to send him to me, without fail.

The rest of the time, I could just impersonate him, but that counted too.

I had more secrets than most, mostly involving things I’d stumbled upon in my work and the confidences of women. My past was a secret too, as was everything I owned—and it would have to stay that way, forever, if I ever wanted to retire. Yet my heists, generally speaking, had no secrets at all once they were done—I rarely tried to hide how I’d pulled them off. (It was more fun not to hide it, actually.)

(Because I didn’t want to be secret, even if everything inside me was.)

But I wasn’t the type of man that blew down the vault doors and left the pieces. No, I was a sneak-thief; I romanced that safe open, with hands, eyes, ears, and a thrumming heartbeat.

And occasionally, someone watching out for my back, counting down the time.

*The truth is something you collect, not something you give away.*

Something you *collect*, not something you *destroy*, or *steal*. 
I collect things, I don’t steal them.

Don’t get me wrong, I definitely stole them, in the dictionary sense. But in the divine sense, I romanced them away from people who weren’t appreciating them, until I could ferry them to someone who did. They came to me. I was just the intermediary.

Especially with women’s hearts.

I had to believe that, or else what in the world would the point be?

Zenigata, I suspected, had many secrets revolving around his work: times he’d covered for people, times he’d overlooked things to save his own life. I couldn’t imagine how many times he had to actually shoot somebody to stay undercover. Or drugs he’d ripped out of someone’s hands with a scolding and shove, which then conveniently disappeared—all for the sake of a greater good against the machine.

We were very much alike, in the lengths we’d go for other people. The side of the fence we were on was the only major difference, really.

But I didn’t imagine he had many secrets anywhere else, let alone dark ones. A few in his personal life, maybe, but I doubted there were many abject skeletons there; just things that left a bad taste in his mouth, that he didn’t care to rehash. Human problems, mistakes of character and learning in a heated moment of need; nothing useful to anyone but his therapist.

And then there was Marti.

Pretty Marti, Smart Marti... clever and careful Marti. Marti with a big heart, and a very bad problem with love.

I was starting to think she had secrets darker than the rest of us. And Pops was helping her hide them.

The only question was: How deep did they go?

And:

Could I romance that safe open?

A few hundred feet of banter later, Christof, Marti, the nameless guard, and I approached the end
of the hall and the elevator from before. We were on a different floor this time, so there wasn’t that massive window.

That window, augh.

An image flashed through my mind, of staring up at bars without glass behind them, and silent snow drifting down behind them. The chill of that night settled over me, as though I’d suddenly been flash-frozen. And the hunger. The utter hunger. I doubt I would ever forget it; it was embedded in my subconscious.

I shivered, and forced it out of my mind, tapping at my stomach to get it to quit growling.

No, this window was just a little one, a standard one, but unfortunately still full of bars and backlit by snow. It didn’t glow quite as neon-radiant as the previous one, because this hallway wasn’t so dark, but that was a small comfort.

Before we could even get to it, I draped the towel that had been over my leg over my face, and decided to close my eyes, hands resting, folded, on my abs. It’d be easier to imagine myself on a Caribbean beach waiting for the cabana girls with trays of rainbow fruit and sunset-colored drinks this way.

No one bothered me about it. I expected they would, but maybe they were all too tired to care at this point, and knew me fairly well besides. A hand towel wasn’t going to hurt anyone unless I inhaled it, and they’d seen me do stranger things. Plus, a blocked airway didn’t seem like something Marti couldn’t handle quickly and professionally.

“Know where we’re going?” Marti asked Christof as the elevator rumbled open. I pulled the towel off my head, as she slid us over the bump, into the car.

Christof came in, but before he could answer her, our constant shadow the guard tipped his head toward his right, standing just outside the door. “I’ll tell the Inspector where we’re going.”

“Good,” she said. “Meet us there.”

He nodded loosely, and turned on his heel.

“So either of you know that man’s name?” I asked, as the door closed. Christof clicked the Basement button, without even being told.

A second ticked by, and they both answered: “Nope.”

“What is he even doing here, then?” I squawked, half-mocking, holding out a hand in the direction he’d gone.

“Dunno,” Marti admitted, clearly amused, hands resting heavily on the wheelchair’s handle bars. She crossed her legs, and blew a strand of hair out of her eyes.

“...Overtime?” Christof proposed thoughtfully, at the button panel.

It took me a second, but I realized he was joking. I pointed at him. “Hah! Good one.”

“Thank you, thank you.” He made a little bow, even though his smile looked dead tired. In the silence, he yawned and rubbed at his face.

In the quiet, I stared at the ceiling, appreciating the inside of this refrigerator. The elevator car was
quite new, all brushed steel, and it helped relieve my mind tremendously.

*That* place, its elevators hadn’t even *worked*.

I could still remember the vines growing out of the one, wild and massive, despite being dormant at the time. It was like a building had grown veins, and if I had just cut them open, pruned them apart enough, its life-blood would gush out, and so too would all its secrets spill....

As the elevator slowed and came to a stop, the little panel above the door alighted a B in old font, cut out of no-longer-shining copper plate.

*Back to the catacombs, huh*...?

We quickly swivelled out into the hall, taking a right. The walls down here were rough-hewn, no doubt used as storage in the hundreds of years it existed before air conditioning. However, storied though they might have been, they weren’t any more inviting for their age. They were craggy and dirty, despite the occasional glitter, and it was *cold*. Cool seeped into my bones, and I jostled my injuries in the process of shivering. I put a hand on my leg, around the wound, just to keep the tremors down. The temperature change made my head swim, too, and I winced as I ached, holding my skull too.

Still, we quickly headed past the showers before I could even consider what had transpired there, and together the Interpol duo and I ended up at the end of the morbid cross-hall. Just before the solid metal door to the stairwell that looked like it belonged to a bomb shelter more than a hospital, there was another doorway, an open-air one. Light spilled into the hallway from it, sunny and inviting.

As Marti detoured us into that light, I noticed a sign hung on the rough-hewn wall in white and blue. It read *CT SCAN* in English and French, with an appropriate arrow.

So they really *did* have the big machines down here. Huh.

*Damn I’m good.*

“You’re going to waste that much money on me?” I asked, idly. “I’m touched.”

“It’s not a waste,” Marti said kindly. “Your health is important to us.”

“Aww. You aren’t saying that just because it’s regulation?”

“You wound me, Mr. Lupin,” she quipped, stopping the wheelchair beside a bank of chairs. I guess we were back to *Mister*.

*Let’s see how long that lasts, Ms. Martelli,* I quipped inside my head. Those barriers had come down once; they’d come down again.

For now, though, we were in a rectangular antechamber, maybe fifteen feet by six feet. To my back was the doorway we’d come through, and in front of me there was another door with a black-glass panel in it—no doubt hiding a control room of some kind. To the left was a row of four or five chairs against a wall, with a long, tranquil painting of the lavender fields of Provence at sunrise. Opposite that wall, to my right, half the wall was wall and half the wall was clear observation glass. In between, there was a glass door that lead into another room.

*That* room was big, brightly lit, and modern-medical sterile, but with a low ceiling due to it being the basement. The glass-and-plastic cylinder of the body scanner sat to the far side of the room,
glowing with an air not unlike a time machine or a sci-fi space ship’s escape pod.

These days, CT scans’ twinkie tubes were made out of plexiglass, so people wouldn’t get so claustrophobic, but each end was still massive, round, and plastic—this time with a neon light tube curving around the middle. So, basically, it looked like something out of Star Trek, and the eerie purple light illuminated the room—either the tanning bed from hell or a nuclear donut that could time travel.

Still, the light lifted my spirits, even if it made my eyes hurt and my mind respond with an instinctive hiss thereby. There was also a nurse in there, I realized after a minute, bending over with her back towards us, in her nice white lab coat and tall brown boots. The purple light made her coat glow, whenever she got close enough to the machine.

“She’s got a nice ass,” Marti said.

“Wh-what?” I sputtered, the verbal version of Christof’s stuttered blinking.

“What?” Marti shrugged, turning away from the nurse to look at me. “I have to beat you to the obvious sometimes, or else you’ll just look like a scuzzball all the time.”

“Oh, Marti dear. You’re a treasure.” I couldn’t help but laugh, even though I felt like it sapped much-needed energy to do so. Every bit of me ached that wasn’t anesthetized, and I was in danger of falling asleep if I stopped talking; I could feel it creeping over me, whenever my limbs were still for more than a few seconds. It was like there was white noise all over my body, filling up my nervous system.

Marti smirked at that, and turned back to the brightly-lit room, her hands on her hips. “You ever gotten one of these before?” She nodded to the machine.

I shook my head, tiredly. “Can’t say I have.” I yawned and covered my mouth, the chains tinkling. They felt like they were getting heavier with every moment, and even just yawning made my sore abs cry out in pain.

Soon, self, soon you can lie down.

In the time machine, no less!

“May I?” Christof asked, interrupting us. He was staring at the chairs rather longingly. Marti gave him a glance and nodded, waving him in. He looked truly piteous.

Beside me, Christof collapsed into a chair, sighing. “You’re a lot of work, you know that?”

I grunted with a noncommittal shrug, not really able to come up with anything better given the time of night. “The pay’s good, right?” I took the handtowel and let it fall onto his face, like it had been on mine earlier.

“Ehmmnh.” he muttered, sliding down, lacing his fingers together on his chest and closing his eyes. He didn’t even fight me on the towel bit. “Emmng flinng hoffl.”

Marti gave him a confused stare, then shook her head.

“Better there than standing up,” she admitted. She turned back to me, rolling her eyes. Still, her voice had dropped, to be quieter. “Anyway. They’re pretty easy,” she continued cheerfully. “They
give you an injection dye to see stuff better, totally non-toxic. It feels all warm and nice, though a little odd, and sometimes it tastes funny. But that’s the hardest part. After that, you just hold still and take a nap as the thing whirls round and round and pop, out comes a fancy picture of all the layers of your insides.” She grinned at me, her best reassuring-children voice. “They’re pretty quiet nowadays, too.”


We both looked at Christof.

“Seems we all do,” I added.

“Seems so,” Marti sighed, nodding, and massaging her own forehead.

“You okay?” I asked.

“Yeah. Just tired.” She yawned too, but shook it off with grunt and came up with a smile. “Not so tired I can’t handle you, though.”

“Heh, good, good…” I chuckled, smiling back and stretching my arms out. When my arms got up above my head, I had a thought: “Say, Ms. Martelli…”

“Mn?”

“You think I can get a print-out of the images? For my personal collection. And science, of course.”

I winked, and the woman standing above me grinned.

“Weeeell, we’ll have to see what Principal Zenigata says, but…” Marti winked back at me. “I’ll see what I can do, my studious pupil. Since you asked so nicely.”

* * *

Since Christof was sitting in the last chair in the line, I took the one next to Lupin. I needed to make sure I didn’t fall asleep too—and that I woke Christof before Zenigata got back. I knew he’d probably let it slide, but generally speaking sleeping on the job was frowned upon (obviously). Especially when the prisoner was ten feet away from you, let alone one that was ever ready for the opportunity to escape.

Though, presumably he wouldn’t try to make a break for it with a six-inch-plus metal rod in his leg, but who knew; some people were truly desperate. And dumb.

Still, it was part of my job to protect people from themselves, as much as it was to protect the furniture from them.

I was tired, physically, but unlike the others, I was still perfectly well awake. I was a morning person, so now that we were past three AM, I wasn’t getting back to sleep for a while, and even then, I’d pop right back up after about half an hour. Second winds without coffee were a natural talent of mine.

Lupin, in particular, looked like he was ready to fall asleep after any given blink, and apparently he had once already, in the showers. Currently, he was staring at the wall with nothing much going on
in his head, and big dark circles under his eyes. Every time he blinked, he shuddered a little, and eventually, he rubbed his eyes with a sigh.

“You all right?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he yawned, the chains clinking. “Just tired. When do you think they’ll be ready for this thing?”

He motioned at the CAT Scan and the woman busing herself around it, with a short flick of his fingers. The tray of implements to one side of her seemed prepped enough. “Less than ten minutes, I’d imagine.”

Lupin nodded. He tipped his head back without a sound, and clasped his hands loosely in his lap.

The line of his jaw was strong at this angle, shadows cutting fiercely along his skin from the overhead lights and his stubble poking out over a third of his face. It started at the end of his sideburns and went down his neck, though not very far.

It reminded me of Zeni, a bit, and how he’d always like to come up behind me and nuzzle his stubble into my neck in the mornings before he shaved. How I’d giggle and shriek and try to get away, and he would just hold me tighter.

And how inevitably, I’d somehow end up kissing him. Pressed against this or that thing, or simply against him....

And as for Lupin...

Funny, to think I’d seen this near-model-pretty man naked an hour ago, and I didn’t even know him. And now, here he was, falling asleep next to me. It was rather amusing, really, as I leaned my chin in my hand. Romance novelists had nothing on this.

He really was good at making improbable dreams a reality, wasn’t he. Just like Zeni always said about him.

“Marti,” Lupin whispered to catch my attention, eyes still closed. His voice was soft and scratchy, and with the dark blotting of bruising around his throat, it was almost enough to make me instruct him to stop talking. But the tension in his tone caught my attention. “You aren’t actually going to amputate my leg, are you?”

“No? Why? Nobody would do that unless it got septic or the bone was messed up. You’ve been walking around just fine, so I’m sure they’ll just surgically remove it, like regular shrapnel, which it is. I’m rather shocked you haven’t been screaming in pain this whole time, actually.”

“That means it’s really bad though, right?” He opened his eyes, and gave the ceiling a hollow sigh.

“Just means you’re lucky,” I replied.

But rather than seeming relieved, he stared upward, misery turning to a look that was intensely thoughtful. His eyes slowly came alight as they narrowed, and I could see the gears turning.

“What?” I asked.

“Just... deja vu,” he mumbled. He shook his head, and rubbed at his forehead.

And then, after wincing and touching at the side of his head, he immediately started rubbing and
scratching at his arms, briskly. “Ugh,” he muttered. “So cold in here.”

“So why are you scratching your arms then?”

He was leaving marks all up and down his bare arms. I caught his hand, and held it still.

He wasn’t all that cold. He was rather hot, actually.

“I’m itchy?” he tossed back, almost a pout.

“You feeling all right?” I came around in front of him and placed my hands on his shoulders. I leaned down so that I could check his eyes, pushing him into the chair back as I did so.

“Yeah? Why wouldn’t I be?” he asked, pulling away as much as he could manage while he eyed me warily. His hands, even free of me now, persistently stayed wrapped around his arms. “I mean, other than the thing in my leg, of course.”

“Look at me,” I commanded softly.

He did, even though his head was still turned aside. Grey-green eyes, shining in the purple light of the scanner, gazed at me attentively, but feverishly. Under my hands, he was still trembling.

Before I could say anything else, Lupin winced suddenly, blinking hard like he was fighting to stay awake. He shook out his head and touched at the side of it, where the stitches were. “Just need a smoke, I suspect,” he said lightly, trying to be reassuring.

That was kind of him, but that was also the kind of attitude that got you killed in your sleep when you had a head wound.

“You keep holding your head,” I murmured, touching at his hand to get it off and inspect what was beneath his hair for any ooze. “Does it hurt?”

“Well, yeah, but no different than I told the ladies before, and they cleared me, right...?”

As he gazed up at me, there didn’t seem to be anything wrong in his eyes’ movement, and nothing stared back at me except exhaustion and nerves. But there were still many options here. Without a word, I swept my hands up his neck and under his jaw, until my fingertips, pressed together, coaxed his head backward.

This was an unthinkable thing to do to a dangerous prisoner, normally: get within inches of them and then prod at them, when no one else was near enough (or awake enough) to help you. But I wasn’t worried.

He was compliant, and this needed to be done.

He was my patient, what’s more; Zenigata was his jailer, not me.

“Uh... Uh?” Lupin asked, a little confused, despite fully obeying my direction. He tilted his head back toward the ceiling, and his eyes flickered back and forth; his hands stiffened on the armrests for support.

I rested one hand on his forehead, nice and cool, and then felt his cheeks for fever, first one, then the other.

“No seriously though, what are you doing?” he asked like I was some pesky friend, when I started prodding at his lymph nodes with my fingertips. “I mean I know I’m pretty but...”
He eyed Christof as I turned his head this way and that.

“...Someone will see~,”

“Oh please,” I snorted, and he chuckled with a shrug.

“Well, I tried.” He gave a sincere smile to the ceiling tiles.

“You keep trying, but you and I both know what’s more important is what’s going on under your clothes.”

“Oh ho. You’re getting better at this.”

“I’ve been doing this longer than you have.”

He grinned. “You know, I’m getting deja vu again.”

“...To what?”

I stopped and looked at him, but he just winked at me. “To being seventeen.”

“Oh, stop it,” I huffed.

He laughed, throaty, and I went back to work, trying to avoid that toothy, self-satisfied movie-star smile. Still, the exchange seemed to have relaxed him; he draped in the chair, the very picture of (beaten and bruised) leisure as I methodically inspected his skin.

For a split-second, deja-vu hit me too: I was aware of how I was standing between this man’s open legs and the view that gave me of him as he tipped his head back, eyes closed and a happy smile on his face.

But it definitely wasn’t him I was remembering.

Unlike that man, under my hands, his lymph nodes were ridiculously swollen; I could even see most of them, with his skin taught. His body was definitely working hard to keep him upright, let alone conscious. Which wasn’t a surprise given how banged up he was, but he was rather feverish, too, and with the shaking as well...he might definitely pass out sometime soon. I’d have to make sure he didn’t look too ashen, or get his heart rate up, all of a sudden.

“I do like this angle,” he giggled, as I stood over him, cleavage and all.

“While you have a fantastic imagination, I’m just checking for nicotine withdrawal symptoms, among other things,” I replied, tone switching from bored and unimpressed nurse to annoyed mother of small children as I decided what I was going to do if he tried to cop a feel. There were only so many places I could whack him without hitting stitches or a bloody patch. “Honestly, did you miss the lesson in school that said not everyone who smiles at you wants to sleep with you?”

“Hehhh.... School.” He chuckled, wryly, in a way that was not at all comforting given the stories he was prone to telling. “Might as well try in case they’re interested but shy, right?”

“You’re the kind of student teachers have nightmares about, aren’t you?” I sighed, prodding down his throat to a pair of spots just below his hyoid and to either side of it. He swallowed at the touch, and his throat moved under my hand.

I remembered that, too, from Zeni—
“Or dream about, maybe,” Lupin said, suddenly looking down at me.

A little jolt went through me, electric, and I was left staring back, unsure. That look of his was unusually intense.

But there was a playfulness to his tone, too.

As he watched me, he was clearly waiting for something.

But...what? It wasn’t an invitation to hit on him, as much as the word choice might make it seem. It was like he was scrutinizing me.

“That’s...kind of a hard question to answer.”

...Was he daring me to ask about it?

I narrowed my eyes and pressed the glands under my fingertips. The tissue was tender and swollen already, and he hissed as I depressed it. He blinked hard, and, head tipped back, left his mouth open in a shivering O. He wiggled in his seat a little, and flexed his fingers and toes with a short gasp.

“I think I’ve arrested a few people like that,” I replied dryly, lifting my hands away perfunctorily.

Released, Lupin grinned as he touched at his throat. “Clearly you haven’t read the right romance novels, Marti.”

My hands jumped the rest of the way back to me like a snapping rubberband.

When I made the mistake of looking at Lupin’s eyes, I found them not only open, but gazing at me, sharp and amused. He was studying me with smoky, half-lidded eyes, his head still tipped back for effect. A large smirk pulled at one side of his face.

This expression, I could read loud and clear.

“That...that is not what they’re about,” I protested.

I could feel my face turning as red as my hair.

“Are you suuuure?” he teased, unconvinced, lifting himself upright again. “No little college-life student-teacher something-something going down on a Spring Break beach somewhere within those lofty pages?”

*Romantic Tales of Beach Life #4* and Zenigata definitely did not go through my mind. At all.

Him and his silly, adorable, wonderful (and utterly reprehensible!) boss-underling fetish.

Not that he didn’t feel the same way about my handcuff thing.

We just met in the middle at uniforms, that was all. Really.

“That’s ridiculous,” I scoffed, standing quickly. I came to lean against the wall opposite him, my arms crossed and head back proudly. It was just a couple of feet, but it was enough to regain my composure.

Lupin, however, was watching me with a satisfied smirk as he slowly tipped his head down and steepled his fingers together, elbows on his knees.
I’ve got you figured out, lady, that mischievous grin said.

As I watched him, his lips curled into an even more Cheshire smile, and I could see danger on those lips as he licked them, preparing to speak.

*Now watch what I can do with it.*

“Before you do that, Lupin!” I hastily interjected. “I need to ask you something, before the Inspector gets back!”

The thief frowned at me, curious, but gave up the ghost for now and offered with a glance at Christof: “What is it?”

Well, shit. What would it be? I hadn’t thought that far ahead. But at least he was being serious again.

“Ah, when...” There was one thing in particular on my mind, and it wasn’t what anyone had asked me for. I looked around, making sure no one else was listening. Christof was passed out, it seemed —his breath was deep and slow, and everything about his form with slack—and the med tech was beyond a closed glass door. No one appeared to be around the corner in the hall, either; I couldn’t hear anyone coming, anyway. “When the Inspector came to talk to you alone, did he...do anything untoward?”

“When he what?” Lupin asked, frowning, intelligent eyes attentive under a creased brow. “Oh. You mean in the showers?”

I narrowed my eyes at that, and he took it as a prompt, because he admitted with an airy wave of his hand, “He was just telling me the casualty count from tonight and how I was a giant disappointment from that. ‘S all. Nothing bad. Just a moral reprimanding on par with a schoolteacher.”

I pursed my lips, but nodded.

“And the other time?”

He opened his mouth, shut it, and then tipped his head, frowning strongly. “What other time? In the car? Or like, on the rooftop...?” His frown remaining, he tipped his head the other way. “Cuz we weren’t really alone, those times. At least, not in any way that matters.”

That...wasn’t good. Seemed he didn't remember being alone with Zenigata in the exam room at all....
Scientific Method

Marti was looking at me with an intensity I didn’t quite understand.

I looked at Christof, but that revealed nothing; he was unconscious. Neither did the nurse, who was busying herself with med stuff, or the open door to the hall, which was nothing but a black expanse. There was just Marti, her back against the wall, giving me a curious look of skepticism.

Was she talking about some time that had nothing to do with tonight?

“It’s nothing,” she announced suddenly, shaking her head. “My mistake.”

I sighed and titled my head back. A breath went by, and then two. But when I looked back toward my feet, Marti’s mood hadn’t changed, nor had her position.

“There’s... something else, isn’t there,” I stated.

A little prickle of anxiety welled up and filled my stomach.

If only it could make me less hungry....

“Ah, you caught me,” Marti announced lightheartedly, frown turning into a schoolteacher’s smile like a switch had been flipped. “As expected from my master thief.”

I snorted. Still, she was being more friendly than patronizing, so I let it slide.

What’s more, my anxiousness evaporated, under that effervescent personality. That was more important to me, in a woman’s company, than being paranoid, so I was happy to follow the lead of such an offer.

“Whaddya need, Marti dear.” I held my hand out to her tiredly, palm up.

She considered it for a second, then sat down beside me like she had been before she started prodding at me. She took my palm and drew my hand over to her lap. Some of the chain length pooled on her thigh.

“This is nice but...” As my hand rested, palm-up, in her lap, she took the end of a finger and wiggled it. It seemed like a particularly motherly gesture, like a mom with little kids, and I just smiled at her, nonplussed. She didn’t seem to mind that I could have easily garroted her from where we were positioned relative to each other; either she trusted me that much, or figured I was much smarter than trying to escape with one leg basically incapacitated. Or, she was just that tired and her guard was slipping.

Not that mine wasn’t, mind you. Mine just tended to involve a lot of giggling.

“You have some signs of head trauma, so I would like to ask you a few questions,” Marti said, voice professional as always. “I know you’re tired, but it’ll really help the process along.”

Ah, so she probably was just trusting me. And still felt she could punch me in the teeth hard enough not to worry.

“Oh,” I replied, finally getting it. “Is that all?”

Perhaps the hesitation in her words, the slight concern underlying her posture, was just worry that I
was going to collapse with an aneurysm or something.

*Just* an aneurysm or something. Hrm. Jigen would be displeased at me brushing off stuff like that. But what could I do? Demand they scan me faster? Medicine didn’t work like that, outside of a triage tent. And times like that, you didn’t get fancy scans. You just got the hands of whomever was nearest to you, and you hoped they could help.

“That’s all.” The redhead smiled back, but she didn’t let go of my hand. In fact, she just cupped mine in hers, rubbing the pad of her thumb over my skin rhythmically.

Okay, maybe I *was* dying.

Unless this was just touchy-feelie Marti coming through.

Touchie-feelie cops—how different. But kind of charming, in a way. Though I guess it made more sense now that I knew she was an administrator, not a cop. I’d have to get on that “work history” story she’d offered; she felt like a mix of so many things, and apparently she knew medicine too to some degree. Maybe she’d been a soldier at some point? Still, in-touch like this as she was with, well, *touching*, it was no wonder she was living in France instead of Italy, Zenigata or not.

“Okay, shoot.” I mustered up with what energy I had left. It was steadily but assuredly draining, and I didn’t have more than an hour or two left, I figured (though that number was just for consciousness, not sanity). Fifteen minutes, though, that was the current goal. I could make it. I could.

But I didn’t really want to. Sleep was calling to me, and so were daydreams about a pretty woman.

“Could you please describe for me the progression of events from the time you blacked out during the...heist...until now?”

I considered for a moment that she might have tried to trick me into talking about my crime itself, but this wasn’t an interrogation proper and the momentary pause in search of the right word indicated that wasn’t what she was getting at.

Marti was good at this, and really, honestly, probably an upstanding cop that Zenigata had requested come along with him. The thought was reassuring; tired as I was, even I was prone to slipping up a little. (Especially with so many cute freckles nearby.)

I pursed my lips and tipped my head back, thinking. The spot on my head that kept hurting throbbed a little extra for the change in blood pressure, but the wince was short. “Let’s see...” I tried to visualize it in my mind, forcing the little spots of light away.

—A dark expanse of rooftop. Flat, with short, decorative black-iron railings along the top, maybe two feet high. Five tall stories up in the sky, with blue shingle tile I did not want to slip down hemming the edges on all sides, because there would be only one way off should the wind blow me off them, because of their angle. And probably with one of those iron spokes in me for my trouble —

I looked at my leg momentarily, before I could even start my story. “Oh.”

“What?”

“I think I just figured out what this is.”

“What?” she asked, as I fingered the gauze. And then: “Stop touching it.”
“It’s a spindle from the ironwork lattice around the top of the roof,” I murmured thoughtfully, hand slowly moving away from stroking the outline of the wound with morbid fascination. “At least, it probably is.”

“Shit,” Marti said.

“Yeah,” I added.

We both stared at my leg for a bit.

“Tetanus shot for you, then,” she deadpanned.

“Fuck! Aww man, can we just not and say we did?” I tipped my head back and immediately regretted it, even before the large sigh that made my ribs stab me on one side. “I was really hoping I could get out of this day without one of those,” I pleaded.

She just shrugged, making a sympathetic (not sympathetic at all) sigh. “Tough being Cassanova, jumping from rooftop to rooftop like that.”

“You’ll be my girl in town though, won’t you?” I teased, rolling my head in her direction. “For all my trouble?”

“Nope.”

I chuckled. “He met Benjamin Franklin and Motzart, did you know that? And Madame du Pompadour?”

Marti’s green eyes blinked in surprise. “What? Really?”

“Yes.” I grinned, raising my eyebrows. “What a time.” I shook my head. “What do I have? Snowden? Yoko Ono doesn’t even go to society parties anymore....”

“Pssh. Don’t let America hear you say that.”

“Heh!”

“Somehow, I don’t think Ono’s your type, either.”

“You never know...”

I chuckled, snuggling into the chair with my hands laced over my abdomen—and the chains too. 
Sad widows can be pretty hot. Jigen always seemed to like them.

And they always liked him.

Okay, yeah, maybe not Ono then.

And not because of jealousy over Jigen’s loyalty; but because every woman that ever tried to get close to Jigen seemed to die tragically.

The world couldn’t suffer that loss.

And I didn’t want to have to pick Jigen up off the floor after something like that, again, if I could prevent it.

“Anyway, what was your question?” I asked.
Marti sighed. “Describe, in detail, what you remember from the time you blacked out during the escapade tonight, until now.”

“Oh! Right, right...Okay. So...”

—Running along the flat rooftop, with nothing but moonlight that was quickly turning into clouds. Which would work to my advantage: no one could shoot what they couldn’t see, nor could they follow its trail. On a pitch-dark night, you could hide two feet from a person and they’d never find you, and I knew all the nooks and crannies along this escape route.

But I’d have to get off this roof first for that. There was a lot of building-jumping left, and with someone chasing me I was already on plan B. There were plenty of safe exit points up ahead, but with snow coming down, upon a roof surrounded by pointy bits was not where you wanted to be sprinting at top speed in the dark.

The sound of helicopter blades swept near, and then the wind they made gusted into me. A flash of light as the spotlight came down. Some intercom noise that was undoubtedly some version of “halt.”

Reaching into my pocket for the wireless remote—

And then, my head hurting, my everything hurting, and staring at something plastic and navy-blue. A rhythmic, gentle jostle accompanied by a constant rumble—movement of a vehicle.

Movement that would only happen inside a vehicle.

I was staring at the inside of a car door, where the glass of the window met the molded plastic interior.

But it was not the color of my car. And it was not Jigen who was speaking beside me.—

I inspected the empty part a bit more, but there was nothing else. Not even a hint of there ever being something else.

Just a blank spot. Clicker, then car. And even that felt fuzzy around the edges, like a particularly vivid dream.

I licked my lips, my mouth far too dry. I’d been up for hours now without a drop to drink except that one paper cup’s worth, so it only made sense, but the unsettling feeling in my gut wasn’t helping. I’d have to ask for more when we got some. “I guess...I was running along a rooftop, right? And then I was in a squadcar.”

When she realized she wasn’t getting anything else, Marti prompted, “You don’t remember anything else about it?”

“Mn-nn.” I shook my head, very slightly, to keep the throbbing down. “My memory sort of...Hm. I remember talking to Zenigata about something in the car, but it sort of starts in the middle.” I was sure I’d known how that conversation started an hour ago. What I remembered vividly was seeing his handgun pointed at me (with a goddamned silencer on it like some kind of mob hit. Dammit Pops, scaring me into thinking someone’d paid you off to get rid of me, what a way to greet me!).

Everything that followed after that was pretty clear, but before that, my memory was hazy. The images, thoughts, and feelings that stood out floated, disjointed, like smoke. “It’s kind of like when you wake up from a dream, but forget all but the most recent bit by the time you’ve walked yourself to breakfast,” I concluded to Marti.
“That’s not unusual,” she said, squeezing my palm a bit. “Forgetting a few things right around the time you wake up is pretty normal. Please continue.”

I looked at our hands, and squeezed hers back, momentarily. I wondered if I’d started gripping hers as I recalled the events. Well, if I had, too late to deny it now. “Yeah...all right, so... He was there, and you weren’t there,” I pointed to Christof and Marti herself in turn, “And the guy with the shotgun was there, driving.”

Marti nodded. I continued, the memories coming smoothly and quickly now: “Okay, so, we got here. The stairs, with the press, which was odd... But yeah, went up the stairs. Didn’t get shot. Thought I did. Pops held me up. Stupid leg.... Get leg kicked out from under me when I meet you. Pops is pissed and I still don’t know why.... Best booking conversation I’ve ever had... Find out I like you two... And then...”

I paused, staring at the ceiling as I counted off on my fingers. Marti tipped her head up, and I tipped mine to the side.

I was drawing a blank. There was just a dark space, where the memories should be, and a little bit of pressure in the front of my mind. It told me not to go that way.

Swallowing in confusion, my throat scratched at me loudly. That stimulation, though, suddenly lit a memory. “Oh! Pills. There were pills. And then...”

Lots of memories, and being a fool who couldn’t control them.

I scratched at my chin. That stupid window. “...We got to the showers.” I flash Marti a tacked-on smile.

Marti smiled back, equally fake. “Very good. And then?”

“Well...” I frowned, not sure how to say it. “I was talking to Zenigata for a bit. Then I showered, and passed out, right? Or fell asleep, I guess it was.”

Marti nodded, somber, and situated herself a little farther away from me. “And he really didn’t...do anything to make you cry, did he? You can tell me the truth, I will write him up for it, friend of mine or not....”

I shook my head, as vigorously as I could, though it still hurt like a bitch. “No, no, he was every bit the gentleman. He lets me hang on him, sometimes, when I don’t feel good. It’s okay. I mean, I know that’s not regulation either, but, please don’t write him up for it. It’s just a thing we do.”

I eyed her, not sure if the look of scrutiny she was giving me was asking for a bribe or threatening a beating.

“Shoes and jewels, remember?” I prompted. “You can’t blackmail again until tomorrow. Thieves’ rules—once a day per person, otherwise it’s just excessive.”

She chuckled and shook her head, sitting back a bit. She pulled her feet up onto the chair—she was small enough she could fit in that way—and, crunched in a ball like that, rested her chin in her hand, while her other arm draped over her knees. “Okay, okay, I get you. And no, I won’t sell him out. I don’t think that’s a very good engagement present, a reprimand from internal affairs.” She smiled, genuinely this time, and tapped at her cheek. “So. After that...?”

“After that what? You guys got me to that exam room, you stitched me up, I played with the nurses, and then we came here, right?”
Marti tipped her head, that oddly intent, curious look continuing. “What was Inspector Zenigata
doing throughout that time?”

*She’s really on about him, isn’t she?*

*But why?*

“He didn’t...do anything bad to me, you know that, right?”

“I know that. Answer the question.”

I closed my eyes with a sigh, trying to think on it. It was an odd question, but if she wanted it, there
must be a reason. A decent reason?

*Zenigata out in the hall, glancing back at me every once in a while as nurses came and went; him
scolding me for copping a feel on them, and poor Christoff getting his knee molested....*

*Him leaving for a while, and me and Marti chatting. The thing with Christof’s phone...*

*Him coming back, being kind of a creeper on me and Marti, and then telling me I couldn’t get
anything to eat or drink.*

*And then...*

*Him leaving for a smoke, and Marti telling me to get in the wheelchair.*

“Well... there was the phone call. And he went out to get snacks. Then he came back, and wouldn’t
give me any.”

I opened my eyes, and shrugged. The images, faded already from my exhaustion, dissolved to black
as reality filtered in.

“And then what?”

“Then he went for a cigarette, and you wheeled me out.”

She tilted her head at me, and I tilted my head back at her.

“What?” I asked. “Did I miss something?”

Her eyes narrowed, just slightly. “Do you remember me leaving to head out to the bathroom?”

I replayed the events over in my mind, but there was nothing about that. Just Marti sitting behind
me and stitching me up, to Marti sitting behind me and Zenigata bringing food. And then Zenigata
staring at me, with Marti and Christof in the doorway.

Come to think of it...the perspective changed between those two things. I was facing the window
and on the exam bed in the first, then facing the door and sitting in a chair for the second. I must
have fallen off the bed or something, or they tried to put me in a place where I could sit upright, for
whatever reason.

If it was that bad, no wonder she was pressing me about it.

Shit, did I really have an aneurysm or something?

Wait. No. That would kill you a lot faster. I probably just had a concussion and they didn’t want
me falling asleep.

Which was a lovely thought, given that it was like 5 AM and I didn’t sleep much last night, either.

I could only hope that Jigen was getting enough rest for the both of us.

“I remember food, and then you all staring at me...?”

Marti frowned, just a little.

“But he said I fell asleep? So that’s normal, right?” I pointed my thumb at Christof. Marti, though, answered me with a pitying look, one rather sad.

Holy shit, was I really dying?

But she smiled a moment later and sat up straight, and patted my knee fondly. “Yup. Perfectly normal. We’ll need to let the real doctors check you out fully, but I think you’ll be just fine, thief-kun.”

I didn’t believe her in the slightest.
Exchange Rate

Chapter Summary

In which we learn some things about Marti, Zenigata, and Japanese.

...And that Lupin is a polyglot that loves linguistics, because of course he is. <3

Chapter Notes

It's my birthday on Tuesday! I will be 28. :3

The fic hit 100,000 words! Thanks everyone for the love, patronage, and daydreaming so far!

This week's song to write to: Satellite, by Tritonal ft. Jonathan Mendelsohn - Takasaki Nightcore remix https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7mhfgLLWuVE

“Thief...-kun?” I parroted back, because apparently I had nothing more intelligent to focus on after so many sleepless hours, even in the face of overtures to my own demise. (Which, really, was par for the course in my life.) “You know about that, huh?” I asked, a smile ticking at my lips, despite it all.

“Of course!” Marti replied brightly, switching tracks with ease and sitting up a little straighter (even though she was still curled up in a ball on the chair), wiggling her butt a little to do it.

Oh. Well then, maybe this wasn’t a life-or-death situation, then, if the steadfast one of the group could be diverted to something that lighthearted.

But I was not one to back down from a challenge of wit—especially one delivered by a smiling face full of freckles—so I was happy to be diverted. So I sat up too, ignoring the hunger, the exhaustion, the cold, the thirst, the shaking in my body, and the paranoia in my mind. I was still on the job here, even if I was tired enough to be on the verge of passing out. But what kind of thief would I be if I cracked at the last moment, in the face of a beautiful woman?

So I dredged up some bravado and tacked it onto my words as I pushed my head back haughtily:

“Well in that case, I’d prefer -chan, if it’s coming from you.”

“Oh really now?” Marti grinned, eyes glittering. “Not -san?”

“Ahh, too respectful.” I waved a hand, the act quickly turning into reality. “Too formal. You’re not supposed to like me that much, on the books.”

“How about -tan?” she asked, wicked. “I think you’re a -tan.”
Japanese social etiquette relied on the use of suffixes attached to names, which were the linguistic equivalent of Mister, Miss, Ms, etc. in English. As one could expect, there were just as many as in English.

-Chan itself was a suffix that was used to express cuteness, and was only appropriate to someone or something you were endeared to; for instance, a cute little girl you wanted to illustrate supportive affection for would be -chan. It could also be used ironically, of course, on adults you were endeared to. (Like I used with Jigen, who was normally so severe.)

However, the main other use of -chan was when it was used by adorable children on anything and everything, including animals and stuffed toys, before they learned the nuances of all the other addresses. This was in part because it was cute, but also because it was way easier for them to say than “san.”

-San, as it happened, was the catch-all default suffix, used between adults who were not family members. Neighbors, coworkers, that jerk off the street; it was genderless and flexible. -San was also used on older girls who had outgrown -chan.

-Kun, meanwhile, was used for boys, but also junior coworkers (including women in vocational settings, as a way to show equality). -Sama was an old-fashioned term you’d use on a lord or other aristocrat, but which you still heard from time to time in conservative settings; -tan, on the other hand, was just made up lovey-dovey nonsense.

It was adorable, wonderfully wanton lovey-dovey garbage, don’t get me wrong. But all of these suffixes came with a price: if you used the wrong one, either purposefully or accidentally, it was a huge insult to somebody’s gender and intelligence. (For instance, if you called a small girl “-kun” she’d cry because you were basically calling her butch, and if you called any given dude “-chan,” he’d probably break your nose.)

Fights could quite honestly break out over these things, as well as lasting feuds, and -tan was the worst offender of them all, in that respect.

And from the way Marti was looking at me, I suspected she knew this.

I stared at her with wide eyes, heart suddenly in my throat. I wasn’t offended, oh no; but the idea of Zenigata even hearing her say that made my future self-esteem crumble. He’d never let me live it down.

I could just hear it now, coming from his mouth, all cheerful and evil: Dorobou-tan.

Come get into my cuffs, Lupin-tan.

Oh God. No. I shuddered.

And then real-Jigen’s voice, imitating that voice, just to fuck with me.

And me kind of liking it.

I desperately wished I could cross my legs, to squeeze that thought down.

“Ah...no.”

But my companion smiled at me, cheesily. “Are you suuuure? Theif-tan.”

I suppose I deserved that, for earlier. I put my hands over my lap, politely, hiding the motion in a
cheeky smile. “You could call me dorobou-dono,” I offered back.

“Dono?” she asked. “Dolubo?”

“Do-ro-bou,” I replied, enunciating the syllables and making sexy work of my throat and tongue moving, all so she could see. The Do was in the top front of the mouth; Ro was in the top back, sounding more like an L; and Bou was all lip. With a little bit of French throat musculature, it was a damn fine display. “Isn’t it a great word?” I sighed, enthusiastically, only to throw her an energetic grin. “You know that one?”

“No...” Marti smiled, coming in a little closer with obvious interest. “Tell me.”

Such attention was no doubt mostly to waste time and entertain me, but she seemed genuinely amused, too.

-Dono was another Japanese suffix, also an old-fashioned one, that non-relatives could use. Unlike -sama, however, it had fallen out of use and was now only employed in books and period dramas. Back when, it conveyed the utmost respect for someone’s professional capacity and personal acumen, as well as a sense of them being of higher rank, but in a way that didn’t infer ownership or kinship. It was kind of like the old way the British used to use the term “master.” Not “my master” but “Good Morning, Master Johnson. Lovely day, isn’t it?”

And Dorobou. Well. That was a fun word too: Dorobou was spelled with the Chinese character for “mud” (doro) and “cane” (bou). This also happened to be the same bou as in aibou—partner. (Which itself was spelled with the “ai” of “together, mutual”—not the “ai” of “love.” So it meant, literally, two canes leaning together, which I always thought was cute.)

However, Dorobou could also be spelled, in a more old-fashioned way, with the bou that meant “monk,” and which was used at the end of boys’ names the same way ko was for girls (like in Fujiko). So in essence, it meant “mudboy.”

Which either meant thieves used to spend a lot of time hanging out in gunk before getting to their target (not impossible), covered themselves in mud to be harder to spot (also not impossible), or that “mud” was some sort of euphemism for slum or hard to spot back in the day.

Mysteries. Everywhere. I loved my profession.

Still, as I rubbed my hands together and explained this to a wide-eyed and heavily blinking Marti, I couldn’t help but imagine Zenigata in my place.

Say something in Japanese for me.

Talking about one’s home language worked every time on chicks. Every time, no matter the language in question. Soon as anyone asked to hear something in a foreign language I spoke (I spoke eight to some degree of passing), I could start the clock for getting their clothes off.

Zenigata would be a fool if he didn’t use that ladder to heaven to, at the very least, get to the cloud of kissing.

Though maybe he was the one that did it at her. I could imagine it well: them sitting on a couch together, each with a drink in their hand as they sat in front of a fireplace on some dark night. A couple of lamps on, but nothing else, so the glow was warm and inviting and intimate.

Zenigata would be sitting near the middle of the couch, stripped down to his button-up and trousers after work on a Friday, with his shoes off, his top buttons undone, and his slicked-back hair
starting to turn unruly.

Marti, in a sweater and dark slacks, would be draped against one side of the couch, watching him with that wicked, man-eating “come-if-you-dare” smile of hers while she sipped her martini. Meanwhile, in this daydream, Zenigata’s legs were crossed in an angle of repose, and he had one arm over the back of the couch as the fireplace crackled. They both took a drink, each spying out the other, but he soon set his aside, to lean in over her with a smile:

_Say something in Italian for me, oré no akakami_, he would whisper—which could mean both “my redhead” and “my red goddess.”

Oh, yes, I could see that. That was how that slick old bastard would come in: the kiss on the fly, as she was distracted. She’d be concentrating on performing the task he’d asked her for, and then he’d swoop in and catch her lips before the words could appear.

And then she’d push him off with a scoff, he’d come back in with a rumble and a kiss to her jaw, and then they’d play together, moaning in different languages—

—oh, I really needed to stop thinking about this.

“Right, so. _Dorobou_!” I coughed sharply, running my hand over my face to keep it from getting too red. “It is the Japanese word for ‘thief’! Well, ‘burglar,’ actually. Which is more accurate to what I do, anyway.”

“Oh, is that so?” Marti said, smiling, raising an eyebrow as she smirked.

...Oops. “Well, hypothetically, of course,” I added sheepishly.

“Of course.” She smirked.

Still, I loved languages and I had a pretty woman next to me listening to me talk about them, so I was quickly getting into this, and forgetting all about the worry—and my pain.

“Isn’t it a wonderful word, though?” I asked excitedly, shifting to face her a little bit more. “Do-ro-bou. It’s sexy and dark and fun to play with—just like me! It flows around your mouth like you’ve got a c—er, a big vegetable in it.”

“A vegetable,” she replied flatly, clearly catching what I’d originally meant. Still, the amusement in her eyes was dark, and she lifted an auburn eyebrow with a smirk.

Now if only she’d been in a little black dress and had a martini in her hand, this night would be set.

“Or something of that shape,” I admitted with a chuckle, resisting the urge to come in closer and walk my fingers up her arm. Instead, I pulled myself back and bit my bottom lip while I wiggled, wantonly. It was a show just for her, just because we were alone, and I got myself more animated as I rolled the syllables in my throat. Marti just scoffed, and looked like she wished she really did have a drink to hide behind.

I didn’t care. I had linguistics to talk about, and someone was paying attention to me.

“Like, ‘thief,’ right. ‘Thhhhief.’” I forced the ‘th’ out of my mouth, long and sharp, the tip of my tongue just behind my two front teeth. “No matter how you say it, it’s a _hiss_. It’s anger and petulance. But _dorobou_, man, it’s a flexible word. You can _curse_ it in anger—DOROBOU!—you can scream it in despair—‘doroboooooo!’—you can whisper it passionately—‘Oh, _dorobo-san_’—and it shifts to suit your needs. For instance:
“‘Oh, dorobou-dono, don’t leave me!’” I mimicked a terribly stereotyped needy female voice of yesteryear, and wiggled appropriately, which set Marti laughing. “‘Dorobou-san, my husband is away....’”

“Jeez...You really do think like that, huh.” But my companion was grinning, delighted.

“Of course! And it’s not like it hasn’t happened.”

Marti sputtered, her eyes going wide. “W...wow.” She hid her mouth behind her hand and looked away, only to glance back at me a moment later, and give me a blushing once-over. “You really need to get on that romance novel thing,” she added, lifting her hand as she spoke, only to put it back down over her mouth again after she’d finished. Her eyes were still a little wide as she stared at my lap.

“Hee hee hee. But like, you know whoever made the word ‘thief’ hated the guy’s guts,” I continued, holding up a finger and leaning in conspiratorially, which directed her attention up again. “But who ever made up ‘dorobou’ had some real respect for the guy. Like, ‘you may have stolen my wife but I hated her anyway.’ You know?”

I grinned, and Marti couldn’t help but smile back at me. She bit her lip, and looked sidelong at the wall, her curls flashing in the light. “So what would I be to you, Mr. Dorobou?” she asked, lowly.

There it was. The opening.

I knew that look on her face, those glittering eyes. She was scheming; inviting.

But what was she looking for, specifically?... That’d be the question.

“Well, there’s always o-mawari-san,” I replied, grin growing even brighter. “Which is rather adorable. It literally means ‘one who walks around in circles,’ as in, ‘doing the rounds.’ Basically ‘beat cop-san.’”

“Hrm.” She pursed her lips. “I’m an administrator though... A liaison.”

“Mmm...you’re not really an office lady type. So... I think really, you’d just be Marti-san.” I smiled politely, and she smiled back, a little pleased, a little nonplused. (Oh how I loved that look. Cultural exchange in intimate settings, you never fail me!)

“But that’s so boring,” she complained, smile falling.

Cultural exchange, you failed me!

Wait, no. There’s still a chance! I got this!

“Wellllll...” I leaned back and put a finger to my lips, tapping thoughtfully. “Zenigata would probably call you Marti-kun, since you work together, out of a sign of respect for your capabilities. Unless you outrank him? Then you’d be Marti plus whatever-your-title-is, I guess? Marti-shacho?”

“Sha...cho?” she asked, perking up. “That sounds nice and sharp.”

Given the way she was smirking into her thoughts, I got the impression she meant sharp like a knife, not sharp as in fashionable.

“It means ‘boss,’ basically,” I agreed, waiting to see what she did with that information.
“Hmmm.” She grinned, a wicked, dark thing.

...Apparently she was going to use that information as ammunition.

Zenigata, that poor bastard.

I could see it now: Marti standing in a darkened bedroom with her hands on her hips the way she tended to, a little pixie grin on her face, demanding: Why don’t you call me Shacho tonight?

And him just being utterly speechless for quite a while.

...Until he got his wits back and said with a grin, You could call me that.

...I really needed to stop thinking about this.

“So what would you call me, then?” Marti continued, just as my face was turning red.

“Ah, w-well...” I cleared my throat, and rubbed my hands together as they rested on my abs. The chains clinked together, not unlike glasses in a tray. “Marti-dono, if I’m feeling generous....”

The redhead put her chin in her hand and smiled at me. She draped over the armrest, leaning in, and I turned my head to smile back at her. It was a little bit suggestive, but mostly just friendly and happy.

This was kind of like late nights in a university dorm, all this—feeling people out for the first time, discussing anything and everything from the safety of the nest. Though now the nest was left unguarded, so the night could go anywhere—from romping through the woods on an adventure to awkward, explorative kissing in a corner while no one was looking. Or even just discovering a new friend to invite to the book club.

I’d never really had the pleasure of such experiences. I hadn’t ever gone to university, and any situation that involved sitting around like this always had me leaving the country in the morning, or the next week, or the next month. Because of that, I only chatted girls up if I wanted them in my bed, or information from them.

So this was... kind of nice, really. Making friends.

I hadn’t done such a thing since I was in my teens, still living with Grandpop.

It made me think of his winery, and the local kids in the town. Running through fields in the summer while giggling, playing hide and seek with all sorts of girls under the grape vines.... And a couple boys....

“Well, I think you should always feel generous to a lady, dorobou-kun,” Marti advised playfully. “If you’re really a gentleman dorobo-kun, like you say you are.”

“Hee hee hee.”

The images floated away, but they left the rays of bright and refreshing summer sun in their wake, settling cheerfully in my soul.

“You know,” Marti continued with an air of obvious, but friendly, baiting, her middle finger sliding up the armrest until it came to point at me, “when the Inspector first told me about you, he described you as ‘a man with a French sense of women, an Italian sense of fashion, and an American-style ego.’”
“Well, that’s awfully succinct of him,” I threw back lightly, with a smirk. Since it was so succinct, I wondered if it wasn’t the subheading on my file, directly under my name. He’d be proud enough of something like that to make that happen. “And what did you say to that?”

She pulled her hand back and smirked. “‘Sounds like the world’s biggest prick.’”

I grinned. “Awww. Am I living up to those unreasonably high expectations?”

“Hardly,” she replied. “Bit of a disappointment, really. Just a two-bit punk who likes hitting on older women.”

I pouted. “But I like older women. They’ve got so much to them.”

She snorted and rolled her eyes, taking a moment to glance back at Christof.

“Clearly, the old man did not tell you about my wonderfully experienced hands,” I insisted, chasing her gaze.

“Oh, he did,” she replied, turning back to me shortly, as if just to make sure those hands of mine weren’t following her. Marti held up a finger with a devilish smirk. “Particularly how you like to get out of cuffs. So I suggested fuzzy ones.”

I snorted, choking on a laugh. “Oh really now?” I asked when I’d come up for air. “What in the world prompted that? I hope there aren’t any rumors going around about him and me.”

I thought about it for a second, then cackled.

Actually, though...was that why she’d asked me about if he’d done anything in the showers?

Oh. Oh dear....

Maybe I shouldn’t have messed with him so much the last time we ran into each other.

...Though it wasn’t my fault that I’d had to dress in drag for nearly a week to escape that cruise ship while being shut up at night in a suite together with him.

“No,” she answered, to which I sighed in relief. “But that discussion was how you got those.” She pointed at my nearest wrist.

I looked down at the iron shackle. I had thought they were Medieval torture chains, and I guess I hadn’t been wrong.

“So you two...,” I asked slowly, my eyes drifting toward the ceiling along with my imagination, “...do things like that, huh?”

“Sadly, no. But he’s too straight-laced anyway, even if we were.” She frowned with a put-upon huff, and crossed her arms.

...So they weren’t sleeping together? Currently, at least?

I glanced over at Marti, leaving my head tipped back. She wasn’t looking at me; she was glaring somewhere near my knee, wrapped up in her own mind.

For once, she wasn’t blushing horribly when talking about her own sexual habits. That was mildly surprising, but maybe it was just because we were alone, finally. I didn’t work with her, so she didn’t have to worry about me using it against her forever and ever and undermining her authority.
It was cute the way she always blushed and blustered about it, and it was definitely fun to push that button, but I could also understand the very real issue behind it, if it was that.

It made me wonder again, though, how much Zenigata knew about how she felt about him. He seemed to have a crush on her at the very least—and it seemed a lot more than that if I added in that “undressing you with my eyes” look he gave her while I had been showering. She, too, had certainly been daydreaming about running away with the guy into Never-Neverland earlier, so....

How the hell were they not all over each other? There didn’t seem to be any personality barriers in the way, neither from what I’d seen nor what they’d said.

So was it simply distance and scheduling?

No, he was a determined man; if he wanted something, he would find a way to make it work. He’d drop me in a heartbeat if he found true love. That I was entirely certain of. He might come back to pursuit of me after the wedding, but seriously, he wasn’t that dense—or that much of a fool to the big picture of what mattered in life.

So it had to be something else.

There was clear evidence that Marti knew the Inspector’s sexual habits, at least to the degree that they had the kind of relationship where they talked about their bedroom tastes. But she sure didn’t make it sound like it was knowledge that had developed only out of talk, and he was not, as I knew him, the type to let that information go just for the sake of talk, either, especially with a woman. And a woman he liked.

So that meant... They must have had a physically intimate relationship, loving by the looks of it, but some pressure in the past must have split them apart....

Something about her son, maybe? I could see her being the type to let a romance go, if it didn’t work well for her kid. And Zenigata made him sound like a jealous type. If her kid was grown and gone now, presumably there would be more room for the two of them....

But wouldn’t that mean they’d be together by now? If it was years ago, sure. But if it was more recent, then maybe not?

Though there was also the possibility that the blockade was something to do with one of her husbands—a messy divorce or something like that, especially given that she was a Roman Catholic and both her husbands were apparently alcoholics, and in the case of the more recent one, a violent alcoholic. I could see Zenigata having a problem with that—both wanting to protect her from that, but also not wanting to go too far with the relationship from a moral standpoint. For instance, if the whole affair was simply a rebound after the one died, or the other one exited her life, that might explain a fizzle.

Though they did appear to be making up for lost time, so it felt more like a problem of circumstance, rather than interest. So maybe...

A thought dawned on me, all of a sudden.

...Maybe she’d finally managed to get a divorce from husband number two, and moved on from her old life.

But that would mean...

They’d had an affair while she’d still been married?
“I did get to wear his raincoat with nothing on underneath it.”

That could have explained why it’d been so passionate, but then they’d been forced apart.

And why they could show interest again now.

But he...he wouldn’t do that, would he? Straight-laced Zenigata, all Mr. Rule of Law himself?
Hitting on somebody else’s wife?

Yet, as I thought about it, goosebumps rose all over my skin.

If it’d been long enough ago...

He could have still been married, too.

I whipped my head around to stare at Marti.

“...What?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Oh...n-nothing,” I muttered, realizing what I’d done. “You’d think he’d at least have a rope bondage fetish,” I muttered to cover myself, as I leaned back in the chair again. “Given his handcuff throwing thing.”

“Right? Or at least spanking.”

I could almost hear the capillaries in my face expand, driving out my other thoughts—or perhaps, combining with them until I was nearly speechless. “You... you’re into that sort of thing? With him...?” I squeaked.

“Isn’t everybody into that?” Marti asked, shrugging with an eyeroll.

She sighed, and I chuckled, nervously.

The problem was, I could very well see him being into that, with her, and it wouldn’t get out of my mind. I groaned, and rubbed my hands over my face briskly.

*Marti, Marti, Marti mon petite rouge,* I sighed. *What are you doing to me.*

Zenigata and slapping... That one time in Thailand came to mind, of its own accord—

*No, Lupin! Be logical! Logic will save you! Think, think. Affairs! Redheads! Handcuffs?...*

*No, wait! Um...*

I tried to think of something that wouldn’t make me aroused in the slightest, especially involving the Inspector.

*Pain? Torture? Punishment?*

—*Me on my knees on a concrete basement floor, hands tied behind my back and shirt off, covered in grime and fresh blood, breathing heavily as Zenigata stood over me. His expression was pained, especially as he struck me again... And me having to endure it the best I could, given the watchers we had.*
(And trying not to laugh, because the whole situation was in hilariously bad taste.)

And then me smiling at the end of it, pressed into the floor and breathing blood, while he just tried not to look sick as he rubbed his knuckles.—

Admittedly, Zenigata had never seemed that comfortable with hurting people; it was the one place his acting cracked. I could see him being the type who was uncomfortable with crossing that line in the bedroom too, since he ran into domestic violence and police brutality off and on throughout his cases. It wouldn’t surprise me if had a hangup about it, given what he’d had to live through himself, and do to people.

And if she had been married to an abusive guy in the first place, he definitely wouldn’t have wanted to....

“Probably just too close to work for him,” I concluded after a bit, and Marti made a grunt of agreement, though she sounded mildly frustrated by it.

“If you’ve got any suggestions in that department, don’t keep ‘um to yourself,” she muttered.

“Show up in a see-through nighty with a pair of fuzzy cuffs around your fingers as you lean in a doorway, smirking suggestively? Pretty sure nobody can resist that.”

“Heh.” Marti checked the time on her watch, and then went back to smirking at the doorway, her chin in her hand. “We’ll have to see who I can blackmail for that present.”

“Him, obviously.”

“But it should be a surprise.”

“True.” I had to admit the validity in that. “Hehhh...I could let you borrow Jigen for a while. I’m sure he’s used to guarding women while they shop. He wouldn’t bat an eye, and I’m sure he’s got some good suggestions, being fashionable as he is.”

“He got deep pockets?” Marti asked, eyeing me with a smirk.

“He wears nice hats, and he’s got my credit card.” I winked back, with a cheeky shrug.

He’d probably complain the whole damn time, but...

Oh. Wait.

Marti was a widow. Twice.

Shit, that was out then.

“Wait, no never mind. No Jigen for you.”

“What, why?” Marti came very close to pouting at that, and it was far too adorable of a look.

“Him and widows... bad combination. Just...trust me on that.”

“...Oh. Okay...” Marti slunk down in her chair a bit, perplexed, but apparently willing to let it go.

“Not because of anything prejudiced. Just... put them in a room together and bad things seem to happen.” I crinkled my nose and shook my head decidedly.
“Ah, yeah, let’s not do that then. Me and Mr. Jigen, far away, please and thank you.”

I nodded repeatedly, eyes squeezed shut.

That was definitely a tragedy Zenigata and I did not need.

“His skills are scary, anyway,” Marti continued, turning to me with some interest. “Can he really draw and shoot that fast?”

“Oh yes,” I nodded. “I’ve seen him do it. Fastest gunman in the world. And most accurate.”

I grinned, and her brows pushed together, worriedly. “Wow... Two for one, huh? I’d never make it. I’m just an EMT that can shoot a taser with some accuracy.”

“Hee. Well, I have to say, he’s afraid of women, especially the pretty ones, so he’d be the first to keep his distance.”

She eyed me, green eyes sharp. “Really?”

“Well, yeah.” I shrugged, leaning back on my hands. “And if you give him looks like that, it’ll send him running.”

She laughed, and I couldn’t help but smile a bit.

“Why?” Marti asked.

I shrugged. “You know, I’m not sure. He got burned a time or two, I think, in his early life, whenever he tried to attach. But I think really what it is nowadays, though... is that, given the line of work he came from and how he thinks, they’re too complicated for him. Women tend to hide how they’re feeling, until it’s too late. And the ones around his bosses, you know, they have all these duplicitous layers of scheming he can’t get his mind around.

“Jigen, however... he’s a very straightforward person, and he always expects women to be, too, which is where he always goes wrong.” He tended to shove his feelings way, way down too, to the point that even he couldn’t understand them, but he was fairly honest about them, at least, once you got him to admit to them. “He’s a cool cat, but he’s kind of dumb about emotions cuz he’s spent so much of his life repressing them. He has a code of honor, but generally speaking, when it comes to figuring out other people, he can only recognize ‘being a jerk’ and ‘not being a jerk.’ He doesn’t actually want to hurt people, so he has trouble understanding the motivations of people who do.”

“A hit man that doesn’t want to hurt people?” Marti asked, eyes narrowing incredulously.

“I know, right? So much to love. Poor thing was in the wrong line of work before he met me.” I laughed, throaty.

“Hmm. And he’s older than you?”

I tilted my head, trying to figure out where her question was coming from.

“Yes. Quite a bit, actually.”

“Interesting that he would change it for you,” Marti concluded, with a slight challenge to her smile.

“Well, the young are the only people you can accept innocence from, right?” I shrugged, and she tilted her head thoughtfully. “Not that I would have thought me that innocent.”
It was probably more accurate to say that our different innocences—the hopes we’d been desperately holding onto lest we break—fit together well, and were capable of blooming in each other’s gardens.

“Anyway,” I continued after a bit, “He doesn’t know what to do when people have more than one feeling at a time, which women usually do, lovely things that they are. He can shoot a problem until it ceases to be a problem, unerringly. He can’t shoot people’s feelings, though, which is what trips him up. If that makes sense?”

Jigen himself was a lovely gun, but he was best when someone else aimed him, metaphorically speaking.

Marti, narrowing her eyes a bit, nodded. “I think so.”

I smirked. “So that’s what I do—assassinate people’s feelings. I just keep him around to shoot the gun, when that doesn’t work out.”

Not that he didn’t do it *amazingly well,* of course.

Marti grinned up at me. “Metaphorical lobotomies?”

“Heh. I’d prefer to call it *persuasion.*”

Marti looked at the wall, thoughtfully, her chin in her hand. I found myself gazing at her, just because that was where my eyes landed. But as I did, a view came to me of something more than just her looks.

Though her cheeks were adorably round when she smiled, she was very pretty from certain angles, especially with her dark hair, streaked with copper in the light, offsetting her pale skin. Her smattering of freckles looked like a star field, faint though they were, and her eyes glimmered with intelligence and amusement under long, almost orange lashes.

However, her overall posture was that of someone loving and caring. Her face was delicate in places, too, but in the end her body type was stocky and strong, especially in her arms, legs, and hips. She was someone powerful, but welcoming, too.

It reminded me of a beautifully engraved shield, in a way.

...A beauty worth breaking vows for?

Redheads usually were, in the old country.

“Ooh, you need to not look at me like that,” she said, blushing, suddenly glancing back at me. She pushed me away by the chest shortly.

“O-oh. Sorry.”

I smiled and looked away—*leaned away,* embarrassed. I rubbed at the spot her hand had landed on, then on the back of my neck once that feeling had gone away. My bedroom eyes did tend to come out when I was past a certain point of exhaustion.

Marti, too, turned away. She went back to sighing and staring out the door as she thought, chin in her hand. I couldn’t help but watch her some more, gears whirring on the mystery of her and Zenigata again.
“How long has it been since you and Zenigata last saw each other, Marti?” I asked.

“Hm?” She glanced up at me, but shrugged. “About a year, I guess.” She added her other hand to cup her chin. “Which is a shame. I miss him.”

“Aww, I’m sorry.” It was probably half my fault, honestly.

“He’s never come around all that often, but you know, whenever he’s in town, he’d take me out to lunch, and he always brought me something. Flowers, food, souvenirs... I miss that.”

“He brought you flowers?” I asked, surprised.

“Oh yes,” she said, rubbing at her cheek slightly to hide the redness. “He always says, ‘A flower as bright as you deserves some friends.’ I guess that was his way of saying he likes my hair.”

I laughed, delighted. “Old dog has some moves, wow.”

And some strong intent, damn. Why the hell didn’t she jump on that ring finger of his already?

My “pending divorce” theory seemed to be getting more weight.

But somehow, Marti didn’t make me mind it, even if it changed everything I thought I knew about Zenigata.

Still, in the other chair a few feet away, the policewoman who was my keeper smiled, sadly. “I figured he wouldn’t be expecting it, or me, so I brought something for him, this time. To thank him.”

I blinked at that, surprised. She didn’t look like she had anything on her, other than regulation gear. “Really? What?”

And where did you hide it?

Those green eyes glanced at me with a glimmer. “It’s a secret, Dorobou-kun.”

She said it like I should already know this, but I played along to the invitation anyway, trying to ply her lock right back at her. “Awww, but I love secrets.” I put my chin in my hands and smiled, cheesily.

“You’ll find out soon enough. You just have to wait your turn.”

“Ahhh... if you say so. But don’t make me wait too long....”

“Oh, I won’t.” Marti smirked, and sat back in her chair properly, crossing her arms.

Out in the other room, I could see the nurse again, doing whatever it was she was doing on a control screen. To the side, Christof was still asleep. He hadn’t moved a bit since we’d started talking; he only slid down the chair a little bit, ever more affected by gravity.

When I looked back at Marti, she wasn’t looking at me. She was just staring at the ceiling, daydreaming.

She really did seem like a nice lady.

I suppose I had to admit that there were other possibilities besides adultery to explain their relationship, as exciting as it was. (Marti’s romance novels notwithstanding... I’d have to page
through one, if she’d brought it along, and see what sort of poison she preferred.)

Anyway, for instance, it was possible that Inspector Zenigata and Ms. Martelli, divorcée, hadn’t
known each other more than a few years, and their relationship simply didn’t have enough time to
cook yet. Which would put this as just another date for them. It was the most logical explanation.
And yet—

“I probably know him better than you do.”

“What, do you want how we first met, the time we got naked together on a stakeout, our work
history, or what?”

My instincts, and the evidence up to this point, told me they’d known each other for quite a while,
probably years. It was the little things—the way they interacted, always having each other’s backs;
the way upsetting things didn’t upset the balance between them; how comfortable they seemed
around each other’s presence, even in compromising situations. They knew how to work together,
and the evidence suggested they probably had for a good duration of time.

And if the story had something to do with her kid (whom she made no mention of, and who
Zenigata made sound like an adult at this point)... then it probably had been a while ago—quite
possibly when she was in Venice, whenever that was.

If she’d worked in anti-smuggling, there was ample time for him to work with her on the job,
especially if he were undercov—

Oh. Ommmm.

Smuggling.

Venice.

Undercover.

...My father had done a lot of business through Venice.

And Zenigata had been gone quite often in that year I was with my dad, getting deals together
there.

It couldn’t have been then.

...Could it?

I stared down at Marti, eyes wide, but she just yawned, oblivious, her cheek on her fist.

No, no. There’s a reasonable explanation for this. There has to be. It’s just a coincidence.

It couldn’t have been that. They couldn’t have gotten together when he was undercover with the
Lupin organization. How would you even have time for that? Who would put you on two jobs at
once? It had to have been after. After, I told myself, hoping my heartbeat would slow down.
Something that happened in the course of following one of my capers, right?

Though there wouldn’t have been time for such a strong bond between them, if that were the case.

So before? Before meeting me, during some other undercover work?

Not that I knew what and where and when that might have been. You’d think it’d been so long ago,
in that case, that they wouldn’t still be this hot for each other.

But if it had been during the Venice stint....

If he had some sort of fling with a cop while he was undercover, then she had either been undercover too, or had been dirty right alongside him.

And she didn’t seem corrupt, because he seemed all too happy to have her here tonight. So she had been an undercover agent? Or maybe an informant? That could explain how she was so iron-willed and fearless, and also not in Italy anymore. Anyone who tried to clean up that place died sooner rather than later.

Though there was one other option, too, in this scenario, that wasn’t mutually exclusive to the others:

She hadn’t known what he was.

So my options were that she was either incredible, or incredibly taken advantage of. There was no middle ground.

And since I barely knew her, I had no idea which was more believable. Shit.

But certainly, what I knew about Zenigata had to count for something.

Except...

While Zenigata didn’t overtly seem like the type to play a woman just for a job, he had been totally willing to play me, and everyone else around me, and I was still practically a kid at the time. He’d completely fooled me when I’d been working with him back then; I hadn’t even believed he was truly still a cop when Fujiko had told me. I’d pushed against it pretty hard, actually, to my own detriment.

However, assuming all this was the case—which was still a very big if—it would have been a very, very dangerous line to walk for Zenigata, if she didn’t know he was an agent and he was in two underworlds at once. And, hell, if that were the case, I’d have to be careful mentioning his other undercover work, not just for secrecy’s sake, but also for the sake of potentially revealing to her eyes some giant lie living between them all these years.

I could very honestly destroy them, if all of this were accurate. Fuck.

And yet, if they’d both been cops working together during that time period somehow, during that deadly game, he must have been absolutely nuts to get involved with her. The only reason he would, would be as part of the job....

However...

—The flash of gemstone-colored liquid in warm, amber light; the clink of two glasses at a bar; the laughter of two men—one younger, one older—each grinning through the din of the darkened speak-easy’s nightly clientele as it caroused about the place—

He’d seemed really, genuinely happy when I’d known him back then. About three months in, hadn’t he... mentioned something to that effect? What had it been...? When he’d almost magically transformed from a gruff, cold husk of a soul to something dark and inviting and merry...?

I couldn’t recall it, fully. I just remembered him saying something about the wonder of women one
night at the bar, us raising a toast to each other, him laughing and me patting him on the back.

He very well could have had a lady on the side. And not just a lady of the night.

A lady named Marti...?

I couldn’t remember it, but then again, he was very tight-lipped about these types of things. He’d apparently known her for years, and I’d never even heard of her, or even an inkling of her existence.

“M-may I ask you, Ms. Martelli? Where did you two, ah, meet?” My mouth was dry; I licked my lips, but it just made my stomach rumble, hollowly. It didn’t like the adrenaline going through me, not one bit; it only made me slightly dizzier.

Beside me, Marti tipped her head at me, curious but frank. She was sitting facing forwards, with her forearms braced on her legs, and her hands clasped together. “Who? Me and the Inspector?”

I nodded.

“When I was still working in Venice,” she replied, matter-of-factly.

_Shit._

“A...romantic place to meet,” I offered, hesitantly, trying to lean back again. I couldn’t help but feel I was getting a little pale, and I resisted the urge to rub the sweat off my forehead.

“It is,” she admitted, her eyes getting a far-off look in them, but glittering all the same.

“...Do you miss it?” I asked, glad for an easy, safe question.

She smiled a little, almost a smirk. “Only the colors. Not the time lost.”

..._Shit._ So much for an easy question.

“‘Time lost’?”

She shrugged, and rubbed at her neck. “It was a hard time. I uprooted my children to be there, and they didn’t like that much. Well, the one. My boy didn’t like it, but my girl...” she smiled, clearly remembering it. “She always liked the big city. And she had a habit of hitting on the gondoliers, silly as it is.” She chuckled once, but there was something profoundly sad about the way she was looking. Like she might start crying at any second.

“You...you have kids?” I managed. _Multiple_ kids?

She nodded, but bit her lip. “I did. But they don’t come around much, anymore.”

“I’m sorry,” I offered, sincerely, rubbing at her shoulder momentarily. She eyed me, cautious, but it didn’t last long—only as long as my gesture. I set my hands back in my lap, and asked, “Pops isn’t...the father of any of ‘em, is he?”

She laughed, genuinely laughed, a short, sharp exclamation. “Hah! No, no, hardly! We didn’t meet _that_ long ago!”

Marti settled back into a happy state, gazing dreamily at the wall with her chin in her hands, and her elbows on her knees. “Though it might have turned out better, if he had been, honestly.”
I frowned at that, but wasn’t really sure I should pry that open—even if I was curious about it.

“Did you...meet on the job, then?” I asked instead.

If she had been in the military too, there was a very slight chance they could have met in the international armed forces, somehow, many many years ago. But as fun as that idea was to imagine—all late-1930s Italian nurse and Japanese soldier with an illegitimate love child to part ways with as it was, in my mind—Marti had another comment in mind:

“More or less.”

*What?* I grumbled inwardly, as though a tumbling in a lock had fallen while I was working on it. “...How long did you work there?” I asked, trying to get around it. The equivalent of adding a second pick into the keyhole.

“Oh...about five years,” she shrugged, thoughtful, and ran a hand over her mouth. “I worked in the prison system up north for about seven years, right out of college, and then went south after my first marriage ended. That was another five or six years. I’ve been at Interpol for about, oh, six now? Almost six, yeah.”

Marti counted this all out on her fingers, then yawned to punctuate her conclusion. She went back to staring out the door, chin in her hand. In contrast, a shiver went down my spine, and the gears in my head couldn’t help but whir, clocking overtime.

Six years ago.

That would have been the year my dad died.

Just about enough time to get someone a new identity.

I was starting to realize that I knew very little about how Zenigata conducted his personal affairs, and the image I was getting pointed in some troubling directions.

And yet, I couldn’t help but wonder:

The thing that pushed them apart...

...Had it been me, blowing his cover?

“Mr. Lupin?”

Marti touched at my shoulder, and I jumped.


“I just...was afraid you were passing out, your eyes were glazing over.”

I opened my mouth, only to shake my head (and wince at the pain that laced through it). “No, no. It’s just...when did you say you were together? The two of you?”

“I didn’t,” she frowned. “Are you feeling all right—?”

“Yes. I—just answer the question, please.” I swept up her hands and held them tightly, my chains clattering against the armrest. “When did you two meet? It’s important.”

“About...” She tipped her head back and counted back in a thoughtful whisper. Her fingers, as they
ticked down, came to rest against my knuckles lightly. With each consecutively higher number, my heart beat in my throat all the harder. “Seven or eight years ago?” she finally decided. "Yes, a little more than seven."

Seven... or eight....

I slumped back in the chair, speechless, a shiver jerking through me—one just the same as the deep spasms that had taken over my muscles in the locker room.

That was just the right time. Just a little earlier, actually.

And then I started to laugh. Hard.

The Venice arm of my father’s work... was how Zenigata got into the organization, then?...

I put my hand against my face, hiding my eyes, pressing against the throbbing in my forehead too, but I couldn’t stop laughing. My other arm wrapped around my ribs, trying to keep the pain down as my muscles spasmed, uncontrollably.

It all fit. It fit way too well, in fact.

I couldn’t catch my breath at all, and my head swam, prickles of light dancing behind my eyelids.

“What’s gotten into you?! You’re white as a ghost...”

Marti stood up and pulled my hand away from my face, or at least attempted to.

I barely felt it, as I stared up into the view of her, her freckles adding to the spots all around my vision.

So what was your part in it, Ms. Martelli?

She reached for my cheeks, and I was vaguely aware that she was telling me to breathe.

Were you working for my father, too?
Sin Wave (Ariadne in Black)

Chapter Summary

Marti and Zeni's backstory, part one.

Chapter Notes

Hi, Everyone! Thank you for your patience. I didn't get a chapter out last week because of general exhaustion and real life stuff, but I think this one will be worth the wait.

Thank you to everyone who left me birthday well-wishes or who just thought them too. I had a wonderful time all the way through, one of the very few times that has happened. I'm still smiling as I think of it. Thumbs up, would do again.

Unfortunately, I confessed my love to my crush of two years and best friend, and I all got was more fence-sitting. The conversation went well enough, though, so feeling encouraged, I pressed it, and......that ended in a weird, not encouraging place, and now I have to wait to address it (like a real adult), because he has a stupid work deadline until today. So, I haven't been sleeping much. Boo. But I mention this because, if anyone wants to commiserate or offer support, I'm all ears! Stupid boys....stupid timing....

The good news is, the next five chapters after this are pretty much done.

Not sure if good news, I think that means the story is now officially half done....

Half. Only half. @__@

(But it's going to be so good, just you wait!)

PS: You have the Cowboy Bebop Movie OST to thank for helping me get this done. The last scene, in particular, is inspired by the jazz song "Fingers."
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5CD9u zo9mfE&index=11&list=PLE473037637E3F77C

PS 2: Another 10,000 word chapter for y'all @__@

When I had first come to Venice, it had been a cool night in that inconsolable time of year where the crisp clarity of winter was gone but the sweet smell of the blossoms of spring hadn’t yet appeared either; that dead space where everything was waiting for the right winds, just before the advent of Easter that year.

Before I did anything else after the long train ride and the boat ride through the city, I hit up the police station of the western waters, which oversaw the international goods harbor. It was the
polite thing to do, and, since it was already the end of the day and they were expecting me, I was quickly shown through the maze of the precinct in to the top floor, and a large office therein, that had seen hundreds of years of aristocrats past.

It was a regally-old, DaVinci-designed building that grew up from the water like a particularly ornate anthill. The ceilings were high, even in this domed office on the top floor at the edge of the building. The ceiling fan whirled around overhead, replacing what clearly used to be a flat, round skylight, drawing in the cool air from the bay beyond through a circle of windows that sat below a dome painted with scenes of cherubs and angels playing on summer clouds. Apparently each of these four domes had a season attached to the theme of its paintings, and this one was summer.

Outside, the late-winter sun was going down, wane and anemic blue tinged with vibrant gold; it’d be dark soon, but for now, the water was blazing brightly.

For now, though, the plaza below, complete with its decorative mosaic visible from even here, was full of revelers, people in the throes of Carnival, complete with the fantastic costumes with feathers, cloaks, and masks of every hue.

“So you’re the new guy they sent me?” asked the man in charge of this precinct, Captain Donatello Medici. He looked me up and down, skeptically.

An old family, with long established connections, one that owned half the town and much of the wealth and art of the province for the last five hundred years. That was what Arsene had thrown me into. No pressure, of course.

For all the regal name, Donatello hardly looked the part. He had his feet up on the desk, black leather shoes crossed at the ankle. He had a fancy suit and tie, sure, complete with egregious Italian patterns and colors, but the jacket was open in an almost lewd fashion, and the top two buttons of his shirt were undone, revealing curly chest hair. He had a cigar in his hand, already lit, and was leaned back in his wooden office chair, his free arm under the desk—probably on a weapon of some sort.

If I didn’t know any better, it was the look of a man who’d just gotten blown, and well. As I wondered about it, it occurred to me that it was possible that his missing hand wasn’t on a weapon, but some poor woman’s head.

...Or a man’s, given that suit and tie of his? Hmmm.

Regardless, his short salt-and-pepper hair lent him an air of command, and it looked good on him—he seemed to have escaped the hereditary bald spot in this part of the world. At least, from what I could see from here.

Still, he was a man with dark, hungry eyes, and I stared back at them, coolly, as he looked me up and down. I sat back, arms in my own curved-back wooden chair, some relic of a hundred years ago. I crossed my legs at the knee, trying to look comfortable more than challenging. It was hard, though. I was always looking challenging, in this persona. It was a thing he did, this self of mine.

And that was why Arsene had sent me here.

“You couldn’t be meek if you tried. You’ll fit right in with the Italians. Just use big gestures when you talk. And be a little louder when you talk eh, Nippon? They like that sort of thing. They’ll think you’re a hitman if you’re quiet the way you normally like to be. Not that I don’t mind that, but you’re going to make friends. Really good friends. Not enemies, and not overlords. Got me?”
“Got you.”

“Good. You leave at six.”

I’d taken a train most of the way, and come in by boat for the rest, as one had to do in Venice. Supposedly, a shipment was coming in tonight, of Arsene’s, and I was to oversee the papers and bribing and all that, as well as making sure the Wolf’s crew didn’t cause trouble among the locals—and none of the locals caused him and his stuff trouble.

And since he was smuggling in wine and cheeses, first and foremost, along with some paintings and such, there was also to be a party with the local officials, to sample the goods and show them the caliber of our people, our money.

Now, you might wonder what the hell someone would need to smuggle that sort of thing for, but people were crazy about French wine and food, including the French. There were rare vintages, of both of the aforementioned sundries, that weren’t normally let out of the country, and could fetch a magnificent price—including ancient vintages he’d lifted from people’s cellars.

That wasn’t to say that was the only thing his outfit was smuggling this season. There were a fair amount of paintings, including forgeries; historical books; ancient treasures; religious icons; the occasional mummy...things of that nature. Old and illicit and high coveted.

And, importantly, not that likely to fight back, and only valuable to the right people, even if they did fall off the truck.

I shrugged at my local contact, brushing off his piercing eyes. “Not as young as you thought I’d be, huh.”

He shrugged, and put the fine cigar he’d been holding back in his mouth. The gold band around its thickest part glinted in the light, just like the sun. “The Wolf likes older guys, I guess.”

“More dependable,” I added, trying to ignore the sexual hint in it. “We know where our loyalties lie.”

The man tips his head once, a nod of acknowledgment. “Not much for longevity of the organization, though.”

I shrugged. “He’s got thirty more years to figure that out, at least.”


My eyes narrowed in a sly smile, the equivalent of a purr. “You think that’s all we do?”

He raised an eyebrow, suddenly catching on. “I guess that’s what you’re here for, huh.”

“I believe in going through the proper channels.” I took out an envelope from the interior pocket of my coat, and slid it over to him. “Permits, assembly and passage requests, you’ll find them all in there.”

The tanned man gave me a look, just to make sure I wouldn’t try anything, or maybe sussing out my honesty, then glanced down at the inch-thick envelope. He swept it up and fingered it open. It was hefty—and entirely full of bills with large denominations.

He pulled a fingertip over the bills’ edges, then nodded, and dropped it in a desk drawer. “I guess you’ll want to be seeing the accommodations, while you’re in town.”
“Mm?” I asked. This hadn’t been part of the plan.

“Come with me. I’ll show you around.” He rose from his seat, motioning to the window. “It’s a lovely night. Why spend all of it on work?”

I looked at him carefully, but, finding no signs of duplicity, nodded, rising out of my seat as well. “Thank you, and yes, I’d like to appreciate the town properly. Since it seems it’ll be my second home for the foreseeable future.”

“Ahh, keep talking like that, and I just might like you,” Donatello said, as he reached the hat tree near the door. “So what’s your name, anyway? Apologies for not knowing in advance. The Wolf just said ‘I’m sending in a guy.’ He likes to be cryptic. I think he pretends it’s still World War II.”

“Hah. True enough. I’m Arakawa. Ichirou.” I paused, and then added, “Ichirou’s the first name.”

“Is that...” he paused for a second as he reached for his coat, thinking. “Japanese?”

“You know it?” I asked, honestly surprised.

“Sure. That’s what my art background’s in.” He picked up his coat, and threw it over his shoulders.

“Ah... Ah!” I muttered, suddenly realizing why Arsene had wanted me in particular for this job.

...Which also meant I’d have to be extremely careful, if he decided to, you know, call up the old precinct I supposedly worked for. There were numbers and such set up for this, if someone asked, but Google was one hell of a thing.

“I mean, I can’t read the language,” Donatello said in his defense, his hard exterior cracking just a little to seem slightly embarrassed—but which only made me sigh in relief. “But I can tell you the difference between Japanese blue-paint porcelain and Chinese-made for a Japanese market. As well as the designs in the rugs and fabrics, and the ink paintings between the different religious sects over the centuries....”

“A visual guy, huh?” I asked, a little surprised. I couldn’t do any of that.

“The Medici have always loved art,” he replied, suddenly flipping a switch to being proud, as he picked up his hat. He flipped it around in his hand, just a bit of pizazz, as it made its way up to his head. “Patrons of Da Vinci, Michelangelo, their understudies and proteges.... Part of the reason I like working with your boss is to get some of it back.” He smiled. “And anyway, art’s the window into the values of the people. You gotta know a place’s culture, before you can get its art. But if you get it’s art, then you can understand its people, its soul. It.”

That made sense—and was remarkably thoughtful for a crook. Though, the guy was a smuggler on paper, alongside being a police captain, so maybe he dealt in that kind of stuff—fine antiques. That’d explain why he and Arsene had been working well together.

“You know, I should take you to a tea shop sometime,” I said. “There’s beautiful Asian culture there too, from India to Japan.”

“Hm.” The man made a thoughtful noise, one of interest. “I’d like that. A taste guide. Hmm.”

That was when, despite everything, I found myself liking the guy.
“You ready to go?” Donatello asked me.

“Yeah, I’m good. My things are downstairs.”

The man nodded and opened the door for me, motioning me out graciously. This office was, for all intents and purposes, in a turret, so the only way in or out was a stairwell just outside. There were a few other open-air offices in another room outside this door, but nothing much, and they weren’t populated. No one could hear us.

“Italy is a land of culture and tradition, and as long as you respect that, I think you’ll do well here, Ark. In fact—this is one of the most colorful nights in the whole country. I think it’ll be a fun time for everyone. Keep an eye out, though—Carnival is a lovely and dangerous time, just like our women. Easy to get stabbed. Not...that I’m hinting or anything. Just remember: Italy’s a femme fatale.”

“Even Venice?” I asked, as I affixed my own hat and stepped into the hallway. Venice was well known for being Italian, but not Italy. The jewel of the place, not the jealous lover.

“Especially Venice,” he said, closing the door behind him and locking it. “This is the one time of year we pretend we’re as dark and rich as Rome.” He grinned, and he flipped his collar up, snazzily. “Now, let’s have some fun, shall we, my new friend and guest? It is a holiday tomorrow, after all.”

“I’d like that.”

He shook my hand, and down the stairs we went.

“So you’re from Japan,” Donatello mused from beside me. “And you were Caught. How’d that work out? Couldn’t have been good, in a straight-laced country like that.”

We were on a small motor boat, not the touristy kind, passing as a couple of friends seeing the sights. There were revelers on the streets above us, both laymen and the costumers. The regular folks had their fine garments on, though there were also a few tourists and kids and whatnot, in regular clothes. The costumers, however, thick as thieves, were all decked out in masks, cloaks, feathers, and expensive fabrics. They shone like stars, buttons and bobbles and metallic thread glinting in the old-fashioned street lamps that ringed the island.

This particular island’s buildings didn’t go right up to the water; there was a cobblestone road, or possibly a public square, that ran along its boundary in a long curve. That feature was buttressed, too, so it was about twenty feet above us courtesy of a brick and stone boundary wall holding it up and holding the sea back—high enough so that no one could hear us, given the noise.

The next nearest island we could see wasn’t far, maybe a hundred feet away to the left, but it was far enough to feel just pleasantly adrift in the night, with the sounds of laughter above us and distant lights to watch us elsewhere. There were other boats around, especially of sightseers, but they came and went without a care, as did the bridges, full of carousing pedestrians jaunting here and there, and stationary couples, draped over each other at the apexes, black knots in the lace of highly decorative guardrails.

At least, the scene was without a care to me. There was a guard behind me, and a guard near the
wheel, and then also the boat’s pilot. They were all watchful, but didn’t really feel tense. This was their turf, and on the outside, they were all upstanding citizens. They didn’t have much reason to fear, it seemed—which wasn’t really as reassuring as it should have been, given the position I was in. Still, even though I’d just met the man, I felt more at-ease than I had in a long time.

It was an odd feeling. Maybe Italy as just better for me, than France was. Arsene was a rather touchy old coot, with those intense eyes of his that always made you think your cover had been blown, even if all he was doing was thinking to himself about whether or not he’d left the stove on. And that kid of his, who’d shown up... Jesus, that was another issue in and of itself. He had those eyes too, but there was an entirely different spirit behind them.

“Well,” I began to get away from that line of thinking, turning to Donatello thoughtfully, “Japan actually has a long history of Pork in government arenas, both modern and historical. So takin’ a little on the side isn’t as odd as you might think, given the reputation. It just depends which department you’re in, how hard the book gets thrown at you, or if they let it slide. Or if they just say, ‘deal me in too.’ You know how it is.” I shrugged.

He hummed, agreeing. “How’d you get caught?”

He had phrased it such that it sounded like simple conversation to pass the time between two old hands, genuine interest at the most—but no doubt he was asking, underneath it, to suss out Arsene’s capabilities and the type of people he was letting on. Which wasn’t a bad question to be asking, given that Arsene was back in Europe exactly because his American syndicate had been sold out. It was hard to get people to work with him now, so I had to do a lot of the work as one of the route overseers to build trust and confidence. So, Donatello was no doubt wondering: Was I the bottom of the barrel, or some top shelf that had just so happened to fall into the Frenchman’s hands? Could he poach me, even, if I was good enough?

“My wife.”

“Hah! Christ.” He slapped his knee and chuckled a few more times, like a rumbling thunder.

“I know, right?” I muttered dryly. “Hey, mind if I smoke?”

“Go ahead.” He waved a hand, and I turned around to let the guard behind me inspect my inside breast pocket before I took them out. You had to get used to being touched and handled, in a mid-level position like this. But the bruiser’s hands were perfunctory, almost bored. I nodded and pulled out two. “You want one?”

The guard looked at his boss; Donatello was thoughtful for a moment, then waved his hand. “It’s a party night. Go ahead.”

“Thanks, Boss,” the man said, and I handed it and the lighter to him.

“You?” I asked Medici.

“Nah. Been trying to quit. Trying to get down to one vice.” He grinned.

“What, crime?”

“Haha. No, alcohol. Well, two, if you count women, I suppose it is.”

“You married?”

He held up his hand, which sported a ring. “Of course. We’re not that far from France,
though.”

He smiled, smug, like that was supposed to be some joke between us. I smirked too, to help him out with that assumption, and used the time to light my cigarette, once the guard had given me back the silver, engraved lighter.

“But my wife, right,” I continued, waving out the flame and capping the little metal with a click, “My ex. Never had tastes a normal job could pay for. So I do all these things for her, and what happens? I find out she’s banging someone else, someone with even more, and when I bring this up, she says, ‘This is how it’s gonna be.’ So, I suspect she revealed what I was doing just to get a different husband. —Ah, right, divorce isn’t something that happens much, in Japan,” I added, my chin now in my hand as I leaned forward sullenly, my elbow on my knee and a cigarette between my teeth.

“Jesus. Fuckin’ women.”

I nodded, glum, and let out a long breath. It was all a lie, but not far from the truth, and the bitterness was certainly from a real place. It was easy to let the emotions have their way.

“Doesn’t help that that prick was my boss’s boss, a government goon. So you can tell how well that went for me.”

“Shit. That is some bad luck.”

I shrugged and rolled my eyes. “Woman just has top shelf tastes. She’s probably dumped him for some cabinet minister by now.”

And I chuckled at that, somehow. It was a fun story, more heated with every telling.

In truth, my wife had been a prosecutor, one of the few female ones. But she’d been amazing at it—and just as hardline in her emotional life as I was in my career. It’d worked at first, a mutual understanding of law and order and justice, from modern people with traditional views on right and wrong. But as we got older, we realized had no way to solve our personal problems, especially given how our careers ended up shaping our growth more than each other. We’d almost never seen each other, given the long hours, and once we had a child, everything got ten times harder, and more contentious.

Something about that changed her—well, it changed us both, really. I got more kind and heartfelt. She got more hysterical and brittle. I tried to tell her that the whole world wasn’t evil people—tried to shelter her from it, tried to not be one of them for her—but it never seemed to help. When I suggested that maybe she should stay at home with our daughter so that she could see that, so that she could stop being afraid for Toshiko all the time, the whole world had practically collapsed. She had wanted to have a nanny, rather than that.

I can still remember her reply to that: *If you want to be that traditional, hire some help to take care of your damn child. It was you who wanted one, anyway!*

I probably should have volunteered to be a stay-at-home dad, now that I thought about it, but that wasn’t exactly a thing that happened in Japan, especially then. And to be honest, at the time, I doubt I could have handled the stigma of it, given how she already made more than me, was more of a public profile than me, had a better education and a higher-status family than I did (which they constantly liked to remind me of). It was stupid bullshit, but for a man in his twenties in a society that valued, hell, ran on, social hierarchies, given that I was in a hierarchy that had always and forever been run by macho men, it was particularly difficult. Especially when you came home to a
princess that had become a harpy.

So it made sense that what happened, happened, in the end. And yet, what persisted in my heart at the end of the day, the thing that would never seem to resolve, wasn’t about her at all. I just couldn’t get out of my soul, all these years, the idea that in the process of the divorce, and us working endlessly, poor Toshiko had thought neither of us wanted her, even though the opposite was true to the extreme.

My ex-wife’s name was Namie, or Nami for short. Nami the Tsunami, they called her, in the trade.

They called me the Tiger of Tokyo, but well, though tigers could swim, they couldn’t survive the wide-open ocean, smashing down.

The sea always won. Always. In myths and movies and reality.

So I took another drag on the cigarette, and tried to look anywhere other than the dark bay around us.

But we were between islands at the moment. There was nothing but black around us, and the far-off paintings of lights—not unlike a Van Gogh.

I stiffened a little as I came out of my reverie and realized it—that this was the body-dumping spot, if you wanted it.

“So how’d you come to Italy?”

It was Donatello’s voice, soft and curious and a little bit tense. I immediately snapped my head around to look at him.

But Medici only raised an eyebrow at that, and we hadn’t stopped at all. We were speeding along same as always, waves rippling out behind us attracting fish in our black wake.

“Pardon?” I asked.

“Did you think, ‘Ah, Italy, there’s a corrupt country, let’s head there,’ or what? Though I guess you ended up in France first...?”

“Oh. Haha.” He was gesturing absently, sarcastically, and I shook my head, small smirk back. “Sorry, I just got lost in memories for a sec. It’s kind of a reminiscent place, this.” He nodded as I waved my cigarette around at the water and the lights. I continued, “I’d always wanted to go to France. And then I happened to walk into the right bar, after about a month of drinking too much in every bar.”

“Heh.” Medici chuckled at that, and looked out at the water after that. “And Italy?” he asked after a while. “What do you think of her?”

“I think she’s treating me pretty well, so far,” I said, momentarily proud of my on-the-spot diplomacy. “And let’s say... I’ve always liked the...climate...of certain industries here.”

“Heh. Well... Let’s make sure that stays that way.” He sat up, after leaning on the edge of the boat as he had been, and pointed at me. “Say. You got any kids?”

“...One.”
“How old? Girl or boy?”

“Girl. About...Twenty-five,” I admitted, not sure where this was going.

“I’ve got a couple kids. Two boys and a girl. You miss yours? You must, if she’s still in Japan.”

I shrugged, and then paused for a second, trying to incorporate it into my cover story properly. “I don’t think she misses me much,” I offered slowly. “She’s got enough trouble to deal with given the scandal of the divorce, much less having a corrupt cop of a father to deal with. She may never get married at this rate, actually, unless she leaves the country.”

“Damn. That’s rough.”

I nodded, making a noise of agreement. “An arranged marriage may be her best bet, not that I get any say in it. Actually—you still have those here?”

“Sometimes,” he admitted, tilting his head. “Not often, though. Only among the old aristocrats. And people like us—people who need to know a guy can keep a secret, you know how it is.”

“Of course.” I nodded, taking a last puff of my cigarette and then dropping it into the bay. It sank slowly, buoyancy lost in the ripples.

Pretty soon it was lost in the black and we were far past its solitary form, never to meet again.

Donatello Medici and I finally navigated our way to the docks, and I was given a tour of the facilities and the men involved. The ships, too, and their captains, were involved in this tour. There was an inspection of the goods, and then, after a crate of vintage wines and cheeses made by monks on a mountain somewhere—neither normally let out of France—was put onto our little motor boat, Medici also toured me around several of the more well-known islands, from the water, on our way to the welcome party he had mentioned earlier.

Perhaps because it was Carnival, his guys seemed pretty jovial—just like dock workers who were getting paid overtime, and about to use it to buy alcohol and a night with double occupancy (or more) in their bed. It struck me that perhaps they didn’t know what they were moving—or that, perhaps, they were just career guys, in work like this for generations, and they knew who their patron was, with smiles and waves and, on Medici’s part, their first names.

It was very nearly a royal welcome, and I wondered just what strings Arsene had to pull to make this happen—or, perhaps, what dealings the two mean had done in the many years before I’d gotten there. This wasn’t turning out like an arrangement that came about out of nowhere—and it seemed, interestingly, that Medici and his organization had absolutely no fear or suspicion of me. Arsene and Medici must have been old friends.

This wasn’t my first undercover case, so I wasn’t jumping at every little thing, but the slight differences in how the Italians operated was curious. They had one of those old-world hospitality cultures, so this was proving almost fun—though I wasn’t quite sure if this friendliness was good or bad. On the surface, though, things seemed fine: they wouldn’t go through all this trouble just to off me. No; I would have been escorted to that place in the water without Medici, if that was the case. However, it made me wonder if he was going to ask a favor of me, to ship back to Arsene,
which was a little nerve-wracking, because of Arsene.

I certainly knew enough about how the Italians treated civilians outside their syndicates, ie, once a favor, always a favor. But for other guys on their level, on the inside, it was no doubt somewhat different—more a thing of equals, though how much like the Godfather movies the assassinations got, I wasn’t sure. Generally speaking, I figured that the men of the mobs didn’t go after each other, to keep the public from having to do anything, but they didn’t hesitate to go after people who tried to “clean” them up, or those who’d paid them disrespect.

Too, there was the issue that Arsene’s outfit was foreign; the same protections probably didn’t apply to him, or his men, that would go to Italians from neighboring syndicates. I just had to hope Medici had a more benevolent view toward international friendship. (Which he could have, given the family history of the Medicis. They weren’t the Borgias, after all.)

However, this was my first longterm assignment in Europe. It was proving to be enlightening, all this touring, which worked well, given that it fit with my real-life appearance in Europe.

I’d never been able to travel much, with my previous job. I had always liked it, though, and I quite enjoyed seeing the sights courtesy of Arsene and Medici—even if I was seeing them through the dark, corrupt lens of the ridiculously rich and pretentious. It helped to understand these people, to see the world from their side, but it also helped me have something to look at, some historical wonder I could silently consider, that was free of them and their pernicious way of thinking and operating.

Still, getting out of Japan, it had changed my way of thinking quite a bit, and continued to do so; I was always worried, just a little bit, of the day I’d wake up while undercover and not be me anymore.

One of the changes in my personality since I’d arrive in Europe was broad and expected: Many things I had never quite assimilated with in Japanese culture finally fell away in the open space another country offered. Ways of living and experiencing, of relating to people and thinking about problems, finally had room to breathe and grow, and it was wonderful—though there was a bit of nostalgia, of sorrow, upon acknowledging the fact that I had to leave my ancestral homeland to do it.

To acknowledge, and then to accept, that you weren’t made to fit into the place you grew up, to the place you supposedly belonged and your family always had, was indescribably hard, especially being part of a culture that had ancestor worship built into it.

But finally being able to live—being faced with what living actually felt like, as a human being with a soul, a person with dreams that could be reached, not just existing as a cog in a machine, a preordained system—was far and away more joyous than that sorrow.

And yet, I was still always alone, as I walked through this journey of mine. I had work, but given the work I did, what could I really tell people, and what would it matter even if I did get close to the truth?

That was an odd consolation to my freedom, or perhaps the karmic drawback of it.

So as I was changing, it seemed weirdly easy to get along with the people I was working undercover against, because I was so isolated. It made me have to remind myself, sometimes, who I was and why I was there, because I was in a space where I was changing as a person, and, unfortunately, I was surrounded by criminals while doing it.
It didn’t help that one of the things that changed in my thinking upon leaving Japan for Europe was my perspective on criminals. That was a change I didn’t expect.

In Japan, it was very easy to say, “it’s the 21st century, you don’t need to do that shit anymore.” Or, “It’s 1960, it’s 1980, it’s 1990...What do you think your father, your grandfather, died for in that war? What did the emperor bow his head for, so that you could keep doing this crap? Get with it and modernize. I’ll even help you go straight.”

But in Italy, in France, in any Eastern Bloc government...they weren’t there, at that stage of development in the current progression of humanity. They may have had cultural camaraderie for any given state, but they didn’t always have an ethnic identity the way the Japanese did, and in fact, they rarely had pride in their ancestry, because the War had destroyed it all, either the culture itself or the pride in the people who had come before.

Many of the current European governments were shams, created not by brave warrior kings or the voice of the people, but by whoever had been brutal and alive after the War; which then set about creating policies set forth by the poor’s cowardly hatreds and the wealthy’s loss of hope. These countries were shells of their former selves, with, at this stage several decades later, young and old alike trying to overcome their scars and lack of parents, their shame and guilt and lack of hope—their utter lack of resources, physical or emotional, to clear away the rubble of the War to rebuild.

They were still overcoming the horrors of war, in just about every way. In Italy, it was just under the surface, since the economy and the buildings had recovered enough that people could worry about love more than food, but not much more than that—they were corrupt all over the place, because a better, stronger economy never presented itself, and might never. And in some countries, that shell-shocked, lawless state was still right on the surface.

The loss of culture in any given European country from the destruction of their precious artifacts and places was still huge, too, and the effect couldn’t be underestimated. Entire movements in art and film (and their associated people) had been lost or otherwise set back fifty years, not to mention great feats of architecture, painting, and science, as well as the small things people didn’t even tend to think about: crown jewels, thousand-year-old books, religious artifacts, stained glass anything, Greek and Roman statues and plays, porcelain, jewelry, gold works... even clocks, telescopes, furniture, and musical instruments.... Anything and everything that had ever been significant to some part of human evolution in the last two thousand years or more had been hurt somehow, its number and knowledge greatly reduced. Not a single thing had been left safe. The entire continent had been mined, burned, and bombed, and the worst part was, afterwards, some of the things that had survived through all that had gotten lost, because they were stolen into private collections or governments that had fallen soon after.

Japan, of course, had been burned a few times over the course of that war, but that was nothing new, for a place that was used to civilization-ending earthquakes every couple-hundred years. There was, of course, the destruction of the swords, which I don’t think anyone in their right mind could not wince at and rage about, just a little.

And not because of the power play involved, but the sheer idiocy involved. The destruction of thousands of katana and similar blades, even the Masamune, the very first, which had survived a thousand years of strife safe in aristocratic compounds (in one family’s compound for much of that time, no less)... thrown off American navy boats into the sea, en masse, to rust on the ocean floor. It’d be a godsend if they were lucky enough to be stolen away by some soldier.

There were still plenty of families hoping for that: that some American kid would find his
grandfather—or at this point, great-grandfather’s—old war memorabilia chest in the attic, and they’d get their sword back.

And all because some foreigners high up in the war command hadn’t realized they were cultural artistic artifacts and religious objects, rather than weapons and symbols of the old order that people were actually going to go use and rally around. God, it made me so mad just thinking about it, even to this day. The order had only stood for about a week before some other American had intervened, a much more benevolent man educated on the topic, but by then, even the Fujiwara, who owned the Masamune, had shown up and turned theirs in. The Japanese, even in defeat, were punctual people.

My family’s too, were gone. Though I did still have my grandfather’s jitte, the policeman’s weapon.

But...that aside:

Mostly, Japan’s cultural shock in the aftermath of World War II had been internal—its faith in itself as a conqueror; its faith in its ruler’s divinity. It was a laughably feudal shock that had gone through the system, really.

What was not laughable, however, was the worst thing Japan had suffered: the widespread death from famine. I could not count the number of orphans that war made, in a place the fighting had never even come to; I don’t think anyone had the numbers on it, because it was too big to count, and the government had far bigger things to worry about at the time.

In the grand scheme of things, World War II was, for Japan, mostly just another step in the modernization of the country that had been occurring since the 1850s. It was another symptom of the New Japan, always trying to play the Western powers’ games so as not to get left behind and labeled “backwards”—which would itself invite a “soft war” of cultural pressure anyway, if not outright colonialization of Japan itself.

So it was simply unfortunate that, this time, what the government had played at was colonialism and war, when the whole reason they’d let the black sails into the country in the first place was to avoid war.

And war was a horrible thing, always, no matter which side you were on or where and when it was happening. It was always nothing but horror, quick or slow...it didn’t matter.

At home, in Japan, the war itself and the aftermath had been a terrible time, but order had not completely fallen, which no doubt helped Japan in the decades after, even with all the problems. So had the help of America, ironically enough, which put millions and millions of dollars into the economy so that it wouldn’t collapse into total chaos.

Europe, the middle east, and much of continental Asia, on the other hand, collapsed into total chaos, with autocratic governments appearing, poorly timed against the industrial revolution and destruction of the educated classes.

Overall, Japan, and its cultural ways and heritages, had survived. Europe, and its ways, had not.

Occupation, rape, genocide...Japan had been one of the instigators of that, but it had never happened to her. The least I could do, as a son of a samurai family, was clean up the place after that, and make sure we never did it again.
But that also meant seeing everyone, even the people on the other side, *as people.*

In Japan, as a policeman, it had been relatively easy—and fairly cathartic—to say, *You’re Japanese and you need to shape up, son. Uncle says so. Here, let me help you.*

But when I’d left Japan, and come face-to-face with these places that had suffered such losses, who no longer had heritages and cultural sensibilities to turn to for guidance, it was harder.

It wasn’t that I wouldn’t say, if given the chance, *Arsene, you do what you do well, but the world has moved on,* or, to his kid, *You need to fucking stop chasing after the respect of a man who isn’t respectable, what would your mother think,* but I found it much more difficult to make stick. The people on the other side of the table, or even mine, they called such things “quaint” or “stupid.” Something that couldn’t be afforded. *Just get rid of the bastards,* everyone said, regardless of their position on the law.

There was an old saying, in Italy, “that when a system is corrupt, the only fool is an honest man.” And they were still living under that banner. Because their economic status, and expectation of honesty, was still stuck in that system. Justice was good and all, but it wasn’t coming to Italy any time soon, was the general sentiment of the place. The only justice you could get, you bought.

In France, it was more like, “You fuck with the wine, justice will destroy you; you fuck with anything else, I’ll check my budget and get back to you.” Outside of the occasional racist, anti-gypsy push, of course—they always hit hard and fast with those, because cultural purity was quite a popular topic, despite their proximity to Germany.

That was why Interpol was great: it was all people with raging hard-ons for hardline, black and white justice that didn’t see color or culture or religion or economic status (or at least, tried to understand it first before meting out said justice). It was lovely.

But, for my own self, while I’d been in Europe and started assimilating, had found my outlook on life and work shifting a little, I’d similarly found my view on criminals falling into two major categories: people who did it because they had nothing else, had no other chances in life (at least as far as they saw it). And then, there were the people who did it to maintain what they had, because there was just never enough, for anyone, and it was the safest way to make sure your kids had enough to eat.

And then there was Arsene’s son, who apparently did it because he was bored and honoring his ancestors.

Regardless, for all I’d said about Japan, this was also, ironically, a very feudal, old-fashioned way of law and order to coexist (excepting Lupin, of course). World War II had, in this sense at least, blasted these countries back before Industrial Revolution, and they were again struggling through the corrupt ages in many respects.

Sure, there were also greedy bastards who were total scum that needed justice in the form of a sword down the throat, and I was happy to deliver them to the judge. But no matter what case I got put on (I’d worked quite a few before going undercover), it was never as cut and dry as the human traffickers in Southeast Asia or the drug cartels in South America—purely destructive forces that were out for themselves and no one else, people and elements you could, frankly, label as evil and the Pope wouldn’t fault you for it.

And in Donatello Medici’s case, I was starting to get the impression he was one of those people who sat at the top and took blood money because the next guy who did it would be worse. The
Gentleman Don. The “sporting” corrupt police Captain.

It was fucking annoying.

However, the thing about undercover work was that it was not my job to take the place down, or decide what would be done to it. It was just my job to get names, dates, numbers, facts, and get out alive.

Which, every once in a while, caused a really difficult problem to fall into my lap.

This time, it was a woman named Annabella Francesca Martelli.

Arsene’s presumed son, Lupin, was enough of a problem in my operation, frankly, but not in a way that threatened to blow my cover. It was easy enough, at that point in the whole ordeal, to write him off: He’s a stupid kid, but not my kid. I hoped he’d get his act together and survive his dad, but well, he was a young man trying to be a crook, he had to learn to solve his own problems. He was really, truly, Not My Problem, and only a part of any given week of mine. But I did find myself liking his pluck; it was rather catching.

He did seem to know a lot of people in the Paris underworld, too, which was helpful.

However, I’d only known him for about two months at that point, and it was, honestly, nice to get away from the dueling sniper game that was the two of them.

So here I was, going to a Policemen’s Ball during Carnival with the Gentleman Don, Medici, with a crate of smuggled French wine and foodstuffs being served up by the staff.

It was ludicrous, but I’m pretty sure that was how we got away with it.

That, and I could only assume that everyone at the party was in on it.

“You really brought that stuff into a Policeman’s ball,” I said to Donatello, wondrously, as I worked on my tie.

Still, this would be a great opportunity for me—I’d learn who was on the take, who was at which level, and who wasn’t (if only by virtue of who hadn’t been let in). I’d make connections for Arsene too, which he would appreciate, and all in all it would be a great night. I might even get lucky, if the night went well enough. And maybe not even get assassinated at the end of it.

“Sure,” Medici replied, jovial. “It’s the best we can get. And it’s a private party.”

We were in the men’s dressing room—this ornate government building (yet another one), complete with its gold-gilded dance hall, was old enough and lavish enough to have one of those—and he was in the process of putting on all his medals and such, while his guards stood by to oversee.

I didn’t know the kind of party this was going to be, so I didn’t have a uniform—though the French or Japanese tones of the two I could have brought along wouldn’t have gone over the best. So I was just wearing a suit, but a fine one, courtesy of Arsene himself. (Well, his tailor, which was the same thing at the end of the day. That person happened to be a nice old man, apparently who’d been friends with Arsene when he was a boy. The man was married to a cobbler; she,
naturally, was the one with all the deadly instruments and who took the money. He just cut and sewed, a natural domestic type. Meanwhile, she hammered away all day, venting her frustrations in some language I didn’t know.)

I shook my head in the mirror, fingering gel through my hair. The thought of the old couple helped me get the wry grin on my face that I needed. “I think I like this place. You know how to live.”

“It’s the culture. Now go out and enjoy it.” He patted me on the back. “You did, after all, bring us the food and drink.”

“Oh, I will.” I got the last of my hair into place, and bumped the faucet on with my elbow. “I’m not based in France for nothing.”

He chuckled, and gave me an appraising look in the mirror as he did up a bowtie. It was an oddly sharp up-down, with eyes a bit fonder than just checking me for acceptability—so what exactly he was seeing, I wasn’t sure, but he seemed to be enjoying it a weirdly large amount. I decided to let it go unanswered, beyond checking behind me to see if it was a signal for something.

It didn’t appear to be. I stood up, turned off the faucet, and reached for a paper towel, watching the captain’s deft hands as I did so.

“Say,” he said, all amiability, as I threw the towel into the bin and went for my jacket. “You like redheads?”

“Redheads?” I asked, wondering if I had the word wrong, all of a sudden.

“Yeah,” he said. “Like, women.”

My eyes flashed, just a little bit, and I hoped he couldn’t see the slight flush I felt in my face. It was embarrassing that such things happened when I was forty-some years old, but it had been a while, even considering my residency in France. They were happily sexual people, the French, and there were certainly prostitutes everywhere, especially in Arsene’s part of town.

But that didn’t mean I met them for their services. And it wasn’t like I’d ever seen my wife much during our marriage, anyway. So, I suppose, that was how you ended up almost fifty, with a kid, and still shy—and a little excitable—about such things. The guys in the syndicate liked to tease me endlessly about it.

Lupin, on the other hand—Arsene’s young buck—flirted with anything that moved. They gave him shit about that too, but put the two of us together at the bar (or the poker table) for the night and it was a fascinating sort of torture, both to experience and to watch. People never stopped talking about how odd of a pair we were becoming.

That, too, was kind of nice to get away from. Though I suspected he’d fit in far too well here, what with the showmanship. Might bring him along, another time, and see if I could whip some sense into him about his dad while I was at it.

“Dunno,” I admitted to the Captain, coming back to the present. “Never had the pleasure. Don’t have many, in Japan.”

And the ones we did have were cursed, by virtue of being redheads. Supernatural spirits and all that.

“Well, then. I think I’ve got the perfect welcome gift for you. Considering how your wife did
you, too.”

Shit.

“...What?”

He really was going to... Hell.

“There’s this fine little thing, real pretty little woman in my organization. Curvy, probably about ten years younger than you. She’s been getting uppity lately, and she needs to know who pays the bills around here.”

I frowned at that, just a little, not quite following how that had anything to do with me.

“I’ll send her over for the night. Do whatever you want to with her—you have my permission. Nothing that’ll leave a mark where people can see—she *does* need to keep going to work. But it’s a message I need to send, and unfortunately, because of the relationship we have, I can’t be the one to send it.”

“How’s that?” I asked, curious. I leaned against the wall next to me, all gold-and-pink paisley wallpaper as it was, my arms loosely crossed. It was a loose posture, trained through long hours, that didn’t match how tense I felt at all.

Donatello got his bowtie done, and crisped it with a flare of his fingers. He turned to me, grinning, and held up his hand, the gold wedding band readily visible. “She’s my mistress.”

He explained his expectation and hopes for the gesture, mainly that he was placing his faith in me as a competent guy capable of controlling himself. Controlling himself enough not to murder someone but properly victimize, please.

Christ.

Nonetheless, that was the directive with which I entered the Venice Policemen’s Ball during Carnival.

Naturally, I spent the entire time terrified of any redheads I might encounter, which didn’t help shake the old superstitions about them that I’d grown up with.

I did a tour of the room with Medici, was introduced to about a hundred people in the course of an hour, and it was as I was on the balcony, nursing a stiff drink to wash down all the names and the crimes and personalities that went along with them, that it happened.

She arrived.

She sidled up right next to me, and set her arms on the railing, her hip swishing against mine.

“Ah, excuse me,” I said, stepping aside. But her hand, gloved in black satin, reached around the far side of my hip, sliding heavily all the way around. There was no way to miss the intention of the gesture. I didn’t pull away, and she pulled herself back in close.

“Where you going?” she asked. “Didn’t you get the message from Medici?”
There was mirth in her voice, just a little coy, and when I looked down at the woman pressed up against me, I found a mousy little smile on red-painted cupid’s bow lips.

And there were freckles. Lots of freckles, surrounding pretty green eyes and eyelashes that were nearly orange.

Yup, yup that could be someone’s mistress, were the worlds that went through my head. (Which I would feel bad about, after she stopped being pressed up against me in all the soft places.)

“Ah...well, yes. But...I... never got your name,” I muttered, trying not to look at the warm, round chest that jutted up at me—or the curve of her bottom, which was really asking for me to hold it so she didn’t set us off balance.

I quickly grabbed my scotch instead and slugged it back, all the while she hung on me. The light wasn’t the brightest out here, but I could see enough of her from the open doors and the orangish globe lights above us. She looked thirty-something, late thirties at most. If she was a mistress, she wasn’t the young kind.

Which was a point in Donatello’s favor. I’d only known him for half an evening, but he was making a habit of being as impressive as possible in all of his scumbaggery.

The woman at my side laughed, light and throaty, and detached, moving a few steps away where she had her drink set on the railing. It was wine, some of the smuggled vintage, no doubt.

“It’s Anna,” she said. “Annabella.”

“That’s...” It struck me as beautiful, as did she in that moment, standing on the edge of a balcony, facing a midnight sea. The town, and its other islands full of lights, stretched out almost into infinity, beneath the starry sky. She was wearing a long black dress with black sequins and black stones, that caught the light with the sparkle of tiny diamonds, the concentration of them higher and lower in places so as to catch the eye and benefit the wearer’s form. She had matching black satin gloves that went up to past her elbows, and her hair, auburn in the shadows and copper in the light, trailed halfway down her back, in long waves. “...A very pretty name,” I finished, a bit later than I should have.

She resembled Venus on the half shell, just in all black, and not at all spaced-out looking.

The woman watched me with narrowed eyes for a second, then bit down a smile and ticked her shoulder. “Thank you. Not that I haven’t heard that before though, mind you.” She took a sip of her drink. “If you want to impress me, you’ll have to do better than that.” She winked at me, playful.

I swallowed, hard.

“It’s a beautiful night, isn’t it?” she asked, leaning her weight to one side. Even against the black of the sea, her velvet dress caught the light, as did its sequins, outlining her smooth curves with light. She turned her head to me, this Anna did, and then motioned me over.

“It is,” I said, stiffly, standing in place.

“Share it with me.”

“I...”

“You were told to, weren’t you?” she said, a little sharp. “So do so.”
“I...ah.” I looked back into the room, but no one seemed to be watching us. No one I could readily make out, anyway. I pulled at my tie, suddenly feeling hot. There was, truly, the chance that this was a trap, and they’d use me touching the mistress as an excuse to throw me in the bay. With lots of witnesses, Arsene wouldn’t really be able to complain.

“Nervous?” she asked, smile turning a little fonder. “Don’t be.” She seemed to notice what I was thinking, and after looking around for watchers, said, “I’m nicer than any of the people in there.”

That caught my attention—as did the little bit of sadness in it.

“How do you know I am?” I asked, swirling the ice in my drink.

“I don’t,” she said, tracing a finger through the air to the sound of the music. “But I suppose we’ll find out, won’t we.”

“Bach,” I said, abruptly.

“What?”

“It’s Bach.”

“Oh, well sure. What, did you think we’d play Mozart or something? Venice isn’t that tame, let me tell you.”

I laughed at that, if just out of sheer nerves. I was acting like I was fifteen, what was wrong with me? It was just a woman. Just a lovely night.

And a hell of a lot of crime, all around me.

“I hear we have you to thank for this wine,” Annabella said, as she returned to her spot on the railing, and I came over next to her. I left a respectful foot of space between us, but rested my forearms on the railing, like she did, weight forward. Still, I tried to block the cool air from gusting onto her, as much as I could. She didn’t have a shawl, and could have used one, for a night like this.

“My boss, really, and the dock guys,” I admitted. “I didn’t do much. Just... had a chat with your boss, I guess.”

“A middle man, huh?” she asked, fingerling the pearl necklace around her throat with her left hand idly.

I wasn’t sure how to take that. After a moment, she dropped the pearls, and rolled her glass against her lip with her other hand, looking thoughtful. The liquid glittered in the light, flashes as red as her hair, and her lipstick left the imprint of her lower lip.

“You... wanted something more?” I asked, mouth suddenly dry.

I wasn’t sure where the thought had come from, from me, but it was there, awaiting an answer with bated breath all the same. The sea breeze blew across the balcony from below, carrying the strong scent of salt with it.

Wanted something like not getting pimped out by her lover, probably. What’s wrong with you, Koichi.
The gaze in her eyes grew distant, filled with reflections of earthly and heavenly stars alike. “Don’t we all wish for something more?” she whispered.

She looked at me then, green-eyed gaze flicking over; caught staring, I looked away, quickly.

But the woman named Anna leaned in, chasing me, closing the gap between us. Before I could pull back far enough, she left a soft kiss on my cheek. “At least you’re someone nice too.”

Her hand set over mine, the satin cool with the chill. She was shivering.

I set my hand over hers, happy to feel it warm. I put my shoulder against hers, and in time, as we talked about the sea and the stars and the music, the tremors slowly subsided.

When I looked up again, I happened to catch her gaze. Intelligent, gentle green eyes gazed up at me, and for the first time, the smile she greeted me with was warm and genuine, faint as it was.

I was supposed to punish... this?
Chapter Summary

We finally learn a little bit about our friend the mysterious guard.

Chapter Notes

Apparently, if I upload the text in Chrome, there are no tabs on the paragraphs, but they're preserved if I upload it in Firefox. Huh.

In other news, I think Zenigata takes pride in the idea of being Good Cop. Probably a little /too/ much, haha.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The frigid air cleared my head, and as it seeped beneath my clothes, my thoughts condensed and crystallized alongside it. Just the same as my breath did, whenever I blew out a stream of cigarette smoke from between two gloved fingers.

This fire escape was in a corner of the building, sheltered on two sides by brick. The other two were open to the air, and already the black ironwork was covered in more than two feet of snow except the closest few feet to the door. I’d propped that open with a convenient loose brick (presumably that had arrived there for this very reason) and, swiftly cleaning off a space on the railing, proceeded to lean my elbows on the iron and stare off into the distance.

That had been about twenty minutes ago, and there had been a lot that had gone through my mind in that time.

Lupin... Jigen... Lupin’s parents.

A mental institution, and my prisoner losing his goddamned mind.

A woman’s kiss.

I touched at my cheek, rubbing the spot.

I smiled, just a little.

The sky was still dark, but where before the space beyond this building had been an inky void, now the falling snow had a backdrop of dark grey, with the edifices vaguely illuminated by something more than their spotlights. Dawn hadn’t yet broken, that was for certain, but there was just a bit more light in the air—the signal of an encroaching sunrise.

Whether the day would bring anything good or not, I had to wonder. It could honestly get much, much worse.
Though it was my job to prevent that.

It was about this time that a sharp knock came at the door beside me.

My hand slipped to my holster and I took a step back to get out of easy shooting range, but really, if someone had wanted to ambush me, they could have just shot me through the slit in the open door.

“Inspector?” came a voice with an American accent. The American South, if I remembered correctly.

I grunted at him in affirmation, and soon the man who’d been driving my car showed himself, shuffling out onto the terrace. He slipped the door closed behind him, onto the brick.

His cold eyes acknowledged me, and then surveyed the view. He took a few moments longer than most—eyes lingering on each ghostly outline in the distance in turn, it seemed—before nodding to himself and putting his back against the door.

“Just here to tell you that Marti and the Snowman are taking the prisoner down to the CT scan in the basement.”

I nodded, my back against the other wall of the alcove, cigarette between my fingers. This man was a big man, a body builder I’d assume, with dark hair tied back in a short ponytail and olive skin beneath it. He looked Latino, of some sort, though he was quite tall for one. His face was weathered from long years of duty in the sun, too, it seemed; he looked around forty, maybe forty-five. His eyes were light, though—some kind of grey. And while they didn’t seem completely uninviting, he didn’t give off the air of a guy you’d want to get in a fight with.

I took a drag on my smoke, and as he turned around to leave, I asked, “What’s your name, anyway.”

Hand on the doorknob, my escort paused for a second before he spoke. “Kyle. Rodriguez.”

Mixed then, maybe? That would explain the height, and slightly lighter skin tone. “American?”

He looked over his shoulder and nodded, then turned around fully, a hand on his hip. “By way of Texas.”

“Parents?”

He tipped his head slightly. “Deceased?”

“Where’re they from,” I clarified, taking another breath of nicotine.

“Argentina.”

I watched him, and he watched me back. The snow drifted down around us like it was in a race to fall, until a brisk gust suddenly whipped up a whirlwind around us and into our shelter.

Neither of us blinked.

“Nice wine there,” I said, once it had died down. The ash had nearly reached my fingers; I stubbed out the stick on the receptacle behind the door, and then tossed it in.

Kyle, as he was known, grinned, just a tick. “Never had it.”

“Too bad. Might be worth a trip just for some, some day. You married?”
“Nah, unfortunately.”

“Then it might be worth a trip for the local color, too.”

He chuckled once, dryly, and I smirked, putting my hands in my coat pockets to keep them warm. “Tell me something. Who do you work for? What’s your specialty?” He wasn’t wearing anyone’s colors, which made me think he’d either shirked his uniform, was a desk jockey who’d been called up without time to get one on, or he was some sort of special ops.

“I’m with the locals.” He shrugged, leaning the shotgun against the wall before he went back to leaning against the brick. He rubbed his arms, briskly. “Part of the bomb squad, actually. Promoted to the desk about a year back, to answer your question about how I can look like this with a desk job.” He grinned, raising an eyebrow.

I nodded, properly impressed—or at least pretending to be. “So how’d you get to France?”

“Argentina.”

I frowned, just a little, looking for an explanation.

“My dad was French,” he replied. “They escaped to America during the dictatorship in the ‘80s. Used mom’s name to immigrate to the States, ‘cuz they didn’t want to get found out as dissidents, to answer that question too. But American officials loooove themselves some democratic patriots, just as they loooove themselves some cheap underclass labor, so they didn’t mind him filling out the forms the spic way.” His accent shifted a bit to make the last line, and he pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his back pocket. “That’s how I ended up in France, to answer your third question,” he added, referring to the racial slur. “Mind if I...?”

“Not at all,” I replied.

I stayed silent as he pulled out a lighter from another pocket and lit the cigarette, replacing all the extra materials to their slots. He sheltered the light from the wind like someone used it...someone who’d once been a soldier out in the field, it felt like.

“’S a big gun,” I muttered, when we’d been looking out at the snow for a while.

He looked down, then shrugged. “Yeah. Well, thought it could do some good against the navy brats and their stupid pea-shooter rifles.”

I raised an eyebrow at that, and he continued: “Gotta use scattershot to catch a slippery guy, right?”

He went back to his cigarette, and I stared out at the lights, beyond the dizzying blur of white cascading down.

“So you work on the bomb squad,” I began, turning the thoughts over in my mind as I went. It was a little slow, since I was so tired. But this conversation was reminding me that, yes, I would have to talk regulation at people in a few hours, and yes, there was a man out there, on the top of the totem pole, who was waiting for answers. “What do you think about the bombing tonight?”

Kyle, cigarette in his lips, thought for a moment, then tilted his head. He pulled the cigarette out, and blew out a long breath through his nose, not unlike an icy dragon. Guy had to have huge lung capacity; he was as wide as at least two of me—or at least, he felt like it. “I’ve seen worse.”

My eyes snapped shut, and I resisted rubbing my forehead. “What I mean is, what do you think was involved?”
“Oh. Well. I know those buildings. They’re old. Made of two-ton stone and more, huge old-growth wooden girders, and granite brick. If you wanted to collapse it with anything other than a missile, you’d need at least C4. And a decent amount of it.” He put his weight on his hip, and rested his hands on the brick, not unlike a fashion model in repose. “That answer your question?” he asked, genuinely curious.

I frowned, cursing in my head because of what it implied toward Lupin, but eventually I nodded.

“Did you see the explosions go off?” Kyle asked me, suddenly.

“Mn? From the top, yeah. I was on the next roof over.”

“For real? Ah, hell.” He shook his head, and took another drag of his cigarette, as if just to deal with the thought. “I knew you came out of the rubble, but I didn’t know you were that close to it. Hell.” He snorted and shook his head, removing the cig for a moment to blow a large breath out—one that ended up obscuring his whole face in fog for a bit. “The reason I ask though—did you see the trajectory of the blast?”

I’d seen...light. Just a lot of light, and then sweeping flames. “Not really. I just saw a bunch of light, I guess.”

“That’s right.”

“What?”

“Light.”

“...Light?”

“Yeah. Light. Most of what came out of the top was just flash. I’m not saying there weren’t explosions up there, but from what I saw, what came from the inside of the building was explosive force. What came off the roof was just light. Now why would you do that, if you wanted to blow up the place? What purpose would that serve?”

I narrowed my eyes at him sharply, trying to suss out the meaning. But nothing came of that breadcrumb trail in my tired mind, except the omnipresent understanding of Lupin’s crimes as being wrapped in often inexplicable (on the surface, anyway) onion layers.

That was part of what I liked about dealing with Lupin, really. It was a challenge, and understanding him from afar—peeling apart those layers—was a thrilling, satisfying cat-and-mouse game. But not when it involved civilian destruction like this. This...this was just inexcusable.

But there still had to be a reason. There was a reason to everything Lupin did. It was just a matter of getting far enough down the onion layers.

“The explosion that leveled the building was in the basement. The stuff on top was mostly harmless, I think—except for the blasts that actually knocked out the top floors, of course, but those were interior too,” Kyle continued, gesturing with his cigarette. “But I gotta tell you—if the explosives had been just at the top, the top couple floors would be gone, and definitely the guy on top of it, but not the whole thing. The one in the basement was what pancaked the place, I can tell you that from here. I don’t know what was going on with the stuff on the roof, but whoever planted that stuff in the basement, they wanted that building and everything in it gone, no two ways about it.”
A bunch of women, all of disparate races and ethnicities, but all of a somewhat young age.

Lupin would have no reason to want that gone, but the Commissioner might. Especially if he was in someone’s pocket.

The furious look I gave Kyle as I considered the implications could have intimidated a raging attack dog to back down, but he simply raised his eyebrows, prompting. He was probably used to murderous-looking COs.

I ran my hand over my mouth, over the wire-bristle stubble; I held my hand out, only to replace it to my face, and some iteration of that several times as I cycled through different thoughts. “Let me ask you something,” I said eventually, to which Kyle nodded patiently.

“Why aren’t you mad.”

He jerked at that, surprised. “What do you mean?”

“This is your town. This is good people dead. Why aren’t you upset? Or even sad?”

Kyle blinked a bit, but as I stared him down, he started smiling. He smiled, a smirk cutting across his face.

“I’ve seen a hell of a lot worse.” That grin only widened, but it was hardly a happy one. It looked a little maniacal, in fact. “You ever been to Iraq, Inspector?” he whispered.

“Hmph.” I didn’t like that wild look, so I set it aside, refusing to play along with it. The last thing I needed was two people going crazy on me tonight, especially the one with the big weaponry.

Though it did make me wonder why he’d been given a desk job.

“You sure you should be carrying the gun?” I asked him, as he tossed his cigarette into the ash stand.

“Pssh. I’m fine.” He waved a hand, mostly back to normal, and bent down to pick up his shotgun, which was slightly snowy on one side now. “Anyway, we’ve got the guy behind it, right? So justice will be served soon enough.”

“Not by any of us, mind you. We’re just transport.”

He gave me a look for just a moment, and I held it, refusing to back down—and making sure he knew exactly where I stood on that.

He tilted his chin at me, an affirmation. “Sure, sir. Whatever you say. Mind if I head in?”

“Wait for me,” I said, “though you can wait inside, if you’d like.”

He nodded, and disappeared inside the heavy iron door.

My hand curled into a fist, and after a grumble, I let my fingers uncurl into the air with a frustrated sigh—and then smacked my palm down on my leg. I expected “let’s mete out some justice ourselves” would happen from somebody, but I was starting to hope I’d skirted it. Guess not.
And that smile of his.... I suppressed a shudder just thinking about it.

The question was whether or not he was working for the Commissioner, too. He had to be, or else why would he be here?

Come to think of it, he’d been at the back of the townhouse building, when I’d dragged Lupin out of it. He was standing by a squad car, calling in help. Christof had been nearby, hanging out by the pond behind the building—because he was a fireman, so why wouldn’t he be next to the safest place against fire—and together the two had come over to help as I had laid Lupin out on the grass. The area behind the building had been sparsely populated, so there wasn’t a lot of assistance, given the chaos that had just scattered the ants out of the anthill.

Christof had wanted to wait for paramedics, but the building was still in the process of collapsing and getting a raging inferno going, so I’d just grabbed Kyle, as I knew him now, threw Lupin in the car, and off we’d gone with Christof coming along, to the first place that Kyle knew that wouldn’t be a general hospital that other vics would go to.

*That’s right*. Now that I thought about it, this place—it was Kyle’s doing.

So if he was working with the Commissioner, it could very well have been a trap all along, and now we were simply fish waiting in the barrel.

But that was assuming a lot of planning that I wasn’t certain there’d been time for. Lupin had announced his crime beforehand, but it had been sheer coincidence that we ended up with the people in the car that we did. *Every* cop in this town couldn’t be corrupt.

...Hopefully.

Though, Rodriguez wasn’t “every” cop. He’d been promoted to a desk job, so he was up high somewhere.

*Up high on the bomb squad.*

*Standing at the back of the building, mostly by himself, with a getaway car....*

Though, he hadn’t shot us when he had the chance, or abducted us, which had to count for something. He also wouldn’t have told me those things about the bombing just now if he were working for the Commissioner’s agenda, right? He had sounded pretty genuine about it.

One explanation, in that instance, would be that it was all a lie.

Or:

He wasn’t expecting me to get out of here with it.

*“Gotta use scattershot if you want to catch a slippery guy, right?”*

...Or a cop, before he could draw his handgun.

I gazed out at the buildings, still lost in their delirious snowy haze, and took a shaky breath.

My concern for Lupin was the first to come to mind, fueled by the view of him unconscious a few hours before and then, as he was when he first woke up—half cogent and covered in blood, and completely vulnerable.
But that passed quickly enough, and what stuck in my head, and gripped my heart, was Marti. I couldn’t stop thinking about her being trapped here with this danger. I could never forgive myself if something happened to her because of me. That was, truly, the last thing she deserved—more trouble because of men.

I sighed and put my head in my hand, rubbing my forehead.

_This is exactly what I need in my night. ...Again._

Eventually, I grumbled to myself and let out a breath I didn’t know I’d been holding. Roughly, I stubbed out my cigarette on the rail, dirtying the new snow that had fallen while I was here. At this rate, someone could simply dump our bodies in the back yard of this place and they wouldn’t be found until spring.

As the last trails of moisture left my lips and I went inside, heaven’s soapsuds were still falling in thick clumps all around us, too dense to escape.

* * *

“I’m fine. I’m fine, really. Probably just a bloodsugar thing...”

A cup of water pushed at my face anyway, followed by a feminine voice. “You still need to drink this.”

“Do what Telli says,” the Norweigan boy scout added. He’d woken up, in the commotion, and was now standing at my left foot, arms folded and looking as stern as he could probably get, courtesy of his sleepy, grumpy face.

It was as I was sighing and whining Martelli’s name that a third shadow fell over me, completing the eclipse.

“Everything all right here?”

I looked up to find a familiar brown hat, and the scent of a dust-covered trenchcoat, underpinned by cologne. It was Zenigata, standing to my right, arms crossed and head backlit by the lights to the point that he had a halo.

“Oh thank God you’re back,” I muttered, and snatched away the cup, quickly downing the contents so I didn’t have to explain anything else. I barely had room to complete the maneuver, as everyone was hovering so close.

He raised an eyebrow, but Marti quickly redirected his attention with a sweet tone: “My thoughts exactly.” She stood up, grinned, and touched at his elbow with a swish of her hips. “I’ve got a couple things of note for you.”

The Inspector frowned, but, looking over everyone once with a critical eye, he nodded all the same. I eyed Marti, and that swish in her hips. Seemed our conversation had gotten her in a certain mood.

Zenigata, meanwhile, looked over me briefly, but apparently finding nothing of interest there, he gave the woman a jerk of his head toward the exit doorway. He turned on his heel to leave, his coat flapping aside with distinct crispness. A few remnants of dust puffed out of the seams.
“Well, that’s my cue,” Marti announced, flashing me a kindly smile and patting me on the knee. “Bye for a moment.”

“Don’t let that old man push you around,” I offered half-heartedly, as a parting gift. My gut clenched at the words though; my mind was still reeling with the implications of having worked with Zenigata in Venice, alongside his undercover work, and thereby, my father’s operation.

You would think I’d run into her then, at some point, but my mind wasn’t forming any leads on that front.

“You’ve clearly never been married,” she winked, and waved a hand over her shoulder as she walked into the hall.

The chuckle I gave her was a stiff one, as I watched her go.

However, for all my concerns, she really was a friendly person. She also, as an aside, had a nice sway to her hips, and a hint of an hourglass curve, too, from behind.... Seeing that woman in a dress was probably a knock-out.

Which was what worried me, a bit.

Not that pretty women weren’t trustworthy. It was just that the ones in my line of work never were.

As she departed, my mind filled in the long lines and frilly ruffles and the pattern of the fabric that would cloak Marti’s form, and within moments, it was easy to imagine the two of them going off to a ball in all their finery, leaving me to a night of tinkering with machine systems for Donatello di Medici.

The fun was short-lived, however. When Marti—presumably—met up with the Inspector to talk, it was away from my view, around the corner. I couldn’t see them at all, and even straining to listen with the two giants breathing down my neck, I couldn’t hear anything. Damn.

Admittedly, it was nice to see that Zenigata hadn’t gotten shot out in the snow (probably the Russian feels of this place coming back to haunt me), but he didn’t look much happier. Less tense, maybe, but still just as grim. I wondered if he’d gotten another phone call while he was out, and that was what had taken so long.

And just as he’d turned the corner this time, the old man’d glanced at me momentarily, but I couldn’t quite make out the tone of it. It seemed...concerned, but not in the usual way.

It sent a little shiver of worry through me—he wasn’t normally this cautious around me, even if he did expect an escape. Was I dying and didn’t realize it? Maybe that was why they were stalling all this time?

No, Lupin, that’s stupidly paranoid, stop. Pops wouldn’t do that to you.

Though, I’d seen a newspaper article once, of the arresting officers of Clyde, of Bonnie and Clyde fame, standing around in a circle in a field drinking and smoking and chatting with him tied up in the center, while the local reporters snapped pictures and took accounts. He died later that day or the day after from his wound, clearly evident in the picture. At that point, he’d looked about as well as I felt.

So it wasn’t really impossible, the idea that your arresting officers would just stand around until you expired, either unaware, or too aware, to care. It went on all the time in shadier parts of the world, and our descent into this dark place hadn’t really helped. And it was cold down here; I kept
shivering.

The guard with the gun came back around this time as well, appearing from the shadowy hall like he was part of it and coming to lean loosely in a corner of the open-air doorway. He gave me the eye, then looked at Christof calculatingly; but Christof just shrugged. So the other guy shrugged too, and went back to idly guarding.

I guess we’d just have to wait and see what the prognosis was, of me, and if it was the reason for all this shadiness. I took the paper cup and dropped it in the trash can that sat a couple of feet away, taking care not to use any more muscles than necessary.

“What’s going on over there, anyway?” I asked Christof, motioning to where Zenigata and Marti had gone to conference, and then rubbing my arms to get the shaking to stop. Laughing that much, albeit hysterically, had taken a serious toll on me, along with Marti’s impression of my sanity, no doubt. I’d gotten lightheaded and dizzy, shoved all my injured torso muscles against my injured ribs, so both of those were complaining; and the energy of the effort seemed to have been more than I could spare, too, so now I really was jittery with low blood sugar and whatever else. Stupid high metabolism.

“They’re worried about you,” Christof replied, kindly. He gave me a big-brother smile from way up high, and clapped me on the back.

*When did you get to be the big brother?* I eyed him, blackly. I’d have to follow up on that.... He seemed like the type to have a little sister, now that I’d seen him action a bit.

“So I’m not dying?”

He shot me a queer look. My voice must have sounded too truthful for once. “No? What makes you say that?”

“You’re all acting suspicious as fuck. I’m either dying or you’re about to make my life miserable. That’s how these things go.”

I glanced at the guard, but his face was stone. Going back to Christof, I found his lips tightened into a frown, laced with frustration, but it was more pitying than anything. It was a weird look. There was definitely something they weren’t telling me. Though maybe he was just offended?

“That’s not going to happen.”

“What makes you say that?”

He gave me a look that was the Kindly Norwegian version of disappointed consternation, and it stung. *Little rock, you have failed to grow the moss I wanted.*

“Have a little faith in us, okay? As people, if not as cops,” Christof said. “Haven’t I tried to be nice to you despite everything?”

I sighed—he did have a point. He’d done an exceptional job of *not* beating my ass blue.

“Sorry...it’s just.... If they’re worried about me, they should let me see one of the doctors around here. I’m pretty sure I’m on my last legs.”

“What...like, mortally?” He gave me an updown.

“No, just exhausted. But that can change instantaneously, if there’s something stupid going wrong in me. Like, I could have a ruptured spleen or something.” I snapped my fingers, to illustrate the
It wasn’t really a good thing to admit, if you were a prisoner around unfriendly forces, but Zenigata was nearby. Nobody was going to take advantage of it, even if I did pass out. Er...again.

The rookie with the chiseled facial features studied me a few moments more, then looked away, face softening. Christof grunted in thought, narrowing his eyes as he stared into the machine room.

It seemed I was forgiven.

As I followed his gaze, however, a niggling little warning sign in the back of my brain tingled at the idea of the doctors in a place like this. I’d had more than my fair share of run-ins with unethical ones, and my thought about Zenigata being unable to pick his crew crept up into my mind again. It stood to reason that he’d had to pick this place on the spur of the moment, since he didn’t start the night expecting me to need a hospital.

Except...that phone call. What had that call been about, that it had taken so long, and grumped him out so much? He wasn’t just getting chewed out by his superiors, was he...? It had to be something else, otherwise he would have come back all cheerful and playful and rubbing the arrest in my face, even if he was worried about my wounds.

This really wasn’t good.

And now Marti... I shivered and rubbed my arms, my breath shaking as I sighed it out. The fact that she was here, in this place, at this time, all of a sudden, could have been exactly what she’d said it was, which was what I wanted to believe.

But it could also be something else.

Something like, Hey, woman who Zenigata used to like. Distract the Inspector so someone can murder Lupin, and we’ll pay off your debts.

“Hey, Christof,” I began, lowly.

“Yes?”

“Make sure you check the bottles before they inject me with anything, ’kay?”

“Who? Telli and the Inspector?”

“No! The nurses, obviously.” I waved a hand. “Just thinking a few steps ahead.”

“Ah.” He sounded unimpressed. “Why are you so paranoid?”

“Because I’m world-famous.” I flashed a grin. It was taking more and more energy to do that; I didn’t have many left in me. In fact, my head swam a bit at the heavier breath, and I pushed my palm against my head to steady myself.

“Ah,” he said again, putting a hand against my shoulder to steady me. It was an almost bored gesture, it was so perfunctory.

“Are you cold?” he asked after a moment had passed and I had regained my upright position.

“Yeah, a bit,” I admitted, miserably.

“Here.”
Christof quickly stripped off his police-line jacket and handed it to me. “Don’t make me regret doing that.”

“Hah, you’re sounding more and more like Pops every day.” I flipped the jacket around and set it over my shoulders. It was too big, and came with his residual heat, both of which made me sigh happily as it swallowed me. “You may have a chance as their adopted son, yet.”

He smirked, only to say a second later with wide eyes: “Wait, what?”

It was my turn to smirk, and quirk my eyebrows at him playfully. “You heard me.”

“I have parents, thank you.”

I shrugged, a minimal gesture, given how I was feeling. “That’s cool. I don’t.”

“You...don’t?” he asked quietly, turning to me fully.

I shook my head, fingering the zipper of the jacket. If I was lucky, he might have left something in one of the inside pockets that I could use to escape. Like car keys, for example. “Nah. Both dead. At least, I suspect so.”

“Oh.... Wait, you don’t know?”

My shaking head just continued to shake, slow and steady. “Nope. Never did find out what happened to Mom.”

The silence that followed that was stifling. The guard to the side shifted just a bit, the gun butt clicking softly against the ground; beside me, Christof took a pointed breath. But it didn’t turn into words.

I could feel the little prickles of unconscious panic trying to jab their way into my mind, from somewhere deep-seated, and I rushed to find something else to talk about. I took a deep breath, finally leaving the jacket alone and forcing my head back. “Well, the other reason I’m so paranoid is because we’re also in the basement of a deserted hospital.” I flashed him a grin. “You play video games at all?”

At that, he tipped his head and narrowed his eyes. He considered me, then the doorway and the spooky light above the exit door. He looked at the guard, his head tipping even further, until it was a little too far to be natural. He was thinking about something, very hard, and the guard raised an eyebrow in response.

“Which Silent Hill was that?” he muttered.

I looked at the guard too, grateful that the change of subject stuck and ready to follow it fully. From this angle, the man in the corner did look a bit like Pyramid Head, tall and imposing. Alongside the shotgun barrel and the shadows over his head that clung to the walls, he made a decent facsimile. I snorted, spontaneous, but cut it off in the middle to hold my aching side with an “ow.”

“All of them, little brother,” I replied when I caught my breath, clapping Christof on the hip lightly, a mockery of what he’d done to me. “All of them.”

“Brother—?” he wondered, staring at my hand with alarm. And then: “Little?!”

I grinned at him, raising my eyebrows. “That’s right.”
“Told you I’d win this game, Rookie.”

My snowbird turned to the bear, blushing. “Well, I...”

I followed his gaze. Our guard was basically twice as big as Christof, mass-wise, and just as tall, if not taller—which was quite a feat, because Christof wasn’t small in any way, either. The guard, though, his arms were probably bigger around than most men’s thighs.

“Yo dude, what is your name, anyway?” I asked him. And when he didn’t respond: “Does he speak French?” I whispered, looking up at Christof.

“I dunno,” he replied. “I’ve never seen him before tonight.”

“It’s Kyle,” came the voice from across the tiny space, gruff, and in English that sounded distinctly American. <“And yes, I speak French.”>

That last part was in French, though with a strange accent.

<“I also speak Spanish,”> he concluded, with a South American accent.

I raised an eyebrow. An American? He did look swarthy, a bit like a Latino, but he wasn’t small like most of them. Maybe the French is just book-learned? Or from the military?...

But that would mean that he was from Interpol too. But no, that couldn’t be; there needed to be some local around, so it had to be him. Huh....

“‘Kyle’?” I asked. “I knew a Kyle, once. He died.”

“Good thing I’m not him,” our constant shadow said.

“You know what, I don’t want to curse you with that. What’s your middle name?”

“Avellino.”

“Aw, that’s cute.”

It meant Longed For, in French.

He blinked, hard, and took a long breath while his eyes were scrunched closed.

“You do realize I have the big gun, right?” he asked back.

“Of course,” I said, perky. “That’s why you’re fun to tease. Got a nickname?”

His eyes opened and he glanced aside, sullen and silent.

“Is it ‘Brick’?” I asked, grinning.

He sighed, head bowed, and shook it; it was a look that said he already knew the value in admitting defeat against my inquisitive talkativeness.

“It’s ‘Juice.’”

Christof and I both tipped our heads, albeit in opposite directions. “Interesting,” Christof said for me.

“You think you’re so funny,” he said, rolling his eyes with a sigh. “It’s because...I don’t drink coffee.”

We both stared at him, tipping our heads the other way this time, until they almost knocked into each other.

The man, Kyle, rallied his embarrassment (which looked a lot like shy misery) and made his countenance shift back to the three-hundred pound bear of pure muscle that he was as he spoke again, pushing his shoulders and head back: “So they called me juice. Cuz I’d drink juice. Or energy drinks.”

“Ooooh,” I muttered, approving. “Nice. So that’s why they give you the gun.”

He frowned, demanding an explanation.

“You aim doesn’t shake like everyone else’s on a stakeout,” I said, raising my hands and illustrating the point. “Because you’re not drinking five cups of coffee.”

“Oh. Ha. Maybe not.” He looked at his top hand then, considering it. There was a little smile on his lips, at least initially. I counted it a victory, and I smiled back. It seemed I had a little bit more energy, chatting like this, so I still had a few left—or maybe I was getting bonus ones from sheer amusement.

“Say... How much can you bench?” I asked.

There was a pause, and then, as he held out his arm and flexed his bicep in thought (and it turned into a floating mountain for the benefit of us to see): “Ehh...six of you, give or take.”

“Oh good,” I whistled.

“Well, sure,” I stated, at Christof. “Who else is going to take you down when I escape?” I motioned at “Juice” politely.

“Hey, wait a minute...” Kyle said, and in the next instant, Christof and he were staring each other down, both looking bewildered, and then, defensive.

I just smiled from where I sat, wholly satisfied.

Wolves: 2, Giants: 0.

* * *

“Thanks for helming the ship for me,” I said, as Marti and I got out into the hallway. We went far enough away that no one would hear, at least as I figured, and parked under one of the creepy lights. The rest of the hallway was dark, except for where the exit light shone all the way down the hallway like a distant star, and where the light from the showers spilled into the hall, about halfway down.

“Sure. Any time.” Standing in front of me and leaning on the stone brick, my impromptu partner smiled pleasantly. She was never bothered by spooky places, probably because she’d worked nights in a lab when she was in Venice, and maybe other times at the castle-turned-prison too, for
all I knew. “First Mate Marti, at your service.”

I grinned, not able to help it. I did manage to bite back the term of endearment that was threatening, though, one that would not have been professional at all:

*You’re so damn cute.*

It probably came out through my countenance, though, because Marti just smiled mousily, as if I had really said it.

“So,” she announced, leaning against the wall to match me, “I got the information you requested.”

“Yeah? I’ve gotten a little more too, while I was out. But you first. What’d you find out?”

She nodded. “So...it seems to be as suspected. He doesn’t even remember you coming in to talk to him alone. He knitted together two different events to collapse the hole in his memory. Instead of remembering that I’d left with Christof to hit the can and you came in to speak with him, he remembers you leaving to have your cigarette, and me never leaving at all.”

That was... oddly specific. Though Lupin did have a smart mind, even if it was malfunctioning. He could probably rewrite himself plenty of complicated narratives, to make up for something he didn’t want to remember. And because of the way he lived his life, it wouldn’t even be that unbelievable, for him—the more complicated, the more believable.

“And you think it’s real?” I asked, in the end.

She nodded, mouth ticking down. “Yeah.”

I nodded, though it was with a sigh. I looked over my shoulder, at the doorway and the light spilling out of it. *Damn....*

“This is so frustrating,” I admitted, as I put my back against the wall. “He’s not supposed to be the one losing his damn mind.”

Marti tipped her head. “Who is?”


“Hm.” She nodded in understanding. “He just seems to be having a little bit of trouble tonight,” she added to soothe me, turning her back to the wall as well to mirror my posture. I glanced at her doing that, an up-down, and when I got to her face with the question on mine, she just smiled perkily, and I rolled my eyes, biting down a smile and a simultaneous huff of amusement.

“The good news is, he’s still functioning perfectly well around this. So your thief is still a perfectly good thief, he’s just got a pit trap around this one thing.”

“More like a bear claw,” I muttered, referring to the metal-toothed traps that went off when you stepped on them. “So what’re we gonna do about it?”

“Nothing more than the existing plan,” she admitted, taking a breath. “I’d say, let him have his surgery, and if the problem persists, we regroup to figure out more. I haven’t yet figured out if he knows it’s even happening.”

“I think he does,” I noted, thinking back to the showers. “At least, he knows that something can set him off into being unstable, which then leads into the flashbacks. Though, it’s unclear what his
experience of it is—if he knows he’s blacking out during them, or not.” I wish I knew what was going on in his head while it was going down; if I could just toss his mind onto a TV screen, that’d sure be helpful.

If I had to take a guess, I’d imagine he knew he was having the flashbacks, but didn’t actually know what he did in them, for obvious reasons. But Lupin was hyper aware. He’d notice when he was missing something.

...Except Marti had just gotten done saying that he didn’t. Hell. Maybe this was worse than I thought.

*What the hell would cause this?* In a guy like Lupin, no less? It had to be something when he was a kid. It *had* to be.

“Right,” Marti agreed. “But if he knows he has that history of flashbacks, he might tell us why. Or just be willing to work with us to prevent further onsets. It can’t be pleasant for him, either.”

“Maybe.” I nodded. If we couldn’t figure it out on our own, letting us in on the secret might be something he’d be willing to do, in the short term, if I could pose it as an appeal to his professionalism, or a plea from me. The other question that lingered though, was, *What the hell is setting him off? Me?*

“Seems he really likes you, too,” Marti added, surprising me. I looked up at her, the question on my face.

“I asked him if you messed with him, in the showers, or any other time,” she said, with a slight smile, her eyes glittering. “To establish that he could trust me, should he not be able to trust you. Good cop stuff, doctor-patient trust, you know how it is.” She made it sound flippant, for my sake, but I knew she took it very seriously. Still, she went on: “But he defended you the whole time. I think he was worried I was going to try to bust you for being so nice to him.”

“Huh.” I chuckled at that. I could see it: him sitting next to her, pleading, *No no! Don’t take my Inspector away. I like him. He’s the nice one!*  

...Though really that was just my wishful thinking. But still. It made me feel unreasonably good, to think that a good lawman was appreciated, even by a criminal. Especially by one.

“That also means he thinks you’re more straightlaced and determined than even me,” I said to Marti, raising my eyebrows with a smirk.

“I hope that doesn’t make you jealous?” she teased, lightly whacking her hand against my arm.

“Hardly.” My fingers flexed as hers brushed mine, chasing hers just a little.

When our eyes met again, we were both smiling.

I wanted to lean down and kiss her cheek to punctuate that sentiment, to taste her pretty spice once more after so long...but we weren’t on a date, sadly. So I just set my hand on her belt, loosely. She swayed a little closer, and I leaned over her, hiding her in my shadow from imaginary prying eyes. “It means he sees the same things in you that I do,” I whispered.

Her green eyes flickered back and forth, until she looked down, shyly.

“What is it?” I asked, gently, turning toward her fully, my hand never leaving her side.
“Nothing,” she said, drawing her arms against her chest in the space between us.

I frowned, unsure, and withdrew to give her space—

—Only to have her sigh follow me. Just as my hand left her, she stepped forward, and her arms slid under my coat. Marti pressed herself against my front, hands clasped together behind my back. Her head rested on my chest, nestled downward.

“I just missed you, is all,” she said.

I stared up at the ceiling for a second, then looked back behind us. But there were no cameras around, and no one was watching us, either. I doubted they could hear us, as well, unless they were really determined and crafty about it.

“It’s only been a few minutes...”

“You know that’s not what I mean.”

I smiled softly, sighed a quiet breath through my nose as I rested my arms around her shoulders. “I missed you too, Marti.”

One of her hands tightened on my vest. “I was afraid you’d gotten caught in the explosion.”

I rubbed her shoulders, and played with a lock of her hair that fell on my fingers as I swayed back and forth a bit. “Nah. Takes more than that to take me out.”

“Silly man, always taking risks for the job,” she muttered into my shirt, muffled.

“Look who’s talking. I don’t know anyone braver than you.”

“Or dumber sometimes, I think,” she muttered.

“No, no. You’re pretty, you’re smart, and gosh darn it, I like you.”

She looked up then, perplexed and touched. The separate emotions played across her face, then mixed together, all the while sending her freckles dancing. Maybe she didn’t know that reference?

“Kind of weird place for a date though, this,” I mentioned, motioning at the cavernous walls.

“We’ve had worse, let’s be honest.” Marti chuckled, and, stepping back, touched at her hair. I missed the warmth, as it disappeared.

She always was a nervous one, when she was vulnerable. And yet, I hadn’t seen a darker, colder stare when she was at work in Venice. But at the same time, get her doing things she actually cared about, and I hadn’t found a warmer light in all the world.

I’d found out though, a long time ago, that the best way to get that anxiousness to leave was to either be her shield or get her to think about the task at hand. Given what I had to work with at the moment, I went for the latter—it was the fastest way to the former, anyway.

“It was a nice surprise to hear you’d be part of the op tonight,” I said, leaning against the wall again with one shoulder and my thumb tucked into my belt, wishing her hands were still up against me. “Thanks for coming when I called.”

She’d sought me out at the beginning of the night, way before Lupin had shown, and that had been a happy surprise—one that energized me, after it initially threw me off my game a bit from the
sheer force of the memories and emotions.

But after Kyle had picked the place, I’d short-waved her over to meet us there, and she’d actually managed to get there faster, parking and all. “When the idiot’s in surgery, I wouldn’t mind hearing about how you’ve been.” I bit my lip and looked away for a second; when I looked back, my voice had lowered, all of its own accord. “I didn’t mean to be away so long,” I whispered. “The schedules just never worked, and I felt you deserved more than a harried lunch hour.”

The green eyes that looked back at me weren’t judgmental, or angry. They were sad, a little, but fond and, I liked to think, happy too.

“Well, you have me now,” she said, which made my heart beat a little faster. She interlaced her fingers, only to fidget them into a ball, as if she were rubbing in hand cream. “It’s good to have a case to work on with you. Even if it is a trashy, ‘snowed-in’-style romance novel.”

I chuckled, loudly enough that I had to put my hand over my mouth to stop the rest of it. I’d seen a couple of her books. They were terrible.

Not that the biographies and PI noirs I liked to read were any better—they were perfectly gratuitous as well. But they were, how to put it... a little more...researched?

“But... You said you had some info for me, too? Did you make some calls?”

“No...,” I said, all the fun falling away. The cheer that had dared to bloom in my spirit for a moment was quickly replaced by a grim storm, clouding over everything. “It’s about our guard, Mr. Rodriguez.”

“Oh, is that his name?” Marti asked, interest peaked. She was still smiling, though, which was not at all what I wanted, unfortunately.

“Yes. Kyle Rodriguez, apparently the son of Argentinian ex-pats living in the States. Got fed up with the anti-Latino culture over there and came here some years ago. Currently works high up on the bomb squad here in this very town.”

“Ooh,” Marti said, nodding. “So he can help, right?”

“If...” The words wouldn’t come out of my throat. I bowed my head, took a breath, and tried again. I took up Marti’s free hand, and squeezed it in mine. “If he’s not here to kill someone, yes.”

Marti looked at my hand, then my face, then my hand again, blinking rapidly. “What?”

“Well I’m not gonna, and you’re not gonna, and I doubt Christof will. So...” I sighed, and released her, running the hand through my hair, under my hat. “Let me explain that phone call I took upstairs.”

“...Oh dear,” Marti said, when I was finished. “That’s bad.”

“Yeah,” I replied. “It really, really is.”

“Well,” she said, a little smile quirking up on her face, “You just helm the ship, Captain, and I’ll man the guns.”

I shouldn’t have been smiling down into those green eyes. But I was, despite it all.
And those eyes were glittering back at me.

_Damn it._

Marti raised up on her tip toes and kissed my cheek, her hand smoothing around the side of my stubble-laden jaw as she did so.

_How does she always manage to turn things around on me like this?_

She tapped my cheek as her heels came back down to earth. “So what’s the plan?”

I sighed.

_I really do love this woman._

“Give the man what he wants.”

Chapter End Notes

RL relationship stuff update, since I'm sure at least some of you are interested: I finally cornered and resolved some things with boy-chan, FINALLY, and it went well enough as far as the experience of it (actually shockingly well, hurray being a real, mature adult), but unfortunately, he doesn't want to stop fence-sitting. So I guess I'm going to have to let this fishy go, for now. Sigh. Not the end of the world, but still kind of sucks.

So, to cheer myself up, I drew myself some nice love-themed Lupin fanart. Maybe I'll upload it here soon.

I also had a really great talk with my dad about how relationships are like pie.
Chapter Summary

In which we see the return of imaginary Jigen, and Lupin considers the mystery that is Marti.

Chapter Notes

Just in case this chapter is boring (I honestly can't tell anymore), I uploaded two for you. <3

I finally put the tags in order! *crying manly tears*

"Thinking Cap": in the US, teachers will say "Put your thinking caps on" to get younger kids to perk up a bit and pay attention when some key information is coming their way in the lesson. They will even get you to pantomime this, for extra value. :) It's oddly effective, honestly.

Just as my two guards were about to tackle each other, my carefully crafted parade of suspicion was interrupted by Zenigata and Marti’s return.

Damn.

It wasn’t like I was going anywhere, mind you, with my leg busted up the way it was. But it would have been fun to sit back and watch the chaos, and put suspicion off of me for the rest of my stay here.

Though I suppose, really, Pops didn’t deserve that sort of drama. He had enough to deal with, assuming that phone call he'd had was someone putting pressure on him. He would be overwhelmed soon enough, once the snow stopped and reenforcements arrived.

Which was another reason I really, really needed to get some damn sleep. All of us did.

Zenigata stopped in between Christof and Kyle, and gave each of them a look that could have...well, not killed something, but definitely cooked it good.

“Everything all right here?” he demanded, clipped.

How did old men even do that? Damn. Things to look forward to, I guess.

Christof gave the armed and swarthy man one last look over Zenigata’s shoulder, then shook himself back to normal and nodded.

Kyle, meanwhile, glowered but nodded too.
“See that it stays that way.” Then the Inspector turned to me.

I expected his gaze to be all hard edges with a side helping of “What are you up to, weasel?”—but what faced me instead was an almost pitying look, as he frowned and surveyed me. Marti, behind him, was gazing at Kyle, while Kyle watched us.

By the time I looked back at Zenigata, that strange look of his was gone.

“You ready for this?” the Inspector asked, hands in his pockets and smiling a little, deviously.

_Smiling...._ Normally, I wouldn’t mind it; I even enjoyed and welcomed it. But given how the night was going, and how everyone was looming over me again, I searched it for signs of imminent danger.

There didn’t seem to be any, however. But he was definitely plotting something. What had they talked about, out there...?

“Ready for anything, Pops,” I rattled off, fist on my hip and my head tilted back. The manacles’ chains rattled as they pooled to the side of my leg, as if to cheer on the sentiment.

For some reason, Zenigata’s eyes narrowed at my response, but the light in them turned fonder. His smile grew on one side, just a little.

“Good.”

I tilted my head at him, trying to determine what he was so excited about, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. It was a little mischievous, and a little fond, all at once. Kind of...challenging me to succeed, almost?

Dads did that, right? Maybe?

..._But not to me._

I glanced at Marti then, confused. She must have done one hell of a something out there, to cheer him up—or whatever the hell this emotion was trying to be, exactly.

But she was looking grim too, all of a sudden, as she watched me over his shoulder.

_That_ made the worry in my gut spike higher.

He’d told her something. Something that had infected her with his scowling disease.

Shit.

_Am I dying?_

Beside me, Christof was standing with his arms crossed, weight to one side, as he usually did. He at least didn’t seem to have noticed the change. But he was gazing at me coolly too, from over his wide, crossed arms.

_Or am I about to regret living?_

“Yesssss...?” I asked hesitantly, to all of those faces.

“Nothing,” Zenigata said airily, taking a step back to give me space—apparently he’d noticed the look I was giving him. He yawned to complete the tension diffusion and added, “How are you
feeling? I see you have procured a coat."

The mood of the room instantly shifted, not that I was completely reassured in the long term. But for the moment, Christof and I glanced at each other, both turned into naughty schoolchildren caught in the act and shrinking down a little to compensate. I decided to take the fall and muttered, “Yep. The rookie took pity on me.”

Zenigata held Christof’s gaze for a long second, but then, rather surprisingly, nodded approvingly. “Good.” And to me: “Don’t abuse it.”

“I’m not that bad,” I sighed, exasperated.

I mean, I was, but he didn’t need to know that. And anyway, the coat was already thoroughly inspected and even though I had found a few things, it was nothing I could hide on me during the scan. I wasn’t so determined, yet, that I wanted to swallow that shit or stash it somewhere.

Besides, this wasn’t the right place to stash things.

“I’ll believe that when I see it,” Zenigata replied dryly, though there wasn’t any heat to it. In fact, his gaze lingered on the jacket itself—something about the letters on the back, it seemed like, though the look in his eyes was rather longing.

“...What?” I asked, looking over my shoulder. “Got something on my back?”

“No,” he said, almost wistfully. He strode past me with an idle tap to my shoulder. “Though you do look rather good in checkers.”

Perplexed, I watched him go toward the control room and, with a knuckle, knock on the black window glass set within its door. As the ghost of his touch tingled on my skin, Marti bent down beside me and whispered in my ear, “Seee?”

I shuddered involuntarily as her hair brushed my neck, and I jerked away; all pretzel-fied into the back of my chair like that, I stared at her from about a foot away. She didn’t move, and at that distance, it took a second for my eyes to focus. But lo and behold, those green eyes were glittering as she smirked at me.

“I’m afraid I don’t take your meaning,” I scoffed, in mock scandal.

“No?” Her eyebrows raised, and after a second of letting me see that, she stood up with a soft noise and her thumbs through her belt loops. “Not even worth the price of your shoes, if you can’t see what that means.”

Her voice was a playful, if pointed, whisper, barely audible—too soft, in fact, for any of the others to hear. Christof was leaned against the wall opposite me, his head down and arms crossed, quite possibly asleep standing up. Kyle was in the corner, obscured over Marti’s shoulder, but far enough away that I didn’t have to worry about him at all.

When I looked back at Marti, now towering over me, the side of her mouth ticked upward, along with her eyebrows—she was inviting me to follow her trail, right down the rabbit hole.

But that was a trap I didn’t need. I knew exactly where it was going, and it wasn’t where I wanted to be. Ever.

_Policemen’s checkers...._
But it seemed like she wasn’t going to let it go.

I sighed and turned away from Marti, purposefully ignoring the carrot she was dangling, and hoped she would take the hint for now. I ended up watching Pops, down the hallway, for lack of anything better. A woman—the nurse from before—had poked her head out of it at his insistence, and they were exchanging words shortly as she hung on the door.

Marti, meanwhile, stood just to the side of me, her arms crossed and her stance wide, not unlike a prison warden. I tried not to look at her, but she was good at being ominous when she wanted to, apparently.

It made me wonder, again, just where Zenigata had gotten her from. The sweet but fiery redhead seemed to be able to play his emotions—and mine—the way Fujiko could, albeit with a much softer technique. Regardless, it was starting to set off warning bells. If I couldn’t trust her, I might not be able to trust him, either, by the time the night was out.

And I did not like that idea.

It wasn’t like I was afraid of her or anything, though. Wary now, maybe, but I didn’t let that bother me as a general rule—if a lady wanted to doublecross me, okay, go for it sweetheart, may the best man win. I could keep one eye open in my sleep, and it was even entertaining, to a point.

The idea I did not like was what was going to happen to Pops, if that suspicion turned out to be true.

I wanted to believe they were just happy lovers, reunited by circumstance, but when had I ever seen that happen, when two people were brought together because of me?

One was always, inevitably, out to kill me, or more rarely, someone on my crew. Usually both, if it was the latter.

My initial assessment that this woman was a strong safe to crack had been right, unfortunately. The more I thought I knew about her, the more I ended up discovering I had yet to uncover—it was like a safe within a safe; a puzzle box. I could read her at any given time, sure; her emotions were pretty simple on her face. But I couldn’t ever discern where exactly they were coming from, deep down, because I didn’t know what image these puzzle pieces were supposed to make.

And part of me worried that what I was getting, I was getting too easily. Her happy cheer, her open comments.... Who in law enforcement was that friendly to a total stranger? Even if she was a desk jockey?

Maybe Zenigata had played her, but it was more likely that she was playing him back. And now she was here... Conveniently in my proximity, conveniently playing off my love of redheads and flirtatious jokes, conveniently distracting the Inspector (and even me)....

I looked down at Marti’s knees, and then up at her face, surreptitiously—but there wasn’t much else to look at in that little space, so she caught me right away. She raised her eyebrows at me, and then when I didn’t do anything but stare at her, she beamed her friendly smile at me, encouraging.

Nope, still wasn’t going to take that carrot.

I turned back around.

Still, our interaction had been honest, hadn’t it? And not like, the half-honesty you put together for cover, but real, vulnerable civilian-esque honesty? I wasn’t so tired that I mistaking that, was I?
“Why would he want something like this?”

It played through my head again, that naked lack of self-esteem. Spies didn’t let that show.

I just have to wait and see what happens, I guess.

I didn’t want to be suspicious of her, though. Marti was a friendly person, and I really did like her up to this point, out to get me or not. But there was something about her story that felt off. And not just missing parts, but tasted funny, off.

Tasted like poison.

Though maybe that was just the knee-jerk reaction to suspecting she had had dealings with my father? And yet... she was the type that he would love to have on his arm, if a little short for it.

Something about her being in Venice was niggling at the back of my mind, but I couldn’t quite tell what.

Down the tiny hall, it seemed the nurse with the dark, close-cropped hair had come out from the control room completely. She handed Zenigata another clipboard of forms to sign. He took the papers and he went about the written declarations with some resolution, as she discussed them with him, pointing here and there.

At this rate, I hoped they weren’t my euthanasia papers.

I checked back at Marti’s knees. She still hadn’t moved. She was still standing like an unmoveable, A-frame object, currently exuding much more presence than anyone else in the place.

Christof might as well have been unconscious. Kyle was a wildcard but I was confident I could throw someone in his way in any given situation. Zenigata I could predict. But Marti....

She was slippery like I was. I could see it from here.

Normally, I would be excited by that challenge. But when it was someone who had possibly worked with my dad, that was not a good combination. And someone I couldn’t seduce, because she was on Zenigata’s arm? My typical avenues of discovering duplicity were all closed.

The fact of the matter was that I didn’t have enough details to know that everything was under control, and that bothered me. And when I was bothered, I missed things. I needed my crew around to keep me from stepping on a bear trap, or falling off a balcony, or forgetting to eat for two days. Or falling asleep on a soldering iron. That sort of thing.

In the mean time, why not believe Zenigata can have some happiness, Lupin? my internal voice asked. It is Christmas.

Yeah, but when has Zenigata been happy? I asked it back. Well, like a normal person, I mean.

I found “myself” plunking down on that same living room setup as earlier, the leather of the deep-set sofa crinkling around me as I fell into it. There was no background but black, still, but I put my feet up on the imaginary coffee table—only to find that too indefensible, too vulnerable. My avatar scrunched up into a ball, my feet on the floor and the rest of me all hunched up like a fidgety pretzel as I picked apart my thoughts.

“Man, the scenery is terrible in this place, can you at least give me Jigen?” I sighed, or maybe thought. Grumbled, perhaps, was a good term for whatever it was. I fiddled with the dial on the
cartoonish, freestanding radio made of red plastic the same as my jacket, seeing if his voice would pop out of it. Little squidy music notes popped out into the air, all different colors, as I—apparently—tormented the poor thing into an acid trip. (Though maybe it liked that sort of thing? It did appear to be giggling a bit, as the static between stations.)

“Meee?” came mental-Jigen’s voice, sliding over my shoulder playfully. The scent of his cologne, and the thick, sweet smoke of cigarettes came along with, while the menthol permanently attached to his vocal chords drifted near as well. Even after he spoke, his deep voice vibrated the still, dark air in my mind. A familiar shiver went down my back, electric, and I sat up straighter, with a smile, and his arms slid over my shoulders.

My mental image of Jigen gave me a kiss on the cheek, his beard tickling into my skin. As I smiled, he stood up and ruffled my hair before depositing his hat on my head, warm and sweaty and with some room on all sides. As I dealt with my sudden lack of vision, he came around the side of the couch to sit next to me.

Jigen leaned back against the corner of the wide arm and the overstuffed back, lounging luxuriously, his legs spread in their black, thin-legged suit slacks and one large, articulate hand raking through his hair as he sighed, heavily.

It was a posture the real Jigen tended to take only when he was supremely satisfied about something, which was rarely, or ragged and sated from good head, which I enjoyed making happen regularly. Regardless, it was one of my favorite postures on him to see, and I tended to encourage it to show up (especially from between his knees)—though I’d never actually told him that. The first part, anyway. He knew about the second part, oh did he.

I might have to mention that, the next time I saw him.

Somehow, the top half of his button-up had come undone since the last time I’d imagined of him, offering a delectable wedge of bare, hairless chest and smooth skin. His shoulder-length hair hung down on the rumpled, plum-colored fabric, locks dark, thick, and plastered against his neck from the end of the day. It kind of looked like he’d gotten caught in the rain. (Which was also a look I liked on him. That was half the reason I dragged him to the beach whenever I got the chance.)

Come to think of it, what looks did he like on me? I knew a few, but I’d have to ask, next time I saw him.

Thinking about that just made me miss the real him more, though.

The avatar of him reached over and tapped my forehead as I got lost in considering this, and I felt it, on my real forehead.

“Ack,” I replied.

Mental-Jigen just grinned, and leaned back with a loud crinkle of leather.

“How could I? You’re half naked,” I returned, amused.

He smiled as he leaned his head back on the armrest, giving me a great view of the strong, wide throat and bristly jaw I loved so much. “You like me this way. Calms you down better than a cigarette.”

One intelligent eye caught me and held me tight. For a moment, we both just savored the view. But
then he could hold it back no more, and cracked a grin—accompanied by a hum that dared me to do something about the tension.

“You gave me your hat,” I replied with a smile, fishing for compliments from my own mind, for better or worse.

“It’s a thinking cap,” he said, with a wink.

“Hah...” I took it off and held it in my hands reverently, fingering the brim of the fine material, remembering vividly how it was in the real world. It seemed I’d ingrained that information, right into my fingertips, and that was what was prickling to life now. “This good old thing...”

“Isn’t anything in this world as sharp as a good hat,” he muttered. “And they last forever, if you let ‘um. Only have to replace the inside band, sometimes. Same as good shoes, that way.”

And he would certainly know. I’d never been a hat person. I think the only times I’d ever worn them was when I was impersonating uniforms. Having my face hidden was fine, but I didn’t like having large blind spots. I’d never understood how he could deal with that.

“So, this woman,” he said, taking a breath and rubbing his hand along his short-cropped beard. “You think she’s bad news?”

“She could be.”

“Tell me about it?” He sat up a little straighter, crossing one of his legs over the other, into the shape of a number four. He didn’t have his shoes on in this scenario, I noted, and he wiggled his socked toes. They were dark purple too, with a gold band around the end. He always was a classy motherfucker about fashion, right down to his lounge wear.

“Well. Right, so, there’s good options and bad options. Which do you want first?”

“Good. Of course.”

I smirked, despite it all. You’d think he’d be a man that wanted the bad first, but that was me—I liked ending on a good note. Jigen, however, never expected to. Bad news meant you were still alive, that was Jigen’s philosophy. Bad news meant there was someone that needed cleaning up; meant there was a job to do and a day to live. Good news, in his life, meant something weird was going on.

I nodded, tackling the problem like when I’d outline a heist plan. “The good options: She didn’t know anything about his work. Maybe just worked in the office and he was around. Never knew a damn thing about my dad.”

“A pretty story. Quite likely, given what we’ve seen.”

“True. Option two: she worked in the office and was Zenigata’s informant on the corrupt guys, and they worked together, but sparingly. Some danger occurred, that pushed them apart. Still never had anything to do with Dad or them.”

“Sure.” Jigen nodded, thoughtfully.

“Good option three: she was undercover with him. Maybe got involved with the Italian group, but not because she wanted to. It was just work. And they fell in love, somehow.”

“That could be cool.” A smile ticked at his lips.
“You really are a romantic, you know.”

He settled down into the couch a bit, reached for his hat to pull it over his eyes—only to remember he didn’t have it. His fingers played at the air. “Damn,” he muttered, even though he grinned.

I smiled, and handed him his hat back. He fixed it upon his head, using it to shut out the world so he could think. But he smiled nonetheless, with his large hands threaded together over his sizeable abs.

That was the Jigen the outside world knew; the one I’d first fallen in love with, as an adult: The quiet professional hanging out in the corner, hearing everything, taking it all in, and never doing anything with it—unless push came to shove, and someone needed help.

I loved that about him, more than anything else: He helped the little guy. It made me swoon for him, all over again, every time he did it—especially when it gave me an avenue to come along with the crusade (or guide it).

“Option four,” I added, coming down to recline against his side with a sigh. He was a warm, gentle place, a bed of curved muscle that I always fit into well. “She was a bad cop, but he got her out of it.”

“That’s a good option?” he asked, while rubbing my shoulder in welcome with his free hand.

“It’s a grey area,” I replied, snuggling up against the curve of him. “Let’s call that the neutral one.”

“All right.” He nodded, the arm of his I leaned upon extricating itself. He set the limb over me, so that he could stroke my exposed skin idly. (Apparently I was shirtless, now that I was looking at it. *Hot damn, mind, you don’t miss a beat, do you.*)

The little radio perked up on the coffee table, wiggling about like an old cartoon, red notes and hearts percolating out of it, its antenna wagging like a dog’s tail: “You’re welcome!”

I chuckled, a bit chagrined, and tuned back to Jigen. “Now, the bad options. Bad option one: She was a bad cop, but he liked her anyway. And she’s still a bad cop.”

“That doesn’t seem likely. Unless she wasn’t a particularly bad cop. Just like the messenger or something.”

*Hah... Bad Guy Lite. Maybe.* “It’s unlikely, but you have to admit that he still likes me, doesn’t he? And I’m a seriously bad guy.”

“You’re a serious bad guy, but not a seriously bad guy. Actually, you’re not even serious about it, most of the time.”

I pursed my lips at him, but he just looked away, tilting his head back conveniently.

“He’s also not in love with you,” Jigen continued swiftly, before I could press it. He tapped a finger on my elbow, playfully, to punctuate the point.

“Luckily!” I laughed, smacking his pec lightly. “Though that would only make him more tenacious, don’t you think?”

“To go after you?”

“To go after anyone!”
I laughed, a happy sigh, and laid my head and hand back on Jigen’s warm shirt. He caught my hand and brought it to his lips, laying a slow kiss on each of my fingers.

“What’re the other options, that’ve got you so rattled?” he asked when he was done, giving me my hand back.

I cured my hand on his chest, only to open it up again after a moment. Idly, I swirled a fingertip around the exposed skin beneath his shirt. “Well, negative option two—she wasn’t a bad cop, but now she is, for whatever reason.”

Jigen nodded. The real him knew that was always a possibility. And the imaginary him knew, because he was in my mind, that the guys we’d hit this time weren’t pushovers. They wouldn’t mind stooping to threatening a woman.

But was she the kind to bend to a threat? I didn’t really think so, but everyone had a breaking point. And she was a mother, so there were plenty of points for them to bend.

“So bad option three, right... She wasn’t in on the bad business originally, but he got her into it for his cause. Got her into the whole thing, all the way to the bottom.”

“You think he’d do that?”

“He might, if he had no other choice. If something forced his hand about it.”

A displeased rumble released from the back of Jigen’s throat. He knew that a bunch of things could cause that; for instance, if they were both just in the wrong place at the wrong time, if she’d seen or heard something she shouldn’t have, it might have been the only way to save her, and him, regardless of where she started. Medici and his ilk were pretty genteel guys, but they weren’t above putting a body in the canal if they really had to. They’d exhaust a hell of a lot more options than my father would have beforehand, but they would still do it.

I sighed, and rubbed my face into Jigen’s chest. His hand stroked through my hair, languidly, the act asking me to continue when I was ready.

“So the last option...the thing that bothers me, is that, once you’re in the mob’s pocket, you’re always in the mob’s pocket.”

He grunted. “’S true enough. So you’re saying she has a debt or something, and got thrown in to the pool tonight that way? Or did, back then?”

“Yeah. Was a civ with a problem, but they found her useful, or maybe even got her a job when she was a single mother between work, and that was the debt. So she was working for them, even if she didn’t want to, and he ended up finding her that way. You know he’d be hard up for a case like that. Some woman in a hard place.”

“Hmm.” Jigen gave off a low hum, mouth grim. “And you think that’d carry over, into now?”

“Given the case I’m working on?”

He huffed, just a bit. “But even in another country? Six years later?” he asked, after a while. “You think it’d follow her that far?”

“Another country next door?”

“Mm. I see.”
“But then... why would she be working with Interpol?” Jigen continued. “How could she? Especially if you were to go with the theory that Zenigata got her the job, as some sort of witness protection.”

“True. But can I assume that job’s on the up and up?”

“No. But do you have reason to suspect it’s not?”

“Not... at the moment.”

“But’,” Jigen stated for me, catching my tone.

“But it’s suspiciously convenient. That I’m here, in this town, going after this prize, with a woman who used to be involved with Dad, meeting us here on a skeleton crew.”

Jigen was silent at that.

“And Pops’s also got worse luck than you with women, and not nearly half the sense to see it coming.”

“Psh,” Jigen scoffed, grumbling and looking off. He rapped his knuckles on my head, once.

“And isn’t that half the reason I announce my crimes beforehand? So that I can ferret out the people who’re involved? Find out who gets nervous when I come around?—All so that he can catch them?” I pushed myself off of Jigen, rubbing my head where he’d hit it. “And that’s enough trouble for me in this state, but I didn’t mean for him to get wrapped up like this. What if she’s one of them, now or then, and he never would have known otherwise? What if I bring that misery on him and uncover that?”

“He’d be better off for it, in the end. But he might not forgive you for being the one to make him face it,” Jigen answered, which was the truth.

“I know, but...”

“You just want to protect him?” the little radio on the coffee table interjected, black music notes popping out of it like bubbles from a wand. They floated over to me and Jigen, and I touched at one onyx eighth note. It landed on my finger, jiggling like jello, and then wobbled off again, past the couch, when I lifted my hand to see what it would do.

“Of course. If she’s here because of me, to get me, and he finds out about it... I’d feel horrible.”

After turning away from the bubble-note, Jigen scoffed again, a little sharper this time. “You propose to take this upon yourself? With whose army? Whose time? This is the stuff that gets you into trouble.”

“That’s not true,” I said, playing at childish petulance.

“It sure as hell is. That damn bleedin’ heart of yours. You would try to out-maneuver an assassin, in the most convoluted way possible, just so that Pops—a cop working against you—wouldn’t have to have his heart broken.”

“The bleeding heart of mine you love cuddling so much? Please.” I waved a hand from my vantage point over his lap. “No, this is just the stuff that gets you into trouble when you inevitably decide you have to come rescue me. I find it a grand old time.”
Mental-Jigen rolled his eyes and looked like he wanted to turn off his brain. He left his forearm over his eyes, in the shadow of the hat.

“So what’re you gonna do?” he asked, after a minute.

“Well, I have to protect him from a heartbreaker. And myself, from an assassin. That’s what men do. And maybe somewhere in the middle I can ask him about Venice.”

“You think it’s really an assassin?”

“You think it’s not? Somebody’s gotta be out to get me, certainly. Just look at this place—even if I didn’t suspect it, this hospital would spontaneously generate one anyway.”

Jigen looked up from under his hat, pushing the brim up with a thumb. “But her? You’re being ridiculously paranoid, Lupin.”

“Not that it’s not helpful at times,” the radio added perkily.

“But seriously, it’s Christmas, don’t be that guy,” Jigen finished.

I frowned, but in the silence, Jigen placed his hat on the lampshade behind him, which sat in the middle of the table next to the couch, just over the armrest. He sat up properly and came in near, drawing me down and drawing me close, until I was held in his arms, sitting in his lap.

Once I was settled, his hands slid reverently up my sides, which didn’t hurt in this scenario, save for a slight twinge of sympathy pain. His damp hair plastered against my neck as he nuzzled his body against mine; warmth flowing into me, I sighed, tired. When my eyes closed, imaginary eyes though they were, I just wanted to keep them closed.

“You need to get some sleep,” Jigen offered, head laid against my chest, listening to my heartbeat. “Then it will all become clear.” One arm of his rose to be around my shoulder, and he scratched at the back of my scalp without a word.

“I just can’t decide,” I huffed, cheek against the top of his head. At least this angle brought me a new view, slowly allowing the thoughts to break up and mold into another shape. “Is she super cop, some undercover person I don’t have to worry about? Or some informant, that I need to help him protect? Or is she Super Infiltrator, who’s still got some secrets and whose favor has been called in tonight, against either or both of us?”

“I could be any of the three. Why don’t you just ask Zenigata? Since I can’t be there, I’m sure he’d be happy to help keep you alive.”

I pulled away from him just enough to look at him. Below me, the avatar of Jigen grinned, while I grumbled, disgusted. “You think he’ll actually tell me about the two of them?”

“If he thinks you’re honestly worried about getting killed, yes.”

“Or he might beat me up for even thinking smack about his woman.”

“Hah! You would worry about that.”

I glowered, actually petulant, but Jigen just leaned forward and kissed me on the nose after I huffed at him. His smile was honest, toothy, and too damn handsome.

“You know,” he said, amused, drawing a loving hand down my bare arm and overseeing the act
with bedroom eyes, “Not everyone’s out to kill you.”

He stayed close-in, keeping his attention on my skin all the way through, even when he reached the end of my fingers with his. But instead of removing his touch at the end, he splayed his fingers and turned his open palm against mine, like two cogs in a mechanism, until he found the combination he wanted. His large, worn fingers came down in between mine, and he held my hand like that, while his other arm wrapped around my lower back to hold me steady. He looked up at me, pretty grey eyes catching mine.

His irises were ridiculously clear, that strange kind of pure-colored eye that you saw on billboards sometimes, that didn’t have a single flaw or harsh grain in them. They were ringed by black, and were a dark shade too: when sheltered under his hat, it was hard to make out their color. But here, in a place with perfect lighting and him close-up and hatless, they were easy to get lost in.

Leaning over me, my *aibou* smiled, touching at my chin with a curled finger. “But if they are, I’ll get ‘um.”

“There’s what?” Zenigata asked, suddenly bending down into my real-life space.

“Nnn-gah—?!?” I pulled back, abruptly back in reality. The furniture in my imaginary safe space and the black, vast expanse beyond it disappeared, replaced by close-in walls of a cream-colored hue and a forest of people’s torsos—or it would have, if not for the fact that I had nowhere to go in my spastic recoil, so I just had a huge view of the Inspector in my face. “N-nothing, sir?!”

“I’m sorry, sir.’ I like that. Keep it up.” After a long second of holding my gaze with a light and pompous smile, he stood back up, ruffling the hair on my head that didn’t include stitches.

“Ugh,” I remarked, trying not to think of Jigen a moment earlier. Well, imaginary Jigen, I suppose. Still counts, my mental voice whispered to me.

Goddamnit, I replied.

Marti was looking at me carefully. “I’m fine,” I snapped, not bothering to look at the others. “Just tired.” I rubbed my eyes so that my watchers got the hint.

“That’s okay,” she said, kindly, graciously—in a way that was so hard to believe could come from someone corrupt at all. But that was exactly why I was suspicious of it now, that I knew there might be a reason to be. “All right, who wants to drive this thing? Christof?”

As they deliberated, I just stared at the floor, going through my thoughts. They seemed clear, but I was so exhausted, it was getting hard to tell which ones I should give more weight. Which one was the joker, and which one was the ace?

*I don’t want to disbelieve his happiness,* I told the other voices in my head.

But they were silent, pushed back to wherever they lived in the blackness from which imagination generated. I glanced up at Zenigata, but, unfortunately, he was already watching me, the tense side of curious, from over his crossed arms (the biceps of which seemed ominously big from this angle, even if he was almost fifty). I sighed, and rubbed the back of my neck, careful not to hit myself in the face with my chains. It was becoming awfully hard to be that coordinated. And my stomach felt hollow too still, and my head spun when I thought too hard. Sigh.
In fact, before I realized it, my right hand had moved from my face over to the nearest person. It latched onto Zenigata’s coat sleeve, clutching at it softly.

He looked down at my hand, then my face, his posture suddenly softening. “What’s up?”

“The room is spinning,” I muttered.

So were the thoughts in my head, but that was all he needed to know. That was all I had the energy to relate, in any event.

He seemed to get the picture, though, and rested his hand over mine briefly. “Five more minutes. Then you can sleep.”

I sighed and nodded. His hand lifted off of mine, and, now warmer, I returned mine to my lap, no longer crinkling his poor dusty coat.

I didn’t bother figuring out if the rest of them had seen, or cared. He was my Inspector. They could deal with it.
Koch's Snowflake

Chapter Summary

Christof and Lupin discuss the past.

Chapter Notes

As a reminder, according to the Lupin wiki, there's a canon-if-you-want-it-to-be backstory chapter in the manga that relates that Lupin's father died in a train explosion setup by a rival, and Lupin was caught up in it too and "almost died." I've never read it, so if you have, I hope this isn't completely out of the realm of belief. I am being fast and loose with the concept at this point. But let's be honest--Lupin's a pretty tough guy. In anime terms, I'm very curious about what could "almost kill" him. ;)

Koch's Snowflake - A fractal shape, one of the first ever discovered, that is made by taking an equilateral triangle and adding a similar equilateral triangle to each of its points, ad infinitum.

--Which means we're going down the rabbit hole, guys. Stay tuned ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was Christof, in the end, who took up the reigns as my new driver. The little hallway took some shuffling to get around, but eventually, the snowbird and I left the other three behind for the room with the big, fancy space machine, slowly cycling through its glowing rainbow.

“Ooh, you have at least two more horsepower than Marti.” I offered as we passed the threshold, distracting myself from the anxiousness that had lodged in my gut about her and, even worse, her insinuations about Zenigata and me.

“I should hope so!” Christof replied proudly. “She may be a stocky little pony, but I’m a Clydesdale.”

“You know, I’m not normally into blackmail.... But that statement seems like a great place to start.”

He sputtered, and for a moment, it felt like everything was right with the world again.

_Maybe Jigen’s right. Maybe I’m paranoid because it’s late, and I’m just reaching for straws because I feel cornered._

Though...

_Shit. I’m talking about some part of my mind like it’s an autonomous person with actual good ideas. I think I just might be going insane from sleep deprivation._
The worst part about that revelation was that it had only been one day without sleep, and barely. I wasn’t even thirty and I was getting way too old for this two-day-sleepless-interrogation thing. I needed to hang out with Fujiko more and get back my spy skills.

However.

*There was always a way out,* my grandfather had been fond of saying. *A good burglar can always find a way out, with enough time and a little pluck.*

But without my other half—Jigen—and with only half my own faculties, things were difficult, to say the least, and I was getting toward “pulling off miracles” levels of low battery—and caring.

At the scanner, Christof parked me by the scan bed. The machine was glowing purple at the moment, on its way to green. The rest of the room was a brightly lit fluorescent yellow, though, so it was plenty easy to see.

He took the coat, and unlocked the manacles around my wrists, courtesy of Zenigata’s key. Once freed, I attempted to push myself up from the chair, but it was immediately painful, and didn’t really work anyway, not the least of which reason was because Christof forgot the foot break. The wound in my leg felt like it was going to tear itself apart, my ab muscles were so tenderized they were next to useless, and in the end I hissed in pain, teeth gritted, pretty sure blood was oozing out of me in at least three places from the effort, even after all this time.

Luckily, though not painlessly, Christof came to my rescue; he quickly put his shoulder under my chin as I panted and lifted me from under my arms. I rose to my feet almost effortlessly, as though I were floating. (Although it was an excruciating flight, given my ribs.)

“Wow,” I muttered, when he’d set me down on the scan bed and I could breathe again. “Hockey’s a better body-builder than I thought.”

“You’re as light as a woman,” he chuckled, and, well-trained at this point, held me still until the prickles of light cleared from my vision and I stopped wobbling. His grip had gotten quite a bit gentler from the beginning of this night, as it held my shoulders.

I really must be dying. That, or I was growing on him.

“Well, whatever floats your boat,” I muttered with a tiny smile, looking over at our keepers. Zenigata and Marti saw me looking at them and then quickly turned away, conversing with themselves.

I felt a little twinge of something close to guilt at that, though I wasn’t quite sure why. It almost felt like a need to please, to reassure, to get their attention back, spiking up—which was an unconscionably child-like feeling to be having at your arresting officers.

And yet, the two of them standing there, one taller, one shorter, debating something in hushed tones—it was almost like they really were a couple, worrying over a kid in the ER.

It was a strange thing to associate with Zenigata, and yet also...not inherently unbelievable.

It felt kind of...right, actually.

I smiled slightly, at that, despite it all.

*Let’s hope I’m wrong about her, then*...
“It’s been a long night, hasn’t it?” Christof asked, following my gaze. No doubt he meant me falling off a building and Zenigata coming after me, however that had gone—not the trip down memory lane he didn’t know I was having.

Taking a deep breath, I turned back forward, to a view of Christof’s black button-up shirt. Since he was still holding me, and my hands were there anyway, I tapped my fingers a couple of times on his biceps in a cascade, gladdened, oddly enough, for the physical company to hold onto—and evidence that something was finally going to be done about my main condition. “Yes, it has been a long night.” I admitted aloud, my head still hanging.


The memories played through my head piecemeal, but in a long, vaguely connected string, like bubbles appearing from the deep and popping at the surface of a slow artesian fountain.

And now I have to worry about Marti too....

So much for new friends I didn’t have to worry about killing me.

“Hey, by the way,” Christof said, tapping a safe spot on my side, where one of his hands rested.

“Mm?” I grunted an assent, sitting back and putting my weight on my hands—after rubbing at my eyes a final time to get the sleep out of them, and yawning to finalize the gesture.

“How’d you get that big scar along your side?” he asked, stepping back. His touch slid away, but a prickle of it remained. I rubbed at the spot, tension slowly coiling through me as the thought sunk in.

“My...scar?”

Jesus, talk about memories.

What more did this night want from me?

He had to mean the long, thin ropey one that ran down my side like a twisting river. It stretched from under my left arm, down over the top of my hip bone and nearly to my leg.

It wasn’t like I didn’t have a lot of little ones, of all different shapes and sizes and reasons, but there was no way to mistake which one he was referencing. I saw it every time I had the lights on and my shirt off; I fingered it idly at night sometimes, thinking of all the unfinished business that went along with it.

Unfinished business that was the main reason I was in this town in the first place.

Still, it took me a second before I realized that he must have seen it when I was passed-out naked on the shower room floor. It was only half visible behind the bruising and scrapes at the moment, but I suppose it was there for the world to see, nonetheless, and was probably an interesting thing to contemplate at the time, while waiting for me to wake up.

I wasn’t sure why he’d want to know, and right now—but he seemed oddly puppy-like about it. I shrugged off the irritation that was quickly clawing over my skin from the head down because of thinking about the scar’s origin, trying instead to concentrate on Christof’s innocent interest. I wasn’t very successful.

“Think it’s cool, huh...?” I probed, a little more icily than I should have, my fingers flexing sharply on the edge of the scan bed.
“Yeah,” Christof said, hands on his hips and completely oblivious to my mood change. He motioned to my side shortly. “But I’m curious—it’s a strange pattern. What causes that?”

He probably thought I was just so lighthearted and talkative of a guy that I’d give up all my dark, bodily secrets. Well, it was just his lucky damn day, then, though I was pretty sure the dark look I was giving him was price enough.

“A train.”

I didn’t feel like making up a story, at this point, or remembering one of the many I’d made up before, when women asked me about it. I was too tired to, anyway.

“Specifically, a bomb on a train.”

Christof, understandably, was speechless at this, and he blinked several times, after a momentary delay. I narrowed my eyes, enjoying the discomfort of him squirming, even if it made me mildly hate myself at the same time because it reminded me so much of my father. Still, this was the man I was when I was tired and tried—vindictive and a little sadistic. And it always felt so damn good, too, crushing things that bothered me.

It seemed to be a hereditary trait, unfortunately.

Still, that wasn’t the kind of man I wanted to be if I could help it, especially not on poor rookie Christof, even if it was a superpower of mine. So after a moment of fun twisting in the knife, my mouth ticked down and I shrugged the irritation out of my shoulders. However, the tension was persistent, coming back as soon as it was gone. Grumble.

“O...oh,” Christof muttered in the mean time.

“Whatever.” My voice went cold, and stayed there.

When I flicked my eyes up to him again, he looked sick, as expected, but also, annoyingly, like a disappointed child who’d really wanted to get the prize from the cereal box.

So apparently he’d wanted to know because it was his inner fire inspector coming out, curious about the melting habits of skin? Wonderful. “Yeah. I got it when my dad died.” I turned away, hoping he would drop it.

“Oh God, I’m sorry.” The snowbird looked appropriately horrified, which ameliorated the majority of my budding anger and frustration, surprisingly. “I shouldn’t have asked....”

It seemed his alarm tripped a switch of pity in me. Beginning to feel as crestfallen as he looked, I sighed, the anger flowing out of my feet like it was a palpable force. It left a heavy, empty exhaustion in my limbs in its wake, somehow more substantial than the physical problems plaguing me. I looked at the floor, and in the end, I sighed deeply, running a heavy hand through the hair that would be my bangs, if I ever let them grow out. “Don’t be. He’s not worth it.”

I turned my head, memories of what had transpired to cause that scar flashing around my brain like a game of 8-ball at its opening break. And about what had happened after, too....

I looked off to the side, spying Zenigata through the doorway. He had stopped the nurse who had been in here earlier and was now chatting with her; she’d disappeared back into the control room at some point post-forms, and he’d apparently intercepted her on her way over to me now. They were talking about something with the other two, possibly him doing the verbal equivalent of checking her clearance paperwork.
Which was nice of him, really, considering. A man who did his job thoroughly, even when the person in question he was protecting was a crook.

I sighed and fingered the bandage over my leg, anxiously, happy for the grit of the gauze to rub my fingers against.

But maybe anxious wasn’t the right word. My chest was tight, and my heart was beating hard, but it wasn’t nerves. It was the heaviness of a painful ache. An ache wanting to be let out.

Since Christof was still standing there—and the only one standing there—a foot away from me with his arms folded like a fleshy wall, I might as well talk to him. I wanted to, weirdly enough—to fill the oppressive silence of the basement and the hum of the machines, to look past the neon painting his body that was slowly changing color like my moods. To run away from my memories and the future I was staring down, with this metaphorical bullet still lodged in my chest. Maybe it was just because I had taken one too many tumbles tonight and was missing Jigen, but I wanted to tell someone.

Even though I’d really never told this story to anyone. Even Jigen only got the one-sentence version.

“I got it because of how I was trapped in the rubble.”

There was no sound that came at this revelation; no surprised grunts or even notes of interest. Christof was quiet, but his weight shifted a little, at the top edge of my view.

“Apparently, I was trapped inside the inter-car door, with the edge of the metal pressed into this part of me,” I continued, making a gesture with my hand along the trail of the scar, where it lay under my hospital gown. Then I held up my other palm like I was cupping an apple and twisted it, fingers clawing downward.

Christof was an arson investigator, so he probably knew about explosives, to some degree. He had even said as much. So if I was going to tell this to anyone, he at least might appreciate the mechanics of it.

And that was important to me, for some reason—making sure he had something of interest to the story other than pity. I still couldn’t look at him, though, and my voice was terribly soft, as I illustrated the story with my hand.

“It was an aluminum metal door; you know how they are on highspeed trains. The blast blew me backwards into it, and it crumpled, wrapping around me. Apparently, as the train derailed it twisted around me more, like a cocoon. The fact that it did was probably the only thing that shielded me from everything else. I was the only person from that carriage to survive, or the carriage I got thrown into, I think.”

Christof swallowed hard; I could hear his throat move. I shook my head, touching at the throbbing wound there. My voice cracked too, courtesy of my swollen, ravaged throat. The rest of the story continued in a slow rasp, even whispered as it was.

“I was thrown a few... well, the whole mess of me and the door was thrown some distance from the rest of the debris trail, down an embankment and into some trees.” The end of an entire trail of bodies, limbs, twisted metal, and broken trees down the mountain ravine, as I’d been told. “The percussion of the blast fucked up a bunch of my organs, so I was pretty much instantly comatose, luckily. Only thing is...” I sighed, lifting my left arm to stare at it. There was a thin line across the underside of my forearm, about two inches from my elbow, that looked a bit like a razor cut.
“Because of the distance, and my being unconscious, and the fact that I was wrapped in metal, they left me for dead.”

A sharp, soft intake of breath went off above me. I glanced up at him, but only got about as far as his collar before I flicked my eyes away self-consciously. “This mark,” I said, drawing my finger over it so that my skin depressed, “is where my arm was hanging out of the wreckage, I guess. It was the only part they could see. They assumed there was just a dismembered corpse in there, if even that much.”

It had been the middle of the night, in the mountains, by the time the rescue crews arrived, and it had also been raining. So I really couldn’t blame them; they had priorities, and my missing corpse wasn’t one of them.

Well, until the cops arrived, that was.

“Jesus,” Christof muttered, finally finding his voice.

“Right? I shouldn’t be alive, honestly,” I muttered, feeling strangely hollow. It was almost like someone else was speaking. Who knew why I was telling this story here, at this moment, to this person, but might as well not stop in the middle—it felt like the only way forward, really.

As I ticked off the reasons on my fingers that I should have been dead, I felt my passion returning, a little bit of me, and the life in me, reclaiming its vessel. My voice even repaired itself, just a little, and sounded more like my normal one. “I was too close to the blast; too exposed to it; and then I was left for a day or two in that little cocoon of steel and blood and mud and rain...; I’m lucky my arm wasn’t gnawed off by some animal....”

I looked over at Zenigata then, and Chirstof followed me. The Inspector was being serious as always, eyes sharp even at the end of the night as he listened to the woman speak.

I smiled just a bit, at that. It reminded me of when he’d come to visit me in the hospital after all this—well, the memories from when I was lucid and doing a bit better, anyway. Apparently I’d been taken to a small, local hospital in France first, but given how hot the situation was, he’d had me transferred to Monaco on the sly, with a fake name and God knew whose money footing the bill.

There, I’d been unconscious for the better part of four months, thanks to a medically-induced coma.

But after that, post-regaining consciousness, there had been more than one occasion where I’d watched him through a door like this one, after he’d spent time talking to me completely normally, completely not like a cop, and completely not like a cop whose cover I’d blown months earlier. (And whose woman I’d taken him away from?)

Even at the time, as nice as they were, those visits had perplexed me.

Though maybe...

I looked over at Zenigata, as he stood outside that doorway, talking to the white-clad nurse again.

...If we had enough time in the next couple days, maybe I could get him to answer it, finally. Call it a Christmas present to me.

...Get him to answer it, without me biting his head off. The jury was still out on that one.
Just thinking about it rubbed me the wrong way. What had happened there.... The whole situation just made me feel all itchy and irritated deep inside my body. Made me just want to claw at things and shout at somebody.

Claw at myself.

And yet. Despite all this, there was one thing I had to admit, no matter what.

“It’s because of him that I’m even alive,” I said to Christof, nodding my head at Zenigata with a sigh. The Norwegian’s blue eyes swung back around to me, curious, alight—and I looked away quickly. “He found me in all that shit, and asked them to pry it open. He was looking for my body.”

I liked to imagine him, sometimes, in the mud and the rain and the cold, looking down at the pale corpses like it was the aftermath of a battle. Was he looking for me, hoping he’d find me? Or was each face that wasn’t mine a godsend?

I had no answer to that, even after all this time.

I looked at Zenigata through the open door, but his back offered no help.

“Fun story, huh?” I scoffed, my mouth ticking down. Before Christof could reply. I added with a huff, “He thought I’d escaped, after planting the bomb. ‘I want every corpse in here turned over, every severed hand fingerprinted,’ was apparently the boot-to-the-ass command of the day—can you believe that?”

“I can,” Christof said fondly, smirking a bit.

I huffed at him.

Zenigata had actually thought I’d kill over a hundred innocent people—put everyone on that train at risk—and for what? To take over my dad’s organization? To get back at him for what he’d done to me and put me through? It was more than insulting, it was idiotic. If I had a vendetta, I’d finish it myself. I didn’t need to get anyone else mixed up in it. He should have known that at the time, after over a year of getting to know me.

And yet, here you are, said my little mental voice.

Stop it, this isn’t a vendetta, it’s closure.

If that’s what you tell yourself at night—

“Arg!” I grumbled aloud, which made Christof jump a bit. “Ah...Sorry,” I added, staring at my lap.

“So you...didn’t do it?” he asked cautiously, ever on point.

“Why would I try to get myself killed?” I shook my head, crinkling my nose with a tisk. And what was worse: “He doesn’t believe me, to this day. Not entirely.”

“Why?” Christof asked, turning to look at the Inspector anew. The concern, the very tiny seed of doubt and suspicion, was a beautiful thing to see planted, given how I was feeling.

But it was a hollow victory. Pretty soon I just felt heavy inside, as I looked at the old guy just doing his job.

To be honest, it was mostly my fault that he didn’t, and I knew that. I just wanted him to believe me for once, without having to have every single fact in place beforehand.
Didn’t I deserve that? After all the things I’d done for him, in the syndicate?

After all the things I’d done to protect him from his own daughter?

Not to mention all the things I’d done for him since then, and he had done for me. Though maybe that was the problem—our interactions after Monaco, as people on opposite sides of the law. But still, shouldn’t he know I wasn’t a train bomber? Who did he take me for?

Though...I guess that building collapse tonight couldn’t have been helping his impression of me.

I ended up sighing anew. “...Because I never told him the truth, I suppose. And he knows it.”

The snowbird raised an eyebrow, blue eyes glancing down at me without moving his head. “Why didn’t you? Tell him, I mean?”

The things my father had said as he disowned me on that train just before he died went through my head, his cold smile included.

*What good would it have done?*

I shrugged, without much energy. “Thief stuff.”

“But...you know? What happened? Who was responsible for it?”

“Of course.”

I flashed him a grin to throw him off my trail, and just as I wanted, he rolled his eyes with a snort. “Yep, yeah, can’t see why he wouldn’t find that suspicious,” Christof finished.

I chuckled hollowly, but it was then that Zenigata finished his inspection of the nurse with the tall boots and let her in the room. He motioned Christof over with a finger, and as soon as he was done with that, the Inspector pointed to me. “*Behave,*” he called, in that same tone as always this evening.

I raised my now-chainless hands innocently, smiling my best obviously-fake smile.

“Well, bye for now, thief-**kun,**” Christof said, waving his hand as he turned away. “You should consider telling someone, though. I’m sure the families of the victims would like to know.”

“Oh-huh,” I murmured, turning to the nurse as he walked off and she came in.

...Wait.

Wait.

*Thief-**kun***?

Christof *hadn’t been asleep,* all that time?

*He’d been listening?*

Chapter End Notes
(*Whispers* You can't trust any of them, Lupin.)
Out of Sync

Chapter Summary

Lupin meets a nurse with tall boots, and Zenigata dreams of the past.

Chapter Notes

Wow, 1,000 hits! Thank you, readers! I'm a happy little clam today.

According to the Lupin Wiki, Lupin's only 5'8" (172 cm). Which makes sense--he /has/ always acted like a weasely little guy. Plus, he came out of Japan in the 1960s, when people were coming off of post-war nutrition levels. 5' 8" was probably tall for the time.

So, I talked to a medical acquaintance of mine and apparently Lupin should be getting an MRI. I guessed wrong, lol whoops. Well, just pretend okay, and I'll change it eventually.

“Okay, we have two things to discuss.” I held up the corresponding fingers. “First thing: I talked to Nadia upstairs, and not only is the base getting shut down today for weather, reports are that we’re going to be snowed in if we don’t leave by noon. So: Who really wants to go home?”

As we stood in the antechamber/hallway to the CT room, my three subordinates all exchanged tense glances, each trying to read the feel of the other. Group consideration (and self-serving scheming) at its finest, but definitely not what I had asked them for.

Once they were all looking at me again, Christof raised his hand.

I looked at Marti. She shrugged. “What? I’m staying with you.”

Christof sputtered. “Wait, what?”

She smirked. “What, d’you misread my poker face?”

“But...” Christof whined.

I grinned, but it fell as I turned to Kyle, who was leaning up against the wall, arms crossed loosely. Of course he wasn’t going to make this easy for me. “You?” I asked him.

He shrugged. “I’d like some sleep, but you pay for me, you get me.”

That...was a rather mercenary thing to say, which didn’t allay my concerns about him at all. If I was taking defensive measures, did I want him on my team, or not...?

On the one hand, I felt like it was far too big of a risk. On the other, I definitely needed more than two people total, if things got any hotter, and he wasn’t the problem.
Though a quick escape necessitated only me and Lupin, to be honest; and I really didn’t want Marti to get into anything deeper than she had to. Christof, too, was just a young guy, a rookie, and not even actually a law enforcement officer—he didn’t deserve this level danger, and quite possibly wouldn’t know how to get out of it alive. Even if it what the Commissioner threw at us just ended up being character defamation, Christof’s young career, as a foreigner no less, might not be able to withstand it.

“All right,” I replied, scratching at my chin and its inglorious stubble. “I’ll think it over and we’ll see what we end up with after this scan. May need you for prisoner transport, may not.”

Everyone seemed to accept this at face value, and with minimal amounts of complaint. Still, the only transparent face was the rookie’s, of course, tired and pained.

“If we’re staying on for a bit longer, then, any idea when we might catch some sleep?” he asked. “Even if just for a little bit?”

I shrugged—dangerous situation or not, I still had to protect my subordinates, and that meant teaching the rookie a thing or two about discipline, leadership, and situation-reading for his future career. “Trust me, I’m tired too. As far as I’m concerned, you can nap during this bit.” I pointed into the room, whilst my hand was in my pocket. “Should take over an hour, given that they need two scans.”

At that, my three workers sighed gratefully, two with their heads tipped back, one with her head down.

“Yup.” I motioned against the opposite long wall. “And there are even chairs. Uncomfortable thought they may be.” They nodded, and I yawned. “Now, the second thing: You all saw what happened upstairs, in the exam room, more or less.”

They got quiet; three pairs of eyes focused on me, corrupt or not. Marti, her hand on her hip, looked up through her bangs at me with decisive intensity; Rodriguez gazed at me coolly with his head tipped to the side; and Christof, most directly in front of me, had his mouth open slightly, attentive like at his very first briefing.

I took a deep breath, and forced myself to admit the truth, hard as it may have been. “Seems the prisoner is having some sort of mental stability issue here. Flashbacks, to something, we don’t know what. We also don’t know what triggers it—something about the facilities, it seems, but other than that, I’ve got no clues.” I turned to Christof. “You did a very good job, keeping him calm upstairs. All of you did, actually, but Christof, you seem to have a knack for getting him to laugh. Thank you.”

He nearly beamed at that, and I had to resist the urge to pat him on the shoulder approvingly.

“Now, even though I don’t know what’s triggering it, specifically, Marti and I have discussed it—since she has some experience with this sort of thing—and I feel it’s best to just give him space and keep him distracted as much as we can, until he can get some sleep or I can get him moved to another facility.”

They seemed to take this fairly well. Marti nodded along, approving; Kyle’s eyes glossed over, dreary at the prospect of more work, by all appearances; and Christof’s mouth pursed, thoughtful.

“Any idea where, yet?”

I was surprised it wasn’t Kyle that was asking, which was a point in his favor. Still, it took me a
second to process why Christof would even be asking. But it came to me soon enough: No doubt he was asking because, if it was out of his jurisdiction, he could go home. He and Marti both worked at a branch office in this town, and lived here too.

“Not yet.” And yet, somehow, I found myself smiling, devilishly. “Now, I’ll ask you all again: who wants to go home? And be honest this time.”

* * *

Zenigata was giving the other cops a scolding, or possibly directions. It was rather hard to tell, from twenty feet away and through glass. But still, everyone seemed quite serious, which in this case, equated to incredibly boring.

Not getting anything out of it—or that prior revelation about Christof’s eavesdropping—and too far away to lip read, I sighed and turned back to the task at hand, as I sat upon the pulled-out scanning bed, feet dangling off of it.

“So what’s your name?” I asked the woman in front of me, the nurse Zenigata had been deciphering earlier.

“Angela. And if you joke about it, I’ll make this a lethal dose.”

And yet she smiled as she said this, a little bit.

“So you’re asking me not to make an angel of death joke, because you want to make it first?”

She smiled larger, at that.

The nurse—or technician, I suppose it probably was—was inserting a needle into my arm, full of tracing fluid. I was mildly surprised that it wasn’t neon yellow, but instead, an innocuous clear.

“Heh...well. Angela of Death, that’s me. And now that you know where we stand and pleasantries are out of the way...” She stood up, and brushed her short brown hair out of her eyes, perky despite the hour. “Let me tell you that this should take about ten minutes to get everywhere we need to see. So we’ll get you strapped in here and then you can just nap for a bit, huh?”

The injection felt warm in my blood; I could see it as it entered my arm, expanding the blood vessels. But feeling it was the odd thing.

Trying not to think about it, I looked away—which, inevitably, meant at her. She was about my height of 5’ 8”, with a pixie-like face and haircut—her hair was a warm, dark brown, and close-cropped around her round, rouged-up cheeks. She wore a lab coat like an ‘80s rocker, and it was really hard not to look down in the hopes of seeing leg above those brown leather knee-highs.

That did not mean I succeeded in not doing so. So creamy.... Sigh.

“What a big, thick vein that is,” she added, admiringly, when she was done injecting me, and had seen what I was doing. Angela capped the needle, and put it on a tray she’d brought in. “Can tell you aren’t a regular.”

My pixie-nurse held down a cotton ball on the tiny wound, and then we stayed like that, me sitting, her standing beside me—with her hand on my elbow and various bits of us brushing together. One panel of her coat, in particular, draped against my cheek with a fresh, floral scent. She tried not to
look at me, staring at the ceiling; I tried not to look at her, and stared at my knees. It was delightfully awkward, us two: Like American teenagers at a prom, while the chaperones stood outside chatting.

Still, that joke of hers had been something else. I couldn’t tell if she just had a weird sense of humor or what, but I wasn’t one to back down from a challenge when a lady had her hands on me.

There were certain things one associated with thick veins, and it wasn’t a man’s arm. I didn’t think I was wrong in hearing the innuendo there.

Smile finally reaching critical mass as it grew across my face, I flexed my muscles under her hand. “Like what you see?” I purred, eyeing her.

“Hmmm.” Angela took away the cotton ball, and set a long-nailed fingertip on my skin. A smile tugged at one side of her thin lips, as her bare hand slid down my bicep, over my forearm and onto my own hand, which turned upwards at her guidance. While she held my palm between her thumb and fingers, inspecting it for something, she looked more than a little devious. I wiggled my fingers at her, playfully, to get her attention back.

She glanced up at me, brown eyes and plucked brows glinting darkly above a smirk. It was an oh you, if I’d ever seen one. But an incredibly aggressive one.

A lump appeared in my throat, despite it all. I’d just walked into a spider’s web, hadn’t I? This...might be too much for me to handle on no sleep, a woman this predatory.

I mean, I could handle it, but the broken ribs might make it less pleasant than I’d initially hoped for.

“Are you saying that for appearance’s sake?” she whispered.

“What?” I replied, thrown, suddenly a little cold despite the heat in my blood—and the thoughts in my mind.

Angela traced a finger down the major vein in my arm, swollen with chemicals. “This looks ready to release,” she said. She leaned down over me, and her fingertip slid over to my sternum, intimately—a finger which she then proceeded to jab into my chest, repeatedly, punctuating her words. “I don’t swing that way, and neither. Do. You.”

And then she turned around on the ball of her foot and strode away.

“Wait, wait! Baby! How do you—I do too! Sometimes! Every Tuesday and Thursday!”

Nurse Angela spun on her heel, hands in her pockets, and grinned at me. She walked backwards, even as she spoke. “I need all woman all the time, pretty boy.”

As she left the room, she jerked her thumb in my direction, and sure as shooting, Zenigata took her place before the glass door could even fully close. It seemed he was done with whatever he’d been disseminating, and hopefully, he hadn’t heard all that, because he’d never let me live it down. He’d seen me in drag faaaaar too many times to let me live that down, God be good.

I followed the woman with my eyes, hoping she’d be back and this genderswap would be put right again, but no such luck: Angela disappeared behind the two-way mirror glass that covered half of the wall, into the console room.

Just as the Inspector approached me, the woman’s voice appeared through an intercom system,
emanating from somewhere within the scanner’s elongated donut shape. “I’ll be talking you through parts of the process if we need you to hold still, but in general, you should be able to sleep. Just lay down with your head between those two metal arms and in you go.”

Shortly, I inspected the little spokes built into the bed beside my right hand. They moved side to side and were curved at the tops, so that they offered a nice brace that wouldn’t snag hair. Seemed easy enough.

Still, not sure why he was there, I gave Zenigata a look; he was standing at the end of my knees, directly in front of me, arms crossed.

“You feel okay?” he asked in response, mysteriously.

“Yes?” I asked, feeling a spike of irritation. “Why do you all keep asking me that? Is it my head, or my leg? Or something else you’re keeping from me?”

He shrugged, and motioned at the machine. “Some people get claustrophobic in these things.”

Oh...was that all? “Nah,” I muttered, flopping myself down onto the bed, manually pulling my right leg up to do so. The cotton gauze over the wound and its metal bit had been removed by Angela just before the injection, to make the scan easier. It was hard not to fidget with the metal poking out of my skin, or stare at it. Even though it hurt, it didn’t hurt as much as it probably should have, which was worrisome, especially given the little bit of crusted red all around it. Still, I could feel my toes—and move them, though it wasn’t advised—so it couldn’t have been all bad, right?

Still, when I slid down, settled into the machine properly, I couldn’t help but sigh in relief. First of all, I couldn’t stare at my leg, but also, the stitches I did have wouldn’t hurt for another couple of hours due to the topical anesthetic Marti had used. With the patches over them, it was almost like being on a real bed, and my bruised muscles and bones—which was nearly all of them—sobbed in relief. “The things I’ve had to crawl through, an hour napping in this is nothing.” I tapped at the side of the donut with a knuckle, offering a tired smile.

“Well, that’s good,” Zenigata’s voice said above me, but I couldn’t even bother opening my eyes again—or figuring out what his somewhat tense tone meant. “I’ll be right outside if you need anything.”

“Mmnf.” I lifted a few fingers an inch, waving him off.

Soon enough, I was entering the machine with a whirr, and I heard the sound of the door to the room shut.

I didn’t remember much, after that.

Just the feel of my blood warming my body like a lover’s touch, and a strange metallic taste in my mouth from the foreign fluid.

* * *

With Lupin taken care of by all accounts—and not hitting on the nurse for goddamned once—I figured it was safe to at least let Marti and Christof sleep. But I’d stay up for a bit; given what I’d learned about Mr. Rodriguez, I wanted to keep my eye on him for a little while longer.
As I waved the others at ease and settled myself into the middle chair of the group, I couldn’t help but assess the situation: prisoner in a dead-end room, with all his keepers in the next railroad room over, which itself was an enclosed space with only one thin door in or out. The stairs just to the side offered a decent escape, as did the dark hallways. But those, for the very same reasons, offered a decent way to both allow and conceal crimes of ambush. The fact that we were in the basement didn’t help. I’d just have to assume that if I had a shark here in this tank at this very moment with me, they didn’t feel like devouring six people.

Unless the nurse was in on it. But that’d be a big if. And wasn’t a doctor supposed to be down here, too? Nadia had said as much.... I’d yet to see him.

Christof sat down and was asleep almost immediately, his head tipped back and snoring lightly. Marti came down a moment later, sighing.

“He’s a handful, isn’t he?” she asked, smiling tiredly at Lupin.

“Yes,” I replied, with a bit of a smirk too, as the scan bed sent itself inside the machine. The neon lights on it switched from blue (it was previously green) to a sunny yellow, and the machine started its opening procedures with a few zurrs.

As it went to work, I watched Rodriguez come down in the far seat, on the other end of Marti—the one on the end. It didn’t make me comfortable, having her next to him, but there was no way to switch it up now. I’d just have to be vigilant. She could take care of herself somewhat, but not against a guy that big. Hell, I probably couldn’t either.

Still, Kyle just set his gun, safety on, upon the ground and under his chair, and settled back, staring at the ceiling with his hands on the armrest. He looked as tired as the rest of us, and truthfully, there was every chance he was just at the wrong place at the wrong time, to be here.

Though my instincts told me something else was going on.

Yet, as I settled in too, resigned to having the least amount of sleep of anyone, Marti’s head leaned over and rested on my shoulder.

“Do you mind?” she asked, quietly.

A smile pulled at my lips, just a little bit. I could almost pretend it was just the two of us, like in the old days.

Marti yawned, and her curls fell over my arm as she settled in. “You’ve always been so warm.”

I glared at Rodriguez just for good measure, but his eyes were already closed.

Well, then...maybe I could be a little less vigilant than absolutely necessary.

I laid my head on Marti’s, but the sweetness of the gesture was quickly lost, because I couldn’t help but gaze at Lupin’s plastic tube, and think about the last time he’d been in a hospital, this messed up. Admittedly, that time in Monaco, he’d been in a lot worse shape, but it hurt to see him laid out on his back again surrounded by machinery, somewhere in the bowels of a hospital.

Dealing with his father just never did him any favors, no matter how many times he’d persisted at it.

And yet...
I looked down at Marti, and the wine-dark locks shining in the front of my field of view.

...It seemed to do me quite a few.

It wasn’t fair, certainly. But I wondered if maybe there was a reason for it.

A reason I still couldn’t quite get him to see.

It was as I was thinking this that my eyelids shuttered, and I fell asleep to the scent of Marti’s hair.

“\textquote{You said you had some information for me?}” My boss, Arsene Lupin the Second, asked. He was the highest man in the organization, the big boss, and it was unusual for me to speak to him directly, let alone have me request it. I’d met him a few times and those interactions had seemed solid enough, but they were never at my own discretion. To be honest, I hadn’t been sure he even would grant my request this time around, and now that I was here, I wasn’t sure how good of an idea it had been. There were guards to my back—one in each corner of the room, and about six just outside the door. If he wanted me dead for any reason, dead I’d be.

He was notorious for his temper, especially when he was drunk, which was almost nightly lately. It was evening now, the sunset filtering in through half-closed curtains, the fan in the old French mansion spinning idly above our heads. He seemed fairly sober, which meant logical, somewhat patient, and sparingly jovial.

Arsene was a tall, Caucasian Frenchman with dark complexion typical to the southern stock. However, he had the narrow side of a medium build, which wasn’t surprising given that he was from a line of thieves (which he would be most displeased if you brought up—he was always wanting to make himself into something more, something world-reknowned and grand, like any mobster).

He was in his sixties, though it was a well-aged sixty; he didn’t look more than fifty. His thick black hair had receded in the front, but it just succeeded in giving him a respectably high forehead for his long face. If there had been tufts of grey at the sides, he definitely dyed them. He had an old-fashioned mustache, too, with high cheeks, which made his face handsome in a timeless way; but it was no doubt to offset an almost boyishly narrow jaw.

And his eyes—they were pretty eyes by any account, a smokey blue with long lashes that sat under thick, dark brows. But they had a power to them, that I could never quite shake; it was like they could see right though you, no matter who you were, or what you were there for. There to do laundry? His eyes told you he knew what you’d done in that bed last night, to need that laundry service.

It was weird thing, and it always kept you on your toes—even though I wasn’t sure he really meant to come off like that. It helped him in this business, surely, but I didn’t think it was a contrived thing, because every once in a while you could surprise him, and it would drop, and be replaced by an almost boyish naivete.

It could have explained a few things about him, really, and why he was the way he was in regards to the worth of other people; if he had had that spooky look built into him from the time he was a kid, he couldn’t control it, and it had consistently pushed people away without him realizing why, then no wonder he thought everyone was inherently untrustworthy emotionally.
I was pretty sure he had no idea what was going on inside my head at any given moment, but to be honest, despite all the work I’d done all over the world, I’d never met anyone else who was so good at finding shadows and cloaking himself in them, like he was now as he sat before me. They clung to him like a lover’s arms in the night, lighting and shading different parts of his body as if to hide him from prying eyes. Combine that with his eerie gaze, and it made an impression.

The blood of a thief. Every time I saw him, I ran into some new trait—his self-carriage, his behavior, the way the world flowed around him, some tiny gesture—that made me ask myself if there really were demons that ran through bloodlines.

Currently, he sat behind his massive oak desk with its ornate inlay, a thing that could stop bullets—never mind that it would have taken the strength of three people to flip over. His temple was resting against his loosely curled knuckles as he sat in his swiveling office chair, and his smokey blue eyes stared me down with that uncanny intensity, even though he had no idea what was going on.

I took a breath, and ran my sweaty hands along my trouser legs. “So... I don’t know how to tell you this, but a young guy came to the bar last night, saying he was your kid.”

Arsène’s eyes blinked once and went wide, and he went totally still for a second.

That...couldn’t have been good.

But then he frowned and, without doing or declaring anything else, looked off thoughtfully. He rubbed his hand over his mouth. “How old was he?”

“How old was he?”

His jaw cocked to the side with a thoughtful noise, and he ran his fingers over his stubble. Blue eyes flicked over to me, unusually vulnerable. “He look like me?”

I shrugged, not wanting to give out a resounding “of course” if it turned out to be wrong. “Kind of.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Can you explain that?”

“He’s got your body type, and the complexion’s all the same. And there’s just...” I gazed at him for a second, trying to find a way to put it, and he tilted his head as well, matching mine. “There’s something intangible that reminds me of you. I think it’s the look in his eyes. And you even...have some of the same physical mannerisms, actually.”

He snorted, a bit of a chuckle, but not nearly enough, I didn’t think—which made me acutely aware of the guards at my back, again. Regardless, Arsène turned fully sideways as he became lost in thought, rapping his knuckles on the desk once.

“There any chance it’s true?” I asked, after the silence stretched on.

“Sure,” he shrugged. “All the women I’ve slept with, someone had to either be lying to me about their countermeasures or had them fail.”

His gaze turned a little darker, as the orange of the sunset slowly shifted to red over his face, as it slipped in through the crack in the curtains.

“You don’t want kids?” I asked bluntly, but a little bit curious too.
He scrunched up his nose and shook his head. “Why bother?”

“So you can have a dynasty? Or love. That’s most powerful men’s reason.”

“Love’s a lie.” Without even looking at me, he shook his finger chidingly, though his mind was already whirring elsewhere. He stood up, and went over to the window, drawing open the curtains.

“Children, on the other hand, are the greatest burden God ever created. A scourge on all right-thinking people, and I sure as hell don’t want to be saddled with that.” He put his hands on his hips, and stared out at the view of the river. “Alexander, Achilles, Napoleon, Shakespeare, Socrates, Elizabeth the First—the greatest people in history had no children. Or at least, no children we can remember. I think that’s sign enough, don’t you, that children are antithesis to greatness? Sure was that way for my father.”

My eyebrows tipped down at that, but he quickly continued: “Arakawa, if I can’t do something big enough to be remembered forever in my own lifetime, why would I want to pass that torch to a kid? He’d not only be burdened with it—he might, in fact, upstage me.” He looked back at me then, his eyes red in the light. “And why would I allow that?”

I had nothing to say to that, and I suspected something else was coming. And soon enough, he tipped his head, debonair with that charisma he always managed when he wasn’t drunk, that offered me a glimpse of what he must of been when he was young. He smiled, and it was a dark, cold thing, completely unlike the young man I’d seen last night. They were alike in many, many ways, but this was not one of them. The difference was stark: That skinny young man, he’d been dangerous, but it was mischievous. And his affect, very warm. He genuinely wanted to make friends out of everyone; while this man smiled a cold, stiff smile, wanting to reel in everyone to destroy them.

It was like night and day, these two—connected, but eternally opposite. I had only met the kid last night, but I already knew. It was amazing what a few hours could do to help you get to know someone, and as I was watching the boss now, I could see it all the more clearly.

“So what’s this kid’s name, and what’s he want?” Arsene asked the window.

“Ah...well.” I looked aside, then slowly had my eyes walk their gaze toward the ceiling as I took a deep breath. “He’s using your name.”

“My surname?”

“Your...” I took a breath, then sighed it out. “Your whole name. He says he’s Arsene Lupin the Third.”

“That little bitch! That copycat! I will kill him with his own tie—”

I held up a hand, even as Arsene spouted this tirade—seemed he was at least one drink into the evening. “At least let me answer your other question first, before you decide that.”

The boss glared at me, bent over ferally with one hand on his hip, but then he took a breath and stood up straight, running his hand through his hair to get it back in place. He turned back to the window and crossed his arms, leaning back against the desk. “So what’s he want, then?”

I nodded, taking the cue. “Wants a job. Says he has an offer for you, too, t’ sweeten the deal.”

Arsene’s head tipped to the side, another oddly quiet moment. He was thinking about something, something I was pretty sure I wouldn’t understand, even if I did ask.
“Does he, now...” he whispered. He was quickly becoming a black silhouette against the reddened city and its purple clouds, graceful and dark as a reaper made of ebony lace. “You know. The last kid of mine who asked me for that drove into a river.” He looked at me, red eyes the only part of his face that I could see. “In December. With his doors locked. You tell him that, and see if he still wants to stick around.”
Arsene and the room he was in began to tilt and shake, like an earthquake. In fact, that was what I thought was happening, and as I popped awake, I grabbed whatever was next to me—which happened to be the biceps of Christof and the face of Marti. They came awake with muffled exclamations, and just like that, all three of us were confused chickens in our chairs.

But in front of me was the answer: the brunette technician with the tall boots, who had been manning the machine. She stood over me with a smile, shaking my shoulder gently. What was her name? An...Angel? Angela? That’s right.... Angela. Good guy. ...Er, woman.

As I watched her, she stood up, and took a few steps back. “The scans are finished, Inspector.” She jerked her thumb toward the door, alongside her head. “You can pick up your prisoner now, and we’ll get the lab results to you as fast as we can.”

“Oh...um... Yeah, sure,” I muttered, looking at my staff quickly. Marti and Christof had fallen asleep, just like I remembered (though they were now wide awake thanks to me); the only one awake of his own volition seemed to have been Kyle, who was sitting with his chin on the back of his hands. They were on the back of the shotgun’s butt as it stood on end, nose down. He was watching us, but with boredom—not at all like some killer waiting to strike.

Which he could have, if he’d wanted to. Shit. I hadn’t meant to fall asleep. When had he woken up and gotten in that position, even?

“Wish I’d brought a book,” he said, to my alarm.

“Your guy’s definitely going to need surgery on that leg of his, from what I can tell already,” Angela informed me, redirecting my attention as I and the others stood, “but you and the doc are going to have to consult with the head nurse about how that’s actually going to get done. It’s not a
good bet to do it with so few hands available, and I’m not sure who’s staying on.”

“But on the other hand, if we don’t do it within a few hours, he could get septic and die,” Marti added from beside me, finally done rubbing her nose from where I’d pushed it. Angela, instead of immediately agreeing with her, took a haughty breath and frowned.

The two of them stared each other down, until the brunette shrugged. “That’s true.” She turned to me, suddenly with a sweet smile. “So you may have to make some calls. Though I’m not sure the other hospitals will want to prioritize the guy who blew up their other patients.”

I looked between the two of them, but Marti had just started scowling.

...Womanly rivalry? Anger at prisoner? Hard to tell. I’d better not get too close to this.

And yet, I was, logistically, in the middle of the two of them. Christof, behind Angela, was watching all of us like a worried child wondering when to employ a timely cry for attention.

The tech gave me one last curt, tight smile and then said, “I’ll be around.” And then she left, out the main door to the hall.

“What was that about...,” I wondered, scratching at my head and yawning. Marti just glared at the door, then stared into the room with the CT machine and, presumably, Lupin.

“...Who’s that?” she asked suddenly.

There was a man in the room, hovering over Lupin. An old man, with bushy white hair a bit like a...well, wild bush. He had a lab coat on, but it looked rather odd—he was leaned over Lupin’s head from the top intently, rather than at the side, like you would expect from someone trying to help the patient off the pulled-out scan bed. I couldn’t see much of Lupin but his knees and feet from this angle, because the man’s back was blocking it.

“I think Nadia said something about a doctor being down here,” I offered, “Le... Blanc, I think it was.” Pushing down the foreboding feeling, I shook my head. “Stay here,” I said to Rodriguez, and then motioned Marti and Christof in with me.

“Do you mind telling me your name, Doctor?” I asked as I came in, brushing aside my coat so I could rest my hand on my holster innocuously. The other two fanned out behind me, equally interested, but not nearly as threatening, since they didn’t know to be.

“Oh, hello,” the old man said amicably, standing up and turning to me. “It seems the patient is asleep.” He slid his hand onto Lupin’s shoulder, and jostled him gently.

Now beside the machine and its platform for passengers, I noticed that Lupin was, in fact, asleep. His face was placid and pale; he looked at peace, minus the slight frown.

He looked dead, actually—as pale and still as a corpse. I swallowed hard at that, and forced down the lump in my stomach as I forced myself to watch his chest rise and fall.

“C’mon son, wake up,” said the doctor at my side, sliding his hand under Lupin’s hospital garment—maybe he thought it would help if he got sharper tactile sensation. The thief had been through a lot today, and knowing Lupin, he’d be happy to sleep for the next 48 hours just to spite me.

Marti and Christof crowded around, curious. And then:

Lupin didn’t wake up with a groan; or a flutter of eyelids; or by pretending to be asleep, and having
to be forcibly dragged out.

His eyes popped wide open, and he stared at the ceiling.

After a second, they moved back and forth slightly, like he was thinking about something.

“Lupin...?” I asked, tentative, leaning nearer. I was still a few feet away, all told; Marti and Christof were closer.

But it didn’t look like he heard me.

In my stead, the old doctor leaned over him. “Time to wake up, son.” He put his hands on either side of Lupin’s head, brushing the head-holders away. It was an intimate gesture, with his fingertips threading through Lupin’s hair and down onto his jaw. When he got his fingers under Lupin’s chin, the old man tipped Lupin’s entire head back, forcing the thief’s wide-open eyes to look at him.

Lupin’s gaze instantaneously locked onto his, and he stopped breathing with a sudden, audible hitch. My prisoner’s grey-blue eyes widened, farther than they should have been able to, no longer any bit of sleepiness to them at all.

And then the light flickered out of his gaze, back to that hollow stare I’d seen in the exam room.

* * *

The snow was falling, gentle and silent, beyond the bars.

It had been falling for hours, and the little white room I was in had an extra pile of white in it—including the part over me.

Snow...

Snow......

Snow could become water, couldn’t it?

I could drink something.

The thought buzzed through my mind; I could feel it, bringing me slightly more aware.

But it didn’t excite me, the way it should have. There was no hope, no strength at the thought of it; instead, only more exhaustion threaded through me.

The pile of snow, which I could barely see now that it was getting dark, was only inches away from my mouth, given part of it was stacked upon my loosely-curled and scabbed-up hand. But it might as well have been a mile. I couldn’t make myself move, let alone that part of me, that far, especially since, afterwards, I’d have to do something.

Lick. Swallow. Swallow harder, work the throat, relax the tongue, all the way down. Breathe. Don’t choke.

It seemed like an incredibly arduous process.

It had been hours and hours since I’d had anything to drink, and even longer since I’d eaten. The
last thing had been some bugs I’d caught. Over the last week I’d learned that some bugs around here were gooey and some were crunchy, but only some of them made me sick.

It had rained a few days ago, too, and as wet and cold and smelly as it’d gotten, it’d given me something to ingest, some of it even clean. I’d tried to avoid the rusted stuff.

But that was back when I could move.

Though I had my coat, it had gotten colder today, in the middle of the day. It wasn’t the kind of coat that was made for the woods in December; it was made for the city, in November. A wool coat, made for clear, sunny days above freezing. So now that it was below the freezing point, I, too, was slowly icing over.

I had been hungry, so hungry, until today. Today, I’d woken up unable to move, with my emotions blunted. I could recognize this, but not do much about it. And now, after the nap I’d apparently had, as I lay here, I was unable to feel much of anything. I’d laid here in this comfy spot in the floor, not a thought in my mind but hunger, as the pain in my stomach, the desperation it made in my mind, finally reached a peak, and then finally, finally ebbed.

I had heard that would happen, and I’d been waiting for it, for days, just so it would leave me alone. I knew I was trapped here. Why wouldn’t my body get the message and let me die in peace, since it had failed to have enough power to get me out of here?

The scabs on my hands and feet, the bruises on my body from trying to force the bars to bend, were proof enough of that.

Still, as much as I welcomed it, I knew the phenomenon of no longer being hungry signaled something bad, as I stared at the tiny snow pile beyond the view of my fingers, but I wasn’t sure what. Even if I got out of here, I’d probably never be able to feel hunger properly again—which had ramifications I wasn’t even capable of understanding, because who couldn’t feel something as innate as hunger?

But still, even as I felt the fundamental system breaking, guttering like a flickering candle, I was so happy that it was finally leaving me alone, and that, more than anything, gave me energy. Gave me hope:

Hope that I could finally stop waking up.

Mentally, I curled up into an even smaller ball.

No one’s coming for me.

I let the darkness hide me.

He forgot about me.

And why wouldn’t he? I hadn’t proven myself properly, and this was the proof. Why not leave me here to die, covered by a blanket of fresh snow?

It was more than I deserved.

I was not so young that I would throw a fit in the face of such defeat. I had been bested. There was only acceptance of this fact.

Though it would have been nice to have a second chance.
I stared at my hand, curled up as it was. It’d stopped shivering. When had that happened?

I’m sorry.

I sighed. That breath, too, was much weaker than it had ever been before.

I’m sorry, Mom.

I wasn’t scared. I was sad.

She was going to miss me. And she would never know what had happened.

But there was nothing to be done about it, now. Where there should have been fear, there was only acceptance. Only cold.

I closed my eyes, letting the darkness take hold of me. It was warm, so warm, as I spun down and downward into it—

“A—”

In the black space behind my eyes, I heard my name, faintly.

“A—, wake up.”

It was her voice, in the distance.

Though it took some time, my eyes forced themselves open.

And there I saw her.

My heart was beating slightly faster.

My mother was leaning over me, a warm smile on her face. She touched at my cheek, but I couldn’t feel it.

Something about it struck me as odd, after a second. The door to the cell was still closed and locked, and I hadn’t heard anyone enter it. I could have fallen asleep in those few seconds of blackness, but...

She had a smile on her face; not one of panic and terror at the sight of me on the floor like this like she should have. (And I’d seen that face before, on her, that time I’d gotten knocked out at the brothel, trying to stop a man from fighting with her.)

She wasn’t wearing a coat, either. She wasn’t wearing much of anything—in fact, she disappeared below the collarbone.

I could see through her face, too, to the white walls in the evening darkness that were covered in blood-like rust stains.

“Just hang on a little longer, okay, my little leaf?” her gentle voice asked. She was wearing her pearls, though, I could see that. They were her favorite. It was a fancy, multi-tiered necklace my father had given her as an engagement present, she said, worth a million francs and stolen from Versailles. And a pin in her hair that I had given her, filched from a rival club owner that neither of us liked.

It was a jeweled sunflower, which was her other favorite thing. Her present-tense favorite thing,
she liked to say—other than me, that was. (Whereas the pearls were her past-tense favorite thing.)

“Mom...”

“Someone’s coming. So just hold on a little while longer, okay, my little one? You need to survive.”

As her voice faded, so too did she, fizzling out into nothing more than snowflakes.

“Don’t go, Mom.... Don’t go....”

But a ray of light filtered through for a just a moment, setting them alight like fairy dust. It was the golden light of a sunset, peaking through the clouds.

“Survive. For me.”

Within a few seconds it was gone though, and I was alone again in the silent twilight, able to see less than before.

I still couldn’t feel anything in my limbs, but I felt like I could move again. So I tucked up into a tighter ball, and blew on my hands. I licked at the water that formed on my fingers, where the snow melted.

There was a little spark of hope in my chest, behind those hands of mine. One that brought tears to my eyes, that froze before they could drift off my cheeks.

“I’m sorry, Mom. I’m sorry....”

The snow was still falling, a silent and gentle blanket covering me.

“Don’t leave me here alone....”

When I opened my eyes, I had forgotten where I was.

Everything was bright and it wasn’t white—it was yellow. And where it wasn’t yellow, it was blue.

Blue like a dance club.

...Blue like neon?

I watched it play out over the ceiling.

I remembered staring at a ceiling like this, once, in the dark with weirdly colored lights going by, slowly alternating because a neon sign outside was rotating—or at least, that’s what I’d always figured it was.

It came to me in a flash: A deteriorating ceiling, with cracks along its length, and low headroom. A cavernous space, long since abandoned, though I was not alone in it. Filled with strange equipment, strange people, and me—on a table, unable to move. Unable to even blink.

Just like the others.
After interminable minutes of watching the ceiling dance like the aurora, there came hands, turning my head. I couldn’t feel them, but I could see who looked back at me, as he stood over me.

I blinked, and the present came back to me; someone’s hand was touching my shoulder. I thought it was Zenigata for a second, but it wasn’t. Not in the slightest.

It was a sickly hand, fingers and skin too old and thin to be his. They slipped under my clothes and shivered over my skin, like they were coveting a prize.

I tensed up immediately, but I couldn’t even move. Why couldn’t I move? Where was I? Why couldn’t I see Zenigata anywhere?

The face of an old man with busy shock of white hair came into my view, standing over me. It was a face I knew, even though it had been many, many years.

“—wake up, son.”

I knew that man.

I knew that voice.

I knew those words.

I had been forced to listen to them, twisting and marking anything and everything I held dear, for far too long.

Currently, his hands slid over my face, and a shiver went through my entire body.

But this time...this time—

I could feel it, his hands touching me.

“Here. Just let the good doctor give you a quick shot, and you’ll be just fine.”

“Why can’t...why can’t I move...?”

“Because that’s what your father ordered, silly boy.”

* * *

“NO!”

All of us jumped as one at the terrified shout—it erupted out of Lupin and filled the entire room. There was a tangle of limbs: Marti was pushed into me; Christof was spun aside, off into the room; and Lupin was a blur that came to rest against the wall behind the machine, ten or fifteen feet away.

“Get away!”

But “rest” wasn’t the right word for it. He was panicked, wild; he crouched down, weight on his injured leg in a way he really shouldn’t have—it was like he didn’t feel it, or any of his wounds, at all. His hands, initially flat on the wall for purchase, suddenly came out in front of him, alternating between boxing stance and clawing for something, like a gun or a knife. His eyes were wide, completely unseeing, and he was gnashing his teeth, muscles in his neck thick and straining.
I set Marti aside before I had time to think, instantly staring at the doctor. He tried to move forward, but I barked him back, a hand flat and hard against his chest. I forced him behind me and quickly looked him over once, but he was absolutely normal—and just as bewildered and alarmed as I was. He hadn’t done anything to him.

“It’s all right,” the doctor threw back at Lupin after a quick glance at me, “I won’t hurt you! Calm down!”

“Stay away from me!” Lupin snarled an unintelligible noise at the end of his scream, and looked around like he wanted to run. In the space of a second, I’d come toward him, Marti was up, and Christof was moving to block off the door. Lupin, without a second thought, darted a frantic look around the room and then looked down at the metal in his leg, as if he’d just noticed it.

I thought that would snap him out of it. Thought it already had.

But I was so very, very wrong.

He wrapped his hand around the shrapnel, and pulled.

“Lupin!” I shouted.

Blood spurted from the side of his leg before the shrapnel was even completely out. What he held in his hand was a thin, rectangular, solid piece of molded metal several inches long; and it was currently covered in red...as was the entirety of the underside of his forearm from the spray.

It had taken less than two seconds, but I saw all of it in slow motion. None of us could have reached him in time to stop it, what with the machine in the way. And yet I could still hear the sound of splitting muscle, echoing in my ears.

And the depressurized spray of his blood.

He didn’t wait for it to stop. With a feral cry, Lupin held the straight piece of metal out in front of him like a stiletto, and lunged.

“Lupin!” Closest to him, Marti tried to intercept him by ducking under his arm. But he swung the make-shift knife with incredible speed, and she deflected off him with a shout, barely able to sacrifice her arm to block the shiv from hitting her face.

Everything about me fell away then. Her attacker was coming at me, only a few feet away. I shoved the doctor aside without thinking, and crouched down with my hands out. There wasn’t enough space, enough time, to draw my weapons—any of them.

Unable to change his course in time to go after the doctor like he’d initially been aiming for, Lupin’s overhand lunge came down with startling force, aimed right at the base of my neck. But I managed to cross my wrists under his, leaving the bloody stiletto to come down about an inch above my nose.

Growling, he clamped his other hand onto the back of his closed fist, forcing the shiv down with both hands. But there was an instant where his weight shifted; in the opening, I turned his momentum aside. I managed to clamp my left hand down around his wrist and immediately jerked
him forward as hard as I could.

As I did so, I punched the first thing I could clearly get at—which happened to be his throat.

I let him go as my fist landed; he coughed and fell backward, into the machine. Admittedly, it wasn’t what I would have wanted to do, if there had been time for anything else, but it was instinct at this point—as was the force of the blow. As he choked, reflexively clutching at his throat with a sickening half-gasp of a wheeze, I had a terrible moment where I wondered if I’d broken his hyoid and collapsed his windpipe—a wound from which there would be no coming back from.

And yet, despite it all, he hadn’t let go of the weapon. The blow had only made him tighten all his muscles, so he still held the dagger in his fist. It rested horizontally in front of his throat as he struggled for air—which made it impossible to approach him safely, seeing as how the machine was at his back.

“Lupin,” I hissed, holding out a hand placatingly, taking one step forward. “Look at me—”

It was the wrong thing to do.

He immediately let out a panicked, strangled noise of rage, and swung at me—boldly, and badly. He was fast, and incredibly precise in his aim at my throat, but he couldn’t control the force in his hysteria, and he even slipped, too. He overextended with a sharp cry of alarm, and simply by stepping back—though the timing of it was no simple feat; a half-second later and I would have had two new holes in my larynx—I was able to get an opening. I swiftly slammed my hand down onto his left shoulder as it passed by, spinning him around.

He yelped, and while he didn’t let it go, the weapon was now out of range of me for just a second. Before he could get around again to face me, I wrapped both of my arms under his shoulders and clasped my hands behind his neck.

It only set him off more.

“Let me go! Stay away from me! No more, no more! Let-me—go!”

His voice cracked and his words fell into unintelligible strings of child-like French; he kicked at me, knocked back at me—and I would have slammed him forward, pinned him down onto the bed of the scanner—except that I was slipping on the tile floor myself.

As I nearly went down, Christof lunged into my view. He grabbed Lupin’s wrist with both hands and quickly disarmed him—even if Lupin bit his arm for the trouble.

Christof recoiled with a yell and was about to knock him in the head for it when suddenly, my prisoner stopped struggling.

It took him a couple of seconds to really get there, though. He gasped like he’d just come up for air, and spasmed once, bodily, on the way down. No longer holding up his own weight, I pulled him against me, but he wasn’t fighting back at all.

When I looked down, I realized why.

There was blood all over the floor.

There was blood all over him.

That...was why I had slipped. I moved my foot slightly, as I stared. A puddle of it rippled out from
the toe of my shoe.

More of it was pumping out of Lupin’s leg at every second, like a half empty bottle of soda, tipped over on its side.

I looked at Christof, momentarily. He was breathing hard and holding the thing that had come out of Lupin’s leg, staring at me with wide eyes. The bit in his hand was entirely red. His forearm was also entirely red, as was part of his face.

I looked over at the wall. There was a bright splash of red there too, a couple feet long. It was fine droplets, like someone had sprayed it with a hose on mist. The drops were starting to fall, making ominous trails down the wall that Marti was standing in front of, hunched over and holding her arm.

Marti...

Marti?

*Marti!*

My heart caught in my throat. Something about the way she was looking at me was alarming me. Maybe it was the fact that *she* looked alarmed, injured as she was.

...Deadly injury?

She came toward me, eyes wide. I opened my arms to her, ready to assist, to save—only to realize there was something already there. Or rather, *still* there.

It was as she got to me—actually, to the thing in my arms—that I realized she was saying something.

The sound came in slowly, like someone gradually turning up a dial from zero.

It was just a track of the word “no,” on repeat, spilling from her lips, each one more desperate and heated than the last.

Someone took the heavy thing—person?—from my arms, and laid them out on the floor. Christof pushed me back with a hand, and Marti started undoing her belt, of all things. Not her police utility belt, but the one under it, that actually held up her pants.

She wrapped it around Lupin’s leg and cinched it tight with startling force.

*Lupin....*

Christof, meanwhile, ripped off the hospital gown from the thief, desperately twisting it again and again over the wound, until he, too, slammed a knot down onto skin, more savagely than any skin had a right to be treated.

*That’s right.... Lupin.*

It was Lupin I was staring at.

He was unconscious on the floor, covered in red where he wasn’t lying in it. His entire right leg was just a sheet of crimson, and his right arm wasn’t much better. The puddles on the floor, which looked like a slaughter house’s, were soaking into his hair, into his cheek as he breathed it, as well as the trousers of the two people kneeling next to him.
Marti, I realized, was being very animated, down on the floor. Currently, she was barking orders to Christof, which made him scoop up Lupin into his arms and stand. She packed the remaining cloth of the gown into Christof’s arms, turned him toward the door, and pushed him off with heated commands.

He was gone a second later. He and Lupin were both gone, and I was still standing there, staring at an empty doorway.

My hands were still up. They were covered in warm, sticky red, clutching at the air helplessly.

When I saw Marti’s face again, it was because she had turned me around. She had grabbed me by the arms and was currently looking up at me, saying something.

The world shuttered and flashed for a few seconds, my balance wrecked—she was shaking me.

Her hands were all red, staining my coat sleeves. I stared at the imprint of her hand, painting itself on the grey over and over again as she touched me.

“Koichi?” she said, voice distant but obviously strained. “Koichi, snap out of it! I. Need. You!”

Something about the last few words sobered me up just enough to be mobile. I put my hands out to her, managing to land on her shoulders, making them red too. She paused her assault, staring into my eyes desperately, searchingly, while my hands couldn’t quite manage to grip her back. My fingers touched her neck, then her collarbone, then her cheeks....Never sure whether to brace myself or to comfort her.

Yet it was not her I looked at, as under my hands her warmth slowly turned my mind back on.

I turned to the side, at the doctor—who was still on the floor, surrounded by red, looking up at the both of us with wild shock.

Chapter Summary

Medical Drama. And some other kinds of drama, too.

Chapter Notes

Hi all! Well, that was a short vacation (*laughs*). --Though I suppose it was only a vaca from posting, since I wrote 50k words in two weeks. (*sobs*) My psyche...My fingers...

Two things of note:
1. Going forward, I'm not sure how consistent the posting will be, since from here on out the story’s pretty much all plot and tons of backstory, and I've had to write ahead quite a bit just to feel out where different pieces of the puzzle should appear, and I don't have as strong of a plan.

But I definitely still need your comment guidance, so I felt I needed to start posting again to get a clear view of those last few savory pieces--which is what you all want to see!

I will, however, attempt to post every week still. :)

2. Content warning -- Starting in this chapter, the story gets really dark and heavy for quite a while, as well as viscerally gruesome (in the next three chapters in particular).

No spoilers, but in this chapter and onward there will be mentions or depictions of child abuse, sexual abuse and coercion, untimely deaths, graphic medical procedures (probably inaccurately), and talk about suicide. And while I am trying to delve into all that responsibly, it was even tough for me to write. So just...bring a buddy, and take care of yourself out there!

And now, onto the show....

“We don’t have time for that,” I pleaded, pushing Zeni back with a hand to the chest. It left a light-red hand print on his vest. “Get to the ER,” I snapped at the doctor; from the floor, he sputtered, acknowledging it as he started to stand.

I gave the Inspector one last look to keep him from causing trouble, then left them behind and ran.

Ran down the dark corridor, full speed, one hand on my police belt to keep the heavy bits down and the other shooting out in front of me like a speed skater. Light after light strobed by, flashing over me like a car in a tunnel.

I wouldn’t be too late this time. I wouldn’t.
The lobby that sat in the middle of the building on each floor appeared before me; I burst into it and its light, skidding across the smooth wooden floor to make the wide turn for the staircase. The main stairs were narrower here, but they still came down double-barreled, and I wheeled for the far one. I vaulted over two pieces of furniture and nearly hit the wall from my long arc, but I didn’t care. I took the steps two at a time, feet lighter and lighter the higher I climbed, as adrenaline took over and Hermes’ wings were on my feet.

Two floors up, I emerged into the main lobby. I saw a familiar blonde head in tight white: Nadia was still there—

And then the world fell out from under me.

I gritted out a curse of mashed together syllables as I hit the floor and the force of it went hard through my side. I managed to land well—with my head on my arm, and the impact spread out fairly evenly along my whole side—but it still wasn’t a landing with a rebound, and my bones clacked together painfully, from knee to elbow, as I rolled across the floor. My head landed right on the stab wound, eliciting a second cry just for it.

But I didn’t have time for pain. As soon as I stopped, I forced myself straight and even still sitting on the floor, pointed a directive finger at Nadia, who had half come around the counter to help me.

“Call whatever Rapid Response team you’ve got!” I snapped. “The vein in his leg blew, I need everyone you’ve got in the ER, stat!”

Chirstof would have come this way, but that didn’t mean he had time to explain. Nadia nodded as she rushed around the desk. “Do you know the blood type?” she shot back, dialing in numbers on the phone.

“I don’t, and we aren’t gonna know.” I rolled onto my feet, only to realize my hands were coated anew in thick, wet syrup.

Between my feet, there was a long, wide streak of thin red smeared across the tile where I’d fallen, and in front of me, a delicate trail of red spatters, every fifteen feet or so.

I’d slipped on his blood.

Shit.

I took off running again, careful of the wet soles of my shoes, following the scarlet road.

Behind me, the navy boys all stood like a flock of Meerkats, each alert and not a single one useful for anything but decorating coats.

The matching steel doors to the ER glowed before me, and I didn’t slow as I approached. It had only taken me a few more seconds to get there; hurting through I was, I turned my shoulder into the swinging doors and shoved through.

About twenty feet away, I spotted the operating table, surrounded by all its mechanical equipment. There was already one nurse there opposite Christof, who was doing his best to turn on the overhead lamps with slick fingers.

Lupin, meanwhile, was unconscious and ashen, draped over the slab without much care. But at
least he was all there.

Save for his blood, which was all over his leg and arm, and dripping in a puddle underneath him, albeit slower. Half of the dressing gown was almost cherry dark as well, discarded to the side while the nurse threw piece after piece of packing gauze into the hole in his thigh like she was stuffing a turkey.

I stopped against the table, panting hard. “I know what I’m doing. What do you need.” The nurse was a woman, with black hair and green eyes above her mask, but that was all I could tell.

“Wash your hands and pack,” she said, shaking her head as her hands moved deftly, quickly, harshly. “Just pack.”

I hurried over to the sink, rolled up my sleeves and went to work scrubbing. The red washed off in streams but a good portion of the soap froth was still pink. I did a cursory rub over my wound as well, hissing at the sting and groaning at the burn but sucking it up. I didn’t matter right now. I had two arms. I could still function, and they’d be fine.

It was the fastest scrub I’d ever done, even out in triage fields during disasters. I forcibly air-dried my hands as I searched a nearby shelf; by the time I pulled off a roll of gauze, they were nearly there. I quickly rapped my wound like a boxer would his fists, and, marching back across the room, held my injured arm out to Christof. “Tie this.”

He looked at me for a moment, surprised, but then quickly did as was told.

Seemed he was more in-tact than the other men.

“Thanks, Chris,” I said, giving him a hard look of approval. “Do what the woman here tells you. If that’s leave, leave. If it’s do something, do something. You did good. Now, let’s save him the rest of the way.”

As I was speaking, Nadia came in with crisply clacking heels, a small cooler in her hands. She popped it onto a shelf that lined the nearest wall and pulled out a bloodpack. She went to work getting a transfusion line in like we were doing a timed drill.

“What happened,” the dark-haired nurse across from me asked as we alternated stuffing little bits of white gauze, a bit like cotton marshmallows, into the hole. She was focused on her work though, which I appreciated; the words were secondary and clipped, only for information. Not the idle gossip chatter of ORs.

“Freaked out and pulled the shrapnel out of his leg.” I wiped at my forehead with my arm, suddenly feeling sweat there now that I was looking downward.

*Shit. I told you not to leave that damn chair but did you listen? You just had to roll a fucking one and get smashed.*

Across from me, the woman sighed. “They always do that.”

“What?”

She shook her head and offered a simple, “The mind-addled patients, they hurt themselves a lot.”

Ah...that was right. This was a mental hospital, wasn’t it? Or least, one wing of it was. Maybe that was part of why they had this ER here....
Nadia’s hands came into the side of my view once more, and within seconds there was the familiar beep of a heart monitor. I looked up; the beat was erratic and fluttering, and on the low end.

She must have seen me looking, because she said from behind me, “It should even out as the blood gets in. Watch.”

I looked at the little stream of red encased in plastic tubing flowing down into his arm, and then over to the numbers on the digital screen. Slowly, slowly, as the blood pressure rose, so did his pulse calm and even out.

“Hands up,” the other nurse said, perfunctory, while I sighed. We both waited, watching the wound.

The top packs we’d stuffed into the hole were getting red, but slowly—simply from the force of what was underneath. If his pulse stayed regular, that meant we’d clotted the wound at least enough to keep him alive for the next half-hour or so—which was not a given; the vein could be receding up his leg. The belt would help with that, I hoped, but even so, we couldn’t leave him like this. We had to repair the vein, somehow—assuming it was the vein. And then, there was the problem of figuring out how to repair the rest of the giant gash in the first place. How many chunks of flesh had he even ripped out? I wasn’t sure he was going to be able to walk right, after this.

We’d need to see the metal spire, really. I wasn’t looking forward to that. Shit, if he’d gotten chunks of bone, too...

“Where’s the doc,” I asked, feeling a little sick at the thought. Bodies and their fluids didn’t bother me, except for when they were completely separate from their person. Then it was just a little too much like hamburger meat and—

Urlf.

My stomach heaved, and I turned away for a second, towards Christof. He didn’t smell like blood—or at least he still smelled enough like himself to overpower it, anyway. I leaned over a bit, and took a long breath.

“You okay, Telli?” he asked, hooking his hand under my bicep in case I fainted.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine...” I wiped at my forehead with the back of my good arm and sighed. “Just...getting a little old for this, I guess.”

He smiled a bit, pitying. “You can do it.”

Before I could reply, the sound of a phone went off. Nadia turned around and made it to the wall in two quick strides. “ER.”

She nodded twice, and within five seconds, hung up the phone after a short We’re coming now. She turned back to us. “Doc and the rest are over at the OR. Once he’s stable enough, we should go.”

We all looked at each other. “How long,” I asked the nameless nurse, since she’d been there first.

Her green eyes flicked over to the monitor, then over to the hanging blood pack. “Wait until half that bag’s gone, then go. I don’t want to just wait until it’s empty, ’case it’s just going into a cavity somewhere, but that should be enough to stabilize him to move him down. ‘S a short trip.”

Thank God. We weren’t going far, then. But far enough that we didn’t want to be caught unawares
with a gusher.

I couldn’t touch my face, because I needed to keep my hands clean, but I sorely wanted to. Instead, I turned to Christof and put my head against his shirt sleeve.

He wasn’t sure what to do at first, but he wrapped his arms around my shoulders, eventually, bloody though they were. The hug involved his elbows more than his hands. “It’ll be okay,” he said.

“It will,” I agreed, praying for it.

_I wish it were Zeni doing this._

Wait. Zeni. I’d left him down there, and he’d basically just watched his beloved charity chase almost die in his arms, after stabbing me. He must have been having kittens by now. But at least he let the doctor get upstairs.

I sighed, and dug my head further into Christof’s sizable hockey player bicep. “This is gonna be a long night.”

“Telli,” Christof chuckled hollowly, “It’s seven-thirty in the morning.”

* * *

I didn’t hurt. But I couldn’t see very well.

Something was wrong.

“L...”

I was on my back, and even though I lifted my arm, I didn’t think it actually got where I wanted it to. Everything was blurry, like there were tears in my eyes, and things seemed weirdly far away—what should have been the end of my arm looked like it was twenty feet away, all distorted and cloudy. I sent the command again, harder this time.

“...’ay d’wn!”

Someone caught my arm. I could tell because pale blobs appeared around it, and it stopped moving as much—and there was a faint sensation tingling up my shoulder. One that I had the distinct recollection was me ripping something in my muscles as I tried to force myself to move against something holding me back.

“..._me_?”

A face appeared in my view. At least, I assumed it was a face. Eyes, within a peach circle, and then a blob of dark around that, which was presumably hair. The colors of an outfit something distant within my mind told me I sort-of, kind-of, should-have-recognized.

A disembodied voice came down, talking to me, and I was pretty sure a hand was clutching mine, as it was held in my view.

“~~~?”

I felt, for some reason, that I liked this person. This...woman?
Something was telling me it was a woman. Something about the voice in my ears, calling my name.

“M...om...?” I asked that face.

There was a pause, and then she pressed:

“Lupin, can you hear me?”

Mom, I’m sorry—

“Lupin?”

Don’t take me away yet....

* * *

The elevator was close-in and quiet as the nurses and I waited for it to take us one floor up, where the OR was. And yet, all I could hear was my heart beating.

Zenigata...the way he’d been reacting. He’d fought Lupin off, and then, when Lupin collapsed, he’d just...totally lost it. He’d gone into shock for some reason.

Shit.

I looked down at Lupin himself, laying unconscious on the gurney. He was completely naked and there was blood all over his black and blue form, some of it drying out by now. Some of it, though, still had its slick, shimmering sheen. The wound in his leg was full of synthetic fiber pads turned a deep, rich burgundy despite their original white, plumped up with coagulated blood. I was currently holding the wound closed, and his skin was fairly cold.

Shit, shit, shit.

What the hell was going through that poor head of yours?

The sigh that came on the heels of my anxiety was a heavy one.

Beside me, the local trauma nurse—or doctor, maybe, I had no idea—with the dark hair was behind the gurney, ready to push it once the door opened. Next to her, Christof carried the blood cooler. Across from me, at the head of the setup, was Nadia, holding the gurney with one hand to steer it and holding up the blood transfusion pack with her other.

When she saw me looking at her, her tired, almost bored stare at the wall came back to life. She nodded at me, face grim, and then flicked her gaze down at Lupin with a tilt of her head.

“He’s fucked himself up,” she said. “But we’re going to fix him, don’t you worry.”

She didn’t smile, but the tone was reassuring. I took a breath and nodded, though my shoulders felt incredibly heavy. “Yes, Ma’am.”

“You’re...Telli, right, you said?” she asked, voice softening a bit. “I thank you in advance for your help. We’ll need your hands.”

I nodded. “I can’t do much, but I know how to clamp a suture, do stitches, and monitor vitals.”
She nodded back, smiling just the tiniest amount. “We can use that.”

The car decelerated. There was a ding, and the door opened.

And then came a groan from below me.

I looked down just as the woman at the back of the elevator pushed us forward.

Lupin’s eyes were open.

He was squinting and widening his eyelids, pupils swooping around like they couldn’t focus.

“...Oh,” I said.

He was awake.

*Oh, fuck.*

He swallowed once, and choked on it.

If he was awake, that either meant his blood pressure had stabilized and he was about to be in a world of hurt—we hadn’t given him any pain killers—or, he was just about to tumble off the last cliff of the traumatic injury landslide and die.

Bodies did that, sometimes—put all of their effort into one last-ditch attempt at consciousness, right before they completely self-destructed. Usually, people started spouting “Don’t let me die,” in that instance. They always knew, somehow, how bad off they were.

Gasping for breath, Lupin tipped his head back and pushed his chest up; his arms and legs squirmed.

“Lupin, Lupin can you hear me?” I asked quickly, leaning down over him as we rushed along. I shoved my hand down onto his thigh farther, keeping it from moving and forcing the pressure tighter against his wound.

He let out a long squeak of pain, but didn’t seem to have heard me—or seen me.

“Lupin,” I called again, taking my hand off the side rail for a moment to jostle his chest. He gasped and looked over at me, but it didn’t look like awareness was there, for all that he was squinting at me. He gurgled an aggressive noise and raised his hand up suddenly, right into my face.

“Aughk—” I caught it, barely, but still stumbled from the powerful knock to the jaw.

I had both hands on his arm, actually—crap.

“I’ve got it,” the new nurse said, coming around without missing a step. She set one hand over Lupin’s thigh as I moved over, and left Christof to push. Nadia, on the other side, let go of the cart entirely to hold Lupin down by the shoulder, and ended up steering the thing with her hip.

Lupin made another incorrigible noise, this one stronger and louder. He might have been trying to say something; I wasn’t sure. But he clenched his fist and jerked me over him, causing the whole parade to stop, suddenly.

“Stay down, dammit!” Nadia shouted in response, knocked off balance. Since were stopped, Christof popped the cooler of blood packs in between the gurney’s framework underneath and held Lupin’s knees down.
This did not help him calm down. At all.

“You’re safe, you’re safe, Lupin, you’re in the hospital,” I told him, holding onto his arm as he thrashed—but it was to no avail. He kicked out, sending Christof and the second nurse bucking.

Some of the hard-fought blood spurted out of him; a couple of gauze bits flipped onto the woman’s white coat and onto the floor as she let out a “woah!” of surprise.

“Lupin can you hear me? It’s me, Marti. I’ve got you,” I pleaded, bending down into his face with the hopes that he would recognize me. I rested a soothing hand on his chest, and curled his captured hand against me.

He cried out sharply at that, but Nadia and I finally pushed him down with our combined torque, one hand to each shoulder. After a few seconds of writhing, he stilled, eyes still flickering about.

As we were stopped in the middle of the hallway, he was panting, and so were we, every one of us. Every muscle in Lupin’s body was tight, which wasn’t good. He might not have been completely there, but he was waiting.

I looked around at the others for a signal. They just looked back at me, and then at Lupin. For a second, we all just looked at each other, gauging, hoping.

“M...om...?” Lupin asked, a tiny voice against the blood in my ears.

I stared. It wasn’t an angry, or violent note in his voice. It was hopeful, and a little afraid.

Mom? I wondered, my jaw clenching not only at the mystery of it, but at the little ping of regret that lit in me. If he was in trauma, maybe flashing back to his childhood, what would he understand? What would calm him down?

I had no way of knowing.

“Hey, son, you’re hurt,” I tried, licking my lips and rubbing his arm. I recalled vaguely that his name was probably just an alias, but knowing his real one would have come in handy right now. “Can you take a few deep breaths for me, please?”

It looked like he hadn’t heard me; he just kept squinting at me, his hand clenching and unclenching as I held it against my chest. But he did breathe slower, somewhat. Good—maybe if he wasn’t all there, his subconscious would at least take commands.

Time was running out. If we didn’t get him to the OR, he’d fall unconscious again, and it’d be even harder to save him. But if he flopped around like a fish before he got there, there’d be no point; he’d just kill himself that much sooner.

I swallowed hard, looking into his feverish green-blue eyes.

What plausible explanation would be omnipresent in a criminal’s life that would get them to hold still immediately when they don’t know where they were or who was with them?

As I held his hand tightly, I rubbed my second hand up and down his arm, hard enough that I hoped he would feel it.

“Lupin, you’ve been shot. I need you to hold still okay? We’re going to take care of you, but you need to stay calm for me.”
He glared at me, displeased, but then he suddenly sighed, as if this was some great inconvenience, and slumped backward. “Shit,” he mumbled.

His eyes closed, and after two seconds of his grip going slack in mine, I realized he was out again.

“Shit,” Nadia added, more emphatically than he did. “You got anything to knock him out with?” she asked the other nurse, the one at my side.

She shook her head, and nodded at Christof, who began speeding us along once more, albeit in our new configuration.

“Do you have an anesthesiologist?” I asked as I jogged beside the cart, heart in my throat and hand holding Lupin’s while I helped steer.

“Today?” Nadia asked. “No?”

I stared, taking a deep breath. She gave me an apologetic shrug, her calm demeanor finally starting to crack as she looked at Lupin again.

“So...Morphine, then?” I hedged.

“If we have to, I guess,” Nadia frowned and then sighed, frustrated. “This’ll keep happening, if we don’t.”

We couldn’t afford that. In part because of how Lupin would react and screw up the work we were doing on him, but also because it’d just be too hard on his body to keep coming in and out of consciousness. Consciousness took a lot of energy and effort; booting up all those systems just to shut them down again would seriously fuck up his body’s trauma-preservation responses. Not to mention the cost of the chemical dumps that being bewildered and afraid would cause.

Before I could think on it any further, the OR door and its light loomed before us, spilling out into the hall. Two men were standing there, silhouettes against the sallow rays.

It was Zenigata and the doctor.

* * *

—Blood spreading across the tile, mingled with still-warm water.—

“You want to tell me what the hell all that was about, huh?!” I roared.

—The flash of Japanese police lights, striking like physical blows across the walls, even though the horizontal window of frosted glass was tightly closed. A rhythmic beat that lashed at me, instead of the heartbeat I was trying to find.—

My fists were so tight the burned skin was tearing and the tendons weren’t close behind.

—A naked body, pulled out onto that tile; the ensanguinated god that was a mountain just laying there, unmoving, from whose body spilled all the rivers of the land.—

I pushed the old man up against the glass observation wall, by the lapels of his lab coat. His feet were dangling off the ground, and he still just kept saying the same damn thing over and over, hands raised like a coward.
—It was a limp form from which that pink water emanated. Stain spreading all over me, as if his life were absorbing into mine, instead of the contact keeping his within him, like I wanted.—

“Inspector, Inspector please...”

—“Please, someone help him. Won’t you at least...?”

There were uniforms all around me, but none of them were helping.

“Please!”

Voices, telling me to let go.

“Please, anyone?!?”

“Zenigata-san, please.... He’s gone...”

A hand at my shoulder, pulling me away.—

“Get off of me!” I shouted, swinging a fist out at the hand that pulled my shoulder.

But the person who stumbled back from me was not a random patrolman who should have known better. It was a woman I knew.

A woman I cared deeply about, who was blinking in surprise, hands half raised and her mouth gaping, as she stood a few feet away from me.

It was Marti. And behind her, a gurney with a pair of bare, lifeless legs on it, wheeling out of my view and into the operating room.

The images of the past evaporated out of my mind, leaving a much deeper, and prescient, problem before me—though one still very much rooted to the past as well.

The woman I had helped raise from purgatory was crumbling before my eyes, back into the woman I’d originally found there.

A few more tense seconds went by, in which we stared at each other in stunned silence. Marti was barely able to keep a straight face, and kept looking down and halfway up again, touching at her chest—the place where my fist had knocked her, presumably. The man in my hands was completely still, watching us, as was the head nurse, standing between him and Marti, strategically blocking the OR doors.

“I’m...I’m sorry,” I whispered, dropping the man and turning to Marti as soon as my mind had processed what my body had done. “I was...somewhere else, all of a sudden....”

“It’s...okay. Just...” Marti held her palm against her chest, and was looking at the wall like she wanted to be anywhere but in front of me, and fast. Her cheeks were getting as red as her hair.

“Anna...”

I took a concerned step toward her, hand outstretched.

“Inspector,” Nadia interjected quickly, curt and pulling rank, and we both flinched. “I need the Doctor if you want this patient to survive. May I take him now?”

I looked at him beside me, and shook my head distractedly. I wasn’t done with him, but...
definitely looked rattled enough for now. “Y-yeah, it’s fine...” I waved a hand, and finally took my step toward Marti.

She tensed up and swallowed, as, in the corner of my vision, Nadia hustled away the doctor.

“Anna, I...”

“Don’t touch me,” she whispered, taking a step back—only to stop suddenly and flinch, her eyes squeezed tightly shut. She was holding her breath.

I knew why this was happening. But I wasn’t sure what to do about it—not here, like this, after so long—and another beat passed, our shadows facing each other on the floor, with what might as well have been a canyon between them.

When her green eyes opened again, she looked me square in the eye, and it was softer, more pitying—though I wasn’t sure if it was for her or for me. She forced a weak smile and amended, already stepping aside into the brightly-lit room, “I mean, I...need to keep my hands as clean as possible. We’ll talk later, okay? Lu...Lupin needs me, now.”

“Ah...of course,” I muttered, stepping back once, then twice for good measure, jamming my blood-crusted hands in my pockets and ducking my head down in submission.

But Marti still just stood there, at the edge of my vision, feet hesitant.

It was then that Christof jogged to where Nadia had just been, coming to an awkward stop just this side of the swinging doors, holding them open. He’d gone into the OR with the gurney.

“Is everything...all right?” he asked, looking between us. “Do you need help?” he lobbed at Marti, almost sternly.

Another moment of silence.

“I...have to go,” Marti finally said, shaking her head and turning on her heel.

“Anna!” I all but shouted at her back, finally free from my emotional paralysis. But it seemed it lasted only a moment, because my words caught in my throat immediately after, at the sight of her tense back.

My little redhead stopped and rubbed at her eyes once, but she didn’t turn around. At her side, Christof touched her arm, half turned away from me but still looking over his shoulder cautiously.

“Anna, I’m...not him,” I said, though it felt so goddamned weak. “And you’re not there. You’re safe.”

I didn’t know if I was talking more to her or to me at that point, and I think she knew it, from the way her jaw tightened just a bit, and how the look in her eyes hardened as she stared forward.

But that look never turned on me. Instead, after a moment, she simply nodded, stiffly. “I know,” she whispered, and wiped at her eyes again with her sleeve, with some finality to it. Before I could say anything else, she took a deep breath and pushed her shoulders back, though she was facing the doors. “Christof, stay with the Inspector, please. And Inspector...”

I automatically straightened at this, heels clicking together crisply at her tone. “Yes?”

“Get some sleep.”
And then she left.

As I stared after her, heart in my throat, beside me Christof muttered, with a tone only someone his age could have managed: “You are in so much trouble....”
Chapter Summary

Marti's Tiny Violins sing a sad song....

Chapter Notes

This chapter really makes me wish I drank.

Also, I have no idea how Italian civil courts work. I used pre-1980s America for the backbone of this.

It had been a very long ride, that night. Out of Venice and into the countryside of a city called Marghera, which is Venice’s mainland counterpart.

It was dark the whole way. I’d crossed the causeway to the mainland under a pitch-black sky, with not even stars to guide me. The moon was lost, and I couldn’t help but know, in the back of my mind, that something so bright was on its way to being lost to me, as well.

It was like I couldn’t breathe, the entire way there. Donatello Medici, my precinct captain, was driving the car, and no matter how fast he went, it felt too slow.

It had started like any other night: I was halfway through my shift in the lab, humming old folk songs to myself as I worked on blood tests and DNA kits, the lone night tech. *Beep beep whirr* went the machines; *tweedle dee dee* went Marti.

There was the coroner next door, but he was fairly busy, all told. We had dinner together, and we chatted on our breaks, but that was about it. In general, my work shift was one long, solo song. And that was okay, because it meant I was free from my husband for a good chunk of my day, and got home in time to hit up the bakery’s freshest goods, which I then sent my kids off to school with before going to bed.

It was as I was singing one particular song about a satyr and his bride that, all of a sudden on one of these twirls over the tile, I found my boss standing in the doorway.

“Oh! Cap! Don’t scare me like that!” I was so startled I threw the plastic tube across the room at him, but luckily, it was already capped. It bounced off the prep table, then scurried across the floor, until it landed near his feet.

Donatello Medici, my precinct captain, stood under the ghoulish light in the stone doorway. Typically—meaning, when he wasn’t standing there—he was tall and handsome, with a chiseled
jaw, dark olive skin, and shoulders that were always strong. He was in his early fifties, intelligent and upper-crust, but always sharply dressed and suave too. Even though he was starting to show touches of grey, it only made him more mature for it. But maybe that was just my tastes maturing, since I wasn’t getting any younger either.

Regardless, he was a nice boss to age with. He’d visit me every night that our shifts overlapped, either before he went home, or during a break if he had to work extra late. He’d bring me coffee from the floor that really knew how to make it, and often a pastry of some sort, too. Since I worked the night shift and in the basement no less, I didn’t know many of the people upstairs. But as the boss of the whole building, he made an attempt to help me feel included, and it worked. I always had a smile for him, and he always had one for me.

In the last year or so, he also had a particular look in his eye for me too, as he sat on the table in the middle of the room and we chatted about anything and everything—and I had one for him, too.

But neither of us had acted on it. We’d never even touched, and it was silly to think we would. We were both married, and he was my boss. But it was fun to flirt with him sometimes, and pretend I deserved a man like that. It was more than my husband would do. I think Donatello knew that, too, and that was why he did it. He just wanted to cheer me up when no one else would, and make sure I didn’t break down crying when I was all alone.

The first time I’d come to work with bruises I couldn’t fully hide, I had to talk him down from beating up my husband—and firing him. But the next day, when I thought maybe he’d fire me instead, he brought me flowers.

They were to keep in front of the workstation mirror, he’d said. “So that you think of these, when you think of you.”

That was when it had started, really, and it just sort of grew from there.

This time as he appeared, I laughed nervously but freely, one hand on the counter and another on my chest, a vain attempt to push down the adrenaline spike. “I thought you were a ghost!”

After all, the morgue was one room over, and the doorway was a particularly shady place. It seemed like spirits would show up there, if they were going to. I’d thought I’d seen one or two before, especially when we had a particularly sad case down there. Normally however, he’d knock so as not to scare me. He was considerate that way. He was always so considerate, and that was probably why I just couldn’t quite ever tell him in words to reign in that smile of his.

But this time, he wasn’t smiling, and he wasn’t coming in, either. He was just standing there in his fine grey suit and bowler hat, with the brightly-colored shirt and tie underneath. The outfit meant he was on his way out, but the way he was standing, determined and jaw tight, the tube abandoned at his feet....

The thought came to me like a summer wind:

*Is tonight the night you’re finally going to do something about that look in your eye?*

My adrenaline didn’t stop. But it definitely changed flavors.

“Marti,” he said quietly after a bit. He took off his hat and bent down to pick up the little piece of plastic, and came into the lab properly, approaching the table that was our nightly rendezvous point. The one he liked to sit on.

I’d thought about this. Dreamed about it, too, by night or by day: he’d saunter in, pretend
something was going on, and hop a seat on the tabletop. Then he’d lean over, mid-sentence, and kiss me....

Sometimes in my reveries, he’d be boyishly shy, but determined nonetheless.

Sometimes, he’d be dark and seductive, putting his hands around my waist and drawing me in.

Sometimes, he’d be awkward and halting, over-gentlemanly, and I’d guide his lips to mine.

“What’s up?” I flashed him a short smile, pulling up the ridiculously large goggles over my face so that they pushed my curls back.

He put the tube on the table, and then his hands. His hands were balled into fists, anxiously, and he leaned on them heavily. The distance of the table sat between us, and I wasn’t sure if I should attempt to close it. So I waited, and waited, the last off the machines dying down.

The silence was stifling.

When the Captain finally looked up at me, it wasn’t to return my smile. He sighed in a way that was more like a growl, and his grey eyes looked something between miserable and angry.

That little fluttering feeling sank into the pit of my stomach, as did my smile, and I immediately regretted ever letting myself have either of them.

“What’s wrong...?” I asked, voice quieting. Quieting the way it did before my husband invariably took out his anger on me.

He sighed and looked off, those strong shoulders sinking. “I have some bad news.”

“O-oh...” I nodded. But at least he sounded less angry now.

Maybe...

That lack of flutter was what he was feeling, too.

“Are you...firing me?” I asked, trying to suppress the quiver in my voice. *I need this job. I’ll stop caring about you, just let me keep working—*

“What? No...” His brow pinched together, and he shook his head, as if the thought were distasteful. “No, there’s....”

He lifted his hand, as if to illustrate a point, but it never materialized. He took a breath, sighed, and his hand back down on the tabletop.

In the end, his answer was to look at me, pain in his eyes.

My reply was to frown back at him.

He sighed, head hanging.

The Captain wasn’t the type of man to be awkward about anything; he had a silver tongue—and a silver ego. It was alarming to see him unsure like this, and the longer it went on, the worse of a feeling I had. My gaze flickered across his face, his posture, my emotions on hold until I could figure out what was wrong.

*Spit it out,* I wanted to say, to shout—but it only came out as a whisper.
He took a breath, his broad shoulders rising, and nodded. He stood up straight, but immediately slouched to one side, weight on one leg.

“Marti, there’s...been an accident in Maghera. They’re still cleaning it up, but...I think you’ll want to get out there. I just heard about it, but I felt I needed to come tell you before you get a call.”

“Maghera?” Why would I have anything to do with Maghera? And furthermore, how would I get out there? Maghera was on the mainland; it was connected to us by a long causeway, and nothing else. “But I...don’t have a car. My husband took it....”

He stared at me, like that should tell me something, and I stared back.

“...Yes,” he said, eventually. “That’s exactly it.”

_A car accident? With my husband? But, wait... No.... That didn’t make any sense._

“But... Why would he be out there?” I asked, pulling off the goggles fully to focus on him better. “He was just taking Anya to a party...?” A party here _in town._

The Captain looked like he was going to stay something, but it was eaten by a look of pity. When he finally did speak, I got the impression that it wasn’t what he had originally set out to say. “Marti,” he began gently, “I don’t know, but... It’s your car, and I think you need to get out there. There are some...complications, and I think you’ll want to get there before the press does.”

“Press...?”

“There’s been some deaths....”

My eyes flashed. “My...husband?”

Relief flooded through me at the possibility. The Captain opened his mouth, then, with a flutter of blinking, shut it. He knew. He knew what that tone of mine was for.

“I’m not sure,” he admitted slowly after a bit, lips pursing. “They haven’t identified all the bodies yet.”

_All the...bodies._

My limbs were suddenly shaking.

“C’mon,” he said, taking my hand. “Get your coat. I’ll take you.”

I stared at his hand...and mine. “Y-yeah, sure.... Just let me finish this....”

“No,” he instructed gently, but urgently. My gaze snapped up to look at him—all of him, from the concerned grey eyes to the prince-like stance as he tried to pull me out of the room. “Leave it.”

I’ll never forget that urgency, that fear. Surrounded by fear and the shadow of death:

That was the first time we’d ever touched.
He drove us out of Venice, through Maghera, and into the countryside.

It was pitch black the whole way. We crossed the causeway to the mainland under a pitch-black sky, with not even stars to guide us. The moon was lost, and I couldn’t help but know, in the back of my mind, that something so bright was on its way to being lost to me, as well.

But I didn’t let myself think it. I didn’t let myself feel it, or anything. I just held my breath, the whole way there. I didn’t mind that Donatello didn’t tell me the whole truth of what he knew. He was kind to me, unerringly kind, and I trusted him. If I shouldn’t know right now, then I wouldn’t.

It was good to be able to trust someone.

Personally, my worry at the time was that my husband was crippled, but not dead. That was something the Captain would hide from me: an even greater burden than I had now, rather than the freedom I’d wanted.

No matter how fast Donatello drove, it felt too slow. But I also didn’t want it to end, in a way, as I stared at the darkness on that narrow causeway. Seemingly infinite darkness spread out around us, bounded on two sides by a galaxy’s worth of glittering lights. Our two headlights lived in the middle, slowly—ever so slowly—moving toward one and leaving the other behind.

For a while, that bubble of light was just the two of us, little souls in the quiet distance between worlds.

I wish it could have lasted forever. Wished we could have just driven away from everything, and kept on going.

But my children needed me.

My boss didn’t say a word the entire way there, except one simple sentence, on that nearly endless causeway of dreams and nightmares:

“Whatever we find there, it’ll be okay. It will. I promise.”

He’d set his hand on my thigh then, and I’d just nodded. I didn’t think much of it at the time, but I’d think a lot on that gesture, in the weeks and years to come.

His hand was warm and steady.

I’d never felt that before.

It was easy to tell when we arrived. It was just a small neighborhood, with brick three-story buildings, apartments on top and shops on the bottom. There were lively flower boxes in their windows, and the sound of club music down the street.

And yet, the sides of the buildings were lit in white and red, screaming up the sides and making the flowers look like something from a demon world. The red reached up into the black void of the midnight sky like hungry flames, trying to escape.

If only they could have.
There were three cars, all piled into each other, and then thrown into a building too. Or at least, that’s what I thought was going on; a tree was tipped over, and benches and signs were thrown halfway down the street.

“What the hell happened?” I wondered, as I stepped out of the car, feet faltering.

It was only then, as I approached the police line with Donatello at my side, that I wondered why he was taking me here, rather than the nearest hospital.

An officer noticed us approaching. The Captain introduced himself with a flip of his badge, then nodded at me. “She’s family.”

“You might not want to...” the beat cop, a young guy, said, but I was already under the line he guarded.

I saw him, sitting on a bench a few feet away: I saw Giuseppe, my second husband.

I ran over to him, but he was being dabbed at by paramedics and was surrounded by cops, shouting obscenities at both. They, likewise, were shouting back at him.

He was surrounded by quieter people, too: bodies under white sheets, scattered about on the sidewalk and the pavement. Large dark spots lay around them, which I would realize later had probably been blood.

“What’s going on?” I asked, jogging up to the ring of uniforms around him, but the first one I tried to push through threw me back with a grunt. I scoffed in annoyance, stumbling back on my feet, and then tried to dive in again. “Step aside! Let me see my husband!”

But hands grabbed my arms, iron-like. “Ma’am, Ma’am you need to let us question the suspect.”

“And I told you, you need to let me see my goddamned husband,” I said, ripping out of the man’s hands and staring at him indignantly. He looked at me with some surprise, to which I added: “Do you have a problem with that Officer, or do you need to take a goddamned seat?”

He stared at me, bewildered, and looked me up and down.

“Who the hell are you?” he asked. “Do you work in the Fifth?”

“It doesn’t matter where I work, I want. To be ten feet. That way.” I pointed behind him, at Giuseppe, voice growing ever more feral and my hand as sharp as a knife. “And if you want to keep getting in my way, you’re going to have. A goddamned. Problem.”

His eyes widened and he looked around at his fellows, who were looking around at each other too now. It was a look I knew: Is she someone important? Is she some mob wife? Should we be scared or annoyed? Who is this ridiculous guy we’re questioning, if this is what comes to pick him up?

All around us, the crowd fifty feet away, behind the police tape, was watching. I knew I was making a spectacle, but I didn’t care.

I growled and threw my hand down. “Get out of my way,” I said, stalking forward, bodychecking him for the hell of it.

He stumbled back, and I ended up in the spot he had vacated. It was at the poor beleaguered paramedic’s side.
Giuseppe was a short man, and at this point in his life, a little bald and a little round. He drank a lot, even when I made it disappear, and he ate whatever you’d put in front of him—after he was done demanding it. He had been handsome once, but the years hadn’t been so kind to him. Every hard night of drinking was on his face, which could quite often be twisted in rage. He was also a homicide detective, but that didn’t seem to help in any good way.

But this time, as he saw me, the anger simmered down, and he looked away. He sat in the middle of the bench, his posture defeated. He knew he’d done wrong, and was in the middle of regretting it. I’d so long wished for that sorrow-filled posture to be offered up to me, alongside a promise of the marriage getting better. I’d wished for it so many times it hurt me to see now, when all these people were watching and his sympathy had nothing to do with me. Because of course it wouldn’t have anything to do with me. As it stood, the only time I’d ever seen it on him had been after he’d knocked me unconscious once, in front of Alessi.

“Why are you handcuffed?” I demanded, hands on my hips.

He wouldn’t look at me.

“You know him?” the paramedic asked, standing up. He was a lot taller than me, all of a sudden, and way too close.

I took a step back; but realizing what I’d done, I pushed my shoulders back along with my head. “Are you deaf?”

He gave me a cold look, then shook his head and left.

Left. Fucking left.

“Where the hell are you going, asshole?” I shouted at him. “Don’t you have any professionalism at all!”

“Anna...” called my husband meekly, from behind me.

“Well do you?!” I shouted at the retreating paramedic, at which point he turned around and shouted back:

“You keep that thing off the street!”

“You—!”

“He’s a menace! He could have at least had the decency to die too!”

“How dare you—!”

“Anna, please...”

“What do you want?!” I snarled, whirling on my husband. “What did you do?!”

I stared at him, so taught I was shaking with rage. I could smell it from here: alcohol. All over him. He looked wasted, clothes rumpled tellingly, on top of the blood and dirt and...lipstick marks on his cheek and neck, where his collar was pushed down.

He looked down, and it was all I could do not to scream at him and attack him.

Finally, I sighed dramatically and ran my hands through my hair. “Jesus. If you’re going to cheat on me and get it all over the papers, just do it when your daughter isn’t waiting on you to pick her
I stood up straight and slapped my hand against my thigh, exasperated. “Where’s Anya. Just tell me where you left her, and I’ll go pick her up. And don’t think you’re coming home. You can spend the rest of your life here behind bars in Maghera, I don’t care.”

I expected a “did that guy bring you here” comment from him, or a maybe a violent outburst with a verbal tirade, but all I got was a slight look to the side. He still wouldn’t look at me.

“Well?” I demanded, tapping my foot.

His head turned more, and then he pointed. At the tree, and our car.

_The...car...?_

It was smashed up around a felled tree and two other cars, until it was nothing but twisted wreckage. They had all clearly been on fire at some point, as had the tree, and the building they had piled into had glass and bricks cascading out of it, spilling out as far as across the street.

I walked toward it, toward the police line on the other side of the wreck and its flashing lights—both cameras and warning lights—glittering like a far shore in the night.

“What an idiot,” I muttered at Zeni, shaking my head as I headed into the OR. The doors swung shut behind me, and I quickly went back over to the sink, washing again. As everyone looked over at me for signs of trouble, I waved a hand and called, “I’m sorry about that. He’s emotionally invested. Please, help the patient as best you can.”

I sounded highly pissed off, which probably helped. The nurses all sighed and went back to what they were doing with more relaxed shoulders, but the old doctor, who had been manhandled the worst and just seen Lupin practically explode besides, glared. “The nerve of that man!” he said, just to make sure I knew how he felt.

“This man is like his son,” I apologized quickly, desperately, and frustrated, pointing at Lupin. “Please don’t hold it against him.”

And it was true. But I wasn’t sure Zenigata knew that.

“Fuckin’ cops,” the old man grumbled, but eventually nodded, pointing at me with angry eyes over his mask. “Fine. But I want him kept out of my OR.”

That was fair enough, I thought as I scrubbed at my arms. And about the best I could hope for. But... “fuckin’ cops”? That seemed a little much.

Except... doctors and patrolmen did run up against each other often times. It was rather notorious, actually, that one often had an agenda while the other didn’t. Or, rather, the doctors’ agenda was the safety and security of a patient, and the cops’ was basically the opposite. And in a mental hospital, it’d be even worse. Maybe that was it.

I sighed, getting under my nails with the soap. _Why do kids always get caught up in adults’ messes?_

“He’s gonna stay on that side of the glass,” I assured the doctor, once I’d come back over. I nodded at the nurses in turn. We were all arranged around Lupin, in different spots. Nadia had already
gotten him attached to all the necessary machines, and he lay there, pale and vapid. The only sign of life at all was his shallow breathing. We might need to intubate him at some point, if it got any worse, but for now he was lucky that the issue wasn’t anywhere near his chest. “Now, what do you need?”

The old man, after a long, hard stare and a grunt of dismissal at me, looked around at us as he spoke. “I need one person suturing, one person on vitals and tools and blood, and another sewing and inspecting with me. Nadia, you’re on tools and vitals. Doctor Christina”—here, he looked at the woman with dark hair and green eyes, whom I had thought was a nurse—“you be my other set of eyes and thread. Miz...”

“Martelli,”

“Ms. Martelli. Do you know how to clamp things?”

“I do.”

“Then I’ll be needing you too.”

Even though Nadia was more experienced than me with all of this, being the one in charge of the tool tray was actually a more important job. I was mostly auxiliary, doing whatever there wasn’t enough hands for the doctors to do; but if a surgeon didn’t have just the right tool when he needed it, it could be the difference between life and death for the patient. Especially if he was the type to get impatient when he was bothered, which surgeons, especially the older ones like this gentleman, were notorious for.

I looked at him over the mash that was Lupin’s leg, the burning surgical lamplight raining down it. He seemed to be fully invested in his job, but he wasn’t calm. He was squinting over his surgical mask.

“You didn’t get hurt, did you, doctor?” I asked gently, most of my anger and memories washed away in the current of more pressing matters. “When you fell?”

He shook his head, the slightest bit. “Nothing a rest won’t fix. Just some bruising. This young man’s been hurt a lot worse.”

He poked at a bit of blood-filled tissue, a mix of red smears and pink flesh. “He really did a number on himself.”

The ruptured vein deep in Lupin’s thigh was finally in-sight. The thief’s leg had been cut open farther to access the wound, a straight slit down his thigh, though we’d had to clamp a bit on the way down the excavation. There was enough time to plan a path to avoid more trauma; luckily, we were able to make an incision in such a way that it pushed muscles apart, rather than cut them in half. Presuming the damage wasn’t too bad from the spike in his leg (and its removal), he should still be able to walk after a few months’ rest. I wasn’t sure about running, but he could walk.

It didn’t make his chances in jail very good in the mean time, but I was sure Zenigata would think of something.

For now, however, the main wound was still bleeding, little by little, and I was currently on straw
duty—the mechanical device that sucked out the blood, the same way a dentist’s tube sucked out spit from the mouth. We’d just removed the last few gauze packs, and now were down to the last one—the one covering the vein. It was sticking. There was no way to tell what the damage underneath it was, and we were all holding our breaths, waiting for a gusher.

If the removal of the pack made the thing burst to life like it had before, chances were we wouldn’t be able to do anything productive; at best, we’d just end up back where we were at the moment. But if removing this caused something worse—caused or revealed the entire vein to be severed, and we couldn’t clamp it—Lupin would have at most three minutes before he bled to death.

So we were trying to be as prepared as we could for whatever we found. To get sutures in, to clamp down the vein. But it was proving difficult. More difficult than it should have.

The vein was up against his bone, first of all; it was actually attached to the bone, so it was hard to clamp it without tearing it completely away from its anchor, or otherwise stabbing the bone to shreds. But the worst part was that the tissue in his leg that we’d sliced open was swelling up to be almost impossible to get around. I wasn’t sure how we were going to do this without making a complete mash of his leg and render him disabled.

It was the same look that was on the other people’s faces, visible above their masks.

“If we can’t clamp this, we’ll have to amputate his leg if we want to save his life,” the old doctor said.

“Please don’t,” I said before I could think better of it. It was like his spirit had reached up and forced me to say it. “Ah...sorry,” I said, after the man gave me a stern look.

“Would probably cut down on his criminal behavior,” he added, turning his gaze back down at the work at hand.

“Yes, but I think he’d be sorely disappointed in the quality of the remainder of his life.”

“Plus, if he goes to jail with one leg, he probably won’t last long, eh?” asked the other doctor, the young female one.

Christina looked around at us, bubbly, only to see our countenances. “Oh...is that not...what we’re hoping for? S-sorry....”

“Er...no, that’s not what I’m hoping for. He’s one of the good bad guys, you know?” I replied, trying to get the awkward smile up to my eyes.

“O-oh...,” she said. “Wait, what?”

“Anyway, who wants to take the plunge and attempt to suture that thing?” the old doctor asked. “I’m afraid I usually only teach these days, since my hands aren’t as steady as they used to be. Christina?”

She was standing there with the sewing thread. “I would, but you’re going to need me to sew as soon as it’s down.”

“Ms. Martelli?” Nadia asked, looking at me. “I can do it, but it won’t be pretty. There’s a reason I’m an admin.”

She was holding the shining silver tool out to me, her motherly voice kind.
“If you think you can do it better, please do. He is your patient after all, if not on paper.”

Her eyes crinkled up at the edges, just a bit. She was smiling at me, gently encouraging.

I took a breath, and nodded. She handed me the suture and I flexed it open and shut. I always hated the way these things were like scissors.

It made me think of all those years at the prison, and all the people I’d saved, after stab wounds or suicide attempts—as well as all the people I hadn’t. Such a little thing, that could kill you so fast....

The urge to vomit came up again as I imagined various people who had bled out on the floors, innards strewn around, but I forced it down. I would do this. I could save him.

For Zeni.

For Anya.

For us.

_I won’t be too late this time. I won’t._

In the end, my daughter was in pieces. Burned pieces. Just few enough pieces to have experienced the burning, but definitely not so few that she wouldn’t have been shrieking the entire time, missing her arms, unable to get out of the car.

When I touched her, she’d turned to ash.

There were three other girls in the car, friends of hers. The sister of one—the only one to get out of the car other than my husband—came up to me afterwards, hollering and shrieking, shoving me around until a cop detained her.

The paparazzi caught pictures of that, and that was on page five. Page one was a shot of me, on my knees, crying, with my daughter’s ashes smeared on my face. The car to one side, the ruined building behind me, and the police line to the right. Overhead, the yellow of the street lamp, shining down on me like an interrogation light.

That was how my son found out his older sister had died.

That young woman who assaulted me, I found out later, was the sister of the one in the passenger seat. The one in the passenger seat, she was the one who had been kissing my husband earlier in the club, witnesses testified.

My daughter had not wanted to be there. My daughter had wanted to leave, had threatened to tell on him to me when she got home.

But they’d been far away from there, so they’d all gotten back in the car.
My husband was taking them all home, supposedly, but verbally threatening them into silence in various ways as he did so. But when that didn’t work, he had sped up and swerved around on the first open drag of road to scare them, and ended up doing what he was only pretending to do—kill them all.

Three people had died in our car. Four others had, too, in the other cars, and there was one pedestrian killed, too. A building was destroyed, though luckily, no people in it were killed—though they did incur large medical bills.

The total damages came to $1.2 million for the building, $100,000 for the cars, and $200,000 per life. There were also the medical fees of various people that sued for restitution, and my daughter’s funeral.

At some point in the ordeal, someone had said to me, “At least you didn’t have to pay for her hospitals bills, too.”

I think I broke that person’s nose, but I don’t really remember, I was so angry.

My husband ended up running. He had run that night, from the scene of the crime—in his drunken stupor leaving my daughter and everyone else to burn; that was why he’d been handcuffed to the bench. But he ran later, too, escaping from the hospital and going on the lamb. I couldn’t divorce him, because I couldn’t find him (if I’d tried to forge the signatures, they’d either know, or indict me for hiding him). So I went through the trial without him, the hated woman of the media’s attention.

They tried to paint me as some harpy that drove him to do it, since I was there. But I testified too: that I hated him, that he hit me (he did, and now the whole town knew, which was the sort of thing that got you shunned and jobless). I finished with my wish that they’d sentence him as hard as possible.

And they did, but unfortunately, that ended up falling to me.

They couldn’t put me in jail, of course, because I hadn’t been there. But without the ability to divorce him, all the civil penalties fell to me.

So there I was. Mother of one, with no husband, a night shift job, and 2.7 million lira in debt. I could never make that much money if I worked my whole life from the beginning, and I was nearing middle-aged. And even if I declared bankruptcy, it wouldn’t go away. I would be paying it off until I died, and then my son would be paying it off until he died. If we were lucky, his children wouldn’t inherit it, but without the ability to pay for him to go to college now, and with the emotional upset of it all keeping him from focusing in what school he could get, what sort of job would he ever achieve that could help him not be crippled by that debt?

I was always hoping that Giuseppe would come back—I had a set of divorce papers in the car, in the kitchen, at work, in my purse: anywhere I thought he might show up. But he never did.

Government agencies were soon knocking on my door too, threatening to take my son away, because they knew I had more debt than I could deal with, and a track record with bad men. Someone in some precinct back home that had a problem with me decided he needed to reopen the investigation into my first husband’s death, and see if I’d been the cause of it.
And it wasn’t like my son was unaffected. By the time the trial ended, he’d already run away from home once. He was failing school. He got in fights all over town. He was thirteen.

It was my fault, as much as it was the situation. He had suffered loss too, loss more devastating than mine perhaps, because I wasn’t able to be there for him. Every time I pulled back, or got angry, so did he, and now there was just this giant chasm in between us. I wasn’t dealing with anything well, and whenever I tried, I snapped at him. But it was just...every time I saw him, I thought of everything that was wrong.

I thought about how Anya wasn’t coming back, and how all my loves were gone.

I thought about my husbands’ alcohol addictions, and how I couldn’t fix them. How it must have been my fault that they were driven to it.

I thought about my dreams in the countryside as a girl, of being loved by someone who could take me away from the world of traditional expectations.

I thought about who my son was becoming. Who I was becoming.

I just kept thinking about how it Wasn’t Supposed to Be Like This, and how much of a failure I was to get myself, and him, into this situation. I’d done everything wrong I possibly could have, in getting him a good replacement father. In being a decent mother.

He deserved better than me. He deserved better than the stigma, the sorrow I’d attached to him, than the failings I kept giving him.

*He deserves a chance that has nothing to do with me.*

One night, I sent a letter up to my boss’s office, courtesy of my intern, and it was not five minutes before Donatello was in the doorway again, out of breath, his tie not even straight.

*Please let Enzo rule it an accident,* the note had said. And that was all.

Enzo was the coroner.

Donatello had swung both doors open wide and held them there, looking desperately around the room. But all he found was me in the far corner, crying on a stool. The little tube of liquid cyanide —only enough to kill you if you ended up too close to it once uncapped—sat on the counter in front of me.

“...Marti...?” he asked, going still. It was the one and only time I’d ever heard his voice shake with abject fear. “Marti, what are you doing?”

There were papers in my hands. Legal ones.

“Please submit these,” I said, hollowly, still staring at my lap. I held them out to him, and soon, he came over to take them.

His shadow over me was reassuring, and for a moment, I could pretend everything was all right. But it only lasted until he spoke.

“What are they?” he asked, looking them over. “The divorce papers...?”

“No.”
“Adoption...papers?” he muttered, turning the sheets over quickly. “Who are these signatories? Wait, that’s your son’s name....”

I nodded, eyes still glued to the floor and body turned away from him, my feet hooked primly around the stool’s crossbar. I’d worn my good shoes, because I wanted to be buried that way. They’d have to sell everything that wasn’t on me, just to pay for a decent funeral. With all the press around me, I doubted the policemen’s union would actually pay for one.

“It’s my parents,” I answered softly. “They don’t talk to me, but they’ll take him. He’s innocent of all this. And...it’s the only way to make sure my husband’s debt stays with my husband, after I’m dead.”

I looked at the bottle. I’d set the whole place up perfectly—I’d sent the intern out for coffee, and Enzo was off duty tonight, so I was alone; I’d made sure to act normally until that point; these were chemicals I used regularly: In short, there was ample evidence to prove reasonable doubt.

But I hadn’t done it, yet. I knew that few minutes between when my intern left and Donatello could get down here would be my only window.

And yet. I hadn’t done it. I’d taken out the papers one last time to see my son’s name in lieu of a picture of him.

But I hadn’t managed to slip them back into my purse. I’d just been staring at his name, thinking about him being orphaned.

Of all the problems I’d had, at least I’d never had that one. But maybe....maybe that was just God’s way of telling me to behave.

I thought of sending the papers up to Donatello, but I realized that he would find them anyway, in my purse. So I’d hung onto them.

That piece of paper, that printed name, was the only reason I was still here, to see him one last time.

It didn’t make me feel any better about it, though. It just made me hang my head in shame.

I was never strong enough. Never.

I curled my hands around my eyes, but that didn’t stop the tears from coming yet again.

“Marti...you can’t,” he said, setting the papers aside. He wrapped his arms around me and held me close, his shadow melding with mine. “Please. I’ll...I’ll fix this. I find someone to find your husband, and then you’ll get your divorce, I promise. Just don’t...do this. Don’t leave me.”

My hands came down to hold onto his arm, and my tears fell onto his shirt sleeve. Just a momentary stain that was slowly evaporating—that was me.

“I’m sorry,” I sobbed into his shirt. “I love you, but I don’t deserve it.”

“I don’t care about that,” he said, kissing the top of my head. “Because I love you too. So stay. Stay. And I’ll fix this. Somehow.”

Unfortunately, that had stalled.
I had suggested to Donatello that he, with all his influence, could find a way to get any trouble with forging the divorce signatures to go away, but he didn’t think he could. It was just high profile enough that they could throw the book at him for it. One of those stupid, petty, well-intentioned things that ends people’s careers, he’d said.

I accepted that, but with a heavy heart. He did a lot for me, but he couldn’t do everything. No one could.

*Maybe I should just...jump off a bridge?* I thought, as I stared at the marble floor of the glittering mansion.

But I couldn’t do that. The only thing that would do was cause Alessi to inherit the debts sooner, since they couldn’t find my husband.

Despite my hopes, Donatello hadn’t found my husband, nor had he reported back that someone had offed him. And he hadn’t left his wife. So I had decided to thank him for his help so far, push him back to being only my boss, and work.

I was just there, dragging myself to work, making the machines sing their slow songs to my silence. I had sent my son off to my parents’—unadopted—for the summer, to give us both some space. At least, it was “for the summer” on paper, though we all knew it might be longer. I was working double shifts to cover the restitution payments, and stayed inside whenever I wasn’t at work. And when I did go out, I covered my head. Everyone in this part of town knew who I was, and they had taken to heckling me, including throwing rotten food.

_The Red Widow_, they called me.

Not that some local gangsters hadn’t come by and offered to fix my problems, too. Carrying drugs, prostitution, fixing case results, leaving threatening things for a cop or two. There were plenty of men willing to fix the problems other men had caused, and they were getting harder and harder to decline. Especially when bricks were being thrown through my window.

Unfortunately, I was crying again, when Donatello came into his own drawing room—in his red velvet night robe, tinged with gold and monogrammed.

“Marti?” he asked, coming down to sit beside me. It was the wrong time of day for visitors, but this was what I could manage, especially with the heckling. He handed me a kerchief, as he rubbed an arm over my shoulders reassuringly.

I’d finally gotten the touch I wanted from him, but it only came because of my sorrow.

*What kind of worthless woman am I, to even be thinking that right now?*

I took me several minutes to stop crying, and I felt bad about it the whole time, and the time of night it was, so I kept apologizing too.

“It’s okay,” he said gently each time. And then, once I’d finally sat up and devolved into only sniffling: “And don’t you look lovely.”

I was still wearing all black, so it was an odd thing to say, to someone obviously in mourning. But he knew it for what it was: these were my best clothes, and pauper though they made me in his family home’s presence, he was trying to make me feel better, even after I’d pushed him away.

“Thanks...,” I muttered, still choking on snot with his paisley handkerchief in hand, and trying to hide it. “Boss.”
“Donatello is fine.” He smiled kindly, and leaned back against the armrest at a splay, legs crossed leisurely. He always was handsome, even with the little bits of grey at his temples these days. His wife was a lucky woman...though that’s what you got, when you came from money. You got to be pretty and happy. “Now, to what pleasure do I owe this visit?” he asked amicably, trying to put me at ease.

I swallowed, and nodded, and it was then that wine was brought in, seeing as how “the female guest” had finally stopped making a fool of herself.

When the butler left, Donatello took up a glass full of red and sipped at it. He watched me carefully, and when I didn’t move, he offered lightly, “Go ahead. It’s on me.”

He smiled, but it bounced off. As I stared down at the remaining, glinting crimson, I was so nervous that I was visibly shivering. I swallowed hard, and curled my hands tight atop my legs. “I’ve come to ask you for...one more thing. A...loan. If at all possible....”

He’d paid for my lawyer with my husband’s trial, since the union wouldn’t cover out-of-work incidents, and he’d made the angry girl go away too—the sister/survivor of the car my husband had been in. She’d threatened to sue me personally, worse than others, due to the defamation of her sister’s character, and her family’s. She was someone important, or at least more important than me, but not nearly as strong as Medici’s family pull. He’d “spoken” to her, and she’d dropped the suit, with an apology no less. But he hadn’t been able to make anything else go away. Not the Paparazzi. Not my marriage. Not my debt.

However, he’d kept me from leaving the department out of shame when I’d tried to resign; and then later, after that incident in the basement in which I was revealed as too much of a mess to function, he let me take a few weeks of leave too, which I still got paid for, so I didn’t have to lose my house. And he still brought me flowers and pastries.

Alongside his kindness, he’d managed to keep my guilt at bay, and keep me around thereby. I had to thank him for that, as a man.

But I also wasn’t naïve. I knew the sorts of things he did after hours, at least by rumor. His family owned half the treasures in the national museum and had more money than the city did, but I also knew that there were reasons for that.

It didn’t bother me, much. There were whispers in the department, some longing, some poisonous. Most were fearful. I wasn’t afraid, and that was part of why we got along, I imagined.

We’d been work friends, maybe more than just friends, but we’d never done anything about it, even after that one caveat to ourselves in the lab that dark night. He cared about me, and was nice to me, and that was enough. He’d get angry for me when I came to work hiding bruises, but wouldn’t cause more trouble by being hot-headed. He wanted me to be okay, but he wouldn’t sacrifice himself for me. It was reasonable. It was enough.

But there was definitely a chemistry there, which had allowed me to be around him sometimes when something darker had come up. A packet of papers that fell inconveniently, or a few words someone slipped around him.

It didn’t bother me. I’d grown up in a village that had Camorra. I knew how it worked. I’d run away from an impending marriage arrangement with one of them, even.

I didn’t want to live that life because it was too traditional, but it seemed it was finally catching up to me. As if someone was punishing me for trying to run away from it, all those years ago.
As if losing my first husband on Christmas Eve hadn’t been enough. Now there was my daughter, on New Year’s.

Though I’d lost Giuseppe way before that.

Maybe God really did hate me. Women like me.

There was no reason to take Donatello down too. So I’d decided to push him away, back to my boss and nothing more, and take tackling the debt and my family problems upon myself in any way I could.

All that was left was trying to save my son, and this was the only way I could, without resorting to prostitution. God wouldn’t begrudge me that, would He?

He wouldn’t ask me go that far, would He?

Though I probably deserved it, for failing both my husbands, and both my children, all the while wanting this man to love me, too.

All that was left was what Donatello would say, even though he’d done far more than he ever should have been expected to, already.

“I know it’s a lot to ask for, and I know I don’t deserve it.” I twisted my hands in my dress, and closed my eyes tight. I sucked in a breath and held it, desperately trying to keep the tears at bay long enough to get the sentence out. I wasn’t very successful. I’d rehearsed the whole ask and conversation a thousand times, but it all fell apart in the moment. Just like everything else about me. “I know I can’t ever pay it back fully, so you’ll need some sort of special price in return like you guys do, and that’s okay. But I just...I just want to get on my feet enough again to get my son back. That’s all....”

I put my hands against my eyes, handkerchief and all, as all the strength left me. It left me in a river of tears, and the sobs bent my frame to the lowest it had ever gone. “Please help me....”

I wasn’t sure how long it took for me to get the tears under control, but when I was able to see again, I looked at the gangster, the boss, the man I’d had feelings for for years, and prayed to God that my sentence would be light.

“Oh,” Donatello said, behind his own glass. He was smiling, just a bit. “Is that all it is? I was wondering when you’d finally ask.”

This time when I cried, it was out of relief, even as I clutched his velvet clothes. Out of gratitude, that felt a tiny bit like love.

“Oh, Donatello said, behind his own glass. He was smiling, just a bit. “Is that all it is? I was wondering when you’d finally ask.”

This time when I cried, it was out of relief, even as I clutched his velvet clothes. Out of gratitude, that felt a tiny bit like love.

“Ah, don’t cry, it’s okay, I promised everything would be okay,” he said, patting my back. I couldn’t help it though, and for a while, he just sat there with me, an arm around my shoulder. But when I was finally done crying enough to see again, I hugged him tight, hiding my head against his chest.

“Thank you, thank you....” I sobbed.

So much for being just my boss.

“Ah, my pretty troublemaker,”” he patted my back, and when I sat up, he grinned at me and raised his glass. “Three mil is a lot toward a mistress, but I guess some guys spend that on diamonds for their wives, so. Don’t worry about it.”
“Mis...tress...?” I asked, haltingly, that happy little feeling cleaving off and breaking into shards.

“Well sure, isn’t that what you are? My love away from home?” His smile was warm still, but now it was expectant, too.

“Oh...ah....” My mouth went dry all of a sudden, and I couldn’t think quite straight as the implications hit me over and over like a physical force.

The flowers. The gifts. The time.

The happy memories.

It hadn’t been because he’d liked me and was trying to hold himself back, but because he was trying to entice me?

The only point of pride I had in this whole ordeal was that I hadn’t been cheating on my husband, like he’d accused me of from time to time. So I wasn’t quite sure what to make of this comment—not from this man, he who was always so respectful and gentle and understanding.

And yet, it wasn’t like I hadn’t hoped for it. Really, I’d wanted more than that, but people didn’t leave their wives for girls like me. That stuff didn’t happen in real life, not to opinionated women like me.

But that was me: Always wishing for too much. Always getting myself into situations like this.

With a crinkle of the couch stuffing and a whisper of his fine clothing, Donatello came forward and kissed me on the cheek. I held stock-still, and squeezed my eyes shut, suddenly unable to breathe—and yet, the tears, and the sob, slipped out anyway.

“Did you think all that help was free?” he whispered into my ear lovingly, and then, hands cupped against my face, kissed me again. “Don’t worry, I’ll be good to you. That won’t change. You’ll finally have all the wonderful things you deserve. Your son can go to a good school, and you can live in a better house. Ah! Marti, you don’t know how long I’ve waited for this.... For you to finally see that you’re mine....”

His hands smoothed down to my shoulders, and his head trailed down alongside them. He drew kisses from my neck, and then my collarbone, as he asked into my skin, “Now. Let’s discuss the terms, shall we?”

Little did I know when I arrived at his house that night that I would soon be trying to save myself, too—because that was the only thing left that could be saved.

The ride out to Maghera had been one long note of tension; like holding my breath for hours. The ride back, on the other hand, felt like a symphony had shattered, and every instrument was playing as it fell apart, out of tune and confused. Once-beautiful notes and the people that played them, all identifiable previously, turned into a gross mess of unidentifiable chords and a flurry of motion as they fell.

That was how my happiness devolved: my favorite songs broke into fragmented refrains, which warped into off-key screeches, that finally unraveled into unappealing twangs that made me want to cover my ears at every mistimed cue.

In retrospect, everything after that night felt like one long ride, sliding to the bottom of a mountain, and right into the mass grave that was Minos's maze.
I believed that all the gods in the world had forsaken me, left me to the Minotaur—until a certain pagan showed up with a ship full of tributes.

Chapter End Notes

Donatello... >:/
Ripples & Waves

Chapter Notes

I swear I'm not giving up on the chapter titles. Really. Waves have all kinds of mathematical properties, gaiz.

Also, now that I have a working metaphor for everything going on with Medici and Marti, I was thinking of renaming her chapters "Ariande in Black" instead of "Venus in Black." But "Venus in black" is so much cooler (and a lot less victim-sounding, arg).... What do you think?

Completely unrelated to anything in this chapter: I was watching Green Jacket (it's on Crunchyroll now!) and daaaamn, it's so classy! And Jigen! He gets THE BEST lines AND poses. Daaaaaang. Green Jack's got some Jigen love, guys. *Drools* I've got my work cut out for me to live up to that and then add to it too though, oh man.

As usual, I *promise* that the insinuations here are going somewhere valuable.

I was sitting with my head in my hands, so many thoughts going through my mind all at once that they’d jammed up, and now I wasn’t thinking anything. I was still feeling everything, though, emotions bouncing around my body. The roller coaster was awful, and I couldn’t get it to stop.

“It’ll be okay, you know,” Christof offered. He was sitting in the chair beside me. “She’ll forgive you.”

“Not about this, she won’t,” I muttered miserably. “She can’t.” And I couldn’t blame her for it. I’d even suggest it.

“But she knows you didn’t mean it. It was an accident.”

“That’s worse though, isn’t it?”

A man who can’t control his temper is no use to anyone, but is an extra special red flag to a woman who’s been married to one before.

I looked at Christof for help, but it seemed he had run out of platitudes. “She likes you a lot,” he offered lamely, eyes pitying.

“Hate sex,” came the gruff voice of Kyle, sitting on Christof’s other side. We were all outside the OR, barely feet from its swinging double doors. It seemed like there was no one else in the whole place; morning light, dim though it was from the snowstorm, was filtering through the faraway windows, and the lights in the building had gotten a bit brighter. But not a single person went up or down the long hallway around us. There was no trace of humanity but us, and the hum of the electricity.

Luckily, there were old glass-and-wood doors, about fifty feet down the way to either end, that closed off this part of the hallway from the rest of the floor, so I didn’t have to worry about ambush much, but that just made the place feel even more out of time.
“What?” I hissed at Kyle, and the rookie turned his head curiously, too.

“I’m serious,” the big man said with a shrug. “By the end of it, she’ll feel like she’s punished you, that her feelings have been known and expressed and taken root and all that, but she’ll also feel safe and in charge. Bare your throat, show your submission. Then she won’t feel scared of you anymore. And it’s only one night, anyway.”

Christof looked rather thoughtful at that. “Hmm.”

“I can tell why you two aren’t married,” I sighed.

Kyle shrugged and, luckily, forewent the dig at my own marital status like Lupin would have done.

_Lupin_...

I ran my hand through my hair, sighing. _What the hell am I going to do with you, once you wake up?_

Furthermore, how was I going to tell my boss I’d let this happen to him? Let alone tell _Lupin_? Or the Commissioner, even?

_Crap, the Commissioner_....

I ran my hands over my buzzed hair and laced them together to push down the dread.

I’d forgotten about him, in this whole mess.

Beside Christof and me, Kyle shifted the long gun in his hands idly (it was balanced against the floor again), and stood up suddenly. “Since we’re here and we’ve got some time, I’m going to lock this up back in the car.”

I nodded and added, “Hey. Bring me my laptop, would you? It’s in the trunk.”

“Sure,” he said, and I tossed him the keys.

“Figure out what’s going on with the Navy boys in the lobby, too. Ask them how they eat in this damn place.”

“Gotcha.” Kyle waved over his shoulder.

It wasn’t long before he was gone, the distant door at the end of the way swung shut with a _clatchk_.

I ran my hands over my face with a sigh for the umpteenth time, and found myself staring at nothing between my feet.

_Lupin_.... _Marti_.... I’d failed them both, in the span of fifteen minutes. And it wasn't like we didn't still have wolves at our heels.

I could have been watching what was going on in there, and I probably _should_ have been. But I both did and didn’t want to. I felt like, if I watched it, somehow that would make things better; somehow, my presence would make a difference, and I would calm down. But I knew that was nonsense, and what’s more, neurotic nonsense. In reality, it would only put pressure on the people working in the room, and freak me out more. It would put me back in shock; I could feel my psyche threatening it from here.
And, in all honestly, the view wasn’t good. All I could see was a bunch of people’s backs, and Lupin’s vapid limbs poking out from between them. The reality of the situation was simple: what I could do standing in front of that window wasn’t going to do anyone any good. It was time to wait quietly, and hope for the best.

If I wanted to get anything useful done, I would have to do it of my own merits.

And yet, whenever I looked down at my arms, I just thought of Lupin’s pale skin, covered in bright blood, totally limp in my arms.

The way Satoru’s had been.

The only difference was how wet the one had been.

—The sight of Satoru’s form, under the coroner’s sheet as they took the body away in the night—

God, why was it so hard to breathe when I kept thinking of him? It wasn’t like I hadn’t seen dead bodies before, including in bulk, or even in pieces.

The blood on my hands was dried by now, but I could still feel it, scratching against my face as I sat there.

“Goddammit,” I sighed, closing my eyes. My heart rate just wouldn’t slow down.

“What is it?” Christof asked gently, his best imitation of Marti, it seemed like. Not-pissed-off Marti, anyway.

“That doctor,” I groaned, my teeth grinding. “Lupin flipped out at the sight of him. This happened because of him somehow, I just know it....”

I glanced at the doors to the OR ahead of us, metal swinging slabs with porthole windows near the top. I couldn’t see anything other than the ceiling through them at this vantage point, so it offered a good place to stare to collect my thoughts.

And deal with the anger that was coming, because I couldn’t deal with the grief any longer.

The way Lupin had woken up, all distant and confused, and then stared at the man with complete clarity.... The violent episode of his hadn’t been until after that.

And, this attack hadn’t been like the others. It might have been because he was asleep beforehand and so it startled him an extra amount, but... he wasn’t afraid and cowering, like before in the exam room. This time, he had been terrified, to the point that he was trying to kill someone to get away.

That wasn’t like him. It wasn’t like anything I knew about him.

And what set him off, anyway? It had to have been something the doctor did. Something that doctor represented to him....

...Someone that doctor was?

And the way he’d touched Lupin.... That wasn’t...normal. It still gave me chills up my spine, just thinking about it. The way his fingers clung to Lupin’s skin, so intimately....

He still hadn’t given me his name, but Nadia and the others seemed to know him and not bat an eye at his presence, so presumably he worked here. He had to be LeBlanc, right?
At my side, Christof was silent while I deliberated. “I guess it just...really startled him,” he said, after a while. “He wasn’t scared of the other doctors.”

I shook my head, taking a breath. “No, it’s something about this doctor. Maybe the scenario too, but definitely that man. Did you catch the words Lupin was saying?”

Christof blinked and tipped his head, then shook it. “Just the ‘get away from me’ part. I guess I wasn’t paying that much attention to that.”

“You are clearly someone who has never had to write a report about these things,” I noted, though it was an attempt to be light-hearted. Christof smiled a little for my effort, and for once, I felt the knot in my stomach unwind the tiniest bit. I turned to him, gesturing as I spoke. “‘Get away from me,’ ‘stay away from me,’ ‘let me go’—Yes. But it was all spoken like a kid’s French. It wasn’t modern him saying that. It was a scared him, from when he was a child.”

Christof frowned. “You think so?”

“What else could explain that?” I asked him back. “And this guy...he’s old. He could have looked almost exactly the same twenty years ago.”

“But he didn’t fight you, did he? I mean, I know you were handing his ass to him, but...did he actually do anything to warrant that?”

It was an honest question, and I had to sigh in response. “Not really, but that’s what bothers me about it.” Mostly, he’d just made comments about how I shouldn’t be manhandling him up the stairs, how he didn’t do anything, and if I didn’t calm down, he couldn’t save Lupin’s life—and wouldn’t. But it felt like...he was saying that far too readily. It wasn’t “what are you doing, let go of me, you utter barbarian!”, it was “I promise I didn’t do what you’re thinking, believe me, I’m meek and helpless.” “When you accuse him of stuff, he’s got no backbone. He didn’t challenge me on it. You don’t do that unless you’re hiding something.”

“Or you’ve been dealing with angry patients for fifty years and you know there’s no point in defending yourself.”

I frowned, lips tight. He had a point, but... “I still don’t like it.”

I stared at the operating room doors again, but no answers came.

I sighed, and returned my face to the warm, dark shelter of my hands.

What the hell happened to you, Lupin?

A traumatic experience where he thought he was going to die, when he was a kid; or a series of them....

Something that upended his whole world....

Add the old guy in, and the prospects narrowed to just two or three very disturbing, and yet unfortunately common, possibilities.

On the other hand...

“What did you do with my mother!”

If I looked at it simply from the fact that the guy was a doctor, and added in the mom part to that....
Maybe there’d been some kind of accident, and she’d died in a hospital unexpectedly. At which point, he’d gotten taken into foster care or sent off with a bad relative? That could be traumatic to a kid, and definitely a point to fixate on, if everything else went south after that. “If only she hadn’t died there, because of them…”—that sort of thing.

It was a ridiculously simple narrative, which, in my mind, made it all the more likely. It was especially likely if she’d been disabled or mentally addled somehow, like I’d previously speculated, and he’d been taking care of her. Who knows, he may even have been hurt at the time, in this scenario, say if the incident in question were a car accident or something.

_Hmm...

But that wouldn’t explain the violent aggression, would it? The need to defend himself so strongly that he wanted to _kill_ something?

It didn’t _quite_ add up.

_Something_ had to have been perpetrated against _him_, bodily, otherwise he wouldn’t have reacted that aggressively, that physically defensive. And if it were something that had happened multiple times...?

_Hmmmm....

Hadn’t he...mentioned from time to time...that he spent at least _some_ time growing up with his grandfather...? Which made sense; he didn’t learn his prodigious thieving skills out of thin air, and he sure as hell hadn’t gotten them from his father’s attentions.

Plus, his paternal grandfather had to have been quite old even when Lupin was born, since Lupin’s father was around fifty at the time. He very much could have looked like this old man here, all the time Lupin knew him.

So maybe it really wasn’t this guy’s fault.

_“What did you do with my mother!”_

I could see it: little him, maybe six or seven, a mop of dark hair and his big eyes challenging, as he stared up defiantly at the old man taking custody of him.

But if the trauma was something repeated, something about an old man, then that would mean...

_Oh, Lupin.... Don't tell me...._

While I was considering the implications, the doors to the OR swung open, and Chirstof and I immediately stood.

It was Nadia, hands up in the air, mask still on. She didn’t look like she had any news, and soon enough, her sharp words confirmed this:

“I hate to ask since we’re so short-staffed, but could one of you or both go down to the basement and get the scans? The doctor said he printed them off before...all this happened, and they’re sitting on the console panel. The door to the room’s not locked at the moment, given what happened.”

I swallowed, and nodded. Beside me, Christof asked, “What about Angela? Didn’t she bring
“Who’s Angela?” Nadia asked. “Oh, one of the techs filling in a shift? No, no, just go down and get them, it’ll be faster, and we need to know how many bone fragments to look for.”

“Bone...fragments....” I muttered, mouth suddenly dry.

“Yes.” Nadia brooked no argument about this. She looked at Christof. “So can one of you get them please? Quickly?”

“Yeah, sure,” Christof said, “Right away, ma’am.”

“Thank you.” She disappeared back inside with a nod, doors swinging shut behind her. I couldn’t see anything in the room of note, which somehow made it worse.

After a second of staring at me when I didn’t move, Christof took my arm and drew me down the hall. “C’mon, let’s go,” he whispered.

“Y-yeah...”

All I could hear was the sound of blood in my ears.

My feet were like lead as we went down there.

“Kyle’s going to wonder where the hell we went,” Christof thought aloud beside me, reprehensibly perky. He was probably trying to make me feel better, and overcompensating mightily.

I glared at the ceiling, but did eventually grunt at him. “If he’s smart, he’ll make a very long detour of the trip. Would have sent him for breakfast proper, if I thought he could find any.”

“Ugh...how many meals have we had here?”

“What’s really worrisome is, ‘what happens when the vending machines run out of food, or we run out of cash?’”

That wiped the happiness right off his face.

Finally.

His silence, however, wasn’t as helpful as I hoped it would be, as we took the elevator down. The silence was stifling, and started reminding me terribly of the noises the scanning machine had made, in that quiet basement space.

As we stepped off the elevator, Christof took a deep breath, one more audible than mine. My steeling of myself consisted mostly of just rubbing my eyes and chasing the thoughts—the memories—away.

We went back through the dark main hall, the lighting of which apparently didn’t change automatically in the daytime, then to the brightly-lit antechamber next to the stairwell.

The rookie and I both just stood there in the open doorway, watching the narrow waiting room
before us, and the black door at its end. That onyx barrier wasn’t readily open, which meant that, if it was locked, we’d have to go through the other room, to get to the door that we knew for sure was open.

Through the room full of blood.

Someone would have to go by that crypt one way or another, though.

“Well?” I asked Christof, shoving my hands into my ruined coat. There was red spray all up and down the front of it, along with various hand prints—which was a shame, because I really liked this thing. Christof, however, had a shirt like he’d gotten sprayed full of lead, because of how he’d been cradling Lupin, and his trousers looked like they had rusty shinguards. Judging by the look of us, we were pretty even in terms of horror that had been thrust upon us. I suppose he’d accomplished far more heroism, though, which in my book meant that he was capable of slogging back through the battlefield too.

Plus, I’d seen the effects of trauma, but usually after the bodies were already expired. Fresh wounds, while the people were still squirming, wasn’t my cup of tea. The smell of blood that hadn’t even dried yet.... There was a reason I hadn’t become a doctor, like Mom had hoped for.

“Me?” Christof squawked.

“Yes, Paramedic-Firefighter-whatever-you-are, you first.”

He frowned at me from way up there, but when I gave him my enigmatic, “Old Swordmaster” stonewalling stare, he saw the futility of fight and sighed. “Fine,” he whined, and hurried forward.

He got to the end of the room and tried the knob, but nothing gave. He tried it a few times, torquing on it ever more, but fairly quickly gave it up with a shake of his head.

Without even looking at me, the young blond man turned to the other option—the room outside of my view. But instead of hopping in, he just sighed, and gazed through the glass door listlessly.

I sighed too. There was no help for it, I guess: Lupin was my professional responsibility; I suppose I should have known I couldn’t get out of facing the evidence of my screw ups.

I joined Christof at the door to the CT scan.

It definitely looked like a murder had occurred in there, and frankly, more than one. About a third of the room was pelted in blood in some way or another, be it in a solid sheen or some sort of speckling and everything in between. The floor had it the thickest, but the machine, the walls, the other fixtures—they were all red somehow, in that part of the room. It had been just long enough now, though, that the thinner parts had already turned a rusted red and crusted over. The parts of him that were left to themselves had already died.

“Christ,” I muttered, annoyed.

You would bleed on a million-dollar machine just to spite me.

“I do not envy the cleaning staff here,” Christof said, mechanically.

I sighed, and turned to the rookie. “You got a phone that takes pictures?”

It took him a second, but he blinked and looked down at me, already reaching into his pockets.

“Ah, yeah. Here....”
“Thank you.” I took it from him, and stepped into the room. “I’ll handle this, you just get the stuff from in there.” I jerked my finger toward the console room.

I quickly navigated to the picture app, which, while in Norwegian, was still easy to find given that everything was visual these days. I took a few quick pictures of the room as a whole, then a few close-ups of the machine, and the thing that had come out of Lupin’s leg, throwing a bill down beside it. The blood was dry enough so that I could get my money back without risking someone calling the cops on me; in fact, it seemed I might need it not to starve.

The piece of metal, which looked like a spindle of some sort, was remarkably straight. It hadn’t curved much, which was lucky. If Lupin had tried to rip out something more intricately tangled within his flesh, he probably wouldn’t have made it this far.

And yet, it really, really was coated in red from top to bottom, as it lay upon the tile where it had rolled to a stop after Christof had thrown it aside.

I took a picture of my shoes, too, just for good measure; my coat would eventually end up in evidence.

Poor thing. It had served me well, but I supposed this was a danger with anything a policeman wore. Your favorite things would either get covered in blood or thrown into an evidence bag. That was the way of the world.

And yet, as I stared at the white tile floor, I couldn’t help but think of how much it reminded me of the tile in Satoru’s bathroom.

“Got it,” Christof said rather breathlessly, coming beside me. When I didn’t respond, he came a bit closer, and looked down at where I was staring—a spot not too far from my feet.

“What are you looking at?” he asked curiously, as if he were completely unaffected by all of this.

There was a little black spot by the blood.

I bent down to inspect it. It scraped off the floor with my fingernail fairly easily, despite a bit of stickiness. Holding it up to the light, I saw fibers on the end of it, slowly fraying.

It was...the missing hole in Lupin’s body suit. It had to be.

“Well, at least they won’t have to look for this in his leg,” I muttered.

I sighed and tossed it aside, then handed Christof back his phone. “Those pictures are evidence, so you are officially in a chain of ownership with them now. Don’t let anyone else have your phone, okay?”

“Oh...sure.” He nodded, and pocketed the device. But it was as I was turning to go that he said, “Hey. Look at that.”

“Mm?” I asked, looking over my shoulder. He was pointing to a place not far from where the little scrap of cloth had come from.

The blood there was still congealing, but it was oddly dark, compared to the rest.

“You know what that is?” Christof asked.

“What?”
“That’s blood that’s turned septic. The dark color’s a dead giveaway.”

“That’s bad, right?” I asked, a shiver shooting through me.

“That’s very bad,” he said. “We should get back upstairs and tell them.”

I nodded, and we hurried out of the room. I didn’t bother looking back.

“Why do you know that, anyway?” I asked, as Christof and I went back to the elevator. It was pretty fast, and we were exhausted, so there was no desire from either of us to take the three or four flights of stairs back up to the OR.

“Marti,” he replied with a shrug, print-outs under his arm. “He’ll definitely need a Tetanus shot, and all the antibiotics they can find.”

I sighed, and massaged the massive headache making its way up my forehead. “Didn’t you guys give him one of those when you were sewing up his stitches?”

“Well sure, or at least, I assume so, but all the blood that had the antibodies is probably gone by now.”

Christof shrugged, and I just hid my eyes behind my hand with another sigh. The darkness helped shut out the implications of all that.

The silence in the elevator descended upon us again, and my hands rubbed down to my jaw, where they held while I stared at the closed doors.

I noticed, after a bit, that Christof was watching me. When I looked over at him, annoyed, he didn’t flinch. Instead, I was met with blue-eyed pity. “You really...care about him, don’t you?” he asked finally.

I rolled my eyes, but grudgingly admitted, “Yes.”

“Why?” Christof asked conversationally, shifting his stance a bit. “You just get close over the years?”

There is that, but... I shook my his head. “He reminds me of my little brother.”

“Oh,” Christof said, quieting. But as the elevator came to a stop and the door opened, he added the inevitable: “You have a brother?”

“Two, actually,” I said, and, thrusting my hands in my pockets, walked off the elevator crisply. “Let’s go.”

“It looks like his head is fine, no bleeds and no major injuries,” the rookie mumbled beside me as we hurried up the hallway. He was peering at them as the lights went by; it was much brighter here —properly lit for goddamned once, probably thanks to Nadia—so it was an easy thing to do, provided he didn’t run into me or a potted plant. “Though I’m not quite sure how he managed that. Lucky bastard.”

I just grunted at that, ominously.
“Oh...” the tall young man added, shuffling the see-through print-offs around. “It looks like they got one of his neck too, to see if there was any damage there because of the strangulation. Obviously his neck’s not broken, but it’ll be good to look over this to see if anything’s torn or in danger of collapsing...”

I twitched at that, annoyed not only at the prognosis but at how damn intrigued he was.

Another sound of flipping plastic A4s, followed by silence.

And then: “Ooh, ouch. Looks like he definitely got the bone, just a little bit....”

“Christof if you don’t shut up, so help me—”

But before he could respond, we had arrived back at the operating room—and stopped short.

Kyle was standing there, one hand on the window ledge. There was a small partition wall in the middle of the hallway, about three feet from the operating room window, that blocked off the window from regular hallway goers but which allowed viewers. He had purposefully come back and started watching what was going on—something he hadn’t had an interest in before. My laptop was abandoned in one of the waiting chairs in the hallway proper, as was something that looked like a lunch box and a paperback book. But he was just standing there in front of the window, eyes wide as the glow from the operating room held him.

I turned. Through the glass, I could see Marti standing up unnaturally high.

She was leaned over the operating table, making a repetitive downward motion with unusual force.

She was doing chest compressions on Lupin.
Probability III

Chapter Summary

Blood. Lots and lots of blood.

Chapter Notes

Phew! Three weeks without a post! Yikes. It's good to get back to posting. I've missed you all!

Warning: This chapter has lots of gory medical details. I almost threw up myself, writing it. //lolz

Fun fact: two chapters ago, my total word count on A03 was 161616. Last chapter, it was 175178. That's what you get for editing, haha. (Just three off.)

“Okay. If the vein tries to recede, Nadia, you keep your finger on it and Ms. Martelli, you suction up the blood so Doctor Christina and I can get in there and do what we can.”

We were staring over the open wound in Lupin’s leg, one final clotting pack separating us from a mire and a miracle. The only thing was, we weren’t sure which one we were going to get.

His pulse was steady, but slow. His breathing was shallow, but there. The precarious peace was a minor miracle already, given the fact that he wasn’t under any anaesthetic.

For now, the bleeding from the wounds we’d caused to excavate down to the bottom of his trauma path were under control, but it wasn’t a pretty sight. It could also go south if it wanted; there were plenty of clamps and patches keeping the pit from filling up with blood.

Still, we each slowly nodded our acknowledgment, plotting the course in our heads—two doctors, two nurses, a pair to each side.

It was no where near enough people for a surgery like this, but it was all we had.

The older doctor’s dark eyes flicked up toward me, sharp through the many wrinkles. Then he looked to Nadia. “If either one of you fails that, we’re dead in the water.”

“Roger that, doctor,” Nadia said through her mask. I followed suit.

“If everything is good, however, Doctor Christina, you start stitching while I hold it down.”

“Yessir! I can do that. I’ll get ‘im zipped up good!”

Well, at least she was energetic about it, hovering over the pink and red surgery site with needle in hand like a delicious steak to tackle. Maybe she hadn’t had a lot of patients die on her, yet.
“They always do this, the mind-addled patients....”

...Well. Here was to hoping she just liked her job.

“Are we ready?” the old doctor asked, gravely. “Everyone take a last check to remember where your tools are.”

“Wait,” I said, automatically. He looked up at me, alert. “What happens if the vein’s severed?”

“I doubt he’d be alive right now if it were. But...” He glanced down, drawing a line with his finger over the vein. “If it goes, we have to catch it, and then find a vein somewhere else to patch it with. If we can’t do that, it’s sewing both ends shut, cauterizing, or nothing. Though any of those solutions...” He sucked in a hiss of a breath, then sighed it out, shaking his head. “Are not ideal.”

Normally, severed veins were patched by placing a bit of pig vein in between to make something to bridge the gap with. I doubted they had any of that on hand.

Being one of the major highways of blood in the body, turning one vein into two put him at a high risk of having circulation problems that could lead to amputation later in life. And just by virtue of being a major vein, it was more precarious whether or not the stitching would hold before the wound could heal.

And cauterizing a major vein into two pieces....yeah, that wasn’t ideal. At all. It would more or less turn Lupin’s body into bomb, set to go off if he was ever too energetic.

He would not be happy about that. Nor would Zenigata, I imagined, at the end of the day.

But at least he’d have both legs...?

“All right. Tools in place?” the man asked again.

We all checked our stations, but it was Nadia this time who held up her hand to stay us. She took an extra look down around the opposite side of the table from her tools, clearly looking at something near the ground that we couldn’t see. “I want you all to know that we only have about half a gallon left.”

“Half...?” I asked incredulously, before I could stop myself. You could go through gallons of blood in a surgery like this.

“Well, we’re half done, aren’t we? Let’s just make sure we do this right, and pray for a drought,” the old man said, stretching out his fingers and then holding them at the ready.

His dark, hard eyes turned to Nadia, and held her still for a moment. “Do it.”

Nadia nodded, squared her shoulders, and then reached one hand into the wound to press her finger over the exposed bit of vein, pumping thickly.

The doctor turned to me. I took a breath and followed her lead, only this time touching the other end of the vein, the one going up his leg rather than down. I cringed and held my breath as my finger slid through the skin, parting muscle and shredded fatty tissue and finally stopping...on bone.

I took a deep breath and cringed. I can do this, I can do this. It’s just that cat in biology class....

Leaning over Lupin hit me with the smell of iodine and blood, thick and cloying; it stung my nostrils even through the mask. His lilac vein was purplish, still quivering strongly with each beat
of his heart.

I took another breath and stared at the ceiling.

*Please don’t be anything complicated.*

Nadia reached in with the tweezers and caught hold of the cotton.

It was thick; the fibers were compressed with congealed blood and pushing it together caused red to spurt out of it.

Still, she held it easily enough. The hard part would be what came next.

Glancing once at us—and finding the others all intently staring down—she proceeded. Nadia twisted her arm and slowly, ever so slowly, tugged up.

It didn’t come.

After a point she hit resistance, and the vein underneath jiggled, the sheen of wetness on top of it flashing a reflection of the lights.

“Careful, careful...” came the old man’s steady voice. It was what everyone was thinking.

She released the cotton and tried again, this time from a slightly different angle, trying each edge of the ruby rectangle to see what she could pull back and how far. Unfortunately, it was always just enough to make me think she had it, but never quite enough to see what we were working with underneath, despite all the intently watching eyes.

“Here, let me see it,” Christina said politely, putting aside her tools. She bent in next to Nadia, and the woman handed her the tweezers from over Lupin’s legs.

“You keep that one, and I’ll pull it back too. Maybe then I can get under it and cut it away.”

Fiber by fiber, the team pulled away the packet under the magnification mirror, one woman’s hand lifting up the cotton while the other’s sliced delicately with a tiny scalpel.

Minutes went by, more and more, as Christina worked, Nadia held, and we waited.

I could feel Lupin’s heartbeat pulsing against my finger. That blood wanted to go. It wanted to be free.

He wanted to be whole again.

*Just don’t let go, I kept telling myself.*

I was consciously trying to think about things other than hamburgers. It was not an easy task.

*Mountain climbing...Quarries....Marble statues....Christof’s cheekbones...?*

“Ohah,” Christina announced happily, lifting her arm, and the red square of cotton with it. “Got it.”

I was just about to smile when the other doctor said, “Oh wow.”

We all instantly looked down.

Lupin’s leg vein was sitting there in the middle of a very wide canyon of slit-open flesh. Most of
that flesh was traumatized tissue from the spike, pink and bulging. The part we’d cut open with a scalpel was just as red, but a little less swollen. It made for an alien landscape, like something out of a microscope, as we stared down at the wide purple river.

The opening, way down at the bottom, that revealed the blood vessel wasn’t that big, compared to all the pink tissue around it. But there was a sandy shore of bone on either side that made me shiver.

My fingers—my whole body—went a little bit weak, and a little bit of blood spurted out from the blood vessel, escaping from under my finger tip.

“Careful,” said older doctor, warningly. “Keep your finger on that vein.”

Christina, who was next to me, gave me a quick, questioning glance, but I shook my head. “I’m fine. S-sorry, everyone.”

We couldn’t clamp the blood vessel properly—the normal way—because it was still actually attached to Lupin’s bone. Doing so would have required...well, unpleasant things.

“You’ve got this,” Christina whispered to me gently, as she put the cotton aside on a tray.

I wish my stomach would get that message; it was roiling, and every once in a while was shooting a minor dizzy spell to my head.

“Looks like we’ve got some ragged trauma, not unexpected,” came the elder surgeon’s voice, calm and diagnostic. “But it would seem that the hole is not all the way through, also as expected. That’s good.... He’s lucky. Another millimeter or two and he’d be dead before he ever got here.”

“It’s insane that he was walking around on this,” Christina added, in awe. “It’s like when you see bars in people’s heads and they’re still conscious and can’t feel it, either.”

Somehow, this was an image that did not bother me at all, except for its lack of cooth.

“You’re...kind of a strange one, aren’t you?” I asked, glancing at her—only to feel sick as I felt Lupin’s heartbeat again. I tensed up, and hoped my nail didn’t dig into his bone.

...Which, only made me feel worse. Actually, my stomach was tight, and my legs were shaking a little.

“Yup,” Christina announced, “But I love my job. Get to work with bodies and fix people.” Her mask crinkled up as she leaned over the hole in Lupin’s leg—she was grinning. “So what’s the plan, doctor?”

He was silent for quite a while, eyes sharp as he surveyed the damage. Luckily, staring at him, I didn’t need to look down much.

“Stitch it closed,” he said finally, though it was tense. “I think there’s enough left.”

Left....

It reminded me of Anya, all of a sudden.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I swayed on my feet, and my head flared with heat, like a very bad case of blushing.

“Doctor Christina, would you do the honors, please?”
“Yessir.”

I hadn’t been breathing much for the last few minutes, but now I couldn’t breathe at all.

“Let’s bring this boy home.”

“Yessir.”

Everything was hot, and fire, and dizzy. I couldn’t feel my limbs—

“Straw please.”

—I opened my eyes, looked down into the operating site, and saw nothing but rivers of red.

“Ms. M?” Christina’s voice asked, distantly.

Like the red that had cracked out from under her ash.

“I think I’m...gonna fai—”

That was all I got out before I started falling, my vision almost completely dark.

“Oh!” Nadia yelled, running to catch me. She barely did; we collided with each other at about the same time as the floor. But if it weren’t for her, my head would have cracked right open.

That didn’t stop her from summarily leaving me on the floor though, because:

“What are you doing?!” roared the old man’s alarm.

To me the sound was distant, but the look on Nadia’s face illustrated that she definitely, definitely did not feel the same way.

“Oh my god,” she whispered, and looked at her hands; the gloves were covered in red.

“Catch it catch it catch it!” the old man yelled from the table.

“Which one, which one?!” Christina cried.

“You take that one, I’ll—!”

Nadia stared at me, fear in her blue eyes, then grabbed at the drainage straw that had fallen out of my hand.

“Shit!” she said. It’d fallen on the floor.

“Lean on it!”

“I can’t see anything!”

“Do it anyway!”

The monitors were blaring. They were so loud, they came across my vision as colors, rather than sounds.

I still could barely see. I tried to sit up, tried to move, but I just ended up whacking into things, with no coordination at all.
Nadia grabbed up the straw with a violent curse and stuck it in Lupin’s leg anyway, on full blast. Then she braced herself on either side of the wound like she was doing a pushup and physically hoisted herself off the ground.

I was going to vomit. I really, really was, and I couldn’t tell which direction was up. Noises, sounds, smells, sights—it was all sounding, smelling, tasting like that car wreck.

“Get it, get it!”

“I can’t!”

“You have to!”

I grabbed my head.

“I’ve got this side—!”

“I can’t get it!”

“Cut it open if you have to!”

The sound of tools, of slick flesh rending. Of people, desperately calling to each other.

In front of my eyes, I could see the flashing police lights. Hear the sounds of the jaws of life, prying open people’s cars.

And Donatello’s voice came through, his gentle, tragic smile: “You do what you have to, right?”

I puked. Strongly.

But at least it was into a bucket that I’d found down there.

It was a while before I came back to my senses. I tried, but the harder I worked at it, the worse it became.

So I just sat there, my head between my knees and over the little blue bucket, trying to breathe, trying to shut out the sounds.

“You can’t do this, Marti, I told myself. You have to be strong. People need you.

I closed my eyes hard, and blocked off my hearing through sheer force of will. The people a few feet away, above me, weren’t happy. One of them was dying, because of me.

Think of something. Anything else. Zeni?—no, that’s not help! Chirstof? Ah, that’s no good either! Your cat? No; no, you don’t have a cat anymore—

Mr. Fluffles.

The thought popped into my head out of nowhere. Mister Fluffles.

I remembered it in a flash: at Christmas time, my first husband holding up a tiny kitten with a bow on its head, smiling and giving the adorable thing to me.

—“What should we name it?”—
Ricardo.

He was the answer.

*Think about Ricardo. Think about how he’d want you to do your best.*

I saw his face; heard his kind, gentle words, from when he wasn’t drinking:

*Come on, Marti. Don’t be so hard on yourself. Just get up, and try again. I’ll help you.*

Ricardo. I needed Ricardo.

*Help me,* I pleaded. *Help me make these hands worth something!*

And just like that, the room stopped spinning.

It took me a while, but I sat up straight, nearly popped up, and finally, finally, the wave of pain and dizziness passed.

But that didn’t mean my heart wasn’t racing.

Finally getting my bearings again, I took stock of the situation and what I had to work with.

Panting fast and hard, I looked over my gown and gloves—they were covered in blood, bile, and whatever microscopic bits had been on the floor. Shit.

I quickly ripped them off, tossed them into a corner and went for the sink.

To the sounds of the other three going full-bore, cursing very other word, I washed my face off, scrubbed my arms until they shone—bandage included—and then whirled around.

I marched over to one of the metal trays behind Nadia, and picked up a new straw head. Without saying a thing, I reached between them, plucked out the old one, turned it off and quickly went about replacing the nozzles.

“I don’t need you here,” the old doctor growled at me, as I inserted the straw again.

“I know,” I said in all seriousness, strained, trying not to breathe—and not to look down. The only person in the OR that was allowed to need to be looked-after was the patient themself. I knew that rule by heart. “But she might.”

I pointed at Nadia. Almost on cue, she said to me, hurriedly, “Glad to see you’re back. Can you hook up another blood packet, please?”

I headed over to the cooler. The hanging packet was, indeed, empty.

“Wait,” the old man said. I thought he was angry at me at first, but he wasn’t. I had a perfect look at the three of them from over Lupin’s head: haggard, bloodstained. Christina had a particularly large smear over her forehead. It must have hit her when I went down.

I tried not to look at Lupin’s face. Through sheer force of will, I succeeded.

“How much blood do we have left?” the man asked, heated.

I looked down. “Shit, three pints?”
His eyes squeezed shut and he sighed. “All right. Tell you what,” he said to the others, heavily. “Let him bleed, and just sew. Sew as fast as you can.”

“Let him bleed?” Nadia asked, voice pitching up.

“It’s his own goddamned fault for having such a strong heartbeat.... Just let him get almost dry, then we’ll clamp it, and you can throw the blood in fast. Both arms.”

“I’m almost done getting the vein back in place, here,” Christina said. “I’m ready for a stint.”

Nadia, protest finished, went toward a tiny fridge—it looked like a re-purposed wine cooler—at one end of the room.

She came back with a tiny box, set it up, and got out her tweezers.

She must have seen the look on my face as I stood there, because she replied with a buoyant sigh, “We’re so lucky we have one of these.” Her crow’s feet crinkled up, around the edges of her mask, which was smeared with pink stains. “There was a ship delayed because of our storm being at sea, so two guys didn’t get to take their finals yesterday.”

She was smiling. Smiling.

This was not a woman who smiled for anything less than a miracle.

Quickly, and with expert ability, Nadia turned away from me and placed the stint down into the hole. “Now if only it will be in time.”

The two surgeons sewed, working together not unlike the robot arms that welded in factories.

But, above my head, the vitals monitor did not share our hope.

The numbers were erratic, bouncing all over the place. Lupin’s breathing was getting slower, shallower, and all this vitals were tumbling on the way down.

“Ms. Martelli. Could you please get that other IV line in, while we’re waiting?”

“Yes ma’am,” I said, and mechanically went off to do so.

It wasn’t a hard thing to do. Connect pieces. Make sure they were airtight. String together; hang.

Hold patient’s arm, and insert needle correctly the first time.

Just as the little metal lance disappeared into Lupin’s arm, the man behind me said, “Almost there....”

Work done, I turned to him; the other two were paused to watch him as well. He was hunched over Lupin, as was Christina. But his hands were still in the wound, while the magnifying glass hovered in the air between him and all the red. It was surreal—above the glass, and he was blue; below the glass, he was either pink or red.

“The stint’s in. The sewing’s complete,” the old man said, half to himself as he glared into the wound. “But...”

“...Why hasn’t the bleed stopped?” Christina finished for him, looking up for answers.

“It’s still bleeding, and I can’t see why,” the elder surgeon said. “It’s not from the stint? Nadia, are
your eyes good for this?"

There was still a thin amount of blood going through the clear tubing of the suction straw. It wasn’t so little as to be normal. There was definitely still something to find, something to fix.

“I can try, but...” she frowned. It was just as she was looking down that the monitor started to go off anew—the sound changed to one slightly more vicious.

“Shit,” Nadia said, looking at it.

“What?” I asked.

“It’s starting.”

Her tone was grave. Everyone was silent for a moment, staring at their task with daunted gazes. Only the old doctor didn’t look at Lupin’s face.

This time, I looked down at him, too. He was as pale as a piece of paper.

Don’t let me have killed him.

I felt weak again, all of a sudden, and had to push myself back against the nearby counter to stay upright.

I...was really no good at this anymore, was I?

What...am I going to tell Zeni if he—?

Before I could finish the thought, Nadia turned to the elder doctor, pelting him with the most serious look I’d seen in her light eyes yet. “You still want to do two at a time? You need more time to find the bleed....?”

Something in her tone, physically and verbally, caught me and kept me from falling.

All the tension in my gut unwound, like a magic spell.

“Do both,” he said, after a long moment of grinding his teeth. “He needs it. We’ll have one left after that, right?”

“Yes doctor.”

He turned back to his work. “Then do it.”

“Ms. Martelli, are you all right back there?” Her voice was kind. Far too kind. But it worked.

I took a breath and came off the counter. “Yes ma’am.” For once, I could fully mean it.

“Do as the doctor requested, please.”

Silently, I did as she asked, as fast as I could.

But as I watched off to the side, the numbers on the screen kept dropping, slowly but surely. Heart rate, blood pressure, temperature, breathing—all of it.

“Any ideas, Christina?” the old man asked behind me, quietly.

“No doctor, not yet. Maybe under there?”
“Keep the area clean for us, Nadia,” he affirmed, “We may be able to do this yet. Shout if you see anything. We know it’s not here....”

Lupin had already lost a lot of blood. We were praying, really, that what we had was enough to get him out of critical territory, bleed or no bleed. There hadn’t been anyone available to keep track of the blood lost.

With nothing else to do, I picked up Lupin’s nearest hand, and held it. It was so very cold.

His long, slender fingers, gently curling under mine.

Even if it’d been ice cold, I wish I could have done this for Anya, one last time. I was sure she missed me, wherever she was.

I sure missed her.

“Is this it?” Christina asked lightly, all of a sudden.

“What is that?” the other surgeon asked, curiously.

And then, before either of them could do anything, Lupin’s heart stopped.

It was just a second at first—a blip, where his heart went into fibrillation. It came back on its own, but weakly. The monitor’s numbers were hovering at the dividing line.

“An air bubble?” I asked, strained.

“Could be. Could just be not enough blood,” Nadia replied, looking up quickly. She glanced at the doctors; they were both peering at something with a pen light. “Do you need me?” she asked them.

“Do what you need to do,” advised the old man calmly, not looking up.

“Can you do the compressions?” Nadia asked me quickly, abandoning her post and coming around behind me, to access the open drawers. She’d opened most of them before we started operating, so that she wouldn’t have to touch the handles. Normally, there’d be someone else around to do that, who wouldn’t be involved in touching the patient proper. “I’ll get the breathing tube in, just in case.”

At this point, it was pretty much assured Lupin was going down; the plan had all but called for it, really. That wasn’t really the issue; the issue was whether or not we could bring him back up.

Normally, young people could be roused from this sort of thing with some certainty. But in this situation—prolonged trauma, massive blood loss of an unknown amount, and an unclear reason for Vfib—it wasn’t a certainty at all.

Still, Nadia wasn’t giving up yet. She seemed unshakable.

I nodded that I could do what she needed, and quickly looked around. I could, but there was one issue: height. The operating table was fairly high, and to get above Lupin’s chest would be hard for me.

Luckily, there was a step-stool not far away. I ran and grabbed it, and quickly threw it against the operating table. It was a stable one with rubber feet, so I wouldn’t have to worry about it slipping under me while I got the proper angle over Lupin’s chest.

*Lupin....*
The view of him hit me hard. From above, it became clear to me, again, just what I was saving here. It wasn’t the cat from biology class. It wasn’t the people from the knife fights on the prison floor. It was not just “a patient” but a human life, and one I knew someone cared about. One I knew wanted to live.

But it was easy to trivialize a life in danger, after so many years of this, as just “something you could save or something you couldn’t.” It was your skill against nature. You took the other person out of the equation, to stay calm, to stay focused.

And yet, that had flown out the window all of a sudden, as soon as I saw his face.

The delicate features, the dark hair and closed eyes. A human being, that someone had gone through a lot of trouble to bring to life. A life that liked to smile and please, the cheer up and cheer on. A life that was depending on me to wake it up again.

Furthermore—

I looked to the operating room window, but it was empty.

This patient was a person that someone I knew cared very deeply for, whom that person would be so desperately sad to lose. And I, in turn, would be devastated to lose my man to that sadness.

Don’t let me lose another love to someone’s death.

When I blinked again, there were tears in my eyes.

“Come on, Lupin, don’t quit on me now,” I whispered down at him, wishing once again that I had his real name so that I could call it to him.

As I readied my hands over his chest, it became even more clear how dire of a situation this was. He was ungodly pale, white like a sheet rather than the healthy mottled pink and yellow of thriving tissue. He really did look like a corpse missing its blood flow.

We’d let it get too low. Goddammit, we’d let the blood get too low....

And if it weren’t for me and my god damned problems, it never would have gotten to this point!

I ripped the tears away and looked at the heart monitor. His heart was still beating, just barely, but it was crashing. In a few more seconds, it would go into fibrillation proper—where the heart was quivering but not beating. That was where I’d have to catch it, and bring it back from.

Nadia came around, stabbing a needle into Lupin’s throat. It had to be adrenaline, to get his heart rate up. A second syringe went in after, a few inches down. That would be Sux, the muscle paralytic. They’d injected some of that into his leg earlier, to keep it from reflexively quivering on us.

“C’mon, come on, Lupin, don’t do this,” I prayed to him as she tipped his head back and, tossing the needle onto a tray, grabbed up a plastic tube. “Stay with me, keep breathing. Keep your heart beating.”

Two seconds, three. Fifty on the monitor, then forty.

“Dammit, dammit,” Nadia muttered. “His throat’s still swollen up, isn’t it? Augh...”

Thirty...
Nadia pulled out the tube, and went for a thinner one.

He wasn’t breathing.

I looked back at the doctors. They were still both leaned over Lupin’s leg, muttering to each other furiously and hands moving fast.

Looking back at the blaring monitor revealed that the pulse had gone erratic. A few smaller-than-normal blips, but no numbers to calculate a heartbeat.

“Nadia!” I pleaded.

“Almost almost,” she hissed, working the tube. It was disappearing down his throat, inches at a time. “It’s going, just a little more... Ah-hah! That’s it!”

The last final blockage cleared itself, and Nadia raised her hands.

“Starting chest compressions!” I called, as she went for the breath-bag hookup.

I shoved my hands down onto Lupin’s chest. The ribcage shuddered, some of it gave in a way it shouldn’t have—and the jolt went through his body. I could only hope that it wouldn’t rip the stitching on the stint.

In between the pulses I was injecting into his body, Nadia got the blue, rubberized plastic bag attached to the breathing tube, and started working it, in time with my rhythm. The doctors, too, after a few seconds were able to get back to work, timed with my artificial heartbeat.

“How’s it coming?” I threw back, heatedly. I couldn’t look back anymore, concentrating on this as I was.

“Not good,” said the older doctor, at the same time that the younger one replied, “It’s coming.”

“It’s...it’s not good,” Christina amended timidly after the overlap, “but it’s coming. Just keep doing what you’re doing. We’ve almost got the bleed stopped, it’s just...this last thing.... There’s something stuck in here, that’s in the way....”

“Where are those guys?” I growled, looking past Nadia—only to find them all three missing men standing at the window, staring at us.

“Nadia!” I called, motioning toward the window with my head.

She looked back, then muttered an “Oh!” of surprise and motioned them in quickly. They looked at each other, and then, with a nod from Zeni, Christof darted in, complete with the scans.

Zeni’s attention returned to Lupin, hollow. He was scared, and probably going into shock again, if that vacant look was any indication.

_Goddammit._

It wasn’t a couple of seconds before he looked up and locked eyes with me.

I held it for a moment, trying to look determined, trying to say _I know_, but all he looked was more upset.

I shook my head and went back to Lupin. “Come on, Lupin, you’re making Pops go through an awful lot, you know....”
Christof arrived and Nadia quickly hailed him to take her place on the breath bag. She held up the scans to the light, staring at one that I could only assume was Lupin’s leg.

“Here, look at this,” she said after a second, holding the scan above Christina’s face, because that was the doctor who was on her side of the table.

“Ohhh,” Christina muttered, as Nadia circled a little bit of the scan with her finger. “That’s gotta be what it is! Here, give me some pliers.”

She dove into Lupin’s leg as soon as she had them.

Looking back at Lupin’s face revealed that he was still just as pale as he had been for. I already knew that this view of him—head tipped back, tube coming out of it, shuddering under each compression—was something I was going to have nightmares about.

“Nadia, how much blood do we have left?” I called, as she came around to the elder doctor to show him the same thing, holding the paper up just the same before him.

As soon as she was done showing him the same thing, she looked down behind the table, at a place I couldn’t see.

Her eyebrows tipped down. “One.”

“One...?”

“Pint. There’s one pint left.”

I stared. Fuck. I’d forgotten about that.

“Yeah. If this doesn’t stop it, he’s done, unless you can find his blood type?” she asked, apologetically.

I shook my head, eyebrows pushed together so hard they hurt.

Nadia shrugged helplessly. “I’m sorry. But that’s what we’ve got. There’s still half in the two still hanging, but...he’s bled a lot.”

“I think...I think I’ve...”

“Wait, wait, no—!” yelled the old doctor.

“—Got it!” Christina’s triumphant voice rang out. “Augh!”

A thin jet of blood hit her square in the chest.

“Straw, now!” the old man yelled at Nadia.

She got it down instantly, reaching across the table for it and filling the room with the sound of gurgling.

I looked at Christof; he gave me a bewildered look, then just stared at what was going on behind me that I couldn’t see.

“Do you need me to stop?” I called.

“Yes!” the old man shouted, holding up his hand.
I stopped the last compression just as I was about to go down, but my hands stayed over Lupin’s bare chest. Over the soft pallet of hair there. He was cool to the touch, even with that. Even there.

“Give me the soldiering iron,” the old man said, clipped.

It appeared in his hand, courtesy of Christina.

A few long seconds went by. I put my hand on Christof’s, to stop his ministrations. Pushing air into Lupin’s lungs wasn’t going to do any good, if there was no blood flow to move it. In fact, it tended to reduce the rate of successful CPR, because cells couldn’t complete their emergency shut-down operations with air still getting to them.

We’d only have a few seconds, though, before it lead to brain damage. Thirty, at the most, and even then there might be some peripheral nerve damage.

I felt every single one of those seconds, like a hand squeezing my throat.

“I’ve got it, I know what’s going on,” the old doctor muttered, not stopping to wipe the sweat off his brow. Nadia reached over to the nearest tray and pulled over a cloth, doing it for him without a word, using her free hand. That woman really was amazing.

“This isn’t a major bleed, it’s just...” There was the sound of moving tissue, but the straw kept sucking up blood. “I’ve seen it before, if I can just get under here...”

Christina held the tissue still, staring unblinking at the work. Even she wasn’t excited anymore.

A little bit of smoke rose up, carrying with it the scent of roasting flesh.

The room was completely silent. Even the monitor had stopped blaring; after a few seconds of having no heartbeat, it figured you already knew.

The sound of the gurgling straw stopped.

Both doctors leaned back at the same time with massive sighs.

“Please continue,” the old man said to me after a second, and then, as I nodded and turned around, he added to the others: “There...see if the bleed’s stopped.”

I didn’t look at Zeni or Christof as I pushed back down on Lupin’s chest. I just looked at him—at those long eyelashes that looked so much like Zenigata’s.

But I knew both men were both there for me, for us, waiting for Lupin’s life to come back.

“Come on, Lupin, stay with me. Pops needs you, he’s waiting for you...”

The monitor recorded my compressions, blipping each time I forced a jolt through his body.

“There’s no...It’s not bleeding,” Christina said, distantly.

“Do you see anything?” the old doctor’s voice asked.

A pause, and then:

“No,” Nadia answered. “I think it’s finally stopped.”

“Good. I think...that bone chip was holding a wound open.”
“That would explain why we couldn’t ever totally stop the bleed,” Christina added thoughtfully.

“Yes. Now. Paddles please, one of you,” the old man added.

“Right away, doctor,” Nadia said, and hurried to the electrical defibrillator.

I looked at Christof, and he nodded at me. Nadia set up the machine, getting it charged in a few quick seconds. In the mean time, she quickly put together another needle, and jabbed it into the vein in Lupin’s neck.

Adrenaline. More of it.

The defibrillator made its beep of readiness, and Nadia tossed away the needle onto the nearest tray. She went down for the paddles and rubbed them together like a cymbal player.

At her defiant shout of “clear!”’, Christof and I raised our hands; I made sure I wasn’t touching the table with my thighs, either.

The impact of the electricity hit Lupin with a massive twunk, like an old flashbulb amplified many times. Lupin’s body lifted to the paddles, and fell back down.

Nothing happened.

I dove back in, pushing my hands on Lupin’s chest—as did Christof, with the breathing apparatus.

“Charging to one-fifty,” Nadia intoned.

“Come on, Lupin. Don’t do this. You’re young, you can get through this.” But even as I said it, I knew that there was only a two in three chance that he’d come back from this. CPR was helpful, but defibrillators weren’t miracles. A surprising number of people failed to respond to them. Even though that was usually because there was some existing heart problem, there was no telling what would happen here, given the trauma he’d already gone through, the blood he didn’t have.

Where’s your reroll? Reroll this, please.

“Clear!”

We lifted again, and Nadia swooped in. Lupin’s entire body tensed at the shwook! of electricity shooting through him, and stayed connected to the metal rectangles a little longer this time.

It was honestly like watching Frankenstein trying to revive his Monster.

The monitor revealed a blip, maybe two, but it didn’t hold.

“Dammit,” almost all of us muttered at once.

“Charging to two-hundred,” Nadia announced. The doctors just watched; there was nothing for them to do just now.

“He’s got enough blood, right?” I asked Nadia, and she nodded. “We could wait, if you wanted, but...” She looked at his skin. It had pINKed up a bit, as my compressions had pushed more blood through him from the IVs. It was no where near where it needed to be, but at least he looked something close to alive again.

“No, no, it’s fine, go again,” I muttered, realizing that before too many rounds of this, we would reach dangerous shock territory. Too much of this could ruin his heart—and also indicate that it
was hopeless to revive him.

“Pops will be so pissed if you die,” I whispered to myself. Before I went back to compressions, I
tapped the thief’s face just for good measure. “Lupin. If you can hear me, I need to you to come
back. You need to get your heart started. Zenigata needs you to stay here. I need you to stay here.
Stay with me, okay? Come back.”

—“Just stay with me, okay? Don’t leave me.”—

I made the mistake of looking over in Zeni’s direction then, Donatello’s voice haunting my ears.

Ricardo had said something very similar, the night he’d died.

I’d wanted to go to the Christmas party, but he hadn’t. I’d thought it’d make him happy, to come
along. I never managed to convince him to come, but I told him that I wouldn’t be kept in by a
man.

When I’d come home the next morning—I’d had to stay over because of a snowstorm making the
mountain passes dangerous—I’d thought he was just asleep on the couch.

On the other side of the glass, Zenigata was still standing there, staring with wide eyes at all of
this. His stern, capable self was gone, replaced with silent fear.

I swallowed hard and tore my gaze away, to look down at Lupin and his terribly pale, blood-caked
face as I forced his chest to squeeze his heart.

“Jigen needs you too,” I said, suddenly shaking and close to tears again from remembering it all.
But just like me, there was someone out there that Lupin loved, truly loved, and for good, positive
reasons. There was someone good out there, that we could both hang onto. That we had to, or it’d
destroy them.

“Come on. You want to see Jigen again, don’t you? Jigen wants to see you, too.”

Christof was looking at me too; I could feel it. But it didn’t matter. Patients could still hear you.
And so often, that made all the difference.

I pushed the desire, the prayer, into his heart.

“Clear!” Nadia called, coming into view again. She placed the paddles in a slightly different
position this time, crossing the chest at a different diagonal. The electricity thudded through them;
one second, two: I could hear the buzz of the power going between them.

God’s power. Jupiter’s power: the lightening bolt. The power that had created all of primordial life,
and kept us going.

When Lupin fell back to the table this time, there was another sound: A gasp.

Around the tube in his throat, his body had let out a reflexive gasp.

I turned to the monitor with bated breath, as did everyone else.

_A death gasp, or...?_

One second, two...

_Beep._
A pause, consuming a long, dreadful moment.

And then:

*Beep.*

...*Beep.*

A rhythm of little triangles, slowly turning into bigger triangles, making their way across the screen from left to right. Numbers in the corner, slowly rising higher, from red to green.

I sighed and put my face in my hands, while a cheer went up from everyone else.

After a moment, as Christof made a fist-pump and doctor Christina bounced up and down excitedly, I turned to the window and pulled down my mask.

I flashed Zenigata a broad smile, and a V sign with my fingers.

Even though I was crying.

It took him a second, but soon enough, he’d sagged in relief, his eyes closing and his hands hiding his face.

And then, in the moment of opportunity that created, Kyle jumped in from the side and bear hugged him.

“We’re not out of the woods yet, people,” the old doctor advised, before I could see the fallout from that manly contact. The doctor looked at each of us in turn, and started giving out instructions for the next steps.

For some reason, he did not look happy in the slightest.

In fact...those did not seem like the eyes of a man who knew happiness at all.
Chapter Notes

Msc fandom things:

1) I have now met three men who unintentionally dress like Lupin, two of them Blue Jacket. Damn does that show know the trends in men's fashion. Royal blue blazers are all the rage over here right now, on both men and women. It's even showing up in department store ads. I gotta get on that cosplay....

2) So, I love the Olympics, especially around gymnastics. There's a wonderful male Brazilian gymnast named Arthur Mariano. He is perfect headcanon Lupin (except with the addition of some massive muscles, lol); he even has the hair! Check him out. He's beautiful and got this ridiculous smile, and just a touch of Asian looks. <3

3) What if Cat (from Midsummer's Butterfly TV special) is Lupin and Rebecca's daughter? "That summer, we two thieves were the talk of the town..."

Yeah...I think someone finally thought to answer that question....

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PART II

Don’t we all wish for something more?

I’d asked him that question nearly an hour ago, and though it was rhetorical at the time, I was starting to wish it hadn’t been.

I wanted to know what this man, this reaper of mine, wanted to get out of life. Why he was so shy and charming despite everything, and what exactly my life would do for the world, once it was given to him. What he would go on to do in my place, once I was gone.

What I was doing falling for him, as we stood above the black water that was about to swallow me whole.

But that was me: Always asking for something more.

I just never learned.

The women’s powder room was pure silver. From floor to ceiling, where the rest of the building was gold, it was silver. It was supposed to make the skin look whiter, brighter, but it just felt cold
to me. A bit like being one of the endless pieces of silverware in Beast’s castle.

Behind me was the only other person in the room: Donatello di Medici, Western Venice Police Commissioner and one of the richest men in the country via marriage, let alone the city. He stood behind me, zipping up the black velvet dress I’d just unboxed.

It was supposed to be a fun affair, these sorts of things. Where I’d go over to his townhouse before an event, and receive the something special thing he’d gotten me, all while his wife was conveniently somewhere else. I’d marvel at how beautiful it was, he’d marvel at how beautiful I was in it, and we’d both pretend as I did a twirl that I felt marvelously lucky for longer than a few seconds. We’d pretend that he was Prince Charming and I was Cinderella, and not the Beast and Belle that we had become.

This time, though, it was a cold affair, cold like the inside of a freezer. It wasn’t the usual setup, nor had the invitation been. I was summoned directly from work on no notice, and ushered up the back stairs to meet him here, the annual policemen’s charity ball. His wife was near, somewhere just outside the doors of this room, mingling with the rest of the party. I had been stripped down while surrounded by mirrors, and now I was being dressed back up.

What’s more, there were guards outside to make sure we were alone, in this place big enough to comfortably fit fifty.

I kept wondering, while he worked so close to me, if his hands were going to produce a knife, or slide up to my throat. Or maybe both.

I watched him in the giant, ornate mirror, the way his eyes, once so intent and loving, looked distant and sad as he gazed down at his work.

It was a view I would have sacrificed for, once—that closeness and show of emotion from him, no matter what it was. Even better that it was an emotion I could be there to soothe and comfort, and thereby build a bridge to him with. But now, I just wanted to run away from it, and pretend we had never been.

It was just as I started looking down too, as solemn as him, that the zipper reached its zenith, and his warm hands slid around my sides.

I tensed up immediately, but he molded around me regardless. His chin rested atop my hair; then, as he pulled me back against him, his head bent down and nuzzled against mine. I reflexively set my hand on top of his for balance, but it didn’t wait for me; instead, it slid up my stomach, over my chest, and to my bare throat.

I tipped my head back, ready as one could be for what I suspected was coming. His palm was large enough to encompass the entire height from my collarbone to my jaw, and even the smallest contact was enough to make my heart race in concern. But after several long seconds of holding his hand there heavily, his fingertips had flexed several times on the side of my neck, but never quite pressed down.

Don’t leave a mark, I wanted to say, but I didn’t think he was in the mood for my advice.

Tilting my head back into him in preparation to say this, however, seemed to be enough of a sign to him. He grunted, annoyed, and pushed me forward, over onto the white-and-grey-veined marble vanity that stretched for a dozen feet in either direction and was as deep as a dining room table—in other words, plenty of room to pin me there.
Which he did. But after a second of holding my arms down, standing in an A-frame behind me, his hands drew inward. He molded his hips and legs into mine, and pinned my lower half against the sharp angles of the counter with his weight. His hands landed in the middle of my back and held me there, right where the back of the dress met skin.

I waited, pliant, not sure what he was going to demand as the next step. The cool of the stone, veined with grey and black rivers and shining silver here and there with polished, crystalline intrusions, slowly warmed under my skin, even though it was hard to breathe.

But he didn’t do anything else. His didn’t rub his half-hard erection into me; it just sat there, between my buttocks, heavy and threatening.

“Look,” he finally commanded in a strained growl, and I obeyed.

I turned my head slowly, lifting my cheek from the stone and instead setting my chin there, in the little pool of warmth left over. My hair, ironed straight, slid all around like rivers of red, momentarily bringing the stone to life. In the mirror, my chest was visible in a rather lewd angle, and my arms were held out in front of me, equally reminiscent of clinging to a bed’s sheets. Luckily, there was no faucet in front of me to have to hold to complete the picture of immodesty.

And behind me in his suit Donatello stood, tall and looming and dominating me at the hip. He gazed down coolly, until he took a fist full of hair at the back of my head and looped it around his fist. He jerked me back sharply, like a horse with a bridal, and I couldn’t stop a hiss of pain, reaching back slightly.

“Look at you. I could take you right here,” he growled into my neck.

There, his head next to mine, Donatello’s cold grey eyes were an unnaturally shining silver, a monster holding my gaze in the mirror.

“You could,” I admitted, looking away after a bit. It’d be cold though. And a bit pointy.

I chuckled at the thought.

He did not like that.

“I should just leave you here to be taken by any man that comes in,” he spat, throwing me down.

I caught myself before my head it, but I stayed where I landed, careful not to look him in the eye.

If I pushed his buttons, he’d definitely follow through on that threat. However, this was the women’s. Not that it seemed to matter, as he pressed one large hand into my back and rested his weight there.

Though, pointing all that out would probably only provoke him, because it would provoke anyone trying to gain control of a situation.

No: There was a better place to strike, one tailored to him. I invoked it once the world stopped spinning, and a few moments went by in silence. “Word would get around the department,” I said, flatly—careful not to challenge, only advise.

He paused, surprised, then huffed audibly.

“Maybe they’d start visiting you at work,” he replied lowly, stroking his fingertips over my skin.
I sucked in a breath, my stomach tightening and heartbeat rising. Even after all these years, the fact
that there were still things he could threaten that could get that reaction out of me, make me want
to curl in a corner....

My hands closed into fists, very slowly.

“...There’d be footage of that.”

“Not if I didn’t want there to be.”

That was true too, but highly impractical, and he would know that, as soon as he calmed down.
Still, his hand pressed into my back until it hurt.

I could feel him shaking. His voice had grown strained, too.

From my place prostrate against the cool marble, I sighed, feigning boredom. “Sounds like a lot of
work though, for little gain.”

“Is it, Marti? Is it little, to get you back on my side?” he grumbled. He stepped away dramatically,
leaving me to figure out what to do to support myself. “I hate this about you,” he continued as he
turned around, putting his hands through his hair, only to point at me when he completed his
anxious circle. “I loved that about you, how you do this, how you always have an answer to things,
but now I just hate it. How you always try to tell me what to do!”

When he got like this, he wasn’t ever actually talking about me, or even really to me. I just nodded
along and sighed inwardly as I stood up, watching the normally majestic man stalk around the
Hollywood vanity lights like a ragged, hunted deer.

When I didn’t respond, eventually he realized what he was doing, and rather apologetically sighed.

But that was gone in a moment, replaced with impatience as he stalked over to a long, flat, low-
profile black case that sat on the veined countertop, beside the one the dress had come in. It almost
looked like a half-size briefcase.

He flipped up the latches, still muttering to himself about his problems, and then abruptly spun the
box around to me. “Here.”

I actually gasped, just a little.

It was a chest of jewels: a tiara headpiece, a throat choker that was several layers tall, and two-inch
long pear-shaped earrings. Every single one of them was made exclusively of clear, glittering
diamonds and molded silver strands.

“Are those real?” I asked, taking a step closer despite it all.

Donatello frowned at me for a second, then sighed. The shape of his face changed from anger to
pity, as he looked at the jewelry. “Yes. They’re Miranda’s.” He slid his fingers over them, that
injured frown still on his face. When he spoke again, his voice had grown quiet. “They were a
wedding present, to her.”

“They’re lovely,” I said, not quite sure what to say about that. Maybe he was just flaunting them at
me, before he called her over to put them on her? “Three million lira” worth of diamonds he might
be about to make a nasty comment about?

Though, I was pretty sure each one of those was worth about that much.
“You...have good taste,” I finished, glancing at him, and then glancing away, not sure where to look to make him less annoyed. I decided to hold my hands politely in front of me and stare at the floor.

“Put them on.”

“What?” I balked immediately, forgetting my prohibition to looking straight at him. “I can’t do that. She’ll know.” And what was more, so would everyone else. This was the policeman’s ball. All the major players in law enforcement were here, including a lot of people who had been at his wedding, thirty years ago.

Furthermore, Miranda was a strange bird, but she didn’t like to share her toys. And certainly not in public, for heaven’s sake.

“Shh,” he said, lifting a finger. He didn’t even lift it to his lips. It just raised off the black crushed velvet of the case—which had the family insignia on it—and then held in the air an inch.

That was his universal “Just do what I’m telling you” gesture. There would be no argument to it.

He hadn’t said Come here and let me put them on you, so I mustered my courage and, after staring at the diamonds in dread for a moment, put a bit of a sashay to my hips as I walked over to him.

“What would you like to do the honors?”

He looked honestly surprised at that. For a second, the boyish Donny was there, grey eyes—wherever he had gotten them from, probably Switzerland—wide and innocent and the many lights shining in them like stars.

But then he looked back down at the jewels, and the fifty-year-old police commissioner was back, crow’s feet and tanned forehead wrinkles etched into his handsome brow, turning it stormy. “No, I shouldn’t.”

I knew what he was thinking: I don’t deserve that fantasy.

Even after all this time, he was still denying himself things about me. All the wrong things. I sighed inwardly.

“All right,” I said, quietly. “But you can if you want to.”

It was probably better that he wasn’t anywhere near me given his state and the circumstance, but I hoped that the gesture would go a ways.

It was fairly easy to get on the earrings myself, and the hairpiece. But the choker was a different story. The clasp was a type I wasn’t familiar with, and kept catching in my hair.

Finally, he came over with a curt hum and his warm, familiar, hardy fingers did the series of latches, no specter of evil in them.

Those were the strong, dependable hands I’d fallen in love with.

If only they had stayed that way, all along.....

When he was done with the diamonds, his hand settled on my bare shoulder, at the base of my neck. His other brushed my hair aside with practiced ease, and he soon set a tender kiss on the back of my neck, hot and reminiscent of other times.
I closed my eyes tightly, and waited.

His hands slid heavily around my front and laced together just below my breasts. His chin came to rest on my head, gently.

He was warm in the cold room, and we fit together like the inset and the altar.

If only my body was still his safe, sacred space.

“Marti....”

Before he could say anything else—make me believe anything else—I reached for the long gloves on the counter, unrolling them past my elbows. It was a slow process, given the slippery satin, and I was quickly cursing in my head, ever more frantic.

Donatello was watching me carefully the whole time, still holding me. His chest was warming my upper back, even if it was a few inches away because of the curve his height difference caused as he bent down. I could smell his cologne; it was sweet and warm, but weak.

Just like him.

Him on his good days, anyway.

Not that I was any better.

As I worked, he took a curled finger and brushed the tiny hairs away from the back of my neck, which he had uncovered from splitting my hair over my shoulders and onto my front. Once he was all done getting my hair back in place, he kissed the side of my neck too, tenderly.

And then he reached forward and groped me, a hard, desperate squeeze. His hips pushed up against my rear, and even through all the layers separating us, I could feel his need still wishing for attention. His large hands, around front, bounced my breasts within the thick cloth a couple of times, securing the automatic stimulation that made me gasp just a bit.

But I arched away from him, rather than into him. I tensed, rather than draped. I wasn’t sure that this would go anywhere I wanted, in the end. At this point in our relationship, his touch scared me as much as it pleased me, so I just stood there, determined not to feel anything.

Instead I watched his hands, trying to think of something mundane as his chin came to sit on my shoulder. His cologne needed refreshing; I thought about reminding him of that, whenever he was done with what he was going to do.

But as it turned out, he just held me gently, swaying back and forth, his hands around my middle, one loosely clasping the wrist of the other.

“I wish it had been you,” he whispered into my skin.

I lifted my head, to look at the two of us, together.

I looked beautiful. Incredibly, remarkably beautiful. Minus the freckles, but they were light from here. It wasn’t hard to imagine a different time and a different place: me in these jewels, at a similar party years ago, but wearing a white dress. Being held by this man, but with all his hopes and dreams still in-tact.

With both of ours yet able to fly.
Still, as I looked upon myself there in that moment, for the first time in my life, I thought I saw what the rest of the people thought they saw, when they looked at me.

It was too bad that I could no longer look at him that way.

I ended up not having to say anything to get him off of me. After a few minutes—literally minutes of him silently pressing his warmth and sorrow into me—Donatello sighed and slipped away.

Despite it all, I felt cold when his body left, rather than relieved.

Out of the frying pan and into the fire. That’s what that was. If he was in the middle of trying to kiss me, he wasn’t in the process of stabbing me, or strangling me—nor were his guards. With each step away from me he took, it felt like death was one step closer.

To us.

To him.

To me.

“Donny,” I called, as he disappeared into the twisting curvature of the exit hall back to the public spaces. I hurried after, not wanting to be trapped in here by the guards without him.

I got to the narrow hallway that went between the hotel ballroom’s powder room entrance and the hallway proper, which was a dozen feet long but barely one dress wide. Donatello paused before he reached the end, though he was superimposed before the image of one of his suited guards, waiting for us at the actual entrance. Neither of them looked pleased.

After a tense moment, Donatello looked over his shoulder at me.

“Do you...want to see?” I asked, wishing I sounded less obviously afraid. I swished my hips once, making the crystals on the dress flutter.

He sighed anew and turned around fully. My date leaned against the fleur-du-le wallpaper, arms crossed and unimpressed.

The dress he had given me was a long, black-velvet gown that went from chest to floor and then some, with a rounded train about two feet long behind me. There were black crystals and sequins in varying density all up and down the dress, as well as on the long satin gloves, which shone in the light. With the diamond choker, earrings, and tiara, I was practically lit up. I had red lipstick on, a little darker than my hair, and with it ironed straight, it went down to the middle of my back. I’d been growing it out on his request for the last couple years.

I had my silver clutch purse in my hand as well, and I sent a beaming smile at him—or the best one I could manage, given how nervous I was.

The look on his face when he first gazed at my feet was almost wistful, maybe even nostalgic, as his eyes crawled up my frame, lost in his own little tragic world.

But then, when he got to my face, he scowled, and quickly looked away. I watched him for a second, assessing, and then stared at the floor in response.
“Well, at least you look good in it,” he replied, coldly.

I nodded, glancing up through my lashes. “For you.”

“Oh, don’t patronize me,” he grumbled, his hands clutching into fists. I flinched slightly.

I was only a few feet away from him; he could have hit me in two steps and that would be my rendezvous with a wall for the night.

But Donatello only thrust both his hands into his pockets, at which point he tipped his head back with a deep sigh. “Marti, Marti, Marti.... What am I going to do with you?”

His voice had turned back into the criminal boss’s. Donatello had several voices that he used throughout his life, and personalities to match: Friendly but Strong Police Commissioner; Charitable Public Figure; Happy Civilian; Personable Criminal; Dangerous and Scary Mob Boss Dealing With a Problem. This was the last one.

This was also the one I was expecting to get, up until now. Followed by a knife.

I found myself clutching my purse with shaking hands. There was no where to run. If they wanted to shove me into that powder room to die, that’d be that.

“I didn’t...” I began, mouth tight and staring at my feet. “I know you don’t believe me, but I didn’t...actually do it....”

“That will remain to be seen, I suppose,” he sighed again. He sounded a little less angry, but unwilling, or unable, to let it go, after he took another look at me, he quickly went over to the little space for leaving hats, where he’d left a glass of whisky. He grabbed it up and slugged the two fingers’ worth down, and then promptly dropped the glass down onto the table along with his arm, a sharp clink that made me jerk.

“Don’t you dare flinch from me,” he grumbled, and my eyes widened. I stared at him, frozen and unsure, twitching a little unconsciously and hoping he didn’t notice—or at least, that the tremors were small enough to keep him from getting more mad.

After watching my reaction, he sighed yet again and ran his hand through his hair, which was quickly getting unruly. He stared at the wall, a grey-eyed glower, and loosened his tie. “You were supposed to be different, Marti,” he whispered.

So were you, I thought, but swallowed it down. That seemed like the least wise thing I could possibly say at the moment, even though it was also the only true thing I could add.

It hurt, that I couldn’t be honest with him. But I supposed I hadn’t ever been able to be, with him. That’s just the way men were—you had to hide your true feelings, or they’d get mad. At least, any feeling that wasn’t love or adoration.

“So.” Donatello began, turning away from me and running his hand through his hair heavily. “You want to sit at the high roller table, you have to pay into it. As such, I require a show of loyalty from you.”

I swallowed again and nodded, suddenly self-conscious of the weight of the millions I was wearing. “Anything.”

“I have a guest coming in. You will accompany him tonight. For as long as he desires.” He motioned with his glass, looking more troubled with each word.
I nodded, slowly going emotionless as he spoke. I knew what that last part meant. I’d seen him request it of plenty of other people, and it wasn’t the first time for him to ask it of me, either. He’d just never done it on no notice, before, and with someone I’d never met.

That didn’t mean it’d ever been pleasant, though.

“If he keeps you for a night, fine. If he keeps you for a week, so be it. If I never see you again, so it is. I can’t keep around people I can’t trust.”

I nodded. This...could work. This could be what I needed to escape. I just needed to get this new guy to like me enough....

I touched at my neck. I’d have to give back the diamonds though, at some point. Surely he wasn’t sending me off with them forever. Maybe there was even a way to track me, in them.

Unless it was secretly...a way to run?

“Who...is it?” I asked, hesitantly, glancing at him and trying not to let the hope show.

He shrugged and waved a hand, nose crinkling. “One of Arsene’s guys. The one who made all this possible tonight.”

I blinked. Arsene.... The Wolf? His old friend? The guy who was an American mob boss well known for all the people he’d disappeared?

This didn’t seem so good, anymore.

I had to have been wrong. Chances were, his friend had sent in someone brutal, on special request. This was a rigged game.

Before I could stop myself, I sighed.

“And I don’t want you causing any trouble,” he said preemptively, as if reading my mind. He pointed at me, idly, around the crystal glass he held. “I love your fire but not when it’s aimed at my people. So you behave, and do whatever he wants. He’s gonna report back to me how it went. In detail.”

I pursed my lips and stared at my feet, unable to find anything to say. In the silence, Donatello glanced at me, a long up and down. Finally, he quietly added, “I’m sorry I have to do this, you know.”

He took another drink of the dregs in the glass, looked me over, then looked away again. He suddenly seemed like the most miserable person on earth, the lines in his face no longer appealing.

“Really, really sorry.”

There was something about his tone that struck me as strange, as well as the fact that he was refusing to look at me despite the torment on his features.

I looked down at myself again for answers, and that was when I realized it:

*I’m dressed in all black.*

I poked the toe of my shoe out from the edge of the dress.

All black, from head to toe. Like a mourning gown.
I’m at a party, with five hundred witnesses, who either work in the police force or are political friends of Donny’s.

A party with a bunch of foreigners of ill repute working the back door.

That the witnesses can all attest were there, but no one will ever see again, nor know the real names of.

And a “remarkably beautiful” woman “of loose morals,” wearing millions, leaving with one of those men....

I started to laugh, hiccuping.

Forget escaping. He’s way ahead of me.

“Oh,” I said. “I see...!”

I started to laugh so hard I fell against the wall, gripping my sides and going weak. It wasn’t happy laughter. But it was there, breathless and painful, until I was so dizzy I could neither stand nor speak.

Surprised, he took a step toward me, but I held up my hand to hold him off. Donatello stopped his advance, but his answer was to give me a black look. That only made the hysteria worse though.

Soon he huffed again and through the tears, I saw him move.

Quick and disheveled, he stalked over to me.

That sobered me up fast and furiously, but before I could get enough air to stand, he grabbed me by the sides and shoved me up against the wall with a thud—and a hard, angry kiss. His hands wandered over me, harsh and heavy, forcing themselves over my curves as much as the crystals, even if it cut his hands.

I pushed at him to get away, then just to hold myself up when he wouldn’t go, and then later, to get air. But he held me still and didn’t let me go, until he had his hands in my hair and was panting in my ear. I was panting too, once released.

It was hot, all of a sudden: the air, our bodies, our memories—and for a time we both just held still, locked together, fists clenched wherever they had landed. Mine ended up under his arms, crinkling his suit, while one of his was around my back. The other was clutching air as it rested on my chest, curled up between us and taking the weight as he leaned on me.

For a long time, we just held still there, fighting against the moment. Breathing hard against one another, held up by the wall; if anyone had walked, they would have seen the people underneath, not the fancy clothes that kept the truth at bay.

Even when Donatello was done breathing hard, he refused to look me in the eyes. He stared somewhere near my collarbone instead, lost in thought and clearly tormented. His grey eyes were stormy and sad, but his jaw was tight with determination. His brows were pushed together too, as if he were in pain.

I waited, but he didn’t say a word. He just looked like he was about to cry.

So that’s what it is.
Slowly, I opened my right hand and rubbed his back.

“Did Miranda okay this?” I asked quietly.

His eyes narrowed, and he swallowed hard. He still didn’t look at me; he was clearly upset about it.

Finally, he bowed his head. “She doesn’t know,” he whispered, hoarse.

That was a surprise. He didn’t often do things in his personal life without her approval.

Which meant he was doing this as a last-ditch effort to keep things together, before she decided she needed to intervene.

In a way, he was trying to make it better.

By picking her over me.

Unfortunately for him, I didn’t believe him in the slightest.

“Oh Donny,” I whispered pityingly, tucking his hair behind his ear. “If you never learn to trust people at the critical moments, you’ll never get out of this hole you’re in.”

I tenderly kissed him on the top of his head, and he closed his eyes quietly.

“Show me to this man of yours. But let’s fix your hair first, okay?”

Chapter End Notes

Donatello.... :S
Chapter Summary

More about Marti and Zeni!

Chapter Notes

Previously, I'd mentioned Marti was wearing pearls. Just ignore that....

Also, the first chunk of this probably should have gone in with the last chapter. But there was a chapter in between these two that I took out, so apologies if it's a little rough of a transition.

Still, 26, 27, and 28 are all meant to be read together (Were originally one hella long chapter....), so I'll try to get them all up this week. :)

I was expecting some tough, scary guy that barely spoke the language and had a habit of pulling the hair of disobedient whores before he knocked them into brick walls.

But what I got was a shy, middle-aged made man who was warm in more ways than one.

Bosco, one of Donny’s guards, pointed him out to me: “The one on the balcony, standing alone.” He put his hand on my back, more gently than he could have, but definitely with a tension that said that hand of his was going to tighten mightily if I tried to go the other direction.

The man that was my destination was wearing a fine black suit, one leg crossed behind the other as he leaned heavily on the railing. I couldn’t see his face, but his back looked almost longing from here; his outline melted into the distant vista of city lights and seawater upon which he gazed.

I swallowed, pulled up a glass of passing wine, and slugged it down. I set that one back on the tray, much to the waiter’s shocked face, and then picked up another goblet for good measure. I rolled my shoulders, nodded, and took what would be the first step of many down that dark man’s rabbit hole.

With hesitant but steady steps, I moved away from the dazzling light of Donatello’s world and onto the twilight of the balcony, where the ballroom’s light and the sea’s black void collided. The dress trailed behind me heavily, while the glinting crystals caught the looks of passersby. Heads in the room turned, one by one, envious, longing, and poisonous in turn.

Without looking back, I left them all behind.

I wouldn’t give in to the eyes that were on me. Not tonight. Not to them. I wouldn’t prove their whispers, their gazes, their rotten tomatoes right. With head held high, I refused to look anywhere but the distant horizon.

The balcony was a half-circle of stone sticking out from the ballroom, french doors and a bank of
floor-to-ceiling windows serving as the partition. The doors were open, letting the cool air in and the sound out, but it was suddenly quiet as I crossed the threshold.

The stone railing curved the same as the balcony, with spindles holding up the guardrail at even intervals. They were carved to look like vases full of grapes, and had probably been brightly painted, once.

It was a beautiful space, but an eerie one as well, for darkness and eternal silence started abruptly beyond that barrier. The contrast was all the more stark for how the stone reflected the light of the room, and left the water pitch black in comparison.

As I crossed the threshold, my heels went from clunking on herringbone wood to clacking on colorful, inlaid stone roses. The sharp, jumbled music and heat of human bodies faded as well, replaced by the steady sound of lapping water and the cool salt of the bay, brought on by the night breeze.

The man who presided over this dark, chilly world was on the balcony all by himself. Dressed in black from head to toe and with black hair too, he seemed preoccupied by the utter darkness of the sea at night, as if he wanted to go back to it.

But there were also lights out there. Beyond the water, the distant cityscape of Maghera glittered between the sea and the sky, a horizon of blooming flowers.

It was uncanny, like something out of a fairy tale.

I watched the scene for a few moments, until the stray music at my back and the chill of the air made me highly aware of the fact that the safety of those fairy lights was an illusion. A paper landscape, far too distant to ever reach.

No longer able to deny that there was anywhere left to run but the far shore across the black river, I turned to the stranger from beyond the sea and set about unfurling what mystery he offered.

It was time to walk toward the light. I couldn’t put it off anymore.

It was all I had left to me, so I might as well do what I enjoyed best, as I waded across the river Styx—get close to a lonely person, and mean something to them.

It turned out, however, that Thanatos was a shy little guy.

In the end, when I sidled up to him, the man I was being delivered to greeted me by trying to run away out of politeness.

That was when I knew: He didn’t want to be here, either.

Something else was going on, but I had no idea what. Something that my life depended on figuring out.
If I could take Donatello’s words at face value—which I doubted, at this point—then what was I supposed to do if this guy wanted nothing to do with me? Report that it was a flub and get shipped off to someone else another night?

On the other hand, if he really was here to kill me and he was being polite as a front (or maybe a weird killer’s quirk), what was I supposed to do to get away from him? It wasn’t like I could just run. There were a hundred people between here and the door that would stop me—and could.

But there was another issue, too. There was a small chance that Donatello actually wasn’t expecting *anything* to happen, and that was the whole point. He wanted me to be scared, think the worst of him—and see what I would do.

Then, and only then, would he decide on the real punishment—which would be far, far worse than a hard night and quick death.

For instance, he may have hired this man to pretend to be on the national police’s side, or a rival syndicate’s, who would offer me an out. And if I’d take it, or spill secrets on him during the course of the negotiation for assistance, Donatello would use it as proof that I was disloyal once the ploy was uncovered. This was doubly possible, if Miranda had a hand in all this.

Or, he could honestly just be a nice, middle-of-the-road syndicate guy who got wrapped up in something tough on his way to a promotion.

There was no way to know which one it was.

I sighed inwardly and glanced at the man beside me. It had been about an hour since I’d sidled up to him, and now he was leaning on one hand like I was—a little bit dapper of a lean if I was honest—watching me out of the corner of his dark eyes. But when he caught me looking, he looked away politely, up at the sky...and then he smiled a little, sheepish.

Well, he sure as hell wasn’t leaving me alone, but at least we were getting *somewhere*.

I sighed and gazed out at the water, my chin in my gloved palm. The lagoon spread out before us, black against the sparkling sea of stars and city lights. The smell of salt crested up as well, and the music behind us played a long, slow ballad filled with strings and woodwinds.

But all of that felt far away. They were simply distant storms of life like those that were swept away into patches of color in Van Gogh’s Starry Night. However, unlike that painting’s dark hillside view, warm golden light wrapped around us from behind, fading away into the obsidian air that sat before us. Shadows of blue were left in the in-between space, as if constantly fighting for dominance on the ornate stonework that held up the balcony.

Meanwhile, two drinks sat in two different hands side-by-side, as this foreigner and I leaned, elbow to elbow, against the stone railing. We’d been talking about everything and nothing for over an hour, as we watched that midnight vista.

“A show of loyalty.”

*He asks me for that, despite the fact that he’s clearly siding with someone else?*

He had finally, finally decided to give me up. And for what?

*Her.* Miranda di Medici, the one from whence his status came.

I knew he loved her. But I thought, over the years, he’d finally managed to hear me about what *her*
love for him really amounted to. Thought I’d finally made some breakthroughs in his mind about why he felt safe with her, but needed me.

He was a fool. But a fool I had to let go, if that was his answer.

That didn’t make it any easier on me, though.

And yet...

The sadness in my chest turned into a ball of bitter, fiery anger.

He’d had the gall to lie about it:

“She doesn’t know.”

I could sense it in his voice. He was lying. She’d ordered him to do it, I’d bet anything. After all I’d done for him, he still didn’t have the balls to disobey her.

And now he was throwing me to the wolves for it.

Which brought me to, once again, glance at the man beside me. He wasn’t very tall, but he had proportions that made him seem like it. He looked good in that three-piece suit, but something about it just didn’t seem to fit him. Like the personality in his posture didn’t quite fit the occasion.

Maybe that was it: It was a stiff, wedding-like tuxedo, where the lapels went all the way to the navel, and were a slightly different color and material than the rest, so they shone a bit. But the way he was carrying himself felt like a guy who was at the edge of a yacht, leaning on his elbow and watching the sea for adventure.

*What a weird guy.*

And yet, he was going to be the deliverance of that lie, whether it was from Donatello or Miranda.

But.

The pain on Donatello’s face. And the way he’d described this man: “One of Arsene’s guys,”—followed by a crinkle of the nose.

The way this guy was so suave on his own, and then so innocent and awkward every time I hit on him, despite his age and supposed syndicate rank....

He was uncomfortable. I would have thought that suggested it was Miranda’s doing from start to finish, and so the hesitance was because Donatello was around. But Arsene was not a friend of Miranda. At all. I wasn’t sure they even knew each other.

Which meant Donatello had picked this guy. I could hope that he’d ordered this man to help me, calling in a favor from his buddy Arsene. My companion was a smuggler, after all. Maybe he’d been paid to smuggle me out? That could be why he was so nervous with me hitting on him—because Donatello hadn’t actually given me up, and this guy wasn’t supposed to touch the merch.

But I couldn’t take the chance believing it, given the stakes if I was wrong. Donatello wasn’t exactly a good actor. He was just really good at obfuscation.

On the other hand, I had neither seen nor heard of this guy before, which meant Donatello probably didn’t know him well, either. And the way he’d scrunched his nose up at him.... He probably didn’t think much of him.
Furthermore, I knew for a fact that Donatello wouldn’t risk disobeying his wife and getting the family wrath thereby with someone new and untried.

So, simply put, he probably just didn’t like what he’d ordered this guy to do, forced or not.

But with the diamonds....

I fingered the little dangle teardrop on the bottom of the choker.

Donatello could be telling me, “Run Marti, while you can.”

He may not have ordered this guy to help me, but he may—just may—have thrown me a bone by making my keeper a weak one. He may have made his choice and decided he wasn’t disobeying Miranda’s directive, but he could still be letting me help myself, giving me an out.

His gentlemanly streak was warped, but it was still there nonetheless.

_Though wouldn’t he have told me as he was holding me, that that’s what he wanted? Whispered in my ear, “This is all I can do for you, make the most of it, good-bye”?_

Instead of the ominous, “I’m really, really sorry”? 

It still sent shivers down my spine, picturing that. I had never seen the man more wretched in all my years with him.

There was no way that could have been something other than the kiss of death. Right?

Maybe....I was just really trying to find a reason to believe that Donatello was still there for me.

I sighed. _That’s you, Marti. Always asking for something more. Always hanging on too long for the carrot called love._

I glanced over at the foreigner, blocking out the wind on my bare shoulder. His fine black suit sleeve nuzzled up against the bare parts of my arm. His dark hair was slicked back sharply, and he had a face that had seen some things, as told by the lines and the look in his eye. The way his shoulders were a little bit tense, and he never completely turned his back to the room.... He wasn’t a novice, that much I could tell.

I knew Arsene dealt in beautiful things of all varieties, including the living. This middle man of his was probably used to dealing with the “merchandise” and keeping it in line. Perhaps he just knew how to keep my guard down, and the real hell would be later.

That could, unfortunately, also be it. It could be simply me misreading this man’s coming horror.

Though...

_How do you know I’m better than the men in there?_ he had asked me.

_“I require a show of loyalty from you.”_

Maybe this guy was in the same boat. Arsene was in the middle of recreating his organization; maybe this guy was new to it, escaping or let go from whatever previous syndicate, and this was going to be his show of loyalty to both Arsene and Donatello.

In which case, there was something else at work, here. Something that was far more likely:
Donatello was trying to be nice to me, by making my reaper the closest person to himself that he could find. Meanwhile, this guy was just doing as he was told, just as I was.

Yes, that was probably it, I thought, as I gazed down at the dark water.

Donatello had just given me the diamonds, and the dress—the whole night—as his way of apologizing.

If nothing else, it was a way to keep me calm and unsuspecting. He himself probably hadn’t expected to get so emotional, and let the truth of the situation show through. He wanted me to be an unsuspecting lamb to the slaughter.

But because it wasn’t Donny’s style to break things, he hired someone else to do the deed, someone who was dressed in a three-piece black wedding tux.

And if it was indeed at Miranda’s directive, he’d gone out of his way to pick someone who was the closest approximation to our mutual fantasy that he could get.

This man wasn’t doing a horrible job of it, either.

But if that was indeed what was happening, he was never going to tell me, no matter how much he professed to care.

I glanced over at him surreptitiously once again, using my glass as a shield.

For the last little while, we had stood on the balcony, watching the stars ripple over the water while the band played classical music behind us. In that time, I could believe that everything was all right.

We talked about music and history and the town; about travel and our dreams. And all the while, he sheltered me from the wind.

It was almost like...the person Donatello was supposed to be. The person my husbands were supposed to be, standing next to me.

I smiled a bit, at that.

I had dreamed of things like this, as a child. Cinderella at the ball, watching the stars with someone sweet.

It was a nice thing for Donny to leave me with, I supposed. He was weird like that. He was nice to people, even as he hurt them. Perhaps because he was hurting them.

And it was me who’d messed up to cause this. I’d brought this upon myself. First it was Giuseppe, but now I had no one but myself to blame.

You didn’t sell out prince charming and expect your pumpkin carriage not to be smashed by his palace guards.

It was as I was thinking this, staring down at the dark, inexorable water, that the man beside me shifted after being silent for a time. “Mm. I’m getting low on drinks, and yours has been empty for a while. Want me to get you anything?”

I looked at the glasses—and his hand as he clasped the rim of my glass, which I was holding at the
stem. It was a wide, thick hand, weather-beaten and worn. No hairs on the back, but it was still nicely masculine.

I tried not to think about how many people that hand had killed, and how.

“No, I’m fine,” I whispered, putting my free hand over his. I guided his hand to slide down the glass’s stem and onto the railing, where it settled there with mine. “Just stay with me.”

I wouldn’t be surprised if he was trying to get me drunk. But I wouldn’t go that easily. I wasn’t a quitter; I wouldn’t be a coward about my fate. I wanted to meet it squarely, and remembered as a woman with grace.

He looked at our hands, then at me, unsure. “Oh, I...”

The cool wind picked up again, swirling up and consuming the balcony. I snuggled a little closer into him, but this time, he didn’t leave. He stayed sturdy against my weight, and in fact, wrapped an arm around my shoulders welcomingly, after a moment.

He’d loosened up a lot since I’d first come out here. He’d gotten a bit suave, even, when he realized I wasn’t bait for an instant broken nose (always an issue, you learn, being somebody’s mistress). I didn’t want to get him too excited either, but for a while, I could pretend like everything was all right, if I just made sure nobody moved.

If I just made him think I was vulnerable and worth loving, protecting, I had hope that I could get out of this.

I had done it before. I could do it again. I’d just never had to do it so quickly with someone I didn’t know.

But to convince someone that I was worth double-crossing the Medicis... That was a tall order indeed. One that could probably only be accomplished with someone who had a death wish, or a foreign shore to run to.

When my hair swirled up between us a moment later and tangled in his clothes, I snuck a look at him as I carefully extricated it with a forced laugh and an apology.

“Oh no, it’s fine,” he apologized back, touching at my fingers as they worked. “It’s an honor to get tangled up in a beautiful woman’s hair.”

His hand held my satin-slick fingers for a moment, bleeding warmth into them.

“What?” I laughed, confused, as I pulled my hands away. I turned aside, trying to hide the hope that crept on my face.

But he was looking at me, when I checked him. Our eyes caught and he smiled at me the tiniest bit, soft brown eyes and all.

“What, you’ve never heard that one?” he asked, smile turning into a smirk. He leaned in a little closer, almost brushing my neck with his nose.

Blushing, I stepped back and quickly returned to picking at my errant strands of hair, staring anywhere but him.

Why does he make me act like I’m fourteen?!
I told myself the sudden flush of warmth in me was just from his body heat; that the nervous smile that broke free of me as he gave me his own was from adrenaline.

It was just a moment of peace, in the midst of a battle. He was not my white knight; he was the black one, about to abduct me away.

And yet, I couldn’t help but be charmed by it, a tiny bit.

I took a deep breath and licked my lips.

“What’s your name anyway, handsome? If I’m allowed to ask....”

He shrugged lightly, even though a smile tweaked at one side of his lips. “It’s Ichirou. Arakawa.”

I tilted my head, digesting it. “Japanese?”

He nodded, and that smile grew a little more. “How do you know?”

I shifted my head toward the room. “Donatello’s art collection.”

“Ah.” He nodded, and looked over his shoulder into the ballroom, still full of regal people and fifty-thousand-dollar dresses. He must have gotten a good look at him from his angle though, because he kept his gaze on one place for a fair number of seconds. Finally, his eyes narrowed slightly before he turned back to the water and his drink. “He’s an interesting fellow, isn’t he. Very...educated.”

I chuckled awkwardly at the turn of phrase. “Yes, he is that.”

“What do you think of him?”

I checked back at my companion’s face, but he was leaned over on his elbow, his head tilted slightly. He really was just curious, as far as I could tell from his tone and posture.

“You don’t know him?” I asked, doing my best to seem “only curious” back.

He shook his head. “Only met him tonight.” He swirled the drink, then took a sip. “Seems a nice guy, minus a couple things. Is a longtime friend of the Boss, though, so I guess I shouldn’t really be surprised.”

That...was interesting. “How do you mean?”

“Arsene, he’s...how should I put it.” He considered the glinting red, and held it up to the moonlight, as if his answers somehow lie in its reflection. “Is a fairly reasonable guy, until he’s got a problem to solve. Then he’s rather...extreme, about things. He strikes hard and fast, with an aim to obliterate. But your guy...seems kind of the opposite.”

I suddenly couldn’t breathe, as I stared at the ground. But I did my best, and tipped my head back at the stars to clear my head. It helped, a little bit.

“So what do you think of him?” Arakawa pressed softly. He didn’t use the moment of weakness to touch me; instead, when I checked, I found he wasn’t looking at me at all. He was gazing at his glass.

If he was testing me, he wasn’t doing it the usual way. “I think...he needs some help,” I managed finally.
The man’s dark eyes picked then to gaze at me shrewdly, and I quickly looked down, fiddling with my purse. Just being able to finger the outline of the weapon there was comforting. I didn’t know how to fight much, but if I could get one good lucky shot in when no one was looking....

“And you?” he asked.

I wasn’t expecting that. But I should have. This noose was tightening in a way I didn’t like, as was my chest.

“I could use all the help I can get,” I laughed sickly, forcing a chuckle and refusing to look at him. I hadn’t thought before I’d said it, before it’d escaped, and now I wanted to flee from the admission itself. I pulled at the railing, anxiously. “Say. You got nickname?” I hurriedly deflected.

He glanced at me, slightly unsure, but I smiled at him nervously. It wasn’t a pretty look; I wasn’t quite able to control it.

But the lipstick must have done its trick, because he shrugged with an open palm, held over the water. “People’ve been calling me ‘Ark,’ lately.”

“Ark...” I repeated, the one to frown this time. “A smuggler named Ark.”

His response was to shrug easily and smile. “The gods are mysterious in their ways.”

He was debonair at times, despite it all, this reaper of mine.

This Arakawa wasn’t very tall for a man, but a head taller than me and then some. He had attractively dark hair and eyes, and while his frame wasn’t lean, it wasn’t thick, either. He was just wide enough overall to be a proper wind block, which I appreciated. His arms seemed strong under his sharp suit’s jacket, where I leaned against him. His cologne was a nice scent too, not too strong but pleasantly crisp and masculine.

He also had some crazy pretty eyelashes, in a face that could otherwise be called completely normal, an almost nondescript sort of weatherbeaten handsome, even. Maybe a little militaristic? Those long eyelashes were nice to look at though, and this time, he caught me doing it—yet again.

Unlike last time, though, he decided to say something about it, rather than just look away.

“Wh...what are you looking at, so intently?” he asked me, his voice just nicely deep.

“Twenty years ago, maybe, and those eyes could have swept me away....”

“Er...nothing.” I muttered behind my glass, quickly turning away, back out to the water, feeling a blush at my cheeks. I curled the errant hair behind my ear. “You just have...” I glanced at him, the water, and then back a couple times, and finally just bit the bullet and sighed. What did I have left to lose? Perhaps if I was romantic enough, Venus would take pity and send Cupid to spare me.

“No, no. It’s fine?” My companion chuckled a bit, as he rested his chin in his hand. He glanced at the waiter as she went by, then back at me, with an amused smirk.
Luckily, one of the wait staff came by at that moment too, and I quickly switched out my wine glass for another one, using him as an excuse to look anywhere but the man beside me. I couldn’t take much more of those eyes looking like that. There were a couple of other groups of people on the balcony now, but it was a big terrace space, so there was enough room between us to not overhear each other, if we were quiet.

The water sloshed underneath us, and I stole a glance back at him. He was smiling, and his eyes were alight; he was turned at just the right angle for the one I could see to catch the golden rays from the room. The light sat there, inset in the corner of his eye, like glittering stars.

It was captivating, a spirit that free and strong.

Was this what Ariadne saw in Theseus, when he came to Minos’s welcome banquet? When she knew she was doomed to eternity there, and he was about to become just another young life sacrificed to the mountain of dead?

“Yours are very pretty too,” he said, tipping his glass toward me graciously.

...Was this how Ariadne felt, when he said he was going to save all of his tributes, and take her away with him while he was at it?

I stared straight at the ground. My face was so hot I might faint. My heart was hammering in my chest, too, and I felt like I couldn’t breathe, even though I was taking rapid breaths.

“That’s...that’s nice of you to say,” I said, squeaking.

“It’s also true,” he said, humming to himself and turning around. He rested his forearms on the railing, his back to the stone, before lazily tilting his head back at the stars. “I’ve never seen a woman with orange eye lashes. It’s lovely.”

If I said anything, I would only squeak like a child. *My plan...! Oh, say something or he’ll get mad....*

I looked up to speak to him, but all that came out was a stare at his profile. His throat looked very nice, in the light.

He glanced over at me, smiled shyly, and took a sip of wine.

And just like that, he let my silence go.

Donatello rarely let my silences go. He was a man that demanded answers, loud and clear.

Arakawa knew I was looking at him, of course, but he seemed to like that fact, even if I didn’t say anything.

“You know,” he began anew, voice refreshingly deep and cool, “Most men in Japan are like that.”

“R-really?” I asked, surprised at both the content and the shift in conversation.

I found myself thinking of Donatello’s lashes, but I’d never once fixated on them, so he must not have had anything to write home about. It was the color of his eyes, really, that caught people instead; in the right light, the grey almost gleamed silver against his strong, dark brows. It was a wonderful thing to look at, lying in bed next to him in the white light of the morning....

I sighed again, but my companion didn’t notice; he had turned around again and was gazing at the
water, a wistful smile on his face.

“Yeah. It’s well known there, culturally speaking, that women have short eyelashes and men have long ones.”

My companion smiled, just on one side, and made a motion with his thumb and forefinger near his eyes, illustrating the concept. “The women are all very jealous, now that Westerners have told them it’s a beauty thing.”

“How strange. Yeah...women are expected to be the ones with them, over here.” I followed his lead, and put my elbows on the railing too, swishing my hips a little bit.

Though—I probably shouldn’t be doing that too much, in view of the other people. Donatello would get upset if I looked like I actually liked this guy.

Though...maybe that would help? Cause a scene, escape out the back...?

Except I couldn’t very well run in this dress. *Dammit.* Donatello had thought this through.

I doubt I could pull a Lady Godiva, either, not that Miranda would mind.

“Th-though I think it looks very nice on you,” I stammered, trying to cover up the thought, standing up ramrod straight all of a sudden. To disguise the motion, I pulled back on the railing, leaning my heels against the base. It was a very unlady-like thing, much more from my old teenage days when I was regularly swinging from tree branches and hanging off of people’s roofs just for something to do.

Those had been fun dares to put to the boys, though it did end up “volunteering” us as the village roofer’s extra hands, whenever it needed to be done.

It also ended in a couple broken arms on those boys, from time to time. Come to think of it, one of them had had nice eyes too, hadn’t he....

“It’s unusual here,” I continued on, smiling at the memories. “But...now I think I know why all the guys like it.”

I grinned at him, and after a second of staring back, he blushed and looked away awkwardly.

“Well, that’s...” he muttered.

“It’s okay, you know,” I said mousily, chasing after him. “To accept a compliment from a pretty lady.”

“More than pretty,” came the gruff reply, hidden over his shoulder.

I blinked, that funny little tingling of excitement swelling in my chest again. “Hee hee.”

Giggling.

I was giggling.

God, I hadn’t done that in...decades.

I quickly turned away, putting my face in my hand. *Way to be attractive Anna, act like you’re a child. That’ll get the attention of the forty-year-old guy in exactly the ways you want.*
Though, admittedly, because he was a different race from me and the low lights besides, it was hard to tell what age he was. Given all that, he probably appeared younger than he was; he was thirty-something to the eye, but probably forty-something in reality, given his mannerisms—though he wasn’t too deeply into them, I suspected. It was...a pleasing age, given that I was in my late thirties.

Despite his age, though, he flickered back and forth between being hard to read and very easy to read, depending on what we were talking about. Anything about work, and he was all shuttered and gruff edges, hard for me to read even after all these years of dealing with Donatello’s associates; yet, anything about his personal life, and he was fairly free, even showing genuine excitement about his hobbies and interests; but anything romantic, and he just froze right up.

It was an odd combination, but oddly endearing, too.

It wasn’t like Donatello, who was occasionally boisterous when he let his guard down and got excited, but who was always, always smooth, because he trained himself that way—even if he was threatening someone. It wasn’t like Giuseppe, either, who had been touchy and quick to anger, and never able to control his emotions, no matter what they were. It was more like my first husband, Ricardo, who had been a kind man, but a troubled one.

When I thought about it, both of my husbands were brittle, but in different ways. And I had never been enough to comfort them, though I’d tried.

But this man.... He tripped up sometimes, but he rolled and sprung right back up. I wasn’t sure if this was what being flexible looked like, but he seemed a bit stronger, than they all did.

It was almost like...men I’d dreamed of, a long, long time ago.

Steadfast, intelligent, and thoughtful. That was all I had ever wanted, really. With maybe a side of suave for some fun.

If only I could get the devotion from him too, then I’d be all set.

When I looked back, he was looking at me. Or more accurately, looking me over. His chin was still in his curled hand, loosely, his head tilted casually and short hair blowing in the gentle wind. He was smiling, and his gaze had turned into a mischievous sort of bedroom eyes.

“You want to get out of here?” he asked after a minute, once his eyes had caught mine.

My heartbeat fluttered at the idea—until I heard the long, low toll of the waves.

I looked below us. At the void of water there, heavy and hungry as it waited.

And beyond it—the lights of Maghera, waiting inexorably.

“What’s the something more you wish for?”

The golden glow of the party stood behind us, full of happy people and their conversations. Donatello waited there, and I’d have to go through all of them to get this journey started, whether it was to be a beginning or an end.

But on the far shore beyond the balcony, there were so many lights, twinkling in the distance. So many lives, that were getting to continue on, beyond tonight.

I wanted to be one of those lights. I really did. *But how?*
“If you don’t learn to trust people in the critical moments, you’ll never get out of the hole you’re in.”

Maybe I should take my own advice.

Maybe, I should believe in Donatello, one last time.

I wished we could have stayed there, in that warm, quiet place until the dawn, but I guessed nothing could last forever.

Especially nothing good for me.

It was time to accept it, my fate. After all these years, I had to stop hiding, and just admit that I had lost this game of getting what I wanted.

I looked at my foreign guide and his pretty, innocent eyes.

Though maybe, with him....there was still a chance. If I could just keep him happy, I might be able to convince him not to hurt me, or I could find a moment to slip away....

Maybe Venus would take pity on me, and let me give this man a ball of twine to navigate the maze we were both trapped in.

“...Yes.”

It was desperate word.

He set his hand over mine and nodded nonchalantly toward the exit, across the ballroom. “Then let’s go.”

I knew his words didn’t mean what I wanted them to, knew they couldn’t, but I followed my black angel anyway.
Adjacent (Ariadne in Black IV)

Chapter Summary

The sadness of the past and the present collide.

Chapter Notes

I found some really cool music that goes with this chapter: "CLANNAD, CLANNAD After story - Sad Soundtrack Collection". Look it up on Youtube under that name. xD; very pretty piano/etc music.

Yeah, this chapter is kind of all over the place (once again, the first scene should probably be in the last chapter), but hey, I tried. A separate story arc just decided to insert itself here, and I couldn't really tell it no, despite trying. ;D

Note #2 - Oh! I just noticed it's this fic's 6-month posting anniversary! Woo hoo. Glad to have you here on the journey all this time, readers. <3

He has a strong back, I couldn’t help but think. With the suit, his shoulders seemed remarkably broad from this angle. Maybe it was just the lights, but the bright dresses and glittering facade of the room blurring by him made his stride seem all the more determined.

I wouldn’t have expected that, from the man I’d seen out there on the balcony. All the shyness was gone, and the gruffness too; it was all steady now, steaming forward.

This guy’s changing....

I kept my head down, but a glance at Donatello across the room—in between the shoulders of other guests happily chatting and dancing—found him gazing at me coolly, furtively. There was someone talking to him, that he clearly wasn’t listening to.

We made eye contact through the crowd momentarily, but, cradling his drink as he was, he looked away sharply, sulking.

His wife, however, a tall women with wavy black hair, smiled and waved at me with gloved hands. It wasn’t a friendly smile, but it was certainly a pleased one.

I hurried on, heart in my throat, hoping Miranda didn’t notice the diamonds. The Asian man’s back and its steady presence were already gone, lost in the sea of swirling flowers.

The usher opened the door to let me out. Leaving the grand ballroom left one in just as grand a hallway, replete with red carpet and gilded pillars against the walls. The ceilings were twenty feet high, as were the renaissance paintings of angels, wars, and gods up and down the walls. In short, the place shone like the inside of a Fabrigé egg.
I looked around quickly. There were a few people milling about to take a break from the party, as well as black-suited wait staff standing about crisply. I found my companion hanging out next to the stairs, back against the wall and hand on the very top of the stairs’ railing.

When I came over, pulling up the train of my velvet dress to get there—it was going to make so much static on this carpet—I was hurrying so fast to get away from the Medicis that I forget who exactly it was I was running to.

“Ready to go?” he asked, half rhetorically, as I came near, breathing hard. It wasn’t because I had run. I just couldn’t breathe, when I thought about that look Donatello had given me, and Miranda’s too. All my heart could do was race.

But the reason...

The reason I couldn’t breathe wasn’t them, but this man before me. This man was the deliverance of the displeasure behind those looks, whatever it was going to be.

I wanted to run from him. But there was no where to go that they wouldn’t catch me. That it wouldn’t make a scene, and just make the punishment worse.

The foreigner in the fine black suit had turned to go down the stairs, but two steps down, he stopped, perhaps realizing I wasn’t following him.

“Anna?” he asked, looking back at me. He stayed like that, top half turned, hand on the worn brass railing. Everything around us shone, and he looked so plain in comparison. His blacks were simple, and held an average man’s handsomeness...

...Except in his pretty eyes, which reflected the myriad lights high above.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, concerned.

Honestly concerned. The worry etched into his forehead wasn’t just for show. Wasn’t just imitation from someone who didn’t know what emotion was. Wasn’t just trying to get me to come along to... to...

“Hey,” he said, snapping me out of my reverie. “I’m not going to pull a Gone With the Wind on you.”

“What?” I asked, bristling.

“I’m not going to get to the bottom of these stairs and then say I don’t give a damn.”

I blinked, surprised.

“You aren’t thinking of pulling a Cinderella on me, are you?” he continued, offering a small smile.

I bristled more at being found out, and threw my nose in the air. “What, turning into a pauper? Please!” Though that wasn’t very far from the truth. I held the pose though, even after the indignation turned into fear. It was a vain hope that he wouldn’t see through me—if he didn’t know the truth already.

In the end, underneath it all, I was still just a mountain girl from a tiny village with a net wealth less than an annual salary down here, and ready to run like hell back to my father’s cottage.

But the only thing there for me would be ritual sacrifice to the gods.
“No, like run away and leave me with a shoe you beat me over the head with,” the man replied, a little exasperated. “What, are you going to pull a Scarlet O’Hara on me?”

Scarlet O’Hara was the harpy to whom the line “Frankly my dear, I don’t give a damn” was given, in *Gone With the Wind*.

“Are you an O’Hara fan or something?” I groused. I crossed my arms and huffed at him, despite it all; I was too frazzled to think about the implications of giving him sass. All I could do was throw back what he was giving me, a little more harried each time.

“Ah, my favorite O’Hara was Maureen,” he quipped serenely, smiling. “Though I’m not sure anything beats Rita Hayworth.” His dreamy look was followed up with a wink.

Redheads. Famous sexy redheads.

Goddammit.

I narrowed my eyes at him, jaw tightening. “Are you an old Hollywood movie fan?” I grumbled, my hands on my hips despite it all.

He didn’t change position, but something in his eyes seemed a tiny bit more earnest, as his voice dropped to a whisper. “I’m just trying to show you that we can write our own ending to the night.”

I stared at him, that terrible hope welling up again—that Donatello may have been giving me an out. But it wasn’t enough to make me move; the heat in my face was only enough to make me root to the floor.

I wouldn’t cry here. I *wouldn’t*.

“But if you don’t want to come, I will go up there and carry you down these stairs,” he continued, which made my eyes flash in alarm. “It’s just...” He looked back for a second, pensively, and then continued, “your dress is very long, and that is a lot of stairs. It may be the most dangerous option.”

*The most...dangerous option.* Me, and my dress, when we were surrounded by mobsters. I looked at it, the pool of black on the floor studded with silver sparkles, and couldn’t help but laugh.

Honestly laugh.

“The hills are alive, with the sound of music~”

Oh. Oh no.

“With the songs they have sung, for a thousand years~”

He was *singing*.

I stared at him, unable, and unwilling, to hide the alarmed chagrin.

But he just continued: “Not that there’re hills, since we’re in Ven~ice~, but there are a thousand stairs, it’s true...~”

And it was true, all other things aside. It was at least five, maybe six flights of stairs into this ballroom. So many red-carped stairs stood before us that I couldn’t see the ground floor where they let off, because the ceiling sloped down with them.
“Your red hair fills my heart, with the sound of music.... My heart wants to sing, to e’rry strand it
sees...~”

I stared at the waiters for help. There were two of them nearby, standing along the wall and clearly
trying to take a break. One of them was giving me the “You’re on your own with this nonsense”
look, and the other was biting down a chuckle as he looked at my suitor. When the waiter glanced
at me and saw my displeasure, he puffed up awkwardly and looked away politely.

“My heart wants to beat like the wings of the birds, that rise from the lake to the trees... But there
are also no trees, because this is Venice....But I can’t think of anything that rhymes right now to
finish that liiine~”—He added this last part without changing the note.

“Please stop,” I said, flatly. Mortified.

He held out his hand, leaned forward, and smiled.

“I’m not stopping till you take my hand,” he whispered, finally not singing. He also winked, to go
along with this.

I rolled my eyes and stared at the ceiling, baleful.

But when I looked down, he was still holding out his hand to me.

Just like Donatello had done, that first night in the lab. Except this time, there was no dread
involved on his part. The dark secret was all mine.

The man turned his head a little when I didn’t say anything, clearly threatening another verse.

I narrowed my eyes and huffed at him, shaking my head.

I won’t enjoy this. I won’t.

His open mouth and began to sing again, this time bolder. He even put his hands to his chest as he
enunciated.

“My heart wants to fly...~ like a chime on a church in a breeze~”

“Oh my God,” I muttered, wincing, even as I thrust out my hand toward him. It took some effort,
more effort than I could have imagined, but I did it. Mostly just to get him to stop. I wished I could
have kicked him, but he was too far away, and it would have been too precarious, besides.

“Woo hoo!” he said, and ran up to meet me.

And then I was being lifted up.

“Wait, wait! What! No! Stop!” I shrieked, as a view of the stairs came at me. He’d pushed me back
a few paces into the hall, then bent down swiftly and, before I knew it, I was over his shoulder.

“Don’t squirm or I’ll drop you and we’ll both die!” he called.

I had a view of the two waiters, gawking like penguins, as the top of the stairs disappeared from my
view.

“To ‘sing’ through the night, like a louse who is learning to lay...”

Oh my god. This man. He had dirty lyrics to the song, too.
The stairs went by as he hummed along. But his arm...was strong around my waist. I wasn’t going to fall, at least.

I would not have been willing to suffer this indignity with someone weak carting me along. Especially since there were plenty of alarmed, mystified, and amused couples watching us along their own journey up or down the stairs.

Sigh.

“What’s the next line, Anna?”

“I don’t goddamned know!”

“Sure you do! I know you got that Rita Hayworth reference!”

“You are a terror and a louse!” I said, smacking him on the back with my purse. “Go back to France and take your stupid American movies with you!”

“Ah-ha-ha-hah! Maybe I’ll take you with me.”

My heart lodged in my throat. He made it down several more stairs before I shook the idea out of my head and the hope out of my heart.

Because, as I looked behind him, I couldn’t help but see a different view of gilded stairs like these, playing out in front of me: A view of people running and screaming, fighting for their lives to get away.

“That’d be like Titanic,” I moaned.

“Do you feel like you’re flying, then?” he replied, undeterred.

God, save me.

“I can sing that one too—”

“Don’t.”

He started humming the opening. To a Celine Dion song. An opening that was four minutes long.

“You do realize every cop in town is upstairs, right?” I snapped, hitting him with my purse again and kicking my feet just enough to cause him problems. We were getting close to the bottom of the stairs; I could survive this fall, but maybe he wouldn’t, especially if I landed on him. “I will! Have you! Arrested! For public! Indecency!” I shouted, as I continued to beat him.

He just laughed and laughed, especially when one of my shoes did, in fact, fly off. Good. I hoped it hit one of those inept wait staff. “How many of them do you think belong to the policemen’s choir?” he called, delighted. “Might be able to get a full chorus going, just for you!”

Now sans shoe, I sighed, and hung my head over his back, miserably. “Somebody, save me....”

“What do you think I’m doing, Red?”

Before I could respond to that, he hefted me up even higher on his shoulder, to which I yelped, and he pointed at a passing waiter. “You! Get that shoe and bring it to me.”

Said like a Matador after a winning fight. I sighed, closing my eyes in defeat. I must have just
imagined what he’d said, because this was certainly not my idea of being rescued.

But my chipper kidnapper went back to humming “My Heart Will Go On,” with a jaunt in his step. Once he hit the lobby floor, he twirled around and around, with me on his shoulder, his voice getting ever louder.

I screamed the whole time—until he abruptly stopped and I fell off his shoulder. With a screech, I went stiff and landed in his arms, bridal style.

I was so startled that I ended up staring up into his face, not a single thought in my head.

I almost expected to see Donatello up there holding me, it was that much of a scrabble for safety in my mind.

But of course, he was not there. It was just this nameless foreigner in a fancy black suit, to match my fancy black Cinderella dress.

“Oh...” I murmured, unsure.

He looked down at me, smiled a cheeky, movie-star smile, and then, hefting me up higher in his arms to another shriek of mine, started across the lobby. I was infinitely glad I couldn’t see anyone else, but it made me wonder if I should maybe be trying to scream for help.

But these were not my people. They never would be. No doubt they just thought something fun was happening.

In the end, this was Minos’s palace, and Ariadne could never escape it. At least not without tragedy ensuing.

Because Theseus, even after he rescued the princess, left her on a beach for his next adventure.

But Thanatos...he would stay with you forever, in a kind, gentle embrace.

I wasn’t sure which one I wanted. But, if I was honest with myself...it was rather comfortable, in this man’s arms.

As I nestled in against his chest, I gave myself over to fate, whatever it was to be. But still desiring a view, I tipped my head back. The amber lights and gilded columns far above passed behind my kidnapper’s head as he walked toward the lobby doors, the vista a distant, heavenly grandeur of golden hues.

But more importantly, every once in a while, his glittering brown eyes—and their long lashes—checked down at me, much closer to Earth.

“Everything’s going to be okay,” he whispered on one of those glances at me, cradling me closer. His tone was far different—far more serious—than it had ever been before. “I promise. Just stick with me, and I’ll get you through.”

As I stared blankly ahead, my memories kept painting themselves on the nondescript white subway tile. It was like a canvas drawn by the sound of the rain.
The hospital’s basement was cold and drafty, but at least the shower room was well lit. The water, too, was a warm embrace, though I couldn’t help but feel the weight of what sat above us. The situation that awaited, once this lingering warmth was through, would not be an easy battle to win.

Lupin’s surgery was being finished up, sans me, but he still had to get through the night. And all the nights after. If he came down with an infection—which he almost assuredly would, given that straw incident—there was a very high chance he would come down with a life-threatening fever, or need to have his leg amputated anyway from gangrene, a few days from now.

Not to mention, even if he did make it through all that, the rehab he’d need. That would require weeks of intense mental, spiritual, and physical determination, which he would definitely not have if he was kept here.

And then there was the political situation we were facing.

—“So what are you going to do?”

Zenigata smirked a little, somehow playful despite the shadows scratching across his face ominously. “Give them what they want.”

I frowned. “And that is...?”

“Lupin’s information. Just gotta do it in a way that keeps us all safe and him in my custody.”—

“Just.”

“Just” is always harder than it sounds.

I closed my eyes and sighed anew, finally giving in and pressing my forehead into the cool tile. The water ran down my back, a steady waterfall.

When I’d come out of the ER a few minutes ago, it’d been in advance of the surgeons. They were currently finishing up the surgery, which was going to take at least another hour, but they had announced that they no longer needed me. At least, what mediocre help I could give.

The weakness I’d shown in there flashed in front of my eyes, and I just sighed again, teeth gritted. “Shit.”

I came out of the OR smiling and happy. We’d brought Lupin back to life, and for a moment, caught up in the euphoria, I could forget all about what had caused it.

But when I stood before the boys, there was a problem.

Christof and Kyle looked up promptly, even standing like soldiers to hear the news. But Zenigata.... He was sitting in the chair still, hands between his knees, looking miserable. His phone was in his hands, and he was staring at it.

“What’s the news?” Christof asked, before I could say anything.

“Oh...um. Yes!” I clapped my hands together. “There’s good news. The surgeons are going to finish up the surgery in an hour or so, and then we can all get some well-deserved sleep.”

Christof smiled at this, relieved for all parties; Kyle nodded thoughtfully, ready for more; and Zeni....was silent and unmoved, lost in thought.
As I watched him, he shifted to put his phone in his pocket and then rubbed his hand over his mouth, coming to stare dully somewhere near Kyle’s knee.

“So he’ll live?” Christof prompted.

I nodded, taking my eyes from the Inspector reluctantly. “Yes. He’s not out of the woods yet, though—if he makes it through the next 48 hours without coming down with a fever or a bleed, then we can breathe.”

“And his leg?” Zenigata asked, voice grave and distant. He turned to us ever so slightly, and then, all of a sudden, flicked his eyes up to me.

They were bright, but far, far away emotionally.

“It’s...there,” I said, hesitantly, a bit shaken. “I made sure of that.” I blew my bangs out of my eyes.

Wasn’t easy, though.

“And his heart?” Zeni added.

I took a breath and held it, lips pursed. I stared at the ground, and nodded, toeing at the tile. “He went into cardiac arrest because of surgical complications, but he should be fine in the future, if he takes it easy for a while. The heart should be fine.”

Zenigata looked down again, nodding. He looked around a bit, nodding here and there, his mouth tightening and relaxing. It looked like he was lost in a forest of thoughts that held several thickets.

“As for the prognosis on his leg...,” I continued, turning to Christof and Kyle’s expectant faces, “I’m not sure what the usage is gonna be; you’ll have to ask the surgeons. Should be pretty good though, after a few months of recovery and some physical therapy. ‘S gonna hurt like a bitch when he wakes up though, and for a while after. I know you need to question him, Zeni, but he’s gonna be high on pain killers for a good while.”

“Shit,” Zenigata sighed, quietly. He put his face in his hands, and rested his elbows on his knees. It was clear he wasn’t really talking to me. But his hands were still stained an alarming amount of red.

I frowned at that—both him and his behavior—but just as I reached for his shoulder, I remembered all the times I’d done that to someone tense, and how bad it’d gone.

Maybe...it wasn’t a good time to touch him. I took a step back and left him be, and ended up staring at my hand.

My stupid, useless hand, that almost got someone killed.

“Maybe we should all grab a shower before long,” Christof suddenly announced, touching my elbow to get my attention. I startled a bit, but he smiled kindly in response, drawing his hand away. He nodded at Zenigata too after a bit, and whispered, “He seems to be having a problem with the blood.”

I stared at the Inspector, and then at myself. My hands were red too, and my shirt front was brown. As was the bottom half of my pant legs, from when Lupin had initially injured himself.

Oh. Huh. Yeah, that was grizzly enough to set somebody off.
I nodded at Christof. “Sure, that’s a good idea. Mind if I...uh...go first?”

The two standing men nodded and shrugged.

God, men could be so useful sometimes. Their propensity against drama—when you got a good one—made all the difference in the world, sometimes.

“Oh, good.” I turned to Zenigata...and sighed deeply.

He was just staring ahead, his mouth hidden behind steepled hands.

I looked at the others. They looked back at me, mystified.

“Hey, boss,” Kyle tried, the words a grunt more than anything.

Zениgata said nothing.

“...Inspector?” Christof offered, leaning around Kyle a bit.

He didn’t even blink.

“Hey, Zeni,” I began tentatively, in my best Soothing Social Worker voice, coming around to his side and crouching down. The chair arm was in between us, so I was confident I could dodge, should an attack come my way.

Admittedly, that was unlikely, but it still made me edgy, what with him and Lupin both going off on me tonight. Although, it wasn’t like Zenigata had ever done that before, outside of that moment in front of the OR doors a few hours ago. I knew he could be violent on a dime, like any man could, to protect something he loved. But he’d never turned it on me before.

That was still so strange, and I wanted to get to the bottom of it.... I was sure he would let me, when things calmed down, but until I heard the story, it was a little hard to breathe around him, especially when he was tense and acting strangely like this—even with the safety net of Christof only a few feet away.

I had every faith that Zenigata would tell me what was wrong, and apologize profusely, when he snapped out of it. But for the moment.... It looked like he was locked in his own head, and I had to get him out of it.

Normally, I’d just let him work it out—he’d probably be better once Lupin showed back up—but there was no guarantee of that. And we needed him, besides. He was the captain of the ship.

As First Mate, I could run the show, but it wasn’t a long-term solution. Especially when we had upcoming shoals to deal with that only he knew how to navigate.

“Hey,” I whispered, reaching a hand very slowly over his back. “We’ve got a while. Why not get cleaned up, so we can be presentable when Lupin sees us?”

Crouched down on my heels and safely behind his arm’s easy range, I rubbed his shoulders. It was an instinctual response on my part—physical touch—but he seemed to need it, so I bit the bullet and did it.

Bit the bullet and trusted him.

And anyway, I wanted there to be more important muscle memories in me, than the ones tied to fear.
After a moment, Christof and Kyle went back to sitting, watching us carefully for any need to intervene. Christof, in fact, gave me a questioning look to that effect.

I gave him a small smile of appreciation—and assurance—and went back to Zeni, rubbing his shoulder as I said his name. “Koichi...it’s time to go. Yeah?”

“Ah...ah, sure,” he said finally, after the second jostle. He shook his head in a way that seemed disoriented, but he quickly shook off the strange look he gave me because of it.

“About sleep,” Christof said as Zenigata and I stood. “I was thinking.... There’s four of us. Maybe...we can do three-hour shifts watching Lupin once he gets out of surgery, if you still need someone to guard him for procedure’s sake. That way, we can each get at least six hours of interrupted sleep, if not more. Whoever needs it most can get nine; I’m not picky.”

“That’s smart. Thank you.” I nodded at Christof, momentarily turning away to watch Zeni as he went a few paces down the hall. “Kyle, are you all right with that?”

He nodded succinctly. “You’re the one that’s been doing all the work; I’ve been sleeping out here. And he”—he nodded at Zenigata’s back—“could probably use some rest. I could take the first shift.”

I almost took it at face value—until I remembered what Zenigata had said about him. But with the doctors around...that would be perfectly fine, wouldn’t it? Insurance against an ambush? I could make sure the doctors knew....

And he didn’t really seem like a bad guy, anyway. I’d met bad guys, and fake bad guys, and wanna-be bad guys, and really bad guys, and he didn’t seem like any of those. He was just here because he had to be, but he wasn’t going to shirk his duties for it. In my book, that made him a good man, in fact.

“And you, Christof? How are you?”

He shrugged, and even though it caused him to yawn, he said, “I’m pretty good. On a second wind right now.”

“All right. Why don’t he and I take showers, maybe find some scrubs...” I muttered, looking down at myself. “Then you two can go too. After that, the first of you can start a shift. Kyle, since you’re pretty clean still, would you do the honors? And let us know when Lupin’s awake, okay?”

“Sure,” Kyle said, shrugging. He picked up his book and kicked back. “Poor guy needs a good watchman, after all this....”

“Oh, and, Marti?” Christof asked, before I could figure out what that meant.

“Yeah?” I asked, hurriedly checking back at Zenigata. He was already halfway down the hall, past the fire doors. Apparently he had just gone and kept walking.

“If you help dealing with him, let me know.” He motioned to the Inspector, his own shoulders pushing back.

It wasn’t help as in "his unusual state.” It was help as in “beat him to a pulp.”

I took a breath and sighed it out. “That won’t be necessary, but thank you.”

Christof’s lips pursed. “If you’re sure....”
“I’m sure,” I sighed, running my hand over my forehead. When I checked, Zenigata was already out of view. “Oh...And now I have to go catch him. Oh gosh....” I turned back to Christof, quickly, holding my hands out to placate him. “Just...take care of Lupin. I’ll be fine. That’s what I really need you to do. For him.” I nodded at Zenigata.

Christof’s eyes narrowed, but he eventually nodded. “Fine. For you.”

“Good. Thank you!” I gave him a quick smile and then hurried down the hall.

I felt guilty for brushing him off, and what’s more, for not having the chance to confess the things I’d done to endanger Lupin, but it seemed there were bigger issues on everyone’s minds.

Issues that were stacking like a house of cards.

When I got to the end of the hall, I found the stairway door swinging shut.

I hurried into the stairwell, only to see the very edge of the Inspector’s coat flip by out of view, one floor down. But it didn’t reappear on the next rung of stairs; instead, the heavy metal door to the floor below me swung open with a creak, and he disappeared inside.

I zipped down the stairs, feet more sliding than stepping, a long practiced technique from years of working in facilities where time was of the essence. I managed to catch the door just after it shut, and ripped it open again. But what opened before me was not another world of shadowed hallway—but that long hallway from earlier, when we’d first arrived. Nearly endless rectangles populated one wall all the way down the hall, a dizzying maze of symmetry and vanishing point lines.

But this time, it was daylight. I guess I’d forgotten, but it must have been nearly nine...ten...? AM by now.

Outside, it was still snowing, but everything was a bright shade of grey. I couldn’t see the coast from this angle—only the fields and the other buildings—but it was a desolate landscape, where everything was buried in silent white.

And down the hall, Zenigata had finally stopped.

He had his hands in his pockets and was simply staring at the wall with his head tipped back. White light was painted on his front, and behind him, his shadow stretched on the floor to look vaguely like wings.

I jogged up to him, stopping a few feet away. His gaze was sharp, eyes narrowed, but he didn’t acknowledge me in any way; I studied him for a second, and then turned to see what he was looking at so intently.

It was The Window. That big, stained-glass monstrosity that was covered in hastily-constructed safety bars.

It was a pretty thing, once upon a time, but in a creepy Victorian way. A massive rectangle, topped by a half-circle with radial framing, it had ironwork grating of black rose vines up the sides. Under the bars, that was. Bars that were more like pipes.

I waited, not sure what to say, and eventually, Zenigata spoke:

“Something about this window.”
He didn’t look at me; instead, his eyes narrowed even further, and he tipped his head.

“I remember...a window like this. But where...?”

I frowned, and he pursed his lips.

“Something about this window set him off. It’s the key to all of this, I just know it. But why...? And why can’t I remember it...?”

I made a sympathetic noise, and very lightly touched at his coat sleeve.

He sighed and, head hanging, pinched the bridge of his nose. “Ugh, I’m too tired to think right now. But I know it’s there...somewhere. But why can’t I—”

“Hey. Don’t push yourself too hard, okay?” I asked, interrupting his train of thought. “You just need to get some sleep. You saved a guy from a burning building tonight, after all....” He still had the trappings of dust on him—which was probably carcinogenic, now that I thought about it.

Gently, I pulled Zenigata’s arm away from his body. His hand appeared from out of the coat pocket, and I gripped it tightly, while holding onto his wrist with my other hand.

“It’ll be okay, you know. We’ll get through.”

I smiled up at him, weakly, and after a second, he looked down at me and smiled thinly too.

It was like a spell unwound. He gripped my hand and turned to me; his free hand, thick and warm, came down on my head and pulled me close to him. He set a kiss on my hair, and soon wrapped both arms around my shoulders, gently cradling me against his chest.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I haven’t been very good to you tonight, I have I.”

I closed my eyes and melted into him, arms wrapped snugly around his middle. “It’s okay. So long as I get you back.”

But when I lead him away from the window, hand in hand, he was already lost in thought again.

I turned to look over my shoulder. These stalls didn’t have curtains, so it was easy to see Zeni’s back, completely naked, as he took a shower across the way.

These weren’t coed shower facilities, but since there was no one else around to complain, I decided that it was safer to share than leave each of us to an entire locker room by ourselves, easy to get picked off without the other ever being the wiser. And, there was the consideration of being able to keep an eye on him.

Zenigata’s current state was surprisingly deteriorated. It was probably just exacerbated by being tired and hungry, but the shock was worrisome. And that look at his phone.... Someone had told him something he didn’t like. Maybe another threat?

I frowned, sympathetic and concerned.

I was still woozy and getting close to loopy, but that hour nap had helped. For now, I could manage, even if I didn’t have a lot of words to do it with.

But Zeni.... A quick inspection found that he wasn’t currently showering, at all. These booths had a
half-step down into the stall proper, and he was silently sitting on the edge of that, on a hand towel, staring at the wall with his arms crossed over his knees. The water wasn’t running.

I gave myself another moment of hot water, then quietly turned off the spigot. I didn’t bother to fetch my towel.

Within moments, I’d plodded over to the other side of room. I stood against the stall divider, my hand against the metal piping.

“Mind if I take this seat?” I asked him.

He didn’t respond. I couldn’t see his face from this angle, but I was pretty sure he didn’t even blink. He was tense and his head was upright though, so I knew he hadn’t fallen asleep. But it seemed he was lost in thought, yet again.

I frowned, and carefully sat down next to him. He wasn’t covered in red anymore, thanks to the soap I’d procured for us both from the supply closet down here. So he’d showered completely, at least.

He had also tried to get the blood out of his shirt it seemed, and while he’d gotten a bunch of it, it was still noticeably stained, since enough time had passed for it to completely dry in the intervening hours upstairs. The button-up, still wet, lay in the middle of the shower stall with the bar of soap on top, wrinkled, pink, and abandoned.

It seemed to be what he was staring at, though.

“He seems to be having a problem with the blood.”...

I sighed, leaving him for a moment to pick up the shirt and get it out of his view. I was half expecting him to be alarmed at that, but he didn’t move nor complain. I wrung out the garment, then tossed it over the edge of the stall to hang dry.

I quickly sat back down beside him, taking up my previous seat. He seemed to be staring at the drain now, though a little less robotically.

“Hey,” I whispered, to catch his attention. He blinked, but not much else happened.

Not saying a word, I wrapped my left arm around Zenigata’s shoulders, pressing as much of myself into his side as I could, trying to get the warmth of my body—and of physical contact in general—to bring him back to alertness. When it didn’t much help, I directed his face to my chest with a tender hand, and wrapped my right around his head, sheltering him against me.

“It’s going to be all right, you know,” I whispered into his skin, before setting my cheek on his head. “Just stick with me, and I’ll get you through.”

He sighed and slowly, wordlessly, his big arms wrapped around me.

When he began to weep softly, I just cradled him closer, whispering kindnesses all the while.
“Do you remember when we first met?” I asked gently, after a time. I’d been holding him for a while, his weight heavy but comforting.

In response, Zenigata, his eyes still distant, reached up and touched my forearm, softly hooking his fingers around my skin.

I set a kiss on his cheek to acknowledge the gesture, but he still didn’t say a word. “How you carried me out of that ballroom?” I continued, with a little bit of pep.

The hint of a smile ticked at one side of his mouth, and he began to lazily rub my forearm with his fingers, back and forth. “Yes,” he finally whispered, hoarse.

“You were so audacious, then.” I leaned my head against his, pulling him into me affectionately. He was warm, and even just the thought of touching him made me happy. I had to maneuver creatively to hold him with any effectiveness, but in the end, he wasn’t all that much taller than me; we fit together nicely, provided I could figure out where to loop my arms. “I think you need to be audacious again,” I whispered, rubbing his arm. “It always gets you out of tight spots.”

Zenigata’s response was to frown just as slightly as he had smiled and grow tense. He fell silent again, brooding about something.

I frowned too, but, not sure what else to do, just sighed and continued to hold him.

“We can’t stay here forever, you know,” I coaxed, trying a different tactic. “Christof will wonder where we went. He’ll get worried....”

Around us, the radiators hissed to life, the silent breathing of the building. Even though the air was warm, it didn’t fix the fact that the tiles weren’t. My back was getting cold, and so were my feet. I wouldn’t be able to stay like this much longer. Maybe he felt it too, and that was why, after a bit, he spoke again.

“Did you know...” Zenigata began, with a worrisome amount of distance to his voice, “That Lupin knew Donatello too?”

“He...did?”

A shiver shot through me, but I didn’t think Zenigata noticed. He simply nodded, eyes a million miles away as he stared toward the drain. He did grip my arm a little tighter, but I wasn’t sure if it was for his sake or mine.

The idea of Lupin associating with Donatello.... It wasn’t something I wanted to think about. I wanted Lupin to be my sweet and silly white collar criminal of little consequence that Zenigata cared about, whom I could support catching in a catch-and-release net. But the idea forced me to admit that there was a lot to the Frenchman that I didn’t know and that he was, yes, the eldest (and only) son of a notorious mob boss. There was no reason that he wouldn’t associate with Donatello.

Given that he and Lupin’s father were longtime friends, there was also no reason to assume he wouldn’t associate with Donatello and then live the same lifestyle as him, too.
Thoughts of Donatello flared to life with an image of all the things I’d had to do for him, with him, under his supervision. The idea of Lupin in that mix too, as just another of his mob associate friends, watching the play, having a go at it....

It made me shiver and want to hide.

I tried not to let it affect me anymore, but it had a habit of doing so, even if I didn’t want it to. Mostly when I’d sit alone at night and wonder if this was the year that Zenigata would stop responding to my texts, because he finally decided I was just too damaged of goods, and decided to go with someone easier. Or no one at all, because that in and of itself was easier than me and my hangups.

I shook my head and tried to get back into the moment. Six years ago.... Lupin must have been just a baby practically. But...

“That’s kind of a hard question to answer....”

Come to think of it, he was just Donatello’s type. Donatello’s male type.

And Lupin would have been new enough to the mob world that he wouldn’t really have had the room to turn him down....

“The police commissioner of this town...is related to Donatello,” Zenigata continued without emotion. “They’re second cousins. My boss just told me.” He motioned over to his phone, sitting on the bench that ran through the middle of the room.

“Oh...” I breathed, all the thoughts vanishing in a moment. That was what he had been brooding about earlier, his phone clutched between his hands.

Everything in me felt cold all of a sudden, where it didn’t feel numb, and I drew away without realizing it. Before I knew it, I’d curled up with my knees against my chest and my arms tight around my legs, chin on top of them.

The police commissioner of the town that I lived in...had not only a tie to that syndicate, but a blood tie?

“How did this happen?” I found myself mumbling, ready to claw at my hair.

But just as I reached my hands up to do so, Zenigata’s warm hand came down on my ankle, gripping it tightly. “Don’t worry about it,” he whispered. “That’s my job.”

“I...ah...” I looked up to find him, to seek out his face, but he wasn’t looking at me. He was looking at nothing still, but at least he’d moved.

That surprised me enough that it reset me, a little bit. That, and his voice, which was always reassuring enough that it dissipated the clouds of the past from my head, from my soul.

“The guy got the position recently,” he continued. “So don’t think it was some kind of placement mistake, or conspiracy. Just a coincidence, as far as the two of us are concerned....”

I swallowed hard and nodded, putting my hand on top of his. Still, this was bad news. For all of us. If I’d known that, I never would have worked here, moved here.

It was dangerous news too, and not just for my future in town. If the guy found out who the two of us were, or already knew, he might make us meet with “an unfortunate accident” just because of
the past—it wouldn’t need to have anything to do with the case. And Lupin would probably be a perfect scapegoat, since Zenigata was being forced to watch him.

If the authorities involved didn’t just outright murder Lupin too, while they were at it. He would be a sitting duck for weeks, now. The question was just which one would be first—him or us. I knew Zenigata would throw himself in front of a dozen bullets for me, and probably two dozen for Lupin, and I didn’t want that. Couldn’t let him do that.

“...But I don’t know that it’s a coincidence for Lupin,” the man continued, still monotone. “Or the fact that there’s an Interpol branch here.”

That...

The thought hit me so hard I actually blinked.

“What do you mean?” I asked through the shivers, hoping it wouldn’t be what I suspected.

Zeni’s head turned to me slightly, dark, damp hair catching the light in a halo as he did so. “Lupin’s crimes are never simple,” he whispered, tone dull and spirit far away. “I’m convinced he’s having such a severe reaction to this place because of something else that’s on his mind, a pressing issue that’s waiting just outside the gates. A person? His past? Something....” He shrugged, listless. “As for Interpol, I think you know that one.”

Zenigata glanced at me at the end of that surprisingly coherent string. His dark eyes were shockingly sharp, and it sent a little shiver through me.

Because I did know. The only weakness in the Medici organization six years ago was the fact that they hadn’t had an in with Interpol. They’d wanted to, but...getting a guy in a position where he could squeeze Interpol workers by virtue of being able to control justice in the town their families lived in would be just the Medici’s style. Maybe they were even hoping to get this commissioner into Interpol, with the experience he got in the police force.

“What’s his...name?” I asked, hollow.

“Carlotto Ciriatto. Different name, so I wasn’t on the lookout for it. Should have though, given that it’s France and that’s clearly Italian. Familiar to you at all?”

I shook my head and squeezed my eyes shut. “It’s not...a familiar name....”

At least, I didn’t think it was. I’d blocked out a lot of things from back then. A lot of faces. A lot of names. A lot of...touches, and their voices.

“Hey...breathe.” Zenigata watched me for a few moments longer before he huffed softly and turned in his seat toward me. He rubbed my shins gently, slowly, and eventually set one hand on my knee while he reached around my back to pull me against him with the other. Once there, he kissed the crown of my head like I’d done for him, and then tucked my head under his chin.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to bring it up,” he offered, reassuringly stroking my naked back.

“It’s...fine.” I said this, despite having my hands balled up at my chest. But he took the hand of his that wasn’t on my back and set it on mine, squeezing them.

“It’ll be okay,” he whispered. “I promise.”

“I’m supposed to be telling you that...,” I complained half-heartedly, trying to ignore the heat in my
cheeks, the fear that was threatening to swallow me because it apparently had nothing else to do but ratchet up to ten. Making up for lost time, perhaps.

“You can still tell it to me, I’ll definitely believe you,” he said, a little bit of playfulness creeping into his voice. “You’re a very trustworthy person.”

He smiled for me, briefly, and dipped his head to search out my eyes. But when all I looked was miserable, his smile fell. The Inspector sighed and turned away, resting his head on my knees—even though he hooked his arms around my legs.

It was a gesture to give me mental space, while keeping the distance closed. He knew what he was doing; he’d done it before, always been gracious enough to do it before, as long as it took. And sure enough, after a while, the fear welling up within me ebbed, and I reached out to rub his head.

He must have been feeling terrible, too. Especially if Lupin had something to do with all this. Whether Lupin had been the perpetrator of something with Donatello or a victim of it—or heaven forbid, both—Zenigata would be pissed about it, either at him or for him.

“It’s just...what are we gonna do about it?” I hedged, as I rested my palm on the man’s damp hair.

“I’m not sure, yet,” he admitted. He sounded miserable, and after a moment of deliberation, he sighed, rolling his head. He ended up looking up at me with his pretty brown eyes, his chin on my knees. “I can’t seem to stop hurting you, tonight. Getting you in dangerous situations, too. Getting everyone I love in them....”

He trailed off. But where the words were lost, something new came instead: His right hand reached up and came to cup my cheek. It was a tender but firm gesture, and I reciprocated by holding his boney knuckles, leaning into the touch. The size difference of our hands was stark, but it made me feel safer for it. I smiled a little, warmly, and for a bit, just admired the view.

He smiled back at me—or tried, at least; I knew such things didn’t come easy to him—and in the end, I placed my free hand on his head.

“Please don’t worry about it. I trust you. There was nothing that could have prevented all this. I was the one that responded to the call for workers. You just accepted the help.”

“Not...just that,” he said, stroking my cheek with his thumb as he frowned. “The other thing, too. In front of the OR....”

“Oh,” I said, hand curling reflexively. But making a concerted effort to keep in contact, I idly drew a finger over the back of his hand, repeatedly, in the deep groove between his knuckles. It might have tickled, but he didn’t complain. “It’ll be fine. I’ll get over it, really.”

Which didn’t sound very honest, especially given how I looked away, but it was true. There were more important things to think about, and I cared more about giving him another chance than crying about how it had made me feel. It was a chance I knew he’d live up to, so I wasn’t too worried about it. It made me a little jumpy, sure, but that was temporary. I was determined to overcome the irrational fear from the past using the trust I had built—that he had earned—from the present.

This answer didn’t seem to satisfy him, though. Frowning, Koichi took a breath and sat up, drawing my hands down while he cupped them between his own. He scooted in until we sat facing each other, legs crossed, knees touching, and our hands held together in the space between us.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, bowing his head over my hands.
I tried to extricate a hand to pat his shoulder, but he held onto them forcibly. So instead, I simply rolled my eyes a little and leaned in, setting a kiss atop his forehead.

His sweet brown eyes looked up through what would have been his bangs if he had them, sorrowful and vulnerable. I answered him with a knowing nod and a small, imperious smile. It seemed to be the Japanese thing to do, judging by the TV shows I’d watched.

He took a breath and nodded, and, after touching our hands to his forehead, sat up straight as if the air from that breath had inflated his whole body.

I drew my hands away to facilitate it, but even as he nodded several times to himself, he wouldn’t look at me. He just stared at his hands, which were now palm up and loose in his lap.

They weren’t bloody anymore, but they were still rough, troubled. I thought I might have seen them shaking a bit.

“I know you didn’t mean it,” I coaxed in a whisper, setting my hand on his.

But Zenigata still stared at the floor, distantly. Eventually, he closed his eyes, grimacing—but he didn’t pull away, at least.

“When I hit you, I—God, that sounds so awful.”

“It’s okay....” I soothed, clutching the top of his hand. It didn’t take him long to continue with a heavy sigh, and a defeated gesture with his free hand.

“I was...I wasn’t even there. I was just remembering him. The day I...found him.” His dark brows tipped down over his long lashes, which I could see in great detail from here—better than I’d seen in a long time—and he shook his head. “I didn’t even realize you were there, or I never would have done it. I’m sorry. Honestly.”

I sighed and, realizing my freely given forgiveness apparently wasn’t all he needed, decided to take another tack: to accept what apology he was offering, even if I didn’t want it. We didn’t have so tentative a relationship—and I wasn’t so petty—that I needed him to grovel for something that happened once, and was an accident besides.

At the time, the instinctual reticence that had awakened in the back of my mind at seeing him angry was nothing compared to the jolt that had raced through me at his arm connecting to me. But I knew, somewhere, that it wasn’t an I’m trying to do you harm strike, and what’s more, it wasn’t even really an aware strike. It was just a sideswipe, to push something annoying away. Even to unconsciously protect it perhaps, from getting into the fray.

I also knew that I wasn’t supposed to be afraid of a little physical altercation—I was a tough girl, and a trained professional. In that moment, he was an irate parent, or patient, and compartmentalizing it like that had helped somewhat. But the delivery of it—the person, the moment—just rattled my barriers loose a little bit, and exposed the crumbling levy.

And he’d tried to fix it, admittedly, in the moment, but I hadn’t let him. Dealing with accidents that set you off when you were someone with a past history of violence being perpetrated against you was best done immediately, before the PTSD fear response could fully set in and identify the incident as “oh God it’s happening again.”

But in that moment, I hadn’t been sure I could trust him to do that, and anyway, there had been someone’s life at stake. That had kept me from switching gears the way I normally would have. So I’d pulled rank and dealt with it the best I could—by walking away and occupying myself, my
senses, with something else, until the desire to freak out had passed.

Subsequently caring about Lupin had given me enough space and focus to breathe, and was what I was supposed to be doing, anyway, from a professional standpoint. All in all, I’d dodged the bullet. I wasn’t going to let myself dwell on it. The sooner I could forget it ever happened, the better.

After all, when you were as old as I was, you learned that there were the types of incidents you should remember, but there were also incidents you knew there was no point in remembering, and you’d be better off dismissing. Being an adult was having not only the foresight, but the opportunity, to do so.

For romantic partners, it was more important to discern if it was going to be a pattern, but I had known Koichi Zenigata for years, through thick and thin. He’d crossed a line, and he knew it. He was responsible enough to make it up to me, to correct himself without me needing to say anything. I didn’t need to see him suffer to soothe me; in fact, I needed and wanted the opposite, and so did the relationship.

Still, it seemed he was beating himself up over it; that forgiveness was something he needed to achieve on his own terms. It would be easy enough for me to deflect the extra, unnecessary bits of penance one more time, even if they were a bit trying.

“I forgive you,” I said sagely to his misery, trying extra hard to make it sound grave and displeased and warning.

This seemed to do the trick. Koichi sighed and, touching my arm, whispered, “Thank you, Anna.”

I hummed a little bit, leaning back against the cool stall barrier and looking at the pattern in the ceiling tiles. At least I could get this right.

For my trouble, a butterfly kiss set on my wrist.

“Has that ever happened before?” I asked, still looking at the ceiling.

“Ah?” he asked, sitting up a little. “No... At least, I don’t think so....”

I looked down at him, and it didn’t look like he was trying to lie. He sat up almost abruptly and waved his hand, voice raising in pitch to go with it. “And it’s not like I had some flashback episode; I was just so caught up in the moment, I forgot where I was. Really. I know it’s the topic of the day, but that’s not what was going on.”

His fingers had slid away from mine to make the gesture, and I missed them already. But that didn’t mean I would ignore what needed to be said.

“You did do a terrible job of keeping your cool, Inspector,” I said with my work voice, looking down my nose at him sternly.

He laughed a little at that, sheepishly, and rubbed his neck as he stared at the floor. At least he was being a little more animated. “Yes.... Yes, I did.”

“So cool your jets or I’m going to have to send you to the councilor.”

He looked up at me, his arm still raised, a question in his eyes.

I winked at him.
“Ah hah...I see,” he muttered.

“C’mere.”

I opened my arms to him where I sat, and with a sigh, he turned and leaned against me. He was heavy, but it was a familiar, comforting weight. Plus, he was decidedly warm, where all the tile and metal was making me cold.

“It’s good to have you back. I worry, when you disappear like that,” I whispered.

Where he lay, Zenigata stroked my side gently for a while in silence—until he leaned in for a short kiss. “I’m glad you’re here,” he said. “Really, really glad.”

It tasted sweet. When he drew back and I opened my eyes, I was able to smile, just a bit, as I held his elbow so that he wouldn’t lean back too far.

“I’m glad I’m here, too.” I drew a finger down his hairless pecs. They were still in good shape.

“I am really sorry,” he muttered. “It won’t happen again.”

“Shh.” I put a finger against his lips. “I know.”

“Will you be okay?” he asked when I pulled my finger away. He leaned in and stroked a few damp strands of red behind my ear. I closed my eyes, enjoying the touch. Each finger of his was a breath of warmth against me, and left a tingling trail.

“I’m not that weak,” I announced almost chipperly, crinkling my nose while somehow also smiling. I doubted it looked all that appealing, but he didn’t seem to mind, because when I looked at him again, his gentle brown eyes were watching me with a fond sort of musing.

“But I appreciate you caring for me anyway. I’ll be fine, so long as I get happy Zeni back.” I swirled a finger on his elbow. “Daedalus and Ariadne both had more than one adventure, after all.”

After a moment, I found him smiling just a bit, genuinely, in those dark eyes framed by their pretty lashes. It was him again—dependable him, and I almost breathed a sigh of relief at it. Maybe he was finally over the shock of everything, and he had come back up to the surface.

“Oh course,” he whispered. “You deserve someone who takes care of you.”

“So do you. So just make it up to me by taking care of yourself. It looks like you’ve maxed out.” I tapped him on the nose.

He hummed, smiling a little bit bigger. “That’s certainly true. I’m exhausted. I could just fall asleep right here.” He leaned on my chest, nuzzling in with overt zest, and then squeezed my love handles too. “Such a nice pillow.”

I giggled and squealed, kicking my legs at a flail. I was soon laughing so hard I couldn’t breathe, and he was struggling to hold on while I bucked.

After his big hands and scratchy stubble finally relented and several long breaths had gone by, I found my head and my heart much clearer. I gazed up at the ceiling in passing and found everything sharper, from my thoughts to the view of the lines between the tiles. And what’s more, no longer did they seem like a view of abject dread, but one of pleasure.

God, I hadn’t realized how much I’d needed that, until it was done. I put my hands against
Zenigata’s, where they held me, and sighed happily.

_Poor Christof, he’s going to think we fell in._

I flicked my gaze down to Koichi. He was watching me, just enjoying the view, a little smile on his face.

Well, Christof would just have to wait a little longer, and I’d explain it all to him later.

What mattered was that the house of cards had a functioning base again.

Chapter End Notes

Since it's been two weeks without a chapter, I'll give you two chapters!

A couple of you have asked how I'm doing. Things are going great! August and Sept went by in a blink because I was so busy, unfortunately, but I finally got over the last major hurdles for my start-up business's operations, and now I get to have fun running it. I'm going to the first fall book festivals in a week, actually. We may meet and never know~!

Hope you all are doing well too. x Enjoy the read--there's uncharted territory coming for Marti and Zeni.

It's been really fun so see how they balance interacting as coworkers vs lovers in the same space through the use of names, affectations, and roles. (Hope I'm pulling it off believably for all you!) <3
I was sitting in the waiting room with Kyle. Or at least, I think he’d said his name was Kyle.

“So...where ya from,” I said, leaning back. Chairs like this weren’t comfortable for anyone, and with me being 6’ 3”, they definitely were only comfortable for me when I was leaning in them with my head on the top of the back and my legs splayed out into the floor space. Which in this case, was a serious tripping hazard, seeing as how we were sitting in a hallway outside an OR. But the place was deserted, so I used every bit of that to my advantage.

“Here, by way of Texas.”

“Oh, that sounds interesting.”

“It’s not.”

“Really?”

The swarthy man with the light eyes looked at me finally: he turned his head and stared me down, like I was a very dumb pest. His jaw could cut rocks, his massive hands stood at the end of arms that were like firewood logs, and the deep circles under his eyes didn’t make him look much friendlier. All in all, he made the chair look like it was made of toothpicks.

That look of his probably frightened small children and anyone under 200 pounds, but I wasn’t worried.

...Much.

Still, my pride as an ice man was itching to come out, and I had to resist cracking my knuckles at him.

“You really like to talk, don’t you? Do you know what time it is?” he drawled, and then yawned at the end, which made him seem a smidgeon less aggressive.

I looked at my watch, shifting Zenigata’s laptop a little bit to do so. While he and Telli were in the showers and we were all waiting for Lupin to get out of surgery, I was holding onto it for him.

“Ten...thirty. In the morning, even!”

Kyle took a long breath that snorted in the middle of it, then just closed his eyes and tipped his head back with a groan. “Where are we even going to get lunch?”

“Hate to say it, but I think it’s a day for deer moss.”

“What in the fuck is deer moss.”

I turned to him, similarly to how he’d done to me. Only, to his accusatory glower, I was grinning.
“It’s moss that deer eat in the winter. They find it through the snow, in the Iberian countries. If you’re starving, you can eat it. Stew it, crisp it, put it in sandwiches…It’s very nutritious. You won’t die, all winter.”

“But you may want to shoot yourself, come spring,” Kyle muttered. He closed his eyes with a long sigh, to tell me exactly how he felt about that.

I watched him for a bit, then looked at Zenigata’s laptop, sliding my hand around the worn black plastic. He’d used this thing into the ground; there were dents and scratches in the casing, and even—when I popped open the lid—yup, the printed letters had worn off some of the keys, and the places you typically rested your hands had worn the color right off the plastic.

Guy sure could use a new one. This thing looked well over five years old.

“It got a password?” Kyle asked, leaning over me and raising an eyebrow.

“Yes, and I don’t know it,” I said, quickly closing it shut. “Not that I was trying to.”

“Then what were you looking at?”

I glanced down at him, and he raised a dark eyebrow at me, threatening to smirk.

“Wondering how poor he and his department is,” I said, throwing my nose in the air. “This thing’s way past its prime.”

“Screening him for Mom's sake?” Kyle asked, snickering and rolling over so that he was curled up in the chair and had a good view of me. It put his head right where my elbow would be, and while it was pleasant to think of smashing it, I also found it terribly uncomfortable to have half my personal space missing.

“Mom?” I asked, aghast. “A-And no, I am most certainly not!”

“Don’t tell me you like her too.” He waggled his sizeable eyebrows.

“N-no! They’re more like my mom and deadbeat dad! Just like you said! Jeez!”

Kyle eyed me up and down from where he reclined, and made a purring noise. “And that’s stopping you?”

“Auk!” I sputtered, and shifted away from him slightly.

He snickered, and used the chance to take over both armrests for his pillow. “Momma’s boy.”

My hands clenched into fists, but I avoided hitting him. I quickly scooted over so that there was a seat in between us, and eyed him anew, much like a hissing cat, I suspected.

But it seemed, even half in a fetal position as he was, that he wasn’t going to sleep. He was staring at nothing, even after letting out a long yawn.

“What a way to spend Christmas huh?” he said, after a bit.

I couldn’t argue with that, and eventually stopped trying, inside my own head. “…Yeah. I just hope I get to see Aimée before tonight.”

He shrugged. “The roads should be cleared off by then.”
“Let’s hope. And that this nuisance is out of my hands.” I nodded at the door.

“Right?” He asked, with a grunt. “What the hell happened, anyway? You all went in there, and then, bam, shouts and grunts and holy shit, a ton of blood.”

Oh...that was right. He hadn’t been in the room, had he? “I’m not sure really. Seemed to have some sort of psychotic breakdown and then started stabbing people with the thing in his leg.”

“Wait.” Kyle lifted up a bit, for the sole purpose of staring at me. “He ripped the thing out of his leg?”

I nodded.

“What the hell is wrong with him?” he asked, like it was a great assault on his own intelligence to hear about it. “I’m spending my Christmas protecting the dude from himself?”

“I guess?”

“Mama mia...,” he swore, and, shaking his head, settled back down. “Sure hope he’s worth it....”

I agreed with that, and nestled back down into my favorite position too. “He’s supposed to be a world-class thief, right? Doesn’t seem like much to me.”

“Flirtatious little bugger, though,” Kyle said, and then, a little grumpily, “I noticed I didn’t get hit on.”

“What, did you want to?” I tipped my head at him, but all I got was a view of his back. He barely fit in his chair setup, even curling up over three of them, when you included his legs.

“Well, no, but you know, everyone else got compliments. Kinda lonely in that circumstance.”

“I think he was properly intimidated by your arms,” I offered, pleasantly. “And the gun.”

“Everyone is,” he sighed. “I think they’re beautiful though. Well, my arms. Not so much the guns, though there is some artistry to them I suppose....”

I shook my head at that. I had nothing to offer about guns; I’d only used one once or twice. Carrying the one from earlier had been enough to put the fear of God in me about them. “Your build is impressive, I’ll give you that.”

“Thank you...Snowman.” He paused, then, almost grudgingly, admitted, “You’re not so bad, of course. Do you build? We could have a contest. Find some furniture to lift, or something.”

“Haha, oh God, no. I just go to the campus gym to stay fit a few times a week. I used to do hockey though, as you may have heard.”

A chuckle, and a movement of those massive shoulders, that were like boulders. “Flexible wrists, ey?”

“Ah...well...”

“Like knocking people up against walls, ey?” He turned back to me, a shit-eating grin on his face. I took a breath, reddened, and stared up at the ceiling, counting.

“Speaking of, what do you think the other two are doing?” he continued.
I paused at that, a little chill slipping through me. “What...do you mean?”

But it seemed I had nothing to worry about, because when he continued, it was the most trite thing in the world: “You really think they’re just showering?” He raised his eyebrows at me, smirking devilishly. “How long’s it been, anyway?—for them, and for us. Are you counting? They promised twenty minutes to get there and back and I suspect they’ll take that whooooole time for themselves....”

“Well, but—! Of...well...erm.” I should have been able to create a cohesive, coherent retort to that, but one didn’t materialize. I, after all, knew how much Telli missed him.

As for how much Zenigata missed her, I couldn’t really say, but—

“I thought so.” But rather than grinning, Kyle sighed and turned back around. “Bosses always have all the luck.”

“Well, I mean, there was a lot of blood,” I protested on Telli’s defense. And I guess Zenigata’s too, by proxy. “They’re probably just getting themselves back together, mentally.”

“That’s what they want you to think, Rook,” he said. “See, why else would they be going as a pair, except to have some alone time?”

I didn’t really have an answer to that. Buddy system, was what Telli had said, about fifteen minutes ago. Not that I wanted to see Kyle naked. But I wanted to see Zenigata naked less. And I wanted him to see me naked even less than that. Telli’s stories, including the occasional TMI daydream ones, would never be the same after that. I shuddered.

Still, I had no explanation for the need of said buddy system, except efficiency. To which the obvious question came: Why not have all four just go at once? Wouldn’t that be the most efficient?

“How long have they been together?” Kyle continued quietly, next to me.

“Ah?”

“They’re an item, right?” he asked.

“Well...kind of?”

“What do you mean, kind of? It one of those awful ‘open relationship’ things? Or like, ‘work wife’ things?” His voice was quickly rising into that mortally offended tone again.

“Um...from what I can tell,” I began, setting Zenigata’s laptop on the floor and lacing my fingers over my abs when I was finished settling back into the seat I was determined to make into a bed, “they’re both interested in each other, but he has a job that takes him pretty much anywhere but here, and Telli’s will take as much she’s willing to give, you know how it is. But the biggest issue is, really, that they just weren’t ready to get together. They were both coming off of bad situations with their families, so they didn’t really want to hop into new ones.”

“Hmm. And how long ago was that?”

“I dunno, I met her about four years ago, and it’s been going all that time.”

Never mind what she had said to Lupin tonight. She’d never, ever told me about that. She had never once said where she’d met this beau of hers, just “at my last job a few years ago.”
Never mind the fact, also, that I had never been able to figure out exactly what and where that job had been. Her records had been sealed about that.

But the people up high had told me to keep an eye on her anyway.

And yet she tells the thief, of all people? A man she’d supposedly never met before tonight?

It made me wonder if they weren’t friends, somehow.

The way Zenigata seemed to be with him, too....

It was all so strange...and so perfectly suspicious that it made my head go around in circles.

“Hey...” I said, turning to Kyle. He grunted at me. “What’s your take on the Inspector and the thief?”

He was silent for a long time, and then turned his head ever so slightly, nestling it into his oversized arm. “If you asked me just what I thought about Lupin, I’d say he was a weasely little card sharp with an ego the size of Dallas. But I hear he takes care of his people, and that’s where his power lies? But if it’s Zenigata—that’s his name, right?—and him, then I think it’s just an old guy who sees a little too much of himself in a young one. ‘S all.” He shrugged. “Everybody’s got a charity case. Always do. The trick is keeping that one from sinking your ship. Trust me, I’ve been there. Sank mine pretty good.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah.”

“Ohhhh?”

“You’re going to make me say it, aren’t you.”

I leaned forward with a smirk. “If you would.”

He sighed.

“That’s how you got to France, wasn’t it?” I asked.

“Bingo.”

“What was his name? ...Her?” I got the image of a pretty Latina in a colorful, frilly, traditional dress and a smile that was a little too friendly, like there always was in movies. Though maybe I should have been thinking of a Caucasian one, given what he was implying.

“Was a guy named Zeek,” he said, surprising me. “From outside a little town named Amarillo, when I was seventeen.”

I batted Koichi’s hands away and ushered him up from where he reclined against me. “As much as I would adore falling asleep on cold, wet tile with you, unfortunately, I think Christof would notice that,” I chuckled.
“I suppose,” he play-huffed, and helped me up. His hands were back to their strong, stable grip, and I almost sighed at it, I was so happy to feel it.

Together, we padded over to the towels and uniforms waiting for us on the benches in the middle of the room. I’d picked out some scrubs for us, to replace what we didn’t have. Zenigata normally had some extra shirts in his car, but it’d look strange with scrub pants, so we decided to go for a full set of each.

“Say...” he began, as he went for his towel and started scrubbing himself down. “Do you think there’s any chance Christof’s IA?”

Admittedly, there wasn’t much wet about either of us at this point, but the Japanese were one of those hyper-clean cultures, and he’d never lost that. It was rather nice, really, and I hastily mimicked him just to make it seem like I was doing something. But when what he’d said sank in, I stopped and turned to him, frowning. Internal affairs? “What makes you say that?”

And what makes you think I’m not?

Though maybe that was what he was asking.

“Just seems the type,” Zenigata shrugged, rubbing down his legs, and quickly starting to get dressed. Seemed he was used to having to do it fast.

But that didn’t mean there wasn’t plenty there for me to admire. His naked profile, fit even at almost fifty, and lacking any body hair at all—it was a pretty sweet deal for anyone who’d grown up with Italians, and I took my time digesting it.

It’d been a while since I’d seen him naked, but he hadn’t dropped the ball. His upper body was particularly buff, the way cops and people who had to do a lot of take-down martial arts were, but his legs were always particularly fit, too. It found myself admiring his calves, until I realized I was doing it and looked away.

Unfortunately, I looked away into his face—and he was watching me.

There sat that sharp, dark glitter in his eyes again that I both loved and hated because of how it made me shiver in excitement while also forcing me to admit that I’d been caught red-handed—and then he smiled, a debonair smirk. He went back to what he was working on without a word, looking highly pleased with himself.

Blustering would be a good explanation of what I did next. I grabbed up my clothes, but I couldn’t quite figure out which was what and which way it was supposed to go.... And then I realized I’d forgotten my bra entirely.

“Oh...well, you know, I’ve never thought about it,” I said, turning it around and around in my hands before finally throwing it aside for toweling the underside of my feet dry. That, at last, I could do until my brain—and body—went back to normal. Certain places were all warm and alert, all of a sudden, which was just...so impractical. Arg.

You know better than to look at me like that when we're at work, dammit.

“Would fire investigators even have that?” I demanded.

“Don’t see why not,” Koichi said. “Because it’s not the fire department he works for—it’s Interpol. And I don’t know if you know—I assume you do—but they’re all over the place, in Interpol; department doesn’t matter. In fact, the further the scatter of the shot, the better.”
That was...huh. I frowned at the towel in my hands, before tossing it at the bench. “Are you implying there’s some other reason he came along?”

Zenigata shrugged. “I’ve got a lot of passive-aggressive enemies who’d love to get a stab at me in a delicate situation like this, because I have a habit of only backing down at the last minute,” he said, mildly. “W... Wouldn’t be surprised if someone was trying to backstab me somehow, now that Lupin’s....” He paused, then shook his head, and his trousers too, quickly slipping them on. “What I’m more worried about is the Commissioner. I can’t be too careful about who he might have influence with, given the situation.”

“I think that’s all highly unlikely...Christof’s a good boy....” I blustered, a shade of anger touching my voice.

“Not that I think Christof would do anything against us purposefully,” Zenigata amended, holding up a hand placatingly. He looked at me, then turned his hand into a single finger pointing upward, his eyes following it toward the ceiling to illustrate the point. “But there’s the chance that someone he gets orders from would, and he won’t know what he’s really doing.”

“I mean, anything’s possible, but...” Done toweling off, I abandoned the fuzzy sheet and came over to him as he put on his shirt. I wrapped my arms over his tense shoulders, pressing up against him. I gave up on turning off the arousal, and the fluster, and simply laid against his back, enjoying the warmth, the scent, the feel of hard muscle, one leg of mine bent at the knee. I loved the feel of other people’s clothing pressed against my skin, and his shoulders were such a comforting place to put my head. “How would a local police commissioner be able to have his fingers in Interpol? Especially our division?”

He paused, then shook his head. “I guess you’re right...maybe I shouldn’t be concerned about it. Physical proximity isn’t everything....”

I kissed the nape of his bare neck and squeezed him tight. “You should be concerned. Concern keeps us alive. But you can trust him,” I whispered. “And if you can’t, trust me about him. I’ve known him a long time.”

Though I suppose...I never have actually seen his girlfriend....

But rather than a return kiss, when I came out of my thoughts, I realized that Zenigata was stock still again.

He’d gone to pick up his coat, presumably to throw it over his arm. But now he had it held in his hands, staring at the blood spots.

He was frozen up again, I realized. I sighed inwardly. It’s gonna be a long night. Lupin may not have been my responsibility for the next hour or two, but Zenigata certainly was proving to be.

I leaned over his arm and gave his bicep a rub. “Hey....”

He took a sudden breath and looked up, then a second later, shook his head. “Sorry... L-Let’s go.” Zenigata pulled away from me, and in just a second or two had grabbed his shoes and was at the door.

“Hey, wait—”

“What? Why?” he all but snapped.
But when he looked at me, he quickly found his answer.

I was still completely naked, standing there with my hands on my hips. Meanwhile, he was totally clothed, save for his shiny shoes, which he held in his hand.

“How does this keep happening?” he hissed after a moment, his brow crinkling together incredulously.

I grinned.

“Because I’m your favorite kind of trouble, remember?”

He sighed and, hanging his head low, rubbed his hand over his eyes. But underneath, I could see that he’d broken into a chagrined smile.

“That is true,” he admitted lightly, coming back up to point at me with a smirk, “And that is exactly why I’m going to stand guard over here.” His hand swung around to point at the door.

I chuckled and went for my clothes while he took up his post. It was something, at least.

*Maybe we can get through this maze yet.*

Kyle Martinez refused to tell me anything about Amarillo (which was not pronounced the way you would think it would be, even though it was actual Spanish). Instead, he’d daydreamed up at the sky for a while, and then shrugged and closed his eyes.

What a jerk.

Still, it wasn’t long after that Zenigata and Telli returned. They were walking together, hand in hand.

I raised my eyebrow at that as I sat up, but I barely caught it before they parted ways. Zenigata came over to me and picked up his old laptop from the empty seat beside me, bending down until his face was nearly hitting mine. I had to keep myself from staring at him while he did so, but I didn’t see any hickies on his neck. He also smelled like nothing but soap, but that didn’t mean much.

He glanced at me on the way back up, and I knew I’d been caught. He smiled a bit, but turned away without a word.

“Your turn,” Telli said suddenly from my other side, tapping me on the knee with her hand. It made me jump, and I stared at her for a second, bewildered.

But she was smiling, her hands on her hips.

*Holy shit, did they really....*

Well, whatever happened, it looked like they had made up, a bit. And he was functioning a little better.

“What?” she asked, tilting her head. “Fall asleep while we were gone?”
“I...uh...” I inspected her, then Zenigata, who was moving toward the OR window. They were both wearing scrubs, Telli’s hair already nearly dry. They were also both looser and happier than they had been before, though I wasn’t sure you could call the Inspector happy, exactly. Functioning and sly, at least. “Telli, you’re magic,” I whispered, nodding in Zenigata’s direction.

She looked at his back curiously, then shrugged. “Nah. That’s just the power of partnership.”

I eyed her, though I concealed it by looking perplexed. I wasn’t going to ask about it, certainly, but they had been gone a fairly long time.

And yet...

By the time he made it to the diving wall that shielded the OR window from the hallway, Zenigata’s back wasn’t loose, or triumphant, or sated.

As he stared at the wall looking at nothing, he was suddenly despondent again, the way old guys looked after I’d told them their only child had died.

Letting the question of fraternization slide, I looked at Telli, allowing the concern fully show on my face. “You figure out what’s up with him?” I whispered back.

He had seemed so stern before all this happened, I wasn’t even sure this kind of emotion was possible from him, and certainly not where we could see it. This couldn’t have been normal.

Telli gazed at the Inspector’s back, sighed, and then looked back at me, mouth tight. “He’s...going through some things. He keeps going in and out of shock, looks like.”

“O-oh...” There was no telling when that would stop, then. I’d suspected there was something setting him off, but if that was her diagnosis, then it was pretty serious.

“What do you need me to do?” I asked, wanting to be helpful. Personal feelings aside, this was a professional setting that needed its parts to keep moving properly.

“Nothing as of yet,” she said, sighing anew and blowing a curl out of her face. “I’m going to keep an eye on him, and patch us up in the mean time.” She raised her arm with a smile. “He still hasn’t taken care of his burns, as you mentioned. And I forgot to say, thank you again, for wrapping up my arm. And, of course, carrying Lupin. Your fast act saved his life.”

I nodded and got to my feet; Kyle didn’t bother—he was still trying to get himself awake enough to sit up. “Ah, sure,” I rushed to say, smiling more than a bit at the praise. “No problem. What else is this fantastic physique for?” I flexed my arm at her. She had always liked that.

Just as expected, Telli smiled at me and touched my elbow. She was so open with her emotions, it made me blush sometimes when her hair caught the light right, way down there—like now. “Thatta boy,” she encouraged, which didn’t help in the slightest.

We both turned to Zenigata then, but he was still leaned against the divider and staring at a blank wall like he wanted to look in on Lupin—the OR’s glass was behind it—but that he didn’t have the nerve to. I couldn’t blame him. When you didn’t know what the docs were doing, watching people in bloody stasis was so unnatural it could honestly be nightmare-inducing. Was almost guaranteed to be, actually.

As we were watching, as if he could feel our eyes on his back, the Inspector did a half turn and whispered, “How’s he doing?”
“Ah...fine, last I checked,” I replied, straightening a little reflexively, given that he was my boss for the night. *As much as you can call stabilization after massive trauma* fine, anyway. “That woman in charge, Nadine? Natalie...?”

“Nadia,” Zenigata corrected gently. He turned around fully, and I found myself startled—and impressed—by how sympathetic and understanding his eyes looked, from so close. They were brown, huh...? “Remember the nurses’ names, it will make a world of difference,” he added, teacherly.

“Nadia,” I nodded, swallowing down the lump in my throat that I wasn’t quite sure why it had appeared. “...Is barking people around pretty good, to great effect.”

On either side of me, Telli and Zenigata deflated in tandem, for some reason. “Good,” they both said, in two different languages.

I eyed them, but Telli just waved a hand—her good hand. “Go get clean, if you want. Then you can sleep. Well, everyone but you, I guess,” she said, apologetically. “Thanks again for the first shift, Christof.”

I’d gotten more sleep than the rest of them, marginally, since I’d been able to sleep during the CT scan and the surgery more than Kyle, who said he couldn’t sleep for more than half an hour at a time if it wasn’t in a bed or on a couch (though he was dead during that half hour, it seemed).

“No problem, once again.” I bowed slightly.

Three-hour shifts weren’t much for guard duty, all told, and it would give me some time to research stuff on my own laptop, along with fielding whatever inquiries might come in. Between the four of us, it would allow nine hours of sleep, or eight hours and a meal of some sort. That, I figured, would buy us twelve hours, and enough time for the roads to clear.

As much as I wanted to be home with Aimée, I was going to get good money for this, and there were drifts outside two stories high. We weren’t getting out of here, even if it wasn’t noon yet. But we should be able to by tonight, if all went well, and that was well enough. A good snuggle on Christmas Eve in front of the fireplace, with enough money for a ring come New Year’s....

That was what I wanted, and I was determined to get it. Even if, at the end of the day, all I was was an arson investigator watching a thief sleep—an utterly mismatched combination, if I’d ever seen one.

Telli touched my forearm, squeezing it with one of her tiny, hopeful smiles. “You saved a life today,” she whispered, before going off to Zenigata. She whispered to him too, and after another long moment of him looking toward the OR, she drew him down the hall. He didn’t give me a single word about any of what had transpired, but he nodded once as he left, an acknowledgment that said it all.

I suspected that he’d pull me aside and thank me properly eventually, which was when I might address some of my own concerns.

Still, he seemed pretty rattled right now, so it was good someone was capable of taking care of him. My advice hadn’t much helped, unfortunately, which always made me remember how damn young I was compared to my favorite colleagues.

But it was also the first time I’d met the man substantively, so it probably wasn’t all that odd that I couldn’t connect to him strongly. I’d seen him in the office a few times, when he’d come to pick up
Telli, but nothing more than that. Most of the time, she’d visit him, and she’d come back with some souvenir, a refreshed smile, and some new sadness, for having to be left behind again.

It was beyond annoying. She worked so damn hard for happiness, and I wasn’t sure he could ever give it to her. Wasn’t sure if either of them were even willing to ask themselves if he could. But then again, he had no reason to, did he? He got what he wanted without having to put in the effort day-to-day. And she felt too vulnerable to demand more. Telli was intense at work—she could shout down a dictator—but when it came to her personal life’s self-esteem, it was rock bottom.

We didn’t talk about the details much. After all these years, I’d managed to help her float her sense of self worth with friendship and sensitivity, but I could never get it to improve any. And I could only assume that was because she’d attached it to him, and he refused to appreciate the duty of that properly. I had hope, of course, for her sake, but....

“They’re a cute couple, aren’t they?” Kyle asked from his spot, his eyes lingering on them. He yawned again, and then held out a hand to me.

“What?” I asked to that hand, bristling.

“Up,” he said.

My shoulders sank. “Are you serious?”

“Very serious, cupcake. Help me get up.”

“Get yourself up, I’m getting married soon.”

“I heard it’s ‘engaged.’ You’re getting ahead of yourself.”

“Deal with your own head,” I huffed.

And just like that, I left the behemoth behind for the showers.

...Even though they were a cute couple.

Seeing their backs wobble down the hallway in matching dark blue scrubs, one leaning on the other, it was easy to imagine them growing old together. Easy to imagine that everything would work itself out, if they could just spend some time together.

I hoped Lupin wouldn’t get in the way of that, alive or dead.
Hypothesis

Chapter Summary

During the quiet, snowy waiting game, Marti and Zeni get back on the trail of Lupin’s past.

Chapter Notes

200,000 words! *_*

.........whyyyyyyyy.

Maybe I should just give this up, I thought, as I watched Marti’s hands wrap gauze around mine. Get a desk job, somewhere with her....

Her hands were careful as they worked around my burns, and not nearly as delicate as some. They had seen years of use, and yet were still such warm hands, willing to do anything for me. She’d jump in front of a bullet for me.

Here I was, fifty years old give or take, and once again I’d gotten us into a situation where she might feel a need to.

But I couldn’t let her do that.

Not only had I been burned last night—and then promptly ignored it for half a day—but I’d run through a collapsed building and nearly gotten trapped in a fire for it. All for my suspect, who was now almost dead because I’d let familiarity hold to much sway over procedure.

I’d also lead a multi-unit, inter-departmental raid, but that could be seen as a massive failure over all, because of the lost lives and the property damage. Not to mention the fact that the goods Lupin had stolen—whatever they were—had yet to be recovered. I wasn’t sure if he’d gotten them out of the place, but whether he had or had not, they were gone at this point and weren’t likely to be recovered.

Like he very well could be, soon. Like we all could be.

The thought filled me with a very strange feeling. It wasn’t grief, or fear, exactly. Not even anger. There was dread at first, sure, but following that wave was just...silence. Very heavy silence, filling every limb and synapse to a breaking point.

It wasn’t exactly resignation, but it was very close to it.

It was the same feeling I’d had when I’d first seen Satoru, lying there, before I decided to drag him out of the red sea.
And then after, too, it’d come over me when I’d been sitting on the front stairs of his apartment building. I had sat there in complete silence until dawn had broken, and people started needing the stairs.

After that, I’d wandered the streets, until well into the afternoon. I’d only come out of the stupor when I’d started feeling hungry—it was the only thing I had felt all day. And then I had sat over a bowl of food-truck ramen cried. Because I knew my brother would never do anything so simple and pleasurable as eat hearty soup on a cold night ever again.

And because it was Japan, no one had said a goddamned thing, the entire time.

But it wasn’t like they hadn’t seen.

This was the same as then—except Marti had seen. And she was talking. She would hold my hand, all the way back.

I shouldn’t need that, but I did.

I was aware vaguely aware that I wasn’t functioning properly, but for that very same reason, I wasn’t sure what to do about it. It was like a heavy curtain you couldn’t find the pull chord for was blocking my thoughts, and everything was just dark and quiet in the mean time. I knew something was wrong, knew everything in me was muted and wrong, but I couldn’t fix it—and couldn’t quite complain about it, either.

I could grope around, maybe rip that shroud open by the fabric, but it was easier to just accept the calm, and either sleep in the artificial darkness...or just go somewhere else, like a zombie.

Zombie. That’s what I was, at the moment. I’d been refreshed somewhat by the shower, but the place, and the warmth, in the end, had just propelled me down memory lane as we ascended the floors.

And even though Marti and I were now wearing clean, horror-less scrubs, once I had looked at my coat again, practically airbrushed with blood as it was, I’d fallen right back here, to this mental place.

Then Marti had shepherded me here. A little bit of Christof, a little bit of Kyle, and a lot of trying not to think about Lupin and Satoru while I should have been thinking about Marti and my job, and here I was.

It was like a hush had fallen over my heart—infected my soul—upon seeing Lupin bleed so dramatically. Seeing him fall off a building wasn’t nearly so bad as seeing the life erupt out of him right in front of me, apparently. It was pathetic, really. Cops weren’t supposed to be scared of blood.

But it wasn’t the blood that was the problem, I didn’t think. It was the loss.

I looked out the window. We were in an exam room, possibly the same one as before. The ghost of Lupin’s cheerful quips as he sat on the ancient relic of an exam bed, bright as a bobbing spring flower, spoke at my back; I had to turn away from the space to get my memories to stop playing in my ears, my eyes.

The old, dusty window that I occupied myself with instead showed a view of a snowy day outside, covering the expansive, flat ground of the base. Grey-white spread as far as the eye could see, while clumps of white drifted down evenly and steadily, until the distant land was nothing but an obscurity. But the few fence posts that poked out from the snow drifts gave off the air of a military
cemetery, all the snowy, forgotten little gravestones in a pristine row.

Maybe that view was why I said what I did, then, to Marti:

“What just happened?”

I hid my eyes behind my hands, gauze mittens and all, as I hissed the words out. I hoped that squeezing my eyes shut would make all the images that wouldn’t stop playing in front of them finally shut down. Those images quieted in the darkness, just enough to give me a tiny bit of space to think again. “Why would he do this to himself?”

Marti was standing in front of me while I sat, bandaging my hands. “I hoped you knew?” she replied with a haggard sigh. She set a hand on my shoulder, and rubbed it firmly.

I just shook my head, giving off a ragged moan to match hers. “I have never, ever seen him act like this. I don’t know what’s wrong....”

I felt so helpless, even though I was fifty goddamned years old and trying to care for someone so much younger. It should have been easier than this.

Then again, nothing had been easy with Satoru, either, and he’d been younger, too.

—Watching the paramedics take away a body, the telltale lumps under a white sheet, while everyone watched and wondered, but said absolutely nothing to me.—

I just...

I didn’t want that to happen again.

“What if he dies?”

I returned my hands to my lap and looked up to her helplessly. After gazing at me in surprise for a second, Marti’s green eyes turned fond, and she set a delicate hand on one of mine—the one she had been bandaging. I squeezed that hand tight and gazed into her eyes. Those eyes that were always so kind and loving toward me.

In the next moment, my vision darkened—Marti had wrapped her arms around my head, and pulled me into her chest.

She was warm, after the shower. And her grip was tight. Like a mother’s.

“Then he’s an idiot for ripping that thing out of his leg,” she whispered. “We’ll track down the mystery of what made him do it, and grieve. For him, and for us.”

I nodded into her chest, one hand coming up to rest against her soft hip. Grief....

Maybe that’s what I’d been doing, these last many years. Putting off grieving about Toshiko, about Satoru, about my wife, with the hope that there was still something I hadn’t screwed up about Marti and Lupin.

I thought I’d moved on from all of those events, but maybe, given this, I hadn’t. At all.

“What’ll I do without him?” I asked.

The thought popped out of my mouth of its own accord, and I wondered at it. It wasn’t like, What will I spend all my time doing?; there were other cases, other jobs, other people. There was Marti.
But I didn’t chase him because of the job. On paper, we were evenly matched foes, and I was
needed to outsmart him; needed because of my expertise on the subject. And while that was
fulfilling, even thrilling, that wasn’t the reason I did it, at the end of the day, to the exclusion of
everything else.

I just wanted to keep another tragedy from happening.

“What will I do if I fail again?”

Honestly, I was afraid the tragedy had already happened, years after Monaco—that I hadn’t
been able to keep Lupin out of a world of crime. And so, I was simply obligated to pick up the
pieces, out in the world; to protect people from him...and to catch him if he fell.

“But he won’t go,” Marti’s kind voice added above my head, no doubt aware of exactly where my
mind was. She kissed my hair and stepped back, only to put her hands on my shoulders and force
me to look at her. “He knows you’re here. He’ll stay.” Her bright green eyes, surrounded by
freckles and so much rich red, gazed at me intently. “And I’ll be here. With you. Okay?”

Her hand came down to cup my cheek.

I nodded, making a concerted effort to place one of my hands on top of hers—bandage mitten that
it was. It was only around the main part of my hands (my fingers were fine, luckily), but it still
made my palms useless, like a giant tennis ball was there instead of anything else.

Still, it helped, to have my fingers touch hers, and my heart—and my head—turned back on, a little
bit.

Marti came down beside me on the exam bed where I was sitting and rubbed a hand over my
shoulders. It was pathetic to need it, even though I did vaguely recognize that I kept going in and
out of shock for some reason—a reason I didn’t quite get. But just because I realized I was there
didn’t mean I had the ability to do anything about it. The shock was making it hard to keep a train
of thought going, let alone one where I moved my mouth, so I wasn’t getting any closer to
unwinding myself.

Shock, for me, was a weird thing: I could think perfectly logically—to a point. A point that wasn’t
very deep. After hitting that wall, the thoughts just got swallowed up in this void circling around
my head, that kept anything from getting to the part of my brain that was capable of making
decisions. Kind of like being stuck on input-only mode. It was probably some thing like the signals
from the freaked-out part of the brain being so strong that everything else shut down to protect
itself, but what did I know? Marti would know, certainly....

I sighed and searched out her familiar, kindly gaze. I’d owe her a lot of flowers after this, for
putting up with me. For taking care of me, when I was surrounded by so much blood, yet again.

The thought of it made it so hard to breathe. I could smell that blood, every time I did; Lupin’s,
Satoru’s—it was the same, mixing together in my head. Thoughts of one triggered the other, until
they were just a jumbled mess until I couldn’t feel anything but the stench of iron. It was like it
went inside me and clung to my innards; like it was determined to infect me.

Which was so strange, because it wasn’t like I hadn’t seen blood and death, after the War and
throughout my job.

“It’ll be okay,” Marti offered gently, bringing me above water again for just a bit. Her voice
sounded so far away that I almost missed it.
“What if he blames me? What if he can’t walk again?” I asked, hiding my hot cheeks in her shirt.

“Then he’s a fool.”

I just sighed. She made it sound so easy. I wanted to fight with her, to be contrary. I wasn’t even sure why I wanted to. But I did know it wouldn’t get me anywhere, after I gave it a second of thought, and luckily, I was too tired to come up with arguments strong enough to make it to my mouth. So I just clung to her, balefully, while I tried to sort out what my heart wanted.

“But there may be a chance to corner him and make him see Jesus,” she added, gently peppy, as she patted my head.

“You are such an optimist,” I sighed after a breath, though it wasn’t a negative comment. It was more awed, than anything.

“Have you noticed that Lupin is, too?”

That threw me. “Ah...?”

“He’s an eternal optimist.” I could hear Marti’s musing smile appear over my head, as she continued to rub slow circles into my back. “I think that’s why you’re drawn to us.”

“I...?”

My frustration at being confused disappeared all of a sudden; her light tone broke apart my upset emotions like sunlight through rainclouds. When I turned to her, wondering what to replace those grey storms with, she kissed my cheek brightly.

I couldn’t help but blush at that, feeling lighter all of a sudden; as Marti stood up, I rubbed at the spot with a finger. I was suddenly smiling a little too, gladness growing in my heart.

I could hear Lupin’s voice: Man, a good woman’s so much better than a bottle of wine. And more expedient, too.

“Anyway, there’s only three possible explanations for what happened downstairs, right?” Marti asked, hopping off the bed.

She had said it with such professional verve that the wind of her words redirected my thoughts and cleared away some of the fog from my brain at the same time. I looked up at her alertly, following her with my eyes as she moved across the room. “Ah—?”

She nodded, standing up and going over to a tray of tools I’d become well accustomed to at this point: all the sharp things necessary for stitches, and the cleaning supplies too. She unwound the gauze around her own arm, revealing the dark purple cut along the underside of her forearm.

My eyes flashed open at it, but she just held out a hand to stay me. “It’s fine. Just got the skin. Would have dealt with it by now, if it were worse.”

My heart was beating awfully hard, and I looked for somewhere to stare that wouldn’t be conducive to worrying over her. That place ended up being between my knees, at my fingers as they laced together, poking out from between the gauze mittens.

“Anyway. Three things. Either, A) Lupin was dreaming about something, and he awoke into a state of flashback; B) he recognized the guy; or C) that guy reminded him of something awful.” Marti opened her hands apologetically, a shrug, then went to fill them with tools. “I don’t like what any
of that means, but that’s all it could be. We’ll just hope he tells us, when he wakes up.”

“You think he will?” I asked hopefully, perking up even further. It was like the shroud was lifting up, floating away, and revealing light. “Wake up, I mean?”

...But the clouds weren’t going easily. God damn, it was so hard to say even those few words, and I was so dreadfully tired besides. Why did I think one hour of sleep would be enough to power the next six? My voice cracked halfway through, and I swallowed hard to make it through to the end.

“We’ll see what they say, out of surgery,” she said with a shrug, winding the rest of the gauze into a little ball and setting it aside. “But I don’t see why he won’t.”

“Even after...?”

My mind filled with images of Marti on top of him, pressing sheer force into his chest. You didn’t come back from those things unscathed, right?...

Marti paused, surveyed me, and then nodded. “Yes, even after that,” she said firmly, going for a needle to thread.

It sounded like a stern nurse telling someone not to scratch at something. Generously, she’d foregone the “We’ll see if he’s mentally all there,” though it was written on her face.

That wonderful feeling that had infiltrated a moment earlier shook hard, and almost sent me toppling right off a cliff, back down to the hole I’d been in. Lupin’s mind...that was his most precious thing. That was the source of his only commodities, in fact. He might have to change his plays without a leg, but without a mind that functioned sharply, everything would fall apart. His relationships, his personality. The need or want of me.... His very humanity.

I wouldn’t wish that on anyone; in fact, I’d rather wish him dead than mentally debilitated. And if he were better than a vegetable—say had to relearn to speak but was still there on the inside somewhere—I knew he’d be frustrated enough with it that he just might put an end to things himself.

“You think there’ll be any brain damage?” I asked, deciding after a few seconds of her silent needle threading that I didn’t want to leave it just to gnaw at me.

That was a whole new can of worms I hadn’t considered, but now that it was here.... It looked like the Grand Canyon.

Marti thought about it for a second, then shook her head. “If there is any, it should be very, very slight,” she said, all clinical. “What’s a bigger worry is his eyesight. That’s the first thing that gets affected when you lose oxygen, that and your fingertips.”

I stared at her, all the blood draining out of me; she looked up from cutting the thread after a second of silence, and then, apparently seeing the very obvious look of alarm on my face, held out her hand—needle, thread, and all. “But don’t worry about it! Really!”

I tried to say something, but it didn’t work. All that came out were staccatoed grunting sounds, like skipping rocks on pavement.

“Ah...I... What I mean is, there’s always the possibility, but we followed all the rules,” Marti amended hastily, standing up straight. “And I think we did a very good job on that front. I know how much you care about him, so I wanted to make sure he survived well. Plus, he’s growing on me. Kinda like ‘im too, little bugger that he is....”
Her nervousness subsided into fondness again, and she even smiled a little. The normalcy of that did the best job of reassuring me, though it only got to the hysterical part, not the logical pessimist part.

“He’s younger, too,” she continued, squinting at the needle’s eye. She lined up the thread with the hole, and then lanced the floss through like a dart player’s throw. “Ah hah....”

She smiled and quickly pulled the string through, voice turning clinical again. “But yeah, being young will help tremendously, even if something has happened. His body’s going to be a wreck, but I really do mean that any damage to his mind or nerves from the chest compressions will be very slight, if anything. It wasn’t more than five minutes. Even if there is something, he probably won’t be able to tell, and it could repair itself over time somewhat as well.”

“Ah...I see,” I muttered, relief flooding through me like a broken dam. I actually sank down, a little. “Thank you, Anna.”

“You’re welcome,” she said, that hint of a smile glittering for me. “Though...”

Her mouth ticked down. Needle now properly threaded, she paused as she picked up a bottle of disinfectant.

“What is it?”

She went very still. Her posture deflated somewhat, almost like a drooping flower. “It’s the fever we need to watch out for. He’s going to get one. I’m...sure of it.”

At the depressed sound of her voice, I went still too—though it was by means of a cold shiver. “Yeah?”

She glanced around, avoiding my eyes, and then muttered, “Yeah.” Marti shook her head, hiding her face behind her hair as she fiddled with the counter full of tools. “We’re gonna have to watch him like a hawk. The next forty-eight hours are critical. Nerve damage, you can learn around as time goes on. Bacterial infection....” She made a helpless motion, mouth pulling into a grimace. “Get too hot, and in two hours, you’re dead. Can only do so much to scrub a billion bacteria out of you.”

I blinked at her, feeling that shroud fall over me again. I was just so out of my element with medical stuff. It wasn’t like I hadn’t heard doctors say all that before, when I’d needed to talk with suspects that’d gotten themselves hurt, but I’d never really cared about it, before. It was only an inconvenience, not a...whatever all this was. Crisis?

There was only that one time before: with Lupin, the train bombing, and Monaco.

But even that hadn’t been a crisis. That had just been...sadness. Endless sadness, without a time horizon.

“Um...and....”

‘Um’? I looked up. Marti was gazing at me, holding the threaded needle in the air toward me. Her mouth was making words, and her face was cycling through expressions, though no sound was coming out. She was thinking about how to say something. Thinking hard.

“Yes?”

Her face finally settled in a frown, and she shook her head. “Nothing.”
Now this was territory I understood. I sat up a little straighter, cop brain coming back on. “What is it?”

“Nothing.”

I smiled darkly, the slightest bit. *Nah-ah, not getting away that easy.* “Tell me.”

“Well...okay, but. It’s just a thought, okay?”

I nodded. “Sure.”

“There’s something else that’s been bothering me. That doctor...he...did some very strange techniques,” she said, her lips pursed and her eyebrows twisting down as she visibly recalled it. “Risky techniques.”

That sat between us for a second, and then she shook her head, going to work applying the antiseptic. “It could have just been old techniques coming into play, I guess—Medicine adapts, and so do the surgery techniques. Older doctors are more familiar with older ones, which are riskier by nature. But they still like to use them, because sometimes the very fact of a technique being new makes it more dangerous to use, you know? But...even the other doctor, the woman, Christina, she gave him a very odd look, when he decided what he was going to do.”

I frowned at that, not quite following. “What do you mean?”

She set the bottle down and pursed her lips as she ran the cotton ball along. She’d put numbing agent on the wound beforehand, when we’d first come in here, and I guess it’d taken effect, because she wasn’t hissing. Marti had wrapped her arm back up in the mean time, but now I guess the big work was going to get done.

“The doc, the man,” she continued, distantly, “he wanted to basically run Lupin dry so that we could get the bleed to stop. Then stitch him up quickly, after which we’d reintroduce the blood. That’s why his heart stopped.” When she caught my surprise at that, she looked aside, guiltily. “Anyway, none of the rest of us liked that, but he did it anyway.”

That sounded awful, and made me a little angry because of how risky it sounded, but then again, I wasn’t a doctor, so what right did I have to question his techniques? But she made it sound like I should. “It worked, didn’t it?” I asked, prompting.

“I mean, it *worked*, but...they seemed kind of surprised. Like it wasn’t normal for him.”

I nodded, a chill creeping up my back.

“I wouldn’t think anything of it, except...the way he looked when Lupin came back. He seemed...almost angry.” Marti shook her head, and started poking the needle through her arm. “He could have just been determined, but...I don’t know. He seemed genuinely pissed off about something.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. That he was alive? After what you said about the local situation...it’s not something I want to ignore. I wanted to give it to you, and see what you wanted to do about it. It’s just my intuition, so I could be totally wrong. It was just a momentary thing, when I was already feeling bad....” She trailed off. It was always sad to see her unnecessarily nervous like this.

“S...sorry about that,” I offered.
But she simply waved her hand, picked up the needle, and poked at her arm.

A creepy feeling slid through my body, and I turned away from her quickly. “St-still, you should always follow your intuition,” I said. “It’s usually a good place to start. And it’s there for a reason.”

And when it came to mine....

Nadia had mentioned that the old man had made a point of showing up tonight, in a time frame that could have possibly involved a call from the Commissioner, or someone from the base (by prompting of the Commissioner). But if the old doc had been scheduled to come in anyway, and he worked here regularly, the chances of him being an assassin were low. In somebody’s pocket, maybe, but a regular evil-doer, not so much. I’d have to ask Nadia about it, but I wasn’t expecting much.

Still, if I needed to be wary of anyone, it was probably him or the navy boys—whose whereabouts I was unsure of at the moment, come to think of it. Regardless, I couldn’t detain the doc for anything longterm, not really. Well, I could, but I wouldn’t get away with it, and seeing as how Lupin was alive (and directly because of the man, no less), I didn’t feel I was at a point where I needed to go to that extreme. Question him maybe, at the most, but once Lupin was out of surgery proper, it’d probably be best to thank the doctor for his contribution, send him home, and let that be that.

“I’ll look into him, see what I can find, and keep him away from Lupin in the mean time. That should be enough.” Admittedly, “enough” was never enough with Lupin, but there was only so much my little team could do on so little sleep while being completely outnumbered. Let alone when someone finally decided to invoke chain of command and protocol. The only reason this was even still in my hands, without a fight at least, was because of the snow and the hour.

And now that it was daylight...the waves were going to start crashing down on us, and I had to be the breaker.

Considering the near-crisis we were in, my job at this point was just to keep things from getting any worse: to keep my people unscathed until the prisoner could be transferred somewhere else, happy and whole and with enough vigor to complain about it. That, and get the information out of him that the Commissioner wanted, as kindly as possible, because it helped the mission succeed as a whole. If I had to sacrifice Lupin’s haul to keep us alive, well, that was a sacrifice I was more than willing to make.

“There’s...also one other possibility,” Marti began hesitantly. She wasn’t looking at me; she was staring at her arm.

...But she also wasn’t doing anything, to that arm.

“Ah?” I prompted, when she didn’t continue.

Marti looked up at me, guiltily, and then looked away. After a minute of that, she put down the needle with a sigh and stared at the wall. But before I could say anything comforting, she spoke in a rush: “It...may have been because I messed up Lupin, and he was mad that I was still there.”

“What?” I asked. “What are you talking about? You didn’t hurt him; if anything, I’m to blame—”

“No, not that. It’s...” Marti’s lips pursed, upset, and she ran one hand up her other bicep as she stared at the door, the ceiling, the floor—anywhere but me. She was gripping her arm hard enough to bruise, as she stared at her toes.

I’d seen this before. Frowning, I readied myself to comfort whatever self-hating thing she was
about to say.

“I kind of... passed out in the OR, and it ripped open the wound. I um... think. It’s... kind of hard to remember,” she mumbled, staring at her feet.

And yet, all that preparation went right out the window, at that revelation.

“You what?” I hissed, incredulous. How did I not know about that? Why had no one told me?

_One of my people had passed out in a critical situation that was still ongoing and no one bothered to inform me about it?

“I know! I know, I shouldn’t have—”

She squeezed her eyes shut, breathing quick, but I brushed aside the unnecessary placation. I sent back to her concerned sympathy instead, my voice quiet but earnest: “Why didn’t you tell someone that you were that effected by it? I would have dragged you out of there....”

I could see it now: me accidentally setting her off balance by making her think of Donatello, and then Lupin’s trauma room making her think of her daughter.... God, she didn’t deserve that, and yet she’d powered through and saved Lupin’s life on top of it? Damn, she had no business being hard on herself, if that were the case; I was the only one that deserved a reprimand. Me and my flaming inadequacy in all sectors over the past twelve hours.

“Marti, take better care of yourself, seriously.... Were you hurt? Do you need some kind of treatment?” I would have gotten up and come over there, but there wasn’t much I could do, honestly, given my hands.

Wincing, my darling redhead eyed me in yet another grimace that I never wanted to be the cause of. But it wasn’t a wince of hurt. The look in her eye—in her uncurling posture—was one of surprise. “You’re not... mad about Lupin...?”

“What? No....” I shook my head, sitting back and waving the thought away with my ridiculous mitten of a hand; in fact, I tried to make it extra gentle. I set my posture to nonthreatening, which was something I’d had plenty of practice with, through working with kids in Tokyo. “He’s an idiot, like you said. What I care about is that you’re okay. What caused it? Did you hit your head or anything?”

“Oh...” She relaxed at that, and rubbed her neck. “N-no.... Nadia caught me. And it was just memories... and tiredness. Nothing a few stitches and a hug won’t fix.” She flashed a smile, though it was fleeting.

“Well, that’s something at least. Marti...” She twitched at her name in a way I hadn’t seen her do in years, and I sighed. I really shouldn’t have told her that stuff about the commissioner, but I thought she wasn’t this broken by it anymore. _Dammit_. I gave her a second, then tried again, kinder this time: “Anna? Come here.”

She looked at the door like she wanted to run for it, but I smiled encouragingly and held my arms out to her, hands beckoning. “Please?” I asked. “I will start singing. I’ve been practicing.”

With a deep breath and rolled eyes, she reached out and took my hand.

Even hobbled as I was, it pulled her between my legs with the form of a dance partner and tucked her up against me, sheltering her eyes the way she had done for me a moment ago. She just stood there, stiffly.
“I love you,” I whispered into her hair. “I will never get mad at you like they did. Sorry if I sounded angry. I’m just a little...worked up. But not at you.”

*God, I am so bad at this. I just keep letting down the people I care about.*

I let my words to her sit, giving her time to respond. I could feel her chest expand and contract against mine, and eventually, her breathing evened out.

“Sorry I doubted you,” she muttered by way of apology, into my shoulder.

“Oh, don’t apologize to me, you’ve done nothing wrong.” I gave her a squeeze, and Marti raised her arms, until she hugged me back.

“Okay,” she whispered.

No apologies, no freezing up. It was a good start.

“Do I need to send you to the counselor too?” I teased, massaging the back of her head.

I felt her smile against my neck. “Maybe. But I don’t think you’ve got another one.”

“Just wait till Lupin gets back. He’s very good with the ladies, I hear.”

“Speaking of that...” Marti whispered, still leaning on my shoulder. “Did Lupin...ever participate...in...Donatello’s...”

She trailed off for so long that I thought she wouldn’t finish.

“His what?” I asked gently.

Marti made a strange moan into my shoulder not unlike a car starter failing to turn over the engine, and then all of a sudden whispered, “...Trysts?”

That...was not what I had been expecting. And from the way it forced itself out of her mouth so haltingly, she hadn’t been expecting to have to talk about it, either.

Shit, I really shouldn’t have brought Carlotto up, if she was thinking about all that. But of course, why wouldn’t she have been? Just Donatello’s name was a curse, opening the doorway to hell for her, and the screams of every tragic soul’s story therein.

Still, it wasn’t like I could lie to her. I closed my eyes and sighed. “Yes.”

Marti took a sharp breath. I shook my head and, taking her by the shoulders (more or less, given my hands), brought her to look at my face. “But not in the way you’re thinking. He wasn’t the aggressor. He didn’t hurt anybody.”

But the Martelli that looked back at me was not Anna; it was Marti. Her green eyes, the lines in her face—were so cold they surpassed professional and went straight into righteous anger. She gave off another version of that strange humming noise while her lips pursed into a tight line, but this time it was clearly a *growl.* “I thought so.”
**Correlation II**

Chapter Summary

In which the story goes way, way darker than I planned, and probably any of you will like. xD;;

Chapter Notes

Last week's Music: Hikaru Utada - "This is Love"


...I sense a pattern here. *shifty eyes*

“Wait...what? *What?*” I asked, bewildered. Had they...met back then, that way? It would change nearly everything I knew about back then, if they had. “Did you...two...?”

I could imagine it clearly: the two of them sitting on a bed, staring at each other awkwardly, or perhaps Lupin trying to smile reassuringly, and then turning to the man, awaiting his orders as he watched from a nearby leather sofa, drink in hand and crooked smirk on his face.

At least, that’s what I assumed it was like. Lupin had never told me the whole of it, but I’d heard enough through the grapevine to understand the gist of that household’s depraved sexual appetite.

Marti shook her head and pulled away from me, heading back over to the counter of tools. I was suddenly at a loss about how to feel. A tangle of emotions popped up, crashing together like a heavy wave on a rocky shore, not the least of which was righteous, protective anger.

And that was right when she detached from me, shaking her head and sliding across the room like a gliding ghost.

In the wake of that, it felt terrible to lose her warmth; to not be able to hold her until I knew she felt safe—but also to lose her just when *I* felt unstable. Which was ridiculous. But I felt that way.

Still, it was my job to be the anchor, the protector, so I had to shove my feelings aside and deal with what she needed from me.

But this was one of those things: touch didn’t make it better for her. At least, not often. There wouldn’t be any clinging to each other until the ship floated again. She’d be okay, probably, and if not, she’d come back over when she was ready. For now, I just had to watch and wait, and be her shield.

“No, he was never one of them. But...” Marti frowned, huffing. She held her hands up at her chest as she turned away from me, one hand clutching the wrist of the other.
However, I could see her face still, a little bit, and she looked like she was getting up the courage to ask something. After a bit, she took a breath, raised her head and turned to me, professional tone back.

“Zenigata...do you....know anything about Lupin’s sex life?”

If I had been drinking anything, I would have spewed it out. As it was, I took a deep breath and sighed it out, very slowly. “Well....”

She stared at me, plainly. I stared back at her, trying not to shrink down.

“In...regards to...what?” I asked, trying not to think about the things that had just been in my head. Or what Lupin had told me in the squad car—offered me, in the squad car—and just in general everyone being naked and upset.

She eyed me, the way women did when they thought men were being dumb and weren’t sure how to get away with mentioning it, then looked at the window.

After pursing her lips, Marti said, “He mentioned something very strange, when you were outside, and we were transferring him downstairs. I asked him when he’d started sleeping with men, and he said it was, quote, ‘a rather hard question to answer.”’

I frowned, confused. “What the hell?”

“That’s my question too,” she said. “It sounded like he kind of...didn’t know. Or maybe, didn’t want to admit that something odd might have been going on. Which made me think...”

She trailed off and nodded at me, slightly. Pointedly.

“You think Donatello...?” I whispered, and then straightened up. “I think it was well before that.”

“Wait...before?” It was Marti’s turn to blink confusedly. “So you do know something?”

I shook my head. “No, no. But look, here.” I went for my laptop. It was hard, but I soon found a way to open it with what limited dexterity I had in my hands.

“The thing about the doctor, see...there’s another option, too, that fits into this,” I explained, as I slowly clicked around on my laptop, hobbled as I was. “Option C: The doc reminded him something. But what if it was not something, but someone?”

I flipped the laptop screen around and showed it to Marti.

“Who’s that?” she asked, squinting at it, all fear forgotten. “The doc forty years ago?”

“Lupin’s grandfather.”

Her eyes widened. “Woah.”

“Yeah. They look a lot alike, don’t they?”

“They really do... I mean, not the clothing, but, the faces....” She paused her worry for a moment and crept closer, leaning down in awe. I couldn’t hold the laptop up much higher, because of my hands, but I tried to angle it for her. “Is it just because they’re both French?”

“Somewhat. That and the facial hair, too.” Lupin’s grandfather was well known for the fashion of the times, which included a thick mustache and a heavy beard. The few pictures I had were all
black-and-white or Sepia, but it was noted in the papers of the time that Lupin’s grandfather, whoever he had been outside of the crime world, had brown hair. Which Lupin apparently shared on the bottom half of his face, the few times I’d seen his beard grow out.

“Did Lupin know his grandfather?” she asked.

“Yes, though to what extent, I’m not sure,” I said, turning the computer back around and setting it on my lap. Marti nodded and went back to her work on her arm on the other side of the tiny room, for which I was glad to have something else to look at—she was always able to do that medical stuff that just made me shiver.

Regardless, when I first met Lupin, deep in his father’s syndicate as I had been, at some point I had wrung out of him that his grandfather had died, and that was what had lead him to be there. That his father was his only living relative, so he’d thought he’d visit him. Knowing Lupin, this could have been a lie, or a half-truth, but I could only assume that he’d been living with the old man, seeing as how he wasn’t very old at the time, and never mentioned any other family.

He had been barely twenty at the time, I had imagined, but judging by what Lupin had said today, er, yesterday, I guess he’d been twenty-one. He’d sure looked younger though, eighteen or nineteen at the most. And he’d acted that young, when it came to his family situation. Younger, even.

But when it came to crime work, he was well beyond his peers. He knew more than half the made men who were in their forties, and how to carry it out unflinchingly, too. It had been a sad, desperate, and terrible combination to witness—as fascinating as it was exhausting, if I was honest with myself.

And why might he be like that...?

“But that’s the thing. What’s happened today...it’s made me think. The way the doctor touched his head, it was...disgustingly intimate.” I set the computer aside and made the motion, and Marti’s frown deepened. “You saw that too, right?”

She nodded, after a bit. “I guess?”

“Anyway, I thought that, if the two people look alike, and he’d woken up out of a sound sleep to find that, then....”

“It could have reminded him of something,” Marti finished for me. She huffed, and then tisked, her whole countenance shifting to one that was heading toward righteous, motherly anger, as she turned back to her arm and stabbed it a little harder than she should have. “Something that happened when he was a kid, involving an old man waking him up in the middle of the night....”

“Right.” Which would also predispose him to the relationships he had with men later, and the one I suspected he had with Jigen. “But what I don’t get is, what would that have to do with a place like this?” I asked, motioning to the walls. “And his mother? I had been thinking that maybe she died in a hospital, and he got taken into his grandfather’s custody, where it would have happened, but...?”

I looked at her, beseechingly. Please tell me something good. Anna, you’ve always been good at finding the silver lining.

And anything that didn’t have to do with Donatello di Medici had to be a silver lining in and of itself.

“Well, the mother and Lupin could have been living with the grandfather. But what if...” All of her unease switched out for interest, she slowly looked around, eyes narrowed thoughtfully as they
trailed along the room’s cracks. “...He was kidnapped? Between his relatives?”

That was...

I mean, it did happen from time to time. But generally only when children were very, very little. Probably younger than was necessary for Lupin to have such strong memories of the incident, whatever they were. Not that it wasn’t impossible, but I would think Lupin would have been pushy enough as a child to run away from a kidnapper, if he was old enough to remember it that vividly.

Unless it was someone he trusted—someone he was already living with, perhaps?

But... “What did you do with my mother!”—that sounded more like a disappearance than a breakdown. Not to, but with.

Though I guess the two things weren’t mutually exclusive, were they—disappearance of a parent and kidnapping of the child.

Though, it would make more sense if it was between Lupin’s dad and Lupin’s mom, but it was pretty clear his father wasn’t around when he was kid, and I knew he wanted nothing to do with him as an adult.

Unless his mother had been unstable somehow, and it was the grandfather fighting for custody. If he’d not only known her, but actually did care about Lupin’s wellbeing, then...Lupin would have been simply another thing for him to enjoy stealing, right?

But how would that be, since the grandfather of Lupin in question was his paternal one, not maternal?

And speaking of, why did he never talk about his maternal grandparents, either? Presumably it was because he’d never met them, but...to never hear any stories, either? That was weird. Had his mother just not been around?

But no, she had to have been, given that outburst of his. Maybe she was an orphan, or estranged from them?...

“It’s...possible, but somewhat unlikely,” I said to Marti’s kidnapping theory. “I have no evidence to suggest that. However, I don’t have any evidence to point away from that, either.” I narrowed my eyes as well, searching across the floor. “I guess it could make sense if his mother was an addict or something? Or his grandfather was just crazy?”

“Have you ever tried running his prints through a missing children’s database?”

“I haven’t.” Rather made me wish I had, though; it was a good idea. I eyed my laptop, and how many hours it would take to search France’s national database on the poor little thing. Might be just about right, if I turned it on when I went to sleep. “Now that you’ve taken them, though, I can as soon as we’re done here.”

She nodded absently, studious attention focused on her wound, which she was about halfway done with now. “We know he grew up in France, right? Would be a place to start, at least.”

“Yes. His French is definitely from France, not any of the old colonies. But if his parents were both criminals, they probably wouldn’t report his disappearance, let alone have him fingerprinted as a child.”

She sighed through her nose. “That’s true, I guess—if you’re bad parents.”
“Or really have something to hide. A mob boss would just take care of it himself.”

Marti’s mouth pursed, and she hummed tersely at the idea.. “Do you think both his parents were criminals?”

That caused me pause. “It would make sense, but I don’t...know, really. Kind of depends on what kind of woman Arsene liked, I guess.”

Knowing my daughter, it appeared to be Asian women that were good at acting like bimbos but who weren’t.

I...should probably not think about that too much.

Still, if Lupin’s mother was a criminal element, it could explain why she and Lupin’s father weren’t together but both knew the grandfather. But the reverse could also be true: if they were both criminal elements of little parenting skill, who simply hooked up once and didn’t particularly like each other, they could be like any separated couple. If she’d gotten stuck with a child she hadn’t really wanted, Lupin could have gotten pawned of on any taker around, ripe to be abused. The culprit wouldn’t necessarily have to have been a relative.

“Like I told you before, I know exactly nothing about his mother—the things he’s said tonight, that one sentence, is literally all I know, other than the fact that she’s gotta be Asian, reportedly Japanese. I don’t know if she was a Japanese national or not; if she had Lupin in France or moved here with him; if he lived with her or not. I’ve always purposefully tried to avoid thinking about it, so as not to taint any clues that might come up.” That didn’t mean I didn’t consider it from time to time when stakeouts were dragging on, but... “I just don’t know enough to say.”

It really would be helpful to know which combination of parents he lived with when, but that was the whole crux of the problem, wasn’t it?

But what if...

A number of half-formed thoughts jumbled together in my mind suddenly, like a bunch of dice being thrown all at once. But slowly, slowly, after I shut my eyes, I was able to count the faces they were showing me.

What if the bread crumb trailed hinged not on what Arsene liked, but what Lupin lacked? Don’t start a beginning you don’t know. Start at the end you know, and work your way back....

Think, think...

Back when I first met him....

There was something, tingling in the back of my mind, trying to make its voice heard.

I knew Lupin had always been there, hanging around his father, for some secret reason I still didn’t know. Some motive he kept tight within himself, that would keep him heading toward his secret goal all that time, even with all the shit his father put him through—shit that was honestly engineered to get Lupin killed, I found out eventually.

What drove Lupin back then wasn’t money or power; those weren’t the things that motivated him now, either, so it was best to just take them out of the equation. It’d been my first thought, back then, because those were the logical choices for a thug, but it turned out to be untrue pretty quickly. So for a long time, I’d operated under the assumption that it was the next most logical thing, to a person with a functioning heart: Lupin hung around his dad, enduring the inhospitable climate,
because of a desperate need to belong.

But that was far too simple of a motive for Lupin the Third, even before he’d taken that “criminal mastermind tinkerer” identity to heart.

The train explosion and the things leading up to it.... That was my clue. That was the end of it. I knew Lupin had some sort of hand in it, I was still sure of that, because Lupin had had a falling out with his father a months or two before it happened. So either he or his father had called the meeting. (If it even was a meeting, and not an ambush from one party upon the other.)

So what if...what if...

Images came to me, one after the other:

Lupin, in his father’s bar, cradling his portfolio of drawings in his lap and being so surprised when I had wanted to see them.

Arsène’s mild curiosity that he had a son, and then anger that he had anything to do with the family name.

Lupin’s glittering eyes, the first night he’d shown up, when he’d clobbered all the guys that had been annoyed at him using said boss’s name.

The things Arsène had said to me, about the worth of children and childhoods and parents.

The tense silence that lingered between Lupin and myself every time I finished a visit with him in Monaco and tried to leave, even though he never said anything about it.

Arsène’s continuing frustrations that his son was acting up. Showing him up.

The hollow look in Lupin’s eyes after he’d been beaten to a pulp, on the orders of his father, when the man had discovered his sexual tastes, and Lupin had gotten cornered....

How happy Lupin had been, when he’d spent some time with Donatello.

And the way he’d been, after Donatello was done with him.

Arsène’s annoyance that his son was screwing, and screwing up, his friendships.

And Lupin’s tragic smile, one winter night after all of this, when I’d offered to walk his battered body home:

“No, no. It’s all right. ‘You just have to know when to give up on a cause sometimes,’ right?”

Add all that in with the fear in his eyes when he’d woken up from the machine downstairs....

The ideas whispered to me, and I moved them around, gradually, rearranging them, until I had the answer in my head.

To be so afraid of that doctor that looked so much like his grandfather, to the point that he’d tried to kill the man....

I took some of the dice, grouped them together into simple sums, and then brushed a certain cluster of them aside.

Regardless of the way he came to be with the man, what if...
If Lupin had been abused by his grandfather, either sexually or some other way or both, that could be why he so desperately wanted to belong to his father. Why he’d fallen into Donatello’s pull, too.

...And why Lupin had shown up at his father’s establishment at the age he did. Because he had finally done something about his situation.

Something like *kill* his grandfather. Lupin had mentioned off-hand a couple of times that the man had died of a heart attack, but there were *plenty* of nefarious chemicals that could cause that. The fact that he died of a heart attack would be *just* truthful enough to make a perfect cover story that no one would glance twice at. And because the man was old—in his nineties—at the time, no one would think twice about the body itself, either.

And then Lupin had come to his father, thinking there could be some solace there, because presumably his father had suffered it too....

I didn’t want to believe it, but childhood abuse would explain so damn many things about Arsene.

But then, his father would also have *known* what had happened to Lupin.

That could have been why Arsene had kept him at arm’s length. Why he’d had so much disdain for his son’s very existence, that so illogically and persistently bordered on revulsion.

So then, when his father had turned out to be an unsalvageable cause, Lupin had killed *him*, too?...

Out of anger maybe? Or sadness? Or sheer desperation? Maybe not even premeditated, but an accident of trauma and emotion? That’d be especially possible, if had had an episode toward Arsene of the same that had happened in the basement.

But that wouldn’t explain the train bombing, would it. That was premeditated, no doubt about it.

Hmm....

An image of Lupin appearing next to me on the bar stool that first amber night I met him, all smiles and obvious baiting, flashed through my mind. I had known he’d come with an ulterior motive; everyone did, and that was not unusual, in the crime world. But if I had known he’d come with blood on his hands and murder in his heart, our entire relationship would have never, ever happened. I would have never let him through that door. Never let him share a glass with me.

And yet. A little shiver went through my nerves, settled into my gut, and set all of my muscles tensing up. It was a feeling not unlike what I imagined it was like to meet a fox demon, its smile slowly turning into an animal’s teeth as its cover fell.

I could see it—his duplicity. The layer I had always been missing came into view, and I could see it, so very clearly: The pain under those smiles. The shape of the wound under all those quiet, reflective moments, too.

It wasn’t anger, necessarily. But there was darkness. So much of it. Twisted, twisted darkness.

The time after I rescued him from Donatello’s dungeon came to mind, the one time when everything that was Lupin’s charade fell away. When he’d just stared at the bartop, at his beer, saying absolutely nothing.

It was the one time I’d seen him for who he truly was, unrestricted—and there had been nothing
there. Nothing at all.

Which raised the question: How did you get so pathologically good at putting on a persona? One that not only hid everything about you, everything you cared about, but created it?

Why wouldn’t you have one of your own, innately?

There was only one reason: someone, or something, had stolen it from you.

After all, why did you go undercover? Why did you become a completely different person, with different sets of morals and behaviors and inhibitions, different from when society was watching?

Because you had to.

Because you had to pretend to live in ways other people wanted, so that you could get the prize no one knew about, and get out alive.

And why did you do that?

Because you were suffering something unimaginable, and believed the world would be better, afterward. For you and everyone else. And that took sacrifice. Sometimes, if you got in too deep, it took the sacrifice of your very identity.

But to get out of suffering so bad that you could live in any form at all, that was what it took, sometimes: the sacrifice of your very self.

Lupin hadn’t learned his thieving skills from his father, since his father hadn’t been there. But his skills aligned so well with the stories of his grandfather’s escapades that he had to have learned them from that man. And when? Before he was twenty years old—when he was a child.

So he was put to work? Pimped out? Wanted to emulate him and the man encouraged it? But then, why the sense of desperation, what impetus was there, to show up at his father’s even while hiding everything he was?

*What is it? Think, think!*...

It could just be that his grandfather was a drunk; he did say nice things about the man from time to time, but I had no way of knowing how much of that was wishful thinking, the kind of things you told yourself because you were a butterfly with one wing, that wanted to convince itself it could still fly—that there was a point to not ripping off the other wing, and just start living as an ant on the ground.

*Think*....

I knew Lupin didn’t want kids; he’d professed it on several occasions, specifically because he didn’t want to turn into his father. He didn’t think he could do it, having never had a good father figure. He never said it like that, but it was there, just under the surface. So painfully visible I just wanted to shake him, sometimes.

And yet. That very first night I’d met him....I hadn’t seen evil in his eyes. Mischief, but there was hope there. So much *hope*. And a boy with life in him. Life *ahead* of him, that he was quickly rolling toward losing, then and now, no matter how many times I tried to steer him away from that danger.

*So then. What if*...
That image of him on the floor, curled up and bloodied, after his father’s goons had beaten him unconscious....

—“Can I tell you something?” a quiet, rasping voice asked.

_I looked over, but he was utterly still on the couch, gazing up at the darkness. His face was a bloody mess, but at least he was alive and breathing—and hell, conscious too._

“I’m half Japanese.”

_His gaze flicked over to me, challenging, only to sink to the floor a moment later._

“...Is that okay?” he whispered.—

What if...

He’d finally run out of hope of ever being wanted?

And then, the train bombing was because he’d tried to kill both himself and his father, out of some misplaced desire to end the cycle of it all?
Astrolabe (Daedalus I)

Chapter Summary

How Zenigata and Lupin met, part one.

Chapter Notes

A mariner's astrolabe is that thing Medieval sailors invented to circumnavigate the globe via triangulation between the stars and the horizon. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mariner%27s_astrolabe

The ancient Greeks had the original land-based astrolabe. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Astrolabe

This week's music: Cowboy Bebop - "Butterfly", "Dijerido" (writing); DNCE - "Body Moves" (editing).

The bar that was the hangout of Arséne’s people—and in my case, my base of nightly operations as a go-between—was in a shady little part of Paris. A part that was just reputable enough to house artists during the day and yet dark enough to have a lot of pretty women for sale at night, if you knew which door to go in.

The place itself was a restaurant in the front, with the gangsters’ bar in the back through the side alley, and some “special facilities” above and below and next door. It was a warm, dark place, classy in that French whorehouse kind of way, which in my book meant decadent, dimly lit, close-in, and full of people that liked wearing awfully...flashy outfits.

Maybe that was why I always sat in a corner seat at the bar that had exactly one stool next to it. As a gangster, it was good business practice to sit where you could see the whole room (but had ample things to duck behind to get to the exit). Still, I was generally alone, unless someone wanted to talk to me about work, in which case, someone would get frisked by the door guards, saddle up next to me on the seat, and start talking.

It was well known that if I had to start the conversation, you were in trouble. Heaven forbid you were dragged in and forced to have that conversation.... But I tried not to think about that too much.

Regardless, that night was a snowy January evening, in which we were all huddled in the warmth of each other under the glint of glitter and booze. A jazz band would be playing later, but for now, there was just the happy hum of guys trying to spend their paychecks and get a little attention from Arséne’s ladies.

I, however, had been hanging out by myself that night, thinking of my little brother Satoru.

I can’t remember why, at this point. Something had made me think of it; probably the fact that it
was near New Year’s, which was a particularly auspicious holiday in Japan. Like anywhere, it was an event of reflection on the past and planning for the future; it was also, back when I was born, when everyone traditionally celebrated their birthday en masse.

The distance made it easier to forget him most nights; except for nights like these, when I would think about the shrines that didn’t exist here. Think about how there was nowhere for me to leave prayers for the past and the future that would reach him. Think about the life my brother wasn’t living, and wondering if his reincarnation was a good one or a bad one.

Satoru had been several years younger than me, and just old enough, when my dad went away, to be messed up by it for the rest of his short life.

Everyone knew that Satoru’s problems began when Dad went off to the war effort. But no one was really sure what to do about it, least of all me, who was just a kid as well. So it was dealt with in the traditional way: by not talking about it. And when that failed, guilt and beatings and other work-related punishments.

But I had been just old enough not only to remember my father, but, as the oldest son, to take his directive to take care of my mother and my siblings seriously.

Katsura, on the other hand—my other brother, the youngest—he’d never known our father, and had a certain different set of issues because of it. Namely, never understanding what the hell Satoru’s problem was.

In the days after the war, there was little hope and less food. But there was, unfortunately, plenty of vice you could get up to if you wanted to. Including drugs from the Chinese revolutionaries, once a certain decade came around. And everyone had to deal with the yakuza and other criminal elements (including the “special” authoritarian police forces that showed up during the war) on a weekly basis just to get by. So it wasn’t surprising that he fell in with them. They were ubiquitous and always taking in members—or victims.

It was just...particularly regrettable, because of the fact that our family was a police family.

And an old samurai one, at that. After my father went MIA, presumed KIA, we were in that situation of being bimbo samurai, or, in laymen’s terms, broke aristocrats (and lower aristocrats in our case, at that). All we had was our pride and our honor, and they constantly dueled with our need to eat. Everyone knew a family like that, in Tokyo; we were certainly nothing special.

In fact, my mother was constantly told that she was lucky, because, even with so many mouths to feed, she had three healthy sons that the war wasn’t going to absorb. At least, if it ended sometime soon.

And end it did eventually, without any of us seeing a battlefield other than the one on the home front. But my father, like many, never came back from the war, ashes or otherwise. My mother held out for a long time, first in hope and then in sadness, but she’d eventually remarried when I was a teenager.

My mother had held out for a long time, but had eventually remarried when I was a teenager. That didn’t really help things; at least, not for Satoru. I was old enough that I understood the need of it, and my step-father and I were politely cool with each other. It was a business arrangement of physical and emotional currency; I knew that, and so did he and so did my mother. He had a job that helped out with the finances, as did I (one that wouldn’t pass child labor laws today).

He and I were kind of like co-regents of the place, until I could move out and get my own place.
Satoru, however, was just old enough to resent the man for everything he did, and my step-father was just human enough to get angry at that, so their cycle of resentment and disappointment never broke, no matter how many conferences I had with them individually to soothe their troubles.

Meanwhile, Katsura got adopted by the bastard.

I shouldn’t call my step-father that, but that’s how I felt about it, if I was honest. It was the one petty feeling I ever let myself have about the man (not that he knew, however).

But that was because... Adoption wasn’t all that strange of a situation, but my mother and he handled it rather oddly. Since my biological father was the only child in his family to have children, it was decided that he needed some sort of heir, so that was left to Satoru and me. But Katsura was young enough that he could grow up to think of my step-father as his real dad, so that’s what they did, and legally, my mother and Katsura changed their names in the family register, while Satoru and I did not.

They asked me to lie to my one brother, and be the dad to my other.

I knew what they were thinking, and in a way I was happy to toe the line of my father’s family, but it was all very alienating, at the end of the day, since I had barely known the man and wouldn’t have minded a new dad as I had grown up. It also didn’t make me any closer to my father’s family, despite trying. I was spiritually important to them, indebted to them, but physically, I didn’t really know them.

And with my step father, there was always a barrier there. Some sort of wall he put up, that implicitly said, *You can stay, but you’re not mine.*

It wasn’t so much what he said, but what he didn’t. It could have been a conflict of personality, looking back on it, but judging by the way my mother acted, too, it wasn’t.

I could swear I was the only orphan in town with two parents, but I’d accepted it, as a good son did.

That might have been why I went so hard into wanting a wife I loved, rather than one that was born out of alliance and need. I didn’t want my kids to ever feel torn like that.

Poor Satoru, though... he’d never really gotten that chance. He’d never gotten over dad’s death and the family shift enough to have the self-esteem to think clearly about himself and his future. By the time he was fifteen he already had women all over town, but nobody you’d write home about.

It wasn’t that my mother wanted to get rid of us for remarriage prospects, though I was thankful on more than one occasion that she hadn’t sold us when she’d had the chance. (Children buyers would come around to our neighborhood every once in a while, and she always beat them away with a broom.) But with the way Japanese families worked, it wasn’t cooth to talk about disgraces and sadnesses, even between spouses, especially back then. So, once my mother remarried, we basically never talked about my biological father, my “first father.” And whenever I did bring it up to my siblings, Satoru rebelled against it, while Katsura chided me.

It was clear Katsura just didn’t really get it. Since he knew us as half-siblings, he grew up thinking we were inferior models, somehow impinging on his existence, no matter what I said or did for him. And he was just smart and talented enough—with enough resources—to make that work for him.

It didn’t help that I spent most of my free time cleaning up Satoru’s screwups once I was a teenager, so while I stayed at the same level or sank, Katsura flew and flew, eventually getting
promoted faster than I did (though we worked in different divisions of the police force, luckily). The fact of my lack of advancement, no matter how I felt about it, was a shame on my mother and father moreso than anything Satoru could ever do. (Unless something he did got in the paper, of course.)

My step-father had helped Katsura and I get our jobs, so it wasn’t like he was a horrible person. He just had an idea of what he wanted his family to be, and it didn’t include me. And it certainly didn’t include Satoru.

Mine didn’t include him either—at least, Satoru the way he was; there was plenty of room for the way he was supposed to be—but, like it or not, he was my responsibility, so I’d done my best.

I’d done my best.

Hadn’t I?

I suppose it didn’t really matter, because what had it gotten me? Gotten us?

Katsura had a prettier wife than me. A more traditional one, too. And a family full of successful children. I didn’t care about that, so long as the people I did have were happy and whole—but that was something I seemed incapable of creating.

Meanwhile, other people certainly did care about all of those things. Those voices often showed up when I could deal with it least, and I inevitably drank them away.

And thus, by forty-one, I was the one with a divorce, a flagging career, a daughter that had disappeared into the spy forces because she hated humanity, a converted religion, and not much of a pension to speak of, since I’d quit and left the country.

I also had a dead brother, a father, and all their ancestors I wasn’t properly worshiping, according to the traditional values.

And now I was in this faraway place, where I could die at any day and never see my family—any of it—ever again, in the afterlife or otherwise. And my daughter, most certainly, would never get married and have children that would comfort my soul when I died. I’d be one of those lost souls the church’s general prayers would look after.

On my good days, I thought I was fortunate for converting, because of that. On the bad days, like now, I would tell myself that it suited me right, for leaving Japan and its responsibilities behind.

I tipped my head back and gazed at the ceiling, the voices of tough people enjoying their short, tough lives washing over me.

France, huh. Finally free and surrounded by thugs. Maybe I should have joined you sooner, Satoru.

The laughter played out all around me, and from below, the occasional shout from the poker tables in the basement came up, all in languages I had somewhat recently learned.

Who would have ever thought?

I wonder if Dad felt like this, when he was shipped off to wherever he ended up?

Sometimes, when I was younger, I liked to think that my dad had run away somewhere and found a new wife, some local woman he had fallen madly in love with, a woman who showed him the
world. One that, if I ever found her, would be happy to have me there.

I would often envision that some day, on my travels as an adult, I’d meet a new half-brother, a real one, that welcomed me with all the lost stories of my father I’d desired—delivered alongside a big, happy family that was throwing me a welcoming meal of some sort, and which would thereafter never let me go. One that would show me all I’d missed about family, love, and friendship.

But it wasn’t to be. After I’d left the Tokyo Police Force but before I’d taken this assignment, I’d tracked down the records as far as they went. Unfortunately, my father had been shipped off to one of the islands in the pacific theater, and the trail had gone cold. His spirit was probably wandering some beach with thousands of others, just as unsure of where it was as I was.

It made me wonder, as I stared up at the French Whorehouse trappings that snowy night a few days after New Year’s, what exactly I thought I was doing here.

Am I chasing my dreams finally, or am I simply running away from the nightmares still?

Had I done the right thing all along, in following Dad’s directive and trying to help Satoru any way I could? Or had I simply wasted myself, too?

Had I not done enough?

Or was Mother right?—That it’s just best to let some things go, even if those things are people?

I sighed and put my chin on the table. It was a disgraceful (and, personally, disgusting) thing to do, but I wasn’t really Japanese anymore, was I? Not truly. In this day and age, I was half French. Might as well roll in the pigpen if you were going to eat with them too, and enjoy yourself.

In any event, that was what I was thinking about, as I stared at the bubbles floating up through my beer, the moment the whole room went quiet on that January night in Arsène’s bar.

It took me a second to notice it, the sound of self-pity was so loud between my ears, but once I did, every nerve of warning prickled to life in me. I lifted my head like an animal looking over prairie grass, trying to figure out what the cause of the sudden stillness was.

Things like this usually ended up with people stabbing or shooting each other, and I wanted none of that, because, aside from the obvious reasons, it inevitably brought the cops. (Which was irony itself, but, that was undercover work for you.)

The cops around here, like most places, were willing to overlook various misdemeanors from the organized crime groups, and even take a cut about them, but when an entire place got shot up—especially one where regular people were, technically, allowed to be—there was only so much they could do to look the other way.

When the papers appeared, just so did the favors disappear. That was the general rule of thumb, and those situations made my undercover work very complicated, to say the least.

“What’s going on?” I whispered at Guy, the bartender. He was looking toward the door, alertly—which was both good and bad. He had “the big gun” behind the counter, but I didn’t want him using it with the room this crowded.

“There’s a guy at the door....” He squinted, and then whispered back wondrously, “Did the boss shave his mustache?”
“What?” I asked, non-plussed. “The boss is here? Why didn’t you just say that?”

I shoved off the seat and made my way through the crowd. It wasn’t an enormous space, but it wasn’t small, either, so it was a fair amount of work to heave aside everyone when they were just standing around like trees and boulders.

But what stood before me, when I broke through the ring of trees, wasn’t the boss.

I thought it was, at first. But then he turned to me, and I realized he wasn’t the right age. Not even the right decade.

Possibly not even in the right half of the century.

It was a guy that looked a hell of a lot like him, though, and barely twenty years old, if that. They were so similar that at first, just like Guy, I’d thought he’d just shaved his mustache.

But there were no crow’s feet. No scowl lines. His hairline hadn’t recessed, but what hair was there was the same color and length for sure. The eyes were a slightly different shape, and darker, and the nose was smaller, but...the body type was almost entirely the same, just a little thinner, and a little shorter. He was even wearing the same cut of clothes, though the style and color was brighter. And in fact....

When he spotted me coming forward to the front of the crowd, he turned his head to me in that eerie way the boss would do—just his head turning on his neck, not unlike an owl—and he smiled.

The boss never smiled unless he was plotting something horrible, and for a second, it rooted me to the spot.

Because there was the hint of laugh lines around this young man’s mouth, so similar to the boss’s perpetual scowl lines.

And oh, how his eyes glittered. But not with anger and malice that gazed into space like I was used to. What lay in those eyes, looking directly at me, was self-pleased mischief.

It was the absurdity of that look, more than anything, that unwound me back to movement. The audacity of it hit me a moment later, and I barked, for everyone in the room: “Who the hell’re you?”

A smile quirked up at the corners of this stranger's thin lips, but he didn’t blink as he held my gaze. “Where’s the boss?” he asked. “I’d like to see him.”

His voice...even sounded like Arséne’s, a little bit. But the accent was all different. Arséne had a twinge of American these days, and the Boston Drawl at that. This guy...had a slightly Japanese tinge, which struck me as so odd I was speechless.

He did...look a little Asian, didn’t he? In the eyes, and the litheness of his limbs. The ones I could see poking out from his sharp suit angles, anyway....

“Punk, he asked you a question,” stated Romanoff from beside me, pulling me out of my reverie with a start. Roman was one of the bouncers, and he was currently standing in front of our interloper, while I was off to the side. Romanoff weighed over two hundred pounds and had a build that could have stopped a moving truck and won; the slip of a youth looked like an appetizer in comparison, and I was suddenly concerned for his bodily safety.

But the kid, after he was done gazing at Roman, simply ticked his shoulder to the side with an easy
shrug and an even looser smile. He took a step back, into the center of the impromptu ring, and raised both arms with a theatrical sigh. “I’m his son.”

My brain screeched to a halt at that, and so did everyone else’s, apparently—made men, working women, all the people on the edges of the operation...everyone. We all looked at each other in confusion, and then back at the whippersnapper. He hadn’t moved. Hadn’t flinched.

“He doesn’t have any children,” Cardinal added for us all, from my other side. Cardinal was another high-level made man who hung out at this bar for contact purposes, one who’d gotten his name from the first job he’d done. I wasn’t sure what had been perpetrated or against whom, but it somehow involved either Catholicism or a very unfortunate bird.

The newcomer that had silenced the place and was working the room for it like an actor with the stage all to himself raised his palms. He sighed, rolled his eyes, and gave Cardinal a look. “You just mistook me for him, I’m pretty sure he has a kid.”

He followed this up by putting his hands in his pockets and shrugging matter-of-factly with a dark and quirky smile, as if to say, I’m sorry but, come on now, guy. Keep up.

“Where’d you come from,” I asked, lifting my chin slightly. My arms had crossed themselves at some point during this charade, and my jaw was well on its way to tightening visibly. The room, if it were possible, quieted further. I could almost feel people shrinking away from the front line of the circle. The ones that didn’t like violence, anyway, which was probably about half of them.

The newcomer tilted his head at me, half acknowledgment, and half sizing up. His gaze was piercing, and way too damn knowing for someone his age. It reminded me immediately of a fox demon; it was a lot like the boss’s, though with a hell of a lot less...evil, behind it, for lack of a better word. It was still snake-like and dangerous—enough to make some small instinctive place inside me startle—but not so much that that feeling actually developed into anything. It was a little more “quick witted trickery” than “uncontrollable violent drunk,” maybe?

Yeah...maybe that’s what it was. The look of someone mischievous who could still be reasoned with.

The look of someone who still knew happiness.

“I’ll tell you if you let me see him,” he offered slickly.

Luckily, I was used to sly types, and rebuffed this water-testing with an easy shake of my head. “Hate to break it to you, but he doesn’t hole up here.”

After a moment, the kid smirked. It was small; not aggressive this time, but quiet, some self-depreciating thought apparently crossing his mind. So he hadn’t known that....

That told me something: he wasn’t all that dangerous. He hadn’t done his research, or hadn’t had a way to. But he was good at making it look like he had.

Though, to be honest, he probably hadn’t expected everyone in the joint to just stop and stare at him, either, and was dealing with it remarkably well for all that.

So a pup, being brave?

“Kid, you better get out of here before somebody breaks your head,” I replied, dryly.

He pouted melodramatically and raised his voice’s pitch to match. “You’d do that? Before getting a
paternity test? So mean.”

It was as though all of his ferocity had suddenly evaporated; there was nothing left to be afraid of
here. I rolled my eyes and motioned Romanoff forward.

“What’s your address?” he asked, cracking his knuckles. The crowd swept back like a dance
troupe, leaving the newbie and the bruise the only ones within reaching distance of each other. “I
want to know where to leave your sorry sack of bones.”

“If it makes any difference to you, I have a deal for him,” the kid said, taking a step back while
flashing me a look. That was the first worry he’d shown, and while it intrigued me, it didn’t move
me to pity—except for the little flash through my gut about how much it reminded me of Satoru,
years ago.

“And that is?” I asked mildly, while sighing inwardly at myself. This wasn’t the time to be
sentimental, but maybe, just maybe....

Half crouched down as he continued to slide back step by step across the wooden floor, the kid
paused in the middle of his defensive posture. He turned his head toward me just so he could make
sure I heard his annoyed sigh, but he never looked at me; his eyes were ever on Romanoff, warily.
“I can’t tell it in front of everybody?” he protested, as if I were stupid.

“Then I don’t really care,” I said, lifting a few fingers off my arm. Romanoff caught my eye, and I
nodded at him. “But,” I added as the man advanced, “If you tell me your name, I’ll make sure
Roman here only breaks your legs....”

He winced at me, exasperated, but I just smiled at him.

“Fine.” All of a sudden, the kid stood up straight, put one hand on his hip in an incredibly feminine
gesture not unlike what one might have seen from a Shakespearean play, and threw his head back.

“It’s Lupin,” he announced. "Arséne Lupin the Third."

He intoned this like it was obvious and we were all idiots, and he punctuated it by throwing out his
free hand as if to add, Thank you very much for making me explain my dumb name.

I was so confused about which part of this to be more offended by that I was actually speechless
for a few seconds.

I settled on the sheer audacity of it eventually, with a helping of insult at the boss and a grace note
of offensive, gender-bending queerness.

Luckily, there were several other people who stopped at the first part of that, and pounced a hell of
a lot sooner.

“Hold it!” This “Lupin” said to their physical advancement, so loudly and abruptly that it actually
startled everyone into stopping. It was a noise incongruous to his small size, and it set everyone on
edge.

And he was fast. In a blur, he’d gotten one of his hands held out in front of Roman’s face, palm
flat, and the other one at his own back, slipping under his jacket...where he paused, waiting for us
to catch up.

“...Hey now,” I warned at him, lowly, the whole room suddenly tensing. “Don’t do anything
stupid, kid.”
He tisked and rolled his eyes, but nonetheless held still—though his hand was still at his back, holding something I couldn’t see. “Who do you take me for? Look, you all got a boxing ring downstairs, right?” he asked, to which we all, once more, looked at each other.

We did have one; it was next door, on the other side of the poker tables.

“...Yeah?” Cardinal offered eventually, when neither Roman or I did.

This Lupin the Third character smiled and straightened up, preening. Lazily, he drew his hand out from his under his jacket, and tossed a clip of cash onto the nearest table. It had to be two inches thick. “Let’s settle this like men, shall we? I’ll prove my lineage with the family boxing style. But I’m a sporting fellow: whoever wants to can fight me. If you win, you get my money and to beat me up. Fun, right? But if I beat all of you, I keep your money, and you”—here, his hand rolled on his wrist with a strange amount of limberness to it, until his pointer finger aimed at me—“take me to my father.”

Lupin’s gaze flicked over to me a couple seconds after his finger did. A gentle smirk came a second later, an odd amount of warmth in its challenge.

He was enjoying this, I realized, mouth falling agape at the sheer, and unexpected, audacity of it.

This kid was absolutely crazy. Who did things like this?

Satoru, that’s who. Though he could never back it up. Inwardly, and probably a little bit outwardly, I sighed. I desperately wanted that drink I’d left behind at the bar.

Meanwhile, everyone was looking at each other for direction, relaxed slightly now that they knew he wasn’t pulling a gun.

And then they looked at me.

“What? Don’t look at me.” I shrugged, prickling. With a scowl, I gave the kid’s money a perfunctory wave. “Dapple, pick that up.”

The head hostess did so, and quickly placed it in her bra.

The lascivious purr the kid gave her didn’t skirt by me unnoticed.

Nor did the little shake of her hips she gave him, followed by a wink and an air kiss. ...

So that’s how he knew about this place. Her.

“Come back in one piece handsome, and maybe you can spend some of it on me,” she said, wagging her finger—which she then licked and drew down her cleavage valley by the tip. “I’ll be keeping this fat stack warm for you.” She kissed her fingers, and then patted the bills with them.

Weight back on one leg languidly and hands in his trouser pockets, he grinned, his whole attention suddenly on her. “Oh, you know it, Babe.”

“I’m going to kill this kid,” Romanoff said from beside me, stunned at this smooth display. “I’m just...going to kill him.”

I nodded, equally aghast. “...Try not to? At least until I hear what the boss has to say?”

Still, the kid’s prospects didn’t look good, given that, after a second, Dapple took him by the arm and lead him downstairs with her soft parts pressed into him, simultaneously calling for
challengers—and everyone in the bar followed them. Including the people that had wanted to be pressed up against Dapple’s ample curves for months, and never gotten there.

Pretty soon, the first floor bar was populated only by me, Guy, and my unfinished beer. Even Romanoff and Cardinal left, cracking their knuckles and chortling.

“Wanna take it downstairs?” Guy asked. “I can get you a cup.”

“...I think I’ll take the mug,” I replied dryly, staring at the heavy glass stein with dread wonder. Memories of tracking down Satoru’s ring fighting locations bubbled up like the beerfoam, and it was hard to turn them away. Of all the fights I’d seem Satoru start—and dragged him out of....

If that wasn’t a message, I didn’t know what was. God, I’d have to make sure this kid didn’t get himself killed. Though, despite the advancements since then in medical technology, I hoped I wouldn’t have to clean up anybody’s teeth this time.

With that in mind, I hefted the frosty glass toward the barkeep before taking a parting quaff. “Just in case I have to break it over someone’s head.”

Guy matched my wry smile. “Well, if everyone’s downstairs, I think I’ll just lock up and head down too...”

The band never did show thanks to a flat tire, but nobody minded.

Because Lupin, at 122 pounds, beat every single challenger that came to him, and then bought everyone in the place two drinks with the earnings.

That was how, in one night, Lupin became more popular with his father’s men than his father was, and I came to wonder if my father wasn’t trying to tell me something, too.
Marti and Zeni get to the topic of Lupin's flings, flames, and cross-dressing.

**Chapter Notes**

Whew! Two weeks already! It feels like so much longer. Well, as usual, since I've made you wait two weeks, you get two chapters! :)

In other news: Happy Beggar's Night/Halloween, American friends! Tonight I'm going to be "the Witch of the Violet Forest," since we have a bunch of pine trees in our front yard that have violets under them.

I have the wand, and the robes! Now I just need the hat and the candy....

I'm gonna sit outside under the trees with a light of some sort (it's very dark under there) and hand out candy. Basically, I'm a spooky videogame NPC that gives out candy if people come up to me and answer my fourth-grader trivia questions correctly, lol.

What's the capital of North Dakota? Minnesota? Kansas?? What are the three branches of government? What culture did Halloween come from? How many days in a lunar cycle? How many days in a calendar year?

(If they get them wrong, they can still get a prize if they tell me the name of a book they've read recently. <3)

#EpicWin #TeacherWitch

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**Did I miss something I should have noticed? Something deeper? Something darker?**

If it was there, I’d missed it. I knew Lupin held some ulterior motive, but that? If it had been something so murderous, it had been impossible to see that first night.

But later, as our relationship developed....

I had known there was something off, something more than just a desperate need to belong. But I’d never asked if it was more than what Lupin said it was. I’d always just assumed it was the story he had given me: that he was an orphan, and had the typical hangups from it.

That had been enough for me, because I’d understood it.

And maybe that was where I’d gone wrong, outside of everything else—I’d been blind, because I’d wanted to be.
And what’s worse, I’d watched that young man rise and fall because of it. Over just one year, I’d watched him grow from closer to a child into something near a mature adult, and then, just as he was about to reach his potential, saw him crash into nothing when everything went to hell. All the while, I’d told myself that there were more important issues at hand; that he wasn’t my problem. I’d watched him suffer, watched him soar, offered support and also left him to fend for himself, because the last time I’d cared that much about a young man, he’d died anyway and I’d just about broken myself to do it.

I’d been a coward to him, and blamed it on my job.

And then, when I’d decided that it was time to man up and catch Lupin—that I couldn’t look away anymore—I’d let him slip right through my fingers.

A soul in freefall was a damn hard thing to put the breaks on.

The surprise on Lupin’s face yesterday and the fire surrounding it came to mind again, unbidden. *Flames, just beyond my outstretched hand, roaring up from the edge of a collapsed building and swallowing him whole—*

It had been a person to reach for, and then suddenly, nothing. A young man, disappearing in a flash.

*I’m always just a little too late.*

The landing though, this time...might have been just a little less abrupt than Satoru’s.

That bathtub full of red came to life, but I forced it from my mind. I turned away from that vision and Marti too, forearms heavily on my knees. I ended up just staring at the wall, at nothing in particular, my hand threaded through my hair.

“What are you thinking?” Marti asked; a glance revealed she was putting her tools into the sterilization bin.

*If he was molested, how am I supposed to fix that?*

*If he killed his family, can I forgive that?*

“What are you thinking?” Marti asked.

I sighed. “My going theory for a long time was that he was somewhat neglected as a child, but I’m starting to think otherwise, with all this.”

It was looking like he might have had the opposite problem, in fact. Which I shouldn’t really have been surprised at; if my years in Tokyo had taught me anything, it was that the fey ones always had the worst trouble, whether they wanted it or not.

“The fact that he flirts with everything that moves tells me that he has very little self worth deep down, which would support that,” she agreed, when she caught my gaze. She had finished stitching up her arm, and was leaning back against the counter, arms crossed in such a way that the injured
part was freely facing downward.

“I had that thought too,” I admitted.

“I’ve watched him do it, all night,” Marti began thoughtfully. “It’s not unconscious, like a regular scumball, and when you call him on it, he admits to it sheepishly. It’s actually fairly innocent, which makes me think he knows what he’s doing is socially...ah, grey, is maybe a good word for it? And yet, some of it, he does it to make people happy, as a way to greet them, get their guard down. He respects people’s boundaries, once he’s found them, so he definitely knows what he’s doing. Pick up artists have nothing on him. It’s very Parisian, to mix work and pleasure, which isn’t a problem in and of itself. But he also...”

“Doesn’t seem to have any other way to engage with people?” I finished.

She nodded. “I think he does, but he’s not very comfortable with it. He also could be addicted to that attention, a little bit, depending on how big the hole in his self esteem is. He’s not broken, I’d say, but he’s definitely been hurt. I’ve been seeing what you mean about the facade thing, and there’s no way that’s there because he loved himself as a teenager. But whatever happened, it wasn’t enough to make him a clingy mess. Or at least, he’s mended, if it did.”

I nodded. Now that she mentioned it, there were definitely times when that lack of self-esteem showed through at Arsene’s. But we hadn’t been as close then; he hadn’t been as much a part of my day, my daily brainpower, as he was, now. Many of those memories had faded over the years, especially the ones before we became close, only coming back to the light tonight.

“I still don’t have enough to make a proper diagnosis about whether he hates himself or not, but he does function well enough, which is good. I don’t think he’s in a crisis situation outside of these attacks, even given his criminal behavior. But the couple times tonight that I’ve seen his guard come down—and it hasn’t been because he’s meant it to—there’s definitely some insecurity there. Insecurity that legitimately frightens him to think about revealing.”

I hummed along thoughtfully, staring at the pattern in the tile floor while my fingers interlaced tightly on the back of my neck, even hobbled as they were. Lupin...afraid of something. It was an odd thought; publically, he was fearless. It was a foundation of his criminal celebrity brand. But even around me, he was usually more about climbing over a wall than letting it stop him, regardless of whether it was emotional or physical.

But whether the thing that had injured him this deeply was something mundane or something criminal and traumatizing, it was hard to say. Everyone had hangups of some variety or another, often from childhood. And those events were caused by things, when you looked back at them, that were often trivial or misunderstood. Though, the scars childhood trauma caused tended to be deep, because you, and your realm of experience, were so small by comparison. You had nothing to normalize bad experiences with other than “someone must hate me.”

While I knew some horrible things had happened to him as an adult, as a child, what would rattle Lupin so much that he’d want to shut it out completely, rather than just deflect it and roll it into his myth...? It’d have to be something pretty significant; Lupin was a very rational guy, who didn’t believe in letting things defeat him.

“He’s really tight-lipped about his past, so I have no idea what it might be. He’ll let his guard down around me, but not in regards to his history, and not even in regards to his deeper emotions, either. Mostly it’s just to occasionally admit he’s human.” Marti hadn’t seen what had happened between him and me in the locker room, but that was pretty much the extent of what I ever got out of him: his egotistical, high-flying criminal persona would shut off for a bit, or maybe let me pull the
curtain aside. But I wouldn’t get him, Lupin the Parisian, I’d just get the actor, off-stage but still on the clock. The “coworker admitting they were hungry or angry or frustrated.” It was never anything personal, like complaints about his boyfriend; nor anything about his goals in life. I got the occasional poetic thing, but it was never anything personally revealing.

Which, once again, made me wonder if he even knew who the person under there was, or if there was simply nothing there to find. Just a body getting through life, moving from one high to the next.

Which also made me wonder, once again, what the hell Jigen was there for.

“I see. Though...,” Marti added, “do you think it’s all for show?”

“What is?” I asked, for a moment wondering if she meant Jigen. My mind was definitely slowing down at switching tracks.

“Lupin’s flirting,” Marti clarified. “Does he ever actually get in bed with any of these people he flirts with, or claims to have bagged?”

I blinked, nonplussed. I’d never really thought about that possibility seriously. It had crossed my mind, but mostly out of sheer disbelief at his success rate, not any need to cover something up. Which, now that Marti was saying it, was probably a terribly male thing to do, and I looked away, sheepishly.

“I...assume so?” I muttered, rubbing at the back of my neck—or as much as I could with my new tennis balls of gauze. “I’ve caught him in bed with people before.”

And wasn’t that always fun. The time with Guy had been rather...alarming, for everyone involved.

*Not to mention the fact that he’s come onto me a couple of times.*

I was never sure if he did that just to get me off-balance emotionally or because he wanted something that the physical distraction would allow, but one way or another, I had always assumed it was part of a ploy. Or just a young guy, not knowing any better.

*Though there was that time on the cruise ship, recently....*

“Oh,” Marti replied, a little surprised, clearly starting to imagine me catching Lupin’s trysts in the act. I waited, eyeing her, expecting to be asked about it—I could see it on her face—but she chuckled and then swiftly moved along, thankfully. Apparently she’d decided in her own mind exactly how that had gone, for better or worse. “Well, that’s good though!”

She smiled brightly, like a summer wind had gone through her, until she abruptly paused: “Well, unless he’s overdoing it to compensate....”

“I always assumed he was just enjoying the springtime of his youth a little too much,” I replied, sitting back on my hands. It was hard from the gauze, but not impossible. Just a little extra stretch in the tendons; I could still cross my legs loosely while leaning back. “Because he had nothing else to do but gamble and steal and play with people’s emotions that was interesting enough to him. He would say he’s sweet on the ladies, but the truth is, women are complicated, and his lifestyle is a lonely one. He needs a diversion from himself, I’d guess, and they’re one of the few things that are complex enough to keep his attention.”

*And me, apparently. But criminals love messing with the cops, it’s their hobby.*
Though.... I gazed at Marti, suddenly recalling the way she’d looked in Donatello’s jewels, and the warm, golden light of that grand ballroom. To be honest, Lupin’s affinity for high-priced women always seemed to be tied to his heists. I’d watched him do it a million times during stings or surveillance, particularly ritzy parties where he was checking out marks.

That rarely went well for him, though, because he lacked their class and shallow tastes; it was an entirely fruitless match. No matter the fact that his grandmother had come from aristocracy, or that he was a con artist specializing in the wealthy; he couldn’t pull it off because he quite clearly hadn’t been raised in money.

Which...was interesting, now that I thought about it. It also probably meant that he’d never much met his paternal grandmother, who was the bankrupt aristocrat who had lovingly eloped with a criminal. Lupin had never once spoken of her, so he’d probably never met her at all. You’d think his grandfather, the thief, might at least talk about her, but maybe not, if he was a quiet type, and missed her...?

Either way: Lupin, nouveau-riche fellow that he was, just didn’t quite have what landed women were looking for no matter what he did, persona or not, and it was painful to watch sometimes. Mostly because, even though I wasn’t greatly upper-crust either among Western circles, I had professional acumen and knew my place. You could work with that, at society events of that kind. He didn’t have either one, because of the nature of his freelance profession and lack of mentors; a lot of his young career just involved feeling out things like that the hard way.

But he was a quick learner, and able to see through people. So his lack of success with high-priced women came off, to me at least, like he wasn’t trying very hard. He seemed to be going after that group of women—the supermodels and the trophy wives—because it was expected of whatever part he was playing. Be it within the heist, or the “man of mystery” brand he was cultivating. In short, he either felt it was either expected of him, or it was entirely a diversion.

Because the bodies he actually scored with were a different story. I’d found them through interviews that involved hitting the pavement and a little bit of arm twisting: bookish regulars at his favorite jazz clubs in any given town; surprisingly gentle people on the trail of talent he’d needed to pull of his work; even victims’ wives, sometimes. It was always people on the outskirts: The working women with big dreams that had stalled due to circumstance; the “gentle giant” criminals who had to hide their kindnesses; the kept women in big houses whose greener pastures had turned brown a long time ago. People who, if you put them all together, were just a little bit like him, in one particular way: They were smart, lonely, and adrift.

Lupin would no doubt call them the “art” of the human race; they who spent their existences unappreciated.

And they’d always said he’d been magnificently loving. I hadn’t believed it the first few times —Sure, just a player and you don’t know any better, or maybe, Did he pay you to say that?, and after the first few times, Do you just want attention, to hook onto this myth?—but eventually, I’d come to the conclusion it was actually true.

He appreciated art, inanimate or not. He knew how to love it. That, more than anything, was his career.

I never would have expected it from the skinny little guy who had come into Arsene’s bar when I first met him—he was too young and flashy. But even once he’d gotten onto the payroll, hunkering down into work of one kind or another that his father twisted his arm into doing, it quickly became apparent that he put himself into his work so thoroughly that I wasn’t sure he ever got laid or attached to anybody.... Except for a few very badly-placed older men, most of whom were there
specifically to take advantage of him.

(Even Dapple, it turned out, was there primarily to get acting lessons from him, with a side of piano and singing, in order to further her attempt at an acting career. They were each other’s Friends with Benefits in the drama club, nothing more.)

Which was something interesting, wasn’t it—that the women he slept with were vulnerable people that needed love. But when he slept with men, they were always older than him, emotional and physical providers. Like Guy.

I said this to Marti, and she hummed thoughtfully.

“Seems like he imprinted on older men being a source of comfort, but not necessarily within healthy relationships. But the women are more receptive to assistance, and ‘dashing men’ are expected to resolve that, so he enjoys helping them where he can—but in ethereal ways where he doesn’t have to attach.”

As the radiator quietly steamed to life, Marti tilted her head and twisted a finger through her curls, grass-green eyes glaring a the wall in thought. “It’s very Robin Hood-esque. On a personal level, it probably makes him feel successful to perform the ‘savior’ role in that myth. Most likely because the people around him needed one, but never had it.”

I frowned. “That’d be an exceptional thing to do, if it was. Most people don’t try to be the thing they lacked, growing up.” Except maybe teachers.

“That’s what he is though, isn’t he? Exceptional?”

“Well that’s true, but...”

“And you’re exceptional too, for following after him so successfully.” Marti cut me off with a wink. “And for trying to help him while you’re at it.”

I couldn’t help but smile at that. “You butter my toast so well.”

She grinned and chuckled. “Anything for my dashing Tokyo samurai.”

I quickly stared at the floor and bit down a smile at that, abashed. “If I am, you’re even better. My perfect Hollywood redhead.”

“Aww. Thank you,” she preened, standing up a little straighter and letting the curl go. It sprung back into place, but not before setting the whole section of her hair a-wiggle cheerfully.

I lifted my head to gaze at her pretty form, her pretty soul, and pleasantly, she gazed right back, smiling. I loved the way it moved her freckles around—

Really, I just love her, don’t I?

“But...ah. Us aside...” I said, turning away to keep the warmth in me from turning into other thoughts, “does that lead you to think there’s a history of abuse in his life?”

I ended up looking out the window. The snow outside was still falling, gentle, grey, and barren.

“From men probably, of some emotional variety,” Marti offered quietly from her spot against the counter, after a time. “But sexual? Promiscuity doesn’t necessarily imply that. Pretending to be and hiding it though, that’s a different story. And chivalrously helping women, I don’t know what that means, exactly, for his sex life. That’d point more toward seeing women in bad situations and not being able to help, when he was younger. Or...the opposite: growing up with no women at all, and
seeing them only as trophies. Though from what I’ve seen, he actually wants to help people, so it’s probably the former. He’s...rather kind, really. Thoughtful, too.”

She got a funny smile on her face then, sort of warm and dreamy but a little bit of a smirk too.


“Oh, nothing,” she said, waving her hand.

I eyed her, but decided to catalog that question for later; there were more important things at hand. “So if you put all the clues together,” I murmured, “His mother was in a bad place, and it fell on him too.”

“I would assume so,” she said. “Do you know if he grew up poor?”

“I don’t. But I suspect he lived frugally at least, from the way he acts at society parties and the like.” On top of everything else, he displayed a strange dichotomy of spending behaviors. I’d have to ask him about that, actually, when I got the chance.

He tended to spend a lot when he was around other people, generous to friends and locals in need, in the way mobsters liked to publicly present themselves, which was probably a trait he picked up from his father’s people. But then he’d also give the spoils of his diamond heists to women (much to Jigen’s ire, no doubt), which was quite unusual for anyone who actually had to work for their money. (Unless he was just a softie in the face of women in need, and an idiot in the face of manipulative ones. Which was not impossible, to be honest.)

But at the same time, when he was pulling off heists, he never stayed in high-priced hotels. I’d never really known if that was simply because of their location or because of personal preference. Ritzy hotels were much better gatekeepers when cops and rivals came around, so it had always made me wonder.

Also, when he was being social, I had no idea if he went through money like a sieve because he could, because he couldn’t help himself, or because he wasn’t expecting to live that long. Or if he actually didn’t spend that much of what he had, but it just looked big because of what I was used to.

I fell silent at that.

_Dammit, Lupin...._

“But you know, he’s doing pretty damn well for that, all told.”

“Ah?”

“He’s not like, a drug addict in a gutter somewhere, or a paycheck-to-paycheck guy with three kids from three different women, no education, and getting arrested for beating up girlfriend number four.”

“Christ, don’t even say that,” I sighed, even though I chuckled, chagrined, at the image. I certainly wouldn’t be here if that were the case.

She shrugged, smirking. “Small blessings, right? But what I mean is, don’t panic. Personal damage is mendable, so long as the other person wants it to be. What we have to focus on now is finding out what the hell’s going on, and deal with that. And keeping him from further attacks, obviously.”
“That’s true enough. There’s one thing left that bothers me with all this, though.”

“Mm? Shoot.”

I looked back at her sharply, warily. “Did you know that Lupin cross dresses?”

“What?” Marti asked, only to suddenly turn thoughtful. “Oh, though I guess it was in his file, wasn’t it? That he occasionally dresses up as women as part of his disguises. I guess it was just so weird and the note so cursory, I kind of brushed over it.”

I had written, on Page 6 under “Known Habits — Within Acts of Criminal Conduct.” I’d left it vague and curt on purpose, so people could keep a lookout for it, but not give it too much emphasis. Lupin had enough eccentricities; he didn’t need the complications from law enforcement and jailors that the mark of “serial cross-dresser” would leave on him too.

“Yeah, it’s such an outlier thing, it’s easy to dismiss if you haven’t seen him do it before. But he’s actually really convincing about it. He’s walked right by me, even spoken to me, and I haven’t noticed it’s him.”

“What? Really?”

“Yeah. Latex is a hell of a thing, and he’s got an impressionist’s voice ability.”

“Huh...” Marti glanced at the ceiling, a slashing smirk parting one side of her face. “I wonder where he learned to do that?”

“Dunno. Probably paid somebody for lessons.” Somebody who wanted sex in return, at the rate these thoughts were going. “Though I’ve always just put it all into the ‘he’s a total fruitcake in every sense of the word,’ box,” I continued, before she could get any ideas about asking him for lessons herself. “That he’s an actor that likes stretching his skills and making people uncomfortable, all of which is true and he’s admitted to before. But...” I bit my lip and pinched my eyebrow together. “In the context of determining if he’s been molested...?”

“Well, first of all, cross-dressing is not a sign of being molested as a child,” Marti offered, waiving a finger as she thought, her gaze coming down from the heavens and settling on me. “It’s more a sign of not being comfortable in the gender you are. Though it depends on why you do it.”

I shrugged. “Supposedly, he does it because ‘it just feels good to be a woman sometimes.’”

Marti took a breath, then sighed it out.

“What?” I asked, straightening up. “Is that bad?”

“It’s not...bad, per se. It’s just...tough.”

I frowned. “Tough how?”

In Japanese, “that’s tough” or “that’s difficult” was often used to politely convey, “I’m sorry but, that is an insurmountable problem I can’t possibly help you with, even though I know it leaves you to the wolves.” The British did it too. I wasn’t sure about the Italians.

“For him.” She shook her head. “I’ll have to ask him about it. God, that pysch consult sheet just keeps getting longer....”
“You want to give him one? When he wakes up?”

“Of course,” she answered immediately. “It would be negligent of me not to, now that this has happened. The hospital probably will anyway, but since they’re so short-staffed, I might have to. Which is fine; I’m trained in it.”

“I doubt he’d tell you the truth, though.” He’d probably make sport of it, in fact.

“I know...,” she murmured, lips pursing as she came to look out the window too. “That’s the trick, isn’t it. Find out some way to get him to.”

I scratched at the back of my neck. “Yeah....”

“I wonder what’ll be the key to get him to open up, now that this has happened?” Marti wondered aloud. She pulled out a physical key from her pocket and started looking through the drawers she hadn’t opened already.

“Where’d you get that?” I asked, curious.

“Nadia,” she said, shrugging. “Before I left the OR, I told her I needed to give myself some stitches. She’s got a big ring of keys, to the whole place.”

“Ah.” Just thinking about the operating room made me shiver again, and I quickly pushed the image aside. Still, it was good to know Nadia was the go-to woman, if I needed supplies of any sort.

Marti rummaged through a few drawers, then with an “ah-hah!” pulled out a clinking set of small devices, from the sounds of it. “No point in worrying about it now though, I suppose,” she said, talking into the counter.

“That’s true enough,” I said to her back, comforted by the familiar shape of it in good health, but eventually sighing again. I put my chin in my hand and gazed out the window, toward the sea. *Lupin’s key...*
“Hey, Lupin.”

“Yeah?”

“...What the hell are we doing here?”

“I am getting some sleep. I don’t know what you’re doing.”

We were on a cruise ship. A big one, with thousands of people, that happened to be in the middle of shark-infested waters with no land for hundreds of miles.

Not to mention the sharks on the boat, who were circling ever closer to us.

Beside me, Lupin flexed his long fingers. He was lying on the cabin’s bed, about a foot away from me, his hands folded over his ribcage and eyes determined to stay serenely closed.

I returned to staring at the ceiling, grinding my teeth. I hadn’t realized it before, but I was holding my breath. Being this close to him and unable to put cuffs on those dextrous wrists was driving me crazy.

“Just say it,” Lupin sighed, without opening his eyes.

“Say what,” I ground out, obstinately.

I’d followed him here to nab him, mostly on a last-minute whim from an even more last-minute tip. He’d sent me an invite, actually, but it’d arrived late, since he tended to mail them from strange, remote places and have them go halfway around the world first as a maze barrier. It was amazing any of them came, really. Did he send multiples just to be sure? I suppose I could ask
him....

Hell, though, sometimes he delivered them in person just to fuck with me.

Nevermind. I wasn’t asking. I could already imagine the wicked grin he’d give me in response, and I refused to give him that satisfaction.

Regardless, here we now were, stuck in a ship cabin together.

My bosses didn’t exactly want to shell out for some high-cost, last-minute cruise tickets just in case their bosses saw the expense list, so I’d shuffled on of my own authority as one of the crew via some arm twisting and gun flashing. But things had not gone to plan.

Not that there was much of a plan on my part, but that’d never been a problem before.

Still, naturally, Lupin was on this ship for a reason. Not the guests’ gems like the letter and its swooping penmanship had peepily claimed, but the people themselves. There were high-level shadow-criminals from around the world on this ship, arms dealers and the like, and he wanted me and my team to overhear them, take some of them down—while he no doubt investigated something even deeper that would take him to some remote hellhole and even more danger later.

It made me want to strangle him. He didn’t have to go through all this on his own; he didn’t have to play crazy games to take down bad guys; didn’t he know that?

Why didn’t he know that? The idea of his talent being wasted due to any number of quick and untimely death strategies drove me insane. I guess I was going to be strangling him with two hands, when I finally snapped.

Regardless, the captain was not impressed with my behavior when the crew member I’d threatened had woken up and promptly squealed (I was still actively avoiding them). But it had been Lupin, in fact, who had stepped in to save my ass from getting thrown overboard.

I would have thought they’d just have a brig, but you know, when you didn’t respect international police authority anyway because you were chartered by world criminals, well...I was a loose end that was bad for business. I had to be snipped.

No doubt about it, this was a hot spot in a very cold ocean, and the stakes were high. The amount of high-court crime being bartered at every table on a certain floor of this ship could have given a lawman a lifetime’s worth of commendations a hundred times over and a promotion straight to the UN on top of it.

However, such a deadly game was not what I’d been expecting to have aimed at me, no less me without backup. I should have, given that it was Lupin’s intricate and multi-faceted schemes I was dealing with, but I hadn’t done the research properly, given the short amount of time.

Lupin was usually sportingly polite about keeping the playing field (mostly) level, and had gotten even moreso as he’d aged; it honestly must have been the mail that delayed the letter.

On the other hand, the thief had planned for everything he could have possibly encountered on his own; it was his job. What he hadn’t planned on was the way in which I’d come aboard. But it seemed my card had been a little too wild this time around.

He’d been planning to—had set up a scenario in which he’d—have to hide from me, enjoying the prolonged game of hide-and-seek as I searched the passengers. He assumed I’d figure out his disguise just as the ship would dock a week later, and he’d make a tidy escape while my team and I
would stay behind to arrest all the hapless villains, who were, by sheer number, a greater issue.

But once he’d had to reveal himself to me on the first night, at the ship’s formal dance, his carefully laid plans had unwound pretty fast.

Not that Lupin minded that, generally; his professional pride was in rolling with the punches as much as his personal pride was playing Robin Hood. If everything went according to plan, he usually considered it a dull affair. But this time, there was something else going on.

He was not rolling with the punches; he was stumbling repeatedly, and it was bothering him.

It was bothering me too, but for different reasons. I didn’t want to watch him get killed. And I certainly didn’t want to get killed, which I would now that we were working together, if he went down. He, potentially, could wiggle his way out if I was caught; I didn’t expect any loyalty from him about that. He was a criminal; but also, he was the younger, and in this instance, more capable, part of the team. He should save himself and continue on with the mission.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see him turn his head in the low light. His dark blue eyes stared at me, catching the South Seas moonlight and boring in.

I refused to look at them.

“You are tense as hell; there’s something you want to say,” he insisted. “I can’t get any sleep while you’re grinding your teeth, so spit it out already.”

“No.”

His eyes scrunched shut. “Just say it—”

“No.”

“Dammit—”

“Why the hell are you dressed like that.”

There. I didn’t feel proud about it, but I’d said it. Even though I’d ground down a couple of molars to do it, my jaw was clenched so hard.

But I didn’t get a thank-you. Instead, Lupin sighed a long-suffering sigh like I was just so predictable and turned back to the ceiling, at which point he closed his eyes sagely. “You know as well as I do, it’s for the job,” he said, with barely restrained complaint. “They find out I’m me, they’ll throw me overboard. You too, by association,” he added quietly.

Just as they were about to close in, slit my throat, and throw me over, he’d walked right up to me out of nowhere and dragged me out of the crowd.

While pretending to be a woman in a very large ballgown.

“Don’t you have friends here?” I asked.

“Who wouldn’t sell me out for a spot at the table?” Eyes still closed, his eyebrows raised slightly. “Hard to say. Not everybody is as willing as I am to row back to Indonesia.”

“Jesus.”

—The air was cool on the deck. We’d left behind the shallow waters of the Indonesian islands
hours ago, and now there were no specs of land in sight. It was as if all that had ever existed was this ship.

It was our island, surrounded by nothing but blackness. Strung with fairy lights up and down its framing, sitting under a heaven of stars that reflected upon a sea that occasionally leapt with life, this party was turning out to be something out of Oberon’s homeland. Each person was wearing ridiculously fine suits and dresses, colors like a rainforest garden in full bloom. Not to mention the hundreds of thousands of dollars of gems that glittered on every dress and throat.

And there I was, shifting in and out of people in the only suit I’d thrown in my suitcase, trying to blend in enough to go unnoticed.

Unfortunately, the crew were looking for me. And they were closing in. I could see the captain and the first mate from where I was, one at my back and one at my front, and a dozen regular crew were standing on the deck above us, at the railing, surveying the crowd. None of them had noticed me yet, but it was only a matter of time.

There were people guarding the exits to other decks too, so without a key to get into the rooms on this floor, I was trapped. And the drink and oeuves d’oeuvres staff, they knew to watch for me too as they cycled about. I could feel my time ticking down.

Ticking down to a matter of seconds.

They would throw me below decks, interrogate me, and quite possibly, shoot me. They might poison me, too, and conveniently add me to the list of people who had died at sea. Throw in a guy with heart disease to make it look normal, and off they’d sail once more.

If they even bothered keeping my body. It wasn’t like I was on the guest list, and, according to the laws of international waters, they had a right to off-board me however they deemed fit.

I threw my back against the wall and did my best to look like I was chatting with the nearest couple. A man and a woman, one in a white suit and the other in a big yellow dress. If nothing else, that dress would be big enough to trip someone with. If only I could hide under it, damn. It made me realize all of a sudden why that sort of thing showed up in old books all the time. A strategically placed hoop skirt really could save a life.

Checking back at the nearest crew members, I took a breath and shuffled behind the woman, up against the wall. “Hey there—”

Before the pair could even properly look at me, I was cut off by a scream.

It had come from across the deck, on the edge. The crowd perked up immediately, and then started rushing toward the railing.

“Falling! He’s falling!”

“Get him up!”

“Somebody, here! Somebody, pull him up!”

Just with me and the rest of the crowd, the crew had turned away, going for whatever drunken escapade was happening on the railing. Hopefully it was that, and not the mafia’s murders already playing out.

Just as I remembered to track the nearest crew again, a body pressed up against me—and a dress,
big and floofy. The fact of that puffy fabric alone kept me from jumping back a foot in alarm.

“Sounds like a good time to hit up the bar, huh handsome?”

A woman’s arm smoothly twined around mine, just as her whisper did. Startled, I turned around to face the intruder—away from the action, away from the couple that was my safety net. They’d turned around, rubber necking, forgetting all about me.

When I looked down, I found a young woman clinging to my arm and pressed into my side with a delighted, hopeful smile on her face. She was dressed to the nines—bright red lips, glinting gems, and all.

And she may have just been drunk, from how intently her sparkling eyes were gazing up at me.

Her hair was reddish-brown and long; a jewel-encrusted braid around the top of her head framed a heart-shaped face. Blood-red gloves went up to her biceps, and a big, blood-red ballgown of many tiers swooped out to her sides, engulfing the lower half of my view. There were silver crystals in the rouching, catching all the string lights above our heads.

It reminded me of Marti, that night long ago.

“We should probably clear the deck, just incase they need an emergency crew,” she announced thoughtfully, though slurring a little. She tugged on my arm cutely. “Did you bring your key?”

The woman raised a keycard in her hand, and, still leaning on me, ungracefully swiped it through the door lock behind us. It took her a try or two, but she managed it, when I unconsciously held up her wrist to steady her sloppy hand.

“Oh, a gentleman too...,” she mumbled. “I have such good taste.”

God be good, I might be saved. By a poor drunk woman, who I would now have to politely pry myself away from somehow.

Unless...I could spend the night hiding out with her. There...might be a way to do it, without her crawling all over me. Maybe.

“Tell me what you do,” she asked peppily, flinging the security door open with what appeared to be superstrength and then bringing the both of us into the hall with her unquestionable momentum.

“I... Um....” Shit, I should have thought up an alias. A second alias. I’d been so preoccupied with the game of cat-and-mouse that I hadn’t had time for that. “I’d rather not say....”

“Nee hee hee. A mystery man, huh?”

As she snuggled into the crook of my arm, I looked up just long enough to see someone approaching us from the other direction in the white and gold suits of the crew. But before we could make eye contact, my vision blurred—

Because the woman had grabbed my face and kissed me.

And was still kissing me.

And it was good.

Under long, heavy strokes of soft lips, her arms came up and held mine in a grip that was far tighter than was necessary. Not that I noticed much else though, because of what those lips were
Still, she must have been incredibly drunk, and she could have had someone she was with immediately nearby. Hell, maybe she thought I was someone else, with how loving and lasting this kiss was turning out to be. I tried to push her away, but she just pushed me against the wall and pressed herself up against me.

The crinkling, blood-red silk ballooned up around us, so loud I could barely hear. But that guard was out there; slowly, I let myself be taken by the kiss—thinking of Marti, praying to the gods that like us together—and slid my hands around this woman’s tiny waist.

When the footsteps of the crew member went by, he chuckled; and he must have continued on out the door, because it shut a moment later, leaving me unmolested.

Well, unmolested by anyone other than this crazy woman.

One of her slender arms had come around my head, forcing it still with her red-gloved hand, and the other held my waist, a very inappropriate and possessive hold. But she was kissing me, hard.

Several strokes went by before the red lipstick parted, no doubt leaving a river of traces on me. I could feel it.

The woman’s hand groped me as a parting shot. “I love a good man of mystery.”

As I looked down, her waterfall earrings dangled, catching the light—and my gaze.

It was a good kiss. Very good, in fact. It was making me rather warm.

I gulped and looked down into those red lips—and then her eyes. They were blue, dark and smokey.

Not green. A little part of me grieved, at that.

Though then the next part wondered what the hell I was doing.

Just as I went to push her away, the woman leaned in and tucked her head against my shoulder, while also sliding her hands around my back and clasping them.

Her head blocked my view of the hallway, and thereby anyone’s view of me, but that didn’t stop my heart from racing. Instinctively, I looked at the security door, but there was no glass there. Seemed I was safe from the crew for as long as that emergency played out, which probably wouldn’t be long.

Resigned, I leaned back and gently settled my hands on the woman’s poofy gown, because there was really no where else for them to go. It felt odd, touching anyone but Marti, but...here I was, and I was probably about to go even deeper. Much deeper than I wanted. “Um.... Miss?”

“Inspector,” replied a man’s intimate whisper in my ear, “You need to come with me.”

It was a familiar voice—as was the wry smile in it.

It took me a minute, but the shiver of realization came and went, leaving my breath caught in my throat.

“You’re about to be shot, if you don’t.”
I shoved Lupin away and gave him a heated once-over: Red dress, red rouching, silver glittery bits. A tiny frame with delicate arms in red three-quarter gloves, reddish-brown hair done up in a braid atop the head to accentuate a long, slender neck. Silver-and-diamond waterfall earrings, red lipstick, dark eyeshadow. No hint of sideburns, an Adam’s Apple, a man’s eyebrows, a man’s jaw, or even a man’s collarbone—even though all the suspect parts were there for show. Hell, there was even a bust inside that sweetheart neckline; I’d felt it.

Quite simply, even though he’d revealed himself, I couldn’t see “him.”

And yet I was the one who was supposed to find him anywhere he went.

“Where did your dick go?” I demanded. It was a non sequitur, but also...rather prudent. I hadn’t felt it, despite all that rubbing up against me.

Once he’d regained his footing across the narrow hall, Lupin tipped his head at me, curiously. “It’s still there,” he announced, then looked down innocently at himself. He patted and plucked at the dress as he did so, smoothing it out. The little silver crystals glinted every time he moved the fabric. “Clearly you’ve never worn this much crepe.”—

“But why...are you still wearing it?” I demanded, rubbing at my lips to get the memory out of them.

“I doubt they will respect our privacy just because the door’s locked,” Lupin replied, trying his best to remain polite. He looked relaxed on the outside, but every word was elongated, dripping with barely-restrained annoyance, and even his contractions had fallen away.

“So get under the covers.” I could understand the wig for that, but the dress?

Admittedly, today’s wasn’t that huge ruffly red thing that probably cost ten grand, but it was still, very obviously, a dress.

There was a rustling of sheets and clothing then, just a whisper as the bed depressed. Lupin had turned to me—and apparently decided to turn all the way over, until he was lying on his side, his head in his hand. Out of the corner of my eye, I could tell he was gazing at me, silently.

I wouldn’t look at him. I wouldn’t.

Not in the goddamned moonlight, no less.

But there was an ominous crinkling of sheets; he was, very slowly, getting closer to me.

I turned to him with a snort to put a stop to that nonsense, but the view that hit me ended up stopping me, instead.

Lupin’s dark blue eyes were shining nearly silver in the low light, and his body, wig and all, was draped in moonlight. Fibers sparkled here and there like distant shine on the ocean’s surface, and his face had lost most of its definition until it was nothing but mathematical perfection. The shape was startlingly different than normal too, much rounder and softer, given the reddish-brown long-haired wig that fell over his shoulders and spilled in front of his chest, which itself had the specter of volume from the colorful dress.

And the look in his eye was intent. So very, startlingly intent—and inviting.

“Why, you want me there?” he whispered gently, after holding my gaze for a bit. His voice was part feminine, part masculine; and it made me shiver a little, to be so close to it, while being held under the stare of those piercing eyes.
It’s no wonder his father thought he was so strange. If Lupin had shown him something like this, it was little wonder he’d gotten beaten to hell.

My eyes flashed, breathing stopped. Lupin smiled just a bit, but schooled it back politely. But even that was bewitchingly feminine. There was grace all over him, somehow, even in this.

It was not something that should have been injured, just for being itself.

“Are you propositioning me?” I managed finally.

“Do you want me to be?” Lupin whispered back, playfully. He didn’t move other than to blink, ever keeping his relaxed gaze on mine. But then, all of a sudden, his voice turned icy. “Or are you telling me I make you uncomfortable and I should be ashamed?”

The accusation was so cold and dagger sharp it made me shiver. “Well, n-no, but....”

Suddenly, it was very hard to think.

In the silence that was the trainwreck of my mind stretching out between us, Lupin did something even more horrifying. He slowly—hesitantly—reached out and closed that gap.

I drew back a bit, instinctively, but was too overwhelmed to move completely; the covers seemed like too much resistance to my hobbled mind, and it told me to stay instead.

Lupin’s hand stroked down the side of my face; it seemed small, and cool, yet remarkably tender. So tender that he barely touched me; the hairs on my cheek tickled more strongly than his touch came down upon me. It stunned me into silence for another moment—which Lupin immediately took advantage of, drawing his hand down farther.

My body started tingling in response, betraying thing that it was—until a moment later, when everything started to hurt, because I was thinking about how much that space, that touch, that feeling, was reserved for a different redhead.

It made me ache for her—and to get this person away from me.

The fact of who it was that was doing this hadn’t even registered, yet. It was just my heart, crying out for Anna.

“Have you wanted to try it?” Lupin continued, in that same, half-feminine breathy tone as before. But it wasn’t being purposefully overdone; it appeared to be natural to him, and even quiet, it seemed so loud in the intimate space of this tiny cabin.

I didn’t want this to continue. But the disconnect between the person I knew to be speaking to me and the person that feminine voice appeared to belong to prevented me from processing properly; everything “he” said struck me at a delay of multiple seconds, at which point “he” was already on the next thing.

Unfortunately.

“I’ll let you be on top,” he whispered slowly, kindly. “Though I can do it too, if you want. I know how; I can make it good for you.”

I could only describe the shaken breath what came out of my mouth as a strangled noise. Across from me, not put off in the slightest, Lupin smiled a bit, anemic.
“Tell me,” he whispered, sliding up against my side and molding his leg around mine. By the time his knee hooked over mine and started pulling my leg back, I finally felt his dick.

Which was what made everything come crashing together. My brain processed the backlog of thoughts in an instant, and I was suddenly free to do what I’d been wanting all this time:

To get him away from me.

The effect was, unfortunately, that I snapped. I jerked away with a shout of surprise and kicked him—hard, right in the stomach.

It was actually a rather acrobatic move, and the fact of it shocked me for a second.

As did the sight of Lupin disappearing. With a sharp yelp, he fell right off the bed and tumbled onto the floor, out of sight.

It sounded like it hurt, what with the clatter of limbs, grunts of pain, and gasp for breath.

But I didn’t want to look. I didn’t want to ask.

Because, while part of me wanted to do nothing but shout “What the hell was that all about?!”, the other part of me was rather alarmed that I’d mercilessly physically injure someone who was, while not getting the message, being otherwise quite gentle.

Someone who was also presenting as a woman? Kind of? And was sort of like my son?

I shuddered. That painful prickle went up and down my body again, but even worse this time.

*Ugh.... The things I put up with for work.*

He was probably just messing with me anyway, trying to get me to run away and leave him to his plotting in this cabin, all alone for the night. There was probably something in here that he didn’t want to me to see, that he wanted to get his hands on and tinker with. Or someone.

...Hopefully, that someone wasn’t *me*.

Lupin’s head poked up from the edge of the bed as he sat up, looking startled and unkempt.

“What was that for?” he squawked, turning around to face me. For a moment, his eyes caught the light, and he looked somewhat demonic.

*Ugh.* Annoyed at him and the view, I curtly rolled over. “What the hell is wrong with you? Don’t fuck around, or I’ll add it to your warrant,” I grumbled.

I could feel Lupin pause behind me, then sigh through his nose, resigned. It sounded like he’d given up on getting up, and was just sitting on the floor.

What, you’re disappointed you have to reformulate your plan? I grumbled to myself. *Piss-poor plan that was, then.*

But Lupin didn’t complain like I was expecting, good-naturedly or otherwise. Instead, he just sat there for a bit, silently. After several long moments, he picked himself off the floor with a soft sigh; I could hear his feet stick to the wood as he walked the length of the bed, toward the other end of the room.

“You all right over there?” I called, warningly. It wasn’t a friendly question. But still, I looked over
my shoulder, wanting to keep track of what he was doing.

“If I’m gonna get arrested, might as well do something to deserve it, huh?” Lupin asked from across the tiny cabin after a while, ignoring my more recent question.

*Fine, don’t care if I care.* “Yeah, whatever.” I shut my eyes, but ended up only bristling more, as the clink of wood and glass came. Seemed he was putting together some alcohol from the cabinet.

*What, it’d bothered him that much?* No...probably more that he needed to forget what he’d just forced himself to do. I know I would have. We’d done some weird things together to evade capture, but this was far from anything I’d ever dreamed up.

“What happened to Jigen, anyway?” I grumbled, trying to get the prickly sensation to go away. “Aren’t you dating him or something?”

“Jigen and I are *just* fine,” Lupin said, attention on the liquid as it poured. “Though he *is* a little annoyed that you’re stealing his spot tonight.”

“Well that’s just...”

*Wait...*

“He’s on the ship?” I rolled over and sat up a bit.

Shit, if Jigen was around, I shouldn’t piss Lupin off too much. Jigen might just decide to do something about it, if I did. And I didn’t know what Jigen looked like under his disguises, so I wouldn’t see him coming.

But Lupin, naturally, was unconcerned by this, though he was still terse. Behind my line of sight, he set down what turned out to be a bottle of vodka, and spun the fancy cap back on. *“Of course. Who do you think ran that diversion so I could grab you?”* 

Lupin looked over his shoulder at me momentarily, darkly, then shrugged. He put the alcohol away without offering me any—which irked me, but at least he wasn’t going to try to get me drunk —and then opened the little dresser’s top drawer.

“What the hell were you doing just now?” I demanded.

Lupin didn’t respond.

God, this was starting to sound like a conversation with my ex-wife.

“What would make you think I want that, anyway?” I continued, voice raising. I sat up completely and faced him, just to make sure he got the point.

But what I saw then was not Lupin’s face, but Lupin’s back. Instead of taking up his newly-poured drink, he had turned away from me, and made a show of slowly undoing the zipper on the dress. Long, slender fingers pulled it all the way down to the hips, the dress unfolding like a flower blooming. Then, all of a sudden, he let it fall to the floor with a quiet *shiff*.

I couldn’t help but notice—since the view was there—that his skin was smooth and tan in the low light, the line of his spine pronounced. It was a youthful body, definitely in its twenties, and I was suddenly aware of how I hadn’t seen one of those naked in decades—at least, outside of traumatized vics I’d rescued from shipping containers and back rooms, and those hadn’t been nearly so nice.
And even though I knew it was a man’s—it had a man’s butt for sure—there was just something about it that looked feminine, too. With the wig draping down; the long, thin limbs that were limber like a dancer’s; and the lack of body hair back there...it was fooling my eyes even unclothed.

Well, mostly unclothed. There was underwear, a strange type, that looked more like a very thin sumo belt than anything. I guess that was how he kept everything tucked up.

God, Marti’s gonna kill me if she hears about this.

Though, knowing Marti, she’d probably get all excited to hear about what happened next and start psychoanalyzing it.

Not that I was ever going to tell her this. I had decided that the moment the woman in the red dress had showed up, pressed up against me, that this entire trip, if I survived it, was going into the "classified" category.

But what was the weirdest thing was how Lupin’s body movements were practiced, familiar, with the dress. It was...queer.

Which was probably why I couldn’t take my eyes off of it. Something new to understand—something new to explore, about this being I’d only gotten glimpses of for the last five years.

Lupin picked up the dress from the puddle it made on the floor, with nothing more than a graceful bend. But instead of folding it immediately, he pulled it to his chest, as if to keep himself warm. Like that, he slowly looked over his shoulder at me, eyes smokey and wig hair falling over his shoulder—and just a little bit of moonlit thigh revealed.

“Because you look lonely every time I see you,” he whispered.

“I have a—” I stopped myself, before I could reveal that juicy bit of information that he’d no doubt love to exploit. “—A perfectly good number of reasons to not need that from you,” I amended.

And anyway, why was I even entertaining this?

Beautiful as it is....

No, no. Stop thinking things like that. I shook my head out. He must practice this shit in a mirror, just to toy with people. People like you.

Hell, maybe he’d learned it from Toshiko.

As I wrestled with the emotional fallout of that idea, Lupin’s look lingered for a bit; it was clear he didn’t believe me.

“Pity,” he announced quietly, turning back around.

Still, it seemed he had accepted it for now, because he went about folding the cheerful dress and putting it away.

I, however, was still just as riled up, perhaps more now that I was trying not to think about my good-for-nothing daughter (who was really just very good at all the things I didn’t like). Honestly, I was almost ready to hit something again if I couldn’t flee from all this weirdness.

It wasn’t that I thought that other men’s forms were dirty or heinous to look upon somehow—I’d
seen plenty of them in bathhouses—but having this one offered up to me on a platter was not something I was okay with. It was making me remarkably angry for some reason, too angry to even think.

Who does he think I am, anyway?

It wasn’t the fact that I particularly disliked the idea of sleeping with men, either; it just wasn’t for me, and while the thought of being pursued did make me feel gross a little, it wasn’t like I denied it existed. It was just something about it coming from him; it made me, irrationally, want to shove him into a wall as violently as necessary to get the idea out of his head.

Which was...a really scary thought to be having. One I didn’t like at all. One that wasn’t me, at all. Especially considering that exact thing had happened to him various times in the past, from others.

God damnit Lupin, why are you doing this to me. Always a chore, you are.

Outside of my thoughts, Lupin was continuing his routine. Dress put away, he slipped on a nightie—a woman’s one. Just like that, the unquestionable femininity was back. He had turned into a woman again with the barest of ease, and proceeded to gingerly rub the spot where I’d kicked him.

—Which made most of anger dissipate. Guy underneath or not, what I saw was a woman, and I felt bad for hitting it.

Even worse, I felt bad for hitting Lupin. I’d seen the kid get beat up enough in his life; he didn’t need more of it, and certainly not from me.

It was only made worse by the fact that when Lupin hissed a little bit through gritted teeth, even that sounded feminine.

It was like his voice had totally changed. I knew he could manipulate it, but there was really no need to whisper; that was clearly a game.

Except...come to think of it, he whispered a lot, when he was dressed like a woman. He got tender and shy, too; soft was maybe a better term. But that’s also...queer, isn’t it?

But it was natural somehow, too. It...fit the form in front of me. It just didn’t fit my understanding of him.

But maybe it had been there all along, huh...? And I was the fooled one? Because I had to be fooled, in his eyes, since I was part of a macho gang?

When he was done rubbing his back, Lupin lingered there by the dresser for a moment, staring at me, looking frustrated.

I stared back, raising an eyebrow. “What?”

Hell, maybe I was the one that was going to get knocked into a wall. Wouldn’t that be different—“So why, then?” Lupin demanded suddenly. “Why do you chase me, if not for that?”

If not for sex?

“Are you serious?” I asked, blinking hard.

Who chased someone for five years just to fuck them?
The scrawny thief leaned back against the wall, his arms crossed. He shrugged, with no small bit of attitude. “You’re honestly the first cop to turn me down, dress or no.”

“Are you serious?” I asked anew, even more aghast. Lupin shrugged, looking away. “Who the hell have you met?” I demanded, professional rage flaring. “Tell me, I’ll have them arrested!”

Lupin shrugged again, one-shouldered and irritated; he picked up the glass of vodka from the dresser and sipped at it.

“Wait a minute,” I said, a different thought falling over me. “You’ve slept with cops? As in multiple? How many? When?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes,” he admitted, hiding his gaze in another sip.

“What?” I hissed, but Lupin only shrugged again. Annoyed, I huffed and forced myself to sit back down. Probably to get things out of locals.... For fuck’s sake. “Ugh. Don’t screw with me.”

Lupin looked a little disappointed, but he hid it behind his drink. “Yes, you’ve made that plenty clear.”

“Don’t get sassy with me.” I pointed a finger at him. “I’m only here to arrest you, nothing more. It’s not my fault you have a room with one bed and an indiscriminate sex drive.”

“Indiscrim—? Ugh.” Lupin cut himself off with an eyebrow twitch. “Yes, well, it wasn’t really meant for you. It’s not my fault you came without backup or an escape plan. In fact,” he said, pointing at me over his drink, “if it wasn’t for me, you’d be dead right now. So don’t complain when you’re on my dime.”

“A dirty dime.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Lupin put the glass down rather sharply, which caused me pause. “You know, you haven’t answered my question, either.”

“Yes I have,” I snorted, folding my arms and glaring at him. “I’m here to arrest you.”

“Yeah, but why,” Lupin snapped back in a rush, patience gone. “What about me offends you so much that you’d put your own life on the line like this when there are real bad guys out there? Like, I understand that you’re just one of those lonely, unhappy bulldog cops that do stupid shit like this because you have nothing else to live for, but why me? What is so wrong with me that you just won’t let me go?”

The last word was a strangled one, and he stood there, wild-eyed and braced on the dresser, panting.

“Is that...what you think?” I asked, stunned.

“Yes!” Lupin shouted. “Why else would you be so determined unless it’s to make me your bitch or your retriever—or maybe both?” He motioned at me emphatically, words coming out faster and faster, higher and higher pitched. “I know it’s not for the fame, though maybe some of the personal glory—”

“Don’t you know me better than that?!” I snapped, throwing my own hand out to the side for emphasis.

“I don’t know anything about you,” Lupin lobbed back, suddenly quiet and incredibly icy, which
stopped me in my tracks. “In case you’d forgotten, ‘you’ were a lie,” he whispered. “A lie that left me to die in a fire.”

**Hey now, I sent the firefighters in to get you.** Unfortunately, he’d been too unconscious to tell, and I’d had to go into hiding after that, so I couldn’t really deliver the message.

I glared at him, but was met with that same black look in return. I couldn’t remember actually seeing him look like that before, and it was enough to cause me pause. Seemed sweet-natured and long suffering Lupin was finally showing his teeth.

It made me feel eminently lucky that Jigen wasn’t here. If this had been anyone else...this could easily have involved a broken kneecap and someone tied to a chair. Undoubtedly, that someone would be me.

However, that aside, when I let myself think about it for a moment, Lupin’s complaint that he had no idea who I was in reality was a valid one. Though I was rather surprised that he’d been carrying it around all this time and never mentioned it. There had been plenty of time in Monaco, and other cases where we’d crossed paths; and hadn’t we covered it in Monaco, anyway? But maybe he’d been burying it because he was afraid to mention it. If he really felt that way still....

I sighed, sat back down, and closed my eyes. “I will tell you why I am so interested you,” I said, rubbing the bridge of my nose, “if you tell me why you are still dressing like that, after everything that’s happened to you because of it.”

He gave me a long glower, but eventually tisked and turned away, to stare at the door. “Not everyone beats you unconscious when you crossdress,” he said sourly, though he was a little less prickly overall.

“The do if they find out.”

“Yes, well, let me know if you’re going to rat me out, because that would make you marginally better than your daughter.”

My lips instantly tightened into a line. “Don’t you bring that up.”

Lupin shrugged and slugged back more alcohol. “Then don’t bring up my dad.”

Then he rubbed his jaw, like he still acutely remembered the pain of that beating.

After a while of glaring at that pitiful display, trying to push away my own memories of that night, I rolled my eyes and huffed. “Fine.”

Lupin slammed down his empty glass, wiped his mouth, and snorted. “So.”

“Right, well...” I eyed him, sizing him up. That had been an all-male display if I’d ever seen one, which let me know we were down to business. But Lupin, after a bit of glaring at the dresser, flicked his eyes over and gazed at me, looking ever more vulnerable by the minute.

What the hell was he expecting me to do with that?

I knew that look, and I hated it. I hadn’t seen it in years, but it always pushed a button in me.

Because I hated the fact that it had to exist.

“I can’t stand the fact that someone like you exists,” I snapped, which was true, but for different
reasons than he would understand. “You’re the opposite of everything I’ve ever stood for, and I won’t stop until the menace that is you, your crimes, and your gang’s flagrant celebritization of criminal activity is wiped from the map!”

It was so overdone—what I typically told the papers—that Lupin ended up staring at me with a blank look on his face.

He knew it was a lie, or at least, nothing more than a professional line; I could tell from here, in the way the vulnerability in his eyes was swallowed up by a flash of disappointment. At least, I hoped that was what that was. Because his face, after a couple of rapid blinks, very carefully closed itself off from showing any emotion at all.

_Fuck. That wasn’t right at all._

Well, it was. But it also wasn’t the whole story. It was the truth, but it wasn’t what I wanted him to hear. That wasn’t treating the disease; that was addressing the symptoms.

But I was too angry to think straight; the only thing going through my head was curse words. It wasn’t like “You know, you should really be a cop” was something he’d accept when he was in the middle of a job like this, pissed off that he had to save me. I was so pathetic right now, this whole situation was; what could I even offer him to make the argument seem like anything more than a joke?

Especially when he’d just all but admitted he’d blown crooked cops before.

_Jesus Christ._

I looked away quickly, grinding my forehead into my palm, trying to get myself together.

Maybe it was just...that I was too afraid to ask, now that I finally had the chance. This wasn’t the way I’d envisioned it going. Standing there in a dress, this also wasn’t the man I envisioned it going to.

Which shouldn’t have been a problem, but it was, apparently. _Fuck._

Across the room, Lupin sighed.

“Right. Well, then, if that’s your answer,” he began mildly, sitting down on the bed’s nearer side. His back was to me, like he might take his shoes off; but he didn’t have any. He just sat there for a minute though, staring at the wall, moonlight covering his back. “Then mine is that, ‘it’s just part of the plan.’”

“Lupin....”

“I’m going to sleep.” The thief rolled into bed, under the sheets this time; he pulled the covers up over his head so that I couldn’t see him. I could tell he rolled over, though, away from me. “I need to be on my A-game to deal with these people tomorrow. I’ll get your disguise made up for you, so that even if anyone searches the room, they won’t know it’s you. Just stay here, and you won’t get hurt. You’ll be safe. But don’t expect it after this, next time we meet.”

Before I could say anything, he burrowed into the mattress. “And if you change your mind about company tonight, just wake me up first, otherwise it’s terribly rude.”

“Ugh,” I muttered. The thought was so distasteful that it train-wrecked all the nice things I was going to say; they vanished in a puff of smoke. “You talk like such a prostitute.”
Why do I even care so much about someone like you?

There was a pause, and then a little rustle of the blanket lump near Lupin’s head. “Yeah, I guess I just keep their company too often. Haha.”

His voice was suddenly very light and happy, in a way that, if I hadn’t been so annoyed, I would have seen was incredibly suspicious.

But it seemed liked everything was fine. He’d probably thrown that last bit out there in a fit of pique, like I had. I’d probably be able to convince him otherwise tomorrow morning anyway, when neither of us was so tired, and in his case, full of vodka.

I could probably convince myself, too, that there was something still worth working toward, here, other than just locking this guy up and throwing away the key.

“Ugh.” I rolled into bed too, under the covers, but throwing a sheet layer between us. “Go to sleep. You’re drunk, aren’t you? Anyway, I’m not going to molest you. You want to know what kind of man I really am, that’s what it is.”

Lupin never did say anything. But he made a noise that made me think he was smiling, just a little bit.

But then again, Lupin was the kind of person to smile when he was unhappy.

That was the last conversation I’d had with Lupin, before I’d caught up to him on that rooftop yesterday. I’d never gotten the chance to explain myself; he hadn’t wanted to hear it, and furthermore, life-and-death developments hadn’t allowed it.

But he’d gotten out alive, and so had I. I figured it counted for something, though it was clear that thread of connection I had with him was on its last legs. One more misstep, and I might just be banished forever.

—*The red and orange of the flames, whisking up behind him as he turned and lunged for me, fear in his eyes*—

The fact that he’d reached out to me for help—rather than just grabbing for the building, or letting himself fall into those flames—meant there was still a door open somewhere. So did the fact that he was still talking with me, joking with me. He was gunshy now, but there was a possibility of repairing this ripped quilt.

Even if I didn’t deserve it.

I’d have to be honest with him this time, no matter what, and Marti would no doubt help.

But would he do the same for me?

The truth was, the only time Lupin ever opened up about himself was when he was hurting from his own actions. When he had to reveal something to maintain his position because he’d been pushed into a corner by circumstance or by others, he would only lie—it was part of the business, the game. He’d give you what you expected, not anything real.
In the end, the only time he ever showed the truth was when he was tormented. When he’d exhausted every option he had to get to his goal, and didn’t know what to do.

The only thing was, I never knew what his personal goal was—it was part of the onion shell that I had yet to peel on him—so I had no way of knowing when he’d exhaust his fuel source and collapse.

I’d only seen it once, after his father’s goons had beaten him half to death with his father watching it all; he hadn’t even opened up to me after I rescued him from Donatello, and mentally, he’d been in a much worse state then. So whatever was motivating him back in the day, had to have been something to do with his father, because after his father had disowned him so thoroughly was when, finally, he’d broken down and cried in my arms.

It took Lupin a long time to reach the end of his rope, but he’d get there eventually, and be in a miserable state once he did.

The last time I’d seen him, he’d already been on that downhill slide again.

The only question left was if we’d hit the breaking point yet—and if I could catch him, once we had.
Double Helix

Chapter Summary

The plot thickens...!

Chapter Notes

There have been more of you commenting lately. Thank you so much! It’s helping me refine the story a lot! :D

Halloween fun went great! I inspired my parents even, who are generally curmudgeons, but especially about Halloween. I got a lot of compliments and ran out of candy, though—apparently our neighborhood has become a "commuter candy" destination. Which is cool, but I was way underfunded! So I was only out there for an hour.

Oh, and I also ended up dressing up as Sophie, from Howl's Moving Castle.

Takeaways: Trick or Treaters' parents loved my forest, my parents loved my drive (I felt validated), people thought I was animatronic from afar, and kids don't know the state capitals, Jesus. xD But they do know math! :D

Zenigata was sitting a few feet away from me, his head between his hands, looking miserable.

It was ironic, really—I was the one that had gotten stabbed, but he was the one that looked like he was going to die. But that was policework for you. “So what now?” I asked him.

“I’m not sure,” he admitted heavily, after a time. He sighed, and, unfolding a bit, shook his head. “I have a sensational conclusion I don’t very much like, so I need to explore it a bit, first. I’m sure I’ll figure something out once I get some sleep, and after that, I can take stock of what we’ve got to work with when he wakes up.... If he wakes up....” He sighed again, and rubbed his hands over his hair briskly. “God, I need sleep.”

I nodded. That was a good a plan as any, for all involved. Zeni’d let me know what he found, if anything, and in the mean time, it wasn’t my place to nose around without orders. Lupin’s state was pretty fragile, mentally and physically, and while I could investigate allegations of childhood abuse well—I’d seen it more times than I could count in the prisons—it wasn’t my place to decide to do it on my own, though I could certainly make recommendations as Zenigata went about his investigation.

Like it or not, criminal investigations took precedence over mental health ones, though it was pretty clear at this point that the two were linked together in Lupin’s case. “What do you want me to do?”

He looked up at me and smiled just a little bit; despite the topic, it was wonderful to see him again. The moments of shock were getting shorter and shorter, which meant, over all, he was on the
mend.

Until he saw Lupin again, at least. I wasn’t sure what was going to happen when *that* happened—and heaven forbid Lupin die at some point hence. He would be out of it for weeks, probably *months*. Maybe even *years*. And then where would I be?

Waiting.

*Like you always do, Martí. Like you always do.*

Zenigata was in my life whenever Lupin was nearby, but that was about it. I tried to fool myself about it, but that was the truth. In many ways, being married to a detective was like being married to a fisherman. There were no set hours, and they’d be gone for years at a time.

Not that we were married though. *Nope nope nope.*

Though I wondered if he ever thought about it, like I did. Or if I was just barking up the wrong tree.

I stole a glance at him, his posture downcast and his body bruised and battered. He rested his elbows on his knees, as he sat atop the exam bed. His dark hair was still full and thick, though I didn’t usually get to see it from this angle.

And then he looked up at me, eyes sparkling and gentle the way they always were when they gazed upon me.

It was that look that kept me going, whenever I had reason to doubt, and this time was no different. Even as he spoke, I unwound a little bit, and smiled back.

Maybe...just maybe...I could keep this little family together.

“There’s nothing special at the moment that I need you to do,” Zeni said, oblivious to my thoughts. “Just keep doing what you’re doing, Marti. Be a friend to him, and your dependable self to me. We can regroup when Lupin wakes up, about how to keep him safe. In the mean time, just keep *yourself* safe. He *is* a prisoner, and we shouldn’t forget that.”

I shuffled the personal thoughts away and nodded again; it seemed he had returned to the idea of strict protocol, both for us as coworkers and Lupin as a prisoner, which was good; it was his stability and his protection and what he was really good at. There would be time for “us” later. At least...if he stuck around, anyway. I could make a case toward that end, but once things calmed down a bit.

In the mean time, I plastered a cool bandage over my arm’s new stitches. *Ahhhh.*

“What about you?” I asked, when I was done feeling the lovely balm.

“Me?” Zeni asked, looking up from between his hands with big eyes, which almost made me hug him in motherly pity now that I was free of medical implements.

“I can handle Lupin fine,” I explained, “but the Commissioner...?”

Lupin was a puppy, albeit a big one. But the other guys...nope, they were wolves and I lacked a shotgun. They’d have me running for the hills as soon as I saw their eyes shine in the headlights.

If Commissioner Carlotto was related to Donatello, then I needed to be nowhere near him. While
he’d been promoted only recently, it was guaranteed that he wasn’t politically inept or unconnected. Also, though it was true that I worked at the Interpol office liaising with Italy (which meant that there wasn’t much I needed to do that involved this town’s government at large), and my name was different from back then, the fact remained that my hair was still red, and I was still me, so if he’d ever seen me before, he’d probably figure it out, and then what?

I’d have to move, probably to another country—yet again. Switzerland was out, since the wealthy of France and Italy liked to go there. So England then, probably? That was a dreary prospect—the dark weather and buttoned-up culture was not something I’d get along with. And anyway, I liked my work friends and my neighbors, as well as my little apartment, with all its flowerboxes and bird feeders. Sigh.

Though maybe I could convince Zeni to go move to Japan with me, where he could show me the ropes? That might be fun. Or Brazil or Hawaii, with their big Japanese populations. We could have lots of fun there too. Maybe even somewhere like Puerto Rico, or Taiwan, if we wanted to live the beach life where no one would ever find us except Lupin.

Ah man...that was right. If Lupin didn’t wake up, I was never going to get my dress. Damn.

I was pretty sure he was going to, but you never knew, with these kinds of things. Not that I could tell Zenigata that, though.

“Well...” he began, wincing in response to my Commissioner question. He hung his head and rubbed his forehead with a hand. “I’d been trying not to think about it, I guess.”

I hummed, and went to work wrapping a stretchy, opaque-plastic ribbon around my arm, which I’d gotten out of the drawer a few moments ago. “Tell me when to hide.”

“Oh?”

“If he comes around, let me know, and I’ll hide somewhere.” I smiled at him tenaciously, as I pulled one end of the thin ribbon with my teeth so that I could get it where it needed to be. I spit it out when it was tied around my bicep and added, “I’m not leaving you alone here. Not when Lupin needs so much help too.”

Zenigata would be the first to want to shuffle me out when danger came. But that was just like him—to think he could save everybody, with zero help and a little bit of distance.

He frowned, first at me, then at what I was doing.

“Does the guy know your face? The Commissioner?” I continued. If there was a chance the guy knew me, there was also a fair chance he knew Zenigata, though not by that name.

“Probably not?” he asked. “I can’t recall ever seeing him before; I only know his relation because my boss texted it to me an hour ago. You think you have?”

“It’s possible?” I said back, equally unhelpfully. “Donny took me to a lot of parties. I don’t remember his name, but, I tend to be more memorable than the other way around, unfortunately.”

This last bit I murmured into my arm, pretending to have something to look at there.

Zenigata sighed, after a moment of looking at me that I pretended I didn’t notice.

“You think it’ll be okay if you end up meeting in person?” I continued, when he declined to speak on it further. “It’s not some trap?”
“Because of a family feud? Or what he wants now?” Zeni grumbled, rubbing his hand over the back of his neck. “I really don’t know.”

“He won’t shoot you on sight though, at least?”

“Probably not, but I should definitely check the car for bombs—Marti, what the hell are you doing? I can help, you know...?”

“Drawing blood.” I waved him off. “For blood tests. You don’t know if Lupin has anything, do you?”

I stuck the needle in my arm and started drawing the first vial of blood. Zeni, as I expected, looked away quickly, half likely to faint.

Still, I was praying Zenigata would say that Lupin didn’t have anything, but I wasn’t expecting much. He did manage to speak, though, which was a good sign that he wasn’t falling back into shock. Seeing that blood and insanity happen in his arms...seeing Lupin go through that operating trauma too... It appeared to be more than he could handle. Which was understandable, but he never had been good with blood to begin with, so that could only have made it worse.

It seemed that the only red he could handle was my hair and Lupin’s jacket.

“I don’t,” Zenigata admitted, voice sheepish and his face a little pink. “A-always seemed clean, though. Never mentioned anything.”

*Men rarely do.*

I nodded though, and with a few quick steps, labeled the first vial and went for a second. “Well, we’ll get this sent off. Tetanus shots for us both, I guess.”

Boo....

“Oh, by the way!” Zenigata said suddenly, with more pep than he had had in an hour, which was so unusual it almost scared me. He tried to clap his hands together, but it didn’t really work; they bounced off each other without much more sound than mittens. “Christof said that the blood in the basement...it looked funny somehow, so he was pretty sure Lupin had some sepsis going on.”

“Oh, by the way!” Zenigata said suddenly, with more pep than he had had in an hour, which was so unusual it almost scared me. He tried to clap his hands together, but it didn’t really work; they bounced off each other without much more sound than mittens. “Christof said that the blood in the basement...it looked funny somehow, so he was pretty sure Lupin had some sepsis going on.”

“Fuck,” I said, then added, “Ah, sorry.”

He shrugged at the curse, but his hands, snowballs that they were, stayed upturned, and his head tipped toward me a little. “He’ll be okay, right? You can fix that...?”

I took a breath, then sighed. *Me, or medicine in general?* “I’ll tell them to give him a shot as soon as they can.” I fingered the radio on my belt, and then tapped it. Christof was going to alert us when Lupin was out of surgery and headed to a recovery room for observation. I could tell them then. It wasn’t like they wouldn’t do it anyway alongside the regular cocktail of antibiotics for surgery like this, but might as well leave nothing to chance.

When I had gotten the second vial drawn and looked back at Zeni, he was staring at the ground, looking miserable again. *More shock? Not again....*

“This is going to sound childish, but...this is really hard, isn’t it?” he asked, surprising me. “Medicine?”

I set down the last of my tools and offered him an understanding smile. “Saving lives is tough,” I
admitted. “Bodies are tough, but life itself is very fragile.”

He nodded to himself, thinking on it as he rubbed his stubble. We’d both seen it more times than we could count, and it made me wonder just which instances he was thinking of.

Though, given the way his face was twisted, he was probably just hoping what he saw in the basement wouldn’t be added to the list.

The man I loved....looking so fragile and alone. That wouldn’t do.

I hopped off the counter and maneuvered over to Zenigata again. The spot next to him was still available, of course, but had gone cold. I scooted up beside him, until my leg was against his, and our warmth began to share. I wrapped an arm around his shoulder, and pulled him against me.

He didn’t resist it, but he didn’t melt, either. I took his nearest hand out from his lap and set it in mine, where I could hold it.

“Does it hurt?” I asked.

“My hand? A little, but I’ll live.” He looked at me briefly, trying to smile. “Thanks, Anna.”

I patted his arm. He didn’t have sleeves now, since he was wearing a scrub shirt. The hair on his arms was all gone, singed off up to his elbows.

“How’d this happen, anyway?” I asked, wondrous and, probably, a little on the scolding side.

But realizing that, I brought his gauzy hand up to my face and leaned down to gently kiss the safe skin on his arm.

His free hand came down on my head, and stroked it once, gently. I looked up, sat up, but he wasn’t really looking at me. He was staring at his hand, hollowly.

It was hard to see his soft brown eyes so distant and lost.

“There was fire, when the building collapsed. All around me. I pulled him out of it....”

He continued to stare at his hands, clearly trapped in the memory. I nodded and rubbed his back reassuringly.

“Twenty people, Marti,” he said with a deep breath and a heavy sigh. “Twenty-plus people.”

He looked at me beseechingly then—though for only a moment, before looking out the window.

“Am I doing the right thing?” he asked the air. “Have I been, all this time?”

I had hoped, all these years, that Lupin wasn’t a bad apple, and that Lupin’s existence wouldn’t wreck Zeni one way or the other, but the landscape was always changing. These two men were, at the end of the day, out of my hands and on their own trajectories. Their paths intersected for now, but how long would they stay together? Zenigata was trying to make sure that Lupin’s would turn and follow his, no matter where it went. Lupin appeared to be trying to go anywhere but there.

And then there was me. Off in the distance, but occasionally crossing the river in the same place as them.

“I’m not sure if you’re doing the right thing for him or for you in the long run, but I think we’ll find out,” I offered softly, after some time had passed. “But when it comes to me, I do believe that
you’re really brave.”

“You...you think so?” Koichi’s pretty eyes were big and wet as they looked at me though their lovely lashes. From this angle, his irises turned almost amber, the gradient of a whisky glass under a light.

I smiled for him and gripped the back of his neck firmly, drawing him forward. “Yes.” I put my forehead to his. “Yes, you fool.”

You’re brave and that is just one of the many reasons I love you. Even if you choke when there’s blood on the people you love.

They may have been out of my hands, but that didn’t mean I was helpless.

“Now, I think it’s time to get some sleep.”

Zenigata looked me over shortly, then nodded with a self-affirming breath, rubbing his hands on his legs to wake himself up further. “You’re right, of course.”

Good. I smiled, really feeling it for the first time in ages. I do love you so, Zenigata Koichi.

But before I could say that, his phone started to ring.

“Who is it?” I asked, peering over his shoulder as he pulled the chiming, lit-up little thing from his pocket. I couldn’t see the screen, but it was buzzing like it was possessed.

Zenigata stared at it, stock still.

“...The Commissioner.”

* * *

Marti squeezed my arm, and with a quick nod at each other, she left me alone, shutting the door quietly behind her.

I took a second to remember where I’d left off with the man a dozen hours earlier, then drew a long breath. At the end of it, I flipped the phone open, silencing its ringer, and put it to my ear.

“Zenigata.”

“Good morning,” came the greeting on the other side. It was a deep voice, smooth and smug and purring. “It’s Carlotto. I hope I didn’t wake you, Inspector...?”

I laughed. Honestly laughed once—short and sharp—into the phone. And I was so tired I didn’t even care.

Confused silence reigned over the other side of the wire. I could hear it.

“Ah, sorry,” I admitted, because that much had been an honest accident and I was feeling generous to my enemies, somehow. Seemed I was falling back into Undercover Me mode, who was generally a more jovial, easy-going fellow toward other criminals. “No, you didn’t wake me. Not at all. I haven’t slept, in fact.”
There was a pause, and then, a smarmy and darkly approving rumble: “You must be tired.”

“Not so much that I want to go home,” I reported chipperly.

“...Well then,” he said after a moment, that avenue shut. I could almost hear his head tilt as he tried to piece out my angle. “You sound in a good mood. Do you have good news for me?”

“No,” I laughed again.

“...Pardon?” he inquired, the gentle caress of an icicle filed to a deadly point.

I took a deep breath and sighed it out—but it wasn’t a noise of regret; it was one of hilarity. I was getting manic, good God help me. Something about that little laugh had set it off, and now my head was spinning and I couldn’t stop the effervescence.

Christ, I was such a mess. This was such a mess. But that was exactly why I was laughing.

“About that. There’s been a slight...hiccup.”

There was a pause, and then: “Is he...dead?”

His tone was decidedly hopeful. Don’t sound so happy about it, jagoff. “Nope.”

“Did he...escape, then?”

A warning tone came in this time, a little stronger than the lingering confusion.

I just laughed again, quietly. I knew I shouldn’t, but hell, I couldn’t control it, and it was legitimately just so ludicrous. “No. A vein in his leg burst and they’re not sure if he’s gonna make it through or not.”

“What?” the man hissed, so loudly I had to pull the phone away from my ear. “Really? He was walking!”

“I know,” I said, hiccuping at it. “Hilarious, right?”

“Did you...” He paused, and then apparently for lack of a better strategy, said, in a strangled voice laced with exasperation, “cause it?”

“Not at all. He did.” I took a breath, and that finally seemed to sober me up a bit. “Trust me, I tried to do as we agreed, but this came up and rather took precedent. There’s blood all over the CT scan.”

“Good God.”

“I know, that thing’s worth about a million francs.”

“That’s not what I mean! What I mean is...Augh.” His deep voice stopped making words and simply grumbled into the phone.

“Yes, it’ll be a public relations scandal,” I admitted almost jaunty, “but he did it to himself, there’s probably footage of it and several non-police witnesses, I’m not kidding.”

The man on the other side of the line took a deep breath, then sighed it out in a long note of Hrrrrrm. Seemed he’d decided I wasn’t incompetent, at least. “He was that desperate to get away from us, huh?” he asked finally.
I paused, looking at the ceiling. For the moment, I was glad he was referring to him and I as “us,” but I was also wondering why he would say such a thing. And how I could steer this conversation without betraying the vulnerability of my own hand.

“Maybe? By the way, you have any leads on his partner Jigen?” I asked, remembering for a moment that he was a real person out there and not just a monster that haunted my dreams.

...Though he was still the darkhorse grim reaper that could kick both our assess, if he put his mind to it.

“Only a few. We’ve tracked him to a forest outside of town, but we’re not sure where exactly, just yet, and he may have fled to Germany already: it’s unclear. We’ve thrown up a checkpoint at the border, but that won’t stop him if he’s on foot.”

“Sure.” That was true enough. “The snow might, though.”

“It might,” he admitted. “It’s stopping us. Drifts are twenty feet high in the country, on top of the two feet of snow by itself.”

I was holding my breath all of a sudden, and I wasn’t sure why.

“Any chance you can get a snow plow out here?” I asked, and all the tension broke away as I finished saying it. “The place is rather low on blood, I’m told.”

“The base should be doing it soon enough,” he said smoothly, ready to shut me down.

I shook my head. “They’re all gone. Bunch of bastards on holiday, apparently.”

He made a thoughtful noise, then said, all pleasant government bureaucracy, “I’m not sure city trucks are allowed in there, but I’ll see what I can do.”

I sighed in relief, inwardly. It was a gamble to ask for legitimate help, but I assumed that if he knew Lupin was in trouble because of lack of resources, he was more likely to let us sit in our igloo and suffer alone, unmolested by his troops. Unless the man really wanted him alive, in which case, above-the-table action would help us, too.

“Though... I could probably call in a favor and requisition you a boat.”

“Ah...?” I looked out the window, but I wasn’t facing the sea side. “In this weather?”

“Sure,” he said, practically purring. “Though they do get lost in this weather, rather frequently.”

I suppressed the urge to shout at him. “You’d sacrifice one of your own guys?” I asked politely instead, as if I’d heard it wrong.

“Who said it’s going to be one of mine? I don’t command the coast guard.”

I just sighed and hung my head—trying not giggle sickly at the audacity of it.

“Anyway... No one said the people on the boat would go missing.... I’m sure we’d find everyone after a few days....”

So that was the angle: Play a castaway, or perhaps runaway, card while they were holding us all hostage somewhere. Assuming he meant find you alive, which I wasn’t so sure about.

“All right, I hear you,” I grumbled. “But he’s not really in a position to be transported over
anything shaky. If he doesn’t wake up, you’re never getting anything out of him, you know.”

“Well, you know, it works for me either way, if the police really had nothing to do with
him...expiring. But I would still like to know the status of the documents we talked about.”

“Can they hurt you if he doesn’t have them?” I asked, rather incredulously.

“Well, we can’t have confidential documents that are evidence in a case just floating around out
there, can we?” he remarked smoothly.

“A case?”

“This case, of course.”

I’d believe that when I saw it. “...I see.”

I took a breath and nodded, hand on my hip as I leaned into the phone. These “documents” had to
be something damn important, if he wanted the loose ends covered up that badly—but also,
interestingly, they weren’t the type of thing Lupin would normally steal. So either the
Commissioner was lying, or Lupin was up to something out of the ordinary.

“Give me a day. I’ll see if they can wake him up, but no promises. I’m pretty sure the doctors are
going to force him out for at least twelve hours anyway, even if everything’s good.”

There was a pause, and then: “I’ll give you more. How about I give you a call in forty-eight hours,
and we’ll see how the suspect’s doing. I don’t want to have to be thinking about all this on the
holiday.”

Today was Christmas Eve’s Day, and it was currently around ten AM. Which meant tomorrow was
Christmas, so the deadline was Boxing Day, ten AM. “Me either, really,” I said, honestly. A
Christmas where I could hold tight to the people I cared about, all in one place, and work on
Lupin’s recovery too...that didn’t seem so bad. ...Minus the specter of impending death, anyway.
But when was that not present in our relationship?

Only in Monaco....

“Well, seems we’re in agreement about that,” Carlotto said, snapping me out of my reverie of the
warm, sunny ocean view, that had been so real for a moment that it hurt to leave it. “So if you can
help it, get me something by then. I’ll make it worth your while—a token of appreciation for all the
interdepartmental cooperation.”

I sighed. I didn’t care about his bribe, but the timeline was something. If we could get Lupin
awake and halfway lucid, due to chemicals or otherwise, I might be able to wriggle something out
of him that I could work with. Just enough to put Carlotto off Lupin’s trail and onto Jigen’s, if I
was lucky.

Sorry, Jigen. Hope you have plenty of ammo and a well-hidden nest.

Except, I was pretty sure I hated Jigen. Or would, once I actually met him someday. Getting rid of
him, in fact, be the key to getting Lupin onto a different life.

“I’ll give you a call then and see how we’re doing. You know, Mr. Zenigata, I had you pegged as a
slightly different person. Seems we’re both better in the mornings.”

I blinked, not sure how to take that. I had been thinking the same thing—minus the fact that he was
a crook, of course. I couldn’t discount the fact that the quiet ones were the most vicious when they got the chance, but it seemed he might have been one of the more tolerant, straightforward ones, until that point. Donatello had always been that way, at least, so it wasn’t odd to think it ran in the family.

“Sure,” I answered finally. “I don’t like anyone moving in on my territory—and I consider Lupin to be that territory—but I don’t mind helping out.”

*Lies lies lies,* screamed a part of me.

*Whatever,* shrugged the other part. The undercover part.

“*Maybe you are a good man, after all. The real kind.***”

The eyeroll that shot toward the ceiling was massive. *God, I want to punch this asshole,* I thought alongside it. *Please give me a chance to punch this asshole, right in the jaw.* “Let me ask you something,” I said instead.

“Yes?”

“Do you have any people here that I can work with? Did you manage to get any in?”

There was a long pause, and then I swore I could hear him smiling. “*Just you, Inspector. Just you.***”

*It was as I stepped out of the tiny exam room, deep scowl on my face, that Christof’s voice came over the radio, staticky and hard to understand. Marti gave me a look, her green eyes sharp in the light from the exam room before I shut the door. I nodded to her, and she pulled up the walkie talkie from her belt, flicking the two-way channel on.*

“This is Red, over,” she said, depressing the talk button.

I couldn’t help but smile at that, despite it all; it took some of my tension away. She glanced at me, hiding her face behind the thing, then looked away embarrassedly, before I could make a comment.

*“Snowman to Red. Please state your location. Over,”* came Christof’s voice. He was businesslike, not worried at all. That was something, at least.

She fiddled with the dial to turn down the sound, then moved her wrist around to look for better reception as she spoke. “Red to Snowman. The Inspector and I are in one of the upstairs exam rooms.”

*“Roger. Prisoner’s being moved to recovery, on the floor above you. Stable condition. Want to come up? Over.”*

Marti turned to me, the question in her eyes. I nodded at her, and she nodded back. “Affirmative. Over.” She let the button up and waited. But nothing came back. So, she replaced the device to her belt, and turned to me. “If you’re wondering, Nadia’s going to pull first intensive care watch with Christof, so his care should be fine. D’you want me to tell her to be careful of ambushes, though?”

I shook my head. “I can do it.” It’d be better if I were in control of what information was
disseminated to whom; I was the ranking officer, but it was also important to not have secondhand
information floating around.

“What about the call?” she asked, putting her hands on her hips. She was alert, and listening
intently, but she looked like she’d gone through hell. How she functioned on so little sleep, I had
no idea, but you could see from the bags under her eyes how tired she was.

“We’re okay for now. We actually have two days, believe it or not.” I sighed, tension I didn’t know
I was holding flowing out of me as I said it.

“Don’t trust it,” Marti replied.

Honestly, that thought hadn’t occurred to me. Maybe it was just how tired I was, but being trapped
in a fort in the snow up against a stormy coast, playing one bad cop to another, I was pretty sure I
could trust the guy as far as I could throw him. If nothing else, I was confident that I could see his
troops coming through the snow.

But, thinking of it like that, that sounded like the dumbest thing I’d ever said to myself.

“What do you expect?” I asked Marti, already formulating plan B. Damn, it would have been
useful to have Lupin to work with in this situation. Not to get the information out of him, which
would be nice, but because he was a strategist capable of pulling off ridiculous things in tight,
embattled situations.

He could handle himself in a scenario like this; he knew what to look for from the enemy, which
no one else here but me, and to some extent Marti, was trained to do. And he was even better at it
than I was in a nest circumstance like this, since he could smell a criminal type a mile away, being
one of them. Though...considering Marti’s background in the prison system, she was probably the
second best at defending a single guardpoint.

“Knowing the Medicis?” she asked, looking aside as she thought and blowing a curl out of her
face; even they were drooping at this point. But her eyes flickered back and forth as she thought,
alertly, and then she nodded, decided. “Someone inside. Someone already here.”

My mouth tightened, grim. “I agree that that’s how it’s going to go if it will, but we have to get
some sleep. I think we can trust Nadia....”

“Yeah,” Marti assented. “Not that doctor, though. Be careful of him. I can’t say why, it’s just a
feeling....”

I wrapped Marti in my arms and pulled her against my chest. “I trust your intuition. Let’s just go
with the plan, huh? It seems Carlotto really wants the documents, or whatever the hell it was, back.
Lupin’s no good to them dead, and Jigen will never talk. He’s the type to go to the grave before he
lets go of a secret, and they probably know that, if they know how to look in a filing cabinet.”

Marti gave my back a squeeze and then stepped back. “So whaddya want to do?”

“Sleep,” I said, without a second thought. Hands on her shoulders, I smiled tiredly and squeezed
her lats. “See Lupin, and sleep. Barricade yourself in if you have to, but both of us are going to get
sleep, and neither of us is going to get shot doing it. I want you to leave as soon as you can—”

“I’m not going to leave you here alone.”

“—But I know that’s how you feel, so...take this.”
As she waited, head tilted curiously and a frown on her face, I rearranged my coat in my hands and dug in the pockets. Getting down to the bottom of one, I pulled out what amounted to a few folded straps of leather and placed the tangle in her hands.

“What’s this?” she asked quietly, inspecting it.

“The leather’s soft, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” she muttered, turning it all around. She found the buckle, and then it all suddenly unfolded in the air, the apparatus’s utility apparent.

“Is this a shoulder holster?” Marti asked, shocked.

“Yeah. It’s Lupin’s.”

“Lupin’s?” she squeaked.

“And this is his gun.” I rummaged around my police belt, undoing the snap of the second weapon. I wasn’t used to keeping a gun there regularly, so I fumbled a bit with my left hand, but I always had that slot available for one, in case I had to take this very piece off Lupin. Even though he wouldn’t train it on me, he always came packing, and it was my job to secure it.

I held the weapon up to her sideways, the shining, engraved silver gleaming dully in the light, where our shadows didn’t hide it. “I’m officially deputizing you. You remember how to use these things, right?”

“Sure...but...isn’t this evidence?” She was staring at it rather dauntedly. But there was a tiny hint of a smile on her face, too.

“I’ve gotten what I need to from it. And don’t pretend like you don’t find it exciting.”

She bit down her smile, but the energy of it somehow only took over her face. “I do like it,” she whispered, as she stared abashedly at the wall.

“There’s my good femme fatale.” I kissed her forehead and slipped the gun into her hands. I took the leather in exchange, and helped her get her arms through it while she held the weapon.

“What model is this?” Marti asked quietly, as I threaded some slack into the buckle. God damn, Lupin was skinny. What was Jigen feeding him? Nothing?

“Dammit, Jigen.... No matter how I thought about it, I was pretty sure I hated him.

“A Walther P-38,” I snorted out through gritted teeth, given the previous thought. “It’s a girl’s gun; it should work fine for you.”

“A ‘girl’s gun’? Really?” She looked over her shoulder at me, eyes already rolled and fingers settled into the grip. “I had a service pistol at the prison. And I shot people with it. Male and female people.” As she stared me down, her thumb pulled back the safety, then made a show of slowly putting it back into place.

“What I mean, my darling danger,” I amended while I blushed, pulling her back by the cross strap and making her breath hitch a bit, “is that the grip is smaller. The recoil’s lessened too.” I slipped my chin onto her shoulder, and slid my hands up the undersides of her arms until I hit her wrists. There, I took her hands and trained them into the right shape, then placed the sight in line with her eyes, aiming at a potted plant down the hall. Her hair tickled my cheek. “So: The kickback won’t
hurt you if you’ve been out of the loop for a while. It’s a true pistol too—one-hand operation, easily concealed; won’t kill anyone unless you hit the right spot...which I trust you know all of.”

“Oh, I do.” I could hear the grin in her voice. “I’m still certified, you know.”

“Good.” I kissed her neck and left her hands in the air, mine sliding down to lace over her front. Slowly rocking us back and forth at a languid sway, voice hushed, I added, “And because it’s Lupin’s gun, it’s got pinpoint accuracy. Can’t shoot through a wall, but it’ll still hit a quarter down a hall like this. Once we get through the whole deputizing procedure, I’ll give you the bullets. But—and this is the important part—don’t hurt anybody with it that you can’t justify in paperwork. And if you don’t have to shoot anybody...don’t tell anyone that I let you have it.”

Still staring down the sight at the plant, Marti chuckled darkly. “Yessir.”

“Now.” I guided Marti to set the gun in the holster under her arm, and then spun her around by the belt loops. She came willingly, with a small ooh, and when she was facing me, I pulled her hips against mine with a grunt.

She was smiling at me, playful and musing. I took the moment to gaze down into her pretty eyes, humming gently, approvingly. “I love you,” I whispered.

She blinked and looked down slightly, her hard smile growing into a shy one.

And then she looked up at me, and, on her tiptoes, gave me a chaste kiss. “I love you, too.”

Standing there like that, gently swaying back and forth, we could have been anywhere and I wouldn’t have been happier. Such was the power of this woman: For a moment, looking at her made my heart block out all the troubles of the world.

So I slid my hands through her hair and, holding her head on either side, dropped down and kissed her, long and hard.

“Mmmn?!” she asked, startled. But she didn’t pull away. She pulled closer, in fact, and gave me back just as much as I gave her.

“Oh,” Marti breathed, when I finally pulled away with a breath and a pop. “What was that about?” she asked, breathing hard and looking me up and down.

“Nothing,” I whispered after a bit of looking into her eyes, hovering over her face and fingers, desperate for more of her, twitching against her scalp. “Was just thinking about a time when I wanted to do that, but couldn’t, because you weren’t there.”

*I wonder if Lupin still has that dress....*

Marti smiled, tiredly, but touched at one of my hands nonetheless. “Everything’s going to be okay,” she whispered up at me, hooking a finger into one of my belt loops and settling her hand on my hip. “Just stick with me, and I promise, it’ll be okay. I’m not going anywhere.”

“That’s my line, you know,” I quipped, laying a long, simple kiss on her forehead. Under it, Marti hummed, and pressed herself closer.

When I came up, I ended up looking down at her face. Gingerly, I drew a hand over Marti’s bangs, sweeping the relaxing curls away from those eyes that looked up at me so intently. I grinned at her, reflexively, and she smiled back, raising her fire-orange eyebrows excitedly.
“Now,” I started again, “My beautiful akakami, repeat after me....”
Chapter Summary

Everyone gets a say as things wind down and this part comes to a close....

Chapter Notes

Hello, everyone. Well, it's been quite a week. If you don't want to hear about politics, no need to read this note further. But if you are, you might find something interesting here.

First of all, I've spent the last week in a stupor. It may be very hard for me to continue writing this fic with any productivity. I will dearly try--they don't deserve to take this joy from me, from you--but it suddenly feels as if everything I'm writing here is pointless. Who has time for the cares of a little fictional family, when there's war on the horizon in real life for just these types of characters? Furthermore, do I have the luxury to write this anymore? Should I drop everything I'm doing to do something greater? I've spent the last six months writing this under the banner that "there is nothing else I should be doing; this is my calling, to write things like this." (I'm turning it into a normal book soon.) But now, I'm not sure....

So what happened in America on election night, you may ask. Did you suddenly turn fascist, America? Well, the answer is both yes and no. What happened in this election is really very simple: the people voted to break congressional gridlock with someone who's anti-establishment. Unfortunately, it was a rigged race, because one side ran an anti-establishment candidate and the other didn't.

No one voted for Trump BECAUSE he's fascist (*except the crazies, which are a minority). But the half that DID vote Trump don't understand history, and the half that DIDN'T vote Trump understand it only too well, and now, like me, are scared out of their minds. It's seemingly open season on minorities, gays, immigrants, non-Christians, and women in some states. Too, if the superpower goes down, where is there to run? This is really unprecedented.

Luckily, there are checks and balances in place, but they are fragile. The military leaders hate Trump and are constitutionally not allowed to follow him blindly; but they can be replaced...by him. The Republican party hates Trump, and will have trouble controlling him--but they are remarkably spineless. They don't stand on principle in the face of a leader, even if he's only their leader on paper. The Dems do stand up on principle, some of them, but they are remarkably bad at rattling cages and fighting back; have been for decades, which is part of how we got in this mess. The Judiciary is mostly in-tact, save this open Supreme Court justice, which is insane--but which also illustrates the American people's lack of ability to control their elected officials. That's the problem we really need to fix. That, and the violent bigotry and racism that is to come. So there is reason to hope. But I think, by and large, the American people got their wakeup call. I'm seeing more people mobilized to fight the good fight than ever. That's huge. It is.
But what if we end up in a civil war? What if we can't combat turning into a religious state, or a military one? What if we take the world down with us? I breathe a great sigh of depression to think that this is what happens when a superpower does not educate its people on the responsibilities of that very power.

A truly fair race would have been four-way between Trump, Ryan, Clinton, and Sanders. (In order of conservative to liberal, respectively.) Barring that, Trump-Sanders, in which Sanders would have won by a landslide, because he's both qualified AND anti-establishment. He's a unifier. He's who we deserved.

And we tried very hard to get him in. The liberal and youth vote, the non-corrupt in the Democratic party, wanted to run Sanders. We tried to create a popular movement to get him to be the nomination. But the establishment elites in the party quashed that. So they ran their choice of Hillary Clinton, thinking that the fact that she was a woman would make her impervious to her other issues. Wrong. If you're asking yourself whose fault this is, there's a lot of explanations of how the climate came to be, but the fault lies within the (wealthy) Dem party elites who shot themselves--and the world--in the foot for the sake of their own cronyism.

To America: I'm sorry. So many people have failed you and then you were given a sham choice anyway, and are now being told to fight among yourselves. To the rest of the world: I'm sorry. Things may get very hard, and I feel highly responsible for it as a citizen of this nation. But we tried, and we will keep trying. Please keep trying with us.

[More at the end]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When they brought Lupin in for recovery, he was on a gurney. The same one as before, but he was bleeding a hell of a lot less. Supposedly, all his internal bleeds were patched, but it still wasn’t good. He was pale as a ghost and still naked under the sheets; part of his leg wound was still open too, just so that the swollen tissue would have somewhere to go until it calmed down—which would be hours and hours from now.

He was still unconscious, luckily for him. If he had any sense, he’d stay that way for a long while.

“Tell me the prognosis,” I asked the head nurse—Nadia, it was?—as she situated Lupin into the recovery room’s bed that would be his new home for a while, while the other woman—the dark-haired doctor that had done triage on him earlier—took the gurney away. It looked like he wouldn’t have a tube down his throat, but there was a slender oxygen line under his nose. Though, that wasn’t unusual, as a precautionary measure. Plus, he’d been through a fire tonight anyway, and probably had lingering effects from that.

Still, it seemed that he was going to hang on, which was unfortunate for everyone involved. If he died, Marti would get her man, Zenigata could get a life, and I’d get to go home to Aimée sooner. Sigh.

“Well, the short version is that we watch for infection over the next forty-eight hours, especially until we can get his leg closed, which should be a few hours from now, with the help of ice.”
Nadia pulled out a fluid bag from the cooler, and hung it on the IV stand. “After that, the surgeons will fix that up, and then we’ll see about waking him.”

She hummed tiredly, then picked up Lupin’s arm and promptly stuck a needle in it. It was a rather savage gesture.

And then she turned those harrowing schoolmaster eyes on me, mouth a grim line. “So tell me about guard duty. I assume that’s why you’re standing here, no?”

The recovery room itself wasn’t a big one. It was two floors up from the OR, a cube that would only hold about four people total. There was the door to the hall, and a barred window across from it. A matching door, leading to a bathroom, was on the adjacent wall to the right. A few chairs hugged that same wall, while the bed was across from them—left of the door. The rest of the room was taken up by the machines. That was about it. Needless to say, it was not going to be a fun place to recover in.

I was currently sitting in one of the three waiting-room-style chairs that sat in a tight row. The chairs hugged the wall and took up most of its length, save for the door to the washroom. But it was the window that had my attention.

It was still snowing, and even though it was nearing noon, it might as well have been evening for how grey it was. There wasn’t a single footprint in the expanse of land that lead up to the water. All in all, it seemed we’d be here for a while yet.

I was still looking out at that snowy view when the Inspector and Marti appeared. At the foot of the bed, in the corner, Nadia had finished up her work and was sitting on a stool, politely watching the monitors. Kyle was outside the door, sitting in what he’d decided would be the guard chair, reading his book.

Regardless, the two newcomers were still in the navy blue scrubs I’d seen them in earlier, though Marti had a jacket on now. It was odd to see them both suddenly dressed like doctors, but it wasn’t completely unappealing; it made us seem a little less understaffed, really. Still, I stood up for them, with military crispness; it wasn’t the sort of thing firefighters tended to do, but I’d seen it in movies enough to know how to do it. Marti nodded at me approvingly, arms crossed and taking an authoritative stance just inside the door. But the Inspector—he hardly noticed me. His eyes were already elsewhere.

I pricked at that, but given the look on his face, I couldn’t really blame him. I wasn’t the main attraction here, after all.

He was staring down at Lupin’s unconscious form, looking stoic as ever—though there was a tiredness in his eyes, his shoulders.

But all he did was stand there, staring at his thoughts as he looked upon Lupin’s face.

When I checked, I found Marti looking at Zenigata’s back forlornly. But she didn’t say anything. She just waited, gazing at his back with concern. So that’s what I did, too.

“Do you…want a minute?” I asked Marti, when the moment stretched on long enough that Nadia had looked up from her magazine and was peering around at us all, expectantly.

Marti glanced at me, then Zenigata. “Yeah, that’d probably be good,” she admitted, and then went
over to the Inspector and put a hand on his shoulder. “It’s okay, you can touch him,” she whispered. It was so soft, I just barely caught the words.

“A-ah, thanks...,” he muttered, looking startled. He put his hands in his pockets, and then turned to Nadia. “Tell me the prognosis?” he asked.

As they began to speak, I looked at Marti. She caught my eye and jerked her head toward the door. Obediently, I followed her as she left, each of us giving the Inspector one last lingering look. But as usual, he had nothing to say to me.

What surprised me, though, was that he had nothing to say to Marti’s sad gaze.

“Well,” Marti said quietly, closing the door behind her, but not quite latching it. “That sure was a night. I’m really ready to sleep, how about you?”

“First shift, remember?” I said as she yawned, forgoing the comment about it being noon. The mountain that was Kyle stood up too, dusting himself off delicately.

“We doing two-person teams?” Marti continued, shaking her head out—and then the rest of her. As she did so, something jangled, but I wasn’t sure what it was. She didn’t have the police belt full of stuff on anymore. Weird. Maybe it was something under her coat.

“Nah, I figured there was no need while Lupin’s unconscious,” I replied. It might be useful when he was awake, since he was supposedly quite slick at acquiring stuff and would need someone to watch him, but there was no point at the moment. “So you all are free to sleep.”

I popped a smile, feeling quite competent, and Marti breathed a deep sigh. Kyle did too, hitting his book against his thigh to punctuate the sentiment. “Good,” he said. “I’m at a slow spot in the story anyway. D’you know where the sleeping rooms are?”

I pointed down the hall. “Nadia said they were down the hall, around the corner to the left. A blue door. So, not far.” I dug in my pocket and then held up a single silver key. “Gave me the key.”

“Oh thank God,” Marti said, plucking it up from my hand. “There more than one room?”

“And one bed?” Kyle asked seriously.

“Not sure,” I admitted, turning to Marti to see how she felt about that.

She gave Kyle a look with a raised eyebrow, but then smirked, head tipped back. “I suppose you’d be a decent blanket, but I’m taken.”

“Heh. Well. You’d be more like a stuffed toy than anything—”

“Excuse me?” Marti interrupted, both eyebrows raising and eyes somehow narrowing at the same time.

“Ah...” Kyle’s eyes widened, and he put his hands out. “I mean...because you’re small...and...um...”

He trailed off there, because Marti’s face looked like it was about to morph into a terrifying creature.
I looked between them in the silence. I’d seen this many times before: Marti the little tiger, eviscerating people.

But then, after letting that sit, she took a long breath at Kyle’s bowed and blushing face and said, with some effort, “Well, I had no idea you were into that sort of thing.”

But instead of blustering, Kyle looked up slightly, his eyes widening in alarm. He’d gone awfully tense.

“Stuffed toys, I mean,” Marti clarified with a slowly-growing smirk, though one eyebrow falling in dubious question. “ kinda more cute of an image than I expected from you.”

“Oh! Haha...” Kyle suddenly eased up and smiled abashedly, slouching a little as he shrugged.

I eyed that, but when he glanced at me, I flashed him a cheesy grin.

Still, it was odd....

“Anyway,” Marti began anew before I could finish the thought, putting the key in her jacket pocket. “There must be more than one sleeping room, for a hospital this size.” She pulled out a ring of keys from her pocket and handed them to me. “Give these to Nadia, will you?”

“Oh...sure.” I stared at them; they must have been what was in her pocket and jangling. And there was a lot—they weighed over a pound.

Meanwhile, Marti turned and looked Kyle up and down, flashing him a warm smile. “I am so ready to sleep so long as you’re not on top of me. I’d die from lack of oxygen. You?”

He nodded with a smirk. “I keep dosing off. I’m gonna sleep like a baaaaaby.”

“Hah.” She grinned, everything apparently forgiven, and then knocked him in the elbow. “Well, I’m ready if you are. We’ll just have to see the landscape and duel if there’s only one bed.”

“I’m very good at rock-paper-scissors.” He turned to me then. “If you’re fine with me leaving, I’ll take off to sleep, then?”

I nodded. He returned the gesture, then made a half-assed solute to Marti that turned into a friendly wave. He quickly moved off, yawning as he went.

Marti watched him go with a long breath, and then turned to me.

I raised my eyebrows at that expectant look, prompting. “You okay?”

“Oh, him? Psh, yeah. He’s not a problem.” She shrugged, rolling her eyes. “Can’t get mad about everything.”

“Oh really?”

She smirked. “You think so little of me.”

“No, no. Not at all. I just think you’re the team canon.”

She snickered, then took a breath and sighed. The sated tone in her voice drained out over the course of it.

“Thank you, Christof,” she whispered, coming a little closer and staring up at me. Sometimes, if
she got too close, it put a crick in my neck, I had to look down so far; she was more than a foot shorter than me. But Marti was a happy soul to look at, all the way down there, generally speaking.

Right now though, she looked worn out—which she often did, when Zenigata came around. It tugged at something in me, and I shifted my stance, muscles tightening a bit as my arms folded.

“I know you’re giving up a lot to be here,” she continued quietly. “But you saved his life. You honestly did.”

I shrugged amiably. “We did it together.” Her order-barking always was impressively effective.

“Well thank you, either way.” She kissed her hand and then touched it to my cheeks. It was a motherly thing she did sometimes, because she was too short to get me involved in the Italian parting-kiss thing, without it being an awkward production. “And now, time for sleep.” She patted my skin, only to pull away to cover her mouth as she yawned again.

“You aren’t... waiting for him?” I asked, when she turned to leave.

She got a few steps down the hall, then paused. And then just stood there silently, back to me.

“Telli...?”

She tilted her head, curls cascading in a wave. It took a moment, but she abruptly turned her upper half, looking over her shoulder at me. “He’ll come when he’s ready. That’s how he always is.”

She smiled a bit, but it looked forced.

“Telli...,” I murmured, disapproving.

“He told me he loved me,” she said, turning to me fully. She looked so small standing there in the empty corridor—small and alone. “Asian guys don’t do that. Not unless...unless....”

She started choking up. Actually sniffling, and rubbing at her eyes.

“Oh Telli,” I said, coming closer, arms opening.

“No, no, it’s fine,” she protested, taking a couple of steps back. She held up a finger at me, one foot behind the other, something like a dancer might—except it was a gesture before she could flee. “This is a good day. So long as Lupin lives, this is a good day. So help me do that, okay? That’s all...I need from you. Okay? Just do that for me. Promise me.”

I took a breath, held it for a moment, then eventually sighed it out. “Okay. I promise.”

Apparently I wasn’t convincing though, because her eyebrows knitted together in concern.

“You can count on me,” I added with effort.

That must have sounded genuine enough, because Marti broke into a smile then, leaving behind the specter of a frightened doormat and returning back in front of me my thoughtful, sophisticated coworker who had all the self esteem in the world.

“Goodnight,” she said, bowing a little at me.

*Bow*ing? Where’d she get that from? *Him...?*

But she waved too, and then hurried down the hall, tracing Kyle’s path.
I watched her back, sucking in another tense breath. I held it for a while—until I rolled my eyes and glared daggers at the door beside me.

* * *

He was pale and cold.

As I picked up his hand, it looked like he was just in normal slumber. But then again, that’s what Satoru had looked like too, under the coroner’s sheet.

*How. How did this happen.*

*How did I let you get so broken, without ever stepping in to fix it?*

*And once you wake up, will I be able to do anything new?*

No matter what I wanted, the fact was that Lupin was another person. I had no right to decide things for him, and he knew that too. This might just be a battle I’d lose, after all this time.

“Are you going to sleep in here?” Nadia asked gently.

“Ah...?” I asked, breaking my attention free of Lupin for a moment. She was a few feet away from me, at the base of the bed.

“You can if you want, but it’s not going to be very comfortable,” she advised. “Take this seat and hang out on this side of the bed, and you shouldn’t get in the way of anything.” She patted the stool she was on, and then motioned to the far wall, which only had about two feet of space between the wall and the bed itself, and nothing of note to speak of along it, not even a painting. “But if he needs something major, you’ll definitely get woken up, be aware of that.”

I sighed but nodded listlessly, looking down at Lupin’s hand, Lupin’s face. She’d explained his predicament—that he was stable but that the next few hours were going to be key. “If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather stay.”

She nodded. “So long as it doesn’t make you cranky later, that’s fine with me. I still don’t like what you did with my doctor, or my patient when you first arrived. But, I should warn you—” she stood up amicably enough, freeing the seat for me. Her voice lowered, the sternness leaving for an unusual tint of sympathy. “I think Ms. Martelli is expecting you.”

“What?”

Nadia leaned against the wall, nodding. She rubbed at an eye, finally showing signs of wear and tear—seemed she wasn’t an android after all. That was a scary thought.

“We talked, her and I, before you got here. And really...that was all we talked about.” Nadia flashed a rare smile, slight but endearing as she gazed upon me. “I think she was really excited to see you.”

She looked down at Lupin next. “Him, too, really—but only because of you. ‘The Legendary Thief’ you so ardently chase.”

I wasn’t sure what to say to that. A wane smile tugged at one side of my mouth, but barely got off the ground. Instead, I just found myself looking back down at Lupin—my prisoner. His delicate
features, burned into my memory from so many obsessive nights with the case files, were all the more inspiring now, though in a different way than usual.

“...I think he needs me more,” I admitted after a while. “They can hear you, right? When they’re like this?”

“It gets in there, yeah,” Nadia said, “though he’s in a medically induced coma, so I’m not sure how much of it will penetrate, right now.”

I nodded. It was still important for me to sit with him, because physical contact could make a lot of difference in moments like this, for a body. But... “You’re trying to tell me...she needs me more?”

The administrator shrugged. “I’m not saying that. I just think Monsieur Lupin already has a couple of friends to sit with him, but those sleeping cots can be awful cold and lonely.”

She winked at me.

“O-oh,” I said, chuckling a bit, chagrined.

“But if you want to stay, then stay.” Nadia tossed the magazine that had been in her lap on the top of a nearby machine. “I’m gonna be sleeping in that chair for a couple hours, until the next round of meds needs me.” She fiddled with her watch, probably setting an alarm, and then plunked down in one of the chairs against the wall behind me.

I took a breath and set Lupin’s tubed-up hand down; I situated it gently, and then moved around to the other side of the bed. I took Nadia’s stool with me on the way, and then maneuvered to sit in it, back to the wall. I was on the far side of the bed, away from all the quietly humming equipment as well as the doors.

It took a few minutes, but pretty soon, Nadia was sleeping soundly in her white uniform and stockings next to the image of snow falling beyond the window, not unlike some Edward Hopper painting.

“Hey, Lupin,” I said when I was convinced she was out, pulling up his hand with a whisper. It was cool, and utterly limp. It was always instinctually disturbing, holding someone completely unconscious. They were heavier, and limp like a ragdoll—it was impossible to tell if there was life in there, at first glance.

But there was. And it would stay there. I demanded it.

I prayed for it.

“Lupin,” I whispered, cupping his hand between mine. “I need to tell you something.”

He didn’t respond, of course. But looking into his face, it was almost enough to pretend that he was just sleeping normally, and wasn’t fighting for his life.

“I need you to stay with me, okay? I want you to sleep well, and then wake up, refreshed and ready to go, because we have a battle to fight. And...” I paused, and looked at Nadia. But she was still, by all appearances, asleep. And from here, she probably couldn’t hear what I was saying, anyway.

But just in case, I switched over to Japanese anyway.

Very polite, family-like Japanese, the likes of which Lupin had never heard from me before.
"I want you to come back," I whispered. "We have to talk, still. I...admit it. I’ve messed up with you, and I want another chance to fix it."

There was more I was going to say, but it dried up suddenly, lost in the prayer. Silently, I closed my eyes, and held his hand up to my forehead, clasped in both of mine.

*Please give me another chance to catch you, Icarus. Please.*

* * *

There were two sleeping rooms as it turned out, each with multiple beds. Kyle and I distributed ourselves one to a room, because apparently the facilities were divided up on the assumption of one room per gender.

I sighed and pulled up the blanket from the nearest bed as the door to “my room” shut closed behind me. The burning light from the hallway windows became a sliver, narrower and narrower, until it left me in the dark.

I flipped on the light switch just as the daylight extinguished, and took stock of what I had.

Five beds, one on each wall save for two on the long side that lacked a door. No windows. Blankets, eye masks, and earplugs sat in a metal stack of cubby cubes in the corner. A few pillows lay scattered about. Concrete walls.

Basically, a bunker, and I had the key. Perfect.

I locked the door behind me and then pulled up a couple of extra blankets. A pillow thrown down summarily and a click of the lights later, I was quickly nestled into the military cot in the far corner, curled up in a ball and watching the door with the help of a nightlight near the floor.

Under the warm bundle of blankets, the feel of Lupin’s holster was snug around my body; even without being tight, it was irritating. How did anyone get used to this? Still, the heavy weight of a gun under my arm, next to my heart, was a comfort.

It made me think, though...he probably lived with this thing next to him. Next to his beating heart. Because he had to.

I put my hand over the metal, by now warmed from my body. The smooth surface, engraved in places... My fingers worked over the swooping, floral tooling of an American style of a hundred years ago, as I considered it all...as well as the tingle of Zenigata’s hands, as he’d bestowed this upon me.

The thief commanded his respect and attention, his care and innovation. And it was little wonder why: Lupin himself was a uniquely powerful person. You could feel it in this weapon, this holster, somehow. He was small and smart, but comfortable with the dangers of the life he lead, and he had friendships with the people in the business, no matter what side of the fence they were on.

But was he happy with that life? With himself?

It was hard to say. It was hard to say without seeing him outside of this environment.

*And are you happy with this life, Marti?*
An image of Donatello showed up in my head then, of how he used to smile, when we worked together. Of all the things that smile had promised me.

Shut up, self. I ground my teeth and forced myself to focus.

My general consensus was that Lupin’s life was a mixed bag, like most people’s.

Like yours?

Still, I couldn’t decide for sure how he felt, or the severity of his mental state, until I got the chance to talk to him more.

Shut up, self. Now’s not the time.

Then when will be?

I stared at an unintelligible shape in the dark. It was probably a table leg. But staring at that didn’t help me avoid the truth. Both sides of me knew the answer to my own question, unanimously agreeing in my mind:

When I’m no longer the Red Widow, with the tainted touch that brings down everyone around me. The tainted hope and dreams that pollute everything.

The only thing was...It’d never go away. The only thing I could do was try, and pray, and hope it was enough. Hope the stain of my irreverent dreams and poor behavior was faded enough that it wouldn’t ruin what little I’d built this time, too.

Zenigata had saved me, but maybe I should have stopped when I was ahead.

Maybe I just hadn’t realized that I was old news.

Maybe...

“I guess the assessment will just have to be the guiding light,” I mumbled, wiping at my eyes and staring at nothing in the dark as I started to sniffle.

The furniture was vaguely outlined in the nightlight, but only if I didn’t look directly at it. It would take quite a while for my eyes to adjust, so I just gave up and closed them tightly, hoping the heat in my face—and the ideas in my head—would go away.

But what I saw then behind my eyelids were memories, horrible memories that would never go away...and one hope: That of a crystal-blue beach in the sun, hand-in-hand with one particular man. A smile on his face, as he looked down at me, our bare toes dug into the warm sand together.

“I love you....”

“Stupidly cold in here,” I muttered, burying my head in the pillow and pulling the blankets tighter around me.

Chapter End Notes
Additionally on politics:

This election was a mutiny in both parties; one can take heart in that. Trump is really something like a cross between Andrew Jackson and if a Rockefeller got elected in the 1880s. He's a child elected with his own dirty money, but a patriotic one. The issue on the table is 1) keeping us from becoming a fascist dictatorship that loses the rule of law because of who the child emperor surrounds himself with, 2) keeping the power of the liberal half motivated and mobilized in years to come, 3) still trying to get congress to do anything helpful, and 4) accomplishing that with a new political party and lots of reforms from the ground-up?

The tops of both parties have been horribly corrupt for years, never looking out for the regular people, but they've kept control of the situation until now. What happened in this election was that the poor, rural, and lesser educated--the more vulnerable section of the population--didn't have the economic luxury to vote on principle anymore. They voted on the difference between starvation (Clinton) and a bad taste in their mouth (Trump). The urban and educated, slightly better off (but not by much) voted based on principle. Which in some cases meant against Trump at all costs, and in some cases meant voting Trump to reject the Dem's establishment corruption. Or voting independent, which had a record turnout this time--between 1% and 5% of the vote (it's usually never more than 1%). Utah voted 25% independent. (This is also the margin Clinton lost by. However, she still won the popular vote.)

Trust me, most of us want to be "a liberal, socialist-democratic paradise like Scandinavia and Europe." (Using quotes because, lol, nowhere is perfect.) But have you seen the heat maps of voting in the under 25 demographic from this election? Only five states voted for Trump among the 25 and under crowd. I'd assume that's true for the 45 and under, as well. In five or ten years' time, there simply won't be enough red people left, simply by age.

As to the outcome, the good news is that Trump listens to reason; the bad news is that he's surrounding himself with people that won't ask it of him. Also, now that the republicans control everything (except Trump), we may finally be able to solve the question of which is better: a brutal religious state with no social services, or a liberal paradise where everyone has opportunity. (Crying that I even have to say that.)

Also, curious and Hail-Mary-Pass news: there's plenty Congress can impeach Trump on, which is probably the one thing both parties will agree on doing. Yes, if he does actually get elected, the man deserves a chance to be a good person, but not much of one. So, I think, if we can hang onto this rocking boat, we could come out okay--though things will be forever different, certainly. If Trump is a bull in a china shop, Pence is a Cthulian monster, but a dumb one, I'm told. (C'mon, Ryan, rolling the dice for you to do some slight of hand tricks and take charge. Have a spine and make it happen, man--you're still third in line, after all!)

I'm also crossing my fingers and praying that the electoral college delegates go "faithless" on Dec. 19th and reverse who the president-elect is. (Ie, Clinton could still get voted in; the popular vote is actually unofficial and non-binding. It's the electors who make the legally-binding decision. Who knew? Lol, none of the American citizens until about two days ago, which is certainly part of the problem.) But--and this is a huge complaint of mine with my country--no one has a spine or sense of duty
anymore, especially not anyone with power, so the chance that the Republican party will take one for the team and ask their delegates to flip is very very low. As is the chance that their delegates are the type to stand on principle and do that. But I still hope. And so should you.

The petition for them to flip on change.org already has 3 over million signatories. So if you're someone negatively effected by this election don't fear--you're not alone. Just make it plain and clear that you're a student of history and you're going to fight with clear eyes, and set that tone accordingly--and do it immediately, and unflinchingly.

Thanks for listening, guys. I need to go cry now.
Rifling

Chapter Summary

1) Fanservice
2) JIGEN

(Did Jigen have his way with that rug, or did Lupin?...)

Chapter Notes

Woah, five weeks! And yet it feels so much longer than that, because what a five weeks they've been!

I went on a cruise for the first time! It was just what I needed to get away from things, but unfortunately, it was like living in Desert Bluffs!--A cross between Vegas and Summer Camp! (I hate summer camp).

Lol, it was really a nightmare in some aspects, though only in terms of taste. (I met some amazing people though, both on the boat and off, and my friends were there too!)

Either way, positives were had, I Fujiko MIne'd myself up and won some (*very little) money at the tiny casino on board (*yay), and all in all I think "that time on the cruise ship" is going to have to be written about some more, in this fic or others. Holyyyyyy crap.

Anywho, after writing at least one chapter every week, I feel like an incredible wastrel...and like I'm missing something.

And that thing is YOU! (And also the writing, but also you! The readers!)

Thank you to all of you who have been with me and this work so far. And especially to those of you who came out and commented on the last chapter about non-story stuff. It honestly helped float AND anchored me.

Some of the delay with this chapter's posting has simply been because I'm not sure what I want to say to you all as a follow-up to the last chapter's notes, in the wake of everything. It seems daunting to fit my thoughts and emotional journey into 5000 characters when I know some of you must be worried about me, if even a little bit.

It's also hard to know what is relevant to say and what is just me talking at myself. But I tend to err on the side of, "people tell me I'm internally mysterious, better give them the internal monologue." [Note: political glub glub at the end]

But anyway, I'm looking forward to hearing from you! Please enjoy the chapter, and warm holidays to you! It's good to be back. <3
The long, black barrel of the magnum lay pointing toward the cabin door. The weapon, one of the largest handguns in the world, had rounds that could shoot through concrete and was currently reflecting the light of the fireplace as it sat silently on the coffee table: sometimes crimson, sometimes gold, the molten tongues danced along the sleek, heavy barrel like partners on the competition floor.

The gun, named Mabel, was currently my only companion—alongside the book on my lap and the dark beer under the lamp, and maybe a few deer outside.

At least, they had better hope they were deer, for their own sake.

For the last few hours, I’d taken up residence on the brown-leather couch, passing the time under the soft light of the table lamp and the warmth of the fireplace, my feet crossed on the coffee table next to where Maybel sat.

The coffee table itself was a long, single slab of oak some six inches thick and with a bark edge; it was a stylish, but simple piece—unlike all the animal heads mounted on the walls.

I glanced up from the book, at the elk mounted above the TV, which itself was above the fireplace. The long, imposing antlers were something to admire, but its untimely stuffing wasn’t. It looked like an angry animal, and its eyes were a little askew.

But then again, all elk were angry and awkward, so I supposed it was a true-to-life endeavor.

I shook my head and turned the page, though my eyes settled not on the book, but the faux Polar Bear rug that lay in front of the fireplace, a little bit of warmth crawling into my cheeks that had nothing to do with the flames.

Oh, how I’d had my way with Lupin and that thing, a year or so before, when he’d first showed me this place....

—We’d checked the place over, he’d given me the short tour, and then I’d immediately proceeded to a shower. The room smelled of cedar and had both a tiny sauna and a jacuzzi tub—alongside the two person shower—so I was rather disappointed that he hadn’t joined me.

But as soon as I’d come out of the room, toweling off my hair, I’d seen why:

In the chilly main room, the fireplace was lit, and Lupin was lying in front of it on the rug, drawing something in a flurry of papers. A half-drunk wine glass glistened next to his crate of artist-level colored pencils as he worked.

He was completely naked.

“Well well, you’ve been busy,” I chuckled, leaving the towel on the doorknob to the bathroom and coming over to him with nothing but a second towel around my waist.

He turned over and folded his arms behind his head. One leg bent at the knee to make a triangle with the floor, a strategic move to enticingly cover up the naughty bits. He idly swayed his leg back and forth as I walked, the movement counting my steps.
I stopped just beyond his bare feet and put my hands on my hips, smiling down at him. As I pushed my shoulders back, my pecs flexed a little bit; I never felt more masculine, than I did when I was standing over him, with that playfully inviting look in his eyes.

“You’re sexy when you’re wet,” he purred more than quipped, one hand reappearing from behind his head and holding itself out to me, like he was measuring proportions for a drawing. “So many beautiful lines I just want to get all over me, intersecting with mine.”

I smirked, never taking my eyes off him. It was inspiring, watching him squirm, and the longer I watched him, kept my hands off him, the more he would do so to fill the silence. And while I found him a beautiful piece of art as well, especially outlined in the white waves of the rug, my mind was never nearly so innocent as his in its imaginings.

Usually when he said things like, “I want to paint you,” he actually meant with paint, poor innocent thing.

He rarely got off so easily when I said things like that, and this time, I wiggled my eyebrows at him shortly in response. “Ah, but it’s just so cold up here,” I said in mock complaint, making a show of shrugging. I knew just which muscles he liked seeing flex.

Below me, Lupin’s eyes lingered and he licked his lips. “You going to stay up there like the Colossus of Rhodes all day, or will you descend to grace my poor mortal presence?”

Lupin looked at the fireplace, if just to refresh his gaze, and then came back, smirking. His hand unfolded and held out to me, while he wiggled deeper into the soft, clean fur.

“Well, if you insist, my little one,” I said, dropping down to my knees and capturing his hand. I pressed a kiss against his fingers...then his wrist...and his forearm....

He giggled and wrapped his free hand around my damp hair, pulling me ever downward, against his muscle, against the fur—

I shook my head and sighed, sinking a little deeper into the couch.

I’m going to get too warm if I kept thinking of that....

Still, the fact that the rug and its couch were bereft of Lupin, naked or otherwise, left a little to be desired in the place’s decorations.

“This Place” was a log cabin in the woods, quite literally. It was a story-and-a-half A-frame, but it wasn’t lacking in amenities nor was it all that small; it came complete with the aforementioned jacuzzi bathtub in the rather glorious bathroom, for instance. That seemed a little ostentatious for me (as was the case with anything involving Lupin), but I couldn’t knock the fact that it was nice. They didn’t call them luxuries for nothing, I guess, and he sure know how to live that life, since he grew up around it. But he was a luxury himself, so he brought it with him everywhere he went—even if all he had was his smile, and the diamond glitter in his eyes when he did it.

It made me wonder though, sometimes, what he saw in me. I liked to think that my plainness balanced him out; that I was the shadow to his light. But I worried, those times, if he wouldn’t get bored with me eventually.

But then I would remember that he was the woman in our relationship, and then everything made sense. I was the hard edges and clean lines; he was the curves, the twirl, the fluff. (And the paisleys.)
—“Do you ever wonder...about you and me?” I asked, drawing my hand down Lupin’s bare flank. He was spooned up against my front, leaning on my arm in front of the fireplace. The coals were low now, but it just gave me new things to look at, in the low light. I was curled up around Lupin’s back, sheltering him; after I was done tracing him, my skyward arm laid back down lazily over his, and I quickly reentwined our fingers.

Lupin smiled a bit and snuggled in, curling up his knees a bit more to get away from the push of mine. He wasn’t weak by any means—he was fit like an acrobat—but he always seemed wonderfully small; it made me want to protect him, and given what we’d just done, the masculine instincts were flowing rather strongly in me, warm and fuzzy. I kissed the side of his neck, at the juncture of his shoulder. Some of my hair was in the way, and, mostly dry now, I blew it away with a breath.

Lupin shivered and snuggled in, but didn’t say anything for a while. After a time, I kissed him again just to let him know I was thinking of him kindly, and still interested in an answer. Softly, he sighed and drew our interlaced hands toward his mouth, where he laid a kiss on the back of my knuckles.

“I think about us a lot,” he admitted as he gazed at the smoldering coals. “About what'll happen, if something goes wrong and you’re not there anymore.”

There used to be a time when “something happening to me” would have been a godsend, in my book—a long time. In fact, I was rather surprised, really, that it suddenly wasn’t anymore. Admittedly, I hadn’t thought about it in a while (which was noteworthy in and of itself), but it was surprising that the instinctual response within me was something other than relief at the idea. I said nothing, trying to piece out the unfamiliar feelings, determine if they were friend or foe—

I turned the page.

The cabin was like us: simple from one angle, complex from another. The footprint was a big rectangle, and on one of the short sides, it sported a front door and tiny mud-room-style foyer. Next to that, separated by a wall and running the rest of the length of the short side, was a raised-platform nook with a small kitchen and pantry, which opened to the dining room via a counter island with stools.

On the other short side, across the dining room table that could sit eight (or one of Lupin’s projects), there was a sunny, southeast-facing seating area that doubled as both the breakfast nook and small office. Next to it, along the rest of that short side, was the bathroom (properly set off by walls, of course).

The living room, where I was, took up the long side opposite the dining area. A wall broken up by a double-wide open-frame airway separated it and the dining room. It also sported the door to the bathroom and several closets.

The bedroom area, however, was up in the loft at the back of the house, the stairway to which was surrounded by horned beasts of different varieties that had come with the place and which Lupin had rigged up for various purposes. And for company, the couch in front of the fireplace—the one I was on—was a pull-out.

(Fun fact: Sleeper sofas offered the best bullet protection of any couch when flipped over, because of all the metal in them. But they were also nearly impossible to flip without at least two very strong people.)
Regardless, it was a warm, cozy hideout that doubled as a retreat when we felt like it. It was full of rich wood tones and ornate decorations. The town down the road was a beautiful seaside one with a friendly culture, and up the road was skiing (which I would never, ever do). Truly, the only thing missing right now was Lupin himself.

—“I’m sorry if I make you worry,” I said to him after a bit.

Truth be told, I thought about losing him, too. Thought about it a lot. But it didn’t do me any good to worry over it, so I didn’t. I just kept my skills honed and the booze away and hoped for the best.

“It’s not you I worry about,” Lupin said, somewhat playfully stroking his fingertips over the backs of mine. It was an anemic, melancholy gesture compared to his usual though, and I frowned.

“Then what?” I asked, coming down and kissing his neck again, reassuring and a little higher up. I couldn’t see his face, only his ear and a high angle of his eyelashes.

“I worry about me.”

“...In what way?”

He took several long breaths. Finally a deep one came, and he squeezed my hand. “I worry that I love you. That I love so much, I might just stop all this.”

That...was a surprise. But also, not one. It was reasonable sentiment, and one I’d had many a time, in lala land, throughout my life. Meet the right person, settle down.... But Lupin’s dreamscape of glory and duty involved him doing more ridiculous things the older and more established he got. I could tell myself all I wanted that it was just because he was young, but that wasn’t true. He wasn’t the fisherman type. He was the world conqueror.

Honestly, I often worried that he was incapable of imagining himself as old. I suspected he hated the idea.

So really, the surprise was that Lupin was thinking it at all. Seemed Lupin was ruminating on that very note, actually.

“What’s so wrong with that, then?” I asked, drawing back to kiss his spine.

He shifted away and left my lips exposed to cold air. Lupin flipped all the way around, breaking my hold on him to stare into my eyes, almost accusatory. It was hard to see him, what with the shadows and low light from the fireplace, but I could see that loud and clear: the blue in his eyes, blazing.

“But that’s not what you want, is it?” he demanded. His hand, on my elbow, was tight.

I took in that look for a second—let it have its moment to feel appreciated—then sighed, and rubbed my hand over his head soothingly. “You know, love, some people think retirement at thirty is a good thing. The ultimate ‘fuck you’ to the system.”

His lips pursed and his eyes narrowed—which meant he was thinking hard because he hated and yet agreed with what I’d just said—and then flipped around, back into the proper spoon position. “Grr,” he replied.

I scoffed softly through my nose and pulled him close.

“Grrrrr,” he added, a rumble in his throat.
“Oh stop,” I said, squeezing him around the middle. “I’d love you no matter what you did for a job, you know that.”

Across from us, a long-burnt bit of log broke apart and crashed down. Lupin never once moved, not even to flinch, or probably even look at the thing. The coals kept burning and none of them had hit us, that was what mattered.

“But how am I going to protect you from all the people in your past,” he murmured finally, “if my reputation says I’ve gone soft?”

“I make you go plenty soft, plenty often,” I teased, nuzzling into him with my beard.

“Agh! Jigen! Ah, you!—ee, no!—stop it, Stop It I’m Being Serious!” Even as he giggled, he struggled an arm loose and whacked at my shoulder.

“Oh, I know,” I said, catching that hand and summarily pinning it to the ground. In fact, I swung my leg over and pinned all of him to the ground—both wrists and a nice view and all. My hair curtained us, and for a bit, I just stared down at him, forcing him to look at my eyes, and the fear that wasn’t in them. “The first couple people come looking and disappear, they’ll figure out there’s nothing ‘soft’ about a thief’s retirement.”

Lupin sighed as he looked up at me, sweet, sharp blue eyes distressed. That thought-line wrinkle that appeared in between his plucked brows showed up again, strong in the light of the coals.

“But what about when we’re old?” he mourned.

“What about it?”

“What if there’s a day when I can’t protect you anymore?”

He looked genuinely tormented by this. Was that what he’d been worried about lately? Really? In that case....

I bent down and kissed him, first on that crease, then on each closed eyelid, and then on his lips.

“Then I protect you, idiot.”—

I looked up from the text, gaze lingering on the loft. It was dark at the moment, but the foot of the bed and its colorful quilt was visible. Maybe because of the time of night and the alcohol, I could almost see Lupin’s shape up there, naked back smooth as he got ready for bed, cheerful voice calling me to him as he playfully wrapped himself in the sheets...not to mention the naturally graceful movements of his youthful body as he got ready for bed.

—The bed was cozy. It was kingsize, for starters, and had come with some kind of heavy fur pelt over it for the extra cold nights. But for now, with the two of us, it was covered in a colorful handmade quilt. It was nothing fancy—just squares of old fabrics at random, with fluffy tufts of yarn popping out of the intersections—but it was...homey. You could tell someone had cared about it, and that feeling seeped into me, whenever I was under it.

It felt like home, this place. The sharply angled ceiling, made entirely of wooden slats and massive timber crossbeams; large, plush furniture; and all of it lit with a warmth only wood could bring....When I laid on my back, looking up at the ceiling of the bedroom, I ended up thinking about that often.

Home.
It was a magical word, and I tasted it in my mouth, silently. I’d never had one before, not really. I’d grown up in a house, sure, one kind of like this actually, but it hadn’t been a home.

I hummed and glanced over at Lupin. He was on his side lying against me, one arm crunched up against his chest and the other wrapped around me to the point that he was slowly plucking at my hair, rhythmically.

“You know what this needs?” I asked, extricating a hand from behind my head and gesturing with it as I spoke. “A skylight. Two of them, big ones. One to either side, you know? So we can just lay back and watch the stars until we fall asleep.”

“Or the rain,” Lupin added with a sigh, tilting his head a little to follow my arm. We were near the apex of the roof, up here, so there was a steep but symmetrical slant to the ceiling, on either side of the thick crossbeam. “But it’d have to be bulletproof glass.”

Ah...right. Damn. Normally I was smarter than that.

“And even then...” he continued, turning his face away, back into my skin. He mumbled something else, something that sounded like I wouldn’t want to put you in danger.

“Ah, live a little,” I said, bringing my hand back down. I brushed over his hair, gently petting the short strands one way, then back. “That’s what curtains are for.”

A chuckled burbled up out of Lupin, quaking his body just a little. In the aftermath, he snuggled in against me, fondly. “Now why didn’t I think of that?”

“Because you’re too smart for that, duh.”

“Heh.... You know me too well.”

“Naturally. I love you.” I picked up his hand, which was resting on my chest, and enfolded it in mine. It was wonderfully warm, the combination of us.

“Yeah....” Lupin sighed, tone suddenly turned mournful.

Curious, I looked down, but I couldn’t see his face—just a bit of his nose and a high angle of his eyelashes. Still, he was clearly staring at nothing, brooding over something.

“What’s wrong, love?” I asked, a gravelly whisper. His hand curled up within mine, but nothing else happened. After continued silence, I nuzzled Lupin’s forehead with my nose in an attempt to get him to surface.

It didn’t work, though. He only burrowed deeper into the groove between my arm and torso.

“Nothing,” he replied, taking his hand away from mine and tucking it up against his own chest, to match its brother.

I considered my cooling hand for a moment, and what to do next. I looked over Lupin’s form; he was imitating a grumpy shrimp.

“Sure doesn’t look like nothing,” I said, with a mild strain of playfulness. When he grumbled and got tighter, I reached over and lightly rapped on his tricep with my fist. “Hello, Jigen to Lupin, may I come in?”

“Blarg.” Lupin flipped over in an explosion of limbs, his arms and legs suddenly going straight as
he rolled across the bed. He eventually stopped in front of the diamond-shaped window, where he laid on his stomach, his chin propped up with both hands.

The window was small; not much bigger than his head. There were two of them in the wall, one on each end of the bed. I wasn’t sure what they were originally for, but since they were just barely shoulder width at the widest points, we used them as escape portholes, sniper’s nests...and daydream portals.

I called them that because, most of the time, I’d find Lupin gazing through them with a dreamy look on his face. In the morning, he’d be drawing something in front of the light (they faced east) when he didn’t want to get out of bed yet, and at night, he’d be staring out them like a kid in front of his favorite TV show—like he was doing now.

On nights like this, the moonglow would cast a pallor over his face, and I couldn’t help but think of a ghost.

My phantom thief, communing with his spirits, I supposed.

“Seriously, what’s wrong?” I asked when I was done taking in the view of him, beautiful and pensive and all. I rolled over until I flopped alongside him, one arm over his naked back. He was half out of the sheets now, and would no doubt be getting cold if I didn’t intervene.

“Nothing’s **wrong**, exactly. I’m just thinking about...things.” He crinkled up his nose at this.

“Well there’s you’re problem,” I replied. “You know that’s dangerous.”

He chuckled and rewarded me a brief, musing glance before turning back to the forest expanse beyond the cabin, a new glitter in his eyes. “I had a window like this, as a kid.”

“Ohhh?” That was news. I knew a fair amount about his past with his father, because I’d been there; and his grandfather, because he liked talking about that; but not his time with his mother in France when he was younger. He didn’t talk about his childhood much, same as me; the only time it came up for either of us was when we were commiserating about unresolved bullshit because of something prescient appearing in front of us. And anyway, I was too damn old anymore for that to constantly effect me.

...Not that I didn’t still have nightmares about my family though, from time to time.

I rubbed Lupin’s back supportively, and he swayed from side to side under the motion, a small smile on his face. “It was a good view,” he offered, the happy side of wistful.

I laid down next to him with a friendly hum and mirrored his posture, chin in my palms and elbows on the far side of the pillow. “Tell me about it?” I asked, hip-checking him.

“Hee. Well...”—

The next day, I went to town to get supplies and meet a couple friends, and ended up staying the night down there. By the time I’d gotten back, Lupin had painted the entire bedroom ceiling with a glittering map of the winter sky—complete with figures of the classical constellations (enticing nymphs and playful cherubs included).

He’d made me my very own Michaelangelo. But now that man-made sky lay only dark, without someone to draw me upstairs to admire the heavens, while I snuggled their talented self.

The fireplace suddenly popped, momentarily redirecting my attention to make sure no embers had
landed anywhere dangerous. I found the culprit—or the product, really—sitting on the tile around the rug, glowing red. I watched, not a thought in my head, as it slowly faded to grey.

Eyes flicking over, I checked the level of wood for the fire. Plenty.

When I’d arrived, there’d been mounds of firewood still outside, and it’d been a quiet day in the livingroom as I’d used it. There was currently some wet stuff drying next to the mantle, which I’d trucked in during the evening news’s commercials. A pot of coffee, satellite TV, dried meats and cheeses that had been stashed around the place...in theory, nothing was better than this.

I sighed and set my chin in my hand, gazing into the fire.

—Flames. First all over the scope, and then, reaching up into the sky. Thick clouds of smoke, and through the ringing in my ears, the low, slow sound of *thu-wunk, thah-wunk, ka-wham*. And then, out of the plume of grey and scarlet, rubble cascading down into the street, plowing into the police standing at the front of their perimeter.

Ducking back down into the scope, I frantically searched the rooftop. Nothing, nothing, nothing through the smoke, not even a building, and then—legs. Facing the explosion; standing, though not presumably still attached to something whole. Part of someone, still on the roof....

“C’mon, c’mon,” I growled, as the smoke whipped this way and that. Legs, I could see. Stance, I could see. Shoe, I could see. But no person, no face, no identifying colors. Everything that wasn’t grey was red, only red. The smoke kept whipping into “him,” blocking my view—if there was even a body attached to those legs.

I had to do something. Either get out of here, or help. I couldn’t just be wasting time, waiting for smoke to clear.

I’d seen too many torsoless limbs left after a bombing to know that was a good idea.

I couldn’t hear properly; couldn’t see a damn thing. All the power on the block had suddenly gone out. But there were screams, that much I knew. Many of them. As many as the flashing blue police lights scoring the bricks, fighting with the flames and making everything a sickly purple.

And then, as my ears stopped ringing, came the whirring of the helicopter blades as they backed off....

The wind shifted, pushing the smoke cloud away from my view.


Fuck.

Where? Where is he?

But there was no red in sight now.

There was only Zenigata, staring at the cavern below, his hand still outstretched. He wasn’t more than a foot from the crumbling edge.

I looked and looked, but there was only one man, lit up by the flames. Not two.

I waited there, watching, trying not to think, trying to rouse my training, my protocols, until the cop jumped down into the wreckage. Until there was nothing left in my scope worth seeing.—
I shook my head out, and looked toward the nearest window. They were all shuttered currently; it was one of the necessary evils of hiding out when the situation was hot. The neighbors would see the smoke from the chimney, but nobody would be able to see me just sitting here. ...Not that I was in the habit of sitting where I was easily picked off, but still.

Last I’d checked, though, it was still snowing out there. It wasn’t supposed to snow like this, in France, but I guess it’d decided to anyway, just to fuck with us.

—Lupin discovering snow one time as he opened these very shutters, and then promptly getting in a snowball fight with me as we went to scavenge firewood. His constant giggles and taunts all the while, until I pinned him to the snow and we ended up in a war of stolen kisses—

I smiled, just a little, and thumbed the stack of unread pages. The book on my lap waited patiently, words still hoping for my return.

There were indeed some houses nearby, on the next ridge, but the snow was currently so high out here in the mountains that I could barely see them anyway. That played into the place’s strategic value: It was close enough to the border that we could go on foot if necessary, but with several available roads to abscond by if we needed to throw law enforcement off our trail when in a car.

Too, the neighbors were close enough that traffic to our cabin wouldn’t be unusual, but they were also far enough away that no one would get hurt in crossfire or wonder what weird things we were unloading. Too, the neighboring properties were rentals, so no one would think twice about people they didn’t recognize coming and going. Lupin knew his stuff.

At least, that was what it was supposed to be.

What there wasn’t supposed to be was only one of us coming home.

There was always that danger, but I never felt good about leaving him behind. And with what had happened, the heat was on, in more ways than one. There were people on my tail, and the manhunt for me would be massive and violent, with no quarter given; I couldn’t just disappear into the next house over from the scene of the crime to hang out.

Still, I had not left that event feeling good about our efforts. It felt worse than amateur hour; it felt like we’d been set up.

In fact, we had to have been. Lupin wouldn’t plant explosives to level a building, and certainly not a building full of civilians. And that aside, he definitely wouldn’t have been confused about which building it was, to the point that he got caught in the destruction.

Plus, there was exactly zero about Zenigata, even Zenigata with local helicopter support, that would drive Lupin to even consider such a tactic. It just wasn’t his style.

I gazed at the elk head, which itself was gazing down at me.

Some lookout I was.

With a sigh, I looked over at the beer, a glittering ruby in the depths where the firelight hit it. A little bit more of it had been drunk than was probably good for everyone.

Whispering an apology to it, I proceeded to set aside the book in favor of laying down on the white rug. The warmth of the fire baked one side of me, while the rest was chilled by the air.

Hands threaded together on my abs, I stared up at the faraway ceiling, all too aware of the fact that
my favorite blanket was missing—and I couldn’t do anything about it, until the time was right.

I eyed Mabel, sitting slightly above my head on the coffee table.

One way or another, I had Zenigata to thank for my lack of company tonight.

Slowly, I reached over and picked her up. She was heavy as she settled into my palm, but reassuringly so. I ran my fingers along the familiar grooves, taking comfort in them as the images formed within my mind.

*Oh yes, Inspector Zenigata, you and I are going to have one hell of a little chat before this is all over.*

I looked down the sight line at the nearest eye of the poorly stuffed elk, the red and gold flames still flashing down the barrel.

*You and everyone you love.*

“...Bang.”

Chapter End Notes

[Note: Political Feelings Glub Glub Follows, but the last three paragraphs are general and update-related]

Okay, thank you to those who don't mind me using my notes as a blog space, and a special thank you to those who took the time to cheer me up in the comments. xD You are good people! <3

So, my country still doesn't have a new leader and WOW, the investigations; they are unprecedented. It is all the papers are talking about. (What are we, Russia? Wait, Russia's behind it all? Fuuuuuuuc--)

I am trying to laugh at things as my shield, but it is hard. And for all I sharpen my sword, it is hard to find a place to use it. It's so frustrating to realize that I don't have the clout or position to make a noticeable difference. It's very hard for a reasonable humanist to see both reason and humanity to break down at so many levels. I guess I need to have a little faith in the system, but that is very hard, when the people in it have abused us so spectacularly along the way.

I still get sick thinking that a gross crook of a mogul got to the top of my country in this day and age (even /if/ via fraudulence, greed, ignorance, and low voter turnout), and then, even moreso, at the thought that he's potentially running it afterwards--despite all the obvious fraud he and his people are committing/ed (Where is justice? Where are the good men in power, brave enough to fight the good fight and stop this person, this epidemic of gross inhumanity, for the good of others? Will the few who are out there make it through? Will I? What should my part be? Should I burn myself up for this cause, or believe there is still something left of me worth using elsewhere?)

Another thing that bothers me a lot is the incredible abuses of power and erosion of
rights that will ensue ala 1880, but...well, cycles, I guess. Give them their cake; they'll eat it, and the masses will realize they've been had, and I will stoke them to their pitchforks. In the mean time, I guess I'll ride this stock wave? (Stock prices love rampant deregulation...! *groans*)

It's not like it will be all bad, all the time, and especially not if you're the right type of person. All this certainly will bring out all the crazies into the limelight, hopefully to their doom. But I do worry about liberty, human rights, justice, and every vulnerable person and part of this planet.

I will say that the newspapers are on watch now too, which is great, and young money is mobilizing; just today I saw that a lot of Silicon Valley people are going to put together a "task force" to combat fraudulent news, which is a great start. Every day is something stronger. Good people in power are mobilizing and liberals are finally aware of what could be if they demand it (and now, how to); that's something to take heart in. (Better late than never I guess, ugh)

Anyway, After talking with many people (and finding myself unable to count on my state seceding), I think the thing for me to do is either A) go to law school B) start some lawsuits, or C) admit that I can't expect to do more good than my current social standing allows, take care of myself in the mean time, and start small, presciently through writing. (As should you!)

It's sounds stupid, but I'm probably going to start a blog. You know, like a real blog, not these comments, where I can finally be fearless in my rabble rousings and unapologetically staunch in my beliefs. xD I'll let you know when it's up.

All in all, I'm mostly over the disaster and have emotionally repaired the meltdown that the election caused, but ohhh boy, only if I don't think about it too hard, or watch certain news, or talk to my parents who are like "it'll be fiiiine, your healthcare is going up 400% next month (*true story) but you're making more money, so please pay more rent yeah?"

[End Glub Glub]

Side note, I also am teetering on the edge of depression from feeling so under siege (which makes it very hard to write well). So, I feel like I'm not up to top speed yet, and the holidays suck anyway for writing (too stressful). My priority is making sure this work stays good, but sometimes that's at odd with speed. I hope you'll forgive me. I'm trying! Lupin wants you to get a really good fic!

But the good news is, most of the rest of the coming arc is written, so you'll be getting fairly consistent content for a little while. Woo!

And there will also be a Christmas present post to you all, one way or another! :D

~Quill out~
Chapter Summary

Little!kid Lupin is a charming terror.

Chapter Notes

Happy Holidays! Have a present: Four chapters! 25,000 words for you to enjoy! :D

Part III

The sounds of a show were all around me: swelling music and rising voices; the whirring of gears and the endless creak of pulleys. There were long bouts of women singing tunes I knew by heart, followed by grand clapping; or sections of silence through the floor, punctuated by laughter and foot-stomping from raucous men.

I knew all the routines by heart even at this young age, so I could figure out when a loud or soft section was coming, given the playbill for the night, and horse around accordingly. Yet at this very moment, I couldn’t see the action.

I was above it.

While I had spent many a night watching the stage performances and their practice runs from the catwalks high above, my secret playroom was higher than even that.

Oh yes: My favorite place to hide was the attic.

It was warm up here, and close-in too. Every surface was made of wood, including the slanting ceiling, but the boards were all mismatched, as were the varnishes. The only uniformity was the sweet amber light that drifted down from the exposed bulbs, haphazardly stuck to the ceiling back when electricity first came to this town. There were two small, diamond-shaped windows on either side of the triangle framework too, currently filled with stars and winter’s frosting.

But this night, like with all nights, what took my attention the most were the things in the room itself.

This was The Attic—the place where all the old props and costumes were stored, as well as every seasonal supply to make them. And more than anything, it was my secret fort.

It was a beautiful place, to me, full of adventure. Today, I could be a pirate, made from an old belt missing some decorations and a broken prop sword; tomorrow, a princess with mismatched glass
earrings and sequin slippers. Sometimes, I picked up all the old hats and imitated the people that came into the business, practicing accents, personal carriage, and mannerisms one by one.

But today, as I slung a pink boa around my neck, I was imitating someone a little closer to home: My mother.

I struck a pose and smirked, then proceeded to delicately apply a tube of lipstick I’d filched.

“Do your job, wretch!” I pronounced when I was done, accent and all, head slung back at the proper angle and hands on my hips.

I felt strong and powerful, when I pretended to be someone, even if that someone was a quiet man hiding in the shadows. But when I pretended to be her, I felt a warmth, a stability. I felt...proud of myself.

I felt...visible.

I was wearing an old pair of her shoes, standing in the toes with my heels barely hitting the halfway mark. I had a dress on, a white one full of missing sequins, and a bunch of costume pearls that nearly hit the floor between my legs.

I wasn’t sure why I was up there in this memory, but I was prancing before the free-standing mirror that lived up here, which had a big spider’s crack. I peered at myself in the amber haze, and nodded satisfactorily at the garish makeup job I’d done. I had her eye shape down, certainly, but...

I paused and leaned nearer. Her eyes were dark. But mine...they were blue. It looked kinda green in this light, but they were definitely not just black like hers. They were...blue.

Did that mean...that my father had blue eyes?

“Okaasan,” I called. “Was my father a white guy?”

I guess it made sense; lots of them frequented the club. Maybe one of them was my dad? That was an exciting thought.

Could I be...looking at my father, when I looked into my own eyes? Maybe I could figure out who he was just by looking at him, if I looked at myself hard enough....

It was as I pulled down my eyelid to stare at my iris more fully in the broken glass that I heard her reply.

The stage had gone quiet; they might have been between acts, or had the comedy routine on. I supposed the difference would be if any laughter came soon.

But in the mean time came the muffled sound of her voice. But I couldn’t quite make it out.

I paused, full of lipstick and sequins, and waited, and—yes, there it was again. A soft exclamation of some kind, just before the dull, familiar roar of laughter came up from the audience, many feet below me.

Curious, I situated my pink boa and dainty but tasteless hat (complete with askew lace veil) and quietly tracked the noise down. Under a rack of clothing, over a pile of prop weapons and around a stack of boxes I was too small to get into but liked to climb—
It came again. A muffled shout. But this time, I could tell it was a sad one.

Maybe one of the girls was up here too, and mom was talking to her? I’d never seen them up here before, but...maybe? Well, I should fix it, if that were the case. It wasn’t good when girls cried. It smeared all their makeup, and then they cried harder.

Plus, it made me sad when they were sad.

Not that the ghost up here didn’t cry a lot. But like, that was different. That was the ghost. She cried all the time.

I mean, sometimes she danced and sang and chatted me up, but like, that was different. That was the ghost. Nothing could fix her. (Though she responded well to flowers and I was on the lookout for her old boyfriend.)

Still, she showed up with a rush of cold, which there had not been, usually around sunset in the quiet before the shows started, so I knew it wasn’t her. (She liked sunsets.)

Anyway, I followed the voice, growing ever slightly louder like an approaching brook as I crept around the trunks and boxes. In fact, coming closer, I found the mystery call to in fact be a string of coherent sounds. So maybe a conversation?

Ooh, this could be my chance to spy, like the guys liked to do around the dressing rooms. It always scared them witless when I came up behind them and asked why they found naked women so fascinating.

But when I rounded the boxes and came into another part of the attic, I found only one person. And it wasn’t the ghost that lived up here.

It was a petite woman with long black hair, cut straight along the bottom, wearing a white skirt suit and holding her hands in front of her face.

It was my mother.

She was sitting on a crate, with an open box behind her. I guess she’d been looking for something, and that was why I was up here at all. That wasn’t unusual, though. She came up here to escape from things, sometimes, just like I did. But she rarely played along with my adventures. Or when she did, she just ended up crying, or occasionally slapping me.

“Mom?” I asked hesitantly, standing in the aisle of boxes just out of arm’s reach.

She sniffled into her hands; I couldn’t see her face. But she didn’t look like she was about to do anything else; her shoulders just continued to shake.

“Mom?” I asked, coming a step closer in all my sparkly, feathery glory. When she didn’t say anything, I touched at her bare arm, very lightly.

She jumped and snapped her head up with wide eyes. Then she quickly turned away from me and wiped at her eyes for several seconds, sniffling.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, voice high and squeaky and sad. “Did someone hit you again?”

I couldn’t see her face behind her hands. But she shook her head, even though she didn’t stop crying. “No, honey.”
I didn’t think I saw any bruises forming there, but I couldn’t be sure. “Did the cops want more money?”

Again, she shook her head, and sniffled hard.

“Are...the girls fighting?” I hedged. “I can talk to them...?”

Instead of answering this, she wrapped her arms around me and pulled me close.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, staring at an ugly lamp over her shoulder, that was up here for no crime other than its unsightliness.

“I wish I’d never had you,” she sobbed into my ear—and then hugged me tighter.

I awoke suddenly, but rather than finding myself in my warm and cozy bed in the attic of the bordello (which, until I had recently started to grow, had been the bottom half of an old steamer trunk that had supposedly lost its lid in a backstage cat fight), I was plastered up against something plastic, with very odd angles and a smell that was definitely not old dust and good cooking.

I sat up, hair stuck to my face, and found a seat as the view in front of me. And another. And another, all uniform and blue.

Oh—that was right. The plane.

I was still on the plane. And—judging by the sudden ding of a bell over my head and the weird feeling of my stomach falling out—we were descending. That must have been what woke me up.

I’d never been on a plane before, though I’d read about it, so I knew what was coming. Being on an international one as my first try was as boring as it was exciting, but the payoff.... That was more exciting than anything.

Making sure I didn’t run into the sleeping man next to me, I shuffled down and grabbed my bookbag from under the seat in front of me. Once on my lap, I quickly undid the lock and threw back the flap.

Inside were three things: A sketchbook and pencils to draw with, a brown-paper-wrapped package, and a photograph. There had been snacks, too, but I’d already eaten all of them.

Rubbing at my bleary eyes, I picked up the photograph. It was black-and-white and very grainy; it was a facsimile. But its confines held the image of a tall, dark-haired, middle-aged man, as seen from over a car of some sort. He was staring into the distance, face hard and determined (at least I thought, squinting at it).

This was supposedly Arséne Lupin II, the man I was going to see.

I was so excited because, in just a few more hours, I would see my father for the first time in my life.

“Hey, champ. What’s up?”
“Not much.”

“You still doing good in school?”

“Yeah.”

“Why don’t you sit and tell me about your teachers this year.”

It was around 10 PM one late Summer night when I was ten years old. It was hot outside, but the theater was somewhat cool due to its ventilation windows. Ten PM meant it was almost my bedtime—but only if the girls who cared could find me, and furthermore, felt like telling me. More importantly, it also meant it was between the evening theatrical show and the after-dark stripteases.

There was a man who came to both sometimes, about once a month. He was a nice old guy, fit and fairly tall. He had grey-and-white hair he gelled and combed back, though it usually went a bit wild anyway. It was the same story for his mustache and beard: it was trimmed nicely, but somehow always seemed a bit Poseidon-ish anyway. His hairline had receded too, but it didn’t look terrible on him; he had escaped the western bald spot, it seemed, which was what mattered to my sensibilities. He always came dressed well but not ostentatiously, and he never caused the occasional trouble that found him (at least so far as I saw)—though he always dealt with it, usually in a way that made me want to clap.

He was also unendingly kind to me for some reason, but he fascinated me all on his own, too. He came alone most times and always had a present for me of some sort. But it wasn’t like the weird guys that tried sometimes to use gifts and sweet words as bait to lure me away and then yelled at me when I didn’t take them; this guy seemed to genuinely care about me getting presents, and asked nothing but my smile in return for them.

And he never seemed interested in cornering me; he’d always sit at the same table (it was strategic, he’d said) and let me come and go as I pleased. If he came in the afternoon, he’d talk to my mom and listen to me playing piano in the lobby. Sometimes he went upstairs with women at the end of the night; sometimes he just enjoyed a glass of wine and we talked about stuff before he went home alone. Sometimes, he taught me to play poker with his guys and how to do sleight-of-hand tricks or pick locks (much to my mother’s annoyance, given how I employed that knowledge).

And sometimes, he gave me food.

I hopped up into the open seat next to him and proceeded to tell him about my teachers and classes and classmates—but quickly ended up eyeing the appetizers. Brussel sprouts with honey and chopped nuts. Green, but decent.

“Want one?” he asked.

I gave them one more long glance, then looked away from him, nose in the air. “Not especially.”

“Your poker face is terrible,” he said. “Take one.”

Just as I turned to protest, he poked it in my mouth. I nearly choked on it. But he only smiled, and ruffled my hair.

“Want some wine?” he asked, taking a sip from his glass and then holding it out to me.

“No,” I muttered with a shrug, chewing.
“No what.”

“No thank you,” I amended.

“Good. But talk while you’re chewing and people will think you’re a slob.” He sat up straight with a small smile, then patted my back. “Show me the high-class manners we worked on last time.”

I preened at him and quickly rearranged myself, approaching the dinner plate and silverware he put in front of me like someone going up to play a piano. I arranged my napkin, pulled up the utensils, then slowly made a show of eating properly.

“Heh, that’s good, you’ve been practicing,” he said, watching me carefully—but also musingly.

“Quite, old chap.”

“Hah.” His temple resting on a loosely curled fist, his old eyes and wrinkled face turned fond as he gazed at me, smiling. “You’re just like your dad when you do that.”

I fumbled the fork, but managed a ten-point maneuver to catch it before it hit the ground.

“My...dad?” I asked, turning to the old man with my eyes big, fork between my hands like I’d just clapped a bug to its demise. “You knew my dad?”

“Well...I...” He paused, blinked quickly a few times, and then swallowed. He ran his hand over his mouth, elbow on the white-linen-covered table as he turned away, toward the front door.

But naturally, there was nothing to see there—just a burgundy red curtain cordonning off the hallway to the lobby.

“Did you?” I continued, putting the silverware down and pulling out the napkin from my shirtfront.

“I...” The jovial old man looked uncharacteristically serious when he turned back to me. He looked me up and down, then, hand still over his mouth, asked lowly, “What do you know about him?”

“He’s dead, white, and French,” I stated quickly. “And mom loved him, but then he died heroically, so obviously it didn’t work out. Then I was born.”

“He’s not dead,” the man replied suddenly, frowning and leaning closer to me like I’d done something wrong. “Who told you he was dead?”

He...wasn’t?

Then why...wasn’t he here with me?

My eyes went wide as I pulled back from him. “My mom did?”

It was a very strange look that crossed the old patron’s face then. Over his hand, his eyes widened. They were blue too, I realized at that moment, as the light caught them.

But that wasn’t unusual; most white guys had blue eyes around here.

“Oh,” he muttered heavily, taking a breath. It sounded like he was quite concerned about that fact.

“What?” I asked. “Is that bad?” Mom could definitely be scary, especially to the uppity
customers, but...

“Um...” He looked back at the door again, arm over the back of the chair. Then he turned back to me, leaned down and whispered, “You can’t tell her I told you that. Just forget it, okay? Or she’ll never let me back in here if you do.”

“What? No. I won’t tell.” I scrunched up my nose and shook my head. Didn’t he know me better than that? I wasn’t that kind of man! Mostly because of his teachings, no less....

“Good.” He took a breath and sat straight in the chair, staring at the stage rather dauntedly. He’d gone pale.

That was odd. “But you have to tell me about my dad,” I insisted instead. “Where is he?”

“...I don’t think I should.”

“Do it, or I’ll tell all the girls you have Syphilis.”

He choked on his drink and gave me an offended look. I threw one back at him, but twice as intent.

“You’re a little terror,” he remarked, as if that were a shocking revelation.

“I learn from the best, old man,” I agreed. They were fighting words, spoken without trace of a smile.

As he composed himself, coughing and sputtering, I didn’t take my eyes off of him—even when I went for another Brussel sprout out of the corner of my eye. Stakeout and food, achieved. I could do this all night, two feet from his face.

The old man glanced down at me, side-eye. But it wasn’t a fleeting gesture; he was peering at me, oddly, the intense way that he did sometimes. Like he was trying to scan me, or maybe read me like a book.

I wanted that superpower someday. It was part of the reason I hung around him. Still, it made me feel weird, every time he did it, because I was never sure what he was looking at.

“Um...?” I asked, similar to how he had before, and leaned back a little. “What is it?”

The look he gave me was complicated. His eyebrow raised, almost pained. But then a little bit of a smile ticked at his lips, too. “Nothing,” he said. “You just remind me of him, is all.”

He didn’t sound quite happy about that, and that, in and of itself, made a chill go through me.

The old man looked at the plate of green bits, his frown oddly austere. He made an impatient motion with his hand, after a bit. “Want the rest?”

I gave him a careful once-over, then shrugged. “...If you don’t.”

I pulled them over and popped another in my mouth. He slouched in the chair, arm over the back, gazing at the stage. After a long sigh on his part and several Brussel sprouts on mine, his lips pursed and he looked down at me, eyes flicking over my form as I ate.

“Do you get fed okay?”

I nodded and shrugged. Truth was, I was pretty hungry all the time, but it didn’t matter. “I have access to the kitchen.”
“Yeah but that’s not the same as nutrition,” he said. “Actually...” He looked at the stage, and the attendants ushering people to their seats down in the front. “Why don’t I teach you to make some eggs?”

“What, like right now?”

“Yeah, like right now.”

I raised an eyebrow and glanced at the stage, concerned. “You don’t want to see the act?”

He shrugged and opened a hand, palm up. “You’re more important.”

I tilted my head at that, but he didn’t seem to be lying, which was...a strangely nice feeling, the content of those words; it made me feel all warm, right in my chest. Still, if he were lying, or maybe trying to isolate me to pull something, there were plenty of people in the kitchen, even at this time of night. And I knew how to use the knives on people, thanks to one of our Chinese cooks.

“...If you’ll tell me about my dad,” I hedged, frowning a bit.

“I will tell you what I know, but you have to promise not to tell your mother that I told you, or anyone else. It’ll be our secret.”

I wasn’t sure how I felt about that...but I could always lie. “Why?”

“Because if she does, it’ll be curtains for me.” He drew a line across his throat.

My eyes widened. That, I understood. He was the nicest guy who came around, at least to me, so I didn’t want to lose him.

But my father.... That was bait no one had ever dangled in front of me, before. It might just be worth falling for, on the off chance that it wasn’t a trick.

“So it’s a deal?” he asked, hand on my shoulder and frowning intently.

I looked around, not sure about that hand, but then nodded anyway, trying to sound brave. “Let’s make some eggs.”

At this point—on the plane to America—I didn’t know much about my father; I’d thought he was dead until six months ago. All I had to go on were my mother’s stories, the occasional hearsay that would disappear as soon as the speaker knew I was listening, and the opinion of the American police file I’d acquired. But that had revealed little outside of the photo in my bookbag.

I’d shut myself up in my room and glued myself to an English dictionary for half a day just trying to figure out all the jargon in the police file, but it was still rather...cryptic, to say the least. And in regards to him personally, it was woefully incomplete.

But, given that it had a lot nicer things to say than the one I’d stolen from the local precinct in France about my mother, I figured the police station filing cabinets here didn’t have to burn.

(They still didn’t have any leads about that one.)

Still, it lead me to believe that the police had a healthy respect for “my dad.” More than they had for my mother. The ones in town had gotten ever more greedy over the years, making it hard for us
to stay in business, from all the freebees they demanded alongside the payout too. Mom hated most of them, and by extension, so did I.

But that was okay. They hated me, too. Kids ruined the vibe, I was told.

Except for the couple of them that kept trying to corner me. They ruined my vibe. Didn’t they know anything about anything? We didn’t trade in the underage, and furthermore, I was the kid of the owner. I wasn’t for sale, and I was never going to be. It was a senate seat or nothing for me. Though, I still wasn’t sure if a few of them knew I was a guy or not. But my name ended in O, you’d think they’d get it....

I gazed down at the photo anew, touching at one corner of the print-out, which I’d trimmed with my considerable scissor skills to be more compact. The man in this image...he had the hawkish eyes of a seasoned general. He wasn’t afraid of anything. That was how I wanted to be. That’s how I’d been told he was, in my mom’s fairy tales. Fair, strong, and capable. Most importantly, he was crafty, too. And always, always loving.

Like Mr. Lucien....

“I wish I’d never had you.”

I shook out my head, squeezing my eyes shut against the intrusion of my mother’s voice. I hated that memory. Why did it have to be my first one?

My eyes came to rest on the photograph again.

“You’re more important.”

Maybe...I could find a solution for her, here.

“Hey,” came a whisper from nearby, perhaps because the scowl on my face had grown so intense it might have soon burned a hole through the paper.

I startled and looked up, only to find the passenger on the other end of the row pointing at me.

“Look out the window,” he said in English, smiling.

Apparently he’d been pointing at it, not me. I quickly looked behind me, and then my eyes widened.

The little gasp that followed was to be the first note of my love letter to the world. In that moment I’d seen her unfettered beauty in the form of eight million lights meeting the ocean at night, and instantly fallen in love.

It was a love that I hoped would last a lifetime.

The oil in the frying pan spread out like a modern art painting. Beside it, in a kitchen still-life, two bowls sat: one with two egg yokes in it, and the other awaiting instructions.

“Here. You take a fork and whip these.” He punctured one of the yokes with a tine, then made a few fast, fancy, circular motions to show me. The goopy yellow stuck to the tines like...like nothing
I’d ever seen before, really. It was some fascinating viscosity. I tossed the egg shells in the sink as the old guy handed me the bowl, just a little standard industrial-kitchen metal thing usually used for spices and stuff. Then he gave me the fork, and I did my best to imitate him.

“The goal with scrambled eggs is to make them nice and fluffy, so you have to whip them vigorously. You just destroyed their natural shape, so no reason to feel sorry for reforming them. If you’re gonna change something, go all the way.” He adjusted the heat on the pan, then leaned back against the counter and watched me.

I stared at my task with far more intensity than was probably necessary. Then I proceeded to make a lot of noise with not much result. I stared at it a second after the first try, then used my other hand, trying to see what changing the angle would do.

He didn’t say anything about this, the way most people did, but he was watching it closely. In fact, when I looked up at him, the old man’s head was tipped curiously. But to my expectant look, all he offered was, “The trick is in the wrist.”

He made the motion again, in the air. “You been practicing the wrist flexibility and finger dexterity stuff I taught you?”

I nodded heatedly. ‘‘Elegance is everything’’! He smirked, pleased, and then tapped my cheek with his palm, an affectionate gesture. “Right. Unless it’s time to run away. That’s also vitally important.”

“Right!”

**Running away requires no grace: it only requires escape.** That’d been one of the first lessons he’d taught me.

I tackled the mess of eggs again, this time with more wrist. It was easier, and felt a lot less clumsy. It was still a strange feeling, but I think I managed it decently enough. I’d have to try this more though; the way he’d done it had been so much cooler. And I needed to be cool, if I was gonna get anywhere in life.

“That looks like it’ll do,” he said thoughtfully, taking the bowl from me as he inspected it. “See how there are bubbles? That’s what you want to see, when whipping things.”

I peered at it and nodded. “Now,” he continued kindly, “chop that stuff up.”

He pulled a knife out of the nearest wooden block of them and spun it around once in a short, utilitarian flourish. He handed me the knife, handle-first. “You know how to use this without hurting yourself or anybody else?” he asked seriously, keeping ahold of the handle.

I nodded. “I know how to do both, in fact.” I took it from him with a grin, and set to chopping the peppers, onions, and cheese. It was one of my favorite things to do, knife skills.

“And who taught you that, ‘ey?” he asked with an amused drawl.

“Xing-bao,” I answered off-handedly, waving toward the cook across the room. “He’s escaping some Chinese mafia or something, I don’t really remember.”

“Hmm,” the old man remarked lightly, and probably, while I wasn’t looking, watching the man in question across the kitchen, from the way his voice turned away from me. We were in a corner of the kitchen that had already been cleaned and closed up for the night, but everyone else was still in
the other half, busily working the dessert menu. “You should pay attention to that sort of thing. Never know when it could come in handy.”

“Yeah? Like how?” I asked, moving onto the onions.

“Well, motivation, for one. Know what a person fears, and what a person wants more than anything, and you can predict their every move—or manipulate it. Make people an offer they can’t refuse, put pressure on the weak spot, that sort of thing. Or it’ll lead you to your friends and allies.” He shrugged lightly. “Also, don’t go blabbing that personal stuff, or they’ll come after you.” When I was done, he ruffled my hair. “That’s the number one rule of being a thief: don’t spill people’s secrets. Always—”

“—Divert, never discuss. Or else you’ll end up under the truss!” I remember.”

“Right.” He grinned. “So I’ll give you rule two.”

My eyes widened, and I put down the knife and the cutting board as I watched him.

“Secrets are to be collected, not given.”

“Oh.” I rehearsed that in my mouth several times, then in my head, nodding.

All right, you’ve got knife skills, that’s great. I’ll have to thank Xing for that. Now. The magic part—the cooking.”

He had me scrape the dry bits into the second bowl, then sprinkle some seasonings on it. Then he took up the bowl of eggs and stood by the frying pan.

“There are all kinds of egg dishes; they’re one of man’s most primal, and most nutritious, foods. People all over the world have been cooking with them for millenia, so, naturally, the farther back a food goes, the more ways to prepare it there are, and the more necessary to one’s diet it is likely to be; in fact, eggs have often kept the sick and starving from death, and most of the people in the world over the age of 100 eat an egg every day.”

I nodded at this in awe as he upped the temperature on the burner. “But as for preparation, some egg dishes require low heat, with high dexterity; others, high heat, low dexterity. It’s all about the finished product. But, for our lesson to day, I’ll say that with scrambled eggs, the key is high heat for just a few seconds. Like so.”

Here, he flicked his wrist and splashed the egg soup down, an imperious gesture that was all the more impressive for the sizzle and curdle that happened next. He put down the first bowl, pulled up a spatula and the second bowl, and within a few seconds, sprinkled down the mix-ins.

“Don’t worry about doing anything fancy until you can do it safely. No point in making food if you just burn yourself or lose the food all over the counter. Plus, ‘I burned myself cooking eggs’ is not really a sexy story to tell a girl about how you got a scar, y’know?” He crinkled his nose, and I nodded at him, grunting an assent. “Now,” he continued quickly, setting the second bowl down, “if you have more eggs, or you’re making an omlet or something, you’d wait to add these until it was this level of cooked. See the color? That’s how you can tell. Chemical change, all very fascinating.”

I was too enamored with this information to remember to nod.

“But you just turn it like this, poke it like that, fluff it up a little...and off you go. All food is better with good presentation, and there’s no excuse for poor presentation, ever, but scrambled eggs
are...well...” He turned to me with a wry smirk. “Child’s play.”

He proceeded to tapp me on the nose with the spatula—having diverted my attention with his other hand to do it.

“Wahgk,” I complained, but then giggled and ate the bit of egg stuck to my nose. It hadn’t been hot; just nicely warm.

He chuckled and turned off the heat. “Here, go sit down and I’ll put it together.”

I smiled at him, stomach growling. Something about being hungry, it made me love the people who fed me an insanely strong amount.

“And then we can talk about...the other thing?” I asked, on that wave of good feeling.

The smile on his face faltered a bit. Perhaps he had hoped I’d forgotten. But he couldn’t get away from me that easily—he was the one person I didn’t expect to take a swing at me when I was pesky, so he was relatively safe to pester.

“Yes,” he whispered eventually, smile falling completely. “And then we can talk.”

Unfortunately, I completely missed how sad he looked.

“Yay!”

New York City. What an incredible place....

I was arriving by night flight, and like most children (and anyone with a sense of wonder), I’d plastered myself up against the window, my eyes glittering in awe at the carpet of lights spread out beneath me. Previously, there had been nothing for the longest time, out that window: just a void of black as we flew over the Atlantic.

This flying ship of hundreds of souls, drifting over the top of the world, somewhere between the blackness of space and its reflection in the water....It had been impossible to sleep, thinking of the marvel that was that. But Somnus must have claimed me at some point, because the last thing I remembered was the moon hanging in the air to guide us, a glowing orb that seemed so much bigger, so much closer, from here—but it had vanished from sight.

I’d fallen asleep to that vast, bright moon, thinking of my mother’s pretty face when it was powdered up traditionally, but as we started our descent, I’d awoken to a dream of my first memory of her. It was disorienting—not only the change in tone, but what the man had told me to look at, outside the window.

At first it was nothing but black for as far as the eye could see; it struck me that it must have been the sky, for how vast it was. But why was it below me?

I’d thought, for a moment, that I was dreaming of being an astronaut, and this was some space port’s backdrop. But then I realized, after a bit, that that was in fact still down, and what’s more, that there was light.

The plane banked suddenly, and the single, tiny pinprick of yellow on the edge of some faraway shore was joined by a myriad of lights, strung together like lace.
There was a pattern to them. On what I would later learn to be Long Island, there was a more organic, twisting pattern of roads, and then, in the metropolis proper, an even, orderly, but very energetic grid. Nodes of light shone here and there in the country—tiny communities glowing together, connected by thin strings of earthly Christmas lights—and then a burning bomb, igniting the cityscape of Manhattan and the surrounding communities.

Thus, plastering myself against the glass lovingly.

What life sparkled inside of those jewels? If each one of those lights was a soul on a journey, what story were they telling? What were their joys, successes, and tragedies? What end were they leading to?

If I could steal those lights, what magnificence would I hold in my hands?

I knew my end in this city. I had it all in my head. There was some wiggle room about how it would go, but I wasn’t worried. I knew the layout of the road, all the steps and shining nodes before me, for a certainty. I’d practiced them for months.

When we came closer to the ground, I could see the lights in every building, rising from the ground like monoliths filled with fire.

The buildings’ outlines soon became visible against the dark, from all the light pollution the city was making, even at this time of night. The high rises glittered like gems. And on the far shore—New Jersey and Connecticut—there was even more, spreading into the countryside for miles and miles. Lights stretched from one end of the earth to the other, illuminating the curvature of the globe, while the coast reflected the shimmer.

This was an amazing place, I decided. It would be an amazing place for me, too.

I would be amazing, here.

Because, in one of those buildings down there, my father awaited.

“Your...father,” the old man began, his chin in his hand heavily as he watched me eat. He paused for a long time, though, apparently unsure of where to go after that.

“Is alive,” I prompted, looking up from the eggs I was stuffing myself with. I was hungry, but they were also objectively good, and I smiled hugely so that he knew that.

He looked down at the plate, then back at me. One side of his mouth ticked down miserably—the side of his mouth that I could see around his hand. It wasn’t quite the reaction I was expecting.

Still, this was the closest—and best lit—that I’d ever seen those dark blue eyes, and the soul in them was even more striking up close. There was knowledge in there. So much knowledge, and I wanted it all to grace me with its presence—and its approval, though I didn’t know it by that name at the time. “Yeah,” he muttered, turning away from me to look at the rest of the kitchen staff.

They were across the room, some doing the desserts while the rest busied themselves with cleanup. We were several stations away from them, sitting at the last island. Far from being modern, the counters were all wooden supports and colorful tile tops.

“Where does he live?” I asked, undaunted. “C’mon, quit looking back there or they’re gonna think
we’re up to something.”

“They already think that, just by me being in here,” he said after a moment of his look lingering across the room. But when I touched his shoulder to pull him back around—which admittedly was a ceremonial gesture, with my hands being so small compared to his shoulder—he looked a little happier when he turned back around. Well, a little less miserable, but not exactly what I’d call happy. In fact, he sighed.

“He lives in New York City,” the old man admitted.

My mouth fell open, half-chewed egg and all. “Ooh,” I cooed in awe.

New York City...that was a big deal. It was the only city in the United States worth mentioning save Hollywood, but oh, was it worth mentioning. There were a lot of clients at the theater that did business there, and enjoyed its arts and culture comforts. I’d hoped to get there, someday. Meet the ladies there....

A smile finally ticked at the old man’s mouth, and gently, he touched the underside of my chin, to close it. “Don’t be a slob. Your informants are risking themselves to give you info, the least you can do for ‘um is give ‘um a good view.”

He chuckled a bit, and I followed suit. “Yes sir.”

I went about eating more egg, chewing properly this time. After a second, I remembered to sit up straight, too. The old man looked a little chagrined at the lag, but he was smiling too, so it seemed like all in all, I’d passed the test and he was a little calmer.

Approval: achieved.

“So why’s he there?” I asked, scooping up some peppers that had fallen out. “He hiding from somebody?”

“No,” he said simply, without preamble.

He didn’t elaborate. I raised my eyebrows at him. When he just stared at me, I motioned my head toward him, too.

The old man shrugged. “He just thought there were better opportunities there.” He sat back, arm over the edge of the chair, but smiled at me fondly from that distance. “You really do look like him.”

I tilted my head at that, not sure what to make of it. It seemed to make him happy though, so I figured it was a good thing. In fact...I might just be able to get a little more out of him, at this rate.

“What’s his name?”

“Oh.” He perked up, but then abruptly did a one-eighty as he scowled. “Wait, you don’t...know?” I shook my head.

“She didn’t...ever tell you that?” His frown deepened, voice tightening along with his mouth.

“Well...she said, she never knew his name.”

His mouth opened, but then he shut it. His jaw tightened, and he made a strange noise in the back
of his throat, something like a cross between a displeased hum and a warning growl.

My response was to imitate at a dumb chicken: head cocked, back straighter, and making a squeaky little noise of question.

He looked at me for a long time, eyes narrowed, but never came any closer. He was clearly mulling something over. “For the record, that’s a lie. She knows it.”

But...why would she keep it from me, then? Did she...not want me to know it?

“Is he...a bad man?”

That was the only reasonable explanation for that.

The man across from me, my informant, took a deep breath through his nose. His whole body expanded as he did so; he looked around the room, head tipped back as he thought.

“That’s not for me to decide. You’re his son; it’s for you to decide.” I wasn’t sure how to take that, though, not knowing anything about him, so I just frowned at the old man, confusion amply evident. “I think he thinks he’s a good enough person, yeah. As good as anyone else. But I’m not so sure.”

“You...aren’t?”

A chill ran down my back again, but I tried to suppress it and look brave. The displeasure in his tone...it was dark. I was momentarily afraid of that turning on me, by association. I’d heard comments about “like mother like daughter” and stuff about “bitch mothers” and “the sins of the father” on a daily basis, inside the theater and out—the only difference was which gender was saying it, and whether or not I got spit on. So it wasn’t a far leap to think he’d turn that anger, or whatever it was, on me because of something he felt about my father.

I was...starting to get a bad feeling about this. Maybe they...had beef with each other, and I’d just gotten myself caught right up in the middle.

Shit, this was the stuff Xing had warned me about....

My hand closed deliberately around my fork, holding it tightly against my leg.

But instead of getting more wound up, the old regular suddenly loosened. He shrugged, making a show of it—perhaps because he’d read my reaction. “Well, it’s been thirty years since I’ve seen him, so he could have changed by now. I can hope, anyway. People tend to mature with age.”

He said this, but his somber tone didn’t match his words. In the end, he just gazed down at my plate, eyes settling there for no apparent reason. He looked a million miles away for a while, and I just let him be.

I knew better than to push adults when they were being reflective. The only thing they’d ever do if you interrupted them then was lash out at you, or start crying. It was like a magic power of mine—tears or beatings. Roll the dice, see which one you got. It was a formula I was still trying to figure out, that magic spell.

“So what’s his name?” I asked after a while, trying to be gentle—after those familiar blue eyes had risen and gazed at me wordlessly for a while. Normally, his skin showed his years but his eyes seemed so young and gallant, always set off nicely by the white of his mustache. But at the moment, they just looked...worn down, was maybe a good word for it.
“Arséne Lupin,” he said quietly. “The second.”

“The second?” I asked, fork in mouth. “Who’s the first?”

He paused, blinking quickly, but then merely shrugged. “His father, presumably.”

Oh...right. “But is that...like, really a name?” I continued. “That’s gotta be a fake name.”

Silver Wolf? Really?

“Why do you say that?” he asked, smirking.

“It’s tacky.”

“It is not! It’s cool.”

“Maybe a hundred years ago, ugh.” I crinkled my nose.

Across from me, the old man hid his face in his hand and did this weird half chuckle, half sob. “Eat your eggs young man,” he said instead.

“Fine fine, yes sir,” I muttered light-heartedly, scooping up the rest.

He reached over and ruffled my hair. “Good boy.”

I grumbled and shook his patronizing off. “Bah.”

“Who taught you ‘Bah’? That’s British! Forget it right now.”

“Haha.”

I ate the rest of my scrambled eggs in relative silence, beyond some suggestions from the old man about what to pair with egg dishes. It was informative, admittedly, but not necessarily what I wanted to be learning.

Still, when I was done and it was time to wash the dishes, it was nearly midnight. I was tired, and I suspected I wouldn’t be getting much more out of him tonight. He came by regularly, so I could probably press him again, but he only came every couple of weeks at most; more like once a month. To a ten-year-old, it would be a long time before he showed up again, and I didn’t want to wait, at least not before I knew a little more.

“Are you sure you don’t want to see the rest of the shows?” I asked politely, as we walked over to the sink together.

“Nah, it’s fine.” He rubbed my shoulder as I hopped up on the stool to get to the sink.

“There’s prob’ly some girls left, if you want to spend the night with them...?”

He chuckled and shrugged. “Some company would be nice, but I don’t think I’d have the energy for them, tonight.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, turning away from the sponge I was squeezing soap into. I squeezed the thing a few times as I watched him; I could feel the white bubbles flow over my fingers as the lather gathered.
“Girls are people too,” he said frankly, once he tore his eyes away from the sponge. He then proceeded to give me as innocent of a look as I was giving him, though it seemed to take a bit of effort. “They want affection, attention, love...as much as the next guy. I don’t think I could do all that tonight, at a level she’d like.”

“Oh. Well, cuddling’s half price, you know.”

He laughed at that, but ran a hand over his face. “How do you know about all that?”

I shrugged, going back to the plate and scrubbing it. I’d gotten some water in the bottom of the sink, so I turned off the tap. It became much easier to hear each other, and the conversation tones turned intimate. “I read the menu.”

“The...menu.”

“There’s a card in the front, for the maitre d’, and foreigners. It’s not like I can’t read pictures.” And anyway, it wasn’t like I didn’t osmosize things from hearing the girls talk. And I mean, I’d definitely spied on people before through the peepholes, but it’d just seemed...kinda gross.

“What if the cops find that?”

We exchanged affronted looks. “The cops know about it.”

“...Oh.”

“Yeah.” I shrugged and went back to the dishes.

“And what do you...think about all that?” he asked, folding his arms and leaning back against the counter.

“The cops? That they’re evil hypocrites.”

“Hah. Well, yes. Some of them. The ones in this part of town. But I meant the other thing.”

“Oh.” I shrugged, and, though the back of my mind pricked with a warning flag, I pushed it aside and scrubbed at a particularly crunchy spot on the plate. “I dunno. Sex is a commodity, our commodity. But I’m told there’s technique, so there’s skill involved too, and we teach our suppliers those skills. I’ve also heard that when it’s not a commodity, it can be very fun. Sacred, even. I hope our girls get that, at least sometimes.” I wasn’t sure about all the ins and outs, but... “I figure I’ll figure it out when I’m older. I read some books, but...eh. Seems like a lot of work for little reward.”

The old man tilted his head at that thoughtfully, but no rebuke came.

“That’s very wise of you,” he said. “Mature, even.”

I shrugged, though I was glad for his lack of scandal as much as his lack of ribbing and provocation, which was what some guys liked to do when they saw me serving at the tables. “It’s a business. The girls are our providers. Gotta take care of them.”

“I see.” He tapped his fingers on his arm, then, as I was going for the silverware, laxly slapped me on the flank with the back of his hand. “Well, when the time comes, just remember the golden rule, and don’t be afraid to have fun. Chances are, the other person doesn’t know what they’re doing, either.”

I smiled at that, though I wasn’t quite sure of all of what he meant.
“Well, unless it’s a prostitute, then they definitely do know, but they can teach you. And anyway, they’re weak to kindness. Be kind, and the working girls’ll love you forever. Always be happy to see you.”

I paused, fingers around the tines of my fork, now all bubbly. **Happy to see you....**

“Anyway, when you’re older, you ask me, okay? And I’ll give you the run-down.”

**Love...**

“Can I...ask you something?”

I turned to the old man, who, fit and trim as he was, was leaning next to me suavely. He turned to me as well, head tilted in a friendly way. “Yes?”

But after a second, I only stared at the edge of the sink. “Was I... Am I... Am I just some John’s accidental kid?”

My mother had told me stories about my father, but a lot of people told me they were made up, too. She would tell me that he was a marvelous man who had once controlled an entire town; that he had powerful friends that ruled Venice; that he’d rescued women from bad men and famous paintings from fires and gunfights. The older I got, the more I realized there was no real rhyme or reason to the stories aside from the dashing, daring thread of them; they were kind of like the **101 Arabian Nights**. But if he was an international spy or figurehead or something, then maybe...that was why she couldn’t tell me his name...?

She’d told me they loved each other, but then he’d died. I’d thought for a long time that she didn’t like me because he was dead, and somehow I’d caused that. But apparently his death was a lie. So what if their love was, too?

I knew she’d been a call girl before she started this business with the earnings; that’d never been a secret. But if I was just some illegitimate kid, and she’d made it all up to keep me happy....

“No,” came the old man’s soft voice. His hand came down on my shoulder, and he squeezed it tight. It was warm, and it made my shoulders relax some, a tension I didn’t know I had been holding. “I wasn’t here at the time, but rumor has it they loved each other very much. That was why you came about. It just...didn’t work out, is all.”

“O...oh.” For some reason, that made my face very hot, and I wiped at my eyes with a clean spot on my arm.

It wasn’t like that didn’t happen all the time, at the bordello. So why was I...suddenly crying?

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“S-sorry,” I muttered, trying to turn away.

“Here,” he said, giving me a towel. It’s okay.”

But instead of wiping off my hands, I just held the towel to my face, hoping the heat would go away. However, my face just grew hotter, and my breath started hitching uncontrollably. Before it could come on stronger, however, the old man wrapped his arms around me and pulled me close, whispering reassurances. “Shh. I know it’s hard, but it’ll be okay.”

“Why hasn’t he ever visited me?” I asked into his shirt, voice pitching up tightly.

“He might not know you’re here,” he admitted honestly, softly. He had one hand on my head and
the other on my back, and the latter patted my shirt. “She might never have told him.”

“But why?” I asked, pulling away from him and staring up into his face, my own no doubt red by now. “Why would she lie to me about him being dead?”

“I don’t know,” he said, looking troubled and cupping my cheek. “She might not have wanted you to meet him.”

“But why?” I all but wailed, slapping the fork down on the counter loudly and pulling back to stare at him for answers. But there were too many tears—I couldn’t see anything but blur.

The old man cupped the back of my head and directed me to look at him with it. He crouched down on his heels and took my small pruney hands in one of his, holding them firmly. With the other, he took up the towel and wiped at my eyes. “I don’t know,” he admitted honestly. “That’s something only she can answer. But please, don’t tell her I told you any of this, okay? I’m sure she had a good reason, and she’ll get suspicious of us, and then I won’t be able to tell you any more.”

I pulled back and sniffled, wiping my eyes with my arm as I sobbed loudly. “Y-yeah, I know, I get —”

But it was just then that I was cut off—by the leader of the kitchen staff and his massive knife.

“Just what are you doing back here, Mr. Lucien?”

It was Xing-Bao, and while his tone was polite, his body language was anything but. He was standing a few feet away, just out of arm’s reach—but a quick lunge would do either of us in.

He was a Chinese man in his late twenties or early thirties, and had a scar on the back of his neck that he hid under a well-kept ponytail—which didn’t ever pass health inspection, but which he refused to change for health inspection, lest they be spies.

Still, when no one was around to inquire, he was my greatest proponent. Said he’d grown up with all sisters back in the old country—that was how he’d gotten into trouble with the mob there—so he knew what it was like to need a big brother around.

And right now, in his chef’s uniform, he looked down at me, filet knife in his hand, then at the old man. On the knife handle, his fingers flexed, then regripped the hilt.

I stared up at him quickly, trying to figure out what to do to diffuse the misunderstanding, even though I couldn’t see very well, but my old informant was already on it. In half a second, he’d spun around to face Xing, and then, while they watched each other, he slowly stood up straight, his shoulders back.

It was a rather impressive gesture from the old man, in all honesty, the swell of his being coming to loom over me once more, and it dried my tears somewhat in awe of the display. In just a couple of seconds, everything about his demeanor had changed; he was radiating seriousness and danger, too—but not like Xing. Xing was a tiger on defense; this man was a proud wolf, watching his prey. That look in his blue eyes, way up there...it was deadly ice.

But then, all of a sudden, it was gone, and he smiled. The old man leaned back on one leg, hand in his pocket, sounding relaxed.

“Just teaching this young man some life skills,” he said easily, and actually very business-like. “Seems he didn’t want to go to bed, so I figured we could use the time constructively.” He put his
hand on his hip and smiled down at me, just on one side of his face, then looked up at the cook amicably. He set his other hand on my head like a banister railing. “Is that all right?”

Xing glanced at me, the question in his eyes. After a moment of glancing between them, unsure which one I was going to have to throw myself in front of for defense from the other, I took a breath and nodded, lifting my chin—even though the hand on my head didn’t move. “It’s all right. I’m fine.”

Xing nodded, just the slightest tilt of his chin upward, and then fixed the patron with a glare, down the edge of the knife and all. “Don’t think you’re taking him home.”

I looked between the two of them, stock still but for a dark shiver that went through me and made my stomach a little sick. Luckily, we were the only people in the room at this point; it had to have been past midnight then: the kitchen was closed.

The man beside me raised his eyebrows in interest, but then, rather than getting mad at the accusation, he just shrugged, hands raising smoothly, including the one on my head. Now free, I whipped my head around, not sure why I wasn’t hearing any fight from him about the challenge, and then gave him an up-down. At that, he turned to me too, and, arms folded loosely, gave me a frank and curious look as he leaned against the counter.

“What? You don’t actually want to come home with me, do you?” he prodded for Xing’s sake. He put one hand in his trouser pocket, then raised the other, palm-up, toward me.

“Well...” I looked him up and down again, then looked at Xing. I mean, I knew what they were talking about, so I couldn’t exactly say yes, but, for the first time, I also wasn’t totally opposed to saying no, if it was taken in a platonic sense. He probably had an entire house full of awesome trickster stuff, and more stories about my missing family members. And furthermore... “Do you have food?”

It was then that the old man turned to Xing again, and for the first time in many months, I saw malevolent coldness in his eyes. He pointed at me, even as he looked at the Chinese man. “This is something I would like to have a conversation about, however.”

I shrunk back, that little welling of hope and imagination suddenly turning into anxiety. Xing was silent—until he suddenly lowered his tools with a sigh. “Yeah me too.” He turned to me, giving me the usual hardwall poker face that was discernable from every other expression of his only by the look in his eye and conversational context clues. He pointed the knife at me, but with less heat. “Holler if you need anything. I won’t be far.”

And just like that, he turned away, leaving the knife on the rack with some frustration.

It wasn’t like he didn’t have other knives on him, though.

As the silence lingered and the rack rattled, the old man sighed and rubbed his neck. He glanced back at me, though, with those knowing eyes.

But now that the tension was diffused, I saw that look and turned to it fearlessly, actually rather perky. “Your name’s Lucien? That’s my middle name.” I flashed him a smile, to show him all was forgiven.

The troubled look on his face turned into a somber smile as he turned to me fully, gazing down with those eyes of his. They were kind eyes, I realized; but capable of being fierce, too. Maybe that was what power was, I thought suddenly—the ability to be both, as necessary. “It’s a common
name,” he remarked.

I pursed my lips, not sure what to say to that.

Mr. Lucien took a moment to look over my disappointed face—that same piercing look that he had sometimes—but then it broke apart, to reveal a gentle, sunny smile, after which he ruffled my hair. “We’re men of light. Whether it’s to shine your light brightly, or illuminate dark places, be a man of light. Never falter in that, and I’ll always be proud of you.” His smile turned fond, and he touched at my cheek. “And even when I’m gone, you’ll always have a reason to be proud of yourself, too.”

He winked at me, and I blinked a few times—and then finally smiled once it sunk in.

No one had ever told me they were proud of me, before. No one who wasn’t paid to, anyway.

“C’mon,” he said, rinsing off the dishes and putting them on the rack. “Let’s get you to bed before someone else thinks I’m up to no good.”
Sandwich (Hatchling Icarus II)

Chapter Notes

Having lived in NYC, I can say that the only unbelievable thing here is that the cabbie is Italian.

As we disembarked, I grabbed up my school bookbag and slung it over my shoulder. My most precious possession on this trip was there—specifically, a gift to the man I’d never met before.

Looking back on it, I suppose you could call it a bribe.

Still, I hoped it was a bribe he’d like.

But where a bribe wouldn’t work was customs. That was another beast entirely—but not one a little bit of smarts and a lot of sugar couldn’t handle.

Before I started this journey, I knew I’d need a cover story for solo travel across the Atlantic. When I was in common areas, if I just hung around the vicinity of another family traveling with children at a close enough distance, no one would ask questions. They’d think I belonged to that family, and that family, if they even noticed me, would tolerate me for a bit out of simple “protect the children” mode. But I’d never get quite close enough—or quite within their vision enough—for them to think I was lost, so it worked out. Regardless, I kept a running tally of distracted people across the room that I could point to who resembled me enough, if anyone asked.

However, on the occasional time when I had to talk to a desk worker or a security guard, I’d tell them “the truth” I’d decided upon: That my father had cancer and was on the verge of death. My mother couldn’t afford tickets for us both, after the cost of medical treatment he was getting here in the States, so she had sent me on alone, to make sure I got one last chance to see him.

That was just enough tear-jerking to brush off the inevitable questions of international security about what kind of irresponsible parent would send a ten-year-old across the Atlantic alone, while not so much that people would want to call the papers and report on it for the week’s feel-good story.

It also got the guy standing behind me in the customs line to shut up so that I could read my book, so that was good too. His face.... Priceless.

However, I was so excited to finally get into the country that it was hard not to smile, even as I read that book. I had to turn my back on him to hide it.

That didn’t stop the fact that “my story” had gotten halfway down the customs line by the time I got to the security desk. Everyone was waving at me as they went into the airport, whispering reassurances and guidance. I was starting to worry that I might have to deal with the presses after all, by the time I got past the little yellow line of tape on the floor and to the woman’s window.

“Name,” said the customs agent, drawl. I stood on my tiptoes to get to the counter—it was unusually high. As I clambered against it, she said, “Oh, hey little guy. Got your parents with you?”

I shook my head. “Nah. I’m the cancer kid. Perhaps you’ve heard of me?”
She raised an eyebrow at that. “...What?”

“Er...from the line,” I said, pointing at the people behind me and suddenly starting to sweat. “I heard the story got pretty far.”

She took a moment to glare dubiously at the people behind me like they were unholy gossips, but then she stared down at my passport instead as I slid it to her, a distraction that, luckily, worked. “Well, sorry to hear that.” She quickly flipped it open. “How old are you?”

“I’m ten,” I pronounced proudly, and then beamed at her with my patented smile.

She read the lines, then my face, and announced, “Indeed you are.” She entered some information on her form, by hand, and then, handing my passport back to me, said, “What’s the reason for your visit?”

“Visiting family,” I announced perkily.

“Okay. Even if you’re sick, you’ll have to show the security guard your bag, okay? He’ll be nice about it. Won’t you, Ben?”

“Yes ma’am,” he announced, riding up on the balls of his feet a bit.

“He’ll look through your things to make sure there’s nothing bad in there, and then once we see you’re one of the good guys, you can come in, okay?”

I nodded. “Yes miss.”

She smiled again over her paperwork, just a little. “He called me ‘Miss,’ Ben, did you hear that?”

“Yes Ma’am.”

We both looked at the security guard for a second. She sighed.

“He’s not very good at this, is he?” I whispered.

“No...he’s not,” she said, smile chagrined.

She was a blonde, but maybe twenty, maybe forty. I was at that age where it was hard to tell how old people were. There was just “ancient” and “adult,” as well as “mom,” “the girls,” and “jons.” Well, that and maybe “college assholes,” “young teacher,” and “old teacher.” There were those, too.

“Well I think you’re beautiful. And I’d know. I’m French. We have topless beaches.”

She blinked at me, mouth open. Then she looked at my passport again, angling it.

“Do you...frequent such establishments, young man?” she asked, her tone turning from confusion to lecturing by the end of the sentence.

I frowned at her, momentarily taken aback, and heart racing in instinctual fear of reprimand from adults. Had I said something wrong? Could they deny me entry for this?

Oh...no, that was right, Americans were very uptight and insecure about their bodies—and suspicious of any cultural trait that let them freely be seen. Could I get deported for saying I’d seen one? “Well...er...no... But... If I did, it would be legal. Is all. And you’d fit right in there, miss.” I smiled brightly, to punctuate the point.
“I...would?” she asked, eyes widening even more.

“Oh course. I imagine any man would like to see you naked.”

She burned bright red, and then set her forehead in her hand. Her elbow supported the gesture; it hit the counter with an audible thunk. Behind her, a few feet away, “Ben” coughed and stumbled as he looked through a woman’s makeup bag. Said woman promptly proceeded to harass him.

“Um...are you okay, miss?” I asked my booth attendant.

She raised a hand, but that one soon came to cover her face too.

“Don’t tell me you’re Protestant,” I complained.

Her face reappeared from behind her hands. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

I opened my mouth, then shut it. “Nothing.”

She glared at me.

“Really, nothing. Just wondering.”

“Actually, I’m Catholic, thank you.” She took a deep breath, then tapped my passport on the counter, along its bound edge. “Right. So. Remind me why I should let you in this country?”

I gave her my big puppy eyes. The visible alarm—and incoming fit of tears—was not hard to drum up.

“I have to see my dad! He’s dying!”

She stared at me anew. “What?”

“DYING,” I repeated, tears flowing into my eyes and ready to drip down at my next blink. My whole face turned red as I gave her the full brunt of my pathetic, “helpless child” stare.

“Wait, why is he dying?”

“What hospital is he staying at?”

“MT. SINAI.”

“Do you need a ride?”

“NO.”

“Why is he here, though?”

“IT’S BETTER HERE?”

“Why were you in France?”

“MOM??”

“Lady, why are you giving the kid such a hard time? His dad’s gonna die,” came the voice of the nosey guy from behind me, in what I would later learn was a thick New Jersey accent. “He could
die while we’re all standin’ in this line and you’re givin’ the kid the fourth degree?”

“The fourth degree is my job!” she snapped at him. But, this seemed to do the trick, as when she came back into her window proper, she sighed, and handed me back my passport.

“It’ll be okay kid. Sorry I gave you such a hard time. But, I wouldn’t want to send you to your parents if they’re the type to teach you all that junk. I have to make sure unescorted children are heading into good hands, not bad ones.”

My eyes got big at that—for real reasons, for once.

_Shit, this country doesn’t mess around._

“Um...okay....” I muttered, wiping at my now tear-stained cheeks and taking my passport back. “I just wanted you to know your pretty, is all. There’s no one to tell my mom that, now that dad’s gone.”

That did the trick. Her eyes widened and she pursed her lips—not in anger, but trying to bite back tears.

“Can I go now?” I wibbled, posture deflating.

The guy behind me was glaring daggers. Security Guard Ben was watching expectantly, as were all the people around us. The booth attendant sighed.

“One more thing,” she said, hiding her face in her forms, and making a show of blocking out the view of other people. “It says here you’re French.”

“Yes miss.”

I tilted my head, not sure what she was getting at—and not sure if it was a trap.

“When you go back, please tell your teachers that your English is very good.”

Oh, was that all? I grinned, tears suddenly evaporating under my regular sunbeam mode. “I will, thank you!”

I waved at her and ran off, dabbing at my eyes. She shuffled some papers in her drawer and gave one over to Ben, sighing.

“You never tell me I’m pretty,” she grumbled at him.

“Sorry, Mary....”

He took the papers, and glanced down at me.

“It’s easy,” I whispered at him. “You just have to mean it.”

He stared at me, unimpressed. “Shit. You’re nothing but trouble.”

“I know. But I’m not the one she’s been waiting to ask her on a date, duh.”

He sputtered.

“And a gentleman too,” Mary cooed over her shoulder—and then glared at Ben.
I looked between them, and then broke the awkwardness with a grin. “I try!”

I didn’t have many pictures to prove it, but evidence suggests that I was one of those incredibly cute Asian children.

“Haha, very funny, get out of her before you get me in more trouble,” Ben whispered, trying to shuffle me off. “Have fun in America, Mr. Kitagawa. Good luck with your dad.”

Demitri Kitagawa was one of the many passport aliases I had, even then. I had simply taken the one that had a birthday I didn’t have to newly memorize.

But the fact remained that I did need some luck with my Dad. I took back my passport from Ben and scurried off. “Thank you!”

As I left, Mary waved at me, and then promptly bothered Ben some more.

*Boy, American women sure are nice.*

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The airport—JFK—was huge, even then. It was breathtakingly bright and maze-like. If I couldn’t read the signs, I was sure it would have been a nightmare, but they were in French and English, so whatever I couldn’t figure out in English, I could read in French anyway. It was pretty great.

The crush of people was impressive, rather than intimidating. Everything I saw just whetted my appetite for my impression of what my dad must have been like, to live here full-time.

One of the signs, I noticed, said something about “red jackets.” *Have questions? Ask the red jackets! They’re here to assist you on your journey.*

“Here to assist you on your journey....” I though aloud as I read it. “I like that....”

Sure enough, down by the baggage claim—which was a very long walk for a ten year old—I found one of them. He was wearing a scarlet red blaser, nicely fitted to him, and dark leggings. The blaser was nice, but I found myself thinking white pants would be better. His shoes were black, too.

Terrible choices. Terrible.

It was as I was shaking my head at his shoes that he asked me if I needed something. I was standing two feet in front of him, after all.

“Sir, have you ever considered white trousers?” I asked in response, eyeing the young man like he was an insult to life.

He stared down at me, brow deeply furrowed. Then he looked at himself, and, one hand on his hip, tilted his head. He had style, but not in his clothes, unfortunately. I’d have to do something about this.

“And maybe a blue shirt? Or black?”

“That’d be good but...I’d look like the flag.”

I stared at his shirt, and tilted my head the opposite way of his. “Not with the right color tie.”

His tie was red too. His shirt was white. He looked terrible. Truly terrible. Overall, he was an insult
to the flag of both the US and France.

I was shaking my head as he flipped up the edge of his tie thoughtfully—and a little balefully.

“How much do they pay you?” I asked, raising my chin at him.

“Ah...uh....”

He blinked, a little alarmed.

“Is the answer ‘not enough’?”

The Red Jacket looked around, quickly getting that “who is this kid?” look on his face—alongside
“I hope my supervisor isn’t watching.”

“I thought so.” I nodded, let go of my luggage, and reached into my pocket. I pulled out a wad of
Francs, flipped out five bills, and slapped them against his chest. “White trousers. Navy shirt. Some tie that’s not red. Better shoes—ask someone who knows for what’s in. And for god’s sake, get a tie clip.”

When his hand came down on mine, his clothing was no longer the only thing that was red. I swept passed him.

“H-hey, wait! Kid!”

“Yes?” I asked, turning to him, luggage in hand and bookbag still over my shoulder.

“Do you know where you’re going?” He looked down at the bills, frowning as he turned them over, clearly trying to identify where they came from. “You’ll need to get your money exchanged....”

I looked at him side-eye, this assault to masculine fashion, piecing him out. He couldn’t have been much older than college...? Maybe...? He certainly fell into that “young guy” category of guys that came into the club, which I was told was mostly college guys. Maybe this was a part-time job for him. It was late at night, after all.

“Can I do that out in town?” I asked, skeptically.

“Maybe, but it’ll be harder. You’ll have to go to a bank. Might as well do at least some of it here....”

He looked at the bills, put them in his pocket for efficiency’s sake and then scooted a little closer and bent down on his heels. He pulled up his pant legs to do it, in a way I liked. At least he had some hope.

And his hands....

For some reason, I found myself staring at them, especially as his cologne hit me. It was a light scent, sort of soft actually, outside of the occasional sharp accent note of it. I liked it. I liked...him.

Suddenly, his soft black hair seemed a lot more appealing. It was like I suddenly wasn’t offended. In fact, I felt all warm.

That...was odd. But not unpleasant.

I took that moment to read his nametag: George.
“Kid,” the young man continued, oblivious to this chemical bomb going off in my body, “I don’t know why you have this much money, but be careful flaunting it around, okay? You....” He looked around, checking the few people that were milling about. It was late, so there weren’t as many people as humanly possible, like most times of day at these places. “This isn’t a safe town for an adult to be alone in, let alone a kid. At the airport it’s a little safer, but once you get out into the city....”

“Pedophiles?” I asked bluntly, albeit in an excited, conspiratorial whisper.

He blinked at me again, stammering. “Ah...well I guess? Wait!—How do you even know that word? No...nevermind. I don’t want to know. Anyway. I was mostly thinking muggers. There are a lot of stabbings every day, for money, I’m sorry to say. And being a kid won’t protect you much.”

“Mmm.” I nodded. “Good thing I’ve got a gun.”

“What?!”

“I’m kidding.” I waggled my eyebrows at him. “But I fooled you, didn’t I?” I struck a pose.

“Oh my god. Kid...” He put his head in his hand, and after shaking it for a bit, sighed. “Is someone picking you up? Do you live here?”

“I do not live here and no one is picking me up.”

He stared.

“Where are you going, then?”

“I don’t know yet,” I said. “I have to ask.”

“Wait, what?”

“Hold on one sec.” I left him with my bag, and lifted a finger to stay him. I went through the doors twenty feet away, to the most disreputable-looking guy milling about.

“Hey, kid! Don’t! He’s a scam—”

But he didn’t finish. The red jacket merely sighed and started after me.

“Hail, cabbie!” I said, striding up to the gentleman. He was actually another Italian-looking guy, middle aged and round, and was asking passersby if they wanted a cab ride.

I’d heard about this. He was a scam artist, not working for the legit cab companies who, funnily enough, had a queue line about twenty more feet away. But because the line for cabs was so long (about twenty-five minutes, and so far down the drive that you couldn’t see the end, even at this time of night), people in a hurry, or just easily picked off, were willing to risk the double fare and lack of insurance just to get where they were going. The cops made summary rounds to shuffle these “limo drivers” away, but generally speaking had more important things to do. They hadn’t murdered anyone so far—as far as anyone knew—so both camps were willing to tolerate each other for convenience’s sake.

Big city people were the same everywhere.

I beamed up at this guy, but he just scowled down at me. Good.

“Do you know the Silver Wolf?” I asked.
His eyes widened.

“Do you know where his operations are? Arséne Lupin the Second?”

His eyes widened farther. Then the poor red jacket came over, trying to shuffle me away. “No,” George commanded at me, and then, to the portly fellow: “You should be ashamed of yourself.”

And then he picked me up and pulled me away, attempting to get back through the doors.

“But you’re a mob guy, right? You know where he’s at?” I asked, kicking my feet and reaching out to the disreputable fellow, who was just staring at us both, bewildered. “Argh!”

“What is wrong with you!” George grumbled. Security was starting to notice, and was eyeing us.

“Let me go, I know what I’m doing!” I grumbled, finally squirming enough to get George to drop me.

I did a marvelous fish-flop midair over his shoulder and that was the trick it took to disengage. I landed ungracefully, but thanks to all my training, didn’t hurt a thing anyway. I stormed back over to the fake-ish cabbie and put up a finger.

“Double your normal fare to take me to his guys.” I turned to George, who was standing a few feet away now, one hand on his hip and the other raking through his hair to get it presentable again. “Five hundred for you if you come with me.”

They both stared.

“What?” George hissed.

“Mm,” the cabbie muttered, approvingly.

“You got an address?” I told the cabbie. “Tell it to me.”

“Mm,” he said again.

“I ain’t a rat, I know it’s on Front Street somewhere between Maiden and Old Slip.”

“What,” George continued, for an entirely different reason. His mouth hung open.

“Guy’s got a sense of humor or something, pretty sure,” I explained over my shoulder at him, shrugging quickly. “Five hundred to you too if you give me the password to get through the doors, and I’ll have him cover his ears.” I jerked my thumb at the red jacket. “You can drop us off around the corner, no less. Get away Scott free and tax free, whadda ya say?”

The cabbie smiled, a rough, small sneer of a smirk, and shook my hand. It was strong and steady, and didn’t seem duplicitous at all.

“And you?” I asked, looking up at George.

He just looked sick. “I don’t...do mob stuff.”

“Who said anything about that?” the cabbie asked.

“I’m certainly not mob-related,” I added, grinning. “I’m just a little kid from France who needs a guide in this big, scary city.”
George was going white. I thought he might faint.

“It’s okay, Georgie. Mind if I call you Georgie? Say, when’s your shift end?” I asked, taking him by the hip and guiding him back into the building.

“‘Bout half an hour,” he muttered.

“Okay, that’s great. Costello here or whatever his name is will wait, yeah? In the meantime, why don’t you accompany me to the exchange booth? You’re allowed to do that if it’s a kid or a particularly hapless foreigner, right? Why don’t I be both, just for you. Say, Costello, what’s you’re preferred currency?”

“Got any lira, I’ll take um. Got some guys who like to gamble in money they can send home.”

“See? Good times. I’ve got you guys.”
“Wow. You guys got those here too, huh?”

In retrospect, a “limo service” with a pyramidal signboard on top that advertised topless girlie joints probably wasn’t the best life choice. But being ten and wanting to be delivered to a mob boss’s door, it seemed a good pick. Poor Georgie though, I can’t imagine the alarm bells that must have been ringing in his poor Greek Orthodox heart.

“Yeah,” the cabbie said, holding the back door open for me.

George had changed outfits into his regular clothes; I figured the red was in a locker somewhere. Pity; he’d looked good in it (minus the rest of the fashion travesty).

But the checkered dress shirt was pretty good, all alone. Gave me a nice view of what was underneath.

At least, as much “underneath” as a kid ever thought about, anyway.

“That place any good?” I asked our portly ferryman, about the signboard.

The cabbie looked down at me, then back at the sign. George, on my other side, exchanged a glance with me too, though it was a bit more...shall we say, daunted.

“Eh. Arséne’s are better. The girls are less...” He paused, looked at us both, then politely looked at the sky. “They’re...fresher, at his place.”

“Oh good,” I said. “A woman should always look her prime, for a man that’s past his.”

They both stared at me, then.

“What? ‘S what mom always says.”

The looks got worse.

“Um...let’s just get in the car then, shall we.”

“Who are you?” Georgie asked, and “Costello” (I’d named him that) seemed interested in hearing this, too, so he hung on the door, watching me.

Suddenly, they seemed like massive trees, looming over me.

The only answer to that sudden realization of my own helplessness was to throw my shoulders back and say, “You wanna get paid or not?”

“I can get paid whether you’re alive or not,” the cabbie said, to which George’s eyes widened. “So you might want to answer the stiff’s question.”

He smiled at me, and waved at George languidly. I looked between him and my quivering guard, then sighed.

Some guard you are.

“Fine.” I tossed my head back. “I’m his son.”
“Whose?” Costello asked, blankly.

“The Wolf’s.”

The guy stared at that. “I thought he didn’t have any kids?”

“Why didn’t he send someone to pick you up, then?” George added.

“He’s got a point.” Costello nodded at me.

I huffed, but it seemed they weren’t budging.

“He doesn’t know I exist, thank you.” I gave them each a black look that was more than a little honest and slid into the car’s wide and plush backseat, wanting to escape from having to elaborate any further. “So if we could get this party going. I’d like to break it to him before breakfast.”

“So, if he doesn’t know you exist, you can’t just show up and break it to him over eggs and toast or snails, or whatever the French eat for breakfast. Especially not in front of the guys,” Costello was saying, as we went along a speedy highway over what seemed to be a rail yard.

“I dunno,” George replied. “Do it in front of the guys, and it’s insurance, right?”

“Ehhh, maybe?” Costello answered, lifting a hand off the wheel to gesture. “Kind of depends on the structure of the organization. What if there’s a successor you piss off? See, that’s what you got to be careful of.”

I nodded studiously. It had only been a few minutes, but they had already bonded over how to deal with my “little bit of news.” It seemed to be an adult thing to have common ground over.

“And I mean, what if he doesn’t want y—”

“Ooh, what bridge is this?!” I asked, plastering my face against the window and cutting off whatever Costello was going to say. I was sitting on the left, to allow Georgie a place, and overhead there came a huge, and I mean huge even to adults, bridge.

Double towers rose up over the highway, and in between the roads was a commuter train line. One zipped by us, yellow lights showing a few very tired faces—until suddenly it was gone, revealing a glittering shoreline.

Dawn lit up the city that had long shuttered its fire-fly like glowing lights. Instead, pink, orange, and amber washed across the buildings, until they just about blended in with the sky.

“Wow....”

Beside me, George smiled. “Yeah.... Still looks good sometimes, doesn’t she?”

“You...lived here long?” I asked, glancing him up and down.

“Yeah.” He rubbed the back of his neck, and turned away from me. “All my life.”

“What part of town you from?” Costello asked.

“Like I’m telling you.”
"Come on now, we’re friends ain’t we?"

"Thank you but...No."

"C’mon guys, don’t fight. I’m the boss here, and I say you can’t."

George smiled a little at me, chagrined, and politely humored me: “Yes, I guess that’s true, isn’t it. We’ve got mini-management here.”

“Hey...” I pouted.

“Hey look at that,” George continued, reaching over me to point at the water. The massive river spread out at the end of the islands, into what appeared to be the ocean. “See that little light, down there? That’s got some ships around it?”

I squinted. There were indeed some distant wake trails and little tiny white ships. And a tall-ish thing, sticking out of the water, with a golden beacon on top that was about the size of a grain of rice, from here.

“That’s the Statue of Liberty.”

“Ooh, cool!” I squeaked. “We gave you guys that.”

When I looked back at George, he held out his hand to me to shake. I was confused for a second, but I took it anyway.

He proceeded to jostle my arm up and down, pronouncing dramatically: “Thank you, mon mini-manager, for such a great gift! America is very glad at this chance for international diplomacy!”

“Oh! Ah! You’re welcome! Um...President George!”

He laughed at that. “We haven’t had a president George in a while, but I’ll take it.”

“Or a Greek one,” Costello added.

He huffed, going back to his seat. “Haven’t had an Italian one, either.”

“Hey! Kennedy counts.”

“Kennedy was Irish.”

“Woah, look at all the tall buildings!”

I was mesmerized by this for several minutes, and that left my partners in crime quiet for a bit.

Eventually, we went past several major landmarks on our way down Sixth Avenue. Costello decided that, while it wasn’t faster than Second Avenue—which was on the eastern end of the island and closer to both the bridge and our destination—he was getting paid enough that it might be worth our while.

Looking back on it, Georgie probably liked the plan as well, because it put us in highly populated areas in the middle of town.

Regardless, that was how I got stuck in traffic looking at brownstones across from the brick sidewalks and green oaks of Central Park; the near-endless white Greek columns of the MET, and the sky-reaching tower of the Empire State Building.
Soon, though, the buildings grew smaller, and the streets more narrow. Five-lane one-ways turned into two-lane two-ways, with a damn lot of cars parked on either side. The parks went from stately and manicured to tumbledown, trashed, and scary, and there were a lot of people sleeping in them, even as dawn broke.

“This is the artists’ part of town,” George explained. “There’s a lot of drugs and homelessness around here, so the rents are low. Don’t do drugs,” he added.

I shook my head, plenty ready to hunker down with my bookbag in my lap.

“They look so sad though,” I lamented, at the dark shapes on the benches. “It’s so cold here. Do they have enough to eat?”

“Probably not,” George added. “But a lot of the churches have free meals. They all know which churches do which days, and rove around to them. The sad thing is when the cops come to move them.”

“Why do the cops come move them? Do they have somewhere else to go?”

“No, but if people complain that they can’t use the parks, they move the bums. You might get a nice cop, but most of the time, if the homeless don’t go, the cops trash their stuff. It’s sad to see, since they’re just back again in a week or two, but this time with no blankets.”

I nodded. Cops were jerks. A couple showed up and demanded money from mom every week...though one of them gave me candy, sometimes. “They don’t have anywhere to go?”

“Well, sometimes they sleep in the subway? And Central Park in the summer.”

“Or New Jersey,” Costello added.

“Yeah, but even then...the only thing there for them is a bus station to somewhere else.”

“It’s true,” the driver added.

“That’s sad,” I muttered, slinking down into my seat fully.

“Yeah...that’s why it’s tough to be homeless. You don’t pay enough taxes to have anyone watch out for you. At least, anyone inside of the system.”

“Yeah, and most of them aren’t sane enough to have anyone outside help them, either. Inside or out, it’s about how useful you are. Votes, money, bodies....”

“Hey, shh. Don’t tell the kid that.”

“If his dad’s really who he says he is, he’ll find out soon enough.”

My eyes widened at that. “Is my dad...a bad guy?” Not like, supervillain bad guy—because he was probably that, being a mob boss—but bad as in unkind. That possibility had never occurred to me, but it was the one that worried me, now that I was having it. Super villains often had good motives; simply “bad” guys did not, no matter which team they were on. My dad couldn’t be a bad guy; mom had always spoken so fondly of him....

And I wanted mom to like me, the way she liked the stories of him....

Though that didn’t explain why she’d told me he was out of the picture all these years. But I wanted answers to that, too. I was sure I would find them here, if I just did enough digging and
flashed enough Charming Child smiles.

I looked between my guides, but neither of them said anything. They didn’t even look at me; only pursed their lips.

“I think that’ll be up to you to decide, once he shows you,” Costello said eventually. He slowed the car to a stop, and, double-parked, put the car in park. “But hey. You got a mom?” he asked, turning around over the seat to face me.

I nodded. “Yeah...?”

“She a good lady?”

My nodding continued. “She works hard, yeah.”

“Then...word of advice. Whatever you see in there, know that it’s no shame to go back to a good woman who treats you well. Dads can be dicks.”

I nodded, gravely.

“I shouldn’t really be in this neighborhood, but...you want me to stay?” Costello asked.

I blinked, looking around. “Are we here?”

He pointed out the window on George’s side. “That’s it. The Rabbit.”

I unbuckled my seatbelt and leaned over George, landing on his lap, which made him all but shriek. I ignored it.

A wall of quaint brick two-stories lined the street, shops on the bottom and tall, evenly-spaced windows on the top, zigzagged with black-iron emergency exit skeletons every so many windows. An awning the color of the French flag (and conveniently, America’s) hung over the storefront next to our car, with brown lettering on the front of it.

“The Dead...Rabbit,” I read, slowly. “Dead...? What’s ‘dead’ mean?”

I pulled back and looked at George.

“Ahhh...like. ‘Morte’?” he asked.

My face split into a grin, at that. “He must have a sense of humor now,” I declared.


I clapped my hands together excitedly, and bounced around on the seat. “The word for ‘Wolf’ in French is ‘Lupin.’ ‘Rabbit’ is ‘Lapin.’”

“They sound exactly the same.”

They would, to unaccustomed ears.

“I rattled off a phrase in French. After the obligatory pause, they both stared expectantly, leaning in slightly. Finally, when Costello made the motion for him to speak, George rolled his eyes and asked, “What’s that mean.”
“Rabbits are prey to wolves.”

And today I would not be prey.

I reached over and popped George’s car door open for him. “Now get out so that I can get the password.”

It turned out that The Dead Rabbit was a bodega-style grocery store that also had a meat-counter and deli. It wasn’t too different from a meat shop in France. So, newly opened that morning, Georgie and I grabbed a drink, something called “a breakfast bagel sandwich,” and headed in, sitting at one of the two-person tables closest to the window.

I could hardly contain my excitement, the giant sandwich jostling in my hands as I swung my feet. This piece of “food,” let’s call it, was nearly as big as my head. It was a giant hard bread thing with a hole in the middle on the top and bottom, with lots of scrambled egg, some kind of yellow cheese, and a patty of spiced meat. It didn’t look clean in the slightest and I loved it. It was pretty tasty, if enormous.

Wash it down with milk and it was a good time. But the milk tasted a little funny; George told me it was because it was something called “pasture-ized.” I wasn’t sure why being in a pasture would make the milk taste different, but I knew very little about cows. I would need to rectify that, I told myself, as I mowed down another bite. It barely made a dent in the thing overall.

“You think he’ll come?” I asked George, swinging my feet excitedly. “Soon?”

He looked worse for wear, and this time gave me a baleful look before tipping his head back to stare at the ceiling with a groan. “I guess? That limo driver said he hangs out here every week day, fairly regular business hours.” He took a sip of his drink, and for a while, we just watched the people passing by.

We didn’t look related at all, so I couldn’t imagine what people thought. Though I guess we both had dark hair, so that was something, at least. Probably brothers.

Yeah, brothers. I liked the sound of that. I’d never had a brother, before.

“But you know, business hours start at ten in this town, a lot of times,” George continued. “I shoulda asked the cabbie if he keeps late hours.”

I whipped my head around to George, giving him my best laser-beam stare. “What time is it now?”

“Well....” Giving me an incredulous look, he turned around and looked at the clock on the wall. “Looks like...eight-thirty.”

“Damn,” I said.

“Don’t swear,” he said, pointing at me before he even turned around.

“Darn!” I replied.

“Better.”

I grinned and took another bite of the massive eggy thing.
“You like that?” he asked when he turned around again. He was looking for solace, it seemed like.

“Yeah!”

He sighed, for some reason.

“How much time you got, Georgie? You need to be somewhere? Class?” I offered, helpfully.

He looked surprised at that. “Ah...no. Just bed, really.”

He fidgeted with his hands at that, but I just nodded. “I see.”

“Mm. A magnanimous manager you are,” he muttered, resting his chin in his hand and yawning, eyes closing tiredly.

I gazed him over, then nodded. “I can fix this.”

I hopped off the chair and headed over to the counter. There was a nice woman there, big and round and French, and in a flowery apron no less. I’d heard her talk to a person in the back in my home language while we were ordering, and the way she pronounced the menu items was a dead giveaway.

I flagged her down, while George nodded off in the morning sunshine.

<“Madame my sweet!”> I called in French. We were before the morning rush, it seemed, so there weren’t many people. <“Can I ask the lovely lady a question?”>

<“Oh, where did you learn to talk like that?”> she asked, scolding.

<“I’m from France!”> I squeaked proudly, giving a salute.

<“I don’t mean that part,”> she replied, but smiled anyway. She finished wiping off her hands and put one hand on her hip. <“What can I do for you, sugar cube?”>

<“I’m looking for the boss. Do you know when he’ll be in?”>

<“The boss? Renée?”>

I shook my head. <“Not of down here.”> I leaned forward and whispered, pointing upward at the ceiling. <“Of up there.”>

Her eyes widened a bit, and her mouth turned into an O. She took a deep breath, stood up, and eyed me like I’d done something wrong and she was about to start yelling. <“Why do you know about that?”>

I nodded seriously. I’d prepared for this. <“Delivery.”>

It wasn’t like I hadn’t done this sort of courier work all the time back home. I knew how to tickle open a door, by lock, luck, or language.

There was a phrase in the thieving world, ’by pick or by prick,’ but back then I’d assumed the “prick” part meant stabbing, like to prick your finger. Oh, how wonderfully naive I’d been. Regardless, I didn’t quite yet know how to do things by prick yet—either way you could take it—so it was up to language or luck. And I was very good with languages.

<“You can leave it with me,”> she said. <“You probably need to get to school, don’t you?”>
I shook my head. "It’s a special delivery. I need to do it myself. Orders." I leaned in, eyes widening for emphasis. "Orders from France."

She looked around skeptically, and her mouth opened once before it tightened into a line. "Is the delivery you?"

That caught me off guard. "How did you know?" I asked, before I could think better on it.

I was a clever ten year old, but sometimes I was still very much the basic ten.

Something about her changed, then. Her jaw tightened, and her hands disappeared inside her apron. She looked upward, like she was thinking of shouting at someone through the floorboards.

"Is everything all right, madame sugar pot?" I tried.

She held out a finger to me to shoosh me, clearly thinking. "Who sent you?" she asked, almost sharply.

I blinked at that, not sure what to say. "Um..."

"Who."

"I’m here on my own...."

"Who told you to say that?"

"Nobody. I’m here on my own, really."

She glared at me, but I had nothing else to offer.

"Is...something wrong?" I hedged.

"Is that man with you?" she huffed and started striding over to him.

"Hey, wait, wait!" I scurried after her.

Poor Georgie awoke to the behemoth of a woman pushing him awake, shouting in angry, accented English. “You! Did you bring this child here? What were you thinking!”

“Ah—what—what, I...who’re you?!”

“Please don’t fight!” I pushed at her armored side, to no avail. I just bounced off.

“You get out of here right now! And don’t come back! This child is worth way more than whatever you’re selling him for!”

His mouth opened at that, as did mine, though it was a little different tone between the two of us.

“What the hell are you talking about?! George demanded, getting to his feet as she grabbed him by the arm and hauled him up.

“Where did you get him from?"

“The airport—! Hey—! Agh!” ...She’d started whacking him with her hand towel.

“The airport?! You kidnapper! Get out!”
She was well on her way to knocking poor George into next week, let alone out of the store, until I latched onto her side, crying, “No! Stop it! Don’t fight! Madame I’m not old enough to sell and anyway, I’m not a girl!”

She paused her assault at that, staring at me. She hit me with the towel too, once, but I bared through the storm. “How do you know things like that?” she scolded.

I stared at her like it was ridiculous that she didn’t know how I knew. Which, from my perspective, it was ridiculous. How could I not? “My mom sent me, okay?” I demanded, frustrated, which at my age meant a display of petulance. She hadn’t done anything of the sort, but the words “my mom sent me” had magical powers in any language.

That stopped the raging shop marm. Her mouth opened, hung open for a second, then shut. Her jaw tightened, and she looked between Georgie and me several times. Then, they narrowed on me.

Me.

I quirked my head at her, eyebrow raised.

Then she bent down so that her eyes were level with mine. “How much does your mom need, sugar cube?”

I blinked at her, totally confused. “As much as she can get?” I asked, reflexively. That was usually the answer with money—at least for anyone at the club, patron or provider alike.

She stood up, taking a deep breath. It felt like it could have been an elephant’s snort, it took so long. Madame gave poor George a long, dark look.

Then she turned around and went back to the counter.

George’s mouth was open for quite a while, until I tugged on his sleeve.

“What...did you just tell her?” he asked me in response.

I tilted my head, not getting why he would ask. “I just told her I’m worth a lot.” I shrugged.

This did not reassure George. He looked at her, long and hard, and then up the stairs, that lay dark at the side of the room. “I...think we should leave,” he said eventually, standing. “Before anyone else comes in.”

“No! We can’t!” I pleaded. “We’re so close!”

George stared at me, and it was the queerest look. It was pitying, and melancholy, and, oddly enough, conflicted.

“Cut you a deal, kid,” he said, after a bit. “Grab your sandwich. We’ll wait on that bench across the street.”
Even though it was early December, it was still pretty seasonable in New York City. Probably around fifty-five Fahrenheit in the sunshine during the afternoon. Given that it was morning, though, it was probably about forty-something. With a good wool coat and some layers under it like I had, though, you didn’t go cold when you were just sitting, unless there was a breeze. But given the uninterrupted line of buildings, it took a lot to get a breeze going, and from the right angle at that.

George and I were sitting on a bench that faced the deli, albeit a couple of doors down; we could see the entrance, but were hidden from the picture window and were behind a line of parked junker cars. There were a couple nice ones on the street, but not many.

A fire hydrant, scribbled with graffiti, sat a couple car lengths down—also parked in front of.

I wondered, vaguely, if my dad might roll up in a shiny black SUV-type thing, or if he was more a red sports car kind of guy...or maybe even a motorcycle. I was thinking it was more the latter, but I wasn’t sure that this city would accommodate the sports car, so I was on the edge of my seat making bets about that with myself.

Pidgeons sat on a tangle of wires a few feet away, cooing lightly.

“So tell me about your mom.”

I looked over at Georige and his sliucked-back hair, then shrugged around a slurp of my orange juice through the straw. “She’s okay. She works hard.”

“You said that in there,” he said, sagely.

I glanced at him, trying to give him my “drop it” face. But that was never very effective when you were ten. I was assured I should keep practicing though. Someday, it would fend off inquiries, I was told.

(Sadly, this was not to be.)

“What’s she do?” he continued.

“She owns businesses.”

“Like...mob businesses? Like your dad?”

I shrugged.

“Look, I’m not going to tell anybody.”
I gave him a long look. “You are anybody.”

He frowned. “C’mon, I’m not a bad guy. What do you mean by that?”

I slurped on my orange juice, and turned away from him.

“Dmitri?” he asked, following me.

“...You’re a cop, aren’t you?”

He choked on his cigarette, nearly swallowing it.

“It’s okay, I won’t tell anyone. Unless you get in the way of me and my dad, then I’ll cut you next time you’re sleeping.” I stared him down, just to make sure he knew I was serious. “I can climb through surprisingly high windows, I’m told.”

He took a breath, blinked several times in rapid succession, then just shook his head. “What makes you think I am?”

“You haven’t run away yet. You haven’t hauled me away, or given me to the real cops.”

“Real cops....” he muttered. “So what am I then, a fake cop?”

“I meant the cops at the airport. But if you want to play it that way, sure, you could be working for some other syndicate, but I doubt it. Nah, you’re new, aren’t you? And they sent you under cover.” I shrugged and went back to my juice. “That’s bad of them.”

“You think I’m not qualified?” he asked, pretending to play the bait but huffing nonetheless.

“No. I just think it’d be mean if it wasn’t what you wanted.”

He took a drag on his cigarette. “I wouldn’t say that.”

“Please don’t lie to me. We’re in this together. Though I will be taking my money back, thank you.”

I held out my hand. He grumbled, and fished into his pocket. He slapped the bills into my palm. “How in the world are you ten years old?”

“The grace of the gods. Anyway, I thought you were a broke college kid,” I replied, putting the francs back into my pocket. “But then I saw your shoes. And how you acted in there.” I sipped the juice, and nodded into the store.

“My shoes?” he asked. “I made sure these weren’t ‘cop shoes.’”

I smirked at the admission and then wagged my finger at him. “They aren’t the style, that’s why it took me a while. But they are good. See, only three people anymore have nice shoes. Bankers, mobsters, and cops. Mobsters have better fashion—and so do bankers for that matter. But you certainly aren’t a banker, hanging out at the airport working the night shift. So by elimination...”

“I’m a cop,” he finished for me, crossing his arms. “Very clever. But a little loose to go on, don’t you think?”

“You did just say you made sure they weren’t cop shoes. You’re cover’s blown by a ten-year-old, accept it.”
He rolled his eyes. I shrugged and took another drink through the straw, but it came up with a hollow scrape of bubbles. Darn...empty.

Beside me, Georgie shook his head and ran a hand through his hair. “The boss is gonna loooove this recording.”

“R-Recording?” I squeaked.

“Mmhmm,” he nodded, and patted his side surreptitiously, like he was tapping out a beat to a song.

“How could you go in there with a recording device, are you nuts? What if they caught you?!” I hissed.

“You’re a cute little mobster,” he said, though with his accent, it sounded like “monster.” I glared at him, then turned away and kicked my feet petulantly. They didn’t quite touch the ground, which made it both more energetic and less fulfilling to kick at things.

“Speaking of. You done with that?”

He stood up and plucked the juice bottle out of my hands. Before I could say anything, he headed over to the nearest trash can and dropped it in—except he missed. He bent down, and in the process of picking it up and tossing it in, took the presumed recording device under his shirt out and affixed it to the top of the trash can’s lid.

The trashcans were black and had a molded top that had an extra bump in the middle—just enough so that you’d never see a thin-ish piece of plastic velcroed to the top, no matter what angle you were at.

George came back over, sat by me, and took out a pager. I tried to look at what he was typing, but he held it above my head. “Hey, no fair,” I pouted, reaching for it.

“It’s just numbers.”

“Why numbers?” I asked, when he was done.

He replaced it to his pocket, and glared out at the building across the way. The sun had risen enough that it was in our faces now—and shining on the building’s bricks and windows, lighting them a cold, winter gold.

“I’ll tell you the secret if you promise not to rat me out in the next twenty-four hours.”

Twenty four? That seemed fair enough. “Sure.”

“These trashcans all have numbers. For the purposes of vandalism and stuff. I just called it in.”

My eyes widened. “That’s genius!”

“Yup.”

I grinned at him.

“So you’re really not upset I’m not on your dad’s side?” he asked, putting his hands in his pockets and looking over at me, a little theatrically.

“No. I’m only upset if you prevent me from talking to him, like I said.”
He looked thoughtful at that. “You’re very wise,” he said. “But a little mobbie. Try not to grow into anyone I have to arrest, all right?”

“Well, if I do, I’ll make sure no one shoots your guys while you do it.”

He blinked at me, then said, “That’s nice of you.”

I shrugged. “Everyone’s just trying to make a living, right? No reason for us to fight.”

He shook his head, then looked at the sky. “Yeah, but. You shouldn’t have to...” He cut himself off, and sighed.

“What is it?” I asked. “You can tell me. I won’t get mad. I’m not like other kids.”

“Erg.” He rubbed his head. “I don’t want to sound like I’m lecturing. Then you won’t listen.”

“I’ll listen. Only teachers have lectures, right? And teachers are good when they’re teaching.”

He smiled a bit, at that. “You must have good teachers.”

“One’s right here.” I said, raising my eyebrows at him.

“Shit, and smooth too.... God, you grow up and you’re gonna be a lady killer. Damn.”

“No, not a killer. A lover. A lady-lover.”

“That’s what that means.”

“Why would that mean that?”

“Because...I don’t know. You make them swoon—which means pass out, faint—and it’s like you’re killing them. Ish.”

“‘Ish.’” I repeated, tasting it. “‘Lady killer’...”

“Anyway,” George said. “A lecture. Okay.” He took a breath, and tipped his head back. “I won’t give you the one we tell the kids when we go to classrooms, okay? I’ll give you the real one. My personal opinion, okay?”

I nodded, excited by the thought. Real knowledge. Secrets. Those were the things that let you have control over situations, people, things. The only things that could protect you, when push came to shove.

“See, the thing is, it’s not just ‘people trying to make a living.’ There’s honest people trying to make an honest living, and people exploiting those people, and then cops and lawyers and stuff, who are trying to make sure the honest people don’t have to surrender their honest work to the dishonest people. Mobsters are the dishonest people, exploiting others, as are corrupt politicians and stuff. In the grand scheme of things, mobsters subtract, not add, the way the honest people do. Sure, maybe they’re useful as middle men in countries where the top is super corrupt, ultra-mobsters too, but America’s not like that.

“So like, yeah, we’re all just trying to make a living, but the system isn’t all that corrupt anymore. America is about honest people being able to make an honest living for the first time in history, and actually getting somewhere because of it. We can’t have criminal guys and live up to that. See what I’m saying? Like, I’m not saying you’re dad’s bad, I’m just saying, he could be doing something better for the community at large than crime. And my job’s making sure people like
him get that message, get a move on, or go to jail so that they won’t be a drain on anybody else’s dollar.”

I tilted my head at that. It was all perfectly logical. “Yeah, I know.”

“Wait...what?”

“No, I know all that. There’s an old guy that comes into the Bordello sometimes and waxes on about that stuff, shifts in policy due to technology and time, or whatever. But more importantly, my mom...” I looked around, then sighed. “She used to be in the business, but she isn’t anymore. I was hoping... See, my dad’s well known for being really clever, people have said. I don’t know why he’s a mob guy. So I was thinking...if he...if he and my mom got together again, maybe she could convince him back to neutral ground, and we could be a family working toward the greater good again.”

At that, George looked at me for a long second, then sighed.

“I’m only gonna say this once, kid,” George said, taking a long drag on his cigarette like he supremely needed it, “But it’s quite possible there’s a reason your dad’s across an ocean and doesn’t know you exist. In fact, it’s probable.”

I frowned at him. My mind wasn’t coming up with anything...probably wilfully. “Like...what?”

“Like, your mom didn’t want him to know. Moms tend to know what they’re doing, with this sort of stuff.”

A shiver crept down my spine.

“I wish I’d never had you....”

“So. Never mind how you managed to get here, but does your mom actually know you’re here?”

I shook my head out, and eyed him, guardedly. “That’s...not important.”

“Yes it is.”

“No it’s not!”

“Look, it’s not my place to tell another man what to do.” That got my attention, and I calmed somewhat, attentive. “You can do whatever you want and suffer the consequences, that’s what being a man means. But it’s my responsibility, man to man, to tell you before you get into it that I’m not going to be around to clean up the mess. So you go in there, you go in there on your own. Whatever happens, you gotta go in there knowing that you’re on your own on the way out, emotionally and physically and whatever else-ly there is. So don’t start anything you can’t finish. That’s also part of being a man.”

I pursed my lips, thinking hard on it. “I get it,” I said eventually.

“Do you?” he asked, teacherly.

“I do.” I threw my shoulders back. “It’s time to be a man.”

“Right. No crying, no matter what happens.”

“No crying? Why not?”
“...Men don’t cry.”

“Sure they do. I see it all the time.”

Georgie gave me a look, the most grown-up of his of the day by far. “Not in this country they don’t. Maybe if they’re sissy men. Anyway, I mostly meant, ‘no complaining.’”

“Complaining and crying are two very different things,” I insisted, as George stood.

“Well. Now that we have that covered...don’t do either of them.” He thrust his hands into his pockets, and let out a cold stream of breath vapor from his mouth. “I’m not allowed to actually endanger you, sad as that is, cuz you seem to want to do it voluntarily. And I can’t detain you over a custody case because you’re a foreign kid; I’d be kidnapping you. So. I’ll take you as far as the door, and then you’re on your own. But...signal if somebody pulls a gun or tries to kidnap you, okay?”

“I don’t need cops to solve my problems,” I replied, waving at him airily. “But thanks.”

“Hey. You never know. We’re pretty useful, to the good guys.”

“What makes you think I’m one of the good guys?” I asked, turning around and smiling, my hands in my pockets.

“Because I can tell.”

I frowned at that, but George only laughed. “Kid. If this mob stuff doesn’t work out for you, or even if it does, consider working for the feds.”

“The...feds?”

“Yeah.”

“What are feds?”

He shrugged. “If cops are good guys, feds are the super heroes.”

My eyes went wide and starry as they looked upon the man, whose age I could only dream about.

“Fed shoes....”

“What?”

I shook my head.

“Anyway. He hasn’t shown yet and you’re out of juice.” I looked down at my hands as George spoke. “Why don’t we go into that bistro over there, and we can get our ducks in a row.”

“Ducks...in a...row?”

He looked at me for a second, then, realizing it was a language thing, he sighed.

“Your stakeout skills are crap, kid. I’m gonna show you how this works.”

My face brightened like a lightbulb, and when I spoke, I squeaked. “Okay!”
I knew nothing about my father other than a few spare stories my mother was fond of telling, and the vague things Mr. Lucien had said. But it was somewhat rare to see my mother happy, so I’d try to get her to tell me them as often as I could. And from there, I’d come up with an idea about the man.

He was strong, tall, handsome—someone who fought for justice and the vulnerable. But would he be fair or dark? Thick or thin? An army man, a doctor, an aristocrat? A magical, illustrious thief, as was claimed, or just some plain guy that could pass for anything?

A man who wanted me, or a man who didn’t?

I tried not to think about that part. My mom, after all, waffled on that sentiment herself. I didn’t need it from two parents. The only logical option to ten-year-old me was that, where one parent lacked, the other would have in spades. So my dad would want me a lot, but just didn’t know I existed because of some heroic tragedy. Maybe he would already have more kids, and I could fit right in among them....

From my mom’s stories, from the way she talked about him, I had been under the impression that he had been dead my whole life, and was a man gone too soon. But then one day not long ago, the old grandfatherly guy with a monocle that came into the Bordello occasionally and chatted up mom told me that he was alive.

Looking back on it, he probably hadn’t meant to. It was a slip. But I was too young to recognize that, especially since I was so excited in the face of it. That guy was always nice to me, so I assumed he wasn’t lying; however, I never asked myself why he might be hiding the information. Well, I suppose I did, but the answer I came up with was right out of my comic books: Because my dad is so amazing he needs to be hidden!

Still, I checked out the mystery by getting in touch with the New York Policemen’s Database (which was an ink and paper book administered by a secretary in those days)—which I did by twisting the arm of one of the fences that came around frequently. He had a crush on one of the showgirls, and I promised to deliver a love letter to her and, more importantly, not tell her of his philandering ways, if he’d make the call for me and impersonate someone on the French force. We made up a badge number and a precinct, and all in all, it worked. In a day or so, they faxed over the information.

It was several pages of information:

Six feet tall, dark hair, blue eyes. Thin build, white skin. There was a black-and-white picture of him, too, with a dark, thick mustache more reminiscent of an Italian, though he also had a receding hairline that was certainly not Italian.

He looked a little grumpy, but the image was a grainy Xerox that had then been faxed: the details were shit. Too, the original photograph wasn’t a mugshot; it was some sort of secret reconnaissance photo with a sedan car top in the foreground—the fact of which I relished, being ten.

My dad was so cool, people had to take spy photos of him.

Still, some of the other language in the missive I wasn’t sure about:

Suspected hideout: the syndicate owns several buildings between Maiden and Old
Slip, including a bakery, a meat shop, and a jazz club. It’s unclear which one is the central operation, or if it rotates from night to night or month to month. Different levels of executives hang out in each one.

Deals mostly in prostitution and gambling scams. Main income operations are in Atlantic City and Coney Island but the boss prefers the City lifestyle and arts, as he used to be an art and jewelry thief. Does not appear to steal in the traditional sense any longer. Possibly working with Vegas arms of the Italian mafia by helping bring in European traffic and laundering goods through the casinos’ art programs.

It then also listed some helpful middle men’s names and aliases and known whereabouts, for the purpose of contacting the organization if “a problem arises that requires delicate handling.”

What it didn’t mention was who got the bribe each week in the police department, and which precinct, who picked it up, and from where. That would have been helpful to know.

It went on: Is a short-tempered man prone to explosions.

I had to look up “explosion” in the dictionary. But I was pretty sure it meant literal explosions, as in, bombs.

My dad knew how to make bombs. No wonder he was hiding from the law: he was awesome.

“So when you do a stakeout,” George continued, arranging the things on the checkered plastic tablecloth to make a diagram, “You want to make sure that you can see them but they can’t see you. You also want to have men covering all the exits. And if you can’t do that, you want to at least cover the logical exits.”

My chin in my hand, I turned to George and looked him over again, in the now bright light mid-morning. I yawned, but I couldn’t fault him—he was really into this, as he moved the salt and pepper shakers and sugar packets around.

Lupin has no children, though he hangs out at Coney Island a lot.

There was a line pointing to that note, that added, in handwritten text, Perv?

Cops are all ass holes, once they’ve pegged you as an enemy, I grumbled inwardly. But we criminal elements are the ones that can actually do something about it, came my mother’s voice. Don’t be the kind of man the cops get to push around.

I raised an eyebrow at George’s hands—they seemed so nice and big—and then at his face as he spoke, intently staring downward.

Gotta keep this guy on my side or I’ll have to shank him. Blood is so messy though, I hate how sticky it makes my fingers.

I rubbed my fingers and sipped at my drink, while Georgie continued his talk, getting more animated as he did so. It was...pretty, really, watching him be so excited.

...Which was an odd thought. I couldn’t remember having thought that a guy was physically appealing before. Tough I suppose...Gigi’s son, who was about two years older than me, had made me seem all...excited?, back in the day before he’d moved away. Was that...the same? Maybe....

It was as I was staring at his large knuckles and feeling that warm feeling again that George leaned back from his presentation, apparently finished, and motioned to my parcel, sitting beside my
“So tell me about that,” he said easily.

“It’s nothing!” I squeaked, pulling it toward myself defensively.

“Hey, I didn’t say I was going to take it, I was just curious.”

I pulled a duckface, highly suspicious of that, but eventually loosened up a little when he didn’t make a move for it.

Still, I never offered up anything about it, though, and George gave me—and it—a long look.

“It’s nothing I should know about, as a...responsible adult, is it?”

I shook my head vigorously. “It’s personal stuff. Nothing important.”

“Personal stuff is the only important stuff,” George replied, “cept maybe world peace and law and order and all that.”

He was starting to sound like Mr. Lucien. But I was still not sure how I felt about him now, so I shrugged, irritated.

George, across from me, shrugged too, more lightly though. He looked out the window, though, above my head, and then—stared. “...Hey.”

“What is it?” I asked, turning around.

There was a man at the front door of the meat shop, just...standing. He definitely looked like a security guy, and he was just...securing, under the awning in a sunny spot.

“He must be in,” Georgie whispered, suddenly tensing those fine knuckles as he stared across the street. “Or someone is, at any rate.”

I looked at his face, finally readily intent about what he was saying, but then frantically turned back to the faraway shop entrance, hidden between cars. “But how’d he get in? D’we miss him?!?”

A chagrined smile tweaked at George’s lips, and he glanced down at me, pointing at the pepper shaker. “There’s always a back. Sometimes a basement, too, or a side door. There’s always one entrance but several exits from a mob place.”

I grumbled, annoyed at myself, but nodded and stood. “I’m going.”

“Hey wait,” he said, reaching out and grabbing my shoulder. “You even got a plan?”

I eyed that hand, suddenly no warm feelings about it at all, and then his dark eyes. “Of course.”

His hand slid away, but only reluctantly. “Is it something other than saying ‘hey is my dad here’?”

I eyed him, then the wall. “Well...of course.”

He didn’t buy it.

“Okay let’s make a *real* plan though.”

“Ye of little faith. ‘Direct’ works awfully well sometimes.”
George pursed his lips. “You at least got a backup plan?”

“Sure. Several.” Hands on my hips, I shrugged.

This was a true statement, which Georgie seemed to notice. How desperate and dumb my plans were, though, that was a different matter entirely.

George added narrowed eyes to his previous expression.

"Stop that," I scolded. "You're weirding me out. People are gonna think you belong in a home or something, and then I really will get given over to the police."

In response, George rolled his eyes. “I don’t like this, for the record. But like I said, I can’t detain you. Please don’t get hurt.”

“You’re probably just saying that, but I appreciate the fact that you are anyway. There’s no guarantee he’ll let me stay with him, so stay here, will you? I’ll send somebody if we end up chatting for more than an hour.”

George blinked rapidly at that proclamation, apparently too much for him to process. But I didn’t give him time—instead, I skipped across the street, brown-paper package in tow—but suitcase left behind with George. I went past the door guard standing on the sidewalk, giving him a look, and then made for the stairs that were along the side wall, just inside the door. There were more people in here now, a long line of people, so I managed to duck in and avoid the Madame.

There was another guard inside though—a massive brick wall of a man who hadn’t been there before. The instant I went for the stairs, the man stepped in front of me.

We stared at each other, one up, one down.

“I’m looking for the Merlot,” I said, in total seriousness.

The guy didn’t even blink. “The liquor store’s closed to kids.”

I did all the blinking.

Well...fuck.

“I have come here all the way from France for this meeting and you are going to pull the age card on me?” I squeaked, indignant. I may have even stamped my foot a bit.

The guy’s eyebrows frowned, but his lips smiled. “Get out of here, kid.”

“I have business here, okay?” I huffed, sidestepping his meaty hand quickly. “Don’t get in the way of my business.”

“I don’t know what business you think you have here, but you don’t. Get going—”

“Is the boss in? That’s all I want to know.”

He stopped. The guy at the door stopped too, suddenly peering in at me. Someone at the table a few feet away, too, had paused in his eating and was watching me, his hand under the table.

“Now why would you want to know that, kiddo?” asked the guard lowly.

“I’m supposed to deliver something to him. Something special that came all the way from France.
Don’t tell me you didn’t get the message...?"

I tried to sound brave, but I was pretty sure my sweat was obvious now.

He narrowed his beady eyes, small gears slowly whirling. “That?” he asked, motioning to my brown-paper-wrapped package, twine strings and all.

“No!” I yelped, holding it closer.

“I’ll give it to the right people.” His bulky arms reached for it.

“No you can’t!” I squealed, pulling away. By now, people were looking. The guy reached for me, and the guy watching from the table stood up. The first guy stumbled into his fellow as I did a feisty twirl, and I used to opportunity to duck underneath him and run up the stairs.

“He’s got a bomb! Get him!”

The crowd immediately screamed.

“It’s not a bomb! Are you crazy?!” I cried from over the railing.

“I told you to get out of here!” came the voice of Madame Sugarpot.

People were thundering both out of the building and after me, all shouting about something. The old wooden stairs underneath me were rumbling like the ground under the calvary’s hooves. But I wouldn’t look back. I took them two at a time, nimbly, despite the earthquake.

Still, I hit the top of the stairs and rolled to the side. There were doors everywhere, some closed, some open. Where to go? Which one?—

I ducked to the right. But rolling over the floor into the room and forcing the door open, I found—a bathroom. Shit.

Though not in the toilet, it seemed. It was clean, luckily.

But my father wasn’t there.

Frantically, I scoped out my surroundings. One window, far above the back of the john. Not enough to squirrel through, and there might not be pipes on the other side.

So as the thundering steps reached a climax, I darted the other way, just in time for several sets of hands to fall forward and reach for my ankles.

Given the people downstairs and the ones racing for the finish line at the top of the steps, there was a massive pile up at the top of the stairs. But I ran right by, heart running too fast to stop now, as people poked their heads out of the doors down the long corridor.

It was a narrow space, all wood and white walls, and all the onlookers helped to block my pursuers in the increasingly incredible traffic jam. Still, there was no sign of the man in the photograph.

*Look for the biggest room at the end of the hall,* I thought. *It’s always that one, with the fancy door.*

I saw it: an engraved door, with a nameplate on it, at the end of the long hall. There was frosted glass in the upper half to he window, and light was coming through it. That was a big man’s office, if I’d ever saw one.
With a shout, I grabbed the knob, shouldered the door, and used my momentum to burst through: “Dad!”

I nearly tripped over myself to get into the room. But I made it.

But the person sitting in the room was not the man in the photograph.

It was a young man in a black hat, leaning over the arm of a brown leather couch. I couldn’t see his eyes, but I could see his slow, dark grin.

Long legs, crossed at the knee. A fine black hat with a wide brim that didn’t match any of the others I’d seen in this town. A sharp, black suit from head to toe, blaser unbuttoned from the steam heating, but fine materials over every inch, including the blue dress shirt and its black tie. A shiny silver belt buckle, engraved and of a cowboyish design. And his hands—

In his strong, worn hands, I came face-to-face with a long black barrel, just in front of deadly-serious grey eyes. It was like the rifling was spinning right into those eyes with pinpoint precision.

As soon as I came to a full stop, the man’s smirk pulled to one side. “Bang.”

I gave an unsightly gasp as I completed the fall onto my ass, my heart racing in my chest.

My hands clenched against the wood floor. The package lay fallen on the ground. For a moment, I couldn’t feel anything, couldn’t see anything other than my heart hammering in my chest. But after a minute, I realized: the gun hadn’t gone off. Just the guy’s mouth.

A mouth I couldn’t help but watch with hyper detail as it spoke to me.

“Now last I checked, I don’ have a child,” he said, in a slow, complicated drawl. He cracked into a smile again. “I don’ think God works miracles like that, fer people like me.”

I was frozen. But the shiver that hit me then wasn’t entirely about the gun. It went straight to my crotch and—that was weird. It hasn’t done that before.

But as those dangerous, playful, leering eyes game me an up-down, my legs felt all weak, and it was different from when I was scared.

“That really a bomb?” the stranger drawled, nodding slightly toward my fallen gift.

“It’s a book, dammit!” I snapped, eyes scrunching shut. “How can you employ such uneducated slops!”

The guman blinked, surprised, and then twirled his gun toward the ceiling with a laugh. It was a hearty laugh, almost sweet. He ran a hand over his clean-shaven face. “You’re a right funny lil’ one, aren’cha.”

“You—!”

But before I could stand, I was summarily tackled, kicking and screaming.

There must have been at least five guys on me. I felt the thumps in rapid succession, after the initial onslaught.

“Ughk...ow....you people...,” I rumbled, with what little breath I had. It was all so very hot and sweaty, painful, smelly, and loud in my ears, suddenly. Gross. Didn’t these people have any manners? Slops, all of them!
Unconcerned with any of this, the suited cowboy, his hands in his pockets and slouching, picked his way over the wiggling gaggle into the hallway. It turned out, the hallway had apparently turned one last time, and there was one last door yet to be discovered. A big oak door, darkly stained, and with an engraving on it. Damn, I’d been tricked!

Still, he loped over to that silent and imposing door as I was pinned by about 600 pounds of sweaty flesh and bone. Once he got to his destination a few feet away, the gunman gave the entire pile, and me by extension, one last pitying look before smirking, perfectly amused.

“‘Ey don’ break ‘im now,” he cautioned. “He’s no more dangerous ‘an a yearling goat chewing on yer shirt and you already got ‘im tied down.”

“I can’t understand your crazy accent you hick!” I shouted back at him, when my head poked out from the heap and I got some air.

“‘Ey now ‘ey now, that’s a mite rude, lil’ fella. Keep talking like that and somebody’s darn sure to give yer rear a whoopin’.”

Quietly, the young cowboy—he wasn’t more than college age, judging by his lack of beard, his build, and his facial features—rapped on the closed door with his knuckles. It was a rather charming gesture, all told, not that I was in the mood to notice. “‘S all clear out here Commander, far’s I can tell.”

“How many times do I have to tell you you’re not in the navy anymore?” came a deep-voiced sigh as the door opened. “And what did I tell you about that drawl of yours making you sound like a ridiculous hick?”

A dark head poked out from behind the door, at about the same level as the messenger. He had dark hair and dark eyes—at least as far as I could tell from this angle—and light skin. A thick, bushy black mustache lived on his upper lip, and the rest of his hair was equally thick and dark and a tiny bit wavy. He had lines in his face that pegged him as older, but that was all I could get before the army on top of me started squeezing the air—and the awe—out of my lungs. I put my head against the floorboards and braced on my forearms, straining to get my spine into a position where I could tense my abs and actually breathe.

It was the man from the photographs, no doubt about it.

But he didn’t know that yet. And I couldn’t tell him, because they wouldn’t get off of me.

Part of me hoped he’d spontaneously notice our connection, but it seemed he hadn’t. Perhaps he wasn’t as much of a wizard as I’d thought.

“Hey, where I grew up, this is the sophisticated way a’ talkin’,” the cowboy continued half-heartedly above my head and a few feet away, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly.

“Yes, but you also didn’t finish high school, and I don’t want anyone to know that,” the ‘Commander’ said, coming out of the door completely. He shut the thick oak slab behind him with impressive delicacy, and, standing straight and tall, crossed his arms. He was thin, really handsomely thin, with a navy blue pinstriped suit. His dark hair and mustache accented it all, tying together with his white tie. “How are you doing on your GED by the way?” he asked, plainly.

I smacked at the floor. I couldn’t breathe.

Nobody seemed to care.
The neck rubbing turned into a fully bashful posture, with hunched shoulders and all. I’d never seen a man in such an expensive suit act like that—not that I had the leisure to care right at the moment, though. “Ah...good,” he said, accent tucking away with effort. “Passed the geometry test last night.”

“Oh. Good! Good for you.” He patted the quasi-cowboy’s shoulder. “I knew you could do it. See, you’re quite intelligent, just as I’ve always said.”

“Yess’r,” the young man with the massive gun said, smiling a bit. “Er...Yes. Sir,” he amended, realizing his drawl had come back.

“You’ll get that too, I suspect,” the boss said, “Just spend more time around the guys, and get some of the girls to help you practice.” As the cowboy gunman nodded and stepped back, turning away shyly from the scrutiny of the others assembled, the older gentleman in the blue suit turned to the rest of us with some curiosity. He just turned his upper half, his arms still crossed—almost as if he were watching the cleaning staff go by as he chatted at the water cooler. “So what’s all this, now?”

“He’s got a bomb,” said Buffoon A, from the top of the pile.

“It’s not a bomb,” I huffed, annoyed. “It’s a holiday present, <for fuck’s sake!>” I switched over to French unknowingly in my annoyance, spending all my mental energy on squirming. <“Ugh, let me up, Jesus. I can’t breathe.”>

The tall man who was supposedly my father just blinked at that, nonplussed. <“Where did you learn French?”> he asked me idly, from over his crossed arms. <“My mom,”> I muttered, gasping for breath and smacking the old wooden floorboards with one hand as a plea for mercy. <“Guhgk. Help....”>

“C’mon, get up Jest, Rick,” the cowboy called, suddenly serious again and accent almost evaporating. “I don’t think the kid needs all four of ya to control him and his oh-so-dangerous book.”

The men did as they were told, and I was soon—and abruptly—held in mid-air, several feet off the ground, a massive arm holding me against Buffoon A’s chest something like a misused cat. My arms flopped out on top of his, present and all.

“Don’t tell them what it is, jeez, you’ll ruin the surprise!” I hissed at the cowboy.

He just stared at me for a second, then shrugged and grinned apologetically, behind the man’s back.

The boss looked back at him—causing him to quickly stand up rod-straight—then at me. His eyes narrowed, and this time when I shivered, it wasn’t that weird, almost pleasant feeling of excitement that had happened with George and the cowboy. It was plain old omens of danger, zipping down my body and priming me to flee.

It wasn’t like the guys at the bordello that tried to corner me.

Or like mom, when she was about to yell at me.

It was like the girls, when they were about to start stabbing at each other with hairpins and scissors.
“What the hell is going on here?” my father demanded, dagger-sharp. All the kindness he’d shown his associate a moment ago was burned away, and he suddenly looked a decade or two older—and scarier.

So I did the only thing I could do in the face of such a situation: Play the cute and loveable card. I stuck the brown paper package out with both hands, and, still held around the chest against the Buffoon’s sizable girth, stuck my legs straight out into the air, too.

“Here, I brought you a Christmas present, Dad!”

That did not seem to help things, judging by the look on his face. His eyes grew enormously, and his mustache twitched. He grew so pale I thought he might faint, actually. It was a good thing the cowboy was standing over there.

“...‘D-Dad’?” He pushed his head and shoulders back, turning to me like a fencer readying to duel. His voice tightened, his expression hardened, and at his sides, he opened and closed his fists several times—until they finally decided to stay tightly closed. They were a fighter’s fists—the knuckles were big and worn, and the fingers were curled just right to knock a hole through a wall. “Is this...some kind of joke?” he queried softly, tensely.

“No,” I answered simply, cheerfully, in the complete silence that followed this display, even from the professional buffoons. “It’s not a joke. I’m your son.”
HAPPY NEW YEAR!! :DD

You commentors and readers were one of the top things in my year last year, and certain the most wonderfully unexpected part! I do so look forward to more bleséd days with you in the future. :3 Thanks for being here, and have a blessed year!

Fandom Things on My Mind Lately:

1) Bruno Mars' music videos pretty much live in the Lupin universe. Someone should really write him into a TV special, just saying.... #PinkJacket #Holla

2) Lol, I have written so much in the last year, including for my dayjob, that the keyboard on my computer is giving out. First the e, then the t, and now the d. Damn. I apologize for any errors involving these letters.

3) Christ, we've gotten to the point where I have to break out the biology terms for chapter titles.

4) There's this miniseries on TNT or FX that came out recently called "Good Behavior." It stars the lady who plays Mary from Downton Abbey. It's really dark, and basically "The Fujiko Miniseries if Lupin was a genuine bad guy", or, "The story of how Fujiko got into crime before she met Lupin." Take your pick. Both are really fun to imagine while watching, oh man.

5) Why does Jigen consistently dress like a cop? Gives a lot of credence to the idea of Zenigata x Jigen

6) VampireNaomi and Papp both have really nice Lupin content on their Tumblrs. You might check it out if you haven't yet: Vampirenaomi.tumblr.com and perunamuusa.tumblr.com, respectively. Papp's also got an X-rated portfolio site you can access from peruna. Good stuff, right there, not scary at all. (thumbs up)

7) If I ever finished the PWP Lupin drabbles I have, would anyone actually want to read them? (*Please leave a comment)

8) Next week's chapter might be a little late. We’ve hit the end of what I've got completed for the story. (*flops in exhaustion*) Three 10,000-word chapters in a row....

9) Music of late:
   Good Grief - Bastille
   Kiss me slowly - Parachute
When I opened my eyes, everything was hazy and white. So very white. Except for the lights. They were shining golden, down at me like heaven’s flame.

In that halo of brightness, there was a face looking down at me. A distant one, the details lost in the shine.

Jigen...?

I blinked, but the light didn’t clear. I couldn’t feel anything, either.

I must be dead.

The figure’s mouth was moving; I could see from the way the shapes moved in the light. Vaguely, I also sensed sound after a while. The “person” was trying to talk to me.

I blinked a few times, slow and painful, until finally, the haze cleared enough for me to see.

The voice came through soon after. It was male, I realized as it sharpened. It was gravelly and deep.

So angels really do have a gender.

Now if only I could see the—

I recognized those cheekbones, and that tanned, weather-beaten face. Its wickedly good-looking eyelashes, too.

“You’re not...Jigen,” I rasped, accusatory. “Or an angel.”

...Unless it was just using the face of someone I knew.

I guess I wasn’t going immediately to Hell; that would have been the face of my mother or father, then. So I guess I was being Judged. Fitting, this countenance, then.

But then the angel-slash-Zenigata scoffed. “Not that you’ll ever know, I guess.”

I frowned at him, still too addled to really figure out what he was saying. I could hear the words, but this time, they didn’t make much sense.

“Ehmrng?” I asked back. It was kind of a word. But mostly just sounds grinding themselves against my throat and occasionally escaping.

“Give me a sec,” he said, disappearing out of my view, leaving me to the light. I wanted to think it was warm, but I couldn’t tell. I felt really cold, actually. Like I was in the middle of a river.
That river, perhaps. They would send me there for my final judgment, wouldn’t they?

“Am I dead...?” I asked, chasing him as much as I could. It wasn’t much—only my gaze moved. I wasn’t even sure I had a body. There was just bright of slightly different shades, and a few colors that I assumed were garments, skin, and hair.

“Angel-gata” seemed to be consulting with someone—the entirety of which was a pair of legs, as far as my vision could determine around the furniture next to my head—who then proceeded to fiddle with said furniture.

Said...machinery?

The blobs slowly sharpened into shapes, which soon came with defined edges. I tracked the bouncing of the light on those edges for a while, until certain sounds redirected my attention.

It definitely wasn’t furniture next to my head. (I had a head?) It was machinery, which I distinctly recognized as medical equipment, once I got to looking at it. The shiny bits and molded plastic tubes were a dead giveaway.

Which was fine, but...I couldn’t remember how I’d gotten hooked up to them. And...that meant I was actually in my body? Not floating above it?

I looked down and reached my hand up—but it came up short with a rattle and a lance of pain.

I stared the culprit—my wrist. Or more specifically, the leather belt around my wrist. It was attached to the bed’s guard rail.

So I was alive. Or this was a really annoying purgatory.

You asshole, I tried to grumble at Zenigata, angel or not, far more blackly than I had a right to—but nothing came up. Maybe I managed to say it aloud. I wasn’t sure. I was guessing I hadn’t; coherent speech tended to be beyond me, for about half an hour after anesthetic.

I guess I wasn’t dead, unless angels had a terrible sense of humor. But no—where there was pain, there was life. The Jewish philosophers in the next neighborhood over from my old one were plenty happy to expound upon that to me whenever they got the chance.

But that didn’t explain how I’d gotten here. I was usually pretty damn good about anesthetic; I could remember from the moment they’d tell me to count to the moment I woke up on the post-op table, without a gap in memory other than the actual being unconscious part. So why couldn’t I remember going under...?

Maybe I’d gotten shot somehow? That was the usual cause.

But that didn’t explain why there was ice packed all around me....

Eventually, after glaring at my offended wrist and the little glossy packets for probably too long—the gears were slow—I tipped my head back with an overly annoyed moan and flopped back into the pillow.

The people moved around me for a bit, speaking softly. I think some of it was supposed to reassure me, given the tone, but I wasn’t having it—nor was my brain. I just stared at the ceiling—glared lasers at the ceiling—trying to piece out what was going on. Zenigata was touching my arm, rubbing it, but I couldn’t hardly feel it. I did my best to ignore it and him since I couldn’t actually manage to take it away from him.
I do think I managed to growl at him a little bit, though, which was a plus.

I ended up counting the decorative holes that lay in the pattern of the ceiling tiles, trying to keep myself awake and moving toward alertness. It was hard. The white was always pulsing, encroaching.

In fact, I might have fallen asleep again while I was doing the counting, because the next time I recognized being conscious, the light had changed, somewhat. Same view, but different shadows and temperature. Zenigata wasn’t there anymore, either.

And the fuzz around my head was mostly gone. That was nice, too. Didn’t make me any less surly though.

“Hey. Lupin.” A woman’s voice drifted over, and a hand came onto my chest. It jiggled me back and forth, a tiny bit. “Wake up.”

_No, Fujiko. Let me sleep. Sleep is better. Sleep is kind._

I tried to roll over. I didn’t think it worked.

“Mmmnrg...,” I protested, annoyed at this revelation.

“You need to wake up now,” her sweet voice persisted, unreasonably kind. “Talk to me.”

_Like hell I do. I pay the bills here!_

I tried to roll over the other way. That didn’t work, either. “Mrthnnng?”

Two fingers came into my view. “How many fingers am I holding up?”

I glanced at their owner, a look that clearly said _go die_, but I sighed when I saw it was only Marti. Resigned, I turned back to the annoying digits, hoping I could get her to go away that much sooner.

I stared at her fingers like a beacon, and very carefully forced my tongue to move.

“Bitch.”

Luckily, it wasn’t that hard of a word.

Unfortunately, it still was enough of an effort to knock me right back out again.

Eventually—and I have no idea how long later—I indeed woke up again. This time, though, things seemed clear.

A ceiling with little holes in it. A hospital bed. Medical equipment, lots of it, slowly making a pattern of ambient noise. Fluorescent lamps, blazing above me.

And pain. A lot of goddamned _pain_, all over my body. My head throbbed. My chest ached, and stabbed me sharply every time I tried to breathe. My leg was a mess of both, and searing lancets of pain as well. That was just lovely. I wiggled my fingers. They seemed unbroken, at least. That was something.

I wiggled my toes. Both sets were there—though the searing pain in my right leg kept me from
trying that any more than absolutely necessary.

I let out a moan of pain and then realized, as it died away, that it was very quiet in this room. Unnaturally quiet.

Apparently that was because, when I looked over, I found the only other person in the room to be asleep too.

It was Zenigata. I guess he’d come back at some point. Or maybe he’d never left, and he’d just been somewhere I couldn’t see, before.

Currently though, his head was turned to the side, laying atop his folded arms. He was sitting down on some chair I couldn’t see, far as I could tell given how his top half was laid out over the empty space in the bed I occupied. The Inspector was wearing a white dress shirt, but not his tie. But that made sense...ties weren’t allowed in hospitals. They transmitted too many germs.

Zenigata’s sleeves were rolled up too—not buttoned at the wrist like normal—revealing his tanned, muscular forearms, dark hair over the back of them. He tended to do that when he typed, or needed to hold somebody down. Either way, it seemed he had been working.

After getting my fill of him, I glanced around the room, careful not to move. His head was against my left arm; my hand was sandwiched in between his. It was warm. Nicely so.

Seemed my wrists weren't restrained anymore, though. I seemed to remember that, for whatever reason, though I couldn’t quite place when or where it had been, or if it were even true.

I was thirsty though. Really, dreadfully thirsty. My throat felt like sand paper had been shoved down it.

In fact, when I swallowed at the thought of it, the muscles burned all the way down, which in turn made my head’s pain spike and my temperature rise. Shit, whatever happened, it must have been awful.

I looked around and spotted a glass of water on a flat surface of the equipment just beyond my head. It was probably the Inspector’s, but I doubted he’d mind too much.

Taking a deep breath, I reached my free hand out to my prize. But it required crossing my body, which moved my ribs, which made me hiss out loud from the pain.

Apparently my pathetic panting, quivering, and squeaking was enough to wake Zenigata, because a few moments later he stirred, rubbing at his eyes. I set my arm back at my side, not wanting to get jostled accidentally.

Turned away from me as he was, when he sighed deeply and rubbed his hand over his face, I couldn’t see his expression. He put his elbows on the bed’s surface and rubbed the bridge of his nose heavily, facing downward.

“God dammit Lupin,” he sighed to himself. It was more like a whispered prayer, and before he was even done saying it, he’d put his face in both of his hands.

No words followed this up, nor a look at me. He just sat there silently, the picture of angsty penance.

“What?” I asked in response to that. My voice rasped badly, and was dreadfully quiet, but I licked my lips with my dry as hell tongue and got the job done regardless. I wasn’t sure how any
subsequent words were going to go, but I got that one out—and in one of the languages he knew, no less.

When the Inspector didn’t respond, I rubbed a finger against his elbow. It didn’t take much effort, since they were already almost touching.

A second ticked by, and then there came a grunt from him:

“Ah?”

His hands parted and his face appeared. After staring at my fingers for a second, his dark eyes zoomed right in on mine, and for once, I didn’t feel a need to look away from their intense scrutiny. I was pretty sure I looked like hell enough to ward off any bad juju anyway.

“Hey,” I whispered, cracking a weak smile.

“You’re awake,” he said, in quiet awe.

I nodded, very slowly and very slightly. I wanted to make a joke about it, but I didn’t really have the energy for it. The exhausted smile on one side of my mouth would have to do. At least, I assumed it’d gotten to the point of a smile. It was a valiant grimace, if not.

“What’s...up...Pops?” I continued, once I’d gotten up enough might for all three words in a row. It had taken about thirty seconds, but luckily, he had been silent the entire time, eyes never wavering.

“You’re...here,” he muttered. “You can see me?”

I tried to nod, but all I got to work was a slow blink instead. “Mn.”

“Oh...Hah,” a breathless smile appeared on Zenigata’s worn face, and then was lost in a flurry of emotion. “I need...I’ll be right back,” he mumbled, blinking several times. He stood up abruptly, body as stilted as his words, and in just a few seconds had gone out the door and shut it behind him.

That was...odd. Though it made me wonder why he’d be surprised that I was awake at all. Had I passed out or something? Worse than before?...

I looked at my arm, the one he had been leaning on. There was a tube in it—an IV line.

What the hell...?

What the hell happened to me?

I stared at my hands, but clear as day as they were, they held no answers.

“Lupin-kun.”

I jerked at the noise, and then immediately groaned in pain. Worse than before—my whole consciousness devolved into a white haze for several moments.

Forcing myself to breathe through the pathetic moan that escaped me, eventually my eyes cleared and the pain lowered. Gently, tiredly, I turned to the sound of the voice.

Across the way was Marti, sitting in a chair, various coats hanging behind her head. She was sitting primly, one leg crossed over another and her hands folded on her top knee. A small paperback book lay over her knees.
As I squinted at her, she smiled slightly, mysteriously, red curls swirling about her round cheeks. The light behind her was splashing on the wall not unlike tiny, glowing wings.

“Welcome back,” she said.

I blinked, and gaped, and I’m pretty sure nothing else came out.

Eventually, though, I pointed at the door, the question on my face.

“Oh, him?” Her smile turned a little bit fonder, her eyes lowering as she turned to the door. “He’ll be back as soon as he’s done crying. He’s been worried about you, you know?”

Marti didn’t say much after that. Which was all right; I was in so much goddamned pain that I didn’t want to test the limits of that with idle chatter. It took a while, but I found a good groove in the bed and way to lay so that, if I just did nothing but breathe, it wouldn’t hurt much. But the minute I moved a single muscle—ugh, it was like I was on fire.

The room wasn’t much to speak of, other than the fact that I couldn’t remember getting here. It was some sort of patient room, clearly; I was in a bed, the ultra-white hospital kind, carefully entombed within its sheets and tubes and wires. There was an IV in my arm, and tape over it, so it was clear it had been there for a while and was meant to stay for a while longer. There a smattering of needle marks in my arms—both arms!—which meant a lot of things had been stuck into me while I’d been unconscious.

As pleasant as that thought was, the majority of it seemed to be done now, whatever it was; I only had one line in me, leading up to a bag on a metal stand beside my head. It was clear liquid, but because I couldn’t sit up, I couldn’t read the label.

If only I had Jigen’s sniper eyes. They’d be able to figure this out from here.

Ah, Jigen.

“I don’t suppose you can rummage up my partner from door number two,” I murmured to Marti, without turning to her. There were two doors in the room; one that Zenigata had gone through, and the other, a couple chairs down from Marti. Probably a storage closet or bathroom of some sort.

“Mm?” she asked, turning a page. She didn’t even look at me. “Now why would you want that?”

Fuck. Had I been delirious, too, during this mystical escapade? I vaguely remembered lots of little things, so I probably had been; my only hope was that I hadn’t spilled any secrets of importance. I guess we’d see once the Inspector got back, but...in the meantime, Marti was definitely acting like she’d gotten used to talking to someone who wasn’t all there, and wasn’t convinced that I was now, either.

“Warm hands and kind words,” I muttered back.

She smirked shortly, but shook her head. “Sorry. Though I’m sure it’d be fine if he turned himself in....”

Ahh, that was right. “Man.... Why...d’you gotta be such...a cop...s’mtimes?”
It should be noted that when I said this, it took several times longer than normal and was barely more than a rasping whisper. It was not a heated gesture by any stretch of the imagination.

“Because that’s where my paycheck comes from,” she continued. I turned my head to her, fuzzy brain trying to make sure I wasn’t pissing her off, and after a second of her smirk growing mischievously, her glittering green eyes flicked up to me, from the pages of the book on her lap. “You’ve tried to bribe me with gifts, but you haven’t made me a salary offer yet.” She wiggled her eyebrows.

My eyes widened.

“I’m joking, Lupin.”

She kicked back and flipped another page of her book.

“Oh good,” I said, very gently maneuvering my non-IV hand onto my chest, as if I was feeling faint. I took several long breaths before I was able to get up the strength to get the words out. “Was afraid...I was...going to have to...defend...Zenigata’s...honor there.”

“Aren’t you a sweet one.”

I smiled a bit, mirrored by her own lips, and we were silent for a bit after that, me regaining strength and her reading patiently. As I stared at her, then up at the ceiling, then simply closed my eyes—she was silent, patiently reading. Tet her book looked like it a bodice ripper.

Well, if he’s gone too long, maybe I’ll have her read out loud to amuse us both.

God though, it was hard to stay awake; this felt a little bit like it did when I had a lung infection that one time as a kid. I didn’t have any energy to move. I’d get a little bit of excitement at the idea of talking, but as soon it was done, I’d feel worse than when I’d started.

Shit, what had happened? Blood infection? Yeah, maybe that was it.... In which case, I would be lucky to be alive, let alone in one piece.

The room didn’t offer many clues. There wasn’t anything to my right, just a wall with about two feet of space between me and it. To my left there was a machine stack next to my head, on the same side as the IV, but it just looked like monitoring equipment and such. Out in the room, which was a square little thing, were three spare, cloth-covered upright chairs of a grey-blue hue, of which Marti was sitting in one. A tall potted plant and a window were to the left of her; the mystery door was on the other side of the chairs, to the right; and on the wall at my feet, there was likewise nothing but a large, tranquil painting of ships in a harbor, and the door to the hallway.

I sighed. That painting.... It sure as hell looked like Monaco's harbor. Couldn’t they give me the cows from the lobby?

Still, there were bars on the windows, but at least the paint on the walls was fresh.

I closed my eyes and just told myself to breathe, trying to feel the calm of somewhere else. Maybe the cabin, with Jigen in it.

“How are you feeling?” came Marti’s voice, probably in response to that string of sighs.

“Like crap,” I muttered. “Head hurts.”

Well, all of me hurt, but she probably knew that.
There was a shuffle of cloth and book pages, and then the inevitable happened: Marti came over. I could hear the footsteps. But, unexpectedly, rather than poking and prodding and bothering, her cool palm settled itself onto my forehead.

I startled a little bit, but only slightly. The movement didn’t hurt as much as it could, but it was still an incentive to stay where I was. I sighed, into Marti’s touch. I hadn’t realized how hot I felt, until that.

“You had a pretty bad fever,” she said, feeling my head, then my cheeks. I looked up at her from under her hand, balefully. My grandfather would do this for me from time to time, when I was sick as a teenager. It was nice.

“Ah, Marti. You somehow always make me feel nice,” I whispered, a little sloppily. But that was okay; she was a forgiving lady.

“Is that so?” she said lightly, pulling her hand away and raising her eyebrows. “You said some pretty mean things when you were cranky.” Her mouth pursed in amusement, but it was slight; there was definitely some underlying tension there.

Probably wanted an apology, or to see if I really had meant it.

“I can, when I’m being forced to wake up and don’t want to,” I admitted in a slow whisper, following her hand and gently curling mine around it. “What’d I say? I can assure you, I don’t remember, if it makes you feel any better.”

She looked at my hand, then at my tired smile.

“You called me a bitch,” she said, flatly.

I blinked hard at that. “I did? Why? You’re so nice....”

She gave me a look, but I made sure to look back at her innocently, apologetically.

“Hrmph.” Marti let go of my hand, fished in her pocket, and then abruptly shined a pen light in my eyes, before I could see it coming.

“Ahg, dirty trick!”

She only smirked. “Hold still.”

“Officer Martelliiiii,” I whined.

But she just held my head down, pointing unforgiving lights at my left eye. “I guess your ‘jerk brain’ doesn’t like being told to count when it’d rather be asleep,” she said, distractedly. Eventually, she stood up and the light backed off. “It gets mighty snippy.”

As I blinked the spot out of my eyes, I figured this made us even.

“Well, on behalf of my jerk-brain subconscious, I apologize. ‘S hard t’control that guy.”

“It is, isn’t it,” she said mysteriously from her spot standing over me, and then wiggled the pen light. “Other eye.”

“Martiiii,” I wheedled.

“No buts.”
“Sigh.”

“Did you literally just say ‘sigh’?”

“Yes.”

“‘Hah-hah’,” The light flashed upward, ruthlessly.

“Ow!”

I followed her commands, slowly. I felt sore all over, but things seemed to be working, if a bit rickety.

She picked up my hand and put our palms together, pushing mine backward with utmost care.

“Flex.”

Marti sent me through a series of finger dexterity tests, and seemed pleased with the outcome—and a little impressed. I yawned halfway through each test she was trying to pull, and by the end of working with my feet, she patted my shoulder. “All right. Thank you for participating in that. Seems you’re in good enough working order for now. Don’t overdo it, though.”

*Good enough? What the hell happened to elicit that as a response?*

But in the end, I didn’t have enough energy to get that complaint to my mouth, so all she got was a warm, friendly mumble: “Mmmn hm.”

As she leaned over me, I was faced with a beautiful view: red hair, curly and backlit, framing her face. The freckles I delighted in so much, sprinkled across her nose and cheeks. Green eyes...soft and caring.

“You’re so pretty,” I murmured sleepily.

“Why thank you. You’re not bad looking yourself.” She pulled the blanket up over me, and patted it down. “Are you in pain?”

I nodded, suddenly feeling exhausted because of it. It hit me like a brick; I closed my eyes to blink, and suddenly, it was very hard to get them open again.

“All right. Well, since you were so cooperative, I’ll up it a little for you.”

“Thanks, doll.”

She clicked a button hung overhead and then sat back down across the room.

When the door opened, I realized I’d probably fallen asleep again, judging by the fact that Marti was reading something different—was sitting in a slightly different position, even—and I didn’t remember her ever picking the new thing up. Didn’t even remember *closing my eyes.*

The door shut quietly and I realized that the noise of the door opening must have startled me awake, though there wasn’t any adrenaline in me. Listless, I blinked at nothing, giving a dead stare to where my eyes happened to be pointing—which gave me a view of Zenigata as he silently sat down next to her, a magazine in hand.
If I had been a little more aware, I would have realized how cute they were together, sitting next to that perky, broadleafed plant and talking about houseware ads.

Still, I stared at his periodical, not a thought in my head. Seemed my mind hadn’t booted up quite yet, and I patiently waited for it to do so, as I looked at the bright colors of the cover.

He must have gotten through five pages before he noticed me.

“Hey,” Zenigata greeted, perking up from his reading when he suddenly noticed I was looking at him. It seemed to be some sort of handy man’s magazine, I realized dully. “You here?” he asked, standing up halfway to inspect my faraway look at nothing.

I took a deep breath, and then remembered why I didn’t want to do that: it prickled pain everywhere, though it was lessened compared to before. Marti’s drug line must have done the trick, though it was probably why I was having trouble waking up and staying focused, too.

I looked around the room with my eyes, trying to force them to sharpen, and then finally turned to Zenigata. On the pillow, my head flopped like a fish. “Hey,” I replied. And then: “Yes.”

My voice was soft and rasping with disuse. I licked my lips, and swallowed hard. My throat still felt like sandpaper, and so did my insides, really.

“How are you feeling?” the Inspector asked, taking my hand and holding it. It was nicely warm, and it eased the pain of the gesture a little bit. Marti, now aware of my consciousness too, momentarily peeked up from her magazine as well—only to hide behind it, when she saw him and me talking.

That was what counted for privacy, I guess, when you couldn’t have a curtain. Oh well. I’d had worse. Like third-world cells full of murderers worse.

“Like shit. Can I get some of that?”

I pointed at the glass on top of the nearby machine, weakly.

“Ah.” Zenigata made quick work of helping me sit up and arranging some pillows to support me—though it wasn’t all that quick, in the end. I had to grip onto his arms pretty tightly, because my abs felt like they’d been hit by a truck, and there was absolutely a broken rib or two. This definitely felt like post-surgery pain, though why the hell would my chest be messed up? Did I actually fall off a flight of stairs or something?

After a shiver of pain and a couple of groans Zenigata was polite enough to pretend not to notice, the glass of water was delivered to my hands, and I quaffed down several gulps.

“Hey now, not too much, you’ll get sick....”

“What time is it?” I asked, after a sated ahhh that completely ignored him. He did have a point, though, so I gave him back the glass when it was still about half full.

As I muttered a brief thanks, Zenigata replaced it to its spot just out of my reach and then checked his watch. “About...one PM. On Christmas.”

I frowned at him, cloudy eyes narrowing as I did the math. It’d been...over a day? Hadn’t it been...6 AM on the day before Christmas?

*Where the hell did yesterday go?*
“Merry Christmas,” Zenigata added hopefully. It was a complicated look he gave me. Sad, hopeful, gentle, kind, worried...all mixed into one. Seemed he was afraid I’d reject the offer. But that was silly.

I’d planned on visiting him on Christmas after the heist anyway, but I hadn’t envisioned it like this. Definitely not like this.

And yet, like this, my welcome was far warmer than it would have been otherwise.

I took a breath, nodded with some effort, and dug deep to dredge up an honest smile through all the pain. It ended up looking like a grimace probably, but at least my voice was genuine. “Merry Christmas, Inspector,” I whispered back.

It honestly made me happy, to be able to say those words to him.

Though...Jigen was no doubt stewing. I’d owe him one, for leaving him alone on Christmas, when I’d promised him a lot more.

I took a few breaths and then glanced over at Marti. She was peaking over the magazine, but sitting up like this, I could only see her if I made an effort to look around the machines. “It’s okay Marti, you’re invited too.” When she looked up at me, I said, “Joyeux Noël, ma rougue agréable.”

She looked off, rolling her eyes abashedly, and by all appearances tried not to turn red. Somewhat surprisingly, she decided to hide behind the magazine once more. But then she said: “You too, Lupin-kun.”

A tiny smile pulled at my lips, and when I looked back at Zenigata, I found him looking at her too, fondness in his eyes.

Huh. Maybe what they had was the real deal. There was no way to fake that sparkle in your eyes. It made me wonder if he realized it, though.

But what was more, he was still holding my hand as he did it. The realization abruptly made me warm all over, far more warm than just his touch. It bloomed in my chest in a fury, and then moved over my face and arms.

This must have been...what having a mom and dad at Christmas was like.

Unexpectedly, Zenigata flicked his attention back down to me without a word—and that look of his continued, just a little more sad. He squeezed my hand.

“Sorry I don’t have a present for you,” I offered, not sure what to do with that look.

Zenigata shook his head slowly, a gentle reprimand. “You are present enough.”
I stared, trying not to acknowledge the emotional insecurity that threatened from Zenigata’s words, but eventually got myself out of it by swallowing hard. It hurt.

I looked over at Marti. She still had her head behind the pages—though I was pretty sure she was enjoying this.

Oh, well. There were worse things than spectators who were armed with only smiles. “Where’s Christof?” I asked, pulling my hand out of Zenigata’s.

He put his hands in his pockets easily as he tipped his head at the door. “Outside.”

“Ah.”

“And Kyle?”

He shrugged. “Sleeping somewhere.”

“Hmn.”

“Why do you ask?” he replied.

I suppose I might as well address the elephant in the room, now that the bare minimum of holiday greetings was done. My body sure hurt loudly enough to be worth a response, and after all this, my throat was dry again. I had an IV in my arm so I shouldn’t have been thirsty, but I was anyway. No doubt there was some sort of bruising in my throat, which meant only one of two things.

“...What happened?” I asked softly, reaching for the water again. My hands were shaking a little bit, for some reason.

Zenigata helped me keep from spilling it, then took it back when I was done. He hadn’t let me settle it in my lap, which I’d wanted—this was going to be a big production to get that entire glass down.

Still, it was odd—he was being rather amicable, but he wasn’t letting me keep hold of anything. Not unusual for a “dangerous prisoner,” but given that it was us? And he was staring right at me with nothing else to do but supervise, while I barely had the energy to stay awake?... Something had to have happened. Or someone else had showed up, and he was being forced to follow protocol to the T.

Made me wonder if there wasn’t an extra reason Marti was sitting there, supervising this visit.

It made me remember that I didn’t actually know much about her. Everything she told me could have been lies, all just an elaborate trick to get my guard down, and us alone.

But then again, she’d probably had ample time to injure me when I was unconscious, so there probably wasn’t anything to worry about.

At least, for her and me.
When he’d settled the glass back on the stand, Zenigata took a breath and folded his arms. His lips pursed, and for a while, he just looked down at me. He didn’t look as tired, physically, as I last remembered him, but there was something worn down about him. “You rolled a one and got smashed,” he said finally.

I frowned at him like he was stupid. Which probably wasn’t very nice, but what else was I supposed to do with that answer? “What was I rolling for?”

“...A sanity check? I guess?”

“But why...would I need a sanity check? What was I doing that made me go insane?”

“Taking a nap?”

“Why would you need a sanity check to wake up from a nap?”

“You were having a nightmare?” Zenigata offered.

“But what was I having a nightmare about?”

“You tell me.”

I just stared at him, boggled and exasperated. “Back up. Let’s try this again in real world terms,” I said, waving a hand, and then pressing on my head. It hurt, trying to unscramble all of this. “What happened? Did you shoot me?”

“No. Why are you always worried about that? Does that honestly keep you up at night?”

“...Doesn’t it keep you up at night?”

We stared at each other, then both looked away awkwardly, at the same time. “Don’t you trust me to keep my word when you keep yours?” he asked.

I sighed. “No,” he muttered. “You’re a cop.” And then, more quietly, I added: “Cops don’t keep their promises.”

“And thieves do?” he snapped back. Though it was a mild bite, he hadn’t even remotely bothered trying to match my semi-shamed tone.

I glared at him, suddenly full of energy for petulance, then turned away. Still, I raised my palm in his direction. It seemed oddly hard, like I didn’t have enough blood to move all the gears. “This. Is exactly why I worry about it,” I said, referring to his righteous lashing.

Zenigata huffed. I sighed, frustrated.

I looked up into his eyes, challenging. But what I saw was just annoyance, disappointment. His jaw tightened; he was grumbling something self-righteous to himself, in there. Something like Thanks for nothing.

I just knew it.

Well, two could play that game.

“Regardless of why you think most cops are untrustworthy, what makes you think I’m like most cops?” he ground out finally, rubbing the bridge of his nose.
I took a breath, and then stared at the wall. “My dad was a cop,” I shot back, point-blank.

“Wait...what?” Zenigata asked.

I glared back at him, shoulders hunched. What, did you honestly not know that? “Why d’you think he went to America? He was a crooked cop that got ousted.” I motioned at Zenigata. “Why d’you think he let you in his org in France with a backstory like you had? Did you seriously never talk about that, ever? Bond over it? And anyway, wasn’t in your dossier before taking the job?”

Instead of responding to me, Zenigata tried to soosh me, looking over at Marti worriedly.

...Oh. Right. Fuck.

Still, she was hiding behind her reading materials. Even though they weren’t in front of her face anymore, but in her lap, she by all means appeared to be ignoring us. I didn’t believe it for a second but, well...whatever. Too late now.

If I was certain of anything at this exact moment, it was that she could handle it.

“Anyway, ’s why him and gramps split, far as gramps tells it. Grandpop didn’t want anything to do with him, because Dad thought being a crooked lawman was more profitable than being an honest thief.”

Zenigata just stared me like the world was spinning, then shook his head and put his forehead in his hands, sighing grievously. “Well that explains some things.”

That doesn’t explain half of it, but go ahead and think that bread crumb’s the whole slice.

“I don’t...look. Just forget about it; I’m just annoyed right now. I’m in pain and was dreaming about Dad. Leave me alone.”

“Your...dad?”

“Anyway,” I continued, a little apologetically, “you shooting me would make us both sad, and the only friend you have is alcohol.”

Zenigata’s response was to look concerned, but then switch into grinding his teeth again once his mind caught up with the back half of my sentence. I looked away and smirked.

“Well, and maybe Marti, I guess. But she doesn’t deserve that.”

Green eyes peeked over the magazine. I winked at her, and she disappeared again.

Satisfied, I settled into the pillows, and eventually Zenigata sighed. “However kind that sentiment is,” he ground out, hand on his hip, “it’s wrong. I didn’t shoot you; no one did, and my only friend is not alcohol.”

Notably, he didn’t counter this with “I have plenty of friends.”

“Now...” he continued, pulling over a stool that sat at the end of the bed and sitting in it at my beside as I smiled to myself, feigning leisure. “If you can stop being prickly for a second, let’s back up a little more. What’s the last thing you remember?”

He picked up my hand, and held it between his.

Oh, the Cop Voice. We were down to business, then. And yet...
I looked down at my hand, blankly.

Zенигата looked at it too, then at me. But I refused to look anywhere but his hands. After a second of that, he coughed and pulled his hands away politely, and rubbed them on his trouser legs.

Something serious must have happened if he was getting all touchy-feely on me. But why wouldn’t he just *tell* me?

I took my hand back into my lap and flexed it, rubbing both together. It probably looked like I was trying to get the feeling off, and maybe I was, but mostly I was trying to warm them up. I felt chilled, but also with my forehead hot, the way you did when you had a fever. Maybe that’s what some of the aching was. Even half-comatose as I was, “sleeping it off” must not have been working that well.

“Lupin?”

“Ah?”

“The last thing you remember, what is it?”

“Oh...um.” I closed my eyes, trying to focus. I remembered snippets of him, and me in what must have been lying here. So before that.... Chatting. Definitely chatting. Being hungry.... Joking.... Marti’s dress and shoes.... The basement....

Ah. The basement. The CT Scan.

“Sleeping,” I announced finally. “I was in the Cat Scan.” I drew my head back up and looked at him. “Did I fall asleep?” I thought I’d fallen asleep.

In fact...I’d been dreaming about my mother. Or maybe my father? I kind of had slices of both floating around in my head, before I started talking to him just now, I thought.

For just a moment, the image of bars, and falling snow, flashed before my eyes.

That’s right...the snow. I’d been dreaming about that snowy cage....

I rubbed my arms, suddenly cold.

“Well...yes. And no.”

Startled out of my memories, I frowned at the Inspector. I wanted to practically scream *make sense already*, but when I took a breath, all my strength was zapped out of me. My ribs were stabbing me in such a way that each time I tried to breathe enough to make a full sentence, pain bloomed to life, sharp and quick, and my head swam. Just lying propped up like this was doing a number on me, too. God, had I gotten hit by a truck? This was ridiculous. I’d fallen off *buildings* and hurt less than this.

*Buildings*....

That was right: the building explosion. *Shit*. I still had that to deal with, too. It’d only been a day and a half; I doubted that had resolved itself much. And it was probably going to come after me soon, too. *Fuck*. If I stayed here much longer, I’d be forced to tell him at least something to keep us safe; there was no doubt in my mind they wouldn’t come after him, too, to get to me.

Perhaps the scowl that came on the heels of that thought got to the Inspector, because he amended,
“You did fall asleep, I presume. It’s when you woke up that was the problem.”

But I only frowned at that, too, demanding answers. “What do you mean?”

Zenigata took a breath, sighed, then nodded to himself once in the process of turning around. He swivelled on the stool and pointed behind him.

I followed the line of his arm to the wall—where his trenchcoat was hanging.

It was covered in dried blood from the waist down, the typical French Grey now rust brown.

“Good God,” I whispered, before I could stop myself. “Whose blood is that?”

I hadn’t noticed it before—I’d thought it was just a shadow—but no, it really and truly was half covered in dried blood.

Something had happened. Something had definitely happened.

“Yours,” he said, not mincing words. He turned back to me. “And Marti’s.”

“Mine?” I asked, and then the blood draining out of my face. I clutched at his wrist with my hand and turned to Marti. “Marti are you all right? Tell me you’re okay...”

Maybe that was why she just kept sitting there—?

But wait, no. She’d come over to me, but... Had she been limping? I couldn’t recall—

Zenigata looked at where I held him in a deathgrip, and then at me. Now you want to touch me, was the look on his face.

“Yes, she’s fine,” he said, almost droll. “Aren’t you, Officer Martelli?”

“Yup.” She turned a page, not even bothering to look up. “Got a couple stitches though.” She held up her forearm in front of the magazine, and there was indeed white gauze over it.

I frowned at that, alarmed, but apparently deciding calm was the best approach, Zenigata slowly plucked off my hands from his person. “Everything’s under control; don’t wig out.”

Forced to let go of him, I sat there for a minute in my pillow pile, breathing hard. Damn, my chest hurt. And so did my heart. Its beating felt very hard, like it did when I was sick. “How are you so calm about this?” I asked, strained, pressing my hand into my chest.

And furthermore, what the hell had happened? Somebody must have shot me. Somebody.

“Because I know you didn’t mean it,” he said sagely.

“Me...?” I asked, eyes widening in disbelief. “You mean to tell me I did this? To myself? How? Why?” And furthermore, why would I hurt Marti?

Unless she’d finally shown her true colors....

But no, that was dumb; she wouldn’t be sitting there like nothing was wrong, if that were the case. And I wouldn’t just slash at her like some loser from Grandpop’s day, what the fuck.

“You tell me,” he said, shrugging. But the look he gave me afterward wasn’t cold. It was a slightly side-eyed concern. “You got Christof too, actually. Bit him.”
“I bit him?!” I hissed. “I haven’t bitten someone since second grade!” Except for the occasional time when I was tied up and needed to in order to get away, but that was beside the point.

Zenigata gave me a dubious look, though one that wasn’t all that surprised. “I see.”

Though...

A chill went through my spine, and I went very still for a moment as I stared at Zenigata.

This was starting to sound like...

Oh. Oh, no.

I’d had an attack, hadn’t I?

*Shit.* I quickly stared at the space between my legs, trying to piece it together, trying to figure out what I’d done and why...trying to keep Zenigata from realizing I’d caught onto something.

But as usual, there was nothing. Just a jumbled assortment of dreams and visions, and then...nothing. Nothing that would have caused hellacious bloodspray, nothing about biting and slashing and—where had I even gotten a weapon?

“Tell me what happened,” I grumbled, crossing my arms in a huff, only to groan in pain and realize, very quickly, why touching my ribs emphatically was a horrible, horrible idea.

In the end, I groaned a few times, batted Zenigata off from helping, and then stared at my lap in annoyance. I was stuck in this room with no one but them, and no memory of how I’d gotten here. There was more than a slight chance that this was a trick. But what would be the benefit of it? Make me scared of myself so I would be complacent? But Zenigata wouldn’t do that to me. Especially not when we were in the middle of something important. And anyway, when would I have fallen unconscious for him to trick me, anyway?

I looked at the wall. That definitely was his coat. He wouldn’t sacrifice that beloved thing to a prank, unless something else had already devastated it. But what the hell would that have been?

I was quickly starting to hope for another explosion to explain this.

Zenigata sighed again and folded his arms. He leaned back in his seat a bit, rocking slightly.

“Something missing?”

For a strangled second I thought he meant my leg, but a quick check revealed, once more, that both feet were definitely there. After that initial panic that he probably enjoyed watching, I unfolded, and followed his gaze. I laid my hand over the wound on my leg, lightly, and ran a finger over where the rod was supposed to be.

Where it *had been*, apparently.

“You removed it?” I asked, turning to him. But...badly? Perhaps?

He shook his head. “You did.”

My frown deepened, and the question was writ clear on my features, while cold simultaneously settled into my gut.

“You ripped it out yourself,” he finished.
My eyes widened; I scanned the wound, albeit covered by blankets, and then the Inspector. I looked at Marti too, and though she was looking at me now, there wasn’t good news on her face. “Why would I do that? How could I even do that?” I asked, panic rising in me.

Zenigata raised his eyebrows with some unsaid sassy thought, but eventually glanced away and offered, “Something scared you. Really badly.”

“What?” I hissed. I drew back at that, in disbelief. I stared at my lap, into my thoughts, set on the path of searching for it like a bloodhound. Marti, and Christof. The food, the marriage jokes. The basement waiting. Zenigata coming back.... Telling Christof about the train wreck—oh shit, I’d really done that, hadn’t I? Ugh, dammit self, you’re so sappy when you’re dead tired....

But what was it? What was it that set you off this time, self?

As I muttered the different possibilities to myself, occasionally pulling at my hair, Zenigata waited patiently. It took me a while to even remember he was there—which he reminded me of, by reaching out and covering my hand with his.

“There was a man downstairs,” he said, cutting off my train of thought. “One who looks like your grandfather.”

I stared at his hand, then at his face—and even though his touch was warm, a chill shot through me.

“What?”

* * *

Lupin frowned, but didn’t do anything more than that, which was no insignificant blessing. So I let him go, sat up, and rubbed my hands on my legs. After a long breath I said, in my best professional voice, “Lupin, I need to ask you something.”

Lupin, getting control over his breathing enough to stare me down with an intensity like I was about to tell him the world was ending—which, it may well have been for him—nodded silently, an assent.

“Please tell me the truth. Did your grandfather abuse you?”

Lupin instantly frowned, deeply. It was like flicking a switch. “What?”

But I wasn’t about to let it go. I dropped my voice to a gentle tone, trying a slightly different approach to tickle the lock open. The last thing I wanted to do was get his defensive hackles up, so if professionalism wasn’t going to work, maybe sympathy would.

And while Marti and I had discussed how to bring it up while he’d been under, there was really no way around this. So I decided to be direct. “Did your grandfather ever molest you?”

“What?” Lupin repeated, but with heat this time—more energy than he’d had this entire conversation. Which wasn’t exactly what I wanted, but it was, honestly, about what I’d expected. He scrunched his eyes shut—and his nose up. “What? No! Never. He had a taste for the ladies, but —No! Hell, what would make you ask such a thing? Ugh.” His voice got quicker and higher as he spoke, and eventually he just shut himself down, shuddering.

I narrowed my eyes. It seemed like a genuine reaction, but...you never could quite tell with Lupin. He could have prepared this years ago. “You’re sure.”
You’re sure that’s the answer you want to go with? was what I was really saying, and given my tone, he knew it.

Lupin glared back at me, searchingly, just as I was at him. I swear, sometimes dealing with him was like interrogating a mirror. “I’m very sure. Trust me, I would remember that.”

Really? I raised an eyebrow. Maybe that’s what you’re blocking out, huh?

I glanced at Marti. She was peering at Lupin, but nodded at me. Apparently she had nothing else to add.

In the end, after glaring at Lupin and Lupin protesting with his indignant, wheezing breaths, I amended, “You don’t have to hide it from me. Like I told you, I’m here to fix things, no matter how cold the case is.”

Lupin opened his mouth, then shut it, apparently swallowing whatever he was going to say. That probably wasn’t as good of a sign as it appeared to be.

“So tell me the truth,” I insisted.

Lupin took a long, long time to stare at me, directly in the eyes. But like always, I won that game. I just hoped he’d found whatever he was looking for there.

My little thief shook his head, looking off. More carefully this time, he folded his arms and then clenched his jaw for good measure. “He didn’t, no.”

“But someone did,” I pressed, chasing that look that refused to make eye contact.

“How is that relevant?” Lupin snapped, whipping his head back around to glare at me.

But this was not the time to let up; I leaned in, and the pointed at the door. “There is a man downstairs who looks like your grandfather. You fell asleep in the Cat Scan and when you woke up, you saw him. And then you did that.” I pointed to my coat, which was in here for this very reason. “You tried to kill him, you tried to kill me, you attacked Marti and Christof and you almost killed yourself. Lupin, if there hadn’t been two trained EMTs next to you and a team of surgeons two floors up, you would be dead right now. I can’t stress that enough: I alone would not have been able to save you.”

I let that sit, then slowly curled my pointer finger back into the rest of my fist, which I set on my leg, gripping it tightly. “That’s why it’s relevant.”

I wasn’t sure it’d been enough. But it was the truth. It was all I had, at this point. That, and begging, which I refused to do. It wouldn’t help.

Slowly, Lupin took his eyes off the coat, off Marti, and then looked at me once more. He was visibly shaken—his blue eyes were worried, and his posture had loosened a bit, scared. He swallowed hard, and then rasped, “You’re not lying to me? Even a little?”

I shook my head, never blinking.

The young man nodded, then stared at his lap, apparently cowed.

“So please, tell me,” I whispered, all the caring I had for him bleeding into my voice, professional though it was not. “What set you off?”
“I...” Lupin looked down.

“You’re having violent flashbacks to something, but what? Is it something that happened since I met you? I don’t remember you having this problem back in Paris...?”

Lupin squeezed his eyes shut, and shook his head.

“It’s older than that.” He put his head against his hand, grinding the heel of his palm against his brow line, as if he had a sudden headache. “But seeing dad get shot, it rattled something loose....”

When he got shot? Oh....

That wasn’t good. I’d been there, well enough to know that that was definitely not something helpful to bring up to keep him calm—

Suddenly, Lupin hissed. By the time I came back to my senses, he was bending, swaying into his head pain. Both hands had come up to his head, pressing against it tightly. So tightly that—

_Holy shit._

Under his hands, his nose had started to bleed.

He moaned, high pitched, and his mouth fell open, a shiver of pain as both palms were grinding into his forehead.

And then he started clawing at his scalp, eyes tightly shut.

“Lupin, hey, hey take it easy...”

I jumped up and pulled Lupin’s forearm, trying to get it away from his head. But it was stuck like glue; his muscles were as tense as a cadaver’s. “Hey, stop it, calm down—”

Marti was on her feet now too, but there wasn’t room for her to sandwich in between me and the machine. Towering over Lupin, I held his arm in one hand and then dug my other hand underneath his, until I finally pried it free. After that, I grabbed his other arm too, just for good measure.

Revealed underneath me was Lupin, staring up at the ceiling, face red, eyes blank, blood running from his nose and tears streaming down his cheeks.

_Holy shit._ Marti went for the tissues, while both of us cursed under our breaths. “I thought I was done seeing blood on you, god damn.”

“Is he having another attack?” Marti asked, coming around to the far side of the bed.

Lupin suddenly went slack, and then wrenched out of my grip as soon as I let up the smallest amount. It was a deft maneuver on his part—followed by the simplest one in the book: curling up into a ball and shivering. Minus the one leg, which was left to lay out.

“I’m fine,” he muttered.

He did not look fine.

“Lupin.”

“What?” he muttered, from that ball.
“What’s my name?”

“Asshole.”

I looked at Marti. She shrugged, placatingly.

“I’m being serious.”

“So am I.”

I stared at the ceiling. *So much for a “Merry Christmas.”*

“What he means is,” Marti interjected, “Are you here?”

“Yes I’m here,” he mumbled. “Where else would I be? I’m not crazy you guys, I’m just tired.”

*Those two things seem to go hand in hand lately,* I mourned.

But as I counted to ten, Lupin held out his right hand—at Marti. He didn’t uncurl any other part of himself, though.

Marti looked at that, and then said, “Oh!”

She put the tissues in his hand. He quickly pulled them into the ball, and wiped his nose with it.

After a few seconds, Marti looked at me for orders. It seemed he was at least in this dimension, so I nodded at her. She backed off, going to the foot of the bed.

“Sorry, I...” Lupin muttered, taking a breath and loosening his ball a bit. “It’s pathetic, I know.”

“That’s not the problem,” I demanded, voice rising from coming off the adrenaline. “What the hell *was* that?”

But Lupin, to his credit, didn’t get mad, nor go into another episode within his ball. He only shook his head against his knees, pressing his forehead against bone at the spot that had been hurting him before. “It’s psychological. There’s something...I’ve forgotten. Something... Important,” he said, sounding distant, distracted. And a little bit childlike, his voice was so small.

But before I could press him on it, he sighed and said, “Just get me out of here, and it won’t be a problem. We’re still in *that place,* right?” He peeked out from under his arm, the one eye I could see pained and hopeful. His blue eye gazed at me, then around the room.

“Yes, we’re still there,” I said, though I could tell from the miserable, tense look on Lupin’s face that he realized it too.

“Shit,” Lupin groaned.

At least he was back to normal, I guess?

“Lupin, I’d love to transfer you, but I can’t. We’re snowed-in still, and anyway the commissioner in this town is pressing me pretty hard, so we’d have to get creative about it anyway. And while I’d be happy to whisk you away, I can’t have anyone but a med team transport you with your leg the way it is. You could spring a leak and be dead in five minutes in the back of my patrol car.

“...Which could still happen on this bed, I might add, so take it easy okay? It scares me every time you move.”
Lupin took a breath and sighed, heavily. His eyes shut, aggrieved. “What exactly’s up with my leg?”

“An important vein near your bone was nearly severed when the rod was pulled out,” Marti said, smoothly, clinically—and with a little bit omitted, I noticed. “They put a shunt in your leg. Until the cells grow back around it, the only thing between you and death is a few stitches and a lot of antibiotics. Not to mention the damage the rod did in the first place.”

“Mother fucker,” he muttered hoarsely. “Can I even walk?”

“I don’t know,” she replied honestly.

“Lupin,” I whispered, interrupting them before he could go from defeated to angry out about that. I reached out and laid my hand on his good thigh to redirect his attention. “Please tell me what’s going on.” He watched me carefully as I sat on the bed. “You’re not going anywhere for a long time. And frankly, neither am I.”

Lupin’s eyes widened, and then got a very hurt, vulnerable look in them.

“I’m staying here to protect you, however long it takes, so it’ll be easier on everyone if you just tell me what I need to know now, so that I can do my job.”

I pleaded with my eyes. My tone was the gentle side of businesslike; there were no lies in it, either, and I thought—hoped—that Lupin could see that.

Hoped that it would be enough, to unlock the safe that was his broken heart.

“Please?” I asked. He stared at me, vulnerably, tears welling in his eyes, but I wasn’t sure why. When the silence stretched on, I drew a thumb over his nearer cheek, drawing away the tears. “I don’t want the next time to be the time that kills you. Don’t make me have to watch that.

Please don’t make me lose another little brother.

Lupin blinked a few times, still staring at me, and then suddenly broke away to rub at his eyes. But even as he turned away, he nodded—like a normal human being would do. I sat back silently, taking my hand away.

“I get it. I do. But can you... give me a minute?” Lupin asked, wiping at his eyes with the dry part of the tissues that carried his blood. “I...I don’t remember it all, so I...need a minute to get it all together in a way that’ll make sense.” He was crying openly now, but denying it, other than just wiping at his eyes, which was more of a mechanical gesture than anything. “I... See? Just thinking about it makes this happen.... Dammit....”

I frowned, concerned, and looked at Marti. She shrugged though, helpless, and eventually, I nodded at Lupin’s question. With effort, I got up and rummaged in my pockets. “Would you rather be alone to compose yourself?”

Lupin was quiet, but soon nodded. He wouldn’t look at me. At either of us. He just sat there, head downcast and expression hidden.

“All right. I’ll give you a few minutes.” I produced my kerchief, and handed it to him.

Lupin exchanged the tissues for it with a muttered “thanks,” and quickly hid his face in the cloth.

Not even Satoru had given me a moment like this. But maybe that was why this would be the one
that succeeded, after all these years.

I lingered for a moment, watching him, considering it all—then patted him on the shoulder.

“I’m glad you’re back,” I whispered. “Take it easy, okay? I’ll be back soon, and then we can get this all worked out.”

When I left, I took Marti and the glass with me. I didn’t feel good leaving Lupin alone, but maybe, finally, he knew he couldn’t run from this anymore.

I hoped he knew that he didn’t have to.
“So it wasn’t his grandfather?” I asked, shoving my hands in my pockets as I closed the door. Christof, sitting in the chair beside the door guarding it, looked up at me, and I nodded at him curtly. He nodded back as I gave him the empty drinking glass, then put it under the chair with my laptop. He went back to watching the hallway, bored.

“Guess not,” Marti said from beside me, giving the door a concerned gaze. “If you believe him, anyway.”

“Hard to say,” I admitted, jerking my head down the hall. “Didn’t seem like he was lying, but it’s always hard to tell with him.”

—“He didn’t, no.”—

“Though he all but admitted it was somebody,” I continued, as Marti and I went down the hallway, out of earshot of Christof. I could feel the lines in my face deepening, the scowl coming over my face as I glared down the empty hallway at the potted plants like shooting targets.

Arsene was the next best candidate of course, but that would have happened when he was an adult, since they hadn’t known each other before then, at least to my knowledge.

An adult trauma from Arsene wasn’t impossible, but it didn’t really fit. He’d said the memories had gotten unlocked, as it were, after he’d watched Arsene get shot, which happened at the end of our time together in Arsene’s syndicate—just freshly six years ago, as of a couple days from now. So...it wouldn’t make sense for it to be Lupin’s father. So an uncle I didn’t know about, maybe? Or some random person who looked similar?

Or just...Donatello?
But again, that was when he was an adult. Plus, he and the doctor didn’t look anything alike.

Still....

—“You’re honestly the first cop to turn me down, dress or no.”—

“Last time I saw him, he actually broke down and propositioned me,” I admitted, mulling over the different memories. “And he all but admitted that he’d given sexual favors to cops then, so...maybe...a cop at some point?”

Marti was nodding along, and then suddenly stopped in her tracks.

“He did what to you? On that cruise ship? Was he joking? He must have been joking, right?”

“Ah...” My mouth fell open, and I made the mistake of looking at her, hands flexing in my pockets. I didn’t have my coat anymore, so I couldn’t really hide behind it. “Um...no.”

I was clearly in trouble, from the look on her face.

Though that intent frown soon transformed into a devilish grin. It gave me chills just watching it.

“You gotta tell me about this,” she said, eyes flashing.

“I’d rather not,” I muttered, hoping in vain that something else would take precedence before she could put her foot down—and my face could get so red that she’d see. It was getting pretty damn warm all of a sudden.

“Oh, no. Not so fast. That seems pretty damn important for understanding how he feels about you. You’re sure he wasn’t joking?”

“I’m...sure,” I said, unfortunately. “But...um, want to get something to eat?”

“Oh...well sure, I guess. If you think we can leave Lupin for that long?”

I shrugged. “He’s got Christof and he can’t walk. What could he possibly get up to? He’ll be fine...I think.”

...I hope.

“Anyway, won’t take more than twenty minutes. It’s a short story. It’ll be fine.”

* * *

Guard duty was probably the most boring thing I’d ever done. How did the guys at Buckingham Palace do this all day?

Needless to say, it wasn’t an assignment I’d be signing up for again any time soon, good money or not. Supposedly, you weren’t allowed to be distracted in any way, which meant no reading. But there wasn’t anything I would deign to read around here, anyway. Marti’s book was a bodice ripper, and Kyle’s was the driest autobiography I’d ever seen. The periodicals weren’t much better: women’s magazines, military magazines, housewares. No newspapers (apparently too incendiary for the patients here). Even the dirty mag slipped in among the pile with rather suspect writings on it was a gay mag.
Sigh.

Over the past day, our tiny Interpol team, buttressed by Christina and Nadia—and, when Lupin was fully sedated, the old doctor—had been taking care of Lupin. He’d developed a godawful fever that’d stressed Zenigata the hell out, which Marti had had to deal with. I just packed tubs and tubs of ice. But eventually, the fever had gone down, the swelling of the injury had gone down, and the docs had sewn up Lupin’s leg. Not long after, the fever broke completely, and now he was awake again, I guess. Joy.

Though, seeing Zenigata come out of the recovery room stifling tears had been something else. But I guess me seeing that was why he continued to fail to acknowledge my presence beyond a grunt and a nod at any given time.

Well, maybe he thinks you don’t need help. That’s how it goes with the kid that doesn’t have cancer, right?

I blew my bangs out of my eyes and dug my wallet out of my back pocket. I flipped it open to the picture of Aimeé and sighed.

Her sweet smile, and plucky artist’s glasses... The hair that was never quite in the right place because she spent so much time welding or sanding or painting....

“Sorry babe,” I muttered, drawing a finger over it. “Soon, yeah? I’ll make it up to you....”

Man, this kind of crap was why I didn’t become a cop. Being an artist, there were days when Aimeé just wouldn’t surface from her workshop until 8 PM except for food, which had worked well when it syncd up with my firehouse stints. But nowadays, I was used to being around. Investigation had more standard hours, aside from the occasional time that I was called to a scene. I’d gotten accustomed to cooking dinner for us; to her healthy smile and healthier lunches; to having her in my arms at night. I liked to think that she’d gotten accustomed to it, too.

But the beds here were really, really hard. And cold. I had half a mind to ask Marti if she needed me as a blanket. I definitely needed another body to keep warm; I couldn’t imagine that she was getting any sleep, freezing her ass off.

I sighed and put my wallet back. I didn’t think she and Zenigata had managed to sleep a single shift together yet, despite the schedule synching up. That was how high-maintenance dealing with Lupin was, and how devoted to the cause the Inspector was. He’d hardly left Lupin’s side the entire time.

But would Zenigata finally paying some attention to Telli actually make me feel better, or worse...?

I narrowed my eyes, chin in my hand.

Better, then worse. Yeah, that’s probably it. Whereas this bullshit of his is just all “worse.”

I wish Telli could realize that this guy thought his job was more important than her, and she deserved better than that.

Letting out a long breath through my nose, I gazed at the white door, closed behind me. There were no sounds from inside.

Maybe there was a way to use Lupin to split them up...? If he was high and addled still, I could slip him some lie of what one said about the other. Hell, he didn’t have to be out of it for that; there were ways to do it when he was fully conscious. But he and Zenigata were both rather shrewd; it would have to be something that, if it got back to me, the damage would have already been done.
and be unsalvageable.

But then my relationship with Telli would be gone.... Hrm. A more gentle touch was needed, then.

*So maybe I can convince Lupin onto my side somehow, get him to bare the standard for a while. He could probably be slicker about it, because Zenigata trusts him.*

...For whatever reason. I still wasn’t sure about that fact. They had a history, it seemed. A history that made me worry about Telli’s career, if she got too close to them. So....

*The best way to do that would be to make Lupin jealous of the two of them, yeah?...*

As I was mulling this over, there came the sound of clicking heels. I straightened up, hands on my knees, and turned to the source of the noise. When I saw who it was, I stood up.

“Oh, hi! Haven’t seen you in a while.”

It was Angela.

“Hi hi,” she said, waving a hand. “I’ve got the patient’s meds, mind if I deliver them?”

“Oh. Oh! Sure, sure. Here.” I twisted the knob open, and stepped aside for her.

“Thanks,” she said, smiling shortly and heading in. Oh, how her short brown hair, close cropped against her head, reminded me of Aimeé, a bit. And those boots....

“Oh, but! First. Could I take a look at what you’ve got?”

“Hm?” She asked, clipboard against her chest and hanging on the doorknob. “How come?”

“Just procedure,” I said, holding out my hand.

She blinked a couple times, sent a quick look in the room, then straightened up and closed the door softly. She laid her clipboard flat and set two little vials on top of it, dug out from her pockets.

They were clear, and, picking them up, were labeled—

“Morphine,” she announced, perkily. “He’s gonna start getting cranky if he doesn’t get more.”

“He sure has been that,” I muttered slowly, looking over the vials. They didn’t appear to be tampered with: Labels affixed, caps tight, contents full. “All right, thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” She smiled, and tapped me on the forehead with the clipboard. “Thanks, Officer Christof.”

“Oh, I’m not an—”

But she’d already shut the door behind her.

...Oh well.

I sat back down and waited for her return. It would only take a five minutes to check on him and deliver the meds. I’d stop her on the way back out; it’d be nice to have someone to talk to for a while.

The door indeed opened only a couple of minutes later. In fact, it seemed a little too quick to have
done everything.

But Angela practically ran out of the room. When I tried to intercept her, her coat swished right out of my hand.

“Hey, wait,” I said, half-standing.

“I forgot something!” she called, hurrying down the hall. She was half-turned and practically walking backward, waving a hand. “I’ll be right back!”

“O-okay....” I muttered, sitting back down. Strange....

But she didn’t even have her clipboard with her, so it was probably just as she said it was.

***

As it turned out, there was a cafeteria connected to the building via an underground passageway. It was in the next building over on campus, across the lawn. We told Nadia, sitting at the front desk, where we were headed to, and then off we went.

Not that we needed to go underground. The military boys left on the base had spent the morning digging tunnels through the snow for something to do—alongside combat-style snowball fights.

The boys hadn’t dug out the half a mile of driveway to the base’s entrance, but there was hope for that by midnight, Zenigata told me.

It was looking like we might actually get out of here alive and whole. Maybe not in time for Christmas, but I’d take what I could get, at this point. Zeni’s present was still in the trunk of my car, but it’d keep. I wanted to wait until things quieted down to give it to him.

We went through the cafeteria line—which was on a pre-packaged menu at the moment—and got sandwiches and drinks. We took a table in a corner by some windows, and enjoyed the solstice sun, snowballs flying by outside.

I picked up the sandwich, just a typical gouda and sausage with a side salad, and went about unwrapping it as I watched the goings-on outside. Seemed there were several teams out, denoted by armband color, each one more energetic than the last.

I’d enjoyed watching the boys at play yesterday, when I wasn’t watching Lupin. There was something nice to be said about seeing young people have fun.

I didn’t know when I’d gotten that old, but I suppose motherly instincts did that to you.

Though it did make me miss my boy, a little bit.

“So tell me about this cruise ship thing,” I said, uncorking the salad and swirling on the dressing from a bottle on the table. “Sounds like a veritable floating love nest.”

Zenigata, naturally, twitched at the idea. “God, it was nothing like that. Not that he didn’t try.”

He was in the middle of neatly folding his sandwich’s Saran wrap into a square that was more like a cube, it was so tightly packed.

It made me feel ridiculously inferior. But there was an efficient way to deal with that: I smoothly pushed mine over to him, and, not even noticing what I’d done, he started folding that one, too.
It was only after he got done and looked around at the rest of his food that he wondered where it’d come from.

“Hec,” I said, in answer to that confused look at his dishes.

When Zenigata looked up at me and realized what I’d done, he sighed, chagrined. “Sorry....”

“No no, it’s fine. I like it.” I put my chin in my hand and smiled. His residual Japanese mannerisms were as cute as they were pleasant. There were certainly worse things than a careful, considerate, and efficient man.

“...What?” he asked, pausing when he saw the dreamy look come over my face.

“Nothing,” I said, eyes glittering probably a little more than they were supposed to. “I just like you.”

“Hah...” He scratched at his stubble, which was two days old at this point, then smiled just a bit. “You flatter me, Marti.”

“You give me lots of reason to.”

He broke the cycle of compliments by simply looking at me then, his soft brown eyes fond as he bit down on a smile.

I wished I could have kissed him, just a peck on the lips or nose. But we were in public, for one, and work for another, neither of which he’d approve of. Not that that ever stopped us entirely, but at the moment he was too far across the table. My lips would never reach.

Still, the afternoon winter light was quite nice, streaming in through the picture windows.

“So tell me about this incident,” I said, sitting back and taking up my sandwich.

“Mm.” He nodded, chewed down a bite, then proceeded to recite a very intriguing tale to me.

It was short, like he’d said. But...

I whistled down at my half-eaten sandwich. “Wow. That’s...something else. And in drag the whole time, no less? That’s downright fantastic.”

Zeni eyed me, a dark quasi-smirk that was mostly just embarrassed and trying to hide it. “Jealous?” he said, mostly as deflection, and then proceeded to hide behind his mug of tea.

“Psh,” I scoffed. “I wish I could do drag half that well—not just the costuming, but the performance aspect of it. He must honestly have talent for it.” I shook my head. “Still, that’s downright fantastic.”

Zeni sputtered at this, understandably. “What are you talking about? He was miserable!” he sputtered, wiping the remnants of some highly misfortunate tea from his mouth.

“Oh no, if it’s as you say it was, he was definitely miserable at rejection, but quite a go-getter otherwise. He gave me a run for my money, hahaha!”

“Marti...please,” Zeni lamented. He put his head in his hand and rubbed his forehead.

“Okay, okay.... What do you want to know?”
“Why in the world did he do it?”

“Well, I’ll have to ask him, honestly,” I said, shrugging. “But I sounds like, he just doesn’t get what you want from him, and he was wondering if that was it.”

“Why would he think I would want that?”

“You haven’t actually told him what you want, have you? Ever?”

Zenigata’s mouth opened to protest, but then he shut it, jaw clenching tightly. “I...have,” he said tightly, looking off. “But not...maybe in so many words. More like...yelling at him to straighten up from across a room.”

“Ah. So you need a sit-down, huh?”

Zenigata didn’t respond to this other than to glower at his plate, sandwich and all. Well...I shouldn’t push it, then, if he was feeling inadequate and guilty.

“I’m sure it wasn’t anything personal, if it’s taken him this long to bother hitting on you. I mean, he could have been messing with you a little too, like you said. I don’t think it’s a comment on your masculinity, by any means.”

“No, I’m not worried about that,” Zenigata replied, still looking at his plate with a deep crease in his brow. “I’m worried that it means that that’s all he expects from cops.”

I shrugged. “I’ll ask him about it—but, ah, not specifically of course,” I added, when Zenigata looked up at me sharply. “It’s certainly possible”—and it was sad if it was—“but you gotta remember, he’s in the”—here, I lowered my voice—“gay community, right? So he’s probably used to dominance stuff like that.”

Zeni stared at me like I’d grown a second head.

I flashed him a cheesy grin and slapped my hand down on the table. “Hey, good news is, he thinks you’re a dom.”

Zenigata blinked several times. Then he sat back and groaned, hiding his face in his hand.

I grinned from over my salad, taking advantage of the fact that he couldn’t see it. Top of the food chain no matter how you slice him, that’s my man!

“So why didn’t you sleep with him?”

Zenigata instantly choked. “What? What do you mean, why?”

We stared at each other.

“He’s half my age,” he protested. “And I’ve got you.” He went to pick up his tea again for relief, but he only got it halfway to his mouth before his face crinkled. “And I’m not into men!”

Oh... I paused awkwardly, processing that, and hid behind my sandwich. I guess he’s not the type to philander away from me? Though I didn’t think we were a...huh, maybe we are.

I smiled a bit at that, especially the end of that, though it clearly mystified Zeni. He watched me carefully, only to shake his head and lose himself in his tea.

“And anyway, it’d be taking advantage of him,” he continued. “He’s vulnerable; I couldn’t do
that.”

“Why not?”

Zenzigata frowned, but I wasn’t being sassy. He eyed me over his mug, looking for clarification.

“What I mean is, not all ‘taking advantage’ is evil. Sometimes it’s all you’ve got. If he’s opening the door for you....maybe all the windows are barred.” I shrugged and picked up my own drink—hot chocolate, made with white chocolate.

The Inspector thought about this for a bit, then carefully set down his cup. “Sure, but why can’t he come out of the house? That’d still be me locking him in his prison, just with me there too.”

I tilted my head, nodding. “I guess so,” I muttered thoughtfully, going back to the last bit of my sandwich. There was only a bite or two left now. “I guess I’m just used enough to working with people already trapped in prison, that you just learn to take whatever they give you, set some boundaries, and work with it.”

Koichi clearly started mulling that over. “‘Set some boundaries and work with it,’ huh,” he muttered. “Hmmm....”

“What is it?”

“Nothing,” he shook his head. “Thank you though, Marti. I wouldn’t be able to do half this stuff without you.”

He stood up, taking either end of the tray that had delivered both our meals in hand. But rather than lifting it up and walking off, he leaned forward on his hands, over the table, and—

Kissed my cheek.

“Hee,” I said, completely undignified. I touched at the spot, feeling all fluttery.

He really did it....

A couple of whoops went up from the Navy boys nearby. “Oh shut up,” I scolded, even as I was reddening.

The snickers died down as Zenigata, standing over me, quickly checked his wristwatch, crystal face glinting golden in the light.

“Ah. If we don’t get back soon, Lupin will complain that I kept him waiting.”

“When’s that ever worried you?” I asked, amused. Still, I stood up with him, helping him collect the items onto the tray.

“Oh, I can imagine Lupin’s face now: ‘What, you give me a directive and then keep me waiting? Lame, old man. Lame.’”

“Hah. That sounds like him.”

“Yeah. Though...it’s going to be hard...” he trailed off, gazing out the window, tray in hand.

“What?” I asked. I followed his line of sight, but there wasn’t anything other than snowball combatants and bird tracks.
“...Seeing him cry.”

He sighed, his shoulders physically heaving. But Zenigata shook his head soon, and went to dump the tray and otherwise appropriate the dishes to their respective bins for cleaning.

*I guess he’s seen a lot of people cry over the years, I thought. More than most....*

“Marti,” he said when he’d come back to the table, “Did it seem to you like Lupin knew he was having these attacks?”

“Mm?” I asked, head titling. “What makes you think that?”

“Well...” He took a breath, slid his hands into his pockets, and gazed out the window. He was speaking quietly, so we wouldn’t be overheard, but it didn’t make him seem any less pensive. “He seemed surprised about *what* he did, but not that it *happened* in the first place.”

I pursed my lips, thinking back, trying to follow the Inspector’s silent thoughts as he gazed out at the snowy, sunny landscape.

“He specifically said, ‘You aren’t lying to me, at all?’, and you know, sometimes people ask that because they’re used to being tricked. Little brothers and stuff. But the way he said it...it just made me think that he knew, and he was reconciling it with what he knew about previous attacks.”

“Not to mention the fact that he didn’t refute your question about when it started,” I said, humming thoughtfully. “He just corrected the time line.”

“Yeah,” he murmured. “I’m just not sure if he knows it’s *this* bad.”

“Hmm. Kind of depends on if anyone else was around when it happened,” I admitted. “But I wouldn’t be surprised if he knew, at least to some degree. He’s a smart cookie, and you know, even if no one else was around to enlighten him on the details, you black out and wake up somewhere else, with bruised knuckles or blood on you, or even just flat on the floor, you tend to figure out something’s going on.”

Zenigata’s eyes narrowed, and his jaw visibly tightened. “But if he did...,” he whispered, “why didn’t he tell anyone?”

I shrugged. “He’s a guy. Probably didn’t want anyone to know. Probably hoped he could just handle it.”

“True.” He nodded, accepting it with a sigh.

*Not to mention that it’s you, and he seems to want your approval.*

“Though...,” Zenigata continued, rubbing at his chin stubble, “may have to have a little chat with him about professional responsibility, at this rate.”

He sighed again, and I smiled a bit at it, chagrined, patting at his shoulder. “One step at a time, and we’ll get this sorted out.”

“I suppose so,” he muttered, shoulders sagging. After a moment though, put his hand back in his pocket and offered his elbow to me. With effort, he managed a genuine smile. “Well, shall we?”

His brown eyes were so pretty in the light, and the stubble made me recall how handsome he’d been with the beard. Even now, it really was a face I wouldn’t mind growing old to. “Surely.”
I smiled back and threaded my arm through his. The nearby navy guys—the one’s who’d commented before—grinned, but didn’t say anything this time. Which was good, because they were now within kicking distance as we walked by.

The sun was warm, through the windows. And the sky, a vividly beautiful blue....

I squeezed his arm a little tighter, breathing in the scent of his cologne.

But before I could say anything, my little party was interrupted. Just as we got to the doorway, the hallway was blocked—by Kyle of all people. He was braced on the doorframe, huffing like he’d just run a marathon.

“Where have you been?” he demanded, barely able to breathe. “Did you turn your radio off?!”

I touched at the radio on my belt. I must have turned it off the last time I’d slept, and forgotten about it. Or maybe it didn’t get reception this far away?...

“What’s wrong?” Zenigata asked immediately, tensing at my side.

“Lupin’s coding!”
1) Get this chapter away from me, I can't deal with it anymore.

2) Excuse me while I go drink myself under a table.

3) Satoru is any given Kurosawa movie starring Toshiro Mifune, omg.

4) I did not know this until I was doing research for this chapter, but apparently Zenigata isn't just an "Inspector." He's a "Chief Inspector," which in England would be a DI (as opposed to a DS), and in America, probably something like a Lead Detective.

That means, apparently, that he has the authority to command a squadron of guys regularly, or could even run station. So that's why he's always got a force with him for backup, apparently! If you believe Cagliostro, *it's actually his platoon of guys from the JP ICPO branch office that he trucks everywhere.* Think of the fic potential (and monetary cost!) of all these background guys and gals! Huzzah. I wonder if his dept gets recovery fees for Lupin's loot sometimes? Otherwise, how can they justify that cost? Heh...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I knew, in theory, what I was going to see when I walked in that room. And yet, I had hoped everything would be fine by the time I got there. That it was perhaps just a mistake, or a joke I’d have to punch someone in the jaw for.

But I was wrong.

I was not prepared for what I ran in on, at all.

The tiny room’s white walls were both looming and claustrophobic at the same time. Two people were in the room, leaning over Lupin: Nadia, her back to me, was pressing down on Lupin’s chest with savage force; and Christof, standing on the far side of the bed, was tucked into the corner like a wraith, intently squeezing a blue bag attached to a mask that he held over Lupin’s face.

I couldn’t see much of Lupin. Just a vapid arm that shook with each compression, and the part of his face that Christof’s hand wasn’t covering. His eyes were closed, and he was pale as a corpse.

It was a terrible thing to witness, and an even more terrible thing to be completely outside of fixing.

I checked the monitor. There was no noise, but half the words and numbers were flashing. The little line where his heartbeat was supposed to be was blipping upward, but only in time with Nadia’s movements.

*Who did this to you?*

It was a frantic thought. But creeping into the back of my mind was another:
Did you do this...to get away from me?

—“Katsura’s always been the favorite, but hell, even you’re worth something, Koichi. So what point is there to me at all?”—

“Got them,” Kyle announced, swiftly entering the room and taking over for Christof on the breath bag. The two sandwiched themselves between the bed and the wall, rotating. Once free, Christof came over toward Marti and me, rubbing at his eyes.

—“I was just another mouth to feed after the war, who knows why Mom didn’t just strangle me in my sleep. She’s sure made sure I knew exactly how she felt about every failure of mine my whole life. How many did she drill into you?”—

What is in that your head of yours, that you or someone else would do this, just to keep it from me?

Marti intercepted Christof by stepping in front of him. “What happened?!” she demanded. “You were supposed to be watching him!”

“I was! I-I-I did!” He gestured at the bed. “The doc came in and gave him some meds and left and I thought it was fine but then by the time I looked in on him, he was blue!”

“The doctor?!” Marti all but shrieked.

“The one from downstairs...”

Marti grabbed him by the biceps. “You weren’t suppose to let him anywhere near Lupin!”

“No, not him!” Christof shouted back, not even bothering to stop her attack. “The woman! Angela!”

“Angela?” Marti asked, and my mind mirrored hers: “Who’s Angela?”

“If you’re done talking about nonsense I could use your help,” Nadia interrupted sharply, not bothering to look back.

I could hear my heart beating. Feel it in my chest, like it might escape.

Angela. The tech from downstairs?... But why...

“...Okay, right. Yeah. How long’s it been?” Marti asked, a little shaken, before I could get the words out of my mouth myself. She let Christof go, and, after a visible breath, stepped into the room, rolling up her sleeves.

And thus I, once more, was left standing there with nothing to do, watching other people try to save Lupin.

Now free, Christof checked the clock from where he stood. “…Twenty minutes.”

“Twenty minutes?!” Marti squawked, turning to him, and then Kyle. “What have you been doing for the last twenty minutes?!”

“Trying to keep his brain alive,” Nadia replied for them, curt. But if she was offended by it, it didn’t show. All of her movements, her words, were fast, professional. “Here. Take over for me. I have to go downstairs to get the meds he needs.”

“Why aren’t they up here?” I demanded as she zipped by me, heading for the door. At her back,
Marti swiftly took her place at Lupin’s chest.

She looked at my hand where it held tight to her arm, and then at me. “Walk with me.” She shrugged out of my grip.

I did so, gaze lingering only a moment on Lupin’s nearest hand, jerking with the weight of compressions in between Christof and Marti’s bodies.

“The only things we have up here are stuff we expect to need after a surgery,” Nadia continued as she strode down to the elevator. She wasn’t running quite yet, but even in her heels, it was hard to keep up with the hurried clacks as they thumped against the floor. “And your man Kyle doesn’t know CPR or directions apparently, so I had to stay with the patient until now....” She waved her hand, frantic, annoyed. “No wonder he works for the police rather than the military.”

“Wait, what?” I shook my head; Kyle could wait. “Then what the hell’s going on?” I tried again, right on her heels as we came to a stop.

Nadia slapped the elevator button and turned to me, puffing breathlessly even as she stood ramrod straight, feet together. “Inspector.” She stared me down, grey eyes sharp. “Your prisoner’s ODing.”

“Satoru, you’ve gotta stop this stuff,” I said, upturning the tray at his table and breaking the syringe as it hit the wall. The girls clinging to him had long since scattered with a shriek, thinking some other gang was here to do their patron in.

He looked up at me, blackly. “What, so you can get promoted again?”

“I haven’t been promoted in four years, thanks to you,” I growled, dragging him up and promptly throwing him out of the club and into the alley.

“What are you even doing here? Go get your own girls!”

“I’m married!” I shouted, as I tossed him onto the bricks. “No thanks to you!” I shut the door behind me just to make sure no one would stab me in the back, and then hopped down into the street, arms crossed.

“Yeah, yeah...stop bragging.”

“Satoru, this is gonna kill you someday! Someday soon! This shit’s killing people all over town, for God’s sake!”

“Like you care.”

I paused at that, taken aback, only to surge forward a moment later, roaring harder:

“Of course I care, I’m your brother!”

“Brother shmother, what’s that ever gotten anyone, anyway!”

I punched him. And it felt good, just to knock that horrible mouth back down.

In the gutter, against the trash cans, my little brother Satoru stayed, rubbing his jaw. “Go fuck a cat or something, Married Man. You, with your perfect life, what would I care? You’re just here because it makes you feel good to hit guys when they’re down.”
“Satoru you souse!” I threw my hands in the air, then just let out a primal scream at the sky as I grabbed at my hair. “Why do you even speak if you’re going to say things like that!” I turned to him finally, throwing my hand across the air like a blade. “That’s it. Next time you get brought in, I’m not helping you. Just go wreck your life like you want to! Who cares about the family honor? Who cares about his brothers’ jobs, or the future of his brothers’ kids? Or the livelihood of his own mother, even?! Not Satoru, that’s not who!”

“What would you know about how I feel anyway!” he shouted back, slowly shuffling himself up the wall. “Give your concern to someone who cares.”

“How could you say that?” I asked, palms up helplessly. “After all I’ve done for you?”

“You?” he asked. “You?!”

“Yes, me! Who else helps you? Your yakuza boss and the ten women around town you screw? Hell no! The only place they help you go is down!”

“Hah! That’s rich coming from you. Yeah, you.” Now standing fully, he lifted his chin, finger in the air. I took a step back, worried for a second that he was going to pull a knife on me. “‘Kinichi,’ they call you! Kinichi, the golden one. Oh, and what do the call you at work? ‘Tokyo Tora!’ Hah! Even Katsura’s nickname’s good, KiriKatsu, the Windfall Winner! The lucky bastard! But me? Li’l ol’ Satoru? You know what they call me? The Screwup! Satoru Sagaru—Satoru the Fallen! That’s my name in the neighborhood around the ‘good side’—you and Katsu, Dad and the neighbors. But that’s not even the best one! You know what Mom calls me? To dad? To her friends?”

I closed my eyes, clenched my fists. “Satoru, stop.”

“‘Kaigo,’” he said, lifting his chin and puffing out his chest. “Her repentance. Her remorse. That’s the best title I’ve ever gotten.”

Satoru’s name was spelled wholesale with the character for “enlightenment,” but put it at the end of a word, and you got a lot of terms that ended in “go.” Most of them were nice, all uplifting Buddhist things, but this one wasn’t. It was the main exception, really.

“Satoru, I said shut up.”

“Or what?” he spat. “Or what, Niichan?”

He’d said it to spite me, but it just sounded like he was remembering the better days. His voice had cracked a bit, and when I realized it, he scoffed aggressively, a gangster sneer, looking away.

“Anyway, there’s no place for me with your folk and you know it. You’re just living a dream, old man. At least here, I get to be ‘Satoru Saku.’ Cleverness blooming.”

I sighed, and just shook my head. I wanted to be angry...but I just couldn’t. There wasn’t enough fight left in me to be angry.

You’re my remorse, too, you know.

For a long time, he just watched me, trying not to cry. But my thought must have shown on my face, because eventually, he tipped his head back. “Ah. Ah yeah. I see. You’re just like the rest of them. I’m your big disappointment, aren’t I? Well, you know what? Katsura-san said he’d help me. He’s flown way past you, you know. I don’t need your help anymore.”

Katsura...san?
Why was Satoru referring to his younger brother like someone he wasn’t related to, and in fact, someone with more power than him? Someone with more power than me?

But before I could ask, Satoru brushed past me, bodychecking me as he went and pointing his finger in the air. “Some brother you’ve been, you know. Can’t depend on you for anything! If I had a government job like you, I’d strike you from my family register!”

Now against the wall, I sighed, aggrieved. But I didn’t move. I just watched him stumble down the alley, high as a kite and bitter as a demon.

Katsura’s helping him? Why? He wasn’t the helping type.

But if he could....

I stared down at the ground, the dirty concrete and upturned trash sliding over my shoes.

Maybe it was for the better.

Maybe this is yet another thing he can do that I cannot.

I closed my eyes with a sigh, and it was a long time before I opened them again. When I finally did, all that was left was a dirty, empty alley, cold and unforgiving.

But the thought that played before me like a dream, in the space between my feet, was not a vision of him. It was of my three-year-old, sitting on the ground in our apartment, looking up at me with a bright smile and open arms, calling for her father.

She at least would be happy to see me.

Maybe it’s time to let him go....

“ODing?!” I hissed. “How?! And on what?!”

“I don’t know how,” she said, hurrying into the elevator; I followed her. “I wasn’t there; you’ll have to ask the blond one among you. What I do know”—she stabbed the button for the proper floor—“is that it’s morphine. So I know exactly what counteractive he needs. Unfortunately...I don’t know how much. But I can guess, so you’re going to have to help me carry it all. This dress don’t come with pockets.”

The look in her eyes wasn’t reassuring.

“It’s a lot, isn’t it,” I muttered, cold trickling down the back of my neck and into my gut. “Do you have it?”

“We do,” she kept her eyes firmly on the numbers above the elevator as they changed. “But we might be too late. I just don’t know what drives a man to inject himself with two whole damn bottles of morphine at once.”

I shut my eyes, but the memories of red didn’t stop.

“Zenigata-kun,” called my boss, motioning me into his office.
“Yes, Commissioner Noruma,” I said once there, clicking my heels and bowing deeply. The sun was setting, and it sent red light through the blinds, beyond a view of the river, and Tokyo’s sprawling suburbs. My mother and the old-timers in the neighborhood would often wax on about how, when I was young, all the houses had been made of wood, and the valley views were filled with low, dark houses with dark, sweeping roofs. But now, everything was concrete, bright little cubes as far as the eye could see without a tree in sight, littered with tiny windows that reflected the red in their uniform glass.

I often wondered if that view was progress, or simply the stop-gap recreation cobbled together by a defeated people.

It sure felt like it, sometimes, when I had to dig Satoru out of their basement drug dens.

But then there was Katsura on the other hand, already with a corner office and making policy decisions.

But that only reinforced the suspicion. If people like him were going to be the new leaders of my nation, I wasn’t sure I wanted to be in it, anymore. We’d get through, but I might just turn into one of those grouchy old timers that complained that nothing was ever good enough, and everything was going to hell.

Katsura already had the rank of Superintendent, or Keishi; he ran a metropolitan police station. I, on the other hand, was simply an Inspector, or Keibu-ho. I worked at a similar-sized station, but I only ran a single platoon.

I’d started at Sargent thanks to my police academy scores, which were lower than his. I’d graduated Second Class and he’d graduated First Class, which meant I started at Sergeant and he started at Inspector, the rank above it. This was mostly due to the fact that I’d been sleep deprived half the time earning money to support the family outside of the academy, and also because I’d given him what I knew to help him pass.

I was a good teacher, but my pupil wasn’t very grateful. In return for my efforts, he’d left me to deal with Satoru and gotten himself promoted a bunch of times. He was now two ranks ahead of me, and several years younger to boot. He said it was for the family good, but I knew better. It was all for him, and one day, he’d pretend he didn’t know us.

It really was the shame of the neighborhood. Everyone knew the tale of the three brothers—the eldest spent all his effort taking care of the troublemaker, and the youngest just skated on by. Everyone had an opinion on it. But mostly it was used as a local fable to educate children not to be like us.

My poor mother.

My wife, Nami, on the other hand, didn’t care one lick about the gossip. She rarely saw the neighbors and hated “low-class people” anyway. Hers was a world dealing with philosophy and taking down heavy hitters of the highest classes; she only ever came down to Earth through me.

What bothered her was that I was dragging myself down, for some sake other than hers. I was neglecting my real family, she said. The one that I’d made myself.

And she was right, but...she also didn’t speak to her family, and they didn’t speak to her. She’d overeducated herself, married a man from a penniless ex-samurai family with no clout that no one had ever heard of (and of which her family, thus, did not approve), and as far as anyone knew, she’d been disinherited.
But she made so much money that it didn’t really matter. Though I did wonder if that was part of why she worked so much—because she knew I could never recoup that family money for her, “good government job” as I had.

But, all that aside, at least I was getting more sleep since cutting Satoru off, and that was making things look a little less awful, no matter how I looked at it.

Not that the guilt didn’t keep me up sometimes. It’d been nearly six months, and I worried about him every day still. Wondered when I’d see him in the police blotter again.

Katsura was supposedly looking after him somehow, but he wouldn’t return my calls about it.

Nami didn’t mind it though. We had more time together, and while it was a bit strained these days, if I couldn’t sleep, I was able to entertain Tokko for her, when the girl wouldn’t go to bed.

And Tokko.... Well, Toshiko was always happy to see me. Sometimes I wondered if she was the only one, though. Nami and I were fighting more than we used to.

When had that even started happening? I couldn’t remember a time without it, now, but at least it wasn’t about Satoru anymore.

I wasn’t sure if that was better or worse, though. Now that he was gone, I could see all the cracks that had been left to grow beneath the floodwaters.

“You’ve been doing good work the last couple months,” my boss said, returning my attention to the room by tossing a stack of papers down. A quick glance revealed that it was my most recent case notes.

“It’s a pathetic attempt of police work that pales in comparison to my superiors,” I said, bowing again. “Thank you sir.”

He waved his hand, sighing. He was a short, well-dressed man with thick, round glasses, someone whose dress and carriage would have been perfect in a Meiji-period film. He had survived the war by being a teacher for the armed forces, and had a fondness for the energetically ingratiating nature of the new recruits, the more enthusiastic the self-immolation the better, but I’d been around long enough that he was trying to pull me out of it, and up to the smooth, dramatically calmer standard of compliment-deflection perfected by people who had a few years’ experience and somewhere to go in life.

I didn’t feel like I deserved that treatment, but I was grateful for it anyway.

“What’s with the change?” he asked, leaning on his hand, against the desk.

I took a breath, then shrugged. “Just...changing some things. Eating better, getting more sleep....”

“You got rid of the mushi, didn’t you?”

Mushi. It meant “bug.” That’s what he called the problem of my little brother.

“Well, I mean, I didn’t smash him or anything,” I stuttered, looking anywhere but him.

“It wouldn’t be a big deal if you had,” he said, shrugging. “You know I wouldn’t tell anyone.”

“Sir...?” I asked, eyes widening.
“I’m not condoning anything like that, of course,” he said, “especially since we’re a pacifist nation now, but in my day, there were ways to deal with delinquent bugs that the cops wouldn’t pursue, and the district judge would thank you for.”

“Sir I...really didn’t, honestly. I just cut him off. is all.”

“Ah,” he said, a mix of unsurprised and mildly disappointed.

I bowed my head and stayed that way, staring at my feet.

I had stopped trying, but I hadn’t stopped worrying. Superintendent Nomura wanted both, but I couldn’t give him that. Not yet.

“Well, anyway, good work, Chief Inspector. A bug-free house is a dependable house that’s ready for visitors.”

“Ch-chief...Inspector...?”

“I think your command of your work and commitment to an improved home life routine shows sound judgement. Enough to promote you.” He nodded, enigmatically. “Come Monday, look forward to a few new stripes.”

“Th-thank you, sir!” I bowed again, emphatically, this time all the way to my waist, arms at my side like they’d been starched that way.

“I haven’t told anyone yet, so let’s leave the big celebrations till next week,” he said, nodding at me. “But you can tell your family.”

“I will! Thank you, sir!”

“That is all. You may go.”

I helped Nadia get the correct antidote from the storage closet—several vials of it, tossed into my pockets and taken from the back to make sure they hadn’t been fiddled with—and then raced back upstairs with her.

“Tell me again: what happened from your perspective?” We were hurrying down the hall, from the elevator to the recovery room.

“I was at the desk in the lobby, reading. No warnings go off, no nothing—until the phone rings. Your blond guy called it, because apparently no one was answering the on-call button on the floor. Christina’s supposed to be doing that, so I don’t know where the hell she is right now, but you can be damn well sure there’s going to be a reprimand in her future for that.”

I nodded, just trying to keep up with her, mentally and physically, without breaking the little glass bottles piled together in my trouser pockets.

“So I go up there, and halfway down the hall I hear the blond guy screaming for help in a terror. By the time I got in there your man’s already flat on his back, and frankly, blue.” She threw out one of her hands like a lancet as she spoke, annoyed. “We argued for a bit and I jumped in to make sure oxygen was getting through to the patient. I sent the blond guy to get Kyle from the sleeping rooms, which unfortunately I had to take him off the breath bag to do that, but the blond guy came back within a minute and Kyle in about two.
“I sent him to find Dr. Christina on the way to you and Ms. Martelli, but apparently Christina’s nowhere to be found. He was gone for about ten minutes, apparently the directions confused him or he searched too hard, I don’t know.” Haggard, she shook her head with a sigh and then her sharp, angry gaze turned on me. “I was about to give up hope, so I’m glad you’re here.”

This woman never smiled, but at least the glare she gave me seemed honestly pleased. “So why do you know it was the morphine?” I asked, as we rounded the door to the room.

“It was in his hand,” she said, coming to a stop and touching my wrist. “I’m going to go help him, now. Stay calm or stay out, please.”

_His hand?_ “But who gave it to him in the first place?”

...Did you filch it from the woman?

She shrugged. “We can figure that out later.”

It was the brush-off. If there had been a curtain, she would have slammed it closed in my face. But that wasn’t what bothered me about it.

It was the fear in her eyes.

She held out her hand. Quickly, I put the bottles in her hand.

Tiny, two-ounce bottles of clear liquid with names so long it didn’t fit on one line. Clattering together into her palm like raindrops.

That was all that stood between me and...

_The door to Satoru’s apartment was simple and unadorned. One of many apartment blocs set up immediately after the war as part of the American’s reconstruction, they were never meant to last for very long but were, like most issues from the war, lingering longer than expected—and desired._

“Satoru?” I asked, knocking on the door. The lights were on; I could see it under the door.

I glanced around, but there was no one else around. The building was two stories, maybe eight units wide, and an open-air, covered concrete walkway was what allowed for access to the second-floor units. Each apartment was only a few hundred square feet of space, but they sufficed. Satoru’s actually had a bathroom attached, rather than a communal one, so it was an upgrade from what it could have been.

“C’mon Satoru, open up. It’s Niisan. I’ve got good news, so I want to take you out for noodles to celebrate.”

Technically, we’d been raised in a family old-fashioned and rigid enough that I was a -sama, but I’d knocked it down to -san years ago in an attempt to make him feel a bit better about things (and the fact that it was a pretentious thing to say in public).

But no reply came. “Damn,” I grumbled, grinding my teeth as I looked over the door. “Probably shooting up with somebody....”

Or maybe just shacking up, if I was lucky...but putting my ear to the door, I couldn’t hear anything like that. The walls were notoriously thin; I would have been able to.
Just as I stood back, hands on my hips, considering how far I wanted to go to try to get the door open, a neighbor from two doors down came out. It was just a normal guy, younger, worn lines on his face. Once halfway-nice clothes adorned his emaciated frame, now rumpled and holey. Probably going to work on a factory night shift, or, knowing this neighborhood, going to get some sort of smack.

Either way, the reconstruction hadn’t done him any favors.

“‘Ey. You,” I said, breaking out the gangster verb form and low-voiced growl that came with it. It was all very close to Cop Speak, but involved a little more slurring, a little more slouch and aggression, and was overall much more offensive to the language itself, let alone the people you used it on. “You seen ‘im lately?”

The guy shrugged. “‘S in there, saw ‘um go in ‘round two hours ago.”

I nodded. The guy bowed a little back.

“Hey!” I barked again, just as he turned his back to me.

“Ah?” he replied, mildly, hand on the stair rail.

“Don’t do drugs.” I pointed at him.

He glared at me, surly, but didn’t do much else before slinking off.

Well, at least someone around here’s mild-mannered.

I glanced the door up and down, and then just decided to kick it. I could fix the lock later.

Apparently someone had gotten the locks changed; my key didn’t work anymore.

I put my hand on my jitte, the knife-baton hanging at my side, that had been passed down through our family for quite a few generations. It was a standard police weapon since there were “police” rather than “samurai,” but this one had been father’s and grandfather’s, etc. We only had one, and it was one of two relics from my father that’d managed to stay out of Katsura’s hands and in mine instead.

Satoru, until recently, was the other.

I was prepared to break out the jitte if there was someone in there who got the wrong idea.

Prepared to break out my father’s hope.

All right Dad, Grandfather. Protect me so that I can protect him.

I watched them work for fifteen more minutes.

“Administering another milligram of Narcan,” Nadia announced.

Watching the clear liquid slide into his veins, it seemed like so little to save a life.

“We don’t know how much he got into him, but it was likely well over the lethal dose for a person of his size,” she clarified for the audience, “so we’re going to flood him with this stuff. Just keep pushing it through his blood and hope it takes. Keep that heart working,”
Marti nodded. “What am I looking for as far as response?”

“It’s an antagonist—a counteractive binding agent. It’s been long enough now that all his receptors are undoubtedly full of morphine; this will eat the morphine. But at this rate...” Nadia bit her lip and looked at the clock, shaking out the needle as she pulled it from the stint in Lupin’s arm. “What are you thinking, Nadia?” Marti asked, in between compressions.

“Give it to him twice, at two-minute intervals, and then shock ‘im. See how he responds. That’s all we can do at this point. Once a patient’s been down this long, there’s a chance, but...it’s long.”

My stomach dropped out. I looked at the clock, at Lupin, at Marti and the others around the room, working or staring like I was.

Suddenly, I understand very clearly how slim his odds were.

Our odds were.

There was no one in sight. The front room, which doubled as both the living room and the bedroom, had drugs strewn all around it, needles and pipes both on the small coffee table. A few bags of smack were just sitting there, in plain sight, stark against the black laquer.

One was even open, its contents strewn about the table...though not, oddly, cut into a line.

And yet, there was no one around. The lights were all on, through the whole place, and yet....

Very slowly, I lifted my head and pulled out my jitte, stalking across the tatami-mat floor. The woven grass fibers crinkled under my shoes, which was a terrible offense to them, but I hadn’t any time for that. They were half threadbare and probably dusted with cocaine anyway.

Carefully, I slunk around to the kitchen, which was behind a half-open shoji screen. “Satoru?” I called, waiting a moment before sliding it all the way open and coming into plain sight.

But again, even as I held the weapon above my head, ready to strike, there was no one. The kitchen was empty. Pots and pans were freshly cleaned, but the entire place was...empty.

I checked the light above my head, flickering. The window to the kitchen was open, barred with wood as it was.

And yet, it was oddly steamy in here.

I turned my head to the bathroom door, which was to my left. Another sliding door, this time glass, hung just slightly ajar.

My eyes widened. If he’d fallen asleep in the bath, drugged out of his mind....

“We just need to get it around his body, get the blood stream moving...” Nadia said, shaking her head at herself, at the air—at the powers that be.

“Assuming that’s all there was,” Marti said.
“Yes, assuming that.” She snapped her fingers and pointed at Christof without even looking up. “You. Is there a possibility of that?”

“No, that’s the only thing...assuming that’s what was really in the bottle.”

“Shit.” Nadia shook her head and took a tiny empty bottle that was sitting off all by itself, sniffed it, flipped it upside down and licked what little came out on her pinky. “No, it’s morphine all right. So there’s that.”

She turned back to the bed, to the monitors, to Lupin.

“What can I do?” I had asked, after they’d administered the first round of drugs to his system.

“Just stay there and pray,” she had said, looking at the monitors. “Praying would be a help, and we need all the help we can get right now.”

But now...as I watched her back, I could see the despair in it. It was weighing her down as she caught her breath, with Marti, doing chest compressions, working hard in the background.

I couldn’t wait any longer. I couldn’t simply watch this, any longer.

In front of me, Nadia looked from the monitors to the clock and then shook her head. “It’s time. We’ve gotta shock ‘im or we’re gonna lose our window.”

“Roger,” Marti called.

Nadia pushed the second round of counteractive drugs into Lupin’s veins and, a few seconds later, Marti flipped off of him as Nadia brought over the paddles; Christof had charged them.

Meanwhile, I just had to stand there, near the door, watching it all. Even Kyle had something to do, administering the little blue football connected to Lupin’s face mask.

The first jolt went through Lupin’s body with the sound of an old-fashioned camera’s flashbulb. Thick and sharp, the thwunk brought his chest up, only to let gravity slam him back down.

In between Nadia and Christof, I could see his fingers uncurl, forced straight by the electricity.

But nothing came of it. Not even a blip.

“Two hundred,” Nadia declared almost immediately, determination in her voice.

They got all the way to three hundred without even a ghost of response. For one long, sick moment, all four of them looked at the monitor, and then looked at Nadia.

“Dammit,” she said, holding the paddles and staring down at Lupin. She suddenly shook her head and passed them off Christof. He caught them, deftly.

“I’m pushing more Narcan,” she announced.

“Throw in some adrenaline this time, too,” Marti suggested, returning to her place as Lupin’s heart.

“Roger that.” Nadia grabbed up one of the other bottles we’d retrieved, set carefully off to the side, and filled the needle with that, too.

“Zeni?” Marti’s voice asked, breathlessly. Startled, I found her looking over her shoulder at me as she pushed downward. “Could you...? My arms are getting tired.”
I blinked a few times, recalibrating, but managed a nod. Everything seemed far away, and I was a little light-headed. “S-sure...”

“I can too,” Christof offered. “I did the first ten minutes; I’m recovered.”

I gazed at him for a moment, critically; Marti looked between the two of us. But in the end I nodded, and she nodded back.

“I’ll do it,” I said, rolling up my sleeves. “Kyle?”

“Yessir?” he asked from his place at Lupin’s head.

“Watch my six.”

He grinned. “Yessir.”

“Mr. Zenigata, do you know how to do this?” Nadia asked from the side. “Have you been certified?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Good. Then I leave him in your capable hands,” she affirmed sternly. And yet, the hand she motioned me to him with was soft-spoken.

Marti and I lined up, and then switched off seamlessly. “Thank you,” I whispered to her, and she nodded.

Soon, it was just me, Lupin, and shadows in my periphery. I focused on putting pressure on the spot; visualizing pumping blood all throughout his body. That strong heart that this young man had...I had to keep it going.

“C’mon, Lupin. Stay with me,” I prayed. “Don’t you dare give up now....”

What I remember most was the red. The absolute, encompassing crimson, like the inside of some monster.

There was even some of it on the walls.

A man lying there, head against the back of the bathtub, in a pond of deep, deep red.

His body looked tired, and his face look pained.

One of his arms was on the outside of the tub. Some red had slid down from his wrist, staining the white porcelain.

It swirled toward the shower’s drain a few feet away, like crimson strands of hair.

Like Izanami’s hair, dragging spirits toward the deepest depths of hell.

Somehow, I knew. I wasn’t sure how I knew, but I knew. He was gone. And he’d been, for some time.

And yet, the air was still warm.
I stood there for a long time without making a single sound.

“Passing forty minute mark,” Nadia announced soon after I started.

“Shit,” Marti replied from my right, staring down at Lupin tensely.

“Is that bad?” I asked, keeping my eyes on the mark.

“It’s not good, I’ll tell you that much,” Marti replied, grim.

“There’s gonna be no point soon, just so you all know,” Nadia added.

“I’ve seen people come back after an hour and a half. So we keep going at least until sixty,” Marti replied, breathlessly. “He just needs time to metabolize it. And we don’t have anywhere else to be, right?”

There was a pause, and then Nadia’s stern voice: “You’re hoping for a miracle Ms. Martelli, but I’ll help you get it if I can. I’ve never seen anyone over thirty come back after forty-five, though.”

“Well then, it’s a good think he’s not over thirty,” I said. “He’s twenty-eight.”

Twenty-eight.

Still just a goddamned kid....

Under my hands, his thin ribcage compressed, sending shudders through the bed.

“C’mon, Satoru. C’mon.” At some point, the jitte slipped from my hand, and the sound of it hitting the tile got me moving. I felt his neck, got nothing, and then immediately hauled him out of the tub from under the shoulders.

“You can’t do this.” Warm water splashed down, spilling over the tub’s edge, over me, over my shoes. I dragged him across the tiny shower space, into the corner by the folded door. I laid him down, and put my ear over his naked heart. “You and me were going to work together, weren’t we? To fix this, to put you back in order....”

I didn’t hear anything. I didn’t. But I wouldn’t stop.

I put my hands over his chest and pushed down. Again, and again, and again.

But nothing, of course, ever came of it.

Marti stepped up and rubbed Lupin’s arm for stimulation. It was limp, and lukewarm.

“C’mon, Lupin,” I hissed. “Don’t do this to me. Don’t go. Stay with us.”

“Hands up,” Nadia announced.

“Stay with me—”

At touch came at my wrist, laying over the view of my hands and Lupin’s chest. It was Marti’s
hand; she looked at me intently, and then nodded at Nadia. “Zeni....”

“S-sorry,” I muttered. I slid off the table, but massaged Lupin’s shoulder after Nadia came down and struck him with lightning. His whole body tensed, the long curve of his slender neck snapping backward.


We looked at the monitor. There was some response, but not much. Just a couple of blips.

“What’s that mean?” I asked.

“He may just be too far gone,” Marti murmured, upset.

“No. Keep going,” I commanded. “I’m not giving up on him.” I slid back in against the table and went back to work. “You hear that, Lupin? I’m not giving up on you. I came back, so you have to come back, too.”

In the corner of my eye, Christof and Kyle switched off on the breath bag. Marti, meanwhile, put her face in her hands.

I was going to feel like an idiot if Lupin didn’t wake up, I realized.

I was going to feel a lot of other things, too, but I didn’t want to think about those.

“Dammit,” Nadia cursed. Marti, too, shook her head and ground her teeth.

Beneath me, Lupin’s face was peaceful.

_The flash of squadcar lights, striking like physical blows across the walls, even though the horizontal window of frosted glass was tightly closed. A rhythmic beat that lashed at me, instead of the heartbeat I was trying to find._

_A naked body, pulled out onto that tile; the ensanguinated god that was a mountain just laying there, unmoving, from whose body spilled all the rivers of the land._

_It was a limp form from which that pink water emanated. Stain spreading all over me, as if his life were absorbing into mine, instead of the contact keeping his within him, like I wanted._

_“Please, someone help him. Won’t you at least...?”_

_There were uniforms all around me, but none of them were helping._

_“Please!”_

_Voices, telling me to let go._

_“Please, anyone?!”_

_“Zenigata-san, please.... He’s gone....”_

_A hand at my shoulder, pulling me away._

_The cold air hitting my palms, where once his warm body had been._
“More,” I said, hovering over the same spot on Lupin’s body.

“It’s already been fifty minutes,” Nadia said, looking at the clock.

“And?” I asked, clipped. “You said it might not have had enough time to work, didn’t you?”

“Well, yes, but it might not matter at this point, even if that’s true,” she replied, wincing. “And if he doesn’t want to come back anyway....”

“He wants to come back,” I said, viciously, pushing through the fire burning up my arms. “He just has to remember how.”

“Do you even know what this man’s DNR order is?”

“It doesn’t matter because he’s in the state’s custody right now,” I snapped back.

“That’s not true and you know it—”

“Either way,” I said, stepping right over her, “He thinks life is the best thing there is. We’re bringing him back and I won’t take no for an answer. Now if that means you’re going to be here, then be here, and if not, get out, I’ll do it on my own.”

There was silence, and then Nadia snorted, turning back to the monitor. She sounded impressed.

The blood was running through my ears. I couldn’t hear anything but my own thoughts, my own heart. It was getting hard to tell what I was saying out loud and what I was only thinking, let alone hear whatever anyone else was saying.

I was to my prisoner’s side, towering over him, forcing that life of mine down into his chest. I kept looking into his eyes over the blue mask, but they stayed closed. Only closed, and they never once even twitched.

Like Satoru’s.

“C’mon, don’t leave me here,” I whispered. Don’t make me leave here with you in a body bag, Lupin.

That’d be a pretty shitty Christmas gift, even for you....

I pushed down again. And again.

“C’mon...”

I wouldn’t let myself feel the burn in my arms, my lungs.

Don’t leave me.

I looked over at Marti, standing in the room next to Christof, either ready to take over for me.

Don’t leave us, before I have the chance to properly introduce you to what this beautiful woman means to me....

I turned my head the other way, to Nadia. She was getting the paddles ready again.
Don’t leave me before we even get the chance to work a case together for real....

I checked the monitor. It was still flat-lining except for when I thrust downward. The sound of the bed shaking was loud, overwhelming, in my ears.

The feel of Lupin’s chest, as his broken rib slid strangely.

Don’t leave me before I have a chance to set the record straight.

The heat in my face, as tears gathered in my eyes.

Please. I can't have failed you, too....

I wandered around the city for I don’t know how long. And then I ended up at the police station for questioning.

They didn’t give it much grilling, and I didn’t have much to say. I just remembered sitting there in one of the interrogation rooms, so often used to being on the other side of the table, listening to my colleagues ask me the standard questions dispassionately.

I answered the endless macabre parade of words. Offered up details, inaccuracies, confusing bits. Talked about how I’d failed him, and how someone should have been watching over him. How Katsura should have been.

And that anger, eventually, sobered me up.

But in the end, it must not have taken long. The guys got what they wanted, shrugged, and walked off.

Just another dead druggie, their shoulders said, as they left.

They’d been trying to reassure me that it wasn’t my fault.

I wasn’t having it, and they were getting frustrated.

And then, the last one to come:

My boss.

He stood there with an air like I should know I was in trouble. And I did know. By going to meet with Satoru, I’d betrayed his trust in my abilities that had lead to the promotion itself. Furthermore, by being the one to find him, it created unnecessary drama in the force and headlines for the papers. Not to mention the fact that I’d caused a scene while I was there.

The paramedics, taking him from my arms....

“The mushi is dead,” I explained as Nomura stood in the doorway, myself staring at the table like my eyes were glued to it.

“So it would seem,” he said, noncommittal as always. “You going to need Monday off?”

It was Saturday. Or something close to it...I wasn’t sure anymore. It had been Friday evening, when I’d gone to visit Satoru.
“...What day is it?” I asked quietly.

“Sunday.”

“...Oh.”

I rubbed my eyes, brain suddenly foggy again. I should get home to Tokko and Namie....

But, the girls aside, he was asking me something very important: Should I have a job tomorrow?

“Take Monday off.”

“N-no, I’ll be fine, I can—”

“Chief Inspector Zenigata,” he said, cutting me off. His tone was unusually stern, but he’d used the term for my new rank. “Take tomorrow off. Spend some time with your wife. If I see you around here, I’ll have you escorted out of the building.” He stood up straight, and nodded. “Call me if you need Tuesday off too.”

I kept my head bowed as I stared at the table. “Yessir.”

Fingers, on my arm. Delicately.

“...eni. Zeni!”

I whipped my head around to the owner. It was Marti.

Her face wore a grimace. “It’s been over sixty minutes....”

Shuddering, I wrenched myself away from that look and turned to Nadia. “Give him adrenaline, or whatever the hell it is you give people who are almost dead—!”

But the look in her eyes at this command wasn’t anger—it was pity. “I already did.”

“Well then do it again!” I roared, staring downward. Christof’s hands...Lupin’s closed eyes.... Him and Kyle must have switched off at some point.... “I won’t...I can’t let this be the end. I won’t.”

I haven’t followed you for six years just to lose you now, just when you were about to tell me everything...!

I looked around the room. Christof, Marti, Kyle, Nadia.... They were just staring.

It was the look, if they were looking at me at all. Christof’s was especially baleful.

“What are you stopping for?” I snapped, and he jumped back into action on the breath bag.

“Again, Nadia, please,” I said, wishing my voice didn’t have to crack like that.

I leaned over Lupin and attacked his chest anew. Every time I blinked, tears were falling out of my eyes and breaking apart on my hands.

I won’t be the person who brakes down in front of everyone again.

Beside me, Marti and Nadia exchanged a look. I heard Marti sigh kindly, and then get another shot together.
Nadia moved out of the way so that she could jab it into Lupin’s neck.

“It just needs more time to work,” I repeated.

“If his body’s even still responding—” Marti shook her head. She was quiet for a second as she removed the needle; then, as I watched her pleadingly:

Her reply was a pitying smile.

But she also understood.

Marti turned to Nadia with determination: “Charge it. As high as it’ll go.” She stepped back. “Go big or go home, right?”

Nadia sighed, pained. “I don’t advise it, but hell, what’ve we got to lose?”

She got the paddles charged again, then came over. I mumbled a quick thanks as I stepped aside, watching the now-familiar course. My arms were tired. All of me was tired, and everyone else looked just as haggard. But I wouldn’t give up.

I watched the monitor, breathing hard, but there was nothing. Just one blip, then nothing.

Nadia, standing there with the paddles, took a look at the clock and sighed, lips twitching into a line.

I quickly looked away from her, to Marti. But she was just watching me—with a telling look of concern on her face.

No, I thought. No....

“We should call it,” Nadia mumbled.

No.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think he’s coming back.”

She turned to me, sympathetically. It was the kindest look I’d seen on her face.

No!

I tore through the crowd and back into my place over Lupin, shaking my head frantically. “He just needs time to metabolize it...he’s got a high metabolism, it’ll be fine, not much longer now—”

“Stop,” Christof said abruptly, icily.

I snapped my head up to him.

“Stop lying to yourself.”

Everyone in the room went quiet. “It won’t help,” Christof clarified, more gently, after looking around.

“That’s crap and you know it,” I spat back, renewing my push on Lupin’s ribcage.

Disgusted and upset, he tisked and looked down at his hands. They were holding the oxygen ball, but not squeezing it.
“Christof so help me—”

His response to my threat was simply to remove his hands.

“You’re a fool,” he said, storming past me.

I would have hit him, grabbed him and thrown him back into working, but I had no time for it. No way to do both things at once, and no air for shouting.

And besides, there were others.

“Well?!” I shouted at Kyle.

But he looked down at Lupin, then shook his head. He stayed rooted to the spot. “He’s right....”

“Marti...?” I said, searching for her. “He needs air!”

But her green eyes just stared at me, pained and silent and...honest.

Even Nadia was just standing there, looking at the clock.

It was so quiet, all of a sudden, outside of my ears.

I couldn’t breathe.

Marti’s hand came down on mine.

“Zeni. It’s over.”

“No. It’s not. I refuse to believe that—”

“Zeni.”

“I won’t—”

“...We’ve done all that we can do.”

“Daddy!” My little girl ran up to me in her pink pajamas, strewn with red hearts and white daisies. “Willcome Home!!”

She ran to the edge of the genkan—the step-down from wood flooring to tile—as she usually did, nearly teetered off the edge like she always did, and then raised her hands up high with an effervescent smile. Her arms offered themselves up to me like little sunflowers, straight-out and perky.

But to those loving arms, all I could do was cry.

Her voice was gentle, no more than a whisper, as mine grew higher and higher.

My hands stopped, but I didn’t want them to. I didn’t know why they did.

They just rested on Lupin’s chest, shaking and burning. My own chest heaved; my head swam.
But that was the problem, wasn’t it?

I looked down at him, at the silence that filled his limbs.

At the people, who had abandoned their posts.

Lupin lay beneath me, disheveled and silent and...

“It’s time,” Marti said softly and then, quite gently, lifted my hands from him. “He’s...”

It felt wrong, not to have that force jutting through my arms. Not to have the flesh, hot underneath them.

Lupin’s chest hair, even, had been soft against my fingers.

I staggered backward, into the wall.

That first step felt like falling.

Under the rain, those little flowers of hers wilted.

“You didn’t come home last night!” Toshiko said, switching tracks, and raising her hands anew. She even lifted up on her toes this time, an attempt to reach me. “Mommy’s mad!”

I sighed, suddenly feeling the weight of everything crashing down onto my shoulders as I tried to hold back the tears. It didn’t work, and my legs suddenly felt weak. “Yes, I bet she is.”

Her face fell, and then her hands, her head tipping. She looked back at the kitchen doorway anxiously, then said, “Daddy, what’s wrong?”

I hadn’t expected this. Hadn’t wanted this. I’d just thought, I’ll go home, and everything will be fine there. I’ll hold my wife, I’ll kiss my child....

But it wouldn’t. It would follow me, everywhere.

I’d touched death. It would cling to me forever, now.

I had to go to a shrine, had to get purified, had to...had to...

“Daddy?”

My legs lost their strength, all of a sudden. I slid down onto the genkan, and pulled her into my arms. I buried my face in her shoulder, but she still hugged me back.

They were watching me.


And not a single one was doing anything for Lupin.

“But he was...he was just here,” I stated, even my own voice diminutive in my ears. “I don’t...understand. He was fine. I only left the room for a minute...” My voice started to crack; breathing fast, I put one hand into my hair, the other on my hip. I paced one way, then the other; I
gestured at Lupin, at Marti...anyone.

But no help came.

The tears were getting so bad that I couldn’t see. But I smashed it all aside, for looking at Lupin, who was growing paler by the second.

“He can’t be...be...”

_It was so bad I couldn’t breathe._

_My face was so hot. Hot, like I had desperately wanted him to be._

_And I didn’t even know why._

He was a good-for-nothing, wasn’t he? The dirge of my life, my neighborhood? I should be happy. Happy like everyone else is.

And yet....

_I wiped at my eyes and sat down on the genkan edge, heavily. I tried to smile for my little girl, tried to speak, but nothing happened. It just got caught in my throat, got turned into tears._

_Before she could get away, I pulled her close to me. He clothes were soft, and she was warm. She wiggled a little bit, but it just made me hold her tighter._

_“Nothing’s wrong, sweetheart,” I whispered, hoarse, as I stared at the flower vase in the wall. “Daddy’s just a little sad today.”_

I swallowed hard, and looked at Marti.

“...Gone?”

My voice was so incredibly small, I hated it. Her response was to bite down on her lip, and blink tears out of her eyes.

But all the signs were there.

The stares. The lack of effort. The overwhelming sound of the alarms and flatline monitors.

...The truth was there, in Lupin’s pale, placid face.

It all hit me so suddenly that I could barely stand.

_The paramedics, reaching out to me and taking my brother. Taking away the warmth, that I had held for the last twenty years any time it needed me. Any time it cried. Any time it had something to celebrate._

_I would never embrace him again._
My brother.

I watched the beat cops set him down on the floor, to rot where he lay.

He was a piece of evidence, now. Not a human being.

Just a body.

Not my brother.

My brother was long gone.

“But he’s not dead,” I whispered, looking at Nadia. “It’s just that you refuse to keep him alive....”

“I’m sorry,” Nadia whispered. She turned away and put the paddles down into their slots, then gently clicked off the monitor’s sound.

A touch came at my side. I jumped, but it was only Marti’s hand, gently wrapping around mine. And then, as I watched—she took up Lupin’s with her other.

With a flick of her kind eyes, she motioned for me to do the same.

And slowly, I did so.

He was cool, but not cold. He was still rather warm.

He wouldn’t be dead for a few minutes, still. His flesh was all still alive. It just...couldn’t function on its own, any longer.

So this is...death? For you?

In a few minutes, though, necrosis would set in, and there really would be no going back.

It would be my fault. Because I’d stopped. I’d have to live with that, forever.

I’d let his soul escape.

Pulling Satoru out of that bathtub...I could suddenly feel the weight in my arms, the cold, the wet, all over again. But not the panic. Just the quiet in my mind and body at the time, from refusing to process any of it.

This can’t be happening.

How long had I stayed on that floor with him, before I even called for help?

“Why are you sad?” she asked, squeakily, trapped up against me.

“Because....”

I hiccuped and pressed her head into my chest, clutchted the little red hearts and flowers tightly.

“Daddy’s brother died today, sweetheart.”
Those were the last coherent words I got out for a quite a while, but she didn’t pull away.

“What’s that mean, Papa?” Toshiko asked eventually.

Ah....

It took me a long time to reorient my mind, my words, all the while my hands clenched and unclenched around her arms. I don’t know why I bothered. But I wanted to. I wanted to explain this.

“Here,” I took her hand, and, kicking off my shoes, slowly lead her down the hall.

I turned into the living room, and, two sets of feet padding over the tatami, went over to the family shrine, nestled into a wall. It was where a fireplace might be, in a western house.

The dark wooden box, embellished and decorated and no bigger than a shoebox, currently had its doors closed.

“It means he’s in there now,” I said, pointing to it, and choking back the words. “With all the other ancestors.”

“Oh,” she said, studiously.

Letting go of her hand—which took some doing since she was confused about how I was acting—I slowly opened the delicate, ornate doors. Inside, there was a tiny incense candle and bell, and a stick for both.

Slowly, I lit the candle, and once the scent reached me, I reached for the bell knocker.

“It means...”

The sound of the bell, clear and tiny.

I put my hands together and closed my eyes, but no prayers came.

Only images. Only nightmares.

“It means that...”

I sunk to my knees, and held my hands over my face. I didn’t know why I was weeping, when the whole thing felt so empty.

“...This is the only way Daddy can talk to his brother now.”

Beside me, my little girl patted my shoulder.

“Dammit,” Nadia suddenly said from beside me. She turned around, paddles in hand. “You’re right. One more time, okay? But then I’m calling it.”

Marti and I lifted our hands, without prodding.

She set the paddles.

My eyes fell to Lupin’s bare frame, the sheets pushed back and crumpled around him, his skin
presented to the light.

*But what’s it even going to do?*

His chest was so damn thin, under all that metal.

*Just stop hurting him already.*

The paddles were placed, and the thunder coursed through him.

*Let him rest.*

His body fell back into the sheets, limp.

*It was all he ever wanted: someone to watch over him as he slept.*

Two blips on the monitor, nothing more.

*Someone to care that he even woke up at all.*

Another shock, and then, Lupin’s frame jerked unnaturally. His toes were curling, I realized distantly, when they did that.

Nadia was whispering something too, I realized.

“C’mon,” she said, positioning the paddles slightly differently. Each time, she’d been trying it a slightly different way. “Just start your heart. People need you here.”

She charged it to the highest setting. If this didn’t work, nothing would.

“*Oh God. Whatever’s wrong, don’t do it.*”

*Those were the first words out of my wife’s mouth when she saw me in the kitchen, sitting around our western-style dining table, which she needed from time to time to entertain foreign guests. This time, though, it was just me with one of the chairs pulled out, hunched over our three-year-old and holding her in a death grip. My head was bowed, and I was crying hysterically.*

*Poor Toshiko, not understanding a bit of it, had stopped trying to reassure me some time ago and instead was just accepting it, a bit like a misused cat. She didn’t get to see me much, so maybe she was actually happy about it, in a conflicted way.*

“*Put down the jitte and talk to me,” Nami said, briefcase instantly falling to the floor.*

*I almost laughed at that. “I don’t have it,” I muttered miserably, into Tokko’s clothing. I looked up at Nami over the girl’s shoulder, eyes wet and red. “It got taken as evidence.”* 

*“Evidence?” she asked, fear turning into exasperation. “Oh hell, please tell me you didn’t get fired.”* 

*“No dear,” I said, looking up at her. I could barely see, the tears were so thick in my eyes. And yet, my shoulders wouldn’t stop shaking, even as I smiled at her. It had been over an hour, and I still couldn’t stop crying.*

*Naturally, this did not reassure her.*
“Did you kill someone?” she asked, alarmed.

“No, honey.”

“Is it cancer?”

My smiled twitched at that, and more tears fell down. “No, dear.” I wiped at them, from around Toshiko, but my limbs felt as weak as my voice.

“I got…a promotion, actually.”

“…What?”

Finally able to see my wife, I looked at Nami properly. She was always so pretty, in her short black hair and business suits. So much more put together than I ever was.

And yet, right now, there was a huge crease of vexation in her forehead. “Who died? I didn’t hear about any shootings—”

It was my turn for my eyes to widen.

“Your boss? Oh no, I knew you liked him…."

“Ah…n-no….”

“Mommy,” Toshiko piped up from over my shoulder, consternated. “Daddy’s just sad!”

“…And why is Dad sad?” she asked, creeping a few steps closer and eyeing us both, hoping it’d pop out of me first in some sane fashion…and maybe the child would come free, too.

Neither happened.

“Uncle Satoru’s in there,” Toshiko chimed, pointing over my shoulder.

When Namie looked down at me, and I nodded my head at her very slightly from my vantage point behind a three-year-old, my wife’s mouth fell wide open.

“Oh,” she said. “Well that’s good, isn’t it?”

“Oh,” said Nadia from across the bed.

“Nadia!” Marti cried, dropping my hand to point at the monitor.

“I see it.”

Without even so much as a look in my direction, Marti left me and went to the plastic blue ball over Lupin’s face.

It took me a second, but I looked up, following her line of sight to the hear monitor.

There were numbers, but not consistent ones.

“What’s that mean?” I asked, too numb to understand.

Nadia went back to the defibrilation station, changing the settings. “We’ve finally got a
response...” She shook her head, then pointed at me. “This shouldn’t be possible, but...we’ve gotta take what we can. Get back on his heart. You good for a few more, or do you need Christof to take over for you?”

“I’ll do it,” Kyle said, stepping up without missing a beat and shoving Christof out of the way as he did so.

“Good. Keep going. That may be all we need. We’ve got him up to Vfib, now it just needs to stabilize....”

“But you said....?” I turned to Marti, hands tingling from the exertion.

She was smiling now.

“We’ve got a chance,” she whispered, excitedly.

“I think you were right...” Nadia said, watching the monitors. “The Narcan only takes two minutes in theory, but it also only lasts half an hour. Meanwhile, it could take about half an hour for all the morphine to metabolize. So if there was a huge amount of morphine in his system, say if he needed five or six rounds of Narcan just to cope with that...then maybe...with a high metabolism...we’re right at the edge of recovery at fifty minutes, given what we’ve been pushing....”

Nadia finished this by rubbing the paddles. “We’re not out of the woods yet, though—his body’s trying but it’s got a long ways to go—clear!”

Marti lifted the oxygen mask and her hands.

A shock, and a slight gasp from Lupin’s mouth before he hit the table again.

I looked up. Lupin’s heart beat, on the monitor, rose.

And it stayed there. Thirty. That wasn’t enough, but it was...stable.

It wouldn’t stay that way long, though. That was a comatose heartbeat. It wasn’t life. It was a gossamer memory, not the real spark.

Nadia set down the paddles though. “Ms. Martelli, is the patient breathing?”

Marti paused and leaned down. “Not...yet, no.”

“All right, so he’s at the point where his heart’s back up but the breathing’s still stifled.... That means we need one more push, then he should come back around.”

“On it.” Marti took the vial from the shelf of them, drew a needle full and discarded the now-empty vial back into the pile of the rest of them. There were at least five of them, now, totally empty.

Come back...around....

“Just give it a minute or two now,” Nadia said, taking the syringe from Marti so that Marti could go back to the oxygen.

There was a small smile on Nadia’s face.

It was all the celebration she allowed herself, but one nonetheless.
I might well have been passing out. I couldn’t feel my body, let alone my thoughts. Everything was just...numb, as I slid against the wall.

“Zeni?” Marti looked at me suddenly, voice both kind and warning as she worked. “Are you all right? Do you need to sit down?”

“No,” I replied, distantly, darkly. It hadn’t gotten all through my head yet, but if what they were telling me was true....

I turned to Christof, who was leaning in the doorway with his arms crossed and a tight scowl.

“I need answers.”

A call came to my home, that Monday morning.

I had finally, finally slept. And what woke me up wasn’t Toshiko, or Nami getting ready for work, or even nightmares, but a phone call.

Probably the coroner? I thought, forcing myself up. I’ll get in trouble if I don’t answer this....

It took everything I had, but I managed to get out of bed over to the receiver.

“Good morning, Niihan,” came the voice of Katsura. Niihan was the terribly degradating thing he called me, instead of Niisan. It was not the actual word for half-brother, but instead amounted to a literal, “half of a brother.”

Still, it made him sound like he had a lisp, so whatever.

“What do you want, Katsura? I had a hard night.”

In fact...

“Terrible news about Satoru. Are you all right?”

...Seemed he’d heard.

I was silent for a while, not sure what to say to that. He normally wasn’t the kind to care. “Do I seem all right?” I answered back, quietly.

“I don’t know,” he replied, a little prickly. “That’s why I’m asking.”

I sighed. “No, Katsura, I’m not all right.”

“Well, okay.”

The line was quiet for a time.

“How did you know about that, anyway?”


It was my turn to shrug. “Okay.”

“Can I throw you a party? Can have it over at my precinct.”
My precinct.

“No.”

“Hey, that’s mean.”

“I don’t care what’s mean, Katsura. I don’t care about much of anything right now, actually.”

“...Gotcha. Well, who’s going to tell Mom and Dad? You or me?”

Shit, that’s right....

“I think it should be you,” he continued. “Give her all the good news at once.”

“Katsura!” I hissed, wincing. "How can you say that—"

“Niisan, Niisan, hang on, I’m not—”

“Don’t you ‘Niisan’ me! You call me ‘Niisama’ or you call me nothing!” I snarled, in a voice harsh enough that it had made grown women cry.

And yet, I didn’t hang up the phone. I wanted to hear what he said to that.

“All right, all right...Keibu, that’s cool. Not exactly what I’d expect a Chief Inspector to call his Superintendent, but whatever.”

“...What?” I asked, a cold shiver of realization spreading through me.

“Didn’t they tell you?” he asked. “You’re working under me now.”

I’d been...transferred? Under him?

“...Are you serious?”

“I was the one that provided the third recommendation for your promotion. We’ve got an open spot, and I thought you’d be a great fit for it.”

My mouth fell open. This...was like my own personal hell coming true.

“And, off the record, Koichi-niihan.... Don’t screw up this promotion.” His voice lowered, deep and soft, like stroking a pet. “Satoru gave up a lot so you could have it. Your superiors would be very upset if you sent back their gift.”

The phone was suddenly a dead weight in my hand; it slid right out, and nearly hit the floor before I got it back to my mouth.

That was when the cold in my gut turned into roiling fire.

“KATSURA! KATSURA WHAT DID YOU DO, YOU SONNUVA BITCH!”

In the next room, I heard Tokko wake up and immediately start crying. But I couldn’t even think about that right now.

“Nothing, Zenigata-keibu. Just my civic duty to this town and this family, and I think your old boss agrees.”
“Katsura! You black hearted, goddamned son of a bitch! I held him in my arms, do you understand that?! I held him in my arms when he was goddamned born and two days ago I had to—!”

“Good for you, full circle, you’re the hero of the day.”

“Daaaaaddyyyyyy...!” came Toshiko’s distant wail of despair.

“And as your new boss, I say, best not dwell on it.”

Chapter End Notes

And that's the chapter! Dun dun dun!

Somewhat related Lupin thing I want to discuss, since I don't have a Tumblr:

Someone on Tumblr posted a screenshot from some episode of Red Jacket where Zenigata and Lupin are in the back of a squadcar, and Zenigata's trying to convince Lupin to go straight and work for a friend of his who owns a bakery. The OP mentioned they "want this Bakery AU to be a thing", and yes, that would be epic, especially considering I sat through all 100+ episodes of Yakitate!! Japan, a show about championship bread making.

But I want to add something that fandom probably doesn't know about this: the reason Zenigata's bringing this up (and in this way) is because, in the Japanese justice system, you only go to trial if you're guilty, and trial consists of everyone you know and wronged (in regards to the case at least) semi-publicly shaming you. Even your lawyer does it, to show that you know the consequences of your actions and have been thoroughly taken to task about it.

BUT, the judge will probably LET YOU OFF with probation (for your first or second major offense, and even up to your fifth misdemeanor offense!), if you:

1) Believably apologize verbally and in writing (to your family and the victim, and in some cases the courts and police);

2) come to a monetary settlement with the victim;

3) someone vouches to watch over you and be your moral compass during probation; and

4) someone comes forward and vouches that you will have steady, gainful employment after the trial. (*Usually offered by a family member in some fashion.)

So, Zenigata's basically trying to get him off the hook, like a good and proper Japanese relative. In no small part, no doubt, because Japanese jail is basically a giant human rights violation (many don't have heat, and you aren't allowed to speak more than 15 minutes a day). So yeah. Serious business, that bakery scene--as hardboiled as it is warm and fluffy. But damn, Zenigata, you're the man.

If you want to learn more about Japanese justice and prisons, you might consider
Dear Other Readers - No, Lupin won't be gone for another four months. He'll be back soon, don't worry.
Boiling Point

Chapter Summary

Zenigata gets a plan, Christof gets angry, and Nadia opens a can of whoop-ass.

Chapter Notes

Ret-Con alert: Let's just all pretend like the previous chapter Zenigata references here *didn't* have Nadia specifically referencing Doctor Le Blanc as a "he." *shuffles that bit under a rug*

Other Notes: This is just a short little cool-down chapter to get us to the excitement of the next few. But at least it's *a* chapter. Sorry, guys.

Dayjob is keeping me busy, but I'm getting through the backlog of work, so that's good. Special thanks to those few who sent me nice notes with words of support and encouragement the last few weeks. c:

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I would like some answers too,” Nadia said tightly, putting away the paddles. “How did this patient get ahold of Morphine in the first place?”

Her fists resting heavily on the defibrillator, she took a look at Lupin, now breathing on his own. Above his boyish face, the cardiograph on the monitor blipped along slowly but regularly.

Huffing with a displeased scowl, the head nurse turned to the rest of us fully, arms crossed and eyes narrowed.

It was a chicken coop of exchanged glances—some nervous, some tired, some threatening—until, fairly quickly, all eyes settled on Christof.

He was next to Marti, but she’d stepped away from him a bit and was currently trying to be invisible. Christof, however, was indignant. He sighed and tossed his head, the epitome of don’t pin this on me. “Angela did it. She came in to give him some, and—”

“I keep telling you,” Nadia snapped, her eyes scrunching shut as she motioned with a decisive hand, “there is no one. In this hospital. Named Angela. Who are you talking about?”

“A brown-haired nurse in tall boots,” I clarified with a frown. “Short hair, close against her head. She was downstairs in the basement with Dr. LeBlanc during the Cat Scan incident. Though maybe she’s actually a tech?” I asked. “She was in the control room with him—”

“‘Him’?” Nadia asked, eyebrows pushing together like they could cut glass. “No, no, Dr. LeBlanc is Christina. The old guy, our surgical instructor, is Martinique. Dr. Louis Martinique.”
“...What?” I asked, a chill running down my spine. I quickly glanced around; it seemed everyone else was thinking it too, in one shade or another. “Then what...were the two of them doing down there? You told me that Dr. LeBlanc was ‘downstairs setting up the machine.’”

“Yes, Christina,” she ground out. “Was she not down there?”

I shook my head. “No. It was Angela and...I guess Martinique. Do you have any other techs?”

“Not during this snowstorm. That’s why Christina was doing it in the first place.” Nadia huffed, and put one hand on her hip, while she gestured with the other out at the snow.

Nadia had told me, earlier in the night, that Dr. Le Blanc had come in late, just before the snowfall but after the explosion, to help deal with the incoming prisoner. So I knew nothing about what this guy was doing here, or how long he’d been there. And then there was Angela, who apparently didn’t even exist?

“So what were the two of them doing down there?” I pressed.

“I don’t know, you tell me,” Nadia replied, teeth gritted. “I’ve never heard of this person before.”

...Never?

But I’d talked to her, given her a fairly thorough verbal examination of who she worked for, what she was doing there, and what her speciality was. If she wanted to kill Lupin, she could have done it when she injected the chemical dye into his arm. I’d never cross-checked it, nor did I watch her administer it; it literally could have been anything, and she could have walked right out of the room (like she actually did), right up the emergency stairway, and out the door. We’d never have been the wiser, since we’d all fallen asleep.

Hell, she could have killed all of us. So why now, if she was going to?

“Who’s in charge of scheduling here?” I demanded.

“Me,” Nadia said with a glare.

“Who’s in charge of this hospital?”

“The Director, but he’s on vacation in Aruba.” She motioned out the window, annoyed. “Why?”

So if the old doc was down there, not batting an eye at Angela, while Christina had let one or the both of them take her place....

While Angela was the last to visit Lupin before this happened...

And now at least two of the three were nowhere to be found....

“We need to lock down this building,” I said, the words hitting me like a brick.

* * *

“Christof,” the Inspector turned me. “Kyle. I want you to detain everyone left in this hospital. Find a breakroom, put them in it and watch them until I say otherwise. Give them whatever excuse you need. Ms. Nadia—” I turned to her. “Thank you very much for all you’ve done and put up with so far. I’m sorry, but I need to lock this place down and turn it into a precinct. Can you please find me a group you trust to secure this building and also setup suitable interview rooms?”
Nadia’s reply, for quite a few moments, was nothing more than a surly look that acted like he was evil incarnate. “You know you don’t technically have the authority to do that, right? Any of that?”

“...Yes.”

This didn’t seem to phase him, and his face was impassive. Probably because he had a right to request it, but she also had the right to deny it. If it was even her who had the authority—it was not at all for certain. We might quickly reach unpardonable conduct territory, if we followed Zenigata down this rabbit hole he was staring down the edge of. Perhaps that was why Nadia was being so tight-lipped. That, and what had just happened, fighting over Lupin’s care.

Nadia glared at Zenigata, but eventually rolled her eyes and held up her hands. “Fine. So long as you know that... I’ll make the call to do an official lockdown of the building, but only for the next hour—and I will be putting your name on the paperwork as the instigator of this.”

“Can you make it two?” he asked.

She sighed, annoyed, one eyebrow raised. “No.”

“One hour it is, then.”

He turned away while she grumbled and went to the phone on the wall next to me. I stepped out of her way, but eyed her closely nonetheless. “An hour and a half,” she said unexpectedly as she put the receiver to her ear, voice clipped, “but only because we need to find Christina too.”

*That’s right, I thought. I never was able to find her, and she still hasn’t shown up....*

The search and rescue training in me was sending up alarm bells. Missing bodies in the headcount was never good. But there was plenty of reason for the mixup. Surely, there were other places she could be? Like lunch? Yeah...like lunch. With the panic to keep Lupin oxygenated, we were never able to sound an all-hands alarm, or any other kind of code across the PA system.

“I’ll call the squad back in,” Nadia said, as Marti and I moved out into the room, toward the door, to give her some space. Unfortunately, this brought me closer to Zenigata, but he wasn’t paying any attention to me at the moment. “Will that be enough men for you, Inspector?” she finished.

He was clearly running calculations, his eyes cold. It was about thirteen guys, right? That should be enough to sweep a building that’s not on fire....

“I’ll be slow, but it’ll do,” he decided after a moment. He sighed and put his hands on his hips, looking at the ground as he thought up his next steps.

I looked over at Lupin, and then at Zenigata. The difference in their energy levels was tremendous, for obvious reasons, but it was a shock to see. It was no wonder he was trying not to look at him.

Nadia, however, had no similar concerns; she eyed her patient, then considered the Inspector for a few long seconds, like she was considering another tongue lashing. What came out, though, was more sympathetic than not. “Well you’ll just have to find the right motivation for them, then.” She put the phone to her ear and turned to us, her back against the wall, as she waited for someone to answer.

“Wait,” Kyle said, speaking up for the first time. He was standing by the window, and quickly got everyone’s attention. “You’re thinking someone did this to him? On purpose? It’s been an hour. Over an hour. If that’s the case, they’re long gone by now. If they’re a professional, I can all but guarantee they aren’t even on the base anymore, snow or no snow. They could have left by water.
or hell, by the front gate while we were all distracted here.” He pointed at the coast out the window, then at the bed.

“Shit,” Zenigata muttered, staring at the ceiling briefly. Apparently he’d forgotten about that. Not that it wasn’t understandable, though; it was easy to lose track of time when you were working on a trauma patient. I’d lost hours that way, at multi-car wrecks and apartment fires.

Nadia turned away and started talking into the phone while Marti detached from my side and went to Zenigata’s. Quietly, she touched his sleeve and offered, “I’ll stay with Lupin.”

He nodded gratefully. I just frowned. She was always sacrificing for everyone but herself....

“All right, everyone,” the Inspector said after a moment. “We’ve got a mole to catch, and you’ve surrounded by guns and drugs. Consider everyone a suspect and all suspects armed and dangerous until proven otherwise. You have half an hour to find and detain Doctor Christina, Angela, Doctor Martinique, and anyone else that may be in this hospital building. Christof, you’ve seen Christina, so—”

“Wait. Inspector, before you—”

I lifted a hand, though he shot a commander’s glare at me that all but incinerated the words in my throat.

“Ah...” was all I squeaked out, in the end.

Holy hell, I had no idea he could do that.

“...What is it?” he asked a little more quietly, turning to me. Still, it was obvious his patience was gone. Marti, next to him, gave us both long gazes, holding her hands in front of herself primly.

Ugh, I hated that cowed look on her.

I hated it even more on me.

“I forgot something!” she had said, but that had been over five minutes ago.

Curious, I checked my watch, and then the door behind me. It was open, just a crack. Lupin wasn’t making any noise. I sighed, and went in to check on him. Maybe he was asleep again, in which case, I’d close the door for him.

Though maybe if he wasn’t asleep, he could help pass the time a bit, till Angela got back.

As I entered the room, I found he was indeed laying on the bed, turned away from me and as still as if he were half dead.

I checked the monitors out of habit, expecting to find the slow pulse of green waves and numbers.

It was red. All red, with a question mark for a heartbeat and a flatline that was every once in a while blipping, erratically.
Huh. Maybe he pulled out the wires?

Wait. Why is there no noise, if it's all red?

*I turned to him, picked up his arm to feel his pulse and look for the missing node.*

As I did so, a bottle fell out his hand, clattering onto the bed.

*Just as my eyes flicked over to it, I realized...he didn’t have a pulse.*

*I stuck my hand flat on his chest, then against his neck, then put two fingers under his nose.*

“Holy shit,” I whispered once, then again at each revelation.

He’s not breathing.

“Help!” I shouted, first anemically, then with vigor, turning out toward the hallway. I frantically looked for the on-call button, but paused for a moment to picked up the bottle that had come from Lupin’s left hand.

Morph...ine. *The* morphine? Shit....

Looking for the call button again, I quickly found it—and a needle situated under his other hand, completely empty of contents.

“God, what did you do,” I whispered, slapping down the button, then pulling apart his gown and going for the defibrillator kit that was stationed in the room for emergencies.

“C’mon, man, Zenigata’s gonna kill me if you die.”

I shocked his heart, and I did chest compressions, and I breathed for him. But no one ever came, no matter how much I screamed for help. Eventually, I just had to forego the work and call the desk operator, listed beside the telephone.

“Hello?”

*It was the worst feeling I could remember, standing around on the phone, waiting for someone to pick up, whilst looking back at a patient turning blue. A patient that only had me to save him. Every second I wasn’t on him was a second he was losing some piece of himself.*

“Nadia? Nadia! Thank god, I need your help—”

“What?”

It was Marti who had hissed the word. Zenigata, beside her, just frowned, somehow managing to look more pissed.

*What, don’t blame me for your messed up psuedo-kid’s death wish.*

One of Zenigata’s eyebrows raised like an ice pick and he turned to me, arms crossed and stare hardened. He took a deep breath, and his chest expanded formidably.

“...About that,” he said, crossing his arms. He nodded at Nadia. “She said a bottle was found in his *hand?* Explain to me how that happened when you were supposed to be *watching* him?”
Part of me twitched at that, and given that I’d had maybe twelve hours of sleep the last two days, had just gone through hell to keep this guy alive, and now I was being threatened for dereliction of duty by this guy that routinely caused my desk partner heartache because of the same, I wasn’t able to keep myself from snapping back.

“I was supposed to be watching who went in and out of the room, not him,” I clarified, slowly and icily, pointing at Lupin, just for the sick satisfaction of forcing Zenigata to look. “Per your request. And I did that. In fact, I did more than that; on Lupin’s request I checked all the supplies she had, so it’s not my fault she then tried to kill him, which, oh, you know, why would she? That is the most incredible conclusion someone could come to. Unless—oh, is it because you haven’t been telling us something that we really should have known?”

“Hey,” Kyle said, putting a hand on my shoulder, but I ripped out of it with a vengeance.

“Get off of me,” I growled. “If he even so much as suspected that, he should have told us! She’s been wandering around here for two days, any one of us could be dead!”

I scoffed and flicked my hand at Zenigata, who never had looked over at Lupin. As far as I was concerned, that just showed what his priorities really were. “So don’t blame me for this when it’s you who’s dropping the ball and putting people in danger. I have been putting up with a hell of a lot from you, looking the other way to shit you shouldn’t be doing—or hell, should be capable of doing and aren’t—”

“Christof!” Telli scolded, but I ignored it. In fact, my finger swung around to her, my voice running hoarse, even as I shouted at Zenigata.

“—Not to mention how you treat Telli all the time, that I have to pick up the slack for. Do you know how often I listen to her cry over you?! And that’s when you’re not even here!” I threw my hand down, and damn it felt good. “There’s a hell of a lot you’re not telling us and fuck, your prisoner’s more capable than you are and he’s literally going insane, isn’t he?”

Marti was slowly inching away from both of us. Kyle’s eyes were wide, and he was readying to jump on someone as necessary. Nadia was probably staring at us too, ready to unleash hell upon me for shouting in her patient room, but I couldn’t see her and wouldn’t be bothered anyway; she weighted maybe half of what I did, if that.

Zenigata, meanwhile, showed no change whatsoever.

“Are you quite done?” he asked, dryly.

“No, actually.” My heart was racing, and I suddenly felt short of breath, even though my throat was raw. I took a deep breath and pointed all my white-hot rage at Lupin. “Your prisoner tried to kill himself, I saw it my goddamned self, and yet you are grasping at straws to defend him. Look at reality for once and stay the hell away from Telli, because I don’t want the same thing to happen to her!”

That got Zenigata’s attention. His eyes flashed, and he looked at Telli, wide-eyed. She looked alarmed and confused as well, and eventually stared at the floor, touching at her hair.

“Sorry Telli, but I’m tired of holding your secrets.”

“Is that true?” he asked her, everything else forgotten.

“Uhh...?” She grasped onto a curl for dear life and looked at me, balefully. Apparently she was speechless.
Keeping the ones I know, anyway.

I narrowed my eyes. I might not be able to uncover all of her secrets like the brass wanted me to after all of this time, but there was a good chance I could make them irrelevant going forward. Convince her, forcibly or otherwise, to make a clean break from the past that chained her, in the form of this guy.

This guy, who was doing a remarkably good job of putting people in danger and nearly getting them killed.

“Are you still...?” Zenigata asked softly, turning to her. His face crumpled as he added, “...Because of me...?”

I narrowed my eyes at that, too, and this time clenched my teeth. So he knew. That prick.

Telli looked around for help, especially from me. “Christof, why did you—?” she hissed, but I just tightened my jaw. Sorry Telli, it has to be tough love this time.

Zenigata took up her hands in his, somewhat unconsciously, so I just rolled my eyes and scoffed. As he opened his mouth, she pulled away before he could speak. She shoved her hands in her pockets with a nervous smile. “Maybe we should just...worry about Lupin right now...?” she offered, biting her lip and pulling at that curl for dear life.

The Inspector took a deep breath, ran his hand over his face, and sighed. He finally turned to Lupin, his eyes turning watery as he looked even more concerned over his hand.

Seemed he’d finally broken out of the robot shell.

Good, I thought, feeling satisfied. It’s a start.

But when I looked at Kyle, he was downright angry. Enough to make me shiver, a bit, since he was so much bigger.

...What the hell was his problem?

“Gentlemen,” Nadia said, hanging up the phone and preventing us from reaching whatever black fate awaited my head at the American’s hands. “You’ve got your force. They’ll be here in ten minutes. Inspector, who’s coming, and who needs to be held for questioning?”

She looked at me then, for some reason. I had no problem holding her gaze back; in fact, I pushed my shoulders back.

“Soldier, you’re out of line for this operation,” she said to me.

“I am not your soldier.”

“You damn well are if you’re under my roof in my patient rooms causing goddamned trouble,” she snapped, running right over me and hand in the air like a knife. “So if you don’t want me to go off on you like a drill sergeant, you better shut your damn mouth and not say that thought that’s on your face.”

“Then I guess you didn’t want me to save him?” I sniped, hackles raised. I whipped my head around to Zenigata. “I could have let him die. I could have just gone and sat back down and said, ‘look, problem solved.’ Would you rather I have done that, or are we ready to see the truth and be done blaming me now? You’re lucky I was even here—!”
“No!” Nadia shouted reprimandingly; it echoed around the room. She came up to me, clapping her hands like a monkey with symbols, her voice getting ever faster. “I. Care. About. Getting. This. Patient. Healthy. Our priority is. Locking. Down. This. Building! So do you think you can address the priorities or do you need to have a timeout somewhere doing pushups until I get back, soldier?!”

I stepped back a few steps, until my back was against the wall. “Woah, look—”

“That’s enough,” Zenigata said, picking up his coat from the rack and digging into the pockets for his cigarette pack. “Thank you, Ms. Nadia.”

“Any time.” She took a step back with a smile, then added, lips instantly reversing direction, “Don’t smoke that in here.”

“No ma’am.” He nodded and put the cigarette in between his lips without lighting it, then said to me, “Clock’s ticking.”

I glared.

He sighed, took the cigarette out of his mouth and put it back in his pocket. “I appreciate what you’ve done. I do. But there are questions I need answers to, Marti isn’t one of them, and yelling at each other isn’t going to help. So can I count on you to sweep a floor with Kyle, or would you rather resign from this assignment? You can hang out in the break room with the other staff until I take your statement and then you can go home, and I won’t mention this to your superiors.”

I eyed him for a trick, then Telli. But she quickly looked away from me, staring at the floor. That stung. But I suppose that was all I could expect, at this point. I went back to Zenigata. His gaze was stony, but his posture was oddly relaxed.

“Do you feel qualified, in fact, is perhaps a better question,” he continued. “This may be more dangerous than I can ask of you, if you haven’t had the training.”

And yet, it was both of them, standing together, looking at me expectantly, that made me realize I’d lost this fight.

But I wouldn’t lose this war. Not by a long shot.

I took a deep breath, lips pursed, and then sighed. Hands on my hips, I nodded. “I have plenty of experience sweeping burning buildings. Anyone who’s lost, I can find. But if you honestly think I might get shot, give me a partner with a gun.”

Zenigata waved at Kyle lackadaisically. “Done.”

I eyed him uneasily. Kyle, the bull mastiff, smiled cheerily as he cracked his knuckles.

In the end, I sighed. “Fine. But only for you Telli, I hope you get that.”

She just shook her head, her hand wrapping around Zenigata’s arm. She wouldn’t meet my eyes, looking like she couldn’t decide to be angry or tragic.

“So should we be thinking someone else is coming for him?” I asked, eyes flicking from her to him.

He shook his head. “Like I said,” he offered with a heavy sigh, turning to Lupin with a rather
longing gaze. “Consider everyone armed and dangerous. But I guess...we’ll know once I make a few calls.”

...Calls?

* * *

“Meet me in the main lobby,” I said, which was the tune that finally got Chistof and Kyle out the door. Kyle rather manhandled him, but it worked in the end.

I took the nearest chair and sat down heavily, my head between my hands.

Marti moved off to the machines and started clearing up the litter left over from the code blue.

“Marti,” I said, the thought coming to me as I saw her work, “Set aside the bottles and instruments Lupin and Angela should have touched. Try not to disturb them.”

“Yessir,” she said simply, turning back to her task.

God, it was good to have a dependable partner. Not that it had done much to prevent the crisis, this time.

Only saved me from it. Only saved me.... I hoped.

Nadia watched the two men go, then came over me, equally exhausted. She stood in front of me, a set of prim, sheer-white leggings ending in sharp white heels the view as she set her hand on my shoulder. “I’m going to tell you this now, and I’m not going to mince words,” she began, in a kind but professional tone. “His body’s basic functions are working on their own again. They’re no longer inhibited from the drugs. But there’s probably some brain damage. Possibly a lot. That blond guy”—she pointed out at the door—“Did everything he was supposed to, but it was still a while before I arrived and got the patient oxygen, let alone you arrived and we pushed the Narcan. So he could be fine, or he could be...substantially altered. There’s no way to know until he wakes up. I’m sorry.”

Tired, weary, Nadia finished this monologue by plunking down into the chair by the window, the picture of overwhelmed and harried. She put her head between her knees and stared into space, her hands threaded together over the back of her scalp.

After a few minutes of silence, Marti came over and rubbed my other shoulder.

“What was he talking about?” I asked, lifting my head. While Nadia was still within earshot, I didn’t have the energy to care. She could no doubt keep a secret.

“I guess he wanted more credit for saving Lupin’s life,” she said, frowning lightly.

“Not that,” I said. I took her hand and held it between mine, and rested my head against her arm. I squeezed her digits tightly. “You.”

“Oh...” she said.

That was the entirety of her response. She just stood there, stiff as stone.

“Do you really cry over me?” I wrapped my arms around her middle and drew her near. “Because of me?”

“Sometimes,” she admitted, wrapping her arms around my head, sheltering me. She ran her hand
over my buzzed hair, playing with it against her palm. “But it’s more about the circumstances, than you.”

I squeezed her skin, encouraging.

“He doesn’t know the whole story either, so when I’m sad about what I don’t have, or what lead up to us being apart, and I tell him, ‘oh you know, I had a bad night,’ the only person he can blame is you.”

“...I see,” I said.

“He also doesn’t understand the difference between my happy tears and sad tears, when you bring me flowers.”

“What’s wrong with bringing you flowers?” I asked.

“Donny used to bring me flowers at work. After Giuseppe would hit me.”

“...Oh God, I’m sorry. I didn’t know—” I looked up at her, but she just shooshed me and smiled momentarily, sadly.

“I like flowers,” she said, shaking her head. “I like them a lot. See, I don’t want them to stop, even if they make me cry sometimes. That’s what he doesn’t get.”

I looked over her face, over all the pretty features I’d gotten so used to feeling warm because of, and then sighed. I put my head against her stomach again, and she let me, rubbing my shoulders silently.

“Maybe we should tell him the truth,” I offered after a bit.

“Maybe,” she admitted, but it was noncommittal. For the first time, her tender words turned decidedly stern. “I shouldn’t have to, though.”

“True,” I said, smiling a bit at hearing her firmness reappear, despite it all. “But smart kids need all the details to make their own conclusions, otherwise they will inevitably make the wrong ones.”

Against my cheek, her stomach expanded as she sighed. “It’s true.”

Around her curves, under my arm, I looked out at Lupin.

And the brave ones will also act on their own to do what they think is right, whether they have the full story or not. Usually sooner than later, in the case of the desperate ones.

I close my eyes and sighed too, pulling her tighter.

Please don’t have done this because you thought it was the right thing to do.

It was a thought I still had about Satoru, sometimes, even after everything. That maybe I had it all wrong all these years, and Katsura and my boss had no hand in it at all. Maybe Satoru really had just done it because he finally felt the proper shame for bothering the family all these years.

And in this case...there was just enough doubt to not know which was it was.

Please be enough of you left to let me find the truth.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, into her shirt. It smelled like her, soft and soapy and comforting. “I’m
sorry I’ve pushed you aside for him. It’s just...”

Still, it wasn’t the right way to deal with it, even if Satoru had finally found guilt.

“Shh,” Marti whispered, rubbing my back. “You lost a child, Zeni. That will always be more important to you. I’ve known that all along. It just comes to the territory, with you.”

“Yes, but you did too...” I mourned, apologetic.

“I’ve moved on,” she replied. “Because mine’s actually dead.” Marti drew my head up, and I found her smiling thinly. “And because I have you to look forward to, pushing me into the future.”

My eyes widened, struck with the force of her in the golden afternoon light, streaming in from the window at our side.

“But you are still stuck in the past with him, trying to pull that life boat to shore.” She nodded over at Lupin.

I sighed. The view of him in that bed was so much like Monaco, it was making me sick to look at. “Seems he is too.”

“Yes, but we’ll fix it. I promise.” She settled her hands on my shoulders, at the base of either side of my neck. I could feel my pulse there, and hers too, thrumming along with mine. “Besides. If we’re being honest, Christof is my replacement Alessi. How can I begrudge you your replacement Tokko?”

But...

“Would you like me to speak to Christof, then? About us?” I asked quietly, staring at her shoes.

...You shouldn’t have to be in here with me. Or worse, forever waiting on that shore....

“No, I’ll do it. He’ll just get more mad at you. He’s young; he doesn’t quite know the fine lines between personal and professional life, yet, and I don’t think it’d go well, coming from you.”

“Oh, well. All right then, but if you need me to talk some sense into him, I will. You can take care of yourself, he needs to understand that.”

“Yes I know, and thanks,” she said, offering a smile. “I’ll let you know how it goes.”

Marti hugged me gently. “This too shall pass,” she whispered into my hair. I hold her back, head sheltered on her chest.

I feel like I can’t breathe...

“You said...you said you had seen people come back after an hour and a half,” I mumbled, ashamed to even say it. “So why did you stop at sixty?”

Above me, Marti took a long breath, then held it. She was decidedly tense. “Well,” she began, starting to pat down my hair, “I...didn’t actually see that, myself. I read about it in a book once. And...that person was sixteen.”

...Oh.

I hiccuped, sickly.
She’d just been trying to convince Nadia and herself. She’d been doing it for my sake. And maybe Lupin’s. But eventually, she just couldn’t hold back reality anymore.

I squeezed my eyes shut and tightened my hands, clasped together at her back, just to feel something familiar, comfortable...something within my control.

But the blackness was just so dizzy.

“Thanks...Marti.”

I couldn’t get the feeling of Lupin’s ribcage off the skin of my palms.

Or the feel of warm red water, sliding down my arms.

“I messed up.”

It wasn’t long before the tears broke free again, but at least this time, they were absorbed into her warm, gentle shadow.

Chapter End Notes

Quill's Corner - A Blog

I got pre-approved for a mortgage! This is the first step to getting away from my mixed-bag (and slowly deteriorating) living situation, woo! It's all very exciting. Wish me luck!

I'm taking two community art classes. I definitely recommend it as a way to stave off the winter blues.

Political Glub Glub [feel free to ignore]: World's going crazy, but the grassroots push back is amazing. 25,000 women actually *surrounded* the capital building of my state (which is in my town), when they were expecting 1/10 that many people, and they've been filling the legislative chamber rooms and even the hallways during every BS vote.

Personally, I have been writing editorials for the newspaper, attending political action how-tos, and looking for political causes to join. So, good progress there too.
Chapter Summary

Are you ready for some answers?~

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the delay in posting--real life has ceaselessly demanded my attention the last few weeks, after almost a year of putting it off. (haha)

Speaking of, the fic's one-year anniversary is in a few weeks! I'll put up a fluffy Lupin x Jigen gift fic to mark the occasion, since that slowburn has been reeeeelly agonizingly slow.

Music for this week: "Cold" by Maroon 5 + Future

See the end of the chapter for more notes

White. White light, streaming through the bank of floor-to-ceiling windows.

There were three of them, standing rectangles with half-circle arches on top, illuminating the wall panels with ambiance like fairy light.

The walls were in a french aristocratic style, white and pink, with thin but ornate raised engravings of ribbons, fruits, and playful cherubs, all painted a luminescent gold. The recessed ceiling was similar, with white crown molding encasing white medallions of molded plaster. A many-tiered crystal chandelier hung in the center far above, scattering tiny rainbows in every direction.

Below it, there was a living room set of white couches with golden trim that looked brand new, and light wood floors that shone across the vastness like a dance studio.

The entire space was like walking into a dollhouse, or maybe a castle of old.

I held my mother's hand and gripped it tight as I gasped in awe. “This is for us?”

“This is for us now,” she agreed. Her hand gripped mine in return, and she smiled down at me, in that beautiful morning light full of rainbows. “This is our home, from now on.”

Her smile turned sad. “You can thank your father for it.”
My father.

Something I had no memory of. Someone I heard of only in stories told at the edge of a bed late at night, or at a park when the very sunlight seemed to inspire the storyteller. Sometimes, very rarely, these stories came because of a painting or photograph, though I had no idea which pictures would be host to my mother’s memories, and which would not.

Perhaps that was why I came to love them so: museums and paintings; any old object of story and inspiration.

Perhaps that was why, as an adult, I feel so much joy in stealing them like a little orphaned monkey demon: collecting forgotten memories and looking after them, ferrying them to wherever they want to go, when they have no one else to call.

Regardless, I was nurtured on sweeping tales of a grand mystery man, told by a woman who loved the dramatic, and loved to smile while she was doing it.

Tales of a dark and handsome figure, tall and slender and with a clever spark in his eyes, who always bested his adversaries. A man you could rely upon and believe in to do the right thing, no matter the circumstance or adventure.

And Oh, was he ever a man of adventure, always with his beautiful paramour at his side! Sometimes he got her out of trouble; sometimes, she got him out of trouble. All together, they were like god-favored beings destined for legend, and when she told these tales, I lived in them with her.

My mother seemed like a different person when she told these stories. Looking back, it was like a muse of old had inhabited her—or that, perhaps, that was the real her, come back to life for a night, an hour, a moment in time, thanks to the very memory of the power of her divinity.

And so too, that was my “real” father—the one in the stories.

I figured out, many years later, that the stories she had been telling me weren’t the stories she and he had penned together, but the stories he had told her, of his time before he had met her.

Of a woman I’d never met, would never know the name of...and neither would my mother. And yet, a woman she would always be second to, and I, third.

Love was funny like that.

Yet she’d believed him, believed them, to that point that, even after he was gone, she’d wanted to live in his tales.

And it was little wonder why.

It was a time they were both trying to reclaim.

A time that I would always exist outside of.

My earliest memories were of living at a brothel. I wasn’t sure which one, but I remembered, distinctly, that my mother went by a different name at the time. Taiyo Tanaka. That had been her name then.
It had been a happy time. She worked nights, so we’d have plenty of time to wander during the day and explore every place of learning there was. She told me that she wanted me to strive for something better than she had; to think big, and do big things.

She taught me to paint, with brushes of every size and shape, and colors of every hue.

Watercolor, acrylic, oils, ink—it didn’t matter. Small canvas or large; wood, cloth, or paper...anything was fair game. And I remember so many days, so many smiles, where we’d both be covered in paint to the point of being mobile rainbows.

One time in particular, I remembered her holding my tiny hands in her lap as we sat together on a concrete floor, smiling as her nose touched mine. We’d actually gotten in a paint fight, the way some kids got in sword fights.

This is art, she had said. This is making the human heart visible.

The memories were vague but bright, tiny snippets of a broader canvas. But the words rang clearly in my head even now, so many years later.

This is how you shine, my little light.

...So maybe that was not just one time, but every time.

But then, something happened.

The storm cloud sent from the gods finally found the little family of nymphs.

We left town in the middle of the night. She pulled me up out of my bed, gathered me in my coat, and rushed out the back door to whispered voices.

I hadn’t even had time to get my coat on.

I remember that it was cold; I could see my breath.

I also remember the stars. Hanging above the glowing arc of distant cities, as she walked from town to town with me on her back. That first night in particular, a particularly beautiful city was glowing below the constellations like something out of a movie.

There were many nights like that in a row, where we quietly found lodging, only to leave abruptly. I remember, vaguely, starting to sleep during the day because of it.

No more museums; no more walks through the park. No more bedtime stories that weren’t laced with pauses to listen to footsteps; no more life lessons that weren’t rushed in desperation. We went from place to place, back room to back room, where I was told not to speak to anyone if I was allowed to walk around; not to make a noise, if I wasn’t even allowed to leave the room; not to breathe, if I had to hide in the rafters.

After a bit, we stayed in a winery. I remember the walls, for some reason: the warm-yellow sandstone, hard against my fingertips. It was hot by then—in this part of the country?—and the air was cool on my skin.

And an old man, thin with an easy air, leaning against a giant wine barrel. I remember that, too, and how he patted me on the head so kindly. He liked my drawings and gave me a piece of candy after
every dinner, if I ate all my vegetables. At those dinners, he made my mom smile so brightly.

I remember, too, having to hide in one of those empty barrels, while the sound of a fight came. First a verbal fight, and then a physical one.

And that when I was let out of the barrel, there were three men on the floor, and the old man was sheathing a knife. They were in a circle around him, like some old painting. There were also red droplets on my sketchbook page, open on a nearby table.

“Looks like you may have to go soon,” he had said, with a sad smile.

I wasn’t sure how long we stayed there in the end, but I remember it being the last stop during that long monsoon season. But when my mother and I eventually settled, it was in a far different place—a far colder place, in every sense of the term—after a fire in the night and a long train ride under a starless sky.

I had no idea why, but my mother never painted again after that.

Maybe it had to do with the scratches and ashes on her skin, that first night she stole into the darkness with me.

The bell. I remember the station bell clearly to this very day; the sound splashing across the canvas of my dreams to illuminate the view of the platform, like spilled ink spreading on a page.

Even though I can’t remember anything about the train ride itself, or what hellish night brought us there, I can remember that clear, brass bell’s ring in the sunrise. That bell, that somehow had escaped the German invasion to ring for wayward souls like us, some twenty years later.

I don’t know if it was engineered to sound sad, or had simply acquired that somewhere along the way from all the horrors it had seen, but somehow, that bell had always sounded mournful to me. I could hear it almost every day, from where I lived.

As I stood on the station platform of what would be my new hometown that first morning, the air was cool again; it was salty, and smelled unhealthy. It was...a saltwater body, on this side ringed by run-down, dingy buildings crammed together in a town where the sun never seemed to shine for all the clouds; and yet beyond the water, on the other side, stood proud, white cliffs, that very often gleamed in the sun.

That would be the cold view I stared at for years and years—became part of, for years and years—as I idled my time along the shore.

I would stare at those white, sunny, faraway shores, so often birthing massive rainbows beyond the whitecapped waves:

First with curiosity,

then with awe;

and then with hope,
Until eventually,
I had none left.

I became just another silhouette
on the edge of that haunted sea,
namelessly melding into its history....

I would come to stand on that harbor shore yet again, the day I took a boat to Britain to get to the London airport for the first time.

I finally crossed underneath that bridge of gorgeous rainbows, the day I started my journey—the journey to find my father, so that he could rescue me from the hopeless landscape at my back.

As the boat left the cloudy city behind and sunlight broke over the prow, it was like the color had come back to me.

I tipped my head back, held out my hands to the wind, and let the sun soak into my skin.

_Ah, muses, give me a story worth telling;
_O, Athena, patron saint of those too clever to be lucky,

_show me the tools I need to survive this quest...._

My first school-age memories were of school and “the club.” I had no idea what its name was; I still don’t. To me it was just “the club my mom owned.” I wasn’t sure of the particulars, but this, too, she said, came courtesy of my late father.

And that, by the way, I had to call her “Sunny” now.

“Why?” _I crinkled my nose._

“Because you just have to. If you don’t, I’ll get in trouble.”

_I stomped my foot down. “But I don’t like that name.”_

_She cupped my cheeks, looking sympathetic, then ran a soothing hand over my hair—though it was decidedly anxious. “Please just forget I ever had that name. Now, do you remember your name for the first day of school?”_

_I sighed. “Yeah....”_

_It was a slightly less stupid name than her new one—my middle name.

_She smiled and kissed my forehead. “Good.”_
School was always an odd affair. *School for the Gifted,* it was called, with big gates and large, ornate brick buildings. They were some of the nicest buildings in this rundown town.

And yet, I couldn’t bring anyone home with me, because of her rules; and I was not allowed to go home with them, because of their parents’ opinion of us. My friendships were all transient work relationships; they existed only so long as a kid was in my classroom.

Still, I liked learning, and school was a restful place full of teachers, whom I liked—the ones that didn’t moralize me, anyway.

But either way, what I liked most of all was the club. In terms of practical knowledge, I learned far more there than I ever did at school.

There were people of all shapes, sizes, and colors at the club. Fancy people, plain people, nice people, people that fit the term “freak.” Dapper musicians and beautiful singers, people who showed me how to contort myself into the letters of the alphabet, and even some tattooed folks that breathed fire.

But mostly, women that wore a whole hell of a lot of sequins and feathers—if they wore anything at all.

For a budding artist and performer, it was a wonderful place, full of color and personality. Even the place itself was quirky.

The sound of gears and theater chairs. The texture of red velvet stage curtains and the brass-and-green light above the Maitre D’s podium. The gloss of the piano in the lobby; the swirling patterns on the ornate carpet and the copper ceiling’s tiles. The near-endless honeycomb of hidden passages, from the fact that the building was a complex made of at least five town homes—hundreds of years old and probably on top of something a thousand years older than that—put together on either side of the theater.

As far as I knew, we owned the whole block—probably got a bargain on the canal-front property, because it was in the red-light district, and half of it was falling down. But that, of course, made it only more fun for a child.

The colors, lights, and sounds of the dressing room and its girls. The old trunk I slept within in my mother’s office when I wanted to nap, and the dusty ceiling above it. The attic, full of every wonderful, forgotten thing.

And my mother, who would take me home at night to that ornately beautiful cupcake flat with the big windows, so vivid in my memory.

It was a wonderful place—a wonderful time—until another “something” happened.

It was not necessarily something traumatic. It was just...something. A series of somethings,
perhaps, slowly changing my environment.

My mom got ever more tired every day. She didn’t work nights anymore (more like second shift), but I had a job too now (school), and when I came home, she was often gone. On the weekends, I had to help tend things at the club if I wanted to spend any time with her. And that meant that, even when she did have time, neither of us had much energy and any attention to each other was rarely exclusive. The times she was around to tuck me into bed were few, and when she did, the happy stories she told me waned. A tinge of sadness—of despair—slowly infected all of them.

Sometimes, she’d just sigh, and stop in the middle of my bedtime stories. When I’d complain, she’d yell at me.

Honestly shout at me. She’d never done that before; she’d always gone out of her way to never be curt.

But more and more, that was what I got.

In the end, I stopped waiting up for her. I would eat the dinner left for me in the fridge (with a cheery note), do my homework, draw, and then crawl into bed. There, I’d tell the old, familiar stories to myself and my stuffed toys, because they were better that way. In the morning, I’d leave mom a note about my exploits and troubles (signed with utmost affection, like hers) and then walk to school, often getting hissed at by passing nuns.

In essence, my mom had become my penpal.

Perhaps because of this, I often made up some stories of my own on the way to school, of what my father and his cohorts would have done in whatever situation was effecting me that week. I acted them out wherever I could, in a mash of languages no one else could understand.

It was that which, so often, would bring me to stare at the distant, sunny cliffs the school faced, sometimes with playmates, and sometimes without.

It was on one such early-morning playdate on the rocks with a girl named Alise that I realized a startling truth:

My mother seemed to have forgotten the best parts of her own stories.

But that was only the beginning.

The muse was about to fall to earth permanently.

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My mother never painted anymore, and while I was still allowed to, it seemed that, every time she saw me at it, she turned dreary for at least a few hours, if not the entire day. So rather than share, I’d come to hide it from her. There were people I could share my creativity with at school, on the rocks, out in the world, at the club—but never at home.

But like any important loss that goes unresolved, she searched for something to take its place. And that something for her was the oldest one in the book: alcohol.

There was always liquor available at the club, and since my mother was the proprietor, she’d hang
out in the lobby/bar quite often, greeting longterm clients, friends, and their associates that they brought along for business. Sometimes, she’d sit with them, helping broker deals over dinner or cards.

Sometimes, she’d tuck me into bed with a kiss, and then spend the night with them.

And all this was fine. By night, she was beautiful in ballgowns and gems and trendy hair styles, and everyone liked her. And by association, they liked me.

The issue was the mornings, when she would cry.

She might be sitting on her bed and cry. She might be at the breakfast table and crying, and trying to hide it. Or in my hiding space, trying to hide herself.

“What’s wrong, mom?” I’d ask, every time.

She’d wipe at her eyes and say, “Nothing, sweetie.” Maybe turn away from me. Maybe hide the martini in her hand. “Mom just had a sad thought.”

“Well why are you doing that?”

She would chuckle gently, an almost magical sound. “Why indeed.” Then she'd pull me into her lap, and run a soothing a hand over my hair. “So tell me. What’s going on in school today?”

I would shrug. "Not much.” Only to brighten a moment later: "But you know?! There's this one thing...."  

And she would listen to me, with a patient but melancholy smile.

But after a while, this narrative changed. She’d just look at me, something hollow in her eyes, and instead of physical assurance, I got only words. A wheel of answers that were ever changing, but always prefaced with the same lie:

“Nothing, sweetie.

“...Just something in my eye.”

“... Mommy just had a bad dream.”

“...One of mommy’s friends got hurt.”

“...I’m not sure what’s wrong.”

“...I just can’t seem to feel happy today.”

“...It’s nothing. Go to school.”

“...Leave me alone.”

Some days, she would get out of bed. Some days, she wouldn’t. Those days, I’d find, I had no lunch. The notes had stopped long before this.

One time, I drew her pictures to help, but that only made it worse.

Much, much worse.
I had drawn a long narration of my father’s gallant adventures in multiple pictures (it was a school project that had the art teacher wanting to call the newspapers about me, which my mother instantly quashed, much to his dismay...and mine).

As she lay in bed that Saturday morning, I presented it to her, acting it out with costumes and everything.

And then, all of a sudden, she burst into tears.

“How,” she moaned, her face in her hands. “Why do you have to look so much like him?”

These vague, early memories of mine were smattered with sharp recollections of her unhappy moments, growing ever in number over the years. Of her crying; of her hurt; of her in pain I couldn’t understand and couldn’t fix, no matter how much I offered to hug her, help with chores, or create things for her.

No matter how much I tried to shine, my light was never strong enough to revive my mother.

Perhaps, it was that I was not the one she wanted—the one that would break the spell of endless cloudy days cast over the life of “Sunny.”

Some of these events that caused her duress involved strange, oddly brusque men getting thrown out of the club, or the occasional outpouring of sadness when one of the girls “got sick” and had to leave.

But some of them were just random, particularly the ones started by my mother. A lot of times, something odd would set her off, and then I’d find her either screaming at me or crying by herself a few minutes later—or hours. (If she did anything but sleep.)

There wasn’t a lot of rhyme or reason to it. I spent much of my early life trying to figure out a pattern and how to react to it—or anticipate it—but there was only ever as much information as held in a single constellation when trying to understand the entire night sky.

Sometimes she got angry. Sometimes she got sad. Sometimes she got both, and sometimes things that made normal people sad made her gleefully happy for days on end.

She’d often say things during these fits of pique that didn’t make much sense, too.

*I wish I’d never had you.*

*I love you!*

*Why couldn’t you just be what I wanted.*

*You’re everything I could ever want!*

*Why did he have to leave.*

*Why don’t you go for a while?*

*I told the truth, so why...?*
No one ever tells the truth....

Don't trust anyone.

Don’t shine for anyone but me, my little light.

The worst of all was when she’d look at me and proclaim I was looking ever more like my father. Something inside her snapped that first time she said that, and things between us were never quite the same after that.

The irony of this situation was, of course (as I understand it now), that the more I tried to be an adult for her—the more I grew up—the more she pulled away from me. The more I reminded her of my father, the less she wanted to remember him.

And it wasn’t because I was just doing so great a job of being him.

It was almost like...she was becoming afraid of me.

As you might expect, this schism created another hole she needed to fill.

...One she filled with the affection of strange men.

Around this time, she’d upgraded from mixed drinks to wine. I’d come home to see her with an entire bottle in her hands sometimes; she tried to hide it, but I wasn’t blind.

She also smoked too, though that wasn’t unusual—everyone did at that time. She even made it look elegant, as did many of the patrons and performers, in their fine hats and suits. Sometimes the club was so full of smoke that you could hardly see the act from the back.

But I had to wonder, in later years, what exactly that smoke was.

Case in point: Boyfriend Number One (as far as I remember). Thrown out of the flat for good when I was six and half years old because he tried to give me what, I know now, to be crack.

Because he honestly didn’t know any better.

But he, too, was only the beginning.
"Taiyo" means "beam of sunlight."
Welcome! I'm entirely certain this suite of chapters and the character of Lupin's mother can be better, but I'm invoking the 80/20 rule on it. It's time to get back to happiness.

Totally unrelated to this chapter, because I still don't have a blog:

1) "The Catch"--that ABC show that I'm pretty sure is a Lupin-in-his-40s fanfic in disguise--has a second season starting this week. Watch it, develop a love-hate relationship with Not-Fujiko it, feel visible as a fandom.

2) The lead female actress in Broadchurch, a British crime drama on Netflix, is basically my Marti headcanon, though maybe a little older. Check her out: Olivia Colman. She was also in The Night Manager and even does voice acting work on children's shows. http://www.imdb.com/name/nm1469236/

Evening, one Fall night at the Marie Antoinette apartment. Or more specifically, the apartment hallway.

My book bag lay forgotten on the floor beside me, half open. My knees dug into the ornate carpet, and my hands were before me, slowly twirling long, slender steel rods that glinted from the lights overhead. One rod had a short curve at the end and one had a longer bend; eyes closed, I tried to feel the hills and valleys within the lock that stood between me and dinner.

I could smell it, cooking in there, but no one was answering the door. I knocked, I rang the doorbell, I called. I attempted to look under the door, too. But nothing, and no one, revealed itself.

Now, that in and of itself wasn’t odd. What was odd was that my key hadn’t worked. But what did I know about keys? Maybe that was just a fact of life with them?

So eventually, it’d come to this. It was amazing what you could learn from people at the club.

Still, my concentration was starting to fail me. I was very hungry; I hadn’t had lunch packed for me this morning, so I had to cobble something together from the fridge, friends, and things stolen on the way to school.

But if Mom was making food—and boy did it smell good—that meant that she might be in decent spirits. I relished that thought almost as much as the meal about to come my way.

A few more twists and insertions later, I got to the back of the lock. The sound of the last tumbler lifting was music to my ears, and in a moment, I stood and flicked my wrist on the knob. The latch was heavy, but I made it work.

“Moooooooo,” I called, bouncing inside as I put my tools back in my bookbag. “Mom, I’m home!” That done, I dug around my bookbag for a specific piece of paper. I had something very important to show her: “We went through the color wheel today, but I told all the kids about tertiary colors
and chroma and intensity but they didn’t get it and so Ms. Pomme took me aside and—”

I strode into the kitchen, which was around a corner at the far side of the living room. My mother was there, but when she looked up from the cooking pot she was leaning over, it was with a look of surprise.

The kind of surprise when adults didn’t want you there.

“...Mom?” I frowned at this, then turned around behind me. I had completely missed it before, but there was a man sitting on the couch, his arm over the back of it. He looked at me, then looked at my mother, with a long, dark frown.

I looked between the two of them, suddenly aware that the room was very quiet.

He wasn’t a man I recognized. He was tall and well built enough to be highly intimidating to a child. His hair was black, and fairly long around a clean-shaven face. His jaw was strong too, and his eyes were almost white, they reflected the walls so brightly. They must have been some very light color to begin with.

“...Oh,” I muttered, sure I’d interrupted something important for the business. “...Sorry.” I bowed at my mother without waiting for a response, then went to sequester myself in room.

Two sets of eyes followed me around the corner and down the hallway, silent the entire time. However, this room let me in easily. I sighed, and swiftly went to set my books on the table—only for the bookbag to make a large whunk sound.

I looked beside me. There was no table.

I quickly flipped on the light switch.

My room was...empty.

My bed was gone. So were my desk and easel. It was all just...empty. Like there had never been anything at all.

For a moment, I was entirely sure I’d just broken into someone else’s home.

I went back into the living room, feeling oddly numb. I couldn’t quite feel my legs, or my hands. My thoughts, too, so usually sharp, were slow in coming and thick on my tongue.

“Uhm...” I began. The man was watching me, but said nothing as I went to the front door. I opened it and hung on the knob, looking out into the hallway for a second. The plate above the door had our name on it. And the number was right, too. So...?

I eyed the mystery man as I shut the door again; he was standing now. He disappeared into the kitchen while I just stood there in the living room, confused. The living room definitely looked like ours, and that was definitely my mother in there. I even recognized the smell of the dish she was cooking; it was one of my favorites.

Maybe I had a new room? There always had been a few doors to the place that didn't ever open. I had figured they were utility closets, but maybe not?

As I was wondering about this, my mother appeared, wiping her hands on her apron. She looked nervous, and surprised...maybe hesitant was a good word for it. After a second of awkward silence where I looked up at her anxiously and she looked down at me in a similar fashion, she
smiled...sort of. It nearly became her usual greeting before her lips fell into a displeased frown.

“...Mom?” I asked. That looked very similar to the ‘I’m about to get yelled at’ face, and the timing was striking me as a “it’s not something you’ll understand” episode. Maybe she’d been drinking all day with this guy?

“What’s going on?” I continued, putting all my courage—and blind hope—into the act. “Where’s my...everything?”

“Didn't Raish talk to you?” she asked. Raish was the evening Maitre D’ who handled ticket sales and inquiries.

I shook my head. “I didn’t go to the club,” I explained simply, very careful to keep my voice neutral. Normally, I’d go there after school, because it was assumed Mom wanted the quiet time during the day. I’d stay there till evening, doing homework, until things started up. Then I’d go home to have dinner with Mom. We’d spend a few hours together, she'd tuck me in, and then she’d go to work to oversee the night’s activities and clients. “I was at the library.”

But tonight, I’d been given homework with subjects the immigrant guys and high school dropouts at the club could only look upon with awe and praise and scrunched noses.

My mother opened her mouth, then nodded without saying anything. But, rather surprisingly, rather than praising this like most parents would—or like she would, most of the time—she looked off, into the kitchen, with concern. The way she would when she needed a bouncer and one wasn’t around.

It was where the man still was, and the, presumably, boiling pots. So maybe she was just concerned about the meal.

“I thought you were going to spend the afternoon there,” she said.

I shrugged. “Where's my bed?” I asked again. At this point, I was fairly used to her dodging questions. “I can wait there if you’ve got something—”

“Um...” She worried her hands together.

Slowly, my mother bent down and took me by the shoulders. Her hands were warm, but trembling. They didn’t feel like the comforting hands that had so often hugged me and tucked me into bed, or the strong hands that had broken up fights at the club. “Here, honey. I need to tell you something.”

I squirmed, shifting around on my feet a little. “...Okay.”

I looked into her eyes, and her dark ones stared sharply back at me. It seemed like she opened her mouth to say something, but then lost it. She shut her mouth and stood up, taking my hand. “This way.”

I complied, clutching that hand all the way.

She sat down on her bed with me—she still had a bed, it seemed; everything was in its place in her room—and then ever so primly set her hands on her lap.

“You know that I provide for us, right?” she began. “And that sometimes it’s hard?”
I nodded and patted her knee. “You do good.”

“Thank you, honey. But...well, you know, sometimes it’s really hard. Too hard. Because I have the responsibility of taking care of all the girls and guys at the club, too. And to do that, sometimes I have to make sacrifices.”

I nodded again. I knew about those. Things like not having money for ice cream, or not being able to come home at night.

“Well, you see...I found someone who really wants to help us out,” she continued, looking at the bureau. “Long-term. But...he...” Here, her voice caught for a moment. She smiled a bit, sadly, tilting her head; she still wouldn’t look at me. “But he doesn’t want children.”

I blinked at that, rather enjoying the view of my mother’s profile, but not the tired, sad look on it. “That’s okay,” I said. “I’m not his child.”

“No, that’s...” She finally turned to me and frowned. A little chill went down my spine, and when she put her hands on my shoulders, it only got worse. Displeased mom was not a good mom to be around. But rather surprinsgly, when she spoke again, it was gentle: “Look at you...my little boy.” She smiled kindly, then tenderly cupped my cheek. I smiled back, leaning into the touch.

“Honey,” she said, “It means you can’t live here anymore. He doesn’t want you.”

“That’s fine. I—”

It took me a second, but once the words sunk in, they wrecked me. Along with what she said next: “He only wants me,” she finished quietly. “I’m sorry.”

“Wh...at?” I asked, eyes flashing. “But where am I supposed to live?”

On the street? Please don’t put me on the street, it’s cold out there—

“You’re going to live at the club from now on. You’ll be taken care of there. By Raish and Xing and Zora...”

She continued to talk, but I barely heard it. I looked over her face, her room. Everything was spinning. I couldn’t breathe.

Dozens of retorts shot through my mind, and like a chess player, I calculated them several moves ahead down the conversation line. But each came up as a failure because it was pretty clear by her tone that arguing would be futile.

My normal response was to deflect and talk my way out of adverse situations, but this wasn’t something you talked your way out of; you had to talk your way into it, and when it came to my mother, tricks only worked when she wasn’t sober, and she seemed plenty sober now.

So why?

She was looking down at me. I looked back at her, tears growing in my eyes.

I don’t...want this....

I couldn’t quite figure out any more than that. My brain was just...stopping, before any more could come. Like a wall in my mind, slowly blocking out everything.
“Mom, help....”

“What...?” came out of me eventually, in the silence. I looked at my lap, my hands, and then at her. My eyes were so blurry that I could hardly see. “But I want...to stay here with you....”

“But you can’t,” she said. It was the final word on the matter.

I ducked down and started crying. Wailing was more like it, as I wiped at my eyes.

Over my head, she sighed. “See, this is what I didn’t want happening....” Her hand pulled the back of my head into her chest. Soft, warm, safe, infused with the scent of her perfume...I wrapped my arms around her like a monkey, refusing to let go. “It’ll be okay.”

“No it won’t!” I sobbed.

“Hey.” She grabbed my shoulders and yanked me back. “Don’t you do that.”

“Do...what?” I asked, momentarily startled away from the tears.

“Be a bother.”

I forced my lips shut, but the tears just fell again silently as I watched her. I was vaguely aware that her hands were bruising my arms.

“Don't tell anyone, okay?” she added.

“...What?” I asked again, confused.

“Please don’t tell anyone,” she said patiently, her hands lifting away. “Or you’ll never be able to come back.”

Suddenly, I felt like I wanted those hands back, even if it was to hurt me. That was far less scary than being left without any touch at all. The distance between us could have been chasmatic, for all the cold that suddenly seeped into me. “...Why?” I asked tightly, bewildered.

Her lips tightened, and her words turned stern. “Because they’ll think you’re poor. And no one likes poor people. That mark will follow you forever, and I don’t want that following me.”

Poor. You are something poor, and I don’t want that.

I shook my head, unable to speak; I wiped at my eyes, but there was so much water on my hands that it failed to do much to clear my vision. But I didn’t have time to pay attention to that. Everything was going faster and faster in my head and yet going nowhere at the same time. I wanted to please her, but...I also didn’t want this. There had to be a way out of it? Something I’d overlooked? Some motive, some nugget I could exploit?

“If I can’t have a room, can I sleep with you, then?”

“No. He’s going to be doing that.”

I frowned, then shook my head out. “I can stay on the couch. Or in the closet. Maybe under the sink...?” (I rather enjoyed hiding under there.)

“No, honey. Please stop that.”

She knew my game. I stared at her, on the edge of despair.
“Is this because I broke that plate? Or washed those curtains wrong?” I began, voice turning treacherously tight and high. “I’m sorry I jimmied the lock, my key just didn’t work, and I thought —”

“Speaking of,” she said. She held out her hand.

I sniffled, but the tears paused for a moment, at this.

“What?”

“Give me your key.”

I shook my head, my hands tightening into fists to keep them from going to my pocket. “No,” I protested.

She gave me a dark look, but then closed her hand and held her head high. “Well, I guess that’s okay. It won’t work anymore, anyway.”

“What?”

That was when a new voice called my mother’s name. It was the man’s, from the other room. She turned toward the hallway. “Coming,” she called.

My mother stood up and gave me a small smile, then patted my head and gave me a kiss on the forehead as I burst into tears. “Don’t go...”

“Please be quiet, I don’t think he’ll take kindly to any more interruptions.”

Interr...uptions...? I’m just an interruption...?

It was as I was thinking this, unable to form coherent words in complaint, that the door to her room shut—and locked.

I sat on the floor for the next hour or so, tucked up into a ball and talking to myself, going through ideas and rehearsing every possible conversation flow.

When the door opened again, I was whip-crack alert and wound tight as a screw. I stood up to greet my mother, justifications for my existence on the tip of my tongue.

But the person who came in wasn’t her. It was the man.

He stood in the doorway, his hand on the knob, a dark silhouette with his shadow stretching inward. And yet, I could still tell he was giving me an up-down, as his eyes tracked around the scene.

And they were cold eyes. Light as snow, but with a soul as dark as the night. Something about him just seemed...dangerous. Off. He wasn’t from my part of town. I shivered and took a step back.

“Hey,” he said without much emotion, nodding his chin at me. “Time to go.”

I shook my head and stayed put. “I want my mother,” I demanded.

He sighed and leaned against the doorframe, his weight to one side and sizeable arms crossed.
“Don’t be like that, kid.”

I pursed my lips, frowning heavily. “Mom?” I called, hoping it got out into the rest of the apartment.

But no reply came.

The man gazed out at the hall, then back at me. “What are you doing?” he sighed.

“I want Mom,” I sniffled, pulling at the hem of my school jacket.

“Don’t you want to be a man?”

“A...man...?” I eyed him suspiciously, but the bait was tempting enough to dry my tears for a moment.

“Yeah, a man,” he gruffed, holding up a finger. “Men do what they’re told, whether they like it or not, cuz it needs to be done.”

I eyed him suspiciously, but it did make sense. “And this...needs to be done?”

“If you want your mom to be okay.” He unfolded his arms and took a step toward me. “And you want your mom to be okay, right?”

“What’s wrong with her...?” I asked, backing up a bit more. My back hit the wall; I was trapped. But the stranger didn’t come any closer.

“She owes people money,” he said. “Including me.”

I frowned at him.

“It’s either this or sell you. And she didn’t want to do that, and I’m a nice guy so I let ‘er have ‘er way. You’re getting off easy, y’know.”

I thought about this for a moment, scowling, but I didn’t quite know what to say to it. I stared at the ground, fists clenching. “...Okay.”

It wasn’t okay, and I didn’t get it. But I was starting to. I had to do this...to protect mom. From this guy’s friends. And mom had to be protected at all costs, because she wasn’t always in good health.

“Good boy.” He tossed my schoolbag at me, which I’d left in the living room previously. I quickly clutched it to my chest, glaring at him.

“Your mom’s tired,” he continued from the doorway. “So I’m gonna be taking you to the club. You got anything else?”

“Well, but...” I looked around in fits and starts, but nothing seemed to be really coming to mind. It was my mother’s room after all, not mine. And there had been nothing in my room....

Just Mom....

Eventually, I just looked at him and shook my head, now holding both arms around myself, trying to be as small as possible.
“Then it’s settled.” He set his hand on my back and navigated me through the apartment. I went along with him silently, even though the touch made my skin crawl. Whatever was happening here, at least people at the club could fill me in on it, could maybe come up with a plan. Maybe, this was just one of my mother’s “bad decision days,” and tomorrow she’d change her mind.

Yeah, maybe that was it. In fact, that had to be it. I pushed my shoulders back, confident in my plan—until I walked into the living room and saw her.

She was sitting at the dining room table, her head in her hands. Her dark hair was draped over her elbows, pooling around the wood. She wasn’t looking at me. She was staring at the space between her hands with a very strange expression on her face.

“Mom,” I called hastily, suddenly remembering the paper from earlier and reaching into the front pocket of my bag, “Mom, can you sign this? It’s from school—”

But the man just grabbed my arm and hauled me back. “Ow! Mom—?!?”

She looked up, that same strange look on her face. It was something between scared and sad. But she never rose from her seat.

I was hauled out the door before I could get the paperwork out. I stumbled into the building’s main hallway; as the door started to close, I called into the narrowing crack, to the view of her pensive, pretty face:

“Mom, I’ll see you tomorrow, don’t worry oka—”

The door shut in my face.

The man and I walked down the narrow, winding streets in silence. I stared at the ground, just far enough away that he couldn’t reach me easily, while he looked everywhere else, pretending I didn’t exist. He even whistled sometimes, his hands in his pockets and his head tilted back. I noticed he had tattoos on his wrists.

When we got to the back door of the club, I was ushered to stand on the stoop. There was no one else there, and the heavy metal door was closed. It was cold; I shivered as I stood there, though his presence wasn’t helping. I could hear the sound of the theater though, pumping out music.

I liked it at the theater, I really did. But I’d never been expected to stay there overnight without my mother, and it was a daunting prospect. Without her to tuck me in, who was going to make sure the monsters under the bed stayed away? They’d eat me.

“I’m sorry,” I said, whirling around on the stoop. “I’m sorry, for whatever I did. I won’t do it again, I promis—”

But the man only held up his hand. I flinched a little.

Yet no hit came. “You like this place, don’t you?” he asked instead. “It’s fun, right? Has all your favorite people?”

I turned to look at the wall of windows above me momentarily, frowning. “Well, sure, but…”

“Then it’s fine. They’ll take care of you. And that’s what we all want.”
I pursed my lips and stomped my foot. “But I want my mom.”

He took his time lighting a cigarette and then shrugged. The end of it glowed gently, like a red beacon in the night. “You don’t get everything you want in life, kid.”

I watched him with a consternated frown, but unwilling to do or say anything that might provoke him, what with my back trapped against a door like this. After a drag or two, he tapped the ash away and said, “Don’t go back. Unless you really want to end up with the trash.”

And then he left.

I sat on the back stoop, crying in the cold, until someone finally opened the door for a smoke. Naturally, the door hit me as he did and pushed me right off the stoop. But that was okay; it gave me a chance to wipe my tears. Or maybe explain them away, at least.

“Oh, hey there little guy,” said Rex, one of the guards. He was Raish’s brother; they were both friendly Turkish guys. They cleaned up well and were family-oriented, so they made the place look more regal (or so I was told) and they were also willing to entertain the stray kids that were occasionally dropped off in the lobby by new customers who didn’t know any better. “What are you doing out here all alone?” he asked. “It’s late. And too cold for a little person like you to be outside.”

“Hey Rex,” I said, hustling into the warmth. “Didn’t you hear? I’m——”

Then I paused, remembering my mother’s words:

*Don’t tell anyone. They’ll think you’re poor.*

And if they thought I was poor, they’d think she was poor, which would make them think their jobs were in danger, and then they wouldn’t like us anymore.

I forced smile. “I’m gonna be sleeping here for a while. Renovations at the apartment.”

Once I stepped inside, the sounds of a show were bright and happy around me. And it was so much warmer.

My back to Rex, I wiped at my eye.

*Maybe, just maybe, it’ll be all right....*

“Oh,” Rex said to himself, like he understood something. “Sure.” Then he mumbled, “Did you come here all by yourself?”

I shrugged. “Rex, where’s Zora?”

Zora was the show choreographer. She had two kids a little younger than me that lived in one of the attached townhomes where the kids were stored. Generally speaking, she took care of the errant children—so long as they all submitted to her terrifyingly stern Russian dance lessons.

“...I think she’s gone to bed for the night.”
“...Ah.”

Somehow, the hallway before me, previously so full of fun and mysterious junk, just seemed like a dusty, claustrophobic tomb. I sighed.

“Hey...you had dinner yet?” the man asked.

Dinner... That perked me up a bit. Maybe I could chat with Xing for a while.

I sighed and looked back at him, over my shoulder. I forced a smile, though it was wane. “No, Rex.”

Here I saw yet another strange look on an adult’s face that night: He was looking at me with a long gaze, like he was trying to read something off of me.

It was a familiar look anymore, and I smiled slightly, sadly. “Did I just say something too mature again?”

“...How old are you, again?”

That smile fell as the musing extinguished from my eyes. “Almost seven, Rex.”

“Jesus.”

“Hey, Rex. Does Jesus know where my stuff is?”

Tell me they didn’t just throw my clothes on the curb.... I need to go to school tomorrow...

But Rex, grinning and oblivious to my plight, shook his head. However, he suddenly announced, “Oh! There was a delivery today though, behind the office? Try there.”

I nodded. “Thanks.”

I walked through the interior narrow passages between the buildings with nothing but my coat and my bookbag, wooden floorboards squeaking underneath the muffled sounds of a raucus show.

Men were laughing, and trumpet mutes whinnied comedically. Gears whirred, and there were thunks from the steps of stagehands and women. I wandered through the backstage of women wearing rainbows, ducking in between the caress of feathers and the scrape of glitter.

Through the back, past the fire door, around a corridor and up the black set of stairs.... That was the back way to my mother’s office.

The whole campus was set up such that there were the hourly chambers in the townhome to the left, and the girls lived in the townhome to the right. In between them was the theater, which was where the lounge and kitchen were, too. Beneath the hourly rooms was the pool and poker hall, which always sent the scent of cigar smoke up through the floorboards. Beneath the kitchen was storage, and some wine cellar tunnels into the void that I wasn’t yet brave enough to explore.

Luckily, the only thing in the basement of the housing wing was dusty antiques. I climbed to the second floor and the door to my mother’s office. My key to that, luckily, still worked.

The office took up most of the floor—what was once some posh living room, complete with fireplace, chandelier, and built-in bookshelves. A view looked out over the street with two large windows, sheer curtains currently letting in some of the streetlight.
But in the back of the room with the large blue-and-gold oriental rug over the floor, there was a door to a small hallway. There, there were two rooms: a back room that was used for storage, and a full bath.

That was where I found it:

In the back room, that was really little better than a man’s dressing room, maybe 10 by 10 feet, was a bunk bed, a desk, and a dresser.

This wasn’t my furniture. It was all new. Well, not new—I recognized a lot of it from the basement.

But my easel, at least, was there, as were all my drawing and painting supplies in their trunk. Leaned up against the desk, too, was my violin case.

And on the bed—was my fish.

On top of a neatly-folded quilt was a plush fish. A colorful tropical fish, blue predominantly, with all the other colors of the rainbow in it too. It was soft, round, and squishy; I’d had it for as long as I could remember.

Letting out a breath, I sat down next to my stuffed friend and pulled him into my lap.

“Well, Pallet, I guess this is…home now….”

*He doesn’t want you.*

I sucked in a hot breath and shivered. I hugged him to my chest and then pulled my knees up too; there, I set my head on my knees.

*If you tell anyone, you can’t come back…*

I sat there in the dark for a long time, pushing the world away. But eventually, the sounds of the building crept in: familiar *tinks* from the steam radiator, but uneasy creaks and blowing winds I couldn’t readily identify a source for. But overall, it was quiet—weirdly quiet. All the girls would be out working this time of night, sure, but it was still weird to me to think that I was in a dark closet that no one would ever find me.

As my cheeks grew hot, the view in front of my face blurred. Even though I refused to blink, the water built up in my eyes until I couldn’t see anything but the colors smearing.

Finally, when I blinked, the tears fell—but I just licked them away, breath hot and short. I wouldn’t touch them.

I put my head down onto my knees and wiped my cheeks on my slacks.

“What’s wrooooong?” the fish asked.

This was really me just talking in a high voice while moving his limbs, but it was enough.

“I’m sad,” I sniffled, head still hidden between my legs.


“Because Mom doesn’t want me anymore??”
“Well that’s okay, I still want you.” The fish cuddled into my stomach.

“You wanna know what I did today at school, Pallet?” I asked the fish, lifting my head. “I didn’t get to show Mom, but, look.” I reached over to my back and dug out a paper; I set Pallet up so that he could look at me. “Ms. Pomme thought I’m advanced enough to be placed in third grade. Isn’t that great! A six-year-old in third grade! They’ve never done anything like it! I’ll save us so much money by skipping two whole years, isn’t that cool?”

I piloted Pallet around in the air, bouncing exuberantly. “That’s so coooool, you’re such a smart kid! All your hard work’s paying off!”

I sighed, fish coming in for a landing against my knees. “...But I need a parent’s signature...”

It dawned on me, not too long after that, that I knew where my mom’s office was. I was, in fact, sitting right next to it.

So I looked through the cabinet with the check receipts and spent an hour or two working on copying her signature.

In years to come, I’d simply sign it with her Japanese name and tell them she didn’t speak French, so there was no point in her coming to conferences.

One year, I had a particularly dutiful teacher who wanted to investigate what was going on with me, but I just told him the truth: My family’s in the criminal world. Please don’t look into it. You’ll die. Luckily, the deadpan nature of what I said convinced him. Or maybe it was just Xing-bao. I was pretty sure he picked up the phone that night.

Either way, that was the beginning of my many forgeries.

My mother and I, needless to say, had a strange relationship after that. The next time I saw her was that weekend.

She came and sat me on the couch in her office, but she seemed nervous.

“Are you…warm enough?” she asked.

I nodded. “…Yes.”

“Do you…have enough to eat?”

I nodded. “Zora makes me lunches. They’re good.”

She frowned at this at first, but then also nodded, like it was annoying but she’d accept it.

“You didn’t tell…anyone at school?”

I shook my head.

“You aren’t…mad at me, are you?”
“You need help, right?” I asked. “This is how I can help.”

“…Oh. R-right!” she grinned and clapped her hands together. “You’re such a good boy.”

“Is he nice to you?” I asked back, in the silence that descended after a pair of smiles that flashed as briefly as a beam of light on a cloudy day.

“Oh! Well, you know? We went to an art gallery, and he…”

I don’t even remember what her answer was. Because, while she was cheerfully rattling things off, something about that question of mine made me understand: I was being replaced.

All last night, and now: that anxious look in her eyes, that dancing around asking what my take on this was: She was asking me for permission.

Permission to leave me behind, so that she could live the life she wanted.

...And who was I to stop my mother’s happiness? A man didn’t do that, to a woman. And neither did a good child. Without my father here, I was the man of the house; I had to take care of her that way.

And that meant I had to let her be free, if I wanted to be the hero of this story. Free of me.

“…Go home, Mom,” I interrupted. “You don’t need to worry about me. The guys’ll take care of me.”

She stopped, looked me over, then hugged me. “I’m so glad you understand! Such a good boy… this won’t be forever, I promise. Just a little while….”

I didn’t believe her. But that was all right; I hadn’t believed anything she’d said for a long time, already.

The only difference was, this time, I didn’t believe the warmth in her arms, either.
My tutors were up in the air during this time. But when I asked my mother about my lessons, this was what she had to say:

“Oh...right. Hm. I’ll have to ask him about that....”

Lessons meant I’d either have to go to the teacher’s place or have them show up where I was. I guess the sense was that, since they’d have unrestricted time with me, and I couldn’t be trusted not to let the situation slip, it was best to avoid anyone with an uppity sense of duty.

So the solution was to summarily fire my tutors and get less reputable ones. My new piano teacher was a very nice young man who always looked a little sickly and worried he might displease me, which could lead to broken fingers for him; the violin teacher was a pretty college girl who was also a girl “upstairs” on certain nights. I think they both owed my mother, or someone at least, a lot of money, and this was part of working off their debts. They were nice people, but a lot less...polished, than the previous ones.

So I studied, and I worked. I helped the girls organize and clean. I helped with makeup and costumes and floor shining. I put together sandwiches and pastries. I played in the lounge, I showed people to their seats. I climbed into crawl spaces fifty feet high no one else could reach to oil gears and string pulleys. I memorized showtunes and tuned instruments and did homework in the back room, a wall behind my mother’s desk, which somehow always happened to empty as soon as I got there. I ate whatever Xing-bao was willing to feed me at night, and was packed off to school in the mornings with Zora’s eldest child.

On weekend mornings, nothing happened at the club; being part brothel as it was, no one even woke up until two pm. But sometimes Johns who’d stayed the night or girls who had the night off might wake up before noon and be decent company. The guys might tell me stories, if they didn’t just ignore me. I might play the piano or practice my violin for the breakfast crowd, which often included the few other children that lived in the far buildings, and that was almost like having a family breakfast.

I never saw much of my mother before that, but now I saw her once a week of dedicated time, and whenever we happened to run into each other.

She always explained this as necessary to business, and, as much as I hated it, I accepted it. That was what dutiful kids did—they didn’t cause problems. They did what the family needed.
That wasn’t to say that I didn’t get angry about it, or whatever rankled me, from time to time. I actually broke my violin once, out of frustration. As a show that tutors didn’t equate to her.

So she just said, “If you don’t have an instrument, you don’t have a teacher. Teachers cost money, and what have you done to earn one lately?”

Just like that, I lost the argument. Just like that, I learned that good things will be taken away from you, if you don’t do what’s required to keep up the appearances desired by the person paying for it.

I also learned that my value was equated with what money I could bring in.

But, I didn’t have the money to get a new violin, and she refused to pay for it (never mind that it was getting too small anyway). I was too young to get a job, and what work I did around the club wasn’t paid.

So, I stole the money. Little by little.

I stole from the girls, but then I found out what happened when you did that: They got beat up by the people who were expecting that money, or cried all night when they couldn’t get what meager nicety (like a bus ticket back home) they’d been saving up for.

So then I stole from other people, the people that could afford it. (And paid back the girls anonymously, and oh weren’t their smiles good.) But that reflected badly on the business, so there were consequences there too. I didn’t get caught, but a few people definitely got beat to hell or fired for it, which left a bad taste in my mouth.

But there’s always someone enterprising in a crime den, so I ended up stealing some jewelry from an exhibit that had come to town and was hanging out in a building across the street. It’s a long story, but it happened more or less on a whim.

“Marques,” I said, one day, to the guy who was, I realize now, basically the club’s bookie and the girls’ pawn guy, and from whom I’d been slowly trying to get the thousand-plus francs I needed for my violin. “What’s this worth?”

He stared at it, a pretty diamond and emerald necklace that had been the headline in the exhibit, and notoriously reported stolen in the morning’s paper.

“Holy shit, is that...?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Is this worth enough for my violin?”

He took a breath, then reached for it. I pulled it back, with a look that clearly said I was waiting for an answer.

“I will buy you three violins with that,” he said.

“One is fine,” I said, and held it out to him. “You cross me though and you’re dead.”

“Dead? Last time it was a leg.”


He laughed, and gave me hug. “All right, kid. Just let me make a few calls.”

Marcques left that night, a tune in his step.
He never came back.

Alive, anyway. They found him in the river out back a week or so later, I was told. That, too, had been in the papers. Everyone was sad; I was seven, so I was just confused about where the necklace had gone, and if I was going to get it back. But it wasn’t like I could actually ask anyone.

So eventually, I asked Mom about it.

“You what?” she shrieked. Everyone in the halls ducked, and where once about ten people were milling, I was suddenly alone. My mom grabbed me by the arm and threw me into her office.

The door shut with a slam as loud as the time one of the grain sack counterweights had fallen from the ceiling of the stage and broken the floor. I was instantly assailed with screaming and did my best to be tiny and a ball.

It never worked, though. She was strong, and always pulled me out of my ball so she could hit me where she wanted.

There was a rain of blows. I lost count by the time I found myself slumped against the base of the couch, staring at her shoes. I touched at my nose; my hand came away red. “He was useful!” she shouted above my head. “Unlike you! Arrrg, why do you do these things!”

“I’m sorry,” I said, tucking into a ball so that her black high heels wouldn’t kick me. “Please don’t make me leave—”

“You should spend a few nights on the street for this! Arg!”

“I’ll find a new bookie, I promise!”

“You can’t, you’re a child!” she yelled, reaching down to pull my hair even as her foot stepped on my side. “That’s the whole point! Why don’t you ever just act like a normal child?!”

“I’m sorry—?!” I wailed, grabbing at my hair.

“Arg!” She shoved me down and stormed over to her desk. I huddled in the corner while she sat in her chair, staring at the fireplace. She was utterly silent—in between mumbling to herself angrily—and I spent the time sniffling quietly, hiding in a shadow of the couch and hoping she’d just leave. Though…her back was turned. Maybe I could…

But then…maybe the door would be locked when I got back. In a way that wouldn’t open, like the apartment.

From her chair, my mother suddenly sighed. “It’s...not that I’m mad at you for stealing,” she said, after she’d lit a cigarette and taken a few long drags on it. “Or about Marc, though I am mad about that. It just...reminds me of your father.”

“My...father?”

I’d never heard about this. Me, specifically emulating him somehow.

“Why?” I asked cautiously, untucking from my protective ball enough to rub my cheeks. They stung, and my fingers were bloody; I could get away with a few cuts, but if they were too dark, I wouldn’t be able to go to school tomorrow. I’d have to call in sick, and that was always a pain; I
liked school, and my few friends there. But moreso the issue was that no one was ever up that early who I could pretend was my non-existent father, and imitating my mom’s voice was tough, since my teacher knew mine.

But this news...this was interesting. This was an achievement. This might be worth a day off.

“Because...” she turned in the chair enough so that I could see her profile. A warm look came over her eyes. “He was a nice man. And he was very good at stealing things.” She sighed, and all the happiness drifted out of her. “He promised to steal me away....”

I watched her carefully, unrolling a little further.

“But he just left me with you, instead,” she sighed.

“...I’m sorry,” I offered after a bit. It seemed like the thing to say.

“...Me too.”

She looked off at the door. “We had plans, you know. Him and I.”

I stayed quiet, but nodded. Not that she was looking.

“We were going to buy an art gallery. Go straight. Fill it full of my paintings. not...his stolen ones. But the ones I’d actually make myself, from my own heart.”

She sighed again, leaning back in the chair. Her head turned to look at me, but while her eyes fell on me, her gaze was interminably far away. “When I met your father...he was a policeman,” she said.

My eyes flashed. Or at least, the one I could open properly. One was getting kind of heavy and not opening right. But I wasn’t about to do anything about it, not with her there.

Still, it was like a stack of cards coming together. Our club had a lot of policemen and other authority types come to it. But also artists too—musicians, performers, painters, photographers, poets. It was a weird mix, that way. Some were corrupt. Most were. But not all. Some, honestly, just used it as a place to broker deals and watch a nice set of legs. I’d never really understood why before, or how.

But maybe...it had something to do with this missing father of mine. Maybe they’d been his friends, or something. It was a cheering thought, and I instantly felt uplifted.

“But he’d been a thief, a long time ago. Far before I met him, he’d grown up as a thief. But he met a beautiful woman when he was young and she broke his heart. He never stole again after that.”

I tipped my head.

“But I reminded him of her, I think,” she said, pulling her legs up to her chest. “He said I was ‘his second chance.’ He said, ‘this time, I’ll really go straight. We’ll see how it goes.’”

She smiled at that, which made me smile. “I told him, ‘you’re my first chance. The first chance I’ve ever had to escape.’”

After this, she started crying.

I wasn’t sure what to say to that, and given the circumstances, it seemed better not to try.
It was the first time I failed to reach out to my mother when she was suffering.

It was not a good feeling. It was...a scary feeling, really. but it also felt...strangely solid, the realization that I was incapable of fixing something and then didn’t have to.

“So what...happened to him, Mom?” I asked, very quietly. “Did he leave?”

She glanced at me, from over her elbow. Her eyes were red, but sharp. I didn’t like it; and I was held under that gaze for a long, long time.

“He’s dead.”

...Oh.

Because of me, somehow. That was the implication in her stare.

“Like Marques,” I murmured.

“Like Marques,” she agreed.

“I…see,” I said, tucking my head down. “I’m sorry, mom.”

“...Me too.”

And she got up and left.

“Don’t do it again.”

When I got to my feet, I bowed at her back. The door shut and locked, from the outside.

It was my version of being grounded. I’d get out whenever she decided to come back.

“Goddammit,” I grumbled the next day, staring at one of my paintings on the small easel I had, as I sat on my bed, being bored, lonely, and hungry. There was a bathroom attached to the office suite, but that was about it. “I want to see Karol again.”

But I also didn’t want to get slapped around anymore. That had been unpleasant; my eye was still swollen shut, and my lip had a tender crack in it. When Mom was upset...it always ended up with me upset too. Since she’d started dating, too, I was never able to be sure when was a good time to talk to her, until I just up and tested the waters.

I also didn’t want anyone else getting killed.

Of course, at the time, I didn’t understand death entirely. I just understood it as “something that left me and never came back, while simultaneously making everyone else behave erratically.”

“I didn’t mean it literally, Marques...”

I frowned, hugged Pallet to my chest, and flipped through the catalog of items that had been part of the necklace’s exhibit. There were a couple of paintings involved.

“...I could paint that,” I murmured.

And so I did.
“It’s a copy,” I said to the man, some months later. “It’s probably from one of his understudies.”

The man wasn’t particularly reputable; his name was Renardo, we all knew him as the shadiest art dealer in the region. But he came to the club more often than anyone should, and so he was easy to lure into the back with the promise of illicit copies. I didn’t even have to lie. Well, much.

“Who painted this?” he asked.

I shrugged. “I found it in the attic. It could be hundreds of years old, right?”

He was a portly fellow, and took out a kerchief to wipe his brow with. “Whew...well. This...this could be...worth a bit.”

I pulled out the magazine I’d been working from, from a top drawer. “It looks a lot like that one, yeah? So I wondered if maybe it was a contemporary copy?”

“Well...it may be. Who...is the owner of the painting here?”

I gave him a look. “No one cares about what’s in the attic.”

“Well, how can you be sure about that? We’d better ask the owner.”

I put the canvas wrap back over the painting (previously over some old costumes and abused in the mud at some point, so it looked about 100 years old) and put on a theatrical sigh. “Well, I guess we’ll just have to wait. I’ll ask her about it.”

“You’ll...?”

“Well I’m her kid?” I asked. He didn’t seem to know that; I’d assumed all the regulars did by now. It was an odd feeling, to realize there were people who came here once a week or more who didn’t even realize why I was there. Had I become that distant from my mother that she didn’t even talk about me anymore? Really...?

But, after a second, this passed, and I smiled at him, sharply. “So you’ve got a direct line! I’ll get you a price tomorrow, okay? Bring a bid. If it’s not high enough, we might have to go to auction for it!”

“Oh! Oh, no no let’s not do that! I’ll bring the checkbook tomorrow! Just be sure to ask her! I’ve always liked her, you know she’s very reasonable, and I gave her that fruit basket last Christmas!”

I remembered that. It had been good. Some much needed vitamin C. I hadn’t had chocolate in about six months up to that point, either. The only money I had was money I stole or received from tips, and all of that I put toward paint. I grinned, coldly. “That was much appreciated, monsieur. Okay. Tomorrow night then, same time, same place?”

“Y-yes, I think…” He came next to me and put a hand on my shoulder. “That would be good.”

He leered down at me, but I glared at him and slapped his hand away. It fluttered away, though his presence didn’t. “None of that, now,” I said. “You haven’t even given me money yet.”

“O-oh!” he said. And then, a foot away from me, he got a very strange, very quiet tone about him.
“...Well how much do you want?” he asked, his eyes going up and down.

It took me a moment, but then I snorted sourly. “Two men can’t do that, they don’t have the parts.”

Mr. Renardo’s eyes widened, and he blushed. “Oh, no no, I don’t mean—”

“Anyway I’m not for sale! Only the painting, Monsieur. Do I look like a girl?” I squeaked, indignantly. “I know I dress up like them sometimes but now is not the time—“

“...You do?” He actually sounded more intrigued by this.

“That’s not the point!” I snapped, throwing my foot down. God, why couldn’t adults ever keep on track? I pulled out a trick I’d seen my mom—and many of the girls—do a thousand times. I threw my nose in the air and said, “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have other business to attend—”

I trailed off for effect and did nothing more. His mouth fell open. “Are you really only eight?”

“Shall I start calling other people?”

“Ah! No! The painting’s fine!”

“Thank you,” I said, barely containing a huff. “Are we agreed to a deal then?” I asked, showing him the door.

“Same time, same place,” Mr. Renardo agreed. “But could you...ah...” he paused, rubbing his sweaty neck. “Wear a dress?”

I guess? I smiled sweetly, my best girl’s smile. “I’ll even wear a bow for you, monsieur.”

“Oh! Lovely. Okay, quite. Then, good day.” He nodded and left.

I sighed and shut the door. “Weirdo.”

“A million...francs,” I whisper-read out loud to myself, after he’d left the next day, and I was sitting alone on my bed with Pallet, in my frilly dress and a ridiculously large bow at the back of my head. I kicked my legs out, frustrated, and the crepe fabric underfluff floated into the air.

“What am I supposed to do with a million francs? I can’t cash this....”

And I didn’t have an account, either.

“ARUGH! At this rate, I’ll never get another violin,” I whined, flopping down on the bed.

I stared at the underside of the ceiling, which really rather needed a dusting.

“I guess...I’ve got no choice,” I mumbled, rubbing at my eye, feeling the ghost pain in it. “I’ve gotta talk to Mom.”
“You...where did you get this?” she asked.

She didn’t mind that I was in a dress; she never batted an eye at that part of me. It probably reminded her less of Dad. Instead, she was sitting on my bed, frowning furiously at the check in her hands.

“Mr. Renardo gave it to me.”

“Yes, but why?” she asked. I looked up, avoiding her gaze. I’d finally found a day she was sober. It helped that she’d dumped the previous guy, though I suspected she had several others circling.

“I gave him a painting. He agreed to sell it for m—uh, us.”

“And this is the commission?” she asked, looking for clarification.

“Uh...no. This is the down payment.”

“There’s more?”

“Probably,” I said. “If he doesn’t run off or end up in the river.”

“What...did you give him, then?” She was eyeing me like she eyed some of the women who said they were virgins, whatever that meant exactly.

“A landscape.”

The check flipped down, and she looked at me sternly. Dark eyes, curving prettily.

“I...may have suggested it was a Renoir?”

“And he believed you?” she all but shrieked.

“Well sure? I know what I’m doing.”

...I said, being eight.

She frowned, then shook her head. “When did you learn to paint?”

“You taught me how to paint.” I shook my head. “Don’t you remember?”

She frowned and bopped me on the head lightly. But it wasn’t a mean gesture, and it didn’t hurt. “Don’t give me lip.”

“No ma’am.”

I didn’t call her “mom” anymore. It seemed to set her off less, if I just treated her like the boss she was to everyone else.

Still, she’d tuck me into bed sometimes, which was nice.

Then again, she also did that to some of the working girls when they were sick, so it wasn’t like that was a thing unique to me. Hell, she did it to them more.

But at the current moment, she smiled and ruffled my hair. She sat down against the wall by the easel, curling up with the check in her hands. “Do you know what this means?” she asked, voice an excited whisper.
“I get to see Karol again?” I beamed.

“No,” she said, putting an arm around me. “You’re worth more than your father thought.”

I frowned at that, pulling away from her. “What do you mean?”

“Oh...well. Ah. He...” She looked around, then, held up a finger, her voice whispering conspiratorially. “We made a bet, one time. Of how much you’d be able to make before your sixteenth birthday.”

Sixteen was the age you legally became an adult, in France.

“...Why?” I frowned at that, even more.

“...And then he gave me that amount of money,” she continued. “That’s what I started this business with.”

I tilted my head at that, but I wasn’t sure where to go from there. She wasn’t really paying attention to me, but rather, was talking to herself.

Still, she was holding me, her arm around my shoulders and my head against her chest, so I let it slide. It felt...warm, this. Warm and safe, in a way that felt familiar and yet so far away in my memories.

I closed my eyes, trying to let it sink into my veins so that it wouldn’t leave me, even after she inevitably did. Pallet could never feel like this, much as I tried. (He also wasn’t scented this nicely.)

“With this, I can be soluble for a year or more...have a cushion...” she was saying as I closed my eyes.

I yawned, tiredly. “Mom, does this mean I can get a new violin?”

“Why do you need that, if you can do this? Just paint more.”

I sighed and pulled the covers up to my face. “I want to play.”

“...Then you shouldn’t have broken it.”

I sighed again, and we watched each other. I looked down. “...I know.”

“...Well, in that case, I guess it’s all right,” her cheery voice continued, unexpectedly.

I raised my face, eyes wide.

“Th-thank you, ma’am!”

“That’s my boy!” she said, beaming and ruffling my hair. “I’ll get you a good violin this time, and then maybe you can play for me.”

For the first time in many months, my mother and I were smiling at the same time. “I’d like that.”

“Say!” she said, as she soon had tucked me into bed, “you think you could make another one? From some other painter, maybe?”

“Sure,” I said, cuddling pallet to my chest under the now-tight sheets. “If I have a reference. It’ll
take a while, though.”

“Oh, that’s fine,” she said. “One every six months, maybe? You don’t want anyone to get suspicious.”

“Sure, mom.” I yawned tiredly and cuddled up with my fish, a little less fuzzy than he used to be.

Her hands were warm and gentle, as they tucked the covers up around me. And for the first time in a long while, they weren’t shaking.

I wasn’t sure why, but I was so happy that I cried myself to sleep that night.

Mom had seen a painting of mine and hadn’t hit me.

In fact, she’d liked it.

Seemed I’d rolled the dice, and lady luck had been on my side, today.

And finally, after two years, I was going to get lessons with Karol again.
Chapter Notes

51 chapters published in 52 weeks! Hah, take that, four months of adverse life situations!

In the last year, I have:
Written 400k+ words of fanfiction;
Edited 36 books;
Gotten 4 editorials published in the newspaper;
Spoke at a protest and joined 4 professional groups and a coworking space;
Watched All of Blue Jacket and Green Jacket, 2/3 of Red Jacket, and 1/2 of the specials;
went on a cruise for the first time;
made several costumes; and
made friends all over the world!

Thanks for being part of my life. :\ It's been good to share the fun.

A little bit after that, a lot of things happened at once. First of all, my mother started hanging around a man named Charles. He was a tall and forbidding man, who took no nonsense at all (even though he always had a smile), and he towered up so high that I had trouble seeing him properly. Honestly, he reminded me a bit of the school principal in that way. His real name was something like Carl, but the important thing was that he had a remarkable penchant for smacking around people that he didn’t like.

Now, my mother tolerated absolutely no one to hit me (minus her), though she did seem honestly relieved when other people offered some sort of parenting service. So when someone was good at hiding the one and showing the other, in that order, it made my life hell.

Of course, living at the club as I was, it was hard to get away with, because there was always someone lingering about that wasn’t you. That was enough protection, most of the time.

The trouble was when Charles would offer to take me other places, and people said it’s good for you. The man had everyone’s confidence. Everyone’s…except for me, my two music tutors, and Xing. But Xing, for whatever reason, was silent on the matter, beyond imminently icy eyes.

The music teachers, including Karol, had been doing their part to keep me in their sphere of influence as much as they could, but they were, really, the bottom of the totem pole. They were even more expendable than the girls, I suspect now; and they certainly had far shorter claws. Xing-bao hated the man too, but they rarely saw each other. The man had something on him, I thought, something that kept Xing’s knives at bay. I’d never seen them cross paths, and even when I tried to make it happen, it somehow never did.

“I want you to go in there and pick a package up for me,” Charles instructed one night, as we stood out back of an alley. It was a long way down the dark, narrow expanse, but as far as I could tell, there was no way out the other end. There’d be no chance to ditch him here and avoid him at
home for a week by living in the crawl spaces.

I sighed.

“Don’t be like that,” he said, taking me by the shoulders. “In you go. Just say you’re—”

“Picking up the three o’ clock package, I know,” I muttered tiredly. I rubbed at my eyes; it was at least midnight.

“Good boy.” Charles pushed me forward, and down I went:

Down the alley, under a wane blue light that shone like a faraway star, and into a red basement.

It was a strange place. No one was guarding the graffitied door, and it creaked open easily into a space that was maze-like and so very red. Every nook of the place was full of people on couches and mattresses, just lying there being...odd. Like bugs that were stunned on their backs. Some of them looked what I imagined dead looked like, all draped over the floor and furniture, occasionally moaning or cooing or reaching for things that weren’t there.

The light was red and dim everywhere I went, with the shadows a wicked, blood-red kind of black. The air was obscured by smoke, so every corner of the twisting hallways was blind. The smell, too, certainly wasn’t good, and changed at every person.

But at the end of the hallway, after having spun around so many times that I had no idea which direction the entrance was, there stood a new door. A tall, imposing iron slab with a thin slot in it near the middle. There were no people around here; it was only bare concrete floors and stone walls. No windows: just one lone red light, bare-bulbed, hanging far above my head.

After staring at it for a moment—the flies seemed to be fluttering around it in odd patterns, like they were drunk—I knocked on the door, to the instructed cadence. After a cough and a hack from me at the smoke, a pair of eyes appeared, as the slot slid back with a shunk.

<“What do you want?”> the eyes asked.

<“...I’m here to pick up the three o’ clock package?”>

The eyes gave me a long look, then quickly glanced aside. <“Hang on,”> they said, in rough-hewn Mandarin. I had been speaking in it, too, though particularly less gangster. Pretty much the opposite of that, really, hoping it would keep me in one piece by the end of...whatever this was.

I kept an eye on my surroundings, but the bodies in the other rooms only moaned. The smoke was thick in here though, stinging my eyes and lungs—I couldn’t see the exit even if I knew where it was, and that was making me slightly antsy. But if I didn’t finish my mission, there’d be hell to pay. I flinched a little, just thinking of Charles’s massive hand against my face.

Another slot, this one much bigger, suddenly opened in the bottom of the door with a frightfully loud shriek, causing me to jump several feet. But it was only a brown paper package, roughly the size of a dictionary, that was pushed out onto the concrete.

The slot made a point of slamming closed. No more talk came. No more eyes. Only me, the smoke...and the paper.

That...must be it, I guess.

I stared at it uneasily, the ghostly moans flitting through the background as I did so.
James Bond had taught me about this. However, at the moment, I was not acting the part of the hero; I was being Expendable Service Agent no. 1.

*Hope for the best, right? I'll get worse if I didn't do this.... Just...maybe this is the part where he’s trying to save the girl by doing the villain’s bidding and he turns everything around by the end, right?*

*Yeah. I'm James Bond, and I'm trying to save my mom...*

Too bad I didn’t have his Walther PPK.

I gulped and stooped to pick up the package. There was dried blood on the concrete floor, smeared away from the door in a thick arc as if by paintbrush. The package had landed on top of it.

But the blood didn’t jump up to get me; it didn’t bubble away into acid. The package didn’t even tick. It was simply hard-packed and heavy, like a book.

I hurried out of the labyrinth, back the way I’d come, avoiding sticky spots. But before I went up the stairs, I ducked into a mostly empty corner nearly void of smells and very carefully unfurled the brown paper.

Under the twine, and under a layer of girlie mags, there was a pile of paper-wrapped packages in little cubes. I took one out, thinking it reminiscent of a small cheese wedge, and pulled it open. But it was all just...white inside.

“What is this?” I wondered, touching my finger to it. “Flour?” I licked my finger. “Sal—”

It was bitter. I pulled a face, and wiped it off my tongue. “Ew, what the hell?”

I scrunched up my nose and quickly folded everything back up (I’d made sure not to unwind the twine tie any more than necessary). I took one last breath of the awful smells, and then pushed the heavy metal door open.

“What is wrong with adults?”

Emerging from the red and ducking under the blue until finally I was under the cold white of the stars, I hurriedly returned to Charles. He was around the corner, hanging out at the late-night coffee shop, of which there were only a few in town. But there was always at least one on the highways, because we were one of the ports for taking ferries across the English Channel.

After leaving the building, I kept the Chinese man’s package hidden in my school bag like he’d commanded, and then sidled up to him. But no matter how long I waited, he just kept sipping his coffee.

This act drove me crazy; he never spoke until I spoke first when we were doing runs like this, but then, back home, he’d always preemptively tell me to shut up if I tried to speak to him. “I got your damn delivery,” I whisper-hissed. “Can I go home now?”

“Don’t you want your ice cream?” he asked coolly from behind his mug, without missing a beat. He spoke slowly, as if he had not a care in the world.
“I want to go home dammit,” I demanded, rather inadvertently throwing my fist on the table. “I’m tired, and I have school tomorrow.”

His steely grey eyes, almost white as the coffee mug reflected in them, stared down at me over the lip of the porcelain. “Who taught you to talk like that?”

I glared at him in response, and he threw the coffee in my face.

I instantly recoiled and wiped at my eyes, at all of me. It was hot, but it wasn’t scorching, luckily. Still, I was covered in rusty stains now, all up and down my front. “Augh, you—!”

I wasn’t sure what happened next, but the next thing I knew, I was face down against the table and dizzy.

The wind was cool against my hot cheek; I noticed that first. Then, how cold the grating of the tabletop was against my other cheek.

We were outside, all alone on the patio and on a deserted street besides. It was midnight and the light was out above our heads, but I could still tell his cup was now in shards, laying in front of my fingers and scattered across the tiny tabletop.

One of the white porcelain bits, sharp as a pocket knife, was slowly and deliberately raking in the groove between my knuckles. Not enough to hurt, but enough to make a point.

It was an almost intimate gesture, though I didn’t know it for that, at the time.

“Augh...what...” I moaned, moving my hand to touch at my head. It hurt. But he only held the tip of the porcelain shard in place, into my hand.

“Look what you made me do,” he said, pressing downward. “I had to break this pretty thing because of you.”

I wasn’t quite sure what to do, and I was too disoriented to think straight. I was all sweaty, too, though I wasn’t sure why. Maybe the coffee? It was a warm night for the season, but not that warm.

“I don’t feel good...sir,” I said, hoping pleasantries would help.

He lifted the porcelain back and twirled it in his fingers, so smooth it was almost mechanical. “You tried some of it, didn’t you?”

“Tried what?” I asked, taking a breath and attempting sitting up. It worked—mostly. I held my head, feeling sick. There was a little bit of blood on my hand, but not much. It was mostly just scraped.

“Stop touching it,” he said. “That’ll make it worse.”

I started to cry. I wasn’t sure why. I just...closed my eyes, and all the heat ran into my face, and I started tearing up.

Charles rolled his eyes with a groan and tipped his head back. “Tell you what. We get back, you can have as much as you want.”

“Of what?” I muttered miserably.

“The package.”
“Why?”

“It’ll make you feel better.”

I shook my head, but that hurt, so I just gave up. “No thank you...sir,” I said with effort, through the tears and hiccups. “Can we go home now? I don’t feel so good....”

“All right, buzzkill.” He stood up and picked up my now-full backpack in one hand, going to the front door of the shop. “Miss,” he called and the woman appeared from the back room. He spoke to other adults in a much nicer, warmer voice than he ever used with me; his vocabulary was different, as was his accent. If I closed my eyes, I’d think he was a different person. “My boy here was doing a trick and broke the coffee cup, I’m very sorry; I told him not to. Can I pay for it for you?”

“Oh! Is he all right?”

“I suppose. Best to get him home and cleaned up though. You know...tears and all that.”

“Um, well...I guess that was one of the old cups anyway, don’t worry about it. Please just leave the pieces and make sure your son doesn’t get cut. I’ll take care of it.”

“Ah, that’s very kind of you, thank you, and sorry again.”

They waved goodnight to each other, and Charles came back to me. I sniffled up at him, wishing he’d just go die somewhere. Like a river, like Marques did. Except I liked Marques. So maybe a fire pit, or a construction site. That was about right for Charles.

“Take my hand,” he said, offering his other to me. “Son.”

“I’m not your son,” I grumbled, but this time he didn’t smack me for it. He just ruffled me on the head, hard, right where it hurt, eliciting the yelp of pain he was hoping for.

He took the opportunity to grip my hand and walk me home. All the way home, where he told the back door guard that I’d fallen in the mud. I was growing, he said, so I’d gotten clumsy. Rex congratulated me.

“Yeah whatever,” I muttered, marching past him.

“He’s getting to that stage early too,” Charles added with a beaming smile, revealing all of his pearly teeth. I didn’t even have to look at him to know he was doing it.

Rex laughed. “What’re ya gonna do.”

He was good at convincing people not to listen to anything I said. At this point, even if I told them the truth about how I felt, or what he was doing, they’d just tell me to stop telling lies. And that was the best possible outcome for me, in those cases. So I’d just stopped bothering altogether.

But at least, this one night a week, I got to have dinner with my mom at the old apartment, which was still as splendid as I remembered it to be. This was the price I had to pay for making that happen. For making sure she was still okay and taken care of.

Then Mom would take a sleeping pill, kiss me and head to bed, and Charles would take me “out.”

“You’ve been a big help today,” Charles said as he waved from the stoop. “See you next week.”

Luckily, he didn’t leave me with any of the weird white powder.
I spent all night throwing up anyway.

Another thing that happened around that time was that my mother started smoking. I wasn’t sure why, but it wasn’t hard to figure it had something to do with Charles. I asked around, and other people said they’d look into it, but it never seemed to make any headway. Even Xing, her closest confidant, returned frustrated reports that she’d stopped listening to him. But Xing-bao didn’t want to worry me about “grown-up issues,” so there was very little he’d tell me these days.

Which was odd, considering that he was always the one who would explain grown-up issues to me.

But where he left off, evidence arrived to deliver the truth: every day now, there were pipes in her desk, around her desk. Little crumbs of white here and there. She would cry a lot. I’d find her in the attic sometimes, crying. Or in her office.

But she’d never tell me what was wrong.

“He’s an asshole, Mom. Dump him.”

A shoe flew my way.

I didn’t bring it up after that.

I just sighed and went back to painting, this time locking my door.

My ninth birthday was something interesting, however. My mother, on one of her good days, decided that I should have a great celebration for all I’d done for the business this last year. I’d made a couple more paintings, and instead of selling them off piecemeal, she decided to have them as part of a larger show. I couldn’t put my name on them, of course, or be mentioned as anything other than “anonymous donor #4,” but I got to go to a real-life gallery show, that doubled as an auction for paintings that were going to go for millions of francs.

The show itself was in a bright gallery one evening, the kind that was so white and glassy that it felt like being on a space ship very close to dozens of shining stars. It was a beautiful place, and the reception was amazing, full of cheese and wine and beautiful people of every hue (and their clothing too).

I went with my mother and Xing-bao, who doubled as her personal bodyguard at times like this. They joked that they got more clout if they “Asianed the place up” (they’d both lived in France most of their lives), but the truth was, he was definitely the most well-trained in martial arts of any of the staff. He could break people (and tables) in half; I’d seen it. (Though it gave me nightmares for a while after, usually, because it also involved bloodied faces of someone or another.)

“Her dress is so pretty,” I said to my mother, motioning to a red-, orange-, and white-floral print that looked like it’d been hand painted. It draped off the tall, dark-skinned woman at a novel angle and then down onto the floor with folds a bit like the ripples in a clamshell, and I was entranced by
the flow of it.

“You can go compliment her on it, if you want,” my mother said, sipping at her dark wine. My mother’s hair was done up with pins and combs, and she was wearing a real kimono, one that was blue, white, pink, gold and even black. She looked a little bit like a butterfly version of Pallet, but that wasn’t something I was going to tell her.

The tall woman in the brightly-colored dress liked my compliments and I chatted her up for a bit. She was from Africa, actual Africa, and her gold-and-diamond necklace was something like 100 karats. Her long, dangling earrings caught the light every time she smiled, this beautiful white curve like I’d never seen, and I could just feel myself melting to look at her.

“You’re so pretty,” I sighed. “I wish I could paint you.”

She grinned. “Well, keep talking like that, and one day, a lady might let you.” She winked. “And that’s not all she might let you do. Hahaha.” She waved after this throaty chirp and drifted off with an elegance I adored. It was like real art walking around, all these people.

When I turned around (we were near the buffet), I ran straight into someone’s legs.

“Oh,” came the legs’ reply.

“Blrg,” I muttered, rubbing my forehead. “S-sorry Monsieur—”

I didn’t get to finish my sentence. Instead, the man’s gasp went off above my head so loudly that I thought someone was being attacked.

But no one was. It was just an old man, with a big, bushy beard-and-mustache combo below a neatly combed-back wave of salty hair, looking down at me through thin, round-edged rectangular spectacles like I was an alien.

“Is...something wrong?” I asked, quickly taking a step back to look him up and down. “Did I...mess up your suit?”

“No...” he said, looking rather startled and putting down his wine glass. “You just...remind me of someone, is all...” He looked around, and quickly picked up his glass again and hurried away from the table. “Here...let’s talk over here.”

I tilted my head, but followed him. I wasn’t sure what this was about, and my child’s instincts for intrigue battled with my club-typical aversion to the requests of strange men. But we were in public, so it’d probably be okay—so long as it stayed that way.

He claimed a quiet spot in the gallery, and leaned against a stark-white stretch of wall. He stared at me for a bit like he was boring into my head, his hand over his mouth. “What’s your name?” he asked finally, softly.

I told him. He repeated it ponderously.

“Is your...mother here?” he asked, a little shakily. “Or parents, maybe?”

I pointed across the way. Mom was talking to some people, looking happier than any time in this city that I could remember. Luckily, she was also being normal. Seemed I didn’t have to worry about her tonight, even with the wine. That was a relief. Leading up to the showing, she’d been doing a fair bit better. I hadn’t had to worry about her getting out of bed for at least a couple weeks.
“In the blue,” I offered, as I pointed.

This didn’t seem to help things. The old man grew pale and went very still, and for a moment, I wondered if perhaps he couldn’t see her. “She’s the Japanese one,” I added, but he waved his hand at me, just slightly, from down-low where it hung beside his thigh. It was a polite gesture, almost conspiratory. I’d seen guys cheating at cards do motions like that, under the table.

“I see her,” he said. Then, very slowly, he turned his eyes down to me, without moving his head. They were intense, but in a different way than Charles’s. His dark eyes looked me up and down, with a scrutiny I couldn’t decode. “What’s her name?” he asked softly.

“Sunny,” I answered. “She owns a club,” I added. I gave him the name of the place, and this, oddly enough, was what finally made him change his countenance—and he broke into a smile.

It was a warm smile, way warmer than it had any right to be.

“Um...I’ll be going now, then,” I said, bowing slightly to him, only to curse myself internally for it. Japanese-style bowing always happened automatically, when Mom was around. Perhaps prompted by a need to redeem myself, I offered: “Unless...you want a tour of the paintings?”

“That would be lovely,” he said jovially, coming off the wall. “Do please let’s.”

I tilted my head at that. It was an odd construction.

“Ah, sorry, the British is coming out,” he added, shooting me a small smile.

I hadn’t seen this many smiles in a while, and certainly not in a row, and it was almost dizzying.

“Are you...British, then, Monsieur?” I asked, trying to keep up. There weren’t many people that put me in that position, these days.

“No, but I did a stint there recently. I’m French, actually, and proudly; have been all my life....”

We got to talking. He made sure I had a cheese plate that was nearly a perfect pyramid, surrounded by grapes and fruits to “balance out the intestines,” whatever that meant. I told him about everything I knew about the paintings in the show, from personal research and otherwise—at least, what I was allowed to tell. But I hinted at a few other things, just to see what he’d say. He seemed fascinated by it all, though I wasn’t sure if he was just being polite. I didn’t think he was, but either way, I didn’t really mind. Even if it was fake, it was warm, this light of his.

“So are you bidding tomorrow night, Monsieur?” I asked eventually.

“Bidding?”

“At the auction? It’s going to be held at the club.”

“Is it?” he asked, thoughtfully. “Do you know if the paintings will be held here tonight, or there?”

“Hmm,” I murmured. “I can ask...”

“No, no need, just a silly question,” he said hurriedly. “It might be fun to see them again, is all.”

I thought this odd, but I shrugged it off. “If you want to see them again, come to the auction. I hear the password’s going to be ‘Moulin Rouge.’”

“Huh,” he said. “Why that?”
I shrugged again, then turned to him, a new thought striking me. “Say! You want to know something cool?” I asked, full of conspiratory excitement.

“What?” he asked, looking equally charmed.

“It’s my birthday today!” I chirped. I grinned and rocked up on my feet proudly.

“Is it, now?” he asked, feigning awe. “How old are you?”

“Nine!”

“Well that’s an important age! Did you get what you wished for?”

My smile fell. I looked over at my mother. “No, but I never get that,” I murmured.

“Why, what is that?”

When I looked back, the man was still half-crouched with his hands on his knees, which was rather spry for an old guy. His inviting, glittering eyes had turned cloudy and concerned. I shrugged and rubbed a kink out of my shoulder from standing straight so long in my little kid’s suit.

“A dad.”

His eyes flashed, and for a second, his lips pursed into a nearly non-existent line. But then he looked off and hummed a dark “Hmmm” as he stood up, running his hand over his mouth.

The last bit was theatrical concern, at least as far as I could tell, but I didn’t mind; I didn’t expect much else from adults, when discussing this. Though the first reaction had been oddly tense. People always got tense, though, when you talked about dads. Adults were weird.

“That’s a complicated gift,” he continued, looking back down at me in all seriousness. “And not something that can happen overnight.”

“I know. That’s why we came here instead.” I forced a smile, which was only half a lie. Honestly, I was happy to be here—delighted, even. “And now I met you. That’s cool too. I think we’re probably going to go soon though, unfortunately.”

I frowned a bit, that realization sinking in, but the old man hummed thoughtfully.

He stood up and twirled his wine flute, which was empty now. It caught my eye for a second, after which my attention was caught again by his other hand, in which appeared a dollar coin.

He gave it to me, and before I could break into a breathless smile, he ruffled my hair.

“Happy birthday then, m’boy.”

He quickly swirled his hand on his wrist, and produced eight more coins in a stack, one by one. My eyes were huge by the end of this, as was my smile. “Cool~!”

The old man was grinning proudly, his hands on his hips and shoulders back.

“Please come to the club later,” I begged. “You can come any time, not necessarily for the auction. I play the lounge piano Tuesday and Thursday night, but you can also just ask around for me....”

“You play at the—?”
He didn’t get to finish his sentence. I checked back, but it was then that, when I looked for my mother, Charles made his appearance near her. “Ugh,” I muttered, suddenly crestfallen. I had hoped he wouldn’t come; I had asked he not be invited. But this was a pretty big event for our town, so it seemed he’d finagled his way in through some other means.

“What’s wrong?” the old man beside me asked.

“The asshole,” I said, then added, “ah, sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” the old man said, putting a hand on my shoulder and patting it. “So long as it’s accurate.”

I snickered. Somehow, his hand didn’t feel like a threat, the way so many did. “I like you, Monsieur. What’s your name?”

He looked at me a little funny at that—I guess I was acting too grown up again—but before he could say it, I heard my mother hail me. Charles was looking my way, too.

I turned around to wave to her, but when I looked back...the old man was gone. Only his wine flute remained, sitting empty on the standing table next to me.

That night, Charles dropped my mother off at the apartment and then drove me back to the club. I was mildly surprised that he actually took me there, and not some other place, but all seemed right with the world, for once.

Until we walked into the club.

It was unusually empty; maybe the place was closed for the night because of the auction; I knew the stage was. Since it was just him, me, and a few of his poker playing friends hanging out on the couches, I immediately made a bee line for the back, aiming for the interior corridor to the other building. But Charles took me by the shoulders before I could.

“What?” I asked, bewildered. I tried to pull out of his hands, but they held tightly to my shoulders.

“I’ve got a surprise for you,” he said, and steered me toward the stairs leading up from the lobby. “Someone still wants to see you tonight.”

We were going into the Left Wing, which was where the girls worked. I’d never been up there, except to clean and the odd occasion where I was spying on someone for someone else.

“But I’m tired,” I complained. “I want to go to bed…."

“Just a little bit now. He’s got a present for you. You want to get another present, don’t you?”

Not from anyone you know, I muttered to myself, but fighting him was futile.

We went down the hallway, which was also eerily quiet. There was nothing but doors upon doors…and the smell of pungent smoke of different kinds, all mixing together in the air.

By the time we got to the last door on the left, I was already holding my breath uneasily. But Charles stood behind me, holding me, so I couldn’t run off.
He knocked on the door, and a few moments later, it opened.

It was Mr. Renard, the art dealer. He was wearing a tweed suit and smoking a pipe.

“Ah! Come in, come in,” he said, motioning to me. Charles’s hand lifted from my shoulder only to be replaced by Renard’s; I was ushered into the room before I could do anything else.

“See ya,” Charles said, nodding at the salesman as he closed the door.

It shut with a clack, and behind him, Renard locked it.

There was nothing in this room but a large standing mirror, a table, a dresser, and a two-person bed. A light hung on above, but Renard’s pipe smoke was getting in the way of it.

“How are you?” he asked, eagerly.

I frowned at him.

“You’ve been very good to me these last few years,” he said, his setting his pipe down on the dresser and sitting on the bed. He turned to me, and patted a spot beside him. “And I hear it’s your birthday today. So I wanted to do something for you.”

There was a box on the bed, between him and me. It was long and flat and made of grey waxed cardboard. There was a pink and gold ribbon wrapped around it, tied in a bow.

“Here, open it.” He scootched a length over, and then motioned at the box.

I gazed at him, then at the door, but unlike Charles—and most of mom’s boyfriends—he was more patient. My gut didn’t feel good at this situation, but I also felt that my salvation did not lie in running away; that’d only upset whatever fragile balance this was, and probably not in my favor.

So I carefully sidestepped my way over to the box, and, standing by the bed, slowly undid the ribbon.

As I did so, Renard’s eyes never left my flank. He was giving me a weird look—it was quiet, but kind of…appreciative. It made that feeling in my stomach worse, so I just turned away from him and back to the box. I lifted the lid.

“…Oh!”

It was, in fact, a garment—as the box’s profile implied. I picked it up by the shoulders and held it up above the bed, then to my chest with a smile.

It was a big, fluffy, pink-and-white dress. There were several ribbons on the front, and a big bow in the back. There was a lot of toole in it too, so the skirt fluffed like no tomorrow.

“It’s so pretty!” I said, brightly. “Thank you, Monsieur!”

“You had one like that when you were younger,” he said, as I examined it. “But I imagine you’ve outgrown it, now. Do you remember?”

I thought back, then nodded, with a big smile. “I do! Ah, I miss that dress….”
“Try it on.”

“…Ah?” I asked, turning to him.

He nodded at me.

“…Now?” I asked. “Here…?”

I looked around, but there was no dressing room. Just the mirror.

“Now,” he agreed. “I want to see you in it, before you take it home.”

“I…”

“Come now, you wouldn’t want to make an old man unhappy, would you?”

“Well, no, but…” I looked around again. “Where can I change?”

“Right here.” I pouted at that, to which he said, “Here, I’ll help you.”

“Well…”

“Come, don’t be shy. Men do this all the time.”

I stared at the bed, then him, as he got off it. He said it was like it was true, and I didn’t really have any evidence to refute it.

“Say. You thirsty?” he asked, going to the table. There were a couple of martinis there, or something colorful in a triangular glass, anyway.

I shrugged. “Kinda.”

“Great!” He picked up a drink and took a sip, then handed it to me. “Nice and fruity.”

I accepted it with silence and took a sip like he had. It tasted as he said, and sweet too. Not as sugary as straight juice, but still, I was thirsty, it was the color of a sunset, and I felt a little bit like an adult to drink whatever it was with him. So I slugged down about half of it.

“Oh my,” he said.

I gave it back to him. “What? It was good.”

“Nothing, nothing.” He quickly set it back down. “So, about that dress.”

He pulled out a box from under the bed, and quickly undid the lid. It looked like a shoe box, and indeed, when he pulled back the paper and held it up to me, there was a pair of cute pink shoes in it: hot pink, with little white bows on the tips. They even had tiny heels, for a tiny person.

“I’ll give you these too, if you do a fashion show for me.”

My brow dipped down at this, and I put my hands on my hips, but when I tilted my head at him, he was smiling eagerly.

And it wasn’t like I didn’t enjoy playing dress-up. I was usually just the show-girls who encouraged it, and usually in a big gaggle. This was unfamiliar territory, was all—though it wasn’t entirely foreign to me.
Plus, he seemed genuinely interested.

“Well, okay…I guess?”

Hands. I remember that. Two hands, large and warm and sweaty, sliding over my shoulders.

As I looked in the mirror, Mr. Renard’s head came down onto my shoulder, where he rested his chin. It was heavy, and his hands slid downward to firmly hold my arms.

“You look marvelous,” he said into my ear.

I smiled a little at that, after making a point of setting aside the feeling of his hands. I looked in the mirror some more, watching myself in the pink and white mass of fluff. With his head so near mine, sharing the gaze, it made me wonder:

*Is this what having a dad is like?*

I turned to him and presented myself. He stood, his hands on his hips, and smiled. “Very nice. Do a twirl, now.”

He made the motion with his hand. I spun around, enjoying the feel of the fresh twill as it swished this way and that, following my movements. I had the shoes on, too, and I clicked my heels as they hit the floorboards. They were almost like the tapdancing shoes Zora forced me into twice a week.

But as I came to a halt, the rest of the room didn’t.

“Ooh…” I groaned and held my head. “I feel funny….”

“But you look great,” he said, picking me up under the arms and setting me on the edge of the bed. “Time to do your makeup.”

“Huh…?”

There was a little case on the bed next to me. When had that gotten there…?

Mr. Renard pulled out a pad of makeup and a brush and flashed his eyebrows.

“O-okay…?” I wheedled.

I felt very light-headed, all of a sudden. Like I did when I got too big a dose of cough syrup because no one at the club could read French. So, I reasoned, it was probably okay if I sat down for a while.

I was used to girls throwing all sorts of makeup on me; hell, I even did it myself as frequently as people would let me. I liked how it could make you look like all sorts of different people of different stations—kind of like paint, but for your body. So I submitted willingly to the man’s ministrations.

He held my chin up and brushed layers of powder over my cheeks and eyelids; I could smell the granules in the air. Soon, a sharp pencil drew along my brow line, and wet brushes pulled at my eyelashes.

“Open your mouth a little.”
I opened my eyes to see a long tube held up in front of me. It was the glory of any makeup job: the lipstick.

And it was very, very pink.

“Do I look good in that color?” I asked, though from the look he gave me, I wasn’t sure I had actually said it.

“It’ll be fine,” he answered, looking a little perplexed. Still, he took my chin in his hand and pulled me forward.

I giggled, feeling dizzy.

The tip descended onto my lips, feelings slightly cold and creamy. A few quick swipes for the main part, and then a little bit of detail work around the edges, first on top, then the bottom. I smiled a bit and swung my legs, but tried to keep both down for him.

“That tickles….”

“Does it?” he asked clinically, going for the lip liner next. “I must be being too delicate.”

I shrugged, and presented my face for the rest. The pencil detailed the edges of my lips, and they felt nicely full from it, in my mind’s eye.

“There!” he said, clapping his hands and putting the pencil away into the case. “Now go look.”

I did as was told, but as soon as I left the bed, my feet did a funny thing: they slipped.

Or at least, I thought that was what happened. One way or another, I was now on my hands and knees, staring at the floor boards. My knees should have been stinging, but everything just felt rather…warm.

“Ah…?” I asked, confused. I touched at my temple, where my head was suddenly throbbing.

“Oh, don’t touch, don’t touch,” Renard’s voice scolded, though it seemed oddly distant and nebulous around me.

I did as was told, and instead tried to push myself to my feet. I didn’t quite make it, and ended up sitting on the floor.

But the mirror was a full-length one, so I could see myself anyway.

I looked like a completely different person. Like a little girl, but also like a beautiful woman.

Not the way the showgirls painted me up, which was garish and strangely hued. But like a real woman, out in the world—and exceptionally pretty. It made my heart race, just a little bit.

“Who…?” I reached out to the mirror, but Mr. Renard’s hand swept down and caught mine.

“That’s you,” he said, setting a hand on my head and petting it. He’d tied the ribbon from the box there (my hair was shoulder length), and his hand stopped right before the bow each time. “You look so grown-up.”

“Oh…” things were staring to go a little fuzzy around the edges of my vision, and breathing felt very hard, all of a sudden.
“Now,” he said, pulling me to my feet. Unable to really do much else because I was so dizzy and uncoordinated, I fell against him and let him move me. “Do you want me to show you some other things grown-ups do?”

“I think…lie down….”

His hands lifted me onto the bed, and I promptly fell backwards. The weight of the bed depressed next to me, and then came the sound of two thumps. He was taking off his shoes.

“We can…that too…”

Hands. I remember them, moving me this way and that—and eventually forcing something in my mouth.

I think it was his tie.

The next thing I remember is waking up in bed, with someone big around me. I was lying on my side, and the person’s arms were clasped over me such that I was tucked in against it.

This was not an entirely strange position to be in, but the smell wasn’t right, nor was the heat. Zora and her pile of children was never this warm when we snuggled up together, nor was she this big and meaty.

I also didn’t recognize the room. It took me a while to realize that I had no idea where I was, and also that I felt like my head was stabbing me.

That, and I had to pee.

The hands in front of me were broad and hairy. A man’s, then. Behind me, he was snoring like saw.

Confused, I pushed up his top hand like a parking lot gate and slipped out onto the floor. My feet were bare and the floor was cold, but I didn’t bother with it. My head was still spinning, and my stomach felt queezy. My butt hurt, as did my sides and my arms. They ached deeply, and when I touched them, my skin stung even at the gentlest touch.

Still wobbling here and there, I went for the door, only to find it locked. Annoyed, I looked on the dresser top and found a key. There was a little bit of light from the window, but that was enough for the maneuver. I quickly undid the lock and slipped out.

It appeared to still be night; I was totally alone as I walked down the hallway. There weren’t any noises, though—ah, right, the party.

There was no one here, because everyone got the night off.

With this thought came a terrible headache, worse than what was already there. There were lights on overhead, dim but enough to make my eyes hurt. It upset my stomach, too, so by the time I got to the top of the stairs, it seemed like a monumental way down.

But the bathroom was down, as was my bed and everything else. So I had to go.
I sighed and slowly made my way down, stopping twice to keep my stomach in check. It was as I was breathing hard on the last five steps that I heard voices.

“Really? You’re going to lay that on me?”

“Yup. Read um and weep.”

A chorus of groans. But nothing more, other than the sound of coins moving.

So poker, then. A little odd to be playing it in the lobby, but not something anyone would look away from if all I did was go past. I sighed, then sucked in a breath and hauled myself to my feet.

It wasn’t a good idea.

I was barely past the steps when I couldn’t take it anymore and hurled my stomach contents into a potted plant.

The talking stopped then, of course, just to witness my shame. But I felt so awful that it didn’t really matter; I would take help.

All that good buffet food...

When I looked up from my sorrow, all I found was several men staring at me from over the backs of their chairs. They were arranged in a loose circle on the orange and yellow couch seats in the lounge, using one of the pull-up coffee tables as their poker board.

It was Charles and his friends. Great. I took a breath, wiped my mouth on a leaf, and pushed myself to my feet.

“Who’s that?” asked one of the guys.

“Is that…Oh, right. Hey, champ,” Charles called as I went by. He reached for me lazily, but I was quite a bit out of reach and not moving in a straight line anyway. “How’re you feeling?”

I just glared at him and kept walking toward the theater, one hand on my head and another on my stomach. There were bathrooms on the other side of it, where they wouldn’t bother me, presumably. And anyway, it was a little closer to my room, which had a heavy-duty lock on it.

“Is she okay?” asked one of the people at my back, a younger voice, by the sound of it.

“Should probably put him back to bed,” Charles said. It sounded distant though, so I shook it off and walked faster. I was nearly to the heavy velvet curtain now, which would hide me safely.

“He?”

But I didn’t make it to the curtain. I sunk to my knees and heaved in another potted plant, the match of the one across the room.

“So how much d’you make off ‘the show’?” came another voice to my ears, when I was done retching but still gasping hard.

“Pleeenty,” Charles said after a moment. “Sold four of five of the little nuisances. Hopefully, they’ll never come back into my life, thank God....”

“And that one?”
"Good. We’re going to get a bigger cut, from now on. Still don’t know where she’s getting them, but I’ll find out, soon enough. And with the new percentage, it barely matters...."

"It’s amazing what some people will do for a little bit of ass...."

"A very little ass, in fact."

Shaking, I stumbled away through the curtain to the dying sound of laughter.

Perhaps instinctively looking for safety, I completely forgot I had to pee once I ended up in the theater. It was completely empty, and quite dark aside from the windows, which included a single open skylight high above. I stared at the stage far ahead for a moment, neck craned back, then down at the square of moonlight it left on the stage. I’d never seen it do that, before, and I was completely distracted by it.

It was quiet here because of the red velvet surfaces everywhere; deathly, gently, lovingly quiet. I sighed, finally feeling the tightness in my stomach ease as I stood there in the back of the room. It flowed out of my legs, and in its wake, I realized how tired I was. My body felt all strange, kind of cold and creepy-crawly, where before I had been so hot and clammy. Many things throbbed but nothing hurt, exactly. Unfortunately, it didn’t feel good, either.

Holding my arms, I sighed and went to the forest of easel legs. That, at least, was a familiar landscape.

The paintings, apparently moved from the gallery earlier in the night, were now arranged in a half-circle on the stage. High on their easels, the heavy wooden frames in gold, bronze, or silver softly caught the skylight’s moonbeams here and there, making curving, ghostly outlines.

I turned from left to right, counting the pieces, including the ones I’d made. Their familiar shapes were a comfort even in shadow....

Until I noticed that one was missing.

And in its place...

Was a man.

He was just a distant black outline. My eyes flickered, trying to cut the truth out of the darkness. But it was definitely a human figure, and it was definitely there.

And then it turned to look at me.

My eyes went wide and I stilled.

But I wasn’t afraid. I’m still not sure why. But I wasn’t. I was aware that I should be, but something about the whole situation didn’t frighten me. It was like the emotion appeared in my mind, but never made it into my body. Shock passed, and it is wake was not fear, but the calm of curious acknowledgement.

Maybe it was because, deep inside, I realized that whoever it was wasn’t there for me.
Maybe it was because, in this room, I was nothing but a shadow, too.

Maybe it was because I realized that this was all I was anymore, and if he took me away from it, that’d be all right.

The faceless figure held my gaze like a lion. We stared at each other, two shadows in the night.

“Well isn’t this inconvenient.”

The man turned and hopped down from the stage, coming toward me. I quickly stepped back, but he came just as quickly. No—even moreso. His legs were a lot longer than mine.

It had definitely been a man’s voice. It had also been quiet—perhaps spoken under the breath, but within the acoustics of the stage, you could hear everything.

That realization made my legs move. I stumbled back until I hit a chair and ended up falling into it just to keep my balance. But by then, he was almost on top of me.

He was fast.

Pulling up my legs to the seat, one hand on the table next to me and the other hanging at my side tense as a whip, I looked up—into a dark figure whose silver outline was all I could make out.

His shoulders were broad, I could tell that. But the rest of him was fairly slender, and he just stood there, a couple feet away from me. Something about his posture looked both imposing and rather...sad.

But rather than bringing out the gun under his arm, the hand of the man in all black moved up to his head—where his finger went to his lips, or where I assumed they’d be.

“Can you keep a secret, ma petite?” he whispered.

I just stared at him for a second, unable to breathe, and then nodded. There was nothing particularly threatening in his voice; if anything, he seemed rather amused—which was honestly more terrifying, if I gave it a thought.

Not wasting any time, the shadow man tilted his head and pulled off his face mask.

What lie under there was a familiar easy smile and its accompanying shock of silver hair, glowing in what little light there was from the skylight. He raked a hand through his hair, pushing it back into place, and then cocked his hip to one side. “If God sees fit to put such a pretty little lady in my presence, I have to thank Him, even if it means I don’t get my work done tonight. Though maybe I still can....”

Very softly, as he spoke to himself, a word bubbled out of me: “...Cool....”

He tilted his head the other way. “Pardon?”

“You’re so cool!”

He put his finger to his lips again, this time hurriedly. “Shh, shhh!” he hissed, pointing toward the room I’d came from. I instantly smacked my hands over my lips.

“S...sorry,” I muttered.

He was very still for a moment, looking into the distance beyond the curtain like a pointer dog,
then, after a moment, his posture eased. He looked down at me, then slid into the chair facing me.

I could see just enough of him in the diffused moonlight to tell that he was on his forearms, leaning forward on the table with a big a smile.

“Make it up to me with this, m’dear,” he said at a quick whisper. A coin appeared in his hand with nothing more than flick of his wrist, gleaming in the light. “Can you tell me who makes these?”

He gestured to the paintings shortly. I followed the point, then, rather haltingly, offered, “...Painters?”

“Heh...” he paused, thrown for a moment as much as pleased. A second coin appearing between his fingers, he pressed, “Yes, but which painters? Do you know specifically?”

I opened my mouth, tearing my eyes away from the coins to look at him. He was smiling pleasingly, and nodded a bit. “Yeeees...?” he prodded eagerly.

“...I do,” I offered slowly, “but I can’t tell you.”

“Hmmmm.” He narrowed his eyes at that; the coins disappeared into shadow as he closed his hand into a fist—a fist that he then put in front of his lips and leaned his head on. “That’s a dangerous place for a little girl to be in.”

I silently leaned away as he scrutinized me, never taking my eyes off of him. I wasn’t sure if he could see my face very well, but if he could, he’d see an intense sign to back off there.

“Did you know these are forgeries?” he asked instead, with a sweet, soft familiarity that was utterly out of place.

“...Yes.” I wasn’t sure what else to say to that, but it came out of me immediately, because this didn’t seem to be a lion to lie to. He could reach right over the few inches that separated us in an instant, if he wanted to pull a Charles, and, unlike Charles, I wasn’t sure I could get away through the power of eventually-appearing bystanders.

“They’re only listed in the ledgers as works coming from Renard’s gallery,” he said, rather mysteriously. “And his ledgers list them as coming from here.” He leaned in and purred, “So which is it?”

“Renard’s upstairs,” I said immediately, a knee-jerk response. I wasn’t sure why I’d said it—it had just sort of popped out of me—but now that I had, I was rolling with it.

“Is he, now?” the stranger hummed darkly.

I nodded.

“Well then, that’s a start.”

He stood—leaving the coin on the table as his palm moved off the cloth, I noticed. But before I could look up, he was leaning down into my space, asking peppily in my ear, “Do you know which room, my little lovely?”

I shivered with a gasping squeak, tightening immediately with my hands over my head.

“Hm,” he said, with a frown to his voice for the first time. He straightened up immediately and stared down at me sharply. He was turned just right so that I could see his eyes—dark circles in
...Cologne,” he murmured. “And sweat and alcohol?”

His hand came up from where it hung at his side and caught my chin. It was a slow gesture, but I was frozen stiff at that point, and half dizzy besides. His hand was gentle though, almost caring, as he turned my face into the light. The pad of his thumb smoothed over my bottom lip; his skin caught on the thick lipstick.

He hummed, displeased. I just stared at him like a turtle tightening into its shell. In return, his eyes narrowed, silver streaks in the night.

Then, all of a sudden, he let me go and turned toward the stage—his body turned back into a warm black shadow lined with thin silver thread—and tapped his knuckles on the table thoughtfully. It was an easy gesture, and just like that, his joviality was back in his voice:

“It’s okay, I can find it.” As I sighed, he roughly ruffled my hair. There was nothing malicious in his hand; only friendly warmth, heavy like it was trying to infuse into me. “Take care of yourself, little one.”

I grumbled preemptively, swatting at him, but as his hand moved away, several small coins fell out of my hair. I was momentarily distracted by trying to catch them before they scurried away. But try as I might, a few made it onto the floor, lost to the darkness.

“Hey, what’s your na—”

But when I looked up, he was once again gone.

I was still sitting at the empty table, in the empty room, when one of Charles’s poker friends came into the room to get me—or maybe check on the paintings.

“Hey, there you are,” he said, rather gently. He was the nice one, I thought; he would get pushed around sometimes, but given who he was working for, I wasn’t about to help him out with it. “You should go back to—hey, where’s that painting?”

I pointed at the empty space. “There’s a card.”

If I stayed still in the darkness, the room wouldn’t spin and my head wouldn’t throb as hard, so I was staring ahead like a zombie, still considering all the implications of the old man.

The young man, on the other hand, came up beside me, looked down at me as I continued to stare, then swallowed hard and advanced to the stage.

He flicked on a flashlight and realized what I had a long time ago: that there was a note there.

_Your secrets shall be mine._

—Arsene Lupin

“…B-boss! Boss!” The young man stumbled away and ran for the door. The curtain shoved over—I heard the rings move—and then, a few frantic shouts later, they were running in next to me.

Charles stood a few feet away, staring at the missing painting. “What the hell?” he asked, voice tightening. He grabbed me by the front of my new dress and shook me. “What did you see?”

I yelped and tried to keep from vomiting again.
Perhaps my moans were pitiful enough to appease him, because he just threw me back into the chair without another word to me. “Arséne? It says Arséne?”

His cohort nodded. He held out the card to him.

Charles stared at the card under the flashlight and for a moment, he just stayed that way, utterly silent and going pale.

It was the only time I would ever see him like that, and it gave me a wonderful thrill, from down in my cheap seat.

“Shit,” he hissed, turning to his guys. “This is bad. Get R—”

Before he could say another word, there was a great crash from the lobby.

The men drew their firearms and waited. Charles pushed a few of them forward with a rough command.

It took a moment, but they were soon at the edge of the velvet curtain:

“Is this your idea of a joke, Charron?! Threatening my life after the deal we made?!”

A man bustled through the curtain, hitting both the mooks with the curtain ends. While they flailed, I tensed.

It was Mr. Renard, in a half-disheveled bathrobe. Apparently the noise had been him falling down the stairs, or something like it. He was rubbing a cloth at his neck, and sweating profusely. It looked like he’d just been through something rough.

“I was about to ask you the same thing. Where is that painting?” Charles stabbed a hand out at the missing piece.

“What? What are you talking about?” he lobbed back, just as aggressive.

“Don’t play dumb with me. Arséne Lupin is not only the best art thief this century, he hasn’t been heard from in years; it can’t be—”

I watched as the two of them fought over my head, and when I seemed in danger of being whacked by an errant gesture or two, I slowly sunk beneath the table. No one noticed.

Needless to say, my ninth year of life started off a little…differently, than the rest had.

The theft set Charles ablaze, in a matter of speaking. He questioned everyone, was often pacing whenever I saw him, and all in all he broke a lot of pencils from thinking too hard at his desk.

I didn’t see my mother during this time period, but that wasn’t unusual. I had Karen and my piano teacher to keep me company on the weekends, and Zora and Sicilia at night. I found it a nice reprieve, really, because she was so inconsistent anymore and Charles had scrounged up someone other than me to do his pickup runs, for the time being.

It was almost like they were trying to keep me hidden. But at the time, all I knew was that, for a
week or two, my life was like any normal boy’s.

…Any normal boy who lived in a brothel and had recurring nightmares about waking up with strange figures.

But Mr. Renard seemed to be avoiding me like the plague. He was a rare sight, and every time he did see me, he got scared and shooed me away.

It was confusing, but a relief as well. I’d gotten to keep the dress, and even the shoes, once I retrieved them.

Still, I was wound tight. Everyone was upset about something or another. My pillars of support barely had time to look at me. Unable to sleep in a normal bed without waking up multiple times a night in a panic, I took to sleeping in the old trunk in the attic. No one could find me there, and no one seemed to notice that I had all but disappeared, either.

And yet, about two weeks after this, the old man reappeared. I was helping out delivering drinks to tables and he was just sitting at one of them in the back of the theater, before the nightly show.

I stared at him from a table away and he, drinking coffee all alone, stared back at me.

And then he motioned me over.

“Hey there,” he said coolly, when I’d finished delivering my drinks and come over.

I fidgeted in my spot. “...Hi.”

“Do you remember me?”

“Of course,” I admitted, smiling a bit in spite of everything as I stared at my feet. “You gave me the coins, how could I forget that.”

He smiled fondly, a glitter in his eye. “Ahh, that’s child’s play. Maybe someday I can show you more.”

My mouth went wide at this. “Yes, please!”

He nodded and leaned back in his chair. But as he did so, his demeanor changed; he narrowed his eyes at the stage. When he spoke again, his tone had cooled. “So…you do work here, mon petite?”


Unlike most people, he didn’t seem surprised at this—either to humor me that I was important by proxy or act shocked that my mom had a kid. He seemed displeased, actually, and shook his head a bit, to himself.

“What’s wrong?” I asked quietly.

“Do you...have a sister?”
I shook my head. He glanced over at me, sharply. It was like he was looking right through me, and I shivered a little.

“Were you…dressed as a girl, the other night?”

I opened my mouth, then shut it. I knew some adults had problems with that, outside of the theater, and generally speaking, I’d been trying to forget the whole thing happened. Charles and Renard’s fight afterward stuck in my mind more than anything, but it was still a confusing and unpleasant memory all around. Just thinking about it made my stomach tight.

“It’s okay, you can tell me,” the old man supplied. I looked up at him, and he gave me a short, sad smile.

I sighed and nodded, staring at the floor.

“Do they make you do that often?”

I shook my head. “I like it.”

“…Like what?” he asked, confused and concerned.

“Dresses.” I checked up at him, then stared at the floor again. I worried my hands. “…Sorry.”

The old man shook his head with a snort. “Don’t worry about that.”

I checked up at him. He seemed amused, a little bit.

“I’m fond of a good dress, myself.” He winked at me. “Girls have all the best clothes.”

I giggled at that, and he tapped me on the nose.

“But you are a boy, right?” he asked simply.

“Yeah.” I shrugged. “Some days.”

He titled his head at that, but ended up shaking it off. He pulled up the last drink on my tray—just a water—and started sipping at it. “So…about the other night. Did you tell anyone what you saw?”

“No.”

He raised his eyebrows as he looked over the glass at me. “Really, now?” he seemed impressed.

I shook my head. “They’re jerks, and you’re cool.”

“Cool?” he smiled, a twitch of his lips at the edge of his coffee cup.

“…Very cool,” I admitted shyly, tugging at the hem of my shirt. “I want to learn to do tricks like that, someday.”

Above my head, I heard him smirk. “That can be arranged.”

I smiled and toed at the ground. “What were you doing, anyway?”

His eyes flicked over to me, and his smirk widened. “Admiring the paintings, like you said. I just got the times wrong.”
I shot him a petulant frown, calling bullshit, but I didn’t press the matter because the smile he gave me wouldn’t allow it, I suspected. I knew a wall when I saw one, and I also knew better than to pester people older than me when they were holding coffee mugs. Plus, since the dress incident, I’d become a lot less talkative.

“Though,” the old man continued, putting the cup down. “Do you know why I’m here today?”

I shook my head.

He leaned over with an odd amount of dexterity—went almost at a 45 degree angle in his seat to get his head near mine, yet without holding onto anything—and whispered, “You.”

My eyes lit up at that. He sat back up and gave me a friendly, knowing gaze over his mug. But as he finished his sip, his eyes turned serious.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

_Are you okay._

The phrase was like magic to me. It was the first time in my life that I could remember someone directly asking after the whole of my well-being with like that, and something about it made a dam break inside of me. I almost started crying, so much tension broke free.

“That man hasn’t touched you again, has he?”

I shook my head.

“Has anyone?”

I shook my head again.

He huffed, mouth tight. “Good. Now I don’t have to murder anyone. Though I still might….”

“So you _did_ do something,” I said, forcing the feelings down to find my voice.

He nodded, silently. “He deserved worse, but he might be useful yet, so…” He paused, and ticked his head to the side. “Ah, but if he’s laid off, then it’s best not to speak of him any longer.”

“Th-thank you,” I said, meaning it.

He shrugged. “It’s the least I could do. Honestly, I think you’re the brave one.”

That was a surprise. I looked around, making sure no one was about to reprimand me for talking too long, then took a step closer to him. “…Why?”

“Because you didn’t cry, or run away.” He smiled and ruffled my hair. “Both are okay in the right moment, of course, but you saw me and didn’t even shed a tear. You barely even moved. And it wasn’t because you were afraid, was it?”

“No.” I smiled fully at that, for the first time since my birthday. “Wasn’t a big deal.” This feeling...was warm. I scratched at my head. Seemed he was good at making me smile.

It felt nice to have someone like that...who was male.

Sicilia, one of the working “girls” with a child a few years younger than me, was always willing to let me sit in on the bedtime readings she held in her child’s room in the back of the club, and
sometimes I read for the girl, too. It felt kind of like that, except...different. Sicilia was love-warm, but this was...pride-warm, I thought. One made me want to snuggle up and rest, while the other made me want to step up and do. This was the latter.

“Try not to make a habit of meeting strange men in dark places,” he advised with a wry smile. “You never know what kind of interesting things might happen.”

I chuckled and nodded, then slipped into the seat beside him, stealing a tiny quiche as I did so. I think he noticed, but he didn’t do anything other than give me a queer look.

“Say,” I asked at a whisper, diverting his attention. “If you’ve got a guy you don’t like, how do you get rid of him? If he’s bigger than you, faster than you, and everyone likes him?”

“How did you—”

“You gotta be smarter than him,” he answered, which just made me sigh. I was smarter than plenty of adults, but not that one.

“Is he here?” the wiry old man continued lowly.

“Not right now, no.”

“Give me his name,” he said, motioning at his gray sideburn with a finger, “And I’ll see what I can make happen.”

“Charles Charron,” I supplied into his ear after a moment.

“...Really?” he asked, looking surprised as we parted. “That was Charles Charron? You’re sure?” Even as his sharp eyes searched mine, his far hand tapped its fingertips on the table top.

I tipped my head. “Yeah, why?”

The old man turned away and ran a hand over his mouth, lips tight. “He’s a cop,” he said. “That’s his undercover name.”

“What are you talking about?” I balked. “He can’t be a cop. He hits my mom. He hits me. He’s thrown hot coffee on me! He plays poker here!”

The man’s dark eyes flicked over to me, a sharp glare that made me flinch a little, despite everything, all these years. Maybe it was just because it was the first time I’d seen it from him, but it unsettled me. That had been a deadly look.

“Not all cops are good,” he said darkly. But then, that displeasure was turned away from me, out at the stage and whatever thoughts of his lay between it and us. “Here,” he said, rapping his knuckles on the table. “Sit with me tonight. Tell me everything, but quietly, while the show’s going.”


He raised his eyebrows and leaned over to me. “So we can’t be overheard as easily.”

Once again, when his mustache tickled my ear, it had no hints of the danger that so many men here did.
So I took him up on his offer, and was glad for an audience who was finally willing to do something about my “very big problem.” But it turned out that he also had some things to offer to me, as well.

For instance:

That Charles Charron was also known as Carlotto Ciriatto.
Pigment (Hatchling Icarus IX)

Chapter Notes

And we're back! Woo! What a nice break after that year of fic. So much going on in real life! Silly adult things. Houses to buy, republics to save, rabbles to rouse....

I also started a Tumblr! I'm Quillheart on there. I'm pretty incompatible with Tumblr though (I disdain it), so I may be switching over to Instagram or something. But for now you can see cosplay pics and essays and writerly thoughts on there. Stay tuned!

After this chapter, there are two chapters of this flashback left. I had no idea this would be a whole book-length thing in and of itself, sorry guys. xD;;;

As always, thanks for reading! :’)

“And that’s why we’re taking him out of school.”

“You can’t be seriou—”

The objection had come from my art teacher, Mr. Arquet. The statement had come from Charles. We were all in the headmaster’s office. Charles and I were sitting in chairs in front of the man’s, with the headmaster Mr. Oberlain stationed behind it, his hands folded with gravitas. Mr. Arquet was to the side, listening to everything as he stood along the wall a couple feet away from me. It was a small office, and the shout had made me flinch a bit. I was used to that sort of thing now, but not at school. School was supposed to be the safe place, where I didn’t have to worry about things like that.

Inwardly, I sighed and stared at the countertop.

At the suggestion of the old man, I’d brought up the drug trafficking thing to the teachers I trusted most. I’d done it in front of the whole class when a clever moment came up (we were getting a lecture about how controlled substances were bad), and yet somehow, it had turned into this.

“Mr. Arquet, that’s quite enough,” the Headmaster stated blackly.

“You going to chide me for my money troubles?” Charles said, shrewdly eyeing my art teacher over my head.

Mr. Arquet’s fist clenched at his side, mirroring the tension in his jaw.

Yes: it had turned into meetings upon meetings of dramatic attempts to cover the situation up.

“That’s why I called this meeting, actually,” the headmaster said, still calm. “Mr. Arquet and several others of the teachers have been discussing it, and it turns out that they have recommended your boy here for a scholarship, should this in fact be the truth.”
“‘Be the truth?’” Charles said, sounding aghast. “You’re accusing me of falsehoods in front of my own boy?”

“I’ve been here since before you have,” Mr. Arquet spat from his corner. “He says he’s not your child and I question your ability to even make this decision for him.”

Bless Mr. Arquet, he should have been a lawyer. I glanced up at him, but he was too busy being angry to check on me. I sighed and stared at my feet.

“…Did he now?”

I didn’t have to look at the man beside me to know where his fist was going to go when we got home. I took a breath and resisted the urge to put my hands over my head; instead, I tried to find something far away from him to look at.

Just stop…everyone….

“To be fair, no one knows who his father is, the little bastard, but I’ve stepped up to the plate and he should be thankful for that. Which is more than I can say for any other man in his life, even those who don’t mind butting into other people’s business in a complete breach of my trust for the scruples of this place.” Here, he turned back to Oberlain, his peace said.

I took a breath and this time held it. Mr. Arquet bit down his lip, but glared at his boss as well.

“Your confidence is of utmost importance to us, rest assured,” Oberlain said, and I sighed aloud and rolled my eyes, disappointed. For a moment, everyone paused to stare at me, so I just stared at the wall, trying not to look like I’d done it on purpose.

In a moment, the conversation continued:

“And rest assured, we have great confidence in your boy to rise far above the station in which he started. He’s an exemplary pupil outside of a…few things. So that’s why we’ve come to this decision. So if you’d agree, we’d like to allow him to stay, free of charge.”

“We’re also moving,” Charles announced smoothly.

“We are?” I asked, alarmed. I’d never heard of this. He smiled and wrapped his arm around me, then rubbed his fist into my hair. I grouched at this; it hurt.

“Don’t you remember, we talked about this? Maybe you didn’t get it…”

“I don’t wanna move, I like it here…” I protested, pulling out of his hands.

But when I looked at him, the look I got brought me back to my senses. He was lying to make a point. I clammed up, swallowing hard and hoping I was invisible. “Oh, right. That…. Yeah, how stupid of me, how could I forget, haha….”

“So you see…” Charles continued with a put-upon sigh. “I just can’t accept your offer. I hope I don’t need to involve the papers in this matter. This fine school, and this child, isn’t worth such a besmirchment.”

Here he looked at Mr. Arquet. The Headmaster looked between them (as did I), and then at me. There was something sympathetic in his eyes, something soft and terribly scary. I liked that the least of any look I’d gotten tonight. I quickly closed my eyes and willed the glares over my head to go away.
“I agree,” Mr. Oberlain said. “Though we’ll be sad to see him go, I wish you and him all the best.”

The entire ride home was tense. I didn’t say a word, and neither did Charles. He went in and out of humming happily and humming ominously. I never once looked at him fully, lest he use it as an excuse to punish me, and as soon as he stopped the car, I made a run for it. I managed to get the door open and bolt out of the car before his arm could reach me.

I managed to hide for about two days. He caught me, perhaps inevitably, when I came up for food. He’d been waiting for me like a mouse to a trap filled with cheese.

The smack that landed on my face was hard enough to knock me into the kitchen cabinet and leave me on the floor.

“That was for running away,” he said matter-of-factly as he readjusted his gloves on his hands. “Have a seat, we are going to have a talk.”

It was going to take me a while to get the room to stop spinning, so one of Charles’s massive hands reached down and grabbed me by the bicep. I winced and yelped, but was instantly hauled into the air and nearly thrown into a seat. I landed at the counter where the staff ate their dinners, and hung onto dear life so that the chair didn’t tip backwards with me in it.

It made a fairly large commotion, but since it was long past close and everyone had gone home, nothing came of it. Since I didn’t have school anymore, there was no reason not to stay up late, especially in trying to avoid him. But it seemed I hadn’t done my homework well enough.

“You’ve been hiding from me.”

I said nothing. Charles was talking to himself, mostly. He liked to do things like this to get his point across. He wasn’t actually talking to you, I’d learned. More like at you.

“Why have you been hiding from me?”

Surprisingly, his tone was mild, and not the fake, smarmy one I was so used to hearing. I stared at him, incredulous. He gave me a thoughtful look, then nodded.

“You thought I was going to hit you, didn’t you? For telling the teachers all that stuff.”

Well duh, shot through my head, but other than knowing he didn’t want to hear that, I wasn’t sure what he wanted, so I stayed silent.

Here, he sighed, that theatrical and put-upon sigh I was both used to and terrified of, for what it often precipitated. “I’m not going to hit you.”

That…was not the mandate I was expecting.

“You’re…not?”

He shook his head slightly. “No, but we are going to have a man-to-man talk about this.”

I frowned, but, tentatively encouraged, I nodded. I rubbed my cheek where it’d been hit and waited.
“Why’d you do it?”

I should have known exactly what he meant. But because of the tone of his voice, *do what* was the first thing that came to mind. Did I do something he *wasn’t* mad about? *Was* there such a thing?

But then the answer hit me:

*Does he know about the old man…?*

“Don’t be shy now. Why’d you tell your teachers that you’re peddling drugs?”

“I don’t…like doing it,” I stated eventually. This was not news to him, and he nodded sagely.

“I don’t like making you do it, either.”

This was new. My eyes widened, and I sat up a little straighter.

“And your mother doesn’t like you doing it, either. So now that we’re both on the same page about that—”

I only half believed that she even knew about it, but the possibility that she *did* opened up a deep, cold doubt in my heart that I wasn’t sure how to fix: “Then why…am I even doing it?”

“Because she’s abandoned you, kid.” He looked at me, with a sort of business sense I’d only seen him use when he was talking to himself to mull over ideas. “Like it or not, you’re my responsibility now, so I have to make adult decisions for you. A man has to earn his keep, and that’s what you’ve been doing. That school isn’t cheap, you know? And if you want to stop doing errands, you have to stop going, otherwise the books won’t balance.”

“That’s not true—!”

He sighed, large and long-suffering, and I knew that was my cue to shut up. So I did. In the silence, his silvery eyes gazed at me with the sharpness of the kitchen knives around us.

“You liked that school, didn’t you?”

“Ah…” Frowning, I sank further back in my seat.

“You liked your teachers?”

“…Yeah?”

“But you botched it. So now you can’t go anymore. D’you know what you did wrong?”

I shook my head slowly. I hoped this wouldn’t end in me tasting the floor again.

Charles, whose arms were crossed, held out a hand lazily, one finger unfolded. “Well, first of all, you went to school dressed like a girl that one day. That was a huge mess. You remember that, yeah?”

Yeah, I remembered the looks and stares and then getting pulled out of class to be Talked To in the headmaster’s office by every goddamned teacher I had, in a ring, without realizing what was really upsetting them. Like, I knew *you’re dressed like a girl and girls and all their things are off limits to boys and you know that so you should be ashamed of yourself*, but I didn’t have any concrete details beyond that vague concept and their acting like I’d ruined my right to exist in the world. I just had a nice dress and wanted to wear it to school, since my other clothes were in the wash.
I also remembered the fit Charles had thrown when he had to pick me up from school to take me home because of all that.

*How dare you do this to me,* followed by several smacks that turned into punches. *You want to act like a girl, you’re going to get beat like a girl!*

Yeah, I remembered that. I shuddered and rubbed at my arms, nodding at Charles. Luckily, he just looked thoughtful, almost pensive, staring at the ceiling with his chin in his hand and his meaty arm over the back of the chair. His free hand unfolded another finger.

“So, there was that. But when you came back to school, you didn’t do a good enough job covering the bruises, right. So then I had to deal with that. ‘Corporal punishment should be limited to belts on the posterior’, yes thanks headmaster.” He rolled his eyes. “So I had to deal with that, too. Are you sensing a theme here?”

I frowned and eyed his now three unfolded fingers, unsure. “I’m…”

“Inconveniencing other people, yes. Because you can’t follow directions well enough, cadet.”

I took a breath, but I wasn’t sure what to say to that. Anything I could say would get me in trouble, I figured.

“And then you told them about what we do here. Haven’t I always made it clear you’re not to tell anyone about all this?” he gave up on the fingers and waved his whole hand. “Cuz it’ll get you taken away from your mother?”

I nodded.

“And you don’t want that, do you?”

I nodded out of habit, but then, actually thinking about it, I shrugged.

But it was like Charles could read my mind. His eyes narrowed, and I stilled.

“That shrug. What was that about, just now?” he demanded.

“I don’t…see her much anyway?” I asked, slowly drawing away from the chill in his voice, his eyes.

His mouth fell open, but there was something hesitant about the way his head tilted back as he gazed at me. He was thinking something very hard.

And then he grinned.

I’d never seen him do that before. I stared, wide-eyed and ready to bolt.

But he beat me to it.

“Ahhh,” he said, wagging a finger and standing up. “Ah-hah.”

He did a small circle once he got to his feet, sounding actually excited. “Wh-what…?” I asked, unable to take my eyes off him.

“See, I knew this day would come.” He turned to me, grinning with wide eyes. “You’re growing up.”
“I…what?” This was totally bizarre. I followed him with my eyes, confused.

“You’re growing up. You don’t need your mother anymore. You’re outgrowing her.”

“I…” This was news to me. I didn’t know this was something to expect. And yet, something about it felt like a relief. There might be a day when I didn’t have a connection to her anymore? “I’m what, now?”

“You’re becoming a man. And men stick with other men. You don’t need her anymore, I knew you’d figure it out eventually.”

I frowned at this, but there was an undeniable logic to it. And the world of “men” was a land of sacred awe to little boys. Our rite of passage, our birth rite and future glory, lived in that world of history and legend. Of the strong, successful creatures who knew so much more than we did, and who ran the world. And who beat me up, occasionally.

“But I like her…”

She didn’t hit me all that often, and when she did, it was light whacks. Not the ones that sent me straight to the floor with my ears ringing for half a day.

With some confusion, I watched him track around the kitchen island, but he came in front of me and smiled—a scary smile, but one a bit more…including, perhaps, than I’d ever seen him do before. Still, all these smiles were unnerving. It felt like I was about to be devoured.

My feeble protest was quickly pushed aside: “That’s why you’ve been acting out. Cuz of her.”

“Wait, I don’t think—”

“But once you become one of my men, you won’t want to anymore.”

I instantly frowned at him, and despite how close he was, found my voice underneath his smile: “But I don’t…even like…you…?”

“Well I know that, but we’re on opposite sides, so why would you?” He asked, standing up and setting his hands behind his back, military-style. Yet his voice was that charming one that he used one everyone else—and had never used on me. “You’ll like me if we’re on the same side, if you’re one of my men. You’ve been one of hers all this time, so of course you’ve been miserable! Look how she treats you, she forgets you’re alive, and then I have to keep you in line cuz you act out. But I, I remember you, huh? And if you’re one of my men, I can give you a lot more. Life’ll get better for you, if you stick with me. You want that, don’t you?”

“I…?”

My mother forgets I’m alive?

“So I’ll forgive it, this time. I’ll show you how nice life can be as one of my men. Women, money, power, friends…you can have it all.”

That sounded terrible, aside from the friend thing. That was everything I didn’t like about the people around here. “I don’t…want those things…?”

“No?” He asked, sounding genuinely surprised. He looked down at me, his hands clasped behind
his back, and tipped his head. “Then what do you want?”

“My…” I blinked and swallowed. I knew he wouldn’t like the answer, so my voice almost evaporated as my eyes turned downward. “…Mom…?”

His response to tisk and look crestfallen. “Well, I guess you’re just not ready yet. I thought you were, but I guess not…. How disappointing. I guess this discipline session will just have to go back to the way things were—” He reached for his belt.

“Wait, no!”

My response was instantaneous.

“Then you’ll do it?” he asked, halting his belt unbuckling and raising an eyebrow.

“Well, I…”

My head was spinning. I wasn’t even sure what I was agreeing to, anymore, but the sight of his belt suddenly coming into play made my stomach knot to the point that it was hard to think. I sat back in my seat and touched at the throbbing spot where my skull had hit the cabinet. “I’m…?”

Charles set his trousers back in order and placed his thick hands on his hips. “But I have to tell you something, as one of my men.”

I frowned, shaking my head, but as he came to sit back down, I stared at him, since that was the best course of action with a predator.

“What…?” I asked. It was all I could manage.

“One of your teachers. That art teacher, you know?”

I nodded hesitantly.

“He got upset with all these displays of trouble you’ve been pulling, and now he’s causing me trouble, and I had to do something about it. You know Sicilia, right?”

I nodded again, wary. “I like her a lot.”

“Yes, I know. Did you see how upset she was today?”

I hadn’t seen her as much as heard her. There had been a large commotion involving her, which was unusual. She didn’t usually start drama and the screaming match (complete with breaking stuff) was shriller than most any I’d ever seen, and that was saying something, since the attic was full of things various working girls had broken in their fits of pique. But today, she’d been yelling for me, too, and I hadn’t been sure why. So I just stayed hidden and hoped it would pass, like most things here, given enough time.

All things except Charles, it seemed.

He put his hand near mine, laying his arm on the counter in a friendly fashion. I stared at it in terror, until he started talking, directing my attention back up with his voice. “Well, your teacher came sniffing around, asking questions. He ended up calling a social service worker to the apartment on your school records. Obviously, you don’t live there anymore, but your mom does, so they wanted to see you. But you weren’t there.”

I nodded, though the bottom of my stomach started to feel uneasy.
“And I couldn’t find you—you didn’t come when you were called. So yesterday, I took Sicilia’s son and we pretended he was you. Unfortunately, the social service worker didn’t like what she’d heard, and took him.”

“ Took him…where?”

He eyed me, then shrugged, sitting back. “To wherever they take unwanted children.”

My eyes went wide. She loved her children; I saw it every day. When she’d read to her two kids at night, and I and the other children wandered in, was one of the few times I knew what human warmth felt like. “But he’s the last kid who’s unwanted!” I protested, coming out of my chair halfway.

Charles motioned me down. “I know. But they think he’s you. And they know you’re unwanted.”

I opened my mouth to protest that, but he held up his hand. “But he’s already been taken, so she can never get him back. No one can. That’s what happens to unwanted children. The state takes them away to be processed.”

“Processed…?” It was the most horrible word I’d ever heard. “Into what?”

He gave me an odd look, but then smiled, coldly. “Canned goods, I suppose. Same thing we do with cows and pigs and things, you know. Not everyone gets to go to an orphanage. What do you think the orphans eat?”

I went so cold I might have been close to fainting. A wave moved over me, a mix of guilt and horror and need for forgiveness—and assurance that I was one of the worthy ones despite what I’d just done.

“That’s what adults do with things they can’t take care of—we dispose of them,” Charles continued. “People are all just meat, you know, until they prove themselves worthy.”

I wanted to throw up, but before the urge reached a critical level, I realized with great clarity exactly why Sicilia had been shrieking.

“I didn’t…I didn’t want that…” I said, grabbing at my stomach. I couldn’t breathe.

People…unwanted people were turned into food?

I have to do something—

“I know you didn’t. Because you’re a good boy, right?”

Sicilia’s son—

I nodded, fiercely, though his voice seemed far away. I gripped the counter tightly and leaned into it. Charles, however, kept on speaking:

“But now you know why it’s so vitally important for an adult to want you. And to be wanted, you have to be worthy. You don’t want to get processed, right?”

I shook my head, too queasy to risk opening my mouth.

“So that’s why you’ll be one of my men, right? Because I don’t forget about my guys. I teach them to be worthy of the better things in life, but in return, they have to do work. Whatever work I
tell them."

"Sure, sure. But what can I do for Sicilia?" I rushed out, finally getting a breath in. I stared at him desperately, and for one short moment, the room had stopped spinning.

He held up his hand lackadaisically. "I’ll take care of Sicilia," he said. "You take care of yourself."

"But…I…?!"

"You see, you’re on thin ice with all this. You’ve become a liability to me. All these stories and tales…If your teacher comes around again, you need to tell him the truth. That you’re fine, you like me, and you’re moving—which is true, cuz you don’t live there anymore. You were just acting out because you wanted to stay, because you liked him. But you just don’t get everything you want in life, you know?"

I nodded, slowly tasting the logic in my mind as my body calmed down somewhat. It came out okay, the flavor on my tongue, though the morality of it wasn’t. Still, it tasted better than being processed. "I can do that, I guess….”

Charles reached over and patted my shoulder. I flinched back, but rather than get mad at me, he smiled again, a hard sort of teacher’s smile. "Good. I’ll give you the rank of…second lieutenant, I guess?"

The world still seemed to be narrowing as I bored my gaze into his face. "In what?"

"…My army."

I tilted my head. He stood up and gave me a grin as he shoved his hands in his pockets. The warm spot from his hand lingered, and for once, didn’t hurt. It was…kind of nice.

"But you have to stop being a liability, or else you’ll get kicked out, eh? And then you’ll get canned."

He chuckled at this, but I just stared at the floor. It seemed a million miles away.

"Hey?" He clasped my shoulder, directing me to look at him. "But you’ll have on your best behavior. Cuz I only take the best. Can you do that?"

I nodded, resolute, though I was shaking from head to toe.

"Good boy." He released my shoulder to tap at my cheek. "Don’t be late for our weekly meeting."

I rubbed off the feeling of his hand, which was still nearly the size of my face, but then suddenly realized what he was talking about. The deliveries would still be an unpleasant reality? But why —

But when I looked up, he’d already left.

I sat at the counter with a cheese sandwich for a long time after that, wondering what exactly I’d just signed myself up for—and how it’d even happened.

As well as what was safe to eat.
“Good evening,” I said with a bow to my mother some days later, as she opened the door to the apartment for our weekly meeting.

“Hi honey,” she said, ruffling my hair in greeting. I smiled back; there was always something warm that bloomed in my chest upon seeing her.

That contracted into a cold lump as soon as her gaze shifted to Charles and she kissed him.

I frowned at this, and in return Charles smirked and my mother scowled. I looked off, and in response, my mother simply turned her back on me. She returned to the living room as Charles shut the door behind us, that smile still on his face.

Charles put his hand on my back and ushered me in, and this time, I didn’t fight it. I just felt resigned and a little guilty, and forced my feet to march.

Tonight was the first time that I was walking into this room not as a my mother’s lone bodyguard, but one of Charles’s many underlings.

And that would be put to the test whenever my mother decided to punish me about Sicilia.

Charles sat down on the far couch in the living room, facing the door, and put his feet on the coffee table with a debonair smile.

*Your mother forgets you exist.*

She sat down as well, on an opposite couch, the dictionary definition of dainty and proper. The two of them started chatting, idle and formulaic pleasantries about the week that I had memorized long ago, and which were complete incidental to my presence.

*She’s abandoned you.*

Normally I’d be annoyed at his display of aggressively bad manners from him—and the fact that he smiled while he did it—but this time, I saw it for something new:

Power.

I looked at my mother. She took a spot on the opposite couch, sitting primly. Tightly. Her hands were on her lap, and in her pink skirt suit, she nearly matched the couch. She was pretty, and done up respectably. But to look between the two of them—one reclining, raking a hand through his hair; and the other, upright and immobile—it struck me that one was definitely different than the other.

And why was that?

*“I’ll give you all the women you want.”*

*Men...get to “have” women, huh?*
It certainly made some things about the club make sense.

*And in return, men...support them. As a thanks for being good company?* That was the main explanation I’d gotten about the club, off and on throughout my life.

I didn’t really agree with Charles’s assessment that women should be treated differently just because they were women, but he seemed to make the rules anymore.

Honestly, most women treated me a hell of a lot better than most men did. But then again, I was always mopping up women’s tears, which I never had to do for guys. I never found *them* crying in back rooms, even if they *did* have black eyes.

Guys didn’t have women’s struggles and guys apparently dealt with them better even when they did. I couldn’t help but admit that there *was* a difference to how it worked.

And right now...

Right now I was a child, but going forward I could ally with the men or the women. *Become* a man or woman.

That’s what that conversation with Charles had been, hadn’t it?

The made-men in the club that played poker smoking fat cigars and wasting money like it was peanuts. The young guys in fine suits and easy smiles, who had girls falling over themselves to get their attention. Businessmen and politicians that came in, deciding the fate of the world around them.

Women that spent hours getting pretty for a single man’s gaze yet never seemed to go home with him. The girls who cried in the back room and got hit in the front. The women who danced with half their clothes on or less, never getting enough change to even leave the building. Girls fighting each other over scraps of affection like hungry alley dogs.

The women were always at the bottom of the totem pole, weren’t they....

Even the well-dressed and respected women like my mother were always doing what someone else wanted. Same with the new guys, who just had to do somebody’s bidding.

I respected the women like my mother, who retained a high degree of autonomy in a place where the populace generally had none, and who could get it with a single cold glance of the eye. But eventually, *the men* got out of that role, didn’t they? If they were smart enough, they lived a long time, did jobs, and moved up. The women never moved up. And that...was just because they were *women*.

So which one did I want to be?

I wanted to be a woman with power, because they treated me better.

But I couldn’t be that, could I? So I had to be a man.

I wasn’t sure if it was just because he was big or a jerk, but Charles *did* have the power wherever he went. No doubt those lying smiles helped too. I didn’t really want to be like that, but would I even get the chance?

I looked down at myself. So skinny, with hardly any height to me. My hands were tiny. I couldn’t punch my way out of a paper bag. Though my dancer’s legs were a different story, you
couldn’t intimidate somebody with your leg.

Still though, I was smart; everyone told me so. And the smart guys in the comic books could always get their way in the end, if they made enough friends.

“You’ve gotta be smarter than him.”

“You can have anything you want…women, money, power, friends.”

I looked at my mother. She was smiling at me just then, as Charles narrated my week for me.

It was a fake smile.

Had I ever noticed that before? How forced and plastered-on it seemed?

It was as if it were saying, “I see you, please go away.”

Was she just humoring these visits, because Charles arranged it for me?

“You’re one of my men now. Life’ll get better for you, if you stick with me.”

Had he been trying to make things better for me, all this time?

That seemed hard to swallow, but. I’d been wrong about everything around her it seemed, so maybe the same held true for him.

“She’s abandoned you, but I, I care.”

Maybe, because we were both guys, he really did care about me more than she did. Maybe she just cared about me cuz she thought she had to. Cuz that’s what women did: they cared about children.

Truthfully, I didn’t really want to be like him, but…maybe if I had some power of my own, I could change things. Be a better man than him….

Be a man that could make my mother smile more often than she cried.

But to do that, I’d have to be a man at all.

“Oh, right,” my mother said, abruptly breaking from Charles’s conversation to turn to me. “About Sicilia…”

I immediately stiffened up, only to shoot myself into a bow from the hip. I stretched myself all the way forward, until my front half was horizontal.

But what came was not a verbal tirade and a series of strikes, nor even hysterical tears that were so much the trademark of her.

Instead, it was Charles’s voice. “We talked about it.”

His tone was calm and collected. I glanced up to find he hadn’t moved from his spot, but he had raised a hand placatingly toward my mother.

Across from him, she eyed me, then sharply stared at Charles, like she was trying to bore a laser into his head; her lips were thin like a knife’s edge. “And?”
“He understood. It’s been taken care of.”

She lifted her head with its fine, sleek black hair in its stern coif, then looked me up and down. After a moment, she nodded with a huff. “I see.” My mother took a sip of tea, the last of what was in her cup. Charles didn’t have one; she’d been drinking it before we arrived. “Good. Thank you, Charles.”

“No problem.”

My mother made no further contact with me, and so I ended up staring at Charles. He soon glanced over at me; he seemed a little surprised, but then he just raised his eyebrows with an easygoing smirk and motioned me up from my bow.

As he sat back he shrugged, as if to say, *Told you.*

They continued to chit-chat. I stayed in my place, astounded. Charles had *fixed* something? For *me*?

It was enough to make my head spin.

But while my soul was off balance, I was also greeted with a beautiful sense of relief that ran through my body.

Allying with Charles had such significant benefits?

But then why hadn’t I gotten it before?

*You were your mother’s man before.*

I watched the two of them, their body language, their speech patterns. My mother was rigid and cold, and Charles was relaxed and, while not warm, at least not stormy.

I felt like I couldn’t trust my eyes anymore. At a loss, I looked around the room, but I couldn’t find my answers there, either.

It was like the color had desaturated from the room. Where once there was the light of many hopes hanging on the gilded surfaces, this time, there was a dull simplicity to the décor here, one without imagination or liberation.

This place was nearly unchanged since I’d stopped living in it, if perhaps a little dustier. But it wasn’t that it’d been patiently waiting for me, was it? It had simply gone on without me. It was oblivious to my existence, just as my mother was. It’d divorced from me a long time ago, and I’d simply never noticed, huh?

*Maybe Charles was right about the unwanted child thing.* Maybe it was only because of him and the club that I’d escaped becoming ham.

It was an uncomfortable feeling, but I was trapped here for the next couple hours. So I did what I always did in such situations: I hung back and silently observed the adults until I found my answers.
This woman, by herself in this room…. This woman I’d barely seen in years who was supposed to be my mother. When I took a step back, it was true that she gave me less than Zora or Sicilia ever did. Heck, even Xing protected me more than her and he had basically shunned me the last couple years, just so I’d stop asking him to deal with Charles.

But Sicilia was gone now; she’d moved out in the middle of the night. There would be no more bedtime stories from her, no more fun with her kids. And that was my fault. I’d ruined her life and she’d left in tears without a single goodbye.

When I’d told Zora about the Sicilia Incident—though she already seemed to know, because Zora knew everything—she simply refused to look away from the stage as I stood at her side. “A boy has to grow up sometime,” she said, in her thick Russian accent. “Seems like this is your time. I’m sorry it couldn’t be longer.”

But just like Zora, she didn’t want an apology. She just told me to get up on the stage and do the moves again until they were right. So that’s what I did, and for those few hours, it didn’t seem like such a problem.

It wasn’t like I couldn’t read. I regularly read entire books I could barely lift. But it was different, without Sicilia. Darker, somehow, at night, with no one to look forward to. Lonelier as I was getting ready for bed. Colder, when I tried to snuggle under the covers.

But…I guess that’s what growing up was. Coldness. Loneliness. It was no wonder Charles was so angry all the time, if adulthood felt like that.

It was no wonder my mother was looking for a man, if that’s all that being an adult allowed her.

And if that’s all that adulthood was, I wasn’t sure I wanted it. But looking upon my mother, I had to admit that it might just have been true. She had been cold and empty for a long, long time.

And when she looked at me and nodded with that fake smile or those terse lips, I realized: she wasn’t really my mother anymore, was she? She was just…my keeper. My…employer. My…

Owner.

For a moment, it felt like the floorboards between us had turned into an ocean. Like she was very far away, and I was sinking.

I was just owned like one of the girls, wasn’t I?

And Charles was offering me the chance to be…one of the guys. One of the owners.

I’d have to work at it, of course. But maybe I wouldn’t end up like her, at least.

That thought made me want to reach for someone’s arms, and naturally Mom was the nearest source of comfort. But I held myself back and thought about it, forced the feelings down.

Going to her right now wouldn’t help anything. There’d be a fleeting warmth from her body as I wrapped around her middle. Mom would soon part from me and with a pat and a few words, and that would be that. And that was if all went well; I might just get pushed away and admonished for being a nuisance.

But what would linger would be Charles’s disgust and displeasure at the unmanly act. And that would last for days.
That was all the interaction would be. Momentary comfort, just to be shoved back out, getting nipped at again by the prowling, ever vigilant hyenas.

So what I needed to do…was not get hurt again. Not feel this need for other people, any more. I needed to be the lion chasing down the hyenas.

I felt bad deciding to create distance between me and her, even when she couldn’t tell, but there was a distance between us, wasn’t there? And it had been there all along, hadn’t it?

One that she’d enforced.

In the space between our arms when I’d asked for hugs. In the wane light of her eyes when she’d tuck me in at night. But not when I painted something for her. That was when it was real.

*Ah, this is beautiful! This is going to make us so much money!*

Wasn’t it?...

And those times when I was very little. Those warm, fond memories of her and me. They were genuine, I thought. But where had they gone? They felt like a folk tale featuring someone else.

I looked down at my hands as she and Charles started speaking about dinner.

*I must have changed somehow….*

The thought of her yelling about me looking like my father came to mind, as I stood there, looking between her and her new man.

*Maybe…*

“A boy has to grow up sometime.”

*Maybe I grew up a long time ago, in her eyes.*

Maybe that was it. I’d stopped being the child she wanted, and now that I was a man, she’d put this distance between us. So maybe it was my fault that I hadn’t seen this all sooner.

*You’ve become a liability to me.*

Maybe she was disappointed in me not become a grown-up sooner, not taking responsibility for things like I should have. Always needing something, always causing trouble for people; maybe that was why she kicked me out. She had hoped it would make me grow up.

*Maybe so….*

But at the end of the day…I had barely any memories of her, compared to everything else. She was a ghost I was chaining myself to, and for what? She made it pretty clear that she didn’t want me, otherwise she would have visited me more, yeah? That’s not the way moms acted in books. Good moms, anyway. Moms that *wanted* you.

I hated to admit it, but Charles was right: he gave me more than she did. What he gave me was mostly bad, but it was at least *more*. At least it was *there*. I had thought he was just using me, but maybe he was just bad at caring?

I bowed back to my mother’s instructive nod eventually and went to the kitchen, leaving the two adults to talk. I knew how to make pancakes and stuff, and dessert things, but any kind of main
dish was beyond me. So in a few minutes, as was pouring hot water for tea, Charles followed me out.

“What are you thinking of making?” he asked perfunctorily, rifling through the cabinets.

“Pancakes?” I asked.

“You really like those, don’t you?” he asked simply, shaking his head. “Here, I’ll make some omelets, too. Ugh…breakfast for dinner, how far I’ve fallen.”

I watched him carefully. He didn’t usually do this with me (usually it would be mom), and while it made me edgy to be within arm’s reach of him, he was different this time. He was…not paying any attention to me, really, and just sort of talking to himself. That put the threat level down a lot, and as I watched him, I saw someone who was quite adept at what he was doing.

“You like…cooking?” I asked quietly, when I thought I could get away with not having something fly at my face for it.

He shrugged, running a spatula through the pan, flipping over some eggs. “There’s something soothing about cooking. You can light things on fire, break things, whip the hell out of something…and nobody cares.”

I watched his thick forearms move as he worked, watched his sharp, intelligent attention on the pan. It was nice not to have that strength aimed at me.

Had it been aimed at me before because I’d been womanly?...

Looking at it from the side, I could see how much more vigorous than mom he was. She was just some delicate thing—a blade, but a thin one. I’d always admired her for it, but in comparison, she felt almost ready to blow away into the wind and disintegrate. He, on the other hand, was clearly going to be around for a while. A halberd, or a katana.

I frowned and went back to the batter.

*Men and women*....

*Owners and owned*....

*Which one do I want to be*...?

“So…about Mr. Renard. What did he do to you, anyway?” Charles asked. We were walking down the street, toward the typical pickup spot. He normally didn’t speak during these things and discouraged me from doing so as well. He’d force me to hold his hand, to make it look like we were more normal, but this time, the trend of curiosities continued. He was making idle talk, and he had his hands loosely in his pockets as we walked.

At the question, my mind stopped so suddenly that my body stopped along with it, and it took a while for me to realize the difference. A few feet ahead, Charles stopped and looked back at me, his head tilted, then jerked his chin forward. I shook my head at myself and skittered closer. I wasn’t sure why my heart was racing so much, or what that stutter of my mind had been.
You’re the one that made it happen, why are you asking? I grumbled inwardly.

“Why?” I hedged, dropping just out of arm’s reach and putting only as much sass into it as I thought I could get away with.

“Just curious.”

The pavement continued under our feet, the gutters dirtier with every block. Fewer and fewer lights were on. I shrugged, rubbing at my neck. Digging my fingernails down it. “I don’t really remember.”

There was a pause, and then Charles said, “You’re not lying to me?”

I shook my head. “Nah.” Pulled my hand away from my skin, drew it into a fist to get the jitters out of it. “I drank something. I…think.”

“Hm,” he muttered from where he towered above my head. “Might have to ask him what it was.”

A cold feeling passed through me at that, but with effort I nodded and kept on walking.

“…Mom wasn’t mad about Sicilia,” I offered hesitantly.

Charles shrugged. “She was always jealous that Sicilia had a daughter.”

She’d wanted…a daughter?

Maybe that was it. She liked it when I dressed up like a girl, cuz she wanted a girl. And now that I didn’t do that around her, she didn’t like me?

But Charles hated it when I did it, in public or not. So which one was right? I stared at the sidewalk for a while, one hand in my pocket and the other around my backpack strap. No matter where my hands were, they fisted and unfisted as I thought.

“Hey…” I muttered, glancing up at my chaperone hesitantly.

“…Yes?” he asked, raising a warning eyebrow as he looked down at me. Well, at least I could take satisfaction in that he was as off-put with my oddities as I was with his.

“Do you have kids?”

“Me?” Charles glanced upward, sounding surprised. But all that stood above us were buildings with broken windows and the stars of late evening. “Nah.”

“How come?”

He seemed pretty old to me. But maybe I just wasn’t that good at estimating. He wasn’t old like the Old Man, but he was definitely older than a chunk of my teachers.

“Why would I? I don’t particularly like kids. You’re enough to handle.”

This was not news. I looked off, pushing down the feeling that welled up with me, which was something between shame and anger.

“And anyway, I’m from a branch family, so what would it matter? ‘Cept to get more fodder for
the family business?”

“Family…business?”

“And the family’s always on me about when I’m going to get married, like some political thing from a hundred years ago,” he continued, ignoring me in favor of talking to himself. “Your mom’s decent I guess, but honestly. Women always get so annoying as soon as they think you’re going to settle down with them. I hate it. I’d rather just have a woman in every town and she can screw as many guys as she likes, so long as she’s around when I come calling and there are no kids to bother us.”

That wasn’t something I completely understood, but I at least got the “no kids” part. “Um…okay?”

“Why do you ask?” he inquired, suddenly shifting tone and staring down at me with his sharp, cold grey eyes. They were like looking into the flash of a knife blade, every time they set upon me.

“Oh…um, just curious.”

I skittered away and eventually Charles turned away from me with a shrug, his leather shoes continuing to hit the cobblestones with an even rhythm. “Well, okay. But don’t ask too many questions; you might find answers you don’t like.”

He tapped at my cheek with the back of his hand, that annoying thing he tended to do when he thought he was being affectionate, and then returned his massive hand to his pocket.

It was not a motto I would follow, at all. On the contrary, it became one of my favorite guiding lights.

That night, my journey through the red bunker’s maze came and went, but this time when I emerged to the clear, dark skies of spring again, there were two men sitting at the coffee house’s table. They appeared to be talking, heatedly.

This had never happened before. I hung back at the edge of the building, under the shadows cast by the red lantern that stood above the bunker’s door.

The two were arguing about something. The newcomer was more slender that Charles, but more aggressive too. He was standing up. Gestured widely. Slammed his hands down on the table.

But in response, all a sitting Charles did was drink his coffee and motion toward me.

The mystery man stopped. He looked my way. I stepped backward, but apparently that gave me away, because the telltale sign of the man lifting his head in recognition came at me.

He hurried over across the deserted street, shouting my name like he knew me—and was trying to catch my attention.

And the form that appeared to me, under the blue streetlights—

“There you are!”

—and then into a coating of red, was my art teacher, Mr. Arquet.

“They told me you got taken by social services, but when I went, it wasn’t you—”
He bent over onto his knees, breathing hard. He put a hand on my shoulder as I stood there, the package pressed against my chest like a textbook.

“Look at this…” His youthful face twisted, his brown hair falling over his face. He pushed it out of his eyes, and they were only all the more bright for it, when they came back into the red light. He touched at the package with one hand, then cupped my cheek. “I knew there was something up with you. But this? Who would have thought you were telling the truth? How long has this been going on?”

I just shook my head, unable to find words. You didn’t believe me. You kicked me out. You—

“Come with me, right now. Before your guardian comes over here.” He grabbed my arm and yanked me forward.

“What? No!” Perhaps just from sheer surprise, I tried to pull out of his grip. I didn’t make it.

“Come on, just come!” he snapped, whirling around. I’d never heard him yell before, and it was, frankly, terrifying.

“No!” I shouted back at him, holding the package to my chest like a shield. I looked over at Charles. He had gotten up and was crossing the street. “You need to get out of here,” I pleaded.

“Don’t be stupid!” Mr. Arquet hissed, grabbing my arm again and yanking me down the alley, into the shadows. It was so sharp it hurt. “I’m the adult here!”

“Please!” I hissed. “You don’t know what he’s like—”

“Just come!” He said, grabbing me around the waist and hauling me away.

“Augh—?!?”

“Sir,” said Charles over my shoulder, from the mouth of the alley and louder than he needed to. “Would you please let go of my son?”

He stopped immediately and I pushed out of Mr. Arquet’s grip, whirling on Charles as I hit the ground. “I’m not your—”

Pshoof.

A soft breath of wind whizzed by over my head.

I whipped my head in the direction it had come from. A black hole greeted me, encased in metal that glinted like blood-red amber.

A soft grunt, and the grip of a hand on my shoulder, clawing at it.

Charles’s face was a shadow, but his light eyes, dyed ruby, slowly shifted downward. Behind me, where they were looking—

Mr. Arquet fell to the ground, gasping. His hand slipped off my body, and went to his chest.

Charles stepped around me and the black dragon raised again. Another soft mechanical breath, and a bead of red appeared in my teacher’s forehead.

I couldn’t breathe.
The tracts of feeling remained on my shoulder.

There was a small sound coming from him still. Blood, bubbling up out of his chest wound like a drinking fountain, staining his dress shirt. But that stopped almost as soon as I started watching it.

While I stood there, Charles holstered his weapon back under his jacket and then took the brown-paper package from my numb arms. He pulled open a few of the packets from it, and tossed them onto my teacher. Quickly, the pure white was smeared with red. But in the light, everything was already red, and so it became smeared with black.

His eyes were still open. Blue eyes, dull and unseeing, turned purple in the red of the lamp. Just like the color mixing experiments he and the science teacher had done with me…

Beside me, Charles had stepped into the shadow. Or, rather, he’d never been out of it to begin with.

“This is what happens when you become a liability,” he said lowly when I finally looked up at him with wide eyes. “I would appreciate if you didn’t become one, Lieutenant.”

It took me a while to realize he was talking about me. But when he stuffed the brown paper into my backpack, zipped it up, and then pushed me along, the movement made me function a little bit again. I gave one last look at Mr. Arquet, as Charles pushed me a different way out of the alley than normal. My breath hitched. Every breath I sucked in just got shallower.

“You aren’t going to start crying, are you?” he asked icily, his hands steering me from my shoulders.

I shook my head. There were no tears for this. They were down there somewhere, I felt, but they were buried under a hell of a lot else. No, I thought; if I ever started crying over this, the tears would never stop. It was better just to ignore them. Otherwise Charles might start hitting me again.

Charles might…do that, to me. Whatever that had been—

*Death*, said a little voice. *That’s death.*

*Like Marcques*…

I put one foot in front of the other; the pavement went by step after step. The red light drifted away into blue. Blue eventually filtered into the yellow light of the club’s back door. Charles didn’t ask me anything else, and I didn’t say anything else. I just went into my room and hugged my fish. But the image of Mr. Arquet’s surprised face, his eyes staring eyes unseeing, didn’t leave me, even when I closed my eyes.

I just didn’t have any words. Not until I woke up screaming in my sleep, anyway.

But Sicilia wasn’t there anymore, so there was no one to comfort me in the darkness.

The club was hot that night. A traveling act that everyone in town wanted to see had performed on the stage, some really famous burlesque dancer, and now, afterward, we were doing a brisk business in the basement. It was unusual to see the gambling hall so packed with people in fine
clothing during the summer, even the early summer, but it seemed like everyone was smiling in the gilded lights, suit or dress alike. Some of the older people were remarking that it was like Before The War.

Because of the crowd, they needed my help running drinks and orders, so I was floating around the floor delivering cocktails and waters and taking such orders to the counter. I didn’t make the same amount of tips as the adults, but I made some pocket change, so it was generally a worthwhile exercise.

I typically found weaving in and out of people and catching their conversations on the sly a lot of fun, but lately, I was just exhausted all the time. I was having trouble sleeping, and even when I did, I didn’t feel good when I woke up. So tonight I was making mistakes, and it was as frustrating to me as it was to everyone else. Especially the people who knew I was better than that.

But the one saving grace to the night was that Mr. Lucien, whose name I had finally learned, was there. And he was there with a small group of people that I suspected were his Thief Friends, given how much they laughed with him.

There were two men with him, and a woman. The woman was tall and dark-haired, a Spanish sort of beauty with slightly olive skin and long, tightly-wavy hair. Her makeup was perfect and she wore a long, elegant black dress with a slit up the side and a wave of beads along the breast that caught the light. Mr. Lucien, similarly, was dressed in an older style of men’s suit, black as well, and he even had a top hat; he seemed to match the woman. The guys, though, were a lot more casual; they were dressed up, but in the way that a handyman or cabby might get dressed up. They were quite the pair; there was a short, round one with a mustache and a bad attitude, and a younger, skinnier guy, with brown hair and a constant friendly smile on his face. He looked like he couldn’t hurt a fly.

They were sitting such that it was the short, grumpy guy on the outside left, then the skinny mop top, then the woman, and then Mr. Lucien, on the right outside.

“Hey there, kiddo!” said the old man with a bright smile once I managed to approach his table. “How”—here, he did a flourish of his hands—“are you?”—and out popped a short-stemmed bundle of five fake flowers, right in my face.

I flinched away from the flash of red, but when I discovered I was still kicking a moment later, I sheepishly took it from him. Mr. Lucien’s face beyond the gift, though, was less crestfallen and more troubled.

“I—I—hey there, kiddo!” I said weakly, turning away from that look while I got my heart to stop racing. The noise of the room was a raucus din, and as soon as another shout went off at the craps table, I flinched again. It was just a jerk of my eyes shut this time, so I could hope that no one noticed.

There was a pause, in which I was pretty sure the adults at his table all exchanged a glance. I forced my eyes open with a plastered-on smile, hoping no one would investigate it. “Can I get you something?”

The woman at the table gave me a pitying sort of smile, but then looked at Mr. Lucien.

“Give those to some girls you like, it’ll make you very popular,” he insisted, putting the flowers on my tray. I took a breath and nodded. Too bad Sicilia wasn’t here anymore, nor was Alisée. They would have loved them.

Well, the girl might not have. She might have thrown it back in my face. But figuring out why she
detested everything normal was motivation in and of itself, so….

I missed her. Them both….

“Um…so,” said one of the secondary men, drawing my attention. It was the shorter one.

The adults all still looked concerned, but I was tired of that, so when they forced a smile, I did too. And that was the end of that.

It was amazing how much people just wanted everything to be okay—to the point that they’d turn a blind eye to anything, just so that they wouldn’t have to worry about things. People in positions of authority would do it automatically and vehemently, I was coming to realize. People who were relatively close to you would do it if you gave them permission. And some people—

“How are things going with your teachers?” Mr. Lucien asked quietly, pulling a drink off my tray. “Like we talked about?”

—saw right through everything, and refused to let things go. I was eminently grateful to those people.

“He’s dead.”

But I was starting to understand why there were so few of them.

Mr. Lucien dropped his drink on my front. The woman at his table actually gasped, as did the skinnier of the guys. The other guy swore violently.

“What?” Mr. Lucien hissed, pulling the drink back, though the champagne was already all over me and the flowers. I sighed and gripped the tray, trying to balance the remaining glasses while keeping my eyes shut. My fingers were shaking and my head was spinning, the thoughts in my head were so loud and running together. I couldn’t breathe.

Then, all of a sudden, the weight in my hands lifted. Eyes opened, I found Mr. Lucien’s brawny friend to the left pulling it out of my hands, while the old man himself gripped my shoulder. He was frowning, distressed.

“What happened? Tell me everything.”

My mouth gaped a few times, but I just shook my head. I could breathe a little, but that was it. Nothing else was going into my mouth or coming out of it but gasps.

“Paper,” I managed.

They looked at me strangely, all leaning in over the table.

“Front page…”

Their eyes widened.

“That guy…”? said the gruff man on the table’s left.

“The teacher they said tried to rob the Chinese?” the woman added.

“Greg, you know about this?” Mr. Lucien asked, turning away from me. “Margaret…”?

“Oh yeah, it was grizzly—” the man said.
“I hear they’re pissed—” added the woman.

*Red. All the red....*

I pulled away as they began to discuss. I heard a short “hey” at my back, but I was already halfway across the room by the time.

I didn’t want to be followed. I didn’t want to be discussed. I just wanted to hide.

So that’s what I did, under a table, in a dark and quiet corner, my hands over my head and my face against my knees.

I wanted to see him, had waited to see that old man again for so long, but now that he was here, I could barely face him.

*I can’t... I can’t...*

The face of my teacher. Of all the cheerful smiles he’d given me.

Of all the times he’d stuck up for me, or encouraged me, in the sunny light of the art room....

That was when the tears finally came, and they didn’t stop for a long, long time.

*I am worth nothing. Nothing at all.*

*All I do is get people killed.*

*I’m not a man nor a woman.*

*I’m a curse.*
Hey, all! Sorry for not updating this since...May?! But I've been working on it all this time little by little in between real life stuff and the other short fics I put out. I tried to write you at least one story a month in the interim, and I succeeded at that most months. And what a pleasure it's been to write some of those. This really is a lovely franchise to view life through and write about life topics within. Thank you for so much support and recognition with those.

I really wanted to get you something on Christmas, so here we are! The beginning of a new story arc--or the back half of the previous one, as it were. This chapter is admittedly laying groundwork, but expect regular updates for the next few months, through the end of this arc. I don't know if I'll do weekly or twice-a-month yet, but we'll see based on how much time I can devote to further chapters. Either way, there's a lot of action coming up. It'll be a rip-roaring ride through the winter.

And of course, thank you to you readers who have stuck through this with me. Lupin and the gang greatly appreciate your readership. I couldn't do it without you! Feel free to say hello in the comments; that'd be a lovely Xmas present back!

Happy holidays!

Since it's been so long, a short recap heretofore:

We just got done reading a section about Lupin's early childhood up to about age 9. He's illustrated a rather strained, and estranged, relationship with his mother, and an abusive one with his pseudo-step-dad the mobster Charles, aka Commissioner Carlotto (the man who threatened Zenigata and Lupin's lives over the phone near the beginning of the story). While Marti and Zenigata have tried to unwind Lupin's flashback issues to uncover the details of what he's doing in town--and therefore, who might be coming after them and why, and whether or not he blew up that building on purpose--a nurse named Angela snuck in to his room on Christof's watch and tried to do Lupin in. Or did she? There's plenty of evidence to suggest that Lupin may have overdosed himself to get away from the terrors of his past we've yet to see, and Angela was either an unwitting pawn--or in on it with him.

Zeligata, meanwhile, is struggling to steer the ship as he feels the noose tighten. For one, he's trying to reconcile the fright of almost losing Lupin with the death of his younger brother Satoru some decades earlier. But he's also trying to mend his relationship with Lupin while worrying about Lupin's current relationship with Jigen, the mysterious international hitman of ill repute. Marti, in turn, is struggling to be everyone's crutch and guidance councilor while dealing with some secrets of her own. Everyone's tired and edgy, and there's only one packet of O Negative left in the snowed-in hospital. And anyway, what in the world was up with Lupin's reaction to that big stained-glass window and the old surgeon he met in the basement?

Stay tuned to find out how our protagonists' struggles play out in this wintry wonderland of horror and psychological thrill!
There are times when you get a second chance in life, and times when you don’t. I wasn’t sure which one this was going to be for Lupin, and judging by the look on Zenigata’s face, neither did he. He was sitting with his hands steepled together such that they covered his nose and mouth, eyes staring intensely at the space between his feet. He’d been that way for several minutes, every once in a while shaking his head at himself as his eyes searched over the floor, but otherwise saying—and doing—nothing.

Next to him and me, in the third of the three seats against the wall in the little white patient room where Lupin lay clinging to life, Nadia checked her watch and stood. “All right everybody, it’s time.”

“I’ll watch over him,” I said, rising with her. I tapped at my belt. “Radio’s on.”

Zen'i nodded to himself and stood, eyes distant. He touched at my hand and then immediately went out the door without a word. He hadn’t even looked at Lupin.

The administrator, on the other hand, searched out my gaze and then nodded gratefully. “Hold the fort, Ms. Martelli.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” I said, saluting out of habit.

A tired smirk twitched at the woman’s lips, and then she headed out too.

“Ah, damn...” I looked at my hand, a little chagrined. But beyond it was a blur of pink and black that quickly brought my attention back to what mattered.

I turned to Lupin and sighed. He was unconscious, but breathing on his own. Nadia had rearranged the blankets and equipment so that the scene looked peaceful—as well as had put the painting, once flipped around at some point, back in regular order. All of this was ready to be thrown aside once more in case assistance was needed, but what was presented before me—a patient in a recovery bed—was a deceptively normal facade for now.

I came around the edge of the bed and touched Lupin’s foot.

—Holding her hand as it crumbled into ash—

I had never gotten this chance with Anya.

—Holding him tight as I kneeled against the floorboards in the living room, the fireplace still smoldering just a little, so warm compared to how he felt—

Nor with Ricardo.

“Well, just you and me now, kid,” I sighed, giving the ball of his foot one last squeeze before settling down on the nearby stool. He didn’t respond, of course; just lay there breathing shallowly, the oxygen line under his nose. “It’s time to pull off one your miracles, eh?”
He didn’t look good. There were dark circles under his eyes, and his skin was pale and clammy. Parts of his chest, visible in the V-neck gap of his hospital gown, were mottled with purple bruising from the last few days. Not to mention the stuff all around his neck and arms from the explosion.

*We haven’t been doing a very good job of taking care of you, have we?*

Elbows on the edge of the bed and chin resting on the back of folded hands, I settled into my seat. The view wasn’t much, but beyond all the medical equipment was the window and its view of the harbor. Snow, a soft blanket on the landscape, was piled high until the coast. But beyond the shoreline the day was bright and sunny, shining down onto a deceptively cold sea.

It looked like we should have been able to just walk right out there and be on our way.

I turned back to Lupin, silent in his bed, and sighed.

*It’s funny how the world works, isn’t it.*

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Sixty-seven minutes. That was how long it’d taken to revive Lupin, in the end. It was now 2:30 PM, Christmas Day.

That had been about twenty minutes ago. I hadn’t even begun to process it all before I was standing in the lobby, in front of a flank of fifteen or so navy men all armed with handguns. Maybe that was why I’d gone straight from shock and out the other side into action, as they stood there at attention like a forest of silent trees.

“All right, men,” Nadia was saying from where she stood beside me. “Emergencies only happen when it’s least convenient, thus we’re having this drill. This building is locked down and the base gates aren’t letting anyone in or out. There is a missing doctor you are tasked to find: five-three, thirty-one years old, short black hair, green eyes. She responds to the names ‘Doctor’ and ‘Christina’ or both. She should be somewhere in this building, but may be unresponsive. So look in every nook and cranny. Under desks, in closets, and restroom stalls. Everywhere. If there’s a locked door, knock it down or report it to us and we’ll get the keys.

“All right, men,” Nadia was saying, clicking her heels together crisply, “there’s a potential other person you may find: the ‘suspect.’ Also female, around...” Nadia looked to me.

“...Thirty-five to forty years of age,” I added, slowly recovering my professional voice as I did spoke. “Five-one to five-five, short brown hair close-cropped to the head. Slender build. Goes by the name of Angela. Was last seen wearing a white lab coat and tall black boots, but may no longer be in that.”

The troops looked either dubious or earnest at this, so I sent it back to Nadia.

“There you have it,” she finished. “Any other people you find, outside of the pair in patient room 419, escort them here to the lobby, where Inspector Zenigata and I will be. The building is to be thoroughly searched before it can be cleared.

“By the way, this is a live-fire exercise,” she added, sharp commander’s demeanor turning droll and unimpressed, “so don’t shoot at anyone unless they’re already shooting at you. Try not to kill anybody or be killed. You have your assignments—four men to a floor, two to each wing.
Complete your inspection in half an hour and report back here when you’re done. Go.”

She clapped her hands and the men snapped to attention, saluting with a pert “Yes Ma’am!” and then running off like the well-ordered platoon they were.

The amount of precision to it all almost made me nostalgic for my days in Japan. Almost.

I sighed as I watched the lobby empty. As soon as the boys brought people back, I would have interviews to conduct, and I sure as hell had better find something in those interviews, or else I’d get my ass handed to me for the whole thing. I could get away with a lot in the name of pursuing Lupin, but there was a lot less you could conveniently explain away to your boss when your suspect was already in custody, and I was probably over the line as it was.

When everyone but Nadia had gone, I put my head in my hand, rubbing the bridge of my nose. Every muscle in my body was wound tight, and I was getting a massive headache from that, even while the post-adrenaline shakes from the crisis of the last hour were finally ebbing. I didn’t expect we’d really find anything from this exercise, but it’d buy me some time and peace of mind, at least—

“You all right, there?” Nadia warned, cutting through the reverie.

The tone sent a thin bolt of annoyance through me. “I’ll be fine,” I gruffed.

“You gonna explode on anyone else?”

“Maybe.” I gazed over at the offices that were going to be my interrogation rooms. “If they deserve it.”

Nadia huffed. “Well, better get you somebody that deserves it, then. Though....” She turned to the windows, arms crossed and lips pursed. “I’m worried about Christina.”

“Because she could be involved?”

Grey-blue eyes trained themselves on me, Nadia turning only her upper half away from the view. “Because I doubt that she was, Inspector.”

I sighed and, shaking my head, sunk down into the longer of the couches stashed in the room. Nadia moved over to the front desk, where she’d distributed a floor map of the place, walkie-talkie heavily in hand. A box of patient-chart color-coding stickers sat next to her elbow, waiting for the calls of “clear” to come in so that she could mark off the rooms. Behind her, the floor-to-ceiling windows offered a breathtaking panorama of the bay.

I sheltered my face in my palm again, but no matter what I did, the throbbing in my head and the shaking in my limbs never quite stopped. I only noticed it when I slowed down, but it was still there, every time, just under the surface.

As were the memories of things that yelled through my mind as Lupin lay on that bed, as did my behavior in the moment because of them. It just kept coming at me on a loop, spiking my adrenaline back up as soon as I thought I was calming down.

“Please tell me you had no part in this,” I muttered from under my hand, pleading for relief.

Please tell me I didn’t drive you to this.

But I still hadn’t figured out for certain if Lupin had a part in planting those bombs, had I?
The thought that he had orchestrated all this as some sort of literal blow-out for himself—and was still trying—came again, and I couldn’t find enough evidence to dismiss it.

As the crackles of “Room 101, 201, 301, clear!” came in over the radio one after another, I closed my eyes and focused on breathing.

But behind my closed eyes came the image of Lupin’s bruised and pallid face as I tried to revive him; the pulse of shock up my arms as my hands closed down onto his thin chest, over and over—

I sighed, ragged, and ran my hands through my hair, eventually threading them together at the back of my head and hanging them there. The wet feeling of holding Satoru Back Then was mixing in to my nerves as well, and it was making it hard to catch my breath.

*This isn’t your fault. It isn’t.*

The sound of my desperate cries in that tiny Japanese bathroom came back, rattling through my heart and filling it with a complicated mix of guilt and shame, as did my yelling at Marti, Nadia, and Christof this time as well.

*If he did this to himself...*

Lupin’s closed eyes, from an angle I didn’t normally see...

*...I’m pretty goddamned fucked.*

If he did this to himself, there was no way I was getting any more out of him about this case without extreme measures, assuming he even woke up.

I forced myself to take a breath, eyes tightly closed under my hands. The darkness didn’t do much to remove the view of the rope burn around his neck, or the way he’d looked at me just a few hours ago when I’d asked him to tell me the truth for once in his life. To *save* his life.

But maybe that was exactly the problem—maybe the truth was the one thing he couldn’t stand to shed light on. Perhaps the truth of what had happened in his past was so bad that it’d break him if he ever fully acknowledged it.

The idea of Lupin’s personality being an onion of protective lies and falsehoods, with nothing in the middle but a black void, was starting to seem more astute with each passing hour.

I sighed and opened my eyes, but they only ended up staring at my equally black shoes. *Why is this happening?*

It was no surprise to me that Lupin might be that desperate and pained inside. But that he’d do something like *this?*

*Did I...push him over the edge?*

I sighed out a shaky breath and squeezed my eyes shut as calls came in over Nadia’s distant radio.

*Satoru...tell me I’ve learned something since you di—*

My thoughts cut off abruptly. It took a second, but I swallowed the lump in my throat, and forced new words through.

*...Since you, period.*
I stared at my feet, eyes sweeping over the cracks in the linoleum between them.

I’ve gotta keep him alive, no matter what’s left of him on the other side of this. That’s my priority now. Everything else can come after that.

Because there was still a chance that someone else had done this to him. But...

The lump came back to my throat, sharper this time.

But how. How am I supposed to do that, if I don’t know what’s pushing him over the edge?

Satoru, admittedly, was the only other personal experience I had with something like this, but there was a lot that remained unsettled, unclear, about his passing. It’d gotten easier with time but only because I had someone to blame, and even then, it was little consolation some nights when I was alone and other failures piled up.

The cases were different, yes. Far different. And yet, there were many points of similarity, too. And that was the scary thing.

For instance, I was privy to both the deep, dark secrets of each man, and their hopes as well—even if they hadn’t known them as such at the time. But how well had that gone for Satoru? He’d surrounded himself with the wrong kind of people until he was used up and thrown away by them, and I’d let him. If I had only done more—

No. Don’t think like that. You wanted to help him, you tried. But he’d never let you help; he never let you in.

And then he’d died for it.

I let out a heavy breath and scratched my fingers over my scalp, where they sat cupping my head.

And in the case of Lupin, I couldn’t refute that the situation was any different at its base, but what I did know was that everything he wanted buried, every failure and sorrow he ran away from, were things that only he and I knew. We were the last vestiges of that ring of Arsene’s syndicate, and as far as I knew, he wasn’t in contact with anyone from his childhood. So maybe the wounds weren’t being ground deep into his mind every day; he wasn’t being forced to see them every day the way Satoru’s perceived failures had been.

Though maybe...that’s exactly it?

I pulled my hands down to my neck and stared blankly at the wall ahead, the familiar drawing of sheep on a pasture, as the proverbial lightbulb dawned on me.

I was the last reminder Lupin had of that time period, where so many of his schisms began. Was the fact that I was still in his life, always dogging his heels, making it impossible for him to move on?

Forget this place; was I the reason that these ghosts were reappearing in the first place, clawing themselves up out of the ground, and this environment was simply the last straw?

—“Have you ever actually told him what you wanted?”—

I hadn’t wanted him to forget everything Arséne and Donatello had put him through (and now, apparently, whomever had run his childhood); I’d wanted him to fess up, acknowledge, and move on in a healthy way, into the world of the light and the right, because I thought he deserved it and
could do it. And that, most importantly, he would want that, if someone just gave him the option. I’d even offered to hold his hand as he did it.

After all, as a cop, it was my job to save people that couldn’t save themselves from the hard situations they’d gotten in.

But maybe that presence of mine had been pushing him farther than he could take all these years—was keeping the wounds open—and now I was reaping the fruits of those labors, by being forced to watch him unravel like this?

It seemed like the sort of thing he’d do, when faced with a mix of desperation and spite. It was, certainly, the sort of thing people in my life tended to do.

—“Sometimes you just have to know when to give up on something, Old Man.”—

...The sort of thing they tended to be driven to, because I couldn’t let them go?

“Of course...” I muttered, a shiver suddenly descending through my limbs.

Maybe, at the end of the day, this whole heist was one big message to me.

“...That.”

I looked between my feet, and the silent briefcase that sat there under the chair.

The key was in there. I’d had it all along.

* * *

“Bullshit, that was utter bullshit,” I swore as we jogged up the stairs.

“Aww, is baby mad?”

This came courtesy of Kyle. I shot him a scathing glare.

“Did you see the way he treated me up there? Did you?”

“You were insubordinate and a guy almost died. What are you upset about?”

“He should have let him die!” I hissed. “Nobody comes back like that. What the hell, did he come back just to spite me?”

“Cold. But it’s his guy and he’s in charge, so whaddo you care?”

“I have to be here! And—”

...I have to protect Telli. And Aimee’s waiting for me still....

Kyle’s response was a dry, unimpressed look that called bullshit. “Uh-huh. Tell me something. You’re used to being that guy in the office all the moms mother and all the girls suck up to, aren’t you? And the guy all the other guys want on their team, right?”

Well, that may well have been true, but... “So?”

“Uh-huh. You know what your problem is? You’re jealous.”
I stopped in my tracks and squared my shoulders. Kyle halted momentarily to watch me, but I stared down at him from my spot a few steps up. “I am not jealous of a criminal who almost just died from goddamned dope.”

“If that’s what it was.”

Kyle held my gaze with a long look; I tilted my head back. The sailors around us vaulted up the stairs, easily passing us by.

“We really should get going,” I said, and turned away.

I heard Kyle smirk as he followed. “Suit yourself, jelly bean.”

“...What?”

“It...a pun...? Nevermind,” Kyle shook his head.

I had no answer to this other than a growl. Still, my shoulders were tense as concrete as we achieved the fourth floor. Our pair of navy guys was already off to the left; we took the right. The rest continued up the staircase, boots pounding stone.

“I can’t believe we’re doing this. On Christmas,” I grumbled.

“Mentally addled suspects on holidays—the only thing worse than full moons and hospitals,” Kyle intoned as we put our backs to opposite doors. “What’d you expect, Snowman?”

I glared at him, but then took a breath to get my professional mindset back on. I didn’t think we’d find anything, but the fact of the matter was that we did have a missing person on our hands, and uncovering the whereabouts of such people in compromised environments was something I excelled at. “Ready?”

“Ready.”

We each shoved our way into a room.

Just an office in mine.

A few moments of searching, then we both yelled the call of “clear” to each other. Met up in the hall, repeated. The next set of rooms were for exams. Lots of tools, but not a lot of places to hide a full-grown someone.

Kyle responded to Nadia on the com with our findings. I readied at the next door, desperately wanting to kick it down just for the hell of it.

“I mean the fact that Zenigata cares so much, though...?” I grumbled at the door.

“The guy’s like his son, what do you want from ‘im?” Kyle called over his shoulder.

“How do you figure?” I demanded back. I mean, Telli had fondly relayed the same in her stories, but I didn’t see it. Not really. They just bickered and razzed each other, and then tried to one-up the other. They were like the coworkers from Hell. A far cry from the wayward saints she painted them to be.

But I’d seen the truth now: Lupin was an addict with a mental schism the size of the English Channel, and Zenigata was an unpredictable defect of a man.
“Just look at the way they interact.” Kyle shrugged, and then we both ducked into the next room.

I didn’t kick it open. But I wanted to.

That door got lucky.

“Ugh.”

There was nothing there but another exam room. I went back out into the hall, waiting for Kyle as quiet voices went off one after another on his com.

“You’re a cop, right?” I went on as he reemerged a few moments later, trying a different tack to assuage my grievances. “Supposedly they knew each other from before Zenigata got on the case, but why would they let him work a case with that personal of a connection?”

“He’s got experience with Lupin?” Kyle shrugged, then readied to storm the next unsuspecting medical space. “And I’m not a cop, I’m bomb squad. I count as tech. But I think...he’s the only one that can get in the guy’s mind, right? Get under his skin?” he added, trying the knob. “That’s what I heard, when the rumor mill about those two started at work.”

I shook my head, exasperated, as I lined up against the wall as well. Firefighters tended to do it differently than cops, so to do it like he did, I had to consciously try. “I don’t feel like either of them lives up to their reputation, for all that Telli talks of them.”

Kyle grinned from across the hall, and a chill went down my back. His face was streaked with shadows, and the smile was a leering one.

“...What?” I asked.

“If that’s what you think, you haven’t seen them at their best.”

“What, you have?”

Kyle raised an eyebrow, but then shrugged. “In the papers, sure.”

I grunted in disgust, but a moment later we were nodding to each other, descending into our respective black holes.

Nothing amiss in mine. Just a dark office. Nobody under the desk, in the closet. No where else to hide a person, or even parts of one.

“You like following their exploits, or something?” I asked when I came back out. Not waiting for a response, I ducked into the next room, while he tried to open a utility closet. It was locked. Kyle radioed it in.

“Don’t you? Isn’t this guy, like, France’s most famous thief after Cassanova?”

I rolled my eyes. “Still a criminal. Caring about the infamy he’s got built up through bad behavior is bullshit.”

Another set of rooms. Another set of nothing. We were nearly at the end of the hall by now.

“Ahh, yea of internal resources,” Kyle chastized idly. “Hate to see what happens when you have a kid.”

“Still, this is a royal shit show,” I muttered. I spied the nurse’s station; that was the last place on
my side of the floor. And where, if I recalled correctly, Christina was supposed to have been when Lupin’s coding went down an hour and a half before. The place where Kyle couldn’t find her, and Lupin had almost died because of it. And now, would probably have lasting damage because of.

The whole debacle irked the hell out of me, made me want to rip something to shreds. This woman had nearly botched my reputation as a first responder, and everything subsequent had made us look incompetent. Not to mention whatever the hell actually had gone down between Angela and Lupin.

The former of which never had come back, the bastard.

Regardless, from here, I could see that the chairs along the booth were all empty. “Was this the way things were when you were last here?”

“Yup,” Kyle said, after looking over it for a moment. “And I’ll agree that it is a shitshow,” he went on mildly, “but heaven forbid we have to work for our overtime.” He snorted, smiling to himself as he went for the last door on his side. It looked like a supply closet or the like. “S’ easier than my usual Christmas work, and happier too. It’ll make a good story, if nothing else.”

“You have an odd sense of priorities.”

“You’re no fun at all, Snowman.”

“Someone almost died. And may still.”

And it was my fault.

I gave him a scathing glare, but he just shrugged. “That must not happen every day for you.”

I frowned at him, but he was right. But whether burned-up people were worse than blown-up people, I couldn’t quite say.

Snorting, I went over to the nurses’ station. Kyle, done with his side, waited for me in the open air of the hallway before we would split up and tackle the arms of the T.

The nurses’ workspace was cut out of where the corner of the hallway would have been, illuminated by greenish fluorescents and a copy of that big window downstairs with the half-circle on top, albeit a smaller one. Still, it was just a hole-in-the-wall type setup, with a printer, a few filing cabinets, a coffee maker, and the ubiquitous bar-style counter for interactions.

All the stools against the desk were empty, but one was pushed back from the rest. Before, I’d only seen the desk from the customer side. But coming around it, I found a half-drunk cup of coffee, hidden behind the lip of the counter. And...papers scattered about.

I touched the cup.

It was still halfway warm. Not hot by any means, but not totally cold, either.

Klitterak

I looked down, following the noise. A plastic pen was rolling across the floor from where I’d accidentally kicked it.

I bent down to pick it up, and that was when I saw it:

The space under the desk.
Simple and brown, I set my briefcase in my lap, the handle clinking softly in between Nadia’s staticky radio calls. The thing had escaped the dust and debris from the explosion that was, what, two days ago now?, and almost felt like a long-lost friend to lay eyes upon.

I said hello for a moment: Ran my fingertips along the familiar leather, visiting each discolored spot and worn edge that was well-known to my hands. And then, with practiced movements, I turned the combination, flipped the latches, and popped the lid.

Various papers were neatly distributed around the inside, and for once my passport wasn’t included. Everything about this investigation was just getting stranger and stranger, when I thought about it.

From the top of the compartment, behind the photograph of Marti and the little stretchy half-curtain briefcases always had, I pulled out a black, greeting-card sized envelope. Flipped it between my fingertips, feeling the fine-weave fibers one more time to reacquaint myself with them, then turned it over.

Inside, there was more black: this time a matte cardstock. In the cold of this asylum’s lobby, swallowed by blazing sunset light reflecting off of snow and marble floor alike, I found myself staring at this little black greeting card, the sound of the bay at my back.

This.

I ran my fingertips over it reverentially.

This is the answer.

The corners were crisp under the pads of my thumbs.

Why he’s here. What he’s doing. Thinking. Wanting. Everything—

“Team twelve to desk, team twelve to desk, come in, over.”

I lifted my head. That had been Christof and Kyle. And indeed, it was Christof’s voice heatedly crackling over the radio:

“I’ve found Doctor Christina. Repeat: We’ve found missing Number One.”

Nadia whipped up the comm to her mouth in a millisecond: “Desk to Team Twelve, roger that. What is your location and the Doctor’s status? over.”

“Location is Fourth-Floor Nurses’ Station, South. Missing’s status: Semi-responsive. Heart-rate...” Here, Christof paused and then rattled off a number that I didn’t understand except that it was low. “Request permission to bring to lobby, over.”

“Permission granted. Can you move her here yourself? Over.”

“Affirmative. Will bring her down. See you soon, over.”

“Roger.”

I quickly shut my briefcase, tucked the card in my coat’s inside breast pocket, and stood. I looked
to Nadia, and she nodded back at me intently, her hand gripping the walkie-talkie like she needed the support.

*Semi-responsive.*

That meant she’d been unconscious....

Chapter End Notes

Christof is so unlikable, omg.

Sorry I made characters named Christof and Christina in a story set during Christmas. FFFFF. (Someone's gonna get their name changed in the revisions, heck...)
Christof and Kyle brought Doctor Christina to the lobby and laid her out on the rug between the couches. With water and oxygen, her dizzy eyes gained focus, and she soon perked up to a coherent level. I stood to the side, arms crossed and watching the scene play out with an investigatory eye.

She didn’t seem to be faking it. Christof mentioned a cup of coffee to Nadia, and soon they were both talking about drug names that were far over my head with the idea of reversing whatever he suspected to be in her system.

Eventually, Nadia left to retrieve a few pills from a supply closet, and in the few moments that took, the boys both looked to me for guidance. Kyle just looked troubled, and I nodded at him reassuringly; that was the end of that.

And then there was Christof.

He gazed at me from where he knelt opposite Kyle, holding a hand against the doctor’s back. For a split second, the look was searching—it was almost like having two scared kids. But when all I did was gaze back at him grimly, trying to look as serious as the situation dictated, fire alighted in his eyes and he turned back to her with a decided shoulder tick.

Well, chalk that one up to cultural differences, I supposed. I was too tired to worry about it and there was no point in worrying the victim, if that was indeed what she was. I’d definitely need her trusting me, if I was to get the information out of her that I needed.

Eventually, though, Christina started talking over our quiet drama: “I’m fine, I’m fine...I think.”

The woman, who was being supported by both men, started pushing them away, holding her forehead with one hand. Her limbs were uncoordinated, but it seemed whatever Nadia had given her had worked well enough to keep her awake for now. Christof spoke to her softly, clinically.

Nadia, meanwhile, was still dealing with the uniforms scattered across the building. “Prognosis?” I asked lowly, as she circled by on the way back to her desk.

“Most of the floors are clear,” she whispered. “They’ve found Doctor Martinique, too, and will be bringing him down.”

“Where was he?” I asked, arching an eyebrow.

She shrugged. “In his office.”
“Was he combative about it?”

“I don’t think so, why?”

The woman’s frown and accompanying short growl wasn’t worth trifling with. Jaw tight, I nodded and turned back to Christina. “And her?”

“Your guy seems to think she was drugged,” she stated. “And the uppers working would indicate that.”

“All right. I’m gonna have to go deal with that space where they found her. You keep everyone here until I get back, and I’ll go cordon it off. It shouldn’t take more than half an hour.”

Nadia’s eyes widened, but then she sighed a moment later. “Be quick about it.”

I smiled tiredly. “Yes Ma’am.”

I pulled out my mini evidence kit from my briefcase and went upstairs. Talcum powder, a makeup brush, clear tape, ziplock bags, a sharpie: I had everything except police tape in there (which was in the car). Either way, I went about inspecting the fourth floor nurse’s station by eye, taking photographs, and making detailed notes on my notepad the old fashioned way.

I dusted what I could with my limited supplies, lifting fingerprints from the cup and pasting them on untouched sheets of the notepad. Prints came to life on the drawers, endlessly, but most were locked. Because I had no idea what possible things were in them—or missing from them—I left that mess for later with a quick note or two. However, there weren’t any places that looked like they’d been wiped clean of prints.

Lastly, I took out my phone and turned on the black light feature.

A wane purple shined out of the back. Shining it over the nefarious cup indicated a number of strange shapes, all of which seemed crystalline in structure.

Bingo.

Pulling out a few q-tips and a plastic bag from my pocket, I wet one from the sink and ran it over the purple spots on the rim. Then, I took a couple swabs of the coffee itself.

Plunked into bags, bags taped and labeled, I tucked the whole business into my coat and went back to shining the black light on the floor. I could see where Christina had lain, given that the way dust was moved out of the way and oils were shining. But it didn’t seem that there was any blood that had been cleaned away. There were a few hairs, too, which I similarly picked up and labeled, and noted in my book.

All of which meant that she probably hadn’t hit the floor hard enough to bleed. Similarly, it was unlikely there’d been an altercation that’d drawn blood and then allowed the hypothetical assailant enough time to clean it up with chemicals that would erase all traces of it.

So that just left talking to her, I decided as I put my phone back in my pocket and surveyed the scene one last time.

And all the rest, too.
“We have military police on the base, you know,” Nadia grumbled, holding out a hand.

We stood in a corner of the hallway, away from all the sailors, the members of her team that had been scrounged up, and my small team too. The lobby was pretty damn crowded, and everyone was getting antsy, like the passengers waiting for the captain to tell them to abandon ship.

“I know, but they won’t know what to ask. And, it’s my civilian suspect that’s been fucked with, so I have the highest need when it comes to interviewing people.”

Nadia’s lips pursed.

“Doctor Christina and you are the only two here who are military personnel. Doctor Martinique is a civilian contractor, and my team, of course, is not under your jurisdiction. So if you’d allow me to question you two off the record, that would get you some closure about this as well.”

Nadia was frowning furiously, mouth as pursed as if she’d swallowed a pickled plum, but eventually the glare in her eyes started looking past me, rather than boring straight into me like a laser. Soon, she looked off into the hallway with a huff, her arms folding tightly.

“All right. But you don’t tell anyone about it. It doesn’t make it into your reports, even.”

“The best I can do is promise that I’ll record it as ‘whatever was said was said in passing,’ or ‘overheard,’ if push comes to shove.”

She glared at me, and I held up my hands. “If it comes to that, I mean. Trust me, I’ve been doing this a long time, I’m not out to screw you over. I appreciate all the help so far, in fact.”

She growled mildly, giving me her best drill sergeant’s “you know you done fucked up, soldier” stare, but then sighed and nodded. “All right. And you tell me what you find.”

I nodded. “Will do, Ma’am.”

“All right,” she said, pointing to a room just around the corner, on the other side of the lobby. “That’s a phone room. You use that as your interrogation room, but know that you are not allowed to actually ‘interrogate’ anyone under my jurisdiction. Just regular voluntary fact-finding. I’ll make the all-clear for the lockdown but keep everyone here until you dismiss them. Any idea how long it will be?”

I looked over the assembled, still milling about anxiously. I had at least five people to interview in this cluster alone. “It could be a long time,” I muttered. “Like hours, long.”

“Damn,” she cursed, tapping her shoe on the floor. “And this it’s just about dinner time. ‘S gonna be a hard sell.”

“You got anyone you trust to bring in dinner?”

“Hell,” she muttered. “At this rate? Only myself. But I can’t leave.”

“Well, no dinner for anyone, then. And make sure no calls are made, either.”

She nodded. “I’ll watch for paper airplanes, too.”

I thought she was mocking me at first, but when I looked, she shot me a fleeting smirk.
The smile I returned to her was so weak that it could’ve been knocked over by one of those paper planes.

“All right,” I said, coming up to the cohort and tapping Christof on the back of the head with my notepad. “You first.”

“What? Really? You’re really doing this?” he asked once he’d shut the door behind him.

“Yes, I really am doing this, like a really real cop does.” I tossed the notepad on the table; it landed with a slap. I pulled out the chair and sighed, tapping at my phone to get to the recording feature. “You gonna give me the same kinda trouble the crooks do, or you gonna just do what I ask?”

That seemed to do the trick; I was provided with a sigh, an eye roll, and then begrudging answers. It was like dealing with a moody teenager.

...Which was frustrating, but not inherently untrustworthy.

“Fine,” Christof grumbled, put upon, plunking himself down into the chair opposite the tiny table and crossing his legs loudly, each boot thumping on the ground. The room really was small, maybe 8’ x 10’, adorned with a mere three chairs and a conference phone in the middle of the plastic table that stuck out from the wall.

Once I’d stated the time, date, situation, and people present for the record, Christof confirmed it and then started his tale:

“I was sitting. Outside the room. Like you asked,” he related with notable hissing and surly pauses. “And then Angela came by. I said hi. She kept going. Came out a little bit later, stating she’d left something behind and had to go get it. Then I got up a few seconds later, went inside, and found Lupin turning blue. Happy?”

He shot me a challenging glare, but I ignored it with a quick swipe of my pencil, making a show of drawing a long, loud, aggressive line under the name “Christof.”

“That the story you want to stick with, for the record?” I asked matter-of-factly, not bothering to look at him as I then wrote out a bullet-point based timeline based on what he’d just related.

“Yeah. Why?”

I didn’t bother responding to that. “When did Angela come by?”

“Couldn’t tell ya, to be honest,” he grumbled. “Didn’t check my watch.”

“How long did it feel like, after I left for lunch?”

There was a pause. I glanced up at him, hand still on the paper, but his jaw was tight. “Don’t you mean you and Telli?”

It was my turn to clench my teeth. “No, I mean me. Now answer the question.”

We stared each other down, but eventually he took the time to think and answered the question, albeit with one eyebrow raised to the sky.
“Wasn’t too long. Ten minutes, maybe fifteen.”

So just long enough to be sure we weren’t coming back, but with enough time to make sure Christina was down, too, huh?...

“And what did you say to her, specifically?”

He huffed, put-upon, but then made an honest attempt to think about it: “I don’t know. Something like... ‘hey how are you, haven’t seen you in a while.’ But she didn’t give me the time of day. Just said ‘Hi I’m here to give the patient his meds’ and went in. Cut me right off in the middle of a sentence and went in.”

“Were you hitting on her?” I asked back, point-blank.

“What? No?”

“Are you sure? That’s why most women run away from a man in the middle of a sentence.”

“Maybe it’s because she was trying to kill the fucking guy within a time limit? I don’t know.” Christof shrugged his shoulders irritably, and then pegged me with a sour look.

“All right, so I’ll take it that was a paraphrase of what she said. Do you remember the exact words you exchanged?”

“No.”

“All right.” I wasn’t going to press this with him. “How long was she inside? And try to be as specific as possible.”

“I don’t know, I wasn’t timing it. I hadn’t gotten more than half a page down the article I was reading. It’d been less than two minutes, I think. Definitely less than five.”

That’s quick, I thought. Perhaps too quickly to commit a crime against him, unless he was already asleep and she knew exactly what she was doing.

“And how long between when she left and you went in?”

He shook his head again, most of the rough edges fallen away for a moment in favor of staring at the table in thought. “Maybe...five, six minutes. Wait, no. Less than that. She said, ‘I’ve forgotten something, I’ll be right back!’ but when she didn’t come back, I checked in on Lupin. Thought it was odd that she’d left so abruptly, and I wanted to make sure he hadn’t managed to finagle himself into trouble because of how hurried she seemed.”

“And she seemed hurried?”

“Yes. Like she was trying to...”

He cut himself off, and I pressed him with my gaze, though he shook his head. “Like what?” I insisted.

“Like she was running away,” he admitted grudgingly. “But...y’know, I just figured she was either earnestly wanting to get back quickly and felt bad about coming in unprepared. Or maybe Lupin had groped her or something, and she was flustered.”

“So it seemed unnaturally hurried, in your opinion.”
“Yes.”

He eyed me honestly, determined, but then, apparently realizing he’d done something helpful, twitched and frowned and looked off again with a growl.

I tapped the recording button to pause.

“You wanna tell me what your problem is, Christof?” I asked mildly as I wrote, still working over my notes.

“No,” he snapped, knee-jerk.

“Well, all right. But if you don’t do it now, you might regret it later.”

“...And why is that?”

“Because later it’ll be on the record.” I finished my bullet points and looked up at him, his blond hair flopped to the side and jaw getting a fuzz of dark blond around it. Seemed like he hadn’t seen a comb in the time we’d been here, same as me.

His blue eyes gazed at me, long and hard, and then simply shook his head. “You are too nice to him.”

Slowly, I set my pencil down and then folded my hands in front of me. “Under what measurement system?”

He frowned at me, unsure.

“Do you know anything about him? Other than what you hear on the news?” I continued.

Christof’s lips pursed.

“No? Then I suppose you shouldn’t tell me what to do with my investigation.”

“Are you even allowed to stop that recording?” he lobbed back.

“I am when I’m not using the approved program because guess what, this one doesn’t record the fact that it’s been stopped, so.” I shrugged pointedly and picked up my pencil again. “Use the silence wisely.”

I waited, but he said nothing more; he only looked the more alarmed side of calculating. I reached out to tap the record button, but my finger hovered for a moment as a thought struck me.

“Tell me about your relationship with Marti,” I said, pulling my hand back and resting it on the table.

Christof’s eyes narrowed. “Why?”

“Because I want you to.”

Light blue lingered on the phone, then me.

“This is against regulation.”

“There are regulations here that you don’t know about, but that’s as far as I can go with your pay grade, son.”
The look on Christof’s face after that statement was rather wild to behold. There was a widening of his eyes, and he cocked his head too. His biceps flexed just a bit under his folded arm posture. And then one eyebrow went down and one went up.

*Yes, that’s right. There’s something going on here that you don’t know about. So get talking.*

I felt a little bad for Marti, but this was something that needed to be done anyway.

“How did you meet?” I began.

“For work. My first day, six months ago. She sits at the desk across from me. It’s an open-plan office.”

I’d expected him to balk at me, but instead, he’d decided to whip out the truth like a lasso. I narrowed my eyes at him, ready to lance his story.

“Even though you’re in two different divisions?”

“Yeah. It’s a small building, and neither of us have particularly confidential information. What I do doesn’t need any more security than passwords and a locked desk drawer. I don’t think she works on anything like that; just needs clearance for high-ranking people’s phone numbers so she can twist their balls once in a while.” He shrugged, though his eyes never left mine. “Why?”

*I think you know why*, almost slipped out of my mouth, but I held it back at the last moment. “And where did you work before that?”

“Norway. Fire investigation for Oslo.”

“The biggest in the country, if I remember correctly.”

He shrugged.

“You work with the oil money a lot?”

“Nope,” he shook his head. “Just insurance scams, local Christmas trees. That sort of thing. Look, if you want to know more, call my boss. I’ll give you his number....”

*A-hah.* There it was: a carefully scripted story, rattled off without pause, followed by the typical tactic at its end: call this imaginary higher-ranking person we’ve set up on the phone lines in case anyone like you gets suspicious.

But I wouldn’t fall for that.

“Please do,” I said, quickly cutting him off. “I’ll take you up on that.” I reached over and tapped the recorder back on. “Now, you got any debt to speak of?”

His eyebrows lifted, and his face dropped a bit. “Are you serious? You’re asking me about my motives for hurting the guy whose life I just saved twice? After turning the recording back on.”

I eyed him dryly, annoyed, then replied, “Yes, is that a problem?”

He rolled his eyes and sighed, head tipped back with a groan. “I live with my fiancée Aimée, she’s a French national. And no, I’m not marrying her for citizenship; we’re both EU members and we met through friends in her study abroad program. I have two happy, middle-aged working parents who are very proud of me, I have no siblings, I make enough money, I don’t have any debt, I actually have some savings, and no, I don’t have any gambling problems nor does anyone in my or
Aimée’s family, all right?”

I blinked at him, a bit surprised that he recited it by rote. I found myself staring at my paper, wondering how much I needed to push him for him to just admit that he was IA so that he could get out of this room. Seemed like it wouldn’t take much.

Still, that wasn’t a card I wanted to play just yet, and I had other things to worry about.

“All right... Well, thank you for that. Now: When you found Lupin, what was the scene like? Describe all the details you can remember, even if you don’t think they’d be relevant.”

“Well...,” Christof began, pursing his lips. “Let’s see. I walked in and he was lying on his back, with a syringe in his hand.”

“In his hand?” I asked before I could stop myself.

“Yeah. It was in his hand. His right hand.” He made the motion. “Or, well, I guess...it was right next to his hand. His hand was kind of on top of it; his fingers weren’t threaded through it.”

I frowned, but then nodded at him to go on.

Christof sighed and raised his own hand, staring at the ceiling as he thought. “It was... under his hand, I guess. But there were a few bottles next to him, on top of the oxygen machine. All of which had been turned off, by the way.” He eyed me pointedly, and the hand he’d been loosely gesturing with—noting the location of objects—returned to the fold of his arms at his chest.

“That’s why I didn’t come sooner; if he’d stopped breathing, and his heartbeat had stopped, the machines should have been blaring warnings audible on the whole floor before he even got that far gone. I don’t know how long he’d been anoxic, but given how blue his lips were, probably not more than a minute by the time I got there. Which is lucky,” he sighed, some of the tension finally leaving him. “I hope it’s enough.”

He stared at the table, looking downtrodden.

“You’re sad that you couldn’t save him the way you wanted?” I asked, a little surprised.

“It’s never fun when you can’t save someone.”

His clear blue eyes fixed on me, then quickly looked away, point made. Seemed that was part of his problem too.

“But we eventually revived him,” I went on, making note of this.

“Yeah.”

“I hope it’ll be enough.”

“Me too.”

“So tell me how that went. Resuscitation and getting help.”

Christof nodded, his tone far calmer now, though also a bit too quiet. “I called the nurse’s station, where Christina was supposed to be, but no one answered. I called out to the hallway, since the door was open, but still no one answered. So I started chest compression on the patient while I called the front desk. Nadia finally picked up and said she’d get help.

“She arrived, but we didn’t know where anyone else was, so I was tasked with finding people
while she took up compressions. I found Kyle, ran right by Christina apparently, and then Kyle found you guys. You know the rest, yeah?”

I took a moment to write down the relevant questions and notes, then nodded. “Yes.”

“Can I go now?”

“Not quite yet. Tell me about...Christina and Kyle. What were they doing?”

“Kyle was sleeping in the room at the end of the floor. He’d told me that, I vaguely recalled at the time, so I pounded on the door a few times. He nearly shot me, but we got that figured out.”

“Shot you?”

“I startled him with the shouting and door pounding.” He shrugged. “The doors are locked from the inside for safety.”

“But it didn’t last longer than necessary? The threatening?”

“No.” He shook his head.

I marked it to down to ask Kyle later.

“And Doctor Christina?”

He huffed, looking annoyed with himself. “I’m tall, right? And in a hurry. So I just looked at the station as I ran by it. I didn’t see anyone, and it’s too small to hide someone—unless they’re literally under the overhang of the counter. Which, why would they be? That was my mistake, I guess.”

“But the place didn’t look amiss?”

“No. Her chair wasn’t even out of place.”

“It wasn’t?”

“No.”

That...was an odd detail.

“But when you found her just now...?”

“She was under the table,” he said, thoughtful. “Er...counter. But her chair was pushed in.”

...Like someone had pulled it back in to make it look less suspicious.

“Do you think that’s possible?” I asked him after explaining the idea to him.

“Yes,” he answered without much hesitation, surprisingly. “She was semi-unconscious when I found her. Sleeping, as far as I can tell. There was a cup of coffee, unspilled and only about a quarter drunk, on the counter. But the chair wasn’t pushed back. So it’s entirely possible that she fell asleep at the desk, and then someone moved her just a little bit to make it look less like she was there.”

I narrowed my eyes, staring into my thoughts. If someone had tried to kill Lupin and gone to all the work of making it look like an accidental suicide, why slip up with Christina?
...Unless the whole point was to make it look like she’d purposefully taken a nap, not wanting to be found.

Huh...

“And how did she respond to you, when you found her?”

“She wasn’t coherent. Confused. No statements of any kind. Just mumbles of confusion.”

“Did her condition seem in line with a drugging? Are you qualified to speak on that?”

“Not qualified on drugs per se,” he sighed, “but of finding people who have collapsed under the influence of some issue, yes. It wasn’t simple sleep addlement.”

I nodded, and he nodded back. Slowly, he crossed his arms the other way. I tapped my pencil on the paper.

“All right. Tell me more about the room with Lupin.”

“Well...as you know, we found two different kinds of drugs. One in his hand, kind of hidden in the blanket folds. The other was on the equipment, and there were multiple bottles of that. Both are lethal at the right doses. But the antidote to each one is specific, so picking the wrong one would have definitely killed him due to the time lost.”

“And we went with...which one? For the record?”

He rattled off the names. I marked them down as best I could to spell them.

“All right. And that was when I went with Administrator Nadia to the supply closet on another floor, to get the counteractive agents. Was there anything else of note about the room? Were windows open, things strewn around? The monitors were off, you said. Could Lupin have done that himself?”

“Possibly,” Christof admitted. “Quite possibly.”

I hummed.

“But,” he added thoughtfully. “You know? The painting. Of Monaco harbor. That was turned around for some reason. And it hadn’t been, the last time I’d been in there. Did you two do that?”

“What?” I asked. “No, I didn’t.”

“Well that’s a clue then, huh?”

Christof tilted his head to the side. The innocent look he gave me was met with a little shiver down my spine.

Because the image of that black card came back to me, its message waiting patiently in my briefcase.

“All right, thank you for that. You can go—but don’t leave the lobby until I give the say-so.”

Christof sighed, gazed at me like I was an utter disappoint, but when I stood up, he soon left of his own accord, without another word.
Kyle was the second one up:

“I was asleep.”

That was the long and short of his interview. He had no alibi but for sleeping. He’d almost shot Christof out of nerves. He didn’t find Christina, even though he supposedly went by where she was when Chrisof had retrieved him. He could have easily been in on what happened to her or Lupin—and just as easily not.

Plus, he was readily truthful. Perhaps too readily. But at least someone was being cooperative, and for that I was grateful.

When prompted, he offered me a little about himself, as well: He was the son of Argentinian refugees who’d escaped to the US when he was younger. However, because of his home life he spoke Spanish, English, and French, so in his early 20s he’d volunteered for the French Foreign Legion and now here he was, some fifteen years later, living in a French flat with little debt, working for a local bomb squad. It was a pretty wonderful story of social mobility. He liked to travel, too, so he’d chosen Dunkirk for the proximity that it offered to a number of other European nations.

He also had no family to speak of, outside of his parents. A thought was forming as I wrote the details down, but in the silence, Kyle decided to voice something of his own:

“Hey...Inspector.”

He was in the chair across from me, posture more exhausted then relaxed; it looked vaguely like he was melting into the fabric, he was leaned down into it so far. It was a position that would have been envious, were it not for my brightly-burning work ethic raising its ugly head.

I glanced up at him, pencil halted, and nodded with a grunt. He continued, swiveling the chair a bit as he stared at the ceiling:

“I should probably tell you: When we went upstairs a few minutes ago and found the lady doc, Snow-boy mentioned that he’d rather wished your guy would’ve died.”

My first response to this was to bristle. The second was to avoid snapping my pencil in half.

“For what it’s worth, anyway.” My interviewee shrugged, finally tipping his head down to consider me properly beyond his massive arms. “But I think it’s just jealousy, to be honest.”

“Jealous enough to kill someone?” I asked, focusing on him sharply.

Kyle looked at the wall darkly, then gave a breezy shrug. “If opportunity presented itself?” he asked pointedly.

That was a large aspersion to cast on someone, but I also couldn’t immediately dismiss it, given the large portions of Christof’s movements where he had been alone. “Jealous of what?” I pressed.

Kyle lifted his chin, cool as a cucumber. “He’s protective of your lady friend.”

I frowned, mind immediately going to what I’d have to redact in the transcript of this.

“Look at this from his perspective, right?—He’s Martelli’s, uh, I dunno what you’d call it, office child-psuedo son? And the thief is yours.”
I immediately snorted. “He is not.”

Kyle gave me an “oh really?” look.

“He’s not,” I insisted, sitting up properly. “He’s an idiot.”

Kyle held up his hands, placating. “Be that as it may, that’s where he’s coming from, I figure. He’s here to protect her from whatever may come, and step-dad and his miscreant son are one of those things. Therefore, as long as you stand by Lupin with an eye for her, you are a problem in his eyes, by extension.”

It was one of the few things tonight that made any internal sense, despite it being entirely conjecture. I figured the she was more of a case and a promotion to him, and I was threatening that, but if I was wrong, his idea seemed a reasonable tact. Tired and annoyed, I groaned and put my face in my hands, elbows clunking loudly on the table.

“Just sayin’, I’m on your side,” Kyle offered pleasantly. “She is pretty hot.”

My eyes scrunched shut and I pointed at the door. “Get out.”

The American just held up his hands again, and, shaking his head, went to take a nap in a chair in the corner of the lounge, where Nadia was watching over everyone.

Third in the lineup was Nadia herself, sitting on the other side of the little plastic table:

“Just so you know, you don’t actually have the authority to do this.”

“I know.”

“Especially without military council present.”

“I know. Call it informal but in a formal space. Thank you for your cooperation.”

“You owe me for this.”

“I do.”

“Repay me by never contacting me again, after this.”

“All right.”

“Well, let’s get this over with. Whaddyou wanna know?”

I could still hear her droll sigh in my ears. I’d be seeing her bureaucratic-red-tape eyeroll in my dreams, I could just feel it. Luckily, she was an efficient woman with plenty of sense, so she was willing to talk off the record—though perhaps it was too much sense, because she seemed to feel a need to remind me of my boundaries at every waypoint.

Then again, working with a rotating string of college boys with their first gun hot in their sex-starved hands probably did that to you.

In any event, Nadia’s recollection of events didn’t elucidate much beyond Christof and Kyle’s contributions. She was just hanging around the desk eating lunch when Christof had called her in a panic. She’d come in, demanded he find Christina, but apparently the doc hadn’t been where she
was supposed to be. So then, she’d sent Kyle to us for extra hands. She’d arrived after Christof
had supposedly found the drugs in their various places and had turned the machines back on, so no
one else could corroborate those details.

So now I was sitting back in my chair, legs and arms crossed, contemplating her as I considered my
next questions. “Tell me about Angela and the old doc. Martinique.”

“Right. Sure.” She nodded easily, sitting straight and proper in her chair. However, she looked
somewhat tired at each blink; her crow’s feet and scowl lines seemed a bit heavier at the moment
then they’d been all week. “Martinique’s been working for us part-time for years, as a teaching
aide.”

“For what?”

“Surgery.” She put an elbow on the table, waved her hand as she spoke, and then put her chin in it.
“Internal medicine. He specializes in transplants, rather than tumors or the like. But that’s why
he’s so good with veins and arteries and saved your guy.”

I nodded, jaw tight as I pushed the memories of that away. I lowered my head and considered the
wall as I thought.

“And Angela?” I asked, quickly flicking a hard gaze back at her to see if she’d flinch.

“I got nothing for you there,” Nadia admitted, sighing wearily and rubbing at her brow. “I’ve
never heard of anyone named Angela, have never seen the person you’ve described. Haven’t
encountered any paperwork regarding her. You’re going to have to ask Martin.”

I stared into her eyes. But she just looked apologetic.

“I’m gonna have a hell of a time explaining this, if that woman was some sort of threat. What if
she was a spy?” she explained to that look of mine.

“Probably more than that,” I admitted, looking off.

Nadia just put her head in her hands and shook it. I sighed and looked toward the door.

“All right. Thank you. You can go.”

“In a minute,” she murmured, resting her downcast head in her hands.

“Sure. Take your time.”

Another loose end was the squad captain in charge of our guard unit from the night before, the
leader of those who had helped us search today. He was in his mid-twenties or little more, and his
guys, now gone from the building, were even younger:

“I was in the dorms, as were all my guys. Well, I guess some were out in the snow. But that’s all
I’ve got for you.”

“What do you know about the suspect?” I jerked my head upward Lupin’s way.

“Oh? Him? Well, I dunno really, we were just told by the Lieutenant-Colonel that we had a high-
profile prisoner coming our way and he was slippery, so we should make a ceremonial show of
‘don’t fuck with us,’ or it’d be our pay and off days on the chopping block if he got away.”
Fair enough. I wrote it down.

“When did the order come in?” I continued.

He thought for a second, then said, “Just after 1 AM, I’d guess? It was a scramble of the night shift guard.”

“Guys getting stuck on night shift duty near Christmas? What’d you guys do to deserve that?”

“Oh! Heh, well...we pranked him at the last holiday,” he admitted sheepishly, face splitting into a wistful grin. “So this is the punishment. We were gonna be on base anyway, but...” he shrugged.

I tipped my chin at him. “You got any family?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. Got a daughter. She’s three.” He smiled, and it was bright. “Wanna see pictures?”

“No, that’s fine. I’d rather get to the bottom of this.”

“Oh...sure.” He looked a little crestfallen. “What exactly happened?”

I gave him the telling eye, a small smile on my face somehow, and he smirked awkwardly. “I get it.”

I nodded. “How d’you like the LTC? He good to you?”

“Yeah...?”

“He ever get into trouble?”

“Not that I know of?”

“Does he have friends in the town’s law enforcement?”

“Oh, well...now that you mention it? He’s friends with the police captain, I think. We do drills together with the local force sometimes, not sure why, but if they can swing it under cost saving or whatever, ‘s not my place to question it.”

Ah...hah. That didn’t bode well.

I eyed him a little longer, coldly, and he shrunk back a bit. “Sir...?”

“Don’t go far,” I said. “I may need you.”

“S-sure...so long as my superiors okay it.”

I nodded and I shuffled him out the door, to wait in the lobby with the others. After asking Nadia, he ended up in another chair, opposite Kyle, napping just the same.

And then there was Christina.

After all these interviews, about two hours had passed. She was finally aware enough to speak, but she looked worse for wear. She kept touching at her head while frowning at the table. But when I came in, she stood for me, though it was wobbly. She kept her hands on the table to steady herself.
“Sit,” I said, waving at her as I shut the door. “Please.”

She nodded and then sat, looking concerned and perplexed.

I sat opposite her, hands folded. I let a few moments tick by, but she didn’t look my way. She just kept worrying her hands.

“What happened?” she asked eventually.

“I was hoping you could tell me.”

Her brown eyes looked up, then away. She pursed her lips, either uncertain or afraid. I wasn’t sure which.

“If someone’s threatened you, I can help you.”

“It’s not that, sir.”

She bit her lower lip, then rubbed the back of her neck. “I’m just embarrassed. I can’t remember what happened. I...”

She stopped there, taking a deep breath and sighing it out. “I...?”

I watched her carefully, taking in every line of her face to suss out the truth of the matter. “Go on.”

Christina shook her head, held out a hand. “I don’t know.”

“Tell me from the beginning: from the start of your shift, what do you remember?”

Her thin brow turned down, then she slowly stated, “I got up after sleeping in the nap room on the fourth floor, checked in with Nadia, checked in on the patient. Then I went to man the desk for my nine o’clock shift. Got some coffee, read some magazines. Hit up the bathroom, got more coffee and then...that’s the last I remember?”

So someone could have drugged the entire pot. That was what Christof had made it sound like, in any event.

Then again, Christof was the one that hadn’t found her, had been guarding Lupin, and had pointed the finger at “Angela.”

He was also the one that would have preferred Lupin dead, apparently. There was also the issue that the physical evidence indicated someone had put the stuff specifically in her cup.

“What time was that? The break?”

She shook her head. “I don’t...” then she paused, tilting her head. “Well, though...?” She traced a finger over the table, writing her thoughts down in invisible ink as she did. “I had just started thinking about getting hungry for lunch, so...about eleven-thirty or so?”

That was about an hour before Lupin had coded. That was a long time to bet on no one finding a drugged girl, but then again, not a long time, if you were waiting for an opportunity for the ones guarding your mark’s door and suspected it’d take ten or twenty minutes for her to drink enough to get knocked out. Either way, it was starting to seem like a precision operation. Maybe “Angela” had been preparing to take Christina’s place at the desk....

But then why would she do the deed and whisk away moments later? Her taking up the desk, and
more or less tying up the legitimate staffer in a closet, was indicative of catching some other opportunity with a second operative, not making her own.

Unless that was the plan and she’d simply gotten a better moment when Marti and I left for lunch...?

I took a deep breath, then let it out. “Tell me about your interaction with Lupin when you went in for the morning check.”

“Well...sure. Sir.” Apparently the scowl lines in my face were intense, because she was getting more reticent whenever she looked at me. Still, she looked at her lap, fiddled with her hands, then took a breath and nodded. Slowly, her voice turned clinical: “The patient was awake. His vitals were stable, though a bit elevated, probably from the anxiety of being in a strange environment, as it is with most patients in our facility. We chatted a bit. He hit on me. I told him he was lucky to be alive. He seemed...”

She trailed off, and, well aware of the recording ticking by the seconds of silence, leaned forward and whispered, “...What?”

“A little sad, honestly.” Her brown eyes gazed up at me. “But I mean, he’s under arrest, so that didn’t strike me as odd. What seemed odd was that he kept looking at that painting on the wall like he was having trouble with it.”

“What painting?” I pressed.

“There’s a painting, well, I guess it’s a painting of a photograph? Of Monaco Harbor in that room. He asked me to turn it around, actually.”

My eyes widened.

_Are you serious? That's...what the problem's been?_

Monaco?

“...Sir?”

“...Did you?”

“Turn the picture around? Yeah.”

I hadn’t even noticed that, but even Christof had mentioned it, so it must have truly been an issue for him.

I sat back, chin in hand, and then tapped the pencil thoughtfully on the pad. “Did you give him any medications?”

“Oh... No, I didn’t. I checked his drip line, but that was it. He wasn’t due for anything else for a while.”

“Did you have any on you?” I asked. “Any that’s not now?”

“Oh, well...actually...?”

She checked in her pockets, first one, then another, then another. There must have been five of the things, including her jacket and pants. With a dawning look of horror, she looked at me. “I had two bottles of morphine for him for later...but they’re both gone.”
I narrowed my eyes. So he’d either taken them from her for some reason, using his sleight of hand
tricks, or whomever drugged her had....

“Maybe they fell out when I collapsed...?” she muttered to herself, staring at the table with a
crestfallen droop to her shoulders.

“Probably not; I didn’t find them when I looked over the space, nor did Christof, your rescuer.”

“Oh...” Christina winced and then stared at me balefully. “Did something happen to him? Is that
what this is all about?”

I opened my mouth a bit, then shut it. If no one had told her out there, they were a tighter-lipped
bunch than I thought. Then again, maybe she just hadn’t asked.

“Yes,” I decided to say, keeping my eyes on her. “It did. Wanna take a guess as to what?”

She looked like a deer in headlights.

Yeah, it’s not a fun game, is it. I tapped the pencil slowly, rhythmically, waiting.

She took a shaky breath. “...Is he dead?”

“Why do you say that?”

She held out a hand. “You don’t hold two hours of interviews for a guy that’s alive. You just ask
the guy.”

I nodded sagely, but to her downtrodden face, added, “He’s alive, for now. We don’t know if it’ll
stay that way, though, or what the damage is.”

“Did he shoot himself up somehow? God, I’m sorry. I don’t know, maybe...I mean, maybe they
fell out somehow?”

“More likely, he pickpocketed you.”

Her eyebrows pushed up, her whole emotional landscape looking crushed. “Oh God, what a rookie
mistake.”

I nodded. “But there’s still the issue of your coffee.”

She looked up with just her eyes. Then, she bit her lip.

“Is there anywhere on this base that can analyze it?”

“Oh...well? Nadia would know better than me...”

I asked her a few more questions about her family background and motivations, financial situation
and other standard fact checking, but there was nothing much there. I suspected that if I found
more about her, she’d have a clean slate. She seemed the type. A little too emotionally invested in
her job, but therefore having no energy left for nefarious things on the flip side.

I couldn’t say for sure, but she seemed like the victim here.

If only I could find out who’d made her that way. There was a myriad of suspects.

Talking to Lupin would be the best, but even if I could, he was in some mood even with his mind
in-tact. Getting the essential truth out of him was not something I could count on.

So that left...

The good doctor Martinique.

Who was currently playing poker with Christof using the candies in the lobby’s bowl as chips.

Once I left the makeshift interrogation room, the two looked up at me at the same time. Christof had the good sense to look a little sheepish. The doc just eyed me and folded his cards with a practiced hand, never taking his gaze from mine.

“Looks like it’s finally my turn with the Beast.”

I returned his stare and one curt word:

“In.”

“State your name.”

He looked at the table, and its conspicuous recorder. I threw down a notepad, however, and wrote Doctor in Japanese on it as well.

Whatever he thought of that, though, when his gaze trailed its way back up, he said with a small smile, “Dr. Louis Martinique.”

“Occupation.”

“Surgeon...retired. Instructor, currently. Part-time.”

I didn’t look at him; on cursory questions, it was easier to assess hesitation and emotional shifts by ear.

“Where did you work during your career?”

“Here and there.”

I eyed him, pencil immediately stopping.

He stared back, stoic as a brick wall and smiling gently under his bushy mustache.

“Nationality?” I asked, after the clock had set off several ticks.

“French.”

“Been that way since birth?”

“Yup.”

“Ever served in the armed forces?”

“French Foreign Legion,” he stated, breaking eye contact for a yawn. “When I was young.”

The Legion...that was the same as Kyle—the other local.
“On what terms did you leave your commission there?”

He shrugged. “Honorably. Contract was up.”

I lifted my head a bit, thinking, then set another question to him, eyes never leaving his face: “What made you get into it in the first place?”

His response was a measured smile down his nose through the thin, rectangular spectacles there. “See the world. See its women. Do some good. That sort of thing.” He waved a hand, then, legs crossed at the knee, set his arm over the back of the chair and rested his cheek on curled fingers.

I raised an eyebrow. “Not doctors without borders?”

“The soldier part came before the doctor part,” he admitted, looking off disinterestedly. “Inspector, do you have something pertinent to ask me, or is this going to continue on like a date?”

My eyes widened at that, just slightly.

A date? You think this has the severity of a date?

“I have things I could be doing right now,” he explained to the look on my face, “Like tending to Christina.”

Not “Doctor Christina” or “[rank] Christina.” Just “Christina.”

I wrote another note in the margins, in Japanese. Old-fashioned. Demeaning to women/underlings? Or deeply familiar relationship with Chr?

He eyed my pages, but even if he could read it, that might just piss him off enough to give me an opening.

“You have nice handwriting,” he said, in that almost eerily soft tone of his.

Another pause of the pencil, another moment for me to collect myself. “...Thank you. It’s regarded as a point of dignity, where I’m from.”

“And where is that?”

Very slowly, I tilted my head back, looking at him all the while.

He just smiled politely, broom-style mustache shuffling as he did so.

“Recite the events of the last few hours for me.”

“I suppose I can’t just say that I was in my office napping, even if it’s true, hm?”

“You could, but then I’d ask you who could corroborate it.”

He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye, then returned to gazing at the white wall as though it were inherently interesting. “Hrm.” It was a brush off. “Then there’s your story. Better go ask someone.”

“So...” I began, after deciding not to snap my pencil in half or jab him in the hand with it at that fetch quest, “Tell me about Angela.”

“Angela?” he asked, blue eyes flicking back to me. “Who?”
“The tech who was working with you in the basement two nights ago during the initial incident.”

“Oh, her. I guess I didn’t catch her name.” He shrugged, and, still draping one arm over the chair back, pulled his leg closer and held it at the ankle. “Didn’t like her.”

“Why not?”

“Pushy broad,” he said, scrunching up his nose. “I think she was one of those lesbian things.”

“Lesbian things’?” I asked before I could help myself, half-wondering if I’d gotten the French wrong. It did trip me up sometimes when certain dialects came into play, but it was rare anymore. But no, given the look he gave me, he really did mean that. “Is that...a problem for you?” I sputtered.

He rolled his eyes and waved his free hand. “If you don’t mind that sort of thing. Terribly unnatural, and therefore terribly fascinating.”

_Good God_, I found myself thinking with a shudder. _Tell me this man isn’t an old Nazi._

“Well,” I said with effort, shaking my head a little, “I’m not here to decide a workplace misconduct case, so. When was the first time you saw her?”

He paused, then said, as if surprised I was so nonchalant, “When I got here, I guess. Two days ago for the start of my shift, I mean, before we got snowed in.”

“And where did you meet her?”

“In the lab where I met you. She was there before I was. Said she was taking a shift helping man the fort upstairs, but wasn’t sure how our model operated. I would have noted that I’d never seen her before when you and I first met in the basement, since I’m sure you’ll ask about that, but honestly, I don’t keep track of all the women here.”

_Only the ones you don’t like, it seems._

“All right,” I said, pushing that aside with a long exhale, “Did she show any behaviors unusual to the staff or say anything that struck you as odd?”

“Aside from wearing boots and having her hair that short and the grating need to assert herself? No.”

_Ah...huh. All right then. One of those._

I jotted down a note in tightly sweeping kanji: _Insecure – demands hierarchy._

“Seemed competent to you?”

“Yes, actually. No less than the regular newbies. Well, moreso, actually, so I believed she really did just pick up a shift from somebody.”

I blinked down at my pencil. This all...sounded rather scripted. There wasn’t a missing drop of information that I’d ask for, and all the answers were coming quickly.

“Did she say anything about her last name?” I asked heatedly, ready to pin him with a stare.

But he wasn’t looking at me; he was staring at his nearly non-existent nails, which were perfectly manicured down to the lowest they could go without ripping out something important. “Nope.”
Still, he found some grime to dig out from under them, and flung it on the floor.

I blinked a few times at that, but when he looked back at me, it was with a sigh. “Anything else, Inspector?”

“In fact, there is.” Matching his bet, I leaned forward with my elbow on the table and rested my chin on the back of my knuckles. “Now that I’ve got you here civilly. Explain to me why my suspect freaked out when he saw you.”

He looked at me with some surprise, but then, for just a split second, he smiled. And it spoke the words “how quaint.”

But then he looked away with a soft scoff at himself and put his pointer finger against his lips and the adjacent thumb under his chin.

“I really have no idea.” His light blue eyes gazed at me smugly. “Like I said before: Sometimes people just snap, and you’ll never see it coming. Especially the people around here. Now.”

He leaned forward and matched my posture, “Tell me what happened to him?”

This time, the smile that crept along his face was much, much darker.

“Stay here.”

My answer was instantaneous. Taking my articles with me, I got up and made for the door, and Marti.

At my back, the old man merely smiled and waved amiably. “As you wish it.”
This probably should have been part of the previous chapter, but oh well... The pacing of this whole arc is a little strange, I do realize that, but I hope you'll forgive it, because I haven't quite found a better way to do it. It's completely different from how I was originally envisioning it, so this is the best we can do. I hope you enjoy it anyway as the updates come along.

If existence is a canvas, then the world is made of lines upon that canvas. Harried scratch marks, delicate pre-planned curves, or staccatoed dots: all the world is simply lines.

But some of those lines burst beyond the black and white to exist in color. And shift those darker or lighter, and you get the inexorable shadow of entropy or the grace of vivacious life.

Add further complexity to these—combine the variants together—and you get a sort of magic. A musical melody, I’d call it, that floated through the world of sighted creatures. A song that was ours and ours alone, whose notes we could harmonize with and play among.

In the end, the world as we know it is made up of this cacophony of line and color in an ever-mixing pallet, and it is we humans’ duty, as creatures who can witness it, to build harmonies within that cosmic painting; but so often, all the wonder of the world is to us is noise. All around us, every day, every minute—we fail to sense it in any way other than distraction; fail to build grace notes around ourselves, for ourselves, for our universe. There is a harmony we exist within, but so often, we miss it, and disrupt the notes in the song around us without ever being aware of the destruction we’re causing.

I tended to see it in my dreams; it would reveal different dimensions of experience to me as memories played back. Yet when I opened my eyes this time, I found one of those momentary harmonies of the universe readily shining down upon me:

White light, with bits of red and orange as hatch marks. The lines were very short and bobbing around.

As my eyes focused, I came to see dots, too. Little brown dots, in the red spectrum.

Then green. In the middle of the fire of wavy lines was a pop of grass green, that nearly took my breath away.

More light filtered in, and the lines sharpened, condensed. It was eyes and hair, I realized. Surrounding a freckled face. A woman’s face.

A woman I knew.

“You’re so beautiful,” I thought, or maybe said. I raised my hand and cupped her cheek. It took a few tries, but I soon found that her skin was soft, and it glowed in the white. So many beautiful colors, so many harmonies, dancing around, all making sounds and emotions in my brain that danced across the lake of my body. “I wish I could paint you,” I croaked.
The woman smiled back down at me, holding my hand in place. Her thumb swept along mine softly.

“Hi there,” she whispered kindly. “Welcome back. Do you remember where you are?”

“Home,” I said, smiling. This sort of beautiful color, this rich white light and feeling of safety inside me, only generated from one place: The living room of the Princess CiCi cupcake flat, and the couches in it.

Perhaps it had all been a bad dream. Yes, that must be it. I must have fallen asleep there and had a terrible nightmare. But now, I could almost smell brunch cooking, as this light shone down upon me.

The lips above me pursed, and the hair moved again, sending red and orange and shots of gold flowing around my vision. I was already breathless, but this made me pleasantly dizzy too. I tried to follow it, but she caught my hand and untangled my fingers from her hair, only to wrap them up in her own digits. Slowly, repeatedly, she smoothed her free hand over the back of my captured one and down my naked forearm. “Can you tell me your name?” she asked over my knuckles.

I licked my lips. My voice felt sore and raspy.

“It’s Aki.”

A few moment of frown flittered by after my whisper, and my stomach tightened.

Tell me it was all just a dream.

“...Did I do something wrong again, Mom?”

Her eyebrows ticked down, but then, all of a sudden, she smiled anew and patted my hand reassuringly. “No, you haven’t done anything wrong at all, honey. I’m glad you’re here, in fact.”

It was such a kind, cheery smile that I nearly gasped before I sighed out my relief. I smiled back at her, feeling overwhelmed by the sense of warmth and safety, something I’d desperately missed for so long. I clutched at her hand, feeling tears threaten.

“I knew you’d come back for me....”

* * *

He was awake. He was talking. And he seemed to think I was his mother.

I tucked a curl behind my ear as I leaned over him, and then went back to holding his hand in both of mine. Lupin was smiling dopishly, fondly, and kept trying to touch my face while slurring words that were half in Japanese and half in French.

But Aki. Aki desu, that I understood.

“It’s Aki.”

I couldn’t help but smile.

It was a cute name. Little wonder he’d distanced himself from it; it didn’t fit his profession at all.
Plus, Zenigata was going to love holding that over his head. It was clearly the name of someone whose mother didn’t want them to go into crime.

I shifted on the bed and came closer to him, looking at the monitor for his pulse now that everything was reconnected. It seemed to be fluttering, continuing to go up the more awake he got, but it was in a good range overall—and holding there.

It wasn’t unusual for people to wake up fairly quickly after an overdose. Once the drug was out of their system, there was no reason for them not to; there was nothing keeping them unconscious.

It was also not uncommon for them to be disoriented and belligerent once they did so. But this...was something else entirely.

Though, these “episodes” post-unconsciousness seemed to be par for the curse for Lupin, so I might as well go with it. What mattered most was keeping him calm, and looking for signs of this being indicative of greater brain damage rather than his usual attacks.

Though, it should be said that his issues apparently weren’t getting any better; in fact, they were getting worse. But this calm before the storm was also a chance for information, and that was perhaps more important in the long run.

“Why did you think that, sweetie?” I asked, stroking his fingers. “Why wouldn’t you see me again?”

He grimaced, and the tears forming at the corners of his eyes flowed down his cheeks when he blinked. But, oddly enough, he didn’t seem bothered by them; the displeasure was from something else. “You were gone for so long,” he sobbed, rubbing at his eyes with his free hand.

His boyish face drawn and haggard; the plaintive look in his eyes; this quiet space, with a mother and child around a bed: This felt like so many night shifts, coming home with a sick kid that’d stayed up waiting for me, too young to realize that Mom being gone for several hours didn’t mean Mom wouldn’t ever come back again.

Perhaps that was why I gave in and stroked his cheek with a quiet note of pity. “Do you know what happened to me? Why I was gone?”

Lupin’s response to this was to choke back a sob. His hand pulled out of mine, and then he held both over his face. “It was dark, for so long...and then you...and he...”

His legs pulled up, or at least attempted to. Because of how I was sitting, there wasn’t enough slack in the sheets to get them up very far. Which was good, given his surgery. Still, that meant he probably wasn’t feeling any pain at the moment. I wondered how long that would last.

But the man choked back a further sob, deeper than the rest, and it was clear from the sounds that, behind his hands, tears were spilling down freely.

“C’mere, my poor boy.” I hummed sympathetically and pulled him close. I repositioned myself closer to Lupin’s head and dragged his top half over, onto my knees; I wrapped my arms around his shoulders.

This was partially strategic: if he started having violent outbursts, this was the best position from which to easily restrain him when all I had was myself and my own power. But it was also an old, familiar place to rest a troubled child, and I hoped he’d respond to that.

Maybe he’d never had that, and this would only unsettle him more. But maybe he had. I was
willing to gamble on good memories existing somewhere in there, for his sake.

Luckily, the Lupin of this fractured state seemed to take to it well: He sighed, shuddering, and then pulled himself forward until his eyes were buried against my stomach. One hand was tucked up against his chest, and the other clutched at the back of my shirt, weakly.

In my lap, Lupin was a weight, but barely heavy. There wasn’t much to him, and that just made me remember my children more. It’d been, what, ten years at least, since I’d held them this way? Probably more....

I’d held Zeni a time or two like this in recent years, but it’d never been someone younger. And even so, the chance to do this for anyone was a rare and precious opportunity that I held dear.

“You don’t have to worry about all that anymore;” I whispered, stroking his hair soothingly. “I’m here, and it’s all right now. I’ve got you.”

Against me, Lupin sobbed desperately, barely able to catch his breath between words. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry....”

“For what?” I asked kindly.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know. I thought...I just knew what you told me, I thought he’d...he’d...” he sobbed and held me tighter, this time a hand coming over his head and clawing into it. “Why did you have to lie? Why did you have to give me that hope?”

“Hey, shh, shh, I’m sorry,” I said, not sure what he was getting at but knowing enough that it was agitating him. I pulled one arm tight around his shoulders and then dug my other hand under his, so that he’d stop digging at his scalp. There were scars there, I could see from this angle. Thin scars under his hairline, long and thin like his fingernails. “It’ll be okay....”

But Lupin, it seemed, couldn’t hear me anymore. His voice tightened, high and distressed. “Why, why...?” he kept saying, over and over, each time more pained than the last. He hid in the darkness of my lap, his bare shoulders shaking.

I held his shoulders with one hand and rubbed his back strongly with the other. “Why what...Aki-kun?”

“Why did neither of you ever want me? I tried so hard—”

I wasn’t sure what to say to that. If I refuted it, he could react violently. On the other hand, if I didn’t offer anything, he’d probably just keep going and get there eventually anyway, this time sans closure. I had to find something to redirect him with—

Before I could do anything though, he popped up and grabbed my shoulders. Startled, I reflexively grabbed his biceps in return, and we ended up staring at each other from inches away.

“Why did I have to destroy us...?” he asked, so many tears flowing down his cheeks that they looked like little rivers. I doubted he could see much.

His grip wasn’t as strong as I’d initially expected, but the look in his eyes behind the tears was manic. He was damn close to me too, especially for a patient having an episode, but he was also falling apart and had barely any strength in his limbs, he was sobbing so hard.

In another moment of his eyes searching mine, he broke down into tears completely and, with a
high-pitched keen, bowed his head and rested it against my chest—more or less falling into it—sobs, hiccups, and shivers wracking his form. He wrapped his arms around me, then held me tight, weeping.

“I’m sorry...” he wailed.

I took a breath and stared at the ceiling, then decided to take the plunge and slowly petted over his hair. “Whatever are you talking about?”

After a while and a note of confusion, he sniffled like a little kid, then slowly sat up. He took my hands and held them, but he could never quite decide on what way to do so. He worried them into several different positions, turning his hands this way and that and squeezing my skin every time.

“You’re dead, aren’t you?” he asked soft and strained. “Tell me how....”

As my eyes widened, he looked up at me with big blue eyes, much brighter from the red all around them. His hand raised, quick at first, but when I pulled back, he went slower.

Cautiously, he cupped my cheek and yet kept blinking down tears as he said, “I drove you to do it, didn’t I?”

“Oh honey,” I said, touching at his hand with a sigh. This, of all things, I understood. This, I had an answer for, one that I wished I had been able to deliver many years ago to my children. “The world of adults is a lot more complicated than all that. It’s not your fault. It’ll be okay. Because I still love you, no matter what happened to me.”

Somewhat surprisingly, rather than any more outbursts, he simply closed his eyes and nodded, and then hugged me again, under my jacket, the last few sobs trickling out of him.

“My dear,” I soothed. “Go back to sleep. You’ll feel better in the morning.”

He stayed on my shoulder, sniffling. I set a hand down his back soothingly. It took several more attempts, but I finally coaxed him to sit up, nodding in agreement.

“O-okay...”

He held my arm in one hand while the far one propped himself up in the sheets. Then, as if only just barely daring to, he gave me a last look, eyes looking far more blue with all the red around them. “Will I ever see you ag—”

“Marti! I’ve got something to—”

We both turned to the door instantaneously. Zenigata was standing there, hanging on the frame. He looked at me, but then spied Lupin. His eyes widened and a moment later he stepped in, as if drawn to an irresistible force.

“You’re...alive?” he said in awe, then suddenly brightened into a smile. He turned to me. “He’s —?”

“STOP!”

Lupin suddenly shouted in my ear, to the point that I pushed away from him and went blind for a second.

And in that moment, Lupin managed to get his arms around me and cling to me in a death grip.
“Don’t come near her!”

He was shouting at the top of his lungs right in my ear, and physically shoving me backward at the same time. I thought he was trying to get away at first, but after a moment with a tangle of limbs going into my face, it became clear that he was trying to force me behind him.

Zeni, for his part, was just staring in alarm, having stopped in his tracks.

“Stop it, stop it, stop it, don’t hurt her anymore!”

Lupin’s voice was cracking and shrieking. I grabbed my arms around him wholesale, unable to do anything else because of how I was sandwiched and because of the concerns about him injuring himself if he fell out of bed or I fell on him just wrong. It had to look like a ridiculous pillow fight, but with one of the participants being a grown man shrieking in terror.

Zeniigata, meanwhile, was still staring, this time with his hands up, unsure about which of us to go for.

“He’s having an episode, Zeni!” I shouted at him over Lupin’s continued cries, still trying to manhandle the patient into a manageable position. “Just...Just leave, please?!”

I felt bad about it, but that was the best I could manage. Lupin’s hair kept getting in my teeth.

“I—sure. Right, sure. Yeah....”

“Thank youuu,” I called. “I’ll be there in a minute—!”

And then, all of a sudden, Lupin ducked his head into my chest and, holding me tightly, just shivered there, whispering to himself.

“Mom! Don’t go, don’t go. Please? Please, I still need you. I’ll take care of you. Just hang on for me, please?”

And then, just as I was leaning in to get a better look at his face, he gripped my arms, pulled his head up, and screamed at the door, “What did you do to my mother!”

But Zenigata wasn’t there. And so Lupin, all of a sudden, stiffened up.

And then just stared there, at the door.

Very carefully, I pulled around to look at his face. But before I could catch a glimpse, he turned away. He looked around, at all the space in front of him. Whether it was intentional or not, he seemed to simply miss looking at me, somehow.

“Oh...”

His gaze snagged on the photograph of Monaco’s harbor.

“‘S just...a dream, then.”

“Lu...pin?”

But he didn’t appear to hear me. He took a deep breath and rolled over, crawling back in bed and releasing all his limbs from me like a suddenly disinterested octopus. Like an automaton ending its day, he pulled the sheet over himself and tucked himself into bed, his back to me.
“Just another day of this....”

He sounded miserable, and tucked his arms up around the pillow, clearly squeezing it for comfort.

“He’s never coming back, is he?”

“Lu—?”

“Heh, Lupin, you piece of shit, why would anyone want to come back for you? No one’s ever wanted you in the first place, you know that.”

“Yeah but, I was hoping...”

“Hoping for what? That he’d care?”

“Yeah....”

He was talking to himself. The second voice was a little higher pitched, a little softer. Not enough to be an entire another personality; it just sounded like he was arguing with himself, like a child would when processing things late at night.

“Well that’s your problem. No one cares about you.”

“Heh...yeah,” he sighed, sounding relieved. He chuckled a little, sickly, and wiped at an eye.

“Yeah, you’re right. How could I forget....”

He took a deep breath; his side rose and fell. He did this a few times, and then his breathing evened out.

“Just another day of this...” he whispered, grinding his face into the pillow. “Maybe tomorrow I can not wake up anymore.”

After that, he ceased to speak.

He just fell asleep.

After a minute, I got to my feet. I stood at the end of the bed, one hand on my hip and one in my hair. “What the hell was that?” I whispered to myself.

That psych consult sheet just got ridiculously longer.

Giving Lupin one last long look and sighing in exasperation, I headed out to the hallway. But Zenigata’s back was already halfway down the hall, stalking angrily.

“Zeni...?” I called.

But he just threw up his own hand into the air, angrily. Shook his head and kept walking.

Oh, damn, I realized. He’s pissed.

I looked a Lupin, curled up in the bed with his back to me, and then at Zeni, his own back getting ever smaller. But why...?
Chapter Notes

This is a Zenigata flashback chapter, if it isn't immediately obvious.

9.8 meters per second squared is the constant you use to calculate fall and velocity--it's the gravity constant.

I wrote the original version of this chapter 21 months ago.

The office was quiet this time of night. Even with the serial killer task force going on next door, it was nearly silent on the floor.

I shut the door with a sigh and ran my hand over my hair. I was helping out with the case, but it wasn’t a pretty sight—underage girls with missing organs, Jack the Ripper style. I guess I got pretty spoiled, following the trail of an international art and gem thief who thought that killing women was unsightly and the uninitiated unprofessional.

But he hadn’t done a large hit in months. Sure, there were a couple of heists I’d heard of through the underground rumor mill that were probably his, but it was nothing definite, and on top of that, they were nothing big. If they were indeed his, they were probably just the small stuff that paid his debts to various people; they weren’t his style. They weren’t the thing that brought the papers—and me.

And that worried me.

With a sigh that was more than part growl, I pulled off my tie and tossed it onto one of the empty arms of the hat tree. The blinds were drawn, but a little bit of burning amber light came in from the streetlights that lined the paths outside.

Interpol was a place to burn the midnight oil, full of people who had a hard-on for justice, but some days, even with that comraderie, it was trying. But then again, story after story of missing persons that were probably gruesomely murdered and decomposing in a ditch somewhere for no better reason than profit and greed tended to do that to you.

In comparison, it made me long for the puzzle, the challenge, of my thief. I felt a little bad about it, given what the serial killer case was trying to deal with, but not enough to dwell on it beyond a single glass of whisky. Theirs was a gruesome, senseless monster in the woods. But mine was clean. Mine was the elegance of history, science, and a well-trained special ops force combined into one.

Lupin the Third, as he was calling himself these days, was a conundrum everyone in law enforcement top brass wanted resolved, because he tended to hit crooked government elites that paid the bills of my bosses, directly or not. It was like running in a hamster wheel sometimes, when I thought about it too hard.
But I admired that about him, really. He didn’t go for low-hanging fruit, and he left a trail of debris that always involved the downfall of people that, well, rather deserved it.

When he did it right, anyway. The rest of the time, though...then it was just a mess of blood and pissed off people who knew other, more dangerous people. That was when I got worried—for myself, but him too.

And when these long silences came...it either meant that he was working on something complicated, or that something personal was bothering him.

He’d been that way ever since I’d first met him, during my undercover days.

I turned around to face the door and leaned back against my desk, arms crossed. The light from the blinds fell over my desk—along with my bookshelf, my papers, my maps. The main map, which covered one entire wall, was a world map, dotted with push pins that gleamed in the light. Next to each were photographs and sticky notes: things that had been stolen; the date; the person who owned it. The reasons behind the theft, stated or assumed; and different colors for stolen, retrieved, or successfully stopped.

There weren’t a lot of the latter.

I’d been on Lupin’s case for five years, and had an office in HQ for it and everything. And I had that, despite the fact that he was still out free, because part of his debris trail was other crooks. His heists had a habit of revealing—or, you could say, leaving—evidence that pointed to other criminal activity that was always of a higher order, a more distasteful racket. Usually, I should note, with thorough enough evidence to clean them up for good.

As nice of windfall as that was—and as much of a boon to keeping my job—it made me grind my teeth; he could have been doing so much more with that talent, and I wasn’t here to be his personal cop. Not that you could tell from the water cooler talk around here, though. (There was a rather long-running and overly fond joke on the floor that I had the highest arrest record and lowest closing record, and that maybe I was paying him for the privilege.)

Admittedly, I’d caught Lupin once or twice, too. Usually when something of his went wrong, though not always. Sometimes I genuinely won the game we had going; and those times I’d thrown him in the nearest jail. But each time he’d be gone by morning—or whenever was most convenient for him. You’d think he was coated in butter.

And yet, he was an oddly jovial fellow. He loved what he did, always did it with a smile whether you were a lawman or his vic, and he could be counted on to threaten, bribe, or jibe his way out of jail in most countries.

It made me think of the days when I’d first met him. When I’d pretended to be crooked, and he hadn’t quite managed to be. If only I could rewind all that and scoop him up back then, get him on our side...he’d make one hell of a spy.

But that was a long time ago now, wasn’t it?

I sighed, pulling up a bottle of local beer and gazing at those pins.

Still, I was on “the Lupin case” because of the work back then: I was the most familiar with him. I could get inside his head and figure out his targets, and his likely points of entry. I wasn’t against traveling the world to get to his heists, either, but with my background in undercover work, I was pretty good with twisting arms or greasing wheels to get the local cooperation I needed to cast a net
to catch him.

That was the other thing that made Lupin unique as a criminal element: he tended to leave a calling card. And no matter who got his case locally, they came to me to resolve those cards. So it just made sense for me to keep being on his case; I wanted to be here, and the top brass really couldn’t keep an effective eye on him otherwise.

Sure, that made them a little suspicious of me from time to time, but...

I turned to my wooden inbox, and the lack of any mail there.

Because Lupin’s heists were so spectacularly intricate and costly, they didn’t happen every day. More like every six months. (At least, the publicized ones. I held no illusions about the fact that he robbed random bank vaults for cash too, and just didn’t tell anyone. It would seem too beneath him, however, to mention it. Such was the hypocrisy of self-styled “gentlemen criminals.”)

So, naturally, working on his case didn’t need attention all the time. Instead, I helped out on other cases in between mobilization for him.

And specifically because he left calling cards like clockwork before a heist, and the fact that his crimes required a hell of a lot of overtime for the local precincts, the bosses had decided that said mobilization would only be when there was a credible account of him camping out somewhere, or one of his own messages. It meant we would probably never catch him, but I was getting closer every time despite it all. That noose was tightening, each time our stars revolved around each other.

There hadn’t been any contact from him in a long time, though. Nearly eight months.

It made me wonder if it wasn’t because of the last time I’d seen him. When we’d been stuck on that cruise ship, full of money and people that wanted to defend it and it hadn’t exactly...gone well.

—“Don’t expect the same courtesy next time”—

I sighed and stared at the map some more, head cocked. So you’ve disowned me, huh?

The idea made me more sad than anything. There someone else you’re sending messages to, these days?

After all, I’d cared about him—as a friend and as a cop—before anyone else did. Sometimes, I thought I was the only person in the world that didn’t want to see him dead. His case was mine, by rights.

With a sigh, I picked myself up out of the chair and went over to the wall of built-in bookcases. There was a small box there, filled with an assortment of small cards—letters, post-cards, dinner invitations, business cards. They had photocopies in the case files, and when I retired, would all take their place among the sea of filing cabinets. But for now, they stayed by me:

Lupin’s old calling cards. All of them.

I pulled out one from two years ago. A postcard from Switzerland, a large ski chalet in the Alps. In his tight, swooping French handwriting (he disguised it sometimes, or flourished it up depending on how he was feeling, it seemed), was a single line: What shines like a diamond but lives in the bear’s eye?

The Ursa Major diamond, possession of a long-lost princess’s. He’d found it, in someone’s illicit
collection, long ago begotten by murder and, ironically, theft. So he’d taken it upon himself to lure several major criminal players to a chalet, throw me in among them, and uncover the crime, murder-mystery-dinner-style. Then, when I was busy cuffing all those guys, he’d taken off, with a cleverly placed avalanche.

Not to mention the newly-found princess who was, naturally, now smitten with him.

Still, we’d had some nice dinner conversation. All business, but pleasant nonetheless:

—“How’s Jigen?”

“Fine. Waiting in the rafters.”

I choked on my wine.

“How’s your daughter?”

“Don’t know.”

“I do.”

I choked again. “And?”

“What, I didn’t say I was going to tell you, did I?”

I sighed at him, fork poised in annoyance.

“Get me out of here alive and I’ll tell you,” he said, napkin dabbing at his mouth.—

And so he did, a couple weeks later by mail, but of course, she’d already flown the coup by then. It was her trail he lead me to, of course, not a real location; and it was a trail I didn’t bother following any more than half-heartedly because it was already cold.

I shook my head with a snort, and put the card back in the box. She was a nice dream, but I’d given up on seriously trying to contact her a long time ago. Our red thread was barely connected at this point, though it was nice to know she was still alive, at least.

I picked up another card. From last year: A square bit of cardstock, done up like a wedding invitation.

Want to meet the leader of Singapore? It asked. There was a picture of a famous temple, and a date on it. It didn’t take long to realize what he was going to hit, upon looking at it. Christ, had been my first reaction. The wedding of an important public figurehead’s daughter.

He’d crashed it. Of course. My constant attempts to get into the ceremony didn’t help. They just distracted the guards.

But that’s what you get, when you don’t listen to the Interpol messenger who comes calling.

Turned out the bride’s husband’s family were merchants of death from China and were going to try to take over the country, and we stopped that, but whatever. Lupin just skated away into the sunset on a jet ski with millions in gems. (And Jigen, presumably, arg.)

Don’t you know Singapore still has public whipping as a punishment? I’d thought at the time. What if they catch you before I do? You’d be dead by morning, or at least sans a hand.
But I knew exactly what he’d say to this: He’d flip me a smirk and say, “No risk, no reward.”

_Idiot._ I huffed through my nose and went for one from about three years ago.

There was a time, date, place, and object written on it, as well as a challenge: _Let’s rumble._

That had been a museum heist. But, of course, he hadn’t actually stopped to chat. That’d been the very first time he’d given the exact time of the heist—and the action’d started exactly on time, it was true—but he’d just whirled the entire force around his fingers with diversion after diversion. Going into it, I’d thought he was twenty-young-something and foolhardy and there was no way we couldn’t catch him, given all the information he’d sent us. That maybe he’d _wanted_ to be caught because he was too prideful to turn himself in. Oh, how wrong I’d been.

And my, but the chewing-out from several levels of bosses I’d gotten from that.

Seemed my little broken kid from the backstreets of Paris was secretly a demon, and he wanted my attention.

Well, my attention he could get. So long as it came with handcuffs. That’d been the operating model, all this time since he’d struck out on his own into the world of crime.

I thumbed to the back of the stack. Four-and-a-half years ago: a stack of postcards, all within weeks of each other.

I hadn’t paid any attention to them at first; back then, I was simply working at Interpol as a generalized Special Inspector with this one petty forger (Lupin) on my red flag watchlist; otherwise, I was doing desk work and still coming down off a long undercover case.

Six years ago, Arsene’s syndicate had fallen apart; five and three quarters was the trainwreck that’d killed him and deeply injured his son; five full years ago, Lupin and I had finally parted ways when he’d fled Monaco. After that, rumor had it that he’d started hitting banks and jewelry shops, and I’d requested to be on the case. But really, there wasn’t much to go on, and it was only in the background.

So four-and-a-half years ago, I was just assisting other people’s cases, thumbing through European gem robbery details, and just generally trying to deal with the fallout of all the important people in my cobbled-together life evaporating when one day I got a mysterious postcard in the mail. So naturally, I didn’t pay much attention to it.

But then, in the weeks to come, there were more.

There was no writing on them. Their only clue was the picture itself: each an object from a museum that, as it turned out, was about to disappear. The postcards were from all over the Caribbean and South America—and, as it happened, were the calling cards of Lupin the Third’s first publicly attributed crimes.

The first few postcards came after the fact, but then, by the end of the three-month string, before. By the third one, I’d started investigating; by the fourth, I knew what was happening, but not who was doing it. By the sixth, I’d gotten the go-ahead to show up beforehand.

And on the eighth, we’d finally come face-to-face once more.
He’d been sitting on a throne. A literal throne, from Brazil’s early colonial days. It was gold leaf over richly-stained mahogany, square, heavily carved, as imposing as it was dazzling, and he was leaning in it like some character from Henry V, a golden crown purposefully askew on his head.

The entire museum was dark and silent. It was just us; not even the jungle creatures outside were stirring. He’d sent a diversion to the few guards, and they refused to believe that that was all it was. They were now outside, but their voices had suddenly and violently silenced. So now there I was...just him and me.

The massive hall I’d run to had a black-and-white checkered floor and a long lead-up to the throne complete with vaulted ceiling and red carpet; that was what I stood on now, about fifty feet from him. The whole room was laid out to replicate the old palace sanctuary, with various priceless artifacts of metal and gem in pedestal cases around the room.

And all was quiet in the moonlight as he smiled down at me, a dark, purring leer.

“Lupin!” I rushed, both in voice and distance. “It is you—!”

“Stop,” he said, raising a hand.

I ducked behind a pedestal, but no shots went off. Come to think of it...maybe he’d just raised his hand, with nothing in it.

Fuck, he was probably laughing about that.

“It’s me! Zenigata!” I called, just to make sure. “Er—Ark!”

There was a pause, and then: “I know who you are, Pops.”

Tentatively, pistol half raised, I looked around the edge of my cover. “Can I come out? Are you gonna shoot me?”

There was a sigh. “No, Pops, I’m not going to shoot you. Stand up. Come out. That’s what I’m doing.”

Slowly, I got to my knees and then lifted myself out from behind the display cases, making sure the coast was clear along the way.

But when I spotted Lupin in the streaming moonlight again, he was still sitting.

Oh. I guess it was metaphorical.

The light was radiating from the skylights, illuminating dust in the air. He almost seemed like a creature of the fey, like this. I couldn’t see him well enough to say he looked good, but... “It’s good to see you. I’m glad you’re alive. ...And well,” I added as an afterthought.

His thin, youthful face gave me a long look, head tilted slightly. He still looked like he needed to eat more, I thought with a pang of concern.

It seemed like he wasn’t going to say anything, but after a while, he offered lightly, “You really think so?”

He sounded somewhat surprised.

“Of course.” I took another step forward. “That was rather clever, really, those postcards.”
He shrugged, the ray of kindness closing off. “Was starting to think you wouldn’t come.”

“Of course I’d come,” I said, with a tweak of a smile threatening to form at his familiar angsty antics. “I wouldn’t leave you.”

I couldn’t see him that well from here, but I did notice the tension that suddenly sprouted from that, and his venomous silence. It was like a porcupine that’d just raised its quills.

Right...well. Probably not the smartest thing to say, Koichi. On to the next one...

“What are you doing here, anyway?” I asked.

“Working,” he said immediately, dismissing that line of questioning.

“For whom?”

“Myself.”

He looked aside and gestured regally at the displays, as if that were an answer. “Lots of money in old things.”

“Lots of people without money who would like to see them, too.”

“Yes well. This one’s a fake.” He flicked one of the diamonds on the crown, and it tinged like glass. “They’ve all been fakes, these last two months. I’m tracking down who did it; why.”

I cringed at the implications of that—both the confession of a crime and the revelation of a deeper one—but eventually I took a long breath and shut my eyes at the surrealness of it all. “You should get out of here,” I said, sounding a little more desperate than I would have liked. “Leave the stuff, and go. Return everything you’ve stolen, anonymously, forgeries or not, and come to my office. I’ll help you. Get you off the hook somehow, maybe tell them you were working for me—”

“I don’t need your help,” he called simply, cutting me off.

“You’re stealing shit from countries with dictators, I should better think you do.”

There wasn’t any heat to his words, but there was in mine. Before Lupin could retort to this, however, still draping boredly in the throne as he was, there came the sounds of dogs barking outside.

“Quickly now!” I pleaded. “The guards won’t be distracted long—”

Just as I said this, there were several pops in the garden outside. There were no windows looking onto it, but it was clearly audible.

And then came silence.

I looked back at him with a chill crawling through me. “...What was that?”

Lupin waved his hand. “The issue of your complaint is hereby deemed resolved.”

I stared hard, mouth slightly agape.

“Did you just...have them killed?”

I was very, very close to exploding in anger; I could feel it coming. The only thing stopping it was
surprise. This hideous shadow creature, a bored, dismissive, ruthless criminal mastermind...couldn’t be my affectionate, lonely wolf cub who so liked to draw.

Lupin’s chin was resting loosely on curled fingers. He was draped in shadow, but the almost-stolen pieces on his head occasionally glimmered in the moonlight that was shining down from the bank of angled skylights, up to my right.

“They’re sleeping,” he said, not moving an inch other than to smirk.

“That’d better be true.” After I caught my breath, I edged closer, one step at a time as I spoke. Seemed that so long as I was talking, he didn’t notice—or didn’t care.

“It is,” he murmured, gazing out that direction. “My help knows how to take directions, unlike yours.”

It would have been the perfect opportunity to hit him with a tranq. It really made me wish I’d had the foresight to take something other than metal bullets.

“Hey now. That’s not a very nice thing to say,” I said half-heartedly, continuing my creep closer. Only thirty feet now, out of 150...almost small enough to rush him.

“Yes well, I’m not your responsibility anymore, am I?”

He turned to me, staring straight down at me. I immediately stopped. I was close enough now to see his face clearly—and how cold those eyes looked. How warning.

This...is a monster I’ve never seen before.

Who the hell made this?

I was suddenly, anew, furious at the “man in black” who’d taken him out of Monaco, whom Lupin had been spotted with off and on for the last half a year. A man I’d later come to know as Daisuke Jigen.

“But you don’t seem to agree with me....” he continued, with the tone of a loveless mother.

There was no doubt about it now—him waiting in here for me had been a trap. And as he spoke, I felt it opening.

I’d never had to see him as a villain before, as an adversary. As a full-out enemy. Maybe conceptually, “one of the guys who hangs around this syndicate I’m supposed to take down”—but not actually. But at this very moment, I felt the familiar spike of adrenaline from danger. I couldn’t get away from the fact that I could die here, and he might be the one to do it.

And that, just maybe, I might deserve it.

But not yet. I wouldn’t go, until I set the record straight. My fingers regripped my weapon and swallowed hard, preparing to speak.

“I wonder why that is?” Lupin finished, flicking his wrist and looking at his hand like his nails were oh-so-curious.

“Because I care?” I retorted, lowly.

“What was that? I couldn’t hear you, peasant.”
I twitched, but decided to let him have this one. If it kept him talking, it was worth it; I could always slap him upside the head for it when he was disarmed.

“Because I am the law, and you are breaking it. It is my responsibility to stop you and take you in, and then get you to change.”

When I realized I could see both of his hands, and they weren’t doing anything—there wasn’t even anything in them, and there appeared to be no one else in the room—I slowly came closer, gun lowered. Seemed he might be willing to talk.

In fact, a little bit of hope welled up in me, that he’d called me here specifically to talk. You didn’t send eight postcards because you didn’t care; the issue was what, specifically, he cared that much about. Revenge or reunion...?

“Stop,” he said, when I was about twenty feet from him. It was a good distance at which to converse in the quiet, cavernous space. Seemed he was still half playing the regent, and half the criminal in the standoff.

Maybe they were one in the same, really.

I craned my neck up, given that the seat was on a platform several steps high. The gesture sent a small spike of annoyance through me, despite everything.

“You seem to be of an incorrect impression,” he said, turning out his nails and then pointing at me. “I am the law. You only work for it. As such, I won’t be taking any more directions from you.”

He didn’t sit up, but Lupin held out his arms dramatically. “I have taken over my father’s work, my grandfather’s legacy, and you are welcome to join me, if you’d wish. You could be my general, even.”

That...was...not what I had been expecting. He didn’t seem to be lying, though, which was the scary thing.

“I’m not actually crooked, you realize that, right?”

It was the first thing out of my mouth, but it’d do, really.

However, whatever I’d been expecting from him in response, Lupin’s stare failed to waver. “You make me an offer, I make you one. Fair’s fair.”

He lowered one arm and held the other out to me grandly. There he waited expectantly, on his throne, head tilted.

Are you serious? I raised an eyebrow.

“I’m not bowing, if that’s what you’re asking.”

There was a pause, which I was pretty sure was an admission of guilt, and then Lupin lowered his arms and muttered like I was a killjoy, “Pity.”

“I’m not working for you, either.” I stuck out my chest a bit. “And I’m not going to stop until you’ve stopped all this. Though, I will help you go straight. I know you were born into it, but that’s no reason—”

“Ah.” Lupin held up a finger. “You speak too freely, sir.”
I rolled my eyes and sighed, shoulders drooping.

“Would you put your weapon away, by the way?” Lupin continued, with a bored shake of his free hand at my gun. “We both know you’re not going to use it on me.”

“Am I not?” I asked, smirking a little. “I hear you come packing these days.”

Lupin, in the moonlight, gave me a look that lacked any amusement whatsoever. It very much said *Is that so?*

“So what’s your decision?” I asked. “I’m happy to talk, but this atmosphere is a little much. I know both a cosy office chair with your name on it, and a jail cell bench that wouldn’t mind your butt on it.”

He frowned, petulant; looked aside; then took a haughty huff of breath as he thought, arms folded in indignation. He even kicked his legs a little, on the armrest of that poor antique.

“Or are you stalling me so that the man in black can get here?”

Suddenly, Lupin whipped his head back around to glare down at me.

“Why are you even here?” he demanded coldly.

“Could ask you the same thing.”

“I’m a thief.” He uncrossed his legs, a motion that propelled him to sit up. He came forward in his seat, legs spread and elbows on his knees, chin on the backs of his threaded fingers. The crown fell forward slightly, down onto his forehead; its parapets glinted like daggers in the moonlight. “I think you need to get that through your head.”

My fingers twitched on the gun. It was pointed at the floor currently, and I really didn’t want to use it, but I would, if I had to, to protect myself—and everything here.

But in the dark, it would be awfully hard to hit something non-vital. My only option was to talk him down...or get to him before someone else did.

But how well, really, had that worked on him and Toshiko in that burning hotel?

My grip tightened nervously.

I couldn’t let them both end up like her. *I couldn’t.*

“You don’t have to be, you know,” I tried. “A criminal.”

“I think it’s a little too late for that, don’t you?” he shot back coldly.

“I...” I blinked, feeling something not small inside me get mercilessly crushed. “It’s never too late. What makes you say that?”

He glared at me, clearly disliking that answer.

Truly, there was a reason that I wasn’t a negotiator. But no reason to stop now, I suppose. That coffin needed all its nails.

“Your father’s dead; you don’t have to do anything he would have cared about. You’re free of him.”
“Yeah in no small part thanks to you,” he snapped. “I remember what you did at New Year’s.”

I opened my mouth, then closed it. “You...remember that, huh?”

“Oh yes. Despite the fact that you left me in the fire afterwards, I remember quite well that you shot my father in front of me and then left us both for dead.” He shrugged, an “oh oops” gesture.

I shut my eyes and took a deep breath. So *that* was what this was about. I rubbed at the bridge of my nose for good measure.

*In that case, he might actually try to shoot me...* This trap could definitely be my grave. And if he had his lackey in black do it....

“So why didn’t you ever mention it in Monaco?” I asked, lifting my head. “If you’re holding a grudge?”

When he’d been recovering from the train bombing, I’d assumed he’d forgotten about it, in the sense of *had never remembered it in the first place*. That was a long time to hold onto something like that, a lot of intimate hours to ignore an incubating egg. Why had he been so cordial if he’d been sitting on that the whole time?

“He was my father, of course I remember it.”

Maybe...our friendship had been real, all along, and he’d been trying to preserve it. I certainly hoped so, and if so, I was going to make ample use of it now.

“To be fair, he rather deserved it,” I huffed, and then muttered: “I’m sorry about that...I thought it was what you wanted. And also...the only way to keep him from killing you right then.”

Lupin grit his teeth. “Yes, thank you for that efficient resolution, but that wasn’t what I—I still hadn’t gotten what I needed out of him,” he explained.

“Needed...?” This was news to me. “You were never going to get love out of him, if that’s what you mean.”

“No! That’s not what I...augh!” He waved his hand and turned away from me, arms folded again, tight as an origami crane. “*I knew* that part!”

“No...”

“So why didn’t you finish the job?” he demanded tightly. “Why didn’t you just put a bullet in me too?”

“What...?” I asked, aghast. “I was never going to do that.”

“Really?” he asked, dubious. “But you’re happy to start a damn task force to put me in jail where you can snipe me, is that it?”

No, I hadn’t imagined Lupin would be happy to see that, as of last year, I was suddenly a detective trying to throw him in jail and end his thieving escapades. But once I’d figured out it actually *was* him making a name for himself everywhere from Spain to China, I’d hoped that I could bring him in, sit him down behind some bars, and give him a come-to-Jesus talk before it was too late. Smooth out some of the stuff from Monaco if it still mattered.

(Apparently, it did.)
Still, I gaped at that. It was ludicrous—willfully ludicrous. “Don’t twist my words around, you.”

“Oh, but now I’ve got you to follow me around and tell me what to do, and I should be just so happy about that, is what you’re saying, then?”

“No, that’s not—”

“Bullshit. Why are you following me?” he asked anew, almost growling. And yet, when he moved, it was graceful: He spread his hand to the side, his head following it, first one side, then the other. “Paintings, jewels. All things that don’t concern you.” When he was done with his side-to-side, he raised a hand to me, just as he had the objects. “Who’s paying you?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Interpol...?”

“Oh don’t give me that bullshit,” he snarled in a rush, words coming faster and faster as he went on. “I thought you were honest, but oh, joke’s on me. Little Lupin, always trusting the wrong authority figures, hah hah. Well, I’m done with that crap. And as it turns out, you’re the best liar there is!” Here, in between hiccups of sick laughter and grandiose tones, he sat up straight and put his hand on his hip, pushing his jacket back to reveal a holster under his arm. “So tell me, or we’re done here. Is it Donatello’s men?”

I actually gasped in disgust, unsightly as it was. “Oh hell no.”

“Did you send me to work with him, knowing what he’d do to...” here, he twitched a bit, then amended, “What he’d do?”

“No,” I answered, honestly—and more than a little pained. “If I had known, I never even would have asked. I swear it. Not that you’ve ever actually told me what he did.” I held out a hand to him, helplessly.

There was silence, and then, “So who is it that’s sent you after me now?”

“My boss? At Interpol?”

“Who’s paying his bills?”

“The UN? NATO? I don’t know. Look, you’re going in the wrong direction....”

“So what is it?”

“I told you! I’m not a crooked cop, I just care about you!”

“Why!”

“Because you’re a good person!” I roared.

That stopped him. Lupin drew back, and then gave me a poisonous glare for some reason. Seemed honest compliments were fighting words. At least from my mouth.

I took a breath and purposefully opened my hands, not sure what he was getting at—and trying in vain to calm him down. “That’s all I’ve got. What are you worried about? It’s the truth, for fuck’s sake.”

His eyes narrowed, and mouth twitched into a grim line. “It’s not.”

“But it is.”
“Is not.”

“Yes, it is—”

Lupin took a deep breath, and in the middle of me talking, ground out through gritted teeth, “You and your daughter were working together, weren’t you? To play my father, and then, once I showed up, you decided you had to play me too. And then at the end you both got away scot free.”

My eyes widened at that—and anger swelled, out of a deep, hot pit. “The fuck are you on about? That is complete crap!”

I may have failed you both in every way but you will not accuse me of willfully trying to hurt you. And not in collusion with her, of all people.

But while I returned to our old, bickering mannerisms, Lupin picked a new one: he suddenly calmed. He went still, and then very slowly tilted his head back, staring me down. “...Uh-huh.” He took a breath and stood up, clasping his hands behind his back. “I see.”

He hopped down the stairs, and then turned his back on me, just standing there, crown on his head. “Well, if you’re gonna shoot me, shoot me. I’m in your museum, stealing your gems, after all.” He slowly started walking away. “You’re a lawman; you gotta stop the criminal, right?”

What...? If you really think I’m going to, why are you doing this...?

It was so obviously a test that I was a little disappointed.

“...I’m not shooting you in the back, Lupin.”

He whirled around—which startled me into raising my weapon—but he didn’t do anything other than stand there, his arms behind his back, so I didn’t pull the trigger. It was close, though, and enough to give me a case of nerves.

“Then shoot me in the face, if that’s what you want to do.”

I stared him down, aghast, but he just stared back, taunting within the cut of shadows. But eventually, in the silence, I saw the waver in his eyes. It was small, but there.

I sighed and put my hands on my hips. “Lupin, I’m not going to shoot you. I’m not a crooked cop, either. I know it’s hard to believe, but...I care about you. Come back to Interpol with me and let me explain it to you, show it to you. What’s made you think that, anyway?”

But the resulting look on his face was dark. “Why’d you leave me in Monaco, then?” he articulated slowly.

I rolled my eyes and sighed deeply. I knew this was coming. “Because something came up.”

“Her, right?”

I blinked, surprised—and terrified. He knows about Anna...?

“Your daughter,” he clarified dryly.

I sighed inwardly in relief and the grip on my gun relaxed somewhat. Seemed he’d misread my look. “Something like that.”

“Listen,” he said, suddenly gentle as I stared at the floor. “You don’t have to ‘clean me up.’ I’m
not going to rat on you about her, or any of the other things you and I did; and I’m not going to go after her, for all the things she did. Just go your way, and I’ll go mine.” He pointed at the display cases. “I’m just trying to make a living, for however long I have. I suggest you do that yourself, and forget all about me.”

“Lupin...”

He’d come closer to me. But just as I reached out to him, smoke appeared at my feet. I leapt back with a shout, but it was just a single smoke bomb in a massive room, maybe two. However, by the time I made it through to the other side of the voluminous and ever-expanding cloud of fog, he was nowhere to be seen.

“You just gotta know when to give up on things sometimes, old man,” his voice said, from somewhere within the haze. “I was never the one you wanted, anyway.”

“Lupin, that’s not—”

I thought I saw his figure, but when I reached out for the shadow, there was nothing there but smoke.

“The sooner you admit that to yourself, the better. So I advise you to give up on this dream you have of me, whatever it is. I want no part of it.”

And yet, for all he could manipulate his voice, right then, it wasn’t terribly convincing. He just sounded tired and sad. I spun around to look through the fog, but there wasn’t even a wisp of his shadow left for me.

“There is no dream that includes me,” his fading voice added. “I was never supposed to exist in the first place. I’m just the phantom thief. So let me go, like a dream into the sunrise.”

I couldn’t deny that Lupin had grown up in those eighteen months of radio silence, which was more unfortunate every time I thought about it. Especially because it was no doubt in no small part because of that man in the black suit—Daisuke Jigen.

Yet I’d decided to stick around, and so had Lupin. Whatever Jigen’s influence, Lupin hadn’t just written me off, and I refused to do that to him as well. Lupin hadn’t shot me when he had the chance that night in the museum, and he’d had numerous occasions since, several under duress when it honestly would have helped him to do so. So, given all that, I refused to be yet another older man that disappeared on him.

He’d probably decided, somewhere along the line, Since you’re here, I’m going to use you.

Admittedly, it was a much better outcome than, Since you’re here, I’m going to shoot you. It proved that, deep down, he wasn’t a mobster, which was something in my dream’s favor.

And maybe he still just cared about me as well?

Somehow, our friendship was still alive, unconventional and confused as it was—albeit after a few prickly spats at the end of pistols. Over time, we’d grown a bit more comfortable around each other after each run-in, steam being blown off in the form of shouting matches and grudging allegiances during pinches. But was it just my imagination that there was warmth there? Or was it
simply our old habits, running on fumes and slowly dying out?

One thing I did know, however, was that, for all he claimed to be a villain, he just kept showing me how good he was.

Cocking my hip to the side and setting my weight on my forearm, which was laid out across the bookshelf, I pulled out the very last card.

Five years ago. A little rectangular card, a Japanese one. I never had figured out who it’d come from, officially.

It had arrived just as I’d gotten my first Interpol office—this office—after all the congratulations from taking down both Arsene’s ring and part of Donatello’s. I could have literally any assignment I wanted, and I had been trying to figure out what it would be, when this card came.

*Good luck,* was written on it in Japanese. Followed by, *No hard feelings.*

And then, a little drawing of a Lupine flower, growing beside a river with some rapids in it.

Arakawa meant, literally, “wild river.”

Around the flower’s base, however, was a traditional five-yen piece, which had a square hole in it. So it looked like the flower had grown up through it.

Zenigata, on the other hand, meant “One Cent.”

It didn’t take long to figure out who it was from...and what I wanted my job to be, after that.

Technically I was a special investigator, and had the authority to float around to different cases as needed; I was one of those people that the current administration just kept in the wings when something of unusual importance came up. Too talented to let go, but too smart to risk on holdrum work that might lead to me misbehaving. At the time, I wasn’t allowed to go back undercover so quickly either, though there were people who were interested, and had lined up to ask for it.

But because of Marti, I didn’t want to go back. I was worried about her, as well as hopelessly entangled with her.

It might have been worthwhile for me to forget she existed and go back to work—deep into work, in some other part of the world with a different name. But I didn’t want to. That was what had gotten my life in this mess—pretending people didn’t exist. Instead, I was determined to watch over her for a while, from afar, at least until things calmed down and she said she didn’t need me anymore. But she’d never quite managed to do that all these years, and actually, we’d only grown closer as she healed.

And I liked that. But I couldn’t abandon Lupin. Not yet. And not for her sake yet again. If I did that and he ever found out the extent I’d gone to for her—at his expense—he very honestly might snap and come after her and me both.

And at that point, I might just deserve it. But she wouldn’t.

Five years ago, Marti and I had both spent the previous year decompressing from syndicate life; trying to take care of ourselves and our baggage. She’d been adjusting to getting re-homed in a new country under a new identity. I’d been on extended administrative leave for reassimilation purposes. We texted each other once in a while, and sometimes, when she was feeling scared and alone, she’d call me up. I’d stay up late and talk to calm her down. I wanted to visit her too, but
there were regulations against it because of how the relationship had formed, not to mention the safety concerns for us both. Eventually, those regs had fallen off, but I’d become busy chasing Lupin by then, and Marti seemed to need me less.

And as for Lupin...as we were hobbling along, he had quite quickly become something of a celebrity on his own. Not for art, or professional poker playing, or formula one racing, or anything else I would have even mildly approved of. No, he went off to be a world-class thief, in line with his family members. The members that had all just gotten done dying and/or trying to slaughter him.

Unfortunately, my pride as a human being, and to some degree, my professional quality, depended on wrapping up “that last hanging thread of Arsene’s” that was quickly becoming a nuisance to important people. People on my end of things weren’t quite sure what he was about...and the ones who weren’t rooting for him to take down the crooked parts of society were worried, behind closed doors, that he might be coming after me.

That was part of why, since five years ago, I hadn’t seen Marti much, after all of this stuff with “the Great Thief Lupin the Third” had started.

It would break Lupin’s heart to hear himself referred to like that—“Arsene’s last little nuisance.” But that’s what my superiors decided he was, and they put pressure on me to deal with it; said his flagrant criminal activity made the agency, and by extension all law enforcement, look bad. Which it did.

Yet I’d never quite brought an end to him, as they’d wanted. Brought him in? Yes. But down? Not even close. Each brush with me seemed to invigorate his crimes, and over the years, I’d been forced to watch him grow from a distance. The crimes, the risks, the payouts...they all matured, as did their player. Every time I caught a glimpse of him, exchanged a few words with him, he impressed me, despite those skills of his being employed in all the wrong ways.

But that was the public-facing side of things: dashing celebrity criminal who was a modern-day Robin Hood, and his antagonist, the star inspector from Interpol. I was suddenly the bad guy here.

In private, however, in a place where there was no one I could talk to about it except Marti, I was worried about him.

He’d lost his father and his grandfather in a one-year span, the former violently, and he’d never been that emotionally stable to begin with. What hobbled identity he’d built for himself in the organization had been torn apart multiple times in quick succession, and then even our grudgingly warm relationship had been forced away from him too, because of my daughter and my own choices. And then there was Donatello, Marti, and Monaco.... What a clusterfuck that had been.

And now.... Well, he was living with some hitman boyfriend, doing ever more daring crimes. It made me wonder if he was really in control of any of it, or if he’d been strongarmed into a guild on the down-low. Or maybe, even worse, if he was just letting himself be used as a workhorse, under the guise of love, until he was sent to the glue factory.

Not that he wasn’t able to take care of himself out on the street; he certainly was. But I had rarely seen him happy in his short life, and I knew how well that went for criminals.

I sighed and put the cards back. Just more wasted talent.... Maybe you should take it on face value and give up, Koichi. Go do your career, your own talent, some good. If he’s happy, won’t that be best for both of you...?
But I had no proof that he was as effervescent as he played at being. And furthermore...he was still my responsibility. He was still my case. I may have turned him into what he was, and because I was the law and he was the criminal, I would stop this downward spiral. So long as he was alive, he hadn’t slipped through my fingers, not yet. He was so very capable, and kind, and young; I wasn’t going to let him throw away his life and potential just so he could follow in the footsteps of people that didn’t deserve his dedication.

But each time I met him, it felt like those truths were getting smaller and smaller, swallowed up by the hard realities of the work he chose.

And then there were these cards.

There was never a fingerprint on them, never a mark that could be traced back credibly. But they were always fancy, friendly. Some were more explicitly playful than others, but every one seemed like a genuine invite to a social event. Like he was doing it for me—

Come to my garden party for law enforcement as I steal everything in sight. Won’t it be fun?

“Maybe to you,” I grumbled to the voice in my head, flipping the card over and then putting it back in the file folder.

Maybe he was just trying to bring Arakawa back?

Well, that man was part of me, but he wasn’t me. But it begged the question...how much of Lupin did I really know? From the difference in the cards to the way he acted with me...it seemed like he was struggling with that himself. Or like there was something unresolved he still wanted to deal with. A conversation we’d been trying to have for five years.

Admittedly, I was focusing on the dark times. There’d been plenty of times where we’d been forced to work together. That was when I got to see him really shine, and we partnered wonderfully. Not that it offered us much time to really talk about difficult things, getting shot at, but there had been calm moments, happy moments, where it had been like old times, and I could see the dream I had, playing out in front of me....

But maybe that was the problem. When we worked together, it was Ark and Pup. Not Zenigata and Lupin the Third.

But maybe that was all Lupin wanted....

I sighed, looking at the map on the wall, full of pushpins and memories across the globe.

The difference between hope and reality....

For Lupin, there wasn’t any. But for me...

I hadn’t heard from him in months. Eight months. He was either planning something difficult, or had given up on that conversation with me.

So now I was here, late into the night, dealing with gruesome child serial killers. Bah.

Annoyed, I shut the container with a clunk and grabbed up my trenchcoat from the rack. Tie rolled up in a pocket and hat in hand, it was time to go home. Maybe I’d call Marti, and see how she was doing.

Though...I checked my watch. It was after midnight. She wouldn’t still be up. Well, home alone
with a beer it was. Sigh.

Not that there was much *in* my tiny apartment, but it promised a better night’s sleep than the cot in my office, at least. What was *left* of the night, anyway.

“Hey guys, I’m heading out,” I said, waving to the group who’d taken over the open-air workspace as I closed my door and locked it. “Gonna get some sleep.”

The golden letters of my name painted on the frosted glass shone even at night. It was something at least, the comfort from a sense of accomplishment and public validation.

The leader of the team gave me a quick wave of acknowledgment and moved on as he sorted papers. A couple of the people I’d known for years waved at me too, offering “good nights” from their encampments at their desks.

“Is there even a bed at your house?” asked one of the locals, a younger one, with a grin.

“Shut up, Dan.”

He grinned and went back to work, coffee mug in hand.

Admittedly, I wasn’t on one of the higher floors, but there was still a good number of minutes to get me to the front door, due to all the security. Normally I’d take the stairs, but I decided to detour to the mail room for our floor and then take the elevator. I hadn’t checked my mail all day.

I didn’t expect much. People yelling at me; people asking me about Lupin. At least I hadn’t had to worry about mail from my ex-wife’s lawyers for years.

Though, sadly, I never had to concern myself with the thought of getting mail from my daughter, either. Heaven knew what it would even say, though, if she suddenly decided to turn over a new leaf and speak to me.

I ducked into the room—nothing special, just a large, white, windowless cube with wooden cubbies and plastic nameplates from floor to ceiling—and went down the line until I found mine. Tucked into a corner where the light wasn’t even working, it was the ultimate eventuality in the Western world for someone whose name started with Z, and then worked in the tiny “Special Teams” department besides.

I picked up the stack of mail. Bill. Invoice. Request for permissions. Interview request...seriously, why didn’t these people just call me on the phone? Were they obsolete these days?

And then, something black.

That was odd. Who sent black greeting car—

My eyes widened, and my breath stopped.

Quickly, I set the other mail, all in standard white envelopes, aside. I checked the weight of the black one and held it up to the next light over to make sure there was nothing amiss, but there didn’t seem to be anything other than paper in it. Frowning, I pulled on the outdoor gloves from my coat pocket and then grabbed up the nearest letter opener and zipped open the top.

Inside was a single card. Black, with silver scroll work and penmanship—all hand drawn, but professionally.
There was a date, a time, and an address in Dunkirk.

That was all it said.

I flipped it over to the back. A drawing, this time in white, lay there. Of a lupine flower, lying on a grave.

It was him. It had to be.

It was all him, from the vagarity to design. He hadn’t even signed his name, which he usually did. But also...what the hell? This wasn’t his cheerful flavor.

There was the drawing of a lupine, though, which he always added—and which wasn’t a publically known detail.

I leaned against the counter, a bad feeling coming over me.

“Don’t expect the same courtesy next time....”

Black, like a funeral. With a tombstone. So his...or mine?

Given the flower on it...

Oh Lupin, don’t tell me....

But...

I brought the card closer to my face and squinted, even as my heart started to race in panic. There was no scent to it, so no clue there. But the drawing...

It was a little rounded-edged tombstone, with a mound of grass, and the cut flower on top. It was right out of an American cartoon; nothing particularly clue-like there either, necessarily. But it wasn’t a light-hearted drawing, not by a long shot. And the words on the headstone...

What I had thought was just a line at first was, upon closer inspection, actually tiny letters:

New York, 19XX

A place, and a year. About twenty years ago. So not his birth year, or that of anyone I knew related to the case.

His father had operated out of New York around that time, but...what was with the other address?

The full address—the one on the other side of the card—wasn’t one I knew, either. But it was relatively close; it was “only” a full day’s drive away, here in France.

It was also...the town where Marti lived.

Shit.

Did he finally know...?

No, he can’t have figured it out....

But even if he did, he wouldn’t make contact with her, would he? Why would he?

Unless...he’s finally figured out about Monaco somehow.
A funeral in time for Christmas....

I ran my hand over my mouth, unsure. Last time, It’d been a last-minute thing, with only a few hours to spare to get to a Jakarta seaport from Lyon, France and maneuver myself a spot on a cruise. But this time, I had plenty of time. Two weeks, just to get down the road. I could do a hell of a lot in two weeks, to set a trap for a spindly little thief.

Or stop him, if he was being self-destructive.

I put the card on the stack of the rest of my mail and headed back to my office.

*So much for sleep.*

*...Dan’s gonna give me so much crap for this.*
Sorry this update took so long. Real life + super intricate storylines = ship with a slow rudder. But to all of you still here, you make this worth it, so thanks for coming around to take a read! Kudos to you for getting this far through a fanfic, of all things.~

In other news, I did a little research into Dunkirk finally (a location that I picked about a year into the story, based entirely on the existing depiction of the town in the work and then looking at a map of France), and it turns out the history of the place works really well for symbolism, so you'll start to see some more color about that from here on out.

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Donatello...

Anya...

Giuseppe...Ricardo...

The view of the bay, frigid and dark as I sat in this hospital room, was making me think of That Night: That warm span of seemingly endless darkness as I went over the causeway, the distance peppered with twinkling city lights.

That Night, where I learned of Anya’s fate, threw my second husband out of my life, and my angel of a boss turned into something far too brightly shining for me to handle.

But thinking of it, alongside the fact that it was Christmas, was slowly turning up memories of Ricardo, my first husband. The man who’d quietly passed away on Christmas Eve.

It’d been many years since then, but the loss still ran deep.

Ricardo had been a nice, teacherly man. He was the warden of the local women’s prison, much older than me, and we’d grown close over the years. He’d always encouraged me; he was the reason I’d gotten into social work in the first place—because he’d believed I could do it. And he was right.

But then he’d died. Just...died. That sort of thing is always a shock, and shocks always lead to scars. But the night it’d happened...why couldn’t it have been some day that wasn’t connected to a holiday the whole world celebrated with month-long vigor?

Not that I blamed him for the date. I just blamed myself: Why didn’t I get home sooner; why didn’t I see the signs?

Why do I have to be the bad woman that God hates?

I turned to gaze at Lupin, sleeping in the bed. I’d never gotten to sit by Ricardo’s side like this.
Nor Anya’s. (And I’d never gotten to send Giuseppe here with my fists.)

I’d simply never gotten that far. So was this...a new form of torment? Or better than my normal luck?

...Or am I just such a curse that I’m taking you this far down, Lupin?

I was starting to wonder if I should just walk out the front door and stay away from both of them, after all this.

But, as I gazed out the window at that haunted Dunkirk bay as the sun went down, the rational side of me knew that they needed me. Both of them needed the expertise of a counselor, and the Inspector’s work certainly needed me too, if only for that which I could provide to Lupin.

Not to mention the personal side of both of them....

And you? I thought, as I stared down at fidgeting fingers. What do you need, Anna?

Just...someone to love me, I suppose.

I stared out that bay, but there was not a single ship to hail there.

But that, of course, you won’t get, because you betrayed your family when you ran out on your arranged marriage. The gods have cursed every love you’ve had since.

I put my chin in my hand and gazed at the lights across the water on the Eastern side of the bay, coming on under a sky of purple and red. My eyes unfocused and then closed, as I listened to the icy wind rattling the old windows.

An image came to me: Of a cool night on the Venice shore, sitting at a tiny gelattoria table with a man named Arakawa as the midnight breeze blew in. The feel of the stars and twinkling island lights a bit later, as they hung above the water and reflected all around us in the gondola....

The way we’d looked at each other in the night—determined, defensive, afraid—before the quick-draw that sealed our fate....

I sighed and opened my eyes.

Koichi Zenigata....You survived all that, and yet you still want to be near me?

He’d rescued me from Donatello’s syndicate, and from what I’d heard rescued Lupin from Arséne’s, all at great risk to himself. He was an incredible man, to me. But that past wasn’t the sort of thing that would stay buried forever. It never left you, and it seemed that Lupin was still connected to those times more than any of us.

I glanced down at the suspect, his once-more sleeping form lying on its back on the bed, full of monitor nodes.

Maybe I’d been doing this all wrong. Maybe the way to keep the Inspector safe was to protect Lupin.

And for that, I have to unwind you... Unwind all your ills and mend them.

It wasn’t something that could happen in a day, or even weeks. But you could maybe stabilize him, in a month or a year—if he worked at it. And, furthermore, if he knew what was going on with his attacks. Zenigata seemed to think that Lupin at least suspected something was wrong.
And he was a sharp cookie; in his lucid moments, he seemed to understand the value of his own sanity.

I touched at my cheek as the kiss Zenigata had given me at the end of that conversation tingled to life, and a small smile tugged at one side of my lips.

But...that aside: Lupin’s road to recovery had a few bread crumb trails I could follow, though they were few and far between, and needed to be delicately tread.

*So what to prioritize, hm.*

My smile fell away, and I narrowed my eyes at Lupin’s face.

The fact that he was alive and physically functioning so well was a miracle in and of itself, one which I was going to explore thoroughly; but beyond that, we needed to stabilize his mental state so that he stopped being stuck in the past.

*And how to do that?... Well, a change of venue, obviously. Before he totally cracks.*

Assuming that display just now hadn’t been that very thing.

I huffed and crossed my arms. *So before that happens, what can I do? Play the role of mother and mine his memories? I mean, maybe, but is that reliable?*

It seemed to have calmed him to play along, this last time. So it probably couldn’t hurt... *Assuming I don’t step on a land mine.*

Which was entirely possible, and actually...probable. Shoot.

*So...*

*I guess...just protect him from any and all men until he can get out of here?*

That idea made me chuckle bitterly. Like protecting a little kid that still clung onto his parents’ legs....

*Man. I wish Zeni was here and rational. He’d figure this out, put a plan in place with the right balance of priorities and I could just follow it.* I felt like I didn’t know enough about what the Inspector needed or what Lupin’s red flags were to do this all by myself.

I tapped my fingers with a sigh. *That was right: Zeni. He was a wild card right now, too.*

It was sad to watch him get thrown so off-kilter. But even worse to not be able to help it. And worst of all, it was frightening me.

It shouldn’t have been frightening—I’d worked in a prison, for heaven’s sake. But I hadn’t been a guard; I’d been protected by the guards. True, I’d been a tough nurse back then, a tougher person overall. But something about working through Donatello’s syndicate just to stay alive, and getting harmed all the while through in one way or another, big or small, every day...it did something to me. Rattled me, in a way I’d just never been able to repair. I’d tried so hard to navigate his every-changing labyrinth of moods and needs that I’d simply broken myself apart on his shoals, and now that I was finally out of it, it was hard for me to trust in four stable walls.

So when Zenigata got upset or violent, although it was always at other people and the rational part of me knew it was just Cop Stuff, the stress of the job—the other part of me, the one that’d been...
hurt so often, just froze up and cried inside, as all its trust bridges collapsed.

“Zenigata and Marti” could get in fights, could shout and argue and rough up suspects and each other if need be in the height of the moment. “Zeni and Anna” couldn’t. “Anna” couldn’t handle it and Anna was currently bleeding through, screwing up my work. Screwing up his.

And it wasn’t excusing the behavior; I preferred clean, good cops that never got angry a day in their lives, but that just wasn’t the way things were in most cases. Ricardo, who was mostly in an administrative position, had managed to be that way, but it’d killed him because he’d internalized everything. In fact, now I wouldn’t be able to handle it if Zeni never emoted at all; I’d be so worried all the time that I’d get a repeat of Ricardo that I’d never be able to trust him.

But I was also a mother—I’d viciously defend my kids, my patients. What I simply didn’t allow was domestic violence coming at me.

But maybe the was part of why I’d never discussed moving in with him. Because “Anna” just didn’t compartmentalize the two anymore, not to the degree it needed.

I sighed, prodding at the plant in the windowsill.

*He needs you now, professionally. Why are you worrying about this?*

It was a legitimate point. Still, a little voice in the back of my head replied, *But what are you going to do if the stress is too much for him, and he cracks and gets violent, just like Donny did? Not necessarily today, or tomorrow, but someday? Do you really want to get closer to someone has even a hint of that potential?*

*Do you want to trust a person like that to save you once more?*

*But... At the same time...?*

*...Hasn’t he done enough to prove that he’s worthy?*

*And yet...*

There was still something eating at me.

I’d tried my best to comfort him when Lupin was clearly not going to get back up off that bed a few minutes ago during the code blue, but that hadn’t gone real well. I’d had to admit to Zeni’s face that I’d been lying to him about the potential positive outcomes, that I was just mustering some courage to go along with what he’d wanted, even though I didn’t really believe it was possible. I’d *wanted* to believe it was, of course, but I didn’t really *think* it was.

Some guys were okay with that—they demanded it, even; but for some, it was a capital offense. I wasn’t sure what his reaction was going to be. I guess I’d just have to see once he calmed down from almost losing Lupin.

...After I protected Lupin from him not being calmed down.

*Uuugh...* I blew a curl out of my face. *Well, let’s just hope he forgets about it, what with everything else he has to deal with. Or at least, until it’s a non-issue anymore....*

The desperate way Zeni had fought to bring Lupin back...the hurt, bewildered look he’d given me when I told him it was time to let go....
I’d seen that look before, quite often on Giuseppe’s face.

Maybe that was what it was?—The Look of Utmost Betrayal. A sense that I’d injured him deeply and unfairly?

I turned my attention down to my hands; threaded the fingers together.

Donny always got a little crazy when he felt betrayed by people he loved. Got violent, at a delay.

Maybe that’s what all this nebulous fear of what’s coming is about... Him. Not Zeni at all, but Him, still, infecting my life.

I took a deep breath, that cold, dark landscape at my back. Yeah, yeah. You know you can trust Koichi; he’d never hurt you on purpose. It’s Donatello you’re afraid of—still afraid of. It’s all just false positives, similar chemicals ricocheting around your body. Koichi likes you...loves you? And you’re worth it to him. You’re worth it, period.

I forced my eyes shut, forced the other thoughts out, and focused on one:

You’re worth loving, Anna; he won’t suddenly turn on you....

Just as I let out a shaky breath, running my hands over my face, a noise came from the bed. It was a groan, followed by a shifting of sheets.

I waited, lifting out of the chair a bit to get a better view, but soon, Lupin’s hands indeed fidgeted.

Frowning, letting the personal thoughts fall away, I walked over to him and found that his eyes were indeed open—sort of. They were blinking deeply here and there; he looked groggy.

I guess his subconscious was just going for a cat nap. It hadn’t been more than 15 minutes. I sighed and committed to coming over, not keen to have a repeat of last time. But for now, I was all either of us had, so there was no point in trying to argue my way out of it.

“Hi there,” I said when I made it over, feeling tired but trying not to let it show as I pulled on my nurse’s voice. “Do you remember where you are?”

Dark, watery blue eyes squinted up at the lights, then focused on me feverishly. Beads of sweat had come onto his forehead since I’d last looked at him. He frowned intently, lips tight as he scrutinized my face.

“...Freck?” he accused.

“What?” I replied. Is he swearing at me again?

He licked his lips, and his throat worked dryly. I leaned down to hear him, and he reached out a weak arm to rest on my side.

“Frecklz....” he rasped into my ear.

I blinked rapidly, then stood up and laughed, despite it all. “Yes, I have those.”

“Why does...an Italian...redhead have...freckles?” Lupin whispered below me, his brow still tightly knitted in concentration as he scrutinized me.
“Oh! You poor thing,” I chuckled, putting my hand against his forehead to feel his temperature. “Grandpa was Irish.”

Lupin smiled then, dopishly, though I wasn’t sure what from. He closed his eyes for a bit under the cool of my hand, then set his hand over mine. His movements were a little off, but once he made it there, his palm stayed well enough—though it shook a little, probably from withdrawal tremors.

“So pretty,” he muttered when he opened his eyes again. “I just wanna pain’t your hair.”

I smiled kindly and checked the monitor. His skin was hot, very hot.

“You and everyone else, hot shot,” I snorted. Though, he’d said that twice now, so he probably meant with actual paint, unlike everyone else. And...actually? Zeni had mentioned that Lupin could forge drawings, so... “Wait, do you paint?”

“Mm,” he mumbled with a sloppy grin. “All kinds...things. Ren’ssance... Impressh...ionistss... seashhhores, prittie laydeez....”

The dreamy smile on his face was quite the sight, since he looked like hell and his voice was barely there. But I’d seen worse in my hospital days—barely.

Giving in to his apparently unstoppable otherwordly charm, I sighed and sat down on the stool next to his bed. “You gonna paint me like one of your French girls?”

When I looked at him again, I found his dreamy gaze had turned soft. His eyes flickered up and down my frame, then settled on mine. “Hon’rary...Fruench...girl. Fer Pops’...birthday?”

...That was right. Koichi’s birthday was today—Christmas—and I’d yet to give him my gift. Shit, I’d totally forgotten about all that. No wonder he was extra wound up—he’d probably planned a much different day than all this, what with offering to stay in town with me after the heist had gone down...

*And yet, all you keep doing is thinking about yourself, Anna...just like always.*

Down at my knees, Lupin was looking me over, studious but tired. He looked like he wanted to say something, but couldn’t be bothered to muster the energy—or maybe figure out quite how to.

“Well!” I declared, slapping my hands on my thighs, determined to move away from this line of thinking. “Do you remember your name? Suppose we should get that out of the way, at least...?!”

Lupin blinked at me slowly, his eyebrows quirking down just slightly as he thought about it. And then he whispered:

“My name is Lupin.”

This time, I wasn’t able to hold back the wave of relief.

Lupin, Zenigata’s precious Lupin. Even though he was exhausted, even though it looked like the recollection caused him visible strain, even though he had months of rehab in front of him...he was here.

As I put my face in my hands and shook, he reached out to my knee. He frowned again, but this time in concern.
“Marti...don’t cry,” he rasped weakly. “I’m here now....”

_I’m the worst person in the world, always getting in the way of these two. But for now, for now..._

_They have a second chance._

All I could do was sit there and cry; it was all I had the strength for. In response, Lupin’s uncoordinated hand slowly came to rest on my elbow, attempting to rub it soothingly.

“...Did something happen?”

* * *

This now-familiar white ceiling, with the now-familiar disorientation of not being fully aware of where I was, who I was, or why I was.

Memories of horrible things the only feeling in my body as I stared at nothing, waiting for my brain to come back online.

First awareness of surroundings: directions, relative angles, male or female people. Then questions: Me? Who is me? Why is me in this angle? Is this normal?

And then the pingback: No, this isn’t normal, but can’t quite remember why.


_Time._

That’s a thing.

Hello, time.

And from there, all other things come: History, identity, what brought me to be here in the last hour, as best I could figure.

And _I_. The concept of _I_ was so wonderfully clear and strong, in those few moments before the pressures of the rest of the world closed in.

But this time, the information accumulation was slow—just a trickle rather than a smack in the face, and when all the synapses were done reconnecting, I still felt like I was missing something important, as I gazed up at Marti with a frown.

And it wasn’t the freckles. It was the fact that she was the only one here. The fact that it was a dark night, and she was distressed, and I _hurt_. I hurt like someone had taken an egg beater to my insides.

And my arms. They hadn’t worked right. My words were slurring, my breath was short and head both dizzy and foggy. I felt a general malaise like a flu, too, over every inch of me. Probably every protein of me.

Something had definitely happened, something bad. But what was it? Had something happened to me, or had they finally upped my drugs to the point that I’d be incapacitated and complacent?

And complacent I was: at first because I wasn’t capable of anything else emotionally, but soon
because, if this was a test, I needed to pass it with the highest score while I was still able to remember who I was.

But my heartbeat kept rising, as I thought on all these things. As we had all this banter and emotion. To the point that, as Marti cried, she stopped once to check the monitor, then check me. She picked up my wrist and held it, sniffling and counting, and I just sighed and closed my eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Marti said, wiping at her eyes. “I don’t know what’s come over me...”

Whether or not I believed that, I liked Marti, so I shook my head. “’S all right. Musta been...scary?”

The words were all muddled in my mouth, the fog thick over my thoughts. I really hoped this was temporary.

“Hey...Mardi? Can you...turn drugs down? Head fog...?”

“Oh...um.... Let’s see....” She went to work while I watched her carefully. It was down in just a little bit, and she went back to sobbing weakly where she sat. I shrugged inwardly, unable to do anything more than pat my hand on her nearer knee, and then tilted my head back. Marti’s tears gave me time to think; time to put myself together a little more, so it wasn’t all bad.

Think...what’s the last thing you remember?

I remembered...

I remembered.......?

Here, I made the mistake of closing my eyes. I must have fallen asleep while I went into that dreamy place of fuzzy memories, because the next thing I knew, I’d suddenly snapped alert and felt disoriented again.

Marti was getting up, and she was no longer crying. The tears looked dry.

“No,” I mushed frantically, reaching for her. My arm way overshot, but at least it was faster this time, fast enough to catch her. Eventually, I managed to tangle my fingers in her clothing as she startled. “Stay. What happened?”

“Oh...you’re...?” she looked around, then sighed patiently. “Do you remember your name?”

“Yes I rem’ember my goddamned name, tell me what’s going on, Marti,” I snapped, only a little pleased that my words were more accurately shaped.

Her eyes flashed a little, and while I frowned at her with truly pathetic frustration, Marti’s gentle voice didn’t mince words.

“Your heart stopped again.”

The beat of that very heart of mine rocketed upward. Marti checked the monitor, noticing it, but I didn’t care. What would cause that? I had just been speaking to Angela and—

Oh.

“Angela of Death.”

The memories were hazy, and came at me like a fade-in from white. But came they did, and
quickly.

My reaction seemed to confirm something for Marti. While she watched me, I focused on breathing, sparkler of pain though it was, my hand seeking out my apparently even-more-battered chest.

Marti took the time to sit down next to me again, her hands folded primly in her lap. “Do you know what happened?” she inquired gently.

I winced, starting to understand, but at least this meant they’d brought me back, however it’d gone.

“Morphine...too high,” I rasped softly, working hard to fix my eyes upon her. Each blink took an inordinate amount of time; I felt groggy, like my head was in a cloud, and listless too. As I watched her, I could feel my limbs begin to shake more. I hoped it was the adrenaline.

“You know about the Morphine?” Marti asked. “But you didn’t call out for help?”

“No...time,” I whispered. “Just eu...phoria, then...sleep.”

I remembered my heartbeat going up and, within a few seconds, being flat on my back, unable to move straight—or really at all.

Marti frowned at this, so I added helpfully, “S why...took...this.”

I opened my right hand—only to find it empty.

Oh, of course. I’d just touched her with that hand a bit ago and there’d been nothing in it. But Marti seemed to get it anyway: “The bottle?” she asked.

I blinked slowly in her direction, a nod. “Mm.”

I’d been alone in here. And because of being upset by something...Zenigata? I couldn’t quite remember yet—I’d been too surly at the moment to properly pay attention to what Angela had been doing after she’d walked in and chimed a hello; I’d turned away in annoyance while she’d rattled on and then, all of a sudden, there’d been a needle in my arm, jamming in an untold amount of clear liquid there.

I only had a split second to think before reacting. I had looked into her eyes—and then I knew. And she knew I knew.

She’d shoved her hand over my mouth and pushed me down with all her weight. I was momentarily disabled by the pain; already at a disadvantage, the struggle was quite real—as was the sudden inability to feel anything at all. While I could still move, think, see: with one hand I’d grabbed her wrist—of course, the expected thing, the automatic response, turned into my misdirection—and in the other, I’d dug into her pocket before whatever it was could kick in fully.

It’d apparently been a lift executed well enough, because she hadn’t found the bottle and taken it away, according to Marti just now; they’d found it. And quickly, too, because:

I’d felt euphoria all over me, and then, just a few seconds later, it all stopped. There were no more memories.

Well, about the present, anyway. I must have been dreaming about the theater again.

Oh...the theater. Right. Still leveled. Fuck.
Yet Marti, for some reason, was smiling through her sadness. As the sense of loss hit me in the form of a heavy sigh, this woman, the mystery woman who’d walked off with my cop and left me here alone to my fate and was now crying over me with crystal tears, said, “Well, the Inspector will be very glad to hear that.”

I sighed weakly, a nervous tick at the corner of my mouth. He would have ripped Angela apart, if he’d found her. Assuming Marti hadn’t been in on it.

“How about, I brought in the Inspector.”

Please,” I muttered from my spot, giving into the drugs and the grog and the facts of the matter as I gazed up at Marti and the lack of Zenigata, “Bring me the Inspector.”

I could still hear Angela’s voice in my head as I’d faded away:

“Just be a good boy and die.”

Just like my father had once said, as I’d sat in the back seat of a sedan as it idled beside an icy river.

* * *

“Please,” Lupin whispered up at me. While there was fear and exhaustion there, it was also a directive: “Bring me the Inspector.”

I nodded and dragged the free-floating stool over, checking the drip line of painkillers in his arm. “He’s busy at the moment, but you’ve got me. I’ll take care of you until he comes back.”

Zenigata would certainly be happy to hear that he was awake and coherent. And what’s more, it was looking like he hadn’t done this to himself. I’d have to check for a defensive fabrication—and just confusion—but it seemed there was hope there, at least.

Of course, that meant that the current situation was still quite serious, but it was hard for me not to smile in the moment.

Lupin, however, didn’t share my sentiment. His frown deepened. “Where is...he?”

“He’s in the lobby interrogating people about what happened to you.”

Lupin took a breath, held it, and then his face very carefully schooled itself.

“Don’t worry, he’ll be back within an hour or so,” I beamed, rubbing his hand reassuringly. “But in the mean time, how much pain are you in?”

“A lot,” he rasped. “But...head foggy. Want clear.”

“Hm.” I nodded and turned down the drip a little more. “It may be hard on you, but we can try it, okay?”

Lupin gazed at me for a long time, with a scrutiny I couldn’t quite read, but eventually just said, “Thank you.”

He turned his head away and tried hard to swallow. I could hear it from here, it was so dry and pained.

And, well, from earlier, I knew he could move around, so....
I stood up, and at the first noise he immediately whipped his head around. I watched his intense stare for a second, then offered hesitantly, “...Here? Let’s get you some water.”

I took the glass sitting on the cart next to the monitoring machines and filled it from the sink in the bathroom. When I came back, I set it down on the machines and helped him sit up.

That got done, through a lot of wincing and shaking and pathetic moans that Lupin tried to pretend weren’t happening. And then, I held the glass out to him.

He eyed it, then me. He repeated this a couple times, each time the look in his eye more alert, more tense than the last.

“...I’ll pass.”

I blinked at him, then at it, then held it out a little more. “It’s not poisoned?”

His gaze didn’t change. “I’ll pass.”

Eventually, our stand off ended when I sighed and put it on the windowsill. When I came back, I took up a seat on the stool once more. He watched me closely all the while.

“So what happened?” he insisted after a bit. “Tell me...th’ whole story.”

He looked utterly terrible, like death warmed over—and I suppose that was accurate, in this case. The bruises and bags under his eyes—and pale skin besides—made him look as though he’d been in a bad car wreck and then stayed up all night as well. With the deadly-serious look of suspicion in his eyes—a black look from a mobster if I’d ever seen one—it gave off commanding vibes that made me profoundly uncomfortable, given everything else I was dealing with too.

I scooted my seat back a little farther out of arm’s reach. I knew that look from Donatello, and I pushed down the sudden spike of adrenaline it shot through me, even though those days were years away and all Lupin was glaring at was the wall.

But, I reminded myself with a deep breath, he was in pain and grumpy. He probably didn’t even know he was doing it.

“Well,” I began, pulling on my professional tone, “Christof found you”—he snorted at this—“and it took about sixty minutes to resuscitate you.”

He blinked at me dully for a second, then his eyes flew open. “Sixty?” he squeaked. He hurriedly touched at his chest like he wanted to make sure his heart was still there. He said it again in Italian, just for confirmation: “Sessanta?!”

I nodded. “It’s no minor miracle that you’re alive and functioning right now, even limited as it is. So someone will have to take a detailed test of your facilities eventually, and probably write a paper about you.” He scowled at this with a force I didn’t quite understand. “But...all that aside,” I continued uneasily, “it was the Inspector who wouldn’t give up on you. The nurses were going to call it, but...he didn’t want to. Wasn’t willing to, I suspect.”

Lupin stared at me with a mix of awe and horror, and perhaps a dash of intense customer dissatisfaction too.

“And so you have him to thank for your life, Lupin,” I concluded.

The young man’s distant, brooding gaze settled on me, but soon enough, he gave a rather startled
nod. “Must’ve been hard on ‘im?” he fished.

“Tears and everything,” I nodded sagely, willing to help the notion along—especially if it helped him feel less paranoid. “Though don’t tell him I said that.”

A nervous smile ticked at one side of Lupin’s mouth, though it was fleeting. He was soon gazing somewhere near my knees, a dead stare of shock growing across his face as the info took root.

“And, to be honest? I don’t think he’s worked through it yet, so if he’s on edge and terse with you for a while, that’s why.”

Lupin winced, but nodded after a bit of thought. He started rubbing at his neck, looking like even that little bit of comfort exhausted him.

“Too much pain?” I queried.

“Nope.” He shook his head with a forced smile, coming back to life a bit—though the lines under his eyes were only growing deeper. “So what’s the prognosis for my...heart? Body? Leg? Brain??”

He seemed pretty familiar with all this, but for now I gave him a calm nod. “So long as nothing else comes at you, your heart should be fine. But don’t push it with adrenaline and unhealthy habits. Sleep. Relax. Eat. Let your leg heal. Take your meds. Rest for about six months.”

“That’s a lot to ask,” he noted, mouth turning into a thin line, “when every time I see a nurse I almost die.”

I frowned, sympathetic. Distrust flickered over his face for a second, but I rubbed his shoulder. “A certain nurse,” I corrected.

Lupin was tense, not responding to my gesture, but he eventually sighed lightly as I took my hand back and he looked around the room. He kept pushing at parts of his chest, wincing all the while. “How long’s it been, anyway?”

“Only a few hours,” I replied. “If you mean since everything went down.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Once the morphine’s out of your system, you just wake back up.”

He hummed pensively, and for a while, a dark cloud hung over the silence between us. But I let him have it, hoping the last vestiges of twilight outside would be enough to clear it up before we settled in for the long night ahead.

“But Lupin?” I asked. He looked at me, tired eyes momentarily innocent. “Do you remember what you and Zenigata were going to discuss before all this happened?”

His eyes grew big and I swear I saw a shiver ripple through his shoulders. But he didn’t lash out or shy away; he eventually nodded, gingerly rubbing his arms like he was cold and swallowing hard.

“I know you’d rather discuss this with him, but would you be willing to tell me, too? It might be useful, to make sure you wake up next time you fall asleep.”

Lupin fell silent, eyeing me sharply.
“O-oh. Um...” My mouth opened, then shut, all without saying a word. Why did I keep messing up right now? And being meek besides? All these thoughts of Venice had me tripped up more than even I’d thought. “Th-that wasn’t a threat, you know...?”

He kept watching me, eyes narrowing as he thought. The gears were clearly turning.

*Shit, that sounded even more suspicious, didn’t it?... Arg, time for plan B.*

I threw him an awkward smile and shrugged apologetically, trying to look as cute and unthreatening as possible—and then just held myself there, until he made a move.

Eventually, Lupin let out a sigh through his nose that sounded disappointed, and then turned his dubious gaze upon his lap. His arms still hugged his body, and he somehow had managed to pale further, under the sheen of sweat on his face.

*Well, let’s call that one a wash...* I sighed too, though of a different flavor. *C’mon Marti, you can do this. You’ve got years of doing this, just remember the old days. They both need you right now, you gotta pull it together and navigate the marsh.*

“You know you have these attacks, don’t you?” I persisted gently, after a few moments and a deep breath had passed us both by.

Lupin rolled his eyes—which caught on the painting for a second—but then he ripped them away and ran a hand over his face, over his neck. He grumbled, wrestling with himself, but eventually admitted grudgingly, “Yes, of a sort.”

His fingernails dragged down the back of his neck multiple times in quick succession, leaving red marks.

“And that!” I added, pointing to it. “You do that, too, when you’re anxious.”

He immediately stopped and flicked his gaze over to me, a deadpan, almost ferally cold stare of warning. But then, perhaps realizing how aggressive that was, he shook his head and pointedly set his gaze on his knees, innocuous lumps under the sheets.

“Don’t get too excited about it now, Marti dear,” he whispered with a measured smirk. “Shouldn’t let anyone see all your cards—especially the guys you’re playing against.”

“Hey, I haven’t made a habit of dating detectives for no reason, you know,” I chuckled, flashing him a smile.

After a telling delay, Lupin returned it briefly—but not by nearly the same magnitude, and quite obviously fake.

“Wh...what?”

“You know what? Let’s make a deal.” He sat up with a fresh smirk. “You tell me about your husbands, and I’ll tell you about my head.”

And then he leaned forward, that smirk turning dark.

I pulled back, not anywhere near ready for that look. “H-how did...”

...But wait, I had told him, hadn’t I? Way back in the first hours of this hospital stay: *One husband drank himself to death, and the other one killed someone else with it.*
I straightened up and eyed him back, Italian instincts kicking in. Normally that line was supposed to throw people off their interest. “One husband.”

I recognized the mistake immediately. My patient let his cool gaze, dark blue eyes full of bloodshot vessels, narrow—then linger unwaveringly.

“All right,” he purred. “One.”

“Which one?” I asked before I could stop myself, stumbling over my own feet in an attempt to escape the feeling crawling over me.

It was then that Lupin’s satisfied hum turned into a predatory grin. “The one you’re still running from, Red

Wi-

dow-

san.”

Hearing that term did something very strange to me:

My audition and comprehension fractured in two.

The words kept going, and my thoughts stayed behind.

My focus narrowed, until all I saw was the filing cabinet of memories spilling open.

Externally, I was silent, but internally, those memories welled up like an explosion. Verbal, physical, emotional—all of the repressed sensations came back all at once, and all of them painful.

“I...I beg your pardon?”

“Who owns you?” he asked with utmost softness—and confidence. “Who’re you running from, Marti?”

My body went very still, whether I wanted it to or not. It was an instinct; my caution turned into a block of ice that told me it was time to play dead. The gangster, for his part, just let his cold smile reach his eyes.

“While dating my cop,” he finished icily.

_My cop._

I’d heard that tone—those words—many times before. With men in Italy, who were telling you not to fuck with them, because they were owed favors by everyone up the chain you could possibly
complain to.

“So tell me about him, unless you want me to find out on my own—”

“No,” I snapped, running over his words.

Lupin paused, tilting his head and waiting.

“Why are you doing this?” I demanded a moment later, a quaver lacing through my voice.

*Have a tender heart-to-heart with the mobster who’s under duress and kept against his will. Right. Rookie mistake.*

Lupin raised his haggard brow with a cool hum. “Someone let that woman almost kill me. I want to make sure it wasn’t you.”

I started to shiver.

And that shiver brought me back to my senses, little by little. But even as I returned to the present, it was like watching a truck come nearer and nearer, blaring its horn as I stood in its headlights.

I blinked a few times at Lupin, hoping that my penchant for freezing up would do me well once more: this time, by making the person I was talking to believe that I was simply slow and confused.

But that only worked on people who had an eye only for what they wanted to see. And Lupin, from the look on his face, most definitely was not that type of person. He’d seen straight through my reaction already; I could tell from the intensity in his gaze, the downward tilt of his head, the foreboding set of his jaw.

“I—?”

“Don’t,” Lupin commanded. “Don’t lie to me, Marti.”

A warning chill zipped down my spine; my eyes flashed and heat rushed to my face. I failed to give him an answer, instead quickly running cost-benefit calculations of different answers, working steps and steps and steps ahead, and generally forgetting to breathe.

Lupin, for his part, watched me a little while longer, then made a show of sighing and leaning back into his pillows—the ones I’d set up for him just moments ago. “I can see why he likes you,” he muttered, folding his hands over his abdomen in a slow display of control. “You’re very easy to read, when it comes to the important things.”

One of my legs jerked. Just a twitch, deep in the muscle, and my jaw clenched shut. My hands, on my thighs, closed into fists.

And in the back of my mind, quietly, quickly, the urge to injure him and run away was coming to the fore.

“Don’t get me wrong—I think you’re a fine person, based on what I’ve seen so far. But you are her, aren’t you? And that means we need to have a little talk.”

*A little talk.* I’d heard that too many times before, always precipitating pain upon someone I cared about.

Pain that couldn’t be gotten out of, no matter how much I begged, apologized, cried, or fought.
The surge to defend myself fell away into a sigh of grief, and I was left staring at the floor, a weight falling over my shoulders, my lungs, my limbs. In my arms and legs and other tender places that had no business ever being injured, I felt the aching memory of bruises and cuts and unwanted hands come to life, sapping my will to move. I stayed like that, hoping submission would lesson whatever punishment was to come.

“The Red Widow, as I understand it,” Lupin went on, either not noticing or not caring about the change in me, “Was a local beauty who got into debt because of her husband. So the city’s crime lord Donatello Di Medici”—here, fluent Italian came out of his whisper, which was smoother, deeper than it had been a few minutes before—“paid off her debt and took her in, because he fancied her. He figured it was a wonderful way to kill two birds with one stone, because he’s blind like that.” Lupin hummed again, and ticked out a finger. “But she eventually fell out of favor some years later because of his wife Miranda, and it was more or less the cause of an internal war in the organization.”

Lupin’s smoldering eyes slid over and held my gaze. “The Cursed Woman of Venice, shunned by the whole town for being loved too much by too many of its citizens. So how did she get to be with my cop?”

I blinked and stayed as silent as the grave, not sure what else I was supposed to do. A part of me—a very faraway part of me—knew that he couldn’t possibly have gotten out of that bed and hurt me right then. But people like him weren’t dangerous because of their hands.

That thought was too faint to grasp onto, though. All I had were warning bells, and the sense that an entire ocean wouldn’t be enough to keep me safe from the displeasure of this man and its fallout. I stared at the floor, body refusing to move...thoughts refusing to move. Even if I had wanted to do either right then, I couldn’t have. I didn’t have anywhere to go that would be safer than this very spot, being stared down by the predator who hunted me.

“Now,” Lupin continued, ticking out another finger, “Zenigata was undercover in my father’s organization at the time, as you well know.” It wasn’t a question; it was a threat. “And during that time, he enlisted me to help him with something. And I...” he paused, wincing slightly. “I gave up a hell of a lot to that cause, so...I would like to know: Are you here on syndicate business, maybe some personal revenge...or have you left all that behind?”

The cracks in the floor continued to hold my focus, daunting and distant and as wide as canyons to my mind.

“Either way, we have a problem, but one of them can be solved with a display of loyalty. The other one...I hate to say, can only be solved in blood.”

Loyalty.

My eyes scrunched shut, remembering Donatello and Miranda’s voices both.

“And...and you? Lupin?” I asked mechanically, getting my eyes to move enough to open, and then to look around at different parts of the floor. I swallowed hard and, still staring at the grout, managed to move enough to clench my pant legs rather than my fists. “Where do your loyalties lie?”

Using the last volts of charge I had, I forced myself to look at him. Lupin’s sculpted but battered brow tipped down, and he tilted his head slightly. “Hm?” he prompted.

“Are you here for revenge too, against me?”
“For what?” he asked softly, eyes narrowing.

_For Monaco. For Venice. For Donny, for Koichi... for any and all of it...._

I gritted my teeth and said nothing, though I was saying quite a bit by that alone. What’s worse, I was shaking, enough that I might have not been able to speak even if I had wanted to. A shaking that always precipitated ugly tears—tears that often lead to beatings.

“For being an unwitting Helen of Troy?” he answered for me after a bit. He thought about it for a second, which was alarming, then shook his head. “Not especially. From the way Pops told it at the time, the woman he wanted to help wasn’t at fault, but, admittedly, he’s biased.”

He shrugged and came forward a little, showing an impressive amount of pain tolerance, though it didn’t make his face look any nicer. “See, my loyalties lie with me—and against the people who cross me,” he whispered, calm and measured. “And as you may know, I _destroy_ the people who cross me, so. Choose your side wisely, Martelli my dear, especially if you want that white dress of yours to be for something other than a coffin.”

I stared at him, shocked. The trust I had instilled in this man crumbled away, block by block, leaving me on a vulnerable little raft in a sea of sharks once more. Like I’d been all of my life, until I’d met the man named Koichi Zenigata.

But maybe that had all been just an illusion, huh? And he was simply trapped in this lifeboat with me, having swum to it after his own ship went down.

“Only a smart—and lucky—person could have survived that place, and those people,” Lupin went on at a melancholic whisper, before his gaze hardened once more. He straightened up and glowered at me. “Tell me how you did it.”

“I just want this to be _over_,” I said, twisting my head back and forth without any real control over it as my voice pitched higher through gritted teeth. “I didn’t want...I don’t want...”

Finally, the heat overwhelmed my face, and with them, the tears started coming. It made me shiver, and choke, and stutter, but soon they were flowing freely, as were the sorrows from my heart. “Why can’t this just stop _following_ me?”

My tears filled the space between us, standing alone for far too long.

Alone, waiting for Zenigata to rescue me again from my demons, for far too long....

“Tell me the story,” Lupin coaxed, voice turning closer to his usual somber one. “Tell me it all.... _Please_, Marti. And if you tell me the full truth, I may be able to make that wish of yours come true. But I have to know unequivocally that you’re not a danger to me—or him.”
Marti’s sobs went on for a while, a thing of surprising hopelessness. And while I’d been presented with plenty of convenient tear-showers in my life, this one didn’t seem rehearsed. Which would normally make me feel bad enough to want to do something about it, if my life weren’t at stake. So this time, I just waited patiently, making a mental note to make it up to her somehow if she was indeed innocent.

As I waited in the silence between the building’s heating cycles, it made me wonder just what Zenigata had to deal with, in his relationship with her. How many nights alone they’d had where he’d tried to get close to her and she’d just ended up crying like this, and he’d ended up having to spend the whole time with an arm around her shoulder, gently soothing these wounds that I was just now seeing the surface of.

Assuming he even knew of them at all; most courtesans, mail-order brides...they knew better than to cry where other people could see them. Though, that seemed unlikely as her story, given how easily she’d cracked. So someone still in the mob’s pocket, then...?

While I calculated the tough questions and steeled my heart to demand them of her, there came a quiet knock on the door. I shot it a dark look, hands closing around the sheets, but when no one went to get it, it, of course, opened on its own.

And in poked the Inspector’s head.

_Dammit._

He briefly made startled eye contact with me, then, hearing Marti’s sobs, barged in, ready to destroy. He quickly spotted her in the chair where she sat, not two feet from me. And there he stood, staring at her from less than a shadow’s distance, his brow creased with concern, his hands at his sides. He still didn’t have his overcoat or suit jacket, so his gun and cuffs were readily visible on his belt, his thick upper chest muscles tight.

The door to the little room swung shut behind him, clunking loudly. Marti jumped. I jumped. He didn’t.

After a moment of taking her in, his gaze moved over to me. There was a demand written there.

I didn’t have a smoke screen to hide behind, and now that he was here, I wasn’t going to get anything out of her. She was probably going to rat on me in a moment, in fact. So while I’d so wanted his presence a bit ago, it was time yet again to pivot.

I looked up from where I glowered at nothing in particular over his timing and then shrugged...
sympathetically, letting my posture deflate. If he was here, my level of concern could reduce a bit—though only a bit. An angry him was never easy to deal with, when you were injured.

His gaze shifted very slightly as it bore into me: It was, however brief, acknowledgment. That I was alive, that I was conscious and gazing back at him. But then, right on its heels, came the recognition that this situation was most definitely my fault somehow, and any kindness there whisked away like tracks in the sand.

“What the hell is going on here?” he snapped.

“No, no, it’s nothing, please stop,” Marti simpered, reaching out a hand to him even though she could hardly see through the tears and, even now, hadn’t once looked up at either of us. She wiped at her eyes with the back of her free hand, but still hiccuped pitifully, just trying to even breathe straight.

And yet she was trying to defuse the situation? Why? It couldn’t have been for my sake.

The Inspector looked between the two of us, apparently wondering the same thing. But as soon as his gaze lingered on her, it softened. He soon settled a comforting hand over Marti’s, where she clung to his coat.

After a brief smile at her and a soothing word, his gaze flicked over at me wordlessly.

“We were sharing stories?” I hedged.

Zenigata looked me over—probably checking for contraband—then shook his head with an exasperated sigh. The minute he turned to Marti properly, my countenance fell and I tisked silently.

Right, sure, everything is always 100% my fault, there are no exigent circumstances ever.

I rubbed my arms more vigorously, wishing I could get the jitters—the itches—out of them. Even with a drug line, everything ached, and everything I touched zinged with little lances that were starting to make me nauseous. And these fucking chills....

But beyond me, once my frustrated gaze ended up on the pair of captors again, something surprising unfolded: the old Inspector pulled Marti’s wheeled chair across the room. She yelped in surprise, but before anything more could come, he bent down on one knee in front of his partner, cupped her hands in both of his, and then sought out her downcast gaze.

“You okay?” he whispered, pushing a curl out of her face and stroking the top of her head once.

“You need to leave?”

And the way she looked at him in return...

A sour pang hit my chest, hot and insistent. I glared and looked away.

He’d completely put his back to me. Me, the suspect. Did he know what I could have done to him right then, if I’d put half a mind to it? Did he? He sure was assuming an awful lot about my invalidity.

That pang hit me again, and I tightened my folded arms with a huff.

Was assuming an awful lot about our relationship.
But...

I clenched my jaw and let out a long breath through my nose. Stared at the wall, determined not to feel any of this.

...Then again, it wasn’t like he hadn’t done this for me a few days ago when we’d first gotten here, with me Marti’s place. So what was this damn batch of fresh feelings about?

*It’s not like I’m just trying to stay alive or anything, and you just fucked it up again by being nice to this complete stranger.*

Even though I told myself I wouldn’t look, I stole a glance at them again. At Marti’s sadness, and the bowed back of the Japanese, so studious in his tending.

The way they cared about each other...trusted each other....

I grumbled and stared at the nearest wall, wiping at the cold sweat rising on my neck.

I hoped looking, witnessing, would alleviate the rising resentment. That maybe I just felt guilty about causing the problem, or seeing something that wasn’t meant for me. But that apparently wasn’t it, because I only felt worse the longer I looked. That throbbing spot in my chest just dug itself deeper at the shape of him comforting her.

And I knew exactly what it was, too: Jealousy.

But why? What the hell did I have to be jealous of her about? With him, of all people—the man who was supposed to be my mortal enemy?

It wasn’t like I couldn’t handle myself. Wasn’t like I needed him or anything. He was a cop, for fuck’s sake. A cop that wanted to lock me up for the rest of my life and throw a party on my grave once that happened.

...But his kindness always did feel nice, when it happened to be thrown my way.

Thinking about when he’d brought me here—how surprised I’d been in a moment that could have easily ended up with me bloody and concussed on that locker room floor—made me calm somewhat. I sighed, the nervous, drug-fueled shaking replaced with a bit of steady warmth.

Across the room, the pair continued to talk softly, tenderly. Marti nodded to herself in her seat, finally getting a handle on the tears, and Zenigata soon after stood up.

And then he turned to me.

From the look in his eyes, I wasn’t going to get away from a lashing this time. And that, I realized, was probably why I was so upset:

That courtesy he’d shown me the other day had never been mine. It was a mode he could get into, a skill in his toolbox when he needed it; it was nothing exclusive to me. I was just a prisoner, so giving it to me was simply a means to an end; the most expedient way to worm his way into my trust so that he could the information, the situation control, the what-have-you that he needed. And that only came when I was a *good* prisoner.

But for Marti, it was different.

*She* got it no matter the circumstance, no matter *who* she was trying to kill, because he loved her.
Just like with his daughter.

And what’s more, it looked like she loved him back...even if the circumstances were flawed.

Yes: She was behind that wall with him; I was just walking along the top of it, dancing past the bottle shards that were embedded in its top. So sometimes I looked down onto that kindness and sometimes I fell into it, but sooner or later something would shove me off that wall on the wrong side, and it would be up to me to scale it again, if I could manage it. If I didn’t get ripped open on the glass first.

The way it always was.

I swallowed hard and forced myself to stare at my hands as he came near.

These damn hands: So pale, clammy, shaky. Full of wire and tubes and tape, with the rest of my body bundled in blankets.

*Ugh, this all reminds me too much of—*

I looked away for relief, but the painting of Monaco harbor was I all I saw.

*Sigh.*

Seemed fate was trying to send me a message.

*But this’s only to be expected, isn’t it? You’re the suspect. You’re the enemy. You’re...*

The answer came to me in a wave of defeat:

*The man in the way of the life he wants.*

I knew the heavy feeling that settled in then, sapping the strength from my limbs.

It was regret. Regret at being alive.

As Zenigata came over, I didn’t look away from him this time. I just watched the steady, calculating look of his that fixed upon me, feeling a grey sort of resignation settling over my shoulders.

He came to stand by my bedside, hands in his pockets. After a second, he nodded at me and looked away pointedly, giving me a moment; with that time, I threaded my fingers together in my lap and turned my palms up, idly wondering at the mechanics of them. At what exactly made them not good enough for the people that’d created them.

*Well, Dads always love Mom more than they love their kids. Kids are replaceable, interchangeable, needy—a drain. But Mom is “the One”: unique, loving, able to support the whole family. The one Dads spend their whole youth dreaming about finding, and then spend their later years loving, protecting, growing with. The one that brings him value. There is way more bond, way more love, built into her than any given child. But she: She is no accident; she and her love is a beautiful gift. The blooming flower, where we are just useless shoots. So she’ll always come first.*

*Children are just...the burden from loving her.*

I pursed my lips against the hurt and jealousy, which was aching in my chest with alternating waves of burning and stabbing, respectively.
And that’s fine, I guess....

...If you can figure out how to be a useful child.

Irritated anew, I huffed and crossed my arms tightly again—and of course, hissed in pain.

Annoyed further still now, I glared at Zenigata’s legs, which were a monolith of tan at the edge of my vision.

“What?” I snapped.

But he didn’t answer.

When I looked, I found the Inspector gazing down at me with a complicated expression. His mouth was a grim and pensive line, but his brows were pushed together, and his eyes were sad.

What, so you’re going to be worried about me now? Or maybe disappointed? Go to hell....

And yet he still didn’t move.

The most remarkable thing about this display was that whatever he was thinking, it was affecting him so much that it was showing through on his face. And what’s more, he wasn’t attempting to hide it.

Confused and unsure, my face was soon mirroring his. My eyes flickered back and forth as they looked for answers in his.

The weather-worn detective just stared at me a little while longer, but this time, when he took a breath, his gaze suddenly hardened. Something had been decided upon in his mind, and the longer he watched me, the harsher it got.

“Wh...at?” I rasped once his jaw tightened.

“Did you do it?”

There was danger in his voice.

“...Do what?” I asked lowly, eyeing him and Marti suspiciously and then leaning back a little.

Faster than lightning, he snatched up my wrist from my lap. Zenigata yanked me forward, pulling my shoulder socket in a direction that made it feel like it and my ribs were on fire, and then turned my hand over for the world to see. He pointed at a spot on my arm, near my elbow. “This,” he snapped.

It was a needle mark. On the arm that didn’t have the drip in it, I think where Angela had intruded upon my person. I shook my head, bewildered.

“No—?”

“Dammit Lupin, don’t lie to me.” His fingers tightened around my wrist, digging into skin.

“Do what?” I insisted, voice going shrill as I tried to yank my arm away.

“Did you shoot yourself up?!” he snapped, pushing my hand into my face. It whacked me in the nose.
“Augh?! What?! No...!” I pleaded, simultaneously trying to shrink back and wrestle my hand away while also struggling to breathe. But it only made my broken ribs jostle, which just made my voice all the more strained and my struggling all the weaker. The heat of injury in my body flared up, instantly making me overheat.

Zenigata shoved his free hand onto the base of my throat to push me back, while simultaneously jerking my captured arm in the opposite direction. Pain lanced through my ribcage, enough to momentarily steal my breath away. The hand on my neck swept downward, where it twisted a fistful of my shirt.

“Did you try to kill yourself, you idiot?!” he roared into my face.

His yell was mixed mine. Agony lanced through all of my limbs as he shook me, and trying to tighten up to stabilize the pain just made it worse, made it impossible to breathe, to see. I doubled over his grip with a pathetic, twisted cry as my chest stabbed at me from multiple directions, in so much pain I couldn’t see anything but white behind my eyelids. And that didn’t even count what my leg was doing. That didn’t even manage to make it to my brain, and soon, neither was his voice, and whatever venom it was shouting.

“Hey?!” came Marti’s attempt at a commanding tone. She hurriedly grabbed Zenigata’s shoulder—an uncharacteristically gentle “Hey, hey,” added to it—but the Inspector only shook her off and threw me down with a tisk of disgust. I curled into a ball with a terrible groan, clutching at my chest in a desperate attempt to get the pain stop, to avoid vomiting, to somehow breathe and see and defend myself. It didn’t help, no matter how hard I closed my eyes or how long I stopped breathing. And every time I did breathe, it hurt more; every part of me that contacted something else felt like jagged glass being ruthlessly and repeatedly stabbed into my bones.

And then came the nail in the coffin, snarled from over Marti’s shoulder:

“I KNOW what happened in Monaco, so don’t you DARE lie to me!”

On the heart monitor, the blips went by with a frantic sound, and yet I’d stilled within the sheets.

But he did not come for me any further, and slowly, still clutching my chest and gasping, that noise became the only sound I heard.

“How...do you know about that...?” I whispered, craning my neck upward to watch Zenigata with wide-open eyes.

“I fucking asked,” he spat back.

I stared at him wildly. But he just kept ahold of my gaze, unblinking and ready to tear me to shreds. His jaw was tight, his eyes accusatory.

But before I could find the words to speak, Marti hesitantly peered over her shoulder at me. “...What happened in Monaco?” she hedged.

A jolt of bitterness—and anxiety—went through me. I pushed up a bit and glanced at the Inspector, but he gave no ground, his shadow still holding us both hostage.

“You wanna tell the lady, or should I?” he threatened.

“Fuck you,” I muttered, eyes flicking guiltily over at Marti as I shallowly heaved my broken chest for breath. I was still seeing spots, racked with alternating chills and fire. And Zenigata didn’t give a damn.
But Marti’s face, still slightly red and streaked with the dried remnants of tears, looked only concerned for me.

I quickly turned away from that, from all of them.

“Well?” Zenigata pressed, a growl.

*Why don’t you tell him?* Jigen’s gentle voice coaxed in my mind. *You’ve wanted to for years.*


I made to turn away, but before I could complete the maneuver, the cop had launched himself inward and grabbed my shirt front with both hands, pulling me forward with his fists. Pain lanced through my torso again as my ribs popped around my vertebrate.

“You absolute, tremendous idiot!” he shouted as he shook me.

To my desperate, pathetic shrieks of pain, Marti’s shouts added to the mix. The woman I’d antagonized only moments ago dove in and dragged my attacker off; I scraped at his hands, cut at his wrists with my nails as she did so, and I may have gotten her too. I couldn’t tell whose blood I’d drawn.

She shoved him away, they both shouted at each other in a fit of pique for a second—and then both cops ended up staring at me, while holding each other’s arms.

And then the silence stretched on.

“Well?” Zenigata demanded, pulling back from her guiltily and shirking his shirt back into place for something to do.

Marti gazed at me as well, both pleading and concerned, looking as much a mess as I felt. She ran a hand through her hair nervously and then held her hands in front of her, twisting them.

I wasn’t sure I could take a third round of shaking, and I didn’t want to have to watch any more of them falling apart. I sighed and stared at the nearest place that was anywhere but their faces. It ended up being the hand that was holding me up. The hand that’d never been able to create the world I’d wanted, no matter what it drew or painted or forged—until it had learned how to steal.

“It was just a bad day and a bottle of pills, all right?” I finally scoffed. “Jesus.”

“That’s what it was?” Zenigata swore. “Fuck, Lupin!”

“What?!” I squawked back, whipping my head around and gesturing at him violently with my free hand. “It’s not like you were there to care!”

“Why you—” He made for my collar again, but Marti was quicker on the draw. Still, even as she held him back, he shouted, “Do you even know what I did for you back then? Do you? Do you even care?!”

“How DARE you,” I swore back, something vicious snapping inside of me like a rubberband. Heart racing, body shaking, my adrenaline exchanged itself for rage in the space between words. With each syllable, it became harder to stop what was coming. Became harder to even remember who I was, outside of the need to yell and scream. “You? Have NO right! To lecture me! About who let down whom in MONACO?!”
“Lupin—!"

“NO!” I forced myself to sit up, using adrenaline to launch me past pain. I pointed at the Zenigata, my voice savage and angry, huge in volume. Each word was louder, closer together than the last, until I was going so fast that I was tripping over myself.

“How the hell would you know what happened, you were gone for half of it! And right when I needed you!” I gestured helplessly, a different pathetic grasp at the air with each equally pathetic sentiment. My voice, betrayer that it was, pitched up with each new word. “You left me there all alone to die and I didn’t know if you were dead, or-or-or coming to kill me the next time I saw you, or maybe just fucked off because I wasn’t worth anything to you anymore...”

My voice trailed off into a noise that was a groan going in and a keen coming out. With a roar, I just threw my hands into the air, only to have them drift back onto my head, where I pulled at my hair. It was the only thing I could do other than hitting someone to get the emotions out, the hysteria to abate just enough to leave me some shred of self-control. Some sense of who I was—even if there were tears stinging my eyes from the pain.

“And then you want to hunt me when you come back a year, two years later, like I’m the worst thing in the world and you’d rather see me dead than acknowledge that what I’m doing could maybe, possibly, salvage my wreck of this thing people call a life?! So No! You have no right! Don’t you dare! Talk to me! About Monaco! Not when you left me there for a woman who wants you dead anywa—!”

The end of the word was ripped out of my mouth with a massive impact sound, and the next thing I knew, I was staring at a wall.

For a moment, the only sensation was that of my ears ringing, and then the dizziness of my brain trying to catch up with what’d just happened.

“Don’t you dare talk about her that way.”

Everything stopped. There were no emotions; no whisper of memory. No breath. Just silence.

Within me.

And within that little white room, too.

Then came the stinging in my cheek, sizzling through the confusion.

Belatedly, I finally processed the sound of the slap that’d struck me.

It took a moment, but in the silence that followed I slowly turned back to Zenigata, glaring as I held my cheek.

You’ll get that paid back with interest.

But the man was standing tall as ever. In fact, his meaty arm was still outstretched, all the way across his body. He’d managed to pop several of my neck vertebrae, he’d hit me so hard. And by the look on his face, he didn’t give a damn.

Don’t fuck with me, punk.

That’s what those hard eyes said.
Slowly, methodically, Zenigata brought his hand back to his side. It fisted there, barely two feet from my head, ready to break my jaw.

I watched that carefully, then glared at him to ward him off, ready to jump on his fist if I had to evade it. For a moment, my eyes flicked over to Marti for help, but—

“Don’t you look at her. You look at **me**, when you’re dealing with **me.**”

His voice was vicious. The very darkest, coldest of his authoritarian dictates that signaled there’d be no quarter given.

“...Fuck you,” I muttered, whispered really, the last I could get out before the treacherous sense of childhood fear bubbled up in force. I quickly turned away, only to realize I’d left myself open a moment later. “**Fuck.**”

That was when I tasted the blood, too.

“You are some piece of work,” the Inspector continued on from above me. “I don’t know why I bother.”

The note of disappointment in his voice, strained and quiet because it was on the verge of rampage, was something I was utterly familiar with, albeit not from him. And yet it hurt just as much as any other man’s ever had. Perhaps even moreso, damn it all.

“Yeah, well...”

Tisking, I wiped at my lip with a thumb and forced the emotions down. There was blood smeared there, bright and thin.

“...I always knew you were gunning for the job of ‘my dad.’”

Right. Sure, okay. Hit Lupin when he’s being mouthy, he can take it.

“Congratulations, you’ve officially achieved it.”

Better yet, just wait until he can’t get away, then beat the hell of him. He doesn’t respond to anything else, anyway. Sure, I get it. Same as always.

I shot Zenigata a black look.

“Why don’t you go die like him too?”

The Inspector’s eyes widened, and behind him, I could see Marti put a hand to her mouth. Too much? Maybe. Oh well.

*Just hit the guy in the hospital bed again. Go ahead—no big deal. It’s not like he can get away. He knows he deserves it, why else would he be there in the first place?*

I honestly didn’t feel any remorse at all. Only alone and, suddenly, exhausted. My whole body was jittery and the room was spinning too. I felt like I could cry and/or vomit at any second, and I wasn’t sure which one was going to win out if push came to shove. I guess I’d just sit here and bleed my remorse like they wanted me to.

In the looming silence, I decided that if they were going to take their anger out on me, they would, and there was nothing more than a few teeth marks I could accomplish in defense if they really went for the five-star tag-team treatment, given how busted up I was. So I simply put my head
between my knees miserably and curled my arms around underneath the screaming, throbbing pain. “Just leave me alone."

Beyond me, out in the room, I could hear Zenigata take a deep breath through his nose, and then sigh it out his mouth a few seconds later—though it was more like a growl than anything.

Automatically, my arms curled around my head, fingers hooked together at the top. I closed my eyes tightly, readying for the assault.

But all that came was a whisper of clothing as he turned to Marti and rubbed a staying hand down her arm. “I can’t do this right now,” he announced.

_Goddammit._

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to get it all away from me, out of my mind. Out of my heart.

I heard his shoes turn and the door open; I peeked through my arms, but he was indeed getting no closer to me. In fact, as I watched, the door closed with a _quiet_ click. He hadn’t even bothered looking at me.

_Right, well, glad you’re still alive too._

Guilt was starting to creep its way in as the adrenaline fell, but moreso I was just relieved that he was leaving. This was too much pressure for my head; everything throbbed. Nothing felt like it should have; some responses were hitting walls and others were flying through the goddamned metaphorical sky. But one thing rang through loud and clear, like on a skipping record track:

_You just always fuck up everything, don’t you, Aki?_

I closed my eyes and sighed, gripping my hands over my head and doing a combination of growling in frustration and dry sobbing in pain. In its wake, I honestly just wanted to cry, but I wasn’t even sure why.

“I don’t want him dead,” Marti stated quietly from beside me.

I...had forgotten she was even there. I lifted my head, setting my cheek on my good knee with a pathetic, defeated frown.

“What are you talking about?” I lamented.

She looked pale. I couldn’t blame her—seeing a guy get mad and slap somebody was never nice, when you were smaller than they were and didn’t actually like sadism. But...she looked even worse off than that. She was worrying her hands, and staring at her feet.

“I love him.”

Very slowly, the gears started to turn.

“... _What_ are you talking about, Marti?”

“I didn’t mean to take him away from you.”

“What? No. I was talking about his daughter. You’re fine.” I crinkled my nose and shook my head, wanting to scream at something, maybe rake my hands down my arms until they bled. _Who needs a fake son to cause you grief when you’ve got a real daughter who already does?_
Though I thought saving his life multiple times would count for something. No honor among power and all that, I guess.

“You don’t know, then...?”

The gears turned a little more.

“Know what...?”

“Why he left you in Monaco?”

A cold feeling settled in the pit of my stomach. “...How do you know about that?”

“Because I was there.”

I stared.

“I think you two need to have a little chat,” she continued, taking a wary step back and then another. “A-About this...”

“Wait, what? Marti—”

But she only shook her head and left.

And then I was all alone in a white hospital room once more.
I wrote this chapter almost a year and a half ago... Sorry you had to wait so long for it! *faints*

“You need to talk to him,” Marti swore at me out in the hallway, her distress animating itself as she paced.

I was overwhelmed. Too much so to really be talking about this. I managed a short, unhappy shrug where I stood, but that was all.

The fact that he’d almost died in my hands a few hours ago. The fact that he was now awake and mostly fine and hated me?

That episode he’d had a few minutes ago, plus the fact that I’d come back to Marti crying hysterically, him being a little brat, and then I’d... Hell, I’d hit him so hard he’d actually fallen over with cascade of popping sounds, and then I’d wanted to hit him again.

So yeah: It was all too much. There was nothing I could say that could even begin to encompass all of that, and really, I didn’t want to think about what that meant about me.

So I just stood there sympathetically, waiting for an opening to help as she paced back and forth anxiously. Occasionally, I’d look at my hands, wondering where the violence in them had come from.

Suddenly, Marti whirled on her heel and planted her feet. She faced me, one hand clawing at her hair and the other in the air: “You never told him?” she hissed incredulously, eyes widening.

I looked at the ceiling for help, but there were no epiphanies there. So I simply settled for holding out those hands of mine toward her with an apologetic sigh. “I never had the chance...”

But my voice was weak, and hers came sharp and fast as an arrow:

“Even on that cruise ship?”

“Even on the cruise ship,” I admitted plainly.

Her hand pulled out of her auburn curls, and she looked at me pleadingly with reddening eyes. “He never even knew I was there?”

Again, I shook my head calmly, patiently. “He never knew your name, or even your face. He knew I was helping get a woman out, but he never knew it was you. That’s the whole point. To keep you safe from him, and everyone else in those organizations.”

Marti bit her lip, then wiped at her eyes, looking at the door to Lupin’s room desperately. I slowly reached out for her, but she twirled away—only for her hurried, uncoordinated steps to wander back near me after a rotation around the diameter of the hall. A distance remained between us as she renewed her pacing, but it wasn’t too far. Unsure, I reached out again, this time hesitantly.
But I should not have feared: Once my fingers hooked around her elbow, her wandering planted itself right into my chest. There, Marti curled up and shivered, eyes hidden in the shelter of my clothes.

“I’m sorry I did all that in there,” I whispered into her hair, rocking her back and forth tenderly. “So sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” she muttered. “Do something about it.”

I wrapped my arms around her shoulders with a pitying sigh, determined to make that safe space bigger, that shield thicker, even if I was the least worthy person to do so.

And yet all Marti whispered into my clothing was:

“If you don’t tell him the truth now, you’ll lose him.”

——— * ———

Monaco. It was a funny little place.

Geographically, all it was was a bright, half-moon harbor and the town around it. Mountains came within a few streets of the shore, and often, clouds hung on the peaks in an otherwise sunny day. Like Rio, the homes stretched up into the hills, but as a tiny resort town, they were mostly mansions in the woods.

Like any southern Mediterranean port, the water sparkled a brilliant, primordial blue that lifted the spirit, and it was sunny most days of the year. And just like the ancient cities of legend and yore, this little monarchical city-state had become a very important place to me.

Because of its location between France and Italy, it was a necessary stopping point if you quickly needed to run away from either. And left alone during the War, it was one of the few tiny principalities in the world to retain its sovereignty in the new age.

Politically, it was “allowed” to retain that status even now, because small, neutral, nonthreatening countries were useful to bigger nations as places to broker deals—and to stash articles of value. If Switzerland was the vault of wealthy European dynasties and Italy was their art dealer, Monaco was where they went to play with their mistresses.

Commercially, the country made its money through high-end casinos and the international people who visited them; many a James Bond film had been shot at Monte Carlo. However, even if you couldn’t get in because of the dress code, there were plenty of people of all income levels who came to gawk at the rich and famous, as well as enjoy the shops and shores. It made it easy to blend in.

I wasn’t sure if the casino business started in Monaco because of the average wealth of the people drawn to it, money laundering, or simply for space concerns, but in any event, now it was the backbone of the economy—an institution that was both financially and politically beneficial. If all the wealthiest people of a continent came to visit one of several close-knit businesses, chances were, the leaders of the nation they stood in could make many, many important friends.

And true to form, I knew a person who knew a person or two in Monaco, and that was how I’d
ended up stashing a very precious “good” there, myself.

The hospice was on a hill overlooking the harbor. It was near the edge of town, practically on a crag, so it was relatively easy to secure the building. More than anything though, it seemed to be a place for young people who had something to hide, some dark shame that needed fixing.

And yet, for all the shadows that lived there, that compound had been so very, very white.

The hospital was built almost in a Santorini style: smooth white stucco, open window frames with no glass where they could get away with it, and clean, modern lines. It was a pretty little place, with light wooden floors and many colorful vases full of equally colorful flowers.

And that spring, I’d been coming there a few times a week like clockwork, visiting a certain person in a certain room.

We were both in hiding, really. And that was what made it uplifting: to have a friend to visit within these sunny shores full of experiences and people way out of my price range.

I wasn’t sure when I’d started calling him “a friend,” but there it was. As I took off my hat and sat in my usual chair, I found myself smiling down at him, the way you would someone you’d known for years and enjoyed seeing every time. The day was bright and cheerful out the sole window in the room, and I couldn’t help but think, as I picked up his hand, that that coast felt a little less lonely, knowing I had him to visit.

I scooted the chair a little closer and, hat set on the shelf under the ventilator, held the cool hand between my two. “Hey,” I whispered, leaning in. “It’s me, Ark. What are you dreaming about today? I hope it’s something good.”

Outside, the harbor sparkled, white-sailed ships bobbing gently in the cool early-spring breeze.

I told him about my day, relating tales of the new café I’d found that he would have liked. About the flowers that were growing in the window boxes, and the impressive yachts that had pulled up that weekend. About the news in the papers, and the news that wasn’t. About the girls who worked at the bookstore on the ground floor of the apartment building next door to mine, that kept throwing me a certain kind of smile—and the woman that I couldn’t stop wishing was there to do so in their place.

He never said a word, but I knew he was in there, somewhere.

When I ran out of stories and it was time to go home, I picked up my hat, secured it back on my head, and gave his hand one extra squeeze. “Hey. I’ll see you in a couple days. You just concentrate on getting better, okay? Once you wake up, I want to hear everything I’ve missed.”

If you had asked me at the time if I thought that Lupin would ever wake up, my response would have been, “I hope for it, but I don’t expect it.”

After all, I’d been disappointed in this area before. There were plenty of vics from my Tokyo days that’d ended up in a hospital room and never managed to make it through to their interview. Given
all I’d been through with him up to this point, and my concerns about the train bombing as well, in the back of my mind, there was a constant whisper that maybe it would be better to let him go. That maybe that was what he wanted, in the end, and I shouldn’t get in the way of that.

But I didn’t want to stop believing in his will to live. I wanted to hear his side of the story. To give him justice. To see his free-spirited smile again.

After all, I’d pulled him out of that wreck still alive, even after days, so that had to mean something, right?

Still, the more rational part of my mind knew that wishing couldn’t get you anywhere in a situation like this. I was prepared to watch history repeat itself, and I’d steeled my heart for that inevitability as much as I could, making the most of every moment I had left with him.

So you can imagine, then, how surprised I was when Lupin eventually woke up.

It had been a morning like most others—warm, sunny, slow. I spent the early hours at a randomly picked coffee shop, read the paper, daydreamed about the redhead who was sleeping in at the apartment these days, and eventually, when the sun got high, headed over to the hospital.

But at the desk, one of the nurses who was always there forewent the usual greeting. She’d looked up from her work station (she was also reading the day’s paper, an article about some local celebrity that I’d skipped over), and her eyes went wide. She hustled around the counter, already speaking. It was lucky that she got the words out before I could process the look on her face, because the wild intensity in her eyes would have scared me half to death if she hadn’t.

“Oh! Mr. Corvali! We didn’t have a number for you so we couldn’t call, but your son! He’s awake!”

The narrative I’d used to check Lupin in was that he was my son, and he’d been in a terrible car wreck up in the mountains, due to his tendency to race high performance machines.

Regardless, or perhaps because of this, she hustled me along to Lupin’s room with a certain energy. I knew they’d taken him off the medically induced coma meds, but they had no idea if—or when—he’d wake up subsequent to that. Seemed the answer was several weeks later, sometime when I hadn’t been there.

It made me feel a little disappointed, that, but it was nothing compared to the excitement that rushed in.

And then it all crashed down once I saw him.

He was still quite messed up, with tubes here and there and everywhere, though at least the swelling and bruising had almost completely disappeared. His hair had regrown somewhat from where it’d been shaved to make way for initial medical treatment, and they’d even done a narrow skin graft or two on his side in the time that had elapsed since he’d first gotten here. But today, instead of lying vapid in the bed, he was wiggling. Wiggling in very strange, inhuman ways, with equally grotesque groans to accompany it.

You couldn’t exactly call him alert, but he was definitely conscious after a fashion around the breathing tube. You could tell from the way he was acting that, while technically awake, he was going in and out of awareness; his eyes would move around, and he’d take deeper breaths here and there—or shorter ones, if you touched him. But his eyes seemed like they weren’t working quite right (it was quite possible they were damaged), because they never opened all the way. It wasn’t
for a few days yet that his eyes would even linger on anything.

It was a horrible sight, and for a moment I was frozen with the knowledge that I may have consigned him to a fate worse than death from here on out.

But I forced myself to sit down and hold his hand like I always did. And when I spoke to him, he finally seemed to calm, until he eventually fell back asleep.

That was how I spent my next few weeks—holding Lupin’s hand, just so that he could sleep.

“Hey,” I greeted one day many long weeks later, from behind a bouquet of flowers.

The train bombing had happened in February. They hadn’t taken Lupin off the coma meds until April, and it wasn’t until May that he’d woken up. It was now the end of July—which meant there was a grand supply of flowers from all over the world in Monaco’s boutique shops and grocery stores.

When I saw Lupin’s face—he was sitting up, propped up on his favorite stash of pillows, a book in his lap—he was biting down a mischievous grin, eyes glittering tiredly. One part of his hair was shorter than all the rest, and his facial hair was a bit scrubby, but all in all, he looked on the mend. The last of the bruising from the tubes and surgeries was finally wearing away, and while he was still pale and wasn’t gaining much weight, he looked a lot less gaunt than he had. And he seemed happy, most importantly of all.

Currently, with that new vigor, he was clearly trying hard not to say anything about the view of me holding a paper-wrapped cone of flowers in his doorway.

“Are all these for me~?” he teased, as I set them in his arms. It made the whole world light up around him, just seeing his pale face and dark hair splashed with a rainbow of perky-petaled hues.

Seemed he’d just been biting his tongue until he could figure out the right words to rib me with. That seemed more like him though, so I couldn’t help but feel gladdened by it. It was good just to have some life in him again.

Even while unconscious, he’d had a tenacious, if precarious, hold on existence ever since the accident—until the day that I’d confirmed for him that his father had died. I’d thought it was the right thing to do, at the end of one of my visits; that he was ready to hear it, and that it was my duty to tell him.

I have rarely regretted a sentence so much in my life.

Because that knowledge seemed to destroy something in him. The friendly, hopeful light in his eyes had instantly flickered and died, and in retrospect, after the revelation, he’d lost much, if not all, of that innate tenacity that kept him climbing back toward health. The smiles he’d shot me since had always been a bit more stiff than normal, a visible distance to them. It had been quite awkward for a while, and thinking he blamed me for it, I’d left him alone for a few days. (Once he’d woken up, I’d been visiting him for several hours every day, which Marti was kind enough to encourage.)
But when I’d come back this time, he’d seemed worse for wear in my absence and honestly cheered up by the time I’d gone home. So I’d persisted in visiting despite my misgivings and, tentatively, we’d gotten through. We didn’t talk about anything hard—just things like the weather, the nurses, the things in the paper. I didn’t ask him any details for my case, and he didn’t ask me for anything prudent with the syndicate. We just chatted and traded stories and then fell into hushed silences whenever one of us slipped up.

On his request, though, I’d since brought him books and music, and supplies to do artwork with too—and did he ever use them ravenously. He’d sketch the flowers I brought him, and the staff who came by to sit with him, producing a different—and breathtaking—still life every single day, and sometimes more than one. It probably wasn’t much of a challenge for a talent like his, but I was glad to see him personally taking charge of his recovery; it was like the more knowledge and supplies I brought him, the more vivid he became.

Lupin was certainly an artist at heart: Feed him supplies, and out came art. Surround him with said art, and soon a wondrous flower unlike any other would bloom in the form of his personality.

For my part, seeing him pursue a hobby that was healthy and legal was a breath of fresh air that made me unreasonably happy, which I would always twitter at the flat to Anna about. The entire time I’d known Lupin (who was at most 22 years old at this point), I’d never seen him anything but distressed, from one issue or another that had been bearing down on him. It was understandable, given what I knew he was going through (and the deep well of things I undoubtedly didn’t know), but I had hope that he would put it all behind him now, and, with a little guidance, take up something safe (and valuable to society at large), like his art.

I didn’t often get to see the finished product of my labors, but from the reports, this one was looking good toward going straight. Lupin’s eyes were strong once he’d started looking at things again; whatever hearing he might have lost from the explosion had had plenty of time to fully repair; and, while he seemed to have some convenient memory loss surrounding the incident, he seemed mentally sound as well—even if he was having trouble with certain syllables in certain languages.

And, perhaps most importantly for him, he said the fine motor function in his hands was serviceable, even if he wasn’t being allowed to walk around much yet. Soon, he’d be doing physical therapy for his legs, too, aimed at getting his overall strength back. I had hope that his recovery wasn’t secretly motivated by the desire to commit further crimes, but because he genuinely seemed to have new things he wanted to try, like sailing one of the wake boards that went out every day in the view of the harbor—either someone’s devoted passion or a tourist thing; we were never sure.

I was going to investigate that soon for him, but either way, it was a miracle, the fact that he had his faculties and functions intact, and I kept trying to tell him that, at the beginning. But he’d get annoyed with it each time, and it was a bit selfish of me. So eventually, I stopped bringing it up and just let the kid draw—and he seemed to be doing just fine with that and that alone.

Some hopes, some dreams, a little guidance, and something to draw. That was all Lupin needed, back then.

At least, that was what I had thought. But perhaps I’d been wrong.

That wasn’t to say we didn’t have things to talk about, though. Sometimes we talked about fond memories in the syndicate, but it was always as if it were still there, just waiting for us to go back to. We were both dancing around the bad memories and sore spots, somehow implicitly understanding just where all the land mines for each other were.
It was an interesting time, that summer’s end. But for all those good moments, I knew that, to some extent, he was always putting on a brave face. I wasn’t sure what he was waiting for, from me, but he seemed to hold his breath, some days. It was always just under the surface, and sometimes, it’d come bubbling out:

Like every time I had to leave. He’d glance at me, anxiously holding my gaze for a bit—and I never knew what that look was asking. If I was going to come back? If I was going to come back with handcuffs, or more bad news, maybe? If I was going to be replaced by someone else, just part of some rotating wheel of a guard? I never could quite figure out what that anxiety of his was, and he never, ever verbalized it, so I just let it be, hoping he’d tell me when he was ready.

As a cop, you might think it strange that I wouldn’t ask the question that was sitting right in front of me at every meeting. But Lupin was not a criminal under investigation at this point. Whatever questions of mine lingered about the bombing, the official investigation had closed quickly and had nothing to do with either of us. To me, he was a victim of two different crime rings, and a witness, and I was taking care of him. With vics, there were a lot of questions you never asked, because you’d only make things worse.

After I’d told him his father had died and the syndicate had unraveled—I’d told him a couple times, actually, but in this case I mean the time that he was conscious enough to absorb and remember it—it had become a constant struggle to keep a desire to live lit within him. But that day as I delivered those flowers, I was thinking that maybe, finally...he had found something to live for again, in the space between my visits.

I thought that because that day, for the first time, his smile was bright and honest again. There was no fear of anything in it. It was like back in the syndicate’s bar, from time to time, when he still trusted me as a made man he could rely on for emotional, physical, and political support.

“Yes indeed, they are for the one and only you,” I smiled back, though only the flower stems got the benefit of that gesture.

As he took the bouquet from me, I went about collecting the old flowers from the vase on the windowsill and disposing of them. I say “old,” but they weren’t, really; I tried to make sure I ferried them away before they got wilted, and I certainly never let them get brown. I’d take the less fresh ones home and give them to the landlady next door, who made mulch out of them for her garden.

“Even the roses?” Lupin quipped lightly. He was holding the bunch cradled in one arm, the wrist of which was still wrapped with a patient bracelet and stuck with a plastic line of something or another. He occupied his other hand with petting down the petals of various flowers with the fingertip, a small, elfish smile on his face. The daisies in particular bobbed against his investigation, and his face altered just slightly, happily, every time they changed direction.

As the summer breeze blew through the open window before me, I decided once more that he really was delighted at the smallest things. It was just another reason that I thought he was far too soft to be in the criminal business—and wasted there.

But as for what he’d asked, the bouquet he held was a mixed set of Fall and Summer flowers of various hue and type, but there were indeed some roses in there, both white and red. “Well...uh. No...I just...had a few left over, and thought you might like them. They added to the colors nicely.”

“Roses?” he asked, sitting up a little straighter. “For someone else?” His voice was still harsh from
disuse, even after all this time, and it squeaked slightly in the playful undulation he tried to pull off. He rubbed at his misbehaving throat, but persevered to the end, even though he had to use a hand to hold his vocal chords in place to get the tone he wanted, apparently: “You cheating on me, man?”

“Hah. Hardly.” I scratched at my cheek, and, vase on the sill now empty, gazed out the window awkwardly.

“Who is she? A local?”

I glanced at him, then away. “Well....”

“Hmmmm~” The pup looked off, self-satisfied, and was still looking at the wall with a smirk when I came back for the flowers.

“What color is her hair?” he asked, when I bent down to pick them up. It was clear from his grip that he wasn’t about to give them up before I answered the question—and maybe some more queries, if he was feeling persistent.

“You are such trouble,” I muttered.

He bared his throat to me—and a bright, toothy grin. “Tell meee.”

“Red,” I gruffed. I tugged at the bouquet, wax paper crinkling.

“Oooh.” Lupin’s grip released and I quickly fled, though his words followed me: “I knew you couldn’t snag a blonde. But red? That’s interesting. Bottle?”

“...Natural.”

“Oh ho! You dog!”

“She’s a very nice woman, I’ll have you know, and I’m very nice back to her.” I tucked the flowers into the vase, a few at a time, and went about arranging them—if just to have something to hide my face in. “She’s very kind,” I added, into the flowers.

While I lamented my slip-up about Anna’s existence, the kid stayed quiet for a while, perhaps watching me work. How had that even happened? Maybe I was going soft...or was really starting to believe we were some kind of friends, he and I. Partners, even, in this crazy undercover work.

Partners...yeah. Just waiting for my partner to get out of the hospital. A foolish notion, but that’s what this felt like, didn’t it?...

When I got done with the vase I looked back, expecting to find him shooting that mousy, accusatory smile in my direction. But instead, I found him gazing up at the ceiling, daydreaming about something, his hand laid gently over his abdomen.

He got tired easily still, and though they fed him plenty, he never put on much of any weight. He looked vaguely emaciated whenever his hospital clothes crinkled the right way.

“Are they feeding you all right?” I asked gently, and then, my mobster voice coming out of its own accord: “Do I need to twist somebody’s arm?”

That got Lupin’s attention. He glanced over at me, just his eyes, and then shook his head slightly. “No.... It doesn’t taste all that great, but I eat it. I’d be pleased if you could not make me eat more
of it, though. Heh.”

“Hrm. For the price of this place, I’m surprised the food isn’t better.”

“It’s probably a side effect of the medications, but actually... who is footing the bill for this?” Lupin asked, eyebrows tipping down. “Since my dad...?”

He trailed off and didn’t finish; instead, he stared at the sheets, his lips pursed, and he swallowed hard. I wanted to come over and hug him, but the answer wouldn’t lend itself to that. I sighed, and made sure no one was nearby to listen before I spoke.

“You’re a witness. So you get what Interpol can pay for.”

This was a lie, but it was a lie he needed to hear.

“...Oh.” He blinked away the redness rising on his cheeks and said, after a breath, “Seems kind of swanky for that.”

He always was a sharp one. I smirked. “Hey. I’ve got some friends.”

He smiled at that, just a little, as he finally looked at me again. The light was back in his eyes—but it was precarious. I’d seen it before in vics: that vulnerable moment where their eyes, their souls, were asking you if they had a reason to live, as you saw the situation. It made all the difference, what you answered to that look.

A lot of people saw that and shied away from it. Being abruptly hit with pure, soulful connection that needed your reassurance scared a lot of people. But I’d seen it enough that I knew what to do.

“And now, you have one too,” I replied.

“Oh bullshit, stop,” he chuckled. But even when he put his chin in his hand and looked away, he was smiling.

“But,” I said, coming to sit on the edge of the bed near his blanket-lump feet, “there’s great places to eat out in town. I’ll bring you something, next time I’m in. See if we can’t fatten you up.”

He looked me up and down, then grinned. “Hee.”

“And maybe...you know, you get that physical therapy going, you can just come with me and eat there.”

Lupin’s eyes softened at that, and he looked at me with a strange intensity for a very long time. His mouth was still hidden behind his hand as he cupped his chin, but his eyes were alight.

I waited patiently for him to work his feelings out, and slowly, he glanced down at his legs. Then he stared over at the flowers—or the view, I wasn’t sure.

“I’d like that,” he finally whispered, briefly lifting his fingers from his mouth.

He flashed me another one of his real smiles, small as it was, before his hand covered it again.

I smiled fondly back.
“Then it’s settled,” I said several weeks later. “You hit your milestones, and we’ll be out walking on October first, just in time for the cool winds.” I wiggled his blanket-covered toes, and he shrieked and swatted at me. He was getting more mobile in bed lately, which was great to see. He even could walk a few steps, with help. “There are plenty of hot guys in this town, just your age.”

His eyes lit up, and I was sure at least some of it was real. “Ooh. Are they all in tight sweaters on yachts~?”

I shrugged awkwardly, rolling my eyes with a pained chuckle. “Mostly.”

“Well, I...” Anna wasn’t really something I could be talking about, since she was technically a witness too. And who knew if she even liked me that much, or was just using me to stay safe. Or maybe both—and once she didn’t need my protection, the attraction would just run its course and evaporate? “I’d rather not, just yet. Want to see how it goes first.”

Lupin smiled at that, and for a second, the view of him felt decidedly different. Instead of me protecting my witness, it felt like him protecting me.

I realized, on that sunny day in that white room as a tired, young, half-Japanese smiled approvingly at me, that this was what having an adult son must have been like.
But then Lupin’s fragile smile twisted into a heavy cough. I frowned at him, but he waved me off and reached for his local jug of water.

“It’s fine,” he announced, after a minute of slurping down liquid and coughing a bit more. “Just been getting a stray tickle here and there, yesterday and today. Think my body’s trying to come down with something, but I’m determined not to let it. Just the seasons changing, you know how it is. I’m normally in good enough shape to avoid it, but...”

I frowned even more at that, but he quickly put both hands into waving my concern down. Hands whose wrists were too thin. “Really, ’s just a cold, Pops.”

Pops.

Most of the time, the term was an annoyance: I wasn’t that old, and furthermore, it was always employed as a flippant way to brush me off. But this time, my face got a little red, and I hastily turned away, my hand hiding my cheek in a motion as though I were scratching at my five o’clock shadow.

“...What?” Lupin asked.

“N-nothing. Just...had a stray thought hit me strangely.”

“Do...I want to ask?”

“Probably not.”

Lupin sighed and shrugged. “Okay. Just don’t get any weird ideas about what all those flowers are going to buy you.”

“Lupin!”

“Ah-hah! But you’re not calling me ‘Pup’ anymore, are you?” Lupin was grinning at me. He was watching me with mischievous eyes from his spot at the head of the bed, nearly lost in pristine white pillows, but after a second, his smile fell into a sigh and he waved me off tiredly. “I’m just joking, you know,” he added around a yawn.

“You’re getting loopy,” I decided, not sure why he’d feel a need to mention that. “I should let you sleep,” I finished, standing up.

“Aww, no, don’t go yet...,” he mumbled, reaching out to me.

Actually reaching out. I couldn’t remember the last time someone had done that—someone other than Anna, anyway. But even that was a recent development.

And yet, now I had two of them in my life.

I thought about her, back in the safehouse, just trying to live a life—any life at all—and it made me think about how this was almost like having a family.

Almost.

Both of them had lost a great deal, including several people very important to them, to land on my doorstep. For a long time, I’d told myself it was just work; that I was a ferryman, getting them to wherever they were going, because their own ships had sunk in the night. But maybe...they could become my crew, you know?
It was an absurd thought, by policemen’s standards. I was trained at this, and they were not, and dragging them into my life—and my work, thereby—was irresponsible. Thinking I could keep them around, unhurt, was incorrect. But the longer I lived with both of them during my time in hiding, the more I liked having them be there.

Admittedly, being useless to crime investigation was driving me nuts. I wanted to right the wrongs I saw that I knew I could do something about, if I could just flash a badge. But I also recognized that these two people were my current caseload. It was just the two of them, but they were big jobs, ones which I wanted to see through to the end. And if that meant making a friend or two—making a family member or two—then maybe that was all I needed to be doing.

In the end, like most people, I just wanted to do something that meant something before I died, and here I was, doing that with an orphan and a widow, using the now-unoccupied slots in my own heart to do it.

I looked out at the sunset sky, and for a while, just watched the boats go by as the clouds changed color.

“Tell you what,” I said, turning back to Lupin after a bit, on the impetus of one of the last hot breezes of the night. “Why don’t you take a nap, and I’ll get some food from out in town and bring it back?”

Lupin perked up at that, though he was already laid down, snuggling into the pillow nest he’d made from deconstructing the familiar mountain of them. “Okay,” he mumbled. “But don’t be long....”

His tired spells tended to hit him fast, and if he was getting sick, that would only take him down faster. I smiled a little, and, hat affixed, came over by his bedside.

“Bring me some spaghetti and meatballs,” he mumbled, eyes closed, as my shadow fell over him.

“Sure.” I rubbed his hair, and he swatted at my hand. I’d never done it before, but that half-hearted gesture was his only complaint. I watched him for a few second more, curled up peacefully, and then walked out the door, clicking off the light as I did so.

A son....

That gesture...had felt warm, to give.

I nodded to the nurses at the station as I left, and hummed to myself as I skipped down the stairs to the street. The women always gave me beaming smiles nowadays, rather than sympathetic ones. It was a nice feeling.

We just might get out of this alive, I thought as I stepped onto the street. Alive and whole.

I whistled to myself as I went, hands comfortably in my pockets.

With a wife and a son....

As I headed toward the main avenue, the coastal breeze hit me, and I almost missed the buzzing of the phone in my pocket for the smile on my face.

It was a text, from Anna. I flipped it up, my heart fluttering with joy.

I’ve been compromised.
A few moments later, the phone started ringing. I immediately answered it, booking down the path to get somewhere private and quiet, my heart now in my throat.

“Someone tried to assassinate Miranda,” she hissed at a whisper. “Donatello’s going crazy. I tried to dodge ‘im but I can’t stay here. Where are you? Please—”

And then, all of a sudden, there was a short gasp, a fumbling of the microphone, and a familiar man’s voice coming over the line.

“—Yes, where have you been?”

I ground my teeth. It was Donatello’s smug tone, and I could just picture punching him. “If you hurt her—”

“Oh, you mistake me. It’s not her who’s going to get hurt, here.”

“Donny, please,” I heard over the line, distantly.

“Stop,” he replied to her, turning his head away from the phone a bit, with a coldness that was terrifying to hear even as a man. I could only imagine Anna’s reaction to that—her habit of shrinking away from him, her hands curled up together, as she tried to make herself disappear from the conscious thoughts of everyone around her.

“You....” I growled, when he came back to the phone.

“Meet me in Milan, six hours from now. The French café across from the intercity train station. I have some...things...to discuss with you, about the future of this little family you seem to have carved out of mine.”

I said nothing; only stared somewhere near the sole bench on this side of the complex, desperately trying to keep myself from threatening him like I wanted to. It would only make things worse; he had a habit of returning your threats to you, in extremely twisted ways, like some character in a folk tale.

“...If you don’t want your puppy to be put down, that is,” he said, when I said nothing.

“You,” I swore. I couldn’t take it any more; I burst: “That boy has done nothing but love you, and you have done nothing but wreck him. Is this how you treat the people you love?”

“No.... This is how I treat the people who hurt me.”

And then he hung up.

It took me several frantic minutes of phone calls and rising panic, but eventually I made it back to Lupin’s room, half shell-shocked and half frantic. To this day, I barely remember getting back there, or what happened after. I only remembered a very short moment with him, for all that happened in the next few days:

I’d hung on the door with very few words in my mouth except a promise to come back, and all the while he watched me uneasily. It was something similar to the concerned look he gave me every time I left, but this time, he knew there was something wrong. Very wrong.
But he didn’t ask. He still didn’t ask.

And this time, I didn’t think to explain it. I didn’t have the time. He knew I was a cop; I figured he could tell simply from the look in my eyes that I was off to help someone who urgently needed it.

Which she did.

He needed me too, I knew. And this was the way to help him. But in this moment...she needed me more. Much more. It was all I could think about. I was trying to communicate that with my face, because the words just wouldn’t come. There was no way to say it in the amount of time I had.

We watched each other for several seconds, and Lupin’s facial expression was slowly changing from one of alert concern to one of deep-seated resignation.

In the end, he didn’t say anything other than a tired, “Do what you gotta do, man.”

He’d smiled a little bit sadly and then closed his eyes, leaning back on the pillows with a soft sigh.

I promised him I’d only be gone a few days, and in truth, that was what I’d hoped for—a simple extraction. But in reality, it proved to be nearly six months before I managed to get back.

Every day of those six months, if I had the mental space, I thought about what I would say to him once I returned. The pleasantries, the catching up, the supportive concern. The stories I’d been through, my reasoning, my ever-deepening apologies. All the while hoping that cough hadn’t gone somewhere bad.

And even some days when I didn’t have that breathing room, I thought about him, because I just wanted to leave him a prayer to work with, if Anna and I were going to end up in an unmarked mafia grave.

But by the time I finally made it back, Lupin was gone.

To be honest, I’d thought he’d died. I walked into the room, and there was nobody there. Just an empty space in a sunny room. It looked totally unlived-in; everything of his had been cleared out, so it was obvious he wasn’t just out exercising and coming back.

“Where is he?” I asked one of the nurses, Beatrice, breathless and mustering my hope. It hadn’t been an easy half a year. I’d nearly gotten killed several times, some very nasty twists with Donatello’s family had occurred, and I’d lost Anna to the winds of fate with the last and boldest one.

Honestly, I’d rushed here afterward, because the entire time I’d been gone, Lupin had been a prime target for getting picked off, little better than a sitting duck—and Donatello had said as much of Lupin’s fate, just days ago. But I’d promised myself, for whatever reason, that it was just a lie to rattle me up, to distract me in a heated moment. But as I stood there, staring at the empty bed in the white room...I couldn’t help but feel the world sinking, thinking he’d been telling the truth.

“Did he get transferred to another room?”

The look in my eyes had to have been a little wild. But she was just as shocked to see me.

“Oh...Mr. Corvali. We thought something had happened to you....” She blinked at me, and then tilted her head. “You didn’t hear?”
I was just about to shake her, but the pit dropping out of the bottom of my stomach and my limbs going numb stopped me. “Hear...what...?”

“He left.”

“He left,” I repeated, deadpan. “As in...died?”

Her whole face opened up at that, eyes and mouth and even her nose increasing in diameter. “Oh! No, no! He got really sick, but...a friend started to visit him, and he eventually got better and was released, just a few days ago. We thought you knew, since you’d stopped coming?”

Just a few...days. Ago...

The rest of that pit opened up into a maw, and I almost lost my footing; I put a hand against the doorway for balance.

“Who was it?” I couldn’t imagine who it would be, except someone unsavory. “A friend, you say?” He didn’t have any friends. At least, not that I knew of, and certainly not alive.

Unless it’d been Donatello himself, taking him away only to throw him into some grave I’d never find—

“Yeah. A man who was always dressed in black. Kind of like...an undertaker in a Spaghetti western, minus the funny tie.”

I blinked at that, completely nonplussed. I didn’t know any associates of Donatello’s who fit that bill, or Arsene’s, and that certainly wasn’t the man himself; he never wore black if he could get away with it. “What was his name?” I pressed.

“I dunno,” she said, waving her hand. “He never talked much, at least not to us, and it was always in English. Jack? Jon? Jacques? We just called him Jaguar, because his name was some foreign thing that started with a J and he always wore black suits.”

Always wore black suits.... That sounded like some kind of mafia guy. But who would it be? And more importantly, I doubted Lupin had left with him willingly.

“Can you tell me anything else about him?” I asked, thoughts racing.

“Well...he had dark hair, down to about here”—she made a motion with her hand at her shoulders—and was quite tall. Taller than you or me. Not skinny, not thick either, though. Had a short beard, and bangs. Somewhere in his thirties. Not sure what color his eyes were, cuz he always wore an upscale hat. Some American kind. That was black too. No decoration on it or anything. Just...black.”

What...a weird person. She clearly seemed to think that, too. “And they knew each other?” I pressed.

“Oh, sure. He even brought him flowers.” I frowned at her heavily, and she quickly added, “But I mean, you brought him flowers, so I’m sure it’s n-nothing...”

Flowers...? So some...old flame, maybe? I narrowed my eyes at her. Or just someone sent to make it look that way?

“How long did he visit? And when?” My arms came up a little bit—I might actually grab her, after one of these thoughts.
“Ah...he...?” Beatrice looked at my hands, then frowned and sternly said, “He came every day, more than you did! Through all of January. He started coming just after New Year’s, and then didn’t leave till your son did. Hasn’t been back since, though....”

I actually put my hands in my hair at that, my eyes sweeping back and forth as I thought. Who the hell was this? Someone coercing him? Helping him? In any event, it couldn’t have been someone on the daylight side of things, if he dressed like that and wasn’t personable in the slightest. “Did he...did he leave a message for me? Or say anything at all?” I managed finally, desperate.

“Well...no, actually.” She gave me a funny look, then, that soon became transparently judgmental. “He was holding out hope until the release party that you would come back, I think. But when...you didn’t show, he just gave up, I think. He said, ‘Sometimes you just have to give up on a lost cause, right?’ And went home with his friend.”

He’s still quoting that back at me? Shit. Of all the things to take to heart—

That would become the sentence that I regretted most in life, after “I do attest to this divorce.”

I didn’t say anything. Thoughts of dread and loss just kept swirling through my head, louder and louder with each go-round. The last resentful words of my daughter accusing me of disloyalty, dishonor, and pain hit me like a hammer, harder each time. Then my wife. Then Satoru’s, and Katsura’s. And finally, Lupin’s own, but all the more painful because of how disheartened they were.

“Mr. Corvali.... Where did you go? I have never seen a long-term care patient less happy to leave a hospital in my entire career.”

“I... I was just trying to fix something. But it...it didn’t work....”

At my distress, the middle-aged nurse touched my arm and gently offered, “Don’t you have a way to get in contact with him?”

“I don’t,” I muttered, as I sank into a nearby chair. Her hand was still on my forearm, but I barely registered it.

“Does he...have a way to get in touch with you?”

I hadn’t given him my current number, which I’d had to burn anyway. He barely even knew my actual name. But...he knew who I worked for, in real life, and maybe remembered my real name. Maybe...he could find me, if he really wanted to? The thought filled me with hope for a second—until I remembered the description of the man she’d talked about. If he’d left with an old mafia associate, he would never, ever contact me on his own, ever again.

Unless...unless he was in trouble and needed me? Then he’d sneak a way to...?

Assuming he was even still alive, and hadn’t died the moment he’d shut the car door.

Shit. I had to fish my contacts, find out who this person was—

“That man...,” Beatrice began softly over my head, “wasn’t the one who got him into trouble in the first place, was he? On the road?”

I looked up at her, momentarily stupefied. That’s right. The cover story. I laughed at it a little, hysterically.
“No, no...not him.”

I hid my face in my hands, wanting to sob. My relationship with Anna had fallen apart in the resolution of the sister syndicates, and I’d sacrificed a hell of a lot of other things to get back here in one piece and so soon after.

Suddenly, after months of tension, I cracked.

I fell apart, right in that hallway chair, and cried with Beatrice’s hand on my shoulder.

I’d lost my father, my mother, my brothers.

I’d lost Nami and Toshiko.

I’d even lost Japan.

And now I’d lost Anna and this boy into the wind too, just like I’d lost the rest.

I’d lost them all, and I had no one to blame but myself.
Labyrinth (Monaco II)

Chapter Summary

...This chapter, on the other hand, I started writing two months ago. 8D;

White. A lot of white, that stung my eyes. And then figures, blurry and whirling around me, that focused into a man standing beside me, a clipboard in his hands.

“Hello, my name is Dr. Fabien. You’ve been in an accident.”

That was how my Monaco experience had begun, minus some blurry fits and starts: fragments of consciousness woven together like a freakish quilt and now existing only in that place that held half-remembered dreams.

Obligatory inquiries came next, like Can you tell me your name, and Do you know where you are?, but they’d just confused everyone in the room.

Because I’d gotten all those questions wrong, and they had Not Liked That.

The people in white coats shined lights in my eyes, and prodded me here and there. Asked me questions I had no way of knowing the answer to, and even less ability to respond to. After a while of that, I have no recollection of what I said to them except a string of dark expletives.

I also remembered the feeding tube coming out, and the breathing tube, and the unfortunate series of events that’d caused. I vividly recalled that string of bodily eruptions quite well.

And then the fact that, all of a sudden, the man who would become “Zenigata” to me had been there in my life, too.

I woke up one day to see him standing in the room.

Whether or not it was a dream, the fear that hit me was very real.

Because, I wasn’t sure what he was doing there. I had been with my dad, on a train, and then this: A hospital, in a place I didn’t know, filled with people I didn’t recognize. And then, all of a sudden, him: a man who’d been previously ousted from the organization by me. Clearly something had happened, but the people in the hospital kept telling me I’d been in a car that’d crashed on a mountain road, and that my name wasn’t my name anymore.

I was disoriented, with no idea who I was. Maybe the me I’d known was all just a dream? My brain was too fuzzy with pain and drugs to tell.

I also had no idea which country I was in. Some of the doctors spoke French. Some of them spoke Italian. Many spoke English and German out in the hallway. I could have been anywhere in Western Europe minus Greece and Spain.

And around me, from one bit of consciousness to the next, all I could see was white.
White women in white uniforms, carrying white implements. A room with white walls filled with white doctors, and my bed with its constantly white sheets.

So when that man appeared, wearing a plain brown suit and a grief-stricken look on his face, the color came back into my life, so to speak—and I remembered a bunch of things all at once, crystal clear:

I remembered that I had been on a train, trying to see my father.

That I was now in a hospital, and no one had mentioned him, so he’d most likely violently disowned me again.

That this man before me was an undercover cop, a once-friend whom I’d refused to publicly out so long as he would leave of his own accord.

A once-friend who’d saved my life multiple times, but who I hadn’t seen since New Year’s, when he’d left me to fend for myself in a fire I had no hope of getting out of, to go after his mark instead.

So what was he here for now, as he stood by my bed looking shocked? To finish the job? And what would that be—to arrest me, or smother me? The former would get him in good with his daylight bosses, and the latter would get him back into any organization’s good graces. I’d never told anyone what his status was, true to my word, so it was entirely possible he was here to clean me up to keep his cover, possibly even under orders to do so. Plus, we’d done a lot of quasi-legal things together, so that only heightened his reasons for offing me, if it was a rogue move.

But I was too much an invalid to respond, let alone get away from him, so as he stood in that white space looking alarmed, I realized he was going to do what he’d come here to do, whatever it was. So I’d closed my eyes and waited for it.

Once he stepped toward me, it soon became apparent...

...that all he wanted to do was talk?

“H-hey,” he offered at a whisper, coming to sit down next to my bed once all the personnel had left. He took off his hat and held it in his hand, against his chest. “You’re awake?”

I stared at him, eyes squinting and watering and wandering. Everything was too bright, all the time, and what’s more, I couldn’t get my body to react the way I wanted, no matter what I did.

“It’s me, Ark. D’you remember me?”

I glared at him, mouth tightening. Growled a little bit, though it was pathetically weak. Weaker than a newborn puppy’s. Still, it was something.

“I...guess I deserve that. Hey, I’m sorry about everything. But...it’s going to be okay now, all right? You’re safe. You’re alive.”

He seemed rather awed by the notion. I eyed him with a slightly different expression of annoyance, and then huffed through my nose. He reached out and gripped my hand.

“Can you...speak?”

I squeezed my eyes shut in irritation, then hissed out a noise with some effort. Tried to form a
letter. “T’chi...”

The man who would soon become “Zenigata” to me full-time leaned forward with rapt attention, rearranging his grip so that his thumb was hooked around mine, his fingers gripping the pad of my hand. My fingers twitched over the back of his hand, unable to close.

“Tchuuu...tchuube.”

The act made me ridiculously tired, and I already felt flushed and out of breath. I looked at him balefully and tilted my head just slightly, hoping he’d get it. My hand, in his, turned just a little, but I never got it to point properly. It felt like my tendons weren’t working right, couldn’t lift even the weight of my hand. What I was trying to say, at any rate, was that the tube that had been down my throat for however long had wrecked said throat, if not this mysterious accident as well.

So I gave up and gazed at Zenigata, hoping for an explanation.

And it was funny... I now knew his real name, but it still didn’t fit the body before me. In my mind, there was Ark, the confident grouse I knew and was friends with, and then Zenigata, this stalwart and earnest cop I didn’t like and didn’t trust because he constantly left me behind for More Important Causes.

But maybe, as I looked into his openly concerned face, I’d trusted the wrong one all along.

And that was the problem in my life, wasn’t it? Trusting the people I wanted to be my allies, not the people who actually were.

“My name...” I whispered at him, hoarsely. It hurt—my head, my lungs, my voice, my throat—and was barely a word. He frowned at me.

“My name?” he inquired, looking apprehensive.

“Mmm-i’ine.” I replied. “Deitch’rictk...?”

Dietrich Corvali was what they’d told me my name was, and until I copped to it, they were determined to pronounce me with all sorts of aphasia. Which implied they were also going to hit me hard with drugs to cope with it as soon as they figured out my baseline, so it was going to be good to figure out this mystery while I still had the brain cells to do it.

“Oh. That.” He looked behind him, then turned my hand palm-down and settled his over it as he leaned in. “I guess I have a few things to tell you, huh?”

I closed my eyes with a tired sigh. He kept fidgeting with my hand as he spoke, but really, I found myself too tired to care. I could barely feel it, anyway.

But what I could feel was the warmth. Gentle, hopeful, a little anxious. And from someone I knew—that was what mattered now. Even if he was here to kill me when it was convenient, at least I could stare into his eyes while he did it and make him feel guilty. Someone still alive in this world would know I had ever once lived, and maybe not hate me for it.

But what he related to my ears was a much different affair than all that:

*Your name’s Arsene Lupin the Third...er, well, at least as you tell it. You’re the son of a French crime boss, but he disowned you...ah, violently...just before Christmas. You were on a train to see him and patch things up, I assume, but there was an accident. The train derailed and you’ve been in a coma for about four months.*
I sucked in a sharp breath, even though it was agonizing to do so. Four months?

But Zenigata continued without stopping, even as I stared at him with eyes as wide as I could hold them.

_I told them a cover story so that Donatello and them don’t find us. The train wreck was all over the news, so I couldn’t link you to that and still keep you safe. Your name for now is Dietrich Corvali and I’m your father, Marcutio Corvali. Sorry about that, but it was the only way they’d let me see you after I transferred you in. The story is that you’re a spoiled rich kid that got in an accident racing around the Alps in a sports car. Sounds like you, right?_

He chuckled anxiously; I _erred_ in annoyance like a tiny puppy once more. He quickly went on, worrying my hand between both of his. I wished I could move it; my eyes were watering, but I didn’t have the strength to lift my hands. Assuming my arms still worked that well, which no one could tell yet, least of all me.

_The doctors don’t know what longterm effects you’ll have, Zenigata went on, but you broke a lot of bones and tore and severely bruised a bunch of things. There’re also burns. The bones are healed properly and you’ve had several surgeries, so you’re mostly put back together now. The most painful parts are done, isn’t that good?_

_Oh, and!_ he added, suddenly much brighter, _The burns have been grafted and are mostly on your side, so you look just fine, your face is fine, and you have all your fingers and toes, so you don’t have to worry about that! The grafts are healing, but if they hurt, tell me and I’ll have them up your morphine...._

When I couldn’t respond other than to widen my eyes in horror, he looked down at my hand and squeezed it tighter. Silence reigned for several long minutes, and when he spoke again, his voice was softer, slower, and trailing a sigh.

_You’re going to have a lot of therapy in front of you, but so far it looks like everything is there, and working. You’ve made it through the hard part...._

I frowned at him, lips tightened into a thin line to refute that. He didn’t look at me though, instead starting to speak more heatedly, exchanging my body parts for worrying the brim of his hat as he spoke.

_And you know? I was here while you were unconscious, talking to you, because they told me you could hear me. I tried to give you good things to dream about. Did you dream about happy things while you were under?...._

He’d been here the whole time and hadn’t killed me? Or maybe that was just a lie to get me to trust him?... But even if all of that were true, what the hell was he even saying?

However, he failed to notice my suspicions; he was mostly talking to himself at this point, staring at my arm and the sheets in turn as he bowed ever further over my bed, his voice getting steadily more choked up.

_Anyway... You don’t have to worry from here on out, because I’ll be here for you, watching your back until you’re well enough to get on your feet again. I won’t leave you this time, I won’t._

And then, for some reason, his voice, which had been getting ever faster and higher, broke. He let his hat fall onto his knees and he swept up my hand between both of his. He clutched it tightly up against his bowed forehead—and in that posture, he started to weep.
Everything’s going to be okay from now on, because you’re here. We’re both here....

I didn’t really believe him; after all, I couldn’t even speak. But still, I sighed through my nose, clumsily wiggled my hand out of his, and then patted his knuckles as best I could.

It’s going to be okay.

“You sustained deep bruising to your kidneys, liver, stomach, and intestines. You suffered extensive fracture damage to the left lower arm such that it had to be stabilized with pins in your elbow and a rod supporting the ulna; a concussion; flash shock to the eyes; minor burns to your underarms and left side; several hairline fractures to the upper back ribs; and severe bruising to the spinal chord in several places along your back that swelled dramatically, both in the thoracic and lumbar, so we’re not sure how well the fine motor function in your arms and legs will work....”

It was weeks after I’d returned to consciousness, but it was only now that it was consistent that a doctor droned on and on with the explanation. Surprise after surprise was hitting me with blows that felt pitched directly to my sense of mortality.

“And so, the prognosis is....”

You may make a full recovery, but by full, we mean limited. Your old injuries will hurt until you die, so that you can never forget this incident. You may walk again, but it’ll take months, perhaps years, and don’t hope for running or prolonged use. You may have the fine motor function you once did, but that’ll take even more years, and please don’t expect it, you’ll just frustrate yourself into self-harm.

You may find that it’s hard to concentrate, or communicate, or remember things the way you’re used to. You may not be able to recall certain things, or feel certain things, or think certain things. On the other hand, you may end up with overfunctioning of some areas. Let us know if you sense any of these symptoms—in other words, prepare to be frustrated and a loose emotional canon when trying to deal with said frustrations cuz your different brain areas may have been forced to reset to when you were a toddler.

Furthermore, you may not be able to think or perform mental functions with the same vivacity that you used to; if some skills are gone from you, that may just be a loss you have to train your mind to work around. You weren’t brought to a hospital for several days, so there was no way to alleviate any damage from the concussion you suffered. In the end, the effects may be so mild as to be unrecognizable, or they may be severe. We’ll just have to wait and see.

I stared at my malfunctioning fingers, growing ever more quiet and jittery as the man spoke. He didn’t even notice over his clipboard. Or maybe he did, and he just didn’t give a damn, because giving any ground just lead to patients trying to argue with him to prop up their mental states. You could tell he had this down.

“Now, the treatment is going to entail....”

Daily exercises and routines, both mental and physical, first in the bed and then with increasing mobility as it comes. It will hurt. It will not be fun. But it will be the only way you will get better and it will be expected several times a day, every day, or your privileges will be revoked. After all, this is not a charity, and you will be expected to get out of here on your own power in a timely
It was as I was staring at him, unsure whether to be violently offended or burst into tears, that Zenigata appeared in the doorway behind him.

“Ark!” I called, delighted to be free of this nightmare parade; only to, with a cough, gaze at the doctor and smile sheepishly at Zenigata. “‘Dad’...?”

The cop shook his head from behind the doc, only to perk up at attention when the man momentarily gazed back at him. The surgeon drone quickly finished up however, and soon I was free of the monster in white.

“Hey,” Zenigata said, sitting down by my side as always and setting a canvas bag full of items at his feet. “How ya feeling today?”

“Awake,” I said, taking a deep breath and letting it out in a wave—an act that, I was aware a bit too late, made me much less likely to be said awake in a few minutes. “Looks like I’m going to start rehab soon.”

I motioned out the door at the doc’s back, which was something I could do now, thanks to an older nurse who had been going through some manipulation partner-exercises with me for the my hands so that I could eat better on my own. Beatrice, I think her name was. The shake in my hands, remarkably, appeared to be a problem of atrophy, not permanent damage, she said, so I was doing everything I could to strengthen them—and which I think had lead to this missive from the surgeon just now.

Zenigata nodded. “It won’t be easy, but you can do it.”

I returned the gesture, smiling a bit weakly and swallowing hard. It went down square, and I rubbed at my throat—much more aware of the fact that my arm apparently had lots of plastic and metal in it, now. It was a weird feeling, that all that had been done without my consent, or knowing what the longterm effects were going to be. I wasn’t sure if it made me anxious or angry or both, but at least it explained the scars.

Perhaps seeing the pensive frown on my face, Zenigata jumped into the silence: “Hey, I brought you something...!”

He always tried so hard to be friendly and positive, in these visits; it was something very strange to see from him. He’d always been eminently practical, a voice of caution and even gruff derision, but this...this was like the shining sun over a reclining landscape, while his previous self was a stormy sea, always waiting to roil if the right ship attempted to cross it.

So was this the real him? If so, it wasn’t so bad. Different; certainly unusual, in my life—but kind of nice, in a civilian sort of way. And if this was what a real cop, an honest cop, could be like...maybe they weren’t all so bad, either.

Though I still didn’t know why he was here, so...that conclusion remained open.

But before me, for now, the man apparently named Zenigata smiled without an ounce of obfuscation and hefted the bag he’d brought. The blue canvas tote was full of books and magazines, as well as a drawing pad.

It was like the sun had come out, seeing that. And it must have shown on my face, because at my happy gasp, he grinned and fished out a pack of artist’s pencils. It was nothing special, just 6H to 6B, but more than you’d find at a grocery store. He set it in my lap, a little pink ribbon tied around
“Thought you might benefit from these.”

“Thank you,” I whispered reverentially, carefully maneuvering my fingers closed around them. Everything was weak from disuse, and my left arm was a little extra bad, probably because of the way the muscles and tendons had healed around the insertions. But everything seemed to work. It was just...hard, and slow, and sometimes painful. But this. This would tell me if I had the steadiness to pick locks or paint or love someone properly ever again.

And with this, no matter the answer, I wouldn’t have to wait for therapy to regain my abilities; I could just start on my own...all twenty minutes that I was awake at a time, anyway.

It would be a while, I thought as I gazed at those pencils, but I’d get out of here. I’d find Dad, get my answers of out him, and I’d live the rest of my life in peace, whatever that was like, whatever that meant.

It was just a faraway dream at this point, nothing I’d ever really had the luxury to believe in before, but it was my dream, nonetheless. I’d be free of them all—of the hurt and the pain and the guilt and everything else—and build my own life. Find out who I was, underneath all the things that’d happened to me, and finally let that seed grow. And that was something my grandfather would definitely have approved of, were he still here.

But in the mean time, I was barely keeping food down, felt good only when on a level of morphine that just about rendered me drunk, and was constantly fighting with the doctors. However, when Ark was here—when I even so much as expected a visit—I could always keep my eye on that spectacular prize of freedom and stability.

Things were simply better, when he was here. More steady. And he’d stayed with me the entire time, huh...?

“Hey, can I ask you...”

I looked at his face, but the attentive smile stopped me in my tracks.

...Why?

Why are you doing this? Why are you here?

Who are you, really, and what are you planning to do with me?

“...what happened?” I finished lamely.

Zenigata’s head tilted a little, and he raised an eyebrow. “Mm?”

“The...wreck,” I muttered. My voice was still hoarse and gross; it was something I was going to have to work on, too, and why one of the books in there was a collection of plays, one Grandpop had trained me on. “He said I...wasn’t taken to a hospital for a few days?”

“Oh...that.” Zenigata rubbed at his ear self-consciously. “I...found you. At the wreck site.”

I nodded at him, but he just looked at me with an unclear unease.

...Wait. That was odd, wasn’t it? Why would he be at the wreck site? He was just an Interpol investigator (I guess?), not a local nor a disaster specialist.
My hands closed around the pencils, that dark cloud ever at the edge of our time together creeping over the horizon toward me.

“It...took a few days,” he admitted at last.

“...What did?” I rasped, a chill scraping down my back.

“Finding you.”

I shook my head, even as those storm clouds closed in around me. “I don’t...understand?”

They kept telling me not to expect to be able to think straight, and while that did happen to me from time to time, I had a feeling it was the pain killers and the exhaustion more than anything else. Still, this conversation was annoying me, and I grumbled a little at him. It was one of the shortcuts we had, since I couldn’t consistently speak well.

“I...don’t know what happened on that train,” he hedged, “I and was hoping you could tell me. But...as for afterward, I was called there because...I was told you and Arsène were on it.”

I nodded, getting a funny little sinking feeling. Zenigata wasn’t looking at me, and for some reason, it just then hit me that my dad and I had to have been both on that train. We had been in the same car, after all. Until this point, I’d sort of thought that something had happened to me individually, like he’d thrown me off of the train and I’d tumbled and lost my memory or something, and he was just off somewhere else, totally fine, because that was the sort of thing he’d do.

But that didn’t make any sense, did it?

I’d just wanted to believe that, hadn’t I? To live in the most convenient version of the story, like I always did. And I’d been messed up enough that I hadn’t really had the wherewithall to inspect the narrative I’d created in the meantime...

“I was supposed to be in hiding,” Zenigata went on softly, “but I was the only one they had who could identify you two and others in the org that were supposedly on the train too. So...I went out there under the cover of night. It was nearly a day since the crash by the time I got there; they were cleaning it up still, weren’t anywhere near done, though they’d thought they’d gotten all the live bodies by then. But...”

The air had suddenly gotten very thick. I waited, not a thought in my head, but a million or so swirling in my heart, just under the surface.

“...But they hadn’t found you. I just had this feeling, so I kept looking. Helped out with the crews trying to chart the last of the wreckage. They were still finding a few deceased in the nearby trees, and under heavy wreckage. And then...there you were.”

He looked at me a little balefully, checking to see if I could handle it. My face was frozen into a deep stare of horror, but apparently that wasn’t enough to make him stop. He looked back at his knees and continued, “So. I found you, with the help of some search dogs. Down a ravine under a pile of wreckage, at the end of a trail of bodies that they’d initially missed in the dark. I’d thought I’d just found an arm, but...”

He pointed at my left arm. I lifted it slightly, gazing at the place the pins were supposed to be, and the little dent that had been press-burned into the skin.

“...the rest of you was attached.”
When I looked back at him, he was trying to smile, though he looked like he was about to start crying. When my response was a look of alarm, he looked down, gripping the brim of his hat once more.

“I thought you were dead,” he admitted softly. “But you weren’t.”

That lingered for a while, and while I felt he was searching for something, I wasn’t sure what to say. I didn’t think there was anything to say. After a bit, he haltingly went on, “You were wrapped in metal. A...door, I think they said it was. The explosive force wrapped you up in it, they suspected...which means they think you were very close to the explosion.”

His eyes flicked up to me then, knowingly. I just stared back.

The memories of the wreck weren’t strong just yet, but with each day, little bits were revealing themselves. Hazy. Disjointed. But probably real. So the empty stare wasn’t totally untruthful.

In fact, it was as he was looking at me that one came back to me, like a distant door opening just a crack, and finally being able to see a bright sliver of what lay beyond.

It was a memory of me yelling, and throwing something. And then a light.

“Oh,” I mumbled numbly.

My dad was...dead, wasn’t he?

I looked through my thoughts momentarily, eyes tracing around in the air, and then soon settled back upon staring at Zenigata blankly.

He noticed this and waited, but when nothing came out of me for several long moments, he asked, “What is it?”

_I have nothing to live for, now..._

“Nothing,” I whispered, blinking a few times. I looked down at my hands...and the pencils there, tied up in their ribbon. “I just remembered something, is all.”

Ten years of work and I’d just lost the only person with all the answers.

If he was gone then I would never... Never...

But he—Ark—he was still here. The _cop_, for some goddamned reason, was _still here_.

As was the little boy who could do nothing but draw.

The breath that came next shook my body, which suddenly seemed very frail. When I blinked again, tears started welling up in my eyes.

I sniffled and pushed them away with a weak and clumsy hand, and quickly forced the emotions down. I would not cry over him. Over this situation, this setup.

... _Over being reduced to that helpless little boy with a cop that owned him, yet again._

“What did you remember?” Zenigata asked in response, gently—but oh so eagerly—prodding.

I put my face behind my hands and tried to breathe.
But my dad was dead, and I was stuck with a man who might very well rather I be, soon enough.

“The bomb.”

Zenigata was stunned speechless for a second. Doubly so, when I curled my hands against my chest and looked at him with red eyes.

“My Dad’s...dead, isn’t he?” I whispered, unable to hold it in.

Zenigata’s eyes flashed, but he didn’t say anything.

“Isn’t he?” I demanded, sharper. Panicked.

The man took a breath, but still didn’t speak.

“Tell me!”

I was frantic, for the first time in this whole escapade of weeks. And now that it had started, I wasn’t sure I had the power to stop it.

“Yes,” Zenigata said suddenly, swallowing hard. “He is.”

He stared me directly in the eye, then looked down, fingering his hat. “There were only very small parts of him left.”

A shiver jolted through me, and then my eyes snapped shut of their own accord, imagining it. I forced them back open, but it took far more effort than it should have. I stared at him, not sure what to do. I could already feel the trauma writing itself into my soul.

“I’m sorry,” he finished.

Everything inside me was all jumbled up. Parts of me were screaming. Other parts were horrified. Some were just numb, not reacting even though I knew they should have been. Those were the parts on top, so all the screaming was muffled underneath them, words angry and scared and incomprehensible.

And I didn’t want him to be around when once they finally revealed themselves.

But I couldn’t move. Couldn’t speak. Couldn’t breathe. And all the while he waited, looking penitent. That look was the worst part—what the hell did he have to feel sorry for?

Eventually, I drew a breath I didn’t realize I’d been holding and said, “I think...I think you should. Go. For a. While....”

I was shaking. But I was also locking up. I’d had to force the words out through my teeth.

“Lupin, it’ll be all right,” he jumped to interject. “I promise. I won’t—”

“GO!” I shouted at the top of my lungs, which just lead me to hunch over in pain.

He left, in the end, when the staff ushered him out so that they could get at me.

Even after they jabbed needles into my skin, I still sat there and cried for a very, very long time.

And it wasn’t because my father had died.
It was because I was never going to know what had happened to my mother.

The fact of the matter was, the single-minded determination to discover the truth of what had happened to her had been keeping me alive since she’d disappeared eleven years earlier. Without it, my sand castle of existence was swallowed up by the sea, and I turned back into the little boy abandoned by his father, who just stared up at the snow, waiting to die.

“I’m sorry about that,” Zenigata had said about a week later, when he finally came back. I’d thought I’d scared him off, but that was not to be, it seemed.

And to be honest, the nurses were professional, but that was it. Most of the patients on the floor were in comas. I was kind of their oddball, unable to be transferred to another unit because the other rooms were full, and so our interactions were sparing. It was nice to see someone who would sit and tell me about the news, and pretend like they were glad I existed.

“I was going to tell you,” he continued, “I just wanted to wait until you were a little sturdier.”

Sitting in my bed with my hands in my lap, limply cupped around the sketchbook he’d brought me, I forced a smile and shrugged weakly. “It’s all right.”

“It...it is?” he asked.

“Yes.” I yawned, already feeling another nap coming on. “He didn’t love me, hated that I existed, blamed me for all the problems to ever befall his life....so good riddance, right?”

I flashed him a smile I didn’t really feel and soon was sighing at my crossed feet. The ones I’d manually manipulated into that position with my weak hands. They could move, but there wasn’t enough strength in them yet to stand up, among other things. It was like my legs had forgotten how to work.

“Hey, don’t say that,” Zenigata chided gently.

“It’s true though, isn’t it?”

That shut him up. “Well...if you want to talk about it, I’m here.”

“Oh-huh.” I shrugged, noncommittal.

There was an awkward pause in the conversation, and then Zenigata said, as I stared at my lap and the sketch pad in it, “Anything I can do?”

I gazed at the little book, which so far had only shaky sketches of memories. I lifted it up with a shaking hand and my first honest smile since I’d gotten the news. “Sit for me?”

That was how it’d gone after that, in that Mediterranean summer: I pretended I was happy, and he pretended that was all he needed.
It was a little like playing house in that white hospital room, and I was one of the dolls being moved around.

And that was okay, at the time. Because that was better than what I’d had before. After all, this was a man who treated his dolls like he wanted them to last.

Whenever he wasn’t there, though, the dark thoughts settled in: The heaviness, the oppressive weight of a future whose only certainty was hardships I wasn’t sure I could bear and had less hope of ever getting out from under.

As I stared at that Monaco shoreline, with all its sparkling water and happy people living in perfectly able-bodied luxury, I knew there was no life out there for me. I did not inhabit that world of happy families, easy living, and lifelong friends that’d do anything for you, and I was pretty sure I never could, given all my flaws. No, there was nothing waiting for me out there but the cold reality of my own failures, all the regrets of my past strewn around in the form the dead. There was no one out there who would ever care about me, ever again.

Even this man who was visiting me and said he wouldn’t leave...

Once I reached a certain arbitrary point of self-sustainment, he’d either disappear or become a monster, just like everyone else I’d ever looked up to in my life ever had.

That summer in Monaco, I knew there was only a life to live in the world within my drawings, so that was what I did: I drew. Day in, day out, hoping that somehow, something would change by the time my body repaired itself; some solution would appear through the strokes of my pencil.

And so as I drew, I wondered about his visits.

Was he working for a syndicate, ready to cut my throat the night they asked for it, provided he got what they needed out of me? And if so, what was that information to be? I had to make sure I didn’t accidentally give it away.

And yet, his kindness and guilt along the way seemed genuine. At least, I wanted to believe it was.

Though that was always what got me into trouble, wasn’t it?: hoping, then believing that hope. Specifically, that any dream could come true if I tried hard enough to mean something to someone else.

But right then, a pretty lie was much more nourishing to me than a hard truth.

So I let him stay. It even made me...happy, off and on, for a reason I couldn’t quite place.

But I trusted that happiness, after a while. If only because I so desperately needed to. Needed to believe what lovely things it meant about me, if it were real.

So every day or thereabouts we chatted and traded stories, and talked about hopes and dreams—including the mysterious natural redhead he’d found for himself. He sat for my drawings, and we encouraged each other. It was almost like having a real father—a loving father, who cared if I lived or died—and for a while, that was enough to prop me up. The image of him and this woman and me, all together someday in a year or two, going on walks or sailing around the harbor—it was a beautiful postcard I could hold close to my heart whenever something got me down.

But then, just as I thought fate had smiled upon me and made my pretty lies into my beautiful reality, it happened:
He disappeared out of my life, just as quickly as he’d come.

That Day, we’d been chatting as we always did: laughing and telling stories and going back and forth about the news. It had been a beautiful early-Fall day outside, and I’d expressed an interest in going outside sometime soon (I was still pretty much bedridden outside of physical therapy) — in time to see the leaves change, maybe. Pronouncing it a great idea that he’d support through and through, Zenigata had gone out to get dinner for us.

It was just as I was fondly looking over the sketchbook pages of recent days, all flowers and smiling faces, that he’d returned — far too early, and without any food.

Before I could ask him what he’d forgotten, I saw the look on his face.

I still remember the feeling of cold that trickled down my body then.

He was hanging on the doorframe anxiously, breathlessly. He didn’t even come back into the room. It was like he was scared to.

“I’m really sorry, but something’s come up. I’ll be gone for a few days,” were his exact words. Heated, quick. Panicked, almost. “I’ll be back, though,” he added as an afterthought.

What’s up? I had wanted to say as I looked over him quickly. What’s wrong?

Or maybe, Take care then; and definitely: Come back soon, with a smile added.

But I knew what a lie looked like.

So in the end, all I had said was, “Do whatcha gotta do, man,” with a sorry smile and a slight wave of my hand. I’d wanted to be cool, to be someone he didn’t have to worry about, so that was all I’d said. Even if I knew he was abandoning me to the wolves again.

As for the wave, it was the only part of me I had the energy to move, when I was tired.

Zenigata had nodded, thanked me shortly, and left. Just like that, he zipped away down the hall, looking relieved.

I gazed at the sketchbook in my lap for a while, then quietly folded it up and set it in the trash.

So we’re doing this again, huh? You’re such a fool....

“Stupid, stupid fool,” I whispered to myself. “You’re such an idiot.”

After a while of that, I’d closed my eyes and fallen asleep, fully expecting to never wake up — or at least, wake up just long enough to feel the murder weapon.

But even that kindness would not come.

Because he never came back, and neither did anyone else.
The room was quiet as I stared at the painting of Monaco harbor. I could hear Zenigata and Marti talking faintly out in the hallway, sounding heated, but the door was tightly shut, leaving the actual wording to my imagination.

*Left alone in a white room once more, listening to the symphony of destruction you’ve created...*

I rubbed the offended spot on my cheek, which was tingling slightly still.

“*Why don’t you go die like him, too?...*”

...Yeah, that’d probably been too much. But it’d felt so *good* at the time. Freeing, really.

*Maybe I’m still bitter about that, huh....*

I sighed and looked down at my hands, situated loosely in my lap.

They were shaking heavily. Much more than they should have, even from fright.

A chill creeping over me even though I was sweating profusely, I tucked my hands under my armpits and leaned forward as much as I could, trying to hunch into a ball. Everywhere the Inspector had jostled around was sore and searing, and yet somehow I was *cold*. I hunkered down to keep the shivers from spreading throughout the rest of my body, but even there, I wasn’t successful. It just took hold of me, as if I were outside right now without a coat.

The rest of the withdrawal symptoms were painful too, so very painful, spidering aches all around me like a window full of cracked glass. My leg, as well, was just a fantasy of pain of its own making, hitting me every time I shivered. The only saving grace was that the swelling in my thigh was low enough that at least my leg *looked* like a leg right now, but under the bandages, I had to wonder how much of it was even in-tact.

And I’d done this to myself, huh...?

At least as far as he’d claimed.

*So what made me freak out?* I wasn’t usually violent in my missing time; usually I just woke up
with a hole in my memory, huddled in a corner the same as I’d started. And that in and of itself was usually just me staring at movies of my childhood until something broke me out of it. Like a falling droplet disturbing a perfectly clear pond, the whole of it would break, then evaporate into ripples.

Whatever I’d thought, felt, seen during that “movie” would disappear, locked back up somewhere deep and dark in my brain, making it seem like there was a hole, because I simply couldn’t get to the memories of what’d happened during that time, even though I’d been there. Then, afterward, I’d just numbly try to go about my day, as far away from my stressor as possible, usually unable to remember where the rest of the day went, too. But sometimes, just once or twice, I’d honestly blacked out and wandered around during these attacks, though I was under the impression that it never lasted long.

But either way, he’d seen it. Fuck, he’d seen it, multiple times, and apparently it’d been violent? And now...

I shut my eyes, trying to push away the images of that place; of Zenigata’s pleading and coaxing a few hours ago, and his anger now; of Marti’s kind warnings and the pained sobbing I’d caused; of all the thoughts and emotions swirling around, not the least of which was what it meant about me if I couldn’t get this under control. And what’s more:

_You’ve royally fucked up, and now you might never walk straight again, huh?_

It was like when the doctors had come to me in Monaco, telling me all the potential losses I’d have from a train wreck I didn’t even remember.

_And what’s worse, you might end up all alone for the duration of your recovery again. Cuz you just couldn’t control your stupid fucking mouth, could you._

I closed my eyes, grinding my head against my good knee. I was pretty sure I’d lost some of my peripheral vision to this round of death-defying medical support, whatever had actually happened. I flexed my fingers quickly, hoping there wasn’t any loss there once more, either. I wasn’t sure how much more of this my body could take, and I wasn’t even thirty yet.

_Looks like you might have to drive from now on, Jigen._

But mental-Jigen didn’t answer. The only words that came were the whispers of memory, sliding over my consciousness like the...

Rain. It had been raining, that day in Monaco.

The day I woke up, and felt absolutely no desire to live.

The rain drops were sprinkling out in the harbor. Ships were moored and silent, bobbing abandoned with a forbidding sea at their backs. The clouds were grey, casting my entire room in moody shades of charcoal. I gazed at the ceiling for a long time, not a thought in me—and no desire to move, either. Not even my eyes would blink.

I’d already rehearsed, for days and weeks and months, every argument I had for why I was in this
situation and how to I should have been able to get out of it, but somehow, I never found anything helpful—It’s your fault he’s not here. It’s your fault you trusted him. It’s you’re fault everyone’s dead—things like that. An endless track of vile self-hate, minute after endless minute, day after endless day, always looking for an escape but finding only dead ends and insurmountable tragedies to stare at.

At that point, laying in that bed in a catatonic state running that self-destructive hamster wheel like I did each morning until someone came to prod me, digging the grooves of hurt ever deeper into myself was the only thing I could successfully do. The only way I could feel. And in a weird way, even though I was causing myself pain, it was an addictive kind of hurt. It felt much more stable of a solution than interacting with people that might just break me wholesale.

Maybe it was just that walking myself to hell step-by-step felt safer than getting thrown there by someone else, but to be honest, it was all I felt capable of doing all day long. It was all I wanted to do.

I turned my head to gaze at the cup of drawing pencils, worn down to nubs but still waiting to give their last. I hadn’t touched them in weeks. Because why bother? They were a present from someone who’d left. Why invest in the hope that person had had for me, if it wasn’t enough to keep him around?

I’d drawn him one picture in case he ever came back. Everything that was me in this hospital was wrapped up in that picture, dreams and regrets in each layered line of graphite. I’d wept over that image, left tear stains in fibers…and then never drawn another thing since. I’d simply lacked the heart to.

I sighed and pulled myself upright. It’d been probably an hour of just staring at nothing by this point of my day, and yet I could only make myself move because my back was sore. My whole body felt like lead—as heavy as my heart.

After a coughing fit that left me feeling drained and a wadded-up tissue bloody, I managed to put my feet in my hospital slippers, probably because it was just habit by now. I didn’t really care that it would be cold otherwise. I could hardly feel it anyway, over the constant pain everywhere.

Taking up the crutches they’d given me, I hobbled over to the window—its simple yellow flower vase long shattered in a fit of unhappiness, pushed out this very window with its wilted brown stems—and then simply stood there in its place, as Ark had so often done.

I watched the scene. Blue: shades of 50% marine and charcoal here, and 30% zinc and cobalt there. Grey: thick and dark and cold, layer upon layer creating a sense of distance to the horizon. Green: smokey and muted, barely jewel colored, more like off-brand greens mixed into heavy black, sliding up the mountains.

The air was cold; the whites of the ships and houses were muted. There wasn’t anyone visible on the streets. The bare trees nearby, shades of lacy black, were like the columns of ancient Rome, watching over a deserted town.

It felt so much like me.

There was none of the usual emotional reaction to what I saw: No joy at the light on the buildings; no splendor at the challenge of the foam on the waves; no sense of adventure on the ships. Just...nothing. Just...knowledge that I was broken, that I’d lost something precious, and I had no idea how to get it back. All that sat within me was the awareness that I’d done everything I could to fix myself, and it was only getting worse, whether I tried to stop it or not.
And in fact, as I stared at that tranquil landscape, I realized that not trying would be easier. Would hurt less.

My heart ached at that. The sweet pain of a familiar despair. It was the only emotion I’d felt in weeks, and at this point, it was a comforting, reassuring friend.

After a while—and for no real reason—I turned around and walked out of my room, onto the hospital floor. I was still sick with pneumonia, so my uncoordinated limbs aside, it was slow going; I had to stop often and heave for breath in and out of coughs that shook my weakened frame and drove my dizzy headache deeper into my head.

But as I walked around the floor, all I saw were things that drained me further. Within patient rooms: Sanitized spaces holding people I didn’t know, whose families were weeping over them from time to time; empty rooms, where there had been people I had known; and even moreso, the silent figures that no one ever visited save the nurses.

Those were my friends. I’d sit and talk to them, sometimes, and pretend they’d talk back. It made the nurses think I was crazy, but...I had still spoken to them, in a way. Wondered at who they were, and imagined who I would be in their eyes. They were nice people, sometimes sad people, who cared if I lived or died, and I cared about them back.

I wondered about them sometimes, those ones who never spoke before they died. Wondered if I’d have been better off like them, never waking up after my accident.

The nurses, who were currently missing, tried not to get to know anybody deeper than what customer service dictated. And as far as other company, ever since I’d gotten sick, I wasn’t allowed to go outside—or visit anyone within fifteen feet. But today would be different. Today, I needed more.

So, early in the AM as it was, I slipped past the sole caretaker reading at the desk like the world didn’t exist and went for the stairs.

It wasn’t easy, and she’d catch me soon, but she wasn’t going to tackle me on the stairs at least, and there I could beg and plead if need be. If I could work up that much breath before she grabbed me, anyway.

Oh, how much we’ve lost, huh, Ark? Do you remember that escape down the stairs of the grand ballroom in Venice?

Just a year ago, I could have slid down five floors of railing and then kept running two islands over, wherein I would scale a few piazza buildings by their stone decor alone, and then raid an unsuspecting room to secure my escape, all the while being pursued by people twice my muscle class and laughing about it.

Now, however, I wheezed my way down the four flights with enough effort to make me dizzy and then pushed the exit door open, still in my pajamas. I left the slippers at the door—keeping it open—and then stepped onto the path.

The grounds were well manicured, and there was a little winter garden out here. I went under the towering pines, first carefully crunching over wet wood chips and then over slick grass as I came out from under wet branches. I didn’t care what happened to my feet. The ocean was just a little bit away, and I was determined to get there.

Soon I saw my prize: the bench. One single memorial bench sat out here, under a lone, towering
pine tree that Japanese ink painters would have loved.

With the Mediterranean sea as my view, I settled in—ready to nap, gasping for air, but knowing I needed to stay awake to have my moment before they caught me.

It was the smell in the air that kept me clinging to consciousness: Salt, like touched the bread in bakeries in Paris. The temp: Cool, enough to wake up my senses and set my skin alert, like that one time when I’d jumped in the big fountain at my grandfather’s winery to impress a girl with a pretty smile. Sounds: Waves, crashing below the cliff where I couldn’t see, like the breakers on Dunkirk’s famous pier that I’d so often stood upon with Alisée. No birds, because of the—

Rain.

Raindrops, on my face. Filtering through the tree.

Head tilted back, I opened my eyes. The radial pattern of falling drops hit me, as did the complicated symmetry of a full-grown tree and all its needles.

I stared at it for a long, long time, blinking against each droplet like it was a smack in the face, until I saw something:

A little shape, moving. Just a tail, settling in.

There was a bird’s nest up there. With two little birds snuggled in it, no doubt waiting through winter to start their next clutch of eggs.

...Their next family.

Waiting to raise the tiny new lives they’d bring into the world.

Those birds would love them. Feed them, shelter them, teach them everything they needed to know—would lead them to adulthood, where they’d repeat the process, well-rounded and fulfilled.

I blinked anew, heat rising into my face.

...That was a process I was never going to be part of, no matter how much I tried.

No matter how much I’d hurt for it, and had tried to prove myself worthy of its light.

Sitting all alone by a grey sea, on a bench that mourned someone else:

That was the moment I gave in—and accepted the loss that was my life.

That my life, which some god or happy accident had given me as my one and only chance, had been utterly wasted.

There, crying over being the baby bird booted from the nest before it was ready—who’d fallen out of the tree and never learned to fly and was now sitting here, still looking for a flock—the attendants found me.

It was the Nice One. She was young, fresh out of academics and now some sort of intern. Compared to the others, she tended to put more energy into her tasks—like corralling runaway patients.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, sitting down beside me. “You’ll get more sick, out here in the rain....”
“I know,” I said, sitting up and wiping at my eyes...and, true to her word, tell-tale shivering. “Just wanted some fresh air.”

“But it’s...raining...?”

“I like the rain.” I smiled softly—felt a tiny bit of light in me. Her presence always did that—but it would fade just as quickly once she left, because I knew it had nothing to do with me. She was just a nice person, and it was nice to be in her unassuming, kindly aura for a while. Like a healing spell in a game.

And right now, she was looking studiously at my reddened face with concern.

“Are you...okay?”

I glanced at her—looked her over—then simply cough-sighed, staring out at the inexorable, and endlessly calming, sea. “Yes. Just...thinking about things that could have been. Old guys do that, you know.”

“Well don’t do that!” she scolded, tapping at my knee emphatically. “Think about what can be, Mr. Two-years-younger-than-me.”

But the waves, as they often did, held no answers as I stared at them; the only thing I found was a very frustrating “further reading”:

What if I don’t know what that is, though....

I was speaking slowly, with large pauses in the middle of sentences. My brain had just shut down that much, and my body was that affected. Or maybe it was the other way around.

“Well,” I sighed to her now, “why don’t you give me my morning meds, and we’ll start from there?”

I held out my hand and she gave me the bottle from her pants pocket, which I knew from previously that she would.

“Only if you come back inside and dry off.”

“Deal.”

I didn’t have the power to fake smiles much anymore, but today I did it, for her.

Because I knew I didn’t have to try much longer.

Once right then, and then again later, when I thanked her for delivering me, I gave her a sweet smile. The second time, I shooed her out of my room with a note that I’d be just fine.

And I would. Because I had my way out, now.

I sat on my bed—the bed that had been my home for ten months—slowly turning the bottle in my hand.

Such a simple thing....

White pills, barely bigger than my pinky nail, slowly turning in a little orange cylinder.
I’d only have a few minutes, maybe a couple hours, before she figured out what she’d left behind.

If I didn’t do this now, I’d have to figure out some violent way—or stop eating, which they’d definitely catch onto.

I took a deep breath and closed my hand around it. Felt it—the blood in my fingers, the warmth in my palms, the weight in my limbs.

Do you really want this? Are you sure it’ll never get better?

I visualized it: where I’d come from in life. Where I wanted to go. How painful the idea of both were.

And then: A genuine assessment of how it might go. It trickled in quietly, and I listened to what it had to tell me:

I might be happy at some point in the future. But I had no faith that it would last—or that it would be worth the pain on either end. When I looked back at my life, there were bright spots, some even a couple years long—like with Grandpop—but those were anomalies. They were momentary gifts that I still didn’t understand, and you couldn’t base your life around other people’s charity. That was especially true now that I was an adult—people didn’t give a fuck whether I lived or died, and since I had no family and arguably fewer friends thanks to my father killing most of them, it would be my fault whether I succeeded or not, regardless of the hardships stacked against me. And I wasn’t sure I had the tools to overcome enough of those hardships to ever enjoy living in the long-term.

Not to mention the fact that I’d squandered most of the years with my grandfather, being so angry all the time. He was the last person I had had that I could ever expect unconditional love from, and I’d realized it all too late. The time with him was a gift he’d given me, I could see now, but I’d wasted so much of it. So...

When I got to the end of my life by old age, at this rate, would I really be able to look back and say, “I sure am glad I stuck it out”? To be honest about my chances, I didn’t think so. Not unless something dramatic changed. But why would it? I could try, but that wouldn’t be enough. It never had been before. I was simply not enough, for anything, or anyone, and that wasn’t going to get better.

I simply didn’t want to do this anymore. Those bright spots were nice, but they simply weren’t worth the years of pain and suffering in between.

Some people got nice lives. Some people didn’t. Why did I have to stick mine out to the bitter end? The only things I could come up with were religious things, notions of guilt and control. Why should I honor those? Especially since they were dropped upon me by a society, by people, that weren’t even going to notice if I wasn’t there.

Yeah...I didn’t want to spend another twenty years being somebody’s unwanted bastard child. Or forty, or sixty. I’d promised myself long ago to remove myself from the world if I ever saw myself turning into the people that’d hurt me, and from here, I just didn’t see how I was going to avoid becoming that vile creature. Each time I got up and tried anew, I got broken worse. Each time I was hurt, there were more holes in the shattered glass that was me, when I tried to glue myself back together.

Each time I tried to change my situation, I got less and less human—became that one step closer to the monsters I was trying to get away from. Even here, I was seeing less and less of myself in
myself every day. Less of the things I loved and more of the things I despised. And I was not going to inflict that on anyone else. If there was one responsible thing I could do with myself, it would be that.

And anyway, this disease in my lungs was killing me; we all knew it. That was why they were being so nice to me now. One more cold from a holiday visitor heaped onto what I already had and I’d probably be dead in a week. Forty-eight hours, if it was the flu. I barely weighed 100 pounds at this point.

*So yeah....why not go out on your own terms?*

This morning had been nice. The rain...it was a good note to end things on.

I’d kissed Alisée once, in the rain, on that beach surrounded by the skeletons of ships from our forefathers’ war. My *first* kiss, with a girl who’d thought it was “okay I guess” and then wanted to one-up me to see if she could do it better. (She did.)

I smiled a little, thinking about that.

*I wonder whatever happened to you. Was it better than me? I hope so....*

I turned the bottle around in my hands again, to look at the clear space behind the label. Hefted it a little.

*Yeah....*

It didn’t feel like a weight at all.

It just felt like my answer.

“...Yeah.”

I turned to the window. The storm was still going, but out at sea, there was a thin stream of light coming through a hole in the clouds.

As I watched it, I uncorked the bottle. Took the glass of water and pulled it into my lap. It was as natural as anything, something I could do right. And it was a nice view. A nice parting gift, from having to stare at that blasted scene through months of self-hate and turmoil.

“See you, world.” I toasted the glass, the light sparkling through its contours like a sunset, and over the course of a minute or two, downed the entire bottle of pills, which was nearly full.

There’d be no note; there was no point to it. I’d realized early into my teenage years that there was no way I’d ever get to the actual deed if I tried to sum up my regrets—or my anger—into one nice package for everyone to see. There was simply no way to do it, and by the time I’d get something close to done with a draft, I’d be so indignant that I’d be motivated to kick some asses and conquer the problem rather than hurt *myself*—not that that effort ever did any *good*, though.

It just got me broken further.

So no, there’d be no explanation. There’d be only inferences, stories, and curious rumors, like the best paintings.

Because it was time to wise up and break the cycle like an adult.

I capped the bottle, placed the glass back on the table, and then settled into bed. Propped up on the
pillows, I watched the sun beams on the sea, humming to myself and wiggling my toes until I fell asleep. I felt warm. Because...

Because perhaps, now, I’d finally be the boy my parents had always wanted.

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I understood major depression pretty well now, scientifically speaking—it was just chemicals that got out of balance long-term. It surfaced when you got your brain into a state where it was wired to hurt itself, rather than help itself, at every interaction with the world and its denizens.

There was the stigma attached, of course: being weak-willed, being a disgrace for being unable to suffer like everyone else and get through it. But I rejected that notion; every part of it was a lie.

People were living beings. They needed a certain set of resources to survive. And when they didn’t have that, they died, plain and simple.

And people were complex beings; they needed a complicated web of things to function, let alone thrive. And for most artists, there was no dividing line between thriving and surviving. They were one in the same, and you were either succeeding at it or not.

Life, as my grandfather used to say, finds a way. In other words, once it starts, it tends to keep going. After all, “life” is the natural state for living creatures; “on” is the natural state for energy. In fact, it can be nigh unstoppable, at times. It’s matter that has an off switch; that lumbersome, finite, unrefined thing that has the ability to combine together, break apart, and cease to animate when energy leaves it for another home.

But life, that mix of matter and energy, for all its tenacity, was also programmed to admit its faults. DNA was a little computer program, on the cellular level, that knew when it hit critical errors. Most of the time, it’d pluck along even with huge bugs in it, and maybe the resultant program wouldn’t look anything like you were planning on by the time it ran its entire process, but it wanted to keep going, so it did. But some times, there simply would be too critical of an error to overcome and it would shut itself down; pop itself off.

Suicidal tendencies, I figured, were the macro version of this micro function. The sense of responsibility in removing one’s self from the world was simply the full-body version of apoptosis for the good of society. It wasn’t even a uniquely human thing; hive creatures did it too.

In a more personal sense, the brain couldn’t tell the difference between physical and emotional pain. So when it was flooded with pain all the time from self-harming thoughts, after a while, that triggered the “fatal error” response in your body’s internal programming, and your brain started sending you signals to shut down, to find ways to die.

So in a way, the science behind it heartened me, rather than frightened me. Knowing the enemy was how you kept an eye on it, and true to chronic diseases, ever since I’d gotten that far down—my brain had learned how to activate that mechanism—I’d be living with this enemy forever. It was in remission now, and I planned on keeping it that way, but only because I’d found something to make life worth living.

I knew that not everyone had that. Not everyone was lucky enough to find something worth living for in time and the means to make that enough; that was the cruelty of Darwinism. So I didn’t
begrudge the lost. No; I begrudged the society that drove the kindest among it to death.

And that was part of why I hit who I hit in my heists.

I couldn’t save everybody. I couldn’t even really be there for anyone emotionally other than my work partners, because I was always on the move. But I could scare the hell out of the people that hurt the kindly ones, until their evils were no longer a problem.

However, at the time, I did not have the mental fortitude nor the experience to know all that.

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Depression manifested in different ways, and people arrived at it through different paths, but each had the same philosophy behind it: whether you were angry, or hopeless, or practical, it all came down to being so out of balance that your internal mechanisms jumped off the rails of life—the most sacred, fundamental thing to our existence as living beings—and went into the ditch of “death.”

It was a strange feeling, viewed objectively: Realizing you were alive—being mechanically hyper-aware of that fact actually—but then having your heart lament, Why.

Normal people didn’t ever think about that. But I could barely remember a time where I hadn’t.

What made it scary, however, was when you looked around at what you might accomplish that same day, and all you could feel was every fiber of your being singing with one single desire, one last hope: Can I be done now?

And it wasn’t scary then. It was scary later, once you got away from it. Because at the time, it feels like hope. It’s only after, if you get that far, that it feels like death.

Judging by that time, I can say that the phenomenon of being that depressed was kind of like being really, really exhausted, emotionally and physically, to the point where your body started telling you to die. Sometimes you’d wake up able to do things. Sometimes you wouldn’t. And all you could tell yourself as an explanation was that you were a failure; a broken creature no one could love.

But then there was the point after that, where you just couldn’t feel at all. That was when the constant intrusive thoughts in your head, floating up from somewhere deep down that said, Hey, why not?, started to look really promising. And not just that—they looked logical and reasonable.

Because anything, including nothing at all, would hurt far less than all this. And “absolutely nothing” carried a finality to it that felt like the relief you’d been unsuccessfully searching for for so long.

You’ve been pushed your whole life by the idea that you are capable and powerful and responsible for yourself. And then one day you’re backed into a corner and you realize, this is the only option left open to you that fulfills all those prerequisites.

So the day you realize that...what are you going to do?

The day you realize that the answer you’d been desperately searching for to get you out of this hole
had been there all along within you: in the form of a knife, or a bottle, or a pill, or a sudden deceleration.

That was how things started to look altruistic, too.

For me, it was the pills, simply because it was what I had, and it wouldn’t leave a huge mess for anybody. I’d even researched it from the books in the hospital’s library—my morning meds would cause me to fall asleep, but my evening ones would make me vomit before they could do too much damage. I thought I’d been doing us all a tidy favor—not to mention saving tax payers some money.

But then I’d woken up, with women all around me, and I’d cried.

I’d cried because I’d failed.

The responses varied. Some nurses started avoiding me like I was contagious. Which, because I was so upset all the time, I probably was.

Others told me I was selfish, and being a burden. The Problem Child on the floor. Other patients had problems that were going to kill them; I had a perfectly good body, so why couldn’t I respect that, get my act together, and just go about my day with a perfectly normal will to live?

But I hadn’t been living. Not in this hospital. Not in my whole life to that point. I’d simply been struggling, reacting, surviving, forcing myself along under the weight others had been throwing upon me, and I didn’t want to do it anymore, now that I finally had a choice. I was perfectly happy to lie down and let that weight crush me.

And it wasn’t like I’d come to that realization quickly. I’d been fighting a losing battle against it for at least a decade by that point, if not more. At each new stage of life, where others normally celebrated milestones, I saw only tragedies. Where some looked forward to more skills and life stages, I only saw how much further behind I was toward the finish line of happiness.

The doctors, oh so helpfully, made a point of taking away my autonomy after that, which wasn’t hard to do, given that I could barely walk. Strip away everything and start the reprogramming from scratch, that was their solution.

If only what they had to teach me had been any good.

It started with tying me down (I escaped), and then a twenty-four hour guard quite unlike the nurses. Then, it was tranquilizer pills and restraints, and after that, anti-depressants and “therapists,” who quickly labeled me uncooperative (they were dicks).

Every last item I had was confiscated from me, including my drawings. It left me with nothing to look at, nothing to do, except stare out that window at the harbor and wait to die from pneumonia.

And yet every morning, I still woke up.

My only stimulation, after that, was what the doctors would do to me and how I could impress myself. I’d recite plays from memory and they’d come in between acts. Some days they’d shun me; some days they’d yell at me; most days they bated me like a dog with treats for my basic human rights. It was a different thing every shift, the roulette wheel of poke him with this and see if he jumps like that, so reminiscent of the childhood I had been trying to escape, just a new, hellish version of it with people who should have known better.

But there was one nurse, the young one I’d gotten the pills from, who’d just look at me knowingly,
smile a little sadly, and then quietly say, “It’ll be okay.”

She even accepted my apology with a hug.

I liked her the best, even if they didn’t let her in with me unsupervised any longer.

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To be honest, the fact that it had happened, the fact that the possibility of the act existed at all, didn’t scare me, anymore. But it did make me sad, and a little bit watchful, sometimes.

In fact, what still scared me was people’s reactions to it. I simply didn’t want them to know that there was a me that was that weak. That they might need to be afraid of, and want to avoid the trauma of knowing.

But it looked like Zenigata had known for a long time.

Was that why he’d followed after me all this time? It wasn’t just for something to do? It was because he was worried?

But if that were the case, then why hadn’t he ever said anything until now?

I put my chin in my hand and gazed at the painting—no doubt painted from the grounds of that hospital or very near it—and then out my current window. There I contemplated, my thoughts drifting down with the fresh evening snow on the equally cursed and blessed Dunkirk harbor.

Being in this town again, still not quite free of all those chains...it hurt. It really, honestly hurt, perhaps was even a feeling I could call frightening, but was definitely throwing me right back into old habits. Into the old person I used to be, who I’d hoped I’d grown away from for good.

I wish you were here, I thought to Jigen; he was always good at telling me where to look, what to focus on instead, when I had pitfalls like these. I may have been a thief, but he was the one who understood the workings of all my mental traps.

Understood who I wanted to be.

I closed my eyes and felt his arms around my shoulders, his warmth against my back.

“I am here,” he said, chin on my shoulder. I imagined his long hair pressing against my neck and warming it; his sharp cologne drifting under my nose as he pushed his cheek against mine. “Don’t panic; I’ll protect you. Just remember the things I’ve taught you: Be kind to yourself, as kind as you’d be to someone else.”

Eyes closed, I sighed. “But I’m a jerk. Just look at what I’m putting everyone through...”

“Okay...,” he rumbled, pressing a kiss into the base of my neck, “be as kind to yourself as you wish someone would be to you. And if you can’t find a solution to your problems, set it aside and live a little—until you either find an answer or you don’t need one anymore.”

I sighed, long and slow through my nose.

“You’re right....”
I imagined touching his hand, and when I opened my eyes, I realized I’d actually moved my fingers to my shoulder.

But of course, there was no one there. Only me, myself, and what I’d learned since childhood, fighting against the fear from back then that had taught me so many wrongs.

And I wasn’t about to lose to that fear; not this time. That was not what I was put on this earth to do, no matter how much my childhood caregivers had wanted it.

I sighed, feeling the weight of the air rattle my insides, and wrapped my arms around my good leg, head tucked down in their warm, dark shelter.

Everything about this job was a mess. A huge, goddamned mess, and it was becoming readily apparent that I’d fucked up royally this time, trying to go it without my partner’s help. I hadn’t wanted to involve him with my stupid bullshit problems, but it just turned out that I was gonna owe him a lot, thanks to all this...

I hope he sticks around. I’m gonna have to apologize profusely, and then I’m still gonna get a lecture, huh....

“Probably,” he answered in my head, that same old living room furniture setup appearing vividly in my mind. “You know he loves you, but...this is gonna feel like betrayal.”

“Yeah...” I sighed, feeling the sympathetic pang as my mental avatar settled into the red three-seat sofa, his hands worrying between his knees. Real-Jigen was going to have a sore spot about this. One I’d been systematically avoiding, even though I could see it in his growing silent frustrations over the months. A deep one, that might be too late to fix, because of how much of a breech of trust it was. And if so, I’d just have to accept that as my own, honest-to-god fault.

I was an adult and I’d used my best judgement but I’d still made a mistake. I’d just have to deal with the consequences.

But...

I looked around that room in my mind, imaging it without him in it. It wasn’t a nice place.

It was cold and lonely, with help me appearing on the walls.

I sighed and scrubbed my hand through my hair.

I didn’t know if I could handle losing him, but I’d just have to suck it up and be a man about it. I didn’t know who I would be afterward, if I’d even have anything left worth calling “me.” Even thinking about it caused very dramatic thoughts to cross my brain, given the circumstances, but I quickly pushed them away.

No, self, there are better ways to deal with problems than that. And you promised yourself: if you ever broke up, you wouldn't be bitter. You'd thank him for the time, for the love, and move on.

Before I could get stuck in a mental loop, however, Mental-Jigen offered a short, pitying smile and came to sit down on the armrest next to me. Long legs, clad in well-cut black suit trousers, crossed elegantly at the knee, while long fingers slid over the length of my shoulders reassuringly. I swayed into it, letting him guide me whatever way he desired. “But if he gives you a lecture, you’ll know he wants to stick around and make it work.”

“It might not be enough, though, if you don’t handle it right,” the little red radio chimed in from
the coffee table, with a somber psychiatrist tinge to its squeaky voice. It was starting to sound a little bit like Marti, to be honest.

“It’s true,” I agreed softly down to it, turning the dial until my own voice was coming out of it, an echo of what I spoke: “Love is a fleeting and fragile thing, that can be revoked at a moment’s notice.” I twisted the dial again, until all that came out of it was a quiet, shore-like static. “So I don’t know that there’s gonna be much I can do, if he’s already made up his mind,” I continued on to the man beside me in my mind. “Hell, he might even already be gone. As we speak, he might not be coming he help, but rather driving the opposite direction.”

Mental-Jigen sighed and pulled me into his side. There, sheltered in his imaginary warmth, he rubbed a heavy, sympathetic hand across my shoulders, up my neck, until that warmth spread throughout my chest, undeniable and steady. And even then, he didn’t stop; he simply held my head against his stomach, thumb idly stroking over my hair.

“But you know he doesn’t love you like those other people did. He loves you better than that.”

As a flush of heat ran over my face at that sentiment, he simply continued to pet my hair gently. “So take some heart and have some faith in him, even if you can’t have it in yourself right now.”

“Yeah...he does,” I muttered into my real knee. “I’ve gotta do a better job of repaying that. And...”

The door to the hospital room knocked softly once more. I gazed at it silently.

...Maybe...

When several long seconds went by, it opened. As expected, Zenigata was the culprit, but there was an apologetic look on his face.

...with this heist...

A look I remembered from so many years ago, so often waking me up in the late Mediterranean afternoons.

...We can finally, finally find a way to rewind the clock a little bit.
Chapter 62

“Well, somebody’s gotta go back in there and talk to him,” Marti said with a sigh after we’d spent even more time apologizing to each other. She had her arms crossed as she stood in the hallway opposite Lupin’s door, next to a potted plant as tall as she was. Her eyes were a little red still, but she had her hands on her hips and was trying to transform the look of abject misery on her face into her game face. It wasn’t entirely working.

“Suppose so,” I admitted with an equal sigh—half-hidden in the fronds of the plant’s twin across the hall. “But I’m the one he’s mad at...?”

“Well I’m the one he thinks is gonna murder him, so...”

She fixed me with a worried frown.

“Murder?” I asked incredulously. “You? Him?”

She nodded, looking off. “That’s what...caused this.” She motioned to her face with a quick Italian finger.

“Did he threaten you?” I asked, shoulders pushing back. “That little—”

“I’m pretty sure he’s just being defensive, but it just scared me... tripped something... God.” She put her hands against her face. “Shit, I shouldn’t even be here, look at me.... First I almost kill ‘im and now everyone’s falling apart ‘cuz I couldn’t handle a little threatening.”

She ran a hand over her face, then over her hair, then it just hung there in her curls as she looked down the hallway, distressed.

“Anna,” I muttered, coming off the wall to pull her near again. “It’s all right, I’ve got you.”

“No. No, you don’t,” she all but wailed, voice soft but tight. “I really don’t. But he thinks I’m here to hurt you... Or maybe him...? Do you think he knew all along??”

“That idiot.” I shook my head with a grumble, rolling my eyes. I wrapped my arms around Anna’s shoulders comfortingly, then set my chin on her hair as she tucked herself under it. “But he won’t tell anyone. At least, if I tell him not to.”

“You think so? Really?”

I hummed an affirmative, running a hand up and down her back soothingly, even as I glared off down the hall.
“He wouldn’t hurt my woman. That’d cross a line for him.”

*Though apparently he doesn’t mind harassing her a bit, I thought, teeth grinding. Gonna have to teach that little punk a lesson—*

Anna sniffled at that, a dark chuckle muffling itself in my coat. “‘Your woman’...”

“Oh...” A nervous smirk plucked at the side of my mouth. “S-sorry...”

“It’s fine,” she whispered, her hands turning tender as they moved up my back to hang a little higher.

“I’ll talk to him, though, all right?” I continued. “Make sure we’re all on the same page here.” I took a breath to push down the flurry of warmth her gesture had made and then took a step back, where I held her hands reassuringly in mine. “You okay to hang out for a few minutes...?”

Marti stepped back and nodded, rubbing at her eyes with one hand and sniffling. She took a breath, looked around, then nodded more. “Y-yeah, I am.”

I smiled for her, though it was brief. “Good.”

Marti nodded resolutely and took another step back. Her other hand finally pulled out of mine.

“Well, in that case, I guess I’ll go into the feral cat’s cage for a bit,” I admitted with a sigh, turning to the door. It was gonna take a while, but I should have been able to calm him down. “Do you think you could tell Nadia that I need some time, but to keep everyone corralled? No matter how much they bitch and complain?”

A smile trickled up out of Marti’s sadness. “Heh...that’s one thing I should still be good at—telling interdepartmental regulations to stuff themselves.” The tension fell out of her frame somewhat as she looked down the hall. “I need to get some meds, anyway, so it should work out.”

“For him?”

“For me.”

“Ah. Hey, before you go?” I reached out a hand to her.

Marti’s green eyes gazed up at me balefully. But as I took her hand, her delicate fingers curled around mine.

Gently, I pulled her into my arms and kissed her on the forehead. “It’ll be okay. I won’t let anyone hurt you.” I squeezed her biceps, and then cupped her cheeks. “Least of all him.”

She took a steadying breath and sighed it out, though it was shaky. Nodded a few times, then shot me a forced smile, her grip tight on my hands. “Go talk to him. I’ll be all right.”

“Thank you.” I kissed her again, this time on the lips. “For everything. I’ll make it up to you somehow.”

The kiss was brief and her lips were chilled, but the gratitude written there far outweighed the melancholy.
When I walked in, Lupin was sitting up in his bed, legs loosely crossed and shoulders slumped. He looked up at me expectantly from where he sat, hands resting in his lap in the folds of the sheets. He looked exhausted and frail, and the dark, haggard circles under his eyes did him no favors. He apparently still had only the dressing gown on his bony shoulders, too, the one I distinctly remembered getting ripping open to do chest compressions.

Lupin...

The fact that you’re alive and kicking right now is no minor miracle, and yet all you can do is look at me like it’s the end of the world...

Arms crossed loosely, I stood in the doorway and leaned my head against it, waiting to see how he reacted. How much of him was here? How much of him was willing to talk, let alone listen to reason? He watched me back the entire time, tired, apologetic—and more than a little troubled.

Eventually, he sighed and rubbed his face, going for his eyes and the three-day-old stubble on his jaw before staring at his legs despondently once more.

I guess now we find out the truth about it all...

“You’re alive,” I remarked after a while as my greeting. “You’re here.”

Lupin looked down at his hands. He worried them in his lap, then sighed and nodded, gazing forlornly at a spot on the wall in front of him.

It was the painting of Monaco harbor, I realized after coming into the room a bit.

“...Ah,” I noted.

“Seems a bit familiar, doesn’t it?” he whispered, not taking his sad eyes off the wall. “All this.”

I nodded understandingly and shut the door behind me. When I got to his bedside, I pulled the stool around and sat down.

“We need to have a chat.”

His gaze slid over, casing me up and down cautiously. But when he spoke, it wasn’t avoidant: “I know.”

He finished this statement by hugging his arms to his chest and hunching forward a bit.

“Cold?”

“Withdrawal,” he noted, voice rasping badly. “Or so I’m told.”

He certainly did look like he was in pain. The kind of pain that left you drained and aching. It showed on every line of his face and exhausted curve in his posture; his coloring was bad, and even his hair looked frazzled.

Not to mention the plastic tube running into his veins.

I’d hoped I wouldn’t ever have to see you like this again.

And this time, to top it off, he honestly looked like every junkie I’d ever seen survive the
ambulance ride.

“Here.” I gave him a glass of water from the other side of the machines. He reached out a hand, only to stop and grit his teeth with a hiss. He hugged at his side, gripping into the gown’s fabric.

“What’s wrong?”

As I set the glass aside, that was when I saw that his hands were shaking heavily. His lockpick’s hands, that had to be as still as a surgeon’s...

“My ribs are broken, or something close,” he replied, with a sweating, wincing smile. “I hear I have you to thank for that.”

“Among other people,” I admitted after a second, preoccupied with looking him over for other tremors.

“Though I gotta admit, if you do CPR that hard, you’re doing it wrong,” he went on, pained smile still on his face. “You break somebody’s rib, it goes right into their lung and kills them. And I’m a grown man...”

“You aren’t spitting up blood, are you?”

“No.”

“It’s probably just bruised.”

Lupin sighed, eyes drifting dryly over to the corner. “Thanks, Dad,” he muttered, though this time mimicking the typical teenager’s tone.

I eyed him, carefully picking over his posture and mannerisms. He had tensed a little bit, perhaps realizing the slip gave me a perfect chance to bring up the fight. However, I had a more important lead at the moment: “You’re not mad about it, though?”

“What, being alive? No.” I was silent, mulling it over, and soon Lupin was staring back at me, a light dawning in his eyes.

“Are you serious? You really think I did this to myself? What the fuck?”

“There was evidence to indicate it,” I noted flatly. “And then what happened in...your previous history around the issue,” I amended with a cough.

“About that,” he said. “I need to tell you what happened.”

A spike of adrenaline—and dreadful hope—washed through me, and on its heels was a heavy sigh.

“Was it the pencils?” I mourned.

He blinked a few times, then said with surprise, “Oh, no. No no, not that. I meant about today.”

I sighed. It was a breath of relief, but also a bit of a disappointment.

Lupin frowned. “Have you been...worried about that?”

“All this time,” I admitted with an equal frown.

As I stared at my hands in my lap, one of his came into view and patted mine.
“No, I’d never disrespect them like that.” He took his hand back to his lap after the briefest of moments, leaving only the promise of warmth on my skin. “They were a good gift. They helped a lot.”

Silence settled between us, in which both of us apparently lacked the bravery to say what came next. Even Lupin’s near-death and now his momentary flicker of a forlorn smile wasn’t enough to get my nerves in the right shape to talk, it seemed.

“About...just now, though,” Lupin began, his smile falling as he turned back to me with his exhausted gaze instead, “you got time for my statement?”

I nodded, pulling out my notebook with an ironic smirk. “Never thought I’d hear you say that and actually mean it.”

“Yeah, I know,” he agreed tiredly. “The enemy of my enemy and all that, right?”

“Is that all I am?” I asked idly, flipping the pages until I found a blank one.

Lupin didn’t say anything; but that was all right—I didn’t need him to, not right now. This was business, and business always came first between us. Maybe that needed to change, but for now, it’d keep us alive—and guide us forward.

On the blank page, after the old doc and the score of others, I wrote LUPIN in English capitals. And the fact that I wasn’t doing it posthumously was almost enough to make the heat in my face turn into tears.

Luckily, the paper in my hands offered something to focus on, something familiar to ground myself to. “Well,” I said, sucking in a steadying breath and then staring him in the eye. “Let’s hear it.”

“All right.”

He gazed back at me softly, not a single ounce of unease to it.

And like that, he spoke.

* * *

When I was done telling him about Angela, or at least what I remembered of her, Zenigata stared at his knees, thinking deeply. Eventually, he flipped his notebook closed with a dissatisfied grunt and set the pen in his breast pocket.

“Thank you for that.”

He didn’t say anything else. Didn’t even look at me further.

For my part, I stared at my feet. The silence stretched on for several minutes, each one of us lost in plotting out our next moves and feeling out the air. The only sound was the heating system, and the occasional creak of the bed as my weight shifted.

And I was okay with that. Marti had said that he was still processing what’d happened to me earlier, and I knew unequivocally that I didn’t want to set him off again. Plus, for my part, I ached
all over, ached in places I didn’t even know I had, and my emotions were spiking wildly. They wouldn’t settle on any one facet for more than a minute at a time, and each stop on the pinwheel was extreme, making me just as likely to snap as cry. Having his familiar presence beside me was somewhat stabilizing, but it still wasn’t advisable for me to engage.

Plus, I didn’t have anything pressing to say at this point, except...

“Sorry about Marti,” I muttered. “I didn’t mean to make her cry. Bend a little, but not break her in half like that.”

The Inspector’s eyes snapped shut for a moment, like he was pushing an angry impulse aside, but then he lifted his head and pegged me with a studious, investigator’s stare: “Yes, well, that’s easy to do to someone who’s been the victim of repeated sexual assaults of the highest degree.”

...What?

My eyes widened. The fact that he’d freely admit that...? And so dryly?

I glanced at the door out of reflex, then back at him. A chill went down my back and settled in my stomach.

“She really is the Red Widow then, isn’t she?”

He nodded.

He’s not even going to deny it...?

“And you trust her?” I asked softly, intently. “One-hundred percent?”

“One hundred and ten, actually.” He shrugged. “Trust her more than I trust myself, sometimes. Quite often while I’ve been dealing with you this week, if truth be told.”

His eyebrows rose slightly, pointedly.

I partially rolled my eyes on my way to glaring at the wall. I would not apologize. I would not.

Not for that, not right now.

God damn emotion spikes, this shouldn’t even have been a concern of mine right now. I felt like I was eight years old again.

I shook my head and shrugged the irritation out, but in the end, I ended up pulling my shoulders in and hugging one arm with the other. I was cold, getting ever more jittery, like the worst cigarette craving I’d ever had. Was damn annoying. If only I could get out of here—

“She’s the victim here, Lupin,” he continued. “Like you were, with them.”

“I’m not...” I huffed at him, then cut myself—and my memories—off with a decided growl. “Vics still have claws, you know?” I ground out.

“Yes, but hers aren’t aimed at us,” he stated flatly.

I sighed grumpily. Something about the way he said it dug deep and stuck there.

“Why are you so worried about her?” he continued tiredly. “She’s been nothing but an advocate for you.”
I frowned, not sure how to respond. But before I could get the feelings to clarify, he added, “Wait, is that why?— You can’t trust that someone has no ulterior motives?”

I shrugged in annoyance. “Everyone has ulterior motives. And they’re always self-serving; sometimes they just mesh with your needs.”

“Maybe if you’re Machiavelli or Ayn Rand? And I’m not sure either of them were working with a full set of cards, to be honest.”

A bitter chuckle burbled up out of me at that, against my will.

“Or are you just jealous?” Zenigata finished lightly.

“What? I—? No!” But when I scowled at him, my voice tellingly strangled, he just tipped his head, no judgement on his face.

_Mothers are always more important._

That pain came back into my chest. I prodded it down with a hand.

“...Well, maybe,” I muttered, owning up to the signs. “But that doesn’t mean I care about you or anything!” I added for good measure.

But Zenigata’s response again that week was surprising: He just smiled at me, a little pained. “I know. I mean nothing to you.”

“What? No, that’s not—”

Zenigata smirked as I spoke, laying his cards on the table.

“Oh, God dammit,” I grumbled, turning away.

“Your hackles are all up, and they have been this whole time we’ve been here. What’s up?” He scooted his chair a little closer.

“You mean other than the fact that you slapped me?” I thought, glaring at the movement suspiciously.

“Other than the fact that you’re being arrested, and that I slapped you a minute ago,” he offered. “Sorry about that latter part. I get...kinda protective of her.”

I sighed, big and put-upon, and stared at the ceiling with my head tipped back.

“And that was an awful thing to say about her,” he added.

“I was talking about your daughter!” I snapped, eyes squeezing shut. “Do you honestly still not know that she tried to get you killed multiple times? And the thanks I got for protecting you was—”

I cut myself off, images of smoke and flames from a vantage point on a hotel floor coming at me with incredible vivacity. I glared at the painting of the harbor, but that didn’t offer me a refuge, either.

“Nevermind,” I grumbled through gritted teeth. I crossed my arms, though I hissed a moment later, fighting the pain down. “Forget it,” I managed after a bit of sucking down lancing needles all around my torso. “Just...forget it.”
Zenigata waited—thinking, I suspected—but just imagining what he would say next wound me up
again. And I was shivering so badly, even hunkered down as I was, that I couldn’t tell if I had too
much adrenaline going or too little. And every little shiver hurt.

“Your father hit you a lot, huh?”

*What the hell kind of question is that!*

“You saw what he did to me the night of the fire,” I snapped blackly, immediately on the edge of
shouting. “And *multiple times* before that—”

“I mean when you were a kid,” he replied patiently, gently, his chin tilting up just a little.

I took a deep breath, bit down the pain from that, then just stared at him, jaw clenched. He was
doing that Japanese Thing where, the more serious he became about something, the less emotive
he got. It was so damn frustrating, when you wanted someone to rage at and rage back at you so
that you could justify your raging.

“What’s it to you?” I finally snapped, when I had to open my mouth to breathe. Apparently that
was the level of self-control I was at: mouth open = words come out. It didn’t make me proud; in
fact, it only made me more irritated.

“Because, if so,” he articulated slowly, in that same sage tone as always, “I’ll have more to
apologize for.”

Startled, I stared at him for a second, but then my eyes snapped shut and I shook my head in
annoyance.

“You don’t have to keep it in, you know,” he narrated from the other side of the darkness. “Just let
it out. Though...try not to blow the place down,” he added after a second.

“I told you, I didn’t *do* that.”

“I believe you.”

I sighed and rolled my eyes, grumbling. Zenigata was silent next to me, the immutable cop
presence ever in my proximity.

“Lupin,” he said rather unexpectedly, and something in his tone caught my attention. “If you want
me out of your life, I’ll go. If that’s what it takes to keep you alive.”

I stared at him then, eyes wide open. Those earnest, bright eyes of his, his worn and scarred hands
clanged on his thighs...

“I...” My words quickly swallowed down alongside the lump in my throat. “...What the hell?”

He nodded at his knees, swallowing hard as well. “If I’m...the reason you still hate yourself, if I
am the chain dragging you down into memories you’d rather not see...then I can go. That’s...that’s
all.” He sat back, took a breath, and then stared at me with concern, waiting.

I was highly aware of the fact that he was scrutinizing my reaction, but for the life of me, I couldn’t
figure out what front I wanted him to see, and it was making me nervous; I could feel my face
getting red.

“But you want me out of your life, don’t you?” he clarified. “So that you can be free of all
that, from back when.”

“I...” I took a breath and looked off, gingerly laying a hand against the base of my neck. “I...don’t want that. But...I just, don’t. Understand...—Why.” My whole body was locking up as the words formed in my mind; even the tremors in my limbs were fighting for attention with how my vocal chords and jaw were tightening.

My mind didn’t want to remember this. Didn’t want me to go there, for all the months of darkness and danger to myself it would bring.

But I forced myself to take a deep breath, to reach into the safe in my mind and turn the dial before I could convince myself to stop for the sake of avoiding the trap inside. I turned my head toward Zenigata, trying to get it out, but couldn’t seem to get my eyes to look at him. In my lap, I clasped my hands, my thumbs weakly, repeatedly massaging over each other. I stared at that instead, using the white of the blankets to keep the dark of that basement chamber away.

“The information you sent me to uncover in Donatello’s organization...that you wanted me to infiltrate his ring for....” Finally, this much done, I managed to look at the man beside me, though only his knees. The words started coming out faster; too fast, warbling like my limbs shook: “Was for her sake, wasn’t it? To make sure you could blackmail him to get away, yeah? And in Monaco, you talked about a redhead. And now this...”

I sighed and gazed at the door.

It hurt. It hurt to admit let alone say out loud. But that hurt, and that anger, finally allowed me to land my eyes on his:

“Did you ever care about me at all?”

My voice had faded to be pathetically small. I instantly looked down, struck through with a ridiculous need to apologize—for being weak, or distrustful, or whatever I was feeling that I couldn’t quite name. And an apology to him or me, even? I didn’t know. Maybe all of it. But that hurt little kid in me kept bubbling up, wanting to please and hide at the same time. And that kid had to wonder...

“...Or have I always just been a tool to you, too?” I whispered bitterly.

My mouth clamped shut after that, and my body followed suit until it started shivering.

Shut up, you idiot! You know what the answer is, so why do you have to be such a dumbass and let people in on your thoughts? They’ll just use it against you and you’ll feel fucking worse later because you’ve left yourself nowhere to run—

Annoyed at myself, I swallowed hard, forced myself to get out of that treacherous childhood reaction mode, and ran my fingernails over my neck to bring my mind out of that dangerous place. I could feel the trauma coming at me: it was like waves, but ones that crashed against a breaker. It repeated over and over with startling force, kind of like a skipping record making a nasty sound after each iteration of silence. And each time, that moment of silence stole my vision away from me, into the deep. Only that jolt of pain kept me rising to the surface. I’d stopped breathing in between.

“Well, anyway—” I quickly began, frantic to change the subject and get away from these waters.

“No, wait.” Zenigata reached out his hand toward me, stopping me in my tracks. “This is important.”
He sat back and stared penitently at his feet, fists tight on his thighs.

Whether or not he meant it that way, that touch on my knee was all I needed to trip the circuits. The little bit of outside warmth pushed away the darkness infecting my mind like dawning sunlight. All of a sudden, my brain was focused on other things, and while I could feel the waves receding into the distance in my mind, I watched him carefully, letting the information of here and now soak into me, pervade me. Keep me safe.

“I’ve thought about this a lot, actually,” he said, downcast gaze turning mournful. “And I...I’ve been afraid to bring it up to you, because I know this hurts you. But I have no idea how to tell you the truth without it hurting you even more....”

Oh...

He trailed off, but for some reason, what he was saying didn’t hurt as much as I thought it would. It just fell over me like relief, the confirmation of my suspicions all this time. The cognitive dissonance of always trying to catch attention I could never get fell away, and I finished for him softly, respectfully:

“You didn’t actually care, did you.”

I’d simply been wrong from the beginning. And that meant...I didn’t have to be angry at him, anymore, because it had just been a misunderstanding on my part—

“No, that’s not it,” he said quickly, staring at the floor with a glower of frustration that confused me. “I cared about you way more than I wanted to admit. It crossed a line I wasn’t willing to admit to myself, so...every time I almost accepted it, I pulled away from you....”

Oh... So that’s what it is...the hot-and-cold. I ran it through my mind, and it fit. The puzzle pieces fit.

Zenigata had been staring at his hands this whole time, a terribly conflicted look on his face that I’d never seen before, and then, he suddenly stood up, put himself at attention with an intense resolve—

And bowed from the waist at me.

My eyes flew open, and a shiver of a different kind went down my spine.

“You needed me and I failed you. Over and over again. I don’t know if I can ever make up for it, but I am truly sorry, Lupin...whatever your real name is.”

He stayed in that position, stiff and still as a tree trunk. Silently, I drew back—looked around the room to make sure there were no candid cameras—and then hunched in on myself, drawing my good leg up to my chest.

“Th-the thing is...I have something to confess, too,” I mumbled, glancing at him. He was still in that position, and, now sure he was listening, I offered in the thinnest of whispers, “I...regret helping you, back then.”

I was glad he was bent down, because I didn’t think I would have been able to say any of this, if he was looking at me. Still, I thought I saw his eyes flash when I chanced a look, from the way his eyelashes flickered.

“I never should have agreed to help you. I regret it every day, in fact. After what...” I swallowed
hard, fingers twisted together guiltily. But, looking down at them I managed at a whisper, “...that man did to me.”

I swallowed again, rubbed my arms, but it hurt and so did little to erase the memories. I rubbed my throat too; my vocal chords were so tight they refused to work. That was the power That Man still had over me. That bastard I would murder with acid someday.

Outside my vows of destruction, the Inspector’s posture shifted slightly. He relaxed—an idea had hit him, I suspected, and I might as well hear it, if we were going through these motions. When he looked up at me tentatively, a nervous tick of a grin on his face for breaking the pose before he was told to, I jerked my head slightly in Boss Mode, indicating he could get up.

I took a breath as he did so, shaking my head.

“I’m sorry,” I admitted, “But I blame you. That’s the truth of it. Even after all these years, everything about it still hurts.”

“I deserve that,” Zenigata admitted frankly. “But...if I’m honest?” he whispered gently, “It’s not like you to blame people for things, Lupin.”

Some people might be irate at that statement, but it didn’t hit me wrong. I understood what he was getting at—and I wanted it, too.

“I know,” I whispered back, plucking at the sheet idly as I looked at a white spot in the wall ahead of me hollowly. “The betrayal just hurts that badly, because I trusted you just that much.”

And I was still ashamed of it.

*Of being dumb enough to trust you, despite everything I’ve ever learned.*

*Of being able to feel betrayed by you, after all the good things you’ve done for me, too.*

I refused to look at him. It was all I could do to keep the tears from welling up.

Zenigata ran his hand over his mouth—I could see it out of the corner of my eye—and then held his hand over his jaw as he stood tightly beside me, elbow supported by his other arm.

Then, very softly, he lifted his fingers from his mouth and offered:

“You never did tell me what they did to you.”

I closed my eyes and shook my head; it was like the world was falling down on me, quickly drowning me. I forced a breath through my injured lungs and, full well knowing what was going to happen if I spoke even one word of it, turned to him with a broken look and pleaded, “Do I have to?”

I opened my arms, hands up in the sheets, my whole body going weak. “I was their *experiment.* Everything anyone ever did to me as a child and more, everything you could find in a book...he did. And I—” my voice caught and squeaked, and I took a second, tears obscuring my vision, before I went on.

Hot, fat tears spilled down onto my lips when I blinked, one after another painting my disgraceful grief visible. “I lost so much of myself to him, to *them,* and I’ve never been able to get it back. I should have been better than that, but I believed their lies—for just a moment, a minute, an *hour*—and I lost my footing. Footing I’ve never been able to fully get back. They got in, and that’s
why...that’s why it hurts so much. I know it’s not manly, not acceptable, not me... But it does....”

I snorted snot up my nose and gave up trying to be presentable; I put my face in my hands and cried there. Ugly, gross sobs, my body shivering at each memory of that dark place—and the thoughts that plagued me there, scars far worse than the deeds I’d been served.

Zenigata, for his part, sat by me silently, unobtrusively rubbing a hand over my back. It was hesitant, at first, but soon just a gentle reassuring presence through the waves of guilt and sobs. I was too overcome to bother addressing it. I simply couldn’t; there was no strength left in my limbs to push him away.

“I still hear his voice in my dreams. And...and...I think what hurts so much, you know...?”

I looked at him, barely able to see his uncomfortable and worried face through the tears.

“I did it for you,” I pleaded. “From start to finish I did it for you, but you never seemed to notice —”

My voice broke. I gazed up at his face desperately for a moment, but there were too many tears in my eyes to see. “They showed me somebody that looked like you, sounded like you, before, before they took him apart, and then...”

He knew what I was going to say, so I only offered:

“...and then that was when they blinded me.”

I gasped again for air, but after that, I just couldn’t speak anymore; my body was too weak. I wept for several minutes, praying strength would come back into my libs, but it never did. Only the shudders and wracking sobs did. I wouldn’t have been able to hold up a tea bag at this point.

“I made a choice between Donatello and you and I chose you, and I have never regretted anything so much in my entire life....”

But through it all, Zenigata held a hand on my back, my shoulder, silent but supportive.

“Is it so much to ask for a little gratitude for that?” I wailed into my hands, rocking back and forth no matter how much it hurt.

After that, I just cried. Hot and hard, body wracked with pain and guilt and spasms of so many different kinds that I didn’t know what to do.

But through it all, anger and fear drained out of me like blood, leaving a well of sadness, pity, and misery coming up—that had to be cried out too.

“I’m sorry,” I sobbed to him. “I know it’s pathetic, I know I fucked up, but I just can’t hang onto this anymore, I can’t. Please don’t hold it against me for not being able to come through all that unscathed like you needed me to. Like I needed me to—”

“Lupin,” Zenigata offered with a sympathetic tisk, but his voice just made me cry anew.

“But when I needed you, you kept leaving, always leaving, for someone else, something else, while I had to suffer alone again and again like always. Always picking up smaller and smaller pieces of myself until there was nothing left that I recognized...and now look at me, crying in front of you like this...”
Suddenly, Zenigata’s hand on my back transformed. His arm reached around me and pulled me in, and the other one wrapped around my front.

He didn’t say anything, just held me tightly against his chest, gave me something to cling to in the form of his shirt.

“I didn’t deserve that,” I sobbed. “I didn’t, I didn’t.”

“You didn’t,” he agreed into my hair at a whisper. “You deserved so much better than me.”

“And that guy,” I moaned, still unable to get control of my voice, “Who came after Donatello was done, he looked so much like my grandfather, I...he...he corrupted all the good memories I had of him. And I can never get them back....”

Zenigata’s rocking stopped abruptly then, but I didn’t care. I just clung to him and cried in the shelter of his warm, quiet darkness, well aware that it was the only one I had left that could heal me.
Fingerprints

The thing about undercover work was that it wasn’t so much “you and your mission against some bad guys,” but rather, you were one of the bad guys, you just had a bigger, badder boss to report to sometimes. If you had to think about “your cover,” you were doing it wrong, and were well on your way to getting shot.

Normally, this was not a problem for me, but in Venice, everything had gone wrong.

Over a year into my infiltration of the Lupin crime ring, I’d been sent to Venice. The night I’d arrived, I’d gone to the party of one Donatello d’Medici, the local crime lord whose family had a finger in every other syndicate around. I’d gone, officially, to help facilitate a new trade line between his syndicate and the Lupin group; Donatello and Arsene were old friends. But unexpectedly, I’d met Marti, a woman I couldn’t force myself to hurt, no matter how much my cover had called for it. After a string of intrigues that pushed me, her, and the younger Lupin together, I’d conscripted the latter into the cause of saving her as well—though he didn’t know it as such.

What he knew was that he was helping me help a woman I liked. He also knew that he was helping me uncover some black books for his father, under the guise of making sure the backroom, two-syndicate deal really was on the up-and-up. He had no idea these were one in the same, though being a smart cookie, he’d probably put it together at some point.

And then one day, he’d suddenly disappeared.

Specifically, during a costume party that would’ve been the night to do the deepest work.

Normally, in my position, when that happened, you’d think the thing to do was run away immediately. However, there was more than one reason he could’ve disappeared.

He’d been getting awfully close to the Medicis over the months, ever since I’d sent him to them; he’d fit in far better than I’d expected. To the point that I thought he might give up the whole quest, and me and his father as well, to become Donatello’s man.

And his man was a rather fitting phrase. Donatello had also taken a liking to him, so to speak. Lupin kept assuring me he knew what he was getting into, but the deeper he got, the more I was certain he was in over his head. Hell, I’d sent an amateur to do sensitive undercover work; how I thought anything good could have occurred is truly a question of history and my own desperation.

Especially since Lupin appeared to have become Donatello’s kept man.

I tried to extract him at that point, but well, the kid had rebelled. He’d decided to run away from home as it were, and camped out at the Medici’s gilded palace in Venice as their lap dog. I’d learned pretty quickly that no one who went into that mansion ever came out willingly, but his father didn’t give a damn—save perhaps to be strangely jealous—and so was no help, either.

Which brought us to the ill-fated costume party, when he’d suddenly told me it was D-day.

But he’d never shown to the drop. Marti (who was also still caught up with them) could only offer that something had happened in the upper org to set them dangerously astir, but she had no idea what.

Yes, my wolf cub could have gotten caught with his fingers in someone’s backroom safe. But
depending on the arrangement—namely, which one of the two Medicis he had been sleeping with—he definitely could have also gotten his fingers caught in the wrong person. He could have been dead in the bay in tiny pieces by now, nothing to do with me at all. The question then would be whether or not they were going to ever find the body.

And then, well, my mission and I would be safe, while Lupin’s disappearance would be just another one of those tall-tale things that old mafiosi waxed poetic about. I didn’t want that to be the case, especially since I’d still be no closer to helping Marti, but under the circumstances, how was I supposed to investigate it? The only one who physically could was Marti, and that just seemed like a repeat of all my mistakes with Lupin up to that point.

Especially since she’d never met him. The night of the party was supposed to be the one where they finally made contact and ran off together. But as she told it, she’d never run into him but for one masked dance. He’d never returned for the whisking away part, assuming it was even him she’d run into.

And because the best way to get a predator to chase you was to run, she and I stayed silent and still for several tense days, each in our respective cities.

But then, a few days after the party, someone had called Arsene in Paris, where I’d also been at the time. I had no idea what they’d said, but the man had been on the warpath about his errant scion’s behavior ever since—and on a short fuse to boot.

The fact that Lupin was apparently alive was almost immediately obscured in my mind by the security risks that fact created. I’d considered getting out as soon as I’d heard that—if the Pup rolled over on where his safe-cracking orders had come from, I’d be done for—but running was going to be instant mission failure for my actual job.

So I’d slept with one eye open and had an itchy trigger finger for the several weeks after that phone call, but it seemed, so far, I was safe—assuming any of us in Arsene’s org were safe. Donatello’s syndicate was far larger and stronger than his friend Arsene’s, and Arsene himself had been leaning on him to survive. So if Donatello wanted every last one of us dead, it’d happen. That was part of why Arsene was constantly on edge and cursing his son’s existence from time to time: If the younger Lupin had fucked up the two families’ working relationship, his father might just actually get whacked for it too.

And then, one afternoon under this omnipresent and foreboding black cloud, the phone in the bar I’d always hung out in to do business had rung. Guy had handed it to me and I’d gotten a few quick, curt lines:

“Go to this address. Pick up my goddamned son. If there’s anything left of him, I’ll kill him myself.”

There was plenty of reason to think this was just a ruse to lure me out of town to kill me, had Lupin ratted me out, but there was also no particular evidence that such a thing was on the menu. Still, if the Pup had coughed up my name, it was entirely possible this was a trap for me and nothing more. So, as soon as I’d been out of the city, I’d called my support, asked them what to do, and a few hours later, found myself in the mountains north of Venice, escorted to the basement door of a quiet country estate, absolutely certain that I wasn’t going to make it out again alive.

The door itself was solid steel reinforced with large rivets, sitting at the bottom of a steep flight of dirty stairs, ancient stone walls dimly lit. What lay beyond the door was probably once either a
bomb shelter or a wine cellar, or maybe one then the other. The air was cool, enough to make my hair stand on end—and that was before I’d even gone in.

In short, there was no way anyone was getting out of it unless the guy with the key wanted them to.

And that guy....

Was a wiry, grey-haired old man, with a thick grey mustache and goggles on his face.

And not aviator’s goggles, or even welder’s. They were almost certainly a set of tactical night-vision, but a homemade design pared down to be somewhat lower in profile.

He didn’t take them off as he greeted me. He simply looked up at me from behind the lecturn at the top of the stairs as he stood in a white coat and black gloves that went up to the elbows, holding out a second pair of goggles—and a key—to me. His coat was splattered with rusty red in places, as was the key—which was on a ring with a number, just like an old, cheap hotel’s.

“Ready?”

I looked behind me. The villa’s two escorts hadn’t suddenly appeared at my back, and they hadn’t been giving each other telling looks on the way in, either. I glanced at the book between me and the old man, then my hand, then the bottom of the stairs.

There was a large, leather-bound guestbook on the pedestal between us, laid open with a ribbon down the center. Names and dates of visitors on the left, with the name of the person being “picked up” in the middle. And in the right column—fingerprints. Thumb-prints all the way down, made in blood.

“I guess so.” I wiped the last of the blood off my finger from the pinprick, then put my hand on my hip. They’d taken my gun, but I could still be plenty imposing, especially given that my weight far outclassed this old beanpole’s. “You try anything, you’re dead.”

The man was still for a moment too long, and then a slow, deep smile scrawled across his face, under his manicured and bloody mustache. “Oh Mr. Arakawa, I’d never even dream of it. It would be unprofessional of me to hurt anyone other than the patients.”

He set the headgear on its hook beside the door, then took a step back. “But you must be the one to pick him up. House rules—it’s important for the ongoing experiments, you see.”

I had no desire to figure out what he was talking about, but I was pretty damn sure I was going to.

“Can’t you just bring him out to me?”

“I’d rather see his face when he sees you,” he drawled in a whisper that sent a chill down my legs. “I think it’d be more worthwhile...for the study.”

My eye started twitching. I desperately wanted to shove the guy up against a wall and force my will onto him. What he was insinuating—that I’d wander through some pitch-black maze on my own, with him watching on some camera somewhere—couldn’t have been worse.

“I mean, if you don’t want to, you can just leave him. I’m sure there’s a starvation study or two worth doing—”

“No.” This time, my lip twitched as I stared those green goggles down. “I’ll do it.”
But he just watched me back, silently titling his head with a slight but fully amused smile.

I took the second set of goggles out of his hands with a huff and turned toward the door.

*I sure to hell hope you appreciate this, Pup.*

“Tell me again what the procedure here is...?,” I said, looking them over as I went down a few steps—and never letting him too close to me.

“It’s dark in there,” he replied slowly, with a hint of mirth on his voice, as if he were telling a children’s story. “Too dark to see without an aid. So you enter the room beyond this door—the ‘decontamination room’ as it were—where all the lights are turned off until your eyes adjust. Then, you put on the goggles, and you go to the next room.” He tipped his head, smiling warmly—under his weird-looking headgear that obscured his eyes. “Your guy’s in room three-five. It’s on the left, at the end of the first hall.”

It was ridiculous, and I was pretty sure I was going to die, but what else was I going to do—run away? Attack everyone bare-handed, and if that somehow worked, liberate whatever was left of Lupin, and then leave Marti to the wolves?

That line of thinking was how I ended up standing in what I was pretty sure was either a spike trap or a gas chamber, closed steel doors to either side of me, waiting all alone for the blow like a total idiot.

The light buzzing above my head dimmed over about five seconds until it was off—and then I was in what I could only call “the void.”

Silence. Endless, utter silence, in darkness so black that I couldn’t see my hand two inches in front of my face. I might as well have been at the bottom of the ocean.

Weird things happen to you when you’re in complete darkness. You start to hear things. You start to see things, and feel things—none of which are there. And eventually, if you’re unlucky, your primal fear of all that breaks your brain, and you come out a foaming mess. Worked real well in Alcatraz.

Just as I was starting to wonder what the cold feelings creeping along my arms were, the metal door before me popped open—only to reveal another one a few feet in.

It was a second room, just alike to the decontamination one I stood in, as far as I could tell. Maybe for extra protection against light leakage...?

It was dark here too. The doors shut, and then another opened.

It was dark in there, too. Just as insanely dark.

Grudgingly, I put the goggles over my eyes and flipped the switch as I’d been told. And just as he’d said, soon the world came to life.

Once the second door was fully opened, it revealed, courtesy of ghostly shades of grey and green and black, a hallway with no apparent end.

I hung back behind the door. Bricks, the walls looked like. About six feet wide, the hallway. Concrete-and-dirt floor—like I was standing on. And down the way: doors.
About ten doors. Some made of bars, like an old prison. Some solid metal, like the one behind me. One was open.

“In,” coaxed the voice in my ear, just a little excited.

“What a fuckin’ creep,” I muttered, hands readying to attack.

I stalked forward, ready to punch to oblivion the first goddamned carnival spook-house pit-phantom that decided to molest my person.

But the first alcove didn’t hold anyone—it was food. A preparation space, it looked like, and fairly big.

I turned around. Another open archway: It looked like a washing area. Showers, to an innocent eye. More like a meat locker’s drain space and bloodied tubs, to a trained one. Complete with chains hanging from the ceiling, and malicious metal implements resting on the wall. And that was only what I could see through the door.

I lifted the goggles for a moment, determined to find out. But I was met with exactly nothing.

Utterly nothing.

The voice in my ear was silent. Even the place didn’t hum. It was just utterly silent, too.

Last door on the left.

A little more quickly than before, I made my way over to it, tripping on the uneven floor to do so. I was met with a solid door, though one with a single square window in it.

And through that door...

A smaller offshoot hallway. Shorter, narrower, that I would almost have to stoop in. More like a tiny cellar room, with iron-wrought gates at five spokes around it. Looking around, I found an identical door on the opposite wall. Above that door shone a number, either heat sensitive or written in some kind of paint that showed up on the goggles: two.

And over my door: the number three.

Room Three-Five....

I swallowed hard. But I couldn’t turn away now.

I gripped the knob of the door I was supposed to take and turned it. I felt a little tingle in my fingers, like the metal was electrified somehow.

Probably activateable if there are escapees...

Fuck, I didn’t want to find a dead body down here. But I was pretty sure that was what was going to be there: a limb in every room, or something, soon to be my fate as well.

Last door on the left.

There was absolutely no reason I should trust that voice, which had gone mysteriously silent. But indeed, number three was the last door before the hallway curved, and went down some steps to further hells, it looked like.
But I also didn’t have a choice. I was already fucked, but at least I still had my wits, and the guys that could get my corpse if I didn’t surface and flash the signal in three hours. Might as well die knowing the truth of what I’d come here to do, if they were going to lock me in here to freeze to death or something.

So I stepped into the little holding cell, waiting for the door to slam shut behind me, or some blow to accost me from the ceiling.

But it didn’t. There was only silence and darkness and terrible, horrible smells.

Though I had to say, it was warmer in this space. Barely.

Still, there was no sound of anyone or anything. At best there was a distant hum, like water moving through a pipe somewhere. And speaking of pipes...

There were five arched cells around me, indeed like wheel spokes. Each with bars from floor to ceiling as their doors, cut into the brick.

I looked to my left: Nothing.

I looked to my right: Nothing.

I stepped forward, so that the final three would be revealed.

Left: Empty.

Forward: empty.

Right:

Right.

It was definitely a cell, no doubt about that. Barely big enough to fully lie down in; maybe not even.

And in the far corner was a human figure, curled up in a ball. At least, I thought that was what it was.

It looked like a ghost, through the specs. Burning a white-green at the center, but with features blurry and disappearing into the background at the edges, from how it was balled in on itself.

“Lupin...?” I whispered, unable to help myself.

He didn’t respond except to twitch.

I looked back—made sure nothing was coming at me—then pulled out the heavy iron key in my pocket.

But just as soon as I aimed it in the lock, I heard the mechanism unlatch.

Muttering to myself, I looked around and located a camera at the ceiling. The old man hadn’t been kidding about watching all this.

And yet, he still said nothing in my ear.

“If you think I’m going in there, you’re insane,” I whispered at the master of the dungeon. Then,
hissing a little louder: “Lupin. Get your ass out here, you’re saved.”

“...ay.”

I thought I heard something. But I couldn’t make it out.

“C’mon, I don’t have all day—”

“Go away,” came the person’s voice, a little stronger. He—assuming it was a he—still didn’t move. His voice was rasping, creaking. There was something decisively wrong with it, like it’d been pushed to the limit shouting, and now there was hardly anything left.

“Get up. I’m getting out of here.” My own voice brooked no argument, and honestly, held more than a little alarm.

“Please go,” said the hollow whisper. “Please stop haunting me.”

Haun...ting?

In my ear, I thought I heard the man chuckle, just a tiny hiss of breath.

“C’mon,” I said, annoyed. “I’m taking you home.”

Lupin—I was pretty sure it was Lupin, anyway—stayed still as I came in, except to ball up tighter, his arms over his head. When I finally came to stand beside him, he tucked in further, a whimpering noise coming out of his throat. He was shivering noticeably.

And that was when it hit me:

The person I was here to save no longer existed.

This was just a broken, twisted shell, that’d been deformed beyond recognition. And not for any physical reason.

After a while of staring at him, and him shivering at my feet, I found my voice.

“Can you stand?” I asked down at him, a worried hush falling over me. A familiar one, that’d haunted my beat cop days.


For a moment, there was nothing but me and my fears, staring down at this abused lump of flesh, not wanting to admit what I was seeing. What I had caused.

And then the anger came.

“C’mon, get up!” I yelled, grabbing for his arm to yank him up. I missed slightly, given the vision I was working with—and he shoved me away, flailed, panicked. Ended up whacking himself on the head with the bricks, from the sound of it.

I took a breath, checked my surroundings—and watched him shiver.

It was cold down here, and he was naked. The only thing he had in here other than a drain was a bit of cardboard, it seemed like, that he was sitting on.

“You can’t...see me, can you?” I whispered. But of course he couldn’t; there was no light for it.
Lupin made a couple of short, desperate sounds that were more like squeaks of misery than syllables.

“Will you...do what I ask you to?” I wondered down at him, a horrible thought dawning on me.

There were cameras around me. Around us. There was one in the top of his cage, in fact, just out of reach.

Which meant this was a game. Forget experiment, “study”, “research”—this was a game, and I was supposed to figure it out...or probably die trying.

A dark resolve settling over me, I eyed the little figure huddled at my feet that had once been a man.

“Get up,” I commanded, in a whisper much like his captor’s. “You don’t want to disappoint me now, do you?”

That finally got a response.

His hands parted a little. His breath hitched loudly a few times, uncontrollably. His eyes, shining a hollow green in the display, flickered around frantically in my general direction, unfocused.

And then, ever so slowly, he stood.

He had to push his back against the wall to do it, and he stumbled even so.

It’d only be later, back in the light, that I’d find out the extent of the injuries on his body, that barely let him accomplish the task.

I still hadn’t figured out the ones in his mind, to this day.

———— * ————

I closed the door behind me as quietly as I could, given how numb and shaky I was.

For a moment, I just stared at the knob and breathed.

Marti was sitting directly next to me in hallway chair. Making up my mind, I turned to my partner.

The woman I’d saved from Venice, who’d been with me all this time, slowly recovering.

The woman who always greeted me with a smile, every flavor from musing to enticing to cheerful.

She was already watching me expectantly, a probably wholly unread magazine open on her lap.

My eyes lingered on her face, searching over the parts of her I knew so intimately: the curves that greeted me on lonely nights. The quirky hair she pulled when she was nervous. The smile that sat on the edge of her lips, and often migrated to the light in her eyes.

The hopes and dreams she told me about, on nights alone together, be it in a bed or on a boat bench.
And all of that looked up at me, waiting. I sighed inwardly, knowing I was going to pop that beautiful bubble of hers, that I’d so long been hiding in. But I had to tell her for the sake of the job. And as much as I wanted to pretend I could handle everything, if I didn’t do that, it’d wreck our trust as people.

“I know who that man is,” I muttered, emotions muted and distant as I looked down into her pretty face. “The doctor from the basement.” I stared into her hopeful eyes, feeling hollow behind mine. “He’s Donatello’s torturer.”

Marti’s green eyes flashed open wide and stayed there. She became very, very still. In fact, the magazine slid off her lap and clattered to the floor, and she didn’t even move an inch in response.

“...Which one?” she whispered a moment later.

“There’s more than one?” I sputtered, eyebrows instantly pushing down.

“Well...ah...?” she looked around, then twisted a finger through a curl, upon which her whole hand hung anxiously. “He had a way of weaponizing people...you know...” Her voice trailed off, and eventually her terrorized gaze returned to mine for help. “Are you sure...?”

“I’m sure,” I admitted, leaning against the door, my legs suddenly feeling weak. “Very sure.”

“Then...what are we gonna do...?”

I shook my head, uncertain—and then, looking at her concerned face, suddenly dropped to my knees next to her.

I swept her up in an embrace. It was a bear hug, full body, and I clapped my wrists at her back, face planted in the sweet smell of her clothes.

“But I won’t let him hurt either of you ever again. I promise.”

No matter what I have to give up to do it.

* * *

I dragged my fingers through the sheets, eventually swirling the tip of my index finger around in a whirl just to watch the light change. I could hear them talking outside, but this time, it was much softer than before, and so my drained mind put the last of its admittedly impaired processing abilities elsewhere.

“Lupin?” The Inspector asked after I had finally gotten the waterworks to stem somewhat, “Do you remember the days after...”

Here, he paused, looking into my eyes, checking. His hands flexed on my biceps anxiously before he pressed on, “...I rescued you from Donatello’s dungeon?”

I winced at the wording, but it was a surface level wound, because honestly, that was what it was. I swept it away, determined. Most of the memories were fragmented and hazy—delirious darkness more than anything, but... “Yeah?”

“You remember that I was there by your side for...what was it, like a week? How I never left your
I guess...that was true, wasn’t it? Had it really been that long...? All I remembered of those days at the apartment was sleeping on the couch, nightmares, and him trying to glue me back together with Japanese cooking and a knowing sort of camaraderie.

“Why do you think I did that?” he went on now, his hands sliding down until they held mine.

I pulled back reflexively but he didn’t let me go. Frustrated, but trying to listen to him, I took a breath and gritted my teeth. The touch...was calming, if I let it be. After the initial panic, anyway.

And what’s more, being forced to pick something to say aloud cut through the instinctive ideas that were, upon outside inspection, more ludicrous and self-serving—and spiteful. Ones like, “Because I was pathetic” or “Because you had to.”

So I put my effort into thinking back to his face then; how he was watchful, vigilant. Aware but never judgmental. Ever trying to get me to eat, or sleep, or stop screaming from night terrors. And not because it was annoying him and the neighbors, but because he was concerned about what it was doing to me in the longterm.

“You were...worried,” I finally muttered, pulling my hands away and folding my arms. This time, he let me go easily.

Admitting that aloud was both a freeing and dangerous precipice.

Because it meant I’d have a reason to trust him again.

Zenigata nodded, still doing that stoic thing of his. “That you’d do something to take yourself out of this world.”

A little jolt of shame and resignation went through me and came out the other side as anxious guilt. I wasn’t even sure why, but I tensed up, teeth gritted, and stared, annoyed and defensive and hurt, at my blankets.

But Zenigata kindly settled his hand over my knee, melting that cloud of anxiety away. “I don’t want that. Not then, not now. Not any time in between. I care about you, and because I think you’ve got a lot of talents to contribute to the world, I want to see you get the chance to do so to the fullest extent you desire.”

I bit my lip, determined not to cry anew. But it was hard, as I stared down at my hands. The hands that had failed at being worthy of love so many times. What had changed now?

I eyed him shortly, wiped at my tears, then shook my head. “I always thought it was because someone wanted you to make sure I didn’t do anything...unapproved...as retaliation.”

Zenigata snorted and shook his head. “No.” He sighed and patted my leg. “I was protecting you from your father in part too, because I wasn’t sure if he’d come to finish the job to save face. But mostly I just finally admitted to myself that I cared, and took responsibility for it.” He paused. “And I’ll do that now, too, until you’re on your feet again, if you’d like.”

I smirked at him a little—sadly, briefly. “You’ve said that before, you know.”

The man frowned, sympathetic. “I’ve changed, Lupin. I was a negligent commander and an even worse friend. I understand my responsibilities far better now, and aim to live up to them. Would you please give me another chance?”
I sighed and decided to relent. Yelling wasn’t going to change anything at this point. That much was obvious. But: “Until I’m put in prison, you mean.”

“Why?” Zenigata noted slyly, sitting up straight. “You’re a material witness in several major cases.”

My eyes widened, but he only shrugged.

“Think about it, okay?”

I nodded, throat betrayingly tight again. He stood and touched my arm with the back of his hand. “I gotta go talk to Marti for a bit. Be right back. Try to get some sleep, okay?”

“Every time I do, I wake up a day later with someone telling me I’ve almost died.”

“Not this time,” he promised, with a steeliness I desperately wanted to believe. “Not anymore.”

He gazed at the door like he was going to guard it with his life, then the sharp look suddenly snapped over to me for one last consideration as he held the knob.

Our eyes met, and this time, I sent him a thin but determined smile. Nodding at him, I spoke the words I’d long wanted to give him, in a white hospital room like this:

“Come back soon.”

I looked at the picture of the harbor, thinking all this over, and felt just a little warmer this time around, as I hugged my arms against the chill.

Maybe so...

There came a cursory knock at the door before it swiftly swung open, but it wasn’t him who entered.

It was both of them.

I ushered Marti inside, but she had lost all of her usual flare upon the one-two revelation about the old doc and the fact that she’d have to go back in to guard Lupin for a while. Silently, she quickly placed herself in an unobtrusive spot by the window, standing with her hands clasped in front of her. It was a normal gesture, save for the fact that it was her doing it.

Lupin, ever vigilant, immediately noticed this even haggard as he was, but I stepped in between the two and waited, my hands in my pockets as I gazed down at him with an unerring, silent stare.

Lupin looked between us, nervous and ready to run if he could have. But I held up a placating hand, and he was soon sitting a little farther back on his hips, his alarmed gaze turning more cautious than animated, as it settled on me with a laser focus.

“I have to get back to the lobby soon,” I began gently, placing my hand back in my pocket. “I would prefer to stay with you, but for now, your safety comes first, so I have to do a bit more work still. However, I feel I need to do something before I get back to that. I hope you’ll humor me—
both of you.” I gazed back at Marti, but she still looked rather desperate and daunted at the floor. I sighed inwardly. This might not take with either of them, but I still needed to do it, since she was going to be the one watching him from here on out whenever I wasn’t. Turning away from her, I took a breath and screwed up my courage, praying to the gods of hearth and home that they might grant me some leeway. With effort, I unfolded one hand and held it out toward Lupin, in Marti’s view.

“Anna, this is Lupin. He’s an old associate of mine from my undercover days. He’s Arséne’s son, but he’s trustworthy when it matters and mostly honest. He’s still pursuing his criminal career, much to my great aggravation, but he’s good at a variety of slippery things, and very smart. You can trust him to take care of you when I’m not available.”

Lupin’s face went from confused to sputtering to touched in the span of those few short sentences. It was almost comedic, but at least I could be sure that the information was getting in. Feeling eminently foolish, I sighed and switched hands, this time gesturing toward Marti. “Lupin, this is Anna. I love her.”

I had a whole paragraph of explanation readied, but for some reason my mouth—and my heart—stopped there. But in retrospect, there wasn’t much else that needed to be said, really.

After thinking about this a second, I cleared my throat, ready to move on, but Marti and Lupin were both looking at me like the world was ending, though Lupin was perhaps a little more dubious.

“Wh-what’s with those looks, you two? P-please...get them off your faces? You both look like I’m breaking up with you....”

Marti blinked rapidly, looking at the floor like she was holding back tears, and Lupin, meanwhile, steeled his face and stared at his knees, looking daunted.

They were so alike sometimes, these two...

Seemed like a pair of school kids being punished, though. How did I end up here, of all places? This was the last thing I wanted.

Anyway,” I said, looking at the ceiling for strength, “I have something to explain before I go. Here, please sit.”

I waved at Marti and she brought over a chair as I took the stool. I hooked my feet on the crossbar and folded my hands neatly in my lap as I looked Lupin square in the eyes. He was watching me intently, gaunt bruises and all. Still, that was a small pain, to be able to see the intelligent and sensitive soul in his eyes once more, considering what could have been.

“I extracted Anna out of Donatello’s syndicate with your help. I came across her unexpectedly on my first night in Venice and she would have been executed if I hadn’t managed to do so. We barely made it out by the skin of our teeth as it was, so thank you for your assistance in that. She’s alive today because of you.”

Lupin’s mouth tightened into a line. But he swallowed whatever he was going to say and nodded once, gaze firm.

“I extracted Anna out of Donatello’s syndicate with your help. I came across her unexpectedly on my first night in Venice and she would have been executed if I hadn’t managed to do so. We barely made it out by the skin of our teeth as it was, so thank you for your assistance in that. She’s alive today because of you.”

Lupin’s mouth tightened into a line. But he swallowed whatever he was going to say and nodded once, gaze firm.

“Anna was also instrumental in saving you from Donatello, so she was not merely an extraction by the end of things. She proved her mettle time and again, and I became quite fond of her as we worked together. Our personal relationship has been off-and-on since then. Intermitten}
I turned to her, and she nodded softly after a moment of looking at me rather wildly. “Y-yeah...”

I nodded, willing to let her distress go for a bit in favor of more pressing matters—though she was clearly close to the edge. “In Monaco, she and I lived together in a safe house, while I visited you. It...” I sighed, running my hand over my scalp as I gazed at the floor. “It was one of the happiest times in my life, and it helped me become a better man—see what was really important to me and become the person I am today. The better person I am today. But the cost of that was that Donatello financed the whole thing.”

Lupin’s eyes widened in alarm. A quick breath sucked into his lungs, through his nose.

I dropped my hand into my lap and gazed at him hard. “Yes—he knew the whole time where we were, and he was okay with it, I guess, because it allowed you two to stay alive and away from Miranda. But...” I gazed at Marti.

“Once Miranda was attacked, he went off-kilter and his priorities shifted,” she reported mechanically, never once looking up from her knees.

I wrapped an arm around her shoulders and continued, despite Lupin’s mildly hurt look at the gesture, “I left you so abruptly the way I did because...because Donatello took her and I thought that, if I didn’t leave on the very next train, she’d be dead.”

“Yes,” I agreed, squeezing her shoulder briefly before turning back to Lupin. “That was his ultimatum, and I wasn’t thinking straight because of it. I was panicking. But I made the choice between her and you because...well, to be honest, I could only be in one place at a time and you at least had nurses to guard you, someone watching you every day. And if I lost her right then, well...I would’ve been no good to you, anyway.”

Silence reigned. Lupin made no noise, only listened on in shock with a rotating rainbow of emotions on his face, subtle but ever changing the lines etched into his skin.

“It was a game to him,” Marti added into the silence, pulling her arms to her chest and folding them—then gripping at her sleeves as she did so. “Split people up and threaten the both, to see who would devote more loyalty to him.” She shook her head bitterly. “Just because he could.”

“I know,” Lupin whispered softly after a moment, rather unexpectedly. “He visited me.”

It was my turn to suck in a breath, hackles raising. “He what?” I demanded, more icily than I would have liked.

But this didn’t elicit a reaction from Lupin—at least, not one I got to be privy to. Instead, his head bowed slightly and he stared at a point in space between him and me with great intensity. I waited, but when he did nothing more than that, I quickly added, just in case it was important to distract him:

“It was a mistake not to tell you. Everything. You deserved to know. I thought I was doing the right thing, but I was mistaken.” On my thighs, my hands gripped my slacks, and my voice soon turned somber. “I kept trying to protect you, but instead kept putting you in danger by treating you like a child. I should have trusted you. You were the most trustable man there, and I could never see that.” I pursed my lips and bowed my head. “I’m sorry for abandoning you. So very sorry.”
Lupin continued to give a crack in the floor the thousand yard stare of death. As I lifted my head, I found his gaze flickering, like a hard drive flipping switches. I looked at Marti, but she shrugged slightly.

“What is it?” I asked softly. “What is that look?”

Lupin’s eyes never wavered from their spot. But after a moment, he shook his head with an eerie smoothness—it was nothing to discuss, apparently.

I looked for Marti’s opinion. She frowned at me, concerned, and then turned back to Lupin, the same brow wrinkle on her face that I was sporting.

“You all right?” I eyed him. Still with the thousand-yard stare, he nodded.

Taking a breath, I decided not to crack open whatever he was thinking about so hard—it seemed like the kind of thing that, if I inquired further, he’d just snap at me irritably, possibly worse. And that wasn’t the point of this endeavor, so I shuffled the questions away and continued cautiously, “I couldn’t contact you. It wasn’t safe, even when I had the means, which was rarely. I came back as soon as I could, soon as things were safe for all of us again, but you were already gone. And I grieve that fact, every day. Because I let you down. I lost you. You have every right to be disappointed in me for that, but I hope you at least understand now, and won’t take it out on her—or yourself.”

Lupin hummed and sat up a little straighter. His eyes moved off the floor, a little more alert now, to search around the sheets deep in thought—which was both reassuring and troubling at the same time. I waited to see if another episode was coming from him, but when it didn’t, I added with a faltering breath,

“But I want you two to know: I care about you. Both of you. Deeply.” I turned to Marti and threaded my fingers through hers, then pulled Lupin’s hand up into my other and squeezed them both. “Neither of you is losing your place to the other. I don’t expect you to get along, but I do think you could like each other, so I expect you to at least try, for my sake—and your own. You’re both good people with lots of admirable traits. So if you try and can’t...well, we’ll cross that bridge when we get to it. But in the mean time, Lupin, please apologize to Marti for threatening her and Marti, please try to accept it. Now...I need to get back out there to keep shielding you two, but Lupin...”

I paused there, and Lupin looked up, finally alert again. “Now that you’re awake again, I hope that you’ll be willing to help out with that.”

Lupin’s intelligent blue eyes, terribly vulnerable, transformed into the hardness of sapphires, and below them, a tiny smile crooked up on his lips. “Yeah. I’m not going anywhere.”

A smirk twitched at the edge of my lips as well. “And Marti?”

“Yeah?” she asked, those kind green eyes gazing up at me with eminent suffering.

“You gonna be okay?”

She took a breath, pursed her lips, and glanced at the window. “Gonna try,” she admitted, tipping her head up, then tossing her hair over her shoulder.

Lupin looked between us with a question on his strung-out face, but I stood up without answering it. “I’m glad you’re alive, Lupin.” His attention fully on me for once, I let that sit, then added, “We’ve still got a lot to talk about, but...I need to get back to work for now. Be good to her...and
yourself, okay?”

Lupin’s eyes grew big. After his face turned a little red, he turned away and nodded, rubbing at his neck.

“I get you, old man. ‘S cool.”

“Good.” I swatted him on the shoulder, gave Marti’s a reassuring clasp, and then headed for the door. “Call if you need me, and don’t let anyone in this room other than me.”
I’m finally done working 60-80 hours a week! 8D You might actually get semi-regular chapter updates again! A year later

This part was very hard for me; it’s fairly unfamiliar writing territory. I hope it’s not too messy!

“I chose you over him and I regret that every day of my life.”

I walked back to the lobby with my hands in my pockets, considering what to do. It seemed I’d gotten Lupin’s emotional state knitted back together enough for now, and a few doors had opened too—though they revealed some things I wasn’t entirely prepared for, like that bombshell.

“Is it so much to ask for a little gratitude for that?”

I never thought I’d see the day where he was crying in front of me—and certainly not because he’d been talking about torture, reduced back down to that kid who just wanted someone to care that he was alive.

I’d seen that kid every once in a while, in that warm, dark Paris watering hole when Lupin had had one too many glasses of wine and gotten all touchy-feely about something or another, or too despondent about how his real father was treating him. Those times, it’d become clear as day in his posture, his face, his telling pauses—and when his eyes turned my way, I’d invariably shut him down about it.

God, I’d really fucked that up, hadn’t I?

But at the time, you were focused on your mission; you didn’t have the ability to help him. Not really.

...Right?

That was true, up until the point where it turned into a lie to ameliorate my guilt. I definitely could have helped him a little more than I did, back then. But I also knew all that already; had beaten myself up over it for years. At least I’d finally gotten the chance to admit it to him, and he’d seemed receptive about hearing it.

And I guess...the thing that was really hurting him was disappearing on him in Monaco, not anything else. The preceding elements were no doubt issues, but perhaps less scarring than I’d thought. If given a chance, everything would probably come out like layers of an onion, but Monaco seemed to be the knife to the heart for him.

Which was understandable, I supposed. But luckily for me, the hurt in question had been caused primarily by a situational issue. In theory, apologies and explanations could accomplish most of the
heavy lifting in regards to moving forward, if given enough time.

And that was the hard thing—keeping him around and open-hearted. I’d have to make good on my promise and be there for him, even though he was currently being suspected of a terrorist bombing, mentally unstable, and utterly unable to walk.

I sighed.

As the black-and-white hexagonal tiles went by under my feet, all I could feel was the heavy burden of fixing him, of fixing us, of fixing this. And then there was Marti, too....

_I hope they can get along, despite it all._

If he’d figured out on his own about her coming from the Venice days, and Donatello’s house of horrors to boot, then sure, he’d have reason to suspect her being a plant that was out to get him; hell, even perhaps a sleeper cell that was out to get _me_ at the opportune time for the Medici family.

But I could hope that my explanation had cut that off at the pass. As far as Marti being afraid of him...she certainly had reason to be: He was charming and physically unimposing, but he could also be intimidating when he wanted to; when adding in his illicit dealings, all together that created a profile that made him everything she’d come to fear from men.

However, I hoped that once they both realized they were victims of the same situation, they’d cool off a bit about thinking each was a threat to the other.

I let out a heavy breath as some potted plants went by the deserted, moodily-lit hallway. Perky plants, despite the lack of direct sunlight, clearly getting along much better than my charges.

Marti and Lupin really did have a lot in common, though none of it was any good. That could be more of a hindrance than a help, depending. And really, none of it was territory I could delve into; it was their burden and their suffering, and I had no frame of reference for truly understanding what they needed to overcome it. All I could do was hold bodies, reassure minds, and offer to beat people up.

But it was _also_ looking like he was getting a little jealous of her. Maybe it was something that would evaporate once the stress was off, something I wouldn’t have to address any more than I just did in there; but those looks of hurt on his face every time I pulled Marti close a few moments ago were like a little kid thinking he was being replaced by a step-mom...

Or a lover, getting told their relationship was over.

It was unlikely he looked at me like that, but even still, it made sense that he might look at his relationships though that lens: Kept men and women tended to get highly territorial over their patrons’ meager attentions. Which, in this case...would now be me.

I sighed again. _Fuck. This is going to be convoluted, if it devolves into that...._

And Marti wouldn’t be able to help me navigate that quagmire much either, because she’d be so caught up in it herself. I fit that exact same mold for her, too.

I rubbed my face briskly with a growl, chasing away all the bad advice I’d gotten from fellow cops over the years about how to deal with the cattiness of prostitutes and professional sex workers.

Marti and Lupin were neither of those things—they were victims of trauma, abuse—but both had been pulled into something like sex work one way or another in their adult lives, from the _same man_, so that was all my tired brain was dredging up about how to handle this tension.
And if my suspicions were correct, it was a pattern that may have roots all the way into Lupin’s childhood, too...

It sure would explain a lot about the cruise ship thing, where he’d actually propositioned me. I groaned and rubbed my browline as I walked.

I didn’t think I’d been wrong about how he’d looked at me in Paris—more as a parental figure than anything else—but then again, given the possibilities we were staring down, that didn’t mean much.

_Fuck, I don’t like where this is going._

After all, Donatello had been twice his age....

And Jigen was a lot older than him too, according to his admittedly sparse rap sheet details...

There had to have been _someone_ taking advantage of him when he was younger. Someone much older, and male, and a care-giver—possibly a father-figure. Plus, he’d all but admitted he’d been assaulted in Donatello’s dungeon. So...

I really hoped he didn’t want anything like that from me.

_There has to be a book about this I can read... Maybe, once we get back to Lyon, the staff shrink can help me out...?_

It wasn’t like I was into men at all, so it wouldn’t be hard to set him straight about that, if he were getting his signals crossed from what he’d experienced in the past. I wanted to tell myself I’d never gotten that vibe from him, either, that it was more just a helpless waif looking for a parent sort of thing, and most of the time, it was. But there were definitely a few drunken nights where I’d walked him home and he’d given me a strangely wanting look or two, when he'd been feeling sorry for himself.

_God, this could get really complicated. Especially if Marti started to wonder, or get jealous, or something..._

She was a wonderful human being, but her patience and trust would only go so far, as with anyone. And that patience could have a rather short fuse, when she was particularly stressed.

Dammit, this was turning into a huge mess. But what was I expecting? You couldn’t just adopt random people off the street and assume everything would be easy, especially at-risk ones. Even if you _did_ have a history together.

_I guess...I was just hoping he was a little less broken. Hurt, but not so utterly fucked up...._

Not that that would change how I felt about him, but it just meant I’d have to adjust my plans a lot, if I wanted to be in it for the long haul.

Which I did. I owed it to him, and myself, to really try.

Besides, giving up would have made everything between then and now for nothing. And I wanted to believe I’d learned something since then.

Reaching the fire door, I stopped for a moment to think. I ran my hand over my jaw heavily.
Regardless, it looked like Lupin’s sense of hurt went far deeper than I’d realized. He’d trusted me a lot more, and I’d hurt him a lot more, than I’d suspected. It was no wonder he was angry...he felt betrayed down to the deepest levels. Levels I would no doubt hear more about, probably at high decibels, the further I peeled down the onion.

But it looked like he was still willing to let me do that. The opportunity was slim, the door open just the tiniest crack. I might not get another chance, so I couldn’t burn the bridge this time. I’d have to be exceedingly careful with him, especially given his current mental strain.

...Whatever it was.

I still didn’t know, did I? What made him wig out about hospitals like this.

Oh, the fact that this stint in hospital bed apparently reminded him of Monaco made him antsy and angry, certainly. I could understand that, given what he’d elucidated just now. But what was making him have these flashbacks? I still had no idea.

And what’s more...

I set my hand on the door’s latch-bar.

There’s still the issue of Angela.

The place was thoroughly searched, mostly by people I couldn’t trust. Even after everything, I had no guarantee she wasn’t still around somewhere. That was unlikely—she’d probably run—but damn, either way, Lupin’s room was never going to be secure unless I was sitting outside it, and Marti within.

Which meant my investigations had to wrap up now, or we probably weren’t getting out of here alive.

I sighed and went through the doors, to the stairs. His bloodstains were still on the floor, days old as they were, since the cleaning staff wasn’t around. I tried not to notice them at first, but then decided that I needed to take a moment to respect them.

Lupin had lost, because of me. Lost blood. Lost faith. Lost a connection that meant something to him. I owed him a hell of a lot, for that.

And when I hadn’t been around...he’d tried to kill himself, huh? Back when...

And maybe now too...

“Satoru all over again, huh?” I muttered, running a hand over my face. When will I ever stop making these mistakes?

Admittedly, it was looking unlikely that he’d hurt himself, since more facts and stories pointed toward an intruder—including his own story, which didn’t have any inconsistencies with the rest. But the story all that wove was a hard pill to swallow—that I’d fucked up our security that badly, when both he and Marti were in vulnerable spots.

God, what a mess...

But I guessed it was better than the idea that I’d failed yet another person so badly that they’d tried
to die.

After gazing at the dried blood a bit, I sighed and headed down the hundred-year-old staircase, mulling over my possibilities, trying to use logic to keep the rage at everything else at bay.

Christina and Christof could have both been in on it, either separately or together. Kyle had the flimsiest alibi. Any of the hospital staff had potential motive, and hell, Lupin could even have been working with his assailant, and something had gone wrong. There was really no way to know the truth without more evidence, which I couldn’t gather without a computer and a lot of time.

And then there was the old doctor.

Martinique. I growled it through my head, trying to recall if I’d ever heard his name back when. I didn’t think so; he’d only had titles. Which meant this was almost certainly not his real name.

If he was who I thought he was—which was still a very big if—I’d have to tread lightly here. Revealing his identity could put everyone in danger, including his coworkers; put last-ditch plans into motion. But not doing so, similarly, could cause plans already in motion to just keep going without a moment of pause.

So what did that leave me with, to keep our collective bacons from being cooked? Myself, sleep deprived and overwhelmed; Marti, now a nervous wreck; and Lupin, all of the above and strung-out too, plus broken in something like six physical and emotional places.

As much as I wanted to pretend today that I was a detective doing detective work and trying to keep his suspect healthy until he could talk, at this point, it was looking like we were under siege. Which meant I needed to go into crisis mode, and get us all the hell out of here as soon as possible, concerns about Lupin’s mental state, and our ongoing relationship problems, be damned.

But I’d been through so much the last few days—first the bombing, then the sudden eruption of blood and hours-long surgery, then this possible-suicide business; not to mention attending to the emotional roller coaster that was Lupin, Marti, and the bureaucratic threats—all on about eighteen hours of fragmented sleep... At this point, I knew I was missing things, slipping up. I wasn’t confident in my ability to stay awake much longer, let alone put all the clues together without missing something. Even my body was giving out on me, being jittery and weak at times.

In other words, we were on our last legs as a team.

Making it into the lobby, I looked around with a sigh. It was about six PM now, Boxing Day. It was getting dark outside the windows, the kind of pitch-black that comes before the moon is up. In the yellow fluorescents, Christof, Kyle, and the navy lieutenant were playing cards, while Nadia sat at her desk doing paperwork and Christina was curled up in a plush chair sleeping. The old doc was still in the phone room; I could see him through the open door.

Him. The chill immediately went down my spine, and landed in my gut as a burning fire.

I clenched my fists and my jaw as I watched him.

It was rather surprising that he was still in there, but I supposed I hadn’t actually dismissed him, either. Maybe the others were riffraff beneath him, not to be mingled with; or the chairs in there provided him better support. Who was to say, but knowing what I did about him now, he liked following rules—and hurting people with them.
I stared at him long enough that he caught me at it. He smiled at me from across the room, waving slightly.

I glared and turned to Nadia, holding up the cell phone from my pocket. “I’m going to make a few calls, then finish this up. Don’t let anyone out of your sight.”

She raised an eyebrow, frowning, but then shrugged long-sufferingly. “As you wish. Try to be quick about it, though, all right? I can’t be responsible for hungry officers.”

“Roger that, Ma’am.”

She sighed, but then rolled her eyes and went back to her work.

“Don’t make any calls,” I snapped at the doctor as I went by, barely able to contain myself from walking over there and beating him senseless.

I looked him over intently as I went by, careful to memorize features. He watched me back silently, and once he was eclipsed by the wall, I headed down toward the fire escape, never once looking back.

* * *

“I’m glad you’re alive, Lupin.”

The room was quiet after the Inspector left. Oppressively quiet, given that Marti was still standing just a couple feet from me and my heart was swirling with a storm of emotion. We gazed after his back still and silent as stone, each lost in our own little worlds.

But for my part, it wasn’t a bad feeling.

*He bowed at me. From the waist.*

As the enormity of that act settled onto my shoulders, a similarly heavy hush fell over my heart.

Such an act was more than I could have ever expected, something that was practically taboo, given that I was a criminal and he was a cop.

*He apologized to me, admitted to shameful behavior that he should have known enough to avoid....*

Coming from such a staunchly hierarchical life as his, drilled with Japan’s rule-abiding culture from his youngest days, it was like I’d just witnessed Heaven and Earth move.

If I were a Japanese person, now that he’d taken responsibility for such a blight on his honor, I’d be expected to forgive him, and move toward a solution together.

But I was only half Japanese, so I was okay with leaving part of my forgiveness on the back burner.

And yet...

*Still, that couldn’t have been easy for him.* It was potentially life-altering, even.

My eyes flicked over to the painting of Monaco harbor, then at Marti, who was gazing at the door
he’d shut a moment ago.

And he said the reason he left was because of her?

No...because of Donatello.

I narrowed my eyes.

Threatening both me and her...

Marti chose that moment to look back at me, and she visibly startled. Politely, I turned away. My gaze ended up falling on my injured leg. My fingers slowly drifted over the bandages, under the sheets.

So he was protecting me, the whole time...? Protecting us?

He hadn’t left at all. He was just doing his job elsewhere; had put his life on the line for months, for the people he cared about.

Like I’d originally thought, but never let myself truly believe. Because I’d been so hung up about being—

Annoyingly, I could feel heat rising in my face.

Yeah, about being that.

And so all these years...all these years that I’ve spent years wanting to shout my hurt out at him, he’s been circling around trying to get me to listen.... No wonder he wouldn’t let things go; to him, there was never a schism to begin with, and he wants to continue where we left off...

I touched at the tears welling in my eyes, quickly brushing them away. I didn’t want anyone else to see me cry today, even if it was only Marti.

And really, what was I even doing, worrying about her? It was clear as day that she liked him honestly and adoringly. If they’d been together off-and-on for six years, there was less chance that she was a sleeper cell and more chance that if the underworld found her, they’d simply pressure her in order to get to him and me. In which case, I could probably make her a better offer before the knife fell, and simply talking to her would elucidate that, given the type of personality she’d shown me so far.

Heh, I’m really messed up, aren’t I, suspecting perfectly normal people of spy-level deceipts like it’s a regular occurrence?...

Honestly, chances were they’d just kill the two of them and torture me; that was their MO. So I should just appreciate her effervescence in the mean time.

I’d come into this assuming the Widow was Donatello’s deadly spider even now, but maybe, just like with me, the truth had been a little less than the darkly beautiful tale he’d spun.

After all, Donatello and Miranda had set me up with multiple aliases in their rumor mill to make his enemies think his ranks had suddenly swelled with numerous full-time pawns. But really, it’d just been me living in his attic, sharing a few pleasures here and there and working out some puzzles to stay busy—and to please him.

Zenigata, on the other hand, was hardly the type of person to make someone pay their way into his
friendship, and I doubted the woman he would fall for would be an untrustworthy sort, either.

I ran my hand over my stubble, sighing.

Maybe he really did know a thing or two about people...

So if what Zenigata said was true—which seemed quite likely, given the way he’d told it—I had a few things to apologize for myself.

That also meant I was in much less danger than I’d thought, because at least I had the two of them to lean on... Though I had to protect them from my past catching up to me.

However. It hardly made up for everything between him and I.

He was right—there were a lot of things left to address. Like the ballroom fire, the nights in Paris, Marti, and the years between. Why he hadn’t just come out and said any of this before. There were a lot of things left that might well be unforgivable in the long run.

But...

“I love her.”

“I care about both you, deeply.”

“Neither of you is losing your place to the other.”

The important thing was that I had a place.

And a choice.

I’d never had either of those before. Not about something like this.

“If you want me out of your life, I’ll go.”

He’d said it: That I had a choice to leave his life or to stay.

I’d already told him I didn’t want him to leave, if off-handedly, so...he might stick around, if I played my cards right. If I wanted it.

And I...

“You’re a witness in several major cases...”

I...

A murky heat rose into my chest, and I wasn’t sure what it was.

Warm, as pleasant as it was painful. Guilty as it was happy. Floaty on top, but heavy pangs down deep.

God, what an idiot....

Listening to that feeling, it kind of sounded like...gratitude.

Don’t you know I can never go straight?

And underneath, there whispered something else. Something heavier.
Jigen would never let me.

Something like...

Neither would my grandfather.

...Regret.

I stared down at the sheets, suddenly feeling very heavy.

You bastard, making me feel like this. You definitely got the check-mate move on me, this time around.

But even so, I smiled down at the sheets as I started to cry again.

This time, I just hid my face behind my hands and let it quietly come.

* * *

Out on the fire escape, the lights were sparkling across the water, almost like a Kinkade painting. The stars were out, but the air, and the salty wind, made it a cold view.

That man...

I never thought I’d see him again. But here he was.

There was no doubt in my mind; that had to be him. Had to be what his eyes looked like.

How had I not noticed that before? How?

I took a drag on my cigarette, letting the crystalline smoke blow out over the railing.

God, I was tired, and it was really showing.

I’d figured he’d gone down with the syndicates, or run. The place had been empty when it was finally raided.

But it seemed he hadn’t run far.

This can’t be a coincidence, I thought with a growl. What the hell were you plotting, Lupin?

And yet, he hadn’t known we were coming here. His heist had nothing to do with this hospital. Hell, I hadn’t known we were coming here, until there was that explosion....

Maybe that was why there was an explosion in the first place? Mass casualties to fill up the normal hospitals, and get him sent here?

I shook my head quickly. No; that was a lot of work for too much left to chance. This was the absolute last hospital I would have taken him to, if there had been any other choice. No one could have reasonably expected to route us here, Lupin or local, even with a ton of casualties, because who would have expected Lupin to get caught, heavily injured, in the first place?

Unless...he was just hoping to get sent to some hospital, somewhere, because the old man does
stints at each hospital, and thus could have answered the call to whichever one he ended up at?...

That was a chilling prospect, and one that was easy enough to investigate, were I not stuck here with no one on the other end of the line around to pick up a phone.

It was all disturbingly plausible, if one cared very little about one’s own life, but still, what that didn’t add up to was Angela. How did she fit into all this? Were they working together...? Was she still here?

Lupin couldn’t have known her, at least not in the same was as the doc, because he had no reaction to her either time. Plus, she was Lupin’s age...

I sighed and pulled out my flip-phone from my pocket. Took my cold fingers and punched in the number for my boss’s emergency phone.

One ring, two...

And then an answering machine.

“Hey,” I began gruffly, “It’s Zenigata. I need an extraction team, asap. I’m getting pressure form the locals six ways from Sunday, I’m basically being held hostage by bureaucratic nonsense, and I think someone just tried to kill my suspect. If you don’t want me or him to die, please send someone in the next couple hours or call me back.”

I hung up and resisted the urge to throw the thing out into the water.

“Dammit.”

I huffed and took an angry drag on my cigarette, quickly pulling tobacco through nervous veins. It helped a little, but the edge was slow in coming off. Every time I closed my eyes, my tired mind focused on something horrible: Blood smeared across white tiles. Lupin’s pallid face under my hands as I performed chest compressions. Marti’s twisted tears. My own sobbing as Marti gently rubbed my shoulders. That old bastard in the phone room.

Frustrated and wanting to clear my head before I fully dug into the matter of Martinique, I hefted up my phone and dialed Jacques’ number. It wasn’t so late that he’d be at dinner yet, if he’d indeed gone home; and if not, he might still have been working.

He picked up on the third ring: “French Regional Commission, Coroner Jacques speaking.”

It wasn’t the best situation to call someone on Christmas to chat about corpses, obviously, but once the phone picked up, I found him more than willing to talk, though he sounded tired.

“Evening, Jacques. It’s Zenigata. How’s the cleanup and identification going?”

He sighed. “Still going. Used some scent dogs, but haven’t found anything but parts at this point. Aren’t people keeping you apprised?”

“Nope.”

“Why not?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“Well...all right. Um...I don’t think there’s anyone else down there alive. The rubble’s all frozen, so it’s impossible to get through. They brought out some massive heat fans, and locals came out to
help, but it’s slow going. There’s really nothing individual people can do at this point. Rather putting a pallor on Christmas, truth be told.”

A moment of silence went by.

“And...the bodies? What have you found?”

“Same as before. Women of all different races, but mostly young.”

I nodded with a grunt, and put the chill wind at my back, shielding the receiver with my hand.

“But no identification. No one’s come forward to claim anyone in the building.”

“...What?”

“Yeah. The local cops are taking statements from neighbors, but somehow none of them are getting filed. Or if they are...I haven’t seen them.”

“...Are you serious?”

“Very.”

I swallowed hard. That meant—

“I can’t get too much closer to it without raising red flags, friend.”

—They were trying to cover it up.

“...So what about the building ownership?”

I could hear him shrug across the line. “That paperwork is mysteriously missing. But I’ll tell you: That theater...was a dinner theater and cat house for many years, until the woman who owned it disappeared. Then it became a mob joint. So says the local water heater talk.”

“...A mob joint?”

So that’s what it was? What Lupin was trying to show me?

“Do you know which outfit?” I asked heatedly.

“No. Well, though...here’s the weird thing. I was told it wasn’t French. It was an Italian branch.”

“...Italian?” What the hell? Here? “How did the local gangs allow that?”

“Well, I’m told there are no local gangs. Haven’t been for years. The Chinese got taken down a long time ago.... When this police commissioner came to power. He apparently knew everyone in the org, somehow. Said it was from his undercover work, and that was why they promoted him here, but...” Jacques did the verbal equivalent of a shrug.

“And he’s been the commissioner all these years? After doing something that brazen?”

How was he even still alive?

“Uh huh.”

“But the Italian branch is still around, hale and hearty?”
“...Yup.”

Police Commissioner Carlotto Ciriatto. The most Italian name I’d heard in France in years.

This...was very bad.

Or rather...it had always been bad; I’d simply just now discovered that there was no earth beneath the bridge I was spanning. Just a giant, black chasm. And the bridge was a worn-out old tangle of rope on its last legs.

“...So who was the woman who owned the building before?” I asked.

“Dunno. They couldn’t remember, or didn’t know. It was a younger guy, said he’d heard it from the older folks. Though...actually. If you want, I’ve got a friend here I could ask about it. An old social worker, Noel; she’s been working here pretty much forever. She might know.”

“Do that, that’ll be a help.”

“No problem. But now...I’m gonna go home for the night. It’s getting dark out, and I’m exhausted.”

That it was. The sunset was long gone, and the only thing that kept the stars at bay was the search lights beaming into the heavens across the water like angel wings.

“The roads clear in your part of town?” I asked before he could hang up.


“It’s not.”

“Well...Jeez. I guess you’re on the peninsula but...that seems strange. Maybe the base doesn’t mind having only boats?”

“It may be more than that,” I advised. “But don’t worry about it. You’ve done enough, Jacques. Stay out of trouble.”

“I hope that’s true. You stay safe out there to, Koichi. I’ll call you after I hit up Noel.”

“Thank you.” I nodded into the phone, then, realizing he couldn’t pick up on that, gave a grunt. “You too. Call me as soon as you find out, no matter how late it is.”

“Roger.”

With that he hung up; I followed suit.

Italians. In the northernmost city in France, a stone’s throw to Britain and Belgium.

The one thing that could mean was trafficking. Probably human. I’d bet anything on it.

So what the hell was Lupin doing with all that?

If that doctor was who I thought he was, it was entirely possible that Lupin was trying to ensnare him, but again, Lupin had no idea that he’d be taken to this hospital, and the heist had nothing, at least on the surface, to do with him or this place.

But then again, it couldn’t have just been some horrible coincidence, either. Not with Marti here,
too.

So, possibility one: He’d incidentally visited the cathouse (“apartment building”) here in Dunkirk and discovered it was trafficked women, and so decided to do a hit there and call me in alongside it, to shine some light on the place?

I thought about it for a moment, then shook my head.

No, his hits were bigger than that. There’d be some bigger reason, otherwise he’d just tip off the locals and it wouldn’t have taken him eight months.

Unless all the locals were in on it. Then, possibly, he’d orchestrated this bombing specifically to take the locals out of it. But why not just call the feds? Was there corruption up to that level too?

That could explain who planted the explosives. But it didn’t explain the need for such a drastic measure. A little bit of prostitution, even human trafficking prostitution, did not warrant that.

So, option two: He’d come by to steal some artifact and bring the trafficking to light along the way.

Probably. But if this was a personal vendetta, wouldn’t he normally deal with that himself, the way underground types were wont to do when something upset their sensibilities? So there had to be something more, something that needed me. What was it, if it wasn’t just a witness to his own demise like I’d been thinking all this time...?

I touched at the card in my pocket. A tombstone, a flower, a date, and a place.

New York. What does this have to do with New York almost twenty years ago?

I took a long drag on the cigarette, and let the smoke cloud the air before me. Almost twenty years ago...Lupin would have been about ten or a little more.

Definitely an age where these schisms could have come from.

“The proprietress went missing”....

A little shiver went through me, growing into excitement.

It couldn’t be.

...Could it?

“...What if it is?” I whispered, the cold air stinging my hands as I leaned over the railing, staring into my thoughts at a million miles an hour.

“What if he grew up here...?”

And there. Specifically, there.

That could explain why he was having so much emotional trouble. His childhood home had just gone down in rubble, and a bunch of people had died on top of it, possibly people he knew.

New York. That was where his father had lived during that time period. So maybe the grave was because he’d gone to live with him then? A symbol of his departure into a new life with the man, leaving France behind, with mother or without?
Maybe. But then again, it seemed like they’d never seen each other before, when Lupin had arrived at his father’s syndicate six years ago.

So...something was missing, here. But I felt close. So very close.

Maybe she went to Arséne...and Lupin got left behind with his grandfather....

A strange feeling trickled over me then: the cold, jittery, yet elated feeling of an epiphany that knocked your feet out from under you.

That could explain why his father didn’t recognize him, what his baggage about his dad was at the time I’d first met him—

But wait. He’s definitely afraid of his father in those flashbacks he’s having. So...a step-father? His grandfather? Or his actual dad?

It could be any of the three, although he’d said he had fond memories of his grandfather. If he’d gotten abandoned by either relative—which was not mutually exclusive to a few good memories—he’d most likely wind up with some other father figure in his life.

But then again...

Maybe the reason he thought he had good memories of his grandfather was because his broken mind was desperately making up lies for him, because he needed it to survive.

I took a deep breath, putting that one on the back burner to simmer a little more, heavy as it was.

If I followed the mother/mobster angle, maybe his mother had gone alone to Arséne, she’d sent for Lupin later, but by the time he arrived, she’d already...gone to whatever fate she’d had. The fate of being put in a place like this, maybe...?

I glanced up at the building and its towering wall of brick and glass. The windows were dark and imposing, reflecting the black of the sky and none of its stars.

—“Don’t come near her!”

“Stop it, stop it, stop it, don’t hurt her anymore!”

“Mom! Don’t go, don’t go. Please? Please, I still need you. I’ll take care of you. Just hang on for me, please?”

“What did you do to my mother!”—

I held the cigarette stub out over the rail, the last tendrils of smoke just curling up into the air like a snake. Took a deep breath as I stared out at the lights in the windows across the bay.

Those lines could have easily referred to seeing a woman, high on mental aid drugs, getting manhandled in a mental institution on multiple occasions.

But to me, it sounded like something else.

It sounded like he’d watched her die.

And that, sure enough, would cause someone’s mind to break apart. Especially if that someone was a little kid who was already getting sexually molested in some fashion out of the deal.
And Martinique....

Arséne and Donatello had been friends, years ago. He might have jumped syndicates in the intervening years, and thus been around at both points in Lupin’s life. Hell, he was the right age to have been Lupin’s grandfather’s friend, albeit somewhat younger. Since they dressed somewhat similarly, according to him, it was quite possible he was some sort of protégé or relative of the man, even...

*Is that what you wanted me to find? What happened to you and your mother?*

*Because everything's buried so deeply that you can’t find it, even in your own head?*

I gazed out at the bay, eyes unseeing, even though the blazing light of wreckage-search created a tiny dome in the distance.

*And if it was that man who did it...*

I sighed and threw my cigarette in the standing tray.

“You’re gonna owe me so damn much for this, Lupin.”

*Right after I get done owing you.*
As Lupin’s sniffling quieted, I turned to him. He caught the movement and instantly fixed his gaze upon me.

He was watching me with the intensity of a hunted animal, but his red eyes and the dark circles under them just made it look predatory.

I was not in the mood for it, and in the silence, he slowly raised one sharp eyebrow in response.

“What,” I snapped.

His other eyebrow raised to match the first.

Yeah that’s right, I can be mean.

When I glared back at him, hackles raised and jaw clenched, he sighed and wiped at his eyes.

“Marti...”

“No talk to me,” I snarled back at him. “You are my prisoner and I am your warden and you would do best to remember that.”

Lupin’s eyes widened in surprise, and he straightened up a little bit, blinking rapidly.

Yeah, you’re still afraid of me, and you’d better be, now that I’m in this mood. Nobody likes step-moms anyway, don’t know why I thought being nice to you would work.

“Here, fill this out,” I said, going to my bag, which was sitting on the chair. Digging through it, I produced a stack of papers on a clipboard, all of which was courtesy of Nadia’s filing cabinets. I slapped it on the nearest empty spot of his bed and handed him a pencil—almost.

“No lose your pencil privileges, inmate.”

He took it mechanically, shivering fingers closing one by one as he stared into my eyes with alarm.

“Uh, Marti—?”

“Did I tell you talk?!”

He tucked himself away real fast, huddled over the clipboard protectively and glancing between me and it in rapid succession. Giving him one last warning glare, I went to sit down in the chairs across from him, newspaper in hand. I crisped it forcefully, growling as I did so.

“Tell me when you’re done,” I snapped.

* * *

Over the last two weeks, how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems?

Oh, Christ, I thought. One of these.

With Marti turned into a wild animal, I thought I’d at least have the safety of the written word to
hide in.  But oh no.  I was quite wrong.  Because:

The first sheet on the sizeable clipboard pile was already digging into me.

It was a basic assessment: one page long, with simple questions and simple answers, set up in a chart.  Questions on the left, numbers on the right.

*Oh PHQ-9, we meet again.*

I lifted the pen, taking a steadying breath.  I’d always been a remarkably diligent student, times when I’d been allowed to attend school, so my desire to fill in the questions to the highest teacher’s-pet extent possible was currently fighting with my desire to throw the damn thing across the room in self-defense.

**Question One:** Over the last two weeks, how often have you been bothered by...little interest or pleasure in doing things?

Well?  I wondered, blinking up at the sky in an unsuccessful attempt to keep my chest from tightening, *Has there been anything to do?*

**Question Three:** ...Trouble falling or staying asleep, or sleeping too much?

I let out a hesitant hum, that constriction in my chest not stopping.  *Does falling unconscious and almost dying count?*

**Question Six:** ...Feeling bad about yourself—or that you are a failure or have let yourself or your family down.

I stared at it, and very nearly threw my pencil across the room out of sheer emotional reflex.  That’d hit a little too close to home.

The questions offered you *Not at all, Several days, More than half the days,* and *Nearly every day* as your answer options.  They had correlating numbers attached, and at the end, you were supposed to add them up.  It wasn’t used to diagnose your specific malady, but simply to determine how bad off you were and, to some extent, whether you had overcompensation or undercompensation patterns.

And lastly, Numero Nine: *Thoughts that you would be better off dead, or of hurting yourself.*

I sucked in a hard breath, grinding my teeth against that one.  It was always cruel, that question.  Cuz if they were giving you this, they already knew the answer, and you were probably going to lie about it, so why bother with it?  It’d just make everyone feel bad about themselves.

And it wasn’t like they actually cared, anyway.  They just wanted to know for liability’s sake, how far down to squash your voice.

I checked over the next few papers, quickly flipping them up: an anxiety test; a childhood abuse screening; a sexual- and relationship-trauma assessment; a minority-specific issues screening; a prison-trauma screening; and then a very long, very detailed intake form with tiny, tiny lines within the boxes to elucidate the exact type of maladies I may or may not have had and how they impaired my life.  It held questions like, *What has made you want to seek counseling today,* and *Tell us about your family situation growing up.*  As well as how much I drank and did drugs, and things like, *List every member of your family, living or dead, how old they are, their relation to you and how you feel about them.*
I whistled inwardly. Yup, that wasn’t getting done anywhere near where it could fall into Interpol hands. And anyway, it would have taken hours. I didn’t really think I had hours of patience right now, let alone energy.

I glanced at the drip line in my arm. ...Or happy drugs.

And at the rate her mood was going, she might just withhold the next round to watch me squirm.

I sighed and busied myself with reading to get away from my wandering thoughts. It felt like every little ripple in my mood would make me burst into tears or hit someone, neither of which I was excited about dealing with. Stupid drugs...

I was starting to get less annoyed that that nurse had tried to kill me than that she’d left me in this state.

And speaking of her—

I glanced over at Marti, but given that reprimand I’d just gotten, she probably wasn’t going to tolerate me asking about the situation outside the door. She was going on full Max Security By the Book mode, which meant I wouldn’t be allowed to speak at all, until she directed me to.

I sighed, turning back to the papers and fully ready to hate them all. But then, what greeted me next in my exploratory thumb-through was a typed-up form that looked home-made. I’d never seen it before, at least. It was just four yes/no questions in a box, that looked like it’d been set up in any given word-processing program.

In your life, have you ever had any experience that was so frightening, horrible, or upsetting that—

By the time I got that far, there were already things flashing through my mind; I had more than a few to pick from. I doubled down my focus on the words, pushing the thoughts aside.

—that in the past month, you:

Have had nightmares about the incident/event or thought about it when you did not want to?

I gazed at the letters, mind going distant with memories of disturbed nights and lack of sleep...

Tried hard not to think about the experience or went out of your way to avoid situations that reminded you of it?

...years of avoidance...

Were constantly on guard, watchful, or easily startled?

...too many days without my partner...

Felt numb or detached from others, activities, or your surroundings?

...days when I’d just end up lying on the floor all day, staring at the ceiling for lack of motivation to get up.

By the time I got to the final YES/NO in all caps, I sighed heavily, gazing at it for a lot longer than was necessary, thoughts shutting down because of all the old emotions rising up.
After a time, letting the bad thoughts and feelings drip out of my leaking sieve of a brain, I turned to the next page, wondering what intrusive horror would be held there—while also feeling the tiniest spark of hope.

These forms were picking apart the scabs on my wounds so succinctly, it was making me feel like someone out there knew what I was going through. Maybe.

And underneath that, a simmering anger appeared:

If it were that easy, if the know-how had been out there all this time, why had it taken so long for it to get to me?...

The next sheet held yet another one-page assessment, but again, one I’d never seen before—something called the PCL-C. I read over it carefully, more gripped by it with each passing question.

**PCL-C**

**INSTRUCTIONS:** Below is a list of problems and complaints that people sometimes have in response to stressful life experiences. Please read each one carefully, then circle one of the numbers to the right to indicate how much you have been bothered by that problem in the past month.

*Not at all / A little bit / Moderately / Quite a bit / Extremely*

1. Repeated, disturbing memories, thoughts, or images of a stressful experience from the past?
2. Repeated, disturbing dreams of a stressful experience from the past?
3. Suddenly acting or feeling as if a stressful experience were happening again (as if you were reliving it)?
4. Feeling very upset when something reminded you of a stressful experience from the past?
5. Having physical reactions (e.g., heart pounding, trouble breathing, sweating) when something reminded you of a stressful experience from the past?
6. Avoiding thinking about or talking about a stressful experience from the past or avoiding having feelings related to it?
7. Avoiding activities or situations because they reminded you of a stressful experience from the past?
8. Trouble remembering important parts of a stressful experience from the past?
9. Loss of interest in activities that you used to enjoy?
10. Feeling distant or cut off from other people?
11. Feeling emotionally numb or being unable to have loving feelings for those close to you?

12. Feeling as if your future will somehow be cut short?

13. Trouble falling or staying asleep?

14. Feeling irritable or having angry outbursts?

15. Having difficulty concentrating?

16. Being "super-alert" or watchful or on guard?

17. Feeling jumpy or easily startled?

It was an odd feeling that came at me by the end. Visible, might have been a good word for it. Or maybe...vulnerable. I wasn’t sure exactly; I felt warm, but startled. Hopeful but...rather shaken.

My whole body suddenly felt looser. I could breathe easier, my anxiety lessened to a measurable degree.

And all from some simple, non-judgmental words on a sheet of paper...from seeing issues I knew so well described so plainly, after so long without any kind of explanation or sense of belonging for my maladies.

All this, from a simple sense of hope. It shone over every crack in me like sunlight through the clouds.

But...it was probably too good to be true. It was a good form, but at the end of the day, it was just a form, written by someone far away. Its existence didn’t mean anyone around me could help me as well as it promised.

I sighed, anxiety zipping up my body—and my emotions. I didn’t want to have to think about all those failed attempts at connecting to someone in the psych ward.

And in my childhood.

And the rest of my life up to this point.

And yet...

I forced myself to take a deep breath through my nose. This was an offer, wasn’t it? From Marti.

Unless it was a threat. If she prescribed some “treatment” for me like they did, and Zenigata swallowed it...

Well, that’d probably be my just rewards for upsetting her so harshly and then failing to do what he’d asked as far as trusting and protecting her, huh...

I wonder if she’ll try to tie me up? She’s already got me on all the drugs, and I know how Donatello’s people rolled....

I found myself staring at my wrist then, where rope burns had once been. Whispers came at me of the things he had said, but also things the people in Monaco had.
I really didn’t want to remember any of them.

I closed my eyes tightly and forced myself to breathe. Tapped the pencil on the page to get the energy flowing out of my body, dragged my other hand down my neck several times. When the energy built up too far for even that, I hurriedly turned to the next page, the very last sheet, almost ripping it:

There was a third home-made form there. It was set up similarly to the others, but had a very specific set of questions:

Do you ever see yourself missing time?

I eyed that, my heart suddenly shuttering. The jitters fell away, and a fog fell over my head in its place, depressing everything.

If so, how often?

My lips pursed of their own accord.

Do people report you acting in events that you don’t remember? If so, describe a situation.

Shit, she was onto me. Onto me hard. It almost made a nervous smile tick at my face.

But that conversation a bit ago with the Inspector, before Angela had attacked me...he’d brought that up, hadn’t he? Some sort of episode I’d had here, where I’d pulled that rod out of my leg. I didn’t remember it at all, but I’d definitely narrowly avoided one on the way to the showers, so it wouldn’t surprise me that something had happened.

How much should I tell them?...

The fact that this form was hand-made also meant that there wasn’t a pre-made questionnaire to my problem; there wasn’t a large body of literature available for treating it.

The distress from realizing that was difficult to describe. It was like disappointment, but far worse. ...Even with everything else that’d just been going through my head.

Quietly letting the papers fall back into their stack, I glanced at Marti with a heavy heart. She had her legs crossed tightly, and her hands were gripping the newspaper like she wanted to end it.

Hmmm...

Considering my course from here, I glanced at the box at the bottom of the first page: the addendum to the depression screening. It read:

If you checked off any of the above, how difficult have these issues made it for you to do your work, take care of things at home, or get along with other people? It then had a fill-in-the-blank line.

Do my work.

The bright lights from what I assumed was the explosion came at me, and then waking up in the squad car.

Take care of things at home.

I imagined Jigen, frustrated with me lately about the things I was keeping from him, and how badly he might react when I finally got back to him. If he’d even be there to greet me.
Get along with other people....

I stared at the wall for a second drolly, then eyed Marti again, and her tightly-wound frame.

She wasn’t going to be any help to me if she couldn’t relax, no matter how many forms she sent me. And I’d caused that, more or less.

But I also could think of a way or two to unwind her, given how we’d interacted thus far—provided I hadn’t used up all my luck for the day already.

Hefting the pencil, I smirked and started to write.

* * *

Out on the fire escape, under the star-sparse sky that stretched over the width of the bay where so many soldiers died, I shook my head and breathed on my hands, even in gloves as they were. A calm was coming over me, a little of the tension sinking down into the dark waters now that I finally had a foundation that made sense to me. A working theory to go off of that had more links than holes. Concrete things I could interrogate Lupin about, when I got the chance.

But that, unfortunately, left only the matter of the old surgeon still on my plate.

If I really was right about who he was—and I was pretty goddamned sure at this point—then I had to protect myself, Lupin, and Marti, all in different ways.

The man who ran Donatello’s dungeon had seen my face, had my fingerprint, but at the time didn’t necessarily know my true identity because he himself might not have had the means to do the tracking that fingerprint gave him. It had no doubt been blackmail insurance Donatello, a police chief, had wanted, but the low man on the totem pole probably had never used it.

However, given what I’d seen of the old man here at the hospital, it was very clear to me that he was the type to take that book with him when the syndicates collapsed, and done all the research he’d need to stay safe and richly retired. The police had never found that book when they’d raided that mansion.

As far as Lupin... The man had certainly seen Lupin’s face and probably known everything about him one way or another by the time he was done torturing him. But did he know Marti? Not necessarily.

Furthermore, could the fact that he was here, in the same town as Marti, be a coincidence? She wasn’t dead yet, after so many years of them inhabiting the same village, so I could hope so; but given the way the weekend was going...?

It was possible that he’d jumped ship after the syndicates fell apart, moving from Arsene’s to Donatello’s to this one. A freelancer, perhaps...

A long look through the Interpol files would elucidate the possibilities, but that wasn’t going to be fast enough. I couldn’t get to them until I got back to my desk, or was able to get someone on the phone, which wouldn’t happen until at least tomorrow.

And if this woman Angela had really tried to kill Lupin, which was looking ever more likely, then I shouldn’t even still be here. All three of us should have been out of this building as fast as possible, the doctor be damned. After all, I had no authority to actually arrest people, except in quasi-legal circumstances that I could bullshit to my boss with enough force that he would cover me for it afterward. But every time I did it, it put other Interpol agents in danger simply by association. So
it was a last resort, and that was *without* the issue of military jurisdictions.

So the old man was hiding in this military job. Hiding well. And working with the local syndicate, then? But why? He was pretty old; maybe he was retired, and they just called in a favor to get Angela in?

I nearly laughed at myself. Wouldn’t that just be the silver lining of this nightmare cloud? The retired old SS officer was the one person I *didn’t* have to be afraid of.

I shook my head and took another long breath through my nose. I needed more information out of him, needed to know why he was here, who’d sent him, what the plan was. How soon I had to engineer an escape—and how far I had to run. How much I had to hide. And I had to do it without endangering Marti any more than she already was.

And that was the thing: I could run with Lupin. The government would help me hide, and hell, *he* might even hide us both with his connections if I begged enough. But Marti, she was a sitting duck.

Oh, she had fire. She could take care of herself in most situations. But it would cost her dearly in the long run to make a stand, and I didn’t think she could make it through another several years of uprooting and hiding. The last time, after Monaco, had very nearly done her in, and that’d only been a few months. This—this could potentially never end.

And that was assuming the man even remembered me, which he may not have. He hadn’t given any indication of it. That way he’d touched Lupin in the basement, however...

My eye twitched, recalling it. Maybe he knew him. *Maybe.* Or maybe he was just a creepy old man at this point.

God, I was going to have to step lightly here. Even when all I wanted to do was destroy him with a hammer, making good on my plans to hurt the man in the event that I ever found him again.

I sighed and headed inside. Nadia would be the best place to start. If she didn’t know his background, I probably shouldn’t tell her, lest that put *her* in danger. At least, not right now, especially if the base commander was in on it by virtue of being friends with the police commissioner; that’d be poor repayment for all her help. But at the same time, if she *didn’t* know, it might put her in *more* danger in the long run...

And all that was assuming I was correct about his identity. It wasn’t like he was going to just confess to being a mob cleaner just because I asked, even if he *was* the guy.

I threaded my way through the stairwell and back to the second floor lobby, mulling my next moves over.

Even if all of my speculation here was spot on—which was far from being proven—how was I going to protect us, without being able to move Lupin? Would doing nothing and keeping my gun close be best, or showing my cards and threatening him do more? He *was* old; there wasn’t much he could do at this point save for botch a surgery and make phone calls.

I stopped in my tracks, a chill striking my gut.

*Why didn’t he let him die before?*

Why was Angela necessary at all? Was it simply that there were too many eyes to allow him to “accidentally” botch that hours-long surgery? Surely he could have found a way, if he’d wanted.
Some tiny moment where everyone was looking away...

I shook my head out and pressed forward, monochrome tiles sweeping along beneath my feet. If I was correct, there was definitely still a lion in my midst—at least one—but was the pride hungry? After all, what the hell had even happened a few hours ago, with Angela’s attack? Since Angela hadn’t asked Lupin a damn thing, per his report, and no one had tried to off me yet...

*Either they think Lupin already knows whatever they’re trying to hide and they can get me later, or...*

*They’ve secured the whereabouts of whatever he was aiming to steal and now all that’s left is to get rid of him...*

*Though maybe the heist was only supposed to be step one... Maybe he knows how to get the goods now, and they want to stop him before he causes more damage? That’d explain why they aren’t concerned about me but are concerned about him, even though it’d be easier to kill him in prison somewhere. Because there isn’t anything big to tell the cops just yet, but dealing with him is more than just a matter of pride...*

*So then...maybe it wasn’t an object Lupin was after this first round, but information?...*

*But...*

My eyes moved as feet moved swiftly, sweeping over nodes of information the way my feet went over the pattern in the tiles.

But why wait? Why wait this long? It’d been more than two days, and they’d had ample chances before now...

I came into the lobby, hands in my pockets and scowl brewing.

If Angela and Martinique were both in on it, and the need to get rid of us was that strong, why didn’t they just murder us all when we were asleep in the basement? Why not make the move then? Cleanup aside—

*What’s happened to make them more desperate now?*

A feeble hope dawned upon me, clutching at my chest.

*Maybe...?*

I gazed out the windows by the front door, where the front gate of the base lie. I thought I could hear the telltale, distant scraping of a plow.

*...Maybe they can’t keep us here much longer?*

I smiled as I surveyed the room. Maybe it wouldn’t matter. Maybe I wouldn’t even have to deal with whether or not I could keep myself from beating this man to death while I interrogated him.

Nadia looked up at me from her desk, where she sat doing paperwork. The naval officer was still playing cards with Kyle.

Christof was nowhere to be found, though, and the doctor—

I blinked quickly, then headed for the makeshift interrogation room. I pushed the door open until it clanged against the backstop, and—
There was no one there.

I spun on my heel, but I couldn’t see him anywhere in the lobby.

“Uh...Inspector?” Kyle asked from over his cards, his eyes fixed cautiously on mine.

“Where is he?” I all but shouted at him. “Where is the surgeon?!”

“He...?” Kyle looked at the others, who were equally wide-eyed and sleep-deprived, then pointed down the hall. “Snowman escorted him to the bathroom.”

My eyes went wide. “How long ago was that?!”

Kyle looked at Nadia; they both looked at their watches.

“Just after you left?” Nadia supplied, sounding just now perplexed about it.

“Find them,” was all I got out before I was running up the stairs.

Chapter End Notes

PCL-C for DSM-IV (11/1/94) is (c) Weathers, Litz, Huska, & Keane National Center for PTSD - Behavioral Science Division. I couldn't drop in an image so I typed it up.
This was originally part of the previous chapter, but that would have been so long that I split it in two.

The chapter title is a reference to the fact that Da Vinci tried to re-engineer the old Roman mileage counter device, and he almost did it. The only thing that stopped him was the fact that he engineered square teeth into his gear, rather than triangular. It's thought that if he had succeeded with this device, the switch to machines (and the industrial revolution thereby) would have started a few hundred years sooner.

“All right, I’m done,” I announced to Marti as perfunctorily as I could—which was not very much, given my stupid roller coaster emotions. I was pretty damn proud of myself at this very moment, and my voice, reduced back to the emotional accumen of a five-year-old, held absolutely no masking of the conspiratorial giggle.

From her spot, Marti pegged me with a mother’s well-attuned raised eyebrow of suspicion. “That was fast.”

I shrugged with a smirk. “I’m succinct.”

Setting down her newspaper, she came over and took the forms from me, quickly skimming them —exactly one step beyond arm’s reach, I might add.

As one page went by, and then another, far from her face smirking with gentle amusement and a sense of appreciation at my answers like I’d hoped, it only started to fall, step by step, into a dark, cold place that would just as soon smack me with that clipboard.

“What the hell is this?” she finally asked.

I was expecting cheer. I’d done my best to answer the questions in whimsical ways that’d make her smile. Bullshit ways, sure, but cute and thoughtful ones meant to make her smile nonetheless, peppered with compliments to her person.

Answers like, I came here to spend more time with my favorite Marti!, to the question “What made you seek counseling today?”

But instead, I got something that reminded me of the Madame far too much.

Not quite sure what I was going to do now, I shrugged pleasantly, folding my hands in my lap and trying to pretend I wasn’t troubled. “Bullshit answers to bullshit questions?” I offered perkily, while quickly trying to close my heart away.

“What is wrong with you, don’t you want to be happy?” she grumbled.

The tone hit that closing door askew and the arrow flew right into it. I twitched in annoyance; the folks in Monaco had lobbed that at me quite often, when I didn’t want to take my pills. “That’s a
low blow. I’m plenty happy when I’m not stuck here,” I snapped back.

She took a deep breath, then stared me down with an unamused glare like she might hit me with the thing. “Do it again, and this time do it right.”

Marti handed back the clipboard, papers and all. I grumbled, sat there for a second—and then threw the pencil across the room, into the far corner. It was just an impulse, a childish and unsightly aggressive one that normally I’d be able to control, but under the circumstances, oh, it felt good.

I pegged her with a challenging stare, and then smirked.

One side of her mouth twitched. And oh, but her look was black.

“I’m not filling this out,” I stated simply. “It’s insulting, and furthermore, if I answered it truthfully I’d have to...burn it. And I think the last thing you all want is me starting fires.”

I would have said kill you, but given the circumstances, I didn’t think she’d appreciate that.

Marti eyed me dryly. “Fine, then we will do it verbally,” she snipped.

She marched over to my bedside and reached for the clipboard. At the last second, I whisked it away from her hands.

The look she gave me, after a second of surprise, could’ve killed a child. I smiled at her warmly, all sunshine and light, still holding the board on the far side of the bed—no matter how much pain I was grinning through. “Why are you so upset, Marti m’dear? We were getting along so well.”

Her jaw tensed. She really, really looked like she was going to shout something—or smack me—but instead she went and sat back down, plunking herself angrily in her chair.

“You are incorrigible sometimes,” Marti muttered, crossing her arms—and her legs—and glaring at me. “I suddenly understand the stories.”

I watched her carefully, similarly understanding a few of the ones about the Widow I’d heard.

“You’re really not here to hurt him, huh?” I asked instead, returning the clipboard to my lap.

“No, I’m not. Though you’re making me want to hurt you.”

“Threats?” I lobbed back, honestly impressed—and a little upset for no reason I could identify. “Classy.”

“Oh, shut up.”

She glared out the window, tight as a wound spring. I eyed her posture for a bit, every muscle bunched up like the smallest breath could cause it to explode, and then sighed. I remembered being like that, about half an hour ago. And many years before, through much of my preteen years. It was never fun, and if I’d pushed her this far, I probably deserved the fallout.

Still, I felt both wounded by her words and guilty that I’d destroyed the happy, kind Marti, facade it had been or not. I was normally better at navigating waters than that.

But, well, if I’d screwed that up, it was time to play the big boy game that everyone else lived in. “That upset about having your identity revealed, huh?” I asked, pulling my professional mask back on.
I guess it made sense; I would certainly be upset if they suddenly knew anything about my past. Very upset.

“No!” she snapped, causing me to straighten up in attention once more. “I had to watch you almost die—twice!—and this is the thanks I get!” Marti held out an angry hand, and the words starting tumbling out of her mouth, each one faster than the one before it—and more accented. “I have been kind to you, I have given you the benefit of the doubt and tried to support you, and now Zeni is falling apart and I’m going to have to deal with it and my cover’s been blown and I am having a panic attack and you can’t even have the decency to do the one thing I ask you that’ll help us all out!” Here, her voice suddenly switched from squeaky and pained to a low, raging growl: “Dammit, this is why I hate men! They’re such scum, the lot of them! And you in particular are a horribly selfish person, miles from the gentleman you think you are, and now look, I’m sitting here heaping abuse on you because I can’t take it anymore, youthinkI’mhappyaboutthis?!”

Her eyes scrunched shut. She bowed her head and hunched forward and then—

There came a telltale keen.

Her shoulders shook, and Marti’s posture soon unwound into one very familiar to me, her hands hiding her face.

“God dammit,” she muttered as she wept in her seat. “I hate this.”

I sighed, tension leaving my body in a wave. I forced myself to witness this and my complicity in it, then gazed out the window politely, letting her have her space to cry.

I recognized that kind of outburst—and at the end of the day it probably didn’t have much to do with me—so I didn’t take it personally.

Still though, I was doing a pretty bad job of what Zenigata had asked me to. Maybe it wouldn’t be too late to start now...if only these god damned emotional spikes would stop.

The alternating chills and fever sweats were one thing, as were the jitters. But the mood swings, they were ridiculous. As was the inability to feel happiness. That was pretty awful, and it was clutching at my sense of purpose even now, draining away all the meaning and color and patience in my life. The track of intrusive thoughts going through the back of my head at every statement was, while currently ignorable, remarkably vile, and probably about the same as was going through Marti’s head, from the sounds of it.

“We’re a mess, huh,” I whispered at her bowed frame, suddenly so very tired.

“Yes,” Marti replied through her hands. “We are.” She bent down and put her elbows on her knees, and then rested her forehead in her hands, such that I couldn’t see her face.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, looking at all that I’d undone.

The radiator heat came on, and I let the sound of hisses and creaks wash over me as I focused on breathing. It seemed like such a heavy burden all of a sudden, the need to breathe.

“My first husband,” Marti began from under her hands, “was a man named Ricardo.”

I frowned but didn’t remark otherwise. It sounded like she needed this—and hell, I needed it too. Though for a very different reason.

“He was the vice warden of the small women’s prison I worked at as a nurse. I loved him, so
much. He was upstanding and kind, the person I thought I’d spend the rest of my life with. He always encouraged me, and by the time I got my social work degree, he was the warden, and we were married, and considering having kids.” Here, she sniffled and wiped at an eye, then went back to the exact same posture as before, but with her face just barely visible as it gazed down at the floor. Her elbows rested heavily on her knees, and forehead rested on the long sides of her fingers. “We were going to start trying right after I got the degree, that was the plan. He was a lot older than me, you see, and it’d been several years of night classes already by that point, so he wanted to still have some energy left for them. Didn’t want to be mistaken for their grandfather, he always joked.” A tiny smile ticked at her lips, then almost instantly dissolved.

“We’d both decided that we were going to look for jobs elsewhere so that we’d be the best people we could for our hypothetical children. We were all ready, all excited, and then…”

She smiled sadly, gazing at the floor as she clasped her hands between her knees. “I went to a Christmas party that was doubling as my going-away party, and when I came back...he was dead.”

She looked at me momentarily, green eyes haunted, but they just as quickly flicked away, out the window. Her voice was a whisper, the hollow tone of it scooping out my insides like a delicate finger. “He was...he looked, asleep on the couch, so I didn’t think to wake him. I just walked past him and went upstairs to bed. And I wonder to this day, if I’d just checked in on him, gone to give him a kiss, would he still be alive? Would I have caught it, and still have my happy ending?”

Marti shook her head, and for a minute or two, I saw every line in her face deepen as she dealt with her tears in the mix of moonless night shadows and yellow hospital light. As her shoulders shook, I couldn’t take my eyes off her. My eyebrows just pushed ever further together.

“And you may think that’s not fair to Koichi, but that’s what he was to me, you know? Because...because...in every other relationship I’ve had, I’ve always been the other woman. Whether it was a bottle, or another actual woman to compete with...even with you and Zenia-gata, I’m the other woman.” She took a heavy breath. “Kids are just always more important than the girlfriend. Always. Step-mom is just the bed warmer, the free labor; the kids are where the real energy is, and unless you get lucky, you’ll always be second place to them.”

My eyes widened, feeling the cold creep of deja vu through my system.

“Well, anyway,” she went on with a tired sigh, never once looking at me, “He passed away the Friday before Christmas. Heart attack. Early onset. He was in his fifties and I was in my twenties, so a lot of people didn’t approve of it in the first place. Maybe God didn’t either.”

My mouth twitched down. So did Marti’s, until she took a deep breath to steady herself. She still wouldn’t look at me; instead, she looked at her hands, twisting in her lap. “But he loved me too. It’s just, he was the kind of person who hurt himself rather than let anyone help him...he kept everything bottled up because that’s what men are ‘supposed’ to do. We had a fight about his drinking—the fact that he’d been hiding it from me—that night, and that’s why he stayed home. And his response was to drink himself to death, I guess.”

Marti’s posture deflated, and she heaved a sigh, her tears suddenly drying up. “And you know how some cops are, especially the provincial ones—they smell money when they smell blood. It was rumored that Ricardo had a good pension and a family nest egg I’d inherit. So they told me that if they didn’t get some of it, they’d charge me for his murder, and make sure I got sent to the same prison I’d worked at.”

Marti ran a hand through her hair and smiled sickly, then gave a helpless shrug to the air as she stared at the ceiling. “And given the frustrations I’d vented at the party, they had all the evidence
they needed. And you know? I was different then. I cried and cried at his side when I discovered him, then just wandered off into the fields. When I went back a day or so later, I couldn’t remember where I’d been or what I’d been doing. Neither of us had other family, so there was no one to tell. So I just...left, I guess. I remember watching the sunset. I remember that. Then I went home and called the ME, because silly me, I believed in people. That was the kind of woman I was, then. The good kind. I should have just buried him in the yard and never come back.”

Marti sniffled and waved her hands dismissively, but she still refused to look anywhere near me. “So y’know, it was easy for them to make up a story that I’d done it, and make people believe it.” She put her hand over her mouth, looking anxiously out the dark window. “And there was no money. Not a cent. That’s what he’d been drinking about, I discovered. Never knew what happened to it. I still don’t know, and because of how the police filed the papers, I couldn’t get his pension. So that was when I decided to stop trusting the men in my life to take care of things.”

Her green eyes glanced over at me, light in the newly-rising moon. She forced a tired smile, but I just looked more horrified back at her. “So,” she went on, face falling as she turned back to the view, “I was in a pickle. Had no family to help me. One of my brothers, you see, was murdered by the local Camorristas when I refused to be married off to one of them to pay his debts. My mother was brutally beaten and raped beforehand, and when I still refused, they killed my brother, so she doesn’t talk to me anymore. Nor does my father, who beat the hell out of me at various stages of the process, among other times.”

My head titled in speechless horror of its own accord. Those sorts of things weren’t supposed to happen to girls. Only boys were supposed to be capable of transgressions that awful.

She eyed my response coldly, challengingly, then shrugged. “You meet her, in that town you visited? My mother? I don’t even know if she’s still alive.”

I shook my head quickly. Even if I had, I hadn’t met anyone that was a dead ringer for that head of hair.

“Anyway,” she muttered, turning back, “what was I to do? I was innocent, but that means nothing when you’re either poor or pretty. So when one of the detectives told me he had a cousin in the city who was having trouble finding a bride cuz of the stresses of the job...”

She held up her hands in a silent shrug.

“I had two kids with him. Tried to put everything behind me, and remind myself that whatever I had—and whatever I had to suffer through—was always, always better than prison.”

Marti stared at the windowsill for a while, then put her elbows there and, legs folded together, put her chin in her hands and gazed out at the darkness glittering beyond our reach, a little bit of silver flowing down onto her face and fiery hair.

“But that’s not the one you asked about, was it?” Her lips curled up and her eyes narrowed, a dark smirk with red eyes. “Husband Numeri Due...one of the ubiquitous Giuseppies of Venice. Oh, Venice was a wonderful town for a woman from the sticks: Scientific, fashionable, historied, principled. I had a new identity, a roof over my head and water in my basement, and the only price for it was to let a violent drunk of a man that I didn’t like and didn’t respect into my bed every once in a while, be his emotional crutch, and run his house and raise his children.”

A square swallow forced its way down my throat, cutting all the while, just like her gaze was doing at the glass.
“But over the years, y’know, I managed to love them, my kids. Even tried to love him, but his drinking kept messing it up. And when the shine wore off, when the hysteria got too high and I found myself changing in all the wrong ways, I convinced him to let me get a job. A night job, underpaid. But doing something I could do well, with a boss who did respect me. It allowed me to get a little nest egg together, so that someday I might be able to flee the country and leave my husband. Which Giuseppe didn’t know I was doing, of course; I was very glad when he got a mistress...minus the money it cost. I was always having to dip into my nest egg to buy groceries...feh.” She huffed bitterly, running a hand over her face, pushing away the last few tears.

“I’m...” I wasn’t sure what to say, but the shivers kept prompting me to. “Surprised you didn’t poison him.”

“I would have, if I thought I could get away with it,” she replied instantly. “His family checked in a lot.”

I blinked at that, nonplussed. “Oh...”

“But I should have,” she went on, “Because he got my daughter killed.”

The shivering stopped.

“Killed someone else with it”...

Marti’s eyes flicked over to me and held me there. “Your research dig that up, son of Arsene?”

I blinked in surprise at that, and Marti quickly shot me a challenging glare in the silence. I shrugged quickly, awkwardly, and Marti’s gaze flicked away, as sharp as a knife.

“And then Donny stepped in to ‘save me from my troubles.’ And I was grateful—until I found out what it was gonna cost. But I still accepted, because I loved him.”
I soft intake of breath sucked into my lungs, through my nose. It was too short and far away for her to hear, but it was there nonetheless. And it set off a long line of shivering that I couldn’t stop. I knew he’d had other lovers, ones he probably actually loved, but...it was easy not to see it, when you didn’t want to. He had made sure of it.

And from the look on her face, she knew that, too. She had been through the exact same thing.

“Stupid, right? Never change, right? I’m mad at men for being horrible...but it was me that was stupid. And with Donny...” She paused, then put her hand over her mouth thoughtfully. “Well. Do you need to know how that went, too? That’s a part you might actually understand, since you knew him too, yes?”

The shivering kicked up a notch, enough for her to notice.

“No.”

But I never looked away from that gaze of hers.

“I’m good.”

Those green eyes kept boring into me, quiet and assuming.

“Are you sure.”

“I. I know the things he...did.”

A look came across Marti’s face, of dawning understanding.

But she knew already. One way or another, she knew. I could see it in her eyes when she’d asked the question.

“That all very much sucks,” I offered half hysterically, trying to get away from this line of questioning and not sure what else there was to say, there was so much potentially to cover—and not wanting to get sucked into sharing my half of it, because of the bottomless pit of despair it would open in my chest. “That really sucks Marti, and I’m sorry men are such trash sometimes. I like to think I’m better than that, but I’m not always, you’re right...”

I thought she might berate me again once given an inch, but she just huffed and folded her arms, soundly darkly amused. “Well...you aren’t forcing anyone to marry you and holding them hostage with systematic debt, at least.” She took a deep breath, audible from where I was, and sat back in her chair, gazing out at the wall. “...I assume?”

“Yeah...that one’s...true. Yup.”

“Well, at the end of the day, you’re still a man, Lupin, and I’m just a woman. You will always have more power than the women around you and any you get will be handed to you far easier and quicker. So all I ask is that when you get a chance to make your own society with the people around you, just try to value women equally in it. They’ll appreciate it, is all, and be grateful to you for it. And then you can feel proud of yourself, because you’ve made the world a better place.” A sad smile ticked at her lips. “You respect and build up the weaker people around you, rather than always trying to chase the respect of the people higher up the chain, who are just out to use you, and you’ll be a great man. I was always trying to teach my son that, but he never listened...”

“Yeah,” I muttered with a harsh, bitter chuckle. “I know that tune. The toxic patriarchy, right?
Learned that the hard way. Man...where were you when I was little?"

She eyed me in a motherly fashion, eyebrows raised above her tear-streaked cheeks. “I dunno. How old are you? Give me a year and I’ll tell you where I was.”

“Hah, you’re not getting that,” I laughed, waving a finger. But still, I smiled a little, sadly, as my gaze fell heavily on my feet.

“But I understand, I do. My mother...was owned by a mobster, after a point. So I know.” I rubbed at my arms, that drug-addled chill settling in. “I know what it’s like. And if you really loved your kids...then they had it better than me, for whatever short time they had. I’m sure they loved you back, and still do, wherever they are.”

That went by like a lead balloon, the air was so still afterward. But it felt good to say, at least.

“Did you...like your mother?” she asked softly after a while.

“I...” I glanced at her dubiously, but then sighed and picked at the blanket. Might as well say it, huh? Since we were here. And anyway, I owed her something.

Rubbing away the shivers that crawled up my arms, I carefully replied, “I liked the her that was capable of taking care of me, let’s put it that way.”

Marti was silent, but the thoughts in my heart were not.

“...I didn’t get to see that her very much.”

Marti stayed silent; I wasn’t sure if it was to think of the next question or to assess my reaction, so after a bit I simply shrugged and stared at the painting of the harbor for an escape. “So you were there...huh?”

She followed my gaze and then said, “Yeah.”

She whispered it, defensively. I watched her hesitantly, out of the corner of my eye.

“He visited you every day, when you were in the hospital. Every. Day. I’ve never seen someone so devoted, save for those old widows who go to Church every day to light candles.” Marti blinked rapidly, shaking her head. Her arms and legs were folded tightly and she was staring somewhere near the middle of the space between the bed and the floor as she thought back on it—apparently there were a lot of feelings involved. “And then when you woke up, he’d come home every day with something happy to report. Even when there was nothing happy to report, he’d be all cheerful about it. He’d tell me everything he was hoping for, for you. For him. For us. It was nice. If...a little delusional.”

I thought back on what she had said about playing second fiddle, and I softly asked, “Did you...feel like you were getting left behind, because of me?”

Marti’s mouth pursed and her brows tipped down, but she shook her head, gazing at the machines thoughtfully. “No. It was good for him to have something to do out of the house, since he couldn’t work regularly or do many of his hobbies.”

Here, Marti’s gaze moved over to the window once more. “I held him a lot as he cried, over you. Every time that bubble of hope of his burst.”

My eyes widened, but before I could sputter out a response, she went on.
“I was worried about Donny changing his mind and all that, of course, but I was also worried what’d happen to him if he didn’t get everything he was hoping for. I knew the Inspector pretty well by that point, but I still barely knew the man, you know? We’d been through things together, but weird things, not real life things. So I had no idea how he’d react. Would it just be another drunken mess I’d have to run away from? I was ready to throw myself into the bay, honestly, if that happened.”

I watched with some alarm as tears welled up in Marti’s eyes again, but they came more gently this time. She shook her head and wiped at her eyes, barely acknowledging them. “He cares about you, you know. More than he cares about me.”

_I don’t think that’s true_, was the first thing that instantly came to mind, but it caught in my throat. I couldn’t exactly deny it for her sake, given what little evidence I had and how much it apparently hurt her, but I personally wasn’t willing to accept it, either.

“More than he cares about himself, sometimes,” she finished.

“But why?” I asked, knowing that much didn’t have to be denied. “He’s got a kid. And it’s not me.”

Marti was silent for a second, thinking, and then looked out the window at the lights. Then, she gave me a very strange stare, half hesitant and half boring into my soul.

“Because you are the man he wishes he could have been, and he doesn’t want you to fall through the cracks of love like he did.”

“What?” I choked, sputtering back a laugh. Holding my ribs, I wheezed, “You can’t be serious. I’m a crook, and he’s like, the straightest cop there is!”

“Not that part,” she whispered, rubbing at her arms. “You have flare. You’re free. You do what you want to protect and help people, and you ooze charm. If he’d been born in a different time, not been held back by his family situation, you’re the exact type of person he thinks he could have been.”

I stared at that, mind freezing up. What the hell was I supposed to do with _that_? He...respected and even _looked up to_ all the parts of me he said drove him crazy?...

“But he’s perfectly good the way he is,” I muttered, confused.

And at that, Marti smiled—with a sharp gaze and a warm smirk. “I think so too.”

Oh, I thought in the face of that dark sunshine, _You’re clever._

Marti put on a sudden smile and rubbed at her legs, taking a hopeful breath to clear the air. “But you can see why I like him, right? He’s dependable, honest, moral....and with a little bit of _pizzaz_. He knows who he is, is willing to protect me, and doesn’t take his problems out on me. Plus, we have similar monetary habits.... And at this point, that’s all I want: honesty and dependability from somebody who has room for me in their heart.” Marti took a steadying breath and then gave me a proud but somehow sad smile, her fluffy hair pushing back in a shining wave. “And...you know? He’s very well built, under that uniform. Much better than your beanpole self. Someone needs to feed you, honestly. Maybe you’d stop being a crook if you got a good meal once in a while.”

She smirked momentarily. An awkward chuckle burbled out of me and I rubbed at my neck. Jigen could barbeque like a god, but that was about it. I made literally everything else, so the poor guy was probably starving at this point...or eating only grilled potatoes or something.
“I love him,” Marti continued in a hush, falling back to her old, demure self of late outside of my reverie. “I don’t want him to get hurt. But I also don’t think the two of us need to be at odds about that. Assuming...you don’t actually want to hurt him, either?”

I shook my head. “I don’t want him dead.”

“Do you want him disgraced?”

“No.”

There was a pause, and then Marti said, “Do you want him to be happy?”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” I said, pretty sure I knew where this was going. But when I looked at her face, I changed my mind—maybe she wasn’t trying to convince me into something, but rather convince herself that I wasn’t a threat. “Well, okay, yes, I do want him to be happy. But I also want to be happy. And I’m not sure those two things can coexist in the same space.”

“Why?”

“Because—” annoyance flared up in me, another adrenaline spike, and I quickly bit it down with crossed (gingerly crossed) arms.

*Because he wants me to be something to him that I just can’t ever be.*

But that was too personal to tell her, especially just yet, and the drug come-off didn’t want me to be able to handle that.

“I dunno, I just do?!” I snapped, like a truly magnificent twelve-year-old.

But Marti only hummed, calmly nodding.

She was quiet for a bit, waiting for my energy to stop twitching my body in weird places, and then said:

“Lupin, why did you threaten me?”

“What?”

“She pressed. “Earlier. Why did you do that? I’m gonna be having panic attacks for weeks now, all because of you, so I’d like to know why...”

“I thought you could handle it, I guess,” I stated, the nervous energy calming a bit with something to focus on—especially something as heavy as shame. “You’ve got a pretty amazing reputation as a hard-boiled egg and I believed it. I-I’m sorry.”

She frowned at me, eyes bright red and with a volume of indignant curses behind them. But it soon faded away, and she went back to looking at the floor dejectedly. She curled a finger through her hair while I rubbed at my neck neurotically.

“She frowned at me, eyes bright red and with a volume of indignant curses behind them. But it soon faded away, and she went back to looking at the floor dejectedly. She curled a finger through her hair while I rubbed at my neck neurotically.

“I don’t know why everyone distrusts me so much. I try to be a nice person,” she whispered. “I’m just always somebody’s other woman, somebody’s prized possession, and there’s nothing I can do about that. I just have a nice head of hair and am kind to people, why is that worth destroying my happiness for, over and over again?”

*If I had an answer for that, I wouldn’t have a problem in the world.*
If I could have, I would have liked to hug her right then. Embrace her, and tell her everything would be all right—but I knew she’d just as soon punch me as get any sort of help from me. I’d hurt her earlier; I didn’t deserve to comfort her afterward, too.

But there was one thing I could do: be truthful.

“To be honest with you,” I began, deciding to take the risk. I wasn’t comfortable with the vulnerable truths I was about to state, but only an airhead wouldn’t have thought of them by now, and Marti certainly wasn’t that. Eventually, after a readying breath or two, my fingers curled to a stop against the back of my neck, and I pulled a professional tone out of myself. “I like you, but I’ve just met you, and there are a lot of question marks in your background that could be very bad for me. As you can see, I’m incapacitated and probably anemic—I get lightheaded every time I speak more than three sentences at a time. Given that someone has now tried to kill me twice in three days and only failed because of dumb luck each time, I can’t really afford to be nice to you. If...you want my honest professional assessment as a villain, that is.”

I gave her a tiny smile, that only made it up to one part of my mouth, but Marti mirrored it. She took a long breath and eventually nodded. “I see. Thank you for being honest with me.”

I nodded and rubbed my foot through the blankets—the good one, on the leg I could actually bend that far. Just to get the anxiety out a little bit, and force some safe tactile sensation through my body. “But’cha know?” I added, trying to sound perky. “I look forward to getting to know you once we’re not in danger anymore. The...happy things, as well as the sad things, I mean.”

She sighed. “I don’t disagree, but that might be never, Lupin.”

I frowned at that, not sure what she meant, but since it seemed we were on speaking terms again, I figured I could bring up issues of our situation a little later. “I’d settle for ‘out of here,’ maybe?” I offered.

She nodded tiredly, still not looking at me as she rubbed at her hair. “Yeah.”

Silence settled. A cold spell was coming over me again, and I hunched my shoulders and tucked my arms in. Every time I started shivering, my injured leg would contract and jerk, and it was a disastrous time. Marti still looked miserable, and I wasn’t sure what could fix any of this but another good bout of unconsciousness—that didn’t end in me almost dead, that was.

The fact that Zenigata would fall in love with this woman from his time undercover...I had to learn more about that, someday. It seemed like a nice story, if it would just stop hurting me so badly. It made me wonder, once again, why they weren’t together full-time. But in the mean time...

“Honestly, I prefer the happy Marti, and I’d like to get her back,” I continued quietly. “S-Sorry I messed that up. So...I’ll work to be w-worthy of that, okay? And make you s-smile again. Um...o-officer.”

I looked off, feeling dumb and wishing the withdrawal chills weren’t fucking up my mouth. But when I glanced back at her, she was gazing at me with a thin, red-eyed smile.

“Oh, okay,” she whispered sadly. “I’ll try to forgive you, too, and see you as a man worth trusting, like our friend the warden tells it.”

I offered a smile back, a little wider than hers. “Deal.”

A few minutes of silence went by then, in which we each took to our own spaces. This was so much like with the nurses and psychiatrists back in Monaco that I found my chest tightening up.
But I forced myself to breathe, to see reality: This was different. This was a different place, a different time. With a man who supposedly cared about me and a woman who genuinely had—or maybe it was the other way around?—running my carnival game of a care regimen.

And well, even if they were clowns, they were clowns I knew, who were trying hard, and I was the freak in the sideshow. So...

“Among your people, huh?” Jigen’s voice asked me.

The familiar wave of calm at the idea of him came over me once again, and I sighed. “Yeah....”

And I wasn’t even mad about it.

Because, after all, I was a different person now, too. I knew more, had more skills in my toolbox. I had more to live for.

In my mind’s eye, I could hear Jigen’s voice whisper gently to me, feel his hand stroke down the back of my head reassuringly.

*I can’t wait to see you again....*

Outside, the moon had finally risen, illuminating the shadow of buildings beyond rays of silver on the water. Marti got up to draw the blinds.

“Here, Marti,” I said as she finished up. “Give me that pencil. I’ll...see what I can, uh, do for you.” I pulled out the clipboard and set it on my good leg, feeling sheepish but also a little hopeful. “Since, y’know, ‘the warden’ will want results, and all.”

Marti, now a little drier-eyed, gazed at me with some surprise. She considered the pencil, abandoned in the corner.

“I’d get it m-myself, but...” I shrugged helplessly, motioning down at my legs.

She smirked momentarily, tiredly, and then rose to her feet. “All right.”

As she came over, the heat came on, rattling through the pipes. It would be a long winter night, but there was no way in hell I was sleeping tonight, or any time before I got out of here. It wouldn’t be easy on my mind, though; sleep deprivation, withdrawal, and life-threatening danger were terrible for intrusive thoughts and trigger fingers.

“Hey, can I as-sk you...” I began when she returned and held out the pencil to me.

Just as I was about to take it, she pulled it out of my reach. My hand closed on empty air—to which I frowned.

I eyed Marti darkly, but then took a moment to close my eyes and take a centering breath.

After that, she smiled warmly and placed it in my hand. “Don’t lose your pencil privileges, Lupin.”

I deserved that. But at least I’d been upgraded from ‘inmate,’ and she’d said it with her old friendly tone.

“And...,” she hedged, “Sorry you had to see all that.”
I took the writing utensil from her with a quiet nod. “S-same.”

The smile she gave me made a little warmth crawl through my chest, and my stomach unwind a bit—until the chills came back, wracking through me like ice cubes running up and down my body.

“Do you h-have another blanket by any ch-chance? These ch-chills really s-suck,” I offered back, trying tiredly to pull on my old disarming and non-threatening smile that she’d liked so much.

“Well, let me see what there is.” Marti glanced around the room and its cabinets thoughtfully, looking for ones that weren’t locked. “Maybe this one...?”

But just as she went to investigate, there was a knock at the door.

Marti glanced at it, then at me, but I only shrugged. She walked over to it, quickly flicking the knob. “Zeni,” she offered with a pep to her step, “You’re back so—”

But it was not him.

It was a thin old man with a bushy mustache and a head of light grey hair, who was revealed as the door swung open. And just as I realized who it was—

He stabbed her in the neck.

Right at the base, where the arteries were.

“Oh my,” he stated with mock surprise, gazing at Marti’s stunned face.

She was already tipping over by the time he pulled his hand away, quick as a flash. He caught her in both arms and pulled her to his chest, where her head tipped backward, limp as a ragdoll.

“You have a guard?” he asked with a pleasant smile. “Well, don’t worry, I have a cure for that.”

He kept his eyes on me, Marti sliding through his grip like a ribbon. She jerked to a stop when his grip got to her wrist, only for him to drop her a beat later. She clattered to the floor in a heap. She didn’t appear to be moving, let alone breathing.

I stared at her glassy green eyes, unable to look away. I couldn’t see anything else, couldn’t think anything else. Couldn’t move—

The door shut with a slam. I jumped, but only enough to stare at the man as he came at me, pulling a syringe from his lab coat. It was filled with something clear.

Under the thick mustache, his smile grew as he beheld me.

“...A cure known as Death.”
Why.
The thought raced through my mind.

Why would he stay here, when Angela clearly ran?

My heart heaved double time to my steps as they flew up the stairs.

The whole interview with him had stunk of something rotten. His responses had seemed scripted, and what’s more, polished. Too, he’d been interested in Lupin’s current condition to an uncomfortable degree, and he’d been with Angela the first time. Whatever doubts I had about everyone else, he had all the bright red flags. Anyone could put it together. I just hadn’t, because I’d been too focused on Lupin.

My coat flipped out to the sides as I clung to the bannister post, sling-shotting my way around the corner to start up a fresh flight of steps.

But that simplicity was all the more suspicious. His composure, his alibis, they were all top-notch. That hadn’t been the interview of an amateur, or of an innocent.

So what did he have up his sleeve that he thought he could get away with that? Which friends did he have, that he thought he could stay here and blatantly shame my team without any consequences...?

Halfway there. Almost to the floor I needed—

Why is he still here?

A gunshot went off in the distance, a muffled clatter from one of the floors above.

To cast doubt? To be the mole?

But I couldn’t let myself stop. I could only curse my faults and run faster.
Or...

The thought struck me so hard as I slapped my hand on the bannister’s rounded head that I nearly tripped:

*Backup?*

I rounded the corner onto the fourth floor landing and sprinted through the wood-and-glass fire door with a clatter. Hallway tiles zipped past underfoot, as did lights overhead, seeming far brighter than when I’d left a few minutes ago.

And then, there came the sharp, ragged bang of a second gunshot, reverberating through the hallway.

*A traumatic incident when he was a child...*

*Something to do with his mother and father...*

*A mother who was no longer around....*

I could see the recovery room. There was no one waiting outside, and no one dashing down the hall, either.

I skidded to a halt in front of the door, hand already on my holster.

All I was greeted with was white. Dull white of the door, crackled and chipped.

And on the other side—

* * *

I knew him.

And I would never let him take me alive again.

“The last time we met, I believe I left you with your eyes.”

And yet I couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t move.

The old man stepped closer, smiling pleasantly all the while.

“Such beautiful eyes.”

But I had to. Had to get—

He stopped at the edge of the bed, posture loose. I managed to suck in a breath, which made me blink a few times, rapidly.

I was seeing things that weren’t here. Weren’t now. Cycling in between my vision of what was in front of my face and—

“Didn’t I tell you what would happen if we had to cross paths again?” he asked in that dulcet whisper, his coarse and bushy mustache swishing. “Let’s see how much of my lessons you’ve retained...”

His free hand came up and hovered in front of me.
I instantly stared at it like it might eat me, mind collapsing back to the pinpoint focus of a prisoner trying to stay alive. After a second, I felt a sting in my lungs—I’d gone so stiff I couldn’t make myself breathe.

“Be a good boy and stay still, all right?”

As I tried to get my lungs to work, that hand slid onto my shoulder, firm and warm.

A spasm jolted through my chest; I wanted to claw him off me, then my arm off my body.

But nothing happened. Nothing moved other than a twitch. He curled his fingers into the meat of my shoulder and raised his other hand, the one with the syringe in it, and coaxed me backward.

“Just lie down, and it’ll all be over soon.”

He pushed on my shoulder slightly, but it stayed as still as a tree trunk.

It wasn’t that I was being valiant. I simply couldn’t move at all.

Knowing that made me feel acutely ashamed. Of not being able to please him. And below that, of not being able to make myself run. My head was a swirling storm, but that managed to get through. Of all things, the sharp dart of guilt was what was piercing me.

And that, of course, lead to more shame, which in turn made it even harder to...

He tilted his head a little, a warning, but then flashed me a pitying smirk once he figured out what was going on. With decided slowness, he cupped my cheek and bent down next to my head.

“Seems you haven’t retained quite enough,” he whispered into my ear.

My eyes snapped shut with a full-body jolt. His fingertips, already in my hair, stroked longingly down the back of my head.

“I’m sorry it has to be like this...”

The rustle of clothing as he stood upright.

“I would have been more than happy to take you back, you know that...”

And then came the cold, as he set the end of the metal thread against my carotid.

But for some reason, there came no sharp sting of liquid forcing its way into my veins.

In a moment, my eyes searched out his.

They were waiting for me. Waiting to hold me, with a soft and almost regretful look.

“Good boy.”

I shivered, and his hand squeezed the back of my neck in response. He paused, looking longingly over my face, my body.

“You always were a good experiment,” he whispered when he came back to my eyes. He was smiling quietly. “I’ll miss you.”

The needle pressed into my neck.
I jerked.

Enough to rattle my muscles loose.

As the sting of liquid hit, my hand jerked reflexively. In a blur, my left arm scooped across my body, under both of his, and then moved up to connect with his wrist. His left hand ripped off my neck, smacked across my throat and clanked into his other hand. The syringe knocked loose, bouncing off the machines and clattering onto the floor and taking a tiny selection of my neck with it.

It was just a simple circular block move, ingrained into me so deeply at this point that it could trigger without me thinking about it so long as someone was jabbing something at me. Like a hand, a knife, or in this case—a needle.

But I kept the momentum going. In the split-second I had before my brain shut down again—I used the residual pain to stab him.

The pencil, which had been in my right hand all this time, shoved in between his ribs, completely unblocked.

“Yargh?!”

The man cried out in pain and immediately pushed backward, his elbow pushing down to block any further strikes. I held onto my weapon though, and yanked it free with a hard, wet *shlurk.*

The old man gasped, and the sound *rattled.* He coughed, and when he came to a stop a few feet away from me, he wiped his lips—and red appeared on the back of his hand.

“You little...”

He was *furious.*

*Not down yet—*

My brain screamed it at me. I wasn’t completely there, my nerves were barely right, but I had enough adrenaline to *finish* this, so long as my mind would hold out. I wouldn’t let go until there was nothing left of him but bloody bits. I would do it with my fingernails if I had to.

I’d promised myself. That if I ever got the chance, I’d return him to the ground from whence he’d come.

We stared each other down. Holding his side, he gasped wetly through his nose, then looked around the floor.

I checked it too. The syringe was half under the radiator, much closer to me compared to the door he was blocking. But with the advantage of already being on his feet and not having to change direction, I’d never be able to reach it first.

And yet he was two feet from the door—he could easily run. And he’d better, unless he wanted to get another taste of—

Our eyes locked.

He moved.
The old man sprinted for the syringe, on my side of the room.

At the same time, I flung myself off the bed, jarred down on my good leg—

And headed for Marti, on his side of the room.

We passed each other with less than an inch to spare. I felt his clothes on my arm, but neither of us thought to push the other off balance, so intent were we on our prizes.

My good leg jammed up into my hip socket. My other leg took a momentary hop but even that tore something. I could feel the slick pressure of blood suddenly rushing through the wounded point, the scream of moving muscle that wasn’t structurally sound. And somewhere in my arm, I felt the sting of the IV ripping out—

Until I let myself collapse onto the floor, that was. The impact smacked into my good knee and my wrists, exactly the way you weren’t supposed to. But with the three points down, I could absorb the impact required to drag my right leg out behind me.

And my landing had to be precise, because:

I reached under Marti’s still-warm arm and searched for the leather there.

I’d seen it. I’d seen it, when she’d reached over me in an attempt to get the clipboard—

I could hear his feet behind me. He’d picked up his weapon and was coming at me.

“Young man, you’re being very bad...”

*The latch, the latch—!*

I fumbled it, again and again, not used to it from this angle. My fingers shook, my heart raced, and I could barely breathe. Heat rushed into my face, flared all over my body with my wounds. I was vaguely aware of Marti’s vapid warmth. And then—

The snap flipped up and I yanked the familiar metal free. It settled into my palm like an old friend as I rolled onto my hip and turned, arm outstretched.

And he was standing right at the end of it.

We both looked at this fact, and then at each other, each of us stark still. His hand was raised, ready to strike.

“I won’t miss you,” I whispered to that look in his eye.

And then I pulled the trigger.

Gunshots aren’t like they are on TV. They’re much, much more brutal than that.

There was the flash from the muzzle. His shoulder reeled backward.

The glass window behind him shattered.

And then blood and bits sprayed out behind him, onto that broken clarity.
Hot red hit me square in the face as well. I blinked once and stared for a few seconds, processing it, but somehow, the longer I waited, the less information filtered through my head. It just felt like the sweat, running down my skin.

After a while, I realized the sound getting into my ears and filling the room was screaming. And not my own.

The image of the shattered glass, dripping red in the yellow fluorescents, burned into my brain—and then I abruptly looked down.

The old man had fallen backward, clutching at his arm and yelping. On the ground, he twisted and squirmed, painting red across the tile.

He left arm didn’t move. A good chunk of his bicep was missing, just below his shoulder. He’d tried to dodge, and in a sense, I guess it’d worked—I hadn’t hit his organ meat.

I couldn’t even remember hearing the sound of the gun, though. Or maybe I had, but it had already been swallowed by that black vault that stored so many of my darker memories. Either way, for a moment I was startled to see the piece in my hand.

As I stared with laser-focus at that shining metal and its weight in my palm, I could feel that darkness creeping over me, a hand sliding over first my nerves and then my mind.

But I wasn’t done yet. Wasn’t safe. I couldn’t let it get me yet.

Shivering, I forced myself to stand, using the wall for support. My legs were both leaden and gelatinous, and the one on the right burned, all the way to the bone.

But it was nothing compared to what I forced myself to see.

Slowly, the curtain of pain and memories of suffering parted, and I just saw him.

An old lump of flesh, worming about on the tile. A man with red slowly spreading out around him as he threw curses at me, at the world.

Unslightly ones. Pathetic ones.

I couldn’t even hear them, but I knew them from the force of his face, the shape of his lips. Knew them well, from other men. There was just too much ringing in my ears to hear them properly, like every time I got hit on the head when someone knocked me around.

But I wasn’t that little boy anymore.

I could end this with one more bullet. Marti deserved as much.

But that would be too good for him.

So I took a breath and, pushing down those warm tendrils of a blackout growing up my body, I looked for the syringe. It was nearby, rolled to the edge of the bed. I limped over to it, hand on my leg, and picked it up with shaking fingers.

I gazed at it for a second in my palm, the plastic warm from his heat. Behind me, I heard more fervent curses and shrieks and clatters, but they were going off like thunder, far apart from me.

Slowly, I closed my fingers around the syringe.
It would do.

It was still too good for him, but it’d do.

When I came back, I wasn’t moving fast. But it didn’t matter.

The old man had flipped around and crawled to the cabinets on the far wall, muttering hysterically to himself. He pulled at one drawer, then the next.

But each one was locked, and each time, his voice got a little more frantic.

“Where is it, where is it, there’s got to be something that can...”

He didn’t even notice me as I limped my way up to him. His focus was already that far gone.

“Hey,” I muttered, gazing at his back.

Blood was smeared across the front of every drawer he could reach, slipping down the white in the shape of bright red finger trails.

For just a moment, he turned and looked at me, pressed against the cabinets and wincing in pain.

I held up the pistol in one palm, and in the other, the syringe—both just out of reach, and utterly steady.

“I recall us playing this game before,” I muttered, eyes narrowing. “Pick.”

“You won’t... get away... with this,” he grimaced, red oozing out from his teeth.

There wasn’t an emotion in my body. Just ice.

“When I get you back in my room...”

—in the darkness, feeling the shape of an object he held. A wooden handle, seemingly innocuous... until my fingers hit the cool smoothness of a blade.

Pulling back, only to have a voice whisper to me to try the other.

This time, a serrated knife.

Pulling back again. But after a moment of silence, of hesitation, that sweet, dulcet voice would whisper over my limbs with no hesitation at all and say—

“Pick.”

He laughed.

“Pick.”

“Oh, my boy, heh, hck, you’re-rrgh, not nearly cu-hhhgh-t out for a dominant position. You know that—”

My hands closed around the weapons, slowly. Ever so slowly.

“Heh. But it looks cute on you anyway.”

I couldn’t feel anything. A thought did not go through my head.
There was only a single impulse, racing up my arm.

So I did the only thing that made sense to me: I shot up into the ceiling.

He jumped, and in the moment he had his eyes closed, I stabbed him.

And again, and again, fallen down on top of him, the gun abandoned to the side.


—Until finally, the last time, when I shoved the syringe’s plunger and its remaining contents all the way down into his neck.

He lashed out at me with his hands, clawed at my skin, yelled and wailed in pain, but in the end, all it did was get me a little more bloody. His liver-spotted hand pushed at my face, messily sliding up my neck and jaw. Clawed at my skin, and maybe raked me here and there.

But it was easy. Remarkably easy. And that was what made me weep by the end of it.

Out of breath, I sucked in a sharp gulp of air and let out a feral scream that turned into a sob. I flung myself off of him, my back hitting the bed. I curled into myself like a pill bug, clutching at my wet sides.

It hurt. Everything hurt, so much, and I wanted to claw off half my skin to get underneath it and get the feeling to stop. But it never would; it never would.

“God dammit,” I wheedled through gritted teeth, trying desperately to push the encroaching blackness away. It was almost here, no matter how much I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to pretend I was somewhere else.

A clatter.

The old man wheezed and clutched at his wounds weakly, sliding the rest of the way down the cabinets to the floor. Bits of bone flaked off in their wake, and more blood fell.

And I just sat there, watching it, shaking like a leaf.


With something just under the surface screaming.

“You didn’t pick, so I picked for you,” I recited, a whispered mantra, clawing my fingernails down my scalp.

It didn’t take long for the last of his muscles to spasm. It was unslightly, like a squished bug twitching.

But it was what I felt like inside. What’d I’d felt like, ever since I was a child.

As I felt myself breaking apart, his dulling gaze fell upon me, holding me tightly from where he lay.

“You learned...well,” he whispered. “M’boy.”
Shut up, I wanted to hiss, but it only came out as tears.

Stupid, goddamned tears, just like always.

“But sometimes...you’re just...so...nor...mal...”

I picked up the Walther from where it rested between us, and the held it between my shaking hands.

I stared at him, mouth open, breathing hard, wishing there was something I could say.

But there wasn’t.

I just wanted it all to end.
4/1/2019: I'm not sure which chapter you all are going to see first in your subscription inboxes, the updated one or the "new" one, so I'll say it again here as in last chapter -- I revised chapter 67 by breaking it into several chapters and then adding a chapter of new material, chapter 69. Thank you for your patience and understanding with this tricky work in progress!

Two gunshots.

Three people, and two bullets.

There was only one person left in that room, and I had a feeling I knew who it was going to be.

I kicked the door open and raised my handgun high, one finger on the trigger and one hand bracing the grip.

“Drop the weapon, drop it now!” I shouted.

Feet planted, I stared down the gun’s sight into the beam of light that was the room, checked left and right, and—

Despite my preparations, there were no shouts that came at me, nor even movement. No guns going off. No men shoving past me to run; no frightened victims being held hostage at gunpoint. No frantic, high-pitched screams or angry, low-pitched shouts.

There wasn’t even anyone left standing.

Don’t tell me...

All that met me in that room was blood, silence, and the cold scent of the sea.

So much blood that I could smell it, a harsh tang in between the salty breeze.

…I’m too late?

Just like Satoru’s bathroom, this room, too, had once been almost entirely white. But now...

For a second, all I registered was the blood.

Seeping over the tiny black-and-white floor tiles and the grout between them. Spattered on glass and mirrors and fixtures. Pressed into white cabinets as hand prints, smeared over drawer handles in finger-drawn streaks, and running down white surfaces in rivulets.

And...

Drenching the guy on the ground.

The guy who was—
I looked at him for a second, very nearly what you would call “mauled” where he lay against the counters. His arms and legs were splayed out, with his head lolled to the side. His bushy white hair was covered in red, as was his neck and torso. His left arm was a gory, jagged mess, most parts purple and unidentifiable aside from the fresh white bits of bone sticking out.

I winced and turned to the “animal” that I suspected had done said mauling.

A person was curled up against the bed frame across from Martinique, legs tucked up to his chest and face hidden behind the arms wrapped around his knees.

Lupin was curled up into a very tight, very small ball, his dark-blue gown covered in something darker, and his bare feet, twisted together, smeared with drying blood. His head was spattered in blood to the point that his entire face looked like a shadow, his eyes sticking out like a beacon.

And yet, the only reason I could tell he was conscious was because he was rocking slightly. He wasn’t even blinking. He was just staring at the old doc like was terrified he was about to get up still.

It looked like...he was in the middle of another episode.

Making up my mind, I sucked in a tight breath and went the few steps until I stood over the old man.

I didn’t need to touch him to know he wasn’t getting back up soon. The glassy eyes were enough to make that obvious, if the blood and chunks out of him weren’t.

Still...

With a sigh, I bent down and touched at his neck.

There was a pulse.

I stared, shook my head out; tried again in a different spot.

But it wasn’t my imagination. My heartbeat was distinctly different from his.

“Shit,” I muttered, quickly grabbing the roll of paper towels from above the sink and looping it around his arm in a tight, thick bandage. It wouldn’t be pretty, and his arm probably couldn’t be saved, but it’d staunch the blood flow at least. Maybe. Enough for now, anyway...

I wasn’t even thinking about who I was helping. And by the time I got past the instincts, the professional part of me realized I still needed him to talk, so I decided it was probably for the best.

I was still thinking that as I silently turned to my suspect.

The old man never once moved; he was staunchy unconscious. By Lupin...

He looked up at me like a frightened child, then quickly looked away. Before I could say anything to reassure him, his eyes fixed on something behind me, staring intently—and guiltily.

I knew immediately what he was looking at.

I hadn’t even thought of it until that very moment, but in an instant, my gut knew.

The thing I had forgotten, seeing just the two of them.
The thing I had taken for granted, seeing that Lupin was still alive.

I turned a little further, and there she was.

Lying on the ground, clearly fallen there, with her arms splayed out in front of her and her pretty red hair sprawled across the tile. She was against the wall behind the door, so I hadn’t seen her when I’d come in.

Her eyes were wide open, and utterly unblinking, opposite but similar to Martinique.

And yet...there was no blood around her. None.

She could have just been unconscious, having hit her head or something, but I didn’t see her breathing, either.

I took a deep breath and forced the sting of panic down. Gripped my gun tighter and then turned back to Lupin, a strong, hot pain throbbing in my chest, threatening to take over my face.

He was watching me from his huddle, both frightened and apologetic.

I swallowed hard. “Give me the gun, Lupin.”

I held out my free hand. He glanced at the weapon briefly, which he was holding tightly in his right hand as it lay wrapped around his knees. I hadn’t seen it until I’d come further into the room, since it’d been hidden on the far side of his body. For his part, it looked like he’d just remembered it was there.

...Which wasn’t, to be honest, a good thing.

“I can’t help her until you give me the gun, Lupin,” I whispered hoarsely. “...Or you.”

He took a breath, which morphed suddenly into a deeper, harsher one. It was ragged, and shuddered out of him with a squeak at the end.

“I’m sorry,” he hiccuped weakly. “I’m sorry...?” He shrugged a little, fat tears spilling down his reddened eyes. He shivered, his weapon hand turning outward helplessly. “I couldn’t stop him...”

I gave the woman I loved one last apologetic look, then nodded to myself with a shaky breath and a desperate prayer.

_Forgive me this. Just a few more moments, and then I’ll never leave your side again._

“Lupin,” I coaxed, turning to him fully and taking a step nearer. “Are you hurt?”

“What?” he asked, blinking up at me hysterically. He flinched back against my step, but soon just devolved back into sobbing. What skin of his face that was being cleansed of its bloody coating by the tears was turning a bright shade of red on its own.

I swallowed thickly, trying to keep the shaking in my voice down. Another step. “I heard two gunshots. Did he hit you?”

The last thing I needed was Lupin bleeding to death from some wound I couldn’t see. Whatever was wrong with Marti, I couldn’t go to her until he was disarmed, now that I knew it was there.
But at this rate, he might not let me near him until it was too late for either of them. I had to work
fast, but I couldn’t risk upsetting him, either. In this state, I didn’t know which one of us he’d
shoot.

He looked down at himself in confusion, then up at me in alarm. “No...?”

I was only a couple of feet from him. Most people would have used the opportunity to launch
themselves at him. But I didn’t have time to be wrong and get rebuffed—and he didn’t have the
durability to get hauled around in a scuffle.

It felt so wrong to tell myself I wasn’t going to use force against an armed and addled suspect when
I had the chance, but I had to be honest with myself: I wasn’t going to. I would rather let him take
me down then have to watch him bleed out from one of my bullets.

Not after everything I’d done this week.

Not with Anna lying there, too.

“Good,” I managed with some believability. “I’m glad.” I made a show of holstering my weapon,
all the while quietly keeping his attention directed on me. Even if my voice was quavering.

“I’m sorry,” Lupin repeated sickly, rubbing at his eyes with the heel of his palm—which only
managed to smear more blood across his face.

“It’s...” I caught myself checking back at Marti and then forced out with some effort, “all right.
I’m...here to help, remember?” I dropped down to one knee at his side—the side without the gun—
hands held out placatingly. Lupin swallowed heavily and stared at me, blinking hard to get his
eyes clear enough to see.

“I didn’t mean to,” he pleaded at a sob. “I didn’t mean to get caught...”

“What are you talking about?” I muttered, totally at a loss.

His dark blue irises bored into mine, brightened by his red sclera and nightmarishly bloodied face.
“Donatello’s party...”

Oh, I realized. So that was where his brain was stuck at.

I sighed and wrapped my arms around his shoulders, pulling him into me with a hand against his
head. Lupin didn’t resist; in fact, he sucked in a hiccup and then just sobbed into my chest,
crumpled up and clutching weakly at my shirt with one hand.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry...,” he pleaded, shaking like a leaf.

“Shhh, it’s all right.” I sighed and glanced over at Marti, panic continuing to rise in my chest that I
had to push down, then took a deep breath at the ceiling. It wouldn’t be all right, but... “I’ve got
you...”

Lupin couldn’t suck in an even breath to save his life. “I didn’t tell them anything, I swear...”

“I know, I know.”

“I’m sorry...”

“Hey,” I said gently, delicately settling my right hand over his. It rested beyond his knees, still
holding his pistol. “I’m gonna get you out of here, but I need you to give me the gun. Can you put
it on the ground for me, please?”

A moment went by, Lupin sucking down air as he tried to stem the waterworks enough to speak steadily. He never moved out from the shelter of my chest, but he never let the gun go, either. Some instinctual part of him knew it was his only defense at this point, seemed like—but I needed to convince him otherwise.

“I’ve got one, I can keep you safe,” I explained patiently, hand moving over the top of the barrel. “But I really want to go to Marti and I can’t if...if you have that still.”

My voice broke at the end, and a hysterical little smile ticked at one side of my mouth.

And underneath me, Lupin went very still suddenly:

“Mar...ti...?” he asked. “Who’s—?”

And then he stiffened, hands—both hands—pressing into his forehead with a sharp hiss.

I plucked the gun away from his fingers as they released it in favor of his skin and quickly put the safety on and secured the weapon in my belt. He pushed away from me and I let him; both hands ground against his skull, and his mouth fell open into a shudder of pain. His eyes squeezed shut for several seconds...

Until they suddenly opened, staring at the floor with a thousand-yard stare.

I watched him, waiting...

And then they abruptly flicked to the painting over my left shoulder. Then over at Martinique, lingering there as well.

Until finally, they looked up at me with a knowing horror.

“Oh,” he whispered.

* * *

Where...was I? Floor. My feet. Other feet. Blood. White. Yellow light—

*a blinking light, walls of blood, a man standing over me with a smile on his face and a scalpel in his hand*

—Floor tiles. Innocuous, simple, white hexagonal floor tiles with the occasional black. Old but so clean they were clearly nicely kept, save where the blood lay. Not like the—

*Floorboards, breaking, falling through but not where I was being kept, why couldn’t I get out of here, if only I were stronger, cleverer*

—Wall. Just a wall. A medical bed? Why was I somewhere with a—?

I lifted my head and spotted the painting on the wall. Oh, oh right, I was in a place...with cream colored walls and lots of bright pictures.

I didn’t like the pictures, not all of them. But these walls held friends. Allies. Me— adult. *I’m an adult.* I’m ten...twenty...almost thirty. *Yeah, yeah. I’m—*

My eyes caught on the face of the man to my left, across the room from me.
Voices screamed through my head. Dozens of them, of different times and days and throat-breaking screams and their crushed, pathetic, beseeching sobs to match.

But they quieted at the sight of the blood spreading out through his shirt. Of his body unmoving. Of those eyes, finally, finally not looking at me.

A wave of relief hit me—until I realized there was a shadow on my arms.

There was a person. Very close to me.

I looked before me and found—

A man.

Another man I knew very well.

A friend.

Sort of.

It was Ark—no, Zenigata. Crouched on one knee and watching me intently, not more than a foot away.

And as I watched him, I remembered.

Remembered everything I’d done in this room, and that’d lead us here.

Remembered why the old man wasn’t getting back up at the moment.

“Oh,” I whispered. It was the only thing I could say. Anything else wouldn’t begin to encompass it. And then: “Is he dead?”

“Dead enough?” Zenigata said hesitantly, and then pressed, “You back?”

I stared down at my hands, trying to figure out how much clarity I had and if I was indeed going to stick around. I was definitely about to vomit, if only to stop the feeling of the need to claw at myself. But yes, I was...here. For now. So long as I could focus on him. Having him around to hold would help tremendously.

But...he knew. The victim next to the cabinets aside, the fact that he’d seen something was written all over his face, and the fact that I couldn’t remember what I was just doing, written all over mine.

I didn’t feel like I had a lot of control; everything was bouncing around in my body and I couldn’t hardly breathe. My hands were shaking against the backdrop of the tile, and covered in sticky red.

How many people did I hurt? What did he see me do....

I closed my eyes and gritted my teeth, accepting whatever admonishment was to come.

...Was he the one that stopped me?

I hung my head and waited.

Sucked in a hot breath, then two—

Until a warm, steady hand set against my own. There was no malice in it, only a question. Its
warmth spread through me, loosening my joints and threatening to take over me.

The Inspector pulled up my clenched fist. “I’m sorry, but I need to do this,” he stated. I watched blankly as he pulled out his pair of worn, silvery handcuffs from the back of his belt. “People are coming, and they need to know you’re not a danger to them so that they don’t hurt you. So humor me and wear these for a while, okay? Even if we both know you can get out of them.”

His hand wasn’t cruel or even tight as the silver snapped around my wrist. It almost seemed like he was holding onto me for strength. I hiccuped a laugh, hysterically.

But I did my best to hold him up. I couldn’t make myself look at his face, though, even as tears rose to my eyes again.

“Oh Ark,” I lamented softly, staring at the familiar nicks and scrapes in his hands as they worked, “You’ve finally seen the truth of me.”

But even though I wanted them to, the tears didn’t fall this time. The dried up under the heavy weight of the truth, pinning me down alongside the handcuffs.

“This isn’t you,” he said firmly.

But his voice was tinged with sadness, and he didn't seem to have an answer for who it was. So I just closed my eyes and sobbed, unable to stop it.

When he was done, he paused for a moment, then heaved another tired sigh. His hand cupped my face, then reached around the back of my head and pulled me into him. My hands were trapped against his chest as I cried.

It was warm. So very warm.

But for all my sobbing, I could tell he was shaking. I could feel it into my muscles.

“I didn’t want this for you, you know that,” he whispered back. “I’m sorry.”

“These are my demons, Ark,” I sighed, closing my eyes as I sheltered my head against his shoulder. “Not yours.”

After a long moment, he took a breath and sighed. It sounded like he wanted to say something more, but he never did. He separated from me with a pat and then pointed to one corner of the room. “Sit there and don’t Move.” It was his Cop Voice, albeit tired and at the end of its rope. “I’ll never forgive you if you make me have to shoot you.”

He didn’t even wait for me to go. I sat there for a bit, watching him haul himself to his feet. His gaze lingered on the old man for a moment, then he sighed and shook his head. Feeling a spike of something unpleasant and muddy at that old man’s face—at the feeling of the pencil jarring up into arm as it tore through muscle, grazed off bone—I turned away too, not wanting to ever see it, ever feel any of that—of him—again.

Gingerly, I crawled over to the corner Ark had indicated, the one at the end of the bed under the harbor painting. The adrenaline was pouring out of me, and all I was left with was a wobbling sense of sickness, so it took a while to situate myself against the wall.

But as I curled up into a ball, so too did the memories of doing so time and again in the past come to me.
I put my hands over my head and tried to shut them out, but they just kept coming like a flood.

When I started weeping, Ark didn’t say a damn thing. He never did, any time I cried in front of him. But he didn’t pretend like it wasn’t happening, either. He just accepted it, and would probably eventually come over and pat my head with a comforting word when it was done, like my mother always had.

My mother on her good days, anyway.

*My mother*...

I watched the middle-aged man with the downtrodden shoulders sigh as he moved across the room. He pushed the door shut with a perfunctory hand and then dropped down onto his knees heavily, leaning over the woman fallen there.

A man...leaning over a woman...?

While I huddled in a corner, bruised and crying...

The memories came back to me not in a flash or a wave, but like a rain, slowly trickling down into my consciousness as I watched what unfolded, with neither of them the wiser.

I’d...I’d seen something like this before....

He was roaring at me. His voice echoed through the room—his office—and I found that all I could do was stare at the floor, still as a post, trying to mentally deflect as much of it as I could with the occasional too-hard blink.

His room mirrored a police captain’s office: full of dark walnut wainscoting and burgundy silk wallpaper with large wooden furniture and all the blinds drawn for the confrontation. It could not hide his voice from echoing out in the hall, and I supposed he knew that, given that Ark was outside being forced to listen as a thinly-veiled punishment.

But for my part, I was hollowed out by the months past in the Venice dungeons, as well as confused and disoriented by the previous day where Ark had driven me out of Italy and up the length of France, and so was generally trying not to listen. But I had to, to pick out which pieces I needed to respond to in order to keep myself alive.

And that last bit—“again”—was something I didn’t quite understand; whatever he was referencing, he hadn’t bothered to inform me about it. But before I could even note it fully, he was onto the next thing:

“Donatello’s family is the most important connection we have—I have—and you just fucked it up by—what was it? What did you do?—Stealing from him?! The fuck is wrong with you?”

His hands were up by his temples, fingers splayed, jutting back and forth toward me. But now, they turned into fists and back, then ran down his face. He let out a feral noise, and then his hands drew out toward me, curled into a throttling motion.

“Why would you believe anyone who told you to do that?! Do you know how long I had to tell him—what I had to give him—to convince him it wasn’t me but an inside job from someone on his side?” he went on, shouting at the top of his lungs and rage-pointing at me. I stayed silent with my head down, though I carefully kept an eye on the glass paperweight he picked up. He squeezed it like he might throw it at me, only to slam it down hard enough to dent his desk. To its credit—or some Venician glassblower’s—it didn’t break. Still, with a deep breath, my father splayed his hands out toward me, curled into a throttling motion.

He was wearing a suit, but he’d put his hat on the tree and his jacket too. His sleeves were rolled up, and his suspenders cut a menacing shape across his boxer’s shoulders. I could see the muscles in his forearms shaking with rage.

“If he had killed you right then I would have been fucking glad,” he went on, “but he sent you
back. To me. To torment me I suppose? Trust me, it was good without you, minus when I thought he was going to snap and kill us all, so I suppose I should thank you for surviving long enough to let him take the majority of his anger out on you?“

My eyes snapped shut, instantly recalling visceral memories and trying to force them away. Unfortunately, it was then that he decided he really wanted a response.

“Well?” he pressed darkly, turning on his nimble feet. His hand lingered on the corner of his desk as he stared me down; I gaped, searching for a response that was least likely to set off the obvious fuse burning through the powder keg. Alongside Charles and the people in the years since, in the last few months in that dark place, I’d been conditioned to pick answers from carefully calculated questions; there were right answers that would please my captors, even if they were questions where every answer would necessitate worse outcomes for me. But they’d always be immediately visible outcomes, and knowing that, they gave me time to think on my answers, enjoying the suffering, the control, of the wait.

In a sense, I suppose you could say they knew how my mind worked—it had a lot of layers to process, and given that my flight, fight, or freeze response was to freeze, sometimes it got stuck in them. The leading man—variously asking me to call him master, doctor, and other things in the heat of the moment—had always enjoyed those instances, using them as excuses for punishments and “treatments” both. I was physically terrified of not having answers at this point, but even worse was open-ended questions that didn’t come with immediately visible expectations.

So, in short, I couldn’t answer him. I didn’t know what he wanted, let alone how to give it to him—but I did realize that could prove fatal, so I hoped the silence would help things.

The eyes in the face that looked so much like mine flickered back and forth, his jaw tightened, and then all of a sudden, he rushed forward. I made it back a step but his rough-hewn fists pulled me up by the collar. “Well now that you’ve come home, what do you think I should do with you? Pick up where he left off? According to him, the only thing you’re good for is torturing.”

My eyes stayed closed and I wavered on my feet—my body was deeply bruised in spots, I was tired, sick, panicking, dehydrated, and malnourished too—and mostly tried to find a place to put my hands that weren’t on him, because that would only set the powder off.

“Answer me,” he growled.

You could love me, came to mind, but it was a stupid thought and I pushed it aside. Instead, my shoulders slumped with a sigh. What little processing power I had was easily overwhelmed, and I’d been primed of late to give very direct, honest answers, even if it hurt, so...

“Whatever you want, I suppose,” I husked back, my voice weak from disuse.

Apparently he wasn’t prepared for that—for acceptance—because he looked at me wildly for a second, before shoving me backward with an exasperated grunt. I stumbled back, tripped on the rug, but managed to stay half upright by pushing myself against a side table, creating another bruise in my hip.

“How the hell are you related to me,” he huffed, turning in a circle, his hand going through what would have been his bangs if he still had them. He looked me up and down, mixed with disdain and frustration, then sighed. “You look like me, but you’re nothing like me,” he pleaded to the fates. “You can’t do anything right, everything you touch turns to ash... Why was I ever cursed with you, when all I wanted was her?”
Over by his desk, he ran his hand over his mustache and mouth, the other braced heavily on the wood. His back was to me, and in the evening dim, he held out his free hand off to the side as he spoke to himself. “I told her I never wanted kids and yet she did that to me. With him... And all this time...”

He trailed off, but I waited, wondering what more would come, enraptured on every word in a way I hadn’t been in a long time. In a way I’d forgotten: quietly, with some hope. Some connection, not just fear of self-preservation.

So perhaps that feeling was why I did what I did, when he didn’t go on:

“Will you...tell me about her? When you two...were together?”

A long second went by where he stayed stark still, as if he hadn’t heard me, and I almost had the absurd thought to ask again. But then, slowly, he lifted his head and turned to me. He stared me down like he was some kind of wild beast about to attack, but for a reason I couldn’t readily identify. There was no emotion there I could understand; whatever I knew of my father, that person was momentarily gone, transformed into something entirely different.

There was nothing there but fury. Pure, livid fury from an unknown source, and I had no idea what to do to quell it.

Immediately, I knew I had to hide.

He rushed across the room again in an incoherent roar and I ducked behind the first big thing that was large enough to count as cover—a potted plant.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” I yelped. But it did nothing; his hands ripped through the palm, tearing it into shreds as I dashed aside, behind the leather chair in the corner.

“What right do you think you have to tell me what to do?!” he roared, reaching for me. “You think I care what you want? You think I want you at all?! I wish you’d never been born!”

I ducked down into a ball, childhood instincts taking over, but of course the heavy chair immediately went tumbling end over end out of the way and his fists came down onto me. A bruise on my arm, then another; a particularly nasty knock on my hand that I could tell tore something in my knuckles and left me dizzy besides.

“You pathetic piece of shit, why are you always cowering like a woman?! At least fight like a man if you’re going to use my name!” he shouted, using the energy to rain down the blows.

“Stop it! Stop it Dad, please!”

“You are no son of mine!” he shouted back, bringing both hands above his head in a hammer grip to sledge my defense apart.

I’d managed to block most everything else to some degree, but that was going to destroy me if it knocked into my head, block or not. Dizzy and battered, I launched myself up, tackling him around the waist. We both ended up on the floor with a hard grunt, but I immediately peeled away and limped across the room, heading for his jacket in a flash.

The key was there. The room had an old-fashioned door, locking from the inside, and—

Before I could get it out, my fingers quaking and fumbling, the glass paperweight came flying at me, landing a square hit on my back like a softball hurled at full speed. Wind knocked out of me, I
stumbled to my knees, pushing the coat tree over in the process in a huge clatter.

Trying to get my bearings, I belatedly heard his desk drawer rattle. His jacket tangled around me just long enough that I didn’t realize until he was already winding up that he’d pulled out his letter opener.

It came flying at my face. I watched the silver whip end over end in slow motion; I lurched to the side at the last moment, the wind from the blade brushing my cheek. A split-second later, it embedded in the wainscotting behind me with a thunderous thud.

“Jesus, Dad! Stop! I can fix this! I promise! It was all a mistake! Please! He forgave you, you don’t have to kill me—?!”

“I don’t?” he asked, ice cold and suddenly calm again as he stood up, back straight. But that was only a facade; it was rage building up, deciding how it wanted to explode.

I stared at him from my knees, panting hard with every limb ready to run but realizing, in the back of my mind, that there was no where to go.

There was only this room and the windows. A long drop...a key I couldn’t get to...and a man I had to stop.

If I wanted to.

If I really wanted to live.

The thought of the silver sunflowers in the moonlight from the other night came to mind, vivid and hard—as did the words I’d told Ark in that field, as he held a gun to the back of my head.

“I can’t run.”

As my father took a step toward me, I cast around, the defense worthiness of the other objects nearby calculating through my mind.

“There’s still something I have to get from him. That only he can give me.”


Rug—

“Don’t make me have to take your body out of there in a rug,” Ark had said to me as he’d dropped me off here. He was still standing out there, beyond that door. Listening to whatever my father did to me through that door as a sign of submission and punishment both, knowing he might be next.

I’d given him a dull look and shrugged, unable to muster anything more. “Can’t make any promises.”

When I’d tried for the door, he’d held my shoulder instead and stared me square in the eye. “I’m serious.”

I eyed him, then replied with a sigh, “...Only one of us may come out of this.”

“Might be a good time to make that somebody you,” he whispered back.

The wide-eyed stare I’d given him was just the same as when I looked up at my father now.
And yet, there was still that something I had to do.

I could die here, and that would be okay.

But I couldn’t kill him.

Because I still needed him. He was the only one with the answers.

“Please,” I pleaded up at him hoarsely as he came to stand in front of me, his hands hanging at his sides. “I fucked up. I’m sorry. I can fix this. Let me—”

His hand whipped out and struck me across the cheek. My head snapped to the side with an incredible noise from the slap, and for a moment my vision blurred. I fell to the side, weight hard on my injured hand.

“Funny thing,” he stated, just as quickly going for my throat. Startled, I grabbed at his massive hand, but he held me in place. It wasn’t even hard for him to pull me around, forcing my legs to change position on the carpet to support me.

His skin was rough and hot, and while I could still breathe, it wasn’t easy. My face heated up and my heart rate ratcheted up even further. I felt it pulsing in my neck, thick against his skin.

Meanwhile, towering above me with posture utterly calm, my father waited a few seconds, locking gazes with me until mine settled enough that he knew I was listening attentively.

“Your mother said that same thing.”

My eyes widened, but he didn’t say anything else. He just slowly squeezed his hand tighter.

“Ugk...ulg...”

I scrabbled at his hand, digging into it with my fingernails and going for pressure points, but it wasn’t making any difference. I didn’t have the strength anymore to force his grip to break.

“Well, I suppose it was Sunny, not your mother. But at this point I don’t really know which one to apply that term to. Does that answer your question?”

His grip continued to tighten, until I couldn’t draw any air. I gripped his wrist in both hands, trying to get this across, trying to lift myself to a point where I could breathe, but of course it wouldn’t make any difference. Not to him, not right now.

“I loved her. I loved her more than I ever cared about you, born or not.”

I closed my eyes, chest heaving and lungs burning. My face flushed hot and I could feel capillaries bursting all over my head from the pressure, but the thing that was stuck in my mind was the look in his eyes. The complete apathy, bordering on annoyance.

“Remember that.”

His hand opened. I fell to my hands and knees, gasping and coughing like I’d been drowning. As I reached for my throat, desperate to find a way to shudder out a “Yes sir, sorry sir,” I saw a blur coming at my head.

I turned just in time for his foot to catch me around the side of my head.

It took a while for me to realize I was on the floor, being stomped on. It was even harder to hear
what he was saying.

But when he was done, I found myself lying loosely on my side with one eye swollen shut and all sorts of fluids flowing from my head, none of them good to be losing. The tang of blood covered my mouth and nose.

Above me, I saw bits and flashes of my father, first feet and legs and then the distinct blur of things being thrown. The sharp spatter of glass and metal crashing, the thick booms of paper and wood flying, each sound tensing limbs of mine, even when they couldn’t move otherwise. With my body throbbing and head dizzy, I couldn’t quite figure out how to change position. I just stared at a view of things falling, at the baseboards across the room, and at my hand curled in front of me, even though I knew I desperately needed to escape.

And at that very moment, I had the strange feeling I’d been in that situation before, with him.

“Do you know what you’ve done?” he kept saying. It was distant in my ears, like through water. “Why would you do this to me?”

As the voice of the cyclone went off above me, I started to see flashes of something.

Flashes that skipped to a view of my mother on the floor, lying on her side like I was now, the baseboards prominent white on either side of her. She lay against a dark, old-fashioned wallpaper that was dimly lit. I couldn’t see her face. Just my father’s back as he leaned over her.

I remembered it. All of a sudden, as I sat on that floor in a bloodied pile watching Zenigata tend to Marti, I remembered, for the first time, how my father’s rage eventually turned into crying, into cradling her close, and sobbing a name.

A name that wasn’t hers.

“Natsu...”
Chapter Notes

I don't know how much of the beginning of this chapter is really necessary, but I guess I was trying to be artistic.

I had been talking to Lupin, about to go get some blankets for him, when I was preempted by a knock at the door. I went over to open it, but before I could process that the man before me wasn’t Zeni, there was a sharp pain in my neck.

Doctor Martinique caught me, and held me, and then I dropped to the floor.

I felt the jarring impact. Felt the residual sting in my neck, and the cool of the floor against the sore spot.

But I couldn’t move.

Why couldn’t I move?—

Am I dying?

I tried to make my body work, but it wouldn’t do it.

...Why?

My vision was fixed in such a way that I could see the floor, the machines, and Lupin’s bed, about up to the top edge of the mattress. And in that view: Feet, walking across the tiny black-and-white tiles. Steadily heading over to Lupin’s bed, with no regard for whatever had just happened to me.

Oh no, I realized suddenly.

Run, Lupin. Save yourself. Run as far as your legs can carry you.

I wasn’t sure what was happening to me, but I was still here. I couldn’t speak, and I couldn’t control whether or not I was breathing. But I could see. For however long I had, I could see, and hear.

I hoped I wouldn’t have to see Lupin die.

The man walked up to him almost casually. I saw Lupin’s nearer hand, just at the very top of my vision, clench in the sheets—until Dr. Martinique’s back eclipsed it.

The old man said something I couldn’t quite make out for a few moments, and then—

He yelled.

Martinique stumbled backward, over to one side of my view and nearly out of it.

A beat went by, and then there was a flurry of color.
I couldn’t move my eyes at all, so I couldn’t move my point of focus. But I could train my brain to pay more attention to one area or another, even if it was blurry. And that came in handy when the old surgeon went one way, and Lupin came at me.

I thought he was going to pick me up and run. But he didn’t. He simply reached under my arm and whirled around and—

The sound. The sound of the gunshot was so very loud, but I didn’t even flinch.

And because of that, it went through me like pain.

I heard the glass crash, and a body crumple to the floor. After a few long heaves of breath, Lupin stumbled out of my view, and there came the clattering of cabinets. Lupin’s hoarse whisper once the ringing cleared, and the doctor’s too.

_You’ll never get away with this._

_Pick._

_You learn well._

Silence, as Lupin held the gun pointed at his opponent.

And then his voice, shouting like I had very rarely heard a person scream.

Raw and ragged, ripped at the edges, desperate and keening by the end—and surrounded by the wet, slick sounds of flesh forcibly tearing.

And then he heaved sickly and pushed himself across the room. I could see his feet, as they curled up against the bed.

And then silence. Terrible, terrible silence, that was punctuated only by his soft sobbing.

I had to listen to it, as the cold winter air floated down onto the floor. I couldn’t even make a noise of soothing sympathy.

But soon there came a bang and a shout, and then more feet into my view. A familiar set of slacks and shoes entered from the side opposite Lupin’s.

It was Zeni.

_Oh no. Please don’t shoot each other. Please don’t make me watch this..._

Interminable seconds went by. I tried to flop over, tried to shout. I felt frantic energy of hysteria rise in me, but it did nothing useful. It was like sleep paralysis almost—I was conscious, but the more I demanded that my body move, the more frantic my brain became that it couldn’t. I felt my temperature rise alongside the panic, my heart race and my breathing quicken, but other than that, nothing. Not even a squeak from my throat.

And it seemed he hadn’t noticed me yet, because he was slowly creeping across my vision, softly calling Lupin’s name from time to time.

For several tense seconds I watched two pairs of feet, inches apart, face the same direction—and then one of them turned toward the other.

Whispers, more words. Zenigata’s shadow left the old doctor and then bent down on one knee,
toward the fallen thief outside my vision.

A beat. A sigh.

A few long moments where they spoke to each other, neither one of them entirely quite here.

He held Lupin, and Lupin held him back, right at the edge of my vision.

And then, a pair of handcuffs snapping later, he finally came over to me.

Just seeing him turn his attention on me made everything feel better momentarily.

The Inspector’s feet stopped near my shins. His legs took up most of my vision until, after several long seconds, he dropped to his knees with heavy exhale.

His hand hovered over me—that hand that caressed, protected, loved—until he sucked in a breath and it slowly curled into a fist without touching me. He took a heavy breath and smacked at his thigh.

I wanted to smile at him. I'm fine. I don't know what's going on, but I'm fine in here, really! Please be happy!

But when he looked down into my eyes, his face was anything but. His brow pushed together and his jaw tightly clenched. Zeni hovered over me on his knees, right hand clenching and unclenching until it finally touched at my cheek. Fingers drew along my skin, making it tingle.

The Inspector sucked in a breath and then sat back, carefully pulling me into his lap. Cradling my head in the crook of one elbow, his face came into my view again—my whole view. This time, his mouth pulled into a line unconsciously as his cheeks turned red.

I just wanted to hug him, to reassure him that everything was fine, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t even speak his name, to tell him how I felt. I couldn’t raise my hands. My legs. My voice.

So maybe that look of his was right.

Cradling me in one arm, he ran a heavy hand over my hair, my shoulder. Turned me a little. I saw my arms flop, one falling off his warm knee to the cool of the tile. Felt his hand on my body, and how hot he was. Sweaty. Shaking.

His breath hitched as he felt up and down my torso.

But when he found no wounds, he huffed a note of utter confusion and unfairness. He looked me in the eyes anew, his lips tightening to fend off the redness in his face.

“Why...?” he hiccuped down at me.

Zeni swallowed hard and placed two fingers against my neck, strong but hesitant.

My head tilted back and by now I didn’t try to stop it. My gaze was in a funny place—kind of half at his forehead—but still, I tried to smile for him.

See? I'm alive. I'm fine. I'm sure this will wear off eventually—

Unless...I really am paralyzed. Then let’s hope I don’t last the night.
I didn’t remember getting stabbed in the spine, but maybe that was the point—once it happens, you
don’t feel anything.

I didn’t want to have to beg him to kill me. Or Lupin. Though Lupin might do it. But that would
ruin what little was left of their relationship...

Though...I could actually be dead, and this is my spirit not ready to leave my body. Wouldn’t that
just be my luck....

That thought was when I started to cry. Watching Zeni, my tears welled up, and I couldn’t blink
them away. I just had to let them pool and accept that they would slowly obscure my final vision
of this precious person of mine, and there’d be nothing I could do about it.

But before he disappeared, I saw Koichi’s face grimace.

“I’m so sorry, Anna,” he whispered. “I’ll fix this, I promise.”

He pulled me up against him, and then all I saw was darkness.

It was funny, though: I could feel him—his hands, his heat, even his breath on my skin—but I
couldn’t do anything, not even blink. But if I could feel him, then it wasn’t a complete severing of the—

“It’s suxamethalene,” came a hesitant voice.

Lupin’s voice.

But there was something different about it. It was high-pitched, almost like an imitation of a
kid’s. And it was incredibly hollow.

I fell away from Zeni’s chest almost abruptly. He let me sit in his arms, rested on his knees as he
turned to Lupin. My head, leaning against the crook of his arm, presented me with a full view of
Lupin, albeit off to one side of the screen.

“What’d you say?” Zenigata whispered, strained. “Suksa-what?”

“Suxa-metha-lene,” Lupin repeated. He was in the corner by the end of the bed, legs curled up to
his chest, his arms around his knees. His face was buried behind his arms but for his eyes and
forehead, but even that was spattered with blood, including some parts of his gown that I could
see. However, his clean white eyes were looking at us sharply—and without any intent to
physically engage. In fact, it looked like he wanted the opposite: He wanted everyone and
everything to stay away from him.

And by his bare right foot, there was a small, thin puddle of red creating a stream along the grout.
I tried to grunt at Zeni to notice it, but no such luck.

“It’s a muscle paralytic,” Lupin began, never lifting his mouth from behind his arms. “One that
paramedics use for surgeries. It’s usually used for pinpoint muscle injection, but if you administer
it directly to the bloodstream, it paralyzes everything in the voluntary nervous system. You can’t
move, you can’t speak. But you can feel everything. Hear everything. Remember everything.
You keep breathing, as long as he wants you to.”

As long as he wants you to....

Zenigata’s hand tightened its grip on the back of my head. He didn’t take his eyes off Lupin.
“She can hear you,” Lupin continued, ducking further into his hands. “It’s scary. You should tell her that everything will be all right.”

“It...it will?” Koichi asked with a deep breath, parroting my thoughts.

“Yes.”

While Lupin hid his face entirely behind his arms, the Inspector turned to me almost instantaneously. He propped me up against his legs (oh dear, dizzying view of the ceiling and half his face suddenly) and ran his hands over my head, hard and heavy. “Anna? Anna are you in there? Can you hear me?!”

Yes, and I can see you. And feel you. Oh—and smell you, that’s interesting.

“Everything’s going to be all right, you hear me?” His voice was getting louder than it needed to. I wanted to wince, but couldn’t. He quickly looked over at the old doc behind him, then Lupin, then admitted down to me, “Well, not all right, but fine for you. I’ll fix this, okay? I’ll get you fixed up—”

Don’t worry about me, worry about Lupin. He needs you more. I don’t think he’s in a good place right now. And his leg...

“Oh, she can see you, too. You don’t need to shout.”

“Oh...uh...sorry. Erm, Anna....” Zenigata looked down at me and petted my hair again, apologetically this time, then looked back at Lupin. He was clearly unsure about what to do now.

“Anna...?”

“It’ll wear off soon,” Lupin added, though I couldn’t see him. “I’m not sure how much he gave her, though.”

“O-oh.... That’s good. You hear that, Anna?”

Well, it clearly wasn’t enough to kill me, so I guess that’s as good a news as I’m gonna get. I did get a good whack on the head from the fall, though, so it’d be nice if someone could check that...

“Dad,” Lupin said as Zenigata gazed at me.

Dad? My eyes would have widened if they could have. As it was, I felt my heart skip a beat.

“...Ah?” Zeni muttered, turning back to him. He hefted me higher in his arms, returning me a view of Lupin in full. The thief’s gaze flicked up at the Inspector, then at me, where it lingered. His brow pushed together in concern.

“Why does she keep trying to kill me?”

...What?

“...What?” Zenigata hissed for me.

“...Did I do something wrong?” he asked, his voice almost squeaky. He pulled into himself a little bit more, hiding his face again. The blood by his foot smeared across the floor, but he didn’t seem to notice. “Why doesn’t she like me?”

“Jesus, I don’t have time for this,” he muttered, turning away to look over me. As he rearranged me in his arms again, I tried to stare at him, blink at him, sigh at him—anything I could do to make
him change his mind.

But despite being able to do nothing, after a moment of his eyes sweeping across me in thought, he muttered to himself, “No, wait...I have to. I have to do this. You’d want me to, right?...”

He cradled me against his chest protectively—one knee up, ready to run at a moment’s notice if needed—and then turned to Lupin, his full attention on him.

“She likes you just fine,” he offered hesitantly. “She’s just sick. It’s the disease that does it.”

“Oh...” Lupin murmured. He ducked his head a little, then looked at me warily. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. People don’t just try to kill their kids for no reason. They have to be sick of some kind to do it.”

I almost laughed. But it was true. Cop logic had its uses.

Lupin stared at him, then seemed to deflate after a moment of thought. “I hoped it was something like that.”

He still seemed conflicted about it, though.

“Hey...um, are you hurt?” Zenigata continued.

Lupin looked around at himself momentarily. A hand unfolded from the tight ball of limbs and rubbed at his injured leg, then his head. He held it like he’d hit it on something, but eventually looked confused and admitted, “No.”

“Your leg is bleeding. Can you put pressure on the wound for me, please?”

“My leg?” he asked in wonder, looking down. “What’s wrong with my le—?”

And then he froze.

And frowned. And—

“Don’t think about it,” Zenigata interjected, luckily. “Just put your hand on what hurts and press down.”

Lupin, looking daunted but intent, did so—rather remarkably. Then he looked back up at the Inspector for more instructions.

“All right. Good. So...” Zeni took a breath and looked around. “I need to...” His gaze lingered on each person in the room momentarily, as well as the doors and the windows and various fixtures.

“Say,” he said, turning to him with a grimace, “Lupin. I need to take care of your...uh, mother, here. But then I’ll look over you, all right?”

He frowned like only a teen could. “Who’s Lupin?”

Zenigata frowned back, like only a disturbed adult could. “That’s you.”

“Oh,” he muttered. And then: “Huh?”

“Dammit,” the Inspector grumbled to himself. “Lord have mercy.” He looked back at Martinique, then the hall balefully, then shook his head out. “Why, what do you call yourself?”
“I told you my name,” he snapped petulantly, turning into a ball again. “Multiple times.”

Zeni forced himself to take a breath and then tried, “Sorry. Forgetful old man, you know?”

He hugged me to him and swallowed hard.

“It’s only three letters, it’s not that hard,” Lupin went on, glowering at the wall.

“Please?”

Lupin sighed theatrically. “It’s Aki. God.”

“Hey, don’t give me lip.”

Zeni...don't get too into it, now. I wished I could see his face better. I might have to slug him in the arm for that one, later. But I guess it was better than nothing.

“...I was right?” Zenigata whispered, apparently higher-level thought filtering in after a moment. “Holy shit, I was right...?”

“What?” Lupin protested after that hung in the air for a second and Zenigata did nothing but stare at him.

In the end, Lupin rolled his eyes but bit down whatever he was gonna say with a visible shiver. “Fiiiiine,” he huffed, bangs ruffling.

“B-but anyway, th—that’s a nice name,” he said with a modicum of a smile in his voice. “D’yer mom give it to you, I assume?”

“Yeah?”

Lupin looked rather blackly over at us. It was a suspicious look that could have cut something, it was so sharp.

“A...ki,” he said, tasting it out on his tongue. “Um...I’m sorry she did that to you. But I’ll protect you from now on after this. All right? I’ll protect you from anyone that wants to hurt you.”

He made sure their eyes connected. Something hurt and hopeful flickered in Lupin’s eyes, and then he nodded and looked at the floor, running a cuffed hand over his head. “Okay,” he whispered, and then quickly slid the cuffs off his wrists with some strange sleight of hand. Then, discarding them as if confused that they were there, he ducked his head down until all that we could see was his hair. He finished this up by leaning into the shelter of his corner, thereby removing himself from the conversation completely.

“Hey. Hand on leg, remember?”

“Oh, right...” He did so studiously, if perplexedly.

Zenigata frowned at him, brow creased heavily and eyes narrowed. “Can’t you feel that?”

“Feel what?”

“...Nevermind. Just keep the pressure on.”

“Y-yes sir...?”
“Sir...?” Zenigata gazed at him a moment longer, humming dubiously, then looked down at me and shook his head with a sigh. But he was smiling a little bit, off and on, on one side of his mouth. Hysterically, probably.

“I’m gonna make a phone call, and then I’m going to be right back with you, Anna. No one’s gonna hurt you while I’m here.”

I’m more worried about someone hurting you while you stare at me... But what was I really capable of at the moment? I just had to hope and trust, I guess. I couldn’t shut my eyes, and they were getting dry and painful, so it was time to just believe in him and good fortune at this point. Apparently I looked dead even on close inspection, so if another assailant came, there was a good chance they’d overlook me—but it was considerate of him to not leave that to chance.

Zenigata set me down gently on the floor and then went for the phone in the room. He dialed the now-familiar tone of the desk and gruffed, “Nadia, if you’re alive, get down here, and bring Kyle and Christof if you’ve found ‘im. We’ve had an incident.”

“Actually,” came the tinny sound of her voice over the receiver that was clearly turned up way too loud, “You’ve had a phone call while you’ve been away. The police commissioner is sending a team to get your guy. By boat. They’re gonna be here in two hours and I’m supposed to make sure you don’t go anywhere.”

The Inspector said nothing.

“So I’m gonna bring some of the military boys too, if you don’t mind.”

Zeni hung up the phone with a heavy hand. He gazed at each of us in turn: the regressed child that was Lupin, the sack of potatoes that was me, and then, finally, the bloody mess that was Martinique.

“Shit,” he muttered, hand raking through his hair. “We’re out of time.”
Creepy Jigen is Best Jigen.

Oh man, it's been two months since the last chapter?! This summer, due to work and illness, just did not go as planned. I can't believe it's already over. I have barely any memories to note from it, and after we waited so long for winter to be over, too... Live every day to the fullest folks; don't wait for tomorrow. You never know when your health or fortunes might fail you.

But thank you, readers, for sticking with me despite my delays. The Lupin season is finishing up, the Evil Trumpet is well on the road to impeachment, and I've gotten enough work done that a lot of good short fics are in the wings for you. Good times. The midterm elections are gonna be craaazy 8D.

Music that helped the final push for this chapter: "The Way I Am" by Charlie Puth

The cabin was lit only by the fireplace in the living room. It crackled softly, the last log finishing its turn to cinders. Shadows held fast the space beyond the tiny ring of light, every nook and cranny lost to darkness. For now, all that was visible was the immediate furniture nearby: a couch, a rug, an end table, and the poorly-stuffed buck head on the chimney.

As well as the man who lay upon that couch.

Jigen gazed up from his book for the umpteenth time. The words had long since turned to mush, his eyes tracking over them three or four times and still coming up with nothing.

His eyes, as dark grey as the metal of his guns, settled dully on the amber kaleidoscope dancing on the surface of the end table from refraction in his half-drunk beer glass. They were almost like fairy motes, he thought, come to life ala The Nutcracker.

And wouldn’t a holiday miracle be nice...?

A faded quilt lay over his legs, one bought at a flee market in nearby Ghent during the last holiday season. It was warm, though not as warm and cozy as the man he wanted to be under it with him.

And above him, as he tilted his head back on the armrest with a sigh: the loft that held their bed.

As he looked, he could almost feel Lupin’s weight on his chest, rising and falling slowly as he breathed.

What he would give to have his lover back safe and sound, his many troubles soothed with nothing but the presence of Jigen’s beating heart beside him.

Jigen put his book over his face and sighed.

Three days. It had been three days of doing nothing but reading books and watching the news
while hoping his partner was still alive.

This wasn’t how Christmas was supposed to go.

The calm of an alpine forest at night lay all around, and the wooden walls gave extra insulation against the sound. He was all by himself listening to the fire crackle, ever watching the front door whilst knowing his lover was never coming through it to meet him.

There would be no smiles of greeting. There would be no warm kisses. No whispered words and sly touches that turned into seductive rumbles, charmed giggles, and twirling forms. No, Christmas Day for Jigen had came hours ago and its cold, lonely persistence was just now nearly, finally gone.

But that would not bring his partner back.

Jigen glanced over at the small tree, which sat glowing in a dark corner of the room. They’d decorated it together before the heist, shiny bobbles and tinsel and all. And when Jigen had gone away to grab his gift from its hiding spot to place it under the tree, he’d arrived to find Lupin tearing up where he sat in front of the display.

The man had professed it was nothing. Even with a comforting touch to the shoulder as Jigen sat down next to him, the smaller man had simply swallowed hard and refused to look at him.

“No really, what’s wrong?” Jigen asked, pulling Lupin into him sympathetically.

Lupin’s sobbing only worsened. It was getting to the point where he couldn’t speak, it seemed.

He held a red ornament in his hands. The shiny kind, with a metallic shimmer. His grip had gone weak though, so Jigen cupped his hand under Lupin’s to hold it up. Turned it so that the reflection of the two of them was in it.

Lupin stared backed at him through that red mirror, then silently fell against Jigen’s chest, wrapping his arms around him.

“I’m happy,” he explained.

Even as his shoulders shook under Jigen’s arms.

Jigen sighed.

Lupin would get emotional at weird things like that. Nice things, totally normal things. Things that made him look like he was grieving, whenever he experienced them.

Jigen had an idea why. Lupin had even briefly explained it then, as he had rubbed a hand up and down the man’s back comfortingly:

*I never thought I’d get to have something like this.*

But his voice had nearly broken to say it.

And then he’d leaned into Jigen and just cried. The boneless, wrecked kind of sobbing Jigen
hadn’t done since he was a child.

But Jigen let him do it all the same, holding him all the while. He didn’t know what balm Lupin needed, but he knew how to stay steady when people fell apart. So he’d stared at the tree, and the ceiling fan, and the badly stuffed buck head, not understanding what terribly dark well these tears were flowing from, but knowing he had to hold the bucket’s rope nonetheless.

But lately, this sort of moment had been happening more often. The moments where Jigen would catch his partner staring at nothing and then sighing. Or staring at nothing and then starting to cry.

Oh, Lupin had tried to hide it, but Jigen saw it all the same, and it was starting to happen frequently enough to deeply concern him.

So this time, Jigen had held him close. Held him until the tears stopped, held him until even the unnecessary apologies had stopped, rubbing his knuckles idly up and down Lupin’s thin body all the while.

And then he’d finally replied:

A press of a kiss into Lupin’s soft temple, followed by a whisper into his hair.

“You sure you’re ready to go through with this?”

“Yeah,” Lupin had replied, with only a momentary delay. “I need to.”

With a frown, Jigen set his book aside and hauled himself into a sitting position. He plucked up the mug of beer for good measure and took a cool swig to wash the memories out.

The first night, he hadn’t been able to sleep. The second night, he’d had nightmares of Lupin’s hand slipping away from him. And tonight...

Jigen sighed and held up the glass, contemplating the colors in it as it stood before the last glow of the flames. The dark, shady brown turned a fiery amber in the center, the rays of light making it sparkle like crystal.

That was the way their lives were supposed to be: gold and jewels and laughing and screwing on top of piles of money. But all he could see in that view of semi-precious liquid was the fire of the explosion.

After a bit of holding the bottom of the glass against his forehead, Jigen replaced the glass to the coaster and tried to go back to his book. But he couldn’t; the letters just sat there, not making it into his brain. He stared at the same paragraph of the biography for several minutes, eyes glazed over.

It wasn’t because he was tired, which he was. And it wasn’t because the book had lost its appeal after so many hours of reliance on it. No, the issue was something else:

Dread.

Jigen hurried out the front of the building, while Lupin and Zenigata noisily blustered through the walls; he could hear Lupin jumping and Zenigata shouting as he followed after. He wasn’t sure
which way they’d go, so it was important to just get out and gain a vantage point within view of the rendezvous point.

While he’d been quick-stepping his way down the stairs and out the ground-floor hall, as soon as he got out the door, he lingered. Languidly pulled up a cigarette out of his pocket like he was just going on a smoke break, and made sure to not catch the attention of the other sidewalk smokers. That couple on the sidewalk was still chatting like nothing had happened; either they were nothing to be concerned about, or Zenigata had gone rogue yet again, just tracking down Lupin on a last-minute hunch.

As soon as Jigen had determined that no one was about to grab him, much less pay attention to him, he ducked into a walk-up across the street. It had a broken lock on its front door, determined ahead of time, so he was able to quickly gain entrance—not that there weren’t people just standing on the doorstop in the ghastly light of the street lights, able to open the thing anyway. Still, none paid attention to him as he went.

Two steps in the door, he tossed the cigarette in the ashtray and bolted up the stairs, all the way to the top.

The lock on the door to the roof was still broken from their planning days before, luckily. He slammed it open and rushed out, quickly surveying the area and then setting himself up behind the lip of the building. He couldn’t hear very well, but he didn’t need to; all he needed to do was see.

There was a spotlight across the street, maybe a thousand feet back; it appeared to be beyond the creek behind the theater.

Just as he got on his stomach at the edge of the roof, the search light flicked on.

It lifted its face, and within the time it took Jigen to get his sniper rifle out of the case, it was pinned on the roof of the theater.

And there he saw first one backlit figure, then two. Skittering across the rooftop, weaving between hundred-year-old iron latticework and tin-blue dormers.

Jigen ducked down in the snow behind his scope and aimed. He was in the dark, so hopefully they wouldn’t notice him, but if he didn’t shoot out their searchlight, he’d have to run pretty fast if he actually took a shot. And given the way he and the light were basically on a line between the runners, his scope might catch the light and tip them off beforehand.

With luck, no extra steps or shots would be necessary. With luck, no one would shoot his partner along the way.

But the locals didn’t always listen to Zenigata’s no-kill warnings, and Jigen expected each encounter to be the one where he no longer did, either.

Lupin believed in the man, at least to that degree. Jigen had no reason to.

Now, the Inspector’s game of chase got all the way across the office building roof and started over the theater. And at the edge of it, there was an elevation change. One that wasn’t the best to just wing.

At the edge, Lupin drew up short, just behind some protruding A/C units or possibly elevator shafts. It wasn’t like he couldn’t scale it; he was trained in that sort of thing. The cop was the one would lose time there, and yet, that was where Lupin stopped.
Behind him, about fifteen feet away, Zenigata came to a halt as well, and the spotlight made to swivel, dutifully illuminating them.

And there, of course, the cop started talking. Right within Jigen’s crosshairs.

The wind would make it hard; but he could do it, if he needed to. If he thought the Inspector, whose pistol was raised, was going to shoot his partner, by god he would—

“Come on, old man... Give up the chase. Admit your age.”

To be fair, Zenigata was only about ten years older than Jigen. But it still counted.

But maybe that was why he always hesitated to pull the trigger on him: because Jigen could see a bit of himself there.

“C’mont, Lupin....stop listening to him and keep running.”

As Jigen watched the two of them talk, he got the odd impression that maybe this whole thing was what Lupin had wanted—to spend some time with him.

There were more ways to talk to a cop on your tail than on the top of a building during a chase. Like abducting him in the parking lot some night.

Annoyed and impatient, he shifted the gun to the side. Pressed the trigger.

A moment later, the giant spotlight shattered. Glittering shards fell down into the backyard of the place, and Lupin and Zenigata were left in nothing but moonlight and the hum of city blues.

And then, just as planned, as everyone was straining to see Lupin, Jigen saw him raise his arm and trigger the flash canisters.

He knew it was coming, so his eyes were closed when It happened:

A bang like a bomb, and then a roar.

Jigen instantly looked up—and that was when the wave of heat hit him.

And the view, over his scope:

Slab after slab of the building pancaking behind a cloud of violent orange. And then, great pillars of grey, stretching up into the night sky. The roar continued for second after second, on the other side of a smoke plume that was stretching another story higher with each passing moment. He waited to hear the silence of the roar ending, and the wail of people and sirens.

For a few bleak seconds, there was no sound but the ringing in his ears, the tremor of the shockwave in his body, and sea of ash drifting upward.

But soon, screams: from the people on the street. Shouts, wails. A few tiny people running out of the rubble, and buildings nearby. The light of cellphones lighting up as they ran down the street.

But Jigen couldn’t leave.

Instead, he ducked back down behind his scope and waited for the biting wind to blow the right direction.

There were breaks in the plume, and...
And...

There!

He found the edge of the roof that still remained, and in his scope he saw:

A pair of legs.

But only one.

And they weren’t the ones he wanted.

On the end table, there stood one object other than the lamp and the beer glass: A radio.

A little red melmac radio, old-fashioned style, with chrome and a long silvery antenna.

Jigen twisted the volume nob further up.

Yet all that came over it was static.

Still quiet, huh?

That was odd. It was a holiday, late at night, a few days after a massive snowstorm and a catastrophic explosion. Why would the police waves be this quiet...?

Jigen ran a hand over his beard in thought, then eventually gave up with a haggard sigh. He rested his forehead in his hands, and his elbows on his knees.

There were too many thoughts to keep out, the moment he let even one of them in.

He never liked leaving people alone in the enemy’s clutches, even if they were cops. He had seen what “lawmen” had done to people they didn’t like far too many times to be okay with that.

Even with his athletic build, Lupin was physically more fragile than most of his partners had ever been, and his tongue always got him into trouble when he was caged. Even so, all the muscles in the world didn’t mean shit against a head injury, which were awfully easy to come by in the slammer.

Separating was part of the plan sometimes, yes. And Lupin was damn slippery, able to talk his way into being the groom at an ongoing wedding, yes. But it wasn’t what Jigen wanted. He trusted his partner—most of the time—and did what he said, because he was the boss. At the end of the day, he paid the bills; he got Jigen’s service, not Jigen’s waffling.

But he was also someone Jigen cared deeply about keeping alive and in-tact.

And that was the reason he was so concerned.

With what’d happened...

The roar of the explosion, then the growl of the building collapsing, the shrieks of the scattering myrmidons...

It wasn’t just going to be him and Zenigata playing chess. It was going to be regular blue-bloods,
defending their town and lost relatives. Lupin really didn’t stand a chance, especially if he was
injured.

Which he most certainly was; Jigen had seen it first-hand.

When the ringing in his ears cleared, all he could hear was screaming from below.

Jigen rolled onto his back, gun cradled against his arm and breath coming far too fast. Snow was
falling down around him, painted all the dark shades of the rainbow.

And then in his ear crackled a different kind of conflagration:

“Nine-nine-two, what’s your position?”

“Valereaux! Report, report!”

“Teams two and three! Two, Three, are you there? Come in, over!”

“Rally points, rally points, now!”

“Teams one through five, pull back—”

“Zenigata’s gone into the rubble—”

“Fuck! Why would he do that?!”

“I don’t know—”

“Shit.” He ripped the police scanner bluetooth out of his ear and threw it aside, into the gun
case. Half of it was in English and half was guys who’d fallen back into French. “What a fucking
mess. Lupin, come on...”

Jigen rolled back onto his stomach and crawled to the edge of the building, rifle hugged up to his
side rather than under him. Quickly, he pulled out his handgun; at less than fifty yards, he had
better accuracy and speed with her anyway, and if anyone tried to sneak up on him with his
attention turned, well that’d be that for them.

He’d definitely be needing all his attention for what was below him.

The undercover cops—easy to spot now because they were looking like firefighters ready to tackle
a house—indeed pulled back, but only a few hundred feet—hovering farther away from potential
explosive debris and updrafts, but not so far that they were out of the thick of it.

Peering over the edge of the building, Jigen waited, and waited, unable to breathe while he
watched the broken ant colony unfold. People spilled this way and that as flashlights went off,
checking the flow of debris, then the people who were swarming. The rowhouse that’d just
exploded was on a gently curving road that backed up to a canal. Jigen was across the street, on a
building of similar walkups, one roof from the corner of the street. He had a good view of the side
of the last building across the street, the back of which had a gate that lead into the grassy knoll
that held the way down to the water. That was their initial escape route, and rendezvous point.

“C’mon Lupin, c’mon....”
A tree, still intact, stood back there, and he watched its shadows carefully, as well as the gate, the streetlights around which had now gone dark. But he could only wait so long. With Lupin’s luck, he would already be in a tunnel or a tree somewhere and Jigen should be gone. But even with Lupin’s luck, he might just need his partner’s eagle eyes.

But there was a problem. There were two police cars back there, and they featured two guys: both very tall, but one wide, one not. A thinner blond, and a much thicker raven. And both of them were ducking behind them, making calls into central command.

There was only supposed to be one car.

There was only supposed to be one guy.

Annoyed, Jigen snapped up the bluetooth again and held down a button on the side. “What the hell is going on down there?” he snapped at their man in that pair.

There was a brief pause before his man on the ground came back; he could hear his radio in the background, frantic shouts non-stop and overlapping. “I don’t know! Your guy just got himself blown sky hi—wait. Wait, someone’s coming out.”

The line went dead, back to the noise of the police scanner. Grumbling, Jigen pulled it out again and went back to watching the road from his stomach. But from this distance, it was hard to see details in the shadows. As sirens and shouts went off around him in several different languages, he dragged the rifle over and peered through the scope.

Coat...legs...shoes....

It was Zenigata. Coming around the back of the building, out of the gate, onto the sidewalk. And he was pulling a person—

In red.

Lupin.

His partner.

His lover, in some cop’s arms, looking quite broken and dead, like his buddies from the warzones.

The three cops swarmed together around Lupin. After his heart shot into his throat, Jigen realized that the motions they were doing were probably medical related, not a quick stab attack. But he couldn’t see much detail; even with the magnification, the angle was bad, and all he got was bent backs.

Which would be so, so easy to hit.

Taking a deep breath, he forced his finger slightly farther away from the trigger casing.

The look on Zenigata’s face, illuminated by fire, through the scope....

Jigen took another breath and zoomed out a bit, so that he wasn’t focusing the cross hairs on his head.

After a moment or two more of deliberation, the three men nodded to each other and quickly stood up.

The big one opened a car door.
The tall one got in the passenger’s seat of his own volition.

The little one picked Lupin up in his arms and deposited him in the back seat.

And then he stood up and, mostly hidden by the car door, surveyed the buildings nearby.

He was looking for Jigen.

Jigen flexed the itch out of his finger, eying the tires of the vehicle and running calculations in his head.

But before he could do anything, the firefighters came, and a frazzled press van’s crew, now regrouped, rushed them. There was pretty quickly an unintentional blockade of fire trucks and bodies on the little side street.

In between them and the actual carnage, the police were laying out the first wounded on the pavement, under the gently falling snow.

Still, he watched the swarm impassively, twisting the bluetooth back into his ear and flipping channels until he found the one he wanted.

The one planted inside a particular police car.

“Suspect One apprehended. Repeat: suspect one apprehended. Taking to Seaside Military Hospital. Suspect Two still At-Large. Suspect Two is armed and dangerous and probably on a roof somewhere, exercise extreme caution.”

And then, rather than getting in and driving off, the back door of that self-same policecar opened and Zenigata got out of the car.

God, the man was an idiot with a deathwish. Probably thought he was immortal because the law was behind him.

And he had his boyfriend.

Grinding his teeth, Jigen rolled onto his back just to get him out of his cross hairs and hide below the lip of the roof.

Over the bluetooth came a voice: “Roger that. Group 1, do a quick sweep of nearby roofs.”

Well, that’s my cue.

Quickly, Jigen threw the gun in its case and rolled to his feet. He hurried across the roof, half-ducking, case in hand. It took a bit to get his footing right; it wasn’t an easy thing with the snow and slush and nerves, and he wobbled quite a bit. They’d no doubt find the trail, but with any luck he could disguise it once he got to the main street. In the end, in half a minute he got to the exterior ladder and slid down, leather-clad fingers swooping down the rail sides and guns over his shoulder.

Still, when he contacted the ground, even with all his military training...he couldn’t make himself leave entirely.

Jigen fingered the satchel at his hip for several long seconds, screams and lights and running figures at the mouth of the alley all mixing together.

But he had to move. Follow the protocol, feelings be damned. He’d do no good to Lupin in jail.
As Jigen rounded the corner and came to the street, he knew instantly that there was no way he was getting through the crush of terrified people that once had been the theater’s adoring crowd.

Please be alive, he prayed to the inferno reaching up into the night, before turning on his heels and heading for the rendezvous point and its getaway car.

And to the leather in his hand, and the taste of ashes:

Please be worth it.

Jigen groaned, rubbing his hand over his forehead as he sat up on the couch.

What did we do wrong?

The explosives? There shouldn’t have been any. Who the hell had set them? And why? When? They’d cased the joint days ago, then again the day before.

Did I do something wrong? Did he?

The image of that disembodied pair of legs, and the feeling of dread it made, came back to him all of a sudden. Jigen put his face in his hands and rubbed his skin, just to get the knot in his stomach to go away.

What did I miss?

After a heavy breath, he glanced at the glass with its amber, and then the tree and its soft lights, his face resting heavily in his hands.

Should I have stopped him...?

Announcing your crime beforehand was admittedly stupid, but it was only ever a diversion in the end, one that helped them get away by muddying the jurisdictional waters. No, the issue here was that they’d been outmaneuvered, by someone in the shadows who wanted them dead—and didn’t care who else went with it.

And that was someone Jigen wasn’t equipped to deal with. Not from here, waiting at the rendezvous point, with no goddamned information.

Jigen sucked in a deep breath and rubbed his hands over his face. He sat back, hands clasped between his legs, and gazed at the Christmas tree, its two presents wrapped neatly underneath.

We’re getting way too soft for all this.

His gaze turned to the ceiling fan far above, antiqued copper and rosey wood. Then at the loft, where its quilts and furs lay.

Look at all this. This isn’t the hideout of people who are meant to run games anymore.

This...

He sighed as his eyes came to rest on the faux polar bearskin rug on the floor, and all the memories he had of twining around with Lupin on it, full of giggles and growls, gasps and moans, and desperate mewls of pleasure.
...Is the home of someone who’s nesting.

A heavy sigh escaped his lungs.

And I helped us get here. I protected him, all the way to this point, as he built this place for himself. For...us?

Jigen’s gaze flickered over to the closed shutters, and the feet of snow and quiet, lonely world that lay outside for miles and miles.

Was this supposed to be our last job, and I just didn’t get the memo?

The hitman leaned to the side and rested his chin in his hand.

Was that what your present to me was going to be? A wonderful life...without you?

His eyes dragged over to the two little presents once more.

Was there some sort of message in his? Some sort of gentle suicide note?

Goddammit Lupin, don’t you dare do that to me. I’ve stood by you too long for you to do that to me.

...Haven’t I?

Maybe that was where he’d fucked up. He’d been too busy watching his partner’s back and hadn’t done enough to watch his head.

Shaking the thought away, Jigen eyed the papers sitting beyond his feet at the coffee table once more. He’d tidied them into a couple of manila envelopes, but they were still waiting to be delivered to their payoff point.

Whatever happened, he still needed to follow through and complete the mission.

And yet...

Jigen leaned back with a heavy sigh, his hands folding together between his knees as he stared at the ceiling.

I hope you’re taking care of him, old man...

I hope...

Jigen had never met the Inspector. He’d only ever heard about him, through contacts he’d pinged and Lupin’s own lips. Seen him plenty of times through a scope; heard him on a radio.

...You’re both still alive.

He had a reputation as a good man, kind of a wildcard cop with a temper when he needed it, who was real good at working the system to get what he needed. He was old-fashioned and not, in the grand scheme of things, the kind of cop Jigen was the most worried about.

He was, however, the specific cop he was most worried about. The man made catching Lupin his life’s work. A guy like that would be more than happy to “celebrate” with said captured suspect in ways that would leave that suspect a vic. He had a lot of understandable and pent up frustration to vent, and social status to regain, carved out from Lupin’s flesh. At least, Jigen could only assume
And Lupin...

For his part, he swore up and down that Zenigata would never hurt him. That Jigen was never to shoot him.

And he had no idea why.

All he knew was the very cryptic, *He did me a favor once.* That was it. There were variations on that theme: *We go back a long ways*, and, if pressed, *He was kind to me for a while.* But generally the surface notion was, *He’s amusing, don’t you think?*

*Not when he’s got you in his clutches.*

Jigen scowled at the darkness.

*And who goes back longer with you than me? Nobody.*

...*Right?*

With a sigh, Jigen pushed the prickling irritation away and busied himself with slugging what remained of his beer—and then rolling the cool glass against his forehead.

*We really need to have a chat about that man...*

He’d wondered, vaguely, if they had been lovers once. If that was what *He was kind to me for a while* meant.

And if that were the case, Jigen had no problem staking his territory.

Still...that didn’t get Lupin back.

No doubt about it, this was a huge mess, and he was being wasted here.

Jigen was not normally the type to worry about people. He was generally the type to stick to the plan, believed in their skills, and then if something inevitably ended with the other person dead, he just shrugged it off with *And thus their luck ran out.* It happened to everyone. It’d happen to him too, someday, and he hoped nobody cried over him for it. He hoped they just shrugged him off too and went on with things. Grief was a pointless emotion.

But with Lupin... This time...

He stared into the fire, the last bits of the log cracking apart and falling into ash.

He was starting to understand the notion, bit by bit.

And it was wonderful and terrible thing, having a reason to miss the living world.

Memories flashed through his head, behind his eyes:

Lupin driving him up the beautifully winding road to this cabin, then leaning over when they parked to give him a kiss, all wrapped up in the sounds of the engine winding down and the leather crinkling.
“What’s all this?” Jigen asked. “Vacation?”

“In a sense,” Lupin’s light voice whispered against the underside of his jaw, as his warm hand slid over Jigen’s thigh. “This is your new house.”

“...Mine?”

Lupin pulled back just enough to look him in the eye, his dark blue eyes fond. “Well, ours. But I’ll give it to you, if you want.”

He nicked another kiss, this time on Jigen’s cheek, just at the top edge of his beard, and then opened his door. “C’mon, I can’t wait to show you the inside. I know you’ll love it.”

One day in the fall, after chopping wood:

Jigen dusting himself off in the foyer, and as he took his shoes off, Lupin calling him over. There was music playing, and Lupin, never one to miss a beat, was soon pulling him into a dance.

The only formal dances Jigen knew were Western ones and tap dancing, which didn’t much work with slow partner dances. But Lupin pulled him anyway, twirling around and following his lead wherever he took him across the floor.

Showers and saunas together, followed up by that soft rug. So many times.

Staring up at the skylights from their bed on many long meteor shower nights, discussing the stars and the wonders of the cosmos and existence, in between silent wishes and not-so-quiet kisses.

Breakfasts with aprons and laughter in the morning light, discussing anything and everything as bacon and eggs sizzled and pancakes bubbled.

Planning out adventures and skirmishes over the granite counters. Ancient treasure maps next to Jigen’s hat, and long discussions with excited whispers.

And, of course, the paintings. Coming home after one long weekend away for work and finding Lupin giddy with delight. He hadn’t know why the entire evening, until they crawled into bed and —

“..........Whaaaat?”

Lupin, lying next to him, (they were both on their backs), turned to him with the biggest grin he’d ever seen. He wiggled in delight, unable to keep it all in.

“I thought you might like it,” Lupin whispered. “It’s the legend of us, see?” He held his hand up, pointing out different parts and explaining them one by one, as well as the historical motifs from
which they drew. “The cowboy and his gentleman on the plains, taking the world by storm...”

“How...how did you do this?” Jigen croaked once Lupin was done, staring at him like he’d grown another head. “In three days?”

But Lupin only smiled his mousey smile. “Love, of course.”

Jigen chuckled painfully, but rolled over and captured him in his arms all the same. “Is that so.”

Below him, Lupin winked as he reached up to hold his cheek. “It’s a wonderful motivator, don’t you know, my beautiful cowboy?”

Jigen set the glass aside and tipped his head back against the couch’s plush leather with a groan. The fire was warm and the light behind his eyes tender, while soothing white noise crackled over the police scanner.

The only things that had come across in the last few hours were house calls: old people trapped in their homes from the snow, needing assistance.

But in the last forty-five minutes or so, even that had stopped. It seemed things had settled down, after all the snow that had fallen.

Though, actually...

Isn’t town about 45 minutes from here?

And...

Jigen cracked open an eye and checked the clock across the room, which was mounted in the mouth of a bear.

It had been absolutely silent since exactly Eleven PM, hadn’t it...?

He glanced behind himself at the empty glass, while the white noise from the police scanner mixed in with the crackle of the fireplace.

This was what radio silence tasted like.

Shit.

Jigen’s fingers tensed around the glass, and just like that, his senses sharpened like a bad trip.

The spark of the fireplace, the silence of the house....the sound of the wind, the crackle of radio....

The lack of owls, birds.... It was snowing, sure, but even lacking the squirrels in the duct work...?

Shit, he had to get out of here.

But he probably didn’t have enough time.

Jigen put down the glass, clapped twice, and the last few lights went out, including the nightlights and the tree.
After staring at the fireplace this whole time, it was pitch black outside of the ring of light it made. But he knew his way around regardless. Hell, they ran drills about this kind of crap, not that Jigen needed it, for all that he did it in his head every day anyway.

Jigen picked up the bag, flipped it closed, and pulled Mabel off the table, fingers slipping into their familiar positions.

He checked around the room for any sign of lasers or smoke and then—saw it.

Light. Coming through the bottom of one of the window shutters. Just the smallest sliver....

They couldn’t get up here in the dark without turning their lights on. They’d probably parked over by the neighbor’s house, just over the hill. But it still left residual light...not to mention the fact that Lupin had rigged up the nearby trees with detectors.

Jigen looked up at the buck’s head over the fireplace. Just as he did, two of the eight points illuminated at the very end, the edge of a fiber-optic cable.

So they were storming from the front and the back door, huh? Hell. But at least that left the windows...?

As he looked, the north and south lights dinged on, too.

Feh.

Well, that meant there was one way out of this—fighting. Good to have that cleared up.

Eyes slowly adjusting, Jigen walked over to the kitchen. Part of it was behind a sizeable wall—a lead-lined wall. The house was mostly open-plan, but there were free-floating walls and half-walls peppered throughout, for just this situation. He sat down on the floor and set his back against the lower counters, hidden by the island—both of which were also bullet-proofed.

First off, Jigen opened the door under the sink and pulled out a gas mask. He quickly situated it on—careful to put his hat back on his head afterwards—and then switched on the night vision goggles Lupin had rigged into it.

Then, he turned around and opened the last cabinet before the wall, the one his back had been to. Behind the wooden door was revealed what looked like a minifridge, but really, it was a safe.

He opened the fridge door to a third door, put down his thumb print on the scanner, and then quickly typed in the numerical code as well—the address of his first date with Lupin. He tossed the satchel in, and his hat, and the little red radio and the presents, and then pulled out a couple of flash grenades in exchange.

That set and done, Jigen closed the safe and all its other doors, reached under the sink to arm the weapons strewn about the place, and waited.

Good boys that they were, they didn’t leave him waiting long.

The smoke came in with a hiss.

It bloomed from under the front and back doors at the same time.

Jigen watched it momentarily, then ducked back down behind his hiding spot.
So they really aren’t going to negotiate, huh? He sighed and tipped his head back, raising Mabel and saying a quick prayer, gas-masked kiss to metal barrel and all.

Well, he couldn’t really say he was surprised. Sucked to be them, though.

How many can I kill before Lupin consigns me to the couch for a week?

The gas filled the room within a few seconds. And then, when it was pretty well saturated, the back door creaked open.

Welp, if he wanted to complain, he could have been here.

One. Two, three. Four-five-six....

And from the front as well...

Twelve, then?

And they all looked like SWAT: heavily armored strike teams with guns as dark as their uniforms.

And...

Each with masks and laser-scope rifles? Shit. They weren’t playing around. Where’d they even get this group, out of a town with fifty-thousand people? Somebody had powerful friends.

Somebody who had their hands on his boyfriend?

Fuck it.

Jigen raised himself from behind the lead-lined kitchen island just enough to see them with his home-made night vision.

He didn’t wait to get a good shot. He didn’t wait to give them the chance to find him.

He simply shot. Six times in quick succession, five bullets hitting from the sounds of it.

It might not have been enough to take them all the way down. But it was close-range from a heavy-as-hell handgun with massive bullets. At least a couple of them wouldn’t be getting back up any time soon, no matter how good the armor.

Machinegun bullets would rip flesh apart like it’d never been connected in the first place. That was not negotiable. But being lighter, made for speed and spray, they also reacted to bulletproof vests differently than magnum bullets. Especially at ten feet.

The first section of guys went down with a series of quick grunts and groans while Jigen reloaded in barely a second.

As soon as he was done, just in case anyone saw the flash, Jigen rolled along the bar to the other side (it was open on both ends) and, staying crouched, shot up into the man closest, just on the other side of the dining table. Took a shot at another. With all the smoke from their screen, the flash of his gun would look like it came from half a dozen different places.

That was when the coherent shouting started:

“Where is he?!”
“I don’t see anything!”

“Yaaagh?!”

“There’s no heat signature—?!”

“I’m hit, I’m hit!”

“The kitchen! He’s—”

As soon as they got that far, Jigen uncapped the grenade with his teeth and chucked it into the living room.

*RIP, rug.*

A few moments—and several shouts—later, heat rushed through the house. The force of the blast hit the furniture and transformed most of it into a shower of flaming splinters in every direction. Jigen’s hands immediately came away from his ears and he dived into the dining room, along the exterior wall. Picked up a gun from one of the first guys he’d hit, laying either unconscious or dead just on the other side of the bar stools. Sliding Mabel in his back hip holster as he went, as soon as he was on the far side of the shattered and tipped-over table—

He turned off his night vision and clapped on the lights as bright as they could go.

A few still worked, which both blinded the guys with similar equipment to his and those with no devices at all; and made them all as visible as possible for him now that the smog had been blown away by the bomb.

Jigen stood.

Sprayed the visible house with submachine gun fire.

“Guh—!”

“Yagh—?!”

As soon as the barrage was done, he ducked back down, clapped the lights off to their special pattern, and found a new position.

*Two more down, at least.*

There weren’t very more left standing. There were a couple screaming, though.

And as he waited by the edge of the couch, half-hidden between the end table (lamp now shattered) and the stairs to the loft, he heard curses and shouts, the sound of people crunching on glass—

*Ptoof ptoof!*

“UGN!”

“ERGK!”

—Two more down, courtesy of the rifle in the deer head that watched their backs while they slept.

So there Jigen waited, holding the submachine gun to his chest and breathing hard.
Honestly, it felt just like the old days.

Days he was hoping he’d never have to see again.

This was exactly what happened when Lupin wasn’t around. He went right back to then.

As soon as he realized he was giving himself too much time to think, he heightened his senses to the sound of movement.

But there wasn’t any. Only the odd moan.

Slowly, after a few more seconds of nothing but radio shouts from their communicator, Jigen ran up the loft stairs, punching the disarm button on the wall but keeping low the entire time just in case.

At the top, he rolled onto his stomach and hid behind the short railing, another lead-lined built-in. But one with a decorative hole or two in it, something like arrow slits.

He gazed through it all with his night vision, now armed again: there were warm forms, but half of them were smoldering logs blown out into the room.

For a second, Jigen waited, calculating, and then he clapped the lights back on to the cadence of their peculiar rhythm.

Crouching and pulling up his visor, the smoke was plenty thick again now, but the explosion of the grenade had eaten a lot of the particulate and either turned it into a momentary fireball or blown it out of the air. So it was hazy, like morning mist, but he could see everything he needed to from here:

Five guys in the dining room, and bits that could have been six or seven guys, in the living room.

“Fuck,” he swore, then clapped the lights back off. “If any of you are alive down there,” he called for good measure, “just stay down and I won’t bother you anymore.”

Not like they’d be with-it enough to listen. But it might work. It had in the past.

Shaking his head, Jigen secured his mask back on and, grabbing his favorite sniper rifle out of the loft closet, got on his stomach next to one of the little diamond-shaped windows on either side of the bed.

And there, there was something that looked a lot like the display screen of a home security system.

He punched in the code and the screen switched from black to heat-sensitive. It was a map of the surrounding area, with little green orbs glowing in the shape of people.

Jigen took a deep breath and sighed it out through his nose.

Well, it’s less than it could be.

With the lights off, they wouldn’t be able to see inside the house. They were probably freaking out about the grenade; that was the only reason they weren’t rushing the place with the backup.

But it looked like they hadn’t brought all that many guys to secure the perimeter. There were either more in the woods, this was all they could drum up on short notice for Christmas, or...

They underestimated me.
Grumbling, Jigen dug through the bottom drawer of the beside table and pulled out a cannister. Slowly, quietly, he opened the window, which was on a simple, inward-pushign swing hinge.

He waited a second, to see if he was about to get his hand shot off...

And then, when it seemed clear, chucked the little cannister out the window.

He waited on his back, staring at the ceiling. Of the panels Lupin had painted him a few years back as a gift, illuminated by the slowly spreading fire in the house.

_I'm gonna miss these...._

About two second later, a thick beam of light came in through the window that was as bright as daylight.

As soon as it was done, Jigen turned on his night vision and rolled back onto his stomach, sniper rifle poised on the edge of the window frame.

Click, _shoomp_!

Turn, click, _thwoonk_!

Shift, click, _shwump_!

Turn.

Wait.

Wait.

_Click._

“Augh!”

_Whoomp._

—The sound of something distant falling into the snow.

Jigen rolled back into the safety zone and checked the displays.

Nothing.

Even the antlers were dark.

He waited several minutes, catching his breath, all the while watching smoke flow out of the window.

_I’ll miss these windows, too. And the starry sky here..._

And above him: the nearly naked angels watching the entire scene, too.

“Sorry man,” he muttered to them, before eventually standing back up. He was being a very bad stay-at-home husband today, if his partner came home to find _no home_.

Still, there was work yet to do.
The forest was cold, dark, and utterly silent.

Save for the sound of his boots crunching through the snow, and—

“Ugnn...augh...rrrng...”

Skriff. Shrik. Shr-shr-shr...

—The sound of one injured man, trying desperately to stay conscious.

There was a wound in his shoulder, right where a lot of blood was bound to be pumping out. He had his hand on the wound, and no hands on a weapon.

He wasn’t very good at this, it seemed.

Judging by the equipment he was squirming next to, he wasn’t supposed to be good at this, though. He was just the communication tech.

Jigen, a towering black shadow with a machine gun over its shoulder and a massive handgun at his hip, backlit by the dim light of the hellish fire that was licking the cabin’s broken first-floor windows, stood at his prey’s feet, waiting.

The man couldn’t see his face. Couldn’t see anything but his outline, as if cut out from the very night itself.

And once he arrived, Jigen waited a few moments in silence, watching him. Patiently letting him decide what he wanted to do, if anything.

Most guys weren’t capable of such a thing when they were panicking. This one didn’t seem much different.

At least this one wasn’t pleading. He hated it when they pleaded with him.

Jigen took one last look around, including at the property’s security app in his smart phone. He set it back on his belt, then crouched down over his wounded prey. Got down on his knees, twisted his hand in the guy’s shirt—he wasn’t wearing a vest, since he wasn’t supposed to be getting shot at—and then laid down on top of him, pressing his weight into the wound.

The man let out a squeak of pain, and a few quick cries of “no.”

“Shhhhhhh,” Jigen whispered.

Gently. Fondly. Words as tender as a lover’s caress.

Laying on top of a guy in the snow, coated with blood and moonlight—how did it always end up like this?

“Hey.” Jigen called softly, to get the hyperventilating tech’s attention.

It took a minute, but eventually Jigen’s weight, almost languidly laid over the guy, was enough to trigger a calming response.

The guy’s breathing slowed, and while his heart rate didn’t, his wild eyes managed to lock onto Jigen’s. After Jigen called to him and tapped his face a couple more times, anyway.
“I want you to know something,” Jigen continued, inches from the guy’s face. After a bit, shivering and jerking, the thin man choked a bit, maybe on blood.

“No, don’t try to talk. It’s time for you to listen,” Jigen whispered. “Got that?”

The man sucked in a quick, shaky breath. Nodded, after a bit. Swallowed wetly.

“I want you to know something. My hand is the only thing keeping you alive. I remove it, you die. Got that?”

The tech nodded again, a little more alert this time.

“I lift my hand, you die. I get bored and leave, you die. I have to deal with your comrades, you die. Got it?”

“Y-ye—”

“Shh. No. Don’t talk,” Jigen cut him off in a velvet whisper. “It’s your time to listen, right?”

The guy nodded, afraid. His breathing slowed a little.

“See, I don’t like killing cops if they don’t deserve it. So. As long as you keep talking, I’ll keep my hand here. You stop talking, I’ll lift my hand and you die. Got it?”

The man nodded; swallowed thickly. “What if...”

Jigen raised his eyebrows, a little surprised, but let the man continue because he didn’t seem about to jerk him around, from the tone of things. His hand was on top of Jigen’s, clutching it like a comrade on a battlefield. Good; that was the best option here.

“...I run out of things to say?” he rasped.

“Oh, smart one, are you?” he purred down onto his face. “Here’s the drill: You tell me everything I want to know, and I bandage your wound, and you get to live. Capiche?”

The guy choked, but nodded. “Y-yeah.”

“All right,” Jigen husked, lowering his voice until it was the gravelly sort of low that made his lovers shiver. He shifted his weight a little, until his knee was squeezing the guy’s dick and his arm pressing into the wound, all at once. “It’s time for you to start talking. And if at any point you want to stop...you get to pick between a knife to the throat and a gun to the mouth.”

It didn’t take long to get what he needed, which was good, because the fire was spreading and he had to things to get still. He’d left his affects just outside the front door, but there was still the paintings, getting more smoke covered by the minute.

“Thank you for your cooperation. Now,” Jigen said when they were done, standing up fully. He pulled Mabel out of her holster, and made a show of undoing the safety.

The guy at his feet went wide-eyed. “B-But you said...”

Jigen gazed down at him like he was stupid. The guy, dizzy and half delirious by now, chuckled bitterly once the rebuke seeped in. “F...fuck...,” he admonished of himself.
“Don’t get the wrong idea,” Jigen noted. “I’m giving you a choice.”

“L-like before...?” he rasped.

“Like before,” Jigen agreed. “And you did well. So.”

He pointed the massive gun at him, finger off the trigger, not that he would be able to see that in the dark. The barrel of the thing was nearly as long as the average woman’s forearm.

“You’re the only guy left. Half the guys are in bits from the grenade. Sorry about that, I bet you liked ‘um, yeah?”

His mark went silent where he laid in the dirty snow. Until the small gasp of horror, telltale of an oncoming sob.

“You wanna live?” Jigen asked honestly. “‘Cuz it’ll be hard. I don’t want t’ make you and your family suffer you slowly drinking yourself to death. I could end it here for you. You’ll get a medal, probably a plaque alongside those guys. Full survivor benefits for the family, and it’ll be painless to you. They can remember you as you were when you went to work today. Not the man you were after you came home. I’ll even deliver some last words to them, if you want.”

The guy sucked in a breath, the tears audibly flowing.

“So.”

“What...what the fuck is this? Charity? Go to hell, those were my friends, you asshole!”

Jigen hummed drolly; this was within the expected list of responses. “I kill people for a living, I don’t really care what you think,” he muttered, checking back at the house. “But. I know the costs of what I do, and I’m not about to let some poor woman and kid suffer for years watching their dad go downhill and get abusive and eventually kill himself or them or both just because he couldn’t handle the shit that happened at his job one day. So.”

Jigen tossed his hair over his shoulder and turned back to the man, hand on his hip. “I ain’t gonna stand here all night; it’s cold out here and my house is burning. You lost. If you’re gonna let it kill you, do it soon. Otherwise, know that this was in no way your fault; you were never gonna win; you were just the furthest guy to the right and I’m right-handed so I start shooting from the left; and you all just had one hell of an unlucky day ‘cuz your commissioner wanted to cover up some shit from the guys trying to bring it to light.”

“...Wh-what...?”

At that, Jigen stomped on the guy’s gut.

With a whoof, the victim took one breath and then went still.

Jigen ran his hand through his bangs with a sigh, then quickly retied his ponytail just to get the aggravation out of his hands. The guy’s arm was already bandaged, and the blood on Jigen’s hands dry.

“Don’t make me come back and finish the job,” he muttered when he was tying the final loop into his hair. “I’d much prefer to be Achilles to all the other assholes running around looking for glory on that godforsaken beach.”
It had been barely twenty minutes from the start of the assault till Jigen managed to leave the burning house with the last of his items. Jigen swirled the car keys from the tech’s pocket around his pointer finger as he went for the driver’s side door, then caught them in his palm decisively.

He dipped his head into the car and picked up the radio: “Central this is 4-5-2. Mission success. Repeat: Mission Success. Over.”

“That’s good to hear, 4-5-2. Any casualties? You said you were taking fire. Over.”

He raised an eyebrow, glancing at the cabin, then clicked down the button. “Negatory. Some fire, no casualties. Over.”

“Wonderful. What’s your return? Over.”

“No live bodies. Suspect down. We’ll radio again as soon as we get the place cleared. And maybe after a beer, hah. Over.”

There was the sound of a snort, and then: “Roger that. We’ll see you then. Over.”

Jigen nodded, then pushed the button down one last time. “Central, remind me what the Commissioner’s ETA on moving the high profile prisoner is?”

“Not till seven PM,” came the reply. “Why?”

“No reason. We’ll be back soon, over.”

“Godspeed, unit 4-5-2.”

Jigen set the radio back in its place and gazed at the house.

Then looked at the guy in the woods, and hefted the sniper rifle over his shoulder.

“I sure hope you didn’t like any of them.”

Jigen closed the trunk of Unit 4-5-2 a moment later. There were a few precious things in it: a little red radio. Two wrapped presents. One quilt (only one survived the grenade). A bunch of guns.

And three wooden panels, painted like something out of St. Paul’s Cathedral or the Sala d’ Psyche.

“Someone’s gonna pay for the shitty Christmas these guys’ families are about to have.”

The lid shut with a decisive thunk. Jigen got in the car, new police uniform and all, and started the engine.

In the front passenger seat was the satchel full of papers. This time, all neatly packed in an envelope, ready to be mailed from any given box between here and the hospital. And his hat, of course.

“God, I hope this is worth it, Lupin.”

As he drove down the pathway, in the rear-view, the windows of the house were all bright with flame.

Luckily, no one would notice until the morning, as the neighbors were out of town on holiday. The
recent snowfall, too, would keep the forest from burning down.

But that was what bothered him about it, as well. Because he’d never get to see it as anything but rubble, ever again.

“Bastards. I really liked that place, too.”
Gosh! Finally back!! For all of you who patiently waited, thank you so much! You are an incredible group of dedicated readers. There's lots of exciting and emotional things coming up in the next 100k words, so I hope you keep along for the ride as we barrel toward confrontations and conclusions.

In the last few months, since the September 2018 update (which admittedly was after another long break in the summer), I was traveling through Europe for the first time, visiting a lot of the cities in this story! I learned, for instance, that Dunkirk is actually a teeny blue-collar town with a cute seaside boardwalk and no red light district. Oops! So when describing the town's neighborhoods, it's actually an amalgamation of the nearby big college town, Lille (which is absurdly pretty), with Dunkirk. I also learned that I absolutely love Venice, and that the people there are the least likely to be mob-involved. LOL, oops there too. Marti should definitely be from southern Italy, not north. The more you know.~ I have to give a thanks to all the people who opened up their homes and hearts to me, be they friends of friends, shopkeepers, or random passers-by, as I traveled. I would absolutely recommend doing a trip like that for your own growth. Scrounge up the funds and budget-travel yourself around; you'll be so glad you did.

But, look forward to better background color coming into the story! I was also able to clarify a lot of the emotional work that Lupin needs to do to move forward in the story...I even learned, for the first time, the name of a lot of the afflictions he's suffering through. (Thanks, well-timed social media posts I stumbled across!) So when I say that the continuation of this story is a group effort that took a lot of research, that's no joke. But I think it's really gonna do well in the end, and I would hope that the other stories I've written in the meantime in this fandom will only improve the writing itself.

Now, a note about this chapter in particular: This is just an introductory chapter to the new arc. There will be an arc of Lupin's childhood at the theater, followed by a return to the hospital. I particularly dislike when books switch to plot arcs away from the main action for ten chapters at a time, but hopefully I'm not committing that exact faux pas by also making that switch *boring.* There's plenty written from here out, probably about 50k words, but it needs a lot of help condensing. I'm not sure how fast this will update, but I'm ready to work, so I hope you're ready to read!

See you in the comments~ :D

Quill 4/2/19

PART IV
Dunkirk’s red light district held a certain dinner theater where cops and crooks from the old neighborhood liked to hang out and reminisce about their childhoods together, and beside that theater, stood a brothel with a French blue roof. Its three rounded dormers reflected the sky rain or shine, and Parisian-style balconies went all the way down the narrow building at every window, often sporting girls hanging out of them and waving at passers by. The basement of the building held a gambling club for people with the right connections, and above that, there were several floors of rooms that could be rented out by the hour for people with the right kind of money. The women there were high end, known for their various hues, skills, and, for those who cared to see it, their vibrant personalities.

But on the top floor of that building lay an attic—one filled with morning light and discarded dreams.

On warm days I would open the windows in the three dormers, their pane glass warped and cloudy by the years, and let the music of the world ring out. Even on cold days, I’d often sit in the deep windowsill before my own music lessons, watching the world go by. Observing humanity’s exploits from fifty feet up was the only place I ever felt like I belonged, so I found myself returning here, day after day, forever sitting alone but somehow right in the middle of the harmonies below.

This was also the only place in the whole complex from which I had a view, except for the roof. But that window and its sweeping city vista would occupy my mind for hours; whether it was watching the sunrise some sleepless night or the sunset on what promised to be a long work shift, I’d watch the colors change as the day went by and the ships in the harbor came and went—always wondering if something different would happen that day to change my life.

Today, as ten-year-old me gazed at the earth below, a woman in a red dress went by, meandering between the copious amounts of black and navy and brown on their way to work. I smiled at that, hoping it was a good omen, and set my pencil to the sketchpad that sat atop my thighs.

Such were the scenes I liked to draw, when I was up here. That, and the birds.

I couldn’t paint out in the open up here, lest someone catch me, but I could draw sometimes with my pencils, and hide my drawings in the windowbox. I didn’t think Charles had ever been in this room; he may not have even known it existed. He rarely went on any floor that didn’t make him money, and this was just where we stored old theater stuff.

Still, the seasons would be changing soon, and then I’d get to see all the colors of Fall I was named for, in the trees of town and the grasses of the dunes outside it. In fact, that meant my birthday would be coming up soon, too.

Another year older... I wonder if anyone will remember my birthday this year?

Should I bring it up to make sure I got something at all, or chance it and see if I could pull a guilt gift that might be better, in the event it was forgotten...?

I should probably tell them in advance, I found myself thinking, because at least then I’d know exactly how much they cared.
On the one hand, it’d hurt to find out if they really didn’t care (which I suspected was the truth), but at least then I’d know. In a way, I relished the pain in my chest that caused, because it was so very real and clear. It was understandable—“I’m not worth it to them.” That jived with my world view, my understanding of myself.

On the other hand...maybe it’d be nicer if we were all able to pretend they just forgot?

It was a nice feeling that swelled in me, but I had a similar feeling it’d end in disaster, that soon became much more insistent. It was a sweet, sort of warm feeling to think we could all just say nothing and pretend everything was okay, but I couldn’t trust that softness. I couldn’t trust it when it showed up—it never lasted long—and I couldn’t trust myself to hold up my end of the bargain, either.

Just thinking about it, I knew from here that I couldn’t properly tow the line and accept whatever they chose to give me as enough; I’d inevitably get angry and mouth off and then I’d be worse than at square one, which was “invisibility.” Yes, in that case I’d be at -1, which was “actively avoided,” or worse, the subsequent backward steps, “Belittled,” “A Problem,” or “Untrustworthy+Child.” Maybe even “locked in closet” or “left on floor with bruises,” if I really pissed someone off.

I was getting better at avoiding those stages at least, but...

I sighed and quickly quashed that warm little feeling. The idea of being accepted by Charles-and-Mom was a lie, after all, and I didn’t really like being lied to, since it never left me a way to solve anything. So I wasn’t going to just give them a lie to walk right into. They’d see I was worthwhile, and then they’d treat me like a normal parent did a kid they loved. I’d do something right, long enough, keep them happy enough, that they’d treat me the way they treated their friends and stuff. Someday, it’d happen. I couldn’t be that bad of a person, after all, since some people seemed to like me well enough in passing.

After all...if I let them forget, then I still might not get anything, because they could pull the excuse that the date has passed, so there’s no reason to honor it, or claim they just forgot the second time around and never do anything, hoping I’ll forget and move on...

I hated that—when people thought I was a kid so I’d be easily distracted and forget to follow up on things. What did they take me for, a three-year-old?

But in any event, if the forget-remind-forget was pulled on me again, I wouldn’t know if they really were just that distracted (ironically). It wouldn’t be a certified slight and I couldn’t use sympathy to elicit pity-gifts and hugs from anyone else. Hrm. So I better remind them and hope I get a good answer...

It wasn’t like I ever got gifts I liked, though. Just as they never knew how to treat me, they never knew what to get me. So...

As my pencil dragged along the fabric of white, laying down its molecules, another thought struck me, perhaps for the first time:

...What am I even doing all this all for?

Can’t I just buy myself a present?

But...that wound mean no one cares about me enough to buy me presents.

And if that’s true...
Then what am I even here for?

Pencils wore out eventually; got used up. They left vibrant, lasting works of art in their wake, in the right hands, records of a life and its loves and concerns. But even those had to be properly preserved to be seen and valued into the future. So what...was I going to leave this world, once I died?

I gazed down at the space the woman in red had occupied, now nothing but familiar stone-colored cobbles and the suits that matched. It was like watching a particularly vibrant fish go by in a stream; but the stream would keep running on, and with just me to tell the tale, who would know that moment of beauty had even gone by?

I was alive, and I was here in this town, this building, this “family.” I was extant and I took up space, and resources—so I’d better pay my way. That I knew. But this place was uninterested in me beyond what money I could make it, so what was my destiny going to be?

I believed in working hard to grow myself into the man I wanted to be. But...that took resources, and I had very few. So who was that man going to be, in the end? What man was really available to me?

Was I just going to get used up and thrown out before I could leave, like so many of the girls, or would I manage to escape someday? And if so...what world lay out there for me?

Escape.

I felt like I could almost taste it, on the breeze as I gazed out this window. But every time, I inevitably had to put my drawings away and return to the amber lights of the speakeasy in the basement; the artless laughter of the evening crowd in all its ill-begotten gems, their shining, stolen stars.

Well, if I’m logical about it...

I had a few skills: I could play several instruments. I spoke a bunch of languages to one degree or another, though they were languages of people no one valued. I could sweet talk my way into and out of most anything (minus anything involving Charles), and I could cook and sew and dance a bit. I was good at school (though I didn’t get to go anymore); I could paint, of course (but I had to hide it); and I was magnificent at coming up with complicated plans...but no one else seemed confident enough to pull them off—or maybe I just couldn’t explain them right?—so...well, that was a useless superpower too.

And as far as superpowers, I was also very good at being a shadow that snuck up and spied on people. Sure I could nick anything small from any vendor’s stand, but that was petty crime; I wanted to be legit if I went into thievery. And anyway, in my future, I imagined it would be nice to be less invisible. I was proud of the fact that I could be invisible, it certainly did me well, but it wasn’t really what I wanted. It was just what I was good at, so while it was a point of pride and safety, it inevitably left me alone. I’d have to come out of the shadows to get what I wanted, but that was a scary, confusing world.

In fact...

I gazed out the window at a distant chimney, eyes glazing over as images played across the screen of my mind.

The future I always envisioned for myself was vague, just glimpses of color in the night. What was
stronger about it was a feeling. A feeling of the joy and warmth of inclusion, that when I followed to an image, I got people: a person surrounded by friends, lovers, comrades. Maybe even followers. Lots of genuine laughter and smiles and glittering eyes that looked my way when I walked in the room. And maybe it was in a gilded gambling hall like a ‘20s speakeasy in my mind, but what I knew for sure about this future was that at the end of the day, those folks were there for each other. Their lives were bonded together over something more than financial and social transactions.

But how to get that? I had read about this in my novels from the library, and seen it on cartoons on TV, so I had a clue at least: I had to be someone other people liked, and for that, I had to...? Give them what they wanted, maybe?

But how to do that? Charles is never happy about what I give him. No matter what I do, he gets upset at me, or ignores me....

How to please people into being my friends? That was a much harder question for me to answer. I stared down at my paper, wondering at the lines there on the smooth surface.

Please them enough that they won't ever want to discard me...

I had...drawing, and back in school other kids tended to praise me for it; it always drew them over to my desk, though of course they wanted drawings for themselves, so it wasn’t really about me. So that was off the list.

I did know lots of history—it was always my favorite class—and as far as books, I liked mysteries and fantasies and crime novels and comics, which I could talk about at length...though that just tended to bother people. So that was out.

I supposed I also liked performing. That was a way that I certainly got people to smile, and the show girls always got lots of affection and attention when they did it well. Hell, there was a whole world revolving around their performances, from high to low.

So yeah...maybe I could go into theater? I already worked at one, after all.

But...

My pencil sketched around and around, the shading on the woman’s umbrella a soothing friction up my arm.

Can I support a family like that?

Do I even...want a family?

That little warm feeling came back, but twisted and aching this time. Quickly, it turned into dread.

It’d be nice to have a family, one that liked me. Maybe, if I escaped this place, I could make my own family, one that didn’t forget about things like my birthday. (And, in the case of Charles, wouldn’t use it to make money.)

But did anyone even like me that much? How in the world could I get to that point of even being married? I’d need to get a job outside of the mob world, and theater jobs were had to come by if you didn’t know someone, or didn’t have the mysterious penache of “it.”

Truthfully, there were people at the club that owed Charles favors, but...if Charles didn’t want me doing it, then it wouldn’t happen, period. Anything I wanted had to go through him, and he...
I sighed just thinking about it. Anything I wanted, he hated.

A long time ago, I’d thought of opening an art gallery, but...you needed money and rich patron-friends to do that, and I had very little of either of my own. I could barely convince people to remember I existed, let alone patronize my efforts. And, particularly of the money, all I’d made for my mother was either spent or in Charles’s accounts.

Plus, if he and the crooks of this place kept coming around, my shop would no doubt be nothing more than a mob front in no time. And for that pretty dream of years ago, shining in my heart like sunlight, I couldn’t bare to give it over to that fate.

But really...

Even the mother I’d once had, who appeared in that dream of a shining future I’d long held—the happy woman with long, dark hair, supporting her as she painted in a stained frock and laughed in the morning light with paintbrush twirling around like a magic wand—was gone.

So what’s left to even do with my life...?

I sighed, resting my cheek in my hand as I gazed out at the coastal clouds. If I couldn’t get what I really wanted because other people were in the way, what else could I have, derived from my own power?

Sure, I helped the girls and they promised they’d help me where they could, but they rotated in and out with alarming frequency, for an organization that I wasn’t sure brought anyone lasting happiness, and they had only connections; never funds. As for those connections, there were certainly customers that’d been regulars for years, and some talked about my future and giving me a starter job soon. Gangsters, generally, or the people who ran their fronts, offering to let me start as their bagman or their bus boy, respectively.

Some talked about my pretty face, however, and the fact that there was a lot of work for a boy who looked like a girl. Niche markets, they called it, smiling around their cigars.

I smiled back stiffly to those folks, and imagined how many ways I could cut them with a sharpened pencil--and then, of course, how Charles would flay me with the same thing for doing it to them.

But where, really, was any of this going to lead? Who was I, really, except for the person who saw all these things, and failed to do anything but draw them? Drawings no one ever even saw...

There’s really no life out there for me, is there?

Except maybe...

Mr. Lucien’s smiling old-man face came to mind, with his bushy gray hair and manicured mustache, that was always happy to see me. He created a different kind of warmth in my chest than anyone else did. A warmth that spread to my whole body and made me feel...rather chuffed. Visible, was perhaps the word for it, and everything that came with it. Or maybe...welcomed? Wanted?

I wasn’t sure what it was he made me feel, but either way, it was always good to see him and I was always sad when he left. Unlike some of the mooks that we had to loan jackets and ties to, he consistently dressed up every time he came, and it was sharp. He wore nicely tailored but old-fashioned suits all the time, often in curious but attractive colors, and a top hat whenever he could get away with it. He even came in with a monocle and cape once, just to show me what they were.
Boy, had he gotten some good hand-shaking time that day, everyone wanted to talk to him to figure out his angle.

At the end of the day, he cut a respectable and jazzy figure that I much wanted to emulate. He was even thin and a little feminine somehow, like me, but he made it work; people respected him. And what’s more, he had friends. He brought them along sometimes to chat and eat and watch the shows, along with a (much younger, but still stately) lover named Marge, who always smiled a magnificently charming smile as she hung on his arm. You could stare at Marge’s smile and feel loved all day, it was like a fairy blessing.

Sometimes, they even went upstairs together at the end of the night, and I liked to think that they really loved each other up there, in an honest way.

All in all, he seemed pretty happy, and welcoming of my presence, too.

So maybe...

*I could be a high class thief, like him?*

He always had enough money, so if I followed his lead, I could probably paint in my free time. Maybe even steal enough to start that gallery, and hell, if I got good enough, maybe I could steal myself away to another place and social status, far enough away so that I would never have to talk to Charles or my mother again, and if they came around, I could pay them away.

I’d have to ask him the next time he came by if I could apprentice with him purposefully. He was, technically, a crook, so Charles wouldn’t mind, right?...

I was still wondering on the phrasing of my pitch to Charles and Mr. Lucien that late-summer morning from my perch as I stopped to stretch out my fingers.

I ran my hands over my arms, inch by inch, first on top, then the underside. Flexed my fingers, stretched the skin of my palms, interlocked my fingers like someone else holding them. As my skin warmed, responded, I tucked my knees up to my chest and hugged my arms to my body. Like that, I stared out at the distant water of the bay, glistening in the light.

How many people down there had dreams they refused to let go of, and how many of them actually made it? What fuel did the dream engine of reality use, and where could I find it when I was feeling bad?

Maybe someday, I’d find the girl of my dreams, and we could run away from here, violin on my back, paint brushes in-hand, and lock picks in my pocket. And somehow, it’d all work out. Because she’d know where that dream engine was. She’d be able to guide me to it, hand-in-hand.

*Maybe it would be with a boy, and I could be the girl. My mother might not be that same lady anymore, but maybe I could be that lady in my memories. In my dreams.*

*Yeah, I thought, maybe that was a me I could manage to be... If only I could grow up into a girl. I’d be a kick-ass girl for sure. My paint brushes would double as stilettos and my pallet knives would be throwing ones, and all the guys would think I was a serious hottie.*

“Aki,” came a voice at my back.
“Mm?” I asked, turning to the room’s interior as the door closed.

The space was far longer than it was deep—it ran the width of the building, but not the depth. Dark floorboards, lacking polish in obvious places, was covered in musical instruments and old rugs. There was a baby grand piano, and an upright against the wall; both old and missing inexplicable chunks out of their hulls but still tuned well.

There were other instruments, too: a harp that was missing the lowest string; a flute with a dent so that it always played flat; a slew of kazoos from some show one time; a tambourine without a few clackers. An old organ under a sheet that was used exclusively for parts when its prettier sister downstairs got too close to a brawl. A saxophone that looked like it had been used to kill someone given the dents and stains and which people swore was haunted, but which still played a mighty tune.

There were music stands and the occasional easel scattered around like so many crooked trees too, plus benches for instruments we didn’t even have, and a stack of dusty booth cushions in the corner taller than me. But today, in a wheelie office chair that had been relegated to this space for missing a castor, my violin teacher Karen sat down, leaning back and staring at the ceiling, her arms on the rests and her feet on the legs. There was a light to her eyes, and the hints of a smile at the edge of her pink lips.

Karen was a beautiful British woman with a teacher’s heart, and she was incredibly smart, too. She had velvety skin of a darker hue and relatively lighter wavy hair that sat all around her head like a graceful, cheerful cloud. Her eyes were brown and her legs were long and shapely, and she typically wore something that showed that off. She loved both pale lipsticks that stuck out like a beacon and those that were dark and shiny like black tulips; she often wore long, beaded earings and painted her nails bright colors that matched her various accessories just for fun. But she also wore makeup only when she was working, and most days, she looked like any other college student in a sweater—because that was what she was.

Karen was my violin teacher, and her boyfriend Victor was my piano tutor. They didn’t know that I knew that they were a couple, but it was amazing what you could oversee here, if you were under a certain height.

Either way, they were both broke, though Karen wasn’t indentured. She wasn’t owned. She worked here in the theater’s pit to get practice, and once a week or so worked as a call girl (with benefits) to pay her school bills. I was under the impression that one of them was one of her professors, but he wasn’t a scumbag about it. More of a sugar daddy, really; her smile always lit up when she was around him...in a way it never seemed to do around her actual boyfriend, which I found odd.

“Do you ever think about what you want to do when you grow up?” she continued, her faraway look at worlds unknown suddenly training on me with a sparkle that would make most people uncomfortable. But in them, I felt a familiar soul, one that had a connection to the happy world I so desperately craved, even if I didn’t know it as such at the time.

This time, though, I frowned and simply shook my head at her. I knew I wanted to help people; to make them happy. Especially women, since they were always my sunshine. And I liked talking to people. But all the things I loved, all the authority figures in my life hated, always actively but sometimes also aggressively. So in lieu of that, I had no response for her. It simply wasn’t safe to hope, here, and it wasn’t like I could tell her I’d just decided to pursue thievery. She wasn’t the kind of person who’d be happy about that.

Besides, there was a man downstairs who owned my mother, and therefore owned me, too. It was
only by his permission that I got to think of flying. But maybe some day I could.

_If I could just get him to like me..._, I found myself thinking for the umpteenth time that day.

“Do you want to get out of here?” Karen continued as I stared at a shiny bit of floor.

I frowned a bit further, the implication crawling over me. Once again, the view of my wished-for future opened into my imagination: before me spread an image of the town, and me running free within it, a colourful scarf around my neck and a snappy suit beneath. A sketchbook and a baguette in hand, chatting up fancy people as I walked to my art gallery, key in hand. Maybe even smiling at Karen and Marge on the way.

Leaving here behind forever, never looking back and being happy for it…was that an option that was honestly attainable? Especially any time soon? It was one thing to daydream about it, but admitting it to someone else suddenly felt like a water too deep to cross.

Around here, most people lived within a few doors of their parents; most of the time, _with_ them. They ragged on them all the time, and beatings went both ways well into men’s forties, no matter how tough of thugs they claimed to be. I thought it crude and their emotional priorities lacking, but it set a precedent for the idea that my family would always be around, and beating me down.

But at Karen’s note, it made me realize that, yeah, most characters I read books about, they didn’t have families and they lived gritty, wild lives with that freedom. And Karen and all the women here certainly had no families. Least, they’d cut ties with them, if they did.

And that…might be kind of nice, wouldn’t it? I could go somewhere as an adult, and be nice to a little boy or girl like me. Take care of them, the way no one was for me. Maybe a bunch of little someones, if I could end up being a teacher like Mr. Arquet... And maybe Karen could teach me how to do that.

I sighed, feeling a pang. I didn’t want to think about him. It’d only make me start crying. There was never an end to it, when I thought about my regrets over him. How all the kids had mourned him, and how so much of my life had been lost when I’d failed him.

No one would ever mourn me; in fact, Charles would probably be glad. Mr. Arquet had been taken from the world and someone utterly unworthy had been left to fill the space.

I tucked up my knees to my chest and gazed out the window, quickly and violently pushing the thoughts aside. The idea of being away from here, living like one of the characters in my books, historical or fictional, was tantalizing, and much nicer to think about. “It’d be nice,” I admitted, “To get away from all the bad memories here.”

Karen was silent for a moment, then gave me a pitying smile. Something about that smile just made a tender spot in my chest angry, though, and the dreams dimmed in my mind, the curtain closing on them for the time being.

“But that’d mean giving up on my mother,” I added with a sigh. “Giving up on the idea that she might love me again someday.”

Karen, rather than give me a line like everyone else did, smiled a little wider—and sadder. “You know, some people just aren’t meant to have children,” she intoned, which caught my attention. “But they still do the best they can. She pays for your lessons, for example. And makes sure you are fed and warm, with a roof over your head. Even if it’s not with her.”

I looked at a crack in the floor that had collected untold decades of dust, then scuffed the dark knot
of wood a little with the toes of my shoe.

*I wish I’d been given up for adoption...*

I thought about it, sometimes: who I’d be if that’d happened. (Now that I knew foster care kids didn’t get turned into Soilent Green, thanks Charles.) Maybe I’d be the son of a rich doctor or lawyer or something. Hell, even a mechanic’s son, I’d be okay with that, so long as he’d lean over an engine with grease up to his elbows and smile as he taught me how to do the same.

Either way, maybe then I could have looked forward to family dinners every night, and two happy parents, and maybe some siblings I could play with—or nurture, maybe teach things to. At the very least, ones I could get into epic kinds of trouble with, laughing all the while. And I’d be in school, getting good grades to make those parents and teachers happy. That’d be nice—if all I had to do to pay my way in my household was succeed in school. I liked school...

“It’s more than my dad did for me,” she finished, that same gaze as I wore flicking over to the piano. She ran her fingers along the glossy surface, something about their tender touch looking downtrodden.

I didn’t know what to say to that, or what she really wanted from me by saying that. So I sat there silently, feeling ashamed for trying to talk up my problems to someone who apparently had it worse, but also for not knowing how to ameliorate her issues once she brought them up. I was doing a pretty bad job as a man, right now. But maybe I could offer some feminine sympathy; I was pretty good at patting backs and calling people jerks—

“He paid for my violin and its lessons, but nothing else,” she continued as I got lost in my thoughts, the view of her back bowing from an unseen weight. “I never even saw him. And that confused me for a very long time. But eventually I realized…he wanted me to have one thing that I could call my own. One skill that no one could take away from me, that had nothing to do with the color of my skin. That if people shut their eyes, they would still pay for.”

I pursed my lips, waiting. It was an arresting story, but one that hurt too, for a reason I couldn’t quite place, and I didn’t want Karen to hurt. She was the one person who consistently cared about me who came around more than once a month.

“But what if that’s not enough?” she continued. “Music’s great, and so is a life skill. But what about all the missed birthdays and skinned knees? What about the sense of pride and safety from having a dad, or not having to see your remaining caregiver struggle? But once you realize that all you’re going to get is all you already have, you’ll probably ask yourself…‘Am I bad for wanting more? For wanting to run away from the ugly pond I grew up in and never looking back?’”

I gazed up at her, blinking feverishly but trying to hide how interested I was. It was like she could read my mind, but that always lead to someone trying to pull something over on me, so I was cautious about letting it show on my face.

“And sometimes it’s not enough,” she admitted, sagely contemplating the ceiling once more, which made me relax a bit. “And you grow up with holes, that you try desperately to fill without a road map. But then…you get older, you get some autonomy, and you realize: one day, that person that failed you is gonna die…and is it worth the sacrifice of your whole life to hold their ball and chain?”

I scowled at her, perplexed, trying to imagine it. But she continued at the cracks in the plaster ceiling: “One day, you’ll have some successes under your belt, accomplishments that no one can take away from you. Maybe things you’ve never even told people about, but which you hold dear.
And you must hold them dear, no matter what! Never let anyone take them away from you, wether that means putting them in a notebook or never talking about them, or sharing them to everyone!”

She leaned forward suddenly, spinning stopped so she could hold her finger up at me. As she gestured, her voice turned into a storyteller’s, full of wonder and mystery and verve.

“Metaphorically speaking, you’ll climb to the top of the hill that you were born at the bottom of. And from there, you’ll see that you have a choice: to let that baggage your parents gave you follow you all the way down the other side, or to leave it behind and fly.”

Karen’s beaming smile came back then, and she said to me with a wicked grin and a flick of her wrist, “I hope you chuck that baggage down a hill, and walk back to town unencumbered!”
Hi, all. Thanks as always for reading. This backstory section continues to prove difficult for me to wrangle. The main theme of it is "How many ways can adults fail a child?" And while it is informed by my own experiences to some extent, I'm not French. (And the gangster scenarios I base the underworld parts off aren't French, either.) So I can't work with the intricacies of a child's expected treatment as realistically as I'd like. In the end, I've erred on the side of a more broad, humanistic default, but that's why each chapter is taking so long, and then is relatively short on top of it. There's a lot of thoughts in here that I need to sift through and short chunks are how to do it. Sorry about that.

As always, if it gets boring or long winded, you can skim sections, I won't mind. It is, after all, an amateur work at the end of the day. (Though this chapter does set up a lot of characters who will come up again.)

I've been having a very hard time in my personal life and some days I just don't want to go on. Thank you all for the comments recently that have given me kind words and motivation.

Every Monday morning, I’d head to the local library. It was about a half-hour walk, and it would take me by two schools, so if I timed it right I could talk to some of the kids milling around the front gates, exchanging nicked goods for petty cash, lunch stuffs, and stories. If I could memorize their teachers’ names, I could go to the local bookstore and get the workbooks and work on them from home.

After that was done and we’d make plans to meet up sometime during the week at the beach or the soccer field, I’d go to the public library to read everything I hadn’t yet in my sections of choice.

My interests in reading were numerous but certainly not all of them, and I went multiple times a week, rotating the haul. Sometimes, after a couple hours, the librarians would come over to me and chat me up—especially the younger ones—and that was where some of the warmest interactions of my day would come from. There weren’t any men in the children’s section generally speaking, especially not where I would sit in a sunny window on the beanbags to read. So it was always a calm, quiet day to look forward to, populated by people I genuinely enjoyed seeing. The librarians had a rebellious yet intellectual streak, their idealism as sharp as their individualism, a mix that I rarely found at home and always enjoyed the attention of.

Toward the afternoon, I’d check out whatever I hadn’t finished if it was available to do so, and then off I’d go to the beach with my bookbag.

After school let out, some of the boys from my part of town would have nowhere to go for several hours, so they hung out at the beach. It was not a particularly friendly beach—just a long stretch of cold sand with vigorous waves at high tide—but it was clean, and you could pass a ball around and smoke without anyone bothering you. Sometimes, well-dressed women and clean-cut men would
go by with their happy families, or I’d see the grandparent contingent at the corner cafés, and I’d
daydream about finding ways to tag along and get invited to stay with them forever.

Still, there was one particular cluster of older boys I’d play football with on that cold shore, and by
the time of night where they would start dipping into the alcohol I’d brought them earlier in the
day and lobbing insults and dares at each other, I’d head off.

Case in point:

“C’mon, don’t puss out, do it, Jean. Everyone knows old man Ejian deserves it. You know what he
did to us yesterday.”

“Well sure he does, but I ain’t gonna go steal nothin’ in broad daylight, even if he is a dirty
Muslim. I don’t got a record and my old man’d beat me senseless if I got caught. Make the kid do
it. He’s stolen a million things and gotten away with it.”

There were three boys in the group tonight: Antoine, the eldest; his even-tempered but utterly
drifting brother, Mattias; and Antoine’s whipping boy, Jean-Cezare. The brothers had a father that
worked out to sea most of the hours they were asleep and slept most of the hours they were awake,
and Jean’s excuse was that his mother cleaned houses, his dad ran off with another woman and he
was endlessly bitter the man hadn’t taken him with to the southern coast.

Huddled around their stolen red-glowing cigarettes on the rough wooden barricade, feet in the sand,
all the heads looked at me. No one in this group was older than thirteen, and I was coming up on
ten.

“He’s downright professional, you could say,” said Mattias, the third boy in the group tonight. The
fourth regular, the fourteen-year-old self-nicknamed Saber, was out at a school sports game.

“And that’s exactly why I’m not gonna do it,” I replied evenly around my own cigarette.

“Everyone knows you deserved it, Antoine.”

The leader of the group, the first guy to speak earlier, turned bright red, or probably did, though I
couldn’t tell from the darkness. In the loud crash of the waves, he grabbed for me with an angry
huff. “C’mere, you! Say that again when I’ve got you by the scruff, eh?!”

I dodged away from him—he was half drunk already—and took the moment to climb the rise onto
the sidewalk, flicking my cigarette onto the sand for them to take care of. “See ya later, guys,” I
said around a wheezing cough. At least I’d gotten through the whole sitting without coughing this
time. I was no good with them, but they did make me look cool, and made dealing with the guys
easier in more ways than one.

“Whatever ya prick, go read your goddamned books or whatever the hell you do around all those
whores!” Antoine shouted after me as I picked up my bookbags. His brother held him back, even
as he hopefully tried:

“Tell Suzette hi for me...?”

“You can tell her yourself when you save up the money,” I replied dryly, as I always did. “She likes
money and yellow roses. Like I told you though, just remember to ask for Raff and wear a jacket
and tie.”

The boys that drifted in and out of our group were mostly bigger than me, so when they got tipsy,
they started shoving me around and jeering each other. Therefore, every evening with them
typically ended with drunken, macho teenage shouting matches and a timely placed “fuck off,” but
somehow we always ended up right back together every other day, generally with mild misdemeanors—and where to smoke the spoils—being plotted.

On the way home though, it was back to my daylight life, so to speak, and I’d pick up whatever groceries and supplies anyone who lived at the club might have asked of me (there was a list by the staff fridge, with envelopes of cash with each person’s name on it that I’d pluck every morning). I’d say hello to each person as I delivered their change and goods, making small talk and exchanging gossip for an extra buck as we did so. This particular afternoon, I remember it was Destiny, Amelia, and Yvonca.

Destiny liked hearing about what all the other girls bought so that she would have the best of whatever it was the next time; Amelia liked hearing about the flowers blooming on this or that street; and Yvonca, who I was pretty sure was actually a man, kissed my cheek and ruffled my hair as she took her envelope of change back, along with the pack of cigarettes.

“Who lets you buy these, anyway?” she asked in a high falsetto, long plastic nails plucking up the pack in the gold-gilt dressing room backstage. She sat near her feathered headdress, doing her makeup. It wasn’t late enough for anyone to be in costume for a show, but she enjoyed looking good all night, chatting people up on the floor, since clients of the other half of the house, as we called it, could come any time and request the services of their lady friends. Her conversation hours were in the afternoon, with the evening reserved for stage performances, and then every other day she had midnight and after open for Upstairs Clients. (I’d long ago memorized the schedules because men would casually stop me in the hallways and ask, slipping me a euro or two for it, on the regular.)

“Mister Alverie. He runs the bodega on Charles De Gaulle. I just hit the back.” I picked up bag money from him once a week, so he worried exactly zero about selling a kid cigarettes out the back, especially if that kid was me. He would just point at me and tell me not to nick one, or his reputation would be ruined with whomever I was taking them to. (I wholesaled an extra pack to the beach boys, saying I’d stolen it to be more edgy.)

“Oh...clever. Aren’t you our good little businessman?” She smiled coyly, fluffed her enormous cotton-candy-pink hair (full of glitter) in the mirror, and then shook her braceleted wrist at me. It clinked, it was so full of little silver charms. “Say! You sew, right?” She paused dramatically, then pushed a pleading shoulder at me. “Alllll the buttons came off my blouse last night. Could you sew them back on for me pleeease?”

“Sur—wait. All of them?” I screeched. “How?”

She smiled up at the ceiling, which eventually came back down at me with a shrug. “I maaay have had a client last night who was really strong....”

She pointed at a blue blouse that was laying over a stool. I picked it up and looked it over; it was a simple dress shirt, with all the pieces in-tact, so it should have been a quick repair.

“Well...okay. Yeah, I can, but tell him not to do it again, because I sew these on tight and if he tries it again it might rip a hole in the fabric, which won’t be as easy to fix....” I paused, eyeing her. “And it’ll cost more.”

“Can you do it tonight?” she asked, hands pushed together like a prayer.

After making her wait for it, I replied with a dashing smirk, “I can do it in an hour, darling.”
“Ah! Fabulous! You’re the best!” She pulled me in and rubbed my back, then spun me away again just as briskly, leaving me dizzy and breathless in a way that I pretty sure was her trademark interaction with everyone. “And—Aki?”

“Yeah?” I asked, rolling up the shirt and tucking it in my bag once I got my balance back.

She winked at me and whispered, “Can you maybe sew them on real loose?”

I winced, but ended up laughing anyway as I threw her a line I’d heard many a time around the bar to great result: “Sure, Yva. Sure. Because I like you.”

“That’s my boy!”

She went back to her mirror and lip liner, but I hung on the door once I reached it. After a breath, I turned around and looked at her. At the whole room, glitsy and messy and glamourous, costumes strewn about like parts of lost dreams.

“Hey...Yva?”

“Yeah pumpkin?”

My eyes tracked down the puff of her hair, the lines of her face, transforming before my eyes.

“Can you...”

*Teach me how to be like you?*

“...Yeah?” she asked, never looking up from the mirror.

“No never mind, it’s nothing. See you later tonight!”

“Okay! Bye~”

I quickly ducked out, heading down the hallway with a blush on my face, heart racing like I’d dodged a bullet.

Regular deliveries done, it was time to head to the Deposit Room. It was the bunker-like counting room at the back of the gambling hall and behind several layers of security, all of which was under the left third of the complex, where the music attic and the girls’ rooms were. I dropped off the earnings and marked them in with Tito, our glasses-wearing accountant who looked a bit like a frog because the specs magnified his eyes so much. Across the way was Charles’s office for the secret work, and, the door open and the sound of something electronic going, I poked my head in.

“I’m back,” I said quickly. His office had a huge L-shaped desk of dark wood that must have taken three men to lift. It was covered in papers like a newspaper editor’s desk, with a computer, an ash tray, and a million sticky notes written in what was probably encoded Latin. There was a printer in there somewhere, and a stereo. He had another, daylight office upstairs, but being the office he didn’t let clients into, the entire room was a mess, far from the imposing spectacle mob bosses put on in the movies.

He grunted at me, cigarette in hand and gaze fixed on the screen.

This was not the grunt of dismissal, but the grunt of *wait*. His hand held out toward me slightly and then—
“Hah! Yes!” He pumped his fist and turned to me with a gloating smile on his face. “Daylily just won.”

“Oh, Ellie’s horse?”

“That very one! She’ll spend a ton at dinner tonight. Be sure to rouse everyone into good service around her—and a free bottle of wine. The Emerald Valley Bordeaux from three years ago should do.” He twirled his free finger around and then pointed at me, smile still on his face and luckily not yet devolved to a malicious one. “Oh, and your friend’s here.”

My heart leapt into my throat at that, a feeling much like joy bolting wildly through me and making me all fleet footed. “Mr. Lucien?”

“Yeah. He’s got a reservation tonight for four. Brought some friends, seems like.” He shrugged, put the cigarette to his lips, took a puff, and then, as he tapped out the ash, leaned back in his seat, one leg crossed over another.

That, unfortunately, was when the smile turned dark.

“Catch as much of their conversation as you can, okay?”

I sucked in a tight breath. That would be a tall order—table twelve was well defensed, and it was the one he always reserved. As this thought crossed my face, Charles replied:

“Give ‘um table 31 tonight. Ellie’s gang is gonna need two tables pushed together.”

Oh... Table 31 had the special feature. But dammit, it was so cramped...

I dipped my head at him, already stepping back. “I’ll tell Jacquim.”

“Good. I’ll be on the show floor at seven and in the den at nine. Dismissed.”

“The den” was the gambling hall beneath the building. The “Show Floor” was the up-and-up stuff, the front of house: ie, the theater’s lobby and dinner lounge.

I nodded and all but ran out, heart racing again because I was happy to be anywhere but in his presence when he was busy. But just as I made it to the stairs, I saw a familiar shape—it was Vincent, Karen’s boyfriend and my piano teacher.

He was in his suit, because it was his turn to play the lounge tunes tonight. But he looked a little unkempt—a button on his shirt was undone, his tie was askew and his hair was a mess—and as I slowed, I found the man next to him blocking the way up.

I hung back, clinging to the wall. There was nice red wallpaper on everything like out of some old hotel, and the wooden stair spindles were gilded in gold paint. The two men were looking at each other from either side of the railing. “Get it,” Raff, one of our bookies and the brother of the Maitre’ D’ Raish, growled. “Or you ain’t gonna last two more weeks here. Forget about a ring—you’ll be in a ditch, and she’ll be making out with that professor like you never existed.”

“Just a little more time, I’ve almost got it—”

“Fah. I’ll believe that when I see it.” Raff picked that moment to look aside, and even though I ducked, there was nothing to hide behind but flowers in a vase. I picked at a daisy extremely unconvincingly.
"Oi," Raff called at me. "Useless. You need the stairs? Just keep walkin’, I ain’t that wide." He tossed his head in that direction and I quickly bumbled my way through the two men with muttered apologies, depositing a carnation flower in Vince’s breast pocket as I did so.

Startled, Vincent looked away when our eyes met, and as I got up the stairs, Raff continued on with his berating while Vincent worried himself with the flower: “You see that? Chuck uses that kid like a mole. He hovers around you, you know the big man’s getting impatient. So you just do what I ask and let that little curse bother somebody else. I got plans in this world and it ain’t bein’ taken down by you. So get outta here and get me my money you penniless bard...”

“Damn, it’s not even six o’clock and Vince is getting shaken down...” I shook my head and sighed. “He’ll never learn.”

Still, though—a ring? That was new. I wondered if Karen knew...

“Hey Raff,” I said, stopping near the top of the stairs to the ground floor.

He stopped his heckling to crane his head up at me, a dark look on his face. “It speaks.”

I flipped him off, nice and slow, and stated: “If I’m a curse, you’re just a wart.”

Just as the devious smile cracked on my face, Vince startled, Raff sputtered incoherent rage, and I sprinted up the stairs to the main floor, where he was never allowed to go.

Messages delivered to prudent parties, I plunked myself down in the kitchen and ate dinner with the cooking crew. This included waiters, cooks, prep staff, dish washers, and the Maitre’ D’. I typically took over for whomever had a night off, and tonight, by Charles’s decree apparently, I was to be a bus boy—delivering meals and drinks, and picking them back up. I didn’t take orders like a waiter, technically, so nobody in legal could have room to complain. I dressed up right—in black slacks, a white dress shirt, and a black vest with colorful brocade bow tie—but they could pretend I “wasn’t working” if they wanted.

Which was true. I wasn’t getting paid. I was “helping out my family business.”

That said, most people would tip me anyway, and Mr. Lucien always gave the best, because most nights, he taught me thief tricks and gave me ten euro at a time.

That night, I sat at the edge of the island counter, Yva’s shirt splayed out over my lap as I added the buttons back onto it. I nibbled on a quinoa salad as I went, shoveling large chunks of it into my mouth every time I got a button done. To my right, Xing was similarly preoccupied, doing switchblade tricks in between eating some kind of duck soup. He was talking to his guys in Mandarin. To my left, a group of Italians were chattering about someone’s sister getting married. A couple Ukrainians were beyond them, discussing in Russian leads on a potential apartment. On the far side, kitty corner to me, several dish washers were speaking Spanish about an upcoming cockfight across town. At their own table, the waiters, all French save for Raish the Maitre’ D’ (who was half French, half Indian), were gabbing about the weather and the upcoming holiday. It was a warm, lively environment, and most of the time, they forgot I could understand them.

"...The plans ready for tonight?" one of Xing’s buddies, one of the cooks, asked into his soup as he pulled the bowl up to his face. He was a newer guy, so I hadn’t learned his name yet.

A second guy shrugged. "Should be."
<“What you two talking about?”> Xing asked, blade stopping dead so that he could look at them.

<“...Nothing.”> they said in unison.

<“Just don’t be out front at eight,”> added the first.

<“Just a delivery,”> added the second, eyeing me.

I wasn’t looking at them, but I did feel the look on me. Carefully continuing to stare at the shirt in my hands, I know I ended up pausing for just long enough that someone sharp would have noticed. I made a point of making a face at the fabric as if it were giving me trouble, and then stabbing the needle down as I turned away from them.

<“Hey,”> Xing said to me, chasing my face, but just as his hand came onto my shoulder, the master of the kitchen, Jean-Michele, came in through the main doors clapping his hands. That was the dinner bell.

“Five minutes till we have to start cooking the long-haul pieces! Xing, how’s the duck stew? The stock simmer well overnight?”

The hand slipped off my shoulder, and he very carefully nodded. “Yes, boss. You wanna taste it?”

Jean-Michele, tall, blond, and definitely ex-military for all that he was built like a brick under his pristine white uniform and was never afraid of anything, smiled. “Definitely.”

Xing nodded and stood, taking his dishes with him. “You heard the man,” he said, and then, leaning down into my ear, <“Keep quiet.”>

Chapter End Notes

Dear real-life mother of Antoine and Mattias, I'm sorry, they're good boys, I just used their names, thanks sorry bye
I wanted Zora to be a happy figure. Instead, she turned into my elementary art school teacher. She was a nice lady who cared about her subject, but I think she was a terrible teacher and she ended up shouting at us en masse and lecturing us about how we were horrible, ungrateful people a lot. She also played mad favorites with kids who had the most talent, and if you had aptitude for one medium but not another, you'd be a favorite one week and not the next. I had her for five years, but she was still better than my middle school art teacher, who was a hack and sent me to the Actual Fascist Principal (TM) for saying she was a hack.

My elementary art teacher lived around the corner from me and her son was in my grade. Her house was immaculately kept and manicured, of course. Her son was intensely quiet. So I wonder if she was totally inconsistent like that at home, too?...

Come to think of it, I had at least one teacher in every grade of K-8 who thought it was acceptable to just scream or yell (and in one case, throw stuff) at the kids, and we were supposedly in the good school. Often, it was the teachers I bonded with the most that would snap, and rather importantly, it was me doing something that'd break the camel's back, because I was "the one they expected better from." If you ever become a teacher, please don't do that. Only one ever apologized, but it still broke our relationship.

I feel like all my teachers forgot that they were teaching actual children. Or maybe their parents were just monstrous and their lives, support networks, and basic teaching standards really sucked, idk.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Just like that, I shoved the last of my food into my mouth and went off to set the tables. The waiters, other busboys, and I worked together to set the tablecloths and replace flowers and candles. The theater was an old-fashioned nightclub, very much of the speakeasy-with-dinner variety, so there were booths of all different sizes and shapes and curvatures in burgundy leather and black lacquer, arranged irregularly throughout the floor, at higher levels the further away from the stage you got.

The house lights could blaze during the afternoon for cleaning, but the lounge’s atmosphere during business hours was dark red leather lit up by votive candles on the tables and Christmas lights around the ceiling and down the satin-red-papered walls. Even with the lights fully on in that setup, you’d never be able to see the words on a credit card and could barely read the menu. But, with the twisting labyrinth of tables, some of which weren’t by the stage at all but in another room “in the back” for people who just wanted to drink and make deals before the show (or the rare night when there was no show), it was the greatest paradise for a child keen to imagine adventures for himself.

Especially when he’d just been tasked with actual spying tonight.
As I moved down to the front with my bucket of little round candles, I found Zora there, talking to a couple of the regular dancing girls, half in their sparkling uniforms.

Zora was my dance teacher, rumored to be a Ukrainian ballerina of years yore who was lying low to escape the communists. She was also the choreographer and costume designer of the in-house shows, and she did it with a Coco Chanel kind of flare. An older woman, she worked all the time and was always grumpy about it, though she was never late and never missed a day. She was strict and never complimented anybody, but in a way, I liked that. I knew exactly when she was pleased and when she was not, because though she pushed her students to exacting standards, she also didn’t set them up to fail. She outlined what she wanted and maybe you were good enough to get it and maybe you weren’t, but she never lied to you and when you were good enough, you got a little sparkle in her eye that meant the world to your self esteem.

These days, she was in her fifties and her blonde hair was streaked with gray under her black baret. She cut an imposing figure, and not just because of her height: she always wore dress suits, usually in dark colors, with her hair in a tight bun. She was known to use yardsticks on pupils that couldn’t get their legs in the right place, so I made sure to practice enough to not get her ire, and to be honest, she seemed to like me for it. I wasn’t her favorite by any means, but when we were alone, I could pretend like I was.

Tonight, however, was not one of those nights. She was here for someone other than me and all the other regulars:

She was here for my rival.

“You will be beautiful,” she was saying to the girl in a prim pink ballet outfit, who was bending down to get a kiss on the cheek.

“Thank you, Mama. For the glory of our countrymen, right?”

“Screw the countrymen. Tonight you dance for a future husband. These are the most connected men in town and someone’s got to have a son I’d approve of.”

I paused putting out a vase of short flowers and watched the exchange. The girl was Zora’s daughter Dahlia, recently back in this part of town to put on a show for her middle school arts final. She was twelve and going to be a big star one day, everyone was certain, and this was going to be her first headlining show, something most other girls in the ballet schools couldn’t even dream of at that age.

Sure, it was just one act before the main event, but it was a full number that was going to use the adult dancers in supporting positions. It was a special thing for her birthday (which had been last week) and a lot of people in the community were going to be here tonight to support her.

That notion, of course, did not endear me to her, given that I could hardly get anyone to remember my birthday let alone show up for it, but I tried to swallow it down and be happy for her and her mother. That was my job, after all—I supported the operations here, and if one of the stars was my own age, then so be it. The show had to go on, and you’d better do it with a smile or someone would get mad and whack you one behind a curtain.

With a huff, I straightened my bowtie, hoping it’d get the kink out of my back that’d suddenly twinged up it and wouldn’t let go. Suddenly everything in me seemed crooked and I hated the hot feeling it stabbed right into my chest.

But when I checked back for one last black, soul-soothing glance of seething jealousy—
“Hi there,” Dahlia said in her cute accent, waving at me conspiratorily as Zora moved off to cluck at some of the other girls, as she was wont to do. Dahlia, who was a year or two older than me, got down on her knees and then rolled onto the stage, side over side like a sausage, until she was lying on her front with her chin in her hands and her feet in the air, crossed at the ankles. Her pristine tutu fluffed up around her like divine spun sugar and her big-lipped smile was friendly even around the ridiculous hat and makeup she had on. Her long blonde braid was wrapped around her head, somehow looping through slits in the eastern European hat, which was itself was horribly pink and decorated with fake pearls, shiny sequins, and glass gems (one of which, right in the center of her forehead, looked like a giant white egg). It was the most gaudy thing I’d ever seen, and I’d seen a lot of drag.

“Hi...?” I asked defensively, deftly caught in her sparkle once again despite my wishes. Just as she shimmered, my feathers ruffled. I felt it move all the way down my back, even though, like always, I had no idea why and knew even less about what to do about it other than hate myself for feeling at all.

“You were here at rehearsal too, and the lessons mother asked me to teach the other week... Do you live here?” she asked, her light and lilting French marked with something warbly. I liked that sound, but admitting that she had any good points at all made me immediately check myself and rage inside instead. It was a hot, and in a way beautiful for it, feeling. She made me feel more strongly than most did...but I hated feeling it at all. If people knew what I was thinking, they’d hate me too.

So, I swallowed the emotions down once more and tensely hissed, “Yeah, what’s it to you?”

“Only whores live here. Are you a whore?”

My eyes snapped shut, only to cast around to either side a moment later. But no help was coming—no adults were within earshot, and everyone was busy working, anyway. They didn’t have time for my stupid problems with stupid girls, I thought as my face reddened in embarrassment and, on its outward edges, shame.

“No,” I stated with a hard huff through my teeth. “...Least, I don’t think so,” I muttered at the end. There was that one time, but... I shook my head out and whirled on my feet, turning back to my tub of objects and hastily sorting them just to have something to do with my hands.

“Then why are you so sad?”

“I’m not sad. I’m fine. Why would you even say that?”

“Because that’s how you look. It’s how you always look.” She paused. “It’s how your dance looks.”

That touched a nerve I didn’t know I had, and I stood for a moment in silence, wondering what she wanted me to do about it—and why it even mattered to her.

For all my righteous annoyance, she was far better at dance than me—she’d taught the last few lessons for Christ’s sake—and even her French was better than mine, because, despite her cute trill, my sentences were populated by the occasional word from five or six other languages, much to the consternation of me and, equally, everyone around me. I’m sure she had dozens of friends, too, and good grades in school, and...
“Come here,” she said to my tensed back. “Talk to big sister. Now you look even more sad.”

“I’m not sad, I’m angry at you for being annoying.”

“Well then look at me, and you won’t have to be either anymore.”

I whirled on her, fists tense. “How’s that going to hel—”

But what I found surprised me: She had rolled onto her back and was reaching out her hands to me, arms unfolding like a fern. Her gaze, around her stupid hat, was a soulful one. One that was actually, for once, looking at me and no one else, with no distractions.

I couldn’t help but sigh at that, and after a moment, I indeed came closer. One step, then another...until my chest bumped into her head.

She wasn’t my sister, but she liked to call herself that to everyone younger than her; it was a dance school thing I figured, and, if I was honest, it was a rather endearing concept. Me, a sibling. There were people all around me, but none of them were ever really my family. And a sister...

Maybe she could teach me to be a better girl...

So I came to stand against her like a moth to a flame, tilting my head down at her like a doll. Since the stage was elevated, her head was right about at my sternum, and the funny hat bumped into it, stiff as cardboard. It kind of reminded me of the shape of a coo-coo clock, I thought as I looked into her eyes.

Light colored eyes, like maybe my Dad’s were, somewhere in the world.

As I was preoccupied with that all, she grinned and closed her arms around my back, a sparkle in her eyes. “I’ve caught you!” her high-pitched voice chimed in squeaky delight.

“What’s up, Princess Cygnet?” I replied flatly. “I have to work.”

“That’s what everyone calls me! You come up with something better. Something that’s just from your heart. Have you thought of anything yet? I asked you last time!”

Girl, I do not have time for this, came to mind, flung with a particularly spicy, Can’t you see I’m working here, at the end, but I also knew that was mean, however many times I’d heard guys say it over the phone. “Peanut?” I asked, the first other thing coming to mind. Maybe I was still hungry...

“She asked, gasping in a way that was theatrical but still sent a little zing of alarm through me by proximity of its loudness. As I swallowed it down, she stood up in a rather impressive roll and, balancing on one leg in a way that looked like it should have been impossible, spread out her lithe and limber arms. “How does one intuit a peanut? Perhaps like this? Or like this?”

She struck another pose, and then another, prompting me each time. As I continued to stare at her dumbly, she kept saying nonsensical things, until I eventually turned around without a word and went back to the table, grabbing up my plastic bucket of votive candles and tiny flower vases.

“Hey!” she shouted, causing several people to turn to her. Much to my dismay, she was pointing at me and puffing out her cheeks. “Little boy, you are so boring! You don’t ever want to have fun!”

I looked around with a bewildered expression to make sure everyone knew I had nothing to do with this. When they went back to work, I hissed, “Why would I want to have fun? Fun doesn’t get work done, dammit. Fun gets you in trouble...”
And I didn’t want to get in trouble tonight. I wanted to be able to spend some time with Mr. Lucien. He was the only person I had to look forward to in a week.

She frowned at me, then put her hands on her hips and started doing toe lifts as she stood there, heels crossing and uncrossing each time, as if this were a completely normal way to idle. I stared at her, and the display that kept going faster and faster, until my stale confusion turned into a frightened tick of a hysterical smile.

“Ah-hah!” she yelled again, stopping her feet and pointing quick as a lightning bolt. “You do smile!”

“Because I’m confused!” I shouted back in dismay, up into the lights that surrounded her glittering gear. “Don’t you smile when you’re confused?!”

“No! I look ‘confused’! You make people confused when you’re confused, confusing boy!”

Luckily, Zora chose that moment to come back over. “Dahlia, do you bother the poor boy again? He’s working.”

“I am also working, Mother.”

“No, you’re bothering me!”

“I was trying to get you to have fun, you...you...you peanut snatcher!”

I stared at her, nonplussed, and eventually Zora, beside me, shook her head out too. “What is she on about this time, Little Leaf?”

Since my name meant Fall, she had a habit of calling me Konoha as a stage name. It meant “the turning of the leaves” in Japanese, but you could also spell it like “baby leaf.” She fancied this a pun of endearment and I let her have it, not the least of which reason was because it was, traditionally, a geisha’s name.

“I told her I don’t want to have fun, because fun doesn’t get work done. Especially,” I ground out through my teeth at the end, looking at Dahlia pointedly, “when I am working.”

“Ah,” Zora noted, patting me on the shoulder. “Very smart. Good working boy. Like good Ukranian boys and girls.” She turned to her daughter. “Not like my half-French girl, who just likes to play all day.”

Dahlia’s demeanor finally fell—and the crash was fast. “You told me you loved him,” she spat back icily.

Zora blinked in surprise, but after a second, Dahlia just grinned, almost maliciously. Then she started pointe-stepping her way off the stage with that same strange, theatrical obviousness as before. “I’ll be baaack~” she called at me in a ghostly timbre. “To make you have fuuuun~”

At the curtain, her top-half reappeared for a split-second to hiss, “Fuuuuun!” like a demon, before she disappeared again, this time for good.

After watching the curtain ripple, I sighed and went back to my tray, anxiety flowing out of me like a physical force. I wished I had another cigarette. “That girl...”

“Sorry about her,” Zora noted, pulling up her Audrey Hepburn-style cigarette holder and lighting it, if just to make me ache. “She is...the handful at times.”
I swallowed down the craving in my throat and forced myself to shrug as I went back to my tasks. Not the kind of girl I’d like to be or date, but I supposed there was some appeal for it in the world. I just wished she’d point her meddling at someone else.

“She must like you.” Zora shook her head. “Though I have no idea why.”

I paused at that, hand slow on placing a candle. “...What do you mean by that?”

She gazed down at me critically from over her nose. “Tell me you try your hardest every day. Truly.”

I frowned, not sure what to say, but feeling a dull, dark sting in my chest. That kind of twisting knife that felt both like your stomach falling and a rush of something richly painful gripping your heart and aching at the same time.

I mean, I thought I did, but maybe I was wrong...? Does it not look like that...?

It seemed a little unfair of an assessment to me, and perhaps my face showed that, because she clarified with a hiss, “You aren’t using even half your potential.”

“Oh.” I noted very quietly, head turning down to my bucket, and all the little candles there. If all I was good for was setting tables, I guess I really wasn’t good for much. “I guess so...?”

“And your lifts need work.”

I sighed. “I know. But she’s big. I haven’t started growing like she has. I can’t lift someone her —”

“It has nothing to do with body size, it is about discipline,” she went on, purposefully cutting me off.

You think I don’t know that already? You think I don’t give you everything I have? my mind snapped blackly, though luckily, it stayed in my mind.

But, if she was saying all that, she clearly didn’t. And it wasn’t like there was anything more to give her to prove it with. So I simply shrugged, carefully forcing down the feelings so everything from my heart to my face would be blank and steady.

“That. Right there. That apathy. Is why you will never succeed.”

I whipped my head around and glared at her, but that was the extent of how I knew how to rebel safely. We shared a look, indignant from me and stonewalling from her, and even though I calculated a dozen chess moves in my head, nothing came out with something that didn’t end in me getting punished far worse than any victory I could score.

In the end, she raised an eyebrow to point that out and gave my scowl a cool up-down. I felt profoundly judged, though I wasn’t sure why. I also felt like my scowl wasn’t adequate to defeat her distaste, and hated myself even more for it when I snorted and turned away.

Still, it was the only defense I had.

“You could teach me it,” I muttered under my breath, after having the thought go through my head multiple times so loudly it eventually came out.

“I have to deal with thirty-five dancing babies on a nightly basis, you think I have time for another
“actual child?” she muttered back. “Guess again.”

“I’m...gonna go back to work now,” I noted sourly, picking up my tub and looking for the next table that needed attention. “See you in class.”

She was never like this when Dahlia wasn’t around. Those days, sometimes, she’d sigh as she watched me and say I looked a little like her long-lost husband that Dahlia liked to hiss about so much. Then she’d take a long drag on her smoke and look off at the wall for a while.

Still, this time, Zora waved her hand as she went back to her cigarette. “Practice your pirouettes! I see that lack of stretch from you sleeping all day! No student of mine will lose his stretches before he can lift a swan!”

“Yes Madame Zora,” I muttered, like any obstinate child would do. Never mind the fact that it wasn’t from sleeping, it was reading at the library. But no one here needed to know that, lest they take that away from me, too.

It made me feel quite strange, those grumbling outbursts of mine. It was freeing to tell and feel the truth, but also profoundly dangerous, and they’d been coming more and more lately. I quickly shoved it down, shoved the need down, hoping I could go back to feeling nothing as quickly as possible—and having that discipline she wanted from me.

“You’re so stupid,” I muttered to myself when I was a few tables away, plunking down the candles harder than necessary as I went from place to place. “She already has a kid, what does she need you for?”

The words were dark grooves I was digging into myself and they felt good, in a way. They felt like power, and though they were negative, I could control them, and together those two things gave me a mighty rush that felt safer than most of my other emotions. Because with them, at least I wasn’t in danger of hurting anyone else, or getting their backlash. I was doing what they wanted, feeling what they wanted me to feel, so I would do it way better than they asked for. I could still achieve, even if all it was was hurting myself.

I’d spent much of my life to this point trying to counter the thoughtlessness and bullshit with statements to the opposite, with evidence from other people who did like me, but these days...there really was nothing to counter with. My chapter books about heroic boys and girls, each one brought up to their potential by one remarkable older person seeing them for who they truly were and could be, didn’t tell me what to do when literally no one believed in you.

The only thing I could do at this point was believe them, and digging in the wounds was cathartic against that pain.

And as that catharsis washed away the pain from their cuts and mine, a salve bubbled up from the wound, like usual: a thought, a goal, a hope. This time, it was all three:

One of these days, I’ll be an adult, and I’ll be able to control myself the way they do. I’ll be perfect at all these games, and no one will ever be annoyed with me—or give me weird looks I don’t understand—ever again. I’ll have perfect mastery of myself and the whole system of interaction, some day. And then I’ll get people to treat me the way I want to be treated. I can be the one that hurts other people...

I’d rather have them like me, but if I couldn’t get that, at least I could be the one that kept people in their place so that they stopped hurting me and the people I cared about.
I might even get someone to stay with me at the end of the night.

The thought came out of nowhere, as they did sometimes, and I sighed as I set the next batch of decorations down, thinking of the delicate way Dahlia’s arms had held me. A pleasant little tingle went up my back where she’d laid her fingers against it.

...Until I thought about that soulful look in her eyes. Of the pity.

“Are you a whore?”

My arm, in comparison to hers, turned tight, gripping the candle enough to bend the little metal sheath. It wasn’t until the thin aluminum started digging into my palm enough to hurt that I noticed it, though.

Annoyed, I tossed it back in the bucket and took out a replacement, telling myself I’d fix it when I got the chance tonight.

Somedays, it felt like all I was good at was breaking things and bothering people.

*C’mon, get it together. Who cares what a couple of women say to you, or how they try to get in your head. Charles has jobs for you to do tonight. You better do them, and do them right. You don’t want him mad at you, too.*

Those days, adulthood and its promises seemed so very far away.

Chapter End Notes

*All the Ukrainian people I’ve ever met have actually been really nice. Not as readily warm as Russian people, ironically, but still very good people.*
And now the whole cast is assembled.

I imagine Mr. Lucien looks like Paul Neuman from "The Sting" (1975) and you can't convince me otherwise.

Once the tables were set, I went to the back and pulled up a mound of clean silverware and a pile of napkins. I often wrapped utensils in their napkin packets—it was menial and worth outsourcing, and while it made your hands very dry, it also let me sit alone and think with something to do with my hands. As I crossed the floor, I found the musicians arriving at the pit, uncovering and assembling their instruments. Karen was there, and she waved at me as I went by. That was just enough affirmation to feel a little less aggravated about Dahlia and Zora, and I stopped for a moment to say hi.

“What are you playing tonight?” I asked as she unlatched her case, hovering intently just out of reach. “For the opening act?”

“Mozart, would you believe it? For this crowd?”

“They love a good farce,” I offered with a wry smile and a shrug.

“Hah! Well, she does seem very ‘pink.’”

Karen looked over her shoulder at Dahlia, who had returned to the stage to listen to her mother’s group comments with the other dancers in all their finery. I couldn’t help but agree, and made a note to that effect in the back of my throat.

“However,” Karen went on, “We’re playing Moonlight Sonata. A brave piece, for such a little girl.”

I huffed at this, mostly to myself, and ticked my shoulder. “And boring. Hope the box office can handle it.”

“Well. It moves into Stravinsky to wake people back up. But. Either way. We’ll get a good workout.” She smiled, flicking her wrist to illustrate.

I smiled back, enjoying the glow of a gentle moment in her soft radiance.

“Anyway, are you keeping up with your practicing?” she asked, pulling up her violin bow—an economic model to say the least—and tightening it.

“Yes, I have. And piano on Tuesday and Wednesday with lessons on Saturday.”

She gave me a knowing look that boarded on pity—Tuesday and Wednesday was when I played in the lounge—but luckily, didn’t give voice to it. I actually liked piano, it was one of the few times anyone praised me consistently, so I wasn’t sure why everyone was so bothered by me making
some money at it and giving Vince a day off.

Speaking of Vince...

“Hey, Karen.”

“Yeah?” she asked idly, continuing to work on the bow.

“I think Vince has a surprise for you.”

“Yeah?” her voice was the same disinterested tone as before.

“You might want to see him soon.”

“Oh I’ll be seeing him tonight, that’s for sure.” She smirked and looked over at the piano, sitting on the far side of the pit. “Or should I say, hearing.”

He tended to play too intensely, and other times too meekly, and right now he was running around his piano bench looking for pages of sheet music that had apparently burst out of his bookbag out of order, his appearance as haggard as a man who’d been shaken down earlier in the night would suggest.

I didn’t used to mind it—his flurry was kind of funny, given how universally pathetic he was—but the days where I could rib him man-to-man about playing everything like he was playing Beethoven without him flipping out seemed fewer and fewer.

He was a very slight man who could barely dress himself favorably, and whose frantic attention was generally elsewhere, so I wasn’t too afraid of him, but I wasn’t in the habit of intentionally pissing adults off either, so I kept my thoughts to myself about him—unless I was with other people who were doing it for sport. There always had to be one chicken at the bottom of the totem pole, I supposed, and I didn’t want it to be me. I knew good and well how to be cruel; why not use it to my advantage in the few situations where I could? It tended to feel good, to be honest. It felt like accomplishment. Like power, and I was so thirsty for that that even the smallest drop of it hit me like a drug. It was a rare, sweet fruit not to be wasted.

“Well, good luck tonight! And tell me how it goes with Vince.” I flashed her a sharp smile, the sunny one everyone seemed to like, and a little bow too, ingrained at this point in me from the other Asian folks who were always around in one way or another.

Because another thing not to be wasted was the goodwill I could generate with a smile.

“Thanks! I’ll need it with him, no doubt. The music I’m sure’ll be fine...”

Another friend of hers in the pit crew came over—a friend from the music school who played bassoon, God help her—and as they started chatting merrily, I moved along, feeling a little lighter.

At the back of the theater, I took a left, went through the curtain, and deposited my silverware tray in the extra booth in the nook on the way to the bathrooms. I checked my watch and found it was almost six-thirty. Immediately, I turned around the other way, headed along the back hall between the theater and the bar in the front-of-house, and out into the theater’s lobby. There, I lined up along the wall with all the other waiters and staff.

In our black and white uniforms—complete with vests, bow ties, patent leather shoes and slicked-back hair—we stood along the wall with its gold-silk wallpaper and warm-hued marble in order of rank. I was at the end, along with some other boys, which had the net effect of also being a line
mostly in height order. On the other side, along the stair railing, were the Working Girls—the women who worked as escorts in the bar and gambling hall and, if they so desired, Upstairs. Yva was there, as were all the others ones I expected on a Friday night, whether I got along with them or not. Some were in traditional costume of wherever they were from, while others had more modern approaches. The dancers, what we called the “talent girls” or “show girls,” would be in the theater with Zora, doing something of the same on their elevated firing line.

Across the way, my eyes caught Yva’s. She winked at me, struck a little pose with her shoulder cocked, and made a small heart with her hands after motioning at her shirt, buttons all repaired.

I blushed, but soon enough, down the stairs came the sound of geta, causing no less than thirty people to snap to attention.

The first thing I saw was her sleeves. Long silk kimono sleeves, the warm amber light of the hall glinting off the moon-colored folds. Then the splash of silver and gold that was her Obi and its ties, followed by the apple-blossom pale neck and face, topped off by tightly-bound dark hair done up with colorful, glittering ornaments.

As the Japanese woman came down the stairs, a bit of that dark French sex appeal about her, Charles met her at the bottom, holding her hand as she came around the landing.

It was the white Fall kimono she was wearing tonight, the one embroidered with red and orange Japanese Maple leaves all over it. Six silver pins and several combs in her hair dangled gems and colorful cloth charms down around the sides of her head, while the stiff collar of her many layers showed off a strong neck painted with a double-V pattern down the back.

Her face was round and smooth and covered in white paint, her lips and eyeshadow not red but gold and a dusty bronze.

She was utterly enamoring, the queen of our establishment.

And she was my mother.

Charles, for his part, was in a sharp dark-blue suit and what was probably a thousand-dollar Italian silk shirt. It was a rather simple look, until you got to the fact that the lining of his jacket was a silver and gold maple-leaf brocade that was somehow both ostentatious and oddly well coordinated all together when you added in his silver tie and silver shoes and the golden shine on his slicked-back hair from the lights.

My mother, head held high, looked over her employees like they were attendants to a landed Lady, most notably the ones in front who were the managers. A sharp painter’s eye looked over each person’s every detail in turn as she went down the line, one clack of shoes for each person. A finger flicking the lint off a lapel here, eyes demanding the reworking of a tie there. One lucky bastard who got not a reprimand but her gentle fingers in his hair because that damn cowlick was always escaping its bobby pin.

And by the time she got to me...

Rather than walking right past me like I didn’t exist like she usually did, this time, her imposing figure, in its three inch heels, gazed down at me. I stared at her obi, then as her shadow stayed over me, bravely flicked my eyes up to hers.

To her brown eyes, in an almond shape that was the same as mine but held so different a color. Somehow, I was intensely aware of that, every time she got angry at me.
I never knew if there was going to be happiness or hatred there at any given interaction, and like with every time, my heart raced as I awaited the answer. By her side, Charles’s broad shoulders lingered, waiting in the wings to either assist her or pull her back.

As I waited, I was calculating how much, and how quickly, I’d have to apologize for my existence if something went wrong, and how to do that to everyone on the staff. The bigger, and more public, the blowup of hers, the harder I’d have to work to control the damage. Because if I was bad enough to make this wondrously beautiful woman fall from her grace, that was an awfully large burden to drag along from my tiny shoulders.

But tonight, a warm Friday night, a smile pulled at her golden lips, and a glint of something close to fond came into her eyes.

“Looking more like your father every day,” she whispered, touching at my cheek.

It wasn’t her fingers that elated me, but the cool whisper of her heavy silk sleeve draping on my chest and arm. The touch, to be honest, was cold enough to sting. Her fingertips were gentle and objectively warm, but to me, that alone from her was enough to hurt. Because gentility from her was so unfamiliar. Because a touch from her was so equated with pain.

And yet, when she turned away and began talking about the night’s show to the group, my face was tingling, in an entirely different way from what Dahlia had given me.

It was hope, and excitement, and fear, all shimmering down from my cheek like fairy dust to swell my heart into a roil.

For his part, Charles didn’t pay a damn ounce of attention to me, and that was more than all right.

Yva, however, gave me the brightest smile she could get away with and another wink from across the room.

“Never forget that you are here to make the clients happy. If they want it, give it to them—unless it’s something that’ll hurt you or this house. If you have an issue, bring it to your superior—and if they must, it’ll come to me or Charles or Raish,” my mother, Taiyou, was saying. “But always with class. What are the three rules of the establishment?”

She held up her pointer finger. “Maximilian?”

“Ma’am! Respect the girls!”

“Correct. Rule two: Kiara?”

“Mistress! No guns!”

“And Aki?”

A jolt went through my chest. I’d been enjoying the glow of her attention, and had more or less spaced off.

“Yes Ma’am?”

“Rule three?”

“Wear a goddamned tie!”
She paused, half a smirk on her face, as everyone chuckled. “Yes, but politely. How would you say it to the actual customer?”

“If…” I sucked down my burning heart and, staring at the stairs, tried, “‘Sir, your wardrobe seems to be missing a piece tonight. Might I get you a tie from the closet?’”

“There we go. Acceptable.” She smiled her luxurious smile and, gems and threads glittering, turned a serene head to the others. “If my ten-year-old here can do it, you can do it. And better. Now.” She clapped her dainty hands together. “Tonight is a special occasion! We’re celebrating Zora’s daughter Dahlia with a fundraiser. Tonight’s show is a series of special performances from her and the dancing team, on top of the talent acts from you all in between. I know you all know this already, as it’s been weeks in the making, but while you are free to feel proud and talk our family member up, please leave your personal celebrating to the end of the night. The gambling hall will be closed tonight, as will the upstairs, and I promise there will be cake and wine in the basement for you all by the end of the evening.”

I smiled a little, a warmth coming over me for being part of a place that’d care like that.

“A special thanks to Zora, Alissa, and Aki for the work on the costumes. There were a lot of sequins and feathers that needed to be wrangled, I heard.”

She looked between us, and I pushed my shoulders back as everyone made approving sounds and clapped for us three.

She went on to say the same for the lighting team and the usual theater helpers. “As well as to the food staff, who went out of the way to develop some special menu items. Thank you to everyone in the kitchens for your hard work.”

I clapped for that as well, and the quiet applause felt like so many twinkling stars to me. Xing and his guys didn’t often get recognition, but I was really looking forward to some of the things they’d engineered tonight getting out to guests.

But I had to wonder what the guy was talking about for Eight PM. That was right when the show as about to start. Maybe a special something? Like an unexpected balloon drop or streamer pop?

I hoped it wasn’t confetti. I’d be part of the people sweeping and vacuuming all that up and it’d take an entire shift to do right. And we weren’t the kind of place that’d leave last night’s confetti lying around. At least, not on a Friday into a Saturday, certainly not.

“And with that, I am out of things to say. Charles?”

“Payment staff, I will remind you of a couple of initiatives and people we’re keeping an eye on.” He went on to talk about various money handling procedures and local drunks, but finished it off by talking about the high spenders they were expecting for the evening, and the nuances of how everyone should treat each group. At the end, he bowed his head slightly and looked back over to my mother.

“Does anyone else have any points of interest?” she asked.

We did the usual round of glancing at each other, but when nothing came up, she clapped her hands to dismiss us with her typical mysterious smile. “Well, with that, could the first customers are here, so I bid you well in your dates and drinks and deliveries tonight.”
With that, we broke apart, each cog to its spot in the machine. The working girls went out front to the bar with my mother to entertain newcomers and VIPs alike, and the men on the serving floor went to their stations.

Which also meant, for now, that I went to that empty booth off the lounge to fold napkins.

It was six forty-five. The first show started at eight, and if we had a second, at ten. People could loiter in the bar until seven, when they’d start being allowed in to the lounge for dinner. Some people didn’t come for the shows—just the bar, the ladies, or the gambling downstairs—but that didn’t tend to start till ten.

So for now, I would fold napkins.

Which I did, studiously, ever thinking about Zora’s note—*You don’t try hard enough*—until I heard a familiar voice on the other side of the oriental lattice-wall, from about two feet below me.

“Ahh, so good to sit in a seat that’s forgiving of old bones! I love this place. Even if it isn’t my usual table, hrm...”

It was Mr. Lucien, right behind my head—although he couldn’t see me. Excitement racing up my stomach, I turned and peered through the shadows the fine, painted wooden mesh made, and down onto table thirty-one, several feet below.

“Ooh, you got bumped, old man. You’re number’s up. Kaput. You’re irrelevant.” This was a boisterous and clean-shaven man with a bald spot, swarthy and round-bellied and in his forties or fifties. It wasn’t one of the friends he’d brought before, I noticed.

“If he’s irrelevant, you’re a speck of dust on the wind,” came a deep female voice, young and whispering even at full speak. That was Magdalena, aka Léna, his sometimes-paramore, for sure; I could recognize her sultry tones anywhere. She was in her thirties, had a full head of dark tresses all the way down to the bottom of her shoulders, and could be relied upon to wear black with some kind of fashionable embellishment, part of the clothing or otherwise. Her dresses and suits always came with interesting cuts, patterns, or textures, none of which I ever saw on anyone else. She was modern glamour personified, but there was always something a little dangerous, a little old-fashioned, about her dark-eyed, dark-lipped, very tall smiles.

There was a pause, wherein the noise of the club filtered in, and then, a fourth voice came: “What? I’m not getting into this.”

This one was male too, though younger than either of the others. It was the man who was bookending Mr. Lucien and his lover on either end of the booth with the crass guy; this was a man in his twenties or thirties, with a slight build. He was in a simple academic’s tweed suit, trendy for the cut but barely quality enough to get him through the gatekeepers to the downstairs. Not that the guy with the bald spot was any better—he was clearly wearing something mismatched that belonged to a blue-collar guy in an alley he’d found passed out drunk. It didn’t entirely fit him.

“So, Lucien...what brings us here tonight? I know it’s not dinner,” said that very oversold man as he adjusted his belt a little. He paused, in which he looked to Léna suspiciously. “Or the whores...probably?”

*That* word. I grimaced. They weren’t whores; *whores* were cheap women who were owned by somebody else, with the connotation that they were overused. *Our* place was full of escorts, companions—they talked and drank and philosophized. They owned themselves and set their own prices and hours. They also *might* go to bed with you, if they liked you—and all of it was most
definitely monetized to high prices—but there was a *difference*. A very important *difference*.

I shook my head out and kept watching. Léna, who was sitting between Mr. Lucien and the middle-aged guy (with...ooh a bald spot!), whapped the latter across the chest with the back of her satin-gloved hand to tell him what she thought of that.

I smirked.

“Yeah...so, definitely not the whores, then. Unless it’s my birthday and I forgot about it?”

“No, Greg, while I appreciate your enthusiasm it’s not your birthday,” Mr. Lucien retorted. “Aren’t I supposed to be the senile one? Just enjoy the show a little, eh? I’m gonna go find somebody.”

“Ah, okay... What drink you want us to get you?”

“Champagne, obviously?” he shot back lazily as he got to his feet, joints creaking and cracking along the way.

got any idea what this is about?” Greg asked the younger guy as Mr. Lucien went out of view, further up the floor. The guy shrugged.

“I do, but I really hope I’m not right,” Léna muttered, her nearly-black lips pursing.

Greg looked her up and down. “You gonna spill, then?”

“Nah, I think I’ll just sip my champagne and watch you react, as always. Order me two, would you? It’s gonna be a long evening. Now, I’m going to say hello to some friends at the bar.”

With that, she too stood, and wandered off toward the front of the house.

“What, don’t look at me, they don’t tell me anything,” came the last man after a pause, the young one.

“Shit,” muttered Greg, who had an American accent of a sort Mr. Lucien had taught me was Chicagoan or near it, sinking into his water glass. “Hope the wine comes quick.”

I watched them all go to their separate corners, aware that it wasn’t productive to bother Mr. Lucien while he did his networking. However, with the sound of a lively floor at my back, it wasn’t more than a few minutes—and a few passing bodies—later that the heavy velvet curtain down the dark, narrow hall swished open and Mr. Lucien appeared with a big smile under his fluffy mustache.

“Ah! There you are. Raish told me you were here!”

“Ah...! Oh! Hello?!” I stammered, taking a moment to switch gears out of spying mode and clumsily setting everything aside in my haste.

“Huh. You know, I always wondered what was behind this wall...” Mr. Lucien eyed the lattice for a moment, then shrugged and let the curtain fall. He came over to me, an easy smirk sitting below his bushy, salt-and-pepper mustache as he loped along with his cane. “Is that any way to greet me? C’mon now. The spoons can’t be that interesting. Or was it maybe you were thinking of a girl over them~?”

He winked at me, and though I giggled with a “hell no,” I soon found myself scooting out of the booth and running into his open arms.
“I missed you, Mr. Lucien,” I muttered into his safe, gentle warmth, the smell of his calming cologne floating up around us, the feel of his favorite wool suitings soft under my fingers.

“I missed you too, kiddo.” He looked down at me as I disengaged from his person and, hand hovering, soon set it on my shoulder instead of my head, unlike he had done affectionately so many times past.

“Mn?” I asked of it.

“Ahh, what the hell.” He set his hand on my head and scrubbed over my hair, sending it amess. I laughed and cringed and it was wonderful. “I was worried you might be too old for that now, but what can I say, you’ll always be cute as a button to me.”

I smiled, one that stretched further across my face with each passing moment, and beckoned him to sit, barely keeping from bouncing around on my own cushion. “What’s up?” I asked, all thoughts of spying quickly forgotten. “How was the ride from Avignon?”

“Long and uncharming as always,” he replied. “The best part is Avignon. And the destination of course, though this time Léna didn’t totally clean me out shopping as I picked her up in Paris. I don’t know what I pay taxes for though, the rail lines rattle a man on a budget around quite a bit these days. It’s an indignity...in my day, there’d be a riot for it, or at least a burning train.”

I chuckled. “You guys rioted all the time.”

“Well there was a lot to riot about. And any young man that doesn’t riot hasn’t really exercised his full civic duty. You have to keep politicians in line somehow, and when you’re poor, it’s usually with pitchforks and fire. Why do you think Prometheus gave men fire? It wasn’t just to stay warm.”

I snickered, but took in every word.

“Say! I have something for you,” he began, as he always began—with a bright, excited whisper and a theatrical wave of his hands. I followed one, then other, very studiously—until he pulled out something from behind his back in a way that made my brain break because of how he’d been diverting my attention with sleight-of-hand tricks.

I rubbed my forehead in pain...until I saw what it was he held.

“Ah!”

With a squeal of delight, I held my hands out reverentially.

A stuffed-toy whale shark was deposited in my palms. It had a happy smile, a wiggly tail, and regular array of oblong white spots that looked a lot like paint splotches.

“To go with your fish,” he explained. “They can be friends. Everyone deserves friends, even your toys.”

“It’s wonderful!” I gasped, smile beaming as I looked her—I immediately decided it was a her—over. Petting her, I found her soft fabric on backwards, so that I had to pet her toward the front. It was a strange quirk, but one I liked. She was new and exciting and cute and soft and mine and I loved her for it.

“Thank you so much! Where’d you get her?!?”

He nodded at the mention of an assigned trait, smiling with pleasure. “The aquarium in Boulogne-
sur-Mer, down the coast road from here to the west at the end of the country. It’s a lovely town and even cooler aquarium, real edge-of-the-known-world type of place. I like to stand on the shore there and imagine what explorers used to feel before we had mapped the whole world. You ever been?”

I shook my head, and he spread his hands out in his old-fashioned suit and theatric tone. The lights above us shown down on him like a puppetmaster, adding to the mystique.

“There’s a big tank in the main exhibit with all the tropical fishes, including the whale shark like this girl you’ve got here. There’s a viewing area, the first one in the place with amphitheater seating. I like sitting there, there or the jellyfish tank, just watching the people and the fish go by. I could sit there for hours just thinking about life.” He swished his mustache at me with a smile. “I think you might like it too, so I’d like to take you someday, if you’re willing. There’s a free children’s day, once a year...that’d be a great time.”

I thought about it, but quickly sighed. “If...my parents says yes, I guess.” I’d never been out of Dunkirk except for within the pages of books, so even though it was a few hours down the road by train, it seemed highly unlikely. Likewise, Charles wasn’t technically my parent, but it was much easier than explaining it all to just lump him into the term and make it plural.

“He winked at me, and quickly did a sleight of hand trick I recognized—and still couldn’t follow worth a damn. A metal coin appeared in one palm, and a chocolate coin in the other. He held them both out to me.

I looked them over, shark against my chest like a cuddly American football and other hand hovering. Eventually, I went for the metal one.

I tried to go for both, of course, but it didn’t quite work—he was too fast for that.

He held the chocolate up while I pouted at him, and eventually he smiled and tapped me on the forehead with it as he held it between two fingers. “You’re a strange kid,” he offered, before putting it in my palm, much to my glee. “You go for money instead of chocolate?”

“Eh, I like white chocolate and these are always milk,” I explained, setting both coins in a little stack and considering the difference in how the light shone on them.

“Oh...” He thought about it, then muttered to himself, “that’s true, isn’t it? Huh. You may have found a nice market niche, there.”

I shrugged and brought the shark around to pet in my lap. “Besides, I can’t brush my teeth while I’m working and eating it now will make my teeth all fuzzy. But I can’t keep it in my pocket cuz it’d melt. So I’d have to stash it, and then I might forget, or someone else might find it...and old chocolate that’s been kept in metal tastes like mint, and I hate mint...”

“You’re...really very thoughtful, aren’t you?” he asked, sounding like something was turning over in his mind. “Very...thorough.”

I smiled a little, unsure if I was getting a compliment or not. But I liked to think I was, and anyway, smiles kept situations from deteriorating 80% of the time.

He looked like he wanted to say something more, but in a moment, he flipped his furrowed brow into a bright smile and an even brighter voice: “I didn’t know ten year olds could think that far
“You clearly know stupid ten year olds,” I replied with a chuckle.

“I was a very stupid ten year old,” he admitted. “Though it was a long time ago so it’s hard to remember.”

“Well, I can’t hardly imagine being ninety.”

He held out a finger. “Hey now. I am seventy-five, thank you. I have at least one ball that still doesn’t need a jock strap.”

“I have no idea what that means but I think it’s lewd, right?”

“Ask your ‘father.’” He snorted. “Actually, no don’t, I have no idea how he would react to that. It’d still be funny to see him react though, who knows what he’d do but I’m sure it’d be hilarious.”

I shrugged noncommittally. Charles riled up was not something I was going to get within a mile of if I could help it. I still remembered that cup to the head in the first couple of months we’d met. Well, as much as there was still left to remember, that was.

“But come now, forget a gift? And one as tasty as chocolate? From me?” Mr. Lucien placed a hand over his heart. “For shame!”

I chuckled, not sure what he wanted from me but realizing it was supposed to be something to lighten the mood. “Of course not, Mr. Lucien, you’re a valued customer,” I parroted back.

“I hope I’m more than that, by now!” he laughed.

“Sure,” I agreed. We were friends as I figured it. He was one of my only good friends, actually. Come to think of it, wasn’t he going to teach me to make crépes tonight, after the show? That was on the lesson plan this month, if I remembered correctly. His ‘grow into a good man’ plan, which involved a lot of cooking, house cleaning, and martial arts skills. They were, he told me, on the foundation of the thievery lessons.

And that was because he was Gentleman Thief, he had explained, and anybody could be a thief but only the truly honorable could be gentlemen, and that foundation had to be laid early, and foremost, and involved a lot of grace and humility in the form upkeeping one’s self and one things. Or so he had said.

“So how’ve you been?” he asked conversationally, turning to face me, his arm around the back of the bench.

I shrugged. “Same old.”

“Runnin’ cons and gettin’ laid?”

“What?” I crinkled my nose. “Eww...”


I glanced through the lattice, not sure what to say to that. It was elevated above the show floor, so it wasn’t like he was going to look through it at a glance and see Léna’s head, but what lay beyond it was still the majority of my world. “ Mostly.”
“Mostly? What does that mean?” he probed gently.

I shrugged, tucking in a little at his displeasure and picking up the shark with the hope that I could deflect with it.

“You know you can tell me when things aren’t right, right? If someone does something they shouldn’t?”

I nodded, swallowing down the feelings.

His pointer finger uncurled and landed on my chest. When I went to look at it, he lifted it, until I was staring down it to his face, his light eyes dagger sharp. “You know if anyone hurts you, all you have to do is tell me and I’ll fuck ‘um up for you, right? No matter. Who. It is.”

I smiled in spite of it all. It was kind of him, even if I would never, ever take advantage of it. Because as soon as he was done dispensing justice and gone back to Avignon for the week, then who would protect me from the revenge?

Still, it was a nice thought.

“I know,” I mumbled happily, turning back down to the shark. “Thank you that. For her.”

“What do you think you might name her?” he asked as I continued to pet the chipper fish.

“I dunno yet. But...maybe...” I tilted my head. “Gesso.”

“Gesso? Like the primer for paintings?”

“Yeah. ‘Cuz of her spots.”

I held her up in explanation. He smiled and wiggled her side fin as I did so, which was stuffed but floppy. “This girl,” he began, “I wanted to give her to you, because she’s very special, just as you are special to me. She comes with everything you need to get out of a bad situation.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, tilting my head.

“If you’re ever in trouble, just hold her close and doors will open.”

I tilted my head at him the other way, quizzical, but he just winked at me with a dashing smile, picking up the shark and shaking her tail at me. When he gave her back, I set her in my lap and petted her, instead of the napkins.

“So about tonight...,” he began after a while, turning to the lattice, his chin in his hand. “There’s a nice show going on with the local talent, eh? That girl Dahlia...what do you think of her? Have you seen her?”

“I see her all the time,” I groaned, rolling my eyes.

“And what do you think of her? She cute?”

“Let’s just say...if I were old enough to have a type, she wouldn’t be it.”

He laughed and then slapped his knee to punctuate it. “Well,” he sighed. “One of these days you’ll answer that question differently and that day I’m going to have a lot of fun telling you about girls and how to treat them. How a Gentleman Thief treats them.”
I shrugged gently, running a fingernail down my neck a few times. “You can tell me now. I could use some help with her, actually.”

“...Oh yeah? What’s up, mon cherie?”

“Every...” I frowned, holding my new friend the shark close, her stuffing tight like a pillow. “Promise me you won’t get mad.”

“Depends on what you did, I suppose. I might have to hold you accountable because I’m an adult.” His eyes were very serious, but his mustache twitched a little, in that way magical men did in movies. “But I promise I won’t abandon you for it, because you were brave enough to tell me—and were kind enough to trust me with your insecurity in the first place.”

After carefully processing his deal, I nodded and decided to take it. “Well, it’s not bad, it’s just, I get really angry around her, and I don’t know why.”

“Tell me more. Angry how? Do you yell at her?”

“No, I don’t like, hit her or yell at her or anything,” I quickly explained, face turning red for some reason at the potential of such a terrible accusation. Even at nine, I somehow knew that was the worst kind of man alive and thinking I was equated with that for even a second, especially to someone I cared about, made my face burn. “She just...she’s so pretty. And popular. And perfect, and happy. And she’s always meddling in my life. Like, if she wants to be so perfect, why can’t she just leave me alone?”

He nodded very seriously at my descent into abject bitterness, and his fluffy mustache swished as he said, “It sounds like you want to be more like her.”

“Why would I want to be like her?” I snapped. “I hate her.”

“That.” He smirked and held out a finger. “That knee-jerk bristle reaction? Means I’m right. Or at least very close to it.”

I glared at him, displeased and sure he was pulling something over on me like adults always tried, but he just shrugged, the picture of innocence as the sounds of a raucus club went on around us.

“That feeling you’re feeling is jealousy. You’re angry that she has something you want...and something you think you deserve.” He gave me a second to process this, then went on, shifting a little, “So ask yourself...are you working hard for it? Really? Or are you just copping out and telling yourself you’re doing your best while playing the victim card on yourself to avoid the real, harder truths?”

I gave him a seething look that illustrated just how unfair and hurtful that statement was, for how close it was to Zora’s.

“Oooor,” he went on quickly, “are you maybe not trying in the right way?”

“Right? Way?” I hedged—suspicious but intrigued enough to be pacified for the moment.

“Right.” He motioned his hands around like he was juggling. “People become jealous when they’ve been trying very hard for a long time to achieve something they think they deserve. And sometimes, they do in fact deserve it, but not in that way. For instance, everyone deserves love, but not necessarily from that person. Or, maybe you do deserve love from that person, if it’s your mother or father for instance, but the way you’re going about it won’t help you get it. Or, maybe that person is just an asshole who will never notice you at all, and so what’s ‘wrong’ is your whole
premise.

“Whether the issue is with the goal, the method, or the premise, in the end you’re jealous because you’re waiting for something that’ll never happen, so you’re mad about the whole situation because deep down, something inside you knows that it’s all in vain and you just don’t want to admit it to yourself.

"And you don’t want to admit it to yourself because you don’t want to have to grieve.”

I pulled back and frowned at him. What? Me? Why? What would I be grieving about, no one died?

This was definitely on my face, though, so he resituated himself politely, hands on his legs. “I’m going to tell you something I learned a long time ago, the hard way, that no one else is ever going to tell you.”

I nodded, coming forward with craving.

“People get jealous when they have something to grieve.”

I cocked my head, the gears not quite turning.

“...Okay?”

“You know what grief is, don’t you?”

I thought about it, a dagger sharp glance at the wall, but I couldn’t quite put it into words.

“It’s loss,” he explained simply. “It’s the sadness of loss. Loss of love, of goals and plans, of affection...of one’s culture, of one’s future. And the most insidious loss of all is the loss of one’s self.”

I frowned thoughtfully at him, a note for him to continue.

“So when you feel that stabbing burn of jealousy again, step back, ask yourself what you’re missing, and then ask yourself if there’s a better way than anger to get it.”

I pursed my lips, considering it. If, at the stage with Dahlia and Zora earlier tonight, I had asked myself that...what would I have found?

I closed my eyes and took my mind back to that place. Took several deep breaths until I was in that moment again, every emotional bowling pin set back up to fall again.

But this time, instead of letting myself get confused and angry, I asked myself what was really going on, and what came back was a note that resonated...and it sang the word Sad.

I was sad about something. About what?

Maybe that was the grieving he was talking about, I pondered, as I opened my eyes and glanced up at Mr. Lucien.

Luckily, he was waiting patiently for me.

“So you’re upset she’s...” he held out his fingers, “Perfect. Happy. Pretty. And what was the other one...”

“Popular.”
“Right. Popular. People like her,” he explained calmly. “She’s, in other words, safe in the group. And the group supports her in the directions she’s going. That’s a natural human desire, to be safe and wanted. The most basic, in fact, and one everyone deserves.”

I tilted my head, ready to deny any part of what he was saying, but it all pinged back true. A light feeling, like a ray of sun shining through the dawn, rather than the weighted anchor that was most of my muddied feelings.

“Which means, in other words, people around her see her for who she is and help her get where she’s going. They see her talents, give her affection in exchange for them, and then help those talents grow. This, in turn, allows her to become self-assured and capable, and able to be a nice person to others—all things a successful adult is.”

As he was talking, relief hit my heart at the possibility of such a thing—and then heat crept up over my face as I realized that I wasn’t the one getting it.

“You’re angry,” he finished quietly, “because you’re being denied a very basic right—the adults in your life aren’t helping you grow up.”

“So?” I demanded desperately, when I realized I was looking at him, and he was looking at me, and I had been terribly found out as the fraud no one wanted, even though I hadn’t even known any of this to be true a moment earlier. I was suddenly very afraid that he’d cast me off too.

“It...” He pursed his lips, then sighed. When he finally spoke, it was hushed. “A child’s goal in life is to grow up well, and the adults in your life aren’t helping you get there. The last person you should be mad at is her.” He eyed me pointedly.

A searing bolt of something dark and painful burned through my chest, all the way down to my feet and leaving me feel almost dizzy. Something that was a mix of guilt and shame and pain, which caused every quill in my back to stand on end and quickly turned into that same anger from earlier in the night at Zora.

Well what else am I supposed to do?

So he was on her side, too. I had opened up to him and yet here was another adult defending perfect Her.

He was telling me I wasn’t allowed to have the only thing in this situation that was truly mine—my enemy and my hatred of her. So the only thing that was honest about me was wrong, and therefore I was wrong. He was telling me I was worthless and shameful just by existing and feeling. I was a Problem, and therefore, I’d get ignored. I’d revoked my right to attention by having the wrong emotion.

It burned, that awareness. I stared at the table, trying not to let my evil emotions—or the tears they threatened to generate—show, but starting to shake for it.

All this, from the one person who was supposed to be on my side and mine alone.

I just couldn’t abide by that. It hurt too much to think about. Like my heart was made of glass and it was being crushed into splinters. How dare he hurt me like this.

“You should be mad at them,” he went on lightly, “or even better, at the system that created them—”

“Sh-shut up.” I pushed back off my seat, suddenly feeling...I wasn’t sure. Annoyed? Angry?
Betrayed? Just...something unsettling and slightly unfair, agitating all over me and through me down to my deepest and most secretive parts, and I wanted it to go away. I wanted to go back to feeling happy, or better yet, nothing at all. “What do you know about it anyway?”

I glared at him. *You’re already an adult and I bet you got there by having lots of people who loved you.*

He was, after all, happy too. Every time he was here, he was as happy and gleeful as could be; it was part of why I liked him. But then again, that was what made us different, possibly too different.

After all, happy people had something fundamental I did not: love, and the capacity to be worthy of it. I could pretend I was worthy, but the illusion would always come crashing down in the end, and I’d be revealed as worthless once more.

It wasn’t fair. It was a truth I couldn’t stand, in fact, because no matter what I did, whether it was something people told me to do or not, I just couldn’t get love out of it. Because I always had the wrong feeling, the wrong request, the wrong hope, the wrong reaction.

Across the table, he took a breath, words on the tip of his tongue, but eventually he swallowed them down. In the end, Mr. Lucien just looked at me sadly...with that same sort of pity Dahlia had.

The same sort of pity that anyone who was ever nice to me even once did.

And I didn’t want to see it any more, even as the tears started swelling in my eyes, obscuring my vision.

Because it meant they were giving up on me, too.

It meant I was already failing without ever having known I was trying, and I didn’t want to see that reflected back at me any more.

“Hey now...”

“Leave me alone!”

I threw the nearest unfolded napkin at him and burst up out of the seat.

“And take your stupid—” I hefted up the shark, “gifts with you!”

The shark bounced off his chest and down onto the booth seats. He made to stand as well, but I was much too nimble for him, and darted off down the hallway, flinging the curtain open with the heat of all my rage and fear and sorrow as I did so.

Chapter End Notes

Don’t worry, Gesso will make a grand reappearance later...
Hi there! I'm still a mess but the rest of you have inspired me to post with your lovely barrage of beat-the-going-back-to-school-bell fic updates. :'

I'll be honest, I've waffled about the necessity of this chapter. Compared to the last one, it's not stellar and mostly procedural, just reminding us where we are. I also have no idea what I want to name the skinny guy. Everyone I name organically in this story starts with L, R, M, C, or A. Send help.

Let's be real, I don't live in the real world unless I get lonely and end up with the terrible idea to be normal and fit in, a sand pit I belly-flop into every few years. Perhaps because of that, one of my weakest writing points is boundaries and limitations for characters and how they interact with the situation. So, I probably over explain them. This probably makes me a great teacher...but not necessarily a great fiction writer.

Would be genuinely interested in y'all's thoughts on the flow, value, and direction of this chapter, and what could be done to improve it (if you feel it's necessary).

Note: There are a couple of derogatory slurs in this chapter that are because the people in it are crass and old. You've been warned.

“Dammit, where did he go?”

It was Mr. Lucien’s voice. I could see his knees and shoes through the wooden vent-cover’s decorative slits. He’d stopped and was looking around.

Naturally, I hugged pulled back and waited, far enough from the vent that no one would see me by accident.

Another set of feet came into view, this time a woman’s black high heels. They were strappy stilettos, but the bands that kept the shoes on were thick and beaded. They looked quite comfortable, and pretty too.

Man, those are nice shoes, I thought to myself inanely, wiping at the tears, and resisting the urge to snerk snot up my nose.

“C’mon, I don’t think he’s here,” she insisted, her clothing swishing close to his. “Unless you think he’s under the table.”

“I swear I saw him go back stage, but as soon as I got there they stopped me...”

Mr. Lucien sounded let down. But before I could decide to announce myself or some other such idiot fantasy, the fatter of his two male companions came trotting up, his black patent shoes also coming into view. His cuffs were a little too long, I realized in annoyance. But the creases of his trouser legs were sharp, at least.
“So boss,” Greg said, bending over a little and huffing, “We gotta have a talk about this, and this seems like a decent time and place.”

“I’d really rather not, Greg,” Mr. Lucien said, still fidgeting on his feet like he was looking around.

“He’s right, though,” came the soft voice of the last companion, the tall and thin younger man with little presence. “We’re not here to steal a painting, are we?”

“What?” demanded Greg, his feet turning to the newcomer, then to Mr. Lucien’s. His voice turned ever more shrill with each word. “What do you mean, we’re not here to steal a painting?”

From my hiding spot under the booth’s bench, I sucked in a breath. Yes—table thirty-one’s special feature was not the fact that there was an elevated booth directly behind it, invisible beyond a specially-constructed lattice wall. No, the unique element of table thirty-one was that there was a secret door in the bench seat of the booth behind the lattice, through which you walk down a few steps, and end up underneath table thirty-one. A crawl space went under all the booth seats on that wall of the theater, allowing for a small adult, or very easily a child, to slither from one end of the theater to another, all the way under the stage to the backstage.

Heaven knew why it was built that way—special tricks to frighten and delight patrons during shows? A way to access the heating pipes under the booths? It was anyone’s guess, but it was useful, on nights like this. I’d simply circled around the theater and entered from under the stage, where the passage ended. And now I was here, hiding under his table on my back.

Why? Well, it was the only place I could hide on the property at this time of night that wasn’t entirely conspicuous and full of people who would ask questions. (I wasn’t allowed in the brothel during operating hours, which prevented me from getting to the music attic, where I would have preferred.) Plus, I still had Charles’s directive to take care of, and if I couldn’t trust Mr. Lucien tonight and was feeling all upended, I might as well do the one thing that might still get me some comfort, thin of a hope as that was.

But back to sucking in a breath. Because I couldn’t breathe through my nose from all the snot of crying, I realized that holding it was getting troublesome very quickly. I sighed it out a fair bit more loudly than I should have, gasping for breath afterward. Luckily, the heat was rattling around through the steam pipes, and plenty of people were gabbing away to the sound of clinking dishes by this point. The front of the booth seats were a wooden or metal lattice as well, depending on the booth, so I could see their shoes, but no one could see me under the table and its shadow in the already dimly-lit space.

“Are you fucking kidding me,” the rounder man, Greg, added. “You dragged me all the way out of my whore’s feather bed in Bordeaux so that I could get more of your shit ability to be straightforward, Lucien?”

“Something like this is too important to be trusted over letter service and telephones, you know that,” the old man replied in annoyance. It was the first time I’d ever heard him be particularly sharp, and it sent a little zing of warning through my already rattled nerves.

Still, for the most part, the group just groaned and started taking seats. Cushions dipped before my eyes, loudly threatening to reveal my position.

“I knew something was off when you suddenly wanted to come out of retirement,” Léna continued bitterly. “So it wasn’t just because of some painting mystery after all, huh.”

“Well...it was. But...here, the rest of you, sit down.” He moved toward the very part of the bench I
sat under. My eyes flew open, and I scooted back a bit as his shadow came near.

There was quickly the sound of someone sitting, and then another, and another. The cushions depressed all around me, and my head pushed aside when something that was either his hand or his boney butt came down right on top of my head.

“Wow, sprung spring here. Geez.”

Mr. Lucien moved along, deeper into the bench, and while I was left to lay on my side, I at least had the wherewithall to snert the snot up my nose while they were crunching around.

The last guy, though, the skinny one, I realized as they resumed talking, hadn’t sat down. He might have been watching for trouble. In fact, he probably was, since he was aimed more or less toward the lounge’s curtain-door.

“So,” Mr. Lucien said, suddenly quieter, and a bit more muffled due to my new position compared to his, “Yes, I brought you here under false pretenses. And I’m sorry. But this is really important to me, so I can’t make any wrong moves. I thought the paintings might be connected to someone I knew. And true enough, she was there.”

There was a silence, and then a creak as someone leaned closer.

Reluctantly, his old, warbling voice added, “As was...someone else.”

“And?” Léna demanded. I could hear her high-heeled foot come down on the crossbar under the table.

“Anyway, my goals just...took a pivot upon finding that new evidence.”

“...A pivot to what?” came Greg’s answer a moment later.

“A boy.”

My eyes widened. Above me, the cushions creaked. Two people toward my legs leaned in toward my head, where Mr. Lucien sat.

Then their voices went off like twin bombs: “What?!”

“Shh, shh, keep your voices down!”

“What the hell, Lucien? We don’t steal kids,” Greg hissed, quiet but accent suddenly turning particularly atrocious to make up for the emphasis his volume couldn’t get.

“It’s not like that! I mean...it is like that, but I need your help getting the kid out of danger. I promised him, but...it’s going to be complicated. And...I think I just screwed up a little.” He sighed.

“The kid?” Léna, however, never one to miss the chance to throw someone down a peg, sounded like she was scrunching up her nose. “You promised a child something that needs all four of us? What the hell is it? Why would you do that, let alone actually follow through with it?”

“Yeah,” Greg added. “What the hell? I know your chivalry goes a long way, but don’t be stupid, man.”

The third man said nothing, and for a few moments their silence stretched on, swallowed up by the room’s happy chatter.
“C’mon, guys.” Mr. Lucien whispered. “He’s being abused, he needs the help.”

I’m... I wanted to scrunch my legs up to my chest, but I couldn’t quite manage it. Still, the chill went down my back all the same: Abused?

No one had ever said that word around me before, at least that I remembered. And certainly never about me. But somehow, I knew it was a bad word, a thing with a stigma too great to bear. Something only weak people were labeled with. So I bit my lip and thought bitterly:

That’s not true....

Above my head, a series of glances and hand gestures were probably being exchanged. “And?” the man named Greg finally prompted.

There was a pause, in which Mr. Lucien’s seat creaked. He must have turned to Léna, who, from what I could tell, was sitting between the two men.

“And?” she asked. As in, “Spill the rest, dumbshit, before I pop you one.”

“I can’t tell you the whole thing now, but...it definitely has to do with the paintings.”

Both of them groaned at the same time.

“I got dragged out of my bed for hundreds of miles just for my boss not to trust me,” Greg lamented to himself at a whisper.

Léna, for her part, sighed and muttered, “Unbelievable, you are unbelievable. You are not getting any for a week!”

“Aww, c’mon...”

“No!”

At this, Greg and Mr. Lucien both sighed. But only one of them added “Mi Beatrix Dulce...” to the end imploringly.

“Can we do it without him?” Greg interrupted.

There was a moment of what I could only assume was bristling from everyone involved, and then:

“No.”

Without...me?

As I recalled, the deal was for him to help me take out Charles in exchange for a painting. Back then, more than a year ago, more than a tenth of my life ago, I’d figured it’d be pretty easy to cap Chuck in the alley and I’d just hand the man a fucking painting in thanks. So this was all pretty mysterious to me. But, given what had happened since with Mr. Arquet, Sicilia, the other children, and my mother...I really didn’t want to go through more deaths, Charles or otherwise. My mother would be destroyed if he suddenly left the picture. And...

“How old is he?” Léna asked.

...If I didn’t have Charles now, who would I have?

“Nine?”
“Oh my God,” Léna and Greg groaned at the same time, loudly enough to startle the thoughts out of my head.

“That is a serious level of ‘kid,’” sighed Guy One from across the way, where his feet leaned against the far end of the booth. “This is pretty far out of our realm of expertise, Lucien…”

“This is so not our fight. This sort of shit happens all the time at cat houses, why do we care?” added Greg.

I pulled up my arms up to my chest and tried to make myself as small as possible as I lay there, listening, all the thoughts gone out of my heart. It was a little hard to breathe again, snot notwithstanding.

“Why don’t you just take him and run?” asked Léna, adopting the same tone as she readjusted herself in her seat. “Just grab him one night, put him in a car, and off you go.”


Wait...they were talking about stealing me? Was that a thing you could do? Steal people?

I felt both elated and afraid, at that.

“Why not?” Léna asked. “If he really needs it…? Isn’t it your job to steal things? What’s a heartbeat or two matter?”

I smiled at that, just a little bit, though I wasn’t sure why. Stealing people. It was a novel idea.

And not, like, kidnaping, which existed to scare, devalue, and probably kill, but stealing. Whisking away. To a greater fate, somewhere to be more appreciated, to be given higher value and a better display case. That was certainly something a Gentleman Thief would do.

“Well yes, but—Charles needs him,” Mr. Lucien whispered. “If I were to just run off with him, the man’d come after us. Plus, since he’s connected to the police, it’d make a huge mess I don’t think I’m up to these days. And if he wants to go to the papers about it, it’d play the part of hero right into his hand, too.”

That all made sense; it sounded like him. But wait...Charles needed me?

“If he finds you, maybe,” Léna sassed back, no doubt scrunching her nose in distaste once more.

“Which he will, because where am I going to take him? Bora Bora? I want to take him to my home and live a good life with him, not my hideout on the run,” he hissed so quietly I had a hard time hearing it. “I’m not taking that risk, it could blow my cover for good. And anyway, what’ll that do to his understanding of me?”

He wants to...

“Either way, won’t it be worth the risk if you succeed?”

“And if I don’t? I’ll be left with nothing and so will he.”

...take me away from here?

“Skittish? That’s not like you, Luc…”

That was his end goal?
“I just…” Mr. Lucien sighed and trailed off in a way that made me certain he was pursing his lips and running a hand through his bushy hair. “How would that earn his trust?”

I stared at his shoes. He was crossing his toes, poking at one set with the other.

*He wants to earn my trust?*

I didn’t think anyone had ever come out and said that to me, at that point. It made me feel…kinda warm, right in my chest. But also fearful.

Because what if he wanted me to trust him, just so he could hurt me in the end? Just like everyone else did who came close of their own volition?

My stomach clenched at that, as it usually did when I thought about the subject, but I forced myself to breathe and push it aside. My life was here, now, no matter how much confusing incidents from the past haunted me.

“Why does that matter?” Léna continued, exasperated. “I mean, do you even want him?”

“Hey, Léna…” Greg, of all people, cautioned, and I was a little grateful, what for the pang her words caused.

“Maggie, don’t say things like that…” the skinny guy added quietly from his corner.

“What? It’s a valid question,” she pressed on, not bothering to hide her voice much more than she had to. “You’re telling us to stick our necks out for this thing you’ve been in for months now and yet you still won’t tell us the reason and you have cold feet about the ending. I mean, I get that you’re getting old and want a protégé but like, pick an easier one? One in your own fucking town, on the other goddamned coast, that isn’t attached to a mob boss…?”

A protégé...

It was like my world had lit up. *He wants to steal me to train me....! I really can become a Gentleman Thief!*

It was the coolest thing I’d ever heard, next to that time Zora had told me that I could use the stage guide wires to fly. But still, this was like something out of a novel. Which meant, of course, that it was wonderful, and almost instantly dried up my tears.

And here I was, secretly lying under their seats like James Bond. I drummed my fingers on my stomach, grinning, tears all but forgotten.

But...oh. Wait a minute—I wouldn’t get to see Mom again, would I? Damn.

But...

Would that be...a bad thing?

I didn’t really think so. Maybe I could get trained as a thief like in the movies, and then come back and steal her away, too? Yeah...that sounded good. Real good. And I’d send her Christmas cards and call her on her birthday and Mother’s Day in the mean time, using a different fake voice each time. Yeah.... I could grow up and steal her away, too. That sounded like a good destiny.

“Yeah, I don’t get your fascination with this one,” Greg chimed in. “It’s not like these things don’t happen everywhere. If you want an abandoned kitten, you can find one closer to you, who’s
already in a box on the street.” He leaned forward, from the way his weight shifted in his seat, and whispered, “And this one is a little…” he paused. “Fruity.”

I frowned at that, face crinkling up, and very vividly imagined shoving my knee up into his ass. *Jerk.*

“What’s wrong with that?” Mr. Lucien said, a smile evident in his voice, and I immediately relaxed, knee decommissioned from its ready-launch position. “So he dresses like girls. Girls are fun to dress up like. They have all the swishy clothes.”

“Yeah, but…”

“Look,” he interrupted resolutely, “his dad was always a little like that too. This is just generations of selective breeding.”

*My dad...*

But just as I was hoping there’d be a story there, a secret one no one was willing to tell me directly, there came a pause in the conversation.

The soft murmur of the dinner theater drifted around us, until the soft-spoken young man in the corner asked:

“And who is...his dad?”

They all stared, with quiet creaks of shifting leather. From below, my ear against the floorboards picked up the sound of the casino rolling along in a muffled conocopia of gayity, while around me in the theater, I could hear Zora and her own protégés practicing behind the curtain to Karen’s violin and Vincent’s piano, both playing jazzy, upbeat songs for the pre-show crowd in front of the curtain. Directly above me, Mr. Lucien coughed awkwardly, drumming the fingers of one hand on the booth seat beside him.

“...No,” Margaret suddenly swore, aghast. He must have looked at her. “You can’t be serious.”

A pause.

“You?!”

My eyes flashed open once again.

“No!” he shouted back, to which I pressed my hand over my chest. “Give me some credit, Léna! ...Though I do appreciate the vote of virility.”

“Oh shut up.”

And yet, though my heart felt oddly faint, I was a little disappointed. That was the ultimate storybook hook, and I rather wanted it. Why have a mystery dad when he could be right in front of you, whisking you away to the beautiful plot, instead? I would have run away with him right then and there if it’d be the case.

After all, he *did* have wonderfully blue eyes, blue eyes that could have, maybe, created mine...

“Then who?” Léna asked, befuddled.

My frown deepened as well. My dad was a master thief. And this guy...was a thief too....
There was another pause, and then:

“AUBREY?” Léna shouted. “Aubrey is his dad?! This kid’s your—”

”SHHHHut uhhhhp, Lénaaaaa,” Mr. Lucien said through gritted teeth, putting his finger either on his mouth or hers. Her feet kicked out, and I had to shift backward when they hit the grating.

“Jesus Christ on a crutch?!” Greg swore, leaning back and sounding like the wind had been blown out of him; another set of feet went wild under the table. “Why me?”

“What? I don’t get it. Who’s Aubrey?” asked the young guy lowly, voice mixing in with the violins.

“Well...” Lucien began.

Which was a question I had, too. Who was Aubrey? Was that...my dad’s name?

“You could have told us!” Léna continued to snap like an exploding volcano above my feet.

“Why would I do that? You’d just react like this.”

“I’m reacting like this because I’m mad you’re keeping shit from us. Goddammit, now we have to do it, don’t we? Arg—”

“Are you sure he’s Aubrey’s, though?” asked Greg, while Léna put her elbows on the table and hid her face with continued grumbles a lot like earthquakes, at least from the sounds of it.

“Yes.” Mr. Lucien’s voice was absolutely steadfast in its conviction.

“How?”

“I just know, okay,” he prickled.

“Meaning?”

“Meaning I’m your boss and you don’t ask shit questions like that. Are you in or out?”

Lucien, I assume, glared at his fellows. The younger one still seemed confused, from the stance of his legs, but no one would acknowledge him; meanwhile, the one called Greg just hummed a little...dubiously.

“I mean, even with all that, are you sure you want him, though?” he asked, as Karen’s characteristically fiddle-like violin played an upbeat Irish melody.

“Yeah, why wouldn’t I?” he asked frigidly. “Because he’s part Jap?”

“Because he clearly…” Greg leaned in and whispered, “is a flit. He’s not gonna get far in life or continue the family line. Your saving grace is that you love women more than you love life itself. No one would mistake you for a fairy. Well...at least for long. Lord knows I thought....”

“Yes, Greg, I remember that black eye. But that’s not the point. The point is, I like him and want to keep him, which is more than I can say about you right now. I also need your help to rescue him, and so. Brainstorming session: Where are we? Anybody got any ideas?”

*I like him and want to keep him.*
I could have fainted from praise.

More than I can say about you right now.

I could also have fainted from the fear of that being turned on me.

...Except, I had already just done that to him, hadn’t I? Shit. I wonder if I can still have the shark back if I apologize? And my thief destiny?...

I sighed and mulled it over. On the one hand, Mr. Lucien had been coming around for a while and this was the first time I’d made him mad. On the other hand, the first time you made a friend mad, they tended to never come back. Unless they were the boys at the beach, in which case we made each other mad every day and came back every night. Hopefully it’d be more like that.

Except, I didn’t want a relationship like that with him. I liked him because we didn’t hurt each other all the time.

Which begged an interesting question...what would life be like with him, if I went with him?

I closed my eyes and imagined it: Avignon. A Medieval town in the hills, the Southern French earth sandy and yellow as it lay under sporadic trees hundreds of years old. Local people at quaint shops, a fancy church on the hill...and Thief Stuff. In my mind, it played out like a training montage in a movie, and my mouth watered for it.

However... As I opened my eyes, Greg’s words fluttered through my heart. If Mr. Lucien’s friends didn’t like me, that’d be tough. On the one hand, nobody seemed to take Greg very seriously, but on the other...none of his complaints were news to me; I knew “flits” and “fags” and “fairies” were the epitome of violently unwanted creatures who got left in the ally with broken bones and bleeding bruises. But I wasn’t one of those; I was just a girl, when I wanted to be. And everyone liked girls.

Maybe I could find a way to explain that to him?

So I listened, contemplating the rest. My father’s name was Aubrey. And he was related to this other thief somehow. Mr. Lucien was probably his master, I quickly decided, and “Aubrey” had run off from the idyllic peasant life of a secretive gentleman thief to the big city in an even bigger country. Since my dad was off in America somewhere, the old man wanted a new protégé, and he thought Aubrey’s son might be a good candidate.

There were practically stars in my eyes, and all the things with Charles and Mr. Lucien a few minutes prior disappeared in the delight. I could more than readily get with that plot line, but I’d want to negotiate the ability to find my dad someday. That sounded like a good quest for the protagonist, yeah? Bridge the two generations and find a dad, too…

The best part of it all was that I’d never have to see Charles again... That’d be the icing on the cake, damn. Or, no, wait... I’d find my father and we’d both deal with Charles, together. Rob him goddamned blind. Rob him of my mother.

Get him back for Mr. Arquet....

Though I wasn’t sure how to do that, if I didn’t want to kill him.

It was as I was pondering over that, that the adults went on:

“You could go to the school? If they saw the evidence, they’d have to do something about it,
“Tried that. First they ignored it, then they covered it up. Then somebody got nosy and apparently died. Now he’s not in school anymore.”

“At all?” Léna put in.

“At all.”

“Shit.”

“And someone died?”

“Yup. Covered that up, too.”

“Hell...”

The companion pair to Mr. Lucien leaned back and sighed, sending the leather above me crinkling.

“I mean, can’t you take kids away from their parents for not attending school?” Greg offered. “I know France is a little liberal but it’s not like, that liberal, is it?”

Lucien shrugged. “He’s something like three grade levels above his age group. Any test they shove at him, he’ll pass, actual instruction or not. And, they already think they got him. And, they don’t set foot in this part of town. It’s a mess, but he’s no longer on the system’s radar.”

Greg whistled. Léna frowned. Even the skinny guy made a note of sounding impressed.

“So how are we going to get at Charles...?” Mr. Lucien queried softly. “That’s the only functional option here.”

“Well he’s a cop you said, right?” Léna wondered. “Just blow his cover with the Chinese.”

“I thought about that, but they probably already know. They won’t mess him up, unless the cops themselves want him gone. They have no reason to get the fuzz raiding them, when they have such a nice arrangement with them.”

“So you have to go national with it, huh,” remarked the youngest member of their team.

“Basically, or find a common enemy that wants to climb a ladder. But it’s gonna take a brave man to rat on this thing and survive,” the old man hummed. “And ‘survive’ is a generous estimate.”

“Well then the art dealer won’t do it,” stated the skinny guy matter-of-factly, coming slightly nearer. “It’d implicate him in too many crimes; he’d still end up in jail, and we all know he’d get his throat slit before he could spend a night behind bars, anyway. So even if we put the screws on him and he caves, it won’t solve anything long-term; we’d just be down a pressure point.”

“Might be worth ending anyway, the kiddler,” grumbled Greg.

“...Kiddler?”

“Kid diddler?”

“Oh.”

“That’s all well and good, and mind you I want first shot at him, but that’s not the point right
now." Mr. Lucien explained. "So, how do we come at the big man? He’s got too many friends on
the law’s side and a lot of plausible deniability on the gangster side; his only regular accomplices
that we have access to on this end are a child and an undoc’d madame and maybe the Chinese
gangs. You can’t use the testimony of any of those reliably even if you could get them and it’d just
be his word against theirs. All three are ‘unsavory elements’ in the eyes of the law six ways from
Sunday, so you know exactly how that’s going to go in court. It’d just traumatize the kid, get him
taken away from his mother and nothing would change in the end about Charles’s deeds. The kid
might even get knocked off in the mean time for being a liability, while the mom ends up in jail.”

“But you want him, right?” asked the thin man, after pausing for a moment as a pair of server’s
trousers went by. “So maybe you play it like a normal custody case with the mom—Charles not
included—get it to that point of government custody, swoop in, and adopt him?” He shifted his
stance; I suspected he put his hand on his hip. “I mean, that’s a long way to go just to get a kid out
of trouble, and there’s a lot of time involved….”

“Yeah,” Léna noted. “That’s not thinking fast enough. I doubt he’s that important to Charles—
like, he wouldn’t follow him through the foster system—but Lucien won’t be satisfied till we get
the roots.”

“Right. Charles has also been legally acting as his father for several years, so he’s probably be
first in line to the adoption papers. It’d be a huge legal battle for years, if Charles would want it to
be,” Mr. Lucien said. “And I don’t have that many years. Which...brings us back to the liability
bit.”

His audience breathed a collective sigh. “Why does the man even want him that badly?” Léna
wondered.

“He speaks some assortment of five or six languages, which he uses when interacting with the
syndicates in town. The kid follows his bagman orders with low liability—he’d be easy to get rid
of, and the kid knows that, so he’s fairly easy to control”—here, I inwardly grumbled, but let him
go on: “It’d take a lot to train another child to do the work with the proper amount of fear
involved…. Plus, he’s the heir to this place.” He motioned at the walls, I figured from the sounds
of things and the way his weight shifted, before putting his hands back down and resting on them.
“Keeping up a veil of taking care of him is a solid way to maintain power among the people—”

“Whom he’s steadily replacing,” Léna added.

“Right. Charles won’t need his legitimacy for too much longer.” Mr. Lucien admitted. “And…to
be honest? I’m worried he might do something to them once he’s got what he wants.”

All alone in the dark, a chill settled in my gut. This wasn’t fun anymore.

“You really think so?” the younger man asked, solemn voice hushed.

Mr. Lucien nodded. The others hummed, troubled. My eyes merely widened in understanding.

A coup? Against my mother and me?

The image of Mr. Arquet flashed through my mind, his body replaced by my mother’s in her
brilliant white kimono, and me beside her on the cobbles.

So Charles might be about to do that to me, too...

It was very hard to breathe.
“What’s made you think that?” Léna asked, and I hooked onto that hope desperately.

Mr. Lucien shrugged, leaning forward and, probably, setting his chin in his hand. “He seems the type. He wants to move up in the world, and now that he’s gotten her under his power, whatever he’s getting from her isn’t going to satisfy him long. She also won’t look good on him in terms of The Family. He’s moving for something beyond the scope of this appointment, but what, I’m not sure. I thought it was access to the local gangs’ distribution routes so that he can take them down for a promotion in his daylight job, but maybe not? He’s selling flesh out the front door…."

“So he’s…what? Gunning for a longterm in for himself and his family?”

“Probably. Though he’d probably just burn that, too, if need be.”

A pensive moment went by, and I frowned too.

“So,” the old man continued, “say Charles gets rid of the mother and keeps control of this place either in person or in name. What’s going to happen to the kid? He’ll either get sold down the river or stick around, and what’s going to happen to him then? He’ll be Chuck’s mule forever? That won’t last beyond the time he starts taking some of the stuff himself, or stick up for himself. It’s a gutter one way or another, and I’m not about to let that happen to him.”

There was darkness in his voice. Faraway, Vincent’s piano melody swept along, a little too heavily.

How sweet to just play my instrument and not worry about any of this. But it seemed we were already a lot farther away than I thought from that image of an older me walking off into the sunset with a violin in one hand and woman’s in the other. So...I had to be smart, if I wanted to be like the protagonists in my books who survived.

“So,” Mr. Lucien went on, “the only avenues we’ve got are: Make a superior shut him down, or make him want to shut himself down. Walk away from it…."

“Well, we know he’s selling kids, so wouldn’t that be enough?” whispered the young guy.

“If we could figure out when he was going to do it and get him caught in the act. Far as I can tell, it was a one-time deal for something that he wanted. He’s smarter than to do that long-term, ‘cept he did mention a second round lately, so he might be able to be enticed into it, with the right incentive—"

“Well, he’s skimming off the top of those painting sales, yeah? So if we can get to his accounts…."

“No, he’ll just claim it was part of the undercover work; the books all put it through her. I already tried looking up that avenue, but his boss—the whole department—is in on it.”

I frowned. The cops know about the paintings? Then why did Mom hide it so much? Well, maybe...weren’t some of the men at the auctions cops and city councilmen? I guess that’d make sense....

“So that leaves…” the young man moaned.

“Give him what he wants?” the three subordinates asked at once.
My mind ground to a halt as the noise of the room fell away.

*Give Charles...what he wants? What is that?*

In all my time with him, I’d never been able to figure that out, other than to have me be seen and not heard, and sometimes not even that. Just unseen and nonexistent.

“Maybe. If we could give him the forger, we could probably get him put on another assignment elsewhere, yeah? Then he might just give it all up.”

*Oh.*

“And just say ‘fuck that guy’?” Greg asked about the painter.

“Pretty much?” Mr. Lucien replied. “That golden goose has gotta know that it’s gonna get cooked eventually. That’s how these things always go.”

*Oh no.*

That...was not going to work.

And anyway—Charles was after the source of the *paintings*. That was why he was here, in my life, making me miserable all this time? That was why he was always bored here—he was just waiting around for that guy to show up so he could catch him like a stray dog?

The thought hit me so hard, so heavy the stack of books it felled, that I didn’t hear some of what the old man added:

“...pretty sure Chuck got her hooked on him so that she’d be more pliable to telling him who it is, but she’s never given it up, from what I hear.”

Léna’s voice was smiling. “How many ceiling rafters did you climb through to hear that?”

“It was floorboards, thank you,” he snipped back, but playfully. “Anyway, I almost wonder if Chuck’s doing half this stuff just cuz he’s bored in this assignment and now he’s in so deep he might as well go to the bottom level of hell to get to the stairs up to heaven. But do you have any leads on the forger, Magdalena?”

“None,” she said after a moment, and I sighed into the radiator steam. “I’m trying to get close to Sunny’s inner circle, but literally no one knows. It seems to be just her and the art dealer. But we’ve twisted his arm plenty of times, and he honestly doesn’t seem to know. And it really does not appear to be her, despite what you’d think.”

“Can’t you just get her drunk and find out if she’s got a stash somewhere?” Greg asked.

I wanted to bite that guy. Really hard, right in the calf muscle. With effort, I restrained myself, and settled for grumbling internally.

But once more, Mr. Lucien came to my aid and shook his head. “Tried. Charles has her under lock and key when outside the building, and when she’s not that way, she’s shooting herself up, so….”

*My mom does not do that!*

...*Does she?*
To be honest, I hadn’t seen her in years, outside of work. She could’ve been doing anything at home, including drugs and Charles.

I shivered at the thought, getting it out of my head by focusing on the conversation above me.

“‘You can’t even get close to her?’ Greg grumbled. ‘You’ve lost your edge, cowboy.’”

“You are welcome to try, Greg! In case you haven’t noticed, I have wrinkles from here to Germany. Even a mask can’t make me that handsome anymore,” Mr. Lucien’s old voice grumbled, and then he sighed in exasperation. “And despite my name, she doesn’t go for silver foxes, it appears. And she doesn’t seem to remember me from back when, so…”

“‘Back when’?” Léna asked. “What does that mean?”

He waved his hand and shook his head, brushing the comment aside. “It’s a long story.”

“A relevant story?”

“Not really.”

“Any chance you could threaten the child to get to her?” Greg interjected.

“You know,” Mr. Lucien began at a thoughtful hum, taking him up on the offer to move along, “I really don’t want to, considering that the whole point is to get the kid to like me.”

His voice was icy at the end, and Léna leaned over and whacked Greg upside the head this time to save the old man the trouble.

On the side, the young guy laughed. “You could threaten him to her face alone, rather than going the whole nine yards and holding him at gunpoint or whatever.”

“It still might get back to him,” Mr. Lucien said on a downcast note, and I had to admit as I listened that yes, I probably wouldn’t like that, and yes, I considered it a mark in his favor that he would try to avoid that. Good man.

Mr. Lucien shifted in his seat, probably crinkling his nose from the sounds of it. “And I don’t like threatening women and children. You know that.” He let out a long sigh. “And I’m not sure she’d even care.”

I winced at that, but I couldn’t exactly deny it.

“That also might have the repercussion of having them lock down the kid or move him, which would just make things harder.”

“You know,” the young guy began, his voice soft as usual as he leaned over the table with a hand, given the way his shadow moved with his feet, “What if we kidnap the kid, hold him hostage over the info about the forger, then fake the kid’s death and give the forger’s info to Charles? Then you take the kid home with a new name. The mom won’t have to worry about the kid she doesn’t want anymore, Charles gets the forger, we get a protégé... Everybody goes away happy.”

Everyone was silent for a moment, and even I had to admit it was a solid plan.

“What about the kid, though?” Mr. Lucien asked quietly, mimicking the other man’s language. “Will he be happy, never being able to see his mother again?”

The young guy sucked in a breath, and probably gave his boss a long, troubled look of thought. He
seemed like the kind of guy to do that.

“It might come down to that, yeah,” he admitted in a moment.

“And what if Charles decides we need to be gotten rid of anyway, for the pleasure of dealing with him? Are you ready to take down his entire hornet’s nest if they figure out it’s us? His syndicate ties go all over Italy. Someone will come for us, someday, I guarantee it, if something goes pear shaped and we have to kill him.”

A hush fell around the table. Eventually, as the pre-show music stopped and the crowd noise lowered in response, Mr. Lucien sighed. “So. Do you have any other ideas?”

The crew shook their heads to murmured “no”s and “nope”s.

The old man took a breath, then rapped his knuckles on the tabletop. “I have one, and only one: The kid said he knows who the forger is, but…”

“He does?!” they all squawked at once; even the younger guy suddenly came farther forward over the table.

“Hey, down, down…”

It was like my heart had stopped. I put a hand over my mouth from the sheer force of the realization. I had told him that, hadn’t I? A long time ago, back when he’d been cat-burglaring the art auction. Far before any of these plans had been put into motion, and far before he was a longterm threat. Fuck.

The guard slowly sunk into his seat as the house lights dimmed for the show, but the heaviness of the gesture belied his shock and intrigue.

The other two eventually leaned in close as well, sending the leather above me dangerously low. “That’s great!” Léna whispered, voice alight. “So get him to tell you! He likes you, right?”

“No...he’s clamming up about it.”

“What? Why?” I imagined her scrunching her nose, and I smiled briefly, though I didn’t really feel it.

Damn right I am.

“Probably someone told him not to tell.”

Léna sighed, sat back, and then rubbed the bridge of her nose, from the sounds of it. “So just use the ‘don’t keep bad secrets’ tack. He’s only like, what, ten?”

“Nine.”

“Nine, whatever, even better. Use it on him.”

I’m nine, not stupid! You’re stupid, stupid woman. Barely, I kept myself from kicking the dent where her butt was. It wasn’t nearly as small a dent as she would probably hope.

“Tried. He won’t do it. Seems to think the world’s going to end if he does.”

This time, Léna sighed and Greg offered, “So pop him one.”
“Greg, the point of this is to get him on my side.”

“Hey, I like my dad, and he hit me a few times. This is important shit. Life or death shit! So explain that to him, and if he doesn’t get it, pop him one. What’s a few baby teeth?”

They all sighed. Léna slapped him upside the head. I really, really wanted to bite that guy. I penciled it in on my list for the next time I saw him. Maybe I could “accidentally” spill a drink right over terrible suit....

“So if the kid knows...” the younger guy whispered intently as I went full-bore imagining the details of the drink I was to spill down the back of Greg’s neck, down to the type and amount of ice, “Can you...follow him?”

“Not enough,” Lucien whispered back, to which I was eminently grateful. “After this business with Renard, there are a few people who are doing the Lord’s work of isolating him from everyone who looks like me.”

“Adult and male and a customer, you mean.”

He hummed. I tried not to think about what that all meant.

“Well that’s something?” Greg mumbled.

“It is.”

“But it’s not working in our favor. So I could...?” Léna posited.

“He’d never trust you, since he knows you’re with me,” Mr. Lucien noted.

...Damn straight, I muttered to myself.

“Why would he distrust that?” she squawked.

“Well...I. Um...” Mr. Lucien paused sheepishly. “I may have just had a conversation with him that went...very poorly...”

Greg and the other guy groaned. Léna sighed and thumped her head on the table.

“I mean, it’s the first time it’s happened...” he muttered defensively. “It was about emotions and stuff, and emotions are hard for children, but I think he took it as a betrayal of our bond instead...”

“So that’s why you still have the shark,” Léna noted dryly.

Mr. Lucien leaned back, and there was a soft thump. It must have been Gesso riding the waves of the red leather cushions, and for a moment my heart leapt at the thought of getting her back.

“In my defense, it probably would’ve worked on anyone over twelve...”

“When the plan you want depends on a nine-year-old...” Greg grumbled. “God it’s good you’re retired, Luc, or I’d demand you hand in your kit right now.”

“Hey, he’s a smart nine year old. But I guess he does seem to trust women more, so if you wanna try it your way Léna, you can, I won’t stop you. I really don’t want to believe we’re at the kidnap-and-fake-death level of solution with this yet.”

They all sighed as another of the servers set down drinks in front of them. They offered thanks and
tips and after the ice clinked and the MC finished up in the distance, I heard the curtain rise.

The low, sweet sweep of Moonlight Sonata began, and the crowd politely clapped.

As the melody played, the many emotions swirling around my chest slowly subsided. I came to realize vividly that I was once again alone in the dark, watching the world go by around me. I had some choices to make, it seemed. Some doors, just as he had said, were opening. Ones opening to a potentially beautiful future.

But it sounded like my relationship with my mother might be the cost of it, and I wasn’t sure what to think about that. Something like pain started to settle into my chest, soft and heavy and squeezing, as the distant sound of Dahlia’s feet jumping on pointe swirled around with the violins and cellos. It made me wish I had the shark to hold onto, drowning here in the dark with my thoughts.

And not more than five minutes into the song, when the other instruments began, the crinkle of leather happened above my head, emblematic of all the conspirators leaning in toward each other again.

“But there’s another option,” Lucien stated at a whisper.

“Oh?” they all asked at once, though Greg’s was more of a grunt.

“He has two music teachers. He seems to trust them, and they’re here tonight. The pianist and the black violinist.” There was a pause as he, presumably, pointed them out. “And, I just so happen to know that the guy ‘lost’ a chunk of cash he owes to somebody not so nice around here. So if we could ‘give’ him the money and then squeeze him, an opportunity might arise…”

My eyes widened of their own accord, and for a moment, I couldn’t hear anything outside my own mind.

“So that’s why you wanted to get here last night,” Lena whispered a few bars of melody later, only for her voice to turn stormy. “I thought you were stepping out on me!”

“For someone in Dunkirk? Please. You know it had to be about money.”

“Hey, there are lots of pretty ladies in Lille…”

“But not nearly so cultured or fashionable as you! I’d never date someone from Flanders, unless they came with a penthouse in Amsterdam and a lot of tulip bulbs.” There came the crinkle of leather, two bodies shifted inwards, and then a series of nuzzle and giggle noises I could picture from here I’d seen them so many times on so many people—but he had a certain kind of pizzazz to his that was rather memorable. "My sweet, soft tulip..."

“Oh stop, ee hee...”

“Good to know you can still fleece a helpless musician in love, Lucien,” Greg added with such a bored, bone-dry tone his words could have spontaneously caught on fire. “Seems there are some tricks an old dog can't forget.”

“Very many,” he assured at a quip. Above me, Mr. Lucien’s weight leaned in Karen’s direction. I could see a sliver of her smiling under the lights as she vivaciously created her harmonies. “And the violinist happens to be a woman whose company you can buy for the night. I think I still have enough moves to charm a young chick, and she might listen to me, even if the kid doesn’t.”
I barely restrained myself from shouting at him from my hiding spot, or punching his seat. My fist did indeed slide against the underside of the leather though, as if to protect against any more revelations.

“But it might be good to have the rest of you try too, just in case.”

Slowly, as the somber music of the main body began, the other dancers came out, their feet audible on the old varnish of the stage. But even though I should have been thinking about Dahlia’s venerable performance, all ethereal and pink like a cloud, all that came to mind was Vincent’s pathetic face as he was getting roughed up by Raff for not having his funds—and the way Karen had brushed him off tonight for it.

“Oh hell no.

“It’s risky,” Léna admitted after the giggling quieted down, “but you are good at that sort of thing~”

“Of course,” Mr. Lucien quipped, no doubt with a smirk and a wink attached.

“And Greg’s good with the threats...” she went on, presumably turning to him. He grunted, knocking the grating with his heel. It sent a bolt of tension up my spine, and for a moment, I forgot to breathe, my teeth were clenched so tightly.

“So we’re up to ‘threaten’ on our way to ‘smash and grab.’ All right, finally something worth getting out of bed for.” Greg cracked his knuckles. “I’m game so long as the kid goes in a van I’m not driving.”

“So you gonna do it tonight?” whispered the youngest man excitedly. “Is that why we’re here...”

But before the answer came, I was slithering out of my hiding spot and closed the hatch, now back into the little side hallway behind the blue velvet curtain.

I stared at the seat for a second, hair mussed, then, hearing Karen’s violin play against Vincent’s piano—and all the other brass and bass that were family here—I felt a rush of emotion that I couldn’t ignore.

Karen.

The last, very last good person I had.

I wasn’t going to let the person I liked the most destroy the person I trusted the most.

I grabbed up one of the knives from the bucket and hastened down the hall.

I went into the lounge, weaving through the familiar darkness with not a soul to notice. I was just another staff member in black melting into the shadows, while Dahlia and her dancers shone like the moon, the main event gazed upon by every envious eye as the performers twirled high above.

Table Thirty-One was near the back, but on a mid-level tier. It was easy enough to sneak up on it with all the music resounding through the hall, even in the darkness.

Down one step, two, regripping the knife the way Xing had taught me—and just as Léna looked up and Mr. Lucien turned to me, I grabbed him by the collar and yanked him forward.

It wasn’t really up, since I wasn’t that tall or strong yet, but with height difference from him sitting
in the booth and me standing on the rise, it was enough to get some momentum going as he was pulled into the butter knife.

It was the first time I’d managed such a thing, and under the anger was a thrill I couldn’t quite stop.

“You give Vincent back his money right now,” I growled through my teeth. “He needs that to give Karen a ring, and she deserves to be happy, so help me—”

“What...the hell?” Mr. Lucien asked, realization dawning on his face as he grabbed at my hand, the one holding the knife. It hadn’t yet broken skin, and given that he was old but fit while I was a child with leverage and rage, it was an honest contest who would win in the end.

The others at the table launched at me, but just as I opened my mouth to snarl at him again in the dark, in the swell of music, servers, dishes being eaten and conversations being had—there came an intrusion.

A tremendous sound, so loud at first I couldn’t process it.

And then another, and another.

All in slow motion, it came to me as I turned my head:

The sound of glass and wood shattering rhythmically, along with a massive, doppler-affected BRRRRRT.

Just as the holes exploding out from the wainscoting were about to line up with me, a blur came up in front of my face, blocking my vision. Force pushed into my head, and everything spun.

I was thrown down and weight fell on top of me; I couldn’t see, couldn’t breathe, but the noise, so tremendously loud, filled my ears, every part of my being, to the extent that in the pick dark I was seeing white anyway.

It went by in a wave, down the length of the theater and into the building next door, each new explosion causing the person on top of me to clutch at me tighter.

For a few terrible moments, there was only sound and fear: wood and glass splintering, people grunting and falling, metal pinging off of metal alongside dishes shattering and, worst of all, a strange, surreal sound like watermelons popping in the sun.

There was silence for a time, and then, belatedly, more pane glass crashing to the floor. It had to be one of the ones that faced the sidewalk, I thought dizzily.

A few long moments later, the screams began. A scream of every hue, male and female, went off around me, like the screeching police sirens that were soon to descend upon us.

Only later would I realize that moment was just past eight o’clock.
Sponge (Hatchling Icarus XV)

Chapter Notes

Warning: This chapter is battlefield gore.

Fun times note: So I got really, really badly depressed this week, someone gave me Indian chai late at night so I didn't sleep on Monday, and last night, I took an anti-depressant for the first time at 10pm and I appear to be suffering from Seratonin Syndrome (non fatal luckily). It's now 10 am and I'm waiting for the pharmacy open to return my call about what the hell to do. But I think neither the pharmacy nor the doctor are open on the weekend. So in the mean time, I guess I'll do the one thing I can do in my sleep, the one thing I can focus on when I can't keep a train of thought, which is...write this story. Long story short, I got a lot of writing done this week.

Don't be like me, kids. Take your meds for the first time during the week, when professionals are available. #GoddamnAmericanHealthcareSystem

I was on my back.

Far above me, one of the chandeliers swayed in silence, half its crystals missing.

Once, twice, three times it swayed, stage lights glinting yellow on one side and coming out rainbow on the other against the designs in the molded plaster ceiling.

And then the screams crept in.

There were groans all around me, a constant hum like a bass violin’s long draw. Some crunching and shifting glass came in, an ominous tambourine creating the beat. It grew from all around me, all different parts of the room.

They slowly turned into keens and sobs, like an introduction of cellos and violas.

Then, a few moments later: a crack. Something massive and far away took several seconds to shatter. It didn’t have the bright tones, heavy thump, and surprised shrieks a falling chandelier would have; this was just a long cascade of shattering sound with no human shouts attached, like running a musical wind chime. It must have been one of the large-plate windows out front crashing into the street, I realized dizzily.

But like a cue, a few beats after it finished, the outright screams began.

It was women at first, shrieking in fear. A few men yelping similarly. Shriill violins, the lot of them. I couldn’t stand shrill violins.

It was the other screams that caused me fear, though—-screams I’d never heard before.

They were just slightly off. Off pitch, off course, off language. There were no words to them, no coherency. And yet, instinctively, I could understand them perfectly:
Dying.

And not just any death. But desperate, animalistic destruction.

Breathless, repeated wails of body horror and pain in one corner, and the mindlessness of primal terror in the other.

It was like all the low brass had begun to play in humid weather, and every competing note was flat and discordant and loud.

But in between them, I heard names.

Names of people I knew. Being called so desperately between tears and shouts for help.

It was like the melody had finally come in, singing its desperate song of somebody, help, my leg, my arm, my husband, my wife, my friend, my daughter—

Breath, in my ear. Heavy, ragged breathing of a man in my ear, all of a sudden.

This was not a chorus note I liked. I shoved him off of me so fast he actually yelped.

I scuttled up into the seating. Pressed into the leather corner, I found it was Mr. Lucien, having been thrown onto the table more or less. I stared at him wildly, gasping for breath, and then stared at my hands, not quite sure why they were shaking or why I’d just done that.

But he wasn’t mad at me. He wasn’t even paying attention. He was bent over the table and its shattered glasses, groaning and clutching his arm.

“Andréa!”

Apparently, I’d been thrown on top of Magdalena, because as soon as I was up, she shoved me aside to get to him with a tangle of limbs. I knocked into the table painfully, and then decided to just slide underneath it, where I would have stayed if not for the forest of feet jabbing every which way.

I ended up at the far side of the booth, crouched down on the floor and grabbing the wood. A chunk of it had been taken off and a splinter jabbed into my palm.

I hissed and sucked at it, but it wasn’t coming out. That didn’t matter, though—I had to do something, had to—run? To hide? To get help?...

I glanced across the booth. Greg and the thin guy were ducked behind the booth’s other side, by Mr. Lucien, guns in hand, glancing around for assailants and exits.

“Hey, we have a no gun policy?!” I squeaked.

They both looked back at me for a second, totally confused and totally silent.

“You bet your ass I do,” Greg grunted, shoving off the non sequitur first as he turned to the other man. “Check the back, I don’t want any fires starting. I’m gonna make sure the front and side are clear. This could be just the beginning.” With that, he proceeded to army-creep through the theater.

“It’s a no usage and brandishing policy actually,” the nameless guy stated to me in his usual teacherly tones, just a little bit more forceful against the screams, then blinked and shook his head out. “You good?”
I...was I?

I looked down. Patted myself over. My hand was the only thing bleeding. But the shouts and cries made it hard to think.

“Good enough,” he grunted. He nodded and went off with only a brief undertone to add to the chorus: “Stay alive.”

“Andrea? Andrea, oh God, how many hit you...?”

Meanwhile, Lena was tending to the old man. He was grimacing, head downcast as he leaned against her, holding his upper arm—the one that had been blocking my head.

“I’m all right, I’m all right, it’s just the one I think b-but...m-my arm...” He did not sound fine. He sounded vaguely panicked and was shaking. A large dark spot stained his brightly-colored suit. “God, bullets sure have advanced since I got hit by the Nazis...” he tried to laugh, but it just died in a staccatoed hiss.

“Ah, shit! That’s a lot of blood... Goddammit, the lights are so low... Here, let me look at it...” She shoved up against him, pulling up cloth napkins to use against the wound. “Stay low, they might come back...”

I did not like what I saw. And not because they made a saintly portrait in the backlight that had absolutely no use for me.

It was because of the pain in my hand. The hand that had been holding the knife at him.

I did not like what pain and distress looked like on this person. This person I cared about, and the ones who cared about him.

Looking around, I did not like it on anyone.

Maybe this was all a message...

“Hey! You! Kid!”

I whipped my head around to Lena’s voice.

“Get the house lights up, we need to be able to see the wounded and get out safely!”

“I...I...” Words stuttered out of my mouth, but I quickly realized I did know how to do that. “Yes. Yes! Okay! Just a moment, it’s not far, just off the stage...”

“Don’t tell me, just go!” she shouted as she pressed into Mr. Lucien’s wound.

“Okay. Okay! Please take care of him?!”

Brushing pieces of crystal off my hair, I rushed to my feet—

—and did not get more than two steps before I tripped over someone.

I stumbled down the stairs to the next landing and jarred heavily on my side. From the floor, all I could see were dimly-lit hands lying limp, spilling out of booths and slumping over the carpet. They were draped in red like the leather and the walls, as if ribbons had grown out of the booths themselves.
As I got to my knees, the rest of the room was not much better.

Those who could flee were already in the process and screaming and pushing along the way. But there were many more who were rooted to the spot. Three women in evening gowns crying and rocking under a table while holding each other. A man holding a limp woman in his arms as he rocked on his knees. Two people pleading and pressing into an older man who was on his back and weakly reaching out to them, one to either arm, and not much more than that.

*Mother; help; I’m sorry; I love you; don’t leave me; Dad—*

The carnage extended to every part of the room. The booths had holes right through them with light shining through from the stage. Half the vases I’d put out earlier were shattered and leaking, though at least they’d put out the candles beside them.

Everything was broken.

Maybe that was why it was so easy to get back to my feet. I knew I was one of the few things that wasn’t.

I quickly stumbled through my route, jumping over obstacles moving and not. Despite the carnage, more than half of these people were gangsters and they weren’t going down without a fight. Some of the guests were crouched behind upturned furniture, guns drawn. But there was a caste to their shoulders that I instinctively understood, with some queasiness, as the posture of hunted prey.

And on the stage...

On the shiny, overexposed pine, glowed a myriad of fallen flowers.

My feet were running before my mind was.

It didn’t catch up until I ran over the pit’s gangplank and vaulted onto the center of the stage.

Everyone was bloody. Everyone. Some limbs were missing, or rather, were a few yards away. They were screaming. So much screaming and writhing and bleeding and desperate pleading to put them back together and there was nothing I could do about it. I had no way to reattach limbs, I had no way to stop that much bleeding. It wasn’t stopping some people from trying.

But.

*Dahlia!*

It took me a moment to find her. Her soft pink and its field of white backup swans was all a sea of red now—but it was her silly hat that ended up being my beacon. It was in-tact—much more than she was.

She was lying on her stomach, red leaking out of her upper body.

She was shorter than the others, so she’d been hit much higher.

“Dahlia! *Dahlia?!*”

Diving down onto my knees, I quickly turned her over, only to find something that wasn’t right.

Part of her didn’t come with her. Something like pink sausages rolled out of her and over the floor like hot ribbons.
Dahlia shrilled in incoherent pain, eyes wavering when they weren’t squeezed shut. The beautiful flute trill of her voice was all off-key.

“Hold on, hold on,” I muttered, trying to gather up the bits and push them back in. It was automatic, and while part of my mind was screaming at me to be terrified and run, my arms just kept moving. Even as my fingers got hotter and stickier and Dahlia just kept crying.

“Help,” I croaked at first, then louder, shrilling out at the audience. “HELP?!”

But my voice was lost in the din of groans and shouts and various kinds of crying, and eventually, my hands were too slippery to hold her pieces together.

Finally, finally, I heard the conductor instructing the musicians to leave or attend to the wounded. Charles, too—I could hear him at the back of the hall, suddenly coming in barking orders. But he was too far away. There was no time. There were so many... And my voice was far too little to reach the back. Why was I forced to be a clarinet when I needed to be a trumpet?

Glancing directly around me, I found no help either. Upstage was full of the fallen and even though they were moving, no help was coming. The wings held no one. They’d all fled.

I quickly shut my eyes and turned back down to Dahlia, hoping I could concentrate hard enough to make the noise go away. There was nothing I could do for anyone else, except—

The lights. The lights! Shit!

“I’ll—I’ll be right back! Don’t die!” I shouted.

They weren’t more than twenty feet away. There was the fancy, manned setup further afield, but behind the stage were the basic on-off lights for the whole room. I flipped them up, blood smearing the switches, and then ran back out to the stage. I yanked at the curtains, but of course they didn’t come down. After a couple of pathetic, harried noises, I pulled off a tablecloth from the backstage water stand, sending everything on it crashing to the floor in a tympanic explosion, and then ran back to Dahlia.

I wadded up the cloth and pressed it against her body. It made the horrible mess go away, but it quickly saturated with red. But it had to stop the bleeding; it had to be enough—it was all I had.

And Mr. Lucien...

I gritted my teeth and hoped he’d be all right. He didn’t need me; he had Lena and his friends, I told myself.

Dahlia’s friends were down. That meant all that was left was me.

I didn’t even like her. But I wouldn’t leave her, either. I only had one set of hands, and this was where they would stay, until one of the adults came to save us.

She was the good one. The one people wanted. I had to keep her alive.

That was my job, my only job—to keep the show alive. And the show wouldn’t go on without its star performer.

There was blood coming out of her mouth, two little streams on either side like tear tracks, drawing a twisted version of puppet lines. No matter what well spring I held down, blood bloomed from other holes all over her clothes. Whenever I looked in one, I could see her insides pulse.
“Dahlia,” I sobbed, body getting hotter and hotter in the lights as hers grew cooler. “Dahlia, what do I do...?”

Soon, her eyes fluttered and finally fixed on something. She looked around at the lights, then at me.

“I’m cold,” she groaned.

“Dahlia, hang on. I’ll get Zora...?”

But try as I might, I couldn’t see her anywhere. She should have been in the front, or in the wings. But she was nowhere to be found. For a queazy second, I wondered if she was one of the people I’d tripped over.

“Dahlia, hang on, it’ll be okay, the lights will warm you up...” I sniffled. “You always complain about how hot the lights are...”

But I couldn’t keep my hand on her wound and look for her mother, too...

Her mother.

What about my mother—?!

With growing panic, I looked around. Charles was nowhere to be seen and I couldn’t spot Mr. Lucien anymore. But as I was about to panic about that too, scared and unhappy noises leaking out of the back of my throat, Dahlia’s hand shakily came up to touch my arm.

“Don’t,” she whispered.

“No, I’ll find her—”

“Boy.”

“Just hang on, okay—”

She gripped my hand harder, until it hurt. I stared down at her, confused and annoyed and panicked all at once. I squeaked a desperate, helpless note at her.

“Let me go,” she whispered, staring back at me with cool eyes. “I can’t feel my feet.”

“I’m sure it’s fine—”

“No,” she rasped again, blood coming out of her mouth.

“Please?” I moaned down at her, and then to the audience with a shrieking, cracking screech: “Please?!”

“You...need to smile...more,” she gurgled. I just shook my head, tears making it too hard to see her clearly. “I’m ser...ious,” she repeated raggedly, “Peanut.”

“Hang in there, Dahlia, please hang in there...” I whispered back, pressing in on her largest source of gushing blood. “Please don’t do this to me,” I pleaded, pulling her up against me in a tight embrace. “Not like this.”

It was the only thing I could think to do to stop all the blood. It was also the only thing I could think to do at all.
“Not again...”

In the end, as I rocked her close, her hand came up to hold me.

“Tell my mother...I’m glad I danced.”

I felt like I stayed with her for a long time, but when I looked up, I had no idea how much time had passed. I didn’t even know where I’d been.

I was very full; it was like someone had stuffed me with cotton balls. My mind was blank, thoughts trying to come to the surface and failing. And yet, feelings, undefined and loud, zipped and buzzed all around my insides in a way that was nauseating. My body was electric but my soul was hollow. I just felt void of all things except loudly ringing bells.

For a long time I sat there on the stage watching people run to and fro, commanding and pleading. I couldn’t hear anything. I could only feel the occasional warmth from the lights, burning into my back.

Eventually, someone, some adult, came up and grabbed at my shoulder. When I looked, I found it was the conductor.

His white suit was covered in dark spots. He looked at me with deep lines under his eyes and I looked back at him with my eyebrows pushed up. And then, suddenly aware of the girl in my arms, I started to cry.

I didn’t even see his face as he tried to pull me away from her, I was crying so hard.

“No, no. I have to help her. I have to—”

“There’s no point...”

“No! You have to! You have to... I have to...”

His hands pried at us, but I just clutched her tighter.

“You can’t! I need her to be here. We need the show to be good...”

His hands lifted, and then, when they came back again, several sniffles later, they were gentler.

“You’re a good lad. You’re right. Let me see her. I can give her more help than you can.”

This time, as he tried to separate us, my hands unfolded, and he gently pushed me back by the chest. My skin was all wet and sticky. It stayed warm because of the stage lights, like somehow her life force was still thriving all around me.

The conductor bent over her and checked her neck for a pulse. He waited a moment, made a few gestures, and set her hands on top of her chest.

“You’re a good lad,” he said as he turned to me. There were tears in his eyes too.

“I did good, right?” I pleaded, voice cracking at the end like a rusty metal music stand.
He sucked in his breath. “Yes...”

“She’ll be all right, right?”

We both looked at her, her peaceful face, then back at each other. “You should...find your mother,” he instructed hoarsely. “She’ll be...glad...”

His voice broke at the end, and he turned away to hide his face. I turned away politely, numbly looking out at the room.

The pit was emptied out, save for instruments, many of which were shattered. A few people lay in the trenches among toppled music stands and a mess of fallen sheet music. The piano, up on stage, was full of holes, all in a line. I didn’t see Vince, but I wondered if he was all right.

There were people jogging around. It wasn’t as empty as one would think—many stayed by the side of someone less fortunate.

And like that, with no one paying attention to me, I rubbed at an itch in my cheek, smeared blood on my face, and numbly made my way through the crowd, not a conscious thought in my head save one:

Mom.

I didn’t know where I was going, but I found my feet taking me there all the same.

Toward the vague, fuzzy light of normalcy, pulling me like a distant comet to a star.

Past the back of the theater, into the theater lobby. Past the Maitre’ D’ platform with a body slumped behind it I didn’t want to recognize, and into the bar....

When I came around the corner, I found many people fallen there too, many more per square foot than in the theater. Some, the very few that had been with friends, were propped up with a partner attending to them. The rest were just left to drape, though. The jons. The girls.

Some drinks were still on their tables, perfectly undrunk and perfectly whole, next to men slumped over in chairs.

Some of them were the people I knew.

I turned my head. The sparkling bottles on the back wall of the bar were shattered in at least two of the three rows. Bullet holes lined the counter. And over the couches, near the windows—were some people who were very clearly dead, all in a group, like someone had killed the members of a card game and then propped them back up.

It was a weird feeling. I’d seen Mr. Arquet get...shot, but I’d seen him talking a moment earlier. I knew who he was. But these people...these were corpses. Heavy, immutable, lifelike. But not alive. My brain wondered if they’d ever been alive, as if to protect me from the mirror of mortality they held.

Something was so very familiar, and yet so very off, as they draped over tables and couches with heads down and blood draining out of them. Kind of like dolls, almost. Macabre dolls set into a twisted play house. They were no longer like me, and that realization shivered through me like a harpstring.
Slowly, from the doorway, I turned my head on my neck. There wasn’t a coherent thought in my head, just a bunch of uncomfortable vibrations piloting my body.

Mother.

In her beautiful white kimono...

Was standing in a corner of the room with a full scotch glass, totally silent.

Some of her hair was out of place, and her clothing was askew in spots, but she was not red like Dahlia. She was not Red like the men in the chairs. She was not slumped over like the working girls, either.

Our eyes met.

Her gaze wasn’t quite right.

But once more, my feet started moving.

All the way forward until I ploughed into her body, wrapping my arms around the shelter that was her.

“Mom!” I wailed, a plea, a protest, a hallelujah all at once. That one magical word escaped my lips, alongside its twin: “Help!?”

I held onto her, shivering and shaking and suddenly crying a river. I gripped her clothes, burying my head into her chest and saying her name and Dahlia’s and everyone else’s over and over until her hand came down onto my shoulder to stop me.

It was not a gesture of comfort.

I was acutely aware of a stiffness in her arm. Sniffling hard, I pulled back to look up at her—and instantly discovered what I had done.

The warmth that’d been all over me. That’d been all over Dahlia...and had pushed into her.

As I pulled away, it stuck to her, and left me dry.

A step back revealed a red shadow in her kimono that was vaguely shaped like me.

And myself...revealed to be the criminal sponge.

My stomach dropping out, I turned back up to her. There was nothing else to do but run, but run was the one thing I couldn’t do right now. My legs just wouldn’t do it. They couldn’t do it. I was still more afraid of the situation than her.

But perhaps that was a mistake, with how swiftly my sun transformed into a raging thundercloud.

I didn’t see the strike coming. All I saw was a blur and then I was falling into a heavy brass lamp nearby. It instantly swept off the table and broke into a hundred pieces with a massive clatter. Bruised and out of breath, I slumped off the table, but not before she grabbed me by the arm and started hitting me more, elbow and shoulder wrenching in strange directions.

“You! Little! Bastard! What have you! Done!” she screeched, the blows raining down. “What-have-you-done! I never! Should have agreed! To take! Care! Of! You! Aierrgh!”
I was too dazed to defend myself, and each blow made my vision shift anew. I managed to cling to the table with one hand and failing legs, but I was so dizzy I didn’t think I could breathe.

“Mom! Mom, please, stop—?!”

But just as she started kicking me, a heavy male voice thundered over mine:

“Sunny! Sunny! Calm down!”

My arm was yanked anew, far harder than she ever could, and I was thrown to the floor, where I huddled up, panting. Just beyond my head, I was vaguely aware of the hem of her kimono thrashing violently across the debris-covered floorboards.

“You did this! You awful little creature, you did this!”

I struggled up onto my forearms, craning my neck around as I tried to evade her long wooden sandals. Everyone’s looks were starting to transform from troubled to glaring, and so I reached out to her to calm her down too, to calm all this down—but of course my hands were still bloody, and it only set her off more.

“Mom! I’m sorry! I’ll fix it—”

“You can’t fix this you idiot!” she shouted, and then wrenched free from the Raish’s arms. She launched a nearby glass at me with impressive speed, and when it shattered harmlessly behind me, she whirled around and went to beating on him.

He was very good at ducking by now though, so when that didn’t work, she reached back and whipped out one of her twelve-inch hair pins, holding it aloft like a gold-gilt crochet needle.

The entire room gasped, and in the silence, she looked like a vengeful marble statue.

“Don’t touch me,” she threatened with vicious volume. “Don’t ever touch me again!”

Raish paused, holding out his hand as he was backed into the bar, but she didn’t advance on him. After a quick glance at me and her, he ended up giving me the longer stare.

He was covered in blood too, I realized. Much like I was.

He had been cradling someone.

Something passed between us, and then he looked my mother square in the eye, long and still.

“Raff’s dead,” he stated—and then stood up straight. “Stop hitting your goddamned son.”

The entire room was silent. After a few moments of looking around at the broken glass and dishes—and bodies in the chairs—she let her arm fall with a snort.

“Thank you,” Raish noted, and then turned on his heel and left. “I quit.”

The only sound was the creaking of floorboards as he left. My mother, calmed somewhat, jammed the pin back in her wig.

“You’re a disgrace,” she hissed, though I wasn’t sure if it was to me or this place or herself or what, and then followed Raish. “I need a smoke.”

With that, her storm blew away.
Everyone, alive and some not, watched her, then the living turned to me. When the sound of her crunching over glass ended and the sounds of moans and nervous whispers and sirens came back, everyone pushed themselves back into taking care of their own parties.

But my party was gone. My mother was somehow untouched by the carnage save for what I had done to her dress, and I knew there was no coming back from that. That thing was easily worth more to her than I could ever hope to be. It was part of what made her mystique; what made her her, in a way that I was not.

Slumping down against the wall, I let out a shaky sigh. Dahlia was gone. Zora was missing. Raish’s brother was dead and Raish might as well have been for all that he was coming back. Karen had probably run. Charles was doing what Charles always did, far from me.

And I’d threatened Mr. Lucien, to the point that he would probably never speak to me again, either. Hell, he might even come after me and beat me up.

As my world crashed down around me not in screams but in silence, I huddled under the end table from which the lamp had fallen, a symphony of fear and loathing and shame blaring too loudly in my mind. I stayed there, tucked into a sobbing, self-apologizing ball with blood crusting all over me, until the paramedics, and finally the cops, dragged me out into the flashing blue and red.

Chapter End Notes

Real life film fact: Nobody ever plays Moonlight Sonata unless everybody dies.
In which I try (poorly) to describe traumatic shock.

In case you didn't know, lindseed oil is a common liquid base for historical oil paints. :)

The blazing blue and red lit up the tiny entrance way like warning lights inside a submarine, so oppressive it was hard to breathe. The neon colors stained the walnut panels, grains glowing like bleeding fingernail tracks.

And yet, I didn’t feel anything, didn’t think anything. I just sat there, staring at nothing, being nothing. Watching. Waiting.

I wasn’t sure for what. To turn back on? To be safe? For someone to need me or tell me what to do?

For things to go back the way they were?

It was an interesting state—to be crystal-clear aware and yet have no reactions at all. It was what being an AI inside a robot must be like, I reasoned distantly.

Things were mostly silent now, which made the lights only more loud. I was sitting on the bench in the lobby, staring at the Maitre’ D’ platform behind which Raff had apparently died. Apparently he’d snuck upstairs trying to give his brother some cake.

I tried not to think about how I’d known that as I went by, but for the while that I didn’t have to see it, I could still believe whatever I wanted to about it, and how much better that had been.

I wanted to go back to when I could just believe whatever I wanted, and have that be my reality.

Holes peppered the paneled wall in front of me, visible in between the thick, flashing silhouettes from people moving about outside. Holes that had almost become part of me. Holes that had become part of Dahlia, and Mr. Lucien, and—

Guns were terrible things. Unfair things.

Beyond the bullet holes was the battlefield: Behind the red velvet curtain was the formal lobby, its gold and marble hues stacked to the brim with bodies under sheets.

It had been hours, and by now, all the people who had a home to return to had found their way back. Everyone who still had need for a hospital had been taken there. And me...

I was sitting in my ruined home, an ineffective blanket around me from one of the paramedics. Zora was sitting next to me, similarly silent and staring at nothing.

We’d both been like this for a long time.
The final ambulance’s doors shut with a thick clunk outside, and as it drove off, the lights staining the entrance way finally, finally shut off.

“I have nothing.”

Perhaps the new quiet allowed me to move again, or perhaps it was just the fact of a change itself. Either way, I found my head turning toward Zora’s sudden words, like a puppet on a string.

I couldn’t really feel my body move. But I could still see, and at a delay, process certain things.

The woman beside me was staring blankly ahead like I had been.

Only, her eyes were glassy and wet.

Zora had never before in my life cried. She was Russian or close to it, and liked to say that the winters had frozen all her tears. But now silent streams were running down her face as she sat, like me, with a blanket around her rust-stained clothing. It had long ago fallen off her shoulders and she hadn’t bothered to pick it up, her hands limp in her lap instead.

“Nothing,” she went on at a shocked whisper, still staring at the wall. “Nothing at all.”

For a while, I just watched the last policemen move around, always stepping the same way over that one pile of broken glass.

“I have nothing,” she repeated. “They’ve taken everything.”

Eventually, I gazed at her hand, wishing I could take it.

“I’m here?”

My voice seemed distant and strange, and it had taken far too much energy to get out of me. But I was proud of doing it all the same, because I felt something then—the tiniest bit of warmth, the faintest spark of hope. I’d connected to an adult. So that meant imminent help would come.

Zora didn’t say anything for a while; she only blinked slowly as she turned to me. Then she looked me up and down.

“You are nothing.”

It was in that same hollow tone. I stared as my heart sank, and that little bit of hope and warmth guttered out, replaced by the sharp tones of guilt and shame and inadequacy.

“I have nothing now...”

She continued to stare straight ahead. I stared at her, the shock creeping back over my body and taking total hold again. It came before the self-hate could set in, for which I was grateful.

Eventually, at a considerably delay, I went back to staring at the wall the same as she was—though I held my blanket a little tighter, hoping some other adult would come by and talk to me.

A few moments later, the last squad car door thunked shut out on the sidewalk and Charles came in through the door, rubbing at his neck and sighing.

I watched him obediently, awaiting instructions as I always did. Deep down, I trembled in both fear and hope of what my fate would be.
But it wasn’t me he came to. Instead, he came to stand in front of my dance teacher, looking down at her with another look I’d never seen before.

It was a look even more shocking than Zora’s tears. It looked suspiciously like what I’d later come to know as grief.

Hesitantly, he reached out a hand to rub her shoulder. And then, when it only made her nod and grimace, he frowned and got down on his knees. Charles pulled her against him, wrapping his huge arms around her head shelteringly.

She clutched at his clothes and wailed into them.

It didn’t last very long. They were both somber people, and so the wellspring went dry in no more than a couple of minutes.

But never once did either of them look at me, either.

Recognizing that I was being a very visible voyeur, I pulled the blanket closer and scooted as far into the corner as I could, trying to occupy myself with something else. I ended up just putting my head into the place where the two walls connected, wishing the darkness there would swallow me whole.

Mr. Lucien and Karen were not in the morgue that sat, ever heavy, just beyond the little alcove and through the open curtain. But even though I was very rarely with them, I always had a secure understanding that they were safe and coming back. Not knowing what state they were in and if they’d ever return was nerve-wracking. What would I do if they never came back...? I’d be stuck in this corner, with Charles, forever.

“Hey,” Charles called to me. I craned my neck up at him like an automaton and caught the tail end of him ushering Zora to her feet with unusually gentle hands. “Time to go home.”

I looked around the room in concern, but he said, “It’ll keep. I sent everyone home save a couple guards and the guests are gone. If anyone’s dumb enough to rob a place that just got shot up by a mob, they will. Doesn’t matter if we lock the doors, since the windows are wide open. Zora...” Here, he turned to her and whispered, “Do you have someone you can stay with tonight? Do you want to stay with me tonight?”

She was slow to react, but eventually she shook her head and whispered, “I will persist.”

“Okay. At least let me drive you.”

“No, I am being fine.”

“Zora, I’m driving you.”

Her jaw tightened, but she still refused to look at him. She just stared at the broken window with a dead-eyed stare—and hands that gripped his arm as tightly as her jaw clenched.

I looked this up and down, wanting to help with the Russian I knew, but I wasn’t dumb enough to interfere with Charles, or a woman I had wronged who had just called me nothing.

So I merely contented myself with tucking into a tighter ball just to feel something. I stared at the floor, rocking back and forth a little, trying to keep their voices from creeping into my mind from the edges: Nothing. Useless. Worthless. Annoying. If I could just keep rocking, the motion kept it from taking root in my head, somehow.
“All right, come on. Both of you.”

I stared at him and froze. He stared back at me, equally still. Eventually, he just sighed and held out an impatient hand, the other on Zora’s back. “What? C’mon, we ain’t got all night.”

I couldn’t think anything, all of a sudden. The lace of displeasure in his voice made every thought of mine disappear. Where were we even going?

Eventually though, he just sighed and grabbed me by the arm, yanking me forward. My blanket clutched to my chest, a fresh set of bruises were deposited on my muscles, just another casualty of the night.

We were silent the entire way across town, which was unusual. There was not a thought going through my head as I stared out the window, my head against the glass, and Charles, who usually quipped to himself or talked himself up when I was in the car alone with him, was as silent as the grave. And Zora....

She was as still as a figure in a wax museum. Her trendy black suit, and beret with its black lace, suddenly felt much more like a mourning gown.

Still, this was Zora we were talking about. She’d go home, she might cry a bit where no one saw it, and then she’d be fine in a day or two. That was the way she always was. She was nigh unshakeable.

And without Dahlia...I could help Zora feel better. I could help her recover, by being the child she wanted me to be. Dahlia was a Real Girl, so she’d always be better than me in that regard, and she was Zora’s Real Child, but I could be a much better me. She’d see. And then she’d be happy again. That was how parents worked after all, right?—they wanted their kids to be what they wanted them to be, and nothing else. I could do that, if it meant I could get her whole attention.

It was Charles I was more worried about, though, the next time he got me alone. This whole situation would no doubt make him angry—the image of his frustrated hand a few minutes ago flashed through my mind—and the silence was only more telling of that. Given how mad my mom was, this was going to be a nightmare if I had to defend myself from both of them. He was going to get mad at me for something; the question was what, when, how would I calm him down, and what would the cost to me be?

Before I could calculate too many moves, though, we arrived at a familiar pink-granite walkup. Charles double-parked on the street and put on the flashers. He reached over Zora to pull something out of the glove compartment, and then turned to me over the seat. Zora, as always, sat there motionless, staring forward.

“Here’s the number of where I’ll be. If something more happens, call me on the land line.”

I stared at the notepad paper he handed me, then at him, then at Zora. When I got back to him blankly, he said, “Well? Get going. She’s waiting.”

I turned my head up to the brownstone (which was actually pink), then at him. I blinked, waiting.

“Oh, right.” He fiddled with the keys in the ignition, then handed me one he’d detached.

I stared at the little slip of metal in my palm. So light, and yet the weight of what it revealed...
“Well, get going. Ain’t got all night.”

I closed my fingers around the key and nearly bolted out of the car. “Yessir!”

I was finally...going home?

Without him?

My mind almost started turning back on as I raced up the stairs.

The little bit of warm euphoria abated as soon as I opened the apartment’s door, however.

It was, after all, an emotion furnished by a momentary lapse in reality, a fall into my dreamland instead.

The sound of the lock and hinges and the curves of the wooden door were familiar still, despite all the time away. However.

The furniture was rearranged, and there was more of it, much more of it. I could hardly make my way around.

“Charles! You’re back!” came the cheery call in French. I blanched, knowing what was about to happen, and as my mother came around the corner by the kitchen, I ended up watching her face fall like a trainwreck.

“Oh,” she muttered. “You.”

I bowed at her politely.

“God,” she grumbled, then turned around and left. “He would do this to me. Stay away from me, I don’t want to look at you right now. I’m still mad at you, you know!”

I sighed and looked around, rubbing my nails down my neck just to feel something other than inadequacy.

“And clean that blood off you, for fuck’s sake!” she shrialed from around the corner.

I looked down. My white shirt was mottled with rusty spots, and my black vest and trousers were stiff with glossy spots as well. I didn’t have any other clothes here, so...yeah, she was right, I needed to clean these.

Luckily, blood-stain-removing detergent had been created a few years ago, so I pulled it out of the closet cupboard (looking suspiciously like the same bottle from the last time I’d been here) and got to work taking off my clothing in the bathroom sink.

I’d have to be careful not to let it stain the marble as I worked. This was a lot of blood.

Blood...

Dahlia’s...blood...

I pursed my lips and pushed the tears aside. I couldn’t think about it. Not right now; I had things to do.
I shook my head and went for the drain stopper, then the cold.

“Welcome home,” I whispered to myself, as I worked the white fabric into the water. “I guess...”
“Mom...”

A long while later, I hung on the door to her room. She was sitting in front of her budoir, staring into the giant, ornate mirror like she was scrying into it. A small, stained-glass desk lamp sat to the side, the only illumination in the room, its top looking like a softly glowing lotus flower. Her bed lay beyond it, the kimono laid flat atop it, the edges of the shining red and orange maple leaves lost to the shadows.

“Mom, can I borrow a shirt?”

She gazed at me sidelong as I stood there in a towel, clinging to the doorframe. Only my upper half was visible, and something in her eyes changed as they tracked along my skin.

“You’ve grown.”

We stared at each other for a moment. She was a cold and dangerous kind of beautiful, all the pins in her hair glinting in the soft white light.

“Can I...come in?” I pressed quietly.

She shrugged and rolled her eyes, going back to the mirror. “I guess.”

“Th-thank you,” I muttered and hastily made my way over to the wardrobe, where I assumed some mix of her and Charles’s clothes would be. “What can I wear?”

She hummed disinterestedly, and I heard the clack of her makeup case setting down on the polished wood surface of the desk. “You’ve ruined enough things of mine tonight.”

“Charles’s it is...”

“Don’t,” she snapped icily, and I immediately stopped in my tracks, hands up in the air and everything. “...Say his name.”

I nodded. “S-sure.”

Slowly, I began leafing through the closet’s hung garments, trying not to make noise. Small sounds came from her direction, around the corner in the room, but never anything that sounded like crying. It was only the familiar sounds of the end of a performer’s night—taking off makeup and accessories and hair pins. Eventually, I found a drawer of undershirts, and pulled out a simple white one. It was big of course—one of hers would have done a lot better—but it’d have to do until the rest of my clothes dried.
As I closed the door to the closet, I found myself lingering again, sandwiched between the bed and wall, not really wanting to be alone in the cluttered living room yet—or for the rest of the night, just staring into the darkness hoping I could sleep. To be honest, there couldn’t have been much night left at this point, but daylight was not something I wanted yet, because daylight would mean being well enough to pretend I could move on. And I didn’t feel capable of that at all. Either the faking or the real thing.

No, I wanted the night to continue on, in the hopes that someone, somewhere, would see my distress and help me. I knew instinctively, somehow, that once the night was over and the sun rose, that window of comfort would dry up like the dew. I wouldn’t be allowed to cry about it after that, and yet, I couldn’t get any tears to come currently, either. It was all messed up. Everything was just all messed up, most of all me, and I desperately didn’t like it, the more aware of it I became.

Why can’t I just be normal? I prayed as I hung on her wall, desperately hoping my stare would silently communicate my need for attention to her.

My mother, for her part, was slowly removing her makeup and earrings. Even if she did see me in the mirror, she was ignoring me. Her obi was off, folded in a corner, sitting next to her large, black laquer wooden sandals. I glanced at the kimono, its white shine laced with gritty dark spots.

Well, if even I’m not normal, I can be useful, at least...

The thought tugged at me like a need, and I quickly set the energy to work, voice pathetically anxious and weak.

“Mom, can I...” I took a deep breath and squared my shoulders a bit. “Would you like me to try to get the stains out of your kimono?”

She gazed at me coldly in the mirror. “How?”

“The bathtub, there’s this stuff—”

“No.”

“It worked on my shirt—”

“Is your shirt made of silk?”

I took a breath, thinking it over. “...No?”

“Uh-huh. It won’t work.” She pulled out one of the pins from her hair with a beleaguered sigh, and it clanked down hard on the desk. “Might as well build a pyre out of it for yourself, if you’re going to do anything.”

I opened my mouth, then shut it. Quickly and soundly defeated, I sat on the bed next to the fabric in question, delicately folding it out of the way to make sure I didn’t offend it any further. I could press the issue, supposedly, that was something physics would allow in the fourth dimension that was our universe, but there was no point. Her voice had made it quite clear that the only thing that would bring me was damage.

But I also didn’t want to leave, yet. I knew she hated me and didn’t want me there, but I didn’t want to be alone, either. It was a scarier prospect, being alone with my fears, trying to process all this. The things she could do to me were terrible, but the damage I could do to myself was worse. She’d trained me well that way.
“Mom. Dahlia’s dead.”

I wasn’t sure why I said it then. But it came out of me all the same. It needed to.

“God dammit,” she huffed, the next pin slapping down louder than the last. In fact, she whipped out the third one and aimed it at me as she turned around on her seat. “People are going to be so pissed.” She rolled her eyes, and her wrist, and then looked at herself in the mirror, impromptu stiletto and all. “This is just like at Chinese Blue.”

“What? What’s that?”

“Charles is going to give me a list of names and expect me to be sad or something, and I’m going to have to go to all these funerals.... Shit. And that’s if they don’t run me out of town, god damn it.”

I frowned at this, each tidbit more deeply than the previous. “Leave town...?”

“I’m not running again,” she declared. “Not without a good, good reason. Not without a good, good payment.”

She eyed me in the mirror. The look was so cold that it made me shiver. I cocked my head at her, not sure what she was getting at. “Wh-at... is it?” I asked haltingly.

“Those were Chinese mafia cars,” she began slowly. “What did you do to displease them?”

She was still holding a hairpin, albeit a little more loosely. I gazed at it, at all the little beads and bobbles that dangled off the nine inch spike glinting like sparks in a campfire.

“I didn’t do anything,” I stated carefully. “I was working, like I was supposed to be...”

“You must have done something...” she coaxed, a smile slowly growing on her lips.

My mouth went dry as it hung open in the air. “Ah...well, I...my last drop went fine...?”

“Did it now?” She turned to me fully and sat with her knees politely together. Her hands settled flat on her lap, daintily pointed together at the tips, the hairpin held beneath them. It was a stylized Japanese thing, the type of thing she reverted to when she was about to savage someone. “Tell me more.”

“I um...” I swallowed hard and edged backward. “Um. It was...it was like always? I went, we traded messages. Um. The old guys? Playing majohng? I listened to them and Xing make their discussions about their drug running and money laundering in town. It was totally normal, and, and —I reported it to Charles! Like always. He had no discrepancies? They even talked about some arranged marriages, it was totally normal. Very normal.”

And one of them had given me some sweets after, that was cool. Told me I was honorary Chinese like he always did, and, like always, I never knew how to feel about that.

Still, my mother was staring at me with that same slight smile and eerie look, and it was making cold prickles run down my neck. I’d seen her look like that right before she messed up a girl’s face, once.

“There was nothing they said that you didn’t understand? Nothing that could’ve been code?” she asked sweetly.
I shook my head; one of Charles’s buddies, an old ex-military guy, had taught me about that sort of thing, so I knew to be on the lookout for it. Mr. Lucien had also taught me all about old thief cants, especially the rhyming American ones from the ‘20s.

“And they didn’t give you any messages to give us? It’s okay if they were something bad.”

“Trust me, you would’ve been the first to know...” I shook my head. “I wouldn’t hide things from you.”

“I hope not.” She tilted her head to the side with a pleasant smile. “Small graves are easy to dig.”

I swallowed hard.

“And I won’t mind digging one now that my dress is ruined. Might as well have a body with that burial shroud. Not that you’d be worth the cost of admission.”

“I...” I bowed at her a little, at a loss to counter that. I knew what a threat was, especially one from your boss, so there was no point in arguing it. Plus, she was blocking the door, and the window in this room was very sticky and full of wooden lattice; I could never get it open in time to escape, even if I wanted to. The only choice was to agree with her and hope for the best. “I suppose so.”

“Hrm. I’m sure we’ll find out why soon enough, but...my concern is that, if they’re trying to exterminate us, then this wasn’t a message but the start of the war.” Suddenly preoccupied, she turned around and began muttering to herself, pulling out her other hair pins. Soon enough, her hair was tumbling down, long black strands waving in the low light. “It’s gonna cost a fortune to revitalize the place...and we can’t sell it like that...god dammit...and if we have to fight a war...hahhh Charles can win but...it’s risky for him if it gets into the news for long... Ugh, how many bribes is this going to cost...? And how many goddamned people will I have to interrogate? That’ll be exhausting...”

Her voice trailed off, sounding tired. But at least she wasn’t looking at me anymore.

My desire for comfort melted away with the tension. I found myself gazing at the clock vapidly, nothing in my head but the numbers as she mumbled to herself. Six, nana, huit...

“Oh.”

I suddenly remembered it:

“...Xing.”

At the desk, mother went very still. “What about Xing?”

“I heard...” I slowly pulled the pieces back from my shattered memory of the night, taking a deep breath to recall the images of happy faces laughing and chiding and all the smells of a good meal. “I heard him and his guys talking tonight, at dinner before the show. They were saying something about a delivery at eight, which is weird, right?...”

She considered this info, tilting her head back, then went back to taking off her rings. “Did he now.”

“Yeah. And he...he told me...to keep it......” I sucked in a hard breath, a tremble coursing through me as I realized it. “...Quiet.”

“That would be it,” she said with an almost chime to her voice.
I can’t believe I missed that...

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell us.” She turned to me, neither a frown nor a smile on her face, her hands politely one atop the other. “Maybe everyone would still be alive if you had.”

I should have recognized that...

The breath I sucked in grew deeper, the truth of what she’d said hitting me first, and the tone of her voice second. She was right, utterly right.

It really was my fault. Charles was going to kill me if he found out, and she—

Suddenly, as I stared at her, my mother cracked a peppy smile. “So you’ll just go to all the funerals for me! What a relief!”

My eyes widened at the horror of the idea, but she just went on chiming.

“Well! Thank you for telling me. I’ll have to ask him about it. Maybe he knows something that can help us figure it out and keep it from happening again. He’s a loyal soul, after all, right? He’d never be so stupid as to leave me.”

I opened my mouth, then closed it. “If you need any help translating, I will.”

“I don’t want you speaking that dirty language.”

“It’s just words, Mom...”

She eyed me, her eyes flicking up, and I immediately quieted, staring at the floor.

“You know what, I think I’ll give Charles a ring so that he knows what to do next, just a moment.”

“No!” I all but shouted, reaching out to her. “Don’t tell him! He’ll hurt me...”

I trailed off, not knowing what else to say to make it seem like something other than a pathetic statement. Between the two of us, I was the man of this family of my mother and I, and I’d just admitted I was failing at it terribly. But my mother just smiled at me from where she stood.

“Not if I tell him not to.” And with an airy wave, she went out of the room. “Clean this up, will you?”

Even though I hadn’t seen it in years, I managed to get the pins and combs and all else back to their places, save a few, by the time she’d returned. I was sitting on the bed, the ruined kimono’s sleeve over my legs to stay warm, listening as she spoke quietly to him about what I’d said. I was a bit reticent about how she’d find me, but after a few short exchanges that were icily pleasant, she came in lighter than before. In fact, she started undressing, layers shedding as she twirled all around the room like a fairy. It reminded me of back when, and my heart lifted for a moment, remembering the better times.

“Worth painting?” she asked, as she shrugged on her night robe.

I smiled. “Worthy of a Raphael.”

“You know, he never much painted nudes,” she said. “Natsu always liked telling me things like that, for some reason. She had such a mind for random facts.”
“Natsu? Who’s that?”

She looked at me suddenly, a bit like a startled animal, only to flash a movie-star smile a moment later. “Nobody at all.”

“Oh...’kay?”

And yet, her gaze lingered on me a bit. Differently than it did when I first came in the room. It was...kinder, maybe.

“You’re a bit alike that way,” she went on musingly. “She was always painting, singing, dancing, though her dancing was always a bit martial for my tastes. She was always putting strange thoughts together, the way you do. She wanted to be a teacher, did you know that? An art history teacher.”

I listened in silence, waiting for an access ramp for this trip down memory lane regarding whoever this was. But it seemed like that wasn’t coming, so as she danced around humming to herself, I tried: “Hey mom...tonight...before...” I swallowed hard, unable to get the words it happened out, “somebody in the club...said that my dad’s name is...Aubrey. Is that true?”

Once again, on the way to her cheeta print slippers, my mother stilled. “Who told you that?”

“Is it true?”

“Why would anyone want to talk about your father? He was a horrible man. Like you are, when you ask me these questions.”

She went back to dealing with her shoes. I stared at the base molding for a while. It needed a dusting, I decided.

When enough time had passed wherein she didn’t engage and I started to feel safer again, I said, “Um, I know he’s a bad person, but, did Dad ever get shot at? Is that how he died?”

“I didn’t say he was bad, I said he was a problem. I don’t love anyone bad, who do you think I am? I wouldn’t love you if you were bad, would I?”

I closed my eyes in defeat and lifted my hands in surrender.

“But yes, he did get shot at, many times, and he always prevailed of course,” she replied lightly. “He had a strange sort of luck that way. Though he always got his revenge, too, that was how he stayed so insulated from pressure. That is also what we’re gonna do about tonight.”

I found this plan comforting, and a bit energizing. Something to visualize and hold onto—except for the slight implication of her turning it on me that existed in her hard gaze when I met hers in the mirror.

“He was a good thief, though. He tended to avoid getting shot at, generally, until the end.”

“Mm.” I made a somber noise, visualizing it. “How old was I when he died? Were you there?”

She leveled a look at me, one complex and unreadable. Then, after a while of us staring at each other silently, she said, “Where is Charles, anyway? I saw his car leave. I called him on his cell, but his answer about that was vague.”

“With Zora.”

She blinked, a strange sort of mechanical wince, but then said, “Why would you let that happen?”
“I don’t have any control over Charles?” I replied, stomach tightening in concern. “Do you want me to...maybe call him?”

“And have both of us call him in a night? No. Men run away if you get too clingy of their time. Women get our revenge in other ways.”

“But I like Zora...?”

“That’s what makes you stupid. Just as stupid as Natsu.”

“Who’s Natsu?”

She gave me a look, and I knew the conversation was over.

She turned back around, and put away the last of her shiny gear. “Guess I won’t be needing these for a while...”

“Do you need any help getting anything off or folding it? I can—”

“You’re the one who ruined it, you think I’ll trust you with anything else?” she snapped.

That shut me up real fast. My mouth opened and closed, and I swallowed hard. “I’m sorry,” I muttered, stepping back and trying to be as small as possible.

“That kimono cost more than you did.”

I wasn’t sure what that meant, so I offered, “I’m very sorry.”

“It cost more than you’ll ever make me, frankly.”

“Even more than the paintings?”

A wooden hairbrush flew at my head. I dodged it, barely.

“Don’t you know better than to talk about that?”

I eyed the brush, then her, repeatedly switching back and forth.

“And it’s not like you’ve gotten me one recently, anyway.”

“I don’t have any money for pigments,” I explained, picking up the brush and petting it in my lap like one might a cat. “Not if you want it to actually get sold. Not since you stopped talking to me outside of our group business meetings.”

She shrugged. “Your document and signature forgery work is doing all right, and Charles doesn’t get suspicious of that.”

I nodded. It’d be nice to finish the half-complete faux Monet someday, but...I suppose I did do a nice and full set of legal documents, modern, pre-war, and Medieval, not to mention the signatures and fake book entries. There were several old catalogs in historic libraries with a line or two I’d redone, that helped somebody or another get a painting or a mansion or an unpublished manuscript signed over to their estate. At five to twenty thousand a pop and another ten percent of assessed value on uncontested acquisition of asset, I supposed it was worth keeping me around, and yeah, probably less than that kimono.

“About Charles...” I murmured. “Why haven’t you told him who’s making the paintings?”
“Because a woman deserves her own source of income that’s safe from the whims of the men around her, when a relationship with them fails to be the insurance policy society promises it to be.”

I blinked in surprise, but I couldn’t exactly refute the logic of that—not that I really understood it all either, though. “...Huh.”

She shrugged, sitting back on her cloth covered seat in front of the budoir, now in her flowing robe.

“But doesn’t that mean...I’m your insurance policy?”

“Yes it does.” She rattled it off as lightly as the last. “As children are. You wouldn’t want your mother out on the street, would you?”

“No,” I answered honestly. “But...on that note,” I began carefully, “do you...really like Charles? Or is he...just an insurance policy, too...? Because I think you could get a better one...?”

She took a breath, her face suddenly turning stormy as she leaned on her elbow. She glared at me. “What would you know about love? You cost me mine.”

I frowned at her, bewildered and speechless.

“Give me the brush.”

I couldn’t think. I stared down at it. “Are you...taking your meds still?”

“Give me it.”

“Does he even take you to the doctor?”

“Stop it.”

“When was the last time you went?”

“Don’t make me come over there or you’ll regret it.”

It took me a while, but eventually, I forced my lips tight and nodded, coming over to her—albeit grudgingly. When I got there, I slapped the brush down on the vanity top, loudly. Enough to startle her, and that tiny bit of power was something I relished. “Take your stupid brush, I don’t care. You know he doesn’t care what you look like, anyway. He’s not even here!”

She took it off the table and momentarily looked like she was considering hitting me with it. The last time I’d been here, I hadn’t been taller than her when she was sitting down, and I think in that moment she realized that as well, for how black it made her gaze. “Leave.”

“Where?”

“Wherever,” she replied. “He said he thought you should be here with me, but if it’s just so that I don’t notice he’s not here, he’s got another thing coming to him. You’re not near old enough for that, yet.”

I snorted and stood there, not quite willing to think about the implications of that—but also not willing to back down yet now that the pins were all put away. “You should just break up with him, you know.”

“You think you’re so clever,” she sneered. “She was like that too. So was he. But I loved him for
it, and then I got you out of the deal..."

“She who? He who?”

She glared at me like I was stupid and hissed, nose crinkling, “Natsu and your father, obviously!”

Then, finally, came the whap from the brush on my hip. “Out.”

It wasn’t a soft one, but it took two or three before the sting was enough to get me to go.

“Fine, whatever.”

As I got out of the room, back against the door, I couldn’t help but mutter, “It’s not like I wanted to come here anyway.”

But that wasn’t true. I did.

I just wanted her to want me, too.

But I had done grievous wrongs. I wasn’t getting welcomed for a long time to come.

I could put myself to sleep tonight thinking about what I could do, at least as a start, to make up for my failures. The first step would be getting her less mad, or mad at something else. Then taking care of her to calm that down, then finally getting her to ignore me. Then, only after that point probably months hence, would she, at random, start to be nice to me again.

It made the beginning of the night, and its gentle public praise, feel like a million worlds away.

And if Charles decides he likes Zora better, I’m going to be stuck here with her badmouthing him forever...

I sighed and walked out into the dark living room, bare feet sticking to the familiar wooden floor. The moon shone through the windows, high and sparkling.

If only I hadn’t gotten mad at Mr. Lucien, maybe I could have gone to the hospital with him...

But he wanted to give Charles “the forger,” and he wanted to wreck Karen and Vince’s relationship to do it.

Plus, Raish was gone, and who knew who else. At this point, all I could hope was that Yva was alive, not that I could live with her (him?). It’d be as wild as my mother, just in a slightly different direction. But at least I’d be thanked for my uses more often.

With a sigh, I pulled out the extra blankets from the hall closet and went to setting them up on the couch.

I wonder if Karen’s okay? And Vince? And all the others? Raff is dead? How can that be? I hated him, he was mean to me, but he was there just a few hours ago, happy and healthy and roughing up people (his favorite thing), and now his brother’s all mad and probably sad I guess, and won’t come back around...

The gunshots rang through the back of my mind, and every door shutting somewhere in the building I thought was one of them. As I settled down onto the couch, sans Pallet and sans Gesso and sans mother, I just wanted to keep the images of Dahlia out of my mind. Keep away the feeling of her blood, and hot pulsing insides, off my hands.
Keep away the tears that threatened to come whenever I thought of her happy smile, trying to be kind to me.

*Should I be glad I’m alive, or...?*

I smoothed the blankets out in the dark, glad on some level for their fluffy comfort.

...*Should I be sad I couldn’t go with her?*

Zora’s look came to mind again, and I wiped at my eyes. She’d been acting so unusually, and I had been useless to fix it.

“You are nothing.”

Well, at least I knew now. I had just been a crutch to her, that she could pretend was her husband, or maybe the boy they’d never had.

I took a breath and sighed it out, staring at the chandelier above me that was, this time, in tact.

I ended up thinking about how my mother looked at me when I first came in the room. It made my stomach a little queasy, and so I rolled over, putting the thought to my back.

Another proverbial door shutting. At least for a while. That was what all this felt like.

*I wonder if there’s any way to make Zora like me more? Maybe if I try harder, like she was asking before, I could get her to be in a better place too... Like I do with Mom...?* I didn’t know her quirks as well, but I could certainly try. She would need *some* kid around, to keep her happy.

And Charles...

At least he’d been mostly normal. In a way, he’d paid more attention to me than normal, though the quality of it left something to be desired.

But the club was in tatters. I probably wouldn’t see him for some time, or anyone else. So what was I going to do? Mr. Lucien...I wasn’t even sure he was *alive*. He’d seemed pretty banged up, so I probably wasn’t going to run away with him for a while, even if everything else ironed out. And he was old, so it was going to take him a long time to heal, if he even managed it. And all of his friends, who were big and strong and spry, would be mad at me, and probably wouldn’t let me near him.

I tucked myself in bed and gazed up at the ceiling, the cool of the blankets slowly turning into heat.

*Might have to nick something from Charles’s wallet to pay for groceries if mom doesn’t take care of herself.*

Actually...

I thought about the note in my pocket, and with some effort, roused myself back upright and over to the phone.

It rang twice, three times...and then it picked up, the sound of a line connecting coming through on a wave of relief for me.
“Hello? Sunny?”

Just that very name—and the touch of hesitant tension in his voice—derailed me entirely. I calculated through it—how mad would be he be if it wasn’t her? How upset that it was me, and then, on top of it, me asking for something; and what’s more, something outside of what he’d told me to use this number for? Especially if Mom came out and saw me... And at this time of night—he probably wanted to be asleep, and...and...

It was enough to make my brain completely stop whatever it’d been doing before to set all its energy to piecing out potential call-and-response patterns and their relevant damage control.

“Hello?”

But eventually, he spoke again, and I shook my head out, unsure how many seconds had gone by. In the end, I said the preprogrammed response: “Charles, it’s me. Aki.”

“Oh... What’s up?”

“I was just wondering...um, sir...” I looked back at my mother’s room, still trying to get my brain back on track. “Can you...come pick me up? She doesn’t really want me here, and she’s pretty mad about her kimono, and...” I paused at that, then just sighed.

It was a stupid request. Just hearing it out of my mouth made me realize that, because he’d never understand about the clothes. But how was I supposed to say, “I don’t know when you’re coming back and I’m concerned I might not have anything to eat or wear or do since I can’t go back to the club, either”? He’d just brush me off and say it was probably fine. That’s what everybody did. I’d never been so anxious about the fact that I’d never asked for Karen’s phone number before. I’d have to fix that, next time I saw her.

If there was a next time. Shit.

“Well, that might be a bit tricky. It’s pretty late, you know, and what with everything that’s happened today...”

“I know. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked, it’s stupid, I’m stupid, I’m sorry, I’m probably bothering you...”

“Well, you’re always bothering me, that is the nature of children, but what is she...doing, exactly? Did she threaten you? I heard about the hairpin thing...”

“No...just threw a brush at my head. The usual.” I paused, thinking about the many dagger-like hair pins still in her drawer. “She is, um, kinda mad you’re not here. She’s onto you, I guess...”

“...Oh.”

“I mean, even I could see it, Chuck.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“No sir. But...she’s...you know I remind her of my dad more now, I guess, and she’s kind of mad about whatever happened with him, and whenever she starts talking like that, um...” I switched my weight on my feet nervously. “She was looking at me kinda funny. Um, is she taking her meds?”

“What meds? She doesn’t take ’meds.’”
“Don’t you live here?” I asked. “With her? You’ve really never seen them?”

“You might be thinking of something else. Maybe she told you that’s what they were, but...”

“No, they came from a doctor. They were prescription, I helped her get the original ones—”

“All right, settle down. You know what, it’s late. Why don’t you go to sleep wherever she lets you, and we can just...figure it out in the morning, okay?”

“Okay...um.” My breath was tight, and it took me a long time to muster up the energy to say the rest of what I wanted. In the interim, Charles heard me sigh, and in turn sighed himself.

“I may regret asking this, but... Anything else?”

“Um...how is Zora doing?”

And for his part, it took him a long time to respond, too. “...Not well, to be honest.” He sighed, in a heavy way he normally didn’t, being the guy in charge. “But look, it’s not your problem. Go to sleep, kid.”

I nodded into the phone, only to realize he couldn’t see me, and offered a wilted, “Sure...”

“...Wait. Is that why you’re calling? Because you can’t sleep?”

“Well...”

On the other end of the line, he let out a long breath.

“I’ll pick you up when I’ve got some time, but it’s gonna be a few days. Just do your best and we can talk about it then, okay, soldier?”

I wasn’t sure he realized I wasn’t his soldier, but I nodded into the phone, and it slowly slipped off my shoulder and down onto the receiver.

There was a goodbye in there, but it got lost in the crushing weight of knowing no help was coming.

I found myself gazing out at the living room of the apartment I once coveted so much, the moonlight coming in through the three round-top windows and gauzy pink curtains turned a dark hue in the night. Everything I used to love was lost in its muted blues, even as I fell back into the chez and curled up under the blankets on its cushions, still familiar after so long.

“Goodnight, Mom,” I whispered to myself. When the hot tears came, I hid under the blankets, hoping to muffle it so she wouldn’t hear.

“I’m sorry about your kimono. Zora, I’m sorry about Dahlia. Dahlia, I’m sorry about your life... Raff, I’m sorry I didn’t even see you die... Raish, I’m sorry your brother died. Mr. Lucien, I’m so sorry I threatened you, I hope you can still like me. Gesso...I’m sorry I lost you, you were a good gift. And self...”

I sighed, staring at the shadows of mountains of clutter in the darkness, forcing the swell of heat in my face down.

“I’m sorry you’re such fucking moron. Why couldn’t you have been brave enough to die, if you weren’t going to be the one smart enough to stop all this?”
Mortar & Pestle (Hatchling Icarus XVIII)

Chapter Notes

Okay, not the last chapter of this arc. Had to break it up a little into digestible parts. But the last suite of them!

Warnings ahead: traumatic lack of bodily autonomy, Crazy, Assholes, teetering on the edge of skydiving into self-harm, and a lot of plot points that you have to read closely for

I dreamt of light. Light flickering, like a sunny morning through curtains, except that that light was an oppressive blue and red.

I watched the dancing plaid-like pattern in my dream with growing unease, until the camera slowly panned backward. A curvature was revealed to the pattern, one that grew and grew in familiarity until I realized what it was:

The pattern of curtain lace was playing off a pale face.

Dahlia’s round face, caked in white geisha makeup, and bleeding from the eyes and mouth.

My boy, she whispered, and just as her wide, accusing eyes flicked over to me, I startled awake.

Not a second later, I saw a flash of silver streak through a large portion of my vision.

With a shriek, I jolted to the side—but there was an unexpected and heavy weight holding me down by the chest.

A moment later, I registered the loud, sharp sound of ripping fabric very close to my left ear.

“Stay still,” coaxed a voice from very close above me. A woman’s voice. Dark and sultry and utterly cold. “I have to prove to him that I’m serious.”

“Mom?!” I screeched in a sick panic, hoping it was her, or hoping it’d summon her. I wasn’t able to see anything but the darkness of the body hovering over me. “Mom?!”

Her hand—whoever this was—was pressed flat onto my chest, just under my collarbone, as she raised herself up. Her entire upper body’s weight was pressed down onto me to the point that I was sinking into the cushions, and as she ripped the knife out of the couch, her hand, and all that weight, closed around my throat.

I scabbred at her fingers, her wrist, her arm—but it was all to no avail. I gagged at the force of it, barely able to keep my throat from collapsing. While my lungs began to burn and my eyes began to sting, in the darkness, I tried to find a spot higher and higher up her arm that would reach something vital, but I couldn’t. I simply wasn’t big enough, and I had to watch, almost like from behind a camera lens, as my hands aimed for a face I couldn’t make out, desperately pleading with it to let me go based on how my fingers pulled at the air, and then my fingernails tore at her flesh.

“Shhh,” she coaxed. “I need you to be quiet for Mommy.”
All I could see was her hair, dark and smooth and long, sliding forward around her shoulder. And the butcher knife, facing the window, a familiar shape of rounded sliver from the block in the kitchen as she raised it high.

I wouldn’t survive another strike. My throat was pinned so I couldn’t move my head, despite how much the rest of me was thrashing. The blade was five inches long or more, and she was much taller than me; there was no way I was going to be able to block the oncoming knife without it simply slicing my arm in half.

So I did the only thing I could think of: I pulled my legs toward my chest in the space between us and then kicked her with both of them in tandem, square in the torso.

The thick impact jolted up my legs, slamming the joints, but the adrenaline was such that I didn’t stop even though everything in me told me hitting this person was wrong. Still, with a woof of air, my assailant tumbled off of me and onto the floor, a couple of heavy objects crashing along with her. It was a sound anyone would have been able to hear, even from outside, but I couldn’t be bothered with that—I had to escape.

I sprang off the chez and stumbled forward, moving faster than I probably ever had in my life up to that point. Boxes and piles went by in a dark blur, several crashing to the floor or into other objects as I ping-ponged from one side of the aisle to the other.

“Mom! Mom!! What are you doing?!” I shrieked as I tumbled into the kitchen, the sound feral in my throat. I didn’t know I could sound like that. I didn’t know anyone could sound like that—pitiful and tormented and weak and terrorized. I touched at everything in split-second intervals, looking for something to defend myself with, even as I realized, distantly, how pathetic I sounded. These weren’t the cries of someone who was going to be spared, I realized with rising dread. Someone who was worth being spared.

Which meant it was me or her. There would be no help.

I didn’t even know what exactly I was looking for until I spied the butcher block, its one major knife missing, and landed a hand around the highest remaining one.

I gripped it and instantly swung it around with a whoosh, holding it like it had always meant to be there.

I found her black silhouette right behind me, just beyond my blade.

But she paused there, her own knife held out, not more than two inches of gap from mine, but a gap nonetheless.

Even though I couldn’t understand it, it was indeed my mother who was looking at me—sort of. It didn’t really look like her; she was wild in her nightgown, hair down, eyes wide, and body shaking a little. She was hunched over, swaying slightly like a snake about to strike. She pulled her knife to her side, while I stayed pressed into the counter, one hand out and one bracing, my heart hammering in my swollen and wheezing throat.

She was even smiling.

“Why do you always have to defy me?” she complained. “Why do you always have to get in the...way!”

She lunged and I quickly sprang to the side. Her knife stabbed into the wood with a thick thunk, and I hit the corner with a massive clatter of cabinets. Several handles jabbed into my back and
side, instantly bruising me and shoving my already uncoordinated movements into even less coherent angles.

“I don’t understand!” I shouted back at the top of my lungs in a panic. “I’m sorry! Mom, I’m sorry, what did I do! I’ll fix it, whatever it is!!”

My hands were shaking and I was pleading for my life. But I still didn’t run any farther than I needed to. I got on just the other side of the counters, back out into what would be the living room, hiding behind a couple of large decorative vases, the kind you could put a person in.

In a moment, she used her foot to pull the knife out, and then whirled on me. She stood on the other side of the display, looking livid.

...A vase you could put a person my size in, that, by the looks of things, had appeared not a few days earlier, given the box and tissue paper around it.

As she saw the realization dawn on me, she smiled.

And then she swept her arm to the side, taking all the vases with it. They shattered in a massive clamor.

“You!” she shouted voluminously, pointing the knife at me with a face twisting into a snarl. “Are the reason he’s not here!”

“Who?!”

“Arséne!” she screamed hoarsely, a voice so wild and anguished I’d rarely heard it. “Charles! Donny! Natsu! All of them! Why won’t you just be a good boy and die already?! Why do you think I wanted you to perform with Dahlia tonight?!”

She swept the knife out in a lateral motion. It was decidedly aimed at my throat now that there was nothing between us. I stumbled backward, but her advance was much quicker, seeing as how she had shoes to walk over the shards with. I tripped over a pile of clothing, cracked my jaw on a table as I fell, and as I hit the floor managed to inadvertently pull the table, its towel, its lamp, and its mug all down with me. Some of them bounced off of my body like heavy rocks, which she quickly shoved aside as she descended.

However, the end table’s legs landed over me, a heavy lattice of iron in a complex scrollwork pattern that prevented her from stabbing at me. She tried, but after several swift clangs and tings it became apparent that she couldn’t get the odd shape of the knife through.

“You can’t even die right! And then! You come back here and defy me! I will not! I will not have it! I will not have another man in my home telling me what to do!”

I screamed at her to stop, shouted and pleaded her name, but she just kept trying. She tried to move the table off of me. I tried to hold it down, and all the while I thrashed, bruising my legs and arms while she shouted obscenities above me.

This went on for an untold number of seconds until, suddenly, she growled and stood up, picking up the entire table and **throwing it across the room**, where it destroyed several other loud somethings, and possibly the window.

She stood there for a second as I scrabbled backward on my butt, myself disoriented and incoherent and my knife missing in the commotion. My back hit the door and I hastily pushed myself upward, but I could still hear her at my back, quietly:
“I never wanted you. I just got stuck with you.”

I pulled at the knob, but the security lock was in place, and it was higher than I could reach. I stood on my tip toes and shoved at it with my bleeding fingertips, hoping I could unlatch it in the dark—

“He said he’d take care of me if I took care of you, but it was a lie. A dirty...lie!”

“Gah!”

I zipped out of the way, running into another pile of boxes. My mother’s strike, flawless in its form, embedded into the oak door. She cursed.

I could hear the loud thumps of people running. I could hear shouting, outside the apartment.

“Help!” I shrieked, as loud and as panicked as I could—and it didn’t take much. I was not a screamer, had rarely ever used my voice for anything other than being barely audible, but in that moment, it was a terrifying sort of freedom to give over to the feral cry, every muscle in my body and every synapse in my brain zipping toward one singular goal: “HELP?!”

There came a banging on the door and it startled me backward into the furniture from the rattle. My mother, barely effected, cursed and yelled through it, “I’ve got it covered! Go away!”

And then she turned on me.

The door shook. She picked up my knife from the floor and, taking a step forward, raised it high.

“I’ll show him,” she said, smiling. “I’ll show them all. I always get the last laugh. I won’t be saddled with his kid forever.”

I had nowhere to go—there simply wasn’t a path backward and nothing I could climb fast enough to make one. Not a thing I could throw back. So I simply shrieked at her:

“Please, Mom! Stop! Please don’t do this! I don’t want to die?! I’m sorry about the kimono, I’m sorry about the club, I’m sorry I yelled at you, I—”

“It’s not about that!”

She flung her hand down, throwing the knife at me. I flung myself in a blind direction after a glimpse of silver and behind me, the knife embedded into the nearest box with a slick, serrated tearing sound. I whipped my gaze back around to her, but she still had the other blade. I wouldn’t get another chance like that, because she wasn’t throwing this one. And she was coming at me.

The entire door was rattling. People in the hallway were shouting in alarm. I had to run—I couldn’t be caught up in whatever they were going to do to me for waking them up—but I had nowhere to go but into her. I had too many things to process, and in the end, I simply gazed at her, hoping she’d see my face and that’d mean enough to her to make her back off.

“It’s about the fact that you and her are the reason I’m always second best!” she screamed through her gritted teeth, lunging for me.

Just as she stabbed at me, I tripped on the rug. It wasn’t graceful and it wasn’t what I wanted but it moved me just enough that her strike mostly missed. I felt it cut open part of my forearm, near the elbow. She spun on her feet and, hair wild, flipped the knife around to strike downward.

“He’ll see. He was willing to pay so much to keep you alive, but he never came back. Imagine how
much the other guy’ll pay to keep you dead, the way you were always supposed to be.” Her eyes
flashed, and her heaving voice lowered. “Now that we can all tell without a doubt whose you are.”

“Mom!” I shouted up at her, readying to flip away on my side the moment she made a move.
“Mom, I can make you money!” I tried frantically. “And I love you?! I love you just as much as
they ever could?!”

For a second, to the cacophony of the door being banged on and shoved against, she laughed.
Really laughed, like something I had said was funny.

“You’re as pathetic as your father.”

The knife came down, quick as a blur. I rolled just as I’d planned, but a cold slice burned through
my shoulder. Annoyed, she slammed her free fist on my head, caught me by the throat as the room
spun, and—

There was a tremendous, thunderous bang. The door burst open, hitting the backstop wall with
nosie so loud it’d sounded like a gunshot. As I closed my eyes and huddled up protectively, pleas
still escaping my mouth, my mother’s weight ripped off of me, and then I heard her shrieking.

“Let go of me!”

“Gah?! Woman—?!”

“Let me do it! Let me kill him!”

“Why would I let you do that?!”

A shout. A thump. A shriek. A few creaks of the floor and gasps of surprise as people scattered
just outside the door. Another dull thud, then the sound of the knife clattering to the floor, spun off
far away from everyone.

“Charles! Stop! Ah, stop!” I heard her yell.

“Like hell I will!”

And then I heard him break her bones.

It was funny—I remembered up until that strike, that sickening sound of crunching bones, flesh
violently impacting flesh, and primal female shrieking mixed with aggressive male snarls. But
then, all of a sudden, my memory cuts out, and the next thing I remember is staring at the faucet in
the bathtub.

It was white. Everything felt white, even my emotional state and my soul. And that was because,
as I looked around, I realized I was sitting in the bottom of the bathtub, with the curtain drawn. I
looked up, immediately got water in my eyes. It was on, apparently. I hadn’t noticed.

Where...am I?

It looked like the cupcake flat’s clawfoot.
I looked at my legs, specifically the space between them. There were colors there, and heavy folds.

I...still had my clothes on.

As I stared down at myself, picking at the wet nightshirt clinging to my skin, a knock came at the door.

It opened after a moment of waiting, and when all I did was stare, Charles pulled the curtain back aggressively.

“You alive in here? Jesus, it’s been—”

He stared down at me, clearly recognizing what I had only a moment ago. In the back of my mind, as I stared up at his familiar face, I vaguely started to recall that something had happened, and that was why I was here. Something he was involved with.

“Is she alive?” I asked, though I wasn’t even exactly sure why I was asking that. I couldn’t quite recall what would make me need ask it.

He looked down at me for a second longer, then looked at my face, carefully neutral. “Yes.”

There was a note of hesitance in his voice. But I didn’t want to remember anything else, yet. That much I knew clearly. So I just made a small noise of acknowledgment and then looked over his shoulder at the man standing behind him. It was a younger guy, a guy I didn’t know. Though all I could see was his face, it was enough to know he was a stranger—and that he wasn’t immediately threatening.

“What the hell are you doing?” Charles went on at me after a bit, exasperated but not necessarily angry. “You didn’t clean your—I told you—?” But Charles just shook his head and threw up his hands. He stepped aside, and the other guy, who was in a uniform of some sort, took his place. He knelt down beside the tub, with what looked like a toolbox at his side. “This guy’s a paramedic,” Charles added from the doorway. “He’s gonna patch you up, okay? Don’t say anything; be nice to him.”

Patch...?

I looked at my body, but in so doing, felt something off about my left shoulder. I looked, but couldn’t really turn myself in a way that I could see what was wrong.

On my shirt, though, there was a long streak of red. And in the tub, where the water wasn’t hitting it, a thin stream of red, almost like strands of hair, bleeding down from my arm in several places.

Oh... Something... To me...?

Silver flashed through my vision.

A knife... I remembered a flash of a knife, and the shouting of my mother, vividly angry but incoherent as far as the words. It zipped up me, tightening every muscle in my body even though there were no specific details coming to mind.

“Here, let’s get you fixed up,” said the young man, with a teacherly tone. He reached over and shut off the water, then came back over to me. I immediately started shivering. Or maybe I
already had been; I wasn’t sure, but I could definitely feel it now. It was making it hard to think.

“Do you mind if I...?” Both hands came at my shirt buttons, and while I watched it like a train wreck, just as he got them in his hands, the combination of seeing a set of a strange man’s hands so close to me, pulling apart my clothes, and the contact of his fingertips against my body made me jerk bodily. I smacked his hand away with enough force that I surprised even myself. He lifted up, looking startled.

“I...I can do it,” I said, embarrassed, going for my buttons. I shrugged off my shirt, then continued to sit in the tub, staring at him. The porcelain was my only barrier, so I wasn’t about to let it go. Charles had left the room, luckily, otherwise he would have been yelling at me by now. Still, I didn’t exactly want to be alone with some random guy trying to take my clothes off, even if Charles had sent him here.

The paramedic frowned, nonplused, then looked around and announced, “Why don’t you get dry, and then we can fix you up?”

The man stayed with me as I undressed, the door open to the rest of the house. He protected me from any prying eyes, or perhaps was shielding me from someone who could monitor us, though I wasn’t really paying attention to either, because his eyes were prying enough. Uncomfortable and confused and a little bit numb, I got out of the bathtub, took off my wet clothes, and then wrapped a towel he gave me around myself.

He directed me to sit on a nearby seat and I did so, staring at him blankly as he opened up his toolkit and continued to talk in gentle, soothing tones that sounded like they didn’t really care all that much. I guess, later, I would learn that that was called a professional distance.

“Well well, that’s a big cut, it’ll definitely need stitches, but it should heal all right.”

I just nodded blankly.

He narrated his work, first numbing my shoulder and then making idle talk as we waited for it to kick in. Then he directed me to look away, and started sewing up my skin closed.

If I’d known what he was doing, it would have bothered me more, but as it was, I wasn’t feeling much of anything, really. I’d never gotten stitches before that I could remember, so as long as I didn’t look at him, I didn’t need to ask any questions.

I could hear people in the other room, though. Talking, arguing. But mostly just talking. Very drollly, too. Charles was talking to people, though mostly they were talking to each other. All men, notably. It was soothing, in a way, the lack of raised voices there.

“How old are you, by the way?” the man in front of me asked, causing me to turn toward him. But he held me still, and directed my head back away from him with a kind but firm hand over my hair.

“I’m nine,” I muttered.

“Nine?” he asked, loudly enough that I winced. “Oh, sorry,” he said, going back to what he was doing, but sounding slightly concerned. “You just...don’t look nine, is all. You look a lot younger —”

“I’m nine,” I repeated. “Asshole.”

That time, I think he believed me.
Sometime later, I found myself standing in my mother’s bedroom by myself, the adults out in the hallway talking to each other. As I stared at her bed, now sans kimono, I was aware that I was very tired and yet utterly unable to sleep. Every time I even thought about lying down and turning off, another jolt of panicked alertness went through me, and I was back to 100% wired.

Still, I was commanded to get dressed, so after a while, I did so, pulling out Charles’s extra clothes. They were all too big for me, so when it got to the bottoms, I wasn’t sure what to do. I ended up standing in the room, staring at the closet, the towel still around my body, when there was a creak at the threshold of the room.

It was Charles, with several backlit uniformed shapes behind him.

“You’re not dressed yet?” he asked, almost kindly. His working-with-victims voice, it probably was, in retrospect.

My eyes turned to the floor, then, after a time, to the clothing I’d been staring at. He waited, and waited, and eventually I pointed meekly, “Doesn’t fit.”

“Wear your mom’s stuff.”

I knew they wanted me to be presentable. I knew they wanted me to look male. I also knew all of Charles’s clothes would be so big I couldn’t be presentable. I further knew that my mother would beat me the hell up and cause a further great shrieking calamity if she caught me wearing her clothes without permission. And so...

I just wasn’t sure what to do, so all I did was stand there, unable to decide and getting ever more anxious.

Charles cleared his throat. I looked over at him and the others, unaware of how much time had passed, but aware that I was being visible and wasting time and not giving the adults what they wanted, which was bad. Very bad.

But he was still standing there, so I forced out haltingly, my voice sounding grating and strange to my ears, “Clothes. Angry.”

Charles sighed. “It’s okay. I won’t let her hurt you anymore.”

I stared at him blankly, blinking once. That wasn’t a good enough reassurance. He wasn’t always around with her. In fact, we three were rarely in the same room together.

“Doesn’t this child have clothes in his own home?” asked one of Charles’s comrades from over his shoulder. It was a man older than Charles, it looked like, with fancy gold braiding on his hat.

Charles took a long, deep breath through his nose, his eyes tightly closed and his shoulders filling. I startled, but he just turned and offered politely to the man, “He doesn’t live here.”

“Oh. He lives with you normally?”

“...He lives at the club.”

“Oh,” the man noted, putting the pieces together. “You didn’t bring him clothes after tonight, though?”
“Crime scene. I figured it’d keep a day.”

“Ah, sure.” This seemed to go over, until the commander suddenly frowned. “Why doesn’t her son live with her? Does she sleep at the club too, most nights?”

They glanced at each other momentarily, some understanding going between them.

“I told you she was crazy,” Charles explained lightly.

The man thought about this for a second, then shrugged. “Just make sure it makes sense in the paperwork.”

“Roger.” Charles, released, went back to me. He took a few steps in, and I stood rooted to the spot, well aware that running away in the presence of others was something he didn’t like because he felt it made him look bad. And I didn’t want to be bad anymore today. I might not survive it.

“Hey. You like dresses, right? Just wear a dress. But just for tonight, until your clothes dry.”

I nodded, then waited.

They waited too.

I mustered my courage and made a small shooing motion. It was easier, and yet more terrifying, than speaking. When I spoke and someone didn’t like it, the only thing that got hurt was my psyche. When I made a motion someone didn’t like, I got slapped or shoved. I didn’t want to think about what all these guys would do to my fingers. I couldn’t outrun them all.

“No,” Charles replied. “They have to look at your bruises.”

My eyes widened. I quickly looked between them, trying to find a way out on somebody’s face, but there was no sympathy anywhere. These were all faces in agreement. Faces that belonged to people much bigger than me, who were blocking the only door, and held the keys to my future punishments and opportunities. After all, one of these people decided whether or not I got food, sleep, shelter, and who I got stuck with overnight, and these were his friends. I had to obey them, and I didn’t want to make them mad in the process. Plus, this, and the people, were all very new and strange, so I didn’t know how far I could push things to stick up for myself.

I swallowed hard, blinking rapidly several times as I tried to push down the panic, shame, and internal monologues of defiance. I had to find some other emotion, and quickly. I wasn’t sure how much time they’d give me, and I didn’t want to be doing anything against my will again, because that would only make me panic more, so I quickly, as quickly as I could, cobbled together an excuse for it all and forced myself to agree to it:

Do what they say. They know what’s best. They’re adults. Listen to them. You’re just being stupid. They know what’s best. They won’t hurt you.

But they will. They will theywilltheywill

Shut up, that’s not helping right now. Just do what they say and then you can hate them and be alone where it’s safe again.

I took a breath and, with sudden clarity, forced my fragmented pieces to behave. They were willing to move in the same direction en masse, if that direction was the promise of self-righteous anger later that I could hold over the people who’d wronged me like an identity. It didn’t seem like a good deal, but it’d do for now. Anything would hurt less than the shame of being found out, in
front of all these people, as so pathetic as to have been beaten up by my mother to the point of needing to be publicly *examined* for it. “S-sure...”

With some effort, I mechanically pulled off the towel, dropping it to the floor. And thus I stood, totally naked, in front of the local cops.

A couple of pairs of eyes widened. One guy snorted, stifling a laugh. Charles just sighed and put his face in his hand. “Not like that.”

But I wasn’t capable of feeling anything at that moment. I still didn’t know quite what had happened and why I was here; I just knew *something* had, something my mother had done. The flash of the knife came again, and...

Oh, right.

She’d attacked me, because I’d hurt her. I’d done something that made her mad enough to hurt me.

But then why were all these people here? That wasn’t a crime, was it? Hurting me when I’d been bad?

Ah, it must have been because of Charles. Because he’d hit her too hard. People didn’t like it when you hit women; that was *wrong*. Someone else from the building must have called the cops on him, and now he was being taken to task for it. We all were, because I’d been too stupid to keep her happy.

This was *my* fault. So I had to accept my punishment.

As I stood there, I felt my mind floating away, wandering off into whatever distant fields of comforting imagination it could find. My mind and body went mostly numb, including every emotion and even the bruises they spoke of. I was just there, totally distant from my body, from the reality of the moment. And it felt kind of nice. Certainly better than the fear of the unknown. I could get used to this feeling.

“All right, I’ll get it all catalogued,” came the voice of the young man from the bathroom earlier. He shuffled the men in black uniforms aside, turned on the lightswitch for the room, and instructed me to sit on the bed.

“Where’s the kimono?” I asked Charles as everyone shuffled out but him and the guy. He was watching me, an odd look on his face.

“The...? Oh.” Arms crossed, he gazed into the living room. “It’s over there. She was trying to smother you with it, I think. Or maybe she was going to burn you in it, I’m not sure. Maybe both. It’d be her style to take everybody in the building down with her and then claim sympathy points. Why, you want it?”

I shook my head, as the paramedic took out a small ruler and a camera.

“Well good, cuz it’s evidence, so I can’t give it to you anyway. Not really.”

*Then why’d you even ask?* I demanded bitterly, as the paramedic took my hand and the ruler and positioned them both so that he could photograph my arm and the stitches. Rage curled up my back, pushed my fists closed, made my face and neck itch.

But no, an emotion like that wasn’t useful right now. I took a breath and the feelings floated away in the exhale, much like my thoughts did. Luckily, it stayed away this time around, and I was able
to stay in the strange, floaty state where I didn’t feel much of anything, physical or otherwise.

Meanwhile, Charles rummaged through the closet, picking out things on hangers and then putting them back. After a time, he laid a blue v-neck shirt with black trim on the bed next to me, one of things which could have been a dress or shirt because of how long it was. “This’ll do. Your underwear will by dry soon, so just wear these.”

I nodded numbly as I was directed this way and that, not looking at him. But he didn’t leave. In fact, Charles stayed there, hovering over me and the work being done. I stared at his shoes, wishing he’d go away and stop watching my shame.

“Hey.”

At the summons, I moved my gaze to his belt line. I didn’t have the energy, or the wherewithall, to deal with looking him in the eye. I didn’t feel like I could look at him without crying, and if I started crying, I knew I’d be at a total loss of how to ameliorate him when it inevitably made him upset.

“You’re alive,” he said, slapping me on the shoulder amicably. “Be happy about that.”

For some reason, the only answer I could muster was to shake my head negative.

Charles did a combination of a tisk and a sigh and headed out of the room. “This is why I’m not a firefighter. A little gratitude is just too much for some people.”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered into the awkward silence once Charles had left.

“Don’t be,” the paramedic answered back simply. “You’re alive. That means you still have another chance to be forgiven. Try to focus on that instead.”

I didn’t fully like that answer, but it was the only thing I had to work with that was even the least bit kind, so I offered feebly, “I’ll try.”

“Good boy.”

And like that, he continued to photograph the marks on my skin.

Eventually, the man had me stand against one of the walls so he could photograph my neck, face, back, and overall form. I stared away from the camera, trying to pretend it wasn’t happening. I didn’t want there to be any evidence of what had happened. But I just kept being asked to produce it, from all these people I didn’t know.

Didn’t know, save one.

“Oh,” I muttered at one of the cops as the paramedic packed up and called them back into the bedroom. “Hi, Aleau.”

He was a man in his forties, light-haired and dark-eyed, with lines in his face like he’d been in the sun many years of his life. He was a very plain person, but recognizable nonetheless, from the many times he’d been at the club with Charles or others. Here, in my mother’s house, far from his usual easy smile, he blustered a bit as I gazed up at him dully in my borrowed dress. He took off his hat and offered—with Charles and the others standing in the background—“Your mother attacked you, he said?”
I didn’t respond. My brain wasn’t working. Why couldn’t they just leave me alone about it? I didn’t want to think about it. I already hurt enough as it was.

In some way, I knew his question to be true, but I couldn’t recall any details, except various split-second flashes of silver and her black hair whipping around in monochrome. And the sound of her growling. That kept coming through, too. I closed my eyes, trying to catch the thread. Images of her mouth yelling with vile words—hurtful, soul-destroying words—but not being able to fully hear any of them, all while the front door rattled thunderously. All I could pick up from my recall was this vague sense of myself shattering to the hits of, I hate you, you are nothing, why don’t you —

“Why don’t you just be a good boy and die,” I whispered suddenly, as my gaze opened to stare at the floor. It didn’t feel like I had said it, and for a second, I wondered at where it had come from.

“She...said that you?” he asked, sounding tense.

I blinked at the floor. I didn’t even breathe. Just blinked. That was all my brain was up to doing at that moment, apparently. I could feel, then, what would soon become the familiar and oddly comforting sensation of my mind “creating a void”—trying to lock up access to ideas and memories that I knew should have been there, shutting their doors and hiding their keys so neither I, nor my unconscious, could get to them. So that my emotions would be safe from ever feeling them and putting their teachings into place.

In exchange for a vaguely artificial calm, I could offer up my panic and terror to that warm, sheltering void. It was a good trade, so I let it empty the proverbial wagon without fighting it much. Sometimes, in the years that followed, it would take mere moments, and sometimes it would take minutes or several “treatments” over days. This time, I just stood there, watching it happen in my mind’s eye, feeling the calm spread over me with a wave of warm exhaustion. It was almost like what being held by someone I trusted was like, few and far between as the experiences were.

“He’s in shock still, I guess,” Charles whispered to Aleau as I blinked tiredly. “He...doesn’t seem to be working quite right, at the moment. Two incidents in one day... Do you want him to maybe make a statement later?”

He shrugged and put his hat back on. “Eh. Yours is good enough. Kids aren’t reliable witnesses a court can use anyway. I’ll just make something up if the sergeant really needs it. Sarge, you think we’ll need it?”

From the other room came a dull, “Nah. Plenty of adult witnesses from the other apartments.” This was presumably from the guy with the braids on his hat. “Charles, I know you just lost your club, but would you mind paying some of the overtime for all this?”

“I can do the books and see,” Charles noted, “though your monthly allowance might be a little reduced.”

There was a pause, and then, “If it gets the mayor off my back, it’s worth it.”

“Got it.”

Aleau coughed a bit at that exchange, but eventually turned back to Charles with eyebrows raised, indicating he hadn’t heard anything. He waited politely for orders.

“Thanks,” Charles said to him, taking him by the shoulder and steering them into the hallway. “Sorry to bother you. Just need some official documentation for something like this. Nothing
problematic for me, just enough to get her committed. Y’know?”

“Yeah, I get it.” He shrugged as they left the room together. “Glad to help. That poor kid though...?”

“It’s all right,” I heard Charles say as the door closed. “We knew it was going to happen sooner or later.”

The door clicked shut, and I was once again left alone in the dark with nothing but my broken wits and throbbing bruises beneath a new dress.

Knew....?
The chapter title is a reference to that one scene in "What Dreams May Come."

When I started writing this arc, I wasn't sure exactly what I was trying to write. It wasn't until the end of this chapter--which I'm still not totally satisfied with--that the writing revealed to me what it was: I was trying to explore how a child is taught to hate themselves over time, in a way that breaks something in them.

I'm still not sure if that can ever be recovered. I hope so. Not knowing the answer to that question is what's holding up the rest of the story from being written. I know the ending I want, but I have no idea what real basis can get us there. Wish me luck finding it. I know some of you reading this are being helped by it as much as I am, so you sure as hell better believe that I'm not giving up on it.

If you have any references about C-PTSD and BPD and childhood trauma that helped you, do consider sharing it with me in the comments.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After the cops finally left, it was well into morning. From the bathroom, I heard Charles telling his comrades goodbye, and then the door shut heavily.

“What a mess,” he was saying to himself as he came back toward the bedroom. He looked around for me, then noted, “Hey. I’m going to call Zora and then get some sleep. Don’t wake me.”

I stared at him from the bathroom sink, and didn’t say a word. My eyes said it all—I just wanted everyone to leave me alone.

“Don’t give me that look,” he snapped, but it was half-hearted. He looked me over—standing there in the dress, surveying my bruised face in the mirror—and then shook his head and headed for the phone.

As I gazed at the dark spots on my arm, I listened distantly to the sound of the buttons dialing, and then his voice talking softly on the answering machine:

“Hi Zora, it’s me. There’s been an incident here, Sunny’s finally snapped. I’ve gotta watch over her ki—over him for a while. I’m going to catch a nap, clean up here, and then come back to you. I should be back by evening. If you need anything, please call me here. Anything you need, I’ll be here. Just stay strong, okay?”

He rattled off the number, in case she didn’t have it. I didn’t know why she wouldn’t have it, but...it didn’t matter. What mattered was that I’d finally heard him say something nice to someone, in a way that I could recognize as obviously caring.

He really was capable of it. And the way he treated her and me really were two different things. Huh.
I turned my other arm over, then held them together, in front of the medically white light of the sink. Dark bruises, the shape of fingers, littered my arms. They went from yellow to brown in parts, and in time, would probably be all manner of ugly colors.

They were unslightly. Unsettling. And they were all over me.

The mark of being unwanted was a truly hideous thing.

But at least now I knew.

As I felt the ghost sensation of my mother’s fingers gripping into my skin, I gazed at my face in the mirror. At the dark handprints that ringed my throat in several layers, and the cut marks on my bare shoulder that were encrusted with stitches that looked like barbed wire. At the dark, swollen wound from where I’d hit the table, and things from the table had hit me. Both my eyes were still open, but there were nicks and cuts and discolored spots speckling my cheeks, nose, and forehead like an animal’s pattern.

Yes, I knew now: What I was supposed to look like on the outside, to match the rotten things inside of me that everyone but me seemed to be able to see.

This was mine. This was me. And I had to make sure I remembered this, even after the bruises healed, so that I’d never make the mistake of believing I was good, ever again.

When Charles hung up the phone and closed the bedroom door, I was still in the bathroom, staring at my skin. He didn’t say anything to me other than, “Don’t leave. I don’t want to have to track you down.”

He didn’t care that I didn’t reply.

He didn’t care at all, I realized.

But that was exactly the way things should have been, because I was an ugly, unlovable person.

I was just glad I could see it now, too.

That evening, after the cops had left, I found myself waking up in the corner of the bathroom, wrapped in what blankets I could find that Charles wasn’t using.

Every part of me ached, while some additionally throbbed or stung. But it didn’t matter. I didn’t want to move. I could fully remember what had happened, now, at least with my mother, and with it came the knowledge that there wasn’t anything or anyone out there for me to engage with. Just an empty house, full of broken promises.

I sat on the floor staring at the wall tile for probably an hour before I decided I was too cold and thus wanted to move. I realized, distantly, that this was a stupid and futile thing—it wasn’t like anyone cared—but I did it anyway, probably out of some distant hope of comfort from my own pathetic form being visited upon by a wandering, caring adult.

Touching at my raw and swollen throat, I wandered into the kitchen with my blankets, where, again, I just sat, staring at nothing, listening to the wall clock.
I didn’t want to look at the broken vases. Or the stab marks in the kitchen cabinets. The missing table that’d gone out a window—or the missing window. And least of all, the chez.

But I did anyway. I did it all anyway, endlessly, not knowing what to think or feel but unable to look away from the jumble of emotions staring at them caused.

It felt like hours until Charles finally got up. I listened to him stretch and yawn and hum; talk to himself and sing a little as he brushed his teeth and took a shower. I was still sitting there, with a thousand-yard stare, when he came into the main room.

Hearing the normal sounds of someone getting ready—and not attacking me—was admittedly rather comforting, and took the edge of formless panic off. But there didn’t seem to be a healing enough amount of it, for when Charles noticed me, his upbeat tone dissipated into the air for a telltale pause as he looked me over (I saw out of the corner of my eye). Hesitantly, he probed, “So...what’re you up to?”

I didn’t respond in any way. I didn’t even worry about it. I simply...couldn’t. I was worthless, ergo anything I had to say was worthless.

“...You eaten yet?”

At this, I blinked, which was just enough to break me out of the paralysis of staring at a particular spot on the wallpaper. “It’s different.”

“What’s different?”

He followed my line of sight out into the room, then back to my face.

The place looked exactly the same, I realized. But it felt so, entirely different. How was that even possible?

“Me, I think.”

Charles tilted his head at me, not sure what to say.

“My eyes are open to the truth now.”

“Howso...?”

“I see all the things you’re always telling me about me,” I explained hollowly, eyes fixed on one swirling pattern in painted gold.

“Oh...Good?” he asked, switching his weight on his feet. “So...you want something to eat?”

Why would I want that? I didn’t deserve it, and it wasn’t like he really wanted to give it to me anyway. He was just doing it because he felt he had to, because the law said he had to, and I didn’t want to be a burden on him, since our bond was tentative enough as it was. If he snapped like my mother did, he’d either throw me out on the street or bash my head in. I didn’t want to learn the hard way which one it’d be. “No?”

“Are you sure?” He checked his watch. “It’s been, what, an entire day since you’ve last—”

“She’s not coming back, is she?”

I turned to him. And maybe something about my face, for once, showed through enough to get him to drop what he was doing and give me an honest answer. He huffed and returned his hand to
rest on his hip.

“No.”

“Did you arrest her?”

“I didn’t. The other cops did.”

I blinked at him dully. “Can I go see her?”

Charles sighed raggedly and walked into the kitchen. After a few minutes, he sat down next to me, an apple and a sandwich for himself. He set down a tangerine orange in front of me, and then ate his food in awkward silence while I sat there rigidly.

“Eat it,” he commanded after a bit, though not harshly. Automatically, I started peeling it, though I wasn’t really sure why. I wasn’t hungry. I just did whatever he said, my nerves buzzing and movements disjointed, because he was the only one left to do so.

I was already full. Of emotions, of thoughts. So many that none of them came out. It was like my body was a glass, full to the brim, and the littlest connection would cause a huge amount to come sloshing out. But until then, it might as well have been a solid block of crackled crystal.

“I’m sorry,” I muttered, when I’d gotten halfway through the orange. Something about the way the peel looked, cast off, torn up, and discarded, made me tear up all of a sudden, made the strength leave my hands. “I’m sorry, for whatever I did.”

I don’t want to be worthless.

I put my hands against my face and hid there. I was too messed up to even care if he hit me, or yelled at me. I was prepared to yell back.

I don’t want to be bad.

I didn’t want to see that knife blade in front of my eyes again. I didn’t.

I don’t want to be only worth disposing of.

But I knew that if I gave in just a little bit more, I would.

I want to be someone loveable.

I couldn’t bare to let that happen, because if I did...

I want my mom...

Tears spilled down around my fruit.

But I’m not worthy. I’m not. I’m not, I’m not, and I never will be, because she’s never coming back, since I made her too angry...

...I’d just cry more, and all the bad emotions would come.
Eventually, Charles, far from leaving in a huff complaining of being inconvenienced like I’d expected, set down his spoon and rubbed a hand over my back. It was warm, and big, and oddly comforting, given the circumstances.

I sniffled, but I still couldn’t really see anything, even as I looked at him.

“What did I do?” I wailed.

“You really are a selfish little kid, aren’t you?” he asked, his hand never leaving.

“...What?” I snarked desperately, afraid that, even after all the painful rhetoric I’d taken on about myself, I was still failing in some way to have acquired enough of it.

“You have no concept that the things that happen to you might have nothing to do with you, do you? In fact, they usually don’t.”

“What?” I shook my head at him, confused. That made no sense; why would someone attack you if they didn’t definitely, absolutely, want you dead? If you hadn’t done something to deserve it? People just didn’t do that...

“Sometimes people just snap,” he explained. “They just do. It’s not your fault.” Here, his hand gripped my uninjured shoulder. “Sorry it had to be on you.”

That...had nothing to do with my new identity as worthless, and I wasn’t about to give it up, now that I actually had one that made sense. “What? I don’t understand...”

“Your mom’s just crazy, kid.” He smiled with a happy sigh at the ceiling. “And now we don’t have to worry about her anasty more.”

“But...but I love her—”

“No you don’t,” he explained simply, a sharp note coming into his voice for the first time that instantly made me pull backward. “You need her. There’s a difference. How could you love someone who’s treated you so badly?”

“Badly?”

*Bad, I’m bad; worthless; stupid; kill it—*

“She tried to kill you,” he went on simply, eyebrow raised like I was stupid. “Even for an Italian mom, that’s a bit much.”

“But...but, she’s my mom,” I protested, heartbeat rising. “she wouldn’t treat me badly, it was *me* that made her mad, it was just me that didn’t realize...”

He eyed me dubiously. “You’re really messed up, you know that? You sound like the girls at the club. The stupid girls.”

He went back to his food with a shrug, the warmth and threat of his hand leaving.

*But?? Need...? Want...? Love...? Stupid?...*

If... If my “love”—or what I thought was love—was really just “need,” then I must have been a very needy person, instead? And needy was bad?...

Well, yes, of course it was; I knew that already, if I took a moment to think it over. No one had
ever come out and said it exactly but it was always there: My mother had said just last night that needy was clingy, which was a capital relationship offense, and Charles and the guys at the club said that on a daily basis in the poker rooms about their female companions, who really wouldn’t be their companions long after being labeled “clingy.” So needy was, therefore, Bad. Therefore I was also Bad, had been Bad for a long time, possibly forever. But if that were the case...if that were true...

Then how the hell did you love someone?

As I stared at the half peeled orange with rising panic, I suddenly realized something:

I must not have known what love was at all, because if I had, my mother wouldn’t have hated me so much that she had tried to kill me. And that, if I had been a better child, she probably wouldn’t have done it at all. It wasn’t that I had done something wrong, which I had; it was that I’d never been doing the right thing in the first place. The entire basis and balance of our relationship had been off all this time, and if I hadn’t been so stupid, I might have seen that, might have been able to give her what she needed to make her want to treat me better.

But how was I supposed to know how to do that...? Especially if she never told me? Maybe she had, and I just hadn’t seen it...?

But the way Charles spoke of it, it was something I was supposed to be able to do normally. That everyone was supposed to come equipped with, the ability to love another to whatever level they needed to keep them wanting to come around.

My chest constricted and a decided bolt of bewildered panic hit me, more disorienting than most of the others I’d become familiar with recently. At the thought of everything I’d known as love becoming labeled as needy, as “bad,” in my mind, it felt like the ground under my feet had turned to sand. If everything that I’d ever done in my life that I’d thought was a good act was actually bad, had pushed people away, then...

I really was a horrible person.

Just...fundamentally, inherently, awful. I was a terrible human being.

No wonder my mother hated me enough to want to kill me, and no one else wanted me around besides. Everything that had ever been done to me really was my fault. And in fact, I should have been grateful not to have been disposed of earlier, in any number of more painful, more sinister ways.

My eyes started to tear up again, but, in a wave of clarity, I pushed it away for a more pressing thought:

I had to do something to make sure that didn’t happen with Charles. He would absolutely succeed in offing me, and for a moment, I was gripped with panic at the thought of dying.

“Charles?” I asked, strained, pushing at a painful point on my chest.

“Mn?”

“Can you...can you teach me how to love someone properly? So that they love me back?”

He laughed spontaneously, almost spitting out his food. He coughed a couple times, chewed the mouthful down, then heavily set his elbow on the table and turned to me. “Where did that come from? Your mom tried to off you and now you want a girlfriend, is that it? Damn, you’re colder
than I thought...”

“I...um...” Under his gaze, and my inability to explain it as anything other than weak and needy and distantly realizing it was also a very feminine question, my voice shrank into nothing.

“No...nowhere.”

“Shit, if I knew that, I wouldn’t be here,” he snorted, going back to his meal. “Eat your sandwich.”

I stared at it, getting stuck switching gears again. So he didn’t know? But he must have. He must have, he had tons of friends (and lovers, apparently). He just didn’t want to tell me, probably because he thought I was too stupid to get it, or it’d take too long.

I frowned at the plate, huffing in annoyance. Maybe at him, maybe at myself, I wasn’t quite sure, but either way, this food offered me nothing toward solving my problems. I didn’t want it. I pushed it away.

“Now;” he commanded. “I’ve got places to be and I don’t want crumbs in my car.”

“Yessir!” I pulled the plate back, twice as fast.

“Good.”

Useful, I reminded myself, as I took up the hateful bread.

That was what he wanted, so that was what I would do.

Because it was the only way I’d earn his love.

Even if I was crying into my bread as I ate, to the point that Charles went into the bedroom to finish his meal with the door shut, put-upon sigh and all.

Chapter End Notes

500,000 words! Ack!

You're my heroes for reading this far. <3
“...So what now?” I asked, when dinner-cum-breakfast was over and I had calmed down enough that he was getting ready to leave. I was standing in the doorway, half behind the frame, trying to be inconspicuous and innocuous and not needy. But I still needed to actually communicate with him, so I was just trying a little bit to see if I could accomplish my neediness in a way that wouldn’t cross his threshold of ‘hate you’ or ‘get the hell away from me,’ or maybe, on a bad drop of the dime, ‘fucking kill you.’

Luckily, he seemed disinterested, which meant I’d succeeded. His back was to me as he changed his shirt, and for a moment I marveled at all the muscles there. I might be like that someday. Have power like that someday. I didn’t find it very attractive to be honest, but I did realize it was useful (Useful!), insomuch as it lead you to be the top of the food chain and, apparently, have lots of friends and allies in Charles’s case. (Ultra useful!) People were always deferential to him. I wanted that. Wanted the safety of that.

But...shit. Wanting was the same as needing, according to him, and I needed to not need things, so I should...just not want things, either. I shouldn’t even try; I should just accept what was given to me and asked of me. Yes, that seemed to fit everything he was asking of me: Just be and not ask anything; just exist and not want anything. Then no one can hurt you, because they can’t take anything away from you; and you can’t hurt anyone else, because you can’t ask too much of them.

It all made so much sense. I had no idea why I was so stupid as to not have noticed it before.

As I was processing this, I realized he had a bunch of scars on his back. Long and thin and in varying directions. Like a rope had hit him and left a permanent mark, or something.

Before I could remind myself not to ask about it—not to want to know—he shrugged at my previous question, buttoning up his shirt without noticing my gaze. “What do we do after something scary happens? We go to work like we always do, and pretend like nothing happened.”

“Why?” I asked, before I could think better of it.

Something had very much happened. That much I knew for sure.

“Because if you do anything else, it’ll hurt too much.”

“Oh...?”

I contemplated that for a bit, toeing at the ground. Charles looked at himself in the mirror briefly, swiping down his hair.

“Don’t let it get to you. That’s the difference between men and women,” he advised, shaking his head with a snort as he started to do up his tie. “And there’s nothing more unseemly than people
who let things get to them, male or female or otherwise. Nah, she didn’t care about you anyway. Obviously. Now you just have proof.” Once he was done, he grabbed up his jacket off the chair and tapped my shoulder with the back of his hand as he walked by. “C’mon, get your coat.”

I did as bade, and as I trailed after him, picked up the suitcase of items for him that he had packed as well. He looked on approvingly, so by the time he got to the hat tree I figured I had earned one question—one need.

“But...Mom?” I asked, hating the vulnerability that laced through my voice, because I knew he wouldn’t like it. Still, the rising fear in me, the random need to just run and cry and hide until I fixed my fear, was overwhelmingly propulsive insofar as my words went. “What about her?”

“Oh. God, you’re a momma’s boy, aren’t you?” he asked thoughtfully from the front doorway, in which he leaned. “I had her committed to a mental hospital. And there she’ll be, until we can be sure she won’t do that again.”

“And when will that be?” I asked, hopeful.

“Never, probably,” he admitted. My face fell, as did the feeling in my body. “She’s sick, kid. Always has been, always will be, and that kind of sickness doesn’t get better. This is a blessing for you, you just don’t know it yet.”

“...Oh.” The word tumbled out of me, crestfallen.

“Don’t beat yourself up about it. I sure wouldn’t.”

That was an impossible ask, so I swiftly brushed it aside. “So...”

He raised his eyebrows impatiently. But I had to know something. I had one more question, because it was important to knowing whether I could expect to have a place with him tonight or not, even I hadn’t earned a second need yet.

“...Is she there and not in jail, because...you...you...you like Zora better?”

His eyes flashed, and for once, he didn’t say anything. But that was enough for me. I wasn’t as stupid as people tended to think. At least not about this sort of thing.

“You’ll tell me, right?” I asked. “When I can see her again?”

I didn’t care if he liked Zora better; if he was out of my hair, the better. I just cared about my mother taking her meds and being all right, because that made her happy, and she was more likely to like me when she was happy.

That wasn’t needy, right, taking care of other people? That was, um...giving?

“I’ll tell you when they tell me.” He shrugged and walked out the door, going for his raincoat in the hall closet. “Don’t hold your breath, though.”

“She needs her meds,” I insisted, following him out, unwilling to give it up so quickly. “They need to make sure she takes her meds——”

“Don’t.”

I drew up short, properly warned by the icy tone in his voice.

“They’ll take care of it. Even I’m not allowed any control over it. Don’t think you will be.”
“Oh...” I tucked my chin in, the typical display of submission. *Don’t upset him you stupid fucking moron, you want him to like you so you can get what you want, why you gotta be so goddamned fucking needy all the time?* I corrected of myself. Still, apparently this wasn’t enough of a lash for him, as he pointed at me, his tone unchanging.

“I know that look. You’re not special, you’re not smart or clever, no one loves you. You’re not going to get around this somehow. She’s gone, deal with it. She made her bed, she’s gotta sleep in it.”

I flinched a little at the last bit, and he muttered an apology, shockingly. “Look...it’ll get better. You just gotta knife a couple other people, and then it won’t be so scary.”

I frowned at him, alarmed. That was absolutely not what my problem was.

“You don’t have to do it right now, obviously, but the longer you wait, the worse it’ll get. You want some targets? I’m sure I can find you a chicken or a rat or a guy who owes me money. Anyway, get your coat, I’m not waiting for you, and it’s raining today.”

“Oh, yeah...sure, sure....”

I did as bade, but once we got to the doorway, I just sort of froze up again. It seemed I only had enough energy for a few bursts at a time. Something about it... I just...my head felt all full and cloudy. I didn’t feel...*normal*, and it was starting to get annoying.

“What?” he asked, when I ended up staring at the room. “I’m willing to accommodate you a little, kid, but you gotta work with me here.”

“So...what about...here? Sir?” I asked, turning to him expectantly. Hoping this counted as a *procedural* question and not a *need* or a *want* question.

Or rather, a *him* question, and not a *me* question. I didn’t matter to anyone; that was clear enough. And that was what he was always saying, wasn’t it? And Mom too... No wonder people were always annoyed when I made things about me. I, and the things I wanted, didn’t matter. I probably never would, unless I could make myself super useful somehow, to someone...

You only got to have *needs*, I realized as I stood there, if you were at the top of the food chain. But, in the mean time, if I could just manage to thread the needle of what the adults did and didn’t want from me whenever I was around them, walk the tightrope so that I was allowed to be around but never upset anyone... Then I might just survive. I might just have a chance to climb the ladder and get a *few* needs met...

“Oh...this place?” he asked thoughtfully, hanging on the knob. “Well...I’ll probably sell it. It’s worth a lot of money, you know. And it was never really my style.”

“...Oh.”

“Always wondered how she afforded it, though...”

There wasn’t a lot to say to that, even as he went on muttering to himself. There *should* have been, but there just...wasn’t anything coming to me. I...understood it, I guess. That nervous response to finality that he was talking about, that I couldn’t quite handle.

*He paid me a lot of money to keep you alive.*

I looked at Charles, then at the pink flat and its gold and white accents, so grey in the cloudy day.
At the couch, where I had almost been murdered, still stained with my blood.

I wonder how much the other guy will pay to keep you dead.

“I’ll miss it,” I murmured as I touched at my stitched-up shoulder, and then let Charles shut the door behind me.

Miss what it was supposed to be, anyway.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!