

WAYWARD

Prologue



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BY

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The third spring greeted me, and I have aged three years since then. I've been working in the ice cream shop and managing things, as Leo taught me. Zion graduated and now runs his family's businesses. We still visit each other from time to time.

In my spare time, I've had Mitsuru train me in Eskrima, a defensive form of fighting. So far, I have learned how to disarm and grapple, which is pretty handy.

To this day, more carnivores have been slowly depleting in population. The authorities' investigations are either information that we already know or more reports of people missing. I knew for sure that something wasn't right, and conveniently enough, Jack got laid off as an investigator. I knew I had to do something.

CHAPTER 1

"Hey!" The small bear clicked his fingers. I had not noticed myself staring at the air for quite some time. The lack of rest recently has been taking its toll. It's not that I hadn't gotten any of it, but it was only shut-eye, with my mind drifting off somewhere far. I could be dreaming myself awake for all I know.

"Where are the peanuts?" the small bear exclaimed. "I ordered this with peanuts! Where is it?"

"It's right there," I pointed.

"I'm counting only five nuts on my cream right now," the customer said.

"You might wanna add more."

"Alright," Ludus replied. "Hand over the cone."

I reached for the cone, poured a generous amount into it for what he asked, and gave it to the small thing. "Here. That'll be fifty cents extra for the nuts."

"You gotta be shitting me," he stepped back, appalled.

"You asked for more nuts, I gave it to you, now you pay for it,"

"Hell naw!" he shouted. "I ain't paying for fifty cents on nuts!"

"You know what? You're done. I'm calling Miguel," the customer took his phone out.

"Who?" I asked.

"Hey, Miguel, this guy's making me pay extra for nuts on my ice cream," the tiny brat yelled at his phone. "He better start counting 'em nuts, 'cuz I'm boutta slap 'em for the same amount!"

"Kid, I don't make the rules; I just run the shop," I annoyingly replied.

Damn, whose child is this? Someone pick him up, please.

"Oh yeah? Well, I'ma shove these nuts up your ass!" the customer roared.

He smacked the cone into my face.

"Eat your nuts, Mr. fifty cent!" the customer jeered and left.

I felt shame and disgrace again this week. These kinds of people never seem to run out of this place. And I was naive enough to think that the war had at least brought some compassion within us.

The door chime rang, and another man came in, taller than the previous one. Hopefully, his ego isn't as tall as he is.

"Hey, hey. Boss called; we're going on our first renegade mission-"

It's Mitsuru, the gray wolf. An old friend I had met back when Phileo and I used to play basketball with a local college basketball team.

"He refused to pay fifty cents for extra nuts," I said, licking the ice cream off his face. "Renegade mission?"

"We're investigating a supply truck that's arriving in the west part of the city," Mitsuru explained. "It could give us some lead to the supplier. We'd get more information from there."

"Alright. Let me wash up first," I replied.

"Ay, you!" a familiar voice called out.

Mitsuru and I turned to the chiming door and saw a hulking mass approaching the counter, accompanied by a small child. It was a nearly seven-foot monster, all shoulders, with tattoos of an anchor and a pink fleshy scar on each muscle. He stared dead into me; these eyes had seen fights both past and present.

"You the guy charging my buddy fifty cents for nuts?" the stranger asked.

"Hey, that's him, Miguel! Show it to 'em!" the customer proudly cheered.

"Miguel?" Mitsuru asked.

"Oh. Hey, Mits," Miguel said. "What brings you here?"

"I'm here to pick up my friend. Ludus." The wolf tilted his head. "How about this guy? Is he your friend?" Mitsuru looked at the small bear.

"Well, I uh-" Miguel stammered.

"C'mon beat his ass!" the customer urged.

Miguel punched the customer, who flew out the window.

"Sorry about that," Miguel said, handing me fifty cents. I hope he didn't cause any trouble. Anyway, have a good evening."

Mitsuru watched Miguel leave.

"Was that tiny brat really a child?" I asked, somewhat concerned.

"No. He's twenty years old. He just looks like that."

"Oh." A wave of relief washed over me.

"Do I get a hoodie on our first mission?" I asked as I washed off the cream.

"You could if you want to," Mitsuru replied. "I find it too edgy. The boss saw the costume from the Kingdom Hearts game I played and thought it was cool. It's so hot to wear, though."

"It's from a video game?"

"Yep."

"Then I could probably dress up like Batman, with lots of utility belts."

"Careful with the belts; you'll end up looking like a BDSM Batman," he warned with a wagging finger.

We got in the car and headed for the cabin, a thirty-minute drive from the city. The boss and I have never seen each other since we last spoke, and I have yet to answer his deal. Though he already seemed to know what I had at the back of my mind in the future. I did not have much of a better choice for Leo and me, seeing him sit on the porch almost all day and stare at coming passersby like he was waiting for something.

Having to do something like this almost feels like treading on shark-infested water. I probably won't be able to get out alive when I get in too deep, but I'm willing to put everything at stake for him and everyone who's missing, just like what my father did for me.

"We're back," Mitsuru announced as we walked on the creaking porch.

"Hello, Ludus." The boss stood tall and enigmatic like he always was. He fashioned a brown trench coat that reached down to his calves, hidden by vintage trousers fastened by a thick belt gilded in precious metal. Below this was a shirt that read 'Armani' and neatly tucked it around his ideal waist.

A sharp aura emanated from him; his green eyes struck me, silent in one motion, and read what was about to escape my lips. His head was slightly tilted, a motion Mitsuru seemed to admire and replicate, but he was different. His was an uncanny yet mesmerizing taunt that ensnared anyone unlucky enough to gaze upon him, and even I couldn't step back.



"You called for a stakeout?" I dared to move closer.

"We're not going out to eat steaks," Russel clarified.

"He meant surveillance mission," Nix added.

"Cut this nonsense; it hurts my brain," Russel said. "So, do you want a cloak?"

"I'll have to pass," I replied.

"You have to cover yourself with something at least," Khordon, the orange shark, insisted.

"I don't wear a cloak, but I do wear a hoodie!" The bear meekly added. "The cloak makes me look extra fat..."

"It's fine, Shin. No one's shaming you for it," Nix said.

"It's not my fault I'm a bear!" Shin roared, showing his gigantic fangs.

"I can wear a normal hoodie with you, Shin," I offered to console his untamed rage.

"Really? That'd be nice. I won't feel left out anymore."

"Is everyone here? Settle down, and I'll do the briefing," The boss said.

"Yep," Nix confirmed.

"Today will be our first big mission and will mark the start of a new age."

"Ooh, sounds big."

"Like me?" Shin patted his belly.

"Settle down," Russel instructed. "Our target is the supply truck from Lower Manhattan. Khordon, our reliable intel, got information that the truck comes directly from one of Plakka's suppliers."

"Just to freshen up, what's Plakka again?" Shin asked.

"Shin, it's what's been causing all the outrage in the city," Nix explained.

"Yeah, but... how will the following help us?" Shin wondered.

The boss covered his face in utter disappointment.

"We're tracking it down to find a clue of where their bosses are," Nix continued.

"And after we do that, we can finally get a clue where their headmaster is."

"Okay, so we're stopping the bad guys," the bear rubbed his chin. "But aren't we the bad guys too?" Shin asked.

"Oh dear," Russel exclaimed.

"Shin, just listen, please," Khordon urged.

"No, we're not, Shin," Nix reassured. "We simply resupply some... borderline questionable stuff and do odd jobs, but that's just how we get by."

"Oh," Shin said.

I glanced at the boss. As much as I felt like Shin was about to be kicked from the group, he seemed to know where the bear's notion was coming from and did not question it any further. Just then, I felt a slight tug behind me. I turned and saw small raccoon.

"Oh." I pieced a smile.

"Are you new?" He asked.

"Y-yeah,"

"Cool!" The boy chewed on a long piece of gummy worm, and he looked at me with such innocence. He did not know what these men do, and what I was about to do. I could only hope it stayed that way.

"Timothy, go back and do your homework," The boss said.

"I'm already done!" He protested.

"We're in a meeting,"

"I'll see you later, Uncle Wolf," the boy scurried back to his room.

Uncle?

"If we're all done on the debacle, we are leaving in 10 minutes. We're taking the car."

"I'm taking the wheel," Mitsuru gladly volunteered.

"We're taking a backseat then," Nix said. "Ludus, you got arms?"

I shook my hands.

"No, silly. Guns!" Nix clarified.

"Oh! Uh, no."

"Here. You'll need this later," Nix said, handing me a heavy piece of metal.

"I've never held a real gun before," The thought of holding it alone had me feeling light-headed. I had never imagined having something that can end one's life so easily carried and at command. I had somehow felt like I had robbed God of his authority.

"The supplier should be guarded with armed men," Nix explained. "It should help keep you alive if we're busy on the frontlines or something else comes up."

"Yeah. Noted," I said, as my mind wandered off, staring at the firearm.

"It's your first mission with us, Ludus," Russel said. "If you feel like staying backlines, don't hesitate. Inexperience in combat is the number one cause of an early death."

"Right," I nodded anxiously.

CHAPTER 2

When my father and I lived in the northern mountains of Pennsylvania, he brought home these weird, orange ear-shaped mushrooms from his foraging trips. Sometimes a salmon, or other times a bag of snails, where we'd boil them up with coconut milk and eat them as a stew.

He would also hunt down some game if our stock called for it. It was a luxury to have in our meals, as hunting was or perhaps still is taboo. A brown, varnished hunting rifle was his best partner for the job, as I was not to shoot with a bow and arrow or hold a knife without it slipping and accidentally cutting my foot. I was merely the patient observer.

We waited inside the vehicle; Mitsuru and the boss took the front while the rest sat silently in the second and third rows.

"Look at all that unloaded Plakka." Mitsuru anxiously tapped on the steering wheel. "At a local bakery? Is no one noticing this at all?"

"Nobody is inclined to," Russel replied. "Anyone who interferes in what they're doing vanishes. Like the rest of the predator species in the New York."

"It's only a matter of time before we disappear too." He added.

"There's the driver. It seems that they've just finished their checklist," the boss said. "Start the engine."

As soon as he instructed, the men closed the back of the truck and went in and drove. We tailed behind, putting a few meters back to keep anonymity, and the rest of us sat up to see where we were headed.

I couldn't think of the first thing when it came to espionage, let alone holding a gun properly. *What if I killed someone accidentally? And what would happen if I did kill someone?* My legs jerked at the thought of the ghosts haunting me in night and inside my dreams. The life I would be living once I became a criminal. I would never be able to go to a dollar store ever again.

We crossed the George Washington Bridge and turned to the right road of Fort Lee. On our right was the Hudson River, its blue glistening waves and sharp air helped me ease my nerves, even for just a brief moment. On our left were rubble and charcoal houses, remnants of old life that were and gray battered-up husks stretching hundreds of miles outward from here.

"Here we are," Mitsuru said. "An abandoned research facility in Tenafly."

"Who knows how many more of these Plakka farms exist, considering the amount of free time we've allowed them to operate." The boss pondered.

"Mitsuru and I will go in and ask around." He turned to us. "I have a wire on me so I can communicate with the transceivers you have. Nyx and Khordon, you two follow in after minute five to avoid suspicion and take a tour around the facility."

"What about us?" Shin asked.

"You and Ludus can stay here and guard the car."

That's a better plan than I could have ever imagined.

"Alright. But that sounds pretty boring."

"It's the most important job, Shin; we're entrusting you to keep our escape vehicle safe," Mitsuru reassured the bear.

"Oh, alright." Shin sat back in his seat.

"I'll keep an eye out if anything comes," I seconded.

"Good. Meet back here in fifteen minutes. If not, then we'll see what happens."

The first pair, Mitsuru and Russel, had moved out and briskly walked towards the facility. I scanned the outside of the building: It was half as long as a football field, two-storey, pale, and covered in dark grime. Its walls were crawling with vines from top to bottom, and its doors were made of stained glass, which meant they could easily break them if they ever got closed in.

I watched them disappear into the doors and waited until the next pair followed. Khordon and Nix walked around the empty front yard in search of a back entrance, while Shin and I carefully watched all the windows and corners for anything unusual.

CHAPTER 3

Mitsuru and I entered the poorly lit room. In front of us was a large desk, where a cheetah lounged carelessly as he stared at his smartphone.

"We're here to talk to the boss," Mitsuru said.

The doors slid shut with a thud behind us, and we both needed our choice of words to be precise: *one, two, three*. The cheetah got up from his chair and walked. A blunt between his fingers glowed a warm red, and the ash gently wilted on the floor where he stood. He began to sigh. He'd heard this before. His eyes rolled, tapped on the cigar, and placed it between his lips once more before uttering a disgruntled hum.

"Where are you two from?" He asked, turning to me.

"New York."

"I know that. Where from New York?"

"Lower Manhattan. Henry street. We're here to ask if we could get a contract or some kind of partnership to supply to other parts of New York, maybe even expand to New Jersey."

"There's already a supplier there. We've expanded a year ago." His shoulders tightened, and he leaned on the desk beside him. "Are you sure you're here on a business proposal?"

Mitsuru turned to me, but I averted his gaze, and I could not risk it. If I did, there would be two bullet holes for each of us.

One of my father's advisors taught me that one's hands could tell a hundred stories, a hundred poems, or speak a hundred dialects. He had told me that if I were in

an unfavorable position in a debacle, I would have to use wit accompanied by words. That compassion is a weapon if I could imagine holding it.

I turned my palms facing forward and slightly narrowed my head. "We only want to make ends meet. We're also in an organization like you are in one." I shrugged. "Perhaps your name would be up for promotion after referring our organization as partners?"

He paused. Call the boss. I whispered in my head.

"Call the boss. Tell them what they want."

"Aight." A voice behind us replied.

Sounds of shifting and metal clicks followed somewhere around his belt, which I presumed was his holster, and that sound was his gun at point blank range before he placed it back.

Not a moment later, a small man came before us. He had big ears and beady eyes, much like a rat rather than a chinchilla, which he was, with a striped polo to fit.

"State your business." He wasted no time for pleasantries.

"We're here for a partnership," I said while looking down at the rat that was only as tall as my knees. "Or could we have a word with you, perchance?"

"What for?" He raised a brow.

"To make ends meet."

He combs the hairs on his chin. "I have not met with an organization that's struggling financially," he mused. "Still, we do need goons to deliver goods around Brooklyn."

"Follow me to my office," he gestured.

Thick brown boxes from shelves stretched to the end of the room, dampening and dulling our footsteps as we walked. Mitsuru and I exchanged glances and knew not to say anything.

A couple of turns around halls and doors were made before we made it to his office. One turn took us to a corridor of more doors, the other large hall and the last a room within a room. When we finally reached his quarters, we stopped in front of two large pine doors before his goons opened them gracefully. Inside was lit by the day through the large glass wall. At the center was a large desk that curved and a chair that was larger than he was.

It was better kept than the other rooms and better than the rest of the building. After all, it was their bosses' room. No need to keep your employees healthy when you can earn more money.

He sat and heaved, resting his little legs on the chair that seemed almost too big for him. I kept still, trying not to look amused.

"Your names?" He asked, his voice shrill.

"Ramone Wetbum," I replied. "My mother is Canadian."

"Right..." He nodded. "And you?"

"Tess Tease," Mitsuru replied, his face unfazed.

"Quebec?"

"No, from Tibet."

"I'll pass this over to the boss. You can start your first shipment by tomorrow."

The man rested his hands on his belly.

"Fantastic," I replied. "But I'm curious, aren't you the boss?"

"No. I'm only one of the soldiers." His voice simmered; he was displeased.

"But to answer your question, our Capo is Signore Rightmane. The don, however, I cannot tell you." He added. *Of course, you won't, because you don't know. But I do.* I replied, stingingly at the back of my mind. One of his grunts stopped by his side and whispered to the rat's ears.

"I imagine it pays well in... this industry. If I may say." I said. Just then, the rat's eyes lit like fire, and stared at me with such intensity that I could not help but look back.

"Yes, I can say so for sure. But I do not gloat as much as you do, Russel Vindsor. I calmly reached for my sleeves, and tried to hide my hand from clicking a switch to turn my wire on. *Hopefully, the others will hear this. If not, well...*

"Had not one of my best guards didn't tell me about you, then I wouldn't have been able to capture such a valuable criminal." He cackled like a bat screeching. I wanted to squeeze the life out of him. "What do you have to say now, exiled prince?"

"As I have said, I've come to propose a partnership. A parlay."

"A parlay? Well, I haven't heard that word in ages. Tell me, then, what do you have to offer that will be worth more than your cold corpse? Fortune? Fame? Certainly, you no longer have any of those." He smiled; he found this amusing while I had none of it. Sadly, I can't pull out my gun and just shoot him. There are already two pointed at us. Lucky bastard.

"Perhaps I could regale you with something else? Information worth more than the riches I used to possess once."

"Really now."

"I know where the silver medallion is." I stared into his beady little eyes. "Both you and I know how much power that thing holds." He sat up.

"W-where? How do you know this?" He stammered.

"It is-" A small can fell from the vent above me, and a thick cloud of smoke flushed the room within a second.

"Boss!" Mitsuru called and tugged my arm while I followed suit. We traversed the corners and long halls, shooting a few goons that stood in our way, and to my amazement, it was not long before we were back at the entrance. The gray wolf had memorized each turn as we first entered, sniffing out the gate like a bloodhound.

"Get to the car. We're getting out of here." He nodded, and we both sprinted to the vehicle just in time as we watched Nix ready his RPG-27 and fired at the building behind us, blowing it into a hundred bits.

"Russel!" The shrill cry of a rat scratches my ear, followed by a swift, airy sweep that seems to have passed the gap between Mitsuru and myself. I turned and saw the chinchilla lying face down on the dirt, gun in hand. Ludus had shot him dead.

CHAPTER 4

The warm air and scent of sandalwood oil gently brush on my cold face. I had not known such a scent existed; sweet and buttery, followed by a hint of freshly dried cloves, warm as a spring day. For a person so unfamiliar, let alone being a shark, he knew how to invite with a welcome using scents. This may be because of his species, especially their skin, but I do not want to be rude. He's a shark.

"You're looking a bit ghastly," he sat on the bed beside me. I was lying down with my arms flat on the soft cotton, staring at the ceiling. Motionless while I listened to the sound of a clock ticking nearby.

"What if he had a family?" I muttered.

"So, what if that rodent did? It's not their fault that their father turned out to be evil."

"What about the children?"

"Most fathers are deadbeat anyway. They won't miss him."

"But-"

"You're really thinking of this too much. You killed a bad person, Ludus. If anything, you're doing the world a favor by getting rid of him."

"Give me your palm." He gently presses on the base of my palms and drops a bit of oil. Sandalwood oil, the scent caresses my nose and lifts my spirits.

"This is nice." I huffed, sated by his massage.

"I learned this from my mother. She used to have a lot of oils back home and used them to relax my dad, who worked a lot underwater. She used it for me, too, when I was

little every night before going to bed. Lavender was my favorite of her oils, and I always requested it."

Lavender. I liked the scent of lavender. I remember he used it as his shampoo.

"Thank you." I turned my head as my eyes started to well up.

"You're always welcome."

I faced the wall. "What was your family like?" I asked.

"My family? Well... we live on the shores of Ontario. My mother worked as a seamstress making dresses at home, while my father worked at the undersea city." He said, "There wasn't really much about us. We cared for each other, and that was all that mattered. I only happen to be here because... it just pays more. I also get to live rent-free, so that's a bonus."

"You're not here for vengeance or grudges and all that? You're just here for the job?"

"Yes, for the most part. The boss convinced me well enough."

"Yeah? Well, the boss is why I'm here as well, but for all the wrong ones."

"Hmm—" he paused. "Whether he meant to do any wrong or not, he did offer to help you."

I could not think positively of him, nor did I even imagine too. I did not know if I wanted to try. All I was thinking about was getting Phileo back wherever he may be.

"How are you holding up?" Mitsuru leaned by the door. He seemed fine. He had probably killed one or two people in there, I'm sure.

But he's fine. How is he fine? Has the madness gotten into his head? Does he enjoy this?

"You look like you're deep in your own head," he brushed his neck. You can crash on his bed if you want. I'm going out to buy some McDonald's for us." He went and left me to the shark.

That evening, we all gathered at the fireplace for the food Mitsuru had bought; a dozen burgers, a bucket of fries, a couple of large sodas, and ice cream for dessert. Everyone was content, gleeful, and celebrated victory in our first mission.

They chatted and shouted in joy while I was sitting with my legs crossed on the sofa, slowly contemplating how little mayonnaise was spread on my bun. I did not show disdain, however, as the bucket of fries was only within arm's reach and I was more than happy to take my fill.

I slept without dreams that night. There was only emptiness and the void, but I had thought that was at least something. Perhaps that was what the man I murdered had felt after I bore a hole in him. The inexistence. The utter nothingness. Had it not been for the loud chirp of a bird outside my window, I probably wouldn't have woken up. The shark was beside me when I woke, still sleeping, as I gently crept out of the bed.

The others had already left to their own matters. I had dreaded that the only person left in the living room was the red panda, and unfortunately, I was right. He rested on a cushioned chair, his feet hung up on the wooden rail with a book in hand that read 'Circe' boldly on the cover.

"I do not like being watched," he said, "Come if you need anything."

My ears perked when I heard him speak. I was not used to this voice before; it was cold but calm and commanded the ears that had heard. I went outside and

approached him, but slowly, like easing towards a burning flame. Who knew what atrocity he could have done to me while we were alone.

"Do you like reading?" he did not look at me but instead set his eyes far into the dense forest. "It's fine to answer in any way you want. I'm not going to lay a finger on you."

"I do read. Sometimes. It was a long time ago."

He sat up and lowered his feet.

"What did you read?" he asked.

"I read some Jules Verne. Some poems, sometimes."

"Poems," he raised a brow. "Tell me then of the saddest noise you've heard."

I had no idea what he was talking about.

"Hurt by Johnny Cash?"

He looked at me with curiosity, "What about the sweetest noise you've heard?"

"The crisp of a freshly cooked fry."

"I see."

He returned to reading and left me anxiously waiting for another word. Oddly enough, he didn't. He didn't even tell me to go. So, I left the cabin and called for a ride home.

Leo was on the porch when I arrived, his phone propped sideways on the rail while he ate what looked like shepherd's pie. I greeted him, gave him an embrace, and went inside. Warm pie was our dinner when night came, and we sat in the living room watching the news. I stuck by his side and glanced at him from time to time. Sometimes, I catch him glancing back, and I pretend to look away.

To my surprise, there was no news of the recent incident of us destroying a Plakka production site, nor was there any news of a man being shot dead. Then it came. A video of me shooting a man while Mitsuru and the boss were running and Nix blowing up the building into pieces while slowly walking away from the explosion.

"What?" I froze in my seat.

"You shot someone?" Leo, although surprised as well, asked rather calmly.

"I did. It was a Plakka supplier."

He huffed, "And you're working with him?"

"I don't like him as much as you do, but he offered to stop all of this."

"He's the one that took Phileo from us."

He left and went back to his room as I pondered the rest of the night on the sofa and, the moonlight as my only company. When the sun had slowly warmed my face, the smell of butter and sizzling filled the house. I pulled myself up and readied myself for another day at work. "Have some breakfast first," the lion prepared the table. The meal consisted of eggs, bacon, some mashed potatoes, and milk. It was hearty enough to fill last night's cold thoughts. After breakfast, I bid him goodbye and embraced him, wrapping my arms around his waist before he sat back again on the porch.

The day passed without trouble, and it was around closing time when Mitsuru had come to fetch me. "Another job?" I asked.

"Yeah. Your job is to have dinner with me tonight."

"Dinner? Is this a date?"

"It's impossible nowadays to have dinner with friends, " He sighed. "We'll just eat some good food, and enjoy ourselves. Ease the nerves from past experiences."

"That is a date you're describing."

"Then it's a date between friends if that really bothers you."

He helped me clean and close the shop before we headed to Chinatown, a quaint place called Uncle Rou with its bricked walls and red paper lanterns. It felt like someone's home, and the scent was inviting me more than ever.

"You can smell the peanut oil from here. Oh, and the seafood platter here?" he cuts the air. "Absolutely amazing. I'll order it for you."

"I don't have much on me right now." I shrink to my seat.

"Not... yet." The wolf pulled out a small brown envelope, thick and formed a square bulge on the paper. "Your compensation... or talent fee, whatever you like to call."

"That shot required no talent." I retorted.

"Right. But you shot their boss and saved ours. He was pointing a gun at Russel." He smiled "This is nowhere near the pay you should be earning."

"Okay? What about taxes?"

"Jesus, Ludus. Just take it."

I hesitated but slowly took the money from his hands. I won't be worrying about money for months after this. Tucking it inside my pocket, it was a bit large and a bit too heavy, but it's a burden I'd be more than happy to be carrying tonight. Perhaps I'll buy Leo a new sweat, or a new mug. Maybe I'll take him out on a movie tomorrow or take him on a carnival ride on the coast.

"You seem deep in thought. Figuring out how to spend all that?"

"That's none of your business."

He laughed, "I'll order for the both of us. I know their menu by heart."

Surely enough, when the waiter came to take our order, he told us what he wanted without looking at the small menu card, saying words I had never heard before, like Kung pao, Chow Mein, and Char Siu. It went on, and on as I sat still. I stared at his flaming red eyes and the thick lens of his glasses that sat in front of it like a shield. He was and still is my friend, but I still feel this kindling sensation that I wasn't.

We ate, and all the aromas of sesame, peanut, seared meat, and seafood gathered into a sensation I had never felt before. Each savory bite of the soft fish meat melted into my mouth, the flavors of the hot soup lingered in my mouth like a warm day, and each bite of the noodles was tastier than the last. I hadn't felt more contented.

"How did it feel when you did it? You know..."

I knew what he meant, but I tried to ignore him for a brief second pretending to savor the food. I had hoped he thought his words fell on deaf ears.

"It's hard at first, but you get used to it. Soon enough, it won't be as different as killing livestock."

I felt my stomach clench itself, and I tried not to imagine it.

"Mits, please."

"Oh, sorry," he sat back, "I forgot. I hope you're not feeling too queasy."

After we ate, he offered to walk around the city before heading home, which we did. We turned to the quieter streets, passing a few cafes and even my grandad's bar. I'd told him that we'd have to stop by the thrift shop to buy some clothes or two, and he pondered why I did, why the cheap store with the heavy money that sagged my pants as we walked.

"I've never had this much before. I'd like to save as much as I can," I told him. He always wore expensive clothing when he possibly could, and that probably had shifted something in his mind.

"You know the news? We're famous now."

"I know. I saw it on television, most especially me. I was there on the television," I held the shirt up in the mirror to see if it fit. "Who even recorded that?"

"Shin. It's to put all the eyes on us."

"Why us? Why not keep it private? We could have gotten arrested in that restaurant, but thank God nobody knew our faces!"

"Or maybe they did, and they didn't want to call the cops on us."

I hung the shirt on my shoulder as I looked for more, then turned to the wolf.

"Did you see what kind of people were in there? The grass eaters. The herbivores. The prey. I'm pretty sure that they knew who we were."

"Then why didn't they stop us?" I whispered, "We were walking the streets just now and I had completely forgotten about it until now."

"The people are on our side, Lud. We're the only few remaining predators in East Point," he whispered back. "This is not the revolution they want."

We parted ways, and I went back home while Mitsuru headed back to the cabin. Leo was not in the living room when I arrived. He'd probably fallen asleep. So, I left the sweater and a new mug that I had bought for him on the table.

"Ludus-"

I jumped, startled, as a deep voice rang behind me. I turned to see the panther behind me, and I was flushed with relief. It was Jack, my other father. He had been

living with us ever since Phileo had been taken away, and he had gone on a trip to Maine last month for his work. "I thought I was being robbed," I huffed.

"A robber wouldn't happen to know your name, would they?"

"Maybe they would. Anybody could be a robber. Could be you, even."

He ruffled my hair and laughed. "Whose are those for? Leonhart?"

"Yes," I replied. "Got my first pay, and I'm pretty happy about it. In fact, I'd like to invite the two of you tomorrow for a movie date!"

"That sounds nice. I'll be here when you're done with your shift tomorrow."

I smiled. I didn't think of it at first, but Jack had come home earlier than I had expected. He was supposed to come back next week from his trip. Some part of me had pulled back, to not ask, at least not now. Jack regards his job as an investigator with the utmost priority when he can, and for it to be postponed without notice is something out of the ordinary for him. Though, I shrugged it off and thought of it as an early leave.

CHAPTER 5

The following day, I was woken up by a clanging of pans and plates, and I rushed to see what was going on. Perhaps we are actually being robbed this time, I thought. It was Jack who was cooking a batch of eggs like a storm. Never had I seen anybody cook eggs and bacon with such intensity before. It looked like he had been operating for a banquet with all the mess that he had made.

"Are you alright?" I asked.

"Ludus! Help me prepare the table, will you?" he asked worriedly.

He was not used to housework and solely drank booze in the morning the last time he told me. I hope the eggs don't have too many shells, he said, but I was too busy thinking of Leo in his bedroom. Eating alone and not with us. Perhaps something troubled him? Is he upset? He already was, but this time seemed different. It felt disdainful. After breakfast, I told them goodbye, and the panther waved for me in his stead.

The day passed very quickly, and I had readied my coat for the movie tonight with the two of them. As I closed shop, a car stopped at the front and honked. It was our car and Jack was driving it, but there was no lion. I asked him where he was, and told me that he wasn't feeling like watching a movie. That he had dropped him off at Grandpa's. Of course, I thought. He's more family to him than I am or ever will be. Brotherhood is thicker than blood, they say, but that can only get you so far.

We went to a burger place first, to fill our bellies before getting soda at the theater. That way we could save more, and satiate the craving for meat. To the stars, was the name of the movie. A convoluted romance story between a man and a princess from

another galaxy. I was not too fond of it, of the man being kidnapped and falling in love with said kidnapper.

If it had happened to me, and been brought to another planet by a princess I would outright refuse. Though, were it to be a hunk prince I probably would have, I think.

"Did you like it? How was it?" I asked the panther as the credits rolled.

"Let me take a moment for it to sink in," he said as he wiped the tears from his eyes.

When we drove back home, I asked him why he was here so early from his travel. He told me that Leo wasn't doing fine, and needed some company. Why? What happened while I was gone? I thought to myself.

"He told me that you had joined a group of criminals."

I looked at him in disbelief, then I realized. It was them, the boss. Mitsuru. They were the reason Phileo was gone, and that I had joined them. It was me, who was the reason Jack had come home from his work so early.

"Is that true?" he asked.

"Yes." I said, hesitantly "Are you going to arrest me?"

He hummed and thought about it.

"I was thinking of placing you in house arrest. But then, who would take care of your dad's business?"

He did not want to. At least, it felt as if he didn't. He was family, the three of us were. What would happen if I were to disappear alongside Phileo? I imagined him on the porch again, but this time, no one was coming home. Not from work, not from an

asylum. No one. It would break Leo's soft heart, as I knew well that he had known this feeling already, not long ago. What more twice? Or the third time?

"If I told you that I was trying to get Phileo back, would you believe me?"

He didn't answer for a moment before he glanced.

"I do believe you, but what I don't believe is that you're helping your own enemy."

"I know. It does sound ridiculous now that you say it."

We arrived home, and I slammed face-first on the sofa. As I shuffled, the panther sat on the other end and rested. He had probably exhausted himself from sobbing. I searched for the lion, half expecting he was already home before we were, but he was not in his room or any place where I had looked.

"Jack? Leo's not here." I said and he pried his eyes open.

"He's coming home tomorrow."

Never had I imagined the lion to be able to become as despondent as this, not even when he's upset. He would only furrow his brows and wrinkle his eyes when he got angry, sometimes he would roar, but it was never this bitter. Is he mad at me? I almost told the sleeping panther, but instead gently woke him up and told him to sleep in Leo's room. He stayed and said that he'd prefer to rest there for a while and wait if he ever came home. I had given him a blanket, at least, so he wouldn't be cold. The next few days went like this, and the air between us had gotten cold. Jack came to talk to me when Leo refused, sometimes offering some bits of comfort whenever he could where mine had shattered. Now he wouldn't even face me, or say a single word. It was as if I did not even exist.

My mind had gone to places it had not been to before. Cold and bitter thoughts had been trickling in one after another. Leave and never come back! You were only doing what's good, and he denied your efforts. He's not your family. Leave him. I stood and jogged around the neighborhood before the thoughts had the chance to run freely and wreak ruin on my mind.

Life went on with my missions alongside the boss, my job at the ice cream shop, and the unnerving silence between Leo and me. Each shot that I fired during my errands had somehow hit me more than their limbs. It had chipped off the edges of my sanity, or what was left of it. Often times I had felt like it was no longer me out there fighting, but instead a phantom, an embodiment of my anger and desperation. Mitsuru called it determination, while the boss told me it was madness, and he loved it.

Some nights Jack and I ate at Uncle Rou's, ordering the same meal Mitsuru had ordered on my first time. Sometimes, we walked around the park and talked about the funny stories I had during work. These brief pauses of relief kept me from throwing a fit, and I savored every moment of it.

"I cannot take this anymore. I want to talk to him."

"Then talk to him. What's stopping you?" the panther asked.

"I don't know."

My room was dark and unkempt whenever I went home, with pillows strewn on the floor and empty soda cans piled up on the table, but I was there lying on the bed. I did not care. Not even when the laundry had piled up into a mountain. A few hours had passed and Mitsuru called and told me about another meeting at the cabin the next day. I had barely made any sounds coming from my mouth, uh, hm, ehm.

"Dude, you okay?"

"Mmh."

"I'll pick you up tomorrow."

"Eh."

He sighed.

I had stood there staring outside the window airless and unmoving. I stared and stared until my eyes paused for a moment to blink, then stared again. The iron on the table started to run cold on my stomach which had been pressing against it, but I had stayed there without a thought. I did not sleep the other night thinking of Leo, of the specters that haunted my dreams when I closed my eyes, of Phileo, wherever he may be.

"Ludus!" he shouted

I jerked and turned, wiping my disheveled face.

"Are you romanticizing your melancholic solitude?"

"Probably."

"Jesus, dude. You're clearly out of it."

He rubbed his chin, plotting something.

"Tomorrow's your day off. We should get a drink later after the meeting," his ears perk up "Better yet, we should go to your Grandpa!"

"Think that's a good idea? To drink booze?"

"It's what sad, old, miserable people do. Not that you're old, but you definitely are miserable."

He helped me close the shop and headed straight to the cabin. They were all there when we arrived, Russel, Shin, Khordon, and Nix. Little Timothy was there but was immediately urged to go play on the porch instead to avoid hearing our inhumanity.

Some eyes were on me as we entered, where Nix had said that I looked like a proper burglar.

I stayed silent throughout the meeting. It was the same as it always was; follow these, kill these, broadcast this. But that night he had told us that we were in the headlines portrayed as liberators and saviors and that my hooded figure was the pillar of it. Shin showed me all the articles and to my disbelief, I was there on every shot, on every second of each video, and at that moment I felt the fire approach my feet. It dawned on me that if hood had slipped off once, my life would have fallen as easily as a castle made of sand.

"I was not made aware of this."

"You stepped in here knowing our agreement," the boss said.

"I know. That I will be the head of this insurgence, but-" I felt my tongue heavy as I spoke, and I looked down. "I'm starting to get afraid."

"You're always safe here, with us." Nix smiled.

"Not for me, my family. What about my father? What would happen then if people knew it was me?" I gulped "What about Phileo? What would they do to them?"

The boss did not reply and instead stared at me with cold green eyes unmoving as the fire behind his throne.

"We'll discuss this another time. Get some rest for now, I know you're tired," he said as he left to the porch.

The bar was thriving during the hour, and Mitsuru had waited at the front bar. One of the bartenders had greeted us and offered a drink, to which the wolf had taken two glasses.

"Here," he placed it near my hand.

I held the glass and hesitantly placed it between my lips, letting the first drops burn my tongue only for a bit.

"I've never drunk alcohol ever." I placed it down, it was too bitter to continue.

"Maybe something a little sweeter. How about a flavored bourbon."

The bartender poured a darker gold liquid into another glass. This time it smelled of berries and citrus. I tasted it, and it was sweeter than the other one. I took another small gulp, then another until I began drinking it whole.

"That was good."

"It's the same one that Zion drinks. You two have the same taste then," he smirked.

"I haven't seen Zion in a while. I hope he's doing fine."

"Oh, right. He got a new boyfriend, look," he shows me a picture of Zion with a brown wolf, his hair dyed pink, and his tail as thick as a bush.

I asked for more drinks and told Mitsuru about the state between Leo and I. The words that I spoke seemed as if they weren't mine, but I let it come, through me. A couple more drinks passed and my eyes began to weigh like stone, and slumped over the table somewhat regretting taking another shot. Not long after, a large paw cups my back and rubs it.

"Look who it is!" Mitsuru turned, he somehow looked better than I did despite having to drink more than me.

"You okay?" his large voice echoed through me.

"Yeah."

"You missed your father. He was here just a while ago."

"I don't think he wants to see me."

"I know. I've heard."

The large man sat with us, and I turned to see his eye. He was the spitting image of his son but without the long, gracious mane.

"Gramps. I think I want to crash here for the night."

"Sure. If you want, you can even move here in the meantime."

"Think that's a good idea? What about Leo?"

"It's to give the both of you some space to think about things thoroughly," he combs my hair. "You'll be safer here when things start to get rough. We've got guards on the clock day and night."

"He's right, all eyes are on the hooded wolf right now. If for some circumstance his face gets revealed on cam, you've got someplace to hide," Mitsuru said.

"Yeah?" All the noise turned into a blur as I blinked, and all I felt was the cold table pressing on my face.

I woke up to a loud thud, feeling a heavy ache in my head that dulled while the room spun around me before I fell on the floor and vomited, the rising liquid gushed out and burnt the linings of my throat. A whole minute felt like an hour, and I had thought death was poking me in the back as I puked out my dinner. I was soaked and smelled like acid as I carried myself into the washroom and hurried into the shower, where I sat on the cold floor as the water sprinkled onto my head, and I leaned tired from the force my stomach drew.

Grandpa found me along with some other men in the shower sometime later, and he looked deathly worried when I woke up to his roaring voice thinking that I had died

in the shower. He checked my face and scoured it of dampness after hours of getting showered. He searched every inch of my fur for anything odd, but I told him I had just fallen asleep after vomiting all of my stomach's contents. He carefully pulled me up and handed me a towel, and a set of his own clothes. It was a little baggy, but it was just enough.

I did not know the time inside the room. There was no daylight nor moonlight that I could take a glimpse through a window, only walls and the amber shade that it was painted with, which I had almost mistaken as a sunset. The large lion slumped over the tables as he ate his bread, he made the food look like a light snack between his large paws. We ate together and drank tea to help soothe my stomach after what had conspired in my room. I dared not to drink alcohol again, even if it meant my death.

"Did Mitsuru say anything before he left?" I asked.

"I don't think he did. He did pay for your drinks," he laughed.

We talked about breakfast, and his life here among dozens of people that come and go, and how he had missed us whenever we were not here. I hadn't realized that we hadn't been visiting him a lot since Leo's arrest. At the time, we were under the suspicion that all of us were still on a hot trail and that it could've put Grandpa at risk. Inundated with self-preservation that we had forgotten about him. I did not have anything to defend myself when he said that he was missing us, and for a moment my tongue tasted bitter of my own guilt. At that moment I thought about staying for a while to make amends and see what his life was like here. He was excited to hear this, and I was happy to see it too.

After breakfast, we went out together on a motorcycle to Port Washington. I felt the cold wind as we passed the fields of Little Neck, and the sharp smell of salt was fresh

on my nose. The ruins and shattered buildings we passed by seemed greener the last time I saw them, and the once-burnt field now flourished into an everglade. Look— Grandpa points to the school of fish that glistened in silver, in groups through waves that swam as though they danced, along the water that stretched out to the horizon as clear as the cloudless sky.

He talked to the men who sat by the shed, and he seemed to know them as they were already bellowing at each other's jokes. He turns to me, and so do his friends, to which I awkwardly stretch out a hand for a greeting. Grandpa seemed younger than the other men, and just as big, but not the same as us. At least, not quite. Pandas. I whispered to myself in awe as I had never seen one before. Big, strong, hairy pandas with drawn-in eye patches you could barely see their eyes. There was one who turned his head to me, though I could not tell if he was looking as I could not even see where his eyes were.

"Ludus!" he called. He gave me a fishing rod, a dark pole made of a material I was not familiar with. It was thick, but light, and had white hatchings that looked like small nets that intertwined with each one.

"We're going to catch big fish so we can put them in our freezers," he said. "And for dinner, of course."

One of the pandas took out a bucket, and I leaned in to see its contents; It was half a bucket of rainbow trout, freshly thawed, one of them said. He wasn't kidding when he said we were catching something big today. We sat off on a small vessel, a boat so pristine and well-kept that its curves were as smooth as finished marble beneath my fleshy palm. It was new, and it was worth its weight more than gold.

Meanwhile, my worth was weighed in chicken drumsticks. We drove out a couple of meters from the dock where no other boats were and stopped, letting the water drift us to a lull.

"Have you fished before?" Grandpa asked as he took out his fishing rod.

"Yep, my dad taught me. We used rods made of bamboo instead of these, though."

"Alright," he took a fish and hooked it, then swung back. The fish flew into the air in a swift arc, while the spool spun wildly in a flash, flinging the fish forward many yards long.

"Wanna find out who catches the biggest fish?"

"What's the winner's prize?" I asked, pulling my rod forward.

"Well, you get to take part of the fish."

"Fine by me."

I took a fish as well, bigger than the one he took, and cast it forward in a swift motion. I wasn't able to swing it further than he had, the skill he had on his back was beyond my years.

"Are you used to standing for long periods?"

"I can do a couple of hours or so. I've been doing a lot of standing in the shop."

We stood there waiting as we gently swayed. Kicked off my sandals, and planted my feet firmly on the floor, anticipating and feeling the taut movement of the string. The lion beside me whistled a tune that seemed to sing with the wind, cool and crisp on my nose as it sang. We grew bored of waiting, and so decided to tell tales that were on the top of our heads.

He had told me of his life in Germany as a young man, a paperboy on the streets handing out the news for coin. He had almost enlisted, in the army with hands innocently pink with youth. *I'm sort of happy*, he told me. He said that if he had taken part in it he could have prevented the Second coming war where he could, or at least, have changed what had transpired. I told him of my days fishing with my father, the many kinds of fish we caught, and the many days we told stories by the sea. *Just like this*, I thought.

It was high noon before my line had caught my first fish. It was swift and nearly tipped me off my balance and I had to put a foot against the gunwale to pull it out of the water. It jumped and squirmed with all of the life it had. *Cod!* The lion cackled upon seeing the long fish squirming around on the deck. After a while, it had stopped moving and was sure to become dinner. It was the length of my arm, two and a half palms wide. Its skin a light mustard, covered in dark brown spots.

It was not long before the lion had also gotten his catch. He did not struggle as much as I did. He was sturdy, and his legs tightly drawn back from each one. It only took a few quick spins with the spool, a small pause, and a strong pull upward, and the fish was yanked out of the ocean. Plucked out of the water with ungodly force. The fish almost looked surprised, and I was too.

"Looks like you win," he pulled the fish up from the line. A Golden tilefish, with gray skin and small specks of gold. Its face captured a look of shock with its mouth wide open. I pulled up mine and held it against his, though only a few inches bigger, I had won today's catch.

"It's a close competition, but I say we both win."

CHAPTER 6:

The boss had called requesting me to pick up Timothy from school and escort him to the mall, and I went after closing the shop. He stood there among the group of smaller children by the sidewalk, seemingly looking for something. Worried, he looked at his phone and tucked it back in his pocket. When he finally spotted me, his face flushed with relief and quickly met up with me before I did.

"Russel told me you'd be my chaperone," he tugged on my sweater and pulled me to my ear. "Don't tell him we're going to the arcade!" he whispered.

"I won't. Don't worry."

"I'll give you an incentive after your mission here!" he pointed at me.

"Really—" I raised a brow.

"Really."

When we got to the mall, the first thing he told me was to go to the school supplies to buy an eraser. Not just any eraser, a pink eraser, embossed with flowers and a holder gilded in gold. So luxurious that I had thought he was joking.

"Why this expensive-looking thing?" I asked.

"Because—"

He was like this, winding his words before timidly lowering his voice.

"It's a gift for someone special."

"Oh, I see."

"Will she like it?" he whispered it like a wild secret.

"Maybe. But I think she would like something simpler."

He looked at me intensely, "I don't think it can get any simpler than this thing."

I scratched my chin and thought that he was right.

"Tell me her reaction when you give it to her."

"Of course. Now, let's go to get crepes," he said. Almost in a princely manner. I did not know where this came from, but I had a hunch. He bought one for each of us and offered to pay before I was able to reach for my wallet.

"If I were to have my last meal before I die, I'd want it to be a blueberry crepe."

"Really? You like blueberries that much?"

"It's my favorite! As a matter of fact, I drink a glass of blueberry juice each day," he savored the crepe as much as he could and happily kicked his small feet while he did, ignoring the rest of the world alone with his blueberry crepe. Finally heading to our last stop, he asked me to play with him.

"We're saving tickets for that giant bear on the shelf," he raised a finger.

"As of today, I've accumulated over 5,000 tickets in my loot chest."

"Loot chest."

"Yes, and that bear costs 20,000 tickets to claim. So, you're helping me," he wagged his finger. "Don't worry about spending, I have the greens."

He opened his wallet to show me, and to my shock, it was a wad of hundred-dollar bills. He was a lot wealthier than I had imagined, and I was sure he was bluffing like most kids often do. However, I should've known this already, that this was no ordinary child.

"Do you know how to race with motorcycles?" he asked.

I cleared my throat, "I can try."

"Good. We'll play together."

I positioned myself on one of the motorcycles and readied a coin.

"Ahem—" he raised his arms up.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm sitting in the front seat! I can't ride a motorcycle, it's too tall."

I figured, but I had never done this before, though I helped him up as he sat in front of me and held on to the lower parts of the handles.

"Go, go!" he giddied. I dropped a coin on the slot and we drove. He laughed and giggled as we leaned left, then right, while I kept track of our score on the screen. I made sure to get all the coins along the way for the bonuses on the tickets. After we were done, tickets fled from the side of the machine, and we hurried to get it all before it intertwined. We moved on to play slots, got three in a row, and hit a jackpot. After that, a round of fighting games on an arcade machine, then the claw machine, and then the karaoke until we finally got to a full stop as we were no longer able to hold all the prizes we had won.

"I think we need to count these at home," he said. Both of us holding a paper bag full of tickets.

"It's getting late, too. We don't want Russel to get angry," I replied.

"Yeah."

We went home with goodies; candy bars, gummies, small toys, and bags of tickets to be counted. On our way home, I noticed a stiffness in my mouth and, I touched it to see what it was. I had almost forgotten how to smile.

Mitsuru greeted us as we entered the cabin, "What're those? Food?" his eyes trailed. On the other side of the room was the boss in his chair, reading a book I had not seen before. He glanced, greeted, and did not speak anything after. There was a slight relief

there, though I was not sure if he would be mad or not. Still, we quietly headed to Tim's room where we poured all the tickets on the bed.

"Mind asking what you're up to?" The wolf leaned by the door.

"Ssh! Be quiet!" Tim hushed, "We're counting tickets from the arcade.

"I see. You went there again without permission, didn't you?"

"Uhh—"

"Well with that many tickets, you'll take all night counting all of 'em," he said, and sat on the bed with us.

It took an hour for the first bag of tickets, and another hour for the second, but we stopped at the third since we were winded from counting more than two thousand.

"There's still the third bag," Timothy said. He seemed rather fine.

"I'm kind of tired, Tim. I need to go home now," I replied.

"It's getting late. I'll take you." Mitsuru stood up and stretched.

I checked the time, and he was right. It was past eleven and I still had work the next day. We helped the raccoon neatly stack the tickets in his wooden chest, and said goodnight before we left. I glanced at the red panda who was still reading just before we headed out. Expecting a nod or a farewell, but he said nothing and only stared at his book.

"Odd kid," I said as I stared out the window.

"Yeah, he's slowly taking the form of a second Russel. He acts like him sometimes too and it scares me."

"Did Russel hire him too? I mean, he was a lot younger when I first saw him."

"He's adopted. Russel took him in for some reason, I can't recall why."

I bid Mitsuru goodbye as he left, and headed inside the building, happy to be home. Inside, the lobby was dim, yet still full of mammals and the intoxicating scent of liquor. Grandad was just at another table sitting alone. He turned to me and smiled when I entered. "How was your day? You've been out for a while. Have you eaten?"

"I have. I've been babysitting, we also went to the arcade," I sat opposite to him. "I'm beat. This job thing isn't as great as I thought it to be."

"Well, what are you doing it for? You want to take over the business, don't you?"

"Yeah, well—" I wanted to tell him that I had received a sum that could sustain me for years, but I still do want to help Leo. Whether he hated me or not. "Never mind. I think I'm just tired."

His green eyes stared at me, and I stared back to see how clear and beautiful it actually was. Like cut gem shone in warm light.

"Grandad?" I started to get nervous.

He placed two fingers between my nuzzle and pulled up something I could not see.

"What is it?" I asked, my eyes crossed on the invisible thing.

"Nothing. I just thought it was funny," He cackled.

I smiled and watched his belly heave as he laughed. It was always a joy to see him like this. I had only wished all of us were here to laugh with him. When I rose in the cold morning, I had followed the drowsy lion in his pajamas to the kitchen and offered to help him cook. We both made carrot stew and toasted some slices of bread, and ate in the silent lobby where the clatter of our spoons echoed in the hall.

I nuzzled and waved at the lion before I went to work, and hated the thought of leaving him there each second. Though I made sure to call him from time to time, and as

I did, he would tell me a joke for each one. He would laugh right after. Closing time came and I locked the doors, already thinking about what Chinese takeouts I should buy for Grandad.

"Ludus!" Mitsuru had pulled up on the sidewalk.

"Hey, what's up?" I said, eyes darting off the distance. I had hoped to not see him today.

"Hop in. We're going to a restaurant."

"I was just heading to Uncle Rou's."

"Sorry, but we're having Italian," he replied. "Get in."

We drove from Lower Manhattan to Maddison Avenue, and turned to a restaurant that glowed brightly from the outside. A tall bricked building in old white, striped in red, with chiseled windows that lined from the bottom up.

"You had Italian before?" he asked, excitedly.

"No, but I'd like to try."

"You'd love the Alla Gricia pasta they have here," he said as he took a fake mustache from the compartment and placed it onto his muzzle. It was the same color as his fur and complemented the glasses he wore.

"You look considerably older, and convincingly so."

"Yeah? Here's yours."

He gave me a darker variant that looked just like my hair.

"Do they have a theme here?"

"No. We're spying on someone."

Not another stakeout, I thought.

"Who?"

"Don Rightmane."

I winced when I heard the name. Surely, I have heard of it before.

"Who?" I asked again.

"The main man. The capo of New York. Russel told us about him some time ago?"

I'm sure he did, but I was too busy wallowing in self-loathing at the time.

"Right. Why him?"

"He's going to be our lead on finding their boss. The very people that have been producing all this Plakka crap."

"I see. We're not going to off him, are we?"

"Hopefully it doesn't come to that, but if it does, what have we to lose?"

We went, and headed to the entrance in full stride. The inside was beautiful and smelled of olives and fine spirits. We were met with a woman in a neat white sleeves and tie. She greeted us with a smile and showed us to a vacant seat, just near the bar table where rows of wine filled the shelves on the wall. Like the ones in Grandad's bar. I looked at him across the table, but I couldn't read his lips to see if he was amused or not. He cleared his throat.

"It's awfully quiet in here," I whispered.

"I know. Isn't it nice?"

"Maybe." I checked the other tables that were next to us, which were only a breadth away "So, where is he?"

"Lion. Suit. Ugly," he whispered even softer.

I turned and there he was, only two tables away. Merely two steps from us. He wore a pitch-black suit and a red tie, his wrist adorned with a gold watch that glimmered as he turned. Almost wanting to blind me. His face was round and looked more lion than

the ones I knew. His fur was stale sand, and his mane was tied back in a ponytail that touched his shoulders. *He did look like a man I would easily loathe.* Seated in front of him was a lioness, lean, and poised as she sat like an heiress to my antipathy. She was also probably his wife. Something sparked in me when I looked at them. A hatred that burned from a place I did not know existed, and I stared seething at the sight of them—

"Hey!" Mitsuru flicked my hand.

"Ow!" I yanked, "What was that for!?"

"Quit staring!"

"Right..."

I sat back and read the menu. Maybe some Aglio e Olio, with some fresh pesto. Perhaps some pasta Alla Ruota, *like, goddamn I hate them,* and cold wine. Puttanesca? *I'll put a fist up his ass.* Cacio e Pepe, this sounds interesting. *I'll probably shave his hair off.*

"You seem really interested in the menu. Got anything you wanna order?"

"Vongole sounds nice. I feel like eating something salty."

"Good pick. The seafood is great here, they're all caught fresh and delivered directly from the local port!"

"I should ask if Grandad would like some takeout."

"Sorry, but they don't do takeout, Lud."

"What? Well, that sucks."

"Yeah. They really want their customers to have the authentic Italian experience."

"Is that also why we have mustaches?"

"Part of it, yeah."

The waiter had come to take our order, and as Mitsuru would, didn't need the menu. He just knew. Spurting out words I barely recognized, and even spoke a little Italian. *Grazie!* He said, smiling.

"How do you know these things?" I asked, "You seem to know a lot."

"Language? I'm not that good, I just know what to ask. I learned what I needed to know just in case the Europeans started to invade United America." He sat back, "Which is something that's already happening."

"Would you like it? If this place turned into United Europe?"

"You have no idea." He sat up, "It was a long time coming. This country was already in shambles anyway."

I wanted to deny it, but he was right. We were running out of everything. Houses, soil, food. We were at a complete loss. To make matters even worse, the men who governed us were fools, and the people it governed were blind. It was a perfect storm, and it really was a long time coming.

The Don melted on his chair as a waitress poured a generous amount of wine into his glass which he emptied within seconds. His large frame told it all, that he wanted more. Their meal on a pretty plate was Pesto and black pasta that I had never seen before. On their side were slices of creamy cheese, a salad, and even more wine. Despite his wild form, he ate with the grace of a gentleman. His wife as well, forking a Penne in such a way that it seemed like a delicate jewel in her hands. *Very demure*, I thought.

She glanced at me for a moment and I quickly turned just in time to not give suspicion.

Our orders came in a white plate, and it looked beautiful like art. The scent was divine, dairy, and tangy. I felt content already just by smelling it. I looked at him as he

held his palms together and closed his eyes. *Grace before the meal*, my father had taught me once, though I did not practice it after he had gone. I waited patiently, to at least respect this.

"Well? Dig in!" He smiled and grabbed the fork.

We ate silently, exchanging glances from time to time. Sometimes when we heard the man's bellowing voice, his ears twitched a little to eavesdrop. I heard some bits of it as well over the murmuring voices behind us, but it was clear enough to make out; *The pasta was fantastic. I wish I had more wine, though.* Some words I barely knew, it was their native tongue, and I hoped Mitsuru had recognized this.

When we were done and were sipping the wine we were given, they got themselves ready to leave, calling for the check and wiping their mouths. Mitsuru called for ours as well as, quickly as they did. I assumed then that we were to trail these two to their homes. They stood and walked to the exit where we followed in just a moment. The wolf glanced at me again from their backs as we headed to our car.

"You know where we're headed, right?" he asked.

"We're going to stalk again like creeps, aren't we?"

"Spot on."

They drove and we followed suit, just a car behind.

It took a long drive, going through Queensboro Bridge to Long Island, before finally slowing down to a rural side of the neighborhood. We continued trailing and came to a halt when they paused in front of a tall gate, where they waited. It opened, and they drove the car inside.

"Well, we know where they live now."

We sat, silent and pondering.

"How did you know he was in the restaurant?" I asked.

"He has a Twitter page. I followed him. One of his posts says, *'I eat here with my wife every Tuesdays,'*"

"Really? It's that easy?"

"Every rich man loves to go online and gloat, Lud. Why wouldn't they?"

"I guess..." I leaned back. "What now?"

"We tell the boss."

"Why don't we just go in and shoot them?"

"As amazing as that sounds, Lud, I don't think we can fight against dozens of guards," he turned to me as if the thought seemed amusing. "Unless you're the dude from Hitman."

"Let's go home," I sighed.

He dropped me off the front of the bar and waved as he left. I walked in and saw Grandad with other stocky men, probably his friends, kissed his forehead and went to my room. I lay flat on the bed, the room pitch black. My limbs ached, and my temples were numb from the silence. Sweat poured from the point of my nose, down to my lips, and I could taste the salt as it lingered. *What is this feeling?* I whispered. A rising tension, violence, *madness*. I was a hair's breadth away to come bursting into a visceral spectacle of pure rage.

Then I remembered, almost heard it again; *Tell me then of the saddest noise you've heard?* As he sat beside me, waiting for an answer. This time, he loomed over my sweaty corpse, demanding an answer. *I don't know*, I said to his specter. Tall, green eyes watched me in the dark and did nothing but stare. *Then, what is the sweetest noise?* I closed my eyes and still saw the void, as though I did not blink. Empty, blank, my mind

had nothing to answer. And yet there he was, smiling at me. The bulky, gray wolf in his blue tank top, his bushy tail, and his soft paws. How he had looked more innocent, and pure than I have since the years that have passed.

"I did all of this for you," I stood in front of him. He said nothing. "I've killed people. Did you know that?"

Still nothing. He blinks, for a moment. Nothing more. Then, his mouth opened, air escaped him, and I watched as he vanished like dust before he could.

The next morning, I felt miserable. Again. I thought moving out of the house and having fun trips with Grandad would cure me of— whatever this is, but damn. This thing is relentless. A perfect trio, a trifecta, of ruin.

"Grandad—" I sat and fiddled around the cooked eggs and ham.

"Yes, son?" he sipped, the smell of coffee sifted through the air.

"Am I cursed?"

He paused for a moment and raised a brow.

"Were you cursed?"

"No. Maybe. I don't know. The people I killed probably did, but I don't know." I trailed off as my mind went blank from exhaustion. I froze. My eyes widened from the realization that I had overspoken. That I have told him my sin. *I shouldn't have said that.*

"You... killed people?" he paused, and I heard the mug land on the table. I could not dare to meet his gaze.

"I need to go." I stood up in a hurry and got around the table.

"Wait—" he grabbed my arm, forgetting that with his length he could reach me with only a few steps.

"Who did you kill?"

His voice lowered, serious but not cold. He wanted an answer, and this is something that I could answer easily.

"Henchmen—" air heaved out of my lungs as I spoke. My tongue was a stone in my mouth, and I begged it to move. "I killed henchmen."

"Who's henchmen?" his voice was more curiosity than authority, desperate for a clearer answer. "Son, talk to me. I'm not a cop, no one here is going to arrest you." His grip on my wrist loosened, and it felt sore as I touched it. I turned to face him and thought for a moment.

"If I tell you, you're not going to call the cops on me?" I asked.

"Why would I do that? It's not like I haven't had a war criminal for a grandson before," he said, half-jokingly.

I remembered *Fern* was his name. I had nearly forgotten of his existence.

"What do you mean by war criminal? Wasn't he a hero?" He hummed, calmed me, and invited me to sit back down.

"I don't know if Leonhart or Phileo had told you the full story, but I can confirm. Both yes, and no."

I sat and listened as he told me everything there was about him. Fern, the enigmatic white tiger I had seen on screens was not as simple as I had imagined him as. Grandad told me that before Fern left to take part in the ongoing war in the States, he already knew what would become of him when he returned. Dead, or exiled. Whichever suited him most. I knew this as well, but I did not get why.

"That's because betrayed his country. He saw what happened during his service in Poland. Carried the memory with him, and knew better." He looked at me intensely,

with a whisper. "He threw a flag as he approached the opposing army, submitted himself, and offered his loyalty and his life, in exchange for our safety to travel here seeking refuge."

"And then he died. He was assassinated."

He paused for a moment before he shook his head.

"No."