

The place seemed innocent enough to Neo. Pleasant even. Most places in Choice tended to be so, and this location was no exception.

Purple vines nearly consumed the entire wall of this small domicile, and engulfed a pale blue door, faded from sunlight. The air was warm and floral, and by all means, postcard worthy.

Yet he was still nervous. The occupant was his first real interviewee, an old world crook who'd found his email, and was willing to share their story. He hoped. All the other old world crooks he knew were tight lipped, if they were to tell you something about their experience, it would be by total accident.

He should know, he constantly peppered them with questions, much to their collective chagrin.

When he had gotten the email from a Cygnus saying that they wished to talk, along with an address, Neo accepted without hesitation. He only saw the foolishness after the fact. He should asked a few more questions, get a feel for the crook, to see if it's not a cruel prank, or an axe wielding murderer.

He made sure he had Jolyne on speed dial, in case it was an axe murderer. He'd prefer Ducky, but she had a habit of ignoring her phone if she was focused on a game.

Stuffing his anxiety down, he knocked on the door.

Silence.

He knocked again, harder this time, and the door came ajar, having not been fully shut. Oops.

“Hello?” He called into the now empty door. “Cygnus? I'm Neo, you messaged me last night!”

He was once again met with silence. Should he, should he go in? What if something was wrong and Cygnus needed help? It wasn't trespassing if he was invited.

“Better to ask forgiveness,” He muttered to himself as he pushed his way in.

Inside was dark, and the furniture was sparse. Old crooks were of two extremes in his experience, wanting all of the things, and wanting none of them. It seemed Cygnus was the latter.

“Hello? Cygnus?” Neo called again, entering a room filled with canvases.

“Woah...”

Most of them seemed to be unfinished, but there seemed to be a common theme to all of them. He turned his attention to what seemed to be the latest work in progress, a mid sized canvas sitting upon an easel.

The subject seemed to be a bed of yellow flowers, carnations maybe, with smaller blue star shaped flowers poking through the bed. The blue flowers seemed to be making some kind of silhouette.

"Do you like it?" A voice said, almost nasal in it's quality.

Neo spun around to see a pink, purple and blue crook, with the brightest markings he'd ever seen on any Skirean. They were far from the biggest crook they've seen, but that didn't mean they weren't dangerous. Or that they were absolutely beautiful.

"I'm sorry!" He said. "The door was open, and I was worried-"

Cygnus raised a hand, signaling for silence. "I was taking a call, otherwise I would have greeted you at the door," He said. "But you are here now, and there's no use in crying about how. You are Neapolitan, correct?"

"Just Neo's fine."

"Cygnus."

He didn't extend a hand to shake. None of the old crooks did, really. Neo thought it had something to do with Banishment.

"The painting," Cygnus continued. "Do you like it?"

"Um," Neo said, considering at the canvas once more. The brushstrokes of the carnations were haphazard and chaotic, full of negligence at best, malice at worst. The blue flowers were more purposeful, painted by a dedicated and delicate hand.

"I do," He replied. "It makes me feel, well, it makes me feel something, but I'm not quite sure what. What is it of?"

"It's a self portrait," Cygnus said, giving a smile Neo couldn't quite read. "The latest of many."

"But uh, I thought self portraits are meant to like, look like the self."

"Self portraits portray a truth about the artist. It may not be true in how I look physically, but it is an emotional truth."

This caused Neo to look at the painting once more. As if understanding it would allow him to understand it's artist.

"Ah, I have been rude," Cygnus continued, clasping his hands together. "Prattling on about me without making you feel at home. Can I offer you anything? Tea, coffee? I have some untouched sodas in the fridge if you'd prefer that."

"Um, I wouldn't mind a cup of tea."

“Wonderful, follow me, we can discuss our meeting at the breakfast table.”

Neo followed, scrutinizing Cygnus' back. Every old crook he knew had a way of carrying themselves, with a certain amount of edge, like they were doing their best to not get comfortable. Like they were waiting with baited breath for something to go wrong.

Cygnus seemed carefree in comparison. Words seemed to come easy to him, and he was oddly okay with Neo's intrusion. He worried that it was some kind of prank, and that this was a young crook, having a field day with him.

But that portrait, something about it made Neo stay.

The table was nestled inside a bay window, looking out into the garden. He could hear Cygnus puttering about in the kitchen, humming an unknown tune, and was again struck by the normalcy of it. Followed immediately by guilt.

Who's to say? Maybe there was a crook who made it out of Banishment unscathed.

But then, what story could an unscathed crook share?

“Here we are,” Cygnus said, returning with a tray and setting it on the table. “I hope you like earl grey, it's all I have left.”

"It's fine," He replied, adding a few sugar cubes to his cup before sipping. The tea scalded his throats as it went down.

"So Neo," He said. "I am interested in regaling you with my tale, but I must ask you a question first."

"Uh, of course, ask me anything."

"What will you do with it once you have it?"

Neo paused. Well that wasn't the question he was expecting, but still, it was a valid one.

"Well, eventually, once I have collected enough memoirs, I'd like to bind them together and publish them in a book," He admitted. "But until then, I have a blog they go on, so somebody is seeing them regardless. With permission, of course."

Cygnus gave another strange smile.

"Of course you have my permission," He said. "Now, I hope you brought a pen and paper, as I will not be repeating myself."

“Way ahead of you,” Neo said, trying not to let his excitement get the better of him. He was to be strictly professional. He pulled a notepad and pen out of his bag, as well as a digital recorder, which he turned on, and placed between them. It was finally starting to feel real.

“I should have known better than to underestimate you, it is so easy to forget that just because the youth haven't suffered like we have, that they're not capable as well,” Cygnus said. “Now, what would you like to know?”

“I know a lot of old world crooks,” Neo started. “None of them are really that willing to discuss their experiences in the alter world. You are among the first to volunteer. And I'm not upset about that, I'm just curious as to why?”

“Ah, yes, that makes sense,” Cygnus leaned back in his chair. “You must understand, Neo, Banishment is like a fresh wound. The time that we have spent in freedom is a drop in the bucket of the time that we spent in hell. Most of us, myself included, have felt that if we mention Banishment at all, then we'll remind the powers that sent us there in the first place that we have escaped our prison, and they'll come collecting. And this time, there will be no escape.”

Neo did get that impression, but it was nice to have it confirmed.

“And what changed your mind?”

There was a pause. Neo tried not to squirm as Cygnus stared him down, his claws tapping rhythmically on the wood.

“Banishment changed you,” Cygnus said, finally breaking the silence. “That much is obvious, anyone with a brain could tell you that. But it also changed relationships. How you relate to the people you knew before, and everyone you would meet afterwards. I have seen the tightest of bonds fall apart the moment food didn't come easy, and I have seen bonds that have tightened in the horror we lived, in rituals as intimate as they were terrible.

“I have been a part of both,” He continued. “I've partaken in the cruelest ceremonies that brought me closer to my lover, only to be betrayed on the turning tide. For the past however many years, I have tried to make sense of that. How best to respond to that ache I feel when I think of him. When I saw your flyer, stapled on that telephone pole, I thought, 'Ah, here is what I do'. I tell my story to someone, that way, I no longer have to carry it on my own, to immortalize our love forever, and move on with my life.”

Neo no longer doubted that Cygnus was an old world crook. The distant look he got, the bitterness that entered his voice, the way his calm demeanor got restless when he mentioned the alter world. He'd seen those traits on Idris, on Mithras, and on Hacksaw.

And it sounded like writing these stories was going to be a lot harder than he initially thought.