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Thread_01 – “A mundane day’s end”

Log_00 - “Eye of the storm”

A jarring, deafening alarm shattered the serenity of Caelum’s every mansion. The nobles flocked to their screens, either out of curiosity or fear. Those with an unblackened conscience usually only scoffed at such disturbances. After all, they’d become an almost daily occurrence within the City walls. And no evil would ever reach them in their golden fortresses.

Those with filthy deeds on their accounts, however, riddled with guilt, always watched the news carefully, fearing that their obituary would come next.

Another one of their own struck down. A powerful politician. A wealthy merchant. A respected businessman. Their life cut short by those from below. The filthy rats - cockroaches that refused to sit silently within their burrows, jealous of the prosperous life in the City, bursting that once safe bubble only to defile it.

But death was not the worst outcome of the Underground’s attacks. Rather, it was the slander that rolled from their viper-like tongues, along with their chosen politician’s head. Thief, rapist, tormentor – gone was the noble man’s reputation. His legacy was reduced to nothingness, an irrelevant aspect of his life. From now on, all that mattered to the lowly citizens was the newest accusation, the newest piece of gossip. And oh, their poor, plebeian minds, so envious of those most fortunate, longed for that confirmation. That the rich were filthy. The rich were worthless. The rich were liars.

Luckily, those above knew better than to pay those slander campaigns any mind. After all, they knew best of their colleague’s deeds. They were guilty of them as well. And a rebellion from the commoners was easily squashed. All you had to do was show them an ounce of benevolence; drop some money

into their empty purses, open a new school, donate to a hospital, and suddenly their faith in you is restored.

Those even lower, however, were not so easily swayed. They knew that behind each act of mercy, a poisoned blade was hidden. They've had enough of deceit. They wanted revenge.

And so, that's how another 'benevolent' soul of the City's finest, a man adored by the upper class, lost his life in the most gruesome way. And along with his spilled blood, down came the rain of flyers, dropped straight from his apartment window up high, landing at the feet of the unsuspecting citizens. And on them, beside incriminating photos, slanderous messages in blood-red ink were written:

A generous nobleman builds schools for the most unfortunate of youths, only to conduct gruesome experiments on them behind closed doors.

Log_01 – “A charming drinking buddy...”

Only a while earlier, somewhere near the City’s border...

Star-Crossed was not the most prestigious of Caelum’s establishments. Hidden near the border, on a shabby, cramped street, it was mostly frequented by those placed lowest on the food chain. But the drinks were good and cheap, and it was obscure enough to remain unnoticed. After all, most of its patrons usually kept to themselves, too preoccupied with their own problems to care about other visitors, intent on drinking their worries away.

That’s why it was a perfect place for Nero.

You see, a Commander’s job was a respected one. A strong guardian, watching over all the citizens’ safety, not caring about their income in the slightest. A man whose sole role was that of a protector. Help the weakest, destroy the villains.

Nevertheless, it came with a lot of downsides. Aside from the dirty assignments and morally questionable work, the worst part of this position was the constant questioning, especially in recent times. *When will you catch them? How many more will die? How, oh how can I sleep safely, with those cruel criminals running wild?*

Nero had to resist the urge to sigh at those questions countless times. It’s not like the ones asking were ever at risk. It’s not honest civilians that those savages were after. *It’s the people above; it’s the sinful nobles who have wronged them. It’s the politicians that constantly pressure them. It’s the president, who-*

Nero squashed that dirty thought as soon as it peeked its head into his mind. Propaganda was a scary thing. Even he found himself pondering over it more and more recently, with each attack only strengthening his hesitance. His doubt in Caelum's innocence.

The rumors of brothels filled with children, of mansions built solely for torture, of facilities experimenting on the least fortunate people of the underground – were they all really lies? On one hand, contemplating it made him feel like a lunatic. A conspiracy theorist without a mind of his own, following the messages from down below. On the other, however...

He's done enough questionable jobs to know that something about this 'utopia' was off. From his weirdly obsessive superiors to the wealthy citizens he's been babysitting, each of them seemed even more shady than another. Each of them seemed like a sinner. The more he thought about it, the more he felt like the Underground's targets deserved their fate.

But what if it was all a lie of the resistance?

A sudden newcomer, loudly announcing his entrance by greeting the bartender like an old friend, snapped him out of those dangerous deliberations. The young man sat by the bar, a dazzling figure among the poor citizens who've been barely scraping by. He was swathed in a luxurious leopard-print fur; his ears and neck adorned with glimmering silver jewelry. His hair was a dark crimson, with ruby reflexes dancing around it in the bar's warm light. It was all messily pinned up with a silver clasp; only a few stray ends framing his youthful face. His silver eyes, painted with dark eyeshadow, peered around the bar with a curious gaze, not paying any mind to its gawking patrons. A rare sight in this part of town, heavily contrasting with the underprivileged citizens dressed in rags.

Nero pondered for a moment whether one of them would be courageous enough to try and rob the clearly wealthy, defenseless man. There was a reason why none of his kind ever frequented such streets, nor left their gilded cages without a gaggle of private guards. He abandoned that thought, however, as the interest in the newcomer died down, the other patrons returning to their booze and card games.

As he ordered his drink, the bartender eyed him suspiciously, unsure of his age. The man only giggled and fished out a wallet out of his spotted, furry coat's pocket, then dropped his ID onto the counter along with a nonchalantly displayed, generous tip.

He was giving off the aura of a young heir of some rich family, idling his days away by blowing his parents' money without a care in the world. Yet there was something about him that wasn't as gnarly as those stereotypical, old money boys. Nero has met his fair share of them. They were usually pretty stuck up, acting like everyone should bow to them, catering to their each and every whim.

But the man before him had a magnetizing air about him, seeming like a conversation with him might actually be worthwhile.

The newcomer idly sipped on his drink, casually chatting with the bartender as he threw around surprisingly flirty comments.

Such behavior was quite rare in the City, with same-sex relationships scrutinized by the masses, especially when it came to men. That made Nero find the youth before him all the more peculiar. What well-off boy would risk his parents' image to carelessly flirt with another man? Gossip ran fast within those rich communities. Surely, he cared about his image at least a little bit?

Nero wasn't sure what inclined him to do this. Whether it was the draining shift or unusually strong alcohol, he didn't know. But he couldn't help but inch closer to that charming intruder, curious about his behavior. Was he so wealthy that he simply did not care about strangers' perceptions? Or did he do so purely to spite his family?

He just had to know.

That's how he ended up abandoning his comfortable bench seat, settling on a wobbly stool next to that peculiar man. He struggled to find the right words to strike up a conversation for a while. In the end, he asked,

"I haven't seen you around here before. Do you live in the city?"

The man studied him for a moment, then flashed him a toothy smile. His sharp canines only added to that cocky grin, making it all the more charming.

"Not really," He replied, swirling the drink in his glass, "I travel a lot. You have some nice bars, though. So, I decided to crash here for a little while."

Nero raised his brow in a slight surprise. A traveling youth then, uncaring about his reputation in the city. Anonymity truly was the greatest blessing in such cruel community of stuck-up, rich assholes. He envied him a little.

He hummed softly, not hiding his amusement, "We don't have many travelers nowadays. The city's become quite strict with handing out permits to just anyone."

That much was true. With the recent increase in attacks from the Underground, Caelum’s borders and security have been greatly strengthened, to many businessmen's dismay. Still, it was a necessary measure.

Though the enemy forces weren't the strongest, they surely worked hard to take powerful officials out one by one, assassinating them with terrifying success. Even those who could afford top-notch security weren't safe from their wrath. The rats from beyond the city walls were getting more and more crafty with each passing day.

(Making his job harder and harder, to the point of being borderline insufferable with how many spoiled brats he had to babysit.)

His drinking companion laughed softly, his nose scrunching up in amusement, "I have my ways. Not many walls can stop me, you know?"

More like, not many walls can withstand a good bribe, Nero thought. Despite the rise in security, corruption still ran rampant within the city. That wasn’t enough to alert him, though. Maybe the man really was just an adventurous spirit, charming even the border guards into giving him a pass with his pretty smiles.

Besides, neither the borders nor corruption were his concerns. His colleagues would have to handle that one.

Deeming the stranger worthy of spending the evening with, he reached his hand out to him. "I'm Nero, by the way. I'm a regular here, so if you want to know which drinks are the best, I'm your man."

The man stared at his outstretched palm for a moment before firmly shaking it with his gloved hand. It was dainty, yet surprisingly firm. "I'm Lix. And I'll only accept if you get me one."

Nero smiled, glancing at the menu displayed on a small, cracked screen. Maybe shooting his shot was worth it. They were on the outskirts of the city anyway. Not many people around those parts cared about such trivial matters as the higher-ups' flings. And nobody seemed to have recognized him as the Commander just yet.

"Well, if you're a whiskey fan, they have a few interesting options..."

Lix hummed softly, not averting his gaze from the man beside him, completely uninterested in the menu. "I'm more of a cocktail kind of person, but I won't decline whiskey from a handsome guy like you..."

Not expecting to also become the victim of his flirtatious nature, Nero choked on his own spit. Sure, he found the man interesting, *attractive* even, with his flamboyant style and pretty face, but he'd never been picked on so outwardly. Let alone by a person of the same sex. Hell, he'd never even felt attracted to a man before. Yet, somehow, that person intrigued him to a dangerous degree.

He stole a glance at Lix, who, seemingly amused by his reaction, only inched closer. "What? I'm not blind. Can't I compliment a man I find cute?"

Nero stifled a laugh as he shook his head. *"Cute"* certainly wasn't a word he'd ever use to describe himself, but if his companion wished to play around, who was he to stop him?

"You're quite bold, aren't you? Very few would flirt with a person of the same sex so outwardly. In this place, most of them stay in the shadows..." He looked over the cocktail menu once more, then glanced back at the crimson

hair of his new drinking buddy. “A Bloody Mary then? Red seems to be your thing.”

Lix dramatically rolled his eyes in response. “Tomato soup with vodka. Fucking *delicious.* If you want to grab dinner with me, just ask.” He snatched the menu from his hands and, with a dangerous glint in his eye, exclaimed, “Sex on the Beach for both of us.” Then, with a smirk, he murmured only for Nero to hear. “At least I hope so...”

Finding it more and more difficult to keep his composure, after clearing his throat, Nero decided to swiftly change the topic, “So, your first time in the city?”

As if feeling at home, Lix leaned against the bar and lit a cigarette. The bartender, noticing this, quickly pushed an ashtray his way, grumbling under his nose. He received a pretty, grateful smile in return. “Not really. I’ve visited many times before. But they were all business trips. This one is purely for funsies...”

Well, choosing this place for “funsies” was quite a peculiar decision. Not many would visit voluntarily, especially with only tourism in mind. Of course, Caelum was beautiful, with the Central Square kept neat and luxurious, opulence dripping from every corner, and the Capitol Tower, the heart of the city, a breathtaking badge of technological and architectural capability. But the atmosphere scared any possible visitors away, many hating the stiff and cold way of life of the upper class. Sure, they threw banquets like no other, but those usually entailed gossip, public shaming, and viperous comments, all to the amusement of the elite. No one would voluntarily join those gatherings unless they were close to the inner circles. Or a masochist.

That being said, Lix’s response was all the more strange, considering that Nero had never bumped into him before. Judging by his demeanor, any “business” he would conduct should be done in the more affluent areas. And with the crime rates rising, no gathering happened without military supervision. Nero has, regretfully, attended many such events. What were the

chances they would miss each other? With Lix's appearance, surely, he wouldn't drown even in the densest of crowds.

Nero rubbed his chin thoughtfully and took a sip of his cocktail. The fruity sweetness coated his tongue. "That's strange... I oversee many business deals. But I've never seen you before." He then stole a glance at his companion, interested in hearing his explanation, but equally as suspicious of his activities.

Lix raised his brow, growing curious of Nero's attendance at such meetings, but not wanting to come off as too inquisitive just yet, "You probably only do business higher up in the city. I rarely visit those parts. Doing any deals with those rich dickheads is a pain in the ass." He shrugged and downed his drink, then shot Nero a mysterious smile, "I prefer to stay in the shadows, far away from their judgement."

That's fair, Nero thought, *If I could, I'd also avoid them like a plague.* Sadly, with his job, he was forced to stand front and center, oftentimes dragged straight into whatever noble mess arose, forced to swiftly clean it up.

"Understandable. But just what kind of business takes place away from the spotlight? In these parts, everything is pretty out there and up front. The rich love to boast about their ventures after all..."

Lix stared at him in slight disbelief, as if he knew something Nero was unaware of. After a moment, he just giggled and shook his head, "Trust me, you don't want to know what those nobles are into when not faced with a crowd. Nasty stuff, let me tell you that. They certainly wouldn't want to *boast* about *that*."

His statement left Nero even more confused. Whatever job Lix was describing sounded like some illegal, black-market trading. But why was he sharing this information with a random man he'd just met at a bar? Was he a rookie pawn, too proud of his shady work not to brag about it to just anyone? Or was he in such a comfortable position that he simply did not care about outing himself? Was he backed by someone so powerful that, even if he were to be arrested, he'd face no consequences?

Either way, it seemed like it was Nero's lucky day. A random criminal just presented himself on a silver platter, hot and ready for capture. All he had to do was prod some more for a confession, then catch him in the act. Too bad such a pretty face would be wasted on some rotten business, though.

A few drinks in, the stranger eagerly responded to any question that popped into Nero's mind. From past occupations, through business partners, all the way to interests and private life. One question, however, left Lix somber, hesitating for a moment before uttering a response,

"So, are you from the City or...?"

The crimson-haired man stared at his glass, only the slowly melting ice left within. His until-now cheery demeanor had soured, revealing some harsh truths hidden beneath. But as quickly as that mask had slipped away, it returned as a false smile, expertly tucking away any vulnerabilities that may have made themselves known for that split moment. Nero, however, saw right through it.

"You could say that... But I haven't called that place home in a very long time."

Having found an opening, Nero dug right in. "Why not? I mean, I understand that you have some reservations against the elite. But with your skills, you could probably lead a peaceful life in the middle district, no?"

Lix leveled him with a flat stare, quickly shooting this idiotic idea down. "What difference would that make? Living up high, or down in the sewers... Any place within the walls is filled with filth. I'm not masochistic nor stupid enough to ever consider living here."

Nero pushed another drink his way, encouraging him to spill more of his feelings. Showing any doubt in the City's integrity would already be considered criminal, worthy of prosecution. That would lead straight into the investigation of that strange person. An easy win.

"What do you mean? Do you dislike it that much?"

His response, however, was not one Nero was expecting.

With a sneer that seemed heavily out of character, Lix leaned closer, whispering words only he would hear. “Tell me, Nero. Do you enjoy being a pawn? Do you like fulfilling your dirty little orders? Do you find your work here honorable?”

Lowering his guard and reducing his prattling to a drunkard’s confession was clearly a mistake. Lix saw straight through Nero’s position and wavering loyalty, striking right at that hesitance.

His distress must have shown on his face, because instead of continuing his onslaught, Lix simply inched away, then reached for another drink, “You’re cute, really. You want to accuse me of treason, yet your heart holds similar sentiments to mine.” A piercing glance made the remnants of Nero’s facade crumble to ash, cold sweat gathering at his nape. “Are you worried? Think I might turn you in for doubting the ones you serve?”

Nero finally collected himself, releasing the shaky breath he didn’t even realize he was holding in, “What do you *really* want? Why are you here?”

Within a blink of an eye, that charming stranger has returned, giggling softly as if the chatter they had just shared was as jovial as simple small talk, “As I said, I’m here for fun. *Killing time*, you could say.” A subtle glance at Nero’s serious face almost made him laugh again, “But it seems that meeting likeminded people might also be on my agenda...”

As Nero carefully analyzed his next step, a sharp sound came from a device long forgotten, hidden deep in his pocket. After all, it was his time off. He disliked mixing up his work life with the few hours of freedom he was allowed. Was it any other notification, he would have ignored it, leaving it for the active shift to deal with.

That, however, was an alarm that would wake him from even the deepest slumber. A code red. Another attack.

He quickly fished the device from his pocket and, as he examined the screen, a familiar person stared right back at him. And beneath the photo, a message from dispatch was written:

Attack from Underground. Main suspect: [UNKNOWN]. Current whereabouts: [UNKNOWN]. Goal: apprehend, dead or alive.

As he lifted his gaze from the small screen, his drinking buddy, a carbon copy of the suspect, stretched on his barstool like a cat leisurely sunbathing on a windowsill. Uncaring about the outside world and pointedly ignoring Nero's intense stare, he took one last sip of the cocktail generously provided by the Commander himself.

Nero put his communicator back in his pocket, then straightened out in his seat. "Lix, may I see your pass?"

The smirk he received in response told him that it wouldn't be such an easy feat.

Log_02 - “... is not what he seems.”

More guards swarmed the bar, blocking all exits; their guns pointed directly at Lix. As much as Nero appreciated the backup, he had really hoped to take care of this one on his own. Maybe finally catching one of those terrorists would get him a few extra days off? Or a small bonus to his already generous salary? As he mourned his lost chance, Lix, completely unmoved by the crowd of guards, hopped off his barstool, snuffed his cigarette out, and bowed to him slightly.

“It’s been really nice getting to know you, though I do believe I should get going.”

Before he could take even one step towards the exit, Nero tightly grabbed his arm, keeping him in place. “Trust me, it will be easier for both of us if you don’t try anything funny.”

As much as he wanted to capture Lix, he’d rather avoid any unnecessary harm a chase would likely bring him. Keeping his well-being in mind, he pulled him closer, the handcuffs ready in his palm.

Little did he know that the sly, crimson fox had other plans. Suddenly, Nero felt a wave of scalding heat emanate from the criminal’s arm, singeing the fur of the spotted coat and burning his captor’s hand. As he cried out in pain, loosening his grip, Lix slipped away, leaving only his fur in Nero’s wounded palm.

The other guards did not hesitate, firing straight at the fleeing criminal. That’s when Nero noticed the source of that sudden heat. A prosthetic arm, now serving as a shield against the onslaught of bullets, faintly glimmered in the bar’s low lights. Nero had never seen such a marvel of technology before. Sure, there were many soldiers in his ranks who relied on prosthetics; their limbs blown off in the heat of battle, or amputated afterwards. But they were nothing like this one.

The one before his eyes changed forms and shifted as its owner desired, one moment shielding him from attack, another piercing the armor protecting the guards, bringing them down one by one. A device not created for the convenience of day-to-day life, but purely for combat and defense. And its owner was clearly a very skilled fighter, his movements quick and fluid as he weaved from guard to guard, not suffering even the tiniest scratch despite their numbers.

Stunned, Nero realized that his target had slipped away only after a moment, his colleagues already lying on the floor either half-conscious or unable to stand. As he moved to give chase, the bartender's irritated voice stopped him in his tracks.

"Are ya payin' or should I call the cops?"

Not wanting the criminal to fully disappear, he just groaned, tossed his wallet to the man, then dashed right after his culprit. He didn't really have the time to explain that he *was* the cops. He'd settle that score some other time.

It didn't take him long to trace Lix's steps. All he had to do was follow the path littered with wounded guards; all of them splayed on the streets, each moaning in pain. He quickly messaged the med-squad and took his gun out, ready to apprehend the criminal. Clearly, he'd underestimated the man. He took him for some low-rank goon, only doing the dirty work in the city. Now, as he ran past so many incapacitated comrades, he wondered: *how come I've never heard of such a dangerous member of the Underground?* Sure, they usually worked in the shadows, only revealing themselves to send a message to the government. But Lix mentioned that he'd been to the city countless times before. How on earth was he missed, with the skill he possessed? A man like him should have been their top priority, dangerous enough to pursue even outside the city walls.

Nero's thoughts were interrupted by laughter coming from above. Without hesitation, he fired at the source, only for the bullet to be deflected by

that damned mechanical arm once again. Instead of wasting any more charges on his off-duty weapon, he just glared at his opponent, the gun still held high.

Lix stood on the balcony of one of the apartment buildings, towering over him. He giggled as he peered at him from behind his shield, a cocky grin stretching his lips, his sharp canines glinting in the sunlight menacingly.

“Is that how you treat all your new friends?” His purr sounded dangerous, yet inviting. Intimidating, but luring his opponent into further battle.

The commander scoffed, his eyes scanning the culprit, looking for any openings to strike. Shooting here would endanger any citizens who remained inside or flocked to see what was causing all the ruckus on the streets. Unwilling to risk it, he decided to entertain him instead, hoping to divert his attention. Maybe then he’d find a way to apprehend him, or stall long enough for backup to arrive.

“You know, I’d be nicer if you weren’t a wanted criminal.”

Lix raised his brow, his smirk only growing bigger. The expression on his face made cold sweat run down Nero’s neck. That coy, play-pretend confusion, paired with that dangerous smile. He anticipated this. He longed for that chase. He wanted Nero to go after him.

Something was clearly off. And his next words only made Nero grow paler: "Wanted...? Are you sure I’m the one you should be after right now?”

As if on cue, Nero heard gunshots coming from one of the structures that towered over them. A tower occupied mostly by the wealthiest of citizens. As he turned to look towards the source of the commotion, he saw a bloodied, lifeless body fall from the highest floor, down onto the pavement, as if in slow-motion.

Another victim of the Underground’s attack. Another life he was unable to protect. Another death he couldn’t prevent.

Before Nero could move from his stupor, explosions sounded right by them, deafening and dazing him as he fell to the ground. Through the haze of the impact and the ringing in his ears he once again heard that teasing giggle. The culprit was clearly mocking him.

He blindly shot at Lix, hoping to use his own attack to his disadvantage, but as the smoke dissipated and his vision cleared, he no longer saw him. He had successfully fled.

Nero, once again, had a corpse on his hands, and no criminal to lock up for it.

He dropped his gun and struck his fist against the cold, rubble-covered pavement in frustration. Cursing under his breath, he shot up to his feet as the world spun around him wildly. He didn't have the time to worry about his concussion for now, though. He had a job to do.

As the commotion calmed down, all the citizens that previously scrambled away in fear swarmed the corpse, their curiosity stronger than dread. Their whispers rang in Nero's ears, overly sensitive from the explosion, all of them wondering if this could have been avoided. If the police truly were as useless as they had thought. If their safety from the Underground's schemes was, once again, compromised.

And, in true Underground fashion, as soon as the crowd started to form, countless pieces of paper fell from the sky, instantly piquing their interest. The pamphlets rained down from the same window the victim fell from mere moments ago, but Nero knew there was no use in going there now. Before he would make it to the top floor, all the criminals involved would be long gone. He'd done this before, the vicious cycle repeating itself once again. Clearly, strengthening the security around those upper-class citizens was useless. Those rats had the means to get in and out undetected anyway.

And, as always, the backup took a while to get to the crime scene, clearly misled and sent to a different attack, one that was nothing but a decoy. A scheme to divert their attention, just like Lix's appearance at the bar.

Alas, his comrades did eventually arrive, along with the medic team. As guards swarmed the building and first responders dashed to the corpse, all Nero could do was stare at the paper littering the ground, still too overcome with guilt to perceive the world around him.

The guards secured the crime scene, dispelling the crowd of curious citizens and annoyed tennants. Their screams and protests echoed in Nero's ears, his mind somewhere far, far away from the site. Focused solely on his failure. On the crimsonheaded criminal. On the blood seeping into the cracks in the pavement. In his dissacioation, he didn't even notice his colleagues interrogating the witnesses, nor the victim's body being taken away.

Long after, with most of the scene cleared, someone finally dared to approach his solemn figure. A mess of white hair came into view, a pair of blue eyes and a kind face along with it. As soon as he saw his friend, Nero's spiraling thought snapped back into reality. Before he could say anything, Aki grabbed his wounded palm and examined it with a scowl.

"You got hurt again. You're pushing yourself too hard..."

Clearly worried, the white-haired man led him to one of the ambulances and quickly got to work dressing his burned hand. He was a young-looking medic. *Baby-faced* even, if you asked Nero. Among all the well-built guards towering over him, he seemed like a lost child, with his lanky stature and fluffy hair. He looked amiable, however, not in the same way Lix did. While that *pest* was charmingly teasing, Aki's face only emanated gentleness, one akin to a parent looking after their child. Even his stern and worried expression was hard to take seriously, especially when paired with the softness of his character which Nero knew so well. His pretty face, however, carried seemingly permanent scars of fatigue, as his eyes were marred by heavy dark circles.

They've been friends and flat mates for a long time; ever since they'd met back in school. Aki was very interested in medicine and caretaking, while Nero's destiny had always been to become a high-ranked guard. Maybe that's why they meshed so well. Aki was there for him, whenever he struggled with

the loads of stressful training he was subjected to by both his teachers and father. Meanwhile, because of his unusual for a man appearance, Aki was often a victim of scorn and bullying. His talent for medicine went unnoticed, while his peculiar demeanor was the only thing that seemed to matter to their peers. Nero could not turn a blind eye to this, quickly becoming his protector and, as a result, a life-long friend.

And, while grateful for his help and care, he'd also grown tired of those words. So, all he could do was scoff bitterly, another failure weighing on his conscience.

"It's hard not to, with the *incredible* results I've had so far."

Those pretty, blue eyes glared at him with irritation. Aki purposefully treated his wound more harshly than usual, pressed the gauze to the bloodied gash harder than necessary, as if trying to teach him a lesson. But underneath that grimace, Nero saw how worried his friend was.

"I've heard you were right next to the culprit, back at that bar... What if he-"

Nero cut him off, quickly correcting his mistake, "He was not the culprit. He was a decoy."

Aki's eyes snapped back to him, clearly surprised, "A decoy? But the guards were already distracted and away from the crime scene. There were more explosions by the walls, so we were all dispatched to that area. Why would he bother distracting a sole, off-duty guard?"

Nero rubbed his face with his good hand, also confused by the whole ordeal, "Maybe he was gathering intel? Or wanted to use that distraction to escape the city? I don't know..." He then sighed, his eyes wandering to one of the pamphlets lying on the ground, "All I know is that he's a dangerous individual. And he's still out there."

Aki's gaze followed his, also landing on that stray piece of paper, already stained and torn from all the footsteps of the frantic guards. Done with his work on Nero's palm, he made his way toward it and picked it up.

He studied the pamphlet with furrowed brows, reading through all the allegations listed under the victim's photos.

"Don't you think it's weird...? Those attacks have been getting more and more frequent, and each time they're the same. A death and this... smear campaign."

Nero was a little too quick to respond, repeating a line he'd heard so many times, coming straight from the lips of his superiors, "It's propaganda. Don't let it get to your head."

Aki stared at him with a strange expression for a moment. He then sighed, tired of it all, "Are you trying to convince *me*, or *yourself*?"

He was taken aback by that comment, surprised to be read so easily. Though he should have expected it, coming from his best friend. He knew his uneasiness was clear, especially to Aki. Actually, he'd begun to doubt those words more and more, with each attack being more brutal than the previous one. They didn't seem like random killings. They were all purposeful, aimed at the most influential citizens. Always accompanied by the pamphlets and a flash drive, conveniently hidden in plain view within the living quarters of the victim. And all that damning evidence, each time labeled by his peers as "*fake*" and "*disgusting*."

And, without a doubt: "How are the others?"

"Safe. Only knocked out."

Never, without a fail, killing bystanders or even guards. Only their targets. Occasionally, their associates too, but always providing some dirt on those as well, were they a part of the victim's inner circles.

Nero stared blankly at the piece of paper in Aki's hand. Child experiments seemed to be the man's sin, according to the Underground at least.

“He founded a school down there, you know?”

Nero glanced at him, dreading the conclusions they were both coming to, “I... don’t-”

Aki continued, ignoring his startled expression, “But why would he? He never bothered to donate to any charitable causes within the city. He hoarded his wealth. So why? And why there?” Nero approached him in panic, silently pleading for him to shut up. They didn’t have to have this conversation. Especially not now, surrounded by their peers. But, unperturbed, Aki continued, “They were executions, Nero. They are executing *their own* criminals.”

As those dreadful words settled in his heart, he heard a commotion within the crowd of nearby guards. Before he could react, Aki was slammed against the side of the ambulance, a burly guard towering over him, spitting in his face as he aired out his grievances.

“Dare to repeat that bullshit, sissy?! Are you with those fucking rats?!”

That *ape* or, rather, Daniel - Nero’s subordinate, used to be Aki’s most frequent tormentor back in their school days. He hasn’t changed much, though his outbursts of hatred had somewhat subsided ever since Nero’s promotion. He knew the two were close, therefore he usually didn’t risk getting reprimanded. However, Aki’s words, greatly blasphemous to the ears of many citizens, were enough to light his short fuse. In fact, he wasn’t the only disgruntled member of the force, with many others circling them, ready to pounce onto his poor friend as well.

With no hesitation, Nero stepped between the two, pushing the man away in anger. “Are you done with work? Is this the time for your private affairs?”

Suddenly self-aware, Daniel sprang away and bowed deeply, “N-no Sir! But... that medic! He-!”

“He was dressing my wound and speculating over the motif behind this murder with me. Nothing more. Are you going back to work or should I punish you for this assault?” His cold tone made even Aki flinch, as he finally realized his mistake.

Disgruntled, the man only sent one more glare Aki’s way and took the walk of shame back to the scene of the crime. Aki sighed in relief and, straightening his uniform, whispered, “They’re going to accuse you of favoritism, you know?”

Nero’s stern gaze followed the guard, but as soon as he faced Aki, his expression softened, the coldness in his voice replaced by concern, “Lisa doesn’t like him, so they won’t dare. Are you okay?”

That earned him a light punch to the shoulder, “I should be the one asking that. You looked... distraught by what I said.”

Unwilling to go through the whole ordeal of peeling the fists of another angry guard from Aki’s face, he shook his head in an attempt to placate his friend. That, however, reminded him of his concussion.

Feeling the world spin again, he clutched at his head and grunted, “Maybe... Let’s talk about this later. That hand wasn’t my only injury...”

Aki only sighed, already dragging his reckless friend back into the ambulance for a thorough check-up.

Log_03 - “Speedy reunion”

Their shared flat was nothing special, considering the fact that Nero could easily live closer to the center of the city with the status he possessed. It wouldn’t be as simple for Aki, however, as he was not considered ‘important enough’ to be allowed this luxury. Nero came from an important family, its roots deep in the city’s military system, generation after generation. Aki, however, was just a kid from a poor family who was smart enough to earn his job, with no generational wealth or strong connections. Money wasn’t everything in Caelum’s foodchain. Just wealth alone couldn’t buy you an apartment in the heart of the city. Proper background, occupation, or lineage oftentimes mattered more than your bank account. Old money was favored, and any up and coming citizens with a ‘rags to riches’ story scoffed at. Who knew how fleeting their success would be? People like them were not relevant enough to earn the prestige of joining the elite.

Nevertheless, neither Aki not Nero would complain about their accommodation. It was much preferred over living closer to the insufferable bustle of the city center, with its nosy egotistical neighbors and, nowadays, constant attacks from the Underground.

A few days have passed since the last one, so Nero was allowed a moment of leisure, his paperwork long done and submitted to his superiors. Even so, he could not rest peacefully just yet, his conversation with Aki still replaying in his mind over and over again, haunting him.

He’s had doubts in the city’s integrity for a while now. And Lisa’s reassurance that it was all ‘bullshit propaganda’ did nothing to ease his mind. There were too many damning pieces of evidence. The attacks were too fierce, too passionate to discount their claims for a made-up excuse. And he disliked those above him as well.

But it was not jealousy, no.

He did not desire their wealth or status. He quite enjoyed his quiet life with a friend by his side. However, he couldn't help but grow suspicious anytime he babysat those wealthy businessmen or influential politicians. He knew their conscience was not clean. Their staff was overworked, oftentimes abused, even in his presence. The women they surrounded themselves with did not seem happy to keep them company. And they had plenty of enemies, especially in the Underground. Too many to miss or label as simple envy.

Then, there was the matter of the Underground as well. Clearly, they had *some* kind of goal. Their manifestos and messages had long ago planted seeds of doubts within the citizens' minds. The wealthy are corrupt, the wealthy commit unthinkable sins, the wealthy play around as they wish at the poorest people's expense.

Even the latest batch of allegations did not go unnoticed; the commoners quickly spread the word among themselves, labeling the 'victim' as the 'villain' of the story. In contrast to the elites, of course, who've only been complaining about the guards' incompetence and laziness, mourning one of theirs, a good man that had died too soon, his legacy buried deep beneath some 'bullshit' allegations.

They knew they could be next. They knew their sins did not go unnoticed either. And they were scared.

Nero sat on the couch of their living room, toying with the knife he had found in the pocket of Lix's coat. He went to pick his wallet up from the bar earlier, and the owner handed him the garment as well, thinking it might be some sort of evidence against the attacker. Sadly, the only thing Nero found within was the said knife, weathered and chipped at the tip, a lighter that had seen better days, as well as some clearly stolen candy. No clues, no message, no answers. Even his wallet was gone, though Nero suspected that any documents it held were fake anyway.

As he contemplated tossing the pile of useless trash out the window in frustration, he heard someone fumbling with their keys by the front door.

Knowing it would be his friend, he quickly went over to assist him. A pathetic sight of Aki, trying to balance a stack of paperwork in one hand and a bunch of keys with too many trinkets in another, came into view. The man, resembling a ghost more than his friend, quickly thanked him and dropped all his things onto the table.

Nero smiled sympathetically, glancing at the overload of work that was once again brought back home for a nice, long session of overtime, “Let me guess, still in the morgue?”

As he made his way to the couch, dragging his feet and dropping his coat and shoes across the floor, Aki let out a loud groan, “I’m doing an autopsy on a *dog*, Nero! Those rich bastards have nothing better than making my life hell to do, I swear... We have a huge case on our hands, meanwhile I’m investigating the death of a family pet that was *very clearly* mistreated by its owners!”

He sighed softly as he cleaned the mess his exhausted friend had left along the way. He then scoffed as he moved the stack of papers into their small office space in the living room, “They’re wasting your talents, Aki... You should be working that case with me. I could pull some strings if you’d like. Your input would be invaluable.” He scratched his neck, once again reminded of the constant failures he’s faced so far, “Maybe then we’d finally have *some* sort of breakthrough...”

Aki plopped onto the couch and wrapped himself in a blanket, still eager to yammer on despite his fatigue, “I heard that your guy was heavily tortured before being tossed out the window. Bet they were recording a confession again, no?”

“It’s inadmissible, since it was done under duress. He had a gun pointed at his head when he confessed.” He then added under his breath, “Though I do believe it was all true. But no one else on my team does.”

As his friend was about to voice his outrage and disbelief, he noticed the damaged coat lying beside him on the couch among the mess Nero was investigating earlier, “What’s that? Is it yours?”

Nero laughed as he picked the furry piece up, “Does it look like something I’d wear? It belonged to the decoy guy. Do you want it?”

Aki studied the coat for a moment, a glint in his eye telling Nero that he *would,* in fact, like it. Even with the slightly singed sleeve, it did look pretty and extravagant, easy to salvage. But after a moment of consideration, he just shook his head, “No, no... Wait, isn’t that evidence?”

“Nope. I investigated it as much as I could, but there was nothing. It was stolen on the same day, from the closet of the victim’s wife. The only DNA on it was from some woman, so it’s useless in this case. It was probably the maid’s, or some other person’s.” His eyes then landed on the knife. An old, rusted piece of metal, “Though this thing did look interesting. But there’s no blood on it, no fingerprints, and it’s years old. Plus, it’s probably stolen too.”

Then, a thought popped into his mind, a reckless little thing. Their gazes met, and Aki immediately sprung up, “No. You’re not doing this.”

“He clearly used it often. Maybe someone saw it. They could point me to him-”

“No!” Now, anger and worry stained his friend’s face, “You’re not going down there alone! They know your face, know who you are, and *definitely* won’t be happy if you pay them a visit.”

Nero sighed as he collected all the junk, wrapping it in the coat. His sole piece of evidence, useless and weighing on his mind. “Do you have any better ideas?”

Aki lowered his gaze, “Maybe we should wait-”

“For another attack or for the army to strike back? Because we had an assembly and they are certainly considering that option.”

That seemed to only spike Aki’s anxiety, as he stared at him with wide eyes, like a deer in headlights, “They... want to attack the Underground? But there are civilians there! Not every person living down there is a terrorist!”

Nero’s grip on the coat tightened, the dread of that outcome clear on his face, “They are not the city’s civilians. Therefore, the city is not concerned about them.”

Aki’s hands darted to his face, rubbing it in sheer frustration and helplessness, “We... we can’t do anything alone.” He sighed, his mind going through all the possible solutions. In the end, he found none. Then, his eyes rested back on the coat, “If only your bar guy could tell us more... Seems like he wasn’t a quiet type.”

Nero only nodded, also staring at the garment blankly, “Let’s not think about it for now. You look tired... Go wash up and I’ll make you something to eat.” He ruffled his friend’s hair, noticing how dull and matted it’d become. Clearly, he wasn’t the only one affected by recent events. “A nice, long bath. Just don’t fall asleep in the tub like that last time.”

A small giggle was enough to ease Nero’s worry ever so slightly, “I won’t. I’ll probably end up scheming and speculating. I have a day off tomorrow. We can discuss it then.”

With that, he quickly disappeared behind the bathroom door. Nero stood in the living room for a while longer, his mind still wandering. Eventually, he took Lix’s belongings, stashed them in his bedroom, then made his way to the kitchen.

Compared to Aki, who’s had many encounters with uncontrolled fires and chopped fingers, Nero was a decent cook. Really, for a guy who stitched and patched people up for a living, Aki certainly lacked precision in the confines of a kitchen. On the contrary, Nero, who was a passionate soldier, raised to fight since his early days, found cooking quite soothing. The required care and multitasking helped him take his mind off things. Made him focus on something more productive than going over the same theories over and over again.

Therefore, not long after, he had a full course dinner waiting on the table, steaming and filling the room with salivating scents. If Aki didn’t scarf

everything down in one go, maybe there would be some leftovers for the next day.

As he smiled thinking about his friend's insatiable appetite, he realized that his bath was taking awfully long. He sighed fondly, thinking that maybe he really did fall asleep in the tub once again. But when he knocked at the door, a slightly startled voice answered,

“I’ll be out in a second! Just... wait in the kitchen!”

Nero scoffed softly, leaving his friend alone for now. Clearly, he’d just interrupted something, and he’d rather not pester him any longer, “So you didn’t drown? Hurry up or your food’s gonna go cold.”

When he didn’t get an answer, he simply shrugged and went back to the kitchen, not feeling too guilty about starting the dinner without Aki.

However, before he could dig in, his friend finally came into the kitchen, and the look on his face made Nero’s anxiety spike once again. He looked pale and shaken, avoiding eye-contact at all costs. Before Nero could even ask what happened, he whispered,

“There’s... A guest waiting for you in your bedroom...”

Without hesitation and as quietly as possible, Nero reached for one of the guns he kept stashed around the apartment in case of emergency. He’s heard countless stories of criminals following his colleagues back home, and there was no way in *hell* he was going to risk Aki’s safety. At least the intruder had made his goal clear, not bothering to harm his friend, aiming straight at Nero instead.

Gun held high, he barged into his bedroom, only to notice how unnecessary the whole ordeal was. Lix was splayed on his bead, already wearing his reclaimed coat, smoking a cigarette without a care in the world. Nero’s sudden appearance did not even phase him, as he only raised his head to send a lazy smile his way.

Nero lowered the gun and rubbed his face in exhaustion.

“Long time no see, friend.” His guest murmured.

Not only was the man smoking in his bedroom, he even had the audacity to use Nero’s beloved plant as an ashtray.

Irritated, the owner of the bedroom quickly went over to open a window, sending an exasperated look his way, “We have a balcony, you know? And windows you could have opened.” Then, he exchanged the poor plant for an empty teacup, shielding it from the intruder.

Lix put the cigarette out, now in the designated place, and stretched leisurely. Like a cat sunbathing in some rich family’s gardens, and not a burglar in a commander’s abode. “I didn’t want to boss around in your home.”

At this point, Nero’s exasperation and confusion were immeasurable, and the dinner he’d been looking forward to has been ruined. Still, an audience with the enigmatic man was just what he needed, so he decided to use this chance, “I made stir-fry. Hungry?”

That made Lix tilt his head and raise his eyebrow in surprise, “I thought you wouldn’t waste time and cuff me right away. I was sorta looking forward to jousting you up a little. We didn’t even get the chance to fight hand-to-hand last time we met.”

Nero dragged his desk chair over to the bedside and sat down, trying and failing to look as casual as possible, “You were the one who fought dirty that time. And... Well, I do have a few questions. Besides, I don’t attack first. Only in self-defense, and to apprehend criminals.”

That seemed to pique Lix’s interest as he sat up on the bed, bouncing on the soft mattress a little, “Criminals, huh? I thought I was labeled as one.”

Nero shook his head and sighed softly, then leaned closer to Lix, making direct eye-contact with the man before him, “As far as I know, you didn’t commit any crime yet. You were just a suspect who fled the scene. It’s not a serious offense, so I can look past that.”

The signature cocky grin stretched his lips once more as he leaned back on his arms, half-lying on the bed now. Clearly, he already felt at home, as he practically purred his words at Nero in that familiar, teasing voice, “A bad boy, huh? Won’t your sweet General friend be pissed?”

However, Nero’s next words stunned the intruder, “I’ll skip over this meeting when I next see her. Because I want to stop this bloodshed once and for all. And I know she will disapprove of my methods.”

“And your methods are...?”

“Understanding the reasoning behind your attacks and helping you resolve those issues peacefully.”

After a moment of silence, Lix burst out laughing, clearly finding him amusing. Nero did not share the sentiment. Barely able to catch his breath, the man finally responded, “Peacefully? Your nobility is killing *my* people, and you want this to end in peace? I’m sorry, I bet you’re great at your job and all, but I just have to ask – are you fucking *stupid*?”

Nero furrowed his brows, irked by his reaction, “Oh, I’m sorry for not knowing *your* side of the story. It’s *totally* not because you skipped over mediating and went straight to murder.”

Lix’s snarky and sarcastic response only made his frown deepen, “Yeah, sure. It’s not like we haven’t been telling you straight up what grievances we’ve had with your sugar daddies. With evidence and all.”

He toyed with his pocketknife, dangerously twirling it way too close to Nero’s belongings. Still, Nero remained still. The conversation was going better than he had anticipated. This was his chance.

“Why didn’t you report it? The Underground’s not under the City’s jurisdiction, but this is a matter of our civilians hurting yours. We wouldn’t turn a blind eye to this.”

Lix barked a laugh straight in his face, pointing at him with the knife in his palm, “You think your superiors don’t know what’s going on? They’re the ones

participating, Nero. From the very bottom of your food chain, aaall the way to the top. Every. Single. One of them." He then rolled his eyes, annoyed by his ignorance, "Why do you care anyway? You have nothing to be worried about. You're not one of our targets."

"Because I don't want anyone to suffer. A citizen or not." Lix glanced his way, surprised by the answer, "I know you think I'm just like all the people of the city, only caring about myself and no one else. But that's not true. I joined the force to protect. And that's what I'm trying to do,

"I may have misunderstood you at first. But now I'm beginning to see just what is wrong with this City. So," He extended his palm toward him, an attempt at forming an alliance, "will you help me? That's why you're here, is it not?"

Lix stared at his outstretched hand for a moment, as if considering his proposal, then slapped it away and averted his gaze, "Who said I'm here for you? Recruiting *you* wasn't on my agenda."

That gave Nero a pause, "Why did you come to *my* place then?"

Instead of answering, Lix simply glanced at the door. A stream of light poured into the dim bedroom from beneath, slightly obstructed by a figure standing behind it. Groaning, Nero made his way over and quickly opened it. Poor, unsuspecting Aki tumbled inside, not expecting to be found out. He sat on the floor, smiling sheepishly and pointedly avoiding looking at his friend.

"Uh... Hi. I was just passing by."

Nero glared at the two, disappointed by Aki's lack of survival skills, "Explain yourself."

And Aki hated that tone of voice so, *so much*. He rarely was the victim of his interrogations, only earning his wrath when he stole his clothes or forgot it was his turn to clean the bathroom. But whenever it did happen, he cracked under that stern voice and intense stare like a fragile egg. And so, it did not take him long to spill everything,

"R- Lix, he... put a bug on you back when you were at that bar."

Now that glare turned to Lix, who only stood up with a giggle, made his way over to Nero, and quickly yanked something from behind his ear. A tiny, barely noticeable on his metal palm, mechanical tick wriggled around, looking for another thing to latch onto. Nero had never seen a device so small, yet still able to transmit whatever it heard all the way to someone's lair. He was impressed but also pissed about the whole ordeal. He did not have to ask any questions however, as Lix provided the explanation completely unprompted,

"I've been watching your friend for a while now. He's an incredibly skilled medic, yet he's permanently stuck doing nothing but dirty work. Don't you find it strange?"

Aki rubbed his neck sheepishly, unaccustomed to such high praise. Meanwhile, Nero did not find the answer sufficient, "Get to the point."

Lix shrugged as he sat back on the bed, "We need medics, and he's incredible. And... seems to already have some doubts in your beloved City." Then, his gaze shifted from Aki to Nero, and he smiled, "At first, I only wanted to recruit *him*, but then I heard *you* share his sentiments. And I'd grown curious."

"*Recruit* him? Surely you don't mean..."

"I do." He looked Aki's way, catching eye contact with the still shaken man, "I have lots of space at my place. And we have a medic who's a real ray of sunshine, but he's chronically overworked. You'd get along."

There was a glint in Aki's eyes. A new sort of curiosity, a hunger for a life he'd always wanted. Away from restraints. Away from judgement. And far, far away from the community that had always hated him so much. A promise of a job far more fulfilling than wasting away at a morgue. A chance to finally put his skills to use. Still, he hesitated, picking at his cuticles in anxiety,

"I... don't know. That's a lot to just dump on somebody so suddenly..."

Lix hopped off the bed, kneeled beside him on the floor, then took his palms, stroking them soothingly, "I understand. I once had to make a similar

choice. And I won't force you either. But it's your life. And I know you'd rather spend it doing something more meaningful than enduring this injustice in silence." He then stood back up, already making his way to the window, "Take your time. It's a tough decision and once you make it, there will be no turning back. But I hate to see passionate people wither away in this shithole. So, my offer will stand for as long as you need."

Nero panicked slightly, sensing that his time for interrogation had come to an end. He approached him and grabbed his arm, "You're leaving already?"

Rin scoffed, prying his fingers away and sitting on the windowsill, "Well, *someone's* colleagues are after my head. And there's a guard change soon. I won't have much time to get back home." He then grinned teasingly, tilting his head a little, "What, are you gonna miss me?"

Aki stood up, also approaching him in alarm, "How will I contact you? I won't know how to find you again..."

Lix sent him a fond smile, "You're smart. You'll figure it out." And, as he leaned away to leap from the window, he grinned at Nero once more, "Oh, I almost forgot. The real name's Rin. It was nice to finally meet a cutie like you."

Without letting them stop him again, he jumped down and disappeared into the night, leaving both their minds swarming with more questions than answers. With a heavy heart, Nero closed the window and leaned against it, trying to wrap his head around everything he'd just learned.

His thoughts were disrupted by a loud growl coming from Aki's stomach, reminding them of their dinner that's already gone cold.

At the table, the tense silence stretched on, each of them struggling to find the right words to breach the subject. They've lived in the city for their entire lives, never stepping a foot outside. The prospect of abandoning it all, of joining Lix, no, joining *Rin* on his borderline suicide mission terrified them. But it was an enticing proposition.

Escaping this corrupt system to help those in need, instead of serving the egotistical maniacs above them.

But there would be no going back.

Nero watched Aki as he attempted to suffocate his anxiety with food. It was clear that this offer was especially tempting for him. He had nothing to lose. He had experienced poverty, back in his childhood years. Going back to a less privileged life did not scare him. In fact, it seemed like he preferred it over his current situation. Nero, on the other hand, had always been surrounded by comfort. His family was of noble descent, with a General leading each generation. From the youngest age, such a position was also expected of him. Alas, a friend of his took this spot, ending this chain of nepotism. And he did not grieve his lost chance. Who knows what sorts of morally dubious orders he'd have to fulfil, was he placed in Lisa's chair.

But was leaving the city really the only way to change things? Was it his only option if he wished to resolve this conflict once and for all?

Aki sensed that he was being watched and, reluctantly, dropped his fork, shifting in the chair uncomfortably,

"Are... you okay? You seem lost in thought."

Nero sighed, toying with the leftovers on his plate, "Does it surprise you? It was quite a visit." When Aki averted his gaze, he asked, "You're considering it, aren't you?"

He nodded curtly but stayed silent for a moment. Nero gave him all the time he needed to voice his thoughts. "I won't be able to come back."

"That's true. And you will be a wanted man."

After a beat of hesitation, he finally unveiled his true fear, "I'll have to leave you..."

Ah, so it was not a fear of change. Instead, it was a concern for his friend,

"Nothing will happen to me, Aki. You know it."

He shook his head, growing more and more frustrated by the weight that was put on his shoulders, “It’s not about that! For years, it’s been the two of us. You’re like a brother to me. How could I possibly...”

“It’s eating you alive though. Staying here, I mean.” Aki’s eyes darted to him, surprised by how easy his sentiments were to notice. He was certain he’d hidden his unhappiness, burying it deep enough to never be found. But he should have expected his best friend to see right through him. He’s never been a good actor after all, “The City is suffocating you. Maybe it’s time to leave this cage?”

The silence stretched between them once again. In the end, Aki parted with him for the night without giving an answer.

Log_04 - “Back to normal”

Nero spent most of his morning cooped up in his office, trying to wrap his brain around their recent encounter with the Underground’s recruiter. While it was nerve-wracking, to imagine his friend leaving him for good, he knew Aki was needed on the other side. He would thrive there, finally able to fulfill his dreams of saving people in need. Accepted into their society of outcasts, away from all the unfounded scorn and criticism. A bird, released from a thorny cage.

But their relationship would suffer greatly.

With no reliable way to communicate, they would essentially be torn apart, forced to stand against each other if the need arose. The thought of one day having to go after Aki, or seeing him arrested and killed filled Nero with dread.

As countless fears suffocated him in his very own office, he was called for an urgent meeting. It was time to put the mask of a good Commander on once more and face the colleagues he so disliked.

Caelum’s way of making important military decisions could seem reasonable to an outsider at first. Three commanders, each responsible for a different domain, yet all ensuring one thing – safety of the city and its subjects.

Nero’s field of work focused on internal cases, dealing with any villainous activities that happened within the walls. From petty crimes to big terrorist attacks; as long as they happened in Caelum, he was the one to deal with them. That, of course, included quelling any complaints from the commoners and appeasing the wealthy. But, also, investigating any issues that arose.

Cyrus, a burly man with a permanent scowl on his face, was the one responsible for guarding the city walls. Aside from organizing border patrols and issuing passes for outsiders, he also cooperated with Nero’s squadron,

providing intel on notable outlanders and possible dangers. Despite his seemingly protective role, he was a ruthless, overly eager man, not sparing anyone he deemed suspicious. Nero had long lost count of how many people he'd had to acquit and apologize to for wrongful arrests.

From the three of them, Katrina was the one who spent her days most leisurely. She was an older woman, somewhere in her fifties, always dripping in opulent jewelry that certainly was against their dress code. But who would dare scold her for her choice of accessories? After all, she was the one responsible for internal problems within the army and government, working to squash any corruption under her high heels. And, since *apparently* there were no corrupt officials within those ranks, she would usually spend her days lounging in her office, sending her assistants on useless ventures such as bringing her coffee or escorting "guests" to her private quarters.

As much as Nero disliked her, he had to remain cordial in her presence, as any dispute with that woman could launch an investigation into his insubordination. And he did not want to alert her, especially with a wanted criminal as his new friend, and his flatmate as a possible renegade.

The three of them were the pillars of Caelum's protective measures, with Lisa, their General, standing at the top. She was the one approving and vetoing their decisions after discussing them in-depth with the City's council. She was admired by many, revered for achieving such great success despite being a young woman. Under her rule, countless dangers had been quelled at the root, squashed before they could even sprout and peek their ugly heads into her beloved city's streets.

That is, of course, until recently, when the terrorist attacks from the underground had begun to emerge. They were a new development, with the first one happening only a year before. Therefore, none of them were prepared for neither the attacks, nor the fallout that followed. And it did not seem like they were going to stop anytime soon.

As Nero stood by her side at the grand conference room, he could see the wrinkle between her brows deepening with each passing minute. The recent events have been plaguing her mind, her helplessness infuriating her more than anything else. Her track record has been flawless so far. The current affairs left a nasty stain on her career, earning her wave after wave of criticism from the higher-ups.

And, worst of all, he was the only one stuck in the room with her. The meetings were rarely held in-person, the faces of the council members and Nero's peers displayed on grand screens stretching from the floor all the way to the tall ceilings, creating an oppressive, suffocating atmosphere. As if they were looked down upon, each of their decisions scorned by those above.

He still remembers the first time he stepped into this room, freshly appointed as one of the Commanders. He felt so small, so insignificant compared to those powerful tyrants that stood overhead. An ant, held in the palms of giants.

And now, as the doubts in the City's integrity sprouted within his heart, he felt all the more feeble.

"The investigation has led us nowhere. Commander Nero was in pursuit of the main suspect, but he managed to escape." Lisa's tired, yet unyielding voice brought him back to the matter at hand, reminding him of his failure at the same time,

"We have no witnesses, no clues, and no accomplices. As far as we know, the suspect Nero was pursuing was only meant to be a distraction. Someone else was behind the murder, though we are not ruling out the possibility that the two parties were unrelated. It's possible that the red-haired man was acting on his own accord."

"According to Commander Nero's testimony, that person was an outsider." Cyrus did not hide his disappointment in Nero's failure to capture the suspect, but he also seemed stumped by his identity, equally mad at himself for letting him slip through the cracks in the walls, "However, we have never seen

such person by the borders. I suppose he was disguised when he crossed the gate."

Katrina's subtle giggle seemed to only irritate Lisa even further, "Are you that sure of the walls' security? Those roaches seem to have a foolproof way of getting in, with dangerous weapons no less. Maybe it was *your* oversight that allowed them to enter?"

"Are you accusing me of negligence?" Cyrus's scornful gaze turned her way, outraged by the implication, "What if they bribed someone? Wouldn't it be your responsibility then?"

"If it was a matter of bribery, then your guards would still be at fault." She stretched leisurely on her chair, unimpressed by his clapback, "Shall I teach you how to properly discipline your underlings?"

Just as Cyrus was about to oppose her, Lisa silenced them both, "Enough. The citizens are *not* hiding their disappointment. Instead of arguing whose fault it was, we should focus on appeasing them before we have an angry mob of protesters on our hands."

Katrina half-heartedly hid the roll of her eyes behind a cup of tea, "We have plenty of prisoners, don't we? Just grab one of them and get this over with. The citizens don't have to know that it's an unrelated criminal."

Nero's eyes snapped to her relaxed figure as she glared at them from behind the screen, urging them to wrap things up, "They want an execution. We can't do that to an innocent man."

Her scoff made him grit his teeth. He knew that this argument was meaningless to her, yet her cruelty still angered him. "Those rats we have imprisoned are hardly innocent. How about that thief guy? He was stealing for the underground, wasn't he?" Katrina smiled and clapped her hands happily, as if she had just solved all their problems with her genius idea, "He's a part of their little gang, then. I'd say he's a perfect candidate."

Knowing his words would go unheard, Nero turned to look at Lisa, hoping she would oppose her. To his disappointment, however, she seemed to be seriously considering that course of action, “That would buy us more time for the investigation. We wouldn’t have to worry about what the citizens have to say.”

“It’s decided then? Can I go back to work?” Cyrus’s hand was already hovering over his control panel, ready to end the call.

“Yes, yes. Go back to work. Take care of those insubordinate underlings of yours. Make sure they don’t let any more rats in.” Katrina’s insufferable voice made his eyebrow twitch, and soon both their screens went dark.

As Lisa made her way to the conference room’s exit, Nero grabbed her arm in panic, “You aren’t planning to do this, right? If we kill an innocent man from the underground, they will-”

She cut him off with a cocky grin, “I dare them to show up again. I won’t let them off that easily.”

“We’re risking another attack! It will put a target on all our heads!”

Lisa laughed softly as she brushed a stray strand of hair away from his face. “You’re going to go gray if you worry so much. Relax, they won’t risk attacking people like us. It would start a war. They’re only after those spoiled rich fucks.”

Her carefree face only infuriated him more, “And the man you’re planning to kill? Didn’t he just steal some supplies from the lower district? That hardly warrants a death penalty!”

“He’s one of them. If it was up to me, I would have gotten rid of all those rats ages ago.”

Well, his job certainly had its pros and cons. A con? That joke of a meeting he had just attended. A pro? Complaining about a nonexistent headache to his assistant just once had him sent straight to the medics' ward.

He finally made his way to Aki's shabby little office, visibly distraught by the meeting's decision. Once he confided in his friend, frantically explaining Lisa's plan, the white-haired man slumped onto his chair, biting his nails as the stress rubbed off on him.

"It's a big, *big* mistake. They... They're going to strike back if we kill their civilian. And it won't end with just one dead official this time."

Nero rubbed his eyes so hard he saw stars. The plan had pretty much been set in stone, with Lisa already arranging the date and place for the public execution. With the underground's net of intel, they would learn about it soon enough. He feared what the repercussions of that would be.

"In theory, he's a part of their force. But judging by his file... He's an insignificant member. He shouldn't be killed for petty theft, even if he's one of them." He sighed as he stared at the ceiling, feeling hopeless, "And you know how *they* are. Insignificant or not, they won't let a comrade die. I'm worried that..."

He did not need to finish that sentence. Aki knew damn well what would happen. It would be a bloodshed.

His friend picked on his cuticles in distress, "The last attack, Ri-... Your culprit didn't even kill the guards that were chasing him. No one, aside from their target, died that day. They don't attack bystanders, don't kill guards. The only victim is always the person they're after..." He trembled slightly, remembering the state of the murdered man's body, "And that victim... He looked unrecognizable. He was beaten, tortured, and almost decapitated. It was hard to even ascertain the cause of death..."

"It's not surprising, considering what he did..."

Aki's eyes slowly raised, finally meeting his, "You trust their words?"

Nero shrugged and averted his gaze, slightly ashamed, “I have no reason not to. The man had clearly wronged them in some way. And I saw the confession and evidence myself. I doubt it was fabricated.” Unlike his colleagues, at least.

As soon as the flash drive they had found at the crime scene landed on Lisa’s desk, she refused to even look at it, already deeming it worthless. *‘A distraction’*, as she called it.

Nero, of course, was the only one to investigate the files in-depth, going against her unreasonable orders. With the lackluster evidence they've collected so far, this was their only hope. Alas, even his detailed report on those videos was ultimately tossed away. They still refused to believe that one of their precious, well-off citizens was the true culprit after all.

“So... that execution. When is it?”

He shrugged as he toyed with one of Aki’s pens. This one had a pair of smiling cherries at the end. A valuable part of his silly little collection.

“Don’t know yet. I already tried to take a PTO for the event, but Lisa refused. She wants me there for some reason.”

His friend smiled softly, waving his notepad in front of his face, “How about a sick leave then?”

Nero seemed to seriously consider his offer for a moment. In the end, he shook his head, “I shouldn’t... Just in case I figure out how to get the poor guy out of this mess.”

Aki sighed, letting his notepad drop onto the desk in resignation. As a red, strawberry-patterned pen rolled to the floor from the impact, he suddenly had an idea, “Let’s tell him.”

He raised his brow in confusion, “Who?”

His friend rolled his eyes, then leaned closer, just in case someone was eavesdropping. Discussing this matter here was dangerous enough, “Our new friend.”

Nero scratched his chin as he considered that option. If they alerted Rin, he might be able to save his comrade somehow. He seemed like a guy with an army of aces up his sleeves. Surely, he had a back-up plan for this sort of scenario.

That being said, another issue arose, “How, though?”

Aki visibly deflated. He forgot that catching their new accomplice wouldn’t be an easy feat, “Well, he said I would eventually figure it out... But that’s pretty vague.” Embarrassed, he scratched his nape. “He was a tad too cryptic with this one. I fear I’m not smart enough to figure his train of thought out...”

It seemed like they were back at square one once again. Now, Nero was *actually* getting a headache.

Nevertheless, with their sneaky meeting abruptly interrupted by Aki’s next patient, they decided they would indeed “figure it out” once they got back home. If all those people from the underground had a way of gathering intel and coming and going as they pleased, surely there had to be a way of sending them a message, right?

The only thing they really had to worry about was ensuring it would end up in the hands of the right person.

As Nero was free to go for the day, he made his way straight back home. Sitting around and waiting for Aki to end his shift seemed like a waste of time, so he decided to try and work out a way of contacting their friend from beyond the wall.

With Rin's cryptic message, he silently hoped he had left something behind. Something that would be useful. Thus, he began his search right where they had met last time – in his bedroom. Judging by how much of his cigarette he had managed to smoke before Nero barged into that room to greet him, he must have been there for a while. There was a chance he had left some sort of hint behind. Maybe even a way to communicate.

Those speculations led to Nero turning his room upside down, emptying every drawer and cabinet, rummaging each corner, and even checking the safe he had hidden under his bed. Sadly, all he had found was a sock he had lost ages ago, and a cloud of dust that made him sneeze approximately every thirty seconds. Even his precious plants weren't safe, their pots emptied, and the soil thoroughly searched. The only strange thing in there, aside from the ash from Rin's cigarette, was a small worm, wriggling around in the pile of dirt.

Disappointed by his search, he had half the mind to release the poor creature outside. He could not figure out how the tiny thing even got there. Besides, Aki was a bit squeamish, so bugs certainly weren't welcome in their flat. He would need to get rid of it before he came back-

Wait a second...

Bugs.

Rin had left the bug behind.

It was still in their house!

Excited by his new revelation, Nero barged into the living room, ready to retrieve it. At that exact moment, Aki hurriedly stormed into the flat, clutching onto his bag like his life depended on it. He was about to excitedly share his findings with Nero, when he noticed the man's state and stopped dead in his tracks. Nero was dripping in sweat, with his hair messily sticking out in every direction. His hands were covered in dirt; the worm still wriggling around his palm pathetically. The open bedroom door made the sight all the more pitiful,

with the piles of his belongings strewn across the floor to the point it was barely visible.

They stared at each other in shock for a few, painfully long seconds. Finally, Aki asked, “D-did... Someone break in again?”

Confused, Nero glanced around, “No...? Why would you...” His eyes finally landed on the chaos of his bedroom. It certainly looked like a crime scene. “Ah... I was looking for something.”

Aki tilted his head, still confused by his friend’s strange behavior, “Did you... find it?”

“Yes! Let me just... uh...” He was about to reach into the cabinet under their TV, when he noticed the state of his hands. He stopped abruptly and hesitated, “Let me just... Take care of this first.”

Though already glued to the wall, Aki still seemed to inch away from him even further, eyeing the worm warily, “Y-yeah... Do it quickly. I have something important to show you.”

Log_05 - “An unconventional use of bugs”

With the worm issue resolved and his hands properly washed, Nero finally joined Aki by their dining table. The man sat across from him, still clutching his bag as if it held the most priceless of treasures within, his expression full of anxiety.

Nero raised his brow, “Well...?”

After a moment of hesitation, his friend abruptly stood up and made a round through their apartment, locking each window and closing the blinds, leaving most of their abode pitch-black. The door was his last stop. Despite being already locked and quite secure, he still ended up pushing a spare chair against the handle, just in case.

Nero stared at that strange display of paranoia with sheer confusion. “Yeah, sure. It’s not like we *just* had hosted a wanted criminal like our guest. Even back then you didn’t secure the place *that* thoroughly.”

Aki finally sat back down, slightly embarrassed, “It happened too suddenly! I didn’t have the time!”

He sighed, glancing at the bag between them, “So, what’s so top-secret that you decided to do it now?”

His friend shifted within his seat nervously, picking at the skin around his nails, “Well... After my office shift, I had to do some re-organizing in the archive.”

That would explain the countless papercuts on his fingers then. And why he looked so absolutely *exhausted*. Still, despite his fatigue, the slight excitement, almost overshadowed by nervousness, was still evident on his face.

Nero’s brows shot up, “You found something.”

With a small, proud smile, his friend finally opened that precious bag and fished out a single, weathered folder, “Yup. Something *very* interesting.”

He pushed that folder over to Nero. Immediately, the portrait photo on the cover caught his eye. His eyebrows shot up in shock, mouth slightly agape.

“Is that...?”

The girl that stared back at him from the photo was eerily familiar. She seemed to be in her early teens, but it was hard to discern her actual age with how emaciated her face looked, her cheeks sunken in. Her hair was dark and long, flowing far past her shoulders. Those grey, doe eyes stared at the camera with an empty gaze, as if she was elsewhere. Zoning out even as a photo of her was being taken, dazed and very clearly exhausted. Judging by her barely visible clothing, she was some sort of patient, dressed in a pale blue gown.

And she looked just like a certain man they’d been meaning to contact.

It was hard to see his features in hers, mostly because of Rin’s cocky demeanor and dark, heavy makeup he wore for both their meetings. Still, his appearance did seem slightly too feminine for a man, even with his personal touches. But the similarities were hard to ignore. Additionally, the last log in the file was made around twelve years ago. The ages of that girl and their new friend would match up. Besides, he *did* mention that he used to live in the city.

One other thing, aside from her striking appearance, also piqued Nero’s interest. The file did not state that the patient was discharged, or even had gone missing. According to the last log, she was deceased.

So, either Rin had a dead sister, or the city presumed that he had already passed. Or, maybe, was covering for him for some reason.

Aki tapped his fingers on the table impatiently, waiting for his friend to finish examining the file. He was clearly very proud of his work.

“You... weren’t lying. That *is* interesting.” Nero ran his fingers through his hair, still a bit shaken by those revelations.

Aki jumped from his chair and hastily came closer, looming over both his friend and the file, “Right? And look at all the other logs!” At that, he shuffled through the papers, fingers tracing over some lines, “Most of the information is

marked as classified. Even if you read through the whole thing, you still wouldn't be able to ascertain what kind of treatment that person was getting."

Nero looked at his friend, not liking where those clues were taking them, "It's like... She, or he was..."

"Being experimented on." Aki nodded, "It seems to be that way. And judging by the dates, it started when he was, what? Seven years old?"

"Just like the underground's accusations... Experiments on children." Nero sighed and dropped the papers onto the table. He rubbed his temples tiredly, "Has this really been going on for so long...? Why hadn't they..."

He trailed off, realizing how dumb that question would sound.

Why hadn't they reported it earlier?

But would that have changed anything? What if they did? What if their words fell on deaf ears, just like all the recent allegations? What if the evidence they presented was ignored all along? Nero was a witness to such a thing happening. Maybe they turned to violence once they realized the city's higher-ups had no intention of investigating, or even conducted those experiments themselves?

Instead of getting answers, more questions arose from Aki's findings. Who sponsored this endeavor? Who conducted those experiments? What facility were they held in? What was their purpose?

And just what sort of experiments were they anyway?

Without contacting Rin, they would have no way of answering any of them. It seemed like their initial plan was still on.

That tiny mechanical tick lay between them on the table, trapped underneath an empty glass, trying to escape from its small prison. Aki leveled it with a slightly disgusted glare. It was not real, yet still bug-shaped enough to make his skin crawl.

After disposing of the worm (gently, in the shabby garden behind their apartment complex) and investigating the files from Aki, Nero had fished a securely wrapped box from the cabinet in their living room. He opened it, and another box lay within. And another one. And another.

Within that cardboard matryoshka, he had hoped the little device would not be able to eavesdrop on them 24/7. Once Rin left, he wondered for a while whether he should destroy it or keep it to further investigate, or even reverse-engineer its mechanism. It certainly was impressive and would surely come in handy in his work. Nevertheless, it ended up tossed into a drawer, forgotten and gathering dust. Like many other trinkets he had decided to keep in the heat of the moment. Their house was a graveyard for such items.

Now, facing this emergency, he was glad he ended up keeping it. Though, he felt slightly bad for locking the poor mechanical creature up like that. It was truly a miracle that its battery was still running.

Its origin was also puzzling. While crafty and cunning, Rin did not strike him as an engineer, especially not one capable of creating something so remarkable. Perhaps the underground had some kind of genius inventor in their ranks.

The two friends glanced at each other as the awkward silence stretched between them. They did not expect to get so far so quickly; hence, they had not yet figured out what exactly they should say once they got their hands on a way to reach Rin.

Nero cleared his throat and, finally, began to speak, “Uh... Rin? Can you hear me? Are you there...?”

The room went quiet once again, only the low humming of their refrigerator and faint noises from the streets below breaking the silence. Then, Aki sighed,

“Nero... It’s a bug, not a radio. He won’t reply.”

Nero felt his cheeks flush, and he averted his gaze from his friend who was trying his hardest not to burst out laughing.

“...right. Sorry.”

He pushed through his initial embarrassment and finally began to relay the information to Rin. From the city’s uneasiness, to the identity of the man who was about to be executed, he gave a full account of the last meeting with his peers. Still, he did not know the date and place just yet. With that, he promised to update him as soon as those were revealed.

He decided to not share what they had found in his file just yet, however. He didn’t know if Rin would take this information lightly, or if he would accuse them of snooping too much, and lose his trust in them.

Unsure if the underground was recording everything, they repeated their message a few more times, each time adding more information they had forgotten initially.

Once Nero noticed Aki struggle to keep his eyes open and stay awake, he decided to wrap things up for now. He placed the bug back in the box and stuffed it into its drawer prison once again.

The two of them stared at each other for a moment, not knowing what to say. It was hard to tell whether their message was received or not. Should they seek another way of contacting the underground, or would this suffice? Would the underground even react to a threat to one of their own? What if he was just an irrelevant citizen, one unworthy of throwing a whole rescue mission for? Maybe it would be too risky? Cyrus did promise to strengthen the city’s defenses after all. Would they even be able to break in before it was too late?

Nero sighed and leaned against the couch. There was no point in worrying about what-ifs. All they could do now was gather more information and try to pass it on.

“Go to sleep,” he said to his friend, “This will be our new routine. We have to make sure this message reaches them.”

Aki nodded, “I have an evening shift tomorrow. I can do it in the morning, then we’ll switch.”

“Alright. I’ll see if we have a date already. Let’s hope they don’t make it a last-minute event.”

A last-minute event it was.

The two of them had spent the last couple of days regularly repeating the message to the small bug, taking shifts and making sure it was being broadcast at all times. While at work, Nero constantly inquired about the date and place, but to no avail. It seemed like his supervisors didn’t want to spread the information too quickly, lest it ended up in the wrong hands. Aka, just what Nero was trying to accomplish. Still, he couldn’t make his irritation too evident. He’d never been interested in such events. His sudden questions could come off as strange, or even suspicious.

In the end, he learned the date a day before the execution, during his private meeting with Lisa.

He was sitting in his office, investigating some group of irrelevant thieves from the lower district, when he was abruptly called over by her assistant. On one hand, he dreaded paying her a visit. She’d become more insufferable lately, dragging him away from important work for mundane chit-chat. Her personality has been changing, too. She was no longer the friend he once knew, turning more ruthless, but also weirdly clingy in the past months. He supposed holding such an important position was the reason for the changes in

her character. However, that, too, seemed too drastic for someone as stubborn and passionate as her.

If he had less responsibilities on his shoulders, both official and private, maybe he would have investigated that matter further. She used to be one of his closest friends after all, spending every waking moment of their shared childhood by his side. Daydreaming about making the world a better place. About becoming strong enough to protect those in need. Alas, gone were the days of that childish innocence. And gone was the girl he once proudly called his friend. Instead, this cruel impostor has taken her place, resembling her only in appearance.

When he entered her office, Lisa was lounging on her couch and reading a newspaper on her tablet, the pile of paperwork on her desk long forgotten. As soon as he entered, she was all over him, offering him coffee and desserts, then sitting him on the couch that was definitely too small to host two people.

“I finally managed to get a hold of you! You’ve been awfully busy ever since we held the last meeting. I even thought you'd been avoiding me on purpose...”

Nero stiffened by her side, inching as far away from her as he could on that damned tiny couch.

“Well, I still haven’t caught those responsible for the latest murder. I thought it would be obvious that I’d be busy.”

Unlike some of my colleagues, he didn't say.

Dejected by his overly professional attitude, she sighed and poured herself a glass of wine. Nero almost scolded her for drinking during work hours.

Almost.

“If only you had caught that guy from the bar... You wouldn’t be drowning in paperwork now. Hell, maybe you’d even get a bonus paycheck.”

I wouldn’t be drowning in paperwork. But I would be drowning in guilt.

He averted his gaze and scratched his cheek, purposefully acting bashful in front of her, “Well, it was my time off. I didn’t think someone like him would approach me in such a manner.”

Lisa laughed, leaning her head on his shoulder as she enjoyed her wine, “Evil never sleeps, my dear! *You* of all people should know that.”

Oh, he knew damn well. It was always awake, working hard from within. Like a parasite, slowly infecting the city bit by bit. Gnawing away at the people that were once closest to him, turning them into villainous caricatures of who they used to be.

He still remembered that fiery-haired girl that used to preach about justice and doing good. A fierce warrior with a heart of gold.

But now she has grown selfish. Cruel. Corrupted by the system. Unrecognizable.

And, judging by her behavior, it seemed like she hoped Nero would follow her down that treacherous path. Like a devoted disciple of the devil, blindly following in her tracks.

“Besides, now’s the occasion to take a break. The underground won’t strike again for a while and, after tomorrow’s banquet, the rowdy citizens will finally shut up about us not catching the culprit. We will once again be their heroes.”

Tomorrow. Did she mean...?

“The execution... It’s tomorrow?”

Nero felt goosebumps rise on his skin. That wouldn’t give Rin enough time to react. He wouldn’t make it to the city in time.

She stretched languidly and refilled her glass, “That’s why I wanted to meet up! We finally got the date. It was a bit last-minute, but we really wanted to hold it in the city hall.”

Her pride and delight were not shared by Nero. Instead, he felt dread.

Not only were the time and place shared on such a short notice. They had also chosen the worst possible place to hold the execution. The city hall was in the very heart of Caelum, looming over all the other buildings and districts with its opulence. It was also heavily guarded and almost impossible to breach.

Besides, if the execution had now turned into a banquet, it also meant a crowd of onlookers. A bunch of those rich rats reveling in an innocent man's misery. Happy that the "evil" has been defeated. Drinking and partying as their enemy slowly bled out on the stage. And possibly bringing their own private guards along.

This was *bad.*

"So... What are you wearing to the party?"

Her sudden question snapped him out of his thoughts. *Right*. He was expected to attend.

"I uh... I was kind of hoping to have a day off tomorrow. I have some plans. Besides, I've been overworking myself lately. I wanted to take a break."

She finally leaned away from him, now giving him a stern look, "You really shouldn't skip this one. You're an important member of the force. Your attendance is a must."

"What difference will it make? It's just a show for the citizens. And you know how much I dislike those kinds of gatherings..."

Lisa sighed softly, then placed her hand on his thigh, squeezing it gently. "Nero. It really would be best if you came. I've heard the whispers from your soldiers. Not only did you have an argument with one of the members of the force, apparently, you were also seen drinking with the suspect like two, good old buddies. People are already talking. You really don't want to fuel the rumors even more."

He mulled it over for a moment. She did raise a good point. The people's words could be ruthless and, sadly, held some power. If too many fingers were

pointed at him, he might earn himself an investigation into his integrity. That was certainly something he couldn't afford. Especially not now.

Besides, perhaps being present at the site would give him a chance to somehow save the poor man, or maybe even assist Rin if he managed to show up.

Two birds with one stone.

"Alright... I will come. But I won't stand idly when someone attacks my friend. Aki didn't start that argument, and neither did I. We have witnesses who saw the whole thing."

She rolled her eyes, not happy to be having this conversation right now. "Right, right... I know that this *peculiar* friend of yours would never start a fight. He's too soft for that."

Nero stood up, drawing clear distance between them, "Don't forget, that *peculiar* friend has saved many lives. Without him, even Cyrus would be dead by now."

"I know, he's talented, I can't dispute that. Still... The guy is kinda weird. He looks like he would faint at the slightest sight of blood. I'm surprised he's been holding on so well for so long."

That was the last straw. He was done talking to her, unwilling to listen to more criticism about his friend. However, as he turned to the door, he was stopped by a hand wrapped around his bicep in a vice-like grip.

"Okay, okay. I won't talk shit about him anymore. I'm sorry." As Nero glared at that offending hand, she abruptly pulled away. "But *please* at least *try* to act friendly at the party tomorrow. And wear something nice."

Then, with a sly smile, she added, "I'll be wearing green."

He stared at her for a moment, confused by that sentence.

"I only have one suit."

With that, he left, not seeing the smile die on her lips.

Log_06 – “A tiger approaches”

The grand ballroom of Caelum’s city hall was lavishly adorned, as were its guests. No dress, no suit was the same – all of them chosen particularly for this monumental occasion, designed by some of the most revered tailors. One such garment could probably afford a poorer citizen a small house, or even proper education. Alas, that small fortune was wasted on this bloodstained party, only to be tossed into a corner and forgotten as soon as it ended.

As those venerable nobles swarmed the hall, each wearing a mask of a different animal’s visage, their joy was almost palpable. They were all ready to celebrate this moment. After all, one of those rabid underground dogs was finally captured. And, with this flaunt of power from the city’s officials, with this cruel death sentence, surely no more of them would dare to endanger its citizens ever again.

Nero slightly lifted his wolf-shaped mask and took a look around, searching for one, particular face. Aki had promised he would attend, if only for his sake, to keep him company in this den of bloodthirsty beasts. He wondered for a moment whether his friend had decided to ditch him. After all, his presence was not required. In the eyes of those above, he was a nobody, only getting to witness this event because of his friend’s position and influence. People of his status did not even dare to dream of attending. It was a great privilege, and he had regretfully wasted his chance.

And so, forced to spend this evening with no good souls by his side, surrounded only by those ruthless nobles, Nero cowered in a corner, away from their view. He didn’t want to talk to anyone, not even Lisa. He didn’t want to join the celebrations.

He just wanted it all to end as soon as possible.

As he sulked all by himself, sitting in solitude by a table that was nearly bending over from the abundance of food and liquor, he wondered if Rin had heard their message. If he was, after all, going to save one of his people. If it was even possible for him to break in.

Neither he nor Aki had heard back from their friend from beyond the wall. Did he not receive the news? Was he too busy with preparations to respond? Or did he simply have no way of messaging them back, with how strict the border patrols had become?

Would he even find a way to get here on time?

Regardless, despite trying to make himself as invisible as possible, too focused on his stormy thoughts to pay others any mind, he was approached by some guests. Regretfully, he was still a public figure. Even with the mask covering his face, he was easily recognizable. And the prospect of having a person like him on their side made the nobles seek him out and swarm him, like starved dogs circling a piece of meat.

Despite his disgust, Nero at least pretended to be nice to them. Maybe, if he was to some rich asshole's liking, he would be appointed as their private guard.

It was not that his job wasn't well paid. Quite the opposite; his salary put him in one of the top spots in the city. However, as the commander, he was forced to do whatever the higher-ups wanted. No matter how morally dubious or cruel it was.

If some noble family decided to buy him off from the city's guard, his life would be much easier. As a private escort, all he would have to do would be to follow them around on their errands, ensuring their safety, entertaining their whims and wishes. He'd taken on such commissions in the past. While it was mind-numbingly boring and daunting, at least he didn't have to arrest the homeless for 'loitering' or kill the innocents from the underground that only sought justice. A position much easier, and much more comfortable than his current one.

And, *maybe*, the guilt would stop eating him alive.

He wasn't a perfect man. His sense of justice and his feelings towards the city weren't as strong as those of Rin, or even Aki. He didn't want to destroy Caelum with his own two hands, nor did he want to escape. He simply wanted to be left alone. To never have to kill an innocent. To never issue nor fulfill the orders that later kept him awake until late hours of the night. To never witness the bloodshed he got so used to seeing on a daily basis ever again.

As he was drowning his sorrows in another bottle of wine, a stranger pushed through the crowd and sat right by his side. Expecting another wealthy man trying to befriend him, or some well-off madam wishing to put her claim on him, he spared a glance their way. Once he looked up, however, he nearly dropped his cup to the ground.

The lady before him wore a scandalously revealing black dress that extenuated every single of her curves, covered in rhinestones glistening crimson in the hall's spotlights. Her long, slender but well-built legs were almost entirely revealed by the slits in her attire, making many of the nobles that still surrounded them drool at the sight. Her long, black hair was pinned up with a silver, claw-shaped clip; her entire neck exposed to those animals who ogled her so lustfully. Her chest was barely covered by the little black dress and tiger-striped fur. It seemed like the only concealed part of her body were her arms.

That, and her face, obscured by a tiger-shaped mask.

Nero stared at her for a moment, dumbfounded by her appearance. While many noble ladies bore equally lavish outfits, none of them were that lustful and promiscuous.

None of them dared. So, why did she?

The tigress did not pay any mind to the men's lewd glances, nor the women's outraged scoffs. Her whole attention was focused solely on him.

Nero finally snapped out of his stupor and set his cup on the table, fumbling with it in embarrassment. It was rare to see such vulgar characters within the city, and he, too, was not immune to her exotic charms.

She seemed to finally notice the crowd of people and, with a dangerous smile that looked strangely *too* familiar to Nero, she turned to the gaggle of nobles.

“Aren’t your wives and daughters in attendance as well? You wouldn’t want to be seen by them in such state, would you?” That gave the wild animals pause, many of them only now realizing how unsightly they were behaving. She absentmindedly winded a strand of her onyx hair around one, sharp claw, leveling the onlookers with her gaze, “While I would love to start a scandal or two, I doubt your fragile little reputations would enjoy it as much. So, scram.”

At that, the crowd slowly dispersed, leaving only the two of them by the table. Nero toyed with his cup nervously. He felt cornered; trapped like prey, caught between the tigress's sharp claws. But maybe it was the alcohol, or her alluring demeanor, because he found himself drawn even closer, falling for the obvious honeytrap.

With a soft giggle and a glint of her long, sharp nails, she snatched the cup away from him, then emptied it with no hesitation. There were plenty of available glasses strewn across the table, and yet, she decided to share this indirect kiss with him, toying with his already crumbling facade. His cheeks grew almost as red as the lipstick mark she had left on the rim of his cup. He was glad he was still wearing his mask. Otherwise, he would have been left defenseless.

He cleared his throat, hoping that his wavering voice wouldn’t reveal his nervousness, “Excuse me, do we... know each other?”

The woman leveled him with her gaze for a moment, a mysterious emotion barely peeking through, as if she was weighing her options. Show mercy, or finish him off? Release the poor prey, or dig the claws deeper into his flesh?

In the end, it seemed like she was not done with her sweet torture, as she leaned in and murmured in a low, seductive voice, “What do you think? Do I look that forgettable?”

Taken aback, he flinched away from her, clumsily looking for the correct answer, “N-no! Of course not!”

Her chuckle was almost patronizing. Truly, in her eyes, his fumbling was very pitiful, “Why so nervous? I don’t bite on a first date.”

Nero found himself at a loss for words. He’s never been that jittery in front of anyone! Not even in the line of fire, chasing dangerous criminals down the streets! So why was she, just some woman at this godforsaken party, able to disarm him so easily?!

At a fucking execution ball, no less?!

His reactions were really, wholly inappropriate. He was supposed to sulk by himself, then go back home and get drunk to forget everything! Then, the next day, his guardian angel, his beloved Aki, would nurse his hangover and berate him! That’s how it was supposed to go!

And why did she seem so... familiar?

The tigress reveled in his misery, tapping her crimson lip with her finger, “What is a cutie like you doing here, all by himself, stuffing his face while the party goes on? Shouldn’t you be snatching maidens onto the dancefloor?”

That seemed to finally sober him up, as he straightened up and, once again, cleared his throat, “I’m not... too fond of those sorts of gatherings.”

She hummed softly, as if pondering over his answer, “Why not? Free food, free alcohol, and plenty of free daughters of nobles who would gladly spread their legs for you. Isn’t this a good chance to mingle and secure a highborn wife?”

The woman did not miss his nervous glance at the stage at the center of the hall. She tapped her chin and grinned, “Oh? One, pure soul amongst the crowd of bloodthirsty beasts perhaps?”

Nero’s gaze snapped back to her in surprise. Did she see right through him already? And what was up with this wording? Did she, too, find those gatherings abhorrent?

“If it’s a gathering of beasts, why are you here? You don’t seem too interested in the execution either.”

She rested her chin on her palm, a finger running across her lips as she pondered over the question for a moment, “You are wrong. I am *very* interested. Just not for the same reasons as they are.” She then abruptly stood up, snatching his arm into her clawed hand. Nero feared that if he tried to run now, his only suit would surely be ripped to shreds. He stumbled as she dragged him wherever she wished.

“But let’s not discuss it here. We can do so while dancing~.”

Nero was, once again, stumped. He only snapped out of it once they reached the dancefloor, “But I- I don’t...”

She cut him off, pressing her body against his in an intimate dance. In this position, even in her dangerously tall heels, her height was far from reaching his. Despite her smaller stature however, she carried herself with so much confidence that she seemed to loom over him. “It was not a question, nor an offer. It was an order.”

As soon as he found himself in such close proximity to her, a few puzzle pieces finally snapped into place.

Her scent was the first thing he noticed. It was hard not to recognize this perfume. After all, he had to wash his sheets three times to draw out the lingering aroma of mint and cedar his friend from beyond the wall had left when he last visited, along with the stench of cigarette smoke that still lingered to this day.

Next, he saw those grey, piercing eyes. Paired with the fanged, cocky smile, it was hard not to see his face in hers.

And, lastly, that overwhelmingly confident demeanor she displayed. Now it all made sense.

He nearly stepped on her foot as he finally recognized who she really was, “I-it’s...! Ri-”

Rin pressed that clawed finger against his lips, silencing him at once, “Careful now, detective. You wouldn’t want this dance to end with me running off like a distressed princess, would you?”

Nero pulled away slightly, furrowing his brow, “How did you even- Wait, so you really got the message?”

His dance partner rolled his eyes, “It was hard not to, since you spammed it all day, every day.” He then smiled softly, an expression that left Nero even more defenseless than his cocky grins, “Though, I am grateful for your help. That guy is pretty important to me. I wouldn’t forgive myself if I let him die. Especially like this.”

That moment of vulnerability made Nero’s steps falter, and he almost stepped on Rin’s dress. His friend flashed him a dangerous glare; the softness gone in an instant.

“S-sorry... Is this a bad moment to tell you that I’m not too good at dancing?”

“Bad at dancing and a shitty detective. What are you good at anyway?”

Nero frowned, “Shitty? I wouldn’t hold this position if I wasn’t-”

“Yet you did not recognize me.” Once again, that demeaning smile of his lips was back, “Or was my disguise that good?”

He averted his gaze in embarrassment, “Of course I recognized you!”

Rin giggled, spinning him around, “Sure thing. Took you long enough.”

Barely able to catch his balance, Nero glared at his partner, “Shouldn’t you be doing your thing? Aren’t you wasting your time toying with me?”

“But toying with you is so fun...” Rin pouted, but once he saw Nero’s unimpressed stare, he sighed, “Okay, fine. Let’s say... I don’t have a solid plan yet.”

Nero was stumped, “So... You got in here without figuring out how you’re gonna find your friend, save him from a guard-swarmed hall, get out, and leave the city?” He shook his head in disbelief, “And *I* am a shitty detective...”

Rin’s long nails dug into Nero’s shoulder in retaliation, “That’s what I have *you* for. I still have some time to gather intel, so spill what you know.”

“I have nothing to *spill*. Ever since they decided to put all the blame on that guy, I’ve distanced myself from this case. I don’t want my name anywhere *near* his death certificate.”

The tiger rolled his eyes once again, “So, you’re essentially useless. Good to know.”

Nero’s palm landed on his waist, squeezing it in annoyance, “But not *completely* useless. You won’t be able to do anything until they bring him out anyway. I can entertain you in the meantime.”

His brows rose in amusement, “Entertain me how?”

At that, Nero boldly dipped him to the floor, so low that a few loose strands of his hair almost touched the ground. Before Rin could even react to this daring move, he was pulled back up and spun a few times, then once again settling in his arms.

He gazed at him in surprise for a moment, glad that his mask was covering his reddening cheeks. Despite it, Nero still saw that shadow of bashfulness in his eyes and smiled proudly.

“I may be a shitty detective and a bad dancer, but I *am* quite a quick learner. What do you say, entertaining enough?”

Rin cleared his throat and averted his gaze, “As long as you don’t drop me...”

“I would never. That dress is too pretty to touch this filthy floor.”

Without any further warnings, Nero dragged his partner into a heated and intimate dance. Gone were the judging stares of nobles, or his colleague’s shocked murmurs. Their little world started where their fingers laced together, ending at the heels of their shoes.

Everything else, wildly twirling around them in a mirage of lights and colors, was irrelevant. All that mattered was the skin-to-skin contact, the rhythmic pounding of their hearts, the exhilarating scent of Rin’s perfume.

And, while at first his partner seemed hesitant to follow, soon he, too, let his feet carry him away, matching Nero’s steps as best as he could. In this untamed waltz, Rin’s hair slipped free from his clip, joining their fierce dance strand by strand, spilling past his shoulders like ink.

The crowd gave way, leaving the dance floor entirely to the intertwined pair, forming a ring around them. Watching, with pure astonishment, as one of the most prominent figures of the city stole the breath of that promiscuous tigress away.

The distant and unapproachable commander. The man who never seemed interested in romantic affairs, to the dismay of many young ladies. And yet, here he was, entangled in this public display of sheer intimacy.

Some wondered out loud, if this was his secret lover many have been gossiping about. After all, there was no way he would pass the countless opportunities to marry their wealthy daughters he was given. Others laughed, thinking that the alcohol stripped him of his shame, showing his true colors. Of course, he couldn’t miss the opportunity to steal the seductive lady all to himself! He was a young, unmarried man after all! Even someone as perfect as him had to have *some* weaknesses!

But those few who knew him closer, more intimately, did not share their sentiments. All they could do was stare in utter shock as the man they thought they knew turned into a stranger in the arms of some *whore*.

Among those was the General herself. Lisa, bearing a mask of a lion, her wild ginger hair resembling its mane, almost dropped her glass when she saw Nero get dragged to the center of the hall, then take the lead in that wildly inappropriate dance. Her stupor soon morphed into barely concealed fury, intensified by budding jealousy.

She prided herself in knowing everything about everyone within Caelum's walls, yet she did not recognize her face. Her net of spies and assistants was dense and flawless, yet she had never heard of someone like her before.

Who was the woman that touched him so intimately? *Who* was the woman that dared to steal him away?

Just who was this wretched little slut?

Her assistant glanced at her anxiously, noting how the glass creaked in her vice-like grip, threatening to crack under the strain at any moment. But before she could react, Lisa's expression was back to normal. Her confident smile once again plastered on her face as the song ended, and she moved to approach the pair.

Log_07 – “The tiger starts a catfight”

Even as the music faded, the two were reluctant to move. They stared into each other’s eyes, unblinking, their quickened breaths mingling as their lips were barely apart.

Nero could not believe his very own actions. Wasn’t his plan to stay in the shadows, then slip away before the execution could begin? Why did he put himself and his undercover friend in such a spotlight, for all to see? *Had he lost his mind?!*

But as his gaze bore into Rin’s flushed face, his crimson lips parted in a pant, the mask concealing his true emotion, all his worries dissipated. Instead, came hunger. He longed to tear the tiger’s visage off. To see if his partner was as affected as him. If-

He heard heels, clinking on the marble floor, and slow clapping as someone approached. He finally parted from his partner, lightly supporting him in case that heated dance made him just as dizzy.

As soon as he let go, his shoulders were enveloped by a lioness with a honey-sweet voice and sticky hands.

“You wound me, Nero! I’ve been trying to get you out onto the dance floor for *years*, but you always refused! How rude of you!”

Nero barely suppressed a sigh as he gently pried the General away. Yet, her hands still refused to leave him. “Didn’t you ask me to be nice to the guests?” he then sent a teasing smile Rin’s way, “That young lady approached me, shyly asking if I knew how to dance. She was hoping I could teach her some things.”

As soon as he saw the dangerous glint in Rin’s eye, he realized his colossal mistake. His partner’s expression instantly morphed into an impeccable display of bashfulness and worry, and he took a small step away from the two officers.

“Ah! I- I apologize! How foolish of me! I did not know you were already spoken for, Commander...” He then clutched at his chest, not sparing any flourishes and dramatics from his little performance, “I hope I had not offended you, dear General. It was my mistake!” Batting his eyelashes, he sized the two up and added, “However, I must admit, I did not see a ring on his finger!”

Lisa immediately jerked away from Nero, as if burned. It seemed like she had finally noticed how inappropriate her little touches and hugs were to the onlookers. Still, she quickly caught onto the stranger’s act, seeing right through her show. She glared at her, disbelieving her boldness to challenge her in such a low way.

Nero, on the other hand, stood between the two, dumbfounded and embarrassed by Rin’s claims,

“Ah, you misunderstand... Lisa is my boss, so that kind of relationship... well...”

Unknowingly, he had just given Rin more material to torment them with. The tigress covered her lips in a play-pretend shock, staring at Lisa with disbelief, “You seem quite close for two people with... That sort of connection.”

Nero sheepishly rubbed his neck, avoiding looking at Lisa at any cost. Internally, he cursed Rin for putting him in such an uncomfortable situation. But hadn’t he facilitated it with his careless words and the puny attempt at teasing his friend?

He dug his own grave, and now he had to pull Lisa out of it as well.

“Well, we’ve also known each other for a very long time. She’s my childhood friend.”

The tigress then brightened up, and alarms blared in Nero’s mind. Whatever he was about to say, would piss Lisa even-

Rin shyly approached Nero, lightly touching his arm with a coy smile, “Then... Does that mean I still have a chance with you?”

Before the poor Commander could even react, Lisa stepped in, towering over Rin with her arms crossed on her chest,

“Nero is a good, proper man, who doesn’t let just anyone approach him in such a shameless way. Only a woman of virtue may ever dream of being with someone like *him.”*

And Nero *really* should have separated them before it escalated to that point. He *really* shouldn’t have taken shots at Rin, knowing how cunning and witty the man was. How possessive and easy to anger Lisa was.

But nothing could have prepared him for...

“Oh? I don’t have to feel threatened in *your* presence, then.”

Nero rubbed his mask-covered forehead in exasperation. Screw him, putting them in the spotlight with that stupid idea to dance. Whatever Rin was doing now was much, *much* worse.

The crowd began to form around them once again, unwilling to miss the opportunity to witness this catfight of a lifetime. Here she was, the General herself, fighting with that mysterious temptress over *a man.* And, to their shock and horror, it seemed like their beloved General was *losing.*

Lisa, blinded by jealousy, refused to step away from this hopeless battle,

“Just look at yourself! Displaying your assets for anyone to see, like any common *whore*! Are you not ashamed? Dressing this way for this grande occasion! I feel sorry for your family. You are embarrassing them in front of every single important person in this city!”

Rin only smiled politely, sizing the fuming woman before him up, “You’re right. I should learn from you. After all, being able to look so *bland* is a true talent. Do you have any tips for me?”

After hearing a few laughs and giggles erupting in the crowd, Nero decided to put this pathetic show to an end. Clearly, Lisa was only

embarrassing herself further, staining her reputation by engaging in something so *childish*.

He stepped between the two women, separating them and snapping Lisa out of it. She finally noticed how much of a show they had just put on and averted her gaze in shame. Still, her anger did not dissipate.

Nero cleared his throat, diplomatically concluding the fight, “Ladies. You are both very charming. There is no need to, uh... do *this*. Besides, I have no time for affairs. This argument is pointless.”

With Lisa’s offended scoff and Rin’s barely suppressed giggle, the crowd around them finally dispersed, already indulging in their new gossip material, spreading the word to anyone who might have missed it.

Since all the fun was over, Rin politely bowed to the two of them, moving to leave as well, “As much as I hate it, I must go too. My friend is waiting for me.” Still, he did not miss the last chance to take one, final jab at Lisa. He winked at Nero, calling out in a seductive voice, “I hope to see my knight in shining armor again soon, though. Farewell~.”

With an elegant turn and toss of his long hair, he disappeared into the crowd as he pinned it back up. Nero stared at his retreating figure, still somewhat dazed by their electrifying encounter. Lisa, of course, did not miss his longing gaze.

She smacked him on the head, and his attention was finally back on her. He looked at her, surprised and slightly alarmed, rubbing his stinging skull,

“What was that for???”

Lisa lightly stomped her foot, turning her anger at *him*, now that her rival was gone.

“What the fuck?! Who even *was* that woman? And how could you let her slander me like that? In front of this whole crowd, no less!”

He raised his hands in defense, fearing any other punches that might come his way.

“I already told you! We’ve just met! I didn’t even catch her name!” He then sighed, still surprised by how quickly his friend had lost her temper, “Why did you fight her like that anyway? She was just flirting with me! It’s not like she was the first one to do so!”

Lisa stared at him in disbelief, astonished by the sheer obliviousness of that man. How that *idiot* did not see her affection was a pure mystery to her. Without answering him, she stomped away, back to her entourage of assistants.

Stumped by her reaction, Nero only sighed and made his way back to his plate with a tail between his legs.

He really had to stop teasing Rin whenever he found the opportunity to do so. Clearly, his arsenal of witty comebacks and insults ensured that any attempt at his dignity would come with severe backlash. And he did not hesitate to retaliate against bystanders either.

As he continued to stuff his face, he silently hoped that the “entertainment” he had unknowingly provided would not distract Rin from his mission.

Before long, the bright grand hall began to go dim, the music growing quieter. The spotlights moved to rest on the heavy, navy curtains covering the center stage, signaling the beginning of the ceremony.

Some swarmed the still covered platform, waiting with bated breath to see that abhorrent man. That cruel and vindictive monster.

That poor lamb for slaughter.

Nero took this as a sign. In the dark hall, no one would notice his absence. It was the moment to finally slip away and let Rin handle the rest. He could finally leave that bloodstained banquet and go home.

But as he made his way to the ornamented door, passing by the nobles so excited to witness that innocent man's death, he stopped. Unable to move. Unable to abandon this godforsaken place.

Unable to leave Rin all alone with this reckless, last-minute mission.

It's not that he doubted his abilities. He clearly saw what the man was capable of. It would be easy for him to just grab the prisoner and slip away before the curtains came down, leaving behind nothing but an empty stage. Disappointing all the guests and alerting every guard in the city.

But...

He turned to face the center of the hall, making his way closer to the growing crowd.

Even if Rin managed to run away unnoticed, the guards would be after him. The city gates would be shut, not letting anyone pass until they were caught. The security would be strengthened, and search teams would be dispatched to every street of Caelum.

His skills were great. But it would be impossible to get back outside while hauling a beat-up prisoner and fighting off a crowd of guards, even for someone like him.

Maybe Nero could stall them somehow? Point them in the wrong direction, claiming he saw Rin run off? Or maybe pin the blame on some nobles, accusing them of spying for the underground? That would certainly stir up enough drama to divert the guards' attention. Maybe then-

Before he could make any moves, the already dim hall grew hazy with smoke, clouds of mist pouring in through the ventilation system, obstructing everyone's view. At first, the guests thought it to be a part of the show; a new

way to make the ceremony all the more flashy. However, soon after, gunshots sounded off from the stage, sending everyone into panic.

The guests, frozen in fear, stared at the falling curtain as the haze finally cleared up.

There, towering above them all, stood their previous object of attention. The temptress that stole their cold Commander’s heart. The vixen that offended their prideful General.

The Tigress, baring her fangs in a wicked smile, for all to see.

Log_08 – “Masks off!”

Nero stared at his friend, frozen in shock, unable to wrap his head around Rin’s crazy, mysterious plan.

Why didn’t he secretly steal his friend away, running off before the curtain went down, buying himself more time to get back home? Why didn’t he intercept him before he was even brought to the hall?

Why the hell was he turning the whole mission into a show?! It seemed like staying in the shadows was never on his agenda. Instead, he was intent on gaining all the attention he could.

Was it a form of protest? A way to flaunt his power? To show everyone how incapable they were of stopping him?

To let the city know that, no matter what they did, the underground would always come out victorious?

He distantly heard Lisa scream out to the guards, urging them to capture the unwanted guest. But when no one came to her aid, she finally noticed – all the security was gone. The only officers present in the hall were her and Nero, both unarmed. Both so confident in their safety that they didn’t bother to carry weapons. Both unable to stop that rat, left to only watch her intercept the show that was supposed to make her feel hopeless. Powerless. To make her cower under the City’s might.

The tigress slowly roamed the stage, observing the people beneath her – her prey – as they trembled in fear. At last, she came to a halt in the very middle of it, stealing all the spotlight and reveling in her starring role.

The hall was dead quiet so, when she spoke, she did not have to raise her voice at all. Instead, she purred in a sweet voice, “Greetings, my dearest partygoers! I hope you are enjoying yourselves!” She giggled, crossing her arms

on her chest, “I certainly did, thanks to the entertainment provided by your generous officers!”

Nero fought the urge to roll his eyes at his friend’s recklessness. As much as he enjoyed watching the nobles recoil in fear and Lisa’s blood boil, he knew that the hall would soon be swarmed by guards. If he didn’t hurry...

Instead of cutting it short, Rin, however, continued, “But with deep regrets, I must inform you that today’s execution is cancelled. You see, the poor man that was about to be slaughtered here was not the true culprit at all!”

The nobles began to murmur among each other, wondering what she meant by that. Was she telling the truth? If so, why was the General so quick to arrange his execution? Why weren’t the guards looking for the real criminal?

Would they really kill an innocent man, just to silence their outraged voices?

Nero saw Lisa struggle to push through the crowd, making her way to the stage, enraged.

Rin did not even spare her a glance, “You must be wondering, *who* killed that gentleman, then? *Who* was responsible for such cruel murder? Well, I won’t keep you in the dark any longer!”

At that, he slowly untied his mask and slipped his wig off, throwing them onto the stage and revealing his short, crimson hair, and a face that was already known to many.

The people gathered in the hall came to a shocking realization.

The woman that’s been taunting them all night and the man who slipped away from Nero’s grasp that fateful day were the same person!

Lisa froze just a few meters away from the stage. She stared at Rin in fury, not knowing what to say.

“You... you bitch! I knew I’ve seen you before! How dare you-”

“How dare *I*?” He smiled, pointing his gun at her, “Dearest General, how dare *you*? Trying to frame and murder an innocent man? That’s deplorable!

“Aren’t you supposed to protect your citizens? How are you going to do *that*? By letting the murderer run free and killing a random prisoner that had nothing to do with the case? A prisoner whose only offense was *petty theft*?”

The crowd turned their heads to stare at their General in shock, in disbelief of the accusations thrown against her.

The murmurs had begun to spread already. Was that… man telling the truth? Clearly, he was involved in the murder. He was seen near the scene by many passersby, after all. But why go out of his way to free another man and put himself in danger like that? Was he mad that *he* got the credit for *his* crime? Was his ego so big?

And why were the officers trying to frame a random man? How could the citizens feel safe if that’s how they solved murder cases?

Were any of the previous prisoners and defendants the true culprits in their own cases? Or were they, too, scapegoats chosen just to silence the crowd’s disapproval?

Lisa ripped her mask off and pelted it to the ground, finally staring Rin straight in the eyes, “I see what you’re trying to do... You think you can ruin *my* credibility?! You weren’t at the crime scene when the murder happened! You were at that shitty bar, distracting one of our officers! How will you prove that the man we sentenced wasn’t the one who pulled the trigger?!”

Rin only laughed at her growing fury, amused by how fast the people had turned against their beloved General. By how easily their perceptions of her were swayed just by a few words, from a criminal no less.

He shrugged as he toyed with the gun, still pointed straight at her head, “I never said I killed the man with my own two hands. However, I *was* the one who orchestrated the whole thing. I also told my guys to record a confession of

that *poor* victim, which you so *generously* hid from the public view. Along with all the proof of *his* crimes."

Nero watched as Rin unveiled each of Lisa's lies one by one. Planting seeds of doubt in everyone's hearts. Showing them how untrustworthy she was. How far she was willing to go to protect her status.

He watched as the show meant to humiliate the underground was turned into a new slander campaign. This time, aiming higher. Not settling for those rotten nobles. Instead, targeting the root of the problem.

The woman who facilitated all their crimes. The woman who kept their secrets.

The woman that was supposed to *protect the citizens*.

That was clearly the last straw for her as, with a frenzied growl, she grabbed a steak knife off a nearby table and charged at Rin.

He did not seem alarmed however as, with a smile and a snap of his fingers, all the lights in the hall shut off. Lisa was left blindly trying to attack him while he easily slipped away under the cover of darkness.

As fast as the power went out, it came back, unveiling the empty stage, only a tiger mask and an onyx wig left behind.

Before Nero could even react, Lisa grabbed him and dragged him out of the hall in a hurry. He had never seen her so angered before. He was growing anxious.

"What... What are you doing? Shouldn't we secure the hall and dispatch search parties? Maybe she-"

He was cut off by her icy voice, "I'm gathering everyone. We're going to the borders."

He stopped dead in his tracks, pulling her to a halt, "You can't be serious! Just because one person-!"

However, when he saw her maniacal, crazed smile, he paled. Suddenly, the woman standing before him wasn't his friend anymore. It was a stranger. A cruel, vindictive, and erratic stranger.

Through clenched teeth, she spat out, "That *bitch* has spent the whole evening slandering me. I'll show her and her friends what I'm capable of." She then laughed hysterically, fingers running through the wild mane of her hair, "I'll have her hung. But before that, I'll tie her up, slice her pretty little face, and let the boys have some *fun* with her. *That* will show the underground filth to *NEVER* step foot in *MY* city!"

Without sparing him another glance, she stomped off to her office.

Nero stood there, paralyzed by shock, his eyes wide, staring at her as she confidently went to start a war.

Was this really the woman he once called his friend?

The one whose only wish was to protect the weak? To uphold justice? To squash all crimes?

Now threatening to torture and facilitate the rape of another woman simply for a *personal offense*? To start a war just to cover up all the lies she had spread on behalf of her higher-ups? All the crimes she'd facilitated?

Gutted, he did not know what to do.

Run off with Rin? Join him? Or fulfil her order and join this slaughter?

He was not ready to make that decision. Not yet.

But he had to do *something.* Warn him at least. Tell him what her plans are.

Without any further hesitation, he hastily made his way to the border.

As the forces under Lisa's command were still preparing to attack, his run to the city's gate went uninterrupted. The thought of having to pass through the security check worried him greatly however, as soon as he reached the entrance, he realized just how easy it was for Rin and his friends to pass.

He did not frequent this area at all, his work requiring him to stay deep within the city's walls. And he was certain that, with Cyrus leading his people with an iron fist, surely all the guards patrolling the borders would be on their A-game, noticing and reacting to the smallest of anomalies happening on either side.

That was not the case at all.

Seemingly, the men stationed by the passage have also been celebrating the capture of the "culprit", all of them merrily drinking and singing, not caring in the slightest for the safety of the borders.

Perhaps Katrina was right. Cyrus had no control over his dogs at all.

Nero did not mourn the safety issue, nor did he scold the insubordinate soldiers. Instead, for once, he thanked Caelum for being so corrupt, so rotten to the bone that any person could pass through the gates without much trouble.

Not having to worry about alerting them, he scaled the steps that lead to the very top of the wall.

As he stood there, on this line between those two, vastly different worlds, he spared a second to ponder in the pale moonlight. He was hit with the crisp, forest air, and he realized how much he'd missed it.

Once upon a time, he would roam those borderland woods with his father and Lisa. That's where he held a weapon for the very first time. Where he shot his first bullet into the flesh of an unsuspecting animal. Where he saw the slowly trickling crimson of blood for the first time in his then short life.

He was just a child when he first drew blood. And now, nearing his thirties, he wished to never do it again.

He remembered how squeamish he was, skinning that poor fawn right in front of its own dying mother. How the squelch of flesh and cracking of bones made his skin crawl. How the sight of its guts made him want to puke.

Yet above him roared the stern voice of his father, egging him on. Scolding him, because *Lisa did not even flinch! A woman was unbothered by that sight! He didn't raise a sissy, God damn it! Why was his son so weak?!*

Nero shook his head, pushing those memories away. Maybe he should have known back then. Maybe he should have realized that the joy on Lisa's face wasn't caused just by his father's praise, nor a job well done. It was her, reveling in her first kill. Face and hands smeared with blood, wild, red hair falling into those eyes glinting with amusement, the sharp blade gliding across the corpse in unnecessary cuts.

He really should have known. She's always been this way.

And now it was time to let go.

He jumped down the wall, the lush greenery cushioning his fall.

That was it. He was out.

Nero took one last glance at the gates, bidding them farewell. And then he ran through the forest that once upon a time stole his childish innocence.

Log_09 - “The other side”

The sight of the outside world did not match his expectations in the slightest.

Whenever he thought of this alien realm, he saw ruins. Maybe a few villages, strewn across the plains beyond the thick forest, occupied only by the unluckiest of souls. Sometimes he even imagined lawless slums, its people tortured by famine and sickness, barely able to keep themselves alive. Or a reflection of the place he was raised in, equally grandiose and just as corrupt, yet slightly more welcoming, judging by the way Rin carried himself.

What met him, however, was a whole city built of scraps.

Hidden behind the forest and hills, it was impossible to see even from the tallest towers of Caelum. A haven for the refugees, cloaked by the greenery.

As he gazed upon the growing number of buildings, he noticed a few things.

Those were not freshly built, nor were they in complete disarray. It seemed as if they were once ruins reclaimed by nature, with branches, vines, and plants sprouting through the cracked bricks. Later, those ruins were repurposed by the people seeking refuge, fixed with whatever they could find, patched up with scraps of wood and metal. Decorated with colorful signs, street art, and patterned fabrics. However, those people did not cast the nature out of this ruined city, living alongside it instead.

It was a strange view, especially when compared to the concrete, monolithic towers of Caelum. The polished gardens and gray, monotone architecture. This was a sight of beauty, a symbol of resilience.

But, most importantly, a habitat where people coexisted with the surrounding nature. Accepting it in their abode. As if thanking it for the shelter and cover it provided.

A bold, untamed place. It suited Rin's spirit perfectly.

A small smile bloomed on Nero's face as the crimson-haired man crossed his mind once again. Soon, they would reunite. Soon, he would-

Except then, he heard a meek, familiar voice whisper *'sorry'*, and everything went dark.

A stinging pain on his cheek awoke him from this unwanted slumber. As his senses slowly returned, leaving his mind fuzzy and sluggish, he remembered what happened before he lost consciousness.

His eyes shot open, unseeing, and he jolted. He was unable to move much however because, as he soon realized, he was tied to a chair, his hands bound to the metal slats behind his back. Panicked, his gaze finally rested on the person standing before him. Messy white hair, sky-blue eyes, and a small, apologetic smile on their face.

At last, he and Aki were reunited.

Nero smiled in relief for a split second, then squinted his eyes, noting the piece of bloodied gauze in his friend's hand, still hovering near his stinging face.

And then, the pounding headache assaulted him with no warning.

Aki quickly dropped the stained fabric, supporting his friend upright instead with a palm on the back of his neck. He spoke in a hushed, somewhat worried tone, "Don't move! You're concussed. I... I must've whacked you too hard. Sorry..."

Nero's eyes found his friend's reddened face once more, confused by his words, "Whacked...? You?" He raised his voice, growing even more perplexed by the situation, "Why did you..?!"

Aki swiftly covered his lips with his palm, instantly shushing him, “Don’t yell! You’ll wake him up!”

Him...?

He gazed around the dim room, finally making out some shapes in the darkness. They were in a messy apartment, banged up and patched over and over again. Some of the furniture looked older than even him, while other pieces resembled brand new luxury items stolen straight from Caelum’s mansions. There were mismatched chairs, rugs with burnt off and stained patches, and stacks of trinkets that could only be described as “controlled mess”. The walls were covered in a cacophony of drawings, newspaper clippings, and photos. There was even an outdated calendar, a few decades old, with a scantily dressed woman at the very top.

Nero averted his eyes from the scandalous image and, finally, noticed the lacquered, antique divan covered with crimson quilted fabric.

And upon it, sleeping soundly, was Rin.

He was visibly bruised and battered, but he did not seem to be seriously wounded. That risky dress he wore at the banquet was lying on the ground, tangled up and torn to shreds. Now, he was wearing a messily buttoned shirt and cargo shorts.

Nero could finally take a good look at him, as during their previous encounters the man was either all dressed up or disguised. He immediately noticed a bunch of tattoos covering random parts of his skin, up until now concealed to retain some semblance of anonymity. His mechanical arm hung off the edge of the couch, and Nero took a second to marvel at the intricacy of the versatile prosthetic. He’s been amazed by its performance in combat on multiple occasions, so he made a mental note to ask about its creator later.

He sighed softly, glad to see both of his friends, old and new, safe and sound. Still, he felt bad. Clearly, Rin had taken part in the fights at the borders. He imagined it must have been a bloodbath. Maybe, if he stayed with Lisa and

stopped her, if he joined the battlefield on the side of the resistance, if he questioned Rin about his plans more-

Maybe if he'd done something *differently*, it all could have been avoided. Guilt gnawed at him and he averted his gaze from Rin's vulnerable form.

Aki scoffed softly and pressed the small crease that formed between Nero's furrowed brows with his thumb, massaging it lightly, "Stop scowling. You're gonna get all wrinkly. Like an old man."

Nero huffed and inched his head away from the offending hand, "I'm sorry... You shouldn't have been involved in all this mess. Maybe if I-"

"If you what? Sabotaged Lisa? Then they would have released a warrant for *your* arrest too. You would have destroyed your reputation, and we can't have that. You worked way too hard for your position." He then smiled, pushed a stray chair next to his, and sat down. "Everything went well. We're outside, and we're safe. Rin's friend is apparently doing fine too, or so I was told."

He glanced at the sleeping man once more, "So, he did figure it out, after all."

Aki giggled softly, "Of course he did. He's smart, *and* he had my help!"

Nero stared at his friend, once again surprised, "You were the one who cut the power off?"

He smiled smugly, visibly proud, "And figured out how to save that poor guy. Yup."

"...And gave me a concussion."

The smile faltered, and Aki rubbed his neck, his ears reddening with shame, "That... was not a part of the plan. Rin told me to hit you on the head. He didn't specify how hard, though..." When Nero let out a barely suppressed giggle, his friend smacked his knee in irritation, "Don't laugh! It was my first time ever doing something like this! And he put me on the spot, too!"

That moment of mirth was cut short, however, as a stern-looking man barged into the small apartment, slamming the door open with so much force that it rebound and closed shut. He was tall, but not as tall as Nero, with a build slightly broader than Rin's. He looked to be in his mid-thirties, his face marred by a long scar that stretched from his forehead down to his lip and a wrinkle between his brows, his expression locked in a permanent scowl. He wore thin-framed glasses, and his attire was far less casual than Rin's, somewhat signifying a higher position. His hair was dark and short, the parted fringe falling right above his brows.

He eyed the two outsiders for a moment, then moved his icy glare to his sleeping partner. He approached him in a few long strides and, with no hesitation, kicked the expensive divan he was dozing on. Rin did not seem bothered by him however as, with an unstifled yawn, he stretched like a well-fed kitty and lazily glanced at his offender.

The man's brow twitched in irritation, and he kicked the couch some more, taking his frustrations out on the poor piece of furniture, "Is that how you take care of your prisoners?! Letting them roam around your place freely?!"

Rin only sighed, already reaching for a pack of cigarettes that fell to the floor when the divan was so rudely assaulted, "I'm being very careful and attentive, boss. One of them is even tied to the chair!"

Nero noted that, *yes*, he was very much tied up. Aki, however, seemed to be completely unrestrained, fiddling with his thumbs and not knowing how to react to the man's futile attempts at scolding. He also noted that the 'boss' looked like he was ready to strangle Rin. Before he could voice his concerns, however, Aki nudged him with his elbow, urging him to stay silent.

The so-called 'boss' yanked the unlit cigarette out of Rin's lips before he could even find a lighter, then spiked it to the ground, "If you're going to pick up strays, at least watch them! Your office is unlocked, what if one of them-"

Rin moved away from him, finally managing to light his cigarette without interruption, “One is harmless; the other is concussed and bound. It’s *fine*.” He sighed and strolled around the place, not worried about his wrath in the slightest, pouting in a pretended dejection, “By the way, the mission went great, *Dante.* Thanks for asking.”

Dante closed his eyes, trying his best to not kill everyone in the room and then himself, “*Unauthorized* mission.” He pinched his brow, “I gave you *ONE* assignment in the city, and suddenly you come and go like you *OWN* that place! What happened to staying in the shadows?! I’ve heard about your little performance at the banquet! You’ve successfully pissed every official in Caelum off!”

Rin, despite his apparent supervisor’s anger, had the gall to *laugh* and shoot him a proud smile. He leaned against Aki’s shoulders, at which the white-haired man scrunched his nose, irritated by the cigarette smoke,

“You should’ve seen the whole thing! I don’t think Lisa’s ever been that angry! Am I right, Nero?”

He nudged the lost officer with his elbow, expecting some sort of confirmation. Nero winced, still a bit bruised from his undignified fall under Aki’s hands, then measured Rin with a cold glare, “You have no respect for *any* sort of authority, do you?”

Rin rolled his eyes, “Gosh, you two are no fun.” He then turned back to Dante, “How did the border situation go?”

Dante finally seemed to calm down, eager to relay the important information rather than dwell on Rin’s misdemeanor, “Well. No casualties on our side. The guards haven’t noticed that you’ve kidnapped two of their people yet. They’ve ceased their attacks for now. Looks like a direct order from the president himself. Lisa didn’t seem too pleased about it.”

Rin scoffed, taking a drag of his cigarette, “Serves her right. And they shouldn't notice for a while. Nero took PTO after the banquet and Aki isn’t- well...”

Aki averted his gaze, slightly saddened but, nevertheless, thankful for his woeful reputation within the city, “I’m not particularly *liked* there... I guess they’ll be rather glad that I’ve disappeared. *If* they notice, that is.” He then glanced at the commander, worry marring his face, “But... the same can’t be said about Nero.”

The man in question shook his head, “Whenever I took time off, I was off the radar. I like to maintain a work-life balance. They won’t look until my PTO is over.”

Rin sent a grin Dante’s way, “See? They aren’t really social butterflies. It’ll be fine!”

“And what do you plan to do with them, exactly?”

“Recruit them to my team, of course!”

The room went so silent you could hear the bustle from the lively streets below, as well as strange banging sounds from the lower floor of the building. Either Rin’s downstairs neighbor was doing some serious renovations, or even the construction of the building itself was struggling against the suffocating atmosphere within the flat.

Dante’s face went through a plethora of different emotions; from astonishment, through concern in Rin’s mental well-being, all the way to agitation, once again.

“No.”

Rin furrowed his brows, not expecting that response *for some reason*.

As if inviting enemies into his home was completely normal and acceptable, Nero thought.

“What do you mean, *no*?”

“Am I speaking a different language? You’ve dragged two random citizens into your den and expect me to be elated about it?” The tone of his voice rose as he questioned Rin’s judgement, “Did you run any background checks? Confirm that they’re trustworthy? That they aren’t playing along just to stab you in the back later?”

“They’re not *random*!” He pulled Aki closer and wrapped his arm around him in a half-hug, one hand waving the cigarette around, dusting ash everywhere in wild gesticulation, “I’ve been watching Aki for a while now. He’s a very skilled medic, and he *hates* the way Caelum operates too! Even if he were to betray us- which, no *way* it would ever happen –he would do *no* damage!”

Aki vigorously nodded along, “That’s true! I don’t know how to fight! I’m a scaredy cat and I just wanna help!”

“And he helped me save Elliot! Without him, it would’ve been impossible to break that dumbass out!”

At that, Aki rubbed his neck bashfully, his cheeks reddening, “Well... I didn’t do that much. I just helped with the logistics and-”

“And just look at how humble he is!” He pinched Aki’s cheeks, forcing his lips to form a smile, “A real cutie!”

Dante leveled the red-haired man with an unimpressed glare.

Next, Rin moved on to pitch the other hostage to his unconvinced boss. He stared at Nero for a moment, scratching his chin in deep thought, “And this guy... Well, I know he’s a commander and whatnot, but he’s also done with the city’s bullshit. Right?”

Nero sighed, “You’re not really good at this.”

Frustrated, Rin jabbed his elbow into his ribs, “Shut *up*! Cooperate, won’t you? Or do you want to be tossed in jail and interrogated by Leiah? And trust me, she won’t be as nice as I am!”

He wanted to counter Rin by informing him that *no, he wasn't really nice*, but he bit his tongue. Instead, recognising his poor chances of survival, Nero decided to comply, "It's been brought to my attention that Caelum's elite is committing atrocious crimes against your people, and I will not tolerate it. I swore to protect *all* citizens. Yet my supervisors seem to only care about the powerful and wealthy." He turned his sincere and determined gaze to Dante, finally ready to face him, "Whether I do it from the city, or from here, I want to help. Because I don't want to see any more innocent blood spilled in the name of comfort and the whims of the upper class."

Dante assessed him with an emotionless glare for a long moment, while Rin and Aki eyed them both, anticipation clear on their faces. No matter how uncaring of Nero's choices Rin seemed at first, now he appeared to be quite excited at the possibility of his enlistment into their ranks. Nero stubbornly held eye contact with Dante, not faltering for even a second. If he doubted his choices at first, now he was certain. He would do his best to aid the resistance, no matter what.

Even if Dante refused to let him join.

Some more banging and crashing came from underneath them, followed by a slew of curses. For a split second, Rin fought the urge to laugh at whatever was causing all that ruckus.

Dante finally pinched the bridge of his nose, sighed, then crossed his arms.

"Rin. Whatever happens, it's on you. *You* will bear the consequences if any of them so much as *thinks* of jeopardizing our operations. And I won't go easy on you."

A genuine smile bloomed on the red-head's lips, and Nero caught himself staring. Rin approached Dante, almost pouncing onto him with a hug, but stopping himself just in time,

"Yessir! Trust me, we won't let you down!"

Dante took a step away from him, not sharing his enthusiasm in the slightest, “Don’t get me wrong, they aren’t official members. And I doubt that they will ever be. But if they are so eager to help, I won’t stop them.” He then pointed his finger at Rin, stabbing his chest a few times, “And don’t even *think* of taking them on assignments. They might as well make themselves useful in Umbra. I’m sure that Zola will appreciate some help at the clinic.”

Without so much as a farewell, he turned on his heel and left the flat, closing the door much more gently this time. As soon as he was gone, Rin crushed Aki in a tight hug, spinning him around the room,

“I *knew* he wouldn’t reject a cutie like you!”

Aki, as excited as Rin, laughed with a slight blush on his cheeks, “I think it was my competence rather than my looks, but sure!”

Nero pointedly cleared his throat, and the two stopped their celebrations giving him a quizzical look.

“You know, I would gladly join you, but I still can’t really move from this chair.”

Having dealt with needless restraints and dirty clothes, the three finally sat down in the mismatched living room. Now that the sun had fully risen, the studio apartment was filled with its warm glow, revealing the eclectic yet welcoming interior. It felt cozy and full of life, even more than Nero and Aki’s small nest in Caelum. Whoever Rin’s flatmate was, they seemed to match his energy perfectly, as piles of expensive fabrics and accessories lay right next to messy stashes of gears and scraps of metal. Weapons coexisted with blueprints. Books shared their shelves with trinkets and blades.

A wild inventor and a cunning fighter, cohabiting this disorganized yet compelling space.

“Did your roomie create your prosthetic?” Nero asked, rubbing his head, still pounding with the Aki-induced headache.

Rin smiled proudly, waving at him with his metal hand, “Keen eye, detective. How did you know?”

Aki ignored the sarcastic response, glancing at Nero with worry, “Does your head still hurt?”

“It didn’t when that guy, Dante, was here. I was too busy worrying if he’ll kick me out or throw me in a jailcell.” He sighed, letting himself melt into the comfy, polka-dotted blue armchair, “It’s not like you can do anything about it anyway. It’s a concussion, I just have to wait it out.”

He didn’t miss the way the other two shared a mysterious look, as if they knew something he didn’t.

“What? Do you have some magic medicine on you?”

After sharing a puzzling silent conversation with Rin, Aki finally turned to Nero, picking on his cuticles anxiously,

“You… could call it that.”

Nero raised his brow, eyeing the two suspiciously,

“What do you mean?”

Rin sighed, then leaned closer, resting his elbow on his knees,

“Say, have you ever heard the legend of the Four Gods?”

Next part ->