

It wasn't hard to find him. And perhaps he wanted to be found. Between two rows of books in a darkened, rarely sought out section this time of year. For holly and jolly. Not thrilling and chilling. Typical. And practically a calling card. "Expansive horror section", his ass.

Aurelia had kept to his word with returning to work as if nothing had happened. He'd disappeared through the weave of bookshelves that stood towering over the smallest Skires. He didn't want to make it too easy, but he didn't want to make it hard either.

He'd grabbed a book cart stacked with books that people had left on it while he walked past. Look busy, that was easy when there was always a job to do. He dragged it along with him, the loud cart wheels thunking and rumbling as he pulled it toward the Horror section.

There was no care if any of the books even belonged in it. He wanted to display an image, put on a show if the dark cccat dared to entertain him, and when he'd heard his seat move, his smile grew.

Umbra's steps were light, and the space seemed to only grow darker the closer he came, smoke dancing at his heels to lighten his steps.

Aurelia was sorting through the books while he waited, fishing out any that fit into the genre as he flipped open the front page in search for its tag. Before he could hear him, he felt him. The air that changed and the brilliant light that poured from tall windows seemed to be dimming as if the sun had decided to set early.

"Nice mask, as good as a mask can be. Especially worn by someone so trained with it." Umbra insisted humorlessly, stopping when he was but a foot away beside him, his ears pinning as he stared down his nose and through those false spectacles. "Aurelia, was it? What's your real name. Who are you."

The Pods' lidded eyes glanced over the book's name, ignoring what he knew was already there, running his delicate fingers along shelves to find the perfect spot. Only when Umbra finished did his head turn, sliding the book into its place with a swift, short push of a finger.

"My, for someone who hates me, you seem obsessed enough to follow me." Aurelia mused, a smile on his face as he reached for another deliberately chosen book. *The Outsider* by Stephen King, it read as if he returned his empty gaze to the bookshelf to search out a place for it as well.

"Hate you? Now now... Don't go jumping to conclusions—That might slip you up. I wasn't following you," Umbra regarded, his voice low, even, with that deliberate calm detectives used when they'd already drawn their conclusions. Watching the supple motion of that hand push the book in. Quaint, innocent. Every move he made seemed to be with a purpose. Not too soft, not too hard—just right. Couldn't move too much, that might shatter his mask.

"Weren't you? A shame for me that such a good-looking man isn't following me." The Pod teased, snickering to himself. Aurelia clearly wouldn't make any of this easy for him.

Umbra's gaze flicked, head tilting enough that the curtain of his hair framed his sharp face to the book in Aurelia's hand—*The Outsider*.

"Interesting choice. How... Subtle." Not truly, not fully. He was playing with him. He had to know that Umbra knew; there was little that would make it seem any different, not with that book. A ghost of a smile crept up his lips despite it, though his eyes didn't follow suit.

"Isn't it? It's one of my favorite books!" Aurelia burst far too merrily. "All of Stephen King's books are a dream, don't you think? Though I'm more particular with *Edgar Allan Poe's The Tell-Tale Heart*. You know, where he buried his wife in the walls, and the beat of her heart drove him insane?" Aurelia never took his eyes off of Umra as

he spoke, as if daring him to question what would normally be a simple exchange of favorite books. "I find many of his poems darkly... Romantic." He didn't want to drive him off his scent. Not yet, not when this play was just beginning, and the dealer had just laid out their cards.

"You talk like a man who's read too many tragedies," Umbra observed, his voice soft, almost indulgent, peering at the cart of books left to put away, wondering just how many were in this section at all. Then, to the books, the blank spots on shelves.

"You mean like stories where one becomes obsessed with someone because they were kind to them once? They're quite popular. I heard they made a show around that sort of tragedy." Aurelia purred a little too easily.

*Fake it till you make it.*

"Oh... You know, the kind where the beautiful one always mistakes curiosity for affection."

"But why wouldn't they? Someone mysterious and inviting.. What a girl to do? *Not* be chased? *Not to* chase?"

"Mmm.." Umbra hummed. "I don't often chase after blue beauties... I tend to prefer those who don't rehearse their every breath to make sure it looks normal enough, *Aurelia.*"

Umbra's gaze lingered. The blue of Aurelia's lips, the fine tremor of restraint in his smile—it was all so *constructed*, yet magnetic in its precision. "*Stephen King* and *Poe*," Umbra continued, low, musing. "You like stories about guilt. Madness. Buried things." His eyes flicked to the title poised under Aurelia's hand. *No Way Out.* "Appropriate."

"You're not here for books, are you?" The Pod inquired. "Or to beg about your brother's job over your outburst. Is there something you want from me, Detective Monroe? Don't you need a warrant?" The false librarian quipped lightly. "I'm busy; hard

at work, as you can see. Or will you continue to follow me about like a lost dog simply? Watching me."

Umbra remained quiet for that moment, staring at the pale wonder of him. This extraordinary being who was putting that spell on him. "I was *observing*," Umbra said finally, flicking his eye to those moons. "There's a difference. Though I'm sure you might find that more flattering than if I were. Something tells me you were waiting. Wanting me to. Like I couldn't just leave you alone." His hands found their way into his pants pockets, posture loose, unthreatening—too unthreatening, perhaps. "But you knew that already, didn't you?"

"Observing is *one* way to put it." He breathed breezily before falling back into that false sweetness. "What can I say? I like being chased by attractive men."

"Is that you insinuating that you're *often* chased by attractive men?" Umbra inquired with a curve of his sharp brow. Umbra didn't flinch at the jab. He'd long since learned that arrogance was a kind of armor, polished by men who'd been broken too many times to show the cracks. But Aurelia's words, the way they slid off his tongue like silk drawn across a blade, left a faint hum beneath Umbra's skin. There was danger in that voice—something poised between charm and confession.

"Jealous?" Aurelia asked, his smile not faltering. He didn't even twitch or show signs under his hardened mask.

"Hardly."

His blue smile only widened. An airy laugh escaped him. Not false like the rest of him but rather bemused by what he'd call it. Observing. He'd just met him, and with no cops on his heels stalking the library, it meant he didn't have winning cards. Umbra needed a hit.

"So? Who are you?"

"I *am* Aurelia. Feel free to look me up in your database. Even gave you my last name, too, so it's easier." He purred, throwing another glance his way. Blank eyes scanning him up and down till he got to his dark face. He was taller. Quite a bit taller, too.

"*Aurelia*," Umbra repeated, tasting the name as though he might find something acidic beneath its smoothness. How it felt, what it might mean to him... and how much of a lie it sounded. "So you've said it was. Aurelia Europa, however *real* that name is or not."

"Do you need my DNA too? I don't mind giving it to you if you ask nicely."

Slowly, Umbra's eye wandered up from his feet to his head, to those eyes, that tempest of hair, dark and practically smelling of the salty sea. "I'd say I already have your DNA, but you seem like the type who doesn't leave much behind. No fingerprints. No trace. Just... impressions." He tilted his head slightly, studying him like one might study a venomous animal behind glass.

If it was games Aurelia wanted to play, then it was games they *would* play together. It was rare that Umbra put himself so into the field with a suspect. When it came to most things, he was on the sidelines. Observing and waiting for the perp to out themselves.

The Casino, for instance, and that woman who had a strange hold on that place, and the actions of most, but not all.

"After all, when I looked into this library the first time, when Ro started, Chelon had sooo much to offer on her part—had lost so much. But you, the famed new owner who seemed to swoop in with fortune untold, didn't even hit my radar at first. Hit *no one's* radar. How is that? How does one who plays so innocently with such a vast fortune to bring this place back up from the brink *not* have any show for it, hmm? No trail."

What a mystery hidden in plain sight. It could fool so many, and likely did. All though? Was everyone bemused by the stagnantly friendly, all too innocent librarian with their dark shadow of a friend?

"Luck perhaps?"

Umbra took a slow step closer, the air around him darkening. "You play the part well, I'll give you that. Gorgeous mask. Sweet exterior. Helpful. Mindful. Dudiful. But tell me—" His tone softened, almost playful, "—how long will you keep pretending to be ordinary before it starts to bore you? This act? This mask. When might you slip up? What will make those inner thoughts I *know* you have come out?" He dared to canter his head closer, just a hint. "For those claws on those pretty little hands to show?"

And as if the Pod meant to rebut, meant to sly his way out of it, his moving hand stopped, caught by the words. His delicate white fingers blushed in blue, still pressing into a book called *Hunted* by Darcy Coates.

And while Umbra watched the sudden pause in motion with fascination, he measured the depths of those white eyes and the measurement of how real that smile was; he thought he glimpsed something glaze over. Like the inner world, the inner thoughts there in that beautiful head captured him. Hooked their way into that mask and pulled forward, showing, if only for a moment, what was behind. What lurked. It made him appear almost... human. As human as they both could be.

Yet then, with a blink, it was gone.

*The Slip*. Umbra liked to call it. When the mask was so deliberate and carefully constructed, slipping if only a hint. Showcasing the beautiful monster underneath. He could take it one of two ways. Accidental, or intentional. By the way he seemed to bounce back, the smile that played, it seemed the latter.

Very interesting. It damn near set his instincts on fire.

Aurelia's smile returned, blue-tinted lips stretching with lidded eyes captured in long black lashes as he looked up at Umbra. He was far too close, in his bubble. "Admit it, Detective. You want to kiss me so bad it makes you look stupid." He purred, hushed so that only the detective could hear. A tease as he grabbed another book from his cart to fill a space. "So... unless you plan on asking me on a date, I have work to do, and you have a brother to console. Don't you think? Why not go let him know he's not fired? After all, it's not *his* fault his brother has awful manners."

*To Be Continued...*