

“You were a private investigator before you came to us,” Madame Shale begins, leaning back into her frankly enormous chair. The light from the fireplace dances up her legs, shrouding her form in never motionless waves of light and shadow. The music playing at the edges of my ears presses awkwardly against my thoughts, as though confronting something within my mind, an internal song that pushes against the order and clarity of Madame Shale’s orchestral recording.

“I was a private investigator?” I ask, “How did I end up working for you? Rave reviews? Word of mouth? Was I the talk of Harmony and you just HAD to get your hands on my unique set of talents?”

Madame Shale laughs, actually laughs. She leans forward in her frankly enormous chair and slaps her leg. “Hah! There was certainly word of mouth about you Aria, but none of it was good.” She pauses, sipping her wine and retaking control of her composure.

“We’d had a problem, one that needed solving, that no one on my team could figure out. And then, you came to us. Damn near broke every bone in Captain Lancer’s arm getting through the door, made a mess of the lobby, fought your way up to the elevator. You broke into my office, gun in hand, right arm drenched in blood and violence in your eyes. Then, a moment later, you dropped the gun and rushed for the liquor cabinet, stopping only to vomit on my rug. You sucked down half a bottle of wine, turned to me and begged for a job.”

My body goes taut as Madame Shale recounts the story, blush reaching my cheeks and humiliation pooling in my gut. “Why did you hire her... that person?” I can’t handle it, I can’t bear to identify that catastrophe of a human... That catastrophe of a clone of a clone of a clone again and again was someone who I had once been, or who had once been me. We had been each other six times as of this morning.

I think. I wrap my hands around my head and resist screaming, the frustration of trying to understand this situation tearing through my heart.

Madame Shale examines the contents of the fireplace, eyes locked to the flames.

“Because you solved the case then and there. Between three bottles of my best drink and bursting into tears next to the vomit, you solved the case. I didn’t care what state you were in, what the word of mouth was. I hired you on the spot to work for us.”

Nothing comes, no memory of my former life rears its head.

“So I was your personal P.I.?” I finally say.

“Not officially. No. That was the plan, originally, but you said you’d have an easier time doing your job if you posed as a normal employee. You spread a rumour in the offices that you were a mistress of mine, jilted and enraged at discovering I was married. The security footage from your little rampage vanished and soon you were on the books as a... package courier.”

I chew the information for a moment, rubbing my temple with my index and middle fingers. Too much information too fast. My head is light. The world sways and dips from left to right. Why is my body so heavy?

It doesn’t matter. I push through it.

“Why a package courier?” I ask, before holding up a palm, “Wait no, let me...” I take in two breaths, slow and steady. “As a courier,” I begin. The conclusion forms word by word in my mouth and mind simultaneously. “As a courier, I can move between departments with ease, between office buildings even. And it’s just low level enough that anyone who doesn’t know my face, who couldn’t place me as your mysterious mistress, would just ignore me.”

Madame Shale nods. “Exactly.”

I chew on my lip, “I was smart. Some of the time, at least.” I look up, meeting her eyes, “You said you hadn’t seen me in months.” My knuckles turn white as my hands tighten into firm fists in my lap. I sense the reflex as a method of staving off the terror in my gut. “You said I left, moved out three months ago, and eventually you never heard from me again.”

The orchestra bursting from the recording comes together in a masterful display of skill right as I am about to complete my question. A smile, half remembered from lifetimes ago, finds my lips. For a moment I don’t finish the...

(Aria trails off as the music plays

...question.

What question?

The world returns to me slowly, sharpening into focus in gentle waves. Madame Shale is standing at her desk on the other side of the room, examining a series of papers, glass of wine at her side. When did she move?

“What,” I swallow, uneasy and unsure of the taste of the words in my mouth, “what just happened?” The whole sentence feels disjointed, like none of the words connect with each other, like nothing I just said made any sense.

Madame Shale looks up at me and smiles. “That’s normal. Right now your memories are returning. Something in the room must have triggered it.”

“My memory, returning” I say slowly, “Yes of course. My memory.”

“What did you remember?” Shale asks, walking over to me.

“Nothing important,” I say quietly, “Nothing worth remembering.”

“I see,” She says. Her fingers clenching against her glass suggest that she doesn’t believe me. But it’s the truth. I didn’t remember anything worth remembering. Supposedly my memory was returning to me, but nothing came.

“Was I- asking something, earlier? I had a question” I say slowly, “But it’s slipped away.”

Madame Shale shrugs, “No idea. Maybe it’ll come back to you later. But I think right now, you would be best served by a very long rest. Come, I’ll have someone escort you to your quarters.”

“My, quarters?” I ask.

Madame Shale nods, “You haven’t used them in some time, not since you moved away to that dingy apartment above the bar, but we’ve kept your room as you left it. I think you’ll find it quite to your liking.”

She walks past me, vanishing behind my vision for a moment before returning with a wooden walking cane in her hands. She holds it out with one hand, offering it to me. “This is your’s.”

I take the cane in my hand, waiting for a familiarity to rise from it, but none comes. “Why did I- Why do I have a walking stick?”

“You have a problem with your balance,” Madame Shale explains, “You never told me full details, but sometimes you get light headed, or feel heavy, and it makes you rather prone to falling over or limping about the place. The cane makes your life a fair portion easier. Supposedly you once collapsed onto a corpse at a crime scene.”

I take in the information with my eyes closed, casting my thoughts back to earlier, and how heavy my head felt, how it never quite wanted to stay up straight. I sigh, gripping the cane, and stand up, leaning my weight on the cane.

“Alright,” I say, when the room finally stops spinning around me, “I think bed might be a good idea.”

My room exudes warmth, it radiates comfort. The wonderful carvings along the wooden wall panels depict small animals and old children’s tales. Among them is an image of a bear and a small boy in a circle of trees.

And a conversation, two unfamiliar voices speak so very familiar with each other, stirs in my memory. And as I stand in the center of the room, the city of Harmony laid out in its cold majesty to my right, I begin reciting the conversation to myself.

“Pooh, when I’m--you know-- when I’m not doing nothing, will you come up here sometimes?”

“Just me?”

“Yes, Pooh.”

“Will you be here too?”

“That’s a lovely story, I have it in my memory banks!” A mechanical voice leaps out from nowhere. I spin in place, but no one else is present. “Who’s there!” I demand, strangely scared.

“I’m not a who, not really” says the voice. “I’m a Fidget.”

“Fidget?” I ask.

“Yes!” she says, so unbelievably excited to introduce herself, “I am Fidget. Hi, how are you?”