# Chapter 1 - A Normal Day?

June 13th,2023

Even though it's not rare, today the Vespera Art Museum seemed to be full of visitors, going forward with the line. The shiny floors of the place seemed even shinier today, combined with the diverse sounds, created a modern day life museum tale.
Sounds such as the crowd, the rotations of the security cameras, occasional phones of the staff. On the right side of the museum were those staff, such as the managers and workers.

Children were glazing at the fine paintings, asking their mothers about it. As they went forward, a picture of a spirit scared them. The youngest of them, possibly 3 years old, went behind his mother, just by having a view of the painting.

Amidst these, another phone call came to the working manager of today, Victor Everhart. He seemed to be a young man, with a white suit on. Even though he was busy, going through phone calls repeatedly, he still noticed, this time he saw something different. Most, if not all of his contacts are saved with a name, but this time it was a new number calling him.

“Hello? Who is it?”, Victor asked, with his confused voice as he was closing his notepad with his other hand.

“Oh yeah I forgot. This is Mr.Vanholt. You’ll have to do an important task, that’s what I called you for.”, A soft voice came from the phone, which rushed through its words.

“Sir, is this your new number then?”, Victor asked with curiosity.
“Yes it is. I can’t find my phone for some reason, that’s why I called you with my second one. Now listen, tell the workers to deliver the 14th Old Piece to the car waiting outside!”, Mr.Vanholt’s voice slowed down.
“I understand Sir. I’m asking them for the delivery asap!”, Victor said with an assuring manner, trying to cut the call, to call the workers.

The clock was running towards 5 pm, and the museum was gradually emptying.

“There’s a reason I told you instead of the other manager, you know. You have been working here for around 6 years, and you have always been a hard worker.”, Mr.Vanholt said, with a sparkle of excitement that could be felt from the phone.
“I’m glad, Sir.”, Victor said, in the same way.

He quickly went through his contacts, and dialed a call for a worker, named Magnus Cole.

“Take the 14th Old Piece from the museum and transfer to the car waiting outside the museum, it's an order from Mr.Blackwood.”, Victor ordered while seeing the visitors leaving in front of his eyes.

“Understood.”, Magnus answered.

Victor Everhart stretched himself a little and whispered to himself, “I went with the flow, just as he said. Now let’s see what happens.”

This museum was indeed the home of a lot of great paintings, consisting of historical arts. Its popularity increased as the news of its owner’s fortune spread. Elias Blackwood, the owner of this museum, became a multimillionaire just at the age of 25, currently standing at 28.
It was around 5:20 pm, when the last session of visitors ended and the place became full of silence, except the occasional chats of the staff, both from the offices and the galleries.

Two workers were seen carrying a painting covered with a tough package. As they left the museum, they witnessed a small but luxurious looking black car. The coldness of the wind made their limbs move slowly.

"Oh man, this one is heavy! Do you know why this is getting transferred anyways?", one of the workers asked the other.
"No idea at all. Maybe some kind of business plan. I mean who cares anyway.", the worker said as he successfully put the art in the car.

"Here, it's done!", he said to the driver, releasing a breath.

A calm but excited voice came from the car pilot. "Good Job and thank you! By the way, do you know any restaurants nearby? I'm a little hungry".

Magnus and Arthur, the two workers looked at the car's pilot from the back of the car, an assuring but mystic man was sitting there.

"I'm actually hungry too, well the working time is ending soon.", Arthur whispered to Magnus, "And yes, there is a restaurant nearby, just go straight and then left.", Arthur continued, this time saying it loud enough for the driver to hear.

"Oh yeah I remember now, thanks pal, Mr. Blackwood is waiting, I'll have to go faster!", the driver accelerated the car and went forward the almost empty road, disappearing into the fog.

"Is this a new driver? I couldn't recognize his voice at all!", Magnus asked, preparing to go inside.
Arthur turned towards the door, saying "Maybe. I mean who cares. Let's go for lunch."

The evening was dark enough, but as the night fell, it became darker.

The working hour for most staff ended at 5:45 pm. That included the two people going back home walking, Magnus and Arthur, who were chatting about something that happened not so long ago, but left a huge impact.

“Have you heard about 'The Ghost' ?", Magnus asked Arthur.
Arthur laughed a little and said, "Dude of course, what kind of museum employee would I be if I didn't know about that".
"I wonder if he has any plans to steal from Vespera", Arthur’s laugh didn’t affect Magnus at all, he remained curious.
"After stealing that 100 million dollar art, his standards must be high, you know. Would he come after this one?", Arthur asked, being confident.
"I mean he can, right? Who knows. And he might stop doing big thefts to avoid getting caught now!", Magnus said, raising his voice a little bit.
"You care way too much about this stuff, Magnus. I mean who car-", Magnus interrupted Arthur and expressed, "Ofcourse Arthur, we have to care! It's not only about Vespera, It's also about our jobs!"
The only reaction that came from Arthur was a giggle.

*That was too easy. Too easy to be exact. I wonder if Aria is done now. I told her to come here at exactly 5:45 pm. She is late as always.*

A man was standing in front of an apartment at Barlow Street, which was around 6 kms from Vespera. He had a weird but charming appearance. He had a black hat on his head, a sunglass on his eyes even though its night. He had informal clothing on his body, but everything he wore was black. Seemed like he was waiting for someone, while having his car by his side.

As the man was looking around, his eyes tracked a girl coming towards him, "Oh, there she is! Finally, Without her, I can't even proceed.", he whispered to himself.

The girl had almost the same appearance as the man, the exception was her expression. Unlike the man, she was smiling with excitement. "Hi! My first work is done, now what is the next thing I'll have to do?", she asked.

The man also sparked a little excitement in himself and said, "Nice job! So...",. Just as he was about to start, Aria interrupted and asked

in a soft voice, "You didn't tell me much about the project this time, what is it?".

He looked at her and said with a casual manner, "Nothing much. That's why I didn't tell you. I just had to steal one from Vespera."
"From Vespera? I heard that it has a good amount of security systems. How did it go?", She became curious.
"Hmm nothing much. Who cares about the security when you don't even have to go through it.", he said, with a neutral expression on his face.
"I won't even question how you did it, I mean you did something impossible some weeks ago, so this shouldn't be that much. Well, obviously with my help!", Aria went from a praising voice to a teasing voice.

"Yes, thank you. That's why I asked you to come here at 5:10 instead of even earlier." , he said with a smile and continued, "Now listen to what you'll have to do...."

They exchanged their words in the cold night, winds making their informal clothes float.

*I don't know if what I anticipated is correct or not. But I can see two paths in front of me, and in both of those paths, I am seeing my absolute victory!*

They were standing in front of the apartment that had a very irresistible silent  aura around it, seemed like only a few people lived in it. Maybe even just one person.

Aria looked back at the road she came from, making her think of the Museum, which just closed, and its manager Mr.Everhart was preparing himself to go home.
He left a cold breath into the air, and checked his mobile phone. Looking at some old news, he went deep into his thoughts while waiting for the bus at the nearest bus stop, just beside the museum.

"I wonder where this 'Ghost' is now. Is our museum safe from him? A lot of security was installed so I doubt that it isn't. But it is insanely impressive to actually steal something that valuable!", Victor made some not-so-noticeable expressions on his face.

Almost every staff member of every museum was aware and conscious of this ‘Ghost’. That's how popular and impactful this theft

was. This news spread in the whole country, everyone, especially the one's handling museums and artworks became super careful of this New Legend.

Well, people did name him 'The Ghost' for many reasons. He was actually seen in many cameras, but every time, he was seen in different clothes. Sometimes fully white, sometimes fully black. Even though it has been around 5-6 weeks since this happened, no one has been able to catch this 'Ghost', nor the artwork he stole.

The man in front of the apartment was also drowning in thoughts.

*I don't know why, but I feel some kind of omen is there. But why do I feel it?*

He came out of his thoughts as he heard a voice from behind,
“Lucian?”

# Chapter 2 - Unconscious Ally

June 12th,2023

Morning,

*Today I received a request. A person named Luther Kane has sent me an email requesting me to perform a theft in the Vespera Art Museum,well that's what he wrote in the email. Professionalism is there, I would have just said "steal it".*
*I was in my living room, with my laptop on my lap. I was feeling lazy enough to not answer the mail right away, so I just started looking for Luther Kane on the internet, to look for surface information. I also thought of another person who might be a help in this project....*

*When I was searching about it, I received two sounds at the same time. One was from my phone, Aria was calling me. And the other one was from my doorbell. With no second thoughts, I went for the door.*

Lucian closed the windows in his laptop, and went towards the main door. As he opened it, he saw a man standing there, with glasses.
It was Magnus Cole. Lucian’s only sibling, his elder brother.

"Oh it's you!", Lucian greeted Magnus, showing him the way to come to his room.

Magnus started looking around Lucian’s house, it was fine as hell, a lot better than his house where he lives as now he was married and lived in a separate apartment.

"How's your art business going?", Magnus asked, sitting on the sofa, after reaching Lucian’s living room.

There’s a reason behind Lucian’s astonishing home, he is a wealthy artist, well, that's what everyone knows him as. His secret of being a millionaire just by selling arts is still a secret to everyone.

“It's going good enough! Wanna take a coffee?”, Lucian offered.
“Sure, why not. By the way, why did you call me?”, Magnus asked, adjusting his glasses to look at the painting hanging on the wall.
"Do I need a reason bro?", Lucian said while brewing a coffee from the coffee machine.
"Of Course not!", Magnus smiled, turning his eyes towards Lucian.
"So is everything alright? Like how is your family?", Lucian asked, placing two cups on the table.

"My family is all good! I'm too! But I would say that the job I have is a little tiring, you know”, Magnus sighed and continued, “Being in the museum for 12 hours!"

"I do understand! Sometimes some of my clients give me deadlines for arts, so I just sit at my table all day and complete it. It surely is tiring.", Lucian said to Magnus.
"By the way, is Vespera doing well? I mean has the "Ghost" laid his hands on it?", Lucian asked Magnus, curiously.

"Yeah it's alright. But I don't think it is gonna stay safe for long. I shouldn't have applied for this job, it's just never secured.”, Magnus expressed his worry, “Who knows when the museum's economy is gonna collapse and we are gonna lose our jobs.", Magnus explained.
"Don't worry too much bro, even if you lose your job, you can join my business. I'm always here for you!", Lucian said with an assuring smile.

Magnus smiled and said, "That's really sweet of you. I just wish this "Ghost" wouldn't come after us."

Lucian started looking at his laptop that he brought to the table a minute ago. Magnus took a sip from the coffee, Lucian did too.

Suddenly his eyes widened and turned to Magnus, and he asked, "Is this the manager of Vespera?". Lucian showed a picture of Victor Everhart on his laptop.

"Oh yeah!", Magnus said quickly, “This is Mr.Everhart, one of the managers of Vespera."
"I never knew that.”, Lucian raised his eyebrows, “I know him, and he is an old high school senior of mine. We used to be friends! It has been a long time since we talked.", Lucian seemed to be nostalgic.

"Yeah he joined this position around 6 years ago, he is a very hard working and passionate manager as well. I can give you his number if you want!", Magnus offered.

"Oh that would be good! Tell me then.", Lucian said smiling.
Just after hearing Lucian’s words, Magnus took out his phone and scrolled through his contacts. As he reached Victor Everhart’s contact, Lucian’s keen eye caught something, there were two numbers of Victor Everhart.

"7304928390 - that is the number!", Magnus said slowly while looking at his phone, for Lucian to note it down.

Lucian immediately called that number and after just 2 seconds he said, "Man, this number is switched off. Is there any other number, Magnus?", Lucian asked, not expecting another number.
"Yes there is! But this one is for professional use, it's his phone that’s located in the managing room of Vespera.", Magnus informed.
"Oh, then you can't give it to me. It's ok I'll try later then.", Lucian said with a little disappointment in his eyes.

"There is no problem giving it to you though, you're my brother after all. And you are his old friend, he won't be disturbed to talk to you while on work.”, Magnus said ,offering the second number, “I mean I have seen him talk with his family members while on work."

"Oh okay I got it. Today's your leave, and he is in the Museum right now. Yeah it's better if I have both numbers. I can call him if his personal phone is off.", Lucian smiles.

Magnus told Lucian the second number as well, just after that, something struck Lucian and he said, “ "Oh yeah, this is your pen, you

left it in here previously.", Lucian handed Magnus a pen, a fancy and shiny one from his pocket.

Magnus’s eyes sparkled, "Oh this was in here? Rebecca gifted me this one, she was sad when I lost it!", he said with excitement. "She would be happy if I told her I found this!".

Magnus quickly took the pen from Lucian’s hands and went towards the door, saying, "I'll go now bro! I have some work at home actually."
"Bye brother! Come again next week! You didn't leave something here this time, right?", Lucian asked with a smirk.
“No, my phone is with me!", Magnus said laughingly while leaving.

As the door closed and Magnus went out, Lucian left a sigh. He went back to his sofa and put his laptop on his lap again.

*Yeah, I didn't know who Victor Everhart was. Him being a friend was just a lie to make my brother give me his number. But now I can at least execute my plan which I made just after looking at the mail. A lot of information about the Vespera Museum is available online. The owner of it is Elias Blackwood, and Dorian Vanholt is the assistant of Blackwood.*

*I searched for videos of Blackwood and Vanholt to see who's voice I can replicate better, who's voice is more similar to mine. I'm having good luck because Vanholt's voice is really similar to mine. Guess what, it just got easier.*

*Being diverse with my project is an important thing. Otherwise these smart-ass people would find a pattern in everything and get closer to me. That is also why I wear different clothes everywhere, use different tactics every time I perform a theft, oh sorry, every time I steal.*

*For the Everhart part, I'll just tell him something that the museum members know very well. Such as that he is working there for around 6 years or something like he has been doing a very good job. That should make him gain trust.....*

*Well, no! I'll obviously need a secondary plan. I'll just tell Aria to somehow remove Mr.Vanholt's mobile sim. So if Victor suspects me and calls Dorian with his actual number, he will find it switched off. Which should convince him and will have a good reason why Mr.Vanholt would use a second number.*

Lucian zoned in as his phone rang, giving him deja vu. And, it was Aria.

*Oh shit, I forgot about her call.*

Lucian quickly picked up the phone and said, "Hello?", in a soft voice.
"You are way too busy. Is it another theft project?”, Aria said with a bored voice, “Like, you could have told me about it."
"Yeah it was another one, I'll tell you about it later. By the way, I'm going to an art festival this evening, wanna go out with me? Bring your friend with us too maybe?", Lucian said, joyfully.
Aria went from bored to excited in a second, her voice became higher in pitch, "Of Course I'd love it! Will it be a problem if it's just you and me?", Aria asked him.
"No, no problem at all!", Lucian said while having a smile on his face.

# Chapter 3 - How it Happened

June 12th,2023
Night,

After experiencing the beautiful Art Festival with Aria and dropping her to her house on his way back home, Lucian finally returned home, back to the life he was used to.
Being so tired from the day, he decided to take a shower, followed by a 45 minute nap.

As soon as he wakes up, he starts mumbling to himself.
*Should I respond to the email now? Yeah, I should actually.*
*The thing is, Luther Kane has given me his number and wants a response via call. This is obviously not something new so I'll just do it after 5 minutes. He would not like my sleepy voice, not like I care but reputation is a thing.*

Lucian got out of his bed and picked a sim from a box that was full of sims and inserted it into his secondary phone.

"Hello? Is this Luther Kane?", Lucian cleared his throat, changing his voice a little bit.
"Yes, it is me. Who are you?", Luther's voice was pretty deep.

"Me? I'm the Ghost. You mailed me, remember?", Lucian expressed in a calm manner.
"And how can I trust you? How can I know if you are the ghost and not someone else trying to scam me?", Luther said curiously, trying to evoke something.
"Oh come on now. You paid 100k to mail me, obviously you would be careful. You probably have given me a very new number that you have never shared before.", Lucian said with a bored voice.
"You are just as experienced as I thought!", Luther giggled, "Sorry for that, I was just testing you."
"Yeah no problem. So tell me more about the theft I guess?", Lucian said, making progress.
"Yeah ofcourse! So you read my mail right? You'll just have to do the job by tomorrow! Do it however you want, just make sure I'm not exposed by any chance.", Luther informed.
"Don't worry about that. Consider the work done. Anything else you have to say?", Lucian asked.
"Oh yeah. I want you to come to my house and give me the art by your hand!", Luther expressed.
"I usually do it by sending it through a private paid service, but if you want me to come by myself, you'll have to pay extra.", Lucian said.
"Pay extra? I guess that's understandable. I actually had more projects like these for you, and I can only explain those to you in person, so that's why I thought...", Luther said, offering potential projects.

"I guess that'll benefit me, but rule is rule. I'm a very disciplined person, you know. You'll have to pay an extra 100k for that.", Lucian informed.
"100k huh? So including the 100k I already paid. I'll give you a total of 1.4 million. Right?",
"You are absolutely right. By the way, is there a time-frame?", Lucian asked curiously.
"Um..Yes there is. Didn't I mention it earlier in the email? I think I did...", Luther said.
"Oh yes I think you did. Is the time really important Mr.Kane?", Lucian said.
"It's not that important but I'll expect you to do it in time!", Luther expressed.
"Yeah don't worry, I'll most probably do it before that time. I'll do my best to make sure you get your piece quickly!", Lucian giggles.
"No no. You don't have to! Just do it in the time frame I mentioned and it'll be okay!", Luther's voice got higher in pitch.
"Ahh sure. I've made a plan already. See you tomorrow then!", Lucian prepared to cut the call.
"Nice to work with you. I am looking forward to it then!", Luther cuts the call.

Lucian removes the sim from the phone and switches it off just as usual. He then threw the phone on his bed and stretched himself and yawned.

He then stares at the huge painting hanging on the wall behind his bed. Minutes passed, he still didn't stop staring. Some memories don't fade, they just return when life gives you a chance to remember.

June 13th,2023
Morning,

"Aria! Are you there yet?", Lucian asked Aria via phone.
"I'm right in here! I said that I'm here for a business deal proposal, right now Mr.Vanholt is outside for some reason, but the staff said he is coming.", Aria whispered through her phone.
"Perfect! Now do as I said. Remove the sim from the phone quickly and then when Mr.Vanholt is coming pretend that you just came inside. Is that alright?", Lucian said.
"I'll try! Pray for me though, I don't want to get caught!", Aria giggles.
"Yeah yeah you'll not, you're an expert in this so don't waste time!", Lucian cuts the call.

Aria quickly takes the phone of Mr.Vanholt and starts the removing process. She removes it and hides the sim inside the clock sitting on the table of the office, making it really hard to find.
Then she positioned herself outside the door and called Lucian.

"Impressive Aria! It has been only 1 minute since you called me previously and you are done!", Lucian said with a smile.

"I know I'm really good. This is just the minimum I have to be in order to be The Ghost's theft partner you know. ", Aria smirks.
"By the way, I saw something in Vanholt's phone that might be useful to you!", Aria whispered.
"Yes, tell me please! Any detail might be useful.", Lucian said curiously.
"Mr.Blackwood messaged Dorian saying that he is going for the break right now, it was around 5:10!", Aria informed.
"That..That is something of...a very good observation! I'll see how I can use that. Now talk with Dorian for some time and then come out and meet me at the Barlow Street at around 5:45, is that ok?", Lucian informs.
"That means I'll have to rush a little, well, I'll try to make it in time. Please wait if I go late.", Aria said.
"Well ofcourse, I'm the one who needs you. Just try your best to come in time. I'm going for my plan now, bye!", Lucian cuts the call.

June 13th,2023
Evening,

And that is how I planned everything.", Lucian summarized to Aria.
"Nice plan! So now you're gonna enter Luther's house and give the painting to him.", Aria asked, expecting agreement.

"You're right.", Lucian said.
"And you want me to come inside when you message me and use the strategy you told me?", Aria asks again.
"Right! Now stand here and I'm going inside!", Lucian expresses.

Lucian tapped the doorbell and instantly a security guard came from the inner door. As Lucian was wearing a mask, the security guard instantly realizes he is the person Luther was talking about as he has already told him to let anyone enter who has a mask on, the rest is on Luther himself.

"Come inside Sir! Mr.Kane is waiting for you inside!", The guard invites Lucian.

Lucian had a black mask with white marks on it. He also had a white cap on. He had a bag on his back which had two paintings. The one behind the top one was the actual painting he had to deliver.

The guard leaves Lucian at the door of Luther's living room. Lucian opened the door and saw two men sitting on the sofas...

# Chapter 4 - The Turns Tabled

As Lucian entered the room he felt a strong aura of danger. The darker visual atmosphere of the room made it more intense.
There were two men sitting on the sofas, one of them was a known person to Lucian, but unexpected. While the other one was an unknown person, but quite expected.

"Welcome, Mr.Ghost! It's fascinating to see you in person! Meet my partner, Mr.Blackwood. Elias, introduce yourself to him, wouldn't you?", Luther said to Mr.Blackwood, who was sitting beside him.

"There is no time for all this, Mr.Kane. Quickly capture him and tell him the stuff.", Elias Blackwood, said in a mid-toned voice.
"You're right!", Luther said, clicking a button on his table.

Amidst this, Lucian observed a lot of things. He noticed that there were cameras installed on the walls in the room. He also noticed that there were footprint sensors on the floor, which didn't affect Lucian because he wore socks beforehand. At the end, he observed sounds

coming from all around the room, from the door he entered, from the other doors in the room, everywhere.

"Capture him! And unmask him quickly!", Luther shouted, ordering the people that came from the doors. They were assassins hired by Luther and Blackwood to corner Lucian.

There were around 12 assassins around Lucian, 4 of them held Lucian tightly with no way to escape.

Lucian suddenly shouted, "Elias! Unmask me and your dear brother Dorian is gonna die!"

As soon as those words reached Elias's ears, a word came out of his mouth instantly, "Stop!". The word was so loud, it echoed through the room for 10 seconds. All the assassins became statues. The fear and anger in his voice was prominent, scaring even Luther Kane.

Lucian then continues, "I have fit a bomb in Mr.Vanholt's office and have tied him completely. I also deactivated his phone. Don't believe me? Just try calling him.", Lucian said in a calm voice.

Luther said, "Blackwood! Don't listen to him! He is trying to distract you! Unmask him quickly!"
Blackwood became extremely angry and held Luther by his collar, "Shut up you idiot! I don't want to get another of my family member get killed!"

Elias quickly took out his phone and called Dorian. His number was actually not reachable. Elias's face was conquered by fear as he realized that everything Lucian said was true.

Lucian again continued with a smile that was visible through his mask, "Touch me and I will say a code word that will instantly activate the bomb through the device I have hidden in somewhere."Lucian said, "So don't you dare touch me or even move from here, all of you! Put your guns down!"

Elias became completely static, along with everyone in the room. Lucian brought out his mobile and said, "I now have texted my partner to come here and rescue me. And that person is already in here, so don't try to make any sudden move, because I too know how to do it!", Lucian warned.

Luther suddenly asked, "B-B-But how did you know about our plan? How did you know that this was a setup?"
Lucian laughs a little, "The small suspicions that I had was enough to make me take advanced steps. But what happened this evening cleared everything for me. When Luther first mentioned the time 5:10 pm in his email, I didn't suspect much except for the fact that why would someone give such a specific time. While talking with Luther on the phone, I got to know that it is very important for Luther to make sure I go to the museum at that exact time. Even though Luther did a very good job at hiding it through his great acting skills.

And when I was executing my plan, I realized everything went too smoothly to believe. I suspected that the people I'm lying to actually know everything. After that, when I sent my partner to Vanholt's office, my partner informed me that Elias goes on a break everyday at around 5:10 pm. That confirmed my theory that you two are working together to catch me. So I told my partner to fit a bomb there. The proposal given to me to come here in person wasn't a very good plan either."

"H-How can you plan this much and this quickly? You were ahead of us all the time?", Luther asked in shock. While Elias was still static with a facial expression mix of sadness and anger.

"By the way, Elias? Your wife was killed, wasn't she?, Lucian's voice became calmer and smile became a neutral expression.
Elias's mind got filled with grief and regret, visible through his face. He murmured some words, "Please, Let go of my brother, I'll let you go, please.", even if he was saying please, he was saying it as an order rather than a request.

"I'll let your brother go if you let me escape this house with no problems.", Lucian said.
Luther looked towards Elias and gave him an expression that was suggesting Elias to not take steps based on emotions.

"But don't worry. I don't want to kill any of you. In Fact, I empathize with you. You are still wearing the pendant your wife gave you, which

has a picture of your wife with you. That's how I remembered about your wife's death in the first place. But she is in a better place now. And don't do anything that'll make your brother die too, live a honest life, unlike me.", Lucian said.

Luther looks at the pendant Elias was wearing. He becomes shocked at the observation of Lucian, as he himself never noticed it before.

Lucian quickly tapped a button on his phone and said, "Goodbye, I'm taking the money and the artwork as a price for the problems you put me through, Mr.Kane."

Minutes pass, but still nothing happens, Luther and Elias keep on waiting, thinking of something. As the sound of the clock progresses, Lucian becomes more confused.

*Why isn't Aria still coming? I texted her and it is seen as well. She is supposed to be on the top of this room. I told her to come here and release the sleeping gas in this room, as no one except me and Aria is wearing a mask, this would have been a perfect strategy. But why isn't she coming?*

Lucian, for the first time in a long period, seemed stressed. He was confused as never before.

Luther whispered to himself, "What is happening? Why isn't his partner coming to save him? Is this our choice? No, If we try to

unmask him right now, he will kill Vanholt in an instant. I guess we'll have to see what happens next."

Footsteps of people came from the top-floor. Lucian became stressed to hear it, he was expecting something else.

Suddenly the sounds stop and the inner door of the room opens, with another 4 assassins, comes a masked lady.

Lucian's brain became fully null seeing this scene, he whispered with mixed expressions, "A-Aria?"

# Chapter 5 - Conditions & Deals

*In my teen days, I always used to think that everything should be fair, and if something isn't, then it is wrong and needs fixing. I believed in absolute equality and blamed nature for creating people inferior to others. But as life went on and I learned to see multiple perspectives, I realized that this is how the world is supposed to be. I realized that nothing in life is fair, and it is not supposed to be either. I started expecting the unexpected, never complaining about something that didn't seem fair.*
*But now, I'm unconsciously asking, why?*

Everyone in the room except Lucian unfreezed. Elias's expression changed from fear to relief.
Seeing Lucian with such a rare expression made Elias believe that he is now in a safe situation.

"Your partner, Aria, was nothing but a traitor for you, it seems", Elias said with a neutral face.
Luther stared at Elias with an amazed expression as Elias started showing his phone to Lucian while sitting still.

"When I was trying to call Dorian, I saw a message from one of my assassins I hired for emergency purposes. He said, a person named Aria is claiming to be the ghost's partner. And she is..", Lucian stopped him right there.

"S-So you are saying, she betrayed me?! And she wanted to get me caught?", Lucian said in a louder voice.

"Yes! That's what it seems like", Elias said, finally with a smile.

*Wait a minute, am I missing something? Did she get caught or is she willingly doing this? Is she doing this to save me somehow? Should I go with her-*

"Look at me", Aria finally spoke up, pointing towards Lucian.
"This was just how I wanted it to go! And you are finally getting caught. Now Mr.Blackwood, I'm right here, there is nothing that can stop you from unmasking him right? Do it.", Aria expressed with a smile.

"You're right! Thank you! We'll definitely pay you for your consideration!", Luther also spoke up, excitedly.

"Aria, how can you do this to me?", Lucian said with a voice that didn't express anything at all.

"I'm still the same", Aria said calmly.

*Still the same? Does she mean she is still helping me?*

"And by that, I mean I was always like this. I got closer to you, to gain your trust and the day has finally come!", Aria shouted.

Elias quickly stood up from the sofa and went towards Lucian himself, to unmask him.

As Elias was approaching him, he quickly balanced his mind and spoke up, "Mr.Blackwood! You are forgetting that your brother's life is still in my hands! My partner not saving me doesn't make your brother safe!"

Elias was punched by an invisible force while going towards Lucian as he heard this.

Luther Kane suddenly smiled and said, "So, should we kill this girl?"

Without giving anyone a further chance to reply, he continued, "If you don't do what we say, we are going to kill your ex partner", he smirked, "And, we are gonna keep her hostage just to keep things safe."

Elias got impressed by the things Luther said. He just went back to sit on the sofa. As soon as he touched the sofa, the assassins surrounding Aria grabbed her hands and started tieing her with a rope. Aria showed no resistance.

Lucing at last took a deep breath and sat on the chair positioned in front of Elias and Luther.

"Tell me what do you want.", Lucian said with a cold voice.
"I want you to work under me, for free.", Elias said, almost trying to request Lucian, even after cornering him.
"So, you were trying to unmask me, to know my identity and use that as a threat to make me keep working for you in the future and not betray you?", Lucian asked.
"Exactly, you know it.", Luther said, before Elias could.
"Well, I can't really know your identity now because my brother's life is in your hands. But remember, Aria Volkov is gonna stay with us from now on, and if you do anything that gets me in trouble, consider her dead.", Elias said in a threatening voice.

"Okay, right. I am ready to work under your conditions, but you'll have to spare my identity. I am gonna go away from here and never meet you in person again. Here is my personal number, so call me

when I have to start. And kill her if you suspect me of betraying you.", Lucian promised boldly.

Luther got close to Elias and whispered, "Would it be a good decision, Sir? His identity would have been the best way to keep him under us. Are you sure this hostage is enough to keep him?"

Elias whispered back, "The emotions I saw in his eyes when he first saw her, no matter how good a person is at deceiving, no one can fake that. I'm more than 100% sure that this hostage is enough!"

*I have no idea why Aria did that. Can I even trust people from now on? She was the only person I genuinely loved and trusted, aside from my parents. No no, this can't be it. No matter what happens, the Aria I know would never do something like this. I am pretty sure she is doing this under some kind of pressure. I'll have to rescue her from here as soon as I get the chance. But why did she not resist at all to being held hostage? Was she really that invested to get me caught? It's an act, I can feel it's an act.*
*Otherwise, why didn't she call me by my real name in front of Elias and Luther? She addressed me as "The Ghost". Was she trying to not expose my identity?*

Elias took the paper Lucian gave him, which had a number written in it. He quickly typed the number and called Lucian.

The phone in Lucian's shirt's pocket started ringing.
"See? I don't lie, why would I?", Lucian said.
Elias smiled and said, "So should we call it a deal?"

Lucian said, "I guess so."

Luther stood up and went towards the assassins surrounding Aria and said, "Go and throw her in the room I made for hostages. This bastard really tried to corner us, show him our power."

Lucian's eyes went towards Luther and quickly responded through mouth, "Watch your language Mr.Kane, throw her in the room huh? Did you just forget that I have Mr.Blackwood's brother as a hostage too? This is a mutual deal."

"Can't you just not say these things now? Didn't I pay you enough to not let your pride interfere with our plan?", Elias said with a silent anger towards Luther.

Luther said, "Yes, Sir. I apologize."

"Not letting pride or emotions interfere with our plans? Did he just forget how he lost his mind hearing about his brother being hostage? In fact, this situation came up just because of that", Luther whispered to himself, barely hearable to anyone else.

Lucian took the art he brought with him and opened the door. As the assassins followed him to the outside door, he faded into the dark of the night.
*I'm coming soon, Aria.*

# Chapter 6 - Betrayed, Did I?

Luther was sitting on a chair in the hostage room, while Aria was sitting on a chair attached to the wall, located opposite Luther's.

"So, what is your name, girl?", Luther asked, looking at his computer.
"Is that important?", Aria asked with a bored voice.
"Umm, yes it is. Just tell me already.", Luther looked at Aria.
"It's Aria Volkov. By the way, is this place safe for me? And will I be provided with everything?", Aria asked, raising her voice a little bit.
"Don't worry. Mr.Blackwood told me to arrange everything for you. I was wondering why he was arranging this much luxury for a hostage.", Luther said.
"And what did he say?", Aria asked curiously, smiling barely.
"He said that 'The ghost' has asked him to give you everything you need. Elias was blinded by emotions back then you know, he accepted the conditions.", Luther said with a mocking towards Elias.
Aria said, "I'm going to my assigned room then". She went for the door.

"Remember, if you even try to escape this place anyhow, there are sensors and cameras to catch you. We have guards and assassins 24/7.", Luther warned with a smirk.
"Quit all that talking. I know all of this. I thought he would get caught, but you guys were planning to use him instead. Well, whatever.", Aria looked back at Luther just to turn back again.

"Hey! Wait!", Luther suddenly said with a higher voice.
Aria looked back at Luther and said, "Now what?"
"If you are a past partner of 'The Ghost', then shouldn't you know about his identity?", Luther asked curiously.

Aria stood there with no expressions for a few seconds before answering, "I should have, but I don't."
"And what do you mean by that?", Luther asked calmly.
"He never told me his real name, as his theft partner, I was only given a nickname. It's 'Luke'. Now can I go?", Aria said, adjusting herself on the door.
"Luke huh? Yeah, you can go now.", Luther said looking back at his computer.

"She really thinks I believed that? But there is no way to pressurize her to say his real name now, so better stay silent", Luther thought with a sigh.

As Aria was on her way to her assigned room, she met Elias face to face. Elias was reaching for the management room where Luther is,

but he quickly stopped and said to Aria, "Miss Volkov, you're assigned to room number 8. Call the management if you need anything.", Elias said formally, with a soft voice.

"Miss Volkov? This guy know my surname too? Damn, that Luther guy is surely fast at sending information. Even though that guy was kind of harsh, this guy seems genuinely nice.", Aria thought before answering, "Yes! I'll go, thanks."

Just after that he rushed toward the management room.

"Luther, I'm going to open the mission now. I'm calling him....what name did you say? Luke, right. We are going to call him by that nickname too. I will tell Luke to start the project tomorrow. Arrange some cars, they might be needed.", Elias said with a low but fast voice.

"Alright, I'll do it.", Luther said.

"Don't worry I'll pay you time to time for all the expenses with your profits.", Elias said, sitting on his chair.

"Thanks", Luther said, turning his eyes towards Elias from his computer.

Just when Elias was about to close his eyes for a little bit, his phone rang. An unsaved number appeared on his screen.

"Hello? Who is this?", Elias asked, not knowing who it was.
"Oh, Elias! It's me, Dorian!", he said.

"Oh shit! How irresponsible can I be? How did I not check my brother's life status? I have been in this house for an hour now, so I didn't even get the chance.", Elias thought with regret and relief at the same time.

"Dorian! Are you okay now?", Elias asked quickly.

"Yeah I'm okay? Why, though? Something happened?", Dorian asked.
Elias's eyes became wide in disbelief, he stuttered and asked, "Why did you call me with this new number? What happened to the other one?"

"Oh yeah, I think someone removed the sim card of my mobile and hid it somewhere. I couldn't find it so I just bought another one. I was actually about to tell you this, maybe some kind of plan is getting used against us.", Dorian said.

"Y-You might be right, I'll call you later, I'm busy so I'll be absent today, is everything okay there?", Elias asked.

"Yeah I got everything managed. Don't worry.", Dorian said.

"Okay, I'm cutting the call.", Elias cut the call and his face drowned in shock.

kind of important info?", Luther asked, waiting for an answer.

"We missed his identity for nothing, absolutely nothing! He didn't place any kind of bomb in Dorian's office nor did he tie him up as he claimed to! It was-It was all a bluff!", Elias shouted.

Luther's eyes became wide too but then he acted normal and said, "Well I did tell you to not take his words into consideration and do what we planned!"

"Just shut up! How could I have risked that considering my brother's life? It's easy for you to say it, would you have done the same if it was someone close to you?!", Elias almost became red in anger.

"Yeah yeah you're right but, calm down! We missed his identity but we still have some kind of control right?", Luther said.

Elias became calm, controlling his anger. "You're right. I shouldn't think about the past. Let's see what happens next.", Elias said and got out of his chair and walked to the middle of the room, going through his contacts in his mobile.

He pressed on a contact, changed the name from 'Ghost' to 'Luke' and then called it.

"Hello Luke! Are you ready to do the theft?", Elias asked rapidly.

*Luke huh? Aria told them that already? Now it's obvious she didn't betray me. I'll ask her what happened after I rescued her.*

"So now you know my nickname too?", Lucian asked.
"Yes I do. Your ex theft partner told us that. Now answer me!", Elias expressed.
"Yeah, tell me what to do.", Lucian said.

"Listen to me", Elias sat on his chair again preparing to tell his plans to Lucian.

"You'll have to steal an artwork from the Eclipse Cultural Museum. The 16th piece to be specific!", Elias informed.

"Another painting? Why? And can I ask what is your goal?", Lucian asked, with a little irritated voice.

"I'll explain it to you in the process. But the thing is, the location of my goal is hidden in that art piece.", Elias said.

"But what are you after though? Some kind of treasure? Or some kind of information?", Lucian asked.

"Can I trust this guy? Trust enough to tell him my goal? I mean we have a really important hostage in our control, he shouldn't be able to do something.", Elias kept thinking.

"Or..Or some revenge?", Lucian asked curiously, almost out of nowhere.

Elias was silent for a few seconds before saying, "Yes..."

# Chapter 7 - Memories from Hell

I failed, I failed to pay my due. Now I feel like I was trapped in here, intentionally. Regret is flowing through my blood, as I am seeing nothing in front of my eyes. Being blindfolded, I'm getting pulled towards an unknown place, an unknown room.

My ears are all open and I can hear the screams and laughs. Both being feminine.

My mind only having thoughts of our past and future, not the present. Me and my wife, Evie, are being treated as animals as they throw us in a room, tying up our hands and legs and blindfolding us.

The room is huge and vacant, the echoes our voice makes tells me that.
"Elias! What are we gonna do now?", Evie says as she cries, and I, being able to do nothing, say "I'm sorry!", while weeping.

"Well, well. See what we got here! Another one! Why don't these damn animals get their lessons? I'm tired of giving them those!", the voice of someone echoed through the room as other voices laughed.

Evie's hands were touching mine, and I suddenly felt it slipping away. They are taking Evie away from me, as I hear her screams intensify. As soon as I was going to scream my lungs out, I realized my mouth was also tied up with a rope.

"Open his blindfold now!", that terrifying voice strikes again.

I feel a lot of disgusting hands touching my face to open my blindfold. It has been hours since I saw something, and as soon as I opened my eyes, my eyes begged me to close it.

I see a lot of men and women around Evie, a little far away from me, doing something to her.
My eyes widen as I see her mouth getting stitched up by needles and threads by those monsters.

I can't do anything except sit there while seeing and hearing her going through this hell. She is the sweetest person I met in my life, and also the most innocent one. Why is she getting the punishment of my debt?

My eyes went dry and my face got tired of trying to break the ropes I was tied with.

Blood was everywhere around Evie as they were done stitching up her mouth and she was just laying there with no control over her body anymore, but those eyes. My insides were exploding with regret as I saw those innocent eyes of her, begging for help, going through

extreme pain all alone, not even being able to scream or talk through her stitched mouth.

I'm only getting more tense as I see her getting dragged in by those monsters. They put her in a big glass box, that can contain more than 3 humans. It was full of salt with a little water.

They laid her on top of the box of salt and started putting some kind of worms on top of her. They started taking me close to her, probably to let me observe those things even better.

I'm internally dead as I'm seeing her getting bitten by those worm-like creatures creating bloody cuts on her body, they increase the number of worms as her internal screams begin to rise, which can only be heard by me.

She started to struggle a lot getting her body parts bitten. Just in a minute, the salt in the box became all red with her blood. The smile of those monsters indicated that hell is just at its initial part.

They start pushing her down the salt heap and salt starts touching her wounds, which persisted now in hundreds. She starts drowning in the salt and the salt starts going in her eyes, giving her an amount of pain I can never imagine. As soon as the salt started going into her nose, stopping her breath, they pulled her nose out of the salt and pushed her down. Now she was experiencing pain every single second while not being able to scream at all and still not die.

They stopped her from dying and living at the same time.

The people around me are holding my face and eyes to make sure I witness every one of these. They killed me internally and her in all ways.

What happened the other parts of the hour, I can't remember, just because I don't want to.
One thing that was consistent through that part of my life, was that voice. That voice of that devil who was instructing all those people to do those stuff to my wife.

I then finally saw the end of her suffering, and I saw them taking her body out of the salt and packing her with a white paper.
"Sell her to the necrophiles!", said that Devil's voice.

My heart stopped almost completely and they dragged my body around the floor towards the exit and threw me out.

My mind was full of these thoughts but my mouth spoke none.

"So you are really hiding this from me? I guess that's reasonable.", Lucian said.

"Just know that It's to take revenge on some people who killed my wife.", Elias said, trying to cut the call.

"I understand.", Lucian said with a comforting voice and cut the call.

*He has his strong reasons to do this. This art surely contains information that he will be able to use against those people, or get closer to them maybe.*
*Well, I do have a plan on how to perform this heist, but I'll have to check on a lot of things before I decide something.*

Lucian closed his eyes for a second and sat on his bed, while having his phone in his hands.
Just after 3 seconds, he took his phone and called Elias again.

"My work is done for now, so goodnight Mr.Blackwood, I'm going to sleep.", Luther said yawning.

Elias made some signs with his hands, indicating a goodnight, while losing himself on his chair. He got up again as he received Lucian's call.

"Hello?", Luther asked quickly.
"Oh hello. What I was saying is that I might not be able to do this project tomorrow. I'll need some specific day or days to do this. Is that ok?", Lucian asked.
"If that ensures the project's completion, then it's okay.", Elias said, with an unusually calm voice.
"Sure. That's all I need. Thanks.", Lucian cut the call.

Lucian looks at the calendar and remembers something. Then he lays on his bed with his laptop on his lap. Getting comfortable while thinking was his favorite thing to do, even if life didn't give him much of those moments.

*18th July, 2001. That's when the Eclipse Cultural Museum was established, which should mean that in just 4 days, the museum would be celebrating its 22nd year...*

# Chapter 8 - Lucian, first you speak.

15th July,2023
Morning,

"Hello, everyone! Welcome to the preparation meeting of our 22nd Anniversary! Huge thanks to all of these talented people for being here!", Mr.Jacobs said, with an inviting smile to all of the people sitting in the office of Eclipse.

Saul Jacobs, the owner of Eclipse, sat on his chair. It was a long, oval table with chairs around it.

"Enjoy the drinks on the table and then we should proceed with our discussion, shouldn't we?", Saul expressed.

The table had artists and designers around it. Some of the notable ones being Gary Loxley, Emily Adams, Lucian Cole, Frank Austin.

After some moments of chatting, Saul said with an announcing voice, "So, now, I request all the respected people here to let their creativity shine and show us a sparkle of it!"

"I do have some plans, Lucian. But I'll let you speak first.", Gary said to Lucian.
"Ah you don't have to, just say it out.", Lucian said to Gary.
"Why not? What about the costume plan you were talking about? I really liked it!", this time Gary said it a little loudly, catching everyone's attention.

As soon as everyone heard Gary's words, the chatting stopped and the room became silent. Everyone, including Saul Jacobs looked at Lucian, expecting him to bring up his idea.

Lucian looked at everyone with a nervous smile and stood up.
"Please, Mr.Cole. Share your idea with us!", Saul insisted.

"Yes, for sure! So I was thinking we could arrange a special week for this anniversary where all our visitors will wear something..ahh..based on something related to Eclipse Museum?", Lucian said looking at everyone.

"That is a really good idea, Mr.Cole! But what could this costume be?", Saul asked.
"What about a suit inspired by a Polar Bear? Since it was the first artwork ever presented in this museum?", Frank Austin spoke up, with a smirk.

"Yeah, that would be a good idea!", Lucian added.
"Mr.Cole! You designed some suits for this, didn't you?", Gary said to Lucian while pointing at the papers he was holding.

Lucian then gave those papers to Mr.Jacobs. As Saul went through the papers his eyes sparkled. "These are some amazing designs, Mr. Cole!", Saul expressed, while showing the designs to the other people.

"Yeah, these suits are almost good. Well, I can make them better.", Frank said, looking at the designs.

"Here comes our 'best designer in the world' to save us!" - Gary whispered to himself, mocking Frank.

"Well, I have some ideas too, may I present them?", Emily said looking at Lucian.

"Yeah please do, I'm done with my idea.", Lucian said sitting down.

"We might paint the walls of the museum with colorful patterns that represent different emotions!, Karl, you have the blueprint I gave you?", Emily said.

"Yeah, here it is!", Karl said giving Saul the blueprints.

"We'll be incorporating all of these ideas into the anniversary for sure. Mr.Loxley, don't you have anything to say?", Saul turned towards Gary.

"Oh. me? No no, I'm going with Mr.Cole's plan. Is that okay?", Gary said, pointing at the suit designs.

"That's all good! So our special week will be from 18th July to 24th July, and we will be incorporating these suits into our theme and the visitors will be wearing these as a part of our celebration!", Saul announced.

"Huge thanks to all of the artists who came together to form these plans, and we are looking forward to its execution!", Saul said as everyone stood up, going outside the room.

"You didn't have to let me speak first you know, maybe Frank or some other people had their own initial ideas!", Lucian said to Gary as they were leaving the building.
"Oh come on, your plan was great. Who cares about that Frank.", Gary said.
"Yeah, our work is basically done here, they will make the suits and arrange them. By the way, are you interested in a friendly competition?", Lucian smirked.
"Oh sure, why not?", Gary smirked back.

15th July,2023
Afternoon,

"So, I'll be doing the heist on 20th July, Is that good?", Lucian informs Elias.
"Why such a specific date?", Elias asked curiously, "Does something happen that day that you can use to your advantage?", he added.
"Kind of. That day seems to be the perfect day for my plan, I have backups but that day is important.", Lucian said.
"Okay then.", Elias cuts the call.

*When I was checking the yearly electric condition of this city yesterday, I found out that every year on 29th December and 20th July, the electric supply of this city goes off for 28 seconds at exactly 4:47 pm. It's most probably because of how the electricity is distributed around the country. It takes a lot of time to fix such an issue and it has been happening for almost 24 years, with no exception.*

*That's why I suggested a special week instead of a special day, as I extended the costume days till 24th July, which covers 20th July.*

*As everyone or almost everyone will be wearing the same costume, it'll be easier for me to steal the art during the blackout and go away with it by confusing the security cameras. The costumes I designed also have space inside it that can store that art. I'm just hoping that damn Frank doesn't change it's structure way too much or I'll have to use backpacks or something else.*

*There's also something I need to do tomorrow. I'll go there with someone, Gary maybe. But, I wonder what Aria is doing now. I thought of planning a way to contact her after this heist, but I'm kind of missing her already.*

*And...The painting I'll be going after is an interesting one too, A spirit possessing a demon to make it suicide. I'll try to draw it myself, haven't tested my skills in a while.*

Lucian went towards his drawing table and pulled out a few pages and his drawing instruments, he then pulled out his phone and searched for the '16th piece' of Eclipse.
He started drawing a sketch of it and then relaxed on his chair a bit.
He then called Gary.
"Hey! Ready to go to Eclipse tomorrow?", Lucian asked.
"Tomorrow? Didn't you say 20th July? I think you got amnesia or something.", Gary said.
"Yeah no. I'm talking about an extra day. I just wanted to look at it before the colors, you know.", Lucian tried to explain.
"I get it. But why me? You can go with your girl, right?", Gary asked.
"I don't have one, remember?", Lucian said.
"Oh yeah how can I forget", Gary giggles. "Sure, when then?", he added.
"11 am maybe?", Lucian suggested.
"Done!", Gary said.

# Chapter 9 - The Eclipse Heist

20th July, 2023
4:15 pm

The Eclipse Cultural Museum is at the moment full to the brim with visitors. It has been only 15 minutes since the Special Week of the Museum started, and it's already full of polar bears.
Lucian, with his friends, entered the line with the same costumes, all pretty much looking the same.
But, some people in the crowd had extra accessories like bags, including Lucian and his friends.

"You guys did come here before, right?", Dale asked, pointing towards Gary and Lucian, while being the first of the four friends in the line.
"Yeah we did. But it wasn't this full with people that day!", Gary said.
"A lot of things have changed for sure, look at the colors!", Lucian expressed, while looking around.
"I heard that Emily Adams was a part of this theme, by the way, what did you guys do?", Miles asked, looking at Gary.
"Us? Ahh..We did the costumes, partly.", Gary said.
"Oh that's why these sucks, so this was your plan.", Dale looked at Gary and Lucian.
"Yeah, like what are these masks for? I can barely see things.", Miles said.

"Shut up, see forward. The line is going on.", Gary told Miles, pointing at Dale, as the line went a little forward.
Lucian was still gazing around, as he was watching certain parts of the museum, he was remembering the last time he got here.

In around 20 minutes, Lucian reached the 10th piece, while everyone was gazing at the paintings, tasting its artistic beauty with their eyes.

16th July, 2023
As Lucian and Gary were walking with the line, Lucian was stopping and taking a good look around the museum.

*The line starts going forward almost every 2 minutes. But the special days will have a lot more visitors than now, so I'll consider that as just 2 minutes. So if one art piece takes 2 minutes, 16 will take 32. I'll have to be present in front of the 16th piece at exactly 4:47 pm. Which means, we will have to enter the line around 4:15 pm. It will make it much easier for me, as I'll have to move less.*

"Let's go forward, Lucian!", Gary said.
"Huh?"

20th July,2023
"Oh yeah", Lucian told Gary as he went forward. Gary was the 3rd one of the friends, Lucian being the last.

"Look at this one, it's a unique one! A human-like beast who is climbing its way to heaven!", Dale said.
"Right! I have no idea what that means though, I'm less into conceptual ones you know.", Miles replied quickly.
"Well, then what do you think about the next ones then?", Gary said to Miles pointing at the 16th piece, which they were about to go infront of, while Dale already did.

Lucian became the ghost infront of everyone, but no one noticed as both of them looked the same.

As the city-wide electric blackout was on its way, Lucian was positioned infront of the 16th piece, apparently by fate.
Lucian was looking at the art, along with Gary, when memories of 16th July struck Lucian's mind again.

16th July, 2023

*So this is the one I'll have to steal. It's even better to look at it in person.*
*All original paintings placed in museums have their trademarks, which are usually hidden, in order to protect them from duplicity.*

Gary was looking at the same painting.

*The trademark is nowhere in the front of the painting, and I assume it's not in the back either, because it'll be too easy to find otherwise.*

*So it has to be somewhere else. Is it inside the painting frame? It is possible.*

Just as Lucian was thinking, he noticed a small button-like point under the painting frame.

*Is that the button that has the trademark inside it? A pretty baseless assumption but there is...a way to confirm this.*

"Hey Gary! Wait for me, I'm getting a call!", Lucian raised his voice.
"It's fine! I'm right here!", Gary shouted from a distance as he went forward already.

"Hey, Elias, where are the trademarks in the paintings in your museum?", Lucian whispered through his phone quickly.
"Huh?", Elias replied.
"Quickly, it's essential for the theft!", Lucian said.
"Our trademarks are usually on the back of the paintings.", Elias said, increasing his talking speed.
"Oh. Do you know of any museum which places their trademarks inside the painting frames itself?", Lucian said, lowering his voice even more.
"I do. Actually most of them place it inside.", Elias said.
"That's all I need to know, thanks.", Lucian cut the phone instantly.

*That button most probably does contain the trademark then, I'll have to wear the night goggles on that day, so I'll be able to remove the*

*trademark better, and the smoothening oil, which will cover up the traces of the removed trademark sticker.*

"Gary, wait for me!", Lucian went towards Gary.
"How is the 16th piece?", Gary asked Lucian.

<u>20th July, 2023</u>

"Oh, it's exceptiona- just as Lucian was about to complete his sentence, the world around him became pitch black.

At the very moment it became dark, the chaos rose. The people unaware of this blackout started shouting each other's names. The guards standing at the 1st,10th and 20th piece were telling the crowd to calm down and wait a few seconds till the electricity came back.

The ticking of clocks became much more intense as the crowd went to the path of silence.
Some people even turned on their phone flashlights.

"You guys don't have to turn on flashlights, the feeling I get from dark places is something else!", Miles said excitedly.
"Yeah yeah we are doing nothing at all!", Gary said.
"Where's Lucian, can you hear him?", Dale asked.
"Yeah, here he is, Lucian?", Gary asked, trying to observe him.
Just after around 1 second, a voice came as a reply, "I'm right here, I'm just tying my shoelace!", Lucian said, from a little isolated place as

the line went forward a little bit, leaving Lucian alone infront of the 16th piece, outside the line.

Just after 28 seconds, the lights came back, and Lucian was just where his friends saw him before the blackout, behind Gary.

After reaching the 20th piece, the last one, they were preparing for the exit, but the line became completely static as an announcing voice from the speakers in the museum spoke up.

"Attention, all the visitors and the staff! The 16th piece has been stolen from this museum during the blackout! Don't let any of the visitors exit yet! The thief is one of them!".

*Shit. If they found the missing painting even after just a few seconds, we would have been out.*

The expressions in the crowd changed, some becoming shocked, some becoming careful.
The guards quickly shaped a square shaped line made of visitors, ready to investigate them.

Through the large number of people, Lucian and his friends were placed around the front row.
As they were going through people's clothes and bags, people were chatting, most probably about 'The Ghost', and how he might be in this heist.

The guards finally came towards Lucian's part of the line. As Miles was infront the line, the guards checked him first.
After the guard checked his clothes, he went for his bag. As everyone was looking towards the guards, excitement flowed within them as they were hoping for 'The Ghost' to be caught.

The guard invents the 16th piece from Mile Gray's bag, saying "So..You are the one....

# Chapter 10 - Foreseen Adversities

Everyone in the crowd tensed up, as they were about to witness The Ghost's identity.
"Unmask him right now!", the other guard said to the guard checking Miles.

"You are caught! Remove the mask right now!", the guard commanded as he grabbed Mile's hands.
"Me?", Miles replied in a loud, but calm voice.
Everyone stared at Miles as he removed his mask, seeing a smiling face.

Gary comes out from the crowd, and tells the guard, "Sir! It seems like you misunderstood something!", Dale and Lucian followed Gary, coming out of the crowd.
The guard became a little confused, "And who are you?", the other guard asked.
As Gary removed his mask, so did Dale and Lucian.

A lot of the visitors, including the guards, were shocked to see Gary and Lucian.
"Mr.Loxley and Mr.Cole? You guys visit here as well?", one of the visitors asked, watching their artistic idols.

"Yeah, we do. But the problem is, you guys misunderstood something! My friend, Miles Gray, is not the thief!", Gary said, being in the middle of the crowd.
"B-But sir, then what about this painting?", The guard asked quickly, carefully holding the painting.

"That is drawn by us!", Dale spoke up just as Gary was about to speak.
"Yes!", Lucian expressed agreement.

"What?", the guard seemed confused.

15th July,2023

Noon,

"Yeah, our work is basically done here, they will make the suits and arrange them. By the way, are you interested in a friendly competition?", Lucian smirked.
"Oh sure, why not, what will this be about then?", Gary smirked back.
"The idea is, we'll be trying to replicate the paintings from the Eclipse Museum. I have the 12th and 16th piece in mind. The competition will be about who can copy the painting including the frame in the museum more accurately. Is that alright?", Lucian asked.
"Damn brother, you're really creative. But who's this 'we'?", Gary asked.

"We? Maybe invite Dale and Miles too? Then we'll be comparing our paintings in the museum itself when we visit it on 20th July. How's that?", Lucian expressed.
"Alright! I know I'm gonna be the winner, but let's give you guys a chance, right?", Gary smirked.
"Yeah yeah, we'll see about that."

20th July, 2023
4:53 pm,
As the line around Lucian was on its way to the exit, he remembered something.
"Hey! I was thinking, we could exchange our paintings now, remember the competition?", Lucian expressed.
"Why right now? Let us exit first, then we'll do it!", Gary said.
"I get it, you are afraid that my painting will beat yours, isn't it?", Dale smirked, looking back at Gary.
"What level of stupidity are you on?", Gary said.
"Leave Gary, show me your painting, Lucian! I was particularly excited for yours!", Miles said pointing to Lucian, while Dale and Gary were talking.
"Oh, here it is! Give me yours then, I don't know how good this will be compared to the others", Lucian giggles.

4:56 pm (Current time)

"You see, we were doing a friendly competition among us to decide who can replicate these paintings better. So the one you are holding is made by...umm..yeah! Lucian!", Dale explained.
Gary nodded his head in agreement.

"So, you're telling me, this is not the actual painting?", The guard seemed confused and suspicious at the same time.

"Yes, Sir. Look at our bags! All 4 of us have made painting replicas from here. They all look pretty real, not just mine!", Lucian took some steps towards the guards.

Seeing this, the crowd was giving different opinions, some even disappointed.

"Wait, Lucian. How can they believe our words, right?", Gary interrupted.
"You can check all the paintings by your own hands.", Gary said in a calm voice, suggesting the guards himself.

"Right", the other guard said while taking the bags of those four.

As the guards looked at the bags, they found a single painting from each bag, excluding Lucian's, which had 4 paintings.

"Hey! Check the trademark on all of them! Then we'll know if they are just a replica or not", one of the staff suggested.

The guard quickly went through all the paintings looking for something, a trademark to be specific.
Just as he reached the first painting in Miles' bag, he found a button under it.
He quickly pressed it and a wooden bar came out of it sliding. And it had no trademarks.

Both the guards were confused about it.
"So...Should we leave now? We have our work to do.", Gary said to the guards.
"We apologize Sir. We definitely made some mistakes.", the guards said in unison.

"No it's okay. There's no need to apologize! You had to check everyone anyways.", Miles said, packing his bag, along with the others.

The Ghost left the museum infront of everyone's eyes, once again. The number of visitors lessened as time passed. Even after the return of the electricity, the museum was still looming with darkness, until Lucian and his friends left it.

"We are gonna lose our jobs, Aden!", one of the guards said.
"We'll make up some excuse, it's not completely our fault either!", the other one replied.

The painting made its way through the museum, through the roads of the city, to Lucian's house.

"Hello?", Lucian picked up his phone, and called Elias.
"Is the painting with you?", Elias asked rapidly.
"Yeah, I got it!", Lucian said.
"Thank God, I thought you lost the painting or something.", Elias said with relief.
"You know about the Eclipse Case?", Lucian asked.

"I do. The theft case is literally on the television! But now the point is, you'll have to analyze that painting you have!", Elias said, with determination.
"First tell me, what is this even about? Like, why would the location of your enemy be in this? And how did you get to know this either?", Lucian asked curiously.

The history of Elias's life was still unknown to Lucian, though he made some guesses.

"Well, you know what, when my wife was killed by them, I heard them accidently, and got to know about their secret of having their location hidden in here.", Elias said, with multiple pauses in between.

"That's all. Well then, I'll try decoding what this painting is about then.", Lucian said with a sigh.
"I expect you to. Aria Volkov is fine here, she also told me to make sure you don't come to this place.", Elias said, with a soft voice.
"She did? Well, I believe you. I'll be updating you as soon as I figure out anything.", Lucian cut the call.

*What was that? Did she really say that? Or is it just another lie to manipulate me? Whatever it is, I'll find a way to secretly contact her.*

*And also...how would Elias have this much information about his enemy's location...just by accident? Something just doesn't seem right....*

# Chapter 11 - I was Waiting for This!

21st July,2023
Morning,
“Sir! Another theft has been recorded! It’s a unique case! No clues have been left behind sir!”, a guy came running, opening the door with a slam. As he opened the door, he saw another person, with glasses, sitting on a chair, looking at the TV, hung on the wall.

“You are quite late to be honest. I already heard the news.”, he said while standing and turning around, continuing with, “I was waiting for this for a long time, now I should get to work.”, he said with a silent excitement. His face was steady, but his eyes sold the excitement.

“Don’t you believe the guards are stupid?”, he asked the one standing at the door.
“You are asking for my answer?”, he stuttered a bit, “Well, at first I thought the guards should arrest Gary Loxley, Lucian Cole and his friends out of suspicion, but then I realized the guards had, basically no proof against them. And….I don’t think arresting such respected people would have been a good job either.”, the person sat on another chair while talking.

As the guy with glasses went in front of the other person, he made his voice louder and said, “You are damn right! Seems like you really would excel me at this point!”.

“Sir, good joke! But maybe you should find more clues I think?”, he said smiling.

“No, I was serious. And for a clue? Why do you think only one of those painting replicas had the wooden trademark-revealing button?”, he said looking at the ground.

“That’s a good question. But that doesn’t really prov-”
“Exactly! It was all planned! Not a very good plan to be honest, or that’s what it seems like. Whoever did that wanted to show off his skills to people like you or me, who can see through his plans you know”, he said looking up this time, “But, he knew he wouldn’t get caught, so none of these matters”, he stopped with a sigh.

The room they were sitting in seemed like a part of an abandoned house, with minimal lighting. Small enough to not reflect sounds.

“You are obviously suspecting this person to be the ghost right? Then, why would ‘The Ghost’ make such a silly mistake and raise even a little bit of suspicion towards himself?”, his eyes beamed with curiosity.

“You are right, again. I would assume, one of those four friends is the Ghost, and they want someone or even us, to find him or atleast try to. That obviously shouldn’t stop us from searching for him”, the guy took off his glasses to wipe them.

“So what are you gonna do now, sir?”, he said.

“Now? Hmmm, I guess we will have to get to work and investigate people!”, he put his glasses back.

“People? Who, to be specific?”, he asked curiously.

"The guy I have in mind is…..All of those four friends!”, the guy with glasses sat in his chair again, “First we will investigate Gary Loxley

and Lucian Cole. You know, it's either the most chalant one, or the most silent one. Maybe even someone in the middle if too sharp. But I've gotta trust my intuition at least.", he ran through his words.
"Don't worry Sir, I'm gonna arrange them for sure!", the other guy said with optimism.

"I'll have to stop this, and achieve my life", he mumbled to himself, "As I am right now worse than dead."

"Are you saying something? Sir?", he asked.
"Nah, nothing. I was just motivating myself again. Let's go for Lucian Cole first, Nicolo!", both stood up.

They started walking towards the door and the next time they were seen was outside the doors of a mall.

Those guys were seen walking down Harper Street the next minute.

"This way?"
"Yes, sir! Just 5 more minutes to go, and we will be right in front of Lucian's house.", Nicolo said.

"Don't call me formally here", the guy with glasses looked around, while whispering, "Didn't I tell you before?"

"Oh right, sorry. So..Ralph! Just 5 more minutes!", Nicolo became nervous.

"Right. 5,4,3…"
"What?"

“Nothing. I was just counting the minutes left. Well, Nicolo, tell me, when do you think we will get freedom?”, Ralph asked suddenly, while looking forward to the road.

Nicolo was a little surprised. “Freedom? Well, assuming you are talking about us two, I’ll say, after we have managed to catch the ghost?”

“I know that already, what I meant to say was, will it be as short as these 5 minutes?”, Ralph pushed his face towards the sky.

“I hope so.”

“I just hope my sister is safe. To be honest, she is the only one I would prioritize even above my freedom. What do you think, Nicolo? Where would she be?”, he looked towards Nicolo.

Nicolo became even more nervous, “I want to stay optimistic. She is most probably safe. But, knowing them…”, Nicolo faded his words.

“You are right, and there’s no point in staying optimistic. The world is unfair as it always was, which disgusts me. I myself might be a great example of this. This unfairness has eaten me alive, yet still leaves me as a whole.”, Ralph’s words reached Nicolo, might not his ears.

“Ralph! We are here, this is Mr.Cole’s house!”, Nicolo stopped Ralph.

The grandness of the house really surprised both of them for some reason. From the garden to the swimming pool, from the rooftop to the rooms visible through the windows, everything contributed to the richness of the house.

*Oh, are they who I think they are? If they are, that was pretty quick. Let's see.*

As Lucian was sitting near the windows, he heard three simultaneous sounds. One from his phone, Elias was calling. The second one from his coffee machine, the coffee was ready, ready to calm his addiction. And, the last being the doorbell.

"Hello! Mr.Cole, nice to meet you, we are sent to you by a team of secret investigators. And we'll like to investigate you, can we come in?", Ralph said effortlessly, with a genuine smile.

"Investigation? For what?", Lucian's face distorted a little bit, with some worry.

"Come on, we can talk later as well right? Wouldn't you welcome us first?", Ralph said, adjusting his glasses.

"Sure. Please come inside.", Lucian said with a nervous smile.

As they were walking through the hallways, Lucian was seeing a familiar scenario, his brother Magnus, adjusting his glasses while entering his room, looking at the paintings. The difference being, this time it was Ralph instead of Magnus, having an assistant with him, Nicolo.

"Please have a seat!", Lucian greeted them after entering his living room, inviting them to the sofas.

Nicolo sat on the sofa real quick. Meanwhile, Ralph was still taking a look around.

*What is he doing? Is he looking for some clue in the room? He obviously will try to expose me in the most unexpected ways, and I'm ready for it. He doesn't even have any proof against me.*

*I'm more worried about these guys finding one of my friends present in the museum that day. Maybe Gary? I did call all of them to ensure I'm the first of their targets, judging from that fact, I guess their next target would be Gary. I do have a plan to direct this towards Gary.*
*He is innocent so no harm should happen to him as our reactions are the only proof they can have.*

"So, Mr.Cole, we came here for investigation regarding the recent Eclipse Cultural Museum theft case.", Nicolo started to explain, "You were present there when it occurred, am I right?"

"Yes, I was.", Lucian answered, followed by, "Have the coffee, please", while emptying his cup.

"Sure.", Nicolo answered, taking the cup.

Ralph finally stopped his searching eyes and stretched himself. Then he at last turned towards Lucian and said, "Are you the Ghost?"

"What?", both Nicolo and Lucian were shocked.
"What kind of question is that?", Nicolo and Lucian said in unison.

"Just tell me, are you 'The Ghost'?", Ralph's voice got louder and he grabbed the sofa way too tightly, almost threatening Lucian.

"Ralph! What are you doing! Aren't we here for investigation? What kind of investigation is this?", Nicolo said.

“Just answer my damn question!”, Ralph insisted.

Lucian became surprisingly calm, and said, “Yes”.

# Chapter 12 - Shocked, am I?

The room became uncomfortably silent. Nicolo's face quickly turned towards Lucian from Ralph. "What?", Nicolo gasped.
Ralph smirked and looked towards Lucian too, expecting an explanation.

"Well. Obviously I'm joking. Even if I was 'The Ghost', why would I be admitting it?", Lucian giggled.
Nicolo was still confused.
"Oh yeah, a joke. I get it", Ralph said smiling, sitting on the sofa, beside Nicolo.

"So, Mr.Cole. Can you give me an explanation?", Ralph asked, leaning towards Lucian.
"I'm all ears. Ask me.", Lucian seemed chill.

"We saw the replicas you and your friends brought to the museum through the info we gathered. Why did only one of those replicas have the wooden button that is used to hide the trademarks?", Ralph asked with a curious look on his face, "I mean if you guys really did a personal competition as you told, how could any of you know about the hiding technique?"

"Well. You see, I went to that museum with Gary the previous day to see the paintings in person with the goal of observing them so I can make a better replica than my friends. Just as I was going through the 16th piece, I noticed this small detail under the painting and tried to do it. That's pretty much all.", Lucian answered in the most natural way someone can.

“Oh really? That sounds pretty believable! But how did you manage to create the same exact wooden mechanism inside the painting as well? Don’t tell me you actually took the 16th piece and then opened it all to see it and then made a replica out of it.”, Ralph smirked again.

“I-I didn’t do any of that obviously!”, Lucian stuttered while having a nervous smile on his face, “I just created the insides on my own and it just matched with the original somehow!”

“Right, right. A coincidence you say. Then how did you manage to make the wooden mechanism? It would be impossible to do so if you didn’t analyze the insides beforehand. Let’s just say that you are caught my guy!, Ralph raised his voice on the last line, as Nicolo stared at both Ralph and Lucian.
Lucian’s face seemed more nervous than ever.

“What? G-Give me some time to say something!”, Lucian said.
“Yeah sorry. Please go on explaining how you opened it then”, Ralph made his face neutral.

“So-So when making the wooden button, I put the aluminium string into the iron bar and pushed it in the hole that matched the lock perfectly!”, Lucian said rapidly and nervously.

“Wait”, Nicolo finally spoke up, “Iron Bar and an aluminium string? Do you know that only the Eclipse museum has that type of wooden covered mechanism in the whole world? That’s a patented lock!”.

Ralph then turned towards Nicolo and said smiling, “Don’t you see, Nicolo? He slipped up finally. People tend to slip up info they should be hiding while making up things on the spot. Seems like ‘The Ghost’ is not an exception either!”

*Oh shit. I slipped up. The tech of the mechanism shouldn't be known by me to this specific point. I slipped up, I slipped up.*

All of Lucian's internal thoughts were being read by Ralph at this point. His face sold every single emotion he was feeling at that moment. The Ghost's legend finally became humanized reality, finally coming in front of investigators.

"I recorded everything you see, Lucian Cole!", Ralph laughed a little and then composed himself, "See this microphone? It has been sending audio signals to an actual recorder since we started talking. Interesting isn't it?", Ralph showed Lucian a microphone that was tucked in his collar all this time and then he finally stood up.

"Come on Nicolo. We should proceed then. No one has come this far, but see, we have. Take out those handcuffs and arrest this legend!", Ralph said, adjusting his glasses again, looking around the room.

"A-Ah yes sir!", Nicolo finally put his hands in his bags and took out the handcuffs.

"No, no, no!", Lucian suddenly became all furious and started screaming, "I can't get caught this quickly!".
Lucian started throwing things around him and screamed all over the place. The room was starting to become messy with all the things he was throwing around.
"Nicolo! Quickly handcuff him and stop all this!", Ralph said in a loud voice.

Nicolo couldn't even respond and quickly put his arms around Lucian and grabbed him tightly, stopping this mess. "You are under arrest Mr.Cole! You are now proven to be 'The Ghost'! There is no escape,

please stop all this!”, Nicolo quickly handcuffed Lucian and finally made him sit down again.

*Damn, this Nicolo guy is really strong. I couldn’t even move a little bit after he just barely grabbed me!*

“Let’s go Nicolo!”, Ralph said just before saying, “Okay wait a minute. I kind of wanna talk with this guy. This is afterall ‘The Ghost’ we were talking about!”, seeing Ralph sit down, Nicolo did too.

“Hmm. I really honor you, Mr.Cole! The way you managed to manage two personas at the same time while performing high stake heists, it’s just something else.”, Ralph said in an amazed, soft voice.

Lucian was looking down all this time, after getting handcuffed. He suddenly started to make his distorted face neutral, and even smiled very barely.

“Hey. Why are you smiling?”, Ralph became super serious asking that question.

Lucian push his head upward and said with nervousness, “Me? No, why would I smile?”.
Lucian continued, “I was just remembering all my good days. When I used to get away with heists, never getting caught. I never thought that I would mess up something this easily, Lucian sighed, “I guess it was luck all along, and now it has expired.”

Ralph felt a little uneasy all of a sudden.
“This..is the ‘Ghost’ we are talking with here. I don't know why I didn’t feel this before, but I’ve gotta be more careful. Talking about his heist

stories all of a sudden huh? Seems like he has given up but his fate hasn’t. There has to be something below the surface.”

Lucian kept his eyes on the ceiling, just before his eyes suddenly went on his own shirt collar.

*Wait, where is my microphone? No way, shit! How can I mess this up to this extent?*

Lucian's face became distorted again and his scanning eyes rapidly went towards the floor where a microphone was laying.

*Oh no, when I got out of my mind I started throwing things around and my, my mic got out of my collar as well. Truly, things can't get more unfair!*

As Nicolo was staring at Lucian the whole time, he quickly noticed his eyes and positioned his own eyes at the point on the floor Lucian was looking at.

“Sir! That is a microphone! Seems like it flew out when Mr.Cole was throwing stuff around!”, Nicolo said out loud.

“Right!”, it seemed like Ralph's deductive eyes were already looking at the floor.

Lucian seemed devastated at this point.
“Tell us! What is this microphone for!”, Nicolo grabbed Lucian tighter and asked him.

“Nicolo, can't you see it? This guy is not the actual Ghost”, Ralph took the microphone from the floor to his hand. “It seems like, Mr.Cole is

only a decoy who was set up to be the one we will investigate, this was indeed a long plan.”

“What? Really?”, Nicolo was shocked, and he slowly looked towards Lucian.
Lucian smiled again, this time it looked more devilish.
“You are sharp as hell, Ralph.”, I guess I am caught now. But the info of this investigation has already been sent to the real Ghost.”

Nicolo was as much as shocked as disappointed, same went with Ralph minus the shock.

“Tell us everything about the ghost you know then.”, Ralph quickly rushed towards Lucian.

Nicolo simultaneously said, “Would this guy say anything?”

“He would. Wouldn't you? You wouldn't even if we don't arrest you?”, Ralph offered.

“That's exactly what I thought. But unfortunately there's only a little I know about him.”, Lucian said while shaking his handcuffs.

Noticing this Nicolo started unlocking the handcuffs.
“Such as?”, Ralph asked curiously.

“He was always careful enough to not reveal anything to me. But I remember clearly, that one time he mentioned his homeland, that is the Barlow Street. So he might be any person living in that area.”

“Why are you helping us in this case, if you were trying to help him even till the end?”, Ralph asked curiously.

“At the end I was fighting for revenge, clearly. I didn't really want you guys to succeed. And…I’m pretty sure, you still can't..

# Chapter 13 - How does He Know?

“And..What do you mean by that?”, Ralph questioned, almost confusingly.

“Nothing. I just think I don’t deserve to get arrested just for being a decoy for this little time!”, Lucian put his unlocked hands on his temple, “Just don’t arrest me, please. I want to live freely, I made a mistake I admit!”

“Want to live freely, right? I get it. We will not arrest you but you are surely not allowed to live fully free from now on, for obvious reasons. Just answer my last question. What have you done for ‘The Ghost’ so far?”, Ralph asked.

“Me? I just followed his orders most of the time, I have only done one thing for him physically. That was on 16th july. He told me to observe the museum and give him the info. I told him about the details I found on the paintings and stuff. He then delivered a replica of that painting to me, most probably to use me as a pawn. I just couldn’t see it at that time”, Lucian started crying, “I was being manipulated all this time, he also told me about the wooden mechanisms and stuff. He stole the painting while me and my friends were caught instead. I should have never agreed to his deal.”

“I understand it now. But what were the ways you used to communicate with him?”, Ralph questioned again.

“Communicate? Only through a phone. But before you came here I tried to call him and found that this number doesn’t exist anymore. He just used me and I was dumb.”, Lucian wiped his tears.
“No problem. You were useful to us, now we understand how ‘The Ghost’ uses people as decoys.”, Nicolo put his hands on Lucian’s shoulders.

“Okay I understand it. Listen to me now, I’ll leave Nicolo here with you to observe you all the time. Sorry, but we still can't trust you fully. And you’ll also have to give a good amount of money as a fine for supporting and helping a criminal.”, Ralph stood up and pointed a finger towards Nicolo, while Lucian looked down with regret.

“So this is it huh. I can feel that this is an act. From the very start he was trying his best to defend himself from the allegations of BEING the ghost. And after being caught, he still had hope because the Ghost still wins, because he isn’t the Ghost. All of these feel just way too superficial, considering the possibility that Lucian might actually BE the Ghost and not a decoy, I can not underestimate him. Let me use my final move.”, Ralph thought out in a matter of seconds.

Nicolo suddenly put his hands away from Lucian’s shoulder and brought out his mobile phone from his own pocket.
“Hey, Ralph. Investigator No.4 is calling, here, have it.”, Nicolo handed his phone to Ralph.

“Hello? What happened? Caught something?”, Ralph asked on the phone.
“Yes sir! We investigated Elias Blackwood! He didn’t expose much details but with the ones he did, Mr.Garrison figured out that Lucian is indeed ‘The Ghost’!”, a voice came from the phone.

“Really? That’s awesome! Now I’ve confirmed my theory and it’s the end, finally!”, Ralph quickly pressed a button on the phone and looked towards Lucian.
*Wait, what?! How does this guy know about Elias? And why would they even investigate Elias in the first place? How would they even find a connection between him and the ghost? And even if they did, how would they know the ghost is me?*

*I have so many damn questions on my mind. Everything from the start of the investigation to until now, was all an act I did just to plant info in these investigators, everything went according to me, but now, how the hell does this happen?*

Lucian’s mind was now a web of complex questions waiting to be answered. He never felt this much pressure in his entire life of 20 years. The amazing part was, his face now was completely neutral and just as it was before. The shock and pressure on his mind was not at all being portrayed by his face.

*I’ll have to calm down. I’ll just have to. There’s a possibility that this is just a bluff. Maybe the voice is just recorded and all. I still don’t know how Ralph would make a bluff that consists of Elias, as there’s no way anyone other than Luther and Aria knows about the connection between the ghost and Elias. But however it is, I’ll have to react carefully.*

*Think Lucian, think! Ralph still distrusts me. How about I make him believe that I’m still loyal to the real ghost and get myself caught as the actual ghost by surrendering? That has to be the only way I can get away. If this is a bluff, then he definitely thought of two ways I would react. One, I would be shocked to hear about Elias from him, as*

*I don't know how he would know about that connection and that will confirm I'm the real ghost.*

*Two, I would surrender and claim to BE the ghost to make sure I defend the real ghost. The second one is very possible because he most probably thinks all of that crying and regret stuff was acting just to make sure I convey the fact that I do not work for the ghost anymore, and that's how the second one would prove that I'm only a decoy.*

*Genius plan, Ralph, but I can see through it!*

*I'm now going to gamble it all. If it really isn't a bluff, then I'm at the end of the story, but if it is, then I still have a chance to get away.*

All of these thoughts and reactions went through Lucian's head in a matter of seconds, 2 seconds to be exact. And even in these 2 seconds, he just lifted his head up and looked towards Ralph with tired eyes.

"I give up.", Lucian said, "I am the real ghost. Now, arrest me!"
Lucian seemed extremely tired.

"He did give up! And I didn't see any shock on his face either. Damn it! It was a plan all along! The ghost did set up this decoy for me to arrest this guy as the ghost", as Ralph thought, his disappointed face slowly turned to a smile.

"Don't worry. He wasn't talking about you, it's another Lucian, not Lucian Cole. We were just investigating different people.",Ralph explained, "I guess it's my time to leave now! Nicolo, you are going to stay here from now on, but before that I'll have to talk to you alone."

“Yeah, no problem. I’m coming.”, Nicolo said.

*Another Lucian? Not me? Yeah, it was obviously a bluff. Nicolo was being shocked with every hidden detail, but this time, he wasn’t. When the guy on the phone said that I’m the Ghost. It was all a setup afterall. I’m pretty sure that wasn’t even a phone call, it was just audio playing.*

Nicolo followed Ralph through the door as they went out of Lucian’s house and stood on the road, from where Lucian can’t hear them anymore.

Lucian was still sitting on the sofa.

“You did a great job acting for the plan we did!”, Ralph said to Nicolo.
“Thanks, sir! I’m just glad we have progressed somehow”, Nicolo smiled.
“Now, you’ll have to live with him, probably for a few days or a week or so.”, Ralph looked at the windows, seeing Lucian still sitting there.

“I’m down, sir.”, Nicolo said.

“Okay. Don’t forget to update me from time to time if you notice any minor inconvenience. Well, I’ll call you by myself too actually. Anyways, Bye!”, Ralph started walking towards the road, while Nicolo went towards Lucian’s home.

As Ralph was walking, he took out his phone and called someone.
“Hello, Mr.Loxley? We have something important to deal with now. Ready for it?”, Ralph asked with enthusiasm.

“Is it about the Ghost?”, the voice from the phone asked.

“Of Course it is!”, Ralph said.
“Then I’m coming. Tell me what is a task?”, he asked.

“We are going to Barlow Street tomorrow for investigation of this case, you’ll be coming with us to get more insider knowledge. You can do that right?”, Ralph asked.

“Of Course I can. That’s what I’m here for! Just inform me when it’s time!”, he said.

“Sure!”, Ralph cut the call, again looking at the sky..

# Chapter 14 - Theories & the Present

*Damn, that was way too close.And of Course that was just a bluff. I'll actually take a rest now, I'm way too deprived of sleep..*

"Hey, you okay?", Lucian was zoned out looking on the floor, he suddenly zoned in as Nicolo asked him.

"Huh?", Lucian looked at Nicolo, "Yeah, I'm fine."
"Sorry for the intense interrogation we did. I guess we put way too much pressure on you doing that", Nicolo smiled nervously.

Lucian's sleepy eyes widened a little and then he said, almost stuttering, "Why are you…sorry? You just did what you were supposed to do, you know."

*Oh right. He is being kind. How dumb am I to even be shocked by such a normal behaviour. I get it, it's just that it was never a normal behaviour for me.*

"I know but..nevermind. I just wanted to ask one thing, Mr.Cole, despite being so wealthy, why did you choose to work with 'The Ghost' for money?", Nicolo seemed genuinely curious as he sat beside Lucian.

"Good Question", Lucian started sliding his fingers through his own hair, "If I have to answer, I'll say that I was too detached from the world. There was no one I could share my inner self with, I never felt

like I was important to anyone either. So when I received an opportunity to work with someone as important as ‘The Ghost’, I felt like I could establish some kind of goal and importance in my life.”, Lucian stopped, his eyes closed.

Nicolo was still staring at Lucian, expecting something more than this incomplete and confusing answer.

“Yeah everything I said might sound illogical, but I just can’t express myself right now. You know, I’m tired and I want to sleep.”, Lucian released his head on the sofa.

“I can understand. Take your nap, but how about a cup of coffee? As I’ll be living here from now on, I might as well start it with a coffee, right? Want one?”, Nicolo smiled at Lucian after standing up.

Lucian’s quick response was, “Yes!”.

Just as Nicolo stood up and freed the space on the sofa, Lucian laid down his body on it.

A few minutes later, Nicolo came from another room, with two cups of coffee in his hands, only to find out that Lucian is deep in sleep already.

“Oh, he is already sleeping. Do I have the capacity for two cups? Maybe? Actually yes!”, Nicolo said to himself, “I did explore the whole house as Ralph told me to, and I did not find anything…other than that painting replica of course.”

Taking a sip, he continued, “I’m here to ensure that Mr.Cole doesn’t contact ‘The Ghost’ again. Means, Ralph obviously doesn’t trust him

fully yet, but then again, why would he?", Nicolo sighed, "Why did I even ask Mr.Cole that question, it's not like I'm fully pure either."
Nicolo was looking at his cup of coffee, he looked in front of him and saw Lucian taking a sip from his coffee.
"What?!", Nicolo got terrified, "W-When did you wake up?"

"Oh, me?", Lucian looked at Nicolo with his sleepy eyes again, "I just smelled the coffee and then……woke up."

"Okay…."

*Man, all of those preparations I did were definitely required, but ultimately useless. I literally called my other new phone everyday during the days of the heist in Eclipse, even talking to myself on calls to make sure that even if they somehow find records of those calls they'll find believable stuff. Well, Ralph didn't even ask for the number, let alone find the records…..*

22nd July,2023
Morning,

"So…Where are we going first?", Karl, a member of Ralph's investigation team, asked Ralph, while they were entering the Barlow Street area.

"Just where we should go first. The 1st house of this street, which belongs to Mr.Spears. We would go sequentially, investigating every house, which by the way, is in the amount of 23.", Ralph was explaining.

"23?!", Karl looked at Ralph with shock.

“Yes, you heard me right. Which means we have a long day of work in front of us.”, Ralph had his hands in his pockets, looking forward. They were full of energy today, as they had enough rest the previous day making sure they can take the pressure of work today. Both of them had sweaters on, as it was extremely cold now, opposite to their flame-ish eyes, looking for the success of their investigation.

“And what about Zeph? I mean Mr.Loxley.”, Karl asked, after a few seconds.

“Didn’t I tell you? Oh right, that was Nicolo. I sent Mr.Loxley to the first business associated apartment in this street. Which belongs to….Luther Kane. He’ll basically pose as a businessman that went there to sign a deal or something. He’ll ultimately not sign any deal but will get some info out of it. We’ll then investigate those apartments as a part of our normal investigation. But as we’ll have info beforehand, we can catch lies easily”, Ralph explained.

“Right, I understand. I don’t know why, but I’ve got a positive feeling about this. I think we are going to succeed in no time.”, Karl said, looking forward.

“You don’t have to understand why you’re getting this feeling, just celebrate that you got it!”, Ralph replied, finally coming in front of the first house on Barlow Street.

Zeph Loxley reached Luther’s apartment at the same time, which was the 14th residence of this street.
As he entered the apartment, he saw a lot of guests waiting in the guest room, possibly all for business deals.

Inside, Luther Kane was sitting on his chair, going through his computer, waiting for the 3 guests, which included Zeph Loxley, which is not the name he came here with.
Meanwhile, Elias was present in one of the rooms in Luther's apartment specially assigned for him. It was Saturday, so no work for him, as the Vespera Museum doesn't open on Saturdays and Sundays.

"I wonder what Luke did with the painting. It has been around a day since he last called me, I guess I should ask now. But then again, considering his skills, he should have found something by now. Is he planning something for himself again? I can't trust that guy fully yet, not after what happened to me when I did trust a guy.", Elias was talking to himself, walking around the room with his phone in his hand.

"No point in this. Let me call him.", Elias called Luke.

"Hello?", Lucian said.
"What's the progress? Tell me the details you found in the 16th piece.", Elias asked quickly.
"Well, let me be completely genuine with you. The 16th piece had no details nor clues about the people you are searching for.", Lucian's voice was heard through the phone.
"What? Are you kidding me right now?", Elias sounded disappointed, really disappointed.

"What is this guy up to now? Oh god why am I still so far from my goal?! How much more do I have to do? Is Luke really hiding those details from me now? Or is he actually telling the truth?", Elias had questions in his mind, which was immediately answered by Lucian in the next second.

“Of Course I’m not. Assuming the fact that you did tell me the truth and you, in fact, are looking for people to take revenge on, then I think the importance of this piece is not in itself, rather in the consequences that comes with it after someone steals them.”, Lucian expressed his mind this time.

“Look, you’ll have to trust me. Whatever I told was the truth, why would I lie about my dead wife?”, Elias took a long breath, “But you’ll have to give me all the info you have gathered, I’m requesting you at this point.”

“Really? Then why don’t you trust me fully yet? If you did, you would’ve told me the enemy’s name. But then again, why would someone trust a thief, right?”, Lucian asked expecting no answers.

“See, it’s just, you don’t need to know the name and stuff, you’ll just have to do what I told you, the rest is on me. If it fails, then I fail. You’ll not have a single thing to worry about. For now, explain to me about what you said.”, Elias sat on his bed.

“Right. So what I was saying is, you were most probably manipulated by someone. When you said that you accidentally got to know about this 16th piece, something came to my mind. I doubt that it was an accident. I think, someone intentionally slipped up that info to you, hoping that one day you’ll yourself or using someone else, go and steal that 16th piece, and then they’ll identify that the one who stole this piece must be Elias or someone connected to him, even though, confirming that takes a little luck, as it can be anyone. But I also doubt the fact that they’ll need you again. I think they predicted the fact that you’ll use someone to steal it, maybe even very specific someone, maybe even ME. So there’s a good chance that whoever this person

is you are going to take revenge on, is also after ME.”, Lucian ended his explanation.

“Y-You, how can you say all of this with so much confidence? Denying everything I experienced with such ease? But, if what you said is true, and they are also after ‘The Ghost’, then what are you going to do now?”, Elias asked.

“I don’t know. I guess I’m going to find more about where they live, completing my mission you gave me. It’s not like they are going to find me any time soon. I’m safe, I’m here for the mission, once it’s done, I’ll go back to my own routine.”, Lucian said.

Sounds came from the office Luther was sitting in, it seemed like the last businessman entered……

# Chapter 15 - Reliving Memories

“I’m Zeph Loxley, nice to meet you Mr.Kane.”, Zeph said.

“Nice to meet you too. Are you here to buy areas?”, Luther asked with a little smile.

“No. I’m rather here to buy some rooms for a certain amount of time. For that I’ll have to know how many rooms you have.”, Zeph said, sitting on the chair.

“Well, I have a total of 20 rooms, but only 7 of them are available right now.”, Luther said.

“Alright. Let me think about it.”, Zeph started looking at the papers he was holding all this time.

Zeph Loxley was a 52 years old citizen, currently working as an secret investigator at TGC, The Ghost Case.

“Okay. I thought about it. But I have some questions for you, which I need answers for, for me to sign this one. Have you ever worked with a millionaire, multimillionaire or very unlikely, a billionaire?”,  Zaph asked, still looking at those papers.

“Yes I have. Tick the millionaire and multimillionaire one. Do you need the names too?”, Luther asked, hoping to sell the deal.

“Yes, please. Name all those people you have ever partnered with. I’ll have to validate the history, in order to buy something from here.”, Zaph said.

“Well, saying Elias’s name shouldn’t be a problem, I mean I’ll have to stay legal to work on this, and his name alone wouldn’t be anything to worry about.”, Luther thought for a second.
“For millionaires, Bruno Walton & Celia Preston, for multi-millionaires, Elias Blackwood.”, Luther said, with a formal expression.

“Alright. Your rooms come with guards and TV’s right?”, Zeph asked.
“All of them do!”, Luther said.

“Excuse me, can I use the washroom for a minute?”, Zeph said, trying to stand up.
“Of Course. There it is.”, Luther pointed towards a washroom, which was just beside the office they were in.

As Luther pointed towards it, Zeph quickly went and entered it.

As Luther went back to the files he was arranging in his computer, Elias came out from the hallway, to the office and sat beside Luther.

“What happened Sir? Was something found in the painting? What did Luke say?”, Luther turned towards Elias and asked all of these in a serious manner.

“Well, what he said is really concerning considering the situation we are in now. He said I might have been manipulated by some people. He suspects that me hiring him and making him steal the 16th piece was all a part of the plan I’m going to take revenge on.”, Elias said to Luther, whispering.

“And what do you think about it? Can it be true?”, Luther asked while looking at his computer.
“At first I didn’t believe his theory. But then as I recalled my memories, I realized that it is very highly possible. I might have been manipulated. But to be very honest, I’m not that worried right now. The fact that I have such a skilled person working for me now really gives me hope.”, Elias said.

“Did you inform him about everything?”, Luther asked.

“Of Course not. There’s a reason behind it other than my mistrust. If I don’t tell him about everything, his natural curiosity will sparkle and he will find those damn people on his own, for his own self. Which lessens the chance of betrayal from him.”, Elias said.

“Well, that’s a really good way to see it, Sir.”, Luther said.

“Yeah. I might not believe him, but I do believe his skills.”, Elias said.

“Obviously! Anyone would believe his skills, he is ‘The Ghost’ afterall!””, Luther was going through his files, upon saying this he quickly realized that he had said ‘The Ghost’ aloud way too casually.

Elias got conquered with fear, while Luther quickly placed hands on his mouth.

“Hey! Didn’t I tell you not to mention that in here? No way!”, Elias whispered with a silent anger.
“I’m sorry Sir! I didn’t realize it!”, Luther said quickly, his deep voice highered.

“Okay, okay! There isn’t someone in here currently, right?”, Elias tried to calm himself down.
Luther became super anxious hearing this. “Yes there is. A business-man called Zeph Loxley is in the washroom right now. But I’m pretty sure he can’t hear us!”, Luther tried to assure.

“What the hell?! Why didn’t you warn me about that earlier? Where is he now?”, Elias’s whispers were progressively getting louder.

Luther’s head was turning towards the washroom while Elias was looking around the room and panicking simultaneously. Ultimately, both of their eyes landed on the person standing in front of the washroom, Zeph.

Both Zeph and Elias’s eyes scanned each other, widening both of their eyes. Both were stunned for a few moments. In those moments Elias felt something which he was driven by, hate!

Suddenly all of the surroundings around Elias changed, he saw blood all around the room. A lot of people were laughing and others, screaming. His wife, Evie was again being dragged around the floor, along with him. A blindfold on his eyes again, the difference was that he was able to see everything very clearly, despite his eyes being blindfolded.

He could see Zeph Loxley dragging him and Evie towards a certain room. All of those horrible memories were being relieved by Elias at this point.

“Elias. I wanted to live, they took away my dreams, my life. Can you feel it? I’m not dead, as long as you’re carrying my memories, I’m always with you. You are the best person ever, but, remember, they

took away my dreams…..”, Evie was standing in front of Elias, at the office, in those moments. Whether it was an illusion or not, Elias was feeling it all.

Suddenly he saw a person sitting beside him , it was Luther Kane. Seemed like he was back to the present. Just then his mouth screamed with anger, “Damn you Zeph!! You son of a b*tch!”, his hands went towards the drawer beneath Luther’s computer, and he took out a gun.

Luther was shocked to know that Elias might have known who Zeph was.

“Elias…Blackwood? I didn’t expect him to be present here at this moment. I’m gonna die, I’m gonna die. I guess this is the end. After all of those things I did, can I question if I deserve death or not?”, Zeph’s mind and body were separated at that point.

Zeph quickly started running and Elias started shooting bullets maddeningly. Luther tried to stop Elias but the flame in his eyes was enough for Luther to not.

“My assassin instincts! I’m running once again, I guess this is not the end then, I have more things to d…”, as soon as Zeph was about to finish his sentence, one of the bullets hit his head.

Everything around him slowed down for an instant, only for it to be sped up as he hit the glass windows.

“Catch him, Luther! He overheard our conversation!”, Elias shouted which echoed through the room.

Luther quickly reacted and went for Zeph, along with Elias.
Zeph ultimately fell from the 2nd floor, breaking the glass windows. As Elias and Luther reached the window, they saw that he fell on a running truck. Watching him survive made both Luther and Elias anxious.

“There’s no way we can let him live! Quickly arrange a car, Luther! We’ll have to catch him and kill him before he shares that info!”, Elias went downstairs, Luther behind him.

“What is it? Did something fell of or something?”, The driver of the truck asked the one sitting beside him.

“Let me check. What? There’s a wounded body up there, it fell from somewhere?!”, the other one quickly entered the truck’s storage and took Zeph inside it. As the truck was going, he said to the driver, “Seems like he is still alive, but bleeding heavily from his head!”

“What should we do then?!’, the driver asked.

“Let’s take him to the hospital, what was the nearest one? Oh yeah, Harris Vanholt Hospital! Let’s go there!”, he said.

“Shit, shit, shit! How did it mess up this bad!? If he tells anyone about this, my whole life is gonna be no better than useless!”, Elias felt tension which felt ancient to him.

Luther was trying to go as fast as he could, dodging the traffic. The truck was slowly going out of their sight, increasing their anxiety even more…..

# Chapter 16 - The Revelation

Approximately 5 minutes later, the truck reached its destination, The Harrison Vanholt Hospital. Zeph was quickly admitted by those drivers, while the doctor assigned to Zeph identified him real fast.

“I know him. I know his son even. His son was admitted here around 5 years ago..”, the doctor said, while performing his surgery.

“Doctor, how do you still remember him? Even after 5 years?”, the nurse working alongside asked.

“It’s just that, this man here, Zeph Loxley, once donated a huge amount of money to this hospital. That’s why I remember him and his son’s treatment.”, the doctor said, “Also, Gary Loxley is a famous artist now, haven’t you heard about him? He is the son I’m talking about.”

The nurse remained silent and passed the doctor some tools as the surgery ascended in difficulty.

Around 25 minutes later, the lights of the emergency room lit again as the doctor came out. He saw a young guy standing outside, with his head down, most probably waiting for the news to come, good or bad.

“Gary Loxley? So…”, the doctor approached Gary as he saw him.

Just after noticing the doctor, Gary quickly went towards him and cried out, “What happened doctor? How is my father now? Is he ok?”, Gary was grabbing the doctor’s shoulders.

“Gary, Gary. I know this is hard for you. But this was not entirely in our hands. We, I, am extremely sorry to inform you that your father has no way to live further…”, the doctor said, with regret in his voice.

Gary’s crying stopped, maybe his heart too. He just physically descended while holding the shoulders of the doctor.
All of a sudden, he composed himself and went inside the emergency room, without saying anything, to the doctor even.

He ran towards his almost dead father, who was now murmuring something to himself. Gary quickly sat on his knees and held the hands of his father, resting his head on his father’s cold body. The tears wet the floor beneath Gary a little bit.

“Dad…How did this happen? How did you come to this point? Tell me, please tell me. I will not let anyone related to this go without paying the price”, Gary’s voice becomes rougher through the weeping.

Zeph’s murmuring stopped as his eyes tried to locate Gary beside him.
A smile appeared on his face, barely noticeable.
“Listen my Son, I just have a little more time to talk to you. I’m gonna answer your questions, but promise me one thing…”, Zeph’s whispers were low, but the silence of the room made it easier for Gary to listen. The doctor was outside the room, still standing there.

“Dad, I’ll promise anything, but please tell me about the people who brought this situation down!”, Gary’s cries became louder.

“You might think someone tried to kill me, but in truth, I’m the one who brought this situation. Gary, please forgive me.”, Zeph was trying his best to convey his mind, “I once, was an assassin at a secret

organization, and I was ordered to kidnap Elias Blackwood and his wife Evie Blackwood. And I, shamelessly, did so. I kidnapped them and brought them to some monsters. And then….Elias's wife died. Rather, killed. I was such a bad person, I didn't even feel guilt over that, but then something struck me around 4 years ago, and I retired from that job and started a legal and honest one…", Zeph continued with some other sentences, while Gary's watery widened eyes were staring at his father.

"The guilt is still within me, I obviously deserve something worse than death, Elias spared me by giving me a simple death. But I still feel guilt, because my death is also affecting you…", Zeph started coughing through his words.

"Dad! Please don't leave me alone in this world again! Please! I have no one except you. I might sound selfish, but, don't leave me alone with those 10 years of hellish memories!", Gary cried, but his father wasn't responding anymore, the machine beside his father started beeping, and his heart rate became Zero.

Gary became completely silent, and then he stood up, leaving his dad's hands, forever. He had his hands on his eyes, which were most probably hiding the anger and regret his soul was raging with.

"Dad, remember this, I'm not letting anyone go! I don't care what your past might have been, I'm going to punish that damn Elias! And anyone else who wrote your destiny! You left me before I could ask you your last wish, but I'll assume it's to take revenge on that damn monster!", Gary was still composing himself, turning back to the door, he saw the doctor is gone now.

Gary's face had descended into darkness, same as his destiny. He had an unique mix of anger and devastating sadness on his face.

As Gary was leaving, he saw the doctor coming towards him.

"Hey, Gary, we'll send your father….father's body to the morgue. You can receive it from there. I'm sorry for your loss", he said.

Gary just stared at the doctor for some moments and then went away. As he was leaving the hospital in his four-wheeler, another car entered the parking area. Two men came out of it, one suited and another in informals.

Both of them ran inside the hospital, towards the emergency room. The doctor was just removing his gloves inside the room, when he saw those two men from inside.

He came outside and said, "Excuse me? What happened? Who are you?"

"I'm Luther Kane and he is Elias Blackwood.", Elias came in front after Luther mentioned him.

"Doctor! Was anyone named Zeph Loxley admitted here?", Elias asked rapidly.

"Yes he was. But now he is dead. But, sir, what are you doing here?", the doctor asked.

Hearing the fact that Zeph is dead relieved both of them. They let out their long sighs. The doctor still seemed confused about why they are here in the first place.

“But has anyone come here after he was admitted?”, Elias quickly regained composure and asked.

“Why? Is it important?”, the doctor replied.

“Yes it is! Now answer please!”, Elias asked again.

“Well, if you are insisting. Yes, his son Gary Loxley did come here to meet him in his last breaths.

“Sir, I don’t think Zeph could have exposed any information on his deathbed. It will be a waste of time to think of this any further.”, Luther suggested to Elias, after the doctor went away.

Elias was silent for a bit, most probably processing all those emotions inside his head. Then he responded, “Yes, you might be right. We shouldn’t think about this that much. But, if Gary Loxley does have any information, what could it be? I don’t care about him knowing about his father’s background at this point, but would he share the fact that I’m working with the ghost?”, Elias was kind of panicking again.

“I’m pretty sure Zeph didn’t have that much time to share everything. But it is a high possibility that he exposed the fact that you killed him, maybe his son asked that”, Luther replied.

“That’s what I was thinking as well. I’ll have to be way more cautious from now on. I might even have to kill Gary Loxley if it ever comes down to it.”, Elias said, “And for the ghost info, I’m pretty sure he has no proof of it if his father did tell him anything in the first place. So if any investigation ever happens, I’m safe I guess, Luke would give some idea for sure, after all this is also about his identity”

Elias and Luther went down the hospital hallway. And then hopped in their car.

Another car was going through the traffic, but significantly different, not from its looks, not from its speed either, or any external feature even. The driver of that car was Gary Loxley, he was releasing a dark aura that could be felt from outside the car.

The loneliness, the angerness, the roughness he was feeling at that point was not at all for the first time. His head was being struck at every second with the memories he never wanted to create.

The roadside, the people, he hated everything about it. Seemed like all of this hatred was returning from its source.

That day, Gary turned into a different human, almost a human.

22nd July, 2023
Evening,

*Have they investigated Gary now? His house is the 20th in the street, so I doubt it. If they truly investigate all of them, which I think they would, this is the time they would reach Gary.*

*I'll have to call him after the investigation to extract information from him about this investigation. I'm pretty sure he will not be arrested or anything, just because he is purely innocent.*

*I might as well extract some info from this guy, Nicolo. Which seems way easier than anything. But then again, they seem really dedicated as well. I would assume Ralph is the lead investigator, so I can't really hold back anything. I'll have to assume the worst, to achieve the best.*

*I might as well call Elias again, if he knows anything about this investigation, surely he will tell me something……*

# Chapter 17 - I Hate People!

?, 2013,
Morning,

“Sir, this is the only child left in here! Are you ready to sign the papers now?”

“Sure! But can you tell me why the boy is looking so sad and angry?”

“I guess it’s because of the days he has been through. He was a beggar on the street for around 5 years, you know how that type of life is, Sir. And then a demon of a man took him, made him do a lot of labour for the bare minimum of food. I don’t know about this child personally, I’m just retelling you the stuff he told me after he came here. He also knows English and has some basic education, well, I don’t know how.”, she said.

“Oh!”, Zeph said, looking at the child, “Don’t worry my boy, you’re gonna live fully happy from now on, I’ll provide you with everything you’ll ever need!”

Zeph gave that child a smile, in return he did too, which was a rare case pretty much.

“Here, Sir. Sign in and give this child a name! It’s yours to choose!”, the lady at the adoption center forwarded the papers.

Zeph started signing it, and when it came to the naming part, he started thinking, “What should I name him? Maybe the same name I thought of before?”
The lady was still waiting for him to write the name.

He finally wrote it down. “Gary!”

“What’s his age now, ma’am?”, Zeph asked while holding Gary’s hand. “Oh his age? It’s 10 years…yeah that’s it.”, she replied.

Zeph reached his home, with Gary. Gary seemed really happy, as this was the first time he had a house of his own, a room of his own. Roof on his head that is secured, and a person he can call dad.

“I’m happy now, as I have finally dropped that disgusting job. But..But my hands are still dirty, I can still see the blood of those people I never killed on my hands. I caused their death. I know I don’t deserve to be happy, but my kid does..”, Zeph was murmuring to himself while sitting on his bed, looking at Gary, while Gary was exploring the house with his sparkling eyes.

“Uncle! So am I going to sleep and eat here too from now on?”, Gary’s childish voice rose up.

Zeph giggled and smiled to Gary, “Not Uncle, Gary! Call me Dad from now on if you can.”, he then proceeded with, “And yes of course! This is your house from now on! You can do everything I can!”

Listening to this, Gary ran straight towards the bed and jumped on it, then closed his eyes, ultimately to sleep for 5 hours.

While Gary was deep in sleep, Zeph was burning some papers. He was in the garden, putting a lot of papers on fire.

“I can’t reveal their name, which I don’t think I would ever need to. Well I can burn all of the documents I received while working with them. I don’t even want to have anything related to them anymore, I’ll

also donate all of the money I made from there to charity, or maybe a hospital so I can save some people, for the deaths I've written for other people."

23rd July, 2023
Night,

Gary was alone in his house, as the other member is now gone. He was laying on his bed while reading a book. Not a book, but a diary. The diary was written by his father, and has been read by Gary many times before. But it didn't contain enough words for Gary to see the broader picture.

Now as he is reading it, he can fill the gaps of meaning the lack of information previously made. He always asked himself what all of this written in diary meant. But what was the cost?
He was still weeping all on his own.

Suddenly, a sound came from the door. He put down the diary slowly and approached it.

"Hey. Is this Gary Loxley's house?", the guy on the door asked upon opening it. There was another guy behind him, both in sweaters.

Gary was silent for a bit. Then after trying to compose himself, he said, "Yes, it is. I'm…Gary Loxley. But, who are you? And what do you want?"

"We'll tell you everything, but first what I want to say is, I'm sorry for your loss", Ralph said, sympathetically.

“But-But how do you know about my father’s death?”, Gary’s pale face was visible, his eyes widened.

“We are the secret investigators team, currently working for TGC, The Ghost Case. There are public investigations that happen often, but we are the hidden counterpart.”, Ralph continued, “And your father is-was a part of our team. We arrived in Barlow Street just today, and it’s unfortunate that this had to happen.”, Ralph conveyed regret.

“What’s that anger in his eyes? Did he somehow find the reason behind his father’s death? Or something else? Well if it’s the former one, then I HAVE to extract that info from him.”, Ralph quickly thought.

“My father w-was a secret investigator?”-Water started to gather in the corner of Gary’s eyes again, but he just welcomed them anyway. After sitting together, the investigation started.

“Look, Gary, I know these are hard times for you but I’ll have to continue the investigation no matter what!”, Ralph expressed.

Gary looked at Ralph, while he continued with, “My intuition says that ‘The Ghost’ is somehow related to this-to your father’s death”.

Just upon hearing this, an invisible flame ignited within Gary’s eyes.

“If you can help us with this investigation, it might lead to our mission’s success! I’m pretty sure your father, wherever he is now, would be really happy if this case gets solved, afterall that’s what he came here for!”, Ralph said.

Gary was still silent.
“Are you sure about this?”, Karl spoke up.

“I’m all sure about it. Wouldn’t his father’s sacrifice be a waste if we can’t even catch the ghost? I even suspect the ghost himself to be somehow connected with Zeph’s death. I’m sure Gary would want to avenge his father, as he should!”, Ralph said to Karl, but the words were clearly hearable to Gary.

Gary finally became ready to speak.
“Tell me what do you want to ask, Sir!”, Gary’s face was full of dedication, all visible.

“Just tell us what you know about your father’s death, that’s still a mystery to us. But, you, you mentioned your father before we even told you whose death we were talking about, which means you have been informed priorly.”, Ralph expressed his mind.

“You’re right”, Gary’s eyes were dry now, but he had fully composed himself, “I’ll tell you what my father told me, before he passed away.”

“You made the right decision. Please do.”, Ralph leaned towards Gary.

“So I was informed by a doctor that my father has been admitted to the Harrison Vanholt Hospital. I went there and found a glimpse of my almost dead father. He told me that he was an assassin in his early life, an assassin at a secret organization..”, as soon as Ralph heard the last words, his eyes widened.

“Secret Organization? What kinda organization? Did he tell you the name of it?”, Ralph asked quickly.

“N-No he didn’t.”, Gary was confused seeing Ralph’s sudden excitement.
“Tell me, what else did he tell you?”, Ralph continued.

“He also told me that as an assassin he was once ordered to kidnap Elias Blackwood and his wife Evie Blackwood, and he did. After he handed them over to the organization, they killed Evie Blackwood. And, and that is why that bastard, Elias, in the name of revenge, killed my father.”, Gary recalled the conversation, and told everything, while clenching his fists.

Gary was looking at the wall while telling all of these, he now looked at Ralph and saw a sparkling face, and his presence felt like a shocking twist, felt like a calculator calculating everything it knew from the very start.

“Organization? Was Zeph talking about O3? Hell yes he was. That’s the only thing it could be! So Zeph was a part of O3? I never knew that, none of the current members, not even Nicolo made me aware of that!”, Ralph was drawing pictures in his head, connecting the dots, maybe with right assumptions or even wrong ones.

“Now it all makes sense! My suspicion on Lucian Cole is now greater than ever! I really believed him fully and thought he was an actual decoy, how dumb was I?!

It was just a plan. He directed all of us, the investigation team, towards Barlow Street, most probably for two reasons! One, to extract information from Gary Loxley after this investigation ends. And the other one requires knowledge of O3, which Elias told him as he is the ghost!

He knew about the revenge plan and killing Zeph was the first step of Elias’s revenge, so Lucian helped him by directing us towards here, creating a chance for Zeph and Elias to meet! And for Elias to kill Zeph!

This theory is immensely possible and to me, it almost confirms that Lucian Cole IS the ghost! We are so close…", Ralph quickly reacted after thinking for some time,

"Gary, I've something to tell you, this might break you, but you deserve to know the truth, at least as the son of an investigator. I assume Zeph never told you about our missions, did he?", Ralph went on….

# Chapter 18 - Flame Ignited

“I assume Zeph never told you about our missions, did he?”, Ralph asked.

“N-No he didn’t, I didn’t even know that he was an investigator, I just told you that.”, Gary answered.

“You’re right. I have a question to ask then. What is your relation with Lucian Cole? A friend?”, Ralph leaned towards Gary more.

Gary was a little confused by this question.
“Yes. He is a friend. Very close one actually, he is one of the people I didn’t hate when I was a teen.”, Gary said in a cold voice.

“Hate? What do you mean by that, Mr.Loxley?”, now Karl asked.

Gary clenched his fists again, trying to say something. He initially hesitated but then spoke, “My childhood was bad, really bad. I was a beggar on the streets, I met horrible people who did horrible things to me. As they found an innocent child, they made me give hard labour for nothing. I hated people more than anything. The only person I was able to not hate for the first time was my dad. One of the others being, Lucian Cole, the one you asked about.”, Gary exposed his feelings, receiving potential hope.

Gary continued after a few seconds of silence, “Did I say unnecessary stuff?”

“No it’s okay. It’s very important for me to know about the people I’m investigating in depth. Everything you say is worth something.

Anyway, I'm sorry that you had to go through all of these..", Ralph hesitated to say the next words, but did anyway.

"I just have to tell you this. We investigated Harper Street previously, and so Lucian Cole was also investigated. From that investigation, we found that Lucian Cole, is a decoy of 'The Ghost'...", Ralph's latest words echoed through the room, and at last reached Gary's ears.

Gary's eyes widened like never before. He felt a wave of betrayal that went through his chest.
"How- how can he do that?", Gary asked himself, whisperingly, drowning in denial.

"I thought of him as my..as my best friend. But, he just turned out to be another traitor!", Gary continued his murmurings, barely hearable to the others.

Ralph continued, "Lucian was working with The Ghost all this time. Did you never suspect him? Even a little bit?"

Gary looked at Ralph, with both confusion and frustration, and finally screamed out.
"That guy, is a damn actor! I thought of him as my best friend! All these moments, all these memories, all of them were just an act huh? Just to convince me that he isn't working with 'The Ghost'? People are indeed horrible!", Gary's voice became rough, he continued.

"Lucian was working with the ghost! The one who is indirectly responsible for my father's death! I'll leave no one, absolutely no one. I'll find out everyone who is related to this, everyone!", Gary was bursting with anger.

“Calm down, Gary. This is not the time to be angry. I know this is extremely hard for you, but you have to think and do what’s best for now.”, Ralph suggested, with a soft voice, “Now, listen to me. I was thinking about the whole thing you told me, and I suspect that….”

Gary interrupted Ralph and spoke up, “That Lucian IS the ghost? Right?”
“What? How did you read my mind?”, Ralph became insanely curious.

“What do you think? That bastard betrayed me and all his friends just for some money! Who knows what else he might be doing?!”, Gary answered furiously.

Ralph understood those statements in a matter of a second.

“Well, you are not wrong at all. But what we deduced is that he just acted to be a decoy to protect himself. And you know what? He told us that the ghost is most probably in this street.”, Ralph took a breath.

“Do you see it now? He directed us towards this street, possibly for Elias and Zeph to meet. This is just my assumption, can be wrong. But whatever his goal was, ultimately, he is the one who indirectly killed your father, together with Elias Blackwood. You might want to know why, well it’s because Elias and ‘The Ghost’ IS working together.”, Ralph let his words be a weapon to ignite Gary.

“Tell me your plan, Ralph. I’ll do anything to bring them down, Elias and that damn traitor!”, Gary proactively said.

Ralph’s face became brighter while Karl was making his own decisions, maybe processing everything and piecing them together.

“Listen. I think, if his plan was a multi-layered one, he would call you and ask you about what we asked you during the investigation, possibly for more information to control the situation. If that is the case, then the call is coming in just a few minutes, as the average investigation time is almost over.”, Ralph was looking at Gary, explaining what he had in his mind.

Gary was listening carefully, his anger was compressed by himself, by pure dedication.

Ralph continued, “ I’ll have to go for the worst case, so I’ll assume that Elias has informed him about the possibility of you, meeting your father and extracting the knowledge of his past. So Lucian will also make his best move by deceiving us, while we try to deceive him.”

Gary was a little confused. But Ralph helped him by saying, “To put it simply, you’ll have to act like you know nothing about your father’s past and portray the fact that you reached the hospital after he was dead. And don’t mention anything about your father until Lucian himself mentions it. You know what this specific detail is for?”, Ralph asked expecting an analysis of his plan.

“Ahh…Info of my father’s death is not publicly available yet, so if he mentions it before I mention it, that would mean Elias Blackwood has told him that previously. And that proves that he is the ghost?”, Gary answered, trying his best.

“That’s right! You’re sharp! But if Lucian IS ‘The Ghost’ we are talking about, then this is way too much of a silly mistake to be made by him. As far as I know him, he is way too smart, smarter than most of us can imagine. And, we don’t even know if Elias has informed him yet. So I

have other portals for this plan. A 3 way plan, all of them ensures his exposition.
“And what are they?”, Gary asked, followed by a quieter voice of Karl.

5 minutes later,

*This is the time. I’ll have to somehow distract Nicolo and find a way to contact Gary.*

“Hey! I’m going to call my friend. I can, right?”, Lucian asked for permission, as he was told to.

Nicolo was half-laying on the other bed, opposite to Lucian’s. He was doing something on his phone, his legs hanging from the bed. Just after hearing Lucian’s words, he sat up and said, “Umm”, he started thinking.

Just a few minutes ago, Nicolo received some texts from Ralph. Which was - “Keep your phone to yourself. Don’t let anyone touch it and see these messages.”

And just a few seconds ago, another message appeared from Ralph, “If Lucian asks for permission to call his friend or Gary Loxley to be specific, just accept it and let him do it. Try to hesitate a bit before letting him though.”

Right then and there, Nicolo said, “ Yeah that’s fine. If it’s your friend, then you can do it. But you’ll have to talk in front of me.”

“Thanks I guess.”, Lucian reacted with a neutral face.

He called Gary and put the phone on his ear, looking away from Nicolo.

A few seconds later, Gary answered, “Hello? Lucian?”
“Yes, Gary? Did they investigate you?”, Lucian asked curiously.

“Who? That secret investigation team? TGC?”, Gary answered and questioned at the same time.

“Yes! That means they reached you! Bro I just can’t tell you how intense that was! They questioned me again and again! I don’t know why they were suspecting me so much! I figured out that they would be approaching you too! And Miles. And Dale!”

“You know what. It was the same for me.”, Gary’s voice wasn’t as exciting or anxious as Lucian’s, it was rather cold with a sprinkle of sadness. Even though Gary was suppressing it.

“What happened Gary? Did they do something to you? What happened ultimately?”, Lucian took a break and then continued while Gary was basically silent.

“Did they prove something or told you something? Come on tell me Gary, this is a dangerous allegation for us! Oh wait, unlike me, you have another family member. What about your father? What was his reaction to this investigation? Did they do something to him?...

# Chapter 19 - In the Middle of a Puzzle

Lucian's words penetrated Gary's ears like a sharp-bladed sword. He started weeping, unable to hold on anymore.

"My father….he is dead now!", Gary told Lucian while weeping, not showing any anger though.

Lucian's eyes widened as he heard the news, genuinely. He was also silent for a moment before saying, "How? How did something like that happen?". His voice was slowing down.

"I-I don't know. I just don't know.", Gary stopped his weeping, continuing with, "I reached the hospital when some people informed me about it. And the doctor told me that he was dead…", Gary stopped his weeping entirely.

*What? Am I missing something? How did his father end up being dead? It can be an accident, but….*
*What if this is somehow connected to Elias? Or something to do with this investigation itself? Doesn't matter for now, I'll just have to play along for now, fish for more info…*

"This is really bad", Lucian's voice sounded rough and low, with a looming weep. "Gary, I'm with you if you need me. I don't know how this happened, but I'm sure we'll find a way!", Lucian's voice became the most supportive and assuring voice ever heard.

"I know, Lucian", Gary hesitated a little bit, "I'm going to find each and everyone connected to my father's death. Don't worry."

“There we go, you are strong, I knew it! I’m really sorry this happened, and really sad too. I knew him personally, he was one of my closest uncles! But he’ll be really happy if we manage to overcome our current situation.”, Lucian took a break, “Now, tell me. What did they ask or tell you in that investigation?”

Gary took a long breath before saying, “What they told me? They asked me a lot of questions about 20th July. What was I doing that day before I entered the museum etc. And at last they told me that they suspect Miles Gray as the real ghost!”, Gary’s voice suddenly rose a little bit, “I have no idea why they would go after us like this. I tried to tell them that there’s no way Miles can do it! They just ignored it. But you know what, Lucian? I think I’m free of suspicion!”

“Why do you think that?”, Lucian asked curiously.

“That investigator, Ralph, shared his plan with me! Well, not with me, but he discussed his plan with the other investigator in front of me.”, Gary cleared his throat.

“Really? What were they discussing? Any plan to catch Miles?”, Lucian asked.

“Yes, exactly. I found it weird, like, why would they expose their plans to me? I realized, it’s most probably because I’m proven innocent somehow. They told me to not expose this plan to anyone, but this is about my friend! Miles! I have to tell you this, if it helps in any way.”, Gary said anxiously.

“You’re absolutely right! There’s no way Miles can do such a thing. We’ll have to do something. Tell me what they told you, Gary.”, Lucian’s voice became louder again.

“So Ralph said that there is an extremely valuable piece of information hidden in the 12th house of Harper Street. That house is of Ralph’’s brother. He suspects that Elias Blackwood is working with the ghost and his next target is that house. If Miles is the ghost, then he will try to steal that piece, however, that piece of information is protected by a locker with a password.

The password is something like 1 to 4 and 8 to 5, yeah. So basically the ghost will not be able to steal it quickly, and the investigation team will catch him in the process. The plan is not bad if you ask me, but them suspecting Miles is pointless.”, Gary explained all of Ralph’s plan with pauses in between. He himself sounded confused explaining it.

“So that’s their plan huh? I understand. Gary, take care of yourself right now, if you need something, tell me please. I know this is a hard time for you. But, I’ll have to spread the awareness to Miles this time. Bye!”, Lucian cut the call with a serious voice, after a few seconds.

Just after cutting the call, Lucian looked towards Nicolo and asked, “Can you tell me, why did you let me have a call with my Gary? Even though he has been investigated already? Wouldn’t that expose the secret info to me? The fact that you guys didn’t reveal to Gary about my previous alliance with the ghost?”

“I wondered this too”, Nicolo answered quietly, “But you are gonna be under my supervision all the time, you having this info doesn’t really mean anything. And I believe in Ralph, he wouldn’t be careless.”

“You are right. I’m pretty tired of this too. I hope Ralph’s suspicion over my other friend, Miles, gets off quickly. I don’t want them to be involved in this.”, Lucian sighed, while laying on his bed.

“I hope that too! I want peace. If this ensures that, I’ll more than happy”, Nicolo smiled a little.

*So Ralph has already taken Elias into the case fully. I knew it to be honest. The moment he mentioned Elias during my investigation sparked curiosity in me. Ralph does have connections that let him know about Elias’s past. Ralph, Elias, Nicolo and many other people around me know something I don’t. I’m still in the dark.*

*What about that plan Ralph exposed to Gary? Exposing the password to Gary?*
*Wait a minute, why would Ralph need to expose that much of a specific information to Gary?*

Lucian’s third eye opened as he drowned in thoughts.

*I’m pretty sure Ralph still suspects Gary. If he really does know about Elias’s next mission, then he knows that the ghost has to steal that piece from the 12th house on Harper Street, which requires a password no one except Ralph knows. From his perspective, if Gary is ‘The Ghost’, then he would use this password to steal that. Which would confirm that Gary is ‘The Ghost’ as he is the only one who knows the password.*

*This is a high possibility. Because there’s no way for Ralph to let any of us 4 friends go without traps!*

Lucian’s phone was put on silent, so as it rang, Lucian’s hand vibrated. He saw that Elias was calling him. In all these recent days, Lucian would never just put his phone on the bed or a flat surface, most of the time in his own hands, so no calls from Elias can be seen by Nicolo.

He quickly opened a messaging app and messaged Elias.

“Tell me everything here. I can’t talk to you on the phone because currently I’m in a public place.” - Lucian.

“I don’t know why I’m telling you this, but after thinking for a lot of time, I decided why not. This information might help you in some way.” - Elias.

“What is it?” - Lucian.

Elias was typing. After around 2 minutes, the message reached Lucian.

“Recently, a businessman called Zeph Loxley came to Luther’s apartment for business reasons. He overheard our conversation about the ghost and tried to run away. I quickly shot him with a gun and got him wounded. He somehow reached the hospital, and his son Gary Loxley went to meet him on his deathbed. It’s unlikely that Zeph exposed anything to Gary before death, because it was simply too late. But because it is a risk to your identity and my reputation, I’m informing you this. You might just do something about it.” - Elias.

Lucian’s eyes widened reading this, but just in his own mind. His face was just as neutral as it was before.

“Right. I’ll try to do something.” - Lucian.

*So Elias is the one who killed him?! That’s just….*
*And Gary might know the reason behind his father’s death?! I did see a possibility of this, but, is Gary someone like that? To fake reactions to fool me?*

Lucian was walking on a puzzle board full of disconnected puzzle pieces. His blindfold was tight till now, which was starting to loosen.

*Let's make a hypothesis. I'll have to assume that Gary does know about the truth and he just faked it in front of me. And the chances of this? Pretty high as I think of it now. His father was his heart, losing him would definitely drive him crazy, he was kind of a hot headed guy who would pick fights everywhere in the early days. So is he plotting some kind of revenge against me now?*

Lucian was reliving the conversation he just had with Gary.

*The way he was talking, I could feel it. It was way too detailed. And, and it seemed like a bait too. What if that password bait is against me and not Gary himself?...*

# Chapter 20 - Inescapable Trap

Nicolo closed his eyes on the second bed while Lucian was laying on the first one.

*It does seem like a bait designed to fool me. I'll have to think and find out all the way to the root of this. So let's assume Gary IS working with Ralph. Because, if this plan is made, then it can only be made by someone like Ralph, not Gary himself. That might also be the reason why Nicolo allowed me to talk with Gary in the first place.*

*Which means Gary intentionally leaked that password to me. And if I'm the ghost and I go after that piece, I'll HAVE to use that password and will get caught instantly. Because, the only person who knows the password other than Gary and Ralph, is ME. Yes, that's very clearly the reason Gary leaked it with so much accuracy and specific detailing.*

*In this world of lies and secrets, you can trust no one, absolutely no one, not even someone like Gary, who seemed innocent to me. There was a time I trusted a person so much that I lost the meaning of trust.*

Lucian closed his eyes.

*Knowing the kind of background Gary has, he has the right to suspect me under Ralph's guide. The fact that there's a possibility of Gary knowing the person behind his father's death gives me enough reason to plan for every possible outcome.*

*So, if Elias gives me my new mission, and I steal the piece, I'll get caught as I'm the only one with the password. But what will happen if I*

*just choose to ignore the mission? Ignoring even Elias. Ralph doesn't know about our deal and conditions, so from his perspective, I can just choose to ignore the deal.*

Lucian was overthinking, but nothing he thought was wrong.

*So far, the ghost hasn't ignored Elias's mission, that being the Eclipse Heist. If I choose to ignore it this time, Ralph will instantly know that I chose to dismiss the mission after deducing his trap. Which will increase his suspicion by almost a hundred percent, that I am 'The Ghost', as I'm the only one Gary exposed the password to.*

*So no matter what I do, steal the piece or not, I'l HAVE to put myself in Ralph's trap, that's how it is designed! Ralph really thought of everything this time and made a multi-dimensional trap. No matter what I do, I just can't escape it. Or that's what it seems like…*

*Well, for now, I'll just have to test the accuracy of the prediction Ralph made about Elias's mission. If he knows about Elias's connections with the ghost, then there's no doubt that he has the power to know more about him too.*

*But this time, did Ralph predict Elias's future actions or…..is going to drive it?*
*Only time can tell.*

Lucian put his mind into rest, switching off his brain to stop all the overthinking. Even though he was now in the middle of an inescapable trap, he instantly made himself relax, because all of his thoughts were merely imaginations. Nothing is confirmed till he actually gets a mission from Elias himself.

Around 4 minutes ago,

“So what did you decide? Would you tell him about it or not?”, Luther asked Elias, while resting his head on his hands, sitting on a chair.

“I think I should. I don’t know how this would help him progress towards my goal, but this isn’t really just about that.”, Elias replied in a quiet voice.

He was sitting on a sofa, inside Luther’s office.

Luther was kind of confused. He questioned with his eyebrows raised, “And what is that?”

“I think I should put more trust in Luke. If I keep hiding information from him, he will eventually get caught and maybe even jeopardize my plans. He is brilliant, who knows what he can do with the fact that I killed Zeph Loxley? He might even need that info.”, Elias was looking towards the broken window, then turned his head towards Luther.

“Is that really it? But you know right, that exposing that information to Luke might mean that he will expose you and get you into jail? I mean what’s stopping him? The only thing stopping him is the lack of information. Remember?”, Luther warned Elias, again.

“I know all of that. But to achieve great goals, I’ll have to take greater risks.”, Elias became silent, so did Luther.

After a few moments, Elias broke the silence by taking out his phone and saying, “I’m going to do it. I may as well say the other things.”

He started typing on the phone, sending messages to Luke.

“Should I also tell him about O3 now?”, Elias thought as his fingers stopped after typing some lines, “No-No. That might create a greater problem than I can realize.”

“Did you do it then?”, Luther asked.

“Yes, I did it. Let’s see what happens now.”, Elias stood up, going towards his room.

24th July, 2023,
Morning,

*Who is that? Oh, that’s Nicolo, he is standing in front of the? The coffee machine, right.*

Lucian was rubbing his eyes as he woke up.
“One for me too please.”, Lucian murmured.

“For sure!”, Nicolo replied.

Lucian checked his phone, and saw a few messages. He unlocked his phone to see that those are messages from Elias. It came yesterday, just a little bit before 12pm.

Lucian locked his apps and ultimately his phone, going to the bathroom.
Around 5 minutes later, he came out, fresh. Nicolo was sitting near the window, with a book in his hands and his phone and a cup of coffee beside him.

Lucian came towards his bed and saw his cup on another table. He quickly sat on his chair and picked up his phone while taking a sip from his cup.

He opened Elias's messages.

Elias - "Luke, I'm still messaging you, assuming that you are still in a public place. The thing I wanna say is, get ready for your next mission."

Elias - "You'll have to steal a piece of information that lies inside the 12th house on Harper Street. Don't ask me the reasons, just do what I say, and you'll be freed soon."

Lucian was amazed for a moment, drinking a lot of coffee in a single sip. His 8 hours of relaxing sleep came to an end, as his imaginations became true, painting a long road in front of him.

*So Ralph really predicted all of this. He knew that Elias is gonna give me this mission, and he made that 2 way trap based on this prediction. Something doesn't seem right for sure..*

*How can he make such a trap based on a mere assumption. This can't just be an assumption. While it is also true that Ralph seems to have connections that expose him to information about Elias's past and his motivation. So, I can't exactly say that this mission thing was somehow set up by Ralph himself.*

*The lack of information I have is really bugging me now. I still have many questions unanswered.*

Lucian took another sip, while putting his phone aside.

*What is Aria doing now? Is she doing okay there? If she is under Elias's control, then I doubt that she isn't okay.*

*He respects people that are good, or people that help him. The fact that he trusted me enough to reveal about his killing of Zeph suggests that I have gained trust. But should I reciprocate it though?*

23rd July,2023,
Night,

Gary ended his conversation with Lucian, and after that, he just held his phone in his hand, while looking down. Karl and Ralph were standing just in front of him.

Gary successfully completed his part of the plan.

"Good Job, Gary", Ralph said, standing, looking towards Gary.
"I promise I'll bring down 'The Ghost', respecting your father's legacy. And everyone involved", Ralph's assuring voice ignited Gary once again.

"Now, as I've set the trap, I'll have to proceed with the next step, acquiring the email…….

# Chapter 21 - I Should Trust

Gary was sitting on his bed, opposite Ralph and Karl, in his own room. His diary was still beside him, while Ralph was going through his phone, not his actually, rather Karl's.

"Where's Nicolo's number? I can't find it.", Ralph asked Karl when Karl was also looking at the screen. Ralph's phone was dead, it was placed on charging inside the room.

"I swear it was there. You are the one who told me the number once, it has to be here.", Karl answered, touching the screen himself to scroll further.

"You could've saved it with a name. Well, I guess not your fault.", Ralph sighed.

Just while scrolling, Karl suddenly stopped and started staring at a specific number on the screen.
"Here it is! This is the one!", Karl said to Ralph, clicking on the call button.

A few seconds later, Nicolo picked up the call.
"Hello, is this Nicolo?", Ralph asked consciously.
"Yes, Ralph it's me. What happened? Should I do something?", Nicolo instantly recognised Ralph's voice. He was laying on bed, but after receiving the call, he sat up.

"Yes Nicolo. I have a favour to ask. Well, to be frank it's not really a favour as it's gonna help for TGC.", Ralph was about to continue.

“Tell me whatever’s needed, I’ll do my best, Sir.”, Nicolo said, ensuring the success of the favour.

“Do you have the main email account of O3? I’ll need it for a specific part of my plan, a very important part actually.”, Ralph explained.

“The email account? I don’t have it, but I may request it.”, Nicolo answered.

“Right. You are not a high-ranking member, so it’s natural you wouldn’t have it. But you are…a trusted member, and an old one. So there’s a good chance they will accept your request. Please do.”, Ralph agreed to Nicolo’s approach.

“I’m asking them right now!”, Nicolo cut the call.

“Are you sure the plan is going to work? I mean, will you ultimately get the email?”, Karl asked Ralph.

“I'm hundred percent sure about it.”, Ralph told Karl with confidence, “Well, Gary, huge thanks to your consideration! We’re leaving now. I’m guaranteeing you the success of this case, and you’ll be able to avenge your father in no time.”

“Thanks.”, Gary spoke no further, and didn't move either, while Ralph and Karl left his house.

Just as they were walking down the road, Ralph’s phone rang again.
“Hello!”
“Hello? Nicolo? What happened, did they give you access?”, Ralph asked immediately.

“Yes! They did! I guess they understand our situation!”, Nicolo responded with energy, “I am sharing my screen, tell me whatever is needed.”

“Thanks! This was an essential part of my plan, please share it.”, Ralph showed some signs to Karl while talking on the phone, suggesting that he should sit on the roadside bench with him.

They both sat on the bench. The road was pretty much empty, no people, no cars, as it was an extremely cold night. They were not immune to it, but the thick sweaters helped somehow.

“Write everything I say.”, Ralph started muttering some words, and Nicolo started typing them on his phone, preparing the email.

The email was done in a few minutes, and it was then sent.
It made its way through the internet and reached someone, called Luther Kane.

A sudden notification popped up on the screen of Luther Kane’s main computer, in the office. He was about to shut it down, but something in him suddenly told him to read the email.

He opened it and read it. His eyes widened before even reading it, just by seeing the sender’s address.
“An email from O3? What should I do?! Should I accept this offer for myself? But I have heard that there’s a lot of consequences for this, I think I should rather redirect it Elias! He would be able to utilize this better!”

He quickly called Elias.

As soon as Elias laid his eyes on the email, he remembered his past memories, he had seen this email before.

“I-I never thought I would witness this email again. But here we are.”, Elias started reading the email carefully.

“Hello, this is O3. We kindly invite you to our association, as you’ll get a lot of freelancing jobs here, with a high salary. But to join it, you’ll have to do some things on your own. You’ll have to steal a piece of info hidden in the 12th house of Harper Street. That’s where our location is hidden. This is made to test your theft skills and intellect, also to maintain secrecy. A lot of fortune is waiting for you, we trust in you.” - the email.

“This is the chance! They were trying to lure Luther in their trap, but they don’t know that I’m with him this time.”, Elias became excited, finally finding a way towards his enemy.

“I know exactly what I have to do”, Elias quickly took out his phone and called Luke.

24th July, 2023,
Morning,

*Elias still didn’t tell me how he just found a reason to start this mission. It just can’t be out of nowhere.*

*Man, I’ll have to convince him now and….and extract everything from him.*

Lucian rested his head on his standing hands on the table. He was probably going through his memories and his predictions.

*The fact that he trusted me, even a little bit, is shocking.*
*Actually, I want to feel like what trust is, again.*
*I'm hundred percent sure Aria did that just to save me in some way, it is not a break of trust. I never trusted anyone in my life, except her. It just can't be all a waste.*

*But very honestly, I'll have to trust again. It's not just a want, but rather, a need too.*

*But what should I say to make him gain trust? The best way would be to reveal my identity to him, maybe some kind of video call.*
*But what if it backfires? Well, that's the point of trust.*

*I need to have no plan B or anything further. I'll have to gamble it all. If he truly is what he presents himself as, then I succeed in gaining his trust. But if all of this is really just an act, then I get caught and my life gets destroyed.*

*To do this, I'll have to take risks. I can't have backup plans and tell, that I trust him.*

Lucian started looking at Nicolo, while Nicolo was gone in the depths of the book he was reading.

*I'll have to get rid of this guy somehow. He looks easy to trick, he actually is.*

*I can't get away with talking to Elias anymore. I'll have to find some time without any supervision.*

"Hey! Want some pancakes? I'm going to the kitchen to cook some.", Lucian stood up and threw his voice towards Nicolo.

“Pancakes? Why not, I actually love them. Thanks, Mr.Cole!”, Nicolo smiled and answered.

Lucian quickly prepared some pancakes and served it, both on his and Nicolo’s table.

Nicolo took a bite of the pancake, and was amazed by the taste of it. “You’re an amazing cook Mr.Cole! I didn’t expect this!”

“Thanks, have more if you want”, Lucian started eating his meal too.

Lucian was staring out of the window for some minutes, he then turned his head around and looked towards Nicolo, he was sleeping with his head and hands on his table.

*I guess the sleeping pills worked real quick….*

# Chapter 22 - Master of Deception

Lucian was staring at Nicolo's sleeping body while typing something on his phone simultaneously.

"I'm going to put on an act, don't be confused. I'll be saying and asking stuff. Respond just how you would naturally, I'll be saying things in a way to confuse my surrounding people. Just listen and respond. And the most important thing, don't show this conversation to anyone, not even to Luther! And also, don't speak when we go on video calling mode" - the message from Lucian, to Elias.

"Video Calling?", Elias was online, he read the message in a matter of seconds, he didn't reply though, most probably because of the suddenness of the situation Luke created.

Lucian quickly called Elias, having the sound of his phone on a very low level. Elias received it.
Lucian's eyes quickly wettened. He started weeping even.
"Mom! Today you'll have to tell me about everything! You are going through your pain all on your own! It is not fair!", as soon as Lucian's weeping voice hit Elias, he was confused, really confused.

"He said he'll act, so I'll assume he is replacing my name with…with Mom I guess? So is this about my pain? Is he talking about my enemies? He was always curious about it anyways.", Elias thought but didn't respond, trying to understand the current one-sided conversation.

"Listen Mom, I know you are doing this for my sake, or maybe not. But don't hide anything from me. I want to trust you. For the first time, I'll

have to trust. So please, tell me about your goals, what are you exactly wanting to do?", Luke asked.

"Luke, are you asking about my enemies?", Elias finally responded. "Yes", Lucian said.

"I have something to tell as well. I agree with you, I want to trust you as well, in fact I have already started taking steps towards that. If you really want to trust me….", Elias stopped mid-sentence.

"I get it. You want me to tell you about myself in order to do that, right Mom?", Lucian said, stopping his weeps.

"That is what I was thinking. Having Aria as a hostage would have been enough, but….", Elias was hesitating a bit.

"Don't worry Mom, I get it. I'm also willing to do this. I want to see you too, I'm video calling you, then you can see me, to see that I'm fully fine.", Lucian clicked on the video call option.

Elias's hands were shaking, as he was the first one ever to see what the Ghost looks like, probably the first one. Everything was happening way too suddenly for Elias.

Elias's eyes widened and his face was full of shock as he witnessed Lucian Cole on his mobile screen.

"Wha-what?! Th-This is 'The Ghost'?!", Elias was speechless, as he was supposed to be. After all this time, he finally witnessed the face of the person the world knows as the Ghost!

“Lucian Cole?! The famous artist, is also the ghost who steals art? How can this be?!”, Elias couldn’t speak, because he was not allowed to, as the call was now on a video call mode, the speaker was on loud, and Elias had to stay silent for that bit.

Lucian was smiling at the screen, smiling for his Mom.
“See Mom? I’m fine. Now tell me about yourself, your problems!”, just after this he quickly turned off the speaker and video, going for normal calling.

“B-But, why did you do this? You know right, I can r-reveal your identity at any moment?”, Elias stuttered, out of confusion and excitement.

“I know that very well. It’s because I chose to trust you.” - Lucian’s words echoed inside Elias’s brain.

He became silent for a moment, just physically silent, as his head was full of questions that were already answered.

“Why would he unnecessarily reveal this much info to me? Who am I? A random person who has his partner as hostage? Why? Why me?”, a second thought crossed Elias’s mind just then, “What if this is a fake? If he is just fooling me?”

Elias spoke up again, “What if this video call you just did was a fake? How can I believe that this was you, still?”

Lucian smiled a little and said, “Mom, if you don’t want to trust me, then it’s alright. But know this, I trust you fully, and whatever I say, is the truth!”

“He is right. I have given him nothing that can make him trust me, but still he has lost a lot of things because of me. I have his partner as hostage, and now his identity as well, considering it is true. No! I’ll have to believe it, afterall he has nothing to gain in this situation. He deserves to know the truth.”, Elias was deep in his thoughts.

“Look Mom. I don’t care about myself, this is also about you. Remember those days father was in pain?”, as soon as Lucian pronounced those words, Elias understood what Lucian was talking about. Despite not knowing anything about Elias’s wife’s death, except its persistence, Lucian still hit the spot Elias was weak at.

“Lucian Cole, Luke, you can believe me. I’m telling you about everything, everything about my goal, in text right?”, Elias finally spoke the words Lucian was waiting for.

“Yes, thanks Mom. I guess I’ll have to cut the call now. Some investigators suspected me for The Ghost Case, and I found a way to talk with you in secret, don’t worry Mom, we’ll talk again”, Lucian immediately cut the call, and stared at the screen of his phone, with a bittersweet emotion in his eyes.

Lucian then laid on his bed, his hands behind his head.

<u>15 minutes ago,</u>

Lucian went to the kitchen, to prepare the pancakes.
*Where are the sleeping pills, I’m pretty sure it was in one of these cabinets.*
His hands went for the 3rd cabinet. He opened it and took a small glass bottle full of sleeping pills, in fact it was written on the bottle itself.

Just after he placed the bottle on the table, he ‘accidently’ dropped the bottle. And it created a loud sound, loud enough to reach Nicolo’s ears in the room beside.

The story of Nicolo’s book broke as soon as he heard a loud sound coming from the kitchen, “What was that sound?”

He quickly remembered something from his own experience. Once Ralph told him, “Don’t eat anything that Lucian or any other suspect makes with their own hands. Never.”

Nicolo tip-toed his way to the door of the kitchen and took a peek. He saw Lucian sitting on the floor facing the opposite side, so he was unable to see Nicolo behind him, or that’s what it seemed like.

There was a small mirror in front of Lucian on the kitchen wall which helped him see Nicolo behind him, but he just acted the way he should.

Nicolo was shocked to see the ‘sleeping pills’ bottle in Lucian’s hands. “Ralph was right then! And here I was trusting Mr.Cole, how stupid am I?”, Nicolo quickly went back to his position in his chair in the other room.

“I guess I should follow Ralph’s suggestions now. I’ll have to act like I didn’t see anything. This will reveal what Mr.Cole is trying to do.”, Nicolo thought.

After around 3 minutes, Lucian came with the pancakes.

Lucian started eating his portion while looking out his window, giving Nicolo the chance to do something with his pancakes, other than eating them of course.

Nicolo quickly put on of the pancakes in the dustbin beside him, and said, “These are delicious Mr.Cole!”

Lucian turned his head to Nicolo and responded with thanks.

He turned again to the window. Upon looking towards Nicolo again after around 5 minutes, he saw him sleeping.

*He is now in my hands. He truly is just like how I predicted. He’ll now act like this for some time, showing me that he is sleeping. He expects me to reveal something in front of him, thinking that he is asleep.*

*But, I have planned even further, let’s see.*

Current time,

*That was all perfect.*

*Nicolo will now sympathize with me after I manipulate him further into thinking that I have a deceased mother with family problems. completed two tasks by one approach. I won both Nicolo and Elias’s trust. Though it’s different with Elias.*

*Now I’ll just have to wait for the results, and Elias’s messages…..*

# Chapter 23 - Prison

“He was talking to his…mother? But then why did he feel the need to put me to sleep? Should I wake up now?”, Nicolo slightly opened one of his eyes. As his face was covered with his hands, his opened eye was not noticeable.

He looked at Lucian and saw him lying on the bed.

“I need to ask him things right now. I’ll have to wake up and finally use the weapon I have with me! If he is capable of doing this, then I have to be careful. I need to know about his family, and his mother.”, Nicolo’s hand went towards his pant’s pocket, which was located behind Lucian’s view of Nicolo.

Lucian’s body shook as soon as he heard Nicolo’s loud voice. He sat up and saw Nicolo standing, with a gun in his hands, pointing towards him.

“You-You are not asleep? How?!”, Lucian said in a confused voice, loud yet quiet.

“I saw you mixing those sleeping pills. I was just acting to sleep, I heard your conversation with your mother. Now, tell me what’s going on, why did you want to make me fall asleep?”, Nicolo shouted.

Lucian was silent for a bit. He bent his head towards the floor, not making eye contact with Nicolo.

*A gun? Right, it's obvious someone like him would have one. But he is way too kind to ever pull that trigger. Besides, he has no reason to do so now. But that means, he is considering me as a threat now. Not a problem.*

"Look, I needed to do that..", Lucian said. Then he looked at Nicolo, with a sorrowful expression on his face.

Nicolo instantly put down his gun and came closer to Lucian.
"Tell me why.", Nicolo spoke softly.

"M-My mom has a heavy fever. And there is no one to look after her", Lucian paused, half-closing his eyes, "And my father, he is no longer alive."

Nicolo sat down, beside Lucian. "I'm sorry, I didn't know that."

"No it's okay. After all, I'm the one who gave you those pills.", Lucian turned his head towards Nicolo, "And you ask why? It's because I didn't want the investigators to involve my mother in this case. If you guys get to know about my mother, who knows, you might even drag her into this."

"OH, that's right. How didn't I understand this simple fact.", Nicolo thought
"I'm sorry for your condition, I understand it. But, you could've just said to me that you wanted to talk to your mother. I would've allowed you.", Nicolo told Lucian.

Lucian went silent again. Nicolo broke the silence by saying, "I understand. How can you trust me? I shouldn't expect that."
"Please don't tell this to anyone in your group, I mean TGC."

“I won’t”, Nicolo said, “I know how it feels to have a single family member, and how it feels when you can’t even contact them normally. I too had only my father…”

“Thank you so much.”, Lucian smiled slightly.

Suddenly Nicolo’s phone rang. He quickly received it. It was from Ralph.

“Anything happened so far? Have you noticed any inconvenience?”, Ralph asked rapidly.

“N-No Sir!”, Nicolo went away from Lucian, to the corner of the room, where his conversation with Ralph couldn’t be heard.

“Really? Something should’ve happened.”, Ralph sighed, mostly from frustration, “Are you sure, Nicolo? Nothing happened? You noticed nothing extraordinary?”

“I didn’t. I’m telling the truth.”, Nicolo spoke quickly.

“What happened? Why is he suddenly bringing ‘truth’? He is obviously hiding something. But why would he?”, Ralph was creating questions in his mind.

“Nicolo. I can feel you are hiding something. Don’t do it. I don't know what is forcing you to do so. But I’ll find it anyway. So please, reveal everything you know.”, Ralph said with a calm voice.

Nicolo left a small breath and said, “Lucian Cole tried to dose me with sleeping pills and use that as a chance to talk with his mother. But, I

saw it beforehand and acted. I heard his conversation with his mother.”, Nicolo was going to continue, but was interrupted by Ralph.

“He talked with his mother?”, Ralph questioned slowly.

“Yes. But don’t worry, it has nothing to do with us. His mother is really sick and he has no other fami-”, Nicolo was going to explain but was interrupted by Ralph again.

“Nicolo! Be right there and take away Lucian’s phone from him. Don’t allow him to use the phone anymore! I’m coming there soon!”, Ralph immediately cut the call, leaving Nicolo a little stressed.

Lucian had his phone in his hands. His contact ‘Mom’ was still typing something in the messenger app. He had been deleting his previous texts all this time, so it was a fresh chat.

*Damn. How long is Elias taking to write the message? And what is he even typing?*

Lucian took his eyes away from his phone and saw that Nicolo was slowly coming towards him.

He quickly created another contact named ‘Mom 2’ and changed the number of ‘Mom’.

“Mr.Cole, Ralph ordered me to not allow you to use the phone anymore. I’m sorry, but I’ll have to follow that order.”, Nicolo said.

“So, did you really tell him about my mother and the things you heard?”, Lucian asked, while raising his hands, trying to give away the phone.

“I didn’t. He just ordered me, that’s all.”, Nicolo said with a smile, “I know you might want to use the phone, but believe me, I’ll return it soon. We might even get you out of our suspicion list soon.”

“I’ll be very glad.”, as soon as he uttered those words, the doorbell rang.

“Oh someone has come.”, Lucian was about to stand up but Nicolo instantly said, “I’ll open it.”, and went through the hallway to the door.

Lucian heard footsteps. Footsteps of two people.

*So Ralph IS coming now. Which means this guy told him everything, or most probably something at least. Ralph already suspected the fact that I might be trying to call someone that is not my Mom. Which is also why he is not allowing me my phone now, as he thinks I might be planning something together with Elias, or someone.*

*I thought Nicolo really wouldn’t reveal anything. But guess what, he did. Still not a problem.*

Ralph entered Lucian’s room, together with Nicolo.
“Lucian! Long time no see!”, Ralph went towards Lucian, while Lucian had shock on his face.

“Why-Why are you here? Am I proved not guilty now?”, Lucian stood up immediately.

“I wish I could say that. But you are not yet. I’ll have to stay with you here, for sometime, in order to prove you innocent. I promise, this is the last time you’ll see us.”, Ralph assured Lucian.

“I understand. If this will prove that I’m innocent, then I have no problem doing this.”, Lucian looked at Ralph’s eyes, only seeing dedication.

*He understood my motives. Even after he layed a dual trap, he still needs more security. He truly knows what ‘The Ghost’ might be capable of.*

“If my intuition is correct, then there’s no way Lucian Cole would be able to do anything anymore. He has no way to contact anyone. If the piece doesn’t get stolen, it is basically confirmed that he is the ghost. If my trap wasn’t enough, he will have to deal with this now too. Let’s see, what happens”, Ralph closed his eyes while thinking.

1 minute later,

“I sent him everything. Let’s see how he can use this information.”, Elias was sitting on his rotating chair, while he just ended typing a whole paragraph.

He sent it to Lucian but it was not seen yet, more surprisingly, not even delivered.

“Why isn’t it delivered? Did he really turn off his internet at this moment? Or is he in some kind of trouble again?”, Elias was thinking while rotating himself along with the chair.

“Did I take the right decision by trusting him?”, Elias questioned himself.

“He showed me his face, his partner was taken hostage by me, he should be vulnerable enough to not betray me. No, no why am I questioning stuff again? I should truly trust!”, Elias closed his eyes.

“But investigators? What kind of investigators was Luk-Lucian wa talking about?”, Elias stopped his rotation as something struck his mind.

“W-What if Zeph Loxley is somehow connected to him? I mean if he truly is Lucian Cole, then his friend would be Gary Loxley, whose father is Zeph. Did his death affect Lucian somehow?”

# Chapter 24 - The Fallen Genius

Ralph, Nicolo and Lucian all were sitting inside Lucian's living room. Lucian was watching TV while sitting on his sofa, on mute. While Ralph was explaining security systems to Nicolo, on another sofa, just a little far away from Lucian.

Amidst the explaining, Ralph turned towards Lucian and said, "Lucian, for some amount of time, you're not allowed to leave our sight. Wherever you go, I'll have to be with you."

Lucian looked towards Ralph and said, "What? Everywhere? Even to the bathroom?"

Ralph answered, "I mean we will stand outside the bathroom of course, but even then we should be at least allowed to hear the sounds, who knows, you might be using secret phones or something."

"That's weird", Lucian looked towards the TV again.

"I know it is. But this is what it means to be under surveillance. I'm sorry, but we'll just have to do this.", Ralph insisted.

"I get it. No problem. I'm willing to prove my innocence. I'm tired of all this too.", Lucian said in a soft voice.

"See? Now you should revise all of this yourself and understand the system better.", Ralph ended his explanation and gave the laptop to Nicolo.

He then just stared at Lucian. Possibly zoned out. As he realized he was zoned out, he closed his eyes for a few seconds.

?, 2013,

“Man, this is so tiring. I should take a little nap for now.”, a kid was sitting at his studying table. He closed his book and stood up. But some footsteps were coming from outside.

The door opened.

“Ivan? What are you doing? Didn’t you just sit to study? And you’re already done?”, his mother said in a rough tone after opening the door.

“U-Um Mom I’m tired.”, Ivan’s voice got nervous.

“What are you talking about? Your father and I invested so much money in your special studies for you to just rest all day?”, his Mom was standing still.

Ivan was silent for a bit, the same as his mother. Then he just went back to his studying table and opened the book again.

“Look Ivan, you’re exceptional and you should know it. You should not waste your life trying to live like normal people, people like us.”, his Mom finally moved and went back to the door, closing the door to go out while saying, “Imagine the amount of money you can make if you study hard and reach your full potential, Ivan”.

“I understand”, Ivan muttered words, while holding the book tightly.

“Can I come inside?”, a girl’s voice was heard from the door after a few minutes.Unlike the previous time, it wasn’t his mother.
“Yes, you can.”, Ivan said looking at the door.

“Ivan! Want to play chess again? I really liked it. The last time we played it was literally 2 days ago!” It was his sister.

Ivan smiled at his sister and said, “We’ll play for sure! Bring the board! Let’s see who is the better player!”

His sister quickly went outside and brought the chess board and immediately sat on the floor. Ivan did too.

5 minutes later, a little scream was heard from Ivan’s room.
“Hey hey, shhh. Come on, don’t scream now.”, Ivan said as his sister screamed out of frustration.
“Why are you always winning? When will I win?!”, his sister finally stopped shouting and said in a childish manner.

“You’ll win next time. Promise!”, Ivan’s sentence started fading as he quickly started looking around, trying to hear something.

The footsteps. They were hearable again.

“No!”, Ivan muttered to himself.

As soon as the door opened, a wooden piece of kitchen equipment came flying from it and hit Ivan on the face. It hit him so hard that he started bleeding a little from the corner of his right eye.

Ivan quickly held that bleeding area and started weeping in pain.

“You piece of shit! Didn’t I just tell you to study? You and your trash sister!”, a scary figure threw words at them, that looked like their Mom.

“Mom I-I just played one match-”, Ivan tried to explain.

His Mom didn’t try to hear anything and just went towards Ivan. She hit his sister hard enough to throw her out of that area.
After that she just started slapping Ivan on his face repeatedly, ignoring his bleeding.

After a few seconds, she finally started talking.
“Don’t you know about our financial condition?! We were in a situation where we couldn’t even eat 3 times a day. And then you were born! You were declared a Genius by your school teachers and…”

As her slappings became weaker, Ivan finally got a chance to speak, “Mom! I know all of that already! You’ve repeated that already hundreds of times! I’m just tired!”, Ivan shouted clearly.

His mom suddenly stopped and stood up from her half-sitting position. “You know huh? And you still do this, right? There’s no point in being tired. Your scholarships are the best thing that happened to us, and you? You are just wasting those? What are we wasting our money then? Food, clothes. What are they for?”, his Mom was interrupted by Ivan as he said, “But Mom-”

“Just shut the hell up. I’m going to tell your father about what you are saying. Right, I’ll do that.”, her rough voice became rougher as she rushed out of the room.

Ivan's sister was sitting in the corner of the room, with her hands and legs compressed. Her hidden face had sadness and grief all over it, but no fear though, as if this kind of situation was pretty normal for her.

Ivan was heavily hurt, physically. His hands were still on his eye's corner, and he came with that, towards his sister.

"Sister, look, you're not trash. Okay? You don't need to be special to be good, is that alright? These people? I thought about it repeatedly, and I don't wanna think of them as our parents. They are just-", Ivan stopped and stood up. He went towards his books.

As he was reading those books, the pages were getting wet.

In the other room, a masculine voice could be heard.
"See? He is just not listening to me.", Ivan's mom said to his father.

"What do you mean not listening? Do you know what we are talking about?", he took a break and continued, "Ivan's sister! She is no use to us. It's a great fortune to have an academic prodigy as our son! Don't you remember how poor we were? This is a chance to change our fortune! And you're saying he isn't listening?!", his father raised his voice a little.

He drank a whole glass of pure alcohol.

"Why don't you try it then? He isn't listening to me!", his Mom raised her voice too.

"Is that it? Right I'll do it.", he prepared another glass.
And drank it too.

Current time,

Now that I remember those times, no, that specific day, I feel relief that I ended it all. I was 14 and my sister was 10 back then. Even though she is not with me now and I'm still working under someone, not freely, it's still better than my 'Family'.

That day, my drunk father came into my room and beat me almost to death, or at least that's what I remember. I tried to protect my sister from him and quite well succeeded. I remember it clearly, the way he broke the glass bottle on my head…

And my Mom? She was just standing behind, probably enjoying the show. I realized quickly in life that not all people deserve to be parents. My parents just saw me as a tool for their fortune and my sister as just a liability.

I graduated through High School at the age of 10. I was considered a prodigy. What happens when a prodigy is born in a poor family?
Yes.

?,2018,

Ivan had a knife in his hands. Full of blood. And there were two bodies beside him.

"Come on. Let's go, sister! We'll move to another city! I can do it! A better future for us!", Ivan said as he forwarded his hands towards his sister.

His sister said nothing and just let Ivan hold her hands.

?,2020,

After around 2 years of hard work, I'm finally a detective, professionally. And my alias is, Ralph. And my sister? She is living in her own house now. And she has her lover too! Well that's what she told me.

I'm so glad that I killed my 'Parents' and moved to Clorida. It's one of the best cities in this country. It's better than Domes, the city I was born in.

Current time,

I had to withstand another 5 years in that house full of abuse before I could finally be ready to kill them. It was necessary…

At Gary Loxley's house,

Gary was scrolling through a bunch of messages on his phones, and after reading a bunch of them, his jaws clenched as he said, "I'll have to take things in my own hands now…..

# Chapter 25 - Fighter

Gary quickly put on a black mask on his face, which covered everything except his eyes. He quickly went out of his house in his four-wheeler with his phone fit in it.

He was going forward the road while having his eyes on this mobile screen. It seemed like he was viewing some kind of map, not a live one. He was following the map in order to reach the destination marked on it.

He finally made it to Barlow Street, which took him around 2-3 minutes.

He finally reached his destination, Luther's apartment.
There were two guards in front of it, with guns in their hands.

Suddenly a flying knife came from somewhere and stabbed one of the guards in the hands, making him release his gun from his hands. He fell down on the floor, with a silent scream, holding his bleeding hands.

The other guard was shocked and his hands started shaking witnessing the scene. He composed himself and started looking around himself, trying to figure out where that knife came from. He was pointing his gun everywhere around him.

"Bastards", a cold voice came from somewhere and a kick hit the guard from behind. The force was too much for him to handle, he fell on his head, but quickly faced back and tried to see who did it. He saw a person in a black mask with a knife in his hands.

The guard quickly fired a shot from his gun, but that masked man just vanished in front of him. He was so fast that the guard couldn't even process what happened until a punch hit his face and made him unconscious.

"I guess killing you guys is no use.", Gary said before trying to enter Luther's apartment.

As he was about to enter, he whispered to himself, "I didn't actually think I'd be able to knock out these guys. The karate classes were useful after all. I thought there was no use of being one of the only black belts in Clorida."

Just as he finished his whispers, he felt something touching his head from behind. The pressure was strong on his head.
He understood that it's a gun. He quickly surrendered by raising both of his hands and turned around to see who it was.

Gary saw two men, both of them were masked. Kind of the same as he was.

"Take your mask off. Quick!", the one holding the gun on Gary's head ordered.

"What's that voice? I-It sounds familiar somehow? Whose voice is that?", Gary thought as he was trying to remember what that voice was like.

"Can't you hear? Take that mask off.", the other one also pointed his gun towards Gary and went a little far away from Gary.

“I was thinking of kicking both of them in the legs at the same time. But it seems like that was predictable.”, Gary took a few more seconds to think.

“Should I do it myself then-”, just as the first one was about to complete his sentence, Gary quickly hit his left leg with maximum force, which made him fall. But while falling, he got turned towards the other person holding a gun and instinctively shot him on the head.

The person just fell on the ground, releasing a flood of blood, ultimately dying.

“W-What did I do?”, his hands were shaking. His left leg was injured to the point where he could move anymore.

Gary was standing still.

“I can’t kill this guy! Ralph ordered me to take him alive! Bu-But if I don’t kill him, he will for sure!”, his whole body was shaking as he was half-laying on the ground, pointing the gun towards Gary.

“I’ll just have to do this.”, Gary said before jumping on him and punching him unconscious, taking his gun.

“I don’t know how to use a gun, but let’s see.”, Gary went inside Luther’s apartment.

As he entered the office, which is in the front of the apartment, he found no one. The whole office was empty.

“Should I go now? Yes, he seems confused, if I do it right now, I might be able to tie him up!”, Luther was hiding behind the drawer-table, in front of his chair.

As Gary was about to move forward, a scream came from nowhere and he saw a person coming towards him with full energy.
It was Luther Kane, he had some marbles in his hand which he then scrambled on the floor and went towards Gary, but then just crossed him.

Gary tried to turn towards Luther and run towards him, but the marbles ultimately made him slip and fall. But when he was falling on the floor, he quickly took out his knife from his pocket and threw it towards Luther.

They both fell on the floor at the same time. That flying knife stabbed Luther in his right hand, making him fall. While Gary’s head hit hard on the floor, his body laid above those marbles.

“Was I able to kill him with that knife?”, Gary’s eyes were getting closed, his head started to hurt a lot.
He continued murmuring, “No. That was not Elias Blackwood! It was, it was Luther Kane!”, Gary started breathing heavily.

As his eyes were in the last moments of being open, he saw someone who made him energetic instantly. Gary was about to scream out loud just when his nose and mouth was covered by a piece of cloth.

Gary went to deep sleep in just a few moments.

“Done! Now let’s take the next steps.”, Elias stood up and took the cloth from Gary’s face.

“Are you okay Luther? I mean, you don’t seem like so.”, Elias went towards Luther. He was still sitting on the floor while holding his stabbed hand.

“Agh. It hurts a lot.”, Luther said while breathing intensely.

“Don’t worry. I called a worker from here, he is coming right now to treat you.”, Elias quickly went towards Gary again and picked him up partially, with both of his hands. Then he placed Gary on a sofa in the corner of the room.

“Where is his phone?”, Elias was searching inside Gary’s pockets.

As soon as he searched in the pant’s pockets, he found Gary’s phone, which was locked.

He quickly took out the phone and sat beside Gary’s unconscious body, on the sofa. At first, he took out a plastic with white substance on it from his own pocket and then took Gary’s thumb and forced it onto the plastic.

Then he forced his own thumb onto the plastic, having Gary’s thumbprint on him. Which allowed him to unlock the phone. Luckily, no time was wasted going through the other fingers.

He started going through the apps and finally landed on the messaging app. He saw that someone had sent a document to Gary previously, which was also the first and latest message from that number.

“Is this the one he was talking about?”, Elias clicked on the document and it had a lot of things written in it. And at the end of the paragraph there was a picture of a map.

“A map?”, Elias saw that the map had a cross on it, which was pointing to Luther's apartment.

“I get it now. He sent Gary the map so he could come here. And the texts written here? I think those are the ones for me.”, Elias started reading the paragraph.
A worker came with some bandages and medicine. He started treating Luther by putting bandages on his wound, after taking out the knife carefully.

“How skilled was this guy anyway? I checked the cameras and saw that he single handedly knocked down two of my guards. And..and there were other two unknown people who came there with guns, to catch him? I don’t know about that, but this guy defeated them too. Actually even killed one of them indirectly! Damn.”, Luther was speaking to himself as he was getting treated.

<u>At Lucian’s house,</u>

Lucian stretched his hands and said, “Damn, that was a good movie. Thanks Ralph! For letting me use your phone……

# Chapter 26 - Epilogue?

Around 20 Minutes ago,

Lucian had his phone in his hands. His contact ‘Mom’ was still typing something in the messenger app. He had been deleting his previous texts all this time, so it was a fresh chat.

*Damn. How long is Elias taking to write the message? And what is he even typing?*

In the corner of the room, Nicolo was talking with Ralph on his phone.

“So he was talking with his mother? Nicolo! Be right there and take away Lucian’s phone from him. Don’t allow him to use the phone anymore! I’m coming there soon!”, Ralph immediately cut the call, leaving Nicolo a little stressed, as Nicolo ended the conversation with, “You are coming here?!”

*What did he say? Ralph is coming here?!*
Lucian quickly went to his ‘Mom’ contact’s messages and typed - “Moving to plan B!”. Elias was still typing. But after a few seconds, his typing stopped completely.

Lucian then tried calling Elias, but it said, ‘the person is out of signal zone’.

“So I was right! He again found a way to talk with someone! Possibly Elias Blackwood! I feel so relieved now as I made my plans earlier.”,

Ralph was thinking as he went out of the building, on his way to Lucian's house.

"I knew it! Lucian would definitely find a way to contact Elias even after being under surveillance, that's how clever he is! I sent Karl and Zach in order to disable all the signals around Elias's house. Karl is a heavily skilled technician after all!", Ralph took a cab.

"But. Even then I'm late. Lucian already had his conversation. But I'm pretty sure he couldn't reveal much info to Elias or capture info from him, while being under surveillance. Karl just said that he has already disabled the signal, which means Lucian can't communicate with that area anymore. Perfect!", Ralph reached Lucian's house.

*Elias isn't typing anymore, and his phone is out of signal now? Is this Ralph's doing? It definitely is! Because Elias isn't the type of person who would slow down just because his phone's network isn't working. He would've tried other networks, other phones even! Yet he hasn't done any of that.*

*Which means all the networks in that area are disabled. This can't just be a coincidence!*

*But that would mean Ralph has sent some kind of special people there who are able to do this, which also means Ralph suspected that I'll be able to contact Elias even after Nicolo is here.*

*I have to execute the other plan, it seems.*

Lucian quickly created another contact named 'Mom 2' and changed the number of 'Mom'.

*This is the moment I'll have to use that document I made earlier for my backup plan!*

He quickly created a new contact and put Gary Loxley's number in it. He quite literally can remember a lot of phone numbers at the same time.

He then quickly sent Gary the premade document he had, but only after editing it a little bit.

Lucian took his eyes away from his phone and saw that Nicolo was slowly coming towards him.

*Damn I'll have to be quick!*

Lucian deleted Gary Loxley's chat. And then Nicolo said, "Mr.Cole, Ralph ordered me to not allow you to use the phone anymore. I'm sorry, but I'll have to follow that order."

"So, did you really tell him about my mother and the things you heard?", Lucian asked, while raising his hands, trying to give away the phone.

"I didn't. He just ordered me, that's all.", Nicolo said with a smile, "I know you might want to use the phone, but believe me, I'll return it soon. We might even get you out of our suspicion list soon."

"I'll be very glad.", as soon as he uttered those words, the doorbell rang.

<u>Around 15 minutes ago,</u>

*I scheduled that message, so it will be delivered to Gary after 7 minutes, and 5 of it has already passed, and Ralph is already here.*

*In these remaining two minutes, I'll have to perform the next step towards my plan.*

Nicolo and Ralph were sitting on the sofa, just a little far from Lucian. Lucian was watching TV, sitting on another sofa.

"Hey, Ralph! Can I make a request?", Lucian asked Ralph, after looking at him.

"What kind of?", Ralph was explaining security systems to Nicolo on his laptop, after hearing Lucian he looked at him.

"Since you guys have restricted me from using my phone, can I use yours? My TV doesn't have an innate internet connection so it needs a device to cast. I have a movie unfinished right now and I want to complete it, can I use your phone to cast?", Lucian requested, forwarding his hand.

"What is he trying to do? Is he somehow trying to disable my phone in some way? Maybe he is trying to drain my phone's battery so I'll miss some kind of call or message? Does he already suspect that I sent my people to Elias's house?", Ralph was trying to figure out Lucian's motivations.

"But why would he need to disable MY phone? I mean, Nicolo is right here, and my Karl can just call him right? Even though Karl can't call or message us right now because all the signals in that area is disabled. Except one!

But from Lucian's perspective, he would think that just because Nicolo is here with him all the time, Nicolo will not be able to contact the people I sent there. That's exactly why he is targeting my phone only!”

“But does he know that the signal around Elias's house has been disabled? He seems so chill even now, which might mean greater trouble for me. Knowing him, he most probably has sent his own people to Elias’s house in order to communicate with him.

I bet he also knows about the signal disabling somehow and that I can't talk with my people normally, but that would also mean he will also consider walkie talkies, which is what we are actually using!”

“Doesn’t matter if he has deduced this much or not. The fact that Karl can contact us through Nicolo’s walkie talkie means we’ll get every information. So even if Lucian sends his people there, Karl would be able to tell us their identities.

I told him not to hurt any people if Lucian sends them, just discover their identities and capture them and tell me their identities. So it would be even easier for us to locate the ghost!

And TGC’s identity wouldn’t be exposed either, because I told Karl and Zach to wear masks this time!”, Ralph was zoned out, living in his own universe.

“Soooo, no…or yes?”, Lucian asked again.

“Yeah, you can use it. But tell me the movie you are talking about and I’ll cast it for you.”, Ralph said to Lucian.

“Okay”, Lucian told Ralph a movie name. Ralph found it and casted it to Lucian’s TV. Then he went to the last parts of the movie just as Lucian requested.

“I did everything he requested. But he doesn’t even know that he is achieving nothing with this! Let’s see if he does something unusual.”, Ralph thought as he put his phone on his lap.

He went back to explaining to Nicolo.

*Now it’s all set. My TV always turns on ‘Do Not Disturb’ on the device that is connected for casting. Which means, while I’m watching this movie’s remaining part, no call can reach Ralph!*

*The fact that Ralph gave me his phone even after thinking, means he wasn’t able to guess my plan.*

<u>At Gary Loxley’s House,</u>

2 minutes passed and the scheduled message finally reached Gary. And after another 2 minutes, Gary read it.

“What?! Who is this number? And the document they sent?!”, Gary was shocked to see what he had been sent.

“Is this true?! What should I do? Should I go there myself?”, Gary was panicking and confused at the same time. He then thought, “I should call Ralph! That will confirm if this is true or not!”

Gary quickly called Ralph from the number he was given by Ralph himself.

He tried to call more than three times, but everytime, it kept saying ‘Person can’t pick up the call’.

Gary stood still for some moments before saying to himself, ““I’ll have to take things in my own hands now…..

# Chapter 27 - The Ghost

“Plan B? Right, Lucian told me his backup plan this morning. That was before he revealed his face to me. Well then, I’ll have to prepare now.”, Elias was in his room in Luther’s apartment.
Meanwhile, the Vespera Museum was being handled by Dorian Vanholt, as Elias took a break from it.

“He mentioned that in case he cannot get in touch with me through his phone, he will have someone deliver a message on that person's phone, even though that person will arrive here unaware of this fact, I will have to knock him down and read that message.”, Elias was recalling all the details Lucian told him about his Plan B, as he was walking down the hallway, trying to reach Luther.

While trying to recall the exact conversation, Elias remembered another line, “The person I’m gonna be sending, don’t hurt him or try to kill him or anything. Just neutralize him and that’s all.”

“At that time I didn’t understand what that meant. But now, after knowing that Luke is Lucian Cole and finding out that the person he sent was Gary Loxley, it all makes sense. It seems like, even the ‘Ghost’ cares for his friends.”, Elias entered Luther’s office and said, “Now it’s time Luther. Get ready!”

Current time,

“A lot of text it seems. If this was sent to Gary in order to drive him here, it means that the message written for him is on the surface, but

for me, it is hidden in some way inside this document.”, Elias was carefully reading the doc.

It was exactly this way -
“this is elias blackwood typing. i Hire A lot of Expert assassins often, but this time, i did it to kidnap ralph and the other members of tgc. we found this number on his phone, and he requests you to come here because you hold critical information. come here and we might find an Alternative to end this. We are no Thief, just gangsters. come here Instantly.”

The next para said -
“wear masks if you value your life. until you enter our apartment. map is given below.”

“So that is how Lucian provoked Gary to come here? He wrote this in a mysterious way, so it doesn’t sound over-explained, which reduces suspicion to an average person! But what could be the message for me?”, Elias was finding patterns.

“I see. It’s not that hard. All of the words here follow a specific pattern, except some. And those exceptions are the words I’ll have to use to form the sentence.”, Elias was piecing together the message.

“Why hasn't Karl or Zach said anything to me or Nicolo yet? Does that mean everything I assumed was wrong and Lucian did nothing?”, Ralph was feeling uneasy all of a sudden, as he was staring at Lucian.

Lucian was preparing to take a nap on his sofa. He ultimately fell on the sofa and closed his eyes.

“How is he so chill? This makes me question my entire investigation! No no! My intuition can’t be this wrong, there is surely something going on!”, Ralph was drowning in thoughts just as Nicolo interrupted it.

“Ralph, are you listening?”, Nicolo said again.

“Oh. Yes, I’m listening.”, Ralph zoned in as he looked towards Nicolo.

“I already tried speaking to Zach and Karl multiple times, but none of them spoke anything!”, Nicolo informed Ralph.

“What?!”, Ralph's eyes widened instantly, as if it confirmed some kind of doubt rising in his mind.

“Why wouldn't they respond? D-Don’t tell me someone overpowered them or something!”, Ralph instantly stood up in hurry, “Nicolo! Stay right here! I’m going to Barlow Street! Keep informing me about everything!”

Ralph flew away from Lucian's house, again booking a cab.

In about 7 minutes, Ralph reached Luther’s apartment in his cab. As soon as he opened the car’s door, he saw no one in front of the main door, not even guards, which he saw many times before.

He slammed the cab door, shutting it up and running towards the main door. He quickly made his way to the main office, where Luther was sitting.

Ralph opened that door with a slam too. He was breathing in and out intensely. Luther saw him composing himself, fixing his hair and his shirt, and then coming towards Luther.

He sat on the chair and started the conversation with an instant question, “So Mr.Kane, why aren't there any guards at your door today? I see them everytime I pass this road.”

“I would answer, but who are you?”, Luther questioned instead.

“I’m a secret investigator, so sorry I can’t tell you much about me. But please answer me.”, Ralph insisted.

“Fine, I would. So just around 15 minutes, I was checking the camera, and I saw a masked guy come and fight with my armed guards. And surprisingly, he beat them! Empty handed! Then another two unknown masked and armed guys came and fought with that guy. And you know what? That guy beat those two as well! Then he made his way in here and then, I don’t know why, maybe he was injured, he fell on the floor on his own.”, Luther explained the story.

“That’s strange for sure. By the way, what’s that bandage all over your right hand?”, Ralph said, looking at Luther’s hand.

“Oh yeah I forgot another thing! After he fell on the floor, he gained consciousness again and suddenly stabbed me on my left hand, I was extremely hurt but I managed to neutralize him using a cloth infused in chloroform.”, Luther explained the remaining part of the ‘story’.

“Can I see that person?”, Ralph asked Luther.

“Sure. You can. There! All of them are laid there on the mattress.”, Luther pointed towards a temporary bed placed in the corner of the office.

Ralph just stood up and walked towards the bed. He saw 4 people laying there, unconscious. He recognised two of them, Gary Loxley and Karl.

“Wait, what?!”, Ralph quickly turned towards Luther and asked, “Who was this intruder you were talking about then? The one taking down everyone?”

“Umm. That 3rd one!”, Luther said, but just then a person from the doorside said, “That’s Gary Loxley, Luther! I’m shocked that you don’t know him.”

Elias Blackwood entered the office.

Ralph started looking at Elias and didn’t stop until Elias spoke again after a handful of seconds, “Who are you? May I ask?”

“He is a secret investigator, that’s what he said. Maybe he knows something about this intruder and those two unknown masked guys as well?”, Luther looked towards Elias and answered.

“Wait”, Ralph said aloud, “Where is the second unknown guy you are talking about?!”, Ralph was talking about Zach.

Luther became silent for a moment, so did Elias.

“Tell me! Where did he go then? If the first person is here, then where is he?”, Ralph’s voice became slower.

“H-H-He is dead. Amidst the fight, he died from a bullet. So we sent his body to the morgue. His family would be notified if he has any.”, Luther talked with a low voice.

“H-How could something like this happen. Gary Loxley out of nowhere came here and killed Zach?”, Ralph sat on the mattress too.
“It’s all my fault! If I didn’t have told Karl and Zach to wear masks, then Gary would’ve identified them, as he had seen Karl before, and he wouldn’t have hurted them, nor the vice-versa! It’s all my fault!”, Ralph was fighting with his own self, “No no, I can’t break down yet. What has happened can’t be undone, I’ll have to find the remaining clues. Like, like what drove Gary here? I told him a thousand times to not take irrational decisions against Elias, yet he did? No. There’s for sure something behind it!”

“Where is Gary Loxley’s phone?!”, Ralph asked aloud, reaching both Elias and Luther’s ears.

“It’s most probably in his pocket!”, Luther said, “I saw it glow one time.”

Ralph quickly saw the phone and picked it up from Gary’s pocket. He opened it through the password Gary had told him before.
He went through the phone calls and messages. He ultimately found nothing suspicious.

He then picked out his laptop from his backpack and connected Gary’s mobile to his laptop through a cable. He pressed some buttons and kept staring at the laptop screen for about 45 minutes. Initially Luther and Elias were looking at him, but then just grew out of it.

“Finally it’s rooted now. No phone calls or messages? I have another way to find out inconsistency.”, Ralph thought as he went to the

screentime section of the phone, he found out that the screen time of the document viewer app for today is literally 10 minutes. He checked the screen time of when it was 1 hour ago, and he found out that it was 9 minutes. And rewinding it to 1 hour and 5 minutes ago, he saw it was 0.

“This means, Gary started seeing the document application around 65 minutes ago and kept using it for another 5 minutes or so. Which can imply that he was watching some kind of map, which drove him in here.”, Ralph was solving puzzles in his own mind.

“Mr.Kane, can you tell me the exact time when he entered your office?”, Ralph asked looking at Luther, while Elias was sitting on his chair, looking at his computer.

Luther nodded and looked at his computer, checking the security cameras.
“I can’t lie about this. This is specifically recorded information!”, Luther thought before answering, “It was exactly 59 minutes ago.”

Ralph’s eyes widened barely as he thought, “This means even after he fought his last fight and became unconscious, his phone was still being used!”, Ralph quickly checked the phone’s screen timeout duration, and it was only 5 seconds, “If Gary entered his last fight with his phone in his pocket 59 minutes ago, there’s no way for its screen to be still turned on for another 2 minutes! Which means someone opened the phone later! But it wasn’t Gary, because he was unconscious by then!”

Ralph quickly thought, “She told me that I can not include Elias Blackwood in this investigation, at least not directly. But I was also told that if necessary, I can watch over him or investigate him for a

maximum of one day!" and spoke, "Elias Blackwood! I'll have to place surveillance in here, watching over Luther Kane and you. And the surveillance is….myself!"

"I thought so. Whenever investigators come, they always put up this kind of surveillance!", Luther looked at Ralph.
"I have no problem. This is my rented office and room only, so I don't have much to say.", Elias replied in the same way.

Around 1 hour later,

Ralph was still sitting in the same spot, while Luther and Elias were sitting on the same chairs, doing their own job.

"These four people haven't woken up yet, but I'm sure they will, and once Karl does, I'll ask him to enable the signals here again. But only after this Elias investigation is over! Nicolo said he is completely watching Lucian all the time as well. There's no way Elias or Lucian can escape it this time!", Ralph was thinking, but his thoughts broke as his walkie talkie made a sound, he put it on his ears and heard Nicolo.

After hearing Nicolo's news, Ralph became devastated.
"What did Nicolo tell? Lucian is right in his house with no connection to the outside world, and Elias here? Is in the same condition. Yet, the information piece from Harper Street's 12th house has been stolen……

# Chapter 28 - Escaped

Around 2 hours ago,

The text in the document in Gary's phone was exactly like this -

"this is elias blackwood typing. i Hire A lot of Expert assassins often, but this time, i did it to kidnap ralph and the other members of tgc. we found this number on his phone, and he requests you to come here because you hold critical information. come here and we might find an Alternative to end this. We are no Thief, just gangsters. come here Instantly.
wear masks if you value your life. until you enter our apartment. map is given below"

"All the words here start with small letters, except some. If I add those words together in order to form a sentence, it would be, Hire-a-expert-alternative-thief-instantly.", Elias quickly joined the pieces.

"Why is that?", Elias was a bit confused, "Well, he did tell me that he was under some kind of investigation", he was recalling his conversation with Lucian on the phone.

"I hope this would not create some kind of trouble.", Elias closed his eyes, "He says instantly. But that means I'll have to find another expert quickly! How am I supposed to do that?", Elias sighed.

"But he trusted me with this, I-I'll just have to", Elias went towards Luther and immediately asked, "Can you hire another thief?"

Luther at first seemed a little confused, but then answered immediately, “I can. I’m better at these connections than you might think!”, he turned towards his computer and started talking while hovering the mouse-pointer on the screen, “I actually have a list of contacts in here, categorized by their professions. If I now go to the thief section, I’ll be able to see all those contacts. This, is the best thief in Clorida.”, Luther pointed towards the first position on the list, that first position was named ‘V’.

“What do you mean the best thief? The best thief is literally working with us right now.”, Elias looked towards the screen and said.

“You’re right. You can say, the second best maybe? You know what’s more impressive? No one even knows his name, he doesn’t even have a famous name such as The Ghost, because most of his thefts were unnoticed!”, Luther looked towards Elias, preparing to say something more.

“Done. Contact him and hire him, quickly!”, Elias insisted.

Luther copied the contact email and quickly sent a hiring message to that thief. In the email, he emphasized the fact that the thief needs to start the theft immediately, and Luther mentioned a huge amount of money too, which ensured that he doesn’t have any doubts or demands left.

Elias saw the whole process and asked Luther, “Luther, this is not your first time working with someone like me, is it?”

“Well. Obviously not.”, Luther answered casually. He then saw his camera monitors and saw a man coming towards his apartment rapidly, after leaving a cab.

Elias looked there too.

“Luther, quickly delete everything you did to hire him, from your side. Make sure there is no evidence of anything suspicious! I’m going to delete stuff from my phone too, oh, and Gary Loxley’s phone as well.”, Elias started panicking a bit and started tapping on his phone, while Luther also started deleting his emails.

Current time,

“I-I just can’t. I can’t do this anymore! No matter what I do I just can’t gather any proof.”, Ralph had both of his hands on his head, sweeping through his hair, while he was looking at the floor, thinking through the probable next steps.

“After all, what she said WAS true. Investigating Elias Blackwood more than necessary, or in short more than 1 day, would mean problems. If we force Elias to break ties with ‘The Ghost’ in any way, our only clues and manipulation source would be gone. I’ll have to make sure Elias still contacts the Ghost somehow, so I’ll be able to catch the ghost’s whereabouts! Even if I catch Elias Blackwood doing illegal tasks, it wouldn't be of any benefit to me, as my mission is to catch the Ghost!”, Ralph quickly looked at Elias and said aloud, “For a part of my investigation, I’ll have to look at your computers for a minute, can I do that?”

At first, Elias and Luther looked at Ralph and after a few seconds, they decided to leave the chairs, welcoming Ralph there.

5 minutes later,

Ralph was again sitting on his mattress, Elias and Luther were back to their positions in front of their computers.

“And just as I expected, I found nothing. But should I accuse or question Elias right now? I shouldn’t, as it will only make him more cautious.”, Ralph looked towards Karl, as he was awake by now.

“Karl. Do you remember everything now?”, Ralph asked Karl with a serious attitude.

Karl was trying to remember what he did recently,
“I can only remember some incidents. I disabled the signals here, right?”

“You’re right. But what I want you to do now is reconnect all the signals here.”, Ralph ordered.

Karl just nodded, not saying anything further. Then he stood up and went towards his backpack, which was laying on the mattress.
He then picked a strange looking device from it and pressed a button on it.

“Done.”, Karl said with a tired voice.

But then the device suddenly fell from his hands as his eyes widened, “WH-Where is Zach?”, his hands got on his head and he whispered to himself, “I-I killed him!”, then he just sat on the mattress, trying to remember what happened.

Meanwhile, Ralph was spraying some water on Gary’s face, and it was working. He woke up instantly, after some sprays.

Gary's body instinctively started moving on its own, most probably trying to fight an invisible enemy.

"Hey hey Gary, come down. It's me, Ralph. Open your eyes!", Ralph tried to make Gary conscious.

Gary finally sat up and looked at Ralph, he instantly started looking for someone, and just as his eyes laid on Elias, he started panicking.
Gary started speaking gibberish and screamed out loud, ramming towards Elias, as he was sitting on his chair.

Gary went towards Elias with immense speed, Ralph went behind him, trying to stop him.

Luther also stood up in an instant, "What should I do? If Gary hits him even one time he is done for!"

Just as Gary was in front of Elias, preparing to throw a punch on him, something suddenly stopped him. He all of a sudden couldn't breathe properly.

Ralph also stopped right there, "Di-did he just catch Gary with one hand?"

Elias was holding Gary's neck with his left hand, so tightly that it stopped all the force he gathered from the distance. Gary was about to throw a punch but his hands surrendered and went towards his own neck to push away Elias's hand.

Elias quickly realized something and released Gary's neck from his hand, making Gary fall on the floor instantly.
Gary started coughing out, feeling pain on his neck.

Without wasting another second, Ralph quickly went towards Gary and started patting his back.

“Gary, are you okay?”, Ralph asked Gary, then looked towards Elias.

Elias was looking at Gary with a nervous look.
“I-It was self defence, I saw what he did with those guards, I-I didn’t want to end up like them.”, Elias tried to explain.

“No no. Don’t worry, I’m not blaming you.”, Ralph assured Elias, then looked back at Gary and said, “Gary, I told you to not take irrational decisions. Please calm yourself, we’ll do something. But first, tell me something.”

Gary was still coughing a little, but he understood the situation and became calmer.
Suddenly Ralph’s phone rang.

“Hello? Nicolo? What happened?”, Ralph asked after receiving the call.

“Ralph! I just called the owner of the 12th house on Harper Street, and he informed me of something valuable!”, Nicolo said rapidly.

Nicolo was in a different room than Lucian, as Ralph already told him not to let Lucian know that the piece of info had been stolen, neither did Ralph let Elias or Luther know it.

“And what is it?”, Ralph questioned immediately.

“My trap would prove itself now! If the piece is really stolen, then it will prove that Lucian Cole is the ‘Ghost’! And if not, then I can use that against him too!”, Ralph thought.

“The piece has been stolen without the password!”, as soon as these words hit Ralph’s ear, he felt all of his plans breaking down.

Nicolo continued, “The thief stole the whole locker! Without needing to open it….

# Chapter 29 - Someone Important

“I remember that time, when I first met Lucian. He was, how should I put it, such an unsocial and weird kid. A kid who would not talk to anyone or socialize much.

Initially I thought he was unable to do so, but after I got to know him better, I realized that he was capable of forming human connections more than anyone, but he chose not to.

When I asked him why this was the case, I think I got a reasonable answer. He said, “Because that’s what my heart says”. He followed his heart.

But that’s not the most significant detail I recall. After being with him for more years, I wondered why he was so frank and open to me. Why no one else? After gathering some courage, I ultimately asked him this too. And the answer was as skeptical as the first one.

He said, “I don’t know.”

I know right, it’s funny. He is funny, really funny. I remember everything about him.

There’s another interesting story about him he told me.

He was really bad at academics for most of his childhood, as he was rather interested in art and music. He would sit in his room all day, either listening to or making music, or painting.

At first, I used to wonder how his parents used to react when they used to see Lucian's exam results, failing again and again. But later, I got to know that he has only his father, and to me at least, he is nothing less than an angel to Lucian.

And his mother? He told me that his mother left his father after 1 year from his birth. He saw his mother for a very little amount of time. But he still remembers her face.

Lucian's father allowed him to do everything. His bad academic performance didn't affect him at all. His father was really really rich, and was a painter himself as well. I guess the love of painting is genetic after all.

Growing up in a rich household, being allowed to do everything you love, while also getting parental love, all of those were alien to me. But for Lucian it was normal. In other words, his father was the ideal parent for any child.

And then one day, after he crossed 10th standard, he gained some interest in his academic books all of a sudden. And he decided to give those books a try. Then something unbelievable happened, I didn't even want to believe it. Lucian read everything from 6th standard to 10th standard in just one night, and learned every minute detail about every subject. That was when I learnt that I wasn't friends with someone ordinary.

But I also remember Lucian telling me once that his father was also the reason why he couldn't trust anyone so easily. His father raised Lucian the way Lucian wanted, not the way he should be raised.

Lucian wanted to not socialize and trust others. And that's exactly what his father allowed, not forcing Lucian to go outside or form friendships. Due to this, he grew up the way he wanted.

But I, I know that he isn't the same anymore. In his near-adult days, he wanted to feel what it means to love and trust, but his own upbringing and instincts restricted him.

I was called a waste for most of my life, unloved, uncared for. But just around 6 years later, now, I am here. I betrayed him, I'm away from my close ones. For one, I'm a traitor, and for the other, I'm a heavy responsibility. And for both? Hostage."

Aria was laying on her bed, her face dry yet wet, wet from the tears coming from her closed eyes.

"I wonder if he misses me the same.", Aria changed her position.

"But then, why would he? I turned him down without informing him anything, or in other words, betrayed.", Aria started weeping.

"Those bastards, why did I submit? I could have overpowered them, right?", Aria spoke through her weeps, "My mind is not working now. When is this gonna end?!"

5 minutes later,
At Lucian's house,

"Nicolo, is the footage ready?", Ralph asked while sitting on the sofa. Lucian was sitting on his bed in the same room, reading a book.

“Yes! See it.”, Nicolo turned the laptop towards Ralph, and started the recorded footage.

“If it was stolen around 1 and a half hours ago, then skip around 5 hours and lemme see.”

Both Ralph and Nicolo kept their eyes on the screen for about 5 minutes before they saw something unusual. The footage screen just turned fully blank, leaving nothing to see anymore. Not even sounds were being heard.

“What!? How did this happen?”, Ralph replayed the clip, “It just happens suddenly! Out of nowhere! Who? Who the hell did this?”

Ralph was thinking, but finally spoke out, “Nicolo. We lost. The Ghost hacked our cameras as well, we have no way out of this. We lost. He found a way to break my trap, break my plans, and hack technologies. There is nothing he can’t do. No matter what we do or what we do, we’ll always lose. My life wasn’t meant for greatness…..”, Ralph was still mumbling words, as his words started fading out.

At that moment, he seemed like a person who lost every hope he ever had, not having any further motivation to live, just mumbling on and on.

Nicolo noticed that Ralph was not in the room anymore, he physically was, but his mind had descended somewhere else, deep under.

“Hey! Ralph! What happened? Are you listening?”, Nicolo shook Ralph with his hands. But Ralph was still mumbling words while his eyes were on Nicolo, but he wasn’t seeing him.

Lucian was viewing both of them, hearing their conversation.
He finally stood up and started walking towards Ralph.

Ralph was still mumbling, while Nicolo was still trying to wake him up from this daydream. But the daydream came to an end only when a shadow entered it.

Ralph saw a shadow, a shadow who had nothing but its mouth. He was speaking but he couldn't hear it. As that nobody started producing sounds with its mouth, the already shattered world around Ralph started breaking down even more.

Slowly but surely, the shadow was becoming an actual person, and as the darkness fell out, the ground below Ralph was broken, which instantly made Ralph stop his daydream. And the shadow became Lucian Cole.

"Ralph? Ralph? You just said that 'The Ghost' has stolen something? Right? Shouldn't that mean I should be out of your suspicion list? Honestly I'm tired of this.", Lucian spoke, directly looking at Ralph's eyes.

Ralph didn't look at Lucian until now, and when he did, he just kept staring at him.

"What? You don't think so? But you took away everything I had, including my mobile phone. Why should I be suspected anymore?", Lucian had a tired look on his face.

Ralph didn't answer, so Nicolo tried to, "Yo-You are right. Don't worry you will be freed. You have paid your fine for assisting a criminal after all, there is no law that allows us to watch you anymore."

The footage on the laptop was still playing, the blank screen was gone, and the room with the locker was visible, except the locker wasn't there anymore.

"And….And I understand your situation….", Nicolo was about to continue but was interrupted by Ralph all of a sudden.

He said quietly, "You're right, you're not the ghost. We are leaving your house today…"

4th House, Gerold Street,

"Aghh, that was intense. I didn't think I would be able to hack all of those cameras successfully, while avoiding all the people there. But now, now I'm very close to completion. You, just wait, I'm coming soon…..

# Chapter 30 - Oxygen

*Ughhh, finally. It all came out perfectly. I was actually a little skeptical at first, but it seems like I read Ralph immaculately.*

*The way Ralph reacted, makes me feel like he has no surveillance for Elias either, at least currently.*

Lucian stretched his hands and then quickly went for his phone, which was lying on the table, left by Ralph at the last moment.

*So should I call Elias now? That would be stupid. What if Ralph just put on an act? What if he is still monitoring Elias in some way? I can't take reckless decisions now. I'll wait till Elias calls me, or maybe at least a day.*

Lucian took the phone and went under the blanket on his bed. As the phone turned on, the screen light lit the darkness inside the blanket.

He scrolled through his messages, contacts, and every detail.

*Huh? So Ralph did call the 'Mom' & 'Mom 2' contacts. But why would he leave it, instead of deleting them? I get it. He acted to be uncareful, so I wouldn't suspect anything, as seeing nothing new in the contacts would seem suspicious to me, knowing that Ralph took my phone for something at least.*

*But none of that matters, as the Mom 2 contact is just a phone I placed in a random area of Clorida, and it has my phone's number as blocked.*

*And the ‘Mom’ contact is Elias’s hidden phone, which he doesn’t use normally. But I wonder, why didn’t Ralph go to the very extreme? Like, searching for every detail in Luther’s apartment if needed? Is he playing some kind of long game? No, I can’t be this wrong, the way he reacted a few minutes ago, that was fully genuine.*

*So, is he restricted by something?*

Lucian kept staring at his screen, his eyes drowning in the screen light. The blanket stopped the oxygen from getting inside, gradually making Lucian’s lungs explode.

All of a sudden, Lucian took off the blanket as his phone rang, finally moving his eyes from the screen and taking a deep breath.

“Hello?”, Lucian asked immediately after a long breath, he showed no nervousness or intense reaction.

“Hello. Is this Luke I’m talking with?”, Elias also reciprocated the carefulness.

“Right. Yes, this is me. So, Elias, did someone come to you in order to keep watch over you, or Luther maybe?”, Lucian didn’t even complete his sentence and Elias replied.

“Yes yes! They did! The way you sent me the message was something I never heard before, what do you even think about those? Anyways, tell me what should be done next.”, Elias curiously asked.

“Look. First make sure there is no one around you related to those investigators, or even security cameras. You can’t trust them easily!”, Lucian suggested, trying to explain further.

“I already did all of those. There is no one here, I ensure you. Now we should continue where we left, right?”, Elias looked around before speaking.

*Right. He was about to tell me about his enemies. His never-ending passion for revenge never fails to impress me.*

“Yes, please do”, Lucian replied.

“My enemy is, that devil. The one I heard back then. The voice I hate the most. I want to kill that devil in the same way it killed my wife.”, Elias became silent for a moment.

Lucian was waiting for him to speak again, and he did, after a few seconds.

<u>??, 2018,</u>

“Are you ready yet, Evie?”, Elias was putting on a black suit, “We need to dress nice this time!”

Evie came out of the other room in a beautiful black dress. After coming out, she instantly went towards Elias. She got close to him and started buttoning his suit.

“You are gonna be successful in no time, I can already see it!”, she whispered. Her face was not only pretty, but radiating an innocent positivity.

“With you by my side, we’ll establish Vespera in no time!”, Elias said with a smile, “I’ll just have to wait till I get the investment!”

In around 20 minutes, they reached their destination. A medium sized, yellow building, with 3 floors. Elias and Evie took the lift and went to the topmost floor.

As they entered the room, they saw a man in white T-Shirt sitting on one of the four chairs surrounding a table. He smiled as he saw Elias and welcomed them.

Both Elias & Evie sat on the chairs, and the other man started the conversation with, “So, Elias Blackwood, I’m happy to let you know that I’m interested in investing.”

Elias’s ears were waiting for these words for days, since the day the investor contacted him and offered him investment, and so, a bright smile appeared on Elias’s face.

“So what procedure do I have to follow now?”, Elias instantly asked.

“I came here all prepared, don’t worry.”, he took out some papers from the bag lying on the ground, “Please put your signature down here, so I can legally invest in your business.”

Elias had a pen in his pocket, he quickly took it out and read the papers.

“I-I can’t understand the language. Can you describe it, please?”, Elias asked quietly.

Evie was sitting there quietly, also taking a look at those papers, seeming confused.

“Oh, don’t worry. I’m not from this country, and the office from where I’m from is located in another country as well. So that’s the reason it is in another language. They are just basic legal permissions and notices, you can sign it.”, he took out another paper, “This is a duplicate version written in english, if you want you can read it.”

Elias just hovered his eyes on that duplicate paper, and quickly signed the original one.

“I signed it. I have seen these notices before, I don’t need to read all of it.”

“By this evening, all the money should be transferred to your business account. It was a nice meeting, Mr.Blackwood! Sorry for not staying longer, but I’m a little busy today”, he just quickly packed his bag and went out of the room, following him, Elias & Evie also went out.

2 days Later,

The same thing could be seen again, Elias & Evie in those same clothes. But there was a huge difference. Their faces told that they were devastated, afraid and in huge agony.

“Elias! Do we have to do this?”, Evie’s hands were shaking as she held Elias’s hands.

Elias turned towards Evie and looked deeply in her eyes, unable to answer anything. He was silent and remained so.

They again went out and after around 35 minutes, they reached their destination. This time, it was a much bigger building with multiple rooms on each floor, gray in color.

“Welcome, Mr. and Mrs.Blackwood! I’ve been waiting for you.”, that guy was standing there this time, with the same white T-Shirt.

“Please, please save us! Tell us how we can get out of this!”, Elias sat down on the floor on knees, almost crying out. Evie’s face was full of fear, standing beside him.

“Don’t do this. I’ll do what I promised.”, the guy took out a device from his pocket and clicked the button on it.

The last thing Elias saw there was that a white gas was spreading in the room, coming from certain pipes attached in the walls.

And the second time he opened his eyes, his & Evie’s hands were tied. And he could slowly hear Evie’s voice.

“Wake Up, Elias!”, that’s what he heard.

After coming into consciousness and making sure Evie is there with him, he saw that same guy standing there with some blindfolds in his hands.

Then everything he observed was from his ears. The car transporting them to a far away place, possibly driven by that same guy.

And the next thing he had to witness, was the last thing he would want to.

Current Time,

“That guy deceived us with those investment papers”, Elias’s voice was much quieter than just a few moments ago, “The paper said to return the profits in just 2 days, but in a foreign language. I made a mistake by not clarifying it but he didn’t warn me either. But then I understood that’s exactly what he wanted, to kidnap me and my wife, in the name of debt!”, Elias ended his explanation.

“I understand. Hearing all those things you and your wife went through really makes me sad.”, Lucian reciprocated the feelings, but instantly curiosity took over him and he asked, “But who was this guy? That investigator? And where did they take you?”

“Right. That’s the most important part. You would be surprised to know that the fake investigator was……..Zeph Loxley. But he obviously used a different name back then.”, Elias’s words cleared some confusions that Lucian had till the point of time.

*That’s why he killed Gary’s father?! That makes complete sense. I get it now. I can completely simulate his point of view.*

“That’s truly shocking! But when you killed Zeph, I kind of did suspect something like this.”, Lucian gave a slightly surprising voice.

“Well, what about that building they took you to? You said you were in a car as per you heard stuff and you both were taken there, right?”, Lucian was genuinely curious.

“After I escaped that place, I took a look at the building from outside before they made me unconscious again and took me in the car. It was too huge. With more than 1000 rooms at least. Seemed like that

group made an entire civilization there. And I know the name of that group as well.”, Elias was about to continue.

“What was the name?”, Lucian asked.

“O3”....

# Chapter 31 - Ozone

*O3? I never ever heard that name. It's surprising because I do have knowledge of many criminal groups and organizations…..yet, I never heard about this one.*

"O3? That is not a name I ever heard", Lucian replied slowly.

"Exactly! You're not supposed to. It is a secret organization, hiding in the shadows. As far as I can understand, it's a criminal group with an extremely rich leader, otherwise, how would they have that much resources?", Elias explained.

"What kind of resource? Are you talking about the building and stuff you saw?", Lucian asked Elias, and his answer came, "Yes!"

*But what could be the reason that they spared Elias? Why kill his wife only and with that kind of torture? It's almost as if their intention wasn't to make him pay his debt, but rather to punish him this way. But why would they want to punish him this way?*

Lucian immediately asked another question, "Elias, I'm not blaming you or anything, but why did you take your wife with you there?"

Elias also answered rapidly, "It's because that's what that bastard told me. Zeph. My wife was an witness and a secondary person who signed that paper, so he told me that he will solve things, but I'll need to come with my wife.", Elias paused for a brief moment and continued, "And that's why I took my wife with me, with the hope of getting things solved….But…"

“I understand. They are truly horrible.”, Lucian answered in a calm and quiet voice.

*So giving that trauma by using his wife, was all a part of their plan. But only one question rises up in my mind, why?*

Lucian thought for another second, and maybe, he understood something. Maybe.

“So Elias, can you answer another question? Is it possible that other people are connected with the organization? Like people we see everyday? I….see everyday?”, Lucian asked curiously, trying to make Elias think about this sharply.

“I didn’t give it much thought. But it is definitely possible. But who is the person you are talking about?”, Elias asked.

“You got to know him recently…”, Lucian said.

<u>In a mall, near Harper Street,</u>

“So, Sir, what are you going to do next?”, Nicolo was sitting on a chair, in that small, half-dark room.

Ralph was sitting on top of the table placed in the corner of the room. The corner was almost fully dark, only leaving Ralph’s legs visible, as they were hanging from the table, still.

At first, it seemed like Nicolo’s words didn’t even reach him. But Ralph proved it wrong by answering after around 15 seconds.

“I don’t know”, that’s all he said.
Nicolo stood up and said quietly, “Bu-But what about your sister? What about your freedom? What about my mission? What would happen to all of those?”

All of a sudden Ralph’s face became visible too, just as his legs were. He immediately jumped off the table and ran towards Nicolo.

“Just shut up okay? I’m aware of all of those things! More than you at least. Be at my position and you will understand how much I’m tired of all of this bullshit. Can’t you see it? No matter what we do, no matter how much we try, I..try, I can never catch the Ghost!”, Ralph’s voice was dynamic at that moment, sometimes loud with rage, sometimes whispering trying to control himself.

Nicolo just stared at Ralph and gave no further reply.

A few seconds after, Ralph closed his eyes for a moment and opened his mouth again, “I’m sorry, Nicolo. I’m truly a failure. So much for a prodigy.”

Nicolo didn’t skip a millisecond and replied with a slight smile, “No. I understand completely. You’re the only one who could be this relentless about this and not surrender quickly. You deserve rest.”

Ralph smiled for a moment, then went and sat on the table again, in the same position, in the dark.

There were 2 light bulbs in the room, and Nicolo was sitting under one of them. But suddenly, that one turned off.

“Oh, it seems like there is some problem with the electricity.”, Nicolo was about to stand up but his phone rang at the same time as the light turned off.

“An unsaved number?”, Nicolo clicked on the green button.

“Hello? Is this Nicolo?”, a voice came from the phone.

“Yes, who are you?”, Nicolo’s eyebrows narrowed.

“Listen, I’m Lucian Cole. I want to talk with you personally, can you come to my house, please?”, Lucian requested.

Nicolo tried to look at Ralph after hearing this, but then he answered on his own, “Yes I can. But can I ask you the reason?”

“I’ll tell you that later. But in short, I just wanted to thank you for not letting Ralph know anything about my mother.”, Lucian told Nicolo.

Nicolo freezed all of a sudden. Maybe the burden of lying was too much for him.

“No no, I’m glad I was of help. I’ll surely come.”, Nicolo assured and cut the call.

“Who was it, something personal?”, Ralph spoke from the dark.

“Y-Yeah.”, Nicolo stuttered but answered quickly.

“Don’t tell them yet. They’ll kill me if I’m useless.”, Ralph’s voice was tired.

“Of Course I won’t. But, what I’m fearing is what if they call me themselves? I hope they don’t”, Nicolo said.

No reply from Ralph came.

The next day,

“Just stay here, don’t try to do anything, and I’ll spare your life.”, Elias spoke roughly, as he looked down on the floor.

It was Gary, all tied up and on the floor. He was struggling, trying to untie the rope surrounding him.

“It’s important for me to keep you away from the public, you know way too much.”, Elias spoke, looking away from Gary. Then he looked at Luther and said, “Your guards are really efficient, I’ll have to admit that. They sneakily kidnapped Gary, without letting those investigators know, that’s truly I didn’t think was possible, at least not after witnessing how dedicated that investigator, Ralph, was.”

“I know right. But I had to send around 6 guards to truly overpower this guy. He is really strong.”, Luther held his bandaged hand again.

“You motherfu*kers! Untie me right now. How the hell do you assume I would let you go after you killed my father, you monster!”, Gary was trying to speak through the rope, but his words were understandable anyways.

“Monster huh? You think we are monsters?”, Elias looked at Gary, and continued with a whispering voice, “Then what do you think you yourself are? You killed one of those guys outside, and, and tried to kill me too! Look there! What you did with my assistant’s hands!”

Elias pointed towards Luther's hand.

"And you call us monsters? You caused all of these casualties based on a single assumption only! That I killed your father. What proof do you have huh?", Elias's voice got louder as he went on.

Gary stared at Elias's eyes with disbelief, or maybe disgust?

<u>At Lucian's house</u>

Lucian and another person were sitting opposite to each other, surrounding a table.

Lucian took his cup of coffee in his hands and said, "So, you DID come here. I wanted to thank you, Nicolo….

# Chapter 32 - My Own Decision

Lucian took his cup of coffee in his hands and said, “So, you DID come here. I wanted to thank you, Nicolo, for not disclosing my mother’s name to Ralph.”

“I already told you, it’s not a big deal.”, Nicolo smiled, while drinking his coffee.

“So, are you a full time investigator?”, Lucian asked casually.

“Yes, I am.”, Nicolo replied and Lucian’s next question came immediately, “Oh, is it easy or hard? Like, what are the things you have to do for TGC?”

Nicolo thought for a second and then answered, “I don’t usually make many decisions for this case, I, for the most part, execute orders from higher-ups.”

“Right. I understand. I just wanted to know about Ralph. I saw him struggle yesterday, he was looking really depressed. Is he financially unstable? If he is, then I can help him.”, Lucian leaned towards Nicolo, bringing a helping hand.

“No no. That’s not the problem at all. His financial condition is all good. He was just frustrated that he couldn’t catch the Ghost.”, Nicolo answered.

“Oh, I thought I could help, but this is something else then. But why was only he so frustrated? I didn’t see you reacting the same? Is he some kind of higher-up then?”, Lucian asked again.

“Yes! Kind of. He is indeed the leader of TGC. He is the one who plans most stuff.”, Nicolo answered with excitement.

“I guessed that actually. Well then, tell more about yourself then. For how many years have you been working in this group?”, Lucian slided another question.

Nicolo seemed to take another 5 seconds before answering.
“Agh….you see….TGC is a new group..so..”

“Oh, I get it. So you joined it recently.”, Lucian said and Nicolo nodded as an agreement.

“But, where did you work before TGC then? Like, I myself am a full time painter. I mean I did make a mistake by working for ‘The Ghost’, but I realize it now. What about you? Where did you work before then?”, Lucian threw some words at Nicolo, expecting something unexpected.

“Me?”, Nicolo was stuttering a little, “This is the first time I’m working.”

“Really? Oh, right”, Lucian said, but then he raised his eyebrows a little and put his cup on the table, continuing with, “But by your looks, you look like you’re in your mid 25’s. Oh, right, I’m stupid. You said recently, and it can mean more than 2 years as well. Sorry, I misunderstood, I think.”

This time, Nicolo didn’t answer at all. His cup was sitting on the table on its own.

“What happened, Nicolo? Drink the coffee please. Is something off? Do you not like it?”, Lucian asked as he saw Nicolo sitting still.

This question broke Nicolo’s illusion and brought him back to reality, “No no. The coffee is really good.”

“Oh fine then.”, Lucian drank and emptied his cup in another minute, and then broke the silence by asking another question, “You know why I truly asked about what your previous job was? It’s because I heard about a rumor.”

Nicolo looked at Lucian with a hidden shock and asked immediately, “What rumor?”

“I heard there is an unknown organization hiring people from intelligence sectors and then using them for their own illegal tasks. And all of those employees end up dying soon.”, Lucian’s sentence was completed and Nicolo instantly replied, “What?!”

“Yes! Though I don’t know if it’s completely true or not. Or from where this rumor originated, but I was a little concerned about you. You know? You’re from one of the intelligence sectors, so..”, Lucian left his sentence incomplete, most probably for Nicolo to join it.

“No no. I don’t work at those. D-Don’t worry.”, Nicolo closed his eyes while saying it.

*There we go. He definitely works there, now it’s confirmed.*

“I never said you do. I was just confirming. Cause you could have been in great danger if that was the case. You know what? I think working there would be the same as how I felt while working with the ghost! It might be filled with deception and lies, and perhaps, guilt!”, Lucian cleared his throat.

Nicolo was silent.

“That being said, if you know someone who works there, feel free to contact me. I have wealth, and I’ll be using that money to help others as usual. I might be able to cut those people’s ties with that organization with whatever I can.”, Lucian paused, then said again, “Nicolo, you may complete your coffee! Is there a problem? Or do you know someone like that?”, Lucian’s face became suddenly curious.

“N–N-No….”, Nicolo became silent for another 30 seconds, before finally speaking again, “I….I work there.”

Lucian’s eyes widened as he reacted with, “What?! Really?!”

“Yes.”, Nicolo was staring down at the table beneath his hands, whispering those words.

“Nicolo! I didn’t expect that at all!”, Lucian paused again for a second and then said, “But don’t worry! I’ll do something! I’ll help you with all I have!”

“First tell me, do you know anyone else who is working with them or under them? Please tell the truth, that would be a great help to solve this!”, Lucian asked his questions.

“Yes. There is another person I know who works under this. He is……Ralph.”, Nicolo’s voice was still quiet, but he was looking at Lucian with teary eyes now.

“B-But why? No, I shouldn’t ask that now. I should rather try to help!”, Lucian said with a panic, “But, I saw how great of a detective Ralph is, by all of his skills that were visible to me! Why would he fall for something like this?”

“No, that’s not the case. He is not working there on his own will, he is forced to work for them!”, Nicolo’s voice rose a bit.

“Forced?! That’s even a worse situation than I imagined! How is he forced?”, Lucian asked.

“His sister. They kidnapped his sister, and kept her as a hostage, forcing Ralph to work in TGC!”, Nicolo rapidly flew through his words.

*Wait, what? So Nicolo works there, and Ralph doesn’t. But Ralph has to work for them because Ralph’s sister has been kidnapped by them and kept as a hostage, right? But why would they go this far to make Ralph work for TGC?*

“Wait a minute Nicolo. Tell me, what is even TGC? Are you telling me that TGC is just a team of a few people made by this organization?”, Lucian asked curiously.

“You’re right!”, Nicolo shouted a little, but then quietly said, “And I-I was told to look over Ralph as he was doing the investigations, as his left-hand. All the people at TGC are from this organization, except Ralph. He was…..he was forced to work for them.”, Nicolo’s face drowned in guilt it seemed like.

“I promise you Nicolo, I’ll take down this organization and free you and Ralph from them! And I’ll ask you later, why you joined them in the first place. So answer my last questions then. Do you know the name of Ralph’s sister? And what is the name of this organization?”, Lucian asked.

“Yes. I do know his sister’s name. In fact, that was the least I was told. Her name is……”, Nicolo pronounced the name, and, after hearing it, Lucian had the biggest shock of his life.

His eyes genuinely widened this time and he kept thinking and thinking, not getting time to process what happened next.

“And the organization’s name is..”, Nicolo was about to tell the name, but as soon as he was about to pronounce the first letter of the name, something happened.

“O…….”, Nicolo’s head exploded, and a fountain of blood came out on the table, a lot of blood splashing on Lucian, and some of it got mixed with the leftover coffee.

Nicolo’s headless body fell on the floor…..

# Chapter 33 - Seven Seconds

It is said that until 7 seconds after death, people can still think and dream. It seemed like that's what happened with Nicolo.

The explosion happened somewhere around his neck, and it blew off most of his head, his left eye came out of his skull, which was laying on Lucian's room's floor.

In those 7 seconds, a summary of his life hovered in front of his vision. Starting from the day he was born to the day he died.

One of his eyes was still there, with water coming out of it. His body was laying on a pool of blood, still coming out of him.

"Why did I do such stupid thing? Why?"
"My mother….she thinks I'm doing honest work or something, and here I am, not even knowing what he was doing until someone told them."

"I'm such a fool."

"I'm dying being a worthless person, what will happen to my single mom? What about, Ralph? Even though I met him just a few days ago, I wanted him to succeed. I'm nothing but just a worthless responsibility!"

Nicolo's remaining 7 seconds were over, leaving no time for last words or wishes, and the real world resumed around him.

Lucian was still staring at the ground, as Nicolo's head was laying still.

*What…the….HELL?!*

Lucian quickly stood up and went towards that shattered head and touched it.

*It's….it's cold! How the hell did something like this happen!?*

"Ni-Nicolo", words came out of Lucian's mouth automatically.

Lucian's eyes were conveying shock till then, but then it closed. And it was closed for another minute.

<u>Around 3 hours later,</u>

The cloudiness of the day made the atmosphere rather darker, even in the afternoon. The wind was making the grass flow with the rhythm of the air.

The black suits of the two men standing there at the corner of the graveyard were following the same rhythm.

Magnus was looking at the grave which was named 'Nicolo' and while looking at it, he asked quietly, "What was his surname, Lucian?"

Lucian was looking there too, and after a bit of silence he answered, "I don't know, he never told me."

Magnus looked at Lucian now, probably a bit confused, "He was your friend and you don't even know his full name?"

“I told you. He never told me. He was a rather new friend. I don’t know about his family either.”, Lucian answered quietly, still looking at the grave.

Magnus didn’t say anything further, until a few seconds later.
“I’ve informed the police about this, don’t worry, we’ll find whoever it is.”

“Is that gonna bring him back?”, Lucian asked Magnus, and no answer came.

*I don’t know anything about you. I don’t even care about you much, not now at least. But I can say one thing.*

*You didn’t deserve this….*

A Day Before,

“So Elias, can you answer another question? Is it possible that other people are connected with the organization? Like people we see everyday? I….see everyday?”, Lucian asked curiously, trying to make Elias think about this sharply.

“I didn’t give it much thought. But it is definitely possible. But who is the person you are talking about?”, Elias asked.

“You got to know him recently. You remember that investigator that went to investigate you and Luther?”, Lucian said.

“Oh you know that one? Well yeah, you would. So what about him? Is he the one you are suspecting?”, Elias asked.

“Yes. His name is Ralph, at least that’s what he told me. He had information about you beforehand, and now as you are informing me about your past, I think it is highly possible that Ralph is connected with O3 somehow. Otherwise, how would he know so much about you?”, Lucian explained.

“Oh is that it?”, Elias took a break and spoke again, “So what’s your next step then? How do you plan to use this information? I too would say that it is possible.”

“Listen then, Elias. If this theory is true, then Ralph can be the perfect source for O3’s location that you’re after. I’ll plan something. But for that I’ll have to take some more steps first.”, Lucian tried to cut the call but put the phone on his ears again.

“By the way, where is Gary?”, Lucian asked suddenly.

Elias was still holding the phone, “He was about to attack me as he woke up, but then Ralph stopped it. Really tough he was!”, Elias was about to continue.

“Where is he now?”, Lucian asked again.

“Ralph talked with him for a while, away from us, and then he went home.”, Elias said.

“Good.”, Lucian cut the call.

Elias was a little confused about Lucian’s next ‘steps’.

*I didn't tell Elias one thing, that Ralph is not the only one I suspect to have connections with O3. What about Nicolo? If he is a fellow investigator, then he might hold crucial information too.*

Around 3 hours earlier from current time,

Gary stared at Elias's eyes with disbelief, or maybe disgust?

Elias was getting furious but then calmed himself and sat on his chair. Luther was sitting on his chair.

Elias rubbed his temple a few times and then rapidly stood up and took out his gun. He went towards Gary and pressed the gun against Gary's head from the front.

"What do you say huh? You are big enough of a problem to be left alive!", Elias pressed harder.

"You son of bi*ch. Do whatever you want. You'll get karma soon!", Gary groaned through his tied mouth. His hands were still struggling because of his tied hands.

As Elias was getting more furious, Luther also spoke up, "No bloodshed, don't do something like that please!"

Elias kept pressing harder and almost clicked the trigger, but quickly held himself back as he remembered something told by Lucian.

"Don't hurt him or try to kill him or anything. Just neutralize him and that's all."

About 4 hours later from current time,

A ringtone tried to echo in the dark room, the light bulb moved a little by the air coming from the small window.
The ringtone stopped as Ralph picked up his phone and said, “Hello?”

“Hello, Ralph? This is me, Lucian! Can you help me please?! Something unexpected happened! And this might be a great help for your investigation too!”, Lucian’s voice had fear and excitement at the same time.

There were black circles under Ralph’s eyes, he has been sleep deprived for a while. But hearing this, his eyes finally widened.

“What is it?!”, Ralph asked immediately.

“Elias Blackwood has texted me out of nowhere! He said that he has something valuable for you, and he will give you that only if you fulfill his one wish…….

# Chapter 34 - Heaven or Hell?

“And what is that thing?”, Ralph asked.

“I don’t know! He said he would tell you only! Now please come to the spot and save me!”, Lucian hurried, while some kind of noise was coming from Ralph’s phone.

“Hold on right there! Where is it? I’m getting there asap!” Ralph asked excitedly,

Lucian was going to answer but he was interrupted by someone, and so, another voice came from Ralph’s phone, “I’m Elias Blackwood talking, I have your sister here with me. Come here, at the 1st apartment of Barlow Street quickly…..otherwise I’ll kill her, along with Lucian Cole ofcourse.”

Elias’s voice was threatening and rough. And just after he made his comment, the call was cut, with some external sounds of a woman.

Ralph quickly looked around him and took a glance through the window of the dark room. He saw the bright sky, contrasting hard with the inner darkness of the room.

The next minute, Ralph was seen in a black four-wheeler accelerating towards Barlow Street. Drops of sweat were visible on his forehead, his hands weren't stable, and his focused eyes opposed the dark circles underneath.

In around 5 minutes, he reached the spot he was asked to.

He opened the door of his car, parked it beside the apartment and quickly navigated his way to the room he heard sounds from. He opened the door with a kick and the sound it made stopped the whispering chatters coming from inside.

He saw three, no four people in front of him. One of them was Elias Blackwood, another was Lucian Cole. Then there was a man standing with a mask covering his mouth, and a girl tied up, sitting on a chair, unconscious.

The man with a mask was holding a gun in his hands, though it was pointing towards the floor, at a rather non-lethal position.

Lucian's hands were also tied, but he was standing instead. Unlike the girl, his whole face wasn't covered with a black cloth, the mouth and nose were spared for breathing. And he was conscious. In the middle of it all, was Elias Blackwood, sitting on a sofa.

Ralph's hands were still shaking, but as time went on, he composed himself and finally asked, "What's the matter, Mr.Blackwood? Why did you go this far?"

"I had to. Otherwise, I can't know the secrets, can I?"

<u>Around 5 hours earlier,</u>

"Elias, I'm going to explain to you my plan then. I talked with someone and got some crucial information!", Lucian called Elias and didn't waste a second.

"Yeah tell me. I'm hearing.", Elias quickly replied as well.

“I got to know that Ralph is working with O3 because he is forced to do so. Because his sister is being held hostage! And I have access to that sister! So listen to me and set this up…”, Lucian continued explaining.

And after a few minutes of talking, Elias quickly went to Luther’s office.

“Luther, quickly wear a mask covering your mouth and tell your guards to allow Lucian Cole in here.”, Elias ran through his words.

Luther’s left eyebrow rose a little bit as he asked, “Lucian Cole? Why him all of a sudden?”

“Because I talked with Luke and he made a plan to use Lucian Cole as a step forward!”, Elias replied with a little more explanation of Luke’s plan.

Luther asked no further questions and quickly started arranging stuff through his computer.

Elias also started wearing formal clothes.

As Elias went to his room, a guest came over Luther’s office.
Luther was looking at his computer screen, but hearing a knock on the door distracted him and he moved his eyes towards the door.

“Yes? Come in,”, Luther shouted.

A girl in a dark blue shirt came in through the door. She looked young, around 20 years old maybe. She came and sat on the chair, looked around for a few seconds and finally asked.

“Are there any rooms left?”

“Yes there is! How many do you want?”, Luther replied in a deep voice, with an excitement in it.

“No no. Just one. Just one for me. That’s all.”, she said.

“Alright, here, sign it and you’re done. The terms and conditions are also written here, feel free to ask me anything.”, Luther handed her a paper, with a little smile on his face.

Luther’s phone rang suddenly, he picked it up. It was Elias’s.

“Someone entered your office, a customer I guess. Pack it up quickly and set up the things I just said. Do it quickly.”, Elias cut the call instantly.

She took another minute reading and signing that paper, and then went to her assigned room.

Luther quickly looked at the signed paper and saw the name.

He then put it in his drawer and turned off everything in his office.

<u>Current time,</u>

“Hey guard, open the mask of this girl, quickly!”, Elias ordered and the masked man went towards the tied girl.

Ralph was standing still, looking at the girl. Same as Lucian.

The man pulled the mask over her head, revealing her face.

Ralph's eyes opened wide. That face, that face was the reason he was there, his sister.

A lot of memories, conversations were getting replayed in his brain. Everything made sense all of sudden, a feeling of victory and defeat at the same time, was being felt by Ralph, no, not Ralph. Rather, by Ivan.

Lucian was staring at her. A face he saw after a lot of time. Even though this was all set up by himself, this feeling, wasn't something he set up. His heartbeat was hearable to himself all of sudden.

The girl's eyes had dark circles under it, as if she hadn't slept for days. But she was in deep sleep at that moment.

Elias spoke up, "Detective Ralph, here is your sister…….Aria Volkov."

Without giving a chance to reply, Elias continued with, "Now, I'll only give you your sister if you reveal one secret information to me."

Ralph was standing there still and asked, stuttering, "W-Wh-What is it?"

"Tell me the location of the secret organization, called O3!", Elias shouted a little.

Behind him was Luther Kane, as he was the masked man. He opened up Lucian's hands.

Lucian's eyes were still looking at Aria, but he spoke up with a pity voice, "Ralph, please give him what he wants and free me from here."

Lucian, in his mind, was smiling. As he was on his way to reveal crucial information from Ralph, and more importantly, get someone back. Elias was tensed up too, as this was more about him than anyone else.

"Oh, is that it?", Ralph, all of sudden, started smiling.

Elias's eyebrows rose and he was confused because he didn't get an answer from Ralph, instead, a cunning smile.

Slowly, Ralph made a gun sign with his fingers and at first pointed it towards Elias and closed one of his eyes, trying to aim towards Elias with his hand sign.

But then, he slowly moved his finger-gun towards Lucian, and then made a 'bang' sound with his mouth, pretending to shoot Lucian, and then said, "Lucian Cole. You're caught now."

He then put on a genuine smile and put his hands down, "It was a good battle I fought. And I almost lost, but then maybe a God, or a devil, wanted me to win. And I did. Elias Blackwood, and Lucian Cole, you guys fought it well.", Ralph laughed a little.

Then he made a gun sign with his fingers again and this time put it on his own head and while pretending to pull the imaginary trigger quickly said, "I'll see you in hell", and then continued with a, "O3"

As he pulled his imaginary trigger, his head exploded. A fountain of blood splashed within the room and the explosion of blood strained everyone’s clothes…..

# Chapter 35 - Trap of the Angel

June 13th, 2023,

Lucian tapped the doorbell and instantly a security guard came from the inner door. As Lucian was wearing a mask, the security guard instantly realizes he is the person Luther was talking about as he has already told him to let anyone enter who has a mask on, the rest is on Luther himself.

And on the outside, was standing Aria. A little tense, as she might need to jump into action soon. She was holding her mobile in her hands and had her eyes locked on the screen, waiting for Lucian's emergency rescue message.

"Right, so I'll just go to the upper room and then I'll have to jump down.", Aria started imagining the scenes and started making subtle movements with her fingers.

A hand came from beside her and covered her mouth, all of a sudden. There was enormous power behind it, and she could feel it, so much so, that the screams she made were all unhearable.

Not much time moved forward, and the second hand covered her eyes, turning everything in front of her black. The next time the

darkness faded, she found herself inside of a long-black four-wheeler, sitting on the back seat.

Five men were sitting in front of her, all masked. One of them forwarded his hand and turned on a device, placing it in front of Aria's face, making her able to hear and say.

Her hands were tied up, as well as her legs. But her mouth was open, though she was completely silent, she spent that time rather observing her surroundings.

After a few moments, a voice finally came from that device, it was a manly voice, "Aria Volkov. We have a deal for you, not a choice, though. We have kidnapped your brother, Ivan Volkov!"

At the same time, in an unknown place at Harper Street, a man was also kidnapped by similar men, and he was also given a similar device in front of his face.

"Tell your sister whatever we told you to.", order came from one of those men.

"Aria, I'm your brother! Th-these men will use you only. Don't trust them! I have no worries about dying for you!", Ivan spoke up, with fear in his voice.

Aria was silent until then, but then finally uttered some words, “No, no, that can’t be it!”

“Aria please listen to me-”, Ivan was about to continue but another voice came from that device, “Enough of your sibling-talk. Just shut up and do as I say.”, this voice was hearable to both Ivan and Aria.

“I’ll kill both of you if you do not do what I say. Now, are you still ready to be a hero and sacrifice yourself? No use of that.”

Both Aria and Ivan became silent, but Aria’s eyes were filled with fear and the possibilities of the future.

Ivan was able to hear Aria through the device, but it stopped suddenly. The device on his side became completely silent, unlike on Aria’s side.

“Now, Aria, go to Luther’s apartment, and ask for a room. Then, go to your assigned room, and stay there for as long as we want. You’ll not be allowed to go outside from there. And remember, we are always watching you and hearing you.”, the voice faded and went to the other side, to Ivan’s side.

“Listen, Detective Ralph, you are now assigned to the mission of hunting down ‘The Ghost’. I’m pretty sure you know about it. We have created a team to do so, but you are needed for it the most. One of the members of this group is Nicolo, a veteran. He is going to be with you all the time. The group’s name is ‘TGC’. Did I forget

Ralph’s eyes were closed and he heard everything that came from the device, with pure precision.

Aria felt the car starting, and then accelerating, but saw nothing as she was blindfolded again. Sweats were visible on her face, as her hands were shaking through the tied ropes.

A few minutes later, she was thrown in front of Luther’s apartment, with a knife.

She took the knife with her tied hands and after some struggle, cut all the ropes and proceeded towards the apartment. As she was going towards the door, she was wiping the tears off her cheek. While doing so, she felt an itch on her neck. She went towards the guards with her hand on her neck and said, “I’m the Ghost’s theft partner, and I’m here to surrender. He is inside now. Can you please call Luther Kane?”, her voice had a nervousness in it.

“We are not guards, but we understand your request.”, one of them said before messaging Elias Blackwood.

<u>After around 30 minutes,</u>

Aria entered her assigned room and sat on the bed. She held her own head with hands and constantly looked downwards.

She clenched her fists and pulled her own hair while murmuring, “Why the hell did I do that!?”

Her teary eyes then looked around the room, which she at first completely ignored. She saw some furniture, a T.V. and overall a shiny and perfectly aligned room. After a while, she also noticed several cameras fit on the wall, high enough for anyone to not be able to reach.

“This is a hostage room, what did I expect?”, Aria continued her murmuring.

“These must be the same cameras those masked men are using to watch me from above. But I can’t do anything right now…..otherwise this act will break.”, Aria clenched her fists again.

Current time,

“So it was really a plan all along?!”, Elias was shocked, he looked towards Lucian, as the theory he made came out to be true!

Lucian, Elias and Aria were all sitting inside Elias’s room, in Luther’s apartment.

Aria became an iron body as soon as she saw Lucian, where he was the magnet.

She told her story as her head was resting on Lucian's shoulders.

Lucian's hands were going through her hair, but his face had a focused expression on it.

"You are right. It seems like my theory was true after all. But I'm now happy as I have gotten Aria back now.", Lucian looked towards Elias.

"B-But we didn't get the location of O3!", Elias was nervous.

"I'm sure we will get it.", Lucian assured again.

"What is he thinking? Was I right to trust him? God, don't tell me all of this was a waste!", Elias' head was becoming a mess, but right then and there another question emerged in his mind, and he didn't waste a single second, "But hey, what was Ralph talking about then? He said…'I win', what was that about?!"

"I'm trying to figure it out too.", Lucian suddenly looked towards Aria and tried to read her expression.

Her face was wet due to her tears after she was informed about Ralph's death, but currently her eyebrow rose a little bit.

"Who…..Is Ralph?", Aria asked all of sudden.

Elias answered immediately, “Ralph! You’re brother! The detective who was after Lucian!”

“Detective?”, Aria looked towards Lucian and said, “My brother wasn’t a detective.”

“What was his real name?”, Elias asked again.

“My brother’s name was…Ivan Volkov.”, her head rose from Lucian’s shoulders, “But he wasn’t a detective though. He worked as an accountant as far as I know.”

“You know what, Aria. A secret investigator wouldn’t let someone know that they are one.”, Lucian said with a surprisingly calm voice, “Elias, show her a picture of Ralph from the security cameras.”, Lucain leaned towards Elias as he went through his phone.

“Here, this is a photo of Ralph….or Ivan, whatever.”, Elias quickly found a photo Luther’s cameras sent him, of Ralph.

Seeing the picture, Aria immediately responded with her eyebrows still in a weird position, “This is not my brother……

# Chapter 36 - Hope & Fear

“What?!”, Elias was surprised, but by now, he was used to getting surprised, “What are you talking about? Are you out of your mind? You can’t recognize your own brother?!”

Aria was about to reply, but not giving any chance to do so, Elias spoke again, “Then…you are saying, you don’t know this guy?”

“No! That’s not what I said at all.”, Aria started speaking, “This guy was one of my brother’s friends, he was a good senior friend of mine, but just for a small duration.”

Elias was still confused. But something popped up in Aria’s mind as her eyes widened, “I get it now! My brother’s name and this guy’s name, both are Ivan! That’s most probably why you guys are confusing him with my brother, is that it?”

A relief in Lucian’s eyes emerged all of a sudden.

“What..are you saying. We got played again?”, Elias’ voice softened with stress, then he turned his face towards Lucian, possibly to get a view of his reaction.

“Lucian, tell me, what is your next step then?”, Elias rapidly asked, while stressing out.

“It looks like I have a view of the bigger picture now, I really do.”, Lucian spoke up.

Aria looked at him and said, “I-I messed up?

“Lucian, tell me whatever you figured out, are you thinking the same?”, Elias spoke instantly.

June 13th, 2023,

“We are going to your house now, speak bullshit and your life is gone.”, as the car progressed, the masked men warned Ivan.

He was silent. Just a few minutes before, everything he was carrying, like his wallet, was abducted by these men. In the wallet, they found some documents that had Ivan’s house address mentioned in it.

With a kick on the door, they slammed open the door of the house, and opened Ivan’s blindfold.

The masked men spread across the house like ants, going through all the furniture and corners that can contain personal information about Detective Ralph, named Ivan.

One of them found a picture laying inside a drawer of a wardrobe and instantly shouted, “Here! I found a picture, this must be his relative!” As all of them surrounded that guy, he presented the picture. It was a photo of Ivan and a girl, standing side-by-side, smiling.

“Is this his girlfriend?”, one of them said looking at the photo.

“No, that's most probably his sister….I think”, another one said.
“Why do you think so?”
“I don’t know, just a gut feeling.”

Ivan was sitting on the floor with his hands tied up, in another room. The chatters of those men were hearable to him.

“What are they talking about?!”, Ivan was trying to understand the situation better, “Oh! They must have found the picture of me with Aria Volkov! That’s the only picture of a woman I have in this house.”

“Good thing, sister’s picture is not here!”, an idea popped up in Ivan’s mind, “Girlfriend or sister, which one should I make Aria? Her brother’s name is the same as mine, then obviously sister.”

“If I can somehow convince them that Aria is someone close to me, they will use her as a hostage instead of my sister! I’m doomed already, the only thing I can do is save my sister from this mess!”, Ivan was stressing out as he started dragging his own body towards the other room.

“No! Please, don’t do anything to my sister! I’ll do anything you say, please don’t do anything to her!”, Ivan screamed, looking at the one holding the picture.

One of those men came forward and kicked Ivan’s face, saying, “Stop those pity screams, we’ll just have both of you. No.4, call the boss and inform him we found Ralph’s sister. We are now ready.”

“What? Progressed any further?”, a voice came from the phone.

“Yes Boss. We have figured out the identity of one of Ralph’s close persons. His sister, it’s Aria Volkov.”

A moment of silence went by and that voice uttered again, “How are you sure that it is his sister?”

“Boss, I’m sure of it! This was the only person who's picture we found in his house! And he himself cried out to ‘not harm his sister’. That just

says it! And his surname was unknown, wasn't it? Now we know that too!”

“You just used way too much of your dumbass brain. But I guess what you are saying is right. Doesn't matter if it is his sister or not, the fact he cares about her is enough. Do the job quickly and let me talk to them.”

“Yes Boss!”

“So his surname is…Volkov. So, Ivan Volkov.”, the voice behind the phone was a man, who whispered to himself.

“Sister, wherever you are, please stay safe. I might never be able to see you again, but you have the freedom that I’m going to lose now, please stay safe.”, Ivan was running an analysis of all the details he observed around him in his mind.

With a relief in his heart, and an act of fear on his face, he started struggling through his tied hands, again.

The group of men then divided into two parts, leaving 5 of them in Ivan’s house.

“And…I’m sorry, Aria. I just had no other choice. Your elder brother was a good friend of mine. I guess the unfairness of the world surfaced again the day it made us meet, but this time, I was a participant in this unfair game. Who knows what kind of danger I just put you in..”, Ivan thought of the last things he could, as his mind faded into the darkness that was yet to conquer his life.

<u>Current time,</u>

“That's my theory. Actually I’m pretty much hundred percent sure that's what happened.”, Lucian explained his theory to Elias, and all of a sudden, everything made sense to Aria.

“So…all of those things I did, the act of betrayal, trying to save my brother, trying to save you, all of them were useless?”, Aria couldn’t believe the revelation she was facing.

“You tried to save your brother. There’s nothing wrong with that. Though your brother was never kidnapped in the first place. But Aria, now that I can understand the situation, I wonder, why didn’t you ever tell me about your brother? Or show me how he looks? If I knew who your brother was, I could’ve catched the lie earlier!”, Lucian asked Aria.

“I-I-I’m sorry.”, her eyes softened as she whispered, “I, I just didn’t want to get my brother involved with us, we are both technically criminals.”

“I understand. I completely do.”, Lucian looked towards Elias now, while his hands rested on Aria’s shoulder.

“No..but what do you mean? ‘Earlier’? Do you mean you already suspected that Ralph is not Aria’s actual brother? Then…then why did you set up this trap? You said Ralph will reveal crucial information about O3 if we execute this trap, but you already suspected that Aria wasn’t his sister. Then, why?”, tension filled Elias’s head, as his grief got mixed with confusion.

He was questioning his life decisions at that moment, doubting every bit of trust he had on Lucian. Not being able to view the full scope of

Lucian’s plan, he was walking on a thin line, between hope and fear, fear of not getting success in his life, which was not fortune anymore.

“I’ll tell you what I hypothesized, and what came out to be true. And they are pretty much the same….

# Chapter 37 - Succumb to Them

A few hours earlier,

“Detective Ralph, or…..Ivan Volkov.”, the voice coming from the phone suddenly giggled, as Ralph was sitting on the table, at the corner of the dark room.

Ralph was still lost in his own void, holding his phone in his hands, listening from a distance, as he was too tired to put it on his ears.

“You made a good fool of us!”, Ralph’s legs were swinging slightly, but after hearing these specific words, they became static all of a sudden. His eyes narrowed further.

“Not us, but this guy, who was already a fool to be honest.”, another person’s breathing could be heard, a very intense breathing. Ralph could feel that the other person’s mouth was somehow tied up.

“Hear this”, a gunshot was heard. Ralph’s eyes widened as the sound broke his half-asleep state. On the other side, the guy whose mouth was actually tied, died.

“You know who this guy was? Knowing how observant you are, you certainly do. Remember those men who kidnapped you? Yes, the ‘Boss’ guy they called. Agh, he was a fool, for the first time I feel like a fool too, for giving that guy such a high position. He easily believed that Aria Volkov was your sister.”, the voice paused for a moment, and Ralph’s fast breathing covered the silence.

“Oh? You are afraid of something?”, the voice indicated that the speaker was smiling slightly, “No no, don’t worry. I’m not going to do anything to you right now, I have unfinished business.”

Ralph swallowed some saliva and finally spoke up, “ What do you want me to do now?”

“That’s a good question. As now I’m directly talking with you, there’s no middlemen. So no lie is useful. A little research on Aria Volkov cleared everything, upon stumbling on her actual brother, I found no relation between her and you, and that idiot couldn’t even check this, he really deserved to die, didn’t he?”

“Stop this bullshit, tell me what to do now, no one asked you how you did shit.”, Ralph said in a quite yet bold voice.

“Oh. You have guts I see. I really like you, not at all afraid for his life.”

Ralph was silent.

“Right, you are not afraid to die, and you’ll not reveal anything about you or your real sister now. So I really have nothing to say.”, the voice paused, “Now, listen to this, we were finally able to hack a camera inside Luther’s apartment. They are really strongly set up, so much so, it took us this much time to only hack one of them. And that is of the main office. And you know what? We saw Aria Volkov, coming out from one of his hostage rooms.”

A shock flowed through Ralph’s body. His mind quickly went through everything he experienced, instinctively trying to tie it all together.

“A shock, isn’t it? Her being in Luther’s apartment, where Elias too, means only one thing. They are keeping her as a hostage for THE GHOST.”

“And..And what are you gonna do with that information?”, Ralph asked, stuttering.

“Ralph, you suspected Lucian Cole to be ‘The Ghost’, right? I do too.”

“Yo-You do?”, Ralph asked, his voice softened.

“Yes I do. But you have to be the one to prove that. Listen to me before you ask how. Before Nicolo died, he was invited by Lucian Cole, at his house. And as per the conversation we heard from the microphone Nicolo was carrying, we got to know that Lucian Cole acquired the name of your 'sister'. Which means, Lucian now knows Aria as your sister. And if he is the ghost, do you know what his next step will be with this new information?”

“Use it against me??”, Ralph asked, with a mix of fear, nervousness and confidence in himself.

“Exactly. Observe closely. By tomorrow, he will set something up, probably to get information out of you. And if he does, then it is proved that he is, without a doubt, ‘The Ghost’.”

Ralph's eyes softened, as he said, “Alright, I will inform you as soon as I see whatever you predicted now. Will I be free then? After proving that Lucian is the ghost?”

“Oh boy, you really dream of freedom still? I thought you were ready to die. And all these days, your acting in front of Nicolo was fantastic.

You acted as if your sister was really in danger.”, the voice giggled slightly, “But you know what? All these days, you were only afraid of dying! You didn’t care about anything but to just live further, you were so desperate to live! Even after securing your sister’s life you still obeyed us, meaning you were afraid to die!”, the voice was surprisingly calm, with almost no dynamics in its volume.

“Yeah, I wanted to live. I really did. But now? You can kill me, at least I would know that I fooled all of you before dying, I never truly lost.”, Ralph spoke boldly.

“I love your attitude dude. But wouldn’t you want to win against ‘The Ghost’? You haven’t proved his identity ye-”, Ralph didn’t let the sentence complete itself, and said, “I will. I will do what I have to do before I die. You guys have a system to know when one of your members die, right? I hope I am included.”

The voice laughed a little, “Damn, I’m falling in love with you. It would be a moment of joy to hear you die.”

A few hours later,

Ralph’s phone rang and Lucian’s number popped up. The moment his eyes landed on his phone, his trance finally broke. The few hours before this moment felt like centuries. His long journey of waiting finally broke and he saw a light of freedom, even if it cost his life.

He never knew what hopefulness and hopelessness felt when mixed, until this moment. As he started driving his car he started to whisper something to himself, practising some kind of phrase. He repeatedly said, “O3, O3, O3”, but not loud enough.

After around 5 minutes, he reached Luther's apartment.
Current time,

"Don't you understand it now? The sudden change in Ralph's behaviour? Why would he go from a lost man to a man saying, 'I win'?", Lucian explained to Elias.

"So you intentionally played into their trap? Just to see how smart this 'leader' is?", Elias finally got a moment of peace.

"Yeah, basically. Until the point where Ralph said 'I win', very honestly even I was confused. But what he said confirmed everything. I'm very sure this O3 leader contacted him as soon as they realized that Ralph fooled them. And then planned something together with him. Because there is no way Ralph, with the resources he has, can deduce this much alone.", Lucian said.

"I understand, but, what now? What are you seeing now? You just sacrificed your identity to O3, just for an experiment. What was that for?", Elias asked quietly.

"That was the point. In fact, I realized my goal and O3's goal is the same. And that is, to meet. I don't even have to go find them anymore, because Ralph's death in itself was a message to them, something like, 'The Ghost is Lucian Cole, confirmed.", and now they will come to me, most probably kidnap me or something. Doesn't matter how it happens, it will, happen.", Lucian was confident.

"B-But if finding was really their true goal, what's the use of me now? Will they kill me?", Elias spoke up and then suddenly went against himself, "No, no, no! What the hell am I saying? It's not like I'll leave behind the world without slicing that leader's throat!"

“Calm down, Elias. I understand you want to kill them as we are so close now. But..”, Lucian paused for a moment before saying, “Have you noticed a pattern?”

Elias was silent, expecting an explanation.

“When Nicolo was about to say ‘O3’, he died. When Ralph suicided, he used ‘O3’ as a code-word to kill himself. And in both of those cases their head blew off, specifically, from their neck.”, Lucian looked at Elias.

Aria was asleep by now, as she was more tired than ever.

“So you are saying, everyone connected to O3, has some kind of device attached to them?”, Elias’ eyes were filled with tension.

“Yes. Exactly. But notice how it was not only Nicolo, but Ralph too. Means they don’t only attach this device to their members, but also to those people who they kidnap. So….Why were you an exception?”, Lucian asked curiously.

Elias tried to think and think, until he couldn’t think of any possible answer. But then predicted what Lucian was going to say next.

“Or…You are not at all an exception….