

2021

Crime/Mystery: Reinventing Tropes

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Recommended Citation

Santiago, Gabrielle, "Crime/Mystery: Reinventing Tropes" (2021). *Honors Undergraduate Theses*. 1040.
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CRIME/MYSTERY: REINVENTING TROPES

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the completion for the Honors
Undergraduate Thesis program
in the Department of English
in the Burnett Honors College
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Summer Term
2021

ABSTRACT

Throughout the ages, the crime/mystery genre has stayed marginally the same with a variety of tropes making their debut as time went on. Many of these tropes were introduced by notable writers, such as, Agatha Christie, Arthur Conan Doyle, Wilkie Collins, Patricia Highsmith, Dorothy L. Sayers, and others. Due to this, the researcher decided to pinpoint the most common or overexposed tropes within this genre and reinvent them within the narrative that the researcher has created. The tropes that will be utilized are the ones with a remote location and limited suspects, having every person connected to the victim to have a viable motive for murder, and the appearance of ordinary objects on or near the victim at the time of their murder that hold the answers to who did it. In the narrative, each trope will be taken and reimagined into a different context to create something new within the crime/mystery genre that has been seldom done before.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my thanks to my Thesis Advisor, Dr. Micah Hicks, who has helped me more than he can know on my endeavor to have my thesis published. He has been one of the most positive supportive forces throughout my research and I am happy that I was able to work on this with someone I deeply respect and admire.

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INTRODUCTION

Ever since the crime/mystery genre took off in the 1930s-1950s in America (also called the Golden Age of mystery), commonly of the murder mystery stock, there have been various renditions ranging from novel to novel. From that age past to the present, certain tropes have resurfaced consistently within the narratives published. This can relate to the plot structure, or all the fragments related to telling a story with a victim, detective, witnesses, and a murderer. However, these structures are never challenged as often as they should be as mystery tends to repeat itself.

Tropes are the easiest route to undergo to when plotting out a mystery novel. It cuts the time needed to build up the plot as they provide the tools necessary for the reader to get the point without too much elaboration. For example, a murder having taken place in a remote location with only a handful of suspects that could have possibly committed the murder. This translates to an assurance toward the reader that eventually they will find out who murdered the victim as, geographically, it could not have been anyone, but the list of suspects already presented.

Another popular theme is good vs. evil where the murderer is someone reprehensible and the detective is the paragon of justice with clear morals. This is not an accurate depiction of the real world. The world is made up of shades of gray, rather than black and white. There are countless ethical dilemmas that many struggle with and the detective will be no different. The character model for the detective will not make them infallible, but rather, someone who can be emotional and blinded by their own beliefs and biases.

The most popular of mystery novelists, for example, Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, etc., write their stories in the way you would expect from the Golden Age of mystery. "Main characters were virtually always white and middle class. Ethnic minorities appeared only in the working classes [...] Foreigners generally were regarded as 'suspicious' and 'not like us'" (Tomlinson). This is something that is regarded as normal in the mystery genre, but even today, while some of it has improved, there are still these stories that crop up that are racist or sexist (no matter how subtle it may be). I would like my story to be as free of this as possible. Not only to build a world with inclusivity, but to also show off multi-faceted characters and the specific struggles they go through due to being a member of a certain race/ethnic group, which I show through the non-humans that appear throughout the story.

This coupled with the other trope reversals I am plotting out, will create a distinct narrative that explores the "what if's?" of the mystery genre that are not usually entertained by the more esteemed novelists. This is achieved through the research I have undergone through various books written and edited by other mystery writers with their own tips and tricks on how to make this a reality. They also verbalize what is expected and unexpected within the crime/mystery genre and how to best avoid the usual pitfalls related to it.

"Remote locations; country houses; characters distinguished only by their eccentricities; families ruled over by grumbling figureheads; bodies discovered in toilets, attics, and beds that don't belong to them; poisoned drinks and disappearing weapons. But it wasn't until I came to write them that I started to consider how these things became tropes in the first place, or why so many authors returned to them so often" (Pavesi). These are all tropes most familiar in classic

detective fiction, which is what I am emulating within my thesis, though there will be an inclusion of sci-fi to create several new twists to the tropes.

Larry Beinhart manages to dictate some boundaries that surround the characters, instead of luring attention to only the plot and the mechanics related to it. Every character needs to perform within normal situations without having all their secrets on display but must also be unique enough that they can be identified easily by the reader. In this respect, every character must also operate within their own moral code. The common tropes within the mystery genre mean that every character must have something that peaks the detective's interest enough that he decides to question them. "They're ready at hand, as a package, with a look, style, an age, a background, patterns of conduct, and some juicy anecdote" (Beinhart).

When referring to characters and the usual molds they occupy, most mystery novels commonly have a specific archetype that they fall under. The detective is hailed as the hero of the story and must operate under certain conditions that the readers are able to relate themselves to. "He cannot have a reaction outside the walls of "character." For the most part the hero cannot, due to moral nature, gun down a defenseless man. This wall of his character makes him appealing, but in certain emergencies, limits his range of action" (Beinhart). If the detective or hero, in this scenario, were to act differently to what the reader believes they should act, it will cause a level of outrage. Most commonly, mystery novelists portray their detectives and other investigators with a strong sense of justice and an indomitable will to achieve justice for the victim's or victims' killer. My detective(s) will be people that are the same, but still different with how they go about justice. After all, justice means different things for different people and

what one may view as just, could be viewed as unjust by another. This is an avenue I explored when this thesis.

The tropes relating to the main character, or the detective can generally be the same in most mystery novels. "The typical hero in a private investigator novel [...] was a man. Why? Presumably, there was a perception that the public would accept as a private investigator only a male with certain physical strengths and acquired capabilities, like being a good shot or a tough street fighter" (Grafton). I plan to change this by having my detective, not only work with a partner, but also be a woman. It, not only, breaks the monotony of the usual solo man, but also portrays someone considered weaker and less intelligent in mystery novels of the past to be the one investigating the case. Having her be the detective with her own personal background and beliefs can create a different type of character model that is usually displayed within the crime/mystery genre.

Regardless, everything must unfold logically as Chapter Twenty-Three: In the Beginning, is the End says. "The techniques of foreshadowing and the planting of clues are invaluable in creating the above qualities, in preparing the reader for the destination only you know about" (Grafton). The destination is the murderer and how the detective was able to gather the evidence necessary to convict them for the murder. Being able to reinvent some of the tropes within the mystery genre means I will have to begin afresh with several narrative convolutions that will amalgamate all this into a comprehensive storyline. Thus, foreshadowing has a hand in it and so do the suspects involved.

An example of this can be taken from the boardgame *Clue*. Each suspect provided is interchangeable due to the murderer being selected in the beginning of the game and concealed until one of the players gathers enough evidence (through process of elimination) to figure out who it is. A trope related to this is a group of oddly random people, all distinct from one another through their professions, marital statuses, nationalities, and hobbies. “The purpose of this oddball group of characters is to keep the suspects distinct, without distinguishing them by means of psychology. We don’t want the reader to be able to make any accurate summations about their behavior” (Pavesi).

Agatha Christie’s novel, *And Then There Were None*, took place in a remote island setting. This is a trope devised before, but Christie made it a very famous example. The book’s premise consists of ten people that are being hunted down one by one, while they are isolated in the middle of nowhere. This trope should have been about how one of the ten is murdering the others and any reader would have expected that to be, with the question being, which one is it?

Christie reassures the reader that it must be one of the ten because the only other suspects could be the passersby in the boats, but they can easily be noticed in the distance with ample time, so that is not the answer. The island keeps the ten people there, helpless to save themselves, as they do not have a boat, and there is a storm on the horizon. This trope is utilized in this way because there is no simple method to raise these stakes in any other setting as Christie does it here. The story on its own is a shortcut made easy by the island where the narrative can begin without the writer going to great lengths to create the same situation anywhere else.

This can peak anyone's interest and I want to create an atmosphere like this without holding it in a remote location. It will be a difficult trope reversal, but this being one of the most popular tropes, means that there are elements to it that I could incorporate into another setting that does not include a remote location within my thesis.

There has been some thought to how the mystery will be presented and to whom. Reinventing tropes aside, there is the question of how it will be presented and what the stakes will be in relation to the characters and the plot. "There are no rules about who gets killed or how, but readers expecting a more soft-boiled tale want their violence off-stage and will be very unhappy if you bump off cats, dogs, or children. Readers expecting a more hard-boiled tale have stronger stomachs. You can't please everyone, so decide what audience you're writing for" (Ephron). To truly portray the horrors that human beings tend to inflict upon others, such instances may be necessary when writing my thesis.

A "soft-boiled tale" may be the preferred candidate to something more visceral, however, conflicting notions about a person, whether it be about the murderer, victim, or the witnesses, shows depth. Can a detective feel the need to investigate and bring justice to a victim's killer if the victim was exposed to have harmed children? The moral dilemma that may ensue might encourage the detective to help the murderer get away with it in the end, even though, in the eyes of the law, it was an unjust act. How about if the killer has no redeemable qualities and the victims, having done nothing wrong, were killed because of something they were born with? This will be harsh to explore as the reader forms their opinion once the victim is discovered and the detective observes what happened to them (said plainly, how they died).

Meaning in the traditional mysteries, this would occur through discovering the victim's corpse in an unlikely place, which could be a library, office, golf course, etc. Not only would the placement impact the reader and how the investigation unfolds, but also who the victim was affects everything. Another common murder mystery cliché, especially in the Golden Age of mysteries, is the head of something nefarious. A character that is considered a matriarch or patriarch. For example, this occurs in Agatha Christie's *Crooked House*.

Being a favorite narrative of Christie's, *Crooked House*, is about the Leonides family who are under the lead and influence of the patriarch, Aristide. All three generations of the family live together in the same house called, Three Gables. After the death of his first wife, Marcia, he remarried a woman named Brenda, decades younger than him and thought to be having an affair with the grandchildren's tutor, Laurence. Aristide is killed after being poisoned by his own eye medicine.

Charles Hayward is the detective and narrator of this story, partnered up with Chief Inspector Taverner. Charles is engaged to Aristide's granddaughter, Sofia, who refuses to get married until her grandfather's killer is brought to justice, so Charles investigates from inside the home with Taverner working with him in his place at Scotland Yard. This, of course, may prove difficult due to more than one person possibly holding a motive for why they would kill Aristide. With everyone else in the house also having the opportunity to kill the man, there is a trope plotted out here about how the victim is despised enough that there are multiple people that could have realistically murdered him. The job the detective and the reader has is to find out who it is without being waylaid by red herrings and other misunderstandings.

This trope holds a similarity to *Clue* with the murderer possibly being anyone inside the home with the detective having the responsibility to eliminate each suspect until they find the correct one and arrest them. This, coupled with the other trope in *And Then There Were None*, combine two tropes as *Three Gables* is considered “remote” due to only the family living there and Aristide’s murderer taking place inside the home, as well. My thesis will separate the two with a patriarch that was well-loved with no skeletons in the closet, in order, for this trope to be reinvented.

James N. Frey writes on plotting and every step that must be fulfilled to make the mystery into something special. There must be a setup and in that, the trope can truly be flipped. The beginning of any good mystery must be plotted out in a chain of events with clear cause-and-effect. In Chapter 11: Plotting Theory, "In plotting Act I, we need to pick an event in this chain of events that will be what the reader reads first." This is what occurs “on-stage,” which is what the reader is aware of due to the scene being written plainly. “Off-stage” as Frey explains, is not revealed until the end when the culprit is caught, and their methods outed for everyone to see and analyze.

Another trope in murder mysteries have the “off-stage” logic to a murder revealed early on through innocuous items that cause a reader’s interest to be piqued. For example, *Murder on the Orient Express* by Agatha Christie starts off with the body possessing four ordinary objects: a handkerchief, a pipe cleaner, a burnt piece of paper, and a match. These objects would not usually rouse any sort of intrigue by themselves, but due to the fact they were all found on a corpse, makes them significant.

So, within my thesis, there will be ordinary objects that the reader will not recognize to be specific until the climax occurs. This would show some curiosity because of household objects being banal but bewildering due to the high importance it has to the case and how the killer managed to catch the victim off-guard.

There are several types of character models that are regarded as the blueprint for the detectives of mystery novels. The mystery I have written is traditional, but whether it had been traditional or cozy, the main character still adheres to a specific mold. This mold may consist of an amateur sleuth or an official investigator. "Cozy mysteries are considered 'gentle' books - no graphic violence, no profanity, and no explicit sex. Most often, the crime takes place 'off stage' and death is usually very quick. Prolonged torture is not a staple in cozy mysteries! The victim is usually a character who had terrible vices and who treated others very badly... and 'deserves to die' (Tomlinson).

My mystery is traditional because there is more opportunity to reinvent the usual tropes without the censorship advertised by a cozy mystery. This can adhere to other elements within the mystery that I can flip from the common structures. The most important aspect of any mystery is the victim and the one who killed them. The way a victim is murdered can speak volumes on who did it and their motivation for doing so. "Rodell identifies three variations: the murder which does not seek to disguise the fact that there has been a death at all; the murder which seeks to disguise the fact there has been a death at all; and the murder which seeks to disguise itself as suicide or an accident" (Tomlinson). My plans consist of the murder to be not at all disguised. The most obvious of answers can evade anyone, even a detective, if they consider the crime to be more complicated than it is. The brutality of the crime committed can bespeak to

someone who knew the victim beforehand, a crime of passion. However, this is not always the case, and the murderer is someone that needs to be portrayed as three-dimensional with their own life and struggles that may have led to them believing they need to kill someone for a particular reason.

To do each character justice, I also want to include representation within a genre that often shows a straight white male as the detective that solves the mystery. So, to do that, there needs to be inclusion. Often, the most popular of mystery novels would tell stories that included harmful stereotypes and preconceived notions that are not at all accurate to the people they are portraying. "Sexism went unchallenged - logic and reasoning were assumed to be the preserve of males, intuition of females. [...] Homosexuality was only ever hinted at, with gay males treated as either camp stereotypes or perverts. [...] Lesbianism was sometimes suggested but regarded as a harmless curiosity rather than a sickness or an offense" (Tomlinson). This is something I can correct in my own narrative with respect given to the characters portrayed without the harmful stereotypes usually present within, although it will be portrayed with the sci-fi elements kept in mind as there are human and non-humans present within the narrative.

Therefore, in this thesis, each noticeably common trope within the crime/mystery genre will be flipped to show another avenue that could be taken, instead of the usual. The inclusion of non-human characters and the prejudice they face will also make an appearance as it can reflect what occurs in the present world, we live in.

PROLOGUE

A shadowy figure enters through the third-story window of the east wing of the manor.

The manor is grand, snugly nestled amongst lush greenery with large bald cypress trees and Carolina jessamine flowers. The exterior is made up mostly of floor-to-ceiling windows and obsidian oak hardwood floors that make everything within the manor gleam slightly from the moonlight peeking through the glass.

The figure sidles along through the corridors, stopping every few seconds to listen, only moving again when there is no sound to be concerned by. A few minutes go by in this fashion, until the figure stops outside a double set of French doors. Opening them up and slipping inside, the figure reaches a hand into their coat pocket, procuring a serrated knife, around seven inches in length.

The doors close.

An hour passes.

The manor is quiet with only the occasional servant garbed in casual clothes loping through the corridors, checking the state of the home as they go. With high ceilings and numerous pieces of finery scattered throughout, the manor is regal in both appearance and value, therefore ensuring that each servant subtly checks for any dust and other such imperfections in every nook and cranny as they pass by.

A more formally dressed man, who appears a little older than the other servants, runs a gloved finger against the colorful surface of a vase made of entirely white jade as he stops at the double set of ash-colored French doors leading into a master bedroom. Seeing no dust upon it, the man smiles to himself and turns his attention to the doors, knocking lightly on them.

The man listens for a moment, then knocks again, “Sir? Are you in there? Ms. Priscilla is on the line right now. She says she could not reach you on your personal phone.”

Still no answer.

The man frowns, but slowly turns the door handle and slides the doors open. “Sir?”

The room is dark as the man creeps forward, squinting through the darkness. He goes to press the touch-sensitive light-switch, the touchpad glowing blue for a moment before dimming back down again. The light does not turn on. The man touches it again, watching the blue light brighten and dim each time with no success a few more times before giving up.

“Sir, I apologize but it seems the lights aren’t working in here. I’ll be sure to have this repaired within the hour—”

The man stops suddenly, his gaze finally landing on the still lump in the middle of the luxurious ivory canopy bed, the person on the bed illuminated only by the faint

light coming from the far corner of the room where a large line graph adorns the wall with a glowing network of lines that periodically decreases and increases every few seconds.

The man averts his gaze and walks closer to the bed, “Sir, are you alright?”

Looking closer, the man chokes in surprise, jolting back. “Oh, God—!”

On the bed is the master of the house, Gerald Cabernet, seemingly sleeping away, if it were not for the slowly expanding pool of blood around his head and the steak knife sticking out of his eye socket.

CHAPTER 1

The house is quiet and still, the afternoon sun peeks through the windows, illuminating the master bedroom of the house.

The bedroom is a decent size but cramped with dozens of case files stacked high into every available tabletop, on top of the desk, nightstand, and dresser. The bed is unmade with a half-unpacked suitcase taking up most of the room with the other clothes spilling out and strewn on the floor. Tucked into one of the corners of the bedroom lays Emilia, her dark curly hair tangled in knots, breathing softly with her head on the desk.

Underneath her arms is a notebook with complicated charts and diagrams, and a holographic map pixelating onto her bare arms, showing locations all over the state of Florida with a few labeled red points scattered throughout the coastline.

Emilia jolts awake as her phone blasts her ringtone, the sound of hundreds of birds taking to flight simultaneously, straight into her ear. She is still at her desk, her cheek sticking to the cherry wood, and her back hunched uncomfortably in her desk chair. She peels herself off the mahogany and presses the answer button, yawning.

“You need to get down here,” a male voice says. Emilia recognizes it to be Levi, both her partner and best friend. His voice is low and hoarser than usual, probably drank too much coffee again.

“Well, good morning to you, too,” Emilia replies, massaging the nape of her neck, wincing at the kinks. Last time she’s going to sleep at her desk. “What’s up with you?”

“Someone else’s dead. Same family. We’re at Cocoa Beach, I just texted you the address. Take the I-4.”

The call is abruptly ended. She blows out a puff of air and lowers the phone away from her ear as it pings, signaling that the address was successfully received.

“I wonder how he got there before me...” she says to herself, yawning as she gets up from her chair.

This will be the third murder that has occurred this month and the killer seems to have no will to stop any time soon. The geographical profile of the murders committed has stayed relatively the same, but Emilia bets that this is someone else within the esteemed Cabernet family that has no obvious reason as to why they were picked off.

The Cabernet clan, wealthy and philanthropic, also doubles as a company with most of their efforts and funds going to helping serve food to the homeless in soup kitchens, donating large amounts of money to a variety of charities, and holding fundraisers for worthy causes, especially in the face of discrimination targeting non-humans. For all intents and purposes, no one should have it out for a family dedicated to the betterment of both the undermined minorities and the less fortunate. Or, at least, that was what most people thought.

The first murder came as a surprise. Gerald Cabernet, the patriarch, married to his husband Julian for twenty-five years, was found underneath the white silken sheets of his bed with a steak knife protruding out of his eye socket. Julian would have been the suspect, except there have been no known marital problems between the two, and he has an alibi due to being in New York City visiting family at the time of the murder.

The second murder took place only a week later with the death of Gerald's sister, Priscilla, who was strangled with her own bedsheets in her home, only a few minutes' drive away from Gerald and Julian's. Another strange occurrence due to the short time it took for the murderer to pick someone else off and because of the choice of victim. Priscilla Cabernet just came back from Yemen after a year-long stint as a teacher in one of the schools there. She was barely home for a day when she was found cold and blue by her housekeeper, the sheets still wrapped tight around the delicate column of her throat.

Now there is another.

Emilia hurries over to her bed, undressing out of her house clothes, and grabbing more appropriate articles of clothing. She tugs them on and gathers the rest of her stuff: car keys, shoes, tablet, and other such items. It will be about half an hour to get to Cocoa Beach, so hopefully traffic isn't too vexing.

#

The scent of a corpse is both familiar and not. Emilia knows the usual markers utilized to identify a body, so she is unsurprised once the foul odor of rotting flesh, feces, and rotten eggs permeate her nostrils as she enters the well-maintained Florida beach cottage. It's unassuming on the outside, tidy, and tastefully decorated with charming nautical knick-knacks out front. All the more unsettling once she swings open the door to reveal the bloated figure of a woman previously known as Flora Cabernet. A middle-aged woman living on her own, whose skull is caved in from enduring the heavy blows to her head that ultimately killed her. The weapons of choice, as Levi informed her on a phone call on her way over here, consisted of a vintage green Hammond banker's table lamp, a hammer, and a golf club—the shaft clearly dented due to the force utilized.

She finds Levi, tall and imposing, looking down at her body, staring blankly, looking a thousand miles away. The coroner is crouched next to him, searching for defensive wounds.

She can't blame Levi for looking so listless. Flora Cabernet was both Gerald and Priscilla's aunt. A woman who protested in the streets for the equal rights of non-humans years ago when the riots first began. Modest too, judging from the less than extravagant dwellings she inhabited.

Emilia's eyes scan the cottage, trying her hardest to disregard the hustle-and-bustle around her as the forensic team take photos and searches the premises for anything the killer may have left behind. It's small, but comfortable, though the interior décor has much to be desired with the blood spatter, brain matter, and upturned furniture marring it.

Her gaze catches onto the shattered glass on the hardwood floor from the window where the killer undoubtedly climbed through to gain entry.

There are no footprints inside the home that she can spot and the struggle that occurred here is obvious for anyone to see. Flora Cabernet was a fighter. Perhaps she may have drawn blood from her attacker before she went down.

Emilia walks up to Levi, meeting his gaze head-on. “What do we got?”

Levi sweeps a hand to gesture to the whole living room. “Nothing much so far. The body was discovered by a friend of Cabernet’s, Willow Black, who was supposed to meet her for Sunday brunch. She was concerned when she came over to the house and the door was open. When she came in...”

Emilia winces slightly at this. The poor woman must have been traumatized from the discovery. She caught a glimpse of the woman before she came in. Willow Black, in all her six-foot glory, hunched into herself as she answered one of the other officer’s questions.

“Any fingerprints?”

Levi snorts, “No. Not even a damn strand of hair. Whoever is doing this is definitely good at what they do.”

Emilia grimaces but keeps silent. She has to agree. This is the third family member to show up dead with the last instance occurring only five days ago. Whoever the killer is, they are confident, borderline brazen.

The coroner finishes with his initial examination of the body and lifts the white sheet over Flora Cabernet, making her disappear from view.

Levi jerks his head to the side, signaling her to walk with him. They make their way through the crime scene investigators analyzing everything left behind to the kitchen. Emilia frowns at the state of it. It's worse than the living room with broken dishware, the scattered remains of various foodstuffs and every kitchen appliance present destroyed on the floor. On the granite countertop lies a single unharmed mug, still half-full of lukewarm black coffee.

"I'm guessing Flora was in the kitchen when she was first attacked?"

"Yeah, but that's not all," Levi says, pointing downward at another mug shattered on the floor. The coffee from inside having seeped into the cracks of the wood, though the droplets show light brown coffee stains on the white porcelain. "Apparently, our killer saw it fit to have a cup of coffee before he left."

Emilia gapes, switching her gaze between the two mugs. "You're joking."

"Nope. The bastard killed her and decided to treat himself. We're taking it in to see if there is any leftover DNA, but I have a feeling we won't find anything, or that it may be a dead-end like the batch of hair follicles we found in the last crime scene."

Emilia nods. The killer has been too meticulous with what he leaves behind. Fingerprints, hair, or other indicators have not been found at any of the crime scenes, except the second, which ended up being a false alarm when the hair follicles ending up

being from the victim. Any other physical evidence has proven inconclusive. As much as she would like to hope, she knows there's nothing of value here.

However...

“Do you think he's meticulous or is it something else?”

Levi furrows his brow, glancing sideways to look at her. “What do you mean?”

“Our guy may not even be in the system,” Emilia says, a frown tugging at her lips. “I know that everyone is registered into the system when they're born, but there are always some that slip through the cracks. That may be why we never found a match before,” she grimaces, “well other than from the victims, of course.”

Levi lightly taps his leg, a tick he acquired when both Emilia and he were still attending the Academy in their formative years. A habit for whenever his mind is preoccupied and heavy with his own worries.

There haven't been many cases where the suspect they were looking for ended up unregistered, but it still has happened enough for most investigators to develop a complex over it. Not many from Police Headquarters like admitting that there are people out there that, for all intents and purposes, are ghosts. Ghosts can't be seen, nor can they have a case built against them. Something that the Police Headquarters has been sensitive about since the Unregistered were brought up for the first time, around twenty-five years ago. Emilia is only bringing it up as an option now because the lack of evidence has been a little too prevalent since they began investigating the Cabernet murders.

“It may be that,” Levi admits, “but don’t go around mentioning this theory to anyone else until we have exhausted every other avenue. You remember why, right?”

Emilia nods.

The last time anyone had brought up the theory that the murderer they were searching for was an Unregistered was two years ago. The Stein case seemed open-and-shut at first but was anything but. The lack of evidence had been both frustrating and demoralizing. Back then, Levi and she had been grateful that they were not in charge of that particular case since the mental and emotional strain as time went on without an arrest was debilitating enough to watch from the sidelines.

The detective in charge raised the question of whether it was either the intelligence of the killer that made them able to evade capture or if it was because they did not technically “exist.” Suffice to say, the Commissioner heard about it and immediately took that detective off the case, even going so far as to make them transfer somewhere calmer, where they could “properly reflect on their own incompetence.”

A position that no one wanted to see themselves in.

Emilia bows her head in assent. “Yeah, that’s probably for the best.”

She looks back down at the mug.

Hopefully, this time is different.

CHAPTER 2

The first person that Emilia and Levi interview is Willow Black, who is nigh near inconsolable once they make their way back outside, tightly grasping the shock blanket around her shoulders. Emilia grimaces at the sight, her mind momentarily straying to the others that wept once they found the other Cabernets murdered within their home. It is not a sight she is eager to see again.

Willow does not react, her stare still far-off in the distance even after they stop in front of her.

Emilia clears her throat, “Ms. Black?”

She jolts to attention, blinking rapidly once she registers their presence. “Yes?”

“I am Detective Vasquez, and this is my partner, Detective Gaumont. We just wanted to ask you a few questions about Flora Cabernet and what you saw today. Is that alright?”

Willow inhales a shuddering breath but nods, nonetheless. “Yes, anything you want. What do you need to know?”

Emilia waves a hand at Levi, who immediately responds to her cue, his hands already pulling out his Agency-issued tablet, his fingers poised to begin typing on the holographic keyboard. “You discovered Ms. Cabernet earlier this morning, correct?”

Willow clutches the blanket closer around her, nodding. “Yes, I came here around eleven because,” her voice cracks, “me and Flora were supposed to go to brunch together

at one of the cafes near here. When I was coming up toward the cottage, I saw that the door was cracked open, which I found strange.”

“Strange how?” asks Levi, his fingers flying as he documents every detail.

“Well, Flora has always been very careful. I’ve never seen her forget to close and lock her door, especially since she lives alone. She was even more paranoid about keeping everything locked down ever since Gerald and Priscilla were murdered.”

Willow fidgets as she begins to say the next part.

“She said that she thought she was next.”

Emilia’s eyebrows shoot up at the words.

It’s true that the whole Cabernet clan had been more than alarmed when their patriarch and his sister ended up murdered by an unknown assailant. The two murders were both executed in less than a month and the investigation has been slow ever since.

Suffice to say, with all the media coverage these murders were bringing in, the public outcry against the precinct’s slow methods in catching the perpetrator is taking its toll.

The rest of the Cabernets are the same. Though they are understandably afraid for their lives, they have not imparted any information that would suggest any of them knew who was next to be killed.

“Next?” Levi asks, eyebrow raised. He quickly glances at Emilia before returning his gaze to Willow. “What do you mean? Was she just paranoid, or...?”

Willow shakes her head, her eyes beginning to water again. “That was what I thought at first, but it was more than that. Flora was absolutely convinced that she was going to die next once she found out the news of what happened to Priscilla. I asked her over and over again about why she thought that, but all she would say was that she had a feeling. I thought she was just spooked by what happened, that it was just her being paranoid... I should have believed her,” she says, her voice lowering to a whisper.

Tears slowly form and fall down her face. Emilia digs into her carry-on bag and hands her a tissue, which Willow gratefully accepts.

“You couldn’t have known what was going to happen,” Levi says, his jaw clenched as Willow dabs away her tears.

Emilia knows this case is hitting him harder than usual. His aunt was murdered in a similar fashion when he was a child, the motive being a jilted lover who wanted revenge after being rejected. She had known that he was going to try something, but no one believed her, not even Levi, until it was too late.

Willow sighs shakily as she balls the tissue into her palm. “No, I should’ve. She kept talking about how sick she was feeling, and I guess she took that as a bad omen. I don’t know why that tipped her off, but she knew. I’m sorry that I can’t tell you more.”

Emilia offers a smile. “You’ve already told us plenty. Just one more thing. “We’ve asked this the last two times in the cases of Gerald and Priscilla Cabernet, as well. Can you think of anyone who would have wanted to do this to Flora?”

Willow immediately shakes her head. Emilia's eyes fix onto her as Willow fidgets in place as she says the next words. "No, no one. Everyone who knew Flora loved her."

"Anyone at work then?"

"Everyone admired her. Her advocacy work for non-humans made her popular with everyone, especially the younger crowd..." she trails off for a moment. "I suppose one person you should ask would be Jason."

Emilia raises an eyebrow, "Jason?"

Willow nods, "Yes, Jason Cabernet. He's Flora's son, though they're not very close. I remember that they traded a few calls recently."

"How recently?"

"Well, a few days after what happened with Priscilla, I'd say," Willow says, biting her lip. "That was around the time that Flora became convinced that she was next on the list."

"Ms. Black," Levi begins, "is there any way that Jason could've convinced her of that, or maybe even have done something to Flora?"

Willow shakes her head, "No, no, no. Jason and Flora may not have been close, but they were still on friendly terms. I heard from Flora that he was having the same thoughts as her. He was thinking that he may also be next."

Emilia and Levi both share a look. Mother and son both convinced that they were going to die with no distinguishing motive to enlighten anyone of why that is.

Regardless of what everyone would like to think, anyone with a large enough of influence will naturally attract those that seek to covet it, even if it is through murder. However, if greed is not the implied motive here, then what is?

Of course, there is no evidence that any other member of the Cabernet family has committed the murders. They will still need to investigate Jason since he had the same feeling as Flora did before her untimely murder. However, the fact that Flora Cabernet predicted her murder to occur right after Priscilla and also being correct in that assumption is quite curious.

“I see,” Emilia says, pulling out a small black sphere out from her pocket. The object shimmers a brilliant blue in the daylight, both Emilia and Levi’s names shining brightly. “Thank you so much, Ms. Black. If you remember anything else, you can use this communication sphere to contact either Detective Gaumont or myself. Our phone numbers are also listed if you are more comfortable with that, as well.”

Willow gently takes the sphere, cradling it in her palms. “Thank you, Detectives. I hope I was able to help you.”

Levi offers her a smile, “You have done plenty, Ms. Black. If you will please excuse us,” he says, beckoning Emilia to follow him.

They leave Willow, her dark skin radiating in the afternoon Florida sun, her gaze wistful as she stares down at the ground.

CHAPTER 3

Emilia sighs loudly, slumping down at Levi's desk. Her head throbs from the steady cacophony of ringing phones, overlapping chatter, and eye strain from looking at her computer screen for hours on end.

The case has not made much progress since Flora Cabernet's death yesterday, though Willow Black's revelation about Flora's behavior before the murder occurred has been helpful in identifying similar behavioral patterns in other members of the Cabernet family.

"Emilia."

Emilia jolts back into attention, her gaze flickering from the blue specks refracting onto Levi's bulletin board, taking shape into a world map with every recorded location of each Cabernet family member inside both the United States and any other foreign country that a member may be in due to company negotiations.

Levi stands in front of her, the circles under his eyes heavy and dark. Her eyes zero in on the two cups of steaming coffee, one with sweet cream and the other plain black, in his hands.

"Here," he says, placing the cup with sweet cream carefully onto her desk. "You look like shit, so make sure to drink it well."

“Thanks,” Emilia says, sighing in delight as she takes a sip, keeping the cup in her hands to warm them after she puts it back down. “By the way, have you received an answer from Jason Cabernet yet?”

Jason Cabernet is someone who has piqued their interest after Willow mentioned him the day before when Flora Cabernet was murdered. He oversees Public Relations over the Cabernet Company and also doubles as one of the people to be in contact with all three murder victims before everything began. In the first place, there have been quite a few rumors about his sudden bout of paranoia before and after the Cabernets were notified about Flora’s death, which is quite the character change from his usual coolheaded disposition.

Over the last two, three days, there have been whispers from the employees under him about Jason Cabernet’s increased sense of caution and paranoia mirroring Flora Cabernet’s before her death. A development that validates what Willow said when they questioned her.

Whether Jason Cabernet’s anxiety reveals concern over being the next victim or signs of a guilty conscience has not been determined however, so they need to find out what he knows.

“Yeah, we should be good to go in about an hour since he’ll be home by then,” Levi says, taking a sip of his coffee.

Emilia nods, laying her head on the desk.

It's been a rough month so far with barely anything to go on after the three murders. The media attention and pressure from the higher-ups to solve the case as quickly as possible to appease the public has been the most debilitating part. Levi's flakiness lately doesn't help either.

Speaking of...

"Can I ask you a question?" Emilia asks, looking up.

"Shoot," he says tapping his fingers against his cup.

"Where have you been the last few days?"

He looks at her, raising an eyebrow. "Here, obviously. Where else would I be?"

"I mean where have you been in the morning. I usually pick you up in the morning so we can go to work together, but you haven't been home. Is something wrong?"

Levi's fingers stop tapping. He shakes his head. "No, nothing is going on. I just had to run some errands for Pietro. He's been really sick lately, so I've been helping him out."

Emilia lifts her head, "Oh, is he okay?"

"He's fine. It's the air over where we live. You know how it is," he says, waving away her concern. "It happens."

"Alright, well, send him get well wishes from me."

“Will do. Now are we leaving or not? Cabernet isn’t going to wait for us forever.”

Emilia curses under her breath, glancing briefly at the time. “Shit, you’re right. I’ll drive.”

#

Jason Cabernet’s home is large and secure with a remote-controlled gate barring the property away from any prying eyes. The hedges surrounding the house are organized in five concentric circles around ten feet tall, obscuring the view of the windows and other areas of the property.

Emilia stops the car in front of the gate doors and rolls down her window just as an automated voice rings out from a hidden speaker.

“Identify yourselves,” the demand is emphasized further when a floating camera, appearing almost identical to a human eye, flies upward from behind the gate bars, swaying side-to-side in the air. The lens’ eye switches its gaze between Emilia’s face and Levi’s from his place in the passenger seat.

“We’re from Police Headquarters. I am Detective Vasquez, and this is my partner, Detective Gaumont,” she flashes her I.D. and does not put it down until Levi reaches over to show his. The eye stares at the I.D.’s for a few seconds before turning its attention back to their faces.

“What is your business here?”

“We have a few questions for Jason Cabernet pertaining to the murders of Gerald, Priscilla, and Flora Cabernet,” Emilia says, eyes narrowing as the eye freezes for a moment before swaying in the air again.

No more words are uttered as the gate doors swing open.

“Real paranoid guy, isn’t he?” Emilia says dryly as they drive through, earning a snort from Levi in response.

“Have to wonder if the security has always been this way or if it’s his mother’s murder that caused it.”

“I guess we’ll find out soon enough.”

They pull up to a long driveway that separates into a larger platform, making their car rise toward the front entrance, which is noticeably fortified with motion sensors, which can be felt through the weak vibrations pulsing after every step they take. They stop in front of the door, which Emilia notices, has a glint reflecting off a tiny lens of a pinhole camera masquerading as a peephole.

Levi knocks lightly on the door which immediately swings open to reveal the stern face of a middle-aged woman garbed in a black bomber jacket with ‘Cabernet Staff’ emblazoned in blue on the front.

“Detectives Vasquez and Gaumont, please come in,” she says, beckoning them inside. The foyer is completely made up of marble flooring with the Cabernet coat of arms, a gold backdrop with a dark blue anchor encapsulated within a ring of gillyflowers. Ahead of that is two sets of spiral staircases leading to the second-floor landing where

they spot a tall dark-skinned man with notably gold eyes and slit pupils. Jason Cabernet in the flesh.

The gold eyes, like all the Cabernets comes from several of their non-human predecessors belonging to a more cat-like species of non-humans hailing from a distant planet called, Kenides.

The blood of the Kenidan people flows strongly within Jason, who inherited his eye color from his mother, Flora.

“Ah, Detectives,” Jason says, a strained smile forming on his lips. Please come up, we can speak in my study.”

Emilia and Levi make their way to the staircase, each step they take vibrating from the floor through the soles of their shoes in the same way it did outside.

Paranoid, indeed.

They follow Jason through a series of twisting corridors, every wall colorless and blank, a stark contrast to Flora’s cottage, fully decorated with knick-knacks and mementos she acquired over the course of her life.

They walk through an open doorway that showcases a L-shaped white and black desk with a built-in keyboard and a miniature sphere sporadically flashing tiny pinpricks of blue light in the air, forming new computer code and encryptions every few seconds.

Jason gestures to two stiff chairs situated in front of the desk with a wave of his hand. “Please, sit,” he says as he takes his place on the plush white chair behind the desk.

Emilia sits carefully onto the offered chair, glancing to the side at Levi who sits and studies Jason's unsmiling face from across the desk.

"What can I do for you?"

Levi smiles at him for a moment as Emilia pulls out her tablet and readies herself, "We wanted to follow up on something that your mother's friend, Willow Black, said when we questioned her."

Jason raises an eyebrow. "And what would that be?"

"She told us that you thought you were next on the list to be murdered. Do you want to tell us why that is?"

Jason sits back in his chair, staring blankly ahead. "Who else would it be?"

Emilia stops typing for a second, her eyebrows furrowing. That implies there is a process of elimination. A pattern that they hadn't noticed before.

Perhaps...

This time, Emilia asks the question. "Would you like to elaborate on that, Mr. Cabernet?"

Jason lets out a sigh, "Isn't it obvious? The only ones that have been targeted are the ones with high status and who hold an influential position in the advocacy work for non-humans. My cousin, Priscilla, may have only been a few minutes' drive away from Gerald, but Diana lived next door. Why wasn't she killed when she is also a Cabernet?" he does not wait for them to answer.

“Simple. She does not hold any sort of notable position in our company or our family and never has. It’s not rocket science.”

“You came up with this theory after Gerald and Priscilla’s murders. How could you be so sure about your theory? It could have only been a coincidence,” Levi says, jaw clenched.

Emilia chances a quick glance over at her partner, observing his tense body and continuously tapping finger against his leg.

Jason shrugs, “Well, my mom’s dead, so obviously it’s not. It’s only a matter of time until whoever is behind this decides to take me out too.”

“Is that what all the extra security is for?” Emilia asks.

“Indeed, it is. I told my mother to move in with me for the time being, at least until the one murdering our family was caught, but she refused.”

“Ms. Black,” Levi begins, “was very adamant about how paranoid Flora was in the days prior to her murder. Why would she decline your offer? Was the security not up to par with her standards?”

Jason snorts at this. “My security is certainly better than the practically non-existent one she had in her cottage. I have built-in motion sensors on the floors of every heavily trafficked area of my property that can tell me the approximate height and weight of whoever steps on it. I have cameras scattered around the exterior of my home with the only exceptions being the windows because those are bullet-proof. I have numerous guard rotations around the grounds and every servant here is trained in hand-to-hand

combat on the off chance my guards are indisposed. So, no,” he says, “I wouldn’t say it was my security that wasn’t up to par.”

Levi’s eyes narrow and Emilia notices his lips twitching up for a fraction of second, “Then why didn’t she come here?”

Jason’s shoulders slump, “I don’t know. My mother and I,” his voice cracks, “were not the closest, but I still loved her dearly. She came to the same conclusion as me once the murders began, so I thought that would be enough to convince her to come here, but well, you know.”

They do know.

Flora Cabernet was brutally murdered in her defenseless home, even after knowing on some level, that she would be the next one to be killed. It doesn’t make sense.

“We asked Ms. Black the same question, but is there anyone you know of that would want to do this?” Emilia asks, her fingers poised to typing up more notes depending on his answer.

“Could be anyone. Our family has endless power and influence, and plenty would want to take advantage of that. The only one that comes to mind are the protesters against our fight to reform the discriminatory policies against non-humans.”

“Have they been threatening you in any way?”

“They always have,” Jason says, running a hand through his hair. His eyes momentarily stray out the window at the other side of the room. “It doesn’t help that we

aren't fully human either. Gerald was only half and so was Priscilla. My mother half as well and I'm a quarter, and this," he gestures to his eyes, "doesn't help anything either."

Emilia grimaces, knowing he's right. Only a quarter Kenidan or not, no human has the genetic coding necessary for anyone to be born with golden eyes or slit pupils. His heritage shines through and overshadows any human appearance he may have and that is all anyone would focus on.

She glances at Levi and is surprised to see a slight sneer forming on his lips before returning to his usual blank expression. "Then that should be a good start," Levi says. "Can you name anyone specific?"

Jason nods, "I have a feeling it may involve one our employees, Dimitri Haven. He's been more outspoken recently because of the discourse surrounding what happened. I'd check him out first."

"Discourse?" Levi asks, raising an eyebrow.

"There have been some whispers that the deaths of my family are due to wrongdoings we've orchestrated behind the scenes and not because of our advocacy work for equal rights."

Emilia presses her lips tightly together at the admission. There have been several rumors as the Cabernets pushed their advocacy farther into the spotlight, but they have always been the definition of transparent. So why would people assume that they had it coming?

“Has there been wrongdoings, Mr. Cabernet? The more you tell us, the more efficient we can be in finding who did this,” she says.

Jason shoots her a bland look, “Of course there isn’t. Due to prejudice against non-humans, we had to be certain we were doing everything by the book lest someone accuses us of something immoral to reach our goals. It only destroyed my family’s reputation, but it would have tainted the reputations of most, if not all, non-humans since we have Kenidan blood.”

Makes sense. They may have human blood, but most can’t look past the Kenidan blood mixed in, not that there *should* be a problem with having it, but she digresses.

The question is why would someone employed by the Cabernets harbor prejudice against his bosses who are publicly recognized as non-human sympathizers?

“Thank you for your cooperation, Mr. Cabernet. We’ll contact you if we have any more questions.”

CHAPTER 4

The Police Headquarters is located in a grand building, the ground floor's interior is almost entirely white with a surplus of potted plants and trees scattered at the perimeter. Upon the white marble floors is the Police HQ symbol depicting a golden shield and two silver swords forming an 'X' in the center of a black circle.

Emilia and Levi go through the customary security checkpoints, greeting anyone that looks familiar until they step into the elevator. Pushing the button for the seventh floor, Emilia leans all her weight onto the side of the door the second it closes with Levi doing the same.

“That took longer than I thought it would,” she says, blinking slowly down at her hands.

“There was a lot of information,” Levi says, yawning into his fist. “Doesn't help that he was paranoid as hell.”

The security checks leading out of the manor were even more exhausting than the ones going in if that was possible. The paranoia is justified though, considering what happened to his mother and cousins.

“Wouldn't you be too? His family is getting killed off and the only lead we have is some random employee that hates non-humans. If that guy has an alibi, we're back to square one.”

“We’ll find him, Emilia, you know we will,” Levi says, reaching out his fist towards her.

She smiles and bumps it with her own. “I know, I’m just frustrated, I guess. There’s no telling when this guy is going to strike again.”

“All we can do is try our best, so don’t bring yourself down. We’ll get who’s doing this.”

His words are enough to make the weight on her shoulders lighten. He always knows what to say, an ability he’s held since the start of their friendship in the Academy and later, when their partnership first began.

Emilia nudges him with her foot, “Thanks, Levi.”

“No problem.”

The elevator stops on the seventh floor and the doors open to reveal granite floors and colorful walls. The walls are personalized for every detective or officer and can be seen through the glass that showcases each desk or office portioned off from where the criminals are picked up and left to wait when they are being processed in the system.

The whole floor is busy with a small group of handcuffed people already occupying the bench seating provided for them to wait to be processed.

“After this, let’s get some more coffee. Your treat,” she says, walking around the outstretched legs of several drunkards slumped in their chairs.

“My treat again, huh? Will do,” Levi says, rolling his eyes with a smile that swiftly disappears when one of the people waiting to be processed accidentally trips him.

Emilia is able to catch him by the arm before he could stumble further. “Shit, you okay?”

Levi is silent, his attention elsewhere. Emilia turns to look at what he’s staring at and sees that guy that tripped him. He’s an average teenage boy with pale gray skin and purple eyes, a Psychien.

“You have some real nerve, tripping a detective like that,” Levi says. But there’s something off about his voice. It’s not as good-natured as it usually would be. It’s hard and cold. The kind of voice he would use when talking to the worst of the worst.

“Oh, I’m sorry, sir! I didn’t do it on purpose, I was restin’ my eyes and stretchin’ out my legs. I didn’t see you, I swear it,” says the youth, his eyes big and doe-like, wringing his handcuffed hands together in his lap.

Instead of relaxing, Levi tenses up even more in the face of the explanation. “Do you *really* think I would believe such an obvious lie like that? Do I look like an idiot to you, you—”

“Levi,” Emilia interrupts loudly. “It was an accident and he’s already apologized. We have to go and report to the captain, so we don’t have the time for this. Let’s go.”

Levi snorts, but obeys, snatching his arm from her hold as he does.

Once they're out of earshot from the Psychien boy, Emilia turns to him, frowning.
“What the hell was that about? You never get angry like that.”

“I got angry because he tripped me, nothing more.”

“He's a kid and judging from his body language, he was being sincere. If you hadn't gotten so pissed, maybe you would have seen that too.”

Levi sighs, “I did, but it doesn't matter. You can't trust those people.”

She raises an eyebrow, “Those people?”

Levi opens his mouth then closes it again. He's silent for a second. “Criminals, I mean. They lie like nobody's business. You're right though, I shouldn't have gotten so angry over something like that I guess I'm just tired.”

Emilia nods wearily, not completely believing his words, but not wanting to argue before they could report their findings.

They don't talk for the remainder of the time it takes for them to arrive at a lone door with a gold shield engraved in the center. Emilia takes out her tablet as Levi knocks on it and does not open it until they hear, “Come in.”

Inside the door is a large office with cream walls and frames displaying awards, achievements, and family pictures dotting every available space on the walls. The desk is black with red lettering flickering on the surface of it where, Emilia knows, dozens of case files and the information pertaining to them are coming in at record speed.

Seated at the desk in a large, old-fashioned armchair is Captain Jeanie Basset, her face blank as she waves for them to sit down on the chairs in front of the desk. Captain Basset oversees the Police Headquarters in lieu of the sickly Commissioner, whose health has taken a turn for the worse in the last year. Emilia and Levi always have to update her periodically on every case they take, but especially for the ones considered high-profile.

She may be stern with a huge chip on her shoulder, but in Emilia's opinion, she's the one of the most reliable people she has ever met.

“Any progress on the Cabernet case?”

Emilia hands her the tablet as Levi begins to explain. “We were not able to find any experience left by the perp at the crime scene, but we found out some relevant information from both the person who found Flora Cabernet, and Jason Cabernet, the victim's son.”

“Walk me through it,” Bassinet says, quickly swiping through the notes on the tablet as he talks.

Willow Black didn't have much to say, but she told us that Flora was afraid that she would be the next to be killed. Apparently, Jason Cabernet was also afraid he would be next as well, so we questioned him earlier today.

“Anything suspicious about him?”

“No,” Emilia begins, “we checked on the ride back over here and he has a solid alibi. There was a televised meeting that showed him and fifteen others around the time Flora was murdered. Other than believing he would be next and more communication

between him and his mother, there's nothing that implicates his involvement in the murders."

"What did Jason Cabernet have to say then?"

"There wasn't anyone he could think of other than an employee of his. Dimitri Haven, he said he name was," Levi says. "He's apparently someone with a known bias against non-humans and has been getting awfully loud with his opinions ever since the murders began."

Dimitri Haven, huh," Basset says, running a hand through her hair.

Emilia nods, "Yes, he's the one that Jason Cabernet is most suspicious of."

Bassinet absentmindedly flicks through the notes Emilia typed about Jason for a moment before handing it back to her.

"Check him out quickly then. This case has a lot of eyes on it, so I need all your energy to go into this. Get going."

Emilia and Levi stand up, recognizing the dismissal for what it is, and leave the room.

"I'll get the coffee," Levi says quietly. "I'll see you in your office in fifteen minutes."

"I'll look up some info on Haven in the meantime, thanks for the coffee, Lee!" she says, waving.

After watching him go, she makes a beeline to her office, sliding open the door, and closing it behind her. All the walls are frosted glass with two large bookcases filled with trinkets, psychology books, and family photos. The desk is white with a blue outline of a world map taking up most of the surface and two multi-colored keyboards and transparent computer screens perched in front of them.

She flops herself onto the blue rolling chair behind the desk, making sure to carefully place her tablet atop her desk.

She reaches her hand on the underside of her desk, tapping her finger twice on the sensor there to boot up her computer, which erupts into action with a low whirl of sound.

Her keyboards light up and the computer screens widen until they both interconnect to form a curved screen in front of her.

Yawning, Emilia quickly types her username and password, which leads her to the home screen where the official emblem for the Police Headquarters gleams through.

As she accesses the national database, the door opens, revealing Levi with two cups of coffees in his grasp.

“Hey, you’re back early.”

“The coffee line downstairs was a lot shorter than I thought,” he says, closing the door behind him. “Got anything on Haven yet?”

“Nope, I’m searching now. I’m curious to see how much of what Jason Cabernet said is true, though. He wasn’t as scathing as I thought he would be when talking about his mother’s potential murderer.”

“Yes,” Levi replies, sinking into one of the plush armchairs situated in front of the desk. “He’s quite the diplomat.”

Emilia snorts at this, easily recognizing the hidden insult.

Anyone too in control of their words and micro-expressions tend to be considered a nuisance to Levi as it implies that they are hiding something. Of course, this could also be the result of Jason Cabernet’s usual diplomacy regarding his position within the company, but logic dictates that it is the former. But, for a reason she cannot identify, Emilia’s gut says he wasn’t lying about anything he said.

“You think so?”

Levi shrugs his shoulders nonchalantly. “It’s only to be expected,” he’s quiet for a moment, eyebrows furrowing in thought. “But Dimitri Haven being against non-humans and working for someone who is both non-human *and* advocates for them? It’s definitely suspicious,” he finishes, handing her coffee. Three sugars and two creams for her, plain black for him.

Emilia frowns, cradling the cup in one hand while the other types. “He’s considered human, you know.”

“What?”

“Jason Cabernet. He’s three-quarters human and even with the eyes, being only a quarter Kenidan is not enough to be considered non-human.”

“Why does that matter, exactly?” he asks, sipping from his cup.

“It doesn’t matter really,” she says, shooting him a look. “It’s just not a mistake in wording that you would usually make. That’s all.”

Levi doesn’t grace her with a response, content to wait for her to go back to her search, which she does after a few moments.

Dimitri Haven has a lot on him. He does work in the Cabernet Company in the PR department. The same department that Jason oversees.

Having him spread rumors about the Cabernets in the middle of their murder investigation is in poor taste. Being in PR at the same time is borderline catastrophic. Smearing their family name while the murderer has not been brought to justice is deplorable. His low opinion of them could lead to a motive for the murders, but they will have to question him first.

“The guy’s a weasel,” she says, eyes narrowed at her screen. “Definitely a person of interest.”

“Where is he right now?”

“He should still be at work... We can go today or tomorrow, it’s your choice,” Emilia says. Ordinarily, she would want to question him immediately, but she would

rather ask about the forensic report on Flora Cabernet's body before interviewing a possible suspect.

"Tomorrow afternoon, then," Levi says.

"You read my mind," she says, shutting her computer back down. "Tomorrow it is."

CHAPTER 5

Tomorrow brings more clarity after a good night's sleep and a quick stop for breakfast before she drives over to Levi's.

Levi's neighborhood has never been quiet due to the nearby industrial plant that operates at all hours. It's one of the few industrial plants to exist in Florida, with this one being the only one in their city, so the operation never halts. It's worrying, not because of the noise, but because the arsenic emissions present from there puts everyone in Levi's area at a high risk for cancer. Everything, including the groundwater is toxic.

He says it's nothing to worry about, which is why he declined to move when the opportunity arose two months ago. A decision she is still baffled by, especially after the recent news of Pietro falling ill over it.

As Emilia pulls into Levi's driveway, she glances over at the small brick house next to his. Pietro, Levi's neighbor, is watering his plants out front, his pallor a lot less sickly than she would have thought with him being sick enough to ask Levi to do his errands.

Regardless, Pietro and she are still on good terms, have been since he first warmly welcomed Levi to the neighborhood when he moved there five years ago. So, before letting Levi know she arrived, she gets out the car and makes her way to Pietro's driveway.

He spots her when she is only a few feet away, smiling brightly as he puts down his watering can. "Emilia, what a surprise! What brings you over to my humble abode?"

Emilia shrugs, rocking back-and-forth on her feet. “Just wanted to see how you were doing. Levi mentioned you were sick. I told him to send my get well wishes over to you, but well,” she laughs, “you know how forgetful he is.”

Pietro tilts his head to the side, “Sick? I haven’t been sick. Are you sure he wasn’t talking about someone else?”

Emilia freezes, “No, I’m sure it was you. He mentioned you by name and said that you were sick. Even said you needed help with some errands.”

Pietro shakes his head. “I’m sorry, Emilia, but I haven’t been sick. If anything, I’ve been feeling better than usual lately. Maybe it was another Pietro?”

“Uh, yeah, maybe,” she says, her head turning to look in the direction of Levi’s house.

Why would he lie about what he was doing?

“I guess I must’ve been mistaken,” she says, smiling. It seems to put Pietro at ease, his shoulders relaxing and smile widening in response. “Either way, I’m glad you’re alright. It was nice seeing you.”

“Yeah, you too, Emilia. Thank for checking in.”

She waves goodbye to him as she walks back to her car, her smile dimming into a frown with her back turned to Pietro.

It’s odd. Levi never lies to her and yet...

She shakes her head. No use thinking about it now. He probably has a good reason, she thinks, as she honks on the horn and shoots a text to Levi saying she's here for good measure.

A few minutes later, the front door opens with Levi quickly walking to the car and entering.

"Mornin'," he says, "Ready to question Dimitri Haven?"

"Sure, why not," Emilia says, a smile pulling at her lips as she backs out the driveway and begins their journey. There's no need to bring the lie up, especially on their way to question a suspect. She'll ask him about it later. "Note down his body language, while I ask the questions, okay? Every little bit counts."

Levi nods his assent at the request.

Early on in their partnership, both of them decided to tag team on who asks the questions versus the one who observed the interviewee's body language throughout without the distraction of speaking during the process. Afterwards, they would compare every note they took to figure out who is being honest and who is not. Willow Black was one of those interviewees. As was Jason.

Every question that Levi asked never once alarmed Willow and nothing that Emilia could pick up on implied a hidden motive either. They still have to investigate her further and keep an eye on her for the next few weeks as per procedure, but Emilia believes what she said to them is true.

Forty-five minutes later and they arrive at one of the branches of the Cabernet Company. Pulling into a parking space, they both exit, with Emilia handing Levi the tablet.

The building is quite large with two dome-like structures connected by a series of bridges. There are hundreds of people milling about outside and inside is even worse with all the security checkpoints it takes to even make it inside. She supposes the Cabernet murders have been spooking more than just the family.

After three pat-downs, two run throughs at the metal detectors, and a quick interview about the reason for their visit, they were able to make it to Dimitri Haven's office.

His secretary opens the door for them, and they get their first look at him.

Dimitri Haven is a lean man with a greasy comb-over and long, spindly fingers. His eyes are as black as beetles once they settle to watch Levi and her sit at the two chairs in front of the desk.

"What can I do for you both?" Dimitri asks, giving them a too-wide smile.

Emilia grimaces slightly before smiling back at him. "Just some questions, Mr. Haven. I'm Detective Vasquez and this is my partner, Detective Gaumont. We're investigating the Cabernet murders and we were told by your boss, Jason Cabernet, that you've been spreading some rumors about the family ever since the murders started. Can you tell us a little about that?"

Dimitri rolls back his shoulders, his smile fixed onto his face. “I’m simply theorizing about what happened like everyone else. The Cabernets are pioneers to the non-human movement and are widely loved by the populace for it. Who would want to kill them? So, maybe there’s something no one knows about them. Something that someone would kill them over,” he shrugs. “It’s just something to think about to pass the time.”

“Pass the time?” Emilia says, raising an eyebrow at his nonchalant tone. “Three people were brutally murdered, and you use them to pass the time?”

“Some would say it’s in poor taste, but I’m not doing anything that anyone else hasn’t. Everyone wants to know what’s going on and why, so I’m just throwing in a few ideas I’ve had. That’s all.”

“How did you come up with these ideas in the first place?”

Dimitri interlocks his fingers as he stares at her. “The Cabernets, Detective Vasquez, are a big family. There have been no scandals, and everything related to them has been squeaky clean. Now how can that be?”

“Not a clue, but I’m *sure* you’ll tell me.”

“The only way,” he says, ignoring her comment, “is to hide all their dirty laundry by any means necessary. Jason Cabernet is the head of the PR department and the only one in the best position to smooth over any inconsistencies that may show up.”

“Inconsistencies?” Emilia asks, Levi typing up a storm next to her. “Can you elaborate on that?”

“It’s not anything concrete yet,” Dimitri says, leaning back into his chair. “But no one is innocent. They preach about doing the right things and giving everyone in need a helping hand, but is that what they’re actually doing? No one is this helpful. No one. They have to be hiding something.”

The man has a point, but Emilia will be damned before she admits it. Whether the Cabernets had skeletons in their closet or not, it still doesn’t excuse the slandering of the same family that puts money in his pocket.

“And what about you, Mr. Haven? You don’t seem all that clean yourself.”

He raises an eyebrow, “Oh? There a reason for that?”

“I looked you up. There are piles of complaints processed by your HR department about you. Your fellow co-workers have not taken kindly to the discriminatory comments you’ve made about non-humans. You hate them, or at least, think them lesser. So, why work at a company dedicated to their betterment in society? Why work in the PR department where its whole purpose is to persuade more people to sign up for that cause?”

Dimitri clicks his tongue. “Why do you think, Detective? It’s easier this way. I don’t like the bastards, but it doesn’t change how the government has been slowly moving towards passing the Equal Rights Bill. Whether I like it or not, they *will* be on the same footing as us humans. I just want to cash in the check before that happens, so I can fund my retirement later. You wouldn’t believe how much money you get when working for the “cause”.” he says, making air quotes.

“I see,” Emilia says, jaw clenching. “Alright then, Mr. Haven, where were you from six to seven a.m. two days ago?”

He scoffs, “You’re joking right?”

“I can assure you that I’m really not.”

“I was here, working. You can review the surveillance footage and my clock-in hours. Now, if we’re done here, Detectives,” he says, straightening up, “I have work to do.”

Levi stops typing and takes out a white communication sphere, marked with his initials. If you need to contact us, you can use this,” he says. “We’ll be taking our leave now. Thank you for your time.”

Emilia sends him a tight smile in farewell and gets up from her chair. “Thank you for your time, Mr. Haven.”

They leave, Emilia’s teeth grinding all the while. “We’ll need to check the surveillance footage,” she tells Levi. “I doubt the people here will give it to you even if you flash your badge at them, so you’ll have to contact Jason for access to the records.”

“Will do. How about you?”

“I’m going to report back to Captain Basset with our findings. Call me whenever you’re done with watching the footage.”

#

It's late by the time she makes it home. The report she had to make to Captain Basset was the worst part of her day since she had to admit that they were no closer to catching the killer.

At this point, she's exhausted and ready to collapse on her kitchen floor since she doubts, she could make it to her bedroom when her phone rings. A phone call from the Police HQ's medical examiner, Geneve. It's later than she would usually contact her, but Emilia still picks up, rubbing her eyes as she does.

"Hey, Geneve. What did you find?"

"Emilia, you're not gonna believe what I found."

Emilia's forehead wrinkles. "What?"

"It wasn't blunt force trauma that killed her! It was poison."

"What kind of poison?" Emilia asks, looping her car keys through the hook next to the door.

"Toxicology report shows arsenic and quite a large amount too. That's not the only thing though. There's evidence that this poisoning has been going on for few days, most likely through ingestion. She succumbed to the last dose before she was beaten. The wounds she sustained from the blunt instruments used occurred post-mortem."

"Shit," she pinches her nose. "And arsenic is relatively easy to come by if you know where you're looking... Do you know exactly how long she was being poisoned for?"

“I would say around two to three days. The amount was very little, and you only need less than 1/8 of a teaspoon to kill someone, but it was a very minute amount at first.”

“Well, that changes things,” Emilia says, biting her lip. “Thanks, Geneve, you just gave me a lot to think about.”

“No problem.”

Emilia hangs up, sticking her phone back into her pocket. Arsenic was not the result she was expecting, but it does narrow the suspect pool quite a bit.

It’s easy enough nowadays to procure, but not many people know where they can get it. The actual poisoning can occur due to contamination with the usual culprits being groundwater, soil, and sediments. This happens most frequently in industrial areas where arsenic compounds are used. So, if Flora Cabernet was beaten after she died, it may be because the killer knew that the arsenic would give his location away.

Emilia stops at the thought, heart pounding in her chest. There’s only one industrial plant in the city where arsenic can be found. The one where Levi lives near to.

“No, nothing is going on. I just had to run some errands for Pietro. He’s been really sick lately, so I’ve been helping him out.”

But Pietro wasn’t sick, and he wouldn’t have reason to lie, not about something so mundane. Levi lied for no reason. He was gone in the mornings she would usually pick him up at, a time ranging from six to eight in the morning. The only times he missed those morning pick-ups were in the last few days before Flora Cabernet’s murder.

Arsenic. Not only just that, but arsenic poisoning that spanned over a few days before finally doing her in. Arsenic that could easily be obtained through high concentrations in the groundwater around the industrial plant by Levi's house.

Her eyes unwittingly stray toward her coffee machine, sitting innocently on her countertop. There were two cups of coffee at the cottage. One was half-empty with black coffee, the other one, though shattered, had lighter brown coffee stains. Levi drinks black coffee. He missed their morning carpools, he lied about where he was.

She closes her eyes and sinks down onto the floor. He doesn't have an alibi, she thinks, her mind spinning. But why would he kill the Cabernets? What's his motive?

Plain hatred?

Levi has shown increasingly aggressive reactions when faced with non-humans. That Psychien boy on their way to report to the captain, the strange mannerisms he would exhibit when interacting with a non-human person.

That can't all be what it is though. There has to be more. You don't just kill high-profile people because you hate what they are. That's not logical and Levi has always been the epitome of logic.

What's missing?

Wait.

Emilia opens her eyes and springs back up onto her feet. "Shit!"

She takes her phone out her pocket, hands sweating as she checks for any missed calls from Levi. Nothing.

He was supposed to go over to Jason Cabernet's manor and look over the surveillance footage with him. She sent him there alone where it would only be the two of them because no servant of Jason's would have the clearance to view any footage at the company building for any reason.

There aren't any witnesses.

She runs out the door, not bothering to lock it behind her.

CHAPTER 6

The ride over to Jason's home is filled with anxiety. Emilia mostly driving way over the speed limit, glancing at her blank phone screen for any notification from her partner.

There are none for the whole drive.

She arrives at the front security gates in record time, rolling down her window as the eye camera floats up to record her. "What is your business here?" the automated voice asks.

Emilia smiles shakily and flashes her badge toward the camera. "It's Detective Vasquez again. My partner, Detective Gaumont, should have arrived a few hours before me. I was busy with another matter, so I couldn't come with him. There's some surveillance footage I need to see regarding to the Cabernet case. Can you grant me access?"

The voice speaks no more, but the gates open, which is all she can ask for.

She drives forward, impatiently waiting for the platform to rise to the main house.

The security still works, which is good news for the people inside. Jason Cabernet may still be alive. Hopefully.

She gets out of the car, making sure to tuck her handgun in the back of her pants, leaving the holster empty.

A different servant from her first visit opens the door, a young man this time with blonde curls and freckles for days. “Hello, Detective Vasquez! Mr. Cabernet is upstairs in his study. He asked that no one disturb since he and Detective Gaumont are going over some footage, but I’m sure he’ll be glad to see you,” he says, cheerful.

“Ah, is that right?” Emilia asks, chuckling nervously as they make their way to the study.

“Yup. Between me and you,” his voice drops to a whisper, “they’ve been in there a *long* time. Who knows what Mr. Cabernet is like right now? He’s such a crabapple this late at night.”

“Then I guess we better hurry,” she says, quickening her pace. The young man seems to be surprised at first, but soon matches her.

A few minutes later, they finally arrive in front of the door to the study. “I can take it from here, thank you,” Emilia says, waving.

The servant smiles and waves back, “If you’re sure, Detective. If you need anything, just yell.”

She waits until he’s well out of range before she opens the door. It creaks open, the whole study dark and silent. She holds her breath, squinting into the darkness.

“Well, this is awkward.”

Emilia flinches, “Levi,” she whispers.

“Close the door.”

She swallows, obeying the command. Once the door closes, the lights switch back on, momentarily blinding her.

The scene in front of her is enough to make her squeamish.

Blood is the first thing she notices. It seems like every inch of the office is covered with it. A small television on the desk is still playing footage of the company building they were in only a few hours before.

On the floor is Jason Cabernet’s body, his neck slit ear to ear with blood still weakly spurting from the wound, and eyes rolled into the back of his head. Then there’s Levi, sitting precariously on the chair behind the desk, head cocked to the side as he watches her.

Emilia steps back, nausea crawling up her as she stares into Levi’s manic eyes. “It was you all along,” she says, jaw clenching.

Levi tilts his head even further to the side, the corner of his lips turning up as he assesses her. “You seem upset.”

Emilia scoffs, shaking her head. “Me, upset? I’m more than upset, Levi, *what the fuck* are you doing?”

He shrugs, sinking further into the chair as he crosses his legs. “I thought it was fairly obvious, Emilia,” he smiles mockingly at her for a moment. “Or are you having

trouble? I thought you were smarter than that, but I can always explain if you're having difficulties."

Emilia reaches back to her gun still tucked securely in the back of her belt. She takes it out, freezing all movement.

Levi's attention flickers from the gun back up to Emilia, laughing softly at her hesitant expression. "Still reluctant? I honestly thought I'd be in cuffs by now. You've never taken this long to deal with a suspect."

"You're not just any suspect and you know that," she snaps, her hands finally raising the gun up toward him, flicking the safety off as she does so.

He rolls at her eyes, not alarmed in the slightest as he stares into the gun barrel. "I think we both know you're not gonna shoot me."

"Then you severely underestimate my resolve."

"I don't," he says, "but I also know that if you wanted to, you would have done so by now."

Emilia grimaces, knowing his words to be true, but not wanting to admit it. Especially not in front of her partner's smug face and blood-stained hands.

Her eyes go unwillingly back to the body on the floor. Jason Cabernet's throat is ravaged. The force Levi used to slice his throat being enough to almost sever his head from his shoulders.

She can't imagine the pain and betrayal he would have felt before he finally died. Having invited someone he thought he could trust, believing he's helping the investigation, just to realize he helped the killer instead.

"I'm not going to shoot you," she says. "Arresting you takes precedence and while I'm doing that, maybe you can tell me why the fuck you've been murdering the Cabernets."

Levi snorts. "You still haven't figured it out?"

Emilia grits her teeth, deciding to take a deep breath before she completely loses her cool.

"Why then? Explain it to me since you think I'm so stupid."

"The Cabernets," Levi begins, for once, not goadingly, "are advocates for non-humans."

Emilia bites back the "*No shit*," that almost slips out at his words. Leave it to Levi to point out obvious information that everyone is aware of. But why is that important in the wider scheme of things?

Unless...

Levi had been shaped by his experiences from long ago. It's why he became a cop in the first place. His aunt, who raised him after his parents abandoned him, was someone he greatly loved and admired. He was never the same after she was murdered.

Emilia's eyes widen.

She was murdered.

Levi's beloved aunt was murdered by her ex-boyfriend who was upset when she deigned to try and get away from him. That same ex-boyfriend was a non-human.

She closes her eyes. "Please don't tell me the reason is what I'm thinking. *Please*, Levi," she begs, eyes burning once they open again to see Levi's face twisted in rage.

"You act like that reason doesn't justify what I'm doing."

"That's because it doesn't! You murdered so many just because they were advocates for non-humans, a *worthy* cause by the way, just because your aunt was murdered by someone who was non-human? That's a sickening reason and you know it," Emilia says, her gun still pointed straight at him.

Levi shakes his head, "You don't understand. You've never understood, Emilia, and that's your problem. I'm cleansing the world one by one because I do the things I do. You should be *thanking* me."

The nausea worsens, crawling up her throat as Levi begins justifying his actions.

"These non-humans," Levi waves his hand, like he's flicking away a fly, "they're nothing. Less than nothing. Practically animals. Even as a kid, I never understood why they were pitied so much. They invade our planet and expect love and adoration? Give me a break," he spits, eyes narrowing.

"Levi Gaumont, you are under arrest," Emilia blurts out, her voice sounding steadier than she expected. "You have the right to remain silent, anything you say—"

“Seriously?” he scoffs, shaking his head. “You won’t even hear out an old friend.”

“Hear out an old friend? You murdered four people. As far as I’m concerned, we’re no longer friends.”

“That’s all it takes then...”

Emilia grinds her teeth, her hands tightening her grip on her gun. This isn’t the Levi she knows, or maybe this is what he always was, and she is just now realizing it.

“There is something deeply wrong with you if you think that killing four people isn’t enough to drop someone,” she says, voice surprisingly steady after the horror she witnessed at her partner’s hands. “Either way, I’m bringing you in. So, we’ll do this again. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can be used against you in court. You have the right to talk to a lawyer for advice before we ask you questions...” she continues giving him his Miranda Rights, desperately trying to ignore Levi’s sickening smile as she does.

#

The interrogation room is dark and cold, a stark contrast from the warmth and bright hues upstairs where Emilia and Levi’s offices reside. Levi sits alone at the table situated in the center where the one-way viewing screen can document his every move. Emilia stands behind the screen, hidden from view, her jaw clenching at Levi’s amused smile.

It was decided that she was too close to the case now that there is overwhelming evidence of Levi's involvement in the Cabernet murders. Having known him since their Academy days and having worked together for the last ten years as they both rose further in rank; she was labeled as compromised by the captain. It's feels unfair, but she knows why it had to be done.

She blows out a breath as she looks on. The door inside the interrogation room bursts open, revealing Captain Bassinet, her glare fixating immediately upon Levi's still form, the tablet holding all the data from the Cabernet case file Levi and Emilia built cradled in her hands.

Captain Bassinet lightly drums her fingers on the screen of a tablet as she sets it down onto the table. She turns on the tablet and slides it toward Levi, who instead, decides to meet her gaze head-on.

He shifts in his seat, leaning back into his chair and stretching out his legs. "So, did Emilia decide she's too good to slum it in here with me?"

"We're not here to talk about Detective Vazquez, Gaumont." Bassinet snaps.

She jabs her finger at the tablet, urging him to look down at it, which he does with a quick roll of his eyes. "This is Gerald Cabernet," she begins as she swipes past every photo of the first crime scene. Emilia spots one of the most brutal ones taken, with the steak knife buried into Gerald Cabernet's eye socket, his face twisted in pain, and mouth forced shut with duct tape.

“I’m aware of who this is, Captain,” Levi says, yawning. “I worked on this case, remember?”

“You made this case, Gaumont,” Bassinet says as she grips his hair and pushes his head down, his nose only a few centimeters from the tablet’s screen. “*You* did this. Now, what I want to know is why.”

Levi laughs, the ringing sound of it echoing throughout the room. The sound seems to surprise the captain enough that she lets go of his hair, letting Levi look up at her from his hunched over position. “Didn’t Emilia tell you? I did it because the Cabernets are non-human, and if that wasn’t enough, they’re trying to change the law to accommodate those freaks,” he says, a sneer on his lips as he turns his head to spit on the ground. “I was doing all of humanity a favor.”

“You were murdering people in cold blood for something they have no control over because of your own prejudice,” Basset says, shaking her head. “Humanity was not your motivation. You did it for yourself. Why?”

Levi gives her a measuring look, something Emilia recognizes as pity. He truly thinks Captain Basset has no hope of grasping his purpose. She wonders when he started to believe his own justifications to villainize non-humans. She wonders if she could have steered him away from this path if she only picked up on it sooner.

“You read my file before I was hired,” Levi says, shrugging. “That should have told you all you needed to know.”

“Yes,” Bassinet says, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Your aunt. She was murdered by an Ilxan. I know the story.”

Emilia sighs, already seeing the early signs of an outraged retort from Levi with how tense his body became at the mention of his aunt.

Ilxans come from a planet called Ilxia, which is in a separate system, light-years away from their home Solar System. They settled on Earth after several widespread natural disasters took place on their home planet and ended up staying even when Ilxia was cleared to be habitable again. There had been a public outcry against letting them stay, but eventually, after years of fighting, the Ilxians were able to stay. This occurred around the year 2110.

If she remembers correctly, Levi’s aunt, the woman who raised and loved him after his parents abandoned him, was murdered by an Ilxian only a year after this event occurred.

It doesn’t excuse his actions, but now Emilia can make some sort of sense over his botched logic. He believes if humans were not so quick to accept the presence of non-humans, then maybe his aunt would still be alive.

Captain Bassinet, having also figured out that much, scoffs, not letting Levi talk back for a moment. “You’re not special, you know. Everyone has lost someone whether it be from a human or non-human.”

Levi briefly closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. “I know you’re trying to make me angry, but it’s not going to work.”

“I’d say you were plenty angry already with how you brutalized the Cabernets. You want to believe you’re in control, but you’re not. It’s clear in the people you murdered, Gaumont. Gerald Cabernet was clean compared to the rest, but Flora Cabernet? She was barely recognizable, same thing with Jason. *You* lost your cool, so don’t tell me about getting you angry. You got there all by yourself.”

“I have every right to be angry—”

“No, you don’t,” she says, slamming her hand onto the table. The resounding bang is enough to momentarily shut him up. “You have the logistical skills of a toddler and you’re too stupid to realize it. You’re taking out your rage on people who had nothing to do with your aunt. It was *one* person. A person who was sick in the head, yes, but only one. Whether he was non-human or not, it doesn’t justify what you’ve done or *why* you’ve done it.”

Levi’s jaw clenches, but he doesn’t deny her words. “I did it because we are better off without them muddying things up in our planet,” he says slowly. “Yes, I’m angry, but I’m doing it for the humans that don’t know what non-humans are capable of. That’s all. If I deserve to be arrested over that, then, well,” he shakes his head. “We’re in worse shape than I thought.”

Captain Basset huffs, removing her hand from the table, and sitting down for the first time since she entered the interrogation room. “How did you do it then? All these murders... How?”

Levi waves her off, struggling because of the cuffs. “Gerald Cabernet was easy, not as easy as Flora, but still a piece of cake. His security really wasn’t up to par for being the family head.”

“You snuck in easily enough,” Basset agrees. “Why a knife? Everyone else you either bludgeoned or strangled, but he was the only one who you let bleed out. Why?”

Levi hums, sinking back into his chair. “Gerald always wore an eyepatch, you know. When I snuck into his room, I was curious. He’s a much heavier sleeper than you would think, too, because he didn’t even stir when I lifted up the patch,” he muses, looking off into the distance. “I thought there’d be some sort of scar or blemish, but no, it turns out he inherited more of those Kenidan looks than anyone thought.”

Basset raises an eyebrow in silent question.

“Once the eyepatch was off, the fucker woke up and when he did, I saw his eye. The one we usually see on TV is normal, but the covered one is as gold and slit-pupiled as any full-blood Kenidan’s. So, I decided to be poetic. Simple, really.”

Emilia flinches at the nonchalant tone he adopts, her fists clenching at the small smile forming on his face.

“And Priscilla?”

“She was the easiest next to Flora,” Levi admits, crossing his legs. “Since she just got back from her trip to Yemen, she ordered everyone who stayed to secure the house in her absence back to their own homes for a change. So, once she went to bed, it was easy

enough to asphyxiate her in her sleep. Nice and easy. I didn't want to get too brutal because that makes things look suspicious."

"Two different methodologies," Basset notes. "Clever. But what about Flora and Jason Cabernet? You were leagues more violent when dealing with them. What changed?"

Levi rolls his eyes, "Are you seriously asking me? They look the most like your standard Kenidan and I wasn't about to go easy on a monster. The arsenic was too easy of a death for Flora and after I beat her corpse, I was beyond exhausted. The coffee helped, so I can't complain, but still."

Emilia remembers the half-empty cup of coffee with startling clarity now. She feels sick to her stomach just thinking about it. Flora, graciously making coffee for the kind detective who had been coming over for the past few days to talk to her about investigating her niece and nephew's murderer.

Flora, needing to go to the restroom and having her coffee spiked for the last time by that same detective.

It doesn't help that even with her cooling corpse, skull smashed in and blood congealing on the floor, Levi still brewed another cup of coffee in an attempt to stay awake after the adrenaline rush faded.

Disgusting.

The captain remains blank in front of Levi, though, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of showing a reaction in the face of his callousness.

“Alright, fine,” Basset says, “then what happened with Jason? You were rushed, sloppy. The only reason Detective Vasquez was able to arrest you was because she caught you in the act. Something that has never occurred before. What happened?”

“Jason was... a particularly annoying pest. The man was stupid enough to tell us every security measure he employed at his property with barely any provocation, but his security was still advanced enough that I couldn’t get in without alerting someone. So, I had to go as myself.”

“Why take the risk?”

“I knew Emilia would be the one to find me. Granted, I thought she would help me instead of arresting me, but well,” he lifts his hands away from the table, handcuffs clinking together. “That obviously didn’t work out.”

“You know Detective Vasquez better than anyone,” Basset says, her eyes never straying from Levi’s. “You should’ve known she wouldn’t be an accomplice to this crusade of yours.”

“I guess I did,” he says, tapping his finger against the table, smiling as he turns his head to look straight at the screen where Emilia stands. “But I thought she would see reason or maybe even look the other way. I was wrong. Nothing else to it. My only regret is that I didn’t take more of them down with me.”

Emilia turns away from the screen, breathing in a shuddering breath.

That’s it then. Her partner is a lunatic and doesn’t display a single ounce of remorse for what he’s done. Four people dead because of one man and his skewed ideals.

Nothing else that can be gleaned from the interrogation matters because she has her answer. There's no hope for him, so she won't waste any more time on him.

As she exits the viewing room, she rests two fingers on her sternum and takes a second to breathe. Levi Gaumont is dead to her. Partner, best friend, it doesn't matter. He chose his path. Now the only thing she can hope for is a life sentence without opportunity for parole and some peace of mind to the friends and family of the victims.

She sighs softly, briefly glances at the door that leads to the interrogation room and walks away.

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