

Father
of the
Punished



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Chapter 1: Artifacts

As Tristain Lanes approached the security checkpoint, he rolled down his window to meet a guard.

The guard exited the booth and stepped toward the car, frowning. He rested his forearm on the frame of the car's window as he peeked into Tristain's vehicle. "Sir, this area is for employees only. I don't see a badge, so you'll have to park at the public lot just like everyone else."

Tristain forced a smile. "I have an appointment."

The guard stared at him with irritation. "Do you?"

Tristain nodded nervously. "There's a permit here." He had a certificate resting on his lap, all prepared for presentation. He held it up, double-checking it was the correct document, and passed it to the guard.

The guard snatched it and held it up to his eyes, squinting. His frown faded as he read the contents. "I see. Well, since you have clearance, I guess you can head to the Depot. I did not expect some kid to be going there, of all places. I do apologize."

"Thank you."

The guard pointed down the road. "You will go this way where you'll come to a sign."

"Which will probably have more directions."

"You'll need to know this next part. It's important."

“Sure, sorry.”

“Because of the announcement at the Castle, all primary entry points will be outfitted with additional security measures. There’s a small exterior wing that connects to the main building—that’s where you’ll go.”

“Alright, thanks. Will I need the certificate?”

The guard rolled his eyes. “I don’t know how else you’ll get into the building.” He returned the certificate to Tristain.

Tristain accepted it and placed it back on his lap. “Thanks.”

The guard entered the booth and pressed a button. The gate to the Castle’s grounds slowly slid open and then stopped with a resonating *clang*.

Tristain glanced at the guard expectantly.

The guard looked back with a blank stare. “Well? You can go on, the gate is open.”

Tristain shifted his car into gear. After slowly passing through the gate, he drove down the road. He passed multiple signs declaring the position staff must hold to enter each department.

Tristain reached a sign that read ‘Supply Depot’. Looking into the distance, he spotted the entrance the gate officer had described.

Tristain advanced toward the protruding exterior wing that housed the Supply Depot. The paved road turned to gravel, and a dust cloud billowed behind him. As he approached his destination, he was confronted by two guards.

Although discreet, they were both visibly armed with stunning devices. This was highly unusual, as it was only in rare instances that the Police Force officers used these devices. They were exclusively reserved for pacifying people who could not be controlled otherwise.

Although similarly armed to officers of the Police Force, the guards at the Castle were under the jurisdiction of the Royal Security Force.

One of them walked up to Tristain with a stern expression. “Turn off your engine and present your authorization statement.”

Tristain turned the key in his car’s ignition. The vehicle groaned and shuddered before coming to a stop. He transferred the certificate to the guard.

The guard received it gently. He produced a sheet of stickers from his bag and placed one on the certificate. The sticker began to smoke and sear the paper’s surface.

After a moment, he raised the certificate above his head, allowing the wind to dissipate the miniature smoke cloud. He passed it back to Tristain. “You’re cleared.”

Tristain looked at it closely. It now had a perfect picture of his face burned onto its surface.

The guard started walking toward the entrance to the building. “Please come this way. Your contact will be arriving shortly.”

Tristain opened the car door and stepped out. He caught up with the guard and stopped at the door.

The guard held his badge to a reader, and the door opened with a click. “You will meet your contact inside. You will proceed down the hall where you will come to a checkpoint. Stop there and wait for further instructions.”

Tristain stepped into the building. “So, when I meet Doctor—”

The guard shushed Tristain loudly. “You should not disclose the name of your contact. This is for your protection, as well as theirs.”

Tristain backed into the hall. “Does this have to do with the announcement today? The security and all that?”

“No. This is by request of your contact. You should know this.”

Tristain tensed as the guard closed and locked the door from the outside, leaving him alone in the hallway.

Tristain walked down the corridor until he reached a set of double doors. He hesitated, then pushed them open.

Another guard was waiting on the other side. She held up a radio and spoke into it. “Checkpoint Two has been reached.”

Tristain stopped after reaching her. “Where do I go from here?”

“You will be rerouted to your contact. Continue down the hall.”

Tristain did as instructed and ventured deeper into the building. He eventually came across another set of doors. Once again, there was a guard on the other side.

The guard announced Tristain’s arrival over the radio, then turned to guide him down the hall.

Neither Tristain nor the guard spoke as they traveled through the maze-like building. Tristain nervously followed as the guard made abrupt turns.

Finally, they reached a giant vault door. The door was open, and a woman stood inside.

The guard strode back down the halls, leaving Tristain at the vault.

The woman walked over to Tristain and shook his hand. “Hello, Tristain. It’s good to meet you. I am Doctor Venn. Come this way, I’ll show you to the artifact room.”

Tristain followed her into the giant vault and came to a wall with several reinforced doors.

Dr. Venn opened one and guided Tristain deeper into the Repository. “I will show you the main artifact chamber. It contains most of the classes of relics you seemed interested in. According to your application, that is.”

Tristain had applied for the visit several months in advance. Although a unique request, he had managed to secure a time with Dr. Venn, the director of the small artifact preservation team. The visit had almost been canceled due to the announcement from the

Castle, but Dr. Venn understood the difficulty of scheduling the visit and decided to follow through with the appointment.

Once inside the room, Tristain looked around to witness shining artifacts behind glass cases. The room was dimly lit, and the air was dry.

Dr. Venn stopped in front of him, blocking his way. “What you see here is highly confidential. You must swear to never reveal what you see here to anyone.”

Tristain nodded. “I swear.”

Dr. Venn stepped aside. “You seemed particularly interested in the health and well-being charms when you sent me the letter. This room has the majority of them. Historically, there are certain criteria that objects must follow to be considered a charm. Because of that, I’ve only indexed artifacts here that comply with the descriptions.”

Tristain looked around, dazed by the glittering artifacts of various kinds. Some of them were pendants, others bracelets. Most of them were some variety of jewelry.

He turned back to Dr. Venn. “That’s a good amount of work you’ve done here. This must have been built up over a long time. How long have you been working on it?”

“As long as I’ve worked here, and I have worked here for over two decades. All the artifacts in this room came from the ancient kingdom’s sorcerers. I know quite a lot about these.”

Tristain walked from glass case to case. “Well, what about the modern sorcerers?”

Dr. Venn looked at him with a stern expression. “There is no such thing. What you see here is the result of years of searching. When an artifact is found, I examine it and store it here.”

Tristain walked from one item to the next, peering at the small runes inscribed into each charm. When he came to a certain pendant, he stopped. It had small marks depicting blades.

He examined it inquisitively. “I haven’t studied one like this before. The outer inscription is an X, and since it has a circle, it is

a Benefit. This other mark makes it a Dampener too. I think this would minimize the effect that blades would have on the wearer. I'm not sure what the *X* means, though."

Dr. Venn stared at the charm from behind Tristain's back. "You sure know a lot about artifacts. Where did you learn all this?"

"Some friend of my father had an interesting collection of journals. They had all sorts of explanations and research on charms. I thought they were neat."

"You should not share that information with others. There are people who want to...abuse enchantments such as these. You need to keep your research to yourself."

"If it's so secret, then why did you let me visit you here?"

Dr. Venn exhaled slowly. "Those who use this knowledge wisely will accomplish a lot. I think you are one of those people."

Tristain smiled. "Well, thank you."

Dr. Venn shifted her attention to another part of the collection. "There's a lot to look at, so I'll show you more."

The two continued until they found a silver ring on a stand. It appeared to be a signet ring, but it had no emblem.

Tristain crouched low to observe it. "This is interesting. Why is there no emblem?"

"This signet ring was used by cultists to signal each other telepathically. They couldn't send words or thoughts, just emotions. The seal is supposed to be fused with your bone, under the skin."

"Huh. That would require...surgery, right?"

"It's possible. Anyway, I have extensively documented all the artifacts in this room. I can retrieve one if you would like to study it, but there are enough that having them all on display would be impractical."

"What are the files on the anti-blade charm?"

Dr. Venn hesitated. "The record is not complete."

"Ah, I see."

Suddenly, the room shook violently, and a boom sounded from the distance. Lights flickered, and artifacts jingled.

Tristain flinched. "What was—"

A guard burst into the repository. He held a stunning device at his side. "We must evacuate!"

Both Tristain and Dr. Venn whipped around to face him.

The guard gestured for Tristain to follow. "You will follow me. Your contact will execute emergency staff procedure."

Tristain and the guard rushed out of the room and down the hall. The massive vault door had closed itself behind them and was rotating into the locked position.

They continued running down the corridor. They soon reached a set of thick double doors.

The guard put his finger on an access panel and the doors unlocked with a click. He looked Tristain dead in the eye. "There's a secure room over here. We'll wait this out until we can figure out what's going on."

"What is going on? I heard a loud sound."

The guard did not respond.

The two continued until they reached an office where other staff rushed around. Voices chattered over portable radios.

"We have another one confirmed," one voice said.

"The cloud is beginning to clear."

"Escorting the King out now."

"All authorized personnel switch to secure channel thirty-four. Top priority message."

Tristain's eyes darted around. "What's going on?"

The guard rushed him along. "It doesn't matter. We'll take care of it."

"Is the King doing alright?"

“Most certainly, yes.”

The guard continued to hustle Tristain down the hall. Eventually, he slowed down. “This is the secure room right around this corner.”

Tristain passed through a heavy door and into a small room with frosted windows. It had chairs, a drinking fountain, and a desk, but not much else. Another door led to a restroom, though a sign stated that it was not operational. No one else was there.

The guard stood in the hall. “Just wait here, we’ll get you back as soon as we can.”

Within moments, he was gone.

Chapter 2: Intrusion

Tristain waited in the secure room. He sat as still as possible, straining to hear the noises outside.

At first, he heard movement. Boots struck tile and cement as guards rushed toward the source of the booming noise.

Shortly after, voices began speaking. A few staff members had remained within the building to protect and monitor it. There was the occasional beep of a radio and garbled chatter.

Finally, loud footsteps started approaching. Someone with large boots stormed across the hall.

A staff member confronted them but was cut off by a muffled *zap*. The noise sounded again, then a body fell to the floor.

The newcomer began walking toward the secure room. Their silhouette was visible through the frosted glass.

Tristain slowly stepped away from the door. After taking a few steps, he bumped into a desk. This large desk sat in the middle of the room and made a loud screech against the tile floor as it moved.

The intruder rushed to the room’s door and tried the handle. After finding it locked, they started pounding on the door.

Tristain looked around urgently. There was nothing to hide behind, and he would be easily seen under the desk. He tried

opening the door to the ‘out-of-order’ restroom, but it wouldn’t budge.

A *zap* sounded again as the intruder shot the door with a stunning device. Their frustration escalated as the door resisted their attempts to break in.

Tristain flipped the desk on its side for cover, though he didn’t hide behind it. He crossed the room and flattened himself against the wall. If the door were to burst open, he wouldn’t be seen at first.

The intruder continued to fumble with the door handle. They were getting increasingly impatient.

Tristain tried to suppress the sound of his breathing, but it was still noticeable. The rattling door handle rested only a couple of inches from his waist.

The intruder continued to shoot the door with their stun weapon, but it caused no damage at all. They groaned and shouted with anger.

Eventually, they stopped attacking the locked door and held still for a moment. Their gloves scratched against the metal of their weapon.

Then, a loud *click* sounded.

Tristain faltered after hearing the *clink* of metal and mechanical parts being slid into place. He bolted behind the table.

Seconds later, a loud *crack* echoed across the room and vibrated through Tristain’s skull. Several pieces of metal flew at astounding velocities through the space he had just occupied.

After taking several hits, the door’s handle fell to the floor. The intricate mechanisms of its lock were now exposed.

Tristain pressed himself against the floor as pieces of metal *whizzed* overhead and embedded themselves into the wall.

The intruder continued shooting until the lock had fallen out completely. He kicked in the door and stepped into the room triumphantly.

His boots squeaked loudly as he walked. “I know you’re in here. Show yourself.”

Tristain began to peel himself from the floor. His voice was weak and scratchy. “I don’t know what’s going on.”

The intruder grunted impatiently. “Come out!”

Tristain slowly stood up, first by raising his empty hands from behind the table’s protection. The rest of his body soon followed. “What is...”

The man snorted. “Of course. It’s just some random kid.”

Tristain quaked slightly but didn’t speak.

The man shook his head. He lowered the large black metal weapon he held. “Were you going to say something, boy, or should I move on?”

Tristain paused. “What’s happening?”

The man chuckled. “I’m glad you asked.” He took a long pause to smirk. “There will be a national broadcast on TV first thing tomorrow. We’ll be discussing the Shift. Do not miss it.”

Tristain scooted to get more comfortable as he kneeled on the cold tile. “What’s the Shift?”

The guard raised his eyebrows, and his voice took on a condescending tone. “You’ll have to watch to find out.”

Tristain squeezed his legs as he huddled against the wall.

The man snickered and walked toward the door. Before leaving the room, he stopped and turned to face Tristain. “What are you even doing here?”

Tristain swallowed. “I’m a student. I was studying some old artifacts the Castle has.”

The man laughed. “Artifacts? I bet they’re not from here anyway.”

“What do you mean?”

The man shrugged. “Nothing’s really from here. That witchy stuff is probably from the same place as Stopper.”

“Stopper?”

The man turned toward the door and started to leave. “Oh, spoilers. You’ll see what I mean tomorrow.”

Before the door shut, Tristain called out to him. “Wait! Who are you?”

The man looked at Tristain. “Why should I tell you? This isn’t your operation.”

“Okay, sorry.”

“And don’t tell anyone I came by. You don’t want to get hurt.”

Tristain tensed upon hearing the word ‘hurt’.

The man walked off, leaving Tristain alone in the cold, quiet room.

It was not long until Royal Security returned. After pushing open the door, a guard called out to Tristain. “Hey kid, are you there?”

Tristain came out of his cover to meet the guard. It was the same one who had originally escorted him to the secure room.

The guard inspected the door and its shattered lock. “Are you okay? This door looks like it took a hit.”

Tristain nodded nervously. “I’m fine.”

“Did you see anyone?”

“I heard people walk by, but I didn’t see anyone.”

“That’s good. We checked the area, and it’s clear. You’ll have to come out now.”

“Okay.”

The guard hurried Tristain out of the door and into the hall. Security staff rushed past from all directions. As the two continued down the hallway, the crowd thickened.

The guard guided Tristain through the wave of security staff. “We can’t take you to your vehicle. It’s right next to one of the spots that’s being investigated.”

“Investigated? For what? Is it alright?”

“It’s fine. You’ll just have to give us some time. It might need to be searched and analyzed.”

Tristain took a deep breath. “Sure, okay. I need a way to get home, though.”

The guard handed him a piece of paper. “Here. Take this certificate.”

Tristain’s hand quivered as he took the note. It was similar to the certificate he had used to enter the Castle.

The guard pointed to a distant location off of the Castle’s grounds. “Take this to the bus stop. Remind the driver that there is a policy for official business and orders. It’ll get you a free ride.”

“Awesome, thanks a lot. Are you able to tell me what happened?”

The guard grimaced. “Someone tried to disrupt the ceremony.”

“And this will all go back to normal?”

“Something like that. But the King will need a good amount of time to prepare before his next public appearance. The Prince too.”

As the two continued walking down the hall, Tristain noticed something. Some of the guards were carrying much bulkier stunning devices. Nobody ever talked about the powerful stun devices, but Tristain recognized the visual difference instantly.

They looked just like the device the intruder had held.

Tristain watched as more of these heavily armed guards marched by. “I’ve never seen so many people with stunning devices.”

The guard led him toward the door. “Don’t worry about it. And don’t talk about it.”

“Oh, okay. I won’t.”

Finally, the two came to an exit. They waited as several Royal Security Force officers rushed in.

The guard held open the door and pointed outside. “There’s public transportation that way. It’s half a mile. If anyone stops you, show them the certificate.”

“Thank you.”

The guard waved at Tristain before retreating back into the building. The door closed with a resonating thud.

Tristain walked toward the distant city road. After a few minutes, he looked over his shoulder.

The silhouette of the guard was still looking through the window at him.

Tristain traveled down the road to the plaza, where citizens would listen to the King’s announcements. Cars were still parked in the lot, but they were empty. The way out had been blocked off with several portable barriers.

As Tristain came to a roadblock, he hesitated and looked around. Nobody else was nearby. He held the certificate close and slipped on through.

He noticed several guards as he crossed the Castle’s grounds. Before he had a chance to see their faces, they turned around and disappeared from view.

Finally, Tristain reached the bus stop and waited. He looked back at the Castle.

The Royal Security Force had set up stations to search civilians before allowing them to leave.

A few minutes later, a city bus pulled up. It was completely empty, as very few people had left the Castle so far.

Tristain stepped onto the bus, showing the driver the certificate as he entered.

The driver looked at it, then placed it in a drawer by the steering wheel. They did not say a word or even glance at Tristain.

As the bus approached Tristain’s stop, he stepped forward. “I’ll need to get off here.”

The driver didn’t make any indication of acknowledgment, but they still stopped at the curb and opened the doors.

Tristain stepped through the door. “Thanks.”

The driver’s only response was a small grunt.

Tristain stepped onto the sidewalk and took a deep breath, putting his hands on his hips. He stood for a minute as the bus took off behind him.

He walked along the block, then into the small alley that led to his uncle’s apartment. He crossed the parking lot and arrived at the stairwell.

Tristain clambered up the steps until he reached the fifth floor. Once at the top, he stared at his front door.

It had been kicked inward and was lying flat on the floor. Its hinges had been ripped from the wall, and large boot marks tracked along the floor.

Tristain looked inside and called out, but there was no response. He slowly stepped through the doorway, peeking around the corner. “Uncle?”

There was, again, no response.

He examined the boot marks. There were at least three variations of prints, and they were all left in a hurry.

Tristain crept to the phone on the wall and dialed Emergency Services. After a few seconds, he was connected with an operator.

“This is Emergency Services. We cannot currently answer questions about the Castle’s infiltration—”

A voice yelled something from the background of the emergency call center.

The voice coughed. “Sorry, incident. I misread the note. What is your emergency?”

Tristain spoke rapidly. “Uh, hello. I just came to my apartment, and it looks like someone broke in. No one’s home. There’s a sign of maybe a struggle. I don’t see anyone around.”

“Where are you right now?”

“I am on apartment block 243, level five, apartment number six.”

“Are you in immediate danger?”

Tristain hesitated. “Uh, no. Danger?”

“I need to verify something with...another team. Please stay on the line.”

Suddenly, the power to the apartment went out. Static played over the phone for a few seconds, then all fell silent.

Chapter 3: The Station

Tristain moved a small chair to the entrance of the apartment. He sat in it, waiting for a Police Force officer or any other emergency responder to show up.

Someone did show up, but it was not an officer. Instead, a man in a bright orange vest rushed up the stairs. When he came to the doorway, he found Tristain waiting in the chair.

“Greetings,” the man said. He was breathing heavily. “I am Tom Benson.”

Tristain looked at Tom with confusion. “Are you with the Police Force?”

Tom took a moment to catch his breath. “Goodness, no. I did just receive notice from them, though. A resident was concerned about a break-in. Might that have been you?”

Tristain sat up straight. “Yeah.”

“Looks like I have some clarifying to do. Someone by the name of Vennice Lanes had a maintenance order with us. We were servicing the air conditioning unit here. A worker slipped as we were carrying out the old unit, and we accidentally ran it into the door.”

Tristain listened attentively to Tom’s story.

Tom laughed nervously. “We were about to send someone back to fix the door when you arrived. We’ve already contacted Vennice and have agreed on compensation and repairs. Is he your father?”

Tristain grimaced. “He’s my uncle. Is it all safe here? Are the repairs all finished? For the AC I mean.”

Tom nodded. “We tested it and it’s working great. I’ll get back to you soon.”

“Cool, thanks.”

Tom waved, then disappeared around the stairs. He walked slowly this time.

Tristain waited a few minutes, then stepped onto the balcony. He leaned over the rail, peering into the parking lot.

Tom emerged below and stopped near a sidewalk. He looked around nervously.

A man with a hooded jacket emerged from the shadows. This man had a long black scarf that hung to his ankles. He met Tom, said something, and then glanced up to the apartments. He didn’t notice Tristain.

Tristain returned to the house and leaned against a wall. He did not ‘enjoy the cool air’. The Lanes’ household did not have air conditioning.

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It was after hours at the police station. Olive Elstrom sat alone in the dimly lit waiting room. She slouched in a chair, passing time by listening to the faint sounds around her. The Station was nicely furnished, but the surrounding darkness gave it an eerie presence.

Her father, Chief Michael Elstrom, was in a meeting. He had instructed her to wait in the lobby but hadn’t explained why. He

didn’t seem to be in the regular meeting rooms, since the lights in that section of the building were dark.

Olive sat for a long while, occasionally checking her watch for the time.

At that time of night, the entire lobby and front desk were empty. Jannett was completing paperwork at the back desk. Chief Elstrom had asked her to watch Olive in his absence.

A few minutes later, someone entered the building.

The main entrance was across the building from where Olive sat. She couldn’t see the newcomer, but she could hear them from afar.

Jannett greeted them. “Hello, can I help you?”

A young man’s voice responded with a warm tone. “Yeah, there’s someone here who I need to see.”

“Okay. You can wait in the lobby. There aren’t any staff around besides me, but I’ll let you know before I leave.”

Olive glanced at the boy as he came around the corner.

He met her gaze, then abruptly looked away. He sat on a bench across the room. He turned himself in a way that would allow him to see her if he looked up.

After a few minutes of silence, Olive received a notification from her pager. As it buzzed, she looked at the name on the small display. It was Bruce, her father’s trusted contact, who worked somewhere within the Royal Security Force.

Olive picked up the pager and held it to her ear. She pressed a button, and an audio message started to play.

The young man across the room tilted his head slightly.

Olive turned down the pager’s volume.

Bruce’s garbled voice was filled with anxiety. “Your father isn’t picking up. Are you with him? Where is he? I called his emergency line which he never misses. I called it twice, Olive. I need to talk to him.”

“When I last talked to him, he made it sound like he would be in a ‘meeting’. I thought it might be an interrogation. Don’t tell him I said that. I have to get a hold of him now. If Jannett is around, have her find him. Stay back yourself.

“One more thing, Keep an eye on anyone around the station. Nobody should be here this late, least of all at this one moment in particular. Thank you.”

“Bye,” Olive said as the playback came to a finish. She took a deep breath and stood up. Even without looking, she knew the boy’s eyes were discreetly on her.

Olive walked across the building and found Jannett at the back desk. “Uh, Jannett?”

Jannett was staring at a monitor at the corner of the table. She carefully read a message displayed on the screen. “Olive, the cameras just cut out. Do you know anything about hosts being in time-out? I can’t get them to connect.”

Olive fidgeted with her hands. “I don’t, sorry.”

Jannett’s face fell as she noticed Olive’s expression. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m not sure why, but Bruce is trying to call Elstrom. Apparently, he’s not answering the emergency line.”

Jannett nodded. “I’ll call their room. Give me a second.”

There was a phone on the side of Jannett’s desk. She picked it up but was met with a long, harsh tone. It had been disconnected.

Olive frowned. “Doesn’t surprise me.”

Jannett placed the phone back down and pulled out her ID badge. “I’ll go find them. Are you good to stay here?”

“Yeah.”

Jannett entered the back offices through a door behind her desk. She rushed deeper into the station, leaving Olive alone in the hallway.

It didn’t take long for Olive to lose her patience. Jannett had only been gone for ten minutes, but the urgency of the situation made it feel longer.

As time passed, Olive became restless. She finally stepped forward and opened the door to the back offices.

Although she didn’t have a badge to unlock it, she was able to exploit a flaw in the building’s security. Underneath Jannett’s desk, there was a small switch installed to unlock the door for visitors.

Olive pulled the switch and entered the back offices. She had been there before, but not alone. All the rooms were empty, and the lights in the hall had been dimmed.

She hesitated as she came to a restricted area. There was a split in the hallway where two open doors stood, but only one was illuminated.

Taking this route, Olive found herself heading down cement stairs. At the bottom, she found a few rooms, one of which was lit.

Through the frosted glass, the silhouette of her father was visible. There was someone else in the room with him, sitting at a desk. Jannett was not in sight.

Olive stopped at the door and knocked loudly three times. She stood for a moment, waiting for a response.

Her father stood up quickly and rushed to the door. He opened it quickly and looked down at her. “Olive? What the heck are you doing here? This is off limits.”

Olive looked into the room. A middle-aged man was sitting on a chair. He was in tears.

Elstrom glared at Olive. “Where’s Jannett?”

Olive looked away. “She went to find you because Bruce called.”

“If Bruce needed to reach me this urgently, he could have used my emergency line.”

“He did, but you didn’t answer. So then he paged me instead.”

Elstrom shook his head. “Impossible.” He pulled a communication device from his pocket.

The man in the room called out in a panicked voice. “I don’t know where my nephew is. He was at the Castle. I don’t know if he is safe.”

Elstrom turned and glowered at the man. “You need to be quiet. The law is higher than any familial connections.”

“Tell that to your daughter there.”

Elstrom’s face turned red. “You leave her out of this.”

Olive clasped her hands nervously.

Elstrom pressed a button on his pager. When nothing happened, his face paled. “No! It somehow disconnected.” He looked at Olive. “You need to leave now. Go to the front desk.”

Olive stepped back timidly. “Also, there’s a problem with the cameras.”

“Now, Olive!”

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Tristain glanced at his watch. It had now been fifteen minutes since the young woman had left the lobby. After concluding that he was alone, he stood up to look around.

Right as he sat up from his chair, the young woman emerged from around a corner. He sat back down and turned away.

The young woman walked right up to him, stopped, then looked him in the eye. “Are you looking for someone?”

Tristain blinked nervously. “Why do you ask?”

“Because he seems to be looking for you.”

“You’ve seen him?”

“Well yeah, but I’d also like to know what’s going on.”

“I...don’t really know what to say.”

The lights in the building went down with a large click, and an alarm started to blare.

The young woman flinched. “Okay, we should probably find a secure room then.” She began to walk into the darkness, then peeked over her shoulder.

Tristain hadn’t followed yet. He stood still, looking at her anxiously.

She turned to face him, though he was barely visible in the dark. “You coming?”

Tristain followed her voice until he had caught up.

The young woman led him past a set of double doors and into a small room. This room was similar to the secure room at the Castle.

Once inside, she tried the light switch, but there was no response. “In that case, we’ll probably have to wait this out.”

Tristain stood awkwardly in the dark. “Mind telling me your name?”

“Of course. I’m Olive.”

“Well, I’m Tristain.”

Olive took a deep breath. “So, I should probably finish what I was going to say.”

“Yeah?”

“My father is Chief Elstrom. He is the head of the Police Force. I came across one of his interrogations, and the man inside said something about his nephew.”

Tristain straightened. “What? Did he do something?”

“I’m not sure, but I want you to know because—”

Before Olive could finish, loud footsteps started echoing from across the hall.

Tristain groaned. “Oh, not again.”

From the other side of the door, a badge tapped against a reader. The door unlocked with a click and swung open.

A beam of light shined from a flashlight in a woman’s hand. Tristain did not recognize her and was startled to discover that she was not a police officer. Olive didn’t seem to know her either.

Someone else stood next to this stranger. His face was barely visible in the dark.

Tristain immediately recognized him. “Uncle?”

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