

It took a while for Leon to remember that his twin brother was waiting for him somewhere within the train. He cursed himself for being forgetful as he glanced at his pocketwatch. He hoped Gideon hadn't been waiting for too long."

Turning to Graves, he said, "If you'll excuse me, I'll go and look for my brother."

"Very well. I'll keep your roommate company for the time being." The panther replied with a small nod.

The detective walked down the length of the corridor and stepped into the second sleeper coach (which he would later learn was named 'Vermeil'). It took him a moment to realize that the carriages were basically color coded.

He hadn't realized it until now, but the Azuré carriage had window blinds, carpeting, and seating in various shades of blue and teal, while the Vermeil had entirely crimson and brown hues.

Shaking his head in amusement, he went to approach the conductor who was sitting by his little chair. The uniformed otter introduced himself as Faber and Leon proceeded to inquire about his brother's whereabouts.

Conductor Faber told him that there was indeed a Gideon Cross listed on the passenger manifest, and he went to say that Gideon had boarded the train a few minutes just before they had departed, and that he was occupying compartment 3.

Thanking the conductor, Leon made his way to the compartment, passing several passengers who were out on the corridor or were inside their own compartments.

Leon stopped at the door when he arrived at the compartment marked with a red '3' on a brass plaque. "Gideon? It's me, Leon." He said, knocking on the door.

No reply came.

The cougar knocked on the door again, this time, louder. "Gideon, can I come in?" His brow knitted when he heard nothing from inside the compartment, and also when he knocked for the third time, louder. He got a weird look from a Wolverine who had just exited his compartment a few doors down as he practically banged on the door. Leon ignored him and knocked again. Where was his brother?

'Oh, well.' He thought. "Gideon, I'm coming in." He said somewhat louder and turned the handle. It wasn't locked to his confusion, so he could easily open the door. It swung into the compartment instead of sliding into the wall as the First Class compartments.

Leon quickly stepped inside, one paw on the handle, before he stopped short. His brother's face was staring lifelessly back to him from the floor, blood pouring from his mouth and his chest, staining his clothes.

"Gideon!" Leon exclaimed quietly, glancing about the corridor over his shoulder and stepped inside. After locking the door behind him, he took off his jacket and knelt beside his

brother's body, taking a long good look. Shaking his head with a sigh, he pressed his finger to the crook of his brother's neck, hummed thoughtfully, and leaned over the body to sniff just right above his brother's open mouth.

Silently, the cougar stood and glanced about the room. Everything seemed to be in order, except perhaps the open window. He leaned his head out and felt cold, dry wind buffeting his face. The train was picking up speed, heading towards the mountains just outside the city.

"Hmm..."

Leon drew back in went to inspect the glass of unfinished champagne and the glass bottle sitting in a basket filled with ice. He sniffed the glass, raised an eyebrow, and turned to look at the body on the floor. With a slow shake of his head, he turned around back to the window, cupping his chin with his mechanical paw, seemingly mulling over the unexpected situation.

He looked so deep in his thoughts that he didn't even bat an eye when there was a heavy thump from behind him, followed by a puff of breath on his neck. Leon did not even flinch even when a bloody paw grasped his neck. Instead, he let out an amused sigh and said, "If you are going to play dead next time Gideon, never move your eyes. They always give it away."

The cougar who was lying dead on the floor not a couple of minutes ago let out a disappointed groan. "Damn... and I thought I could have tricked you this time." He said forlornly.

Leon turned to his not quite dead brother with an amused grin. "Not a chance, dear brother." He said, sitting down by the armchair. It had been an odd sort of game they tend to play, usually when Gideon was feeling impatient waiting for him, or just wanted to prank him on a whim. He had to admit, his twin brother's skills were getting better and better. "Still, it was a great improvement from your last attempt."

Gideon Cross was the younger twin of the Cross brothers. He shared the same basic physical similarities with Leon; identical shade of blue eyes, dark golden fur, and similar markings on their faces. The only difference was their build. Where Leon had a fast, agile swimmer's build, Gideon's participation in the university wrestling team gave him more muscle mass. He was also slightly taller than his older twin brother. The colonel's observation of Gideon being the muscle while Leon being the brains was certainly not quite off the mark.

"So, what else gave me away?" Gideon went to ask.

"Your champagne." Leon answered, watching his brother as he removed his shirt and vest, opening the door to the adjacent washing room to clean the artificial blood from his fur. Although quite identical with the First Class compartment in terms of furnishing, the Second Class compartments were built with a much simpler decor, and was equipped with

a small washroom which was shared between the two compartments, instead of a washbasin cabinet for private use.

"Good thinking of making me think it was poisoning by applying a sharp chemical scent on your mouth by the way." He added, moving to stand by the doorway of the washroom. "Unfortunately, it was absent from your drink."

"I could have not been drinking the champagne with I took the 'poison'." Gideon suggested with a small playful grin, turning the tap and began to wash his face.

Leon smiled. "Yes, but the distinctive smell of your *Faucon Vintage* was quite apparent." He nodded to the bottle by the ice bucket.

Gideon made a noncommittal gesture as he dried his paws. "Ah well." He said, drying his fur with a towel. "I take the case with the colonel went well?" The cougar asked, eyebrow raised.

"Yes. It was quite simple truth to be told." Leon replied with a dismissive wave of his paw, turning his attention back to the compartment and spotted the small, dark, unassuming bottle by a small shelf. He popped off the lid and took a small sniff.

"I see you have perfected that artificial blood solution." He pointed out. "The odor is just right."

"You think so?" Gideon voiced, sounding quite happy as he opened the small wardrobe and took out a fresh pair of vest. "I still think it's too runny."

"Hmm." Leon placed the bottle back onto the shelf. "Anyhow, how was the office while I was away?"

His twin shrugged. "Nothing out of the ordinary. Solved a theft and an insurance scam that turned out to be connected."

"And the situation that you mentioned in your telegram?"

"Ah that." Gideon buttoned up his vest and reached for the thin leather briefcase that was resting by the armrest of the seat and pulled out several papers. "I have the details written down here. As you can see, the client is..."

The two brothers ended up discussing over Gideon's documents and notes for several hours, sharing their thoughts and correcting each other's deductions on the case. None of them even realized that several hours had passed until a melodic ting came from the speakers in the corridor, followed by an announcement which was repeated at least twice.

"Premier service! Le dîner est servi sur la voiture-restaurant!"

"That time already?" Gideon remarked as the announcement was repeated in Arlemanic, Bretonian, and finally Rosvenian. The sun had already set and the overcast sky looked even darker without the light. "Well, I didn't even realize I was hungry."

Leon chuckled as he stood up and gathered up the papers and handed the documents back to his twin brother "We should get ready then. I'll see you at the dining car." He said as he and threw his jacket over his shoulder.

"Of course." Gideon answered as Leon left his compartment.

A couple of passengers were already making their way to the dining car up front as Leon made his way back through the corridor and into his own coach. Upon reaching his compartment, Leon found it locked and so he knocked on the door, which was soon opened a few seconds later by Erichsen.

"Oh hello!" The arctic fox looked pleasantly surprised to see him again, Leon noticed as he entered into the room. Graves seemed to have returned to his compartment, judging by how the connecting door was now closed.

"Was your talk with the colonel entertaining?" Asked Leon while he took off his jacket and sat down on the enormous, plush seat.

Erichsen nodded with a smile. "Yes, we talked of a number of things. He just left about an hour ago." He said before he paused, looking at Leon with something akin to a startled look.

"Is that... blood?"

"What?" Surprised, Leon turned to look down on his clothes. His shirt was stained with dark crimson, and he immediately caught a whiff of a faint iron-like scent.

"Oh. It's not blood." He said with a small laugh. It must have caught on his shirt when he checked his brother's 'body'. "It's just a coloring solution my brother had accidentally spilled on me." He replied, waving his paw dismissively. "I guess I have to change now... this won't wash off easily." He added with a small sigh.

Erichsen's expression was something akin of relieve. "Ah, that's an unfortunate accident."

Leon's mouth twitched. "Yes, yes it was." He uttered as he pulled down his suitcase and took a fresh pair of shirt and vest and took off his stained ones. He could feel Erichsen's eyes on his back as he changed, but the fox was quick to look away, a hint of a flush marring his cheeks when he turned to look at his roommate.

Shaking his head in amusement, Leon busied himself to make himself to look presentable. "Well then, let's have dinner." He said, mostly to himself.

Graves was already waiting by the vestibule of the dining car, talking animatedly with Gideon on the latest rugby league tournament. He seemed to be most interested to what Gideon was saying about some underdog team that had made recent headlines. Being an avid fan of the sport, Leon joined in the conversation as the four headed into the dining car.

The dining car was handsomely appointed, with panels of dark mahogany and oak, plush red leather chairs and white silk draped tables. A feathered dragon waiter in a stiff, stark white jacket welcomed them in a thickly accented Breton, directing the four passengers to a large table somewhere in the middle of the dining area. It would seem that most of the tables had been filled with other passengers.

However, instead of joining them, Erichsen excused himself and went over to a white rabbit who had been waving for the fox's attention a few tables down. They must have been friends as Erichsen and the rabbit was quick to exchange pleasantries and was soon exchanging stories and laughing on a joke the rabbit was telling.

Leon found himself sitting beside the colonel while his twin brother took the seat opposite him. After looking at the menu card, Leon told the waiter of his choice of one of the five course meals, which was shared by the colonel, to the waiter while Gideon opted for separate meals.

"I never noticed you took first class accommodation." The other cougar remarked as the waiter left with their orders.

Graves smiled. "I insisted. Your brother saved my life after all."

An eyebrow was raised, and Leon knew Gideon would want to drill him for details when they were alone. Leon waved his paw dismissively at his twin brother and went to observe the passengers who was dining with them.

Two passengers occupied the table on the far end of the dining car. Sitting quite stiffly on his seat was a grey wolf. Well groomed and certainly knowledgeable of how to dress well, the wolf had a certain aristocratic air about him as he spoke to the waiter in a polite and refined manner, if not demanding.

Sitting opposite the wolf with his back to Leon was a great white feathered bird. Only when he turned his head to the waiter Leon identified the bird as a snowy owl. The wolf and the owl were mostly silent, conversing lowly only among themselves. Leon's eyes caught the gold and silver firebird pin on the wolf's tie. Similar shapes appeared on the cufflinks worn by the wolf and the owl.

'*Rosvenian nobility then.*' Leon concluded, sipping the red wine which had just been poured by their waiter.

Seated on the larger table across the two Rosvenians sat three gentlemen. A drake was sitting by the window, tall and well made with smooth dark blue scales, polished jet black horns, and a silvery white hair. He was wearing a deceptively plain looking suit, probably to hide that he was a wealthy man, Leon thought. He could easily see the subtle, intricate patterns on the plain black jacket, and it was certainly tailor made for the drake. Tailor-made suits with subtle patterns weren't exactly cheap, and there were only a few places in the continent who could tailor those. Leon suspected a special tailor shop in Arlemany, as the drake's jacket was distinctively Arleman in style.

A sparrowhawk was sitting across him, clad in a three piece tweed suit and tie, the kind you won't ever find in cheap clothing stores. Although, he looked almost casually dressed compared to the drake. Probably a businessman or a wealthy trader.

The third occupant was Armand Förstner himself, and he seemed to be really enjoying his dining companions for tonight.

"...and you can't really appreciate good wine until you've been conned with a watered down one." Said the drake in Arlemanic.

"Indeed." Replied the sparrowhawk. "Now tell me you didn't go along with it? God knows I've had my share of bad deals and con-men..."

Förstner was quick to voice his thoughts. "Con-men are the worst." He said. "To water down a perfectly good liquor is a crime on its own." He added with a laugh.

"Can't disagree with that." The drake replied with a nod.

Moving from the table, Leon's gaze fell on a lone mountain hare with grey-brown fur, and he was dressed practically. Charming, was the first thing that came to Leon's mind as he watched the hare. His mannerisms were certainly smooth, almost like the kind of men who would hunt for pretty ladies in clubs... but something about the hare was quite peculiar. Leon couldn't put his paw on it.

Erichsen and the white rabbit were talking in a more spirited manner while enjoying their food. They spoke of their common friend and their latest excursions. The rabbit seemed to be doing most of the talking, however making animated gestures with his paw as he spoke, occasionally slipping into Gallian.

Erichsen works in journalism, Leon quickly guessed, watching as the fox talked about the article he had been working on about ancient Anatolian and Misaryan temples and ruins. Their conversation slowly shifted to Gallian, too fast for Leon to catch. He did catch a few sentences, however. It would seem that Erichsen had made frequent visits the pyramidal tombs of the ancient Misaryan kings, investigating a shipment of an unknown brand of cigars, and attending the Anatolian Sultan's banquet while interviewing the crown prince.

Leon's observation was momentarily interrupted when Graves nudged his arm.

"Enjoy playing the detective?" Asked the colonel with a hint of a smile.

"It's something I can't help." The cougar replied with a small shrug and focused his attention on his food. It was really delicious, more so than the food in the hotel. "And I'm not *'playing'* the detective. It's my job." He added, nodding to Gideon whose sharp green eyes lazily shifted from one point to another. "And I'm not the only one."

Graves shook his head in amusement. "So tell me who've you seen." He said as the waiter came to their table, rolling a tray of delectable soups and fish. The feathered dragon

handed Leon his cream of potato soup first before he served Graves' grilled fish and another cream soup for Gideon.

"Two Rosvenian nobles sitting by the far end; an Arleman gentleman, a Bretonian businessman, and the director of the train are sitting opposite them... also we seem to have a Rosvenian who's a frequent traveller." Leon listed once the waiter left. "Then, there is Erichsen and his friend, both seemed to be journalists."

"Ah, interesting." The colonel voiced, slowly cutting his fish.

"I've got two Columbian businessmen... of sorts." Gideon uttered idly. "Seemed to be close friends. Two young women were sitting across them, gossiping about the Columbians' dashing good looks... and also, we have a group of Crezovkians. "

Graves pulled a face. "I see them. I wonder what are those gypsies doing on board this train."

Leon turned around on his chair. Indeed, there were four canines who looked quite out of place. Despite their fine clothing, they looked uncomfortable in their suits—except for the coyote, who was the only one of the group that didn't look uneasy. Leon noted how the other three heads kept glancing around occasionally, giving everyone suspicious looks.

"Well, just ignore them. I think they don't mean any harm." He said to Graves. "After all, anyone who could make enough money could board on any luxury express trains like the Mercurius Express."

The colonel made a sound of assent and drank his wine.

As the dinner went on, a cheerful, young voice fell to Leon's ears when he was just finishing his soup. Glancing over his shoulder, the cougar saw a couple of Norvdallian Forest cats. One was pretty young, could be no more than ten years old. She was talking in animatedly to who could only be her mother, who nodded and smiled patiently while she guided her daughter to the small table right behind Erichsen and his friend.

"...and then *Onkel* Hans brought me to see the Baserian river, *mama*! It was so cold, but cousin Dedrick and Ramond went swimming! They caught cold the next day though." The girl said.

The mother looked amused as she folded the napkin neatly on her daughter's lap. "Oh? And did *Tante* Hilda threw a fuss?"

"Very." Her daughter said with a grave nod. "It was quite scary to see her angry and worried at the same time."

"She can be quite scary." The mother agreed with a laugh. "Now don't slouch Adalie, it's bad for you." She added somewhat sternly.

"And we have a strict but caring mother who was picking up her daughter from her relatives in Hieropolis." Graves remarked, watching the mother picking the menu and

sharply told her daughter that no, she couldn't have puddings, ice creams, and cakes solely as her dinner. "She highly disliked Anatolian food and was worried about what little Adalie eats while on her sister's care."

Gideon stared. "How on earth did you know that?"

The colonel smiled impishly. "You detectives have your ways, I have mine."

The cougar brothers looked at each other for a split second, before turning back to the colonel. "You overheard them somewhere, didn't you?"

"Ah, take the fun out, will you." Graves made a face.

Gideon chuckled. "Don't feel too bad, Colonel. At least she's a lovely lady. If not a bit too efficient."

"That is true, but I find the company of men much more entertaining." He said with a grin.

"Oh, of course." Gideon said, giving his twin brother a knowing look and a small smirk. "I trust my brother had been a good company?"

The colonel chuckled and eyed Leon. "Oh, indeed he has."

Leon simply gave the panther a meaningful smile before he decided to observe the lone doberman who had came right after the mother and daughter, sitting on the table right next to them. He was the same passenger who boarded right before him and the colonel... Signor di Firenzi, was his name if he recalled correctly.

From his suit and the way he addressed the waiter, Leon quickly concluded that the canine was an Inotrian nobleman, or perhaps a very successful businessman that had rubbed shoulders with the upper circles. After all, there were only a handful of people who could afford an elaborate prosthetic eye piece, which was plated with the finest bronze and glass, like an elaborate art of metal and gears itself. The glowing amber oculus inside the eye piece was a startling contrast to the doberman's natural right eye, which was a shade of a warm brown.

His gaze passed Leon's as he was attended by the feathered dragon waiter, lingering for a few seconds before he focused his attention to the menu card.

As the evening wore on, the plates were quickly cleared and waiters brought out desserts were brought out for the passengers. Just right then, the Mercurius Express began to slow down.

"Le train entre en gare de Hadrinar! Gare de Hadrinar! Quinze minutes d'arrêt!" came the announcement.

The darkness was soon replaced by the dim lights of Hadrinar train station, passing by the windows slowly, before the whole train came to a full stop. Leon couldn't see much of

the dimly lit station outside, but he could make out a small crowd gathered on the platform, slowly making their way to the front. Must be the regular coach passengers, he thought.

"Don't lick your spoon like that Adalie." Said the feline mother gently. "It's unbecoming. Come on, let's get you cleaned and ready for the night."

Young Adalie was reluctant to leave, but with her wide yawning and her mother's insistence, she followed her mother but not before hastily scarfing down several slices of apple from her plate.

After the pair of felines was the Rosvenian nobles. Quiet and dignified as they walked past Leon's table. The two of them didn't talk much once their food was served.

Seeing that the passengers had begun to leave, Colonel Graves then stood up and straightened his jacket. "Care to join me in the saloon car? Perhaps a cigar and brandy?" He offered.

"Sure thing." Gideon nodded as he stood and turned to his twin brother.

Leon waved his paw. "I'll catch up with you both later." He said. "Don't wait for me."

With a nod, Graves and Gideon left the dining, and Leon waved for the waiter, whose name was Matteo as he would later learn, and ordered a cup of iced latte.

As the waiter left, the cougar's attention was drawn back to the three gentlemen, who were preparing to leave their table. It sounded like they were now deep in their discussion of their own country's politics as they passed by Leon's table.

A series of light pitter-patter from the window drew Leon's attention away. It would seem that a light drizzle had begun to fall, obscuring most of the view outside. The crowd on the station outside was almost completely gone.

"Here's your *caffè latte*, sir." Said Matteo, handing him a glass of the iced, caffeinated drink.

"Thank you, Matteo." Leon turned to the dragon with a smile, and began to stir the contents of his drink slowly.

"My pleasure, sir."

Erichsen and his friend decided to depart the restaurant car right then. However, as the arctic fox went straight back to the sleeper carriage, the white rabbit went towards the table Leon was sitting instead.

"Evening. May I join you?"

Leon nodded at the rabbit, gesturing to the chair opposite him. "Be my guest."

The rabbit grinned and sat down. "Thank you." He did not waste with pleasantries it would seem. "Are you really Leon Cross? Private investigator?"

A hacking cough came from Signor di Firenzi's table. Evidently the doberman had choked on his fresh fruit salad.

Leon looked at the canine, who was quickly attended by Matteo, before he turned back to the rabbit with his brows knit. "Yes..." He said slowly. "And, you are?"

The rabbit had a wide, impish smile on his face as he reached into his jacket and pulled out a name card. "Lucien Casseaux. Reporter." He said. Leon glanced down on the card, which read:

LUCIEN SYLVAIN CASSEAU
La Tribune Métropolitaine
Journaliste d'investigation
Photographe

"Ah, from the Tribune Métropolitaine." Leon nodded with a nod, having read the newspaper during his stay in Gallia. It was pretty informative, although it tends to have the penchance of the dramatics. "To what I owe the pleasure?" He looked back to the rabbit with a slight air of weariness. Investigative journalists tend to not bode well with him.

Casseaux continued to smile. "I was surprised when my friend, Erichsen, told me he's roommates with Hesperica's most famous detective—"

"Well, I wouldn't say famous—" The cougar interjected.

"—the thing is, you are quite well known on these days." Casseaux continued with a laugh. "So, what brought you on the Mercurius Express? Are you in one of your cases? *Chasser un criminel à travers le continent?*" His grin widened, brown eyes boring down on the cougar with unnerving level interest.

Leon cleared his throat. "...Not exactly." He replied. "I'm simply on my way to Capitolium with my brother."

"Ah, from the scorching hot Anatolian desert and hills to the cold shores of Bretonia." Casseaux said, chuckling, before he stole a glance at his watch. "*Eh bien*, as much as I'd love to chat, I better get back to my compartment. I hope my roommate hasn't been too bored waiting for me." He said, standing up, before he turned to Leon once again. "He's been quite ill you see."

"Hope he gets well soon." Leon nodded.

"My car's attendant and conductor has been most helpful," said Casseaux. "Ah, right. I think I will be interested in your latest case with the colonel, *monsieur* Cross. You do seem particularly close." He added with his impish grin as he gave Leon a parting nod. "*Bonsoir, détective.*"

Leon merely raised an eyebrow as the rabbit left the restaurant car. He got a feeling that Casseaux is the kind who likes to gather as much as information as possible. Perhaps he should be more careful around the rabbit.

He was jolted out from his musings as a long, loud whistle came from the engine. The entire restaurant car jerked as the train began moving. Glasses, utensils, and china rattled as the Mercurius Express continued its journey northward.