

“Stay strong for me, figlio mio...”

Aurelio’s father put him down, kissed him, and ran into the building to get his mother. Aurelio, following orders, stayed right where he was. He looked around frantically, looking for a hand to hold or a voice to console him.

There was none.

A crowd of people ran by, fire bells rang relentlessly, and there was screaming all around, but Aurelio could only focus on the raging fire in front of him. His childhood home smoldered and crackled as the flames licked at the wooden scaffolding.

And as suddenly as the fire had begun, it all seemed to stop. The world paused, and everyone but the firefighters seemed to hold their breath.

CRACK!

The wooden foundation, eaten too much away by the fire, gave way, and the whole house fell inward with a crash. Dust covered the street and fell through the gaps in the wooden road into the Venetian lagoon.

Tears tried to form in Aurelio’s eyes, but he was so dehydrated that he couldn’t even manage that. A single, piercing cry escaped his lips, and he fell to the floor. There was no point continuing, was there? There was no way his parents...

His parents were dead.

Aurelio lay there, unmoving, for hours. The firefighters put out what was left of the ruins that smoldered, the crowds dispersed, and anyone with any sense of safety got out of the area that Aurelio used to live in. He could have lain there for days and, indeed, died there with his parents, had it not been for the voice that broke through his stupor.

“Ehi, ragazzo!”

Aurelio did not answer.

The voice got closer.

“Ehi! You hear me alright?”

Aurelio did not answer.

“Hmph. That’s fine. I was the same way.” The boy to whom the voice belonged stepped around Aurelio and into his view. He was a young boy wearing dark pants, a long dark coat, and a brown satchel over his shoulders. A small stubble was trying its hardest to appear on his chin. And his hair was, similar to his clothing, dark and very greasy.

“My name’s Scipio. And don’t worry about this whole ‘mute’ thing. You’ll outgrow it fast.” Scipio took his hand and led him away from the bright, painfully bright, road into the alley between buildings. The darkness enveloped them, and Scipio dragged him along the path to what would become his home.

“We’ll make you strong yet.”

...

Aurelio couldn’t sleep, but that wasn’t new. He opened his eyes. It was still dark, judging by the lack of light coming in through the roof of their abandoned butcher’s shop. He had been living with this merry band of boys for three months now, but was still struggling to find his voice, or even understand it all. He looked around the room at the sleeping boys, or “his new family,” as Scipio called it when he took him in.

Pincho and Trappino slept together in a tangled mass of limbs on a blanket. Their corner of the room was littered with comics that they had managed to “acquire.” The twins, both of them 10 years old, were inseparable after their parents’ death three years ago. Scipio found them and took them in, just like he did Aurelio, who was 12 now.

In the other corner, Coltello... slept somewhat. He never truly slept, not anymore. Aurelio had no clue how old he was, only that his parents were still alive, and had one day decided they just didn’t want him anymore. Apparently, they tried to kill him one night, and Coltello barely managed to escape, breaking the window to the outside with a kitchen knife, hence his nickname. Next to his singular pillow on the cold floor lay his several knives.

Finally, behind the butcher’s counter lay Scipio, king of the orphans. Nobody could agree on how old he was. Pincho was adamant that Scipio couldn’t age, and that he’d been saving orphans as a 15-year-old for years. Trappino said that Scipio was actually the youngest of all, at just 9 years old. Coltello refused to answer. Aurelio still didn’t know much about the group that he had found himself with, but he knew that he didn’t belong. This was a family, that much was clear.

And some people just don’t belong.

Aurelio tried to close his eyes and sleep, but it didn’t come. Frustrated, he threw off his covers, or cover, more accurately, and stepped outside into the crisp Venetian air. After a moment, a familiar voice joined him.

“I know it’s hard.” Aurelio turned with a start to see Scipio walk up behind him and sit down next to him.

“We all went through the same thing, you know. It makes us *brothers*. You’ll find your voice eventually.” They sat in silence for some time, until Scipio continued.

“Being tough is how you survive out here. You think anybody cares about us?” He scoffed. “Ha! *Menzogne*. We don’t have anybody but each other, you’ll see. I need you to grow strong for us, Aurelio. The time to be sweet...” He looked at Aurelio.

“That time has passed, *fratello*. Now what we need is someone who we can rely on. Out here, you don’t get to stay the same. When I took in the twins, they wouldn’t even eat for days. But you see them now, they have a family.”

He keeps using that word. Family.

“The time is coming. Sooner than you think, Aurelio. We’re just about out of food, and you know what that means.”

Aurelio looked away from the horizon and locked eyes with Scipio.

“It’s almost time for you to get your name.”

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Aurelio pretended to sleep once more in the room they shared. It had been three days since his conversation with Scipio. Judging by the amount of movement he was hearing, the twins were probably fighting over their blanket again. Scipio hadn’t returned since their conversation, probably out scouting their next mark.

In the days without Scipio, Aurelio had tried to talk with Coltello, mostly through gestures and other cues, and had found out a few things. This group survived entirely on thievery, but, of course, the newer members could never be trusted to go out on their own

without training. What “training” meant, Aurelio had no idea, but he would surely find out any day now.

Well, no use thinking about it now...

Especially because there was now a knife pressed to his throat.

“*Svegliati*, Aurelio. The time has come.” Coltello’s voice whispered roughly into his ear.

Aurelio’s eyes snapped open. Coltello knelt at his side and slowly removed the pressure from the knife. He gestured for Aurelio to follow as he climbed out the window.

They ventured outside, Aurelio taking big gulps of the crisp Venetian air. They stalked through dark alleyways, climbed up walls, and slowly made their way to a richer part of town. They stopped in front of a vine-covered stone wall, the biggest house on the street they were on. The rest of the group had been waiting for him.

Scipio looked up their arrival. “Excellent. Let’s get to work.” He patted Trappino on the back. “You take the lead today.”

Trappino, glowing, stepped into the middle. “Welcome, *amici*, to *Via Innocenza*, the best spot to take from those who have too much,” He spun around, arms open, “and give to those who have too little.” He brought his hands to his chest.

“Now, seeing as we have someone who has yet to earn their name...”

The group looked at Aurelio. His heart pounded.

“I suggest, with your permission, of course,” He said, looking at Scipio, “That we let Aurelio take care of this one.”

Scipio flashed a smile and nodded. “I agree. Thank you, Trappino. You all can go.”

Pincho and Trappino gave each other a high five and skipped away. Coltello stalked behind them.

“Feeling it yet?” Scipio said, “That *rush*?” He hopped in place a little, then stopped, grabbed Aurelio by the shoulders, and leaned in.

“Listen closely. A family of three lives in this house. There’s an old woman, no need to worry about her, a baby girl, again, no trouble, and a young man. He’s the one to be scared of. They all sleep on the second floor, but luckily, everything we’re after is on the first.”

“All you’re doing is sneaking into the pantry. It should be next to the kitchen.”

He slung a brown knapsack over Aurelio’s shoulder.

“If something happens... I’ll get you if I can. But *don’t* let something happen, y’hear? You can’t trust *anyone* to pull through for you, especially if that means they’d have to put their neck on the line.”

“Not even me.”

Scipio rustled Aurelio’s hair and clapped him on the shoulder. “But no pressure. You’ve got it under control, don’t you?”

Aurelio didn’t answer, as normal. Not even a nod, which, truth be told, he couldn’t have managed.

“Right. Forgot about that.” Scipio turned around and walked into the darkness. As he walked away, he said something under his breath that Aurelio barely heard.

“*Pronti o meno, è ora.*”

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Aurelio found himself alone once again. Standing next to that vine-covered wall, the reality of the situation hit him all at once. His breath came shakily, and sweat beaded on his forehead. He looked up at the wall, and the house behind, and his head swam.

Finally, taking a deep breath, he calmed himself enough that he could think clearly.

So this is "earning my name." Just sneak in and steal from this family. Seems easy enough? They should all be asleep right now.

Aurelio, looking up again at the wall, thought back to what Scipio told him last night. "Out here, you don't get to stay the same."

Gritting his teeth, he grabbed hold of what seemed like the thickest vines growing in the cracks in the wall. He pulled himself up and found a spot for his foot.

Nobody.

Up some more.

Gets.

Another handhold.

To stay.

Pull!

The same!

With a heave, Aurelio found himself sitting on top of the wall. He looked around, catching his breath. He looked down towards where he started. That fall would hurt. He'd have to be careful on the return trip, especially with everything as dark as it was.

Getting up slowly, he lowered himself into a crouch, sneaking along the top of the wall. He found an open window not far from a part of the wall he could get to.

Just do the job. Don't think about this innocent family I'm robbing...

He looked at the street sign. *Via Innocenza. Isn't that funny.*

He grabbed the outside lip of the window and, stopping for a moment, caught his breath and tried to relax his nerves. His hands still shook, and from the climb and the stress, he was more than a little sweaty.

When he built up the resolve to go inside, the window gave less resistance than he had anticipated and opened smoothly. He dangled his feet inside and, taking one last deep breath, plunged into the darkness.

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His shoes landed on the soft, carpeted floor with a quiet *thud*. He was on the second floor, where everyone would be asleep, if what Scipio had told him was true. The only light in the long hallway he had dropped into was coming from the window Aurelio had just opened. A soft breeze followed Aurelio into the corridor, giving him gooseflesh.

Aurelio, in a crouch, made his way carefully down the hallway. He could hear soft breathing from the rooms as he passed. Beside the last door before the stairwell down, the floor creaked agonizingly loud.

Aurelio froze. Surely they could hear his heart pounding, or the vibrations through the floor as his legs shook. Every instinct in his body told him to run, but he just stood there, still, for what felt like forever.

I need to get out of here! They'll wake up any minute!

He slowly, painfully slowly, crept down the stairs, careful to avoid making any more sounds as best he could. A small child's blanket lay on one of the steps, reminding him that there were actual people here, with actual lives.

As he descended to the first floor, he thought, *It's so much easier to think about them as targets, or to think as if they don't exist. Is this what Scipio meant by becoming strong? Changing? This isn't who I am. What am I doing, creeping around a home in the middle of the night? What would Mami do if she saw me...*

Before his thoughts could reach their conclusion, he was in the kitchen. The downstairs was mostly open. A living room with some sofas, connected to the kitchen, which had an island in the middle and counters all around the walls. There were three doors, one led outside, no doubt, and one was in the kitchen, meaning that one was probably the pantry. The other door, however, was just there. Paste-on stars were attached to the top, and a pink sash hung from the knob. The door called to him, but he tried to stay focused. The sooner he was in and out, the faster he could leave this all behind.

He carefully opened the door to the pantry and had to pause in shock. Mouth agape, he took in the sheer quantity of food in the poorly lit room. It was more than he had seen even at his house. He grabbed some bread, some meats from the ice box, and other things. His mouth watered as he did so. Taking a deep breath as he shoved stuff in the bag, Aurelio imagined Scipio's face after seeing the haul.

He also imagined the family tomorrow. A family with a little baby girl who would be missing food in their pantry.

Not my problem...

But he couldn't get his mind off it as he started making his way out. Back up the stairs again, and then to the window, and he would be free. He crept up the stairs, careful not to make a sound.

Something stirred on the first floor.

He froze. Behind him, he heard a shuffle of blankets and a soft tap on wood. A few moments later, a baby began to cry.

This is bad! That mom is going to wake up any second to go take care of her! If I run... I might be able to get out the window, but there's no way they won't hear me...

Aurelio's muscles tensed. In a few moments, he'd be up the stairs and halfway down that hallway.

But he hesitated.

That child... She was crying, and as far as Aurelio could see. No help was coming. Memories flashed in front of his eyes.

A fire.

Screaming.

His outstretched hand, empty.

He wouldn't let that happen again.

It's not who I am.

His mind made up, he, still carefully, made his way down the stairs. He found himself in front of the door with the paste-on stars and pink sash. The crying was just beyond it. He opened it with a smile on his face and was immediately bombarded with a room full of *life*. The baby's cries softened.

Aurelio stood over the small crib, one hand resting lightly on its edge. The room smelled faintly of milk and lavender. The little girl, face flushed and wet with tears, blinked up at him. For a moment, he didn't move—unsure of what to do, unsure of why he had come back at all.

Then, slowly, awkwardly, he reached down and rocked the crib.

"Shh..." he whispered, his voice cracking from disuse. The sound startled him more than it did her. But it worked.

The crying quieted, fading into soft, uneven breaths. The baby's tiny hand curled around nothing, and her eyes fluttered closed. Aurelio let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding.

A floorboard creaked. His head snapped toward the door.

Voices.

Low. Groggy. Awake.

His blood ran cold.

No, no, no!

Aurelio slipped out of the room, easing the door shut behind him. The hallway felt tighter now, darker. Every step he took threatened to betray him. The voices grew clearer—closer.

"...hear something?"

"I'll check."

The young man.

Aurelio's heart slammed against his ribs. He bolted.

Down the hallway, feet barely touching the ground, breath sharp and ragged. He didn't care about the noise anymore, only distance. The window loomed ahead, pale moonlight spilling through it.

Freedom.

He vaulted through it, catching the ledge with both hands and swinging himself out. The drop to the wall scraped his palms raw, but he didn't stop. He hit the stone, rolled, grabbed for the vines...

"Ay! Stop!"

The shout came from inside. Then another sound...

A crash. A struggle. Voices. Aurelio froze.

I know that voice...

He turned. Below, in the shadows near the base of the wall, a figure twisted in someone's grip. Steel flashed in the moonlight—a knife knocked from a hand and clattering across stone.

Coltello.

The young man had him pinned, one arm locked tight around his shoulders. Coltello fought like a cornered animal, silent, vicious—but he was losing.

"Go!" Coltello hissed, the word torn out between breaths. "*Vai!* Leave!"

Aurelio's fingers tightened around the vines. He was halfway up. One pull, just one, and he would be over the wall. Safe. He heard Scipio's voice.

This is what you do.

This is how you survive.

"Go!" Coltello snarled again, sharper now, desperate. "Don't be stupid!"

Aurelio climbed. One hand higher. Another. The top of the wall was inches away...

The man shouted something, dragging Coltello back. Coltello's heel struck the stone, his grip slipping, his body forced down.

And in an instant, Aurelio saw it all once more.
 Flames. Smoke. His father running inside. His hand reaching out. Empty.
 He stopped. His breath hitched.

No.

His jaw clenched.

No!

Aurelio dropped.

He hit the ground hard, pain shooting up his legs, but he was already moving. He lunged forward, grabbing Coltello's fallen knife as he ran. The man had no time to react as Aurelio slammed into him from the side, driving the hilt of the knife into his wrist. The grip loosened, not a lot, but just enough.

Coltello twisted free.

"*Idiota!*" Coltello spat, but there was no anger in his voice, only relief. Something stirred within Aurelio, and he felt a barrier within himself break.

"Move!" He shouted, his voice unfamiliar to him. Coltello, wide-eyed, nodded.

They ran. Footsteps thundered behind them. The man recovered fast.

"Thieves!" he shouted. "Stop!"

They didn't.

Aurelio grabbed Coltello's arm, pulling him toward the wall. "Up!" Coltello didn't argue this time. He leapt, catching the vines and hauling himself up with practiced ease. Aurelio followed, slower, muscles screaming in protest.

The man reached the base just as Aurelio's foot slipped. He felt a hand grab his ankle. Aurelio kicked wildly, panic surging. Coltello, already nearing the top, looked back.

Their eyes met.

Everything seemed to freeze.

Then Coltello dropped one hand, reaching down for Aurelio.

"Take it! *Dai!*"

Aurelio lunged, catching his wrist. They pulled together desperately, and eventually, the grim on Aurelio's ankle broke.

He scrambled upward, both of them dragging themselves over the top just as the man slammed into the wall below. They didn't stop. They dropped down the other side, hit the ground running, and vanished into the maze of alleyways, shadows swallowing them whole.

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By the time they reached the butcher's shop, both of them were gasping. The others were already there. Pincho and Trappino jumped to their feet, eyes wide. Scipio stood behind the counter, arms crossed, expression unreadable. For a moment, no one spoke.

"What happened?" Scipio asked.

Aurelio tried to answer, but his breath came in ragged bursts. Coltello stepped forward.

"He had the job," he said shortly. "He got it done." He jerked his chin toward the bag slung over Aurelio's shoulder.

"And then he threw it away."

A pause. Aurelio stiffened. Coltello continued, voice quieter now.

“The baby woke up. He went back.” The twins exchanged a glance. Scipio’s eyes flickered. “He calmed her,” Coltello said. “Woke the house.”

Another pause.

“He could’ve left,” Coltello went on. “He almost did.”

Aurelio looked down. Uncomfortable, but willing to let Coltello tell the story. Coltello shifted, wincing slightly before the next part.

“...I got caught.” Pincho inhaled sharply. Trappino’s grin vanished.

“And?” Scipio asked. Coltello let out a slow breath.

“He came back.”

Aurelio clenched his jaw.

“He didn’t have to,” Coltello added. “Shouldn’t have.”

“But he did.”

Silence.

Scipio studied Aurelio for a long moment. Something in his expression shifted.

Aurelio stepped forward, using the voice that had been lost to him for so long.

“I chose.” Pincho nearly fainted. Trappino caught him. “I chose to go back for him.” He cleared his throat. “Because there has to be a different way to live than what you told me. We can care... we’re *allowed* to care about each other and protect each other, Scipio.”

Scipio continued to study him, wordless. The twins moved closer, hovering near Aurelio like they weren’t sure what to do with him now.

Coltello looked at him again, longer this time. Different. Then he gave a small, almost imperceptible nod.

“...Salvatore,” he muttered. Pincho blinked.

“Salva—?” Trappino’s eyes lit up.

Scipio’s gaze sharpened. Coltello didn’t look away from Aurelio.

“He saves,” he said simply.

Crushing silence. Aurelio’s heart felt like it was going to explode. Slowly, Scipio smiled.

“Is that so?”

He stepped forward, placing a hand on Aurelio’s shoulder, not heavy, not light. He faced everyone and spoke.

“We take,” Scipio said, almost thoughtfully. “We survive.”

His eyes flicked briefly to Coltello, then back.

“...But maybe,” he continued, “there are other ways to do it.”

The room was full of tension as Scipio continued. Scipio straightened, his voice clear now.

“And his name will be...

Salvatore.”

The End