Nocturne in Black and Gold
by Silbrith

Summary


"Do you hear any music?" Mozzie turned to peer hopefully at Neal through his glasses.

Neal tore himself away from studying the canvas and rubbed his eyes. "Her strings are still mute."

He and Mozzie had spent the past few hours scrutinizing the Braque painting yet again. The confined atmosphere of Mozzie's bunker at the Aloha Emporium added to Neal's frustrations over *Violin and Candlestick*. A month ago he'd retrieved the painting from the church in Paris where he and Klaus had hidden it. Mozzie smuggled it into New York, and it had been residing in his bunker ever since.

They'd run every test they could think of on the painting. They'd examined it under filters throughout the entire electromagnetic spectrum with nothing to show for their efforts.

Georges Braque had taken the violin and fractured it for his painting. He believed the process made the violin seem more alive. Neal could attest to that. Not just alive, she was a wraith who followed him around wherever he went. Violins were supposed to sing. This one mocked him by singing "The Sounds of Silence." Was this his karma for having recovered the painting without informing Peter?

Mozzie tapped him on the shoulder. "Your mind is spinning in a rut. It's time to call the tow truck."

He walked over to the bookcase and retrieved the *Monopoly* box. "What we need is a fresh approach."

Neal rested his chin on his propped up elbows and watched as his friend took out the pieces.

Mozzie picked up the wheelbarrow token. "We've eliminated a secret message written in invisible ink. No hidden clues under layers of paint. What does that tell us?"

Neal reflected on his question. "The painting is only part of the solution. We know Adler is looking for it, so we assume he thinks it contains information about the location of a hoard of Nazi-looted art. But by itself it's not the answer. We need another piece to the puzzle."

"Precisely. What other clues do we have?" Not waiting for Neal to respond, Mozzie continued unabated as he placed the battleship on the game board. "We have the World War II diary of a German soldier. We have a shipping manifest containing names of paintings which we know were looted by the Nazis and so far haven't been recovered. And we have one other clue—the sheet of equations that was found in the diary. The mysterious fractal formulas."

Neal had discovered the materials in the safe of a shipping company owner named Karl Huber who worked for the criminal organization Ydrus. The team had identified Huber as the son of a Nazi officer who'd served with the Rosenberg task force in charge of confiscated art in Paris. No link
had been established between Adler and Huber but it was tempting to speculate that both men were on the trail of a lost shipment of plundered art.

"Have Jones and Travis made any progress with the equations?" asked Neal, hoping they might have a new theory. Mozzie had declared a truce with Jones over the past month. In the interest of picking Jones's brain about U-boats, a subject Jones was rapidly becoming an expert on, Mozzie had decided that a thaw in the cold war between them was warranted. Travis, White Collar's tech expert, and Mozzie had been friends for much longer. Détente was established last winter over a mutual interest in the hunt for extraterrestrial intelligence.

"Travis believes they could be linked to an antenna," Mozzie said. "but the equations are unlike what are currently used in antennas. Still, who knows what some Nazi mad genius may have concocted in his underground laboratory?" He picked up the top hat and placed it on the board. "I leave for France tomorrow. I'll pursue my research there."

"Another job for Gordon Taylor?"

He nodded. "Gordon is proving to be a valuable resource, and not merely because of the generous remuneration he provides for my services. Through his network I'm accumulating a list of former French Resistance fighters. Some of them are shadow-dwellers like me. After the war, they assumed new names. They're unknown to French authorities. I suspect one of them may provide the enlightenment we need." He sat back in his chair and studied Neal, frowning slightly. "You need to take a break. Your brain cells are starting to atrophy. Our violin will regain her voice in due course."

Neal didn't realize he was looking that gloomy. He shook it off. "Will you be back in time for Comic-Con?"

"Of course. How could I miss the West Coast premiere of Yellowface, the Masked Avenger? Just think— in less than two weeks, our video will be viewed by the movers and shakers of Hollywood. I wouldn't be at all surprised if Steven Spielberg or George Lucas stops by to inquire about developing it into a feature-length film." His eyes widened. "They may both come. We'll have a bidding war. Yes, I must brush up on contract law."

Neal broke into a laugh. No one topped Mozzie for reviving spirits. "Have you discussed it with Aidan? He owns the rights to the video. It's his production, after all."

"Technically, I suppose, but since I wrote the script, surely I should be listed as co-owner. And, if you'll recall, the video was my concept." The idea had been born shortly after Mozzie had proclaimed himself a champion of bees at the beginning of the year. He'd gone into the organic honey business with Billy Feng, the owner of the Aloha Emporium, and had quickly expanded into the production of honey wines. When Neal's friend Aidan Phillips was looking for a project for his animation course, Mozzie suggested featuring the plight of the endangered Hawaiian yellow-faced bee.

Sometimes it felt like Mozzie was attending Columbia along with Neal. He'd adopted Neal's college friends as his own and often wore Columbia-emblazoned attire when on campus. He'd insisted Neal prepare him several college ID cards with different roles ranging from student to employee to alum. His favorite was his faculty member ID.

But Neal wasn't prepared to let him assume the lion's share of the glory for the video. "How about Richard and I? We prepared the artwork for Aidan to animate and helped voice the characters. Angela, her boyfriend Michael, and Aidan's girlfriend Keiko were also involved. Fiona co-wrote the music with Richard. She deserves a cut as well."
Mozzie rolled his eyes. "I thought you said you'd cast off your white knight image. How can you possibly justify your ex-girlfriend receiving a payment? She already ripped out your heart. She's not getting anything else."

"Fiona simply found someone who's much better suited for her. We're still friends. I talked with her last week."

Mozzie shook his head despairingly. "That's no way for a jilted lover to behave. Still I will be happy to extend my services as agent to all of you—even Fiona. For the proper percentage of course. And I warn you in advance, she'll have to pay the premium rate. No friends-and-family discount for her, the trollop."

Even with Mozzie's trashing of Fiona, Neal left the bunker at the emporium in a much better mood. His art studio in Watson Hall was a short walk away. He resolved to focus on his art and lay aside all thoughts of the Braque till fresh inspiration struck.

It was not a surprise that Mozzie was in such good spirits. Orders for his new commemorative honey wine, J. Edgar's Private Cellar, were flying in at a faster clip than he could have dreamed. And Mozzie dreamed big. Neal was getting a small cut in the proceeds as well. He'd suggested the wine in honor of FBI Day. On July 26, 1908, the Bureau had been established. The idea of reaping profits off the event was too enticing to pass up. Neal had ensured that the wine wasn't laced with anything toxic and helped design the gift box which resembled an evidence vault.

Was the wine worth the exorbitant price Mozzie demanded? Hardly. But the inflated price tag appeared to contribute to its popularity. Originally Mozzie had intended to distribute the wine only in New York, but he'd been inundated with so many requests from D.C. and the field offices that Billy had hired several additional employees. Last week, Mozzie gleefully reported that the wine was trending in the watering holes of Wall Street. His status as wine mogul was rapidly solidifying.

Unlike many of his fellow students, Neal had retained his studio throughout the summer. He'd been working on two masters. His degree in visual arts would be achieved in May, dependent on a successful final exhibition. His masters in art history had been rolled into the doctorate program. There was no end in sight for it. With no classes in art history to take in the summer, Neal planned to get a head start on his paintings.

He was by no means convinced it would be possible to achieve both degrees while working at the FBI. The doctorate program was designed to be full time. It even came with a cost of living stipend. But Neal didn't want to give up on his job at the Bureau. When offered the chance to apply for the doctorate, he'd debated long and hard if it'd be worth the demands on his time.

Peter and Mozzie—for different reasons—convinced him it was too good an opportunity to pass up. Peter had volunteered to check into a reduced hour schedule for him. Last week they'd developed a thirty-hour per week schedule for September through May. The proposal was now making its way through the convoluted FBI bureaucracy. Hughes had given it his blessing, but the stamp of approval rested with Kramer. The head of D.C. Art Crimes had thrown up obstacles for every request Neal had made over the past year. Would he raise a red flag again? The budget for art crimes was tiny. Neal's offer would save the Bureau money, but Neal wouldn't be surprised if Kramer rejected it simply out of spite.

Watson Hall during summer recess resembled a ghost ship. No students in the lounge or milling around the corridors. A few lone spooks like himself worked away in their caves. Normally Neal could count on Richard, whose studio was adjacent to Neal's, to provide a welcome distraction, but
he was on temporary assignment in Los Angeles. At first the quiet hadn't bothered Neal. He'd
lectured himself that fewer distractions were exactly what he needed, right?

That lasted maybe one evening.

The spook in the cave next to his, Bianka, had been his sanity preserver. She was a new student
from Hungary and had started early in order to improve her English before classes began. She'd
been hesitant to ask for help but Neal was glad to assist. Hungarian was a language he'd never
picked up. He asked her to teach him some basic phrases so she wouldn't feel guilty about him
tutoring her in English. Mainly she needed practice in conversation, and that was the best way to
banish the loneliness of an empty hall as well.

Bianka wasn't around when Neal arrived at his studio, but Peter might drop by. He was coming to
the campus midday to discuss the next year's telescope workshops with the head of the program, an
astronomy professor named Daniel Leavitt. Peter had mentioned if it weren't too late he'd stop off
on the way home.

Neal placed a blank canvas on his easel and changed into his painting t-shirt.

Were the paint pigments in the Braque a clue? Could a message be hidden in those shades of gray
and umber?

He brought himself up short. Sneaky violin. He was supposed to be thinking about his own art.
With a noisy exhale, he exorcised the violin from his mind as he spread out preliminary sketches
on the worktable.

Waterways—that was what he needed to focus on, not a mute violin. He'd decided on rivers for the
theme of his master's exhibition and had selected ones that he'd run along during key moments in
his life. They would all be night scenes. Whistler had painted a series of nocturnes. Perhaps he
would call his night music.

The subject for today was the Rhone as it flowed through Geneva with St. Pierre Cathedral in the
background. As Neal got out his supplies he immersed himself in the mood he wanted to capture.

The year was 2003. A frigid night in February. The wind was gusting off the Rhone. He'd jogged
along the promenade bordering the river as he debated whether to quit Klaus's crew. They'd just
returned from Berlin. Klaus was furious at the heist being blown wide open. They still didn't know
the cause. At the last minute, the guard schedule had been changed, but they hadn't realized it until
they were already in position. In the ensuing chaos Neal's only focus was to escape. The crew was
scattering in all directions. He was running with Klaus. Suddenly Klaus stopped him. Told him to
wait while he went ahead. Neal heard a gunshot and raced forward. That's when he saw the guard.
A bullet hole in the center of his back. The guard was young. He couldn't have been much older
than Neal. The sight of him dead, collapsed on the marble floor . . . The guard was unarmed. There
was no need to kill him.

From somewhere Klaus materialized, seized Neal by the arm, and forced him to flee with him.
Otherwise Neal would have stayed rooted to the spot till the police came. On the long drive back to
Geneva, they'd had plenty of time to analyze the job and discuss what went wrong. As the others
reported where they'd been, Neal knew with certainty that only one man could have killed the
guard and that was Klaus.

When they returned to the townhouse in Geneva, it was already late in the day. The others went to
bed, but Neal couldn't sleep. Instead he headed for the park next to the river. That night he decided
that there was only one option that made sense.
Neal studied the canvas. Why was he having such difficulty? The emotions were still so fresh. Last month they'd discovered that the cybercriminal Azathoth who'd been taunting them for the past nine months was Klaus's older brother Rolf. Many of the actions Rolf had taken could be attributed to him seeking revenge for Klaus's death. Perhaps that was the answer. Neal had too many competing emotions to express them all in one painting.

Peter set a brisk pace through the university quad. Neal's studio was several blocks south from Pupin Hall where he'd met Leavitt.

His meeting about the upcoming telescope workshops had gone on longer than he'd expected. Last spring Leavitt had launched the program, targeting kids ages ten through sixteen. Travis, who knew the professor from his work with SETI, had persuaded Peter and Mozzie to help out. The kids learned the basics of stargazing and telescopes that semester. This fall they'd begin constructing their own scopes. Peter was particularly looking forward to that project. He'd built his first telescope when he was eleven. The last one he made was when he was in college. As he helped the kids, Peter planned to build his own.

Travis and Mozzie would also help out. Mozzie was a natural at working with the younger ones, and there was an additional benefit: his participation ensured he wouldn't have as much time for his less-than-legal activities. That was not a subject Peter ever discussed with Neal, particularly now that Mozzie's contacts were invaluable. But Peter yearned for the day Mozzie would retire from his criminal pursuits.

Neal, on the other hand, was a major success story. He'd turned his life around and was putting down roots, not just in New York City but at Columbia. Peter relished the thought that he could visit Neal in his studio and not be concerned about what secrets he might be hiding.

That hadn't been the case last summer. His cousin Henry had disappeared off the grid for months while working on a scheme to take down a crooked music publisher. Henry cut nearly everyone out of the loop, including Neal. As a result, Neal developed his own secret agenda to help his cousin. No one saw fit to include Peter in their plans. The cousins were keeping secrets not just from their families and friends but from each other as they crisscrossed the country.

All ended well, mainly due to Neal's realization he couldn't succeed on his own. When he brought in the FBI, he learned a valuable lesson in the advantages of teamwork. Over the past several months, the team had confronted the challenges posed by Azathoth, Ydrus, as well as a host of other criminals and in the process built up an admirable track record.

Like last summer, Neal would be leaving for the West Coast in a couple of weeks. But instead of taking off on some private agenda, he'd be flying with Peter, El, and his college friends to San Diego to participate in Comic-Con.

This was a summer where Peter didn't have to worry about what Neal and Henry were up to. Not that there weren't challenges. Rolf Mansfeld was still on the loose. Peter had a stack of other investigations to manage and limited resources to tackle them all, but all the members of his team were on the same page.

Peter stopped to pick up two cups of java at the local coffee shack before entering Watson Hall. This was his first time to visit Neal's studio since the end of the semester and he was surprised at how empty the building felt. Did the lack of students bother Neal? His cousins were both away.
Angela was conducting field work in West Virginia for her ethnomusicology doctorate. Henry had left Thursday for an extended business trip to South America. Peter was glad El had suggested holding a Fourth of July barbecue for the team.

Last year they'd held a barbecue in June but Independence Day made even more sense. Their townhouse was not far from the East River which was the site for spectacular fireworks. Barges on the East River lit up the sky, and the fireworks were easily visible from their backyard.

Neal was sketching at his worktable when Peter arrived. A large canvas containing a few preliminary outlines was on his easel. Neal looked up and smiled as he sniffed the air, apparently happy for both the interruption and the drinks. He peppered Peter with questions about the telescope workshops while they had their coffee.

"I gather your painting's not going well?" Peter remarked. "You're not normally that curious about the details of telescope mirror grinding."

Neal glanced at the canvas. "I restarted it several times and scratched each attempt. Now it's back to the drawing board, literally."

Peter picked up a photo lying on the table. It showed a city at night. The lights were reflected in a body of water. "Is this your inspiration?"

Neal nodded. "That's Geneva. The Rhone is in the foreground. St. Pierre's Cathedral is on the hill."

"And why, may I ask, are you drawing inspiration from Geneva?"

"I selected rivers that I'd run along during various stages of my life for the exhibition. Geneva's turned into my Waterloo. Perhaps it's because everything about that period has become so muddled."

Peter could well imagine his feelings. It was only last month that Rolf had been identified as Azathoth. Instead of having been killed in a car accident five years ago, he was believed to have undergone plastic surgery. Rolf assumed the identity of Alistair Chapman and worked for years as the creative director at a major special effects company, Scima Workshop.

But the evidence was not sufficient to pass muster in a court of law. Chapman had been identified as Rolf based on DNA samples and behavioral clues but disappeared before they could apprehend him. The team had identified a plastic surgeon living in Salzburg who had likely performed Rolf's transformation, but local officials had repeatedly denied access to his files. In response, Peter and Hughes had taken the extraordinary step of green-lighting a hack attack on the doctor's computer. Travis and Aidan Phillips, who had developed the anti-malware program to counter Rolf's attacks, were now working to decrypt the files. Peter wasn't feeling muddled. He was frustrated. Every time they made a step forward, another door was slammed in their face.

And Neal? Was he feeling guilt more than anything else? The discovery that their arch-enemy was the brother of the man Neal had once considered his mentor and who had viewed Neal as a younger brother was not a good scenario. Rolf was a constant reminder to Neal that he'd unmasked Klaus to Peter. That action set in motion the chain of events which led to Klaus's death at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Neal was smiling at him. "I can see those brain cells working. You're stewing that I chose Geneva because of Klaus, aren't you?"

"And is he why you're having issues with the painting?"
He shrugged. "I don't deny I have been thinking about Klaus, but that's the point. Professor Stockman has drilled into me the need to transfer those emotions onto canvas. Seeing them as art should enable me to be more objective about them, right?"

"It's a good theory. Do you think it'd work for me, too?"

"More paint-by-number masterpieces like the one in your parents' basement?" He laughed. "Probably not, but finger paints might do the trick. I'll set you up with an easel."

Peter had closed the door when he walked in, an action which was now automatic. Their conversations so often drifted off to questions about cases, it was only prudent. He was glad when he heard a knock at the door. Even though Watson seemed deserted, there were others present.

When Neal opened the door, Peter saw a pretty blonde standing in the doorway. She was dressed casually in jeans and a paint-splattered t-shirt with her long hair tied back in a loose ponytail. Peter would have said she wore no makeup, but he'd learned from El that was really just a woman's artful way of pretending not to wear makeup. Whatever. With makeup or not, she was a looker.

Neal made the introductions. Her name was Bianka Kaldy, a new student from Hungary. She spoke fluent English but with a heavy accent.

"Neal and I were discussing studying to music," she said, handing Neal a disc. "This is a CD of Haydn's string quartet music."

Neal thanked her. "I'd mentioned how I used Mozart to survive my course in computational art."

"And I had tried the same technique at my university in Budapest, but had used Haydn. Neal lent me a CD on Mozart and we're going to compare results."

"I didn't think there were any courses in the summer," Peter said.

"None in art," she agreed, "but the American Language Program at the university offers English classes for international students."

Neal smiled. "Don't let her fool you, Peter. Her English is excellent."

"Hah! Tell that to the shopkeeper who can't understand what I'm talking about."

"I like your accent," Peter said gallantly. "It's charming."

"I shall quote you to the next shopkeeper who orders me to speak English when I already am."

"Not bad," Peter remarked appreciatively to Neal after she left. "I'm glad you're not the only one here. This is probably Bianka's first Fourth of July. You're welcome to invite her to the barbecue. It would just be a group of friends."

"You realize who you sound like, don't you?" Neal commented, eyeing him skeptically.

Peter groaned inwardly. He knew he shouldn't have tried. This was work best left to the pro in the family.

"Your counterpart in Diana's stories used practically the same words when he tried to fix Neal Carter up with a date." He shook his head. "I knew El was a matchmaker. Et tu, Brute?"

Snagged again. Recently, both he and Neal had caught themselves acting like their alter-egos. Last spring Diana had started writing fanfiction stories featuring him and Neal in an attempt to
manipulate Azathoth, who was a fan of the horror writer H.P. Lovecraft. The strategy certainly seemed to be working on Peter. He hoped it was equally successful with Rolf. "Why are you so sure El's a matchmaker?"

"Diana has you admit it in her stories. And if Diana wrote it, it must be true. As you no doubt recall, I promised I'd hold her as my guide in all things so she wouldn't exact revenge on my character."

"And how has that worked out for you?"

"Not bad. I survived the last story, didn't I?"

" Barely, thanks to yours truly, and don't think I didn't notice you deflecting neatly away from my question."

"I appreciate the offer, but if I take Bianka to a White Collar event, you know Jones will start razzing me about the new woman in my life. Soon everyone in the office will be asking questions about her and offering unwanted advice. If I say we're just friends, they'll mock me."

"I understand." Neal had used that line for months before acknowledging he and Fiona were much more than that.

"It's only been a few weeks since Fiona and I broke up. Let's wait a while longer before you rev up the matchmaking machine, or at least till I get the painting of the Loire done."

"You're painting Amboise, the scene of the crime, too?"

He shrugged. "I refer you to the Stockman therapy technique that I'm using for Klaus."

"Is it equally successful?"

"I'm happy to report that the prognosis for the Loire is more favorable. Fiona and I have talked several times. We've decided to avoid recriminations and have declared a no-fault breakup."

"That's good news, and I'm glad you have Bianka for company. You must miss having your friends around."

"Aidan's kept his studio as well. I'm meeting him tomorrow. He's added some new lines for Yellowface, the Masked Avenger, which I need to record. Comic-Con is less than two weeks away."

Prentis Hall, Columbia University. Sunday afternoon.

Aidan's studio was north of the Columbia campus. Like the building it was in, his workspace was a different world from the traditional setup Neal had. Whereas Neal's studio was stuffed with easels, art supplies, and canvases in various stages of completion, Aidan's looked like a computer lab. But for an artist who was also a skilled programmer at a cybersecurity company, it made sense. Aidan had become interested in the visual arts when he was an undergrad at MIT. At Columbia he worked exclusively in digital media.

Neal and Aidan worked solid for hours on Sunday with only a quick break for lunch. Aidan's quest for perfectionism was worse than Neal's on a forgery. Well, maybe the equivalent. Neal heaved a sigh of relief when Aidan finally took off his headphones and pronounced himself satisfied with the results.
"I lost track of how many times you made me record that twenty-second segment," Neal grumbled. "You must have used every sound effect in your arsenal. Are you trying to be the next Peter Jackson?"

"Better not say that. If recording you could do the trick, I'd keep you here for the next week." Aidan began shutting off the equipment. "I still can't believe I'll be showing at Comic-Con."

"It should have sunk in by now. The way the judges raved at your video at the sci-fi convention, it was obvious you'd win first prize. Mozzie's already dreaming of movie deals."

"He may not be so far off base."

"You mean you've already been approached?" Neal asked, stunned.

"Not quite but close enough. And it's thanks to Keiko. She has a cousin who works for Hotaru Productions, one of the largest animation studios in Japan. Toma is attending Comic-Con along with several other representatives from their company and wants to meet with me. He thinks Hotaru may be interested in the video."

"To develop as a . . . ?"

Aidan shrugged. "Comic book, cartoon . . . He wasn't specific, but I'd be happy with anything. Keiko returned to Japan at the end of the term to attend a friend's wedding. Without breathing a word about it to me, she took a copy of the video along expressly to show to Toma. She probably knew I would have insisted on multiple revisions." Aidan chuckled as he admitted, "I never thought she could be so devious."

"It's the sweet, innocent ones who can make the best con artists." At first glance, Aidan's girlfriend was the least likely person in the world to pull a scam. Neal remembered how shy she was when they first met last September. They'd helped each other become familiar with the university. Neal had also felt out of place, but his jitters were nothing compared to hers. And now he could claim partial credit for Aidan and Keiko's happiness since he had introduced her to Aidan.

"You should talk with Mozzie," he reminded Aidan. "He already has plans to be your agent, and his skills as a lawyer are not to be sneezed at."

"I'm counting on it. Mozzie reviewed the contract my company has with the FBI. I'm sure he already believes he's on retainer." Aidan rolled his chair away from the video-editing console and stretched his legs in front of him. "I hope to investigate other opportunities as well while I'm at Comic-Con. Richard thinks he can get me an interview with Scima."

"I thought Richard was working on game development."

"He is, but the facility where he works also handles film productions. It's second in size only to their headquarters in London."

"You'd move to L.A.?"

"In a heartbeat. Or San Francisco. George Lucas's production company, Industrial Light & Magic, is there. I could make the sacrifice." Clearly Aidan was in the grips of Comic-Con fever. He was so excited that his face was turning almost as red as his hair.

"What about your cybersecurity company? Would you quit?"

Aidan shook his head. "That shouldn't be necessary. You combine your art with working at the
FBI. I don't see why I couldn't work on visual effects during the day and also keep a hand in programming. I could work remotely, doing just the jobs that interest me, like the software we developed to combat Azathoth's security system malware. In fact I could make a strong case to my company that we need a representative on the West Coast. Playa Vista, where Scima is located, is considered to be another Silicon Valley. We could open a branch office, focusing on West Coast and Asia. You know the West Coast museums have been slow to adopt our software."

Neal nodded. "Travis complained about it at Friday's briefing."

"You proved my point."

Once they finished outlining Aidan's future career path to their mutual satisfaction, Neal rose to leave.

"You need to see these first," Aidan said, stopping him. "Keiko brought them by yesterday." He removed the lid from a large cardboard box on the floor.

Neal peered inside. "The t-shirts came!" Keiko had taken Richard's design of the bee avenger and converted it into a t-shirt design. She'd ordered more than enough for everyone who had participated in the video along with their friends who were going to Comic-Con. Neal picked up t-shirts for Angela and Michael and for those who'd be at the barbecue. Michael wouldn't be at Comic-Con. He was saving his vacation days to visit Angela in West Virginia, but they could both wear their t-shirts in a gesture of solidarity.

**The Ritz-Carlton, Marina del Rey, California. Sunday, July 3, 2005**

Marta Kolar pulled her car up to the portico at the Ritz-Carlton and handed the key to the waiting attendant. Let someone else park the car. She felt like splurging. The long months of preparation were drawing to an end.

Rolf had made an excellent choice for his hotel. It was only two miles from the Scima campus which meant she didn't have to battle the infamous L.A. traffic to see him. In the two months she'd been at her new position, Marta had learned that in California location was everything. It was what made her value the tiny shoebox of an apartment Scima had arranged for her. That hadn't been the case when she first saw it, but the apartment's proximity to Scima made it prime real estate. In any case, she'd only have a couple more weeks to endure it and the congestion. Rolf had promised that after Operation Capriccio was concluded, she could return with him to the castle in Hungary.

Anya's home in the mountains north of Budapest was not only an impregnable fortress for Ydrus but it had also become Marta's safe haven. She still felt like she was living in a dream world. She'd risen in just a few years from being a lowly programmer in Prague to one of Anya's closest associates. As head of Ydrus, Anya called herself Python. For Marta she'd chosen the name Diamondback. Marta liked the name so much, she'd had a tiny diamondback rattlesnake tattooed on the small of her back. Anya had a tattoo of a small python on of her fingers which was readily disguised by a ring. Marta's was also easily concealed. She'd now hidden her identity as well.

Marta rode the elevator up to Rolf's suite. Pausing at the entrance, she listened to the strains of piano music coming from inside. Those dark and somber chords had to be Rachmaninov. She'd once told Rolf it reminded her of an approaching storm. He'd looked at her with fresh eyes after that.

Anya had warned her he'd changed. Would she recognize him? She knocked on the door. The music stopped and a moment later he opened it.
Her mouth dropped in amazement. "Is that you?"

He smiled approval at her reaction. "Come in, my pet."

The man who greeted her at the door looked nothing like Chapman. Rolf was transformed. Younger and more virile. So much sexier . . . His dark angular face reminded her a little of Sean Connery. But the eyes were the same as when he was Alistair Chapman—mesmerizing. So dark, they looked black. Anya might be enchanted by Klaus's blue eyes but not her. She could lose herself in Rolf's espresso gaze. Who was she kidding? She already had.

He beckoned her to take a seat. "My appearance pleases you, I see. Rolf has been dead for so long, I decided I could safely regain my former appearance. You see before you Rolf Mansfeld with the plastic surgery stripped off."

For as long as she'd known him, he'd always looked like Chapman. She used to think it was because of the power he wielded that she found him irresistible but no longer. "Did Bergeron perform the surgery?"

"No, I used a surgeon in Italy. Bergeron's usefulness has been compromised now that he's on Interpol's radar." He stroked his chin. "A few bruises are left, but in general I'm pleased. When I go out, I wear a beard as does Klaus. A simple procedure but quite effective."

"You're retaining your English accent?"

"I've grown fond of it. I see no need to change." He sat down opposite her. The armchairs were in front of the French patio doors which opened onto a private terrace overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Marta gazed around the room. It reminded her of a luxurious version of Napoleon's field office in gold and navy. Masculine and opulent. Even the furniture seemed neoclassical.

"Your new appearance suits you," he said, pouring her a glass of wine from the wine bucket next to his chair. "Should I call you Katja?"

"Please. Marta Kolar has been put on a shelf to be resurrected at a later time."

"That's wise. You're less likely to slip up. Katja Visser. Short and sweet, my pet. You'll do."

"When will Klaus arrive?"

"In a couple of hours. You've performed all the checks?"

She nodded. "We'll have no recurrence of what happened at the Met in May."

"Good." A brief smile flitted across his face. "I've already informed Kramer to be prepared. It's unfortunate he won't be able to record Peter's expression when he receives the request. I'd enjoy having it as a memento." He sipped his wine for a moment. "Earlier this year, we came close to eliminating Kramer. Now he's become a key element to our operation. I knew my instincts were right." He turned to her. "Anya called yesterday to report on her sister's progress. Bianka and Neal have become friends. As we instructed, Bianka is proceeding slowly, but she's confident Neal is already interested in her."

No wonder Rolf was in such a good mood. All their decisions were having the predicted results. It had been Klaus's idea to use Bianka. Last fall when Neal was working with them in New York, Klaus had visited Neal's studio on campus. While there, he'd met a shy Japanese student whom Neal had befriended. Bianka had been coached to appeal to Neal's chivalrous side in a similar fashion, and it was working.
"What's the status of Operation Capriccio?" Rolf asked.

"We're on hold, awaiting Klaus's arrival. When will I be able to interview him?"

"Beginning on Tuesday, he'll be at your disposal."

"Good. We'll have to make the preparations at night," she warned. "I won't be able to leave during the day. Have you decided if you'd like to proceed with Operation Counterpoint?"

"Is your code ready?"

"It is, but to implement it, I won't be available for anything else over the weekend."

He pondered for a moment as he gazed out at the ocean. "Yes, go ahead. You'll have the evenings to work with Klaus. That should give you ample time. Our doctor, Herr Penfold, promises success, and the research I've conducted substantiates his claims. Still, the lack of independently confirmed documentation is a concern. This weekend will be the perfect opportunity for our experiment, and Neal's friend makes an ideal candidate. Have you met Richard?"

She nodded, setting down her glass. "He's not on my team, but I've consulted with his group on their project. I've kept my contact with him to a minimum as you recommended."

"Good. There's no chance he would recognize you but there's no need to draw any attention to yourself. Once the experiment is finished, it won't matter. How long will you need for Counterpoint?"

"I'll notify Penfold to finalize the program. Since it's already written, there are only a few adjustments to make. The procedure itself will take fourteen hours. I'll schedule it for Saturday. Richard lives alone, so I don't foresee any difficulties. Sunday I'll monitor him for its effectiveness. When he returns to work on Monday, I'll run further tests."

"Make sure to finish the evaluation by the thirteenth," he cautioned. "Any adjustments must be finalized before Bastille Day on Thursday." A slight smile etched his lips. "Ironic, isn't it, that as the French celebrate their independence, Neal will lose his freedom."

She raised her glass to him. "And he won't even realize it."

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Notes: Thanks for reading! You're all invited to the Burke Brooklyn Barbecue next week in Chapter 2: Fireworks in the Sky. Rolf also has a celebration planned, and it includes a message to Neal and Peter. I'll post chapters weekly on Wednesday.

This story is part of the Caffrey Conversation AU, created by Penna Nomen, and I'm delighted that Penna has once more agreed to act as beta editor for Nocturne in Black and Gold. If you'd like to see photos of the cast members and other visuals, visit the Nocturne in Black and Gold board at our Caffrey Conversation Pinterest site at www.pinterest.com/caffreycon where both Penna and I pin illustrations for our stories. I'll update the board with additional pins when I post a new chapter. This week's pins include cast members, locations, and the paintings mentioned in this chapter.

Penna and I share a blog, called Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation at www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com, where we post about our stories and adventures in writing. We also have summaries for all the stories we've written.
**Background on the Caffrey Conversation AU for new readers:** This series was created by Penna Nomen and begins with her story Caffrey Conversation. Our blog has a list and short summaries for all the stories in chronological order. The primary difference from canon is that Neal was never sent to prison and the characters are several years younger. The personalities of canon characters (Elizabeth, Mozzie, Diana, Jones, Hughes, June, and Sara) are the same.

*Peter recruited Neal in 2003 when he was 24. In the fall of 2004 he entered Columbia University's graduate program in art as a part-time student. In the spring of 2005 Peter and Neal were appointed to the Interpol art crimes task force. The work on the task force is part time and places additional emphasis on art crimes for the White Collar team. In canon, Neal's only relatives to be mentioned are his father and mother. In ours, his mother Meredith has a twin sister named Noelle who is a psychologist. Noelle married Peter's older brother Joe during the 2004 Christmas holidays. Henry Winslow is Noelle's son and nearly three years older than Neal. He works at a private investigation and security company named Winston-Winslow (usually referred to as Win-Win). Neal has one other cousin, Angela, who is the daughter of Noelle and Meredith's deceased brother. Working with the White Collar team are two non-canon characters: Travis Miller, a technical expert, and Tricia Wiese, a profiler. Neal's friends at Columbia include fellow grad students Richard and Aidan. Pins for the entire cast and locations are on our Caffrey Conversation Pinterest site.*

**Disclaimers:** White Collar and its characters are not mine. Any references to real institutions, people, and locations are not necessarily true or accurate.

"One veggie burger, medium-rare." Neal slid the burger onto the bun on Travis's plate. The Burke Brooklyn Barbecue was in full swing. He and Peter were taking turns at the grill with food for carnivores and herbivores alike.

You couldn't have ordered up a more beautiful Fourth. Crystal blue skies. The low humidity guaranteed optimal visibility for the fireworks later that night. The guests had gathered at six o'clock at the Burkes' with the pyrotechnics scheduled to begin in a couple of hours.

Peter came outside with a plate of sausages to be grilled. "You've been cook long enough. Go ahead and eat with Travis."

"Thanks." Neal grabbed a veggie burger for a plate.

"You, too?" Peter winced. "Is no one a meat-eater anymore?"

"You'll come around," Travis predicted calmly.

"Go vegan and prosper?" Peter raised an eyebrow at White Collar's chief Star Trek fan.

"You have to admit El's black bean burgers are enough to convert anyone," Neal said diplomatically and forked a brat on his plate to proclaim his omnivore status.

He and Travis loaded up with drinks and condiments and moved inside to eat in the dining room. Peter was playing his vintage Woodstock records on the stereo and Travis had never heard them.

"What's the news from Richard?" Neal asked. "Does he like L.A.?"

"His apartment is close to the beach, not that he has much opportunity to enjoy it with the hours he keeps. He's been working weekends, too."

"Will that interfere with Comic–Con? Surely Scima wouldn't keep him from attending?"

Travis shook his head, his mouth full of burger. Swallowing, he said, "He's already talked with his boss, Ian Forster, about it, and has secured permission. I wouldn't be surprised if there's only a skeleton crew working during the four days of the convention. That's one of the reasons everyone's putting in such long hours now."

"How far away is San Diego from where Richard is?"

"It's about a three-hour drive in normal conditions, but that can double during peak traffic periods. We decided to stay at the Hard Rock Hotel along with you, Aidan, and Keiko. Have Peter and El decided on a place?"

"They'll be at the same hotel. Peter insists he has more a claim to being there than we do."

Travis shrugged. "He has a point. The hotel is known for its classic rock memorabilia. I hear it's filled with signed instruments, musicians' costumes, handwritten letters—there are even sketches made by Jerry Garcia of the Grateful Dead."

Peter had worn a Jerry Garcia disguise last fall. Could he be enticed to wear it again? Perhaps if
Neal sneaked it into his suitcase, plied him with a few beers . . . El could be his co-conspirator. He glanced through the patio doors to the rocker chef. "We really should fix Peter up with outside speakers."

"I already tried, but he wouldn't go for it," Travis said, taking a swig of beer. "Claimed it could bother the neighbors."

Peter had a point. Henry planned to put in a system on the terrace of the loft he was having remodeled. The speaker wiring was already in place. Neal wondered if he'd checked with the association. If there were any restrictions, Henry would find a way to circumnavigate them. He had the knack of always getting what he wanted and if it involved being devious, so much the better. It made Neal doubly appreciate that as long as he lived at June's, he'd have no need to deal with condominium associations. "When are you leaving for L.A.?

"Next Friday. Richard hopes he won't have to work over the weekend. He's already put in the request with Ian and has been working extra hours to make up for it. I think we're okay, but hours for game developers appear to be almost as unpredictable as Bureau work."

Jones slid into an empty chair at the table. "I'm counting on you two to give me a full report on Comic-Con. If I didn't have the symposium on identity theft to attend I'd join you. Is Henry going? Neal shook his head. "He left last week for South America and won't be back for at least two more weeks."

Jones set down his burger to attack the potato salad. "When I heard he was traveling to Argentina, the thought crossed my mind he chasing after Adler again."

"You weren't alone," Neal admitted. The elusive hedge fund manager Vincent Adler was presumed to be hiding out somewhere in that country. "Henry swears he's not. He and another team member are visiting the airports that have been part of the beta tests for the facial recognition software. The trial program's coming to an end, and Henry will employ his powers of persuasion to sign them up for the official release."

"He won't have to work hard," Travis predicted. "The software's already racked up an impressive track record. Finding Garrett Fowler in Paris and Keller in Buenos Aires should be enough to convince anyone. In Santiago, agents were able to seize a drug lord after he arrived at the international airport."

"Mozzie better watch out," Jones warned. "Soon we'll be tracking him."

"Good luck with that," Neal said with a laugh. "If Mozzie were here, he'd point out the software's limitations. Disguises, false beards, plastic surgery—plenty of ways to avoid detection."

"Did Mozzie ask Henry to investigate Hitler clones while he's in Argentina?" Travis asked Jones. It amused Neal that Travis was asking Jones rather than him for news about Mozzie. Once Jones became a member of the Arkham Round Table, Mozzie had taken him on as an apprentice in the art of using games as a strategic planning tool. They were currently playing a video game about U-boats during World War II. Mozzie informed Neal he'd made the offer to keep up with any theories the White Collar team developed about Adler. What was less easy for Mozzie to admit was the extent to which White Collar team members had become part of his extended family.

"You guessed it," Jones said between bites. "His latest hypothesis is that the spirits of Nazi generals are haunting the ruins of that World War II hideout which was discovered last winter in
northern Argentina. He told me he pleaded with Henry to take along an EMF meter to investigate any spikes in the electromagnetic field at the site. Spooks and spirits are supposed to leave behind an electrical residue. EMF meters are standard equipment in ghost hunters' toolkits."

Did Jones believe in ghosts? He was speaking as authoritatively about them as if he were explaining a point of law. Travis exchanged a quick glance with Neal. He was the only one at White Collar who knew about Neal and Peter's experiences with the paranormal when they'd worked on cases with Dean and Sam Winchester. They'd mutually agreed not to discuss what happened with the other White Collar team members, but it sounded like Jones might believe them. As for Diana, Neal didn't want to think about what her reaction would be.

"Richard thinks he may have seen a ghost in a derelict house in New Orleans," Travis said. "Have you ever experienced anything similar?"

"Not personally, but many in the Navy claim to have spotted them, particularly on the USS Hornet. I toured the ship—it's docked now in California—and talked with one of the officers who used to serve on board. The accounts he told would make a believer out of you."

It was a good thing Henry wasn't around to hear Jones's stories. They would have turned him into a phasmophobe if he weren't one already. Henry refused to admit it, but Neal knew ghost stories freaked him out. There was zero chance Henry would be searching for Nazi spirits in Argentina. The odds of him pursuing any other hidden agenda weren't much higher. With the hunt for Adler now a Win-Win officially sanctioned case, there was no need. Neal and Mozzie were the ones keeping a secret, not Henry.

After he'd finished eating, Neal did a round of KP duty to carry dirty plates into the kitchen. He found El preparing to slice pies for dessert. "Would you like my help? I'm told I'm rather good with a blade."

"I accept your offer gladly. I made two varieties: cherry and blueberry." She handed him a knife.

"You can't be more patriotic than that." Neal paused to admire them. "They're too beautiful to cut." She'd decorated the edges of the crusts with cut-outs of stars.

"Coming from you, that's high praise. I'm sorry Mozzie couldn't make it to the barbecue. It was very generous of him to send over the wine. I gather J. Edgar Hoover has become a friend of his now."

"Certainly his vault has. Mozzie is convinced that buried somewhere within a secret vault at the Bureau are more of J. Edgar's files waiting to be made public. The JFK assassination and the moon landing are at the top of his shopping list."

She smiled. "I'd expect no less. Does he assume the commemorative wine gives him plundering privileges?"

Neal nodded. "Unfortunately it's not something I can tease him about. He'd never believe I wasn't serious."

"Perhaps if it comes from me? That would teach him to miss our barbecue. I'm sure that wherever he is, the fireworks won't be as spectacular as what we'll enjoy." She began loading the pie plates onto a tray. "Is this your first Fourth of July in New York?"

Was it? Two years ago he was living in New York. That was right after Adler had absconded with the money Neal and so many others had invested in his Ponzi scheme. Neal had spent the Fourth of
July weekend in the casinos of Atlantic City. He hadn't even gone outside to look at the fireworks. Not a subject to be discussed with El. "I believe it is. Last year I was in Baltimore."

She nodded. "On Julia and Graham's yacht. Sara was with you then, wasn't she?"

"That's right. She called me this morning to wish me a happy Independence Day. No fireworks, alas, for her in London. Sara asked me to thank you for including one of her favorite songs in Diana's latest story."

"My pleasure. 'You've Got a Friend' is also one of my favorites. And since in the stories Arkham Neal sings James Taylor songs, picking Carole King as an artist for Arkham Sara to like was an excellent suggestion. James Taylor and Carole King were good friends."

"That makes it even more fitting, since Sara and I are as well."

She flicked a sly glance at him as she wiped her hands on a dish towel. "You don't think you'll ever be anything more?"

Neal sighed. Why was it that everyone was so interested in his love life? Could he blame it on Diana's stories? El was a member of the Arkham Round Table. They sat around dreaming up plots for Arkham Neal. Were they now doing the same with him? "Sara and I are both quite comfortable in the friend zone," he said firmly. "Besides, you know she only likes jocks."

"That's the Sara in our stories, not in real life."

"I'm not so sure. Sighin' Bryan was a jock. When I was in London, I advised Sara to aim higher—a duke perhaps. Did I tell you she found out Fiona's boyfriend Gerald is the younger son of an Earl?"

"Oh, my."

"My thoughts exactly. The Earl of Bodmin, no less. The family estate is somewhere in Cornwall. That's proof positive Gerald and Fiona were meant to be together." Neal used to think he was Fiona's knight. Now she could live in a castle with Gerald. Fiona's mother was Irish. The Celtic influence was strong in Cornwall. Neal could picture Fiona and Gerald having several blond children, each playing a different music instrument. Gerald would make a perfect knight and never abandon her to go off and fight dragons.

Neal shoved thoughts of castles and knights aside when Diana strolled in, offering to help. They loaded up trays and carried them onto the dining room table. Peter had made homemade ice cream and was in charge of dishing out scoops. Neal took his dish out to the patio and sat in a folding chair next to Diana. The fireworks were scheduled to start in a few minutes.

"Did Christie have to work today?" he asked.

She nodded. "She pulled emergency room duty. With all the illegal fireworks that are used, the staff is braced for a busy night. I wish people would learn to leave fireworks to the professionals . . . and writers."

He stole a glance at her. Diana was wearing her wicked plot-schemer look. "Are you planning something with fireworks in your next story for Arkham Files?"

"What kind? Pyrotechnic? Romantic?"

Neal winced. More would-be Cupids? "Strictly fireworks in the sky. Unless that is, you're thinking about someone other than me. Mozzie, for instance, would make a good choice."
"Didn't he have enough of a romantic part in *The Crypt*?"

Neal snorted. "That was just a tease. Unless . . . Do you have plans to develop it?"

"It's up for discussion," she conceded. "My decision may be based on how much he annoys me. June's another possibility."

"Is that a news flash? What about her present fling? Will something gruesome happen?"

She snorted a laugh. "You can stop with the wide-eyed goopy look. We haven't sorted it out and I know how you don't like spoilers."

"Since when?" he protested.

"Since I said so," she replied smugly. "But I'll toss you this crumb. There are some in the Round Table who are advocating for June and Mozzie to become romantically involved."

"It's an intriguing thought," Neal said thoughtfully, "but the characters are such close friends, it might be difficult for them to make the transition."

"In other words, you see them like you and Sara in this world."

"That's right," Neal said firmly. "How about your character and Jack?"

"Oh, I intend to have fun with that." She took a sip of beer. "You're sure I can't interest you in any fireworks for your character? It doesn't have to be Sara, it could be someone else."

"Arkham Neal's so clueless about women, you better leave him in the realm of fake dates for a while."

"You haven't grown cynical on me, have you?"

"More like gun-shy." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a box. "As promised," he said, giving it to her.

Her eyes lit up. "Is this what I think it is?"

He nodded. "I'd hoped to have it ready by the time of the party to celebrate your latest story, but it turned out to be more challenging than I'd realized."

She opened the box and gave a squeal of delight. "A nightgaunt! I bet I'm the only writer who has an origami nightgaunt to commemorate a story."

"You earned it with *The Crypt*, and the way you handled Keller. Have I thanked you for his fate?"

"Several times over, but I can't hear it often enough."

Will I see more nightgaunts in the next story?"

"Hmm . . . the crystal ball is murky."

"If the fog should clear, I have a few suggestions. You still haven't worked in any swordsmanship. When does my character get to be a swashbuckler?"

"You're already one in real life."
The fireworks started before he could convince her of the wisdom of his argument. The display was as dazzling as Peter had promised. Neal took a few pictures to send to Sara. It was too bad Henry was out of town. He would have had a breathtaking view from his new terrace, perhaps even better than from Peter's backyard. But as Neal gazed around at his team members on the patio, he realized nothing could top what he had here. Neal scanned the group for Peter and when he spotted him, raised his wine glass, filled with J. Edgar's Private Cellar, to him. Peter smiled an acknowledgement and lifted his beer bottle.


"How appropriate to have fireworks for Independence Day." Marta stepped closer to the Whistler to study the details. "When I saw pictures of this, the painting seemed muddy, but that's not the case at all." The canvas was propped up on Rolf's dresser. Soon it would be on its way to Hungary.

Rolf pointed with his right forefinger. "Whistler depicted the fireworks at the Cremorne Gardens—flickers of lights piercing the gloom of the foggy night sky of industrial London."

"I consider it one of his masterpieces," Klaus added from his chair by the patio doors. He'd stretched his legs in front of him, the image of a relaxed leopard. An easy smile graced his lips over his beard. Marta could understand why Anya liked the beard. It made him look like a pirate. Klaus, though, hated it. The one he was now wearing was a false one which he only wore when the occasion demanded it.

Marta had joined the brothers in the evening to celebrate the heist's success. Rolf had ordered room service. Her first Fourth of July in the States and they were feasting on lobster and Dom Perignon. Not bad for a girl who grew up in an impoverished Czech village near the border with Slovakia.

Her husband Jacek had left ahead of schedule and was already back in Hungary. Marta suspected he rearranged his timetable in order to remove himself from the scene and avoid any awkwardness. Jacek was tolerant of her relationship with Rolf, in large part because he enjoyed the freedom as well. With their little boy dead, there was no reason for them to stay together. They could work closely on jobs without any emotional entanglements and still be occasional lovers when it suited them.

"Any trouble with the heist?" Rolf asked Klaus.

"No, it proceeded like clockwork. I suspect the earliest the museum will realize it's missing is sometime tomorrow morning." He retrieved the champagne bottle from the ice bucket and refilled his glass. "If no one has noticed the switch by the end of the day on Wednesday, I'll phone in an anonymous tip myself."

Klaus's opinion of museum visitors was almost as low as his views on the public at large. His contempt made him utterly without remorse for the thefts he committed. Marta remembered vividly how nervous she'd been when she first did jobs for him. Jacek had been equally anxious to please. Had Neal felt the same way?

She and Jacek had started working for Klaus after Neal quit, but Klaus had been lavish in his praise of his former protégé—both for his skill as a thief and as a forger. Marta used to resent the comparisons, until Klaus said she and Jacek were equally gifted in their own fields. Even that first year they'd known his goal was to win Neal back.

Now that Klaus's dream was about to be realized, she could already detect a difference in him. He was easier to get along with, more humorous. It made her wonder what he'd be like after they'd accomplished their goal.
Rolf's attitude was curious. He seemed to be as fixated on Peter as Klaus was on Neal. There were very few people that Rolf admired but Peter was one of them. He was convinced that Peter was sending him signals under the radar through Diana's stories. *Make me an offer*. That's what Peter was telling him. He was particularly excited about the messages he deduced from her latest story.

Those stories had been an odd twist in the plan they'd formulated so long ago. It had been almost a year since Klaus had initiated the operation to lure Neal back with the theft of Raphael's painting of *St. George and the Dragon* from a Washington, D.C. museum. Marta and Jacek were brought in to be part of the crew in September when Klaus rented the townhouse in New York City. When Klaus realized Neal was attempting to play him, he'd been intrigued and amused by the strategy Neal and Peter employed. Rather than being disappointed, he was excited by the challenge. That job also gave Rolf the first indication Neal was not the only prize to be acquired.

When Diana began posting the Arkham Files stories, Rolf mocked them openly but Marta was convinced he was being influenced by them. Anya was concerned as well. She'd spoken with Klaus on several occasions but he insisted there was nothing to be alarmed at. He claimed that if anything they served to up Rolf's game. Boredom had always been the main vulnerability for Rolf. But not now. Rolf was convinced Peter was using Diana without her knowledge to conduct private negotiations with the man they called Azathoth.

Diana, Peter . . . Marta appreciated the relaxed way the Mansfelds talked about their targets as if they were friends and she'd adopted the same strategy. Of course, she already knew Neal. Peter and Diana she'd never met, but it didn't matter. Klaus and Rolf certainly treated Neal's boss as their friend. They acted as if they'd already won him over. She remained skeptical, but she wasn't calling the shots. Personally she would have chosen Peter rather than Neal for Operation Capriccio. That would have made a delicious twist.

"What are you thinking about, my pet?" Rolf asked, refilling her glass with champagne.

"That program for Peter you'd conceived. I wish we could implement it."

Klaus raised his glass to her. "If we succeed with Neal like we believe, Peter will be our next test subject."

She turned to Klaus. "Now that you've acquired the painting, I assume that you're at my disposal?"

He made an expansive gesture with his hand. "For the next several days, I'm yours to command at will. Will you force me to wear a beard?"

"Only for a short while. But you'll have a lot of homework before we can start." Marta reached into her bag and pulled out a flash drive. "It's all on the drive, but I also made you a paper copy in case you'd rather prepare the old-fashioned way."

He huffed. "Is this a scheme of Anya's to keep me away from Hollywood starlets?"

"Would you suspect her of anything that devious?"

"Of course I would. But that's because I play the same games with her. Tease and torment."

The Leopard and the Python. They were well-suited for each other. Anya had recently cheated on him, but he was aware of it and had enjoyed making it more difficult. Marta hadn't discovered Klaus cheating on Anya, but she wouldn't be surprised. When she worked with him in Paris, she'd wondered if he didn't have someone on the side. That snatch of a phone conversation . . . Klaus and Anya were two of a kind.

"Did you see the news?" Neal demanded. He waved the printout in front of Peter's face. "It's a Whistler."

Peter wasn't surprised when Neal burst into his office that morning. He received the same art crime alerts that Peter did. "You saved me calling you up. Take a seat. And I know what you're thinking. Whistler was one of Klaus's favorite artists. We've been waiting for Rolf to toss down the gauntlet ever since he fled from London. Is this it?"

"It's hard to believe anything else. That this particular painting was chosen has to be a signal. Are you familiar with Nocturne in Black and Gold?"

"No, just what was in the crime bulletin."

"It's a scene of London at night. The atmosphere is dark and foreboding, the figures obscured by fog. It looks like something out of Lovecraft."

"Hold on. Let me see that for myself." Peter turned to his laptop and searched for the painting. Neal was right. It was hard to imagine anything murkier. All it needed was a ghast—or a leopard—to have Azathoth's name scrawled over it.

Neal stood next to his monitor and pointed to the upper quadrant of the painting. "Amidst the gloom you can see a faint burst of fireworks. It was stolen on the Fourth of July. Azathoth may have wanted to boast about being able to choose the timing of the theft."

"Tricia will attend our morning briefing. We should solicit her opinion." Agent Tricia Wiese had been building up a profile of Azathoth for the past several months and had been working with Diana to influence Azathoth through her stories. Peter was looking forward to hearing her views on this latest message.

Rolf had already been on the agenda as one of the main topics for the briefing. In addition to Tricia, also attending were Jones, Diana, and Travis.

"The circumstantial evidence suggests that Azathoth's malware was used to facilitate the heist," Travis confirmed. "No signs of physical intrusion. Whoever did it was able to bypass museum security."

"The West Coast museums have been slow to adopt Aidan's anti-malware program," Jones pointed out. "Their reluctance may haunt them now. Officials are unclear as to when the theft occurred. The museum was the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena. They'd been holding an exhibition of Whistler paintings for the past month. The one that was stolen was from the Detroit Institute of Arts. The thief had replaced it with another painting. The switch was discovered when a museum visitor noticed it on Tuesday afternoon."

"Which painting replaced the original?" Peter asked.

Jones looked at his notes. "A reproduction of a Turner painting, Moonlight, a Study at Millbank. It was an inexpensive copy such as you can buy online. The painting had been cut to make it fit into the Whistler frame. Since the Turner is also a dark atmospheric piece, it's understandable why it wasn't immediately spotted."

"Neal, assuming that Rolf was involved in the theft, what significance do you see to the Turner being used?" Tricia asked.
"With his resources, he could have easily had a forgery prepared. Rolf could be expressing his contempt for museum guards and visitors that they would even notice by choosing a different work. I'd say he proved the opposite. The styles are somewhat similar. Whoever challenged the museum knew the artists' different techniques even if they weren't familiar with their works."

"Neal's right about it looking like a scene from a Lovecraft story," Diana commented. "That oppressive atmosphere? The fireworks could symbolize an intrusion of horrors from the Cthulhu Mythos. I researched Whistler before the meeting. Like Lovecraft, he was repelled by the pollution and social problems being caused by the Industrial Revolution."

"Diana makes an excellent point," Tricia said. "Now that we know Rolf is Azathoth, we can refine our analysis of why Lovecraft holds such a fascination to him. Before we could only speculate."

Jones nodded. "Both men share an interest in higher mathematics and astronomy. Lovecraft was reclusive, a loner. Some claim he had elitist tendencies. That would also match."

"And don't stop with Rolf," Peter added. "Include his brother Klaus as well. The two men shared similar tastes in music and art. Neal told us Klaus was fond of gargoyles. Did he also like Lovecraft?" Everyone turned to look at Neal, since he was the only one with extensive knowledge of Klaus.

"He never mentioned the author to me, but I wouldn't be surprised. Rolf must have had the books around when Klaus was growing up."

Travis steepled his hands together and pointed them in Tricia's direction. "Have you considered if Rolf is trying to make us believe that Klaus is alive?"

Her eyes widened. "In what sense? His ghost or that he was somehow reborn?"

Travis considered a moment before replying. "It could be a little of both. The paranormal is a key element in Lovecraft, and there's no doubt Rolf's been referencing Klaus in some of the taunts he's made."

"You may be onto something," she agreed. "Rolf may have become so obsessed with Klaus that he could start believing his brother's specter is still with him. Or he could want Neal and Peter to feel Klaus's spirit is seeking revenge."

"I'm being stalked by Klaus's ghost?" Neal glanced over at Jones, a faint smile on his lips. Was Clinton Jones, former Navy officer, a believer in ghosts? Peter was glad Neal wasn't as sensitive as his cousin Henry was on the topic. What if Tricia asked Peter for his thoughts? Dean and Sam Winchester had encountered ghosts. Should he call them to assist with Azathoth? Peter shuddered at the idea.

Neal scanned the team as if to judge how seriously they were treating the speculation. "I admit when I didn't know who Azathoth was, it was a little eerie. I couldn't figure out how he knew so much about what had happened when I worked for Klaus. But now that I know who we're dealing with, no, I don't believe that Klaus is haunting me."

"But Rolf doesn't know what your attitude toward ghosts is," Diana countered. "Many believe in spirits. Did you ever discuss it with Klaus?"

"Not that I remember," he admitted.

Tricia made a note. "And here's something else we should be prepared for. I wouldn't be surprised if Rolf reveals his identity. The man is convinced of his superiority. He's confident he can escape..."
any traps we might lay for him and vainglorious enough to crave recognition. He's unaware that when he was disguised as Alistair Chapman, Neal recognized him. I suspect Rolf's anonymity is a constant irritant at this point."

Neal looked skeptical. " Isn't his fame as Azathoth enough? Why would he handicap his ability to operate freely by identifying himself?"

"He may have something more subtle in mind," she said, "which only hints at a connection. For instance, allusions to the University of Bremen where he taught mathematics. If Rolf's motive is revenge, the satisfaction he'd acquire by revealing himself may well be worth the risk."

For Peter the key takeaway of the discussion was the likelihood that the Whistler painting would be used as bait and that the arsenal of psychological gambits at Rolf's disposal was more robust than Peter had initially considered. Against such an enemy, the best response would be to beat him with the very tools he was using, and at the top of Peter's list was the Ydrus informant they believed was operating within the Bureau.

When he asked Travis for an update of their countermeasures, Travis said, "I'm working with Aidan on a plan to track any attempted hack attacks of White Collar emails and files. It has similar characteristics to the program Aidan developed to thwart Azathoth's museum security malware."

"We can't forget we may also have someone leaking information to Vincent Adler," Jones reminded the group. "Win-Win continues to help us monitor phone calls. They've designed a program to crunch through the data for calls which originate in Argentina and arrive at the Bureau, both at headquarters in D.C. and here in New York." He turned to Tricia. "Recently they expanded it to include Paraguay. It borders Argentina on the north and isn't far from that Nazi hideout your husband discovered."

"Good idea," she agreed. "We suspect Adler visited the site. He could easily live next door in Paraguay. The rainforest is thick in that region and makes an excellent location for a refuge."

"What about the plastic surgeon's files?" Diana asked.

"We're still working through them," Travis said. "I've become much more knowledgeable on the esoteric programming language they were coded in but my best guess is that decrypting the files will still take several weeks."

"What do you think the probability is that Rolf knows about Aidan's anti-malware?" Tricia asked.

"At this point I assume he's aware that museums are tightening their security," Travis said after a moment's reflection. "I doubt strongly that an Ydrus mole would have accessed any details of the program, but once we began promoting its use to museums, the news was bound to spread. Up to now the only attempts we've caught in advance has been at the Met and an intrusion at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. But as more museums adopt the program, our successes are bound to increase."

"If we're able to shut down Rolf's malware, that's a major success in itself," Jones asserted. "Because of the sophistication of Aidan's program, Rolf won't know if a museum is employing it or not. He won't be able to take the risk."

Peter nodded. "Once we've removed his weapons, he'll be neutralized."

Neal smiled. "If we remove the threat of malware, it will be back to the good old days when the success of a heist depended on the artistic flair of the thief, not the code of some programmer."
From Neal's expression, Peter knew he expected to be heckled for that comment. It was a good feeling that no one on the team expected Neal to be that thief.

Notes: Thanks for reading! In next week's chapter, "California Dreaming," Richard receives an unexpected invitation, Henry calls with news from Argentina, and Kramer makes a surprise gesture.

This was Neal's second year to celebrate the 4th of July in our series. The first time was in Caffrey Disclosure (Chapters 18-19). Fireworks have also held a special place—both pyrotechnic and romantic in our series, thanks in large measure to Muse-in-Chief Penna Nomen. She wrote about them in her post: Fireworks and Romantic Sparks in Caffrey Conversation. Neal's trying to keep the flames turned down low over his love life, but Bianka has other thoughts. As for the Arkham Round Table matchmakers, Neal's doing his best to steer them onto other characters.

Diana began writing fanfics in an attempt to manipulate Azathoth. The original intent was to make the cybercriminal develop sympathy for Neal and Peter (the Lima Syndrome). Particularly in the last story, The Crypt, Peter inserted additional signals designed to make Azathoth believe that Peter wanted to be recruited for his crew. We see in this chapter that Rolf got the message. If you're curious about the messages Peter planted in The Crypt, I wrote about it for our blog: Subliminal Messages to Azathoth.

The USS Hornet is an aircraft carrier which is an infamous ghost ship. It has the reputation of being the most haunted ship in the Navy. It's now a museum ship in Alameda, California where reportedly the spirits continue to stalk its corridors. If you'd like to read more about the Hornet's ghosts, this webpage has a good summary: https://seeksghosts.blogspot.com/2011/05/haunted-uss-hornet.html.

Henry showed his sensitivity to ghosts most clearly in Penna's Vignette: April Fool. It's a trait he apparently shares with Jones. I wrote about some of the ways Penna and I've been fleshing out Jones's character for our series in my latest blog post: Shining the Spotlight on Clinton Jones.

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Nocturne in Black and Gold board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon
Richard stood back to scrutinize the creature. He'd been working on it for the past two days. Maybe just a couple of extra inches to the tail . . .

He glanced around the room. His sculpting space was in a corner of a large workroom filled with artists working in front of computers or on sketchpads and clay models. Shelves of monsters, figures, gear, and weapons lined the walls. His boss, Ian Forster, had said Scima was keeping its options open to eventually develop a movie out of the video game. This could be the start of a new franchise series. Richard couldn't believe his luck to get in on the ground floor of something so exciting.

He picked up a ball of clay and began molding it . . .

"Stop!" Richard wheeled around to see Ian standing behind him. "Don't touch it! That hnakra is friggin' awesome. It's perfect as it is."

Richard stood back to eye the sea monster dubiously. "You're sure the tail's long enough? In Katja's description, she made a point of insisting that it appear to have a life of its own. When the hnakra attacks, the tail is supposed to act like a serpent, capable of lashing out at a second victim."

"Relax, you've already achieved it. Man, I don't know how you can work on it. It scares the bejeebers out of me."

Ian's words were reassuring, but when Richard looked around the room at the works the other artists were creating, it was hard not to feel jittery. He was the only intern. Everyone else was a seasoned gaming artist. Even though Ian had warned him the atmosphere would seem overwhelming, he hadn't been prepared for this degree of intensity. After the game was fast-tracked, everyone knew it would be a race against time. Their goal was to have a demo ready for next year's Electronic Entertainment Expo in June, but video game development normally took several years. The veterans were all complaining in one breath that it was insanity while giving each other fist bumps to achieve the impossible. When Richard collapsed in bed at night, he still had the sensation of clay in his fingers. He realized he'd gone over the edge when he awoke one morning to find his hands air-modeling creatures.

Being asked to participate in the project to bring C.S. Lewis's *Out of the Silent Planet* to the gaming world was the dream gig of a lifetime, but the secrecy with which the project was cloaked was draconian. The only person Richard had told was Travis. Lewis's novel was being extensively revised with the addition of many creatures in addition to the species Lewis had created. The scope being given to Richard's imagination was mind-blowing.

Members of the team had relocated to California for the summer to give it a giant kick in the pants forward. On the plus side, Ian thought Richard's chances of a permanent job were high. That is, if he were still breathing.

When Travis had suggested coming out for a week-long vacation before Comic-Con, Richard didn't foresee any issues. He knew the studio would be on a skeleton staff during the convention. He assumed he'd have to work during the week, but surely he could take a weekend off.

That was before he'd discovered he was supposed to work seven days a week along with everyone
"Katja asked me about you," Ian said, tossing him a rag. "She's been impressed by your work."

"You wouldn't joke about that, would you?"

He grinned. "I know I'm accused of looking demonic but even I wouldn't be that sadistic." Ian was quite aware of his resemblance to Spike from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*—a natural comparison with his ice-blond hair and sardonic features. He deliberately played on it by favoring leather pants and heavy metal vests. "Katja checked with me about your availability to work on the concept oversight team."

Richard stared at him, dumbfounded. He'd seen Katja in the corridors and had attended meetings where she presented, but she was the equivalent of a rock star in his world. A Dutch programmer who was also skilled in concept art, she'd flown in two months ago from Amsterdam to oversee development.

"That's unheard of for an intern to be invited to the oversight team," Ian added. "Are you some sort of friggin' comet?"

"I've heard of the team, but would that mean I'd no longer sculpt?"

He nodded. "And there's another problem. The group's locking themselves up in a conference room this coming weekend to hammer out the details. She asked if you'd be free, and I told her you had a conflict, but that I'd speak to you about it. I haven't forgotten your request to have that weekend off, and I have no problem with it. You’ve been working seven-day weeks, sixteen-hour shifts, to make up for it."

Richard plopped onto a stool, wiping his clay-smudged hands on the rag. "Will I pay a price if I turn it down? My understanding of the oversight team is that they don't do the actual art. They critique others. Frankly, I don't think I'm that well suited for the role. I came to Scima to develop my own art. I don't think I'm ready to evaluate others."

Ian pulled up a stool next to him. "You won't get any argument from me. You're still wet behind the ears, plus you're already on the edge of burning out. I've managed my share of obsessed artists like you, and I know exactly what would happen if you accept her offer. You'd do that job but you wouldn't be able to leave your art alone. You'd wind up working two jobs and get no sleep at all. We'd be carting you out on a stretcher."

Richard winced sheepishly. His boss had him pegged.

"Besides I need you," Ian added bluntly. "You got the hnakra looking kickass, but who's gonna build my pfiftrigg if you leave? Who else could blend the head of a tapir with a frog to look like something intelligent? Help a bloke out and don't leave me in the lurch."

Richard exhaled with relief to hear Ian echo his own desires. "You'll handle it with Katja?"

"Yeah, I'll tell her you said thanks but no thanks. She can steal someone else. Now, mitts off the hnakra and focus on the pfiftrigg."

**Watson Hall, Columbia University. July 6, 2005, Wednesday evening.**

Neal frowned at the painting once more then fixed a steely-eyed gaze on Bianka. "Tell me why you squandered valuable paint on this canvas?" He reinforced his scowl. "Well? I'm waiting."
"Trust me, Professor Stockman can and will. She used almost exactly the same words on me last year."

They were perched on stools in Bianka's studio. She'd been stressing over the critiques she'd be subjected to by her art professors once classes resumed. Neal had felt much the same way last year when he faced his first critiques, but he didn't have the language barrier to overcome. He'd offered to conduct mock interviews to help Bianka prepare.

Neal liked her accent and had no difficulty in understanding her, but he could understand why she was worried. When she became nervous, her accent broadened. The correct English expressions sometimes proved elusive, leaving her flustered and tongue-tied.

"Stockman is infamous for her intimidation tactics, particularly with first-year students. Apparently she takes joy in pulverizing any confidence we might have and reducing us to puddles of pond scum. By the end of the year, we realized she was doing it deliberately as part of the toughening up process. She actually is quite nice and in another setting, you'd find her delightful."

"If you say so," she said, taking a deep breath. "What is Neal Caffrey's opinion of my art?"

"Your technique is refined and elegant. And you know how much I admire the old masters."

"I sense a 'but' coming."

"Classical realism is not seen very much at Columbia," he said, trying to express it as gently as possible. He predicted Stockman would impale her for being too derivative.

"You're being kind. My professors in Hungary had warned me about the criticism I would receive. That I was all technique and no originality." She looked up at him nervously. "Any suggestions?"

"You have to listen to your internal voice. I suspect your professors will encourage you to experiment with different methods. That's why you're here. I had many of the same issues and sympathize with your situation. My first teachers had me copy the masters, a method that is now frowned upon."

"But you were able to move forward. Perhaps if I listen to more Mozart it will help."

"It can't hurt. Or Haydn. That CD you lent me is beautiful music."

Her face brightened at the praise. "That's the Festetics String Quartet, Hungary's most famous ensemble. They're in town and scheduled to give a concert at the Frick Museum on Friday night. Are you familiar with the salon evenings the Frick holds?"

"I've been to several of them."

"I was planning to go. Would you like to join me? We could have supper first, perhaps the Liszt Cafe. Have you ever been there?"

"No, but I've wanted to. It has the reputation for having the best Hungarian food on the Upper East Side."

"It's my source for comfort food when I miss Budapest," she said. "Their chicken paprikash makes me think I'm home again, and their desserts . . . Don't get me started."

"She dissolved into giggles. "No one could be that cruel."

"Trust me, Professor Stockman can and will. She used almost exactly the same words on me last year."
As Bianka described the dishes, Neal's mouth began to water too. He hadn't been to the Frick in a while. He'd enjoy visiting old acquaintances among the works on display. Included in the collection was one of Neal's favorite paintings—Vermeer's *Mistress and Maid*.

The more he thought about it, the more he liked the idea. He and Bianka had both earned a reward after all the painting they'd done over the past few weeks. It wasn't really a date but it'd be good to have an evening on the town. And so what if it were a date? It was time to move on.

When Neal arrived at work the next morning, he stopped off for a coffee then headed straight to his art authentication niche in the lab. Travis was already working at his computer which was next to his art corner.

"Any news on the Azathoth front?" Neal asked, taking a seat.

Travis nodded, swiveling his chair to face Neal. "We received the data yesterday evening and already have positive confirmation that his malware was used. It appears that the security program was infected two weeks ago. This is the first instance of us sharing an investigation with D.C. Art Crimes since the directive took place. So far so good."

Last month the assistant director had ordered that in all cases where there was a possibility of museum security software tampering, Travis's team was to be in charge of the analysis. Neal had wondered if Kramer would play nice or drag his feet.

Neal took a sip of the coffee and grimaced. The swill was worse than normal. White Collar really needed to make daily cleaning of the coffee machine a required task for all probies. "This will make the West Coast museums rue the day they didn't implement Aidan's anti-malware."

Travis nodded. "I've already heard from museums in L.A. and San Francisco. News like this spreads like wildfire. Kramer's having all inquiries concerning technology forwarded directly to me."

"Kramer, the team player. This will take getting used to." For as long as Neal had worked at the Bureau, Kramer had only grudgingly allowed the New York office to participate in art crime cases when they occurred in the New York metropolitan area and even for most of those he claimed jurisdiction.

"Hard to believe, isn't it?" Peter said, approaching them. He pulled up a chair. "It's a new era of cooperation."

"About time," Neal muttered to his coffee.

Peter chuckled. "I understand the sentiment and second it. Apparently my former mentor has finally seen the light."

"Or the assistant director lit a fire under him," Travis noted. "Nothing like pressure from up above to stoke the flames."

Peter smiled acknowledgement. "Then by your reasoning, that must have been quite a fire. Phil called me yesterday afternoon just as I was getting ready to leave. He wanted to brainstorm ways to provide assistance to the West Coast museums. Kramer was very complimentary of our successes with the Interpol art crimes task force, and specifically mentioned the compliments the French gave us for our presentations in Paris last month. He'd like us to take our dog and pony show to the West Coast."
"The one where I conduct a workshop on how to steal a painting?" Neal asked incredulously.
"Kramer wants me to present on that?"

Peter shrugged. "He knows you're the expert, and the timing couldn't be better. You sacrificed vacation time to help Travis and me at astro camp a few weeks ago. Good deeds like that shouldn't go unrewarded. You were going to have to pay for your airfare to Comic-Con. Now I can offer you expense-paid airfare. Kramer wants us to go to Seattle, San Francisco, and Los Angeles next week. It's a tight schedule but the upside is that we'll be done in time for the opening day hoopla at Comic-Con on the thirteenth. How does that sound?"

"Like I better start reviewing blueprints." Neal was excited at the excuse to study the security systems of some of America's finest museums. Too bad Mozzie had already left. He would have loved participating, even if the thefts would never be accomplished. "I've always wanted to plan a heist at the Getty," he confided, not caring how that sounded. "I accept your offer gladly."

"Three cities in three days?" Travis asked. "Is Kramer trying to establish a new record?"

"If we took more time, we'd have to miss out on the first couple of days of Comic-Con," Peter said. "With the museums pressing so hard, Kramer didn't want to delay till the following week." He turned to Neal. "How do you feel about it?"

"The security presentation is ready to go. Tailoring the workshops to the specific museums and planning the thefts will take the most time, but I accept the Bureau challenge to win the triple crown of museum heists." Neal wasn't concerned. This was the kind of dream assignment he thrived on.

"That's the spirit," Peter said, beaming. "I promise the full cooperation of the team to assist wherever we can."

"I'm glad to hear it. Does that mean I can count on you to be part of my crew?"

"Sure. We'll turn the conference room upstairs into our hideout. Cover the table with blueprints. I suspect Diana and Jones will also want to take a crack at stealing art. How about you, Travis?"

He chuckled. "A useful addition to my skill set. Count me in, at least through Friday morning. I can leave for the airport straight from work."

"We'll make this a super-sized version of the workshops you held in Paris and London," Peter said. "It's been on my list to have you conduct one for the team. You'll be giving us valuable training while we help you prepare for next week."

Did Peter understand the ramifications? Neal decided to test him. "You know what you're saying, don't you? Art Heist Boot Camp?"

He broke into a smile. "You got me. I hadn't thought we'd ever hold another one of those, but the cause is good." He paused to give Neal a stern look. "No costumes, agreed?"

"I'll take that under advisement."

"We have two days to prepare plus any weekend time you'd like to sacrifice," Peter said.

Neal considered Peter's remark. He knew Peter wasn't serious, but it was a natural opening. "Ever since Paris, El's been teasing me about wanting to join my crew. A Saturday session presents the perfect opportunity. I could make her dream come true."
Peter hesitated like he was going to subject Neal to more eye-rolling, but instead relaxed into a smile. "You're right. You can teach her how to be a thief, and I can't believe I just said that. I'll give her a call. I bet she'll want you to come over to our place and stay for dinner. In fact, bring your suitcase too. Sunday morning we'll fly to Seattle. You should stay overnight then we can go to the airport together."

"When you've wrapped up your presentations in L.A., you can ride down to San Diego with Richard and me," Travis offered. "I'll be working out of the L.A. office Monday through Wednesday."

"Weren't you scheduled to take the entire week off?" Peter asked.

"That was the plan, but since Richard will have to work, I might as well too. I'm refining my program to crunch the Bureau's email data. Thanks to some tips from Win-Win, I was able to improve my algorithms."

"Realistically, do you think it will be possible to track down an FBI informant simply through email patterns?" Peter asked.

"Frankly I don't know, but I'm prepared to give it my best shot. Win-Win's assistance on cell phone transmissions increases our odds considerably."

The FBI was grappling with the likelihood of informants who were leaking not only to Ydrus but to Adler as well. That the fugitive hedge fund manager had been able to escape capture for two years raised the odds that he was receiving assistance from someone within the Bureau. Neal suspected that while Henry was in Argentina, he'd consult with Win-Win's local partners on the problem. For Adler to remain free, he had to be paying off authorities in Argentina as well.

During the time Neal worked for Adler, his boss often commented that anyone could be bought. It was a game of skill to discover what the proper leverage was. Klaus had been equally cynical about law enforcement agencies. When Neal left Klaus's crew, he met Mozzie who took it upon himself to 'enlighten' Neal about the corruption plaguing the military, corporations, and government. In Mozzie's eyes they were all one vast corrupt industrial complex. For a kid who liked to hold onto some illusions, it had been a disheartening education.

Then Neal chanced upon Peter, a man of complete integrity. You could see it in his eyes. Yes, a fed but one who couldn't be bought. Peter believed in the system. Maybe the world wasn't quite as bleak as Neal had been led to believe. Peter was someone who treated you fairly. Afterward, Neal discovered Peter wasn't alone. Travis, Jones, Diana, Hughes—they all counted among the good guys.

"Anything wrong?" Peter asked. "If you're having second thoughts, we could cancel one of the cities."

"No, it's not that," Neal said, fingering his mug of FBI swill. "Just the twists and turns of life. I renounced my old career path to make a clean start, and now I'm taking you back with me."

"No one's going back," retorted Travis. "You're teaching us how to shapeshift, and I for one can't wait to learn."

WCWCWCWCWCWC

It didn't take long for Neal to claim possession of the conference room. Peter could track his progress through the glass wall in his office. Diana was helping Neal with the prep work, and
they'd already accumulated an impressive stack of blueprints and diagrams. Luckily no one else had booked the space. For the rest of the week it would be heist central.

Peter regretted he'd miss the start of boot camp which was scheduled to begin at two o'clock, but he'd already told Tricia he'd meet her in her office. And these days her schedule was tighter than his.

As he pushed the elevator button to go up to her floor, Peter reflected on the possible reasons for the meeting. She'd been vague on the phone, simply stating she'd rather discuss it in person. They'd reviewed Azathoth at the previous day's briefing, which invited speculation she had a new theory or proposal.

Tricia didn't take long to confirm his suspicion. "When Travis confirmed Azathoth's involvement with the Whistler theft, it raised a red flag for me," she admitted.

"You think there's something more to it than him simply flaunting his ability to steal with impunity?"

"I do," she said, tapping her notes with a pen. "It's the location that troubles me. Rolf could have easily discovered that Neal would attend Comic-Con. Once Aidan's video was selected to be presented at the convention, he likely assumed that Neal and his college friends would all go. Your presence, however, was more problematic. What if Rolf arranged to have a painting stolen close to the convention site in order to give you an additional incentive to go? He may have designed a trap for which he wants both of you present."

"I can see why you'd be concerned, but if Rolf had wanted to lead us into a trap, why wait for California? He knows where we are. He could pull something at any time in New York."

"He may have a special reason for wanting you to be in California. He's made use of a movie soundstage before."

"When he trapped me in the TARDIS at the bottom of an underwater tank? No need to remind me."

"And that house where he held you and Neal captive last fall had many elements of a movie set."

"What do you want me to do? Cancel the trip? Now, it's not only Comic-Con we're talking about, but a series of presentations as well." Peter explained their plans for the following week. "I'm encouraged by Kramer's initiative. This demonstrates his attitude toward Neal is finally beginning to soften. He's openly acknowledging Neal's contributions to the work of the Bureau."

Her brow furrowed. "I remember Kramer was difficult when the Raphael painting was stolen last summer but haven't heard of any other issues. I gather it's been an ongoing problem?"

Peter nodded. "Kramer's been a tough sell. For the past several months he's attempted to convince me that Neal would eventually revert to being a criminal and that I was putting my own career at risk. It had gotten to the point I was unsure what kind of future Neal would have if he stayed with the Bureau. As you know there's always been a certain amount of rivalry between D.C. Art Crimes and our task force over allocation of the limited budgetary resources, but this year the problems quadrupled."

"Does Neal know about Kramer's views?"

"Not regarding him personally, but he's aware Kramer's tried to cut us out of handling art crimes." Peter hesitated. He wished he could tell Tricia of Kramer's campaign to keep Neal off the Interpol
art crimes task force, but Hughes had divulged that dismaying information confidentially. In any case, it was past history. Kramer was now promoting Neal rather than shutting him out.

Tricia gazed at the photos of her sons on her desk as she considered. "This places me in a tough spot. As a friend, I'm concerned you're walking into a trap, but professionally speaking, you need to go. If you were to turn down Kramer's request, I don't know of any reason you could give which would satisfy him. Who will attend Comic-Con?"

"El will fly out on Wednesday to join us. Travis, Richard, Aidan, and his girlfriend Keiko will also be there. Mozzie plans to attend, but I don't believe Janet will be there. She's in the midst of final preparations for a new musical."

"Are you relieved about that? She can't bring costumes."

Peter chuckled. "We already have t-shirts of Yellowface the Masked Avenger to wear. I think I'm safe this trip."

"Costumes and disguises . . . That's another item of concern. We don't know how Rolf and Marta may have changed their appearance."

"Do you view Comic-Con as the greatest threat?"

She nodded. "I've even considered that Azathoth ensured Aidan would win the prize at the sci-fi convention to encourage your attendance. How crazy is that?"

"Not very," Peter admitted ruefully. "Henry and I discussed the possibility that Rolf manipulated the judging of the painting competition to facilitate Neal going to London. That man has devised such elaborate hoaxes that nothing would surprise me now."

"The only reassurance we have is that up to now he hasn't seriously injured you. I continue to believe Rolf wouldn't have allowed you to drown when you were abducted in London."

"And for that I'll give Diana and your assistance a large share of the credit. Your plan to use her stories to manipulate his behavior appears to be paying dividends."

"Is it helping with that other aspect we talked about?"

"Encouraging Neal to be more open? I think so. El told me in Paris that she had a conversation with him about Fiona, where he confided he'd been starting to equate her with her doctor role in Arkham Files. It seemed natural for him to talk about private matters, the implication being he wouldn't have before."

"That's excellent news. That's what we'd hoped for when Diana made her a neurologist."

"Unfortunately, it works both ways. El wouldn't share very much of what they discussed. She claimed doctor-patient confidentiality."

Tricia broke into a laugh. "An unforeseen complication! You need to remind her that Diana also wrote that you two share everything."

"I already did," he reported glumly. "She countered that Diana only wrote that I shared everything with her, not the other way around."

"Oops. I'll mention that at the next Round Table session." Her expression grew more serious. "I'm glad Neal is finding so much support. When I heard Rolf was Azathoth, I was concerned about
how he would handle it."

"He claims he's not affected, but both Henry and I believe he's fooling himself. I'm doing all I can to keep him busy. If he realizes the valuable contributions he's making to the team, that should help."

"What's your strategy?"

"At the moment he's leading the team in a round of Art Heist Boot Camp." Peter knew she would appreciate that. Last fall Tricia had attended a video gaming boot camp which Jones and Diana had run.

"Not another one!" Tricia said, chuckling. "How many does this make?"

"We've lost track. The last one was for my role as a ski instructor. I must confess I'm much happier playing an art thief than a Lothario." Peter described the parameters of the boot camp.

She smiled her approval. "By demonstrating how much you value Neal's skills as a thief, it lessens any distance that might still exist between him and the rest of the team."

"June's husband had expressed much the same sentiment to me shortly after Neal moved into their house. I believe that was the last time I saw him before he passed. I've often thought about those words, especially when Kramer made Neal's past such an issue."

Tricia smiled understanding. "Now you'll all be art thieves together."

"I bet you never thought you'd be saying those words to me," Peter said, chuckling, "but look at the assistance Aidan's been providing. His company thrives because they're hackers at heart. Travis had a little of that same instinct, and Aidan has brought out more of it. By being able to place themselves in the mindset of hackers they're able to foil them. We're applying the same principle to art crimes."

Tricia quirked an eyebrow. "If Ydrus hears about this, they may want to recruit your entire team."

"It better not come to that. Before identifying Rolf, we'd considered Ydrus was using Azathoth to recruit Neal. Now we're back to revenge."

She nodded. "Which brings us back to Comic-Con." Swiveling her chair to face her computer, she pulled up the image of the Whistler painting. "I showed this work to the family last night. My older son took one look at it and asked if the name was *Something Wicked This Way Comes*."

Startled, Peter asked, "Did he study Macbeth last year at school?"

"I wish! He's been reading Ray Bradbury." A smile crossed her face but it quickly vanished. "We already discussed the painting's resemblance to Lovecraft, but his words made me wonder if there's a more ominous significance? Be careful, Peter, and pass the same advice onto Neal."

**WCWCWCWCWCWCW**

When Peter returned to the White Collar floor, he joined the team at boot camp. As a veteran of the workshops which Neal held in London and Paris, Peter planned to assume the assistant role.

Peter had been glad to see that Travis was enthusiastic about attending the camp. With his technical expertise, he could bring a valuable perspective to the art of the heist. When Peter arrived, Diana and Jones were working as a team and Neal was helping Travis. Peter replaced Neal
to allow him to be a floater.

The first stop on their trip would be in Seattle, and that was their current assignment. Neal had targeted the Seattle Art Museum. He'd designed a hypothetical Caravaggio exhibition for the galleries. When Peter saw the piece he'd selected for them to steal, he had to chuckle. *Cardsharps?* Did Neal have himself in mind? Or did he plan to have Henry participate in the workshop later on? That thought gave Peter pause. Neal and Henry working together on a heist . . .

Travis had appropriated the museum blueprint and was buried in circuity diagrams, which left Peter free to muse over what-ifs. Henry's father had blackmailed Neal into fleeing to Europe. If Henry had known about it, he might have been upset enough to take off with Neal, forming a team of criminal brothers similar to the Mansfelds. Klaus quite possibly would have hired both of them. Neal freely admitted he was on the path to becoming a renaissance criminal. If Henry had been along for the ride, they would have been an even worse nightmare for law enforcement.

"Are you feeling okay?" Neal asked, walking over. "You look like you saw a ghost."

"Simply engaging in a scary hypothetical," Peter said, huffing a chuckle he didn't feel.

"Care to share?"

"Not now. Maybe after several beers."

Neal's cell phone rang. He smiled when he saw the name on the display. He showed it to Peter then answered, "Buenos Dias, Henry. Or should I call you Enrique? . . . No, I'm not playing hooky. I'm planning an art heist and Diana, Jones, and Travis are helping me. Peter's right here if you don't believe me. You want me to put you on speaker?" He raised a brow at his response.

"I'm calling from the office of Win-Win's partners in Buenos Aires. There's been a break in the Adler case. Detective Gonzalo has a lead on where Adler's hideout may be. There's a potential site in the rainforest in the northern part of the country near the border with Paraguay that bears checking out."

His news electrified the room. Henry didn't have many details. Gonzalo had received a tip from a local while he was visiting his parents in a small town two hours away from the site.

"Have you been in touch with the local authorities?" Jones asked.

"Not yet. If we contact the police, they may leak it to Adler and he'd be gone before we have a chance to investigate. Besides the tip is so sketchy, we're not sure if there's enough to go on."

When Henry rang off, boot camp was put on hold. The possibility that Adler might finally be captured knocked any other thoughts out of the room. Jones was in charge of coordinating joint operations with Win-Win. His counterpart at Win-Win was Radha Prasad. Since Adler was out of the FBI's jurisdiction, White Collar was forced to leave the investigation in the hands of Win-Win and Interpol.

Adler had been a fugitive since 2003. Was this finally the break they'd all been hoping for?
Notes: Penna and I were saddened to hear of the death of Chester Bennington this past week. He was the lead singer for Linkin Park, a group which has a close connection to our AU. Its angst-driven music resonated with Penna during a very stressful time in her life. It was a period when the canon episodes of White Collar were also angsty. She channeled those emotions into the AU, and has written about the experience in her latest post, "One More Light Goes Out."

My post for this week is called "A Thief Among Thieves." It's a follow-up to a post Penna wrote about do-overs and keepers a few weeks earlier. In canon, Neal's felon status was held against him even as his team members reaped the benefit from his expertise. His anklet served as a constant reminder that he wasn't one of them. In our AU, it's a different situation. Penna had Byron reference it in By the Book, when in Chapter 10 he urged Peter to demonstrate to Neal that his skills as a thief are valued and he now has the opportunity to use them for good. The art heist workshops are a manifestation of that strategy.

The creatures Richard is working on at Scima are taken from the novel "Out of the Silent Planet" by C.S. Lewis. To my knowledge, it's never been made into a video game.

Next week while Neal leads art heist boot camp, Rolf and Klaus have a strategy session of their own, and down in Argentina the action heats up for Henry. I hope you'll join me for Chapter 4: Unfinished Business.

Many thanks for reading and your comments and, as always, to the magnificent Penna for her beta help!

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Nocturne in Black and Gold board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon
Rolf's hotel suite at The Ritz-Carlton, Marina del Rey. Thursday, July 7, 2005.

"That must be our dinner." Rolf rose from his chair to answer the knock at the door.

Klaus stood up to look at the ocean through the patio doors. The shimmering expanse of water spreading out to infinity was a fitting reminder of what the future would be like once Neal was working for him again. In a week, they'd take a major step forward. It had been two and a half years since Neal ran away. In retrospect, the loss of Neal's expertise had not been as much a disaster as Klaus had feared. Neal's skill had improved at Columbia. He was acquiring his doctorate, and there was no reason for him not to continue. Simply because the prodigal son was returning home didn't mean he'd need to make any adjustment to his trajectory. It would simply be enhanced. Klaus took pride that his lectures to Neal on obtaining a degree had born such spectacular results. A European university would have been preferable, but Columbia had advantages, too. Soon Neal could be in charge of the entire East Coast operation. His contacts would be invaluable.

Rolf wheeled over the room service cart. He lifted off the lids to inspect the organic salmon with quinoa salad they'd ordered. "I selected a California Chardonnay for us."

Klaus shrugged as he inspected the label. "When in Rome. I would have ordered the Puligny-Montrachet, but the vineyard is acceptable."

"We'll be back in Europe soon enough." They took their seats at the table in front of the patio doors. Rolf slanted him a glance and chuckled. "I haven't seen you look so content in a long time."

"I have good reason to be. Having my brother back is one of the main ones. You look like yourself again after far too many years. It makes me glad I didn't have plastic surgery."

"I've resolved to never go under the knife again. We can take adequate safeguards without resorting to drastic measures." Rolf filled their glasses with wine. "How are the preparations with Marta proceeding?"

"Now that we have the entire weekend to work, we've added a few additional refinements."

Rolf's brow furrowed. "I thought she'd be tied up with Operation Counterpoint."

"You haven't heard? We had to cancel." Anger flashed briefly on his face. "Why?"

"It can't be helped," Klaus said, taking a sip of the wine. A bit harsh for his taste. "Marta spoke with Richard's boss about the offer of a new assignment as we'd discussed. Our sculptor unexpectedly turned her down. She dug a little deeper into the circumstances, thinking she could implement the procedure through another means. She discovered Richard will have a roommate this weekend. It wouldn't do to kidnap him with his FBI partner here to notice it."

Rolf grunted an acknowledgment. "I don't like it. What we're attempting is untested. Richard would have provided an extra security margin."

"How does Erasmus feel about it?"
"Our doctor is not concerned. He insists he will be successful."

"Based on the documentation he's provided, I'm satisfied. The tests we've built into the program will allow us to judge if any leakage occurs. In any case, to attempt anything with Richard is far too risky. We can proceed later if we deem it warranted. I've instructed Jacek to retain the profile we'd built for Richard. He may yet prove useful."

Rolf nodded acceptance. "Assuming Neal remains at Columbia, Richard could be even more valuable in the future. A few modifications to the program would provide additional insurance. Perhaps this was for the best." Cutting into his salmon, he asked, "What's on your shopping list for tonight?"

"I'll return to the Getty. Their storage site is a goldmine, and your program is working flawlessly. For tonight I've targeted a Canaletto and a lovely Turner I've had my eyes on for a while—Long Ship's Lighthouse. I may not sell it. Every time I go into the museum, I'm tempted by Van Gogh's Irises."

"Restrain that impulse," Rolf advised. "Our strategy to focus on works not on display has succeeded so well, we should ignore all others."

Rolf smiled. "An interesting word choice. The treasure we're accumulating in Anya's castle may soon surpass one of Hitler's secret repositories."

Klaus refilled his brother's glass. "Speaking of Nazis, Anya had an interesting tale to relate when I spoke with her this morning. You remember Karl Huber?"

"Our ex-shipping partner now freeloader? The man's a disgrace. His exposure has rendered him useless."

"Not so fast. Anya initially felt as you do. She met with him earlier this week to give him an opportunity to explain why we would possibly want to keep him around. He told her that his father worked at the Jeu de Paume museum during World War II for an assistant to Alfred Rosenberg."

"The head of the Nazi looting program?"

"The very same. Huber's father served as personal attaché to Anton Bergmann, the man responsible for coordinating shipments of plundered art out of Paris. The father was killed toward the end of the war. Huber told Anya that he found among his father's effects his World War II diary and a partial shipping manifest of some of the most important masterpieces which are still missing."

Rolf put his fork down, a smile ghosting his lips. "Huber may have just saved himself. Does he know where the art is?"
"No, but he believes he can find out. Anya told him it was in his best interest to let us examine the materials, but apparently he is reluctant to share."

"He's no fool. Anya will dispose of him as soon as he hands them over."

"He asked her to give him six months to research it. With our connections he feels he finally has the means to see if there's anything substantive to be discovered. Anya is inclined to go along, although she suspects it will be a dead end. You know how many rumors there are about missing stockpiles of art."

Rolf nodded. "This could be just one more wild-goose chase."

"She wants us to continue our focus on our current projects. Neal should be fully reintegrated in a couple of months. Then we can move on to other challenges."

Rolf sat back in his chair, looking thoughtful. "Neal will be a valuable asset if there's something more than smoke and mirrors to Huber's tale."

"We'll need to tread carefully," Klaus warned. "Neal disliked the thought of profiting off Nazi plunder. We argued about it in Geneva. If there is a treasure to be discovered, he should be kept unaware."

"There may be a way," Rolf persisted. "He may not be as idealistic as he was then, and even if he is, we can finesse it. You recall the fortune we made from Hagen's forgeries. With Neal's skill, we could achieve that sum a hundred times over. For instance we could claim that we created a hoax of a recovered treasure trove in order to sell forgeries."

"I like it! We'd keep Neal's conscience clean while reaping all the benefit."

"I've also come to a conclusion on the choice of painting," Rolf said.

Klaus hoped Rolf had picked his preference—the Braque. It was one of the first paintings he and Neal had stolen together. To have it be the one which would threaten to destroy not only Neal's career but Peter's as well would overwhelm him with guilt. The Lion Cub would be easy to remold.

"The Braque is enticing I grant but I believe we should use the Vermeer instead. With The Astronomer, we're able to play up the unfairness of the FBI. Neal will feel betrayed. We can build on that incident last fall when he was accused of having stolen diamond jewelry which once belonged to Marie Antoinette."

Klaus swallowed his disappointment. Rolf had a point. Kramer had kept them well informed on what took place. The frame attempt had been an unexpected gift. Because of it, Klaus abandoned a long-planned heist at the Hermitage to return to New York. He'd been prepared to advance their own timetable to take advantage of the situation. At the last minute, he was forced to call a halt when Neal somehow wiggled free of the noose tightening around him. The experience made Klaus more than ever determined to bring Neal back to the fold.

"Neal will have no choice but to feel abandoned and forsaken by those he considered his colleagues," Rolf went on. "And Peter as well. He will be sucked into the dragnet along with him." Rolf chuckled. "Diana would appreciate that allusion. She sucked them in through the ruby crystal. We'll suck them in through the Vermeer instead. I should leave her another coded comment."

_Tread carefully, brother._ Rolf had become far too interested in Diana's stories. The signals he was leaving, the clues he'd sent. How much did the White Collar team realize?
Klaus had already detected a softening in his brother's attitude toward Neal and Peter. Was his disinclination to use the Braque a sign that he didn't want to cause Neal the additional guilt? Or was it that he thought he had a better chance of ensnaring Peter by using The Astronomer? Rolf's desire to have Peter work with them was becoming equal to Klaus's longing to have Neal back. That could cause issues later on. Rolf disliked anyone questioning his decisions. For now, Klaus would say nothing but remain vigilant.

Klaus poured the last of the wine into his glass. "Very well, I'll inform Marta. We'll use The Astronomer."

"The Braque provides additional insurance. We have the evidence ready to send to Kramer. If we encounter any difficulties with the Vermeer, we can use it as a fallback."

"We may not even have to put it into play. Once the Vermeer is used, the Braque will weigh heavily on our cub."

"Exactly," Rolf said, nodding complacently. "Did Anya have anything else to report?"

"She'd heard from Bianka. Neal's going with her to a concert tomorrow night."

"Has she been given our instructions?"

"Not yet. Anya feels the less she knows in advance the better."

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Neal was glad he had boot camp on Friday morning to distract him from thinking about Henry. Jones had spoken with Radha Prasad in Baltimore at the end of the day and found out Henry and his team were leaving for the rainforest the following morning. Neal would have gladly jumped on a plane to join him if he didn't have so many commitments. Last month Peter and Neal had joked that the discussions about Nazis and lost treasure made the investigation sound like an Indiana Jones movie. Now Henry had grabbed the role of Indy.

Neal swallowed back his envy and focused on his four crew members. Diana, Jones, Travis, along with veteran crew mate Peter, had assembled to learn the fine art of breaking into the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco, and he wasn't about to disappoint them. Diana had earned herself extra points by coming in costume. To look the part of a thief, she wore a black-and-white striped top over black leggings and tennies. Her dollar sign earrings were a nice touch. Diana could be on his crew whenever she liked.

Even Jones was showing surprising aptitude as a thief. It made Neal long for the occasion when they could pull an FBI-sanctioned heist.

The target for his crew was a charming Matisse, Woman with a Hat. The painting had been called a Fauvist interpretation of Donatello. Neal had a strong personal attachment to the Fauves. Their wild brushwork and bold colors spoke to his own exuberance.

An image of the painting filled the large wall-mounted monitor. The woman was staring at their preparations with a wary eye. The teams had switched members for the morning. Peter was working with Diana. Jones and Travis made up the other team. Were they sensing her watching them? If they were truly in thief mode, they would.

At break time, Neal ordered lunch from the French Café Gourmand. No pizza at his boot camp, especially not for a crew who needed to stay light on their feet. Over ciabatta sandwiches and salads they analyzed their various strategies.
"Dropping down from the ceiling was a masterful touch," Travis told Diana wistfully. "Do you think you could actually pull it off?"

"I copied a Lara Croft move in Tomb Raider," Diana admitted. "If she could do it, I don't see why I couldn't."

"What were the vulnerabilities you saw in the museum layout?" Neal asked between bites of his chicken and Brie ciabatta. Their responses were well-reasoned and astute. Peter and Jones keyed in on the security guards. The vetting system employed by the museum needed to be upgraded. Travis had spotted the alarms on the exit doors. He'd also gone to great lengths to analyze the ventilator shafts, leading Neal to wonder if he thought the museum was a funky version of the USS Enterprise. Diana attacked the potential hiding areas.

"In general I gave the museum high marks," Peter said. "Sure, they have some areas which could be improved. But once they install the anti-malware package, they'll be in excellent shape. Neal, did you find anything we missed?"

Neal considered as he swallowed. "I've spent the past couple of months reviewing blueprints of museums in London, Paris, and now the West Coast, and picked up on one gaping vulnerability they have in common—their storage areas."

"That's cheating," Diana complained. "We were supposed to focus on the Matisse which is in a gallery."

"As your instructor I wasn't in the running for a prize anyway. Security at off-site storage facilities is something we need to address during our presentations. Large museums typically have multiple storage locations. As the museums themselves become more difficult to access, these secondary locations become even more attractive. Stolen items could go months before being reported. We have limited knowledge of the facilities, and it's understandable why museums are so reluctant to share information. But for someone brazen like Rolf, those secret vaults could be an irresistible lure."

Diana flashed him a look and quickly wrote a note.

Peter turned to Travis. "What do we know about the security systems at the off-site warehouses? Do they run the same software as in museums?"

"Generally not. The software at museums is targeted toward objects which are displayed in cases or mounted. In off-site facilities much of the art is stored in crates. Typically they have microchips embedded but for someone of Rolf's capability, he could develop a means of overriding the system."

"We need to address this issue with the Interpol art crimes task force as well as D.C. Art Crimes," Peter said. "Neal, prepare a bulletin about off-site security concerns." His cell phone buzzed. He raised a brow when he glanced at the display. "Talk about timing. It's Hobhouse."

John Hobhouse, the head of the Interpol art crimes task force, worked in London. Neal's first thought was that Rolf had struck another British museum. It was a natural assumption. The team was learning how to evaluate museum vulnerabilities and Neal was channeling many of the skills Klaus had drilled into him. Like Klaus, Rolf loved to make grandstand plays. Had he now masterminded the theft of the Crown Jewels? Or another Whistler? Dueling signals from both sides of the Atlantic would be an unexpected twist. It wasn't Neal's fault he was thinking like a thief. This was art heist boot camp. Had Rolf decided to claim a seat at the table?
But it quickly became apparent that any discussion of thefts would be put on hold. When Peter ended the call, he informed the team that the plastic surgeon who'd been suspected of operating on Rolf had died the previous night.

"Natural causes?" asked Jones, raising an eyebrow.

Peter winced. "These days it's hard to tell. Gilbert Bergeron was fifty-six years old. A heart attack isn't uncommon for a man of that age, and Bergeron had a history of cardiac disease. He was discovered at his home in Salzburg. Still, John isn't taking any chances. He's ordered a DNA analysis be performed to confirm that the man who died is indeed Bergeron."

"Does his death mean that we'll now have full access to his files?" Travis asked.

"I believe so," Peter confirmed, "although it may take a while to obtain clearance. John's already spoken with Austrian officials. We should know more by Monday."

Neal wrapped up boot camp over lunch. Afterward Diana became his partner in crime for removing the evidence from the conference room.

While they worked they speculated about Henry's activities. Was the hideout indeed Adler's? Were Fowler and Kate there as well? Would the master fugitive finally be taken into custody? Discussing the possibilities helped Neal vent his frustration over not being included.

"I don't know why you're envious," Diana commented as she sorted worksheets. "I never pictured you as Jungle Boy . . . unless it was a concrete jungle."

"How about the jungle of art museums? Klaus called himself the Leopard. He and I used to roam through the wilderness of art galleries. Don't I get points for that?"

"Klaus called you Lion Cub . . ." She gazed off into the distance with unfocused eyes, mumbling something to herself. Grabbing one of the worksheets, she began writing notes on the back of it. "What did I—?"

"Quiet!"

Frustrated, he sat down at his laptop and pulled up the website of the Getty Museum. He needed to select a painting for the workshop in Los Angeles. There were several tempting targets . . .

"Thank you!"

"For what?" he demanded. "First you won't talk to me. Then out of the blue you thank me. Don't you owe me an explanation?"

She smiled an acknowledgment to the overwhelming logic of his argument. "You just gave me an idea for the next Arkham Files story."

He rested his chin on a propped up arm, giving a look guaranteed to melt butter. "Any hints?"

"You'll find out soon enough."

Diana could be exceptionally annoying about her stories, refusing to give spoilers, even though he was the hero. Neal thought back to what he'd been talking about. "You mentioned Jungle Boy. We were discussing Henry. That's it, isn't it? Peter and I will be exploring the darkest jungle for lost treasure just like Indy."
She scowled at him. "The term jungle is horribly dated. You should use rainforest instead."

"Rainforest Boy doesn't have the same panache," Neal argued.

"Too bad. You better get used to it. Unlike you, I can speak with the voice of authority. When my dad served in Australia, I spent a school holiday exploring the Daintree Rainforest."

"Indiana Jones had adventures in the jungle, not the rainforest," he pointed out mildly.

"And now you're picturing yourself armed with a machete as you hack your way through dense undergrowth while monkeys chitter at you from the trees and snakes drop onto your pith helmet."

"Actually I could forego the snake part. You should use some of your rainforest expertise to send Arkham Neal on an adventure."

"Aww, poor Lion Cub. Are you feeling bored?"

"Comic-Con seems pretty dull in comparison to what Henry is doing," he admitted. "But I am appreciative that you let Arkham Neal learn how to pick locks. It's a start."

"My pleasure. Since it was for a good cause, I allowed it once. But don't get cocky."

"I couldn't help but notice you got that same faraway look in your eyes when I was discussing off-site storage facilities . . . " He snapped his fingers. "I mentioned them being like vaults. That's it, isn't it? Neal and Peter will plunder the library vault!"

"You really want Arkham Neal to face the wrath of Lavinia?"

"Maybe not, but it has something to do with the vault, doesn't it?"

"No spoilers," she said firmly. "Now, do you want my help or not?"

WCWCWCWCWCWCWC

Reese Hughes dropped in on Peter as he was preparing to leave for the day.

"I spoke with Interpol," he said, taking a seat. "The autopsy has been completed on Bergeron, and they found nothing suspicious. Also no signs of plastic surgery. Authorities are confident that the corpse is the doctor's."

"Anything more about the files?"

"They've begun searching through them. So far no mention of Rolf Mansfeld or the Kolars. I asked specifically about any encrypted files, and they haven't discovered any."

"It's possible Rolf may have alerted the surgeon to destroy them when he fled London."

Reese nodded. "He may have heard that Interpol was making inquiries. Interpol has been keeping track of Bergeron's patients, and no one resembling Chapman saw him. Rolf most likely went to another surgeon."

If Aidan and Travis hadn't hacked the surgeon's files, they probably would have never learned anything about what procedures had taken place. Now at least they had a chance. Peter's relief didn't escape Reese's notice.

"I know you were concerned about the propriety of your authorization, and when you told me
about how you'd sanctioned a . . . shall we say non-traditional method of file recovery, I'm sure you remember my reaction."

The phrase scorched earth came to mind. Hughes had been scathing in his initial comments. "I expected no less."

"But you stood your ground and you were right. Standard procedure doesn't count for much when we're forced to work within the constraints of a compromised system and the likelihood of multiple informants."

"We've both had to adapt."

"And now I'm allowing my agents to plan art heists in the conference room." Reese snorted a chuckle. "Did you know that Caffrey had the balls to ask if I wanted to join in?"

Peter laughed. "Somehow he failed to mention that."

"And do you know what was even more astonishing? I almost accepted his offer. If I hadn't had a conference call scheduled with the assistant director, I would have tried my hand at stealing that Matisse, too."

Peter had noticed him casting glances into the conference room earlier in the day. He wished Hughes could have joined them. Peter would have loved to have seen Neal's reaction when his offer was accepted.

"I talked with John this morning," Reese continued. "He mentioned he's being forced to go through the same paradigm shift in London. He alluded to an operation he sanctioned recently where someone conducted a clandestine search. When I asked if he was referring to Caffrey going in as a Doctor Who stunt double, he was shocked I knew." Reese's mouth twitched into the broadest smile Peter had ever seen him project. "Thank you for keeping me so well informed. Too often managers lose sight of reality. You're helping me keep my feet planted squarely where my people are. If they're in the mud, I want to be in the muck with them."

**Burkes' Townhouse, Brooklyn. July 9, 2005. Saturday afternoon.**

"Peter, I know this isn't what you want to hear, but your wife was destined to be an art thief. If Mozzie ever finds out about her hidden talent, he'll try to recruit her." Neal beamed at his star pupil while El basked in the glory of her teacher's praise.

The Burke dining room had been transformed into heist central. Neal had saved the Getty Museum for them to work on. Peter joined El to form Team Burke, matching their wits against Neal. Their objective was *The Promenade* by Renoir. Peter suspected Neal had chosen the painting in an obvious effort to win her over to the dark side. El had taken one look at it and immediately started planning where she'd hang it in their house.

"It's all thanks to you," she told Neal, "and this painting. Who wouldn't want to steal it?" She lay down her pencil to gaze yet one more time at the object of her craving. The painting showed a couple taking a walk in the countryside. The man was in the shadows as he held out his hand to the woman. She was playing coy by pretending to admire the flowers when clearly she was much more interested in him.

Neal beamed even wider at her comment. "The work reminded me of you and Peter when you had your picnic in Jenny Jump State Forest last month."

"That's hitting below the belt," Peter said with a groan. "Here I was getting ready to give you grief
for turning my wife into an accomplished criminal, and now you've completely disarmed me.”

Neal had showed up in the afternoon for the final round of art heist boot camp. He'd stay the night with them. In the morning El would take them to JFK airport for the flight to Seattle. They'd scheduled an early morning departure in order to have time to visit the Seattle Art Museum in the afternoon. Peter was relieved they'd already planned to spend the day together. He knew Neal was having a difficult time focusing on anything but Henry until he got news.

El was also aware of the problem and maintained a running line of banter to help keep Neal distracted. She didn't have to dig far for a topic. Her community theater players group was much on her mind. The playhouse they used was upping its fees. The increase came at the worst possible moment since the borough had also warned them it was no longer able to help subsidize their costs.

She pointed her finger accusingly at Neal. "You realize you've created quite a dilemma for me. If I sold the Renoir, I could buy the playhouse and ensure a lifetime of performances, but then I wouldn't have the painting on my wall." 

Neal's eyes lit up. "I have the perfect solution! I'll forge it for you. Then it will be your choice which one you sell."

"I'm calling time out before the cops come and bust us," Peter declared. "Those hors d'oeuvres in the fridge are calling to me. Who's ready for happy hour?" As if he didn't know the answer.

While he opened up the bar, El set to work in the kitchen and Neal cleared off the dining room table. The sound of Peter's cell phone was an unwelcome disturbance. Couldn't whoever it was have waited till he'd eaten a few of the ham crostini?

Peter grumpily pulled his cell phone out of his pocket but he was glad he had. Neal was already peering over his shoulder to see who it was and motioned for Peter to put it on speaker.

Jones didn't apologize for calling on a Saturday, alerting Peter straight off it was likely concerning Henry. "You mentioned Caffrey was coming over."

"I'm here," Neal confirmed.

"Good. It was a toss-up who I should call first. We've got a situation on our hands. Radha Prasad just called me from Baltimore. He heard from the Buenos Aires office that Henry is missing. The assumption is he's being held prisoner by Adler or whatever crime lord is living in that hideout."

Peter heard El gasp in the kitchen. She hurried in to hear as well. Neal was staring at the phone as if willing Jones to come up with the full explanation.

"The team approached the site early this morning. It was up a primitive road in the mountains. When they got to within a few miles of the estate, they spotted a barrier with a sentry gatehouse. Not wanting to give away their identities, they turned around and pulled off the road a mile or so away."

"How many people were in the group?" Peter asked.

"Four. Three Argentinians and Henry. Henry convinced them that he should try to gain access over the fence—"

Peter groaned, shaking his head at Neal.

"Yeah. Exactly my thought. Henry and a detective named Raul headed off into the rainforest,
saying they wouldn't attempt to approach the house, but were simply assessing the fortifications. Two hours later, Raul came back alone. He said the chain-link fence was wired but Henry had climbed over anyway, claiming that the guards would think it was a monkey. He told Raul he'd make a quick check and be back within fifteen minutes. When he hadn't returned in an hour, Raul tried to contact him on his two-way radio but was unable to reach him. He then returned to the others. They waited along the side of the road for a few more hours but when there was still no word, they headed back down the mountain. As soon as they got coverage, they phoned in a report."

Jones explained that the agents were contacting the Argentinian Federal Police for assistance. They didn't want to take the risk of alerting provincial authorities who might inform Adler. The estate along with the road leading up to it were unmarked on any local maps.

If there'd been a convenient wall for Peter to pound his fist through, he would have. Henry had gone rogue. On his own. Taking on Adler. And there wasn't a damned thing he could do about it.

He would have vented to the rooftops, but Neal and El both were looking too stricken. Radha had informed Allen Winston, which meant that Henry's mother and grandfather would soon know about it if they didn't already. Noelle served on the Win-Win Board of Directors and Graham Winslow, a retired CEO, still maintained an active presence in the company.

As soon as the call with Jones ended, Neal left the room to call Noelle. Peter wondered what was going through his head. He hoped it was what an idiot Henry had been. But was Neal thinking instead how much better it would have been if Henry hadn't involved anyone else in his scheme?

Notes: Next week in Chapter 5: Jungle Boy, the action moves to Argentina. Neal may not know what happened to Henry but you will. Much as Neal might rather go to Argentina, instead he'll leave for Seattle with Peter. Meanwhile, our man in France, Mozzie, calls in a report, and Travis has news on the FBI mole.

In earlier stories I've written about Klaus's obsession with Neal. Rolf's interest in Peter is a recent development. For this week's blog post I wrote about why Rolf has fixated on him. The post is called "Two Puzzle Masters."

Planning which paintings Neal would choose to steal was a dream gig for me. The Matisse is a nod to the episode "Bad Judgment," where he mentioned admiring a Matisse at the Met. Last week's choice of Cardsharps was a no-brainer, and I imagined El would have liked Renoir. As for Vermeer's Astronomer, it has a major role to play in this story. There are pins of all the paintings mentioned on our Pinterest site, the closest I’ll ever get to having them hang on my wall. I also pinned Diana's thief outfit to the board for all of us who long to participate in our own version of art heist boot camp.

Thanks for reading and commenting! Special thanks to Penna for taking time out to help with this story. She just spent the past month participating in Camp NaNoWriMo to work on her novel and has taken a quantum leap forward. Woo-hoo!

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Nocturne in Black and Gold board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon
Jungle Boy


Were you out of your mind?

Henry sighed. As he crept through the forest toward the house, he was already hearing his mom's voice in his head. Not a good sign.

A dispassionate observer—clearly not his mom, Joe, his grandparents, Neal, or anyone else who cared about him—would have evaluated the options Henry had been presented with and pronounced he'd selected the one with the highest probability of achieving the desired outcome.

They had zero proof Adler lived on the estate. If their vehicle had pulled up to the sentry station, surveillance cameras could have recorded them. Adler might have recognized Henry and realized his hideout had been discovered. The fugitive would have escaped before they had a chance to come back with reinforcements.

Someone needed to go in covertly and find out the truth. And that person had to be Henry. The odds of being captured were not in his favor. Anyone else who was taken prisoner would likely be summarily executed. Henry had a chance. Adler by now must know that Henry hadn't actually been shot on the tarmac when Kate escaped to Argentina. An Adler informant was presumed to be working at the FBI and was likely keeping tabs not only on Neal but also his close associates. Adler was too astute a businessman not to recognize the value of keeping Henry alive as leverage.

But what if he was breaking into the estate of a wealthy drug lord instead of Adler?

No point in thinking about that. Henry had dealt himself into the game and now had to play with the cards he'd been given.

He was unarmed. Dumb mistake, but hell, he hadn't planned this in advance. On the plus side, he had a snooper pen. He'd been carrying that handy toy around ever since Neal told him about the one he used when he was undercover at a bank. No field investigator should be without one. Or a machete . . . Something else he'd neglected to bring. Note to self: never take off for the rainforest without a gun and a machete.

Were there any other positives? He'd be the only one to face the repercussions of having conducted an illegal maneuver. He'd give himself a half-point for that. And if a drug lord killed him, he wouldn't have to face his mom's wrath . . .

Henry kicked aside the doubts. He'd have to make the best of it. He'd mismanaged Kate last spring. When he watched her plane take off from the airstrip, he knew that someday he and Adler would be squaring off against each other. That moment was here.

He was now close enough that he could scan the buildings with his binoculars. The house had been built in the middle of the rainforest and close to a lake. It had a thatched roof and was camouflaged with vines, making it virtually impossible to detect from the air.

A shed, also covered with thatch, was on the far bank of the lake. Henry could see the nose of a seaplane peeking out from within. That must be how Adler managed communications. He probably also received provisions via seaplane.

The main building had three floors. Much of the ground level functioned as a garage. Henry could
see two Land Rovers inside. Three side huts were grouped around it—probable maintenance facilities and barracks for Adler's employees.

It was early morning. The only things stirring at the moment were bugs, and lots of them. Henry swatted one at his neck. Were there poisonous bugs in the Argentinian rainforest? Nah. More likely he'd catch some weird tropical disease which hadn't been documented yet. Then he could play the sympathy card with his family. He was going to need a lot of sympathy cards. *C'mon, bugs. Bite away.*

How about poison ivy? Was there a local variety? It had been a long, _long_ time since Henry's Boy Scout days, and he hadn't earned a single merit badge on survival skills for the Argentina rainforest.

As he crept up to the house he could see a few lights shining through the windows. Somebody was home. The dense vegetation made the hideout appear even darker.

Every few feet Henry paused to scan the surroundings. As he neared the house, his vigilance paid off. Two guards armed with assault rifles rounded the corner of the building.

This was confirmation that Henry had made the correct decision. If he'd tried to come in with a larger force, they would have been slaughtered. But one man alone? The odds of him being able to sneak in undetected were slim but acceptable.

*Screeeeeere!*

Henry froze, his heart pounding. Now his lungs locked up on him, too. _Breathe, man—it's just a monkey._ Henry spotted it jeering down at him from high up in a tree. Its mocking white face against the dark foliage looked demonic. That monkey was _evil._ It reminded Henry of the monkeys in *The Wizard of Oz._ The men had pointed one out on the drive up. Capuchin they called it. Henry had a new name for it: _Heart Attack._

Never had he dreamed of being Henry of the Jungle and this experience was confirmation. Give him the squeal of race car brakes any day.

Although . . . he and Tarzan did have one thing in common. They both knew how to climb. Henry had been an excellent tree climber as a kid and had done his share of rock walls. You never knew when you'd need to scale a parapet. Last month he'd challenged Neal on the Chelsea Piers rock wall with a race to the top, and Neal won by the slimmest of margins. Henry had demanded a grudge match after his trip. If he hoped to ever have that match, he better focus on staying alive.

The forest grew close to the house. Adler's desire for privacy would work well for Henry, too. A quick climb, an easy swing onto the balcony, and he'd be in.

Henry sneaked around to the back of the property. Narrow verandas wrapped around the upper floors. His objective was the office. He assumed it would be in the back. Henry took a chance that the third floor would be the easiest to enter and picked his tree.

Scaling the tree turned out to be easier than he'd expected. Thick vines provided firm handholds. His worst fear was that he'd encounter a snake, and that also turned out to be true.

Henry had already decided that any snake he encountered was deadly poisonous. This was not the time to extend the hand of friendship. If it meant taking a stick and knocking it loose or climbing around it, he was fine with that. Fortunately all the snakes he saw seemed as scared of him as he was of them. They slithered away practically as fast as he could spot them.
He dropped from the tree onto the balcony and snuck up to the French patio doors. It was a bedroom and appeared to be recently vacated as the bed was unmade. A woman's robe had been tossed over the sheets. No sounds that he could detect.

When he tested the patio door, he found it unlocked. *An invitation to come in? I accept.*

The door to the hallway was open. As Henry crept toward it, he could hear the murmurs of voices and the faint clatter of china. Had he caught the residents at breakfast? Could he have been that lucky? The voices were coming from the floor below. Next to the bedroom he'd exited was a larger bedroom. It looked masculine. Adler's? Across the hallway was a closed door. Henry gingerly opened it, holding his breath. He'd found the office. And it was empty.

He slipped inside and closed the door quietly behind him. The office was minimal like everything in the place. Simple furniture. Few belongings. It reminded him of what a camp office would look like. A temporary base of operations for someone who wanted to be able to make an escape at a moment's notice. That fit Adler's profile.

But was this really Adler's office or had Henry invaded someone else's hideout? He needed hard evidence. A bowl of candies on the desk was suggestive. Raffaello pralines in their distinctive white wrap. Neal had said Adler was addicted to them.

The drawers of the desk were locked, but were trivial to open. Rifling through the top drawer, Henry found the confirmation he needed—Adler's signature on some documents.

There was a large laptop on the desk but it wasn't on. Henry hadn't brought along any flash drives. He wasted a few minutes trying to guess the password before giving up. Why did Adler even bother with a password? Did he think the monkeys were evil, too?

Henry whipped out his snooper pen and began snapping photos of all the documents he could find. There was only one file drawer in the desk. He scanned through the names quickly. Nothing about Ydrus or Keller.

There was one file marked Bergmann. Henry paused, his heart quickening. Anton Bergmann worked at the Jeu de Paume Museum in Paris during World War II and had been in charge of shipping looted art out of France. Huber's father had worked for him during the war.

He opened the folder on the desk. Inside was a badly damaged sheet of paper encased in a protective sleeve. The faint handwriting was barely visible through the grime. The paper had been eaten away in several places. Henry took several photos of it and also an envelope that was likewise protected in plastic. A modern document in Spanish had been inserted into the folder. Damn. Why hadn't he learned more of the language?

Henry slipped the folder back in the drawer, his eyes darting to the window. There was no balcony off the office. It'd be safer to exit via the bedroom—

The door opened. Henry whirled around to see Vincent Adler standing in the doorway.

He was wearing tropical slacks and a safari shirt—not the three-piece suit he wore in all the photos Henry had seen of him—but there was no mistaking him. And accompanying him were two burly guards carrying assault rifles.

"Did you find everything you came for?" Adler asked, raising a brow.

Henry didn't miss a beat. "I'm glad you finally decided to show up. I was starting to question your security. Win-Win could help with that."
He smiled. "I like your style, Henry. You don't mind if I call you by your first name? Kate's told me so much about you, I feel we're old acquaintances. But I shouldn't presume. Perhaps you've adopted your cousin's penchant for aliases. Am I addressing Hank Halden?"

"Henry will do."

"I hear that was quite a performance you gave on the airstrip with Neal and Burke. It was clear we were destined to meet again. You'll have to forgive me if I postpone our conversation, but at the moment I have more pressing matters." He jerked his head to the guards. "Take him away."

They strode up and seized Henry's arms.

"I'm counting on that chat," Henry tossed out. He caught sight of the guard on his right raising his rifle. Henry tried to jerk out of the way, but he wasn't fast enough. A blinding blow to his head made him cry out . . .

On the Plane to Seattle. Sunday morning.

"Neal, the flight attendant's requested we turn off our cell phones."

When his travel companion showed no signs of compliance, Peter reached over and covered Neal's phone with his hand. "As soon as we land in Seattle, we'll both check."

"Noelle texted that she and Joe will depart in half an hour. They arrive in Buenos Aires late tonight."

"By then we may have some positive news." Despite his words, Peter didn't feel it was likely, and judging by Neal's expression, neither did he.

"Interpol's assisting Win-Win, but the police are dragging their heels. They say the earliest they can dispatch a unit to the estate will be tomorrow afternoon or more likely Tuesday."

"From what I've read, this is an extremely remote area of the country. It would have to be for Adler to elude us all these years. Logistics will be difficult. The road the agents described won't accommodate large vehicles."

Neal nodded absently. While the flight steward went over safety precautions, plainly his thoughts continued to be thousands of miles away. Peter's were as well. In the hours since the news broke, updates had provided little additional information. Allen Winston, Win-Win's CEO, had been on the phone with Argentinian authorities to apply additional pressure. Their maternal grandfather Edmund was placing calls to his diplomatic contacts.

Neal had at first pleaded to go down to Argentina as well. If they didn't have the West Coast trip scheduled, it might have been impossible to dissuade him. The logical arguments over what Neal could possibly hope to accomplish were meaningless in the face of his concern for Henry.

Nobody was speculating about what would happen after the initial crisis was resolved. Henry's paternal grandfather Graham had called them last night. Fear for Henry and anger over him acting on his own were blended with a hint that some of Graham's outrage was because he longed to be down in the rainforest with Henry, too.

When the stewardess brought their meals—a box of corn flakes and a banana—Neal didn't make an attempt to eat but limited himself to orange juice and coffee. A good indicator of Neal's mood was that he'd made no sarcastic remarks about riding in economy class or the breakfast.
"Do you think Henry acted on gut instinct when he scaled the fence?" asked Peter.

Neal made a face when he took a sip of the coffee. "Most likely. He'd never been up that mountainside and couldn't have known what they'd encounter."

"There's no proof it's Adler's estate."

"True, but Henry must have thought that its proximity to the Nazi hideout made it worth the risk. I'm positive Henry was convinced this was the best way for everyone. He didn't want to lead others into danger. From what the agents reported, the gate was barred. They had no proof Adler was inside. Henry must have thought that if he sneaked in and obtained evidence, they would then be able to conduct a raid."

"And he got caught."

Neal nodded gloomily. They were both holding onto the hope Adler hadn't already executed him.

"Would Adler recognize Henry?"

"I'm sure of it. Kate must have told him everything that happened in the spring, and he would have wanted to learn more about Henry. Henry hasn't led the life of a recluse. One of Adler's agents—possibly Fowler—could have easily made a detailed dossier on him."

"You think Kate is still alive?"

He gazed out the window for a moment before replying. "Yeah. We know the plane exploded over Argentina, but there were parachutes in the cabin. She and her father could have jumped out before the explosion."

Neal relapsed into moody silence. While Peter munched his cereal, he attempted to focus on the upcoming presentations, but his thoughts kept returning to Henry. Peter had talked with Joe the previous night who indicated they were planning to stay in Argentina for as long as it took.

After breakfast, Peter got out his laptop. He was glad he'd insisted Neal take the window seat. He'd pulled down the shade and had already fallen asleep, his head resting against the window. Neal hadn't gotten much sleep the night before. Neither had Peter, but he'd never been able to sleep on a plane. He'd have to make up the hours some other time.

When Neal awoke, he checked his watch. In twenty minutes they should touch ground and he could turn on his cell.

He pushed up the shade to look out the window. The sky had low-hanging clouds. Mt. Rainier was hidden in cloudbanks. Neal knew it was there, but he couldn't see it—just like Henry.

A year ago Neal had flown into Sea-Tac Airport to attend his cousin Angela's birthday party. Henry's status had been unknown then, too. He'd been on the run, hiding out from his father while trying to implement a con to take down Masterson Music. Henry was keeping Neal in the dark and only involved Angela and Graham to the extent their assistance was essential. Should Neal be grateful that this time Henry hadn't involved Angela and Graham? Neal knew Henry's actions were based on wanting to keep others safe—he did the same thing—but it was beyond aggravating to be on the receiving end. No doubt it was cosmic karma.

He glanced over at Peter, buried in some long Interpol report. Henry's actions gave Neal a much
better understanding of how frustrated Peter felt when he shut him out. Neal hoped he'd never have
to again. The Braque painting had been a bizarre fluke from his past which wouldn't be repeated.

When they landed in Seattle, there was no news bulletin from Argentina to greet them. It was
midday on the West Coast, and they had the rest of Sunday free. Originally Neal had intended to
play tour guide for Peter's first visit to Seattle, but as they walked through the concourse toward
baggage claim, it was hard to muster the enthusiasm.

Peter was gamely attempting to spark a conversation on the various Seattle attractions he saw
advertised on the walls. Neal put his responses on autopilot while considering how he would have
handled breaking into the estate. Had Henry taken along any equipment? Could he be hiding
somewhere in the house, waiting to make his escape? Or maybe he was still in the jungle and
hadn't broken in yet. Once Neal had waited for twelve hours in the rain before—

"Neal!" Peter yanked his arm. "You did this deliberately, didn't you?" He was trying to sound
accusing, but the corners of his mouth were twitching into a smile.

"What are you talking about?" Neal had no need to fake his bewilderment.

"Good act, but you don't fool me for a minute." Peter pointed down the concourse. "You mean to
tell me you didn't know that Bigfoot was in the airport?"

Neal broke into a grin as he headed toward Bigfoot Food and Spirits. "It wasn't here last year. I
promise you I would have remembered."

Peter kept pace with him. "I know I made you swear to never tell anyone about the trick Joe played
on me, but it's just the two of us. No one will know, and I think Joe would like to hear we stopped
to have a drink with Bigfoot. C'mon. My treat."

Over Sasquatch's favorite salmon—at least that's what the restaurant claimed and it ought to know
—the dam burst. All the anger, frustration, and fear that he'd been suppressing for the past twenty-
four hours spilled out in a torrent. And not just for Neal but Peter as well. Neal was glad no one
recorded them. But they were both in a better place afterward.

Neal drained the last of the Washington fumé blanc from his glass. "You know we haven't
considered one other possibility."

"What's that?" Peter asked.

Neal nodded to the large stalking image on the wall. "Maybe Bigfoot captured Henry. He could
have formed an alliance with the Hitler clones Adler's been creating in his secret laboratory."

Peter snorted. "Should we call the Winchesters? They could contact their fellow hunters in
Argentina."

"Why not? And it's not just Bigfoot we have to be concerned about. Who knows what demonic
spirits haunt the rainforest? It'd serve Henry right to wind up in the most haunted wilderness in
Argentina."

Peter smiled as he signed the receipt. "I think we're done here. Weren't you going to give me a tour
of the Seattle sights?"

"Yeah, let's do it," Neal agreed. For a few minutes the pain had eased enough that he could make
dumb jokes. If you can joke about someone, that means they're okay, right? Neal knew it was only
a temporary break before all the emotions came back. Sightseeing would help preserve their sanity
while they waited to hear something.

The travel office had booked them into the Executive Hotel Pacific in Seattle because of its convenience to the FBI field office. Although the travel office hadn't planned it that way, they couldn't have picked a hotel that was much more convenient for the places Neal had on his list.

They first perused the museum which would be the subject for the art heist workshop. Neal primarily looked at the art while Peter focused on the security layout. Neal enjoyed comparing notes with him afterward, pausing only briefly to daydream about what it would have been like to have Peter and his security expertise on his crew. They would have been unstoppable.

The second stop on Neal's tour route was a surprise. When Neal mentioned they were going to the Burke, Peter thought it was another joke. When he learned that it was the state's natural history museum and he could spend hours roaming around the dinosaurs and other exhibits, Peter's look of delight made Neal feel like he'd brought his kid instead of his surrogate dad along.

Afterward they headed for Pioneer Square. Peter insisted on going on the Underground Tour where Neal had led Henry's dad the previous summer. That time Neal had picked a lock to access the underground. Peter couldn't resist rubbing in what a thrill it must be to be in the underground tunnels legitimately.

The Columbia tunnels were still a sensitive topic. Peter was aware of Neal and his friends' explorations in the restricted areas of the tunnel system. In May after Neal had nearly died in a forbidden area of the network, Peter no longer remained silent about his disapproval. And Neal had been able to reassure him. He'd already explored them thoroughly. There was no need to return. He'd constructed a detailed map which Mozzie was converting into a 3-D interactive diagram. The tunnels were a valuable resource that Neal could safely shelve for the moment.

He and Peter strolled around the Pike Place Market afterward and stopped for a meal of seafood. Neither one commented to the other about the frequency with which they checked their cell phones. When they hiked the steep incline back to the hotel, Neal's thoughts kept returning to the mountain fortress in Argentina.

By mutual agreement, they made an early evening of it. The lack of sleep finally caught up with Peter. Neal kept himself busy by sketching the layout of a gallery in the art museum. He'd taken photos of it but wanted to test how much he could remember without looking at them. It was an exercise Klaus had taught him and which he still practiced. There was no better way to keep observational skills sharp, whether to be a thief or to catch a thief.

Neal became so absorbed in the project, he jumped when his cell phone rang. He didn't let his disappointment show when he heard Mozzie's voice.

"You should have come with me," Mozzie exclaimed. "For dinner I feasted on truffles and a superb bottle of Chateau Latour."

"Where are you? Bordeaux?"

"Close. Bergerac. I spent the evening with a delightful lady."

"Does Janet need to be jealous?"

"Perhaps not. She's confined to a wheelchair and lives in a senior home but if she were a little younger and healthier . . . But I digress. Her name is Camille Souchon." Mozzie paused. Neal could hear him take a sip of what had to be wine while he let Neal mull that one over.
"Am I supposed to know who Camille Souchon is?" he asked after nothing came to mind.

"She was the secretary to Paul Lévy." As if that explained anything.

"It's been a long day, Mozz. A little more info would be nice."

"Fractals, mon frère! Paul Lévy is a French mathematician who was one of the giants in the field. He did groundbreaking research in the years leading up to World War II. Functional analysis, probability theory, partial differentials, he was one of the founding fathers." Mozzie continued to rhapsodize for several minutes, losing Neal somewhere between the Lévy C curve and alpha-state distributions.

"Oookkaaay. I'll take your word on it. But how does—"

"Your brain's already been polluted by your exposure to the West Coast. Let me explain in terms you can understand."

"Please do."

"Lévy was living in Paris and at the height of his career when World War II broke out. The Nazis swooped in and had him fired in 1940 because he was a Jew. When I researched Lévy's biography I discovered he'd provided valuable assistance to the French artillery during World War I. I then asked myself, how would such a man respond to the Nazi invasion? Would he simply lie down? Of course he wouldn't."

Mozzie was on a roll. Neal continued to let him answer his own questions while he sat back.

"At last we had a potential link between that page of fractal equations in Huber's journal and World War II. Through a long circuitous route involving many clandestine meetings with former members of the French Resistance, I found a man who knew a friend who married a widow of a man who had helped Lévy during the war. He told me Lévy himself was active in the Resistance. That path led me to Bergerac and Camille Souchon."

"And how does this relate to the page of equations?"

"I don't know yet, but I feel I'm on the cusp of a major discovery. I'm taking Camille out to lunch tomorrow. We have just begun to become acquainted. But, alas, this may take longer than I'd anticipated. I may not return in time for Comic-Con."

Mozzie proceeded for the next several minutes to explain how to conduct preliminary negotiations for *Yellowface the Masked Avenger*. He gave Neal strict orders not to allow anyone to sign anything before Mozzie had a chance to review the documents. "Aidan and Richard are innocents in the type of warfare film moguls engage in. Neal, you must protect them from being abused."

"I'll do my best."

"I can tell you're disconsolate that I won't be there. Perhaps I should change my plans. But Camille had her heart set on a picnic tomorrow."

"It's not that." Neal told him about the events in Argentina. Mozzie's reaction was predictable.

"At last! Henry as we speak may have penetrated Adler's secret laboratory. Has he discovered any Hitler clones?"

"We don't even know if he's found Adler. I'd hold off on any speculation." Mozzie's fantasies, as
improbable as they were, did succeed in cheering Neal up. His exuberant friend professed to have no doubt that Henry could extricate himself from whatever mess he'd gotten himself into. Neal wished he could be as confident.

Peter awoke to the news that the owner of the estate Henry had infiltrated was Eduardo Cardenas. According to Argentinian authorities, he was a reclusive Chilean billionaire who had paid substantial sums of money to ensure he was not disturbed. The Argentinian authorities were expressing outrage over the incident. It was only with the greatest reluctance that they'd agreed to send a delegation to inquire about Henry. That was scheduled to take place on Tuesday.

Peter texted Jones to research Cardenas. Midmorning he reported back that the story checked out to the extent he was able to obtain any information. Eduardo Cardenas was the younger son of a family who'd made their fortune in the copper industry. Three years ago he'd relocated from an estate in Chile to Argentina. The property had been bought in September 2002, which placed the purchase a little less than a year before Adler fled the country in the wake of the Ponzi scheme debacle. Was this the rainforest bolt-hole of the crooked hedge fund manager or did Eduardo Cardenas actually live there?

Neal pointed out that if Cardenas was the owner, surely he would have had Henry arrested. Neither one of them speculated aloud about the other options, such as that Cardenas was a drug lord. Until verification was received on Tuesday, there was nothing further they could do. Peter was glad their full day of meetings would help make the time pass more quickly.

Representatives from local museums as well as regional Bureau agents had been invited to attend the sessions. The morning was taken up with security concerns. Neal led the discussion on off-site storage, and Peter could tell it was an eye-opener. When participants weren't asking questions, they were scribbling notes.

The pressure Neal was under made Peter doubly appreciate his skill as a con artist. To look at him, no one would have suspected that he was more concerned about a family member's security than museum heists. He responded with infinite patience to the questions, even as Peter found it difficult to focus.

They had a working lunch at the office with the session participants. Neal's workshop was scheduled for the afternoon. While the attendees worked on their heist plans, Peter and Neal planned to check in with the team. Travis had texted Peter earlier in the day to request a conference call. He'd arranged for Jones and Diana to also participate.

The field office had allocated a huddle room for their use, a point Neal didn't fail to pick up on. "Why don't we have one of these?" he complained. "We could turn some of our smaller conference rooms into huddle rooms. We can't let the West Coast show us up."

"We already have huddle rooms. They're called interrogation rooms."

Neal made a face. "Not the same thing. Tricia has huddle rooms on her floor. Just think—artwork on the walls, maybe a mural or two, splashes of color. They could do wonders for morale."

"I didn't think we had a morale problem, but go ahead and talk with Hughes about it." The huddle room in the Seattle office wasn't bad, Peter had to admit. It was small but had a large window which looked out on Elliot Bay. Instead of tossing his rubber band ball, Neal could watch the ferry boats.
When the conference call started, Peter had Travis lead it off.

"This morning I was able to trace a message which had been sent from Chapman's IP address to the Bureau's D.C. headquarters." Travis's matter-of-fact voice seemed out of sync with the momentousness of the statement.

"You're positive?" Peter asked.

"That's an affirmative. Malware had been installed on the National Police Squad communications software in London which specifically targeted email transmissions between White Collar and John Hobhouse. The Brits cracked the code this weekend. It was the most sophisticated hack they've seen. The IP address the email was routed to belongs to Chapman's home address."

"How does the D.C. office fit in?" Diana asked. Peter could hear the faint tap of her pencil on her notepad.

"Whoever wrote the program—I assume Rolf or Jacek—provided a backup recipient. Transmissions were sent not only to Chapman's home but to this second account which corresponds to an IP address used by D.C. The addresses there are changed regularly, but in scrubbing the data, I was able to find a link to a shared computer registered to the D.C. Art Crimes office." Travis paused. Peter could picture him steepling his fingers pondering his next statement. "Based on the evidence, it's my belief that the informant is someone within the Art Crimes group."

Neal exhaled, his eyes locking onto Peter. "Art Crimes is a small group. Six agents headed by your ex-mentor, Philip Kramer."

Peter nodded. "And each of them should now be considered a potential suspect. Jones, go ahead and speak with Hughes."

Jones promised to keep them advised. Hughes would need to obtain clearance from the assistant director before any countermeasures could be initiated. But the evidence was damning. It should be sufficient to secure the AD's authorization to monitor all the members of the group.

"How does this connect to Kramer's newfound enthusiasm to cooperate with us?" Neal asked. "Is Ydrus providing the motivation?"

"Careful," Peter warned. "We've narrowed the number of suspects, but we're nowhere close to naming anyone."

"That's not what I said," Neal protested. "My question concerns how Ydrus could be manipulating Kramer, not that he's the informant."

"Neal makes a good point," Diana agreed. "Is Kramer being fed false information?"

"The most likely candidate is a subordinate," Jones hypothesized. "Someone with a low profile. Kramer has a long, outstanding record. How could Ydrus have corrupted him?"

"If Kramer's the mole, he wouldn't have been such an obstructionist." Neal slanted a glance at Peter. "Ever since I've been working at White Collar, he's put up roadblocks to us investigating art crimes."

"If fighting over jurisdiction made someone an informant," Travis commented, "then the Bureau has a much more severe problem than any of us realized."

"For the moment let's set aside speculation on the who and focus instead on the significance of the
mole working within Art Crimes," Peter urged. "That means Ydrus and by extension Rolf are being kept aware of our movements and our cases. They have intimate knowledge of how the Bureau conducts art crime investigations."

"It also increases the probability that Ydrus instigated your trip," Jones pointed out. "We assume Rolf was behind the theft of the Whistler. He could have planted suggestions through the mole. You'll be near movie studios. Those soundstages and backlots may present a tempting scenario to him. Look at what happened at Scima in London. Is he preparing something even bigger?"

"Tricia was also concerned that Rolf was plotting something on the West Coast," Peter admitted.

"It's not only Rolf we have to worry about," Travis said. "Jacek and Marta Kolar could be in California, too. They're the other reason I asked to speak with you. Richard told me about a proposal he received which sounds suspicious to me." Travis proceeded to relate how Richard, an intern with a little over two months of work experience, had been offered a position on a supervisory panel. "I'm the first one to praise Richard's brilliance as a sculptor, but this doesn't hold water. And that it involves off-site work during the weekend? Maybe I'm being overly paranoid but I wondered if there wasn't something more to it."

"Who made the proposal?" Neal asked, his expression growing tense.

"A Dutch programmer, name of Katja Visser. From Richard's description, she appears to be about Marta's height and age as well as body type. I asked him how difficult it would be to make Marta look like Katja, and he thought it would be a relatively simple procedure."

"What would it involve?" Peter asked, sharing Neal's concern. Was Rolf now targeting their friends?

"Their noses and chins are a little different, but Richard believes a little plastic surgery could easily take care of it. Otherwise, it's a simple matter of dyeing the hair, plucking the eyebrows, adding collagen to the lips, and using a different style of makeup. The eye color is the same, and we know Marta has the technical expertise to slip into the role. Katja was transferred to L.A. from the Amsterdam office a few months ago. Richard was able to take a photo of her this morning. He sent it to me and I'm forwarding it on to you. The photo's not great. He took it at quite a distance to avoid arousing suspicion."

"Jones and Diana, check into Katja," Peter ordered. "Find out everything you can about her."

"I don't like this," Diana said. The worry was evident in her voice. "Why is she interested in Richard? And what is she doing at Scima?"

Neal had been listening intently. "Marta's been involved with Scima before. She worked at their Prague office under her true identity early in the year when she prepared a watercolor similar to one of my paintings. She could have been the one who stole the Whistler painting. We have no evidence that Rolf ever committed a heist personally."

"She could be laying groundwork for another trap," Peter said. "We suspected she assisted Rolf in London. She may intend to use Richard in some way as leverage, either against Neal or Travis."

"Richard and I wondered if she was working on a Lovecraft video game," Travis said. "Perhaps she plans to inject references to Arkham Files in it. I'm sure you remember that Lovecraft movie idea Rolf had floated last spring. This could be a follow-up. I've already warned Richard to be careful. I'm meeting him at the end of the day, and he's going to give me a tour of the facility. I also recommend we look into heightened security at Comic-Con."
"I don't see how we can pick her up for questioning until we have something more tangible," Jones said, "but I wish we could put her on ice."

Peter shared his assessment. Katja Visser could be exactly who she said she was, but Travis was right to be suspicious. Peter hoped it was a false alarm for everyone's sake, especially Neal's. That his college friend could be a person of interest for Rolf would have been tough to handle under normal circumstances but he was already stressed about Henry.

Peter was inclined to believe that Richard was likely not in any immediate danger. If Travis's theory was correct, Richard had thwarted their plans by rejecting the proposal. The situation at Art Crimes though, that was a sucker punch. Was that the reason for Kramer's attitude toward Neal? Somebody was poisoning the well? That Ydrus instructed the informant to drive a wedge between Neal and the FBI seemed to be the inescapable conclusion.

Destroying Neal's credibility at the FBI could be part of either a revenge or recruitment agenda. With Neal's love of secrets and a hazy criminal past, he must have rich blackmail potential. Had Neal already been targeted? That was a conversation Peter intended to have with Neal at the first opportunity.

Notes: Peter has that talk with Neal in next week's chapter, and we catch up with Henry who has a game-changing conversation of his own when Kate pays him a visit.

Henry and I would be lost in the rainforest together if we hadn't had Penna's help with this chapter. I thought Henry was tough to manage in a city environment. Trust me, in the rainforest he's ten thousand times worse. Fortunately Penna has the gift on how to tame our Jungle Boy. Penna also served as my expert on Seattle. She alerted me to both the Burke Museum and Bigfoot Food and Spirits. The Bigfoot establishment opened in 2008 but I couldn't resist having them open a few years earlier.

I've been able to substantiate much of Mozzie's research on Paul Lévy. As for his participation in the French Resistance, the details must still be classified since I couldn't find any reference. If you'd like to learn more about the mathematician, there's a good article about him on Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_L%C3%A9vy_(mathematician). As far as I know, he never had a secretary named Camille Souchon.

Several times in this story Peter and Neal reference events which took place a year ago in Caffrey Disclosure. Penna's wonderful story also provided much reflection and inspiration for me. I wrote about the connections for our blog in my post: "Ghosts of Caffrey Disclosure."

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Nocturne in Black and Gold board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon
New pins include scenes of Argentina and Seattle.
Hypotheticals


When Neal wrapped up the afternoon workshop, they had barely enough time to make their flight to San Francisco. The itinerary the travel office had worked out was insane. Who does three cities in three days? Was that Kramer's plan to drive him away from the FBI?

When Neal mentioned it jokingly to Peter, he took it surprisingly seriously, saying they needed to talk. Neal was all for that but not while standing in line at the airport. The saving grace in their West Coast adventure was that each day their presentations were scheduled to begin at ten in the morning and conclude at three in the afternoon. Midday they held a group lunch. It was just barely possible to keep on schedule and cover all the material. Since there was no news about Henry, the tight timing might have been for the best. Perhaps Kramer was doing him a favor after all.

Which begged the question: why would Kramer help him? The most popular theory was that Ydrus was using Azathoth to recruit him. If Kramer was the informant, wouldn't he try to drive Neal away?

When not stressing about Henry, Neal directed his thoughts to the other puzzles currently floating to the top of the stack: the informant and Marta.

If Travis was correct in his assessment that Richard had been targeted, would family members be next? Neal and Peter had discussed the issue on the plane to San Francisco. Aside from alerting everyone to be vigilant, there wasn't much more they could do. Up to now, the only Caffrey relative who knew about Azathoth was Henry. Should Neal now inform Angela? Her last name was Caffrey. If Rolf knew about Richard, he could have easily found out about Angela as well. The other relatives didn't live in New York. Did that make them safer? Neal knew Peter was having the same concerns for El.

It was nearly nine o'clock by the time they'd checked in at their hotel. The travel office had booked them into the Union Square Hilton which was close to the FBI field office. He and Peter had grabbed a sandwich at the Seattle airport to eat on the plane, and neither one was feeling particularly hungry now. It was the middle of the night in Argentina. Was Noelle able to sleep? Neal didn't think he could.

Everyone was being forced to pin their hopes on the delegation arriving at the estate tomorrow. Neal could already hear in his head how that would go. *I'm sorry, but we have not found any intruders. Señor Cardenas is much too busy to be disturbed. Perhaps in a few days he'll have more time.*

Neal needed to brace himself for minimal results. The delegation would leave, report back that their hands were tied, and Henry would still be missing.

Neal felt a hand tug at his arm.

"The lounge looks inviting," Peter said. "I could use a nightcap. Judging by the way you've been staring into space for the past five minutes, you could too."

Neal winced an acknowledgment.

"I know what my nerves are like," Peter added quietly, "and yours have to be a thousand times
worse."

Peter was right about the lounge. It was quiet and comfortable. They picked a couple of club chairs in a corner. Late on a Monday night, there were few other customers.

Neal took a sip of his Chardonnay. "Noelle left me a message. She's breathing fire that the officials refused to allow her to accompany the delegation."

"I'm glad Joe's with her." Peter set his beer glass down on the table. "I can't be any help with what's going on in Argentina but I may be able to provide some insights on D.C. Art Crimes. Is there anything you'd like to ask me about the group?"

Neal appreciated the offer. He'd been spinning his wheels in the Argentina rut for far too long. "Kramer hasn't let us assist on cases with them, so I don't have much of a feel for his team. The extent of my interactions with them has been limited to a few emails. What's your take?"

"It's hard for me to imagine what Ydrus could have used as an inducement to make Kramer turn his back on a distinguished career of service. On the other hand, younger agents can be more idealistic and driven than older ones. From Ydrus's perspective, someone with a lower profile would be less likely to face scrutiny."

"The power Kramer wields within his specialty makes him a valuable target," Neal said, choosing his words carefully, "but that doesn't make him a more likely suspect. You value him highly. That in itself leads me to reduce the odds of him being the informant."

"Let's tackle the problem from another direction," Peter suggested. "You like dealing with hypotheticals. I also find them instructive."

"What do you have in mind?" asked Neal, intrigued.

Peter pursed his lips for a moment before replying. "Assume Ydrus is using the informant to drive you away from the FBI. Ydrus and by extension Rolf now have complete access to your files at the Bureau. What would be the most effective tool they could use? And base your answer on the belief that Klaus provided Rolf with a dossier containing everything he knew about you."

Neal slowly rotated the stem of his glass in his hands. Peter's question was a difficult one. How could he expose all his vulnerabilities even to a man he trusted so much? Because it wasn't a question of trust. What would Peter think of him afterward? Maybe if he was drunk . . . or loopy.

"Close your eyes."

Neal stared at him, baffled. "Why?"

"Just do it," Peter insisted.

Neal shrugged. "Okay, eyes closed." He heard Peter mumbling something incoherent for a few seconds. "You sound like Satchmo with a chew toy," he noted with a grin.

"Quiet. Genius at work." A few seconds later, Peter ordered him to open his eyes. Gesturing to Neal's drink, he said, "I've transformed that wine in your glass into the emerald wine Lavinia is so fond of serving in Diana's stories. You should drink it. You will then be a dispassionate observer, able to discuss your experiences with objectivity, knowing they can't harm you."

"Nice try," Neal said, snorting. "Do you realize that if you succeeded in mutating this lovely Chardonnay into emerald wine, you are indeed Lavinia? When I look at you, I now see an African-
American woman in tweeds, glaring at me over her glasses."

"I'm willing to put up with it. Need I remind you Arkham Neal could discuss nightgaunts, ghasts, zoogs—all sorts of monsters—with Arkham Peter? He even opened up about his fears of being schizophrenic. So what are you worried about?"

"You want me to drag my own monsters out of the closet? You may regret it." Neal took a sip, trying to envision the wine as emerald green. This was Lavinia in front of him, not Peter. Lavinia didn't know who he was and didn't care what he'd done. And Lavinia-Peter wouldn't be satisfied until he gave him something to chew on. "Rolf would know not to try to tempt me with money. It's never been about the money with me."

"That's good," Peter nodded encouragingly, making a rolling gesture with his hand to keep him talking. "How about for the thrill?"

"That's tricky. Your Mr. X has been keeping Rolf supplied with an account of our cases. Life at the FBI hasn't been boring. The challenge of catching a thief can be just as satisfying as being one."

"Klaus reveled in the ability to flaunt the law. Does that have any appeal? And drink more of that emerald wine before you answer."

That was one command he was happy to oblige. "Merely breaking the law doesn't hold any particular attraction."

"Then there's no way they could entice you?"

Neal considered for a moment. "If I felt the system were unfair or rigged," he admitted. "That might have a bearing."

"Like when you were forced to wear the anklet last year?"

He nodded. "It didn't make me want to become a criminal again, but I was willing to use any means at my disposal to right a wrong. And if they happened to be illegal . . ." He shrugged the rest of the answer.

"Now we're making progress. If the cause justified it, you could conceivably go to any lengths."

"Within certain limits," he clarified. "No guns, for instance."

Peter raised his glass to the bartender and pointed to him and Neal. "More emerald wine coming up. What would be an appropriate cause?"

 Neal waited till the bartender had brought their drinks. "If the only way I could protect someone was by working for Ydrus, I'd do it. Then once the person was safe, I'd do everything I could to take them down."

"I hear you," he said quietly. "How about if you felt your path forward was being blocked? Like when you fled to Europe? That's what Klaus would have been the most familiar with. You said he tried to recruit you to rejoin his crew permanently when you worked with him in the fall. He must have been basing that effort on the experience in Europe. You'd been convinced by Henry's father that if you associated with Henry, you'd be arrested and you'd ruin your cousin's career at Win-Win. I postulate that you weren't concerned about being thrown in prison as much as you were about the harm you'd do to Henry. Robert knew that was the most effective way to blackmail you. How much did you tell Klaus about that experience?"
"None of it. I refused to discuss anything about my past."

"But Rolf could have found out about it," Peter persisted. "His ability to hack databases forces us to confront that possibility. Rolf could take that knowledge and extrapolate the key to controlling you. If he's able to convince you that you would harm someone you care about such as—"

"—you or El, my family, friends, Richard . . . " The calming effect of the emerald wine was beginning to wear off. Neal's unease was growing by the moment.

Peter nodded. "My gut's telling me that's what Rolf will try. If he can convince you that you're a threat to us, then you'll bolt. That will give him the leverage he needs to have you work for him. Game over."

"In that scenario, I would run as fast as I could away from him, not toward him," Neal objected.

"Not if he possesses something he could blackmail you with. We can stop that, but only if we know what he'd use. Anything come to mind?"

"But why does he want me to work for him?" Neal blurted out, louder than he intended. He lowered his voice. "I helped kill his brother. Doesn't he want me dead?"

Peter locked him in his gaze. "Maybe he thinks forcing you to work for him will be the cruelest revenge of all."

"Death is too easy?" Neal huffed and took a large gulp of emerald wine which was rapidly turning back to Chardonnay.

Peter didn't reply. He didn't need to. "What could Rolf hold that would be so damaging you'd agree to work for him?"

Neal fought the urge to stand up and pace. Any trace of Lavinia along with her emerald wine had disappeared. All he could see in front of him was Peter . . . and the ghost of the Braque painting right beside him.

"Answer the question, Neal. What could Rolf hold over your head?"

"Isn't it obvious? Take you or El prisoner."

"Anything else? Remember, that's emerald wine you're drinking. You're merely a dispassionate observer."

"Sorry, it's back to being a Chardonnay." Neal hoped Peter would ease up. Surely he couldn't turn into Lavinia twice in one evening. But Peter had dug in his heels with a look that said he wasn't leaving till he had an answer.

"Anyone who's drunk the amount of emerald wine you have must already be impaired. This won't come back to bite you, I promise you."

Neal took another sip and made an effort. This wasn't him talking. It was someone speaking for him. "Speaking in pure hypotheticals, here's one. Suppose I stole a painting with Klaus, and Rolf has proof that I did it. He could hold it over my head, saying that if I didn't join them, he'd plant evidence that you knew about it and had concealed the theft to protect me."

Peter grudgingly acknowledged the truth to his words. "Do you think that scenario's likely to happen?"
Neal shrugged. "You know that hypothetically I may have committed a lot more art thefts than I told you about."

"Is Ydrus blackmailing you now?"

"No. We're simply engaging in hypotheticals. But I have a question for you. Assume for a moment I had committed that theft and now it had become an issue. Would you want to know about it? And before you answer, remember that this spring just before John Hobhouse interviewed me for the Interpol position, you told me not to make an issue about any crimes I may have committed in my past."

"I did say that." Peter exhaled and thought for a couple of minutes. "A lot has changed since then. That Van Gogh paint-by-numbers painting I'd done as a child that you like teasing me about? That used to be me. Everything within the lines. But the past year has clearly demonstrated that's not always the best policy. Our work with Dean and Sam Winchester has forced me to step out of my comfort zone in so many ways I can't begin to count them. We have to tackle enemies who have gamed the system—Garrett Fowler, Bryan McKenzie, Vincent Adler. Now we have an informant within the Bureau. The old black-and-white Peter Burke is now several shades of gray. And I'm not the only one. Hughes is as well. We discussed last week the necessity of using procedures which formerly would have been considered off limits—Aidan's hack attack of the plastic surgeon's files, Hobhouse's approval of your Doctor Who caper."

"Wait a minute," Neal interrupted. "Are you telling me that Hughes knows about my sneaking into Scima and searching Chapman's office without a warrant?"

Peter chuckled. "I thought that would surprise you. Hughes endorsed the op, although he may never admit it to you. The point I'm trying to make is if you were being pressured because of an incident in your past, I'd want to know about it. I refuse to believe that two smart guys like us couldn't figure out a way to handle it that would keep us both of out of prison and enable us to arrest the bad guy. I'll throw your question back at you. Do you doubt my words? Do you think we'd be aced out?"

"If you discovered I'd committed a crime which I hadn't included in my confession, wouldn't you feel obligated to report me? Would you be able to live with yourself if you didn't?"

Peter fingered his beer glass for a moment. "If you returned the object or explained who had it, and if you hadn't killed anyone in stealing it, then I believe that your efforts over the past year and a half have wiped your slate clean. If something from your past popped up now, we'd find a way, together, to finesse it. But if you don't let me know you're being pressured, Ydrus and Rolf can take full advantage of that and clean your clock with it."

"You say that, but you can't control the actions of others. You can't speak for Hughes or the powers that be at the FBI. If you helped me do something illegal, that would provide Ydrus the ammunition to not only force me out of the FBI but you as well. I can't take that risk. Especially not with the possibility of Kramer being the informant."

"Neal, look me in the eye. You swear you're not being blackmailed?"

"I'm not," Neal said emphatically, but that Braque painting was an albatross around his neck. The longer he went without finding a solution, the more pressure he'd feel to tell Peter. Now with Henry probably captured by Adler the situation was even murkier. The Braque painting could be the bargaining chip they needed to rescue him. And if it came to that, Neal would turn it over in a heartbeat. But so far, there was no indication that would happen. When Fowler had kidnapped Mozzie last spring, Mozzie had planted the idea that Neal didn't know where the painting was.
Under those circumstances would Adler even approach them?

Should Neal go ahead and tell Peter so they could prepare? Neal hadn't answered that question by the time they left the lounge and headed upstairs to their rooms. He'd walked into a trap when he recovered the Braque painting from the church and had barely escaped being caught. Clearly Rolf knew about the painting. Peter had been in Paris, staying with El at the same hotel as Neal. The informant could charge Peter, perhaps El too, with complicity. The only thing that kept them safe was that they could honestly deny any knowledge of what had happened. Peter was no con artist. Asking him to lie to the Bureau would be unconscionable.

And why was he even thinking about the painting now? Henry hadn't been found. Was Adler holding him as his new bargaining chip? But if that were the case, why hadn't Neal heard anything?

There was no point in discussing hypotheticals. They needed to know the truth about Henry. Both he and Peter were exhausted, but Neal didn't think either one would get much sleep. Last May Henry had overcome his fear to search for Neal in the underground labyrinth of Columbia's tunnel network. What was Neal doing to help him? Having drinks in a lounge?

**Adler's Hideout, Argentina. Monday, July 11, 2005.**

After the blow to his head, Henry didn't remember anything till he woke up in Adler's version of solitary confinement. Judging by the length of scruff on his face, probably two days had passed. His cell was empty of furniture. Concrete walls. No windows. He had no way of knowing if it were day or night. A bucket served as his commode. Generous of them.

The air was foul. No ventilation. The only fresh air came in through the cracks of the door.

Henry rattled his chains in frustration. Even Neal wouldn't have been able to free himself. His ankle and wrist manacles appeared to be controlled by USB keys. His ankle chains were bolted to the floor in the center of the room and allowed him to move only about three feet. He could lie down but not much else. The chain separating his wrists was less than a foot long.

A couple of heavyset guards armed with assault rifles had entered four times to drop off a tray containing a bowl of porridge and a few water bottles. He hadn't seen Adler.

He wished he hadn't watched *The Count of Monte Cristo* on TV last month. How long would his beard be before he escaped from his cell? What must his family be thinking? In retrospect, he was willing to acknowledge his plan may have had a few flaws. He wasn't supposed to get caught.

Neal would never let him live it down. Could Henry possibly trick him that he'd deliberately let himself be taken prisoner? But why? Henry could see Neal's teasing face in his mind, mocking him for letting Adler find him. Of all the dumb-ass things Henry had done in his life, this was the dumbest.

Someone had clad him in an old set of worker's coveralls while he was unconscious. Gone were his own clothes, watch, phone, and pen. They must not have wanted to risk he had anything hidden. Clever. Had they found his lock picks?

Think, man. His head was no longer throbbing as much. He'd score himself points for that. Adler hadn't killed him. That qualified for bonus points. Adler couldn't be holding him for ransom. No need, not with all the wealth he'd accumulated. So what was his game? Exchange?

Bingo.
Adler wanted Neal, not Henry. That's why they hadn't killed him. Adler was biding his time. He'd wait till Neal was crazy from worry—if he weren't already—then would send an emissary to meet with him in secret. Who would he send? Fowler? No, Adler was too smart for that. He must know Neal couldn't be swayed by anything Fowler could say. But Kate?

Henry groaned. He'd played right into their hands. Was she already in New York, having arranged a clandestine meeting with her ex-boyfriend? If so, she wouldn't find him. Or would she? When was Neal heading for Comic-Con? Was it Wednesday or Thursday?

The effort to remember was making his head complain. If he only knew what day it was . . . Focus on that. He'd been captured on Saturday. Two days' worth of scruff, so today was Monday or Tuesday. Neal would still be in New York. Kate would wait for him outside June's mansion. Invite him into her car. Drive him to a secluded spot where they could talk.

How would Neal respond? Would he tell Peter? Not likely.

He'd worry Peter would clip his wings. Neal would want to avoid anyone else getting mired in Henry's mess. He'd slip away and offer himself to Adler in exchange for Henry. That's exactly the sort of self-sacrificing, knight-falling-on-his-sword boneheaded gesture Neal would make, trusting in his ability to extricate himself from Adler's clutches later on.

Henry groaned aloud. Enough with the torture. His water bottles were empty. His head was going to crack in two. He wasn't thinking clearly. He was sure he'd been slipping back and forth out of consciousness. Were they drugging his food? How long had he been here? When was Neal going to Comic-Con? Why did . . .

A faint sound coming from outside his door startled him awake. Henry strained his ears. Muffled footsteps. He stared at the door as he heard the soft clicks which he knew meant someone was working the electronic lock.

The door opened. "Kate?" he blurted in amazement. She was wearing safari clothes. She was clean. Her hair was beautiful. She looked like a goddess.

She grimaced as she entered his cell and wrinkled her nose. "God, I didn't know it was this bad."

Henry shrugged. "Just call me the Count. Did you bring air freshener?"

"Something better." She held up a USB key. "You need to get out of here, now." She stooped to unlock his manacles. Henry stared at her, astonished. She really was a goddess.

"Why are you doing this?" Stupid thing to say. Never question a rescuing goddess.

She stood up. "You helped me escape. I owe you." She looked at him seriously with those immense sapphire eyes. No wonder Neal had been so smitten. "I realize you can't have a very high opinion of me, but I'm not a killer. And if you don't leave now, you'll die."

"Come with me," he urged. "Adler will find out and take his revenge on you."

She shook her head adamantly. "I'm leaving with him in three hours. He won't realize you escaped." She looked around the cell. "No windows? You don't even know it's the middle of the night."

"What time is it?"

"A little after two o'clock. At six this morning, we're scheduled to fly out of here. The guards have
orders to blow the house up as soon as the plane takes off. You're to be killed in the explosion, and
I can't have that on my conscience." She reached into a bag and pulled out his phone, watch, wallet,
and pen. They must not have realized the pen was a camera.

"Take these," she said. "You'll need the phone to call for help. You'll have to walk down the road
for a few miles before you'll be able to get a signal."

Henry stood up, rubbing his wrists, as she moved to the door. "Wait. Before you go . . . is Adler
looking for a U-boat? Do you know anything about a stockpile of paintings looted by the Nazis?"

She hesitated then shook her head. "I've helped you all I can. Be satisfied with that."

"But you're an artist yourself. Neal told me how much you love Raphael. Will you let Adler profit
off war crimes?"

"It's not like that," she insisted but Henry was certain she wasn't totally convinced. He couldn't let
this opportunity escape. The urgency of the situation erased all the cobwebs that had clogged his
brain.

"Let us recover the art and restore the paintings to those who were violated so many decades ago,"
he urged. "You know it's the right thing to do. This is not a shipment of ordinary stolen goods but
priceless masterpieces."

She didn't reply, but he kept quiet. He knew he had her. Finally, pursing her lips, she nodded. "I
don't know that much about it, but it's enough to make me sick. Vincent's obsessed with dreams of
lost treasure. It's destroying any chance for happiness." She paused a moment. "I'll do it for his
sake. He's had the information for years and hasn't been able to take it anywhere."

"What do you know?"

Her eyes darted to the door as she listened for a moment. "Vincent's father, Wilhelm, served in the
U-boat shipyards during the war. Wilhelm heard from a friend who was working with looted art in
Paris—I think the last name is Huber—that a shipment of valuable paintings had been placed on a
U-boat bound for Argentina. The U-boat developed engine trouble and sank somewhere off the
Atlantic Seaboard. According to the last reports, the hull was still intact. Huber asked Wilhelm if
he knew anything about fractals being used in U-boat antennas."

"And that's all Adler has to go on?" he asked incredulously. "He had no hard evidence?"

"I'm telling you the truth," she insisted. "Vincent bought a marine salvage company to search for
the sub. He tried to win Neal back just based on this rumor. I told you he was obsessed."

Kate was growing increasingly uneasy, her voice barely audible. She kept casting furtive glances to
the door. Henry knew he wouldn't be able to keep her for long, but she couldn't leave yet. There
had to be more.

"Why was he interested in Neal?"

She shrugged. "Adler's a financier, not an art expert. He realized he'd need help to sell the works.
Neal was the ideal choice. Then everything changed a few months ago. Did you hear about the
Nazi ruins they discovered not far from here?"

"Yeah, I attended the press conference about it."

"Adler visited the site about a month before its discovery. I don't know what he found, but it was
something that made him convinced that the key to solving the location of the U-boat is in a painting by Georges Braque, *Violin and Candlestick.*" Her eyes flitted toward the door and she whispered anxiously, "Did you hear something?"

"No, keep talking."

"Vincent's been trying to buy it. He's so fixated on finding the lost art that he's no longer the man I fell in love with. If he obtains the painting, maybe he'll at last realize he's been pursuing a pipe dream." She strode over to the door and listened for a moment. "Vincent thinks Neal knows where it is. He asked me about it, but Neal never mentioned anything about a Braque to me. Vincent heard that the painting was somewhere in Paris and has put out feelers through fences." She looked at Henry pleadingly. "When you see Neal, ask him about it. If he can locate the painting, he'd be rewarded handsomely and perhaps then the Vincent I fell in love with will return to me."

"Why does he believe Neal knows about it?"

"He heard a rumor that Neal had stolen it."

"I'll ask him," Henry promised, "but how can he contact you?"

"Tell him to let the fences in Paris know. Vincent will hear through them." She placed a hand on his arm. "I have to go. Give me about ten minutes before you leave. You're on the ground floor next to the garage. Be careful outside. Guards patrol the perimeter." She glanced at her watch. "You have over two hours. Plenty of time to be out of the area before the explosion goes off. Good luck."

Henry tried once more to convince her to go with him, but she refused. She wouldn't tell him where they were going and pleaded for him to stop chasing them.

After she left, Henry stretched his muscles. Why was she helping him? Was it as she said or a trap? Either way, he'd take advantage of it. The question was how much was true. Neal never mentioned any personal knowledge of the Braque, but that didn't mean anything. He never talked about the items he stole in Europe.

Henry thought back on their conversations about the painting, Neal's trip to Paris . . .

When he left his cell, the house was quiet just as Kate had said. He passed several closed rooms. Did they contain the equipment to make Hitler clones as Mozzie believed? He refused to take the time to find out.

He snuck into the garage then outside. A few dim security lights. No guards that he could see. He'd have to chance staying on the road which led to the security gate. It was too dark to risk making his way through the forest. Once he was close to the gate, he should be far enough from the house to be safe from the explosion. He could hide out in the bushes and wait for dawn to climb over the gate.

Henry crept along the edge of the house to the road. The sounds of the rainforest at night were creepy. Night monkeys, insects, low growls. Was that a jaguar? Something else? He'd been warned about caimans. Were they out at night? And then there were snakes to worry about. Damn. What he'd give for a flashlight . . . If he stayed to the center of the road, he could—

"¡Alto!"

Henry dove into the bushes as shots rang out.
Notes: Henry had helped Kate flee the country in Caffrey Disclosure, and now she's returned the favor. Does she have an ulterior motive? Is she acting on her own or did Adler plan the escape? If Henry weren't so preoccupied, he'd be puzzling that out.

Last week I mentioned the influence of Caffrey Disclosure on this story, but Penna's story By the Book plays an even more pivotal role, particularly for Neal and Peter. The conversation they had in the lounge would have been very different if they hadn't gone through the experiences in By the Book. I wrote about it for our blog. The post is called "Peter & Neal at the Crossroads: By the Book, Take Two."

Sorry to leave you with a cliffhanger! I'll try to make up for it by posting two chapters next week. The ending of Chapter 7: Quicksand may leave you scratching your head for answers so you can continue straight on to Chapter 8: Remember.

Thanks for reading!

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Nocturne in Black and Gold board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon
San Francisco. Tuesday, July 12, 2005.

Peter awoke early on Tuesday morning in spite of having gone to bed late. He could make the excuse that he was still on Eastern time, but he knew that wasn't the cause. With Henry still missing, no one was getting much rest. When he went down to the coffee shop, he found Neal already there, reading a newspaper over breakfast.

Peter joined him at the table. "You couldn't sleep either?"

Neal dismissed the idea with a flip of his hand. "Noelle texted me this morning. Since she wasn't allowed to go with the delegation, she and Joe are waiting it out in Buenos Aires. Joe is researching options for relocating to a town close to where Henry was last seen. The best facilities may be in Brazil, but since they need to work with Argentinian officials, they'll probably stay put for now."

"I got a text from Joe. Noelle's frantic with worry, and he's not in much better shape. Will you be able to focus today? I can handle the morning presentations if you'd rather stay here."

"Thanks, but the hotel would probably evict me for wearing their carpet out from pacing. The presentations will give me something to do."

Peter wouldn't argue with him. Staying busy was the best policy for both of them. "My inbox has been filling up with demands from museums on how to beef up their off-site security."

Neal drained the last of his coffee and beckoned to the waiter for a refill. "I assume you saw the email from Travis? The Getty Museum discovered several valuable works are missing from their off-site security warehouse. They only have a rough idea of when the thefts occurred. It sounds like we may have an epidemic on our hands."

Peter seized on the thefts as something productive they both could focus on. Niggling at the back of his mind was the conversation they'd had the previous night. Neal, distracted by worry, had as much as admitted there was something in his past that could be used as a weapon against him. Peter suspected he could have pressured him to cough it up but decided not to take advantage of Neal's vulnerability. He hoped he wouldn't regret giving Neal a period of grace to admit it on his own. Once Henry was found, Peter intended to return to the subject. And next time, there would be no leniency. The time for secrets was long past.

The sound of Neal's cell phone buzzing broke into Peter's thoughts.

Neal stared at his phone a moment and took a breath. Glancing up at Peter, he said, "It's Noelle." As he answered, he put the phone on speaker.

"Sweetie, I just heard from the team in the field." Noelle's voice sounded strained. Peter braced himself for what might come and he could tell Neal was as well.

Neal explained that Peter was listening, too.

"I'm glad you're together. I'm afraid we don't have a resolution yet. The delegation arrived at the estate an hour ago, only to discover that the house was a smoldering ruin. The employees who live on the estate said that it caught fire around seven in the morning. They were able to put out the blaze but not before the house had burned to the ground. The landowner, Eduardo Cardenas, was reported to have died in the inferno. We don't know if Henry was in the house or not. Nobody
knows anything about him." Her voice broke at the end. Peter could hear Joe's voice comforting her in the background.

Joe then got on the phone to explain that a team from Win-Win along with their local partners was working with the national police on the site. The investigation had just begun and they hoped to have more news later in the day.

When Joe ended the call, Peter reached over and turned off Neal's phone. He'd clasped his hands in front of his face and was staring motionless at the table.

"Don't jump to any conclusions," Peter warned.

"I'm not. This sounds like the same stunt Adler pulled with the private plane that Kate and her father were on. The plane exploded over Argentina, but most likely they'd already parachuted to safety."

Peter had heard Neal make that assertion before, but he was also aware there was absolutely no evidence to substantiate Neal's conviction that Kate was still alive.

"I refuse to believe Adler and Henry died in the fire," Neal continued. "Henry's much too valuable a bargaining chip."

Peter didn't try to dissuade him, nor did he try to force him to stay at the hotel. It would be better for both of them to be together, and Peter wanted to be present when the next call came.

They had forty participants—both FBI agents and museum representatives—for the morning presentations and no one would have suspected anything was wrong. Peter took the lead, and Neal assisted on the Q and A sessions. Neal was particularly helpful in describing the off-site security issues they'd discovered. Both of them were keeping their emotions firmly in check.

Peter was in the midst of reviewing the history of Azathoth's malware when the call came. At the buzz of his cell phone, Neal excused himself and left the room to answer it. Peter quickly wrapped up his comments and called a fifteen-minute break.

An office had been set aside for their use next to the conference room. Peter entered it to find Neal standing by the window with his back to him. At the sound of the door opening, he turned around, a smile spreading across his face.

"Good news I take it?" Peter asked, striding over.

He nodded. "Not the best, but acceptable. Henry was shot in the shoulder. He lost a good deal of blood but the doctors believe he'll make a full recovery. They found him near the road by the barrier. Apparently he'd hidden in thick undergrowth to escape detection, but that also made it difficult to find him. Henry had passed out, but came to when he heard voices. He was able to call out to alert them of his location."

"Was he able to give any details of his capture?"

"Just that it was Adler in the house, and Kate was there as well. He didn't see Fowler. Noelle and Joe are on the way to the airport now."

Peter offered to finish the morning presentations so Neal could communicate the news about Henry to the rest of the team. By the time of the midafternoon briefing with New York, other matters
were front and center. At the top of the agenda was the authorization by Hughes to monitor all communications coming in and out of D.C. Art Crimes. Travis was in charge of the project with Aidan greenlighted to assist him.

"Hughes secured the permission of the assistant director in record time," Jones said. "Since the targets are employees, the legal footing is sound."

"I talked with Aidan about it earlier in the day," Travis said. "And he's already started to work on it. It's possible he'll have something in place before he flies out to California tomorrow."

"What have you found out about Katja Visser?" Peter asked.

"Her background checks out," Diana said. "She's single, has worked for Scima for the past seven years in Amsterdam. So far we haven't found anything that raised a flag."

"Marta could have taken Katja's place like Rolf did with Chapman," Neal argued. "He went undetected for years."

Peter agreed with him. "The most likely opportunity for a switch would have been when Katja was transferred to California."

"Katja arrived two months ago," Travis supplied. "That means the plastic surgery would have had to be done no later than April. March, more likely. Richard believes she wouldn't have needed much work done, but it takes time for the bruises to disappear."

"Marta was photographed at Scima's campus outside London on the morning Peter was attacked," Jones noted. "That was on May 26. She must have already had the surgery, but someone else could have been made up to look like her."

"Or it could have been Marta herself," Neal pointed out. "She might have enjoyed recreating her former appearance with makeup."

They agreed to have one more conference call the next day from Los Angeles. Neal was looking forward to telling Mozzie that Aidan had been given the okay to hack Art Crimes. It was just as well that Mozzie wasn't attending Comic-Con. He would have badgered Aidan to broaden the hack to include not just that unit. The Kennedy assassination, the rumored X-Files unit, the moon landing—all would be fair game to his conspiracy-wired brain.

The afternoon workshops were a haze, brought on by jubilation over Henry plus mind-numbing fatigue from lack of sleep. All the practicing must have paid off because everyone seemed pleased, Peter included. Neal was glad no one had recorded him. When Peter asked him about a point he'd made, he couldn't even remember having spoken about it.

Noelle phoned in an update as they prepared to leave for the airport. Henry was still on track for a full recovery, but there had been a complication. He'd acquired an infection that would keep him in the hospital longer than they'd originally anticipated. He was being flown to a nearby private hospital. Noelle hoped he'd be well enough to return home next Saturday. Neal got the distinct impression that when Noelle said home, she meant her home in Baltimore. How long would she be able to ground him?

Henry currently had a reprieve from the inevitable lectures because of the infection. He was running a fever and in no condition to be interviewed about what had taken place. There was still no sign of Adler resurfacing anywhere.

Neal dozed on the flight to Los Angeles. Peter, who normally never slept on the plane, did as well.
When they got to their hotel they both headed to their rooms. If he'd been home, Neal would have crashed for twenty-four hours straight.

Mozzie's call at nine o'clock in the evening woke him up. When he heard what his man in France had to say, it was worth losing an hour of sleep. After a picnic and an excursion through the countryside, Mlle. Souchon confirmed that the mathematician Paul Lévy had served with the French Resistance. Over a five-star dinner and two bottles of Chateau Margaux, Mozzie struck pay dirt. Lévy had invented a code based on fractal equations that was used for vital communications between members of the Resistance. Mozzie was now convinced that the sheet of equations they'd found in Huber's safe was a coded message which, once decrypted, would supply the location of the looted artworks.

With Henry safe, the conference call on the next day was filled with jubilant conjectures over what the coded message would reveal. Jones and Travis were convinced that another part of the code resided in the Braque painting. Neal knew they were building fantasy castles on quicksand. If the painting contained a hidden message, he would have discovered it. That he couldn't tell his friends was a bitter pill to swallow.

Diana further stoked the speculation flames when she daydreamed about what Henry might have discovered in Adler's hideout. Neal was glad only Travis and Peter were in the room with him when she brought it up. Their attention was on the speaker phone, not on Neal, and that was one discussion he let the others take the lead on.

Neal had been focused on Henry, not the evidence. Diana's questions shocked him out of his euphoria. Did Adler have proof of Neal's involvement with the painting? Henry was too ill to be questioned, but that wouldn't last. Neal knew that if he'd discovered something, he wouldn't betray Neal. But was Neal's carefully constructed Braque castle also rapidly sinking into quicksand?

WCWCWCWCWCWCWC

Three days of presentations under his belt, Henry rescued and recovering in a hospital... by the end of the afternoon workshop Peter was more than ready to kick back at Comic-Con. He and Neal had brought their bags to the field office. Travis suggested they change into their masked bee t-shirts and jeans before Richard picked them up. Peter was glad to comply. Neal had been quieter than normal after the conference call. Peter suspected he was experiencing a delayed reaction to the stress over Henry. A little Comic-Con madness was just what the doctor called for.

When they exited the building, Richard was already parked at the curb. He'd rented an SUV for their adventure so they'd have enough space to stash their gear. They'd tried to leave early enough to escape the worst of the traffic, but it seemed that half of L.A. had the same destination in mind. Richard warned that the drive to San Diego—two hours in light traffic—could easily take twice as long. No matter. Neal and Richard had brought along enough music to last to Mexico City.

Richard got everyone in the mood by playing the soundtrack to Aidan's video. Neal, who was riding with Peter in the back, started snapping his fingers and swaying back and forth to the music. If there'd been enough room, he would have been dancing. Before long, Peter was moving to the beat along with him. Travis tapped a lively drumbeat on the dashboard. Peter wished El could have been along for the road trip.

"What's the news about Henry?" Richard asked.

"I spoke with him this morning," Neal said. "Or attempted to. He's still running a fever and loopy from all the drugs they've got him on. The gunshot wound was a clean through and through but that virus he picked up was a nasty one. Noelle said he'll have another day of misery. They're
tentatively planning to fly to Baltimore on Saturday."

"Have you heard anything from Aidan?" Peter asked.

Richard nodded as he hummed to "Road Trippin' " by the Red Hot Chili Peppers. "He and Keiko arrived this morning. When I talked with them, they were heading to the convention center to set up the display for tomorrow."

"The video will be part of a presser about up-and-coming talents," Travis added. "There will be a panel from Scima as well as reps from some of the biggest names in special effects studios. In addition to Yellowface, four other works will be discussed. It's a huge honor."

"Aidan would be impressed by how high tech the operation is at Scima," Richard said. "I can't begin to guess the purpose of some of the equipment they use. They even have a top-secret virtual reality lab for working on cutting-edge technology. Ian warned me about the security precautions. It's off limits to everyone except a select few."

"Does Katja have access?" Peter asked.

"I don't know. The lab wasn't included during my orientation tour. I've just gleaned a few snippets about it, and they were mainly warnings to stay away. The tour guide explained that studios have been known to try to steal each other secrets. With the vast amounts of money invested in films and games, I guess it can get pretty ruthless."

"Katja hasn't approached Richard since he turned down the offer," Travis added while he slapped a dashboard drumbeat to "Beverly Hills" by Weezer.

"Will she attend Comic-Con?" Neal asked.

"I checked her schedule," Richard said, "and she's slated to be on a panel discussing 3-D animation on Saturday. She wasn't originally, but management decided they wanted a more robust presence."

Travis turned his head to face Peter. "Did you hear Keiko's brother works in anime and is interested in commercializing the video?"

"Neal told me." Peter nudged Neal. "Your voice as Yellowface will be heard by all those bigshots. I hope you're not thinking of changing careers?"

He smirked happily. "They can make me an offer."

"They may have to wait in line," Richard commented. "David Tennant and Billie Piper will be there as well. I bet they'll remember you from the Doctor Who set in London. David will grab you to be a stunt double, if the booth babes haven't snatched you first."

Peter looked at his watch. "My own booth babe's arriving at the San Diego airport now." He glanced at the bumper-to-bumper traffic and sighed. "I wish I'd brought along a police siren to pop on top of the car and clear a lane."

"El will have unpacked by the time you get to the hotel," Neal said. "She'll be rested and ready to greet you with a cold beer. We're going out on the town tonight. You two are welcome to join us."

Peter thought a moment. It was tempting, but after being apart for several days, he had no desire to share El their first night. "Can I take a rain check?"

"Smart man," Neal said, "I'd be doing the same if I were in your place."
As Peter gazed at the excited, happy faces in the car, he suppressed the urge to give them yet another lecture to be careful. They'd already heard it. *No wandering off alone. Keep cellphones charged at all times. Be alert to anything or anyone suspicious.*

He wished he felt confident that their measures were sufficient. Tricia's warning continued to play loud in his ears. He'd made arrangements with the hotel to have all their rooms grouped close together on the same floor. The FBI office in San Diego had placed additional surveillance cameras in the hallway outside their rooms.

Comic-Con was supposed to be a relaxing vacation. Peter wished his gut wasn't acting like he was entering a war zone instead.

**WCWCWCWCWCWCWC**

It was official. Neal had caught it. He'd missed the early symptoms, but now that Henry was recovering, Neal could feel his own fever raging. And not just him but Aidan, Keiko, Richard, and Travis as well. An epidemic of Comic-Con fever was sweeping through San Diego.

Keiko's cousin Toma had supplied them with invitations to a party his company was hosting. Hotaru was one of the biggest names in anime in Japan. They were into comic books, cartoons, film productions, and gaming. Aidan described it as the anime equivalent to Scima.

Over drinks they discussed the video with Toma. Keiko hadn't overstated his interest in *Yellowface.* He'd already scheduled an interview with some of Hotaru's reps. Toma wanted them all to attend. He believed there was a real possibility his company would want to develop the adventures of the bee avenger into a commercial product. The interview would take place that afternoon in one of the huddle rooms reserved for professional use.

It was perhaps for the best that Mozzie, in his dual capacity of lawyer and screenwriter, wasn't present for the initial talks. Hotaru might not have the proper appreciation for the costume he would have undoubtedly worn for Comic-Con.

When they left the party, they returned to the convention center which was open for previewing by presenters. Toma got them into the Japanese screening room for a crash course in what the latest trends were in Japan. Afterward they hit the video games.

It had been a long time since Neal had played a Jedi knight and he'd never faced off against Aidan with lightsabers, but there were several *Star Wars* video games where they could live out their fantasies. *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* was the most popular. It featured a multiplayer mode where they could fight endless waves of enemies. They decided to make an impromptu tournament of it where the six of them—Richard, Travis, Aidan, Toma, Keiko, and Neal—could mix it up.

Neal and Aidan were expert fencers. Neal fully expected they would emerge victorious even though they were using controllers rather than blades. Toma, on the other hand, worked in the gaming world. He was an unknown foe. Richard was a novice fencer but might have picked up some gaming tricks at Scima. Neal felt fairly confident that Travis as a peace-loving Vulcan wouldn't pose much of a threat.

But when the pulsating buzz of lightsabers faded away and the guns stopped firing, there was only one champion left to jubilantly twirl the blade—Keiko. Who knew?

Aidan's girlfriend clobbered them all, and embarrassing as it was to admit, surprisingly effortlessly. How could such a sweet-looking girl be such a maniac with a blade? Travis was the only one who
came halfway close to approaching her skill. Plainly Neal needed to practice on his controller technique before engaging in another death match.

"What's your secret?" he asked her afterward.

She smiled mischievously. "Did I forget to mention I grew up on Final Fantasy games?"

"Keiko was kicking my butt when she was five," Toma added ruefully. "I bet she can still name all the swords."

"Let's see—Flame Sword, Vorpal, Mythril, Wyrmkiller, but my favorite ones are the katanas."

"I've been trying to persuade her to take up fencing," Aidan said, slinging an arm over her shoulders, "but so far she's resisted. She's probably worried she'll put me to shame."

"Hardly!" she said, giving a laugh. "As Neal just demonstrated, expertise in one area doesn't translate to the other. Actually I was considering it, but Neal's cousin Angela and I have already made plans for something else which will take up our Saturday mornings."

"You haven't mentioned anything about this to me," Aidan complained. "What have you two been scheming?"

"All in due time," she said. The tease in Keiko was coming out loud and clear. She was beginning to remind Neal of a certain firecracker he knew.

The next day was for Yellowface, the Masked Avenger. They would be in the audience for Aidan's video and meet with Hotaru. They'd take part in the games, the demos, and hoopla that defined Comic-Con. Richard had finagled invitations for them to all go to a Scima-sponsored cocktail party that evening at the Rooftop Bar of the Hard Rock Hotel. Everyone hoped they'd feel like celebrating.

And by the time the evening rolled around, they did.

El and Peter had left the convention early to hold a table for them at the cocktail party. When Neal and his fellow bee avengers walked in, Peter rose to wave them over.

"First round's on me!" Aidan called out happily.

Richard nudged him. "You know Scima's providing the drinks, right?" Waiters proved his point by coming over with serving trays of wine, beer, and martinis.

When everyone had a drink, the toasts began. Never had one bee been cheered so much by one group of people.

"Don't keep us in suspense," El said. "What's the latest from Hotaru?"

Aidan's grin spoke it all. "Toma called me an hour ago. The company wants to explore an option to develop it as a cartoon series for Japanese TV. They'll propose it when they return home. Toma expects they'll commission a thirty-minute version for a formal presentation. If the video goes over as well as Toma predicts, we could have the contract for the longer version by the end of the summer."

"They were quite taken with the name of the hero," Travis said. "As you know, yellowface has been used as a derogatory term against Asians. The video uses it to reference the yellow-faced bee, a species threatened with extinction. Hotaru liked the idea that Yellowface takes a physical feature
and converts it to a positive."

Neal nodded. "The Bee Avenger has made it a badge of honor. Hotaru thinks he can be an excellent role model for someone who is proud of his identity and doesn't let himself be bullied."

"Mozzie will be very busy looking over papers," Keiko said, raising her glass to him. "Not only is Hotaru interested in having Aidan continue to be involved with the project, but they'd also like to speak with the scriptwriter."

Peter raised a brow. "For our shadow-dweller, that could present issues." He turned to Neal. "Has he already begun work on a new identity?"

"He will as soon as he hears about it," Neal predicted. "For now, Keiko calls him Hachimitsu-san. Hachimitsu means honey. I wouldn't be surprised if Mozzie wants to keep it as his nom de plume."

Later in the evening, Toma stopped by their table. Aidan introduced him to El and Peter, and pulled over a chair for him to join their group. Toma was almost as excited about the video as they were and had several suggestions to make, including additional sword play and more female characters.

In the original video they'd considered including damselflies as an insect version of Amazon warriors, but the shortness of the video precluded their use. Assuming Aidan would receive the commission to make the presentation version, he'd now be able to develop the concept. Richard had already drawn the damselfly prototypes and recommended that Keiko take over the artistic reins for the project as they moved forward. With her knowledge of Japanese tastes and gaming, she made the ideal partner for Aidan, not only for love but work as well.

When Neal returned to his room, he texted Mozzie the news so Hachimitsu-san could begin work on his scriptwriter alias as well as the additional scenes which might be needed.

Aidan's future was beginning to look as promising as when they'd daydreamed about it in Aidan's studio a couple of weeks ago. He had an appointment to meet with Scima recruiters the next morning. Richard's boss, Ian Forster, had offered to give Aidan some pointers before the interview.

Neal's future was looking equally bright. Henry was improving daily. They were closer than ever to exposing the Ydrus informant. Between his frustrations over the Braque and his breakup with Fiona, June had been a difficult month. Neal was glad to put it behind him.

He checked his watch. It was late morning in Paris. Fiona was at work, but she could take a few minutes off to hear the news . . .

He and Fiona must have spent thirty minutes on the phone. His phone bill would be outrageous but he didn't care. They had their best talk since the breakup. She'd been on pins and needles about what kind of reception Aidan's video would receive. She and Richard had written the music, and she deserved to know how complimentary Hotaru had been about it. It was possible some of it would be included in a commercial version. Fiona also had news to share. Sara had told her she'd be coming to New York for an assignment.

For the next two days Neal would be on vacation. It would be hard to top the day's events, but he intended to give it his best effort. In the afternoon he'd been able to introduce Peter to David Tennant and Billie Piper. David remembered Neal—even asked if he was still interested in being a stunt double. Neal was sure Peter suspected Neal had embellished his adventure in London, but he couldn't now. Travis had even recorded their conversation so Neal could show it to Henry.
Everyone planned to return to Comic-Con the next day. Saturday Neal intended to be a tourist in San Diego. El had mentioned wanting to visit the zoo and SeaWorld. Neal had targeted the Museum of Art. They'd fly back on the same plane to New York midday on Sunday.

It seemed like he'd just fallen asleep when someone knocked on his door. Rubbing his eyes, he glanced at the clock. Three in the morning? Was there a fire?

Before he could stumble out of bed, the door swung open. Two cops accompanied by a man in plain clothes strode into the room and turned on the lights.

For a second he simply stared at them. "What's this—?"

"Neal Caffrey, we have a warrant to place you under arrest for the theft of a painting in Paris, France on June 1, 2005." As the cops read him his rights, Neal's brain froze. He was in a t-shirt and sleep pants. They didn't allow him to change but let him put shoes on. Stripped him of his watch. Confiscated his phone.

He tried to get their permission to speak with Peter, but they refused, claiming he could make a call later from the police station.

They handcuffed him and hustled him out of the room, declining to give any more details about what he'd been charged with. On the ride down in the service elevator, Neal raced through the events in early June. That date was when he'd recovered the Braque painting from the church in Paris. Had Rolf made his move? What evidence did he have against Neal? Had he sent a video to Kramer?

The elevator had no other people. They rode straight down to the garage level. As the cops marshaled him into the waiting patrol car, he found out why they hadn't let him call Peter. He was already sitting in the backseat of a second patrol car. And not just him. El was there, as well.

WCWCWCWCWCWCWC

"Almost done, bro. I only need to tape the dressing in place then you can relax."

Neal grimaced at the pressure on his back. He was lying on his side on the bed. The art on the wall did little to alleviate the pain. Why was it a Whistler painting? *Nocturne in Black and Gold*—not exactly a typical subject for a bedroom. Did someone have a dark sense of humor? He focused on the fireworks in the painting, trying to block out the discomfort. But he couldn't suppress a grunt when the pressure intensified. The wound splintered into sparks of colors, making him cry out. He flashed back to the prison. Falling into the SUV . . . the bullet tearing into his back—

"Sorry. Clumsy of me. The tape wouldn't stick. Just one more. You're almost done."

Who was that voice? He felt he should recognize it, but his brain was congealed. Aspic. Who'd said his mind was aspic? As the pain intensified, it paralyzed all his thoughts. He gripped onto the edge of the mattress to ride it out.

"Hey, deep breaths, remember. I can't have you hyperventilating on me. Relax, Neal."

He forced himself to comply. The command was an imperative he couldn't disobey. Suddenly, the pressure stopped and with it the torment. He felt his t-shirt being pulled down over the dressing.

"Hey, deep breaths, remember. I can't have you hyperventilating on me. Relax, Neal."

He forced himself to comply. The command was an imperative he couldn't disobey. Suddenly, the pressure stopped and with it the torment. He felt his t-shirt being pulled down over the dressing.

A hand lightly gripped his shoulder for a moment. A low chuckle. "That wasn't so bad was it? After all the times I've done this, I think my technique is actually quite good. You should address me as Nurse Nightingale. Hold on while I rearrange your pillows."
The mattress shifted as he rose. Neal heard the soft slaps of pillows being plumped. Strong hands gripped his shoulders and eased him back onto the pillows. "The painkiller will kick in before long. Concentrate on your breathing. It will help."

Neal stared at the muscular fingers on his shoulder. Blunt nails. Low music was playing from a CD player on the dresser. Schubert's *Huttenbrenner Variations*. He turned his head. "Klaus!"

"You recognized me!" Klaus broke into a wide grin as he stepped around the bed. "That's excellent. The doctor said you would, but I wasn't convinced." He pulled up a chair close to the bed and sat where Neal didn't have to turn his head to see him.

"But . . . you're dead!"

He winced. "Not that again. Come on, bro. Use those brain cells. We've already gone over this many times. You know what happened. Try to remember." He fixed his gaze on Neal, his eyes boring into him. "Remember."

As Neal thought, slowly small fragments emerged, each one crystal-sharp. Shards of glass lacerating his consciousness. The prison . . . Peter . . . A wave of nausea swept over him as the images of Peter came back. The attack . . . His head . . . The infirmary. Klaus, dressed as an orderly, spiriting him away from prison . . . The escape. Gunfire . . . so many guns . . . El.

Klaus nodded with satisfaction. "It's starting to come back to you, isn't it?"

"You told me what happened . . . how many days ago was that?"

"Months, not days, bro. And I've been repeating it ever since. I kept telling myself that if you heard it often enough, your memory would eventually return. Don't stress over it. The doctor said it was natural after what you've been through. You're still suffering from the effects of the skull fracture." Klaus was speaking slowly, allowing extra time for Neal to process his words. His voice was warm and reassuring. Neal could rest. Klaus would take care of everything.

"It's still January, right?"

"January 25 to be precise. It's a good sign that you remember."

"The memories are coming back in jagged bits," Neal said after a moment. "Impressions really."

"For a man who had near total amnesia, you've made a remarkable comeback. The doctor suspected that you were blocking them out because they were too painful. As you regain your strength, your mind—just like your body—will make a full recovery."

Neal sorted through the questions. "Is Peter still in prison?" He braced himself, dreading to hear Klaus's answer.

"I wish I had better news but the court denied his appeal."

"But I don't understand. The evidence wasn't sufficient. No one's found the painting." Neal scanned his face anxiously.

Klaus hesitated, his face growing grim.

"It was found? Where?"

He nodded. "In the gun safe at his home. Kramer must have planted it. With evidence like that
against him, Peter had no chance for an appeal. Hughes spoke against him in court. I still have the
ewspaper account if you want to read it."

"Maybe later." The horror of Peter's situation came back in full force. Those images of him
sharpened into a clarity that seared his brain, and with them the sense of hopelessness and despair.
The accusation of the theft . . . The trial . . . Diana, Jones, and Hughes on the witness stand . . . El . . . God, Elizabeth. What had he done? Neal closed his eyes, attempting to block out the scenes, but it was futile. He only succeeded in making them more vivid.

"I should let you rest," Klaus said, starting to stand up. "We'll talk later."

Neal reached over to grab his arm, hissing as the pain erupted once more.

"Hey, careful!" Klaus quickly pressed him back on the pillows. "No sudden movements. You're not ready for that."

"Don't leave me." He was flailing, desperately searching for anything to cling to. Klaus was the only thing solid in the maelstrom he'd been swept into. "Please . . ."

Klaus resumed his seat and waited quietly for Neal to get himself under control again, letting him remember on his own. Slowly he collected his thoughts, swallowing down the bile. Kramer, the Bureau—they had been conspiring against him for months. The frames, the traps they'd set for Neal and Peter—copying Azathoth. Neal looked up at Klaus. "Rolf is alive."

"That's right."

"You didn't tell me in Geneva because you didn't trust me."

He shook his head firmly. "That's not true. Rolf and I had already planned to go into partnership before I met you. I wanted to go ahead and tell you, but Rolf hadn't met you. He worried that you were too young. And if you recall when we first met in Parma, you were spiraling out of control. Keller was dragging you into the gutter with him."

Neal waved his hand in acknowledgement. Klaus was right. Neal didn't blame him for not letting him know about Rolf. Who would have trusted Neal in those days?

"I got Rolf to agree to give you a two-year apprenticeship then we'd bring you in as a full partner."

Klaus shrugged. "Then Berlin happened. You thought I killed a man, and you ran off."

"Can you ever forgive me?"

"Of course." He brushed Neal's hair back off his forehead. "It's understandable that you reacted the way you did. You abhor violence, and I admire that in you. Lucien had us both fooled. By the time I'd discovered that he was the killer, you'd already fled. I'm glad you finally understand what really happened."

All this time Neal had blamed Klaus. How could he have been so wrong? Klaus could never be a murderer. When he explained how their crew member had deceived them—planting the evidence to make it appear that Klaus had fired the gun—Neal had been appalled at how he'd unjustly accused his friend. All those years, the bitterness, they were unnecessary. Klaus's attempts to mitigate the pain, claiming it had all worked out, were of little comfort. He never should have left Klaus. Peter and El would have led happy lives if only he hadn't intruded upon them.

Klaus tapped on Neal's arm to get his attention. "I'd hoped that I could fill you in on what really happened when I saw you in New York. I intended to tell you about Rolf. But it was quickly
evident you were being monitored by the FBI. They were forcing you to be their tool." He paused for a moment, taking a breath. "I'm sorry I had to deceive you at the Met, but you left me no choice. If I could have spared you from witnessing what you thought was my death, I would have. You know that, right?"

Neal nodded. "Kramer was working with Ydrus. They kidnapped Peter at Scima Workshop . . . Tried to kill him."

Klaus nodded with approval. "That's right. From what you told me, if you and Chapman hadn't figured it out, Peter would have died. They planned to frame Azathoth for the crime just like the Czech detective."

Neal struggled to keep his eyes open. The painkiller was kicking in. His back no longer hurt, but he was exhausted . . .

Klaus gave a low chuckle. "Enough remembering for one session. You've made a huge improvement. Hold on to that"—he wagged an admonishing finger at him—"and your walker. Next time you get out of bed, don't forget to use it. Remember what happened last time."

"I won't forget."

"Good. Now go ahead and sleep. I'll wake you when dinner's ready. The bouillabaisse is already simmering."

"I can smell it from here," Neal said sleepily.

He closed his eyes and heard Klaus's footsteps recede. He'd left the music on. Rachmaninov's La Folia was playing. That was heist-planning music. Soon he'd be back with Klaus, stealing masterpieces like the Whistler. He knew it would take a while to adjust to the news. Rolf had adopted the mannerisms they'd learned to associate with Azathoth as the means to win Neal back. Klaus and Rolf were trying to save him. They knew the FBI would try to eviscerate him. And they were right . . .

Notes: Is Neal actually back with Klaus? Is Peter in prison? I've gone ahead and posted the next chapter so you can continue reading.

Penna wrote about Neal playing a Jedi knight as a child in her story Written in the Stars. This was her first White Collar fanfic. Although not part of the Caffrey Conversation AU, much of what happens could easily fit. It's a bittersweet what-if which I recommend highly.

When Neal wakes up in Klaus's townhouse, he wonders about aspic. That was a comment Klaus's ex-wife Chantal made in Echoes of a Violin. She joked that Klaus believed that playing rock music would turn Neal's brain to aspic. Neal met David Tennant and Billie Piper in the same story.

Aidan's video, Yellowface, the Masked Avenger, is the result of an idea which wouldn't stop growing and still has potential. I've written about it for our blog: Yellowface, the Adventures of a Bee Plot Bunny.

Many thanks to Penna for her beta help and creative plot-bunny taming. Neal and Peter's long history with road trips began in earnest in By the Book, although they also had a short road trip in her second story in the series, Choirboy Caffrey. She wrote about them for our blog in a post called Road Trips with Peter and Neal.
Thanks for reading! Your comments often provide bunnies too. An idea by MoonFaith on FanFiction provided inspiration for Azathoth's current machinations.

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Nocturne in Black and Gold board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon
New additions include scenes from Comic-Con and the road trip music
Remember

When Neal awoke, the pain in his back was barely noticeable. He could hear Klaus whistling in the kitchen. The clock on the bedside table said five o'clock, and his stomach was telling him it was time to eat.

He sat up gingerly. The pain from his wound had subsided to a dull ache, but he felt lightheaded and disoriented. Klaus had explained the sensations were caused by the medication and should serve as a reminder not to overdo it. Neal sat upright for a couple of minutes before slowly swinging his legs off the bed. Using his hands as leverage, he nudged his body sideways till he could reach the walker. Much as he hated the thought of using it, he couldn't risk another setback.

Standing up was a challenge, but not as painful as when he'd attempted it before. When he was finally upright, he stood panting for a moment, relishing the sensation of being on his feet. Carefully he wheeled the walker into the bathroom. Klaus had rented a brownstone in a Brooklyn neighborhood close to Fort Greene where Peter and Elizabeth used to live. Neal had visited Boerum Hill with them. Together, they'd explored some of the many art galleries. Klaus said he hoped the proximity would help Neal heal. He'd converted the downstairs study into Neal's bedroom since he wasn't able to walk upstairs . . . yet. Klaus told him that once he could make the climb that they'd leave for Europe. Perhaps another three weeks.

The bathroom was old-fashioned like his had been in the loft before June had it remodeled. Neal wondered if June had rented the loft to someone else. A young jazz musician would have been fitting. Neal would no longer play her piano, but Klaus had one in the brownstone. Although Neal wasn't strong enough to stand up to paint, he could sit at the piano and play for short periods. He'd also begun sketching again. Klaus already had quite a collection of drawings he'd made, although he couldn't remember making most of them.

Neal looked at his face in the mirror. His beard made him look like he'd been stranded on a desert island for weeks. Klaus said it made a good disguise but he was sick of it. He took a pair of scissors to whack at it and then applied a razor. The final effect wasn't quite as slovenly. Besides, he didn't need a full beard as a disguise. With his gaunt face and dark shadows, no one would recognize him.

Klaus stood at the doorway and chuckled. "You're like me. I hated my beard. I'll order a decent beard made for you to wear when we go outside. Dinner's ready. I uncorked a Pouilly Fumé to pair with the bouillabaisse."

He gestured toward the kitchen and let Neal lead the way. He didn't need to hover. Neal wouldn't be breaking the speed limit. His back was voicing strong disapproval of him taking even those few steps into the kitchen. It was difficult not to be discouraged, but Klaus said he was walking much better than before.

Klaus was spoiling Neal with the cuisine he'd been preparing. When he protested, Klaus laughed it off, claiming he needed to have something to do. And there was no doubt that the meals were the highlight of Neal's day.

Neal breathed in the delectable seafood aroma as Klaus helped him ease into a chair. "This smells like Chantal's recipe."

"Your nose is as accurate as ever, bro." He poured him a glass of wine and passed him a slice of hot French bread. "Thanks for telling me about your visit to her last year. I still miss her."
"And she misses you." Neal tasted the soup, relaxing as he swallowed the savory broth. That soup was better than any painkiller. "You told me you hope to reconcile?"

He nodded. "If she'll have me. Look at you and me. We've been able to put our past differences behind us. When she sees us together, she may give me a second chance. You did."

Neal nodded, raising his glass to him. The best decision he'd ever made. "And you're doing the same for me."

Klaus smiled and clinked glasses. "Chantal's bistro will be our first stop when we're in Paris. I know she'll want to keep it, but we should be able to find a way to make it work . . . just like you and I have. Did I ever tell you how she and I met? It was in Parma. We were both attending the opera. It was a performance of The Marriage of Figaro. I took that as an omen."

Neal had never known of the connection with Parma. That had also been where he met Klaus. As they discussed those early days, they switched from speaking German to Italian.

While they ate they discussed their first meeting in Parma. Neal had arrived in Europe a few months earlier and was working jobs with Keller. They'd gone to Parma on a commission job to steal a Correggio at the National Gallery. Neal had taken a break from casing the museum to sketch Leonardo da Vinci's Head of a Woman. Klaus happened to be visiting the museum and struck up a conversation with him. A chance encounter that changed both their lives.

Rachmaninov was playing in the background during their meal. Neal had never enjoyed the music as much as he did now. He didn't think he'd ever want to play his old music again. Why play rock when he could play Rach? Klaus had promised to coach him on the classics.

Their talk flowed from a discussion of Head of a Woman to his own lost love. "From what you've told me about Fiona, we're brothers in broken hearts," Klaus said. "Your difficulties with Fiona resembled mine with Chantal. They wanted to settle down, have families. We wanted to roam the jungle."

"Is there a way to have both?"

"Possibly, but you need to recognize in our line of work we wind up hurting people. We don't want to, but it happens. Isn't it better not to seek a commitment? Keep ourselves free and unencumbered? We won't hurt as many people that way."

Neal nodded absently, his thoughts returning to Peter. Fiona was safe now, out of harm's way. But Peter . . . Neal should have run. Then Peter and Elizabeth would have been safe.

"What's troubling you?" Klaus asked. Not waiting for Neal's response, he added, "It's Peter, isn't it?"

"How can I leave with him in prison? Isn't there anything we can do?"

Klaus put his spoon down as he considered for a moment. "We've talked about this before. I've offered to break him out, but you didn't think he'd agree. Have you changed your mind?"

"If I could speak with him, perhaps I could persuade him. Is there any way you could sneak me in?"

"Possibly." He took a sip of wine while he pondered the idea. "If you're well enough disguised, it could be arranged. But first you'll need to be stronger. I can't send you in with a walker."
Neal eyed the appliance with loathing.

"It won't be forever," Klaus added quietly. "Do you remember our gargoyle game?"

"Where you'd hide objects for me to find in gargoyles? I haven't thought about that in years."

"That's right. We played it in Paris, Geneva—"

"That dragon in Munich!" Neal interrupted. "You bet me I'd never be able to scale the tower to reach it."

"That cost me handsomely," Klaus said with laugh. "You and your dragons. I thought about that incident when I read about you riding the dragon in Diana's story."

Neal lifted a brow at him. "Correction. That was a nightgaunt."

Klaus waggled an admonishing finger at him. "Don't play semantics with me. In that same story the characters speculate how nightgaunts could have given life to the dragon legends. When I read that, I knew you were the one who insisted she include that scene. Neal, the dragon-rider."

He paused when Neal didn't respond. "Don't look that way. Soon you'll be back riding dragons, scaling castles, reaching for the sky. I wasn't going to tell you yet but—"

"Tell me what?" Neal demanded, interrupting.

"I've hidden something for you in a dragon. It's in the dragon gargoyle at Riverside Church."

"On the bell tower?" Neal's mouth dropped. The church was visible from the Columbia campus. The bell tower soared high into the sky. He'd never attempted to climb it, but what an adventure that would be.

"I see how your eyes light up," Klaus said with a smile. "I'm glad I went ahead and told you. You won't have to scale all twenty-two stories, but there is a fair amount of climbing."

His expression grew serious. "I know you'll make a full recovery, even though you doubt it at the moment. Hold on to that thought."

Neal wanted to believe him, but it was hard to be patient. He'd been shot six weeks ago. Shouldn't he be recovered by now? There was nothing for him in New York anymore. He longed to break free. Europe called out to him. The tales of all the heists Klaus had done. The art he'd amassed. That could be his life once more as well. He could taste the desire along with the bouillabaisse. Could he possibly persuade Peter to join him? They could rebuild their lives together. Peter had nothing to hold him to New York now either. His career at the FBI was over. It was time to be reborn, just like Neal. Why should masterpieces languish in museums when Neal could leave expert forgeries behind for the world to enjoy while they reaped the profits? It was so simple. Like reverse mortgages. Nothing illegal about that. The system had used and abused both Neal and Peter. They could thumb their noses at it. Unencumbered from rules and regulations. They could run free. Run . . .

"You need to eat more if you want to recover," Klaus urged. "And don't try to deceive me that you're ready to walk unaided when you're not. Let your last misadventure serve as a reminder. You tried to rush things and now you've set your recovery back. Do as I tell you and it will all work out."

Neal nodded and resumed eating.

Dipping a slice of French bread into the bouillabaisse, Klaus added, "You've been cooped up here
too long. That can't help. Let's go on a drive after dinner."

"Leave the brownstone?" Neal dropped his spoon with a clatter into his bowl.

"You don't need to sound so thrilled about it!" Klaus grumbled, snorting a chuckle. "I did my best within the constraints I was forced to deal with—"

"I know that and I'm grateful but—"

"—you've got cabin fever. That's clear." He poured the remaining wine into their glasses. "Where would you like to go?"

"Could we drive by Peter's place?"

He hesitated. "Do you think that's a good idea?"

"I need to see it for myself."

WCWCWCWCWCWCWC

After supper Klaus donned his fake beard. Before he left to retrieve the Mercedes he lectured Neal not to step outside without him. This would be Neal's first time to leave the brownstone after having been brought in on a stretcher. At least that was what Klaus told him. He had no recollection of the event and only small snapshots of the first several weeks.

Could Neal avoid blacking out? Klaus had told him that ever since the attack in his cell Neal had been subject to recurring bouts of amnesia. He would start to recall what had happened only to have all the memories vanish once more. After each incident he'd have to start from scratch.

There were only seven steps from the front door down to the street, but at the moment the height seemed taller than the bell tower at Riverside Church. Neal declared a small victory when he got into his down jacket without assistance and the pain was manageable. It was time for the next step even if it was a baby one.

He waited by the bay window, watching for the SUV. More snow had fallen in the morning, but Klaus had swept the steps before leaving to fetch the car. It wouldn't be possible to use a walker but Neal had a cane and Klaus would keep an arm around him. He was safe now.

They made the journey down the steps without any catastrophes. Sliding into the car was worse than going down the steps, as it required Neal to twist his back. He had to stop a couple of times to ease his protesting wound, but Klaus was patient. Unbelievably so. He'd mellowed since the days when Neal lived with him and Chantal in Geneva.

When at last Neal was safely inside, they headed off for the short drive to Peter and El's. Even though they no longer lived in the house—Klaus told him it had been sold two months ago—to Neal it would always be their home.

As Klaus drove, Neal gazed out at the familiar streets. The snow on the streets had turned to dirty slush but was still white on the window ledges of the shops and galleries. Klaus did his best to avoid the potholes, but the streets were in poor condition and Neal was soon sweating from the discomfort. Initially he'd thought of asking Klaus to drive into Manhattan once he'd seen Peter's house. No longer.

Klaus was asking about his first year at Columbia. Neal suspected he was attempting to distract him from the jostling. Apparently, Neal had already filled him in on his studies, as he seemed to
know all about them. It was frustrating that Neal had no recollection of having done so. He had a
hole in his head, and it was leaking out far too many memories—the good ones along with the bad
ones.

When they turned onto Peter's street, Neal asked him to stop. Klaus pulled up alongside a fire
hydrant since there were no free parking spaces. Neal silently watched the house for several
minutes. He didn't know what he was waiting for. Hoping against hope that El would open the
door? But that was, of course, impossible. Satchmo was probably living with Peter's parents now.
What must they think of him? They'd always treated Neal with warmth and kindness and he'd
destroyed their son's life.

A woman came out of the house, carrying a baby. Following her was a man about her age, likely
her husband. El and Peter would have liked that. They'd had so many loving moments in that
house. The house needed another family that would love it as well.

Klaus's hand on his shoulder brought him back to the present. "We should leave now," he urged
softly. "Best not to dwell."

Neal nodded, blinking to relieve the burning in his eyes. Before the memories overwhelmed him,
he dredged in his mind for something else to focus on. Anything. The Vermeer painting he'd been
accused of stealing? The thought of that was almost as bad. The Braque? Neal turned away from
the window to Klaus. "What did I tell you about the Braque painting we stole? Did I know why
Adler wants it?"

"If you did, you didn't tell me. Sorry, bro."

"Why didn't you ever sell it?"

"Did you forget? It was the first painting you stole with me. I told you it was yours. You were the
one who discovered it was genuine. I wanted you to have the profit. After you fled, I didn't give up
hope that someday you'd come back. That you'd understand it was Lucien who killed the guard not
me."

Why had Neal been so blind to the truth? Klaus had been framed, something Neal had a great deal
of experience with.

Klaus turned onto their street and parked the car in front. "It was strange that Kramer picked the
Church of Saint-Roch, the same church where we hid the Braque, for his frame. He claimed you
and Peter had hidden the Vermeer in a back office till it could be spirited out of the country. Any
ideas why he chose that same church?"

"Kramer's supposedly a scholar. St. Roch is the patron saint of the falsely accused. Was he gloating
over how he'd ruined us?"

"Possibly." Klaus sat in silence for a minute. "Perhaps you told Peter about the painting? When you
see him, you should ask him. He may be able to help you remember."

Neal nodded. Peter will know. If he'll talk to me . . .


"C'mon, Neal. Wake up!"

"Shhh," El admonished. "No telling when he went to bed. He and his friends may have visited
some of the other parties after we called it a night. I bet Richard and Aidan are still sleeping in,
Peter had already knocked on Neal's door a couple of times with no effect and was not in a forgiving mood. Neal had been the one who insisted on having breakfast with them. He let out a noisy exhale as he rapped again.

El quirked a smile. "Do you think you're the big bad wolf and gonna blow his door down?"

Peter looked at his watch. "He was the one who picked this time. He should be ready." He pulled out his cell phone to call him.

"Perhaps he overslept and is taking a shower," she suggested.

"Then he can step outside the shower to answer his phone." When he pressed the speed dial button, Peter's call went to voicemail. At the sound of Neal's recorded message, Peter's mood switched from exasperation to concern. Neal wouldn't fail to answer his phone even if he was in the shower. He was fully aware of the heightened need for security precautions.

Twenty minutes later Peter was inside Neal's room along with Travis, and a hotel security guard. Richard and El were keeping each other company outside in the hallway. Peter had already contacted the San Diego FBI office. They were sending over agents and notifying the police.

Neal was not in his room and the bed sheets were in disarray. For someone else that might not be significant, but Neal carried neatness to an extreme. He was the only man Peter knew who made his bed even when he stayed in a hotel room.

But there was no need to waste time wondering what had happened. It was obvious. Neal's GPS-enhanced watch was on the dresser next to his cell phone. Propped up on the cell phone was a playing card belonging to the Call of Cthulhu card game. The card depicted the image of a man in a suit ensnared by a writhing octopus, crying out for help.

**WCWCWCWCWCWCWC**

The command center was set up in the San Diego FBI Field Office some twenty minutes up the coast from the hotel. Peter and Travis worked with local agents to search and photograph Neal's room. After collecting the surveillance footage, they headed to the field office. Peter hoped the tapes would provide a lead. For the moment they had little to go on. The police were in charge of interviewing hotel employees to find out if anyone had seen anything.

This was not the first time Azathoth had used playing cards to send a message. He or one of his crew had left a doctored card depicting Neal as a mutilated corpse in Peter's newspaper last winter. After a few anxious moments, Peter discovered that Neal was unharmed and unaware of the sadistic hoax that had been played. Although that time the card turned out to be simply a false alarm, Peter was concerned it was a warning shot of a much more serious attack ahead. Had that moment now arrived?

The San Diego agent in charge was a woman named Evelyn Martinez. Peter didn't attempt to bring her up to speed on the entire history of Azathoth. Instead he focused on the previous assaults relevant to the kidnapping—their abduction in the fall, the murder of the Czech detective in Prague, and the attack at Scima Workshop in London.

"It doesn't take a rocket scientist to see that water and an octopus are a common theme in London and Prague," Evelyn commented, flipping a page in her notebook. "How about this 'house of horror', as you call it, last fall?"
"Water was also part of the strategy. A hologram of an ocean with an octopus-type monster was projected on the wall of our cell. Tentacled monsters are common in the horror writer H.P. Lovecraft's works. We nicknamed the cybercriminal Azathoth because of his interest in Lovecraft."

"If Azathoth is looking for another water locale, he couldn't have picked a better location than San Diego. We have several in our area—SeaWorld, Sea Life, the Birch Aquarium. Los Angeles is only a couple of hours away, with the Aquarium of the Pacific, Cabrillo Marine Aquarium, and the Santa Monica Pier. The L.A. field office has already been informed. We could divide the aquariums between us and bring in the local police for assistance."

"Are there any aquariums which are particularly noted for their octopus exhibits?"

She thought for a moment. "I took my kids to the Sea Life Aquarium a few weeks ago. They have a giant Pacific octopus. I recall them mentioning it was the only one currently being exhibited in the San Diego area. Should we start there?"

"That has the highest likelihood," Peter agreed. But as he uttered the words, his gut was pounding out a warning. That's what Azathoth would expect. You're following the route he's laid out for you. But what choice did he have? There was nothing else to go on.

Travis knocked on the door. "You'll both want to see this."

They moved into the lab where Travis displayed the feed from the surveillance camera in the hallway outside Neal's room. At 2:55 a.m. two men wearing the uniforms of the San Diego Police Department and accompanied by a man in plainclothes were recorded approaching Neal's door. After a couple of knocks, they used a card to enter his room. Ten minutes later they reemerged with Neal in handcuffs. He was still wearing his sleep clothes with his hair disheveled. He looked like they'd dragged him from bed.

Peter had braced himself for something similar but to have it confirmed sent his stomach to his feet. And that it was cops who led Neal off added to his nausea. He tried to focus on the positive. Neal appeared unharmed. "Do you have any other footage of him?"

"Not so far. There are no cameras in the elevators. Agents are checking the hotel lobby and parking garage camera feeds."

"We've already spoken with the San Diego police," Peter said. "They would have said something if they'd arrested him. These have to be imposters."

"Get me stills of those images," Evelyn requested. "I'll assign my agents to trace them."

They had good images of the men, both front and profile views. But the image that would haunt Peter was Neal's face—bewildered, shocked. What was going through his mind? What had they told him?

WCWCWCWCWCWC

"I found another one." The San Diego police detective handed Peter the card encased in an evidence bag. "It was behind a rock next to the starfish pool. That was a good tip to look there."

Diana had suggested they check the starfish exhibits at the aquariums. Since the starfish was a prominent symbol both in the Cthulhu Mythos and in her stories, she thought conceivably Rolf would reference it.

For the past two hours Peter had been searching the grounds of SeaWorld. He'd hoped to be
finished by now, but hadn't realized the facility was so large. With 190 acres to survey, they'd barely scratched the surface.

Travis walked up, looking hot and grimy. He'd been leading the team scouring the Journey to Atlantis ride. Jones had suggested Atlantis might appeal to Rolf since one of Lovecraft's most famous monsters, Cthulhu, was held prisoner in an underground fortress. "We'd scheduled a conference call with the team in New York. Do you want to delay it?"

Peter took out a handkerchief to wipe his face. The midafternoon sun was brutal. "No, I need to step back and reassess. Azathoth's still jerking our strings. We gotta stop it."

He nodded. "My car's closer. I'll drive."

Travis was being diplomatic but Peter knew what he was doing. He was too focused on the abduction to pay attention to California traffic. Getting into an accident wouldn't help Neal, and there'd been far too many screeching brakes and honks already this morning. The San Diego police had offered them the use of an office at their headquarters and since it was much closer to SeaWorld, they'd take advantage of it for the conference call.

On the way to the police station, Travis insisted on stopping at a fast food place for sandwiches. When Peter protested, he said they could eat while on the call. Peter called El from the car to bring her up-to-date on the lack of progress. Even though they'd found additional playing cards, they were no closer to finding Neal.

That was a point not lost on Jones and Diana when they joined the call.

"I've plotted a map where the cards have been found," Jones said. "The first one was the furthest north up the coast where the giant octopus is."

"That was also the one with the most ominous message," Diana added. The card depicted Azathoth with instructions to destroy all characters not named Azathoth.

"The San Diego police found a card near the leopard shark exhibit at Birch Aquarium with another message about the need to destroy a character," Jones continued. "Now you have a third card with no message showing a man in a suit shooting at a tentacle monster. Is that supposed to be you?"

"Are the cards meant to be clues leading us to Neal or distractions?" Peter demanded. "It's clear Rolf wants us to think we're in the midst of a game."

"He couldn't have predicted with any degree of accuracy in which order we would have found the cards," Travis pointed out. "We've analyzed the sealife currently being exhibited at public aquariums and have targeted leopard sharks, starfish, and octopuses. But we could logically expand the search to stingrays, jellyfish, and many other species."

"This doesn't feel right to me either," Peter said. "My gut's telling me he's trying to distract us, make us waste time."

"What about Katja?" Diana asked. "Have you been able to locate her yet?"

"We can only bring her in for questioning," Jones admonished. "We have no evidence against her."

"True, but shouldn't we at least do that?" she challenged.

"We've been trying," Peter said, "but no one can locate her. She's scheduled to be on a panel discussion this afternoon at Comic-Con. We have agents at the site, ready to bring her in. Richard's
already spoken with his boss, Ian Forster, and he can't locate her either."

"What kind of panel is she on?" asked Jones.

"The topic is new trends in gaming," Travis explained. "Graphics engines, 3D rendering, virtual reality technology." Travis didn't need to go over the meaning of the terms with Jones and Diana. Both were gamers themselves. But Peter had limited understanding of the technology which would allow a player to be immersed into an artificially constructed world.

"Games have been a constant in Rolf's strategy." Diana said.

"But we can't rely on Neal being uninjured," Jones warned. "The earlier taunts could have been designed to make us less concerned when the real thing happened."

"Rolf may have placed Neal in a staged scene," Travis mused aloud, "just like he did with Peter. We'll probably never know if Rolf would have gone through with killing Peter or not."

"Tricia continues to believe recruitment is the strongest driver," Diana said, "but from where I sit, it's hard to discount revenge. How would kidnapping Neal help recruit him?"

"Bolotnov attempted to abduct Neal last spring," Peter reminded her, "with the purpose of brainwashing him into working for the Russian mafia." He stopped short. Was that it? Abruptly turning to Travis, he asked, "Could virtual reality be used for mind control purposes?"

Travis's eyes widened. "I've never heard of it being used that way, but as a component in a strategy —"

"This has to be it," Peter interrupting, slamming the desk with his fist. "Those cards are a smokescreen." He sprang up, convinced he was on the right track. "Jones, Diana, bring Tricia up to speed. See if she's heard about virtual reality being used for psychological manipulation. Travis, you and I need to speak with Ian Forster ASAP."

"VR for mind control?" Ian stopped to consider Peter's theory. "You mean like what was used in *The Matrix*?"

After the conference call, Peter and Travis had raced over to the convention center just a short distance away. Richard located Ian for them, and by the time they arrived, both he and Ian were waiting for them in one of the huddle rooms Comic-Con allocated for interviews.

"The movie relied on a somewhat similar technique," Travis agreed. "Richard mentioned Scima's engaged in cutting edge research in virtual reality."

"Yeah, but we're working with game simulations and VR headsets, not psychological experimentation. The lab at Scima is developing technology for the next generation of games."

"What is Katja's role?" Peter asked.

"She's been in charge of VR programming for the past five years at our center in Amsterdam. This May she was transferred to L.A. Do you suspect she's involved in Neal's kidnapping?"

Peter nodded, not attempting to explain their suspicions that the woman Ian knew as Katja Visser was actually Marta Kolar. "We have reason to believe she's working with a cybercriminal. If she wanted to employ your equipment—"
"—Comic-Con would present the best opportunity," Ian agreed. "Scima's a ghost town during the convention. In any case, very few are allowed into the lab." He reached for his cell phone. "I'll call the front desk. They may have seen her. She's still a no show here." Afterward, he reported, "The guard remembers seeing her yesterday afternoon, but didn't see her leave. That doesn't necessarily mean anything. She may have pulled an all-nighter and left this morning. It's routine in our business to work through the night. We even have a dorm for employees to sack out."

"Can you get us into the lab without raising any suspicions?" Peter was counting on Ian's help. They likely didn't have sufficient evidence to obtain a warrant, and negotiating for one would cost them precious hours.

"Run a black ops raid of Scima?" The corners of Ian's mouth twitched into a smile. "I'll need clearance with the top brass, many of whom are attending the convention. Who would conduct it?"

"FBI and the LAPD. Travis and I'll take a police chopper to Scima."

Peter gave Ian points. Once Peter detailed their concern that Katja Visser was involved with Neal's kidnapping, Ian sliced through the layers of bureaucratic approval with surprising speed. Within a half-hour he'd secured permission from the Scima directors present at the convention for a raid of their Los Angeles facility.

While Ian worked with Scima, Travis made arrangements with the San Diego police department to obtain a chopper. Peter contacted the L.A. FBI field office which would provide additional agents and coordinate the op with the local police department.

Playa Vista, where Scima's campus was located, was a small community on the coast, north of the L.A. International Airport. There was a helipad on the campus, but units were rendezvousing at a pad a few miles away to lessen the chance of discovery.

Marta Kolar could not possibly conduct the entire procedure on her own. She might have done the programming but would have required medical assistance. Peter had spoken with Tricia who had attended seminars on psychological manipulation. It was her belief that if Neal were undergoing such a procedure, drugs would have been administered.

In addition to Marta, her husband Jacek was quite possibly involved. Rolf could be in town personally overseeing operations. Peter was determined not to let anyone escape their net. The LAPD was on alert to dispatch additional choppers if needed. But if Rolf strolled by, would Peter recognize him? He must have cast off his Chapman disguise. His fingerprints weren't on file. How can you put out an alert for a faceless stranger?

Ian and Richard flew with them in the chopper to Playa Vista. Peter had been reluctant to include them in the mission but had eventually agreed with their argument that he'd require their assistance to navigate the maze of corridors which led to the virtual reality lab. In addition, Ian would need to disarm multiple security checkpoints on the way in. During the flight, Peter and Travis familiarized themselves with the floorplans Ian had secured for them. The lab was on the second floor in the back of the sprawling building.

Peter expected Marta would take full advantage of surveillance cameras to track any suspicious activity. To lessen the chance of discovery, they were wearing ordinary street clothes. Ian was prepared to play the part of host. He'd notify the front desk shortly before their arrival that he was taking a group of investors on a tour of the facility. Peter had requested the L.A unit provide bulletproof vests for both Ian and Richard to wear underneath their shirts.
As Peter studied the layout, he wondered how long in advance Rolf had been planning this move. Was Kramer an innocent pawn in Rolf's scheme or had he requested the trip under instructions from Ydrus? Quite possibly the location of the lab was the reason Rolf had decided to wait until California to spring his trap. He'd known Neal would probably be at Comic-Con ever since the sci-fi convention. Had something at the convention given him the idea?

The FBI agent in charge of the operation in L.A. was Scott Weller, a veteran of twenty-five years with the Bureau. Peter had collaborated with him on a few cases in the past and had gotten to know him better during their presentations in L.A. That was only two days ago. He little expected that he'd be calling on Weller's assistance so soon.

Weller was an ex-Army officer, well-versed in tactical maneuvers. He still wore his hair in a buzz cut. The current op was much more in his skill set than the type of virtuosic heist which Neal had introduced him to during his workshop.

There was no certainty Marta had chosen the Scima location, but Ian knew of no facility in the region which had more advanced virtual reality equipment. Peter was going with his gut, and it felt right. If he'd squandered resources on a bad call, there'd be hell to pay, but it was better than a pointless search for playing cards in aquariums up and down the Pacific coastline.

Notes: Leonardo da Vinci's Head of a Woman is reminiscent of the drawing displayed on an easel in Neal's living room in the TV series. That work is also by Leonardo and is called Study for the Head of Leda. I've pinned Head of a Woman to the Nocturne Pinterest board, and you can see the drawing on the easel in one of the pins on the Cast and Locations board. As for the drawing Neal was making of Head of a Woman when Klaus introduced himself, that will appear in a future story.

Some of the cards from the Call of Cthulhu card game look tailor-made for Azathoth. It's understandable why he couldn't resist using them. I've pinned the ones mentioned in this chapter to the Nocturne Pinterest board.

In the next chapter, Neal is found but all is not well. After the abduction described in The Woman in Blue, Azathoth has not physically harmed Neal, restraining himself instead to puzzles and hoaxes. He's now discovered a tool to up his game of psychological manipulation. I'll have much more about that in Chapter 9: Dueling Realities.

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Nocturne in Black and Gold board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon
Dueling Realities


Agent Weller was waiting for Peter's chopper when it landed in Los Angeles. Two small Scima shuttle buses were parked alongside the patrol cars. Ian Forster, their Scima contact, had arranged for the transport to maintain the illusion that the agents were investors on a tour of the facility. Support personnel and EMTs would remain out of sight until summoned.

The drive from the helicopter pad to Scima took less than ten minutes. After a brief communication with Ian, the security guard waved them through. The campus looked like any of a number of West Coast corporate headquarters with several contemporary buildings scattered around a lush parklike landscape. No live production work was done here although there were stages for sound and visual effects.

The facility was, as Ian predicted, practically empty. A few lonely cars in the parking lots indicated a minimal staff presence. It was six thirty when they arrived at the front gate. Ian said most employees would probably be down in the basement food court.

They scanned the perimeter as they drove up. One chopper was on the pad. Weller ordered two of the agents to remain outside near the pad to prevent any escape by air.

Once inside the building, Ian pretended to show them around for the benefit of the lobby cameras, but after they mounted the broad staircase to the second floor there was no need to continue the charade.

The building seemed even larger than what the floorplans had indicated. The most direct route which Ian had detailed for them would have been impossible to achieve without his assistance. They were taking shortcuts through work areas and restricted corridors which required deactivation of security devices. When they arrived at the section containing the lab, Richard along with an agent were ordered to stay a safe distance back and alert any approaching staff that the area was off-limits.

There was only one entrance to the lab. Travis had already grilled Ian about the ventilation system. Peter suspected he was remembering how often ventilator shafts had been used on Star Trek, but he was glad Travis was being so thorough.

Weapons drawn, Peter and Travis waited with the other agents while Ian disarmed the iris-activated security system. Weller then motioned for Ian to remain outside, and, with a nod to Peter, gave the clearance to enter the lab.

They already knew the overall layout of the lab since Ian had reviewed it with them on the way over. The cavernous space was divided into multiple workstations and testing areas. The VR simulation chamber was in a self-contained room shut off from the rest of the lab. No one was working in the outer sections when they entered but Peter could see light escaping from under the door to the VR chamber.

When they flung open the door, they found four people, but Peter locked onto Neal. He was strapped into a medical chair which was in the full horizontal position. Electrodes were attached to his head, chest, and legs. He was wearing a massive black headset which completely covered his eyes.
A white-haired man in a lab coat and Katja Visser were working frantically on their laptops, ignoring the commands to step away. A man in a guard's uniform was positioned in front of a bank of monitors displaying surveillance camera feeds.

Travis rushed up and seized Katja's laptop from her grasp. Ripping out the power cord, he removed the battery. Another agent was doing the same for the other laptop. Katja had undoubtedly been conducting an emergency purging of her files. Peter hoped they weren't too late.

Katja didn't say a word. She simply stared at them with a mixture of hostility and fear as she was handcuffed.

The man in the lab coat was the opposite, babbling on about how they were conducting a test on a volunteer subject and were well within their rights.

"Unhook him!" Peter ordered, pointing at Neal.

The man stared at Peter aghast at the request. "I couldn't do that! Not yet. No, no, that wouldn't be good at all."

"Who are you?" Weller demanded.

"Doctor Erasmus Penfold. I must insist you that let me attend to the volunteer. The conclusion of the experiment has to be performed in a gradual, careful manner. If you don't allow me to proceed, I can't be held responsible for any harm he may suffer."

The doctor reached inside his lab coat to pull out his wallet. Opening it, he handed Weller his driver's license. "Clearly you've been misinformed about what we're doing. I'm a neuropsychologist. Ms. Visser hired me to conduct tests on a new virtual reality game. The test subject is a volunteer she provided. If you'll permit me to stop the feed in a staged manner, he won't suffer any ill effects."

Was the doctor right? Or if he was allowed to continue, would Neal be harmed even further? Peter swept his eyes over the lab cart next to Neal—the monitoring devices, the prefilled hypos. What kind of experiment had they been running?

A loud pop accompanied by a puff of smoke came from an instrument next to Neal. That answered the question for Peter. He ordered Travis to remove the electrodes while he carefully lifted off the headgear, ignoring the doctor's frenzied protests.

Neal's eyes remained closed. His pulse was on the low side but steady. Peter couldn't detect any physical injury. He was breathing without difficulty.

Weller was on the phone with his agents. He looked over at Peter. "The EMTs are on their way. All's quiet outside."

Penfold was livid as agents led him away. "The volunteer was sedated. He would have been fine if you hadn't intervened."

He dared chide them? Peter anxiously checked Neal for any sign of returning consciousness and detected none. He didn't believe for a second that the doctor was innocent, but had he been right in his warning? Had Peter just made Neal's condition worse?

**WCWCW CWCW WCWCW**

The closest hospital to Scima was the UCLA Medical Center. Peter rode with Neal in the
ambulance, grateful that Agent Weller would supervise the crime scene. The suspects would be taken to the FBI field office for initial questioning. Travis was in charge of the confiscated computers. The hospital was only a short distance away from the field office which would simplify coordination. Weller promised to drop by later in the evening with an update.

Neal still had not regained consciousness. Richard stayed with Peter at the hospital while Neal underwent the initial evaluation. Ian stopped by shortly after they arrived with an offer from Scima to put everyone up in a nearby hotel. The Kimpton Hotel Palomar sounded much grander than the one Peter and Neal had stayed in previously, but Ian insisted, and it was so convenient to both the hospital and the FBI office that Peter relented.

When Peter called El, Keiko and Aidan were with her. They'd work together to pack up Neal and Richard's rooms along with their own. Richard's SUV was still in San Diego. Aidan would use it to ferry everyone to L.A. Peter was glad El was surrounded with friends. They agreed not to contact Noelle since it was the middle of the night in Argentina. In a few hours they'd have a much better feel for Neal's condition and could update her then.

Penfold, the so-called doctor—Peter doubted he actually was one—had insisted Neal had only been given a mild sedative. The blood work had yet to come back but Neal was not showing any sign of reviving. No injuries had been found, but his mental state was a mystery.

After he was transferred to a private room, Peter and Richard kept watch together, spelling each other as needed. The news from Travis was not reassuring. The data had been encrypted and apparently most if not all of the encryption keys had been purged. Without those keys, file recovery would be impossible. Travis feared that Katja had started the process as soon as Ian disarmed the security system protecting the lab entrance.

"Do you think Rolf's in town, personally supervising operations?" Richard asked.

"It's certainly possible," Peter admitted. They were both speaking in undertones, although Peter wasn't sure that was necessary. If Neal heard their voices, would that help him regain consciousness? "We now know there have been multiple thefts in the Los Angeles area. That raises the likelihood he's here overseeing the heists. The problem we face is that we have no idea what Rolf looks like. Chapman's photo is being used on the most-wanted lists, but everyone believes Rolf looks like Chapman's. His photo is being used on the most-wanted lists, but everyone believes Rolf's gone through another round of plastic surgery."

"So he could be anyone?"

Peter nodded. "He may have already prepared a backup identity when he was Chapman. Tricia Wiese, our profiler, believes Rolf is so arrogant he may crave recognition. I suppose he could even revert to his original appearance. How difficult would that be?"

"If the underlying bone structure wasn't altered, fairly straightforward. After all the years of playing someone else, Rolf could long for his old appearance." Richard gave a wry smile. "You think he's ready to out himself?"

Peter relaxed into a smile, too. "It's about time!"

"If you have a photo of Rolf, I could draw what he'd look like with various beards," he offered.

Peter considered Richard's suggestion for a moment. Would Rolf actually be that brazen? He had a hard time believing it, but Richard was clearly anxious to help in some way. Agents were starting the painstaking work of tracing Marta's movements over the past several weeks. They had photos of Katja but nothing for Rolf. Richard's drawings would be a shot in the dark but couldn't do any
harm.

Peter encouraged him to make them. Travis could provide him with the last known photograph of Rolf before his supposed death. Delighted at his offer being accepted, Richard promised to have the drawings ready for Travis to take to the field office the next morning.

Agent Weller dropped by to give an update after they'd been there for a couple of hours. He and Peter moved into a family room where they could talk in privacy without disturbing Neal.

Taking a seat across from Peter at the multipurpose table, Weller powered on his laptop. "We ran Katja's fingerprints. There's no match with Marta's fingerprints and Katja's aren't on file."

"That's not surprising. Given we're dealing with sophisticated cybercriminals, they may have hacked into the Czech database to replace Marta's fingerprints."

"Good point," he acknowledged. "Judging strictly by the photographs, the physical characteristics of the two women are similar. We've called in a plastic surgeon who will perform an assessment tomorrow."

"What does Katja have to say?"

"Other than demanding to speak with her lawyer, she refuses to discuss anything." Weller grunted. "She's not making it easy. Wants a court-appointed lawyer. Rejected making a personal phone call. Agents are currently searching her apartment. We'll charge her with kidnapping and intent to cause bodily harm. If we can prove she assumed another person's identity, we can add fraud to that. The Dutch have already been notified to investigate. The guard professes ignorance of what was occurring. He's a known petty thief. I suspect Katja hired him to monitor the security displays and he won't be able to provide much if any useful intel."

"What about Penfold? Is he really a doctor?"

Weller nodded gloomily. "Neuropsychologist. He's a tenured professor at CalTech but is currently on unpaid leave because of questionable research methods." He stood up and poured himself a glass of water from the sink in the corner. "You want something? You look like you could use it."

Peter got a cup of coffee from the coffeemaker. Should he feel better that Penfold wasn't a quack? Which scenario was worse for Neal? Peter steeled himself to hear about Penfold. "What's his field of research?"

"For the past several years he's been studying the use of virtual reality to modify behavior. There's a lot about him on the internet. He made quite a splash at a symposium in 2004 when he claimed remarkable success with a new treatment. He asserted that he was able to implant false memories in his test subjects which caused them to alter their value systems." Weller scratched the back of his neck. "It sounds like science fiction to me, but supposedly the subjects weren't aware of the new memories because they were buried in their subconscious. Penfold's been able to change a person who used to hate spiders to loving them and someone who was afraid of heights to take up mountain climbing."

He swiveled his laptop around for Peter to view the webpage. It was a short news release on a science website. "You said he was suspended from his position at the university," Peter said, scanning the article "Do you have any additional information on that?"

"I spoke with the dean of his department. Penfold wasn't following proper procedures with his test subjects. Compounding his difficulties, he didn't wait for clearance from the university before
going public with his findings. He's still listed on the faculty but is awaiting administrative review."

"And the doctor's sticking by his story?"

Weller nodded, taking a sip of water. "Penfold claims Katja Visser hired him to run a test on what he was told was a Scima employee. She assured him that the subject was a willing volunteer."

"Who'd believe that?"

Weller shrugged. "He has the papers to prove it. He showed me a document that supposedly Caffrey had signed, indicating he was volunteering to be a test subject. I don't know if this will be enough to get the doctor off the hook, but it might. He's still playing the innocent victim card. Threatens to file a protest for us stopping the procedure. I hate to say it but if Caffrey doesn't have any serious medical issues, there may not be much to charge him with."

"What about his laptop? How does he explain the destroyed data? That's hardly the action of an innocent man."

"Penfold professes ignorance of how that happened. I questioned Travis about it, and he agreed that Katja could have initiated the purge programs on both laptops."

"He had to be operating in collusion with Marta. He's no innocent." Peter swallowed his frustration with a gulp of coffee and asked for Penfold's account of what had transpired during the procedure.

"He claims that he arrived at Scima at six in the morning. At that time Caffrey was already in position. He'd been given a sedative and was supposedly resting comfortably. The sedative was one Penfold had prescribed and had them administer in advance to lessen the amount of time he'd need to work."

"Neal's not just sedated. He's unconscious!"

"I know, Peter, and you won't like his response. Penfold claims we caused his present state by ending the procedure prematurely. He said any malpractice is on our hands, not his."

Peter suppressed his curse. He wished he could dismiss Penfold's assertion, but he couldn't. And proving who was responsible could be a formidable challenge. "What details did he provide about the information he was feeding Neal?"

"Penfold claims he doesn't know. The program was supplied by Marta. That doesn't hold water with me. How could he possibly not be informed about what he's trying to implant? But so far he's sticking by his story." Weller glanced at his watch and rose to leave. "I need to get back, but go ahead and keep the laptop. You can bring it back tomorrow." He paused at the door. "Let me know as soon as you have any news about Caffrey."

Peter walked out with him as far as the elevator. It was the middle of the night on the East Coast. He'd spoken with Jones earlier in the evening but would wait for the morning for further bulletins. He planned to research Penfold while waiting for Neal to revive, but first he needed to speak with Neal's doctor.

Had Penfold been successful? What memories were now buried deep within Neal's subconscious? By stopping the procedure so abruptly, had Peter succeeded in preventing it or had had he only caused further damage? Peter's unease was growing by the minute. Until Neal regained consciousness, the questions would continue to haunt him.

WCWCWCWCWCWCWC
As Neal grew slowly aware of his surroundings, he fought the tidal surge of despair washing over him. The last thing he remembered he was riding in Klaus's car. Now he was back in bed. The sheets didn't feel the same. How many weeks had he missed out on this time? He'd just asked Klaus how he planned to sneak Neal inside the prison to talk with Peter. Neal must have blacked out immediately afterward. How had Klaus managed getting him into the house? Or was it simply that he couldn't remember?

He wished he could recall more about seeing Peter's house. Even though Peter no longer lived there. Neal lay quiet, stilling his thoughts. Klaus had said not to be discouraged. Relapses were inevitable. He was tracking in the right direction. Hold on to that.

Odd. This bed didn't feel like the other. It wasn't just the sheets. The mattress was harder, the pillowcase starched. And it was cool. Too cool. Klaus knew Neal was sensitive to the cold and kept the thermostat warmer than Klaus would have liked. He joshed Neal it felt like the tropics. What happened? It had been snowing. Maybe a storm knocked out the power. The room wasn't completely dark so the power must have returned. Soon he would be warm again.

His back didn't hurt as much. Whatever happened, he must not have reinjured it. He'd count that as a big positive. No music. A soft, steady hum, broken by regular beeps. They sounded vaguely familiar.

The beeps increased in frequency as Neal's heart began to race with the knowledge of where he was. That was an IV attached to his hand. His back didn't hurt as much because he was full of drugs, lying in some hospital . . .

That thought sent him into a tailspin. His injury must have grown worse. Klaus wouldn't have allowed him to go to the hospital unless it was absolutely essential. Why couldn't he remember? The police would find out. He'd be thrown back in prison. What had—

"Easy. You're safe now. Neal, can you hear me?"

Neal stopped struggling, confronted with a new puzzle. He knew that voice. But not in a hospital. Neal opened his eyes. "Richard?" he whispered. Was this a dream?

Richard smiled and nodded confirmation. "Welcome back! It's about time." He pulled out his phone and texted someone.

Despite his panic, Neal broke into a smile as well. He didn't believe he'd ever see Richard again. "How?" He stopped himself just in time. Klaus must have arranged it, thinking a familiar face would help Neal's recovery. Klaus wouldn't have used his own name with Richard. He'd rented the brownstone as Ken Maddux, picking names that were close to his own to make it easier for Neal to remember. "Did Ken bring you?"

Richard shook his head slowly and hesitated before answering. "Ian brought me. How are you feeling?"

Who was Ian? Neal gave up trying to figure it out. His wound was beginning to throb again. All he wanted to do was focus on seeing a friend from his past before he blacked out once again. Richard must have seen the news reports. Neal had been convinced that none of his friends would have anything to do with him now. He was overwhelmed that despite everything Richard had come.

He looked just the same. For once Neal's scruff was much longer than his. Richard was still
wearing a masked bee t-shirt. Yellowface seemed like a lifetime away. Was he wearing it for Neal's sake?

Richard looked up from his phone to give him a sympathetic smile. Neal pinched the bridge of his nose to keep from breaking down completely. "Still wearing Yellowface, I see?" he said, his voice husky.

"I'd already dressed for Comic-Con when I heard what happened. I didn't take time to change."

"You're joking, right? It's been months. Or is that your new work uniform?"

"Months?" Richard looked at him, bewildered. "It's still Friday."

Neal sank deeper into the pillow. That didn't make any sense. It was winter. Neal was positive about that. He'd seen the snow. There was an East Coast version of Comic-Con but he'd remembered it was in April. The last time he'd been conscious, it was January. Had he lost three months? He wasn't safe here. He had to run. As soon as Richard left, he'd—

The door opened.

Peter.

Neal's mouth dropped but he couldn't get a word out. Peter. Not in an orange jumpsuit. He had a wide smile on his face but his eyes looked worried.

"Are you okay?" Neal managed finally to stumble out. Stupid, but his heart was too full. He wanted to hug him, but he didn't see a walker, and Peter probably wouldn't appreciate the close contact. He couldn't believe it. Peter. Here in the hospital. Did that mean he'd forgiven him? But how could he?

"I'm the one who's supposed to be asking that," he said, approaching the bed and placing a hand on Neal's shoulder. "I was just with your doctor, and he'll be here shortly. How are you feeling?"

Neal scanned his face. There was no sign of the ordeal he'd suffered. No bruises. He looked tired but healthy. Peter's case must have been overturned. He could have been out for months. Neal blinked back the tears of relief. Even though Peter must be here to arrest him, he hadn't brought the cops with him. Neal felt a sense of immense gratitude to be given a few minutes with him before being hauled back. He'd even let Neal see Richard. Peter was waiting patiently for him to say something. Neal sorted through the chaos of his thoughts to come up with something. "Not bad. My back's better. Is that why I'm here? Where am I?"

"You're in the UCLA Medical Center," Peter said, answering only his last question.

"I was taken to Los Angeles from New York? When did that happen?" he stammered, growing more confused by the minute. The prison was in New York. Were they transferring him to a West Coast facility? Or was Peter working with Klaus now? Neal paused to take a deep breath. He didn't remember but he must have visited Peter in prison and Klaus broke him out. They'd escaped to the West Coast . . . The beeps were growing in intensity making it impossible to think.

"Richard, could you find the doctor for me?" Peter took him aside and murmured something to him that Neal couldn't catch.

Richard gave Neal a reassuring smile. "I'll be right back," and left the room.

Neal watched warily as Peter returned to his bedside. He looked so real, but Neal had experienced vivid dreams before. "Can we get out of here? I know I can't walk that well, but if you can find me
a walker, I can make it. Maybe a wheelchair, then they'll think you're taking me for an outing." He surveyed his hospital gown. Blue polka dots. Yeah, definitely a wheelchair.

He looked up when he felt Peter's hand on his arm. The solidity of that grasp helped calm him. "Why do you need a walker?"

Peter spoke in slow motion, increasing his disorientation. His thoughts were galloping far ahead, but Peter's question yanked him back. Neal felt the heat as his face flushed at the question. "It's my back. The wound's not healed yet. I have to be careful . . ." His words trailed off as he watched Peter shake his head. He wasn't going to let Neal leave. This wasn't Peter after all. He was merely a hallucination. Or a dream. That made much more sense. If Peter were really there, he would have been aware of the bandages on his back. He wouldn't have made Neal admit his disability. Neal would wake up and find himself in Klaus's townhouse. Just a dream.

"Look at me, Neal. Do you know what month it is?"

"Sure." Neal gave a half-hearted attempt to laugh, but it came out a dry rattle. "My brain wasn't totally scrambled by the attack. It's January of 2006, or at least it was the last time I was conscious. January 25 to be precise. How many weeks did I miss out on?" When Peter didn't say anything, his anxiety mounted. Had it been months after all?

Peter shook his head slowly and locked his eyes on him. "It's July 15, 2005. You were kidnapped this morning from your hotel room at the Hard Rock Hotel in San Diego. You spent the next twelve hours at Scima's studio in L.A. We rescued you three hours ago."

"That can't be right." His voice was a whisper. This was the confirmation he'd dreaded. Peter wasn't here but still locked up in prison. Nothing was real. Neal wanted to close his eyes to block the hallucination, but he might never see Peter again. Even a hallucination was better than nothing at all.

Peter leaned forward on the rail of the bed till his face was inches from Neal. "I'm telling you the truth. You were subjected to a mind control procedure. That's why your memories don't match with reality. You know I wouldn't lie to you."

Neal reached out a hand to touch his face. The scruff on Peter's cheek was rough under his fingers. He felt his own chin. Instead of the half-inch beard he'd trimmed, there was only maybe a day's growth. If he'd been unconscious, his beard would have been even longer.

Peter watched Neal check his face in the mirror on the bedside table. His expression changed from disbelief to shock. "It was all a dream?" he asked uncertainly.

"Unfortunately it's not that simple." Peter's hopes that Penfold was a quack vanished. It was clear that what Neal had experienced was much more than a dream. Not only did the memories seem real, but they weren't fading away.

"How does your back feel?" Peter asked, bracing himself for what he knew the answer would be.

Neal swallowed and didn't answer for a moment. "It aches." He attempted to push himself up with his elbows and grimaced. Sinking back into the pillows, he admitted the obvious. "The wound still bothers me, but it's not quite as bad."

"Can you reach the location on your back where you were injured?"
He nodded and twisted his arm to touch the small of his back. His eyes widened as he cautiously moved his hand up and down. "There's nothing there!"

"That's right." Peter kept his voice low and calm. He wasn't at all sure he'd convinced Neal that he wasn't a hallucination. "We believe Marta hired a neuropsychologist who implanted false memories in your brain. Everything you remember after last night is an artificial construct."

"Last night? You mean the evening when we had drinks on top of the Hard Rock Hotel?"

"That's good. You remembered."

Neal grimaced. "You sound just like Klaus," he said bitterly. "That's what he kept telling me."

"You saw Klaus?" Peter asked, taken aback.

"For months," he asserted. "He rescued me from prison. How did you learn where I was?"

Peter choked back his exclamation. Klaus was dead. They'd both seen him fall to his death at the Met. Now Neal thought he was alive? Peter felt out of his depth at how he should respond. Tricia had warned them that Rolf might try to convince Neal he was being haunted by Klaus's spirit, but this was something entirely. Neal believed Klaus was alive. He was treating it so matter-of-factly that for the moment Peter didn't attempt to dissuade him. Instead, he explained what they'd observed on the hotel surveillance camera and their hunt through San Diego's aquariums.

By the time Richard returned with the doctor, Neal was no longer questioning Peter's version of what happened. He wasn't saying much of anything.

Peter had spoken with Neal's doctor, Tuan Nguyen, after his meeting with Weller. Nguyen was a neurologist but had no experience with the type of procedure Penfold had used.

Neal seemed to respond well to Nguyen's gentle, understated manner. He answered all the doctor's questions readily, joking about the spaced-out dream he'd had. Peter knew it was an act, but he was reassured at how well Neal carried it off. Richard exchanged glances with Peter. He knew it was a con, too.

"We're in agreement that there's nothing wrong with me, right?" Neal asked. "I'm chalking this up to a video game experiment not ready for prime time."

"Physically, your assessment is correct," Nguyen agreed. "You may notice a little drowsiness from the drug you were administered. Don't drive or operate heavy machinery for twenty-four hours, but you can rest at home. Psychologically, you shouldn't dismiss what you experienced. My recommendation is for you to consult a specialist who is familiar with the technique Dr. Penfold used on you."

"So I'm free to leave?" Neal persisted, blowing away his advice.

Nguyen hesitated, glancing over at Peter. "Does he have a place to stay?"

"We're making arrangements. My wife is driving up with friends and should arrive in another hour or so."

Nguyen turned to Neal. "That will give you more time to rest. If you still want to check out when she arrives, I'll approve it."

After the doctor left, Peter exchanged text messages with Travis while Richard chatted with Neal.
Peter appreciated that Richard switched from a discussion of the ordeal to what Neal missed at Comic-Con. Neal was much more relaxed when he wasn't discussing the ordeal. It was a reprieve he badly needed.

Unable to help with the investigation, Richard had spent the morning at the convention with Aidan and Keiko. They'd attended an advance screening of a TV pilot called *Supernatural*. The plot apparently had much in common with the lives Dean and Sam Winchester led. It made Peter wonder if a hunter was being used as a consultant on the series. Travis must have told Richard about the events at astro camp where he'd met the Winchesters as he seemed quite familiar with Dean and Sam. Neal gave no hint of believing his own experiences over the past twenty-four hours had anything to do with the supernatural. That was a small bit of comfort.

Just to listen to Neal, it would be hard to know anything was wrong, but his actions betrayed his true condition. He made no attempt to sit upright, and flinched at any sudden movements.

"Can I bring you anything to eat?" Richard offered. "The cafeteria downstairs looks decent and you've missed out on a day's worth of meals. Anything appeal to you?"

"Could you see if they have any smoothies?" Neal asked.

"Better bring back two of those," Peter added and, calling out to Neal he'd be right back, accompanied Richard into the hallway.

"The doctor said Neal wasn't injured, but plainly he's suffering from something," Richard said, keeping his voice low. "What's going on?"

"Dr. Nguyen was right that Neal has no physical injury, but during the VR procedure the memory of a back injury was implanted. Now he's experiencing psychosomatic symptoms. When I spoke earlier with Nguyen, he warned me this could happen. He advises not making an issue of it till Neal sees a specialist. The doctor deliberately kept his questions to a minimum. He felt it would do more harm than good to point out symptoms at this point. You did the right thing to ignore them as well."

Richard promised to inform the others so they'd be prepared.

When Peter reentered the room, Neal broke into a relieved smile. "I was beginning to worry that you'd disappeared on me."

"No such luck. You're stuck with me, Sundance." Peter pulled up a chair to sit close to his bed. "You know I have to ask what you remember about your experience. Would you rather wait?"

"No, I'd rather get it over with," said Neal quickly, but his expression grew guarded.

"It's for the best," Peter added, more for his sake than Neal's. He felt like a jerk to place him back in that hellhole so soon. "You can provide invaluable information about what Rolf's plans are. If we delay you may forget."

"I wish I could," he huffed. Neal cast a quick glance at him and added, "Don't look so worried. I'm fine now that I know it wasn't real."

Peter wished it were that easy, but he knew it wouldn't be. "You said you were awakened at three by the police and a Bureau agent who claimed they were putting you under arrest. That tallies with the video we have. There's a manhunt out to find them. Two of them were identified as being local petty thieves. The third one—the fake agent—hasn't been yet. Authorities are using facial recognition software to try to track him down." He hoped that when Neal heard the details of what
had actually occurred, it would help bridge the gap between the world of reality and the virtual one he'd been trapped in for twelve hours.

"They claimed they were arresting me under orders of Hughes. He'd been given evidence that I stole a painting from the Louvre, *The Astronomer* by Vermeer."

"*The Astronomer*?" Peter repeated, startled. "I remember that painting. It was the one you wanted to show us, but it wasn't on display."

"That's right, and that's not the only connection to our trip. Supposedly I stole it on our last night in Paris, June 1." Neal stopped to take a drink of water. "I wasn't given any other details during the initial arrest. It came out in the trial that museum officials had gone to the Louvre storage warehouse to retrieve the painting and discovered it was missing. When they reviewed surveillance camera footage, we'd been recorded stealing the painting."

Peter swallowed. "I was charged too?"

"Not only you . . ." Neal paused and shook his head, looking away at the window for a minute. Peter wished he could ease up on the questioning but the information was too vital.

When he'd regained his composure, Neal went on in a lower voice. "Elizabeth was charged as well. I'd asked to call you when the police broke into my room. They denied permission and when they took me downstairs, I found out why. The two of you were already in a squad car with other cops."

"Did they take you down in the main elevator?"

"No, a service one."

"That must have been when they drugged you. We have footage of a police car speeding away from the parking garage at 3:15 in the morning. Needless to say, we were asleep at the time. Not in the patrol car."

"Yeah, I get that."

"The first memory I had of any length was waking up in a townhouse Klaus had rented. My memories of the earlier events are scattered fragments like snapshots. But they're startlingly vivid. I've been piecing them together. Scenes of Hughes interrogating me. Kramer was also brought in." His jaw clenched as he reviewed the scene. "Standing in court to hear my sentence. How you were convicted too. Being in a cell . . . The attack."

"You've mentioned that before. Do you remember any of the details?"

"It wasn't sexual, if that's what you were thinking," he said quickly. "I was in a cell with two other inmates. I have no memory of what caused the attack. They slammed me against a wall. Klaus told me I had a severe concussion . . ." He shook his head and took a drink of water. It appeared to be an automatic gesture to help calm his thoughts. "Klaus explained that I was in pretty bad shape afterward—with recurring bouts of amnesia—that's why my memory was so faulty. I wasn't improving."

"How did Klaus explain that he knew what happened?"

Neal gave a humorless chuckle. "My arrest and conviction were supposedly front page news in Europe as well as the States." He added in a lower voice, "As was yours. The press had a field day reporting how I'd corrupted you, dragged El into it." His words trailed off.
Peter placed his hand on Neal's arm, hoping the solidity would reassure him. "None of this was real, remember?"

He looked up. "You gotta think of another word. Every time you say remember, I hear Klaus saying the same thing in my head."

"That must have been a device to reinforce the images they were planting inside you."

Neal nodded agreement. "Klaus had a source inside the prison who was feeding him information. After the attack, he sneaked into the prison and broke me out. I have only the briefest of recollections of the escape—broken shards. We were discovered at the last minute when we were almost free. I was shot in the back as I entered the car."

The way Neal was talking, it wasn't like he was remembering a dream. Peter had interrogated hundreds of people. Neal was reliving the experiences of prison and his convalescence with Klaus as if they were real. He shifted his position several times in bed, making an occasional grimace. What would be the consequences of the procedure Neal had endured? He'd been dragged into a world where a dead man was alive, and for now that alternate reality continued to hold him in its grip.

Notes: I live in Houston and because of problems associated with Hurricane Harvey decided to post this chapter early. I hope to be on a regular schedule next week and post Chapter 10 on September 6.

Virtual reality is currently being used to implant false memories as a psychological tool to modify behavior. Some scientists warn of addictions which may occur from being immersed too long in an alternate reality. Weller was right when he said therapists have employed virtual reality to successfully treat phobias. But I could find nothing to substantiate anything equivalent to Penfold's technique. Rolf must have confiscated all the research.

To craft his strategy, Rolf prepared an analysis of Neal where he identified several key vulnerabilities. I wrote about them for our blog in a post called Target: Neal Caffrey. Next week, Neal reveals to Peter how Klaus faked his death.

The pilot of Supernatural was actually given an advance screening at Comic-Con 2005. David Tennant and Billie Piper may have been present. In the summer of 2005, preliminary work was underway for the premiere of the Tenth Doctor in the upcoming Christmas special.

Thanks for reading and special thanks to Penna for venturing inside the unnerving mind of Azathoth with me!

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Nocturne in Black and Gold board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon
Peter had spent the past hour questioning Neal about what happened in the nightmarish virtual reality he'd been subjected to. Although Neal didn't dispute that his memories were fake, he was steadfast in his conviction that Klaus was alive.

Under the circumstances, Peter decided to go along with the pretense. "Did Klaus explain how he faked his death?" he asked.

"Last summer he had a plastic surgeon operate on a member of his crew. The man was already the same height and approximate weight. The surgeon turned him into a perfect double. Klaus planned to use him in his heists. It would allow the Leopard to be at two places at once. It also gave him the option of having the double play the role of Klaus Mansfield, investment advisor, while he committed a heist." Neal hesitated for a moment. "That body I saw on the ground outside the museum—I can close my eyes and still see his face. I was certain it was Klaus."

"You weren't alone. All of us did. There was never any question that the man who plunged to his death was Klaus Mansfield. His fingerprints weren't on file, so we couldn't compare them, but no one thought it was necessary. I suppose it was conceivable that it was someone else . . ."

Could it have actually happened? Had Rolf fabricated the story or had his brother been working alongside him to manipulate both Neal and Peter for months? Was Klaus in Los Angeles now? For the first time, Peter allowed himself to consider the possibility. On the surface it seemed illogical that Klaus would have wanted to explain to Neal how he'd done it. But, based on what Weller had learned about the procedure, Neal wasn't supposed to remember. Peter forced himself to hold off on any further speculation and prompted Neal to continue.

"Klaus told me that when I forged the Vermeer painting for him at his townhouse he realized how conflicted I was about the job. In thinking back, I can understand that. I was treading a thin line between trying to encourage Klaus to change course and acting as a loyal member of his crew. He called me out a few times for not sounding like I used to." He lowered his voice. "You were aware of the issues. I'd hoped he'd turn back before it was too late."

Peter moved his chair even closer to the bed so he could hear Neal better. His voice was barely audible as he reviewed the painful memories. "You told us how cautious Klaus was. He may not have trusted you, no matter what you said. He knew you worked for the FBI. It must have been a concern that you were playing him. When did he pull the switch?"

"In the museum. He had his double hide in another storeroom of the Met. When the team moved in to arrest us, Klaus retreated to the storeroom. He switched places with his double and remained concealed in the closet."

"Did Klaus also order him to not surrender?"

"I asked him about that and Klaus claimed he honestly believed the man could escape. He regretted his death bitterly."

"He would say that," Peter pointed out.

"Yeah, I know. Klaus had taken care of his family so generously that the man was willing to do
whatever he asked. That much does sound like the Klaus I knew. When Marta and Jacek's little boy was injured, he handled all the arrangements for them to return to Prague."

"Did he give you the double's name?"

"No, but maybe it will be on one of those files from the plastic surgeon that Aidan is trying to decrypt. Klaus waited till the next morning when the museum was full of visitors to make his getaway. He's been hiding out in Europe ever since."

"It does sound plausible even if it's a lie," Peter admitted.

"But it's not." Neal locked his eyes onto him as if willing him to believe. "I understand six months haven't gone by. I realize I don't have a beard. There's no back wound. But I'm also certain only Klaus could have supplied the programmer with the wealth of details used on me. No one else could have recreated his mannerisms and speech so perfectly. If Klaus isn't alive, then we'd have to believe he'd just happened to give Rolf an incredibly detailed dossier on me as if he knew what was going to happen. And I find that unacceptable. We discussed at length the day we met. That was in Parma, Italy. He saw me sketching at the museum and stopped to chat for a moment. Afterward he invited me to lunch."

As Neal reviewed how Klaus described where they'd gone, what wine he'd ordered—so many seemingly insignificant details—Peter's uncertainty grew.

The emotional strain for Neal of reliving the experiences was growing increasingly apparent, and Peter was drained as well. He decided to postpone further questions. El would arrive soon. Peter had been texting her throughout the evening. Aidan and Keiko would drop her off at the hospital before taking the suitcases to the hotel where Richard and Travis were waiting for them. A nurse had already come by to unhook the tubes.

"Would you like to change out of that charming hospital gown before El gets here?" he asked.

There it was again. That worried look. Every time Peter mentioned El, a shadow crossed over Neal's face. Surely he wasn't concerned that she'd be upset at him? Yet another piece of the puzzle which needed a solution but now was not the time. Neal glanced down at his gown and broke into a crooked smile, one of his few of the evening. "Not exactly my style is it?"

"I'm afraid you'll have to wait for the hotel for fresh clothes, but the clothes you had on are in good shape. Sleep pants and a t-shirt may not be as fashionable as you'd like—"

"Compared with this, they'll be fine."

Peter brought Neal's clothes over to the bed. When he handed Neal his t-shirt, he didn't make a move. "You sure you're ready for this?" Peter asked. "You can stay here overnight. I'll camp out here too."

Neal didn't answer for a minute. Absently, he took his t-shirt and clenched it in his hands. "For nine months Klaus and Rolf jerked us around. Made us think we'd been responsible for killing him. Used us. Mocked us." He fell silent, his fingers still twisting his t-shirt.

"We'll make 'em pay," Peter said quietly. "First step is getting up and reclaiming your life. You're in control, not Klaus."

He nodded and reached for the back ties on his gown, wincing at the movement.

"You need help?"
He shook his head quickly. "I can manage."

Despite his words, it wasn't easy. Neal hadn't left the bed since he arrived. He was stiff and awkward in putting on his t-shirt while attempting to keep his back rigid as a board. Slipping into sleep pants would be a major challenge, but he rejected Peter's attempts to provide assistance.

Peter sat down. To give Neal some privacy, he pretended to be engrossed in reading the discharge papers. Out of the corner of his eye he monitored Neal's progress. By swinging his legs off the bed, he was eventually able to get the pants on without standing up. Afterward he sank back on the bed to rest.

Peter gave him a few minutes before approaching him. "You wanna try putting weight on those legs?"

"Sitting's good," he countered, breathing heavily and made an unsuccessful attempt at a smile. He wasn't just exhausted from the exertion. Those were lines of pain on his face.

Peter didn't know what was better in the circumstances. Neal knew he wasn't injured but his brain wasn't cooperating. "Would you like me to get a walker?" he asked, treading carefully.

Neal gazed at him horrified. "Absolutely not, and no wheelchair either. I can do this. I just needed to rest a moment." He moved to the edge of the bed and slowly slid off. Peter held himself back from lending a hand. Neal needed to evaluate for himself what his condition was.

He wobbled for a moment, bracing himself with one arm on the bed while righting himself.

"Tell me honestly. How painful is it?"

He swallowed. "It's manageable." He took a few tentative steps before retreating to the bed. "Shit," he muttered, leaning against it. He was sweating from the effort. Neal never cursed. "What did they do to me? I shouldn't be feeling like this."

"Your subconscious doesn't know that. It's still remembering what it was like."

"I don't want to remember. I want to forget," he said in a low voice, sinking back onto the mattress.

Peter sat down beside him. "I hate that you have to go through this, but the fact you remember gives us the best chance of fighting whatever they tried to do to you."

"You don't think I'm a ticking time bomb?" asked Neal, his face a mixture of attempted humor and anxiety.

Neal deserved an honest answer but there were so many uncertainties. "I don't know what they tried to program into you, but I'm confident if we work together we can defuse anything they throw at us. How about giving it another shot? And this time we'll stroll together through this luxurious room."

He hesitated then relaxed into a nod. "A little assist would be good."

Peter kept an arm wrapped lightly around his shoulders as they walked. At first Neal needed to stop every couple of steps as he fought to repress the false signals his mind was sending him, but gradually he regained his confidence. After a few minutes, he stopped. "I think I'm ready to remove the training wheels."

Peter lifted off his hands. "Go for it, hotshot."
Neal took a few tentative steps then slowly walked with more confidence. "I may not be ready for the Indy 500, but point me to a beginner's racetrack and I'm your man."

Peter took a deep breath. He'd take that as a signal the damage wouldn't be long-lasting. "You need to sit down?"

"I've been doing too much of that," but he moved next to a wall where he could lean on it while they talked.

When El arrived, Neal was the one to respond to her knock on the door. Peter noticed a flash of apprehension cross his face when he saw who it was.

Peter's concern redoubled. How had Rolf poisoned Neal's feelings about her?

**The Ritz-Carlton, Marina del Rey. Friday evening.**

Rolf performed one final check of the suite to verify he hadn't left anything behind. He didn't plan to make a return trip to California for a long time. He still had an hour before he needed to leave for the airport. He'd yet to hear from Klaus. He should have arrived in Budapest an hour ago. Would nothing this evening go right?

He put aside reviewing contingency plans when his cell phone finally rang.

"Sorry, I'm late," Klaus said. "My plane was held over in Frankfurt. Have you already started the celebration?"

"That would be premature." Rolf sat down in front of the patio doors. The sky was dark, as black as the sky in Whistler's painting.

"Was there a delay?" Klaus demanded in a sharper tone. "By now Neal should have been moved to the aquarium."

"That's no longer possible since he's in the hospital."

Klaus remained silent for a long moment. In the background Rolf could hear the voices of taxi dispatchers. Klaus must have gone outside the airport to place his call. "What went wrong?"

"I knew I'd picked a worthy opponent. Herr Burke bested us. They discovered Neal at Scima."

"When?" His voice registered as a harsh bark.

"Calm yourself. The procedure was within minutes of being concluded."

"Did Marta escape?"

"No. She and the doctor are both being held by the police. It was only because we had the forethought to position an operative outside the security gate that I know about it. He saw them being driven off. I've heard nothing from either Marta or Penfold. Our agent estimates that the agents arrived at six thirty. He saw two Scima shuttle buses arrive at that time and suspects the agents were inside. When the police cars and ambulances appeared on the campus, he alerted me. He followed an ambulance to the UCLA Medical Center and was able to determine Neal had been admitted, but he was unable to obtain any details about his condition."

"Erasmus said he needed fourteen hours to complete the procedure. How exact was that estimate?"

Klaus was being unrealistic in his demands. Rolf needed to calm him down before he talked with
Anya. "You may recall that the doctor explained he'd built in a cushion. It's quite likely that the procedure was a complete success. We were able to implant what we needed and now Neal has no recollection of what occurred. The last step was to build the wall to quarantine the memories. Until I've talked with Erasmus we can't be sure. I shall need to reevaluate our next step."

Klaus grunted. "Initial damage assessment?"

Rolf knew what a bitter pill this was for Klaus to swallow. He felt the same way. Their goal was zero recall. Rolf looked at the expanse of dark ocean in front of him as he considered his answer. "Marta won't talk. I'm convinced of that. The plastic surgery was superb. Even if Peter suspects she's Marta, he won't be able to prove it. The Dutch may push for her extradition. That may provide the best opportunity to extract her. As for Penfold, he's a devious character, and a greedy one. He may be able to convince the police he was an innocent dupe. We've prepared both of them for the possibility of being arrested. Now that it has occurred I have every confidence, they'll execute their orders. Marta's loyalty is unshakeable, and Penfold's greed will prevent him from talking."

"I'll prepare Anya. She won't be pleased about Marta."

"True, but we should downplay the negative consequences. Even if Neal remembers some of the events, that won't negate the effect they'll have on him. I'm quite confident that with a little fine-tuning we will still achieve our goal."

"What if Neal informs the others?"

"The odds are low of that happening. Neal will be mired in guilt over the emotions we planted. He won't want to tell his father figure how excited he was to resume his life as a thief. But suppose for argument's sake, he does. If he mentions the Vermeer to Peter, it will accomplish little. Most likely Peter would consider it something Azathoth dreamed up in order to taunt them. If he does transmit the information to the French and they check their storage facility, they'll find the painting in place. I doubt they'll realize it's a forgery, but we'll be able to judge by following the news bulletins. If the theft is discovered, Interpol will carry the reports within hours. Then we'll simply advance the timetable. The forgery was sufficient for our needs. I verified it personally. Bianka may not be up to Neal's level, but she'll make a good apprentice for him. Under his tutelage she'll advance quickly."

"I'm not as confident as you, but I agree that there won't be any harm done by discovering the switch. A more serious issue is that now Neal knows about us."

"So what? The world believes we're both dead. Peter will think he's delusional, perhaps suffering from a psychotic episode." It was clear Klaus still needed reassurance. He lacked Rolf's confidence that everything would still work out as they'd planned. At the moment Rolf viewed Anya as the most serious concern. She'd been growing increasingly impatient about the length of time the operation was requiring. Now that they were so close, they couldn't lose her approval.

"Consider for a moment," Rolf went on. "Peter found Neal hooked up to a machine. He will quickly discover where Penfold's expertise lies. He will assume that we fed Neal a pack of lies to disorient and confuse him. If Neal begins raving about you and me being alive, Peter will naturally attribute it to the drugs. They have no evidence to corroborate Neal's account."

"Burke is clever," Klaus warned. "I wouldn't be so complacent."

"All right. Suppose Neal remembers everything and Peter believes him. There's nothing they can do about it." Rolf strove to project his confidence onto his brother. "We hold all the cards. We have the Vermeer. With Kramer in our pocket, we can initiate the next phase whenever we like. We'll be
able to assess how much Neal remembers based on how he conducts himself. The memory of the wound we implanted is severe enough that if he remembers the injury he won't be able to disguise it. Our agents are monitoring him and will report their findings. In the next few days we should know for sure."

"Very well," Klaus agreed. "I'll contact Kramer. He should be prepared to act quickly, but my hope is he won't be needed. I'd like to give Neal time to discover the secret concerning the Braque painting before we move."

"Yes, I'd like to have that mystery solved, too." Why was Vincent Adler so interested in purchasing it? The offer he was making was far more than its value. Until that question was answered, Rolf was content to let the Braque remain in Neal's hands.

Rolf rose from his chair. "My plane awaits. We'll discuss it further once I'm in Hungary. In hindsight I'm glad you recommended inserting the wildcard. That will also help assess the effectiveness of the operation."

"Neal is an open book to me. If he remembers, he won't be able to resist searching for what I hid in the gargoyle of the church."

"The cameras are in place, I assume?"

"Of course. At the first hint of activity, we'll know about it."

Rolf smiled. Klaus was on board. He'd ensure that Anya was, too.

**WCWCWCWCWCWCWC**

Peter awakened early on Saturday morning. El was still fast asleep. It had been a late night and a draining one. He was glad she was finally able to rest.

Peter slid out of bed and padded out of the room in bare feet, closing the bedroom door quietly behind him. Scima had booked them into the Presidential Suite of the Kimpton Hotel Palomar. They must be feeling extremely guilty about what had happened, and they should. Even if they'd been duped by Marta, in her disguise of Katja Visser she was their employee.

The Presidential Suite consisted of two bedrooms with separate baths, living room, and kitchenette. The living room came with a large sectional sofa and ottomans, wall-mounted TV, and panoramic views of the city. Peter would have been uncomfortable at the extravagance under normal circumstances, but that was hardly the case now. And as a practical matter, the layout allowed him to keep a careful watch on Neal.

Peter started the coffee then walked over to the floor-to-ceiling windows to gaze out at the L.A. skyline. There were no sounds coming from Neal's room. Peter hoped that meant he was asleep.

By the time El arrived at the hospital last night, Neal was walking well enough to insist he leave under his own power. Peter wasn't sure if his need to escape was elevated from his ordeal or simply a reflection of his usual loathing for hospitals. Neal wasn't an invalid. There was nothing physically wrong with him. Peter hoped that rejoining the world would help his subconscious realize that.

Peter had texted El earlier, and she came prepared with a wheelchair, claiming that the hospital rules mandated its use. Neal grumbled but accepted the restriction. He probably realized that navigating the hospital corridors without assistance would have been beyond his capability. Peter suspected he would have even agreed to be transported out on a gurney. Anything so long as he
Neal didn't say much on the drive to the hotel. He answered El's questions politely but evasively. To fill in the awkward gaps, Peter rehashed the search through the aquariums for El's benefit. They chalked up Neal's mood to exhaustion and didn't press.

When they arrived at the hotel, Aidan, Keiko, Travis, and Richard were there to greet him. His walk was a little tentative, but Peter was pleased to see there was no limp. If anyone didn't know better, they'd think he was simply tired. Peter found himself hovering a foot or so away and tried not to make it noticeable. The others had been warned not to mention the supposed injury.

When they got upstairs, Neal had gone immediately to his room. They'd given him the master bedroom with the soaking tub, and he said he'd indulge in it before going to bed. Peter had been reassured that there was no outside deck from any of the rooms. He was half a mind to sleep in the living room to guard the door. Travis had installed a security camera in the hallway outside the entrance. There was already an electronic keypad for the front door of the suite. The additional security was another reason Peter hadn't objected to Scima renting it for them.

Peter viewed it as unlikely that Rolf would make another attempt so soon. Did he feel confident he'd already succeeded?

Peter had stayed up emailing the team a status update. It was already morning in France—late enough to call Marcel Jauffret in Paris. Marcel was the French representative on the Interpol art crimes task force. Peter and Neal had developed a good working relationship with him during their time in Paris last month. The connections they'd made during that trip were now proving invaluable.

The thought that the Vermeer painting had been stolen haunted Peter. Marcel promised to check on its status and call in a report later that day. If a theft had occurred, Marcel agreed to keep it a secret until he'd have a chance to consult with Peter.

El had curled up on the couch and read a novel while Peter worked. They were both monitoring for any sounds of distress coming from Neal's room. Peter couldn't fault Neal for declining the sleeping pill the hospital had provided. After what he'd experienced, it was understandable he didn't want any more drugs. But had he been able to sleep? If he'd had any nightmares, they'd been quiet ones.

The sun was beginning to rise over the skyscrapers, promising another beautiful day in Los Angeles. When the coffee was ready, Peter poured himself a cup and started on his list of phone calls.

He'd moved on to emails and was well into his second cup before anyone joined him. A sleepy-eyed El opened the bedroom door a little after seven. "When did you get up?" she asked.

"A while ago," he admitted. "Couldn't sleep. I spoke with Tricia. She'd texted me during the night to give her a call."

El sat down at the dinette table while Peter went into the kitchenette to pour her a cup of coffee. The round table was equipped with comfortable club chairs so that it could be used as a game table.

"What did she have to say?" El asked.

"I'd written her last night about Penfold, and she's familiar with the procedure he used. She'd attended a symposium at Quantico last spring on psychological manipulation. The speaker was a
professor of neuropsychology at Columbia. He also serves as a consultant for the CIA. Tricia remembered he'd discussed the use of virtual reality in that context and she dug out the notes she'd made."

"I can tell by your expression the news isn't good," El commented.

He sat down beside her. "She confirmed my fears. When Agent Weller first told me about it, I couldn't believe something like that could actually be effective. Then, when I saw the pain Neal was experiencing from a non-existent back injury, I realized this was much more serious than I first realized. Tricia said the speaker, Jacob Nussbaum, reported that the Chinese have been performing extensive research on the topic. Nussbaum mentioned Penfold as being at the forefront of the technology."

"What are you saying?" she asked, her eyes widening. "That the procedure worked?"

"It's too early to tell. Tricia explained that for the procedure to be considered a complete success the patient has no recollection of the memories on a conscious level. Instead, they're buried in the subconscious. In some cases, the objective is to bring back the memories by use of a trigger—some event or object—which provokes a response. In other cases, the memories stay buried, whereas the emotions they provoke are on the surface. Tricia believes it's a good sign that Neal remembers so much now. She plans to contact Nussbaum today."

El fingered her cup. "Are we sure we can trust him? I'm beginning to adopt Mozzie's attitude of trust no one."

He placed his hand on hers and squeezed it gently. "We can't let ourselves sink to Mozzie's level of paranoia. Tricia stressed the importance of Neal describing every detail he can remember. That will be my challenge for the day."

"It's clear that Rolf intended to distance Neal from his friends and colleagues. Make him feel that he would be a danger to us. Do you think there's any chance that Klaus is alive?"

"That's one of many reasons I didn't sleep much last night," Peter admitted. "I would blow it off as impossible but Neal is so convinced of it, he's forcing me to reconsider. We both saw Klaus's body when he fell to his death. An autopsy was performed, but there was no reason to hold onto DNA evidence. The body was returned to his parents who had it cremated. They'd done the same with what they assumed was Rolf's corpse. Now there's nothing to be exhumed. Our best hope at this point is that Travis and Aidan will be able to decrypt the plastic surgeon's files and provide corroboration."

She looked at him anxiously. "From what you told me, that's weeks off. How will you handle it in the meantime?"

"I've decided not to question Neal's belief. I've also advised the team members to do likewise. It would only add to Neal's stress to be doubted, and I have no proof to convince him he's wrong."

"You don't think Neal will bolt, do you?"

"It's a concern and needs to be evaluated," Peter said, not feeling at all confident of the answer. "In the past when he felt overwhelmed, that was his instinctual reaction."

"Should we stick with what we planned last night?"

"Yes, I think that's . . . and look who else is the early bird!" Neal had opened his door. An uncertain smile was on his face, as he walked toward them. His walk was still slow and hesitant with a slight
limp, but given what Tricia said, perhaps that was for the best. It could indicate he hadn't forgotten anything.

El rose to give Neal a hug, and, unlike the previous evening, this time he returned it. When she asked him how the night had gone, he deflected. The dark circles under his eyes told a more truthful tale, but Peter let it pass.

Neal handed him a USB drive. "For your eyes only . . . and those you designate. I know you like to say what happens in the field happens in the file. I figured that applies to what happens in the mind."

Peter nodded. "I wish that wasn't the case, but thank you. This is what you were working on in your bedroom last night?"

"Instead of sleeping," El added reproachfully, pouring him a cup of coffee. "I should be giving you herbal tea instead."

"Don't even think it!" Neal said, protecting his cup with his hands. "I'll make up for the sleep later. Writing everything down helped clarify my thoughts, and . . . I was concerned I'd wake up and not remember anything."

"Did that happen?" Peter asked, not knowing what he should hope for.

"The memories are still there," he admitted. "If anything, they're more vivid than last night. Perhaps because the drugs they gave me have worn off."

They had their break delivered to their suite. Peter joked about running up Scima's bill, but Neal didn't pick up the low-hanging fruit with his normal banter. *Time*, Peter reminded himself, it would take time.

When El asked what he wanted to eat, Neal shrugged off making a decision, letting her select for him. She ordered omelets, ham, and fruit for all of them.

Despite claiming he wasn't hungry, the food appeared to do him good and he became more talkative over breakfast. "I found a voicemail on my phone from Noelle. They're flying back with Henry today. He'll spend a few days in Baltimore before returning to New York."

"It's excellent news that Henry's well enough to travel," El said. "Did you let Noelle know anything about your situation?"

"No, I don't understand it enough myself. Besides, she already has plenty to worry about." He looked over at Peter. "Any news from Weller?"

"Not yet. I'll go in the office later in the day."

"Can I go in with you?"

"We'll see." Neal would need a psychological evaluation before being allowed in any FBI facility but Peter didn't want to hit him over the head with it. He would realize that on his own once he thought about it. "Our focus this morning will be to review what happened and make sure we've captured every detail you can remember."

Over breakfast, Peter explained what Tricia had found out about the procedure. Neal handled the news well. At the end, he said, "I understand why I shouldn't go to the office. Penfold's technique supposedly can modify behavior. What have I been programmed to do?"
As Neal looked to him for the words to make it right, Peter wished he had them. Saying that they'd have to wait for an expert to weigh in wasn't a satisfactory response for either one of them.

"Neal, I hope you don't mind my asking," El said, "but what was my part in the lies they planted in your head? The reason I ask is that you appeared anxious when you saw me in the hospital."

He hesitated for a moment before replying. "You were included, but as you say, they were lies. It's for the best you don't know about them."

"No, it's not," she protested. "Rolf tried to use me to manipulate you. Exposing the lies should dilute their potency."

Neal looked to Peter for help. "I have to agree with El on this," Peter said. "It's important for both of us to know what we're dealing with. Eventually all the details will have to come out."

"It's ugly," Neal said quietly. "I'd rather you were spared."

"It can't be worse than what I imagine," she countered. "Please tell me."

He took a moment to collect his thoughts. "The short version is that you were charged as an accessory to the theft. One memory I have is of you visiting me in prison. At the time Peter was also imprisoned, but not in the same ward. Unlike us, you weren't considered a flight risk and were out on bail. You were furious at me for having caused Peter to be arrested."

Her face whitened. "I'm so sorry, Neal."

"It wasn't you, I know that." He cleared his throat. "You're sure you want to know the rest?"

"I think I have to. Rolf could try to take advantage of the images, and it's better for me to be prepared."

Neal nodded reluctant agreement. "You were in the courtroom when my verdict was pronounced. I have a vivid impression of what your face looked like." He gazed down at his hands and paused a moment before continuing. "There was one other snapshot. I can see the newspaper article which reported you'd been killed in a car crash. You were on your way home after having met with me in prison. You were so upset, you must not have been paying attention to the road. The report said you were killed instantly." He looked up to scan her face. "I see you in front of me, alive, healthy, but my mind tells me you're dead and I was the one responsible." He rubbed his hands in his hair as if he were trying to erase the image. "This is stupid," he muttered. "I shouldn't feel like this."

El's eyes filled with tears. "No, it's not. They made you believe it actually happened."

Peter took a slow breath to calm his own emotions. He'd dreaded for a long time that Rolf would involve El in his manipulations, and it had finally happened. Neal's greatest fear was hurting people and Rolf knew it. He'd played on that emotion and combined it with Neal's tendency to put women on a pedestal. Undoing the damage had become a much more formidable challenge.

Notes: Like Neal and Peter, I also believed Klaus Mansfeld had died at the Metropolitan Museum of Art last fall. But it didn't take long for me to hear whispers that he'd escaped. Neal is an expert at faking death. Wouldn't his former mentor be as well? I've written about Klaus for our blog in a post called "Klaus Mansfeld: The Character Who Wouldn't Stay Dead."
Next week one of the kidnappers is captured and Peter receives unsettling news from Paris.

Thanks so much for your comments and messages of support. I still don't have power but hope to in the next few days. Floodwaters came to within a street of us but no water came into our house. Fortunately the chapter was at the final tweaking stage.

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Nocturne in Black and Gold board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon
Prisoner


Neal's nerves were left raw after he described the part El had played in his virtual reality nightmare. He was relieved to hear Peter call a timeout from questions during the rest of breakfast.

Simply sitting at the same table with them felt disconcertingly awkward. His non-existent wound was throbbing again as if to punish him for the pain he'd inflicted on both El and Peter. His rational self could argue till he was blue in the face that none of it had actually happened. His emotions remained unconvinced.

After breakfast, El excused herself. She'd mentioned earlier that Keiko had offered to take her around to her favorite haunts in Beverly Hills. Neal knew the real reason for the trip was to give him and Peter some privacy. The agenda for the morning was not one he was looking forward to. He would have preferred reviewing the implanted memories outside, but they couldn't take a chance of being overheard.

Peter suggested they move into the living room. He brought in pillows from the bedroom so Neal could flop on the couch. Neal only offered a token resistance. His sleep the previous night had been minimal. Whenever the nightmares woke him up, he'd returned to writing the report. No chance of falling asleep now either, but resting on the cushions eased the pain in his back.

Peter looked up from his laptop. "Hughes testified at your trial as well as Jones and Diana?"

Neal nodded. "That was brutal, but it was only a brief sequence." He was glad Peter didn't make him repeat the details. Describing the events in writing made them seem less real. "Klaus told me that Kramer set us up. He was acting under Ydrus's orders. They were determined to have our reputations destroyed because we were causing too much disruption to their activities. Kramer quickly discovered that Hughes and the assistant director readily believed the lies he spread about us."

Peter made no comment about how Kramer was depicted but wrote down several notes. His next questions all concerned Rolf. "How did you react to the news Rolf was alive?"

"I remember being stunned when Klaus told me. No chance of believing that memory was real. Rolf had persuaded Klaus to keep me in the dark during my apprenticeship in Geneva. Klaus was preparing to tell me when I fled. Last fall in New York, Klaus intended to bring me in. Once he grew suspicious that I was working undercover, he canceled his plans."

"What did he say about Ydrus?"

"Klaus was approached by Ydrus but turned them down. He never mentioned Rolf in connection with the group. Ydrus has been courting Klaus. When Kramer heard I was working undercover with Klaus, he alerted them. Ydrus warned Klaus about me as part of their campaign to demonstrate how useful they could be to him."

"It was a clever lie," Peter remarked thoughtfully. "Kramer could have found out about the op. At the time, we hadn't heard about Ydrus and had no reason to suspect an informant was working at the Bureau."

"After the events that night at the Met, Rolf and Klaus formulated a plan to win us both over. Their
hope was that you too would realize the Bureau was corrupt and you'd be better off working with them."

"It sounds like the Arkham Files strategy was working," Peter commented. "That's exactly what we wanted them to believe. Tricia and Diana will be very happy to hear this."

"The seeds were already there well before Diana started writing," Neal warned. "Rolf and Klaus don't think of themselves as bad guys, just superior. They assume their lifestyle is something you'd want to emulate. Klaus told me that Rolf staged the Galileo forgery primarily as an enticement for you."

"That would mean they'd already been studying us well before October when the theft occurred," Peter pointed out. "Despite Klaus's claim, my bet is they were both working closely with Ydrus. The informant could have kept them updated about our cases."

Neal agreed with Peter's reasoning and appreciated he wasn't disputing that Klaus was alive. "Rolf designed the house of horror as an elaborate video game so we'd realize the kind of thrills that awaited us if we worked with them. Klaus claimed they didn't intend to injure us when they held us prisoner. As he reviewed the traps, I remember thinking how exhilarated we'd both been... how much we loved the element of danger. I never once thought of the cruelty of what they'd done." Neal stopped abruptly, the bile rising once more in his throat. Klaus and Rolf had staged an attack where Neal was led to believe he'd killed Peter. How could he have possibly been okay with what Klaus told him?

Peter placed a hand on his arm, grounding him. "Those were fake memories. Their twisted version of reality."

Neal nodded, taking a moment to gain control of his emotions. "Klaus apologized for the severity of the traps. He said that he regretted his brother had gone overboard, but at the time Rolf was angry at me for betraying his brother to the Bureau. He wanted to remind us of Klaus's supposed death at the Met by having one of us appear to kill the other."

"For that alone, I'll never be able to forgive him."

With difficulty Neal wrenched himself away from the memory of seeing the man he thought was Peter lying dead on the floor. "After that, there were no more incidents where they physically threatened us. Klaus took responsibility for the origami on the Christmas tree at the Museum of Natural History as well as the golden lion pendant. He also said he'd stolen the Hilliard miniature as a signal to me."

"What about the attack at the Scima Workshop in England?"

"Klaus claimed Kramer was responsible."

"I should have known," Peter scoffed. "Was Kramer blamed for every bad thing that happened?"

Neal shrugged. "Just about. Klaus had made friends with an operative at Ydrus who was keeping him informed of Kramer's actions. Ydrus helped him arrange the trap. The Mansfelds had nothing to do with it."

"How about Marta? She'd been recorded on the Scima campus. Her name was on the painting which Chapman showed us."

"She was also framed. Klaus mentioned that she and Jacek were still working for him, not Ydrus."
Peter snorted. "I can't wait for Tricia to hear this. Klaus and Rolf want you to believe that their crew is just like us—we're all innocent victims of the big bad Ydrus."

"And you don't even know the full scope yet. Kramer had read the file about the abduction in the fall, and with the help of Ydrus began copying Azathoth's moves. The first time Kramer framed Azathoth was when he sent you the doctored playing card in your newspaper."

"They wanted you to believe Kramer did that? What was his motivation?"

"Ydrus had decided to frame Azathoth for our deaths. The playing card was supposed to serve as an omen. Ydrus ordered Bryan McKenzie to kill me. When that failed, they focused their sights on you and tried to make it appear that Azathoth was the one responsible. Klaus felt that Ydrus actually intended for you to die in London. Placing you in the TARDIS at the bottom of the Underwater Stage was not a prank. They assumed I'd quit the FBI if something happened to you."

Peter shook his head in disbelief.

"Klaus was more than ready to praise Rolf's technological expertise, but he insisted both of them abhorred violence. It was an agent of Ydrus who murdered the detective in Prague. Ydrus appropriated symbols of Azathoth—water and the octopus—with the intention of damaging Rolf's reputation so I'd never want to join his crew. Klaus repeated several times that he and Rolf never hurt anyone."

Peter grunted. "Klaus knew what you needed to hear. Did he realize we knew Rolf was disguising himself at Alistair Chapman?"

"I don't think so. He referred to Chapman as the creative director of Scima. Klaus also insisted that Kramer was the one who planted the Vermeer painting in your townhouse."

Peter stopped him, cursing under his breath. "They found the painting at my house?"

"You were storing it for me in your gun safe while I found a buyer. I remember seeing at my trial a video of you, me, and El talking about the Vermeer at the Louvre. Peter, we actually did that."

His face flashed recognition. "And not just that. I was teasing the two of you about the other painting. What was it? A Caravaggio?"

Neal thought a moment. "The Fortune-teller, that's right. El and I were joking about imaginary heists." He brushed his hair back. Klaus must have been watching them at the Louvre . . . Tailing them . . . Tracking his movements to the church the evening he retrieved the Braque. The Leopard was stalking them throughout Paris. He must have been delighted when Neal picked the same hotel where he used to stay with Klaus and Chantal.

"You want to take a break?" Peter asked quietly.

"No, I'd rather get through it and then never have to relive it again." Neal took a breath and picked up the thread. "Kramer testified that he was suspicious you were already covering up my thefts. He'd employed Interpol agents in London and Paris to monitor us."

"And Kramer used the excuse of the painting being stored in an off-site facility to explain why it took so long to discover the theft."

Neal nodded. "Klaus's informant told him that Ydrus had stolen the painting. You and El were charged as accomplices. I was accused of stealing it on the Wednesday night of the week we were in Paris. That was the last night we were there." Neal paused, his emotions once more rising to the
surface. He swallowed and fought through the anger, looking down at his hands, to avoid seeing the pain in Peter's eyes. He couldn't tell Peter how close this was to what actually happened. He'd retrieved the Braque painting that same night. Earlier, he'd suspected Rolf had set the trap at the church where he'd nearly been caught. Now he knew Rolf and Klaus were working together. It made him wonder why they hadn't used the Braque painting rather than the Vermeer. Or was this their subtle way of compounding the pain? The second shoe to fall?

"Keep going," Peter urged. "We're almost done." His words brought Neal back to the present reality. He wasn't in Paris. The Vermeer wasn't in Peter's safe. Neal was sitting in a hotel room in L.A., and Peter needed to know about his virtual hell. What actually happened in Paris would have to wait.

"The team testified about how I'd been manipulating you from day one. I played the victim card to win you over and now our friendship was too deep for you to turn me in. Kramer got on the stand to corroborate what had happened. He testified he'd warned you repeatedly about the danger you faced by making me a member of your team. When you refused to fire me, he went to Hughes with his concerns. Hughes and Kramer had been working together since the fall to monitor my movements."

"Did Kramer bring up the Marie Antoinette diamond earrings at the trial?"

"Yeah. He knew all about them. He claimed I'd committed the theft then framed Fowler. Hughes acted as if he was on my side since he couldn't prove anything, but that's what persuaded him to work with Kramer."

Neal looked up to judge Peter's reaction. Even though he knew the memories were false, they felt real to him. Maybe it was because the scenario Rolf and Klaus had concocted was so close to what he feared would happen with the Braque. Was that deliberate on their part?

Peter was gazing out at the L.A. skyline, his face unreadable. Neal flashed back to the memories about Elizabeth, the prison, and how Klaus rescued him. He sank deeper into the cushions and closed his eyes, but there was no escape. The non-existent wound throbbed with renewed intensity. He'd managed to conceal the discomfort quite well, but he longed to lie on his side and not aggravate it further.

"How did it end?" Peter's voice had the calm dispassionate tone he used when interrogating prisoners. When Neal didn't respond, he clarified. "What were your last memories?"

"Klaus took me on a drive. It was my first time out of the house since I'd been brought in on a stretcher. The brownstone we were living in was in Boerum Hill near your house. Did I mention that?"

Peter shook his head. "No. Where did you drive?"

"I asked him to drive me by your place. Of course, you were in prison. El was dead. It had been sold, but I still wanted to see it. During the drive, Klaus and I discussed how he would sneak me in to see you before we left for Europe. We were hoping you'd let us break you out of prison." Neal paused to scan Peter's face. "I know how crazy this sounds, but it was real at the time. That's the last thing I remember. I was pleading with Klaus to get me into the prison so I could talk with you."

"Did you think that you'd be able to convince me? And before you answer, don't worry how I'll react. I realize they were planting ideas and emotions in your head, but I'm curious where they would have gone with it."
Peter brought up a valid point. Which ones were his real emotions and which ones were fake? He had no way to distinguish except based on what sounded believable now. "I thought there was a chance. I was horrified that you were imprisoned in a cell, perhaps the victim of an attack like I'd suffered, or something worse . . ." Explaining the rest of it aloud was much more difficult. Neal took a couple of breaths first, hoping to keep his voice steady. "I also realized that you probably didn't want to have anything to do with me. I'd destroyed your life. El might not have died if she hadn't been so distraught. Klaus tried to convince me that you wouldn't hold it against me, but I knew better. Even so, I knew I couldn't leave without making the attempt."

Peter started to speak, but the buzz of his cell phone cut them off. Neal tuned out the conversation. Klaus had been giving him a preview of what his future would be like if he stayed with the Bureau. It was also a warning of what would happen to Peter and El if Neal didn't join his crew. For their sake, wouldn't it be best for him to leave now?

"That was Agent Weller," Peter said when he ended the call. "He wants to meet with us and suggested coming to our suite. They arrested one of the men who kidnapped you."

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A half-hour later, Neal was staring at the mugshot of one of his kidnappers. Weller tapped on the rim of the laptop display. "You're positive this was one of them?"

"I'm not likely to forget. He was the cop who put the handcuffs on me."

"Who is he?" Peter asked.

"His name's Chico Santiago. The San Diego police picked him up early this morning. He was identified from the camera feed in the hallway. So far they haven't located the other two suspects. Agent Martinez has been performing the interrogation."

"Martinez?" Neal looked questioningly at Peter.

"Evelyn Martinez is the head of the field office in San Diego," Peter explained. He turned to Weller. "What's the rap sheet look like for the suspect?"

"He's been arrested for robbery, assault and battery. Two convictions."

"Is he talking?"

Weller snorted a chuckle. "Big time. With his record, he knows he's landed in it. He's trying to plea bargain his way out of an armed kidnapping charge. So far he's helped his case. He claims a woman contacted him with the offer of a quick job for easy money. She didn't give her name. Chico described her as being roughly the same height as Katja but a blonde."

Neal shrugged. "An easy disguise. Did he identify her in a lineup?"

"He'll have that opportunity this afternoon. Chico doesn't know the names of the two others and claims not to have worked with them before. She paid cash—thirty grand—for them to kidnap you and take you to a field north of San Diego where a chopper was waiting to pick you up. He also explained that once you were in the car, they gave you a shot which knocked you out."

"Do you have any memory of that?" Peter asked.

"No, the man who identified himself as a Bureau agent sat in the back seat with me. I suppose he could have given me a shot then." That memory of Peter and El sitting in a second patrol car had
been planted. They'd never been arrested. How long would he have to keep reminding himself that all those scenes were fake? Weller was continuing to speak. Neal forced himself to refocus his attention.

"Chico stated that yesterday evening the three of them drove up to L.A. They were addressing each other with code names that had been assigned by the woman. She referred to herself as Diamondback and dubbed them Rock, Sidewinder, and Desert."

"Isn't sidewinder a type of rattlesnake?" Neal asked.

Weller nodded. "We looked them up. They're all rattlesnake species. And get this—Katja has a tattoo of a rattlesnake on the small of her back. It sure looks like a diamondback to me."

Neal recognized the small smile that flitted across Peter's face. Neal had seen it often when the prisoner Peter was interrogating tripped up. "Not only does Marta's vanity tie her to the kidnapping but also to Ydrus. We've known for a while that they use the names of snakes as code designations for their operatives." He jotted a note on the pad of paper beside him.

"It was sloppy of her," Weller agreed. "Ydrus must not know you've cracked their code. Using rattler names is appropriate for these bottom-feeders. Our guy Chico was pretty smug over being called Sidewinder. He said their orders were to drive to L.A. then wait for her call. That was expected to be around ten o'clock that evening. Once she alerted them, they were to go to the location she indicated. Chico only knows it was somewhere in west L.A. She would be waiting for them with you in a car. She said they wouldn't have any difficulty handling you as you'd still be knocked out."

"It probably would have been in an anonymous location like the parking lot of a shopping mall," Peter commented. "Marta wouldn't have wanted them to know anything about Scima."

"Do you know what they were supposed to do with me?" Neal asked.

Weller nodded. "You were to be delivered to the Aquarium of the Pacific. That's in Long Beach, about a forty-five minute drive south of here along the coast. Supposedly the woman would go with them. They planned to drop you off somewhere within the exhibit. Chico claims that they weren't going to hurt you. It was all an elaborate ruse to quote 'teach you a lesson.' "

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Once Neal heard that Marta intended for him to be found at the Aquarium of the Pacific, Rolf's plan snapped into focus. His abduction would have been written off as another hoax. Yet one more sick trick.

Assuming the procedure had been a success, Neal wouldn't have remembered any of the implanted memories. The team would have been baffled to explain what Rolf had expected to accomplish. Neal would have gone through the medical exam with nothing more than a sedative in his bloodstream to be discovered. No one would suspect that he now had a fuse inside him waiting to be lit.

But Rolf's plan failed, and that thought gave him a margin of comfort. The team's successes were steadily piling up. They'd unmasked Rolf. They also knew Klaus was alive, or at least Neal was convinced of it. Peter undoubtedly had reservations but he wasn't questioning Neal's claim. That was acceptable. The evidence would come out eventually. Although the cost had been high they now knew what Rolf's strategy was.
Neal wasn't alone in being buoyed by Agent Weller's news. He could tell Peter was energized as well. As soon as the agent left, Peter proposed calling the team in New York. He explained that even though it was Saturday, Jones and Diana had gone into the Bureau to work on the case.

It was the first time for Neal to talk with them since he'd been kidnapped, and he hadn't felt so nervous since the first day he arrived at the Bureau. After the experience with Elizabeth, Neal braced himself for more flashbacks.

Peter was aware of his concern. Before he started the call, he gave Neal a chance to back out. He said everyone would understand if Neal needed to take a break "to rest." That was their euphemism for the PTSD symptoms he was experiencing.

But rest was not what Neal needed. It was his life back. And to achieve that, he needed to prove to himself Klaus and Rolf couldn't control how he felt.

That sounded great in theory, but his resolve faltered when he heard Jones and Diana's voices coming through the speaker.

The jarring reality of what had happened in the virtual world reemerged with startling clarity. Neal longed to see their faces. Then he might be able to erase the images of the way they looked at his trial.

Peter had already explained the details of the abduction and the VR procedure to them. He must have also informed them of Neal's conviction that Klaus was alive. Neal wondered if they thought he was delusional. No one questioned him about it, not even Diana. They took it as an accepted fact, and that wasn't normal.

Neal attempted to shove his unease aside. Peter was focusing the discussion on the significance of the implanted memories, and he needed to do the same.

"Why would Rolf implicate Kramer?" Diana asked.

"This may prove Kramer doesn't work for Ydrus," Jones suggested. "Neal wasn't supposed to remember any of this until the trigger is activated, but Rolf did hatchet jobs on all of us. When he turned Kramer into an Ydrus stooge, Rolf demonstrated that he wants Neal to view Kramer and by extension the FBI as the enemy."

"Or Rolf may have wanted to build on any feelings of animosity Neal already has for Kramer," Diana countered. "The implanted memories don't necessarily indicate Kramer's innocence or guilt."

"That may explain Kramer, but what about Ydrus?" Jones demanded. "Why did Klaus badmouth them? Rolf works for them. We assume Ydrus wants to recruit Neal. So why make them a bad guy along with Kramer?"

"They may have felt they had no choice," Peter said. "For Kramer to have killed the Czech detective, he would have needed assistance. Once Rolf decided to spruce up his image, a fall guy was essential for some of his actions. He picked Kramer and Ydrus. I wonder if Ydrus knows what he's done. We may be able to use that."

"Klaus went to great lengths to explain how he and Rolf were working alone," Neal added. It was the first time he'd spoken to the group and he had to clear his throat. He forced himself to continue as if this were just another team discussion. "That may be what they eventually intend in reality."

Peter's face flashed understanding. "Set up a rival organization to Ydrus? You could be onto something." He jotted a note on his pad of paper. "Let's discuss this with Tricia when we get back."
"Ydrus is into gunrunning," Neal mused aloud. "That's never been an interest for Klaus. Add to that, he now has to follow someone else's orders."

"You were taunted with that pendant of a lion on a leash," Diana noted, "but they're the ones being yanked around by Ydrus's chain."

"A collared leopard?" Peter suggested. "It could be a constant irritant. Klaus is no longer as unfettered as he used to be. He works for Ydrus and is restricted by whatever conditions they impose. That could give us an opening to exploit."

"We've all been speculating about which thieves Ydrus was using to steal the artworks," Jones said. "If Klaus is alive, we could have our answer. What about the Vermeer painting? Has anyone checked if it's missing?"

"I contacted Marcel last night," Peter said. "He phoned in an update earlier this morning, and the news isn't good. The painting had been stolen. It was replaced by a forgery which would have stood up to anything but an expert appraisal. Marcel didn't notice anything wrong but a museum specialist pointed out several key mistakes. No one knows when the switch occurred."

Neal stayed quiet, trying to imagine what Jones and Diana looked like as they heard the news. Peter had already told him about the theft of The Astronomer, and he'd had time to prepare. He knew on one level this was a different reality, but hearing them discuss the painting made him flash back to his virtual experiences. He stared down at the table trying to blot out the images.

It didn't help.

The team's looks of dismay and revulsion when they believed he'd betrayed their trust were mirrored on the surface of the table.

He felt Peter squeeze his arm. Glancing up, he saw Peter ask him a mute question.

Neal nodded for him to continue. He picked up his glass to refill it with water and retreated to the kitchenette. He stood motionless at the sink, bringing his emotions under control while listening to them talk.

"I explained that we feel confident Rolf or Ydrus has the painting," Peter said, "and that our best chance to recover it will be to keep news of the theft a closely guarded secret. Marcel believes that he'll be able to secure permission from the French museum authorities to hold off releasing the report for a few months. The painting is scheduled to be off-exhibit until December when the Louvre opens a major exhibition on Vermeer. At that point, they'll have no choice but inform the public."

When Neal resumed a seat at the table, Diana was speculating about details in Klaus's townhouse. "Does anyone have any ideas as to why Klaus had the stolen Whistler painting hung in Neal's virtual bedroom?"

"It added to the reality of what I was experiencing," Neal said. "I already knew it had been stolen. Klaus told me he'd done it to help tempt me back. He was convinced that the Bureau would turn on me. He hoped I'd quit before it happened."

"Is that what his goal is?" Jones demanded. "Make Neal quit on his own?"

Neal didn't answer, and Peter also took a moment before responding. "It's certainly a possibility and will need to be evaluated. Rolf apparently injected as many factual bits as he could into the scenario, perhaps in the hope that when the memories eventually resurfaced they'd be more
believable."

"They're egotistical monsters," snapped Diana. "I bet Klaus boasted about Rolf being alive because they want Neal to admire what they'd accomplished. They were confident Neal would admire their Azathoth subterfuge. They want all the glory for themselves while dumping responsibility for the murder of the Czech detective and the attack at Scima on Kramer and Ydrus."

The group moved to ways Rolf could make use of the Vermeer painting. Everyone appeared anxious to make it seem like a normal discussion. It seemed to Neal there was more ribbing than normal despite the seriousness of the topic, but now Jones bore the brunt of Diana's sarcasm.

Didn't they worry that he was a double agent? Had he been hotwired to report everything back to Rolf and Klaus? Neal felt like he should excuse himself and shut himself up in his room till the call was over.

"I wonder what Rolf is thinking now," Jones mused. "Does he believe he succeeded?"

"There's a good chance he does," Peter said. "Based on what Penfold said, the procedure was near completion."

"Rolf couldn't have known the precise timing," Diana pointed out. "The doctor either, for that matter. In experiments a cushion is always built in. Should we play along? Not let him know Neal remembers anything of the ordeal?"

"How do we demonstrate to him it worked?" Jones asked.

"For one thing, we can't let on that we know anything about the Vermeer painting," Peter said. "None of the details of Neal's ordeal will be entered into the FBI files. We'll act to the outside world as if what happened to Neal was just another hoax."

Jones and Diana didn't question Peter further about the con, and no one asked Neal if he could pull it off. They didn't need to. He was already puzzling over that.

When the call ended and Peter asked, "Can you do it?" Neal knew what he was referring to.

Neal hedged by asking instead, "How did I do last night? If someone had been spying on me, would they have detected anything?" When Peter hesitated, he had his answer. There was still work to do.

"You were a little shaky," he admitted, "like you were getting over the flu. But you shouldn't be dismayed over that. You'd been knocked out all day. The way you behaved was completely natural under the circumstances. The past couple of hours you haven't walked with a limp. Do you still have the pain in your back?"

Neal wished he could say no, but he couldn't. "It's better, but it comes and goes."

"That's natural. It's been less than twenty-four hours. You still haven't answered my question. Can you con them?"

"What stops me from saying yes is that we don't know what trigger they intend to use or what my reaction will be. I'd feel better about it after discussing it with the shrink Tricia recommended."

Peter nodded approvingly. "That's the response I was hoping for. It shows you're being realistic about the issues. We'll minimize your time outside until you feel more comfortable. In answer to your question, I'm confident that you can fool them . . . as long as there's complete honesty between
Keiko and El brought back lunch supplies with them. Neal had no appetite. He was glad he didn't have to go out for a lunch and pretend to enjoy his food.

Aidan and Travis who had been working in the FBI field office all morning also joined them. Aidan had discovered that Marta had not succeeded in purging two of the encryption keys on her laptop, leading to the hope that some of the data could eventually be recovered. The files had been encrypted using a similar form of the esoteric programming language Aidan had found on the plastic surgeon's files. That in itself was a victory as it provided further evidence to tie the woman still technically identified as Katja to Marta and by extension to Rolf and Ydru.

Travis reported that Richard was working at Scima that day. He was preparing paintings of Rolf with various styles of beards which would then be fed into the facial recognition software database. His drawings were already being used by agents in the field who were trying to trace Marta's movements.

Over lunch the group discussed their travel plans. Aidan and Keiko would return the next day to San Diego to take their originally scheduled flight. The rest of them planned to leave from the L.A. airport midday on Sunday. Travis would carry Marta's laptop with its precious files back with him. There was no need for anyone to stay in California, since the local FBI office would handle the investigation and prisoner interrogation.

Neal ate his lunch in a chair by the large plate glass windows. He felt restless and unsettled. Sitting close to the L.A. skyline reminded him of being on his terrace in New York. He hoped it would relax him.

El brought her lunch over to eat with him. "A few slices of sushi? Is that all? You should try the quesadillas. From the way Travis is wolfing them down, they must be good."

"Sorry. Not very hungry." Neal made more of an effort to eat.

Keiko brought over a container. "How about some pork katsu? This is so good it takes me back to Osaka." She waved chopsticks in front of him. "You have to try it." Without waiting for a reply, she speared some onto his plate.

Neal roused himself to be a better companion and asked about their shopping expedition. Once started, they didn't stop. El hadn't spent much time with Keiko before this trip, but they were both forging a close friendship over clothes now.

"Will you hit more stores this afternoon?" Neal asked, trying to look interested.

"Only if you come along," said El hopefully.

"It's tempting, but I'd like to spend the afternoon drawing."

"Your"—Keiko paused, blushing—"I'm sorry. I don't know the expression for what you experienced."

"Don't feel bad. I'm not sure what to call it either. My alternate life? I don't know how long the memories will last but I thought it would be helpful to capture them. Peter, Travis, and Aidan will be working at the field office. I'd like to do something useful, and there's not much else I can do."
"That's an excellent idea," El encouraged. "I imagine you didn't bring many supplies with you. We could shop for them together. I haven't been to an art store in ages and would love an excuse to visit one."

"Richard told me about a store near here," Keiko added. "While you draw, I could work on damselfly designs for the video."

"Will the damselflies make use of swords or have some other type of weapon?" El asked.

"Good question," Aidan said, walking over to join them. "What will the damselflies use, Keiko? The bees are expert fencers but you recommended the damselflies employ a different fighting technique."

"Don't you agree, Neal?" Keiko said, appealing to him for support. "If the damselflies are simply female versions of bees, that wouldn't be very original."

"What do you have in mind?" Neal asked. As captain of their fencing team, Aidan was pretending to look miffed at the thought that anything could rival blades as a weapon.

"Are you familiar with jittejutsu?" she asked him, speaking rapidly in Japanese.

Neal had heard of the Japanese martial art which made use of batons but had never seen a demonstration. "Will you incorporate traditional moves?"

"No, I'd like to—"

"Hey, enough with the Japanese!" Aidan roared. "Not fair!"

"Aren't you studying Japanese?" Neal asked with only the faintest trace of a snicker. "We were speaking very slowly."

"Even I could almost understand them," El said, happily piling on. "You were talking about mops, right?"

Aidan groaned. "Neal, help a brother out. Tell me Keiko doesn't plan to use mops."

"Harry Potter uses broomsticks," Neal pointed out. "She could be onto something."

Keiko set down her container and assumed a warrior stance. Neal had learned only a few days ago that she was a video gamer. Was she into martial arts as well? She and Aidan would have some interesting discussions.

"It's not mops, I promise you," she said. "You'll have over a month before you need to submit the expanded version of the video to Hotaru Productions. There will be plenty of time for us to negotiate options."

"Don't spring anything on me at the last minute," he warned. "Fencing practice resumes in a couple of weeks. We need to build on the success of the previous year."

Peter and Travis joined their discussion as Aidan outlined the schedule for the upcoming year. He already knew the universities they'd face during their Saturday bouts. This year they'd travel to arch-rival Harvard in the spring. A visit to Yale was slated for the fall. Peter and Travis would be spending many of their Saturdays at Columbia too since they'd assist with Columbia's astronomy program for kids.
As the group talked about their plans, there wasn't a word about Rolf and Klaus. Neal kept reminding himself that he hadn't missed out on anything. He hadn't spent months in prison. This morning he'd finished reviewing the experience with Peter. He'd devote the afternoon to drawing scenes from the ordeal. Then it would be over. He could exit his virtual cell and shut the door on what happened.

Notes: Neal feels disoriented and unsettled. He's lost confidence in his ability to con others. He hopes that after drawing the scenes of his virtual prison, his ordeal will be over. Unfortunately it won't be that simple, but help will soon arrive.

I wrote about the dilemma Neal faces for our blog in a post called "When a Shapeshifter Can No Longer Shapeshift." I also pinned a fanvid of "Hold On, I'm Coming" by Sam and Dave to the Pinterest board. It was used in the pilot episode when Neal broke out of prison to go to Kate. Penna referenced it in Caffrey Disclosure when Neal sent a message to Angela and Henry that help was on the way. It's time for Henry to return the favor. Mozzie, the master of many voices, is also winging his way back from France. The cavalry starts to arrive in next week's chapter: Reality Sandwich.

If you're feeling stressed by storms or other upheavals in your life, I'd like to recommend the perfect antidote. I know it worked wonders for me. Penna Nomen has posted a new addition to her Vignettes series of Caffrey Conversation short stories. "Splash" is about a puppy Henry adopts and includes flashbacks to the time shortly after Henry found Neal as a teenage runaway. It's a feel-good, happy story which will bring a smile to your face. Penna also wrote a blog post about it: "Puppy Love: the Splash vignette."

As many of you know, Penna is writing a science-fiction novel nicknamed Prime. She's imagined a world so enticing that already it rivals White Collar as my go-to place to escape. How can I resist hanging out with a charming young investigative journalist who has paranormal abilities and an adorable purple duckling for a companion? Penna's written an introduction to Prime for our blog. She's also started a series of Prime-related posts where you'll find snippets and updates. In the first one, which she posted last weekend, you'll be able to visit the home of Prime's main character. The post is called "Novel Progress: Welcome to Zach's home."

Penna has truly been doing it all. In addition to her own writing, she's managed to keep my spirits afloat while also providing invaluable beta help. Thank you, Penna!

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Nocturne in Black and Gold board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon

When they returned from the shopping expedition, Keiko curled up on the sectional and Neal converted the chair in front of the window into his art niche. He'd made a list of the scenes he wanted to capture—his bedroom, the living room, the Whistler painting on the wall, the kitchen, and most importantly, Klaus. He also wanted to draw the bearded image of himself in Klaus's mirror. Now when he looked at his face he sometimes saw the same expression . . . the eyes of a prisoner.

El had brought along a book to read. Neal was surprised to see it was a C.S. Lewis novel, *Out of the Silent Planet*. "I didn't know you liked science fiction."

"I've never read much in the genre," she confessed, "but I thought C.S. Lewis might be relevant to Diana's stories. His hero in the *Space Trilogy* is a philologist. That's close to Arkham Neal's specialty."

"Will Diana send Neal and Peter on off-world adventures?" he asked. "Those visits to Leng were so brief they shouldn't count."

"If she plans to, she hasn't told me about it."

His Arkham counterpart might not travel to other planets, but Neal felt like he was in the midst of his own off-world drama. Saturday was passing in an odd space warp. He'd been surrounded by friends the entire time, but he often felt like an invisible force was creating waves of distortion between them.

When he immersed himself in drawing, his reality could shrink to the distance between him and the paper. The disorientation was less unsettling. El and Keiko immersed themselves in their own projects. The silence was comforting.

When his cell phone buzzed, he ignored the unwelcome intrusion. Then he realized it might be Noelle. Henry could have relapsed and they were unable to leave. Grabbing the phone from his pocket, he discovered a text message from Sara, asking him to call her.

Should he? There wouldn't be any need to discuss any of Friday's events. This would be a good test to see if his con artist skills were still intact.

He made the call from his bedroom. Sara was as bubbly as ever. All Neal had to do was toss in the occasional murmur of agreement, surprise, or chuckle. He gradually relaxed as she chatted about her assignment in New York. She expected to be there for three months while an agent was out on maternity leave.

"I've been doing all the talking," Sara said, "but that's not why I called. I'm dying to know what happened in Fantasyland."

"What?" Neal blurted, shocked into reacting before taking the time to think. "How did you know?"

"Comic-Con?" she asked, the bewilderment reading loud and clear in her voice. "Have you been partying so much you forgot you told me about it?"

Taking a couple of slow breaths, he kicked himself for overreacting. "When I hear fantasyland, I
think of wizards and fairy princesses. I must have missed that section."

"You have to admit Comic-Con is one huge escapist fantasy. I wish I could be there."

Neal began to fill her in on what had happened Wednesday evening, but she stopped him before he'd said more than a few words.

"What's wrong, Neal?" Her voice had become sharp with concern. He knew it was because she was worried, but it set him even more on edge.

He told her in as few words as possible about the kidnapping. "I'm okay. I was held prisoner for a day and was put through the grinder, but I'm coming out of it."

He was grateful she didn't press him for answers to the thousand questions she must have, but was restrained in her comments. When the call ended, Neal waited a while before rejoining the others. He'd failed the test. Those walls he used to be able to erect so easily had disappeared. Was he even the same person?

When he finally returned to the living room, El put her book down and gave him a questioning look.

"It was Sara," he explained. "She flies into New York tomorrow for a three-month assignment."

"That's good news, right?"

"I guess. Sara sensed something was wrong. I told her a little of what happened." Neal retreated to the kitchen to pour himself a mug of coffee. El and Keiko didn't appear to pick up on how out-of-sync he felt. That was a positive. Maybe he wasn't quite as transparent as he feared.

Peter returned in the late afternoon. When he arrived, he asked to see the drawings, but Neal resisted. He didn't want anyone to see them before they were finished. El suggested that everyone go to a seafood restaurant along the beach. It was their final night in California. Neal would gladly have skipped it to work on his project instead, but Peter and El wouldn't let him.

Peter fiddled with making a pot of coffee in the kitchenette, not that anyone wanted to drink it. As soon as they'd returned from dinner Neal had appropriated the dining table to resume work on his drawings. Peter considered sneaking some peeks, but it was clear from the way Neal hunched over his work that he wasn't ready.

During dinner, Neal had been polite but quiet, letting everyone else carry the conversation. The restaurant had been so noisy, it hadn't been too noticeable, but Peter took it as a bad sign. This morning he'd detected signs of progress. Neal had stopped limping. He was able to talk about his experiences. He was opening up. Peter had hoped that when he returned from the field office Neal would be acting even more like his old self.

Instead he'd apparently regressed. He now seemed more withdrawn than ever. Maybe Peter should order him to stop documenting those scenes. Were they dragging him back into Rolf's virtual prison? In the past, painting had helped Neal process emotions, but it wasn't working this time.

They were all treading water in an ocean far out from shore till Neal could see the doctor. Perhaps he felt that way too, and that's why he was quiet.

It had been a frustrating afternoon on many fronts. Marta still refused to talk. Her court-appointed
lawyer insisted on bail. A judge would decide on Monday. Penfold was sticking to his story from the previous night. He denied any knowledge of the specifics of the program and hid behind the signed agreement he had from Scima. It was no surprise that Scima was providing the group such luxurious accommodations. They must be worried about being sued. As soon as Mozzie heard about what happened, he'd undoubtedly draw up the papers.

While he was at the field office, Peter had spoken with Hughes at length. He outlined the role Hughes had played in the lies Rolf had crammed inside Neal's head. Hughes had already discussed the procedure with Tricia. His initial disbelief that such a technique could be effective had been replaced with concern over how difficult it would be to reintegrate Neal into the team. Hughes, Jones, and Diana had all played pivotal roles in both the trial and Neal's back injury. Rebuilding trust could prove to be a major challenge.

El approached Peter and frowned at his stalled attempt to make coffee. "Put that pot away," she ordered in an undertone. "That's the last thing any of us needs. You have to relax. Neal's coping with what happened in his own way. You should as well."

She put an arm around him and urged him back into the living room where they sat on the sectional. "Let's watch a movie. We've got premium cable and a long list to choose from." She retrieved a TV schedule from the stack of magazines on the cocktail table and began calling out names to Neal.

Peter scanned the listings with her, silently vetoing many of the names in advance. No love stories to remind Neal of Fiona. No horror stories to remind Peter of what might be going on with Dean and Sam Winchester. El didn't like war stories. Absolutely nothing scary. That didn't leave much.

"What about Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban?" she asked before Peter could stop her. He would have nixed that straight off. Prisoner of Azkaban sounded far too similar to Prisoner of Azathoth. El had received the DVD as a Christmas present from her sister. Peter didn't know if Neal had seen it, but it bore far too many disconcerting similarities to Neal's situation. Harry was being stalked in the movie. Friends turned out to be enemies while some he'd considered his adversaries were revealed to be allies. Shapeshifters abounded. That was absolutely a non-starter.

"Yeah, that sounds good," Neal said without looking away from his sketchpad.

When Petermouthed a forceful No! to El, she shrugged and whispered, "It's the first movie he's expressed an interest in."

"Neal, you don't think the tale's too dark?" Peter called out.

Neal dropped his pencil to glare at him. "Do you honestly think I'm too fragile to handle Harry Potter? I already know he survived. I can testify that they were in post-production at Scima for the sequel when we were in London."

Delighted at a hint of the old Neal resurfacing, Peter went for broke. "Will you sit on the couch to watch it with us?"

"I can multitask. Go ahead and start it. The music's good. I'll listen while I work." He picked up his pencil and returned to his drawing.

Before Peter could protest, El gave him a nudge and signaled for him to follow her into their bedroom.

"You're pushing too hard," she admonished when they were out of earshot. "I suggested the movie
because it's great escapist fare. We've joked about Neal having some similarities to Harry and I think he likes the comparison. He'd no doubt enjoy a break from the dueling realities in his head by spending some time in a fantasy world. Harry emerges victorious even though he faces some very tough challenges. That could be reassuring to Neal."

He kissed her. "I should know better than to doubt you."

"I wish that were true," she admitted ruefully. "I should have eased up this morning. I wasn't sensitive to the warning signs Neal was sending. He wasn't ready to discuss my role in the implanted memories. I don't want to make that mistake again. Our stress could be exacerbating his. Let's try chilling for a while."

They returned to the living room. Peter made no further attempts to persuade Neal to join them. He helped himself to a beer from the well-stocked mini-fridge and brought over a glass of brandy for El. Toeing off his shoes, he plopped next to her and put his feet on the ottoman. There were too many pillows on the sectional for his taste but El loved them. She snuggled close to him and rubbed his back as they watched the movie. Gradually some of his tension dissipated.

The last time he'd watched the movie, he'd fallen asleep and wound up dreaming about Neal being a wizard. This time he paid closer attention to the plot. They'd just gotten to the part where Remus Lupin transformed into a werewolf when Neal surprised him by coming over to join them.

Soon Neal had his feet up on the ottoman too, seemingly entranced by Harry's adventures. When Harry saw a mysterious figure casting spells and mistook him for his deceased father, Peter's alarm blared once more. Was Neal equating the figure with Klaus?

Peter glanced over at Neal but he didn't appear to be freaking out. In fact, he looked more like his normal self than any time since the ordeal had begun. At the conclusion of the movie, Neal gave Peter one of the few smiles he'd had all day. "If only Harry Potter had been around when you found the broomstick by your door, you wouldn't have worried about witches. You would have hoped it'd let you play Quidditch."

Peter had told Neal how when he was a child, his brother Joe had tricked him on Halloween to think a witch would visit his house. He was glad the story gave Neal something to laugh about. Peter supposed he should feel lucky that Azathoth wasn't as powerful as Voldemort. Was Rolf drawing inspiration from the J.K. Rowling character in addition to Lovecraft? He'd masqueraded as Alistair Chapman. Who was next?

And that invited speculation as to whether there were any allusions to Harry Potter in Azathoth's actions. Scima's campus outside London had been used to film sequences of the Harry Potter movies. Had Chapman worked on them? For a man who liked theatrics, he would have been attracted to the dark ominous nature of many of the scenes. Peter made a mental note to bring up the subject with Tricia.

But it was not up for discussion tonight. For a brief while, Neal had been able to escape the prison Azathoth had placed him in. Peter wished it could have been for longer.

"Would you like to see my drawings?" Neal asked. "I've finished them."

There was no doubt of the answer. Peter and El sat at the table while Neal showed them scenes of the various locations—the courtroom, prison, and rooms inside Klaus's house.

Neal lingered over the drawing of their house. "That's one of my final memories. Klaus drove me by. Another family had moved in. I remember wondering what had happened to Satchmo. I hoped
he was with Peter's folks in Albany." He leafed through the sheets of paper and pulled out two from the bottom of the stack, laying them without comment on the table.

The papers had several views of Klaus on each of them, both front and side profiles, with different expressions, from laughing to serious. Looking at Klaus sent ice cubes down Peter's back. These were the memories that had been planted in Neal's head—a wiser and more experienced older brother who had saved him from prison, protected him, and was helping him heal. And they were completely phony.

"I'd like to give the drawings of Klaus to Richard," Peter said. "He can use them to prepare paintings similar to the ones he made of Rolf for the facial recognition database. Field agents are asking about Rolf. They should include Klaus as well."

"Do you continue to believe Klaus is alive?" El asked Neal.

"There's not a doubt in my mind, but that doesn't mean anything."

"Why do you say that?" she asked.

Neal hesitated a moment, frowning. "My head is full of contradictory memories. Sometimes it's hard to distinguish the real from the fake. I expected the scenes would have faded by now. With all the dreams and nightmares I've ever experienced, I might remember the general feeling, but not the actual events or the visuals."

"And that's not happening?" Peter asked, matching Neal's quiet tone.

He shook his head. "I can call up the memory of what my bedroom looked like and I see it in sharp detail right in front of me. I'm sure it will eventually fade, but it's not so far. That's not the worst, though. It's my emotions that are out of whack. On the one hand, I feel angry about how Rolf and Klaus manipulated both of us for months, but then I have these other emotions."

"What emotions?" Peter prompted when his words trailed off.

"Gratitude for Klaus rescuing me, admiration for their success . . . When I look at the Whistler painting on the wall, I don't think about how it should be returned to the museum, but I wonder how he stole it. There's a lot of guilt—for believing Klaus had killed a man, for having quit his crew. I know the emotions are planted, but that doesn't make them seem less genuine." 

At least he was admitting what he felt. That had to be the first step toward the cure.

"That gargoyle game you played with Klaus," El asked. "Did you also play it in Paris?"

He winced. "That's just it. Those memories sound right, but they're all a sham. I never played gargoyle hide-and-seek. Those memories are easier to label. It's the emotions that are harder to process."

"We'll get them sorted out," Peter promised, trying to inject a note of confidence not just for Neal but himself as well.

"I hope so."

"Do you want to call it a night?" El asked.

"You go on. I think I'll stay up and watch another movie."
"Good," she said, "because I noticed Finding Nemo will start in a few minutes."

"You're kidding, right? I would have picked you for a romantic drama after Harry Potter."

"I happen to be very fond of fish," she declared. "Have you seen it?"

"I'm probably one of the few who haven't," Neal admitted.

"Then it's high time. You too, Peter. You can learn a thing or two from clownfish." She eyed them a moment, and smiled. "Before we begin, we should change into sleepwear. We'll make a slumber party out of this."

Neal raised a brow. "A slumber party? Isn't that for girls?"

"Not always." She put her hands on her hips. "Should I call it a sleepover, tough guy?"

A few minutes later, clad in sleep pants and t-shirt, Neal joined Peter and El on the sectional. El was wearing a soft microfleece robe. Peter knew what she was thinking. Neal had barely slept the night before. Now, flopped on the cushions and surrounded by pillows, he'd last maybe fifteen minutes before he'd be asleep.

And that proved to be the case. And not just him but El, too. Peter made it till the end of the movie. Nemo's father Marlin was a kindred spirit. The story of the clownfish's search for his son seemed eerily similar to what Peter was going through.

When the movie was over, Peter turned off the TV and checked on his slumbering Nemo. Neal was stretched full length on his side, his head buried in a pillow. El had slid next to Peter to give Neal more room and was also fast asleep. Peter closed his eyes and tried to rest as well.

WCWCWCWCWCWCWC

"Run!" Klaus tightened his grip around Neal's shoulders. "Only a few more steps. The SUV is straight ahead."

Neal's nausea increased as Klaus urged him ever forward. The cold air told him they'd exited the prison, but his eyes wouldn't focus. Klaus's anxious face swam next to him as the pain in Neal's head redoubled in intensity, making him cling to him for support. Klaus's voice was the only thing that kept Neal going.

His balance had been gone ever since the concussion. If Klaus hadn't been able to wheel him through most of the prison on a gurney, Neal never would have made it. His memory was pulverized bits of shattered glass. When Klaus arrived in his cell, Neal had only recognized him by his voice. He'd thought he was dreaming. Shadows and shapes . . . murmurs of encouragement. Klaus guiding him forward . . .

"Stay with me, bro." Klaus's breath was hot on his neck. "We're almost there."

"Halt or we'll shoot!"

The pop of gunfire reverberated in Neal's head, making him cry out. Who was that? Jones?

"Caffrey, don't make us shoot you!" Diana's voice was a harsh siren. Hughes yelled something. Sirens, megaphones . . . He was drowning in the noise.

"Keep running!" ordered Klaus, dragging him as Neal's legs buckled.
Hughes barked out orders. The words no longer made any sense. Gunfire erupted from all directions. Neal wanted to put his hands to his ears to block out the sounds. Klaus attempted to shield him with his body.

The sudden screech of tires signaled an approaching vehicle. "I'll hold them off," Klaus yelled. "Get in the car!"

Neal could feel Klaus tense his muscles. Without warning, he gave Neal a sudden shove forward. Neal staggered and fell. The next thing he knew, Klaus jerked him upright. "Go!"

In an instant of clarity Neal saw the car. As he reached for the door, his back blossomed into a pain so intense, the world froze into a still frame—

With a jerk, Neal awoke, gulping in lungfuls of air. His back . . . He kept his eyes closed, his heart racing, as the pain slowly diminished.

Where was he? It didn't feel like a car seat. No scratchy hospital sheets. He cautiously felt with one hand the surface he was lying on. Faux suede cushions?

He opened his eyes and blinked to focus. A light was on in the entry. He breathed easier when he recognized the hotel room in L.A. El was sleeping peacefully in the middle of the sectional. Alive. She was curled up next to Peter who was propped up on pillows and watching him worriedly. When he saw Neal's eyes on him, he gave him a questioning nod.

Neal waved a hand to show he was okay and sank back into the pillows.

Gesturing with his hand, Peter took exaggerated deep breaths then pointed at Neal.

Neal shrugged ruefully and obeyed as he gradually relaxed. Just a nightmare. He must have fallen asleep during the movie. Someone had draped a blanket over him. El didn't have much room. She should be in bed where she could stretch out.

Neal nodded toward El then over to their bedroom.

Peter shook his head and mouthed, "Slumber party." He pointed at Neal, put his hands to the side of his face, and closed his eyes. "Go back to sleep," he whispered. "I'll keep watch."

Neal shook his head. Not yet. He didn't want to risk having that nightmare again. He scrunched up higher on the pillows and let his eyes rest on Peter and El, nestled side by side. They were safe, unharmed. He was, too . . .

When Neal next awoke, bright sunshine peeked between the edges of the closed drapes. No one else was lying on the couch. He didn't see El, but Peter was sitting at the dinette table, typing on his laptop. Perhaps he was filling out Neal's forms so he wouldn't have to do the paperwork. Was that the faint silver lining to the ordeal?

Neal rearranged the pillows. If he'd had additional flashbacks, he didn't remember them. He needed a sofa like this at home. He wouldn't need a bed. The faint tapping of Peter's fingers on the computer keys was oddly relaxing. Neal decided to close his eyes for just one additional minute . . .

When he opened them again, Peter and El were both sitting at the table. He sat up and stretched.

"Coffee's on," Peter said, "unless you want to sleep some more."

"Pour me a cup. I'll be right back." Neal headed for his bedroom, dragging his blanket behind him.
He must look like the *Peanuts* character Linus, but he didn't care. Linus was a smart dude.

Time passed quickly before they needed to leave for the airport. Henry called from Baltimore while they were having breakfast. Neal put him on speaker. He claimed to feel fine, although his voice sounded weak to Neal. There was nothing wrong with his brain. He realized straight away that something was wrong.

Neal was grateful that Peter explained what had occurred. After reliving everything all day yesterday, he didn't think he could stand to go through it once more. He gave Peter credit for keeping it low key and as nondramatic as possible but even so, Henry's anger was an unfiltered blast through the phone which jarred him out of his numbness.

Henry said he'd return to New York on Tuesday. When Peter asked for details on his captivity, he was annoyingly vague, saying only he'd explain when he was in New York.

Tricia also called. She'd arranged for an appointment for Neal to meet with the psychologist she'd mentioned to Peter. Neal had fought the idea last fall when he was having flashbacks about Klaus. Now he welcomed another shrink in his life. This one was supposedly an expert in the technique Penfold used. He'd soon find out. Neal was scheduled to see him on Monday morning. Neal was glad when Peter offered to go with him. Dr. Nussbaum had suggested meeting at his apartment. He lived in a brownstone within walking distance from June's.

Gone were the questions and interrogations from yesterday. Both Peter and El were sensitive to Neal's desire for a respite. There was a heaviness to his head which blocked out everything—the good as well as the bad. El said it was exhaustion, and Neal didn't argue. He hoped that was all it was.

On the flight back to New York, he had the window seat in the row with Peter and El. While they watched a movie, he mainly slept.

Peter had invited him to stay with them on Sunday night, but Neal held out to return to the loft, and they hadn't pressed, even though it was far out of their way to take him there. El had left the Taurus at the airport when she flew to San Diego. She'd called June the previous night, saving Neal the difficulty of explaining yet again.

When he arrived at the mansion, June greeted him at the door with an embrace. "Welcome home," she murmured in his ear.

Neal gazed around the entry and the oak staircase leading upstairs to his loft. It did feel like home, a safe house he badly needed. June had played no role in his virtual world. There were no conflicting scenes to process as there were with Peter and El. Neal's spirits lifted even more when they went into the living room and he caught a glimpse of her bartender. Mozzie was back.

He and June had conspired to make the homecoming a mini-celebration for *Yellowface, the Masked Avenger*. Mozzie had mixed up a pitcher of honey lemon-drop martinis to go with the honey-based appetizers June's chef Emil had prepared. The best were the crostini made with Brie and grilled pears. Everyone kept the conversation focused on Comic-Con and the glorious future Mozzie was convinced was in store for the yellow-faced bee.

El prompted him to speak about Keiko's newly discovered prowess as a gamer and plans to include damselfly warriors in the Japanese version. Mozzie, it turned out, was an expert on damselflies and appeared to know almost as much about them as bees. He claimed it was thanks to his girlfriend Janet, but Neal knew better. Mozzie was a master of everything.
Mozzie had returned to New York with a new focus in life—deciphering the page of fractal equations from the World War II journal. Now that he knew that Paul Lévy had devised a cipher based on fractals, he'd leaped to the conclusion that this page must have been written using that code. It was a non sequitur that made Peter look slightly cross-eyed, but Mozzie knew he was right.

He also announced he was staying at June's for the next several nights. June said it was because she needed his help on Diana's stories. A tall tale if ever there was one but Neal was too relieved to dissuade him.

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Once Peter and El left, Neal went upstairs to unpack. June offered to have the chef prepare something but Neal wasn't hungry. Mozzie, on the other hand, was starving. He commandeered all the leftover appetizers and carried them upstairs along with half a honey pecan pie.

"You don't need to sleep in the loft, Mozz. June said you were welcome to stay in one of the guest rooms."

"And I may take her up on it later, but your couch will suit me very well. Don't worry. I'll postpone any Latin monologues for another time." He went to the fridge, pulled out a bottle of honey wine, and uncorked it. "We need to talk, mon frère. The account you gave Peter was no doubt the censored version, and he touched on the major points to June. We must now partake of the reality sandwich and dispense with the lettuce."

Neal smiled. He'd missed Mozzie misquoting Ginsberg. "What would Ginsberg say to my situation?"

"Most likely he'd say that there is no truth, only points of view. I gather you have three points of view dueling inside you."

Neal unzipped his suitcase. "That about sums it up. Fake me and real me are in a constant argument. Then there's Klaus butting in, insisting he only has my interest at heart. But is it really Klaus or is he being the mouthpiece for Rolf? Maybe there are four voices, not three."

"For the moment let's stick with Klaus. He and Rolf must be acting as a united front. Are you sure you don't want any of this pie? It goes remarkably well with the wine."

"Okay, but just a small slice." Neal retrieved the laundry bag from his closet and began stuffing it. "Klaus said he rescued me from prison because he couldn't bear the thought of me being locked up. Fake me is grateful for what he did and eager to resume my old life as a member of his crew."

"Klaus wasn't angry for how you conned him in the fall?"

"No, because I didn't succeed. He recognized the con right away." It hurt to admit he'd been discovered. "Klaus plied me with stories of future heists and the paintings we'd steal." Neal sat down across from Mozzie at the table. Unpacking could wait. "You want the uncensored version? I can remember how excited and happy I was to hear about them. Peter said the program was capable of planting false emotions, but I'm not so sure they're all phony."

Mozzie handed him a glass of wine. "Did Klaus mention the Braque?" Neal was relieved Mozzie didn't comment on his last statement. He probably thought Neal was ready to resume his old life, and that was far from the case.

"We discussed it a little. I asked him why Adler wanted it, and he didn't know. Klaus suggested that I might have told Peter and I should ask him. He already knew Adler wanted it. Thinking back,
I'm surprised I didn't tell him everything."

"Fascinating." Mozzie stroked his chin. "Klaus doesn't know why Adler wants it, so he couldn't plant your answer. He was provoking you to find the solution."

"He twisted all the screws. Having the Vermeer stolen on the same night that I retrieved the Braque?"

Mozzie shrugged. "We already assumed that Rolf was behind the trap. Assuming Klaus is alive makes what happened so much more understandable. We'd wondered how Rolf could have directed operations from London. It must have been Klaus who was in Paris and informed the police."

Neal nodded. "He's been playing me since September, making me feel guilty for his death while biding his time to spring his trap. He was probably tailing me the entire time I was in Paris. He knew I'd met with Chantal."

"The man is the worst kind of predator. The leopards of the world should sue him for defamation of character."

Neal wasn't about to contradict him. That's why his present situation was so untenable. On the one hand, he loathed the man for what he'd put him through, and on the other, he could hear that fake Neal voice in his head saying how much he admired him. It was why he was willing to see a therapist for as long as it took to exorcise Klaus completely.


Peter arrived early at June's house. He wanted to have a chance to assess Neal's condition before they left for the doctor's appointment. Although he was pleased Neal hadn't resisted seeing a psychologist, the fact he hadn't was an indication of how low Neal had sunk.

Peter had managed to speak with Mozzie alone before their departure the previous night and had impressed upon him the need to watch over Neal. Peter's primary concern was that Neal's already strong instinct to run had been heightened by Rolf's manipulation. Neal was dealing with a ton of guilt from the fake memories and could decide to bolt at any moment.

For once, Mozzie and he were on the same wavelength. Mozzie promised that if Neal did approach him about leaving, he'd keep it from happening. He even put Peter's cell number on his speed dial.

When June opened the door, Peter heard Neal playing the piano. He was singing "Sounds of Silence." That wasn't an optimistic sign.

"I'll get Neal for you," June offered.

Peter nodded to the living room. "Let's talk first." When they entered the room, he chose the couch on the far side from the music room. "What's your impression of him?"

She sat down beside him. "He's withdrawn. I had him down for breakfast, and tried to draw him out about Comic-Con but it wasn't easy. I spoke with Mozzie while Neal was dressing. He's also concerned."

"Is Mozzie with Neal now?"

"He left a little while ago, making vague noises about orchids. Perhaps he thinks flowers will help." She smiled and shook her head. "It will take more than that, I'm afraid, and Mozzie realizes
that. He spent yesterday afternoon installing additional surveillance monitors and sensors, not only for the house and loft but the terrace as well."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"Neal's being well protected." She glanced toward the music room. "I suggested he play some music for me. I thought it would help him relax."

"But did it have to be that song? Is he identifying with the isolation his counterpart in Arkham Files felt at the beginning of the series?"

"It's possible, but you have to admit he sings Simon and Garfunkel beautifully. When Diana asked him to pick singers for the stories, they were at the top of his list."

"Why can't he sing the one I suggested Diana include—'A Little Help from My Friends'? 'Sounds of Silence' is an SOS signal if ever there was one."

She winced acknowledgement. "I wish Henry was here to help. Have you heard when he's coming back?"

"We talked with him last night. He sees the doctor this afternoon, and assuming he obtains clearance, will arrive in New York tomorrow." Peter and El had discussed Neal's situation at length with both Noelle and Henry. The type of psychological manipulation used on Neal was not an area Noelle had any experience with, but she knew Dr. Nussbaum. She told them she'd left a list of therapists with Neal in case he ever felt the need, and he'd been on the list.

"How is our other problem child?" June asked.

"Still a problem. Physically, Henry is recovering well, and as long as he continues on his antibiotics, he should have no more difficulty with that blood infection he had. But management at Win-Win is none too pleased with the way he conducted himself in the field. Allen is threatening to place someone else in charge at the New York office till he gets his act together. Everything's up in the air at the moment."

"What's up in the air?" Neal asked, entering the room.

"Soon we should be," Peter said, standing up. "Do you need more time before we leave?"

"No, I'm ready. The brownstone where he lives is only a few blocks away. We can walk."

Peter liked Neal's suggestion. He planned to take advantage of the time to reconnect with him. To outward appearances, Neal appeared fine. He didn't have a trace of a limp. If Rolf was having Neal monitored, he'd believe Neal didn't remember the injury. But that didn't provide much comfort. It was what was going on internally that Peter worried about.

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*Notes: Neal was speaking Mozzie's language when he explained the different voices he was hearing. Mozzie thrives on having many personalities dwelling within his brain. Unlike Neal, they seem to co-habitat without causing any distress. Allen Ginsberg is one of Mozzie's favorites. The quotes he referenced are:

"A naked lunch is natural to us. We eat reality sandwiches. But allegories are so much lettuce. Don't hide the madness."*
"I don't think there is any truth. There are only points of view."
— Allen Ginsberg

The Prisoner of Azkaban was featured in Magic Trick, one of Penna's vignettes. During that story, Peter dreamed Neal was a wizard. No such happy dreams for Neal, alas. Nightmares have been a recurring issue for him since childhood. This was a theme Penna developed and I've continued. Peter wonders if Rolf is getting ideas from Harry Potter. The evidence is unclear. But there no's doubt about the inspiration I draw from Penna's stories :)

In the past, Henry was often around to help Neal cope. Henry will return soon, but in the meantime Mozzie's stepping up to the plate. In next week's chapter, Neal will have a reunion with the White Collar team and meets with his therapist, while Mozzie reveals yet another talent.

I wrote about the many faces of Mozzie for our blog. Penna's new post is about an angsty incident in the childhood of her main character Zach. The post is called "Novel Progress: Zach's backstory."

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Nocturne in Black and Gold board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon

Neal didn't have to dredge up topics of conversation for the walk to the doctor. Peter spent the entire time talking about Jacob Nussbaum, relating what Tricia had learned from vetting him and also Noelle's words of support. Neal had already heard it all from Noelle but didn't mention it to Peter. He suspected that Peter was doing it as much to reassure himself as Neal.

Nussbaum had worked with both the NSA and the CIA. Now in his late fifties, he'd also been a tenured professor of neuropsychology at Columbia for over twenty years. During the summer months, his schedule was booked with research and government projects.

Peter alluded to the doctor's offer of daily sessions if Neal was willing. From the uneasy look he gave him, Neal was sure Peter expected him to object. But he'd reserve judgment.

When Nussbaum greeted them at the door, Neal felt a barbell of nerves removed from his chest. Sometimes you click straight away with a new acquaintance, and that was how it was with Jacob. Clad in a rumpled checkered shirt and faded khakis, he had grizzled hair and a wry smile that made you want to become better acquainted. He was Jacob, not Dr. Nussbaum, from the moment they met him. His New York accent smacked of lox and bagels. This was a guy that Peter would want to take to his favorite deli.

Jacob's apartment looked like something out of a William Morris house. Arts and Crafts furniture, Tiffany lamp shades, old books. Neal scanned the living room for a Pre-Raphaelite print and was disappointed not to find any. He held out hope for the study.

The three of them sat down to talk. Neal let Peter handle the initial explanation. Tricia had already sent Jacob the files on the Mansfelds and Azathoth. The doc adopted their usage and called Rolf and Klaus by their first names. His familiarity with Neal's history made it less jarring to discuss what went on. Before they left L.A., Neal had also granted Jacob permission to consult with Noelle about his earlier therapy.

"I've studied Dr. Penfold's research," Jacob said. "He's not alone in researching VR technology for psychological manipulation. The Chinese have an ongoing program. I'd mentioned to Tricia that I'm currently conducting a study for the NSA on the topic. Based on what you told me, I agree that they planned to have you discover Neal at the aquarium. If the procedure had been successful, he would have had no memory of what had occurred. Then, at some point in the future, the French would have probably been alerted to check on the Vermeer painting. Evidence to frame Neal would have already been prepared."

"We suspect an informant for Ydrus is working within the Bureau," Peter supplied.

"That will make the frame even simpler to execute. In this type of manipulation, a trigger event is implanted which causes the memories to resurface. Most likely that would be the discovery of the theft. But Neal may not necessarily be implicated. Since you believe recruitment is the goal, they may refrain from tying him to the theft. Instead, either Rolf or Klaus will approach Neal and warn him about the upcoming frame." Jacob turned to Neal. "What would you do under those circumstances?"

Neal attempted to relax as he directed his thoughts inward. Hearing Peter review his VR experiences had forced him to relive the memories. The emotions were much more intense than
what he'd experienced on the weekend. Flashing snapshots in rapid-fire succession. He could feel the panic lapping at his mind, washing away rational thought.

"Neal?" Jacob's quiet voice was reassuringly normal. Neal tried to lash himself to the sound to keep from being swept away.

"I don't know," he admitted, fumbling around for something to fill in the awkward silence. "Right now the voices are all shouting at each other." He glanced at Peter. He wouldn't like what Neal had to say, but even he had to realize it was the only practical solution. "All I know for sure is that I want to run. I can't put you and El through that ordeal. If I leave now, I can prevent it from ever starting."

"But running won't help," Peter objected quickly. "You know that. In your virtual world, the painting was planted at my house. They would have still framed me and El even if you'd fled. If you run, it will be worse. The Bureau could construe that I aided your escape."

Why hadn't Neal thought of that? His brain must be in worse shape than he realized. The nightmare would play out no matter what he did. But if he confessed, that wouldn't help either. He was trapped. His mind became a spinning top as he flailed for a solution. Why couldn't he find one? There had to be a way . . .

"Neal, listen to me." He looked up to see Jacob had risen and had his hands on his shoulders, pressing him back into the chair. "The scenario they planted inside you won't happen."

"What's to prevent it?" Neal suppressed the urge to bolt out of the apartment right then and there. Run was a steady drumbeat in his head.

"Rolf will stop it himself," Peter said firmly. Could he be right? How could he be so certain? Jacob had poured him a glass of water and was urging him to drink, but all Neal could focus on was the noise inside him.

"That panic you feel," Jacob said in the same reassuring tone, "is the trigger. It won't last for much longer. You're aware of what the voices are telling you, even if they do seem jumbled. That wasn't supposed to happen. We can disarm that trigger so it can't control you."

Neal nodded, taking deep breaths. Running wasn't an option.

"Rolf probably has you under surveillance now," Jacob said, confirming what they already suspected. "At the first indication of flight on your part, he'll intervene. He'll convince you that the only way to keep Peter and his wife from being implicated is for you to continue on your present course. But from then on you'll be his tool. You'll agree because it's the only way to keep your nightmare from turning into reality. Rolf might even suggest you paint a forgery of the Vermeer to replace The Astronomer."

"That does sound like Rolf," Peter said thoughtfully. "He likes to play on events from our past. You'd painted the forgery of The Woman in Blue, another Vermeer painting. Rolf is fully aware of your expertise. He could claim he'd substitute it for the mediocre forgery. Then no one would know about the theft."

Jacob nodded agreement. "Rolf knows your instinct is to run. By channeling that drive into the forgery, he'll accomplish his goal of controlling you—"

"—while having the Vermeer to sell," Peter finished. "He believes those implanted memories will make it easy to convince you that the FBI can't be trusted." He turned to Jacob. "Neal believes that
the reason Rolf is so well informed is because Klaus is alive and has been working with him from the beginning."

"Tricia told me. Neal's the expert on Klaus. Let's continue working on that assumption."

"We've agreed to call them jointly Azathoth when we're unsure who's responsible," Neal added, forcing himself to calm down. Nothing had happened. They had time.

"And I'll do the same," Jacob agreed. "Tricia's file indicates that Klaus placed a high value on you pursuing a higher degree. You're in the PhD program. The Mansfeld brothers don't want you to leave. You're in the ideal situation to help them achieve their objective. Your connections at the FBI, Interpol and Columbia are all invaluable to them. And because of the positive emotions toward Rolf and Klaus they implanted, they believe they'll be able to control you without any problem." He paused to smile. "Then there are the Arkham Files stories."

"Tricia told you about them?" Peter asked.

He nodded. "We discussed the Lima syndrome at length. I read the first story last night. Tricia explained how you were using them to make Azathoth believe you've planted hidden messages about your willingness to be recruited, too. Rolf probably feels Neal won't have a hard time in persuading you. When the moment is right, he'll walk Neal through all the signals you've been injecting."

"The stories were designed to make Azathoth feel more sympathetic toward us," Peter said. "The results were not as we hoped."

"I'm inclined to disagree," said Jacob. Surprised, Neal stared at him. How could he call that virtual reality pleasant?

"Neal wasn't supposed to ever remember the ordeal he'd experienced," Jacob said. "Just the emotions. Azathoth no doubt believes that he succeeded in manipulating Neal's emotions without coercion. In my analysis of the VR program, I saw many signs of the stories' influence. The most obvious is Azathoth's desire to have you as well as Neal a member of the crew."

"But the scenes with Elizabeth?" Peter persisted.

"They didn't intend for Neal to be aware of any of the actual scenes. He was only meant to experience the emotions—gratitude toward Klaus, apprehension about the FBI, a desire to protect you and your wife. In the future when Klaus explains how Neal had been mistaken about the incident in Berlin, Neal will accept his version of reality readily. Azathoth wants to rekindle Neal's desire to be a thief. If the programming had been successful, Neal would have gladly resumed his former life."

Jacob's argument made sense. That war in his mind was being waged by the new voices battling the old ones. Neal supposed he should feel grateful. Better to know the truth, no matter what the cost.

"We yanked Neal out of his VR hellhole before the procedure was completed," Peter said. "Any ideas on what the final scene in the program would have been?"

Jacob considered the question for a moment. "Most likely it would have been of Neal visiting you in prison. Neal would have made the arguments Azathoth implanted and you would have agreed, thus providing the happy ending they wish to achieve. At that point Neal would have been put into deep sleep while the memories were buried in his subconscious." He turned to Neal. "Now that we
know what they intend to do, our job is to make sure that doesn't happen."

"How?" Neal demanded. "Can you erase those memories from my brain?"

"I can't, but you will. Together we can render them harmless. In time you'll be able to banish them from your conscious thoughts, making them seem like nothing more than a bad dream. Do you still feel the pain in your back?"

Neal hesitated. He hadn't mentioned it to Peter, who must have assumed it had gone away since he didn't limp anymore. "It's still there."

"Good," Jacob said. At Neal's surprised look, he added, "That will be a benchmark on your recovery process. When you no longer feel it, you'll know you've made a major step forward in regaining control of your life."

Neal asked the question that was uppermost in his mind. "Could he have planted some command that I would perform when given the correct stimulus?"

Jacob smiled and shook his head. "Turn you into the Manchurian candidate? To my knowledge that's never been successfully implemented though many have attempted it. For now it remains the stuff of science fiction." He shifted in his chair. "I'd like to have some time alone with you. Peter, do you want to stay?"

He indicated his laptop. "I'd planned to. I brought my work."

Neal was relieved to hear Peter wasn't leaving. Jacob didn't make him nervous, but he was uneasy at what he might discover.

"Good. Help yourself to coffee. There's a pot made in the kitchen. Neal, we can use my study."

"Do you have a couch you want me to lie on?" Neal asked, raising a brow. Noelle never used the technique during the sessions he had with her, but perhaps Jacob was a traditionalist.

He chuckled. "No, but how are you at jigsaws?"

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"Seriously, Peter. That's what we did."

Neal didn't look like he was joshing him, but Peter knew they couldn't have spent the entire time simply working on a puzzle. Neal was with Jacob for two hours. Afterward, he was the most talkative he'd been since being rescued.

That hadn't been the case earlier in the morning. On their way to see the doc, Neal had been as skittish as a probie on his first field assignment. During the initial interview, Peter didn't need to hear Neal admit he wanted to run. He looked ready to bolt at the first opportunity. Peter didn't doubt for an instant those emotions were still there, but he was controlling them better. And that was an encouraging sign. "What kind of puzzle is it?"

"It's called Krypt. All the pieces are solid silver. It's the most fiendishly difficult jigsaw I've ever seen." Neal surprised him by breaking into a genuine smile. That was a rare occurrence these days. "It's German. I suspect Rolf of having designed it."

"How far did you get?"
"Most of the border is in place," he said, looking satisfied. "I'll return tomorrow to work on it some more."

That was welcome news. "Does that mean you've agreed to daily sessions?"

Neal nodded. "Like the jigsaw, I know there's no quick fix. We talked while working on the puzzle."

"Are the memories fading at all?"

"No." Neal hesitated for a moment. "If anything, they're stronger. Jacob said that's a positive because it shows I'm trying to wrest back control." He winced. "You're probably not surprised that Greco-Roman wrestling was never my strong suit." He slanted a glance at Peter. "Don't look so worried. Jacob taught me some trick moves which may give me an edge."

Clearly Jacob had scored a hit with Neal. Peter made a mental note to update Tricia in the afternoon. He remembered Neal had commented on how he'd liked the Arts and Crafts style of Noelle and Joe's new house in Baltimore. Was the fact that Jacob's apartment was decorated in the same style making it easier for Neal to accept? Or was it that Neal realized he was in such a dark place, he recognized he had no choice? Neal continued to talk about the session during the walk to June's. He jumped in dizzying fashion between the puzzle, memories of the virtual world, and a drawing by Edward Burne-Jones, a Pre-Raphaelite artist Neal admired, which Jacob had hanging in his study.

"Are we going to the office this afternoon?" Neal asked after pausing to take a breath.

"No, the office is coming to you. I made productive use of the time you were with Jacob. Jones, Diana, and Travis are meeting us at June's. They've been working on an idea they want to present, and Jones requested Mozzie attend as well." Peter stopped himself. "Even with the news about Paul Lévy, I still have a hard time adjusting to the fact that my second-in-command has apprenticed himself to your master crime tactician."

"You'll know you're in trouble when Jones starts quoting Sun Tzu and requests Chinese takeout to plan an op."

"Perhaps," Peter said, chuckling. "But for matters concerning Rolf, our resident warped genius is an invaluable asset."

"Do you know what they've come up with?"

"I'd rather you hear it from them."

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Neal gazed around the dining table at June's house. They'd met here so often to discuss Arkham Files plots that Diana joked it had become the White Collar annex. Double leaded glass doors sealed them off from the staff. June was not meeting with them today, but had provided coffee and snacks for the session.

The initial awkwardness of seeing the team members in person was wearing off. Neal had braced himself beforehand and was ready for the flashbacks. Scenes of the trial quickly faded. Jacob had advised him to picture the jigsaw puzzle when the memories resurfaced.

"Diana and I brainstormed on Sunday," Jones said. "The Vermeer painting is clearly the key, and Sun Tzu tells us we can't rely on the chance it won't be used. Instead we must make our own
position unassailable."

Peter shot a quick amused glance at Neal when Mozzie murmured, "Very good, grasshopper."

"Wasn't one Mozzie bad enough?" Diana quipped, performing her classic exaggerated eye roll.

"There can only be one of me," Mozzie scoffed. "All others are cheap imitations."

Peter wasn't about to let that remark go unchallenged and even Travis joined in the banter. Neal suspected they'd staged the scene to help calm his jitters, but he didn't mind. It was working.

"We decided to take a page out of Klaus's playbook," Jones continued. "Neal emulates him for heist planning. We should as well. When Peter told us that Dr. Nussbaum brought up the same idea, we knew we were on the right track."

Diana turned to Neal. Crossing her arms on the table, she leaned toward him. "We plan to beat Rolf to the punch. We'll replace their forgery of The Astronomer with another one so superbly crafted that it will pass any test the experts throw at it." She cocked her head. "Feel up to the challenge? You prepared one of The Woman in Blue for Klaus last fall. It's time for an encore."

Forge another Vermeer as a sanctioned assignment? Neal's heart leaped at the prospect.

"Can you do it?" Peter asked.

"Yes, if I have access to the correct supplies."

"I can take care of that," Mozzie offered promptly. He didn't seem surprised by the proposal. They'd probably already discussed it with him.

"I understand the concept," Neal said. "If it's believed to be genuine, any attempt to frame me and Peter with the theft would fail. But how will you convince the French to be part of the con?"

"Already handled," Peter said with a smile. "I talked with Marcel while you were meeting with Jacob. He'd secured permission on Saturday to keep the theft confidential. Your forgery provides extra insurance. What supplies are required?"

"Canvas of the proper composition, oils corresponding to the period . . ." as Neal began rattling off his list, Mozzie interrupted him.

"I'll be in charge of provisions. I assume the budget is adequate for the challenge?" He raised an eyebrow at Peter, daring him to say otherwise.

"Within reason and with full accounting," he acknowledged.

"Naturally." Neal noted the hint of a smile on Mozzie's face. Peter didn't ask for unforged paperwork. The suppliers Mozzie dealt with never left a paper trail.

"For the operation to be successful, Neal's work will have to be kept secret," Jones warned and turned to him. "You won't be able to work at your studio."

"I can paint in the loft," Neal offered. "The Astronomer is a small work. Less than two feet high as I recall."

"How much time will you need?" Travis asked.

"The Woman in Blue took five days. Once I have the equipment, I should have it ready for aging in
about the same length of time. I'll need detailed photos of the painting, front and back."

"Already taken care of," Peter said promptly. "Marcel will supply them."

"Should we invent an excuse for Neal being away from the office?" Diana asked. "We assume Rolf is having you monitored."

"I'd considered that," Peter said, "but there's no reason for Neal to fake an illness. Let Rolf wonder what's happening. He must know we found Neal hooked up to equipment at Scima. It's only natural that he'd be placed on medical leave afterward and that he'd be required to consult with a psychologist."

"What's the latest on Henry?" Travis asked.

"I spoke with him last night," Neal said. "He'll see his doctor today and hopes to obtain clearance to fly here tomorrow. He wants to meet with us. Henry suggested an off-site location in view of the sensitivity of the topic."

"Nobody's claimed that our conference rooms are bugged," Jones grumbled.

"If we meet at the Bureau, Mozzie couldn't attend," Peter said unexpectedly, "and in matters concerning Nazis we need our conspiracy expert. It will save Neal having to repeat everything." He turned to Mozzie. "Should we rename ourselves the White Collar irregulars?"

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Diana had thought she was prepared. Peter and Tricia both had warned her. But it still came as a shock when Neal flinched at the sight of her and Jones.

She lectured herself it was to be expected. They'd all read Neal's report which contained the description of him being shot as he broke out of prison. Neal said he didn't know who had fired the gun which wounded him. Diana wanted to believe that was true, but she was the best marksman in the group.

When Neal mentioned going to his studio to pick up art supplies at the conclusion of the meeting, Diana jumped on the opportunity to offer him a lift. Peter readily seconded the idea. He offered to take Travis and Jones back to the office with him while she kept the Bureau car.

Diana was counting on some alone time with Neal, not just for his sake but hers as well. He reminded her eerily of the way Arkham Neal was at the beginning of her stories, nervous as a cat and ill at ease. She wanted her old Neal back, and she intended to throttle Rolf, Klaus, and whoever else was responsible.

Tricia had spoken with Dr. Nussbaum after the morning session. She'd then met with Jones, Diana, and Travis to go over the issues they might encounter. Tricia instructed them to act as normal as possible around him but not kid him about any missteps. Not tease Neal? Tricia didn't know what a tough assignment she was demanding.

Still, Neal seemed to relax during the meeting. She awarded Mozzie points for that. On the walk to her car, Neal even initiated some conversation. A welcome change after being so quiet during the meeting.

"Any hints on your next story?" he asked. Wheedling spoilers out of her had become a standard tease. She'd take that as a promising first step.
Scanning in all directions before replying, she whispered, "Don't reveal your source, but Tricia and I discussed the plot this morning. We feel it's time to bring Klaus in and we have just the role for him."

She wasn't sure how he'd react but he appeared pleased at the thought. "You believe me, then?"

"As crazy as it sounds, I do. We've accepted that Rolf faked his death. Why wouldn't Klaus have done the same? Honestly, after hearing Klaus's explanation, I wondered why we didn't think of it earlier."

"You know why," he said. "You saw his corpse."

"Yeah, but I didn't know him that well." Damn. Did that hit too close to home? She felt like she was walking on eggshells, and she hated it.

Neal gave her a sloppy smile. "Don't worry, Di. I won't break in two if you breathe on me."

Neal never called her that. It wasn't his intention, but using the nickname made him seem even more vulnerable to her. "I'm that obvious?" she said lightly, unlocking the car doors.

He shrugged as he slid into the front passenger seat. "It's not just you. It's Jones, El, June, Peter—scratch that, Peter in overdrive, I appreciate the effort. Especially for you, it must be torture. Just beat me up like you normally do. It will make me feel like I'm home."

"Got it," she agreed happily, gunning the car to merge into traffic.

Neal grabbed onto the armrest when the car sped forward. "Did Peter teach you how to drive? Or are all feds maniacs on the road?"

"Shove it, Caffrey," she jeered. "You're getting a free ride. You can't complain." Watson Hall was only eight blocks north of June's. Not much time to torture Neal with her driving, although she did her best. She justified it as a welcome relief from stressing about Rolf and Klaus.

Neal had brought along boxes to pack his supplies. She dropped him off then scrounged for a parking spot. Even in the summer, that wasn't an easy feat around the university.

Diana had never visited Neal's studio and was curious to see what it was like. Her footsteps echoed jarringly loud in the deserted corridors. She was glad Neal wouldn't paint the Vermeer here. It couldn't be healthy.

Neal had told her his studio was at the back of the building on the second floor. As she approached it she could hear voices and laughter. Neal laughing? That was a pleasant change. Was that because the other voice was a woman's? Another sign that the old Neal was resurfacing?

The door to the studio was open and Diana heard a soft, sultry voice say, "If you change your mind, give me a call. It'd be a shame to have that ticket go to waste. And don't forget I owe you a dinner. You paid for the Hungarian restaurant. It's my turn."

Diana entered the room to see an attractive blonde standing next to Neal. She appeared to be about Neal's age. Artsy type in leggings and oversized tunic. With her face and body, she could have been a model. Definitely Neal's type.

Neal made the introductions, explaining that Bianka Kaldy had the studio next to his. He introduced Diana as a friend, not a colleague. Was that deliberate? Or was Diana reading a hidden message about everything he did?
"Let me know how the portrait goes," Bianka said as she left.

"I will," he promised.

Neal had already boxed up his supplies. During the drive back to the loft, Diana questioned him about the portrait Bianka had mentioned.

"She came in to visit while I was packing. You saw how empty the hall was. I think she was lonely. She was worried that I was giving up the studio and she'd be the only one left. I told her I was taking supplies to paint a portrait of June."

"Good excuse," Diana commented. "Are you and Bianka dating?"

He raised a brow with a touch of his old humor. "You jealous?"

She reached over with one hand to give him a light punch. "That's the Neal Caffrey I know and you didn't answer my question."

He shrugged. "We're friends, that's all. Once the school year starts, she probably won't give me the time of day."

"You won't be lonely at June's. I hear Mozzie's staying there too. After a week of being around him, you'll long to return to your studio."

WCWCWCWCWCWCWC

Neal's Vermeer workshop was ready for business on Monday night. It wasn't as posh as the workroom Klaus had provided last fall, but Jones and Mozzie made sure he was supplied with all the necessary equipment. Jones had prepared several images of The Astronomer using different filters and magnifications, including one monster version at ten times the actual size. He also made a DVD of the documentation Marcel had sent from Paris.

Mozzie had procured the canvas and paints. He arrived back in time to have dinner with Neal and June. Last night Mozzie had insisted on sleeping on the couch in the loft, but Neal intended to persuade him to use one of June's guest bedrooms. Although Mozzie held to his promise and didn't mutter in Latin, humming arias from Don Giovanni wasn't much better.

Neal had converted his dining table to a worktable for the photos and paints. To eliminate any toxic fumes inside the loft, he set up a workbench outside on the terrace for cleaning his brushes.

"It's a shame Jones is so ethical," Mozzie said wistfully, studying the photos. "He'd make a fine leg man."

Neal sat beside the table to sort the paint tubes. "You're not having any luck corrupting him?"

"Not yet. Still, we mustn't lose hope. How did your session with the doctor go? Did he explain how he acquired such an appropriate surname?"

"Why his name is German for nut tree? No, we didn't discuss that or how I was a nutcase. He has an interesting technique. I'm working on a jigsaw puzzle."

"And you haven't finished it yet? You're sicker than I realized."

Neal raised a brow. "Six hundred fifty pieces, all solid silver? Most nearly identical? I think even you might need more than one day." Neal explained Peter and Doc Jacob's view on what Azathoth
had hoped to accomplish by planting the false memories.

"Blackmail you into doing their bidding?" Mozzie shrugged as he stroked one of the paintbrushes. "With Klaus's voice reinforcing your emotions, it would have had a good chance of success. That may have been their objective in Paris as well. Klaus could have staged a rescue of you at the last moment and earned your gratitude."

Mozzie pointed at Neal with the brush. "That night you were in the church . . . perhaps Klaus meant to draw off the gendarmes just like I did. He could have called in a theft at the Louvre. Possibly of the Vermeer itself. That would have foreshadowed the memories they intended to instill, adding a piquant note of déjà vu. I don't suppose Klaus told you anything about the Vermeer's present location?" he asked hopefully.

"He led me to believe that the feds had confiscated it when they found it in Peter's safe." Had Klaus stolen it the same week Neal had been in Paris? Someone must have been in Paris to oversee monitoring the Braque. Rolf couldn't have done it since he was still using the Chapman alias and was being watched. What happened in Paris was further proof that Klaus was alive. But it was a moot point since Neal couldn't inform Peter and the team.

Did Klaus plan to use the Braque painting like *The Astronomer*? Another means to ensnare them all? Even if the team succeeded in taking the Vermeer out of play, Klaus and Rolf could use the Braque and achieve the same result. They didn't have the painting but they could have a video. Klaus could have tailed Neal after he retrieved the painting. He might have recorded the exchange to Mozzie. Once the Vermeer painting was finished, perhaps Neal should take off before they pulled the trigger. Running was the only sane option.

Mozzie had gone into the kitchen. He poured out two glasses of honey wine and handed Neal one. "Special fortified blend, just for you, mon frère. I started with Ohelo Sunset and added an extra dose of pinecone ginger."

Neal took a healthy gulp and then another. "Our passports are in order, right?"

"Of course. Are you contemplating taking a trip?"

"It might be for the best," Neal admitted.

Mozzie sat down and reflected for a moment before answering. "Now's not the time. It must be on your terms. That's what you told me. Are you having second thoughts?" When Neal didn't answer, Mozzie nodded understanding. "No need to be hasty. There's no immediate threat. Henry will be here tomorrow."

"That sounds good. The Vermeer will be done this weekend."

"We'll reevaluate it then," Mozzie said comfortably. "While you were with Jacob, I spent the morning at the Aloha Emporium. Billy and I had an interesting chat. Your case is an intriguing one. I've often considered I have multiple people in my head—Sun Tzu, Voltaire, Thoreau, among others. Billy helped me compartmentalize them." He tapped Neal's forehead. "Now you have Klaus and Rolf rattling around inside you. Although the knowledge they possess is a treasure house waiting to be plundered, I grant you it can be distracting."

"That's not what's happening to me at all," Neal objected. "I have warring emotions, not people."

"Tosh, don't fixate on minor technicalities. I discussed your situation with Billy and he offered to assist if you're willing."
How had Billy helped Mozzie? Mozzie had told him that Billy was an expert in kung fu, which wasn't a surprise since his basement was outfitted as a martial arts studio. Neal had on more than one occasion tried to persuade Billy to teach him, but he'd always resisted. Had Billy agreed to train Mozzie but not him? That was an unsettling thought.

Mozzie reached over for one of Neal's paintbrushes and stood up. "You no doubt admire the way I can transform a seemingly harmless item like a pair of chopsticks"—he spun around, brandishing the brush in the air—"or a paintbrush into a lethal weapon. My foes are lulled into a false sense of superiority. That is intentional." Mozzie approached him and wiggled his fingers inches from Neal's face. "Yes, my young grasshopper, I am a master in the Way of the Orchid."

At his look of complacent enlightenment, Neal burst into laughter.

The paintbrush kung fu master couldn't resist a smile either. Picking up another of Neal's brushes, he twirled the two with impressive if not scary dexterity. Any would-be assailant would have fallen over himself with laughter. Perhaps that was the objective?

But Mozzie insisted he was serious. Neal knew that Billy was an expert on orchids and had an extensive orchid greenhouse over his shop. And Neal could testify to Billy sometimes using orchids as metaphors. Last fall Billy had used an orchid with tiger-patterned petals as an analogy for Neal.

The Way of the Orchid sounded like something Billy would dream up. Mozzie explained that Billy and his daughter Maggie had jointly developed the new style.

Orchid kung fu? What did he have to lose?

Notes: I'm not an expert on psychology, but Jacob referred me to an article about the psychological benefits of jigsaw puzzles. Likewise my knowledge of kung fu is rudimentary. If you have questions relating to The Way of the Orchid, I'll pass them on to Billy or Mozzie.

Diana was particularly distressed about the role she played in Rolf's VR program. In our series Diana has sometimes acted as Neal's protector. Her feelings toward him have become more complicated since she began writing Arkham Files. It's not only NYC Neal she has to worry about but his Arkham character. And now she's confronted by the evil doppelganger of herself that Rolf created. I wrote about the dynamic between Diana and Neal for our blog. The post is called "Brothers and Sisters."

Last week Neal relived the nightmare of being shot. This week Penna posted a scene where her main character Zach is shot. It's called: "Novel Progress: a slow-motion moment."

Henry finally arrives in next week's chapter, "A Tale of Two Paintings." It will be a time of revelations and disclosures.

Many thanks to Penna for taking time away from her novel to offer beta advice, and thanks to you for reading and commenting!

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Nocturne in Black and Gold board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon
A Tale of Two Paintings


Always in the past when Neal descended the backstairs at the emporium, his objective was Mozzie's bunker. He'd eyed the sparring mats and the martial arts gear with curiosity and a trace of envy. They were regalia to a world he'd been denied admission.

But not today.

Neal arrived at the shop after his morning therapy session. Maggie was at the florist station helping a customer. She stopped to greet him and said they were waiting for him downstairs. They? Was this to be a group lesson?

Not quite.

In the basement he saw he was to have not one but two kung fu masters—yin and yang. Billy was clad in a white martial arts uniform. Mozzie was all in black. Compared with them, Neal felt like an interloper in his jeans and t-shirt.

Billy's smile was as genial as ever, even if Mozzie did insist on assuming a frozen stance, his arms projecting outward like the wings of a crane . . . or a vulture. Was there such a thing as vulture kung fu? If there was, Mozzie had it nailed. On a stand in the center of the room was the tiger-patterned orchid Billy had shown Neal earlier.

"You're not pulling my leg, are you?" asked Neal warily, eyeing the flower.

"No," Billy replied, "but with Mozzie as my disciple, it's a natural question. You may wonder why I agreed to take you on. Mozzie explained what happened. You've lost your way, and it's up to us to put you on the right path."

"The Way of the Orchid?" Neal asked, letting a trace of his skepticism show. "I'm all for learning how to defend myself. I haven't been doing a particularly good job of that lately. I took your advice when you counseled me to imitate an orchid by faking an injury with the yakuza, but that wouldn't have helped in San Diego. Flowers are passive and that won't work in all situations."

Billy nodded agreement. "Like flowers, kung fu relies primarily on defensive techniques. Certain situations, however, require us to take the offense, and that is where the Way of the Orchid comes in." He walked over to the tiger orchid and picked up a photo which was lying next to it. "What do you think of this?"

Neal studied the image. "Unusual orchid. Lovely fuchsia veins . . ." Neal peered closer. "What is that? A second orchid?"

"Not quite. That's an orchid mantis, a superb example of mimicry."

Billy was right. It was hard to believe the rose and ivory creation was an insect.

"The orchid mantis blends perfectly with the flower, disguising its ability as a warrior. You, my friend, need to do the same."
By the end of the lesson Neal couldn't see that he'd made much progress in becoming either an orchid or an orchid mantis. Billy spent the entire session on taiji. Neal had often seen the discipline practiced in parks, but Billy used the method espoused in competitions. As Neal practiced the positions, Mozzie demonstrated them in his own unique style, adding flourishes no Chinese master would have ever incorporated.

Neal found that slowing himself down enough to perform the movements correctly was an impossible task. Billy appeared satisfied, however, claiming that until his qi was healed he couldn't expect to do better. Great. It wasn't enough that he had to stop the war going on in his head. He now needed to nursemaid an ailing qi.

Neal reluctantly agreed to continue the lessons at least for the week he was working from home. He'd then reevaluate. Before the lesson, he'd pictured himself performing acrobatic leaps, flying through the air in feats of dazzling virtuosity. The Way of the Orchid was so far a dud.

Neal had worn his running shoes and he raced through Riverside Park on the way home. The exhilaration brought a measure of relief. How could he possibly perform taiji when every muscle in his body screamed run?

It wasn't until he reached home that he realized his back didn't hurt anymore. Was it because of Doc Jacob or the Way of the Orchid? Whatever. Neal pounced on it as a victory. That was going into his milestones box of accomplishments. And he knew exactly what he'd make. An origami of a leopard. He'd taken the first step in wrestling control from Klaus and snapping a collar around the Leopard's neck.

Taking advantage of his better mood, Neal made significant progress on the painting before the meeting was scheduled to start. He'd spent most of the previous night on it as well. He'd worked till he was so tired he didn't have to worry about nightmares. It wasn't a permanent solution, but it'd tide him over till Jacob and the Way of the Orchid worked their magic on him.

Henry had called him daily, filling him in on how he broke into Adler's hideaway and how Kate had rescued him. Neal wasn't surprised at her actions. Kate wasn't the type of person who could just stand by and let a person be killed. Besides, Henry had helped her flee the country. She owed him.

Mainly, Henry wanted to discuss the virtual prison Neal had been in. Since Neal had already discussed it for hours with Jacob, it was no longer so painful to talk about. Henry appeared particularly interested in the roles Rolf had programmed for El, Diana, Jones, and Hughes. Never had Neal been so appreciative that he'd omitted any mention of his relatives to Klaus.

Henry was still on his way from the airport by the time the team had gathered at June's. She kept watch for him while Peter discussed the news from Los Angeles. Erasmus Penfold was scheduled to appear in court today and most likely would be released on bail. The D.A. hoped to have Katja Visser's bail denied. The team was confident she was Marta, but there was still had no substantiating evidence.

When Henry's taxi rolled up, June called Neal out of the meeting so they could both greet him. Henry looked paler and thinner than when Neal last saw him. His left arm was in a sling, but his grin was as self-confident as ever.

"And I thought I had the title of black sheep of the family sewn up," Neal teased. "Are you trying to muscle in on my turf?"

"I've snatched that title and hidden it where you can't possibly find it," Henry pronounced smugly.
"All you have to do is ask Mom and Joe for confirmation." He nodded toward the dining room. "How much trouble am I in with them?"

"None. They figure you're Win-Win's problem."

Before they joined the others, Henry pulled him aside. "How many voices are you hearing inside your head right now?"

"Just like I told you Sunday," Neal admitted. "The same three: Klaus, me, and the old me."

"At least they're not increasing in number. That's a positive. You had another therapy session today, I hope."

Neal shrugged acknowledgement. "I'm having daily sessions till he signs the release form."

"Yesterday I researched the use of jigsaw puzzles as a psychological technique. It's chalked up some impressive results."

"I think it's helping." Neal hoped his voice didn't sound too tentative. He felt as if he couldn't hide anything. He'd lost his ability to shapeshift and along with it his identity. Now that Henry was here, maybe he could help him recover it.

"After the meeting, I'll need to touch base with my team," Henry said. "They only started in mid-June, and their boss has been AWOL for half the time we've been open."

Neal swallowed down the disappointment. "That's okay. I need to work on the Vermeer."

"But you take breaks to eat, right? I'll be back with takeout this evening. I have a craving for Indian food."

Neal nodded, satisfied. He could wait till then. He turned toward the dining room but Henry stopped him with a hand to his arm.

"If you need to leave during the meeting, go ahead. I'll catch you up later."

"You already told me about Kate. You have something worse to bring up?"

"Of course not. It's just we may drone on about Nazis for a while."

Neal wasn't concerned. During their phone calls Henry hadn't mentioned anything about the Braque painting. If he had found anything incriminating about Neal, he certainly wouldn't bring it up in a group discussion.

Seated around June's dining room table were Peter, Jones, Travis, Diana, and Mozzie. When they welcomed Henry, they contained their teasing of Jungle Boy to a minimum.

"How's the shoulder?" Peter asked.

"It's healing well. And I think when you hear what I found out, you'll believe that my Jungle Boy experience was well justified." Henry paused for dramatic effect, making sure he had everyone's attention. "We now know who's been feeding Adler information. When Adler fled Argentina, we assumed it was to Paraguay. Yesterday Win-Win's tech wizards traced a call which was placed in Asuncion, Paraguay last Wednesday. That was the day after Adler fled. The call was made to the FBI's New York office. It was a coded message, consisting mainly of strings of numbers. The voice in Paraguay has now been identified through voice recognition software to be that of Garrett
Fowler. Distinctive vocal patterns give the finding a high probability of accuracy."

"And the voice on the other end?" Peter demanded.

"A private cell phone belonging to Agent Joseph Ruiz received the call. Ruiz answered with a brief acknowledgment that the message was received." Henry turned to Jones. "Yuri Pazuniak is in charge of the monitoring team. He expects you and Travis will contact him for details of the transmission."

At Henry's news, the room erupted into a feeding frenzy of questions and speculation. Neal knew Ruiz disliked him. He'd made no secret that he held Neal responsible for somehow framing Fowler and ruining his career, when in actuality it was Fowler trying to stick it to Neal. Fowler used to work in Organized Crime with Ruiz. He had many friends there. Was this what Henry was talking about when he said Neal might not want to hang around?

"I didn't see Fowler at the hideout," Henry said, "and Kate didn't mention him, but there were multiple voices talking over breakfast when I broke in. One of them could have been Fowler's."

"I'm not surprised it's Ruiz," Travis said. "The way he tried to intimidate Neal back in December? I knew he was trouble."

"Neal, that was the day you were practicing with the snooper pen," Peter said. "Do you still have the recording?"

Neal nodded. "I saved it in case there was another incident."

"Ruiz's team botched their assignment during the Samurai bond op," Diana said, her mouth twisting into a grimace. "Neal could have died from their incompetence."

"Their actions were investigated by OPR," Peter cautioned. "Ruiz made a strong case for it not being deliberate."

"I was furious when I found out about it," Henry said, "and still am." He turned to Neal who was sitting next to him. "Did any other issues pop up with Ruiz?"

"No, but I've tended to avoid Organized Crime's floor," Neal admitted. "During the few encounters I've had with Ruiz, he's been civil."

"I bet Fowler approached him sometime after the bond case," Jones speculated. "If Ruiz had been working for Fowler, he never would have threatened Neal so openly in the hallway."

"It's difficult to accept any Bureau agent being an informant, even someone with Ruiz's history," Peter said. "He was a young star on the rise. I wonder how Fowler was able to persuade him."

"It might not have been that difficult," Travis said. "Ruiz already resented Neal for what happened to Fowler."

"And we don't know the extent of Ruiz's betrayal," Jones added. "He may not realize Fowler is working for Adler. It's possible he has a misguided notion he'll be able to persuade Fowler to come back and be reinstated. If he genuinely thinks Neal framed Fowler instead of the other way around, Ruiz could delude himself that he's working to right an injustice."

"I'll notify Hughes," Peter said. "It will be up to OPR to prosecute the case."

"But there's no need to inform them immediately, is there?" Neal asked. He noticed Henry flash
him a quick smile. He had the same idea. "Ruiz is a minor player. He can be taken down anytime. He's much more useful where he is. We've now got an open channel to funnel false intel to Adler."

"I like it," Peter agreed. "If Ruiz knows we're suspicious of him, we will have lost our advantage. He provides our best chance of locating both Fowler and Adler."

"I sense the beginning of a Machiavellian counter-strategy," Mozzie commented, his eyes glinting in a look Neal knew well. Up to now he'd been a silent observer, but this was Mozzie's turf. "We must now lull our mark into a false sense of security. Does anyone have an in with him?"

Diana waved her hand nonchalantly in his direction. "I do."

Mozzie beamed at her as if she'd presented him with the keys to Fort Knox. "La femme! You will be our agent provocateur."

"Just what is the nature of this relationship?" Peter complained in his cut-the-crap voice.

"Ruiz was more than a little friendly when I worked with him during the bond case last December," Diana explained.

"Does he know about Christie?" Jones asked, raising a brow.

"Yeah, but that doesn't matter. It may make me even more attractive to him. I can easily play the flirtation game with Ruiz. It won't be nearly as enjoyable as when I flirt with Neal"—she paused to toss him a coquettish smile—"but I won't need to come on as strong. Ruiz hinted at the opportunities I'd have at Organized Crime. I could work that angle."

"Diana could simply act friendly, not like she's falling for the guy," Henry agreed. "Ruiz will probably hold out hope he can eventually win her over." He turned to face her. "Does he know anything about the stories you're writing?"

"He may have heard about them," she conceded, "but that shouldn't raise any flags. I can lay it on thick about how I'm being forced to work evenings on them with no extra compensation." She paused to clear her throat and raise a brow at Peter. When Neal snickered, she directed her glare on him. "I could vent for hours about how Neal's a spoiled brat, and I resent the extra perks he gets."

"You need any extra grievances, I'll be happy to supply them," Henry quipped.

They all jumped in to prime the pump. Had Diana spread the word that the team should stop treating him with kid gloves? They were all bare-knuckled now and Neal was happy to play along. He didn't need Henry's nudge to participate. "Since you insist," he said, heaving a deep sigh. "I agree to take one for the team and become extra annoying."

"Attaboy!" Peter said, cheering him on. "Put that smartass spirit into overdrive."

"Carry your obnoxiousness to new bounds," Diana encouraged. "I could use some fresh material."

"We've got the agent," Travis said, ticking off the points on his fingers. "We have the motivation and the pipeline. Any ideas on what we'll feed into it?"

"All in good time," Mozzie said. "Jones and I've been working on a solution so devastatingly brilliant that it—"

"Which is not ready to be presented," Jones said, interrupted him hurriedly, frowning at his overly exuberant strategy master.
Peter took the opportunity to question Henry. "Besides forcing Adler out of hiding, did you discover anything about the Braque painting or Adler's apparent obsession with Nazis?"

"I have that obsession to thank for my escape. You know that Kate set me free. She claimed that it was because she didn't want to see me die, but I pumped her for information before leaving."

Henry went on to explain how Franz Huber had told Adler's father about a shipment of art which had been loaded into a U-boat bound for Argentina. The plan had been to conceal a secret treasury for Hitler to avail himself of after the war. When Travis and Jones heard that Huber mentioned fractals being used in U-boat antennas, it was like mini-antennas sprang out of their heads and began broadcasting signals to each other.

How did this tie in to Mozzie's discovery of fractals being used to send coded messages within the French Resistance? Suddenly fractals were appearing everywhere. Fractals were taking over the world.

"Did Kate say anything about the Nazi ruins Mitch discovered?" Jones asked.

Henry nodded. "She confirmed something I'd discovered earlier in Adler's office—a handwritten letter. Adler had discovered it in the ruins and it led him to believe that the key to the location of the U-boat was that Braque painting he's been trying to buy for the past several months—Violin and Candlestick. I'd found the letter in his files when I searched Adler's office and photographed it. Win-Win's lab boys have spent the past several days working on it. 'This is a copy. Kate returned my watch, pen, and phone. What she didn't realize was that the pen was a camera, similar to the snooper pen Travis provided Neal.'"

"I take it the letter was in German?" Peter asked.

"Yes. It was inside an envelope addressed to Nina Bergmann. There was only the name, not an address. It had never been sent."

"Bergmann?" Jones repeated, his face flashing recognition. "That's the name of Rosenberg's assistant. Rosenberg was in charge of confiscating the art. Anton Bergmann was Huber's boss."

"Nina was Bergmann's wife," Henry added.

"What did the letter say?" Mozzie demanded.

"The letter was in pieces, much of it was destroyed. The signature—a scrawled Anton—was barely legible. Bergmann refers to a shipment of art works. The name of the Braque painting is mentioned. He ends the letter by saying that the key to recovering the art is in the violin."

"Do we know what happened to Bergmann at the end of the war?" Diana asked.

"I'd researched it," Jones supplied. "The last mention of Bergmann was in August 1944, shortly before the liberation of Paris. The Germans surrendered the city in August of that year. He was presumed to have been killed during the assault."

"Instead, we now believe he fled to Argentina," Henry said. "In the same file containing Bergmann's letter was a printed report in Spanish. There's a copy of it on the flash drive I gave Jones. The priests at the Jesuit settlement near the hideout were questioned and tipped Adler's agent off to a retired priest living in Cordoba. The priest said that several Germans lived in the settlement around the end of the war. He suspected they might be Nazis but had no proof. He was acquainted with Bergmann. The priest remembered him contracting malaria and dying from the disease. When you see the handwriting on the letter, you'll understand why we think Bergmann..."
must have been sick when he wrote it. The writing trails off in several places."

"Does it sound like his wife has the painting?" Travis asked.

"That's the way we read it. One phrase that wasn't destroyed says 'don't sell the violin.' "

"What do we know about his wife?" Peter asked.

Jones searched through a file on his laptop. "Nina Bergmann's listed as having been killed during the bombing of Munich. That was in April 1945."

"There's no date on the letter," Henry said, "but we know Bergmann disappeared from official records the previous August. He could have written her, not knowing she was already deceased."

"What you learned explains Adler's interest in the Braque," Peter said. "This makes me wonder how Bergmann got his hands on the painting. Was he responsible for transporting the shipment and decided to keep one of the paintings for himself? And what happened to it after the wife died?"

"Someone could have found it in the rubble," Diana pondered aloud. "It may have exchanged hands many times with the owners not realizing its value."

"Did you find anything to explain his interest in Neal?" Peter asked.

The question was expected. Once Henry began talking about Kate, Neal had steeled himself for the inevitable linkage. But so far nothing had been mentioned which would connect Neal to the painting. Neal was careful to express innocent curiosity, fixing his eyes on Henry for his response.

"I asked Kate about that. She said Adler realized he'd need Neal's help to sell the paintings. Adler's a financier, not an art expert."

"Do you really believe she betrayed Adler simply because she didn't want you to die?" Diana asked, ever the skeptic.

"You aren't the only one who suspects an ulterior motive," Henry said bluntly. "Kate claimed it was because Adler's obsession was destroying their lives. That's all he wants to focus on."

Peter looked unconvinced. "More likely she was acting as Adler's puppet. They let you take away the files and now expect you to lead them to the U-boat. I suspect Adler examined your pen and knew what it was. He downloaded the file, opened it, and decided to let you keep it."

Henry shrugged. "If they want us to lead them to the treasure, that's exactly what we should do. Adler had no luck in finding the Braque. He must figure with the resources of the FBI and Win-Win behind us we have a much better chance. I had all my gear checked. The only bug I brought back was that virus. If he wants to have his agents tail us, let them go ahead. That gives us the chance to catch them."

"Fowler must have told him that Ruiz doesn't have access to our files." Peter shook his head thoughtfully. "It's quite a gamble, but Adler may have figured that was his best bet. He has to realize we'll try to trap him."

Henry smiled at the group. "We got ourselves a game of high-stakes poker. I assume we're all in?"

"What did we miss?" Neal demanded, swirling to face Mozzie.
He didn't expect an answer, and he knew it was stupid to ask, but that was all he could think of. When the meeting broke up, everyone headed back to work—Peter and his team downtown to the Federal Building, Henry to his office in SoHo, and Neal and Mozzie upstairs to reassess.

They'd examined the Braque from every angle, under every filter. They'd researched all the invisible inks known to have been used during World War II and tested the painting with every combination of reagents. And now—just as they'd concluded there was nothing to be found—Henry waved a letter from Bergmann in front of them, insisting the painting was the key to locating the art.

"Stop pacing!" Mozzie ordered. "You're scaring my qi. What we need is calm deliberation." He sat down on the edge of one of Neal's dining chairs and folded his arms so that the palms of his hands were pressed against each other. Lifting his arms high above his head, he slowly lowered them while taking an excruciatingly long breath. "Now you do it."

Neal glared at him. "I don't have time for this." His qi had already melted and was now molten lava, threatening to smother them both.

Mozzie crossed his arms. "Sit!"

Neal huffed and grabbed a chair. Anything to keep his shaolin master from insisting he perform taiji.

"It's all proceeding according to plan," Mozzie said calmly. "You should feel contentment, not frustration. Now that we know more about the Braque, we can drill down on where the key is. I agree there is no hidden message. In the words of the immortal Sherlock, what remains must be the solution, no matter how improbable."

"What's that?"

"Fractals, mon frère. I submit that the sheet of fractal equations is linked to fractal patterns contained with the painting."

"You already searched for them and didn't find any."

"But that was before I knew about the equations being a code. We each have our task. Mine is to work on the Braque. Yours is the Vermeer painting." He bounded up as if a hidden spring had been released. "Why are you sitting around? The game's afoot! When I return this evening I expect to see significant progress on that painting."

Neal reluctantly nodded agreement. For the analysis Mozzie intended to perform, Neal couldn't help. The act of painting would restore some semblance of control before Henry returned.

When Mozzie departed for the bunker, Neal slipped a CD into the player and changed into his painting clothes. As he once more set to work on the canvas, he grew calmer. It was just him and the astronomer. Nothing else mattered. One painting at a time. One puzzle piece at a time.

WCWCWCWCWCWCWC

Henry returned at seven as promised with Indian takeout. Apparently his appetite was healthier than his shoulder. He brought a feast of lamb vindaloo, naan, dhal, raita, and samosas. He also supplied several bottles of Indian beer to replenish Neal's supply in the fridge. A front had passed through and it was cool enough to sit outside. As the sun dipped low over the Hudson, the sky cloaked itself in a Turner sunset of soft coral and azure.
As Neal dug into the food, he asked Henry how much trouble he was in. Henry shrugged as he popped the top off his beer bottle. "My injury may have been a good thing. The sympathy card worked well with Joe at first, and it tempered Mom's response. The grandfathers were a mixture of anger and envy. But after the initial storm passed, they realized that the intel I'd acquired was valuable enough to make it worth the risk. I knew it would be a gamble and there might be severe repercussions, but it was all on me. No one else was exposed to harm."

"I knew that was why you handled it that way. Who will lead the effort to find Adler?"

"Radha is in charge of that," Henry said, reaching for a samosa. "He and Jones have developed a good working relationship. I'm off the travel circuit for a while and will focus on New York projects."

"Has Mozzie grilled you about Hitler clones yet?"

"He called me yesterday. Is our paranoid friend sleeping here and should I be worried about that?"

"Yes and no. He slept here last night, but I convinced him to stay in one of June's guest rooms from now on. You don't have to be concerned about him stuffing my head with Nazi invasion theories."

Neal tapped his temple. "The inn is already full with conspiracies. There's no room for his, too. Besides, his humming was waking me up."

Henry gave him one of Peter's no-nonsense looks. "Are you sure it was his humming?"

There was no point in deflecting. Henry knew him too well. "I'm making progress. The nightmares are getting better. Now when I see Klaus's face, I try to picture those silver puzzle pieces instead."

"Not a bad strategy." He helped himself to another samosa. "What was that music you had on when I arrived? I thought at first I was listening to Springsteen's 'Incident on 57th Street' but the introduction went on forever."

"Springsteen? That's a stretch. That was a Schubert piano sonata."

Henry frowned. "You told me Klaus played Schubert. Is this another instance of him messing with your head?"

"I don't think so. It helps me focus on the forgery. I want this painting to be perfect. *The Woman in Blue* was the best forgery I'd ever made. I associate Vermeer now with Schubert, and yeah, I guess Klaus. But that's not necessarily a bad thing. I'm preparing this forgery to thwart his plan. Keeping my focus on the objective is good, right?"

Henry didn't look convinced. Neal busied himself with eating so Henry wouldn't ask him more about it. When he focused on painting he didn't think about the memories so much and that was healthy, even if Schubert might seem freaky.

Henry had never seen Neal prepare a forgery and appeared genuinely curious about how he approached it. After they demolished the food, they went inside. Henry declared he wanted to study the painting with fresh eyes.

Neal went into the kitchen to refill his glass with wine. That painting was calling to him like *The Woman in Blue* used to. He often conducted conversations with his paintings. Generally he heard female voices, but this time it was a man. The astronomer was believed to be Antonie van Leeuwenhoek, a seventeenth century scientist. For Neal, the scientist now represented Azathoth.
The team had known of Azathoth's interest in astronomy since the time he forged the Galileo manuscript. This painting by Vermeer must have represented the embodiment of Azathoth to Rolf and Klaus as well. Vermeer and Galileo were from the same period. The figure in the painting was studying the celestial globe. It was easy to imagine he was Azathoth planning his next move. A brass astrolabe lay below the globe. It reminded Neal of the armillary spheres Azathoth had used in the house where he'd kidnapped Peter and Neal. How much inspiration had Azathoth derived from this painting?

"Hey, Earth to Neal. You still with us?" Henry had walked into the kitchen. How long had Neal been staring at his wine glass? No wonder Henry looked worried. "Come and talk to me about this painting. What are you seeing in it?"

Neal winced. "I don't think you want to know."

"Yes, I do," he insisted.

Neal walked him through the associations he made with Azathoth. "You think I'm the typical obsessed artist," he said afterward.

"No, it makes sense. And I like your use of Azathoth to refer to both Rolf and Klaus. We knew he was playing mind games. We gotta work on our own now." He helped himself to another beer from the fridge. "Did Klaus ever discuss Nazi plunder when you lived in Geneva?"

"He used to daydream about finding lost masterpieces. We argued over what should be done with them. I advocated for returning them to their owners. He didn't see any difference between profiting off the Nazis and stealing art from museums."

"But you did?"

"Yeah, I couldn't profit off war crimes then or ever. Klaus brought up the subject in the virtual world, but there I had no objections. That's one set of memories that I can easily discard as fake." Neal sprawled on the couch where he could continue to look at the painting.

Henry pulled up a chair to sit across from him. "You mentioned that Klaus asked about the Braque painting. Is it possible he's working with Adler?"

"I don't think so. We know members of Ydrus helped fund your investigation to find Adler, and we've established that Rolf is a top operative within Ydrus. Since Karl Huber also works for them, we assume he told them about his father's journal. Now that he's in hiding he probably needs their help if he wants to find the art. Klaus must have heard about Adler's offer to buy the Braque and was fishing to see what I knew."

Henry nodded absently. "You didn't ask if Kate mentioned you."

"Did she?"

"She gave me a message for you. She said that Adler believes you know where the Braque is. He put out feelers but you didn't answer. Kate pleaded for you to locate the painting for him. She claimed you'd be handsomely rewarded."

Neal swallowed. The Braque. It was now at the center of everything, and Henry knew about it. Neal felt like a hamster trapped in an exercise wheel spinning around it. He tamped down his unease and acted nonchalant, even though Henry would probably recognize it as being fake. "What else did she say that you didn't tell the others?"
"That Adler heard a rumor you'd stolen the painting. Is it true?"

Neal didn't answer. The voices inside his head screamed at him to run. That was the only way to keep Henry safe. Knowing that the voices were planted didn't help. Puzzle pieces. He tried to picture Jacob sitting in front of him, handing him another puzzle piece, but the pieces were scattering in all directions, flying off the walls, smacking him in the face.

Now that Adler knew Henry was working with Neal, would he strike at Henry again? Kidnap him in an attempt to blackmail Neal? Not if Neal ran. If no one knew where he was, they couldn't threaten anyone he cared about. He had to escape now.

Neal bolted off the couch and retreated into the kitchen to pour more wine even though his glass was still full. Henry stayed seated, watching him, waiting.

Neal dropped the glass on the counter and sped outside to the terrace wall. The air inside had become unbreathable. He stared out at the skyline, a jigsaw of rooftops and terraces. Focus. Not on Braque, not Adler, not Klaus, not Henry, not Peter. Jigsaw pieces . . .

Dimly he heard racing footsteps behind him.

"Slow down that breathing!" Henry ordered, pressing hard with his good hand on Neal's back and forcing his head lower. "Don't you dare hyperventilate. I'm in no shape to drag your ass back inside."

"I'm okay," Neal muttered.

"Like hell you are." Henry was loud in his ear, drowning out the other voices. "You have to tell me. You keep that painting a secret, it will destroy you."

Neal didn't reply, but Henry didn't let up. "You know you can trust me. I won't tell anyone—not Peter, not Mom, not Win-Win. This is just you and me. You gotta let me in."

Notes: In Penna's latest vignette "Splash," she wrote about how Henry extricated a puppy from a hole it had fallen into. The puppy was howling its frustration at being trapped. In this chapter Neal is also making a howl of distress, and Henry is there to hear it. I blogged about Henry and Neal this week. The post is called "A Silent Howl."

Henry freed the puppy. Neal presents a much more difficult challenge. Henry's efforts continue in next week's chapter. Sara is also featured in Chapter 15: Clueless.

A few notes about references to earlier stories: Neal had faked the severity of an injury when he was held prisoner in An Evening with Genji. That same story contains the incidents with Ruiz which the team referenced during the meeting. Billy used the tiger orchid as a metaphor for Neal's situation in The Queen's Jewels.

The orchid mantis is a superb example of mimicry. Its pink, cream, and purple hues allow it to blend perfectly with an orchid. I've pinned a photo to the Nocturne in Black and Gold Pinterest board.

Purple has been much on my mind lately, and not just because of orchids. It's also the color of a duckling named Amethyst who is a character in Penna's upcoming novel. Amethyst may be pint-sized but she has a ton of personality. If you'd like to meet her, hop over to our blog. Penna's latest
post is: "Novel Progress: meet Amethyst." On the breaking news front, a scene she'd posted earlier about Zach's childhood will be published by Ninja Writers and appear in their NW zine! Yay, Penna!

But not all the news has been happy. Our thoughts and hearts go out to those affected by the latest tragedies. Penna blogged about the events in Puerto Rico and Las Vegas where she envisioned the reactions of some of the Caffrey Conversation characters.

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Nocturne in Black and Gold board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon
"You know it all now," Neal said, draining his glass of the last drops of wine. The frustration in his voice sounded about equal to what Henry was experiencing. "Mozzie has the painting hidden for safekeeping. He's analyzed it for fractal formulas. We've performed every test we can think of, searched for coded messages and invisible inks, and have found nothing."

Once Henry had gotten Neal to calm down, he bowed to the overwhelming reasonableness of Henry's argument and spilled the beans. For the past half hour he'd related an incredible tale. Only Neal could get into a mess like this. Why hadn't he simply come clean at the beginning?

Henry hadn't been living in New York when Chantal first called Neal in February to tell him about the offer. But even if Henry had been there, it wouldn't have made any difference. Neal wouldn't have confided in him. He couldn't have used the same excuse he used with Peter—that he was shielding his career—but he would have invented some other reason. He might have deluded himself into thinking that Henry's career would have been threatened too. Because that's what Neal and Henry always did. Protect everyone else from the fallout of their reckless behavior.

Last winter Neal had yet to disclose anything about Klaus to Henry, so he couldn't have explained the initial theft without uncovering that skeleton, too. Neal and his secrets. It was beyond maddening. And knowing that in his place Henry might have acted the same way was beside the point.

Henry had thought he'd claimed the black sheep designation. Clearly Neal believed he'd out-maneuvered him and had stolen the title. Well, not so fast. No one could be more badass than Henry when he put his mind to it. But first things first. Time to extract Neal from his quagmire.

Seeking the confirmation to what he already knew, Henry asked, "That night when I was waiting for you in your Paris hotel room, that's when you stole the painting?"

Neal winced. "Not steal, retrieve. There's a difference."

Henry choked back the disappointment that Neal hadn't disclosed anything that same night. It would be so easy to lay into him, and by the way Neal was eyeing him, plainly he expected it. But as satisfying as that might be, it wouldn't do any good. Neal had to be shown that he could let others know the truth and it would be okay. "And your plan continues to be to return it?"

He nodded. "If I can find the looted artworks, I'll sneak it in with them. Otherwise I'll make an anonymous donation of the painting."

"You realize that the Mansfelds most likely know you have it?"

He nodded. "Mozzie and I suspect Klaus orchestrated the trap in the church. He may have stolen the Vermeer that same week."

"I agree. Your doctor's theory that when the Vermeer painting is reported stolen, Klaus will ride in at the last moment to save your ass and earn your gratitude would work just as well for the Braque. How do you think Adler found out about your connection to the painting?"

"My first thought was that Rolf had spread the rumor with the desire to trap me, but now that revenge isn't the motive, I'm not sure."
"Perhaps simple curiosity? They heard about Adler's offer and decided to take advantage of it. What I don't understand is why Adler didn't attempt to kidnap you if he's so sure you have the painting."

"Mozzie bought me some time. Do you remember when he disappeared for a couple of days in April?"

"Yeah?" Henry braced himself warily.

Neal fingered his empty wine glass for a moment. "Garrett Fowler kidnapped him. Gave him a truth serum and asked him about the painting. Mozzie had been able to build up a drug tolerance—and trust me, you really don't want to know the details of that. He planted the idea in Fowler's head that I didn't know anything about it. That's why they've been leaving me alone. When you showed up, they may have decided to take a final gamble. Perhaps they believe I kept it a secret from Mozzie."

"That helps explain why they let me escape. Because I agree it was staged. Kate's pleas—she's developed into quite the actress by the way—I didn't buy them then, and I certainly don't now."

Neal appeared lost in thought. Henry debated for a moment how much to press him on the Braque. He looked exhausted. He claimed it was because he was painting late into the night, but Henry knew that he must be continuing to have nightmares about the virtual world.

Neal's argument that Klaus was alive was a compelling one. It meant that his nightmare hadn't started with the virtual world he was plunged into in California. It had begun the night of the botched heist at the Met when Klaus supposedly fell to his death. And ever since then, Klaus had been sticking Neal with additional pins.

Klaus and his fellow sadist Rolf were going down. Henry would see to it. Legally, illegally, whatever it took. But he had a much more urgent issue to address first, and that was to get Neal to see reason.

Henry knew he had a golden opportunity to act. Neal was at his most vulnerable. His defenses were down, his ability to con at a low ebb. It didn't make Henry feel good to take advantage of Neal's weakness, but this was tough love.

He suspected that Neal's guilt over not informing Peter about the Braque was weighing more heavily on him than anything else. Until he confessed, the wound would only fester. Since Neal apparently didn't realize the danger he was in, Henry was left with only one option. Drive him to the edge to make him face reality. The trick would be to pull back before he made the situation worse.

"I get it why you didn't tell me, but why didn't you go to Peter for help?"

"I already explained," Neal said impatiently. "It would have put him into an untenable position and exposed him to far too much risk."

Henry retrieved Neal's wine glass and filled it with water. Neal needed to think straight. Wine wasn't helping.

Handing him the glass, Henry fired his missiles. "So you're willing to sacrifice everything? 'Cause you know what will happen. The team's working on providing insurance for The Astronomer, but it's the Braque painting they need to worry about. You may have been recorded entering the church or when you were changing clothes. It's only a matter of time till you're blackmailed over this."
"You don't need to lecture me," Neal retorted, glaring at him. "I wanted to tell Peter from the beginning, but the only way to keep him safe is to keep him unaware. If I bring him in, it will set into motion exactly what happened with the Vermeer. The evidence will come out, and Peter will have to admit he knows about it. Peter would never lie. He'll be accused of being an accomplice. Maybe arrested, imprisoned. El could die." He stood up abruptly and strode over to the patio doors.

"That won't happen," Henry said quickly. Time to reverse course. Neal was still too heavily influenced by Rolf's twisted version of reality. Henry had succeeded in getting Neal to confide in him. That would have to suffice for the moment. "You've got a plan. It sounds like you may need some help implementing it. Shawn is hereby volunteering to be on your crew." Shawn was the acronym their cousin Angela had given Henry. She'd informed him it stood for Super Hero AWesome Nobody and Henry had appropriated it for his rock star persona. It had become his alter-ego, and he was pleased to see Neal appeared to relax slightly at the change in tactics.

Turning back to him, Neal gave a long shuddering breath and nodded. Shoving his hair back with a hand, he muttered, "God, I'm a mess."

Henry was surprised he acknowledged it. Was that because of his therapy sessions? It was a promising start. "Have you ever considered meditation? If ever anyone needed it—"

"Funny you ask. I'm—" Neal stopped short when the door opened and Mozzie walked in.

He surveyed the two of them, shaking his head with disapproval. Neal's face was drawn, a reflection of the warring emotions raging inside. From the way Mozzie frowned at Henry, he probably didn't look much better.

"Should I call the medics? What did you two do to each other?"

"Hold off on that," Neal said with a shadow of his usual smile. "We're okay."

"Or will be," Henry corrected, standing up.

"I was demonstrating to Henry why I need to learn the Way of the Orchid." Neal said, explaining the lessons he was taking. "Billy's restricted me to taiji purgatory till my qi is in balance."

While Mozzie proceeded to expound on the martial art technique, Henry took the opportunity to get a beer. His qi was probably out of whack as well by the events of the evening. He slouched into a chair and watched Mozzie's peculiar brand of therapy. The man was a genius at adopting precisely the right tone to get Neal to relax. He teased him about Billy's instructions and demonstrated in a comic bravura performance his own martial arts ability. Soon Neal was laughing and Henry with him.

Mozzie had spoken with Aidan about the yellow-faced bee video and enthusiastically painted a wildly over-the-top plot for Yellowface. The possibility of including more females had apparently stimulated his already overstuffed imagination to new heights. Mozzie was preparing a new script to submit to the anime company. Henry predicted Japan would be as entertained as Neal clearly was.

With the immediate crisis defused, Henry vowed to lay off further pressure about the Braque till Neal was further along in his recovery. It had only been four days since his abduction. There was still time to talk him down from the self-destructive path he was determined to pursue.

"Did you hear about the bar next to Randy Weston's music shop?" Henry asked, taking a swig of beer. "It has a new owner, Jeremy Sangford."
Neal looked up. "Will he have open mic nights like the old owner?"

"That's my understanding. Eric visited the place last week. It's been renamed Riffs. Eric said it reminded him of a rock version of the jazz club where Richard plays. We'll have to check it out sometime."

Neal nodded absently. "How much does Eric know about your time with Adler?"

Henry winced and didn't answer. Neal was paying him back. That was a sensitive subject. He and Eric had been seeing each other for a few months now, but he was keeping that part of his life separate from his work on apprehending Adler. When Henry called him from Baltimore on Sunday, Eric had let him have it with double barrels for keeping him in the dark.

Mozzie narrowed his eyes. "My services as love guru are available to you, too."

Was Mozzie counseling Neal on affairs of the heart? No wonder his love life was a train wreck.

Before Henry could voice in no uncertain terms what his reaction would be to any meddling, Mozzie cut in with the declaration he should visit Riffs. "It's time the world experiences my ability."

"Which one?" asked Neal, looking amused.

He waved his hand vaguely in the air. "For Riffs, poetry and music should suffice. The hip-hop culture has many similarities to the beat generation. I've fused Allen Ginsberg poetry with my own angst-ridden lyrics into something I call beat-angst." He eyed them pointedly. "With you two as my inspiration, I predict I'll be the latest sensation."

Henry raised his hand. "Guilty as charged, and I can take the hint." He stood up to leave. "Tomorrow I have an appointment with a client not far from here. You want to have lunch together?"

Neal rose as well. "Thanks, but I'm meeting a friend."

"Anyone I know?"

Neal hesitated for a moment. "Sara's in town." He took one look at Henry and huffed an exasperated snort. "Your brain's already scheming. Put those thoughts on ice. It's bad enough having Diana plot Arkham Neal's romantic adventures in her stories. Sara's a friend, nothing more."

Henry held up his hands in a gesture of defeat. "Message received and I can relate. I'm being dumped with advice as well. Tell Sara hi for me."

Henry jogged down the stairs. First step accomplished. He'd gotten Neal to confess about the Braque. Painting the Vermeer forgery gave him a purpose. It would help keep him from running until his head was on straight again. That wasn't the team's primary intention, but it might be the most important one. It was unfortunate Neal was hypersensitive about his dates, but with Mozzie as a love guru who could blame him? Henry was left with no choice but to continue his work in secret. Sara's arrival in town presented new opportunities. Now that he was back in New York, a consultation with his co-conspirator was in order.

Upper West Side. Wednesday, July 20, 2005.

Neal paused to check the address on his phone. Sara told him she'd discovered a sushi shop in his neighborhood. Neal was familiar with 111th Street, but he didn't remember any Japanese restaurants at that location. She'd mentioned it had just opened. It may have happened while he
was on the West Coast. Still, he passed the street all the time. Wouldn't he have noticed the preparations?

The Way of the Orchid this morning was a disaster. Billy was relentless in his demands for Neal to slow down his taiji. As if anything would soothe his rebellious qi. Mozzie made it look easy, adding to Neal's frustration. Their talk of being an orchid mantis lurking on a petal, poised to attack, wasn't helpful. Neal was wilting on the vine.

At the end of the session Billy had pronounced himself pleased and praised Neal for the progress he'd made. That had to be only in his imagination. Neal would have quit if it weren't for Henry. After his father tried to kill him, Henry had gone to India where he learned meditation to still his raging emotions. What Henry experienced with Robert was ten thousand times worse than what Neal had gone through. Maybe he should try meditation instead. But sitting motionless for minutes on end, thinking of nothing? That'd be worse than taiji.

In comparison, his session with Doc Jacob gave him hope. They'd discussed the Pre-Raphaelites in addition to Neal's virtual hell. He made significant progress on the puzzle. For a couple of hours he felt more like his old self.

Now where was that sushi shop? The quiet residential street in Morningside Heights was primarily apartment buildings. Sara said the number was 528 which put it between Broadway and Amsterdam Avenues and one block south of the Aloha Emporium.

The address turned out to be an elegant Beaux Arts-style building. No sign of a sushi shop. What was Sara pulling? She'd said to ask for table 15. Neal scanned the list of occupants and grinned. Number 15 displayed S. Ellis. Her name had been written in ink and taped over the typed name of the occupant, Claire Groves.

When Sara opened the door, Neal greeted her in Japanese, "Is this the sushi shop?"

"Best sushi in town!" she replied with a bow.

Impressed, he asked, "When did you learn Japanese?"

"It's a good way to pass the time on those long plane flights," said Sara, reverting to English. "I figured a smattering of Japanese would come in handy."

"Especially now that you're running a restaurant." They were still standing in the doorway. Neal peered around her to check out the room ahead. "Are you going to let me in?"

"Of course. Your table awaits." She stood back and let him enter. A short corridor opened into a small but bright living room dominated by a long overstuffed couch in a soft fabric the color of milk chocolate. A cream-colored cashmere throw was draped over one end. The sofa faced an entertainment center which filled the opposite wall. Large windows offset the smallness of the room.

"Should I take off my shoes?" asked Neal mockingly.

"It's not required unless you're wearing patterned socks. Then it's mandatory."

"If only I'd known, I would have. But what's going on? Is Claire Groves a friend of yours?"

"It's a long story. Let me heat up the sake first. I think I can manage cooking that. You don't have to worry about the sushi," she added with a grin. "It's quite safe since I didn't make it."
"Does Diana know about your cooking skills? Is that why Arkham Sara can't boil water?"

"So harsh! Arkham Sara can make a decent cup of tea, but I wouldn't test her on anything else. Diana might have asked me about personality traits. She was looking for something I wasn't good at."

"Hence Arkham's Sara singing ability?"

"Guilty as charged." Sara had bought assorted maki rolls from the local sushi shop on Broadway. They sat at the kitchenette table in front of a window which looked out on the courtyard below.

"I hope you don't think I'm moving in on your turf by living so close to you," she said, "but this was too tempting an offer to pass up. As you correctly surmised, Claire is the owner. She teaches comparative literature at Columbia and is letting me have the use of her apartment."

"How did you meet?"

"At a class I was attending. After breaking up with Bryan, I looked for something to do with my evenings and I decided to sign up for a series of one-week classes on antiques at the Victoria and Albert. We covered furniture, porcelain, silver, and jewelry. That one was my favorite," she admitted happily. "I have a weakness for anything sparkly."

"I assume that includes precious gems."

"Oh, particularly them. I hope the Met has similar courses. Fiona introduced me to the ones at the V&A. Sterling-Bosch encourages us to specialize but for the longest time, I couldn't decide. Luxury cars, art, collectibles—how's a girl to choose? With sparklies I think I've found my niche. Last month I attended a seminar on Renaissance jewelry and that sealed the deal."

When Neal had given Sara the alias of Tiffany Case, James Bond's diamond-loving smuggler friend, he hadn't known how appropriate it was. What would Sara say to Neal's interest in gems? The jewel heists in Europe? The time he forged a diamond ring owned by Marie Antoinette? The forgery could be justified since it was the means to catch a thief, but there wasn't much of an excuse he could make for the heists.

"Claire and I were the only Americans in the class on antique silver and we became friends," explained Sara between bites of sushi. "She's teaching this year at the University of London in an exchange program with Columbia. She didn't want to sublet because she occasionally comes back to New York. The apartment has two bedrooms and I'm staying in the second one. It's not very convenient to Sterling-Bosch but it's ideal for my workouts."

Neal knew Sara was into self-defense. "I would have thought you could find facilities throughout New York."

"I could, but not for the Way of the Orchid."

Neal dropped his maki roll from his chopsticks in his surprise. "The Way of the Orchid?"

"It does sound bizarre, doesn't it? Last winter I took up kung fu as a way to exorcise my frustrations about Bryan. He's an expert in Japanese martial arts, so naturally I needed to study Chinese techniques. A month ago, the studio where I practice had a guest speaker from your neck of the woods, Maggie Feng. She works near Columbia as a florist. You wouldn't think anyone interested in flowers would be a martial arts master, but she put on a demonstration that blew me away. She and her father have developed a new style of kung fu based on orchids." She paused to stare at him. "Why do you have that funny look on your face?"
"Because Maggie and her father Billy are both friends of mine. Billy owns the Aloha Emporium, and Mozzie's in the organic honey business with him. And because yours truly is also learning the Way of the Orchid." He set down his chopsticks and, clasping his hands, gave an abbreviated bow.

Enjoying her look of astonishment, he explained, "I've been trying to coax Billy to teach me for months, but he's steadfastly refused. Then . . . after Los Angeles." He shrugged and cleared his throat. Even though Sara knew, he felt awkward discussing it. "Mozzie spoke with Billy. I only recently found out that he's been studying with Billy for years. I'm scheduled for daily classes this week."

"I'll meet Maggie Saturday morning at nine. She's starting a class for the Way of the Orchid—her first ever. I believe there will be one or two others."

"I'll see you there. I meet Billy at eight before the store opens."

"We can compare notes. I wonder if Maggie has modified the technique for women." Sara stood up. "I bought some mochi ice cream. Let's have dessert in the living room. You must try the sofa. It's like sitting on a cloud."

"I love mochi ice cream. I'm glad to see you're not giving up on all things Japanese because of Bryan."

"Hey, I'm not masochistic. I need my mochi! And I bought Kona coffee flavor just for you."

Sara was right. Claire's sofa was the most sinfully luxurious he'd ever sat on. He wondered if it came in a size which would fit into his living room.

"When will you go back to work?" she asked as he bit into the crisp tartness of the mochi.

"I'm on medical leave for the entire week. I wasn't sure how I'd handle the boredom, but I have an interesting project to work on that makes the time speed by."

"Does Diana plan to reference your abduction in her upcoming story?"

He acknowledged it with a sigh. "She mentioned Tricia was already sending her ideas about the messages they want to embed. I understand the necessity, but I made Diana promise to discuss it with me first. Although she agreed, I don't know how much good it will do. Lately I don't seem to have any influence with the powers that be at the Arkham Round Table. I hope you're not uncomfortable with the story line she'd given you. I tried to get them to tone it down."

"I don't mind. I've grown quite fond of my character. She knows what she wants and goes for it. I wish I had her knack for getting her way."

"Portraying us as friends is fine, but the romantic signals they're sending . . . " Neal huffed his discontent. "They've made Arkham Neal appear so clueless, I don't understand why your character doesn't dump him as a lost cause."

She gave a half-smile. "I'll admit he's portrayed as being somewhat innocent, but I find it endearing. And I completely understand where my character's coming from."

"She should run away while she has a chance," said Neal forcefully. "Arkham Neal's like me. His head's messed up with that weird chemical element algolnium inside him. Arkham Sara could do so much better."

"Stop that! No one, not even you, is allowed to knock my fake boyfriend!" Her expression turned
serious. "I know you. You'll emerge from this experience stronger than ever. If anyone needs their head examined, it's me."

Surprised, he paused mid-bite. "Are you still kicking yourself over Bryan?"

"Sorry. It's a hard habit to give up. When I think about what an idiot I was for"—she stopped herself with a gesture—"Forget that. Tell me about Henry. Is he working full time now?"

Sara did her best to change the subject but Neal was struck by the flash of regret that passed across her face. He set down his bowl. "I know a deflection when it smacks me in the face. What's going on? If it makes you feel better, Doc Jacob says I'm not supposed to dwell on my own issues. You'll help my recovery."

She gave him an uneasy smile. "I don't believe this qualifies."

"You're not the best judge. My imagination's already coming up with tortured scenarios, and I've had enough of those."

"And I don't want to add to them."

"Sara?"

"I was just going to say that I was an idiot for not giving us a chance last year when you asked me out." She winced apologetically. "Did I mention I'm also a master at bad timing?"

Of all the possibilities Neal had considered, this wasn't even close. Did that imply she was interested in trying again? Maybe before L.A. happened she would have been, but not now. He forced himself to rein in suddenly galloping emotions and think it through. Sara was an excellent actress. She was doing this to make him feel better. That was a blow. What kind of pathetic vibe was he giving off? He’d had to lecture Diana to stop being so nice. Now it was Sara's turn.

It was kind of her to be concerned. Neal considered how to respond while giving himself a quick lecture to stop moping around.

He opted for the diplomatic route. "It wasn't your fault. You were already in a relationship by the time I got around to speaking up. Anyway, you shouldn't feel bad. Look how I fooled myself about Kate. You bring up a good point, though. I shouldn't be so hard on my character. He's no worse than me."

"Sometimes I envy Arkham Sara. She hasn't made as many mistakes. I'd give anything to be able to jump into the TARDIS with Doctor Who and travel back to a time before Bryan."

"But you know what the Doctor would say," Neal said, attempting to put a casual spin on it. "You can't change the timeline." He wished he knew if Sara really meant it or she was simply feeling sorry for him. He'd lost his confidence in being able to read people. Last fall his heart would have performed cartwheels over her words, but now he didn't know what he was feeling. There were too many voices inside his head, and the loudest one of all was the siren directed at Sara, warning her to stay away for her own good.

"You think you know me, but you don't," he warned quietly. "I'm poison to those who care about me."

She raised an eyebrow. "I'm the one who tried to poison you, remember? That must mean we cancel out each other's dangerous tendencies."
"Good try, but I know better," he scoffed. "That was Bryan, not you, who dosed the chocolates. And if anything, that proves my point. He was trying to get at me, and you got caught in the crossfire."

"What's life without a little danger? If you ever feel like tempting fate, let me know." She gave him a sly smile. "After all, it's not like you have algolnium circulating inside you."

Neal shrugged. "I should be so lucky. I'd rather have algolnium than Azathoth rattling around in my cranium." His thoughts calming, he found himself on slightly more stable ground. "You must know my track record is a lousy one. If Fiona hasn't supplied you with enough of the gory details, I could provide other references. I need to have a label attached alerting anyone foolhardy enough to make the attempt that I'm a disaster waiting to happen."

"Proving yet again how well suited we are for each other," she retorted. "My love life is a junkyard of bad decisions. I suppose I shouldn't point it out, but I thought it was already slightly obvious."

"We have two strikes against us from the get-go," he added. This wasn't real. Sara was simply being a kind friend. They could discuss it, knowing that it would never happen. "Not only do we have our pasts to contend with but it seems we're surrounded by matchmakers. They mean well, but I'd rather make my own decisions, and if they don't work out, I'll only have myself to blame."

"I know exactly how you feel," she said, settling back into the cushions and curling her legs underneath her. "A year ago when we were on Graham and Julia's boat, I panicked at the way they assumed we were meant to be together. We hadn't even dated yet. How could they possibly know?"

That was a revelation. He hadn't realized she felt that way. He remembered he'd been building his own castles in the sky about asking her out, but she was transferred to Boston before he had the chance. "I can relate. In London it was plain that Peter was looking forward to my making some sort of commitment to Fiona. When it didn't happen, I felt doubly guilty for his sake. I vowed never again to let others get so involved in my love life."

She nodded in agreement. "And now you have to put up with the Arkham Round Table playing matchmaker. They've become so used to directing Arkham Neal, they undoubtedly want to do the same with you."

"When Henry heard I was meeting you for lunch, I could see the wheels spinning in his head. I wouldn't be surprised if he's been sending Diana suggestions as well. You remember he was the one who plotted to have us volunteer at the same shelter for runaways."

She winced. "Henry's like his grandfather Graham. He's probably already vetted me."

"I'm sure you're right," Neal said glumly. "Henry vetted Michael once he began dating my cousin Angela. Now that everyone's convinced I need to be protected, they'll scrutinize my every move. If I try to date someone, I'll probably find daily tips on my desk along with tracking reports of the unlucky woman." He sighed at the very real prospect looming in front of him.

"You're not the only one to be pressured. Fiona's been encouraging me to go out with you. She thinks we're the ideal match."

He chuckled. "She gave me the same advice." He looked over at her, curious. "What did you tell her?"

She hesitated. "You want the honest answer?"

"Yeah, I'm trying to go for that these days."
"I explained you'd been interested but I didn't know what I wanted and tossed up false obstacles. And she's not the only one I'm hearing from. Diana's been writing me. First it was harmless stuff—clothes, hobbies, what singers I like. Now it's about the direction she's taking my character. The questions seemed odd to be coming from Diana. From what you say, I sense either Elizabeth or Henry behind her questions."

"Maybe both. Henry could have formed a conspiracy with El. He's done it before." He paused for a moment to think it through. "When the inevitable breakup happens, it won't just be hard on us but also on all our friends who are cheering us on." And they weren't the only ones he was worried about. With Klaus and Rolf circling around, no one was safe, least of all someone he was dating.

Sara's face brightened. "What if no one knows about it? Then when I do something idiotic, and you wise up, you won't have to face any repercussions."

"Date in secret?" No harm in going along with the daydream a little longer. "That has a certain appeal, but it wouldn't keep the Round Table from trying to throw us together."

"What if we take a page from our counterparts in Arkham Files? Neal Carter has a fake girlfriend so his female students will leave him alone. Decoys could work for us too."

Intrigued, Neal let his thoughts race ahead as he relaxed into the sofa cushions. "And if the decoys were actually code names for ourselves, we wouldn't really be lying to our friends. They would think we were still in the friend zone—"

"While in reality we were letting our secret selves date," she finished triumphantly. "What alias would you invent for me?"

He studied her a moment, laughing as she cycled through a variety of goofy faces. Selecting an alias should be a matter of serious reflection . . . Okay, a few snorts were allowed. "You say you're clueless, just like the movie. That was based on Jane Austen's Emma."

"But I can't use Emma," she warned. "Diana already knows that I like Emma Peel. She'd guess right away. How about Alicia? Alicia Silverstone starred in Clueless."

"The perfect choice. As I recall there's a famous scene with her in a red dress. Rather like your showstopper of a dress you wore at the gala last December."

"You still remember that?" She grinned mischievously. "Is that a spark of hope for our secret selves?" Before he could riposte, she rushed on. "Continuing with our theme, I think you'd make the perfect Darcy from Pride and Prejudice, another clueless individual."

"Better not call me Colin or Charles or William," he cautioned. "I had an undercover job where Charles Darcy was my alias. El's a Jane Austen fan. She'd suspect something. Besides, the name is cursed."

Her eyes widened. "Seriously?"

"Absolutely. If Mozzie were here, he'd tell you all about the Jane Austen curse. If a con artist uses the alias of William Darcy, he's doomed to failure."

"We have enough headwinds confronting us. We don't need a curse, too. But there's always a way."

"That's my line!"

"Since when? I've used it for ages. I'm sure much longer than you. Now don't interrupt. Let me
think."

He sat back and finished his mochi, happy to let her have at it.

"We need to be extremely devious if we're going to trick the expert matchmakers lined up against us. There's a new version of *Pride and Prejudice* coming out in the fall with Keira Knightley. I read about it. Matthew Macfadyen plays Darcy. How about Matthew? We'd avoid the Darcy curse while also mocking it."

"Matthew . . ." He rolled it on his tongue. "I like it. Old-fashioned. A little stuffy."

"I could call you Matt if you'd rather? Or Matty?"

"No," he said firmly. "Matthew is much more appropriate for someone clueless."

"Then it's settled. Alicia and Matthew will be our secret selves."

"The Clueless con to combat the Darcy curse. And if Matthew and Alicia mess up, which of course will be Matthew's fault—"

"—more likely Alicia. That girl's a catastrophe in the making."

"We won't drag our friends down with us, and we'll remain friends, no matter what happens."

"Agreed," she said happily.

Neal hesitated. Sara was probably late to get back to work. He'd already taken up too much of her time. He hadn't laughed so much in ages and he found himself wishing they could continue the game a little while longer.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"No, it was a delightful lunch, and the entertainment was fantastic. But the real world beckons." He stood up. "I'll help you clean up."

There were only a few dishes to be washed. While they tidied up, Matthew and Alicia continued to be the topic of conversation. As they filled in backstories for their secret selves, a voice inside his head whispered an idea. Who was that? Neal wasn't normally that hesitant. Had Arkham Neal somehow slipped inside?

Sara passed him the dish towel. "I'll be sorry to say goodbye to Alicia and Matthew."

He shoved Arkham Neal aside. It was time for Neal Caffrey to come out of hiding. "What if there's a way for us to play the game whether or not we decide to date?" he asked.

"You mean take them on a test drive?"

"Exactly. They could provide a buffer." More like an escape valve to release a little of the pressure. "Would you be okay with that?"

"Of course," she agreed readily, breaking into a smile as bright as the sunshine pouring in through the window. "We can ask Alicia and Matthew later if they wish to remain like our other aliases."

"We are beginning to accumulate quite an assortment—Tiffany and James, Rose and Doctor Who." He lifted his eyebrows and in a theatrical tone added, "Will Alicia and Matthew dare fate by actually going on a date?"
She raised a finger to her lips. "It's a secret!"

Notes: For those of you interested in Neal and Sara's past history together, they met in Caffrey Flashback. At the end of the story, Henry conspired to have them volunteer at the same shelter for runaways. In Caffrey Disclosure they celebrated the Fourth of July on Graham and Julia's boat. Neal's initial attempt to date Sara sputtered and stalled in The Woman in Blue.

The Jane Austen curse was in By the Book. When Neal referred to Henry's previous conspiracies with El, he was thinking about an incident in By the Book, Neal's birthday party in Caffrey Flashback, and Henry's surprise appearance at the sci-fi convention in The Mirror. The April Fools' Day prank Henry played is in Caffrey Vignettes.

I've also had a conspirator for the Clueless con, but it's surely no secret. It's time for the awesome Penna to come out of the closet and take a bow! She'd started the Jane Austen thread, and we brainstormed the con together. Referring to the movie Clueless and Sara's alias Alicia are just two of her many contributions. If you'd like to read more about the Clueless con and the headwinds facing the schemers, they're the subject of my latest blog post: "Unlucky in Love."

As for this chapter's more serious conspiracy, Henry now knows about the Braque. He's already at work to extricate Neal from the mess he's in. But Peter's hot on the trail too, and an unwanted recurrence of an old problem comes back to bite Neal in Chapter 16: View from the Top.

Several noteworthy events to mention: Penna and I would like to extend happy birthday wishes to Matt Bomer. His birthday is on October 11, and I was delighted I could include an Easter egg to him in Sara's choice of an alias. Tomorrow, October 12, will be the 4th anniversary of the day Penna Nomen posted Caffrey Conversation, the story that launched a series. That's cause for a major celebration at my house. I hope you'll join me in toasting Penna's achievement. Her initial story set off a chain reaction which has led to 25 stories—for a total of over 1,500,00 words—2 crossover series, Pinterest boards, and a blog. Because of Caffrey Conversation, Penna and I became writing partners and best friends and we've been able to correspond with many of you. Thank you for joining us in Caffrey Conversation! We appreciate all the comments, kudos, and feedback you've given us.

Penna has added a new blog post based on her Coursera assignments. In a former post she described an incident in the childhood of her main character Zach. In this new post, "Novel Progress: hospital scene," she depicts the aftermath in the hospital. It makes me wish I could use her futuristic hospital for Caffrey Conversation stories. Neal might not try to escape from the room she created!

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Nocturne in Black and Gold board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon

Peter was working in his office with the door open when he heard a commotion coming from the bullpen below. He walked outside to the balcony to be greeted by a welcome sight. Neal had arrived and was being mobbed by his team members.

Peter hadn't been pushing for Neal to visit the office that week. It was a positive sign that Neal had chosen to come in on his own. Yesterday Neal was still acting distant at the meeting at June's place. For him to show up today must mean that the morning therapy session had gone well.

Neal tossed his fedora onto the bust of Socrates on his desk and glanced up to see Peter descending the staircase to greet him.

"Don't worry, I'm just making a social call," Neal said. "I figured it was high time to verify no squatters had taken over my prime real estate."

"You came back too soon," Diana said with a moan. "I was going to booby trap your desk."

"And if I'd only known, I'd have saved more files for you," Peter deadpanned. "How will you feel like you're back if you don't spend time in the file vault?"

Before Neal could respond, Hughes came down the stairs to join them.

"I should have known you were the cause," Hughes said, a rare smile breaking out. "The bullpen has been far too quiet lately. It's good to have you back. When you have a moment, come and see me in my office."

Peter watched Neal for his reaction. If he felt any unease, he hid it well. For once Neal concealing his emotions was a good thing.

"No time like the present," Neal told Hughes confidently.

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Jacob had warned Neal what would probably happen, and he was right. When Neal saw Hughes on the stairs, memories of him in the courtroom and the interrogation room flashed through his mind. But by the time Hughes shook his hand, Neal was once more fully in control. He'd take that as another milestone.

Neal stopped off to see Peter after the meeting. "You'll never believe what Hughes told me."

Peter gestured for him to take a seat. "Let me guess. He wants to sign up to be a member of your crew."

"You knew?"

"I figured it was just a matter of time. I know he regretted missing out on art heist boot camp. You may have to schedule another session."

Peter had a smile on his face but something was troubling him. Neal hoped it wasn't because he'd shown up at the office. He'd gotten the idea on the spur of the moment, buoyed by how well lunch
had gone. "Is something wrong?" he asked.

"Agent Weller called. The doctor who conducted the procedure, Erasmus Penfold, jumped bail. He missed an appearance in court this morning. So far the police have been unable to locate him."

"How about Marta?" asked Neal, concealing his unease.

"Still locked up fortunately. Agents have been working to trace her movements over the weeks leading up to Comic-Con and their efforts are starting to pay off. She was identified as having visited the Ritz-Carlton in Marina del Rey. It's only about ten minutes away. A parking attendant recognized her."

"That's one of the top luxury hotels in the area. Was she alone?"

"That's what the attendant recalls. We suspect she was visiting someone at the hotel."

Neal's mind raced through the possibilities. "Rolf, perhaps? Or Klaus?"

"We're trying to find out. I requested the hotel send us their bookings list. We already have copies of the security camera feeds."

Jones appeared at the doorway. "I heard the news. You want me to contact Win-Win to add Penfold's profile to their facial recognition database?"

Peter motioned him to take a seat. "Go ahead. Weller's already contacted Interpol." He cast a quick, assessing glance at Neal. "We all know where Penfold's likely headed."

Jones grunted. "Into Azathoth's welcoming arms."

Peter nodded. "Our advantage is that Penfold was kept uninformed of your condition. He doesn't know the procedure failed."

"He may have scrambled my brains," Neal quipped, aiming for a light spin on it, "but the soufflé fell flat."

Peter was not amused. "That's not how I feel and you know it."

Jones wisely chose to ignore the exchange. "Surveillance cams may provide the confirmation we've been looking for that Klaus is alive. I've been pondering that letter Henry found from Bergmann and how it may relate to Klaus."

"In what way?" Peter asked.

"We assume that Bergmann's wife had the Braque painting and know she was killed at the end of the war. At that point what happened to it? Adler believes the Braque still exists even though it's been listed as missing since World War II. Why? Did Adler enlist Klaus's help to find it?"

Peter nodded thoughtfully. "Good question. We have no evidence that Klaus and Adler ever worked together. Right, Neal?"

"Not as far as I know, but Klaus may have done a job for him after Adler fled to Argentina."

"What if Klaus knows who has the painting?" Jones asked. "In the virtual world Klaus asked Neal about his views on Nazi plunder. We've assumed that was because Karl Huber told Ydrus about the shipping manifest, but it also could be because Klaus knows something about the Braque."
Neal's heart began to pound against his ribs as Jones and Peter speculated about the connection. He forced himself to relax. They weren't linking him to the painting. This was mere speculation. They had nothing to go on . . . yet.

"Bergmann is the key we've been looking for," Jones was saying. "Huber's father worked for him. Does Klaus know that Huber and Adler's fathers were friends?"

"Neal, did Klaus ever mention the Braque—" Peter paused when Travis knocked on the doorframe.

He looked startled to see Neal present. "I'd planned to call you. I just returned from Aidan's office. He cracked the code!"

At Travis's news, Peter called Diana to meet them in the conference room. Neal took advantage of the break to duck downstairs for a mug of coffee. Travis had tossed him a life preserver. Peter's eyes had swiveled to Travis when he showed up with the news. Peter most likely hadn't noticed anything, but it had been a close call. Neal wasn't feeling confident of his masking ability, especially not with Peter. Coming in might not have been a good idea, after all.

How would he have answered Peter? Neal had never lied to him. Would this have been the first time? Better to deflect if at all possible. Klaus and Neal had discussed Braque, yes. A tiny bit of wiggle room about whether Neal was referring to the artist or the painting.

By the time he took a seat at the briefing, Neal had outlined his strategy. He didn't like it, but he had no choice.

"Everything fell into place this morning," Travis reported to the group. "Aidan said he woke up in the middle of the night and he could see the code in his head. He was so excited, he was shaking the bed. Keiko thought they were having an earthquake. He contacted me at an insane hour—luckily by text—and we've been working all day in his office."

"Which code are we talking about?" asked Diana. "The one for the plastic surgeon's files or for the files on Marta's computer?"

"One led to the other. Aidan started with the surgeon's because they were undamaged. When he applied the solution, not only did it unlock the text but also the images. We suspected the files belonged to four individuals and we were correct. The oldest record was of an unknown man who was given the features of Rolf Mansfeld. He was identified only by a numerical code."

"This must have been the man who died in the car crash and was believed to be Rolf," Jones commented.

Travis nodded. "And his file was grouped with a second patient—Rolf Mansfeld. The file confirms he assumed the identity of Chapman."

While Travis talked, Diana plugged her laptop into the projector and pulled up both their images.

"And the third?" Peter asked. He shot Neal a questioning look who nodded back at him. He was ready for whatever the results were.

"This patient is another John Doe. He acquired Klaus's features. Assuming Klaus was telling Neal the truth, this was the man who was killed at the Met."

Neal realized he was holding his breath. He attempted to focus on Travis and shove aside the
emotions that were rushing through him.

"The fourth patient was Marta. As we suspected, she became Katja Visser."

"I don't want to be Debbie Downer," said Diana, "but you realize that this doesn't prove Klaus is alive. Yes, it strengthens the case for how someone could have taken his place at the Met, but what we need is tangible evidence for Klaus."

"I haven't finished," Travis pointed out calmly. "We also have Penfold and Marta's laptops. They present a far harder challenge. Penfold's files were so damaged that we may never be able to recover them. For Marta, we have some glimmers of success. Aidan was able to decrypt partial records from undamaged data. From what we've gleaned so far there were two projects, called Capriccio and Counterpoint. Capriccio was the name of the program used on Neal."

"And Counterpoint?" Neal asked.

Travis's jaw hardened. "It appears to have been a beta test and wasn't implemented. The subject was meant to be Richard. This must be why Marta tried to have him placed on her team. We found photos and a profile. They probably meant to perform the procedure the weekend before the convention."

"Do you know the nature of the program?" Peter asked.

"We've only been able to recover bits of the feed," he admitted. "Many of the images were of his boss Ian. Based on Neal's experience, we suspect the program was designed to make Richard distance himself from Ian and Scima."

Neal was sickened at the news. With Richard, the procedure might have worked. If he'd accepted the reassignment, Travis would have conceivably delayed his trip. There wouldn't have been anyone to rescue Richard. He could have abandoned what he considered was his dream gig. What else had Azathoth planned? Were they working on any other programs?

"We also recovered a few notes Marta had made for the videos used on Neal. She indicated who'd given the instructions. Some were marked Klaus, others Rolf. Although the evidence is circumstantial, it provides further confirmation."

Neal expected he would have felt better at the news. The team must have wondered why he was so positive that Klaus was alive, and now they had corroborative evidence. But, instead, he found himself thinking back to all the months of guilt he'd endured while Klaus had been mocking him. He'd been duped. The white-hot heat of his anger against Klaus and Rolf should burn those voices in his head to ash.

"Neal, how do you feel about this?" Neal looked up at the sound of Peter's voice. It was forceful enough that he must have been talking to him for a while. Everyone was looking at him.

"Could you repeat the question?" he asked, embarrassed at having zoned out.

"I was reviewing the events of the fall," Diana said without a trace of her usual impatience. "You believed that Klaus hadn't planned your initial meeting at the Met in advance, but I think that's unlikely."

"I agree," Peter said. "Given what we know now, Klaus and Rolf were most likely working together on this well before Klaus arrived in New York. Travis, do you know when the surgery was performed on the man who took Klaus's place?"
He nodded. "April 2004."

"Neal, you saw Klaus at the Met the following September. He may have been in the States for several months before he contacted you." Peter jotted a note on a pad of paper. "Here's what I suspect occurred. Klaus and Rolf had been monitoring you with the goal of recruitment. They knew you were going to Columbia and decided to take advantage of it. It had always bothered me that you should be giving a presentation on the very painting Klaus wanted to steal."

"Klaus probably decided on the spur of the moment to use that Vermeer to trap you," Jones added. "He'd been following you. Knew you were a regular at that bistro you like so much—La Palette. It can't be a coincidence that he requested you meet him there."

"It also means we need to reevaluate just who Azathoth is," Travis said. "We've been assuming Rolf was responsible, but some of his actions may have been instigated by Klaus instead. That house of horror could have been designed by them both. Klaus could have been at Scima Workshop in London when Peter was abducted. He could have been one of the Dumbledores."

"And the use of the gargoyle in New York last spring to hide the jeweled lion?" Diana added. "Neal mentioned at the time Klaus's fondness for gargoyles. He may be as fond of Lovecraft as Rolf. Separating who was responsible for what may be an impossible challenge unless we can get them to talk."

Peter nodded. "We have no indication that Rolf ever personally stole anything. Klaus, on the other hand, is an expert thief. He could have stolen the Whistler painting from the museum in Los Angeles, the Galileo manuscript . . . " He considered for a moment. "The Raphael painting, St. George and the Dragon? Klaus could have been behind that theft as well as the Raphael drawing." He scribbled another note.

"We've got ourselves a new ball game, boss," Diana said, talking Peter's lingo. "It's our turn at bat. What's our strategy?"

"Out-con the con," Neal said promptly. "At some point Klaus will approach me and offer me the deal. I should agree. It will be an easy sell. I can assure them Peter will give me a pass, no matter what I do. Diana's stories indicate what a close relationship I have with all of you. You're even helping me plan my heists now. It's the perfect set-up. After all, that's what they tried to instill in me. I should demonstrate they succeeded. I'll continue working at the Bureau and go to Columbia but I'll start working for Azathoth. That's what he wants. I say I should give it to him."

**WCWCWCWCWCWCWC**

At the conclusion of the briefing, Peter asked Neal to stay. His words about conning Azathoth sounded like the Neal of old. Shapeshift into the personality they wanted him to be and out-con the bad guys. But Neal's shapeshifting came at a high cost.

Despite Neal's confident words, Peter knew he wasn't emotionally ready. It was a difficult call. The longer they waited to initiate a counter-strategy, the more likely Azathoth would be to take matters into his own hands. Peter had spoken with Jacob about how much therapy Neal would need. He replied that Neal would tell him not by his words but by his actions.

And right now Neal was alerting Peter he needed help.

Last October, Neal had suffered flashbacks as a result of Klaus's death. The PTSD symptoms included acrophobia and hand tremors. Up to today there had been no sign of a return. And there shouldn't be. Neal had no reason to feel guilty.
So why were his hands shaking in Peter's office earlier in the day? The first time Peter noticed the problem was when Jones was discussing Bergmann, Klaus, and the Braque painting. What was it that set Neal off? Later, during the briefing when they were reviewing the files on Marta's laptop, Peter had seen it again. Neal didn't seem aware of the problem, and it was so slight that others might not have noticed it.

Only a couple of hours ago, Peter had been relieved to see Neal mask any unease over seeing Hughes for the first time. Now that raised a warning flag. Last fall, Neal had refused to disclose the symptoms till he had no choice. If Peter asked him now, he'd most likely either deflect or make a joke of it. Worse, he might try to conceal it so Peter wouldn't postpone the op.

Henry had once told Peter the best way to find out how Neal was really doing was to trick him into demonstrating it . . .

"Do you need to head back right away?" Peter asked.

"No need to. The Vermeer's coming along well. What do you have in mind?"

"It's a beautiful day. Some fresh air would do us both good."

Neal looked at him questioningly. "You want to take a walk in the park?"

"Not exactly. Oh, and you can leave your fedora behind. I wouldn't want you to lose it."

"All right, now you've got me intrigued. Where are we heading?"

Peter smiled. "You'll see." He led Neal to the elevator bank and resisted all his questions while they waited for the next one to arrive. Neal could be very persistent. Peter heaved a sigh of relief when he finally heard the ding of an approaching car.

The jig was up when he pushed the button for the forty-second floor. Neal's face brightened immediately. "We're going to the roof! I haven't been up there yet."

"A likely story."

"Peter, you know it's off limits."

"And when has that ever stopped you?" Neal grinned at the banter. The kid certainly acted like he was back. Peter had a momentary qualm. Was he making too much of it? Would it seem like a dirty trick? But Neal was acting so much like his old self—cocky and self-assured—Peter needed to know how much of it was a con.

The roof had restricted access through a maintenance area. Peter had only been there a couple of times himself. Although he had clearance, he felt like he was playing hooky.

When they stepped outside, it seemed like they were on top of the world. There were other skyscrapers around them but even so they had magnificent views of Governor's Island as well as the merge of the Hudson and East rivers at the tip of Manhattan. The roof wasn't designed for sightseeing. Much of the space was taken up by massive utility equipment. A security railing ringed the perimeter, but it was not a place for anyone with a fear of heights.

"Come stand beside me," Peter suggested and walked close to the edge.

Neal strolled over, even leaning forward to scan the vista. He turned to face Peter, "Are you suggesting I use this view for a painting? You know my theme is rivers. Perhaps I'll take you up on
"Hold out your hands," Peter said, keeping his voice neutral.

Neal huffed but complied. He stretched out both hands, and was able to keep them steady for a few seconds before they began to shake. "Damn," he muttered and stepped back.

"Do you want to go inside?"

"No, I'm good," but Neal retreated to stand by the door to a utility shed. He gazed off in the distance, disappointment plainly written on his face.

Peter stood beside him. "It's not that surprising given what you've gone through. You've made a remarkable recovery since Friday, but you're not a hundred percent and you know that. I didn't like doing it this way, but we need to know if your PTSD symptoms were returning."

"You were concerned I'd conceal it," he accused, making a face. "Given what happened in the past, I don't blame you. Honestly, I didn't realize heights were a problem again."

"Are you experiencing flashbacks, too?"

"Like before? No. But the nightmares, yeah, they're still there." He turned to Peter. "What made you think of the acrophobia?"

"Your account of Riverside Church and how Klaus said he'd hidden something there for you. It made me wonder how he intended to use it. Have you discussed it with Jacob?"

"He knows about Klaus's challenge. He hasn't enlightened me on what it may mean."

Peter wondered what Jacob's take would be to the acrophobia. Although the earlier incident hadn't been entered into Neal's official file, Peter had warned Jacob about it as well as the issues resulting from the abuse Neal had suffered as a child.

"Is it okay if I go with you tomorrow?" Peter asked. "We can discuss it together." They agreed to meet at Jacob's apartment the next morning. As they went inside, Peter added, "For the record, if you're not thrilled about heights, this isn't a problem for me. It's a mild case. Many others have it. But I need to know. Before I'll agree to your participation in field work, I must be fully aware of what vulnerabilities you have that others could take advantage of. You understand?"

Neal nodded. "You don't want to fly blind."

"Exactly. If we know what pressure points they'll hit, we can prepare for it. We're still in the planning phase for multiple operations. You can use this window to heal. You're not holding us back."

Neal appeared to agree, and Peter believed Neal when he said he hadn't realized the acrophobia had returned. But Peter's radar was continuing to ping a warning.

**Jacob Nussbaum's Apartment. Thursday morning.**

Peter picked up a jigsaw piece from his pile and examined the partially complete puzzle for places where it might fit. Neal and Jacob were similarly engaged with their own stacks to work on. Strangest therapy session Peter had ever been to, but if he ever needed to see a psychologist, he was going to Jacob.
Jacob's study was equipped with a round oak game table. It was a beautiful piece of furniture in the Arts and Crafts style. The chairs were covered in soft, worn leather. Table lamps with mica shades provided non-obtrusive lighting.

Jacob had a carafe of coffee already prepared. Neal had brought along a CD of *La Folia* by Rachmaninov to play. When Peter asked him about it, he explained that Klaus considered it heist-planning music and Neal was on a heist to steal his mind back. What impressed Peter was that he was so open about it.

Jacob didn't rattle off questions. He let Neal set the pace.

"Yes!" Peter patted the piece into place, taking a moment to enjoy the success.

"Not bad," Neal said. "You only have nineteen to go in your stack." He rotated a piece in his hand while studying the puzzle. "Peter helped me discover that my old nemesis, acrophobia, has come back. It's not bad, but I'd rather banish it entirely." He reviewed what had occurred the previous day. "Any ideas?"

Jacob sorted through his pieces. "When we discussed the flashbacks and issues you were having in the fall, you felt they related to your guilt over Klaus's death."

"But now I know he's alive. I've no reason to feel guilty."

"That's not quite accurate," he pointed out mildly. "Klaus has given you another reason. He wants you to feel guilty for having quit his crew in Geneva. He planted the memory that you wrongfully believed Klaus killed the guard when it was actually someone else. The fact you recognize it probably explains why the acrophobia isn't worse. But that planted suggestion is still there, influencing your subconscious."

Neal fell silent for a moment while he fitted a piece into place. "Do you think the challenge he gave me to climb the church spire was designed to test if I have a fear of heights?"

Jacob nodded. "Those gargoyle games he invented could serve the same purpose. Did you ever have an issue with acrophobia when you worked with Klaus?"

"Never. Working in high places was always one of my strengths. Peter's been known to call me a spider monkey."

"Is there any chance that Azathoth knows about the acrophobia you developed in last October?"

Neal pondered the question and shook his head. "I don't think so. Peter, what's your take?"

"He knows," Peter confirmed. When Neal shot him a dismayed look, he added, "That night we were held prisoner in New Jersey? You froze on the ledge of the fourth floor window just as you were on the point of climbing down. I was already on the ground and calling up to you, but you were flashing back to Klaus. Finally, at the last moment you broke free but you barely escaped the fire. We assumed Azathoth was recording everything."

"But the cameras were destroyed in the blaze," Neal protested.

"He could have been using live feeds," Peter warned.

Neal slumped into his chair. "You're right." He turned to Jacob. "If the treatment had worked, I wasn't supposed to remember any of this. How does he intend to use the memory of Riverside Church?"
Peter leaned forward expectantly. He'd been wondering the same thing.

"They may have inserted the discussion of the object hidden behind the gargoyle as a test. Azathoth is monitoring the church spire. If you attempt to retrieve it, he'll know that your memories have resurfaced and will adjust accordingly." Jacob smiled. "Confession time. Aren't you tempted to search for it?"

"I think about it every day," he admitted ruefully.

"Azathoth knows you so well, that's what he's counting on. He may also be curious to see if the acrophobia will resurface. If you make no attempt to investigate the spire, Azathoth will have more confidence that the procedure was a success. Once the trigger is pulled, he believes you'll start having flashbacks and nightmares about the virtual world they created for you. Your fear of heights will return until you start working with them again. Azathoth's intention is to have you so consumed by guilt over the issues you'd cause to Peter and his wife as well as to the team that you'll gladly accept their offer."

"But wouldn't he expect that I'd feel guilty about betraying the Bureau?" Neal asked.

"They may have planned to subject you to a second treatment," he said in the same even voice. "Once you're a member of their crew, they'll go in to modify the memories."

"Could they have succeeded?" Peter asked.

"I've seen no evidence that such a transformation could be achieved by Dr. Penfold's methods, but he's a brilliant doctor... and an excellent salesman. Is he still not talking?"

"He jumped bail," Peter admitted and explained the circumstances. "Our fear is that he's already back with Rolf."

Jacob shrugged. "That may work in your favor."

Neal paused, holding a puzzle piece in mid-air. "How so?"

"Penfold has an inflated sense of his own worth. He'll do everything he can to persuade his superiors that the procedure succeeded. That means there's less of a risk that they'll improvise a new strategy, like simply kidnapping you to force you to work for them. We want them to stick with the original plan. Now that you know what it is, you'll be able to thwart it."

Jacob spoke those words so confidently, he was making Peter believe them as well. "You still believe that the Vermeer painting is the trigger?"

Jacob nodded. "Azathoth knows you were both in Paris that week. Neal told me you'd attempted to see The Astronomer at the Louvre, but it wasn't on exhibit. Azathoth could have discovered it was your first trip to Paris. It would have been natural for you to visit the Louvre. Did anything out of the ordinary happen on the evening the theft supposedly occurred?"

Peter thought back. "That was our last night in Paris. El and I went out to dinner. Neal met friends. Henry came to town..." He glanced over at Neal to see if he had anything to add. Neal appeared lost in thought, absently holding a puzzle piece up in the air, seemingly unaware that his hand was shaking slightly. Peter pretended not to notice and turned to Jacob. "What's your take on how long they'll wait to act?"

Jacob was also watching Neal. "It won't be this week, not with Neal on medical leave. My hunch is that they'll wait at least a couple more weeks to see if Neal makes a move for the hidden item in..."
the gargoyle. The counter-argument is to act swiftly while the memories are fresh. Then there's the X-factor—some piece of information we're unaware of—which could cause them to delay."

Peter looked over at Neal. He was flipping a puzzle piece between his fingers, but his eyes remained unfocused. Was the action a subconscious reflex meant to hide his hand tremor?

When the session started, Neal had been fine. Peter had first noticed the change when they were discussing that last night in Paris. Klaus wasn't mentioned. The previous day, Peter had suspected Klaus might be the trigger when Neal's hands shook in his office, but on the roof the Mansfields weren't discussed. At the briefing, Travis reported on the aborted attempt on Richard. Was Neal blaming himself for that too? Or was it simply that his condition was deteriorating?

At the end of the session, Peter dropped Neal off at June's on the way to the office. As he drove on the expressway, he kept replaying the conversation in his mind, twisting that puzzle piece around. It refused to snap into place. What was he missing?

When he was still a couple of miles from the exit, he abruptly switched lanes, thankful that Neal wasn't in the car to hear the honks from outraged motorists. Pulling off to the shoulder, he reviewed the situation one more time. Could that be the answer?

Peter had once told Neal all roads led to Henry Winslow. That was back when Neal had just started working at the FBI. Peter had no idea who Henry was except that Neal referenced him far too often for Peter to be comfortable about this unknown force in his life.

Once Peter got to know Henry, the road map shifted. Ever since Peter learned of Neal's connection to Adler, it appeared that all roads led to the hedge fund manager. Fowler's frame attempt in the fall, the Braque painting, Henry's trips to Argentina—all were tied to Adler. Had the map now reverted to its original configuration? And would Henry point to the same destination that all the signposts Peter saw were leading him to?

During his therapy session, Neal had been fine till they began to discuss the supposed date of the theft. That was the only evening Neal wasn't with Peter and El. Was Azathoth monitoring them that closely that he knew Neal wasn't with them? Or did the date have another significance?

Neal had seen his former fencing instructor, André Renard, the previous evening, and André had introduced him to Gordon Taylor. Could André have pressed Neal into participating in a crime? André had provided vital assistance when Fowler attempted to frame Neal in the fall. In San Francisco, Neal had as much as admitted if a good friend were in trouble, he'd do whatever was necessary to help them.

In that scenario, would Neal have told Henry? If he had, Henry would never betray Neal, not even to Peter . . . unless he thought it was in Neal's best interest. Last summer Neal had done just that, disclosing Henry's secrets to Peter in order to save his cousin. It was time for Henry to return the favor.

Peter pulled out his cell phone. Henry was at work and suggested Peter meet him at his office. Henry had rented space for Win-Win's New York branch in one of the historic cast-iron buildings in SoHo. Located south of Washington Square, it was on Peter's way to the Bureau.

Peter readily accepted. He'd never visited the place and was curious to see what Henry had done with the facility. One thing was certain. He knew it wouldn't be like White Collar.

And he was right.
Henry’s team occupied the entire third floor of the building. When Peter got off the elevator, he found himself in a reception area decorated with rock music motifs. Guitars and memorabilia hung from the walls, reminding Peter of the Hard Rock Hotel in San Diego. A young Asian woman working at the front desk directed Peter to the back. Henry was easy to spot. He was directing a game of pool being played by Radha Prasad and Sofia Winston.

Radha had come up to New York last week from Win-Win's headquarters in Baltimore. Peter suspected Allen Winston was anxious to have someone keep an eye out for Henry to make sure he didn't go off the reservation once more. Radha was a little older than Henry and from Peter's interactions with him, much more conservative. He was probably viewed as a stabilizing influence, although he wasn't acting like one at the moment.

"You gotta finesse it," Henry urged, as Radha bent down low to eye his next shot.

Sofia blew on the end of her cue stick and grinned as she greeted Peter. "I think I've found my calling. My career plan is to become the Fast Eddie of Win-Win."

"Just wait till my sling comes off," Henry growled, "and I'll give you a run for that title."

"Neal advocated for a pool table in one of the conference rooms last month," Peter said with a laugh. "Now I know where he got the idea."

"Did he tell you about the poker room?" Radha asked. "That's in one of the huddle rooms. We do some of our best brainstorming there."

Henry shrugged happily in a gesture that made him seem the spitting image of Neal. Henry no longer bore much physical resemblance to Neal, but in some of his mannerisms the relationship came through sharp and clear.

Henry led Peter not to the poker room but to an austere room with minimal furnishings. Henry's sitar was propped against the wall in a corner. Two small drums were on the table. They looked handmade. Peter assumed they were Indian, perhaps items Henry had picked up during his stay in that country.

"We call this our Zen room," Henry explained. "It's soundproof and sometimes used for meditation. Then there are the occasions when you feel like pounding a drum. From what you told me on the phone, that's the mood you're in now."

Peter nodded and sat down in one the chairs. They were sleek leather designs—contemporary but designed for comfort. That's what he needed at the moment. "Did Neal tell you about Jacob's jigsaw puzzle technique?"

He chuckled. "Yeah. That was a new one to me. I researched it and liked what I read. Working a jigsaw puzzle makes use of both sides of the brain—the analytical left side and the creative right side. When both sides work simultaneously, dopamine levels are increased. The key element though is that the brain moves more easily between the Beta state of wakefulness and the Alpha state natural to dreams and focused meditation."

"In other words, Neal's subconscious is closer to the surface."

"That's right. We tend to build barriers to make the subconscious inaccessible. Jacob's tearing down the walls to expose what's behind them."

Peter pulled one of the drums closer to him and gave it a tentative tap. The sound was low, mellow, and oddly liberating. He tapped it a couple more times as he reviewed the events which caused him
concern. "Klaus told Neal the Vermeer theft had reportedly happened on our last night in Paris. You saw him that night. My question to you is do you know of any incident that could be relevant?"

Henry tapped a rhythmic pattern on the second drum while he considered Peter's question. "Neal said he'd visited friends. When he returned to his hotel room, we took a walk by the Seine and discussed Fiona as well as some sketches he'd made."

"I remember you said at the time you were surprised that Neal was taking the breakup so hard. Could there have been another factor in play? To me, the PTSD indicates he feels guilty about something. Do you know of anything which could cause it?"

When Henry didn't answer him directly, Peter knew he was on the right track.

"You know Neal overdoses on guilt," Henry said, continuing to tap the drum. "Those fake memories of how he harmed you and El are doing a number to him. Rolf knew exactly the right pressure point to target."

"I was afraid of that. Neal told you what happened when Azathoth held us prisoner?"

"And tricked Neal into believing he'd killed you?" Henry nodded, taking a breath. "Azathoth must have recorded the entire incident and realized how well it worked. Now he's reinforced those emotions. I doubt Neal ever fully got over the trauma of the first experience. It's no wonder the PTSD has resurfaced. His head's telling him he's in danger of ruining your life. Compounding the problem, Azathoth planted the idea that Neal was partly responsible for El's death. On the subconscious level that's continuing to eat away at him."

"Is there anything I can do to help him get over it?"

"Give him time. If he is hiding anything, I can guarantee he wants to tell you, but he's scared about you being harmed. As he works through the issues, I bet he'll come to you. If you try to force him before he's ready, he's likely to panic and run."

Henry's words didn't bring Peter much comfort. "When we were in San Francisco, Neal virtually admitted there was something he could be blackmailed over. I'm telling you this now in the hopes you can get him to understand. As long as he hides these vulnerabilities, he'll never break free of Azathoth's control."

"I'm working on an idea which should help, and don't underestimate the effect of Diana's stories. Neal relates to his Arkham counterpart much more than he'd ever admit."

Peter exhaled. "We're all being influenced by our characters. I heard him singing 'Sounds of Silence' when we returned from California. It made me think of the isolation Diana had Arkham Neal endure. Our Neal feels the same way."

"I wasn't a fan of Simon and Garfunkel," Henry admitted. "I should listen to their songs. Music can work miracles."

Although Henry didn't give him the answers he was looking for, Peter left the Win-Win office in a slightly better mood. Henry had confirmed Peter's suspicions. He mentioned he was working on a solution. A few more details would have been nice.

As for Peter, he intended to rummage through El's Simon and Garfunkel collection at home. At the moment, the only song that came to mind was "At the Zoo." The animal personalities described in the lyrics seemed weirdly appropriate for the present situation. Did Neal think of him as the kindly
but dumb elephant or the skeptical orangutan? Perhaps Peter should remind him—and Henry too—that it was the pigeons in that song who plotted in secrecy. Wouldn't they rather be honest monkeys?

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Notes: Incidents in three earlier stories are particularly relevant to this chapter. Neal's PTSD symptoms surfaced the previous fall in The Woman in Blue, the story which introduced Klaus Mansfeld and Azathoth. The team members are now grappling with a reevaluation of those autumn events. That's the subject for this week's blog post: "Woman in Blue Redux."

Henry warned Peter about Neal's tendency to overdose on guilt in Penna's story By the Book. Henry gave Peter valuable advice to discover what was going on by tricking Neal into showing it during a run in the park. Peter first heard about Henry in Caffrey Conversation. The mystery about him continued till By the Book when they met face to face. It was in that story that Peter told Neal all roads led to Henry.

Peter hopes Henry will open up like Neal did during Penna's story Caffrey Disclosure, but Henry realizes Neal needs to be the one to own up to his mistakes. Peter's bound to be angry and hurt by what Neal did. The extent to which that affects their friendship will depend in large measure on how Peter discovers what happened. Henry has a plan. Will it work? Will Peter find out before Neal's ready? The clock continues to tick. In Chapter 17: War Games, Henry sets his plan in motion.

Penna has posted another scene set in the world of Prime to our blog. In this one, her main character Zach investigates a theft at a jewelry store. The post is: "Novel Progress: crime scene."

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Nocturne in Black and Gold board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon
I added a pin of the view from the top of the Federal building. Peter's right. It's magnificent!

Peter hadn't expected to return to the mansion so soon. He'd dropped Neal off only a few hours ago. But in light of the discussion with Henry, Peter decided to bring the news in person.

Henry had urged him to give Neal time. In a roundabout way, Henry had also confirmed that Neal was keeping secrets in a misguided attempt to protect Peter and El. Henry's request wasn't unreasonable. It was less than a week ago that Neal had been abducted. Peter would have liked to grant him a couple of weeks, hell a month. But these weren't normal times. Rolf could spring his trap at any moment, and when he did, it might not be the Vermeer but whatever else Neal was hiding.

Peter reasoned the best course of action was to make himself a fixture in Neal's life till he got over the anxiety that was the root cause. The information Peter had received when he returned to the office provided adequate justification for a return trip.

June was out when he arrived and he was let in by the housekeeper. When he jogged up the final flight of stairs to the loft, he could hear Neal's voice on the phone. He'd left the door open and appeared to be chatting with a friend.

"Big Brother really isn't that typical." When Neal saw Peter at the entrance, he waved him in. "American men aren't all like that, I promise you," he said into the phone.

Neal had his painting t-shirt on and was sitting at the dinette table. Paint tubes and brushes were scattered on the surface which had been covered with a drop cloth. While Neal ended the call, Peter studied the painting on the easel. It already looked nearly complete to his eye. Up to now, Peter had always been presented with the finished product. Witnessing it take shape was an eye-opening revelation of Neal's technique.

"That was Bianka on the phone," Neal explained. "She's become addicted to Big Brother. I don't think that's the best introduction to American home life. I'd suggested TV shows would be a good way for her to practice English and learn contemporary slang, but that wasn't what I had in mind."

Peter took a seat at the table across from him. "What did you tell her about being home this week?"

"Just that I was on leave after a case. She'd wondered why I wasn't coming to the studio, and I told her I was working on a portrait for June." Neal paused and gave him a sharp look. "You don't have to worry. I'm being careful."

"We used to joke about Klaus's ghost hounding us. Now that he's no longer a ghost, I find myself wondering when he'll pop in again. You told me how interested he'd been in Columbia. He insisted on a campus tour, wanted to see your art, even worked his charm act on Keiko as I recall."

"You think he may try to spy on me at Watson Hall? Pump Bianka for information?" Neal shrugged. "It's possible. Do you remember the man who wanted to purchase my painting at the art exhibition?"

"The one which depicts Klaus's fall at the Met? The man called himself Albert Wilmarth and left one of the Leopard's business cards."

Neal began screwing the caps onto his paint tubes. "Last month we thought he was Rolf, but I bet it
was Klaus instead. He could have worn a simple disguise, like the beard he wore in the virtual world."

Peter considered Neal's theory. "Do you think Klaus would have realized the subject?"

"It's an abstract, but if he'd had someone monitoring my studio, it would have been simple to break in and check what I was working on. Klaus no doubt reveled in how torn up I was over his death," he added with a grimace.

"Did he mention Columbia in that virtual hellhole you were in?"

"Only how much he regretted that I'd have to leave before I got my degree." Neal sat back and raised a brow. "I'm always happy to see you, but this was unexpected. Did something come up at work?"

"The Dutch authorities found Katja Visser's body. They'd been going through their Jane Does since we alerted them. The corpse was found in a canal near Amsterdam a month ago. Decomposition had already set in, and they were unable to identify it at the time of discovery."

"Did they use Katja's dental records for the match?"

Peter nodded. "The L.A. Field Office contacted us to let us know."

Neal took a deep breath. "That'll put a different spin on the case. The Dutch will push for an extradition."

"I expect it will be granted. She can be charged with conspiracy to commit murder as well as fraud. Hughes and I discussed the situation this afternoon. In cases such as this, the Dutch will have precedence."

"Marta will be happy to return to Europe." There was an overtone of bitterness to his voice. "It will be simpler for Azathoth to engineer an escape."

"He can try, but prison escapes aren't easily managed."

Neal didn't respond but Peter could tell he wasn't persuaded. It was a concern for him too. "Hughes wants to know how you plan to sign your forgery. I have every confidence that your work will be so precise, it will be impossible to tell it from the original otherwise."

"I'd already planned for that," Neal said, looking delighted at the question. "A blue tapestry cloth with a floral motif is draped over the table in the painting. I added a tiny mark among the foliage. It will be impossible to spot unless you know where to look and even then you'll have to use magnification. Once Azathoth is caught, I'll sign the back of the painting." Neal pointed out the spot on the canvas and handed Peter a high-power magnifier.

Peter could barely make out the "NC" even with the magnifier. He was glad to hear Neal had also prepared a photo of the exact spot to look. "I'm amazed at how quickly you've been able to prepare this. You are taking time out to sleep, right?"

Neal tossed off the easy smile of a con man which wasn't one bit reassuring. "Of course."

"More than two hours a night, I hope?"

He didn't answer but stood back to study the painting. "When it gets to this stage it's difficult to leave alone. I'm glad you let me focus on it this week."
"Juggling your courses, art, and job was brutal last year. I'm happy to report that it won't be quite as bad next year."

"They agreed?" he said, his face lighting up.

Peter nodded. "Hughes told me you received approval for a reduced workload. You'll be on a thirty-hour schedule when classes resume, and I'll do my best to hold you to that. If you're on a case and need to work overtime, you'll receive comp time afterward."

"I may not be a walking zombie after all."

"And now I'll disobey what I just said by asking you to interrupt your painting time. Can you take a break tomorrow afternoon?"

"Sure. What's up?"

"Jones told me they're ready to discuss the sting. He wants Mozzie to be present so we'll avail ourselves once more of June's magnificent dining room."

"Jones and Mozzie met here till late last night. I tried to pry out of them what they were planning, but they wouldn't share. Henry dropped in for a couple of hours as well. I'm eager to hear what they've come up with."

Peter's phone buzzed as he was about to leave. When he saw it was Travis, he put it on speaker.

"We finally struck pay dirt!" The jubilation in his voice came through loud and clear. "The facial recognition software identified an image of Rolf in Los Angeles. It was the painting Richard had made of Rolf with a full beard. I looked at the feed and the man is almost an exact double. He was recorded at the Aquarium of the Pacific in Long Beach."

Neal slapped the table in his excitement. "We got him!"

"Almost," Peter agreed. "We know what he looks like."

"You were right," Travis said. "Rolf was tired of looking like someone else."

"It was initially Tricia's idea. You, Richard, the L.A. agents—it was a team effort." Peter took a deep satisfying breath. Azathoth was showing his true colors.

"I bet that beard's a fake," Neal commented. "Klaus complained to me about the necessity of wearing one. Rolf probably feels the same way."

Travis promised to send stills of Rolf to them both. This had been a long time coming. Rolf wasn't yet their prisoner, but they'd taken a gigantic leap forward in making that goal a reality.

**WCWCWCWCWCWCWCW**

The news about Rolf's unmasking buoyed Neal throughout the rest of the day and well into Friday. His morning session with Jacob went exceptionally well. Even Billy noticed an improvement. He wasn't letting Neal do any leaps yet, but he inserted a lightning-fast arm sequence in the middle of an achingly slow balancing act that gave Neal hope.

When Neal returned home from his therapy session, he found Jones, Mozzie, and Henry had already set up the war room in June's dining room. The others had yet to arrive. Neal's attempts to extract hints went nowhere. Henry shoved him out and closed the leaded-glass doors into the
dining room. Adding insult to injury, Mozzie taped a Do Not Disturb sign on the glass.

Not all the glass in the doors was etched and Neal was still able to peer through. But the schemers were wise to him and sat facing the doors so that he couldn't see their laptops.

"Frustrating, isn't it?" June said, approaching from the kitchen.

"I'll say. What I don't understand is that Mozzie doesn't have *Monopoly* out. Moreover, there's no chess board."

"No wonder you're confused. Mozzie's gone modern. They were all playing *Silent Hunter* earlier in the morning. How about helping me and Chef Emil with lunch? That's much more fun and we can be tasters."

Neal agreed readily. June had invited everyone for lunch with only one stipulation—that she be included in the war room meeting. Neal expected Peter to raise an objection, but he didn't. Henry had called the con a game of high-stakes poker. They were playing to her strength.

Not only would Peter have the best crew in attendance, but they'd also be the best fed, and not in the *federal* sense. Lately, June had been encouraging Emil to include Creole dishes in his repertoire. It was an inside joke that June hated to cook. Like her character in Arkham Files, June was from New Orleans, but she claimed that she was a disaster at making any of the dishes. Who needed to cook, though, when Emil was around? His primary job was managing a catering business but he always made time in his schedule for June who had jump-started his business three years ago.

For lunch Emil had made Emeril Lagasse's muffulettas—Italian cold cuts and cheeses layered with olive spread on crusty French bread.

Neal smeared some of the spread on a cracker and tasted it. "Are you sure your name's not Emeril?"

Emil, a Haitian-born native, crinkled his face with pleasure. "Creole cuisine is a Haitian invention. Emeril and I are soul brothers."

"New Orleanians may dispute your claim," June said with a chuckle, "but having multiple creators is appropriate. Creole food is the original fusion cuisine."

He handed Neal a knife. "You're an expert with blades. To you goes the honor of slicing the muffulettas."

Emil had also made Creole tomatoes and potato salad. For Travis he'd made a vegetarian version of the sandwich.

They were in the midst of debating New Orleans versus Haitian beignets when Henry the Muncher wandered in. "I hope Neal's left some for the rest of us," he said. He made a beeline to the plate of pecan tassies and promptly helped himself to one.

"Hands off the dessert, young man!" June scolded, shaking her finger at him. "You have the willpower of a three-year old."

"I've been saying the same thing for years," Neal told her. "Nothing gets through that hard head."

"Where have these been all my life?" Henry exclaimed, ignoring their comments. "Miniature puffs of pecan goodness." He turned to Emil. "I hope you made a second plate for the others. These are
"Not if I have any say on the matter," retorted Peter, arriving just in time to rescue dessert.

With the arrival of the White Collar contingent, they moved on to lunch. Neal and Henry helped Emil carry the food out and supply beverages for everyone.

When Neal took the ice bucket to the freezer, Henry approached him. "You know I've got your back, right?"

"Of course," Neal said automatically, surprised at his serious expression. "What did you do?" he added, suddenly suspicious.

Henry relaxed into a smile. "Just trust me. It's all gonna work out."

More mind games? At the last meeting, Henry had sprung the news about the Bergmann letter. That had worked out okay. But why didn't he want Neal to know about the next twist beforehand? More than likely because he thought Neal would object to the idea . . . Such as Sara being a member of the crew? Was this a call to action for Alicia and Matthew?

When lunch had been devoured, Jones took the floor. He'd borrowed one of Neal's easels to prop up a large magnetic map. Along the edge of the graphic he'd placed a collection of magnets of assorted shapes. They were jumbled so closely together, it was hard to tell what they represented. Neal smiled when he saw what Jones had in mind. He'd tried using naval tactics once when he outlined an op at a ski resort. Peter had made unkind comments. Jones used to be the type who'd never rock the boat. Now he was propelling his patrol vessel straight into the shark-infested waters of traditional FBI project planning. Was this new daring an indication of Mozzie's influence at work? Perhaps just a few too many hours of playing Silent Hunter? Neal helped himself to a cup of coffee, another pecan tassie, and settled back to enjoy the show.

The map was of the Atlantic Ocean with North and South America on one side and Europe and Africa on the other. That in itself was impressive. Did Jones intend to imply that they'd work the con on both sides of the Atlantic? Neal had never worked a con on four continents at the same time. He felt Henry's eyes on him. When Neal shot him a glance, Henry's mouth twitched into the suspicion of a smile.

Jones picked up two of the magnets. "Adler and Huber are represented by two battleships." He slapped one off the coast of Argentina and the other off Greece, the last known location of Huber. "Both think they have the key to a hoard of plundered Nazi art. On the one side of the Atlantic we have Vincent Adler working with Garrett Fowler and Kate. Thanks to Henry, we know he believes the Braque painting will lead him to a U-boat filled with treasure." He rummaged through the remaining magnets and stuck a submarine off the New Jersey coast. "On the other side of the ocean, we have Karl Huber, an Ydrus operative. He has the partial shipping manifest, his father's journal, and a sheet of fractal equations. We assume by now he's most likely working with Ydrus to recover the treasure. Huber's father believed that the art had been shipped out of the country on a U-boat and asked Adler's father if fractal antennas were being used on the vessels."

"Thus proving," Mozzie said, breaking in, "that he didn't realize the equations were a code developed by mathematician Paul Lévy to send secret messages to the French Resistance."

"We believe that the younger Huber and Adler know nothing about each other's plans," Jones continued. "Kate didn't mention either the shipping manifest or the sheet of equations to Henry, and the only inquiries about the Braque have come from Adler and Fowler. What Henry, Mozzie, and I
have been working on is a strategy to mount a simultaneous sting against both groups."

A double-pronged con on multiple continents? Neal's heart began to race at the prospect.

"The essential element is to play from our strengths," Jones said. "And what are our strengths? Two wisasses who flout authority and play by their own rules whenever they can get away with it and a reprobate who would never agree to go along with an FBI sting." Jones paused while Mozzie stood up and made a sweeping bow to the group. "We'll use them to convince Huber and Adler that Henry and Neal found the U-boat."

"Ever since Neal began working at the FBI, he's spread the word that he's working a long con," Henry added. "We intend to take full advantage of that. Over the past several months Neal's been pumping White Collar for information. He fed Mozzie all the research Travis and Jones had performed on the sheet of fractal equations."

"And because of my unquestioned brilliance," Mozzie said. "I was able to use the equations to home in on the U-boat's fractal antenna."

"Hold on," Peter objected. "Adler believes the Braque is critical to finding the U-boat. He doesn't know anything about the equations."

"The con about the fractal antenna is designed primarily for Huber's benefit. For Adler we have something else in mind," Jones explained.

Henry stood up and walked over to the easel. "You may not realize that when Neal worked in Europe, he stole the Braque painting."

Neal slapped a look of smug complacency on his face to disguise the blaring klaxons inside. Was this how Henry demonstrated he had Neal's back?

"Oh really?" Peter said with a smile on his face. "Tell me more."

"My pleasure," Henry quipped. He commanded attention away from Neal by placing a magnet of a painting on top of Paris. He may have wanted to test Neal to see if his con skills were up to snuff, but he was also providing a diversion to let Neal adjust while everyone's attention was directed elsewhere.

"Neal left it in a secure location in Paris to be picked up later," Henry said, keeping his eyes primarily on Peter. "When he heard about Fowler's offer to purchase the painting, he decided to retrieve it during his trip in June. Neal's no fool. That painting isn't worth nearly the sum of money Fowler is willing to pay. There has to be another reason Adler wants it. For the past several weeks, he and Mozzie have been examining the painting in one of Mozzie's safe houses. They uncovered a message which reveals the approximate location of the U-boat." He turned to Neal. "Now that you've extracted the information, you no longer need the painting. You intend to sell Adler the Braque to stick it to the man who swindled you out of so much money."

"Not bad," Neal admitted while calculating how much Adler would likely cough up.

"It was your forgery of the Vermeer that gave me the idea to use a forged artwork to con them."

"Neal was known to be a master art thief in Europe," Diana said, making a note. "It will be easy to sell the idea he'd stolen the painting." She pointed her pen at Neal. "You probably stole it from an individual—perhaps a former SS officer. Give me a few minutes and I can put together a backstory that will knock your socks off."
Neal smirked at Diana, hiding his discomfort at Henry's brazen outing of what actually happened.

"How will Adler know Neal has the Braque?" Travis asked.

"Once the forgery's ready, I'll take it to Paris," Mozzie explained, "and circulate the news through the usual channels that it's available for purchase. Then we'll sit back and wait for Adler to take the bait."

"I love it!" Diana exclaimed. "The U-boat con. Neal and Henry thumbing their noses at the FBI and Win-Win. Taking advantage of us while going after hidden treasure. Henry and Neal never grew up. Who wouldn't believe they've joined forces to be pirates with Mozzie?"

Peter turned to Neal. "Are they right? Could you prepare a forgery which would fool Adler? The painting's been missing since World War II. Is there enough documentation?"

"More than enough to trick him," Neal said confidently. *Especially since I have the original to guide me.*

"Adler will assume Neal discovered the message," Diana said, "and now no longer needs the painting."

"Why would Adler buy it if he thinks Neal already knows the secret?" Travis asked.

"Because the itch to own it is something he can't control," Mozzie asserted knowingly. "Adler's been dreaming about this painting ever since he found Bergmann's letter. He may think Neal missed something."

"The cost means nothing to a man of his wealth," Neal added.

Mozzie nodded. "And there's another factor. Adler's a collector. That painting is tied so closely to the treasure, I predict he'll insist on it being part of his collection—a trophy to hang on his wall."

"We intend to trick Adler into believing that Neal and Mozzie brought Henry in to provide funds for the salvage operation," said Jones.

Peter had been quietly taking notes. When Jones mentioned the salvage operation, he asked, "Do you actually have a U-boat?"

"Unfortunately not," Jones admitted, "but we have the next best thing. The South Jersey coast is a prime area for shipwrecks. We intend to spread the rumor of a U-boat discovery in the Cape May waters. There's ample supporting documentation. In 1942 a British freighter, the SS *Miraflores*, was sunk forty-five miles east of Cape May. It had been torpedoed by U-432, one of many U-boats which were active off the Atlantic Seaboard and in the Gulf of Mexico. A U-boat surrendered in Argentina after the war, and Mozzie's supplied us with several reports of rumored voyages carrying Nazi leaders and treasure to South America."

"I'll be happy to share my extensive research on the subject," Mozzie added eagerly, tapping with his finger on a thick binder in front of him.

"Perhaps at another meeting?" Travis suggested diplomatically. He was already well-acquainted with Mozzie's extensive files on UFO sightings and probably wanted to have the meeting concluded before midnight.

"How do you intend to convince your marks that you found the U-boat?" Peter asked.
Henry jumped in before Jones could answer. "I've already planned to take a sailing trip with Eric around my birthday—no presents, please. It's partly to appease Mom—I told her I'd use the trip to tighten the screws in my head. I could extend that to a couple of weeks, and sail up and down the coast. I'll plant the suspicion that the trip is an excuse to pinpoint the site. At some point, I'll have Neal take some time off. You're such a tolerant boss, you'll let him. You probably won't even make him call it vacation time."

"That won't be necessary," Neal interjected. "I can call in sick and play hooky. There's no need to involve Peter."

Henry shrugged. "That will work too. My overly tolerant grandfather Graham will be a pushover. I'll borrow his sailboat. Neal, Mozzie, and I will spend a few days anchored off Cape May."

"While I zero in with my fractal antenna detector," Mozzie said, "Neal and Henry will spend their time diving for treasure."

"After they return," said Jones, "we'll stock a warehouse in Brooklyn with the loot."

"Aren't you skipping a step?" Diana questioned. "You've got Neal, Henry, and Mozzie finding a U-boat stuffed with art lying on the ocean floor off the New Jersey shoreline. I guess I can buy that, but how will you salvage it? This is the sort of thing that would give me writer's nightmare."

Henry smiled. "You need to include me in the Arkham Round Table—I'd turn all those nightmares into sweet dreams. We'll play Huber and Adler off each other. We'll make Adler think that we've gone into partnership with Ydrus and are using Huber's shipping company, Argos, for the salvage operation."

"While making Ydrus think we've partnered with Adler," Mozzie added. "Ydrus will be led to believe that we made an arrangement with Adler's company, Wilhelm Salvage."

"By playing our enemies off each other, we plan to ensnare them both," Jones concluded.

It was a variant of the classic Prisoner's Dilemma. Neal wondered if Mozzie had used the term with Jones.

Peter nodded slowly. "It's crazy and grandiose enough it just might work, but there are a lot of moving parts to configure."

"It won't be difficult to prove that I've gone dark side," Henry said. "I already went off the reservation in Argentina. Establishing that Win-Win is furious with me is not much of an overstatement. I'll spread the word that Allen Winston placed Radha in charge till I get my head on straight. And that won't be any time soon. Noelle and Joe are also upset with me. I can easily persuade them to increase the decibel level."

"You also have your wounded wing," Peter added, pointing to Henry's sling. "You can take full advantage of it. Give the impression you're exaggerating the severity to gain more time for your criminal activities."

"Selling the idea that I've gone back to my old ways will be easy," Neal said. "I can approach fences, spread rumors of art treasures which are shortly to appear on the market."

"Leave that to me," Mozzie said. "In the blink of an eye, I'll have everyone convinced Neal is back in business."

"You'll still need to communicate this to Adler and Ydrus," June said, "and that's an ideal role for
molls." She turned to Diana. "Have you had a chance to speak with Ruiz?"

Diana grinned wickedly. "We met for lunch in the cafeteria yesterday. I may have let it slip that I'm worried about promotion opportunities in White Collar. I'm bored by the lack of action. Organized Crime, on the other hand, has a definite appeal. Ruiz has invited me out to lunch on Tuesday."

"You've got your conduit to Adler," June said, "and Diana's just the person to supply the fuel, but who do you have for Ydrus?" Neal appreciated the way she commanded attention in the war room. He'd long suspected she was a superb moll herself for Byron's less-than-legal activities.

"June makes a good point," Peter said. "Jones, how do you propose to ensnare Ydrus?"

"That's a tougher assignment," he admitted. "We know the informant is within D.C. Art Crimes. We're monitoring all their communications. If they hear something juicy about Neal, they'll want to transmit it to Ydrus, and we'll catch them."

"And how do you propose they find out?" June asked.

Mozzie raised his wine glass to her. "A Mata Hari of course. Do you know of any Mata Haris?" he asked innocently.

She smiled. "I have just the candidate in mind. Sara would make the ideal moll. She's an excellent actress. I heard what a smashing Rose Tyler she made on the Doctor Who set. But for this she'll need to play a much more complicated role."

"June, you have the floor," Peter said. "What do you suggest?"

"Neal broke up with his girlfriend a couple of months ago. He was interested in Sara before Fiona. Sara's getting over a failed romance as well. Azathoth's been reading the stories. He's seen what's happening between Arkham Neal and Sara. It would be natural for New York Neal and Sara to start dating. I imagine Sara has a wild side which may be the equal of Neal and Henry's. She could be another Kate and act as their partner in crime."

"Or she could pretend to be their partner, all the while plotting to take them down," Diana said. "She's an ace investigator for Sterling-Bosch. There are several ways you could play it."

"Women make excellent con artists," Mozzie said. "Duplicity is in their nature. Sara is the ideal choice to make Neal fall in love with her. The hussy will then betray both him and Henry to the FBI."

"And at the same time I could be playing her," Neal suggested, "by pretending to fall for her in order to gain access to Sterling-Bosch's client list."

Mozzie's eyes brightened. "Ooh, I like that."

"Is Sara available?" Travis asked.

"She's traveling a good deal," Neal said, "but I don't imagine this would take too much time."

"Do you mind talking with her about it?" Henry asked. "You know her best."

Neal shrugged. "I'll give her a call."

"Once you've secured her agreement," Peter said, "I'll contact R.W. Bosch. Given the objective,
I'm sure he'll go along. Jones, give me a time estimate."

He frowned slightly as he considered. "With all the simultaneously moving parts to schedule, a bare minimum of three weeks before we can begin."

Mozzie nodded agreement. "As Lewis Carroll would remind us, the hurrier we go, the behinder we get. We must be Cheshire Cats, not White Rabbits. As you noted, the Huber con isn't ready. Neal will require time to paint the Braque. Henry needs to lay the groundwork by taking that sailing trip."

"How much longer do you need to finish the Vermeer?" Diana asked.

"I'll age it on the weekend. It should be ready to be shipped on Monday," Neal assured her.

"I'll schedule a meeting with Hughes Monday morning," Peter said. "We'll need to obtain his approval. I can guarantee he'll ask how you expect to pay for this."

"Already thought of that," Jones said with a smile. "Adler should cough up more than enough with what he pays for the Braque." He turned to Henry. "What was the last offer you heard?"

"Ten million euros. By the time we're ready, it may have been reduced a little but still should be more than enough."

While they discussed options, Peter sat back, listening to the others. Neal knew that look. He was working on something. He must have some angle he didn't want to share with the team. Out of the corner of his eye, Neal caught Peter studying him on more than one occasion. Neal didn't think he'd given anything away, but it made him wonder.

At the conclusion of the meeting, Neal shot a quick blink at Henry. A slight nod in response was all the confirmation he needed that Henry had gotten the message.

As soon as they were alone in the loft, Neal closed the door. "A little advance notice would have been appreciated," he said, keeping his voice low. "Did you even think about asking me beforehand?"

Henry stood his ground, crossing his arms in front of his chest. "Yeah, I did. The odds that you'd refuse were unacceptably high. If you'd turned me down, I would have had to go along. Now you have a measure of protection. Once the forgery is sold, Azathoth will think you sold the original and won't be as likely to frame you."

"You don't know that. Even though I don't have the painting, they could still use surveillance footage against me."

Henry raised a brow. "I'm glad to hear you admit the precariousness of your situation."

Neal didn't respond to that low blow. He kept his voice even, but Henry needed to understand where he was coming from. "Don't try to trick me into doing what you think is best. When did you tell Mozzie?"

"This morning," Henry admitted.

"Does he think I knew about it in advance?"

Despite not being given a heads up, Neal had to admit Henry's plan was brilliant and it would take some of the pressure off. Venting at him would do no good. Henry would simply take it as a sign
that Neal was out of control.

"We're still good, right?" Henry asked.

"Yeah, let's call this one a draw. I didn't tell you about the Braque in Paris. We're even now."

Henry gave him a sharp glance but didn't question him further about it. "I'm glad you don't mind calling Sara."

Neal shrugged. "Why should I? She's a good friend."

"Tonight Eric and I plan to go to Riffs, the new rock club I was telling you about. Why don't you call Sara and join us?"

"Sorry, but I already have plans."

"I hope it's not painting all night in the loft."

"No it's not. You realize, I hope, that I do have a social life. I admit the past few days I haven't had much of one, but the Vermeer's coming along so well, I decided to celebrate. Besides, you realize that if I asked Sara to join us, Eric would overhear our plans."

"I thought you'd tell her beforehand."

Neal breezed through that remark. "I'm glad you mentioned Eric, though. When are you filling him in on the con?"

Henry gave him the same exasperated look he'd used on him for the past seven years. It only made Neal want to be more obnoxious. The questions about who Neal was seeing which were sputtering on Henry's lips had to wait while he made excuses for keeping Eric out of the loop.

Henry could stew in his own curiosity. After the stunt he pulled at the meeting, Neal felt completely justified. He'd survived Henry's surprise in excellent shape. He supposed he should thank Henry for the reassurance that Neal's con artist skills were once more fully functional.

Henry and his mind games... Neal would love to know if it had really been June's idea to include Sara or if Henry had planted the suggestion. No matter. It was now Neal's move and he was ready to play some mind games of his own.

Notes: Neal is frustrated that Henry didn't consult him in advance. Henry gave an explanation for why he kept Neal in the dark, but is it the only one? There are various ways to interpret Henry's action. The reason Henry told Neal is not as compelling as another one which will be made clear later in the story.

I posted a recap of the U-boat con on our blog. Penna first teased the idea of a U-boat in Caffrey Flashback, basing it on the canon arc in the TV-series. I've added some twists to reach this point. Still unclear is whether there actually is a U-boat. In the meantime, the team plans to take full advantage of Adler's belief in one.

In Neal's timeline it's late July but Halloween is less than a week away in ours. Was Jones sneaking in a reference to Halloween when he mentioned Cape May? That New Jersey seaside resort is famous for ghosts as well as shipwrecks. If you're looking for a spooky Caffrey Conversation story,
we have several. Particularly relevant is The Woman in Blue when Neal celebrates Halloween with Peter and El in the Catskills (Chapters 23-24). That trip will be referenced later in this story. Arkham Neal and Sara enjoyed Halloween in The Crypt. If you're looking for witches and vampires, they haunt the stories of Crossed Lines, a fusion of Supernatural with Caffrey Conversation.

Penna has also dipped into the world of crossovers with an added twist. For her Coursera creative writing course, she was assigned the task of writing a scene which included a new character as well as 2 known characters from a book, TV show, etc. She chose Dean and Castiel from Supernatural and had them meet the duck Amethyst from her upcoming novel. If you're looking for something lighthearted for Halloween fun, surely Dean trying to interrogate a duck qualifies! The blog post is called: "Novel progress: using fanfiction."

Many thanks to Penna for her beta expertise, and thanks to you for reading and commenting! In this week's chapter, June's dining room was claimed by Henry, Jones, and Mozzie to work on the U-boat con. In Chapter 18: Girls' Club, the matchmakers take it over while Neal and Sara plot a con of their own.

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Nocturne in Black and Gold board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon
Girls' Club


Henry probably thought Neal had a date that evening. Whether a strategy session counted as one was debatable but Neal enjoyed raising the possibility. It was a harmless game of misdirection.

Sara had asked Neal over for drinks. Diana had invited her to June's house on Saturday morning to discuss Arkham Files. When Sara heard that El would also attend, she suspected the matchmakers were about to make a move.

Neal offered to help formulate her response and supply dinner. It would also give him the opportunity to bring up their discussion from a couple of days ago. The insertion of Sara into the con made an understanding mandatory.

Was there hope for Alicia and Matthew or would they remain simply a pleasant pipe dream that had already dissipated? Neal saw several major obstacles before Alicia and Matthew could ever go on a date. But there was no need to immediately rinse their creations down the drain.

When Sara opened the door and saw all the bags Neal was carrying, she looked like a kid at Christmas. "This is much more elaborate than sushi!" she exclaimed. "What did you bring?"

Neal usually saw Sara in her dressed-for-success attire. Now she was barefoot, wearing a loose tunic top and leggings. They'd arrived at a new informality and he liked it.

"I told you I'd supply dinner. Did you expect meatball grinders?" he teased.

"Not since Peter isn't with you. Slapping on my investigator's cap, I cleverly deduce from your response that you're in an Arkham Files frame of mind. Are we having a meal based on one of the meals in the stories? I hope so!" She tried to peer inside one of the totes. "Did you pick up halibut or some of June's wonderful gumbo?"

"Sometimes Arkham Neal shows flashes of insight," he said as they walked into the kitchen. "I thought the cheese fondue he prepared over Halloween was a smart move. Especially the part about leaving the pot for future meals."

She clapped her hands. "I love fondue. I have white wine."

He pulled out a wine cooler from one of his bags. "No need. I also came prepared."

"Did June see you leave?"

He nodded, pulling the fondue supplies out of his bag. "The bags are deep enough, she couldn't see what I was carrying. I'd already cubed the bread so there were no baguettes sticking out."

"Good, because we'll have to be very devious to outfox the master schemers arrayed against us."

Neal wasn't the only one who'd been thinking about Diana's stories. Sara had put on a CD of Carly Simon music. He remembered she'd suggested the singer to Diane. What did it mean that they were copying their Arkham counterparts? Were both of them yearning for a little fantasy in their lives?

Soon they were sitting at her table by the window with glasses of Chenin blanc. The Caesar salad had been tossed and served. All that was left was the fun part—dropping the grated Gruyère into
"I'm glad you called for several reasons," Neal said. "The team met at June's this afternoon to
discuss a double con we plan to run against Adler and Ydrus. June suggested you be included."
Sara had never heard of Adler's interest in Nazi plunder so the explanation took a while. They had
already put quite a dent into the fondue by the time he'd answered all her questions.

"I'm sure it's not a surprise that I'm delighted to participate," she said, refilling both of their glasses.
"We'll have to work around my schedule which is usually unpredictable. I found out this morning
I'll need to leave for Chicago on Sunday. Peter contacting Mr. Bosch will be a help. My company
has as much interest as you do in bringing down Ydrus. And from the standpoint of our clueless
friends Alicia and Matthew, this could present an ideal opportunity."

Neal took a breath as he stirred a bread cube in the pot. "You're right. But before we go any further,
there's something you need to know."

"Is anything wrong? Did something occur in therapy?"

"No, the morning went surprisingly well. I may finish that puzzle tomorrow, as a matter of fact."
He blew gently on the cheese-covered bread before popping it into his mouth. He'd already
prepared what he wanted to say. Arkham Neal had told Sara about algolnium over fondue, and their
friendship had deepened because of it. But that was a work was fiction. What would it be like in
real life? He was about to find out. "A few minutes ago, Carly Simon sang 'We Have No Secrets.'
That was in one of Diana's stories, and I suspect Peter requested she include it. I doubt Peter ever
listened to the words, because at the end she wishes her lover hadn't told her all his secrets. I hope
that's not an omen, but I don't want my secrets blowing up in my face before we even start."

"You don't have to say anything now," Sara said. "I have secrets too."

"Not like mine, I imagine."

She studied him warily. "Don't tell me you really have a weird chemical element circulating in your
body."

"I wish it was that straightforward," he said with a laugh. "You remember those years of insanity
Henry and I've referred to?"

She nodded. "You mentioned them after Bryan had been arrested for poisoning you. That's when
you were jealous of my day of incarceration."

"Not exactly." It would have been so easy to deflect and make a joke of it. She'd given him the
perfect setup. "That period was real and it's what we need to talk about. There are a few gaps in my
education, like a high school diploma. A college degree is another."

She looked as shocked as he feared. "And the FBI hired you? How did you manage to get accepted
as a grad student at Columbia?"

"My aunt Noelle teaches psychology at Loyola University in Baltimore and occasionally lectures
at Columbia. She persuaded her contacts to let me take the tests normally reserved for foreign
students. When I obtain my master's next year, the bachelor's will be folded into it. I'm playing
catch up . . . and making amends. Before I joined the FBI I spent several years perfecting my
skills"—Neal hesitated for only a second before continuing. He'd gone too far to stop now—"as an
art forger, thief, and con artist. I was on Klaus Mansfeld's crew for two years and also worked
freelance. I did several jobs with Keller. I was never arrested, but Interpol has a long file on me as
does the FBI."

Her face flashed recognition. "That's why Keller approached you last spring."

He nodded. "I also spent several months working with Adler on less-than-legal activities. Peter took a chance on me in the fall of 2003. He recruited me for the FBI, gambling that I'd be able to turn my life around. I confessed to several crimes in exchange for immunity . . . and the rest you know about."

"I met you in March 2004. You'd only been working for the FBI a few months?"

"That's right."

"Why did you decide to tell me now?"

"What we talked about Wednesday was fun, but you've already gone through enough misery from guys who didn't turn out to be who you thought they were. I value you far too much to put you through that kind of pain." He attempted a smile, realizing it wasn't his best effort. "I hope you believe me that I've left my old life behind, but I also understand why you wouldn't consider me suitable dating material."

Sara's eyes registered sympathy, but Neal knew that look. Over the past week, he'd gotten it from everyone. She'd need time to let his words sink in. The best thing he could do now was leave. He'd intended to leave the fondue pot with her anyway. He'd accomplished his mission. If she decided she didn't want to participate in the con, he'd be able to explain it to the others. They had plenty of time to make other plans.

When Neal started to stand up, she put a hand on his arm and told him to stop. Apparently, she didn't need that much time after all. She looked flustered. That was probably from trying not to reveal the depth of her disappointment . . . or sense of betrayal. Neal sat back down and waited for her to lay into him.

Now she was looking as nervous as he felt. "I'm the one who hasn't been up front with you. I already knew." When Neal stared at her, her cheeks flushed. "Bryan told me in February about your record with Interpol. It was right after he'd proposed and I'd yet to respond. At the time I thought he was slandering you because he was jealous, but he urged me to verify it for myself . . . so I did."

"But you never said anything."

"No. I thought you must have made some sort of arrangement with the FBI and it wasn't my business."

"Did you tell Fiona?" he asked, keeping his voice even. As a close friend, Sara would have wanted to warn her about him. Why hadn't Fiona ever mentioned it to him?

"No," she said quickly, looking at him dismayed. "I wouldn't have sabotaged your relationship with her." She took a hasty gulp of wine. "Then later . . . I found out that the FBI had placed your name on Sterling-Bosch's person of interest list when I was made lead investigator for the Raphael drawing case last May. When I came to New York to investigate, I had no choice but to speak with Peter about it. Peter said there were extenuating circumstances. He didn't explain them but gave you a glowing recommendation. Not that he changed my opinion of you. He simply confirmed it. I'd already decided in my own mind that whatever happened in the past shouldn't be used against you now. Please don't be upset with Peter. It's clear he didn't tell you. That was at my request. I
didn't want you to think I was checking up on you."

Art Crimes must have put him on the person of interest list. Kramer, probably. Neal wished he could discuss it with Peter, but then he'd have to admit how he found out about it. Sara was looking at him anxiously. He put those thoughts aside for another time. "You still want to take a chance, Sara? I have to warn you. I just scratched the surface. There's a lot to go over."

"For me too. We both have a few demons and ghosts lurking in our closets." She thought for a moment. "We'll have plenty of time for that later, if and when we decide to date. For now, can we just live in the present?"

That certainly suited him. "Honesty can be a more challenging game than closet-stuffing, can't it?"

Her face brightened. "That's just what we should do—make a game of it. If we start seeing each other, we could take something out of the closet—perhaps once a month—to reward ourselves for lasting so long."

He liked the idea, but as a practical matter . . . "You realize at that rate it would be years before my closet would be emptied."

"Is that so? Is this now a game of who has the most stuff crammed into their closet? In that case I can already declare victory."

"That doesn't sound right. Our game shouldn't be a challenge over who has the most mysteries to disclose but more like a treasure hunt. Our pasts are a Japanese puzzle box."

"That we can work on together till we find the secret compartment? You're on! Any rules? Tell me now before I start making them up."

He made a show of pondering her question. "How about working backwards? Starting with the most recent events?"

"Good idea and that reminds me we have a more immediate problem to handle. What line should I take at tomorrow's meeting?"

They decided to tackle that issue over dessert in the living room. Neal had brought over Red Velvet cupcakes and Sara brewed a pot of hazelnut coffee.

Neal set the dessert plates on the cocktail table while Sara carried in the coffee. She then announced with a mischievous smile that she'd be right back. Without further explanation, she took off for her bedroom.

Neal relaxed into the cushions of the couch. Was she changing into something more comfortable? She was already barefoot and in leggings. How much more comfortable could she get? If they were dating, he could have offered a few suggestions.

Sara had known about his past all this time and hadn't said anything. It must have been a difficult decision not to tell Fiona. Perhaps he and Sara did have a chance. They could test the waters by having a little fun with those overly romantic members of the Round Table.

Sara came back, wearing the same clothes, poofing away a pleasant fantasy. "Is that a game you're carrying?" he asked.

She placed the box on the cocktail table. "Not just any game, but our game—Clue. I bought it this afternoon. Since we're so clueless, I thought it would help. You probably think strategizing with a
board game is weird."

He laughed. "Not at all. Some of the best minds I know strategize the same way. Mozzie prefers Monopoly. If I tell him about Clue, he'll adopt you as a sister."

She quickly shook her head. "But you mustn't. This has to be our secret."

"Understood, Alicia. Which character should I be?"

She pulled out the pieces in the box and lined up the men in a row. After scrutinizing each in turn, she handed him a figure in a plum jacket with orange pants, wearing glasses and carrying a book. "Professor Plum speaks to me. Neal Carter's a professor. I'll take that as an omen. Now I need to buy you a plum-colored scarf to wear."

"I could rock a plum scarf," Neal agreed.

She held her hands up, making a frame. "Wearing a dark suit—no orange pants, please—your scarf draped casually under your lapels as you stride forward . . . Yes, you were meant to have one."

"And there's only one character for you." He picked up the figure of a woman in a slinky red evening dress. "You have to be Miss Scarlet."

She grinned. "Is that why you brought over Red Velvet cupcakes? Okay, Professor, how do you want me to play this tomorrow? You know what the Round Table will ask me about." She raised an eyebrow. "Should I mention Matthew? It's your move."

He hesitated only for an instant, before placing his character in the dining room of the game board. "He's ready to begin the game."

She flushed with excitement. "I was afraid you were going to call it off! I've been plotting all day at work, and I have a suggestion to make." She set her piece in the ballroom. "You remember the mockingbird reference in The Crypt?"

"Arkham Neal teased Sara that she was a mockingbird because she was an excellent mimic and persistent to the point of annoyance."

"We should take advantage of that. What if Arkham Sara uses the mockingbird song by Carly Simon as a ploy to see him more often? The next story takes place in November. He could tease her about the way she muddles lyrics. She would then riposte by challenging him to teach her 'Mockingbird' with the goal of singing it in public as a duet on New Year's Eve."

Sara's plan was outrageous, but it suited her character. And it also demanded a follow-up. "It's only fair if your character has to do this, you should as well," he said in his best professorial manner. "Are you willing?"

Her eyes widened. "That clearly wasn't my intention."

He faked nonchalance. "I understand. It would take frequent meetings. Our schedules are already packed—"

"I'll do it!"

Elizabeth rang the doorbell at June's mansion. She'd been lucky to find a parking spot in front.
She'd only had time for a rushed breakfast, but that was probably for the best. She had no desire to be grilled by her sleuth husband on what she was up to. She'd told Peter she was meeting with the Arkham Round Table, and she hadn't hidden the fact they'd invited Sara. But he didn't know that Tricia, Jones, and Mozzie weren't attending, and she had no intention of revealing it. His puzzlerbrain wouldn't have left it alone.

It worked to her advantage that Peter was so preoccupied, although she wished the cause wasn't so serious. He'd discussed his concern with her last night that Neal was hiding something. Peter was worried it was impeding his recovery. El ached for what both were going through. It helped to soothe her conscience over her actions. She might not be able to convince Neal to open up, but at least she could do her part to prevent another disaster in his love life.

June said that Neal would be gone all morning so they'd have plenty of time. There was nothing suspicious in the Arkham Table meeting. But Sara being present? She remembered all too well how Neal had flared up when she'd asked him about Sara at the Fourth of July barbecue.

For the matchmakers to succeed, both Peter and Neal had to remain unaware. El grinned. Her new life as a covert agent. It was exciting and also a little nerve-wracking. The past two days, she'd had long discussions with Henry on the phone. Fortunately, he called her during the day so there was no chance of being overheard. Peter had said Henry wanted to act the part of an out-of-control lone wolf. If he only knew. Spending hours on the phone in non-business negotiations? Henry was firmly into his new identity.

June welcomed her at the door.

"Am I the last one here?" El asked, giving her a kiss.

June shook her head. "Diana only arrived a few minutes ago, and Sara shouldn't be here for another half hour."

"Good. We have time to make sure we're on the same page."

"Come into the dining room." June paused to smile. "After all the strategy sessions that have gone on there this past week, perhaps I should rename it the war room permanently."

"For what we intend, girls' clubhouse may be more appropriate," El suggested and couldn't resist a giggle. "Such schemers we are."

"Isn't it delicious!"

Diana was helping herself to coffee when they walked in. "Does Peter suspect anything?" she demanded.

El quickly reassured her. Chef Emil had made miniature lemon almond scones to have with the coffee. She'd have to spend more time in the gym this afternoon, but they were worth it.

"I must confess I had my doubts about the romance thread in Arkham Files," June commented as she refilled her cup. "I thought it would remain a very minor issue. Tricia had initially explained it was to be used to demonstrate Neal's isolation."

Diana made a face. "It's now taken on a life of its own. Sometimes I feel like I'm writing an advice to the lovelorn column."

El took a seat beside her. "When Neal's aunt Noelle and grandmother Irene were in town in May for Neal's art exhibition, we discussed Sara at length. They felt she would have been ideal for Neal
but were staying out of it. Sara had rejected Neal and he seemed quite happy with Fiona. I had my concerns that Fiona and Neal weren't compatible last spring and admit I may have injected a few nudges in the second story, *The Locked Room*.

"Then after Neal broke up, the gloves came off," Diana summarized bluntly.

"Do you blame us?" June asked. "Neal was unhappy, and what we added in *The Crypt* was very tame. Noelle told me that Henry's grandfather Graham and his wife Julia are also reading the stories."

"Graham Winslow, the former CEO of Win-Win?" Diana moaned. "More pressure."

June patted her hand. "They're both enchanted by them, dear. Neal and Sara had spent last year's Fourth of July with them on their sailboat in Baltimore Harbor. Julia felt that Neal was falling for Sara but she had some personal issues that were holding her back. It's up to us to smooth over those past issues."

Diana heaved a much put-upon sigh. "Don't you think Neal's old enough to take care of these things on his own?"

El exchanged looks with June as they both broke into grins and shook their heads. "Henry agrees with us," El added. "He was concerned about how Neal was acting after we returned from Paris. Henry blamed himself for not realizing that Neal was so smitten."

"That's why you had me add that scene between Neal and Sara in her apartment!" Diana exclaimed. El nodded. "Henry volunteered his services as co-conspirator, and no one knows Neal better than him."

June smiled. "I'd wondered. Henry's been making comments about not reading the stories, and I didn't see how that was possible."

"Henry's acting disinterested so as to not arouse Neal's suspicions. Peter doesn't know anything about this," El added. "Henry's convinced Peter would quash any attempt at us—"

"Meddling?" Diana raised an eyebrow. "It is rather manipulative, and after everything Neal has been through, I don't know that I'm that comfortable with it either. As it is, I'm constantly getting flak from the team about their parts. Sara's contacted me, too. She wasn't thrilled that she was overwhelmed by her attackers in the last story. I thought she'd appreciate that I included her self-defense skills. I went to great lengths to point out that her attackers were covered in bruises afterward."

June looked thoughtful. "I wonder if that doesn't give us another opening. We could have Sara teach Neal martial arts."

"Do you know how difficult it is to describe martial arts moves?" Diana protested, making a face. "And I don't think Tricia would be thrilled with turning Neal into a ninja fighter."

"You're probably right," June agreed, "but it's tempting. Neal's studying martial arts now."

"Really?" El asked, surprised. "Peter hadn't mentioned anything about it. Does he know?"

"I'm not sure how many people Neal's told. Billy Feng, the owner of the Aloha Emporium is an expert. He's been teaching Mozzie for a while and offered to give Neal lessons. Mozzie told me he's developed a new style of kung fu called the Way of the Orchid."
Diana roared with laughter. "Oh, Caffrey, am I going to have fun with you on this."

June frowned. "You better not, dear. It's part of Neal's therapy. If you tease him, he may stop going. He's at the Emporium now with Mozzie."

"Not even an orchid on my desk?" she asked hopefully. When June's face continued to register disapproval, Diana conceded defeat. "That means we shouldn't include it in the stories either. I gather you don't have any qualms about the romance angle?"

June shook her head slowly. "It's a difficult call, I admit, but under the circumstances justified. We have Neal's interest at heart. I'm convinced he'll thank us in the long run."

"Or never let us live it down," said Diana gloomily.

June passed around the plate of scones. "But I have to warn you, it may not be easy. Neal's started dating again."

"When did this happen?" asked El, dismayed.

"It was inevitable," June said. "Neal has many friends. He was going out before California, and last night he said he had a date." She gave them a sneaky smile which made her look twenty years younger. "I curled up with a book in the living room that evening. I'm afraid I got so engrossed in the story, I stayed up far past my normal bedtime. I heard him come in. He was humming something, but too softly for me to hear what it was. He saw the light on and came in to talk." Her eyes twinkled. "He was in good spirits. The date must have gone well."

El groaned. "Do you remember the Hilliard miniature that was stolen in May from the Victoria & Albert Museum? Peter told me that Klaus teased Neal about wearing his heart on his sleeve just like in that miniature. He's easy prey for any pretty face."

"It might be Bianka," Diana suggested between nibbles of a scone. "I met her when I went with Neal to pick up his art supplies. She has the studio next to his, on the other side from Richard's. Neal mentioned they'd gone to a concert together. He claimed they were just friends, but we've all heard that line ad nauseam. She's a sultry one—hard for anyone to resist." She chuckled. "Don't tell Christie I said so."

"Peter mentioned her to me," El confided. "He overheard Neal having a conversation with her on the phone earlier this week. This is more serious than I realized. I don't think we have any choice. It's for Neal's own good. He has blinders on now. He's become so comfortable with Sara as a friend, he can't see her any other way." The sound of the doorbell caused her to fall silent. That had to be Sara. It was show time.

**WCWCWCWCWCWCWC**

The conspirators were already in position by the time Sara arrived. She assumed June and Elizabeth were the principle matchmakers. They must have coaxed Diana into joining them as it was difficult to picture her wanting to scheme about Neal's love life.

Not that they put their cards on the table at first. Instead they focused on the principle themes they wanted to convey in the next Arkham Files story. Neal hadn't been told the details yet, and when Sara heard what they were planning, she understood the reason why. Tricia was convinced that the path they'd chosen was correct but Peter had yet to sign off on it.

They asked her not to divulge anything, and Sara agreed. She resisted pointing out that they were sounding like one of their characters—Lavinia, the intimidating librarian. She refused to reveal
anything to Arkham Neal, and now they were doing the same. Was that part of the reason New York Neal was so frustrated? The Arkham Round Table liked to think they were pulling the strings of their characters as if they were marionettes. Now she and Neal would be snipping those links and attaching ones of their own.

It was only after she'd finished her first cup of coffee and one of those delectable scones—how did they know she had a weakness for scones?—that they got down to the heart of the matter. Another innuendo. Between plum, scarlet, clues, and mockingbirds, her life would be spinning around innuendos.

"Do you like the storyline I've written for you and Neal?" Diana asked in her usual blunt way.

Sara acted enthusiastic just as she and Neal had agreed. "You've injected just the right amount of humor and teasing. I've become quite fond of Arkham Sara."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," El said. "We wouldn't want to do anything that might adversely affect your relationship. That is to say . . ." Her words trailed off as she fumbled for words.

"Elizabeth's right," added June quickly. "We want you to feel completely comfortable with the direction the stories are headed. It's a minor thread and could be adjusted. For instance, if you felt any interest in Neal yourself . . ." Her words also died in her throat.

Sara assumed a guileless, confused expression. "What do you mean?"

Diana exhaled noisily. "Are you interested in Neal romantically? Because if for some unfathomable reason you are, we could tweak the stories in that direction."

Sara laughed, not overplaying it, but just enough to show how absurd the notion was. "Neal? We made a stab at that last summer and quickly realized it would never work." She shook her head emphatically. "He makes a great friend but I'm quite content to leave it that way. He's as much as said the same thing to me." She paused as if reflecting on the idea. "If we were to date, it would be a guaranteed catastrophe. We'd wind up hating each other." She stopped to consider them. "Surely you're not trying to fix him up?"

"Of course not," Elizabeth hastened to say.

"Good," Sara said, "because with his looks, I'm sure he has no trouble finding any number of women who'd love to go out with him. Just don't add me to that list." She stopped to take a sip of her coffee. "Besides, I don't mind telling you that I'm dating someone else now."

"I'm happy to hear that, dear," June said. "It's time to move on."

"Exactly," Sara agreed happily. "I wasn't looking for anyone, but they say that's usually the time someone finds you." She paused for a small, heartfelt sigh. "Matthew's so charming . . . I think I may have finally found the man of my dreams."

"Did you meet him in England?" El asked, clearly trying to assume a pleased expression for Sara's benefit.

"That's right."

"Then you may not see him as much now. How unfortunate. It makes starting a relationship such a challenge."

"I'm not worried," Sara said confidently. "Matthew travels the world as do I. We expect our paths
will cross frequently on our trips." She added a mischievous smile to enhance the effect. "Even romantic stopovers at airports." She paused for just a moment to daydream on that happy thought. "But I don't want to give you the wrong impression. Neal's a great friend, and Arkham Neal is adorable." She rotated the porcelain cup on its saucer. "It's too bad the real Neal isn't more like him."

"Oh, I don't think they're that different—"

Sara interrupted El with a laugh. "You must be joking! I'm also quite fond of your Sara. I've grown to think of her as my younger sister. I'm excited to see where their friendship leads." She paused. "Here's a thought—would you like my help?"

"Sure." Diana shrugged. "The more the merrier, I always say."

Diana's expression telegraphed the exact opposite, but Sara pretended not to notice. "Wonderful! We can plot together. Tell me more about what you've planned."

She sat back and listened to them outline their ideas, and tossed in a few suggestions of her own. During a longish pause, she delivered her master stroke. "Mockingbirds!" she exclaimed, snapping her fingers.

June looked at her, puzzled. "I don't understand."

"Are you thinking of the scene in Neal's office when he compared her to a mockingbird?" El asked. "That was Tricia's idea. I thought it worked out quite well."

Sara nodded emphatically. "I agree. Neal and Sara are good friends now. But you've been so subtle, it's an open question as to whether or not Sara is interested in him romantically. She's probably unsure of that as well. They're two innocents who don't know their own hearts."

"In a nutshell you got it," Diana said. "The way you and Neal tease each other is what gave me the idea."

"We could take that a step further. What Arkham Sara challenges Neal to teach her how to sing 'Mockingbird'?" She sat back and indulged in another scone, waiting expectantly for their pleased reaction.

June looked to El for help. "Is this a game the younger generation plays? I'm afraid I'm not familiar with it."

"Nor am I," El said.

"Here's a hint," Sara said. "If I mention Carly Simon, does that help? James Taylor used the song to help Carly Simon get over stage fright. Sara hopes that all those evenings of practicing the song will allow Neal to start seeing her in a different light."

**WCWCWCWCWCWCWC**

Diana stood up to refill her coffee. "Sara's idea for the next story is cute but as for bringing herself and Caffrey together, she answered your question with a resounding no."

El winced. Diana had a point. This was one trial balloon which developed a leak on its first flight. Sara had just left, and they'd regrouped to conduct a damage assessment. "What do you think, June?"
She reflected a moment before nodding. "I'd have to agree. Sara's so taken with Matthew, she's not open to any other possibilities."

"Good," Diana declared. "We can forget the romance angle. Instead we'll focus on the adventures, the danger, the lurking horror—"

"Don't give up yet!" El pleaded. "Readers have responded so well to their blossoming romance."

"What blossoming romance?" Diana demanded. "Maybe, if you got a microscope out, you'd see a few buds starting to form. We all agreed Arkham Neal isn't ready. He still mourns the love of his life who died less than a year ago. He can't be rushed into another relationship."

"I agree," June said, "and that's our saving grace. We still have time. Our Neal also isn't ready. Between Fiona and the trauma he just went through, he needs to heal first."

"But you were the one who mentioned he's already dating," El pointed out. "We have to move forward now. Neal's an easy mark for any pretty face."

"In other words we need to save him from himself?" Diana asked skeptically.

"Exactly. And Sara from herself," El added. "They need us more than ever."

"Her idea has potential," Diana admitted. "It needs work, but it could arc over a few stories."

"Another positive is that our Sara's so engaged," June said. "She'll be more susceptible to our persuasion. Gradually she may come to realize that Neal is the one for her. Perhaps we should tweak Arkham Neal to act older and more sophisticated?"

El shook her head. "If anything we need to stress how similar New York Neal is to him. I think New York Sara prefers the Arkham version."

"You misunderstood her," Diana said. "New York Sara was speaking about Arkham Sara. She told me she likes to think of herself as Arkham Sara's older sister." Diana paused to shudder. "I may need to have a session with Neal's doctor before we're done. It's hard enough having to deal with two of me. Now I've got to play matchmaker for two sets of Neal and Saras."

June patted her arm. "Don't make it more complicated than it needs to be, dear. The two Neals aren't that different. With time New York Sara will learn to appreciate that." She took out her notepad. "Ladies, we have our work cut out for us."

Sara kept a straight face till June closed the door. She was careful to walk with her back to the house so anyone glancing out the window wouldn't see her grin. She couldn't remember when she'd spent such an entertaining Saturday morning.

The momentary pang she'd suffered from deceiving them had quickly vanished. After all, they were all working toward the same objective. They wanted her to date Neal, and she did, too. But the method the matchmakers were using was all wrong. Now they'd arrived at the perfect solution.

Sara wished she felt more confident that Neal was willing to give her a second chance, but she knew better than to expect any answer for weeks. His recovery was the number one priority. He genuinely seemed to enjoy the game aspect of the Clueless con. She'd added a little laughter to his life, and that was good enough. They'd enjoy playacting and not think about the future.
Sara stopped off at her apartment to change into workout clothes. She dug into her dresser to find her plum tank top. She'd always liked that color and now more than ever.

When she arrived at the Aloha Emporium she spotted Keiko and Maggie sitting in the café. Like Sara they'd opted for modern martial arts clothes, wearing soft jersey pants and tank tops. Maggie fittingly wore an orchid pink top. Keiko's was turquoise.

Greeting the others, Sara took a seat. "Keiko, I didn't realize you were into martial arts as well." She'd met Aidan's girlfriend last spring at the sci-fi convention. Was there a crouching tiger lurking inside that shy exterior?

Keiko smiled. "It's my secret self. Every woman needs to have one."

Sara couldn't agree more. She and Keiko had even more in common than she'd realized.

"She and I've been working out together for the past year," Maggie explained. "Keiko was the one who coaxed me into leading a class."

"Neal's cousin Angela is also eager to learn," Keiko added. "When she returns from West Virginia, she'll join our group. We'll be damselfly warriors together."

"Neal told me how Aidan's video is being expanded to include more roles for women," Sara said.

"I've asked Maggie to help develop martial arts moves for the new fighters. Have you ever used a baton?"

"You're speaking my language," Sara said with a smile. "I'd taken police instruction on how to use one."

"The Japanese use batons in martial arts," Maggie said, "but in China it's not been widely practiced. I've developed a technique especially for women which makes use of telescoping batons."

"Very appropriate for damselflies. Hopefully they come in a range of colors." Sara already knew which ones she'd pick.

"I found a supplier," Maggie said. "Janet had already asked about it. She's Mozzie's girlfriend and a costume designer. Janet couldn't make it today, but hopes to meet with us next time."

"Is this women only, or can I join?" a familiar voice called out. Sara turned her head to see Neal approaching them. She liked the appreciative glance he gave to her tank top.

"Billy and Mozzie are downstairs changing," he added. "The studio will be yours in a few minutes."

Neal lingered to chat then headed off for his therapy session. Sara didn't try to clue him in on how the morning had gone. They'd have plenty of time tonight when they'd plot their next move.

Notes: Even as Neal and Sara mock the matchmakers of the Arkham Round Table, their scheme appears to be bearing fruit. Neal and Sara rely on strategies employed by the Arkham Files characters to overcome some of their own obstacles. Leaving the comfortable security of the friend zone can be a risky undertaking, and they're both saddled with issues from past misfires. Slipping into the world of their Arkham counterparts or their fake love interests, Matthew and Alicia, helps
reduce the pressure.

Thanks to Penna for recommending Neal and Sara incorporate the board game Clue in their con. It's now been added to the growing list of board games used in Caffrey Conversation.

Last week I blogged about the U-boat con. This week I focused on the other cons being run in this story. Have you spotted all of them? If you found any I missed, please add them to the list! The post is called "Cons within Cons." Penna posted a scene from her creative writing course where her main character, Zach, overhears an argument the night before his mother's funeral. The title is "Novel Progress: eavesdropping."

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Nocturne in Black and Gold board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon
The Missing Puzzle Piece


Neal held up the puzzle piece. "Final one!" He tapped it gently into position and sat back to admire the completed jigsaw. "Is this a new record?"

Jacob's face crinkled into a smile as he reached for his camera on the side table. "I believe it is. I'll take a photo to prove to others it's achievable and send you a copy."

"Thanks." Neal stood up to stretch his back. "You said when I'd completed the puzzle I'd be ready to return to work. Do you still feel that way?" He studied Jacob's face, hoping to read an answer, but Jacob wasn't making it easy.

"What's your view?" he asked. Jacob had the knack of making any question seem non-threatening. It was if they were discussing someone else.

"It's where I belong. I visited the office Wednesday and regretted I wasn't back at work."

"I agree. I'll sign the release form and clear you for desk duty starting on Monday."

"And field work?"

Jacob snapped another photo. "I'll leave that at Peter's discretion. He knows you—and your cons—better than me. Do you think you're ready to go undercover again?"

"Yes." Neal knew he wasn't being complete honest, but he was curious to see Jacob's reaction.

"No flashbacks of your virtual reality world when you're awake?"

"They stopped midweek. I climbed down the outside of June's house to get here and didn't have any unease about the climb. That episode on the roof of the building must have been a fluke occurrence. Last fall, I was flashing back to the night at the Met. I'm not having anything similar now."

"That's excellent. As we discussed, the nightmares will continue for a while. As long as you're not experiencing any issues when you're awake and you're able to get adequate sleep, they'll gradually diminish. Do you have any questions for me?"

Neal sat down to study the puzzle for the final time. He'd never mentioned the Braque painting to Jacob. Even though Jacob had assured him everything they discussed was confidential, the risk was unacceptable. Once Neal's knowledge of the Braque was placed in a file, it could be used as evidence that Peter was aware of what he'd done. Aidan had hacked into a psychologist's files. Ydrus could employ their hackers to do the same. The nightmare scenario would begin.

But after the events of the roof, Neal had begun to wonder if the Braque had already been incorporated into Rolf's program. He couldn't ask Jacob directly without filling him in, but there was no harm in asking a general question. "Have you ever heard of two triggers being used? Perhaps one serving as a backup for the other?"

"It's never been documented." Jacob considered for a moment as he refocused his lens. "It would require additional programming. Do you know of something similar that you suspect was used? Perhaps the Whistler painting that was in Klaus's townhouse?"
Neal didn't answer. Now that Henry had added the Braque painting to the U-boat con, it was impossible for Neal to bury the issue. Jacob might not have heard of two triggers but Neal had. Jacob knew that jigsaw wasn't really complete. He was letting Neal decide how to finish it on his own terms. But with each snap of the photo, Jacob was pointing out the hole in the puzzle.

The missing piece.

Neal glanced down at his hand and was horrified to see the tremor had returned. He quickly controlled it by flexing his fingers.

Jacob returned the camera to the shelf and sat down. If he'd noticed the shakiness, he didn't comment on it. Nor did he repeat his question of what could be used as a second trigger. "You mentioned climbing down June's house. Walls are like that. No matter how thick or tall they are, there's always a way to render them impotent. Look at the medieval castle. Ignoring for a moment the psychological tools of treachery and betrayal, the besieging army had a wide arsenal to choose from—catapults, tunnels, mines, battering rams, siege towers."

"Do you have a Lego set? We could conduct experiments."

He smiled. "Lego therapy? I'd considered it but never tried it. Perhaps I should buy a set." He began to dissemble the puzzle. "Triggers only work if the gun is loaded. We removed the ammunition for the Vermeer painting. If you have something else which is locked and loaded, you have the means to disarm it. But I should warn you—the hardest triggers to get rid of are the ones we create for ourselves."

"Do you think that's why my PTSD symptoms came back?"

Jacob shrugged. He picked up two pieces and snapped them apart. "Guilt is a trickster. It likes to fool us, hide puzzle pieces."

Neal took one of the pieces and placed it on the palm of his hand. "Like this?" A twist of the wrist and the piece was gone.

Jacob chuckled. "Exactly! You keep that puzzle piece. It's your key to disarming the second trigger. Bring the puzzle piece back when you've figured out the solution."

*Sneaky, Jacob.* Now the jigsaw was no longer complete. Jacob knew Neal wouldn't be able to rest until it was.

Neal left shortly afterward. The jubilation he'd felt earlier had vanished. When he returned to the loft, he placed the silver puzzle piece beside the milestones box in the bookcase. Originally he'd planned to make an origami to mark completion of the puzzle, but the celebration would have to wait.

Neal thrust aside the disappointment and returned to the Vermeer. That was one work he would be able to complete. He'd set aside the afternoon and early evening to finish the painting . . . just in time for his appointment with Miss Scarlet.

**WCWCWCWCWCWCWC**

"Going out?"

Neal stopped in the entry when he heard June's voice and detoured into the living room to talk with her. She must wonder about the guitar he was carrying. "The painting is ready to be aged and I decided to celebrate. I haven't played at Marmalade's for a while."
June smiled at the news. Based on what Sara had said, she was probably relieved he wasn't going on a date. June was familiar with Marmalade's. Richard was a regular at the jazz club in the Village when he was in town. "I'm sure they'll be happy to have you join in their jam sessions."

_I expect they would although I won't be there._ Neal was careful not to lie. He hadn't been to Marmalade's for several weeks. "They miss Richard. I make a poor substitute," he added. _One of the reasons I'm not going._ "He's coming back next week and they won't need me anymore."

Neal enjoyed chatting with her. Playing an innocent game of deflect-and-obfuscate was more delightful than he'd anticipated. And it served a useful purpose. He needed to hone his con artist skills for the U-boat con. Neal had felt like an open book the past week. It was time to close the cover.

He'd decided not to trot out his fake girlfriend Alicia unless he was forced too. The situation was different for Sara. Her relationship with Bryan had ended months earlier. She didn't have as many nosy friends.

Neal intended to first craft an image of playing the field. If he appeared to be getting serious with one woman, he'd face too many overly zealous friends concerned that he'd make a rebound mistake. Alicia would be simply one of many women he dated.

But tonight was her night.

When Sara answered the doorbell and saw the guitar, she gulped audibly. "It was more fun talking about it to the Round Table than actually doing it," she admitted.

"You'll be fine," he assured her. "You just needed a good teacher."

"Brave words. You haven't heard me yet." She retrieved a gift bag from the bookcase and tossed it to him. "In the interest of not irrevocably destroying any chance of future happiness, I did some shopping this afternoon. This demonstrates the level of commitment I'm prepared to make to this crazy experiment. Finding these in July was a real challenge."

Neal laughed when he opened the box. "Scarlet ear muffs?"

She shrugged. "You'll be happy you have them. This afternoon, it struck me what a sacrifice I was asking of you."

"That's true," he admitted, adopting a grave expression. "You're forcing me to spend several evenings with a beautiful woman. Azathoth's torture can't begin to compare."

She grinned. "I'm glad you recognize the reality of the ordeal. Do you think we could really pull it off?"

"Which one? Singing or dating?"

"I'm not sure which will be harder," she admitted. "You realize that if we do manage to succeed, we'll need to thank the Arkham Round Table for giving us the push."

He nodded agreement. "But let's not jinx it by thinking how to celebrate before we even get started." It was so tempting to tell her he'd like to go on a date. But how could he? His future was too insecure. With Klaus and Rolf circling the waters around him, he wouldn't be able to keep her safe. He already had too many friends who could be hurt by the mistakes he'd made. He'd just been forced to add Richard to the list.
Seeing Sara as a friend, that was one thing. Their subterfuge fit well into his desire to not let anyone else get close to him. Sara seemed to understand. She joked about dating like he did, but it was merely a game. It wasn't real.

WCWCWCWCWCWCWC

Early on Sunday morning, Neal returned to the Vermeer for the final push. All that was left was the application of the craquelure. Neal prided himself on his ability to forge the delicate pattern of crackles which forms on the surface of oil paintings as they age. It was an art to itself, in many respects more exacting than forging the brushwork.

After taking the painting out of the oven, Neal called Mozzie over to inspect the finished product. While Mozzie conducted his eyeball-and-magnifying-glass scrutiny, Neal slipped a CD into the player. He'd been hearing a selection from an album by E.S. Posthumus in his head all morning. "Nara" was the title of the piece. The dark music had been used in many movies. For him it captured the spirit of The Astronomer.

Mozzie stopped his examination to frown at him. "That again? You know what it reminds me of? The crack of a whip."

"It's supposed to be Nara, the ancient capital of Japan."

"I'm familiar with the CD. Was it essential that you picked the most ominous track?"

Neal shrugged. "It suited my mood. Does the painting get your seal of approval?"

Mozzie took off his glasses to wipe them, and nodded. "Your skill improves, mon frère. Your expertise is unmatched."

Neal took a deep breath. He'd call Peter to let him know it was ready. Once the Vermeer was on its way, he could start on the Braque. It was time to leave the Dutch Baroque behind and take a quantum leap forward. The year was 1910. Braque was working with Picasso—

"You should be floating on a cloud," Mozzie said, disapproval in his voice. "Your forgery will be in position at the storage site in a couple of days. You no longer have to be concerned that the Vermeer will hurt you or the Suit and Mrs. Suit. And yet you're not. What troubles you, grasshopper?"

Neal huffed and remained silent.

"Is it the Braque? Are you upset that it's part of the con?"

"No, that was brilliant . . . but it doesn't change anything. It's still the second trigger."

Mozzie only needed a second to make the connection. "You think it will be used as a weapon against you."

"And Peter. And El. I'm stuck in a holding pattern. Klaus and Rolf don't have the original and I'm not concerned they'll find it. But if they recorded me in the church, they can still blackmail me and frame Peter."

"Let's analyze your situation, shall we? It may not be as dire as you think it is, or the music makes it out to be." He rose, turned off the CD player, then retrieved the chessboard from Neal's bookcase. "Since you're in a 'posthumous' mood, let us postulate that Klaus or Rolf comes to you and shows you a video. Perhaps they recorded you in the vestibule as you changed clothes.
Although you wore a hood in the church, they could have recorded you slipping it on. They then recorded you when you removed the painting from behind the clock in the church. Now they insist you work for them." He moved the black rook forward. "How do you respond?"

"I'd agree." Neal moved the white knight to meet the rook. "I'd then inform Peter so we could plan a sting to arrest them. I'd also confess to having stolen the Braque. Peter at this point has two options. He could alert Interpol. The statute of limitations isn't up. I'd be tried for having stolen plundered art—probably in Germany, maybe in France." Neal tipped his knight over. "Checkmate."

Mozzie picked up the white knight and returned it to its starting square. "And the other option?"

"The first option is in my view a remote possibility." Neal picked up the white king and studied it a moment. "Much as Peter might feel the need to inform Interpol, I don't think he will. He'd told me in San Francisco that if something popped up from my past, he wouldn't make it an issue now."

"Do you doubt him?"

"No. He was sincere, but I can't hold him to that. It would violate all the principles he holds dear. Peter is defined by his integrity, his high standard of ethics. If he found out about the Braque, it would put him in an untenable position. Peter once told me if he began making exceptions in cases for personal reasons, he'd have no choice but quit his job. He'd not want to go back on what he told me but neither would he want to compromise his principles." Neal placed the king back on the chessboard. "I would have destroyed Peter's trust in me. I don't think he'd ever forgive me."

Mozzie grimaced. "I don't like either one of those scenarios. We need a new gambit."

"I could disappear now, but then our chance to capture Rolf and Klaus would vanish along with me. That's not up for discussion."

Mozzie moved the black king forward. "Are you sure the Suit would be so harsh?"

"This is Peter we're talking about!"

"Exactly. Peter's your friend, not the Pope. I refuse to believe the Suit's so much a saint that he can't stand a smudge or two."

"This is more than a smudge," Neal pointed out.

"So you intend to keep yourself in a Purgatory of your own making, racked with guilt for the rest of your life."

"I recognize there are some flaws in my plan."

"I can see I'll need to brush up on my quotes from the second part of Dante's Divine Comedy, Purgatory. Il Purgatorio. Let's see, we'll begin our journey at the bottom of the mountain with the excommunicated. In time, with diligent perseverance, we may ascend the slope to the second level, the terrace of the late repentants."

Neal groaned and rested his head in his hands. Jacob would have a long time to wait for that puzzle piece.

Peter parked his car outside June's mansion. When Neal called to tell him that the painting was done, Peter offered to come over. This would be his best chance to study it before it headed to
As Peter strode up the front walk, he noticed someone stooped over her rosebushes, snipping off the wilted blooms. "Mozzie? When did you take up gardening?"

Mozzie straightened his back and turned around. "I find it conducive for thought experiments."

"Ooo-o-kay." Mozzie was quoting Einstein. He must be in his Arkham persona. Treading carefully, Peter asked, "How's Neal?"

Mozzie didn't answer. Instead he scrutinized him for a long minute. "Your clothes are ill-advised."

"What's wrong with them?" Peter glanced down. He was wearing jeans and a gray Cornell t-shirt. "Now you're a member of the fashion police?"

"You need more color in your wardrobe. Your palette is too dull. Gray, black, white—pfiff!" He frowned disapprovingly. "You should embrace the colors of the rainbow—the vibrant red of a fresh rose, the azure blue of the sky, the sensual purple of an orchid."

Was Mozzie tripping again? Was that why he'd been quoting Einstein? And this was the man who was supposedly watching over Neal? Heaving a sigh that could only be appreciated by someone who had to deal with the likes of Mozzie, Peter started for the entrance. "I'll leave you to your rainbows and roses. Do not attempt to drive or operate heavy machinery."

Mozzie stopped him with a gesture. "You asked about Neal yet you refuse to listen? Neal has been tainted by your palette. He's become a grayscale version of his former self. He's turning into a suit before my eyes."

"And I should complain about that?"

"Yes, you should," he said pointedly. "To express it in words you can understand, you two need to go fly a kite." He pocketed his pruners. "The next time I see you, try for a little color. Even a pocket silk will be a start."

What was Mozzie trying to infer? Couldn't he have just spit it out? Peter filed his words in his mental file cabinet labeled Mozzie's Conundrums for later study. He headed inside the mansion, growing increasingly unsettled about what he'd find.

But his concerns were groundless. Neal appeared happy to see him. With a sweeping gesture, he invited him to inspect the painting. The work was small, only 18 by 20 inches. Neal provided him a magnifying glass to use on it. He'd also spread the photos he'd worked from on the table.

While Peter studied it, Neal got him a beer and poured himself a glass of wine. "To the astronomer," he said, raising his glass to it.

"He looks perfect to me," Peter said, clinking glasses with him. "Are you satisfied?"

He nodded. "Marcel's photos were particularly helpful."

"The Astronomer seems like a member of the family"
I felt the same way about *The Woman in Blue*.

"I can understand that, particularly with this painting. I'm holding you to your promise that I can have your forgery once we recover the original."

"With pleasure."

"What strikes me is what a perfect painting it is for Azathoth. It's not just the astronomer studying the celestial globe, it's the astrolabe on the table, that cryptic diagram on the wall. The subject looks like he's in the act of creating another puzzle."

"The same thought occurred to me. I sometimes felt like I was painting Azathoth's portrait," he admitted.

"Rolf would be flattered. We should take advantage of our knowledge about the painting in Diana's next story. If she inserts subtle references to the painting, we can tweak Azathoth's tentacles. Make him wonder if any of your memories about the painting have resurfaced. Marcel has already installed security cameras at the facility where the forgery is being stored. Azathoth likes to be in full control. What if he begins to wonder about the status of the forgery?"

"In that case, we should leave the present forgery in place," Neal suggested. "If Rolf or Klaus does check for it, we don't want them to find mine. Marcel could store it in a secure location to have available in case anyone questions its authenticity."

Neal's idea was sound. The possibility always existed that a scholar might secure permission to view the painting. Neal's forgery could be used to satisfy the request. They assumed that Rolf would initiate the blackmail attempt through an anonymous tip. Neal's forgery would prove the original was still there.

The idea of making Rolf obsess about the painting was a tantalizing one. Peter approached the easel to study the constellations on the celestial globe. Vermeer had depicted them pictorially. Parts of Hercules, the Serpent, Draco, Leo the Lion, and Ursa Major were visible. Images on a globe... Could they be made into a mystery for the next Arkham Files story? Would Rolf understand the reference? Klaus had nicknamed Neal the Lion Cub. How would Rolf view himself? Too bad the ancients hadn't named a constellation the Octopus.

Neal's chuckle brought him back to earth.

"What's so funny?" Peter asked.

"Not funny. It's a confirmation. Your expression was remarkably similar to the man in the painting. It was like I'd used you as a model. I was thinking about that earlier in the day. When I started work on it, I saw Rolf as the astronomer, but the more I worked on it, the more I realized I wasn't seeing him but you. I like to think that *The Woman in Blue* is El in disguise. That letter she's reading is from you." He flipped his hand to dismiss the idea, looking a little embarrassed. "Forget it. You can get some weird ideas from spending hours on a painting."

"That wasn't weird. It was beautiful... and humbling. Do you know where the Nazis had hidden it?"

Neal nodded. "Marcel had sent along a photo from the war archives. The Monuments Men found it in the Altaussee Salt Mine in Austria."

"Make sure the Arkham Round Table knows about that too. They may be able to use it. I wonder if there's any significance to Azathoth having picked a Nazi-looted artwork for his scheme. Is it
somehow a reference to the Braque painting?"

Neal looked startled "I don't see how. We don't believe Adler and Azathoth are working together."

"Then it's a coincidence? Azathoth doesn't leave much to chance. He may have chosen the Vermeer because he knows of my interest in astronomy, but I bet there's another link. Soon you'll work on a forgery of the Braque. Two Nazi-looted paintings back to back."

Peter paused on that thought. Were there any other similarities between the paintings? A clue he was missing? He asked Neal to pull up an image of *Violin and Candlestick* on his computer. Neal shot him a questioning look as he displayed an image of the Cubist work. The colors of the Vermeer were subdued and earthy. The palette wasn't very dissimilar to the Braque which was in shades of gray and brown.

Was that what Mozzie was referring to? Was he worried that Neal was becoming depressed from painting? That was certainly possible. Neal was spending a lot of time alone, his thoughts on Rolf and Klaus. Was that was what was causing the PTSD to reemerge? Mozzie had made a suggestion. What did he have to lose?

Peter turned to Neal. "Let's take a walk."

"Any particular reason?"

"Not especially. You've been holed in your loft painting. I bet you could use some fresh air and I could too. I don't get the chance to explore Riverside Park very often. You don't happen to have a kite?"

**WCWCWCWCWCWCWC**

On a Sunday afternoon the park was filled with runners and families enjoying the outdoors. Neal didn't have a kite but he offered to take Peter on his favorite path, the one closest to the Hudson River. As they strode across the park, they occasionally stopped to toss a wayward ball back. Two teens invited them to an impromptu Frisbee sudden death tournament. Peter might have been the old man of the crowd, but his aim was as true as ever. Paired up with Neal, they beat their opponents easily. Not a bad signal for what Peter had in mind.

Once they stepped onto the trail, Neal set a brisk pace in a northerly direction. Gradually the park assumed a wilder appearance.

"I got the release form from Jacob yesterday," Peter said, starting with a topic he knew would please Neal.

"He mentioned he was sending it. I finished the jigsaw yesterday."

"He attached a photo in his accompanying email. Impressive work, puzzle-solver."

Neal shrugged. He didn't seem as excited at the accomplishment as Peter would have expected.

"Will you continue to see Jacob?"

"Yeah, probably. Nothing's scheduled, but a few odds and ends remain." Neal moved to the side to let a cyclist pass. "Jacob mentioned getting a Lego set. We may besiege a castle. That could be a useful talent to have."

Neal didn't elaborate and Peter didn't press, but he was glad to hear Neal was open to a
"I take it you feel ready to return to the office on Monday?"

"I'll be there," Neal promised. After a moment, he added, "You'd mentioned talking to Hughes on Monday. Assuming he gives his approval, I'd like to start on the Braque forgery."

"Let's table that discussion till you've gotten some rest. With the Vermeer finished, that shouldn't be a problem." Peter hoped that would be true. He suspected Neal was using the painting as an excuse to avoid sleep and the nightmares that came with it. "You have to lose those bloodshot eyes before I'll sign off on you tackling another forgery."

Neal huffed. "I'm not that bad."

"You're not that great either," Peter said bluntly.

Neal winced but didn't fight him on it. "At least I'll be able to attend the planning sessions at work. June will be happy to have her dining room back." As they rounded a curve in the trail, Neal slowed his pace to gaze fixedly at something in the distance.

Peter turned to see what was so mesmerizing. "Is that Riverside Church?"

Neal nodded. "The gargoyle Klaus referred to is on the spire."

"Do you think you could climb it?"

"I want to so badly, it hurts," he admitted softly.

"Let's take a break," Peter suggested. "There's a free bench by the trail. We have a great view of the Hudson. You can tell me how you'd accomplish the climb."

"Mozzie's photographed the steeple from every angle," he said, taking a seat. "There's only one dragon and it's on the west side. It's at the very top of the steeple. I could access the tower from the top flight of windows. There's a small maintenance ledge that will be more than adequate. Okay, a rope for safety's not a bad idea." He stopped abruptly. "It just occurred to me. Why hadn't I realized that earlier?"

"You lost me."

"The steeple, the dragon . . . Anything come to mind?"

"Of course! The Church of St. Jude and the nightgaunt in Diana's first story. Why would Rolf reference that?"

Neal looked out on the river. "I'm not supposed to remember the incident until there's a mention of The Astronomer in the news. If the procedure had worked, the memories would return as flashbacks. Does he want me to confuse the world of Arkham Files with reality?"

"I don't think it's that complicated. The gargoyle game Klaus told you about was to remind you of the sense of freedom and adventure you had when you were a member of his crew. You could do whatever you wanted. There were no restrictions and no rules. In a sense you could fly dragons. He wants you to yearn for that time again."

Neal nodded. "In her stories, Diana's trying to do the same thing—give Rolf a taste of the kind of adventures he could experience with us. Now he wants them in real life."

"And that's what we'll give him." Neal looked at him puzzled, but Peter wasn't ready to go into the
"Will you be able to resist that itch to go for the dragon?"

"And check out the gargoyle? I have no choice." He paused for a moment and cleared his throat. "You didn't ask but I don't have any desire for the kind of adventures Klaus and Rolf want me to participate in. I'm only interested in the one that takes them down. When can we start?"

"We already have, but you know it will take a lot of planning first." Now it was Peter's turn to hesitate. He was determined not to let Neal go back in the field until he found out what Neal was hiding. Henry had warned Peter to go slow, and he'd agreed, but the clock was ticking on them all. Far better for Neal to cough up the information willingly, and his impatience was the bargaining chip Peter needed. "I have to be absolutely certain you're up the mental challenges of shapeshifting before you're involved in the con."

"I'm ready now," he objected.

"Are you really? That episode on the roof? We can't take the risk of you having a flashback at a critical moment, putting yourself and others in danger . . ."

Neal shook his head. "That won't happen."

"You're damned right it won't. I won't let it."

Neal didn't say anything but turned to look at the river. Peter decided not to press his advantage for the moment. Once Hughes signed off, he'd be in a much stronger bargaining position.

A couple of squirrels approached, looking for a handout. They weren't the only opportunists. Several pigeons flew in and began pacing in front of them. Their plaintive coos reminded Peter of his desire to get Neal to open up. Simon and Garfunkel were right . . .

Struck by an idea, Peter asked, "Do you think pigeons are secretive?"

Neal looked at him as if he had rocks in his head, and maybe he did. "Care to explain?"

"I was listening to Simon and Garfunkel's song 'At the Zoo' last night and was curious about the personalities they gave to the animals. You familiar with it?"

"Sure. I used to sing it as a kid."

"So, humor me."

He pursed his lips and studied the pigeons. "Yeah, I can see where they'd be secretive. They were used to carry messages during the world wars. Mozzie has a pigeon named Estelle who's performed vital tasks."

This wasn't going well. That wasn't the conclusion Peter had hoped for. He decided to try again. "How about me? Do you think I'm a kindly but dumb elephant or a skeptical orangutan?"

Neal snorted. "Those are my only choices? That's not fair. The song doesn't include bears. You know that's what you are. Sometimes a grizzly. If I'm lucky, you're a panda. Maybe a koala?" He began to laugh, and Peter joined him. If there was magic in music, it wasn't coming from the zoo.

"I thought Paul Simon was unfair to giraffes though," Neal added. "They're one of my favorite animals, and he called them insincere. How could such a beautiful animal be insincere? Although . . . With those immense eyes, they could be great con artists. They could charm you out of anything." He cocked his head at Peter. "Is that how you see me? Am I an insincere giraffe?"
"Of course not." Peter sighed. "Wouldn't you rather be an honest monkey?"

Neal's grin threatened to split his face. "Do you want to go to the zoo, Peter? Is that what this is all about? 'Cause you know . . . we could take a crosstown bus and the animals would love it if we do."

Peter swatted at his smart-aleck pigeon who'd sung the last words at him. "Forget it."

"Now you're really sounding like that grizzly." Chuckling, Neal turned back to gaze out on the river. So much for music therapy. Peter muttered a couple more silent growls while he regrouped.

Neal was still watching the Hudson. What was it with Neal and rivers? All those sketches he'd made in Paris. The moods were very different in each of them. Peter remembered the painting of the Hudson Neal had created for his first exhibition. It exhibited an anger Peter didn't know Neal was capable of. Wild emotions, a force of chaos.

"Is that what it is?" Peter asked abruptly. "Rivers are always in motion, like when you run?"

He looked at him, surprised. "First it was kites. Then the zoo. Now you want to hop on a riverboat? You're in a strange mood today."

"Am I right?" Peter persisted, determined not to be thrown off course.

Neal shrugged. "Rivers never stand still. They have the ability to conform to any vessel. Not a bad metaphor for a shapeshifter."

"Then why don't you paint oceans? They're even more expansive. They have a freedom rivers don't" —Peter snapped his fingers—"It's not just the river, it's the riverbank. The dynamism of wildness on one hand and the restraints imposed by the riverbank."

Neal nodded in approval. "Very good analogy."

"Does the river resent the riverbank?"

Neal turned to stare at him. "Not at all. The river appreciates it. Without the riverbank, the river would lose its identity. It might turn into a swamp." Neal stopped and looked embarrassed. "I have no desire to be an ocean, if that's what you're worried about."

"What does concern you then?"

He shrugged and didn't answer. Peter figured he'd hit too close to home and he'd refuse to answer.

"A river can overflow its banks," Neal said quietly, breaking the silence. "Its destructive power is not to be underestimated. A storm comes along, whips it up, and the river can flood the town, leaving devastation and ruin in its wake." Neal started to stand up but Peter grabbed his arm to make him sit down again.

Did Neal think of himself as a destructive force? That would tie in to what Henry had said. Neal was looking at him, frustration in his eyes. Peter knew that look. Neal expected him to come up with something to challenge his assertion. But what?

Peter looked out at the Hudson, the boats . . . George Washington Bridge was off to the north beyond the church. About a year ago, Neal and his abductor had crashed off that bridge. Neal nearly lost his life. It was no wonder he considered rivers a destructive force.
Peter turned to Neal. "That's why the town has bridges. They provide the communication that keeps the town from being destroyed. If the bridges you build are strong enough, you don't have to worry about storms whipping the river over its banks. The storm will pass, the river will subside, and the town will be fine."

"Are you sure?" he challenged, looking deadly serious. "Azathoth is a Category 5 hurricane. It threatens you. It threatens El. It attempted to go after Richard. Who will be next?"

"As long as those bridges are intact, we'll survive and so will you. You call Azathoth a hurricane. Those bridges are evacuation routes to safety. And allow me to point out that your analysis is incomplete. You failed to include all the richness and bounty a river provides to the town. They would be lost without it. I bet if you asked the townspeople, they'd all say they'd rather have the river flowing through the town even with the risks it can entail. The townspeople aren't helpless, you know. They're not plants on the riverbank which have no chance to flee. And if the bridges they've built are strong enough, they can escape any storm that comes their way."

He gave Neal a friendly slap on the back. "You mentioned building castles out of Legos. Sounds to me like you need to work on bridges instead."

Notes: Henry's strategy was highlighted a couple of weeks ago. Now it's Mozzie's turn, and his approach is radically different. I wrote about problem solving à la Mozzie for the blog this week.

There's a photo on the Nocturne Pinterest board showing the Monuments Men when they discovered The Astronomer in the Altaussee Salt Mine. If you'd like to read more about the painting, I found the following resources helpful:

* Essential Vermeer 2.0: The Astronomer
* Critical Assessments: The Astronomer

Peter had some thoughts on how to use the painting to send messages to Azathoth in the next Arkham Files story. You'll be able to find out what the Arkham Round Table does with them as well as Sara's mockingbird idea in Cinereous Skies, which I'll post at the conclusion of this one. Diana reserves tweaking rights for all suggestions.

During Neal and Peter's discussion, they referenced some earlier events connected to the Hudson River. The near drowning incident occurred in The Golden Hen. Neal created a painting of the Hudson River in The Queen's Jewels at a low point in his life.

Will Peter's discussion about bridges make a difference? The answer comes next week in Chapter 20: Brooklyn Nocturne.

Penna added a new blog post about her upcoming novel. She was given the assignment of writing in first person POV and decided to use it as an opportunity to experiment with one of her female characters. She wrote three different versions of the scene. The other two versions will be posted in subsequent weeks and it's a fascinating look at how Penna approaches scene creation. The title of the post is "Novel Progress: First Person POV."

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Nocturne in Black and Gold board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon
How did a walk in Riverside Park turn into something so serious? Neal should have insisted Peter stick to joking about animals in the zoo.

When Peter made a left turn onto bridges, he only served to muddy the waters. Bridges, rivers, loaded triggers . . . Peter might not be a tree about to be uprooted by Hurricane Klaus, but bridges could get washed out too. Then what would happen to the townspeople? Wasn't this exactly why Mozzie said to avoid long-term entanglements? Neal needed to make that clear to Sara. If she wanted to play games, fine. But don't expect any commitments. Not from him. He couldn't cause any other casualties.

On the way back to June's from the park, Peter reviewed the plans to take the painting back to Paris. Marcel had made arrangements with the French consulate to have it transported to Paris via diplomatic pouch. Neal already had the courier's box. Peter offered to pick him up the next morning and they'd stop off at the French consulate on the way to work.

Neal felt at loose ends after Peter left. He attributed his restlessness to the Vermeer being finished. For a week that painting had filled up every available minute, and now it was done. He was left feeling unsettled. That was a completely natural aftereffect, right? It had nothing to do with bridges . . . or hurricanes.

Neal decided to go to Columbia. He hadn't been to his studio for almost a week. He didn't plan to stay very long but Bianka was also there. She'd prepared a new painting and asked him to give it a mock critique.

Slipping into his art student persona was a relaxing change which he welcomed. Afterward they went for a coffee. The Frick Museum was having another salon evening, this time with a Danish piano trio. The performance was to take place next weekend, and Bianka invited him to attend with her. Sara would be in Chicago, and Neal accepted readily. Another sign of returning normalcy, and it didn't sound like Peter would let him start on the Braque anytime soon.

He'd have to be careful that Bianka didn't get the wrong idea. She apparently liked flirting with him, but she didn't seem to take it seriously. Neal figured that she considered him a placeholder until classes resumed in the fall. With her looks, she'd have no trouble in hooking up with whomever she chose.

That evening Mozzie brought the Braque over. On Saturday Mozzie and an associate had installed a fake panel in Neal's armoire which provided a convenient hiding spot for paintings and other slim objects. Not that Neal intended to need it for anything else, but as Mozzie reminded him, a little extra insurance never hurt anyone. Mozzie also brought him a copy of *The Divine Comedy*, in Italian, of course.

His expert on Dante stayed late into the night. Discussing *Il Purgatorio* in Italian might be helpful to maintaining Neal's fluency in the language, but it wasn't conducive to getting any rest. Neal's nightmares returned with a vengeance. He relived the horrors of the trial, but instead of the Vermeer, he was being tried for the theft of the Braque in front of the Inquisition. The results were the same. Peter was in prison. El was dead.

When Neal awoke in a cold sweat at five, he didn't attempt to go back to sleep. Not the best start
for convincing Peter he was once more in control.

He wasn't hungry but popped a couple of slices of bread into the toaster. Before eating, he retrieved the puzzle piece and laid it on the dinette table. It could be his breakfast companion. Should he start carrying it around in his pocket? How many more nights did he want to spend with Mozzie in Purgatory?

Neal twisted the piece in his fingers. Was it time for a leap of faith? Would it become a crash off the bridge for both him and Peter with no one around to rescue them?

**WCWCWCWCWCWCWC**

When Peter picked Neal up on Monday morning, he was disappointed to see that Neal didn't look any more rested than he had on Sunday. Was that a sign Neal had been working on bridge-building? Infrastructure repair could be exhausting work.

But if Neal was troubled, he wasn't letting it affect his spirits. He bounced from one topic to another without stopping for breath. Just how many cups of coffee had Neal drunk? Peter hoped his mood wouldn't be dampened by the mountain of emails and bulletins that were surely waiting for him after two weeks' absence.

When they arrived at work, Peter headed to see Hughes, comfortable that the rest of the team would give Neal a proper welcome. The Vermeer would soon be on its way to Paris and in place by the end of the day. Even if Rolf sprang his trap this week, they'd be ready.

Peter had already spoken with Hughes on the phone but working out the details and securing agreements took longer than they'd anticipated. The start time for the morning briefing had to be rolled back a couple of times before they were ready.

When everyone gathered in the conference room, the team was greeted by an unexpected sight. Jones, Travis, Neal, and Diana wore almost identical expressions of curiosity at the presence of Hughes at the head of the table. He didn't normally attend their briefings, and it was an instant signal that something out of the ordinary was scheduled.

Hughes didn't leave them in suspense for long. "I know you're surprised to see me here but the unusual circumstances warranted it. Peter came to me this morning with a cock-and-bull story of how you were going to con Adler into thinking you'd found a U-boat. You intend to sell it by having Caffrey appear to have coerced his cousin into helping him recover a hoard of lost masterpieces—acting on their own, with no thought of the consequences. Salvaging treasure from a shipwreck isn't a crime, but those art pieces are all the possessions of others. Trying to sell them for profit is a crime against humanity." His expression turned even more forbidding. "In addition, I hear that Berrigan intends to deceive Agent Ruiz into being an unwitting accomplice." He eyed them all grimly one after another. "If you think you can pull such an outrageous scheme . . . and not include me, you're not as smart as I think you are." He scanned the group, locking each one with his eyes before continuing. "Deal me in."

"And me, too," Peter quickly added. "It's plain that Azathoth has been doing his best to prey on Neal's past. He assumes he can jerk us around. He's an arrogant SOB who believes he knows what our triggers are. We'll take advantage of that. Azathoth doesn't only want to recruit Neal, he wants me too, and I'm gonna let him."

The team members sat in stunned silence, none more than Neal. Good. Hughes and he had agreed to go for the shock treatment. "That's right. Neal and Henry are family by marriage. They're out of control, and they've dragged me down with them. They're using me, taking advantage of my
friendship for them. And now that I've gotten a taste of it, I like it. Hughes will have no choice. He'll be forced to work with Art Crimes over the growing corruption problem at White Collar. I'm destroying my career and he'll make one last stab at preventing it. But he won't succeed." Peter paused to let his words sink in. "We're giving Rolf exactly what he wants. He'll have no need to play the Vermeer card because he's already obtained the desired result."

"Getting Adler is one matter," Hughes said. "Bringing down the Ydrus informant plus capturing the Mansfelds will require extreme measures. One part of your plan that particularly concerned me is that for too long we've relied on Caffrey to do our dirty work. That's what Ydrus expects. We need to shake them up. Let them think their dreams are about to come true. I've been on the phone with Win-Win's CEO, Allen Winston, as well as Henry's grandfather Graham. They've given their agreement to be part of the op. All documentation and pertinent files will be stored on the private server Travis has set up. The only ones at the Bureau who will know about this besides us is the assistant director."

"My brother Joe and his wife Noelle will also be involved," Peter added. "Other members of the Caffrey and Burke families may be called upon. I'm fully aware this runs counter to the standard guidelines all of us have operated under. But those very rules are what our adversaries have been exploiting, and they've been winning. They've dragged our families and our friends into their schemes." He nodded toward Travis. "Richard was targeted. El was included in Neal's brainwashing. No one is safe until the threat is removed."

After Hughes left, the team members got down to charting timelines, strategies, and responsibilities. They placed a call to the Chinese restaurant on the corner for a late lunch that they ate while they worked. The choice of food was suggested by Jones, a point Neal couldn't resist commenting on. It was as if Mozzie were in the room with them. Would the day ever come when he'd join them in the conference room? If there were ever a con tailor-made for him, this was it.

Peter made a point of mentioning that he planned to eat hearty since El would be away that evening. He'd done all he could short of issuing Neal a formal invitation. Had he gotten the message?

**Bistro Maurice. Monday midday**

When El walked into the bistro in SoHo, she took a second to let her eyes adjust to the dim surroundings. The cool interior was an oasis from the muggy heat outside. Thunderstorms were predicted for later in the day.

She'd spent the morning consulting with an art gallery owner about an upcoming reception. Lawrence Sheffield was a new client and a demanding one. The owner of the Cecile Gallery where Mozzie's girlfriend Janet had her costume exhibition last winter had recommended El to him. Sheffield's gallery was one of the most prestigious in SoHo. El had been trying to establish a foothold with art galleries. She hoped having Sheffield as a client would open doors to similar opportunities.

Henry's choice of restaurant was only a few doors away. When she entered, Henry stood up to wave from a booth in the back. The musician portraits on the walls, tin ceiling, and low lighting gave the bistro the feel of a private jazz club. Henry couldn't have picked a better place for their plotting.

Up to now all their scheming had been conducted by phone. El remembered fondly when Henry included her in his mind games a year and a half ago. That was the first time she'd met him. He stayed overnight at their home along with Neal and had conducted an experiment to see if Peter and Neal were well suited to work together. She'd learned then how protective Henry was of Neal.
El slid into the booth. "You made a wonderful choice for a restaurant but I wouldn't have thought French cuisine was on your list of favorite foods."

Henry saluted her with his beer. "Bistro Maurice is also famous for having some of the best burgers in town. What can I get you to drink?"

She ordered a glass of Chardonnay and opted for a ratatouille and a salad. Henry preferred to chow down on a burger au poivre and French fries. While they waited for their orders, she described the Saturday morning meeting with Sara. "You see the immensity of the problem. We expected Neal would be difficult. Instead it's Sara who is blind to what everyone can see is the perfect match for her."

"This was completely out of left field," Henry admitted. "I know what a skillful investigator she is. How can anyone so intelligent be so dense when it comes to her love life? I was concerned that Neal's past would be an issue. That was why I recommended including the Halloween date in Diana's story."

"You hoped Arkham Neal's admission about the algolnium within him would lead to New York Neal opening up as well. It was an excellent theory."

He shrugged. "But a useless one. Yesterday Neal told me Sara already knows about his record with Interpol." Henry paused to swallow down his grumble with a swig of beer. "But it's not a big deal, he told me, remarking it's not like they're interested in dating."

"But it may explain Sara's attitude. We were pinning our hopes on her to make the first move. Since she was the one who pulled back last year when Neal wanted to date her, she should be the one to take the initiative. I now have serious doubts our strategy will work."

"Do you know anything about this guy Matthew she's hooked up with? I could have him investigated. After Bryan, she may have latched onto someone on the rebound. Plainly her judgment is questionable."

"Sara didn't give us a last name, and I don't think it's right for us to interfere."

"Even if it's for her own good?" Henry took another swig of his beer, clearly unhappy. By the time the waiter brought their orders, he still wasn't in a good place. "Why doesn't she see what is so obvious to us?" he complained. "You were instigating things from the get-go. That first story? Confess. You were the one who introduced Sara into the plot."

El winced. "I haven't told anyone this, not even the Round Table. Diana thinks her inclusion was originally Tricia's idea, but yes, I had my concerns about Fiona. When I first met her—that was back in February when Neal was working undercover with Keller, he was being overly protective of her. Fiona was unhappy and he was miserable, too. Sara went on a fake date with Neal to divert Keller's suspicions from Fiona. Neal described afterward how much they'd enjoyed it. I thought at the time what a good couple they'd make and suggested to Tricia we add Sara to the stories. The Round Table believes she was introduced to illustrate Neal's isolation."

Henry broke into a grin. "You added Sara as a backup?"

"Guilty as charged," she admitted, "but it didn't work out like I'd hoped. When you spoke with me about your ideas for Sara in the stories, Neal had just broken up with Fiona, and it seemed like a good idea. But now after what he's had to cope with, it may be too soon."

"What we're doing is totally in Neal's best interest," Henry insisted, "and I'm not as pessimistic as
You are. Sara's wacko idea for the story indicates there's a chance they could still work out. She obviously likes Neal."

"But remember, she once accused Neal of being too young."

"I bet she was using the age issue as an excuse. She must have had some other hang-up which prevented her from wanting to move forward. Let's maintain the strategy for at least the next story. The way this con is shaping up, I'll be able to throw Neal and Sara together a lot. If after that, there's still no chemistry between them, I'll be ready to retire my matchmaking shingle too."

**WCWCWCWCWCWCWC**

Peter would let his reputation be dragged through the mud. The news of the morning was all Neal could think about for the rest of the day. For the past five months Neal had been doing everything he could to keep Peter unsullied from his actions. Guess he didn't have to worry about that anymore.

In San Francisco Peter suspected Neal was being blackmailed. All that talk yesterday about bridges was clearly aimed at getting him to cough up the details. What Peter didn't realize was that by his actions at the meeting this morning, he'd defused the issue. Neal had no need to confess. Peter already planned to act like he'd been tainted. If Rolf and Klaus tried to use the painting as a weapon, it would be toothless.

Now the only question of any significance was how badly Neal had damaged his relationship with Peter by keeping the Braque a secret.

Henry had inserted the Braque painting into the center of the con. Peter would never stop till he found out the truth. To have any hope of saving their friendship, Neal had to tell him before that happened. He was no longer concerned that Peter would inform Interpol—not with the Mansfelds on the loose. Neal was too vital for the success of the con.

But afterward? Big unknown. At the moment, though, that didn't seem very important.

Neal tried to see Peter in the afternoon, but he was away at meetings. Perhaps that was for the best. If Neal told him in the evening, it would give Peter more time to decide how he wanted to handle it.

Peter mentioned El would be out so Neal left him a voicemail, asking if he could come over in the evening. Peter had texted back, suggesting seven o'clock.

On the subway ride to Brooklyn, it began to rain. An omen of the coming storm? By the time Neal got off the subway, it was a downpour. When he arrived at Peter's, he paused to shake off the excess water from his umbrella before ringing the doorbell. It was the first time he'd visited their house since California, and it provided comforting reassurance. No matter what damage he'd do to his relationship with them, Peter and El would have each other.

Some grass clippings had stuck to his shoes from his walk on the drenched Brooklyn sidewalks. He was scraping his soles on the welcome mat when the door opened.

"Do you want to come in?" Peter asked. Satchmo was wagging his tail but had cocked his head in a silent question as if asking why Neal was intruding on their happy home. "I saw you walk up and wondered what was taking so long."

"I didn't want to mess up your house." *Like I have your life.*
Peter glanced at the rain which was now coming down in sheets. "You said you had something to discuss. I know you prefer talking outside, but it's a little wet for that. I could open the patio door and let the rain come in, but El wouldn't be very happy at the puddles."

Neal attempted a chuckle. "Do you have an inside confessional?"

That provoked a sharp look but Peter didn't comment. He knew why Neal had come.

When Neal abandoned his effort to clean his shoes and left them by the door, Peter raised a brow. "Sorry, I don't have a bed of burning coals for you to walk on, but you can pretend there are nails on the floor, if that helps. Let's use my study."

Neal agreed, relieved at Peter's choice. The living room was for family, not for confessions.

Peter's study was at the back of the house next to the dining room. It was small with just enough space for one armchair in addition to his desk chair. Hanging prominently on one wall was the painting Neal had made of them stargazing at the Catskills cabin. That had been in the aftermath of their abduction in the fall. Peter and El had taken him to the cabin. Under a star-filled sky Neal had admitted having issues with PTSD. He remembered vividly Peter's lecture afterward, particularly the bit about partners not shutting each other out. And that's exactly what Neal had done.

This couldn't end well.

Satchmo trotted in after them. He flopped next to Neal and gave him a sorrowful look. That was confirmation. Neal should have confessed at work. Even Satchmo knew he shouldn't be here.

"Hey, I'm having a beer."

Neal jerked his head up.

"Drink?" Peter repeated patiently. "You sure you don't want anything? There's an open bottle of wine in the fridge. I'm sorry it's not that emerald wine Lavinia has in Arkham. You look like you could use a calmative. I think we have some green wine glasses El had bought for Christmas. I'll pour it in one of those."

"That may be a good idea," Neal admitted, forcing a smile. Whatever helps.

When they returned to the study, Neal pulled the chair close to Peter's desk and set his glass down after a quick sip. "I know much more about the Braque painting than what I've told you. Four years ago, Klaus and I stole the painting from a house in Germany."

"The story Henry told at the meeting?"

"It was essentially true," Neal admitted. "Kate told Henry that Adler suspects me of knowing about its whereabouts. This wasn't coming out as he wanted. Peter would think Henry was complicit. "Henry talked with me about it on Tuesday night and urged me to tell you, but I couldn't. All I could see was the nightmare that Klaus planted in my brain coming true. Don't blame Henry for any of this. I take full responsibility."

Peter hid his emotions behind a mask. Neal knew that look. It was the one Peter wore during an official interrogation. It reinforced what Neal already knew. By invading Peter's home, he was abusing their friendship, compounding his mistakes.
"Klaus had me steal it in 2001 as a training exercise," he continued, at only a slightly slower pace. "We both thought it was a copy at the time." Forcing himself to steady his thoughts, Neal outlined the entire sequence of events. How he'd discovered the painting was genuine, the phony provenance story Klaus told him, how it'd been hidden in the Church of Saint-Roch. Chantal's call about Adler's offer, and how he'd retrieved it. The only part he left out was Mozzie's involvement in Paris. He kept his voice as matter-of-fact as possible through the narration as he prepared himself to be grilled.

Peter was taking notes, demanding specifics. "Explain me this. Why didn't you come to me when you heard from Chantal?"

"I wanted to," Neal said quickly.

"But you didn't. What stopped you?"

"The statute of limitations isn't up. I figured you'd have to inform Interpol, and they'd arrest me."

Peter started to speak but Neal rushed to continue, "I didn't want to go to prison and I didn't want you to have to go through the pain of initiating the proceedings."

A flash of anger crossed his face but Peter once more hardened his face into a mask. "You didn't think we might have worked something else out?"

"No," Neal said quietly. "You'd told me once that making exceptions for personal cases is a perversion of justice. You said if you ever compromised your ethics, you'd have to quit. I didn't want to be the cause."

"I remember saying those words. That was right after you'd started working for me. We've gone through a lot since then. You've changed. I've changed."

"I tested the waters about letting you know the same week Chantal called. You probably don't remember but when I asked you about traveling overseas, you said that I shouldn't make an issue of any past crimes I hadn't already confessed to."

A moment his face darkened. "Don't twist my words around to justify what you did." He clamped down before saying anything more.

"For the sting the team is proposing, you'll either have to arrest me or become tainted by my misdeeds. I was doing my utmost to keep you shielded from that. I thought if I could somehow return the painting without dragging you into it, we'd avoid the very scenario we're talking about now. Until I found out that it might have a hidden message, I intended to make an anonymous donation of it. I never intended to keep the Braque, nor did I want to profit from it."

Neal stood up, unable to stay sitting any longer. The room was too small to pace. Why had he agreed to sit here? One error after another. "The last thing I wanted was for you to suffer because you offered me a second chance."

"Sit down," he ordered. "Drink some more of that emerald wine. We've barely scratched the surface." He waited till Neal resumed his seat. "When did you first learn of Adler's interest in the painting?"

"That same month. Keller asked me about it. He claimed he'd heard I had it. I denied any knowledge, but couldn't figure out who'd told him. Keller had never worked with Klaus, and I hadn't mentioned it. This was back when Henry had discovered Garrett Fowler was making inquiries about the painting in Paris. Everyone presumes Fowler still works for Adler and acts
under his orders. I didn't know about any connection between the painting and Nazis—I still believed Klaus's lie about the provenance, but I wondered if Adler and Keller were working together. I suspected Adler might be the buyer for the Egyptian artifacts Keller wanted to steal. Remember I mentioned that?"

"Yeah, right," he dismissed, "but you failed to include any reference to the Braque at the time." Peter stopped to take a hefty gulp of beer. "You must have developed some theories about why Adler suspected you. What were they?"

"I thought Klaus might have done a job for Adler. Perhaps he'd even offered Adler the painting. I also considered that Klaus had at some point offered the Braque for sale on the black market, and Adler heard about it. If Klaus told Adler I'd worked for him, that would explain why Adler believed I knew about it. Fowler had access to my file when he worked at OPR. He also could have told Adler that I'd worked with Klaus."

Peter flipped the sheet on his notepad. "Who else approached you?"

"Gordon Taylor."

"When?" he demanded. "In Paris?"

"No, the same month I heard about the painting from Chantal. He also heard about the inquiry. He'd gotten an anonymous tip I might have the painting. Now I believe Klaus or Rolf most likely initiated the rumor."

"Why?"

"They must have heard about Fowler's offer and decided to use it to trap me."

"And I assume Mozzie knew from the beginning?"

"No. The first he heard about the Braque was when Gordon asked him to relay the message. I didn't know Mozzie when I worked for Klaus and I'd never mentioned the painting to him. When Mozzie told me about Gordon, I explained what I knew about it."

"Mozzie helped you in Paris, didn't he?"

Neal hadn't wanted to get Mozzie involved, but Peter's direct question left him no choice. There could be only one answer. "Yes, but he didn't break into the church. I was the only one who broke the law."

"He was the one who called the police in the church?"

"That's right. He phoned in a false alarm and saved my butt in the process."

"And Henry's the only other person who knows about your connection to the painting?"

Neal nodded. "Please don't be angry at Henry for not telling you. This was my fault. Henry tried to persuade me to confess, and I wanted to as well." Neal tried to calm himself with emerald wine, but the glass was empty. He pretended it wasn't and took a sip of air. "I just . . . I was afraid that I'd set something in motion that would take you down too."

"The painting's already in play, and you know that."

Neal heard the front door open. El must have returned home. "You stay put," Peter warned. "We're
not done yet, not by a long shot.”

El's return from her theater meeting was a godsend. Peter badly needed a break. He'd expected Neal was hiding an incident from the time he'd been working for Klaus, but the extent of his deception was much more sweeping than Peter had imagined. He was trying his damnedest not to lash out. It was exactly as he'd predicted—Neal had done it as an idiotic way to protect Peter—but God, it hurt.

All those months Neal kept his knowledge of the Braque a secret. The initial concealment was somewhat understandable, but not once Neal learned about Adler's interest in the painting. Damn it, the team was working on the case, trying to figure out its relation to Adler. Neal sat in on those meetings—all the while knowing where the painting was—but he'd said nothing.

Peter had sensed something was wrong when Henry brought up the painting at Friday's meeting but dismissed the idea. How could Neal have withheld vital information for so long?

What was Henry's intent? Was he trying to help Neal confess or simply to defuse the issue? Had he worked on the scheme together with Neal? Did they think that once Adler had the forgery, the heat would be off Neal? During Henry's explanation of the con, Peter had checked several times for Neal's reaction. Guess this proved his con artist skills were once more fully operational.

Peter knew Neal was troubled by something in Paris. He'd assumed it was Rolf or Fiona—not this. Neal had been living a lie for the past six months. He may not have overtly lied to Peter, but his concealment of the truth amounted to virtually the same thing.

Peter closed the study door behind him and took several deep breaths. He didn't want to drag El into it too. Walking into the hallway, he slapped a welcoming smile on his face. "Hi, hon, how'd your meeting go?"

Her smile vanished when she caught one glimpse of him. "What happened?"

So much for his con artist skills. How had Neal managed to maintain the deception for so long? "Neal happened," he admitted, aiming to keep his tone neutral.

She let out a gasp of dismay. "Is he all right?"

Peter didn't answer that loaded question. "He's in the study. I'm sorry but I can't go into the specifics."

She put her arms around him and wrapped him in a tight embrace. "Are you okay?"

He gave her a kiss. "I will be. We're in the midst of something we need to work out. Do you mind if I go back?"

"Of course not. Do you need another beer first?"

"How did you know?"

"Beer kiss," she murmured with a shrug.

"You're a saint. Please." He hesitated a moment. He wasn't being fair. He needed to be, if he didn't want to make the situation worse. "And I'm sure Neal would like to see you."
He returned to the study and opened the door. Neal was still sitting on the edge of the chair, like he'd been for the past hour when he wasn't trying to pace. He had his cell phone out and was texting someone. When Peter walked in, he stared at him as if he expected to be thrown in irons. From Neal's expression, it was clear there wasn't much Peter could do that would make him feel more miserable than he was already. Satchmo whined when he saw Peter, making him wonder whose side he was on.

Peter nodded to Neal's phone. "Is that Mozzie? Are you telling him to scram while he can?"

Neal flushed. Damn. He'd intended it to be a joke, but plainly Neal didn't take it that way.

"It was Henry," Neal said. "He'd sent me several texts. I told him I was at your place and had confessed. Would you like to read the messages?" He held up his phone.

"Put that down. I'm sorry how that came out. I wasn't serious."

"I'm getting a beer. You could probably use a refill, too, unless you'd like to continue drinking air wine." He glanced pointedly at Neal's glass and was relieved that this time Neal got the joke. "Come join us. I'm declaring a timeout and El would like to see you."

They found her in the kitchen where she was placing a covered dish in the microwave. When she saw them enter, she gave Neal a hug. "Something I learned from my counterpart in Arkham is that no freezer should ever be without an emergency supply of brownies. From the looks of you two, this is one of those times. And unlike her, we're lucky to live in the age of the microwave. They'll be ready in a few minutes."

"Thanks, but I don't think I could eat anything," Neal protested, and he was looking queasy. Too much emerald wine? More likely, not enough.

"If I'm going to indulge in double-chocolate sinfully rich brownies, so are you," she insisted, giving him a no-nonsense look that put Peter's to shame. She glanced at his wine glass and turned to Peter. "Why are you using our Christmas glasses? Are you trying to create a festive mood?"

"Hardly. Neal was in need of emerald wine, and this was the best I could come up with."

"Ah, yes, I understand now. But we can do better than that." She went over to the refrigerator and pulled out a wine bottle from the back. "This is one of Mozzie's special honey wines, Ohelo Sunset. It's supposed to have a calming effect on the nerves."

Neal's face relaxed slightly. "I know it well. He's been keeping me well supplied this week. Mozzie had me drink it daily during the con to take down Keller."

"Op," Peter corrected automatically. According to Neal that had been the month he heard from Chantal. "I should have a glass too."

El smiled her approval. "I have several bottles in reserve. Mozzie brought them over this morning. He and I both believe in being prepared for whatever life tosses our way. Peter, go ahead and get down two more of those green glasses."

Did Mozzie know Neal was coming over? Had he been working on Neal as well? The thought went against everything Peter had grown to expect from the man he'd once considered to be the devil on Neal's shoulder. Mozzie had urged Peter to modify his thinking. Had Mozzie done the same? Had he been acting as a guardian angel to both Neal and Peter? That thought brought Peter up short. Surely not. Maybe a well-intentioned imp?

When the brownies were ready, they moved into the living room and for several minutes acted as
if everything was normal. El talked about her community theater. The municipality announced it could no longer subsidize productions. The players were scrambling to find new funding sources but if none could be found, the upcoming season would have to be drastically curtailed.

Peter fished around for a safe topic and asked Neal if he'd heard from his cousin Angela. She was spending the summer working at a college in West Virginia. Angela was in the doctorate program for ethnomusicology and was required to do field work in the summer. She'd decided to work with underprivileged kids in Appalachia under a program sponsored by a nonprofit Henry volunteered for, the Global Education through Music Initiative. Neal's tension seemed to abate somewhat as they discussed her. El tossed in some jokes about Angela's boyfriend Michael who was languishing in New York over the summer.

The brownies were quickly polished off, even by Neal despite his disclaimer. Afterward he offered to wash the dishes, but she didn't take him up on it. "You two better go back and finish whatever it is you need to do. Then we'll all sleep better. Does anyone need more emerald wine?"

Neal got a refill, but Peter felt mellow enough to return to beer.

When they had their drinks, she announced, "I'm heading upstairs to read. I'm confident if you just really listen to each other's side, you'll be able to work this out."

"We're building a bridge," Peter said. Out of the corner of his eye he watched for Neal's reaction and was pleased to see he got the message. "It's a little rickety at the moment, but we'll keep working on it." He turned to Neal and nodded toward the study. "You go on. I'll be there in a minute."

An uneasy glance briefly crossed Neal's face which he was quick to conceal, and he beat a hasty retreat.

"Thank you for being so understanding," Peter said when Neal was out of earshot and embraced her. "Because of you, we're both in a better spot now."

She kissed him. "I love you, hon. Good luck with that bridge. If it starts to collapse, come and get me."

Notes: Henry and Mozzie can share in the credit for Neal and Peter arriving at this point and they'll be called upon again in the next chapter, The Speckled Band.

References to earlier stories include The Mirror for the early history of the Braque painting and Echoes of a Violin for the events in Paris. In Penna's story By the Book, Peter told Neal that as an agent, he couldn't make exceptions for personal reasons. That happened on the same night Henry asked El to take part in a psychological experiment. Everyone was pleased with the results of that experiment. Henry doesn't know it yet, but his Arkham Files plan also worked. Arkham Neal's confession about algolnium did help NY Neal. Both he and Sara have been relying heavily on Arkham Files for help in moving beyond the friend zone.

This week I blogged about the crisis between Neal and Peter in a post called "Wall Demolition." Penna added her second experiment with writing in first person POV. The post is "Novel Progress: First Person POV part 2."

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Nocturne in Black and Gold board on the Caffrey Conversation

When Peter returned to the study, Neal was standing in front of the painting he'd made of the three of them stargazing.

They'd gone to the cabin to heal after he and Neal were held prisoner by Azathoth. Neal had been blaming himself for Klaus's death. Then Azathoth tricked him into believing he'd killed Peter. That was the beginning of the Mansfelds' manipulations of both of them. How many of Neal's decisions about the Braque were influenced by the horrific scenes during that first abduction? If they were ever to escape the nightmare, they needed to reverse course and seize control.

Neal quickly sat down when he saw Peter and asked, "Where do you want me to start?"

"Did you know Henry was going to bring up the Braque at Friday's meeting?"

"No."

"You hadn't fabricated the scheme with him as a way to cover up what you did?" Peter challenged, not content with a simple denial.

"Henry didn't tell me anything about it beforehand," Neal said, a ragged edge to his voice. "No more deflections. No more concealment. I'm telling you the truth. Including the Braque in the con was Henry's idea. I was upset not to have been consulted and confronted him about it afterward. He said he did it to provide the same sort of insurance the Vermeer forgery was providing me . . . " Neal hesitated a moment before adding, "By his action Henry was encouraging me to open up. He didn't admit it to me, but I know that was his intention. It would be impossible for me to ignore the Braque and what I'd done now that it was being openly discussed."

That's what Peter hoped to hear. Henry had told Peter he was working on an angle. This must have been it. Neal could have viewed the con as a way to provide him cover. The forgery would provide some protection and allow him to continue the deception. Henry's action left the choice up to Neal, and he'd made the right decision. That counted for something.

Peter flipped back to his page of notes on Adler. "You explained what Kate told Henry about the painting. But months before then we already knew Adler was interested. Henry called from Paris in April to inform us Fowler was making inquiries. That's the first time I heard about Violin and Candlestick. I asked you to research it."

Neal nodded agreement. "That was when I discovered it had been plundered by the Nazis. Up to that moment, I'd believed what Klaus told me about its provenance."

"Let's leave that aside. Didn't you think I needed to know about your connection to the painting? We knew Adler was interested in you. Here's the reason, and you kept quiet about it. Why?"

Peter remembered questioning Neal about the painting in the office. He'd wondered if Neal had been hiding something. Then Neal told him about Mozzie being missing and Peter had concluded that was the cause. In the future, he wouldn't be so quick to leap to conclusions.

"Because nothing had changed," Neal said, looking frustrated. "I've been working the entire time to protect you from any fallout because of my actions. Of course, I wanted to tell you. I can't count the number of times I had to hold myself back. I hated having to keep you in the dark, but it was
"the only way I knew to keep you safe."

"And in Paris? What if you'd been arrested in that church? What if I'd been called in for questioning about why my consultant had broken into a church and had a missing masterpiece in his possession?"

"You could have said that you'd been duped. That you'd been wrong about me. That I'd betrayed all the efforts you'd made on my behalf." Neal stopped to take a breath. When he resumed, he was marginally calmer. "You could have walked away, with only the minor embarrassment of having misjudged me."

Peter exhaled and forced himself to count to ten so slowly it hurt. "What kind of lousy scenario is that? Are you so deluded as to think I could have possibly been okay with that?"

"It wasn't my first choice," he said miserably. "I didn't intend to get caught."

"And now? Am I supposed to thank Azathoth and Adler for having finally forced the truth out of you?"

That made him flinch. "After Los Angeles, Klaus"—he stopped and made a wave with his hand as if that covered all the stuff he'd been dealing with—"I was already convinced you'd be caught in the crossfire over me. I didn't want to add any more ammunition." He swallowed and took a moment. "I talked with Jacob on Saturday about a second trigger. That's what I felt the Braque had become. I didn't tell him about the painting but he knew I was hiding something. He said it was up to me to disarm it. Then your talk about bridges . . . Your offer to participate in the con . . . Purgatory." He propped his elbows on the armrests of the chair and lowered his head, raking his hair with both hands.

Where did Purgatory come from? Neal had never been particularly religious, although at the moment he did look like he'd been to Hell and back.

He raised his head, his hair standing up in spikes. "Despite my best efforts, you made yourself a target."

"Yep, that's right. You have to learn to deal with it." Peter paused to let that sink in. "You've often thanked me for trusting you and giving you that second chance. It's high time you start trusting me." When Neal started to protest, he cut him off. "Trust that I may not have the street creds you do, but I can hold my own in any con and that you don't need to keep me on a shelf."

"I realize that by not telling you I was giving Klaus and Rolf exactly what they wanted."

Finally. He knew Neal was smart enough to figure he was playing into their hands. "You have to accept that ops don't always work out. You try your best, but sometimes that's not good enough."

"I know that . . . on a metaphysical level, but when I'm the one who introduces the bad element—"

"Stop that!" Peter ordered roughly. "You proved my point. Get over it now. Is that really the way you want to live? Shutting yourself off from your friends, not committing yourself to any long relationship because you're worried about the fallout?"

"That's not the way I am," Neal protested.

Peter didn't dignify that comment with a response.

"Well, maybe a little," he admitted after a few seconds.
"Replace little with a lot and you're getting close."

Neal acknowledged defeat with a shrug. He rotated his wine glass in his hands for a moment before looking up. "Are you going to tell Interpol?"

Peter was flummoxed. "I wouldn't do that. I told you in San Francisco I wouldn't use your past thefts against you. Did you doubt my words?"

"We were speaking in hypotheticals," he said quietly. "I won't hold you to that."

"I wasn't speaking in hypotheticals then and I'm not now. Believe that."

"How about El?"

"No. There's no reason to involve her—and you don't have to give me that look—I know what you're thinking. I'm shielding her like you shielded us. But Neal, it's different for you and me. If we're going to move forward, we can't ever let this happen again." Peter paused to consider how best to express it. "It's like in Arkham. You and me, we're the ones with algolnium. We can fight the monsters Azathoth flings at us, but only if we're together."

He raised a brow. "So we're starmen after all?"

"Yeah, I think we are, and starmen don't keep secrets from each other. Is that a deal? 'Cause I'm gonna work my damnedest that we never need to have a conversation like this again, and I want your promise you'll do the same."

"You have it. I kept telling myself all these months that if I could just make this right, I'd never get trapped like this again. I hated not telling you, not sharing what I knew with the team."

Peter liked what he was hearing but couldn't resist pointing out, "And all the time you were digging yourself deeper into their trap."

Neal locked his eyes on him. "It won't happen again." His faced relaxed a little. "From now on, I've got the Burke tow truck on speed dial."

They stayed up for another hour. Neal walked him through what really happened to Mozzie when he disappeared in April. Peter couldn't decide what surprised him most—that Mozzie had been abducted by Fowler, that he'd built up a tolerance to sodium pentothal, or that he'd used the Cinderella drug on himself. Whatever. By Mozzie's actions, he'd managed to cast doubt in Adler's mind that Neal had the painting, and he'd done them all a service.

Step by step Neal outlined every detail on how he'd retrieved the painting. He'd brought along his laptop and pulled up images of the church which he referred to for the locations. For a brief moment, it seemed like Neal was conducting another of his art heist workshops. That was a bitter thought. Neal had conducted a workshop for the French police that morning and committed a crime in the evening.

It was close to midnight by the time Peter called it quits for the night.

"I'll let myself out," Neal offered. "You've probably seen as much of me as you care to for a long time. Do you still want me to report for work tomorrow morning?"

Was he kidding? Neal looked serious, and surely he was too drained for it to be a con job. Still, Peter decided to test the theory.
"No, I don't want you to come in."

Neal's face whitened. "I understand," he said mechanically. "I'll wait at home till you decide what you want to do. I won't run."

Peter exhaled. His question had been answered. "Before you get carried away by another false assumption, allow me to clarify. You're not going to the office because we'll be working in your loft tomorrow morning. Am I correct that's where the painting is?" At Neal's surprised nod, he added, "You're not going anywhere tonight. It's late. Taxis are hard to come by at this hour. You'll sleep here, and tomorrow we'll go over to your loft together. I'd also like Henry to be there and Mozzie as well. I don't anticipate any problem getting Henry to come, but how about Mozzie?"

Neal raised a brow. "You're not planning to arrest him?"

Peter chuckled. "No, I suppose I should thank him for rescuing you, but I won't go there. Tomorrow will be about how to handle the painting. They're the only others who know about it. They should be present. I assume by now you've told Mozzie about the undercover op in the fall when you forged the Vermeer for Klaus?"

"I told him in Paris the day you and El arrived."

"How did he take it?"

Neal took a breath. "Hurt, betrayal. About the same feelings you had when you heard about the Braque. He walked out on me. I thought our friendship might be over . . . like I worried about us tonight."

"But he forgave you, and I like to think I'm as good a man as Mozzie." Neal's look of gratitude was the only response he needed. "So you got dumped by your girlfriend and by one of your best friends in a twenty-four period. No wonder you were singing such depressing songs at the hotel."

Neal winced acknowledgement. "Not the best day of my life. Knowing how much I hurt you makes this evening rank even worse."

Peter appreciated the words but Neal didn't have to say it. His face had already conveyed the message for the entire evening. "This has been a long time coming. I've known for a while you were hiding something. We were stuck in a holding pattern until you faced up to it. Thank you." Peter stood up. "Bed's calling. Tomorrow will be about the future."

Neal rose from his chair. "You don't know how sweet that sounds."

"Oh, I think I have a fairly good idea."

**WCWCWCWCWCWCWC**

When Neal went upstairs to the guest bedroom, he discovered El had already laid out spare sleepwear. Had she suggested to Peter he stay the night? Whoever's idea it was, he was grateful. It would have been a long, lonely ride back to June's mansion.

After a quick shower Neal texted Henry, only to discover Henry was talking with Peter. Neal suspected Henry had been texting Peter as well as him. It would have been natural for Peter to consult with Henry. Neal knew Henry wouldn't have told him about the Braque. How much pressure had Peter exerted?

While waiting for Henry to get off the phone with Peter, Neal called Mozzie and explained why
he'd gone ahead and confessed. Mozzie was surprisingly philosophical about it. He must have been worn down as well by the events of the past few weeks. Neal's brainwashing had not been at the hands of government overloads but by the very thief Mozzie had previously admired. Reality had shifted for everyone.

By the time Henry called Neal back, he already knew everything that had gone on. "I hope you're feeling good about what you did," Henry said. "It was the only rational decision."

"I am. You played a major part. First, giving me the time to work it though on my own. Then that little nudge when you spilled the beans about the Braque."

"Anytime, kiddo. Nudges are one of my specialties."

"I understand now why you didn't tell me in advance using the Braque in the con," Neal added. "Thanks to you I was able to deny any prior knowledge. Peter had his doubts at first about the motivation. If you'd told me before the meeting . . . well, things might have gone very differently. Did he give you a hard time?"

"Nah, he understood where I was coming from. He also said you went out of your way to praise my efforts to get you to open up. Thanks. You ready to turn the page?"

"Yeah . . . and continue the repair work."

"Explain."

Neal hesitated for a moment. It wasn't easy to talk about, but it was time to stop hiding. "Peter asked me to trust him to take care of himself. I didn't ask him if he trusted me. I know I lost a lot of ground by my actions. Going forward, rebuilding that trust will be my major challenge."

"You'll get there," he said quietly. Neal was glad he didn't try to deny the problem existed. "I don't think there's as much damage as you might believe."

They didn't talk long. Neal would be seeing him in a few hours and exhaustion was setting in. He assured Henry that he'd sleep better than he had in a long time.

The next morning, Neal felt like he was living a dream. On the ride to June's, Peter held true to his word. He didn't berate him for his decisions over the past few months. Instead he focused on their strategy to take advantage of the situation. Perhaps as a sign of a new era, Peter had chosen a bright blue shirt to wear with his suit—a far cry from his standard white dress shirt.

When Peter parked the Taurus in front of June's house, Neal studied his face for any signs of hesitation. Once they mounted the stairs to the loft, Neal would take the Braque painting out of its hiding place. Peter's journey to the dark side would begin. The window to change directions was quickly closing.

Neal paused before opening the car door. "You're sure about this? Plausible deniability won't cut it after this morning."

Peter nodded. "Just remember, I'm in charge of the crew, not you." He smiled. "And stop looking so serious. I'm the one who's supposed to be the helicopter dad, not you. I'll be fine, Junior."

When he and Peter climbed the stairs to the loft, they found Mozzie waiting for them at the door. He gave Peter the nod of a host inviting a guest into his house. "Welcome to my world, Suit. Nice shirt."
"I had the advice of a wardrobe consultant," Peter said cryptically. "Thanks for the help."

Mozzie smiled complacently. "Anytime."

Bewildered, Neal stared at them. Since when was Mozzie acting as a style consultant for Peter? This new world order would take getting used to. But they both seemed okay with it, so he wasn't about to make waves.

Peter turned to Neal. "You ready to show me the object of Adler's desire?"

Neal went to the armoire in the bedroom, removed the fake panel, and brought out the Braque. Mozzie didn't protest, but Neal knew it galled him to have the hiding place revealed. He was probably already calculating where to construct a new cache.

Peter exhaled when he saw it. "After studying images of it for months, somehow I thought the work would be more prepossessing."

At twenty-four by twenty inches, a subtle study in shades of umber and gray, Neal understood where Peter was coming from. But the time Peter had spent on it didn't compare with the hundreds of hours Neal had worked on it. He suspected he could make a perfect forgery without even looking at it. That painting was seared into his brain.

While Peter studied the painting, Neal made coffee. Henry had offered to bring over breakfast. Knowing Henry, that meant chocolate. When Neal heard Henry's footsteps on the stairs, he met him midway on the staircase.

Henry gave him a sharp look and by his smile must have approved what he saw. "No nightmares?"

"Just the opposite. I finally awoke from one. I bet you slept better, too."

He shrugged acknowledgment. "We really should stop doing this to each other."

"We could test the waters for a month?"

He grinned. "That long? Let's not make any rash promises!"

Henry had outdone himself with breakfast, providing quick fixes for both Neal's love of almond croissants and Henry's for chocolate. Neal dished out the chocolate almond croissants while Henry had his first look at the source of so much controversy. The violin was sitting quietly on the easel, her strings still mute.

"And neither one of you could find a hidden message?" Henry asked.

"That's right," Neal admitted bitterly. "I've spent six weeks examining it under every filter, every magnification. Tested it with every reagent known to have been used during World War II."

"I've analyzed the fragments for possible fractal equivalences," Mozzie added, "and if there are any, I haven't discovered them."

"Let's back up," Peter said. "We need to establish some ground rules. You ready with the coffee?"

Neal poured out four mugs and they sat down around his dining table.

"To confirm we're all on the same page before we proceed," Peter said. "We're the only four who know Neal has the genuine painting and that's the way it will remain. We won't endanger the careers or reputations of any of the other team members, friends, or family. If you don't agree to
those terms, this ends now."

No one did. Quite the opposite. If Peter had advocated for anyone else to be included, Mozzie would have erupted.

"The second ground rule is that there are no secrets relating to the op between the four of us. There has to be absolute trust. We're all putting skin in the game, and without that trust, it can't proceed. If any of us at any time feels that something can't be shared, we need to alert the others of the reason. We'll then reach a joint decision on how to proceed."

Peter waited till they all took the pledge before he'd allow the discussion to continue. Mozzie agreed with the others, but was it only a pro forma gesture? Neal was sure Mozzie considered himself above any such restrictions, and Peter undoubtedly realized that. But he may have considered the fact that Mozzie was willing to even give lip service to the arrangement a victory.

Henry licked the chocolate off his fingers. "Adler we have figured out, but how much does Azathoth know about the Braque?" He looked to Neal for the answer.

"I assume Klaus discovered that it had been looted by the Nazis when he checked on its provenance. That was back in 2001 when I first raised questions about it. He may have believed a Nazi officer had made off the painting. During the chaos of the closing months of the war, the painting could have changed hands many times. At some point it could have been classified as a copy."

"If Klaus suspected it was a key to lost treasure," Mozzie added. "He would have recovered the painting himself."

"In the virtual world, Kramer claimed you hid the Vermeer in the Church of St. Roch on the same night you retrieved the Braque," Peter said. "Did Rolf intend for you to confuse the two paintings?"

"Worse than that," Henry said. "I'm willing to wager their intention was to have the paintings reinforce each other and in the process intensify Neal's guilt about ruining your life. In the virtual world Klaus suggested Neal ask you about the painting. He wanted you to know about it. And possibly not just for blackmail reasons. Adler wants Neal to solve the mystery for him. Azathoth may as well."

Peter nodded thoughtfully. "If nothing else, they know of Adler's interest. Once they get wind of the U-boat rumors, they'll likely postpone using the Vermeer or the Braque. Greed will be their downfall. And not only for treasure, but for us, as well."

"Naturally, they'll reach out to me, too," Mozzie added complacently. "They probably assume once Neal is working with them, I can also be persuaded."

"And it's not just the three of you," Henry said, brushing the croissant crumbs off his shirt. "By the time we're done, he'll be salivating at the prospect of having me join their crew."

Peter chuckled. "You're right." He paused for a moment, eyeing Neal and Henry. "When Neal was leading the art heist boot camp in New York for the White Collar team, he used Caravaggio's Cardsharps as an example. That painting made me reflect on how close you two came to becoming a force like the Mansfeld brothers. Rolf has studied us so intensely that he must know about Henry. Wouldn't he have the same thought? He could see himself and Klaus reflected in you two. Together you could initiate an unparalleled empire of thieves. With me and Mozzie along as well."
So Peter had been daydreaming too. Neal found that oddly reassuring. He and Peter were always on the same page even when they weren't. "When we were in Seattle at the art museum, I was imagining what it would have been like to have Peter on my crew," he confided to the others. "His security expertise along with Mozzie's creativity would have made us the gold standard of the underworld. I wouldn't be surprised if Rolf has had those same thoughts."

"Adler and Huber will be our first targets," Peter said. "Through Huber we'll then move to snare the Mansfelds and Ydrus. And that brings us back to this painting."

"We're certain there's no message in hidden ink," Mozzie said. "There may be something in the geometry of the fragments themselves which corresponds to the code in the sheet of the fractal equations. I'll continue to work on it until the breakthrough occurs. But as to how long that will take, even for a genius like me, I don't have an answer."

"We may be able to find someone else who was in the Resistance who knows about it," Henry said.

"I talked with Camille Souchon, the mathematician's secretary, on Sunday," Mozzie said. "She's still searching for additional contacts. She found one, but he'd already passed away. We're under the gun to move quickly not only to recover the art before Adler and Huber, but because the Resistance members aren't getting any younger."

"Finding the art is a separate track from capturing Adler and the Mansfelds," Henry pointed out. "For now, our focus should be on the con. One potential concern is the Braque forgery. Adler's aware of Neal's skill in art. He may suspect a forgery. I think it's still worth the risk, but in the interest of full disclosure, I feel I should mention it. Is there anything we can do to lessen the chance he believes it's a forgery?"

Peter nodded with satisfaction at his words, as if he expected it. "You already answered your question at the briefing on Friday. You'll claim the Braque led you to the discovery of the U-boat. The original may not have a message but the forgery will." He turned to Neal. "How difficult will it be to plant it?"

Neal broke into a grin. "It's as if Mozzie and I've been preparing for this for the past two months. We've researched all the invisible inks and reagents known to have been used during the Second World War."

"For the Braque, I recommend an ink made from copper sulfate and cobalt salts," Mozzie said, assuming a professorial pose. He stroked his lip for a moment. "Just a dash of potassium ferrocyanide for color. It will take two applications of iodine vapor for the message to be revealed."

"If we add cerium oxalate, the message will be visible for about two hours before fading once more," Neal added.

Peter laughed. "When you selected the subjects you were to be tested on for your admittance exams to Columbia, I couldn't understand why you chose chemistry. Now it's clear. You two are grinning like kids who just got their first home chemistry kit."

"And you're smirking with them," Henry retorted for them. "Peter, confess. When did you make your first stink bomb?"

The captain of their crew let out a loud snort. "My mom was a science teacher. Stink bombs were mandatory." He turned to Mozzie. "But don't get carried away. You don't want this ink to be so..."
difficult, it won't be discovered."

"Don't worry," Neal said. "Kate will probably be the one to examine the painting. She was fascinated by coded messages and invisible inks when I knew her. I'm willing to bet she still is."

"Kate loves the classics," Mozzie added. "This particular ink was one of the Nazis' favorites. She'll be thrilled by her discovery."

*Hiding a message for Kate . . .* It'd been a while. They used to play games with their coded messages to each other. Now Neal intended to use one to trap her. It gave him no pleasure, but she'd made the decision when she tied her fate to Adler's.

According to the timetable they worked out, Henry and Neal would pretend to discover the U-boat in mid-August. The painting could only be offered for sale once the sub was supposedly located. Neal chafed at the delay but there was so much planning to be done, it was unavoidable.

"This gives time for you and me both to heal and be at one hundred percent before starting the con," Henry told him. "Agreed?"

Neal nodded. He knew he'd need to prove to Peter he was ready and could be trusted before Peter would sanction his participation in field work.

While they finished breakfast, Mozzie outlined ways to spread rumors of the U-boat's discovery. He intended to blast the tabloids with rumors, starting with reports of Hitler clones being spotted in Argentina. Diana was meeting Ruiz for lunch the next day. Mozzie had given her tips in the art of dissimulation and obfuscation, not that she needed any.

"My reputation is already being dragged through the mud," Henry reported, looking inordinately pleased. "Allen Winston and I discussed the steps yesterday afternoon. Radha will assume temporary command of the New York office. The official explanation will be that I have been placed on special assignment status. Soon rumors will spread that I'm being punished for my actions in Argentina. Upper management has grown increasingly impatient with my non-adherence to standard protocol."

"Have you spoken with Noelle and Joe?" Peter asked Henry.

"They're on board as well. Joe's looking forward to calling you at work. He said he was already preparing his litany of complaints about his recalcitrant stepson."

"While I will plead for tolerance," Peter said, his lips twitching into a wry smile. He turned to Neal. "I trust you can keep the painting safe? You've already managed for months."

"Once the forgery is done, I won't store it here. If Azathoth makes a move, this isn't as secure as another location I have available. Do you want to know the details?"

"No, you've done an excellent job up to now. I'm confident you'll continue to do so." Peter kept his eyes fixed on Neal, not the man he must know would be handling it.

Henry's cell phone rang as they were cleaning up the breakfast supplies. "It's work," he said and retreated to stand by the patio doors to take the call.

At his excited exclamation, they froze in place. By the way he was grinning, it had to be good news. While he talked, he headed for his backpack.

"We caught him!" he said when he ended the call. Retrieving his laptop from his backpack, he took
it to the dinette table and powered it on.

"Who?" Neal demanded.

"Klaus. And not literally caught but the next best thing. He was recorded on camera. That was the tech lab in Baltimore. Our facial recognition software recorded a match with one of the images Richard had prepared from Neal's drawings. Klaus was recorded at Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris. They sent me an email of the photo." Henry was scanning his email while he talked. His face lit up brighter than a jukebox when the image came through.

Neal stared at the photo. Klaus. No longer just inside his head. The Leopard was stalking the airport concourse with a woman by his side. He had a neatly trimmed beard, the same he'd worn on the drive to Peter's home in the virtual reality sequence. Neal was convinced Klaus was alive, but until there was proof, there would always be a niggling little self-doubt that he'd been mistaken. That Rolf was manipulating him yet again.

No more.

Neal found himself taking in great lungfuls of air as if he'd just completed a marathon . . .

"Neal?" Peter's voice was tentative as he laid a hand on his shoulder. Neal realized he'd been oblivious to what the others were saying. He turned around to see everyone staring, not at the monitor but at him.

Henry smiled. "Feeling good?"

Neal nodded, still speechless, not able to express adequately the relief flooding through him. No longer was he restrained in that virtual cell, prisoner to Rolf and Klaus's tricks. "I'm free," he said finally. Dumb remark but no one teased him for it.

"You'll allow me," Mozzie pulled the laptop close. "So, we meet at last," he murmured to the screen. What do you have to tell me?" He zoomed in on the photo.

The woman was almost as tall as Klaus with long brunette hair. Slim, in her early thirties. She appeared poised and confident by Klaus's side. A fellow predator? She had a feline air about her. Perhaps a cheetah.

"She doesn't match anyone in our database," Henry said, "but the lab said they'd already added her image. Should we alert Interpol?"

Peter hesitated. "Under normal circumstances, that would be our first action. But do they have an informant as well? Ydrus has penetrated the FBI and Sara's company, Sterling-Bosch. It stands to reason they would have also tried to infiltrate Interpol. So far the only officials who know about Klaus and Rolf outside of White Collar are John Hobhouse in London and Marcel Jauffret in Paris. I'll call them to discuss it."

Mozzie pointed at the screen. "The Leopard is accompanied by a snake. Could she be a python?"

Mozzie had magnified her right hand. The base of the third finger was circled by a tiny tattoo of a snake. Marta had a tattoo of a snake on her back. Now this woman. It raised the likelihood she was an Ydrus operative, possibly even the leader of the organization. Neal studied her image. She looked powerful and arrogant. Was this Python? The Leopard and the Python together? Klaus's ex-wife Chantal had mentioned he'd been cheating on her. Was this the woman?

Mozzie turned to face them. "Gentlemen, I posit Klaus is no longer the Leopard. By uniting with
this snake-woman”—he hissed the words dramatically—"they have formed a Speckled Band." His eyes gleaming, he added, "We must delay no longer. The game's afoot!"

When Peter rolled his eyes at Neal, he simply shrugged and smiled. Mozzie had left Purgatory behind. If he wanted to add a little Sherlock to a U-boat con, Neal wasn't about to stop him.

Notes: Tomorrow is Thanksgiving in the States and I'm glad the timing was such that everyone in this chapter has much to be thankful about. Thanks to Henry, Neal was able to reassure Peter he hadn't known in advance about Henry's scheme to involve the Braque. After working for months to ensure Peter could claim plausible deniability, Neal found himself in the situation of benefiting from it.

Is there a hint of Thanksgiving in the breakfast Neal, Peter, Mozzie, and Henry share? I'll let you decide. If you're looking for a more traditional Thanksgiving-themed story, in The Queen's Jewels Neal celebrates Thanksgiving twice—first at Columbia then in Albany with Peter and his family. (Chapters 14 and 15).

I couldn't resist adding a nod to the coded message which canon Kate left on the wine bottle for Neal. I assumed that in our AU, Kate is just as fascinated with codes and invisible inks. The history of invisible inks used during World War II is extensive. Unlike Neal and Mozzie, I'm not an expert. The chemicals I mentioned were used in invisible inks, but I wouldn't bet on them having the desired effect.

A love for codes and ciphers is something Mozzie shares with one of his heroes, Sherlock Holmes. Given how many traits Mozzie has in common with Sherlock, it was only a matter of time till Mozzie would slip the great detective into the U-boat con. I wrote about the connection between Mozzie and Sherlock this week for our blog in a post called "The Game's Afoot."

Penna's been working on a puzzle of a different sort: the art of coaxing a new character to speak. That's one of the most difficult aspects of creating an original character. Hearing their voice in your head can seemingly require infinite wheedling. For a Coursera assignment, Penna's experimented with three different scenes for her characters. She posted the last version this week. The post is "Novel Progress: First Person POV part 3." She also shares details about her characters' emerging personalities as they begin to come out of hiding.

Please join me next week for the final chapter of Nocturne in Black and Gold. A few more surprises on tap, and I'll have news about the upcoming lineup, including a new vignette from Penna!

Happy Thanksgiving everyone!

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Nocturne in Black and Gold board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon

Neal reluctantly thrust aside excited speculation over the identity of the woman in the photo with Klaus. It was time to return to the world of the known. Mozzie was eager to brew a batch of authentic invisible ink. Henry needed to go to his office, and after a quick change into a suit, Neal was ready to report for work as well.

During the drive downtown, Peter filled him in on his new assignment. "You'll assist Jones with the Twillingford mortgage fraud investigation. Over thirty properties were targeted by industry insiders."

As Peter droned on about the intricacies of the case, Neal wasn't about to give him any flak. Mortgage fraud was not high on his list of plum assignments. Plum . . . he'd have to remember to mention that one to Sara. He hadn't decided whether to proceed on the dating aspect to their relationship, but as for Professor Plum and Miss Scarlet, their pieces were already in play on the game board.

Peter chuckled. "You're smiling at mortgage fraud?"

"I hope you don't think I'm that clueless. I realize I can't hog all the plum cases." Two more innuendos. Should he and Sara keep score? The one who got the most in any one given—

"That's the attitude I like to see. Team work, right?"

"It's the only way, and I mean it."

"Good. You'll need to adjust to Hughes's new role. He's signed off on playing the heavy since I'm being Mr. Soft Touch. He'll make it known that he's reviewing your work assignments. Apparently, he's received complaints from team members that I've been exhibiting favoritism. Hughes stressed the importance of warning you that he intends to play his role to the hilt."

"He's well cast. I'm just glad this time it's a sham." Last summer Hughes had warned Neal against taking advantage of the closeness of his friendship with Peter and El. Now Neal was supposed to do exactly that.

"I'm aware of the irony, too," Peter said. "Embrace your slacker status. We're waltzing in at a late hour today. You should continue to do so the rest of the week. You didn't make up for your sleep deficit last night. I fully expect you to do so this week. Besides, you'll need the extra time at home."

Neal turned to face him. "Does that mean what I think it does?"

Peter smiled. "Checking to see if we're on the same wavelength? I think you'll be pleased with the results. You're cleared to begin work on the Braque." His expression turned serious. "I used to stew about the Vermeer being put into play sooner than we were ready. Now we have two paintings that can be used against you. If the Mansfelds relay incriminating evidence about the Braque before we've initiated the sale of the forgery, it will make the sting significantly more difficult. My hope is that they'll target the Vermeer first, but we can't rely on it."

Two art forgeries in two weeks? Two plum assignments back to back? Neal had hesitated to broach the subject after Peter had been so dead set against him starting another forgery.
He relaxed into the cushions of the Taurus, not bothering to tease Peter about his driving. The long nightmare was over. Peter knew about the Braque. They had confirmation Klaus was alive, plus a lead on another Ydrus operative. Although Peter hadn't officially declared the con to have started, as a practical matter it had begun with the discovery of Ruiz being the informant. Diana had met with the agent last week and was having lunch with him today. Neal wished he could be a fly on the wall for that conversation.

WCWCWCWCWCWCWCWC

Diana added a hint of flirtation to her smile as she gazed across the table at her mark. She'd wanted to go to this restaurant since it opened. And that is was being paid for by the scumbag Ruiz was sweetness personified.

The con was a no-brainer to execute. At Quantico Diana had specialized in crime syndicates, primarily the mafia and the yakuza. When she was transferred to White Collar she became the go-to person for information about them. Those crimes were the bailiwick of Organized Crime for which Joseph Ruiz just happened to be the acting Special Agent in Charge. She sought him out last week to follow up on the Samurai bond case where Neal and Ruiz had originally clashed. A restaurant with ties to the yakuza had been discovered during the case. It was only natural that she'd want to know the results of the investigation.

The meeting had gone well. She'd dished out the compliments with an oversized soup ladle, gushing about how much she'd enjoyed working on the case with Ruiz. And in many respects she could be honest. Taking on gangs was far more appealing than mortgage fraud cases. She even managed to slip into the conversation that they gave her a high like playing *Grand Theft Auto*.

When Ruiz invited her to lunch, she'd suggested the Lure Fishbar. The SoHo restaurant was designed to look like the interior of a luxury yacht. It fit her persona as a woman with drive and ambition. If Ruiz wanted to take her to power lunches, she was more than willing to supply the venues.

So far Ruiz was restraining his flirtation to a minimum, but she'd already spotted signs that he was testing the waters. For her part, she responded in kind, adding just enough coyness to give him hope.

Over martinis and lobster rolls, Ruiz was upfront at expressing the reason for the lunch. He wanted to recruit her for Organized Crime, and that gave her the opening she needed.

The natural follow-up was for her to voice her dissatisfaction with White Collar. The lack of advancement opportunities. The favoritism. Her boss was in danger of becoming a stooge of a criminal. Caffrey had used his con artist ability, which everyone agreed was unsurpassed, not to take down criminals but to hoodwink those gullible enough to fall under his spell. Diana had so many examples to reference, she had to be careful not to overplay her hand.

She chose a couple of her favorites, starting with her outrage over Caffrey persuading Peter to look the other way when he conducted illegal searches. She gave Ruiz specifics of the incident at Scima Workshop in London to prove her point. Their resident conman was so slick, he'd even gotten their contact at Interpol, John Hobhouse, to lick his boots.

She could have gone on for hours but restricted herself to lamenting about Neal finagling a week of sick leave when he wasn't really sick. With that, she considered she'd primed the pump adequately for one session.

Once Diana returned to the office, she rewarded herself by taking a break. Collecting her laptop
from her desk, she filled her coffee mug and headed for a small interrogation room which she'd appropriated for her writer's cave.

When Diana began writing stories, she'd sacrificed her free time in the evening. That quickly became an exercise in frustration. To her chagrin, all her best ideas were coming at work. How could she not take time out to write when her characters were standing right in front of her? Most authors heard voices inside their heads. Hers were speaking to her openly, chatting in the breakroom, standing by the elevators, taking part in meetings.

Diana found herself constantly jotting down notes for the evening writing session. But when she attempted to decipher them, they were worse than the unknown languages she'd plagued Arkham Neal with. If he only knew. Those arcane starfish script symbols were based on her own illegible scrawl.

Peter found her sitting at her desk one morning, viciously poking holes with a pencil into yet another sheet of indecipherable notes. Most men fled when she vented, but Peter stood his ground. Not only that, he offered her a solution. From then on, as long as no meeting was scheduled, she could take writing breaks whenever inspiration struck.

She suspected it was as much for the sanity of her co-workers in the bullpen as herself, but whatever. Peter earned the Boss of the Year award that day.

With a sigh of satisfaction, Diana closed the door of the interrogation room and laid out her supplies. Over the past year, she'd developed a ritual. She couldn't begin writing without a full mug of java in the octopus mug Christie had given her. Next to her laptop on the left-hand side resided a starfish plush toy that she could talk to or throw against the wall as the occasion required. Jones's nephew Ethan had taken a liking to it and called it Peachy after a character in Finding Nemo. He didn't seem to think it relevant that her starfish had leopard spots and blue eyes.

Christie said Peachy freaked her out. She claimed the starfish represented Azathoth with the leopard fabric a clear reference to the art thief. The starfish's big blue eyes reminded Christie of Neal being held a prisoner. After that Diana didn't toss Peachy around quite as forcefully.

Taking a deep breath—focus was critical for writing—she placed her laptop, mug, and Peachy in the correct alignment.

The first challenge was to sort through the Arkham Round Table emails and notes. How on earth did June expect her to work the Beatles' song "Blackbird" into the storyline? Wasn't it bad enough that she had to incorporate Henry's latest suggestions?

Because she knew.

Even though El said they were her ideas, they had Henry's fingerprints all over them. Diana had a responsibility to Arkham Neal. Would she let him be manipulated by Henry's notions about romance? Shouldn't Henry spend more time on his own love life, not Neal's?

It wasn't that she didn't like Sara. Quite the contrary. But Sara wasn't interested in Neal in this life. Why should she be in the stories? Would she hit the roof if Diana acted on El and Henry's ideas? And what would Caffrey say? That, of course, was of secondary importance. The main question was would Arkham Neal be so annoyed he'd never speak to her again?

A knock on the door interrupted her musings. Diana grumped. Couldn't they read her Do Not Disturb sign? She was just getting into Neal's POV. Now she'd have to yank herself away. "Come in!" she yelled.
Tricia stuck her head in cautiously. "Bad time?"

Diana forced a smile. "Of course not."

"Great because we need to discuss the upcoming story." She took a seat opposite Diana and placed a canvas tote on the chair next to her. Were those additional suggestions? Diana's stomach began to clench. "Have you thought of a title for it?"

"Cinereous Skies."

Tricia blinked and was quiet for a moment. "That's rather an odd name," she ventured at last, breaking the silence. "Will readers know what cinereous means?"

"That's the point," Diana said, suppressing a huff. "I'm supposed to make Azathoth curious, aren't I?"

Tricia knitted her brows together. "I did catch you at a bad time. I'll come back."

"No, it's okay." Diana took a long glug of her octopus coffee and wrote herself a reminder of the witty line she was about to have Neal utter. "I know Peter's eager to have this posted as quickly as possible."

Tricia nodded. "You'd asked me for help with the birds, and I've gotten a few ideas."

As Tricia pulled out several field guides from her tote, Diana tried not to reveal her dismay. Mozzie had already sent her a long list of options. Clearly he hadn't consulted with Tricia. Now Diana would have to sort out the dictates of two birders from opposite ends of the spectrum.

While Tricia lectured her about the birds of Australasia, another knock was heard. Had she unconsciously sent out party invitations to her writer's cave? It was with truly astonishing good grace that she welcomed the next intruder. Since it was the boss, she was glad she had.

"I see you're working on your story," Peter said. "That's just what I wanted to talk about. I've come up with some suggestions that I'd rather discuss without Neal being present."

"I felt the same way," Tricia said. "On the subway to work this morning, I reviewed the story outline. Have we gone too dark with the plot?"

Diana forced herself not to shudder as she heard them debate a complete revision. At least they weren't changing the rainforest . . . much. Calm, be calm. She shot a glance at Peachy who was pleading mutely not to be hurled at the wall.

"Peter, your suggestion for the leopard was brilliant," Tricia said.

*Don't encourage him!* Peter was beaming at the praise while Diana started a new sheet of notes.

Peter picked up Peachy. "Is that why your starfish has leopard spots?"

"The symbolism seemed appropriate."

Tricia raised a brow. "And the blue eyes?"

Diana shrugged. "Klaus has blue eyes as well as Neal. You can read into it what you will."

The boss could care less about blue eyes. He was impatient to discuss his own brainstorm. "An idea occurred to me while watching *The Prisoner of Azkaban* with Neal and El in L.A. It's about
Lavinia and Phineas."

Tricia was ecstatic over the suggestion and Diana had to admit it was pretty cool, too. Worth a rewrite. Luckily they decided the level of violence was acceptable in view of the circumstances, or Diana would have been sunk.

"We want to make Azathoth wonder just how much Neal remembers from his virtual experiences," Tricia said. "We'll plant images which can be interpreted in multiple ways, just like we have been with the hints about Peter."

He nodded. "Rolf must have questioned if I were trying to send him secret messages in *The Crypt*. We assume he realizes Diana's getting suggestions from the team. If I was trying to send him a coded communication, this is exactly how I'd handle it. That armillary sphere in the stories resembles the globe in the Vermeer painting."

Diana began to get excited despite her initial misgivings. "And I can work with the astrolabe as well. In the painting, a cryptic chart is hanging on the wall. That could reference the script on the armillary sphere."

"Exactly," Peter confirmed. "Do we know about the Vermeer? What steps have we taken? If we keep Rolf and Klaus guessing about how much we know, their mistakes will pile up. They already overplayed their hand in L.A. We want to prod them still further."

"Diana's already incorporated our recommendation about psychological manipulation," Tricia noted. "My concern is how our Neal will handle it when he reads the story. Peter, did you talk with him about it?"

"We covered it over lunch," Peter said. "He was a little uneasy at first, but after I outlined the reasoning, he agreed it was the correct approach."

Diana eyed Peter warily as he reached into his suit jacket. She knew what was coming. How many rewrites would this cause?

"This is for the scene on the river," he said. "I got the idea while walking with Neal along the Hudson. This is not so much for Azathoth but for our Neal." He explained his concept, and yeah, it was worth revising the scene. Tricia also loved it. Peter was really being quite sweet. He even offered to cut back on her other assignments. They'd targeted posting to begin in two weeks. She'd need all the help she could get.

Diana walked with them back to the bullpen in a subtle gesture to let her resume writing. After she refilled her coffee mug, she retreated into the cave, first making sure the Do Not Disturb sign was plainly visible.

But getting back in the groove wasn't easy. Diana pulled up her Cinereous Skies playlist and put her current favorite on an endless loop. As the pulsating beat propelled her forward, words finally began to flow.

She'd just gotten to Peter's river scene, when someone knocked on the door. She ignored it. Then she heard a tap on the glass window in the door and looked up to see Neal's pleading face. Heaving a heavy sigh, she beckoned him in as she scribbled another note to herself.

"Lay it on me, Caffrey, but I'm warning you upfront, you're not getting the ability to fly."

"I figured as much," he said, taking a seat opposite her, "but there might be something else you could do. Peter filled me in on what happens."
She eyed him sympathetically. "Pretty grim, huh?"

"Yeah, Arkham Neal won't have an easy time of it." He nodded to her laptop. "Your music's appropriate, but shouldn't they be singing about running through the rainforest instead of the jungle?"

She snorted. "You're catching on, finally. I'll give Creedence Clearwater Revival a pass. Back then the term rainforest wasn't used as much. As I recall, only a few weeks ago you were envious of Henry running through the jungle."

He made a face. "You would remember that. What you have planned isn't exactly what I had in mind." He put his elbows on the table and leaned forward, his eyes intent upon her. "Let's face it, the kid could use a little boost."

No point in a prolonged debate. Diana knew she might as well cut to the chase and give in now. Neal was a master at knowing exactly which stops to pull. His face had assumed the expression of that younger Neal—an innocent in a world filled with enemies. And was that so different from his own situation? For all his polished veneer, Arkham Neal and New York Neal were very much alike. Or was she falling into the trap of becoming too involved with her characters? Diana vowed to take out her frustrations on the firing range as soon as she got the story revised . . . if she ever got it revised. "What's your idea?"

"Something to raise his spirits." He grinned sneakily. "Sara muddles music. It seems only fair."

Diana snorted out loud when she heard what he wanted. "If I do this, it has to pass muster with Tricia. You realize I'm telling her whose idea it was?"

"Naturally. Just doing my part to give Arkham Neal a pick-me-up."

**Federal Building. A day later.**

"Why are we returning to the roof, Neal?" Peter eyed him suspiciously. When Neal dropped by his office midafternoon to suggest the break, Peter wasn't so dense as to not appreciate he had an ulterior motive. Was Neal making the request as his consultant or as a member of his crew?

"This fits into my new image of being a constant disrupting influence on your schedule," he said with a hint of devilry in his smile.

Peter sighed to himself. He was beginning to appreciate the major flaw in their op. Once they brought down Adler and Azathoth, would Neal ever be able to regain the attitude of a normal employee? Then again, did he ever really have it in the first place? Peter's next meeting wasn't for an hour. In his new role as an overly tolerant pushover of a boss, it was time to get into the groove.

Neal picked up his fedora from the bust of Socrates on his desk as they headed for the elevator.

"Aren't you afraid a wind gust will carry it off?" Peter asked.

He shrugged. "A risk I'll have to take. It's a glorious day. Let's take in the view. The others can think we're planning our new crime empire." He reached inside the keyhole of his desk to retrieve a nylon bag.

"What's in the bag?"

"A few tools of the trade," Neal said cryptically.
"That's why we're going to the roof? So you can teach me advanced pickpocketing techniques? We could do that in my office."

"Someone might spot us."

"We could use Storeroom 51," Peter suggested. The windowless space had been appropriated as a go-to spot for exhausted agents requiring down time.

Neal pushed the elevator button. "Not the right ambiance."

"Since when is the correct environment required?" Peter grabbed his arm. "That better not be a boombox inside."

Neal shook off his arm. "You'll find out soon enough."

By the time the elevator dinged its arrival Neal had yet to reveal his scheme. Understandable. There were others around. But since they were the only ones in the elevator car, Peter could continue his interrogation unimpeded. "You got me a set of lock picks and have decided to make an initiation ceremony out of it. Will you reveal the thief's secret handshake at the same time?"

"Excellent suggestion but wrong. Still I give you points for your desire to learn. We should start lessons immediately. Perhaps another boot camp, just for you." Neal grinned. "Costumes will be mandatory."

Peter continued to hit Neal with off-the-wall ideas all the way to the roof, carefully avoiding what he suspected the true reason was. Last week it had rankled Neal deeply to discover his acrophobia had returned. Peter was surprised he wanted to test it again so soon but was willing to do his part to keep Neal relaxed.

When they got on the roof, Neal opened the bag and pulled out a collapsible field stool.

"Only one?" Peter joked. "Where's mine?"

"This isn't for sitting," he said and unfolded it next to the edge of the roof.

Peter's stomach plummeted at the implication. There was a security wall around the perimeter of the roof, but it wasn't wide enough to stand on. "No demonstration is necessary," he said firmly, striding forward to grab the stool.

Neal stopped him with a warning hand. "You challenged me last week, and I failed."

"It wasn't a question of failing. I simply pointed out an area of concern."

"Not to me," Neal said, quietly serious. "This demonstration is to regain my identity. I'm not afraid of heights, and Azathoth has no control over what I feel or who I am."

"I understand, but surely there's a more sane way—"

"Than what? Doing my hat trick? That would be crazy . . . if I weren't myself." Before Peter could stop him, Neal tossed his hat high in the air then leaped onto the stool to catch it before it sailed off the roof.

His heart performing its own somersault, Peter braced himself to hold onto Neal's legs, but he didn't need to. "Don't you ever pull a stunt like that again!" he growled as Neal grinned down at him from his perch.
Ignoring him, Neal tossed his hat on the ground. Holding his arms straight out in front of him, he locked them in place. Not a tremble, not a twitch. He slowly brought his outstretched arms to the T-position, appearing ready to do a high dive, then jumped off, pirouetting in the air to stand facing Peter. Giving a low bow, he had the cheek to add, "Let the con begin."

Peter gave an especially loud and satisfying snort. "Okay, hotshot, you've proved your point, and yes, I'm happy that you're free of Azathoth's clutches. But no more daredevil antics. Not if you want to participate in this con. Speaking as the leader of this crew, I should ground you for performing this maneuver." He stood and glared at Neal for a full minute, trying to keep his lips from twitching.

Neal was giving his best imitation of Satchmo who'd just retrieved a newspaper, mangled it till it was a soggy mess, and now expected to be praised for it.

"Just this once, and I repeat, for one time only, I'll give you a pass."

"Many would argue that the stunt you pulled at the Monday morning briefing was more reckless than what I just did."

"Not the way I see it. And there will be no competition of foolhardy behavior on my watch."

Neal smiled and turned to admire the panorama, resting his elbows on the barrier. "I plan to come here more, but I'll try to restrain myself. I'd like to sketch the idea you gave me to paint the merger of the Hudson and East Rivers."

Peter walked over to stand beside him. "Be sure to include the Brooklyn Bridge. I don't want you to forget it's there."

"I won't," he promised. He fell silent for a moment, his eyes scanning the view. "Earlier I'd planned to make all the paintings night scenes, but you inspired me to see them in a different light. Now the first one in the series will be sunset over the Hudson River. The night scenes will follow. The last piece will be sunrise rising above the Brooklyn Bridge on the East River. When the van crashed into the Hudson, you rescued me." He paused for a moment. "Now I feel you've done it again."

"You saved yourself both times." Peter pointed out, feeling a warmth that the afternoon sun wasn't providing. "I simply gave an assist, but I like the progression of paintings you have in mind. We've both experienced some sunsets and dark moments. Let's call this the dawn of a new partnership. Will you make an origami for your milestones box?"

He nodded. "I already know what it will be. A silver puzzle box."

"Representing the puzzle you worked on with Jacob?"

"That's one interpretation. Saturday morning I asked Jacob if it were possible to have two triggers." He glanced at Peter. "I couldn't understand why the acrophobia had come back. I thought perhaps it was something else Azathoth had planted which was causing it. I'd hidden my knowledge about the Braque from Jacob as well. He knew I was holding something back." He paused and chuckled. "Jacob called guilt a trickster. He's not so bad himself. He conned me into doing a magic trick with one of the pieces. After I made it disappear, he told me to keep it till I'd defused the trigger."

"So the puzzle was no longer complete."

Neal nodded. "He knew that would be an itch just like that item hiding behind the gargoyle."

Peter had wondered why Neal wasn't happier about solving the puzzle. He was glad Neal admitted
the truth. One more secret unmasked. "Now you can claim full puzzle-master bragging rights."

Neal grinned. "Coming from you, that's high praise. I'll deliver that puzzle piece back to Jacob this evening. The origami puzzle box is to remind myself that uncovering secrets is much more rewarding than keeping them."

"For that, I just might let you toss your hat in the air again . . . as long as you're not standing at the edge of the roof." He glanced at his watch. "I'm sorry but I have a meeting to go to. Do you want to stay up here?"

"No, I've probably indulged in being a slacker long enough."

As they waited for the elevator, Neal asked, "Regarding that promise to not keep secrets . . ."

"Yeah?" Peter braced himself. What next? A stolen Rembrandt? How would he handle something like that?

"Does the promise extend to all areas? Even non-work ones? You see, there's someone I'm thinking of asking out and—"

"Stop right there," Peter ordered, exhaling in relief. "Every man's entitled to a few secrets. I'm giving you immunity on your love life. You know what's work-related and what's not."

Neal broke into a relieved smile. "Thanks, man. I'd appreciate it if you'd keep it under your hat."

"Trying to fly under the radar and avoid the matchmakers?"

He nodded. "With all the Arkham Files scheming going on, my life sometimes feels like a goldfish bowl."

"You deserve some privacy in your personal life. We'll discuss it no more, unless you want to, and . . . good luck. I hope it works out this time."

"Thanks. Me too."

"If you need it, I could be persuaded to run a little interference." More than likely, Bianka was the woman Neal was talking about. It wasn't so long ago that he'd been reticent to reveal his feelings about Fiona. Hopefully Bianka would prove more suitable. That Neal was interested in dating again was a welcome return to normalcy. Kate, Fiona, now Bianka . . . Third time's a charm? "How's that itch to climb the Riverside church tower?"

"It's still there. Going to the roof helps."

"I'll speak with security so you don't have to pull any fast ones to get up here."

"You don't have to," Neal said, waving off the suggestion. "I have my reputation to maintain, remember."

"You have to promise no more acrobatic stunts," Peter warned sternly. "As your boss, may I recommend something a little less extreme? Like, for instance, going on a date?"

Neal grinned. "Good advice. I'll keep it in mind."
Notes: Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoyed the story. A grateful shout-out to Penna Nomen for beta wisdom and cheerleader support throughout the 130,000-plus pages. She managed to find time for me with nary a whimper while working on her novel, not to mention her full-time job. Thank you, Penna!

I'm going to take a short break and leave the stage for Penna who has written a new vignette. This one is a trip back in time to the weekend when Neal helped Peter celebrate his birthday in 2004. In our AU, Peter's birthday is January 11. The action takes place shortly after her story By the Book. Neal has only been working at the FBI for about a month. There are guest appearances by many beloved characters, including June, Byron, and Henry. The vignette is called "Treasure Hunt." She's targeted the second weekend in December to post it.

Penna has also added another post to our blog about her Coursera creative writing course. The assignment was to write a scene where a character is obsessed with an object so much that, given the choice of living without the object or keeping it and dying within 24 hours, the character would be torn over the decision. The title of her post is "Novel Progress: a character's obsession."

As for my upcoming lineup, Diana promised Peter she'd have her story ready in a couple of weeks. I'll post the first chapter of Cinereous Skies on December 13. In this story Neal and Peter's abduction to a distant planet leads to the unmasking of a secret conspiracy, and Neal learns the truth about who he is. If you're curious about the suggestions Peter, Tricia, and Neal made for the story in this chapter, I've written a blog post about them called "Team Suggestions for Cinereous Skies." Caution for minor spoilers!

Back in this world, Neal's been given clearance to start on the Braque, but Peter's keeping a careful eye on him. This is his first week back at work. He hasn't done any field work since California. Is he ready to tackle the U-boat con? That's a big question mark. Peter will have the chance to test Neal's readiness when unexpected news arrives from his cousin Angela in my upcoming story, Dark Rabbit. To solve this Crossed Lines case, Dean and Sam Winchester will be needed. I plan to post Dark Rabbit at the conclusion of Cinereous Skies. The U-boat con is the subject of the following story, Harlequin's Shadow. You can keep track of all our upcoming stories on the story summaries page of our blog.

Many thanks to all of you who took the time to leave feedback. You made posting days that much more special. Till next time!

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Nocturne in Black and Gold board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon

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