There will come soft rains
by Silence89

Summary

Eliot made it home, but he's not okay. Parker and Hardison try to help. Everybody drinks a lot of tea.

Or: The Leverage/Laundry AU nobody needed. This is a Leverage story with only brief cameos from The Laundry Files. I don't think you need to have read any of the Laundry books, but if you're a Laundry fan who hasn't seen Leverage, you'll be confused.
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Parker’s elbow digs into his ribs.

“Hardison, wake up!”

“Hmm…Was I talking in my sleep?”

“Someone’s downstairs,” Parker snaps, getting up and pulling a taser from the nightstand. Which doesn’t actually seem like a safe storage location, considering the other things they keep in there, and he’s about to say so when the meaning of her words finally sinks in.

Shit.

He grabs his phone, but it’s green lights all the way. Whoever it is, they bypassed the alarm. Which means either they are in serious trouble, or…

He’s out of bed and moving fast, bare feet slapping on the stairs, barely taking the time to grab a baseball bat in case it really is an intruder. Parker beats him by jumping the last six steps.

“Eliot!”

Eliot’s leaning against the counter in the dark, sipping a glass of water. Like he just wandered home because he got thirsty, nothing to see here.

“Don’t—Parker, stop!” He throws his arm out, fast and jerky: He’s startled. Hardison almost expects him to turn the movement into a punch. His voice is raspy, like he hasn’t used it in a while. An alarm bell goes off somewhere in Hardison’s head, relief at seeing Eliot mingling with renewed worry.

Parker skids to a halt about a millisecond before she would have launched herself into a hug. “You’re hurt,” she says accusingly.


“Okay,” Parker says. “Does this hurt?”

“Parker,” Eliot growls.

Hardison switches on the light and sets down the bat. “Welcome home, man. We were worried.”

Understatement of the freaking year, he thinks.

“Sorry I’m late,” Eliot says. He’s looking at Parker like he’s trying to memorize her face, but he’s keeping his arms in, taking a step back, nothing but the look in his eyes to say he’s even glad to see them. It stings, but probably Eliot’s just sore and tired from travel. If he’s been traveling.

He looks like crap, that’s for sure. The left side of his face is covered in fading bruises—not quite as bad as Nebraska, he can still open the eye—and where he isn’t bruised his skin is that sickly greenish-pale color white people get when they really aren’t feeling well. His jacket’s hanging loose over his left arm, and Hardison can make out the edge of a sling.
“What happened?” he asks. Not that Eliot will ever give a straight answer.

Eliot’s right hand shoots out to grab Parker’s wrist as she starts to poke. She frowns at him and feels his forehead with her other hand.

“Lost my phone,” Eliot says. He pulls away from Parker and turns back to the kitchen cupboard, pulling out dry goods and putting them on the counter. He’s only using his right hand, and he’s moving his whole body to avoid bending or twisting.

“Your phone went offline three weeks ago,” Hardison says, keeping his voice even. Something’s wrong here, beyond the bruises. Eliot keeps glancing at them out of the corner of his eye, but his body language is shut down hard, and Eliot usually emotes a bit more than that. A lot more than that, if you count “grumpy” and “angry” as moods. Tonight all Hardison’s picking up is stress. “You haven’t checked your email. Or your voicemail. Or used your bank accounts.”

Eliot doesn’t turn around.

Hardison sighs. *Give him time*, he tells himself. Act normal, that’s the way with Eliot. Man likes to think he’s a damn wolf, but he has a lot more in common with one of Nana’s old housecats.

“What are you doing? It’s like one in the morning, you gonna bake or something?” He tries to sound like he’s just curious. Like that’d be a totally normal thing to do, break in after you’ve been— wherever—and just start making dinner. Probably that’s Eliot’s post-torture routine.

“Looking for these,” Eliot grunts, fishing in the back of the cupboard and coming out with a set of keys. “Lost my keys, too.”

“You keep spare keys in the office kitchen?”

“You never use it,” Eliot points out, laboriously replacing the food in the cupboard, still one-handed. “You guys can get back to sleep. Sorry ’bout the noise, I didn’t realize you’d be sleeping here. Call me tomorrow and we can—damn it. Got a spare phone?”

“We have a bed,” Parker tells him, grabbing his arm—the right arm, she’s being careful now. “You’re really hurt.”

“Parker, I can sleep in my own bed.” He’s growling, but if he hadn’t wanted to see them, he wouldn’t have come to the office, spare keys or not. Even if he’ll never admit that. Plus there’s the way he keeps stealing glances at them, like he’s checking them for injuries.

“Gimme the keys, then,” Hardison tells him.


“You’re gonna drive one-handed? Car’s a stick, right?”

“Damn it, Hardison.” Eliot hands over the keys. “If you scratch my baby…”

Like he hasn’t left his *baby* parked behind the brew pub for almost a month.

Hardison doesn’t want to take his eyes off Eliot long enough to get dressed—*three weeks* the man’s been off the grid, *three fucking weeks*—but a shirtless black guy driving a muscle car in the middle of the night is going to get pulled over or worse, so he bolts for the stairs and throws on the first clothes he grabs off the floor, grabbing some pants for Parker while he’s at it. When he gets back, Eliot’s still there, leaning against the counter, a small duffel at his feet. Parker catches the pants and pulls them
on as they head for the door.

Eliot lets out a pained little grunt as he slides into the low passenger seat, then shuts his eyes and leans his head against the window. He doesn’t even move when Parker perches herself on the center console (so much for not getting pulled over) or when Hardison adjusts the radio, and he’s starting to wonder if the man’s slipped into a coma or something when they pull into the driveway and Eliot opens his eyes.

“Home sweet home,” Hardison says as cheerfully as he can, hopping out a little too slowly to help Eliot out of the seat. He does snag the duffel, ignoring Eliot’s irritated growl and beating him to the front door.

“You break in while I was gone?” Eliot asks, looking around the foyer suspiciously. Hardison looks around too. He shouldn’t be able to tell; they hadn’t moved anything.

“You were late,” Parker tells him. Eliot nods, accepting the intrusion. “Thanks for the ride,” he says. He’s obviously waiting for them to leave.

“Oh, I guess I should have followed you in Lucille, huh?” Parker says. “Oops. Now we don’t have a ride home.” She doesn’t bother to sell the con.

“Damn it,” Eliot says. “Fine. There’s sheets in the spare bedroom.” He’s tired enough to thicken his drawl, but he checks all the windows and doors before he stomps off to his room. His footsteps pause once on the stairs, like he might have something to say, but they pick up again, a little slower, and Hardison hears the bedroom door swing shut.

The spare room’s on the first floor, and the bed’s firm but surprisingly comfortable. Hardison props himself against the headboard, listening to the silence from upstairs and wondering, not for the first time, why Eliot even has a spare bedroom. He never mentions houseguests.

“It’s in case he’s too hurt for the stairs,” Parker tells him when he wonders out loud. “You notice he’s got accessibility bars in all his bathrooms? He plans for this stuff.”

Which is totally logical and more than a little upsetting.

“So,” he says. “Ribs, right? And his shoulder. Those bruises on his face probably mean a concussion.”

“Limping a little too,” Parker says. “Left leg. He was almost hiding it, so it’s probably not serious. He had these in his bag.” She hands him some pills.

“Percocet,” he tells her, scanning the pills. “And…gotta look these up, hang on. Got it. Antibiotic and a muscle relaxant. Well, if he takes those together, he isn’t going anywhere before we wake up.”

“He isn’t going anywhere anyway. He’s home.” Parker says it like it’s an unquestionable fact, and he loves her for it.

“Yeah,” Hardison says. He pulls Parker close against his chest, and she lets him.

“He’s okay,” she says.

“I know.”
They listen to the house settling.

“Three weeks,” she says.

They hadn’t noticed for almost two. He’d been annoyed when Eliot hadn’t returned their calls—he could usually be relied on to at least text directions to some hole-in-the-wall in whatever city they were visiting that would turn out to make the world’s most amazing dumplings or something, but hey. Sometimes he didn’t answer right away, and Eliot’d been the one to push for six weeks of downtime after that last job. Like it even made sense to split up when Hardison and Parker would be traveling together anyway.

Maybe working with just the two of them had been getting to him. With no Sophie and Nate to provide a buffer, maybe Eliot needed space. They could be a little much to take, Hardison knew that. Eliot said it enough. If it hurt Hardison’s feelings a little, maybe made him a little slower to reach out on the phone, well.

He’d made jokes about Eliot being too busy with some flight attendant to answer a text, but he’d been the one keeping busy, taking Parker on a tour of movie filming locations around the world. Focusing on the ones with the fewest cliffs. Respecting Eliot’s privacy and not trying too hard to track him.

Hardison had been annoyed, then hurt, then edgy, then a little nervous and annoyed all over again at Eliot for making him nervous, but he hadn’t been scared until the downtime was over and Eliot didn’t swagger in with a cryptic comment about working on his tan.

By then the trail was cold. Hell, there was no trail left at all.

“Those bruises weren’t three weeks old,” Parker says thoughtfully.

She doesn’t say that if Hardison had been better at his job, they’d have found Eliot before—before whatever happened, happened. She hasn’t said it this whole time, and it’s been scaring him worse than anything, Parker showing that kind of restraint. Like she thought it might end badly and she was scared to drive him away too.

Upstairs, water runs through the pipes, then a floorboard creaks. Parker rolls off Hardison’s chest and settles in on her half of the bed, slightly closer to Hardison than usual. He turns off the lamp.

Doesn’t dream at all.

He’s not sure what wakes him the next time. Not an actual noise; Parker’s still snoring softly. Maybe just leftover worry. He grabs his phone off the nightstand and glances at the screen: 4:13. If he wakes Parker now she’ll decide it’s morning, so he slips out of bed as quietly as possible.

It’s three hours later for Nate and Sophie; they might even be starting their day. Sophie’ll be up, anyway; Nate’ll be sleeping off a hangover. They’ve been worried too. He takes his phone out to the kitchen.

Eliot’s sitting at the kitchen table, staring at nothing.

Hardison clears his throat, keeping back and giving Eliot room to startle.

Eliot doesn’t notice. Hardison feels the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

He steps forward, scuffing his feet.
Eliot isn’t blinking.

Hardison freezes too. He doesn’t know what to do—he thinks maybe he should just turn around and pretend he hasn’t seen this, but he can’t. He can’t walk away. So he’s still just standing in the doorway like an idiot, trying to figure out what to do, when the kettle starts whistling on the stove. It goes for maybe ten seconds—long enough that Hardison’s expecting Parker to come investigate—before Eliot finally blinks and sees him.

“You mind getting that?” he asks. He doesn’t acknowledge what just happened. Might not be aware of it.

There’s a mug ready to go on the counter next to a box of cheap tea bags. Hardison’s listened to enough lectures on the proper preparation of loose-leaf tea from both Eliot and Sophie that he’s surprised at the choice, but he pours the water in and fixes another cup for himself, careful to make enough noise that Eliot can track his movement without having to turn around.

He sets the mug in front of Eliot and pulls up a chair next to him—Eliot’ll talk easier if they’re not face to face. But Eliot just wraps his good hand around the mug and shuts his eyes. He’s shivering a little in his hoody, but there’s sweat along his hairline. Hardison wraps his own hands around his mug to keep from reaching out.

Moving slow, he raises the mug and takes a sip. He makes a face and spits it back out, and the corner of Eliot’s mouth curves up a little.

There. That’s better.

“What’s in this?” Hardison demands.

“Chamomile?” Eliot drawls sarcastically. “Mint. Some lemongrass. You ain’t had chamomile tea before?”

“I don’t drink a lot of tea,” Hardison says, a little more defensively than he really feels. “Maybe if I add some sugar?”

Eliot rolls his eyes. “There’s orange soda in the fridge. If you didn’t drink it when you broke in.”

“When we—Eliot, man, we were looking for signs of struggle, or like, a ransom note or something. I was halfway expecting to find—we weren’t here to raid your fridge.” Asshole, he doesn’t add, but maybe Eliot hears it anyway, because he looks a little apologetic.

“Wasn’t like that.” He doesn’t say whether he wasn’t kidnapped at all or whether it just wasn’t from the house.

“You just lost your phone,” Hardison prompts.

Eliot sips his tea. “My mama used to make this when I couldn’t sleep,” he says.

He’s never mentioned his mother before. Not once in five years. Hardison has a sick, angry feeling he’s only doing it now because he knows it’ll throw Hardison off track, get him to stop asking about wherever Eliot’s been. And if he’s willing to go that far, maybe Hardison doesn’t even want to know.

“She’d put honey in it, though. Said it was for sweet dreams.” He huffs out the ghost of a laugh. “Think that’d still work?”
Hardison sighs. Gets the honey and a spoon and puts it on the table.

Eliot just looks at it blankly and shakes his head. “Tastes change, I guess. Don’t like it sweet these days.”

Hardison adds some honey to his own cup and stirs it, then dumps some in Eliot’s. “Try it anyway,” he says, feeling his face flush a little.

Eliot pushes the cup away. “Nah, I think I’m up for the day, man. Gonna go shower. You should go back to sleep though.” He stands up carefully, resting his hand flat on the table like he needs the support.

“You need help?” Hardison asks, trying for casual.

“I can shower,” Eliot snaps.

Eliot’s in the bathroom a long time. Long enough that Hardison gets worried and starts hovering outside the door, listening for movement and hoping Eliot doesn’t notice and kick him out. Not that he’d go. He has a sinking suspicion he might be able to keep up with Eliot in a fight right now. At least if Parker joined in.

When the door to the bathroom opens Hardison has to take a quick step back to avoid being hit. He takes another when he gets a good look at Eliot.

There are bruises everywhere, darkening into black and blue geometric lines like he was crushed under something with edges. There’s a wide semicircle—the circumference would be bigger than Eliot’s torso, a corner of his brain can’t help calculating, part of it’s cut off—of darker bruising that curves across his stomach. It almost looks like…

“Jesus, Eliot, did you fight a dinosaur? Is Jurassic Park real? I knew it!”

“Damn it, Hardison,” Eliot says. He’s keeping his eyes down, avoiding contact, and his ears are turning pink. Like this is embarrassing instead of horrifying. “This is my bedroom.”

He turns away and rummages in his dresser for a shirt. It’s the same story on his back, which is so—if he rules out dinosaurs, and Hardison concedes, if only to himself, that he probably has to rule out dinosaurs, then what does that leave, some kind of torture device? Hardison feels a surge of nausea.

The bandage on his left arm is already in back in place, post-shower, and he’s careful to support the arm as he moves.


Eliot considers for a moment, then says, “Body armor.”

Hardison feels the blood drain from his head. “This happened through body armor?”

But as horrifying as that is—he’s going to have to research the pounds of pressure it would take to do that, even though he knows he doesn’t want to know—no one puts body armor on a man before they torture him. Half a hundred nightmares, banished in a sentence. Maybe banished. Hopefully.

Eliot grunts. “Since you’re here, make yourself useful and grab me a shirt. Cold in here.”

“Eliot…”
Eliot sighs. “It’s over, man. Don’t—I’m fine.”

He’s not, though. Hardison can see him shaking, just a little. And it isn’t cold in here. Gently, trying not to touch the worst of the bruising, he wraps his arms around Eliot’s chest and pulls him into a hug. Listens to his heart beat.

“All right,” Eliot growls, sooner than Hardison wants but a little too slow to deny he wanted the hug.

Hardison lets go anyway, taking a moment to rub at his eyes with the back of his hand. Eliot doesn’t offer any more information, and Hardison isn’t sure what to say that isn’t just freaking out or yelling at Eliot for getting into…whatever the hell this was, so he picks out an old, soft t-shirt he’s seen Eliot wear enough times it must be a favorite.

Parker’s standing there when he turns around, arms crossed. She takes in Eliot’s injuries with wide eyes, then grabs the shirt and helps Eliot slip his arm in, ignoring his grumbles. “Does it hurt?”

“Yes, Parker. It hurts.”

“She’s here?”

“Here, then.” She holds out Eliot’s pill bottles.

Eliot hesitates.

“You don’t have to be tough all the time,” Hardison snaps. “Just—Eliot, take the pills and go back to bed, okay?”

Parker glares at him. He’s breaking the rules and he knows it. But how Eliot thinks they’re going to just act like this is nothing, like his pain doesn’t matter. He takes a breath. House cat, he reminds himself.

“We’re here,” Parker tells Eliot cheerfully. “We’ve got you. It’s okay to be fuzzy for a while.”

Eliot runs his hand through his hair. Sighs. Takes a Percocet and one of the antibiotics and puts the bottles on his dresser. “You guys mind giving me some privacy in my own bedroom now?”

Hardison does mind, and it’s obvious that so does Parker. But it’s not the right moment for that discussion. It’s probably never going to be the right moment, and Hardison’s just going to have to accept that.

In the meantime, they have other things to worry about.

Chapter End Notes

Takes place post-series Leverage and after The Rhesus Files in The Laundry Files (AU from there, and I have not read Delirium Brief at all yet). I don’t own the rights to either of these, and I’m not making any money on this.

This is my first fic on here, so please let me know if I need to adjust the tags/warnings/whatever. I have no idea why this, the most random, self-indulgent h/c fic, is the Leverage fic I have finished first of all the half-written ones hanging in my cloud, but here we are. This started as an entirely different Leverage apocalypse story that it no longer resembles in any way, and I don’t really know what happened.
Anyway, I have somehow turned my Trump-era stress writing into a Leverage/Laundry crossover novel. Enjoy?

Title is from a poem by Sara Teasdale.
“We have to come up with a new plan for the McKinleys,” Parker says, smothering a yawn.

“You don’t think we should put that on hold, maybe call Nate and see if he and Sophie can take it? Did you see Eliot—I’m thinking we don’t need a job, we need a damn ambulance.”

Hardison looks around the kitchen for the coffee machine and comes up with a French press, so he refills the kettle and puts it back on, dumping the tea mugs in the sink for now.

“He looks like he tried to wrestle a shark while wearing body armor, Parker. That’s literally what this looks like to me. Is that—is that a thing now? Like some kind of hitter extreme sport? Did he fall in a shark tank while taking down a supervillain? I mean, I don’t even know what could have—Are we not making our jobs challenging enough for him? Because if he needs some new challenges, I could figure something out. Let an alarm go off once in a while, or we could take down a cage fighting ring? Do you know where we could find one of those? Because it would obviously be safer than whatever he does when we’re not looking.’’

“He’s acting weird,” Parker says, ignoring his rant. “Weird for hurt-Eliot, even. So he needs us to be normal for him.”

“Normal? Normal is calling your friends when you get ate by a shark, Parker. I mean. Did you see him. And I just—what if he died? I had nothing, mama. No freaking clue about where he was. What if he died in a freak shark wrestling accident and we just never found out?’’

She leans forward at the table, propping her chin in her hands. “He’s not dead. Look, when you were a kid? Before you found your nana? What made you feel better, the foster homes where it was ‘ooh, they sent a pretty blonde one this time, let’s have cake and pretend we’re a family and everything’s special and perfect’ or the ones where they just told you not to eat anything that wasn’t on the top shelf of the fridge and you were going to be third in the shower schedule? We should do the job.”

He sees her point at the same time he adds tracking down the cake people and ruining their credit to his ever-growing to-do list.

“We don’t have a lot of wiggle room to do it right,” he says, conceding.

They’ve been avoiding deciding about the job all week, and he still thinks they should consider tying Eliot to his bed, but Parker’s right about the importance of routine and right about needing to act fast. The McKinleys will lose their patent if they don’t shut down the lawsuit by the end of the month.

The problem is, even if work is the best thing for him, Eliot obviously isn’t going to be able to play the college-football-player-turned-survivalist-blogger Hardison spent a full afternoon inventing for him. He doesn’t look like he can fight, either, although he’ll probably disagree. They’ll need to get a better look at that arm somehow; hitting things always puts Eliot in a better mood.

“Two-man con with Eliot on surveillance duty,” Parker says, thinking aloud. “Adapt Eliot’s identity to you, but play it as a straight distraction. Can you throw a football? I guess you could sprain an ankle right away or something?”

“I can throw a football,” Hardison says. It stings a little, how just because he’s, okay, not incredibly coordinated, they assume he’s useless at sports. He’s average. It’s just that next to Parker and Eliot, average looks a lot worse. “And it’s only touch football, right, no tackling? I can do that. Maybe not
well enough they’ll want me on the team all the time, and we’ll have to downgrade college ball to, like, high school, but if I have something else to offer…”

Parker fishes a notebook out of Eliot’s junk drawer and starts scribbling notes.

“We’ll come back to that. Then I fake a break-in at the storage annex while you’re meeting with Welch—they’ll send their guys running. I’ll slip in when they’re distracted and grab the papers while you…Hmm. Fifteen minutes from the annex to the vault, more if I’m still dodging guards. Can we have the fake break-in on a timer or something? And can you wipe their files from the meeting room?”

“Welch is seriously paranoid, babe, it has to be a hard connection. I could fake a bathroom break and get to one, maybe? Parker 2000—”

“Hardy.”

“—Parker 2000 could trigger the alarm in the annex. It won’t hold up for long once they have a security response, though—and I can’t give it orders while I’m meeting with Welch, that’ll be too obvious, so they will find it. Can you run it remotely while you head for the vault?”

“Mmm. Can you pull up the floor plan again?”

Hardison pulls out his phone and they both lean in to look at the tiny screen, bumping heads a little. Parker swipes it from his hand and curls around it, blocking his view entirely. She pulls out the notebook again and doodles something as she thinks.

“This is ridiculous,” Hardison says. “We have an office full of equipment for this, and he can’t spend one night in the apartment?”

The kettle whistles, and Hardison scoops coffee into the French press, yawns, adds more coffee, then sets a timer on his phone. It already smells better than chamomile.

“Do you speak French?” Parker asks. “Or can you just do the accent?”

“Un peu,” Hardison answers.

She looks at him steadily, and he sighs. The problem with dating your mastermind is she has to know your weaknesses as well as your strengths. Which is true in any good relationship, no doubt, but at least in a regular relationship you don’t have to announce them all the time.

“I took it in school and did some DuoLingo before we went to Paris that time—I understand it pretty well, and I can fool an American who hasn’t spoken French since high school, but anyone better will see through it and an actual French person will probably spit in my face for trying.”

Parker just nods and scribbles on the pad again.

“What’s the job?” Eliot asks, entering the kitchen and giving the coffee an approving look. He’s shaved and he’s wearing the sling. His pupils are tiny, and the artificial light isn’t doing wonders for his skin tone; Hardison can’t help it, he reaches to steady him and blurts something stupid about resting before Parker’s glare catches him and sends him back to the counter. She’s right about how to play this, he can see that—Eliot’s alert and interested and focusing on them, asking about the job like it’s any other day, so Hardison gives the coffee a stir and lets himself smile.
Eliot needs a few minutes to get his head together. Hell, he probably needs a few months, but he knows he’s not going to get’em. And now he’s wasting whatever time he has left, just sitting on the edge of his bed like a damn zombie. He’s still damp from the shower and he managed to wash his hair well enough, but he can smell the thick sweet air of that place clinging to him, the old blood and rotted meat on that thing’s breath when it—

Fuck it.

He shaves carefully, takes his time getting dressed—hell, he needs it, the shoulder strap is a bitch to manage and his arm is throbbing with his heartbeat. The Percocet’s barely touching it, but at least the ache of his ribs is—well, it ain’t gone, but he doesn’t have to pay attention to it if he doesn’t want to. Good enough.

The kitchen smells like coffee, thank God. Hardison’s standing at the counter squinting at the French press like it’s a mystery when Eliot knows the guy could probably give a ten-minute PowerPoint on the chemistry of coffee brewing. Probably would, too, if Eliot were ever dumb enough to mention it.

Parker’s frowning over a notepad at the kitchen table. Neither of them has noticed him yet, so he lets himself just watch them. They’re planning something, he can tell by the way Parker’s biting her lip, the distinctive furrow between her brows. She’s seeing floor plans in her mind, itching to move but waiting for her moment. It’s a job, of course. He should have realized. Hardison always has one lined up when they come back from a break like this, and he shouldn’t have expected—he’s screwed up their plans already, leaving them without a hitter, and he’s going to have to fix it somehow.

Parker asks Hardison if he can speak French, and he turns to sputter at her, saying something about some dumb app, and eventually—he’s way too unobservant, how has he survived this long—he looks around and sees Eliot. His smile is forced, and he looks a little guilty, like Eliot shouldn’t want them to move on without him.

Not yet, though. They don’t gotta do it yet.

“What’s the job?” he asks, stepping into the kitchen.

He tries to say it casual, like he’s just a few minutes late for the morning briefing, but Hardison’s nostrils flare and his hand twitches up like he wants to tell Eliot to stop.

“Eliot, man—I don’t think—don’t you want to lie down?”

“No,” Eliot says. He knows what he wants, and it’s this: The smell of coffee in his kitchen, Parker and Hardison close enough he could reach out and touch them if he needed to.

“I want to get back to normal,” he tells Hardison. “Quit fussing like an old lady and run it, Hardison.”


Eliot lets himself relax a little, lean against the counter.

“Sarah and Howard McKinley,” Parker cuts in, smiling. She’s harder to read than Hardison, but also more likely to take things at face value. “He’s a materials engineer, she’s got a master’s in public health. Together they incite crime.”
“Woman, you are amazing,” Hardison says, reaching up for a fist bump.

She gives it to him without even needing to turn her head. “They invented a machine that makes clean water out of air. A lot of water. They say it could save millions of lives.”

Parker pauses expectantly, so Eliot chimes in agreeably, falling into the rhythm as well as he can. “One in ten people don’t have access to safe water.”

His mouth is full of the metallic taste from the trickle in the cave, but he keeps it off his face.

“And it’s solar powered,” Hardison chimes in. “Really, it’s gonna change the world.”

“Except, for geniuses? The McKinleys are stupid.” Parker says.

“The McKinleys trusted the wrong people,” Hardison clarifies. “Wrong person. They were going to crowdsource production online, but Geoffrey Welch—that’s Geoffrey with a G—cherry-picked them as an investment opportunity, then offered to handle the manufacturing in his own facilities over at ReadySetGear. Next thing the McKinleys knew, Welch stole their design and filed for a patent himself. And he ain’t interested in low-cost, low-profit sales to NGOs.”

“He’s trying to corner the prepper market,” Parker says.

“Preppers are people who stockpile survival supplies for, like, the upcoming zombie apocalypse,” Hardison explains. “They have a ton of online forums where they trade tips and product recommendations. A lot of them are more in love with fancy gear than I am. Some of them spend hundreds of thousands of dollars constructing bunkers and stuff, it’s nuts.”

“What’s the timeline?” Eliot asks.

Parker glares at him. “We were going to send you in last week. We only have till the end of the month before the McKinleys lose out for good and Welch jacks up the price on the water machine.”

Right. He nods, acknowledging he screwed up.

They have a right to be angry. They’ve obviously been worried, and besides that he has a job to do here, one they count on him for, and he’s—it’s unprofessional, to say the least. Showing up late with no explanation at all. Not even Someone called in a favor and it got complicated. Not There was a problem with transportation.

That’s all he’d meant to say; he’s not stupid or selfish enough to pull them in on this. Ain’t like it would have given away any fucking state secrets, but his tongue wouldn’t make the words and a bolt of pain shot down his spine just for trying. A smaller one plays across his nerve endings just for thinking about trying again.

It’s overkill. Hardison’s a geek, and he pretends to believe in all kinds of stupid shit, but what he knows about Eliot—about reality—has him primed to think about terrorists with bombs, not apocalypse-worshipping cults and interdimensional portals. He wouldn’t fill in the blanks.

“We were planning to send you in as a big-name survival expert,” Hardison’s not as obviously angry, but Eliot’s pretty sure it’s there under the surface. “But the in was through a pick-up football game Welch and a lot of local prepper guys are into. You know, let them see you’re one of the boys, then drop your name—I got the online ID backed up, you’ll love it—and Welch’d probably ask you to move into his freaking bunker, not to mention his company.” He gestures at Eliot’s sling. “Looks like we need a new plan.”
“Lucky you guys are quick thinkers,” Eliot says drily. “What kind of muscle does Welch have?”

Hardison rubs his chin, letting Eliot know he’s not going to like the answer. “Not muscle, so much…but half the company’s ex-military, so even though they’re small-time, if it came to a fight…”

Well. This is a good opportunity, then—it’s the answer to something’s he been worried about since…it’s a good excuse to get started on a solution, even if Eliot’s going to hate it. “Gonna have to go to the bench, then.”

“What bench?” Parker asks, frowning.

“A substitute,” Eliot explains. “You want me to try calling Quinn?”

Quinn works well with them, or well enough. But if he’s going to do this, he ought to do it right, set them up with someone they can trust if—when—he has to go back. And Quinn’s not right for them without Eliot to supervise. He’s too cocky, too quick-tempered, and he’s in it for the paycheck, not the mission. Not a long-term solution. “Or I got a friend could use some cash. Be good for you to meet some new hitters, expand the roster. My buddy ain’t much of a grifter though. We might have to just keep him as backup.”

“We don’t have a bench,” Parker tells him. “We have you.”

“We aren’t talking about Leverage International?” he asks, keeping his voice calm and reasonable. “If we’re gonna expand, we might as well try some people out. You can’t just—lot of hitters won’t be good for you guys. Best if I put together a list and let you get to know the ones who might be okay.”

The notebook makes a little slapping sound as it hits the table.

“We don’t want to replace you, we want you. We made that plan for you, Eliot,” Parker snaps. “You were supposed to have fun. And you got yourself hurt without us. You probably don’t even speak French.”

They made a plan for him. A welcome-home present. Like kids setting up a surprise party. And here he is, coming home all fucked up and stomping on the cake.

Maybe he can make it work.

Might be the painkillers talking, but it’s what he wants anyway, why he came back. Why he’s gonna keep telling the suits no as long as he can. One more job with just the three of them—maybe two or three, even, before it’s time to find them a replacement. If they weren’t on a deadline, if he could have a few weeks to heal first. But he can hear out the plan, check the situation for himself. He can always call Quinn in a day or so, if things look too dangerous.

In the meantime, he can be selfish. He can have this: Parker’s smile as she takes down the bad guy; Hardison’s stupid babble as he pulls rabbits out of his hat from the van; helping people, regular people, without killing or dying or causing more trouble than he’s come to fix. Building a world worth saving.

As long as he can.

“I speak some French,” he says. “But it’s with a Congolese accent. Will that work?”

“No,” Parker snaps again. “What’s wrong with you?”
“I can still be a survival expert,” he tells her. “We could set up a book signing or something. Football 
would have been fun, but you always have contingencies; I know you can come up with another 
way.”

Hardison starts slamming mugs on the counter, like he’s suddenly remembered there’s coffee and 
wants to remind the rest of them.

“Until someone bumps into you in the elevator and punctures your lung,” Parker says quietly. “Eliot, 
I can’t make a plan that’ll get you killed. Or get us killed because you go down over something 
stupid.”

“I’m pretty hard to kill, darlin’,” Eliot says. “And I already said we should bring in backup.”

Parker throws her pen, aiming for his left shoulder. He reaches around and catches it easily in his 
right hand, ignoring the pull through his chest at the motion, keeping his face quiet. If that was her 
test, he passed.

“What’s wrong with you?” she says again, and he doesn’t know what she wants. Not for him to call 
in another hitter, apparently, even though it makes sense, and not for him to work without one.

She makes a frustrated little noise, like he’s doing something wrong.

“I need to know, Eliot,” she says. She’s using her mastermind voice, making it clear this is about the 
job. “I can ask Hardison to leave if you want to keep being weird about it, but I need a status report if 
I’m going to plan this. So. What’s wrong with you?”

Oh.

She’s right. He’d tried to get around it, letting them get a look earlier, but if she’s going to be the boss 
she has a right to a full(ish) account. He just—he hates this part. Nate almost never made him report 
like this, just trusted him to say what he could and couldn’t do. Hell, often as not Nate ordered him to 
do more than he said he could do. At least he knows Parker will play it smarter than that.

Still, he finds himself stalling just a little. He passes Parker a mug of coffee, brushing against 
Hardison as he passes, claiming some space. Takes his own cup. Reminding them it’s a normal 
briefing; he always has bruises and shit. Planning is one thing, but there’s no need to overreact.

“Eliot?” Parker prompts.

“Broken ribs. Fractured humerus, but it’s just a crack, really, not a full break. Bunch of bruises. 
Some…internal bruising, but that’s mostly healed already. Might, uh, might be good if no one hits 
me in the stomach for a little while.”

There. And it came out easy enough—a warning throb from the geas, but his own injuries seem to be 
fair game, at least as long as he’s not trying to tell anything else. Even that line about the body armor, 
back in the bedroom—he probably wouldn’t have said it if he thought he could say it, but at least it 
let Hardison know it wasn’t a kidnapping, he hadn’t come home trailing enemies. They’re as safe as 
he can make them, for what little that’s worth these days.

He sips his coffee, thinking that over. It’s—it’s fucking terrible coffee. Way too strong and 
overbrewed. Hardison’s wincing over his own cup like he just burned his mouth on the stuff, and 
Eliot smirks a little. Serves him right for abusing good beans like that.

“Are internal bruises different than internal bleeding?” Parker asks, glancing at her notepad like she 
has a contingency outlined for either answer.
Technically bruises are internal bleeding,” Eliot explains. “So…”

“We should take you to the hospital,” Parker says, but not like she expects him to go.

“I’m fine,” he tells her. “I don’t need—I already did that.”

“At least go lie down, man,” Hardison says. He’s wide-eyed, like hearing it’s worse than seeing it for himself earlier. Well. Hardison’s never really had much of a sense of what injuries to worry about, always freaking out when a head wound bleeds a bit but acting he honestly thinks a cracked rib heals in a week.

Eliot shakes his head. He’s tired, yeah, but he’s starting to float a little on the painkillers now, and the shower got the worst of the tension out of his back. “It’s better if I move around a little,” he explains.

“So, no fighting,” Parker says, turning a page in her notebook. “How long do you need for recovery?”

“Depends what you mean,” Eliot says. “For the, uh, bruising, a week, maybe? Arm, probably more like six, ain’t much I can do to rush it. But I can fight with one arm. I’ve done it before. Even with a broken arm.”

He grins, remembering that time in Syria. “A cast makes a pretty good weapon.”

Hardison lets out a long-suffering sigh, so Eliot skips the story.

“No cast on this one, though—upper arm you just gotta strap it and keep it still,” he goes on. “Faster recovery ’cause you don’t lose so much muscle tone, but less mobility while it heals.”

Parker rolls her eyes. “What happens if you get hit before a week?”

He’s honestly not sure. Doctors always overstate things, but. “Better if I don’t let anyone hit me.”

Parker makes a note on her pad. Hardison gulps his coffee again, like he didn’t learn from the first sip. Makes a horrified face.

“Man, I do have sugar,” Eliot says, happy for an excuse to change the subject. “Where’d you learn to make coffee, anyway?”

“You can’t do this again,” Parker says.

“Wasn’t exactly the plan.”

“I’m serious. We can’t replace you, Eliot. You’re the best hitter I know, and you’re the best grifter of the three of us, and you’re…we’re a team. And I can’t plan jobs if I don’t know whether you’re going to show up with bruising, so you need to promise this is the last time.”

Aimee’d asked that too, back when. Stood in the doorway with her arms crossed, trying to glare him into submission. Like now he was out of the service, he should just forget about everything, go to his PT appointments and settle in and be the dependable boyfriend—husband—she’s been waiting for.

He’d wanted to, or wanted to want to. But no matter how hard he’d worked at it, how much he smiled and nodded and agreed to her demands, they both knew he wasn’t up to the job. Hell, the horses startled every time he walked in to the barn, by the end. Like they could smell the blood on him.

Difference was, back then he’d wanted to leave. Despite himself, maybe, but. He’d needed the
action, the sense he was doing something that mattered.

Here, now, he already has that, and partners who know what he needs and plan for it, turn it into something good. Who want him, Eliot Spencer, not just some imaginary future version of him. Even if they don’t want him quite like he sometimes lets himself wish they would.

“Eliot, just promise,” Parker says. The drugs have him dangerously off-balance, he realizes. He doesn’t even know how long he’s been standing here, not telling Parker what she needs to hear.

But he can’t.

“I already said I’d keep you safe till the day I die,” he says instead. “I’m gonna do that, Parker, one way or the other.”

If he didn’t know her so well, he wouldn’t see the flash of hurt in her eyes as she hears him not promise to stay. Like she should have known better than to rely on him at all.

“If I were free to choose,” he tells her, holding eye contact and willing her to believe him, to trust him this far. “If I could choose, I’d choose you every time, forever. Both of you. But I swore an oath a while back, and it means I don’t always get the choice. And I learned a long time ago not to make promises I can’t keep.”

“Then promise to take us with you,” Parker says. “We’re a team. We can help.”

“No,” he snarls, and—Trevor’s screaming and they have to blow the gate how is he still screaming how no time oh god he’s out of position he has to—hot coffee splashes onto the back of his hand, stinging a little.

Fuck, he’s fucking shaking again.

He turns and dumps the coffee in the sink. It’s awful anyway, and he clearly doesn’t need the caffeine. Fuck. He breathes in and out, deep as he can with his chest how it is, focusing on the water running down the drain, slowing his heart back to something normal. He hip checks Hardison a little as he turns back from the sink—the guy’s hovering like a damn mother hen—but the ache of the bruise on his hip as he does it is grounding, real.

“So, football’s the only way in?” he prompts them. He’s been letting them get sidetracked, but Parker’s right, they have a job to do. “We can’t just run a straight heist?”

Parker exchanges a look with Hardison, one he can’t quite read. He turns his back to them, giving them privacy while he pokes around in the fridge, looking behind the beer and orange soda like somehow it’ll have restocked itself while he was gone.

“We can,” she says slowly. “That’ll be the fallback. But if we do that, Welch’ll still take them to court and the thing might never get made at all. What I want is to take him down, and I think we can do it if…” and she’s off, laying out a twisty little plan that, he notices, is going to leave him tied to the van for most of the week. He adds air fresheners to his mental grocery list, pulls up a chair and settles in.
Work the problem, Parker reminds herself. And when there’s too many problems, you break them into steps and tackle them one at a time. Or call off the job and run, of course, but that’s not on the table anymore.

Hardison’s the first problem. He’s freaking out about Eliot disappearing even now that Eliot’s back, and she can tell it’s driving him nuts that he doesn’t know what happened. He keeps hovering at Eliot’s elbow and staring at him like he might vanish again.

It’s no good. Parker would go crazy if he did that to her, and Eliot’s like her; he needs space when he’s upset. He keeps snapping at Hardison, which wouldn’t be a problem except that he keeps pausing before he does it, like insulting Hardison takes effort. Hardison can tell, too, and it’s making him hover more.

She breaks the feedback loop by sending Hardison back to the office to work on the new plan, hoping he knows enough to pack some clothes for them for a few days. Eliot needs space, but he needs supervision too.

That’s another problem. Hardison thinks this is his fault, just because Eliot turns out to be really good at going off the grid. But she’s the one in charge, and Nate left her very clear instructions about how to take care of her people.

Most of them were obvious, things she already knew, like how to keep Hardison from making things ridiculously complicated. (Give him a deadline 65 percent sooner than the amount of time he claims something needs.)

Some were about things she wouldn’t have thought of, like this one: Never give Eliot time off when he’s thinking of leaving.

“You think I wanted to drag us up a mountain? Eliot’ll tell you he needs time off, and that’s when you keep him too busy to get in any trouble.”

But it made sense to keep their heads down after they stole the Federal Reserve. And Eliot would never just leave them, anyway. Not without at least telling them first, because he would never, ever, leave them unprotected. He hadn’t said anything about leaving after the Fed job, just that they needed to lower their profile and he for one planned to go fishing. It seemed like an acceptable risk.

Nate would have known to stop him.

And now he’s hurt, which is bad and scary but probably okay for Eliot, but he’s also upset, which isn’t, and he wants them to have a bench.

It might be too late to solve this with Nate’s user manual: She can’t keep Eliot all-the-way busy with the job when he’s too hurt to do the job. It’s stupid and inconvenient, and he should know better than to let someone do that to him.

She’ll just have to fill his time another way.

Cooking keeps Eliot busy with his feelings. Parker’s not sure that’s the best idea when Eliot’s
feelings are the problem, but if he cooks something for her in his kitchen it will remind him he likes her and shouldn’t leave. It could work.

“Cook me something,” she says, putting down the notebook where she’s been outlining the new contingencies.

Eliot’s sitting on his couch, pretending to read because he told her he was through having company and she could go home now. (He wasn’t trying very hard to make her leave: Parker’s not company and she already knows she can go home whenever she wants.) He puts the book down and raises his eyebrows at her. “Cook what?”

“Pancakes,” she decides. It might as well be something she’ll like.

“Can’t,” Eliot says, and goes back to his book. She pouts at him from the edge of the couch, counting off the seconds in her head.

At 223, he sets the book down again. “You need milk and eggs for pancakes, Parker. You want to go to the store?”

The closest grocery store is next to the local credit union (shoddy security but a small enough haul that it almost wouldn’t be worth the effort), which makes it 1.3 miles away and down that steep hill. Hardison took the car back to the office, and the motorcycle in Eliot’s garage won’t work with the sling unless he lets her drive while he rides pillion, which he won’t do.

Which leaves walking. Eliot walks about 3.1 miles per hour when he’s just wandering around and about 3.6 miles per hour if he’s focused on his destination or in a crowded city. But he’s hurt; the leg wasn’t important enough to make his list but it’ll mean smaller steps, plus she can see the muscles at the back of his jaw standing out, which means he’s in pain, so 2.6 miles, up that hill…

“Hardison will bring groceries,” she says, sending a text to make sure of it. “Cook something else. Cook Chinese food.”

“For breakfast?”

“They eat breakfast in China,” she points out. “Hardison and I went there on our vacation, and there was breakfast.”

“And you liked the porridge?” Eliot’s interested now. He thinks he’s found a way to make her eat fiber. Which means he’s planning to stick around and make sure she eats fiber. This is a good plan. Except she hates porridge.

“No,” she tells him.

He sighs.

“I didn’t like the food,” Parker says. “I thought it was fine the first time I went, but I didn’t know about food yet then. So this time I thought it would be really good because I like it when we get Chinese takeout, and that thing you made with the peppers was okay once I picked out those icky white things, and when I went before I just bought food when I was hungry, but Hardison has all these guide books and he picked a really fancy hotel and planned all these meals for special dates. And you were supposed to text us and tell us where to go for real-people food and maybe come and have dinner with us since no one was looking for us in China, but you were fishing, only I guess you weren’t really fishing, huh? So we only went to the fancy places and nothing tasted right, and I tried buying food from this grouchy guy on the street because he reminded me of you, but it wasn’t like
your food and I didn’t like it.”

She pauses to see if he’s still listening, and she can’t tell. His eyes are all blurry. It’s probably just because he’s on drugs, but it means she’s going to have to be really clear. She summarizes for him. “So you owe me Chinese food.”

Eliot scrunches his forehead, but his eyes crinkle a little, so it’s okay. “I don’t think I can make you Chinese food either. But let’s see.”

Eliot rummages through his cupboards, pulling out noodles and some oil and spices. “Okay,” he says. “It’s not going to be very authentic, but I doubt you care. Go outside and see if I still have vegetables.”

Eliot keeps his kitchen organized, but his garden’s different. The vegetables are in half-circle planters made of boards and cinderblocks, like he’s trying to pretend planting a garden is a temporary thing he might walk away from if he gets bored, even though doing it that way probably took more work. Some of the little plots are overlapping, and there are flowers growing all mixed up with the vegetables, like he might eat them by mistake. Everything’s a little bit overgrown. Probably no one’s been back here since Eliot left, she decides. He’s going to have some work to do.

She pokes around and picks some vegetables. Eliot wasn’t very specific about what he wanted, so she takes cucumbers and strawberries because she can tell they’re ripe and she likes them.

He’s sitting at the table when she comes back in, not doing anything at all. He smiles at her but his eyes don’t crinkle.

“Okay, wash those and—Parker, I said vegetables. Strawberries are fruit.”

“I want strawberries in it,” Parker says. It sounds a little weird, and she doubts she’s going to like it. But Eliot makes his “There’s something wrong with you” face, which is almost like smiling, and gets up from the table. He makes her chop things. At first she doesn’t do it like he taught her, but he doesn’t take the knife from her, so she has to correct herself and do it right without him. Maybe because he’s still shaking a little.

That’s happened to Parker before, back when she was young and things sometimes went wrong, and it’s scary. She needs her hands to do what she tells them to do. So does Eliot, so that might be why he’s upset.

“That goes away,” she tells him.

He follows her gaze down to his hand, then ducks his head like he’s embarrassed. “I know,” he says. “Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m not.”

He makes her a strawberry-cucumber-noodle stir-fry. It’s not bad, but it tastes tense and mixed up. It’s definitely not his best work, and she tells him so. Eliot likes when she gives him feedback on his cooking.

He takes a bite. “Maybe with balsamic,” he says, setting his fork down thoughtfully, like he’s going to keep experimenting until he gets it the way he wants.

It’s a normal-Eliot thing to say, so she’s doing this right.

“You should eat it anyway,” she tells him, when half her plate is gone and Eliot’s barely tasted his.
“Or are you on a diet? No noodles, like Sophie does sometimes?”

Eliot frowns. It’s rude to talk about people’s diets. Sophie told her, but Parker forgot.

“It’s working,” she tells him brightly, as an apology. “You look really skinny.”

People mostly like that, but Eliot must still think she’s being rude because he scowls and takes a big bite of his noodles.

Cooking helped with the Eliot-leaving problem, she’s pretty sure. Not all the way. She’s going to have to be careful for a long time, after a mistake like that.

She thinks about it for a while, watching him. He’s just eating like it’s a chore, like she used to do sometimes before he told her about food. He isn’t doing it right. That’s okay, though. Eliot might think food has to be special, but food is also food, fuel to help you climb things or punch people or heal injuries or whatever you like to do. It’ll help whether he enjoys it or not, so it doesn’t need to go on the list of problems yet.

Her phone rings while he’s stacking their plates in the dishwasher. It’s Sophie, and she wants to talk to Eliot.

He makes a funny little face like he doesn’t want to do that, but Sophie’s good at fixing things when people are upset, so Parker says “Yes, he’s right here and he wants to talk to you too,” and hands him the phone.

Eliot sighs again and rubs his face before he takes it, then carries it to the living room and sits back on the couch.

Parker stays where she is for a while, going over the list of problems and rearranging them. Hardison is as fixed as she can make him for right now. He’ll feel better now that he’s in his workshop with a puzzle he can solve, and anyway his brain will catch up soon and realize Eliot’s home and doesn’t need to be rescued anymore.

Eliot’s voice drifts from the living room. “Hardison exaggerates, you know that. I’m fine.”

Keeping Eliot busy will be an ongoing project, and maybe one she can use to solve the next problem on the list at the same time. She’ll need supplies, though.

She pokes her head into the living room to check on him first. Eliot’s lying on the couch with his eyes closed, not moving. Her stomach jolts a little bit.

Then he shifts and says, “I’d rather hear what you’ve been up to. Who did you end up casting for Lear?” and her stomach settles down. He’s fine. She only worried for a second because he’s all pale and sick looking. And maybe there was something wrong with the noodles. It’s fine.

It doesn’t take long to find what she needs. She’d already poked through the boxes in Eliot’s garage last week, when they were searching the house, and she’d had to pay attention then to make sure they put it all back the way it was so he wouldn’t be mad when they found him.

The garage is nice, like a mini-warehouse. All the tools are laid out where they’re easy to find, and it smells a little like damp cement and oil. It’s much better than the garden for relaxing.

When she goes back to the living room, Eliot’s off the phone, but he’s still lying on the couch with his eyes closed. She watches him for a minute, then pokes him gently in the side, just to make sure. Eliot’s tougher than other people, so it’s hard to tell when he needs doctors.
“What, Parker?” he grumbles, batting her hand away. She’s going to have to rework the job a little more. Hardison still messes up sometimes when he’s grifting, and grifting without Eliot is like climbing without a rope: It can be fun. But you can’t make any mistakes.

“You lied to us about going fishing,” she says. “And you didn’t apologize.”

Eliot pushes himself up to a sitting position. “I didn’t lie,” he says, looking her right in the eyes. Sophie says that means a man is lying, but Eliot isn’t. She can tell. “I went trout fishing with an old friend. It was…” he trails off and does that thing he did in the kitchen, where his body is there and he isn’t. She waits for a while, then she pokes his ribs again and he jumps a little and blinks.

“I wasn’t lying,” he says again. “Something just came up.” He fakes a cough as a reason to stop telling her things, but that’s okay. She doesn’t need to know what happened right now; that’s a lot further down her list.

What matters for now is he hadn’t lied.

“Nate wants you to call him,” Eliot says. He’s looking at the box she brought from the garage, curious.

“Later,” Parker says. That might be another mistake. Maybe Nate knows how to fix Eliot. But he’d probably have to come back to do it, and her gut says that’s a bad idea. If Eliot’s going to stay with her and Hardison, they need to be the ones to fix things. And she has a place to start.

She opens the box and hands Eliot his present.

He blinks. “An old padlock. This is the one you told me not to use.”

She nods, smiling as she sits cross-legged next to him on the couch. This is going to be fun. “It’s too easy to pick. But it’s perfect for this.”

“Perfect for what?”

“Fixing your hands.” Eliot doesn’t look like he gets it. “The shaking.”

Eliot drops his eyes and stares hard at the lock, turning it over in his hand. “That’ll stop, remember? It’s fine. I don’t need—how is a lock going to—I don’t need help.”

“I know,” she says. “It’s not a big deal. It’s just extra adrenaline, right? I mean, most of the time you like adrenaline, so it’s not like it’s a problem. I just thought you might like to fix it faster.”

Eliot’s looking at her now. “With a padlock? Parker, if this is one of those things you learned in therapy, like that creepy doll…”

“No!” She lets him see on her face how much this is not one of those things. She takes back the lock and puts it on her lap, pulling out her picks. “This is something I taught myself. Look. I like adrenaline too. But sometimes it can be too much, and it feels weird and I have to jump off a building or steal something. For you that would probably be hitting things. I bet you want to hit someone right now, right?”

Eliot’s mouth twitches in a tiny smile. “Kind of,” he says.

“But you can’t because you got hurt,” she reminds him. “So, like if I can’t steal things or climb things, that makes me feel…bad.”
Eliot doesn’t say anything.

“When I first got to juvie, I couldn’t stop shaking,” she says, holding out her hand so he can see how steady it is now. “I wasn’t scared, just really, really mad, but then I couldn’t stop shaking. I was already good at locks then. I have good hands and a natural talent. But it wasn’t skill. I didn’t know how to work around things like I do now. I mean, I was still pretty young, and I hadn’t met Archie yet.”

She picks the lock as she talks, opening it and then closing it to do it again.

“I thought I couldn’t pick the locks with my hands shaking. So I got scared. And then that made me make more adrenaline and I shook more and I couldn’t do anything. I guess I could have stabbed someone, but the other kids were leaving me alone, and I couldn’t stab a guard without an exit.”

She pauses, but Eliot doesn’t mind that she thought about stabbing the guards, not like Hardison would. “Good policy,” he says.

“I made a set of picks out of bedsprings right away,” she goes on. “But I still couldn’t use them because my hands wouldn’t stop. Then I got mad at myself for not being able to stop, and that was bad.”

Eliot just waits.

“So I decided to pick the lock anyway. The bedsprings didn’t make very good picks and I couldn’t do it when anyone was around because I couldn’t trust the other kids, and I couldn’t find the pins when I did get a chance to work on it. But after the first few tries I figured out my hands stopped shaking when I was concentrating on the lock. Cool, right? And I learned how to adapt to difficult circumstances, like picking a lock in the dark or on a moving train or with just one hand, so even before Archie taught me I already had a lot of skill. And now if I get all jittery and I can’t do anything real, I can still practice locks with different challenges and it makes it go away faster.”

“That’s good for you, Parker.” Eliot rests his hand on her shin so she knows he isn’t being sarcastic. “It sounds like a good system. But I ain’t much at locks.”

“You could hit people even though you’re shaky and it would probably do the same thing, but Hardison told me I had to make sure you rested.” Eliot’s mouth quirks in a smile again, like he thinks she’s being funny. “And you like having exit plans as much as I do.”

Eliot’s grip gets really tight on her shin. He lets go after a second and rubs the spot he touched, like he might have actually hurt her.

“If you weren’t so bad at locks, you could escape from things easier. It would make us more efficient if I didn’t have to rescue you and Hardison. This is a good chance to practice, so even if it doesn’t work for your hands, it’s still a good use of your time.”

“I only have one good arm,” Eliot grumps. He takes the lock. Eliot never says no to team safety or anything she really asks him to do.

“That’s why this lock is perfect,” she tells him, handing him the picks. “It’s way too easy for me. We can start with my picks, and once you have that down, we’ll move on to found objects.”

Eliot fumbles with the picks. He cheats at first and uses the hand in the sling to hold down the tension bar, but she stops him. If he’s tied up he probably won’t be able to do it that way, and she’s already letting him use real picks.
“You’re really slow,” she tells him. He rolls his eyes, but the second time is a little faster.

She’s never really coached Eliot on locks before. It’s hard to do when people already know the basics, because you can’t feel what they’re feeling, and a lot of people have numb, stupid hands. But Eliot’s hands aren’t stupid, and she already knows this padlock well enough that she can tell Eliot what he should be feeling, and that helps. He gets faster almost every time, so it’s not as frustrating as she thought it would be.

She decides they should do this more often, with different locks so he doesn’t get too used to it being easy. Hardison too—it really would be better if they could get themselves out of handcuffs, for instance.

Eliot’s hands are shaking a lot less now.

She’s about to suggest they move on to the found objects part of the program—she’s already spotted some wires that might be stiff enough, and there are staples in the couch upholstery and strings on his guitar—when she realizes he’s getting really sweaty.

He doesn’t argue about taking the pill this time—he takes two. “So I can practice being drugged,” he tells her in a voice that means he’s teasing.

It’s a good idea, though. She’ll have to try it if she sprains her knee again.

She clips the strings on his guitar with the wire cutters from the garage and ignores the noise he makes. “Eliot, it’s just a string. You can’t play it with one hand anyway. Would you rather I took apart your lamp? We’re actually using that.”

He’s terrible with the guitar string. She’d hoped he could get used to it before the drugs hit and make him fuzzy, but he doesn’t. She bites her lip, considering, and decides not to give him back the picks. He has to be able to do this under adverse conditions, and this is probably the only chance she’ll have to coach him while he’s drugged and no one has a gun to their heads.

“That’s what I thought happened,” she tells him. She’s doing a finger agility drill with her pick, spinning it around each of her fingers while she watches him fumble with the lock.

“Mmm?” He’s got the pins now, and he’s managed to bend the string to hold the tension while he rakes with the other end.

“When you didn’t show up. I thought someone probably hit you with a dart or something and they were keeping you drugged. Because you’d be dangerous otherwise, but you do react really well to drugs. Remember when Sterling drugged your coffee? Bam! No resistance. You should work on that.”

Eliot pauses and looks at her for a few seconds, then goes back to the lock.

“That’s how I’d take you down,” she tells him. “Or with a sniper rifle from a safe distance, if I wanted you dead and not just captured. But no one found your body, so we were hoping for the dart thing.”

“That’s a good plan,” Eliot says. “You think about how to take me down a lot?”

“Hardison says he’d use a drone.”

Eliot’s mouth twitches again. “He doesn’t want to nuke me from orbit?”
“You get his references!”

“Don’t tell,” he says.

She mimes zipping her lips and locking them. Eliot doesn’t really care if anyone else gets his jokes as long he thinks they’re funny. It’s nice that he’s letting her share this one.

“He looked everywhere,” she says more seriously. “We both did, but he had more places to look.”

“You call anyone else looking for me? Besides Nate and Sophie.”

Parker shakes her head. “Just Flores. We had to know it wasn’t Moreau.”

Eliot’s jaw twitches.

“We were worried,” Parker says. “But Flores seemed a little off when we asked if he’d heard from you, and he’s your friend. It made Hardison nervous about spreading the word you were missing. Did we make things worse?”

Eliot shakes his head. “You did good. Thanks.”

Eliot looks down at the lock, clearing his throat, and a second later there’s a click. “How’d you like that?” he asks, grinning.

“Slow,” she tells him. “You’re shoving it in there and wiggling like you forgot what the inside is supposed to feel like.”

Eliot looks at her like he’s thinking about saying something, then shakes his head and coughs into his shoulder.

She takes it back. “If you go lighter and let it be a little loose in your hand, you can feel the pins like…one, two…four…” the lock clicks open and she sticks her tongue out. “Try it again.”

She calls a halt when Eliot’s time starts getting slower and his fingers get clumsier.

“We can do this again in an hour,” she tells him encouragingly. “You made a lot of progress, but Archie says it’s not good to practice when you’re too tired unless you’re already really good. It’ll lock in bad habits.”

Eliot drops his head back on the couch. “Don’t you have things you need to be doing for the job?”

“No,” she reassures him. “It’s fine. Hardison’s taking care of it. I’m helping you all day.”

Eliot chest heaves like he has to cough again and he leans forward to make it stop. His arm wraps around his ribs like they’re hurting him, but it’s not time for more pills yet.

“Do you need water?”

He shakes his head. “I need—I’m worried about my garden. It would really help me if you could maybe weed it? And water it.” He shakes his head like he’s having second thoughts. “Not a lot of water. I have a drip line.”

“It did look overgrown,” she tells him. “I guess I can do that. You probably shouldn’t bend like that.”

Eliot drops his head back onto the couch again. “Thanks, Parker.”
“But how do I tell what’s a weed? Is it like ‘leaves of three’ or something?”

Eliot rubs his forehead like he’s getting a headache. He does look pretty tired. “You could take a nap while I do it,” she tells him. “How hard can it be?”

Chapter End Notes

I decided to aim for Sunday/Wednesday updates, but I'm going to screw that up right away because I'm going eclipse camping.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It takes most of the day to build the ApocaLight, but by the time he’s done, Hardison’s half-hoping for a zombie uprising or something so he can show it off. Just a small one. Once Eliot’s feeling better. It’s definitely going to get Welch’s attention. He texts Parker he’s on the way back and gets bring groceries starving in return, so it sounds like she’s managed to keep Eliot out of the kitchen and hopefully in bed.

She hasn’t.

He hears Parker laughing from the backyard, follows the sound and finds them in Eliot’s garden, which looks like they’ve spent the whole afternoon tending it. There’s even a plastic grocery bag full of harvested produce that looks like the makings of Eliot’s pasta sauce—it’s the exact opposite of what they agreed Eliot should be doing today.

Parker’s wearing a big floppy hat that couldn’t possibly belong to Eliot, one of Eliot’s gym shirts, and her pajama pants, which are covered in dirt. She’s pulling a piece of wiring off of one of Eliot’s tomato cages, grinning a hello at Hardison over her shoulder.

Eliot, thank God, is sitting on the little bench, but he’s got enough dirt on his knees to make it clear he’s been working, not resting like a sensible human being. He’s got shadows under his eyes to match his bruises, but he looks up from the little padlock he’s playing with and smiles. He’s looking a little less corpelslike by now with some sun on his cheeks, so at least there’s that.

Hardison sets down his laptops and the groceries, catching Parker’s eye. “Parker? Sweetheart? Can I talk to—”

“Eliot’s teaching me foraging,” she yells. “It’s a survival skill.”

Hardison’s not sure it counts as foraging when you consider she’s in a vegetable garden, but Eliot does have things spread out. It’s probably to satisfy the plants’ different needs for sun or something, but it gives the space a relaxed, homey feel, like everywhere you turn there’s something growing. If you sat right in the middle during the growing season, you wouldn’t be crowded, but you might not be able to see the fence.

Parker hands Eliot the wire and bounces over. “We’ve been waiting for you! We found Eliot’s football and we want to see your moves. Eliot thinks you don’t have any.”

Hardison feels his exasperation meet her cuteness: No contest. He chuckles a little as he hands her an armful of gear.

“Y’all moving in?” Eliot asks, eyeing Hardison’s bags.

“I brought you a phone,” Hardison says, fishing it from his jacket and handing it over. “Same numbers’ll ring through as your old one, but you didn’t sync all your contacts so I hope you got’em written down somewhere. Oh, and Sophie’s waiting for your call.”

Eliot makes a face at that. “Already heard from her.”

“Suck it up,” Hardison tells him lightly. “You don’t want us freaking out, don’t disappear.”
“You know I can still beat your ass, right?” Eliot threatens with a smile. Despite the exhaustion, he’s making solid eye contact for the first time all day. Maybe Parker has the right idea. Hell, she usually does.

“Why’s it always got to go to the violent place with you, man?” Hardison shakes his head, letting Eliot see his smile.

“Why you always gotta tempt me?” Eliot asks. “All right, Hardison, stow your crap and let me see what you’ve got.”

“What I’ve got? Brother, you are looking at an NCAA Football champion. You don’t even know how good I am. Just you catch your breath while I put the milk away and it is on.”

Eliot pinches the bridge of his nose, stifled agony on his face.

Hardison freezes. “E, you okay? You need another pill?”

“You’re talking about a video game, aren’t you?” Eliot groans, shaking his head. “You—you think you learned football from a video game.”

So now Eliot’s just being cruel, playing like that at a time like this.

“Think?” Hardison calls over his shoulder as he shoves the front door open. “Eliot, man, I know.” He doesn’t mention the pickup games with his foster brothers. Let Eliot underestimate him for once. Especially since the man ain’t gonna be tackling him today.

Parker’s got the ball when he comes back out, tossing it in the air and catching it over and over like she’s hypnotized. Eliot’s leaning against a tree, watching her with soft eyes. Hardison feels a little more of the tightness he’s been carrying slip out of his shoulders.

“All right, Parker, go long,” Eliot calls. Parker hands him the ball and trots across the yard to the fence, arms up and ready.

“Should you be doing that?” Hardison asks. He literally bites his tongue a second later—it hurts, too, it works much better as a metaphor—because Parker and Sophie were both very clear about the importance of not hovering. Does it count as hovering when the patient clearly has less survival instinct than a three-year-old? Because not hovering over a three-year-old is what sane people call neglect, or maybe reckless endangerment.

“Hell, no,” Eliot says, showing a glimmer of common sense for once—which only means he’s probably dying. He hands Hardison the ball. “This is on you. Parker’s been helping me all day, man; you gotta tire her out before she kills me. And you’re taking her with you next time.”

Hardison throws the ball back to Parker. The toss goes a little wobbly—it’s been a while since he’s done this—and she has to run sideways a bit to make the catch, right into some of Eliot’s marigolds. He winces.

Parker turns and sends the ball back in a tight spiral, neat as you please.

The football stings a little as Hardison fumbles the catch, but he keeps control of it and pulls it in.

“Listen,” Eliot says quietly. “Thank you for trying to find me. Parker says you worked real hard on it, and—you know, thanks.”

Thanks. Like he’d done any good at all. If Eliot had been stuck in some dungeon somewhere waiting
for a rescue from Hardison, he’d still be there. Or dead.

“I’d say anytime,” Hardison says, spinning the ball in his hands. “But seriously, I think I aged 10 years this week. I got a wrinkle and everything.” He points to a random spot on his forehead.

Eliot shakes his head; he’s not done. “We should have had this talk when Nate left; it’s my fault for not thinking of it. You need to know, if anyone ever did manage to capture me, they wouldn’t be the kind of people you should be messing with. Hell, most of my enemies don’t want me **captured**; they’d just kill me right off. So you’d be pulling Parker into some warlord’s compound and probably getting yourselves both killed over nothing.”

Hardison throws the ball hard. It sails over the fence and he waves an apology at Parker, waiting until she climbs after it to turn toward Eliot. “I’mma pretend I didn’t hear that,” he says, grabbing Eliot’s good arm and pulling him around to face him. “You are our family, Eliot. We will always come for you. Every single time. And don’t think you can try that little line on Parker, neither. That girl would walk through fire for you, and you know it. Hell, Eliot, if someone ever did kill you, she’d probably come up with a plan to steal you back from the dead.”

Eliot pulls his arm away, shaking his head. “Don’t even joke about that,” he says. He looks completely serious and a little angry.

Parker hops back over the fence, football under her arm.

“Didn’t work out too good on Buffy,” Hardison muses agreeably, reining in his own anger—Eliot should know better by now; Hardison might have been a failure at the rescue business, but of fucking course they’re not going to **abandon him**—and taking a step back so Eliot won’t get hit by Parker’s throw. Eliot won’t get the reference, but he obviously knows it is one because his face shifts from horrified to indulgently annoyed. Hardison lines his fingers up with the laces on the ball, and this time the throw’s better.

“So maybe just don’t die.” Hardison finishes, so quietly Eliot probably can’t even hear it.

Parker’s getting bored, running back and forth like she’s dodging imaginary linebackers. She throws the ball about 10 feet to Hardison’s left, forcing him to run for it too, and then she’s charging him full speed, going for a tackle.

“It’s gonna be **touch** football,” he yells, picking himself up and checking the grass stains on his jeans. “None of that.”

“Plenty of contact in those games,” Eliot smirks, wandering over for a fist bump with Parker. “And those guys’ll outmass Parker by a long ways. You gotta practice like you plan to play.”

He demonstrates some ways to take players down without the contact being obvious, trying them on Hardison in slow motion. It’s more about throwing them off-balance and letting inertia take care of things than force, so it’s not that different from a lot of the moves Eliot’s already tried to teach him. Hardison’s careful not to bump him more than necessary during the demo, but he can’t exactly demand the injured guy stop bumping **him**.

When Eliot slips back to his spot under the tree, his good hand’s cradling his side and his smile’s fading.


Eliot makes a face he better not make again. Insulting Nana’s sick food. Man’s taking too much
advantage of the fact that Hardison’s scared to hit him.

“We picked stuff for tomato sauce,” Parker says, picking up the bag. “We could have pizza.”

Hardison cuts his eyes toward Eliot and shakes his head a little. “Pizza sounds great, but let’s take a rain check on that sauce. There’s a place a few miles west of here that’s turning into competition for the pub, and they do delivery. I’ve been meaning to check it out, see what they’re doing.”

“Sounds good,” says Eliot, a little tonelessly. The painkillers probably wore off ages ago and he’s just too stubborn to take them. It’s infuriating. Studies have shown people heal faster and with fewer complications when their pain is adequately controlled, and Hardison knows Eliot knows that because he’s told him probably twenty times. Ain’t no point to this nonsense.

Inside, Eliot heads straight for the couch and sags onto it with none of his usual grace, grumbling that Hardison’s skills are “not terrible,” but he’d better not get too cocky.

“Did you get the invention?” Parker asks.

“Done like dinner,” Hardison says. “Speaking of which, Hawaiian sound good?”

“With jalapenos and olives,” Parker agrees.

“Sure,” Eliot says. He’s supposed to argue toppings at this point. Or rant about how they eat like feral children when he’s not around and insist on cooking them something with more nutrients in it. He drops his head against the couch.

Hardison waves his hand at Parker, signaling nice job getting him to rest.

Parker raises her eyebrows and tilts her head: Trust me.

Hardison glances back at the couch. Eliot’s eyes have drifted closed. Parker sticks her tongue out. She doesn’t try to be quiet as she orders the food, which is probably also part of her plan (sometimes Hardison’s sure it’s making noise that Parker has to focus on), but Eliot’s breathing deepens as he drifts off.

They run through the modified plan again, checking for cracks and patching them with contingencies where they can. It’s not the thing of beauty that was Parker’s original scheme, but it’s going to work, and it’s not as risky as a lot of the things Nate’s had them do. Parker minimizes Eliot’s role even further, which implies something worrying about the day they’ve spent together, but she just says they don’t really need to pull him into the storehouse if Hardison’s managed the smoke bomb, and can she see his invention?

Parker’s impressed with his flashlight/laser cooker/water sterilizer and aims the laser at half the things in Eliot’s living room, finally burning a small hole in a cushion. Hardison keeps waiting for Eliot to wake up and snap, but he’s sleeping more soundly than he’s seen in…ever. He doesn’t even react when they toast marshmallows on the coffee table.

He does snap awake to the doorbell, which has Hardison kicking himself for ordering delivery, but also—Eliot’s instincts didn’t wake him when they were freaking burning the couch he was sitting on. He trusts them, even if he won’t talk to them. Hardison gives the pizza guy a $5 tip out of sheer happiness.

Parker hands Eliot the pill bottles again, and this time he shakes one of each into his hand, no arguing, then adds a second Percocet. His cheeks are still flushed, and Hardison isn’t hovering, so he tells himself it’s sunburn. Which…Now that he’s looking, part of what’s making Eliot look so sick
might just be the lack of his usual tan. Like he’s been out of the sun the whole three weeks. Hardison’s going to put that little clue into his web crawlers as soon as he gets the chance.

“I got something on my face?” Eliot growls.

“Too much sun, maybe?” Hardison says. He doesn’t ask how Eliot’s feeling otherwise.

Eliot sighs like he knows what Hardison’s not asking. “You lock the door, Hardison?”

He did, of course, but he gets up and checks anyway, letting Eliot watch, then tests the windows, even though probably no one’s opened them in weeks. Eliot nods his thanks and swallows the pills.

Hardison gets plates for the pizza—Eliot’s real particular about that, and he hasn’t noticed the marshmallow goo on the coffee table yet—and gives everyone two slices. Eliot rests his on his lap, snatching the laser flashlight from Parker and looking at it skeptically instead of eating.

“It’s called the ApocaLight,” Hardison tells him. He points at the switches and the pull-off cover. “See? Stand it on its end and the laser makes enough to heat to boil water, you know, eventually, or you can just aim it at the thing you want to cook. Look, try it on this marshmallow.”

“Cool, right?” Parker asks.


Hardison nods.

“Could be handy, then,” Eliot says. His eyes are drifting closed again. “Could probably start a fire with the laser part, boil water on that.”


“It’s the drugs,” he says apologetically when he notices Hardison’s worried look. He takes a second bite like he has to force himself.

Hardison pulls his phone out and starts looking into what anti-nausea pills work with Eliot’s prescriptions. Throwing up with broken ribs? Can’t be fun.

“Hey, Parker,” Hardison says, distracting her from staring at Eliot while he tries to eat. “What’s your zombie survival plan?”

Eliot lifts his head, surprised.


“Same,” Hardison says. “Only not a bank. I’d be hoping for more of a Mira Grant Newsflesh zombie apocalypse, so we’d need the internet to organize the resistance—I’d break into an office building with lots of servers. Eliot?”

“Mmm?” Eliot blinks at him hazily. “Sounds like I am the plan.”

“Bro, there’s no safer place for us to be,” Hardison tells him.

Eliot smiles, embarrassed. “Got a pen?” His accent’s thick as honey. Parker obviously didn’t make sure Eliot ate enough during the day either, because the pills are hitting him fast.
Hardison pulls out a notepad and pen and hands it over. Eliot scribbles something awkwardly, then rips out two pages and hands one each to Parker and Hardison. “If there’s ever anything like that,” he drawls, “This is where you go.”

“GPS coordinates?” Parker asks.

“Safehouse,” Eliot tells her. “Oklahoma. Got a well and a septic, and there’s an emergency generator to run’em when the power’s out. Go there. And Hardison, you get your nana to go there too. Chicago’s too close to the lake.”


“So you really are a prepper?” Parker asks.

“A safehouse ain’t a bunker,” Eliot mumbles. “You have safehouses all over, Parker.”

“Not in Oklahoma,” she points out. “Mine are in the kind of places that have stuff to steal.”

“Mmm,” Eliot says sleepily. Hardison thinks it was intended as a growl.

“It’s smart,” Hardison counters, thinking out loud. “Look, here it is.” He pulls up a map on his phone. Eliot’s safehouse is outside a town called Quito, in the Oklahoma panhandle, which is nowhere Hardison would have ever considered. “Rural, so there wouldn’t be too many zombies already in the area, but close enough to town to meet up with other survivors or get more supplies. Plus, statistically speaking, there’s a higher ratio of gun owners in the rural South. Might make it easier to find allies.”

“S’where I’m from,” Eliot says, his eyes closed. “Not there. But not so far. ’f you end up there, you can track down my dad, bring him in.”

Parker and Hardison stare at him. Eliot’s serious about the zombie plan. Very serious, if he’s giving Hardison enough information to track down his hometown. He’s never confirmed what state he’s from before—hell, Hardison’s pretty sure Eliot’s been playing one of his little games with him around that, intentionally clouding the issue to throw off his guesses. Either zombies are real or Eliot’s trying to tell them he trusts them. Or, Hardison concedes, possibly he’s just really, really high.

Parker’s not on the same track. “Where will you be?”

“mm?”

“Eliot, wake up,” she snaps. “If we’re supposed to go to Oklahoma with your dad and Alec’s Nana, why aren’t you going to be there?”

Oh. Huh.

“Eliot?”

No answer.

This time Parker does poke him in the ribs. He blinks his eyes open and shifts away.

“Eliot, where will you be?”
Eliot thinks it over. “Well,” he says hesitantly. “If it were like that movie of Hardison’s? Where were the soldiers in that?” He smiles again, like he’s happy he managed an answer. It’s a sweet smile, relaxed and a little dopy. Hardison wishes he could see it sometime without all the rest of this.

“You’re not a soldier anymore,” Parker tells him. She’s speaking slowly and clearly, like the painkillers might have affected his hearing.

“Retired,” he mutters, agreeing. His eyes are drifting shut again. He leans over and rests his head on Parker’s shoulder.

She sighs and runs her fingers through his hair, scratching a little. Eliot smiles. Hardison takes the plate off Eliot’s lap.

“Should we try to get him in bed?” he whispers.

“Can’t move,” Eliot mumbles into Parker’s shoulder. He lifts his head and lets it drop, demonstrating. “Opiates and muscle relaxants have…” he trails off.

“A synergistic effect, right,” Hardison finishes for him, amused.

Hardison settles on the other side of Parker, hoping she doesn’t need to move anytime soon. Woman has a bladder of steel from all her time hiding in air vents, though, so it should be all right.

“Zombie movie night?” he asks.


So Hardison pulls up Shaun of the Dead. Eliot doesn’t respond much even when Parker laughs, but by the end of the movie he’s somehow lying across both their laps. He might have lost a few pounds while he was gone, but he still feels like he weighs a ton. Hardison does not have a bladder of steel, but it’s his turn to run his hand through Eliot’s hair and feel him almost purr in response, so he leans forward carefully and starts Zombieland.

Parker leans sideways and kisses him, long and cool and slow, like it’s normal to kiss with Eliot right there, and Hardison hopes Eliot really is as out of it as he seems because his lap just became a more interesting place. They half-watch the movie between kisses, not taking it further but not really stopping (except for the part with Bill Murray), and Hardison has to call a time-out before the credits roll. He slips out from under Eliot as gently as he can, sliding a pillow under his head and letting out a long breath of relief when Eliot doesn’t even mumble a response. Parker, of course, slipped out from under 3,000 pounds of sleeping Eliot while Hardison was still trying to find an unbruised spot to touch him, and she’s already taken the extra blanket off the guest room bed, laying it over Eliot and kissing his cheek before leading Hardison back to the bedroom.

It feels like getting away with something and like coming home.

Chapter End Notes

Feel free to skip this, as there will be some exposition in later chapters, but here’s a brief guide to the Laundryverse for those who are interested. (Side note: I can’t believe people are reading this and commenting! I should warn you the whole plot of this is unbelievably stupid. I just needed to get it out of my system, and I promise my next
The Laundry Files are a series of books by Charles Stross, mostly featuring a character named Bob Howard, who will not appear here. They take place in the UK, with excursions to other locations.

The Old Gods of Lovecraft are real, as are various other Lovecraftian-esque horrors. There are Deep Ones living in the oceans, and the governments of the world have secret treaties with them and even exchanges in towns like Aberdeen—they are more powerful than we are, but are uninterested in dry land.

Magic is real, and almost everybody who uses it does so with computers, although there are several characters who can do it in their heads. Technically anyone can do that, but doing it too much or making a mistake will cause death by possession or cause tiny extra-dimensional parasites to chew lots of tiny holes in your brain.

Laundry: The Laundry books focus on the Laundry, which is the British intelligence agency that deals with this sort of thing.

Nazgul: Other countries have paranormal intelligence agencies as well: In the U.S., that's the Black Chamber, more often called the Nazgul and occasionally the OPA. They are generally bad guys in the Laundry books, as they do things like binding extra-dimensional entities (read: demons) to the souls of some of their assets to control them. However, they are technically allies of the Laundry and do act like it to a certain extent because:

Cae Nightmare Green: The current location of our solar system combined with the increase in population (and the explosion of microchips in everything) means too many intelligent observers in our dimension, which thins the walls to the other dimensions and has caused us to enter Case Nightmare Green, a mass-extinction level event which has already begun. Case Nightmare Green will last for several decades, during which we will be invaded by the Old Ones while simultaneously magic becomes easier to perform (see consequences above). (Note: Case Nighthmare Green is the Laundry codename. Americans probably call it something else.)

Geas: Laundry employees (mostly people who learned something they shouldn't and found themselves drafted) are bound by a geas (magic compulsion) which forces them to keep the secret, follow lawful orders, and further the interests of the organization. It has been successfully subverted at least once. Laundry employees can also use their warrant cards to compel cooperation from the police, etc. It's not stated how the Nazgul control their people, but at least some of them have tattoos that allow their Control to possess their bodies as needed.

In addition to governmental groups like the Nazgul and the Laundry, there are independent occult criminal/intelligence groups and individuals.
Chapter 5

Parker and Hardison are talking softly over his head, and someone’s running their fingers through his hair, light enough not to even really hurt. He should stop them anyway. He shouldn’t get to have this, not this much comfort, not when Trevor—but he can’t make himself push them away just yet. It’s the drugs, is all, making him weak.

He shifts a little, feeling his body’s response come unsettlingly slow. All his limbs are too heavy, and he can’t even worry about it. Someone rubs his arm, below the bandage but it hurts, a muted roar through the fog of the drugs, and he tries to tell them to knock it off but he isn’t sure it came out as words. Whichever of them it is drops their hand to his chest and makes light, slow circles instead, tracing the outline of his heart.

They’re still talking about zombies, he thinks. It’s a stupid trend. Real zombies aren’t like that, they’re just…inhabited. Safe as long as you don’t touch them, and no time to worry about it if you do. He’s heard they use them as guard dogs over in Britain, which is pretty fucking sick if you ask him (no one has). But at least they’re dead. Better than what the Chamber will do, if he lets them get their hooks in.

“Shh,” Hardison says. Then, “Here you go, is that better?” Hands shift him a little, and it is better, the pressure’s off the worst of it. The hand in his hair starts up again, regular as a heartbeat.

The zombie movies are stupid, but they’re useful. They might even be part of the Plan, getting the population ready for what’s coming. Or maybe not, since the intel in them is mostly wrong. Still, they’re something he can talk about, if he’s careful. He gave them his safehouse, and maybe the future’s going to look a lot more like Lovecraft than World War Z, but they’ll make the connection. Parker will find his old gun safe and have it open before…but Hardison’s not a killer, not even a hunter, and he shouldn’t. And Parker. She’ll do what it takes, make a set of picks out of a bedspring or shoot monsters, he knows she can do it, but he’d die before.

He will die, before.

He could cut down to Quito, empty the safe. But then they’ll be defenseless.

The drugs pull him under while he’s still fighting it out in his head. Someone’s playing with his hair and bony knees are pushing on his wounds every time they move and he doesn’t go deep enough for dreaming.

When the hand stops moving, he drifts closer to the surface, wary. It’s fine, though. They’ve forgotten he’s there, is all.

They’re kissing.

They’re kissing, inches away, and he should move, or make a noise, or anything to remind them they’re not alone, Eliot’s right here and he’s awake. He doesn’t do this. He always backs away, goes home, lets them have their own pure thing.

He should feel embarrassed. Or ashamed—he’s not a voyeur.

But he doesn’t. He feels good, like he’s a part of something whole. Not forgotten: included. It feels like home.

Eliot’s never pretended to be a good guy. He holds on that feeling and lets it take him all the way
Eliot fires another burst, and he’s not missing, he never misses when it matters it’s who he is, his
gift/curse/fate, but the beasts ain’t stopping and

One of the cultists lurches from the left his eyes writhe green and Eliot doesn’t miss he doesn’t miss

Trevor turns, yelling something Eliot can’t hear over the covering fire. He doesn’t need to hear it; he
can see for himself the gate’s too strong taking hold taking root feeding on them oh god those stupid
fucking fools and

He meets Trevor’s eyes, sees the question there, gives a nod. Turns and aims and it’s too small too
far and this is it this why he’s here they must have seen it planned it the man who doesn’t miss and

One shot, one shot to seal the gates of Hell and the vicar’s mouth drops open in dismay eyes wide
like Eliot doesn’t know what he’s about to do who he’s about to kill and

Trevor’s screaming he can hear it over everything he’s screaming no time to look no time and

Exhale. Aim.

He takes the shot.

He doesn’t miss.

He doesn’t miss and he closed it saved them kept his promise all his promises his dying day because
he didn’t miss

He closed the gate.

And they’re on the wrong side.

Trevor’s still screaming and what if he can’t die what if—

“Eliot!”

No oh god oh no he had to do it had to save them but Hardison’s here Trevor’s still screaming how
and Hardison’s here and he’s killed/trapped/killed him and he doesn’t want to look doesn’t want to
know.

He turns and Hardison’s here, he’s bending over him his eyes writhing green and

no

no.

“He’s falling he’s falling it

It hurts. Eliot scrambles back, away from the thing that used to be Hardison. He hits the coffee table
with his bad arm and the pain explodes, but he doesn’t slow down—Hardison’s still reaching for him, his eyes are shining and Eliot can’t kill him, he can’t, but Parker’s here somewhere and it might not be too late, so he shoves his feet under him before Hardison can touch him and—and Hardison stops, eyes wide and shining.

He stops.

“Eliot?”

He’s talking. Hardison’s talking, he’s saying his name. This is his coffee table. His couch. His living room. His Hardison, still his, still talking, hands up and eyes wide and shining with the light from his phone. He probably scared him half to death—he could have hurt him. Killed him.

“Eliot, can you say something? I’m so sorry, Eliot. That looked like it hurt, are you okay? Eliot?”

His eyes are shining, but they’re warm and brown and sane and Hardison.

He pauses, trying to put it together. His heart’s still hammering in his chest.

Hardison takes a step toward him, then stops, hands up again. He looks back over his shoulder like he’s checking something, then rubs his head. He looks worried, and Eliot can’t see Parker.

“Where’s Parker?” he asks. It was a dream, he’s got that now, but. He needs to know.

“Sleeping,” Hardison says, keeping his voice low. “Guess you tired her out today. Yesterday. Whatever.”

“She’s okay?” Eliot presses, making sure. “What’s wrong then?”

Hardison laughs and wipes his eyes. If he’s laughing, Parker’s okay. So it’s just that Eliot scared him. It hurts. He hasn’t been able to scare Hardison in years, not even when he’s trying. And now he went and did it in his fucking sleep.

Hardison’s arms are down now, folded over his chest like he’s just realized he’s wearing only his boxers. In Eliot’s living room.

The blanket from the spare room’s lying on the floor in a tangle. Hardison’s pulling himself together now, but he’ll probably feel safer if he ain’t half naked in front of a crazy man. And it’s cold in here anyway; Eliot’s got a chill himself and he’s still layered up in his hoody.

He reaches to get the blanket and the pain shoots through his ribs. He pauses to measure it. It’s a little better, he thinks, considering he’s due for another pill. He’s finally into the soft callus phase, starting to heal.

Hardison bends down fast and grabs the blanket, then freezes again. He holds it out at arm’s length, careful not to get too close.


Hardison frowns. He steps closer to Eliot, his movements cartoonishly exaggerated. Like Eliot’s a stray dog or something, might snap if he’s startled. Great.

So he holds himself still and takes a moment to make sure his posture’s loose and his breathing’s steady, counting off the exhale in his head. Hardison wipes his eyes with the back of his hand again, then drapes the blanket over Eliot, pulling him back toward the couch. Eliot lets him do it, keeping
his head down to make himself smaller, less of a threat. Hardison doesn’t relax, but he doesn’t pull away.

“You hit that table hard, man, did you hurt yourself?”

Eliot considers that for a second, then laughs.

“I mean did it make anything worse,” Hardison says. He’s still towing Eliot by the blanket, not touching him.

“I’m fine.” His arm is throbbing, but he’s pretty sure the stitches held.

“Yeah, I know you are.” Hardison sounds tired. “Did I say how sorry I am? I am so sorry, Eliot. Let’s get you back down on your couch, okay? Don’t want you falling over on that arm, right?” Hardison puts one hand at Eliot’s back, like he can’t sit himself down, and the other on his good shoulder. Eliot starts to push him off out of sheer reflex, but he catches himself and lets Hardison ease him into a seat. The couch smells like fear sweat. He’s going to have to get it cleaned, after all this.

“Good,” Hardison says. “That’s good, right? You comfortable?”

He’s still talking to him like he’s a feral dog, only now he’s petting him, too, pushing his hair back and resting a hand on his forehead.

This time Eliot does push him off, because there’s not wanting to scare someone and then there’s basic self-respect, and he needs all of the latter he can get right now.

Hardison’s bolder now, maybe because Eliot’s sitting and can’t hit him as easily, and he bends over him and rests his lips on Eliot’s forehead.

“The hell?” Eliot asks. He’s still a little disoriented, and he wasn’t expecting a kiss. That’s the only reason he doesn’t pull away faster.

“Checking for a fever,” Hardison says, like what he just did was completely normal.

“…And you were gonna kiss it better?” Eliot asks as sarcastically as he can manage.

“I would if I could,” Hardison says, not seeming the least bit embarrassed. “Nana used to do it like that. And I think you have one, by the way.”

Right. Hardison’s not turning into a zombie, he’s turning into his nana. Eliot wishes there were a ward for that kind of possession—he hears his dad’s voice come out of his own mouth sometimes, when he’s tired or when Parker does something particularly crazy. It surprises him every time, and he tells himself it was just a fluke, and then Hardison tries to reroute the taps in the pub and it comes out all over again. Like it’s just built in too deep to escape. It ain’t that his dad’s not a decent guy—hell, he did his best, and better than a lot of people—but Eliot’s gone to a world of trouble to make sure he doesn’t wind up just like him. For better or worse.

“Eliot? You with me?”

“What?”

Hardison’s frowning at him again, a bit of scared coming back, which makes no sense. He’s just sitting quietly; didn’t even take his head off over the kissing thing.
“I asked if you have a thermometer.”

“I’m fine,” Eliot says. “I gotta tattoo it on my forehead or something?”

“Eliot, you—” Hardison says, then stops. “What if I call Dr. Nguyen? You liked him, right?”

“I already saw a doctor. Yesterday.”

Hardison rubs his forehead. “Okay. We’re going to take your temperature with a real thermometer, and we’ll decide from there. But don’t think I’m gonna let you sit here and die of gangrene or something stupid like that, we clear?”

Eliot rolls his eyes. Hardison tugs the blanket over him and pats his chest, like he’s a dog again. “Just wait right here, okay? Unless you want to go to bed? No? All right, here’s fine, I’m gonna put the kettle on, fix you right up.” Hardison’s voice fades out as he blusters off, wide awake and chipper like Eliot hasn’t interrupted his sleep two nights running.

Eliot closes his eyes. He’s not trying to avoid Hardison, not really—but Hardison’s going to want to talk, and fuss, and he’s going to want to know that Eliot’s not going to snap on him again, and Eliot…he hurts. He hurts and he’s tired and, yeah, he isn’t feeling great, and if he’s going to convince Hardison he’s safe to be around, he needs to make it true first.

He counts his breaths, and tries to focus. Pictures the pain running through him as a series of little streams, trickling away, feeding a river. No screams, no smell, no fear. Just the river. Just part of the landscape. He smooths out the rapids and calms the flow. The trick to pain is not to fight it, try to dam it up. Just keep it between the banks and float with it to the sea.

When he opens his eyes again, the sun is up, the kettle is whistling, and the house smells like bacon.
Hardison eyes the pancake, judging his moment. He shakes the pan, then slides the spatula in and gives an expert flip of the wrist. The pancake flips, neat as you please. Hell, it’s perfect. He’s the pancake master.

It’s the first thing he’s done right since the day Eliot was late to work.

“You didn’t break it this time,” Parker says.

She’s sitting at the table, playing with a little padlock and watching him cook with an insultingly skeptical look on her face, which isn’t fair—he cooks! Sometimes. He could if he wanted to. He just likes to leave Eliot a place to shine, is all, protect his cowboy ego. In fact, that’s probably why he wrecked the first few. It’s subconscious, making sure he doesn’t outdo Eliot in his own kitchen. Yeah.

“So why are you cooking?” Parker asks again. “Why are we awake? Again?”

Hardison sighs. He explained already about—about the thing where he broke Eliot. He might have glossed over a few bits of it. Not the part where he was stupid and thoughtless enough to lean over Eliot and startle him out of a nightmare, just the way he’d…Eliot wouldn’t want Parker knowing he could look that small and scared.

Hardison didn’t want to know it either.

“Because Eliot needs to rest,” he says patiently, keeping his voice low. “And if he wakes up and sees us sitting in his kitchen, he’s going to go ahead and make you pancakes one-handed. Best if we just present it as a fait accompli. See now, there’s some of that French you like, ma petite chou.”

He turns the bacon in the other pan. It’s not his favorite way to cook it. Eliot does this thing sometimes where he covers it in brown sugar and bakes it in the oven and, mmm, it is amazing. He and Parker scarf it down like candy.

On his own, Hardison makes it in the microwave, quick and easy and perfectly edible, thank you.

But Eliot doesn’t cook with sugar unless it’s to make them happy, and he has attitude about the microwave; he likes to cook his eggs in bacon grease, and the easiest way Hardison knows to get a pan full of bacon grease is to cook a pan full of bacon.

The smell is powerful this way, too, maybe strong enough to wake Eliot. He has no idea how Eliot could fall back asleep after what Hardison did to him, but by the time he was back from making sure Parker didn’t in to see what the fuss was about and probably give Eliot another panic attack, the hitter was out.

He’d spent a solid five minutes squinting at him from a careful distance, just to make sure he was all right.

Then another couple of hours in the armchair, watching him sleep.

Eliot hadn’t had another nightmare, at least not that Hardison could tell, and he’d moved enough to
make it clear he wasn’t in a coma or anything. Just sleeping too deep to notice he was being stared at.

It isn't right. Either Eliot’s in worse shape than Hardison had thought—and the comforting thing about being a worrier is that his crew is almost always in better shape than he thinks—or he’s had enough nights like that for this one not to stand out much.

Hard to know what to hope for, there.

But Eliot’s due for another dose of antibiotics, and if he has a fever—not too bad, he was just a little warm, so calm down, Alec—he needs to wake up and take them. Preferably with some food. And bacon? Bacon makes a great alarm clock.

“You’re scared again,” Parker says, opening the lock without even glancing at it.

“I’ve been scared for what, ten days now?” Hardison says. It feels like longer. “You think it counts as cardio? I mean an elevated heart rate’s an elevated heart rate, right?”

“But he came home and you felt better, and now you don’t.”

“Yeah, well, maybe now I’m not so sure he’s made it home yet,” Hardison says. It feels wrong, saying it straight out like that. Like he’s betraying something. Anyone can have a nightmare, anyone can panic. Hardison’s done plenty of both himself.

Ain’t like he hasn’t seen Eliot slip away in his head before, caught up in a memory, or seen how tense he is around explosives. Sleep problems, irritability…Eliot’s been ticking off boxes in the PTSD checklist as long as Hardison’s known him well enough to notice. But he’s also never lost control, never let it slow him down. He’s never run from a threat. Acting a little nervous around explosives is a world away from the horrified, terrified scramble off the couch last night.

“We could ask Nate to come back,” Parker says quietly.

Hardison can’t imagine what she thinks that would accomplish. He likes Nate, he does. Nate brought them together and gave them a mission and taught Hardison a lifetime’s worth of lessons in five short years, and he wouldn’t be who he is, or have the partners he has, without him. He’s a friend and a mentor, and he’s earned their respect. But the man’s an asshole. Especially to Eliot, now that he thinks about it. Nate Ford is exactly what this situation doesn’t call for.

“He’d know how to fix it,” Parker explains, seeing his look.

She’s looking for the closest thing she’s had to a caring parent, someone who might swoop in and come to the rescue.

Hardison slides the bacon off the stove. He puts the pancake pan in the sink and fills the kettle; time for coffee. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” he says. “Nate’s…Nate, you know? But they left, and we’re us now—I think we need to keep this in the family.”

Parker looks oddly relieved. “That’s what I thought yesterday. But he knows how to be in charge of Eliot.”

Eliot got hurt all the time working for Nate. More than he has working for Parker, if this latest disaster doesn’t count. Hardison points that out as he cracks eggs into a bowl, stirring them with sea salt the way Eliot likes.

“But Nate never let him get lost,” Parker says.
It’s the closest she’s come to blaming him for not being able to find Eliot, and it feels like a slap. He can’t even look at her right away.

He wants to defend himself—he looked, damn it. He looked for hits on the darknet, he tracked their former marks, he’d had crawlers sorting through every police or news report, he’d hacked Colonel Vance’s secure computer, he’d—he’d done everything he could think to do, short of putting Eliot’s face on milk cartons. Including a filtered search through the morgues and hospitals of sixteen countries. There were a surprising number of dead white men in their late 30s with blue eyes and brown hair, including three he’d thought really might be Eliot. He’d had to look at their—he’d done everything he could think to do.

He’s still looking, although now he can skip the morgues, thank God. He’s going to find out what happened, he’s going to track down the people who hurt Eliot, and he’s going to end them. He’s been telling himself it’s just a logical precaution, making sure there are no loose ends to come back on him or the team, but if he’s being honest? They hurt his friend, and they are going to pay.

But for someone who still seems to barely know what Hardison can do, Eliot’s surprisingly good at evading him. It’s one dead end after another, and if there’s one thing Hardison learned from Nate Ford, it’s that no one’s interested in unsuccessful scutwork. Results are what counts, and he’d failed.

When he finally turns to face Parker (she won’t be cruel, he knows that; she’ll only want him to improve for the good of the team), he sees his own guilt mirrored on her face.

“Hey,” he says, leaving the stove. “Hey, Parker, c’mere. This wasn’t your fault. How could this be your fault?”

“I let him go.” Which doesn’t make a lot of sense. She lets him pull her in, then melts into the hug, not quite crying but definitely snuffling into his shoulder. “I don’t know if I can fix it,” she says.

“Me neither,” Hardison admits, rubbing her back.

The kettle whistles.

Parker doesn’t let go, so Hardison doesn’t pull away either. “Maybe…I don’t know, Parker. Maybe it doesn’t work like that.”

Parker nuzzles his neck, making a small, dissatisfied sound. Hardison pulls his hand up, cupping the back of her head, pulling her in under his chin. Sheltering her. They stay that way, her breath warm against his collarbone.

“You gonna let that thing go all morning?” Eliot rasps from behind Hardison, startling him into a jump. He hits the top of Parker’s head with his chin and bites his lip a little.

Eliot stalks past them to take the kettle off the heat. He looks annoyed.


Hardison loves stovetop tea kettles.

Loves. Them.

He’s cancelling the electric tea infuser he ordered yesterday, and he’s going to buy a kettle in every color for the office, his apartment, Parker’s warehouse, anywhere Eliot might shut his eyes. He’ll mail some to Nate and Sophie.
Hell, he will install a kettle and hot plate in Lucille as soon as the hardware store opens if it means he has a way to wake Eliot that means he won’t ever, ever have to see him look like he looked last night.

“Hey man,” Hardison says, in what turns out to be not a very casual voice. “How you feeling?”

“Better,” Eliot says. He gives the pancakes and bacon a long look, then nods toward the bowl of eggs Hardison’s had prepped and left sitting on the counter. “You’re cooking?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I thought I’d just—I mean, just this one time, I thought maybe…” Eliot’s expression is hard to read, and suddenly cooking in Eliot’s kitchen doesn’t seem like such a good plan. He’s intruding on the thing Eliot enjoys and giving him one more reason to remember he never actually invited them to stay.

“We were going to bring you breakfast in bed,” Parker puts in out of nowhere. She leans against the sink, hiding the stack of dirty dishes, and makes a pouty face. “Breakfast on the couch, anyway. Less messy that way.”

“I don’t need breakfast in bed,” Eliot growls. “You’re making a mess.”

He reaches for the bowl of eggs.

“Nope,” Parker says. “We’re serving you breakfast at the table then.”

“It’s our final offer,” Hardison says. “Sit your ass down before we go back to the breakfast in bed plan, and don’t think that’s not a real threat—we didn’t say you had to be the one in bed, and you know how much Parker likes syrup on her pancakes.”

Eliot snorts. He pushes Parker to the side and helps himself to a glass of water, then bumps Hardison lightly with his good shoulder as he grabs his pills (skipping the muscle relaxants but not the painkillers). It’s all a little stiff, Eliot faking his usual irritated affection—but the act’s a lot better today, almost convincing, if you ignore his total lack of eye contact. Maybe he is feeling better.

Hardison’s still going to need some data to work with.

“Sit down,” he tells Eliot again. “Seriously, step away from the bowl. I can hack the NSA, I can make scrambled eggs, damn it! That’s like, basic cooking. I just need to check your temperature.”

Eliot finishes prepping the coffee before he sits. Hardison’s more than a little tempted to check his temperature the old-fashioned way again, but Eliot tenses a little when he approaches, so he just hands him the thermometer as matter-of-factly as he can, not touching him. Eliot takes it with another little frown.

“I’m fine,” he says.

Parker grabs the thermometer, looks at it, and looks Eliot up and down, visibly considering where best to insert it. Eliot grabs it back and puts it under his tongue.

Not bothering to hide his amusement, Hardison pours the eggs into the pan of bacon grease. It turns out cooking eggs is easy; his eggs are fully cooked in much less time than it usually takes. It’s just that they don’t look much like they do when Eliot makes them. Hardison suspects he’s missing an ingredient, because the eggs are rubbery instead of fluffy, and they’re a funny brownish color from exposure to the bacon grease.

Hardison resigns himself to the egg tutorial that’s doubtless headed his way in the near future. Really,
there’s probably just something wrong with Eliot’s pan, or maybe with the bacon grease, because Hardison’s made eggs plenty of times in his life with no complaints. Just not recently. And maybe they were never quite as good as Eliot’s, but can Eliot land an airplane remotely with a laptop? No, he cannot. So there better not be any comments about rubbery eggs.

The thermometer reads 100.2. Not a high fever—Hardison’s pretty sure it’s gone down some from last night—but a fever. Hardison runs the possibilities through his head—sepsis, gangrene, pneumonia, not to mention who knows where Eliot’s been and what exotic germs he’s been exposed to.

“It’s normal,” Eliot says, scooping some eggs onto his plate with a distinct lack of enthusiasm. Next to him, Parker’s loading up on pancakes and bacon, which she’s layering in an unstable tower that’s higher than her bowl of cereal. “Normal for the circumstances, I mean.”

Hardison pulls up a chair and pulls out his phone. Dr. Nguyen’s discreet, and he’ll make house calls if the price is right.

“I said I’m fine.” Eliot’s more than annoyed now. He grabs the phone with his good hand and pulls it away. “I’m already on antibiotics, Hardison. I don’t need another doctor. What’s on the schedule today?”

“Surveillance,” Parker says.

They don’t really need to do any more surveillance; this whole job’s been thoroughly mapped out while they waited for Eliot to come home, and Hardison’s pretty sure Parker’s been watching the offices as stress relief while he was combing the darknet for any whisper of their hitter. This is another of Parker’s plans to make Eliot rest. Trouble is, Eliot looks exhausted just thinking about it.

“Surveillance cameras,” Hardison corrects. “Parker’s going to plant some more cameras around the outside of the facilities. You ain’t exactly going to blend with those bruises, and I have to get ready for the football game tonight and keep my face off their radar, so we’re going to monitor the cameras from here; I need you to give me some pointers on how to fit in with these guys.”

The look Eliot gives him isn’t quite a thank-you, but if you translate from Eliot-speak it’s pretty damn close. Parker, on the other hand, looks a little wounded. Guy time, Hardison mouths, and she nods, accepting it for now.

Pharmacies will be opening soon, and he can get those anti-nausea pills delivered. He grabs his phone back from Eliot, who’s carefully depressing the plunger on the French press.

The coffee’s good. Really good.

“This is amazing,” Hardison says.

“Good beans,” Eliot says. “I don’t know how you screwed it up yesterday.”

“It’s your whole setup,” Hardison grumbles, ready for some bickering. “You got to have some coffee before you wake up enough to make the coffee in this thing. And you call my tech overcomplicated. At least I can make a damn espresso without having to, like, start a fire with a piece of flint.”

He waits for Eliot to argue back, but Eliot’s playing with his eggs.

“The pancakes don’t taste right,” Parker says, pouring more syrup onto her plate. There must be half a bottle of it already. Hardison helps himself to a pancake. It tastes pretty good to him—pancakes, it turns out, are easier than eggs, if you take Parker’s breakfast food loyalty out of the equation. He
should set up a blind taste test, see if she can really tell.

“Don’t eat’em, then,” Eliot says, eyes on his plate. “Try the eggs. You need protein, Parker.”

“Is it really zombies these people are prepping for?” Parker asks. “Are they…you know, crazy?”

“Some of them, maybe,” Hardison says through a bite of bacon. “The zombie thing’s more a shorthand, though, like if you’re ready for zombies that means you’re ready for other things too. They’re all getting ready for different disasters, whatever they think is most likely. Could be World War III or, like, solar flares. Or the actual apocalypse from the Bible.”

“So, crazy.” Parker says. She pours the rest of the syrup straight onto the pancake platter. Eliot opens his mouth, then shuts it, visibly deciding to let it go. Parker looks disappointed.

“Not that crazy,” Hardison says. “Like I said, maybe some of the individual people on those forums are a little nuts, but it’s not crazy to keep earthquake supplies on hand if you live on a fault line, right? And the people worried about EMPs or viruses…You know those are real threats. Hell, we’ve stopped’em ourselves.”

“So are zombies real?” Parker asks. “Because Eliot has a zombie safehouse, and I don’t think he’s crazy. Not crazy crazy, I mean.”

Eliot’s head comes up a little, and the corner of his mouth twitches. “It’s just a house,” he says. “I got it because I blend in there and most of the people who might be after me don’t.”

“Because you can’t fake country,” Hardison says, approving the rationale. “Plus I bet rural Oklahoma ain’t really on anyone’s radar in Myanmar. Bit inconvenient, though, isn’t it? Hard to get to?”

“I mostly use it when I get hurt and I need a few weeks to recover.”

Like now. Only he isn’t in rural Oklahoma, he’s here with them. Hardison takes another piece of bacon.

Parker looks disappointed that Eliot doesn’t have a house specifically built for zombies, so Hardison points out that all of Eliot’s houses are at least sort of built for zombies, or at least for general defense.

It turns into a friendly argument about baseball bats versus bows and arrows as zombie defenses—Eliot surprisingly sides with projectile weapons as the way to avoid possible infection, while Parker claims the bat would be more reliable and avoid the risk of running out of ammunition. Hardison doesn’t see why you wouldn’t use both options in a zombie situation and is told he’s missing the point.

They segue into the always contentious side issue of moats and whether they’re a good idea—no, according to both Parker and Eliot, who claim to have invaded/broken into/entered without a formal invitation a few places protected with moats and who don’t believe they’re effective. Yes, according to Hardison, because: moats. Filled with piranhas, for preference. Eliot points out that lethal booby traps are against zoning regulations, as if that were a reason not to construct one. Hardison has half a mind to rezone Eliot’s lot to allow for a moat and maybe one of those pits with the spikes just to prove his point. Well, he’d do it if Eliot didn’t know where he slept.

That gets them through breakfast without anyone having to discuss nightmares and stupid hackers who make them worse, and it takes long enough that even Eliot eventually finishes his eggs and a bit of bacon. They send Parker off in a cheerful flurry of instructions about how to set the cameras (from Hardison) and warnings about not getting bored and going in alone (from Eliot), and if the whole
process of a normal team breakfast has visibly worn out Eliot, Hardison knows better than to say anything.

He waits till Eliot’s in the shower to call Dr. Nguyen. It turns out the man’s in Antarctica, of all places—unreachable for months. He’s going to have to find someone else, and he can—he will—but he isn’t going to be able to find someone with emergency medicine expertise and flexible ideas about house calls and unexplained injuries in the time it takes Eliot to shower. *This* is the kind of thing they need a bench for, and sooner rather than later.

Chapter End Notes

1. This story does have a plot, sort of. It's coming.
2. It occurred to me I should have explained about the guns in Eliot's nightmare last chapter. He did use a gun on his side mission, because it was an emergency and because per the Laundry universe a lot of the Bad Things out there spread by touch, so punching isn't survivable. He did not shoot any human people, only monsters and things occupying former humans. In my headcanon, Eliot was a weapons specialist when he was in the military--his hatred of guns didn't (fully) develop until later.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

In which everyone's getting a bit sleep-deprived, Eliot gets a phone call, and Hardison finds a clue.

By the time Eliot gets out of the shower, fully dressed this time—the man’s starting to carry clothes to the bathroom in his own house, which makes Hardison feel just a bit a guilty—Hardison’s got the bedroom set up for restful surveillance.

“What’s this?” Eliot growls.

“What’s it look like?” Hardison gestures at the laptops set up on the bed. “I set up a command center in here. You mind monitoring Parker while I grab a shower myself?”

Eliot shoots him a look, but he sits with his back propped against the headboard, tapping experimentally at the controls for the comms. He’s probably going to mess up Hardison’s settings again, but Operation Keep Eliot in Bed is a go.

Hardison takes his time with his shower, then brews some tea—not the chamomile, but some mint stuff that’s caffeine-free and smells all right. He does some quick research, and it turns out Eliot’s right. He’s on some pretty strong broad-spectrum antibiotics already, and it’s probably best to give them time to work their magic. He switches his reading to PTSD, even though it’s all ground he’s covered before. If he could Eliot to acknowledge the problem, though, maybe…

When he makes it back to the bedroom, Eliot’s still awake, watching the screens attentively and making notes on a small notepad. Hardison settles next to him, ignoring Eliot’s sigh at the invasion of his bed.

Parker’s got a camera mounted across from the main entrance already, but nothing’s moving on the screen.

“Guard just did a loop,” Eliot says. “Looked pretty bored.”

“We’ve got an hour till the next one, then. So…” Hardison opens a new window on one of the laptops. “I’m thinking Westerns? True Grit? You seen the Coen Brothers version?”

“We should be doing our job,” Eliot says, even though he must realize it’s busywork. “And I don’t watch remakes. They’re always worse than the real thing.”

Which, just. No. Nope.

“Eliot, the remake was clearly the superior film. How can you even say that? The Coen brothers took the fake-ass theme park Old West and made it real, man.”

“You think that was real? It’s still a movie, Hardison. And I gotta be honest with you, there’s just no way I’m picking Jeff Bridges over John Wayne. It’s John Wayne!”

“Movement at the southeast corner,” Parker’s voice cuts in over the comms. She’s got a new camera
online, clearly mounted from the side of the neighboring building. Hardison doesn’t let himself think too hard about how she got it up there. At least she probably enjoyed it. “Delivery truck.”

Eliot turns back to the screen, all focus now.

“Parker, that’s a bad angle,” Eliot says. “We can’t see the approach to the loading dock. Can you shift it 30 degrees to the right?”

“I think we can work around it,” Hardison says. He likes eyes on a situation as much as anyone. Hell, more than most. But Parker’s going to have to go Spiderman across the building to give them a clearer view of a quiet street. “We’ll have the view from the next corner, so it’s what, twenty yards of obstruction?”

“Twenty yards where we won’t be able to see you,” Eliot says. “We don’t need the risk.”

“Fine,” Parker says, frustrated. Maybe she’s not having so much fun with her climb, if Eliot’s been fussing the whole time.

“You told me we needed to check for blind spots,” Eliot points out. “Thought that’s why we’re doing this?”

“I said fine,” Parker says, clearly wishing she’d chosen a different way to keep Eliot busy.

“He needs backup, I’m gonna be slow,” Eliot says, more gently. “And you know how he oversells things.”

“Hey, I’m right here,” Hardison says, wounded. “I can hear you.”

“Good. About time you listened.”

Which is totally unfair. He’s been getting much better at the cons, and he hasn’t been kidnapped by Russians in years now.

Anyway, all he’s going to have to do for this one is play a little football and imitate Eliot. Easy peasy: Just scowl a lot and grunt when people ask you questions. He could do it in his sleep.

He’s just about to say so when Eliot’s new phone rings.

Eliot looks at the screen and tenses a little. Hardison assumes it’s Sophie, and settles back to wait while she works her magic and talks him down from this little overprotective fit.

“Spencer,” Eliot growls as he answers.

On the comms, Parker’s quiet grumbling cuts off. She’s listening hard too.

“I told you I had somewhere I had to be.” Eliot’s voice is stiff. There’s a pause then, “Give me a minute.”

He pulls out his earbud, and looks at Hardison, face blank. “Hey, can you go get a soda or something for a couple minutes? I need to take this.”

Hardison doesn’t get up. “Is this about…?” he waves his hand at Eliot’s injured arm, not sure how else to sum things up.

Eliot turns away and begins the obviously painful process of getting himself up from where he’s propped on the bed.
“Fine,” Hardison says, standing. “But you are going to explain this.”

Eliot just watches him impatiently till he leaves the bedroom and shuts the door.

Hardison pauses and doesn’t hear anything, so he loudly walks toward the stairs, then tiptoes back. Still nothing. He has other options, though.

“Hardison, can you trace that call?” Parker asks.

“I can do better than that,” he tells her, pulling up an app and starting a trace anyway. Eliot’s phone is as secure as he can make it—from everyone else.

“Fool me once, shame on me,” he mutters.

“Do we have audio?” Parker sounds a little uncomfortable with that. Not too uncomfortable to ask, though.

“Not on the phone,” he says. “I thought that’d be going too far. Man has some right to privacy.”

Parker makes a frustrated noise.

“Eliot wouldn’t forgive us, babe. I’m not tapping his phone. But what I can do—” he pulls up another app as he talks, heading downstairs for real this time, “is turn on the mic on my laptop. We’ll only get his half of the conversation, but it’s something.”

“Do it,” Parker says.

“—Nazgûl,” Eliot says, sounding angry. There’s something wrong with the audio feed. Eliot hasn’t even seen the Lord of the Rings movies, as far as Hardison knows. He definitely doesn’t refer to them in conversation with secret scary contacts.

There’s a long pause while Eliot listens, making small noises of acknowledgment here and there, and Hardison tries to think of words that sound like Nazgûl. That’s cool? Has drool?

“I already have a job.”


Parker shushes him. “I can’t hear.”

“An allied nation,” Eliot says, still arguing. “Don’t threaten me with that. If you could give me orders, you’d have ordered me to do it. You think I couldn’t spot your fingerprints all over that setup?”

“They’re threatening Eliot with something,” Parker sounds worried. “Do you have a trace?”

“It was a government,” Hardison muses. He’s not sure if that’s better than another Moreau. It must be, obviously, except…Eliot hasn’t ever shared the details of his government work, and while Hardison can tell himself that these days Eliot would only have taken a job to fight terrorists or something, he’s always been clear that a lot of his military history was on the wrong side of the moral event horizon. Still, it’s a lead.

He checks his phone, and the trace is complete—to an unassigned number. He tries to track the physical location, but he can’t get a lock.

“They’re good, Parker. These are some serious countermeasures.”
“But you can crack it?” She’s set the camera now, and he can hear her slight sounds of exertion as she climbs back across the face of the building.


The algorithm is twisty, like it can feel him coming. Twice he thinks he might have an in, but it shifts fast. No one uses this level of encryption, and Hardison is going to crack it, he is, but he isn’t there yet, and God knows Eliot’s not the chatty type; he’ll be off the phone before—

“Yeah, I’ll be there,” Eliot says. His tone has changed. It’s less belligerent and more…Hardison’s not going to call it defeated, because it’s Eliot. Resigned, maybe. Resigned would fit. “No…Fine…I can get there…Address?”

The call ends. Damn it.

“We aren’t letting him go,” Parker tells him over the comm.

“Hell no,” Hardison agrees. “Not alone, anyway. What’s the plan?”


Hardison doesn’t point out that keeping an eye on Eliot was already his plan for the morning. He goes back to the kitchen and grabs an orange soda for verisimilitude, then lets himself back into Eliot’s room.

Eliot’s right where Hardison left him, watching the cameras. He’s breathing fast, and he’s gripping his new phone hard enough to turn his knuckles white, but he doesn’t say anything.

“Who was that?” Hardison asks. No point in pretending not to be curious. Eliot knows his crew.

“Cable company,” Eliot says in a voice that’s way too empty to count as sarcastic.

Hardison sits on the bed again, taking up a little too much space, testing whether Eliot will let him get away with it. “Eliot, you know you can talk to us, right? If you’re in trouble.”

Ten minutes go by, and Eliot just watches the screen.

There’s still forty minutes till the guard’s next loop.

Hardison yawns.

Thirty-eight minutes, now.

A UPS van pulls up and the driver walks in with pile of packages. Hardison checks his face against the UPS employee records, because he’s a professional, but there is absolutely nothing to see here.

“So, remakes,” he says, desperate to break the heavy silence. “I’ll grant you they ain’t usually better than the originals, but there are exceptions.”

Nothing.

“The Man Who Knew Too Much?” Hardison poses. “Even Hitchcock thought that one deserved another swing, and he aced it the second time, am I right? Eliot? You like that one?”

“Yeah,” says Eliot. He sounds patient. Like he’s doing his best to humor Hardison.
Parker sets another camera, obviously from another stupidly dangerous vantage point.

“Who are you meeting?” Parker asks. “And when?”

Eliot looks around the room, then at the laptop on the bed, realization dawning.

“Anyone ever told you it’s rude to eavesdrop?” He growls. “That was a private conversation, and it’s none of your damn business.”

“Eliot, stop.” Parker sounds hurt, and over the comms, Hardison’s not sure if it’s a strategy or genuine. “We’re a team. We deal with things together. We can help you with whatever this is.”

Eliot looks at Hardison like he expects him to run interference. Hardison folds his arms, siding with Parker.

“I know you’re hurt and it’s making you weird, but you didn’t do this when you got shot, so I don’t see why a few broken bones are making you this way, and you’re scaring us. You have to tell us what’s going on. Just tell us what it is so we can fix it, okay?”

Eliot’s face does something complicated.

“I know talking doesn’t always help,” Parker says. “Hardison’s wrong about that.”

Hardison takes a deep breath to keep from interjecting.

“There’s things you never have to talk about with us if you don’t want to. But for some things it helps. It does. I didn’t think it would but Alec said it would and he was right. I’m not very good at it yet, but you can take your earbud out and talk to just him if you want. He’s good at it and he doesn’t—he doesn’t make you feel like you’re wrong. And sometimes it’s like just letting it out gives you a little bit more stretch in your lines and it doesn’t change very much but it makes your landing softer, and sometimes it’s like you couldn’t find the exit but he has the cameras and he can just tell you where it is. And I think you need to try it.”

Hardison has to take some deep breaths and swallow hard before he can say anything. Parker never talks like this face to face, where he can hold her and kiss her, and he needs to right now. He’d jump off a freaking cliff to kiss her right now. “I love you too,” he finally manages.

“I know,” she says. He’s not completely sure she’s quoting Han Solo—she might just be that amazing on her own. “Eliot? Whatever it is, we’re your team. Just tell us.”

“I can’t,” says Eliot, still watching the screen, his face stony. Like Parker hasn’t said anything that matters.

In the earbud, Parker makes a tiny, sad sound, and all Hardison’s frustration and fear flashes into sudden anger.

He hasn’t hit anyone out of temper since he was 10 years old, and he doesn’t hit Eliot now, but he grabs his good arm, hard.

“That’s great, Eliot,” he hisses. “You can’t. Can’t what? Can’t trust us? Or even just once acknowledge that we are your friends and we’re trying to help you? Parker’s in charge now, she thinks keeping your dumb redneck ass alive is her responsibility, and you can’t give her one fucking crumb to work with. All we been doing is trying to help your ungrateful ass, like we don’t got better things to do, and you just keep—”
“Hardison,” Parker’s saying. “Alec, shut up.”

Eliot’s not looking at the screen anymore. His eyes keep focusing on Hardison and then through him, like he’s slipping into the thousand-yard stare he was working last night. He’s still breathing too fast.

“What the hell, Eliot?” he asks. It comes out too harsh.

“Alec, stop,” Parker says again. “Eliot, do you mean you can’t talk or you don’t want to?”

“Can’t.” Eliot licks his lips nervously. “I can lie. I could’ve done that. I did that for Aimee, though, and it didn’t…I didn’t want to lie. Guess that might have been a mistake, huh?”

“No,” says Parker firmly. “Not a mistake.”

“You’re saying it’s classified?” Hardison asks, trying to feel around the edges of this.

“I can’t talk about it,” Eliot repeats. His eyes are still doing that thing, like he’s barely hanging on, and Hardison’s still not sure what he’s even trying to tell them. Or refusing to tell them, whatever.

“Sometimes you’re better at showing than telling,” Parker says, thinking it through. “Like you showed us Aimee and Moreau. Maybe you could act it out?”

Eliot’s mouth twists, like he’s forcing a grimace into a smile. “Like charades?”

Hardison can’t help it: He gets a sudden, vivid mental image of Eliot miming his way through one of their past jobs, punching the air ferociously, and he lets out a completely inappropriate laugh.

Eliot glares at him, then focuses back on the screen, coughing lightly to cover his own laugh and signal an end to the discussion.

A pigeon lands on the trash can outside the main entrance. Nothing else is moving.

Parker retreats to the bakery down the block, ostensibly to avoid showing her face too much, but really because she wants a mocha to help her think.

They watch the empty street and listen to the sounds of the coffee shop through their ear buds. Eliot doesn’t take his eyes off the laptop. Hardison sips his orange soda.

“I need a day off tomorrow,” Eliot says, too flat.

“No,” Parker says.

“I have some loose ends to tie up from my vacation. It’ll only take a day.” Eliot looks up at Hardison, like he’s making a decision. “If you—I could use a ride, but…It ain’t a safe trip for you.”

“This is you showing us,” Parker says, not quite a question.

Eliot nods, even though Parker can’t see him; he looks serious. “I can take my truck, if you’d rather. It’s fine.”

“I’m up for playing chauffeur,” Hardison says lightly. “I got some sick new road trip mixes I’ve been working on; you’ll love’em.”

Eliot ignores that. “Think before you decide,” he says. “I ain’t gonna let you get thrown in any more pools.”
So it’s like that.

Hardison suppresses a shudder at the memory—the shock of betrayal more frightening than the lack of air. But Eliot’s warning him this time.

“I don’t need to think about it,” he says. He keeps his voice confident and steady. “We’ve been trying to tell you: We have your back, man.”

Eliot flushes a little at that, and turns back to the screen.

On the cameras, another delivery truck pulls up to the ReadySetGear loading dock. Eliot’s gaze sharpens—he’s better with something to work on, Parker was right about that—but it’s just a few boxes. Probably office supplies.

The truck pulls away and the loading dock closes again.

Parker appears, carrying her mocha, and stands at the bus stop, studying the schedule with a bored look on her face.

Graham Wallace, Welch’s assistant, comes out for his second cigarette break of the day. Eliot makes a note on his little pad. “Do we have another camera angle on him?” he asks, still in that too-even tone.


“Something’s off,” Eliot says. He studies the screen. “You run a background?”

“He’s pretty clean,” Hardison tells him, pulling it up. “I didn’t go too deep, but: Graham Wallace, assistant, worked for Welch for over a year now. Before that he worked at a camping supply store—in the marketing department, not on the sales floor—and before that, did a few years in the Navy as an engineer on a submarine. Couple speeding tickets, parking tickets, no other criminal record, and his credit’s not great, but I’ve seen worse.”

“He doesn’t move like a nuke,” Eliot says.

“A nuke?” Parker prompts.

“He doesn’t move like a guy who served on a submarine,” Eliot clarifies. “They tend to not take up more space than they choose. He’s controlling his body, but more like I do.” He says it with less enthusiasm than he’d use to read a menu. A lot less, given Eliot’s strong opinions about menus. Less enthusiasm than a phone book.

“You sure?” Hardison asks.

“No,” says Eliot. “But I’m sure he’s a fighter, and there’s not a lot of call for hand to hand on a sub.”

Wallace finishes his cigarette and pinches it out neatly before throwing it in the trash. They watch him go back into the building.

Hardison hacks into the Navy’s personnel records.

Two women walk out, talking to each other, and head for the bus stop, stopping a few feet away from Parker and ignoring her completely. Eliot makes another note.

“You’re right,” Hardison says, scanning Wallace’s evaluations. “The sub thing’s a cover. He was some kind of special forces—record’s sealed. Administrative discharge in 2006.”
Parker pulls out her phone, turning her back on the women. “So what does it mean?”

Eliot shrugs.

“It could be nothing,” Hardison points out. “We already know Welch likes to hire veterans. And I didn’t dig into the guy’s service record on my initial checks, but I did look through his social media. He’s been drifting into the prepper thing the past three or four years, posting on the blogs and going to meetups. It makes sense he’d work here if he really is retired.”

“Or they’re into something we don’t know about,” Parker points out.

“Or that,” Hardison agrees. “Want to call it off?”

“No,” Parker decides, moving a few steps farther away from the women. “We looked at their finances and their paperwork, and we’ve seen the factory. I don’t think there’s a big conspiracy here. But you need to wear a button cam.”

“Deal,” Hardison says. The water generator really could be a game changer for millions of people, if they can get it out there. *Worth some risk*, he decides.

“Eliot?” Parker asks.

Eliot doesn’t say anything. He looks worried.

“That sound okay?”

“I told you already, we need more backup,” Eliot says. “Hardison might be able to fight free of Welch, but if things get ugly with this guy…Even if I could get there in time, I do have limits.”

“If everything goes to plan, no one’s going to be hitting anyone,” Parker says. “If Hardison digs in to the rest of the staff and doesn’t find anything, we keep going for now.”

“I can do that,” Hardison says. “It’ll take me a few hours. I might not finish before the football game.”

“Get started,” Parker says. “I don’t want any surprises.”

So Hardison retasks one of the laptops for work, leaving Eliot to watch the building on the other. “This is why you need a real TV,” he points out.

Eliot doesn’t argue. He adjusts one of the pillows under his arm without taking his eyes off the screen. The bus comes and the women get on it, but Parker doesn’t.

Hardison adapts a function he wrote a couple jobs ago to exploit his door into the military databases and feeds it the list of employees, then lets it simmer while he thinks about Eliot not arguing.

Hardison pulls out his earbud and waits while Eliot does the same. “Did I hurt you? When I—I’m sorry, I just. I’ve been on edge for weeks now, and. It’s hard for Parker, opening up like that, and it seemed like you were—”

“You didn’t hurt me,” Eliot says. “I ain’t made of glass.”

Except it kind of seems like he is, just lately.

“I could watch this while I run backgrounds,” Hardison offers. “Let you get a nap or something.”
Eliot sighs. “This is fine. You need a new set of eyes—you wouldn’t have spotted Wallace.”

“You really think you’re up for whatever you have going tomorrow? Cause I’m not about to let you get thrown in any swimming pools either, and you might not be made of glass, but you are not okay, Eliot.”

“I’m getting better,” Eliot says. “And it ain’t gonna be dangerous for me. These are the good guys, and…we go back.”

“They were threatening you,” Hardison says.


“You told them not to threaten you with something, which means they were. I know you said you can’t talk about it, and I’m not trying to push, but if you need some leverage…” Hardison waves vaguely at his computer. “This is what we do, you know.”

“No one’s threatening me,” Eliot says. “They’re trying to recruit me, not put me in jail on a technicality.”

Which means it will be dangerous tomorrow. Just not physically.

“You already have a job,” Hardison reminds him.

Eliot runs a hand through his hair. “It won’t stop’em from trying.” It sounds like a warning. “I know Parker’s…I know I ain’t been handling this right. I…Maybe I’m not…I want to stay.”

Hardison nods encouragingly.

“I said no,” Eliot says.

Hardison can hear the “but” Eliot didn’t say.

“You’re old,” he says bluntly. “You’re almost forty. And you’re a civilian now. I know you swore an oath or whatever, but I don’t see why it still applies to you. You aren’t replaceable to us, Eliot, but the military has literally thousands of guys who can do whatever they want you to do. You couldn’t have been with them more than three weeks this time, and you’re hurt. You’re the toughest guy I know, Eliot, you are, but how long do you think you’d last doing whatever that shit is full time?”

Eliot closes his eyes and runs his hand through his hair again, and there it is.

Eliot knows all this already. And he’s going to do it anyway.

“Eliot…” he begins.

“I think I do need some rest,” Eliot says. “Since I’m so old.”
Eliot thinks he’s going to die.

Hardison can’t settle at the kitchen table, where he’s supposed to be going through employee records. He can’t make himself a cup of tea and work on his identity as a survival expert. Eliot’s the survival expert, and Eliot thinks he’s going to die.

Hardison remembers the look on his face in that train car in DC. If Eliot thinks it’s his duty, he’ll walk right into a bullet. No hesitation, no fear.

But Eliot is hesitating. He doesn’t want to go. He just can’t see his exit.

So Hardison’s going to have to find it for him.

The first step is always the same: information. He puts the earbud back in, tells Parker to shout if she’s in trouble, and transfers the record of his trace attempt on Eliot’s call from his phone. He couldn’t get the trace while the call was live, and he won’t be able to get it now. But an algorithm like that? It’s a work of art. Which means whoever wrote it, they’re Someone in the hacking world. There’s a signature there, and Hardison’s the man to find it.

It doesn’t jump right out at him, of course. Anyone clever enough to build a masterpiece like this is clever enough to hide their tracks, and Hardison didn’t get a chance to capture much data. He’s not going to find a literal signature. But there’s something familiar about the gestalt of it, like it’s a pattern he might have seen before. Distinctive, Eliot would call it.

Not Cha0s, this feels more organic than anything he’d build, and Cha0s wouldn’t be smart enough anyway. An earlier rival, maybe, someone who dropped off the radar. That feels right, but he can think of more than a few hackers like that, easy, and there are more who never made enough of an impression in his teenage brain to stick out now. The identity teases at the edge of his mind, refusing to click.

In the meantime, he’s getting results from the military databases, and the clock is ticking on his football debut. He pushes the other hacker’s pattern to the back of his mind, letting his subconscious do the work. It’ll deliver results in the end, and probably faster than if he pushes, with this kind of thing.

There are a few more inconsistencies in the employment files, but they’re all along the lines of one of the security guys appealing his discharge status and getting it changed to honorable. Further digging into that one turns up an alleged minor drug offense—not a serious player, just a low-level fuck-up.

And as long as things go to plan, no one’s going to be fighting anyone.

He thinks about how often things go according to plan A. Or B, or C. Or G.

And he can still hear Eliot saying: “He needs backup, I’m gonna be slow.”

And: “Might be good if no one hits me in the stomach.”

“You know how he oversells things.”

With a sigh, Hardison pulls out his phone. “Hey, Sophie. You busy?”
Eliot stays upstairs the rest of the day. When Hardison leaves a glass of water on the nightstand, it’s empty the next time he checks in, but every time he cracks the door, making plenty of noise to avoid startling Eliot, the hitter’s asleep. Or pretending to be.

He reappears in time to head to the football game, arm tucked into a hoody instead of the sling, like taking it off is actually going to conceal the fact that he’s injured. They ride over in silence.

Parker’s already there, sitting on a picnic blanket, half eating a giant bag of caramel corn and half feeding it to the birds. Every time Hardison glances her way, she’s got more pigeons gathering. Eliot hesitates for a second before walking away from the van, giving Hardison their slap-slap-bump. He vanishes into the park, blending surprisingly well for a guy with severe facial bruising. He must be able to see them, because he lectures Parker over the earbud on not giving sugar to birds. Or herself. Or anyone.

Hardison’s laughing as he heads to the field and starts introducing himself to the other players. “Lamarr Babbage, no relation—I’m new in town, and I heard this was an open game?”

The people at the game are friendly in a white-guy-pretending-not-to-be-racist kind of way, which is what he’d hoped for and better than the fears he hasn’t mentioned to Parker—infiltrating a group of ex-military white guys who have a thing for bunkers has a set of risks for him that wouldn’t occur to her without some prompting. But it’s fine: They welcome him in to the game, asking what brought him out and only blinking a little when he tells him he moved to Portland because he’s an engineering consultant with a contract at Boeing.

“Really, I’m trying to launch my own company,” he explains. “Sell my own designs? But I just got divorced, so I need to rebuild my funds a little, and Portland seemed like a good place to make a fresh start. Someone I met at an open house told me about this game, and I thought, why not? I’d rather get some functional exercise than just get pumped at the gym, you know’m saying? I haven’t played much ball since high school though, just to warn you.”

“That’s awesome, man,” says Charlie Miller, sales rep for ReadySetGear. He smiles, overcompensating for his surprise at Hardison’s education by overdoing the friendliness. “Welcome to Portland. You’re an engineer? Don’t worry—we aren’t all hipsters like you see on TV, there’s plenty of real people here. You find a place yet?”

“Nah,” Hardison tells him. “I’m actually thinking I might have to look east a bit, past the Falls, maybe? I need a lot of space for my shop, and I don’t like worrying about bothering the neighbors with noise, but it’s hard to find a good-size lot around here. I’m worried the commute might drive me crazy, so I’ve been a little reluctant to pull the trigger.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” Welch chimes in. “I’m way out there, myself. Makes it hard to do things like this, stay in and have fun with the boys, but it’s worth it to have your property laid out the way you want. You said you’re looking for a place with a shop? You do woodworking, or…?”

And he’s in. Welch is genuinely interested in the tinkering he does in his shop—and more interested once Hardison explains what he’s been working on lately. “My ex was into camping—she’s actually the one who thought Portland would be a great place to live,” he explains. “Me? I don’t really like
spear a hot dog with a stick and calling it dinner, and I seriously hate those dehydrated meals, you know? So before we split, I’d spend most of our camping trips trying to think of a better way that didn’t involve me hauling a massive propane stove down 10 miles of rocky trail.”

When it comes time to pick teams, Welch goes for him right away.

They go for beers after the game, everyone sweaty and cheerful and relaxed enough that Hardison doesn’t have to do more than buy a round to make an opportunity to clone their phones. Welch doesn’t stay long (Hardison knows he wasn’t joking about the long commute), but he takes the time to set up a meeting with Hardison on Monday. Hardison’s buzzing with success; his engineer character turned out to be a smoother way in than Eliot’s survival expert would have been, and he’s basically playing a version of himself for once, thank you Sophie, so when he gets drawn into a surprisingly nuanced discussion of fish ladders with one of the other guys, it only cements his cover.

“Nice work,” says Parker, when Hardison climbs back into the van. “You changed the cover?”

“Adapted it,” Hardison says smugly. “Figured I had to ditch the military part anyway, in case I missed something distinctive. Better to go with what I know.”

“Smart,” Eliot grunts approvingly. “You did good.”

He feels good. He wants to go back to the brewpub and celebrate over a round of his latest beer. Maybe run through a play-by-play of the game, make sure Parker saw him make that diving catch.

Eliot unwraps his arm from where it’s curled against his ribs and offers him their tap-tap-bump again.

He’s trying. He’s also fading fast from the exertion of sitting in the van while Hardison had beer with the football bros.

No pub tonight, then.

“Movie night?” Hardison asks. Parker smiles.

“Movie night sounds good,” Eliot says. “But…so do drugs. And you know I ain’t gonna be awake long enough for a movie.”

“We’ll have to watch in the bedroom, then,” Parker says, like a sleepover in Eliot’s bed is the obvious answer.

“I’m not sure that’s what Eliot meant, Parker.”

“Well, he can’t take the really good drugs if we aren’t there,” Parker says, like he should have thought of that. “He’s way too floppy to defend himself like that. And I don’t think sleeping on the couch is very good for him.”

Eliot snorts, but for once he doesn’t argue. So it’s going to be a paranoia-induced, drug-fueled slumber party. Hardison decides he can be down with that.

“Serenity?” Hardison suggests optimistically.

“Sure,” says Eliot. He’s really trying. Or he assumes he’ll pass out before the torture goes too far.

“Again?” Parker complains. “We already watched it.”

Which kicks off the ever-familiar argument over why a person with a perfectly functional memory might want to watch the same movie repeatedly. There’s no clear winner by the time they get to
Eliot’s, but Hardison’s going to convince her eventually.

Hardison puts the kettle on again while Eliot, moving stiffly, secures the doors and windows and heads upstairs. He adds plenty of honey to the tea this time. Eliot might claim to have outgrown his mama’s home remedies, but Hardison believes in playing every card he has, and he’s always liked things sweet. Parker takes a sip of her mug and adds more.

By the time Eliot emerges from the bathroom, wearing a baggy sweatshirt, pajama bottoms, and a look of tightly controlled pain, Hardison and Parker have established themselves on the bed. Parker’s wearing pajamas (“It’s a sleepover!”), but they’re both on top of the blankets like they might not be planning to actually spend the night, and they’re settled firmly enough that it’d take a crueler man than Eliot to have second thoughts about this plan.

Eliot takes his tea from Hardison, raising his eyebrows at the sweetness, and takes his antibiotic. He sets the other pill bottles on the table by the bed and sits on top of the covers too, a little self-consciously.

“Take them,” Parker orders.

Eliot nods, but doesn’t pick them up right away. “Hardison, you’re good at the computer stuff,” he says awkwardly.

“I’m a damn wizard,” Hardison retorts, stung by the understatement.

He might have been a little too harsh with his tone, because Eliot actually flinches a little.

“What do you need?” Hardison asks, raising a hand in an all-friends-here gesture.

“I know you’re a genius, Hardison, that’s not what I—You’re self-taught, though, right? And you’re not—you like the practical stuff,” Eliot says carefully. “I mean, that’s what interests you? You aren’t into, uh, theory? Academic stuff?”

“I keep up.” Hardison’s not sure where this is going. Eliot doesn’t seem to be trying to insult him, which is something. “A lot of that stuff ends up being in the next-gen security systems anyway, like the Steranko, so it pays to know what’s out there. I can do the academic stuff, if you need me to.”

“But you don’t like it?”


“It’s cool, seeing what people come up with,” Hardison expands. “And you know me, I like solving problems, so some of that stuff is…it’s a’ight. I could do it more. But there’s always another job, and solving those problems ain’t a theory; it keeps you guys safe, and it takes down the bad guys. So, like, I’d rather come up with a way we can make your earbud waterproof than write a paper about Fatou and Julia sets for some journal no one reads.”

Eliot nods. He hands Parker the pill bottles—what kind of sadist gave a man with an arm injury child-safe painkillers, Hardison wants to know—and lets her hand him some.

“Any reason you’re asking? Or you just suddenly taking an interest?”

“There’s targets you won’t hack, right?” Eliot asks.

“Of course,” Hardison says. “I ain’t one of those guys hacking into pacemakers and insulin pumps just to prove I can. Psychos.”
Eliot’s forehead wrinkles. This is isn’t what he’s after.

“Eliot, you want me to hack something for you?”

Eliot shakes his head. “I want you to leave something alone. Never mind. Let’s just start the movie.” He takes the pills and leans back against his headboard.

“Requests?” Hardison looks at his partners.

“Something quiet?” Eliot asks. Yeah, maybe zombie movies weren’t the most thoughtful move, soundtrack-wise. All things considered.


“Quiet with thieves, coming up,” Hardison says.

He scrolls through the movies, rejecting the ones with too many explosions…How to Steal a Million should do it.

Eliot falls asleep as fast as he’d warned he would, Parker curls into Hardison’s chest, and Audrey Hepburn hires Peter O’Toole to steal a statue.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

The crossover part is mostly in the next couple chapters. They did have to leave Eliot's house eventually, right?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There are too many feelings in the van. Parker knows enough about feelings now to notice them clouding everything up, but she doesn’t know what she’s supposed to do about it. Open a window? Maybe she’s supposed to do nothing. Sometimes, Eliot says, you just have to let people feel things on their own. Hardison says that’s true for Eliot most of the time, but it’s not usually true for Hardison, and he’s being weird too.

So Parker plays the license plate game. Hardison usually plays it with her, but not today.

He’s driving carefully, shooting glances at Eliot every couple of minutes and then giving Parker worried looks in the rearview mirror, like she’s supposed to understand what’s happening. She shakes her head to let him know she doesn’t get it, and he sighs. Eliot’s sitting shotgun, watching the scenery warily and adjusting his tie every six minutes between nervous coughs.

He’s on edge, and it’s making Parker nervous too, even more than missing whatever cue Hardison’s trying to give her. He’d got up too early again and made pancakes that tasted like stress, and then when he’d gone upstairs and come back in a jacket and tie Hardison had got nervous too, asking about dress codes. Eliot said to dress like they were going to church, and Hardison got really still and quiet and pulled their FBI suits out of the van.

Parker didn’t think people dressed like Feds for church. No one’s explained.

It’s good Eliot’s showing them things, if he can’t talk. It’s good. Talking can be hard, and Parker can be flexible with him like he’s flexible with her. She can wait.

But he could talk a little.

So far all he’s said is the name of the town—Aberdeen—and that it’s a long drive and they should get going.

It’s Nate’s fault. He was always leading them places with cryptic remarks, and it’s becoming a security flaw, how willing they are to put on a costume and hop in the van every time someone drops a non-sequitur. Like all an enemy would have to do is say “Let’s go steal a blimp” and they’d all be parachuting over a football game before anyone actually asked a question.

“Eliot, where am I actually going?” Hardison asks, giving him another nervous look and ruining her theory about the team no-questions Kryptonite.

Eliot’s going to have to give him something soon anyway; they’re 20 miles out of town and closing fast.
“Here,” Eliot says, leaning over to type an address into the GPS. He adjusts his tie again.

“Want me to re-tie that for you?” Hardison offers. He’d had to do it the first time, with Eliot’s arm in a sling, and Eliot had turned a funny shade of pink when he asked, but Hardison didn’t make fun of him. They’re both being too careful with each other. The whole point of this is to make it so they can be normal again.

“Maybe this was a mistake,” Eliot says.

“Hell, no, Eliot,” Hardison says. “We’ve been in this van more than two hours. That makes this about an hour and a half too late for second thoughts.”

Eliot looks out the window again. “These are the good guys. They’re on the right side.”

“Of what?” Parker asks. If someone’s making a mistake here, it’s Eliot. He’s always been really clear that he isn’t a good guy—which just means he can’t tell the difference.

“And they ain’t gonna hurt me any,” Eliot says. “I just need to—I have to talk to some people, before the, uh, thing.”

“What thing?” Parker asks, leaning forward.

This time Hardison’s look means shhh.

“Without you,” Eliot adds. “So if you want to just drop me off, you could…uh. Kurt Cobain’s from Aberdeen. You could go see his house? Or something.”

“Eliot. We didn’t come all this way to—wait, how do you even know where—never mind. Sorry. Don’t try and get rid of us. We’re here for you, okay? We’re gonna go to the thing with you. Unless you really, truly don’t want us there.”

Eliot rubs at his chest idly. He didn’t take his drugs this morning, which is good because it’s a security risk. But he already seems really sore and they haven’t got there yet, and Parker’s pretty sure that’s also a security risk. She rests her hand on the Taser, reminding herself she’s got this covered.

“I still need to talk to some people. In private.”

“The good guys. Who might want to throw us in a swimming pool.”

“That was a metaphor,” Eliot says. Which, even Parker got that. He’s being difficult on purpose. She kicks the back of his seat.

“Look,” he says. “Don’t worry. Just, I don’t know exactly who’s going to be there, but there’s always a lot of shop talk at these things, and I don’t want anyone knowing what you do.”

“So we won’t tell them,” Parker says, patiently. If that’s what’s worrying Eliot, this is going to be fine. “We are criminals, Eliot. We don’t just walk up and announce it to everyone. You want me to be Alice? Or Agent Hagen?”

“Hardison’s really good at building identities,” Eliot says. “Seriously, dude. Really good. All those little details? All my aliases have freaking high school transcripts now.”

“…Thanks?” Hardison tries to make it sound sarcastic, but he’s obviously pleased. Parker stares at the back of Eliot’s head, trying to see through it. Eliot doesn’t do random compliments.

“You’re the best I know,” Eliot continues, still weirdly sincere. “And you’re good at forgery too.
Remember when you made that book out of like, intestines and pee or whatever? So maybe you could…think of that as your primary skill set? I mean, don’t mention it at all if you don’t have to, no reason why you should, but just in case?”

“Okaaaay,” Hardison says. “You’re giving me my cover story, is that it?”

“Yeah, but it can’t just be a cover story; it has to be true,” Eliot says. “My friends don’t like hackers much, but they ain’t gonna hurt you. But there are some people—they’ll know if you lie.”

“We’re meeting your friends?” Parker asks, sidetracked.

“I don’t know who’s going to be there,” Eliot says again, running a hand through his hair.

“Well, chill, Eliot,” Hardison says. “It’s cool. We ain’t gonna embarrass you in front of your buddies. I wasn’t planning on announcing what I do anyway, you know?”

“Yeah, but…If you hear people saying stuff about the Church-Turing thingy or some shit like that, you gotta just walk away, okay? Pretend you don’t know what that is.”

Parker doesn’t know what that is, but Hardison looks away from the road long enough to drift onto the rumble strip, and he has a look of such total surprise on his face it makes Parker giggle a little.

“The Church-Turing thesis? Do you know what that is?”

“Why the fuck would I care what it is? I’m not a virgin, Hardison!”

“Neither is Hardison,” Parker tells him, leaning forward and smiling. She can give compliments too, if that’s what they’re doing. “He’s actually really—”

“Don’t tell me that, Parker.” Eliot pinches the bridge of his nose. He shakes it off and looks back at Hardison. “This is a security issue,” Eliot says quietly.

“Okay,” Hardison says. “Fine. I am a damn fine forger when I want to be.”

“What about me?” Parker asks. “What’s my cover?”

“You can be you, Parker,” Eliot twists to look at her, wincing, then rubs his chest and gives her a gentle smile. “They ain’t smart enough to know how dangerous you are.” That makes Parker feel warm in her stomach, knowing Eliot isn’t trying to hide her from his friends. Even if she’s weird sometimes and doesn’t always understand what’s happening. She smiles back and pats his head before settling into the back seat again.

Hardison follows the GPS through the sprawl on the edge of town. It starts out with cellphone shops and dollar stores, a marina opening up the view just before they roll onto a fairly generic main street, none of it looking like the right setting for a gathering of hitters. Not that Parker’s been to a gathering of hitters, unless you count when a mark sends a group of thugs after them and Eliot beats them all up. That’s mostly in offices and warehouses, maybe a palace here and there. Not dollar stores.

They end up at a little clapboard church, up on a hill overlooking the water. Hardison parks carefully, and they all just sit and listen to Lucille’s engine tick. There are already a lot of other cars in the lot.

A middle-aged woman pulls in next to them and gets out of her car, wearing a black dress. So the costumes are right after all.
It almost looks like a funeral.

But Eliot’s supposed to be showing them something about his side job. No one dies on the job when Eliot’s around. Eliot doesn’t let them.

Hardison’s watching the woman too, his eyes sad and worried but not surprised.

“This looks like a funeral,” she says. She waits, but Eliot doesn’t explain what she got wrong. He opens his door and gets out, walking toward the church.

“Hardison?”

“Pretty sure it is a funeral, mama.”

Parker shakes her head, trying to make things make sense. After a moment, she opens the door to the van. Maybe it’ll be clearer when she’s in the church.

Maybe the dead person will be Eliot’s grandma, dead of a stroke or something, and it’s just bad timing that it happened right when Eliot’s side job went bad. That would make him moody like he’s been, probably, but it wouldn’t be Eliot’s fault. Old people die. Young people too, but not around Eliot. If the dead person’s young—it still might not be Eliot’s fault. Jobs go bad. People die. But Eliot won’t see it that way.

She hears Hardison’s door open and shut, his shoes scuffing the parking lot as he hurries to catch up to her.

Parker’s looking at her costume. She wears dresses to Sophie’s funerals, because Sophie says that’s the way it’s done. She’s wearing pants today, and Sophie would ask her if she has a dress. There’s probably still time to steal one.

“Is my costume okay?” she asks Hardison.

“Your what? Oh. You look fine, Parker. Very appropriate.” He adjusts his tie like she’s reminded him, but he’s holding her hand by the time they get to the door.

Eliot’s at the side of the sanctuary, talking to a beautiful woman who’s sitting in a wheelchair like it’s a throne. There’s a little bubble of space around them. He meets Parker’s eye and shakes his head a little, warning her off. The woman’s looking Eliot up and down like she’s measuring him for something. Eliot runs his hand through his hair and smiles at her a little awkwardly, not flirting even though she is definitely his type.

A man in a suit is sitting in a pew, watching Eliot and the woman and trying not to be obvious about it. He looks exactly like what Hardison would call a Man in Black. Parker nudges Hardison, pointing him out. She tries to catch Eliot’s eye again, but he’s following the beautiful woman toward the front of the church, where a dark-haired woman pulls him into a hug.

Parker takes a step forward, meaning to follow, but Hardison stops her. He’s looking at something else: There’s a photo display outside the sanctuary, next to a table with some programs. The dead guy—Trevor Harris, according to the programs—smiles at them from a fishing boat in his mid-30s, poses solemnly in an Army uniform in his early 20s, and dresses as a Ninja Turtle (the red one, Parker can’t remember which that is) in his childhood. From his 20s on up, a dark-haired woman is in a lot of the images, but Parker doesn’t see any sign of children. There are a few group shots along the edges, and she leans in, scanning closely.

She’s doesn’t want to find Eliot in the pictures. If he’s here, Trevor Harris was someone important to
him, and that would be bad, since he’s dead and he’s a soldier and he’s not old at all, really. Eliot’s age. If Eliot’s not here, maybe it won’t matter so much that Trevor Harris is dead.

Parker should care when strangers die. Hardison cares; he gets upset sometimes just reading the news, and Parker makes sad faces or angry faces or whatever faces mean she cares about people, because she does, these days. Just not as much as a really good person would.

Eliot’s there.

The first photo she spots him in looks recent. Judging from the length of his hair, it’s from the first year or two after Leverage got together. After the David jobs, maybe, if that’s Pakistan in the background. Eliot and Trevor Harris stand with a handful of younger men in fatigues, faces serious but, Parker decides, looking closer at Eliot, happy enough. Satisfied.

Hardison sees what she’s looking at and taps her arm, then a second photo.

Eliot’s impossibly young, almost unrecognizable with his short hair and wide smile, face smooth and open. He’s holding his beer with a group of other men, boys really, all toasting something. Trevor Harris, in the center of the frame, has his arm thrown over Eliot’s shoulder. Parker doubts either of them was old enough for the beer to be legal.

She’s never seen Eliot smile like that. It hurts, seeing it. Knowing he can smile like that and he just hasn’t, not in almost six years.

“I’ve never seen Eliot happy before,” she tells Hardison.

“You’ve seen him happy,” Hardison says. His hand rests on her back, fingers spread. It’s like a little blanket of warmth in the cool of the entryway. “He’s happy with us. Not lately, but you know, in general. Happy enough.”

Happy enough. The same thing she’d just been thinking, like happy enough was okay. Like happy should have a modifier. She taps the photo, letting Eliot make her point for her.

Hardison sighs. “Yeah. But, Parker, he was—he’s a kid in that. He literally might still be a teenager. Look at him, he’s—he doesn’t have any scars yet.”

“You think he doesn’t smile because he has scars?” Eliot doesn’t care about scars. He tells stories about some of them (if you ask him just right) and ignores others, and he doesn’t like it when Parker traces them with her fingers, but he doesn’t really mind having them. Not so much that it would keep him from smiling.

“Basically. People…stuff happens to people sometimes, and they change. Eliot’s had a lot of stuff happen, babe. Do you still smile like when you were a kid?”

Parker didn’t smile much at all when she was a kid. She smiles now, when she’s in free fall or about to be. When she steals something shiny just to prove she can. When Alec gives her pieces of himself, just for her to see. If Eliot doesn’t have that, that’s…

Hardison’s on another track, looking at the photo. “What do you think happened to the rest of them?”

Parker looks at Eliot’s friends. Trevor Harris is dead, obviously. The rest of them could be too, for all she knows. That’s what Hardison’s trying to say, that they’re dead and that’s why Eliot doesn’t smile. But they didn’t all die this week, and you can be happy again even when people you care about are dead. Parker knows that for sure.
Also, these guys aren’t all dead. She taps the one on the edge of the frame, almost cut off. “At least one of them’s here.” She points with her chin at the Man in Black, who’s back to playing with his phone.

“Who—the guy watching Eliot up there? You sure?” Hardison leans in. Then, shielding his actions with his body, he carefully aims his phone, copying the photo. He smiles. “Man in Black, meet my facial recognition software. I think you’re going to get along famously.”

“If they’re friends, why is that guy just watching Eliot?” Eliot hadn’t acted like he saw the man, even though he always sees people who stare at him like that.

“Good question,” Hardison says, studying the photo on his phone. Parker looks around, scanning the church for more people from the photo.

She spots several of the younger men from the Pakistan one, standing in a clump and looking like they’d be more comfortable in uniforms than suits. They look suspiciously beat up—a couple have visible bruises and one is leaning on crutches. An older man—late 30s or early 40s—stands with them, in a tweed jacket that makes him look more like a professor than a soldier. He doesn’t have bruises, but he has a beard that might cover some, and he has long brown hair. It looks a lot like Eliot’s used to. She points them out to Hardison.

He scans them casually, then raises his phone like he’s taking a selfie and snaps some more pictures for his facial recognition program. “Want to try mingling?”

Parker checks Eliot. He’s talking to the woman in the wheelchair and the dark-haired woman who Parker now identifies as the woman in the photos with Trevor Harris. They’re standing next to an older woman Parker’s pretty sure is the dead guy’s mother. The mother isn’t as old as Parker would have guessed, although that could be the result of makeup: Sophie always says you can do wonders with a little makeup, and this woman’s wearing a lot, carefully applied. She doesn’t want to mingle with the dead guy’s mother.

Anyway, people are beginning to take their seats.

Eliot finally excuses himself from the women, turning back and smiling when he sees them waiting. It’s just his mouth muscles moving, not even his happy-enough smile. She can’t help comparing him to the photos, and it gives her stomach a twist. Even compared to the Pakistan one he looks tired and sick, like it’s hurting him just to give them his stupid fake smile.

Hardison doesn’t seem to notice. He steps forward and pulls Eliot into a quick hug, then steps back and says, “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Eliot blinks, then shakes his head a little, like Hardison got it wrong, even though Parker knows that’s what you’re supposed to say at funerals. Eliot runs his hand through his hair and looks past Hardison to the photo display, focusing on a shot of the dead man and the dark-haired woman.

“We should sit,” he says. His voice is hoarse. He hesitates for a moment, then leads them to the back pew—maintaining their exit route—and slides in, grimacing a little as he sits.

Parker sits between Eliot and Hardison, both of them tense. Hardison just doesn’t like funerals, she knows. He’s being brave right now and not complaining, and Eliot doesn’t seem to remember to thank him for it, so Parker does it for him, rubbing Hardison’s knee in slow circles to distract him from where they are. At least there’s no coffin in sight.

The last few stragglers sit down, and the pastor leads everyone in a prayer. Sophie’s funerals don’t
usually have a lot of praying.

Parker bows her head with everyone else, but it’s distracting, feeling Hardison’s nervous tension to her right and Eliot’s to her left. It makes her want to move, and she has to focus on not jiggling her leg. Or not jiggling it too obviously.

The pastor gives a speech, a lot of stuff about service and sacrifice.

He doesn’t say much about Heaven, Parker notices. In the movies they always talk a lot about Heaven at funerals. At her brother’s funeral it was all anyone said, like him being in Heaven made anything better on Earth. But Trevor Harris just gets a lot of words about well-earned rest. Eliot coughs again into his shoulder. Parker reaches out and takes his hand, and he squeezes back, hard.

Hardison leans over, whispering, “He’s being pretty vague. The guy must not have gone to church much. This eulogy could be about—about anyone.” He gives Eliot another worried glance, and grabs Parker’s other hand.

She should feel trapped, but she doesn’t. It’s nice, being needed, being held by both her boys. It’s her turn to be the safety harness.

She takes another look around the church. It’s not very crowded. There’s a cluster of older people toward the front she pegs as family and other civilians. Eliot’s friends with the bruises fill a pew on the left, their shoulders broad and muscular beneath their jackets. And there are more men in suits that make them look like Feds, scattered around like they think they’re blending in, pretending to listen as some high school friend of Trevor Harris tells a boring story about him fixing the engine on an old car.

The beautiful woman’s parked her wheelchair toward the back, near an exit even though she doesn’t seem nervous. She’s sitting alone; Eliot’s Man in Black from the photo is a few rows up, with another man in a government suit. He’s put his phone away. Parker realizes Eliot’s watching him out of the corner of his eye, his jaw set hard.

At the front of the church, the dark-haired woman from the photos steps up to speak and promptly dissolves into tears. Eliot’s grip gets tight on Parker’s hand, hard enough that she can feel the bones move. Hardison would yelp, but Parker squeezes back, hard as she can. Eliot gives her a grateful look.

She focuses on their hands, all together in a chain, and doesn’t let go to pick up a hymnal for the closing hymn. She doesn’t let go until they’re all invited to continue remembering Trevor at his house, with refreshments, and then only because Eliot pulls away first.

They take their time heading to the van, and when they get there, Eliot swallows a handful of ibuprofen and rests his head against the window. Maybe they could skip the refreshments and remembering and just go home.

“There’s no burial?” Hardison asks, making it sound like it wouldn’t bother him.

“No,” Eliot says shortly. Then he must finally realize Hardison’s problem, because he sighs and explains in a softer tone, “Sorry. I didn’t think. There’s no body. So. Don’t worry about it. Make a left at the intersection.”

Like the mountain job, then. Eliot takes a sip of his water, his hand shaking a little. It bothers him. Eliot’s practical about things like bodies, but still. They were friends.

“And no…you know, flag and stuff?” Hardison asks. “Isn’t that a thing?”
Eliot looks out the window. “This was a compromise. His mother…there’s some denial there. And his dad’s family’ll have their own service.”

“Why?” Parker asks. Hardison gives her a warning look in the rearview mirror.

“Family’s complicated.” Eliot coughs. “Death brings that out. People’ll fucking go to war over a stupid knickknack. You’d think it’d bring people together, but it don’t work like that…You’ve seen it, Parker. Look at Nate and Maggie. Don’t mention Trevor’s dad to anyone at the house, okay?”

“Hardison and I want to be cremated,” she tells him, partly to test his reaction and partly because he should know. No one dies on a job with Eliot, but there are car accidents and lightning strikes and plane crashes. “And I want to be scattered at the Mint. In the ink, so I get to be printed on all the money.”

“Hardison, make a right down there,” Eliot says. “Follow that blue truck, they were at the church.”

The town falls away behind them, but Eliot doesn’t say anything about Parker’s plan.

“Will you do it?” Parker asks.

“Hardison will,” Eliot says. “Probably get himself arrested.” Because Hardison’s going to outlive her, and Eliot’s not. She remembers his zombie plan for them. Them, not him.

“What do you want when you die, Eliot?” she asks. She keeps her tone light, all simple curiosity.

“Hmm?” Eliot says, not turning to see her face. “It doesn’t matter what you guys do, Parker, I won’t know about it. Funerals are for the living.”

“Left again on the gravel road,” he says. “That guy in the truck’s gonna miss the turn…yeah. This is it up here.”

It’s an older house, slightly graceless and bland, with too many windows to be really secure. There’s a wraparound porch and a fire pit in the yard and a bluff with a view of the water. There’s a dog, too, a black lab sniffing at the guests as they pick their way across the field that’s obviously used for parking.

Eliot whistles and calls, “Hey, Bear,” and the dog comes running, jumping up and hitting him in the stomach hard enough that he winces and stumble back.

Hardison steps forward fast—“Eliot, you okay? Hey, boy, don’t jump, bad dog”—because Eliot’s not supposed to be hit in the stomach yet, maybe not even by a dog. But Eliot pushes the dog off, smiling and rubbing behind his ears, telling him he’s a good boy.

He’s been to this house before.

Eliot’s told them they can’t have a dog, not with the way they travel. Trevor Harris had a girlfriend, though, the dark-haired woman. She probably stayed home while he did whatever he died doing. If Eliot wants a dog, he’ll have to have a girlfriend like that, someone normal. Not a thief like them.

Hardison’s a ridiculously slow driver, so people are already there, mixing drinks and eating little sandwiches with the crusts cut off. Parker helps herself to some little sandwiches and a handful of cookies, and she’s turning to offer some to Eliot when one of the younger soldier guys swoops in, throwing an arm around Eliot’s shoulder with a little too much force. Eliot grunts in surprise but doesn’t throw the arm off.

“Sorry!” the soldier says cheerfully. “But you just won me twenty bucks. Pete here insisted you
weren’t coming.”

“You’re meant to be in hospital,” says the long-haired man in the tweed jacket, who turns out to have a British accent. That might be a clue, so Parker elbows Hardison a little to make sure he’s paying attention. “You were—”

“Course I came,” Eliot cuts in, smiling at the soldier. He turns to Pete, still friendly. “Not that it ain’t good to see you, but what are you doing here?”

“Yes, well,” Pete waves his hand vaguely, still scanning Eliot with an air of concern. “Slight, er, problem with my passport, apparently, and by the time they worked it all out, it was only an extra day’s delay to come. They’ve paroled me as long as I stay in Carver’s custody.” He nods toward the younger man, who lets go of Eliot and grins like that last part’s a joke.

“I knew you were supposed to be in the hospital,” Hardison hisses, grabbing Eliot’s arm like he’s planning to drag him there right now. “Probably about to keel over because you’re too stubborn to just stay where they put you, and my Nana always told me the number one rule of funerals is you don’t upstage the corpse. It’s rudeness, Eliot.”

Carver’s frowning at Hardison’s hand on Eliot’s arm, like he’s deciding whether or not to intervene. Like Hardison’s the threat here. Eliot rolls his eyes and pulls away. “I’m fine,” he says, directing it more at Carver than at Hardison. “Where’re the others?”

“Porch.” Carver holds up a bottle of whiskey. “I’m on supplies. Eat, drink and be merry, right?”

Eliot eyes move smoothly between Carver and Pete. “We’ll be out in a bit,” he says. “But you mind if I borrow Pete for a minute?”

Carver doesn’t, apparently. He claps Eliot on his good shoulder, hard, tells him get his ass outside fast or he’ll send in a search party, then tucks the whiskey under his arm and leaves.

“You okay?” Eliot asks quietly, as soon as Carver’s gone. “How serious were you about being a prisoner?”

“They’ve been polite,” Pete says with a shrug. “Not at all what I was warned about. They haven’t even questioned me much.” He smiles. “I think your men have been looking out for me.”

Eliot nods, apparently unsurprised to hear that he has men. Parker can see Hardison opening his mouth to ask about that, but before he can, Pete’s leaning in, still with that concerned look. “Are you okay, Spencer?”

Eliot shakes his head, annoyed. “Said I’m fine. And it’s Eliot, man. You’re sure you don’t need anything?”

Pete nods. “Only…well. I’ll be going back tomorrow anyway, or at least that’s what they’ve said, so perhaps it doesn’t matter? But they haven’t let me make any calls, and Sandy must be frantic.”

Eliot nods, then turns to Hardison. “Can you set him up with a secure line? Quietly?”

Hardison shrugs and pulls out his phone. “Yeah, of course.”

“Parker, distract anyone who tries to come close, but try not to make a scene doing it. Pete here—” Eliot cuts himself off, then starts again. “I owe him my life, okay? Take care of him. I’ll distract the suit.” He strides off deeper into the house, clearly knowing his target.
Pete looks after him, still with that worried frown, then turns to them. “You don’t have to take any risks. It’s only a phone call, and I—actually, I have no idea what I’m to tell her. I don’t lie to my wife, ever, and she understands about confidentiality, but I mean. I was meant to be home weeks ago. It was just supposed to be a theology conference! Nothing dodgy about it.”

His eyebrows are almost touching in the middle, he looks so worried, and Parker has a sudden urge to pet his hair. She can see why Eliot would like him. Not to mention—“You saved Eliot’s life?”

Pete blinks and rubs at his beard. “Bit of an overstatement,” he says diffidently. “More the other way ’round. And if I’d been quicker to begin with, none of this—well. Anyway, if he’s Hardison, I’d say he gets a fair amount of the credit.”

“What?” Hardison asks.

“If you can do it on a computer, you can do it on a phone.’ That was you, apparently?”

“What do you mean?”

It’s the wrong question, because Pete’s face falls in dismay. “Quite right. You don’t—forget I said anything, will you? Dragging his team into this would be a poor repayment indeed.”

“What about helping his team pull him out of it?” Hardison asks. He hands Pete the phone. “We need to know what this is, man, and you seem like you care enough about Eliot to get why.”

Pete looks thoughtful, and still worried. He turns the phone in his hands, obviously eager to make his call, but too polite to ignore Hardison’s plea. “I haven’t known Spencer long,” he says carefully. “But I do know he makes his own choices. He called them in, when we saw what was happening—I didn’t like the idea—and he chose to go in with us. He chose…what he did after that. And I’m a father.” He glances at the phone. “I have a vested interest in Spencer’s continuing to save the world as needed. It’s rather my duty not to help you.”

He looks guilty as he says it. Parker crosses her arms and gives him her best puppy eyes.

Pete looks at her like he knows what she’s doing, but Sophie says that doesn’t always mean it won’t work, so Parker slows down her blinking rate to make her eyes water just a little.

Pete turns his back and dials a number, stepping away for privacy. Oh well.

Parker scans the room, watching for anyone who might step in. If this Pete saved Eliot, they owe him. Even if he won’t do what Hardison’s asking.

The problem is, Pete obviously thinks they’re right to be worried. He’s worried too, only he’s willing to—to sacrifice Eliot, if he can convince himself Eliot’s willing. And Eliot’s always been willing to sacrifice himself, for the team now, but for the Army before them. Even for Damien Moreau. Eliot isn’t as choosy about that kind of thing as he should be.

So it’s a good thing Eliot’s not in charge of the team. She looks around, wanting to catch his eye and remind him he belongs to them. He isn’t free to make the kind of choices Pete’s implying. But Eliot’s nowhere in sight.

Chapter End Notes
I can't believe people are reading this! Thank you so much for the kudos and comments and just for reading! Please don't stop just because they are in the crossover portion of the story. Don't worry, the focus of this story is still Eliot, Hardison and Parker. But if Eliot can't talk, someone has to.

I actually went through and trimmed some of Eliot's interactions with the Laundry people, because I do want this to be a Leverage story. If it's hard to follow, let me know.
Chapter 10

It’s nothing to worry about. Eliot’s distracting the Feds, which probably means leading them into the kitchen or punching them out and sticking them in a closet. He couldn’t do either of those in a living room crowded with mourners. Eliot has very clear ideas about how to behave at a funeral.

Still, she takes a few cautious steps away from Pete as he stammers a constant mix of reassurance and apology that’s clearly not making much of a dent in his wife’s worry. She scans the room again, then checks the window. There’s Eliot—back outside, with the dark-haired woman and the Man in Black from the funeral. They walk slowly over to the bluff and stop to look out at the ocean.

Eliot’s leaning in, shoulders tense, talking. He reaches out a hand, and the woman pulls away and takes off down the bluff, following a tiny footpath Parker hadn’t noticed before. Eliot watches her go, then turns back toward the house, head down. The MiB hesitates like he’s caught between them, then takes the footpath, disappearing from view.

By the time Pete finally winds down, apologizing to Hardison for the length of the international call like he thinks Hardison pays for minutes or something, Parker’s buzzing with impatience.

She leads Hardison and Pete—since he’s in their custody, apparently—through the living room. One of the soldiers from the funeral is grabbing more drinks, but Eliot’s not with him. They head to the kitchen, usually a good bet, where they find several women drinking wine and peeling foil off casserole dishes. There’s no sign of Eliot.

She puts her earbud in before sending Hardison to take Pete back to the soldiers—she’s not going to risk losing track of him too—and they split up, Parker finding her way unobtrusively up the stairs. It’s an old house, with good solid doors, but she can hear voices from a room at the end of the hall, and one of them is low and gravelly.

“Got him,” she says quietly, letting Hardison know.

She moves quietly toward the door, stepping at the edge of the hallway to avoid any telltale creaks. Eliot’s talking steadily, in a tone she doesn’t quite recognize. He’s not loud, but she has good ears and he’s speaking slowly and clearly. “He didn’t suffer at all, Mrs. Harris. It was too quick for that. He knew he’d saved lives, that we’d completed our objective, and then the IED—I’m very sorry.”

“You’re sure he’s gone? Because he’s really very resilient, you know.”

“He’s gone,” Eliot says patiently. “I saw it myself. There’s no doubt.”

“But there’s no body?”

There’s a pause. “Trevor’s sacrifice bought the rest of us time to retreat, Mrs. Harris. He knew that. He wouldn’t have wanted to risk further loss of life by…”

“Can you go back for it? Wherever you were, he’s still there, isn’t he? Alone.”

“Trevor was very close to the explosion, ma’am. There wasn’t…” Eliot obviously can’t find a tactful way to finish the sentence.

“Oh my God,” the woman says.

“I know it’s hard to hear. What you should focus on is that Trevor died preventing mass civilian
casualties,” Eliot says. “I’m sorry I can’t give you all the details of the operation, but you should know that much.”

Mrs. Harris’ response is muffled. “I’m sorry,” Eliot says again.

There’s more crying, so Parker isn’t expecting the door to open. Eliot stares at her for a moment, his face tight. He doesn’t say anything. Parker follows him to the bathroom, where he fills a glass of water.

“Go back downstairs,” he whispers.

He squeezes her arm before he picks up the water to go back in.

“Parker, what’s happening? Was someone crying?” Hardison asks.

“I’ve got this,” she whispers. She sits on the steps, far enough away that she can barely hear the crying.

After a while, the door opens again and Eliot comes out. He pauses again when he sees her sitting there, but he doesn’t yell.

“Are you okay?” she asks.

He nods. “Part of the job.”

She stands and blocks the stairs until he meets her eyes. He’s not okay.

She reaches out to tuck his hair behind his ears, just to stall him, give him a minute to wipe the tension off his face before he faces the people in the living room. He leans in to her hand, taking the offer of comfort, so she pulls him into a hug. He tenses, then relaxes against her, warm and solid.

Eliot’s face is hot against her neck, and it’s stuffy up here, but she rubs the back of his head, mussing his hair, and doesn’t rush him.

Finally, he pulls back, grumpy but composed. “We gotta move,” he whispers. “Don’t want to meet her on the stairs.”

“Chicken,” she teases, even though she completely agrees.

She takes his good arm and they go down together, slowly. They slip out through the kitchen, ignored by the gossiping women.

She stops him outside the door, before he can round the corner and see Hardison, who’s listening to the soldiers talk about food with an intensity that speaks volumes about how much weight Eliot lost on the job with them. Eliot looks at her patiently as she pulls her earbud and pockets it.

“Will I have to do that if you die? Is that what you meant by part of the job?”

Eliot rubs at his face, avoiding eye contact. “Lie to my dad? We ain’t exactly in touch.”

Which wasn’t a no. He’d given them enough information to find his dad, the other night. Slipped it in there like it was just because of the drugs.

“Oh,” Parker says, considering that. “You lied to her?”

He nods. “Part of the job,” he repeats.
“So how do you know what to say?” It wouldn’t be the worst part of Eliot dying. That would be Eliot dying, which is impossible and not allowed to happen. But it matters, how you handle a death. It’s important. She needs to know.

Eliot seems to get that, because he considers his answer carefully, appraising her like he does in sparring practice before he teaches her a new hold. He’s modifying his answer to fit her, just like he does in the gym.

“The details don’t matter,” he says. “You just have to make it clear it was quick and clean, no suffering. They’ll be picturing it in their heads after you leave, so don’t get fancy. No last words, because that means the person had time to be scared. Best if you give’em something to make it mean something, like that they died doing something worthwhile.” He rubs his face again.

Parker nods, letting him know she understands.

“C’mon,” he says. “I have to talk to a few more people before we can go.”

He heads around the corner to the porch, his posture shifting as he goes, like Sophie settling into a new character. By the time the soldiers spot him, he’s relaxed and confident, with head up and shoulders back. She can see the bruised faces relax a little as he settles in with them, greeting them by name and slapping shoulders, redirecting their tension into funny stories about the dead man. He’s a good leader when he tries, she can tell just from their response to him.

He’s never tried to be like this with her, with the team. This isn’t who he is. He’s conning the soldiers. They aren’t his team, of course—Parker and Hardison are his team, his only team—but they aren’t marks, either, and something isn’t right.

Parker settles herself lightly on the porch rail and studies them, trying to decide why this feels more dangerous than letting Eliot be taken to a marina by mysterious secret agents.

She wouldn’t have seen how upset the men all are even a few years ago. They give her cocky smiles when Eliot introduces them, and their conversation’s light and jokey, focused for the moment on mocking Carver and a guy named Blake about an incident in a bar the night before.

But she’s learned to read people, to see past their surface smiles and look at the rest of the picture. The smiles are plastered below several sets of hollow eyes, and their personal space bubbles are wrong—they keep touching each other like they need the contact, and they don’t seem like they should be huggy people. They even touch Eliot, although they’re careful of the sling—they hit him lightly on the back of his head or throw an arm over his shoulder just like they do to each other. They’re checking in, making sure they’re all still there.

It shouldn’t feel dangerous, but it does.

Maybe it’s how friendly everyone’s being on the surface and how excluded the two of them actually are, the foot of space around them like they’re literally untouchable. Pete sees it too, she can tell. He’s not included either, instead leaning against the railing with a thoughtful look on his face.

He sees Parker watching and leans over with a rueful smile. “Like a pile of puppies, aren’t they?”

“Scary puppies,” Hardison comments, watching as one of the men—Blake, Parker thinks, although the names are already a blur—passes Eliot the bottle of whiskey. Eliot tips his head back to drink from the bottle, then swallows wrong and coughs, laughing it off and trying again.

He looks like he fits, here. Like she’s seeing him in his natural environment. It’s because he’s a good grifter, Parker knows that. He’s not Sophie, but he’s the best of the three of them. He gets sucked in
to the role sometimes, but he always shakes it off at the end of the job. And that’s what this is. He
told them. He’s tying up loose ends. Still, the way he rubs his hand over Blake’s shaved head trips an
alarm in her head.

“Surviving the unsurvivable,” Pete says quietly, slipping between Hardison and Parker and sipping
his own whiskey from a plastic cup, “can have a powerful effect on a group. I think he was a legend
to them before all this, you know.” He knocks back the drink. “Now? It’s one thing to follow a
legend through the gates of hell, isn’t it? A much more powerful thing to follow the one who lead
you back out.”

Pete looks back at the house. “Most of them,” he adds, studying his empty cup.

“And you think he should join them,” Hardison says.

“Mmm,” Pete says. “Maybe I’m buying into the legend myself.”

He hesitates, then looks at them seriously. “But I’m still a vicar. I have a duty of care here. And
Spencer got me out, too; I owe him.” He gestures toward Hardison’s pocket. “I forgot to delete my
home number from your phone. You might pass it on, if he ever wants to just have a chat. Don’t
look so skeptical, mate. I’m actually trained at this, you know. And he literally can’t talk to much of
anyone else.”

Pete pushes off the railing and enters the scrum, grabbing for the bottle and laughing when one of the
soldiers first holds it away, then dramatically overfills the cup. They’re touching him too, now that
he’s joined them. Not like Eliot, but still. For a weird, long-haired Brit who says he’s a vicar—which
he can’t be because Parker’s pretty sure that’s the same as a priest, and this guy looks like a geek, not
a priest—he’s blending in pretty well with the soldiers.

He’s looking at Eliot with the same quiet awe. The same need.

That’s the source of her alarm, Parker realizes. This con’s going both ways: Eliot can walk away
from the military; he did that before he’d ever met them. But then Nate helped him discover what it
felt like to be a good guy. (Again. A good guy again, because Eliot started out that way. He’s the
only one of them who really did.) And soldiers who think they need him—well, everyone has a
hook.

Eliot gives them a suspicious look as the geeky Brit tells them about leaders, but he’s in the middle of
some complicated story that would probably be funny if Hardison spoke Kigali, and he doesn’t break
off to intervene. Either he knew the vicar would keep it irritatingly metaphorical or he really is
willing to let Hardison find out what he can. As long as he isn’t the one doing the talking.

He’s got some angles in play. Photos of the soldiers mean facial recognition: It’ll take time, but these
guys are definitely military or ex-military, which means records. (He’s trying not to remember that
he’s never found Eliot’s records.)

So far the so-called vicar’s the only obvious opening, and Pete’s conscience will clearly convince
him better than anything Hardison could say, if he leaves him alone enough to let it work.
Meanwhile, the black ops men have been drinking at a rate that would impress Nate, and their
supplies are running low. Another round might loosen their tongues.
Hardison steps away from the railing and makes his way back to the house. Inside, the living room is stuffy with the scent of too much perfume and too many people. None of the civilians are taking advantage of the porch, and Hardison can’t blame them: Despite the way they’re joking with each other, the soldiers are radiating tension, and every one of them looks like he could kill Hardison without breaking a sweat. He’d steer clear too, if Eliot wasn’t right there with them, defusing them with nudges and smirks.

He helps himself to a cookie from the buffet set out on the table, pocketing another one for Parker, then eyes the drink selection. Beer for himself and Parker—they have a long drive, if he can pry Eliot loose from the soldiers—and another few beers plus a bottle of whiskey for the troops. It’s a lot to juggle, and he almost loses one of the beers.

A hand reaches out and snags it just as it starts to fall.

It’s the Man in Black from earlier, the one who was watching Eliot at the funeral.

“I’ve got it,” Hardison says, keeping it polite and trying not to think about swimming pools.


“You need a new ID?” Hardison asks, trying to stick to the forger story. “I’d have thought you have people for that.”

The man laughs. “We can always use a few good men. I was thinking of that worm you fed the Bank of Iceland. Your own design?”

“I collaborate a lot,” Hardison tells him. His mouth is dry, but his arms are too full to actually open his own beer.

“Really,” the MiB says. “Then imagine what it would be like to collaborate with someone who could keep up.”

“I already have partners.”

“Spencer and Parker, right?” the man says, raising one eyebrow like he’s trying to look evil. “Is Parker a programmer too? I don’t have much on her. Because Spencer might be a genius with a gun, but I wouldn’t have thought his skills would be compatible with yours.”

“Eliot doesn’t like guns,” Hardison says automatically.

The man squints at him as if he’s genuinely confused by that. “You could still work with him, you know, if you sign on with us. When the mission calls for that sort of thing.”

“I’m retired,” a hoarse voice drawls from behind Hardison. He whirls around, bobbling the whiskey bottle. Eliot grabs it and sets it back on the table with a thud just loud enough to make one of the other mourners glance over, then quickly edge away. “Remember?”

“I remember you told me you’d appeal that,” the MiB says. He’s not smiling. “Guess Aimee talked you out of it. I’m sorry that didn’t work out.”

Eliot doesn’t answer that, but Hardison can feel the heat of his gaze as he steps forward, pulling Hardison to the side, out of the way.

“You don’t need him,” Eliot says.
“We always have openings.”

“Because you go through hackers like tissue paper,” Eliot snaps. He’s breathing fast. “There’s plenty of geeky kids out there to melt their brains for you. You leave this one alone.”

“You think he’s not up to the job?”

“I think he’s doing a lot more good where he is,” Eliot says firmly.

The MiB sighs and reaches into his jacket. He pulls out a business card and holds it out to Eliot. Eliot looks at it and doesn’t move. The suit shifts smoothly, offering it to Hardison. Hardison sets down the rest of the beers and folds his arms. From the corner of his eye, he can see Eliot smirk.

The man looks back at Eliot. “Monday morning, 8 a.m., Portland VA. Dr. Holzer’s expecting you for an outpatient visit. She’s fully briefed.”

He looks Eliot up and down, slowly. “If you need her before then, call the number on the back.”

Eliot glares.

The MiB ignores the glare and holds the card out to Hardison. Hardison takes it, hating himself a little.

Eliot gives him a disgusted look.

“Time to go. Get Parker and meet me at the van.” He stalks off.

Hardison hesitates, looking at the card in his hand. It’s the MiB’s business card, with the appointment information written on the back in blue pen. The MiB’s name, apparently, is John Holmes. There’s no organization listed. “What’s the catch?”

“No catch.” Holmes sighs. “He thinks I set him up. He’s right. Makes this my responsibility.” He nods around the room to indicate he’s including the death of Trevor Harris.

“You feel guilty.” Hardison puts all the skepticism he can muster into the comment.

“Not guilty,” the man corrects. “I’d do the same again. Responsible. And maybe I just care what happens to Spencer.”

Hardison crosses his arms again.

The man sighs. “Fine. How about this? You might have noticed we now have an opening Spencer would be perfect for. But he’s got a medical retirement; he’s going have to appeal his status to reenlist. It’s in our interest to get him healthy as fast as possible. That make you feel better?”

Hardison pockets the card.
Chapter 11

It feels like it should be midnight when they pull back in to Eliot’s driveway, but it’s still light out. Not much past dinnertime. Hardison can see the neighbor kids playing in the yard.

“You guys want takeout?” he asks.

Eliot shakes his head. “I’m gonna crash. Why don’t the two of you go check on the pub and we’ll catch up tomorrow?” All the energy and ease he’d shown on that porch had vanished by the time they hit the highway. Eliot hasn’t said more than two words in the past hour, and his jaw’s set hard, like he’s bracing himself against something.

“You still owe me Chinese,” Parker tells him.

Eliot does that pointedly neutral face he’s developed just to make fun of Parker. “Not tonight.”

He slowly climbs out of the car, wincing.

“You good?” Hardison asks, hopping out and hurrying around the van.

Eliot ignores his offer of a helping hand. “I’m just sore,” he grunts. “Five hours in the car round trip ain’t great on cracked ribs. You have to hit every bump between here and the coast?”

If Eliot’s bitching, he’s probably okay. Hardison gives him a grin. “I was thinking we could do another road trip next weekend, tour the coast? Sea Lion Cave? There’s a Ripley’s Believe It or Not museum somewhere, right?”

Eliot glares. Yup, situation normal. Or as close as they’ve been, lately.

“Seriously, we’ll order in,” Hardison says. “You need us there to take your pills, right?”

Eliot shuts his eyes for a second. He looks wrung out, and not just physically. “Go out,” he says. “I’m fine.”

He probably wants some time to himself, and after the day he’s had, Hardison gets that. He also gets that Eliot needs sleep—and last night, with the three of them sharing a bed, he got more than he’s had since he got home. “We’ll bring you back something,” he says. “Kung Pao Chicken?”

Eliot makes a face. “Soup, maybe?”

“Just don’t be throwing any knives when we let ourselves back in,” Hardison warns, only half joking. Eliot scoffs out a laugh as he turns away, and it turns into a cough halfway through. It looks like it hurts.


Dinner’s nice—it feels kind of special, being alone with Parker again. They go for Chinese, because apparently Parker didn’t get enough Chinese food in China, they talk about jobs they’ve done and jobs they want to do, and Hardison’s fortune cookie promises things are going to take a turn for the better.

“In bed?” Parker asks with all the humor of a 12-year-old boy. Hardison raises his eyebrows back at her.
“We should talk about Eliot,” she tells him.

Hardison’s has to do a force-quit and refocus on what she’s actually saying. “What?”

“I think he wants to reenlist or whatever,” she says. “Be a good guy again. We have to change his mind.”

“He doesn’t want to,” Hardison tells her. He watches the hope spread across her face before he can finish. “But I think he might anyway. I’m working on it.”

“How do you know he doesn’t want to?”

“He told me.”

Parker smiles, surprised. Apparently it didn’t occur to her to try words.

“They’re running something on him, though,” Hardison says. “Trying to bring him in. If I can figure out who they actually are, I can hack them and… I don’t know. That guy today made it sound like they need their paperwork to line up, and you know I can do magic with that. Make it so Eliot ain’t eligible, or erase his files. Steal him some leverage. I won’t know till I’m in.”

“You think they’re conning him?”

Hardison’s hand goes to the card in his pocket. “Not exactly. But Eliot’s easy to manipulate, if you hit the right buttons. Like convincing him it’s his duty.”

Parker exhales. “He’s done that already. He shouldn’t have to do it again.”

“He knows he’s too old,” Hardison says, uncomfortable. There’s a pretty big gray area between too old for special forces and too old to be a hitter, but Eliot hasn’t bounced back from his injuries like he usually does. It might be grief and trauma. Or it might mean they need to start thinking about changing Eliot’s role on the team.

“He’s not old,” Parker says. “Not Archie-old. Not even Nate-old. He’s only a couple years older than me.” Which is true, but. Parker doesn’t break so many bones, thank God.

Parker knows Eliot can be hurt—she’s seen it enough. But some part of her will always think he’s invincible. Maybe the same part that gets nervous when she thinks about things changing between the three of them. She finally has a family that feels safe, and Eliot stepping back from being a hitter, even if he stays with them… It doesn’t have to happen yet. No reason to borrow trouble.

“At least now we have a target,” he tells her. “I’m pretty sure Eliot wants us to stop him; he’s just too stubborn to ask it straight out.”

He gets the check and an order of soup to go, then stops by the office so he can check in on the pub and start running facial recognition. It ain’t possible to be untraceable these days, not to Alec J. Hardison. Not once he has a face and an alias to match. And if he can track just one of the soldiers—or, better, Holmes—he’s in.

Parker lets them into Eliot’s house, smiling delightedly when she realizes he’s thrown his deadbolts, like he added the challenge as a gift to her. He probably did at that. Hardison makes a lot of noise turning on the lights and heading up the stairs, but the house is silent.

He knocks before he opens the bedroom door, keenly aware that this is not going to be a good night to startle Eliot again.
“In here,” Eliot calls. He’s in bed, carefully propped on enough pillows that it’s obvious his arm must be killing him. “You lock up?”

“I brought you a fortune cookie,” Parker announces, poking him lightly in the side and getting an affectionate growl. “So you owe me two Chinese meals. Your eyes are red. Were you crying?”

“Excuse me?” Hardison interjects, drawing Parker’s attention off Eliot’s possible crying. The man lost a friend; he wants to have a few manly tears in a private moment, ain’t no need to go calling attention to it. “I brought him soup. Pretty sure he owes me Chinese food. Or a steak.”

“Bone in, well done,” Eliot mutters, a look of distaste on his face. He swallows a double dose of Percocet dry before Hardison can question whether enough hours have passed since all the liquor at the funeral. “Thanks for the soup, man. Gonna save it for lunch, though.”

His eyes are already drooping; add in the drugs and he’d probably fall asleep in the soup anyway. “I could make you some toast,” Hardison says. One hand drops to his pocket, like that business card has a weird kind of weight to it.


But when Hardison makes it back upstairs, bearing toast and the thermometer, Eliot’s out. Parker, curled next to him on the bed, holds a finger to her lips as a warning. Hardison sighs. It can wait till morning, after all. Nothing’s going to happen tonight.

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Hardison’s in a hot, tiny broom closet, Parker pressed against him. She smells like honey.

“I hacked a museum with a boomerang,” he tells her.

She smiles, her pupils wide. “You woke the President. He’ll call the Dustmen.”

It’s too hot in here. He unbuttons his shirt.

“You’re sweating,” says Parker, cool as ever. “Why is it so hot?”

“It’s zombies,” he tells her.

And suddenly it is. He can hear them on the marble floor of the museum, an army of zombies. A low moan rumbles through the walls.

“They’ll set off the heat sensors,” Parker frowns. “They’re too hot.”

He looks around for the temperature controls, but there’s only brooms and Parker, not even enough elbow room to sneeze. He fumbles his earbud, drops it on the floor, picks it up and jams it in.

Listens to the static of an empty line.

“Eliot?” he calls.

“Can you hack zombies with a boomerang?” Parker asks. “We have to steal the statue before Sterling gets here.”
“Eliot?” he calls again. The static sounds like rain. He’s been in this closet for hours, and he has to pee. But he has to find Eliot first.

“Where is he?” he asks.

“He’s out there,” Parker says. “He’s a zombie now, remember?”

Hardison opens his eyes, the closet dissolving around him. He hears Parker’s light snores and Eliot’s gentle wheeze, and relaxes. Just a dream. Except he really does have to pee like a racehorse.

He helps himself to Eliot’s bathroom, and he’s already half asleep again, stumbling back toward the bed, when he hears the zombie.


He turns on the light. “Eliot,” he hisses from across the room. Some lessons you only have to learn once. “Eliot, wake up.”

Eliot shifts against the pillows, a pained expression on his face. Hardison glances at the clock, and yeah, the drugs have worn off. He’s never been seriously injured himself, not really, and he hadn’t realized how tiring it must be. Eliot can’t even lie flat in bed without hurting himself. Hardison flicks the lights on and off in a quick strobe. “Eliot, time for your pills. Wake up.”

Eliot shifts again, then opens his eyes with a grimace of pain. “Hardison? Wha’s matter?”

Parker raises her head fuzzily, then rolls over.

“Pills,” Hardison tells him in a whisper, approaching the bed. He opens the bottle and shakes out a couple painkillers. Eliot stares at them sleepily.

“You hurting?”

Eliot frowns. He isn’t really awake.

“Take them,” Hardison tells him firmly, and Eliot does. Hardison hands him the glass of water from the nightstand. “Bad dream?”

“He wouldn’t stop screaming,” Eliot says blearily. “He wouldn’t die. He just kept screaming.”

Which wakes Hardison up nicely. “Trevor Harris?”

“I called him,” Eliot says. “I needed backup and I called him. They didn’t even know it was happening. Why didn’t they know?”

“Who?” Hardison asks.

“I knew he’d come,” Eliot says. “’s what he does. But he was always—I didn’t think he could die.”

Hardison sits on the floor next to the bed, leaning against the nightstand. He can see Eliot’s face from here, but they aren’t eye to eye, and he isn’t looming over him in the dark. “It wasn’t your fault,” he tells Eliot, not sure he’s awake enough to hear it. “Holmes told me he set you up.”

“’s what he does.” Eliot shakes his head. “But he wouldn’t risk…”

Eliot shivers suddenly, raising his good hand to his head like something hurts. He swallows hard and continues, more awake now. “They should have shut it down months ago, if they had the intel, so
why didn’t they? Something hinky’s happening. I think maybe…Maybe that’s why he had Ramona pull me in. If there’s trouble inside the—with his people…I think that’s what this is about.”

“An internal power struggle?” Hardison asks, parsing that out. “And Holmes wants you to solve it for him? Why you?”

“Gotta trust someone,” Eliot says.

“You were friends.” Parker’s voice, perfectly awake, makes Hardison jump a little. “He was in the picture where you were happy.”

“What?” Eliot asks, his confusion obvious. He doesn’t seem at all surprised Parker’s awake. It’s not fair.

Hardison pulls his phone off the nightstand and pulls up his scan of the photo, handing it to Eliot.

“Oh,” says Eliot, in a softer voice. He stares at the phone. “How did you—can I have that? Can you print it or something?”

“…Yeah.” Hardison says, a little taken aback by the sudden shift in the conversation. “Of course. First thing in the morning.”

The light from the phone reveals a soft little smile on Eliot’s face. Hardison makes a mental note to get him a frame, too. Something simple.

“You were friends?” Parker repeats.

“We served together,” Eliot says slowly, the smile fading. “We were brothers.”

“What happened?” Hardison asks.

He isn’t really expecting an answer, but after a while Eliot sighs. “It was a long time ago. Doesn’t matter now.”

Hardison waits a few beats to see if Eliot’s going to expand on that, then says, “Okay.”

Eliot coughs. Hardison wants to think he’s doing it to avoid answering, but it goes on a little too long for that, and it leaves him breathless.

He’s been coughing a lot today, Hardison realizes with a jolt. He hands Eliot the water again, watching him carefully.

“We got seconded to a group that was. Well. Sometimes good guys make the best bad guys, you know?” He’s looking at the phone again, tracing the faces gently with his thumb. “So. Mission went to hell, and. Anyway. Woke up to find he had a brand-new fucking tattoo and I had a set of retirement papers.”

Eliot puts the phone down hard enough that Hardison winces, thinking of his screen. He rubs his arm absently, looking back at something Hardison can’t see.

Hardison waits a while, giving Eliot room to go on.

“He said your retirement was medical,” he finally says as neutrally as possible. “Was it Holmes’ fault you got hurt? Is that what you’re saying?”

“It was his fault I got retired.” Eliot’s accent’s thickening again. Anger or the pills kicking in, it’s
hard to say. “Pulling fucking strings behind the curtain like it’s any of his business.”

Hardison thinks about that. And about Holmes saying he cares about Eliot, the frustrated look in his eyes when he’d said it. He thinks about sitting on the sidelines of an MMA fight, watching Eliot take a beating, and the way it felt to watch him stroll confidently into the next fight. And the next. About calling his name on the comms and not getting an answer. About Eliot waking up after a mission and how none of the other men in that photo came to the funeral. Why that might be, and what he might do if he had the chance to send Eliot to safety instead of letting it happen again.

“You think he was trying to protect you?”

“That was my career, Hardison. It was my fucking life. And suddenly I was just this guy with a lot of dead friends and a really specific skill set.”

Which he’d put to good use—bad use—probably as soon as he’d healed up. “Unintended consequences,” Hardison murmurs.

“But now he wants you back?” Parker prompts.

“Yeah, well,” Eliot’s blinks are getting longer as the drugs pull him under again. “That’s life, isn’t it? No do-overs.”

Parker props herself up on one elbow and runs a hand through Eliot’s hair. He smiles and lets his eyes stay closed, but Parker looks older than usual, sadder. She rests her hand on Eliot’s forehead with an unhappy frown and a worried glance at Hardison. “No do-overs,” she sighs.

“We’re glad you’re here, you know,” Hardison says awkwardly. “I mean. I’m sorry. That things happened that way. But I’m glad you’re with us now.”

It hits Hardison that it’s probably the wrong thing to say. He’s the only one of the three of them that wouldn’t want a do-over. He has his regrets, yeah, and there’s things he wishes hadn’t happened. Wishes had happened different. But even the bad things led him someplace good, in the end: To Nana, and then to Leverage. If you offered him a time machine—once he got past how cool that would be—he’d be trying not to stomp on any butterflies. Eliot and Parker? They’d change things. Even if it meant he never got to know them. He can’t even blame them for it.

Eliot’s asleep again anyway.
Eliot wakes to the soft sound of typing. Sunlight’s streaming through the window, and there’s a framed photo on the nightstand. His new squad, just through their specialized training, toasting the beginning of their first tour. Young and dumb and ready to save the world. Trust Hardison to frame the thing; he’d meant to stick it in a shoebox or something, not put it where he’d see it all the time and be reminded. He shakes his head, which swims alarmingly at the motion. *Something’s wrong.*

He sits up, looking for the sound of the typing, and the pain in his chest catches him off-guard, doubles him over in a heavy fit of coughing. It makes his eyes water a little, and he sags back against the headboard, waiting for the heaviness to ease.

“You’ve been coughing in your sleep,” Hardison says. He’s right next to the bed all of a sudden, too close, and Eliot didn’t see where he came from. *Something’s very wrong.*

Hardison’s looking tired, like Eliot’s coughing kept him up.

“Sorry,” he says. Even though they invited themselves into his bed.

Hardison raises his eyes to the ceiling and mutters something under his breath. He holds out a thermometer. Eliot thinks about objecting, but his head is pounding and Hardison probably has the right idea for once. Not that he needs to admit it, any more than he needs to admit that yesterday was nothing like the rest the doctor back at the hospital had warned him he needed.

He sticks the cold thermometer under his tongue with a sigh, letting Hardison think he resents it.

The beep startles him again—he’s drifting, not thinking, not sleeping, just lost in the fog. 103.5. Which explains a lot, really.

“Can we trust Holmes?” Hardison wants to know.

Eliot frowns. *No* is the answer, not since he’d got that damned tattoo. He thought he’d been pretty clear about that.

“*Eliot,*” Hardison says, sitting on the edge of the bed. The dip of the mattress sets off Eliot’s ribs, and he moans a little, surprising himself at the sound. “*Eliot,* do we use his doctor? Or should I find a new one? Are you following me?”

“Yeah,” Eliot says. “His is fine.” He’ll owe another favor, but he’s too tired to care as much as he knows he should.

“You sure?” Hardison asks. “We could just take you to the ER.”

Eliot smother another moan. Hours of waiting, sitting up in a hard plastic chair that’s going to be covered in worse germs than he’s already dealing with, and at the end of it they’ll probably send him home with the same drugs he’s already taking. It sounds like torture. John’s way means an appointment, at least. And he won’t have to come up with a story to explain his injuries.

“It’s fine. I can wait till tomorrow.”
Hardison rolls his eyes to the ceiling again. “Not happening. Here, drink this.”

It’s orange juice, too sweet. Hardison probably thinks this fake stuff is healthy, so Eliot sips it, trying to be a good sport.

It helps. Maybe he’s not that sick; maybe it’s just low blood sugar. He can’t remember eating yesterday. He works on the orange juice. Calories are calories, and even the fake shit usually has added vitamins.

Hardison’s on the phone, sounding nervous and frustrated. “He needs to see someone now,” he’s saying.

Eliot’s going to tell him the low blood sugar theory, but he’s distracted by the need to hit the head, which feels really far away right now. He pauses by the dresser and leans over to catch his breath. There’s a tray on it full of pancakes and cold bacon, and his stomach twists with nausea.

“What do you need?” Hardison’s at his elbow before he can blink the spots out of his vision, one hand covering the phone. “You hungry?” Eliot grabs a fresh shirt, pretending that’s why he’d stopped, and feels Hardison’s eyes on him all the way to the bathroom door.

Hardison opens the door while he’s washing his hands, startling him—his heart jumps in his chest, then pounds painfully.

“What.”

“I need to see your arm,” Hardison says. He’s dropping his eyes and ducking his head like he’s sorry, but Eliot can see by the line of his shoulders he isn’t going to back down.

“Leave it for the doctor,” Eliot tells him anyway. He really doesn’t have the energy for Hardison’s fussing today.

“Your buddy Holmes is tracking her down, but it might take a bit,” Hardison says. “So I need to look at your arm and see whether we’re going to the emergency room or not.”

He has a point. Again.

Eliot can’t do this standing up; he’s already so tired it hurts. “Can you grab the bandages? We do this on the bed, where I can prop it up. And you do not poke. Got it?”

“I’m not Parker,” Hardison says, bickering automatically. He looks reassuringly serious as he grabs bandages and disinfectants.

Eliot’s out of breath as soon he pushes off the sink, but he makes it back to bed without having to rest on the way—hell of a victory, that one, someone should put him down for a medal. “Be careful,” he warns, dropping onto the bed and pulling off his sweatshirt. “It’s sensitive.”

It’s tingling already and Hardison’s just looking at it.

“I’m getting that,” Hardison says gently. “You’re due for more meds, by the way.”

Eliot washes them down with another sip of too-sweet orange juice. The glass is starting to feel heavy in his hand, and he passes it back to Hardison, dropping his head against the headboard with a thunk.

“The doctor’ll call back soon,” Hardison says, suddenly hesitant.
“Can’t rush the VA,” Eliot tells him. “She calls, she’ll probably turn out to have a six-month waiting list. Probably have to fly back from a job to make the appointment.”

“Are you—you’re teasing me right now? You think this is funny?”

“I think you’re funny,” Eliot tells him. Hardison’s shaking his head, but he looks calmer. That’s good. Panic never helps, and anyway, this might be—is, he admits—a setback, but it ain’t an emergency. He feels like shit, yeah, and he’s probably bought himself another round of antibiotics, but he’s been through worse and survived it, without millions of dollars in the bank and the American health care system at his fingertips.

Hell, he’d survived worse last week.

“Hold still.”

Hardison has delicate hands for a klutzy guy. Probably all those video games, training him up. Eliot watches his long, agile fingers as they carefully remove the bandage, then the strained look on his face as he pulls it away.

Hardison’s eyes get wide and round, and he gasps a little. Eliot looks down at his arm, then cocks his head, confused.

“What do you see?” he asks, Hardison must have spotted a problem he can’t. There has to be an infection (something’s wrong), but the arm looks okay to him. Well, the same. It isn’t red or oozing or anything he’d have thought from the rest of his symptoms.

“What the hell did this?” Hardison asks.

“It’s okay?” Eliot just wants to confirm it and be done, but Hardison’s making a face like he’s going to be sick.

“You and I have different definitions of okay,” Hardison says shakily, like Eliot hasn’t been whining about the damn arm all week, popping painkillers like candy. “But I don’t see any red lines or anything. Hold still a minute longer.”

Eliot looks out the window while Hardison rebandages the arm, trying to block out the inevitable jostling. “What time is it?” he asks. “Where’s Parker?”

“Probably stealing you an ambulance or something,” Hardison says. “She’s supposed to be at the pharmacy, buying a better thermometer. And it’s after nine. I woke up at six—six!—because you’ve got me trained to get up at completely inhuman hours now, and I made breakfast and went to get you your picture frame, thinking it’d be a nice surprise, and you—you slept in.”

Eliot rolls his eyes at that. Hardison sleeps till noon like a damn teenager when he thinks he can get away with it. This complaint’s a bit rich, coming from him.

Still, he looks worried, and he shouldn’t worry. It ain’t an emergency, after all.


“You like it?” Hardison smiles. He’s clearly proud of himself, so Eliot smiles back, then lets his eyes close as Hardison rants about the frame, the uneaten pancakes, and whatever else is on his mind like a fast-paced, angry lullaby.
Eliot drifts in and out all morning, mostly coherent but sometimes frighteningly confused. Once, shaking with chills, he seems to think he’s in the dungeon of the psych experiment—Hardison hopes it’s that dungeon anyway, and how fucked up does a person’s life have to be to have a preferred torture hallucination? But it must be the one from the college job, because he settles when Parker tucks a blanket over him and closes his eyes with heartbreaking fortitude.

Hardison forces more ibuprofen into him after that one, recommendations be damned, but Eliot’s fever stays high.

Hardison sits at his laptop, listening to Eliot’s coughs and trying to stay calm. He finally has an appointment with the mysterious Dr. Holzer coming up in an hour, but the very fact that Eliot’s conceded the need to see a doctor at all is scaring the shit out of him. Hell, he’s spent the past few days being glad Eliot’s willing to take his damn painkillers, and maybe that should have been scaring him too. It’s not right, not for Eliot.

He can’t exactly drag Eliot to the ER, though, not when he says he won’t go. And they’d probably have to wait at least an hour to get him seen anyway. At least here he’s in a bed.

So there’s nothing Hardison can do but wait. He’s set up his laptop on a card table at the foot of the bed, where he can watch Eliot shift uncomfortably in his sleep and still try to concentrate on tracking down Holmes’ agency, but he isn’t getting anywhere. Men in Black might be right—it’s uncanny how well these guys have hidden their tracks. He’s down to breaking into intelligence agencies one at a time and hoping he strikes gold.

Parker’s downstairs now, doing something in the kitchen. He should probably intervene, but she’s worried too, and with nothing to steal, climb, or con, she can’t seem to settle. Instead she’s been wandering the house and yard, reappearing at random intervals with glasses of ice water for Eliot. At least she’s keeping him hydrated, which is more than Hardison’s accomplishing.

“This is stupid,” he mutters out loud, setting his orange soda down with a little too much force. There are at least forty agencies Hardison knows about, and the odds are good this is one he doesn’t. He needs more to go on, and nothing he’s tried is getting any hits.

Disturbed by the noise—damn it, Hardison—Eliot stirs in his sleep, moaning a little. He’s breathing fast now, almost panting.

They never seem to be good dreams. Maybe it’s Trevor Harris screaming again. Like an earworm Eliot can’t get out of his head.

Hardison starts humming without picking a melody, just wanting to drown out the noise in Eliot’s head. He aims for something soothing and repetitive, boring even, singing little nonsense syllables here and there as he goes.

It works.

Eliot’s still breathing fast, but his fist relaxes and his face goes slack again. So Hardison keeps humming, smiling to himself. Eliot’s got a beautiful singing voice, there’s no denying it, but Hardison has pipes too.

Hell, his humming got Parker through a job once, that time in Dubai with—with the DDR pad.

Something connects in the back of his mind, something he’s been waiting for.
DDR. Just a stupid game, a way to show his moves to the other geeks in the arcade. That’s all, but it snags in his mind anyway. He takes a breath and lets himself free-associate.

DDR. The arcade, and DeShawn Williams dancing next to him. Parker’s arms around his neck in Dubai. The scent of jasmine. A girl laughing at the setup in his apartment, even though it ain’t like he’s as bad as the hacker who claimed he’d rewired his rig to install a physical password to his dorm room, Twister-style.

The hacker who’d been so good at countersurveillance. Snotty asshole, but a damned good hacker; his codes were graceful, natural, like they’d evolved naturally out of the laws of physics. Distinctive.

The hacker whose fingerprints were all over whatever system blocked his trace of Eliot’s phone call.

Hardison still doesn’t remember his real name—he’s pretty sure he never knew it. But he remembers his stupid freaking handle—Sm00ves, supposedly in reference to his DDR prowess, like that was something to tell people. And he remembers who sucked up to him the most obnoxiously.

“E? You good for a few minutes? I gotta make a call.”

This is going to suck.

Chapter End Notes

As we head more into the ridiculously stupid medical drama, I refer you to the tags on this story, which do not lie.
There’s an elephant on his chest. No, a gorilla, hot and heavy and dangerous, like the ones he’d seen in Congo. Eliot likes elephants, but he’s never had much luck with monkeys, and this one’s the worst yet; it’s hard to breathe, exhausting, and when he coughs the gorilla roars with rage, stabbing at his broken ribs.

He’s too hot, and the blanket is so heavy.

He has to rest from the effort of throwing it off, and he realizes he’s soaked in sweat. He needs water. A shower. Clean sheets.

He’s so tired.

This time the cough leaves tears in his eyes, and he almost can’t sit up enough to make it stop.

Someone’s left a glass of water on the nightstand, inches away. Eliot reaches out, shaking with the strain, and gets one blissful gulp before another round of coughing hits and he doubles over, dropping the glass. The water spills across the sweat-soaked sheet, wasted.

He thinks about calling out—Hardison’s downstairs, isn’t he? Or maybe it’s Monday, and they’re meeting the mark. He isn’t sure. He can’t quite catch his breath enough to yell and find out, and anyway, it would be embarrassing. He’s not a child.

He can do this on his own. He always has. It’s just one step at a time. Slowly, he forces himself to his feet, ignoring the way the room sways around him.

A wave of vertigo knocks him off-balance and he almost falls, stumbling on heavy legs. Eliot thinks again about calling for help, but it’s dark now, it must be the middle of the night. He can’t keep waking them.

Another step, and the room spins.

“You should have stayed in bed,” a voice scolds.

Eliot looks up, squinting to clear his vision. Trevor’s standing in front of him, arms crossed.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Eliot tells him.

Trevor grins. “You called the cavalry. We came. That’s what we do, remember?”

Eliot shakes his head. “I killed you.”

Trevor cocks his head, like Eliot’s said something interesting. “You should sit down,” he says, and suddenly Eliot’s on the floor, the polished wood cool against his cheek.

“Oops,” says Trevor. “Unintended consequences.”

“I’m sorry,” Eliot says. It’s completely inadequate, but it’s all he has air for. The floor is painfully cold.

“I knew what I was doing,” Trevor says, sitting on the floor next to Eliot. “Do you?”

“What’m I doing?” Eliot wants to know. He doesn’t think the words made it out, but Trevor smiles
“At him anyway.”

“Pretty sure you’re dying,” Trevor tells him.

Eliot tries to think about that, decide what to do about it, but there’s another round of coughing, sharp and pointless. The pain of it flashes like lightning at the edges of his vision. Eliot shuts his eyes.

“I got them out,” Eliot says, or maybe just thinks. Trevor will want to know that.

“It’s okay,” Trevor’s voice is easy to hear over the buzzing in his ears, and Eliot tries to focus on it. Tries to hold on. “It’s easier than you think.”

It is.

“Sm00ves?” Cha0s sneers into the webcam. The connection lags for a second, freezing him that way, and Hardison snickers.

“What?” Cha0s demands. “And why do you want to know about Sm00ves?”

“I was just wondering what happened to him,” Hardison says vaguely. “He dropped out of the scene, what, a decade ago? So was he in prison or…”?

Cha0s snorts. “Hardly. He got recruited by some alphabet agency.”

“Do you know which?” Hardison cringes at his own eagerness, but Cha0s will tell him, in the end. He’ll make him grovel first, but he’ll tell just to prove he knows something Hardison doesn’t, like fanboying some jerk hacker means he’s some kind of Big Man in the freaking community.

Behind him, Parker clangs some pans together. She’s making soup, she says, and she claims she’s following a recipe. There’s even a cookbook open on the counter, but Hardison has serious doubts: He doesn’t know of any soups that require multiple pots.

“OMG,” Cha0s says, apparently also hearing the noises, even though Hardison’s made sure Parker’s not in the camera frame. “Is the little woman making you lunch? Is she barefoot? I bet she is.”

“Sm00ves,” Hardison snaps. “Which agency?”

Cha0s sneers again. “Like I said, one of the alphabets. He dropped off the hacking scene after that. I guess they put a leash on him. But he was still a gamer, and he was in my guild.”

Cha0s pauses like sharing a guild with Sm00ves is something to be proud of. Hardison waits, letting him have the moment.

“How important is this?” Cha0s asks. “Important enough for you to owe me a favor? Because I’m having a brain fart all of a sudden. You know what might help? Parker, dressed as Daenerys Targaryen.” He waggles his eyebrows in an overdone leer.
“Important enough that if you tell me, I’ll do you a favor right now,” Hardison says, playing it cool. “I won’t tell Eliot you said that.”

“Are you seriously threatening to tell on me to Spencer? Like I’m scared of that musclehead.” His eyes are scanning the screen, though, like Eliot might show up to punch him right through the camera. Hardison allows himself a small smile.

“I’m asking you because I heard you two were friends and I already had your number,” Hardison says. “But a lot of people knew Sm00ves. I can get all this somewhere else.”

“A lot of people knew Sm00ves,” Cha0s corrects. “But how many people knew Michael Yeh?”

Hardison yawns dramatically. “So you know his name. Do you know which agency he works for?”

“He never called it by name,” Cha0s says. Hardison’s heart sinks as Cha0s continues. “He used to tell us it was the Ministry of Magic. Like because he was such a wizard with computers? Totally lame.”

“I thought you two were tight,” Hardison says. “He didn’t confide in you? You sure you even know his real name?”

“He always used to complain about his strict NDA was. He’d tell us—me, I mean—that it was so strict his brains would boil in his skull if he broke it.”

“Great,” Hardison says. “So, you know how I could get in touch with him?”

Cha0s makes an exaggeratedly apologetic face. “That’s gonna be tricky. He’s dead.” He pauses, then laughs. “His brains boiled in his skull, more or less. Ironic, right?”

“What?” Hardison’s not sure if he’s more appalled by the idea of that happening or by realizing that Cha0s genuinely thinks a supposed friend’s death is at least kind of funny. “What the hell?”

“Seriously, it was fucked up. He ate a bad burger. Or had bad genes, something like that. He died a couple years ago of some kind of mad cow variant. Freaky, right? He’d been shaky for a while, though, mixing up the game and reality and getting real intense about everything. Paranoid. We had to ask him to leave the guild. I mean, you know how it is. Anyway, he got diagnosed not long after.”

“Paranoid about what? And do you know where he lived? What city?”

“What the hell, Hardison? Not even a ‘sorry for your loss?’ Guild membership’s like a brotherhood, you—hey Parker, how’s it going?”

“Cha0s.” Hardison’s about to lose his temper, and he can’t afford it—he needs answers, any answers. Parker rests a hand on his shoulder.

“Seattle, which is weird, right? We actually met IRL once, at the con there. It was great; I was dressed as Han Solo, and he was doing the whole Tolkien thing, super hardcore, he had a custom-made—”

“No one cares,” Hardison says. He should check on Eliot again; he doesn’t have time for con gossip.

“Wait,” Cha0s says again. “I remember now.”

Hardison gestures impatiently.

Cha0s looks annoyed, puffing himself up for a rant, but then he pauses, deflating a little. “Listen.
Sm00ves was a friend, you know? And even if he was paranoid because of his brain thing, he was still in over his head. I think these people might actually be a job for you guys.”

“Spit it out,” Hardison says.

“I told you we went to Emerald City ComiCon, right?” Cha0s says. “Well, we ran into a guy there who worked with Sm00ves, and we got to talking Tolkien, you know? Sm00ves was dressed as a Nazgûl and the guy said he should watch out because—”

“Did you hear something?” Parker asks.

“A lot of hot air,” Hardison says, gesturing at the screen.

“Hmm. Keep an eye on the soup.” She fills another glass of water and leaves the kitchen.

“Was that an apron she had on? Does she wear it in the bedroom?”

“Get to the point,” Hardison says. “Please.”

Cha0s blinks. “Please?”

Hardison glares, counting to ten in his head. Arguing will take longer.

“OPA,” Cha0s says. “I don’t know what it stands for, but they hire a lot of Tolkien nerds, and they scare the shit out of them. That co-worker we ran into said—”

“Alec!” Parker screams. She sounds terrified. Hardison runs.
Eliot’s crumpled on the floor of his bedroom, lying on his bad arm. For a long second all Parker can think is how uncomfortable he must be. He should move.

“Eliot?”

Nothing.

She bends down to shake him, and he doesn’t respond, not even a moan when she rolls him onto his back.

He’s not breathing.

“Alec!” she screams. She hears the panic in her voice and quashes it ruthlessly.

Parker takes one deep breath and dives in, counting out the compressions. Elbows straight, weight over the chest, just like in class. Eliot’s still warm—too warm, he has a fever. Which doesn’t matter right now. Work the problem.

Hardison skids to his knees on Eliot’s other side, pulling out his phone. She concentrates on keeping the rhythm fast and steady, trusting him to handle things.

Eliot had insisted on the AED for the restaurant and first aid classes for the staff, including Hardison and Parker. He’d been firm enough that she understood he wanted the machine for the office too, just in case. CPR without an AED hardly ever works, he’d said, and even when it did the person usually wished it hadn’t. The AED was a gamechanger.

He hadn’t bought one for his house.

His ribs give under her hands—if they were only cracked before, they’re broken now. She’s hurting him, she has to be, but he doesn’t react. She doesn’t let herself worry about it. Two inches deep with each compression, that’s what’ll give him a chance to complain about the ribs.

“How are you doing?” Hardison asks, tears on his cheeks. “Need to switch?”

She shakes her head. It’s hard work; she’s sweating a little—but she could do it for hours, if she had to. If that’s what it takes.

“How’s Eliot?” she hears Hardison say. “Don’t do this, okay? Please, please don’t do this.”

She can’t block out the raw fear in his voice, and she can’t afford to let it affect her. “Go downstairs,” she says, tilting Eliot’s head back for rescue breaths. She watches his chest rise with her air. “Let the paramedics in.”

He reaches toward Eliot, hand shaking, then nods and goes. Good. Minutes matter in a situation like this, Eliot says. Seconds matter.

Average response time in Eliot’s neighborhood is five minutes. She’s on the fourteenth round of compressions when boots stomp in and Hardison pulls her away.

He grabs her too hard, pulling her to his chest and trying to hide her view, and she has to twist away to watch them calmly slap pads against Eliot’s battered chest, injecting him with something before resuming CPR. He jumps a little when they shock him, but he doesn’t move on his own or make any
noise. They go back into CPR, then try another shock. This time they don’t go back to doing compressions like they’re supposed to, and Parker pulls all the way loose from Hardison, ready to scream at them for giving up when this is Eliot, but the tall one gives a satisfied nod and Eliot’s heart is beating, it worked.

They’re calm, but they move fast, strapping him to the gurney and barking questions at her—How long has Eliot been like this? What are the injuries to his chest? Does he have any history of heart problems?—and Parker makes herself speak slowly as she answers what she can. Details matter in a crisis. Misunderstandings will waste time.

“He has an appointment at the VA,” Hardison tells them shakily, stepping aside as they carry Eliot down the stairs.

The shorter EMT looks at her partner, then shakes her head. “General’s closer,” she says. “You can meet us there.”

They load him up and pull away, siren blaring. Parker doesn’t stop to watch them go. She turns on her heel and walks briskly back into the house, to the kitchen.

The soup is still simmering gently. Chaos is still leering confusedly from Hardison’s laptop. It’s only been a few minutes. Parker slams the laptop shut and switches off the burners on the stove.

They’ll be at the hospital for a while, and they can’t risk a fire. Eliot needs a house to come back to.

Someone is screaming in the back of her head, and she ignores it ruthlessly. Eliot didn’t teach her how to stop feeling things, but she still knows how to push them away when there’s work to do.

Parker grabs Eliot’s keys. The Charger’s faster than the van, and they’ve lost too much time already.

Hardison can’t stop crying. Or, not crying, exactly. He’s not sobbing or anything else that would embarrass Eliot. It’s more like an allergy: his eyes just keep watering.

Parker hands him a tissue, not taking her eyes off the door next to the triage desk. She’s been completely calm, navigating the hospital like she’s casing a bank, only with none of the joy. She’s handled everything so far—the drive to the hospital, the calls to Dr. Holzer and Nate, even keeping Hardison in Kleenex and giving him regular pats on the shoulder—with the same frozen precision, not rushing but not wasting a moment. He should probably be worried about that, but he’s never been more proud of her.

The waiting room is crowded—it’s getting late on a Sunday afternoon, which means people are off work and the urgent cares are closing. There’s a screaming toddler two seats over, red-faced and flailing (ear infection: Hardison heard the frazzled mother talking on the phone), and a homeless man pacing behind them, talking to himself. All around them people are coughing and sniffling and talking too loud on their cellphones, and Hardison’s going to have to bathe in hand sanitizer once they’re done here.

Eliot would have hated this.

Hardison should have forced him to go anyway.
He should have called an ambulance as soon as Eliot “I’m Fine” Spencer stopped saying he was fine and admitted he needed a doctor.

He should have at least stayed in the damn room.

He should have…

An old woman, leaning heavily on a cane, sits in the empty seat next to Hardison. He glances at her automatically, and she gives him a wary once over—yes, the crying black geek is the big threat here, apparently—takes in Parker’s intense stare, and then shifts to the next open seat, next to the screaming child.

The doors open and the nurse comes out, heading right for them.

“You’re with Mr. Spencer?” She leads them to a second, smaller waiting area, “where they’ll be more comfortable,” and tells them the doctor will be in soon to talk to them.

The new room is more comfortable: A little dingy, but there’s a small couch and a box of tissues, even a nice nature print on the wall. It’s quiet here. Private.

Hardison’s never been admitted to a hospital himself, but he grew up in foster care—which meant households with lots of kids, all of them on Medicaid. He’s probably spent cumulative days of his life in emergency room waiting areas, and none of them have been this nice. He knows what it means, wonders if Parker does.

This is the Bad News room.

He reaches out and takes Parker’s hand, watching the clock tick, trying not to think stupid things like this is the last minute before we find out Eliot’s…Or, looking at the nature print, Now every time I see a giraffe, I’ll be reminded of Eliot’s…

The door opens, and the doctor comes in. She’s not smiling.

“I’m Dr. Freeman. You’re Eliot Spencer’s family?”

“I’m his sister,” Parker says. “This is his husband.” Hardison’s already inserted the marriage into Eliot’s records, just in case. He doesn’t even feel guilty marrying off Eliot’s real name. Uncomfortable, yes, but only because it feels wrong to use it at all. It can’t be helped—Dr. Holzer already has Eliot Spencer’s medical records, and saving his life takes priority. They’ll worry about the security breach later. At least he hopes they will. It won’t matter what name they used if Eliot…

“We’re admitting Mr. Spencer to our intensive care unit,” the doctor begins, and Hardison’s head drops to his hands. He’s weak with relief. Thank you, Jesus. He’s alive.

Parker listens closely as the doctor talks. Hardison files away clinical terms for later research: QT intervals, ejection fraction, respiratory distress.

Parker takes notes too, on a notepad that looks like it came from Eliot’s kitchen, but she also asks questions, as calmly as she would at a briefing, until she understands exactly what Dr. Freeman is telling them, and this can’t be happening. Eliot was laughing yesterday.

Parker passes him another tissue, leaning forward. “So it wasn’t a heart attack? I did CPR. Did I hurt him?”

“You saved his life,” the doctor tells her firmly. “He’s very lucky you were there. Does your brother
have a history of heart problems?"

A heart attack is caused by blood clots, apparently, and Eliot doesn’t show any sign of those. That seems like it should have been good news.

But Eliot’s heart muscle is damaged. And the doctor doesn’t know why.

“You said he’s been ill? In addition to his injuries? Has he complained of chest pain at all recently?”

“His ribs have been bothering him,” Parker says. “And his arm hurts. He didn’t mention his chest, but I saw him rubbing it a few times yesterday. I thought it was because of his ribs.”

Dr. Freeman makes another note.

“He has a fever. And a cough,” Hardison tells her. “I thought maybe pneumonia—I was taking him to the doctor today. I didn’t—he didn’t say anything about his heart. Why wouldn’t he just say?”

“He probably didn’t realize what was happening,” Dr. Freeman explains, watching him sympathetically. “The heart can compensate for damage up to a point, and when it can’t anymore, the symptoms aren’t always obvious. That cough, for example—he has a lot of fluid buildup in his lungs. He’d probably assume any chest pain was related to that, while actually they’re both symptoms of his heart failure.”

“Heart failure,” Parker notes clinically. “But you can treat it.”

They are. There’s a fucking balloon pumping Eliot’s blood right now, because his heart isn’t doing the job well enough on its own. There’s a machine fucking breathing for him. And it’s all fucking temporary.

“Our focus right now is on finding the underlying cause and preventing any further damage. From what you’re telling me, his symptoms seem to have hit him quite suddenly, and the test results so far haven’t been conclusive.” Dr. Freeman sighs. “The wound on his arm looks…Can you tell me anything about that?”

“Dr. Holzer can,” Parker tells her. “At the VA. We have her number here.”

“She called,” the doctor says. Something flickers across her face. Distaste, maybe. “We’re working out the paperwork to credential her to treat him here, with our hospitalist team. She’s also asked us to send her samples of our cultures for her labs. Do you know what she’s testing for?”

They don’t.

“She recommended we start him on dialysis…has he been exposed to any toxins?”

They don’t know.

Does Eliot do drugs? She’s not the police; she just needs to know.

“He’s been doing a lot of drugs lately,” Parker says.

“He’s been on prescribed antibiotics and painkillers this week,” Hardison clarifies. He gives her the names and doses. “He doesn’t do recreational drugs. At all. Ever. Hardly ever takes the legit kind, even, he’s got this whole macho—he’s been hurting. Is he—does it hurt, what’s happening?”

Foreign travel?
Parker details Eliot’s trips with them, trips he’s mentioned off-hand, and trips she suspects, giving dates. She tells the doctor about every injury Eliot’s had in the past year, and about the time he got a cold and claimed it was an allergy to Sophie’s new perfume. Hardison hadn’t known she paid that much attention.

What it comes down to is that Eliot’s lungs are full of fluid, his heart is *dying*, and this doctor has no idea what’s wrong with him.

“Well, as I said, we’ve taken cultures and we’re running blood tests to narrow down the cause so we can treat it directly. In the meantime, we’re supporting his system to try to reduce the risk of organ failure.”

“Organ failure,” Hardison echoes.

“We’re doing everything we can,” Dr. Freeman says gently. “But you need to know that your husband is very ill.”

She’s telling him to prepare himself. Hardison nods his understanding, feeling himself smile politely like he’s grateful for the information. He doesn’t know why he’s bothering. He actually feels like he might throw up on Dr. Freeman’s shoes, and from the way she takes a quick step back and refocuses on Parker’s questions, his smile didn’t fool her.

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Eliot’s disappearing again.

Hardison knows it’s a cliché, thinking someone looks small in a hospital bed. But Eliot’s been wearing layers since he came home, except for those few shocking moments after his shower that first day, and then Hardison had been too focused on the injuries themselves to really take in how much weight Eliot’s lost. Now that he’s lying here still and slack and fragile, covered in a light sheet that exposes his bruised and bandaged chest, he realizes he can almost count Eliot’s ribs.

“Damn it, Eliot,” he says, pulling the visitor chairs closer to the bed and sitting in the nearest one. He leans over and presses his lips to Eliot’s forehead. If Eliot wakes up, he’ll tell him he’s checking his fever again.

Eliot doesn’t move. He could be dead, except for the machines measuring his vital signs, proving he still has them. He *would* be dead, without those machines.

“You have to flirt with the nurse,” Parker says, sitting in the other chair, arms folded. She’s looking at Eliot thoughtfully, like she’s calculating something.

“I have to what?” Hardison asks. He’s still freaking crying—he’s past being embarrassed about it now—and Parker’s ordering him to flirt with random nurses. “What are you talking about?”

“Make them like you,” Parker orders him. “So they take better care of your husband. You’re good at getting people to like you. I’m not.”

His heart manages to break a little further at that. “I like you. Eliot likes you.”

“Eliot flirted with the nurses when I sprained my knee, remember? And they told him where to get the good crutches.”
“Okay,” Hardison says. He tries to force his face into a smile like Eliot’s. “I can flirt.”

“Do it better than that,” Parker tells him, cool and practical. “If you’re crying, use your sad eyes.”

Hardison looks at Eliot’s pale face. Pictures his expression if he could hear Parker giving him flirting instructions.

“Like that,” says Parker.

Hardison wipes his eyes again.

“What are these?” Parker asks next, looking at the machines.

“Um. I’m not up on this yet,” Hardison says. “Give me a minute. But that’s his heart rhythm there, that’s his blood pressure. Oxygen levels. This one I don’t know, that one’s to do with controlling his IV…”

Parker nods, committing it to memory.

Now that he’s started, Hardison can’t stop looking at the monitors. He’s always been attracted to screens. Data. *Facts are friends*, he reminds himself. It doesn’t really feel that way.

He watches Eliot’s heartbeat trace across the monitor. Too fast, like he’s running a race. He’s no expert, neither, but even he can tell the shape of it doesn’t look right.

Hardison reaches out to drape his arm over Parker’s shoulder, maybe absorb some of her calm if she’ll let him.

Her shoulders are shaking. He turns.

Parker’s bent forward, one hand over her mouth, sobbing silently.

“Shit,” he says, standing up. “Parker…” he trails off. He can’t tell her Eliot’s okay, can he? He doesn’t think there’s anything else she really needs to hear.

“You did so good,” he says, folding her into his arms and feeling her snuffle into his chest. “You did everything just right for him, Parker. He’s gonna be so proud of you. Just wait till he wakes up.”
Another little room, another animal print. Orcas, this time.

Beautiful predators. Like Eliot. Hardison’s going to take the team on one of those whale-watching tours when this is over. They’ve been in the Northwest going on two years now, and they still haven’t done that. He’ll probably get seasick, but to see Parker’s face when the orcas jump? Maybe tease a grin out of Eliot? Yeah. He’ll buy Dramamine.

“Mr. Hardison?”

He looks away from the print. Dr. Holzer, a middle-aged white woman with a too-thin, too-severe face and an air of annoyance, is frowning at his distraction.

He spent the night in the hard plastic chair at Eliot’s bedside, watching the numbers slowly spiral down and reading PubMed in between hacking attempts on the OPA (which turns out to stand for Operational Phenomenology Agency and seems to be running itself with no oversight he can find, and what the hell did Eliot get himself into), and he’s shaky and exhausted. It’s hard to think. He takes a sip of bitter hospital coffee and tells himself to focus.

Dr. Holzer smiles politely. “We need to discuss Mr. Spencer’s treatment plan,” she says a little pointedly. He can’t tell if the woman’s hostile because he’d been rude on the phone, because she’s racist, or because she’s homophobic. Or because she knows Hardison’s not really married to Eliot and shouldn’t be allowed to have these discussions at all.

“There’s a treatment? You know what’s happening? Where have you been?”

He has more—a lot more—but Parker nudges him and he clamps his mouth shut. If she has a plan, they need to hear it.

“Researching,” she says drily. “As I’m a researcher rather than a cardiologist, it seemed the best use of resources.”

That much, he’d found online. He’s not sure why Holmes sent Eliot to this woman at all, other than simple proximity. She’s a medical doctor, but she doesn’t seem to practice; she’s in Portland on a research grant, investigating degenerative brain disorders. Like CTE, at the VA. Or mad cow.

She sighs. “I take it this…antagonism…has some connection to the attempts on our external networks last night. Let’s get this out of the way.”

She opens her attaché case and reaches in.

To his left, Parker tenses, dropping her hand to her belt, where she keeps the taser. Except she hadn’t been wearing it when—she hadn’t worn it to make soup.

“I didn’t get anywhere,” Hardison says, raising his hands in a way that looks placating but which frees them for a strike. “No secrets. I just wonder why an organization that refers to themselves as the Nazgûl would be willing to help.”

Dr. Holzer pulls out a small leather folder and a plastic case, then rolls up her left sleeve. Hardison
notices a tattoo on the inside of her arm, about where Eliot likes to wear a cuff. But he’s seen Eliot’s bare arm. Eliot isn’t covering a tattoo.

The plastic case turns out to hold sterile lancets. She pricks each of their fingers, then collects a drop of blood from each of them as they glance at each other in confusion.

Dr. Holzer takes a deep breath, then touches the tattoo.

Hardison shivers, something prickling over his skin and raising the hairs on the back of his neck. Parker has gone very still. Dr. Holzer opens the leather folder and holds it up. He leans in to look.

It’s a badge with a holographic seal. He tries to look back at the doctor, to ask her what’s going on, but he can’t look away…it’s fascinating.

The colors and lines shift, planting hooks deep into his brain, holding him in place.

A voice is chanting in a language with too many consonants. There must be someone else in the room, the tiny part of him that can think observes. The voice is too deep to be Dr. Holzer. Too deep and too hollow to be human.

When Dr. Holzer’s putting the badge away and Hardison can move again, he looks around. They’re alone.

“Sorry,” she says. “This really was the kindest option. You can think of that as a nondisclosure agreement. You won’t be allowed to reveal anything you learn.”

“Are we going to get mad cow disease?” Hardison blurts. He can’t lose Parker too. No, not too. He can’t lose either of them. But he never meant to risk Parker.

“Where did you dig that up?” she smiles, tilting her head. “And no. What you’re talking about isn’t mad cow or any kind of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. It’s called K syndrome, and it’s caused by parasites. And, ah, unsafe use of magic.”

“Magic.”

“Magic,” she confirms. “Or what we commonly understand as magic. We really don’t have time—and you don’t have clearance—for a full briefing. The short version is, magic is a subset of math and physics—we mostly do it on computers these days—we live in a multiverse, in several nearby dimensions there are alien intelligences who are not our friends, and Mr. Spencer was wounded stopping an invasion that would have been quite possibly an extinction-level event.”

She pauses, as if to make sure they’re keeping up. Hardison’s pretty sure he needs a minute. Maybe a day. Not to mention he needs to kick Eliot’s ass for not mentioning any of this. And for doing something stupidly heroic in another freaking dimension.

“Hang on, how could there be—”

“You think Spencer fought a venomous servant of a demi-god where, in Australia?” Dr. Holzer snaps. “Alternate dimensions, people, catch up.”

Parker is already nodding impatiently, ready to move on, so Hardison struggles valiantly to ignore that last tidbit. He’ll make Eliot tell him, later. When he’s better.

“Mr. Spencer initiated that operation at the behest of certain key allies of ours. They’ve expressed their desire to work with him again in future, which makes his survival diplomatically advantageous,
and, of course, as a veteran of our forces, he is entitled to medical care in this situation. I’ll add that it’s your somewhat dubious status as Mr. Spencer’s husband that saved your life last night and prompted us to have this little discussion. Any further attempts on our network will be met with immediate and lethal force. May I proceed?”

“Yeah. I mean, yes. Okay.” Hardison says. His mouth is suddenly very dry. “Please. That would be, um, advantageous.”

“Based on Mr. Spencer’s lab results and our own experiments with some biological samples recovered when his team returned from their mission, Mr. Spencer was exposed to a small amount of what for conversational purposes I’ll call a venom.”

“Is there an antidote?” Parker asks.

“We discovered the venom about 18 hours ago,” Dr. Holzer says. “After your call. It’s fascinating, and we’ll certainly be investigating it further, but that kind of research takes time. Mr. Spencer’s situation is urgent.”

Fascinating. Great.

“During the, ah, incident, microscopic sacs of venom were introduced into the wound in Mr. Spencer’s arm,” Dr. Holzer continues. “The doctors who treated him initially were understandably unaware of the threat, and their focus was on traditional medical care; between his initial heavy bleeding during the incident and their attempt to clean the wound, he avoided an immediately lethal exposure. However, it’s obvious that some sacs remained in the wound, and we think they’ve been slowly decaying, leaking venom as they do. It’s that venom that’s been slowly diffusing through his bloodstream and damaging his internal organs.”

“Organs? Plural?” Parker asks, her voice pitched a little high.

“It seems to have a particular affinity for human cardiac tissue, but yes, his lung function is obviously affected, and the liver and kidneys are showing early signs of damage as well.”

Parker raises her hand.

“Yes? You don’t have to raise your hand, Ms. Parker.”

“Just Parker. If magic is real, can’t you just fix him with magic?”

“No,” Dr. Holzer says, unexpected kindness in her tone. “I can’t. I’m sorry.”

She pauses as if she’s considering saying something, but apparently changes her mind.

“What I can do is direct his medical care with the knowledge available to me. My team back at the lab is continuing to experiment with the venom sacs, and they’ll pass on anything relevant immediately. In the meantime, while this particular case is unique, we have dealt with similar situations, and I have outlined a course of action. We’ve already started dialysis to remove as much of the venom currently in his system as possible. But with the sacs continuing to release increasing amounts of the toxin, we need to clean out the wound in Mr. Spencer’s arm, this time with a magnifying lens. I’ve booked an operating room and a surgeon, and I’ll need Mr. Hardison to sign a consent form saying he understands the risks of that procedure.”

“What are the risks?” Parker asks.

“In addition to the usual risks of surgery—and you need to understand that in Mr. Spencer’s current
condition, those are real risks—the venom sacs are, as I said, microscopic, and they’ve had time to spread through the wound area. We’ve identified a dye that makes them easier to track, but removing them will be time-consuming, which increases the risks of operating on someone as ill as your—as Mr. Spencer.”

“They are also, as I said, decaying.” A real smile flashes across Dr. Holzer’s face. “It’s fascinating from the perspective of a student of biology. The evolutionary pressures involved must have been—but you don’t care. The point, as far as Mr. Spencer is concerned, is that even with the best surgeon, there is a risk of either missing some and leaving them to continue their damage or rupturing one or more of the sacs, which would release a larger quantity of venom at once. Either outcome would probably be fatal.”

Hardison breathes in slowly and lets it out, counting as he does. Parker gives him a little nod and breathes with him once, giving him her rhythm.

“What are our other options?” Hardison asks, trying to sound like he can be rational about this.

“The safest option, in terms of saving Mr. Spencer’s life, would be to remove the arm.”

“What?” Next to him, Parker’s eyes widen.

“As I said, we haven’t actually dealt with this exact situation before, but it would be much less likely to lead to missing or rupturing the sacs. The downside should be obvious.”

Hardison nods, numb.

“I’ve been ordered to preserve Mr. Spencer’s ability to work in his chosen field if at all possible,” Dr. Holzer says carefully. “And I can’t recommend amputation if a less severe surgery has a good chance of success, which it does. But…”

She smiles again.

“It turns out Mr. Spencer is married. Which means my employer doesn’t get to make the call; you do. So, what will it be?”

Hardison freezes.

“We need time to talk it over,” Parker says. “As a family.”

“Of course,” Dr. Holzer says, standing. “I’ll leave you here for a few minutes to discuss it. But the surgery itself is already scheduled, and I need your decision soon.”

She pauses in the doorway. “This is a lot to take in,” she says. “And I understand that this situation makes it difficult to trust me, but I assure you, my primary responsibility is to my patient’s well-being. I’ll follow his wishes, as I understand them, as far as possible.”

The door closes behind her with a quiet click.

“Magic,” says Hardison. “I—is she fucking with us? This is not the time to fuck with us.”

“You saw that badge thing,” Parker says. “You felt it. And some of Eliot’s bracelets feel like that sometimes, all jangly in your head. I thought it was something in the material, because I stole a necklace once that did the same thing. It explains a lot.”

“It explains—Parker. Never mind. We can worry about it later. Do you trust her to treat Eliot?”
“She didn’t look like she was lying,” Parker says. “She didn’t have any of the tells Sophie taught me. She was leaving things out, but not lying. And what would be the point? If she wants to kill Eliot, she could just sit back and do nothing.”

Because Eliot’s already dying.

And sane, kind Dr. Freeman, who has the tact not to mention whether Eliot’s case is interesting from a scientific perspective, can’t figure it out. Probably because medicine doesn’t work like this, venom doesn’t work like this, and there is no creature on earth that could have done this to Eliot. So. Magic.

He looks at the print again, considering. Eliot wouldn’t need two arms to watch orcas. Hell, he’s been doing pretty well at everything these past few days, hasn’t he? It’s obviously the right answer, and he says so.

“We can’t risk making him worse. He could still grift with one arm. Or cook. He did all right with the sling.”

Parker bites her lip, not saying that a one-armed grifter is going to be plenty memorable.

“Plus,” Hardison says, warming to the idea. “They won’t be able to recruit him. It could save his life that way too.”

“He needs to fight,” Parker says quietly. “Like me and stealing. He needs it.”

Hardison’s not so sure. Eliot’s changed, in the time they’ve known him. He’s—well, all right, he is not mellow. Ain’t nobody gonna call him mellow. But he’s relaxed a bit. He might have needed to fight once, but now? Maybe he just likes it.

He thinks about Eliot fighting. Sees the fierce joy on his face, his grace in motion.

It’s still who Eliot is, and he loves it. Damn it.

“Parker,” Hardison says slowly. “If everything she said works perfectly, it still won’t undo the damage that’s been done already. I did a lot of reading last night, and—”

“Eliot isn’t a statistic,” Parker says. “He’s Eliot. If he lost every time the odds were against him, he’d have died years before we even met him and probably twenty times since.”

Hardison nods. He’s told himself that already, reading the mortality statistics on heart failure. It’s why he’d forced himself to switch to the material on living with it. Because Eliot’s going to live.

“He won’t be able to fight,” Hardison tells her quietly. “All the materials I found—and I’m including the ones for people in the early stages of heart failure, which our boy skipped right over—say people with physically strenuous jobs have to at least make changes. Like sitting down while they work kind of changes. And a lot of the advice out there is about, like, taking a rest break from doing the dishes.”

Parker stares at him. “He has a dishwasher.”

“Eliot wouldn’t choose death over disability,” Hardison says. “You know he wouldn’t. He’ll adapt to whatever we choose.”

“Not death,” Parker says. “But we could try. There’d still be the option of—they could still remove more, if they just missed some. They can’t put it back.”
“It didn’t sound like Eliot can handle a whole lot more surgery.” Hardison looks at the orcas again, trying to picture one-armed Eliot on the boat. His mind keeps showing him the traces on Eliot’s heart monitor, and the way the nurse has been hiding her frown every time she adjusts his medications.

But there’s also Eliot’s anger, more than a decade after the fact, at the man who’d chosen his safety over his career. And Eliot, for all his complaints, loves his job.

“He has enemies,” Parker points out. “It’s not only about adapting. What if we save his life today and then word gets out that Eliot Spencer can’t defend himself? It would get out. He’s here under his real name. At least if he has two arms he’ll look like he can fight. And you saw her face when she said magic couldn’t fix him. Maybe she can’t do it, but someone can. We’ll steal magic.”

“He could die if we choose wrong, Parker. We can’t take stupid risks.”

“I don’t want to lose him,” Parker says. “I can’t lose him.” She says it a little defiantly, like she expects him to argue.

“Yeah. Yeah, I love him too. You know that.”

“Even if he can’t fight. He could just sit there and watch football and complain about stupid things and he would still be ours.”

“Yeah, of course,” Hardison says. “We’ll work it out.”

“We won’t work it out, because he doesn’t know that. And if we try to tell him when he thinks he has no choice, he won’t believe us and he’ll leave. And if he leaves and he can’t even—he has to have two arms.”

They stare at each other, worried and frustrated.

“She said she’d follow Eliot’s wishes,” Parker says. “What would he choose?”

Nate and Sophie find them in the surgery waiting room. Parker’s pacing back and forth, earning dirty looks from the other patients’ families and affectionately exasperated looks from Hardison, but she can’t help it. She can’t burn off her nerves climbing the hospital or stealing a diamond. She has to be here, waiting for news.

They could have chosen wrong. The damage could be worse than expected. He could be too weak to handle the surgery. He could die.

She can’t sit still.

Sophie gives Parker a brisk, affectionate hug, then grips her shoulders and holds her at arm’s length, studying her face. “That bad?” she asks.

Parker nods and swallows back another round of tears.

Nate shuffles uneasily behind her, looking rumpled and sipping from a cardboard cup that probably isn’t just coffee. He gives her a nod, but his eyes are warm. “Why are we here?”

“Because you said you wanted to come,” Parker tells him, suddenly angry. She’d talked to him
yesterday. She remembers every minute of it, from the soup that was supposed to make Eliot feel better—probably rotting on the stove now, yuck—to the long night in the ICU, watching Eliot fade away. She’ll remember it for the rest of her life. It isn’t fair for Nate to forget.

“I meant, why are we in this waiting room?” Nate explains, taking a long sip of coffee. “What kind of surgery is he having, exactly?”

“His arm,” Hardison says in a hollow voice. He’s barely moved since they sat down. They’d chosen together, in the end. They’d agreed. But he was the one who had to make it official.

“His arm,” Nate says. “It’s infected? That’s what caused the heart attack?”

Parker starts to explain, and her tongue freezes in her mouth. She tries again, and it immediately feels like a Very Bad Idea. “Huh.”

Sophie gives her one of those long looks, then turns to Hardison.

“He’s—” Hardison cuts himself off, eyes widening. Then he smiles, honestly happy for a moment. “He couldn’t tell us,” he says.

“They have to clean out the wound,” Parker tells Nate. It’s like handcuffs in her brain. No, shackles, because she can’t feel the lock. She takes a deep breath. She can crack it if she needs to, she can.

Nate nods, looking at her closely. Maybe he can read her mind. Maybe he already knows about magic and he couldn’t tell her.

Parker swallows again.

Sophie looks hard at her, then at Hardison. She sinks into the seat next to Hardison and pulls him in to a hug of his own, murmuring something in his ear. His shoulders shake as he hugs her back.

Nate coughs a little and sips his drink, looking uncomfortable. “If Eliot’s on sick leave, do you need help?”

Parker doesn’t understand. Of course they need help. They need to fix Eliot. But even Nate can’t do that, and she doesn’t expect him to. He couldn’t fix his son either. She’s going to have ask God. Or Santa. Somebody powerful. If there’s magic, there’s someone who can solve this.

“Help with what?” she asks. Maybe he could go to Eliot’s house and do the dishes. That might be a thing people do, when other people are sick.

“With the job,” he prompts. “The prepper thing?”

She has to think for a moment to remember that there is a job.

That’s bad: The McKinleys are counting on them, and so are all those people without water. The worst part is she doesn’t even feel very guilty that they’re going to blow it. Family comes first.

“We do need help,” she says. “Hardison was supposed to meet Welch this afternoon.” Hardison jerks a little in Sophie’s arms, surprised. He’d forgotten too.

Nate checks his watch. “Is that what he’s going to wear?”

He doesn’t get it. Nate usually seems to know everything, but he’s acting like Eliot’s having his tonsils out, or he has a cold. Parker can almost understand that—she’d acted the same way, worrying about Eliot choosing to leave them but not really worrying about him being injured. He’d always
been fine before, even if sometimes it took a little while.

This time is different, and if she can see that, Nate should too.

“I am not. Leaving him.” Hardison says, in a tone Parker’s barely ever heard him use. Sophie’s looking between them, shocked and worried.

“Ah,” Nate stutters, taken aback. “I see.”

He still doesn’t see, though, because the next thing he says is, “Eliot will understand, Hardison. Yeah. He’s a professional.”

Hardison laughs, dropping his head to his knees. Parker sits on the other side of Sophie, rubbing his back as Sophie glares at Nate. “Sorry,” Hardison says, still laughing. “Just. If anyone else tries to tell me what Eliot would want.” He waves a hand vaguely.

“Right, then,” Sophie says. “We’re on a reset. Nate and I will handle the preppers. Can you catch us up on where you left things?”

They do. Parker still can’t make herself care, really, but it’s better than pacing. Even if she does some pacing while she talks.

“The deadline’s too tight,” Sophie says. “We need more time. The Hunchback’s Harmonica?”

“Lutefisk Lunch,” Nate counters. Parker doesn’t know that one, but she’s too nervous to ask. Eliot’s been in surgery for hours now. They should have heard something.

“We still need Hardison,” Nate adds. He looks less happy about it now. He might not understand about Eliot, but he’s at least figured out that Parker and Hardison aren’t budging.

“No,” Parker says.


“Nate, he can’t leave,” Sophie says. “You of all people should—”


Sophie holds up her hands, miming surrender. Nate gets up to refill his coffee from the machine in the corner. Parker watches as he pours some out and refills it from his flask. He takes a sip, grimacing at the taste, and sits back down.

“Eliot’s been in surgery this whole time?” Nate asks.

Parker nods, eyes flicking to the door.

“Then he’ll be out soon,” Nate says confidently, turning to Hardison. “You can see him, sit with him a while, then you can step out and meet with Welch for half an hour, and we’ll get you off the hook for a week or two—how long do you need?”

Hardison looks at Nate blankly.

“Okay,” Nate says softly, like he’s catching on. “Okay, that’s—let me tell you something.”

He clears his throat, then goes on, talking to the floor between Parker and Hardison. “When someone’s sick, really sick, you go into crisis mode, and that’s good. It’s important, to be there
when…but if it goes on a long time, you can’t stay all the time. You have to go home, shower. Walk the dog, pay some bills. Whatever. Life stuff. If you don’t, then when the crisis is over, you don’t have a life to go back to.”

He glances at Sophie. “And maybe you think that’s okay. But it also means you don’t have anything left for the person you’re trying to take care of, and that’s unacceptable.”

Another sip of coffee.

“Guys…Eliot’s going to be fine. Eliot Spencer is not going to die of, what, a broken arm? Whatever this is. He’s going to get better, and he’s going to bitch and moan about being in the hospital, and you’re going to wish you had a job just to distract you from what a pain in the ass he is. You’re going to need the distraction or he’s going to make you want to kill him yourselves.”

Parker smiles a little. It sounds good.

“So here’s what we’re going to do. Hardison can’t cancel on Welch if he’s supposed to be selling him something. But Welch can cancel on Hardison. We’ll wait here until Eliot’s out of surgery, and then Sophie and I are going to go steal a judge.”

Nate can’t make his usual dramatic exit, so he wanders over to the far wall, apparently reading and rereading the handwashing sign. Hardison fiddles with his phone, studying a journal article about organ failure. Sophie watches the people on the other end of the waiting room. Parker paces. They wait.

They wait a long time.

Chapter End Notes

Popped in to fix a mistake--let me know if there are more and I will fix them. This is an exposition-heavy chapter, and the next two chapters have been completely rewritten a few times, which means this one is likelier than usual to have some re-writing screw ups.
“We were able to reestablish a rhythm,” Dr. Holzer says.

“So he’s alive,” Parker confirms. That’s good news. She isn’t sure why she’s still so nervous, or why Dr. Holzer looks so serious. “And the venom? You got it out?”

“The surgeon was finishing up when the sac ruptured,” Dr. Holzer says. “That’s what stopped his heart.”

Hardison keeps staring at the picture on the wall. Parker can’t tell if he’s hearing this, and he should be. He’s better at faces; he’ll know what’s wrong.

“But you got him back,” she pushes. “So he’s going to be okay now. What about his arm?”

Dr. Holzer sighs. “We had to remove a small amount of damaged muscle. But I’m afraid that’s not the important issue.”

“What’s the issue?” Hardison tears his eyes from the picture. “What now?”

Dr. Holzer looks a lot more patient now than she had earlier. Patient and sad.

“At least one of the venom sacs ruptured,” she says again, slowly, enunciating each word. There’s something familiar about her tone, but Parker can’t place it.

“The sacs are tiny, but the venom itself is very powerful, even in small doses. You’ve seen the damage a slow release caused.”

Dr. Holzer pauses, waiting for Parker to nod her understanding, so she does. She’s placed the careful, slow tone now. It’s the way Eliot was talking to Trevor Harris’ mother. She reaches sideways for Hardison’s hand. His fingers are ice cold, but he squeezes back comfortingly.

“Mr. Spencer’s heart muscle was already badly damaged,” Dr. Holzer says. “The venom is… destroying it.”

She waits again.

“So what do you recommend now?” Parker asks, pulling out her notebook and flipping to a new page. “Another surgery?”

Dr. Holzer shakes her head. “Have you ever talked about end-of-life care?”

Parker tries to make that make sense. There’s always another way in, another thing to try. Eliot never gives up, and they can’t either.

“Magic is real,” says Parker, thinking of Alec’s games, trying to remember how they work. “So is there someone—we can pay. Are there wizards or—healing potions? Spells?”

“Magic,” Dr. Holzer says, still in that slow, patient tone, “is really just sufficiently advanced technology. It works in specific ways. I could use it to, say, open a portal to the place Mr. Spencer was injured, get another sample of the venom to work with. I can compel your obedience or your silence. I don’t personally know anyone who can use it to heal cardiac muscle.”

“So we’re supposed to just…?” Hardison sounds angry.
“You aren’t supposed to do anything,” she says kindly. “But I’ve asked the palliative care team to check in. They’ll be in to talk to you when we’re done here, and they can walk you through what to expect.”

“You want to pull the plug,” Hardison says.

“Not at all,” she says. “Palliative care is focused on keeping the patient comfortable—reducing pain, giving him the best quality of life we can. It doesn’t mean we’ll stop treatment. But there really isn’t anything else to try. I’m very sorry, but he is going to die. If we continue dialysis and our other treatments, I’d say it will be a couple of days. If not…Does he have other family we should notify?”

His dad.

*Make it clear it was quick, Eliot had said. Lie to the family.*

“No,” Parker says, shaking her head at Hardison’s questioning glance. “They’re already in the waiting room.”

They’re already sitting with Eliot, it turns out. Or Sophie is. Nate’s standing at the foot of the bed, hands in his pockets. Sophie’s holding Eliot’s hand, smiling and chatting. Her eyes keep sticking on Eliot’s bruises and bandages, the tubes hooked up everywhere, but even her body language is relaxed and confident.

Sophie turns her smile on Parker and Hardison, then freezes, eyes widening. “Parker?” she whispers, like she’s trying not to wake Eliot.

Parker’s throat feels thick. She wants to scream, but she doesn’t say anything. She pushes past Nate and leans over Eliot, looking at him closely.

Someone’s shaved him and cleaned him. He looks like he’s ready for his funeral. There’s no color left in his face, not even his lips.

She kisses him gently on the forehead.

“Parker?” Sophie puts a hand on her arm.

Parker shrugs it off. She traces Eliot’s face with her fingertips, feeling the tiny wrinkles, the thin line of his eyebrows and the smooth scars. Her thumb strokes his cheekbone.

“Hardison? Report.” It’s Nate this time, using his mastermind voice.

Hardison’s voice is strained. “It’s not going to hurt,” he says flatly. “They—they’re giving him more pain meds, just to be sure.”

“It’s not going to hurt,” he says again, softer. Telling Eliot.

“His fever’s going down,” Sophie says. “That’s a good thing! Why are you talking like this? He’s not…”

Parker looks up, not taking her hand off Eliot’s cheek. She wants to explain to Sophie, but she still can’t make herself speak. She looks at Nate. He’s staring at Eliot like he can see through him to his
flooded lungs and defective heart.

“Yeah, Soph,” Nate says. Parker can see white all around his eyes. “It’s a good thing. Hardison, can I talk to you outside?”

“Think I’m gonna stay right here, man,” Hardison says. He’s not looking at Eliot; he’s watching the monitor again.

Parker wants to tell him that’s wrong. He should be memorizing Eliot, not staring at lines on a screen. But maybe that’s the idea. Maybe he doesn’t want to remember Eliot like this. She tries it his way, watching Eliot’s heart race across the screen. It stutters as she watches, skipping a beat and then settling back into its too-fast rhythm. It’s starting. She looks away.

“Hardison,” Nate says again, impatiently.

“Stop,” Hardison hisses. “Back off. He is—”

Hardison catches himself and lowers his voice to a whisper, looking at Eliot guiltily. “He’s dying, Nate. This is—he has days, maybe less. You got a plan for that? It that P or W or something? That what you want to talk about outside? Because if it is literally anything else, I am busy here. Why’nt you just go steal a judge or whatever you were on about.”

Nate’s eyes widen, and he opens his mouth, then snaps it shut. “I think I’ll do just that,” he says. And he’s gone.

Sophie doesn’t follow. She has her fist pressed against her mouth, and she’s staring at Eliot with pain in her eyes.

Parker isn’t disappointed that Nate’s gone. She doesn’t have room for any more feelings about anything right now. But she can tell she will be disappointed. Someday. When she isn’t too sad. Nate was supposed to know how to fix things.

“He left,” she says. “I thought…”

“I know,” Sophie sighs. “He just—he’s Nate; he can fake a miracle, but he can’t handle…stuff like this…very well. It brings up too many bad memories. At least he’ll make sure the job works out, right?”

Parker turns back to Eliot. She picks up his hand, feeling the calluses, the network of scars on the knuckles. She turns it over and traces his life line, then holds it between both of hers, trying to warm it.

“You’re sure?” Sophie asks softly.

Hardison nods toward the monitor. “Just got done talking to the head of the cardiology department,” he says. “He showed us. His heart’s—it’s too much damage. So. Sent Eliot’s records to half a dozen more doctors. Took a while, but I could do more. Ain’t like we can’t afford whatever he needs. But. Some things you can’t.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” Sophie says gently. Parker can’t tell which of them she’s talking to, Hardison or Eliot.

Then, “Oh, I am going to miss you, darling.”

Parker takes a deep breath, fighting down a sob. Eliot doesn’t like crying. She can wait. But he was
wrong, helping her feel things and then making her feel this.

They sit, listening to the ventilator breathe for Eliot. His pulse skips a beat here and there, and it keeps speeding up and slowing down, like he can’t find the right pace. It makes Parker tired just watching.

That’s what the doctors promised it would feel like, if he felt it at all. Like he was tired.

An alarm goes off and they all jump up, calling for help. A nurse comes in quick, but she just pushes some buttons on Eliot’s IV, then watches as his heart slows a bit. She gives them a sympathetic smile as she leaves, and Hardison dutifully smiles back, but he doesn’t flirt like she’d told him to. He’s tired too.

“What about…I mean, I’m sure you’ve thought of this, but you could hack the transplant list, couldn’t you?” Sophie looks a little ashamed, but she doesn’t take it back. “It wouldn’t be—it’s supposed to be based on need, isn’t it? And he’s still young and healthy, so you’d only be expediting…?”

“He’s too sick,” Hardison says. “I asked. And I checked on pacemakers, artificial hearts—there are some things out there, but. Not in his—we aren’t giving up on him, Sophie.”

“I know,” she says quickly. “I didn’t mean to imply that.”

“We aren’t giving up,” Hardison says, then, to Eliot, “And you don’t get to either, okay, Eliot? Not until you have to.”

He looks back at Sophie. “But we are out of options.”

“Maybe not,” a man says. Parker looks up: John Holmes is standing in the doorway. A dark-haired woman stands behind him, wearing jeans and a man’s sweatshirt.
Chapter 17

“You said he could give permission,” Trevor Harris’ girlfriend says. She’s talking to Holmes, but she keeps looking at Parker and Hardison, like she’s trying to place them. She looks different than she did at the funeral. She’s not wearing makeup today, her hair’s lank, and there’s something wrong with her skin, like it’s scaly or shimmery or something. Dr. Holzer keeps giving her fascinated looks, like she can’t decide if she wants to kiss her or dissect her.

“We were at the funeral,” Parker tells her, trying to get to the part where they save Eliot. Sophie’s in Eliot’s room, holding his hand and telling him about all the people he’s helped. He’s not alone.

She still isn’t going to waste time.

“I’m Parker, this is Hardison. I’m sorry for your loss. You can help Eliot?”

The woman hesitates for a second, like Parker’s delivery was off, then shakes her head. “Jen. I’m sorry. When he called, he told me Spencer could consent. I can’t do anything without that.”

“His husband can consent for him,” Holmes says. “Spencer and Hardison are married. And Hardison here has a power of attorney. Show her.”

Parker gets it: This is why the Nazgûl cared about saving Eliot’s arm even if his heart was damaged. It’s why they let them pretend Hardison was married to Eliot. Holmes was saving this option the whole time. He’s like Nate.

He’s going to be a bad enemy. After he saves Eliot.

Unfortunately, Jen gets it too. She shakes her head, not even looking at the paper Hardison tries to hand her.

“I know Spencer isn’t married. Maybe he didn’t talk to you, but he talked to Trevor—they were friends. He’s been to the house a few times this past year. The two of them even went fishing a couple of weeks ago.”

Holmes takes a beat. “Then you know they weren’t married like you and Trevor weren’t married. They’re partners. He still has the power of attorney.”

“I told you: Eliot told Trevor about his team. I know he’s a forger,” Jen says. She looks at Parker with tired eyes. “I am very, very sorry. Believe me, I know what you’re going through. I wouldn’t have come here just to be cruel.”

Holmes looks at them, stymied. He’s off-script now, and not as good at it as Nate.

“Please,” Hardison says. “Please. If there’s something you can do. Eliot and Trevor were friends. He didn’t—he couldn’t talk about what happened, but I know he would have given anything to have saved him. Wouldn’t Trevor want you to help Eliot?”

“Almost anything,” Jen corrects, her face hardening for a second. “Spencer got him killed, remember? To do what, buy a few months? A year? That’s what he was worth?”

“Trevor chose to do what he did,” Holmes says.

“So did Spencer,” she says. “They both chose to sacrifice the unit—to die. He told me they chose
together. It’s only taking him a little longer to catch up, right?”

“Eliot wouldn’t do that,” Parker tells her. There’s no time for bickering, but still. She can’t let that one go. “He’d never do that.”

“He would.” She smiles wanly at Parker. “He did. And he’s been very clear about his feelings about…what I used to do for Trevor. He signed papers, when he was in the service—no magic. Soldiers like him are a big investment, you know—the Chamber put more resources into them than their actual operatives. He must have pulled strings to be allowed to choose that. He meant it.”

“Then why are you here?” Parker asks.

“I thought—I was given the impression he was in better shape. If we could have talked it through, maybe…I thought we could talk. And if he still said no, at least—he was there, with Trevor. I thought someone should…”

She trails off a little awkwardly, and Parker doesn’t understand. Then she sees Hardison’s jaw tighten in anger and, in a flash, she gets it: Eliot had told Trevor he worked with criminals, and Jen had just assumed that meant they’d have left him. That he’d be alone. So this woman’s kind, and she’s naïve. That could be useful.

Dr. Holzer nods. “I saw it in his file. She can’t do this against his explicit wishes. It would be assault.”

Parker takes a quick step toward Dr. Holzer, remembering how careful her wording had been when she’d told them there was no hope—she’d known it was possible, all right. Parker’s ready to show her what assault actually means. Hardison grabs her wrist, tight.

He’s right. They need these people. Eliot needs them. She takes a step back.

“He signed that almost twenty years ago,” Holmes says. “And if you know why, you know it wasn’t about this. He didn’t even know this was possible back then.”

“Look, this has gone far enough,” Hardison says. “Someone has to explain something. We already got whammied by the doctor here.”

“She can heal his heart,” Holmes says. “Good as new. Better.”

Parker feels a ribbon of hope slice through her chest.

“I can’t heal it. I’d be, um, replacing it. And I won’t do it without his consent,” Jen says. But it’s won’t now. Won’t isn’t can’t. Won’t can always be changed, Parker knows. Nate taught her that.

“Your people won’t be happy with you if he dies,” Holmes tells her. “They want him alive.”

“You think I care what they want? They aren’t my people, anyway. Trevor was my people, and he respected people’s wishes.”

“You should care,” Holmes tells her. It isn’t—quite—a threat. “Look at you. You’ve been in the water since the funeral, haven’t you? You won’t be able to resist much longer.”

Jen looks at her feet.

Dr. Holzer tilts her head, looking Jen up and down like she’s more interesting than what’s happening to Eliot.
Parker meets Hardison’s eyes and gets a slow nod. Dr. Holzer’s going to pay, somehow, when this is over.

“We don’t have time for this,” Parker says. There’s always a way in, but she doesn’t know Jen, hadn’t even paid much attention to her at the funeral. Still, she’s naïve, she’s kind, and she wouldn’t be here if she weren’t willing to help. She just needs them to make it okay for her to do it. She’s met Eliot before, she said. So maybe they just need to get her in the room, make her say no to his face.

“Why did Eliot say no before?” Hardison pushes. “Why are you so sure he wouldn’t consent now?”

Holmes hesitates for the first time. He looks at the print Hardison keeps staring at as he answers.

“He didn’t want magic used on him because he still believed in God back then and he didn’t like the idea of making deals with the devil,” Holmes says. “It’s not relevant. He doesn’t believe in that anymore.”

Hardison believes in God. Parker tenses, glancing at him.

“He’s not telling the truth,” Jen says, spinning a bracelet on her wrist.

Holmes looks away from the orca and frowns at Jen. “I am.”

“Half-truths might fly on the phone,” she says. “But my wards are the best there are, face to face.”

Which means Eliot couldn’t have lied to her, the day of the funeral. When he’d said they chose to die, he hadn’t been lying.

“We—resurrection’s an effective torture method,” Holmes tells the orca on the wall.

“Torture,” Parker echoes.

“I wouldn’t do that to him,” Holmes says firmly, still looking at the print. “I’d let him die. This isn’t like what happened then. I’m not going to let him die just because he has issues about it.”

“But you’d send them on a one-way trip?” Jen asks, angry again. “Why was Trevor expendable if Spencer isn’t? He wasn’t human enough to matter to you?”

“Everyone’s expendable,” Holmes snaps. “Spending their lives isn’t the same as wasting them. You’re willing to let Spencer die because he’s stubborn? Or because you are?”

“You said the devil?” Hardison’s voice is pitched a little too high. It buzzes against Parker’s ears. “We’d be making a deal with the devil? The actual devil?”

“No,” Holmes says, pulling his eyes away from the print and giving Hardison a sardonic smile. “Because, A, the devil doesn’t exist. There are intelligences that it’s possible to summon and negotiate with, if you’re very, very lucky or very, very careful. B, this deal’s been made. She simply needs to activate the terms of this particular exchange.”

An exchange.

“What’s the price?” Parker asks.

“Five million dollars,” Holmes says coolly. “In diamonds. You helped Spencer take down Moreau—that cost us money.”

Hardison blinks a few times, fast, and Parker automatically pictures Nate’s face if he could hear the
assumption that Eliot was in charge. She almost smiles.

“That’s not the price,” Jen says.

“They’ll pay me, and I’ll pay it,” Holmes says calmly. “I doubt any of us are going to die of old age anyway.”

A good person would probably follow up on that line, so Parker jumps in before Hardison can.

“Deal. We can get you the diamonds.”

She’ll have to empty some of her caches, but she has the money. She has it in diamonds, even. Hardison gives a small, approving nod.

“It’s not a deal,” Jen says. “Because I’m not doing it.”

“Because Eliot didn’t tell you we were married?” Parker says.

Everyone stares at her, even the doctor.

Parker reaches for Hardison’s hand and he grabs it. She squeezes once, slowly, hoping he understands.

“If we’re really his family, we can decide for him, right?” Parker pushes.

“He told Trevor he had a crew,” Jen says. “Co-workers.”

Which means yes.

“Eliot’s very protective,” Parker explains. “And maybe he trusted Trevor, but he doesn’t know you very well, does he?”

“I’m a hacker, not a forger,” Hardison says, squeezing Parker’s hand back. He’s on board. “Trevor worked for the Black Chamber, right?”

“More or less,” Holmes says, waggling his hand.

“Dangerous line of work for a hacker,” Hardison points out. “You go through us like tissue paper, Eliot said. He didn’t want your people knowing about us.”

“He’s protective because we aren’t just co-workers,” Parker tells Jen, underlining it.

Jen twists her bracelet again. “You haven’t actually said you’re married,” she says quietly. “Because you know I’ll know when you lie.”

Parker swallows hard. She cares about Eliot. She needs him. She can’t live with the idea he might not come out of this. He’s her friend, and more. He’s her family. That probably means she loves him, even if she’s never said it.

But—it’s hard, pinning that kind of feeling down. Jen might hear her doubt, and if she does, Eliot will die. She takes a step forward, deliberately, not letting go of Hardison’s hand. He’s nervous too—she can feel his palm getting sweaty—but he’s not showing it.

“Of course Eliot’s our family,” he says, saving her. Saving them. “I can make you paperwork if you need it, but it ain’t like the forms allow for three, and we don’t live under our real names anyway. I never had—my family ain’t never looked like the government papers said, so trust me: That’s not
what matters. We’re married as it gets. He’s *ours*, and we’re his. We love him.”

Jen sighs. “You’re telling the truth, but…”

Parker tenses.

“But does he feel the same way?” Hardison asks, smiling a little sadly. He doesn’t say anything, though. This is where Hardison has doubts, not about who he loves—Hardison’s love is as certain as gravity—but about whether they love him back.

“Has *he* said you’re married?”

Parker looks at Hardison, telling him she’s got this. She takes a deep breath, concentrating. She has to be *sure*.

She thinks about Eliot following her to go up against a Steranko, even though he thought it was stupid to try. Eliot pulling Hardison out of that coffin and into his arms. Eliot rolling his eyes when he thinks she’s being crazy—and listening anyway. Eliot in the ice cave, telling her it’s okay to be broken, that it gives her strength. Eliot leaving Hardison’s terrible food on the menu. Eliot singing in the car with Hardison, letting himself be silly. Eliot cooking for them, day in and day out, adjusting his recipes until they can taste the love behind the gruff complaints. Eliot’s face that day in the office, telling Sophie he’d protect them till his dying day.

“He says it all the time,” she says, slow and clear, putting all the truth she can muster into every syllable. “Every day.”
Chapter 18

Eliot wakes up slow, echoes of fever dreams slowly shifting to a weird, tuneless humming, mingling with overhead pages and a very distinctive set of smells. Hospital. He thinks about that for a while, not moving.

He takes a deep breath, and regrets it instantly; his throat is dry and raw, and coughing hurts. There’s something on his face.

He opens his eyes to see what it is, and it’s a minor effort, reaching up to pull at the cannula. The humming stops.

“Leave that,” Hardison says, annoyed. Then, surprised and hesitant, “I think he’s awake this time.”

Eliot turns his head. “Hey,” he croaks.

Hardison looks terrible; he has bags under his eyes and days’ worth of stubble. He’s smiling anyway, fumbling for the call button. In the other chair, Parker snorts awake, wiping away drool with the back of her hand, red marks on her face from where it’s rested on her arm.

They’re beautiful.

“Hey yourself,” Hardison says. He grabs a cup of ice from somewhere and offers it, steadying Eliot’s hand a bit more than he actually needs. The ice feels like heaven.

“You’re supposed to go slow with that,” Parker tells him. “Be careful.”

Then she’s hugging him, crying, half on the bed in her enthusiasm but worryingly gentle. Parker’s not supposed to be cautious. He wraps his good arm around her and squeezes back. “Hey. Hey, it’s okay.”

“It is now,” she says. “How do you feel?”


“Eliot?”

“I’m okay,” he says, feeling for the binding, for whatever’s been tied in that shouldn’t be. He can’t tell if there’s anything there or not, but Parker’s here, and Hardison, and he can tell he’s scared them enough already. “What happened?”

He’s about to reach for Hardison, maybe pull him in for a hug before he can second-guess the need to touch them, but a nurse comes in, all smiles and questions and “Deep breath, please,” and might be it’s just as well he has a minute to get himself together.

So he answers questions and gets’em mostly right. He can see Hardison’s nerves ease when he shows the nurse his brains aren’t scrambled; he still ain’t clear on what happened to land him in a hospital, and he’s more than a little shocked at how long he’s been here, but it’s just missing intel, nothing wrong.

“When can I get out of here?” he asks the nurse.

“When the doctors say you can,” Hardison tells him, his eyes flashing. “And not a damn minute
earlier. None of this AMA bullshit, Eliot. If you’d stayed put when you got hurt, this might not have happened. You’re an idiot. And don’t—don’t look at me like that, Mr. I Lost My Phone. You see that over there? Right there in the damn hospital? It’s a phone. You can reach it from the bed.”

Eliot feels his lips curve up at Hardison’s vehemence, and he looks at Parker to see if she’s smiling too. She’s not.

The nurse is, a little. “You’ll have to ask the doctor,” she tells him. “But I’d listen to your husband, if I were you. You’re lucky to be alive.”

Husband.

Eliot stares at her, then looks at Hardison, who looks a little nervous. He’s smiling again, though.

Parker’s fucking grinning. “You look good all red in the cheeks like that. Ooh, look, Hardison, even his ears are turning pink!”

The nurse leaves, laughing, with a warning to Parker and Hardison to let him rest. It ain’t a bad idea—he’s tired already. Not the deadly exhaustion that’s most of what he remembers from before; this is the too-familiar drag of healing, not painful but insistent as hell. He could use a nap.

Not just yet, though. “Husband,” he says, hoping the little thrill the word sends through him doesn’t show up on the heart monitor.

“And I’m your sister,” Parker tells him.

“If—” He has to cough again, and it’s torture on his throat, and his ribs—they feel fresh broke again.


“If she’s my sister, why didn’t you just make yourself her husband?” Eliot rasps.

“Huh,” Hardison says.

“Oh,” says Parker. “I didn’t think of that.”

Hardison did, though. He’s not one to overlook the obvious, and anyway he’s been Parker’s husband on enough cons where it didn’t have to happen that Eliot knows he’s been trying to get her used to the idea slowly. Like taming a skittish horse.

“I guess,” Hardison says. “Um. I didn’t want to be just—just Parker’s plus one. I…Damn it, Eliot. No one here’s extra, okay?”

Hardison rubs a hand over his face, then looks back at Eliot, meeting his eyes. “I love you. We both love you.”

Parker nods, watching him expectantly.

There’s an easy out, if Eliot wants to take it. If he’s not dying, he’s going to have to live with whatever he does next.

Maybe for longer than he’d thought, if that different feeling in his chest means what he thinks it might.

He doesn’t even have to lie. Just let himself fall back asleep, and Hardison will drop it. Things’ll go
back to normal, and Hardison will just play his brother next time, skin color be damned. Not even that. He’d probably even make himself Parker’s plus one.

Eliot takes a careful breath.

“I love you too,” he tells Hardison. And to Parker, “I love you.”

He feels his face flush again, but Hardison’s there, brushing his hair back with a serious look on his face, and he leans in and kisses Eliot right on the lips, feather-light.

“That okay?” he asks Eliot, scanning his face, then glancing at the heart monitor. “If that ain’t what you meant, you know, that’s cool, you don’t have to…And we don’t have to talk about it now, you know. We should probably…”

He hasn’t pulled away, really. Not so far Eliot can’t get his hand around the back of Hardison’s neck, pull him back. Hardison tastes like stale coffee, and Eliot’s gotta be worse, and this ain’t how he imagined their first kiss, but it’s—he almost didn’t get to have this.

He shouldn’t get to have this. He’s still going to have to leave.

He’s a little breathless when it ends, which is maybe why Parker’s kiss is surprisingly gentle. He’s going to have to do something about that, and soon. He can’t do his job if Parker starts thinking he’s some kind of delicate flower.

“Seriously, when can I get out of here?” he asks her. Parker’s jaw gets tight and she looks over at Hardison.

“Seriously, not for a while,” Hardison tells him.

“They’re going to move you to a regular room tomorrow,” Parker tells him. She’s watching him intently. “You’re doing really well.”

“Play it safe just this once, Eliot.” Hardison’s taking his silence as an argument, apparently. “Please. You scared us, man.”

“What happened, anyway?” Eliot asks. He remembers the funeral clear as anything. He remembers coming home exhausted and aching, too tired to resist the comfort of sleeping with them. After that everything’s tangled in his head, dreams mixing with reality in a way he’s rarely experienced.

“You died,” Parker tells him. “You aren’t allowed to die.”

He stares at her. He’d had a damn close call, yeah, that’s feeling pretty obvious. About as close as it gets, he figures, but…his ribs hurt. He rests a hand on them, still watching Parker’s sober face.

“You do that?” he asks, thrown. Fuck, that was…

Parker nods, hesitant.

Eliot swallows, absorbing it. Then he grins, wide and proud as he can make it. “That’s my girl,” he crows, watching her smile spread to match.

“Thank you,” he says, more seriously. “I’m sorry you had to…You saved me, Parker.” In so many ways. He can’t put the words to it, but they know. They must know.

They know. He was right. A distinctive kind of strange…Hardison had that damned business card. And these two don’t know any better. He wonders what they had to do to make it happen. And what Eliot’s going to have to do to get them out of it.

“Damn it, Hardison,” Eliot sighs. “Couldn’t tell you. And—I never wanted you to know. It’s my job to keep you safe, and you’re—you’re so damn smart, Hardison, you’re exactly the guy who gets…You told me the other night you could leave things alone? …Leave this alone. Magic’s no good, you know? It ain’t like in your stupid movies or whatever; it doesn’t do anything useful. It just gets people killed.”

“It saved you,” Parker points out.

Eliot can’t help it; he shudders. “Who?” he asks. “How?”

“Jen?” Hardison says. “Your friend Trevor’s girlfriend. Holmes brought her.”

Trevor’s little mermaid. That…might be good news. Nothing to count on—the woman didn’t owe him a thing. Might be the other way around, if she blamed him for Trevor. But she doesn’t work for the Chamber. If it had really been that close—well.

“Oh, he says, setting it aside. He can figure it out later, when they aren’t watching him so close. “But magic—it’s a tool, and it’s double-edged. You haven’t seen the things I’ve seen. You ain’t going to, if I can help it.”

“Like demi-gods from other dimensions?” Hardison prompts, still just so fucking curious. He wouldn’t be curious if he’d seen…it if he’d been there.

*Hot foul breath washes over him and it’s crushing him, he’s going to die screaming like Trevor but he pulls the pin too close he’s too close and his ribs crack as it tries to get a grip and his arm oh God—*

“Eliot? Hey, you okay?” Hardison’s staring at him.

“I’m fine,” Eliot rasps, pulling himself back to the moment. “Just. Don’t want to talk about that.”

“Yeah,” Hardison says softly. “You don’t have to. But maybe it would…Pete—remember Pete?—gave us his number at the funeral. He said you could call him. If you ever want. It might, you know, not be such a bad idea.”

Eliot doesn’t want to argue right now. Not about magic, and not about whether he should talk to someone. Eliot knows how this kind of thing goes. He’ll say no—because he’s fine, most of the time. Talking won’t help, and anyway anyone would need a little time after what happened. It’s like Parker says, just excess adrenaline, and once he’s back in action he’ll be able to set it aside.

And a few days ago, that would’ve been okay, wouldn’t it? His life, his call. But he’s gone and changed things between them, and now these two’ll want to change things more. He’s been here, and those three little words turned into four right quick. *I love you, but.*

*I love you, but if you sign that contract/do that one more time/don’t settle down/take that job…*

*I love you. But.*

Eliot can’t take it back. He doesn’t want to take it back. It’s…he’s going to get to have this, something perfect, something real. Everything he hasn’t been letting himself admit he wants. He’s going to get to be with them, until he has to leave or it all goes bad. He’s not going to ruin it before it
starts.

He makes a noncommittal noise.

Hardison sighs.

“What happened with the job?” Eliot asks, changing the subject.

“With the—are you even serious right now?” Hardison’s instantly distracted—even dismayed. “You don’t need to worry about that, okay? Jesus. You just focus on getting better, Eliot.”

Eliot frowns. He looks at them again, closer. They’re looking rumpled, but they ain’t injured, as far as he can see. “It go bad? That guy, the one who wasn’t…?”

“Everything’s fine,” Parker tells him, a little stiffly. “Nate’s got it.”

Eliot lets himself relax at that. Nate’s here. It’ll be handled, then. He’d only really asked to shift their focus back to something normal, let them know he’s okay, but—water’s important. A machine like that, as efficient as that one—it’ll save lives, when They come. It matters.

“By himself?” he asks, smothering a yawn.

“Nate can take care of himself just fine,” Hardison says. “And he’s got Sophie backing him up. Don’t worry about Nate, okay? Just rest, man. You look tired.”

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Eliot loves them. Hardison knew he did, really. Almost definitely. But he loves them, and he said it (he’s alive to say it), with words, and he—he freaking blushed about it, got his cheeks going a nice healthy red that means his heart is pumping just fine.

Eliot kissed him.

And yeah, he was sort of out of breath after and he’s obviously still messed up about what happened, but he loves them and he is alive and awake and talking and he’s going to be okay. Hardison is not going to focus on problems right now. He’s the luckiest man alive—Parker’s smiling again, looking more confident than she has since Eliot came home, and Eliot—Eliot kissed him.

And then Eliot asks about the job, like he just assumes they wouldn’t have stayed with him. That they’d just leave him, on his fucking deathbed, to go steal a damn water filter.

Whatever. It’s fine. Hardison had his work cut out for him already, convincing Parker she’s worthy of love. The two of them can tackle Eliot together. They’ll get there. It’s cool.

At least Eliot hasn’t asked about his arm, or what happened to Holmes, or anything else Hardison had a careful little script prepared for. The job’s taken care of.

But then it’s the mention of Nate that reassures Eliot, and Hardison’s just glad his own mood isn’t as easy to read on his skin, because he is suddenly so freaking furious he can barely breathe. Nate. Nate who ran away when Eliot needed him.
“Nate can take care of himself just fine,” he says, making it as soothing as possible.

Eliot wouldn’t even be angry, if he knew. He’d understand.

But he ain’t gonna have to understand the people he counts on letting him down ever again, not if Alec J. Hardison has anything to do with it.

And yes, fine: Hardison’s still a little strung out from the past few days, and maybe Nate’s a convenient target. Hardison’s self-aware enough to grant that. The man has issues, and he comes by’em honest, and he did, Hardison is willing to admit, come back eventually, bearing a list of experimental procedures gleaned from his insurance contacts.

But he’d left first.

Hardison’s got issues too, and Parker—even Sophie, and she’d stepped up. When they’d come out to the waiting room after—the Magic—and she’d seen their faces and thought it meant—she’d wiped her eyes and put her shoulders back and moved to comfort them. And Nate hadn’t been there for that. Not the waiting, and not the moment when Eliot was going to be okay.

He wasn’t here today, to see the look in Eliot’s eyes when he understood how he’d been saved. Like he’d rather they let him die.

Maybe it ain’t Nate you’re really mad at, he thinks.

He looks at Eliot, listening sleepily to a chatting Parker. He turns his head like he can feel Hardison’s thoughts, and looks at him questioningly. Hardison smiles, and Eliot smiles back, a little forced. The doctors said—the real doctors have no idea what the hell happened, so they’re a little shy of predicting much, but they’d been depressingly clear that Eliot wasn’t going to be jumping out of bed and turning cartwheels. Magic’s fast, but it’s not instant. Eliot’s probably just tired.

Except.

Hardison hadn’t asked any of the questions he wanted to, during that crazy meeting. There hadn’t been time for the geek spiral, not with Eliot literally dying down the hall. So he doesn’t know the details of what went down on Eliot’s little extra-dimensional excursion any more than he knows how that kind of thing would even work, if it’s like Dr. Who or Star Trek or…. Anyway. He doesn’t know.

But that woman had said Eliot decided to die. And given the not-relieved-enough look on his face, he’s at least a little upset that it didn’t happen.

Somehow Hardison doubts there’s going to be a magical solution to that problem.
Chapter 19

Parker settles the Glenn Reader XJ78563B specs manual on her lap, keeping Eliot in her peripheral vision as she reads.

Eliot already wants to go home. He hates hospitals, and he hates what he calls sitting around in bed wasting time and everyone else calls entirely necessary healing. He’s like her—he isn’t going to feel like himself again until he gets to move—and not the supervised walks down the hall the nurse thinks are such a big achievement.

Parker gets it. She does. It’s hard being treated like the weak one. And hospitals do kind of suck.

She’s not Nate—she’s not freaked out by the building. She’s never spent much time in hospitals before, except on a con, and she’s never wanted to, but she doesn’t get all weird and tense and sad about them.

But she is almost as eager as Eliot to get out of this one. It smells bad, it’s noisy, she has to let strangers come in and poke at Eliot, and now that he’s not dying they have a lot of rules about visitors that Hardison says they have to follow.

Eliot keeps saying he’s fine and they should go home, but Parker’s pretty sure he doesn’t really want them to listen, and anyway he slept for three hours after his stupid little walk, so he probably isn’t ready to defend himself if anything happens. They’ve worked enough cons in hospitals by now that Parker knows they aren’t very secure. They stole one with no preparation at all, that time Nate gave that guy a nosebleed with his mind.

Also, it’s starting to feel like every time they leave Eliot alone, something bad happens.

So someone has to be here all the time. For security purposes.

Parker finishes the specs manual and closes it quietly. Eliot’s still asleep. Again. It is the middle of the night, so it’s a good time for sleep, but he slept most of the day too, and usually Eliot only sleeps a little bit of the night.

It’s probably ungrateful to think magic healing should work better than this, especially considering what it did to Holmes. She still thinks magic healing should work better than this.

The nurse says it’s important to let Eliot rest, so Parker doesn’t poke him, even just to make sure he’d wake up. Which he would.

She watches him instead. At least he does just look like he’s asleep now, not like—not like before. He’s even a little tense, frowning in his sleep like he knows where he is and he doesn’t like it. Or maybe his arm hurts. Hardison would push the button to give him more drugs.

Parker doesn’t. Eliot’s been complaining about being drugged all afternoon, so she knows he doesn’t want them. Also, it’s comforting to see him frown. Eliot’s supposed to be grumpy.

“Parker, quit staring at me.”

She grins. He is getting back to normal.
Eliot opens his eyes. “Hardison go home?”

“I won the coin toss,” Parker explains.

“You should go too,” Eliot sighs. “Sleep in a bed. Or a harness. Whatever you do.”

“But I won the coin toss,” Parker explains again.

“You cheat?” Eliot asks, looking at her thoughtfully.

Parker nods. Of course she did. That’s how you win a coin toss. Eliot smiles.

“C’mere,” he grunts, shifting sideways on the bed.

Parker hesitates—Hardison was really insistent that they have to follow the rules just this once.

“C’mon, I can’t sleep with you sitting there staring. Feel like I’m in a zoo.”

Hardison probably just meant she shouldn’t get caught breaking the rules. And Parker never gets caught.

She climbs in as carefully as if there were pressure plates hidden under the sheets. Eliot’s jaw tightens a little as he puts his arm around her, but he doesn’t say anything. He’s broken ribs for them before plenty of times, Parker decides. This isn’t different just because she felt them break, can still feel them breaking under her hands. She puts her head on his chest and listens to his heart beat, slow and strong. Eliot’s warm fingers scritch into her hair, right above her ponytail.

“Am I hurting you?”

“No.”

Parker’s pretty sure Eliot’s lying, but it’s better like this than watching him from the chair. She wraps an arm around him carefully.

“Are you mad at us?” she asks, keeping her ear to his chest.

“Hmm?” Eliot asks, like he doesn’t know what she’s talking about.

He does know. She can feel his muscles tense.

“You didn’t want magic. Would you rather we let you die?”

“I’m not mad,” Eliot says, tugging her ponytail a little.

Parker wishes she had a bracelet that could tell her when people are lying. She should have stolen Jen’s, but she hadn’t wanted to risk it before Eliot was safe. Maybe Eliot can get her one.

“Does your jewelry know when people lie?”

“I have a ring that does that.” She can hear the smile in his voice as she snuggles in. This question doesn’t upset him like Hardison’s did. “It’s not as useful as you’d think. You can borrow it and see, if you want.”

She nods.

“Sometimes people lie for good reasons, Parker,” Eliot adds, like she might not know that.
“Like you saying this doesn’t hurt,” she offers, nestling against his chest. There’s a little vibration under her ear, like he might be about to laugh. Or cough some more. He doesn’t do either.

“Wards are a good idea anyway,” he muses. “I’ll get you and Hardison both some protection once I’m out of here. Now that you know. Not the lie detector kind unless you really want it—those burn out too fast in our line of work, and they can distract you at the wrong time.”

“If I had your ring on now, would it say you were mad at us?”

“Parker, I’m not mad,” Eliot says, sounding annoyed. He sighs. “I’m worried. Something like this don’t come cheap. Gonna tell me what you had to do?”

“Nothing,” Parker says, surprised. “That woman did it. Is it something we could have done?”

“No.” She can feel the growl rumble through his chest. “What did you promise, then?”

“Five million in diamonds,” Parker says. She tries to say it like it doesn’t matter at all, but she can’t quite keep the anguish of it out of her voice.

“Money?” Eliot laughs in disbelief. “That’s it?”

Which is kind of rude. Eliot is not as thoughtful as Hardison usually is. He’s supposed to know how she feels about her money.

“I have to go get them out of storage tomorrow.” She hadn’t even negotiated, and now all the other jewels will be lonely.

“I love you too,” Eliot says. Parker feels him lean over to buss the top of her head. “Do you want to help me steal more diamonds?”

“No hurry,” she tells him, smiling into his chest. He does understand.

“So John’s still in town?” Eliot asks carefully.

It takes Parker a second to figure out who Eliot means. They’ve been calling him Holmes, but Eliot hasn’t called him that. Eliot hasn’t called him any name at all. He is now, and maybe that was Holmes’ plan all along, making sure Eliot owed him.

She shrugs. “Must be. He’s going to call tomorrow about the handoff.”

Eliot’s heart beats at the same reassuringly steady pace.

Parker considers. Holmes used to be Eliot’s friend, and more than that, part of his crew. He wants Eliot back, and she’s not going to let that happen. Eliot is Parker’s crew now. Parker’s family. She doesn’t have to say anything.

Hardison would. Hardison would think they needed to be fair. And Holmes did help save Eliot. She owes him too.

“I don’t like your friend,” she says, forcing it out. “I think he’s like a spooky Nate. I think he has more than one reason for anything he does, and they aren’t all good reasons. But I’m pretty sure one of the reasons for saving you was just that he didn’t want you to die. You should know that.”

Eliot nods a little in acknowledgement. His hand is resting lightly on the back of her neck, warm and soothing. Hardison has amazing hands, but they’re usually a little cold. This feels nice.
An alarm goes off down the hall. They listen to the brisk footsteps and the overhead page. Eliot goes back to playing with her hair. Parker shuts her eyes and focuses on Eliot’s heart, letting it block out the noise. He does have to cough after a while, and she imagines she can feel his ribs shifting and scraping. Eliot doesn’t complain, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t hurting him.

That all of this isn’t hurting him.

“Does it hurt? Holmes said it could be torture.”

If she weren’t paying such close attention, she’d have missed the tiny hitch in his breath before he forces himself to take a deep one.

“No.”

“But you aren’t happy we saved you.”

Eliot’s hand pauses in her hair.

“It’s not that,” he says, and his hand starts up again, gentle and calm like his heart hasn’t just sped up. “I am happy. I’m always gonna want more time with you. Just…There ain’t a lot of people can heal someone like that, and the one I met before…The thing about torture is there’s only so much a person can take. Physically, I mean. So if they come at you hard, you know it’ll stop or they’ll push it too far and…it’ll stop. If you take that away, it’s…I need to know I can die, sweetheart. I can’t…I need that.”

Parker doesn’t have an answer for that. Eliot’s not allowed to die, no matter what. She doesn’t want to make him upset by saying so, though.

More upset.

“Is Jen human?” she asks, changing the subject. Eliot lets her do it. He takes a couple of too-steady breaths before he answers, letting his heart drop back to its slow pace. Good.

“Nope,” he says. “Not legally.”

So there’s a legal definition. Good to know.

“Is she an alien?” Hardison will kick himself if he met an alien and didn’t notice. They’ll all have to go back to Aberdeen and do it again.

“No,” Eliot says. Which is a little disappointing, except maybe it means she’s something more interesting than aliens. Something magic.

“What is she?”

“That’s classified.” Parker can hear the smile in Eliot’s voice as he settles into picking his answers. He likes it when they play this game.

“Was Trevor human?”

“Mostly,” Eliot says. He tenses again. “Not sure I’m all human now, either. I don’t know what she did.”

Parker sits up so can see Eliot’s face. He looks nervous. Maybe he thinks she’s speciesist. Eliot can be really dumb.
She raises an eyebrow at him. “Can I be the one to tell Hardison? I want to see his eyes do that thing when he realizes he kissed an alien.”

Eliot growls. “How could I be an alien? I’m from Oklahoma.”

“An elf? An orc? Ooh, are you going to grow a tail? Because that could be fun.”

“Shut up, Parker,” Eliot’s scowl doesn’t match his eyes at all. “Get some sleep.”

Parker wiggles her eyebrows before she settles back down on the bed. “Are unicorns real?”

“Classified,” Eliot says. “And if you think horses are scary, you don’t want to know about unicorns.”

That makes sense. Horses with horns could only be more murdery than horses without horns. Which reminds her: “Rhinos?”

“…Yeah.”

“What about griffins?”

“On the endangered list.”

“Vampires.”

Eliot laughs, and it doesn’t even make him cough this time. “Everyone knows there’s no such thing as vampires.”

Eliot’s refusing to confirm or deny the existence of leprechauns when the morphine pump hits. He gives a little sigh of relief, and his hand relaxes on the back of her neck. He’ll be asleep again soon. It’s good to have the warning—it still kind of freaks her out when he dozes off in the middle of a conversation.

“Eliot?”

“What?” He’s reassuringly cranky on top of his sleepiness. Parker relaxes, just a little.

“I have to go tomorrow. To get the diamonds.”

Eliot nods.

“Don’t make Hardison cry again.”

Eliot doesn’t answer right away, and she wonders if he’s asleep already. Then he squeezes her shoulders in a hard-enough-to-hurt hug.

His arm relaxes as he drops off to sleep. Parker holds herself still, fighting her own drowsiness. The nurse will make her rounds soon. If Parker’s still in Eliot’s bed when that happens, the nurse will make her leave. Well, try to make her leave—there’s a drop ceiling, which is basically a joke, so it’s not like anyone could keep her out.

Hardison will be mad if he has to crawl through a ceiling to see Eliot. Hospital ceilings probably have extra-bad mites (or whatever he’s always going on about).

It’ll be a whole thing.

So she listens to Eliot and feels her muscles softening with the calm of it, but she doesn’t sleep.
There’s another commotion down the hall, and Parker hears a page for “Dr. Blue.” Someone’s
crying out there, the loud, ugly kind of crying that makes Parker’s stomach twist into knots. She
squeezes Eliot a little harder by accident, and he grunts a little and mumbles something she can’t
make out. It does hurt him, having her here. She finds the controller for the pain medication and hits
the button, watching Eliot’s face smooth out.

More footsteps, and Parker figures someone has come to take the crier to the little room with the orca
print before they give everyone a stomachache, but whoever it is only pauses for a moment before
continuing slowly down the hall.

Toward Eliot’s room.

Parker lifts her head away from Eliot’s chest. It sounds like loafers, not the sneakers that signal
Eliot’s nurse. Parker untangles herself from the bed as quickly as she can, careful not to snag Eliot’s
IV or any of the alarms still attached to him.

She slides the chair in front of the door—it won’t keep anyone out, but it might buy a moment of
distraction if she needs it.

Whoever it is, they’re slowing down as they approach. It gives Parker time to thumb on her taser.
She steps to the side of the door just as the footsteps hesitate outside.

The door opens slowly, the chair scraping across the floor in front of it. Eliot stirs a little, but doesn’t
quite wake.

Nate steps in cautiously, frowning at the chair and looking carefully at Eliot. If he were a bad guy,
Parker would totally have had time to taze him, so her plan was good.

She clears her throat. Nate finally spots her, and his frown deepens.

“What’s wrong?” he whispers, looking between her and Eliot. “Is he…okay?”

Parker rolls her eyes. “What are you doing here?” she hisses back.

He shouldn’t even be allowed back here; it’s only family at this time of night. He must have taken
advantage of the code down the hall.

“Oh,” says Nate, looking sheepish. “Ah. Well. I thought maybe you’d want to be home with
Hardison. You two haven’t had a normal night in a while, so…yeah. I could sit with him.”

His eyes keep cutting sideways to Eliot. He frowns again and gives Parker a speculative look. She
hadn’t had time to fix the sheet on the bed. It’s something to remember for next time.

Nate pulls the chair closer to the bed again and sits down, crossing his legs. Parker crosses her arms.

He’s acting like he’s going to stay, but if Eliot gets sick again, he might run away and leave him, like
before.

Eliot is her responsibility now. Anyway, she won the coin toss.

“I can handle it,” she says, keeping her voice low.

Nate pulls out a flask and takes a sip, looking back at Eliot. “How is he?”

“Sleeping,” Parker says. Obviously. She sits on the bed again, resting her hand on Eliot’s head. He
moves a little, but doesn’t quite wake.
Nate nods. “I’ll wait.”

He leans back in his chair, then pulls a little book of crossword puzzles from somewhere in his jacket, holding it curled in one hand. He’s watching Eliot with a thoughtful expression.

“Don’t stare at him,” Parker says. “You’ll wake him up.”

Nate stares at her instead. Parker can smell the liquor on him from where she sits. It’s mingling with the hospital smells and making her feel sick to her stomach and comforted at the same time. She never found the smell of whiskey comforting before the team, and she kind of resents that it still works on her now. Nate should go home. Or, not home, because he needs to finish their job for them (Parker should be grateful but the thought only makes her more angry; she made them such a good plan) but to the hotel or wherever he and Sophie have been sleeping. It’s unprofessional, wandering around drunk and staring at people when he has a job to do in the morning.

“I’m not good with hospitals.” Nate’s still looking at her seriously. Maybe he can tell what she’s thinking.

“Why are you here?”

Nate blinks a couple of times, fast, so it probably sounded harsher than she meant it to. It’s hard to pick the right tone of voice when you also have to be quiet.

Finally, Nate shrugs. “I wanted to talk to Eliot. I don’t know. Apologize.”

“Don’t,” Parker says, dropping her voice even lower. “We didn’t tell him you left.”

“You don’t have to protect me, Parker.” Nate flashes her a quick smile, though, like he’s thanking her.

Parker reminds herself to keep her voice soft. Arguing will wake Eliot too. She runs her fingers through his hair, feels him lean into her touch without waking. She picks up the button for the morphine and hits it again.

“I’m not protecting you.”

Nate blinks his understanding.

He nods again, then takes another swig from his flask, his shoulders dropping.

“Okay,” he finally says. “Good.”

They sit awhile.

“So you don’t have to be here,” she tells him.

Nate makes a face Parker can’t quite interpret. “I’d like to stay, Parker. Eliot’s my friend.”

Parker considers that. Nate watches her fingers comb through Eliot’s hair, giving her time.

“It’s a tough job, protecting Eliot,” Nate says softly.

It really, really is.

“Is there a trick?” Parker wasn’t going to ask that, but she needs to know.
Nate’s smile is sympathetic. “Not that I’ve found. If you figure it out, maybe you could tell me.”

Chapter End Notes

Note: Eliot is dead wrong about vampires.
Chapter 20

Hardison had thought he never wanted to see Eliot with his eyes closed again. Even after Eliot’s fever finally broke and he’d been able to wake up and talk to them, it was—it was scary, was all, seeing him so worn out.

The nurses keep saying Eliot’s doing amazingly well, but it ain’t like they know anything about magic—there’s no way to check if everything’s happening like it should. And Eliot isn’t supposed to stay down like this, ever.

So yeah, a big part of him is happy to see Eliot acting like a frustrating asshole, taking his displeasure with the situation out on his favorite target. As that target, though—well, it turns out Nate was right. Again. Hardison isn’t going to tell Nate, just on principle, but Eliot’s already driving him crazy.

“Maybe you’re tired?” Hardison suggests, as mildly as possible. “You should try taking a nap.”

“I don’t need a nap, Hardison,” Eliot snaps. “I need to get out of here. What are they waiting for, anyway? I’m fine.”

It’s actually a fair point. His heart is eerily, gloriously perfect—Hardison’s checked the imaging himself about six times now, just in case—his liver and kidneys have been testing normal for two days now, and he’s finally off the oxygen.

Eliot isn’t normal-people fine—his lungs still aren’t back to normal, he is definitely going to need rehab for his arm (so far no one but Eliot thinks he’s going to get full function back), and he’s still got that tired, unhappy look in his eyes—but the health care system being what it is, the doctors probably will be talking about sending him home soon. They’d probably be doing it already, if Hardison hadn’t hacked Eliot’s already top-flight insurance to pre-approve anything the hospital asked for.

“They are waiting,” Sophie says, turning a page in her magazine, “to make sure your sudden, miraculous recovery sticks. Still don’t want to tell us why you’re so sure it will?”

Hardison doesn’t feel bad about not telling Nate the truth. He feels a little bad about Sophie.

“I got sick, and then I got better. That’s what’s supposed to happen, right?”

Eliot doesn’t look like he feels guilty at all. But then he’s apparently been hiding this stuff from them the whole damn time they’ve known him. It’s a little unnerving, even when Hardison knows Eliot hadn’t had a choice.

Sophie looks at him and raises an eyebrow. “Uh-huh. Well, I’m not one to look a gift horse in the mouth; whatever happened, I’m grateful. But you can see why we do want to make sure of you?”

“This isn’t a prison, you know,” Eliot tells Hardison, gesturing with his good arm to show how unrestrained he is. “I could just get up and leave.”

Just for that, Hardison steals the Jello off Eliot’s tray. Eliot won’t admit he likes Jello, but it’s the only part of the heart-healthy, low-sodium hospital food he hasn’t been complaining about. Hardison is trying not to find that adorable.

“We agreed you’d stay,” he tells Eliot. Agreed was a stretch; Hardison has ordered Eliot to stay in the damn bed until the doctors clear him at least three times today, and he’s pretty sure Parker left
him with the same order. It hasn’t stopped Eliot from complaining, but he’s been weirdly careful to
stop short of a real argument—something Hardison’s filing under the why-Eliot’s-not-well-enough-
to-leave column. “Anyway, they just want to run more tests. It won’t hurt you.”

It might hurt the doctors, or at least their egos. The head of cardiology wants to write up a case study
for some journal, and it’s going to sting when Eliot’s records vanish. It’s going to be more work for
Hardison, too, but it’s worth it. Every additional ultrasound is more proof that Eliot really is all right.

“Take your pain medicine,” Sophie suggests, turning back to the magazine. “And your arm won’t
hurt you either. Then maybe we’ll have a little less whining? You’re giving me a headache.”

“I don’t whine.”

Hardison checks the time again. Parker hasn’t checked in yet. She refuses to wear an earbud to her
stashes, but she promised she’d wear one for the meet with Holmes, so she should be on his private
channel any minute now.

“I got you a present,” he tells Eliot, shaking off the worry and reaching for his bag.

“Real clothes?”

“Better!” Hardison passes him the netbook. “Open it.”

He does. “This is the comms display. How is that a present?”

“We could watch another soap opera,” Sophie says. “If you’re not up to it. You’ve been pretty sick. I
understand if you need more rest.”

“Or,” Hardison jumps in, “You could monitor comms with me. Here, look.”

They have a ridiculous number of cameras all around the perimeter of ReadySetGear, so they might
as well enjoy them. He passes Eliot an earbud and opens the feed just as Nate gets out of a car in his
Jimmy Papadokalis outfit, hair slicked back.

“Seriously?” Eliot murmurs.

“I know,” Sophie sighs. “But it does work for him.”

“Whatever,” Eliot mumbles. He cuts his eyes toward the Jello in Hardison’s hand. Hardison peels off
the lid. Eliot narrows his eyes.

Nate adjusts his tie and a new camera feed pops up.

“Got the feed?” he asks.

“Yeah, I got it,” Eliot says, poking at the keyboard.

“You just have to click the—” Hardison puts in helpfully.

“I said I got it,” Eliot growls, rolling his eyes. “It came right up.”

“Okay, don’t bite my head off,” Hardison says cheerfully. “I know computers ain’t your thang, is all.
I don’t know what you’re so cranky about anyway. Running comms from a nice air-conditioned
room, people waiting on you hand and foot. You’d really rather wear a suit in this heat?”

“Computers rot your brain,” Eliot tells him, eyeing the Jello.
“Yeah, I can see where repeated head injuries are the safer career choice,” Hardison answers, smiling fondly.

“Children,” Nate says. “If we could have some quiet on the comms? I’m heading in now.”

“Quiet on the comms,” Eliot grumbles, hitting the mute button obediently. “Wonder what that’d be like. What’s the plan, anyway?”

Hardison sighs. He’s honestly not even sure at this point, and he’s not used to working like that anymore. It’s amazing how fast a guy can get used to working with people who are willing to talk things through and collaborate. If he can just get them to communicate that well off the job, he’ll be in clover.

Eliot smiles and rubs Hardison’s shoulder in an unexpected display of empathy. Sophie opens her mouth like she wants to say something, then shuts it. Eliot goes back to hitting random buttons on the netbook. Hardison sets the Jello down and folds his hands to keep himself from helping. Eventually Eliot maximizes the stream from Nate’s tie.

On the comms, Nate snaps his gum at the receptionist, who calls up to Welch with an urgency born of the understandable desire to get the creep lawyer out of her waiting room.

“It’s nothing fancy,” Sophie says. “The fancy part was the maneuvering I did with the judge to tie up Welch’s finances in an escrow account for the water filter lawsuit. That’s what made Welch desperate enough to cut a quick deal. He thinks Nate has money to invest, and he needs it to fund filter productions ASAP or he’ll lose some kind of big deal he’s put together with an outside distributor.”

“That’s why he’s in there alone?” Eliot asks, frowning. And this is the point Hardison and Parker weren’t so sure about. Eliot’s not on the heart monitor anymore, and he’s getting better fast—he is—but sitting in the hospital while Nate’s out without backup isn’t going to be easy on him. Sitting in the hospital not knowing why Sophie and Hardison were tense wouldn’t have worked well either, though, and this way Hardison can talk Nate through any technical problems without having to leave Eliot.

And the man does desperately need a distraction.

“He’s seen my face,” Sophie answers with a faint grimace. “And Hardison’s, of course. Smaller teams mean bigger risks, you know that.” She doesn’t ask where Parker’s gone. Hardison wonders again what she thinks happened—part of him wouldn’t put it past Sophie to have read the whole story off their microexpressions.

“He’ll be fine,” Hardison says, hoping it comes off as confident and soothing instead of annoyed and (a little) worried. “We all have plenty of experience working solo, right? And he ain’t even working solo. We got eyes and ears on him, and once he gets a chance to insert the drive I gave him, I’ll have their internal network too.”

Eliot doesn’t look impressed.

Welch is smiling at Nate, welcoming him to the office.

“Can I offer you a beverage?”

“I’ll take a scotch,” says Nate. “Kidding! Coffee’s fine. Black.” Hardison makes a face—it is hot out today, especially for Portland. Eliot and Sophie are always insisting that hot drinks cool you off on hot days, but Hardison doubts it.
“Of course,” Welch says. He turns away and says something to Graham Wallace, the ex-special forces assistant. Hardison can feel Eliot tense when he comes onscreen.

“What?” Sophie asks, noticing. “He’s the one with the hinky background, right? But there’s no sign he’s into anything he shouldn’t be here. People do retire from special forces.”

“You see me working as some asshole’s office assistant?” Eliot asks. He un-mutes the comms. “Nate, you remember to watch out for that one.”

“Cream, no sugar,” Nate says.

Wallace takes the order with a pleasant smile, and Eliot’s right. Hardison can see Eliot doing this for a con—has seen him do this kind of thing on too many jobs to count—but he can’t picture Eliot making it a career.

“You could be a cook, though,” he says without thinking.

“What?”

“If you ever, you know, wanted a change,” Hardison says, trying for casual. Eliot doesn’t look away from the screen, but Sophie’s eyes sharpen in a warning Hardison doesn’t actually need. “You could be a cook all the time. Or a grifter and a cook. If you wanted. Instead of an office assistant, I mean. The pub is a really good cover for Leverage; we can do it again if we have to move.”

Eliot doesn’t say anything to that. Hardison tries not to sigh audibly. Eliot usually knows his body pretty well, and he thinks his arm will be fine. But Eliot gets it wrong sometimes.

Which is why they’re here.

(Unless Eliot didn’t get it wrong. Unless he knew how sick he was and just…chose not to say. Which he didn’t. Probably.)

Anyway, Eliot needs to know there are options, even if this wasn’t the smoothest way to bring them up.

Sophie’s watching Nate settle in to read a contract like it’s as interesting as the soap opera from earlier, carefully not glancing at them.

Eliot pulls up the outside cameras in a series of smaller windows, obviously looking for an excuse to change the subject.

“How do I…?” he asks, gesturing vaguely.

Hardison leans over and sets up a split screen view, Nate’s tie on the left and the exterior cameras cycling through the right. He squeezes the back of Eliot’s neck reassuringly, then settles back in his chair.

Nate’s yawn is audible through the earbuds. He’d been in Eliot’s room when Hardison arrived this morning, smelling like a distillery and playing cards with Eliot and Parker under the disapproving eyes of the morning shift nurse. Hardison’s pretty sure he hadn’t slept at all.

Hardison echoes the yawn, suppressing a surge of irritation. He can’t actually remember the last time he had a good night’s sleep himself, but he’s keeping it together. Nate better be doing the same.

“Sorry,” he says, covering his mouth as he yawns a second time. “Hey, did you know yawns can be
contagious across species? Dogs catch them from humans. Cool, right?”

“I brought tea,” Sophie offers, pulling a thermos from the tote bag she’s calling a purse. She pours it into a pair of cups with a moue of distaste at the Styrofoam, handing him one and keeping the other for herself.

Eliot sighs loudly. He’s not allowed to have caffeine, which is yet another thing he’s spent the morning complaining about. It’s probably a little unfair, making him watch everyone else enjoy some. Maybe they could bring him something herbal so he can keep them company. The cafeteria downstairs probably has—

“Nate never got his coffee,” Eliot says, scowling.

“Huh,” says Hardison. He’s right, but it isn’t exactly a candidate for Unsolved Mysteries.

Eliot’s scrolling through the exterior views.


“What?” Eliot asks, flipping back through the camera views.

“Her,” Hardison says, pointing.

Sophie’s out of her chair now, leaning over Hardison’s shoulder.

“The woman?”

“That’s Eliot’s doctor,” Hardison says, reaching over to zoom in on Dr. Holzer’s unsmiling face as she approaches the building. “Why would she be there?”

“Are you sure?” Sophie asks. “I don’t remember her.”

Eliot shrugs his agreement. But he never met Dr. Holzer, not really. She’s still getting blood samples and test results, but she hasn’t bothered to actually see him since his symptoms got less interesting.

“I’m sure.” Ain’t like he could forget the woman told him Eliot was dying.

Eliot must hear something in his tone, because he turns away from the screen, eyes soft and concerned.

“That’s Holzer?” Eliot confirms.

Hardison nods. Eliot turns back to the screen with a frown.

“Nate, get out,” he says. “I don’t like this.”

“Portland’s a small city,” Nate comments, shuffling papers in front of the camera. “I’m actually surprised we haven’t met before. Sometimes it feels like everyone here knows everyone else, you know?”

“I suppose,” Welch says slowly. “But you’re from Reno, right?”

“Oh, of course,” Nate says. “But business is all about networking, isn’t it?”

“Nate,” Sophie says. “You don’t have backup. Don’t push it.”
“Is something wrong?” Welch asks.

“No,” Nate says. “This all looks pretty standard so far. Just making conversation. I like to know the people I do business with, is all. Are you from Portland originally?”

“Boise,” Welch says. “But I’ve been here since college. Why don’t you keep looking through that and I’ll see what happened to our coffee?”

Hardison can’t see a connection, and Eliot’s frowning in thought himself, but it can’t be a coincidence. It can’t be.

“Tell me about her,” Eliot says.

“She wanted us to pull the plug on you,” Hardison says. “It didn’t seem—I thought she was actually trying to be kind. But, she. She knew there was, um, a possible treatment, and she didn’t tell us.”

Sophie flinches a little at that. Eliot just gestures for him to go on.

“And she wanted us to amputate your arm,” Hardison tells him. “She said it was against her orders, but I could ask her to do it. She said it would be safer for you.”

“Against orders,” Eliot repeats with a frown, like that means more than letting him die. “You’re sure?”

“What are you talking about?” Sophie wants to know. “Is Nate in trouble?”

“Yeah,” Eliot says, sitting up. “I think so. Hardison, did you ever figure out what unit Wallace was actually assigned to?”

Hardison shakes his head.

“Does he have any tattoos? Check his arm and neck.” Eliot taps a spot at the back of his own neck, hidden by his hair, then points at his forearm.

Hardison grabs the netbook, pulling up the records on Wallace, scanning his social media posts.

“You think he was in your unit?” he asks. “You don’t have tattoos there.”

“Hell no, I don’t,” Eliot says. “I was just a soldier.”

Which seems like an understatement, given the lengths the OPA’s going to in order to get Eliot back.

“Long sleeves in all the photos I can find,” Hardison says.

“He’s wearing long sleeves today too,” Eliot points out. “I know they got climate control in there, but you said it’s hot today? And he’s a smoker, he spends time outside.”

“Long sleeves in an office is normal, Eliot. There’s nothing a bit more…you know, distinctive?” Hardison asks. Eliot frowns again.

Sophie’s watching them like it’s a tennis match. “There’s something distinctive, all right,” she says. “It’s just hard to spot your own tells. But Eliot already said it, didn’t he? I said special forces, and he instantly compared Wallace to himself. He doesn’t usually do that with our marks.”

He doesn’t. And it’s not the first time, now that he’s thinking about it. Eliot had said Wallace moved like he did the very first time he’d seen him.
Nate rattles his papers again, squaring them into a neat stack, then pushes back his chair. He’s finally moving.

“What’s going on, Eliot?” he asks quietly.

Eliot doesn’t answer right away. “Sophie, you said Welch is putting together a big contract for those filters?”

“Yes, and he won’t be able to finance production without this contract from Nate, so he has no reason to hurt him.”

Eliot shakes his head.

“There’s something happening,” he tells Hardison, frustrated. “That job I did on vacation, it wasn’t supposed to be… Control should have known—” he cuts himself off with a little growl.

Hardison’s had that happen a few times in the past few days, trying to answer Nate and Sophie’s questions. He winces in sympathy.

“You think this is connected? That’d be a hell of a coincidence.”

Eliot takes a deep breath. “Yeah. But from what you’re saying, Holzer was trying to make sure I couldn’t reup.”

Hardison swallows, absorbing that. Eliot couldn’t reenlist with one arm. But Hardison had said no. He and Parker had rolled the dice on Eliot’s life and come too damn close to losing. Only… Only if Dr. Holzer was a black hat, maybe the dice had been tampered with.

“You saying you think she tried to kill you?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.” Which sounds like a yes to Hardison.

Wallace is on the exterior cam now, greeting Dr. Holzer. It’s friendly, but business-friendly. Portland might be a small city, but this is not a social visit.

“If she’s seen my file, she might’ve seen Nate’s photo,” Eliot says. “Nate, man, keep your exit subtle if you can.”

Nate makes a frustrated sound in the back of his throat. Hardison allows himself a tiny flare of bitter satisfaction. It’s not so fun not being told the whole story, and it’s time Nate learned that.

Still doesn’t mean he’s going to let the man get caught.

“If you’re in the top floor conference room, you want to go left to the fire stairs,” Hardison says.

Nate’s up, but he’s not heading for the door. The tie cam shows the conference room cabinets, flashes of paper plates and notepads, an older model speakerphone.

“Nate,” Eliot growls. “Stop messing around.”

Finally, Nate cracks the conference room door, then strolls casually down the hall.

“Good,” Sophie says. “We’ll regroup here, okay? I think Eliot has some explaining to do.”

Eliot’s cycling through the exterior views again. Dr. Holzer’s vanished into the building, escorted by
Wallace.

On the tie camera, Nate’s almost to the end of the hall.

Suddenly Nate’s camera swerves right, entering an empty office. He shuts the door behind him.

“Nate, what are you doing?” Sophie asks. “Keep going to the stairs.”

Nate ignores her, pulling Hardison’s drive out of his pocket and bending under the desk to the computer. The smooth bastard’s going to get the job done on his way out. Or part of the job, anyway.

“Hardison, you got the connection?” he asks.

Hardison reaches over Eliot’s shoulder, typing fast. Eliot rolls his eyes and shoves the netbook at him.

It worked. Hardison has everything—the access he needs to screw Welch, of course, but also—and more important at this moment—the company’s internal security cameras. He pulls them up, biting his lip in frustration: None of the offices are on camera. He scrolls past yet another view of the damned parking lot (which now has more cameras than Orwell’s worst nightmare), the loading dock, the main lobby, the elevators (Dr. Holzer’s fixing her hair on the way up), and lands on the lobby of the executive floor.

Welch is there, carrying two mugs of coffee and looking around with a scowl on his face. He’s moving slow, trying not to spill the hot drinks, which Hardison takes as a good sign. If Nate were already blown, Welch wouldn’t be worrying about the refreshments. He’s about to turn the corner to the hall Nate’s in, though—and Nate’s about to step out of the wrong office.

“Hold your position, Nate,” Eliot says. “You are not clear.”

The elevator doors open, and Dr. Holzer and Wallace step out. They turn right, away from Nate and Welch.

Hardison lets out a breath. Maybe they’re still clear.

“I’m getting you a distraction,” Hardison says, activating the fire alarm.

Onscreen, people slowly file through the public areas, chatting as they evacuate. For a group of people whose careers focus on disaster preparedness, they aren’t taking an unexpected fire alarm very seriously. Welch hasn’t appeared in the stair well, and now Wallace is back, a file in his hand. Hardison zooms in—it’s pixelated, but he knows Nate’s mug shot when he sees it. Damn.

“Guys?” Nate asks. “What’s happening out there?”

Hardison hits some keys, pulling up the sprinkler system and spoofing the temperature readings. He hears Nate let out a little yelp as the water comes on.

Now the staff is exiting fast. Hardison smiles.

“The doors,” Sophie says, tense.

Almost everyone is out now. But several of the guys Hardison remembers from his evening of football are hanging around just inside the exit doors.

“Nate, they’re watching for you. Look, play it safe. We’re ten minutes away, tops.” Nate’s tie cam
shows him checking the window.


Eliot’s on his feet, one hand gripping the bed rail like he needs the support.

“Eliot, do not do that. Have you lost your mind?” Hardison snaps. “Nate, Sophie and I are on the way. Eliot, sit your ass back in that bed.”

“Have you lost your mind?” Eliot looks at Sophie. “How fast can you steal me some clothes?”


Sophie’s already elbow-deep in her tote, rummaging for her car keys and giving Eliot a worried look. Hardison looks at the tote, thinking fast.

“Eliot, do not leave the hospital,” Nate orders. “I’m fine here.”

Hardison grabs Sophie’s bag. Eliot can kick his ass later, he decides, his fingers pushing aside the taser (not a good plan for a heart patient) and finding what he hoped they would.

“Everybody hold still for one second,” he barks, and Sophie and Eliot both pause, looking at the netbook to see what’s happened. It’s enough of an opening to let Hardison cuff Eliot to the bed rail, and then he’s moving, leaving Eliot’s enraged growl behind him.

Sophie moves shockingly fast for a woman in heels, tugging him toward the parking ramp with increasing urgency. The sound of the fire alarm blares through the comms, an urgent soundtrack, and damn it, there’s a line of cars waiting to get out of the lot.

The woman in front of him is paying in cash, in 2017, like that’s even normal, and she’s opening a damned coin purse like people don’t have places to be. Hardison staring at her in disbelief, trying to decide if it would be faster to hop out and pay for the old lady’s parking himself when Sophie gasps in surprise and the back door opens.

Eliot’s found some clothes, or at least some scrubs, and his bedhead is suddenly looking a lot less cute and a lot more deranged. It probably has to do with the death glare he’s sending Hardison. Hardison resists the urge to flinch.

“Eliot, man, how the hell did—”

“They’re fake handcuffs,” Eliot growls. “There’s a quick-release button.”

“They aren’t fake.” Sophie tucks her hair behind her ear with a sudden return to her usual poise. “They’re just not, you know, police issue.”

Nate clears his throat pointedly over the comms, and Sophie smiles fondly. Hardison holds up a hand, stopping her from finishing the sentence.

“And you carry them around because…No, you know what, that is not important right now. Eliot, get out of the car. You’re supposed to be in bed.”

“I’m supposed to be walking around,” Eliot points out. “It helps my lungs drain. Doctor’s orders, remember?”

He promptly ruins his argument by letting out a series of painful-sounding coughs. Hardison reaches for his seatbelt, ready to drag Eliot out of the damned car. Too late. The old lady has finally finished
her transaction. Sophie hits the gas and they shoot onto the street to a chorus of squealing brakes and honking horns.
So after 60,000+ words about feelings, it's time for five seconds of action.

“I need to see Wallace’s service record,” Eliot says, good arm gripping the oh-shit handle as Sophie takes a sharp turn without even tapping the brakes.

Hardison has to wait for the wheels to grip the road before he can turn around and glare at Eliot properly.

Eliot smiles back. His eyes are shining with defiance, his jaw set with the stubbornness that is so frustratingly *Eliot*.

Hardison stares at him, his mouth dropping open. He fully intends to say something like “You asshole, you just spent the past week proving pretty fucking conclusively that you are not, in fact, Superman. You have a broken arm and broken ribs and I can *hear you wheezing*, and I didn’t know it was physically possible to be that fucking terrified for that long, but I cannot do it again, so you are staying in the damn car until we get you back to the hospital, preferably before Parker finds out about any of this. *Idiot.*”

But Eliot’s smile stiffens, and there’s a look in his eyes that’s suspiciously like fear. The words catch in Hardison’s throat, because he doesn’t for one second believe Eliot’s scared of the fight. Not when he’s suddenly looking more like his usual self, his real self, than he has since—God, since this whole thing started. Not when Eliot hadn’t shown an ounce of hesitation (or self-preservation) until Hardison had locked eyes with him.

Eliot isn’t scared of the fight. He’s scared of what Hardison’s going to say.

The flash of understanding feels like a punch to the gut, because Eliot isn’t going to stay in the car. Not this time, not ever. He’s not going to be a cook, or a baseball player, or a country singer, or any of the thousand things he could do instead of being their hitter. He’s going to keep fighting. He’s going to fight injured, and tired, and old, and one day he’s going to lose.

One day Hardison is going to lose him.

But not today.

“Here’s the deal: If you die, I’m changing the menu at the pub,” Hardison threatens. “I mean it. I’ll replace your chili with—with shrimp pizza. And ranch dressing. And—and beets?”

Eliot blinks at him.

“Our edible menus will taste—and *smell*—like anchovies,” Hardison says, finding his rhythm. “And I’ll let Parker pick the specials.”

Eliot’s smile is tentative, but it’s real.
“I’ll use your kitchen knives for wire strippers,” Hardison adds.

Eliot somehow manages to flinch and grin at the same time. “Too far, Hardison,” he says.

“Nope,” Hardison tells him, because it’s not nearly far enough. “Just keep it in mind.”

Eliot nods. “You got those records?”

Hardison pulls out his phone, opening the Wallace dossier. “Why?”

Eliot’s smile is almost feral. “Cause apparently my knives are on the line.”

Hardison can’t see how Wallace’s fake records can possibly help, but he hands over the phone. There’s a specific, tiny little furrow in Eliot’s forehead that gets deeper the harder he concentrates. Eliot’s all focus now, not even glancing up to see if Hardison’s still watching him.

Nate’s voice cuts back in on the comms, still in character. “Oh, hey, guys, what is going on here? I went looking for the little lawyer’s room and all hell just broke loose. Just look at this suit, would you? You know I paid almost two hundred beans for this. It’s ruined! When’s the last time you flushed these pipes, anyway? You could be looking at some serious liability here. I mean, you have heard of legionnaire’s disease, right? Say, what kind of company are you running here?”

Sophie changes lanes, startling the driver of the Subaru she just cut off into a frenzy of honking. “Hey, Sophie?” Hardison asks, figuring it’s about time he did some focusing of his own. There’s no way pull this off in a fair fight.

There’s also no reason to fight fair. “Is that taser in your bag a toy, or is it the real deal?”

“Oh, it’s very real,” Sophie says. “Parker gave it to me. I only brought it along in case she asked about it—that thing is not safe. I think she did her own modifications. Do you have a plan?”

“Eliot keeps insisting these are the good guys.” He shrugs. “But we ain’t. So, yeah, I got a plan. We gonna cheat.”

Hardison feels his own face stretch into a grin every bit as vicious as Eliot’s.

Hardison has his hand on the door latch before Sophie comes to a halt, and he’s out and running to the loading dock before the wheels have a chance to roll back. Use the momentum, he tells himself, and then he’s slamming into the first guy at the door, taking them both down in a tackle that surprises him almost as much as his opponent.

Get up, get up, he thinks, remembering Eliot’s lessons. Grappling’s an important skill, but you got reach on most people, and you can’t take advantage of that on the ground. Can’t position yourself for the next threat, either. Keep your feet if you can.

So he slams his elbow into the guy’s throat and digs a knee into his solar plexus and he’s up and looking for the next one, splashing and slipping a little through the inch-deep pool fetid sprinkler water and only remembering his stance at the last second.
This one doesn’t go quite as perfectly—it’s always a surprise, somehow, getting punched. Eliot never seems phased at all, but Hardison’s inner monologue always starts up with an indignant, “Hey! That hurts!”

He has to remind himself to hit back, and it’s a little clumsy with the floor so slippery, but he can hear the splashing behind him that means Eliot’s catching up. He can’t let this guy past him; it’s just not an option today. So he darts a jab at the guy’s nose and follows it with a hard cross, putting his hips into it, and now it’s the pain in his hand that’s surprising him, the impact shooting up into his shoulder, but the dude stumbles back. The water’s a problem for the enemy, too.

Eliot’s somewhere to his left, and Hardison can hear the sounds of another fight, and maybe he’s getting better at this or maybe fear’s just a motivator, but he pulls off another set of punches, his rhythm suddenly perfect, and then he hits the guy—Joe? Dave? He half remembers throwing this guy a long pass at the football game and sometimes his life is just surreal—right in the side of the head with a perfect freaking haymaker and he can see the lights go out before Joe-or-Dave collapses in a splash of nasty water.

Hardison wants to make sure he lands okay—is it possible to drown in this little bit of water? He thinks it might be—but now men are coming in from the other entrances and Eliot needs backup yesterday.

He spins around just in time to see Eliot dodge a punch—oh God, his ribs—and turn the sidestep into a kick that does something horrible to the other guy’s knee. He goes down screaming, an embarrassing high-pitched yipping scream, and Eliot doesn’t even glance at him, just shifts his posture to get ready for the next fight, calm and focused and goddamn beautiful in motion. Hardison steps up next to him, then takes another step forward, balancing his weight forward just a bit and trying to ignore the urgent pain signals coming from his brand-new bruises.

He’s breathing hard, his arms are aching with the strain of holding them ready, and it’s hard to believe how little time has passed. The men from the other entrances haven’t reached them yet, but they’re getting close.

“There’s too many!” Sophie gasps from behind him, ragged and panicky. “Just run! I’ve called the police!”

In the corner of his eye, Hardison sees Eliot hesitate. He grabs the idiot by his good arm as he runs past, half-tugging him back toward the exit, trying not to worry. Fighting is exhausting; even Hardison’s out of breath.

They shoot past Sophie and skid to a stop on the sidewalk. Eliot doubles over alarmingly, his back muscles straining to force air through his lungs. He shakes off Hardison’s hand with a frustrated, if wheezy, growl, and Hardison lets him. He can hear the men gaining on them, almost to the door.

“Now,” Sophie says, suddenly calm again. Hardison turns in time to see the taser crackle as it hits the flooded floor of the office building, and there’s a flash as it shorts out, discharging a completely illegal level of electricity. Parker definitely modified it.

The men splash as they hit the ground.

Sophie and Eliot look at him.

“I didn’t think that would work quite so well,” Sophie murmurs.

“Age of the geek,” Hardison crows, flexing his hand. Damn. It’s going to hurt to type.
Sophie and Eliot are still just looking at him, not moving.

“What are we waiting for?” Hardison asks.

“You go ahead,” Sophie says benevolently. “This is your plan.”

“I have a heart condition,” Eliot says, straight-faced. He waves a hand toward the door in an after you gesture. “Anyway, it’s your turn to get tazed.”

Hardison rolls his eyes, but he is secretly a bit relieved when stepping back in to the pool of water doesn’t give him even a mild jolt. He leads the way to the fire stairs, keeping his pace down until he hears Eliot’s breathing slow. So far, so good.

“So listen, this has been fun and all, but maybe we should just reschedule,” Nate says through the comms.

“Reschedule what, Mr. Ford?” Wallace asks.

“It’s Papadokalis,” Nate says. “But call me Jimmy. Mr. Papadokalis was my father. Look, if you can just tell Welch I had to go, I’m sure we can pick this all up later. There’s no need for guns.”

“We know you’re Nathan Ford,” Wallace replies. “We know Spencer sent you in here. We just want to know why. Who put him onto us?”

“Ah…I think you’re barking up the wrong tree,” Nate tries. “But that’s fine. Fine. We can just start over, maybe pretend this never happened? Because I honestly have no idea what you’re talking about, and I don’t care. I’m just here to run a con on your boss, that’s all.”

Hardison picks up the pace, Sophie on his heels. Eliot’s coughs echo up and down the concrete stairs. Hardison’s brain is racing in all directions, but it pauses for a moment to be grateful Parker hasn’t put in her comm yet.


Like that’s happening.

“Nah,” Hardison says. “Listen. We being strategic, remember? I’ll distract him, you take Holzer, and Sophie grabs Nate and runs like hell.”

“Distract him how?” Eliot asks. “By running your face into his fists? Or his gun, maybe?”

“Oh, and what’s your plan?” Hardison asks. “Gonna cough on him? Hope he’s a germophobe?”

Eliot’s not too out of breath to glare as he pushes past Hardison and take the lead, slower than usual but steady enough.

Hardison sighs and follows, resigned to his fate: If they make it through this, Parker is going to kill them both.
Eliot reverts to hand signs when they reach the top floor, signaling Sophie and Hardison to wait. Sophie bites her lip and obeys. Hardison tells himself Eliot’s not just buying himself time to catch his breath.

Eliot pauses just to the left of the conference room door, listening to Wallace question Nate.

“‘You don’t have to hit me,” Nate says, his voice audible through the open door as well as Hardison’s earbud. Sophie bites her lip again, but it’s obvious he’s more annoyed than injured.

Eliot takes a deep breath and steps through the doorway.

Chapter End Notes

On the road this weekend, and I'm not sure about internet access, so the next chapter might be slightly late.
Eliot hesitates before he goes in. There’s no time to waste, but he needs a minute: His head is swimming a little from the trek up the stairs. It’s embarrassing, being this weak, and worse than that, it’s dangerous.

If he’s called this wrong, if this is a legitimate operation, and he does what he’s planning to do…But it’s too late to keep Hardison or Sophie out of it anyway. It was too late before he even made it back to Portland, what feels like a million years ago now.

Hardison’s watching him with worried eyes, hovering a step away like he thinks Eliot’s going to drop dead on him, and Eliot wants to tell him not to worry, that he’s got this, that he’s not even going to have to fight.

But that might not be true.

Even if it’s what he thinks—what his gut is telling him it is, against all common sense—this could get ugly. His intel’s a decade old. And Wallace’s records are fake; it’s more a hope than a certainty that the years will line up at all. This is going to be a gamble.

Eliot hears Nate gasp in his earbud as someone hits him, then his indignant complaint, his voice loud and healthy enough to carry through the open door.

Eliot takes as deep a breath as he can without coughing, lets it out slow. Time to go.

“’Sup?” he asks as he heads through the door, taking in the scene as he smiles a greeting.

Nate’s duct-taped to a chair in the corner, soaked from the sprinklers but not bloody yet, at least as far as Eliot can see. Welch is duct-taped to a chair too, but his eyes are closed and there’s bruises darkening along his face. Not Nazgûl, then; likely he’s just a useful idiot. Not a factor.

Dr. Holzer and Wallace are standing near Nate. Wallace has a gun, and he’s not as thrown by Eliot’s nonchalant greeting as the low-rent goons usually are. He’s already turning, adjusting his stance and his aim smoothly to keep Eliot covered. There’s no time to close the distance before he’d shoot, and Hardison’s already on his heels, apparently thinking his luck downstairs is going to carry him through a real fight.

So it’s a good thing Eliot’s only planning to talk.

“Eliot Spencer,” Wallace says, taking a step to the side—a smart move. He’s shielding Holzer and putting the conference table between himself and Eliot, all without losing his line of fire.

“Unctuous, Kafka, tangerine, cromulence,” Eliot enunciates carefully. Be a shame if he got them all killed because his accent got in the way at the wrong time.

Wallace blinks, bemused.
“Elastic, sublation, pencil, splurge.”

Still nothing. Wallace’s eyes are narrowing like he knows there’s a threat, and Eliot’s already tried the two most likely codes. He might’ve guessed the dates wrong, or maybe this particular hole in the defenses has been covered over. He’d hope so, if it weren’t his team on the line.

“Shoot him,” Dr. Holzer says, her eyes widening. She knows what he’s doing.

Wallace adjusts his stance, tracking Eliot’s progress, but he doesn’t fire. Yet.

“Cryolite, plaster, grass, neighbor.” Eliot spits that one out fast, accent be damned.

“Shoot him now,” Dr. Holzer says.

She’s too late, Eliot can feel the static in the air even before Wallace’s face goes completely blank.

“Wallace, that’s an order.” Dr. Holzer says, turning to face him.

He doesn’t move, of course. He’s waiting for the right command. Which means rolling the dice again, but if he’s got this far, there’s no reason the rest of it should have changed. He just might be able to pull this off. He sighs in relief, then has to fight down another cough. Won’t do to show weakness, not now.


Eliot can hear the horror dawning in his voice as he realizes what Eliot just did. It’s funny, really, because Eliot just played it Hardison’s way. Used a cheat code, or a back door, or whatever dumb-ass term Hardison uses for this kind of thing.

Only it ain’t Hardison’s way, not really. Hardison’ll hack your bank account, your phone, your car. He’ll invade your privacy without a shred of guilt. But hacking a man’s mind? That takes a real bad guy.

It’s done, anyway. And even injured, he can deal with the woman—might not have to hurt her, even. Then once the civilians are clear, he can call Control and let Wallace out of the hell Eliot’s put him in, no harm, no foul. And no longer his problem.

“Wasn’t sure that would work,” he tells Dr. Holzer, keeping his voice calm and casual as he closes the distance. “I told ’em years ago what massive security risk that is. Guess I should be glad they didn’t listen, huh?”

He walks past Nate with a nod, ignoring the questioning look on his face. He’s almost to the same side of the table when Holzer grabs the gun out of Wallace’s unresisting hands. Her aim is shaky, and her grip is barely passable; she probably hits the range when it’s time to qualify and doesn’t spend a minute longer than she has to, but that’s what makes her dangerous. If she fires now, she might miss entirely or take out anyone in the room. Eliot takes a slow, careful step, not wanting to startle her.

“Stop,” Dr. Holzer says.

Eliot puts his hand up, palm out, friendly. And takes another step forward. He’s almost close enough to take her. If he thought he could manage his usual speed, he could lunge now, but even if he pushes past the pain in his ribs, his muscles are shaky from disuse, unreliable. He’s going to need two weeks in the gym, minimum, to get back to where he needs to be.
“Hey now,” Eliot says, patting the air in a placating gesture with his good hand. “Don’t worry, Doc. I just wanted to thank you.”

He takes another step.

“In the name of the Constitution of the United States of America, by the power vested in me by the Powers of the Pentagon and the Rites of Black Chamber, by your own blood and oath freely given, I do bind and command thee.” Dr. Holzer’s voice is a rapid singsong, high-pitched with nerves.

Fuck.

Eliot’s muscles lock. His damaged triceps pulls tight as he slips into parade rest, and fuck, this woman’s a lab rat, that’s all, she shouldn’t be able to do this. Spots dance in front of his eyes as his body tries to cope with new orders.

It might be an improvement, doing this injured. It's better than the last time: The pain is all his, even if his body ain’t, and it cuts through the panic like a red hot poker. He’s even starting to be able to think again, to hear the distressed sounds of his team. To wonder what they’re making of this.

Holzer looks him over, a faint smile playing on her lips. “I was pretty sure that would work. Now tie your friends to these chairs so we can talk more comfortably.”

It’s an order, and Eliot has to follow it. His body shifts, still so stiff his ribs are scraping, and—no. No, he doesn’t. By your own blood and oath, Holzer had said, and those are the right words, but. His oath ain’t to her. He can fight this. He can fight this, which proves his point. If he’d got this wrong, if she was running a legit op out of this damn ridiculous company, he’d already be forcing Hardison into a chair.

“I think he’s having a seizure,” Hardison says, his voice coming from too close on Eliot’s injured side. He has to back off. Eliot’s going to fight this, but he could lose, he could—he won’t. He won’t hurt Hardison, not like this. She can’t make him. She’s already tried, and the only part of him that’s moving is his right arm—and that’s an uncoordinated spasm, his nerves reacting to too many conflicting signals.

Wait, he tells himself. His nervous system’s still hard-coded to obey, even after all this time, but brains change, people change, and he’s got residual magic burning through his system.

Holzer’s got no right to give him orders. He repeats that to himself again and again, willing the message into his neurotransmitters.

“How are you doing that?” Holzer asks. “Stop that. You’re only hurting yourself.”

Eliot’s arm stills.

“What did you do to him?” Hardison demands. “Let him go.”

Holzer breaks eye contact, and the pressure eases. It’s not gone—Eliot tells himself to charge her and nothing happens.

But he has time to assess the situation.

It’s bad. He can’t get his people out; he can hear Hardison murmuring something in his ear, and Sophie and Nate whispering behind him. They won’t leave him while they think he’s vulnerable.

He can’t wait forever. Holzer’s got no right to give him orders, but someone gave her the power to
bind. That someone ain’t going to let any witnesses go to carry word back to John. And Eliot doesn’t have a backup plan, or not one that doesn’t involve moving. He’s going to have to go ahead with what he’s got and hope for the best.

“Execute communications protocol alpha three,” he says, darting his eyes at Wallace.

It works. There’s a charged feeling in the air, like lightning about to strike. Wallace turns his head toward Eliot, like a radio tuning to a station. His mouth opens.

Dr. Holzer shoots Wallace in the head.

She flinches with the recoil, the barrel swinging up wildly, and Eliot holds his breath—too many targets in this room—but she settles with a little shriek of dismay, staring at Wallace.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Eliot says. It won’t have done her any good—Wallace was Marked, the fact that the communications protocol worked on him at all is proof of that. Eliot’s not sure how long it will take Control to notice He’s down an operative. It might be a while. Holzer—or whoever or whatever’s been pulling her strings—must have been blinding him for a while, as impossible as that sounds to Eliot. So it might take some time. But Wallace is dead, and he was Marked, and that means he belongs to Control now. Control will have questions, and Wallace will have answers. Whether he wants to talk or not.

Holzer stares at him, her face reddening. “How are you talking? I told you. I ordered you. In the name of the—”


He can feel the binding tightening again, wrapping around his chest and cutting off his speech. Wallace’s death didn’t do him any favors, he realizes. His oath of office still recognizes a fellow soldier, and there’s no denying he got Wallace killed.

He’s bound by that oath, even if it’s Holzer powering it, and that’s a mixed blessing. On the one hand, he’s sworn to defend against enemies foreign and domestic—if that includes Holzer (and Eliot’s pretty damn sure it does, even if his oath needs convincing), he ought to be able to break out of this.

The downside is that it’s going to be tough to convince his oath of that. Holzer’s up to no good, but Eliot knows too well that doesn’t qualify her as the enemy.

It’s hard to guess what will.

His oath isn’t to Control, or even, technically, the OPA, but the loyalties that power it are inextricably tangled. And Control might be bound to serve just as the OPA is bound to Control, but Control’s not human. He—it—has given orders before that were more clearly wrong than whatever this is, for the good of the country.

Eliot’s followed them.

“In that case, maybe we can make a deal,” Nate says from somewhere behind him. He’s moved, which means Sophie’s managed to cut him free of the tape. That’s good. They’ll be able to run when they have to.

“It looks to me like you have a hell of a mess on your hands,” Nate continues. “My crew, we’re pretty experienced at cleaning this kind of thing up. We’d want a cut of your profits, of course.”
Thank you, Eliot thinks. Get her talking. Nate’s just buying time, he knows that. Just trying to get a sense of the situation so he can make a play, but it’s exactly what Eliot needs.

“Profits?” Dr. Holzer repeats, a little blankly. She’s blinking too much, and her knuckles are white on the gun. This might have been her first kill.

“You’ve seen Eliot’s file,” Sophie puts in. She’s moved too, and Eliot sighs in relief. They’re spreading out, giving Holzer too many targets to aim at.

“You know who we are,” Sophie says. “We’re thieves. We were planning to steal from Welch—well, that job just went down the drain, didn’t it? And I’m afraid we thought you were the… authorities. If Eliot says not, then…well, that puts us all on the same side, doesn’t it?”

“Thieves.” Dr. Holzer laughs, looking at Eliot. “That’s what it says in the file, and I couldn’t figure out what Holmes was playing at. But you really think he’s one of you, don’t you? God, the speech they gave that witch in the hospital!”

“Who do you think he is?” Sophie asks politely.

“Eliot Spencer. He’s even still using the name.” She snorts a little, amused. “You know, Mr. Spencer—Mmm, no, I can call you Eliot, right?—I must have studied your brain scans a thousand times. Job training. They tried to bring combat ops in-house for a while there, back when I first started. They wanted more of you, only without having to justify anything to the DoD if they lost another team. Even the OPA had to answer some questions after that one.”

Eliot’s jaw twitches, but he can’t afford to think about them now. Answering will only keep her on the topic, and he needs her focused on her current plans.

“We couldn’t manage it, of course,” Dr. Holzer continues. “Natural sorcery is almost impossible to replicate, and if you can’t build your own super soldiers, pulling from the military is really for the best.”

Eliot can feel Hardison’s eyes on him at that, and he grits his teeth. It grates like it always does, hearing them assume he must be doing magic, like hard work and discipline aren’t even on the radar. It’s still better than hearing the deaths of his unit—his family—referred to as a bureaucratic snag.

“No comment?” Dr. Holzer says. “That creepy little puppetmaster Holmes would be proud. But you don’t have to bother sticking to your cover. He told me himself that Forecasting said we needed you—or was that just another cover story?”

“Cover for what?” Sophie asks. She’s using her grifter voice, lower than usual and a little slower. It’s good. It’s even calming Eliot, a little, and he’s used to her tricks.

“For this,” Holzer says. “Holmes is clever, I’ll give him that. The All-Seeing Eye has a touch of glaucoma these days, a little blind spot all around Lifeboat, and we were ready for Auditors. But we weren’t looking for thieves. It was a lucky break for us, Holmes pulling me in and handing over your file.”

“Lifeboat?” Eliot asks. “The survivalists? They’re what, the fallback plan?”

It’s still hard to talk, but it’s worth it. This is what he needs to hear. He only hopes Nate and Sophie realize it, because he needs to focus on breathing and listening, not talking. Hardison obviously isn’t catching on. Instead of spreading out the targets, he’s standing shoulder to shoulder with Eliot now.

“Fallback plan?” Holzer snaps. “It’s the only plan. We should be training the Marines to fight
Eliot feels a little jolt at that, because that’s twice she’s mentioned magic in front of Nate and Sophie. It’s not enough to set him free—she’s obviously still planning to kill them, so spilling the beans doesn’t matter—but it helps a little.

“We should be setting up a SEAL team for monsters,” Holzer says. “We should be engraving wards into our tanks, and Delta Force should be using our training ground to practice banishment. That was the deal, wasn’t it? That’s what we sold our souls for: Survival. But it’s all a trick. All these years we’ve been sacrificing ourselves to him, feeding him the best and the brightest. Look at what happened to your team. Meat for the monster. Did they have to die like that, do you think? Or was Control just hungry that day? Slow deaths are better, you know. The suffering adds flavor. It’s only a pity they weren’t Marked, but he’s been fixing that. He’ll get to keep Wallace.”

Eliot’s nostrils flare. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“But I do,” Dr. Holzer says. “The stars have come right already. You know it, I can see it on your face. It’s begun, and what’s Control doing? Nothing. We almost lost Colorado last year, did you hear? Hundreds dead. And where was Control? Locked. Out. Utterly useless. It was all a con. He doesn’t have a plan, and he isn’t going to save us. Operation Lifeboat—that’s just his way of saving a few for dessert. All the supplies we’ve been sending them, they’ll only make sure they don’t die before he can enjoy it.”

“The stars have come right?” Nate asks. “Is this a horoscope thing? Eliot?”

“It sounds a bit like one of Hardison’s games,” Sophie murmurs quietly. Louder, still in that calm, soothing tone, she asks, “It sounds like you have a plan. To…save the world from this control? We could help with that.”

“He could,” Dr. Holzer says, wagging the gun at Eliot. “He could be useful, he’s shown that already. My orders were to take him out of the game, but there’s more than one way to skin a cat.”

“You don’t want to kill him,” Sophie says. “You had your chance in the hospital, and he’s still alive—you saved him. That proves you’re not a killer, not really. You’re a healer. You want to save lives, we can see that. Let us help.”

Which is a tricky angle to take, with Wallace dead on the floor. Eliot’s not going to argue with a professional about her area of expertise, but it seems like a long shot.

“We have a real life boat,” Dr. Holzer tells Eliot. Her eyes glitter with urgency. “An escape plan. We’ve been stockpiling supplies, enough to keep going for 150 years. It’s a select group, of course—200 people, with frozen sperm to add genetic diversity, obviously. And I do mean diversity; we’re not like those groups in Idaho. We’re preserving humanity here. All of it.”

She looks at Hardison pointedly at the end of that. Eliot can sense the eyeroll without looking.

“Where?” Eliot manages. “You think your bunker’s gonna work out better, is that it? Or is this the moon colony plan again?”

Hardison twitches a little when he says the thing about the moon, and Eliot’s going to have fun teasing him with it. If they survive this. Building a bunker ain’t the kind of thing his oath’s going to be willing to fight.

Dr. Holzer just smiles. “That was the problem. We’ve been going through the archeology reports, looking for somewhere suitable, but…”
Eliot blinks. She can’t mean what it sounds like she means. He’s been the security escort on archeology missions often enough that they’re still a recurring feature in his nightmares. Fimbulwinter or nuclear wasteland, poisoned air or no air at all, every world he’s been to has one thing in common. Every world is dead.

“We found one,” Dr. Holzer says. “Our…benefactor said the world would be habitable, but I admit I was weak. I had doubts. And then the Laundry started poking their noses in our territory, just when we were going to—but it all worked out for the best, thanks to you. You gave us proof of concept.”

Eliot can only stare at the doctor in horror, putting it together.

“You and your men survived for nearly a week with no preparation. You could help us.”

She’s planning to start a colony in Hell. And she wants him to help her do it.

“And the locals?” Eliot asks. He shudders, hearing Trevor’s screams echo in his mind. Closes his eyes and sees dead cultists, betrayed by the Thing they were fool enough to worship.

The only good thing about how badly Holzer’s misjudged the situation is that this colony won’t survive long enough to bring children into it.

He shudders again, then concentrates on breathing steadily. There’s no time for panic now, not when his team’s in danger.

“The ‘locals’ won’t be a problem,” Dr. Holzer says. “We made a deal.”

A deal. A lie, of course—that bit about the survivalists being dessert, that’s going to be the end game to this; on some level Holzer must already know that. Eliot’s made deals with monsters. He knows the lies you tell yourself.

But: A deal means something to trade. Means they’re planning to give it something it can’t get on its own.

“You betrayed your oath,” he says, because that’s what matters most right now.

“It’s going to happen anyway,” Dr. Holzer says defensively. “We can’t win. We can’t. You know what’s coming. The staff at the lab, they’re clinging to the lies, but I’ve seen your name on those reports, I know you’ve seen it. I have to betray them to save lives. You have to see it’s the only way. We can stay here and die to feed Control, or we can cut a deal with someone else. Someone stronger.”

“I ain’t gonna die for Control,” Eliot tells her. “I’m going to die for them.” He moves his hand, just a little, brushes Hardison’s hip, and leans into his oath, not fighting it but accepting it. He’s going to do his duty. He’s going to defend his people—all of them, not just the ones on his crew. But you have to let me loose to do it.

“Then they’ll die too,” Dr. Holzer says. “You won’t be able to save them.”

“Everybody dies,” Eliot says. He takes a deep breath, feeling the binding tingle as it dissolves. “And it’s always too soon. Don’t matter if it’s one person or billions. The world’s always ending for someone. It doesn’t matter.”
He realizes he believes it as he speaks. Maybe the magic changed something, maybe it’s Hardison and Parker. Maybe it’s just acceptance.

“It doesn’t matter,” he says again. “What matters is you do what you can, while you can. You make it better or you die trying. Took me too long to learn that. Maybe we don’t have a chance, but we ain’t going to surrender. We ain’t going to sell humanity to—to the highest bidder. We’re going to fight until we can’t.”

He moves then, finally free—or bound more tightly than ever, maybe. It doesn’t matter. He can fight. He can, and he will.

He slams into Holzer’s thin frame, feels the bullet whip past him to the ceiling, and slams her head, hard, against the table.

“Duct tape,” he tells Hardison, resting his knee between her shoulder blades just in case. “Get her mouth first. And I need a phone. Got to call this in.”

Hardison’s staring at him again, still worried, but he’s tapping his ear. “Done, man, Parker’s with Holmes, remember? She caught about half of that, and she’s pretty pissed off about missing it, so you know. Are you—are you good? Was that…” He lowers his voice. “That was magic? Because I think you’re right; it’s terrible. Can anyone do that to you? I know you don’t want me messing with this, and I’m starting to get why, I am, but you got to talk to me, man, because that was not cool, and there’s got to be some way we can prevent—she was behind the portal thing? And what was that about—”


Nate and Sophie are watching them, whispering to each other and giving him that look, the one that means they aren’t going to buy the usual cover stories. He’s going to have some explaining to do. For now, though, he can rest. For now he has duct tape, and Hardison babbling in his ear, backup on the way, and a table to lean on while he waits.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay. It kind of got away from me at the end. And Happy Thanksgiving!

It’s crowded outside. The staff of ReadySetGear is still milling around the parking lot—Hardison notices with amusement that they’ve obviously sent runners to Stumptown for coffee and seem to be more or less enjoying the break from the office routine—there are black Suburbans and men in dark suits crawling all over everything, and to top it off, someone called the fire department, which happens a lot less often than Hardison had expected when he started this gig, so now there’s an entire fire crew arguing with the men in suits over access to the building.

It’s a circus, and it’s easy to get lost in it. They split up on the way out the door, Nate and Sophie slouching their way toward the office workers, Eliot and Hardison toward the fire truck. The unspoken understanding is that they’ll meet back at the office.

That’s how it usually works, anyway. Hardison supposes a lot of things are different this time.

Eliot sits on the curb as soon as they’re out of the crowd, resting his head on his hand. Hardison looks him over, wondering if he should grab one of the emergency responders to check him out. There’s a spatter of blood on Eliot’s scrubs, but Hardison’s pretty sure it’s Wallace’s.

Hardison looks around at the swarm of suits, then sits down himself, close enough to feel Eliot’s body heat but not actually touching. Eliot gives him a tired smile.

Sophie and Nate join them, standing in the street in front of the fire engine. They’ll have to move in a minute; Hardison can see the suits flashing badges at the fire crew, and they’re starting to disperse.

“You okay?” Nate asks gruffly.

Eliot nods, so Hardison does too. “Just taking a moment,” he says.

“What was that in there?” Nate asks Eliot. “What did she do to you? And, oh yeah, minor question: We’re all going to die?”

Eliot drops his head back onto his hand. “Neurolinguistic programming,” he says.

Which means, Hardison realizes with a sinking feeling, that Eliot thinks that’s the less dangerous topic than the crazy stuff Dr. Holzer was saying.

Sophie laughs. “You can do better than that, Eliot. I know what NLP can and can’t do.”

A car door slams, and suddenly Parker’s there too, sprinting toward them. Hardison stands up to catch her as she launches herself at him, hugging him tight and feeling him for injuries, before ducking down to wrap herself, significantly more gently, around Eliot.

“You’re both okay,” she says, squatting on her heels with a sigh. “You are, right?”
Hardison nods again, hoping it’s true.

“Eliot was just about to explain a few things to us,” Sophie says. “I think it’s about time, don’t you?”

Parker’s smile fades, and she glances back in the direction she came from. Holmes is there, talking to one of the suits in an authoritative manner.

Eliot does a double take when he sees him, his eyes widening.

Hardison winces. It’s a shock to him too, and he saw it happen: the years settling on Holmes in the blink of an eye, hair turning grey and wrinkles spreading like a bad special effect. He’d been planning to tell Eliot. Eventually.

Holmes sees them looking and breaks off his conversation. He strolls over and looks Eliot up and down, checking for damage.

Eliot’s giving Holmes pretty much the same look. “How much?”

“Twenty years,” Holmes says. “Don’t worry about it, man. I kind of like it. I mean, I looked good before, but now I’ve got that whole silver fox thing going. Who knew? It’s going to be an advantage at work, too, believe me.”

Eliot gives that a beat, then looks at his knees. “I thought you might have killed someone.”

Hardison hears Sophie’s sharp intake of breath. No one says anything for a moment.

“No,” Holmes says. “But next time...”


Holmes blinks at him, hesitates like he’s not sure what to say.

“Mr. Ford and Ms. Devereaux,” he finally says in a brisk tone, still watching Eliot. “We need you to sign some nondisclosure forms. If you’d just step over that way a moment, one of my colleagues will walk you through them.”

Eliot stands up faster than Hardison thought he could, stumbling between his team and Holmes.

“They’ll be fine,” Holmes says. “You have my word.”

Eliot glares a little, but eventually he steps back. Nate and Sophie allow Holmes to pass them off to one of the suits.

The four of them watch them go, Hardison trying to smile reassuringly, Eliot coughing into his arm.

“She was sure you’d sent me,” Eliot says. “Did you? Did you know?”

“No,” Holmes says. “I knew something’s been going wrong with the Eye, but not what or who. Operation Lifeboat’s an authorized op—Wallace was supposed to coordinate supplies and liaison with survivalist groups throughout the Pacific Northwest—but it wasn’t my project.”

Eliot’s looking just a little unsteady on his feet. Hardison doesn’t put an arm around him—the day Eliot Spencer leans on him in public is the day...well, it has happened, but since Eliot doesn’t currently have a bullet hole in his leg, Hardison doesn’t expect to get away with it today. He compromises with himself by laying a hand on Eliot’s back instead. Eliot surprises him by leaning into it a little.
“This could have gone much worse,” Holmes is saying. “If they’d opened that portal…What were you doing here, anyway? What tipped you to this?”

Eliot shakes his head. “It wasn’t like that. We were just…doing what we always do. Helping a client.”

“Luck,” Holmes says, and gives a silent whistle. “You know I’m going to go ahead and take credit for this, right?”

Eliot snorts.

“What about our client?” Parker asks. “Welch stole their design. We stole it back. Problem?”

Holmes takes a second to shift gears. “Shouldn’t be. Welch is going out of business anyway—it’s going to be a hell of a job auditing that mess to try and figure out who actually got what supplies, if we assume Wallace was siphoning them for his little colony. Not my department, thank God.”

Parker nods at that, then pushes herself into Eliot’s personal space, pulling his arm over her shoulders and resting her head against him like she’s leaning on him and not the other way around. Eliot smiles and goes with it, rubbing Parker’s shoulder affectionately. It looks remarkably like a rare display of affection from Eliot, but Hardison can see from Parker’s stance that he’s actually leaning pretty hard.

“We good to go?” he asks Holmes. “We need to get Eliot back to the hospital.”

Holmes nods. “Yeah, get him out of here. He looks like an escaped mental patient.”

He starts to turn away, but pauses. “I still need to talk to you,” he tells Eliot.


He watches Holmes go, not smiling.

“I’m not going back to the hospital,” Eliot says.

Hardison and Parker lock eyes.

“Eliot, man…” Hardison starts.

Eliot looks back at him, tired and stubborn and sad.

“Okay,” Hardison says, stepping in and pulling Eliot and Parker into a three-person hug. “Let’s go home.”

Hardison can’t bring himself to drive to Eliot’s house. Honestly, he thinks maybe he should sell the place out from under him or something, because he’s never going to be able to leave Eliot alone in that bedroom again.

The office, on the other hand, feels right for the first time in months, with the three of them home and Nate and Sophie on the way.
Eliot doesn’t complain about being there, but he doesn’t let them put him to bed. He helps himself to a beer from the office fridge and sits heavily in his usual spot on the couch.

“Should you be drinking that?” Hardison asks.

“Yep,” Eliot says, shutting his eyes in pleasure as he takes a long sip.

Hardison thinks about arguing, then shrugs and grabs one for himself, settling next to Eliot. Parker perches lightly on the arm of the couch, legs crossed, watching them like a cat in front of a fishbowl and noisily eating a bowl of cereal.

Hardison takes a long pull of his beer. It’s the ginger honey wheat, and the ginger gives it just enough sharpness that even Eliot admits it’s drinkable. He’s still optimizing the recipe, though. Next time he’s going to try peach instead of honey. Maybe just a hint of licorice.

He takes another sip of the beer. He can feel the tension in his back starting to unravel as they sit and listen to the faint sounds of a busy afternoon in the pub. But he’s not as good at silence as his partners are.

“What was she talking about?” he asks.

Eliot sips his beer and doesn’t answer.

“You said we could talk later,” Hardison reminds him.

“Yeah,” Eliot says, resigned. “I know you have questions. I’ll answer what I can. Just…Just think carefully about what you really need to know.”

So Hardison does. There are things he wants to know a whole lot more about, like the whole portal business and whether Eliot secretly has superpowers, and there are things he very much doesn’t want to think about ever again but know he will, like whatever Dr. Holzer did to Eliot. And what Eliot did to Wallace.

And then there’s the bigger question.

He’s never been one to turn away from truth because it’s ugly, though, and…and if it’s what it sounds like, and if Eliot’s planning to do what it sounded like he’s planning to do, then wanting to know isn’t the issue. Needing to know is.

“Was she just crazy?” He asks hopefully. “Because it sounded like she was talking about…like you were talking about…”

“She wasn’t crazy,” Eliot says quietly. “But she was wrong. There are plans.” He’s studying his beer label pretty hard when he says it. Hardison wonders if the plans are something Eliot knows about for a fact or just something he’s hoping is true.

“There are plans,” Parker says, and Hardison can hear the same doubt in her voice. “We need plans because…we’re all going to die?”

Trust Parker to go right to the heart of it.

Eliot looks at her. Hardison can’t see his face, but he sees Parker’s.

“Do you mean we’re all going to die eventually,” Hardison pushes. “Like of old age?”

“You’re going to die of old age,” Eliot says, too firmly. Then, because Eliot does try not to lie to
them, he adds, “If I can help it.”

He rubs his bad arm, then nods to himself.

“It’s called a transient weak anomaly,” he says. “It’s…complicated. There’s all this orbital…not my field. What it comes down to is the walls are getting thin. Magic gets easier—people will start doing it by accident, which isn’t as cool as you probably think. More like handing everyone in the world a loaded gun and hoping they figure out not to point it at anyone by accident. Meantime, we’re losing our protection against the, uh, elder gods and the many-angled ones and, and…They’re infovores. Means they…like minds. Processing power. So we’ve got exponential population growth, and all those microchips they put in everything now. It’s like waving a bloody steak in front of a pack of hyenas.”

If anyone else had been saying this stuff, Hardison would assume it was a joke, or some kind of marketing campaign for a new RPG. But Eliot’s not into fantasy, and he doesn’t look he’s kidding. He just looks sad.

“But you kept them out,” Parker says. “With your soldier friends. And we stopped Dr. Holzer. So we stopped it, right?”

“We stopped that attack,” Eliot says quietly.

Hardison takes another long sip of his beer. He wishes someone would hold his hand for this conversation, but his partners don’t always react the way he wishes they would. Parker’s making herself small on the arm of the couch, staring thoughtfully at Eliot, and Eliot’s using his good hand to hold his beer. He’s studying the label intently. Too intently.

He carefully nudges Eliot’s knee with his, and Eliot blinks and looks at him, refocusing. He doesn’t pull away.

“Okay,” Hardison says, thinking. There’s always a way. It’s the first rule of hacking. Sometimes it’s bad code, sometimes a lazy employee with weak password habits. Sometimes you have to get really creative.

Which happens to be what he does best.

“Microchips are the problem? That why you hate my toaster?”

“No,” Eliot grumbles, relaxing a little now that Hardison’s given him something to bitch about. “I hate it because it’s the dumbest thing I ever heard of. It’s a toaster; it’s supposed to make toast. It doesn’t need to connect to your damn Wi-Fi. You just watch the thing, Hardison, why’s it even easier to have it text you? Why does it have to have lights?”

“But that stuff’s the problem?” Hardison pushes. He could write a virus. It’d take more than one, really, but if he coordinated them, spread the worms enough before activating…He’s already thought through most of the problems, just as an intellectual exercise, of course, because doing it for real would…

Eliot and Parker think he’s the good one. But they’ve never understood the kind of damage he could do.

Eliot nods, then shakes his head. Sips his beer. “Part of the problem, but…I mean, first of all, you can’t unring a bell, man. That tech is here, and we rely on it. Too much, I think, but there’s no changing it now. Second, our brains are a bigger problem. And you can’t—even if you…if you lowered the population enough to. It’d make it worse. Pain and suffering attract them too.”
Hardison stares. “They considered that?”

Eliot shoots him a pitying look.

“Don’t go trashing your toaster,” Eliot tells him. “Well, yeah, that toaster, but don’t…It won’t help.”

So maybe Eliot does have some idea of what Hardison could do.

Hardison takes a long pull of his beer, wondering how much he’d have to drink to forget that his government—that Eliot—had calmly considered mass murder on a large enough scale to alter the world’s population profile. And rejected it for practical reasons.

It’s not that he’s naïve, and he’s never been fool enough to trust the government. But still. If that’s the kind of response they’re willing to consider...

“How long do we have?” Parker asks abruptly.

Eliot puts down his beer, gently.

“It already started,” Eliot tells her. “A couple years ago. I didn’t find out till just recently, but. It’s already happening. Won’t be able to keep it quiet more than a year or two, if we’re lucky. Welcome to the Alamo.”

“You’re not Davy Crockett,” Parker says.


Eliot makes that blank face he uses when he’s not sure how to respond to Parker. “I know?” he says.

“I heard you on the comms,” Parker says accusingly. “You said…you’re going to fight.”

Eliot takes a breath, then coughs again. It’s probably not fair to think he’s stalling, so Hardison just hands him his beer.

“Not today.” Eliot moves his bad arm a little, wincing. “Might not be that soon. But they’re going to call me up.”

“But you’ll come back, right?” Parker asks. “When you’re done.”

Eliot looks at her. Hardison can’t see his face, but he can see Parker’s. It’s enough.

“You don’t think you’re going to win,” Parker says, pulling her leg back and wrapping her arms around her knees.

Hardison doesn’t think Eliot’s going to answer that either, but he does.

“You can never know for sure how a fight’s going to go,” Eliot finally offers.

Hardison drains the last of his beer.

“We need more beer,” Hardison says.

What he needs is to freak out, but Eliot and Parker are sitting there so calmly, looking at each other in
that way they do sometimes. So he gets up and goes to the kitchen, overly aware of the sound of his shoes on the hardwood floor.

So. The end of the world, then. It doesn’t feel real. Maybe because of the whole magic thing, which he’s still trying to wrap his head around, or maybe it’s just too big to process. Eliot believes it, though. He believes it, and he’s not even going to stay and face it with them. He’s going to go make some stupid last stand. He’s going to get himself killed.

That feels real. Maybe it wouldn’t have, before all this, when Eliot could still almost convince them he was invincible, but now, when they almost lost him…They aren’t going to lose him again.

Eliot’s coughing breaks the silence from the couch. Hardison pulls his head out of the fridge and checks on his partners.

Parker’s poking Eliot with her foot, frowning thoughtfully. Eliot does something Hardison can’t see, and she jerks her foot back and narrows her eyes, not spilling a drop of milk from her cereal. Eliot coughs again and rests his head on the back of the couch with a tired sigh.

He should be in bed. If he won’t go back to the hospital, Eliot should be in their bed, upstairs in the loft, where they can keep an eye on him.

Where he’d probably just have more nightmares, after today.

Hardison opens cupboards aimlessly, like there’s going to be an answer to any of this tucked behind the popcorn or gummy frogs. Food isn’t the problem.

Except it sort of is, at least for Eliot. One of the problems. Eliot’s eating again, thank God, but he’s still unsettlingly thin. At this point, it’s probably a big part of what has him so tired. Maybe part of what keeps giving him that defeated look that doesn’t belong on Eliot’s face at all.

Hardison digs out a bag of tortilla chips, the good ones, made by the people who run the food cart down the street, salty and a little oily but so good. And nicely high in calories, if not nutrients. Hardison pours some into a bowl, then considers. Food’s never just about calories, not for Eliot.

There’s a low murmur of conversation coming from the couch now. Hardison’s quiet as he slips out the door to the pub.

Eliot raises his eyebrows when Hardison comes back bearing snacks, but apparently his appetite is back, because he grabs a full handful and doesn’t ask why he was gone so long. “Mango salsa?” he asks approvingly.

“I know it’s not Jello,” Hardison apologizes sarcastically, and smiles when Eliot glares at him.

“Go easy, though,” Hardison tells him. “There’s a lot of salt—”

“Heart’s fine,” Eliot says through a mouthful of chips. “Magic. Remember?”

“So I could have tased you.” And prevented Dr. Holzer from doing…whatever she did to freeze Eliot in place like that. Of course, maybe she’d have done it to Hardison or Sophie instead, and he
wouldn’t have known what to do. He thinks about what it would have to feel like, being locked in your own body like a coffin, and shivers.


“Eliot!” Amy’s beaming when she comes in, three bowls of chili on her tray. “Thank God you’re back.”

“Kitchen okay?” Eliot asks, sitting up a little and frowning. Clearly the brewpub’s kitchen is high on Eliot’s list of concerns, end of the world or not. Hardison decides to take that as a good sign.

Amy’s smile freezes as she takes in the sling and the blood stain on Eliot’s scrubs, but she knows better than to ask, by now.

“They’re killing themselves trying to learn knife tricks from YouTube,” she tells Eliot with slightly forced perkiness. “Tim started it by trying that flippy thing you do? He was showing the new guy. But at least he can do it. Marisa almost cut off her finger trying to one-up him. And the new guy, Hector, keeps overcooking the burgers.”

Eliot looks at Hardison accusingly, like he should have known about this. Hardison shrugs with elaborate nonchalance. Yeah, he owns the damn pub, but if Eliot thinks undercooking a burger is a big deal in the end times…Well. It’s Eliot’s kitchen. Eliot’s just going to have to be here to keep an eye on it, now won’t he.

“I’ll talk to them,” Eliot says. “It’s not that hard to do, you know.” He pushes himself off the couch with his good arm, obviously intending to do it now.

“Later,” Hardison tells him, throwing out an arm like it could hold him down. Eliot allows it, which sends a jolt of alarm through Hardison’s stomach, but no, it’s okay, Eliot’s just humoring him. And hungry, apparently.

Amy passes out chili and hovers for a moment, looking like she might have some questions after all. She settles on, “We missed you,” then leaves while Eliot’s still trying not to look pleased.

Hardison scoops chili onto a tortilla chip. He’s not hungry at all, he realizes. Eliot’s sampling his thoughtfully, and Parker—who just had a bowl of cereal—has swapped bowls like none of this affects her. He takes a bite, not wanting to call attention to himself by putting it down.

“Tim’s been tweaking it,” Eliot tells him. “I think he added cardamom. You don’t like it?”

Hardison can’t really taste it at all, but he takes another bite anyway. They eat in silence for a while.

“I signed us up for a whale watching tour,” Hardison announces.

Parker and Eliot both look up from their chili.

“It ain’t whale watching season, is it?” Eliot asks.

“Whales have a season?” Parker asks. “Like fruit?”


“We’ll do that too, then,” Hardison says firmly. “No rule saying we can only see one kind of whale. But I meant orcas. We’ll go up to Anacortes. We could even try and kayak, if you want.” He doesn’t think that came out too nervous. Eliot’s face softens into an almost-smile.
“You ever seen an orca?” Hardison asks him.

“No,” Eliot says, sounding slightly surprised at himself.

“But you want to?” Hardison asks.

Eliot looks wistful for a second. Then he drops his eyes back to his chili, his jaw tensing again.

“Gonna be a bit before I can kayak, man. I don’t want to make you promises I can’t keep.”

“I called Holmes,” Hardison tells him. “From the pub. I told him he can’t have you.”

“And?” Eliot asks.

“And he said he needed you. He said Forecasting—that’s what it sounds like? They’re predicting the future?”

Eliot nods, then waggles his hand. “Never useful,” he mutters.

Hardison ignores the interjection. “Anyway, Forecasting said fixing your heart would boost the one-year survival metrics by 27 percent.”

Eliot swallows hard, like he’s taking a hit and trying not to show it.

“So I asked him if a year was as far as they could forecast.” Hardison doesn’t pause for Eliot to answer. “It’s not.”

Eliot nods again. He knows this. Parker tilts her head, watching Hardison.

“So I asked how you affect those survival rates.” He swallows. “And you don’t. Next set of numbers was for three years out. You aren’t a factor. Not a factor in any predictions after that, neither. What do you think that means, man?”

Eliot doesn’t answer.

“I figure there’s two possibilities. One, it means you ain’t a factor because you’re with us. Kayaking with whales and helping people. Making a difference for the people who aren’t into magic or government conspiracies, who’re just regular people caught up in regular problems. Or two. It means you go off with your buddy in the suit, and you die, Eliot. Because it don’t seem to me you have a great track record with this shit, do you? It pretty much sounds like every time you get into it, you get hurt bad. How many missions like that last one you think you got in you?”

Parker’s doing that thing with her eyes and her bottom lip. If Sophie did it, it would be manipulation. Parker didn’t grow up with anyone who cared much about puppy eyes. When her lip wobbles, it’s real.

“He tell you how many people are in that 27 percent?” Eliot asks, his voice carefully reasonable. Like there’s any way to do that math. Some kind of cut-off where it’s suddenly worth Eliot’s life. Hardison wonders where Eliot thinks that tipping point is.

“I figure it’s about the number would have died if Dr. Holzer’s plan worked out,” Hardison says instead. “I think you did what they needed already. So I told Holmes he can’t have you.”

Parker smiles, still a little shaky. Like Hardison has the power to give orders to Holmes. He doesn’t even have the power to stop Eliot from volunteering, if that’s what the man thinks he needs to do.
“You can’t know that,” Eliot tells him, flat.

“You can’t know I’m wrong,” Hardison counters. “I know about prophecies, man. There’s always a loophole. Forecasting said you had to survive. They didn’t say you had to be working for them. So even if I am wrong, maybe we’ll stumble into something else like this thing with the doctor. What are our odds if you aren’t around, Eliot?”

It feels callous, putting it like that. And he and Parker aren’t exactly babes in the woods, whatever Eliot thinks. But it’s the best argument he has.

“I can teach you some things,” Eliot says, not meeting his eyes. “Not the fancy stuff. But. There’s stuff you can do to protect yourselves. And I told you about that safehouse in Oklahoma, right? You go down cellar there, there’s some supplies…I mean. If it came to that.”

“That why you picked the Alamo for your analogy?” Hardison asks. “Because the noncombatants survived? Here’s the thing, though. Nothing you’ve said makes it sounds like freaking Cthulu is going to be sparing the women and children.”

Eliot winces.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” Hardison knows it’s a mistake to sound so angry. He can’t help it. Hardison can see the effort Eliot’s putting in to holding himself still.

“You want to go out in a dramatic last stand, is that it? ’’ he pushes. “We ain’t gonna stop you, E. No, Parker, you said it back in the hospital, and you were right. Eliot’s gotta Eliot. But. Listen, man. We love you, and we want you with us, you got that? Long as you can give us. And there ain’t no need for promises, okay? Life isn’t going to be making any of us any promises, and we want every minute of you we can. The last couple weeks have made that real clear, not like it wasn’t already. If you really think this is your duty? Fine. We’ll just…make the time we have count. You ain’t going anywhere soon—you ain’t passing any medical board with your arm how it is. But be sure, okay, because that last stand thing, just to be noble? Thinking you’re what? Expendable? That’s stupid, and you never struck me as stupid before.”

“It ain’t that,” Eliot says. “I’m not a damned hero, Hardison. I’m not—not noble. That’s why I’m still alive.”

Hardison presses his lips together to keep from saying anything.

“You might be right,” Eliot concedes. “Maybe. But you might not be. Are you willing to risk watching something like that on the news, knowing I could have stopped it?”

“Yes,” says Hardison, not at all sure he’s telling the truth. “Are you willing to leave us—and Leverage? You said I was doing more good out here than I could do with the OPA. You know we can’t do it without you.”

Eliot opens his mouth, but Hardison talks over him.

“Don’t say we can get another hitter. We can’t get another Eliot. It ain’t just that we love you; I’m talking logistics. You know someone who can fight, and con, and not kill anyone? Not carry a gun? Someone who’ll ride a racehorse bareback to make sure the job doesn’t fall apart? Or sing in front of a crowded bar? Someone who’ll keep the two of us on an even keel? Someone who can make sure we don’t get scurvy or whatever you’re always on about? We ain’t going to quit helping people if you leave, Eliot. I don’t mean it like that. But we’ll be in a lot more danger—and not from tentacle monsters—and we won’t be half as effective.”
There’s a silence.

“I’ll stay if I can,” Eliot says. Hardison wants to kiss him, but Eliot’s not done. He holds up his good hand. “You said after a year, it won’t matter if I join. Gonna take almost that long to be able to hold a weapon right anyway. So, yeah, maybe you’re right, and we already did what we were supposed to. But maybe not. You can make cracks about Cthulu all you want, man, you haven’t seen the things I’ve seen. I’m a weapons specialist, or I was, and whatever you think, I was good at it. So good I wound up being a consultant on a lot of expeditions, looking to see how other worlds fought this. I’ve seen what’s coming, Hardison, and...There is a plan. And if they need me to make it work...But you’re right too. It matters, what we do with the time. If we help people, give them a halfway decent world for a while longer...I’ll tell John no, okay, but if he needs me before the year’s up...”

It’s not a perfect answer.

It’s the best one they’re going to get. Hardison’s relieved, but Parker’s still got that stubborn wrinkle on her forehead. Eliot sees it too.

“I meant it, when I said you don’t know how a fight’s going to go,” Eliot tells her. “It might not be the Alamo. It might be—it might be Pavlov’s house.”


Parker still looks blank.

“It lasted for months,” Eliot explains. “The USSR had over a million casualties. But they fought for every inch, defending the city. Starved their own people to deny the Germans supplies. There was this apartment building overlooking the river bank—a strategic position. Sergeant Pavlov and his platoon were told to hold it at all costs. It was just twenty-five men and about ten civilians they found hiding in the basement, in this four-story apartment building, facing the whole Wehrmacht offensive—tanks, artillery, the whole nine yards. It was hopeless, and they knew they were all going to die. But they fought. For two months. They kept fighting. And they held it. They won.”

He smiles. “There was a baby born in the basement, in the middle of all that. She lived.”

“We live in a multiverse, right?” Hardison puts in, holding on to the image of a child born in battle, fierce and healthy and, he hopes, happy. Trying not to picture her playing in the ruins of the world she should have known. He shakes his head to clear it. “Infinite worlds. You know what that means, right?”

Eliot shakes his head fondly, then reaches out with his good arm and tugs Hardison closer on the couch, close enough that Hardison has to remind himself not to lean on Eliot’s ribs. He puts an arm over Eliot’s shoulders instead, carefully but firmly, and feels the other man relax. Parker uncrosses her legs again, dropping them forward across Eliot’s lap, and Hardison picks up her foot, runs his finger over the sole. She twitches and drops herself onto the seat of the couch, then steals a chip from Eliot’s plate.

“It means every possibility exists, somewhere,” Hardison tells him. “It means there’s a world where we win—more than one. So yeah, that could be us. I think—I think we have to assume it’s going to be us. Which means we have work to do. And whales to watch.”

Chapter End Notes
That's the end, folks! Thank you to everyone who read, kudoed, and commented.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!