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**Water dripping on a stone**

by [Lyssian](http://archiveofourown.org/users/Lyssian)

Summary

"Water dripping on a stone, dissolving and removing. Changing the shape of the world one drop at a time. Water flowing underground bubbling up in unexpected places." 47 rents a room in Chicago to use as a base between missions, and discovers over time he's staying for more than the cheap rent and easy airport access. (The result of a friend and I bemoaning the lack of Hitman romance, and coming up with enough ideas that I couldn't resist trying it out).
Canaries

“Here?”

The driver looked dubious as he leaned forward to gaze out the windshield. He had followed the GPS directions to the letter, yet his passenger - sitting straight-backed in an expensive-looking wool coat with his gloved hands folded loosely on his lap - didn’t match the modest townhome that was marked on his phone map. In fact, it seemed like the entirely wrong end of the city for his passenger’s destination. Surely it had been a mistake.

“Here.” The passenger confirmed, and placed a fan of $20 bills on top of the taxi meter. He leaned back to take his duffel bag from the backseat, and climbed out of the car. “Thank you,” he added, then swung the door closed behind him and made his way up the sidewalk to the house.

The driver re-locked the door as soon as it closed, and watched as the man felt in his pocket for keys, then let himself inside. The driver shrugged, put the car in gear, and left. Not his job to wonder why people lived where they did, just to get them home from the airport.

47 closed the front door behind him with a soft click, and toed his shoes off into the boot tray. His gloves were removed and pushed into the pockets of the coat, which was hung in the hall closet. That done, he slung the duffel across his back and moved silently up the staircase.

At the first landing he paused, letting his senses run through the house for any sign of danger. There was a bar of flickering light below the door to his left, no doubt from the television. Ava, the woman who owned the home in which he was renting a room often fell asleep with it on, a fact he had filed away in his mind in case it ever became necessary to kill her. A movie with gunshots and explosions provided decent cover for the real thing in a pinch. The soft murmur of recorded voices told him it had gone to infomercials, selling a detergent that would get grass, wine, and blood stains out of white shirts. He had tried the product before, though - it did nothing for blood, though it did a passable job on wine.

The rest of the house was dark, quiet. Empty - as it should be. There were no other boarders or residents, which suited him well. Less people to ask difficult questions. He turned up the next set of stairs to the attic room, where he put down the duffel bag. Unpacking could wait until morning, after he had recovered from a tense mission and a too-long flight from Copenhagen.

First things first. He made a brief sweep of the room - no land phone line to check for listening devices (an advantage over staying at a hotel), but he checked the mattress, window and door moulding, floorboards, and closet for any unexpected bits of wiring or microphones that might have appeared since he left a few weeks ago. Finally, he pulled a chair to the middle of the room to thoroughly check the ceiling fan. Satisfied that his safehouse was as safe as he had left it, he returned the chair to the corner, draped his discarded clothes over it, and turned down the bed for sleep.

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Morning announced itself with a shaft of light streaking through the window blinds and into 47’s eyes. He grunted with irritation as he pushed back the warm blankets and rose to tighten the blinds. Not as much sleep as he would have liked, but more than he expected. Before he could return to the warm nest of the bed though, the sounds and smells of breakfast and fresh coffee reached him. His stomach growled at the thought - when had he last eaten? At the airport in Brazil, probably. Too long ago.
Downstairs, he could hear the sizzle of eggs frying in a pan, and the morning news reporting on a recent spate of carjackings. He listened a few moments for anything relevant to him, then moved back to his bed to make up the sheets, smoothing down the edges. Next was the closet, to put on a black shirt and pants. No messages from Diana on his phone.

Below him, he heard the door open then close and lock. It seemed Ava was continuing her morning routine. He moved to the window to watch her go, recognizing the pattern. It must be 7 a.m. She woke at 6:30 a.m., ate eggs and toast for breakfast. 7 a.m., morning jog in the nearby forest preserve. She would be gone an hour, returning to shower, dress in scrubs, and go to work at Forestview Animal Hospital, ten blocks away, to clock in at 9 a.m. In the snow, she took the 173 bus to get there.

All of this was recorded in the rolodex of 47’s well-honed mind, the small habits that make up a person. The little opportunities that may someday come in handy if she got too curious.

Per her pattern, she had left the coffee pot warming with a mug beside it for him, and a plate covered with a tea towel to keep in the heat and moisture. He lifted the towel - eggs, bacon, and toast. He took the mug and plate to the table, and settled in to eat.

It had been one of the selling points of setting up this location as a regular safehouse - the ready breakfasts. Ava had explained it away with a shrug, saying she had been used to cooking for two for several years before she began leasing the room in the attic, so it was no trouble for her to keep doing it now.

He hadn’t asked who she had been cooking for before, and she hadn’t volunteered the information. He got the impression that neither of them thought it was any business of his.

The phone in his pocket buzzed - a text alert from Diana, giving an all-clear. No contracts today. Good - he could use some rest. He scooped the last of breakfast into his mouth, drained the mug, and sat back. Thirty minutes until she returned. Enough time to unpack his gear from last night without fielding uncomfortable questions.

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“Attic room to let: quiet, smoke-free, prefer male. Monthly rate.”

There was nothing flashy about the ad in the newspaper. Simple and to the point. It wouldn’t draw the attention of most readers - but 47 was not looking for an airy, open-plan penthouse with a good view of the lake. While he felt the allure of floor-to-ceiling windows and exotic, bustling locales, those things went against the premise of a good safehouse. He needed a quiet neighborhood. No kids to get in the way or ask questions adults knew better than to say out loud. Small windows, preferably with an alley view and no hiding points for snipers. Close to international airports. Good cell phone reception. Blackout curtains.

He stood on the porch, assessing the location as he waited for his knock to be answered. So far, it seemed to tick all the boxes. Anyone who had passed as he walked up had been looking at their phones or into the distance, no attempts to smile and greet the newcomer.

A woman, early 30s, answered the door - deadbolt, lock, secure but not insurmountable. She gave a tentative smile. “Can I help you?”

“I emailed you this morning,” he said, holding up his phone as some kind of proof. “Is the room still available?”
“It is,” she said, and stepped aside to let him come into the house. “Sorry, I’m Ava. I placed the ad. The room I’m renting out is up top… not afraid of heights, are you?”

“Not at all.”

As she turned to lead him deeper into the house, he took stock of his surroundings. Kitchen to the right - knife block on the counter, good brands. Laptop open on the table. To the left, a staircase. Solid wood railings, too sturdy for a fatal accident to be believable. Ahead, a short hallway leading-

“Good, come on up then.” She said, and began up the stairs. “What did you say your name was, again?”

47 watched her walk about halfway up before following her. Short brown hair, just past her ears - no ponytail to grip in a fight. Post earrings. T-shirt and jeans. Barefoot, unable to run quickly outside if attacked.

“Tobias Rieper,” he said, somewhat distracted by the cold calculus that had been ingrained into every strand of his DNA. Average height and size, easy to overpower. Neck relatively slim, jugular vein accessible.

“German? ‘Rieper’ sounds like it, somehow.” At the landing she pointed out each door in turn. “My bedroom is there, bathroom there.”

That put her bedroom over the front of the house. Clear shot from the opposing building, probably. Check later.

“And up here…” she climbed the stairs to the small third floor, “is the room. It comes furnished, everything you see here. Feel free to look around.”

47 walked past her, scanning the room with a practiced eye. Iron bed frame, heavy. Solid. Good looking mattress. Window over a roof awning, good for a quick escape. Closet large enough to hide weapons among the clothes. A body, if it came to that. He flicked his gaze up to the ceiling, which angled up toward the roof peak. Ceiling fan. Good for summer heat, but also for stashed listening devices. He would need a chair to check.

“Do you have any questions?” Ava asked, after what seemed like more than enough time to look at the space.

“Is anything between this ceiling and the roof?” He asked abruptly. “Crawl spaces?”

“Not that I’m aware. Should just be some insulation and wiring for the electrics in this room. Why?”

A pause. “You know how squirrels can get in this weather. Looking for any nook to make a nest.” The excuse came easily, naturally, leaving little time for her to wonder why a crawl space might sway his decision.

“Oh.” She laughed. “I’ve been there before, pain in the ass to get them back out. Don’t worry, everything’s tight as a drum.” Then, when he didn’t comment, she added “It wasn’t this house, anyway, but a place I was renting a few years ago… I called a humane removal service, of course, the whole nest was moved to some wildlife refuge area or something. I didn’t need a bunch of dead baby squirrels on my conscience, what would my clients think?”

“Clients?” He turned to look at her, interest piqued.
“Hm? Ah, I’m a veterinarian. Dogs, cats, exotics… I try to avoid killing anything I don’t have to, but it’s a hazard of the trade…” She trailed off, suspecting he’d stopped listening two sentences ago.

“I know the feeling,” he said absently, moving to the window to look out at the street. Sparse trees, nothing to climb up to reach the window. Few hiding places.

She was certain he’d stopped listening now. “So… what do you think?”

A brief pause, his expression turning to that of a person adding up an entire checkbook in his head at once, then, “Yes. I’ll take it.”

A knot of tension she hadn’t realized was there released in her chest. Good. It wouldn’t hurt to have an intimidating-looking man coming in and out of the place. “Oh! Good. Any other questions before we sign some not-legally-binding paperwork?”

A thought popped into his head, bypassing his reason filter and coming out of his mouth without permission from any other faculty. “What do you think of birds?”

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A knock on the handrail at the bottom of the staircase broke 47’s concentration. He placed the cleaned rifle back into its pelican case and clicked the locks.

“I’m here,” he called down as he pushed the case under the bed and stood. “Come on up.”

Ava climbed the stairs slowly, balancing the base of the wire cage with both hands. The canary inside flapped furiously as it tried to keep its balance on the perch, chirping bitterly at the treatment. “I think he missed you,” she said, putting the cage gently on the top of the dresser. “He goes off his seed a little when you’re gone for a long time.”

47 moved to the dresser, turning a critical eye to the bird. Feathers smooth. No signs of stress. “He doesn’t miss me. He misses the window.”

“I can’t,” she said, retreading a well-worn path of conversation. “If I leave him up here, I’m afraid I’ll forget he’s here and never feed him…” she shook her head, eyes closed. “I can’t.”

“You wouldn’t,” he said, voice somehow more relaxed than before. “You wouldn’t forget.” He took a bottle of water off the window sill and splashed it into the dish inside the birdcage.

The canary hopped to it to bathe itself.

“Besides,” she said, eager to change the topic, “I like the singing. It’s nice to hear while I’m getting ready for work.”

47 gave a slight hum in response, watching the bird clean its feathers. “Thank you again. For taking care of him, I mean. I know it was last minute…”

“It always is.” She gave a short laugh. “You always seem to get called to a conference at the last second. You really should talk to your boss about that, it can’t be legal.”

“A flicker of a smile. “It’s the nature of a career in sales, Ava. A new contract needs to be closed, someone has to jump on it.”

“Mm. I guess.” She looked around, suddenly self-conscious. “Sorry. You’re probably busy…”
“I’m not,” he said, lifting the cage door to run a finger down the bird’s back. The bird flapped its wings and bounced foot to foot in delight.

“Oh.” She wasn’t sure how to interpret that response. Improvisation seemed necessary. “In that case, I was thinking I’d open a bottle of wine and watch a movie or something, if you…?” her voice trailed off, uncertain.

47 closed and carefully latched the birdcage, taking the moment to consider the branching options ahead of him. Blend in, that was the brief. Always act as you are expected to, until you must do otherwise.

“Yes,” he said with finality. “That would be nice.”

“Red, white, or pink?” She led the way back to the stairs, beginning down them without looking back. “I have a nice red. It’s nothing expensive, but it tastes nice.”

“That sounds- ah,” his phone was buzzing. He didn’t have to look at the screen to know who was calling. “I have to take this,” he said, and turned away from the stairs. “Save it for another time.”

“Sure,” she said, deflating slightly.

“Thank you.” He answered the call, retreating into his room as he put it to his ear. “Diana?” The rest of the conversation faded out of Ava’s hearing range into murmurs.

Ava paused. Ah. Well then. That explained quite a lot, actually. She descended to the kitchen to begin pouring one glass. Well, she thought, it’s better to know early, before I thought of doing something foolish.

Her mood somewhat soured, she took the glass to the couch and placed it on the coffee table at either end. She pulled a blanket up around her, snuggling down into it as she pulled up Netflix to find something worth watching.
The train job

The snowfall was going to affect his shot, 47 thought grimly as the first flakes landed on his coat’s lapel. Nothing he couldn’t handle, of course, but it would need to be accounted for.

Ahead was the compound, sprawling across the rolling desert like a lazy spider waiting for a moth to touch its web. It appeared to be a flat, single-story building, but 47 knew better than that. He had had plenty of time to examine the blueprints on his way here. The compound was built like a tooth, its roots deep into the ground to prevent this from happening. To prevent someone like him from coming to visit.

47 gently put his case on the ground and knelt to open the latches. The brief from Diana had been simple - keep your distance, get one clean shot on the drug lord holed up inside, and get out before anyone started looking for a source. However, now that he had the mission in his sights, it seemed that improvisation was going to be necessary. The drug lord with a big enough price on his head to warrant 47’s attention wouldn’t leave by the exposed front door. Even though the blueprints in his intel packet didn’t indicate the presence of escape tunnels, there was simply no other explanation. The rifle would be no good in close quarters - this would require close-up work. Fiber wire. Remote explosive. Stiletto knife. Nothing to leave behind. Poison? He might as well bring it…

His phone buzzed, and he paused his train of thought to wonder at it. It couldn’t be Diana, she was in his earpiece. He pocketed the weapons and took out the phone. An image had been sent to it.

“Diana, did you send something to my phone?” He asked, then pulled his glove off with his teeth to use the fingerprint unlock pad.

“What?” Her voice sounded confused, both at the question, and its placement during a quite delicate procedure. “Why would I be texting you at a time like this?”

“That’s why I asked.” He unlocked the phone and swiped the screen to bring up the message. A photograph of the canary, huddled up in its nest basket with its eyes squeezed shut, preparing to sleep. Overlaid on the image was a bar with text - ‘See? I told you he missed you. :)’

Diana cleared her throat pointedly when she could tell he hadn’t moved from his location for longer than seemed necessary. This drug lord wasn’t going to eliminate himself. “47? Is everything all right?”

“It’s not important,” he said, quickly sending back ‘This means nothing’ before standing and putting the phone back in his pocket. “I’m going to have to go in. There’s only one entrance and it’s completely exposed.”

“Do you think that’s wise?”

“I don’t have a choice.”

The phone buzzed again, but received no attention. 47’s focus was narrowing, discarding nonvital stimulus as he prepared for the job at hand. Eyes on the compound ahead, he began to make his way down the hill. His best chance, he thought, would be to cause a panic and send his target into the escape tunnels. But where would that be?

He scanned the horizon as he walked. In the distance, train tracks. The tracks ran past the compound at enough of a distance to appear unrelated to someone driving past. Maybe they usually were. Sometimes, he speculated, they were very related. He followed the lines of the rails to a
tunnel under a highway overpass.

Aha.

That would be where the getaway train would be, at least. A switch in the rails, a set leading down into the hill to meet the escape route somewhere below. There, he would capture his fleeing prey.

His steps sped up as he neared the gate, though not out of anxiety. The agency had provided a uniform that matched the security team roaming the compound, as well as a list of shift changes. The last change had occurred approximately five minutes ago. The gate guard would still be resetting the chair height and checking his email, if luck was on 47’s side.

“Can’t stop, I’m running late,” 47 panted, looking to all the world like a man who had sprinted from the parking lot and was now hoping to get to his post before the bosses noticed he was late again. He held up the counterfeit staff badge, putting his head down to gasp for air and obscure his face. “C’mon, I hit traffic!”

“No traffic this far out,” the guard said, not looking up from the computer’s log-in screen. “You’re lucky if I don’t turn you in for fuckin’ around.”

“But I /am/ lucky, right?” 47 put the badge back into his coat and straightened. The man didn’t look up as he pressed the gate open button.

“This time you are,” he said, attempting an ominous tone.

47 nodded by way of thanks, and hurried past the gate. Never underestimate the hunger of a man given a crumb of power, he thought idly as the gate closed behind him. Ask him to do you a favor just this once, and he will happily oblige.

Safely inside the gate, he adopted the stroll of a guard with nowhere particular to go for the next eight hours. Few people looked up from their work, and fewer still showed sustained interest. Only the other security guards looked puzzled at his presence, but he made sure to quickly leave their line of sight before they could formulate an entire suspicion. Eventually, he came across a bathroom. Perfect. He slipped inside, making his way to the end stall and locking it behind him. He removed the remote explosive from its pocket and secured it to the stall wall. A tiny LED indicated it was armed and ready.

Now, to find the tunnel. He crawled out of the stall beneath the locked door, smoothed his jacket, and went on his way unobserved.

The train tracks had been to the north, therefore the escape route would be as well. The first basement level seemed reasonable - too deep would have raised many questions about the need for it, off-the-books workers or not.

47 made his way down a staircase, pausing at a door midway between the first and second basements. Surely it couldn’t be so easy? The door was locked, with a large sign reading “UTILITY TUNNEL, AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY.” This looked like the place. He tried the knob - locked. No matter, that was what lockpicks were for.

Once the door was unlocked, he opened it a crack to look for guards. None. Good. The tunnel stretched out ahead of him long enough that he couldn’t see the end. What he could see, however, was a train.

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The blast shook the walls of the compound, shattering office windows. The drug lord slammed the panic button under his desk, and staggered into the hallway to meet his personal bodyguards. Around them, the manufacturing staff was scattering in all directions.

“What was that?” he demanded as the two guards flanked him to escort him to the escape tunnel’s entrance. “What happened?”

“We don’t know,” one of the men said, “but it was up top. The path should be clear for us here.”

“Good. I want the exit guarded, nobody leaves.”

“Already done,” the guard affirmed, unlocking the tunnel door and hustling the drug lord inside.

“Good.” The drug lord climbed the steps into his private car, waving the bodyguards away. “Go up front, get us out of here.”

There were no visible obstructions on the tracks. The bodyguards moved to the controls and started up the speedy little passenger train. Once they came out of the tunnel and onto the public rail, it would be a smooth ride to the next city. Then they could lie low, count losses, and return when the time was right.

The drug lord poured himself a glass of whiskey from the built-in bar table. He swirled the liquid in the glass as he walked to his chair and reclined to wait out the trip. As he lifted the glass for a triumphant sip, he felt the fiber wire slip around his neck and tighten until his vision went black.

Once the death was confirmed, 47 leaned forward to pluck the whiskey glass out of the man’s limp hand, then pushed him out of the chair to a heap on the floor. He re-coiled the fiber wire and slipped it back into his jacket as he moved to sit in the now vacated chair. It was at least fifteen minutes to the next station, no rush to jump out of a moving luxury car.

He took his phone from his pocket and unlocked it. The same photo from before of the nesting canary, but the frame pulled back to show the full birdcage, and the attic window behind it. A new bar of text across the image.

Ava: What about this?

47 sipped the whiskey as he looked at the image, at a loss for a response. Finally, he pulled up the keyboard panel to begin typing.

47: You think you’re very clever, don’t you?

Ava: Like a velociraptor ambushing a sniper.

A moment of mild panic as he thought of the rifle he’d been storing under his bed, then confusion.

47: What?

Ava: OMG you’ve never seen Jurassic Park?

47: No.

Ava: I’m going to remedy that. When will you be back in town?’

47 finished the whiskey, then made his way to the emergency exit of the train car and wrenched the door open. He glanced back to be sure he hadn’t left anything other than the corpse, then leapt into the tall grass alongside the tracks, tucking his head and rolling to burn the momentum of the
train. Once he had stopped, and was certain he had been unseen, he pulled his phone back out and typed.

47: Tomorrow.
47 closed the cab door and picked up his bags to carry up to the house. There was a light on in the kitchen- unusual for this time of night. His steps slowed, shifting the gun case to his left hand and slowly putting his right into his jacket to touch the fiber wire. It was probably nothing, but that was what every security guard he'd ever eliminated had said as well.

He unlocked the door and opened it a crack, listening for movement. There was an odd humming sound he couldn't place, and an irregular popping. Otherwise, silence. He shouldered the door open, muscles tensed and ready to strike if necessary. “Ava?” He asked, listening closely for any sound of struggle.

Ava’s head popped around the kitchen entrance, a broad smile on her face. “Movie night!”

47 relaxed, letting his hand slip from the garrote. “You're up late.”

“What can I say, I love Jurassic Park.” She ducked back into the kitchen. “Does red or white wine go better with popcorn? I can never keep them straight…”

“White with fish,” he began to recite, putting down his luggage, “red with beef,” shoes in the boot tray, “and bourbon with popcorn.”

“Was that humor?” She looked back at him as he followed her into the kitchen.

“Consider it more of an offer.”

“An offer I can’t refuse, Godfather?”

“What?”

“Oh my God, you’re useless.” She put away the wine glasses and hunted around for some glasses suitable for bourbon.

Skipping over the conversation that had lost him completely, 47 forged ahead. “I have a bottle of 25-year Macallan, if you’re interested. Opened, but stored well.”

She paused in the middle of wiping the dust off of a tumbler with a dishrag, working through his statement. “If… you’re interested, then yes,” she said slowly, suddenly unsure if she was being tested. “Otherwise, I guess red.”

47 turned without a word, and went up to his room to get the bottle out of the closet.

Ava waited for his footsteps to fade, then unlocked her phone and typed the name he had said into the Binny’s website. Yes, that was what she had thought. She put the phone away and looked at the tumbler in her hand. Her $10 bottle of wine may as well have been cat urine next to that, even if it had been stored in a dumpster for 10 years. She should raise his rent, she reflected, if he can afford $1700 bottles of bourbon.

“Here.”

The voice came from directly behind her, much closer than seemed possible without hearing footsteps. She jolted - hadn’t he been two floors away a second ago? - and dropped the glass from her hands. In a flash, he had caught the glass in his free hand and offered it back to her. When she
didn’t take it, still shaken, he opened the bourbon and poured a measure into the glass, then offered it again.

She took the glass with shaky fingers, and gripped it tight in both hands to avoid dropping the same thing twice. “Woah,” she said, duly impressed. “That was… really cool.”

“I didn’t mean to startle you,” he said softly as he poured the second glass for himself.

“It’s not your fault. I guess I wasn’t paying attention.” The microwave beeped, and she opened the door to take out the bag, shaking it to distribute the salt and butter. “Okay, time to party,” she said, and walked to the TV room to curl up on the couch.

Blend in. Maintain cover. Raise no questions. 47 took his glass and the bottle of bourbon, and followed to sit on the remaining couch space. Between them was a mixing bowl, into which she poured the hot popcorn. “Ready?”

“As ready as I ever will be,” he said honestly.

“Good.” She pressed play, then took a handful of popcorn to begin munching piece by piece. “Watch and be enriched.”

---

Not long into the viewing, Ava began to feel that, somehow, she had made the wrong decision in putting on the movie.

Don’t you see the danger, John, inherent in what you’re doing here? Genetic power is the most awesome force the planet’s ever seen, but you wield it like a kid that’s found his dad’s gun.

Beside her, from the corner of her vision Ava could see her boarder’s jaw clenching, muscles working up the side of his face. His expression was otherwise unreadable.

Your scientists were so preoccupied with whether or not they could that they didn’t stop to think of they should.

Ava had stopped watching the movie. She quietly licked popcorn out of her cupped hand, watching 47 with curiosity. She had never seen someone have this kind of reaction to Jurassic Park.

You have plants in this building that are poisonous. You picked them because they look good, but these are aggressive living things that have no idea what century they’re in, and they’ll defend themselves, violently if necessary.

47 stood abruptly, nearly upturning the popcorn bowl. “Ice,” he said, by way of explanation when he caught her expression. “Do you want ice for your drink?”

“Sure,” she said slowly, and let him take the glass from her. She watched him go to the kitchen, wondering what she’d done wrong. Had she done something wrong, or was she just imagining it?

47 stood at the freezer, drawing a deep, slow breath. She didn’t know. She couldn’t know. He had been so careful, his cover had been perfect. And yet… yet here they were, watching people act out an indictment of everything he had been raised to believe. Born to believe. Made to believe. He splashed two ice cubes into his glass, swirled the liquid, then drank it down. The smoky bourbon felt bitter on his tongue.

“Hey.”
Ava was leaning her shoulder against the entrance to the kitchen, empty glass in one hand. Her face was a picture of pure, undisguised concern. Behind her, the movie had been paused. “Are you okay?”

“It’s nothing,” he said, and took two more cubes from the ice tray to drop into her extended glass.

“Geez, I’d hate to see what ‘something’ looks like, then.” She gave a slight smile, not sure what else to do. “Do you want to talk about-”

“No,” he interrupted sharply.

Her smile dropped, and she turned back to the TV room, walking toward the couch. “Come on back, then. You haven’t even seen the dinosaurs yet.”

Reluctantly, he followed.

Ava unpaused the movie, then held out her glass for a refill. “Can I…?”

47 refilled the glass.

They watched in silence, broken only by the sound of Ava crunching popcorn. The characters reached the hatchery, where the baby velociraptor was busy being born. It was too much. All of it was too much.

“It’s just,” he began, deciding that if he started speaking, he could get it over with more quickly. It would be more suspicious to leave it as it was - who knew what she thought when she saw him in the kitchen? His cover needed to stay intact.

“Just…” she prompted softly, looking across at him.

47 cleared his throat. This was difficult terrain to tread, a minefield to navigate. Luckily, he was an accomplished navigator. His explanation didn’t have to flow seamlessly, it just had to hold together at the edges. “My parents…” No, that was the wrong wording, but he was in it now. “They were scientists. They worked on genetics all my life.”

Ava uncurled into a more attentive position, and paused the movie. Somehow, she felt that this deserved her full attention. “…dinosaur genetics?”

“Human.” The mines were closer now, nearly touching as he traversed them. “Early CRISPR work, cutting genes together to cure… humanity.” Again, the wrong wording. Too close. But she didn’t seem to notice.

“Cancer,” she said, then went on when he gave her an odd look. “Nowadays they use it to fight cancer. But… you probably knew that.”

“They worked in embryos,” he said smoothly, feeling more acquainted with his explanation. “They wanted to skip the cure phase, they were trying to… perfect the species.” He noticed he was fidgeting with a piece of popcorn, and put it down. “Anyway, it didn’t work,” he said breezily, feeling the end of the minefield nearing. “I was just… thinking about them is all.” There. He was out.

“Oh.” Ava nodded slowly, turning the conversation over in her mind as her hand drifted to the remote to unpause the movie. Her finger hovered over the button. “Should we watch something
else?"

47 considered the options, and chose what seemed to be the least suspicious, though most painful. “No. Just. Something different next time.”

Ava unpaused the movie and curled back up under her blankets, hiding a slight smile at the admission. Next time. Cool.

---

“I don’t think that’s what chaos theory is.”

“They’re not talking about chaos theory,” Ava said with a slight laugh. “I mean, they are, but they aren’t.”

47 topped off her glass. He had been carefully making sure she was at least a glass ahead of him. Losing faculties was never part of the plan. “I don’t follow.”

“Mm. Okay.” She sat up and put her glass on the table, feeling very sorry for Diana if he didn’t understand what she was getting at. “So, his voice is talking chaos theory, right?” She held out her hands, gesturing for his. “Come on. Nothing weird, I promise, strictly for demonstrative purposes.”

47 reluctantly offered his hand, which she took. “Dr. Malcolm is talking about chaos theory, yes?” She said again, and lifted her free hand to dip a fingertip into his glass of bourbon, drawing out a droplet. “But he’s doing this,” she said, meeting his eyes as she let the droplet fall onto his knuckle and run down the back of his hand to soak into his sleeve. “And as he’s demonstrating that the next droplet won’t fall the same way, he’s doing this.” She cupped her hand under his, bringing the other up to lightly trace an oval on the back of the hand, drawing the remains of the bourbon across his skin.

“And he’s describing,” she said, her voice lowering almost to a whisper and slowing to illustrate her point, “how her skin… and her blood vessels… and the tiny variations they have… affect everything around them in different ways.”

Her eyes were strange, 47 thought. Not drunk, but different. Something new. Something he wasn’t prepared for. The thought of an unknown disturbed him, and he pulled his hand away from hers. In his life in his line of work, there were not supposed to be unknowns. “And?”

Ava sat back, picking up her glass and toasting toward the movie. “And that,” she said, feeling even sorrier for poor Diana, “is flirtation. Which both is and is not chaos theory, if you ask me. And you did, kind of.”

The outline she had traced on his hand seemed to inexplicably burn, like the bourbon had been poured into an open wound. He rubbed it away.

---

The DVD stopped, and switched back to the menu screen. 47 glanced across the couch at Ava, who was curled up under a pile of blankets, sleeping quietly. At some point during the movie, she had wedged her toes under his leg for warmth. Her eyelids fluttered slightly as she, presumably, dreamed. He leaned over her, holding his breath to not disturb her, and took the remote from the arm of the couch to turn off the TV.

“Mm…” she smiled softly as he brushed against her side, then tucked her limbs more tightly against her body. “Bedtime?”
A strange sensation fluttered down his spine, and he straightened up. “The movie’s over. I'm going upstairs.”

She hummed softly. “G'night.”

47 put the glasses and empty popcorn bowl in the sink. He picked up the bottle of bourbon, looking meditatively at Ava’s sleeping form. He turned the bottle in his hands, watching her ribcage slowly rise and fall under the blanket. Complications, he mused. Complications were not acceptable. And yet...

He looked away. He had been awake for too long. Needed to recharge.
“Be careful, 47,” Diana warned, fairly needlessly. “This one isn’t going to be easy.”

“I know.” He swiped his entry ticket at the turnstile and passed through it, past the bored college students manning the entrance. “Client requests accident, no collateral, target is heavily guarded,” he summarized. He glanced at nearby clusters of parents with children - none seemed particularly interested in anything around them. “This place is ripe for an accident,” he added.

Ahead, the centerpiece of the park was a carousel slowly rotating beside a reflecting pond. A roller coaster roared by, spinning its riders into a corkscrew, and zoomed away. A wheel of swings at the ends of long chains picked up speed, making its riders scream and stretch out their hands to each other. “I think it would be more difficult to make it look intentional.”

His pocket buzzed, and he fished out the phone to swipe it open. A photo of a table, with a bottle of wine posed next to a filled glass. Overlaid were three words - ‘You have competition.’ He frowned at the image, zooming in on the glass at the other end of the table, and the decidedly masculine hands holding it.

‘Where are you?’ he typed back, and didn’t have the chance to put the phone away before the answer came.

‘Date.’

Hm. He returned to the photo, examining the scene with a careful eye. The hands were smooth, the nails clean. Desk job. A french cuff was just visible, with a smart silver cufflink. Expensive desk job. Ava’s place setting had three forks, plus a bread plate. Fancy restaurant. He released the zoom, scanning the background. Yes, he knew the restaurant. His thumb hovered over the response bar, hesitating a moment before responding.

‘Order the cherry quail. You won’t regret it.’

“47?” Diana’s voice in his ear cut through his concentration. He realized with a pang of guilt that he hadn’t been listening to her intel brief.

“I’m here,” he said, putting the phone quickly away and forcing himself to focus on the mission at hand.

“Did I just hear you…” she paused, trying to find the most dignified way of asking the question she needed to have answered. “47,” she started again, “are you… texting?”

“No.”

“It’s only… well, I heard a phone text alert, and that ticky tapping noise the keyboard makes.”

“I was not texting.”

Silence at the other end of the earpiece for a moment, then, “of course. There must be some kind of line interference. I will have it looked into immediately.”

“Good.” 47 said, and began his sweep of the park for his target.

---
“Who are you texting?”

“Oops, Sorry.” Ava dropped the phone into her purse and focused her attention on her date. Derek was handsome - brown hair swept across his forehead over hazel eyes, a smooth, easygoing face. “I was just trying to make a friend jealous. He’s at some stuffy trade conference right now, I couldn’t resist.”

“Ah.” He held his wine glass to his lips for a sip. “Did it work?”

“I think so. He must have been here before, I got an entree recommendation.”

“It sounds like you’re very close,” Derek responded, a note of distaste in his voice.”

“Oh,” she said, realizing how it sounded. “It’s not like that, sorry. He’s seeing someone.”

“Ah.” Derek relaxed, smiling brightly. “Good.”

---

The target was indeed well guarded. Throughout the park, he was flanked by two guards that had only left his side when he had been securely on a ride, and they picked him up at the exit platform to continue to the next ride. They waited in every line, like any other visitor, though they were uncommonly short due to the cold weather.

It would have to be done on one of the rides.

47 blended into the line behind his target, looking away as if watching for the rest of his group to arrive. So far so good. His phone buzzed again, and he swiped it open, welcoming the small distraction from his waiting game.

A photo of a dessert menu, surrounded by scribbled red question marks.

47: Tiramisu. It’s the best in the city.

Ava: Thx. ;-*

He stared at the response, trying to parse the symbols. At a loss for meaning, he entered them into the search bar, finding an emoticon dictionary entry. Oh. He switched screens back to the conversation with Ava. The bottle of wine in the background of the last photo looked nearly empty. That explained it.

47: Consider switching to water

At a loss for a better response, he put the phone away. No more distractions.

They were at the front of the line now, a roller coaster that secured passengers with a seatbelt instead of a shoulder harness. This would do. The ride operator motioned them forward, and 47 slipped into the seat beside his target, buckling and unbuckling the seatbelt a few times to get a feel for it. Easy, like an airplane belt. One pull, and it would open.

The roller coaster jolted to a start, and began to climb the first hill. The cars were two seats across, which 47 had carefully managed to make contain him and his target. This would be much easier without having to reach between seats.

“I love these fucking things,” his target said conversationally. “Can’t get enough of them.”
“Adrenaline junkie, eh?” 47 responded, falling into his role.

“Been to every park in the country. Couple of em over and over. Nothing beats a wooden coaster like this girl, though.”

“Oh?” They were halfway up the hill.

“Yep. They don’t go upside down, but they’re the originals. You get a good look at the world from the top. This one’s tall, too, you can see everything. The structure it takes to build these is amazing.

“You can only see the distant hills, I’d imagine,” 47 said conversationally. “You can’t see below you without leaning.”

“Everyone says to keep your arms and legs inside the car, but right before you go over the hill you can lean over and get a good look at everything below you. It’s a hell of a rush, give it a shot. And that’s coming from an expert,” the man said, jerking his thumb at himself.

“I see,” 47 said, feeling the coaster beginning to crest the hill. “Now?”

“Now,” the man affirmed, stretching over the side of the car to look down at the tracks. He continued talking about the construction, pointing, but it was no longer important. 47 caught the lever of his seatbelt, pulling it loose just as they hit the top of the hill and began freefall. Catching the man’s arm, he lifted him easily and helped him over the side of the coaster. The target shrieked and flailed, trying to catch at the wooden beams as he cartwheeled down, crashing against the supports until he came to a crushing landing on the ground below.

The man had very good timing.

---

Ava stopped on the sidewalk outside her house, smiling up at Derek. “Well. This is me.”

“I can see that,” he said, and put a hand on her waist, drawing her closer to him. “It looks nice. All yours?”

“All mine. I mean, partly the bank’s, since I’m still paying the mortgage… but you know what I mean.” She rested her hands on his chest, biting her lip lightly. “I’m going to go inside now,” she said, in a firm tone. “But I would like to see you again. Some other time.”

Derek looked disappointed for a moment, then masked it with a nod and a smile as he released her. “Of course. I’ll text you, we’ll set something up.”

“Okay.” She turned, walking up to the house. “G’night,” she said over her shoulder.

“See you soon.” He said, not moving.

Ava slipped inside and locked the door behind her. He was still out there as she drew the window shades on the way to the kitchen to put away her leftovers. By the time she’d gotten upstairs to shower and get into pajamas, he had gone.
“Did you watch the news this morning?” the technician asked as she opened Ava's surgical packs.

“No, what did I miss?” Ava adjusted the fit of her gloves, then took the instruments from the technician.

“Some big time engineer threw himself off one of the oldest roller coasters in the country.”

“Geez. What happened?”

“They didn't have a lot of details, but apparently from the security camera footage he was leaning out of the car like a dumbass and lost his balance as they went over the first hill. Smashed his shit on everything on the way down, too.”

“Can I get a 10 blade?” Ava asked, and took the blade from the offered packet. “Crazy what people do… never heard of keeping all arms and legs inside the car, I guess.”

“Yeah. The park was almost brought up in negligence charges, but the camera at the loading platform shows them checking his seatbelt, everything was secure.”

“Strange.” Ava began her incision. “Seems stupid for an engineer to take off his seatbelt, he had to know the risk.”

The technician shrugged, peeking under the drape to check the dog’s color. “Sounds like he'd done it before and it never went wrong before. Just got cocky.”

“I guess.” Ava said, letting the dog’s intestine run through her fingers. There was a blockage somewhere, she knew it. She just had to find the spot… aha. A squishy bulge between her fingers.

“There you are, you little bastard,” she said triumphantly. “Let's get you out of there.”

“Maybe it was suicide. He wanted to die in a way that his wife could collect the life insurance.”

“Oh, there out a hit on him for the same reason.” Ava opened the intestine, and drew out a red, lacy thong with a pair of forceps. “Ooh la la.”

“Speaking of wives, hopefully this pup’s mom is missing these, otherwise there's going to be some explaining to do.” The technician held out a bowl to accept the item.

“Yeah, save it to show them. You never know. 3-ought PDS please.”

“Got it. You think the wife took out a hit?”

“Oh, c’mon, we’re not living in a film noir.” Ava said, suturing quickly. “Occam’s razor. The dude was an idiot and fell out of the car. End of news item.”

“Yeah, true.”

Ava finished closing, humming lightly to herself. “There. Let's get this pup back on his feet, and see if his parents are getting a divorce.”

---

The sound of splashing water drew 47 down the stairs earlier than usual. It sounded like an otter
trapped in a washtub, but that seemed unlikely. He peeked into each room before coming to the kitchen, which looked like a bakery had exploded.

Ava stood at the sink washing dishes, her hair clipped back from her face. She wore pajama pants, which were lightly dusted with white powder handprints, and a tank top shirt. Her feet were bare.

47 felt a strange, hollow echo of a life that wasn't his. He shook it off. “What's going on in here?”

“Oh!” She looked up with a smile, and offered a mug of coffee to him. “I couldn't sleep, and I don't work today, so…”

“So…?” He prompted, taking the mug and inhaling the hot steam as he raised it for a sip.

“I thought… pancakes?” She said, the word upturned as though she were asking his opinion.

His gaze traveled past her to the table. A syrup bottle, along with a can of Redi-Whip and a bowl of blueberries were in the middle, separating two place settings. He took another slow drink of the coffee, taking the time to dissect the scene. Her eyes didn't waver from his.

“I haven't eaten pancakes in a very long time,” he said, remembering the mixed lessons from the asylum. A good and correct kill, rewarded by pancakes. An admonishment to stick to the script in the future, and a promise of more rewards if he did. Carrot, stick.

“Not since I left… the…” Careful, he reminded himself. “Since I left home.”

“Home?” She caught the hesitation in his voice.

“Romania,” he supplied, sitting at the table and beginning to pour the syrup. “I grew up in Romania.”

“Are your parents still there?” She asked, trying to tread lightly. He had never mentioned them, and her curiosity was beginning to overtake her discretion. She had begun to think he had sprung, fully formed, from a cave somewhere.

“Ah, no. My parents are deceased. I grew up in an orphanage.” Careful. Keep cover. Control the dialogue. Ask questions to avoid having to answer them. “Yours?”

Ava’s phone buzzed, and she glanced at it before answering. “Deceased. Mom early, when I was five or six. Too young to really know what was happening.”

“And your father?”

“When I was in undergrad, he got sick with some kind of infection that moved really quickly. The doctors said it was a lung thing, but God only knows… he was a career military man, so he’d been to a lot of nasty places to do nasty things in his day. Could have picked up anything.” She waved her fork to dismiss the memory. “Buried with military honors, flag on the casket, the whole bit.”

Ava's phone buzzed again, and she picked it up to read the messages.

Derek: Good morning sunshine :)

Derek: Have you had breakfast yet?

She put the phone back down.

“Other family?”
“Nope. The only child of two only children. The closest thing was my dad’s service buddies. A pack of gruff old men teaching an eleven year old girl how to fire a shotgun. Not sure Mom would have approved, but to Dad it was an important skill.” She picked at her food, trailing her fork in the syrup. “I was totally on my own for bra shopping, but I was an ace at skeet shooting. God, that was a long time ago.”

Derek: There's a place on the north side we could try.

“Not anymore?” 47 asked, filing all of this intel away for later. No family ties. Able to shoot.

“Wouldn't know where to go, and I sold all of his guns when he died. Needed the money for vet school. Someday I'll go again, dust off the old reflexes.”

47 fell silent, thoughts nagging at his mind. “Why did you make these?”

“The… pancakes?” Her fork hovered over the next piece, uncertain. “Do I need a reason? I like pancakes, and had the time to make them today. You came downstairs, so I invited you to have some too.” She speared the chunk of syrupy cake. “They’re just pancakes. Don't read too far into it or anything.”

That was all, then. No motive. Some part of 47 that had been holding its breath slowly eased. He knew he was on edge at the house lately, his insides feeling like an animal pacing its cage. It was foreign and unpleasant.

As if on cue, his phone rang.

“Thank you for breakfast. Excuse me,” he said, pushing his chair back and heading to the staircase before answering. “Diana.” He began, fading out of Ava's earshot as he went.

Ava stood, gathering their plates and taking to them to the sink to wash. She unlocked her phone, skimming the messages from Derek.

Ava: Sorry, got to get some stuff done.

Derek: Are you off work?

Ava: Yes but busy.

Derek: Oh, ok.

Derek: What about tonight?

She put the phone down and continued cleaning. The messages could wait until later.

She heard sliding, shuffling noises upstairs, the telltale sounds of 47 getting ready to leave again. Why there were so many scraping sounds was a mystery, but one that felt somewhat above her pay grade. She did her best to avoid the attic except to dust and vacuum - it seemed like an invasion of privacy to do otherwise.

By the time she had dried and put away the dishes, he was at the bottom of the stairs, duffel bag across his back, long pelican case in one hand, and the canary cage balanced easily in the other.

“I have to go,” he said, as if that wasn't obvious.

“Put him on the coffee table,” she said, wiping her hands on a towel to dry them. “That was sudden.”
“Something came up.”

Ava waited for him to elaborate, then moved on. “Any idea how long this time?”

“No.” He paused, then added “A few days.”

“Okay. Then I'm going to change sheets and stuff, if that's okay with you…?”

“Of course.” He put down the bird cage and went to the door, pausing with his hand on the knob. “I’ll… see you soon.” Before she could answer, he left.

Ava moved to the couch, watching the bird flit around in the cage. She unlocked her phone and scanned through her missed messages.

Ava: I'm free tonight.

Derek: Great. Movie?

Ava: Sounds good.
Ava looked into the cat carrier at her current patient. The rabbit gazed back at her, noisily blowing snot bubbles from its left nostril. She looked past the carrier, at the young couple who had brought it in, and now stood nervously on the other side of the exam table. “Well,” she began, looking back to the rabbit. “I'm pretty sure we both know this little guy has a respiratory infection, right?”

The female owner nodded. “It just started this morning. Do you think…?”

“If it started this morning, I think we have a good chance. He's going to need a lot of close care for the next month or so, though. Antibiotics, Bene-bac, fluid therapy, the whole thing.”

“That's the problem,” the woman said, chewing her lip. “We're going out of the country for Christmas, to visit his aunt,” here she gestured to the male owner, who looked equally nervous, “so I'm… not sure what we can do.”

Ava looked through the rabbit’s medical record. Fairly young, otherwise healthy. Owners had brought it in for regular check-ups. Good owners, she decided, who weren't trying to get out of caring for this animal. “Nobody you can leave her with…?”

“Nobody we could trust.” The woman sounded close to tears now.

“What about a 24-hour hospital?”

“I'm… we're going to be gone for two weeks, I don't think we can afford it.”

“Look…” Ava said, regretting the decision immediately. “If you trust me, we can board her here so she's monitored during the day, and I'll take her home at night for the overnight care. It'll still cost a lot, but much less than an ER would charge you.”

The pair looked at each other, then at the rabbit. “Would you do that?”

“Sure,” Ava said, wanting to kick herself for taking that stupid oath at graduation. “Just once. Don't go telling your friends or anything.”

The grateful couple said their goodbyes to the rabbit, who sneezed on them. Ava moved the carrier to the treatment room and opened the door to get a better look at her new housemate.

The rabbit was an overfed buck named Domino, owing to its all white fur with black patches around its eyes.

“You are so lucky,” she grumbled as she began to pull up a syringe of antibiotic. “You had just better hope your new upstairs neighbor isn't allergic to you.” She gave the injection into its thigh, then rubbed the muscle to reduce the pain. “And that you get through this, because I don't need your parents thinking I killed you.”

The rabbit blew a snot bubble and grunted its teeth together.

Ava put him back in his carrier, then went to the break room to cut a slice from the apple she had brought for lunch and returned to put it in front of him. Domino licked the apple thoughtfully, then began nibbling his treat.

Good. At least she wasn't going to have to tube feed him just yet.
47 moved easily through the gala, unnoticed by the partygoers. Their eyes were on each other, or on the paintings newly on display at the gallery. His target would arrive soon, one of the artists being displayed tonight. The paintings were remarkable, and would surely go up in value after the artist’s untimely demise.

Each painting depicted a dark landscape, which to most angles looked like a solid black canvas. In the right lighting, at the right angle, leviathans in charcoal grey became visible, their eyes pits of darkness behind their jaws. Sea creatures, the artist's statement claimed, imagined after a series of diving trips, deeper than almost anyone else had gone. Creatures coming out of the darkness from all sides, ready to consume the intruder.

It was a shame the man had to die.

47 loitered by the bar, scanning the guests. He slipped his phone from his pocket, surprised to see several missed messages.

Ava: Are you allergic to anything?

Ava: I ask because I have to bring a patient home for overnight care, but if it's going to be a problem then I'll find someone else to take him.

47: I don't have any allergies.

Ava: Great!

A multimedia message loaded next, a photo of a frightened looking rabbit. 47 felt a tightness in his throat, but forced it away.

Ava: Just two weeks. I'll keep him out of your way, he's going in my room.

47 watched the cursor flash for longer than felt comfortable before he replied.

47: Good.

A murmur ran through the crowd of guests as the painter was announced, and applause as he appeared at the door and began greeting the guests.

47: What's wrong with it?

Ava: Snuffles.

47: Snuffles?

Ava: Pasteurellosis. Rabbit disease, fatal if not treated quickly, etc. Etc. Two weeks. I promise.

“47, are you listening?” Diana's voice in his ear, sounding more amused than usual.

“Yes.”

“What did I just say, then?”

Silence.

“As I suspected.” Her voice was smug. “Now, when are you going to introduce me?”
“Hm?”

“To whoever it is that is more interesting than mission briefs.”

“I think this battery is going out, I'll have to get it replaced on my way back to Chicago,” he said, and removed the earpiece to turn it off and put it in his jacket pocket.

The artist was reaching the crescendo of his speech now, raising a glass into the air to call for a toast. 47 moved away from the bar, making his way quietly to the nearest men’s bathroom. Behind him, everyone cheered and drank.

Not long after, the artist stumbled into the bathroom, leaning over the sink to vomit. For a moment he saw a shape behind him in the mirror, then the garrote tightened and he ceased to think about anything at all.
Rabbits and rescues

Ava sat at the end of the bed, Domino in her lap. She tented the skin of his scruff and inserted the needle, then rolled the valve on the IV line open. The saline began its slow drip into the dehydrated rabbit. She gently stroked the growing pocket of saline under the skin, soothing the nervous animal.

“Shhhh,” she hissed through her teeth, which were clench on the top of the saline bag to act as an impromptu IV pole. “S’okay.”

There was a light knock at the door.

“C’min,” she said around the bag.

The doorknob turned, and 47 peeked into the room. “Ava?”

“Mm. Ca’ oo ’old ’is?” She asked, nodding down at the rabbit.

He entered the room, looking warily at the sight in front of him. Doctor. Rabbits. Needles. After a moment of hesitation, he sat down next to her on the bed and took the IV bag from her teeth. “What are you doing?”

“He isn't drinking, so I'm giving him some subcutaneous fluids. It looks weird, but it works great. Hold that up, gravity helps.”

47 raised his arm as instructed. “Ah.”

“I hope he comes out of this okay,” she said softly. “First I've got to get him drinking and eating on his own, though.” She looked up at 47 with a bit of a smile. “You make a good IV pole. The height helps.”

“Thank you,” he said, glancing at her, then away.

“Rabbits are probably my least favorite species, you know?” Ava looked back down at the rabbit. “You look at them funny and they fall over dead.”

“Then why did you bring it here?”

“What, and just let it die at home? No thanks. I'm trying to keep from killing anything that doesn't need to die. Even if it is a rabbit.”

Domino looked sidelong at 47, then sneezed a fan of snot onto the leg of his pants.

“Oh, geez,” Ava closed the IV line, then removed and recapped the needle. “I'm so sorry, hang on.” She picked up the rabbit and put him back in his pen, then grabbed a tissue from her bedside table to clean up the rabbit snot rocket.

“It's… it's fine,” he said, trying to take the tissue from her so she would stop touching him. “I have it.”

She relinquished the tissue and went back to the rabbit's cage to put a few cubes of Timothy hay inside. “Eat those,” she said sternly to Domino. “Doctor's orders, okay?”

Domino twitched his nose at her.
She looked back at 47, who crumpled the tissue and lofted it expertly into a nearby trashcan. “Good throw.”

“Hm?” He looked up at her, unaware of what he had done of note.

“Since you're here….” she said slowly, fiddling with the cage latch. “I have to give him an injection at about 8 o’clock if you'll be around…?”

“I will be.”

“I promise I'll point him toward me next time. I just need someone to hold him still for me. Have you held a rabbit before?”

“Yes.”

“That'll make it even easier.” She smiled at 47, lightly touching his shoulder a moment as she moved to sit on the bed again. “Thank you. I don't know what I'd do without you.”

“You'd find someone else,” he said, then suspected that was the wrong answer from the way her expression changed, the smile fading.

“Well,” she said and got up to leave the bedroom. “Since I do have you, do you want to watch a movie?”

“My choice this time,” he bargained, following her to the hallway.

“That's fair. What are we watching?”

47 considered it a moment, flicking through his mental catalogue. “Have you seen The Third Man?”

---

In Italy for 30 years under the Borgias they had warfare, terror, murder, and bloodshed, but they produced Michaelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and the Renaissance. In Switzerland they had brotherly love - they had 500 years of democracy and peace, and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock.

Ava squeaked and curled her limbs closer to herself, watching the screen with rapt attention. The popcorn had been forgotten as the plot of the film had gained traction. She tucked the blanket up under her chin, full of anxious energy as the movie’s climactic chase began.

The doorbell rang. Ava did not glance up.

“Oh my God,” she whispered, bouncing slightly in place. “Oh my God, why have I never seen this movie before.”

“It’s pretty old,” 47 said, glancing at her. “And nothing like Jurassic Park.”

“Shush.”

The doorbell rang again, more insistently. The person on the other side of it was not giving up.

Finally, 47 reached across the couch and pressed pause on the remote. “The doorbell,” he said when she shot him a look.
“Oh.” Ava unfolded herself from the blanket mound and made her way to the door, which was now being knocked on furiously. “Hang on, hang on…” she muttered as she undid the locks and opened the door. “Derek?”

He stood on the porch, hand raised to continue knocking if she didn’t answer. “His expression was one of concern mixed with anger. “You weren’t answering my texts,” he said accusingly.

“I… what?” she began, feeling her own irritation beginning to rise.

“I was texting you,” he went on, “and you weren’t responding.”

“I’m watching a movie! My phone is muted. Besides, it’s not like we had plans tonight that I missed, why are you here?”

“I was worried.”

“Thanks, but I’m an adult. I don’t need to be checked up on like a child.”

“I was worried.” He said again, as though that explained everything. “And then I got here and the lights were all off, so I tried the bell but you weren’t answering…”

Ava put up a hand to stop him, opening her mouth to respond. Derek grabbed her wrist and twisted her arm up, pulling her onto the porch with him.

“Derek,” she said, speaking evenly, “Let go of me.”

“Why are you mad? I thought something might have happened to you. I was worried, Ava. You should want someone who worries about you when you don’t call them back.”

“I asked you once,” she said, and dispensed with the pleasantries. She caught his pinky finger with her free hand, pulling it back until she heard a pop as he let go of her wrist. He swore, then pushed his hands against her shoulders to shove her backward, away from him.

Ava felt herself falling, aware that there was nothing close enough to her to grab onto for balance. Then, just as she’d made her peace with either a broken wrist from landing badly or brain damage, an arm caught around her shoulders. She looked up.

Derek’s expression told her everything she needed to know. His eyes had gone wide, but still full of anger as he looked above her.

She felt 47’s other arm slip around her waist, pulling her upright and drawing her back into the house and against his side, shielding her from her attacker.

The two men stared at each other for a moment as Derek weighed his options.

“Leave.” 47 said. “I won’t ask again.”

Derek complied, storming down the front path and back to his car.

The arm around Ava’s waist loosened and released her. 47 stepped away, turning to return to the TV room without a word.

“I… w-wait,” Ava said, closing and locking the door before following after him. “Hey hang on.”

47 turned to look at her. “What?”
She moved close, wrapping her arms around him and pressing her cheek to his chest. Her hands lay flat on the backs of his shoulders. 47 froze, finding no precedent in his memory for how to handle this. After just a moment, Ava released him and stepped back. “Thank you. That’s all I wanted to say.”

“You’re… welcome,” he said awkwardly, not sure if he was allowed to go back to the movie yet.

“Okay.” She ran a hand through her hair, trying to push away the adrenaline that was still making her tremble. “Now, let’s finish the movie.”

They returned to the couch and unpaused the DVD. Ava stretched out on her half of the couch, snuggling up under her pile of blankets again. After a few minutes, she slid her feet against his side to tuck her toes under his leg. He glanced down at them, then back to the movie. His hand moved to draw the blanket around her feet, tucking it in at the sides.

This was all wrong, he thought. His mind, accustomed as it was to connecting behaviors and memories like links in a steel chain, agreed. First it had been the rabbit at the asylum, then the mouse, and the first canary. Personal interest leads to death. Then Father Vittorio. Personal interest leads to others’ pain. Proximity breeds familiarity, which breeds tragedy.

Despite this compelling argument to himself, he didn’t move. Even when the closing credits had ended and the DVD defaulted to the title screen, he and he was certain Ava had fallen asleep from the change in her breathing pattern. 47 tilted his head back against the couch cushion, closing his eyes. He had slept in worse positions, he reasoned, and drifted off until finally she stirred.

“Mm,” Ava felt her phone buzzing against her side. “Time for rabbit meds.” She rolled sideways off the couch and tossed the blankets back onto it.

47 nodded and stood. “Okay. Let me know what you need.”

She led him back to her bedroom, opening a small tackle box next to Domino's cage. “He has to get an injection in the muscle, right about here,” she said, demonstrating by pointing at her own back. “In his epaxial muscles. So all I need you to do…” she removed the rabbit from his pen, demonstrating the way to hold him properly. “You tuck his head between your side and elbow so he can't see, and squeeze him against you so he can't kick when I stick him. Clear?”

“Clear.” He took the rabbit, looking into its eyes a moment before sticking its head under his arm. “Like this.”

“Perfect.” Ava opened a sterile syringe and cracked an ampule to draw the liquid inside into the syringe. She tossed the broken ampule into the garbage, and turned the syringe needle-up to tap the air out of the barrel. “Now talk to him, something soothing.”

“I'm not talking to him,” 47 said, but stroked the rabbit as well as he could as she pulled the needle cap off with her teeth and chewed on it as she felt for the correct injection site.

“C’mon, it helps,” she said, finding her mark and inserting the needle to begin injecting.

“Everything's fine, it's almost over.” He said, fairly certain it didn't sound soothing at all. However, the rabbit didn't move.

“Annnd done.” She finished injecting and removed the needle. “Good boy, Domino,” she said, rubbing the injection site as she leaned to drop the syringe into a small red sharps container. “Good boy.”
47 relaxed his grip on the rabbit, which began kicking almost immediately. He put it back into the pen and latched the door.

“That wasn't hard,” he said, watching as the rabbit began grooming all the spots a filthy human had touched.

“I didn't say it was hard,” Ava defended, “it's just easier with two people doing it.”

“He didn't move at all.”

“Which one of us has an advanced degree in rabbits, hmm?” Ava began putting the injection supplies back into the tackle box.

“I suppose.”

“Are you... teasing me?” She asked, looking a bit surprised when the thought clicked together in her mind. “You're teasing me.”

“No more than you deserve.”

“Mean.” She gave a slight pout, then turned to look back into the rabbit pen. “Well, you are relieved of duty until tomorrow. Hopefully he eats, or tomorrow he's getting a tube down his nose.”

“Why a tube?”

“A rabbit that doesn't eat is a rabbit that's going to die. They can go into gut stasis really quickly. He ate a piece of apple at work yesterday, but that was all. Gotta get more into him to keep his guts working.

47 nodded, and moved to leave. “Good night then, Ava,” he said, and closed her door behind him. He could still feel the rabbit in his arms, its heart going much too quickly and its bones far too thin. Not a very well evolved species, and yet here they were.

He went up to his room, undressing and laying his clothes over the chair. He pulled back the bedsheets and climbed under them to sleep.
47 was awoken by light tapping on the handrail at the bottom of the stairs. At first it seemed like part of a dream, but after a moment it started again. Tap tap tap. Tap tap tap. He sat up, slowly reaching for the handguns tucked behind the bed.

“Ava?” he asked, closing his fingers around a handgrip. “Is that you?”

“Yes,” she said, sounding a bit embarrassed. “Um… Did I wake you?”

He released the gun, pushing it back into place behind the bed. “Yes. What do you need?”

She paused, then, “I can’t sleep. I just keep thinking of… it’s stupid. Sorry. I’ll go back to bed.”

“No,” he said, climbing out of bed and going to the top of the stairs to look down at her. She was wrapped in blankets, and clutching two pillows under her arm. The pieces fell together in his mind — that, after the earlier events, every shadow in her room felt like it was hiding an intruder - and he motioned her upstairs. “Come on up.”

She nodded, lifting the blankets to climb the staircase. “Thanks,” she said. “Just tonight. I promise.” She tossed the pillows down, then the blankets, making a makeshift bed on the floor. Finally, she wrapped herself in the remaining blanket and lay down, curled up to the pillows.

“You don’t have to sleep down there,” he said, still watching her from the top of the stairs. “You can sleep on the bed if it would make you more comfortable.

“I’m okay here,” she said, already beginning to drop off to sleep. “Don’t want to make Diana jealous,” she said softly, eyes fluttering closed.

47 stared, wondering if he had misheard her. What did she know? How did she know? Surely he had misheard her. He moved to the bed to get back in, laying on his side to look at her sleeping on the floor. He had been careful. She must have already been asleep, dreaming something strange.

Yes. That seemed the most reasonable explanation. He turned onto his back, looking up at the peaked ceiling. It wasn’t possible for it to be anything else. Slowly, sleep returned to him.

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Ava awoke with a brief moment of panic, not recognizing her location. She lifted her head, looking around the room. By the window, the canary was singing his morning routine. The bed against the wall was carefully made, looking as though it had never been slept in at all. She pushed herself upright, feeling the aches and crackles that accompanied sleeping on a wood floor.

The anxiety of last night had passed, luckily. The way Derek had looked as he left had made her convinced he was going to come back, though she had no idea why. If he hadn’t come back yet, though, she was in the clear.

She climbed to her feet, gathering up her bedding to bring back downstairs. Domino was going to need his morning coercion soon, she remembered, and her own stomach was beginning to rumble.

Ava made her way down the stairs to the landing, and paused. Her bedroom door was closed. It had not been closed last night when she left it. She gently put down the bundle of blankets and moved to the door to listen.
Nothing.

She turned the doorknob slowly, pushing the door open and entering as quietly as she could.

47 was sitting cross-legged on the bed, Domino wrapped in a towel on his lap. He looked up as she came in, trying not to move too quickly and startle the animal. “You slept through your alarm.”

“Oh.” She took in the sight before her. 47 was holding a section of banana, which the rabbit was eagerly eating. His other hand was resting on the rabbit's back, holding the towel tightly around it like a straightjacket.

“I turned it off, you looked tired.” He looked back down at the rabbit, uncomfortable with the look on her face. “But the alert said 'Feed Domino.'”

“... banana?” She asked, unable to form a more complete question.

“Rabbits like banana.”

“How did you…?”

“You've never given a rabbit banana?”

“I... no, of course not.”

“You should. It goes over well.” Domino had finished the treat and was licking the remaining morsels off of his muzzle. “And they like to be secure.” He added, motioning to the towel.

“I know that,” she protested. “I have a degree in knowing that.”

47 gave her an even look for a moment, as if to ask why she hadn't done it first, then.

“...look,” she said, moving to sit next to him. “I'm grateful, I promise. Really. I'm just so, so angry at you for thinking of it first.” She gave a slight laugh. “And stunned that you did.”

“I had a pet rabbit for a while,” he said, thinking each word over as he spoke. “At the orphanage.”

“Mm. What was its name?”

“I didn't name it.”

“Oh. Didn't have it very long?”

“Two years.”

“And you didn't name it?”

“Why would I give it a name? What benefit would there be?” He asked, a bit irritably, then reined himself back in. She didn't know she was probing a deep wound, like a dental drill into an unanesthetized nerve root.

Ava drew back her hand from the animal, looking up at him. “Okay, I feel like I've missed something important here, are we in a fight about something I wasn't here for?”

47 looked back at her a moment, then away. “It had escaped from the genetic testing lab, so it had an ID number tattooed on its ear instead of a name. I don't remember the number. I found it wandering outside and took care of it in my room.”
“It escaped from the genetics lab… at your orphanage?” She asked slowly, making sure she had all of the words correct.

“Yes.” He said tersely, his jaw tightening. He needed a reason to leave. If the building could catch fire at this moment, he thought, it would be a relief. Short of such divine intervention, he wished Diana would call with a new job in Morocco, Siberia, or anywhere other than this house at this moment. Neither opportunity revealed itself.

Genetics lab at an orphanage? Was it just the rabbits, or was there more to it? From the stony expression on his face, she suspected she knew the answer to that one. If that was the case… she remembered his reaction to Jurassic Park with a stab of guilt. Oh God. It made so much more sense.

“I had a hamster when I was five,” she said, looking carefully at only the rabbit. “I named him Prince Terrian. I can’t remember why. Anyway, he had some kind of seizure disorder and died after about 6 months.” she trailed off, not sure this was helping. “Caring for a pet by yourself for two years is good for a kid. Hell, two years is good for most adults in my experience.” She patted Domino’s side lightly. “We should all hope to be so well cared for, eh?”

The knot of tension began to release in 47’s chest. The room no longer seemed to be folding in around him, choking off escape. He stroked the rabbit's head lightly with his thumb. “I agree.”

“Rabbits especially. You sneeze in their presence and they fall over dead.”

“I imagine.” He stood to return the rabbit to its pen, latching the cage door.

Ave gently took the towel from his hand to put in a nearby laundry basket. “Thank you for all of this,” she said, gently touching his arm. “Really.”

“Of course.”

“But now I need breakfast.” She smiled. “Do you want something?”

“Yes, I think so.” He followed her downstairs, the remainder of the tension fading. “I haven’t eaten yet either.”

“Good. Sit.” She pointed at the kitchen table as she passed it. “I'll cook, you sit.”

47 sat obediently. His mind was running like grains of sand through a sieve. He watched her move around the room, gathering ingredients to make french toast.

“Who were you cooking for before?” He asked, noting the change in her demeanor at the question. Her shoulders tensed, hand tightening on the spatula.

“I had a dog that was very sick,” she said, and began to mix the batter. “She was my dad's before he passed, a big shepherd named Lady. She was allergic to just about everything, so I had to cook special food for her. Every morning and night.”

She dropped the first slice onto the griddle, which made a satisfying sizzle. “She passed a couple of months before you started renting, and it felt wrong to knock around here alone.” She flipped the slice of toast. “I felt safe with her barking at anyone who came to the door, but without her… hence the ad in the paper.”

47 nodded, mulling that over. “I see.”
“So, that’s me.” she smiled a bit, placing a plate of french toast in front of him. “And you’re my replacement German shepherd.”

Against all expectation of himself, he found himself warming to the metaphor.
“Your next patient is in room 3,” the technician said, holding out a clipboard.

Ava took it and began flipping through the cat’s medical history. “I can't see this patient. You're going to have to give it to someone else.”

“The owner requested you as his doctor, said he'd gotten a referral.”

“I'm sure he did request me, but I'm not going in that room.” Ava said, voice rising as anxiety set in. She pushed the clipboard back into the tech’s hand.

“Oh okay…” the tech said, confused. “Want to tell me what's going on?”

“I… may have broken the owner's pinky finger about a week ago.”

“What!?”

“Not for sure, it just… popped a little.” Ava mimed stretching a finger backward.

“But-”

“Look. I went on two dates with him, he made it super creepy and showed up on my porch when I didn't answer his texts fast enough, and he kind of grabbed me and I kind of may have broken his finger.”

Silence.

“I'll get Dr. Davis to see his cat.”

“Thank you. Oh, and see if his left pinky is splinted.”

The tech nodded and hurried off. Ava sat back down at her desk, drumming her fingers as she waited for the anxiety to leave again. After a week, she'd thought she was rid of him. After how he had left, she'd been certain of it. Now here he was, knowing where she worked. Could find out her work hours. Could wait until she was walking to her car.

Finally, she picked up her phone.

Ava: You're a terrible German Shepherd.

---

47 glanced at the phone as it buzzed beside him, then back down the scope of his rifle. Focus on the mission, he reminded himself. It had never been difficult to do before, and there was no reason it should be difficult now. He waited for his target to appear. The car should be coming up the path any minute now, if the intel was correct. It usually was.

“Your mysterious lady friend?” Diana asked, her voice teasing.

47 didn't respond.

---
Ava stood in the treatment room as Derek paid for his cat’s exam at the front desk. She was out of his view, but almost anywhere in the county would be too close for comfort right now. The technician had updated her on the situation after the exam had finished - he had been disappointed to see Dr. Davis, but understood that Ava had been busy and said he would catch up with her another time. Fuck.

She moved to the exotics ward to check on Domino, who had been eating things other than bananas for a few days now. His case of snuffles was much less snuffly than when he had first come into her custody, which was also good. The little guy looked like he was going to make it after all.

“Hey buddy,” she said, opening the cage door to pet his nose. “How’re you feeling? Good? Ready to see your mama and daddy on Friday?”

Domino twitched his nose at her in response, then thumped his leg.

Ava drew back in deference to his anxious thumping. “See, this is why I don't like rabbits,” she complained to him. “You're all fluffy and chubby and cute, but you don't want anyone touching you. That's not a pet, that's an… an angry pregnant woman.”

Apparently offended by this, Domino hopped to his litter tray to urinate.

“Same to you, then.” She scooped some alfalfa pellets into his bowl, which he moved eagerly to eat. On a whim, she took out her phone and snapped a picture of him, face in the bowl. She sent it to his owners with an excited caption about his progress. Almost immediately, they responded with equal enthusiasm.

Another text came through not long after.

47: What?

Ava: Never mind. Look who's feeling better.

She sent the photo of Domino.

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47 was packing up the rifle when the photo arrived, and he swiped it open, then quickly closed again, as though he might be caught looking at a photo of a rabbit. In the next building there was chaos as the target was discovered dead, slumped over his desk.

“I've had another contract come through for you, 47,” Diana said in his earpiece. “A bit of excitement, actually.”

“Excitement?” He echoed, closing the pelican case and locking the latches.

“Yes. This Saturday, a man named Eric Armstrong and a woman named Elizabeth Hanson will be attending a play…” she was looking through the contract as she spoke. “Ah, at the Chicago Theater. The Ballad of Sweeney Todd, very precious of our dear client.”

“Both of them?”

“Yes. Mr. Armstrong's wife was very clear about that. Ah, Ms. Hanson is to be eliminated first, and ideally Mr. Armstrong will discover Ms. Hanson's body before he is eliminated.” Diana paused. “Though she was willing to bend on the order if it becomes necessary.”
“This Saturday?” He confirmed as he made his way out of the partially constructed office building and into an alley.

“Yes. Your ticket to the show will be waiting at the Will Call booth, the name will be- oh, how embarrassing, I've ordered two tickets instead of one, damn this new computer.”

“I don't need two.” he stopped at the mouth of the alley. Suddenly he had the feeling of someone lazing on a surfboard who has just spotted a fin cutting through the waves.

“It's done now,” she said breezily. “I suppose you'll have to find someone for the other ticket, it would look strange to pick up two and only use one.”

“Don't do this.”

“Happy hunting!”

The line went dead.
47 paid the driver and took his luggage from the trunk, then made his way up the front steps to unlock the door. He could hear Ava inside, and the various clangs and thumps that indicated she was trying to decide what she wanted for dinner based on the contents of the fridge and the most accessible vessels. Still, he opened the door a crack to confirm it was her by her “welcome back” call from the kitchen, then entered the house and locked the door behind him.

Shoes in the tray. Suitcases upstairs. He put the bags down on the bed and began the now-familiar circuit of looking for changes in the room. Corners. Window frames. Above, below, and behind every stick of furniture. Finally, he pulled the chair to the middle of the room to closely examine the fan.

“I just dusted up there yesterday,” Ava said from the top step, rubbing her hands in a washcloth. “Pinky promise.”

“Ah, I wasn’t-” he began, slightly startled, but realized he had no less-suspicious motive for what he was doing than looking for dust accumulation. Instead, being reasonably certain everything was as he’d left it, he stepped down from the chair and moved it back to its spot by the bed. “I can see that.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to spook you,” she said, staying where she was. “I was just coming up to tell you there will be shrimp risotto in the kitchen in about an hour if you haven’t eaten yet.”

“Of course. Thank you.”

She nodded and headed back downstairs.

Once she was safely out of sight and busy elsewhere, he turned back to his security rituals and preparation for the mission on Saturday. The Chicago Theater. Two targets, presumably together in a private mezzanine box. The woman was to die first, the man once he knew what had happened to his mistress. Once the cheater felt the loss of the one he loved - or said he did. Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, nor hell a fury like a woman scorned, he mused, reviewing his information from Diana. Sometimes poets were more correct than they knew.

The tickets. He remembered them in a flash, and they complications Diana had tied them up in. 47 resented the implication that he needed further cover than he could already provide for himself, though he could hear the justification already. Nobody goes to a musical alone, or at least nobody that isn’t up to something peculiar. As a person who was indeed up to something peculiar, he didn’t need to risk drawing that kind of attention. It might go fine, unobserved. But his absence from a single seat would be more obvious than his absence as part of a pair. If she wasn’t suspicious, their neighbors wouldn’t be, either.

She? He surprised himself at his own choice of wording. Was he not even going to consider other options, few and far between as they might be? Very few, he reminded himself, short of quickly hiring a friendly contact and flying them to Chicago for three hours. A logistical nightmare, and he knew Diana knew that as well. Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, nor hell a fury like a woman scorned, he mused, reviewing his information from Diana. Sometimes poets were more correct than they knew.

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Plates and cutlery were being moved around downstairs, and the scent of risotto had reached him. Hunger began to draw his attention away from his preparations and he rose to make his way down to the kitchen.
Ava held out a plate to him. “Successful conference?”

“Thank you. Yes. Everything went as smoothly as could be expected.” He began loading his plate. “Though one unusual thing did happen,” he said, forcing the words out before they could escape.

“Oh?” She sat at the table with her food and a glass of water, watching him with interest.

“A client offered me a pair of theater tickets for Saturday night.” He glanced at her as he said it, waiting for some sign of suspicion to appear.

“Which show?”

“Sweeney Todd, at the Chicago Theater. First balcony, I believe.”

“I'm jealous!” She said, looking up from her plate. “That was one of the first shows I wanted to see. Before the Johnny Depp movie came out, mind. You're going to love it.”

“I was actually...” he was in the home stretch now, all that was left was the hardest part. “Wondering if you wanted to accompany me. I have two tickets, after all.”

She stared at him a moment, long enough that he began to wonder if he'd said something wrong. Then, “I mean, I guess it's not my business but why aren't you taking Diana?”

“Diana?” He asked sharply, tension rising. “What do you mean?”

“She's your girlfriend, isn't she?” Ava asked meekly, now also convinced she'd made a misstep.

47 eased. Ah. Puzzle pieces fell into place in his mind. That was what she had meant before. “Oh, no, she's my administrative assistant,” he said, the words coming much more easily now. “I can see why you may have thought…”

“Oh my God, I'm so embarrassed,” she said, clasping her hands over her face as she gave a nervous laugh. “I'm so sorry, you're just always on the phone with her…”

“No, no, I understand completely. We've worked together for years, but there's nothing like… that.” The mere idea was inconceivable.

“I feel ridiculous now.”

“Then I suppose you'll have to make it up to me,” he said, spotting his opportunity. “By accompanying me to the theater on Saturday.”

“I… can do that,” she said, embarrassment still burning through her. “Dress and heels, I assume?”

“Yes.”

“Cool. I don’t get many opportunities to dress up, it'll be nice. Oh, before I forget - Domino’s owners are coming home on Friday, and will be picking him up from work. So, say any goodbyes you want to say before I leave for work with him Friday morning.”

“Has it already been two weeks?”

“Yep. Time flies when you’re not tube feeding every four hours. Cute little bastard is going home to piss off his rightful owners now.” She glanced up at him. “They’re very grateful to you for getting him to start eating on his own.”
“I didn’t do anything special.”

“His owners and I respectfully disagree. Though now they know he likes bananas, in case he has another flare up.”

“You did all of the medical care.”

“Can you please just take the compliment?” She laughed, picking up her plate to take to the sink and wash. “You’re impossible to please, I swear.”

47 went quiet, finishing eating and getting up to do the same. “Then… you’re welcome.” He said finally, taking a dish towel to dry the plates as she put them in the strainer.

“Thank you.”

They fell into silence as they washed the dishes. 47’s mind drifted back to the upcoming mission - preparations would be complicated. With the addition of Ava-as-liability, he had to be certain that everything went as planned. Getting into unexpected combat with security guards or his targets would be difficult to explain away afterward, as well as finding a reason to not go to the hospital to treat any injuries he sustained. He would heal fine, of course, genetics would take care of that, but how could he explain that to a panicked civilian? There was no reason to involve her any more than Diana already had, and he sought to keep it that way.

The targets would be in a box in the mezzanine, allegedly by themselves. Too early in the show and they would be discovered before the end - normally not a problem, but he doubted he could convince Ava to leave at intermission if something went wrong. She might do it, but it would be suspicious. Too late in the show and he risked missing them entirely - a professional failure that he couldn’t allow.

“Are you expecting someone?” he asked abruptly, focusing on the street outside the window.

“What?” she handed him the next utensil.

“The car across the street.” He nodded at the window. “Your… admirer from last week.”

Ava looked up, her veins suddenly full of ice. “What?”

“What was his name… Derek? That’s his car.”

“It… it could be anyone’s.”

“Anyone with the same license plate number and scrape mark on the driver’s side door, certainly.”

“Oh, shit,” she hissed, leaning on the edge of the sink. “I… He came into my work this morning with his cat, requested to see me specifically…”

“You didn’t see him, did you?”

“Of course not, I’m not stupid, I had one of the other vets take the appointment and I hid in the treatment room with Domino. But…” she paused, debating on how much to say.

“But…?” he prompted, voice softer, more curious than usual to draw out the story.

“He told the technician to tell me he’d catch up with me later.” She admitted. “I had someone walk me to my car and make sure I got out safely, all the things they teach you to do… but I didn’t think he was serious about it, not really.”
“Not until he parked across the street, where he appears to have been for some time.”

“Right.”

47 dropped the dish towel onto the counter and stepped back. “I’ll take care of it.”

“What? No!” She turned to him, looking panicked.

“Why not?”

“You could be hurt! I don’t know what he’s here for, or what he’s capable of… he might have a weapon or something, I don’t know.”

“I’ll be fine. Don’t worry.”

“That’s what people say two minutes before they get stabbed in the fucking chest.”

“He’s not going to stab anyone. I’ll make sure of that.”

She searched his expression for any hint as to what was about to happen, and came up empty. She relented. “Okay, but… be careful, yeah?”

“Of course.” He went to the front hall to take his coat and gloves, buttoning up for the cold wind outside. “I’ll just be a minute.”

Ava nodded, and moved back to the kitchen window to peek outside. She held her phone in her hand, ready to call the police if something went badly. She watched as 47 made his way calmly down the path, in no hurry to get anywhere. He crossed the street, making his way to Derek’s car and rapping his knuckles on the closed window. The window rolled down, and the two men appeared to speak intensely for the longest minute Ava had ever experienced. At the end, 47 nodded, looking pleased, and tapped the roof of the car in a casual goodbye before turning to walk back up to the house. What little she could see of Derek’s face inside the car looked stunned and angry. He rolled the window back up, started the car, and drove away.

“What did you say to him?” she asked, once 47 had come back inside and taken off his coat.

“I… explained that you weren’t interested,” he said, choosing to leave the majority of the conversation unsaid for now. “And I suggested he find somewhere else to park his car tonight.” There was no reason to tell her the various locations he had offered to help Derek park it, most of them under either water or a construction site. “I believe he understood, and chose to leave quietly. That was all.”

Ava smiled slightly, feeling fairly capable of filling in the gaps in the conversation on her own. “Well. I guess you make a decent German Shepherd after all.”

“If he thinks my bark is bad…” 47 began, feeling strangely pleased with himself.

“Hopefully he’s never going to find out. I certainly wouldn’t.” She stepped back, turning back to the kitchen. “Now I’m going to finish the dishes, then go make sure my dress still fits. I hope I don’t have to get a new one before Saturday.”

“If you do, let me know.”

She gave him a sidelong look, not sure exactly what that meant. Was he offering to purchase? Was he going to take back his offer? She hoped she wouldn’t have to find out - either option seemed
uncomfortable. “I will.”

“Good.” 47 nodded, then looked at the staircase. “I’m going to finish unpacking. Thank you for dinner.”

“Thank you for chasing away that creeper.”

“Bark bark.” he said, then began up the steps to his room.
47 tied his classic red tie without a mirror, so practiced that he knew it looked correct without a reference. This was the easy thing about missions at fancy parties and exotic venues - a suit fit in without question at any of them. Contracts found at beach vacation resorts and ski lodges, those were more difficult to prepare.

Dressed and well-creased, he descended the stairs to the landing, and knocked on Ava’s bedroom door. “We should leave soon. Are you ready?”

“Just a minute. Meet you downstairs.”

He went down to the coat closet, grateful for the moment to examine his gear, and make sure he had everything he would need for this contract. No ballistics. This would have to be all close-up magic. Fiber wire, poisons, knife in case things get difficult. That was all.

“Oh.” her voice came from behind him, and he tucked the last item into the pocket before turning to look at her. He tipped his head slightly to one side, taking in her changed appearance. She wore a red dress, closely tailored in the bodice and flaring into a full knee-length skirt at the waist. Her hair had been pinned back behind her ears and her facial expression was nervous, shy. She absently spun the bracelet on her wrist - not diamond, but enough shine to make up the difference.

“Tell me I look pretty,” she blurted, then looked embarrassed at the request.

“You look pretty,” he echoed reflexively, stepping closer as his eye for style took over. He lightly lifted the black shawl from her bare shoulder, sweeping his gaze across the red fabric. “This isn’t off a rack, is it?” It wasn’t a question, he knew the answer already.

“No,” she said, turning her head to watch him as he examined her. His expression had barely changed, but she could see the interest growing there. “It was for an event about a year ago, I couldn’t find anything that looked right on me, so… I went custom.” Part of her assumed he was making sure she looked well enough to accompany him - after all, he dressed smartly every day, and she was usually either in surgical scrubs or pajama sets.

“I can tell,” he said appreciatively, fingertips feather-light as they trailed up the concealed zipper between her shoulder blades. A very good tailor had done it, perhaps one in one of the more expensive districts of the city. He would have to find out later where she had gotten it done, and if they did men’s suits as well…

The other part of Ava, the part that tingled pleasantly at his touch, had begun to suspect he was flirting with her. Very inexpertly flirting, she conceded, but you couldn’t have everything. As he came around her other side she looked up at him, unsure what she should say to him. Had she been missing signals since she had thought he was taken, or were they new? Impossible to tell now.

“It fits you well,” he concluded. “Very nice.”

“Thank you,” she said, not knowing what else she could possibly say at this point. “We… should probably get going.”

“Of course.” He took her car keys off the hook by the door. “Do you trust me to drive?”

“Yes.” She picked up her phone and wallet, putting them in nearly invisible pockets on either side
They drove mostly in quiet, Ava with her head tipped against the window, watching the city lights pass, and 47 planning the contracts in his mind. He knew the venue, had examined the blueprints. The mezzanine was readily accessible, and would not be guarded by ushers once the performance was underway. Once everyone was settled, there would be no tickets to check or seats to point out. He could slip away, under the guise of visiting the bar, or the bathroom, and find his quarries unobserved. He could find an usher outfit to arouse even less suspicion, if necessary. It would be dark - nobody would look too closely at his face if he had the right clothes. Two kills confirmed, then back to his suit, and his seat, and he could finish the performance much richer and without any connection to the deaths. They would be found when the ushers were cleaning up after the performance, dead in their box seats. Easy. Clean. Simple.

At some point, he realized Ava had been asking him a question. “Hm? Sorry, I was on autopilot.”

“I was just wondering why your client gave you tickets to the show. It seems like an odd gift.”

“She was planning to use them herself, along with her husband, but there were some… unexpected complications in their plans and they had to cancel. They happened to know I also live in Chicago, and would be more than happy to take the tickets off their hands.”

“Lucky.”

“Very.”

“Thank your client for me when you see her next.” She put her head back against the window. “I told everyone at work I was coming, they’re all jealous.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. We may have sung a round of ‘God That’s Good’ during surgery, but I would deny it in a court of law.”

“Not ‘A Little Priest’?”

“Not when I’m wrist-deep in a dog’s guts. Seems insensitive somehow.” She pointed out the windshield. “There’s the parking garage. I can pay for parking since I’m freeloding on the tickets.”

“Nonsense.” He took the ticket from the machine and pulled into the garage to find a spot.

“Interesting surgery, being wrist-deep in a dog’s guts?”

“Exploratory. He was acting funny and there was a strange shape on his x-ray film.” She held up a hand, index finger and thumb a few inches apart. “He had a Matchbox car stuck right in the duodenum, blocking most of his food from getting down. Once it was out, he was feeling much better.”

“...what kind of car?”

“Police cruiser. Would have been funnier if it was the ambulance, but labradors have no sense of irony.”

“A shame.” He parked and turned the car off.
“I know.” She got out, adjusting her dress once she was standing and pulling her shawl a bit closer around her shoulders. “Brr. Let’s get inside.”

47 placed a hand on her low back, guiding her out and to the front of the theater. “Our tickets should be at the will-call station,” he said, directing her toward it. “Is this shantung?”

“You cannot possibly know what fabric this dress is made of. I don’t even remember what this dress is made of.”

“It’s shantung,” he informed her. “You should know in case it needs alterations.”

“Fine, it’s shantung.” She smiled a bit as he stepped away from her to speak to the cashier and receive their tickets.

He returned, giving her a ticket and leading her to the entrance to the theater, where their tickets were checked and they were directed to their seats.

“Thank your client twice for me,” she said as she settled into her seat, peering over the railing at the people below. “First balcony is nice.”

“It’s better than the floor seating, in my opinion. Of course, not to someone with a fear of heights.”

“Can imagine. Hell of a drop, you’d probably break every bone in your body at the bottom.”

“It would put a dent in the performance, at least.” He looked around them, counting ushers and exits. “Very unfortunate.”

“Once someone noticed, at least. There’s a lot of screaming in this play, not sure it’d be spotted right away.”

“Indeed.” A similar thought had crossed his mind as well. “Steamship whistles, too.”

“This is a dark conversation.”

“We can talk about something else.”

“I wasn’t complaining.” She smiled at him. “I kinda started it, after all.”

“Good. Would you like something to drink?” He stood, looking at the people around them, assessing how easily he could get in and out of their row. Only a few people to his left, shouldn’t be difficult.

“Sure. One of whatever you’re going to get.”

“Back soon,” he said, and made his way to the aisle, and out to the hallway. The mezzanine was half a level below them, currently guarded by ushers ensuring nobody entered a box that hadn’t paid for it. One of the ushers looked about his size, his uniform a close enough match that it wouldn’t be noticed. That would be his first target, when the time came for disguising. From there, he found the bathrooms - always a nicely secluded option if one was needed - and made his way down to the main floor to look for his targets in the mezzanine boxes above. He knew which one they were supposed to be occupying, but proper field work required proof - the client wouldn’t know if they’d switched boxes at the last moment for a better view, or had both come down with the flu and stayed home altogether. They were there, matching their photographs, laughing and chatting in their assigned box. Perfect. Finally, he found the bar area. The stock was lacking in options, mostly bottom shelf beers, so he settled for two bottles of water. The house lights flashed,
then dimmed. He paid for the water and made his way back to his seat to wait for the right timing to present itself.

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At intermission, Ava stood and stretched. “I’m going to go look at the merchandise table, are you interested?”

“No, enjoy.” 47 stood to let her out of the aisle, watching her go.

“How’s the play, 47?” Diana asked in his ear. “The casting is supposed to be excellent.”

“It is,” he said under his breath as he sat back down. The theatergoers seated around him had left, leaving him to seemingly talk to the air in peace. “Very well done.”

“Your guest is very well cast as well,” she added, lightly teasing. “I approve.”

He looked around, then remembered the security cameras in the lobby. “You should. You forced my hand.”

“Come now, you can’t put the blame on me. You’ve been… distracted lately, I thought this might keep your mind on the work at hand.”

“The work has been going off as planned,” he defended. He had to concede that he had been somewhat less focused recently, though his proficiency at his job more than made up for any lack of attention.

“No question about it. I suspect we could blindfold you and tape your hands together and still get the same results for our clients.” Diana paused. “Your targets are returning to their box, 47. I would recommend moving soon.”

47 stood and made his way to the hall, scanning the moving crowd for the usher he’d noticed before. Not at his post. Perhaps on break? He walked toward the employee bathrooms to slip inside and look for his usher. There, at the sink, washing his hands. The usher spotted the intruder and began to tell him that this bathroom was employees-only, but a swift strike to the neck stopped him from raising the alarm. 47 dragged him to a supply cabinet and tucked him inside among the cleaning supplies, along with his neatly folded suit. The usher uniform fit well enough for the short time it would be needed.

The lights dimmed and rose, indicating the intermission was drawing to an end. Move quickly. Be silent. He left the employee bathroom, making his way out to the mezzanine boxes. A glance through the curtain told him that he was in luck - the mistress was alone, sipping a glass of something bubbly and waiting for the return of her beau. Her attention was on the stage, waiting for the play to continue.

“The show is about to-” she began, turning as she heard the curtain move. “Oh, sorry, I thought you were someone else… But while you’re here, can I get another one of these?” She lifted the now-empty glass toward him.

“Of course.” He took it from her, bringing it to the bartender. “Box N wants another round,” he said. “I assume they’re running a tab.”

“Yes. Getting to be a big one, too.” The bartender refilled the glass and returned it. “Must be nice, eh?”
“Must be,” he echoed, and made his way back toward the box with the glass, deftly tipping a lethal measure of poison into it along the way and swirling the liquid until it blended. Odorless. Colorless. Quick acting. He presented the glass to the mistress, who drank it down easily. He moved outside the curtain, standing guard. After a moment, he heard the telltale soft gags of the poison taking effect, then a sigh as the last threads of life broke and her body slumped into the chair.

Ahead, his second target was approaching with two glasses, moving quickly to get back to his seat as the music had begun rising in the orchestra pit. 47 stepped aside, gesturing the man into the box and listening as he tried to rouse his date to take her drink.

47 stepped through the curtain, watching dispassionately as the man attempted to find a pulse on the dead woman. Panic was beginning to take hold, much more of this and he would start screaming. Time to act. A syringe of poison into the left cephalic vein did the job quickly, leaving the man swaying dreamily for a moment before he slipped to the ground in a heap. 47 lifted him into his seat, arranging them as naturally as possible. As a final touch, he tucked the remainder of the oral poison into the man’s coat pocket, and left the syringe, uncapped, loosely in the man’s right hand. He was right handed, 47 knew from the briefing notes, and would thus inject with it. A murder suicide, of lovers about to be discovered by a jealous wife. The little touches that earned him his price.

He checked for pulses and breath on each - kills confirmed. Job done, he slipped out of the box and back to the employee bathroom to return the uniform to the usher, pose him in a stall, and return, smartly dressed in his suit, to his seat to continue the second half of the play.

Ava looked up as he made his way into their aisle to sit. “Thought you’d died out there or something,” she whispered. “Maybe you took our talk about falling off the balcony too seriously.”

“Just a long line for the bar,” he said, offering her one of the glasses of bubbly champagne that his targets were no longer going to need. Shame to waste them.

She took the glass. “You’re a sweetheart. Thanks.”

“Mm.” It would not have been his choice of words, but there was something pleasant in them anyway. “Did you buy anything?”

“No, mostly just wanted to look. Boring stuff, t-shirts and posters, nothing eye-catching like a commemorative silver-handled straight razor or a copy of Mrs. Lovett’s cookbook.”

“Shame.”

The stage lights came up, and the performance continued.

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The house lights came up, and the audience began to gather their coats and bags to leave.

“What did you think?” 47 asked as they made their way down the aisle to leave.

“Amazing.” She said, wrapping her shawl around her shoulders. “I mean, she was no Angela Lansbury, but who could compare to that?”

“No one.” He put his hand on her low back again, keeping her close to his side as they moved through the press of people trying to leave. “I’m glad to hear you enjoyed it. Would be a shame if you didn’t.”
“Mm. Oh, drama,” she said, catching sight of paramedics rushing past them, going up the stairs to the mezzanine. “I wonder what happened?”

“No idea.” He said, moving her along as she tried to turn to see where they were going. “Hopefully everyone is okay.”

“Yeah.” She yawned, putting a hand over her mouth to cover it. “Sorry, it’s well past my bedtime, and I haven’t been sleeping very well lately. I’m ready to take a hot shower and get into bed.”

47 unlocked the car, opening her door to usher her inside. She climbed in, pulling her skirt out of the way of the door closing again. He started the car, and drove them home.

Ava dozed against the window on the way home, leaving him time to process the mission in peace. A success, despite Diana’s meddling. Two targets, in the desired order, no alarm raised until well after it would do any good. The performance had been nice as well. And the accompaniment… He looked over at Ava, silhouetted against the city lights outside the car. The accompaniment had also been adequate. More than adequate, if he was completely honest with himself. He had no desire to be so honest, so looked back at the highway. Keep moving. Don’t get close to anyone. That had been the advice when he joined the ICA. But now… Diana had been encouraging it, hadn’t she? Teasing him like a schoolchild, knowing full well where all of it would lead in the end.

He parked the car on the street and looked at the sleeping passenger. The pin in her hair had come loose, and he lifted his hand toward it to fix it before stopping himself, and instead putting his hand on her shoulder. “Ava. Time to wake up.”

“Mm. Okay.” She gave the hand a light squeeze, then unbuckled her seatbelt and pushed the door open to make her way up to the front door. 47 followed, glancing each way down the street. No sign of Derek - good. Maybe he had learned his lesson after all.

Ava closed and locked the door behind them, glancing out the peephole. “I hate this feeling.”

“Hm?”

“This feeling of looking over my shoulder every time I walk into the house. Expecting someone to be following me.”

“He isn’t following you.”

“I know, I just...” She shook her head, sitting on the stairs to remove her shoes. “Never mind. I’m going to go to bed. Thanks for a lovely evening.”

“You’re welcome.”

She stood, barefoot, and began up the stairs. “Don’t wait so long to ask me out again, huh?”

“I won’t.”

Ava went into her bedroom, closing the door before unzipping her dress and stepping out of it. She put it on its hanger in the closet, then shed the rest of her clothes on the way to the attached bathroom to step into the shower, letting the hot water run over her skin. She knew Derek wasn’t following her, not now. He would wait until she began to forget, to stop checking out every window as she passed, to stop jumping every time a text came through on her phone. He would wait until she was alone and unprepared, and he would try again.

Alone. Unprepared. Her mind drifted back to her childhood, to her father pressing the shotgun into
her hands with some ceremony as he explained why he had brought her to the gun club with him that day. You are my only daughter, he had told her, and someday I won’t be around to make sure nobody fucks with you. I’m going to give this to you, and show you how to make it do what you tell it, and you’re going to be the most un-fuck-with-able woman in the world.

Hm. She turned off the water, opening the curtain to grab her towel and wrap it around herself. This was the second time in as many months that she had thought about the gun range of her youth. A sign? Maybe.

She put on a nightgown and climbed into bed, turning the TV on low for some white noise to help her sleep. She could think more about it later.

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“Tragedy struck at the Chicago Theater last Saturday, when a murder-suicide was uncovered after the final curtain - and not the one you’d expect. Millionaire Eric Armstrong and an unnamed woman were found dead in a theater box at the end of the performance of Sweeney Todd. Police have stated that it appears she died by drinking poison, which was found in Armstrong’s pocket, after which Armstrong killed himself by injection. Mrs. Armstrong, speaking at her husband’s funeral, said—”

Ava changed the channel to cartoons, and pulled the blankets back over her head to try to sleep. It was not coming easily lately.

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“Do you have a FOID card?”

“Hm?” 47 looked up from the book he was reading, placing a finger on the page to save his spot. Ava was standing at the top of the stairs, one hand on the railing.

“I said… do you have a FOID card? Firearm owner’s identification?”

“That’s a strange thing to ask.” He closed the book, putting it aside and motioning her to sit on the bed with him. “Sit. You look like something’s on your mind.”

She did, picking at her cuticle as she spoke. “You know how I said I used to go skeet shooting with my dad and his friends when I was a kid? I was thinking about it again, what with… everything going on lately.”

He nodded, understanding slowly resolving in his mind. “You want to remember how to shoot.”

“Yes,” she said, relieved he’d said it first - and not in a horrified tone. “I mean, maybe a handgun, something you don’t have to lean up against the wall when you’re not using it. I haven’t used one of those before.”

“I have.” He said, trying to tread lightly around the implied question while being acutely aware that the more mainstream pieces of his armory were in locked cases beneath the bed on which they were currently sitting. Did she know? Had she seen it? “I can teach you, if you’d like. There’s a firing range in the western suburbs we can visit. I’ve been there a few times.”

She smiled, inwardly pleased that her assessment of him had been correct. Ex-military, she could spot it a mile off. “Okay. Cool. So um. When do you want to go?”

“Tomorrow? I’ll make sure there’s room for us around dinner time, unless you’re working late…?”
“No, just in the morning.” She felt lighter already, the weight of helplessness beginning to dissipate. “I should be back by four o’clock.”

“Four o’clock, then.”

“It’s a date. Sort of. Well, um. I’ll leave you to your reading,” she said, suddenly aware that she might have intruded on something important, and stood to leave.

“You don’t have to,” he said, surprised at himself even as he spoke the words. “Unless you want to.”

She bit her lip, unwilling to tell him that she didn’t want to go. Didn’t want to go back downstairs and risk a knock at the door, a face at the window, a car idling at the end of the sidewalk. Didn’t want to go back to checking the locks and worrying herself. “Okay,” she said, giving a slight smile. “Then I’ll stay.”

47 moved back to sit against the metal headboard again, reopening the book he’d been reading and stretching his legs out on one half of the bed. After a moment, Ava crawled up next to him, laying down on her side and closing her eyes. In a moment, she was asleep.
Ava blinked awake some time later, disoriented. At some point during her sleep, a blanket from the couch downstairs had been put over her and tucked in under her feet. She drew the blanket up under her chin, snuggling into its warmth. 47 appeared to be asleep beside her, though he was facing away so could have been staring off into space for all she could tell.

She shifted slightly onto her side to face him, taking the opportunity to get a closer look at the tattoo she hadn't felt comfortable enough to ask about just yet.

A barcode and, under it, 640509-040147. Odd. She imagined there was some personal meaning to it, some sense to the numbers, but none she could fathom without asking. Maybe it was dark humor, the old sentiment of soldiers being mass produced for war. She had heard it before. Maybe it was something else entirely. In any case, it seemed like a particularly painful location to choose, so close to skull and spine and bundles of important nerves.

He surely had his reasons, and she was certain they were none of her business.

As quietly as she could, she pushed herself up on the bed and slid to the end to climb off without disturbing him. She wrapped herself in the blanket like a toga, then made her way down the stairs to the kitchen to begin the coffee pot. It was close enough to the time she should be waking up anyway that it wasn't worth trying to fall asleep again.

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They arrived at the gun range, signed all the paperwork, and received a briefing on range safety before being turned loose on the target booths.

“I think I’ve been here before,” Ava said once the safety officer had moved on to other groups. “Long time ago, though.”

“With your father?”

“Right. I was too young to shoot, though so I just watched them firing.”

47 nodded, unlatching the case he’d brought along with them. The concept of ‘too young to shoot’ was foreign to him, but he knew better than to mention it. He took out one of the twin silverballers, examining it briefly before offering the grip end to her. “This one is for you.”

“Thanks.” She took it, running her fingers along the slide, lingering a moment on the zig-zaggy emblem etched into it. Interesting. “So, come here often? I noticed you didn't get as much of a speech as I did about safety.”

“A few times. Not recently.” He looked over the second gun, then opened the box of ammo to begin the lesson. He walked her through putting the bullets into the magazine, seating it correctly, and loading the chamber, demonstrating his technique at each step. Ava was a good student, picking up the basics fairly quickly. It was clear she had at least watched it done before, even if she hadn’t done it herself.

Once they were loaded, he put his down on the case and stepped behind her to direct. “It won’t bite
back like a shotgun, but it’s not as forgiving. Aiming takes more practice.” As she lifted the gun, he gently touched her arm to guide it more centrally, estimating her aiming point based on his. “Try that.”

She squeezed the trigger, letting off a shot downrange. It tore through the edge of the paper target. “Hell, that was nowhere near it.”

“I’ve seen worse first shots.”

“Yours?” She glanced up with a slight smile.

47 ignored the question, moving back to his station to fire off a few rounds. “I don’t remember mine.”

“Thought the saying went that you never forget your first?”

“It was a long time ago.” He fired off the rest of the magazine into the target.

Ava peered down the range at his target as he reloaded. “So… I have a question.”

“Yes?”

“Did you miss 7 of those shots?”

“No.” He put the magazine back into place.

She looked back at the target, perfectly unblemished except for one hole torn through the center ring, then back to him. “Do it again.”

“Pay attention this time,” he said, and fired off three rounds through the same spot. “See?”

“…that is so cool.” She turned her focus back to her own target, aiming carefully and firing a few shots through the outer rings. “So… ex-military?”

He looked slightly startled at the question, recovering quickly. “Excuse me?”

“You. Ex-military? You’ve never said it, but that’s the shooting of someone who knows what he’s doing. You’re either a SEAL or into some Blackwater shit, and you’re not going to admit to Blackwater if that’s what it is.” Her gaze flicked to him a moment, then back at her target. “Hell, Dad wouldn’t even talk about the legit stuff sometimes.”

“No?” He asked, glad for the opportunity to talk about someone other than himself.

“Nope.” She put down the emptied gun and held out her cupped hand to him for more bullets to reload. “Sometimes he’d come home from a trip overseas and everything would be sunshine, sometimes he’d look like hell and lock himself in his room for a day or two before he’d talk to me. He wouldn’t tell me why, but… I could tell something had happened. Reminded me a little of a sinner performing ablutions before entering a church. Like he didn’t feel right being around me after… whatever had happened.”

47 realized he’d been listening intently for too long, and gave her the next magazine’s worth of bullets. “You never asked him about it?”

“Hell, what am I supposed to ask?” She began reloading. “Hey Dad, I saw this thing on the news about a village of innocents being slaughtered in some war-torn country, were you pulling the trigger on any of them?”
“Point taken.”

“Anyway, you’re avoiding the question.”

He considered it, replaying their conversation in his mind to find the question that had sparked it. “Yes,” he said carefully. “I have gone through extensive combat training.”

“I knew it.” She smiled, pleased with herself.

“How so?”

“You check exits. You look for security cameras, and keep your face away from them. You open the front door every time you come home like you expect someone with a rifle to be behind it.” She cast a knowing look at him. “Nobody notices, right? I wouldn’t, either, except Dad would do it for a little while after he got back from a trip overseas.”

47 turned back to the range, raising the handgun to fire again. “Does that bother you?”

“Not really. You can’t help the way you’re made, or what you’ve had to do in the line of duty. He said the work was just, and seemed to believe it. Beyond that…” Ava shrugged. “Beyond that, it’s not my call to make.”

“It’s your call on whether to associate with such people. Is knowing the mission is a just one enough?”

“For someone I care about? You bet your ass.”

That was that, he thought, falling silent to concentrate on his firing pattern. They were arguing about something neither of them had said, the conversation behind the conversation. He asked himself again, for what seemed like the hundredth time, how much she really knew. How much she cared to know. How much he would tell her, if she ever asked. Would it bring relief or suffering?

“When did you join up?” She asked finally, once the silence had stretched out too long.

“Right after I left the orphanage,” he said automatically. “I wanted to find a purpose.”

Ava nodded, absorbing that. It wasn’t an unexpected answer. “When did you leave?” she ventured, pushing her luck a bit further still.

“You’ll never get better at your aim if you keep talking.”

She hesitated a moment before raising the handgun again, focusing on each shot. That was the line, then. Recent history was apparently not up for discussion. Another time, then.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s notes: I debated on changing 47’s ID number to fit with the age I’m imagining for him (mid-30s) but it just felt wrong… so I’m leaving it, even though it kind of messes up my timeline. Oh, and I’ve never used a handgun, so blame Wikipedia if my info is wrong. I tried!
“I have a contract for you, 47.” Diana said, skipping pleasantries. “It sounds like it will be scenic.”

“Scenic?”

“Have you ever been to Navy Pier?”

“A few times. Why?”

“There is a fireworks show off the pier on Saturday, according to our client. The targets will be having dinner at one of the restaurants, then taking a chartered boat out into the lake to enjoy the festivities.”

“Interesting.”

Plans began to formulate in 47’s mind. He moved to the closet to begin assessing his weapon options. Remote explosive? Once he found out which boat was being chartered, sabotage would be simple. Poison? Dinners or drinks could be poisoned almost unobserved if he had the right timing. Fiber wire? He could get aboard the boat and choose his moment, but it would be risky to get back out without being spotted. The pier only had one main entrance area, it could be locked down quickly once a body was found on a boat. Fireworks… fireworks made it interesting, too.

“I thought you might like that. The target has a dinner reservation at Riva, shall I make one for you at the same time?”

“Yes, that's a good idea.” He could find them at the restaurant, size up the options. Make a decision in the moment as to the path he would take to complete the contract.

“I’ll give you more information as soon as I receive it.” Diana said, and clicked off the line.

He picked a few items to put aside for later consideration, then closed the door and made his way downstairs. Ava was stretched out on the couch on her side, half-watching the History Channel.

“Hey.” She smiled a bit and pulled her legs in to give him space to sit, then tucked her feet under his leg.

“What are you watching?”

“Modern Marvels. They're talking about marine salvage operations. Kind of interesting.”

“Ah.” he adjusted the blanket over her legs, smoothing it out.

“So what are you up to today? You have a look of contemplation about you.”

“Do I?” The restaurant was relatively expensive, he knew, not the kind of place people went to eat alone on a Saturday night. The kind of place that expected couples and families. Keep cover. Blend in.

“Mhm. Like you're doing long calculus equations in your head. Sort of way off somewhere else.” she turned onto her back, boosting herself up on her elbows to look at him. “So?”
“I was… wondering if you wanted to go to dinner on Saturday.” He said, thoughts turning as he spoke. He would have to ask Diana to make the reservation for two. “There's a restaurant I want to try at Navy Pier. It's called Riva. Seafood, that kind of thing.”

“Mm, I think I could clear my schedule.” She smiled a bit. “What's the occasion?”

“No occasion. Does there need to be an occasion?”

“Nope. Just curious. What time?”

“I haven't called for a reservation yet. In fact… I should do that now then.”

“Go forth. I look forward to it.” Ava watched him go, then stretched back out on the couch, picking up the TV remote to look for something else to watch. She wouldn't have pegged him for a tourist attraction kind of guy, but wasn't planning to complain about the selection. She liked Navy Pier - the waves on the lake were nice, and she hadn't been on the new Ferris wheel yet. Not to mention dinner. Yep. Not going to complain.

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“I haven't been here in ages,” Ava said as they left the parking garage. “They've done a lot of renovation since then, so it'll be nice to see what's changed.”

47 nodded slightly, scanning the area for his quarry. They would be here somewhere, shopping or walking around while they waited for their reservation time.

Ava veered away from him to admire a jewelry kiosk, slipping a large rhinestone cocktail ring onto her middle finger. “Ooh, look at these. Shiny.” She waggled her fingers under a spotlight to make the rhinestones sparkle.

“Those aren't real stones, it's all glass,” he said, looking over her shoulder at the ring.

“Of course it's glass, that's why they're selling it for three dollars and put it on an adjustable band. If it was diamonds, I would have been tackled before I could get it on my finger.” she took off the ring and put it back on the display, then nudged him with her elbow. “Spoilsport.”

“It's a waste of money is all I meant.”

“When you start offering to buy me diamonds and rubies, we can talk about whether or not rhinestones are a waste of money. Until that day, though, I’m going to keep buying rhinestones.”

“Suit yourself.”

“I will.” She moved to the next side of the kiosk, running a hand down a gauzy linen scarf. “I can't wear rings at work anyway.”

“We should get to the restaurant, our reservation should be coming up soon.”

“Fine, fine.” She released the scarf and turned to follow him. “Lead the way.”

He put his hand on her middle back to guide her along beside him as they walked, still scanning the crowd for the targets. As they got closer to the restaurant he began to worry they had rescheduled and he would miss them completely.

They reached the hostess table and gave the name Rieper, which she accepted and led them to a table for two.
Ava opened the menu to begin reading. “Everything sounds good,” she said once she'd gotten halfway down the page. “Though it had better be delicious when they’re selling $38 crab cakes.”

47 wasn't paying attention. The targets had been seated early and were at the other end of the restaurant, already midway through their entrees. The main target was a man in his fifties, who, according to the briefing, worked for a pharmaceutical company that was engaged in what could only be called questionable business practices to remove competition. The competition was now biting back. He was surrounded by his sales team, attractive men and women who did the dirtiest work on his behalf. The client had requested a full elimination, leaving no one to carry on his legacy of creative legal interpretation.

They all had their entrees - the chance to end this cleanly with some well placed poison had passed.

“...put in an appetizer or drinks?” The waiter was saying. Ava was looking at 47 expectantly.

“Ah,” he skimmed the wine list quickly. “Chardonnay?” Ava nodded in agreement. “Good. Whichever bottle is the best,” he said to the waiter, offering the wine list back. The waiter nodded and left.

Ava glanced over her shoulder, spotting the cluster of targets. “Admiring the view?” She teased, nodding toward the several female sales reps.

“I was… thinking about something, not looking anywhere particular.”

“Mhm.” She smiled a bit, pleased to have flustered him a bit. “So… not looking at the blond who looks like she got sewn into the white bodycon dress over there. Got it.”

“I wasn't.”

“Hey, no shame in it.”

“I wasn't.” he said again, more severely. This was a strange argument, utterly foreign to his experience and training, but he felt innately that he should defend himself on this point. A subject change was required. “What are you going to order?”

“Mm. Fine.” She let the subject drop as the waiter returned to uncork their wine, pouring two glasses. “There’s sea bass which sounds good, but there's also cheese agnolotti, which sounds like carbs wrapped in carbs and I do like that sound of that, too.”

“Both good choices. I think I'm going to get the cioppino.”

“That looks good, too, except for the lobster.”

“You don't like lobster?”

“I used to, but then someone told me they're related to cockroaches. Never able to eat them after I learned that. Blech.”

“Shouldn't that make you want to eat cockroaches, then? Lots of cultures eat insects.”

“I'll wait for the apocalypse to start eating vermin, thanks.” She took a sip of the wine. “Our waiter made a good selection.”

“They usually do.” His attention drifted back to the table of sales reps. They were receiving their desserts and a carafe of coffee. The opportunity had officially expired. Thankfully, there would be
more.

“The view of the lake is gorgeous from here,” Ava said, resting her chin in her hand while she looked out the window beside their table. “Might as well be the ocean.”

“Mm. Would you like to stay for the fireworks tonight? It's a few hours from now so we would have to find something to occupy ourselves until then, but if you're interested…”

Ava's eyes lit up. “I am! And I have a great idea for how to pass the time.”

“Oh?”

“Yup.”

“Do I get to know what it is?”

“Eventually. For now it's my secret.”

Secrets were worrying, especially when 47 wasn't the one knowing them. So far she hadn't given him cause for concern, though, so he decided to not push for an answer now. He would find out soon enough. In the meantime, the targets had finished their desserts and were gathering their bags and coats to leave. He would have to locate them again, though the thought didn't worry him. He had tracked much more elusive targets before, and these were going to be in the immediate area for hours. There was plenty of time.

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Ava stopped in front of a sign and gestured up at it like a car show presenter. “Ta da!”

“Laser tag?”

“You don't sound as excited as you should be. Have you never played laser tag?” She slipped her arm through his to lead him inside.

“Not to my knowledge.”

“It's like paintball for people who don't like getting massive welts on their backs.” Ava pulled him to the registration desk to sign them up for the next round. A display of security camera feeds behind the counter showed clusters of people running and hiding from each other as they tried to score the most points and ruin the most friendships.

“Okay, you get to pick a code name now, so you can see your results later. Pick something cool. Mine is Shadow.” She offered 47 the keyboard to type in his player information.

He considered a moment, then began typing and submitted the form.

“Agent 47,” she read off the screen, peeking around him. “Sounds dangerous. I like it.”

They were given ID tags, briefed on the safety rules, and sent to the preparation room to put on the target sensor vests and scan the ID tag into the guns to link their codenames to the scoreboard outside.

Ava leaned on the wall, hefting the laser gun against her shoulder. “Have you really never done laser tag?”

“Should I have?” he pointed the gun around the room, sighting down it.
“It’s just a staple of childhood. Sad that you missed it.”

“I had larger concerns at the time,” he said, examining the gun and testing the trigger.

“I guess. You’ll pick it up quickly though, it’s not hard once you get a feel for it. Oh, and if you get hit, your vest lights up and you can’t fire for five seconds.”

The preparation room began to fill with other players, mostly college aged men with other demographics sprinkled throughout. An employee clapped for attention and explained the rules, which sounded to Ava like all the stupid things previous groups had done that were now officially banned by the company. Finally, the employee unlocked the door to the arena and bid them good hunting.

47 caught Ava’s arm, holding her back as the other players flooded into the arena. “Watch,” he said under his breath to her as she started to protest. He nodded at the retreating players, who were spreading out into hiding spots before the vests activated. “Observe, then act.” Once the group had passed, he released her and started through the door.

Ava trailed behind him, debating the merits of firing on him. It would be an easy point on her scorecard, but seemed like a betrayal of trust. It was just laser tag, she reminded herself, but lowered her gun.

The speakers counted down from five, then the vests and guns activated. 47 put his back to a wall, looking around the side of it for the other players. Ahead, a player was still working his way up the spiral stairs to the second floor. The unfortunate player’s vest lit up as 47 pulled the trigger, a red flash at the shoulder to indicate which sensor had activated.

“Aiming is off,” he muttered, looking down at the gun as though it could explain itself. He had been aiming for the sensor on the chest. No matter - he was used to compensating for shoddy workmanship. It wouldn’t happen again.

He glanced at Ava, and motioned her forward. She took the hint and climbed over a barrier wall, checking the grates that might allow someone on the second floor to fire down at them. She stopped and fired up through a grate, ducking out of the way as the person began firing back. The other player swore as his vest lit up, and he darted away. 47 advanced past her, getting to the bottom of the stairwell and pointing the gun up it for a moment before passing it by. After a moment, she followed. If she wasn’t going to shoot him, she decided, she might as well enjoy the benefit of his skills - whatever they may be. His demeanor had changed the moment they had put on their gear, and she was dimly aware that she should probably wonder a little harder about that.

They pushed forward into the arena, firing at opponents as they came across them. As they moved into an open area, there was a flash of motion to their right. 47 turned, raising the gun and squeezing the trigger just as his shoulder sensor lit up. No firing for 5 seconds. The attacker would go unpunished. Instinctively, he caught Ava’s wrist and pulled her close to sight down her gun instead, wrapping his hand over hers to catch the trigger. The retreating attacker’s vest lit up across his back as he darted around a corner and away. He released her and dropped behind cover to wait out the remaining seconds until his weapon reactivated.

Ava pressed against the wall next to him, less for cover and more to disguise the swooning feeling that was currently distracting her from the game. When 47’s gun bleeped to indicate it was ready again, he emerged from cover to seek out the next shot. She took a deep breath, then followed. They made their way up the stairs to the second level, which was designed like a mirror maze. 47 motioned her ahead, and she worked her way around corners, looking for signs of other players. She paused, hearing a noise behind them, and turned. “Watch out!” she hissed, and swung her gun.
up to fire at one of the mirrors on the wall behind them. Her shot banked off the mirror and struck the player’s chest sensor. The player fled.

A bell sounded the end of the round and the arena lights brightened so they could find their way back out to the preparation room.

“Not bad for your first round,” Ava teased, reaching up to unbuckle his vest for him and pull it off his shoulders.

“Not bad?” He shrugged out of the vest and put the gun back on its charging dock.

“I mean, you did get shot.” She hung up her own vest beside his.

“Once. You got shot five or six times.”

“Yeah, but I don't have military training.”

“Neither do-” he caught himself.

She paused, looking up at him with curiosity for a moment. He could almost hear the gears turning in her mind. He looked away.

“Then I take it back. Only one hit is damn impressive.” She slipped her arm back through his, giving it a slight reassuring pat. “Come on. I want to walk along the pier a little before it gets dark.”

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Midway through their walk along the Pier’s edge, Ava announced she wanted something warm to drink, and let go of 47’s arm. “I'm going to go to the Starbucks inside, do you want anything?”

“I'm fine. Meet back here?”

“Sure. Line's probably a mile long, so wish me luck.” She turned and walked to the enclosed shopping area to get in line.

“Can we trust her?” Diana wasted no time in her questioning once Ava had gone.

“I hope so,” he said absently.

“Hope isn't enough, 47.”

“I know that.” He turned and made his way back to the transient boat launches, looking for the right name on the right boat for his targets.

“Then I'll ask you again. Can we trust her?”

“I believe we can. And if we can't, I will take full responsibility for… correcting the oversight.” He silently hoped it never came to that. There was no reason it should - it would have happened by now. She didn't have the full picture, but she had enough of the edge pieces that she would know whether or not she wanted to continue putting the puzzle together or not.
“Good.” The answer seemed to satisfy Diana for the time being. He knew she would ask again eventually, and want a better answer. For now, she was moving on to mission developments. “Now then,” she said, shuffling papers. “Your targets are enjoying the bar at Margaritaville, so the way is clear for whatever you have planned next.”

“The boat. They haven't changed reservations, have they?” He walked down the row of private vessels, all of them small and sporty.

“Not that I've found. There is a bank transfer from our man’s account to the owner of the Lady of the Lake. It should be near the end of the docking area.”

He read off the hull identification number, which Diana confirmed. The boat was small, just the right size for about ten people to relax comfortably without any extraneous hired crew.

“Good.” He glanced around, then climbed aboard to examine the console. There was a space beneath it that was unlikely to be examined before they took the boat out to watch the fireworks. It would be dark, too, and from the looks of the group at dinner they were not the type to check nooks. He planted a remote explosive device under the console, and a second under one of the benches at the opposite end of the boat. That should be enough to do the job no matter where they stood to watch the show.

He climbed back to the dock, and walked back toward the main portion of Navy Pier. He returned to the meeting place, pleased to see that she was only just returning.

“Longest line I've ever stood in for overpriced hot chocolate,” she said, hands wrapped around the cup as she sipped. “They're lucky I wasn't in a hurry. Sorry if you got bored waiting for me.”

“I kept myself busy. Where to now?”

“Find a spot for the fireworks? They should be starting soon.”

“Lead the way. Maybe at the far end of the pier…?” He pointed away from the transient boat docking area. The remote detonator had plenty of range, no reason to end up dodging shrapnel.

“Sounds good to me. Oh, hey, I got an update from Domino's owners. Hold this.” She handed her cocoa to him, then dug in her coat for her phone. She scrolled through her messages, then brought up the photo. “See? It was his birthday a couple days ago.”

The photo was of Domino chewing a mouthful of lettuce, a paper party hat taped to his head.

“He's looking well.”

“Right? His owners keep updating me on how well he's doing. They seem very happy.” She put away the phone and took her cocoa back. “Thought you'd like to know.”

47 nodded, looking toward the transient dock. He couldn't see the Lady of the Lake from here, but the targets should be boarding soon. Readying the boat to go out on the lake to watch the fireworks show. He could imagine them bringing bottles of champagne, playing music. Continuing the party unaware of their fate.

Ava moved closer to him for warmth, tucking herself against his side. “Thank you for all of this. I'm having a great time.”

47 moved his arm around her, resting his hand lightly on the back of her coat. “Cold?”
“Little bit.”

“Here.” He motioned her to the railing, then unzipped his coat to draw her back into the warmth of it as well as he could. There wasn’t a large amount of space to share, but she seemed happy to accept it. Her back pressed against his chest, her head turned slightly against the angle of his neck. “Any better?”

“Little bit.” She crossed her arms to hold the edges of his coat around her. “How about you?”

“Fine.” He said, wrapping his arms around her to get at the pocket with the detonator. He palmed it, working it into his sleeve for the moment. The last thing he needed was for her to find it and start asking questions so soon after assuring Diana that it wouldn’t be an issue. He felt her settle into the embrace a bit, taking the gesture at face value.

Ava released one side of the coat to pick up her cocoa off the railing and take another drink. “So.” She said, with no follow up.

“Hm?”

There were too many questions spinning in her mind, every dropped thread of conversation that she wanted to ask about. Everything she knew she didn’t really want answered, because she knew it wouldn’t help anyone. But now she had started to speak, and now she had to go on.

“Do you think we’ll do this again sometime?” She asked finally, lifting her head slightly to try to catch his expression - such as it was.

47 considered this, rolling the detonator in his hand as he worked the question over in his mind. “Navy Pier?”

“No, silly, I mean…” she searched for a non-terrifying way to phrase it. “Go somewhere again sometime. I don’t mean tomorrow or anything. Just... This. Sometime. You know?”

“I do.” He gave a slight nod, unable to commit further. He wanted to say yes, again, every day if that’s what she wanted. And he wanted to say no, that she didn’t know what she was asking. That, one way or another, it would end in blood.

The loudspeakers around them crackled to life, announcing a countdown to the start of the fireworks display. Showtime. 47 began scanning the boats on the lake, looking for his target. It was there, out behind the fireworks barge, its lights dimmed to not detract from the coming display. He could just make out the cluster of well dressed sales reps onboard.

The crowd counted down from 10 to zero, and the first volleys of fireworks went up. His thumb hovered over the detonation button, focused on the barge. The finale would be the best moment - who could tell if one of the shells had gone wild when there were fifteen going off at once? It would be too bright to know what had happened until long after it didn't matter anymore.

The fireworks reached a crescendo, lighting up the sky with explosions of color. The finale. 47 pressed the detonator and let it fall back into his pocket, flinching back with affected surprise as the Lady of the Lake joined the finale in a fireball of explosives and burning fuel. There was first applause at the novel display, then chaos as the audience realized it had not been a planned event.

“Oh, shit,” Ava gasped, clasping her hands over her mouth. “What the fuck was that? Did they get too close to the barge?”

“I don't know.” 47 searched the glaring firelight, counting bodies. The fire department boat was...
already approaching the wreckage, calling out for survivors. No responses, just the steady crackle of fire and the gentle drift of bodies on the lake. The contract thus confirmed and closed, 47 took Ava's arm to draw her into the press of fleeing people. “Come on, they're telling us to clear the area in case something else catches the flames.”

Ava followed weakly, looking back over her shoulder at the wreckage.

“Don't,” he said when he noticed, stepping into her line of sight to block the view back. “You don't want that in your head. It won't help them or you.”

“I know.” She bit her lip, but let him pull her along toward the parking garage with the rest of the crowd.

Chapter End Notes

We realized long after we'd come up with this idea that there isn't actually laser tag at Navy Pier. There should be, and I suggest a petition.
‘You seem to have gained an admirer, 47.’ Diana said at their next contact. ‘A new one, that is.’

‘Have I?’

‘The client from your recent Navy Pier job has made another request. A marine biologist at the Shedd Aquarium, working on some kind of fish disease research. A lot of technical jargon here, let's see…’

‘Shedd Aquarium. Another Chicago contract,’ 47 murmured.

‘Yes. We seem to be doing someone's housekeeping for them. The payments are still clearing, though.’

‘I know. It just makes me wonder where it's all leading.’

‘Wondering will get you in trouble in this line of work,’ Diana teased.

‘Not wondering will get you a knife in the back.’

‘Fair enough. I'll send the relevant files to you and leave you to your preparations.’ The line went dead.

The aquarium. Not far at all from Navy Pier, nor from the Chicago Theater. The contracts moved north of the theater, then south. Diana didn't seem to see a pattern emerging, but 47’s life had been devoted to finding and exploiting them. There was something there, but not close enough to tell what it was - or what it meant. Two data points could not yet make a theory, did not prove anything at all. He had no reason to disbelieve their client, nor to refuse the contract. Concerns for another time, then.

Downstairs, Ava was coming home from work. It was later than usual, 47 thought as he glanced at the clock on the computer. An emergency at work, an after hours surgery. That was usually the case.

He could hear her in the kitchen, filling and turning on the electric kettle, then making her way up the stairs to her bedroom. A minute later, the sound of the shower coming on, then off some time after that.

He examined the files from Diana, moved them onto an IronKey, then removed the drive from the computer and stood to go intercept her before he could talk himself out of it.

He found her in the kitchen, pouring hot water into a mug for tea. Her hair was wet and sticking to her neck and face in tendrils, her skin flushed from the hot shower. She didn’t seem to have heard him approach. ‘Ava,’ he said, once she’d put down the kettle.

‘Oh, hey.’ She turned toward him with a smile. ‘Thought you were out when I got home, don’t know why.’

‘I’ve been here,’ he said, moving out of the way for her to walk past him to the couch.

She put her mug down on a coaster, and started searching the couch for the TV remote. ‘Up for a movie? My turn to pick.’
“I actually wanted to talk to you. About… the other night.”

Ava paused in her search for the remote and straightened, turning to look at him. “Oh?”

“Yes.”

“Well, go on then.” she said, looking at him expectantly.

“You asked me a question, and I realized later that I didn’t really answer.”

“Took you long enough.” She gave a slight laugh. “I was starting to think awkward silence was the only answer I was going to get.”

“No, that… wasn’t my intention.”

“Good. Because that would be a dick move.”

“I swear it wasn’t.”

“Good. So…?” she prompted.

“So, I was thinking,” he said, choosing each word carefully, “that if you’re not busy tomorrow, there’s a behind-the-scenes tour at the Shedd Aquarium that I’ve heard is very interesting.”

“Me and you?” she asked, just to be sure she’d understood that this was an offer for a date and not just a suggestion to fill her evening on her own.

“Yes.”

“Tomorrow.” She said, and nodded. “Yes. I would like that.”

“Good.” He said and, task completed, began to turn to go back upstairs.

“Hey, wait.” She sat on the couch, patting the spot next to her. “Come on. My turn to pick the movie.”

After a moment of hesitation he relented, moving to sit beside her on the couch. “Which one did you have in mind?”

“Hmm, well since you seem to like old Hollywood based on your last pick…” She moved closer to him, resting her weight against his shoulder. “Double Indemnity?”

“A good choice.” He took the remote from her to search Netflix for the movie, and slid his arm around her waist to keep it from going numb from her leaning. After a moment, he felt her fingers snake up to touch his hand, tentative, like they might be broken for the offense. His hand flinched away before he could stop it, then relaxed again, fingertips spreading to interlace with hers.

“D’you want popcorn or anything?” She asked softly once the opening credits were rolling. “I can go get movie snacks.”

“No. Stay.”

“Okay.”

He could feel her smile against his shoulder, and was mildly surprised to realize he had caused it. A rarity in his experience.
This Dietrichson business. It's murder. And murders don't come any neater. As fancy a piece of homicide as anyone ever ran into. Smart, tricky, almost perfect.

“When’s the thing tomorrow? The tour?” Ava asked, voice beginning to blur with tiredness.

“3 o’clock. Are you falling asleep?”

“Can't help it,” she said, drawing a deep inhale against his shirt. “You have that effect on me.”

“Am I boring you?”

“Mm. Opposite.” she lifted her head slightly to look up at him.

He looked down at her a moment, sensing she was waiting for something to happen, then turned his attention back to the movie. She lowered her head back to his shoulder, closing her eyes to drift off again.
Better than Xanax

Ava hummed along to the music on her phone as she flipped through the well-creased cookbook. Flour. Sugar. Butter. Chocolate chips. She put the butter and sugar into the mixer and turned it on to cream together. The increasingly-familiar slight change in air pressure told her that her housemate had come into the room.

“Hey.” She glanced over her shoulder at him. “Not bothering you, am I?”

“No, I was on my way down already.” He went to the fridge, looking through for something to eat. “What are you making?”

“Chocolate chip cookies.”

He closed the fridge door and moved closer to look over her shoulder. “Oh?”

“Not for you.” She waved her spatula threateningly at him. “These are a gift.”

“For who?”

“Uncle Grant. His birthday is this week, and I always send him a batch.”

“I thought your parents were only children?”

“Oh, yeah, sorry. Uncle in air quotes. One of my dad's buddies from way back, he kind of helped raise me after my mom passed.” She stopped the mixer and scraped down the sides. “Hand me the eggs?”

47 took the egg carton from the refrigerator and offered them to her.

“Thanks.” She began cracking eggs into the bowl, smiling slightly. “It’s my mom’s recipe, too, so I think of her whenever I make them.”

“Ah.”

“You have anything like that? I mean, I’ve never seen you cook, but something you do that reminds you of home?”

“Can I get you any other ingredients?”

“Sure, whatever I haven’t gotten out yet.” She tapped the ingredients list on the recipe page. “If you’d be so kind.”

He busied himself with locating the rest of the ingredients and putting them out on the counter for her.

“Thanks for the help. Extra set of hands makes the whole process go faster.” She reached for a container, then paused. “Oh, baking soda, not powder.”

“There’s a difference?” He asked, swapping it for the correct canister.

“Yes.” She paused. “Don’t ask me what it is. I knew at one point, but it’s completely out of my brain now. All I know is that they’re totally not the same thing, even though they look about the same. I think baking powder has more stuff in it? Like how flour and self-rising flour aren’t the
same thing.”

He looked at her, baffled.

“Okay, so regular flour is just flour, that’s all. Self-rising flour has leavening in it already, so you don’t have to add it. Don’t ask me which one, probably baking powder.” She scraped down the mixing bowl again. “Baking’s all science and math. Fun stuff.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“Good, that makes it easier.” She mixed the chocolate chips into the dough, then offered him a spoonful. “Here. Tell me if I need salt.”

47 accepted the dough, taking on a slight thoughtful air. “Enough salt. Tastes fine.”

“Perfect. Now you have to help me scoop. Wash your hands, then I’ll show you how big to make them.”

He obeyed, washing and drying his hands before taking a clean spoon from her. She scooped up some dough, then rolled the ball between her hands and put it on a cookie sheet. “About that big. Too big and the edges burn while the middles are mushy, too small and it’ll take ten years to cook all of them. Your turn.”

Ava watched as he followed her instructions, nodding encouragement. “Good. You’re not terrible at this.”

“Not terrible?”

“Mhm. See, they’re getting steadily bigger as you go, but I’ve seen worse.” She stole one of the larger dough balls from the tray to pop into her mouth. “Not terrible.”

“I usually get much better grades on assignments,” he said, focusing more on the size of the cookies he was scooping, and trying to ignore the fact that she was eating more dough than she was putting on the cookie sheet.

“Nobody can be a straight-A student on the first try.”

“You can’t, maybe.”

She caught his wrist, bringing his hand to her mouth to try to steal the dough ball from his fingers. “Ahhhh- hey!” He tossed the cookie dough onto the sheet before she could get to it. “That was mine.”

“I thought these were for your uncle?”

“Only the ones that actually make it into the oven. Until they’re baked, they’re free game.” She took the filled sheets and put them in the oven, then moved to the sink to wash her hands. “Now we get a 15 minute break while they cook.”

“Then do the whole thing over again?”

“Now you’re getting it.” She dried her hands on a towel, then offered it to him to do the same. “You do what you want, but I’m going to sit down for a minute.”

“I’ll come with you,” he said, and followed her to the couch to sit. “So. This uncle of yours. Local?”
“No, way across the country in San Diego. I don't see him in person much, just phone calls and cookies, really. We keep in touch.” She put her back against the arm of the couch, stretching out to press her feet against his leg.

“Ah.” His hand moved down automatically to rest on her ankles. “Any of them local anymore?”

“Nope. I mean, I moved away from them. Not on purpose, I just got a job offer. They didn't like it, but what were they going to do? Tell me no?”

“They might have.” He absently rubbed his thumb back and forth over her ankle bone.

“They knew me better than that.” she moved her foot a bit, trying to encourage a proper foot rub without having to ask for it outright. “If they told me I had to stay, I'd have probably moved all the way to the other coast.”

“Not very nice.” He took the hint, hand beginning to work its way down her foot, stretching and pressing the right pressure points.

“You're one to talk.” She said, flexing the arch of her foot against his hand encouragingly. “You ran all the way to another continent.”

His hand stilled. “That wasn't for spite.”

“No?”

“That was necessity.”

She sat up straighter to look at him, sensing unexplored depths opening beneath them. “…want to talk about it?”

“No.” A pause. “My leaving was not… amicable. It seemed best to get as far away as possible. Putting an ocean between me and them seemed adequate.”

“Them?”

“The d-” he caught himself before the word 'doctors’ could escape, amending his thought. “The people running the orphanage.”

“Oh.” Her voice was soft, full of sympathy as she slid across the couch toward him, raising a hand to lightly touch his shoulder. “I'm sorry you went through that.”

“It's been 17 minutes.”

“Oh shit.” She hopped up, hurrying back to the kitchen to get the cookies out of the oven. “Good call, they're not burned yet. We're good here.” She looked up as he came into the kitchen behind her. “Want to put these on the cooling rack or roll the next batch?”

“You roll this time.” He took the turner from her to begin transferring the cookies. “Since I'm merely not terrible at it.”

“You're not going to let me forget that, are you?”

“No.”

“You know what will make you feel better?”
“What?”

She offered one of the balls of cookie dough. “Eat this. Better than Xanax, I promise.”

He gave a skeptical look, then took it to eat. She wasn't far off. “Thank you.”

“If it still hurts, you can have another. Doctor's orders.” She smiled a bit at him. “After this batch is in, how about TV?”

He nodded, putting the last of the cookies on the cooling rack and taking another chunk of cookie dough to eat. “Good idea.”
There were cameras watching every corner. Volunteer tour guides circulating between groups. Families crowding the great hall, creating variable after variable that had to be controlled. And, of course, the variable at his side, scanning the museum map and talking about all of the exhibits they could visit.

“We have some time before the tour starts, so maybe we could see the penguins and sharks before we have to meet up with the tour group.” She tapped the map. “I think the sharks are closest, so may as well go there first, eh?” She hooked his index finger with hers, pulling him along toward the reef exhibit.

The sharks were a possibility. His target was, as Diana had said, researching “fish diseases.” Further investigation on the man’s name revealed it was research into shark immune systems, with apparent implication for human health. The research was in collaboration with a state university, funded through the NIH. Public records and the right journal subscriptions were a marvel in this business.

The lighting changed as they reached the reef exhibit, dimming to reduce the glare on the tank glass. “Here we are,” she said, slowing her pace as they approached the massive tanks. “Sharks.”

47 moved toward the glass, pulling her along by their linked fingers. “Incredible creatures, aren't they?”

“They're pretty cool.” She lightly bumped him with her shoulder. “For fish.”

“They’re apex predators,” he said, looking slightly offended on the sharks’ behalf. “They hunt without fear of being hunted themselves.”

“So are lappet-faced vultures, but people don't line up to walk through a tunnel of them,” she teased. “But I know what you're saying. They are born ideal for their purpose, and they're great at it. Most species can't say that.”

“Vultures eat what others kill.” 47 leaned toward the glass, looking up to the surface. The sharks were being fed, fresh meat tossed into the water from the caretakers. The shark feeding tour would have been interesting, but wouldn't have taken him anywhere near his quarry.

“Silly me, picking such a shameful example. You're right, that endangered species deserves to die out. Fuck lappet-faced vultures.”

“That's not what I-” he began, then saw her amused expression and gave up. “You know what I meant.”

“Yes,” she said, following his gaze as two bonnethead sharks glided past them. “You were admiring your reflection in the glass.”

“Very funny. Let's keep moving.”

Ava followed him down the tunnel through the reef tank, watching the sharks and schools of fish cut through the water overhead. “Ever think about how horrible it would be if the glass cracked?” She asked suddenly, once they had reached the midpoint of the tunnel. “Like, catastrophic failure, water and glass and sharks everywhere.”
“There are safety measures. Glass thickness calculations, bracing… a bullet couldn't bring down that glass.”

“Speaking from experience?”

“Speaking as someone who has been on aquarium tours before where they mentioned it. It's fairly common knowledge.”

“Hey now…”

“What? You're very uncommon.”

Ava considered the statement from several angles and decided to accept it as the odd, unpracticed compliment it probably was. She slipped her hand into his, linking their fingers and giving a light squeeze. “Well, thanks. I think.”

“Any time. We should get back to the great hall for the tour.”

“Yeah, probably. Lead the way.”

47 defaulted back into his mission mode as they moved through the tunnel, tracking their distance from the shark feeding pier as they went. It might be useful later.

The two made their way back to the great hall, where they were to meet their tour group. 47 presented the tickets to the tour guide - slim, male, probably a college student doing an internship. Wouldn't be deeply attentive to what his tour group was doing. Perfect.

The rest of the group arrived, and the tour began.

---

“Our first stop on the tour is our microbiology lab,” the guide said, motioning around the room. “Here is where we do water sampling, looking for any changes in our biome. The table over there is for cytology. All of our specimens are screened for disease before they are allowed onto exhibit, including blood, fin scrapes, and other materials.”

47 ran his free hand over the cytology table, palming a blood vial off a test tube rocker and slipping it into a pocket as they moved to the next area.

The tour moved through several more laboratory spaces, then stopped at a door. “This is a very special part of our lab space,” the tour guide said, turning back to face the group. “We are working in collaboration with a few other institutions on a project in our shark colony. I can't go into detail, due to the nature of the work, but we're all looking forward to what it's going to produce.”

47 released Ava's hand, moving along the edge of the tour group to scan the room. She glanced at him curiously, then looked back to the tour guide. There had to be some kind of proof here to indicate this was where he could find his target. A stack of notes on the edge of the desk. He shifted the papers slightly, looking for a name. A topic. There. Notes on the metabolic rate of tiger sharks in different temperatures and salinity. On the desk, beside the phone, a photo of his target water skiing somewhere exotic and tropical. He had confirmation of the target, now the next steps could be taken. He moved back into the group, taking Ava's hand again, as before. She looked up with a slight smile.

“Here is our staging area,” the guide said, unlocking the door to the next room and swinging it open. “This is where our team gears up to go into the tanks. Keeping it in this room prevents cross
contamination in the lab spaces.” Wetsuits and air tanks hung on both sides of the room, embroidered with the names of the employees. 47 thumbed the cap off the blood tube in his pocket as he read the names on the wetsuits, leaning on the wall beside the one labeled for his target and tipping the blood into a zipped pocket of the wetsuit. Sharks. Blood. Water. Sometimes the mission itinerary wrote itself. He put the emptied tube back into his pocket and stepped forward again, refocusing his attention on the tour guide. The door they'd initially come through opened, and a man stopped through.

“Oh! I'm sorry, I didn't know you had a tour in here. I can wait until you're done to get my samples.” He closed the door again and returned to his desk to wait for the end of the tour, straightening the scattered notes on his desk.

---

“Well. Where shall we go next?” Ava asked at the end of the tour. “Penguins?”

“Back down the tunnel?”

“We're going to have to look at something other than sharks at some point today.”

“...in order to get to the penguins you wanted to see, which are on the other side of the tunnel from us.”

“Uh huh.” She said, but relented and followed toward the reef exhibit. “Good cover.”

“Cover?”

“Look.” She stopped, catching his arm to stop him as well. “I get it.”

“Get what?” He asked, keeping the twinge of panic carefully out of his voice.

“I get that you don't like penguins.”

“Ah.” Relief replaced the panic.

“So here's what I'm thinking.” She stepped toward him, putting one hand lightly on his chest and looking up at him. “You go look at the sharks. I'll go look at the penguins. And in, say…” her free hand caught his wrist to lift it in front of her to check his watch, “twenty minutes, we meet by the touch tank to poke the sea cucumbers. Fair?”

“Fair.”

“Good.” She smiled and stepped away, turning to go find the penguin exhibit.

47 watched her go, then started for the shark exhibit again to make sure the contract was completed.

“Incredible.” Diana's voice as he put in the earpiece and switched it on. “Just incredible.”

“Hm?”

“You. I don't know if it's luck or skill, but it seems to be working.”

“Skill. Though the tour simplified things.”

“Not the - never mind. The target is on his way to the shark enclosure.”
47 reached the tunnel, tracking back to the launching site for the laboratory area. Flippers were visible at the water’s edge as the diver eased into the water, putting his breathing mask on before submerging to begin searching for his subject. It was not long before the sharks caught the scent of the planted blood on his wetsuit and began to circle. The scientist noticed the change in behavior and began to kick back toward the exit ladder, but it was too late. The sharks descended.

---

Ava leaned over the edge of the touch tank, gently poking the spines of a sea urchin. She felt a hand slide up her back, and glanced up. “Hey.”

“These are good in sushi,” 47 said, looking at the urchins.

“Never had it.” She straightened, smiling a bit. “We’ll have to amend that sometime.”

“We will.”

“Were the sharks everything you hoped for?”

47 considered this, then nodded. “Yes, they were. How were the penguins?”

“Adorable. Hopping around on their little silly legs, wiggling their little silly tails… they’re like the opposite of sharks, they don’t look perfectly made for much of anything. But they’re cute and that’s what’s important. Like that sea cucumber,” she said, pointing into the tank. “Want to touch the sea cucumber? It feels like wet mochi.”

“Interesting. I’ll pass.”

Sirens began blaring outside, getting louder. Ava frowned a little, looking around. Nobody seemed particularly worried about it. She took her hand out of the water and moved to a hand sanitizer dispenser to clean her hands. “Okay. I think I’m ready to move on. I’ve touched everything the sea has to offer.”

“Where to now?” 47 offered his arm to her, which she took, and started back toward the main part of the aquarium.

“The mammals? The dolphin show is whatever, since nobody’s allowed to go into the water with deadly deadly animals after Blackfish, but there’s an underwater viewing area that’s really pretty.”

“Mammals it is.”

The sirens had stopped now, and there was no sign of emergency services in the public areas they passed. There was, however, an employee stationed at the entrance to the tropical reef telling guests that there were some repairs being done in the tunnel and to come back in an hour or so. Ava didn’t seem to notice.

They reached the underwater viewing area, and Ava moved to sit on one of the benches. Around them, parents and children pressed against the railing to watch the animals swim past.

“So,” Ava said after some time watching the dolphins, “I believe you mentioned something about a sushi date?”

“Something like that.”

“Where? When? Have you been there before? Is the menu online?”
“A bit over eager, aren't you?”

“What can I say. I like a lot of foreplay.” She nudged him with her shoulder. “Well? Answer my questions, it’s not very nice to leave a lady begging.”

“You have a strange way with words.”

“You don’t like it?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Good.” She smiled a bit and reached for his hand, linking her index finger with his. “I’m still not hearing answers.”

“The restaurant I had in mind is called Momotaro. You pick the day. Yes, I’ve been there. The menu is probably online.”

“What’s good there?”

“Bad question, it’s all good.”

“Describe your favorite plate.”

“I’m not doing that.”

“You’re no fun.” she said, pouting.

He looked at her, trying to decide if she was teasing him. “You’ll see what they have when we get there. For now, look at the fish.”

“Fine, keep your secrets.” She scooted closer, snuggling against his side. After a moment, he tipped his head against hers.
Momotaro

“What’s this one?”

“Hamachi. It’s amberjack, try it.”

“What’s an amberjack?”

“Big ocean fish. Try it.”

Ava picked up the nigiri and took a tentative nibble. “Ish hard to bite.”

“You’re supposed to put the whole thing in your mouth at once. Have you never eaten sushi?”

“None that didn’t either rotate on a conveyor belt or arrive with the little plastic grass on the side.” She put the nigiri in her cheek to chew thoughtfully. “That’s really good.”

“See?”

She nodded, looking down at her plate. “Okay, what’s this one that looks like a tongue?”

“Tongue?” He leaned closer to look. “Oh. That’s the sea urchin. Uni.”

She picked it up, giving it a curious look. “Looks like a tongue.”

“You don’t have to eat it.” He said, reaching for it. “Here, give it to me.”

“Split? We can Lady and the Tramp it.” She offered the other end, then realized he wasn’t looking at her anymore. “Everything okay?”

“I’ll be back in a minute.” He said, and got up from the table, scanning the restaurant. A table in the corner was watching them, he was sure of it.

Two men, the look of a business meeting. Eating miso soup, not sushi. Who would come to a sushi restaurant and only order miso soup? He moved to the bar, examining the drinks list. The server brought the table their check, which they paid on a credit card and left without looking up. 47 made his way back to his table.

“What was that?” Ava asked once he’d settled again.

“I don’t-” he began to lie, then relented. “There was a table that kept watching us, I was concerned they were tracking us.”

“They’re probably just horrified that you wanted me to eat sea urchin.” She offered the other half of the nigiri. “It tastes like the ocean smells.”

“More for me.” He took the piece from her.

“Why would someone be tracking us, anyway? We’re not on a bank heist or something. Are we on a bank heist?”

“That reminds me… you haven’t seen your friend Derek again, have you?”

“God, don’t say his name or he might appear.” She sighed. “I haven't seen him again, but he keeps
emailing me because he thinks I blocked his phone number.”

“You haven't blocked his email address?”

“I would but I'm kind of worried that if I do, he's going to show up on the porch again or something. I don't need that. Creeper emails I can handle.”

“If he does try something again…”

“You'll be the first to know.”

“Good.”

The server brought the check to the table. Ava reached for it, but 47 was faster. “Oh come on, my turn.”

“No.” He looked at the bill, adding it up silently to be sure it was correct.

“Just let me just see it.”

“No.” He passed it back to the server with a credit card.

“But I feel guilty.”

“No.”

“Fine. Thanks.”

“You're welcome.” He signed the slip and put the card away. “Ready?”

She stood and followed him out of the restaurant. “I saw that.”

“Saw what?”

“We're not being followed. You were checking behind us when we walked out.” She caught his hand, giving it a squeeze. “Relax. You're not at work.”

“Work?” He asked, glancing down at her.

“Or wherever you've been that made you so paranoid all the time.” She gave him a slight smile. “Please. For me?”

He nodded, trying to shake the strange feeling. First the string of local jobs, now this. Something felt off, and he had to believe it wasn't him - dull instincts were bad for business. “It's not that easy.”

“I know.” They stopped at the car, and she turned to look at him straight on. “I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked that. I know better.”

He raised a hand to brush her hair back from her cheek, tucking it behind her ear. “I can try though.”

“Thanks.” She smiled a bit, leaning into the touch, then reached for the car door to get in. “Let's get home.”

Once they'd driven off, the men who had been sitting at the corner table started their car to leave.
“47. Your next target is a biochemist named Madeline Christiansen. She can be found at the University of Chicago main campus where it appears she is working in a laboratory.”

“Same client?”

“You're well ahead of me, aren't you?”

“Go on.”

“Dr. Christiansen appears to have an interest in gene therapy. We have unearthed some speculative editorials under her name about its use in fish embryos to correct genetic disorders. Some controversy regarding the implications for - well. You can imagine.”

47 made a slight noise of agreement.

“The client further requests that Dr. Christiansen's research is destroyed by whatever means are necessary to do so. I assume she has cloud storage, backup drives… anything you can find.”

“Tying up more loose ends.”

“Seems to be the case. I'll leave you to prepare.”

---

Ava pulled off her surgical gloves, putting them in the trash outside the OR. “Can you recover him without me? I was supposed to leave half an hour ago.”

“Got somewhere to be?” The technician asked, untying the cat from the table to take to the recovery cage.

“If you must know…” Ava pulled a brush out of her desk to run through her hair.

“I must.”

“I have a date.”

“Oh yeah?” the technician put the cat in the recovery cage, watching it closely.

“Yeah.”

“Attic guy?”

“You’ve got to stop calling him that, it sounds like he's a vampire or something.”

---

47 passed through the revolving door, glancing around the lobby. A security station to one side. A gift shop. A staircase up to the elevators. He moved forward, showing a mock-up hospital ID to the security guards as he passed them. Third floor, that was her office. If she wasn't in the office, she would be in the chemistry building. Room 109.

He pressed the button for the elevator and watched the numbers change as it descended. So far so
What should I call him, then?"

"His name is Tobias."

"Bullshit."

"Right? Sounds wrong, doesn't it?"

The elevator opened on the third floor, and 47 stepped out into the hallway. Several white-coated doctors brushed past him. He checked a map on the wall, and made for Dr. Christiansen's office.

Ava stepped out of the bathroom, smoothing her shirt and giving a twirl. "Well?"

"You look nice, and your patient is swallowing on his own."

"Excellent." Ava peered into the cage, where the cat was lifting his head and licking the air. "Good kitty."

47 knocked on the door marked Dr. Madeline Christiansen, and waited a moment. No response. He tried the knob. Unlocked. He pushed the door open, slipping inside. The light was on but the office was empty. His target must have stepped out for a moment. He would have to move quickly. He moved behind the desk, tapping the computer's spacebar to wake up the monitor. Not logged in, he would need a password.

"I have Dr. Christiansen on a camera in the cafeteria," Diana announced. "Not moving yet."

"Good." 47 stretched his hands over the keyboard, thinking. "I need a password."

"Have you tried 'password'?"

"Very funny."

"Swordfish?"

"Diana."

"Just passing the time," she said, typing rapidly. "The password is Charlie Romeo India Sierra Papa Romeo zero nine eight one."

"Thank you."

Ava scratched the cat on the head. "Give him food and water once he can walk around on his own, okay? I'm going to write up his chart quick and get out of here."

"Tell Attic Guy I say hi."
“I will.”

---

Deleting the cloud storage was easy enough after a few more passwords, and the back up hard drive was in an unlocked desk drawer. That should be all of it. 47 checked the time on the desktop.

“Where is the target?”

“Still in the cafeteria. Long line for the register.”

“She needs to move soon… I've been here too long.”

“You were unobserved on the way in, I don't think anyone is keeping track.”

“I have… somewhere to be soon.”

“Oh?”

“Tell me when she's leaving the cafeteria.”

“It might be a while. Where do you have to be?”

“I'm meeting someone.”

“I gathered that much. I haven't placed any reservations lately, though, have I been cut from the loop?”

“Never.” He stood from the desk, looking around the office for inspiration. “It's nothing so…”

“Date-like?” She supplied.

“Significant.” He finished.

“Of course.”

---

“Okay. His record is updated. Pain meds onboard, and he has some for tonight and tomorrow morning. Drugs are locked up. Is that everything?”

“Sounds like it.”

“Perfect. Text me if you need me, but Dr. Beran is on call.”

“Go, you're going to be late.”

---

Madeline Christiansen put her styrofoam take out container on the desk and flipped it open. The cafeteria had recently gotten a new supplier, and the quality had definitely suffered. The macaroni was nothing short of gluey. Disappointed but hungry, she dug into her lunch. Once she finished, she would head over to the lab to check on her experiments.

As she ate, she logged into her computer and opened the cloud storage client. She was confronted with a log-in screen. Odd. She typed in her password. The client denied her access. Had she changed her password recently? Was one of her students accessing the storage system from the lab?
Madeline finished her lunch and threw away the container, then stood and put her lab coat back on to head to the lab space.

---

Ava stepped out of the car, locking it behind her. She pushed her hands into her pockets as she glanced around her, then started toward the ice rink.

It was a chilly but sunny day, and she had been concerned the rink would be closed. Instead, groups of people were zipping around the rink, laughing and singing along to the music piped through the speakers overhead. Kids clung to one another as they staggered onto the ice.

She scanned the crowd, but didn't recognize anyone. She had gotten here first, it seemed.

---

Madeline opened the door to the lab and flicked on the light. “Anyone in here?” She asked, closing the door behind her. At the other end of the room, the computer monitor was lit up on the log in screen. That must have been it - a student accessing files had locked her out. She walked to the computer to shut it down.

There was a rustle of fabric behind her.

---

Ava went into the heated building where skates were rented. She smiled at the bored student who stood behind the counter, doing homework. “Hi, I'd like to rent some skates?”

---

47 closed the lid of the chest freezer, pressing down on it to make sure it sealed firmly. He then sat down at the desk and began feeding notebook pages into the paper shredder beside it. Once the last post-it had been fed through the machine, he removed the garbage bag from the shredder, tied it, and hefted it over his shoulder to take to a dumpster outside.

“Very good timing, 47.”

“Hm?”

“Your non-significant next appointment seems to be commencing nearby.”

Slight confusion, then clarity. Of course. Ava must have run her credit card for the skate rental. Records easily pulled with ICA resources. “I don't appreciate you flagging her accounts.”

“I didn't think it was wise to wait for her to vanish with a briefcase full of secrets before beginning surveillance,” she defended. “It's well within my job description.”

47 dropped the bag of shredded research into a residential dumpster a few streets from the lab. He couldn't argue with that. It was, objectively, a sensible decision that he would have encouraged if it was someone else.

“Besides,” she added. “I was curious.”

“I'm signing off now.” He said, and put the earpiece in his pocket as he approached the ice rink. Ava was seated on a bench, lacing up her skates. She glanced up as he sat beside her. “Hey, you
made it. I was starting to think you'd forgotten.”

“I just got held up with some work things.” He took the second pair of skates from her and began lacing. “All squared away now though.”

“Good. Everything go smoothly?”

“Yes.”

She stood, getting her balance for a moment before offering a hand to him. “Good. Come skate with me.”

He took the hand as he stood. “Were you waiting very long?”

“No, I got held up with work too. We're quite a pair, aren't we?” She stepped onto the ice tentatively. “I had an emergency surgery that couldn't wait for the next shift, so I had to stay late. Sweet little kitty who ate about two feet of ribbon a couple days ago. He lost a foot of small intestine, but I think he's going to be okay.”

“How did he eat two feet of ribbon?”

“I don't know. I mean, I always imagine it's like slurping up a long ramen noodle.” She pushed off from the wall to begin skating. “I don't think I've been ice skating since middle school.”

47 didn't respond. He was fairly certain he had done it at some point, probably as some kind of strength and spatial awareness training, but couldn't pinpoint a time. There was no grade levels to denote each year, nor birthdays to mark ages passing.

Ava made a lazy loop on the ice when she realized he hadn’t followed her, skating back toward him. “Come on. Skate with me.”

He pushed off from the wall to glide after her. “You haven’t fallen down yet, must not have been too long ago.”

“You just wait, it’ll happen.” She glided close to him, catching his hand. “I’m going to expect you to catch me when I do fall, by the way.”

“I can do that.”

“Good.”

They made a few circuits of the rink in comfortable silence, finding a pace that suited both of them.

“Oh, so remember those alarms at the aquarium?”

“Mhm.”

“A client told me this morning that the Shedd had to close the shark exhibit temporarily. A guy fell in and cracked his head or something and the sharks tore him apart.”

“Unfortunate. He was doing fairly dangerous research, though, that kind of thing seems inevitable.”

“Like Steve Irwin being killed by a stingray.”

“Who?”
“Never mind. Can you imagine, though? You study sharks for years, then you cut yourself on a piece of coral or something and boom. Shark food. It's like a bad sci fi movie. Killed by your own creation and all that Frankenstein stuff.”

“Almost poetic.”

“Mm. I'm sure someone out there says it's how he would have wanted to go.”

“Probably.” He held out his free hand to take hers, then pulled her along as he scraped to a stop by the wall. She stumbled, careening into the wall beside him.

“Owww…” she whined, rubbing her shoulder. “Warn me next time you're going to do that.”

“Sorry.” He drew her closer, looking down at her. “Didn't hurt you, did I?”

“I'll survive,” she said, smiling up at him and resting a hand lightly on his shoulder. “Hi there.”

“Hi.”

“Having fun?”

“I am.”

“Glad to hear it.” She slid her hand up to his shoulder, straightening his coat collar slightly. “We done skating?”

“We can keep going if you want.”

“Maybe later.” She looked down at her feet. “Can you do me a favor?”

“Sure.”

“Make sure I don't fall on my ass in the next five seconds, okay?”

“Okay.” He moved his hands to her sides to steady her, counting off seconds. “One… two… th-”

Ava pushed up onto the toe picks of her skates, pulling him down by his collar to catch him somewhere in the middle for a light kiss. She released him and dropped back down onto the blades of the skates. “There.”

“What was that for?” He asked, unable to think of something more clever. The well-honed gears of his mind had hit a momentary stutter before returning to smooth motion. Strange sensation.

“I got tired of waiting for you to do it.” She looked suddenly nervous. “Did I misread the situation?”

“No.”

“Good.” She relaxed a bit. “Was kind of worried.”

He realized Ava was speaking, and refocused.
“I think I'm ready to start skating again now, if you want.” She said, moving away from him to turn back toward the flow of traffic on the rink.

47 nodded, and followed as she pushed off back into the crowd. He could worry later.
Ava knocked on the handrail as she made her way up the stairs, pausing when she heard the rustling and sliding of something being moved in the attic room. She waited until the sounds had ceased, then asked “Can I come up?”

“Yes, come on up.”

She continued up the stairs, shifting the pile of bedding in her arms to hold the handrail. “Sorry if I interrupted anything. I'm off work today so everything is getting cleaned.” She dropped the bed sheets on the dresser. “I can come back later if you want, though.”

“No need.” He moved a few things off of the bed to give her space to work. “Here, I can help.”

“Damn right you can.” She shook a pillow out of its case and threw it at him.

He caught it with one hand and dropped it onto the floor, then caught the second one just as easily. “Hey,” he began, then dropped that pillow too when she tossed the balled-up top sheet at him. “I said I'd help.”

“You're helping by bringing this down to the washing machine for me.” She knelt on the bed to pull the fitted sheet up next. “Incoming,” she said, and tossed it to him.

He picked up the old bedding and took it down to drop into the washing machine.

Ava unfurled the new set of sheets and climbed onto the bed again to tuck the corners into place. Next were the pillows, shaking each one into its case. A hand touching her back told her 47 had returned. “Did you start the wash?”

“No. Should I have?”

“I'll get it, don't worry.” she turned to face him, then freefell back onto the finished bed with her arms stretched out. “Ahh… nothing like clean sheets.”

He moved to sit beside her, arranging the pillows as he wanted them. “You don't have to do this, you know.”

“Do what?”

“Sheets. Dusting. All of that.”

“I don't mind. Besides, I'm the one on the mortgage and ultimately responsible for the upkeep. You could move out tomorrow for all I know, and then where would I be?”

He looked down at her, sensing the tinge of uncertainty in her voice. “I'm not moving out.”

She reached up to lightly rub her hand back and forth over his back, looking contemplative. “No?”

“No plans to do so. Why, did someone say I was leaving?”

She shook her head slightly. “No. I just…” she trailed off, unable to find the right word. Don't want you to go? Worry you’ll leave me? She wasn't even sure he knew how she felt, this was no time to show her weaknesses.
“Just…?”

“Like you being here.” She said finally, not sure if she hoped he did or didn't pick up on her meaning.

“Ah.”

“So… that.”

He lay down next to her to be at eye level. “I like being here as well.”

“Because the rent is cheap as hell?” She gave a slight smile, giving him an out if he needed it to escape the conversation.

“Because you're here.”

Ava nodded, thinking that over. “Even better.”

Her phone buzzed, and she sat up to dig it out of her back pocket. “Uncle Grant!” She said as she answered the call. Then, taking the phone away from her ear, she looked back at 47. “I'm going to go start that laundry. Back in a flash.”

“Happy birthday, Uncle Grant,” she said into the phone, descending the stairs. “Did you get the care package?”

“Just as good as your mom's, kiddo.”

“Flatterer. I had help this year though.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Dough is all mine and mom’s, but I roped him into scooping.”

“Him?”

“Oh, sorry. I’m renting out the attic room.” She said, and put the phone on speaker as she loaded the washer the rest of the way.

“Him?” Grant repeated, for emphasis.

Ava sighed, picking up the question this time. “Yes, the renter is a man. Don't worry, though, he's not rapey.”

“Ava…”

“I know, I know… it's your job to worry.”

“Exactly.”

“Because I'm out here on my own.”

“And your father-”

“Would lose his shit if he were alive to hear this conversation.”

“See, I knew you knew better. Is it money? You know you can always ask if you're short on loan payments.”
“It’s not the money. I just didn’t like living alone after Lady died.”

“Could’ve gotten another dog. Big shepherd to keep you company. Gotten a boy if you wanted a man in the house.”

“Uncle Grant-”

“Okay, okay. Tell me about this guy so I can sleep tonight.”

She took the phone off speaker and put it back to her ear. “His name is Tobias Rieper.”

“What is that, German?”

“Romanian, apparently. He works in sales for some corporation, I can’t remember the name of it. Goes on a lot of business trips to go to big trade conferences.”

“I’ll bet. Spell that for me?”

“Romeo India Echo Papa Echo Romeo.”

“Thanks, kiddo.”

“Any time. Are you Googling him?”

“Not Google. So how long’s this been going on?”

“He moved in last fall, answered an ad I put in the paper. Nice guy, pays in cash, never had a problem. Oh, and he has a canary.”

“Tell me you ran a background check on him before giving him your house key.”

“You know what those cost?”

“Ava!”

“Look.” She lowered her voice, glancing out of the laundry room door to be sure she wasn't heard, then closing it. “I know. I just… have a good feeling about him. Call it intuition. He hasn't given me any reason to doubt it.”

Grant sighed. What good was logic against intuition? “Okay, okay. I know I can't stop you. But I'm going to do some asking around, and don't tell me not to because your dad's gonna haunt me if I don't. Deal?”

“Deal.”

“Take care, kiddo. Thanks again for the cookies.”

“You too, Uncle Grant. My love to everyone.” She ended the call and put the phone back in her pocket, then left the laundry room to go back upstairs.

47 stepped back from the top of the staircase when he heard the laundry room door open, busying himself with smoothing the bedsheets and definitely not eavesdropping.
“Good morning, 47. You have another Chicago assignment, this one at the Art Institute. There's a private party after the museum closes to the general public.”

“Let me guess…”

“Interestingly, it’s a new client. The targets are two men, apparent patrons of the arts. They have shared their personal collection of Degas with the museum for a special exhibit. Several are, ah… notable.”

“Notable?”

“Apparently, La Sortie de Pesage and Three Mounted Jockeys are among them.”

“Isabella art theft.”

“You know your history.” Diana sounded pleased.

“I knew there was a recovery, but they were supposed to be exhibited in Europe.”

“Ah, yes, they were. There were some issues with the permits, someone managed to lose all of them off a secure server. Several times.”

“How careless of them.”

“Indeed. Our client is not pleased that these drawings are returning to the public sphere. They are requesting that the donors are eliminated, and the drawings recovered. There is a UPS locker nearby, entry code 162439. The drawings are to be put inside, and left unattended.”

“162439.” 47 repeated, committing the number to memory.

“Correct as always. Should you need it, we've left some things for you in gallery 162, in the Eugene Schoen cabinet. Oh, and 47? Do try to enjoy the event. It took a great deal of time and resources to destroy those permits.”

“Diana?”

“You seemed to be enjoying working from home, what kind of handler would I be to get in the way of that?”

“You don't have to do that for me.”

“Don't worry, it wasn't for you.” The line went dead.

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“So… what am I looking at here?” Ava asked, tipping her head first one way, then the other.

“You are looking at a pastel sketch of two ballet dancers stretching.”
“Yes, but why am I looking at it?”

“Because it was sketched by Degas, therefore it is priceless.”

“And this one?” She walked to the next frame. “Three Mounted Jockeys,” she read.

“That one's famous because it was stolen.” 47 followed her to look at the plaque beside it.

“Stolen?”

“It was the biggest art theft in history. Two men disguised as police officers walked into the Isabella art museum, tied up the security guards, and stole 13 works of art. Including this one and the next one.”

“Wow.”

“The FBI never made any arrests. These are the first two to be returned, apparently found at a flea market.”

“I'll bet. That's what people always say when famous pieces of art show up.” She turned to look back toward the main party area, at the men holding court with the story of how they found the drawings at a flea market in southern Illinois. She leaned in conspiratorially to whisper. “Maybe they did it.”

“Who?”

“The guys who donated it. Maybe they stole the art and the rest is in their mancaves or something.”

47 considered the possibility. “Could be. The ages would be a match.”

“Maybe they wanted to wait until the reward was high enough to bring them back.”

“The reward wasn't that high.”

“The reward was ten million bucks!”

“The art could be sold piecemeal for much higher to the right collector.”

“Sometimes I worry about you.” She turned to face him, sliding her arms loosely around his neck. “You're not supposed to have reasonable, clearly thought out in advance opinions on how to flip stolen artwork.”

“You brought it up, what does that say about you?” He rested his hands on her hips, drawing her slightly closer. “Says more about you than me, I think.”

“Maybe…”

In the thick of the party, voices were raised as one of the donors began a speech about the discovery of the sketches. Champagne flutes were being distributed.

“I'll be right back,” 47 said, releasing her and patting his pockets vaguely. “I think I left my phone in the car.”

“Fine but I'm gonna drink your champagne,” she called after him, taking two flutes from the tray.

47 left the party area, circling back once he was out of sight to find Gallery 162. The furniture hall
was darkened and roped off as he approached, stepping silently over the barrier. There it was, a reddish, blocky cabinet. He slid the drawer open, peering inside. A small, sealed envelope was tucked into the back corner. Inside was a small, unmarked ampule and two syringes.

“What is this?”

“Carfentanil. Elephant tranquilizer, can be absorbed through the skin so handle it carefully. Your targets have a history of recreational opiate use, which post-mortem testing would bear out.”

“Interesting.” He held up the ampule, examining its clear contents. “This is enough for both of them?”

“Plus several bystanders, if necessary.”

47 took the envelope and closed the drawer. “Good to know.”

“How’s the party?”

“I’m missing a toast.” He stepped back over the barrier. “And, apparently, my glass of champagne.”

“Please admire Ava’s new earrings for me. These security cameras are terrible but I do like the cut of the emeralds she chose.”

He cast a glance up at the nearest camera, giving a pointed look, then turned to go back toward the party. “Noted.”

Ava handed him a nearly empty champagne flute upon his return. “Find it?”

“Yes, it was on the seat. Did I miss anything?”

“Just a pretentious toast to Degas, and some cheering. The walk to the car was probably more exciting.”

“Mm. What else did you want to see?”

“There are more ballerinas over there.” She pointed, and started moving toward the next display.

One of the donors, named Oren according to the mission documents, accosted her en route. He put an arm around her waist, pulling her in with a broad, boozy grin. “How was my toast, my dear? Have you seen our ballerinas?”

“Was just on my way.” she said, peeling his arm off of her and stepping away. “Excuse me, I’m-”

“Oh, terribly sorry!” 47 said, as he tripped forward and spilled the contents of his champagne on Oren’s outstretched arm. “Lost my footing for a moment.” He turned the champagne flute upside down to empty the last drops of the carfentanil laced champagne onto the floor as he fumbled for a napkin on a nearby table. “Please, let me pay for the cleaning…”

“No, no need,” Oren said, pushing the napkin away. “No harm done, this suit is a rental anyway.” He lifted his sleeve to his mouth to suck the last of the champagne out of the fabric. “It’ll be someone else’s problem to clean in the morning.”

“My apologies,” 47 said, stepping back and sliding his arm around Ava to resume their walk to the ballerina paintings. “Are you okay?” he asked her, once they were away.
“Yeah, fine. He was probably the least aggressive drunk guy I’ve had to deal with. Thanks for the redirect, though.” She patted his hand. “Quick thinking.”

“Of course. Are your earrings new? They catch the light well.”

Behind them, Oren swooned and stumbled to a chair to sit down, head tilted back. His partner circulated around the room, eventually returning to his starting point. Concern began to grow in his expression, and he moved to sit next to Oren, taking his arm to check for a pulse. The arm was still damp with the laced champagne, and he rubbed it dry with the side of his hand before checking again for a pulse on Oren’s wrist.

Ava leaned in against 47’s side as they looked at the series of ballerinas on display. “Thank your client for the tickets for me. This is pretty cool, being here after hours.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, hearing the words echoed by Diana in his ear. He had to restrain himself from responding. She was so pleased with herself.

The second target walked to a balcony, resting his hands on it as he looked down at the sculpture gallery below. His vision swam and blurred, then his body went limp and his vision darkened.

Screams rose throughout the party after the crash. A group ran to the guardrail, screaming for an ambulance as they looked with horror at what had transpired. One man ran back to Oren, shaking him by the lapels in an attempt to rouse him without success. Oren’s limp body slumped to the ground as the man released him to run for the staircase. First target eliminated. Below the balcony was an iron sculpture, now adorned by the second donor’s broken body draped at an unnatural angle over the top.

Ava followed the crowd to the staircase, leaning over the railing to see what had happened. “Shit,” she breathed, and looked around for 47. After a moment he was at her side, watching as blood began to form rivulets down the sculpture’s surface. “That’s a bad way to go. I wonder what happened to him?”

“I can’t imagine. They didn’t seem excessively drunk, at least not enough for such a bad fall.”

“Crazy.”

A team of security guards appeared and began shepherding the partygoers toward the exits, declaring that the party was over and there was nothing to see here. Two guards pulled the man off the sculpture, where he fell into a heap at its base. Second target eliminated.

“Wait here,” 47 said once they’d reached the main hall. “I’ll get the car, you wait here for me. No reason for both of us to fight out way through the crowd trying to get out of the parking structure.”

“Good idea,” Ava agreed and moved to a wall to be out of the press of bodies.

With Ava safely out of the way, 47 passed the parking structure to the next intersection, where a bank of UPS lockers stood beside a gas station. He entered the code, and placed the rolled up drawings inside, then closed the door. He returned to the parking garage to retrieve Ava’s car.

“Very elegant, 47. Two very neat accidents.” Diana observed with some admiration.

“The second was an accident, to a point. I didn’t expect him to come in contact with it.”

“Accept the credit if the client asks.”
“Of course.” 47 unlocked the car and got inside. “Almost a shame, though. There was a Chihuly chandelier that was calling to me.”

“No reason to destroy that much art in one night. I suspect that sculpture will already be taken off exhibit for restoration.” After a moment, she added “And possibly an exorcism.”

“If ghosts existed I would have larger concerns than broken glass.”

“True. Enjoy the rest of your evening.” The line clicked into silence.

Chapter End Notes

I really wanted someone to get impaled by a falling Chihuly, but I couldn't figure out a way for that to be 47’s doing. Also, this chapter was in no way an excuse to talk about the Isabella Art Theft.
“A new assignment for you, 47.”

“In Chicago again?”

“Unfortunately, no. I didn't think it wise to lure a French terrorist to the United States for your convenience. This time you will be traveling, so pack some bags.”

“Go on.”

“Your target is Lucas Belmont, a criminal apparently intent on becoming a fully fledged terrorist. According to our client, Belmont is planning a sarin gas attack in an outdoor market in Paris. Eliminate Belmont before he can release the sarin gas. The dispersal device, whatever it may be, should be recovered and brought to a forthcoming set of coordinates for safe disposal.”

“What do we know about Belmont?”

“Early forties, average height and build. Until recently he worked in a hospital records office. He was fired for using his access to confidential records to harass several patients. Criminal charges were not pursued.”

“Why the sarin?”

“Our client believes it to be retaliation against several of the women who reported his behavior. Two of them work at an outdoor market on Saturdays. Belmont was heard claiming this to be the time and place for the attack.”

“This sounds like enough evidence for law enforcement to get involved. Why did they hire us?”

“The client was evasive on that point. If I were to venture a guess, it would be that the sarin was obtained from someone who claimed to adhere to the Chemical Weapons Convention and would not like to receive questions about why they had a schedule 1 substance in stockpile.”

“Ah.”

“Indeed. Your flight leaves from O’Hare at 3:15 p.m. tomorrow. I will leave you to prepare.”

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47 stepped off the bus at the entrance to the outdoor market, scanning the crowd. His target would be here somewhere, waiting for his moment. Around him, clusters of people chatted and haggled with the vendors over the price of onions, flowers, bread.

The sarin would be concealed in something like a backpack or shopping bag. Belmont would be a very poor terrorist-in-the-making if he was walking around with a vial in his hand, after all. His best chance would be to locate the women who were being targeted for the attack. The sarin package would be left near one of them, or both of them, to ensure they were affected. Anyone else who was affected, he supposed, was just collateral damage.

47 moved with the flow of traffic into one of the rows of stalls, scanning faces. No target yet. “He
“Patience. We have confirmation he’s left his apartment with a backpack, he should be here soon.”

“Good.”

“In the meantime,” Diana said, her tone playful, “you can tell me more about Ava.”

“What about her?” He asked cautiously, pretending to browse a rack of clothing.

“How did you meet her?”

“I needed a place to stay, and she had one available.”

“Why her place?”

“Quiet block. Disinterested neighbors. Didn’t ask to run a background check.” He glanced around, confirming no one was interested in his conversation before continuing. “Makes breakfast.”

“Oh?”

“Mm. And leaves a coffee mug next to the carafe when she leaves for work.”

Diana could hear as close to a brag as she’d ever heard from the agent. “It must be very nice to be taken care of like that. I’m tracking the bus your target is taking, it’s being held up by traffic nearby.”

“Tell me when it arrives.”

“Of course. And she hasn’t been a hindrance to your work? You’ve brought her on several assignments now.”

“You said it yourself, two people are less suspicious than one.” He moved to a produce stall with a better view of the bus stop. “Blending in is important.”

“Blending in is using a security guard’s uniform to get through a checkpoint. Taking a woman ice skating is a date. This should be your bus, number 6204.”

“It wasn’t a date.” He stepped away from the stall, watching the passengers disembark. “I see a backpack.”

“Oh, it wasn’t? You may want to make that clearer to her next time, preferably before the kissing and the cuddling.”

“Can we focus?”

“I’m very focused. Visual match, backpack is our man. When you get home, just say ‘Ava, I have no interest in you romantically, with no desire to-”

“Diana.”

“Kiss you on an ice rink-”

‘Please, Diana.’

“Nor wake up beside you in my Parisian hotel-”
“The mission, Diana.”

“Knowing you will be there when I return from stopping terrorism.”

“I’m going to mute you.”

“You wouldn’t. Don’t let your target get away, now, he’s going into that shop.”

“I see him.” 47 moved to the next aisle, where he could watch Belmont through the front picture window. “It… isn’t like that.”

“Isn’t like what?”

“Your mocking. It isn’t how I feel.” Belmont left the shop and made his way into the crowd in the open air market. Belmont’s demeanor had changed - he seemed to be a man on a mission now, threading his way to a specific aisle. “He’s moving.”

“I would suggest following him to the pastry stand several rows away from you, as that is where the two women who lodged complaints are employed. How do you feel, then?”

“I feel like…” he paused as his target passed him on the way to the pastry stand, and turned to watch Belmont’s path through the crowd. He searched his vocabulary for the simplest way to describe emotions he was not quite prepared to name. “Like I want to answer questions she hasn’t asked.”

Diana considered this statement. “Fair enough.”

Belmont had slipped off his backpack and was carrying it at his side as he approached the pastry counter. He slowed down just past it, putting the bag down beside him as he knelt to re-tie his shoelaces. He stood again, and continued without the backpack.

47 moved to the counter, picking up the backpack easily and slinging it over one shoulder. Hopefully the sarin hadn’t been deployed just yet, and Belmont had built some sort of delay into it for his own safety. Belmont was walking toward an alley now, preparing to slip away from the crowd and out of range of the sarin. Once he had passed out of sight of the marketplace, 47 dropped the backpack beside a dumpster and moved with quiet steps behind Belmont, fiber wire in hand. He cinched the wire tightly around his target’s neck, pulling him down into the shadows to wait out the oxygen deprivation.

“Good catch,” Diana complimented. “I hope he didn't release the gas yet, for your sake.”

47 twisted the garote into one hand to free the other to feel the man’s pockets, finding an improvised switch. Next he reached for the backpack, unzipping the main pouch. A gas vaporizer with a homemade mechanism to open the shutter with a button press. “Not yet. Looks like he was going to release it remotely, once he was out of the dispersal range.”

“Good. Five minutes on the clock, then.”

He adjusted his position, leaning against the wall to wait more comfortably.

“Before you leave, I recommend stopping by La Maison du Chocolat. I've sent the address to your phone.”

“Why?”
Diana sighed. The poor woman. “To buy a small box of truffles, of course.” When he didn't respond, she prodded further. “For Ava?”

Diana could almost hear the click as the gears slotted into place. “Oh,” he said, then added, “of course.”

“What kind of chocolate does she like?”

“Is this the best time for this conversation?”

“Is there a better one?”

He looked down at the unconscious man, still a minute or two away from confirmed death. She had a point. “I don't know what she likes.”

“White, milk, or dark?”

“I don't think she's eaten chocolate in my presence. No, wait. She’s eaten M&Ms.”

“Milk chocolate, then. Does she have any allergies? Never mind, I'll look into her medical history myself.”

“Probably best.”

“No allergies. Get a small assorted box, no more than 12 pieces. More looks too showy. Five minutes are up.”

“Noted.” 47 released the garote and heaved Belmont's limp corpse into the dumpster. “Maison du Chocolat?”

“Yes. Don't forget your backpack.”

“I didn't.” He doubled back to pick it up, putting it over his shoulder.

Chapter End Notes

Much as the art museum chapter was not an excuse to read up on the Isabella art theft, this one was definitely not an excuse to read up on Aum Shinrikyo.
Ava leaned over her patient, deep in thought. “You're gonna lose all your teeth kiddo.”

“Ouch.” Her technician, Sarah, said as she leaned in for a better look. “You think so?”

“I mean, look at em.” She poked at one of the teeth with a dental probe, wiggling it back and forth. “I think if I blew on them they'd fall out.”

“I'll call the owner to confirm.” Sarah left to make the call.

“Thanks.” Ava put down the probe and reached for a bottle of bupivacaine and a syringe. She pulled the needle cap off with her teeth and drew up a measure of the drug. “Let's get this mouth happy again,” she said, and spit the needle cap into the trash can before beginning the process of nerve blocks.

Sarah returned, looking worried. “The owner is pissed that you want to pull all of Magenta's teeth and wants to know how she's supposed to eat her dental diet kibble if she doesn't have teeth.”

“If the dog doesn't have teeth, she doesn't really need the dental diet, does she?” Ava murmured as she injected the last of the bupivacaine and threw the syringe like a dart into the biohazard bin.

“I'm not going to be the one to point that out.”

“Me either. That shit’s expensive.” Ava looked up at the anesthetic monitor, staring at the measurements as she formulated a response to the owner. “We can send home some canned food, see how Magenta likes it, and keep her on that until her mouth heals up. Tell Magenta's mom she can soften the kibble with water or broth if she wants to use up the bag.”

“Got it.”

Ava stood to put on a surgical cap and mask, then resumed her seat to get to work. The dog’s teeth were ready to fall out on their own, and it seemed a few had already done so. She picked up a pair of forceps to start gently removing the incisors.

“Before you get too far,” Sarah said, hanging up the phone and leaning through the door to the dental suite, “the owner requests you leave all the canine teeth, for defensive purposes.”

“Why, is she starting an underground lapdog fight club?”

“Beats me.”

Ava sighed, pushing on one of the canine teeth with the forceps. “Fine. But if one just happens to fall out of her head while you're polishing it, I'll back you up.”

“Aye aye, captain.”

“Good. Okay, so everything but the canines. Still calling it a win for this one.”

“Win noted.” The technician picked up her clipboard to record the teeth as they were removed.

Ava called out numbers as she dropped the teeth in a bowl beside the dog’s head, leaving just the canine teeth. “She looks like a vampire.”
“Maybe that's why the owner wants them left?”

“Could be.” Ava stood to stretch, then opened a new packet of sterile gloves to put on. “Okay, time to suture what's left. Can I get 3-ought PDS?”

The technician opened the packet for her. “So, how's attic guy?”

Ava smiled behind her surgical mask. “Attic guy is good. He's in… Paris, I think?”

“Oh, for real? Hopefully he's okay.”

“How so?”

“It was on the news this morning, attempted terrorist attack in a marketplace in Paris. Apparently a backpack with a can of sarin was recovered from the scene.”

“Shit, that's scary.” Ava said, shaking her head. “Sarin? Like Aum Shinrikyo sarin?”

“Yep. Some psycho, apparently. They found him dead in an alley nearby, they think whoever hired him to do it wanted to tie up loose ends.”

“Shit,” Ava said again. “Going to have to text him when I scrub out.”

“Didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Too late.”

“Otherwise going okay, though?”

“Yeah, I think things are going okay. I mean, I keep getting emails from Creepy Guy, but he doesn’t seem to care that I haven’t responded to any of them so I guess that’s all I can ask for, right?”

“Does Attic Guy know?”

“Yeah, he’s offered to threaten Creepy Guy’s life, but I’m not quite ready for extreme measures yet.”

“Aww!” Sarah said, then shrugged at the expression Ava gave her. “What? That's kind of sweet!”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“C’mon, a guy offering to defend your honor but backing off when you say no?”

“Okay, fair.” Ava stood and pulled her gloves off. “All yours.”

“Thanks. Go check on your bae.”

“Never say bae in my presence. And he’s not my bae.” Ava called as she left the dental suite. She took her phone out of her locker and sat down on the floor to type.

Ava: Hey

Ava: Are you dead?
47: Not that I’ve noticed. Why?

Ava let out the breath she would deny she’d been holding. Silly, she told herself. Of course he was fine. Why would he be anywhere near the site of a terrorist attack? Yet she still couldn’t shake the feeling that it was entirely possible.


47: Don’t worry about me.

Ava: Don’t tell me what to do.

Ava: How was the conference?

47: Usual.

Ava: Learn a lot?

47: No. Aren’t you at work?

Ava: Between surgeries. You’re home tomorrow?

47: Probably. Why?

Ava hesitated, thumbs poised over the keyboard for a moment, then quickly typed “Because I miss you” and tossed the phone back into her locker before she could change her mind or see a response. She stood, dusted off her scrubs, and went back to the treatment room to see how her next patient was coming along.

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“Well?”

“Well what?”

“What did she say?”

“She said 'because I miss you.’” 47 could hear Diana clap her hands together appreciatively at the other end of the connection.

“Excellent!” She said, then, after a moment of listening for typing, prodded further. “Now you.”

“Now I what?”

“Well, do you miss her, too?”

47 considered the advantages of throwing himself out a window instead of having this conversation with his handler. It was no good - he’d probably survive, and would have to endure this conversation in physical pain as well as the current variety. “There are… elements that are absent when I’m on assignment like this.”
“Yes?” She encouraged.

“Her TV on at night.” He offered, casting about for the least implicative examples. “Infomercials, usually, for white noise. I can hear it when I come in late.”

“Go on.”

“And when she puts her feet under my leg when we sit together.” He said, then, as if he had to justify this action, “To keep them warm. Because her feet get cold.”

“I see.” Diana said slowly, fitting these pieces of information into her overall knowledge of the agent.

“And other things. But those are the ones that come to mind.”

“Of course.” She agreed, patiently waiting for him to come to the conclusion on his own. Finally, she could hear the tick-tick-tick of typing, followed immediately by the sound of a phone being shut down and zipped into a bag where it could be safely ignored. It would have to do.
Ava opened her locker at the end of her shift to get her bag. She picked up her phone cautiously, opening the waiting message.

47: Miss you too

She smiled a bit and put the phone in her pocket as she closed the locker and headed for the door. Halfway there, a new message popped up.

Grant: In Chicago for the night, got time for dinner?
Ava: Sure, just leaving work now. Where am I meeting you?
Grant: Hotel’s in Greektown.
Ava: Parthenon at 6?
Grant: It's a date.

“Uncle Grant!” Ava said as she was led to the table, holding her arms out for a hug.

“Hey kiddo!” Grant stood to embrace Ava tightly. “Glad you could make time for an old man on such short notice.”

“For you, anything.” She said, sitting across from him. “What are you doing here?”

“I was giving a talk at UIC, so they put me up for the night.”

“Cool. We’re getting saganaki, right?”

“Of course. I also wanted to talk to you in person.” He paused as their water glasses were filled and appetizer was ordered, then continued once the waitress had left again. “I did some checking into your guy.”

She nodded, having expected this to come up sooner or later. “Hit me with it.”

“The name he gave you shows up about 5 years ago on hotel registers and credit card slips, but that’s all. No birth certificate. No name change record. No medical history. He may as well have fallen out of the sky.”

“Well. That explains why he wanted a place that didn't ask for a background check.”

“Ava..."
“I’m just saying, glad I didn't waste my money on ordering one! It answers some questions is all. Go on, let's hear the rest of it.”

“That’s all I've got right now, but my gut says this guy is into some shit, kiddo. He’s not the sales exec he says he is.”

“I knew that already.” She gave a slight laugh, then another when she saw Grant’s puzzled expression. “Sorry. You’ve never met him, but believe me, he couldn’t sell seals to a starving polar bear. I like him, he’s great, but he has no sense of social cues.”

“Ah.”

They both sat back as the saganaki arrived, Ava clapping quietly as it was set on fire tableside, then put out with lemon juice. She cut a chunk of it from the block and wrapped it up in a piece of pita to eat. “That’s still the best part of the meal. Always loved the flaming cheese.”

“I know. Your dad was worried you were either going to go into bomb disposal or some kind of hippie fire dancing troupe.”

“If he’d let me take ballet, the second one might have happened.” She pointed her fork at him. “But no, he put me in karate. So I can’t do a pirouette without rolling my ankle but I can flip a man twice my size onto his back in under a second.”

“And which one’s more useful if your mystery guy goes off his meds and tries to put you in a wood chipper?”

“I don’t think he’s on meds.” She said thoughtfully. “I do all the cleaning, never even seen a bottle of ibuprofen on his side table.”

“Oh, even better.”

“Nor a wood chipper,” she clarified, giving him a light kick under the table. “Nor C4, bomb parts, or plutonium cores, before you ask. He has a couple of nice, engraved handguns, but if that was the mark of a maniac I’d have to cut ties with you, too.”

“Engraved?”

“Yeah, kind of a…” she drew the symbol in the air with her fork. “Squiggly shape. No idea what it means, no military insignia I’ve ever heard of.”

Grant looked interested, but stumped. “Me either. Huh.”

“Right? Nice though. We went to a firing range a while back, he let me use one of them to practice. I meant to ask about them, but never got around to it.”

He made a sound of grudging approval as the server returned to bring their entrees. “Never took you for a handgun gal.”

“There were… extenuating circumstances. I went on a couple dates with this guy I met, Derek, and he got creepy so I wanted to brush up my aim. Just in case, you know?”

“This guy Derek try to hurt you?”

“No. I mean, he grabbed my arm but I dislocated his finger before he could get any bright ideas.”

“Atta girl.”
“I’ve gotten a couple of emails from him since then, alternately begging for forgiveness and acting like nothing happened, but I’ve been ignoring them and he hasn't made another move. Oh, point in Tobias’s favor, he spotted Derek lurking around outside the house and scared him off. See? Good guy.”

“You don't have to convince me. If you say he's good to you, then he's good to you. I just don't want you to be blindsided by something big.” Grant took the bill when the server returned with it, counting out cash to leave.

“I know. Hey, there's a bakery on this block I want to visit while we're here. I'll buy you something for your flight home.”

“You spoil me.”

“I really just want an excuse to buy some treats.” She stood and offered her arm to him. “Shall we, sir?”

“We shall.” He took her arm, and together they started toward the bakery. “So tell me more about this guy you’re seeing. A fake name is nothing to go on as far as background research.”

“I never said I was seeing-” she began, then caught the unimpressed look he was giving her. “Fine, fine, but it’s not gonna help. He’s about 6-foot-something, white, blue eyes… very fit…”

“Can guess why you like him, but that describes a lot of people.” He said, opening the door to the bakery and ushering Ava inside.

“Told you it wouldn't help.” She drummed her fingers on the counter as she tried to decide what she wanted to order. “Hm… I want the kataifi, but the cakes look really good…”

Grant stood beside her, looking toward the street as she talked to herself. “Must have some distinguishing mark. Scars, piercings, tattoos…?”

“I haven’t gotten a close enough look to confirm or deny piercings, but no scars I’ve seen… Oh, tattoo!” She perked up, and pointed at the back of her head. “Barcode, right here. I thought it might be a squad thing, like a bunch of buddies get when they enlist or something. There were numbers on it, but I’ve only really looked at it once so don’t ask me what they are.”

Grant frowned slightly. “Odd ink, odd place. That might get me somewhere. Hang on a sec, kiddo,” he said, and walked to the door to speak to someone outside.

Ava stared into the display as the woman behind the counter waited patiently with a box and tongs. “I want the kataifi, but I can’t justify it to myself… Everything else is easy. Chocolate eclair? Sure, chocolate is full of antioxidants, so that’s okay. Fruit tart? Easy, fruit makes everything healthy. Ice cream? Milk has calcium, which is good for your bones. But kataifi… phyllo threads covered in honey syrup, where’s the upside to that?”

“Walnuts,” Grant supplied as he returned to stand beside her. “They’re rich in omega-3s. Good for, uh, skin or something.”

“Well, I’m sold. Kataifi it is. Oh, and a piece of raspberry mousse cake.” She offered a bag to Grant. “This one’s yours. Kataifi, baklava, and loukoumades. Enough honey syrup to put you in a diabetic coma, but it’ll be worth every bite.”

“Thanks.” He took it from her. “Did you drive or take public transit?”
“Drove. There’s a parking garage down the street.” She pointed in the general direction of the garage.

“Good. I’ll walk you to the car.” He said, and took her arm again.

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah. Thought someone was tailing us, but he looked at me like I’d lost my mind and got on a bus. You talking about the guy showing up at your place has made me paranoid, I guess.”

“I guess.” She patted his hand lightly as they headed into the parking garage. “But don’t worry. I’m used to paranoid at this point.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter brought to you by Maiden Garnet's excellent beta reading advice, without which it would have been two paragraphs long and extremely boring.
47 put his carry-on bag on the seat beside him to deter his fellow passengers, and sat to wait for his flight back to Chicago. There was still about half an hour before they started calling seat numbers, which gave him plenty of time for overthinking. It was a well-tuned skill, looking at a situation from every side, considering every aspect until everything was perfectly planned and routine. It worked well on the macro level, planning assignments down to every moment, but on the interpersonal level it was useless.

Without a mission for focus, his mind turned to the last texts with Ava. What else could he have said? Even without Diana’s goading, there was no way around it. No way to get out of returning the sentiment that wouldn’t raise questions. What else could he have said? ‘I don’t?’ Nothing? Regardless of actual intent, he assured himself, it had been handled as well as it could have been.

As if summoned by his rumination, his phone buzzed in his pocket. He unlocked it, and his train of thought was immediately derailed. The image that had been sent was a close-up photo of a canary - his canary, if he wasn’t mistaken - with a tiny paper hat taped to its head. Before he could fully process what he was seeing, a text popped up after it.

Ava: Happy Hatch-day!

47 stared at the words, attempting to discern order. Without a better option, he responded.

47: What?

Ava: According to his pet store paperwork, today is his second hatch-day.

47: Hatch-day?

Ava: Like a birthday, but for things that hatch.

Ava: Like canaries.

Ava: Or platypodes.

47: Why does it have a hat?

Ava: Celebratory purposes. Wait, hang on…

The chat window stuttered as a video downloaded. He unmuted it as it started to play, then quickly turned the volume down to a whisper when he realized what he was seeing. A circle of banana was being offered to the bird, with a shred of carrot stuck into the top like a candle. Ava was whistling “Happy birthday” as she placed it into the cage for the canary to tear into with zeal.

47: Do you have a fever?

Ava: Excuse you.

Ava: When’s your birthday, by the way?

47: Why, are you planning to order a hat for the occasion?

Ava: I didn’t BUY his hat.
Another photo downloaded, this one of the table beside the birdcage. The table was scattered with bits of tape and construction paper. Clearly there had been many prototypes.

47: But why?

Ava: Why not? I think he likes it.

Another photo, this one of the canary sleeping in his nest basket with a slightly-askew hat still in place. Before he could form a response, there was a chuckle from the next seat over.

“There, I didn’t mean to look.” The man said, having the decency to look sheepish about it. “Just heard singing and saw the photo…” He nodded at the phone. “Let me guess, girlfriend?”

“She’s…” he paused, flicking quickly through the possible responses. Girlfriend? “Yes. She’s… bird-sitting while I’m gone.”

“I feel you. Mine rounded up our cats in little Santa and elf costumes for our Christmas card last year. You’ve never seen true hate until you’ve seen an orange tabby with elf ears.”

“I can imagine,” he said, relaxing slightly. The sideways admission had passed without consequence, without alarm bells and explosions. Even better, it had passed without anyone of note hearing it.

“Anyway, sorry for snooping. Tell your girl the hat’s adorable.”

“I will.” 47 said, and looked back to the phone.

47: Fellow traveler thinks the hat is ‘adorable.’

Ava: Don’t you?

As much as his training hadn’t anticipated tiny birds in tiny hats, it had well prepared him for spotting traps. The two word message may as well have been ticking.

48: Of course I do.

Ava: :)

The speakers around the terminal crackled to life, announcing first class boarding would begin shortly.

47: Boarding now.

Ava: Have a good flight.
47 patted his jacket pocket for what seemed like the hundredth time since he’d left O’Hare Airport. The small box was still there, as he, logically, knew it would be. He closed the door to the taxi and picked up his bag, then started up the front path to the door.

It would be fine. Diana had been very clear about the procedure when they had last spoken. He was to greet Ava, and tell her he had brought her something. Give the box of truffles, explain that he had thought she might like them, and excuse himself to go unpack. Simple as that. No more complex than bypassing a security checkpoint, though Diana had encouraged him to not draw that comparison in the future.

As he approached the door, he noted that the kitchen light was on. According to the time of day, Ava was almost certainly at the table, scanning through news on her phone while she waited for dinner to finish cooking. Garlic. Parsley. Butter. All good scents wafting out of the house.

He unlocked the door, opening it a crack for a brief moment to assess before opening it the rest of the way. “Ava?” He asked, a bit more tentatively than he had intended.

She appeared from the kitchen with a smile, drying her hands on a dish towel as she walked toward him. “Hey, welcome home.”

Her hair was loose around her face, almost to her shoulders now. She was barefoot, dressed in an Iowa State sweatshirt and pajama pants. Comfortable. Glad to see him. If she knew what he’d done, would she still be smiling?

“Hi.” He put down his bags. “I brought you something.”

“Oh,” she said, eyes brightening as she moved closer. “I like surprises.” She closed her eyes and held out her hands, palms up, to receive the unknown gift. Trusting his word without question. Would he have done the same in her position?

47 felt for the box of truffles, then hesitated. Why turn down an opportunity that presented itself so clearly? He stepped forward, gently taking her wrists to lower them to her sides as he leaned in to give her a light kiss.

Ava made a slight sound of surprise at that, but moved closer and lifted a hand to the side of his neck to prevent any potential flight response. After another moment, she broke the kiss to say, “Especially that kind of surprise.”

“I meant…” he fumbled slightly, distracted by the sudden awareness of his own heartbeat, then offered the box of truffles to her. “I got this for you.”

“Those are a good surprise, too.” She took the box and stepped back to remove the wrapper and lid. “Ooh, they’re pretty.”

47 felt slight relief at that, and made a mental note to thank Diana for the recommendation even though he suspected she would be overly smug about the compliment.

“Pick one,” she said, offering the box.

“They’re for you.”
“And I want to share them with you.” She jiggled the box. “C’mon, pick one.”

He considered the box, then picked up one of the pieces to eat.

Ava waited until it was being chewed, then affected a stricken expression and said “oh no, that’s the only one I wanted!” The uncharacteristically panicked look on his face made her both laugh and feel like a complete monster for laughing. “I’m so sorry, that was cruel. Which one was that, anyway?”

“Caramelized mousse in milk chocolate. Did you really want that one?” He asked, after he’d recovered.

“Was it good?”

“Yes.”

“Then we can improvise.” She drew him into another kiss, gently encouraging his mouth open with her tongue to be able to taste the chocolate on him. His hands moved to her hips to bring her closer, which she allowed without protest. After a moment’s eternity, she released him and gave a slight smile. “You were right. That one was very nice.”

“Mm. Told you.” He rested his forehead against hers, not willing to break the spell just yet. He could have, he assured himself, he just didn’t want to at the moment.

Ava raised a hand to the back of his head, lingering a moment over the barcode before trailing her fingertips down the back of his neck to rest on his shoulder. “I’m going to go take dinner out of the oven before it burns the house down, okay?”

He took his hands off of her, letting her slip away and back to the kitchen. Spell broken, he picked up his duffel from the floor to bring upstairs. He needed to get away, and to unpack his things. Needed time to think.

Ava turned off the oven, then removed the pan. The chicken kievs were not yet burned, luckily, though they were sizzling. She lifted the lid off of the asparagus on the stove top to examine for doneness. Also good.

She looked at the open box of truffles she’d left on the table, and lightly touched her lips. So she wasn’t imagining it. At first she had wondered if she was misreading him, seeing flirtation where there was only friendly companionship. It was nice to see that she had been on the right track after all.

Still though, her dinner with Uncle Grant was still fresh in her mind. There was so much she didn’t know about the man who introduced himself to her as Tobias Rieper. His name, for one. Where his money came from, for two, though she had strong suspicions about that particular mystery. An orphanage with genetic researchers onsite. Immigrated to the United States as an adult, with no paper trail.

He may as well have fallen out of the sky.

She hadn’t lied to her uncle. She knew it looked sketchy, and had a vague idea that she should be more worried about that than she was. From what she could tell he wasn’t into trafficking drugs or humans, wasn’t bringing police to her doorstep or building pipe bombs in the attic. All she had were suspicions, and she was slightly surprised to realize that she didn’t mind them.

Of course, before things went much further she would need to know more about him, but that was
down the road - he wasn’t pushing for more than she was willing to give physically, and she was more than happy to extend the same courtesy emotionally. Instead of pushing for answers, she would wait to see what he was willing to give on his own. She suspected she would never have all the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle, but a lot of the edge pieces were in place and she was starting to make out shapes within the larger image.

She made up two plates, assessing them for artistic merit a few moments before deciding they would do. Upstairs, the sounds of unpacking and checking for bugs had quieted. She picked up the plates, balancing them and her glass of water like a waitress, and knocked on the railing as she made her way up the stairs. She would take things one step at a time. It had worked so far.
“A new assignment has come in for you, 47. I think it will bring out your… creative side. There is a 5 kilometer run this weekend along the lakefront, raising money for some charity or another. Several members of the board of directors for our now-familiar pharmaceutical company are taking part. You have been contracted to make sure they don't make it to the after party. No restrictions on the how, just the who. Photos and race numbers will be provided to you.”

“Board of directors… looks like we're getting to the end of the shopping list. I wonder what their end game is.”

“Hostile takeover?”

“Could be. All in the same part of the city though.”

“It's a Chicago based company, 47, they wouldn't be sending you to Paris for it. Ah, speaking of Paris, though, how did Ava like the chocolates?”

47 considered the not-so-subtly inserted question a moment before answering. “She… seemed to enjoy them.”

“Oh?”

“The caramelized mousse one in particular,” he said, allowing himself a moment to enjoy the memory before focusing back on the work at hand. “When is the run taking place?”

“This Saturday, with the first wave beginning at 7 a.m. I will provide a map of the course as well, though it mostly follows the lakeshore path between Grant Park and Jackson Park.”

“Open space. Lots of noticers.” 47 mused, running through the variables in his head. “Moving targets. Bystanders.”

“There are several buildings along the route containing bathrooms and water fountains, as well as several piers with rather steep drop-offs into Lake Michigan. May be useful to you.”

“I'll keep them in mind.”

“Good luck.”

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On Saturday, 47 intercepted Ava by the stairs on her way out for a morning jog. She looked surprised to see him, as he usually didn’t come downstairs until she’d already left. More surprising, he was dressed in running clothes and giving an uncharacteristically sheepish look. Still more wolf than lamb, she reflected, but there was a definite hint of wool in his expression.

“You’re up early,” she said as she pulled her hair back from her face with a headband.

“I thought you might like a jogging partner. You're not working today, are you?”

“Correct on both.”

“Then I thought… the weather is nice today, so we could go along the lakeshore path, perhaps?”
Ava gazed at him for a few moments, then nodded. “That sounds nice. Ready to go?”

They began a leisurely jog out of the neighborhood, turning toward the nearest underpass to get to the lakeshore walking path. 47 let Ava set the pace, following her on autopilot as he reviewed the mission that lay ahead. Five targets. Four men, one woman. Race bibs 059, 148, 267, 306, and 319. They would be spread out, different starting groups and speeds. With some luck, enough time between each to ensure success. The route would be busy throughout the race so subtlety, more than usual, would be key.

“Race today,” Ava said, pointing at a signpost as they approached the path. “Hope they didn’t block off the whole thing.”

“Should be fine,” 47 responded, leaving out the fact that he’d checked the night before to be sure they could get onto the route without having to be actual participants. It appeared the route was primarily on the honor system, with chalked arrows and temporary signs giving directions on where to turn back. “I don’t see barricades.”

“Good.” She slowed as they reached the lakeshore, glancing each way to not get run down by a bike. “I forget how beautiful it is over here,” she said, crossing into the grass to look out at the lake. “Pretty big waves today.”

47 stood beside her, looking not at the lake but at the north bound path. The first batch of runners would be approaching soon, and he couldn't miss his chance. He took her hand to lead her back toward the path, lacing his fingers with hers without a second thought.

Ahead he could hear the sounds of cheering, of friends and relatives supporting their runner. The runners would loop back around at Promontory Point to head back to the finish line. It was a good location - sheer, rocky drops into heavy waves. If he hadn't come with Ava he might have been tempted to camp out where the trail came closest to the rocks and push his targets into the lake one by one. Under the circumstances, he was going to have to improvise.

“Let's take the scenic route,” he suggested, indicating the spur of path that followed the Point. “Since we're not in a rush.”

“Sure. There's a good photo op on the far side, too. You can see downtown and Navy Pier.” She squeezed his hand lightly. “Indulge me?”

“Of course.” He glanced up at a nearby security camera as Diana's voice came through his earpiece.

“This is all very sweet, 47, but I question how you're planning to complete this assignment under the circumstances.” Diana sighed. “No, don't answer, I suspect I know what you'll say. Race bib 059 nearly there, blue top, green shorts.”

47 glanced around them, spotting the man in question jogging down the trail. He would be making the turn soon, coming up behind them. The window of opportunity would be brief, and timing would have to be perfect.

“Up here?” He asked, nodding ahead at a rock wall. Beyond it was a steep fall to the waves and a postcard view of the Chicago skyline.

“Yeah, right here.” She released his hand to pull her phone out of her pocket, then hopped up to sit on the rock wall. “Take a photo for me?” She asked, holding out the phone.

Race bib 059 had made the turn and was beginning around the spur of trail.
47 took her phone, swiping the camera open and walking to the other side of the path to take several photos of her with different framing.

Race bib 059 was at the back of the pack of runners, lagging further on the incline rising toward the lakeshore path.

47 held out the phone to Ava, staying where he was. “See if these are what you wanted,” he said, giving up the phone once she’d crossed the path to his side and moved onto the path to intercept his target. He caught the man by the collar, other hand coming around to choke off his breath before he could make a sound of protest. He gave 059’s neck a sharp snap as he pulled him to the rock wall and hurled him down into the spraying waves.

He turned back toward the path, elimination complete, just as Ava looked up from her forensic analysis of the photos. “I like these two,” she said, swiping between them.

“Both are good,” he agreed.

“Now one more,” she said, moving to stand beside him against the rock wall and switching to the front facing camera. “If you're willing? Just for me, I won't put it on Facebook or anything. Won't even make you smile.”

He picked up her meaning after a beat and nodded his agreement, putting his arm around her waist. Her breath was warm on his skin as she snuggled closer for a selfie, resting her cheek against his collar. He tipped his head against hers, nuzzling slightly into her hair to obscure himself from the lens. Citrus shampoo.

“Perfect,” she said, and stepped back. “Shall we continue?”

They linked hands and started back to the main path to continue north.

“Unbelievable,” Diana said once the pair was underway. “The next target is wearing bib 148, black skirt, red top. Ponytail. You have some time before she’ll be in sight.”

“Got it.”

“Hm?” Ava looked up at him. “You say something?”

“No. Come on,” he said, and started back into a jog. She followed.

After a short distance, he realized she was lagging behind and glanced back at her. “I can slow down if you want.”

“No need. Just enjoying the view,” she said, giving a slight smirk and gesturing him on with a hand. “Don't worry about me, I'm happy back here.”

Though still unclear on her meaning, he focused on the path ahead, and the upcoming mass of runners. Somewhere in there would be his next target. Female, red top, black skirt, race bib 148. This one would be trickier, since the target was surrounded by possible witnesses. Strangulation would take too long, and snapping her neck would be too obvious. The loose jogging clothes hadn’t been very forgiving to his arsenal, containing few pockets to stash supplies. No fiber wire, no knives. A small selection of poisons was all he’d been able to store - emetic, lethal, hallucinogenic. The trail ran close to danger on both sides here: on one side, the crashing waves of Lake Michigan, and on the other the speeding cars on Lakeshore Drive. A stumbling, confused runner could end up in either location very easily. Hallucinogenic poison it would be, then.
“The target is approaching, middle of the pack,” Diana said as the group of runners came closer. “The only red top in the group, luckily. Would be a shame to eliminate the wrong one.”

47 slowed, then stopped and knelt to retie his shoelace and slip the dose of hallucinogenic poison into his palm. Ava stopped at his side, dropping a hand to his shoulder to rub lightly. “You okay?”

“Just a loose shoelace.” He lingered a moment to enjoy the impromptu massage before getting back to his feet. “Keep going?”

“Sure.” She said, letting her hand slide down his arm as he stood. “C’mon,” she said, and pushed off into a jog ahead of him, moving to the edge of the path to stay out of the way of the cluster of runners.

He scanned the runners quickly - there she was, running at the edge of the group with a few other women. He readied the syringe of poison and jogged toward the edge of the cluster to pass around them. With a quick motion he administered the poison to his target as she passed, then dropped the emptied syringe to crush the barrel under his shoe and disperse the glass across the asphalt. It would blend in with the broken bottles tossed from the road. Evidence removed, he picked up his pace to catch up to Ava, encouraging her along to get them out of range before the poison took hold.

Less than a minute later, runner number 138’s foot caught on her opposite ankle as her vision began to swoon and develop auras. Either there were UFOs swirling around her or something had happened to the headlights of the cars on Lakeshore. A few stumbling steps later, she became convinced her initial assessment of UFOs was correct, and adjusted her trajectory to sprint toward them. Her job paid well, but she had always dreamed of being an astronaut. Now might be her only chance. “Take me with you!” she shrieked as she vaulted the guardrail and into traffic.

“Target eliminated,” Diana announced soon after, once the ambulance arrived and determined nothing could be done. Water intoxication, the radio chatter had theorized, or heat exhaustion. Maybe just off her meds. In any case, there was no need to turn on the ambulance siren on their way to the hospital. “It’s put quite a crimp in that section of the race, but I think they’ll overcome it soon.”

“Good,” he said under his breath. “Next up?”

“In the second wave of runners, only just starting. Enjoy your run, I’ll tell you when he’s close. Oh, and see if you can find out more of Ava’s favorite things. You’ll need to know eventually, and now’s as good a time as any.”

“I don’t-” he began to protest, as he would if he were alone, but caught himself as Ava glanced curiously at him. Quick recovery was necessary. He picked up his pace to jog beside her. “I realized I don’t know what you like,” he said, forging ahead when she continued to look confused. “The next time I go on a business trip, I mean. I don’t know what to bring back for you.”

She considered the non-question for a few paces. “You know you don’t have to bring me anything, right? I’m just happy getting you back at the end.”

47 could hear a slight ‘awww’ from Diana, just loud enough for her microphone to pick up. Between the two of them, he was trapped. His own doing, he knew - he was the one who invited Ava - but trapped all the same. There was no way back, the only thing he could do was forge ahead. “I know, but say I saw something and thought of you, and didn’t know if you’d want it.”

Ava hummed softly as she thought it over, slowing her pace to a walk. So he was thinking of her
while he was away? That was promising. “I like anklets.”

“Anklets?” He fell into step beside her, watching the trickle of runners ahead of them for signs of his next target. Not yet.

“You know, like a bracelet but on your ankle?” she said, unsure if he was surprised at the suggestion or just had never heard the word before. It could have gone either way. “I can’t wear earrings or necklaces or anything at work because animals have a tendency to snag their claws on them, but anklets are safe.”

“Anklets,” he said again, as if committing this fact to memory.

“Or food, of course.” she said, suddenly concerned she was going to end up with a closet full of anklets and wouldn’t have the heart to say no. “You can’t really go wrong with food, everywhere sells something different and it gets eaten so you don’t have to figure out where to put it. Like the truffles, those were perfect. Rich and decadent and gone in like three days.”

“Diana will be thrilled,” he said, watching the runners ahead. Was that race bib 267 in the next pack? No, 251. Surely it would be soon, then.

“Oh! Should I be thanking her for them?” She teased.

“She may have helped with the selection process,” he said, ignoring the ‘yes’ from Diana in his ear.

“Well then, tell her thank you for me.”

“I will.” In his ear, Diana warned him that the next target was just ahead.

“And that I prefer gold tones over silver, milk chocolate over dark, and can’t help but view bouquets of flowers as a reminder that everything is slowly dying.”

“Noted.” He caught sight of the runner, who was detouring into one of the public bathrooms stationed alongside the trail. “I’ll be right back, okay?” he said, gesturing to the bathroom as he broke away from her.

“You know where to find me,” she said, moving to the side of the road to let the runners stream past.

47 stepped into the bathroom, where race bib 267 was standing at the mirror splashing water on his face to cool off. They were alone in the small room - there was nowhere for someone to hide even if they wanted to. He stepped behind his target, and brought his hand down on the back of the man’s neck to slam him downward into the bowl of the sink. The man scrabbled at his arm, then went limp after another strike. 47 dragged the man into the stall, locking him inside to prevent discovery for a while.

“That makes three,” Diana said. “Just two targets left.”

“Ava likes milk chocolate, dislikes flowers,” he said, returning to the sink to rinse out the blood.

“Very good work.”

He turned off the sink, then checked in the mirror for any traces of blood before leaving.

“Sorry, where were we?” He asked, motioning Ava along with him to continue their walk.

“Talking about your inestimable administrative assistant.”
“Inestimable might be a strong word…”

“Indispensable?” She suggested.

“Nearly indispensable.”

“Nearly?” Diana interrupted, voice mildly offended.

“It would be difficult to do my job without her,” he amended. “She makes everything run smoothly.”

“Oh? Like what?” Ava asked, interest piqued. It was a rare moment when he spoke about himself, and she tried not to waste them when they appeared.

47 considered the question a moment as they walked. “She organizes meetings and works out details with clients.”

“Details like what?”

“What the contract will entail. What the client wants, and any conditions they have for the project.”

“Conditions?”

“Staying within a certain budget, using only a specific supplier for materials…” he trailed off, unable to think of a euphemistic way to explain further. What else could he say? That she tells him where, when, how, and who to kill, and he carries it out? No. Not if he ever wanted to see Ava again. “And she keeps me in the loop on any changes during the course of the contract,” he concluded.

“Hell of a lady,” Ava said. “She sounds like she knows her stuff.”

“At least someone appreciates it. There's a water station ahead,” Diana said. “I don't know that it'll be helpful, but your next target is approaching it.”

47 looked at the water station, running scenarios in his mind for its usefulness. If Ava hadn't been with him he could have gotten a race volunteer outfit and be done with this easily. Hand a spiked cup of water to the right person, and the autopsy would show cardiac arrest, not uncommon in runner deaths. It could still work, with a little luck and misdirection.

“Thirsty?” he asked Ava, nodding at the water station.

“I think those are for the runners. Besides,” she held up her water bottle. “I came prepared.”

“I didn’t,” he said, and diverted toward the water station to examine the rows of small cups set out for passing runners. Race bib 306 was just ahead, also closing in on the water with a hand out to reach for a cup. 47 intercepted the cup his target was reaching for, then looked slightly ashamed as he offered it to its rightful drinker. “Whoops,” he said as the target glared, grabbed the cup, and disappeared back into the crowd. The target didn’t seem to notice the slight swirl of yellow as the poison dissolved into the water, and drank it down in one gulp.

47 recapped the palmed vial and slipped it back into its hiding place as he picked up another of the water cups for himself. He sipped at it as he reunited with Ava. “Much better.”

“Can’t take you anywhere with cups, can I?” She asked with a smile as they resumed their walk.
“How so?”

“We go to a gallery opening, you spill a drink on one of the donors. We go for a jog, you drink-steal.” She uncapped her water bottle to take a long drink before continuing. “Remind me to never go on a distillery tour, someone’ll get crushed by a rolling whiskey barrel or something.”

“Maybe it’s your influence, I never had this kind of thing happen before I met you,” he said, which wasn’t entirely false. Without her at his side, he was freer to engineer his contracts well in advance, not on the fly. There was a kind of thrill, such as it was, in the sleight-of-hand technique, but she seemed to be catching on a bit more than he liked.

The idea of a falling barrel - about 200 kilograms, give or take - was something to remember for another assignment, though. A solid accident kill.

“Race bib 306 has collapsed of an apparent cardiac arrest.” Diana confirmed. “Last one, bib 319.”

“No?” Ava asked, recapping her water bottle. “And what kind of thing did happen before you met me?”

He considered the question. Careful now. “I worked a lot.”

“You still work a lot,” she teased.

“By percentage, less now.” He glanced over at her, trying to read ahead in the conversation. “Because of you.”

“Sorry, I think I’m getting mixed messages... Your tone sounds like this is a good thing but your words sound like I’m ruining your career?” Ava asked, voice edged with anxiety.

“No,” he said quickly, stopping to look at her directly now. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Oh, good.” She looked relieved.

“I meant… 24 hours in a day. Subtract five for sleep-”

“You only sleep five hours a night?”

“And you have 19 hours for everything else,” he continued undeterred. “In my case, everything else was work. Travelling, meeting with clients, assignments, paperwork, follow-up.”

“On five hours of sleep.”

“But now,” he said, taking her hands and squeezing them lightly to shut her up, “That’s 24 minus five, minus the duration of a jog, of a dinner, a movie, a museum tour. “ He pressed her hands together between his. “And the concept of work-life balance becomes less alien.”

The corner of Ava's mouth quirked up into a slight amused smile. “That is the most mathematically convoluted way to say you like spending time with me.”

“You asked.”

“Fair.” She stretched up onto her toes to give him a quick kiss. “Ready to head back?”

He glanced back for any sign of his final target. Had he missed him? Had Diana warned him and he wasn't listening?
“Your final target will be along soon,” Diana said, as if reading his mind. “At his current pace, he will overtake you before the turn. Keep alert.”

“Yes, let's head back.” He agreed, and they turned to follow the flow of runners back the way they'd come. Ava offered her water bottle to him, which he took for a drink before passing back. “Thank you.”

“So, how long do I get to keep you?”

“Until what?”

“Until you run off to go meet a client somewhere exotic and exciting.”

“Ah, that. There's a conference in Greece that I'll be attending in a few weeks. Unless something changes, I'll be here until then.”

“You're going to Greece?” She asked, suddenly excited.

“Yes. Why, do you want to come with me?”

“No, I mean, yeah, of course, but with way more notice so I can put in for the time off work first. But what I meant was that I know what you can bring back for me. If you want to, of course. You don't have to.”

“What is it?”

“Kataifi. It's this shredded phyllo thing with honey syrup and walnuts, and it's delicious. I had one when uncle Grant came to visit a couple weeks ago, and now I'm craving another.”

“Kataifi,” he echoed, both to remember the word and to make sure Diana heard it for later reference, then- “Your uncle Grant visited?”

“I didn't tell you? He came out for a lecture at UIC, so we met for dinner.”

“Ahh.” He paused a moment, trying to approach his real question without raising suspicion. “How is he?”

“Good. Keeping busy. I told him about work, and about you…” she trailed off, taking another drink of water.

“About me?” he prompted when she didn't elaborate.

“Mhm.” She gave him a slight reassuring smile. “About how I like having you around, and how you chased off Derek for me… and pictures of the canary, of course. You know, stuff that matters to father figures.”

“I wouldn't know,” he said honestly, willing himself to relax a bit. That wasn't dangerous. None of that was compromising, not really. Just talk.

“Oh, right. Sorry.” She gave his arm a light squeeze. “He just wanted to know I was safe is all. I assured him I was.” She offered the water bottle again.

“You are,” he agreed, taking the bottle to drink.

Diana’s voice broke through his thoughts. “47, your final target is- oh, never mind.”
He glanced up as a jogger pulled up on Ava's other side. Race bib 319.

“Do you know you over-pronate?” The runner asked as Ava looked over at him. “I was watching your feet, they roll into the arch a little more than they should.”

“Hadn’t noticed,” she said, looking down at her feet a moment, then back up at the runner. “I’ll keep an eye on it, I guess.”

“There are really high quality orthotics you can put in your running shoes,” he forged on, keeping pace with her as she slowed to a walk in an attempt to deter him. “It’ll keep your arches healthy if you’re really serious about running.”

“I’ll look into it. Fine for now though.” She glanced up at 47, hoping against hope that he who hadn’t picked up on a single non-verbal cue thus far, would pick up on the one she was trying to telegraph now. “Do you over-pronate? I’ll have to watch the next time we run together.”

Race bib 319 ignored this. “And if you’re interested in the orthotics, you should give me a call,” he said, producing a business card to offer to her. “I know a guy at the company that makes custom inserts, I’d love to talk to you about what you’re looking for. Maybe over dinner, get to know each other better, see where things go?”

Ava took the business card, and held it out to 47. “I’m pretty sure I’m working that evening but, you know what, my boyfriend might be interested.” To her great relief, the message seemed to have gotten through.

47 placed his hand possessively on her low back as he took the card to examine. “Yeah,” he said, glancing up at the man whose name was apparently Alan Jorgenson. Name matched the contract. He shook the water bottle, then handed it back to Ava. “Sorry, I drank the last of the water. There should be a sink in the bathroom over there, though, to refill it.”

She gladly took the excuse, and slipped away to refill the water inside.

Once she was gone, Jorgenson turned back to 47. “Hey, I didn't know,” he said preemptively, raising his hands. “And you can't blame a guy for trying, right?”

47 gave an agreeable nod that did not include a smile. “No harm done,” he said, and motioned toward the nearby sea wall. “Now, I do have a few questions about your products.”

“So sure,” the man said, relieved he wasn't going to be beaten to paste. He followed 47 around the edge of the the sea wall. “Now I don't have brochures, obviously, but I can send you some literature by email.”

“Perfect.” This would be far enough. The sea wall came up about waist high, and took three levels down to the crashing waves of Lake Michigan. Well out of sight of any joggers. Or Ava, he reminded himself. She would be back soon, he had to work quickly.

The man was bent over his phone, trying to use his body to shield the screen from the sun’s glare. “Okay, email address?”

47 swept Jorgenson’s legs out from under him, knocking him to the concrete. There was a sharp, wet crack as the back of the target's head hit the ledge of the sea wall. 47 caught the man's jaw as he fell, and gave his neck a hard twist.

“Bit dramatic,” Diana observed as 47 pushed the body into the lake.
“Dramatic would have been to inject him with the neuromuscular blockade agent to paralyze him and put some rocks in his pockets before pushing him in so he drowns slowly but fully aware,” 47 replied, watching the body sink in the waves.

There was a thoughtful pause before Diana answered. “Yes it would.” Another pause. “My view is poor here. Did you-”

“My view is poor here. Did you-”

“Diana, that would be petty. I'm a professional.”

“Of course.”

A tap on the shoulder made 47 turn, a bit more sharply than intended. Ava flinched back in response. “Didn't mean to startle you,” she said.

“Was lost in thought, don't worry about it.”

“Thanks for chasing that guy off,” she said, lifting herself to sit on the sea wall, legs dangling.

“Any time,” he said, moving in front of her to block any potential view of the body. He was fairly confident it wouldn't resurface for a few weeks, but you couldn't be too careful.

Ava took his hands to pull him gently closer to her. “You're a better German Shepherd all the time. Just a shame her name was Lady, not a very masculine nickname for you.”

“I'm sure you can think of something else to call me,” he said, linking his hands behind her back.

“Suggestions?”

He felt the sudden urge to tell her, to rip down the wall he'd built between them so long ago. It was a foolish, dangerous urge, though, and he pushed it away. Not the time, not the place. It was just as likely to never be.

“I suggest we get home,” he said, lifting her easily off the sea wall to put her on her feet. “I just remembered I didn't have breakfast yet.”

“Sure. Whatcha want?” she took his hands as they started back to the path.

He considered his options a moment, then, “Pancakes?”
“There’s someone on the phone for- oh.” The receptionist paused as he entered the treatment room.

Ava turned to look at him, continuing to scrub her hands with a surgeon’s brush. “Who is it?” she asked suspiciously through her face mask. This had become her habitual response since the last time she had picked up a call from an owner to hear Derek on the other end of the line, asking why she had blocked his e-mail address.

The receptionist checked the sticky note in his hand. “Alan Hauser? New client with a rabbit, says the rescue referred him to us for it.”

She relaxed, and pressed the sink’s foot pedal as she leaned in to wash the soap from her arms. That checked out, at least. Rabbit rescues were a common source of referrals, since the ones nearby didn’t have their own surgical suites. “Neuter or spay?”

“Spay.”

Ava stepped off the foot pedal, letting the water drain down her arms and into the sink drain. “Sure. Let him know my surgery days, tell him she has to stay overnight.”

“Will do.” The receptionist turned and left as Ava pushed the surgical suite door open with her back and went inside to begin.

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Ava stepped off the bus at her stop, feeling in her pocket for her house keys. Her gaze swept across the streets around her, looking for anything that might be out of place. There was an unfamiliar black Ford Fiesta idling at the corner with two men inside. Odd, but not unheard of - probably a rideshare picking up a passenger. Also odd that they were watching her walk home instead of looking for the passenger they were picking up.

She flicked through the keyring as she mounted the porch and let herself into the house, locking the door behind her. “Hey, did you see-” she began, the rest of the question vanishing from her mind as she entered the living room.

All of the furniture had been pushed to the walls to make space for an exercise mat, upon which her housemate was currently stretching. He looked up when she spoke, releasing the hurdler’s stretch he’d been holding. “You’re home,” he said, starting to stand.

“Uh huh. But don’t stop on my account,” She said, admiring the view. His shirt had been discarded on the couch, an uncommonly careless gesture. He must not have expected her to be home yet. She’d have to make sure to get home earlier if this was what she’d been missing. She moved to sit on the couch and block access to the shirt in case he got any funny ideas about putting it back on. “Please, proceed.”

47 gave a slight shrug and returned to the task at hand, rolling onto his front to push up into a plank position. “In for the night?”

“Yup.” She tucked her feet up under her body, wondering mildly if she should pop some popcorn while she enjoyed the show. “You?”

“I could use your help with something, actually, if you’re willing.”
“What is it?”

“The birdcage needs to be cleaned, but I couldn’t find a box to put him in. Can you hold him while I scrub?”

“Sure.” She said, only slightly disappointed by the favor he needed. “When?”

“Now?” He got to his feet, bouncing slightly on his toes a moment to loosen up his muscles as he glanced around the room. “Do you have my shirt?”

“Yup.” She didn’t move.

“...can I have it back?”

“Nope.”

“Why not?” he asked, tipping his head slightly like a confused puppy.

“You’re about to wash a birdcage, you don’t want to splash dirty water on it.”

He considered this, then nodded. “Makes sense. Would you get the cage?” He rolled up the mat and set it aside, then started moving the furniture back to where it belonged. Once everything was in place, he met Ava in the laundry room, where there was a sink large enough for the cage pieces to be scrubbed.

Ava put the cage down on top of the dryer, and opened one of the little wire doors to put her hand inside. The canary scooted across a perch toward her, then hopped onto her fingers. She withdrew the hand and bird, hopping up to sit on the washing machine with it. “You’re up.”

“Nice trick,” he observed as he began breaking down the cage to clean. “I usually just grab him while he’s flapping around.”

“That’s why he likes me better than you.” she said, gently stroking the canary’s back. “Because I’m nice.”

He plugged the sink and started the water. “Hm. I see.”

“So, how was work?”

“Work?” He asked, trying to come up with a plausible answer as he put the cage walls into the sink to soak. “It went fine. Doing some background research on a company I’m working with, to get a better grasp of their… future needs.” Not entirely incorrect. He had spent much of the morning reading the news reports of the recent Chicago assignments, looking for any indication of what they were planning for the endgame. Lots of pithy PR quotes about what good salespeople, scientists, and company leaders they had been. Nothing to indicate how they were connected, or where all this was headed. He wasn’t surprised by this finding, but he had hoped for more.

“Cool. What company? Or can you tell me?”

“Can’t tell, sorry. Trade secrets, that kind of thing.”

“Mm. Hand me a washcloth?” She asked, then draped the cloth over the bird, grasping around its wings to turn it onto its back in her palm. She took a pair of nail trimmers from her pants pocket, and began carefully clipping the bird’s nails.

“How was your day, then?”
“I spent my morning removing a Boston terrier’s right eye.” She said, then went on when he didn’t react with horror. “He had glaucoma we weren’t able to control with meds, so his owners booked him in for an enucleation.” She squinted down at the bird’s nails, trimming them just a bit shorter. “You wouldn’t believe hard it is to actually get an eyeball out. Movies make it look so easy, you know?”

47 nodded, declining to mention that he knew exactly how much pressure and dissection was required to remove an eyeball.

Ava put down the nail clippers and continued her examination of the bird, stretching first one wing, then the other. “He’s going to be much happier now, though. And the ladies at the dog park are going to love him.”

“Are they?” He drained the soapy water out of the sink, and turned on the faucet to rinse the cage components.

“Sure. Women love scars on any species.” She smiled a bit and nudged 47’s side with her foot. “You never noticed?”

“Can’t say I did.” He said with a slight shrug. It had never crossed his mind before. Any injuries he sustained during missions were generally gone in a few days, provided the bullet was removed in a timely manner. Genetically-enhanced healing had made downtime and scarring something that happened to other people.

Exam finished, she let the bird back upright on her hand. She leaned forward slightly to sweep her gaze over his bare skin, all smooth paleness without so much as a tan line to mar it. Odd, now that she was thinking about it. “Yeah, I guess you wouldn’t have.”

47 picked up a towel to dry the cage before snapping it back together and putting a layer of paper into the bottom. “There. Much faster with someone to hold him.”

“Glad to help.” She released the bird back into the cage, then hopped down from the washing machine. “Oh, I was going to ask when I came in, but you distracted me… there was a car I didn’t recognize when I got off the bus, was going to ask if it had been there all day or if I’m just being paranoid.”

“Derek’s car?”

“No, two guys. Just sitting in a black Ford Fiesta watching me walk home, like a couple of weirdos.” She shook her head. “Sorry. I’m being paranoid. Forget it.”

47 pulled the garbage bag out of the can, and tied it up. “Could be,” he acknowledged. “Could be something, though. I’ll see if anyone suspicious is out there when I take this to the dumpster, okay?”

Ava looked relieved at that - both that he didn’t think she was crazy and that he was going to check it out. “Okay. Thank you.”

He nodded and put the bag over his shoulder as he went out the front door, scanning the street for anything that didn’t belong. No Ford Fiesta. He threw the garbage bag into the dumpster, then crossed the street to look at the place she had seen the car. There was a scattering of pistachio shells and an empty water bottle on the curb - someone had been here for some time, but it was hardly diagnostic. It could have been someone waiting for the bus to arrive. At a loss, he turned and went back into the house.
“Well?” Ava’s voice echoed down the stairs as she put the birdcage back on its dresser.

“No Ford Fiesta, but some indication that someone spent a fair amount of time at that corner.” He said, climbing the stairs to meet her on the landing.

“Great. Someone loitering on our street all day.” She said, looking toward the front door as though someone might burst through at any moment.

“Ava,” 47 said, gently lifting her chin to make her look at him instead. “There’s a bus stop there. The car could have been someone picking up a friend, and everything else could be commuter debris.”

She nodded slightly, feeling a rush of irritation. Not at him, but at herself for getting worked up over nothing, at Derek for giving her something to worry about. “True.”

“Good.”

“And thanks,” she said, moving closer to wrap her arms around him in gratitude.

“For what?” He asked, suddenly acutely aware that he hadn’t put his shirt back on yet. Her hands were soft and warm on his scapulae, her heartbeat thrumming steadily against his chest.

“Putting up with me.” She murmured.

“It’s mutual.” He gave her a gentle squeeze, then released her. “I’ll help with dinner.”

Ava nodded and led the way back downstairs to start taking ingredients out of the refrigerator. “You’re gonna help, huh?”

“If you’ll have me.” he said, detouring to the living room to pick up his shirt to pull back on. Knives and spattering oil were no environment for bare skin regardless of healing ability.

She tossed a bag of green peppers to him. “Chop these up for me?”

He caught the bag and put it on the counter, then took the chef’s knife out of the knife block. With his free hand, he rinsed the peppers, then lined them up by size on the edge of the cutting board.

“What?” He asked, sensing her eyes on him.

“Nothing. I’ve just never seen someone hold a knife like that in the kitchen.”

47 looked down at the knife. The handle was gripped in his hand like a dagger, the blade pointed backward with the flat edge against his forearm. “Oh,” he said, and flipped the handle around to point the blade forward. “Cut all three?”

Ava laughed and gently plucked the knife from his hand to swap for a more delicate chopping knife. “Use this one, Jack the Ripper,” she teased. “Green peppers aren't going to fight back. Yes, all three.”

He tilted the knife to feel the weight and balance, then began chopping and seeding the peppers. “You can tell I don't cook, can't you?” he said conversationally after the first pepper had been diced and pushed aside. “One of the gaps in my knowledge.”

“I can tell.” She said, putting ground beef into a soup pot to brown. “You were lucky to show up at my door, then, because it's one of my favorite things.”
“I was,” he said, without a trace of a lie, and offered her the green peppers.

She took them to add to the pot, then handed him a peeled onion. “Small pieces for this one. I used to cook with my mom when I was a kid, then after she passed I cooked for me and my dad, then me and Lady. It's nice. Meditative.”

“Ah.”

“Don't 'ah’ me. You must have hobbies or stuff you do to wind down after work.”

The awkward silence that followed lasted long enough for the diced onion to make it into the pot.

Ava cleared her throat to break the silence, then, “I was thinking… you keep taking me places, and I’d like to take you somewhere this time.” She glanced up at him. “Not an art gallery, sorry.”

“Ah.” An unexpected development. No mission, no need for cover or a distraction. A real date, no motives.

“So… Friday night?” She ventured when he didn’t offer more than a syllable of response. “And I’ll drive. It’s a surprise. Unless you don’t want to.”

“No,” he said quickly, “that’s not what I meant. I do want to. Friday night is good.”

“Cool.” She smiled a bit. “Friday night it is. 7 o’clock?”

“7 o’clock,” he confirmed, tipping the cutting board of his remaining ingredients into the pot. “Now what?” he asked as she put the lid on to let the soup simmer.

“Now we wait for all the ingredients to make friends and turn into soup. C’mon, let's find something on TV.” She tugged his sleeve lightly, then led the way to the couch. “Maybe the Food Network. Teach you what a tomato knife is.”

“I assume it’s for boning chicken,” he said, following her to sit and putting an arm around her.

“See, you’re learning already.” She smiled, snuggling in against his side. Better than she expected, actually.
47 felt a growing sense of foreboding as Ava signaled to the bus driver to stop at Foster and Ravenswood. Their surroundings had become increasingly familiar to him as they neared their destination, and he was now realizing why. He followed Ava off the bus, and stared up at the sign over the door as she stood beneath it with her hands up like Vanna White to indicate their destination.

“Ta da!” She said, wiggling her fingers like sparklers. “Big Joe’s 2&6.”

“Turtle racing,” he said, knowing where she was headed.

“Oh, you’ve been here before?” She asked, opening the door to usher him inside.

“Once, a few years ago. I was meeting a client.” He reminded himself that Ava didn't need to know the client had been a turtle. He had tried very hard to forget about the contract on the turtle.

“Odd place for a meeting.” She twined her fingers with his as she led him toward the bar to look at the drink specials.

“It was.”

“Hmm…” she examined the specials card. “Turtle themed martini of course, a few things with blue Curacao, gross… something called a Bare Knuckle Boxer…”

“Not that one,” he interrupted, grimacing.

“Why, have you had it before? Is it gross?”

“I made one for a business contact once,” he said, looking over her shoulder at the menu. “At an event.”

“What, and you were moonlighting as a bartender?” She teased. “Sales not working out?”

“Ha ha. The bartender didn't know how to make one, but I knew the recipe so I made it for him.”

“So what's in it?”

“Rum, vodka, and orange juice.”

“So why is it green?” She asked, watching one be handed to someone at the other end of the bar.

“In my experience, the green is from an additive.” He glanced down at her. “Food dye, flavored vodka…” *Rat poison*, he added mentally. He got the attention of the nearest bartender. “I'll have an old fashioned.”

“And an amaretto stone sour for me,” Ava added, putting down the menu card.

“Got it,” the bartender said, and tore off two raffle tickets to hand back along with the drinks. “Hang on to these, now. Six races tonight.”
47 took his glass, and offered the pair of raffle tickets to Ava along with her drink. She took the tickets, looking uncertain. “Are you sure? One of those is yours, you might win.”

“I’m sure. You’d make a much better turtle racer than I would.” He planned to stay as far away from the turtles as he could tonight. Time had not, in fact, cured all.

Ava shrugged and put them in her pocket for safekeeping. “So,” she said, turning to lean back against the bar counter, “tell me about Greece.”

“Greece?” He asked, turning as well to survey the room. Not much had changed since he had been here last, aside from the employees. Same well-marked exits, camera locations, racing set-up. Why mess with success, he supposed. “Capital is Athens, population about 11 million, composed of a mainland with—”

“You mentioned you were going to a conference in Greece in a couple of weeks.”

“Oh, that. What do you want to know?”

“Have you been there before?”

“A few times, for work.”

She gave a light laugh. “Do you ever go anywhere not for work?”

“Work sends me a lot of interesting places,” He gestured to the bartender for another round of their drinks, and handed two more raffle tickets to Ava. “I like that about it.”

“I know I would,” she said, putting the tickets with the others. “I’ve been to Belize once, for an internship, but that’s about all. Think we’ll get to race tonight?”

A cluster of college-aged men passed them with fistfuls of tickets and bottles of cheap beer. They were singing something indefinable.

“I think they have the advantage,” 47 said, nodding at the men.

Ava shrugged. “Maybe we’ll get lucky, you know?”

“Tends to happen,” he said, mostly to himself, and put his drink down on a beer mat. He took his phone from his pocket and unlocked it to begin writing a message.

47: Diana

Diana: Yes?

47: I need a cost-benefit analysis as soon as possible.

Diana: Variables?

47: Purchase of drinks ranging from $3 to $8 in exchange for raffle tickets, with 36 winners over the course of the night, in a room of

He paused to do some quick head counting.

47: Approximately 100 people, most of which appear to have been drinking since 1 pm.

Diana: I don't have any contracts listed for you at this time. Where are you?
47 put the phone away, feeling reasonably certain she was already working on his request even if she had no idea why.

“So, have you ever been to Japan?” Ava was asking as his focus shifted back to her.

“Tokyo, of course, and a very nice resort in Hokkaido.” Yes, he assured himself as he said it, those locations would have the correct alias among their records if she really started digging. He knew, realistically, that this was a non-issue, but years of training and covering tracks couldn't be ignored. “You'd probably like the resort, actually.”

“Why’s that?” She asked, switching out her now empty glass for the waiting replacement.

“It's high in the mountains, isolated. Beautiful views from every window. Excellent food, too. Even fugu, though I wouldn't recommend it.”

“Mm, yeah, any food that can murder you if it isn't prepared right is permanently off my menu.”

“I wouldn't know where to start with knowing if it was made correctly,” he said, having only prepared it very incorrectly on a few occasions. He noticed his phone had been buzzing, and he checked it.

Diana: What's the raffle for?
Diana: Are you on a date?
Diana: Are you trying to cheat at a raffle on a date?
Diana: I approve but I'm not telling you how to win until you meet my demands.
47 scrolled back in the conversation to see where the questioning had started before he answered.
47: The turtle bar. For turtle racing. Yes. Yes.
Diana: THE turtle bar?
47: Numbers please.
Diana: Did they buy a new Jolanda?
47 put the phone down again and ordered another drink for himself, offering the raffle ticket to Ava as before.

“Everything okay?” she asked, taking the ticket.

“Hm? Oh, yes. I just remembered a few questions I meant to ask Diana about travel arrangements. Sorry,” he added, in case he had offended her.

She waved it off. “I don’t mind. I just wondered if you were going to suddenly sprint out of here to go catch a plane or something.”

“Of course not,” he said, and slipped his arm around her waist to pull her gently closer. “I’m here with you. Not going anywhere.”

“Good.” Ava tilted her head against his shoulder, closing her eyes.

With his free hand, 47 swiped his phone screen open again.
47: Didn’t we agree to never discuss it?

Diana: You texted me first.

Diana: It seems to be purely luck for the drawing, there are groups of 10 complaining on Yelp reviews that they had 80-plus tickets and none were called. My advice is to either hope for the best or begin liberating tickets from careless drunks to increase the odds.

Diana: Or pay off the bartender.

“I can hear you texting,” Ava stage-whispered, not moving or opening her eyes.

“You said you didn’t mind.”

“I didn’t say I wasn’t going to razz you about it, though.”

The TV monitor over the turtle race arena was switched on, and the turtle caller stood and tapped a microphone for attention. The first six racers were about to be announced. Beside him was a cardboard box with small scraping sounds coming from within.

Ava straightened up and pulled the tickets out of her pocket, fanning them out like a hand of playing cards. “Okay, here we go.”

“Racing Chucks, we have… Ticket number 631205!”

“Damn.”

“Racing Lola… 631282!”

“Hell.”

“Racing Doozy… 631050!”

“Shit.”

“For Swisher… 634399!”

“Piss.”

“Lucky Dan… 639021!”

“Fuck!”

“And last - and least - racing Jolanda tonight will be… 639581!”

“Good,” 47 said, before Ava could find a stronger expletive to express her disappointment.

“Good?” Ava asked, putting the tickets away to wait for the next race.

“You’ll see.”

“Maybe I like Jolanda.”

“Nobody likes Jolanda.”

“So, what, does she never win?”
“Correct.”

“Poor thing.” Ava gave a sympathetic pout. “Well. I believe in her. Fancy a wager?”

“What’s the bet?”

“On which turtle will win, of course. I pick Jolanda.”

“What are the stakes?”

“Loser buys the next round?”

“Deal. I pick Doozy, and will have another old fashioned when the bartender comes back, on your tab.”

The racers had clustered around the table as the turtles were placed under a clear bowl in the middle of the ring. “Watch.”

There was a drumroll from neighboring tables, then the turtle caller lifted the bowl over the racers. A turtle with the number 2 taped to its back started crawling for the edge of the table, over the back of the turtle labeled 6. Turtle 5 had retracted into its shell. Turtle 1 made a break for a different corner as though its life depended on it, but turtle 2 flopped over the finish line first and was immediately lifted in celebration like Simba at the beginning of The Lion King. A cheer rose through the crowd, then quieted. The rest of the turtles were still in the race.

Ava glanced at the list of numbered turtles - the winner had been Lola, with Chucks making a wide curve toward the corner and still moving. Somewhere in the middle, Lucky Dan and Doozy were squabbling over the same section of the court and Swisher was taking a slow-and-steady approach to the competition. Jolanda extended her head from her shell to see what all the fuss was about, then extended two legs to test the floor suspiciously.

“...roll over the bet into who comes in last?” She asked after the cheering had quieted down.

“You’re still buying the next round.”

“I wonder how long they let them go?”

“Five minutes.” 47 pointed to a countdown timer next to the ring.

“Hm. Not as exciting once the winner made it out.”

“I know.”

“I can see why you don’t like Jolanda.” Ava said after another minute had passed. Doozy had knocked Lucky Dan onto his back and was headed for the edge of the table, while Jolanda was paddling with one forelimb and slowly rotating on the starting line like a curling stone. Lola and Chucks had long since been put back in their box to load up on waxworms before the next race.

“I warned you. You didn't listen.”

“Okay, okay, you don't have to twist the knife.”

“Twisting makes the kill quicker.”

“Fine, I concede.” Ava turned to flag down a bartender for another round of drinks, trying to hide her amusement.
“There's always the next round.”

“Hmph. You’re getting a message,” she said, nodding at his phone as it lit up on the bar top beside his glass.

“Thanks.” He swept it off the tabletop quickly to unlock and check.

Diana: Whoever set up Big Joe’s security never changed the password off of ‘admin’

47 glanced up at a camera over the bar, then locked the phone and put it in his pocket. “Nothing important.”

“More travel arrangements?”

“Mm.” He didn’t want to lie to her, but didn’t have a better answer. “You said you’ve been to Belize?”

“Yeah, during vet school. We had a summer trip to Belize, where we spayed and neutered all the dogs and cats in sight and did a bunch of wildlife rehab work. It was really cool to wake up to the sound of howler monkeys talking to each other.” She sipped her drink, smiling at the memory. “Would be fun to go back when I don’t have to be up at the crack of dawn to chase stray dogs down the street with a rabies pole.”

“We could go sometime.” We. He hadn’t noticed it until it was out of his mouth, but there it was. We. There had never been a We before.

“We could.” She smiled up at him. “Have you ever been there before?”

“Not that I remember. Not many opportunities for work in that part of the world.”

“Yeah, true. Nothing like Hokkaido, I imagine.” She paused, backtracking through their conversation from earlier. “So wait, why was there a conference at an isolated mountain resort?”

“Hm?”

“You said you were in Hokkaido for work, then said it was this pretty resort in the mountains. Weird place for a conference, isn’t it?”

“Ah,” he said, trying to buy a few moments to think it through. “It wasn’t a conference, it was more of an… emergency meeting with a contact.”

“Emergency meeting?”

“Our client was considering taking his portfolio to another organization. I was asked to go convince him otherwise.” Portfolio, ICA operative list. Convince, eliminate. Slotting words into place where they weren’t an outright lie, but didn’t leave a trail either.

“Did it work?”

“He had a change of heart.” This, 47 had to admit to himself, was a lie. The heart in question had ended up in a biohazard bin instead of Soders’s chest, and there had been some significant software issues with the surgical robot. Still, the deal hadn’t gone through and 47 was certain the man regretted crossing the ICA in his last moments. Close enough.

“Shame.”
“Why a shame?”

“He sounds like a pain in the ass. The next time he’s not happy, he’s just going to do it again.” She shrugged. “Doesn’t sound like the kind of person I’d want to have to appease, at least.”

“The payout for the trip was big enough that it was worth it.”

Ava snorted, then recovered herself. “Sorry. There’s a reason I went into the career path I did. Money’s nice and all, but last-minute long-haul flights to other countries to deal with some asshole, then hurrying back without taking a couple days to enjoy the scenery? No thanks. I’ll stick with foreign body extractions and explaining to children why puppies need their vaccinations. Do you at least enjoy it?”

47 considered the question, running various answers of various levels of truth through their paces. It's all I know? I'm good at it, and that's what matters? If I stop, good people get hurt?

“There's a… certain satisfaction that comes with a difficult assignment completing smoothly,” he said after a few moments of thought. “Does that make sense?”

Ava nodded slowly, biting her lip in concentration. “I think so… like suturing the last layer on an emergency surgery. Difficult and frustrating throughout, but the endorphins kick in at the end and you feel amazing.”

“Something like that, yes.”

“Mm. Then yeah, that makes sense.” She nudged him lightly with her shoulder. “Still no excuse to not enjoy the high afterward. You're done, you deserve some time to yourself.”

“It's never crossed my mind, to be honest. What do you do, then?”

“Go for a drink with the surgical team. Job well done deserves a reward.”

“And for someone without a surgical team?”

Ava took a moment to think, then said, “You're going to Greece, right? Weather's going to be beautiful. When you're done with work stuff, find a beach. Sit. Relax. Take a photo for me as proof you did something for fun.”

47 nodded. He was at home with orders and assignments. He could do that. “Okay. I will.”

“Good.”

“By the way, you owe me a drink,” he said as the countdown timer buzzed, leaving Jolanda with one foot over the starting line.

“I believed in Jolanda, and she failed me.” Ava pouted, but bought the drink for him. “I know this date was my idea and all, but it’s going to be kind of a let-down if we don’t get to race at all.”

“You could drink faster.”

“Ha. I’m hitting my limit already, thanks. Much more and I’ll fall asleep on your shoulder on the way home.”

“You can if you’d like. But if you won’t buy more drinks…” he paused for effect. “There are only two other routes I can see to improve our odds.”
“Oh? Do tell.”

“Firstly, you could attempt to bribe the turtle caller, inducing him to read out your number instead of the one on the picked ticket.”

“Doubt it’d work. They wouldn’t give an untrustworthy employee that job. He’s probably unbrivable.”

“Or…”

“Yes…?”

“You could lift them from other people.”

Ava laughed. “Oh, that’s a terrible idea. I mean, it’s great in theory, but I am not a good pickpocket.”

“Oh?” He asked, interest piqued. “You’ve tried before, then?”

“I mean, didn’t everyone when they were a kid? Try to sneak something out of mom’s purse without her noticing, that kind of thing?” She looked slightly awkward. “Did you not do that?”

“Oh, I did. I was just good at it.”

Ava gave him an appraising look, leaning back on the edge of the bar. “That so?”

“Mhm.”

“Fine. Prove it.”

“Right now?” He asked, a bit surprised that she was taking this in such stride.

“Yep. Mama wants to win, go get me some tickets.” She smiled at him. “Since you’re so good at it and all. Don’t worry, there’s an ATM if I have to get bail money.”

47 looked at her a moment longer, waiting for her to back out of the challenge. “Hold my drink,” he said, handing the glass to her. “And wait here.”

He moved into the crowd, glancing back at Ava as he pulled a strip of tickets from a pants pocket and transferred it into his. Her slight smile told him she was indeed expecting to see this through. A few loose tickets on a table were taken though they hardly counted - their owners had wandered over to the racing table to watch the turtles and weren’t paying attention. He brushed past a drunk college student holding loops of tickets at his side, carefully tearing a few off the loose ends of the fistful before moving on. He made a zig zagging loop through the bar, occasionally glancing back to Ava to check her expression. Still quiet amusement, with a touch of something foreign to him but decidedly positive.

“This is the winning ticket, I'm telling you, I’m psychic,” a man was saying somewhat too loudly to the woman he was with. “I'm gonna race and win in the next round.”

47 paused to listen, both for the sake of curiosity and for the sake of never passing up an opportunity that presented itself to him on such a pretty silver platter.

“Looks like all the others,” the woman said, both more sober and skeptical than her date.

“No, no, see, I folded this one up, that's how you can tell it apart from the others. You watch, that’s
gonna be the first call.” The man put the tickets into his jacket pocket for safe keeping until his sure win could be called.

“Sure,” she said, looking past him as though for salvation on the other side of the room.

47 brushed past them, apologizing for his rudeness as he bumped the man’s shoulder along the way. The man frowned after him and patted his pocket - it still contained a neatly folded ticket. No harm done, then. His luck was safe.

As he made his way back toward the bar, 47 glanced up to check Ava’s expression again. Still watching, still following his movements around the room. Still waiting for his return. He plucked a strip of tickets from an unattended handbag at the edge of the crowd, folding it up one-handed as he approached Ava, stopping to face her. “For you,” he said, turning his palm up to reveal the folded strip of tickets. “Oh, and these,” he said, revealing the pile in his other hand.

She looked up at him a moment, then clasped her hands over his to pull them behind her, dragging him into a kiss. Ah, he thought as he slipped the tickets into her back pockets, that’s what I was seeing. Her body was warm against his, her skin prickling with gooseflesh as he trailed his fingertips up her back. Why not, he reminded himself. They were in a bar full of drunk people, this may as well be considered blending in with how some of the others were acting.

One of Ava’s hands tugged helplessly at a fistful of his shirt, the other moving up to rest on the side of his neck, thumb on his pulse. Decades of training and muscle memory would have called it a threat in any other circumstance. Here, now, with her, it was like striking a match.

He made himself pull back, putting enough space between them to speak. “Almost forgot this,” he said, taking the folded ticket from his pocket and holding it up between them. “This one feels lucky.”

Ava smiled a bit and took it between thumb and forefinger. “We shall see, shan’t we?”

The turtle caller had stood up again, calling for the crowd’s attention to begin drawing for the next race. He shook the bucket of tickets to mix them around, then reached in for the first ticket.

“639269!”

“Ah, f- Oh!” Ava brightened, unfolding the ticket and raising her hand. “I have that one!” She gave 47’s hand a squeeze before moving toward the turtle arena to see who she would be racing.

47’s phone buzzed.

Diana: Good work.

He glowered at the nearest security camera, then back down at the phone.

47: It was your suggestion.

Diana: She seemed… appreciative.

47: She did.

Diana: Oh dear

Diana: It just occurred to me, should I be giving you The Talk?

47: No
Diana: First, we’ll discuss the term ‘under false pretenses.’

47: My battery is dying.

He held down the power button until the phone screen went dark, and put the phone into his pocket to be ignored the rest of the night. One more glare at the nearest camera, then he picked up their drinks and moved toward the turtle arena to find Ava.

“Okay, now I want to see a clean race. Go straight for the edge, ignore what everyone else is doing. I’ll see if I can secure some lettuce off someone’s sandwich for you if you win. Got that?” Ava was holding Swisher at eye level, talking quietly to the turtle as it paddled at the air with all four legs. She blew a kiss to the turtle, then placed it back in the box with its brethren.

“...what?” she asked, catching sight of 47 beside her. “I don’t want salmonella.”

“It wasn’t the kiss that was disturbing.”

“Ha ha. You didn’t like my turtle pep talk?”

“I shouldn’t be surprised, I suppose. You talk to the canary like that all the time.”

“He never needs a pep talk, he’s great on his own.” She said, and turned her focus on the race as it began.

The bowl was lifted off the turtles and four stumbled out into the arena, leaving Jolanda and Lola behind. Lucky Dan made an early lead but stopped in his tracks when someone banged a hand on the wall. Swisher climbed over him, tottering on his back a moment before tumbling back down the other side. Doozy doubled back to poke at Lola, who apparently had a bit of waxworm left mashed under her foot. Jolanda watched them with apparent curiosity.

Chucks sideswiped Swisher as they both headed for the same corner, and a shoving match started. Doozy had stolen the bit of waxworm off Lola’s foot and was eating it quietly in the starting ring while Lola watched. Jolanda emerged and took a few tentative steps out of the ring to the delight of her racer, who startled the creature back into her shell.

The bit of waxworm eaten, Lola began the trek toward a corner with Doozy close behind, hoping for more goodies. A cheer went up as Chucks pushed Swisher over the finish line with his claw, following close after.

Ava cheered, bouncing up and down in delight. “See?” She turned to 47, pulling him into a quick celebratory kiss. “Pep talk!”

“Happy?” He asked, resting a hand on her back as she accepted her free t-shirt from the turtle caller.

“I am.” She smiled. “The night has been a success.”

“Good. Do you want to see if you make it into the next race?”

She considered it, then shrugged. “I had my fun. Did you have fun?”

“I did.”

“Cool. Then let’s call an Uber and get home.”

He nodded. “Sure. You call, though. My phone… died.” He glanced up at the camera over the bar
again, then led her back through the crowd to wait by the door for the ride to arrive.

Chapter End Notes

Possibly my favorite bit of writing I've ever produced. Put it on my headstone someday. In other news, this chapter marks the point where this story is the longest thing I've ever written, fic or original, with much more to come. Thank you everyone leaving love and feedback, you all are keeping my creative fires well stoked.
47 leaned his forearms on the balcony railing, looking out at the clear ocean. The flight had been uneventful as usual, and the late-night hotel staff had been eager to carry Tobias Rieper’s suitcases just in case they got a sizeable tip out of the deal. They did. There was a warm, mild breeze this morning, carrying sea birds and the salty, earthy scent of the ocean. Ava would have loved it, he thought idly.

“Welcome to Greece, Agent 47. Your target is a man named Daniel Harkin, who is considered a person of interest in the disappearance of a six year old child late last year. He has recently made international news when he was released from police custody due to mishandling of crime scene evidence. Our client, as you can imagine, is very upset about him walking free.”

“Parents?”

“Of course. We have tracked Harkin to this hotel, where he is staying in room number 605 with his girlfriend Miranda Clark. According to the terms of this contract, Clark is not to be harmed as she is considered uninvolved in the disappearance. Apparently they didn’t begin their courtship until after the crime was committed, and she has an iron alibi for the date in question.”

“Don’t harm the woman, got it,” he confirmed, scanning the hotel grounds below his balcony. The walkways were edged with waist-high stone walls, good for concealment. However, there was considerable foot traffic, including tourists taking photos and videos of the grounds. Not worth the risk. It would have to be indoors.

“Correct. Additionally, the clients want it to appear he’s committed suicide, perhaps out of guilt for his crimes. The exact method is left to you, but make it look convincing.”

“Always.” He went back into the hotel suite, closing the balcony doors behind him. Time to get to work.

---

“First cut,” Ava said, glancing at the anesthetic monitor before lowering the scalpel blade. “How’s mom doing?”

“Mom’s fine.” Sarah replied, noting the beginning of the procedure in the medical record. “You worry about the little ones.”

The owners stood outside the surgical suite like nervous parents, watching the procedure through the window. The c-section had been expected, but it never got easier. The bitch was a first-time breeder, from healthy bloodlines, but she was a bulldog and bulldogs were touch-and-go anesthetic patients at the best of times. Even more so when the pups appeared to be in distress. Their heart rates were slow and the owners hadn’t been able to feel much movement on the bitch’s abdomen.

Ava held her breath as her co-surgeon retracted the incision site, and peered down into the abdomen. Everything looked pink and healthy from the outside. Perfusion good. The pups might be okay if they worked quickly. She gave a thumbs up to the owners through the window, and they broke into smiles.

---

“Your target has ordered room service,” Diana said, “but it appears to be only for one person.”
Unless they’re going to share a single turkey club sandwich and can of Sprite, of course.”

47 made a slight sound of acknowledgement. It seemed unlikely. Probably safe to assume that his girlfriend was out for the evening for one reason or another. “Any word on the girl?”

“Her cell phone is pinging nearby but that doesn’t mean much. It’s a large resort.”

“See if you can find her. I don’t want her there when I pay him a visit.”

“Way ahead of you. There’s a list of classes and seminars, security footage should tell me if she’s in one of those.”

47 checked a map in the hall, then headed toward the kitchen. The room service call was practically a gift - it suggested that the target was not only an amateur criminal, but also didn’t believe he could be a target. An employee delivering a meal would be let into the room without question, without leaving any signs of a struggle. From there, it was just a matter of orchestrating the scene to make it look right to the police.

The employee locker room was near the kitchen, the door unlocked. Stacks of employee uniforms were folded neatly on a shelving unit beside the door. Too easy. He took a calm walk around the locker room to confirm he was alone, then changed into a kitchen worker uniform. Not a perfect fit, but it would be convincing enough for its purposes.

He passed through the double doors at the other end of the locker room to go into the kitchen, making a quick assessment of the other employees. They were hard at work, slicing, cooking, cleaning. No one looked up as he entered the kitchen area except a woman he suspected was the executive chef. She looked at him as though she had been expecting him.

“Finally the restaurant sends someone down to help,” she said, and pointed to a well-stocked dining cart. “Orders are up, get ‘em to their rooms before someone throws a shit fit. And don’t take my cart back to the restaurant, they have their own.”

“Yes, chef,” he responded, and hurried to the dining cart to push it out into the hallway.

---

Ava passed each puppy out of the surgical field once it had been removed from the mother and checked for any obvious defects. The circulating technicians carried the puppies to a table to rub vigorously and give fuller exams once they were whining and wiggly. There were five in total, three girls and two boys, which meant Dr. Davis had won the betting pool.

The last puppy she removed was still and tinged with blue, and she hurriedly clamped the umbilical cord and handed it off to a technician with a spare hand. “Found our problem child. Tenth of dopram under the tongue, get her breathing. Swing her if you have to, but carefully.” The technician nodded and hurried to the crash box to pull up the drug and administer.

Ava watched a moment, worry gripping her chest, then forced her focus back to the surgical site. The pup was in capable hands, and she had more immediate concerns. “Okay, that’s all of them, time to close her back up. Four-ought PDS, please.”

---

“Ms. Clark is in the pool area” Diana said as 47 took the dining cart to the elevator and pressed the button for the sixth floor. “She’s swimming laps.”
“Good. Let me know if she starts to go back to the room.”

---

The irritable wail of a puppy who had just figured out what hunger was rang through the clinic, and the tension gripping Ava’s heart released. A crying puppy was a live puppy, at least for now. That made five live births, and a very grateful pair of breeders waiting for her outside the operating room. Her eyes blurred a moment with happy tears before she blinked them away and refocused on her work. Mom wasn’t awake yet, so the pups weren’t out of the woods just yet. Once Mom was on her feet, she could celebrate.

---

47 gave three sharp knocks on the door to room 605. “Room service,” he announced, then listened for his target on the other side of the door.

“Yeah, hang on a second,” the man in the room said. There was the rustle of fabric, then the sound of footfalls as he crossed the room to open the door. “Thanks, just put it by the table there.”

“Yes, sir,” 47 said, and pushed the cart past him toward the table. The door closed behind him as Harkin followed him to the table to make sure his order was correct. “Turkey club, can of Sprite,” he said, lifting the metal cloche off the plate. “Is there anything else I can get for you, sir?”

“Nah, that’s it.” Harkin said, and walked away to look out the window. There was clearly no intent to tip for the delivery.

47 slipped the fiber wire from under the table and caught it around the man’s neck. He dragged him back into the room and released the garotte once Harkin had gone limp. Make it look like a suicide, he reminded himself, and started pulling the sheets off the bed to twist into a rope. Once the knots were secured, he knotted one end around the foot of the bed and the other tightly around Harkin’s neck. He inspected his work a moment, judging it for believability. The knot was a simple one, tight but common. The knot’s location could have been tied by the man himself, and the room didn’t look like it had contained a struggle. After all, it hadn’t.

With the scene adequately set, 47 dragged the man out to the balcony, straightened him upright, and hefted him over the railing. The rope should be long enough and the drop sharp enough to kill almost instantly. With a bit of luck - and a fair bit of understanding of human nature in a crisis - the scene would be immediately contaminated when the girlfriend returned. Her first instinct would be to either haul him back up into the room or cut the sheet rope to drop him. Either instinct was helpful to the overall appearance of the thing.

He took the dining cart back to the kitchen as he’d promised, and exited through the locker room to change back into his own clothes. He tossed his uniform into a washing machine along with several others and started the cycle to muddle any DNA they might think to pull off of it - not that they would. Now he just had to get his bags from his room and leave by check out time, since Mr. Rieper had only booked one night.

Just one more thing to do before the airport.

---

After the puppies had gone home with their diligent mother and grateful owners, the staff of Forestview Animal Hospital adjourned to the bar down the street for a celebratory drink.

The waitress brought a tray of shots to the table, distributing them among the surgical team. Ava
stood and tapped her glass for attention. “A toast,” she said, and everyone raised their glasses even as they booed. “Fuck you, I’m paying for this round, I get to say whatever I want.” She cleared her throat dramatically. “A toast to the five little puppies who made it, and the mom who probably vows to never go through this shit again. And to you all, the best team I’ve ever worked with. I couldn’t have done any of it without each and every one of you.” She smiled, letting the words settle for a moment. “Okay. One, two, three, cheers!”

They clinked their shot glasses, then drank.

Ava felt her phone buzz in her pocket, and she swiped it open. A photo message without text. She opened it. The sun turned the sky brilliant reds and purples it rose over the ocean, with waves crashing against the shore. At the bottom edge of the photo, only just in frame, a pair of bare feet with toes dug into the damp sand. Beside them were a pair of very neat, very expensive, and very familiar shoes and socks waiting to be put back on once the photo op had ended.

She smiled and saved the photo.

Ava: Beautiful. I’m so jealous.

47: Next time.

Another photo, this one of the sand beside him. As Ava enjoyed the idea of being next to him on the sand, she spotted an edge of suitcase in the photo. Yep, she thought, feeling as though she should be more surprised than she actually was, he stopped on the way to the airport. Nerd.

---

47 brushed the sand from his clothes and bags once he was back on a boardwalk, and called for taxi service to the airport.

“The authorities have put up a preliminary statement that Harkin’s death appears to be a suicide,” Diana said, once it seemed appropriate. In truth, the statement had come across the news wire half an hour ago, but it had seemed rude to interrupt his little detour. “They are questioning the kitchen staff, as it appears the room service clerk would have been the last person to see him alive, to see if they know more information, but none of the staff will admit to bringing him the meal.”

“And the clients?” he asked, picking up his bags as a taxi pulled up and popped the trunk for him.

“Satisfied. Your fee has been wired to your account.”

“Perfect.” He closed the trunk, and took a last look at the beach, where the colors of the sunrise were fading into the blue of daytime. After a moment, he got into the cab and asked for the airport terminal. Time to go home.

---

Ava closed the car door behind her, waving goodbye to Sarah as she drove off. She turned and started up the path to the house, jingling through her keyring for the house key. As she unlocked the door and pushed it open, she heard an engine roar to life and tires squeal as a driver pounded the gas pedal.

She whipped around at the sound, one hand tightening into a fist around the keys in case defensive maneuvers were required. Nothing.

A car took a hard right at the end of the street, disappearing into the darkness. Too quick and too
dim to see if it was the Fiesta from before, but the rounded lines of the silhouette were too close for her comfort.

She locked the door again and felt in her bag for the pocket knife she carried. Her fingers closed around it, thumbnail in the unlatching groove just in case.

The street was quiet again, just the usual sound if the nearby highways and music from open windows. She walked along the sidewalk to the spot the Ford Fiesta had been parked before. Her heart hammered in her chest as she watched both ends of the block for the car’s return.

Nothing.

In the gutter was the usual road debris - leaves, food wrappers, disposable water bottles. One object caught her eye - a cigarette butt, still smoldering a dim red. Still fresh.

Ava stepped on the ember to crush it out, then crossed the street to go into the house. She locked the door behind her and checked the windows before going upstairs to bed. He would be back tomorrow, she reminded herself. He would be back and everything would be fine.

She stood in her bedroom a moment, then picked up her blankets and climbed the steps to the attic room. The canary chirped a greeting from under his cover, then went quiet. She wrapped herself in her blankets and curled up on the bed to sleep. It was no German Shepherd, but it would do for tonight.
Toxic masculinity ruins the party

...abdominal wall closed with 4-0 PDS in a simple interrupted suture pattern. Subcutaneous sutures 3-0 PDS simple continuous pattern. Skin closed with

An urgent knock at the back door of the hospital pulled Ava's attention. She put down her pen and checked her watch. Everyone else had gone home for the night about ten minutes ago, and had locked the doors behind them. She looked around the treatment room as the knocking continued, her gaze settling on Dr. Davis's cellphone left next to the computer. That would explain the urgent knocking.

Ava picked up the phone and walked to the back door to push it open. “I think you'd lose your head if it wasn't attached to your-

“Ava!” Derek smiled brightly, catching the edge of the door as she opened it and stepping inside as though he had been invited. “I've been trying to get ahold of you, did you lose your phone or something?”

She stepped back automatically, then cursed the instinct as he moved past her into the hallway. “Nope. Phone's in working order. What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to talk to you about the way we left things the last time we saw each other.”

“When you tried to dislocate my elbow and shoved me through a doorway?” Ava walked back to the treatment room. If she was stuck talking to him, she could at least finish writing up her charts at the same time. “Sure, let's talk about that.”

Derek followed her, looking shocked. “You were the one who was getting aggressive with me. You know you dislocated my finger?”

Ava resisted the urge to snort. Shame, she'd been trying to break it. “You wouldn't let go of my arm.”

“Okay, this is what I was trying to avoid,” Derek said, raising his hands in surrender. “The past is in the past, right? And I want us to move forward in the present.”

“Right.” 2-0 nylon in cruciate mattress suture pattern. Isoflurane turned off and

“Good.” Derek looked relieved. “I'm glad we're on the same page with this.”

animal kept on 100% oxygen for 5 minutes before

“So, since we seem to be in agreement… let's start over and get dinner this weekend.”

being returned to the recovery

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“Sorry, what?” Ava put her pen down with a sharp click.

“I was thinking we could go back to the restaurant we went to on that first date, really do it right.” He looked much happier than seemed warranted considering the situation. “Maybe we could go to that bakery in Greektown that you like?”

Ava stood, putting the files in her drawer to finish the next day. This conversation was going to require much more attention than she had expected. “Look. I tried to do this the easy way, then the
hard way, then the easy way again. I’m not interested. Really. I’m sorry, but it’s not going to work out.” She paused. “Bakery in- were you following me?”

Derek frowned, confused at the turn the conversation had taken, and forged ahead. “We’re going to start over, though. All of that in the past, I’m going to ignore it.”

“I don’t think you understand what I’m saying.” She stepped away from him, trying to put some distance and maybe some furniture between them. “I don’t care what you’re planning to ignore. I’m seeing someone else. I’m not interested in you. And now I’m going to go home - alone - and you’re going to leave me - alone.”

His expression changed, losing the friendly brightness of before. “You haven’t even given me a chance.”

“Ah. I did. And I wasn’t into it. Please leave before I have to call someone to make you leave.” She tried to keep her tone light as she picked up her bag to drape the strap across her body. “Deal? Deal.”

“You’re treating me like some kind of criminal!” he said, taking a few steps toward her as she stepped sideways around an exam table. “I’m forgiving you and you’re acting like I’m committing a crime. Stop backing away from me!”

“I’m asking you to leave,” she said, continuing along the table as he followed her, making her way toward the back door.

“I said stop!” he said, and lunged across the table to grab the strap of her bag and yank her forward against the table. “I just want to talk!”

The table edge jammed painfully into Ava’s ribs as he tried to pull her across it, and she hissed out a breath between her teeth. He pulled again and the strap broke, allowing Ava to duck away from his grip and leave him holding the torn bag.

She stumbled past the table, putting a hand over her aching ribs as she tried to breathe through the stabbing pain.

“I bought you dinner,” he said, following her around the table and grabbing her arm to pull her around to look at him. “You had a great time. I walked you home.” He said this last bit with a slight whine, as though he had done the extra credit questions on his homework and now the teacher wasn’t accepting his answers.

“Let go of me,” she hissed, trying to pull away from his grip.

“Ava, listen,” he said, lifting a hand to her cheek to direct her gaze toward his.

“I said let go.” she said again, flinching away from the hand.

“I said listen!” He struck her hard across the side of her face, knocking her sideways into the wall. Her head and shoulder bounced against the wall and she slid to the ground, momentarily stunned.

Derek was pulling her up now, pinning her arms to her sides as he hauled her upright. “This is not how I wanted this to go!” he snapped. “This was supposed to go well!”

Ava closed her eyes and cursed online dating apps, then lifted her foot and stomped hard on his ankle. The tight grip around her body released and she lurched away from him. She caught the doorknob and twisted as she fell against it and stumbled out into the parking lot.
The door swung closed behind her, lock clicking into place. *He has all my stuff,* she realized as she ran toward the front of the hospital. *He has my keys. My bus pass. My pocket knife.*

She felt her pants pockets as she ran across the thankfully clear street, putting as much distance between her and Derek before he came after her again. *Phone.* She unlocked the screen on the second try, fingers trembling as she dialed.

“Yes, hi, I’ve just been assaulted? He has my car keys and wallet, can I get a police escort to the station?” She glanced at the intersection as she approached it, and gave the street names to the dispatcher. “Last I saw him, he was inside Forestview Animal Hospital, I don’t know where he is now. Yes. Thank you. I’m going to wait inside the gas station. Yes, I’ll stay on the line.”

She walked through the parking lot to the convenience store, pulling the door open and stepping into the blessedly well-lit space. She gave the employee behind the counter a quick smile as she wiped a trickle of blood from her temple. “Sorry,” she said to the employee, who looked on the verge of pressing a silent alarm at the sight of her. “I’m on the phone with the dispatcher. You should see the other guy, though.” When the employee went back about his business, she turned to face the door and let the tears come.

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47 powered his phone on as he stepped out of the airport, leaning on a pillar as he scrolled through his phone book for a taxi dispatch number. Before he could call, the phone rang. Diana. He accepted the call. “I just landed in Chicago.”

“There’s been an incident,” Diana said, skipping pleasantries.

He pulled off to the edge of the sidewalk. Incident usually meant going somewhere exotic to clean up someone else’s mess. “I’m still at the airport - which terminal?” He had been looking forward to getting home, seeing Ava, maybe going out for breakfast in the morning. It could wait, though, if it had to.

“With Ava.”

He froze, grip tightening on the phone. The image of waffles and coffee and talking about Greece was replaced by funeral flowers and a very empty house. “Is she alive?”

“She’s alive,” Diana assured him. “She’s going to be fine, injuries appear to be minor.”

“She’s injured?” He asked sharply, glancing around to make sure he wasn't being overheard. “How do you know?”

“I have her name flagged in our system, and a police report popped up this evening. She was given first aid for face and body contusions but declined further treatment.”

47 felt a flare of anger, the sharp desire to teach someone a clearer understanding of the word suffering. “Where?”

“According to the report, she was working after-hours at the hospital and opened the door for what she thought was a returning co-worker. I must say, based on the report, it appears she dished out at least as much as she got back. Good job her.”

“If you're looking at the report, you have a name for me.”

“Derek Fields.” Hearing a sound of displeasure from the other end of the line, she added “Does that
“Ring a bell?”

Derek. He silently cursed himself for not killing him when he’d had the chance. Verbal threats had clearly not been enough. “Is he in police custody?” he asked, keeping his tone as even and professional as possible. He could work around police custody if he had to. It wouldn’t be the first time, or probably the last.

“No. I suspect when they returned to the scene he was no longer there. They’re looking for him as we speak, according to the chatter coming across my screen.”

“Did they list his home address? No, they would have him in custody by now if he was there... Can you find him?”

“With all of the ICA’s resources and contacts at my disposal? Yes. Do I think it’s a good use of those resources? Hm…”

“On second thought, get me his home address. He may have gone back after the police left.” He picked up his bags and walked to the curb to watch for a cab. Give the driver an address a few blocks away from the location, scope out the grounds, find a window or fire escape, and end him.

“I have it, but I wouldn’t recommend visiting tonight. The police haven’t left yet, and appear to be waiting for him to return. I don’t doubt you could work around them, but I also doubt it would be a wise use of your time to break into an empty house when you could make yourself more useful elsewhere. Why the rush?”

“If he’s still on the street,” 47 began, paused, and began again, “If he’s still on the street, he could still hurt her.”

“This is all very romantic, but I have nothing to offer you until I can verify his location. I will get you the information as soon as possible, and you can take it from there - however you see fit to respond. In the meantime, answer the other line.”

The phone bleeped, and 47 took it away from his ear a moment to see what it was. An incoming call from Ava.

He put the phone back to his ear. “How did you-”

“Go home,” Diana interrupted, then disconnected the call before he could protest.

“Ava,” he said as he switched to her call.

“Welcome back to Chicago.” She paused as if still formulating her next sentence, then, “Hey, are you on your way home? It’s been a rough day and I kind of… need you here.”

The thorn of finding Derek waned as she spoke, her voice trembling under the burden of normalcy. Could retribution wait for tomorrow? Yes, probably. And, if Derek was stupid enough to come back for a second round, Ava wouldn’t be alone this time.

“Are you okay?” Her tone was worrying him, and the hour’s ride home seemed an eternity.

“No.” She gave a slight laugh, which choked off at the end with a pained hiss. “We can talk about it when you get here. See you soon?”

“Soon as I can.” He let her end the call, then dialed Diana as he worked on hailing a cab.
“I'm flattered you think I can work that quickly, 47, but it's been about two minutes since our last call, I haven't located him yet.”

“I know. I'm going to go home first, see if Ava needs anything.”

“Good.”

“When you do find out where he is, though, let me know.”

“I will. And 47?”

“Yes?”

“As for what she needs, a hug - mindful of the bruising - and someone to talk to will do more good than anything else you could be doing tonight.”

“Understood.”
47 scanned the yard as he approached the house. Nothing looked out of place, no open windows or doors ajar that might indicate Derek had returned for a second round. Every light in the house appeared to have been turned on. He tried the doorknob - locked, good - and put his key into the lock to open it. The urge to skip his usual cautionary measures was strong, but he pushed it back. Caution couldn’t make Ava any less safe, but carelessness could.

He pushed the door open a crack, listening a moment, then the rest of the way as he stepped into the house and locked it behind him. “Ava?” he called, glancing around.

“Bedroom.” She called down.

He went up the stairs, knocking lightly on her bedroom door. “Can I come in?” he asked, feeling slightly foolish for asking but suspecting entering unannounced might get a lamp thrown at him in post-traumatic terror.

The knob turned, and she opened the door with a slight smile. “Hey.”

His guts clenched at the sight of her. Her hair was damp and strawberry-kiwi scented from a recent shower, and did nothing to disguise the purple-blue bruise covering her left temple and cheekbone, nor the fading red mark on the right. There was a stripe of friction burn wrapping the side of her neck.

“Ava,” he said again, reaching up to lightly touch her neck, then her cheek. Words couldn’t begin to cover what he wanted to express. Anger. Vengeance. Helplessness. Guilt.

“You should see the-” she began, but her resolve crumbled and she lowered her head as she stepped into his embrace.

He wrapped his arms around her, loosening them slightly when he felt her flinch at the pressure. He rested his chin on her head and held her as carefully as he could as she began to cry.

When her sobs waned into sniffling, hitching breaths, 47 wiped her damp cheek with his sleeve and tipped his head to look into her face. He wanted to ask a dozen questions, debrief her about the entire evening's events. But first... “Have you eaten dinner?”

She shook her head slightly, closing her eyes. “I’ve been… I haven’t had a chance.”

“Wait here,” he said, and released her to go back downstairs. He found some eggs in the fridge and cracked them into a frying pan to cook, stirring them around with a spatula until they seemed adequately scrambled, then tipped them into a bowl. He brought the bowl and a spoon back upstairs.

Ava had moved from the doorway to the bed, where she sat with her feet on the floor and her face in her hands as she tried to rub away the remains of the tears. She smiled a little as he sat beside her and put the bowl on her lap.

“Thank you.” She said, poking the eggs around the bowl with the spoon before starting to eat.
“You’re welcome.”

Ava ate the eggs, then put the bowl on the nightstand. “So, um.” She cleared her throat. “I guess I owe you an explanation.”

“You don’t owe me anything.”

She nudged his shoulder with hers. “You know what I mean.”

“Then tell me,” he said, and moved back to sit against the pillows, legs stretched out next to her on the bed. “I’m here.”

Ava crawled up beside him, curling up against his side and resting her head on his chest. “I was the last one out at work, I had to finish writing up my charts for the day. Dr. Davis locked up on his way out. It happens all the time, no big deal.”

He combed his fingers through her hair as she talked. “Mhm.”

“A couple of minutes after he left, someone knocked on the employee door and I figured it was him again because he’d left his cell phone next to the microscope like he does all the time. So I went to the back door to give it to him…” she trailed off.

After a moment, 47 supplied “and it was someone else?” He felt her nod, and the warm drop of tears soaking into the fabric of his shirt. He fell silent, waiting for her to be ready to go on.

“Derek-” she began, the last letter choking off into another sob. “God, I’m so stupid.”

“No,” he said, and realized it had come out a bit more sharply than he’d intended when she lifted her head to look at him. He started again, more softly. “I mean… you didn't know. How could you have known?”

She shook her head. “I just… I should have. It was stupid.”

“What happened next?” He asked, urging her past the self-loathing. They could deal with that another time, when tonight was just a bad memory.

“He said he was going to forgive me for being a finger dislocating bitch and wanted to start over,” she said, then gave a short laugh. “Oh look, it sounds just as crazy when I say it.”

“You dislocated his finger?”

“Remember when he showed up on the porch? I’d tried to break it, but I guess I’m out of practice.”

“Wrench and twist,” he said, miming the technique in the air. “That will break it.”

“I’ll keep it in mind.” She closed her hand over one of his, pulling it in to tuck against her chest. “Anyway, he didn’t like me turning down his forgiveness, so…” she waved her free hand at herself. “This.”

They lay quietly for a few moments as he considered what to say next. He could fill in the blanks from there, and get the specifics from the police report when Diana sent it. No need to make her relive it any more than he already had.

“I could kill him for you,” 47 offered, in what he hoped was an adequately joking tone. If she agreed to it, Diana surely couldn't protest, could she?
Ava gave a slight laugh and patted his arm. “Ow. Don't make me laugh. Ask me again when he gets off because the judge thinks he's such a nice young man and blames me for wearing revealing scrubs.”

“I will.”

She pushed herself up on one arm to look down at him, searching for meaning in that, then leaned down to kiss him. “Deal.”

He reached up to brush her hair back from her bruised cheek. “Did you see a doctor? Are you…” he tried to phrase the question gently, not wanting to make things worse by reminding her about specifics. “Okay?”

“My head hurts and my ribs feel broken but I didn't want to spend the night in the hospital so they let me go.”

“Can I…?” He began, and was grateful when she seemed quicker on the uptake than he usually was.

She nodded and lifted the hem of her shirt to show a dark stripe of bruising where she'd hit the table. He touched lightly, mindful of her slight flinch at the contact. On another night it might have seemed uncomfortably intimate, but he had seen and experienced enough broken ribs and chest contusions in his life to know what he was looking for.

“Deep breath,” he said, leaning close to listen and closing his eyes to focus. “And out.” She released the breath, grimacing with the pain. No crackles, no unexpected whooshes. If they were broken, they had at least not punctured anything.

“I don't think they're broken.” He sat back. “Just badly bruised.”

“My hero. Was that supposed to hurt like hell, because it did.”

“It will for a while. You might want to sleep upright.”

“Great.” She reached for the pillows to stack them against the headboard. “May as well get the pillows and blankets from your room, while we’re at it.”

“What for?”

“So you have something to sleep on,” she said, giving a slight smile. “You think I’m going to let you leave me alone tonight? What kind of a guard dog are you, anyway?”

“Ah.” He nodded, then stood. “I’ll go get them, then. Anything else, while I’m up?”

“Ibuprofen from the medicine cabinet, and some water.”

He got her the pill bottle and water, then went upstairs to change into pajamas and gather a bundle of bedding. His gaze fell on his weapons stash, and he debated a moment with himself before tucking one of his pistols into the blankets to bring back downstairs. Couldn’t be too careful.

Ava had arranged her pillows into a ramp to sleep on, and was trying to find a comfortable position on them as he returned. He slipped the pistol into the nightstand as he got back onto the bed and climbed under the blankets with her. She moved close, putting her back against his front and shifting until she found a position that wasn’t painful. Once she settled, he slipped an arm around her, resting his hand on one of hers.
Just as he began to slip off to sleep, he heard the buzz of his phone on the nightstand. That would be Diana, calling to provide him with Derek’s location.

“Gonna answer that?” Ava asked, voice fuzzy with exhaustion.

For a moment he toyed with the idea of answering the call, going to find his target, ending this before it went any further. He pushed the thought aside. He had asked and she had said to ask again if he got off without any charges, and that wasn't going to happen before morning. Besides, then he would have to leave the bed.

“No. It can wait.”

Chapter End Notes

Ava’s too polite to say it, but you just KNOW he fucked up those scrambled eggs.
47 awoke to his arm tingling like it had been wrapped in a cilice. After a moment, he remembered why. Ava had fallen asleep with her head on his arm and cut off the circulation. He flexed his fingers to work some blood back into them, trying to not move enough to wake her up in the process.

After a minute of fruitless attempts, he put his free hand to her head to steady it and slowly pulled his arm out from under her. Success. He turned onto his back, rubbing sensation back into his arm. That done, he reached over to the nightstand to check his phone. A single missed call from Diana, then a two-word text several hours later: ‘In custody.’

He put the phone back on the nightstand, satisfied for the moment, and looked over at Ava. Her injuries were in full swing now, the bruising on her face settling into swollen, mottled purple. The friction burn on her neck - how did that one happen? - was red and raised, but better than when he had first seen her. He lightly traced the burn with a fingertip, his mind’s eye reconstructing the scene. A torn necklace? Unlikely, she never wore them to work. A strap of some kind. Her purse, torn from her shoulder. After a moment's thought, he bent to press his lips to the red mark. All things heal, given time, but it didn't make it easier to watch.

One of Ava's hands lifted to the back of his neck, keeping him close even as he tried to pull away in surprise. “Mm. G' morning.” She said softly, eyes still closed.

“Hi.”

She turned onto her back with some difficulty to look up at him. “You're still here.”

“Where else would I be?”

“Greece. Canada. Japan.” She smiled a bit, her tone teasing. “Might have gone back upstairs.”

“Not this time.” He brushed her hair back from her face, fanning it out on the pillow. “Nowhere else I'd want to be.”

“Charmer.” She lifted her head to give him a light kiss, wincing slightly at the strain on her ribs. “Ow. Worth it.”

“I was going to ask if you wanted to go out to breakfast this morning, but I'm not sure that's a good idea now.”

“Mm good question… Answer will depend on how I feel when I get up, but if you keep looking at me like that it's not going to happen anytime soon.”

“Like what?” He asked, puzzled. He wasn't aware he was doing anything out of the ordinary.

Ava shrugged. “Hard to describe. Contentment? Oh, and there it goes.” She gave a teasing smirk. “Now let's see what we're dealing with…” She pushed herself up to a sitting position, taking stock of herself, then moved to the edge of the bed to stand.

“Well?”

“Everything hurts.” She sat back down.
“Come back then.” He extended an arm toward her, which she happily tucked herself against. With his free hand he took his phone off the nightstand to unlock. “We can look for good news.”

“Mm. Sure.” She snuggled back against his chest, pulling the blankets up around their shoulders.

47 pulled up the Chicago Police arrest record search page and typed in Derek’s name, then hit search. After a moment, a record popped up on the screen. “Hm… Derek Fields, arrested at 4 a.m. this morning…”

“What?” Ava lifted her head slightly to look at the screen, suddenly interested.

“…by the Chicago Police Department, charge of aggravated assault.” He tilted the screen toward her.

“Damn, that was fast.” She frowned slightly. “Released on bond at 7 a.m. Shit.”

“Offer’s still open.”

“He’s being charged, just not held.” She rolled over to face him, snuggling against his neck. “Let due process have a go at it first before you go all vigilante justice on him. Besides, the cops would think I revenge-killed him if something happened right now.”

47 fell quiet again, combing his fingers through her hair as he thought it over. He had to admit she had a point. He could cover his own tracks so perfectly that nobody would ever know he was there… but suspicion would follow her. He could make sure it would never be proven, but rumor could damage her career. Best to wait it out, and cause Derek to have a terrible accident a few months from now, once the trail was cold.

“Funny thing, trauma,” Ava said conversationally after a stretch of silence.

“Hm?”

“I don’t remember ever telling you Derek’s last name was Fields. I guess I must have yesterday and just blocked it out already.”

He tensed a moment, waiting for a question, an accusation, something, but it never came. She had gone silent again. Feeling like he should say something in response, he settled on “I guess so.”

“Mhm.” Ava nodded slightly in agreement. “Looking forward to the rest going away while we’re at it.”

“I can imagine. Do you want breakfast? I can bring something.”

“Nah. I should get up anyway and let work know I’m alive but not coming in today. They’ve probably figured it out from the police tape and my panicked texts last night, but just in case…”

“You stay here,” he said, pushing himself up and looking around the room. “I’ll get your phone for you to call in.”

“Bathroom sink, probably.” She pointed in the general direction of the bathroom.

47 retrieved the phone, putting it on the bed next to her. “I’m going to grab a few things, I’ll be back. Don’t move too much.”

“Yes sir,” she said, and unlocked the phone to call in to the hospital and give an outline of why she wasn’t going to be in the office for a few days. She then began typing responses to friends and co-
workers who were checking on her condition. Brevity seemed the best route for the moment - yes, she was safe, no, she didn’t know what was going to happen now.

After a few minutes of this, the bedroom door opened and closed, and he was beside her again. “Ice will help with the pain this morning,” he said, gently pulling her blanket down to press a towel-wrapped ice pack to her ribs. “20 minutes on, 20 minutes off. There’s more ice in the freezer to trade out.”

Ava nodded, putting a hand over the ice pack to hold it in place. “Got it.”

“And you’re due for more ibuprofen.” He said, glancing at the bedside clock.

“Good call.” She reached for the bottle to shake two tablets into her hand, then swallowed them with some water. “What else’ve you got, nurse?”

“Something I was planning to give you yesterday, but circumstances got in the way.” He offered a plastic-wrapped bakery box.

She took the box with some confusion, unwrapping the plastic. “Oh! You remembered, didn’t you?” she said, smelling the sweet honey syrup inside as she opened the box.

“I did.”

She took one of the kataifi out, holding a hand under it to catch crumbs or dripping syrup as she took a bite. “Oh ma gah,” she mumbled through a mouthful of pastry, and offered it to him. “Ish sho good.”

47 waved it away. “All for you. I don’t really like Greek pastry.”

“More for me,” she said, putting the rest of the pastry back into the box. She put the box on the nightstand and reached for him. “Now come back here.”

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“How is Ava? I hope she’s well, under the circumstances.”

“She’s sleeping.” 47 gently closed the bedroom door behind him as he went into the hall. “What’s happening?”

Diana sounded apologetic as she spoke. “Our Chicago client has another contract for you.”

He opened his mouth to ask the usual where, who, and how, then closed it again. Then, “When? Now?” He began to protest that he couldn’t go anywhere until Ava was back on her feet, then thought better of it. Diana was already steps ahead of him.

“I told them you were in the middle of another job, but they assured me it wasn’t an immediate need if you weren’t available. They’re willing to wait until you’re available again in order to fulfill the contract. It seems they need your… special touch.”

Relief washed through him. “Thank you.”

“Do you… have a timeline on when you think you’ll be available again?” She asked delicately. “A few days, a week…”?

The memory of Ava’s shallow, painful breaths against his chest rose in his mind. Her frustration when she read that Derek had been released on bond. How long did this kind of thing take to go to
“We will leave it at a few days, then, and see how things progress.” Diana said, making a note of this in her records. “And how are you doing?”

“Yes, you. I was a bit concerned when you didn’t pick up after how insistent you were that I call you.”

“We- I was asleep.”

“Mm. Nothing to worry about, though. Shortly after I tried to call you, the police received an anonymous tip on Derek’s location. He was arrested without a struggle, from what I heard.”

“Good. Thank you.”

“Of course.”

“They let him out, though.”

“Indeed. Would you like to know his location now?”

47 felt the weight of revenge, balanced by Ava’s request to give due process a chance. Finally, he let out a slight sigh. “No.” When Diana didn’t react, he added, “I asked. She said to see how the justice system treats him first.”

“You… asked Ava if she wanted you to kill her attacker?” Diana asked slowly, as though waiting for him to figure out on his own what was wrong with that sentence.

“Twice.”

“And she… entertained the idea?”

“Yes.”

Diana was quiet for a moment as she processed this information, then, “I should leave you to your work. Please pass along my regards, and see that she recovers swiftly.” Because you’ll never find another one like that, Diana specifically did not say.

“I will. And tell the client the job will be done once I’m available.” He walked back to the bedroom door, preparing to go back inside once the call was over.

“Of course. Have a good day, 47.”

The call ended, he let himself back into the bedroom and sat on the bed beside Ava’s sleeping form. He counted her breaths, then took her wrist to count her pulse rate. Parameters were still normal. Good.

He had been careless. Careless to pull up the arrest record without pretending he didn't know what he already knew. Careless to offer to kill him. He said too much and revealed even more, but at the time it hadn't felt like anything at all.

Looking at her now, 47 felt a strange drive to protect, to defend. Yet, another voice - one that sounded suspiciously like Diana's - pointed out that Ava had already done that on her own without
any input from him at all, and quite a good job of it at that. Of course, he would go overseas again soon, and next time...

He realized he was still holding her wrist and released it, then tucked it under the blanket to keep warm. Next time? No. There wasn’t going to be a next time. She knew what she was doing, that was clear, but there was always room to improve. Perhaps once she had finished recovering she would be interested in refining her hand-to-hand combat skill. He had plenty of that to offer, after all.

47 glanced at the clock beside her bed. It would be dinner time soon, and nutrition was important to the healing process. She had dozed through lunch, so she would probably wake up hungry and stubbornly demanding she be allowed to go downstairs to cook something more complicated than a frozen meal. He carefully slid off the bed and slipped out of the room.

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Ava awoke to the clatter of plates and silverware, followed closely by the scent of food. Her stomach burbled. She pushed herself upright and looked around the room for answers, but found none. There was a distinct grilled scent, like butter and charcoal and baked potatoes. Had he cooked? Was she going to have to eat it? The scrambled eggs had been a lovely gesture but she had never gotten the impression that he had ever cooked for himself. He seemed to treat food as something to be eaten, not prepared.

She pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes a moment to quell a rising headache, then got out of bed to look for the bottle of ibuprofen. It was on the edge of the sink, two tablets left on the lid along with a filled glass of water. She quickly downed the pills, then pulled a blanket around herself and made for the stairs to face whatever was happening downstairs. It smelled good, but that didn’t mean anything yet.

“Kitchen,” he called, the moment her foot stepped off the bottom stair.

“Got it,” she said, shuffling to the doorway to look in, part of her expecting rolling smoke and a grease fire.

Instead, she found two carefully plated meals that looked suspiciously delicious. Before she could ask if he’d made them, she spotted the discarded takeout boxes on top of the trash can. Aha.

“What’s all this?” She asked, moving closer.

“I thought you might be hungry when you woke up, so I ordered in.”

“From where?” she asked, sitting at her usual spot at the table and looking down at the still-steaming plate.

“Bavette’s.” He sat across from her, reaching across the table to indicate each item. “Filet mignon. Truffle macaroni and cheese. Roasted bone marrow.”

“Jesus.” She picked up her silverware, still in shock. “I didn’t know they delivered all the way down here. Or that they delivered, come to think of it.”

“If you pay well enough, any restaurant will deliver,” he said, as though that was an experience everyone had. “Did I choose well?”

“Yeah. I mean, I’ve never had bone marrow, but I’ve heard it’s really good. Smells amazing.” She scraped the marrow onto a piece of toast, and took a cautious bite. “Mm. Tastes amazing, too.”
“Good. Eat, you need nutrients for recovery.”

They ate in happy silence, Ava commenting on each stage of the meal with delight. When they were done, 47 took the plates to the sink to wash and put in the drying rack.

“Oh hell,” Ava said, moving quickly to the stairs. “That’s my phone ringing.”

“They’ll call back if it’s important.” He was beside her, one hand lightly on her back. “Don’t hurt yourself trying to run.”

“Not going to hurt myself,” she said, holding the handrail tightly for balance and gritting her teeth as she began pulling herself up the stairs. After a few steps, the phone stopped ringing and she paused to rest her aching ribcage. “Well. They’ll call back, right?”

He looked at her a moment, then closed the gap between them to pick her up into his arms. She gasped in surprise, then relaxed into his strong grasp as he carried her the rest of the way back to her bedroom. He tilted her toward the bedside table so she could grab her phone, then sat down on the bed with her resting across his lap. “Better?”

“Mhm.” She snuggled against his neck as she unlocked her phone to see what she missed. “Uh oh.”

“What?” He tensed, recognizing the stress in her voice. “Is it-”

“No, it’s Uncle Grant. Shit, I knew I should have called this morning.”

“Why?”

“Because now he found out about last night from someone other than me. Probably one of his ‘contacts,’ if I know Uncle Grant,” she said, making air quotes around the phone. “Old soldiers never die, they just track their niece’s police record in case she needs someone to make bail.”

47 felt a pang of something that hadn’t decided what it wanted to be yet. Guilt that Diana was doing the same thing to her, or relief that she seemed undisturbed by the behavior. “Does that bother you?” he asked tentatively.

Ava shrugged. “I always thought it was kind of sweet, like having a guardian angel.” The phone started ringing again, and she carefully climbed off his lap and walked a few feet away as she answered the call. “I swear I was going to call you,” she said immediately.

At the other end of the line, Grant huffed. “Why did I have to hear about some asshole trying to hurt you from someone other than you, kiddo?”

Ava sighed, leaning against the wall. “I’m sorry. I know. It was just a really difficult night and I’ve been in bed most of the day.”

“Want to tell me what happened? I got the facts but no background.”

“Short version, guy I went out with a couple times decided he was entitled to a second chance, it went badly for both of us. Worse for him.”

“I know a couple guys in the midwest, want me to give someone a call?”

“I already had this conversation once today, nobody’s killing him!” She said, laughing in disbelief at what she’d just said and waving a hand at 47, who was unknowingly doing a fair impression of a confused puppy at her statement. “I’m trusting the justice system on this one, okay?”
“Hmph. Well, if lady justice fails you, I get first crack at him.”

“I’ll let you know.” Ava laughed. “I love you, and promise to call you later. I’m going to get back into bed with an ice pack now.” She ended the call and put the phone down on the bed. “What?”

47 shook his head and put out a hand to bring her back over to him again. “An interesting conversation to hear half of.”

“You’re one to talk,” she said, snuggling up on his lap again. “But you might have to race Uncle Grant for the right to honor kill for me.”

“I’d win.”

“Mm. Probably.”

“Definitely,” he corrected.

“Fine. Definitely.”
Diana had sent over some of the specs for the next assignment, a trickle of information dispensed over the last few days. It wasn't clear to 47 whether she was simply sending information as it came to her, or if she was tossing breadcrumbs to remind him that he'd committed to the contract and was eventually going to have to fulfill it.

The information was, for the most part, unremarkable. Blueprints of an office building. A FedEx locker where he would find access credentials for said building, as well as a flash drive. The mission itself seemed even less interesting. A large amount of confidential information had been stolen from the client by a now-former employee, who had gone off their grid. The information was being stored on a computer that was not connected to the internet - which was where the ICA came in. With no network to access, the computer couldn't be bricked from a distance, someone would need to insert the flash drive to destroy the stolen information. Presumably a buyer was in the shadows, waiting for a hand-off.

All of this seemed well below 47’s pay grade - and he had told Diana as much - but the client had been impressed with his work thus far and didn't want to go with someone else.

“You should be flattered,” Diana assured him. “You have proven yourself well worth your fee.”

“Anyone can put a flash drive in a computer.”

“There may be security guarding the building,” she said placatingly. “I’m sure you can find someone to subdue if it'll make you feel better.”

Before 47 could protest that he wasn't trained for 30 years to play tech support, he heard the jingle of keys from downstairs. “We can continue this later,” he said, and ended the call.

Downstairs, Ava scrutinized her face in the bathroom mirror. The concealer she was applying was covering the worst of the bruises, fading the red into a softer pink and yellow. At least it didn’t look as fresh. She closed the tube of concealer and straightened up. There. Maybe she wouldn’t have to answer too many questions from clients, at least.

“You’re up early.” 47 said from the door.

“No earlier than usual.” She stood back, turning her head side to side as she debated on more concealer.

He took in the image before him - scrubs, sensible work sneakers, ponytail. “You’re going to work.”

“I have to go back sometime.” She put down the concealer and began blending the edges. “Can’t let him win,” she said under her breath.

“It’s only been a few days.” He reached vaguely toward her. She moved obligingly closer, and he rested his hand on her side, over what he was certain were still quite bruised ribs. “You shouldn’t overtax yourself.”

“I won’t lift anything heavier than a stethoscope.” She smiled up at him and pressed a hand over his. “Promise.”

“At least let me walk you there,” he said finally, then quickly added, “I know you’d be fine on your
own, I’d just feel better.”

“Good save.”

“Is that a yes?”

She kissed him, then gave him a light pat on the shoulder as she stepped away to get her shoes on.

“That’s a yes.”

47 got his shoes and keys, and opened the door to usher her outside. “Busy schedule today?” he asked as he locked the door behind them.

“They agreed to go easy on me for a while, so it shouldn’t be too terrible… cat neuters, that kind of thing.” She reached for his hand, lacing their fingers together as they walked. “How about you?”

“Nothing exciting. I wanted a bit of a break after returning from Greece. Circadian rhythms and all.”

“Mm. Oh, I never asked how your trip went.”

“It went as anticipated,” he said after a moment. He shuffled through his memory for what he had told her about the trip - how much truth had been mixed in with the deflections. “It was a one-day event but fairly busy. Tight schedule.”

“Spent more time traveling than working?”

“Probably close, at least. It often is with that kind of assignment.”

“I guess. Oh, by the way,” she let go of his hand to take her phone from her pocket, pressing the power button to reveal the lock screen. A beach in the throes of sunrise, blue waves crashing on yellow gold sand.

He took the phone from her to look more closely as they waited for the stoplight to change in their favor. “You liked it, then?” He asked as he passed it back.

“I did. Did you?”

“It was… a welcome change,” he admitted, as much to himself as to her. “Peaceful.”

“See?” She put the phone away and gave his hand a squeeze. “Relaxation is good.”

“I relax,” he said, a bit more defensively than he intended. “I spent some time in Sicily that was very relaxing.”

“Sicily?” Ava asked, surprised. Images of The Godfather flashed through her mind; a whole new set of reasons Grant couldn’t dig up any background. “How’d you end up there?”

“I was… taking a sabbatical, and it seemed as good a place as any.”

“Sabbatical from…” she prompted when he didn’t continue.

He glanced at her a moment, then focused back on the street ahead. “My work was making me question a lot of things, so I left to try to resolve that.”

Ava nodded. She had heard this song before, and could hum along pretty well. “You needed some space to think about where things were headed?”
“Yes. So I drifted around Sicily a while until I found somewhere to stay. A church.”

“You didn’t join the priesthood, did you? Because I’m going to have to reconsider our relationship if that’s the case…” she gave him a teasing nudge with her shoulder.

“No, they took me on to help with the groundskeeping.”

“Groundskeeping?”

“Gardening.”

Ava looked surprised. “Really? You don’t strike me as the type.”

“No? I liked it.”

“I just can't imagine you in coveralls and work boots.” She gave his hand a light squeeze. “But that does sound restful. So, why did you leave?”

“I got a job offer that I couldn't pass up. The place I'd worked before wanted me to come back on. Contract at first, then it became full time again once I wanted to stay, and that was that.”

Ava nodded, letting that absorb as they walked. “So, did it work? Moral dilemmas resolved?”

He took a few seconds to respond, then, “Yes.”

“And now you're here. And we are here,” she said, stopping as they approached the hospital. She tugged his hand lightly to stop him, and moved around to face him. “You're walking me to the door, aren't you?” She asked, knowing the answer already.

“Inside, if you want.”

Ava considered this, then shook her head. She would get enough grief from her co-workers as it was, no need to add to it. “Door is fine. I'm not going to stay late, charts be damned.” They reached the employee door of the hospital, and she glanced up at him as she reached for the knob. “I’ll be out the door by 8, barring emergencies, so if you're in the mood for another stroll…?” She trailed off, letting the rest of the question float between them.

“8 o’clock,” he confirmed with a nod.

She brought a hand up to the side of his neck, leaning to the other to plant a light kiss on the angle of his jaw. “Thanks,” she said softly, then drew back to go inside, pulling the door closed behind her.

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“So.”

Ava closed her locker and turned. Sarah and a few other of the female employees were blocking her way to the treatment area. Her shoulders tensed in anticipation. She had whittled the recap into a paragraph after all the repeating she’d had to do, and prepared to relive it all over again. “...yes?”

“You’re ashamed of us, or what?”

“Huh?” She combed her fingers back through her hair, twisting it up into a bun.

“Was that. Or was that not. Attic Guy. Outside.”
Ava froze, then laughed. “You caught me.”

Sarah took Ava’s arm, giving it a gentle squeeze as she led her to the treatment area. “Damn right we did. Now come on - morning rounds, then you’re telling us everything about him.”

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Diana picked up the call on the first ring. “Good morning, 47.”

“What’s that assignment still pending?”

“It is.”

“Tell them I accept.”
The remaining details of 47’s next assignment came quickly once Ava has returned to work. He had retrieved the flash drive from the storage locker, which had contained a further envelope of instructions for destroying the data and an access badge to an unfinished office building. The traitor was named Marcus Silva, and the fee for this job would be doubled if Silva was silenced along with his stolen goods.

As he walked away from the grocery store he had given the cab driver as his destination, he unsealed the envelope and shook the enclosed flash drive out into his palm. It was an Iron Key, which seemed like overkill. Did they really think he was interested enough in whatever information it contained to try to pull data off the drive? If so, they had vastly overestimated their own importance.

He put the drive into a pocket and unfolded the instructions. Once the drive was inserted into the computer, it would self-mount and work its magic without further user input. The program on the flash drive would destroy the computer's storage, then brick itself. As proof of the job’s completion, the computer would be returned to the storage locker along with any assignment briefing materials, and the money would be wired as soon as the drop was confirmed.

Messy overkill. Not unusual for a particularly paranoid client, but messy overkill.

He arrived at the building, and moved down the alley beside it to confirm exits. Front door on the street, plus a door in the alley for deliveries, and a fire escape zigzagging down to the dumpsters. Standard building protocols. No modifications, no surprises.

He swiped the badge through the scanner at the side door, and the scanner beeped green. Good, it was functional. He cocked his head, listening for footsteps or voices inside - nothing. If there was security, it wasn't back here.

“Diana. Security system?”

“Only outside. There are no cameras I can find within the building, nor on the blueprints. I'll be blind once you get in. Good luck.”

The light on the scanner turned red, and the locking mechanism clicked. He swiped again, then quietly opened the door and slipped inside. The room was stacked with boxes of office furniture, ready and waiting to be assembled once they had put the finishing touches on the upper floors. He would need to move carefully, there was no telling if everything on the blueprints had been installed. The building seemed nearly ready to open, but he couldn't be too sure.

“Fourth floor,” Diana prompted, and 47 moved to the stairwell to begin the climb.

At the fourth floor landing, he tried the door - unlocked. He hesitated before turning the handle, listening closely for signs of life beyond. The quiet tapping of fingertips on a computer keyboard, at the speed of someone used to working at a desk. Silva. There was no internet connection to this building, per the briefing, so maybe he was already writing his memoirs, or the Great American Novel. It wouldn’t matter in a few minutes anyway.

47 gently nudged the door open, dropping into a crouch as he did to survey the room less observed. This floor was unfinished, all of the walls still plywood skeletons. There was a mattress against one wall, with a few blankets and books beside it. Closer to the middle of the room, with a power cord
trailing to a bare outlet by the bed, was the source of the tapping. A man - average build; short, dark hair; jeans and sweatshirt; sneakers - was standing at a card table with his back to the door, typing at the laptop. He wore a pair of headphones, which were plugged into the laptop. The typing did not break stride when the door was opened - clearly engrossed in his work, and the music in his headphones.

47 crept forward, readying the fiber wire in preparation as he came within reaching distance of his quarry. As he straightened up to loop the wire around Silva’s neck, the man spun around, a hand rising to his mouth as if in horror, then clenching closed as the man got a bright idea about self defense. Silva swung at 47, who effortlessly caught the man’s wrist before it could get halfway between them. He caught just the edge of Silva’s grin as he opened his hand to reveal the crushed ampule full of fine white powder. As the final mental puzzle pieces snapped into place, the man drew a deep breath and blew the powder into 47’s face.

47 reeled back, fiberwire slipping from his hands as he rubbed at his face with his sleeve. Silva advanced, emboldened by the flicker of success. “Sure, rub it in, it'll just absorb more quickly. Inhale it, while you’re at it.”

“What-” 47 began, but his speech was already unraveling.

“Elephant tranquilizer,” Silva - was his name even Silva? - supplied, peeling off his gloves and tossing them in a corner. “You know, you ask enough junkies and someone knows a guy who can get his hands on some.”

47 pressed his nails into his palms, focusing on the dull ache as an anchor to reality. Stupid stupid stupid. It had been too easy, he had known it was too easy, and yet he had ignored it. Distantly, he could hear Diana's worried voice calling to him, begging for a response. “Drugged,” he hissed, hoping that was enough information for now.

Focus.

Then act.

47 pushed himself up from the floor, diving forward to tackle Silva to the ground. The other man shouted as he fell, clawing at the air as he tried to scramble away. He pressed his forearm across Silva’s throat, forcing him flat. As he pushed his weight onto the man’s trachea, he saw Silva’s eyes glance away, flickering with recognition for just a moment.

Move.

47 released his hold and rolled aside just a bit too late as a new attacker brought a hammer down on his shoulder, where his head had been a moment before. The pain was sharp and immediate, radiating down his arm. He pressed his free hand over the shoulder, feeling for breaks. Nothing that wouldn't heal up soon.

The hammer came down again on his back, knocking him down. His temple struck the ground as he landed, and he felt his earpiece slip loose and fall out with a tic. He felt around for the little plastic bud, fingers closing around it as the attacker stomped his hand flat, crushing the little instrument beneath it. The man’s other knee was pressed into 47’s back, preventing leverage to stand and respond. There would be no help from Diana now, no assistance with exfiltration. Assuming he survived to that point, of course.

“Thought you said he was tough,” he was saying to Silva. “Face full of tranq powder and we're halfway home.”
Silva was talking on what looked like a burner phone, ignoring his companion's chatter. “Then set up the fucking drip, why don't you. Boss left a note on the dilutions, don't tell me you lost it.” Longer pause. “Look, just put two mills of each into the bag, easier to handle a vegetable anyway.” Pause. “Look, we’ll meet you in the alley, we can work it out once we get back on the road.” He looked back at the other man, snapping his fingers irritably. “Zip ties, dumbass.”

The pain was fading in 47’s shoulder now, no doubt a result of the drug reaching his bloodstream. A small comfort, offset by the leading edge of fog and confusion. He could hear footsteps by the door, two more entering the room in the middle of an argument.

That made four.

Four enemies, and an increasing level of incapacitation. How much had been in the ampule? How much had absorbed?

A man rolled 47 onto his back, checking his pupils with a penlight before nodding at the others. “Yep, he’s still here.”

“This would be so much easier if we could just kill him.”

Symptoms of overdose. He would have asked Diana for a quick list, but that ship had shipped. Sailed? Yes, that was the word. Symptom one: confusion.

“Boss says we need him alive.”

47 felt the zip ties being looped around his wrists, and he instinctively flexed his hands apart to afford as much wiggle room as possible for later escape. It wouldn’t be difficult - the idiots had tied them in front, not behind his back. Whoever had trained them in hostage-taking should be shot. The floor was cold and pleasant, and he found himself having to fight the urge to stay there even as the debate intensified above him. Symptom two: sedation.

“Yeah, but how alive? I mean, there’s a lot of the body that doesn’t have any bone marrow at all, we could just lop off a couple pieces to make it easier to get him back to the lab…”

Bone marrow. The lab. The desire to sleep pulled back as 47’s mind - slowed as it was by the drug - slotted the pieces into place. A lifetime of Tyvek suited doctors with long needles and constant experimental procedures stretched ahead of him. Never again.

47 locked his hands together, swinging them like a club at the closest man. He caught him across the jaw, and heard the wet pop of a dislocating joint just under the man’s howl of pain.

No doctors.

He rolled to the side and pushed himself upright. Where was the… ah! The window over the alley. Symptom three: disorientation.

The man positioned by the window caught his glance and leveled a handgun at him. “Try it,” he snarled, finger hovering at the trigger. 47 froze. A good time to wait and see how this played out.

“We need him alive!” Silva said sharply, stepping toward his companion with his hands outstretched.

“You said he’d be down by now,” the gunman shot back. “I’m not getting killed over this.”

“The dose was enough for a herd of bull elephants, just give it a minute to-”
Snap.

The men paused in their argument, looking back at their captive as he shook the broken zip ties from his wrists and gave them a cursory rub as he waited for them to finish. He knew, logically, that he should be using this moment to escape. The drug made everything feel slow and heavy, and besides - they were blocking his window.

“Fuck this,” the third man said and bolted forward, knife in his hand.

47 took a step aside, redirecting the knife wielder’s momentum past him as he broke for the window. He felt a sharp pain as the knife slashed through his shirt and bit into his side. Painful. Uncomfortable. Non-fatal. The man stumbled and fell to the ground, knife skittering across the floor ahead of him.

“No!” Silva shouted, lunging at his partner as the man pulled the trigger. The bullet struck 47’s upper arm, and that was painful too - but pain that had to be compartmentalized and handled later. The two men fell, tussling for the weapon, and 47 vaulted over them and onto the fire escape.

He caught the handrail and climbed up to the next platform, then glanced down to assess his route. There would be more downstairs, waiting for their patient to be delivered in the alley. That wouldn’t do. 47 moved to the edge of the platform, looking for exits.

Roof. Get up high, and reassess.

He climbed up, pulling himself onto the roof of the building and moving around the edge to pick his next step.

Below, he could hear his would-be kidnappers arguing on the fire escape. Silva was directing his cohorts to spread out, get the situation under control before it got any worse. The steps of the fire escape platforms thundered as they hurried downstairs to fan out on the street.

Once the sound had faded, he began the work of becoming invisible. He jumped to the next roof, protecting his injured side as he rolled on impact. His shoulder had begun to ache dully as the adrenaline drew back under the opioids in his system. No time to deal with it now.

A few more rooftops and the sounds of pursuit had faded into the background of traffic and loud car radios. He slumped against an HVAC unit, trying to catch his breath. It was getting more difficult, oxygen harder to come by. Time to get to ground level before he lost the capability.

47 made his way slowly to street level, taking refuge in an alley doorway. He could hear shouts in the distance, not close enough to be a threat. Good.

As he rested in the shadows, he took stock of the situation. It was likely he would be unconscious soon, once the tide of adrenaline had passed. He touched his side, feeling the sticky blood soaking his shirt, and his still-bleeding shoulder. That would need to be dealt with as well.

Most immediately, he needed to get out of this neighborhood. A taxi would raise too many questions, and any ICA affiliates would take too long. He unlocked his phone, and stared contemplatively at the home screen for a moment. There didn’t seem to be another option, was there? Decision made, he pulled up the keypad and began to dial.
I need a favor from you.

Voices. 47 leaned deeper into the shadow of the entryway, focusing on the conversation.

“He’s long gone by now.”

“Fine. You go tell the boss we lost the package, see how far you can run before you get a bullet in the back.”

The beam of a flashlight illuminated the alley, sweeping back and forth across the ground. Leave, he thought insistently. He slipped his pistol from its holster, gripping the cold metal tightly as he waited. If they took a few more steps down the alley, they would see him. If they saw him, they wouldn’t have to worry anymore about what their boss thought of them.

“I’m not saying we should go back, I’m just saying he’s gone.”

“He can’t be too far. You heard what they said, that much drug and blood loss isn’t going to get a bus driver to stop for you. Cop, maybe, but I don’t think our guy tangles with cops.”

“Boss says this isn’t just some guy, he’s some kind of advanced I-don’t-know-what. Maybe he’s immune to sedatives.”

“Don’t be stupid, that’s not a thing.”

The flashlight beam was shut off, and the voices began to fade.

“Oh, sure, you think Area 51 is hiding a flying saucer but it’s stupid to think super soldiers exist.”

“I’m not having this argument with you again.”

47’s shoulders untensed as the voices disappeared back into the darkness, thankfully not in the direction he was headed. He peeled away from the shadows, continuing down the alley. Two more streets, and then all he had to do was wait. The traffic shouldn’t be bad at this time of night, it shouldn’t be too long.

I’m at the old Lawndale Theater.

The effects of the tranquilizer were increasing. A growing percentage of his consciousness wanted to lay down and sleep, even as the shrinking remainder knew that would seal his fate. It would either end in death - if nobody found him - or worse than death - if someone did. One more street. That was nothing. He could make it. He could see the crumbling theater from here.

How had he missed it? Had he been so distracted lately that he hadn’t noticed? The questions swirled over and over like a zoetrope. The local assignments, using 47 to destabilize the competition while also exposing his location. It was clever. Sneaky. Almost respectable, if it had been used against someone else.

I can’t explain why.
There.

He slipped down the alley behind the abandoned theater, making for the stage door. It was padlocked, but that didn’t matter - he wasn’t going inside. He sat heavily on the steps, pressing his back against the cold metal door. Felt nice. The white noise of the city was lulling, amplifying the wave of sedatives as it washed over him. His hand pressed over the gash on his side, applying pressure to slow the bleeding. His clothes were sticky with drying blood.

Crunch.

This shirt would be a total loss, he thought idly as he looked up at the starless sky. Never any stars in the city, too much light pollution.

Crunch.

It would be expensive to replace, but that had never been an obstacle before. Turnaround was usually a few weeks, but he could wait. Nevada. The Nevada desert had beautiful night skies. Maybe Ava would want to go to Nevada. Did she like camping? He had never asked.

Crunch.

“You’d better be fucking worth it,” a voice said, resolving out of the shadows as its owner approached.

47 lifted his head, focusing hard on the silhouette before him. The shadowy figure held a long maglite in one hand, its pool of light cast on the ground between them. “Because you’ve cost us a lot of money, and a lot of fucking trouble.”

*And I can’t explain why I can’t.*

47 ignored the words, all of his energy focused elsewhere. He pushed himself up along the wall to stand, raising the pistol to train on his opponent.

“You’d better be fucking worth it,” the man said, gloating as he shoved 47 back against the brick wall. “No contacts, no history, no paper trail. All it means is nobody is going to notice when you disappear. You’re not even going to notice, probably.” He unholstered his own gun, deliberately readying it to fire as he stepped forward.

“I’m no good to you dead,” 47 said, looking down the barrel of the gun as the other man took his time picking his target. Talk. Keep him busy. This wasn’t over. His hand slid up under his shirt to press against his injured side, brushing lightly against cold steel. “So put down the gun and call your buddies.”

“They said to bring you back alive, but that’s a pretty loose word when you think about it. Ever hear of Mike the headless chicken? Just gotta leave enough brain stem intact to keep you breathing
and I’m golden.” He moved his finger to the trigger. “But hell, I’m not a doctor. Maybe I’ll miss.”

*Just please... get here quickly.*

47 closed his eyes, freeing the handle of the folding knife just a moment too late to be useful. The gunshots made his ears ring.

The attacker froze, eyes swiveling in confusion as he looked at the gun in his hand, unfired. He raised his free hand to his chest, fumbling at the twin blooms of blood soaking through his shirt. As the man sank to his knees, 47 looked past him. Good timing.

Ava’s face was set in concentration as she lowered the silverballer to her side, watching the man slump to the concrete. 47 felt an odd surge of pride in her handling of the weapon. How fortuitous that he’d let her use it at the firing range, she had become a decent shot. He would have tried to hit both sides of the sternum, for maximum stopping power, but if it worked, it worked. He watched as she walked forward, jaw clenched, and took careful aim. “I’d notice,” she said softly, and put another shot into the dying man’s head. Good work, Ava. Good work, gun.

47 felt the last of the adrenaline leave him, and he slid to the ground with a thud.

Chapter End Notes

And now you're all caught up with what I've written so far... time to get motivated and write the rest!
Ava put the pistol on the ground beside her as she dropped to her knees in front of 47. “Your blood or his?” she asked, noting the profusion of blood on his skin and clothes.

“Unfortunately, mostly mine.” He lifted his hand from his side, wincing as he leaned to give her a better look. “Possibly all mine, from a few locations.”

“Triage for me.” She said, slipping the backpack off her shoulders and upending it between them. A pet first aid kit, packets of latex gloves, forceps, hemostats. *Call me over-prepared now, Dr. Davis,* she thought smugly as she unzipped the first aid kit.

“Stab lower left quadrant, shot left shoulder. Side hurts more.”

Ava nodded as he spoke, sorting through the first aid kit for something more useful than butterfly bandages. She came up with a foil packet of lidocaine jelly and a pair of scissors, and went to work cutting through his shirt to better access the wound. “Side first, then.”

“Might be more elsewhere.”

“Might? You’re not sure?” she asked, tearing the foil packet open with her teeth and applying a strip of the gel to the wound on his side. It wasn’t a long term fix, but it would at least help with the pain. She pressed a wad of gauze over it, and moved his hand onto the gauze. “Hold pressure.”

“I’m having trouble concentrating.”

“Are you going into shock?”

“I think I’m ODing.”

Ava paused in her ministrations to look up at him. “If I just shot your fucking dealer, we’re about to have our first fight.”

He gave her the most withering look he could muster under the circumstances, which was at most a mild sting. “Not on purpose, they attacked me and blew some powder in my face.”

She sighed and pulled a flashlight out of the bag to check his pupils. Constricted but responsive. “Okay, do you know what it was? Did you see a vial?”

“They kept saying ‘elephant tranq,’ if that helps. About this much,” he said, tracing a small circle in his palm.

Ava let out a hiss of breath between her teeth “Okay, new plan. We have to get you to a hospital.”

“No.”

“Don’t be stupid.”

“Ava, look at me,” he said, leaning in to catch her eye. “Whoever ordered this attack knows who I am, they’ll be calling around. I can’t trust anyone.”
Except me, she thought. She searched his face for any bright ideas, but came up empty. “Fuck,” she sighed, and swept the pistol and the first aid supplies into the backpack. “Okay, Blackwater, I have a terrible idea. Wait here, I’m going to bring the car around.”

“It’s called Academi now,” he called after her as she turned to jog back to the street.

“Ha! I knew it!” She pointed triumphantly at him as she disappeared around the corner.

47 tipped his head back against the cool brick wall and closed his eyes to wait. The pain in his side was fading to a dull throb as the lidocaine jelly performed its magic, pulling his attention to the bullet lodged in his shoulder. He should have asked her to leave the packet. Too late now. Maybe she’d be back soon, and he could ask her for it.

The hum of the engine drew him back to reality as Ava backed the car into the alley, angling to block the view of any passerby. She cut the engine and hopped out, coming around to open the passenger’s side door. “Still with me?” she asked, leaning over him.

“Mhm.”

“Can you stand?” she asked, holding a hand out to him.

“I can try.” He reached up to lock arms with her, pushing against the wall for leverage as he struggled to his feet. The pain in his left shoulder was intense, but not unbearable; he had experienced worse. He stumbled forward against the car as Ava ducked out of the way to not get squished, and slid gratefully into the passenger’s seat.

Ava closed the door behind him and moved to the driver’s side to sit and collect her thoughts. “We need to go. There were more of them.”

“I know, I know,” she said, then glanced in the rear view mirror. “Oh, hang on, loose end.” Before 47 could ask her what she meant, she was out of the car and around the back. He leaned slightly to watch in the side mirror as she walked toward the dead man, pulling on a pair of latex gloves. With no small amount of effort, she dragged him to the back of the car. He heard her unlock the trunk, and the car bounced and thumped as she heaved the body into the trunk limb by limb. She slammed the trunk, peeled off the gloves, and returned to the driver’s seat to sit heavily and buckle her seatbelt. “No more evidence. Now we can go.”

47 looked at her in confusion as he began to suspect that he’d been shot after all and was hallucinating as he bled out alone in the alley.

She glanced over at him. “Seatbelt.”

“Mm?”

She gave up, and reached across him to pull the seatbelt across his lap and buckle it for him. “By the way, you get a pass because you’re trying to die on me, but the next dead body we find, you’re doing the moving.”

“Deal.”

“I’m holding you to it,” she said, and merged into traffic.

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47 awoke to a sharp pain in his arm.

Ava counted herself lucky that he was too out of it to reflexively snap her neck in retaliation as she loosened the tourniquet and began to inject a syringe of naloxone into his bloodstream. She held the needle cap between her teeth, causing a slight slur in her voice as she counted to thirty in pace with the injection. At the end of the count, she pressed a square of gauze over the insertion site and held pressure as she withdrew the needle and tossed it into a sharps bin.

“Mh?” was the most 47 could manage.

Ava spit out the cap and checked under the gauze for bleeding. “I know it’s not really the time or place for this, but you have beautiful veins. They’re like a greyhound’s. Is that weird? Why am I asking you, you don’t care.”

“Nn.” He tried to focus on her through the slowly-receding haze. The room around him seemed familiar but dark. The animal hospital? How had she gotten him inside? Large sections of his memory were missing. He remembered getting in the car, and now he was here. He felt cold, possibly from blood loss, possibly from the cold metal table. Probably both.

He reached for her as his motor control began to return, catching her hand lightly. “Ava.”

“Hey.” She smiled a bit, squeezing his hand before releasing it to walk to the light switch. “Watch your eyes,” she warned, then turned on the lights in the treatment room.

“Ow.” He raised a hand to put over his face, then winced at the breakthrough pain in his shoulder.

“I warned you.” She walked back, tucking her hair under a surgical cap. “Can you do me a favor, and tell me if you feel sleepy again?”

“Yes… why?”

“Because it means the reversal drug is wearing off and I have to give you more.” She took a pair of bandage scissors off a table and cut through the rest of his shirt to remove it and toss it into a trash can. “Okay, let’s get a good look at you.”

She cleaned the entry wound on his arm with surgical scrub, then picked up an amber vial to draw up a syringe of liquid. Seeing his attention on her, she held the bottle closer for him to see its label. “Lidocaine. I can’t give you the good drugs because someone’s going to notice they’re gone, but I can give you some local blocks.”

He nodded in agreement, and she returned to her work.

Ava moved away to open blue-wrapped paper bundles, arranging them on the counter nearby. She tied a surgical mask in place, then turned on the sink faucet to begin scrubbing her hands and arms.

“I guess I owe you an explanation,” he said once she had returned to his side, turning his head slightly to watch her as she put on a pair of sterile gloves.

“You don’t owe me anything,” she said as she sorted through her tray of surgical tools. She turned back to him, scalpel and forceps in hand. “Can you feel this?” she asked, tapping with the forceps.

“Distantly.”

She nodded. “Good. If it gets bad, tell me and we’ll top up the local.”
“I’ve been through worse. I can take it.”

“You shouldn’t have to. Tell me if it hurts.”

“I will.”

They fell into silence as she focused on her work, her face set in stony concentration. 47 closed his eyes, listening to the click of her instruments and occasional plink of bullet fragments being dropped into the bowl at her side. By all logic, he should be making preparations to walk away from this little life he’d been building. He had done it before, in Sicily, walking away from the church, Father Vittorio, and any chance at redemption. This time, he realized with equal measures of surprise and concern, he wasn’t sure he could make it out the door.

He wanted to try to save this - whatever ‘this’ really was. Even if trying meant driving her away. It was a risk he would have to take. "I haven't been completely honest with you," he said finally.

"I know."

"You do?"

"Well. I figured, at least. You haven’t been particularly subtle lately, and since I’m not blind and I’m not stupid I think I deserve at least a little credit for recognizing a liar when I see one."

It should have sounded cold, accusing, but 47 could hear the smile in her voice as she spoke. Was she teasing him?

"I haven’t lied," he said in his defense, "except by omission and embroidery." A pause. “With one exception.”

“Oh?"

“I told you my name was Tobias Rieper. That name is a complete fabrication, a cover.”

“Good thing I didn’t get anything monogrammed, then.” She pulled a length of suture from its packet, and began to stitch up his shoulder.

There was no backing out now. Honesty had never been among his virtues - as few as they were - but he had committed to it. May as well tell her the whole thing. She had already seen it and hadn't run away, all that was left was confirmation. “My real name is 47. I'm a professional assassin.”

Chapter End Notes

Before you get mad that I left it on another cliffhanger, you should know that I ALMOST ended it at the scene break but felt bad enough about last week that I didn't. So. Hate me just a little less, maybe?
“47,” she echoed, slotting the number into position in her mind. “Your name is a number?”

“That’s the part you question?”

“Yeah, yeah, put a pin in assassin.” She waved a hand dismissively. “Is 47, like, a code name or something?”

“Sort of. More of a lot number.”

“Lot number? Like a manufacturing code?”

“Yes, exactly like that,” he said, feeling a twinge of relief that she seemed to be following so far. “Clone series four, first of the batch, version forty-seven. Oh four oh one forty-seven.” He glanced up at her. “So they just called me 47.”

“Wait wait. Did you just say clone?”

“Yes.”

“You said before that you didn’t lie to me. You did not mention cloning.”

“I said I wasn’t completely honest,” he clarified. An important distinction, under the circumstances. “A child raised parentless. Orphan, orphanage. Clone, experimental genetics lab.”

“That’s some fucking embroidery.” She shook her head slightly. “So the orphanage…” she began cautiously. “You said it was attached to a genetics lab. You’re telling me it was a genetics lab.”

“Yes.”

“And your parents were geneticists.”

“A group of five men donated DNA to create genetically perfect, exceptionally trained assassins.” He supplied. He could feel she had stopped suturing, her full attention turned to their conversation. “They hardly count as parents, from what I gather. They weren’t particularly… parental.”

“So you never had a family at all?”

“I had brothers.” He remembered the hospital rooms, lining up in numerical order with his brothers for vaccinations. The sedatives that inevitably followed whenever he resisted the doctors and their needles. “Other clones in my series, the ones that survived at least. We were all raised together. Trained together.” The various batteries of physical and physiological tests they endured on a regular basis, the doctors trying to isolate and enhance the spark of life that defined them. “Experimented on together.”

“Fuck,” she breathed, and picked up her instruments to place the last few sutures in his arm. “Do I even want to know?”

“Do you?”
Ava nodded without hesitation. “Yes. If you're willing to talk about it, then yes, I do. I want to know what you've been through.”

Was he willing? 47’s strategic mind ran down the scenarios. Talk, refuse. Leave, stay. Set fire to everything and move to Morocco. After a moment, the decision seemed obvious. “What do you want to know?”

“First, if you can turn on your side so I can see the laceration. I'm done up here.”

47 turned as requested. Ava peeled off her gloves and picked up the lidocaine again to begin blocking the new area.

“Second,” she began slowly, trying to pick from the long list of questions which one she wanted answered first. “You said you had brothers? Are they…?” she paused again, not sure how to phrase this delicately, “around?”

“No. Just me.”

She put on a new pair of gloves and began flushing out the wound on his side. “I’m sorry to hear that. That has to be rough.”

“We weren’t close,” he said flatly.

Ava leaned over him to look into his face a moment, eyes searching for meaning. “You were raised together, it just seems like—”

“They wouldn’t have survived very long after the project ended, anyway,” he interrupted, tone clipped and professional now. “Too reliant on their creators and routines, no sense of purpose outside of following directions. It wouldn’t have been sustainable outside of that environment.”

“Oh.” Ava nodded slightly in response, working the statement over in her mind. The way he had said it made her skin prickle, like something that had been repeated over and over until it no longer held any significance.

“Besides,” he said, taking her silence as an opportunity to move the conversation past his siblings, “bonds were discouraged, it interfered with the training program.”

“Training program?”

47 cocked his head slightly a moment, trying to summarize thirty years into a list of bullet points. “Hand to hand combat, agility, weapon handling and maintenance, improvised weaponry, human anatomy, crowd camouflage… Anything they could throw at us to refine the skills required for efficient assassination.” In a colder tone, he added, “It was very thorough.”

Ava had been working quietly as she listened, waiting for him to finish. After a few moments of silence, she asked, “How old were you when this started?”

“Initial tuition began at six years old. Strength, combat, melee weaponry.”

“Tell me the motherfuckers who did this are locked up somewhere.” She said softly as she turned to switch out her instruments.

“They’re dead. Everyone involved in the project is dead, except me.”

“Is that how you got away?” She fiddled absently with a needle driver on the instrument table,
focusing her attention on the locking mechanism.

“No. I escaped before that.” If you could call it an escape, he thought bitterly. “After 30-odd years there, I managed to successfully escape by killing two guards. Eventually I went back and ended the project permanently. That’s how I know they’re all dead.” I made sure of it, he added internally.

Ava let out a slow breath. “Wow. So… I mean, after that… how’d you end up here?”

“I worked freelance for a while, then came to the attention of an agency, who asked for an audition.”

“How does one freelance in that kind of thing? Craigslist?”

“You’d be surprised how easy it is to find that kind of work if you know what you’re looking for.”

“I guess. So, agency?”

“The agency that contacted me is an organization that takes international contracts for assassination and mercenary work from people who have the connections to find us and the money to pay for our services. Much less public than a private military.”

“Hence, flying to Greece and Tokyo on short notice.”

“Exactly.”

“And why you suck at having fun on vacation.”

“I’m going to ignore that.”

Ava gave a slight laugh, and reached for a fresh packet of suture. “Okay, so you auditioned to be a professional assassin. Why?”

“Why what?”

“I mean…” Ava searched for a more diplomatic way to ask the question clanging around in her mind. “I guess I just don’t get it. You escaped from a childhood of being trained to be an assassin forever so you could… be an assassin forever?”

“It’s what I knew. I was good at it, and there was enough demand to keep me busy. What else could I do?”

“I…” Ava was stumped. “I don’t know. You had to make up a fake identity anyway, might as well have forged some high school transcripts, gone to college, figured out what you really wanted to be when you grew up…” She trailed off with a shrug. “That’s what everyone else does, minus the forged transcripts anyway.”

“It’s not that simple,” he said shortly. This is where I lose her?

“Oh?” Ava asked, letting the unspoken follow-up question float in the air between them as she sutured.

“I tried,” he said finally, when it became clear that she was waiting for him to either respond or change the subject. “I quit and walked away from all of it, but it didn’t last.”

“Gardening at a church in Sicily.”
“Yes.”

“You said you left because you got an offer you couldn’t pass up,” she said slowly, trying to work it out for herself. “Something happened?”

“The short version is that a friend was abducted as bait to draw me out of hiding, and I went back to my agency so they could help me find them.”

“Did you find them?”

“Yes, alive and relatively sound under the circumstances. And it made me realize that someone would always be looking for me. I couldn’t put my past behind me, so I decided to embrace it. Throw myself into my work, so to speak. But it will never be over. Tonight proves that.”

“Tonight?” She asked, removing her surgical garb and wadding it up on the instrument tray. “What does tonight have to do with it? Same people or something?”

“No. Different group, different motive, same result.”

“What was it this time?”

“I don’t have all the pieces yet, but from what I know of the client and what the men tonight were saying to each other I’m sure the client who ordered the contract tonight wants to pick up where the original cloning project left off, and they need me to do it. They have enough of the original research to know that they need a sample of my recombined DNA to stabilize their clones. From what they were saying to each other, they wanted to keep me alive but incapacitated, a reservoir of DNA to draw from indefinitely.”

Ava turned off the surgical lamp and began clearing the rest of the surgical supplies off the table. “Not gonna happen.”

He pushed himself upright on the table, turning to look at her. “They won’t stop. If it isn’t this client, it’ll be someone else. There will always be a threat waiting for me.” And for you, if you’re with me, he added silently.

She smiled a little and stepped closer, lovingly cupping his jaw and lifting her gaze to his. “Don’t try to talk me out of this, it’s not going to work,” she said quietly, then pressed her lips to his.

47 slipped an arm around her waist, keeping her close. Relief washed over him, mixed with new and confusing anxieties. She had listened. She had understood. She had stayed. New problems presented themselves, to be worked through later on, once he had gotten some rest.

An insistent chirping from Ava’s pocket broke the moment, and she leaned back slightly to silence the alarm. “Time for more naloxone. First dose will be wearing off soon.”

“I feel fine. Stay here,” he said, reaching for her phone. He startled slightly when she swatted his hand away from it. “Hey.”

“Doctor’s orders. Naloxone and a nap while I clean up the mess we’ve made.” She pulled away from him to retrieve the vial and a fresh syringe. “Then we have to get out of here before the morning shift shows up to open the hospital.”

47 picked up the tourniquet she’d used earlier and tied it around his arm. “We can’t go back to the house. It’s probably compromised after everything that’s happened tonight.”
“I’ll find a hotel, then,” she said as she tapped the bubbles out of the syringe. “A nice one, in the Loop, with a big Jacuzzi tub.” She gently took his arm to find the vein and insert the needle. “Okay, let off,” she said once she was sure she was in the vein, then began injecting once he’d loosened the tourniquet. Once she’d finished the injection, she pressed a piece of gauze over the site and tossed the syringe into the sharps bin.

He moved to lay down on the table again, adjusting to find a comfortable position despite his injuries. “Sounds good to me.”

“Good.” She smiled and bent to press a kiss to his forehead. “Now sleep. I have evidence to destroy.”

Chapter End Notes

The last several chapters are brought to you by Maiden Garnet, who basically dragged me over the finish line like a marathoner with a broken leg because I'm terrible at dialogue and she isn't. Next... the destruction of evidence!
Ava draped a blanket over the sleeping form of the man she now thought of as 47, tucking the edges in around him. It was a garishly floral fleece, but it would have to do under the circumstances. That done, she returned to the sink to begin cleaning the instruments she’d used. There was enough time before the hospital opened for the day to get them cleaned, autoclaved, and cooled if she worked quickly. It would be like they were never there.

Like the man in the trunk…

She looked back at 47 as she scrubbed his blood off the scalpel handle. Somewhere in the back of her mind, the full force and realization of all that had happened tonight was pacing like a restless tiger. She pushed it back farther, willing it to hold off until she’d had a hot bath and a decent meal.

Have to get rid of him.

She had gotten good at compartmentalization, between her upbringing and her career path. She forgave her father for the “business trips” she wasn’t allowed to acknowledge, and never asked how he’d lost two fingers during the last one he went on. She put aside her anger at the client who made an appointment for their sickly cat three months after she could have saved it so she could face trying to save it anyway.

She had learned early to separate the person from the emotion otherwise she would never stop crying.

Toss him in the lake? Too obvious. And where would I get chicken wire at this time of night?

Ava towel dried the instruments and arranged them into a metal tray. Hemostats on the bottom. Scalpel and forceps on the edge. Scissors next. Towel clamps on top. Gauze. She pressed sharp, straight lines into the paper wrap as she folded the corners of the pack into place. Finally, she tucked the last edge and tightened the wrap. Perfect.

She taped the pack closed and placed it into the autoclave, then started the sterilization cycle.

Have to do something with the man in the trunk.

---

Ava wasn’t sure how long she’d been staring into space when her phone rang. She looked around, startled at the sound, then stepped down from where she’d been sitting on the edge of the counter to retrieve the phone. Her heart dropped as she saw the caller - Uncle Grant. Let it go to voicemail? No, it’d never work, he’d call back again and again until he just bought a plane ticket.

She pushed through the door into the surgical suite as she accepted the call, letting the door swing closed behind her. A bit of quiet, no need to wake the patient.

“Hey Uncle Grant!” she said, in her most sunny tone.

“It’s almost 2 a.m., kiddo, what are you doing awake?”
“... You called me.”

There was a beat of silence. “I didn’t think it could wait until morning,” he admitted. “Are you okay, Ava?”

Ava’s brow crinkled, and she hopped up onto the surgical table to sit. “I’m fine. What’s up?”

“Am I on speaker? Are you with anyone right now?”

“No, the room is just echoey. I’m alone. What couldn’t wait until morning?” She looked through the plate glass window to the treatment area, silently counting 47’s breaths in time with her watch. Still asleep, still alive. Good.

“The leads you gave me on your boyfriend paid off.”

“Oh, that.”

“Yeah. That.”

Ava let out a deep sigh. Here it was, then. The rest of the puzzle pieces, offered to her whole and complete, to fit in with the rest she was still trying to sort through. “So you turned something up? I thought you said he was a ghost.”

Grant snorted. “Ghost is right. More like urban legend. I asked around with the specs you gave me - over 6 foot white male, blue eyes - and got nothing, no surprise there. So I started asking about that barcode.”

“Oh huh. That ring some bells with people?”

“More like psycho strings. Everyone who’d heard of him assured me it’s probably all a myth, but they’d heard of him.”

“Are you about to tell me his real name is Keyser Soze?”

“Don’t joke. Look, I’ve been having serious, level-headed, professional guys go pale when they tell me about the time they were running security for a mob boss, and the boss gets strangled to death in a locked room without a single peep out of him. Saying someone saw someone like your guy on the premises but thought nothing of it, and couldn’t find him once the alarm was raised. Real ghost story shit.”

Grant snorted. “Ghost is right. More like urban legend. I asked around with the specs you gave me - over 6 foot white male, blue eyes - and got nothing, no surprise there. So I started asking about that barcode.”

“Aha. That ring some bells with people?”

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Ava made a slight hum of acknowledgement so he wouldn’t think they’d been disconnected, but wanted to let him go on uninterrupted.

“I’m not exaggerating,” he said, taking her silence as doubt. “Got a story from one guy who said he was fighting off assassin attacks for days during a job in India, some kind of nuclear arms theft the CIA was hunting down, and this guy turns up and wipes out the rest of the attackers like it was nothing. Then goes and takes down the two targets this guy was there to surveil, no alarms raised, gone in the breeze.” Grant paused, then added, “Full disclosure, the source on that one seems more likely to be holed up drunk in a closet somewhere than repelling assassins for a week, but not my story to tell.” (*)

“Of course.”

“I have dozens of stories like that. People dropping dead of poisoning surrounded by their most trusted associates, security guards investigating a weird sound and waking up an hour later short
one uniform and their boss garrotted in a locked office, falling chandeliers in auction houses… only connection is reports of the man with the barcode tattoo on the back of his head.”

“Damn. Points for creativity, I guess.”

After a few beats of silence, Grant prompted, “Ava?”

“Hm?”

“You okay over there? It’s a lot to take in.”

Am I okay?

Ava moved to the window to look at her patient, sleeping peacefully under the gaudy floral blanket. She certainly felt okay. The rush of adrenaline from the impromptu rescue mission was long gone, the person she cared about was safe, and the people that threatened that safety had been dealt with. Maybe not in the way she’d intended, but there had been no other option at that point.

Ava turned her back to the window, looking into the darkness of the operating room. “Yeah, I’m fine. I mean… I had a feeling it was something like that, you know? Private military, black ops, something. But I’ve never felt threatened and he’s never tried to hurt me, and that’s more than I can say for some guys.” The memory of Derek floated up in her mind, tempered by the following days of 47 bringing her ice packs and take-out. The hourly perimeter checks she suspected she wasn’t supposed to have noticed. “Hell, if anything he’s been the opposite.”

“Danger follows a guy like that, and you know I’m speaking from experience. You okay with that?”

“Could be worse. Could have turned up that he’s married in three different states or something.”

Grant laughed at that. “Okay. I’ve done my duty. You know where you stand now, and if you’re happy then I’m happy for you, kiddo. But if you ever need my help, you know where to find me. I might have to call in some favors on it, but what’s family for?”

“Thanks, Uncle Grant. Love you lots.”

“You too, kiddo.”

“Oh, while I have you on the line, where would you get large amounts of quicklime at this time of night? No reason.”

“You’re thinking of lye, sweetheart. Try Home Depot, pay cash, spread your purchases around to a couple stores.”

“You’re the best. Now go back to sleep.”

“You too. G’night, Ava.”

“G’night.” She ended the call, looking at the phone screen for a few moments before opening a new search window. Book a hotel. Find a Home Depot. Time to get back to work.
(*) Okay, so that's not /exactly/ how the Temple City Ambush mission went down, but would YOU admit you were drunk and hiding in a closet?

Writer's note: Expect a bit more schedule slip over the next month or so - I have a handmade wedding gift to finish (despite having a year's notice to do it, I've waited until the last minute) so that's taking precedence right now. But NEVER FEAR I have so many mission-dates I still want to write that this story isn't going anywhere anytime soon. ;) Y'all are great and I read and appreciate all of the comments you leave on my chapters. Thanks in advance for your patience! <3
Ava dropped the last Walmart bag into the backseat of the car, and took mental inventory of her purchases. Yes, that should be everything. Had to be, she was almost out of cash and couldn’t risk leaving an electronic trail tonight.

Next steps.

Find somewhere out of the way to unpack the trunk. Dig hole. Fill hole. Cover hole to prevent discovery. Take a hot bath in a jacuzzi tub and let the night melt down the drain.

Okay. The first step she could do on her own, but the next three were going to require another set of hands. Deadlifting a St. Bernard onto an exam table was one thing, but she’d had enough trouble getting this guy into the trunk, much less out of it after extended manual labor. Time to pick an accomplice.

She got in the driver’s seat and locked the doors, then began scrolling through her phone contacts. All of the obvious helpers were either out of state or sleeping off significant injuries. Her first choice would be 47, but he was sleeping off a pretty rough night of his own. She had no doubt he would help if she asked, but all of this would be for nothing if he made his injuries more dire in the process. Uncle Grant would have been on a plane in an instant if she had asked, but there was no time. Besides, no reason to bring him into this. She’d risked enough by asking him for advice, anything more would remove the plausible from the deniability if this went badly wrong.

Okay. Someone else. Someone she wouldn’t mind getting caught up in what might be a massive conspiracy, or at the very least being an accessory after the fact. Someone expendable in her life, because after this she was certainly never going to speak to them again.

She landed on an entry that looked promising, and smiled to herself.

Hm.

That could work.

---

Derek looked warily through the driver’s side window as the car pulled up to the curb beside him.

Ava rolled down the window and motioned him over. “Hey.” She smiled. “Get in?”

“Yes.” He moved around the car to get in, buckling his seatbelt.

“Thanks for meeting me on such short notice. I know it’s kind of a weird time of night.” She pulled back onto the street and began driving.

“You said you’d drop the charges against me if I did, it didn’t make much sense to turn you down.” He paused, then ventured, “you’re going to drop the charges, right?”

“Of course! As you said before, it was all a big misunderstanding.”

Derek felt washed with relief. “Yes, exactly.”
“So I wanted to talk it out, and make it up to you a little. No reason we had to end on such a rotten note, you know?” She flashed him a smile, all shiny teeth in the dark car.

He nodded enthusiastically. “That’s what I’ve been saying. I’m glad we agree.”

“Mm. So I thought it was a good opportunity for us to kind of touch base and see where the night goes.”

“I like that idea.”

“I thought you might.” Ava took the next exit off the highway, slowing her speed and focusing on the buildings passing on either side.

“So um. Where are we going?” Derek asked, peering out the window.

“Somewhere quiet, where we won't be interrupted. I don't want our little reunion party to be crashed.”

“Right, right.” He watched as they passed a ‘No Trespassing’ sign and continued on their way down a gravel access road. “Kind of out of the way.”

“Mhm. And here we are.” She cut the engine and turned off the headlights. “Cozy, right?”

“I guess.” Derek leaned forward to look through the windshield. They had parked in a weedy, overgrown lot, hidden from the street behind a long-abandoned plant of some kind. The lights and sounds of the city were muted and distant. He unbuckled his seatbelt and turned to look at her. “So. Here we are.”

“Here we are. Now, I brought some stuff for us. You know, moonlight picnic kind of thing. Would you be a doll and get it out of the trunk for me?” She released the trunk latch, and gave him a bright smile. “I’d really appreciate it.”

Derek nodded and got out of the car.

“Oh, one more thing.” Ava held out a hand toward him. “Give me your phone. I want to make sure you have my new number in your phone, since I changed it.”

He unlocked his phone and tossed it to her, then made his way around to the trunk and lifted the lid. “This?” he called back up to her, putting his hand on the suitcase within and giving it a slight rock to test the weight. “Can see why you’d need some help moving it, it’s pretty heavy. What’s in here, rocks?”

Ava appeared at his side, looking past him at the suitcase he was trying to get a good hold on. “Dead body.”

Derek gave a laugh and hefted the suitcase out of the trunk and onto the ground. “I love your sense of humor, Ava. No, really, what is it?”

“I told you. Dead body.”

He looked up at her, uncertain. “Pardon?”

She laughed. “The look on your face when I said that was priceless.”

Derek laughed after a moment, relaxing. “Don't scare me like that, Jesus.”
“Right? ...seriously though, be careful, that bag might leak biohazards and I don’t have a medical history on that guy.”

He froze, letting the bag slip from his fingers. “Uh.”

Ava shrugged. “You want to check?”

Derek looked uncertain. “Are you serious?”

“Deadly. Ha. That was perfect. But yeah, I’m serious. Go ahead and check.”

He looked at her again, searching for something in her face to tip him off to the joke this time. “Wait. Really?”

“Really.” After a moment, she gave a bright smile.

His gaze traveled to the suitcase, and he placed it on its side and reached for the zipper. As he touched the pull tab, he glanced back up at her to see if he had adequately called her bluff. Nothing. He grasped the zipper pull and ran it around the lid of the case to open it. After a moment, the sickly metal smell of blood hit him. Against his better judgement - not that it had been very good so far - he gingerly lifted the lid of the suitcase and stared into the face of a dead man. “Fuck!” he yelped, pitching backwards from the suitcase. “That’s a dead guy!”

“I told you so.”

“I thought you were joking!”

“I said I was serious!”

“Did you… Ava, did you kill someone to impress me?” He ventured. He could think of no other reason for any of this to have occurred. It had to have been a misguided show of love.

She looked at him blankly for a moment. “It’s still all about you, isn’t it?” She asked, then looked back down at the phone in her hands.

Derek stepped away, running a hand back through his hair as he tried to focus and think this over. What did that mean? What was happening? How had the night gotten so far out of hand so quickly? This was supposed to be a sentimental reunion. “Give me my phone, I’m going to call the police.” He held out his hand to her, expecting it to be filled immediately.

“Did you… Ava, did you kill someone to impress me?” He ventured. He could think of no other reason for any of this to have occurred. It had to have been a misguided show of love.

She looked at him blankly for a moment. “It’s still all about you, isn’t it?” She asked, then looked back down at the phone in her hands.

Derek stepped away, running a hand back through his hair as he tried to focus and think this over. What did that mean? What was happening? How had the night gotten so far out of hand so quickly? This was supposed to be a sentimental reunion. “Give me my phone, I’m going to call the police.” He held out his hand to her, expecting it to be filled immediately.

“You know, I was just thinking I might do that,” she said, peeling open an alcohol swab and carefully wiping down the phone before handing it back to him. “See, I’ve been getting all of these weird texts from this guy I went out on like two dates with. Threatening me and my boyfriend and following me to work. I mean, I asked for a restraining order, but even then…”

He took the phone and swiped through the most recent messages.

Derek: That restraining order isn’t going to keep me away from you. I’ll find you no matter where you go.

Derek: You fucking whore, you see what happens if you don’t pay attention to me.

Derek: I’m going to make you regret this. Someone is going to end up dead and it’ll be your fault.

Derek let the phone slip from his fingers, which seemed suddenly numb and useless. It landed on the suitcase with a soft thump. “I didn’t write that,” he said, then, realizing with horror where this
was headed, “Nobody is going to believe I wrote that.”

“You don’t think so?” Ava held up her hands, ticking off each item on her fingers. “You’ve been texting me without response for months, you’ve been following me around the city, you attacked me at work …” She turned away from him and walked toward the still open trunk. “This is exactly the kind of escalation that would follow that kind of behavior.”

“But there’s no proof,” he said, voice rising in pitch as he followed a few steps behind her. “You have no proof!”

“What more proof do I need?” She whirled to face him, thrusting the handle of a shovel into his limp hands before he could react. “You’re the one with your fingerprints and DNA all over everything.”

He looked at the shovel, then at her. Before he could form a thought about how she could have gotten ahold of his DNA, she sprung forward and plucked a few hairs from his head, then toed the suitcase open with her shoe and sprinkled the hairs onto the body.

“Now, I recommend you start digging. Do you want me to drop the charges or not?”

“This is a terrible thing to do to someone, Ava,” he said, the fight draining from his voice. He worked his hands back and forth on the shaft of the shovel, weighing it for something indefinable. Salvation, perhaps.

“Yeah, so is stalking and beating up someone for not wanting to date you,” she snapped. Derek held the shovel closer, like a shield, as he winced away. “So here’s the deal, from one terrible person to another. You dig a hole for this suitcase, then we fill it back in. I drive you home, and that’s the last I ever see or hear of you again. In exchange, I go to the police station in the morning and drop the assault charge, and that’s the last you ever see or hear of me again. I save all of this lovely evidence against you, and as long as nobody ever asks me about it, I never have to show it to anyone. Do we have a deal?”

“You can’t force me to dig a hole,” he said, and tossed the shovel back into the trunk with an air of defiance.

Ava sighed, reaching one hand behind her back. “You’re right,” she said, and tilted the silverballer to let it flash in the dim light as she brought it into view. She wished for a moment that she could bottle his expression and save it forever. “But I’m tired, and I think my ribs are still bruised, and I don’t want to have to dig two holes tonight.”

After a moment, Derek retrieved the shovel and began to dig.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for your patience! More chapters as I write them. :)
The autoclave finished its cycle and decompressed with a loud pop. 47’s eyes snapped open at the sound, and made a quick assessment- alive, no immediate danger, pain manageable - before swinging his feet to the floor and stepping down from the table. His shoulder was stiff and sore, his side a belt of dull pain. He folded the blanket and set it on a shelf with its fellows, then opened the autoclave to remove the wrapped package and store it as well.

On top of the autoclave was a folded set of maroon scrubs with his phone and a carefully written sticky note resting on top.

*Sorry I destroyed your shirt. You look better in red anyway. x*

Well then.

He ran the note under the faucet to blur the ink into nothingness, then dropped it into the nearest trash can. That complete, he picked up the scrubs to get dressed. The fit wasn’t terrible - they would do for now. He’d certainly worn less-comfortable clothes during his various escapades.

His phone lit up as he picked it up from the counter. There were 9 missed calls, and 3 text messages waiting for him. Texts first.

Diana: What happened?

Diana: Report in as soon as you see this.

Diana: Answer your phone!

Of course. The last thing she’d heard was a scuffle, then the crunch of a broken microphone. For all she knew, he was dead. He gathered the rest of his things that had made it into the hospital, and called Diana as he left through the back door and began walking.

“Good morning, 47,” Diana greeted him, her voice edged with relief. Whether it was relief for his safety or at not having a mountain of paperwork to fill out regarding his death in the field, it was good to hear. “How nice of you to check in.”

“It’s been a long night.” he said, by way of apology.

“Aren’t they all?” Apology accepted, then. “Now,” Diana said, tone settling into business matters. “Would you like to start, or shall I?”

“It was an ambush, and I should have seen it sooner. I didn’t. It went badly all around, but much worse for them.”

47 ran through the parts of the evening that he could remember as he walked, glancing back periodically to gauge his distance. He needed to be far enough from the hospital when he hailed a cab that there was no chance of connecting him with the building. It would be a long shot that the driver would notice or care, but he was done with taking risks tonight.

Diana listened patiently, occasionally interjecting comments and sounds of support as he went
along. Yes, a clean up crew had been dispatched to the address of the ambush to handle the aftermath. The ICA was working on getting ahold of the footage from nearby security cameras so they could trace the attackers. There would be grave repercussions for this.

“I lost track of you after that. A brief flash on a security camera across the street, then nothing.”

“I know. I was taking alleys and side streets to lose them.”

“Mm. Thus began your thrilling escape. Then what?”

“I needed extraction. Too far to go on foot, and a cab or public transit would have been too risky between my mental state and increasing blood loss.”

“Good choice. Which operative needs payment, I’ll wire it over now.”

“I... called Ava,” 47 admitted with some hesitance. He had debated the best way to break that bit of news, knowing the likely response it was going to elicit.

“You called Ava,” Diana repeated flatly. “You have all the resources of the ICA at your disposal, and you called Ava.”

“It made sense at the time. I was heavily drugged.”

“I could have had backup to your location in two hours.”

“I didn’t think I had two hours. I was given a large dose of an unknown substance, backed by a group of men intending to incapacitate me for a buyer. In two hours, the backup team would have found nothing.”

Diana was silent at the other end of the line for a few moments, then, “Hm. I suppose it’s forgivable, but don’t make it a habit. Well, go on, then. You called Ava.”

“I told her I needed her to come to a location, and to not ask questions.”

“And?”

“She did.” 47 could hear the small creaking sound of Diana sitting back in her chair. Surprise? Relief? “And then after I blacked out, I came to on a table meant for a Great Dane.”

Diana made a thoughtful hmm at this. “Resourceful woman.”

“She is. Not bad with a pair of needle drivers, either,” he said, touching the suture knots on his side as he recalled the strange evening.

“Useful skill to have, especially around you. Speaking of your lovely lady, where is she? With you?”

“No. She left about an hour ago. Said she was going to go destroy evidence.”

“Evidence?” Diana asked abruptly. This was an unexpected development.

“Yes... when she arrived at the pickup point, one of the attackers had already found me there. She shot him, and put him in the trunk of the car to deal with later. I wasn’t in a position to tell her the ICA employs people for that kind of thing. I’ll have to mention it to her.”

“Maybe not tonight,” Diana said slowly. “Give it some time before telling her all of her work was
“Good point.” He took the phone away from his ear to put on speaker as he looked for a cab company to call.

“Was she…” Diana searched for the right word. “All right when she left? Did you talk about it at all?”

“I think so. She was holding a scalpel and didn't cut my brachial artery so that's a good sign. There was a lot to take in, though.”

“Young love,” Diana murmured, then, a bit alarmed, “A lot of what to take in?”

“Explanation. Once the situation changed from a simple extraction to a shootout, it became apparent that there was some undisclosed information that would be necessary to supply. Beyond my profession, telling her the why behind the attack required certain aspects of my personal history.” he paused, sensing her silence. “We had a lot of time to talk while she was suturing.”

“...what was her response?” Diana asked, tone carefully controlled as she spoke.

47 reflected on the conversation, searching for a good summation. “Professional. Supportive. Confused at first, but she seemed to understand my position by the end.” He hesitated. “She didn’t seem particularly surprised.”

“I can’t imagine why. You were doing so well at concealing it from her.”

“Will this be a problem?”

Diana gave a slight laugh. “Oh dear. Our organization - which is a closely guarded secret known only known to world governments, the UN, the CIA, criminal empires, and the thugs who attacked you a few hours ago - has been revealed to a mild-mannered veterinarian. I’ll warm up the car battery and jumper cables forthwith.”

“Sarcasm, I presume.”

“You presume rightly. Does she know the name of the company or its employees, have access to any of your accounts or secured dropboxes, or a list of our clients?”

47 paused as he gave each question a full dissection, running through any disclosures he had given, and finding his security intact. “No. All information she has is about me, and me alone.”

“Good. I can’t say it’s ideal, considering the hiring brief specifically recommends not forming any personal connections, but I admit I was complicit and am in no position to throw stones.” She waited a beat before continuing. “Now then,” she went on, tone brightening. “As long as you maintain discretion in future contracts, I don’t see any reason to elevate this matter beyond this conversation.”

“Understood.”

“Besides, there’s no quicker way to confirm a conspiracy theory than by trying to silence it. We try to avoid making martyrs in our business, 47.”

“Of course.”

“Our double-dipping client, on the other hand…”
involved in this whole scheme, they will be dealt with.”

“I look forward to it.”

“Circling back to Ava’s whereabouts, you didn’t let her go home, did you?”

“No. She mentioned booking a hotel for a few nights until more information surfaced. I want to confirm whether or not the house is being monitored before either of us try to go back there.”

“Hm…” 47 could hear the clack of Diana’s keyboard as she worked. “Let’s see what hotels are at our disposal tonight.”

“She wanted one in the Loop, with a whirlpool bath.”

“Fine choices.” More typing. “I’ve made an open-ended booking at the Palmer House for Tobias and Annie Rieper. Will you let her know or shall I?”

“I will. She hasn't met you yet.”

“There's always Christmas. Enjoy your staycation, 47.”

Chapter End Notes

If you've never seen the interior of the Palmer House, go look at photos. The rooms are whatever but the public spaces are GORGEOUS and I imagine 47 appreciating the luxurious decor.
It goes like this, the fourth, the fifth

Room reservation at Palmer House.

Meet you inside.

Ava turned away from the valet stand to look at the entrance to the hotel. It was a beautiful place. The lobby was lined with candelabras, illuminating a ceiling painted with classical reproductions. There were a lot of gold accents on just about everything.

She would have picked somewhere a bit less ostentatious, but it wasn't her money being spent. Maybe? There was no Miss Manners protocol for who pays for the room when you’re hiding from a rival assassination syndicate who wants to use your boyfriend as a DNA farm. Where would Dear Prudence even start with that one?

Ah well. A discussion for later.

Ava picked at the dirt under her nails self consciously as she looked for somewhere to sit and wait. The valet had taken her car wherever fancy hotels stored vehicles. She hoped it was clean enough. She had done what she could on the fly, but if anyone ran a blacklight through the trunk it would light up like a pinball machine.

She was startled back to the present by a hand on her back and she whirled without thinking, fist raised.

47 caught it easily. “Didn't mean to frighten you.”

“Sorry.” She relaxed, lowering their hands to their sides. “My mind was elsewhere and…” she trailed off, remembering with relief that no explanation was required. “It's been a long night,” she said simply.

“I know.” He put a key card into her hand before releasing it. “I already checked us in. We're on the 20th floor.”

“Neat.” She looked at the card a moment, then put it in her pocket. “This place is beautiful. Have you been here before?”

“A few years ago. The rooms are fairly standard, but I requested a lake view and a whirlpool bath if possible.”

Ava gave his hand a squeeze as they walked toward the elevator. “Hey, you remembered. I guess you didn't lose as much blood as I thought.”

“You'd be surprised how much blood a person can lose and still be coherent.”

“I'm going to try to never find out.” Then, once the elevator doors closed, she turned to face him. “Before I forget, I have to return something to you.”

“Oh?”

“Mhm.” She moved closer, resting her hands on his chest and snuggling against him in case he hadn't heard of this game before and needed a hint.

47 put his hands on her shoulders then trailed them lightly down each arm, somewhere between a
frisk and a flirt. Close enough. His hands met at the small of her back, resting on the grip of the silverballer tucked into the back of her jeans. “Ah. I was wondering what you did with that.”

“I needed it for reasons,” she failed to explain. “I'm done with it, though, if you want it back.” She smiled up at him.

He fingered the pistol contemplatively, distracted for a moment by the way her body heat had warmed the metal, and the growing curiosity about where exactly it was nestled to keep it from jostling as she walked.

The elevator door opened at their floor. Ava slipped away from him, taking his hand to follow his lead out of the elevator.

“Room number is 2009,” he said, leading her down the hall. He swiped his key at the door, and pushed the door open to motion Ava inside. “It's the best they could do on short notice.”

“Best they could do?” Ava echoed as she explored. “There's a dining room in here!”

47 followed her in and flipped the bolt lock behind him. “It's a suite.”

“Yeah, but-” she began, then decided she ought to act as appreciative as she felt. “It's really nice. I love it.”

He nodded, satisfied with the reaction. “Good.”

She looked down at herself, at the dirt flecks on her hands and the lye dust that she really should get off of her clothes before it caused a problem. “Um. I'm going to go take a bath. Whirlpool or not, I feel like I'm 90 percent CSI right now.”

“Good idea. Scrub hard under your fingernails with a toothbrush if there's one in there, and toss all your clothes out here. I'll have them washed while you're bathing.”

“Sure,” she said, and turned to go toward the bathroom.

“Hang on a second,” he said after a moment, catching her arm lightly.

“Hmm?” She let herself be drawn back to him, head tipped with curiosity. “What's up?”

“I forgot something.” He bent to kiss her, snaking his hand under the back of her shirt. He trailed his fingertips down the ridge of her spine, then grasped the silverballer and pulled it free. “There.”

Ava smiled, and closed the bathroom door behind her. She disrobed, then reached out the door to drop her clothes in the hallway as requested. After a moment of consideration, she left the door open a small crack. Just in case.

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47 flipped through his mental checklist.

They had a secure room, thoroughly examined for signs of compromise.

Ava's clothes had been sent out for washing, which should be returned shortly by hotel staff.

Filling in the base of the hierarchy of needs. Shelter. Clothing. Food and drink were next on the list.
He knocked lightly on the bathroom door. “Ava?”

“Come in,” she called back. He could hear light splashing, the sound of her sitting up and turning toward the door.

Steamy, coconut scented air swirled into the hall as he pushed the door open. Ava was surrounded by a cloud of lush bubbles, looking at him with her arms folded on the edge of the tub, chin resting on top. “I’d invite you in, but as your back alley doctor I can’t condone you getting your incisions wet.”

“Tomorrow, maybe,” he said, touching his shoulder lightly. “I heal fast.”

“Of course you do.” She sat up and extended a hand to motion him closer. “Just here to watch, then?”

“I was going to order breakfast,” he said, and offered the room service menu to her. “I wasn’t sure what you wanted.”

“Ooh. Room service.” Ava took the menu and turned to stretch out again as she flipped through the pages.

47 watched her a few moments, unsure of the protocol for the situation. He could leave, and come back when she’d decided what she wanted. He could stay by the door, looking out of place and letting the warm air escape. Or… He closed the door behind him, and moved to sit on the edge of the bath.

Ava shifted to lean back beside him, tilting her head to rest it against his side. He lifted a hand to brush back through her hair, tucking it behind her ear as his fingertips traveled down the side of her neck. The pulse in her carotid was quicker than he expected, and he lingered a moment in curiosity. She pressed lightly into the touch, letting out a soft sigh. “I’m never going to figure out what I want if you keep doing that.”

“Sorry,” he said, pulling his hand away.

“I didn’t say stop.” She tossed the menu onto the floor beside the bath and tipped her head back to look up at him. Waiting.

Okay then… he thought, and cast about for an excuse to continue. After a moment, he reached for the mini bottle of body wash to pour a bit into his palm and work into a lather. “Lean forward.”

Ava leaned forward and pulled in her legs to wrap her arms around them. She turned her head slightly to rest her cheek on her knees, her eyes closed, face calm and unconcerned about what he was going to do next.

He moved forward slightly to put his hands on her back, pressing with his fingertips to tease out the knots and tension he knew he would find. He felt her back round against his hands as he worked his way up toward her shoulders. She said something he couldn’t hear, and he paused his work. “Hm?”

“I said ‘harder’,,” she said softly, opening an eye to look at him. “You don’t have to hold back.”

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he said, but pressed deeper until she let out a soft hiss between clenched teeth and nodded her approval. “Like that?”

“Mm.” She closed her eyes again, smiling a bit in enjoyment. “You’ve done this before.”
“Just have a good understanding of anatomy,” he murmured, sliding his hands up to the back of her neck. Doubt crept into his mind and he hesitated. He knew what he was doing, but did she? “I’m just going to…” he began, at a loss for how to explain away the surprisingly thin line between neck massage and cervical dislocation without drawing attention to it if she hadn’t yet made the connection herself.

“I trust you,” she said, thankfully quick on the uptake, and tipped her head back into his palms.

He cupped his hands around her neck, lacing his fingers loosely under her chin, and pressed his thumbs against the base of her skull to guide it forward into a deep stretch. After a few moments, he released the stretch and dropped his hands to rest on her back. “Feel better?”

“Mhm.” She turned to face him, pushing herself up from the water to press her lips to the angle of his jaw. She trailed kisses along it until she reached his mouth and found it already slightly open in anticipation.

47 lifted a hand to the side of her neck as he leaned into the kiss, feeling the sensitive skin prickle under his thumb. Heat steamed off her body, soft and damp against him.

After a few moments she pressed a hand to his chest to push him slightly away and whispered, “Waffles.”

“Waffles?” he asked, having utterly forgotten what he had come into the room for in the first place.

“Mhm. With strawberries and whipped cream.” She reached for the discarded menu to point out the item in the list. “See?”

“Ah.” He took the menu back and stood. “Are you almost done? I can place the order now.”

“Yeah, water is going to get cold soon.” She leaned forward to pull the bath plug, and cast a slight smile over her shoulder at him. “I’ll be out in a minute.”

47 nodded and went to the door, glancing back a moment before going back out to call in the order.
47 put down the phone and turned as he heard the click of the bathroom door. “Food should be here in... 30 minutes,” he said, faltering slightly as she emerged, hair wet, cheeks still flushed with heat.

“They have bathrobes,” she said, tightening the fuzzy belt around her waist. “Do nice hotels always have bathrobes?”

“Usually. Your clothes are on the table,” he said, nodding to a neatly folded stack. “Breakfast should be here in twenty minutes.”

“Thanks.” Ava moved to the window to peek through the curtains at the city beginning to wake up outside. After a few moments, she said, “I hope the canary is okay.”

“He’s fine,” 47 said automatically, despite having no evidence to back it up. None that would satisfy her concerns, at least. Something told him that telling her he would have been told if someone had burned down the house was the wrong thing to say at this moment. The something sounded quite a bit like Diana.

“Yeah?” she asked as she let the curtain drop and turned to face him.

“He has food, he has water, he can handle a few days without a human trying to whistle back at him while she dusts the furniture.”

Ava smiled a bit, her dark mood seemingly broken by the disclosure. “You weren't supposed to hear that.”

“I have very good hearing.”

“Figures.” Ava took his hands, pulling his arms around her waist as she directed him toward the end of the bed. When they reached it, she put one of her hands on his chest to push him down onto it. She dropped to her knees and smiled up at him. “Now take off your shirt.”

“What?” he asked, startled.

“You heard me.” She reached for the hem of the scrub top to pull it up and off of him. “I want to check your incisions.”

“They’re fine,” he said, but turned and raised his arm to let her see the wound on his side. “The most strenuous thing I’ve done since you last saw me was hail a cab. I’ve done much more with much graver injuries.”

“None of which I sutured. I have professional pride to consider,” she said, and leaned closer to gently probe along the line of sutures.

47 looked toward the window as she worked, the first glow of morning starting to flash off the neighboring buildings. She was much gentler than he was used to, fingertips brushing gingerly over the recent injury like she might reopen the wound. Nothing like the ICA surgeons, who worked quick and dirty and used cheap vodka as a sterilant. Even less like the doctors at the asylum, whose goal seemed to be causing the most pain with the least consent.

He was drawn back to the moment by Ava’s voice. “Hm?” he asked, looking down at her. “Sorry, I
“I wasn’t listening.”

“I just asked how long I’d been in the bath.”

“About an hour, why?”

“This incision looks about a week old is why, and I could have sworn I stitched it five hours ago.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, oh,” she said, fixing him with an expectant look. “Have anything you want to share with the rest of the class?” she asked, climbing on the bed beside him and gently inspecting the wound on his shoulder. “Like if you have metal claws or an adamantium skeleton or something?”

“I just heal quickly. Call it a perk,” he said under his breath, looking away and trying not to squirm while she performed her exam.

“Mm. I see.” She let go of him and crawled up to the head of the bed to stretch out. “Guess I’ll have to keep a closer eye on you than I thought, so I don’t miss taking those stitches out at the right time.”

“I guess you will,” he said, moving to follow her up the bed.

“Oh no,” she said, lifting a foot to push him away. “This is my bed. Find your own.”

47 caught her ankle, holding her foot against his sternum where it couldn’t do any real damage. “I’d think that as my back alley physician you’d be encouraging bedrest.”

“You heal quickly, I’m sure you’ll be fine,” she said, bringing up the other foot to help push. He caught that foot as well, ignoring the twinge of pain in his shoulder as he grasped her ankles to pull her down to the end of the bed with him. Ava shrieked with surprised laughter, grabbing at the sheets in vain for a handhold. He released her feet and dropped forward onto his hands by her shoulders and knees between her legs, caging off her escape routes. “I want a second opinion.”

Ava’s giggles faded as she settled her shoulders back onto the bed, bending her knees against his sides. “I’d like to hear it,” she said, voice softening as she gazed up at him. One hand came up to stroke the back of his head and neck, drawing lazy oblongs with her fingertips.

His skin prickled at the sensation, resisting the shiver that wanted to bolt down his spine as she scratched lightly with her nails. Her expression was soft and inviting, lips parted as though about to speak. Before she could draw a breath for it, he remembered his mission and climbed over her to claim the head of the bed.

“Hey!” Ava said, sitting up and turning to glare weightlessly at him.

“In consultation with my referring physician, Dr. Rieper, bedrest is highly recommended. I think the couch pulls out, though, if you insist on having a space all to yourself,” he said, stretching out his limbs to take up as much space as possible.

Ava gave a slight laugh. “Those scrubs don’t make you a doctor, you know.”

“Really? It always worked before.”

“Oh?” She crawled up the bed to curl against his side, head on his good shoulder and hand on his chest. “Like when?”
“A few years ago I was at a conf-” he began, but the rest of the lie (half-truth, he assured himself) died in his throat. He could tell her now. He could tell her the whole thing, nothing left out. No half truths.

Ava lifted her head to look at him curiously, waiting for him to continue. “Conference?” she prompted.

“I was sent to Japan for a contract,” he said slowly, one by one removing all the safeguards he had built up over time. “At a secluded, high security medical facility.”

“I’ve heard this one,” she murmured, snuggling in again for story time. “But keep going, I want to hear the rest of it.”

“A man there had sensitive information about the agency I work for, and was planning to sell it.”

“Idiot.”

“Mm.” He moved a hand to press over hers, lacing their fingers together as he spoke. “He was scheduled for surgery when I arrived, and only the medical staff have access to the operating rooms. People in scrubs, lab coats, and the right permissions badge.” He paused, checkpointing the recollection in case she wanted out after all. She had asked, but had she known what she was asking for?

“Wouldn’t the surgical staff know you weren't one of them, though?” came the response after a few moments.

“Well spotted. A lesson in human nature: if you look the part and act like you’re supposed to be there, people don’t ask questions. Avoid the staff surgeons, get in and out quickly, and if anyone does ask, you're a visiting surgeon contracted to assist in a very delicate procedure.”

“Makes sense,” Ava agreed. She pushed herself up a bit to fix him with a darkly dramatic look. “So, doctor, did the patient make it?”

47 gave a slight chuckle. “He did not. There was an unfortunate malfunction of the surgical robot, and the patient could not be revived.”

Ava considered this a few moments as she settled back in against his side, silent for slightly too long for 47’s comfort. Just as he wondered if he’d overstepped, she spoke. “I wonder if they just decommissioned the surgical robot, or if they had a technician come out and frown over it for $200 an hour. Those things are expensive, but if they can’t find an error to fix, I wonder…”

“If they had someone look at the machine,” 47 said slowly, trying to switch gears from ‘damage control’ to ‘full disclosure’ on the fly, “they probably noticed that the failsafes to prevent this kind of error had been turned off.”

“Why even make those turn-off-able? That’s like having a big red button to set off all the nukes - it’s just bad engineering.”

“I’m sure they patched that particular loophole as soon as possible.”

“Well, you’ve convinced me. I’m never going to steal secrets from mercenaries just before I get robot surgery.”

He released a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. The tension in his chest loosened. They lay in comfortable, tired silence until it was broken by the hotel clerk's arrival with their breakfast tray.
Ava sat up first, pressing him back down onto the bed with a hand. “I’ll get it. You rest,” she said, straightening her bathrobe on her way to the door. She peeked through the peephole, then slid the bolt open and greeted the clerk.

47 pushed himself upright, moving to lean back against the headboard as she returned with the tray. She knelt on the bed with the tray in the space between them. “Smells good. Guessing it’ll taste even better. I’m so hungry I don’t think I could tell the difference.”

“I got you scrambled eggs, too. To balance the waffles.”

“Always thinking of me,” she said, taking her plate to balance on her lap for eating. They ate quickly and quietly, the arrival of food making them too hungry to talk until they were done.

“So,” she said as she put down her utensils, “what happens now? Because if we’re changing identities and skipping town, I know a guy, but I’m supposed to give at least a little notice at work so they can hire someone else.”

He shook his head slightly, pushing his empty plate away. “No. What happens now is that you stay here where you’re safe and I can keep friendly eyes on you.”

“And you?” she asked, helping to stack the plates and silverware back onto the tray.

“I find out who made the mistake of trying to double-cross me, and show them what a mistake they’ve made,” he said, getting up to put the tray back outside the door.

Ava moved up the bed to pick out which pillow she wanted to use, and how many layers of blanket would be necessary for naptime. “And after that?”

Ahh. 47 understood. Would he come back or disappear, that was the question she was asking. According to precedent… well. Precedent had been thrown out the window hours ago. He returned to the bed, lifting the blankets to settle under them with her. “That depends, I suppose.”

“On?” she asked, turning onto her side to look at him.

“On how much vacation time you have,” he said, wrapping an arm around her waist to pull her against his front. She fit perfectly there, legs tangling with his as she seemed to melt into all the gaps between them, leaving no room for doubt to remain. “I was thinking that we should go somewhere. No work,” he amended quickly, “just a long weekend in an interesting place.”

Ava smiled against his chest and gave a slight nod. “Sounds nice.”

“I’m sure Sarah would be willing to feed the canary,” he added, as though it might be a dealbreaker if he hadn’t considered the little bird’s welfare.

“Mm. I’m sure she would,” Ava agreed, pulling the blankets up to tuck them in around their shoulders. “But first, rest. I think we both have some recovering to do, though yours might not take quite as long.”

“Fair enough,” he agreed, and adjusted his position to be able to sleep without any limbs going numb. “Good ‘night,’ then, Ava.”

She moved to kiss him, lips parting as she captured his mouth with hers. After a few slow moments, she drew back just enough to speak. “Goodnight, 47,” she whispered.

The words seemed to smolder as she said them aloud, making his skin tingle at the sound of her
saying his name. On another night, any other night, the sensations crawling down his nerves could have been explored as far as she would allow. Tonight, still sore from shrapnel and knife wounds, he pushed the idea away and settled for combing his fingers through her damp hair as she nuzzled into his neck and drifted off to sleep.

In a few hours, Diana would have a name, coordinates, and, if necessary, a plane waiting for him. Handle the immediate threat first, then leisure. Plan thus made, he followed Ava into much needed slumber.
Ava awoke to the sensation of her quickly-cooling back. She lifted her head slightly and was met with a hand brushing over her cheek, then a light, uncertain kiss on her temple to press her back down to the pillow. The blankets were pulled up around her shoulders and carefully tucked in. The rustling of fabric, the scratch of a pen on paper - pause, crumple, start again - the soft click of the lock on the door, then silence.

She drifted back into sleep.

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“Good morning, 47. You will be pleased to know that our friend from last night has been somewhat careless in covering his trail.” Diana said, all business. Their partnership was back on familiar ground - there were threats to their livelihood, and there was a solution to implement.

“Good.” 47’s voice echoed in the storage locker. He had pulled down the door behind him to avoid any curious employees who might pass by as he removed dust covers and unlocked the tool chests beneath. The weapons he’d stored here weren’t his first choices, but they would do for now. He couldn’t risk returning to Ava’s house until he was sure it was secure, and he couldn’t be sure it was secure until all of the loose ends had been tied up, questioned, and eliminated. “We know who hired him?”

“We have a fairly clear picture of it now, but I imagine it’ll be more complete once you’ve had a word with him. Our research suggests there were three players in this performance piece. Someone with power to funnel resources into the project, someone with money to privately fund the hits, and someone with the cloning research documents to pull the strings. The assassin from last night - Silva, you called him? - was merely a bit part.”

“Makes sense.” He gave the stashed fiberwire a few firm tugs, checking the tensile strength, then tucked it into his jacket. “They’ll have regrouped and formulated a new plan by now.”

“Then we should move quickly. I’m sure Mr. Silva has informed his employer that the situation has changed. The options from there are he’s on the run, he’s laying low on their payroll, or they’ve killed him.”

47 took stock of his ammunition, packing as much as might be necessary without slowing down his travel. “If he’s dead, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“True. Just before I contacted you, we pinged a cell phone at a gas station in Utica, Illinois. The same one used to discuss the contracts.”

“Why wouldn’t he use a burner phone?” 47 considered the bag in front of him, then pulled open a nearby drawer to remove a set of lockpicks. These were put in a side pocket, and zipped closed.
“God knows. A credit card was used there, under the name of Marcus Silva.”

“Is our man with an organization, or a freelancer?” 47’s practiced gaze scanned the storage locker as he ticked off the mission checklist. Distractions. Explosives. Ballistics. Clean suit. Yes, that was everything. He replaced the dust covers, then slung the duffel bag over his shoulder. “I’m tempted to lodge a complaint about the quality of their training.”

“We don’t all have the luxury of 30 years in Romania.”

“Luxury.” 47 huffed under his breath, and left the storage locker. “You know where he is, then?”

“I have a good guess. I hope you packed bug spray and hiking boots.”

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47 closed the trunk and locked the car, then turned to regard his surroundings. The drive had been shorter than he expected - about two hours outside the city. Seemed a bit close to home for a mercenary to hide, but maybe the contractors thought it wouldn’t be long before they had regrouped and come up with a new plan. Otherwise, why not go to Canada, or Argentina, or some other place well out of range?

Then again, he reflected, this had all been sloppy workmanship from the start. If he were in Silva’s position, he would have done it more quickly, efficiently, and - of course - for a much higher price, whatever the man had charged. You had to pay for quality, after all.

“Starved Rock State Park,” Diana said. “Ten and a half square kilometers of wilderness, characterized by the many canyons and glacial-”

“You’re sure he’s here?” 47 interrupted, and pretended he didn’t hear the slight huff from the other end of the connection.

“No, I’m not sure he’s here. There isn’t exactly an extensive CCTV system I can access, it’s ten kilometers of rocks and trees. But it’s the only place that makes sense based on his last known location. I have him on security tape checking in at the main lodge, so I would start there and circle outward. I’m sure he’ll turn up somewhere.”

“Hm.” 47 scanned the lot, then started toward the main building. “Anything else I should know?’

“Ava has watched a full season of The Great British Bake-off on Netflix.”

“About the mission. ...is that a cooking show?”

“A baking competition, very popular right now. She’s never mentioned it?”

“Should she have?” He pushed open the door to the lodge. Everything was log paneled, with exposed rafters and animal heads mounted along the walls. A receptionist smiled brightly from behind a counter.

“Good afternoon, sir, are you checking in or just here for the day?” the receptionist chirped as he approached.

“I’ve never stayed before, but I have some questions about the accommodations,” he said, leaning on the counter. A paper ledger was open in front of her, though her hands were spread over the pages of careful handwriting. Between her fingers, he focused in on last night’s new arrivals.
Could be. Might be. It was worth investigation, at least. A few more names might- “Sure!” the receptionist said, and closed the ledger. “What would you like to know?”

“How many rooms do you have?” He scanned the counter for possibilities. A peg board of keys. A computer beside her, with someone’s Facebook feed loaded onto the screen. A video of a cat playing with the sound off.

“We have 61 rooms in the lodge and thirteen cabins, depending on what your plans are for your visit. Our Sunset Cabins are-”

There. A mosaic of security camera footage. An array of hallways and exteriors, plus one camera pointed at the check-in counter, one at the parking lot. The hallways might pass, but he had been standing here too long, and been too engaged in this conversation to leave any recordings. The hard drive would need to be scrubbed on his way out.

“-and we have a sauna, hot tub, and heated pool in the main lodge for your enjoyment,” the receptionist finished, and offered a brochure and a trail map. “Here are the prices and locations if you’d like to book something now, we’re filling up quickly for the fall so you should book soon if you’d like to see the leaves change!”

47 took the papers and put them in his jacket. “Thanks. I think I might,” he said as he turned from the counter and walked back outside.

Room 126. With only 61 rooms, it couldn't be in order. Perhaps the 26th room on the first floor? That seemed the most likely. He strolled to the edge of the lodge, turned the corner, and continued along the building. The rooms looked nearly identical, at least from outside. Same windows, same curtains, same visible furniture within. It wouldn't help with infiltration, but it reduced the variables once inside.

“Wait.” Diana’s voice was sharp and sudden. 47 halted, pressing his shoulders against the wall of the building, looking toward the corner he had been approaching. “Emergency exit around the corner,” she explained. “An employee is taking a smoke break.”

“Door?”

“Appears propped open. She’s standing a few feet away from it, on your side.”

47 nodded and moved to the corner to risk a glance for visualization. The employee took a leisurely drag off the cigarette and puffed out a stream of smoke. Clearly in no rush to get back to her post. He glanced around, then fished a quarter from his pocket and took aim.

The coin tinged off a tree branch beyond the employee, and she dropped and crushed the cigarette in one practiced motion. She affected her best customer service smile and walked toward the noise, asking if someone was there that had a question about the accommodations offered at the lodge. The door clicked closed behind her, and she frowned as she picked up the cigarette packet she’d used to prop the door for her break. Must have been a gust of wind, she decided, and counted herself lucky when she found a shiny quarter on her way back to the front door to get back inside and to her post.

47 moved down the hallway, pausing at a security office to mark the location in his mind. Erase today's tapes on the way back to the car, he reminded himself, then moved on.

Room 126 was at the end of a row of rooms. He paused at the door, listening a moment, then tried
the knob. Locked, of course. After a few moments with a lockpick, the knob gave and he edged the door open.

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Rick Vanston swished his razor in the sink, then leaned close to the mirror to examine his cheek for any stray hairs. Mary and the kids should be back from their hike any minute, and then they would go into town to splurge on the biggest dinner of their lives. Mary had wanted to save the five grand windfall for Christmas, really blow the doors off the holiday this year, but he had talked her down to three grand - one per kid - and to get a little crazy in the present tense for once. After all, Christmas was months and months that away, and he had a thick wad of cash burning a hole in his pocket. The guy who had pressed it into his hand had been strange, a little methy if he knew his rural types, but who was he to turn it down? They'd only rented the cabin because all the rooms at the lodge were booked anyway, and it was nice to be right on the main road.

He pulled the plug on the sink and turned on the warm water tap. He bent over the sink, cupping water into his hands to splash over his face. Water was cold. Maybe something was wrong with the heater? He'd have to ask at the desk.

A firm hand tightened painfully on the back of his neck, pushing his head down until his nose almost touched the water. “Mar-” he started, trying to lift his eyes to the mirror. That was not Mary. His gaze twitched to the jacket, to the pocket with the rubber banded bundle of hundred dollar bills. A set up? A lifetime of Hollywood movies unspooled in Rick's mind. Strangers on a Train. Dial M for Murder. That one terrible movie Mary had insisted on seeing because Timothy Olyphant was in it. Oh God.

“Marcus Silva.” The stranger said, voice glacially calm.

“Who?” Rick squeaked, and felt the hand tighten. “I don't know who that is!” He yelled, voice pitching with panic.

“You're in his room.”

“Oh, him? He didn't give me a name. He didn't tell me anything, he just wanted our cabin. Birdwatching or something, he said he was birdwatching, and the birds don't come up to the lodge because of all the-”

“Cabin?” the stranger interrupted. “Which cabin?”

“Cabin six, we were renting cabin six and he said that's the one he wanted.”

“When?”

“This morning, about ten or so?”

“How long is it booked?”

“Until Monday.” Rick swallowed nervously. “So uh. Are we cool?”

“We're cool.”

Rick exhaled in relief as the grip on his neck loosened. He began to lift his head, then let it drop as it was pushed firmly back into the bowl of the sink. “Okay, okay,” he said quickly. “You're right, I'll wait here. Lock up on your way out, okay?” He asked, feeling mildly insane for asking.
“Good. You've been of great assistance. Enjoy your vacation.”

Rick held his breath as he listened to the retreating footsteps, the sound of the door lock being turned, the door clicking closed. He exhaled, and slid to the floor until everything stopped spinning. When Mary and the kids arrived a few minutes later, he had nearly convinced himself he'd hallucinated the whole thing.

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The man staying in the Vanston family's cabin refilled the tea kettle and set it back on the stove with a sigh. Go hiking, they told him. Enjoy the quiet. Lay low until they could find a new angle on the plan.

Fuck that. Fuck this. Fuck the trees, and the prepackaged meals, and the spider he'd had to chase out of the shower this morning. And fuck the guy who told him a gram of carfentanil would kill an elephant in ten seconds.

He walked back to the couch, sitting heavily and picking up another book off the pile. Was sure burning through the supply. Was going to have to head into town to find something else soon. No fucking TV, no fucking internet. Barely any phone signal. The whole situation was fucked.

The kettle whistled, and he tossed the book, unopened, back onto the pile. “Fucking dealer didn't know shit about his product. ‘This shit would drop Andre the Giant before the dust even settles,’ he said, what a fucking…” the rest of the complaint died in his throat. The kettle had been moved off the flame, and steam curled from two teacups. “Liar,” he finished weakly.

“He was probably right.”

The man spun around, falling back against the edge of the stove. “Where did you-”

47 stepped forward, grasping the man's throat to silence him and forcing him back over the burners. “Andre the Giant died of heart failure. Organs strained from extreme growth.” He leaned closer, moving a hand to the stove knobs to light the burner beside the man's head. It clicked and puffed into flame. The man's eyes flicked to it, then back up to his attacker. “But your dealer’s purest cut didn't have a prayer against me.”

“What-” the question, whatever it was going to be, was choked off. After a moment, a rush of blessed oxygen.

“No. I'm going to ask some very simple questions, and you're going to answer them in short, complete sentences.”

“You'll have to kill me,” the man gasped.

“I don't need your permission for that. But you can convince me to make it less painful.” 47 turned the burner knob to its limit, letting the flames lick the air inches from his victim's face.

“No! No no no you don't have to kill me, I'll talk,” the man said, closing his eyes against the heat of the flame that filled his vision.

“Good.” 47 spun the knob to extinguish the flame, and loosened his grip. “Then let's begin. Who is paying you?”

The man tried to stand, and was pushed back down. “Uh. Um. I don't know his name, it's all phone calls from a weird number.”
“Weird?” 47 reached across to the teacups with his free hand to remove the steeping tea bags and toss them into the sink.

“Not local. I looked up the area code, it's in like Iowa. Why the fuck's he calling from Iowa I have no idea…” A sharp shove to the chest pulled him out of his thoughts. “Look, it's in my phone, it's right over there.” He pointed across the room, at the stack of books by the couch. “Right on top. No bars, but you can see the contacts, right? Some texts, too, have at it.”

The fingers around the man's neck released. 47 followed the indicated directions toward the couch, picking up one of the teacups as he passed them and blowing on the steam. “I assume it's PIN locked?” He asked, putting the cup down on the top book as he reached for the phone.

“Yeah, PIN lock.” The man pushed himself up from the stove and leaned heavily on the opposite counter. A bright idea struck him. “Hey, if I give it to you, can I walk?”

“Number.” 47’s thumb hovered over the keypad.

“Answer first.”

47 sighed. “Fine. If you give me the correct code on the first try, I'll walk out that door without another word. Deal?”

“Deal.” The man couldn't believe his luck. Maybe he was going to pull this one out after all. “Three six oh one four.”

47 typed the number, then nodded in satisfaction and pocketed the phone. True to his word, he walked briskly to the door, stepped onto the porch, and turned. He raised the silverballer, and fired. “Nice doing business with you.”
Apex Predators

47 raised the monocular, adjusting the focus as he scanned the windows of the building opposite his position. People milled around the ground floor, going to and from meetings and lunch breaks. The floor above looked like it held mostly offices, their blinds open to bring in some natural light throughout the workday.

“The data on Mr. Silva’s phone has turned out to be very useful,” Diana said conversationally after some time.

The third floor windows were few and mirrored, unable to be seen through without pressing one’s face right up to it. Probably the R&D area, protected from prying eyes.

“Silva’s contact at Novira Pharmaceuticals seems to be the head of their security force, a man named Jared Robinson. Robinson first contacted Silva last autumn, offering a large sum of money in exchange for information.” This last word she said with a note of distaste, as though offended by the mundanity of it all.

The fourth floor had no windows at all. Definite R&D, and any secure offices. Basement? How many sub-basements would a building like this have? More to the point, where would they have their security room?

“Robinson’s office is on an inner corridor on the second floor, no windows. However, his ID card is regularly swiped at the company gymnasium between 11:30 and noon on workdays. Perhaps he could use some fresh towels, or a bench spotter? I’ve sent the floor plans to your phone with points of interest marked.”

47 put down the monocular on the sill and unlocked his phone to examine the map. A pending text message caught his eye first.

Ava: I've run out of stuff to watch on Netflix and now I'm bored.

47: I'm sorry to hear that.

Ava: What are you up to? Entertain me.

47 looked at the message a moment, then opened the phone's camera and aimed it at the floor beside him. A screwdriver, a length of fiber wire, a scoped rifle, and a small, neat stack of coins. After another moment of hesitation - let her in, she's asking you to let her in - he sent the image.

He set the phone face down beside the monocular and sorted through the equipment while he avoided waiting for a response. Going to the gym, then. He took the coins, screwdriver, wire. The 5mm would have to do for ballistic back up. Not his first choice, but easily concealed in case there were pat downs at the entrance. The rifle wouldn't have a prayer anyway, no matter how loose the security. Pick it up later.

The phone buzzed.

Ava: Is that a WA 2000?

47 began to type a response asking how she knew, deleted it. Began to ask if she'd fired one, and deleted that, too. The image it was summoning in his mind was too distracting.
47: Yes.

47: I'll try to entertain you once I'm done here.

Ava: Just come home in one piece. x

He muted the phone and put it away.

“Well?” Diana asked expectantly.

He considered playing dumb, then relented. “Ava's getting restless.”

“I'll see what I can do. In the meantime…” she trailed off encouragingly.

“Right.” 47 stowed the remaining equipment and made his way down to ground level as he ran through his approach. There would be a front desk, and a receptionist. Might wave him through without looking up, might be sharp enough to ask for a badge. Was it worth the risk?

No. Plenty of time to make it to the gym and prepare, no need to gamble. Besides, he noted as he surveyed the building's exterior, there was a balcony along the west wall. Two men stood with their backs against the railing, smoke curling up from the cigarettes they were gesturing with as they spoke heatedly with one another.

“Look, it's not for everyone, I'm just saying you should give it a shot.”

47 moved under the balcony, climbing a support pillar below the men to get as close as possible without entering their line of sight. His fingers gripped the edge of the balcony, feet braced on the pillar as he waited.

“I refuse to stand in my closet and ask myself if every goddamn tie brings me joy or not. That's the dumbest fucking thing I've heard in my life.”

“It's more than- okay, fine, you're the one who asked what I did last weekend.” The man crushed his cigarette out on the railing beside him, then flicked it into a trash can. “Keep your dirty ass apartment, then, see if I care.”

“I will,” the second man snapped, folding his arms across his chest. “Hey, you going to the brewery after work tonight, or are you going to be too busy folding up all the socks that love you?”

“I'll be there. Kick your ass at darts this time, too,” the first man said, voice fading as he retreated back into the building.

“Hmph. We'll see,” the remaining man said as he lifted his cigarette to his lips for another drag. This proved impossible, as before he could inhale an arm had clenched around his neck, cutting off his breath just long enough to knock him out.

47 pulled himself onto the balcony, and lifted the ID badge from around the man's neck. He swiped it at a card reader and pulled the door open, then scanned the hallway for any witnesses. Finding none, he pulled the unconscious man to a broom closet and dropped him inside. That would do for now.

“Diana,” he said softly as he checked the badge in his hand, “does Walter Grigori have security clearances?” He could hear the swift tapping of computer keys, then an affirmative sound.

“For the next hour, Walter Grigori has access to every door in this building. I can make no
promises about how the people on the other side of said doors will react, however."

“I’m sure they'll see reason.” He hung the lanyard around his neck and exited the closet. Illusion complete.

“Or the inside of a bin.”

“Reason takes many forms,” he said, consulting the map on his phone to consider his route. The gym facilities were on the ground floor, at the other end of the building. Would it be better or worse to cross public spaces, that was the question. Higher, more secure floors would have fewer employees to cross his path, but they were also more likely to recognize their colleagues. After a few moments of consideration, he took the staircase down to the ground floor.

The reception desk was staffed by a bored-looking 20 year old who glanced up at the employees passing by with the signature tepid interest of one who is not being given enough money or oversight to care. 47 flashed Walter's badge at her as he passed, thumb partially obscuring the photo she made no effort to compare to its bearer.

He palmed the badge again, slowing his approach to the gym entrance to examine the surroundings. The door had a slot to swipe a badge, and beyond was a room stocked with free weights and treadmills. The room seemed vacant. Good.

47 swiped Walter's badge, then pushed the door open. The room smelled like lavender Fabuloso cleaner, with just a trace of sweat. Not a particularly active employee population, then. Less questions asked, less threat of interaction. He moved through the room, noting possibilities. A barbell bench. A set of kettlebells. A set of shower stalls with a large towel hamper outside them. The beep of the door lock drew his attention, and he stepped behind the curtain in the shower stall to assess the shift in the situation.

“Mr. Robinson’s personal trainer,” Diana supplied after a moment. “Not an employee, but has access to this room for lunchtime sessions, it seems.”

47 nodded slightly. An opportunity seemed to be revealing itself. He waited, pressing into the wall as he tracked the trainer’s progress through the room.

The man was whistling to himself as he picked out sets of free weights, loading them onto a barbell rack. Next, he wiped down the handles on the treadmill and set the incline for the belt. He glanced at his smartwatch, then turned to walk to the stalls to grab a few fresh towels. He pulled the privacy curtain aside and, before he could register what had happened, everything went dark.

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Robinson swiped his badge and pushed through the door to the gym. He pulled off his Bluetooth headset and tossed it onto a ledge. “Okay, Thomas, ready to get my ass kicked again today. My legs only just recovered from Monday, so how’s about we do upper body to-” Robinson stopped, assessing the man before him. “You’re not Thomas.”

“Sorry, sir,” Thomas’s replacement said apologetically. Tall, bald, well built, shirt with the company logo. Badge lanyard around his neck, under the shirt. Familiar in a nonspecific way. “I told him to leave a message with your assistant but I guess he didn’t get a chance. Thomas is sick, no voice, some kind of upper respiratory virus. He called in a favor and asked me to lead your-”

“Badge,” Robinson interrupted, holding out a hand. Irritation crackled through him like static electricity. He didn’t have time for games and too-neat stories. He needed concrete facts and
information, and to get back to work by one o’clock.

“Excuse me?” the other man asked, head tilting in apparent puzzlement.

“You got in here, didn't you? Thomas might not have mentioned, I put together the security program around here. Everyone has a badge.”

“Ah.” The stranger produced a badge from under his shirt, looking at it. “Thomas gave me his, said it would be too much trouble to get a new one printed and keyed for just one day.” He turned the badge toward Robinson as proof that it did indeed belong to Thomas. “I hope this won't get him in trouble.”

“We’ll see about that,” Robinson grunted. He would have to speak to his trainer about that. About what the fuck the point of a secure gym facility was if he was going to just hand his ID over to someone who hadn't been fully vetted and given clearance. He examined the badge, tilting it to catch the light off the holographic watermark. It was legit, at least. He tipped his head side to side, popping his neck as he looked back up at his opposite. “What’s your name?”

“Armin,” the other man said, deflated. He looked concerned, shoulders dropped and eyes lifted. Worried how much of an ass-chewing his buddy was going to get for staying home sick without notice? No. There was something in the stance that nagged at him. The look of a cat waiting for the mouse to come in swiping range.

Robinson shook himself, rubbing one wrist with the opposite hand as he swiped into a menu on his smartwatch. Systems normal, no sign of forced entry, no alarms raised or intruder alerts. He knew this security system inside and out, and a fly couldn’t fart on the conference room muffins without him knowing about it.

He was overworked, paranoid, that had to be it. He had been putting in twice as many hours as he was being paid for lately, trying to fix what that two-bit hit crew had fucked up. He’d been looking forward to his training session all day, and he was reticent to let it go - with or without Thomas.

“Fine,” he said finally, squaring up to the other man and holding his gaze. “But I’m calling the shots, got it? We’ll see if you can keep up with me. I want a damn good workout today, not some pansy-assed pilates class.”

Armin brightened, a strange smile crossing his face. “Yes sir. I think I can handle that.”

They worked the circuit in near silence, save for brief instructions and Robinson’s occasional grunts and panting. Treadmill sprints, Turkish get ups, box jumps. Armin watched with apparent approval, correcting form where necessary and preparing the next station.

Robinson hit the water fountain, sucking down mouthfuls of icy cold water. He splashed some onto his face as he came up for air, then wiped his face with a towel as he walked back to the trainer. “Shit. I’d like to know who trained you. I know it couldn’t have been Thomas, don’t tell him I said so though.”

“I trained overseas with some very brutal instructors,” Armin said as he screwed the barbell collars into place. “No rest, no water breaks, no talking.”

“Shit,” Robinson said, shaking his head in awe. He’d have to figure out a way to let Thomas down easy, and find out this guy’s contact information. Sorry, Tommy, time for a new trainer. “Coulda used them in basic, they sound like my kind of guys.”

“I have no doubt,” Armin murmured, and gestured to the bench. “Now, shall we continue?”
The men moved to the weight bench, and Robinson lay down below the barbell. Weights were added, and he removed the bar from the rack to begin his set. The bar sank to his chest, and he grunted as he strained against the bar to lift it again to the rack. “Hey, too much. Not gonna make it through the set with-” he stopped as he watched Armin’s hand wrap around the middle of the barbell, pushing down just enough to prevent him from hooking it into place.

“I thought you wanted a killer workout,” the man above him said, voice changing to cold steel.

Robinson lifted his gaze to what was no longer the helpful, compliant gaze of Armin, but the hard eyes of a killer.

Shit.

“I’m paying you to spot me here, what the fuck do you think you’re doing?” he snapped. 

“Buy some time, find your escape route.

“Isn’t it obvious?” the false trainer said, tipping his head slightly like an entomologist gazing into his killing jar.

“You’re about to lose your job, that’s what’s obvious,” Robinson said, face reddening as he pushed back against the bar. Fatigue had been setting in before he lay down, and it was coming up fast now. Find your escape route.

The bar pushed suddenly down on his chest, knocking the air from him. “Don’t try my patience. You recognize me, I can tell, and that is strange. There’s only one class of person who knows I exist at all.”

Robinson wheezed as the weight was lifted just enough - with one hand, he only used one hand - to let him respond. “Oh yeah? Who’s that?”

“My clients,” Agent 47 said coldly.

Game over. Robinson threw his weight against the left side of the bar to off-balance it to the right, gritting his teeth with the strain as his shoulder was pushed back to the bench. 47’s steady hand held the bar over the other man’s chest, pressing it down.

“Fuck,” Robinson hissed, his eyes squeezing shut as he weighed his options. He was going to have to buy some time. He was certain he couldn’t talk his way out of this one, but eventually someone would come in, right? “Yeah,” he said, voice as even as he could manage, “I hired you.”

“Good. Let’s start there… why hire me?”

Robinson added this to the scale of options. There didn’t seem to be an obvious disadvantage in answering a few questions. Keep him talking. “I had to draw you out. How do you find a ghost? Word on the street was, you fulfill a contract and vanish into thin air. We had to know where you were going to be next.”

“Why Chicago?” Agent 47’s hard gaze never wavered from Robinson’s, nor did his grip on the barbell.

“Chicago jobs got filled faster than others. International or domestic, Chicago was the place to get shit done quick. Once we knew where you denned, it was easy enough to hire guys to wait near the targets and shadow you out. Gotta give you credit, you didn’t make it easy,” a chuckle hissed between his clenched teeth. “Took a lot of money and a lot of jobs to narrow it down first.”
“Yes, I’d imagine.” A thought seemed to occur to 47. “Whose money? Surely not yours. You wouldn’t go to all the trouble to pay out all of those contracts if it was your own money you were playing with.”

“Got handed a blank check to write for whatever amount you asked, as long as I found you. Whatever makes you special, the boss wants it and he ain’t fucking around waiting.”

“Boss?” 47 asked, rolling his wrist side to side to rock the barbell in Robinson’s hands. “You’re getting tired, we should speed this up.”


47’s eyes narrowed at that. “And how did they know?”

“Dunno.” He gave a half shrug, working his shoulders side to side a bit. “She had a stack of research notes, something about a medical breakthrough. Not my area, don’t care. I heard ‘get the guy’ and that’s what I did.”

“Not quite. You'll notice you're the one fighting gravity for 600 pounds of steel.” A pause. “And losing, it seems.”

“What, you think killing me will stop anything?” Robinson hissed out a laugh. “You think I didn't plan ahead? I'm a man of some principles, sure, but I'm not above dispensing some…” and here he paused, considering his next words as carefully as he was watching the other man's expression, “collateral damage.”

If he hadn't been watching for it, or if he has blinked, he wouldn't have seen it. But Jared Robinson had not worked his way up to the top of the corporate heap by missing cues. For just a moment, the assassin wondered just how safe a safehouse could actually be.

Jared Robinson was not a man to pass up an opportunity like that.

He grunted as he released the barbell, rolling out of the way as 47 let it drop from his grip. He stumbled to the exit, grabbing his phone and keys as he passed. He fumbled for the little silver fob on the keyring, and mashed the silent alarm button with his thumb.

*He is not leaving this building alive,* Robinson promised himself as he turned down the hallway that led him to the security control room. *Or maybe not even dead.*
A game of cat and also cat

Robinson locked the control room door and dropped into the chair at the center of an array of monitors. He hooked a security headset over his ear and switched to a channel saved only for emergencies. If the regular training drills had done their job, every member of his team would have received the silent alarm notice and would have done the same to wait for instructions.

He felt a slight thrill at the idea of an actual infiltration. This was the true test of his ability, of the team he had built, of all the time, money, and effort that he had put into making this building a fortress.

It was better than cardio.

As the earphone buzzed to life, he heard a yammer of voices, guards wondering if they could go back to their normal patrol routes yet or not. He clenched his jaw in irritation. “This is not a test. It’s game time, so look sharp. We have an intruder, white male, tall, bald, possibly in exercise clothes but don’t discount anyone who might fit the profile. Ten grand to whoever brings him in alive, eight grand if he comes in dead. No heroes, just do your job. You get that, or do I have to repeat myself?”

“Got it,” chorused a jumble of voices through the speaker.

“Good men. Hop to it,” Robinson said, and turned to the array of screens begin checking security cameras.

The camera in the gym, he noted without surprise, had been disabled.

The cameras in the first floor hallways were clear, panning back and forth as they recorded the movements of employees. Nothing remarkable, he thought as his practiced eye scanned the images.

Bingo.

Robinson rose from the desk, pressing the talk button on his headset. “Second floor, by the break room,” he barked into the mic. “Moving north. Charlie team, that’s you.”

“Yes boss!”

“Got it, boss!”

“Ready, boss.”

Robinson’s blood ran cold. The last, mocking syllable rang in his ear. Hang on now. He knew that voice. He knew all the voices, but this one was Wrong.

And now, somewhere in this building, he was missing one of his men.

---

47 closed the locker door with the unconscious security guard inside, and clipped the headset to the pocket of his uniform alongside the man’s badge. He slipped into the hall, then pushed through another door and into a utility tunnel. Thick braids of power cables were lashed to the ceiling, pipes making sharp corners down adjoining hallways.
He crept down the tunnel, moving along the wall to reduce visibility. "Diana?" He asked softly once he was certain he was alone. "Do you have eyes on him?"

"Not eyes, per se," she responded. "But I followed him on camera to the basement stairwell, and his credentials were accepted at the door. Barring a daring escape through the HVAC, I think it's safe to say he has gone to ground in the control room."

"Good." He paused at a door, listening for signs of life on the other side of it. "Credentials?"

"Thumbprint scanner. Before you ask, I tried to amend the credential list, and the request was rejected by the system. It seems Novira has decent security measures, at least where it affects them directly."

"Hm." He caught the edge of the doorframe, hoisting himself up to a bundle of cables running into the wall beside it. Adjusting his grip, he reached for a likely wire and pulled it out with a sharp snap.

"Was that you?" Diana asked a moment later. "I lost the feed on camera 16."

"Yes." He released the ledge and dropped back to the ground. "Now, let's see who wants that ten grand the most."

---

Bravo team were moving in pairs. They had passed a member of Charlie team, who hadn't been able to raise his partners on radio or otherwise. Pairs seemed safer, less likely to be ambushed. They moved toward the dead spot in the camera network as directed, guns drawn but held at their sides. Don't scare the civilians, Robinson had said. Act like this is a training exercise, while knowing it isn't.

The two men chatted about the weather - one planned to go for a run after work, the other had a weekend in Michigan coming up if the rain held off. Bravo Two nodded at a janitor as they passed, and the man in the rugged work clothes nodded back as he swept the corridor, head down to focus on his work. The two tightened their grips on their weapons as they turned the corner into the hallway with the security hole.

"Hang on," Bravo One said, touching his partner's elbow to stop him from advancing. He pointed at the door to the maintenance tunnel, which was slightly ajar. That was wrong. A torn piece of cardboard had been wedged between the door and the frame to prevent the lock from catching. That was wrong, too.

"... Well I'm not going in there," Two said after a long moment. "I'm not dying for this shit."

"What, you think he's waiting for us? Hiding behind the door with a knife to shank us when we storm through like rubes?" The runner stepped forward, reaching for the cardboard. He hesitated a moment, doubting his own theory, then pulled the paper out in a single, swift grab. The door slowly clicked shut. Behind him, his partner snorted irritably. He crumpled the piece of cardboard as he turned back to his colleague to gloat. Before he could form the thought, everything went painful, then everything went dark.

The cardboard slipped from his limp hand and fluttered to the ground. After a moment, it was dropped into the garbage bin on top of the two unconscious members of Bravo team, and the janitor that had been stripped of his uniform. 47 pulled a gym bag out of the bin to sling over his
shoulder, then pushed the bin into the utility tunnel. They would have headaches - and possibly forced resignations - but they were not the focus of the exercise.

47 closed the door to the tunnel, and continued to the stairwell that would take him to his next waypoint. This was already taking too much time.

---

Robinson reclined in his chair, eyes scanning over the array of monitoring equipment. *Where had he gone?* They had maintained radio silence since his quarry had made his presence known, and he was itching to ask for a report from his teams.

The question knocking around in his brain now was why. If Robinson had been the one on the run, he wouldn't have said shit about having a radio. He could have tracked the team movements. He could have provided false information. Could have. Didn't. Why?

He reached for the talk button, and pressed it down. “Are you planning to write out a message with the bodies of my men?”

Dead air.

“Are you listening, waiting for me to trip up?”

Robinson sat forward, glaring at an empty hallway.

“Are you waiting for me to come out like some arcade final boss to be beaten?” When he received no response, he went on. “Do you think I'm that stupid?” The last word rang in the small control room. “This control room has so many safeguards, it's more secure than the Pentagon.”

The radio crackled to life. “I've been inside the Pentagon,” the voice at the other end mused. “I wasn't impressed.”

Robinson's hand clenched into a fist, then relaxed. *Ah, so you are listening...* He felt a buzz in his pocket, and he reached for his phone. His gaze fell on a text from the remaining member of Charlie team, who had apparently taken “just do your job” to heart.

C2: You're fucking with him, right?

Robinson: ?

C2: You said control room

C2: You're in your office though

Robinson reread the texts, searching for meaning.

Robinson: I'm in the control room

He watched the three bouncing dots that indicated his employee was typing, then saw them vanish. Reappear. Vanish. Finally,

C2: But we just saw you go in

Realization unspooled in the theater of his mind as he reread the messages. "Shit," he declared to no one in particular. "Shit, shit, shit." He grabbed the walkie-talkie, mashing the talk button.
"Do you think it was wise to tip your hand so early?" Diana asked suddenly.

"How so?" 47 tilted a framed photograph of Tuscany to use as a mirror as he adjusted the collar of his - formerly Robinson's - suit. The head of security had decent taste at least - the suit was mid-range Hugo Boss, but expertly tailored for a muscular frame. How unlucky the man had left it in his locker when he rushed out of the gym, or finding a way into the office might have been tricky. The accompanying gym bag - now stocked with weaponry and ID badges of various clearance level instead of street clothes and protein bars - had been a very useful prop on the way upstairs.

"Responding to him over the radio. He knows you're listening, so they'll take communication offline."

47 made a non-committal sound in response as he sat at the desk and began opening drawers. The top drawer had a neat row of pens, a box of paper clips, a pile of sticky notes. The left drawer contained operating manuals for various security systems. Below that was paperwork, filed and labeled neatly. Jared Robinson was a conscientious man. He pushed the drawer closed and leaned forward to check the USB ports on the back of the computer tower. *Not conscientious enough*, he thought, and reached for the password token left plugged into the tower. He pressed his thumb to the token to activate it, and watched the computer screen as it logged in.

"Unless that's your intention?" Diana asked after a minute. "Playing with your food, are you?"

"I don't need him," 47 said as he began his search. "He was told to find me by the head of Novira and some scientist, but he doesn't know why. He knows me only when prompted, not on sight. He's already told me he knows nothing, and as a professional I try to avoid non-target kills." He paused a beat, then added, "However, he has very sloppily hidden documents about his employer that I'm finding to be very interesting."

"Send them over when you can, I'll see what I can find."

"Doing it now," he said, just as the radio crackled back to life. It seemed his quarry, whose voice was sounding increasingly clipped through gritted teeth, had more to say.

---

"Hey, asshole. Your intel sucks, you're on the wrong floor." Robinson released the button, counting a full ten seconds of silence before pressing again. "You listening? You're three floors off target."

"Death is only the end if you assume the story is about you," the voice on the radio intoned.

Robinson squeezed his eyes closed, focusing on the background. The words meant nothing, they were a distraction. The clicking, the rustling… that was the key.

The radio crackled again. "Didn't anyone ever tell you that you're not supposed to leave your password token plugged in? I'd expect more out of a security expert."

"Are you going through all my shit?" Robinson blurted, then flushed red at his own admission. He was supposed to be in control of this situation, and it was starting to spin out of his grasp. This was not how it was supposed to go.

"Not all of it." A pause. "Don't worry, I'm not after your saved credit cards and dating site passwords."
Robinson grasped for meaning and found only mist. The adrenaline dump from before had faded, leaving him uncertain of his position. The agent was trying to kill him, then he wasn't. They were locked in a battle of mind and muscle, and then they weren't. He had prepared for this moment for ages, every possibility from every attacker, and this was not one of the scenarios he had run. Time to run it now.

Clearly his underlings couldn't be trusted with capture - the quarry was too clever. The security measures around this room ensured the hitman couldn't get inside without being spotted, but if he left this room to capture the man himself, Robinson would be at a disadvantage.

Continuing on this trajectory, the other man would leave of his own accord and vanish, and Robinson would have nothing to show for his loss. He would be fired. Killed. Worse.

New trajectory. He would not chase - chasing left one open for ambush. He would lure. Now, he thought, scanning through the files of everything he knew about his quarry, what would get your attention? As he sifted through some admittedly-grainy surveillance photos courtesy Silva's reconnaissance, an idea sparked. That was the wrong way around - he had already caught the man’s attention, back on the weight bench. What had made the assassin flinch?

I'm not above dispensing a little collateral damage.

Robinson straightened his posture, taking the situation back in hand. He picked up his phone from the table, and opened the conversation with C2.

Robinson: I have a job for you.

---

“I concur, 47,” Diana said once she’d reviewed the first batch of information from Robinson’s computer. “This is very interesting. And very poorly hidden.”

47 gave a huff of agreement as he wiped down the computer keyboard and mouse. No prints, no DNA. Leave them with nothing, in case they decide to try again. “As I said.”

“It looks like our next stop isn’t far. The CEO of Novira lives in Old Town, in one of those gated townhome associations. Very nice home, three floors. Two dogs, Rhodesian ridgebacks. Tread carefully, and perhaps visit a pet store for some biscuits on your way.”

“Noted.” 47 shut down the computer and stood, then strode to the door to begin exfiltration.

“You know,” Robinson said, voice chipper and friendly instead of the tantrum he had been having a few minutes ago, “I’ve never stayed at the Palmer House. Is it nice?”

47’s rhythm faltered. His fingers slipped from the doorknob. Steady, he reminded himself, that doesn’t mean anything. All he knows is that a pseudonym is registered there, not who-

“But then, I don’t have a lady friend to impress.” Robinson paused, still holding the talk button so as to not be interrupted. “Was she impressed? Never mind, I can ask her myself in a couple minutes.”

How could he know? How could he have possibly known?

“47,” Diana warned, her steady voice like a lightning rod trying to ground an entire supercell.
Ava said she saw someone near her car, and he didn’t think to check it for a GPS tracker. Did she leave geotagging enabled on her phone? He couldn’t remember if they’d discussed it before he left the hotel. Maybe someone had paid off hotel staff for a peek at the ledger. Maybe she’d been followed. Maybe...

“She’s cute. But if I’m honest, I liked her with her hair shorter last fall, when you took the job at Navy Pier.” Robinson seemed to be warming to his role now.

She thought Derek was following them. She thought he was watching the house. She thought she was being paranoid. He had told her it was nothing.

“47,” Diana said again, more insistently this time.

Robinson had moved closer to the microphone now, voice almost conspiratorial. “Well. I should go. My guest is on her way, and I’d hate to be a bad host and keep her waiting.” The speaker clicked to dead air.

He was supposed to keep her safe. Keep her out of it. Keep to cover. Keep moving. Don’t make attachments.

“47!” Diana snapped, clapping her hands together for attention.

“Yes?” he asked softly, as though she was making a social call.

“The rules have changed, and so must we. Here is what I propose.”
This chapter was an absolute beast that took far too many rewrites to get to flow the way I wanted, and I am so damn delighted to be done with it. During the frustrated rewrite process I started the next chapter, so hopefully it's not another too-many-months wait for the continuation. Your collective patience is externally treasured, and I appreciate all of the comments and kudos.

Ava stuck her thumb in her mouth, nibbling at the cuticle. She was burning quickly through her Netflix and Hulu watch lists, and there was only so many kickboxing videos she could stomach before she had to take a break. It hasn't been more than a day and a half that she'd been stuck in this hotel room, but the inability to leave made the hours seem all the longer. Her normally well-maintained fingers were beginning to take the brunt of the boredom.

The sharp knock at the hotel room door startled her, breaking her concentration. Now I'm hearing things, she thought. I guess I'll start hearing voices next.

The knocking paused, and a voice from the hallway called, “Package delivery!”

---

Diana's proposal was as simple and logical as 47's should have been. The suggestion that Ava had been put in danger, however, had been a new and untested factor that bucked his careful algorithms. It certainly hadn't been in his training at the asylum, or in ICA protocols.

Urban legends don’t show weakness.

Ghosts don’t worry.

They also, generally speaking, don’t have a voice of reason in their ear explaining exactly why cutting a swath of blood straight down into the basement control room was a bad idea.

Focus, she had told him. Concentrate on the task at hand. This is nothing new - there exists someone who knows too much and needs to be silenced. That territory is familiar, and he has spent years treading it. Call it a contract, if that helped - he already had all the intel, and the last step was elimination. The human factor, as she had so delicately referred to it, was more Diana’s department.

“Current information,” she began, shifting easily into her mission brief voice, “tells us that Jared Robinson has made the very foolish mistake of making a direct threat, for which he will pay dearly. He claims to be holed up in an unbreachable basement control room.”

“Unbreachable,” 47 said with a note of distaste. “Unless he’s sipping a glass of Amontillado in there, nothing is unbreachable.”

“I’m sure it could be arranged with enough time, but I don’t suppose there’s a mortar trowel at hand.”
“Seems unlikely.”

Robinson’s borrowed suit was as good as compromised now - the security team would know of the deception, and would be on high alert for someone wandering around looking like their boss when they knew he was in the control room. A shame to leave it - it was well made. 47 sifted through the gym bag and found the clothes he’d taken off a member of Bravo team. Those would have to do.

---

Ava walked to the door of the bedroom, peeking around the corner toward the hotel suite’s entryway. There were two still shadows at the gap between the door and the carpet - someone was indeed standing on the other side of the door. The shadows moved slightly, and the knocking recommenced.

“Package?” she asked, brow furrowing in confusion. “Who’s it for?”

“Label says Anna Rieper. This is the room of Tobias and Anna Rieper, is it not?”

_Tobias and Anna Rieper_, her thoughts echoed. _Ava Rieper. Dr. Ava Rieper. Hi, I’m Dr. Ava Rieper, I’ll be doing your dog’s surgery today._ She suddenly felt very warm, and was just as suddenly very glad to be alone in the suite. She walked to the door and leaned to the peephole. The person on the other side of the door wore a hotel employee uniform, and held a cardboard box under his arm. His expression was one of mild boredom papered over with a customer service smile. “Yeah?”

“It was dropped off about ten minutes ago, I figured I’d bring it straight here so you didn’t have to come down to the desk to pick it up.” The statement was hopeful, the tone of an underpaid employee hoping to get a nice tip for going above the call of duty.

“I don’t-” she hesitated, hand poised on the chain lock. It wasn’t completely out of the question, but at the same time... “From who? Did they leave a name?”

“I didn’t catch a name, sorry,” the worker said apologetically. “It was a tall guy, tailored suit, looked like he was going somewhere important? I guess he figured you’d know who he was, he was gone before I could ask questions.”

It was a very convincing description of 47. A week ago, she might have gone along with it without question, appreciated the kind thought and gone no further as to why, if he had indeed brought a gift for her, he hadn’t brought it up himself.

But it had been a very unusual week, and the note she’d found under her phone upon waking had been fairly clear on this subject.

_There is no room service._

_There is, however, a handgun in the drawer._

She checked each lock on the door, touching the chain and the deadbolt in turn to ensure they were secured. “Just leave it outside the door, okay? I’m- I’m just getting out of the shower, you see, it’s not really a good time.”

“‘Ah,” the shadows under the door shifted slightly as the man in the hall considered a new tactic. “Well the guy who dropped it off gave express instructions that it was signature only, it must be something very special.”
You must think I’m stupid, she thought as she crept back to the bedroom. You think I have no idea what I’m dealing with, and you’re so wrong. She slowly opened the drawer of the bedside table and closed her fingers around the grip of the Bartoli 75S.

Click-click-click as he tried the door. “I have other deliveries to make.”

“Go make them,” she called back as she slotted the magazine into place and checked the safety catch. It wasn’t a model she had fired before, but she held out hope she wouldn’t have to find out how good of a shot she was. She made a mental note to go back to the firing range once all of this was over.

“Look, I’m just trying to do you a favor.”

“Just leave it in the hall,” she said. “Or take it back to the desk if I have to sign for it, I’ll pick it up later.”

There was a long pause, then the bright customer service voice and polite knocking returned. “Ma’am, please open the door. I could get written up for this, please help me out here. You don’t want me to get written up, do you?”

Ava clenched her jaw and closed the bedroom door to muffle the voice a bit more. She couldn’t focus with him out there trying to talk to her. She strode purposefully to the phone, then paused. What if she was wrong? What if security came and were mad at her for calling them on an innocent employee? What if she got in trouble? What if, what if, what if.

But what if I’m right?

She drew a deep breath, and huffed it out. Okay. Hope this place has decent security. She picked up the phone and dialed.

---

47 had to admit, the control room was sturdy.

The entire structure seemed to be a custom job, a box separate from all exterior walls and dropped from the ceiling. It seemed to have its own interior air filtration, nothing that could be affected by, say, poison gas being pumped into the building’s HVAC. The walls were thick, probably layered steel and - if Robinson’s behavior thus far was to be trusted - lead lined in case of some kind of inexplicable radiation attack. Any electrical cables seemed to be routed through the floor, probably to an equally-secured source separate from the rest of the facility.

He pulled himself up onto the roof of the control room, scanning the blank surface with a critical eye. No human-sized vents. No convenient bundles of electronics.

He dropped back down to the floor and walked another circuit around the structure. Assuming this was indeed the control room in question - and he was reasonably certain it was - it was built by someone who had seen a few too many action movies. Someone who had absorbed every frame of Mission: Impossible and Die Hard as though they were modern gospels. Someone who was very, very clever about exactly the wrong things.

“Do you ever wonder what you would have done if you hadn’t come to the ICA?” Diana asked suddenly.

“No.” 47 said, voice impassive as he focused on the floor plan in his mind. 30 paces, turn right, 20 paces back to the stairwell, through the door marked SB. Down a flight, through the door marked
“Why?” Diana fell silent. She had come to recognize the moods of the agent quite well over the years, and the tone of his voice was the aural equivalent of seeing a bloodhound’s ears prick up as it lowers its head to a scent.

He took 20 paces deeper into the maintenance floor, then turned left. A door labeled “LINEN.” He moved to it and placed one hand on the handle, the other on the crack around the doorframe. It was slight, but he could feel positive air pressure flowing from the other side. He had a feeling he knew what he would find on the other side - or, at least, what he would have put there if he were a paranoid security guard with unlimited funding.

He glanced back into the main room, scanning for cameras he knew weren’t there. Of course Robinson hadn’t put any down here, why would he need them? He would be the only one who would be here, after all. He turned back to the door, then slowly eased it open a few centimeters. The air within smelled like a hospital, filtered so many times it may as well have been sterile. Beneath the sterility, he could smell the tang of oiled metal. He pulled the door open the rest of the way, and let his gaze follow the cables and counterweights up into the darkness. “It’s an elevator.”

“An elevator?” Diana repeated, unsure if she’d heard him correctly.

“More precisely, an elevator shaft.” He leaned into the dim space, squinting up at the thin blade of light between the floor of the elevator car and the wall of the shaft. “The elevator car is one floor up,” he said, then added under his breath, “Personal elevator. Not bad.”

“Buttons, switches, card readers...?” Diana asked, hands no doubt poised over the keyboard and ready to unlock whatever apparatus was required.

He withdrew from the elevator shaft and closed the door quietly. “You won’t find them. I suspect,” he said slowly, working the rest of the sentence through as he spoke it, “that our friend Mr. Robinson thought of that.” When she didn’t seem to catch his meaning, he added, “It will be manually operated. He’s the only one who would go up or down, so no need to call it from another floor. All mechanical, no electricity. No network. Hand cranked, probably.”

“Why, 47, you sound almost admiring.”

“Almost.” He frowned at the door, then turned to sweep his gaze across the rest of the maintenance area. The doors were variously marked with mundane contents - ELECTRICAL, JANITORIAL, MECHANICAL. Based on the contents of LINEN he felt relatively confident that his next waypoint would be behind one of them. “But not quite.”

Craig dropped his arm to his side, staring hard at the door. His knuckles were starting to get sore from knocking. The door was more solid than he expected - not that he had been sure what to expect. In his experience, people generally opened doors to him. Of course, those people had seen a badge, a uniform, a person they had been conditioned to trust. What was different this time? He’d even brought a box as proof of his claim. He didn’t have his Charlie team partner with him, maybe that was it. Jer had a few years of experience on him, and was generally better at this part. Granted, they had both been out of practice since they’d been hired on at Novira. Corporate espionage was more easily done behind a computer screen than actually face-to-face. None of this old school boots-on-the-ground shit.

He stepped closer to the door as a family emerged from the elevator and started down the hall. The
children chattered excitedly with their mother as they walked - apparently the dinosaurs at the Field Museum had been impressive. God, he’d lived in Chicago for years now and still hadn’t gone. Maybe in the winter, when kids like these were back in school and he didn’t have to hear them yammering the whole time.

Craig considered the door again as he waited for the witnesses to pass around a corner. He couldn’t very well return empty handed. With the state Robinson was in today, he might not get a second chance before his ass was on the street. As he mulled his options - return empty handed, break down door, empty bank account and hightail it to Canada - the elevator dinged to announce its arrival. The door slid open and two security guards sidled out and made their way toward him.

“How the hell would you know, anyway?” he snapped, tucking the box back under his arm as he turned toward the guards. He didn’t have time for this, he didn’t have time for any of this.

“Because this room isn’t getting any packages we don’t know about. Boss’s orders.”

The other guard slid a straight stick from its holster on his uniform and hefted it in his hand as though to check the balance. “And we take the boss’s orders seriously,” he said, and swung the stick in a wide arc.

Thunk.

---

Jared Robinson stood with his ear to the elevator door, straining to hear more noise from downstairs. The other man had found the elevator, had gone away to figure out how to get up to the control room and end their game. Just try to get up here, he thought smugly. See what happens.

He pushed away from the door and walked back to the array of monitors. The assassin was slipping between his cameras, nothing more than a brief blur of shadow at the corner of a frame. Where are you going?

One by one, the monitors darkened. The green lights on the switchboard before him flickered and went red. Ah, he thought, feeling a swell of relief. He knew his position now, knew the other man’s goal. He was going to blind him, take away his security measures one by one, then come back to finish the job. Like that would help, like that would do a single bit of good when there was only one way in, one way out. There was no sneaking up on him, not now.

You’ve done me a favor, now there’s nothing to divide my attention. He sat down in the chair and twirled it around to face the elevator door. He propped his right arm on the armrest, lazily sweeping the sight of his handgun side to side, covering all edges of the door in turn. One way in, one way out.

---

Inside the hotel suite, Ava peeked around the bedroom door. The insistent knocking and cajoling voice had stopped, and had been replaced with voices arguing about something. Her, she supposed.
She could hear the dull thuds and rustling fabric that suggested the argument had gone physical, then nothing. After a few moments she heard a clipped, unfamiliar voice through the door. “Area secured, requesting to pull back to neutral.” The owner of the voice waited a few moments for an unheard response, then, “Understood. Pulling back.”

The shadows retreated and Ava was left in silence and wonderment.

Her phone dinged, alerting to a new message. She pulled it out of her pocket to unlock.

Unknown Sender: Situation under control.

She stared at the words, at the heading of “Unknown Sender”. She chewed her bottom lip thoughtfully, thumb hovering over the keyboard as she considered her response. First impressions on the future in-laws - so to speak - were important, after all. What if she was wrong? After a few more moments of consideration, she decided to gamble.

Ava: Thank you, Diana

Unknown Sender: You're welcome.

---

Robinson checked his watch.

It had been too long. Too long since he had heard from his quarry. Time to pump the gas a little.

He wet his lips, then unmuted his microphone. "You haven't given up, have you? My men are due back any minute, and it'll be so awkward if you're not here when they arrive."

…

He stood and walked to the elevator door to listen. After a few beats he frowned and cleared his throat. "I can send down the elevator, save you a daring climb. It's manual, you just have to turn the-"

The radio crackled to life. "Where is she?"

Robinson swallowed a sigh of relief. Play it cool. He's taken the bait, now you've just got to reel it in. "On her way. Safe, I promise. Strict orders to my men, they're not to so much as scuff her shoes."

"You have coordinates?"

"I-" Robinson hesitated. Should I have had- no, who gives a fuck, I wasn't giving them to him even if I did. "Yeah, of course."

"ETA?"

"About ten minutes. Less if traffic is good," Robinson said boldly. He took a few steps back, raising the gun again. Time to push all the chips into the middle.

"Excellent."

A loud clank behind him made Robinson's finger twitch on the trigger. He turned, sweeping his aim toward the sound. One entrance, there's only one entrance. Don't let him distract you sneak up on you get you there's only one entrance, his brain rambled as he searched for the source of the
sound. After a moment, he lowered the gun slightly and walked to the source of the sound.

The air vent.

The vent was no more than a panel of narrow slats in the wall of the control room, covering the most powerful micro-filtration system he could find. No human-sized passageways, no easily removed panels to hide behind, and nowhere to aerosolize poison or anthrax spores. The best, most secure air scrubber known to humans, and it was clanging.

He raised his hand to the slats, and frowned. No air was being pushed into the room. Okay. That was fine. The air scrubber was off, but he had hours before that would become a problem. His quarry was trying to draw him out, trying to reverse the plan. This would be resolved long before he had to worry about his oxygen. All he had to do was go downstairs, and that little hiccup was no more. Yes, he could go along with that. He would get in the elevator and-

Robinson's thought was cut short by the shriek of metal. He tucked the gun into his belt and pressed his hands over his ears as he walked to the elevator door. He pulled the door open and knelt to peek down the narrow gap between the control room door and the elevator car, down the elevator shaft to the floor below.

Sparks.

A shower of sparks falling around the elevator cables like fireworks, lighting up the frame of the entry door below.

Is he-

How could he-

Who does he think he-

Robinson closed the door and pressed his forehead against it. He was starting to get a migraine, and he was quickly realizing that a headache was going to be the least of his worries.

---

She started as she heard a dull thunk by the bedroom window, and was halfway under the bed when another message came through.

Unknown Sender: That one was me. Check the ledge.

Ava put the phone back into her pocket and pushed herself up to her feet. She walked slowly toward the window, heart still pounding from the residual adrenaline flowing through it. She unlocked the window and pushed it open a crack. Just below the frame was a bolt driven deeply into the bricks of the building’s facade, a well-taped package secured to the shaft. There was a large, round sticker affixed to the package, bearing a symbol like a black Fleur de Lis drawn by an artist on PCP. She smiled slightly at the increasingly-familiar insignia, then carefully popped the screen out of place just enough to wiggle the bolt free. Once the package was inside, she secured the window again and sat on the bed to pick at the tape.

---

Robinson pulled the door to the elevator open and stepped inside. He untied the rope and slowly let out the slack to descend to the sub-basement level. He placed both hands on the door and shoved - nothing. Not even a creak. He ran his palms around the edges of the door, feeling for seams, for the
flow of air around the frame.

No.

No no no no no.

He slammed his fist against the door, then pressed his ear to it. Dull noise on the other side, but that was all. He unmuted his microphone and chewed his cheek a moment as he gathered his thoughts. “Did you block my door?”

“No.”

“I can’t open it.”

“Ah.” The assassin’s voice brightened. “That’s because it’s welded shut.”

Robinson’s breath caught. Welded. Shut.

"Yes, probably wise," he went on, "hold your breath. I only have a rough estimate of the air volume on the other side of this door, but you will want to conserve every breath. The engineers had a very nice TIG welding set up that they let me borrow. Very tight seals, no gaps."

Engineers. The engineers had no idea, the whole operation had been under wraps. Where were his men? What was all the training for if not this?

"They'll get me out," Robinson said, opening his phone to send out the alarm. Open this fucking door. "Idiot. My men are on their way."

"Do you know how much fresh air you have? As I said, I only have a rough estimate of how much time you have, and a rough estimate of how much time it will take to get through this very well made solid steel door... but the margins of error don't come close to intersecting."

He felt light-headed already. It was psychosomatic, there was plenty of air. Hours of air, maybe, if he was really conservative and stayed calm. He could talk the men through restarting the air scrubber, and-

"One more thing... you'll need a new air filter. Someone took a welding torch to the other one."

The line went dead. The control room suddenly felt very, very small.

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Ava carried the box back to the bedroom and poured out the contents. A Nintendo Switch with a pile of games, a bag of Haribo gummy bears, and a Nokia 3310. She picked up the phone and switched it on. There was a message waiting, from an unknown number, that simply said “For emergencies. - DB”

She set the phone face down on the side table, then returned to the pile of goodies to pick out a game.

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“Nice work, 47,” Diana said once her charge had emerged from the sub-basement and returned his borrowed equipment to their proper locations - minus a few key components to each. “I don’t think Jared Robinson will be threatening anyone any time soon.”
“Ava?” he asked, his brisk tone suggesting that if Diana didn’t answer quickly enough someone else might get welded into a storage room.

“Safe.”

He exhaled slowly, relief flooding through him. “Good. Thank you, Diana.”

“If I’m honest, she did most of the heavy lifting on that one. I sent some local contractors to recon the area, of course, but Robinson’s man beat them to the door.”

“Is she-”

“Hurt? No. The door was locked and chained, and her would-be attacker was in the hall trying to figure out what to do about it.” Diana paused a moment to let that sink in. “I delivered a care package for her trouble. She was promised one, after all.”

“Care package,” he echoed under his breath, mind already off on a tangent. She was safely under ICA observation, and Robinson had been handled. The two men - Robinson and Silva - that had known of her existence were now eliminated, and her safety was assured.

Or was it?

The thought rose unbidden, and made him pause in his exfiltration. There were still two more people involved in the scheme - the CEO who had bankrolled the endeavor, and the scientist who had possession of Ort-Meyer’s notes. The next stop would be for the CEO, whose address placed him on the north side of Chicago. With luck, the man would be at home.

Home, he thought. It was a word that had never held any particular meaning to the assassin, aside from being the easiest - and usually least defended - place to complete a contract. Now he felt his insides twist at the thought of it. What he wanted, more than anything else at this moment, was to go home.

First, though, he had to ensure there would be a home to return to. “Diana,” he said finally, “I need everything you can pull up on an address in Old Town.”

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