Gertie - The Outback Job

by TheTetrarch

Summary

Sequel to 'Gertie - Part One'. It might help to read that first!

When a tragedy strikes, Eliot ends up travelling back to Wapanjara Station in the Northern Territory, Australia, to help the people who saved his life when he left Moreau's clutches. And this time, the team decides to go too.

Notes

Acknowledgements – My two muses:

Arthur W. Upfield: author, one-time jackaroo, stockman, drover and murder mystery writer. His knowledge of the indigenous people of Australia and his skill in portraying that great continent in all of its wild beauty is the inspiration for this little tale. It is thanks to his unsurpassed stories that Gertie and all of her little foibles came into being.

Major Les Hiddins AM, ARA (Retired): Vietnam veteran, botanist, author, survival expert and the original Bush Tucker Man. His astonishing expertise, scrupulous honesty and big grin has made him one of my all-time heroes. Thanks to him, Eliot has his bush skills and Hardison has Bernadette and Oggie.

All chapter headings are from the works of Henry Lawson, one of Australia’s greatest poets and short story writers.

I have never been to Australia, so all mistakes are entirely mine.
To the Old Lands

“Eat your broccoli, ‘Lizbeth Grace!’ Eliot grumbled, “or no pavlova, okay?”

Six-year-old Elizabeth Grace Ford glared at Eliot Spencer, her guardian, bestest friend in the whole world and the man who insisted she eat her greens.

“Awwww, Eliot –“

“Don’t you ‘aw Eliot’ me, young lady!” Eliot scowled at Lizzie from his seat across the table in Leverage International HQ, “You’ve eaten broccoli since you got teeth to chew it with, an’ you’ve always loved it, so –“

“But I don’t like it now,” Lizzie whined, and drew her brows down in a fair facsimile of Eliot’s frown.

“Eat your broccoli, dear,” Sophie soothed as she worked her way through her plateful of broccoli gratin and pork escalopes with lemon, parmesan and thyme crust, one of Mikey Gonzalez’s excellent signature dishes. “It won’t kill you, and you love cheese, so don’t irritate Eliot. You know how he gets,” she added, and forked another bite of the tender pork into her mouth.

Mikey Gonzalez, one of the three excellent chefs at the Bridgeport Brewpub, had excelled himself, she decided. The pork was fantastic.

Lizzie glared at her mother, who ignored her, and switched her gaze to Nate, who drew his mouth down in dismay.

“Oh, don’t put me in the middle of this,” he muttered, and took a sip of his soda.

“But Daddy –“

“Hey, baby-girl, I’ll eat it for ya if you like,” Hardison interjected. He was sitting beside Lizzie and was on the point of shovelling Lizzie’s portion of broccoli onto his plate when he caught the death-glare Eliot Spencer was sending his way. He raised his eyebrows. “What?”

“You do anything of the sort, Hardison, an’ I will stab you with your own fork!” Eliot growled.

“But I like broccoli!” Hardison said, mystified.

“I don’t,” Parker muttered, shoving her portion around her plate, eating the cheese sauce and nothing else. The pork was sort-of-okay though. She preferred Fluffy Pops.

“Okay,” Hardison said, “I can eat yours too.”

Eliot’s blue eyes began to spark in annoyance.

“Have you got a parasite or somethin’, Hardison? Huh? A tapeworm?”

Hardison was revolted by the very idea, but tried his best to maintain his dignity.

“Hey, man! My Nana, she don’t abide waste, El! An’ this is great chow, so … it makes sense!”

And so the argument went on, the pros and cons of eating broccoli being bandied about the table as
Lizzie surreptitiously shoved her serving of greens to the side of her plate and then tucked into the pork.

This is what she loved … her family around her, bickering and laughing, joking and eating, all over an impromptu homecoming dinner after a long trip.

The team was newly-home from Qatar. Just a few hours earlier they had wandered out of Portland International Airport, tired, grouchy and jet-lagged. However, they were all financially even better off, they had helped their client, a woman fired from a prestigious art dealership after discovering illicit artefact-smuggling from Iran, and now they were having a celebratory meal before going to their beds for a well-deserved rest. They would leave heading off to their respective homes until the next day.

Lizzie studied Eliot. She thought he looked tired, but she knew it was because he really didn’t like flying, and he never slept during the journey. She, however, felt as bright as a new pin. She slept like a log on aeroplanes.

Eliot was also beginning to sputter, which Lizzie thought was hilarious. Hardison knew exactly which buttons to push to send Eliot into an incipient rage, and the Oklahoman was well on his way to a spectacular fit of pique, Lizzie knew.

Things were beginning to get delightfully noisy when Lizzie heard something ‘ping’ under the arguing. It was a telephone ringing. Eliot stopped in mid-rant.

“Whose ‘phone is that?” Nate asked.

Eliot’s face was suddenly wary.

“Mine,” he said quietly, and standing up and pushing his chair back, he limped into his office and disconnected a small burner ‘phone from its charger.

“Must be family,” Parker stage-whispered.

They all knew Eliot now had a fragile but pleasant relationship with his folks back in Oklahoma, and he used the cell ‘phone as a contact for his sister. He normally left it in the office when he was working abroad, and hadn’t checked the ‘phone since arriving home. They all looked at one another.

Hardison realised he had never actually heard Eliot’s little private ‘phone ring before. *It must be serious,* he thought.

They saw Eliot through the row of windows separating the room from the main office, lifting the ‘phone and answering it. He looked worried.

“Yeah?” they heard him say, and then he paused, obviously listening to whoever was calling him.

“Oh hey there, Jo!” They could hear the sudden warmth in his voice. “How are ya, darlin’?”

“Who the hell’s Joe?” Nate hissed *sotto voce.*

The only Joe the team knew was Joe Bartulis, the ex-marine who was one of the Brewpub’s chefs. But Joe wouldn’t be using Eliot’s private number.

“And I want to know why he’s callin’ this Joe ‘darlin’!’” Hardison said, quirking a smile.

But all thoughts of the identity of the caller faded as Eliot sagged against his desk as though the breath had been knocked out of him.
“Oh Jesus,” he said, grief in every syllable. “When??” He ran the fingers of his free hand through his hair, making unruly tufts appear. He had left his ‘long hair’ phase behind several years before, and even though it wasn’t really short, it was still thick and curled around his ears.

“Did somebody die??” Parker asked loudly, and was shushed by Sophie, who desperately wanted to hear what Eliot would say.

“Jo … Jo, don’t worry. I’m on my way. I’ll be home as soon as I can,” Eliot muttered, and everyone, even Lizzie who was concerned suddenly at the pain in Eliot’s voice, wondered just what the hell was going on.

Eliot listened to the unknown caller, and then managed a soft smile.

“I’ll see you soon, sweetheart. I promise.” And ringing off, he turned and sat on the edge of his desk, wiping a hand over his stricken features. The team waited, holding their collective breaths as Eliot gathered his wits about him and stood up. He took a deep, deep breath and walked out of his office and back to the team, still clutching the cell ‘phone.

Nate chewed his lip for a moment before asking the question to which everybody wanted to know the answer.

“Is, ah … is everything okay, Eliot?”

The hitter slumped down in his chair and put the ‘phone on the table, staring at it. He then turned bleak eyes on Nate.

“No,” he said. “No. It’s not.” He turned to Hardison. “I need you to get me on a ‘plane, Alec. Soon as you can. I gotta go home.”

The young hacker studied his best friend and nodded, worried. Eliot never called him Alec. Whatever was going on with Eliot Spencer was frikkin’ frightening.

“Well, thought Nate. That was unexpected.

“Australia?” Hardison blinked in confusion. “You … you want to go to Australia?”

Eliot’s temper, already shredded with grief, wasn’t about to improve.

“Yeah, Hardison – Australia. You know the place … great big funny-lookin’ bit of land full of snakes an’ kangaroos an’ Australians. That Australia. Okay? An’ I have to be there like yesterday.”

Hardison suddenly noticed the strain in Eliot’s voice … and something else. Deep, deep worry. Eliot Spencer was nervous. He was worried to death about what he would find when he got to wherever-it-was in friggin’ Australia.

“Yeah, El … sure,” he replied quietly, “I’ll get you onto the best flight I can, bro. I promise.”

Eliot sucked in a breath and let it out slowly, trying to calm himself.

“Eliot?” a small voice said, and the hitter suddenly realised Lizzie was watching him slowly going to
pieces. “Are you alright?”

Eliot swallowed his anger and gave Lizzie his Lizzie-smile … a half-hitch of his lips that made the laughter lines around his eyes crinkle.

“I’m sorry, ‘Lizbeth Grace. Didn’t mean to upset ya, but … I just got some bad news, okay?”

Lizzie gazed up at Eliot and nodded, her dark eyes concerned.

Sophie ran her hand over Lizzie’s curls, reassuring her. Lizzie adored Eliot, and was sensitive to his feelings … which meant she probably understood the enigmatic man more than any of them.

“What can we do, Eliot? Is there anything –“

Eliot shook his head, and it was obvious to all of them that he was completely off-balance.

“I … I don’t know, Soph … I gotta think …”

“But … but I thought your family lived in Oklahoma? And I thought this was your home?” Parker asked, confused.

“Not now, Parker, okay?” Hardison mumbled, busy searching through flights.

“No … no, I don’t understand,” she insisted. “We’re your family and … and your folks’re in Oklahoma. So … how can you have family in Australia? I don’t get it –“

“Parker!!” Hardison insisted quietly, “Leave it be, will ya??”

Parker’s face scrunched up as it always did when things baffled her.

“But –“

“PARKER!” Sophie and Hardison said in unison, and the little thief shut her mouth, looking hurt.

Eliot tugged his hair until it began to stick up, and he sighed.

“Guys … it’s okay. I suppose it’s about time I told you.”

“Told us what?” Hardison said with a slight smile. “That you got a wife an’ six kids in a condo at Bondi Beach?”

For some reason Hardison’s flippancy broke the tension thrumming through Eliot, and his shoulders relaxed a fraction.

“No, you idiot,” he replied, a little of his growl back in place. “No … these folks … they saved my life.”

Lizzie’s eyes widened as she remembered a story Eliot had told her the previous year when they were on vacation in Crete.

“Your good wolf!” she said excitedly, “when you got that scar on your side!”*

Eliot’s gaze grew warm with memory.

“Yeah, darlin’. You got it.” He looked at each member of his team, this other family which had grown to be a part of his life over the past decade. Okay. So. Here goes. “When I left Moreau, he
wasn’t too happy. Nobody left his world. But I did, an’ he made me pay. I spent seven months avoidin’ him, but then … but then some of his men cornered me in Darwin.”

Lizzie’s eyes grew round.

“They hurt you! They were really, really bad guys, huh!”

Eliot nodded.

“Yeah.” He didn’t mention that he had left all four of Moreau’s men bleeding in an alleyway. “I got away, but I was bleedin’ and hurt bad. I patched myself up and got the hell outta Dodge. But I got sick … I nearly died. Soapy an’ Jo … they saved my life. Took me in, put me back on my feet an’ set me right.”

Parker chewed the inside of her cheek as she absorbed Eliot’s words. She frowned.

“I get that, Eliot. But why didn’t you tell us?”

“Because it’s private, Parker, okay?” Nate said waspishly. Parker really didn’t understand the concept of privacy, although she could be as secretive as the rest of them.

“I know,” she said tartly. “But –“

“Moreau found them,” Eliot interrupted sharply. “Moreau found them and targeted them because of me. He sent Mason Coetzee to kill me.”

Eliot heard a hitch of breath come from Sophie and Nate. They had heard of Coetzee.

“He held ‘em hostage, hurt them and would have killed them, all because they took me in.”

The silence around the table was profound. Even Lizzie had heard of Damien Moreau, although she wasn’t aware of his history. All she knew was that he was one of her long list of ‘bad guys’ who hurt Eliot or who her family took down and made them pay for their ‘bad guy-ness’.

“What happened, El?” Hardison asked softly.

“Coetzee … he didn’t make it, and the Munros and their people are fine. But I swore on the day I left that nothin’ … nothin’ … would ever come back to hurt them because of me.” He shrugged. “An’ that’s why I never told you.”

Sophie suddenly leaned forward and squeezed Eliot’s wrist.

“You go back, don’t you? When you go and do your ‘independent’ jobs, you go back to them.”

Eliot nodded.

“Whenever I can. I go back to Wapanjara an’ I work. It’s a cattle station. I do fencing, work cattle … anything I can. I rest up, and I get to be just me for a little while. And because I go back now and again, my silence keeps them safe. But now …”

“What’s gone wrong, Eliot? How can we help?” Sophie asked.

“A good friend … Charlie Jakkamarra, he’s the station manager … he helped me back then. He’s one of the best people I’ve ever known. He’s like a brother, y’know? He got married the year after I left, an’ he an’ Alice … his wife, they got a little boy not that much younger than Lizzie.” Eliot took a shaky breath full of emotion. “Alice … she, um … she was killed in a car wreck a few weeks ago.
Charlie an’ Kip – their boy – are okay, but Jo’s been tryin’ to get hold of me.”

“Oh man …” Hardison whispered.

But Eliot wasn’t finished, the words coming from him in a rush.

“At first, they thought it was an accident. But now the police think her brakes were compromised somehow. She’s … was … active in tribal matters, and there’s been rumours of somebody sniffing around Warumungu land. It’s not just that, though …”

“There’s more going wrong, isn’t there?” Nate said.

Eliot nodded.

“Yeah … tainted water bores … cattle fallin’ sick … and now Soapy’s crew is beginning to leave and no-one else will work for them. This has only been goin’ on for a couple of months, and until Alice’s accident Soapy just thought it was drought problems with the cattle. But three days ago Soapy fell off the water tank housing. He’ll be okay … a couple of cracked ribs an’ bruises … but Charlie an’ me, we replaced the frame last year. It was damn’ near brand new.”

Parker was watching Nate’s face, and as she saw him digest everything Eliot was saying, a slow smile crept onto her elfin features.

“We’re going to Australia!” she crowed.

“Wait … what?” Hardison said, bewildered.

“If you want us to,” Nate said to Eliot. “We can help. If … everyone else is okay with that,” he added, checking the members of Leverage International.

Sophie looked at Lizzie, whose face was alight with anticipation. She dearly wanted to see a kangaroo. And, the little girl knew, Eliot needed them.

“I’m in,” she said, smiling at her daughter.

“Me too!!” Parker cackled, and she fidgeted with delight. Who these people were in Australia who Eliot thought of as family, she dearly wanted to know. And if Eliot thought of them as family, then they must be special. She couldn’t wait.

Hardison sat with his mouth open.

“Um …” he said.

“Well? Are you in?” Nate asked impatiently.


“Yeah, Hardison. You.” Nate frowned.

“Australia?” Hardison’s eyes rounded in slight panic. “The continent entirely composed of things that bite, sting and kill-you-dead, Australia?”

“The same,” Nate said.

Hardison put down his tablet and began to gesticulate.
“Have you ever heard of *Latrodectus hasselti* … the Redback Spider? Or … or *Oxyuranus microlepidotus* … the Taipan snake? Did you know Australia has the largest number of poisonous critters in. The. *WORLD*? And I won’t even *start* on the crocodiles an’ frikkin’ *sharks* that swim in the rivers an’—”

“So…O…” Nate said soothingly, “…that’s why we take Bernadette and Oggie with us.”

“What? But Nate … they’ve only just *got* here from Australia!!”

“Wapanjara doesn’t have good internet access,” Eliot said, “an’ the house won’t take us all. We’ll need ‘em,” he added, warming to the idea. “The place is a hundred miles from anywhere.”

“So … that’s decided,” Nate said, satisfaction in every word. “We’ll want your geeky crap, Hardison. C’mon, man … these people need us.” He smiled. “They’re *family*.”

And Eliot, hurting and heart-sore, looked around at these nut-jobs who cared about him, and sighed.

“Thank you,” he said.

Eliot couldn’t sleep. He had a headache, and his right leg was sore, which only happened when he was exhausted. But he couldn’t stop thinking about Charlie and Kip. The boy was the light of his parent’s lives, and how the hell Charlie was coping without his beloved Alice, Eliot had no idea.

He had called Jo Munro and told her the team wanted to help, and she had been teary with relief. Eliot couldn’t wait to see her. He missed his Australian family so badly his chest hurt.

He shifted painfully on the big couch, and took off his spectacles to rub his eyes. He had read the same paragraph in his book half-a-dozen times and still had no idea what it said.

He checked his watch. Three-thirty-five in the morning. Some of the tiredness was jet-lag, but mostly it was worry and stress.

“Eliot?”

The tiny, sleepy voice snapped him out of his reverie and he turned to see Lizzie, comforter and pillow in tow, standing looking at him.

“Hey, ‘Lizbeth Grace, you should be in bed and sleepin’, girl!” he said quietly so as not to wake the others.

Lizzie gave her favourite hitter her best smile.

“Did you know wombat poop is like a cube?” she said.

Well, there wasn’t much he could say to that, Eliot decided.

“Lookin’ forward to Australia, huh?” he asked.

Lizzie shuffled over to the couch and crawled next to Eliot, placing her pillow against his shoulder and snuggling in. Eliot pulled the comforter over her and shifted sideways a little. Lizzie was all elbows and he didn’t want his ribs to suffer.

“So … what do you want to know?” he asked gently. Lizzie always knew when he was feeling down or sad, and also knew how to distract him by demanding stories.
Lizzie smiled up at Eliot as she settled down next to him.

“I want to know *everything,*” she hummed.

So, in the early hours of the morning, as the light began to tinge the horizon outside, Eliot told his god-daughter and best girl all about Wapanjara.

To be continued …

Author’s note:

* You can read about it in ‘The Wolf’.
And the Bairns Will Come

Hardison, now that the entire team was on board with the trip to Wapanjara, decided the easiest thing was to charter a private jet. It meant that they could catch up on their rest in comfort, especially as they were travelling halfway around the world. *Again.*

He was also worried about Eliot. He knew the man was fretting about these people whom it was obvious he loved deeply, and he was still worn out from the Qatar job. Although he hadn’t got into much of anything violent during their time in Doha, he had worked a substantial part of the grift involved and had very little sleep, unlike the rest of the team.

Hopefully the jet, with all of its comforts and space, would allow him some respite.

The hacker had already sent Bernadette and Oggie ahead of them, and they would be awaiting the team when they arrived at Tennant Creek airport. Hardison was secretly looking forward to working with them, he had to admit.

He sighed. He didn’t like bugs, and he hated snakes. Crocodiles … big, scaly, toothy bastards, and he didn’t even want to *think* about bull sharks. But … for Eliot, he decided, he would deal with it. But if he got bit by *anything*, the hitter would owe him *big time*.

It was mid-afternoon and Team Leverage was back in the air, less than twenty-four hours after landing in Portland, thinking they could relax and rest after a difficult job.

The big Gulfstream G650 climbed quickly to 40,000 feet and levelled out. The pilots held steady, and Eliot, even though flying wasn’t his favourite pastime, unbuckled his safety belt and pressed a button to lay the large seat flat. He had already pulled off his boots, and he laid his head back and closed his eyes. He had every intention of trying to sleep his way to Australia, only waking up while the ‘plane refuelled in Tokyo and then went through immigration and customs in Darwin before continuing to Tennant Creek.

But then he realised someone was watching him, and he pried open one eye. Lizzie was curling up in the seat beside him and studying him with such intensity that he frowned.

“What’re you doing, Eliot?” she asked, yawning.

Eliot shut his eye.

“Tryin’ to get some sleep here, darlin’,” he murmured, amused.

“But you don’t like sleeping on ‘planes,” she mumbled wearily, already half-asleep.

He heard Lizzie shuffling about and a hand flung itself over the seat arm and rested on his chest. The hand patted him clumsily. Eliot smiled. Lizzie had patted him since she was a baby, a way for her to satisfy herself that Eliot was okay. She knew deep down that he was stressed and worried about his Australian family, and Eliot was thankful for her care. He heard her snuffle.

“Go to sleep, ‘Lizbeth Grace. We got a long trip, an’ I’m tired.”

Lizzie’s only answer was a soft snorkle. She was out for the count. Her fingers twitched as they rested over his heart.
Eliot took a calming, deep breath, knowing his best girl was safe, and then he settled comfortably into his chair, and allowed himself to drift.

Ten minutes later Sophie wandered past with a couple of blankets and covered her daughter and her protector as they both slept soundly. She smiled. Trust Lizzie to get Eliot to rest. Shaking her head indulgently, she headed back to her team.

Tennant Creek airport was mainly used for internal flights from Darwin and Alice Springs, but could easily accommodate the Gulfstream on the longer of its two runways.

It was spring here in the remote Barkly region. Eliot had tried to explain to Lizzie about the difference in seasons between Portland and Wapanjara, but she was just delighted to find that Christmas Day in Australia was bang in the middle of summer and a barbeque was a great way to have a seasonal meal.

When Team Leverage collected their luggage and wandered out to the entrance to the airport, Hardison spotted a young man holding up a sign, ‘LEVERAGE INTERNATIONAL INC.’ He grinned.

“That’s our ride, people!” he said to Nate, who blinked at him tiredly. How the hell Hardison could be so cheerful after two days on an aeroplane, he had no idea. And now there was more sitting down and being jolted about to go, if Eliot’s description of the road to Wapanjara Station was accurate. He narrowed his eyes. Hardison was looking ‘waaaay too smug if the white smile and merry dark gaze were anything to go by.

As the young man grinned, said ‘G’day’ and led them outside, Lizzie gasped with delight.

There, sitting majestically in the roomy parking lot, were Bernadette and Oggie.

Hardison gave the young man a tip after the lad dropped a set of keys into the hacker’s palm, and then danced forward and flung himself on Bernadette’s gleaming black hood.

“Hello baby!!” he crooned, and patted her sleek paintwork. “How’s my girl?”

Bernadette looked like a huge pick-up truck which had been designed by paranoid ex-military types who thought the zombie apocalypse was upon them. There was nothing rounded or ergonomic about Bernadette. She was big, angular and covered in grilles and winches and compartments tucked into every nook and cranny. She had a heavyweight roof rack and what looked like a built-in collapsible tent on the rear. Two spare all-terrain tires sat at the back, and her dual cab would take all of them reasonably comfortably.

All in all, Eliot thought as he took his first look at the vehicle, she was one bad-ass piece of shit. He had known about her, of course, and was party to Hardison’s detailed requirements for her build, but hell … she was somethin’ to behold.

Her sidekick, Oggie, was attached to her tow-bar, and was painted the same shade of black. To call Oggie a trailer would have been an insult. Built along the same lines as Bernadette’s thuggish design, Oggie was a whole lot of attitude stuffed into a rectangular box-shape which contained a fully functional kitchen and a huge fold-down tent. He carried emergency supplies, a military-standard first-aid kit, a refrigerator … the works. Hardison had also modified Oggie to be his geek-mobile, with state-of-the-art hardware and advanced – and probably purloined from the NSA – computer systems.

“Hmmm …” Nate said, studying the brutal-looking vehicles. “They’re not exactly inconspicuous,
Hardison. ‘Way to go on the ‘we’re trying to meld into the background’ plan, huh.”

Hardison waved a dismissive hand.

“Well, now we’re ‘international’, we needed somethin’ that can take us anyplace. So,” he gestured at Bernadette and Oggie, “that’s what we’ve got.”

“Dibs I sleep in Bernadette’s tent!” Parker squeaked, delighted.

“You got it, babe!” Hardison said smugly.

“Can I get in, Alec? Please???” Lizzie said breathlessly, overwhelmed by Bernadette’s sheer bulk.

“Why, sure you can, baby-girl,” he replied, and opening the door to the rear seats he helped her clamber in. She bounced down on the leather seat and a Cheshire cat grin widened on her face.

Sophie had to smile at her daughter’s delight. However, they had more travelling to do.

“Can we please get going? I’m tired and we have a long way to go, so …”

Hardison’s grin widened even further.

“Your wish is my command, my lady,” he purred, and with Nate and Eliot’s help, stowed their luggage in one of Oggie’s numerous bins and they were ready.

“Before we leave town, there’s a couple of places I gotta go,” Eliot said as he clambered into the front passenger seat. Nate, Sophie, Parker and Lizzie crammed themselves into the rear seats. It was snug, but they would manage well enough. “An’ Hardison …” Eliot rasped as he glared at the hacker. “Remember you drive on the other side of the road, okay??”

Hardison looked affronted.

“Yeah, Eliot, I know, I know! I’ve done this before,” he added, inserting the key and turning on Bernadette’s V8 engine. The big vehicle rumbled to herself, purring like a mechanical panther. Hardison hummed happily. “’C’mon gorgeous … let’s show Mr Punchy what you can do.” And easing into gear, Hardison drove Bernadette and Oggie out of the parking lot and onto the road towards the centre of Tennant Creek.

“DAMMIT, HARDISON!!” Eliot yelled and clutched his safety belt.

“Oops … sorry …”

And Bernadette swerved back onto the left-hand side of the road.

A few minutes later, they found themselves at one of a row of small lock-up garages at the rear of the airport.

“Why –“ Hardison began.

Eliot unbuckled his belt, opened the door and slid out.

“Back in a sec,” he said.

Fishing a set of keys out of his pocket, Eliot unlocked the garage and disappeared inside, only to appear five minutes later pushing an old Ducati motorbike and wearing a helmet. Locking the door,
he sat astride the bike and turned the ignition key, the engine growling into life.

Nate scrambled out of the rear seat and into the front next to Hardison, and then Eliot eased the Ducati ahead of Bernadette. Waving a hand in a ‘follow me’ gesture, Eliot led his team out onto the Stuart Highway, and headed south into the land of big, open skies and endless, lonely vistas.

After another stop in Tennant Creek to pick up provisions, Eliot rode along the highway for a few miles and then slowed and turned onto a single-track asphalt road to the right.

“Jeez … this looks interesting,” Hardison muttered as he manoeuvred Bernadette and Oggie onto the road and followed Eliot, who looked perfectly at home in this wilderness.

The landscape was one of Mitchell grass, mulga and strange, red-orange spiky mounds, and Lizzie opened the window so she could get a better view. It was a hot day, certainly into the eighties, but the warm, balmy breeze that wafted into the truck carried the scent of earth and eucalyptus, and Lizzie grinned with happiness. She was in Australia.

She pointed at the mounds and turned to her mother and Parker, who were peering past her at the view.

“Those are full of termites!” Lizzie said gleefully. “Thousands and thousands and thousands!”

Hardison glared at the mounds. They seemed to be everywhere. Did termites bite? He had no idea.

And he nearly ran into Eliot as the hitter slowed his bike to rattle over a cattle grid beside a sign which read ‘Wapanjara Station’. The road instantly turned from asphalt to red dirt, but Eliot didn’t seem to take any notice of the rough surface and picked up speed.

“What the hell is it with Eliot an’ havin’ to be in the back of nowhere?” Hardison grumbled, and then had to slow down again as Eliot gesticulated urgently to his right.

“Oh mama!” Hardison breathed. “Lizzie … kangaroos!!”

And there, bounding alongside the fence of what they would later find out was the south paddock, were three kangaroos, moving effortlessly and easily keeping pace with Bernadette.

Lizzie yelled with delight. They were absolutely everything she had hoped they would be. She had, of course, seen pictures and programmes on television, but nothing … nothing … compared to seeing them in their natural habitat, as much a part of the landscape as the plants and trees and termite mounds.

Curly hair blowing in the draught, she pointed at the leader of the group, an enormous male, tail balancing his powerful body as each leap covered at least twenty-five feet of the uneven ground.

“That’s a boomer!” She shouted over the noise of the wind.

“A what?” Parker bawled back, entranced. She thought she had never seen anything so wonderful.

“That’s a big boy kangaroo!” Lizzie explained.

Sophie smiled to herself. Lizzie had always wanted to visit Australia, and when Eliot had mentioned the previous year that he had visited the country, she had been doing her research with surprising alacrity for a six-year-old. She loved reading – something she shared with Eliot – and Hardison had helped her do some searching on-line. And now Sophie saw all of that research come to fruition.
Lizzie was in her element.

And for the rest of the drive to Wapanjara homestead, Lizzie stared out of the window, spotting a small group of emus as they trotted away from the noise of the vehicles. She saw a pair of dingoes slouching through the grass, which thrilled her beyond belief, and was even more delighted when another group of kangaroos bounded away into the bush, tails beautifully balanced as they moved.

For the rest of her long, adventurous life, Elizabeth Grace Ford never forgot this first drive to Wapanjara. It was everything she had hoped for and more, and it was then she knew in her heart that she would never settle for what others thought of as ‘normal’.

Two hours into the drive along this uneven dirt road Hardison tooled Bernadette and Oggie up a small hill, a stand of stringybark trees adorning the top and dotted here and there with acacias.

The sun was beginning to set, and he saw Eliot pull the Ducati to the side of the road at the summit and stop. He got off the bike, put it up on its kick-bar and took off his helmet.

“Now what is he up to?” the hacker muttered, but nevertheless he brought Bernadette to a stop behind the Ducati, and the team eased themselves out of the big truck and stiffly went to stand beside Eliot.

The hitter looked at his friends and pointed.

“That’s Wapanjara,” he said.

And below them, spread out amongst the trees and bush, was a neat homestead, the glitter of water shining amid the gum trees, and behind it rose low, beautiful hills fading into an endless horizon.

“We’re staying there?? Really??” Lizzie asked, her brown eyes huge with astonishment.

Eliot grinned and crouched down beside her.

“Okay … now, there …” he pointed at the bigger of the two houses, “… that’s where Soapy, Jo and Effie live. We’ll put Bernadette there in the yard beside the house. And there …” his hand moved to a big building and a series of smaller ones surrounded by what looked like a patchwork of fences and gates. She could see a few animals … cows, she thought … standing resting in the shade. “That’s the barn and the cattle yards,” he said. “You don’t go there unless someone grown-up goes with you, okay? And that house there …” he pointed at a neat bungalow about five hundred yards from the main house, “… that’s where Charlie an’ Alice –“ he stopped himself just in time. “That’s where Charlie an’ Kip live. Charlie manages the station. You’ll like him a lot. Kip’s maybe seven months younger than you, ‘Lizbeth Grace.’” Eliot smiled sadly. “I haven’t seen them in almost two years.”

As Lizzie stared at Wapanjara, Eliot straightened and looked at his friends.


“Yeah … it’s beautiful,” Eliot agreed. “This is my true home. Wherever I am, I know I can come here and live out my life with no worries.” He took a hitching breath. “This is where I’ll die, an’ this is where I’ll be buried.”

And turning away from them, he put his helmet on and clipped the chinstrap. Swinging himself onto the seat, he pushed the bike off its kick-stand and started the engine.

“You people comin’ or what?” he asked. And pulling down his visor, he put the old bike into gear
and set off slowly down the hill, taking his time now as though to absorb the timelessness of Wapanjara, as well as deal with what he had to face.

“Well, looks as though this is it,” Nate said quietly. “Guys … when we stop, let’s give Eliot a few moments, okay? Let him meet his folks … touch base. Then we can say Hi.”

Parker, who was buzzing with excitement at the chance to meet these people who meant such a lot to Eliot, nodded reluctantly, but she swallowed her disappointment and agreed. Eliot needed a little space, she knew.

So they all piled back into Bernadette, and Hardison drove the huge truck down the long incline to Wapanjara, into the setting sun and the beauty of this stark and ancient land.

They were waiting for him on the veranda.

Soapy and Jo had heard the familiar rumble of the Ducati’s engine, and rising from their seats in the shade, they stood and waited as Eliot halted the bike, put it on its stand and stepped off, unfastening his helmet and removing it.

“Happy now, old girl?” Soapy whispered softly. “Our boy’s come home.”

Jo looked up at her husband, his hair greyer than it used to be but the black eyes sparkling with happiness.

“Always, love … always.”

And then she was darting down the steps to meet the American, still sprightly despite her nearly seventy years.

Eliot’s face broke into a wide, happy grin and he opened his arms to gather her to his chest.

“Jo … we got here as soon as we could …” he whispered brokenly, and then he buried his face in her silver curls, still shot through with auburn. He felt her hiccupping sobs against his shirt.

“Oh Eliot … it’s been terrible. I’m so glad you came …”

Eliot barely held back his own tears, but then he felt Soapy’s hand on his arm and he let go of Jo and pulled the little pastoralist into his hug.

They stood comforting each other, until Bernadette and Oggie rumbled into the yard and pulled up under the gum trees beside the orchard.

Eliot reluctantly let go of the Munros and wiped his eyes with his jacket sleeve. He was damned if he was going to let Hardison take the piss out of him for what the hacker might think were tears. Which, of course, they weren’t. *At all.*

Soapy winced as his sore ribs twinged, and Eliot saw the bruises on his left forearm below the rolled-up sleeve.

“You’re okay, right? Jo? He’s alright, isn’t he?”

Jo, still a little weepy, patted Eliot’s arm.

“He’s fine. We’ll tell you all about it after we’ve had some tea.”
Tea, in Jo’s opinion, would sort out the end of the world if required, although it might take a couple of teapots-worth.

“Bloody hell! That’s a beast of a thing!” Soapy said admiringly as he studied Bernadette and Oggie.

“Yeah,” Eliot agreed, “but don’t tell Hardison. We’ll never hear the last of it.” He grinned ruefully at these two people who he loved dearly. “Want to meet them?” he added, as the rest of his team … his family … got out of the truck and waited, letting Eliot take the lead on the situation.

“Oh, yes please!” Jo said, and smiled brightly at the visitors.

Eliot waved at the rest of Team Leverage, and for the first time, Eliot’s non-biological family were as one.

As Soapy shook hands and introduced himself, Jo studied these people who were so much a part of Eliot’s life. She knew who they were, of course. Eliot spoke of them constantly when he was home, and she knew they meant the world to him, although she suspected he didn’t tell them so.

There was a sadness in Nate Ford, she thought. She knew of the loss of his son, and his marriage to this beautiful, elegant, kind woman called Sophie Devereaux had probably been the saving of him. But his blue eyes were warm with pleasure as he was introduced and she knew instinctively she had done the right thing to call Eliot for help.

Now the fair-haired slip of a girl called Parker intrigued her. Eliot had tried his best to explain about Parker. There was a child-like quality about her … something that was slightly odd in that she didn’t see the world as others saw it, but Jo also saw the intelligence, shrewdness and strength in the girl’s eyes, and liked her immediately. He could see why Eliot regarded her as the little sister he never had.

Hardison. Here was a boy who carried his heart on his sleeve. He was … what was the word Eliot used? Geeky. Hardison was a nerd. Which meant, apparently, that he spent a lot of his time with computers, which were mysterious and unknown creatures to Jo. But she instantly loved his open heart and big smile, and she sensed the inherent gentleness in him.

Both he and Parker were good for Eliot, she knew. They tempered him … grounded him. And with the steadiness of the two older members of the team, she knew in her heart that he had done the right thing when he settled down to work with them.

And then … there was Lizzie.

“Well now,” she said as she saw the little girl look up at her with brown eyes so like her mother’s, “you must be Lizzie. Welcome to Wapanjara, Lizzie.”

Lizzie studied Jo’s extended hand and then shook it carefully. She had never shaken anyone’s hand before. She looked into Jo’s green eyes and smiled.

“We saw kangaroos!” she said with wonder in her voice.

Jo chuckled.

“We have lots of those around here,” she said, “and you’ll probably see lots more things you’ve never seen before,” she added, amused.

Lizzie was just about to tell Jo about all of the other animals and birds she had seen when suddenly the internal door to the house swung open and a small, white hairy dog shot out and took the veranda steps three at a time, quite a feat for its short, stumpy legs. Roaring its yelpy ferocious-sounding barks
it jumped at Eliot, who bent down and gave the noisy thing some rough rubs, making the creature wriggle with pleasure.

“Easy, Buster!” he said, and the dog flopped down on its back in the dust, legs flailing as Eliot rubbed a pink, chubby stomach.

Lizzie was enchanted. She loved dogs and had always wanted one but their itinerant lifestyle didn’t allow it.

But before she could make a move to go and say hello, a coarse voice came from the veranda.

“Well, Yank! It’s about bloody time you came home!! I heard your noisy bastard of a bike from a mile away, so I did, so why haven’t you come and said hello? Hey?”

Eliot gazed up at the small, rotund old woman standing on the veranda, grey hair pulled back in a bun and muddy eyes sparking with something which could have been ire or amusement. Nate, looking at her with amazement, couldn’t tell which.

“C’mon, you cheeky mongrel, aren’t you going to introduce me?” she growled. “These poor buggers look as though they could do with tea and cake, so hurry up and get the intros over with, you bludger! I’ve got lamingtons waiting!”

Eliot winced at the language, and then sighed. Lizzie’s precious ears would have to cope.

“Guys … meet Effie,” he said.

To be continued …

Author’s note:

*If you would like to know what Bernadette and Oggie look like, go here.
They ate dinner together on the veranda, just as the full moon filled the clear night and the cicadas thrummed in the scented air.

Lizzie sat and ate the delicious roast lamb Effie had produced, but she couldn’t tear her eyes away from the world outside the veranda. There was no sound of traffic … no street lights and no background noise. She heard a faint howl in the distance, and shivered with delight when Soapy smiled at her and told her it was a pack of dingoes singing in the night.

“So …” Eliot said quietly, “… what happened?”

“You mean Alice? Dear god, Eliot …” Jo said, her face suddenly struck with grief. She glanced at Lizzie for a moment, but Sophie smiled reassuringly.

“Don’t worry, Mrs. Munro … we hide nothing from Lizzie. We tell her the truth. We …ah … adjust things, slightly, if we have to, but in general we don’t shut her out. The life we lead? It’s safer, and she knows we will protect her with our lives. So please, don’t worry about discussing this. She’ll be fine.”

Jo relaxed slightly, and smiled.

“Please … it’s Jo. Jo and Soapy. Any friends of Eliot are welcome here. And he’s told us so much about you, we feel as though we know you already –“

Hardison grinned, his eyebrows raised.

“You mean Mister Grumpy Butt told you about us??” Hardison shook his head even as Lizzie giggled at his teasing tone. “Oh man … you do care!”

Eliot scowled, but before he could speak Parker poked the hitter in the ribs.

“OW!” Eliot yelped, and rubbed the poked place, which was the nerve lying between the lower ribs on his right side. “What the hell was that for, Parker?”

“You should have told us, silly!” But even as she scolded Eliot, the little thief smiled gently at him. “We could have come sooner. I like it here,” she added, noticing Lizzie slipping Buster a morsel of lamb.

Eliot raised an eyebrow and glared at Parker.

“Yeah, well, just you wait until you see how many horses we got here!” he rasped, as he finished his last piece of carrot and laid down his fork and knife.

“Horses?” Parker squeaked, and shuddered. But she took a deep breath and steadied herself. “They’re not so bad,” she said, trying to tough it out.

“You don’t like horses?” Soapy said, puzzled. How could anyone not like horses?

“It’s a long story,” Nate muttered, and smiled at Effie as she lifted his empty plate.

Then the little cook reached for Eliot’s plate and gave him a gentle slap to the back of his head in passing.
“Dammit, Effie –“ he winced, and lifted his plate to hand it to her.

“So Missy don’t like nags! I’m not so keen on the buggers either, so that’s fine by me!” Effie grumbled, and Parker grinned at Eliot in triumph.

Hardison pushed his chair back and stood up, and then began to help Effie gather up plates.

“Let me help you there, Effie …” he murmured, and the little cook studied the tall young man.

“Well now, sunbeam, you get the plates, and I’ll go get dessert. Don’t drop ‘em, laddie, or I’ll smack you silly, y’hear?”

Hardison smiled down at Effie, who barely came up to his chest.

“Yes ma’am … I hear ya,” he answered dutifully, and as Effie headed off to the kitchen, he looked at his friends who were gazing at him with a mixture of disbelief and disdain. “What?” he asked.

“She’s … well, she’s just like my Nana … only, like … well, a hundred times more Nana than Nana,” he explained sheepishly. And off he went, plates carefully balanced, into the kitchen after Effie.

Soapy and Jo told the team everything.

As they worked their way through Effie’s apple cobbler, redolent with cinnamon and nutmeg and served with rich, yellow cream, Soapy gave them a rundown of what had been happening at Wapanjara.

“It all began with the water bore in the north paddock,” he said. “A few months ago it began to run a bit cloudy and then slightly brown, and the cattle became lethargic and a few of ‘em died. The vet said it was because the water was tainted with dioxin, with traces of chlorine … antimony, even arsenic. It was traced to a titanium mine about fifteen miles north and their heavy metal treatment had seeped into the aquifer which feeds into our water supply. They fixed the problem – or so they say – but the water still isn’t right, I’m pretty sure.”

Eliot looked at Nate.

“I’ll take a look out there as soon as I can. Hardison … can you check out the mining company?”

Hardison nodded.

“Yeah … let me get my gear set up in the morning and I can do some digging.”

Soapy sighed.

“The Albany Mining Company,” he said. “Owned by some bloke called Troy Rickenbacker. He’s from your neck of the woods, Eliot … he’s from Texas. He bought over the land about six months ago. It’s right next to Wapanjara and borders tribal land too, and ever since they began mining things have been a bit wonky out here.”

“Wonky how?” Nate asked.

Soapy shrugged.

“After the cattle getting sick, we began having trouble with wrecked fences. Oh, it was nothing obvious, like cut wire, or anything like that. But there was a lot more damage than usual. Posts dragged out of the ground … rabbit wire peeled back, that sort of thing. And then my crew began
leaving.”

Eliot frowned.

“But most of the guys have been here for years,” he said, puzzled.

“Yeah – they’re good blokes, and that’s the thing. It was just one or two here and there … they
suddenly had family problems and had to go home, or they had a job offer from somewhere else,
they said. Or simply that they wanted to move on. I can’t argue with that,” Soapy said, and Eliot
could hear the hurt in his voice. “But they seemed desperate to be gone. And what’s more, I can’t
seem to hire on any stockmen to replace them.” He shook his head. “I’ve got fatstock to go, Eliot,
and I don’t have the crew to muster ‘em. I’ve got bills to pay, and although I can keep going for a
while, I can’t survive in the long run if this keeps going on. And then …”

“And then some bastard killed our girl!” Effie swore, her voice full of venom laced with grief.

“I … um … I don’t mean to be rude,” Nate said gently, “but is it certain that Alice’s death wasn’t an
accident?”

“Yes … I’m sure,” Jo said, her voice hitching. “The brake cables on her ute weren’t cut, but they
were very worn and they failed as she drove down a track out at Jalkaji Point. But Charlie had
replaced the brakes and cables only two months before. There was no way they would have given
out so quickly.”

Eliot’s blue eyes became sombre.

“How’re Charlie and Kip?”

“As you’d expect them to be,” Soapy replied. “Charlie’s trying to hold it together for Kip’s sake, and
the boy hardly speaks. It’s like somebody kicked the soul out of the pair of them. He’d be here
tonight to welcome you, but he’s still got family at the bungalow and he needs to be there.”

“What about the water tank?” Parker asked. She had seen the big, cylindrical tank when they had
arrived, and taken in the steel framing around it.

That’s another thing,” Soapy said. “The supply to the house suddenly got a bit iffy, so off I went to
see what was blocking the intake. I climbed up there to check water levels, as you do. The bloody
frame suddenly gave way. Which it shouldn’t have done ‘cause Eliot and Charlie replaced most of it
last year.”

Jo clasped his hand with hers.

“Luckily he hadn’t climbed very far,” she said. “When he fell he gave himself a bit of a knock on the
noggin, cracked a couple of ribs and bruised himself silly.” She turned green eyes on Eliot, who
looked as grim as she had ever seen him. “I don’t want to repeat the ride to Tennant Creek to the
hospital any time soon. He’s a crabby old beggar when he’s concussed,” she added with a weak
smile.

The team looked at one another, and all of them could see the silent, stony fury on Eliot’s face. This
was the face they only saw when one of his own was hurt.

“‘Lizbeth Grace? How’d you like to go for a walk an’ meet Charlie and Kip?” he said curtly.

Lizzie, now quietly scratching Buster’s scruff and sending the little terrier into paroxysms of delight,
nodded eagerly. She was tired and full of Effie’s delicious food, but a walk before bedtime sounded
like a good idea.

“Can we go now?” she asked eagerly.

Eliot nodded, and he got to his feet.

“Effie, leave the dishes until I get back. You pulled the stops out for us tonight, an’ I’ll –“

“No, Eliot. We’ll help Effie,” Sophie said, her voice soft with concern. “It’s the least we can do after such a lovely meal.”

Effie looked at these people who had come to help and to find out who had hurt her loved ones, and her muddy eyes were suddenly glistening with tears.

“Righto, Duchess,” she whispered, and turned to Lizzie. “Come with me, nipper,” she said, her voice gruff with emotion. “Let’s get Charlie and the little ‘un something for a treat, hey?”

Lizzie smiled and followed Effie into the kitchen, and returned a minute later with a bag.

“Effie says I have to give Kip these,” she said, holding up the bag. “His favourites.” And then she was off, following in Eliot’s wake as he headed down the veranda steps with an enthusiastic Buster in tow.

The walk only took ten minutes or so, but Lizzie was entranced by the whole experience.

Eliot took it slowly, both because Lizzie’s legs struggled to keep up otherwise and his own right leg was aching like a sonofabitch as it did when he was very tired. Not badly enough to make him use his stick*, but he would be glad of the hot water bottles Effie would nag him to use when he retired for the night.

As Lizzie clutched the bag of Anzac biscuits she was to give to Kip, she was amazed by the clarity and ghost-like presence of the moonlight. The night was rimmed with moon-silver, the trees stark and magical in the limpid light. The world was quiet, and she could hear clearly the sound of her boots and Eliot’s on the track to the bungalow, and fireflies left trails of cold light here and there in the clear, dry air.

A pair of eyes suddenly glowed in the undergrowth, and she let out a sudden hitching breath of fear. But Eliot laid a reassuring hand on her shoulder, and she grinned happily as a possum ambled across the track, minding his own business until Buster let out a grumbly bark of warning to the creature, who huffed and sped up to a slow trot as it forced its way into an acacia bush.

An old woman was waiting for them on the stoop of the small bungalow, standing in the light above the veranda.

Lizzie thought she had never seen anyone so old. She was tiny, and her skin seemed ten sizes too large for her. Her hair was absolutely snow white and cropped close to her scalp, but her eyes were dark, shining with knowledge and intelligence, and Lizzie wondered who she was.

Eliot’s hand came back to rest on Lizzie’s shoulder, this time holding her back.

“Stand still, ‘Lizbeth Grace.” His voice was low and calm.

“Why?” Lizzie asked curiously.

When Eliot replied she could hear the respect in his voice.
“So she can see us and decide if we’re to be invited to visit. It’s good manners,” he explained.

So Lizzie stood straight and still, doing as Eliot asked, and after a minute or two the ancient woman lifted a hand and beckoned them to come closer.

“Now,” Eliot continued, “Auntie won’t speak to you, okay? You can speak to her, but don’t expect her to answer you with words. She’s not allowed, because someone in her family has died. “

Lizzie looked up at Eliot, her eyes round.

“Alice?”

“Uh-huh,” Eliot murmured. “But you can’t say her name. That’s hurtful to those she left behind, and it’s rude and disrespectful. So just be quiet and mindful, alright?”

“Okay,” Lizzie breathed.

“We’ll speak to Charlie out here so we don’t intrude. C’mon then.” And Eliot led the way, Lizzie walking silently beside him, a subdued Buster alongside her. She clutched the bag of biscuits tightly.

And then Charlie Jakkamarra was there, walking through the door and out into the neat yard in front of his house.

“Eliot Spencer of the Aniwaya … it’s good to see you, brother!”

And before Eliot could respond, Charlie was hugging him as though Eliot’s mere presence could drive the pain of loss away.

Eliot held his friend tightly, rubbing Charlie’s back, the young stockman taking refuge in the American’s comfort.

“Hey, kukkaji**, it’s good to be back. I’ve brought them with me this time.” Eliot let go of Charlie, and the younger man wiped tears from his face with his sleeve. “We’re gonna find out what happened, Charlie. I promise.”

“She’s gone away, Eliot … she left me and the boy, and I don’t know … I don’t know what to do. I don’t even know what she was doing up at Jalkaji Point. She was ‘way out there in the middle of nowhere and I don’t know why.” Charlie took a deep, shaky breath. “Anyway …” he looked down at Lizzie, who stared back at him. “I take it this is Lizzie. Hi, Lizzie,” he said and offered her a hand to shake.

Lizzie, now laid-back about this hand-shaking thing, did just that and then held up the bag.

“Effie said I was to give you this,” she said.

Charlie gave a flash of a white smile, and turned to the old lady on the stoop.

“Auntie … Eliot and Lizzie have brought something for Kip.”

And without a sound the old woman disappeared into the house and returned a few seconds later with a little boy in tow. She gestured at Charlie.

“C’mere, Kip. Look who’s arrived!” Charlie called out.

The boy was small for his age, but then, Eliot thought, neither Charlie nor Alice were tall and were slight in build. He smiled at the little boy, who made his way over to them to stand beside his father.
Eliot felt a deep, deep pang in his heart as he studied Kip’s blond curly hair, a relic of his mother’s ancient Melanesian ancestors. The contrast of his fair hair with his dark skin was striking, and Eliot’s heart lurched. He was so like his mother. Kip’s big, almost-black eyes took in Lizzie, who smiled at him and offered him the bag.

“Hi. I’m Lizzie. Effie sent these for you.”

Kip hesitantly took the bag, and gave Lizzie a little smile. Opening the bag, he reached in and brought out a biscuit, and then offered the bag to Lizzie, who, being a bottomless pit when it came to food, took an Anzac biscuit and tucked in, despite having just eaten a two-course dinner.

Kip looked up at his father and then back to Lizzie.

“We’ve got a new foal. Wanna see her?” he asked shyly.

Lizzie took a deep intake of breath and then looked up at Eliot, desperate pleading in her eyes.

Eliot sighed dramatically.

“If you don’t, I’ll never hear the last of it. Go, you little terror, an’ listen to Kip – he’s knows about new momma horses an’ you don’t, so be careful, y’hear?”

“Yes!!” Lizzie hissed quietly and punching the air – Eliot would be having words with Hardison about that - and Kip grinned at her.

And before either men could say anything, the two children and one small, hairy dog headed off to the small paddock behind the house.

But Eliot’s smile faded and he studied Charlie, seeing the lines of grief deep in his face and the normally cheery visage riven with sorrow. He rested a hand on Charlie’s shoulder.

“C’mon, man … let’s have a beer an’ you can tell me what you can. Because I tell you now … we’ll get the bastards who did this.”

Charlie Jakkamarra nodded, and led the way towards the veranda where they sat down, and then he told Eliot all about how some unknown person had killed his wife.

The morning dawned bright and clear, and the sound of fluting magpies cut like crystal through the air as they bickered and chatted in the old almond stand beyond Jo’s beautiful little garden.

The entrance to the expandable tent on Bernadette’s roof unzipped, and Parker’s tousled head peered out. She yawned noisily, and then sat with her feet dangling over Bernadette’s roof. Closing her eyes for a moment, she took a couple of deep, lung-expanding breaths of the fresh, crisp air, and then still in her pyjamas, dropped to the ground and did a couple of back-flips to stretch stiff muscles.

She stood up and rotated her head to loosen the muscles in her neck, and then checked on her team.

The door to Oggie’s vast family tent was tightly zipped. Okay then … Nate, Sophie and Lizzie were still sound asleep, and probably wouldn’t be awake for quite a while. She had no idea about Hardison, but the fact that he wasn’t busy under the awning working with his built-in banks of computer-y stuff meant that he was probably still a-bed, snoring softly in the guest room in the low, comfortable house.

The reason, Parker knew, that Hardison had the guest room and not Eliot, whose room the ‘guest
room’ actually was, was because Eliot had chosen to sleep on the veranda on a fold-down bed. Why he had done this, Parker didn’t know, but she supposed it might be because he could keep an eye on everything from there.

But Eliot was nowhere to be seen. The bed was neatly made and three hot-water-bottles lay on the pillow.

_Huh_, she thought. _His leg’s bothering him._ And then she heard the clatter of pans coming from the cavernous kitchen, and of course, that was where Eliot would be, cooking breakfast and helping Effie.

She padded barefoot across the yard towards the veranda, and then her gaze was caught once more by the big water tank, set away from the house for safety, its metal frame gleaming in the sun. Soapy’s fall intrigued her.

So Parker changed her tack and headed northwards to the water tank, gazing up at all twenty feet of it, and studied the frame. Soapy was too old to be clambering about on the thing, she decided, and so it was up to her to check it out. Anyway, her skin was itching to get climbing again, and although the thing wasn’t high at all and it had a supposedly solid and easy frame around it, it was, Parker decided, better than nothing for now.

She was just passing the kitchen door in the side of the house when it opened and Effie stumped out.

“The Yank sez you’re goin’ to climb that bloody thing,” she said without any preamble, gesturing at the water tank with her stubbly chin.

Parker gave Effie a cheery grin.

“Oh yes,” she said. “That’s what I do.”

Effie screwed up her face in thought, and then pointed at Parker.

“You don’t move, Missy. I’ll be back in a sec.” But she was only gone for a few seconds and then she was back, and she threw a small paper bag at Parker, who caught it deftly. “These need eating up and they’ll keep you goin’ until brekkie,” she muttered. “And if you fall off that bloody tank like Mister M, don’t come crawlin’ to me to set your broken neck.”

Parker had a quick peek in the bag. Anzacs! She had discovered she loved the sweet, sticky things. Perfect climbing food.

“Yum!” she said, and grinned her thanks.

As Effie turned back into the kitchen, Parker heard her grumble to herself.

“There’s something _wrong_ with that girl!” she muttered, and then she heard Eliot snort in agreement.

But right now Parker had a Thing to do.

By the time she had reached the base of the tank, she was set. She had studied the frame, and her innate sense of strength and weakness in structures was niggling at her.

Holding the bag of Anzacs with her teeth, she set her foot on the first cross-bar and swarmed up the side of the tank. Working her way around all four sides, she studied each join carefully and methodically, beginning with the cross-bar that had given way under Soapy’s weight. She looked at the slightly askew steel section and frowned.
“Hmm,” she said and scowled.

It didn’t take her long to check the whole thing, and then she slipped her legs through the frame and hung upside down, hair hanging and shimmering in the slight breeze. Opening the paper bag, she pulled out one of the two Anzacs and munched on it thoughtfully.

“Hey, Parker,” Eliot said, and Parker stared at the hitter standing at the base of the tank. “Find anything?”

Parker swallowed another mouthful of goopy deliciousness and nodded.

“Acid,” she said.

“Where?” Eliot asked.

“Here and there. In the soldered joints. Probably a nitric acid solution just to weaken the frame.” Parker pulled out the other Anzac and licked the sticky surface. “It was just a matter of time, really. Someone was going to fall off this thing sooner or later when the joints gave way. Soapy, Charlie … you.”

“Damn,” Eliot said to himself.

“Oh, and another thing,” Parker said as she decided which bit of the biscuit she would take a bite out of first. “We’re being watched,” she added.

Eliot’s body stiffened but he didn’t react.

“Where?”

“ ’Bout three-quarters of a mile away, beside some kind of pond. Someone in a tree with a scope. Not binoculars.”

“Ex-military, probably,” Eliot said, thinking it through. “Okay, Parker – get down from there before that thing falls apart around you. We gotta talk to the others.”

And Parker, easing her legs free and holding the Anzac between her teeth, eased over and worked her way off the tank, dropping down beside Eliot.

Taking the Anzac from her mouth she grinned up at the hitter.

“I like it here,” she said, repeating what she had said the previous night. “Let’s go eat!”

To be continued …

Author’s notes:

* Read ‘Too Late The Hero’ to find out about Eliot’s walking stick.

** ‘kukkaji’ – Warumungu for ‘little brother’ or ‘younger brother’.
Chapter Summary

This chapter, I'm afraid, is pure, unadulterated fluff.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” Soapy said with disbelief. “Acid??”

“Yep,” Parker said as she helped herself to pancakes and Effie’s homemade sausages. “Not enough to eat right through the steel, but enough to weaken the crossbars. Easy to do, and no noise. Somebody snuck in when no-one was about – and if you have no cowboys, then there’s nothing to stop someone creeping in at night, maybe. I could do it. Easy-peasy.”

“Stockmen,” Eliot grouched. “Not cowboys, Parker. There’s a difference.”

“What kind of difference?” Parker asked, mystified. “They ride horses, herd cows … same thing.”

Eliot sighed. Patience, Spencer … have patience …

“Look … back home they’re called cowboys or cowhands … here they’re called stockmen, and in South America they’re gauchos … just different names for folks who work cattle. In the States they use a lasso, gauchos use a *bolas* … here we use a stock whip.”

“But why?” Parker asked.

“They just are, Parker, okay??” Eliot’s temper was taking a hit this morning, to the delight of his team, and Jo had great difficulty keeping her laughter under control. Now she understood why Eliot loved these people – they drove him crazy, loved him to bits and he was absolutely convinced that without him they would all be chalk-marks on the sidewalk. “I’m gonna go see my girl,” he muttered abruptly under his breath. “She don’t talk all kinds of crap, an’ I get more sense from her than from the whole bunch of you put together.” He then realised, *far* too late, that he had let something slip that would make his life a misery, at least for the next hour or so. *Shit.*

Hardison’s ears perked up.

“Girl? What girl?”

“None of your business, Hardison,” Eliot replied, eyebrows drawn down in a frown. He poured himself some coffee and spooned some more of Effie’s honey onto his pancakes.

“Eliot has a *girlfriend*?!” Lizzie said, horrified.

“*Darn* it Lizzie –“

“Where does she live? Are you going to introduce us? What’s her name?” Parker babbled, picking up on Eliot’s ire.

“You never said anything about a girl, Eliot,” Nate joined in, grinning.

“Why does Eliot need a girlfriend??” Lizzie asked. “He’s got us!” she added tartly, and Hardison
sniggered.

“Now, darling.” Sophie said, “leave Eliot alone. If he wants a girlfriend then he can have one. It’s not up to us to tell him –“

“No, it ain’t!!” Eliot retorted, his voice raising a couple of notes as it always did when he was being verbally cornered by his so-called friends.

“So,” Sophie continued serenely, “what’s her name?”

“Do you guys know who this lady is?” Hardison asked Soapy and Jo. Luckily they both had mouthfuls of food, so Hardison turned to Effie. “So … is she pretty? Blonde? Brunette? ‘Cause Eliot likes both. Or a red-head?”

Effie’s muddy eyes glinted with amusement, even though her face was in its perpetual scowl. She had a sip of tea and sat back in her chair.

“Well … “

“Damnit, Effie –“ Eliot was beginning to sound desperate.

“Tall,” Effie said, thinking. “Very tall.”

Hardison’s eyebrows shot up.

“Taller than him? Mind you,” he added, “that ain’t difficult.”

“I am gonna disembowel you –“Eliot hissed through clenched teeth at the hacker.

“–and brown hair. Curly.” Effie continued, pondering her subject. “Big feet. She don’t have the prettiest smile, though. Long, yellow teeth. Bit of an ugly bastard, if you ask me.”

“Yuk!” Lizzie said, her face scrunched up. And then a terrible, terrible thought took her. “You’re not going to marry her, are you??” she asked her best friend with utter disgust.

Eliot had had enough. He pushed his plate aside and stood up. His pancakes could wait.

“Okay. You wanna meet her? You got it.” He said, muscles jumping along his jawline.

Team Leverage stared at their irate hitter, and then looked at the remnants of their breakfasts.

“Now?” Nate said. “But –“

“Now,” Eliot snarked, and pointed at the veranda door. “C’mon!!”

It was obvious Eliot was not going to take ‘Later, Eliot, okay?’ as an answer, so Nate put a lid on it and gestured at his friends.

“Okay … let’s go meet Eliot’s young lady, people.”

They all stared at him as he stood up. Lizzie looked at her pancakes and then at her father.

“But Daddy –“

“Lizzie, they’ll wait. Pancakes reheat. C’mon now. Eliot wants us to meet his girlfriend –“

“Not my friggin’ girlfriend!” Eliot snarled under his breath.
With his team in tow, followed by a highly amused Soapy and Jo, they trooped down the veranda steps and followed Eliot as he marched around the house and out to the gate of the huge south paddock.

“She lives out here??” Hardison whispered to Sophie. “Jeez … what kinda woman is she?” Then he thought about it. “Maybe … maybe she’s one of those rootin’-tootin’ cowgirl types who can rope a cow an’ cook a steak at the same time.”

“I have no idea,” Sophie stage-whispered back. “It can’t be much of a relationship if she lives here and Eliot’s back in the States. But who knows? A country girl might just be the type –“

But she fell quiet as Eliot came to a halt by the big gate. He pulled back the bolt, swung the gate open a smidgin and slid through, fastening the gate behind him.

“Well,” Nate said, raising a curious eyebrow. “This is different.”

Eliot walked out to the hard-packed earth which led away from the gate. Beyond that was nothing but bush … gum trees, acacia and the odd termite mound. A kookaburra laughed in a distant stringybark, and lorikeets chattered in a stand of old, grey-barked coolibah eucalyptus.

Eliot cocked a smug look at his team, and then turned back to the bush. He tucked his hands into his pockets and relaxed, and then he let out a soft, sweet whistle that echoed through the balmy air.

“This is one strange lady,” Hardison whispered to himself.

And then he straightened, alarmed, as there came the most godawful bellow he had ever heard in his life.

“What the hell -???”

And then Parker let out a shriek of terror and slipped behind Hardison’s tall frame as a brown, hairy and absolutely enormous camel came charging out of a clump of big acacias, jaws gaping and long yellow teeth bared in a deafening roar.

Hardison started and took a step backwards, colliding with Parker, who let out a yelp.

“Bloody hell!!” Sophie whispered, and clutched Nate’s arm. Nate was so astonished he just stood there, jaw dropped, and he patted Sophie’s hands as though it would help. It didn’t.

“For god’s sake Eliot!!” Sophie screamed as the big camel bore down on their hitter, who just stood there, relaxed and smiling.

Lizzie, on the other hand, let out a whoop of delight. Eliot had a camel!! Not a girlfriend!! This was just perfect!

But even as the entire team – minus Lizzie - stumbled forward in some kind of feeble effort to rescue Eliot from certain death by camel, the big animal slowed down and began to dance about like a lunatic, gurgling and harrumphing, her big, flat feet sending up puffs of dust.

Eliot, for some reason, found this behaviour funny, and he took his hands out of his pockets and walked slowly towards the insane beast. Sophie was sure that the creature had rabies, especially as it began to generate a lot of frothy spittle around its mobile lips.

“Are you insane!” She yelled as Eliot put his hands out to touch the crazy dromedary.
Eliot ignored them all.

He lifted a hand and ran it down the beast’s wiry curls on its forehead, and the camel suddenly stopped bouncing about like a yoyo and stood still. The thing began to hum.


Gertie gurgled to herself, and her long, wibbly tongue crept out and licked Eliot’s face.

“Jeez … stop that, will ya??” Eliot said, wiping frothy saliva off his face, and then he gave her a scratch under her jaw.

Gertie melted. He friend was home, and he still loved her, even though he didn’t appear to have a carrot secreted about his person. But she forgave him and bobbed her head, flapping her bottom lip in delight.

Eliot tugged one of her rounded ears and Gertie rested her head on Eliot’s shoulder, closing her big, expressive eyes. She sighed. Life was good.

Hardison was in shock.


“That’s a camel!” Parker whispered needlessly. Hardison could feel her trembling as she wrapped her arms around his back, hanging on tightly as if Hardison could stop the camel if it decided to eat them.

“Her name’s Gertie,” Eliot said, and gently pushing the camel’s enormous head off his shoulder, he walked back to the gate, Gertie following devotedly behind.

It was then everyone noticed a little bay gelding tagging along behind the camel, tail swishing lazily. He was a bit grey about the muzzle but he looked fit and well.

Team Leverage took a collective step backwards away from the gate – except Lizzie, who was jiggling excitedly in anticipation.

Eliot smiled down at her as he came to a halt a few feet away, Gertie whiffling at his hair, making it stick up in tufts.

“’Lizbeth Grace … go see Effie an’ ask her for a few carrots, will ya?”

And Lizzie was gone before Eliot could say anything else, running as fast as her legs would go. Eliot. Had. A CAMEL. And he needed carrots, because, she knew, he was going to feed the carrots to the camel and she, Elizabeth Grace Ford, was also going to feed the camel, because Eliot wouldn’t ever say no to her.

And then she let out the loudest yell she could muster as she ran, because, she was sure, life just couldn’t get any better.

“C’mon, Hardison, stop bein’ such a wuss!” Eliot grinned nastily.

Gertie was leaning against the gate, head outstretched on her powerful neck, and she was doing her very best to give Hardison a loving lick with her long tongue. She pulled back her prehensile lips and stuck her tongue out as far as it would go, but Hardison cringed away from her, horrified at the idea of being licked by a goddamn camel.
Parker, on the other hand, was completely enchanted. Once she had overcome her fear, she gave Gertie a tentative scratch, and then when the animal shivered with delight and let out a moan of appreciation, she flung her arms around Gertie’s neck and gave her a hug. Gertie hummed.

Not only was Eliot home, but he had brought other people with him … people who smelled odd but had Eliot’s scent on them, however faint. They were his people, so they were okay in Gertie’s book, although she could sense they were wary of her.

Then Lizzie came pelting back from the kitchen with a bag in her hand, and her eyes were bright with eagerness. She stumbled to a halt beside her mother, who was tentatively petting Gertie’s muzzle, and gulping in air, she held up the bag.

“Carrots!” she gasped, catching her breath.

“Want to feed one to her?” Eliot asked, his grin softening.

“Eliot –“ Nate said, caution in his voice.

“Nate, Gertie loves kids. She’s gentle and good natured, an’ Lizzie’s safer with her than she is with most folks. I’m here … I won’t let anythin’ happen to her, you know that.”

And Nate Ford knew the truth of it. Eliot’s heart belonged to Lizzie and he would protect her willingly with his life. Looking at Lizzie’s bright, eager face riven with desperation, he couldn’t deny her.

“Well, go on, sweetheart. Go feed the camel,” he said, and then realised how absurd he sounded.

Lizzie’s grin almost split her face in two. Digging out a long, juicy carrot, she looked at Eliot, waiting for guidance.

“Okay, darlin’ … hold the top end and let her take it. She’ll be real gentle, so don’t worry, it’ll be perfectly safe.”

Everybody stood back and gave Lizzie some room. Carefully holding out the carrot, Lizzie was thrilled beyond belief when Gertie carefully inhaled the carrot from her grip and crunched it noisily, licking her lips.

The old bay gelding shoved his head forward and Gertie let him, still enjoying her treat.

“What about a carrot for ol’ Bomber here?” Eliot said, scratching the horse’s rich bay neck.

Bomber, Charlie’s trusty stock horse, had taken over as Gertie’s companion when old Moke had died two years previously at the grand old age of thirty-one. She had been buried beneath the old mulga tree in Gertie’s paddock, and for a while Gertie seemed alright on her own. But she grew sad and distant, and Bomber, now getting a bit too slow for stock work, became her companion.

Lizzie gave Bomber a carrot, which he took graciously as was his wont, and Lizzie decided she was in heaven.

Parker eyed Bomber suspiciously, but the little gelding didn’t appear to have any kind of murderous intent, so she gave him the benefit of the doubt and fed Gertie another carrot while keeping an eye on Bomber.

“I’m gonna take Gertie out after we’ve finished breakfast … check out where Parker saw the guy watchin’ the house. See if I can find some tracks,” Eliot said to Soapy and Jo. “I want to know how
long this has been goin’ on, so I’ll take a look around the billabong, okay?”

Jo nodded, and then turned to Soapy, who had been enjoying Lizzie’s instant connection with Gertie.

“Why is this happening, love? Why us? What have we done to deserve this?”

Soapy slipped his arm around his wife of over forty years and kissed her cheek.

“No idea, old girl. I wish we did … and some bugger killed our Alice because of it, I’m sure.”

Nate’s face was set and grim for a moment, even as his daughter laughed with pleasure at Gertie’s attention.

“We’ll find out, Soapy. This is what we do, and I’ll tell you now … we are the best at what we do. It sounds like the classic ‘we’re going to do our worst to you so you’ll sell out cheap and we can use your place to make lots of money in some way’, but we don’t know yet. Hardison will do some digging around today, and then we’ll maybe know more.” He took a deep breath and suddenly his face relaxed into an amiable grin. “I’m going to finish breakfast, people. I can’t think straight on a half-empty stomach.”

“You have a point,” Soapy said wryly. “Effie’ll be fizzing her way into an early grave trying to keep everything warm, so if you value your lives, I’d go and eat up before the Wrath of Effie is visited upon us.”

“Daddy, can I –” Lizzie begged, feeding Gertie and Bomber the last of the carrots.

“Nope,” Eliot interjected. “We’re gonna eat, an’ then we can think about what we’re gonna do today, okay? This is work, sweetheart, you know that. You can come see Gertie an’ Bomber later.”

Lizzie let out an explosive breath of disappointment. Life just wasn’t fair.

Hardison was busy setting up his banks of mini-screens and keyboards, and extended a mobile antenna to enhance the Munros’ shaky broadband access. He was humming to himself, settling a fold-up chair in front of his workstation under Oggie’s awning, when a hand appeared and placed a mug of tea and then a slice of ginger cake at his elbow.

“Wotcha doing there, sunbeam?” Effie said. It was obvious she was intrigued.

Hardison looked up at the pudgy, round face with its muddy eyes and grey bun, and smiled with delight. He lifted the ginger cake and took a bite. Despite having eaten a big breakfast, his eyes closed with pleasure at the rich, sweet flavour.

Swallowing, he opened his eyes and sighed. Man, that was delicious.

“Effie … ma’am … take a seat.” He dragged over another camping chair. “Let me tell you all about how I’m gonna take apart The Albany Mining Company an’ Troy Rickenbacker an’ find every nasty little secret he’s got.”

Effie’s resulting grin was revenge personified.

It was mid-morning when Eliot rounded the corner of the house leading Gertie and Bomber, both of them saddled and ready to go. He and Soapy had checked the few cattle in the yards and fed them,
and then fed the horses, Lizzie helping as best she could. Charlie had enough on his plate for now looking after Kip, and he needed space to grieve.

Soapy and Nate were studying a plan of Wapanjara on the veranda table, looking at the water bores and borders of the station, and Lizzie was working on the project she had decided to do for her schoolwork, which, it turned out, had everything to do with Australia and camels. Her tongue stuck out as she drew a rather ferocious picture of Eliot and Gertie.

Sophie sat beside Jo, drinking tea and looking out over the garden and almond stand in the distance. The scent of newly-opened rose blooms was almost overpowering.

“Hey Soph …” Eliot called out as he came to a halt in the yard and kooshed Gertie down, the big camel settling down on all fours and tucking her legs under her like a cat. Eliot tied Bomber’s reins to her saddle. “… feel like gettin’ on a horse? Bomber’s a safe ride,” he added, one eyebrow hitching up questioningly.

Lizzie instantly abandoned her project and flew down the veranda steps and gave Gertie a hug before anyone could stop her.

Nate sighed and then looked at a grinning Soapy.

“What can you do? She never listens to me these days,” he added.

Sophie was suddenly back to her childhood. She had hunted with her local hounds as a teenager and was a keen rider, and since Lizzie had been learning to ride over the last year, she had accompanied Eliot and her daughter to the local stables in Portland and re-acquainted herself with the joys of horseback riding.

Jo patted Sophie on her arm.

“Go. It’ll do you good, and goodness knows, Bomber needs the exercise,” she said.


“Don’t ask me, ‘Lizbeth Grace, you know that. It’s up to your Momma an’ Daddy.” Eliot said gently.

“Gertie has two places on her saddle and Eliot can hold me and Gertie won’t let me fall, I know she won’t and … and …” Lizzie, breathless, ran out of words and just looked pleadingly and her parents. “Pleasepleasepleasepleaseeeeeeze –“

Nate checked in with Sophie, who nodded.

“You wear your helmet, okay?” Nate warned, knowing Eliot had made sure Lizzie had brought her riding hat, “and you do everything Eliot tells you to do without argument, you hear me?”

Lizzie shrieked with delight. Making Gertie blink, she danced for a moment on the spot and then dashed over to Oggie’s tent to retrieve her helmet.

Eliot watched Sophie as she trotted down the veranda steps and he untied Bomber, handing her the reins. She set her foot into the stirrup and swung astride the little horse, settling into the stock saddle with its thigh pads and deep seat. She touched Bomber’s sides with her heels and the gelding obediently walked forward. Her face was a picture, Nate thought with pride. God, how he loved his
wife.

Lizzie burst from the tent, fastening the chin strap on her riding helmet, and stumbled to a stop beside Eliot, gazing up at him with adoration. Eliot had a camel, and she was going to ride it.

Long ago, Eliot had fitted stirrup bars to Gertie’s Afghan saddle, and he had now attached stirrups to both seats. Lifting a giggling Lizzie onto the front seat, he adjusted the stirrup leathers for her and then helped her slip her feet into the safety stirrups. Gathering up Gertie’s soft rope reins, he slipped onto the rear seat on the heavy saddle and they were set.

Wrapping one arm around Lizzie, he whispered instructions in her ear and Lizzie nodded.

“Gertie … hut-hut!” she said loudly and clearly, and then let out a yell of surprise as Gertie rose to her feet backside first, and without Eliot’s strong arm holding her close she would have ended up around Gertie’s neck.

And then she was seven feet in the air, sitting comfortably astride Gertie, her guardian’s arms holding her steady as Eliot told her to balance properly and to tell him if she felt unsafe.

Lizzie knew in her heart that she would never feel unsafe if Eliot was beside her.

With Lizzie nestled safe against his chest, Eliot turned Gertie towards the almond stand, and led the way along the track, Gertie striding rhythmically along with Sophie trotting easily behind them on a happy Bomber.

“I’ll be watching!” Parker yelled.

Eliot turned in the saddle, and saw Parker sitting on the house roof, munching an Anzac biscuit and holding Eliot’s sniper scope. She could see for miles, and she was never happier than when she was high above the world.

Now, though, Eliot and Sophie were all business. They needed to know who was watching them and why, and with that in mind Eliot headed towards the huge billabong in the south paddock.

To be continued …
The World Seems Bare

It didn’t take long to reach the great billabong in the south paddock. Sophie dismounted and opened the paddock gate to let Gertie through, and then she remounted and seeing the water glint in the near distance, she touched Bomber into a canter and she was off, black hair blowing behind her and her dark eyes alight with sheer pleasure. A yell of pure, unadulterated joy echoed through the vastness of this ancient land.

Eliot and Lizzie watched her from their seat on the big camel, and Eliot, his blue eyes shaded by the brim of his stockman’s hat, chuckled. Lizzie felt rather than heard the rumble in his chest, and she twisted around to look questioningly at the hitter.

“Can we go faster, like Mama?” she asked.

“Yeah, we can. But not this time.” Eliot said softly, watching Sophie lengthen her reins and let Bomber go, the little gelding stretching into a gallop as she discovered just how responsive and well-trained the animal was. “Let’s just leave your momma be an’ let her enjoy herself without us hangin’ on her shirt tails, ‘Lizbeth Grace.”

“But Eliot –” Lizzie didn’t quite understand Eliot’s reasoning.

“Sometimes grown-ups just need time to be themselves, darlin’,” Eliot explained. “Your momma is a lady who spends a lot of time workin’ with people. She understands how they tick and what they want … what their plans are. She reads people like you would read a book. An’ because of that she sometimes needs to just belong to herself, and not to anyone else. Besides, I think she’s just havin’ fun,” he added, amused.

Lizzie, rocking easily to the sway and tilt of Gertie’s long stride, thought she understood, and, she had to agree, her Mama did look really happy and relaxed. So, she leaned back against Eliot’s broad chest and listened to the sounds of the outback … the calls of a mopoke and the ever-present galahs, and she breathed in the heady scent of eucalyptus. Elizabeth Grace Ford knew then that she loved Wapanjara.

By the time the billabong came into sight, Eliot saw Sophie sitting on the trunk of a fallen mulga tree, Bomber munching on the new spring spurt of grass beside the water’s edge.

Just for fun, Eliot nudged Gertie into a trot, and Lizzie, taken by surprise, let out a yell and then burst out laughing at Gertie’s lurching speed as she balanced easily in the saddle and put her hands on Eliot’s as he held the soft rope reins of Gertie’s bosal, and he helped her guide Gertie to the fallen tree.

Lizzie thought her mother looked beautiful. Her skin glowed with the effect of the wind and her eyes sparkled with pleasure, and her easy, relaxed smile warmed the dark pools of her gaze.

“Mama! Mama!” she called out as Eliot helped her bring Gertie to a halt. “Look at me! I’m steering Gertie!!”

Sophie laughed, pure joy in her heart.

“I see, my darling! You’re very clever and very brave! And I have to admit riding Bomber has done me the world of good,” she added, looking at Eliot, whose eyes shone with good humour.

“Thought it would,” he said. “Sometimes … you just gotta take time for yourself, Soph. Now then
… c’mon, Lizzie, do as I told you an’ get Gertie to sit down.”

And taking his hands away from the reins he held her gently as Lizzie, so full of herself she was almost at the point of implosion, cleared her throat.

“Gertie … koosh!” she said as loudly and as clearly as she could.

And Gertie kneeled, folded her back legs and sat down, shifting slightly to make herself comfortable.

Lizzie wriggled out of Eliot’s grasp and slid in an ungainly heap out of the saddle and onto the ground. She lay there, flat on her back and limbs spread-eagled, and giggled helplessly until she had an attack of the hiccups. Gertie swung her big head around and whiffled at Lizzie’s hair in affection.

Eliot dismounted and scratched Gertie’s head, and then looked around at the trees, mostly young stringybarks, but here and there was a big mulga tree. They were each well in excess of two hundred years old and had grown to over thirty feet high, and their branches were spread in a halo of burgeoning buds.

Leaving Gertie and Bomber to idle their time away beside the billabong, Eliot began to methodically work his way around the stand of trees. He ignored the stringybarks – they were much too young and willowy, certainly not strong enough to support a human, let alone enable someone to climb high enough to view the homestead.

With this in mind, he concentrated on the old mulgas, and began on the leading edge of the tree stand, Sophie and a still-hiccuping Lizzie following on behind.

It took nearly an hour, but Eliot finally found what he was looking for. Sophie was checking the ground on the outskirts of the small wood, looking for tracks, but Lizzie stayed with Eliot, dutifully following behind him so that she didn’t destroy any evidence. She was getting a bit bored, but she knew enough not to complain – she had had a terrific morning so far, so she kept quiet and let Eliot work.

But her interest peaked when Eliot suddenly hunkered down below a big, spreading mulga, and studied what appeared to Lizzie to just be some wood fragments which lay under a sturdy limb. Eliot picked one of the fragments up from the dusty ground and studied it closely, and then tasted it with the tip of his tongue.

“Tastes sweet …” he murmured, and then picked up a few more. He sniffed them and frowned. “’Lizbeth Grace … can you go an’ fetch Gertie for me? Don’t ride her, y’hear? Just walk her over here. Don’t worry about Bomber … he’ll just follow.”

Lizzie, thrilled at finally having something so important to do, ran back to Gertie, and grasping the camel’s reins, she ordered Gertie to stand up. It took her less than two minutes to lead Gertie - with Bomber in tow - back to Eliot, who by this time was working his way around the tree.

The tracks were faint … but they were there. Eliot traced them moving away from the mulga, and he yelled to Sophie, who was away to his left.

“Soph! To your right! Look for marks like sneakers or converses heading towards the notch in the hill yonder. Use that for gettin’ your bearings.”

“Oh … okay!” Sophie called back, “What have you found?”

“Not too sure yet … I gotta climb a tree first!” Eliot yelled back, looking up at the mulga. This was where Parker would be useful, he thought. However, when you had a Gertie, at least getting into the
tree might not be too difficult.

Lizzie arrived, Gertie huffing behind her, and Eliot *kooshed* her down beneath the long, sturdy limb under which he had found the fragments.

“Okay, ‘Lizbeth Grace, you just keep Gertie here an’ wait for me to tell you when an’ where to move her.”

And leaving Lizzie to hold Gertie’s reins, Eliot got her to her feet, bending low over the saddle as she stood under the tree limb. Reaching up and wrapping his arms around the limb, Eliot swung free and hauled himself up into the tree, working his way along the limb to the trunk.

Lizzie stood as still as she could, holding Gertie and talking to her and scratching the big camel’s muzzle. This was work, Lizzie knew, and she was convinced it was up to her to keep Eliot safe while he was in the tree.

Eliot leaned against the trunk, his feet braced against where the limb grew from the sturdy main structure of the tree. He noticed his boots leaving tiny scuff marks on the tough bark, and he realised that there were no other marks other than the ones he made. So, he thought, *sneakers or something similar that are too soft-soled to leave a trace*. He pushed away from the trunk, and hanging onto nearby branches he clambered his way upwards for a few feet, and turned towards the homestead. He could just see Parker sitting on the roof. He needed to be higher. It took him another ten minutes to work his way to a three-way fork in the main trunk, ideal for sitting in with a scope.

Seating himself in the fork, he thought about the man – for Parker, with her excellent eyesight, was sure it was a man – who had sat and watched the house through a scope. Parker had seen the glimmer of a single lens, and when she described the way the man was seated, Eliot knew then that he had not been using binoculars.

A scope, with its sharp, single lens, gave more clarity and was easier to manage under difficult conditions. He also knew the man wasn’t tall, and hadn’t been in the tree for more than a day. Then he noticed something caught in a loose piece of bark in the tree trunk down by his left boot.

As he cautiously negotiated his way back down the tree, Eliot carefully removed what appeared to be fibres from the sliver of bark, and he tucked them into the breast pocket of his shirt.

“Okay, Lizzie … bring Gertie close to the trunk, will ya?”

Once Lizzie positioned Gertie beneath Eliot, he eased himself down and slid into the saddle, and Lizzie led the camel away from the tree.

It was as Gertie was *kooshed* down that Sophie called out.

“Hoofprints! Whoever it was tied a horse here in the bushes. The prints head off towards the hill, as you said,” she added, and then she hurried towards Eliot and Lizzie. “Find anything useful?” she asked as she drew near.

“Yeah, I think so,” Eliot replied and he crouched down beside Lizzie, Gertie peering with interest over their shoulders. Sophie came to a halt beside them and watched as Eliot included her daughter in his discoveries. She smiled to herself. Trust Eliot Spencer to turn everything he could into a life lesson for Lizzie … and he didn’t even realise he did it, she noted with amusement.

“See these?” he said, holding out the little fragments of woody substance he had found under the tree limb.
“What are they?” Lizzie asked, intrigued. The tiny objects appeared to be what was left of a twig with some sort of soft substance attached. They gave off a very faint smell of apples.

Eliot frowned, as he often did when he was concentrating on telling something interesting to Lizzie.

“Mulga apples,” he said, turning the fragments over with his fingers. “But they’re not really apples at all,” he continued. “They’re little balls created by a baby wasp … a larva … and they’re called galls, made by the tree around the larva, and you can eat ‘em. But folks call them apples because that’s what they taste like.”

Lizzie’s face suddenly screwed up in disgust.

“A wasp?? You eat a wasp??”

Eliot grinned at her dismay.

“It’s good tucker,” he said, “and yeah … you eat the larva along with the gall. Charlie would call ‘em ‘good eats,’ an’ they’ll keep you alive if you’re hungry,” he added. “Anyway … the man who was watchin’ us was eating these. He’s either an aborigine or someone who knows how to survive in the bush. He wasn’t tall … shorter than me, anyway … because he only ate the apples within reach. I could easily go further an’ grab a few he couldn’t get to.”

“Seriously?” Sophie said, and had to agree with her daughter. “Eating wasps??”

“Yeah, Soph – they’re tasty.” Eliot insisted. He pulled a couple of round, rough balls from his pocket. “Here … wanna try one?”

Sophie blanched and shook her head, horrified. But suddenly Lizzie was curious.

“They really taste like apples and not wasp?” she asked.

Eliot nodded.

“They’re pretty good.” And he popped one into his mouth and crunched with relish.

And before Sophie could stop her, Lizzie screwed up her courage and ate the other mulga apple. She scrunched up her face expecting something revolting, but her expression went from distaste to a relieved smile. It really did taste of apples!

“Mmmm … she sighed, and looked up at her horrified mother. “Good eats!” she said past a mouthful of gall and wasp larva.

“Eliot Spencer,” Sophie said, exasperated beyond belief, “you have far too much influence on my daughter!”

Eliot grinned at her unrepentantly.

“Life lessons, Soph,” he said, “… life lessons. Might keep her alive one day,” he added a little more seriously.

“Well … let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” she said under her breath.

“I also found this,” he said, gently pulling out the few fibres he had found caught in the tree bark. They were rough, like hessian, and dyed a murky green.

Sophie, still internally cringing over her daughter eating a wasp larva, bent over to look at them.
“Did you find any tracks of somethin’ like a canvas shoe or sneaker?” he asked.

Sophie shrugged.

“I’m no expert, but I found a couple. The foot was smaller than mine,” she added, “not much larger than a child’s, to be honest.”

Eliot thought about that for a moment, and then proffered the fibres to Lizzie.

“Smell,” he said.

Lizzie sniffed and then recoiled.

“Stinky feet!!” she said loudly, making Gertie chomp with surprise.

Eliot let out a soft huff of amusement, and his eyes crinkled as he smiled, as they always did when Lizzie was involved.

“Yeah … stinky feet,” he repeated. “The colour … the smell … these are from a pair of Chinese Liberation boots. They’re the smelliest army footwear in the world. Bad ventilation an’ jungle environments … the stench can be pretty bad. I got kicked in the head by someone wearin’ a pair once … they’re very distinctive,” he said, grimacing at the memory.

“So … we’re looking for a small man … possibly an aborigine, with a scope, a taste for wasps and with a pair of incredibly smelly feet.” Sophie said, humour now rife in her voice.

Eliot shrugged.

“That’s about right,” he agreed. “An’ what’s more, he only got here after we arrived … someone sent him here probably to keep an eye on the strangers at the Munro home.” He stood up, and so did Lizzie. “We should head back,” he said, frown lines appearing on his brow. “I don’t like leavin’ Soapy, Jo an’ Effie unprotected.”

“But Nate, Hardison and Parker are there –“ Sophie said, and then quirked a smile. “Well, I suppose you have a point …”

Nate could handle a gun but Parker and Hardison wouldn’t be a great deal of help if a bunch of hoodlums turned up unannounced. Soapy was injured and Charlie … Charlie was too wrapped up in caring for his son right now. Eliot had to guard his family.

So with that in mind, Eliot lifted Lizzie back onto Gertie’s saddle and sat behind her, and with Sophie heading off in front of them riding an eager Bomber, they rode back to Wapanjara homestead through the noon-time heat of a spring day.

It was Lizzie who spotted the vehicle first.

As Gertie and Bomber ambled along the track towards the house, Lizzie straightened in the saddle and prodded Eliot’s arm as he held Gertie’s reins.

“Look! A truck!”

She pointed towards the summit of the hill from where Eliot had first showed her Wapanjara.

Eliot checked the house roof – no Parker. It was lunchtime, and Effie must have called her down to eat. Then he checked out the road leading to the homestead, and he saw the pall of dust and the large
pick-up heading down the road towards them. It didn’t appear to be in any rush, and the driver was cautious on a road which to the uninitiated could be a little bumpy.

By the time the big, black pick-up trundled into the homestead yard, Buster was barking like a lunatic and the three heelers who lived at the cattle yard were yelping hysterically as the vehicle drove past the barn.

Gertie and Bomber were hitched beside the house, and Soapy and Jo had joined Nate and Hardison on the veranda to eye the big vehicle as it drew to a halt. Parker and Effie were nowhere to be seen. Sophie stood beside Eliot and Lizzie leaned on the veranda steps, her eyes cautious. Before the pick-up had rolled to a complete stop, Sophie had spoken quietly, her voice subdued.

“The Belgravia Stalemate, I think,” she said.

Nate’s eyebrows raised.

“You sure?”

“Absolutely!” Sophie replied, a little irritated. “It’s perfect!”

Nate hitched a shoulder in a half-shrug. He trusted his wife.

“Okay. You lead. Soapy … you and Jo just follow our lead. Agree with everything Sophie says, no matter what.”

Soapy, his dark eyes confused but willing to give whatever idea Sophie had come up with a go, nodded and looked at Jo, who smiled confidently.

“No worries, Nate – we’ll go with the flow.”

Nate straightened, and Hardison slowly walked down the veranda steps to stand by Lizzie. The little girl was standing warily at the bottom of the steps, watching her mother and listening to every word.

She knew this was serious. In her nearly seven years of life, she had lived and breathed as a member – however small – of Leverage International. She had travelled with her family and been a part of their world. She was kept away from any danger, but she knew her parents, Parker, Hardison and Eliot were people who helped those who had nowhere else to go. People who needed justice. And her family delivered that justice, sometimes at enormous cost. It was a reality she lived with, but she wouldn’t change a moment of it. So she knew to trust her family and to go with whatever came.

Hardison stood beside her and rested a big hand on her shoulder, ready to protect her no matter what happened. Lizzie relaxed.

The truck was a big Dodge RAM, a left-hand drive, with the logo of the Albany Mining Company plastered along both sides.

The front doors opened and two men got out.

One, the driver, was tall and lanky, dressed in work clothes and wearing a baseball cap with the company logo on it. The other was very different. Stocky and middle-aged, he had a round, amiable face shiny with good humour. He wore an expensive suit and a bolo instead of a tie, and he wore a spotlessly white Stetson on his head. He beamed a smile at Sophie as she stepped forward and he respectfully removed the Stetson, revealing perfectly coiffured blond-grey hair.

“Well now,” he said, his voice maple-syrup smooth, “to whom do I have the pleasure?” He held his
Stetson in one hand and extended the other for a hand-shake.

Sophie’s demeanour had changed. She was a beautiful woman and she knew it, and she suddenly had an aristocratic elegance about her, an aura only bred from a Roedean education and the benefits of a Swiss finishing school. She extended a hand.

“Lady Eloise Stanton,” she said diffidently. “And you are …?”

“Oh, I’m Troy Rickenbacker, Lady Stanton, owner of the Albany Minin’ Company.” He gestured at his driver, “an’ this is my manager, Derry Ryan.”

The tall man nodded, but didn’t speak.

Rickenbacker grinned.

“Derry isn’t much of a talker, I’m afraid.” He looked around the faces gazing at him. “I, uh … I thought I would come by and see Mr and Mrs Munro. I hear Mr Munro had an accident, so I had no meetings this afternoon and Derry and I were passin’, so I thought I’d call in,” he added, his Texas accent finally battling its way to the surface.

“That’s very kind of you,” Jo said and introduced herself and Soapy. “Would you care for tea?”

Rickenbacker smiled cheerfully even as he eyed Bernadette and Oggie, noticing the high-end electronics, the heavy military-style build and the sheer bulk of both vehicles.

“Um … no thanks, Mrs Munro, but its very kind of you to offer.” He turned back to Sophie, who arched an eyebrow at him. “Are you visiting for a vacation, ma’am?”

“Oh no,” Sophie said airily, waving a hand at the house. “Dear Soapy and Jo have decided to retire, and my livestock manager, Mister Stone here,” she gestured at Eliot, who nodded his greeting, ”has known the Munros for years. He thought the place might be an interesting investment.”

“Investment?” Rickenbacker was suddenly taken aback. “You … you’ve finally decided to sell?”

“We have never considered selling before now,” Soapy said from the veranda. “We just decided … after the accident, it might be the time to retire,” he continued, grinning.

“Yeah, it’s a great place,” Eliot said, “an’ Soapy breeds some of the best brahmans I ever saw,” he added, his Oklahoma accent rich and strong, “an’ Lady Eloise … she sure does love her cattle,” he said, grinning.

Sophie sighed.

“Daddy - Lord Edwin Stanton – was very keen on his rare breeds. He won the Derbyshire Longhorn championship at the Royal Show nine years running, you know. When you’re raised to appreciate a good brisket, then it becomes a bit of a passion,” she said.

“Lady Eloise … she’s kinda gone international,” Eliot explained. “I run a small place for her … ‘bout ten thousand acres … in Oklahoma where we breed black angus, an’ then there’s the ranch up in Wyomin’”, he added, warming to his subject. “She’s got into breedin’ buckin’ bulls an’ she’s got some really good cows but the seed bulls ain’t up to par. Soapy here’s got a couple of young ‘uns that make Asteroid an’ Bushwacker® look like a couple of three-legged donkeys, if you know what I mean,” Eliot concluded with a knowing wink, grinning.

“My team are looking into the pros and cons, Mister Rickenbacker, but the indications are that I will
“buy Wapanjara. I’m very taken with it, I have to say, and my ward …” Sophie gestured at Lizzie, “can spend time here when she’s not at boarding school. The Munros and Mister Jakkamarra … the station manager … will stay on for a while, I think.”

Rickenbacker stared at the people standing looking at him, and he cleared his throat.

“Well, I wish you the best, ma’am,” he said, and Nate thought he could hear a little bit of a shake in the man’s voice. Rickenbacker was thrown, no matter how hard he tried to hide it. “I … uh … I’d best be going, then.” He put his hat back on and tipped his fingers to the brim. “Ma’am,” he said, and gesturing at Ryan, he got back into the RAM and without any further ado, the vehicle backed up and drove away, sending up clouds of red dust.

Hardison frowned.

“Well now … that was interesting. No-one does a four-hour round trip just to ‘drop by,’” he said, thinking.

“Yeah,” Nate added. “And he was really shaken by the prospect of you guys selling Wapanjara. So why was that? Hardison, you found anything about this fella?”

Hardison shook his head.

“Not a damn’ thing. Nada. This guy is as squeaky clean as the inside of an empty morgue. No shell companies, no tax evasion, no nothin’. An’ believe me I looked,” Hardison said, irritated. “Not even a parkin’ ticket.”

“Huh,” Nate said. “Weird. I have a gut feeling this Rickenbacker isn’t the brains – I think he’s part of it, but he’s not the instigator.”

This whole business, Nate decided, was just getting curiouser and curiouser.

To be continued ...
“So … let me get this right, baby-girl …” Hardison said, disbelievingly, “you won’t eat broccoli, but you will eat baby wasps.” He stared at Lizzie, who was bright-eyed with enthusiasm.

“Eliot says if I ever get lost in the bush they’ll keep me alive!” she said as she sat beside him on the veranda. “Eliot says they’re ‘good eats’ and great bush tucker, and I should know more about this stuff. Eliot says –”

“Well, what Eliot says is a whole lot of crazy stuff!” Hardison countered, glaring at the hitter who was sitting at the table, busy cleaning his old Ka-Bar knife and scowling at the blade, which apparently had some invisible blemish on it that only he could see. “You do know he’s taken one helluva lot of hits to the head over the years an’ it’s probably sent him a bit doo-lally? Huh? Or … or … he’s just eaten too many bugs an’ one’s got into his brain an’ he’s got some kind of brain-bug eatin’ away at his little grey cells – “

Eliot snorted.

“You never know when this sort of information will keep you alive, Hardison! Might do you some good to learn this stuff, y’know.”

Hardison raised an eyebrow in extreme disdain.

“Ooohhh no. No way. You keep your bug-eatin’ tendencies to yourself, m’man. Ain’t no way Nana’s little boy is gonna start eatin’ worms.” He shuddered.

Eliot waggled the Ka-Bar at him.

“Well, if you get lost out here, I’m not gonna come lookin’ for you, an’ we’ll find your dried-up ol’ carcass lyin’ under a tree all wizened an’ chewed up by dingoes – “

“Eliot says dingoes like eating old meat!” Lizzie interjected knowledgably. “And they can crunch on bones, but not like a hyena, and they –”

“Jeez, Eliot!!! What the hell are you teachin’ this girl???” Hardison squawked.

Eliot curled his lip in a sly grin.

“Playin’ games on a computer with nerdy people you’ve never even met ain’t goin’ to keep you alive out here, man. It’s about time you learned some survival skills – “

“Well, the last time we ended up out in the ass-end of nowhere we almost got ate by a bear!”* the hacker complained testily.

“Yeah, an’ without me you’d have been bear-poop, Hardison!” Eliot growled, sounding very much
like the grizzly that had stalked them.

“And without me, you’d have both frozen to death,” said Parker sunnily, materialising beside Eliot as if from nowhere.

“Oh, people!” Nate said as he emerged from the house followed by Sophie and Jo. He placed files and plans onto the table, and rolled out the large map of Wapanjara for everyone to see. “Let’s see what we know so far.”

Soapy wandered in from the cattle yards where he had been feeding the heelers, just in time for Effie to bring out a tray heaving with tea-cups and saucers, her big industrial-sized teapot and a huge plateful of scones with butter and jam.

She set the whole thing down in front of Eliot and shoved his shoulder.

“I need the milk bringing through, Yank. Make yourself bloody useful for once.”

Hardison looked at the still-warm scones and beamed even as Eliot muttered and put his knife away.

“Effie … you are simply a wonder,” he sighed dreamily. “I just gotta introduce you to my Nana.”

Effie scowled.

“Well, at least that nice lady has raised a boy with some bloody manners,” she grumbled.

Hardison raised a hand, waving Eliot back down into his seat.

“Don’t you worry, Effie … I’ll get the milk an’ sugar, okay? Anythin’ else you need?”

Hardison’s cheesy grin made Eliot want to poke the hacker in the eye with his knife, but he just narrowed his eyes and sent revengeful vibes the tall young man’s way.

“Nah, sunbeam,” Effie muttered, “just the milk and stuff. Oh, and maybe a few side plates.”

“Mmmm,” Parker hummed, sounding very much like Gertie, “not-pancakes!” She reached out and picked up a scone, splitting it in half with a butter knife and lathering on the butter and jam.

“They’re called scones, Parker,” Sophie said with a sigh.

“Not pancakes?” Parker said before biting into the butter-glistening perfection.

“That’s right, not pancakes,” Sophie answered and then realised she had been cornered by Parker’s miles-out-of-the-box logic.

“But that’s just what I said … not-pancakes!” Parker mumbled while stuffing a loose crumb into her mouth.

“Dear god,” Sophie said to herself, “why do I bother … anyway,” she continued, rolling her eyes, “I want to know why dear Troy was so taken aback at the idea of Wapanjara being for sale,” she asked.

“Well … I can tell you now, he ain’t got the money to buy a second-hand pick-up,” Hardison commented as he placed the milk jug and sugar bowl down on the table. “The Albany Mining Company is workin’ on a hand-to-mouth basis. If someone’s wantin’ to buy this place and tryin’ to chase you guys off so you’ll sell cheap, it isn’t our good ol’ boy Rickenbacker. I think somebody else is funding the whole rig.”
“Why would he want it anyway? That’s what I can’t figure out,” Soapy said. “There’s been mining in the Barkly region for a century or more … mostly gold … but not here. There’s a little gold … some bauxite and manganese … but nothing worth mining. Albany wouldn’t be interested in the station as a livestock concern, so … what’s going on?”

Nate frowned as he studied the map and ate a scone.

“No idea.” He gestured at the north-west section of Wapanjara where the west paddock abutted not only aboriginal tribal land to the north and east but also what had once been Amery Downs sheep station and was now Albany Mining Company. “Soapy … how long has this ’sniffing around’ been going on … all of this weird stuff that’s been happening?”

Soapy shrugged.

“I thought about three months, but thinking about it, maybe a bit longer. Y’know, daft stuff … gates left open … nobody out here leaves gates open … complaints from Albany about cattle getting out through the fences … isolated stuff here and there. But I keep my fences in good repair – Eliot knows that.”

Eliot nodded, grinning ruefully. “Yeah … I’ve fixed enough of ‘em over the years.”

“So … what’s been happening on tribal land?” Nate continued.

“Just sightings of trucks and horseback riders here and there … nothing concrete,” Charlie Jakkamarra said as he wandered into the yard, Kip running ahead of him. “If people want to go onto tribal land they have to get permission from the council, so … yeah … trespassers.”

Eliot stood up and clattered down the veranda steps to greet the man he regarded as a brother.

“Hey man … it’s good to see you!” he said softly, and then he ruffled Kip’s blond curls. “Hey buddy. How’re you doin’?” he asked.

“Is Lizzie here??” Kip asked, brown eyes wide.

“KIP!” Lizzie yelled, and ran down the steps to see her new friend. “We’re eating scones! Want one??”


“Oh … yeah …” Lizzie thought about it for a moment, and then gestured at her family. “That’s my Daddy, my Mama, Hardison – I call him Alec – and Parker. Now would you like a scone??” she asked breathlessly.

Charlie grinned, and Eliot was pleased to see his friend’s dark eyes light up with pleasure. Charlie raised a hand in greeting.

“Charlie Jakkamarra, station manager … and this little tyke is my son, Christopher Eliot Jakkamarra. But we call him Kip.”

Eliot, to Team Leverage’s delight, blushed, the tips of his ears turning a delicate shade of pink.

“Y’know …” Sophie said, “Wapanjara never ceases to amaze me. Soapy, if you two ever really want to sell this place, let me know. It’s beautiful.”

Jo looked up at her husband and shook her head.
“This place … when we’ve gone, it’ll belong to Charlie and Eliot.”

And it was then that his friends realised how much Eliot loved his home and his people here in the remote Top End of Australia, and how much Wapanjara meant to him. And they also remembered his comment that he would die here … and he would be buried here. No matter where the team was in the world, Eliot had a home to go to.

Charlie made his way up the veranda steps and joined them, and Effie stumped out of the kitchen, her muddy eyes warm with the pleasure of seeing the young aborigine.

“How bloody time, boy. Sit. Eat.” She turned to the two children. “Do you two ankle-biters want some ice cream? I got mango or pash!”

“BOTH!” Kip yelled, and the two children pelted into the kitchen with Effie following, a knowing grin on her lumpy face.

Now with the children out of the way, they could get on with their discussion about why Wapanjara and its people were under threat.

“So … this is mostly happening on the north-west border of the station,” Nate pondered, as he looked at the station plan.

“Yeah …” Charlie stood beside him and pointed out places where gates had been left ajar, boundaries had been breached and on one occasion where cattle had strayed onto Albany land. “It’s the obvious place to push the issue if you want to incriminate Albany and Rickenbacker. But I don’t know …”

“What are you thinking, Charlie?” Sophie asked, seeing the doubt on the aborigine’s face.

“It’s a bit of a haul from the west boundary to get to the homestead to wreck the tower frame, and Eliot said your visitor rode off to the south. That’s Wapanjara land all the way to the highway, and to the north it’s Warumungu. It just seems strange, that’s all.”

“You think the hinky stuff up here,” Hardison prodded at the map, resting a long finger on the west boundary, “is a distraction?”

“No idea, mate. It just rubs me up the wrong way a bit,” Charlie pondered.

“Your crew … your stock hands … why did they leave?” Nate asked.

“At first it was just one or two,” Jo said sadly. She had known many of their stockmen for years. “Sick family members, that sort of thing. The first lads to leave were just here for a few months, and youngsters like to move on. But then they began to get wary. Jittery, even. They couldn’t look Soapy or me in the eye. It took nearly three months. But they all went, and on the face of it for perfectly good reasons … even our old hands, two of whom had been here for as long as Soapy and me. They just suddenly decided to retire. But the really annoying thing is that we can’t seem to hire anyone on. In this day and age, with a recession going on, and we can’t even hire a jackaroo or two,” she said bitterly.

“Jackaroo?” Hardison asked. “Who they?”

“Both Charlie and I have been a jackaroo … someone learning the job.” Eliot said, studying the map.

“Y’know,” Charlie said quietly, “the blokes used to hang out at a boozier in Tennant Creek … bit of
a doggo place, but they’d go on a bender now and again and Mabel would let them sleep it off in the coal cellar. She runs the place,” he explained. “This all began when they came home from a booze-up at Mabel’s. After that, every time the hung-over buggers came back from a bender, one or two of them would be gone within a couple of days.”

“Interesting,” Nate said, and Sophie could almost see the cogs turning in his brain. “I think we, as the prospective buyers of Wapanjara, should perhaps go into Tennant Creek tomorrow and show our faces. Y’know … meet the locals.”

Eliot’s scowl turned into a wide, knowing grin. “Y’know Nate, I think I feel the yearnin’ for a cold beer comin’ on,” he said.

“Me too,” Charlie added, his dark eyes showing some life at last. “I think I need to get out for a bit. It would do me good. It’s too late today, but tomorrow is the day for picking up groceries and feed, so … why don’t we do that? I fancy a beer, so I do.”

Nate rubbed his hands together almost gleefully.

“Can we come??” Lizzie piped up, and everyone turned to see Kip and Lizzie working their way through platefuls of mango and passion fruit ice cream, courtesy of Effie.

“Actually, Kip came to ask you a favour,” Charlie said, studying Lizzie. “He goes back to school tomorrow … the first day back since … since she left,” his voice catching a little. “He, ah … he wondered if Lizzie would like to meet his class and talk about living in America.”

“I think that would be a lovely idea,” Sophie said smoothly. “Lizzie and I will be there. Where –“

“Oh, it’s via the internet. School of the Air. Our connection’s a little bit bung, but Kip can usually manage. His schoolmates live all over the Territory. So if Lizzie could come up to the bungalow tomorrow morning, he can introduce her via the video link.”

Hardison thought this was an excellent idea.

“Hey, man … I’ll see if I can help improve your link. I got some nifty little doo-dads that might work out here in the boonies.”

Lizzie, although not enamoured of school, thought about it.

“Can I bring my project? It’s about camels!” she said, and Kip nodded enthusiastically.

“That would be pretty great!” he said shyly. “Dad? Can she?”

Charlie winked at the two children and nodded.


“Me too,” Parker said around a not-pancake. “What? Is it a boy’s day out or something?” she added, seeing the frowny faces. “I’m coming, and that’s that,” she stated before anyone could stop her, and licked jam off her fingers. “I haven’t anything to do. Nate’s plotting, Sophie’s grifting, Hardison’s … well … doing whatever it is Hardison does, and Eliot gets to be all growly and be Wilderness Eliot. Even Lizzie’s got to ride a camel. All I’ve done is climb a water tank. Well, phooey to that,” she snorted, her decision made. “I’m coming with.” She grinned. “Oh, and I hope you have an extra helmet around, Eliot, ‘cause I’ll be riding with you on the bike.”
Parker looked at the faces surrounding her. They ranged from Sophie’s smugness to scowly frustration, the latter being their short-tempered hitter. Eliot let out an explosive sigh of annoyance and glared at her.

“You start wrigglin’, Parker, an’ I leave you on the side of the road for the dingoes to eat, y’hear?”

Parker grinned happily.

“Well that’s sorted then,” she said, and patted Charlie on the shoulder. “No worries, mate!”

*Tomorrow, Nate thought, was going to be interesting.*

“WOO-HOO!!” Parker yelled, the wind catching her blonde hair as it flew around her face from under Soapy’s old motorcycle helmet as Eliot sped down the Stuart Highway towards Tennant Creek. Now *this* was what she was talking about! She could see the wonderful landscape of outback Australia unfold before her as she peered past Eliot’s shoulder, the only thing between her and the flies being her visor.

She unlocked one of her arms from around Eliot’s waist and twisted around, giving a couple of air punches to Hardison, following on behind the motorbike in Bernadette.

“Will you friggin’ *sit still!!***” Eliot yelled, and cringed as Parker gave him a hard poke in the ribs. The Ducati swerved slightly. “*Shit!!***” he yelped, although he knew neither of them were in any danger, but Parker could be nothin’ but a *goddamn pain. “Dingoes, remember!***” He bawled, trying to make himself heard against the wind-noise. He swore to *god* he would never … *ever …* let Parker ride on one of his bikes again.

“This *is awesome!!***” Parker yelled back, grinning.

In Bernadette, Charlie, sitting beside Hardison in the passenger seat, watched the young woman on the old bike, clinging to Eliot like a limpet and obviously having the time of her life.

“Is she always like that?” he asked, puzzled.

“Charlie … m’man … you have no idea …” Hardison muttered.

Soapy, sitting in the rear seat beside a drowsy Nate, chuckled. He had a feeling this little outing was going to be *fun.*

The afternoon was taken up with ordering feed and picking up essentials, and Nate made sure he dropped the name of Lady Eloise Stanton around whenever he could. Like all small communities, he knew the gossip would spread like wildfire, even though he never actually mentioned that Lady Eloise was trying to buy Wapanjara. The wonderfully unique character of Chinese whispers would soon put paid to any so-called secrets, and he wouldn’t be surprised if by the end of the day it would be common news that a member of the British royal family was moving to Australia.

Parker wandered about, looking at the local stores, and found the people welcoming, chatty and kind, although a bit nosy. But that was okay, she thought – she discovered home-made treacle toffee, hats with corks suspended from the rim for the tourists who browsed through the local market, and she treated herself to a koala soft toy. Maybe Bunny would like company, she decided.
She re-joined her friends just as Soapy was stowing dry goods in one of Bernadette’s numerous bins, and she offered the pastoralist her bag of toffee. Hardison reached past Soapy and stole a piece and then instantly regretted it. The stuff was sticky enough to be used as super-glue.

Nate checked his watch.

“Okay guys and gal … let’s head to Rafferty’s and see how our presence will disturb the local low-class watering hole.”

Within minutes, the Ducati and Bernadette were parked in an abandoned lot behind the Tennant Creek dump, alongside a couple of battered utes and a twenty-five-year-old landrover.

Charlie was right – Rafferty’s was a little bit of a dump. A low building with a corrugated iron roof, the interior was bright and noisy, and the bar was propped up by a selection of men obviously having a cold beer after the end of a hard day in the spring heat. Some of them wore boiler suits and a couple of old drunks lounged next to a battered television suspended behind the bar. A game of Australian football was creating a noisy reaction amongst the customers, most of them obviously regulars.

But there was also a group of tough-looking customers wearing baseball caps, most of which carried the Albany Mining Company logo. One of them was Derry Ryan.

The only woman in the place before Parker walked in through the door was a middle-aged brassy blonde with a big, cheery smile.

“G’day, folks,” she called out as Nate led the way into the bar, Eliot bringing up the rear. “What can I getcha?”

“Oh, what’ve you got?” Nate asked, smiling genially.

“Well, a Yank! Welcome to Rafferty’s,” she answered, “I’m Mabel. This is my place. I got cold beer mostly, bottled or draft. Four-X? Foster’s? Or maybe you like American … Bud? Miller’s? Take your pick.”

“Foster’s,” Charlie said, setting a booted foot on the brass foot-rail and leaning on the bar.

Mabel frowned good-naturedly at the young aborigine.

“You been in here before, love? I remember you … coming in with that rowdy mob of charmers from Wapanjara, hey? I’ve not seen ‘em for a while.”

Charlie flashed Mabel a white smile.

“Yeah, that’s us,” he said, accepting a glass of beer so cold the condensation ran down the outside. “It’s getting warm out there, so we thought a beer would just hit the spot before we head home,” he added.

“I’ll just have a soda,” Nate said. He winked at Mabel. “Designated driver.”

“No probs, mate,” Mabel said. “It’s nice to see somebody plays by the rules,” she added acidly, looking pointedly at Ryan, who stood drinking further along the bar.

Ryan watched as Nate and the team took their drinks and leaned against the old, worn surface of the oak bar. A few of the regulars eyed Parker appreciatively. A pretty young woman in Rafferty’s was as rare as hen’s teeth.
“I uh … I heard Wapanjara’s on the market,” Mabel said, eyeing Soapy. The pastoralist was a well-known figure in Tennant Creek, and she recognised him instantly.

“Well …” Soapy said, humming and haa-ing a little, and then he gave Mabel a cheeky wink. “So they say …”

Mabel laughed raucously, delighted.

“Keeping it under the table, hey! Well, I heard you’ve got some posh lady looking at the place – good luck to ya, pal! It’ll be a sweet deal if you pull it off!”

Soapy sipped his beer, but waggled his eyebrows at Mabel in agreement.

“Hey, girlie … want to join us for a drink?” The voice was rich with the tang of Belfast.

“Huh?” said Parker before she could even take a drink of her light beer. She turned and found Derry Ryan standing behind her. “Oh … hi!” she answered. “Um … no thanks,” she added, and turned back to her drink.

Eliot watched the big Ulsterman, his eyes narrowed. The big man’s cronies, he noticed, were mostly Chinese, he thought. *Odd.*

Silence fell around the bar, the only noise coming from the muted commentary on the television.

“Derry –“ Mabel warned.

“Shut it, Mabel,” Ryan said, his grey eyes stony. “I’m talking to blondie here,” he continued, his angular face studying Parker as though she was a piece of meat. “Come and have a drink with me. I’m better company than a couple of yanks, an old man and a bloody abo.”

Charlie twitched, but his half-smile never wavered.

Hardison, on the other hand, straightened, his dark eyes hooded.

“Back off, man –“

“Oh yeah,” Ryan said, his shark-like smile widening, “I forgot the nig – OOF!”

His grunt of agony came as his eyes began to water as Parker, smiling sweetly, dug her strong fingers into his crotch. Her nails began to cut off the blood supply to very sensitive parts of his anatomy he thought essential.

“I don’t like you,” Parker hummed softly. “Go away.” And giving Ryan’s groin a hard, scrunching, parting squeeze, she let go and turned back to her friends.

“You bitch –“ Ryan snarled, his voice betraying the pain Parker had caused.

Eliot caught the wrist of the hand Ryan had raised to Parker, but before he could break the bones a baseball bat slammed down on the bar, the noise echoing through the still room.

“Derry!” Mabel growled, her good humour nowhere to be seen. “Out! D’you hear me? *OUT!* You and your merry men! No fighting in here – I like having a liquor license!!”

The Irishman scowled, but pulled his hand out of Eliot’s grasp and gestured at his cronies. Jerking his head silently, the men reluctantly put their beer glasses on the bar, pulled out a few dollars as payment and wandered after Ryan as he left the bar. Eliot watched as the man glanced back as the
door closed behind him.

Mabel lifted her baseball bat from the bar, and grinned apologetically.

“Sorry about that. He’s a bit of a pain, sometimes. He used to hassle the Wapanjara blokes every chance he could for some reason.”

Nate, eyes softening with humour, thanked her for his drink and raised the glass to her in a salute.

“Ma’am, you’ve never seen a bar in Boston when the Patriots are three points down in the last quarter with twenty seconds to go,” he said, and took a mouthful of the lemonade Mabel had placed in front of him. “Anyway … where were we …”

And for a little while, Team Leverage and the Wapanjara owner and station manager relaxed in a doggo bar behind the dump in Tennant creek, Australia, and chatted with Mabel about the pros and cons of the recession and what it meant to the local economy. Perhaps having a member of the British aristocracy living locally might be a benefit, it was decided.

But they all noticed Eliot didn’t touch his beer.

It was getting dark as they left Rafferty’s.

Mabel had prodded them for more information on the supposed sale of Wapanjara, and they had played along, giving little hints here and there, and promising to bring Lady Eloise Stanton along to the dingy bar next time she came to Tennant Creek.

It was as Eliot emerged to a resplendent sunset that he murmured loud enough for his friends to hear, but no further.

“Soapy … stay out of the way, okay? I’m not goin’ to explain to Jo why you got beat up on a regular trip for groceries.”

Soapy flexed his hands, but nodded. At nearly seventy years old, he was a little too old for a good brawl.

Eliot’s blue eyes checked the lot where Bernadette and the Ducati were parked. The two utes were still there but the landrover was gone.

“You think –“ Hardison said nervously.

“Dammit, Hardison!” Eliot said sotto voce, “how long have we been doin’ this! You an’ Parker keep an eye on Soapy an’ Charlie … I don’t want ‘em hurt.”

“Eliot –“

“Nate … let me do what I gotta do. If you want to throw a punch or two feel free, but don’t get in my way, okay?”

They began to head for Bernadette when a figure stepped out of one of the utes, silhouetted against the setting sun.

“Hey, cowboy,” Ryan said. “Just want a quick word.”

Eliot sauntered to a halt, and the others ranged out behind him. The Irishman had chosen his position well – the sun’s rays made Eliot squint, but there wasn’t much he could do about it right now.
“And what word would that be?” he asked casually.

“Leave,” Ryan said, his Belfast accent full of distaste. “Go back to bloody Hicksville, or wherever it is you come from. And take your hoity-toity tart of a boss with you. Wapanjara won’t be sold to you.”

Eliot’s eyes creased into a warm smile.


Ryan turned to Soapy.

“You don’t sell to her, old man. You hear me? Not her.”

Soapy’s grin was feral.

“Rack off, you arse,” he said, and clenched his fist.

And it was then that Eliot saw a movement out of the corner of his eye, but his vision, limited by the brightness of the sun, couldn’t quite make out what it was. And then his eyes cleared a little and he knew exactly what it was.

A slight figure, almost like a child, moved like lightning and he caught the sudden, lethal glint of a knife aiming straight for his chest.

To be continued …

Author’s note:

* Read about Eliot, Hardison and Parker going head-to-head with the wilderness in ‘A Walk on the Wild Side.’
Eliot shifted his balance onto his left leg and twisted sideways even as he felt the sting of the blade as it nicked his right biceps, and he swore under his breath. His left hand grasped his assailant’s wrist and his right pushed at the figure’s shoulder in a smooth move intended to dump his attacker on the ground.

But he was profoundly surprised when a small, fine-boned hand punched him hard in the chest and staggered him and he let go of the hand bearing the knife. It swept forward again, once more aiming straight for the place under Eliot’s sternum where the slender blade could slice slightly upwards through his heart and surrounding major arteries. Eliot would be dead in seconds.

But a hand grabbed hold of Eliot’s jacket and he was yanked sideways, and then all hell broke loose.

Once again the knife came at him, even as Nate let go of Eliot’s jacket and took on a heavily-built man who was targeting Soapy, and Eliot saw the slight figure slide back and away only to come at him again from another angle, stark against the setting sun.

But Eliot let loose a flurry of short, chopping blows that powered the figure backwards even as the razor-sharp blade nicked him again, this time pricking his chest, and he felt a tiny stream of blood trickle down to his belly, soaking his shirt. Damn … that was deeper than he had anticipated. But he pushed forwards, driving his assailant backwards until … whoever … slipped and fell to one knee, nearly dropping the knife in an attempt to stay upright.

Eliot let his breath hiss through his teeth and he caught the figure as it got to its feet and he let fly with a neat but powerful slam with the heel of his hand that made whoever-it-was gasp with agony, and the small, slender shadow-person staggered back and wiped blood from their face.

Nate was piling into the heavy-set man and out of the corner of his eye Eliot could see Hardison flatten a skinny fellow with a pretty decent left hook, the tall hacker whirling to take on another attacker coming in from his left.

And then, goddammit, he saw Soapy floor Derry Ryan with a calculated blow to the throat and backing it up with a sharp kick to the Irishman’s sternum as he went down.

“Soapy!! Back off, man! Hardison!! Help Soapy will ya!!”

“Don’t need help, boy! Look after yourself –” Soapy yelled back, looking as fearsome as a snake on the prowl.

Eliot growled and began to run towards Soapy, knowing he had to protect him … save him for Jo, and make sure Charlie went home safely to his son –

… and then Eliot was tackled to the ground by what felt like a rhino. The man crashed on top of him and Eliot bucked hard, trying to dislodge the moron, but he just couldn’t move nearly three hundred pounds of human sitting astride his chest.

The pressure on his ribs was agonising. His focus, such as it was as the black spots of impending unconsciousness prickled around his vision, settled on the enormous fist that was heading his way, and he knew if it landed it would break something as well as leave him with a concussion he could do well without.

But suddenly the enormous man jerked and folded sideways - remarkably gracefully, Eliot thought –
and crumpled groaning to the ground clutching a broken upper arm, revealing Parker holding what appeared to be small length of piping which she had used on the man’s shoulder. She was grinning like an idiot.

She held out a hand and helped Eliot to his feet, only for the shadow-warrior appear from nowhere and whirl a kick at Parker that would have broken her knee had it landed. But Eliot suddenly grasped Parker’s shirt front, hauled her towards him and in one smooth, elegant move, lifted her sideways and pushed her away from him.

“Stay put, will ya?” he yelled, exasperated, “I can’t keep an eye – “

And then the goddamn knife nicked him again, this time through his nearly-new jacket and into his shoulder, and that really pissed him off, because, dammit, he really liked this jacket and now it had a friggin’ hole in it and Effie would make his life friggin’ hell for getting blood all over his clothes.

“ELIOT!!”

He turned at Parker’s yell and she threw him the pipe, and he caught and twirled the short length of metal, wielding it expertly to deflect yet another blow from his mystery assailant. He still hadn’t managed a good look at whoever it was, but for all their slight build, they were extremely skilled and very dangerous indeed.

And then it became a beautiful, frightening and lethal dance of death as Eliot and his nemesis wove patterns of light in the ensuing gloom, the last vestiges of the sun striking the shining blade and the dull length of pipe, Eliot’s solid build and his unknown enemy’s tiny frame oddly well matched. Both were deadly, skilled fighters, and the knife slid past the pipe to clip Eliot’s forearm while the pipe caught the small figure hard enough for Eliot to hear the grunt of pain as the metal connected with the figure’s shoulder.

They both stepped away from one another, breathing hard, and Eliot couldn’t make out any features in the lessening light, but before they could engage in another round of blows, Derry Ryan staggered to his feet and stumbled his way back to the utes.

Eliot could see Charlie demolishing a broad, rangy man with a flurry of well-placed, accurate punches, but Ryan’s voice rang out and the man managed to pull himself away from Charlie’s grasp.

“Leave ‘em!! Let’s go!!” Ryan gasped.

Eliot wasn’t too sure how many men there were, but he didn’t have any time to think about it as the phantom attacked him again, this time the knife aiming for his leg. He knew what this crazy ninja-person was doing ... trying to cut the tendon behind his knee, and then once Eliot was down and crippled, the knife would slide home into his chest or his throat.

“Khen!!! KHENBISH!! Leave him!! NOW!!” Ryan bawled, his voice hoarse from the damage Soapy had inflicted on his throat.

The figure stopped dead it its tracks, knife poised, even as Eliot prepared to do his best to break the phantom’s neck. And in a heartbeat, the figure ran lightly to the other ute, following Ryan and his stumbling, hurt men, and within seconds the vehicles were heading out at speed, away from the abandoned, run-down lot and from the six people now standing panting in the evening light.

Eliot limped over to Soapy, the older man leaning on Charlie’s shoulder. The young station manager was grinning, a wild light in his dark eyes. The pair of them looked thoroughly pleased with themselves.
“Dammit, Soapy!! What did I say about stayin’ outta this?? Jo’s gonna have my hide for a duster when she sees you … both of you!!” Eliot growled, wincing as the sting of his cuts began to get more painful as the adrenaline wore off.

Soapy had bruised knuckles and a cut under his eye and Charlie’s nose was bloody, but that didn’t seem to worry either of them, and Eliot had to admit Charlie looked more like his old self than he had since Alice died. Perhaps pummelling the crap out of one of Derry Ryan’s cronies made him feel as though he had worked out some of his grief on one of the people who might have been responsible for her death.

Nate wandered over, dabbing at a split lip.

“Give them a break, Eliot … they’re fine, both of them. They look as though they can handle themselves.”

Hardison, face wreathed in a cocky grin, sauntered across, rubbing cut knuckles.

“Two, Eliot! I took out two of ‘em!” he drawled, thoroughly proud of himself.

“You’re bleeding!” Parker snapped, her eyes narrowing as she perused Eliot. “Let me see!” And she began to tug his shirt out of his pants belt so she could check his wounds, but Eliot fended her off as gently and as firmly as he could.

“M’okay, Parker! It’s these two idiots I’m worried about!” Eliot gestured angrily at Soapy and Charlie. “You could’ve got your sorry asses killed!”

“Now, son, stop getting your undies in an uproar,” Soapy said in a conciliatory tone and smirking at the Oklahoman. “You know damn’ well I can take care of myself in a pinch, and I think it’s done Charlie the world of good, don’t you?”

Eliot stabbed a finger at no-one in particular, his face suffused with anger.

“That ain’t the point!! My job is to keep you safe – that’s what I do, an’ there’s a little boy who needs his father an’ Jo needs you, Soapy, you know that! I can’t be worryin’ about you an’ … an’ …” He suddenly stammered to silence, and he understood then that his anger had boiled into suppressed grief and pain, his lips set in a thin line of hurt. “DAMMIT!” he ground out, and Parker, perhaps the only person on earth who could do what she did then with any safety, wrapped her arms around Eliot and clung to him, her head between his shoulder-blades, one hand rubbing his chest and to hell with the pain it caused.

Eliot realised he was shaking.

“It’s okay to breathe, Eliot,” Parker said quietly, and the hitter slowly forced his breathing to slow and become steady instead of the hitching, stuttering mess Parker was trying to ease.

Soapy began to look a little sheepish, and rested a bruised hand on Eliot’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry, boy. You’re right. Still … we’re all upright, so let’s go home, hey? By the way … who was that little arse with the knife? Are you okay?”

Eliot looked around him and saw that his team and family were alright, if a little bruised here and there. He was bleeding, but he would make it home easily enough if he patched himself up.

“C’mon,” Parker whispered, patting Eliot’s damaged chest. “Let’s get you cleaned up a bit. Effie is going to be so pissed.”
“Hey … guys …” Hardison said wistfully. “I took down two baddies. Look!” he waved his hands about as if to prove his point. “My knuckles’re all beat up … guys?? Guys???”

Parker let go of Eliot and grasping the sleeve of his jacket, dragged him over to Bernadette where she unshipped a flashlight and the big medical kit and proceeded to try and mop up blood, Eliot protesting loudly about the fuss.

Nate grinned at Hardison, wincing at the pull on his split lip.

“You’ll live, Hardison. Let’s go back to Wapanjara.”

Hardison scowled.

“But Nate … two bad guys!” he repeated, a little desperately.

But nobody took any notice as they wandered back to Bernadette, rubbing sore bits and admiring each other’s bruises.

Hardison sighed and trailed behind, muttering to himself.

“Yeah, sure, Hardison … you did good, buddy … two bad guys … eat your heart out Spencer, m’man … but no … it’s you gettin’ the attention jus’ ‘cause you’re bleedin’ all over the damn place …”

And wincing at the pain in his precious hands, he pulled out Bernadette’s ignition keys.

It turned out that Parker was wrong.

Oh, Effie was pissed, alright. But so were Jo and Sophie.

It had been a long, long time since Soapy had been in Jo’s bad books, but she certainly made up for it as he sat on the veranda under the lights as she cleaned the cut below his eye and ranted at him as though he was a five-year old. The only blessing to the whole debacle was that she had to rant in a loud whisper as both Lizzie and Kip, who was having a sleep-over, were out like a light in Oggie’s tent.

“But Jo—“

“Don’t you ‘but Jo’ me, you old fool!!” she hissed, “you cracked some ribs and had a concussion just a week or so ago, and you get into a bar fight??“

“Well, not really a bar fight—“

“I don’t care … you got into a fight!! You were too old for that twenty years ago, you nerk!!”

Soapy shrugged, a little embarrassed.

“Well, it just kind of happened, and -“

“Theodore Alphonse Munro Junior, if you weren’t already recovering from a bashed noggin I’d get Effie to give you the hardest head slap she can muster!”

Soapy sighed. She was using his given name, and he knew then that she was furious with him. It was time to concede.
“Sorry, love,” he muttered and then winced as his irate wife pressed on the cut under his eye. Oh well. He supposed he deserved it. “Won’t happen again.”

“It’d better bloody not!” Jo said.

“I took two of ‘em down, Effie! Two!! Ow!!” Hardison winced as Effie wiped his cut knuckles with antiseptic and he told her about the ambush in the abandoned lot.

“Next time, you young boofhead, keep your fist tighter and wrap your thumb over your fingers – that way you won’t break anything,” Effie commented as she taped up Hardison’s hands. “Bloody stupid – hasn’t anyone ever taught you how to hit somebody??”

“Well, now you mention it …” Hardison said, glaring at Eliot as Parker helped the hitter ease off his undershirt as he sat on the kitchen table so he wouldn’t drip blood on the floor, “ … not really.”

“That’s because you’re more of a liability in a fight, Hardison! All that … arm-wavy … thing you do an’ dancin’ around like you’re walkin’ on some kind of hot coals!!” Eliot hissed in pain as Parker prodded at the still-oozing nick in his chest. “That’s why I do the fist-fighty stuff!”

“Hey! I do my ‘floatin’ like a butterfly thing, Eliot!! Helps distract the enemy!”

“Yeah, so they can’t hit back for laughin’!” Eliot retorted and then winced as Parker began to clean up blood.

“Sit still!” Parker ordered, and scowled at Eliot, who grimaced back. Nate wandered into the kitchen with Sophie and Charlie, the latter having some cotton wool stuffed up one nostril. Sophie studied both men with ill-concealed disdain.

“A bar-fight? Seriously, Nate? At your age? Charlie, I can understand, and Eliot … well, Eliot’s just Eliot –”

“Hey!!” I’m here, y’know. I can hear you!” Eliot grumbled.

“So shut up,” Parker scolded, and taped a dressing over the cut in his chest and moved on to the one in his shoulder. “Who was that who did this?” she added, studying the nick. It was deep, and she wondered if it needed a stitch or two. “I couldn’t see whoever it was really well, but they were fast!” she added, concerned at the deadly turn the evening had taken.

Eliot shook his head.

“Don’t know. But they were damn good,” he pondered. He thought about the skill set of his assailant. The style was vaguely familiar … a martial art, he knew, and he thought about the spartan execution … never a wasted move, functional yet elegant – “Xing Ye Quan!” he said suddenly. “I knew I’d seen it someplace before. It’s a battlefield style – no fuss, you get the job done as soon as you can. It’s been part of the Chinese elite for hundreds of years. It’s aggressive an’ practical. You don’t see it much in our business, but … it’s pretty distinctive.”

Parker bit her lip.

“This needs stitches, Eliot. It’s deep.”

Eliot raised an eyebrow.

“So stitch it, Parker. I ain’t goin’ anywhere.” He checked Charlie. “You doin’ okay, man?”
Charlie unplugged his nose and sniffed to see if the blood had dried up. He grinned.

“I never thought I’d ever feel better, but … I do. I feel as though I’m doing something, at least, to … to … just know why. I need to know why they took her away from us. So I can try and explain the whole bloody mess to Kip when he’s older.” His voice hitched a little, and Nate put a hand on the young widower’s shoulder.

“You never get over it, Charlie … but you do get used to it. Believe me, I know … and I tried my damnedest to kill the pain instead of learning to live with it. If we can give you answers … then hopefully at least the pain will become manageable.”

Charlie knew about Sam. He knew that Nate had spent years trying to drink away the ache of loss, and Charlie wanted nothing more than to get rid of the pain of losing the love of his life. But he also knew he had to look forward, because Kip was all he had left of Alice, and he was damned if he would let anything harm that.

Parker broke out a needle holder, sterile needle and suture thread and prepared to clean up the nasty cut in Eliot’s shoulder. Eliot, who had stitched himself up more times than he cared to remember, was secretly grateful for Parker’s care, and gritted his teeth as she began to skilfully push the needle through the flesh with the holder.

“Somethin’ … ow! Jeez, Parker!!” Eliot grunted in protest as Parker none-too-gently inserted the needle through the left side of the cut, and then grumpily continued with his line of thought. “There was somethin’ … Ryan shouted out a name, or … or order, maybe … it sounded like ‘Ken’ … and then ‘Knish’ or ‘Kenbish’ or …” he sighed, frustrated. “It sounded familiar, but I can’t figure out where the hell I heard it before.” He flinched as Parker tugged the thread through the incision. That was the bit he hated most of all.

“I still can’t figure out why they don’t want you to sell,” Nate pondered, careful of his split lip. “The whole thing’s just all out of whack. And now there’s this strange Chinese connection,” he added, puzzled.

Effie had finished cleaning up Hardison’s knuckles and shooed him away so she could make hot chocolate on her old cooking range, and she gave Eliot a gentle clip on the ear in passing, before spooning chocolate powder into rich, creamy milk, added vanilla, and set the big pan on the hotplate.

Eliot let out a rumbling curse of protest, but knowing it was done out of what Effie would label as love, he let the head-slap pass, although Hardison was delighted. He thought Effie, next to his Nana, was the coolest person ever.

Parker finished the third stitch and cut the thread, and then perused her handiwork as Jo wandered through followed by a resigned Soapy.

“You’d better check him in the morning, sweetie,” Jo said to Parker. “Cuts can fester here in the outback overnight.”

“I’ll be fine –” Eliot cut in as Parker helped him put on a tee-shirt.

“I will, Jo, I promise,” Parker smiled at Jo, completely charmed. She wasn’t used to being called ‘sweetie’, and she was touched that Jo thought of her so kindly. “Don’t argue, Eliot. I’ll check you out before breakfast.”

“God, El … you are so ass-whupped, m’man!” Hardison crowed.

Eliot was very pleased indeed to see Hardison yelp with surprise as Effie slapped him hard on the
It was past midnight and everyone else had retired to their beds over an hour earlier, but Eliot wandered over to the south paddock gate and fussed Gertie for a while. She burbled and hummed, sniffing at him in concern. She had seen him hurt before, and it always worried her, and she lipped at the bandage on his forearm.

“M’okay, darlin’ … nothin’ serious this time, I promise …” Eliot murmured, scratching Gertie’s head. The big camel leaned her head on Eliot’s shoulder, and he let her even though it pulled the stitches in the cut there.

So he stood there for a while, allowing the cool evening breeze soothe him. He inhaled the scent of newly-flowered jasmine, and he listened to the night-noises of the outback. It was a clear night, and away from the veranda lights he could see the outlines of the hills behind the station.

Who was this mysterious assailant who had attacked him with such skill and speed? He had a name now … **Khenbish**. It had come to him as he sat on the veranda drinking Effie’s excellent hot chocolate.

He knew of only one person called Khenbish. But it couldn’t be her, surely. She had been dead, as far as Eliot knew, for over a decade. He didn’t know much about her other than she wasn’t Chinese – she was Mongolian, an unwanted child from a large family of the reclusive yet powerful Khoton clan. She was one of the deadliest undercover agents China had ever produced.

The reason for her success was her ordinairiness. She was unassuming, bland … anonymous. Eliot smiled grimly. Even her name suited her. Khenbish in Mongolian meant ‘nobody.’

But he had known so-called ‘dead’ agents come back to life many times – hell, he’d even done it himself once or twice. So, he wouldn’t be surprised if the woman was still alive.

He looked skyward and took in the huge night sky, the crescent moon hanging bright over the top of the hill over which the road to Wapanjara ran, the stand of stringybarks stark against the ghost-light of the moon.

But one of the black shapes moved.

It resolved into a figure, small and sparely-built, and Eliot pushed Gertie’s head from his shoulder and walked into the centre of the yard to where the moonlight cast inky shadows. He stood where the figure could see him, clear and solid in the moon-glow, and he looked back at the figure who stared down at him.

They studied one another for long moments, and then, in an unmistakeable gesture of disdain, Eliot slowly turned his back on the figure, walked back to the house, and was gone.

To be continued …
The Wounded Fight to Live Again

Lizzie and Kip thought they were the first ones awake the next morning. They hauled themselves out of their respective bunks in Oggie’s ‘Nipper Nest’ - as Effie had nicknamed it - and unzipping the entrance, they were on the point of roaring up to the house in their pyjamas to see if Effie was around. They both knew that the little cook would feed them if only to keep them quiet until everyone else had roused from their slumber, but they were surprised when they found the entrance blocked by an Eliot.

He was sprawled out on his fold-down bed, guarding the entrance to the children’s sleeping area, warmly wrapped in his blankets and apparently sound asleep.

But Lizzie gasped as she saw the dressing on the wound in his exposed shoulder, and the bandage covering the cut in his biceps.

“Eliot –“ she whispered, her eyes round.


“But … but you’re hurt –“ Lizzie continued, worried, and crouched down beside her best friend, Kip standing beside her, his cuddly goanna toy in one hand.

Eliot opened an eye and smiled his Lizzie-smile, a half-hitch of his mouth which made his laughter lines appear.

“I’ll be fine. Go on now … Effie’s awake an’ cookin’, and if you’re lucky you might get a pancake before Hardison wakes up an’ eats ‘em all,” he said warmly.

Kip gazed at Eliot and then at his injuries.

“Is my dad –“

“He’s asleep on the veranda, an’ he’s perfectly okay.” Eliot widened his smile and opened his other eye. “Your pa …” he added quietly, “… is a very brave man. But I reckon he could probably do with a hug right now. Think you can do that before gettin’ your pancakes?”

“Really???” Kip asked with wonder. “Was he in a fight??”

Eliot closed his eyes and winced as he shifted into a position where his injuries didn’t hurt quite so much.

“We’ll tell you about it over breakfast. Go give your pop his hug an’ leave this beat-up ol’ soldier to get a little more sleep. Damn, I’m as stiff as hell …” he muttered, and pulling his blankets over his shoulder, tried to relax.

“See you in the kitchen!” Kip said to Lizzie hurriedly, and ran off to find his father while Lizzie knelt down beside Eliot. The hitter felt a small hand cup his cheek. He sighed.

“’Lizbeth Grace … I’m tired an’ I’m sore, so stop worryin’ and go get fed. I’ll be ready for breakfast in an hour or so, so go pester Effie an’ go away,” he said good-naturedly.

“I don’t like it when you’re hurt,” she said, her voice wavering.
Eliot raised an eyebrow even as he tried to slide back into sleep.

“It happens, sweetheart, you know that. Anyway, wait until you see your daddy’s lip. Oh, an’ while you’re at it, ask Hardison about the two guys he hit. He’ll tell you all about it. At least twice. So git, an’ leave me be.”

“Oh … okay.” Lizzie said. Eliot heard a sigh, and then he felt a tiny kiss on the very end of his nose. “But I want to know everything!” Lizzie continued. “I bet Mama’s throwing a blue fit!!”

And there was another phrase Eliot would be having words with Hardison about. He heard the little girl get to her feet and wander off towards the kitchen. Damn, but he ached. He was gettin’ far too old for this kind of nonsense, he decided. And settling once more into the warm embrace of his bed, Eliot Spencer fell into an uneasy doze.

Breakfast that morning was far from quiet.

“Two, baby-girl! Two bad guys!” Hardison said enthusiastically, “that’s one more than Eliot!”

“Yeah, well, mine had a knife!” Eliot growled as he forked more food onto his plate.

“Grandpa Soapy, did you save anyone’s life?” Kip said, his eyes round with amazement.

Soapy ducked his head shyly and grinned. “Well –“

“Grandpa Soapy should know better!” Jo retorted as she poured herself a cup of tea. “Fighting isn’t something to be admired, young man!”

Kip tried to look chastened, but he couldn’t stop the smile from creeping onto his face as he glanced at his father, who now sported a bruise on the bridge of his nose and a swollen cheek. His Dad was amazing.

They finished eating and as Parker helped Effie to clear the table, the children were excused and Kip led the way down to the yard with Lizzie and Buster in tow, the little terrier ready to have a great day digging holes and haring around doing doggy stuff.

“Hey!” Eliot called out. “You two stay in the yard where we can see you, okay?? An’ keep Buster with you! No wanderin’ around, y’hear?”

Both children bawled a distracted agreement, and dashed off yelling.

“Are you going to tell us what’s going on?” Nate asked quietly as he sipped coffee. “Parker said she found you asleep in front of the kids’ door this morning,” he added.

Eliot leaned back in his chair and waited until Effie and Parker joined them, and sighed.

“Her name is Khenbish Hadan. She’s the most dangerous operative China has … had,” he corrected himself. “She was watchin’ us last night.” He looked at Sophie. “She doesn’t care who she kills. Women … men … children … they’re all targets to her.”

Hardison frowned and looked over at his god-daughter who was watching Buster excavate a hole at the base of a gum tree, Kip giggling as dirt flew in all directions.

Eliot’s eyes were chilly blue.
“Maybe you guys should take Lizzie back to Portland,” he said. His face was stern and worried.
“Whatever the hell’s goin’ on, the fact Hadan’s hangin’ around here means it’s goddamn serious. Charlie … I’d take Kip to your folks if I were you. In fact … I’d be happy if you all left for a while. Let me take care of Hadan.”

Nate looked at Sophie, eyebrows raised in query.

“Well, what do you think? You could take Lizzie back home, and we can stay and —“

“No,” Sophie’s reply was emphatic, much to everyone’s surprise, especially Eliot’s. “You need me to finish the job. And,” she continued, holding up a hand to stop Eliot’s growl of protest, “if we don’t finish the job, your family won’t be safe. We’ll be leaving them out on a limb. This needs to end or Soapy and Jo’s life – and probably Effie’s and Charlie’s – won’t be worth a bugger. Kip … that’s a different matter. He can go —“

“Not going to happen, Sophie,” Charlie said, his voice sad with loss. “The last thing Kip needs is being fobbed off on relatives. Look … this is Kip’s home. It’ll be his home long after I’m gone. He’s happy here, and the last thing he needs is more disruption. And with you lot here …” he gestured at his new friends, “we’re probably safer at Wapanjara than anywhere else.”

Eliot wiped a hand over his face and then ran fingers through his hair, as he often did when he was frustrated. But, he had to admit, Charlie had a point.

Sophie leaned forward and rested her elbows on the table.

“Eliot … Charlie’s right. Lizzie is safest here with us. With you. You’re her guardian and her best friend. No-one could keep her any safer. And there’s the fact that if we sent her away with her knowing you’re in danger, she would never forgive either Nate or me. We’re better than the FBI and NSA combined, and if we close ranks and work together as we’ve always done, we can end this.”

Eliot turned all of this information over in his mind, but he already knew the views of his friends by the expression on their faces.

“She targeted me, you know that,” he cautioned. “She knows what I am.”

“Yes, well,” Parker said, “you know who and what she is, so that makes sense, don’t you think?”

“But why? Just what the hell is going on???” Soapy asked, exasperation now in every word.

Eliot’s gaze sought out the two children playing in the yard, and he felt his stomach knot with fear. What if … but no, he decided. He couldn’t think like that. If he did, then Hadan’s mind games had succeeded.

“But if she knows your skill set, then won’t that blow our cover?” Hardison asked. “I’ve just got everyone’s stories in place an’ I’ll tell ya, it was a damn’ pain! If I never see another picture of a cow it’ll be too soon!” he added, irritated.

Nate shook his head.

“I don’t think it’ll make one bit of difference. So Lady Eloise has hired an ex-special forces professional with twenty years’ worth of experience, and who also knows a thing or two about cattle and all of this outdoors-y stuff. So what? Eliot is, in fact, a pretty logical choice. They’ll probably think he’s an up-market security guy who also happens to be a cowboy. It works.”

Eliot turned the whole thing over in his head a couple of times, and then had to grudgingly agree
both Nate and Sophie were right. But putting Lizzie in any kind of danger … hell, it made his heart almost stop in mid-beat.

He threw up his hands in resignation.

“Okay … okay, you got me. At least we’re all within sight of one another we can keep the kids safe. But … I think we need to take a look at Albany. Any way we can use earbuds?”

Hardison pondered the issue for a moment, and then shrugged.

“Yeah, I guess, but only around the homestead. Cell ‘phones the same – although the upgrade I installed on the satellite dish should help. Google Earth is a no-no – not enough band-width. But out in the bug-ridden, scary ol’ wilderness? I doubt it. Too many dips an’ hollows. We maybe gotta go stone-age an’ use walkie-talkies an’ even they might not work.”

“There’s a radio in every vehicle we have, and they still work alright,” Soapy said. “We have a couple we carry when we’re out on horseback, and the reception’s not too bad. But how are we going to get a look at Albany?”

And Hardison did that thing when he had the answer and no-one else did. He beamed brightly and rubbed his hands together.

“I think, my friends, it’s about time you met Larry, Curly and Mo!”

“A drone?? You’ve built a drone??” Nate gaped at the small, unobtrusive machine that looked like a cross between a mechanical praying mantis and a helicopter. The weird-looking contraption was parked somewhat menacingly on Oggie’s kitchen surface.

“Technically, a quadrocopter … a UAV with military standard stealth software an’ facial recognition capabilities,” Hardison explained smugly. “Larry here is my spy drone. Curly deals with tactical issues when I don’t have stuff like CCTVs to work with, an’ Mo … well, he’s just packed full of heat-sensor equipment an’ search an’ rescue sequentials.”

“You really have to get a life, Hardison,” Eliot muttered as he bent over and studied Larry’s sleek casing. He poked at a hexagonal box suspended under Larry’s chassis between the two curved legs. “It’s a camera, right?”

Hardison batted Eliot’s hand away and frowned.

“Hey, man! Fingers off! I don’t want clumsy fingerprints all over the damn lens, okay???” The hacker couldn’t stop the pride leaking out of him. “Yeah … camera … it’s mounted on a 3-axis precision gimbal, it’s got ultra hi-def video … slo-mo … no-distortion lens … all the bells an’ whistles, bro. Jus’ the thing to deal with Albany Mining Company. All we gotta do is get reasonably close.”

“How close?” Eliot asked, thinking about locations.

“Four miles, maybe a little bit more. But that limits us to only twenty-five minutes flyin’ time.”

“How quiet is it?”

Hardison dismissed that with a shrug.

“Military standard stealth mode, remember?”
Eliot leaned carefully against Bernadette’s bulk and scratched his neck as his team, Soapy and Jo studied Larry’s elegant design.

“Bore Seven,” Eliot said, eyeing Soapy.

The pastoralist nodded.

“That’s about as close as we can get and stay on Wapanjara land.” He looked at the group of people around him. “Bore Seven supplies the water to the house as well as that part of the west paddock. But it’s a bit of a beggar to get there. We usually have to back-pack in on horseback. I’ve had plans to dig a new bore close to the house, but … well, other things get in the way … you know how it is …”

Eliot grinned wryly.

“Well, seein’ as you had water problems with the house intake and supply, it makes sense to go out there an’ check it. Hardison?” He turned to the hacker. “How do you feel about riding a horse?”


Eliot grinned, a wicked glint in his eye.

“You got a choice – horse or camel,” he said, unable to control the triumph in his tone.

“Wait … I-I-can’t – horses??” Hardison blustered, horrified.

“Well … yeah, Hardison. Not unless you can get Larry here,” he patted the drone, “to carry your sorry, heavy behind over nothin’ but bush. And you know what’s in the bush … snakes. Lots an’ lots of snakes.”

Hardison shuddered.

“Horses … blech!” Parker huffed.

“You said it, babe,” Hardison breathed, thoroughly un-nerved by the whole idea.

“An’ this from the man who took down two bad guys to my one, and you’re afraid of a horse,” Eliot scoffed.

Hardison brightened suddenly.

“Bernadette! She’s designed for that kinda thing! We can –“

Eliot shook his head sagely.

“Nope. She won’t. C’mon Hardison … where’s that heroic nerd we all know and love?”

“But … horses –“

Jo patted Hardison on the shoulder sympathetically.

“Don’t worry, son – it’s not that bad. It’ll only be a few hours each way.”

“Hours?? On a horse?? Nuh-uh.” Hardison began to back up, stumbling into Bernadette’s rear, “Not goin’ to happen, m’man, no way Jose –“
“Soapy, we’ll keep an eye on the kids while Eliot and Hardison check out Albany,” Nate was already in mastermind mode, “and – how long will you guys need?” he asked, mid-flow.

“If we head off today we’ll get there mid-afternoon,” Eliot said, “it’ll give Hardison a chance to do a fly-over. We camp overnight, let Larry do his thing again at sun-up an’ head home. Easy.”

“I am not –” Hardison groused, desperate now because it was obvious no-one was taking any notice of him whatsoever.

“We need to know exactly what they’re up to … layout, activity … see if we can figure out how many of them there are. And see what the hell the Chinese have to do with it!” Nate added, the exasperation obvious in his voice.

“Dammit, people –” Hardison was bordering on panic.

“Suck it up, Hardison,” Eliot rumbled. “It ain’t gonna kill you, so go pack up little Larry here and be ready in thirty minutes. I’ll have provisions, hammocks … everythin’ we need ready to go, okay?”

“But …” Hardison watched as his team … his friends … headed off to do whatever it was they needed to do, and he listened to the screams of two happy children as Buster chased them around the yard barking like an idiot. He sighed dramatically. “Why me?” he asked no-one in particular. “Why is it always me??” He rubbed his backside, probably in anticipation of the agony incurred by sitting on a goddamn horse.

Damn, he thought wistfully, this is gonna hurt.

Bomber eyed Hardison, doubt in his eyes. He flicked an ear as Hardison muttered to himself, even as Eliot handed the horse’s reins to him. This noisy, arm-wavy human didn’t look too happy, but Bomber, being the phlegmatic horse he was, decided he would see what was going to happen.

“Okay …” Eliot said, gesturing at the stock saddle and left stirrup, “left foot in there, hold here,” he touched the base of Bomber’s neck and placed his other hand on the far side of the cantle, “and just try not to pull the damn saddle off as you get up there. Oh, an’ do not kick Bomber’s ass as you get on or he’ll dump you, okay?”

Hardison, muttering epithets under his breath, stared at Eliot and then at the saddle. Oh ... man. He could do this. He placed his left foot in the proffered stirrup, hopped a couple of times and then, with his heart in his mouth, managed to swing aboard, settling into the deep-seated saddle. He sat there for a moment or two. God-damn. He was on a horse. Leaning forward slightly and slipping his right foot into the remaining stirrup, he patted Bomber on the neck.

“Nice horsey,” he said.

Bomber sighed.

Gathering up the reins, he felt Bomber shift a little under him, but he managed not to fall off. So far, so good.

Eliot checked Hardison’s stirrup length and prying the hacker’s hands off the reins he showed him how to hold them and how the horse-steering thing worked. Then he grasped Hardison’s booted foot and pushed his toe further forward. “Keep your heels down, man,” he said. “Keeps the thigh muscles tight. That way you won’t fall off so easy,” he added.

Hardison nodded nervously, and then inadvertently touched Bomber’s side with his left heel.
Bomber, well-trained as he was, moved several steps forward and to Hardison’s right.

“Jesus!” Hardison gasped, and clutched Bomber’s mane.

“Don’t worry boy,” Soapy said, rubbing Bomber’s soft muzzle, “You’ll soon get used to it. Bomber here’s a good horse … safe, gentle and he’ll look out for you. Just relax and enjoy the ride,” he added, unable to stop the humour creeping into his voice.

Effie scowled at Bomber and patted Hardison’s knee.

“No worries, sunbeam – there’re biscuits and a box of lamingtons in that bloody camel’s pack, alright? And don’t be a daft bastard and do something silly, y’hear? Or your Nana will be getting a call from me, you young bugger!” She then passed a stockman’s hat to Hardison, who managed to hold the reins in one hand and place the hat on his head with the other. “‘Keep it on or else you’ll get bloody sunstroke!’”

“Yes’m,” Hardison mumbled, as Eliot swung onto Gertie’s big Afghan saddle and got her to her feet.

Two packs slung over the rear seat of Gertie’s saddle contained everything Eliot and Hardison needed on the trip, including Larry – broken down into his various parts – and the small portable radio kit.

Eliot felt his wounds twinge, but he knew he had to do this – without the information Hardison could gather with Larry’s hi-tech equipment, they were at a severe disadvantage. He was also fretting about leaving the homestead with Hadan possibly on the prowl, but Nate had assured him the children would be sleeping in the house and Charlie, his family having headed home, would bunk down in the living room of the homestead.

It was now or never.

“C’mon, Hardison … time’a-wastin’. Let’s get going.”

And Eliot touched Gertie into a long, swinging stride, Bomber following on behind with a terrified Hardison aboard.

As Lizzie stood by her mother and watched Eliot and Hardison head for the big gate to the western paddock where Charlie waited to let them through, she glanced up at her mother, her brown eyes worried.

“But Mama …” she whispered, slipping a hand into her mother’s grasp, “Eliot’s hurt! What if he gets sick! And Alec’s never been on a horse before and what if he falls off and bashes his head and –”

Sophie frowned. Lizzie had seen both of her menfolk hurt before, Eliot more than once, and she fussed and worried over anyone in her family who was hurt or sick. But she had never fretted about them going out on a job. This was new. She rubbed her finger over her daughter’s knuckles, trying to ease the little girl’s concerns, and her voice was reassuring.

“It’s only until tomorrow, darling, and Eliot’s fine. I promise. They’ll be back before you know it.”

But even as she said it, Sophie felt a sudden roil of worry in her stomach, and hoped to God she was telling her daughter the truth.
To be continued …
Chapter Summary

There is violence and blood in this chapter, plus the death of a minor animal character, so be warned.

Hardison only fell off Bomber twice.

Once was when he – not Bomber – was alarmed by a group of little red flying foxes clumped together sleeping in a gum tree and disturbed by Gertie plodding past. The creatures rustled and flapped before settling down again, and Hardison, caught unawares, flinched in the saddle, lost his balance, slid elegantly off sideways and landed in a heap beside Bomber. The little gelding, somewhat resigned now to his fate of being lumbered with a rider so inept, stopped, eyed the hacker and huffed.

Eliot didn’t even stop to wait for him as Hardison scrambled to his feet and did his best to pretend it had never happened as he struggled back into the saddle, gathered up the reins and tried to catch up.

“You okay, Hardison?” Eliot asked without turning around as Bomber tucked himself behind Gertie and settled down to a sleepy amble.

“Me?” Hardison said squeakily, “Yeah … yeah, I’m fine. Just startled is all. Bats,” he added, a little queasy. To Hardison, bats were on a par with squirrels – hairy, rabid critters with sharp teeth. He didn’t like either of the scary little bastards.

“Uh-huh,” Eliot said, sitting easily in Gertie’s saddle, swaying gently to the rhythm of the animal’s rocking gait. “Good job you didn’t get too close.”

“Um … why?” Hardison asked, and then wished he hadn’t.

“Those little guys can carry three different kinds of disease fatal to humans,” Eliot explained, a little too happily for Hardison’s taste.

Hardison digested the information, and then shifted in the saddle, trying to take the ache out of his ass-bones.

“Yep …” he murmured to Bomber, who wasn’t listening. “M’gonna die.”

The second time he and Bomber parted company was a little more serious.

They were about half-way into the trip when Hardison realised why Bernadette, although designed for remote areas, would not have made it through this particular landscape. Gertie and Bomber were picking their way through a boulder-strewn shallow valley, ending in a deep billabong cutting into a loop of what had been at one time a raging torrent of a river. Hardison was riding ahead of Eliot, the hitter wanting to keep an eye on both Bomber and Hardison as they tackled a steepish incline climbing out of the valley.
Bomber inadvertently slipped on a loose rock and suddenly slid sideways, almost falling onto his side. He scrambled upright, but Hardison let out a yelp and was dumped onto the rubble-strewn track.

Eliot, not having enough room to koosh Gertie down, slid straight from the saddle and landed crouched beside the big camel. He had to stop a yelp of his own as his wounds burned, but he was beside Hardison in seconds, helping the hacker to his feet.

He dusted off Hardison’s jacket and checked him for damage.

“You in one piece?” he asked.

Hardison did a body-wriggle and pronounced he was safe and sound, if a little bruised. But Eliot wasn’t really listening. He was checking Bomber, who apart from a tiny scrape on his hock, was perfectly fine.

“We walk from here,” Eliot said. “Only a mile or so and then we’ll be back on level ground. If you try ridin’ up this incline you’re gonna end up in the billabong, and I ain’t fishing you out,” he continued, pointing at the still, forbidding body of water further down the slope. It looked scarily deep, Hardison thought.

“Damn water’s probably full of friggin’ sharks an’ things that chew you into little itty-bitty pieces,” he said, grimacing.

Eliot had to duck his head to hide the grin on his face.

“Nah,” he said, trying not to chuckle, “no sharks.” He didn’t add that the billabong would never have held a shark. Bull sharks inhabited rivers only accessible from the sea. But he couldn’t resist. “Crocodiles ate all the sharks,” he said casually.

Hardison stared at the billabong. Nothing moved. Then he looked at Eliot’s back as the man headed past him and began to lead Gertie up the rough, stony track.

“Crocodiles? Here? I mean … here??”

“Yeah,” Eliot informed him. “Freshies … freshwater crocs. They’re okay. Maybe seven … eight feet long. Just little guys really. They’re nothin’ on the saltwater crocs – they’re nasty, mean bite-y sonsabitches an’ a whole lot bigger.”

Hardison’s eyes widened even as he led Bomber up the stony incline.

“God,” he said. “I friggin’ hate Australia.”

It was early afternoon by the time they reached Bore Seven.

Powered by a windmill, the large pipe shaped like an upside-down L stood over an old, circular concrete tank intended for watering livestock. The base of the pipe was embedded in a cement block box with a small metal door. This in turn gave access to the valves and pump mechanism that powered the flow of water from the artesian aquifer nearly one hundred feet below. It was one of the deepest bores in the area and accessed an independent supply, which was what made Wapanjara such a successful station. It never ran dry, and managed correctly even in droughts, meant that the livestock had access to year-round fresh water.

Only now, the supply was being interrupted somehow. This was what had puzzled and deeply worried the Munros.
The bore had been sunk in Soapy’s grandfather’s time, and although the equipment was old, it was well-maintained and serviced regularly. Eliot had replaced one of the valves himself, and knew the design of the bore as well as its foibles.

So, why had the water suddenly become tainted? No other supply ran into the artesian basin, and it could only be subterranean seepage which had worked its way through the rock. It was possible, the experts had supposed, but Soapy thought it really meant that they had no idea. Still, Albany Mining Company had apologised and said they had fixed the problem.

But now the water-flow itself was under threat. Soapy had been checking the tank at the homestead, and had found no problems when the crossbar he was standing on gave way and he had fallen ten feet to the ground.

Eliot unpacked the gear and unsaddled Gertie, leaving her to graze happily. Hardison, left to his own devices, managed with a little difficulty to take off Bomber’s saddle and bridle, and with Eliot’s shouted instructions, hobbled the little horse.

So, as Eliot set up camp and dug out the small camping stove and billy to make tea, Hardison pulled out his little folding seat, parked his saddle-sore backside on it and perused the land laid out before him.

Albany Mining Company was situated below them in a dip in the countryside about three miles away, and from Hardison’s vantage-point on this low plateau at the very edge of Wapanjara, he could, with his binoculars, make out the buildings and mining works.

To his left was a heavy scatter of gum trees which ran from the slight rise behind him, then leading away to the south-west onto Albany land and settled amid large boulders, left behind from ancient flash-floods which had carved away the edge of the plateau.

He knew from the plans Soapy had shown him that the artesian basin stopped at the edge of the shallow escarpment, and did not encroach on Albany land, so the decision to drill a bore hole on top of a narrow plateau had been irritating but necessary. It meant drilling deeply and had cost Soapy’s grandfather far more money than he had intended to spend, but the reliable water supply had saved Wapanjara many times over the years.

He was so engrossed in studying the lie of the land that he didn’t hear Eliot crouch down beside him, two mugs of hot tea in his hands.

“Here,” Eliot said, offering one of the mugs to Hardison, who took it gratefully. “Anythin’ interesting so far?”

Hardison shrugged and then took a sip of the hot liquid. Even though the temperature was in the eighties, he savoured the hot drink as it soothed his parched, dusty throat.

“Not really. Well, not from here. I’ll get Larry up an’ runnin’ and send him out there to see what’s what.” He lifted his hat and shaded his eyes from the sun, the heat filtering through the shade of the gum trees behind the bore and their little camp. “I’ll have to run him pretty low to keep him below the skyline behind us,” he added, trying to gauge angles.

“Yeah, well, you do what you gotta do, Hardison.” Eliot, hunkered down beside the hacker, grunted as he stood up, wincing. “I’m gonna have a look at the bore valves an’ then I’m gonna try an’ sleep for a half-hour.”

Hardison glanced up at his best friend. The man looked as sore as hell.
“’Kay, El. You do that. It’ll take me a while to put Larry together an’ calibrate the software, so …”

Eliot waved a dismissive hand, and began to saunter stiffly back to where he had strung the two hammocks between some gum trees.

“Yeah … fine. Wake me if you need me. Oh … an’ watch out for bunyips,” he added.

Hardison blinked.

“Wait … what??” he watched Eliot’s retreating figure. The hitter didn’t look agitated or worried. “What the hell is a bunyip?” he asked nervously.

“Don’t worry about it,” Eliot said. “You’ll know when … if you see one.”

Hardison heaved himself to his feet and headed to his pack, muttering quietly.

“Goddamn wildlife … friggin’ bats an’ sharks an’ … an’ crocodiles an’ now friggin’ bunyips … I ain’t never ever comin’ back to this hellhole no matter how much Lizzie likes it here … that girl spends jus’ too much time with Mister-Crazy-as-a-fruit-bat-Eliot-goddamn-Spencer …”

And grumbling under his breath, he began to extract Larry from his bag.

Eliot swore quietly as he checked the main valve which regulated the water flow from the bore. Artesian aquifers worked under high pressure, and the valve dropped the pressure so the water ran from the pipe into the huge trough in a low but steady trickle. He had found some rust which he wire-brushed off the valve plug and he had discovered the actuator spring needed replacing sometime in the near future, but he couldn’t find anything wrong with either the pump or the valves.

He studied the inside of the small pump-house and tapped his wrench lightly but rhythmically against the lead-in pipe as he thought it through.

There was something not quite right, but he was damned if he could figure out what it was. So … he would check the perimeter of the pump-house and windmill to see if the … whatever-it-was … had left any signs. He flinched as his shoulder wound throbbed and ached. He really ought to check it, he thought. But he had other things to do, and it could wait until he settled down to eat after nightfall. His afternoon snooze would have to wait.

Stopping his pensive tapping, Eliot eased himself out of the door and into the late afternoon brightness.

Hardison was finally ready, and so was Larry. He lifted the controls and brought up the live feed on his tablet. Clear skies meant he was getting fairly decent reception, so he powered up Larry and the little quadrocopter whirred into action.

Larry lifted off and Hardison grinned, manipulating the toggle controls to send the small, dark machine hovering overhead, its soft hum barely noticeable in the clear air.

And then Larry was off, skimming lightly over the trees, Hardison keeping the drone low and level so that anyone who happened to look in their direction would find it almost impossible to see Larry against the backdrop of the escarpment dotted with trees and boulders.

Now this was what floated Hardison’s boat.
“Go, Larry … go!” he cackled, and the camera streamed images on the tablet, all of them recorded on the roomy pen-drive. He listened to Eliot working his way around the bore pump-house, and out of the corner of his eye he saw the hitter stop and stare at the windmill, the blades turning only slightly in the light, balmy breeze coming from the great Tanami Desert far to the west. Then he heard Eliot swear to himself and saw him hoist his damaged frame painfully onto the top of the pump-house.

Hardison toggled the camera so that it took in the fast-approaching buildings of the mining site, and he slowed Larry down, allowing the drone to hover for a minute or two as Hardison scanned the area, filming every nook and cranny he could find.

He frowned. Something had caught his eye.

“What the hell is that?” he muttered to himself, and sent Larry in for a closer look.

Troy Rickenbacker was getting mighty fed up of trying to keep his cash flow problems under wraps, and as he sat in his air-conditioned office at the heart of the Albany Mining Company site, he ran his fingers through his carefully combed-over hair.

But he was distracted from shuffling invoices by a knock on his door and without waiting for an answer, Derry Ryan entered, closing the door behind him.

Rickenbacker sighed. He studied Ryan’s bruised face – the damage which had, he was told, been inflicted by a man in his late sixties and half Ryan’s size – and put down his pen.

“What?” he said irritably.

“I just got a call from Eades,” he said, his voice still croaky from Soapy’s punch to his throat.

Rickenbacker straightened in his chair.

“Somebody’s at the bore,” he guessed. “Who?”

“Two of the yanks,” Ryan answered, his lip curling in disdain. “The mad bastard Khenbish had a dust-up with, and the tall black kid.”

Rickenbacker ran the information through his mind and made a decision.

“Sit.” He waved Ryan into a chair and then lifted his cell phone and pressed a single number. Putting the ‘phone to his ear, he waited, drumming his fingers on the desk top impatiently. Someone eventually answered on the eighth ring. “Yeah,” he said, “It’s me. They’ve made a move.”

Rickenbacker listened intently for long moments, and then he glanced at Ryan, who sat silently, waiting to find out what was to be done. The Texan nodded a couple of times, and then his face became grim.

“Done,” he said, and rang off. Placing the ‘phone carefully on his desk, he turned to Ryan.

“Tell Eades to fix it,” he said.

Ryan nodded.

“Will do. And Khenbish?”

Rickenbacker thought it over and then shook his head.
“She’s to stay put an’ just watch. Let Eades deal with them.”

Ryan allowed a slow smile to creep onto his face and he stood up to leave, but he was brought to a halt by Rickenbacker’s soft voice.

“Tell Eades when he’s done to put them someplace on tribal land, alright?”

Ryan’s smile widened into a grin.

“Happy to,” he said, and headed out of Rickenbacker’s office with a spring in his step, closing the door behind him.

Rickenbacker sat quietly for a few minutes, digesting the instructions he had been given during his telephone call. He didn’t like it. He didn’t like it at all. But, he knew, he couldn’t back out now. And in the long run, if it got him out of his financial tight corner and also made him a whole heap of money, then it was worth the risk.

Sighing, he lifted his pen and returned to the ignominy of dealing with unpaid bills.

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Hardison was squinting at the pictures streaming onto his tablet, and he toggled Larry to turn almost 180 degrees to the left to look at what appeared to be a number of metal columns, not unlike silos, next to four small ponds.

He felt a sudden chill down his spine. This sure as hell didn’t look like titanium mining. He checked his watch. It was time to bring Larry back, or else the little drone’s batteries would be bled dry and Hardison would not be happy to see his state-of-the-art quadrocopter crash-land right in the middle of Albany territory.

“Okay, bubba, come to Papa,” he mumbled, and instructed Larry to make his way back to the camp.

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“Sonofabitch!!” Eliot swore, his blue eyes sparking with anger.

The ‘thing’ he had been looking for turned out to be a simple flow inhibitor. The needle valve was set into the pipe leading from the windmill to the pump-house, inserted just before the pipe led into the pump-house. But instead of slowing the flow of water even further, it was set to systematically introduce air bubbles into the pump and cause a lock-down. A timer allowed the inhibitor to be switched off and on, and the result was intermittent flow which would cause issues all the way from the bore to the homestead.

No wonder, the hitter thought, Soapy had found nothing untoward in the homestead water tank feed.

Eliot had managed to heave himself onto the low, flat roof of the pump house, gritting his teeth against the increasing pain in his shoulder, and sat down on his heels to study the inhibitor. He knew he would have to stop the pump to remove the thing, and then check the electrical system.

Damn, he thought.

Standing up, he turned to yell at Hardison, knowing his expertise would be useful.

“Hey!! Hey, Hardison!! When you got a minute!” The pain in Eliot’s shoulder made him flinch, and he shifted slightly to his right to ease it.

But the sudden, wickedly hard blow to his left side, followed almost instantly by the sharp crack of a
rifle shot, knocked him sideways, staggering, and he tried desperately to stay upright, and it was so, so hard, but for some reason his legs wouldn’t obey him, dammit, and he fell off the low roof. The ground rushed up to meet him and the sudden agony in his body that bloomed through him was cut off by a blinding pain in his head and then … nothing but blackness.

The sound of the rifle shot startled Hardison so much he unbalanced and fell off his little stool, Larry’s controls still tightly clasped in one hand.

As he sprawled on his side, cursing, he rolled over and tried to sit up, only to have to scuttle backwards as a bullet sent up gouts of dirt only inches from his face.

“Oh … shit!!” he yelled wildly, and he backpedalled on his rump as fast as he could go to the relative safety of a small clump of acacias. “Eliot! ELIOT!!” he bawled, and scrambling onto his knees he looked over to the pump-house.

“Oh … Jesus!!” he breathed, horrified.

All he could see of Eliot was a crumpled, still figure sprawled on the ground. Hardison just stared. He could see blood on Eliot’s side and shoulder, and his face was masked with a splatter of fresh red.

“Oh-god-oh-god-oh-god –“ he swore, and then he heard the crack of another shot.

The bullet hit Bomber in the head, killing the little gelding instantly, the horse collapsing and kicking spasmodically, sending up clouds of dust despite the hobbles he wore. Hardison yelled wordlessly in horror.

The next shot punched a hole through Gertie’s left ear, and the huge camel roared with pain. She skittered sideways and then galloped untidily away into the stand of gum trees, bawling in fear.

The following flurry of shots destroyed the camp. The water canteens, packs and radio were blown apart by rapid fire, and Hardison, in a sudden moment of clarity, realised he had only one chance to try and stop this nightmare.

Several yards away sat his tablet, un-noticed by the shooter so far, so while the bullets were tearing apart everything they had brought with them, Hardison army-crawled over to his tablet, grabbed it and scurried back in a flurry of arms and legs to his refuge in the acacia.

“Oh … okay, I can do this …” he rambled under his breath, and glanced once more at Eliot’s body. His friend … his brother … looked dead. “M’comin’, bro … hang on … I’m comin’ …” he babbled, and then he took a deep breath and focused as well as he could as another bullet smashed into his little stool just feet away from him.

The tablet was still streaming visuals, and Hardison shifted onto his backside and sat cross-legged, resting the tablet on his legs. Lifting Larry’s control box and with his hands shaking, he began to focus the little drone’s camera on the source of the shots.

Larry had been heading back to the camp in a straight line, a red light beginning to blink on his chassis. His batteries were just about done, and Hardison knew he didn’t have much time. Larry banked to Hardison’s left, heading towards the fall of great boulders lying between the gum trees heading down the escarpment towards Albany.

The Wapanjara boundary fence lay no more than two hundred yards from Hardison, so he knew the unidentified shooter was on Albany land. That little bastard Rickenbacker was trying to kill them. He scowled at the tablet and angled Larry a little further to his left, cranking up the lens definition to its
limit. Just for a second he wished he had Mo with him with the drone’s heat-sensor capabilities, but he dismissed the thought instantly as he caught sight of a small flash of light and a bullet pinged off the already perforated water canteen.

Hardison flew Larry closer.

There, almost invisible between a pile of large rocks and dotted with acacia, was draped a camouflage net, whoever-it-was lying a few degrees above the level of the camp. As Larry hummed closer, the barrel flash came again, and Hardison flinched as a bullet smashed the little gas bottle that fuelled the camp stove. The small explosion was deafening.

“Cmon-c’mon-c’mon-“ Hardison ranted, and his eyes widened as the net moved and a head appeared. Whoever this asshole was, it was obvious he thought he had done his job and was creeping out of his hidey-hole.

“Har … Hardison …” a voice croaked painfully.

The hacker’s eyes widened. *Oh, thank God.*

He stared at Eliot and saw a shaky hand rise into the air, Eliot trying to somehow let Hardison know he was still in the land of the living.

“M’comin’, El!!! Be still, bro – just hang in there, okay??” he yelled, relief pulsing through him.

But his voice cracked as he saw the shooter throw back the net and stand up, the man bringing his rifle to his shoulder. *He had seen Eliot move.*

Hardison’s lip curled into a sneer.

“Not on *my* watch, you sonofabitch!!” he snarled, and jamming the toggle on Larry’s control box forward, he sent the sturdy, solid little drone straight at the shooter.

The view on the tablet telescoped dramatically.

Hardison’s dark eyes glittered with anger as the man suddenly realised he wasn’t alone. He must have caught a hint of Larry’s soft hum, Hardison thought, because he turned and looked straight at the camera, his lean, pale face changing from determination to sudden shock.

And then his face filled the screen and Hardison heard a small, contained crashing sound and the screen became nothing but static.

Taking his life in his hands, Hardison stood up and ran, zig-zagging his way down the incline to the Wapanjara boundary fence, and craned his neck to see the result of his work.

There, a hundred yards away, he could see a figure sprawled on the top of the boulders, legs and arms akimbo and a rifle lying ignored in a crack in the stone. The man’s head lay at an unnatural angle. What was left of Larry was scattered about the surrounding area.

Hardison suddenly realised he had killed a man.

But right now, *right this minute*, he didn’t have time to worry about it. He had to get to Eliot. Turning his back to the dead man, he quickly made his way back up the escarpment to the small plateau, and once on the flat he ran desperately to the body of his best friend.
To be continued …
“Eliot! Eliot … c’mon man … wake up …”

Eliot struggled through a red-tinged fog of pain and disjointed sensations. Whoever the hell was sticking a molten poker in his side was pressing so hard he was sure his ribs would melt.

He tried to lift his left hand to punch the mystery figure, but agony tore through his side and his head was feeling decidedly brittle, so he tried with his right hand instead. It was batted away and he growled in protest, but the effort of taking a deep breath nearly sent him spiralling back down into limbo.

“Leave … leave me ‘lone –“ he rasped weakly.

“Welcome back, dumb-ass … lie still, okay? You’re bleedin’ like a stuck hog and we don’t have that many pressure bandages so damn’ well stay still, y’hear?”

Eliot grunted as the pressure increased, but he did his best to open his eyes despite the throbbing pain in his head. All he saw was a blurry, shifting world with faint impressions of shapes and colours. One of the shapes moved.

“Who … I can’t … where …” he whispered, confusion echoed in every word.

Hardison glanced at Eliot’s bloodied face and took in the gash over his left ear. Like all head wounds it had bled like crazy, but he knew he had to deal with the wound in Eliot’s side, so he kept pressing one of the only two pressure bandages left in their decimated first aid kit against the gouge along Eliot’s ribs.

“To answer what I think were questions, it’s me, Hardison, you can’t move because you’re shot, you fool, and we’re still in the armpit of the world and stuck here, so let me patch you up first an’ then we’ll talk, okay?”

“Head … hurts …”

“Yeah … well … that happens when you get shot, fall six feet head-first off a pump-house an’ bash your head against a rock.”

Eliot frowned and then wished he hadn’t as pain thudded through his skull.

“Shot?” he asked. Huh. Some bastard had shot him.
He struggled to get up and managed an inch or two before his side exploded in even more pain and he sank back onto the dusty, bloody ground with a groan.

“S’all right, Eli … the shooter … he’s taken care of. Here,” Hardison pressed a gauze pad into Eliot’s right hand, “if you want to do somethin’ useful, hold this against your thick skull.”

It took two tries for Eliot to get a firm grip on the gauze and then Hardison helped guide his hand up to the still-oozing cut.

“Sniper?” the hitter asked faintly.

“Yeah …” Hardison replied. “I took care of him. He’s … he’s dead.”

Eliot, eyes blessedly shaded from the light by his right forearm, digested the information, but he would ask Hardison about the sniper’s demise later. But if the man was dead, others would come looking for him.

“Al … Albany Mining, right?” Memory was returning, and Eliot figured out now what had happened. Someone had been watching Bore Seven, and reported their presence. What the hell was Albany Mining hiding?

“Yeah,” Hardison said as he checked to see if the bleeding was easing up. “I got some footage before Larry crashed, an’ there’s somethin’ definitely hinky goin’ on – aw hell,” he added under his breath as Eliot felt him run his fingers around the wound and check something. Hardison pressed gently over a rib, and the pain made Eliot want to rip the hacker’s face off and feed it to him, but he just let out a keening groan and dealt with it.

“What … what’s wrong,” he asked huskily. God, he was thirsty.

He heard Hardison hesitate before he spoke.

“Bullet’s still in there, man. Under the skin and lyin’ against a rib. But it’ll have to be cut out an’ I can’t do it. Half of the medikit got blown to pieces.”

Eliot shifted and winced.

“It’s okay. Just get Gertie an’ Bomber saddled up an’ we’ll be out of here –“

“El … listen … we’re stranded.” Hardison explained awkwardly. “Uh … Gertie, she’s … she’s gone, an’ Bomber … that bastard shot him right after he shot you. He’s …”

“Shit,” Eliot said under his breath. He was very fond of the little horse and for Bomber to have been killed so needlessly … “Gertie … she’s gone, you said?”

“She got nicked by a bullet and high-tailed it.”

Eliot lay still and thought about their situation for a bit while Hardison bandaged up the bullet wound. They were in one helluva bind.

“Eliot … I gotta get you sittin’ up so I can take off your tee and check your shoulder. You must’ve bust your stitches,” Hardison muttered.

Eliot removed the gauze from his head wound and nodded, even though it cost him a lot of pain. Jeez, he had a headache.

Hardison managed with a bit of effort to help Eliot to sit up and prop himself against Gertie’s saddle,
which, apart from a bullet hole in one of the pads, seemed to be in one piece.

It turned out that Eliot had indeed burst the stitches in the wound in his shoulder, but what made Hardison take a deep breath was the redness of inflammation around the injury. *Infection.* And he could do nothing about it other than clean it up and bandage it.

Eliot, screwing his eyes shut against the sunlight, gave a tired grin.

“IT’s fine, Hardison – you know I’ve survived a helluva lot worse.” He saw Hardison raise a doubtful eyebrow as the young hacker taped gauze over the wound. How were they to get out of here? Because the dead man would soon be missed and people would come looking for him, and, Eliot knew for certain, they would *not* be friendly.

It was then he heard a soft gurgle, and he twitched a smile. He let out a gentle whistle, although he wished he could have had a drink of water first. His mouth was as dry as the Gobi Desert.

And there was Gertie, trotting out of the bush, big, ugly head held high and bottom lip flapping as she headed straight for Eliot and Hardison. But she stopped and smelled Bomber as he lay silent and still. He had been Gertie’s constant companion for over two years, and she rumbled to herself as she nosed at her friend. She honked quietly, and Eliot, his heart aching, called out to her.

“Hey! Hey, Gertie! C’mere, girl …”

And Hardison moved nervously out of the way as Gertie trotted over to Eliot and dropped her head down to him, awaiting a scratch. She rumbled dejectedly to herself, and even though Eliot’s sight was still a bit blurry and his head felt as though it was on the point of exploding, he managed to raise a hand and rub her soft muzzle.

“I know, darlin’ … I know …” he murmured, doing his best to soothe her, and Gertie tried to rest her head on his chest. Eliot could make out blood on her left ear, but not the detail of the damage. He didn’t think she was too badly injured because she began to hum, but then she realised Eliot was hurt. Her humming turned to concerned rumbly squeaks, a silly noise, Eliot thought, for such a big animal, and she nuzzled very gently at his side and shoulder.

“Hey, *hey!* Stop that!” Hardison scolded, and tried to push Gertie away, but the camel just gave him a couple of slurpy licks on the face and returned to fussing over Eliot.

“Hardison … I can’t see straight … c’n you check her out for me? See if she’s okay?”

Hardison, doing his best to fend off the huge animal and sputtering through the camel saliva, scowled.

“She’s fine, man, I promise … she’s got a bit of a hole in her ear, but not much blood. I think she’s gonna be okay. Now, I need to get your head fixed an’ then we talk.”

Eliot, rubbing Gertie’s head and smiling at her squeaky attention, decided they were ‘way past the time for talking.

“Hardison … we gotta go as soon as we can. Can you saddle up Gertie?”

“Me?” Hardison sat back on his heels after finishing taping up the cut on Eliot’s head. “How the hell do I do that?”

Eliot sighed in exasperation.
“You just put it on her back, tighten up the girths an’ the breastplate an’ that’s it. Give me those ropes I hung on the tree beside the hammocks. I’ll clip ‘em to her bosal … that’s her bridle.”

“Oh … okay,” Hardison answered, and then looked at the devastation of their camp. He didn’t really want to look at Bomber. The little horse had been very patient with him and had been the perfect introduction to horseback riding, and Hardison discovered he was very upset by the animal’s death.

“El … I’ll cover Bomber with the hammocks. It don’t feel right just leavin’ him like that.”

“Yeah … yeah, do that, Hardison. Look after the little guy.” Eliot didn’t mention that the hammocks wouldn’t prevent predation by scavengers, but it afforded the old gelding some dignity until someone could come back to the spot and either burn the body or bury his bones. “I gotta lie down for a few minutes, Hardison … feelin’ a bit queasy here …” Eliot continued, and Hardison suddenly saw the hitter’s face turn ashen.

“Uh-oh – you gonna hurl?” he said, and before he could do anything Eliot turned away and vomited, although he didn’t have much in his stomach to bring up. The pain in his side didn’t help, and Eliot retched until his stomach muscles ached with the effort.

Hardison held him until he finished, and then wiped his friend’s face with a cloth soaked in water from the trough.

Eliot was wheezing, and resting his head back on Hardison’s chest he closed his eyes and tried to deal with the explosion of pain in his head and side.

“God, I friggin’ hate bein’ sick!” he gasped, swallowing bile. He dearly wished he had a mouthful of water to rinse with, but the water canteens all had holes in them and had bled their precious contents onto the dry earth.

“Easy, man … it’s the concussion, okay?” Hardison whispered, trying to keep his voice low so as to not make Eliot’s headache any worse. “Let me get you moved to someplace a little more shaded and see if I can find a clean shirt for you. Then I’ll go find out what we got left. That bastard pretty much wrecked everythin’ we had.”

Gertie nuzzled at Eliot, and Hardison couldn’t help but give her velvet nose a rub, although how Eliot’s concussion-riddled noggin dealt with the overwhelming smell of camel he had no idea. But the animal was obviously worried and fretting as well as dealing with the loss of her equine companion, so Hardison had to sympathise.

He spent the next half-hour sorting through their damaged packs and salvaged what he could. Taking down the hammocks, both of which were torn and now not much use, he draped them over Bomber after giving the old fellow a pat on the neck. At least his passing had been painless and instant, but it still didn’t stop the swell of fury and grief in Hardison’s chest.

But when he turned back to Eliot, who he had moved to rest beside a gum tree, he was astonished to see the hitter on his feet, slowly working his way around the tree and poking at it carefully with his old Ka-Bar knife.

“Eliot!! What the hell -??” he ranted and was about to sort the idiot out, but Eliot, left arm tight against his bandaged side and squinting at the tree trunk, waggled the knife at him. Gertie stood beside him as though making sure he didn’t fall.

“You keep on doin’ what you’re doin’, Hardison. I’m gonna try and fix the canteens,” he rasped, and then turned back to his chore, almost falling as his poor balance threw him, but he used his left hand to grab hold of Gertie’s bosal and the big camel stood as still as she could as though she knew
he was out of kilter.

“Whoa … dizzy …” Eliot murmured to himself and his shoulder and side twinged, but he righted himself and letting go of Gertie, he felt the ‘give’ in the piece of bark his knife had gently eased loose. Sticky resin clung to his fingers and he grinned. Sliding the Ka-Bar back into its sheath at his belt, he gathered a lump of the resin, moulding it into a ball. Once done, he shakily kooshed Gertie and slid down to sit beside her. He waited for the world to stop tilting, and then he waved erratically at Hardison.

“Hey! Hardison! Got the canteens??”

Hardison, sifting through his pack, raised his eyebrows.

“Yeah … just a sec –“

He grabbed the three canteens, all with neat holes punched through them, and took them to Eliot, dropping them in his lap. Crouching down beside the hitter, he gave Eliot a run-down of what he had managed to save.

“Okay, ‘m’man … I sure hope you like gummy frogs ‘cause I got four packs. Bullets, apparently, cannot destroy gummy frogs.”

Eliot, trying his best to focus his bleary gaze on the canteens, began to plug the bullet holes with resin.

“Figures. An’ there’s me tryin’ to improve your and Parker’s eatin’ habits. Gummy frogs ain’t a food group, Hardison! What else did you find, an’ I hope it’s some proper chow.”

“A few packs of that organic soup you like … uh … let me see …” he rummaged in the bag in which he had placed all of the available food. “Not much, I gotta say. Tea … two tins of condensed milk, whatever the hell that’s for … some fruity oaty bars … and, would you believe, Effie’s box of cookies an’ lamingtons, bless her antsy-rage-y heart.”

Gertie suddenly showed a great deal of interest in the box, and Hardison had to shove her whiffling lips away from it. He slid it back into the bag.

“Other than that, I got some bandages and one pressure bandage left … butterfly strips … no thermometer, that’s broke … a couple of ampoules of saline. Tape.” Hardison shrugged. “Socks … bottle of paracetamol –“ he lifted the little plastic container and shook it, the contents rattling, “- which, of course, you won’t take because you’re Mister roughy-toughy punchy guy … an’ some of that dried stuff you add water to an’ you get some sort of orangey drink with lots of electrolytes in it. That’s it – oh, and the billy with two mugs. Forgot those.”

Eliot finished repairing the canteens and left them in the sun for a few minutes for the resin to harden, and then he slumped back against Gertie, who gurgled quietly and turning her head, lipped at the injured man’s side.

Eliot closed his eyes and rested his right hand on Gertie’s head, and thought about the situation in which they found themselves. If he could stand the strain and if they could find somewhere safe for the night, they could be back at the homestead by midday the next day. But they had to get away from Bore Seven, and the sooner the better.

He opened his eyes and waited for his vision to settle. Concussion was a bitch.

“We have to go, Hardison,” he said wearily. “We can’t stay around any longer. We need to be
someplace safe by nightfall.”

Hardison studied his friend. Eliot was concussed, although he didn’t think it was too bad as Eliot’s pupils were even and reacted to the light. But he had a helluva bump on his head coupled with a nasty cut held shut with butterfly strips and nothing else. He was dizzy, disoriented and a little punchy. But that was the least of the Oklahoman’s problems. Apart from the infected cut in his shoulder, he was still carrying a bullet. Hardison had no idea how long Eliot could keep going under the circumstances. But he couldn’t worry about it at this moment in time. They had to leave, and it had to be now.

So with Eliot giving him somewhat addled instructions on how to put an Afghan saddle on a camel, Hardison managed to get Gertie saddled up and the pack slung over the raised peak in front of the second seat. Then he filled the patched canteens with fresh water straight from the bore pipe, and was surprised when the containers proved to be completely watertight. Eliot Spencer, the man Hardison was sticking to like glue if the apocalypse was ever upon them, had done it again.

He made Eliot drink a couple of mugs of the cold, fresh artesian water, and then he quenched his own thirst. They were ready.

Helping an unsteady Eliot to his feet, Hardison looked at Gertie. Gertie gurgled at him as she sat comfortably in the shade.

“Um … Eliot … I have no idea how to ride a camel,” he said as Eliot stood beside him, the hitter having a distinct list to the left.

Eliot winced.

“Dammit, Hardison! Not so loud, okay? Look … all you do is sit on her an’ tell her to stand up. Then you just steer her like a horse. Easy.”

“That’s what you say, El!! It was hard enough ridin’ Bomber … this … I mean … I don’t know … she’s your camel, I don’t know if she’ll work for me …”

“She’s not a robot, man! Just … just get me settled an’ I’ll help you all I can … damn, my head hurts …”

Hardison caught Eliot as he sagged a little and the man grunted as his side flashed pain.

“Rear seat … you’re up front …” Eliot gasped, and as Hardison helped him sit astride Gertie, the hacker was wondering how the hell Eliot was even going to stay in the saddle. Well, he thought, it couldn’t be an issue. They had to get out of danger, and that was that.

Once Eliot was aboard, feet in the stirrups, Hardison, with his heart in his mouth, eased himself into the front saddle. He sat there, looking at Gertie’s ears which twitched as she listened for Eliot’s voice. Her ear was ragged and torn, but the bleeding had stopped. She would have the scars for the rest of her life.

“Okay … okay El … what now?” Hardison asked nervously.

“Got the reins?” Eliot said, his right arm clutched around Hardison’s waist to help keep himself in the saddle.

“Yeah …” Hardison said faintly. This was going to be just terrifying, he could tell.

“Here we go. Lean back as she stands up,” Eliot advised, and then he said “Hut-hut!” as clearly as
he could.

Gertie hoisted her backside into the air, unfolded her front legs and stood up, Hardison letting out a yelp of terror, but miracle of miracles, they both stayed in the saddle and they were ready to go.

“You … you alright, Hardison?” Eliot asked tiredly.

“I think so … hell, it’s a long way down …” Hardison swallowed dryly, and then urged Gertie forward, and she set off down the track towards the billabong they had passed the previous day.

If they could make their way down past the billabong before nightfall, the rocky terrain would proffer shelter and safety through the long night and Eliot could get some rest.

Hardison just hoped Eliot could stay in the saddle long enough for them to get there.

To be continued …
The sun was setting, flaming red and peach-orange as it dropped towards the horizon, and both Lizzie and Kip sat at the table on the veranda at Wapanjara, Buster flung in a snoring, twitching pile at their feet.

They were poring over old photographs with Soapy. Both children had projects to do, and Kips’ teacher had decided it would do the little boy some good to have a friend to help keep him grounded, considering the isolation in which he lived and the trauma with which he was dealing.

So camels had become a focus for both children, and Soapy had brought out some photograph albums of his grandfather during his cameleering days. The table also was littered with books from the Munros’ informal library, much added to over the years by Eliot Spencer, who was an avid reader.

“See … look at the saddle. It’s just like Gertie’s,” Soapy explained, pointing at the train of camels photographed packing goods into the wild interior in the 1930s.

“But the camels have things in their noses, Grandpa Soapy,” Lizzie stated, pointing at the pegs in the animals’ sensitive septum. “Doesn’t that hurt them?”

“Grandpa Soapy??” Sophie asked as she emerged from the house, cup of tea in hand and settling herself in Eliot’s recliner chair.

“Kip says Grandpa Soapy is his other grandpa, and I don’t have a grandpa and grandma, so I thought –“ Lizzie began to explain.

Sophie raised an elegant eyebrow, amused.

“Lizzie, have you asked Soapy and Jo if it’s alright –“

“That’s perfectly fine,” Sophie said, a little embarrassed. “Jo and I … we don’t have kids of our own and Kip decided we should be honorary grand-people, so when Lizzie asked …”

“Soapy’s grin was infectious, and Sophie laughed softly, enjoying the warm family dynamic. The Leverage team was very much a family in its own right, but now it had grown, and rightly so. And all because of an enigmatic, taciturn loner of a man, war-scarred and dangerous, for whom a family had been for so many years out of reach and not for him.

“Well,” she said, “if it’s alright with Grandpa Soapy and Grandma Jo, then it’s okay with me … and with your daddy too, I have no doubt.”

“Works for me,” Nate said as he wandered up the veranda steps and sat down beside his wife. “Kids need grandparents,” he added, and felt a twinge of grief as he thought about his own father and his untimely death.

“Mama … why haven’t Eliot and Alec called us?” Lizzie asked suddenly.
Sophie looked at Nate.

“Well, probably because they can’t get any reception,” Nate explained, which wasn’t unexpected, although Soapy had said the radio was fairly reliable. But Nate wasn’t unduly worried – Eliot could take care of both himself and Hardison.

But Lizzie’s expressive eyebrows wrinkled, puzzled and a little concerned.

“But Daddy,” she said in a loud whisper, “Eliot’s hurt, y’know.”

“I know, sweetheart,” Nate soothed, “But Eliot’s very capable and I’m sure he’s managing perfectly well,” he added, although he remembered Parker telling him about Eliot charging a man with a gun intent on infecting a whole city with the Spanish ‘flu virus. Twice. And had also been shot twice, even as he stopped the fellow with a hefty punch, teeth bared like the wolf he carried in his heart. He could be impervious to danger if people’s lives were threatened.

But that had been years ago, before Lizzie was born, and he had been nearly a decade younger. Still, Nate reasoned, Eliot was always at the top of his game, despite the scars and old injuries.

Sophie studied her daughter, and once more felt the chill of worry run down her spine. Lizzie was sensitive when it came to Eliot. She knew what he did and she knew his skills, but she always trusted that he could handle himself and keep his family safe. Lizzie had never fretted about him like this before.

“Tell you what,” Soapy said. “After dinner we’ll see if we can raise them on the radio. They’ll have camped for the night so we have more chance of getting through, okay?”

Lizzie and Kip looked at one another, and then Lizzie nodded reluctantly.

“Okay,” she said, chewing her lip. “I suppose. But what if they don’t answer? What if –“

“There are lots of ‘what if’s,’ my darling,” Sophie said gently, hoping to ease her daughter’s concerns, “and most of the time they are completely unfounded, you know that.” She smiled reassuringly. “Come on now, you two – let’s tidy up, put the books away and you can help Grandpa Soapy feed the horses with Daddy and Charlie, if that’s all right, Soapy?”

Lizzie and Kip both broke into broad smiles.

“Can we? Please??” Kip begged, his face alight with hope.

Soapy grinned back.

“Well … I suppose so … but only if you get everything put away first!”

Kip picked up several books and ran into the lounge intent on putting them back on the library shelves, but Lizzie was slower, and happy as she was at being able to help, she looked up at her father.

“Eliot’ll be okay, won’t he, Daddy? Alec will look after him if he’s sick.”

Nate nodded, but felt a sudden pang of worry. Where the hell was Lizzie getting this from?

“Stop worrying, Lizzie. They’ll be okay,” he said.

But even as Lizzie carried her armful of books to the lounge, Nate could see the doubt in her dark eyes.
“Fairwell and … and adieu to you fair Spanish ladies … fairwell and adieu to you ladies of Spain …” Eliot sang softly, his forehead resting against Hardison’s back and doing his best to control the thumping pain in his head. Singing didn’t exactly help, but the idea was distraction more than anything else.

“Um … a pirate movie …” Hardison proffered. “Maybe … maybe Captain Blood? Errol Flynn?”

Eliot huffed in disgust as his damaged body rocked gently to the rhythm of Gertie’s stride.

“Call yourself a movie buff?” he murmured into Hardison’s shirt. “C’mon, man … think!”

“Okay, okay … gimme a clue!” Hardison retorted, annoyed.

Eliot thought for a moment and then came up with something.

“’We’re gonna need a bigger boat,” he quoted.

Hardison’s eyebrows went up.

“Jaws?” he said, keeping his voice low so as to not make Eliot’s headache any worse. “Are you kiddin’ me??”

Eliot let out a low, raspy rumble of a chuckle.

“Quint sang it, remember? When he was goin’ out of his way-" he couldn’t stop himself letting out a grunt of pain, “- goin’ out of his way to piss off Hooper.”

“Shit!” Hardison cursed quietly. Eliot Spencer, damaged, bloody and not-quite-right-in-the-head, was winning. “Okay … okay, let me think …” He tried to come up with a movie he thought Eliot wouldn’t watch if his life depended on it. He brightened. “How about this one?” He cleared his throat and Gertie gurgled to herself as though in answer. “’Was you ever bit by a dead bee?’” he quoted.

Hardison could feel the heat from Eliot’s body and knew the man had a fever, and he was doing his best to keep him conscious until they camped for the night.


“Damn, Eliot!! I’m gonna have to start on Disney movies in a minute!”

Eliot chuckled, despite the lights sparking agony behind his eyes.

“My momma was a Bogart fan. Me too, come … come to think of it …” He closed his eyes and tensed. “Hardison …”

“Yeah, El?”

“Think … think I’m gonna puke … koosh Gertie …” Eliot gulped.

“Uh-oh!!” Hardison, panicking slightly, quickly brought Gertie to a halt. “Koosh, baby … c’mon now –“

And Gertie sat down, Hardison still un-nerved by the way she did it, and the hacker was off the saddle before Gertie had even settled herself. He eased Eliot off the big camel just in time.
After Eliot finished retching and bringing up nothing, the two men sat quietly for ten minutes leaning on Gertie’s comfortingbulk, allowing Eliot to catch his breath. Hardison held one of the canteens to Eliot’s lips and the hitter drank some of the cool liquid, freshening his mouth and quenching his increasing thirst.

Hardison felt Eliot’s brow with one hand and frowned at the feverish heat he felt emanating from his best friend’s skin. Then he checked bandages, and there was no blood seeping through, so that, in Hardison’s opinion, was a win.

“Right – you ready, bro? ‘Cause I think we’ve got that crappy steep bit comin’ up.” He asked Eliot. There was no answer. Eliot just sat with his head resting on Gertie, eyes closed. “Hey! Eliot! C’mon now … no sleepin’ on the job, m’man!” And he gently prodded Eliot’s good shoulder.


Hardison snorted.


“Yeah … I know. But you’ll feel better in a day or two, once we’re back home an’ you can rest up. How’s the pain?”

“Keepin’ me conscious,” Eliot said, almost relieved. “It helps.”

Hardison shook his head.

“Only you, you idiot, would say pain is a good thing. You always gotta push things to the limit, huh.”

Eliot gave a pained half-smile as the thumping in his head made him wince.

“You must not let anyone define your limits because of where you come from. Your only limit is your soul,” he said cryptically.

Hardison’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Ratatouille?? You’re quotin’ Disney now??” He reached out a hand to help Eliot to his feet while shaking his head in disbelief. “Well, thinkin’ about it, of course you are. It’s about a rat. Who’s a chef. An’ the whole damn film is about cookin’.”

Eliot’s soft chuckle made Hardison feel a bit better. Knowing Eliot was still able to pull his chain meant the Oklahoman was dealing with the situation so far. So far.

Once Eliot was standing up, looking more than a little wobbly and pale underneath his tan, Hardison tried to help him back onto Gertie, but Eliot waved him away.

“Nah … we gotta walk from here for a little bit. Get down the hill and past the billabong.” He rubbed his head as though to ease the ache. “I don’t think I could stay on Gertie … when we’re back on the flat I’ll be okay.”

“You sure?” Hardison was doubtful. “Your leg …”

“I'll be fine,” Eliot insisted, although Hardison knew the old wound in his back could cause Eliot
severe pain on occasion. “You walk in front an’ lead, an’ I’ll hang on to Gertie. I can see her easier … you’re still a bit of a blur,” he added.

“Story of my life,” Hardison muttered. “Especially when Parker’s pushin’ me off a damn’ building,” he complained. “Okay, tough guy – hang on to this big hairy bastard an’ we’ll go easy, alright? Tell me if you need to stop.”

He grasped Gertie’s reins and got her to her feet – which made Hardison wonder about the sheer craziness of his life … Nana’s little boy workin’ with a camel, for Christ’sake – and waited for Eliot to get a firm grip with his right hand on Gertie’s breastplate.

“M’ready,” Eliot said, and Hardison thought the man looked like he was ready to fall over and pass out.

The hacker rubbed Gertie’s nose, and the animal gurgled with affection, whiffling at Hardison’s fingers.

“Okay, girl … you take it easy now, y’hear? Look after your papa …”

And off they went, Gertie pacing slowly and carefully, Eliot supported by her comforting presence. Hardison couldn’t make his mind up whether to watch Gertie or keep an eye on Eliot, so he decided Gertie would find her own way, and he let the animal take the lead while he dropped back, still holding her reins, to walk beside Eliot.

They were quiet for a few minutes, and then Hardison just had to ask.

“Why didn’t you tell us, El? You know we would have kept ‘em safe, because they’re family. Same as you would take care of Nana. An’ I know it ain’t anythin’ to do with trust, bro … hasn’t been for years.”

Eliot, doggedly holding onto Gertie, squinted as he thought about answering or not. But, he knew, Hardison wouldn’t let it lie. He never did.

“Honestly?” he said finally.

“Yeah, Eliot … honestly. They’re good people. I like ‘em a lot.”

“They are that,” Eliot admitted. “For … for a long time … they were all I had. An’ sometimes … when somethin’s precious an’ it’s all you got … it’s not easy to share, even with those you –”

“-love?” Hardison finished, grinning. He caught Eliot as he stumbled and let his friend regain his balance and his breath again, “yeah … an’ we love you too, you stubborn, bad-tempered ol’ bastard,” he added.

“Jeez, Hardison – don’t say things like that! It’s … it’s just weird …”

“Yeah, Eliot … of course it is,” Hardison quipped and Eliot grumbled to himself even as they came to the beginning of the steep track leading down past the billabong.

Then and there, Eliot Spencer swore to God that when he was fit again he was going to lace Hardison’s friggin’ gummy frogs with laxative, so help him.

The billabong looked even more menacing now, Hardison thought, as the sun began to set in earnest and the dark waters lay still and deep below them. He saw a movement at the far side … something
lean and scaly at the edge of the sandy shoreline, and he realised it was a crocodile resting with its mouth open, cooling down in the balmy evening air. It wasn’t a huge one, Hardison had to admit, maybe five or six feet long, but hell … a crocodile of any size was something he really, really didn’t want to meet.

Eliot grunted with pain as a stone rolled away under his boot, and Hardison was there in a second, making sure his friend didn’t fall. Gertie was taking it slowly. She didn’t like the incline, although her big, tough feet tackled the rough surface with ease. But heading downhill was more difficult for her, so she was wary and careful of Eliot, whom she knew wasn’t up to par.

Eliot was on her left side, next to the steep fall down to the billabong, his good right arm and hand hanging on to her breastplate as well as he could, Hardison keeping an eye on both animal and human.

“D’you think they’ll be followin’ us?” Hardison asked, his voice hollow with stress.

“No idea,” Eliot replied huskily, and he coughed, his throat dry and his wounds aching like a sonofabitch. “whoever ‘they’ are. That bastard who shot Bomber an’ me … was he Chinese, d’you know?”

“No Chinese,” Hardison replied. “But he’d been there for a while, watchin’ the bore. I guess they’ll miss him sooner or later.”

Eliot was silent for a moment.

“You did the right thing, Hardison. Saved my life.”

“Yeah … well …” Hardison sighed. He really didn’t want to think about the fact he had ended another human being’s life. “What the hell was he watching the bore for?”

“The pump was sabotaged,” Eliot said. “Just what … what the hell is goin’ on?” he ground out. Staying on his feet was getting harder, and sweat ran into his eyes. He let go of Gertie and tried to wipe his face.

“For god’s sake, El, hang onto Gertie will ya??” Hardison rasped, irritated.

“Dammit, Hardison,” Eliot retorted, his mind fuzzy but annoyed and trying not to catch the wound in his head with his sleeve, “I know what I’m doin’ so-“

And then he slipped.

In a split second Eliot was a crumpled, sliding figure and he landed hard on his back, and no matter how hard he scrabbled with the fingers of his right hand he couldn’t get any purchase. His boots couldn’t get a grip, and he yelled with agony as his wounds jarred with the impact and the subsequent inexorable slide down the slope.

But then he felt a hand grasp his wrist and pull.

“Hang on!! I gotcha!!” Hardison bawled, and for a minute the hacker thought he had stopped the slide, and he pulled hard as he fell to his knees beside Gertie and hung on. But Eliot’s solid one-eighthy of muscle and bone was too much, and before Hardison could even think about it, they were both rolling down the incline in a tumble of arms and legs, Hardison doing his best to cushion Eliot from the worst of it and failing.

The slope ended fifteen feet above the billabong.
The two men suddenly found themselves falling through nothing but air, flailing and trying to control their descent, but then they were in the water, plunging deep, deep into the still depths in a rush of bubbles and muted noise.

Hardison broke the surface, gasping for air and coughing. Shaking water out of his eyes, he trod water and looked around for Eliot.

“Eliot!! ELIOT!!” he yelled, desperation growing the longer he went without seeing his friend.

There was a sudden tinge of red in the water.

“Oh no … oh no-no-no-no-“ he swore under his breath and dove straight below the stain of red, thanking his Nana for insisting he learned to swim.

The water was reasonably clear as Hardison discovered as when opened his eyes, holding his breath and frantically looking for Eliot. Oh God. There he was, suspended in the water, arms and legs unmoving and eyes closed. Bubbles escaped from his nose and mouth. Blood drifted from his head and side, and Hardison saw Eliot’s mouth open. He was drowning.

He swam as fast as he could and reached out, hoping against hope to grab Eliot’s shirt before the man drifted out of reach, and he strained forward, almost out of breath … and missed.

The material treacherously floated like a wisp of smoke from his fingers and he struggled forward even as he ran out of breath and tried again. Eliot floated ever downward.

The surface of the billabong settled as the ripples faded, and apart from a faint and persistent tinge of blood, nothing moved. The crocodile snapped its jaws shut and shifted in the fading light, sliding back into the still water, the light of the sunset painting the surface in fire and brimstone, the only movement coming from the muscular tail of the crocodilian, drifting lazily across the billabong.

The water suddenly erupted as Hardison surfaced, spluttering and coughing water up and holding Eliot in the crook of his arm, the unconscious man pulled close to Hardison’s chest as blood streamed down his face from the gash over his ear.

Hardison began to work towards the south side of the billabong and he could see Gertie hovering like a fussy nurse, honking and pacing backwards and forwards on the waterline, having trotted down the hated incline to make sure her charges were safe.

Hardison obviously wasn’t swimming fast enough, because she then began to wade into the water, rumbling and gurgling, and Hardison aimed for the big beast, and it was just then that Eliot started to rouse from unconsciousness. He began to flail, annoyed, and as weak as he was, the wallop he landed on Hardison’s nose hurt.

“Hey!! Stop it, Eliot!! I’m tryin’ to save our sorry hides here, an’ you’re gonna drown both of us!!”

Eliot coughed up a lungful of water and struggled against Hardison’s fierce grip, even as the young man reached out and grabbed Gertie’s bosal, the camel instinctively knowing to work her way back to the safety of the sandy edge.

By the time they were on dry land, Hardison felt as though his arm was being pulled out of its socket. Soaked and exhausted, he let go of Gertie, who dropped her big head down to inspect her charges, mobile lips running over limbs and Eliot’s chest. Then she licked Hardison’s face, making the young man curse, although he didn’t have the heart to push her away seeing as she had just saved his life.
“Good girl … you’re a special girl … that’s right … you are …” Hardison crooned, and he scratched her chin, making Gertie huff with pleasure. “Okay … let’s check out this pain-in-the-ass, huh? Why don’t you hold him down so he doesn’t take a swing at me?” His nose was still a little tender.

Gertie, always happy to oblige, dropped her head down to rest very, very gently on Eliot’s good shoulder, humming to herself.

“Gert … Gertie … you okay, gal?” Eliot gasped, his lungs still feeling waterlogged and wheezy. He could sense Hardison checking his head wound and then ease up Eliot’s sodden shirt to look at his side.

Gertie hummed louder at Eliot, happy that he seemed responsive, and Hardison stood up to drag the pack off Gertie’s saddle to retrieve what was left of the medical kit.

“Ask how I am, why dontcha,” Hardison grumbled, “but no … you have to ask how the goddamn camel is, huh. Now I know where I stand, Spencer –“

And it was then that the crocodile erupted from the shallows in a spewing gout of water and fastened powerful jaws on Eliot’s left boot.

To be continued …
“OW!” Eliot croaked, irritated. “Gertie … get … get off my damn foot —“

“ELIOT!! ELIOT!!!!” he bawled, but was almost knocked sprawling by Gertie as she dashed forward towards the reptile.

The freshwater crocodile had had to twist itself sideways to try and grab Eliot, and it had only got a perfunctory grip on Eliot’s sturdy boot, so it loosened its hold and tried to shift its prey further into its powerful jaws.

But before it could regain a hold Gertie was upon it.

With a roar, Gertie bit down hard on the crocodile’s front leg and yanked the creature away from Eliot and hoisted it, wriggling, into the air. It hissed and struggled and twisted, but no matter how hard it tried, its snapping jaws couldn’t quite reach Gertie.

The big camel began to try and shake the crocodile, all two hundred pounds of it, her throaty rumbles working their way past the mouthful of reptile.

Eliot, lying flat on his back, soaking wet and bleeding, was a little annoyed.

“Hardison?? HARDISON!! What the hell’s goin’ on —“

“CROCODILE!!” Hardison yelped, and stumbling backwards to Eliot, he leaned over the hitter’s prone body and yanked Eliot’s trusty Ka-Bar knife out of its sheath.

“HEY!” Eliot yelled as he felt his knife being purloined, and he managed to dabble water and tears out of his bleary eyes, but he still couldn’t make out what was going on. All he could see was indistinct shapes shifting in front of his eyes and the only one he was fairly certain he could identify was Gertie.

Hardison grasped the knife firmly even as the wet grip felt slick in his hand, and then he unceremoniously grabbed Eliot by the scruff of his shirt and dragged him away from the edge of the billabong, Eliot protesting every inch of the way.

Gertie was enraged. She had no intention of letting go of the beast, but her grip was slowly slipping as the crocodile used its muscular body to twist and coil itself free, tail whipping and jaws getting uncomfortably close to Gertie’s neck.

Eliot, foggy-minded and hurting, suddenly realised what Hardison had yelled at him. A crocodile. He had been attacked by a crocodile. And now, it seemed, Gertie had grabbed hold of it. He had an
“Hardison!!” he bawled as he tried to sit up. “Kill it!!”

Hardison, doing his best to stay out of Gertie’s way and avoid the lethal jaws of the flailing crocodile, nearly dropped the knife in surprise.

“Wha – kill it?? Whaddymean, kill it???” he yelled, terrified.

“Hell, yeah!!” Eliot shouted back. “We can eat it!!”

Hardison’s eyes widened. Now he knew Eliot was insane.

“EAT IT???”

Gertie roared as the crocodile finally managed to wriggle free, snapping at Gertie who was busy baring her bloodied teeth at the creature. The crocodile lunged at Gertie’s legs and missed her by a hair’s breadth, and the irate reptile tried again, this time sprawling between Gertie’s front legs. If it got hold of Gertie the sharp teeth would rip her leg to pieces.

Hardison waved the knife in the air and ran at Gertie, trying desperately to shoo her away, but the dromedary wasn’t about to abandon either Eliot or Hardison, and she just tried to stamp on the crocodile, honking. Then her head snaked out and she suddenly flipped the crocodile onto its back. Hardison seized the day.

“KOOSH, Gertie … KOOSH!!” he bellowed, and Gertie, obedient camel that she was, promptly sat on the crocodile.

The end came quickly. When twelve hundred pounds of camel sat heavily on two hundred pounds of crocodile, there was only one outcome. Gertie burbled triumphantly as she sat on the now-defunct reptile, and looked distinctly smug.

Hardison leaned forward and resting his hands on his knees, dragged in whooping breaths as Gertie gurgled happily to herself. Eliot managed to sit up, holding his side and squinting in the increasing shadows of the late afternoon.

“Well?? Did you kill it??” He yelled, and wished he hadn’t as his headache began to thump again.

“Wait … wait a minute …” Hardison gasped, and then he straightened up. He clutched the knife as though his life depended on it, and gazed at Gertie and then at the long, scaly tail sticking out from beneath her ribcage. “Yeah … yeah, El … Gertie got it …” he wheezed.

Eliot grinned. He was soaked to the skin, shot, bleeding, concussed and in pain, but most of all he knew they both had to have something substantial to eat, and crocodile meat would give them some much-needed protein.

“Okay, Hardison … skin out the tail an’ … an’ … we’ll find a place to camp. Okay? I’m … I’m freezin’ …” Eliot shuddered, chilled to the bone after his unexpected dunking in the billabong.

“Wait … skin … are you nuts???” Hardison croaked.

“Yeah,” Eliot retorted brusquely, “Skin. The crocodile. That’s what …” his breath caught for a moment as his side protested at the movement, “that’s what the knife’s for.”

Hardison glared at Eliot, who was now sitting up and gesticulating at him, his right hand making
vaguely knife-cutty motions. He thought he had never seen Eliot look so bloodthirsty, especially as blood still trickled down his face and stained his shirt. It didn’t help that Eliot was grinning ferociously.

Hardison stood straight, still dripping water and shaking with cold and terror.

“Now, just how the hell do I skin a friggin’ crocodile??” he demanded.

And that was when Eliot lost it. He leaned back on one elbow and hugged his damaged side with the other, and then slowly toppled back onto the sandy ground and laughed until the pain became too much and he had to groan with the intensity of it.

Hardison turned to Gertie and gingerly told her to stand up, and he winced as he saw the somewhat flattened carcass underneath her. He led Gertie back to Eliot, and the camel dropped her head down to whiffle at Eliot’s tousled hair, sniffing worriedly at the blood on his face. She hummed contentedly to herself when she realised he was conscious and responsive.

Eliot lay quietly for a minute or two, shivering from the sudden shock of the cold water, but his head was a little less painful and to his surprise, once he had knuckled the water out of his eyes, his vision was nowhere near so blurry.

“We … we gotta move, Hardison. There’s an overhang about a mile away where we can shelter an’ start a fire without bein’ seen. Help me up an’ I’ll tell you how to skin a croc.” He couldn’t stop the grin widening on his face.

Hardison stared at Eliot, and realised the hitter was enjoying the hell out of the situation.

He looked at Gertie, and then looked at the crocodile.

“This,” he said glumly, “is gonna be just disgusting.”

It was getting on for nightfall before Hardison and Eliot had skinned the meat-packed tail and boned it out. To Hardison’s distaste Eliot pushed the lean steak meat away from the spine, reached into the resulting gaping hole and pulled out a length of tender fillet meat, wrapping it in the belly skin Hardison had gingerly peeled off the creature.

Hardison had not appreciated Eliot growling instructions at him … comments such as “Dammit, Hardison! Don’t stick the knife through the belly or you’ll get a face-full of croc shit and guts, an’ you’ll taint the meat!” and “Jeez, Hardison! It’s a knife, not a goddamn toothpick! If you don’t get the skin off now, it’ll get tougher as the carcass cools, so man up an’ damn well pull!!”

But he had managed to keep himself from heaving his guts up and skinned the damn croc, and after quickly washing his hands in the billabong, keeping his eyes open for more of the nasty, toothy, scaly sonsabitches, he got Eliot onto Gertie and led the camel through the encroaching gloom along the ancient river bed.

By the time Eliot had found the dry, sandy place carved out thousands of years ago by the ancient river, stark moonlight filled the night sky and a soft breeze caressed tired bodies and helped to dry them after the sudden shock of the cold water of the billabong.

Hardison’s fire-starting capabilities had somewhat improved over the years, and he soon had a fire crackling on the flat, clear ground away from the stunted trees and acacias trying to keep a grip on the rock-strewn dry river bed. The heat was very welcome, and after helping Eliot get settled against Gertie’s warm, solid bulk, Hardison dug out the crocodile meat and spitted the steaks over the fire to
Roast.

Eliot had stopped Hardison several times along the way to pick stuff off plants and trees, which had made the hacker cringe, because he had no idea what Spencer was going to force him to eat. But now Eliot managed to sprinkle wild lemon myrtle and some thyme over the fillets and wrapped them in fresh saltbush leaves, and laid them on the coals to cook. Hardison heated water in the billy, and while their food cooked, he cleaned up Eliot.

He replaced the butterfly strips in the head wound and cut off the still-wet bandages around Eliot’s ribs. The bullet wound worried the crap out of him. The skin and flesh around the embedded bullet was swollen and discoloured, and he soaked a gauze pad in hot water and laid it over the entry wound, letting the heat try and draw out some of the infection.

Eliot bore it as well as he could, and then handed a few long, leathery leaves to Hardison.

“Here … see if you can find somethin’ to soak these in boiling water. Maybe after we’ve had some tea we can use one of the condensed milk tins,” he said. “Emu bush leaves. Crush ‘em into the water and it’ll help with the infection.”

Hardison raised an eyebrow.

“You drink this stuff?” he asked dubiously.

“No, Hardison,” Eliot answered, irritated. “Use it to clean these holes I got in me. Now these,” he held up some other leaves he had pulled off a tree as Gertie had brushed past it, “I can drink like a tea once they’re left to infuse. Eucalyptus leaves. They’re good for fevers.”

Hardison could feel the heat emanating from Eliot, and knew he had quite the fever brewing. The unexpected swim hadn’t helped, and Hardison had stripped Eliot of his wet boots, pants and shirt and wrapped him in the old, warm blanket that covered Gertie’s saddle.

So, as the fire warmed them up and their clothes lay spread on acacia bushes to dry, Eliot and Hardison ate a hearty meal of crocodile meat, accompanied by sun-dried *kutjera*, and followed by a hot mug of tea laced with condensed milk, and kakadu plums for dessert. Hardison was highly relieved they still had their can-opener.

The crocodile meat was tender, juicy and chicken-like in texture, but with a hint of fish – not unpleasant, Hardison decided, and Eliot’s impromptu bush herbs added even more flavour. *Huh*, he thought – trust Eliot Spencer to produce chef-y type food with a bullet hole in him and stuck in the outback with a camel and an out-of-his-depth techy genius.

Hardison ate until he was stuffed. Eliot managed what he could, although the heat of the food did him more initial good than the calories and protein content. His stomach was still queasy and his balance wasn’t great, but he knew he would rest easier with a full stomach and some fluids in him. He also got a great deal of satisfaction gloating over Hardison actually enjoying eating croc steaks.

They sat in silence for a while, the only noise being the crackle of the fire and Gertie’s never-ending grumbles and gurgles as she chewed her cud, eyes half-closed as she sat contentedly with Eliot tucked into her side.

Hardison was beginning to doze, but he mentally shook himself. He wanted to redress Eliot’s various injuries before they settled down for the night, and the emu bush leaves intended to help with the infection were still steeping in hot water.

He pulled out his tablet and powered it up, the light from the screen sending an eerie glow around the
small space. The thing still had about a third of its power left, Hardison discovered. *Good.* He inserted the memory stick and began to look over the shots Larry had taken before his untimely demise.

The quality was as good as he had hoped. High resolution definition, and as Hardison had sent Larry in closer to the Albany setup, he mentally patted himself on the back for choosing the best equipment he could find. And, of course, Homeland Security would never notice that some of its surveillance software had been copied and modified.

“El …”

“Yeah?” Eliot replied, already halfway into a doze.

“Do you know anything about mining?” Hardison asked.

“Coal, precious metal or minerals?” Eliot murmured.

“Metals. Titanium, to be exact.”

Eliot thought about it for a moment or two.

“Not much of it up here. It’s mostly western Oz and New South Wales. That’s not to say there isn’t any up here, and I reckon licenses would be hard to get if there’s no titanium on Albany land, wouldn’t you say?”

Hardison pondered the information, and then looked again at the strange, silo-like columns and the four, square ponds.

“What do titanium mines look like?” he asked. He so wished he could do an online search but the remote, sheltered landscape negated that particular option.

“I, uh, I retrieved somethin’ from one in Kwa-Zulu Natal, back in ’07. It’s mostly dredge-mining, taking titanium oxide slag from the sand. Damn’ big strip of land, a mile wide or so an’ maybe ten miles long. It’s a damn mess.” Eliot said, his eyes still closed and leaning back onto Gertie’s warm hide.

“So …” Hardison was thinking aloud now, “titanium mines don’t have silo-thingies, then? Or filtration ponds?”


“Albany Mining Company has a real tidy set of buildings, lots of pipes and these silos beside four ponds on the east side, away from the main setup. I have no idea what they are.”

Eliot pondered the information, and then his eyes suddenly snapped open.

“Alice!” he hissed quietly, and tried to sit up, wincing. Gertie rumbled and swung her head around, worried. Eliot managed to ease himself upright using Gertie as a prop, and then he frowned, thinking hard.

“What about Alice?” Hardison said, puzzled.

“I know why she was up at Jalkaji Point.” He fixed Hardison with a hard glare, his blue eyes glinting in the firelight. “Alice was a rock hound,” he added by way of explanation. “She loved art, an’ she loved her tribe. Both of ‘em were at the heart of her. But she’d been interested in geology since she
was a kid. Especially here, with the land being so much a part of her people. She kept an eye on commercial mining all through the Barkly region, just makin’ sure they didn’t damage the land too much an’ didn’t impinge on aboriginal rights. She’d know what kind of mining Albany’s doing an’ she could keep an eye on ‘em from Jalkaji Point. It’s the only place on Warumungu land that’s high enough to see the mine,” he said firmly.

“Well sonofabitch,” Hardison breathed. “So … we need to know what Alice knew before those bastards killed her.” He studied the footage again, but he was really too tired to make much more sense of it, so he shut down the tablet and stowed it away in Gertie’s pack. He stared into the fire for a while, and tried to shake off the dread that suddenly permeated his mind, and he tried not to think of Alice Jakkamarra or the man he had killed.

“How?” Eliot replied wearily. He was very sore and he felt crappy. The fever made his joints ache.

“What did you ‘retrieve’? Y’know … in Africa?”

Eliot shifted and couldn’t contain the moan of pain.

“Shit …” he grunted, and then answered. “A ten-year-old boy,” he said.

Hardison’s eyes widened in shock. Now he almost wished he hadn’t asked.

“He’d been kidnapped by his father,” Eliot continued, the memories coming thick and fast. “He wasn’t much of a dad. He ran the mine for a diamond and mineral consortium with connections to far-eastern cartels. The boy’s mother is a high-ranking American criminal lawyer. I won’t go into the family dynamics, but … the boy was leverage.”

Hardison could almost feel the disgust in Eliot’s voice as he spoke of the man who threatened his own child.

“I … uh … I take it the job went okay?” he asked tentatively.

Eliot sighed, twitching with pain.

“Mostly,” he said, his tone soft and gentle now.

“Mostly?”

“I killed the boy’s father before the bastard could cut his son’s throat,” he said bluntly.

Hardison blinked.

“Jesus,” he breathed. He was silent for a second or two before speaking again. “Eliot … sometimes … sometimes I wonder how you’ve done … how you do the things you do, m’man, an’ don’t go crazy-insane because of ‘em.”

“Yeah …” Eliot said ruefully, “sometimes I wonder that too. An’ sometimes I think I already have.”

Raising a hand he scratched Gertie’s head, and listened to her grumbles of pleasure. He gazed into the fire and fervently hoped he wouldn’t see the faces of the people he had killed as he dreamed that night. But in his heart, he knew, he would. He always did.

All Soapy got on the radio was static. Lots and lots of steady, rawling static and nothing else.
Soapy tried again. He clicked the button on the old Motorola mike.


Nate sat beside the pastoralist, staring at the radio set as though he could make Hardison or Eliot answer by sheer power of will.

Soapy had smiled at the call signs when Hardison had told him what they were. He could hear Richard Burton’s precise, Welsh tones as he used the call signs in *Where Eagles Dare*, and Hardison loved the film, hence the somewhat prosaic names. But right now, ‘Danny Boy’ was as silent as the grave.

“It could simply be they’ve got no reception,” Soapy said, trying to be upbeat.

Nate frowned and shrugged.

“Could be,” he agreed, and on the face of it that was a perfectly reasonable supposition. He looked at his watch. It was well after nine in the evening, and the moon hung limpid and bright over the homestead, the night clear and still. There was no wind. But Charlie had explained that there were several places along the track to Bore Seven where reception was bad even in the best of weather, and at least two of the locations were blind spots. But on the other hand … he remembered that Hardison and Eliot were camping at the bore as Larry the drone was supposed to be flying again in the morning before the two men headed home. “Would you mind trying once more, Soapy?”

“No worries,” Soapy replied, his own concerns now beginning to knot his stomach. “Broadsword calling Danny Boy … over.”

Silence.

“Have you got them, Daddy? Can I speak to them??” Lizzie wandered in through the doorway into Soapy’s office, wearing her pyjamas and carefully carrying a mug of hot chocolate. “Are they okay??” Her voice was rife with hope.

“Nothing yet, sweetheart,” he answered, trying to keep his voice confident and calm.

Lizzie’s face fell.

“Grandpa Soapy … they’re alright, aren’t they?” she said, her voice wobbling a bit. Her brown eyes were huge and worried. “Why don’t they answer??”

Soapy reached out and grabbed Lizzie’s mug before hot chocolate spilled over his desk, and then took Lizzie’s hand in his, the rough calluses on his palm warm and comforting.

“Lizzie, sweetheart … just because we can’t get hold of them on the radio doesn’t mean they’re in trouble. It could just be because they’re in a place where the radio doesn’t work, that’s all.”

Lizzie’s lip began to tremble.

“But –“

“Soapy’s right, Lizzie,” Nate said, trying his best to reassure his daughter. “Don’t assume they’re in trouble just because they –“

“Daddy!” Lizzie said firmly, her wobbly lip turning into a grim line. “Eliot’s hurt. And he’s sick. I just know it. And he needs us. We have to go help him!”
“He was perfectly alright when he left this morning, darling,” Sophie said as she entered the office and put a comforting hand on her daughter’s shoulder. “Please don’t worry – you know Eliot’s extremely capable of looking after both of them.”

But Lizzie wasn’t to be placated that easily. Her face became the very epitome of Eliot-Spencer-stubborn, and the scowl was fearsome.

“I’m going to see Effie!!” she declared, and grabbing her hot chocolate, she stumped off to the kitchen. Effie would understand, she was sure.

Sophie moved to go after her, but Soapy laid a hand on her arm, stopping her.

“Effie’s the best thing for her right now,” he said quietly. “The old bugger’ll calm her down simply by agreeing with her. And I have to say … Lizzie might have something. This radio silence just doesn’t feel right,” he sighed. “We can’t do anything about it tonight. I’ll try again in the morning, and if they’re not back by midday at the latest, we’ll go look for them. Doing it at night would be bloody dangerous.”

Nate eyed Sophie, seeing the worry deepen on her beautiful face.

“Soapy’s right, you know,” he said. “We’re stuck until the morning.”

“And we’re still being watched,” Parker said as she came into the office through the door which led to the cattle yards.

“You sure??” Nate asked, surprised.

Parker had spent the day on top of the water tank, sitting on a deckchair under Jo’s sun-brolly and drinking lots of water. She had Eliot’s scope and a cool-box filled with sandwiches and Effie’s lamingtons, and watched the silent figure in the distance. Whoever it was wasn’t even bothering to hide in the stringybark stand at the top of the hill.

“Yeah. I’m still not convinced it’s a woman. But they’re on a horse.” She shuddered dramatically. “Horses. Blech. Anyhoo … they’re still there. I can see the horse in the moonlight because it’s kinda grey.”

“Well, that decides the matter,” Nate sighed. “We stay put tonight and probably the morning, and then try and sneak away somehow. I don’t want the kids out of sight for a second. We’ll make a plan in the morning, people.”

Soapy nodded, although he didn’t like the idea of someone watching their home. But what worried him even more was Lizzie’s concern about Eliot and Hardison. He knew the little girl loved them both, but had a deep connection to Eliot, her guardian and closest friend.

But there was nothing for it – they would have to wait.

“Oh well,” he said, trying to keep the fear out of his voice. “Tea anyone??” he asked, and without waiting, he switched off the radio and headed out of the room to get his evening cuppa.

To be continued …

Author’s note:
‘Kutjera’ – wild bush tomatoes, best eaten dried by the sun. Very tasty.
There is some blood and infection in this one, but it’s mostly angst and fluff. Oh, and some deadly intent towards insects. For ann.ryce of fanfiction.net, who desperately wanted Hardison to eat a bug.

Hardison was dreaming.

He was looking at his tablet and there was Larry the drone’s view of the world, humming his way across the landscape and the man, that goddamn man with the rifle was aiming at Eliot, and Larry just wasn’t fast enough and no matter how hard Hardison pushed the toggle he knew the little drone wouldn’t get there in time. The man aimed and fired … again and again and again, and Hardison couldn’t tear his eyes away from the bullets striking Eliot … his best friend … his brother … and he knew Eliot was dead as his body jerked with the impact, and Hardison screamed. It was a primal scream, one from his very soul, and he swore and yelled and Larry just didn’t get there in time … oh God, Eliot was gone … he was gone and Hardison hadn’t saved him and –

“Hardison!”

Hardison awoke in mid-yell, the terror surging through him like an icy river, and there was Eliot, hand on Hardison’s shoulder and concern rife in his blue eyes.

“El –“ he croaked, and he realised he was trembling.

“You okay?” Eliot asked, his voice gruff with worry.

Hardison swallowed bile and nodded.

“Y… yeah … I think so …”

“Bad dream, huh,” Eliot said quietly.

“You could say that,” Hardison answered, and sat up.

Eliot was sitting beside him. Somehow the wounded hitter had managed to retrieve his dried clothes and boots and dressed himself, and he had been in the middle of heating water in the billy when Hardison had begun yelling.

“It’s tough,” Eliot murmured as he studied his friend. “Seein’ things in your head an’ not able to do anythin’ about it. I’m guessing I died, huh.”

Hardison closed his eyes and instantly saw the horror as Eliot’s body jerked again with the impact of the bullets and he gasped, opening his eyes wide as though reality would drive away the shock of loss.

“You killed a man,” Eliot continued. “It’s not an easy thing to live with. I know.” He winced as he tried to ease the throbbing pain in his body. “First time I killed a man I didn’t sleep for three days.
An’ you know what? It’s as though your mind can’t decide between the guilt of killin’ a human being an’ what might have happened if you didn’t kill them. An’ I’ve killed a lot of people since then. You deal with it.” He grimaced. “But that’s probably not what you wanted to hear, though, huh.”

“M’okay …” Hardison rasped, and wiped the bleariness out of his eyes. He suddenly remembered listening via an earbud to Eliot tell an interrogator about why he didn’t need to count the people he had killed. He remembered everything … their eye colour, their last words … whether they begged, and whether they deserved it or not … and once again Hardison didn’t know how Eliot stood living with himself sometimes. He sighed. His own memory was too raw for him just yet. He would deal with it later. Much later. If the nightmares would let him, he decided.

“It’s comin’ up dawn,” Eliot said, digging a couple of teabags out of their pack and dropping them in the billy. “C’mon, man … get dressed, warm up an’ eat something. We gotta go soon.”

Hardison nodded wordlessly and stretched, trying to ease the stiffness from sore muscles. Sleeping on the ground was not one of his favourite occupations. He reached for his pants and boots, but was stopped by Eliot, who waggled a finger at him.

“Check ‘em first,” he said. “Shake out your clothes and boots.”

Hardison sucked in a breath.

“Oh god … scorpions, right?”


“Seriously??” Hardison ground out, staring at his boots. “I mean … seriously?? Frikkin’ centipedes??”


Cursing to himself, Hardison shook his clothes until his arms ached.

Effie sat quietly on the veranda at Wapanjara homestead, a cup of tea and a plate with slices of her own version of walnut cake beside her on the table. Looking out over Jo’s garden, she sighed, watching the sky slowly lighten as dawn approached.

Somewhere out there in the bush, two of her boys were fighting for their lives, she just knew it. She sipped her tea and wiped her eyes. Hardison, in just a few days, had wormed his way into her old, cynical heart, although it hadn’t been difficult. His Nana must be a bloody wonder, she thought. The lad was kind, funny, frighteningly intelligent and respectful. And he had a way of prodding Eliot into a raging fit that delighted her, because sometimes Eliot, the boofhead, was so uptight Effie was sure he would burst a blood vessel and Hardison gave him a way of letting go. Hardison was good for Eliot … a little brother who drove the older man nuts but, Effie knew, Eliot would protect him with his life.

And her boys were in danger, she felt it deep in her soul.

She took another sip of tea, and then a soft voice disturbed her reverie.

“Is that cake?” Parker said as she ambled through from the living room, wrapped in a sleeping bag.
“Walnut with honey. Want a piece?” Effie asked, keeping her voice low so as not to disturb the household.

“Mmm, yeah!” Parker murmured and dropped into a chair opposite Effie. She took a piece of cake, bit into it and mumbled happily. “Ooohh, tea!” she whispered and disappeared for a minute into the kitchen, returning with a cup of her own. She poured tea and drank it black.

“Well, Missy … can’t sleep, hey?”

Parker’s eyes blinked and she looked away, drinking more tea.

“Eliot and Hardison … Lizzie’s worried, Effie. That makes me worried too.”

Effie grunted in agreement and ate a piece of cake.

“The nipper’s got a feeling, so she has. She an’ the Yank … they’re good mates, I can tell. He’s her best pal, and she thinks the world of the daft mongrel. She knows, Missy. She knows something’s up – she has a feeling in her gizzard.”

Parker wasn’t too sure what a gizzard was, but she knew Effie had nailed it – there was something wrong, although she couldn’t place exactly what it was. She turned in her chair and looked up to the stringybarks at the top of the hill, and saw something shift in the early morning gloom.

Whoever it was watching Wapanjara, they were still there.

“If they’re still hanging about,” Effie murmured, “it means they’re not chasing the Yank and young Alec,” she said. “If some drongo has hurt my boys, I’ll gut them with a spoon, I swear,” she growled.

“Effie? Can’t sleep,” a small voice declared, and both Parker and the little cook turned to see Lizzie standing in the doorway, her comforter in one hand and using the other to try and wipe weariness from her eyes.

“Want some cake?” Parker asked, her voice warm with love.

“Yes please,” the little girl mumbled. “Has Eliot radioed us? Is Alec okay? Why haven’t they called?” Lizzie said groggily, and dragged her comforter around her as she clambered onto Eliot’s recliner next to Effie. The child was obviously very tired but worry was preventing her from sleeping.

“They’ll be back today, little ‘un, come hell or high water,” Effie said firmly. “So stop worrying. Mister M and your dad will go looking for them or they’ll come home on their own, I bet, so why not go back to your bed and get some sleep.”

Effie tried to sound in charge, but her own worries softened her words. So she leaned over and tucked the warm cover around Lizzie, pulling out the soft old cushion Eliot kept on the recliner to ease his back when his leg hurt, and placing it under Lizzie’s head.

Lizzie sighed, snuggled into the cushion and grasped Effie’s hand in hers. The old woman clasped the child’s fingers and rubbed the small knuckles gently with her rough-skinned fingertips.

And so the three of them sat in silence on the veranda, eating cake, drinking tea and worrying, and watching as the light grew on the horizon and the sky became wreathed in the gold and blue of a new day.
The sun was nearly above the horizon when Hardison finished eating his second lamington of the morning and washed it down with a mug of tea. He eyed Eliot. The man was leaning back against Gertie, sipping some eucalyptus infusion in an attempt to halt the ever-growing fever in his system.

Hardison had cleansed Eliot’s wounds with the emu bush concoction to try and control infection, and the bullet hole looked messy … oozing pus and blood, and Eliot had stoically borne the agony of Hardison tending to the swollen injury. The shoulder wound was also badly inflamed, but this morning the injuries looked a little less angry, and Eliot’s eyes were clearer. The fever was taking a hold, but Eliot was bearing it as best as he could.

Perhaps this bush medicine nonsense wasn’t so weird after all, Hardison thought.

Eliot finished his drink and made a face.

“Damn, this stuff’s evil,” he grumbled, and then dropped his head back against Gertie, who whiffled at his hair. “You ready to go?” he asked Hardison.

“More to the point, are you?” Hardison replied. “You ain’t slept a wink.”

Hardison had set the alarm on his watch to remind him to wake Eliot and make sure the concussion wasn’t getting worse, but every time he checked, Eliot was already awake. His eyes might have been closed, but his wounds ached too much to allow him any meaningful rest. The Oklahoman was exhausted.

“I’ll make it,” he said wearily. “It’s only a few hours to go, an’ then I can get stitched up. It’ll be fine.”

“Eliot … you need a hospital, man. You got a bullet in you – Parker can’t deal with that –“ Hardison insisted, just a little exasperated with Eliot’s declaration that he was raring to go.

“Jo can,” Eliot interrupted with conviction. “She’s dug a bullet outta me before.”

Hardison’s eyebrows hitched in surprise.

“What?? When??”

“Washington … Spanish ‘flu … remember?”

“No way!” Hardison was stunned. “That’s where you went?? You flew all the way to Australia with two bullet holes in you?? Parker an’ me … we thought you disappeared off to one of your struck-off animal doctors!! You came to Australia?? Damn!! The flight alone coulda killed you! How’d you get through immigration, hurt like you were??”

“Vance,” Eliot smiled wanly. “I patched m’self up, an’ then he got me on a military transport to Darwin and into the country with no problems. He owed me big-time. Jo an’ Soapy drove all the way to Darwin to fetch me. To be fair, she dug out what was left of the slug. I’d already got most of it. She found the fragment an’ pumped me full of antibiotics. I was pretty out of it for a while, but I healed up good as new.” His smile became a slow grin. “Not even a limp.”

Hardison remembered Eliot showing up suddenly after being missing for over three weeks after he was shot … he had gone to ground like a wounded bear. He’d looked thinner and a little frayed around the edges, and he was careful when he moved, but he had been whole and well … more or less.

“Sonofabitch, Eliot!! We were worried sick about you!!”
Eliot shrugged and grunted as the wound in his side objected.

“Hey … now you know. You’ll also be thrilled to know that Jo wasn’t too happy either at me comin’ home with two bullet holes in me. She an’ Effie made my life hell for quite a while.”

“Damn straight!!” Hardison grated, “an’ you didn’t bother lettin’ us know you were okay, either, you idiot!!”

“Couldn’t,” Eliot said. “Had to keep ‘em safe … remember? I couldn’t afford any mistakes or weak spots, an’ a ‘phone call is always risky. Our security’s been breached more’n once.” He eyed Hardison. “You knew I’d be alright. You knew I’d be safe an’ healed up when I came back. It’s not as though you hadn’t seen me hurt before.”

Hardison had to grudgingly agree, but he didn’t have to like it.

“Parker’s going to do somethin’ real nasty to you when she finds out, m’man. You know that, don’t you?”

“I’ll live with it,” Eliot stated huskily, pain etched in every muscle. “I just … I had to go home.” He took as deep a breath as his ribs would let him. “C’mon, Hardison. Help me up. We gotta make a move.”

“Okay, okay … I’ll put out the fire an’ clear up here, an’ then we get going. You stay put until I’m done, El. Jeez,” He shook his head. Eliot Spencer, stubborn asshole.

Heaving himself to his feet, he began to tidy up their camp.

Eliot rested against Gertie, closed his eyes and tried to deal with the pain in his head and the fever in his body.

“They still there?” Nate murmured as he picked at his breakfast and glancing up at the stringybarks on the hill. He didn’t see anything, but that didn’t mean their mysterious watcher had gone.

“Missy thinks so,” Effie grumbled quietly. “Eat something, will you? I didn’t spend hours over a hot stove for you lot to waste good food,” she added testily.

Nate gave a tired smile and looked at Sophie, trying her best to work her way through one of Effie’s delicious omelettes. She recognised the recipe … she’d eaten it often enough when Eliot cooked breakfast for the team.

Parker yawned and stretched, nodding.

“Yep. Still there. What are we going to do, Nate? I mean … what can we do without alerting Rickenbacker?”

“I could go checking yearlings maybe,” Charlie said, sitting beside Kip and pouring his son some orange juice.

“Not on your own, you won’t,” Soapy commented, buttering toast. “I can’t sit a horse just yet … bloody ribs … but that might work.”

“I’ll go,” Sophie interjected suddenly. “Charlie could be showing me the lie of the land. It wouldn’t look out of place, and we can head along the track towards the bore.”

Nate frowned and shook his head.
“I don’t like it. It’s splitting us up again, and I don’t want either of you taking any risks. We have children here, people. Look … Eliot and Hardison aren’t supposed to be back until midday, and we don’t know that anything’s happened to them, so why don’t we wait?”

“Daddy … I told you –“ Lizzie sat by her father, eyes bleary and dead tired, but refusing to sleep until Eliot and Hardison were safely home.

“Lizzie … sweetheart …” Nate couldn’t stop a hint of exasperation from creeping into his voice. Lizzie wasn’t usually so stubborn. “We know absolutely nothing. It’s what … less than four hours from now? It’s common sense to wait until they’re past their ETA.”

“But Daddy –“ Lizzie’s Eliot-frown was back.

“Enough now, Lizzie. This is serious. We’re being watched by someone who probably managed to stick a knife in Eliot more than once, so until we know what’s going on we act normally. You know that, sweetheart. We’ve done it before. So … we wait, okay?”

Lizzie looked around at her family, tears finally beginning to well in her eyes.

“Lizzie, love … it’s killing me worrying about them,” Jo said softly, “but your dad’s right. We have to wait. Eliot would be furious if we endangered ourselves for him. I know that’s daft, because we love him … we love both of them … but we have to be careful.” She thought for a moment. “Tell you what – Charlie and Kip are supposed to be shifting bales this morning over in the yards … why don’t we go over to the west paddock gate and feed the horses? That’ll take the pair of us most of the morning, we’re in Charlie’s view and you can keep an eye out for Gertie, hey?”

Parker perked up a little.

“I can watch out for all of you. I can see just about everywhere in the yards and the homestead boundary from the water tower, so … it should be safe enough.”

Lizzie straightened, looking more hopeful.

“Can we, Daddy? Grandma Jo and Parker will keep an eye out for bad guys, and then we can wait for Eliot and Alec?!”

“Soph?” Nate raised his eyebrows at his wife.

“I don’t see why not,” she answered. “But you stay in sight of Parker and Jo, and yell for Charlie if anything happens, you understand? Promise?”

Lizzie didn’t take promises lightly … Eliot had made sure of that.

“I promise, Mama.”

“Soapy and I have some digging to do through land registration records, and I think there are old mining reports on Wapanjara?” Nate asked Soapy.

The pastoralist nodded.

“Deep in the recesses of my filing cabinets, yes. My grandfather had them done back in the forties after the war. You never know … they might have some useful info in there. Worth a try,” he added hopefully.

“I just have a hunch that it’s to do with mining rather than taking over the station,” Nate pondered,
and then ate a mouthful of omelette. “Maybe not whatever they’re digging up, but how they’re doing it and what they’re trying to hide. And what have the Chinese to do with it? Damn … I wish Hardison was here …” he fretted. He would have set Hardison on finding out what mineral interests any Chinese businesses might have in the Northern Territory. The whole thing was so amorphous … so hard to nail down the facts, and the landscape itself was the difficulty, he knew. In an urban landscape everything was much more accessible, digitally and physically. Out here, when one had to drive over a hundred miles to buy groceries … it was almost impossible. Unless you were Alec Hardison.

“Okay … breakfast then work. Lizzie … you listen to Jo, y’hear?? No wandering off.” Nate said.

Lizzie managed a mouthful of toast and nodded.

“Hey nipper,” Effie rumbled, “how’s about you and the Missus take a picnic with you?” She stood up and began to gather empty plates, and ruffled Lizzie’s curls. “I know it’s just here at the homestead, but bloody hell … it’s better than nothing. And then you’ll be able to keep a watch out for them two daft young mongrels without having to come back here for lunch. You alright with that, Missus?” she asked Jo.

“Too right, Effie! Sounds like a plan to me.” Jo smiled at the little cook who had begun to love this new extension to their family.

“Righto then. C’mon, nipper. If you’re not going to eat that toast you can help me clear up and then pack some grub. And before you ask, yeah, you can take some anzacs,” she added with something that was almost – but not quite - good humour. She knew Lizzie was fond of the sticky oaty biscuits.

Lizzie stood up and nodded. She was very, very tired, but she wouldn’t rest until her menfolk were home safe. So gathering up her plate, she headed into the kitchen after Effie.

“Dear God, Nate … how did we produce such a stubborn daughter? Look at her – she can barely stay awake.” Sophie sighed, frustration in every word.

Nate had to smile at his wife’s comment.

“Nurture versus nature, Sophie. Who else do we know who’s so damn stubborn?”

Sophie got it.

“Oh, bugger it. Bloody Eliot Spencer.” She sighed. “Oh well. Nothing we can do about it now. I just hope he’s all right – that they’re both alright - or else we’ll never hear the last of it.”

Nate, sipping his coffee, couldn’t agree with her more.

“Hardison …”

The hacker, sitting on a saddle-sore backside in front of Eliot on Gertie, had felt his friend slump against him more and more over the last hour, so he halted Gertie as she strode along a narrow track barely visible in the bush.

“Yeah, man? You need a break?”

“Just a little bit,” Eliot murmured weakly.

“Hang on …” And Hardison kooshed Gertie down before dismounting and easing an increasingly
weak Eliot off the saddle. “Here … rest up for a few minutes,” he said.

Eliot found himself resting at the base of a dead mulga, the dry wood rough and warm against his back. Hardison crouched beside him with a canteen of water.

“Here. It’s the last of it,” the young man said, sloshing the canteen. “No more until we get back to the homestead,” he added sombrely.

“Nah,” Eliot rested his head back against the tree, “I’ll be okay. You finish it – you’ve been givin’ most of it to me, an’ you need to stay rehydrated.”

Hardison had to admit he was parched, but after nearly three hours in the saddle, Eliot looked like he was on the point of unconsciousness. At this pace he had another couple of hours to go, so he needed to keep up his strength.

“Drink, you moron,” the hacker rasped, irritated. “I’ll be fine.”

“An’ you idiots call me stubborn,” Eliot muttered, and then swallowed the remaining few mouthfuls of water.

“You need it, El.” Hardison felt Eliot’s forehead and tsk’d. “You’re burnin’ up, bro. Take a break an’ chill. Want a gummy frog?”

Eliot scowled.

“I’d rather eat my boot,” he growled, sounding a little more like his usual grumpy self. Then his eye caught movement in the leaf scatter around him from the nearby acacias. “Huh,” he said softly. Then he pulled out his knife and began to dig in the dirt around the base of the tree.

“Now I know you’re delirious!” Hardison said, scowling at the wounded man. “What the hell crazy thing are you at now??”

Eliot didn’t answer, but carried on excavating a hole beside him, trying hard to not jar his injuries while working diligently.

“Eliot … what are you doing??” Hardison insisted, now getting annoyed. “You’re gonna open up that hole you got in you, man! What the hell –“

Eliot let out a grunt of satisfaction, dropped his knife and reached into the hole, and Hardison could now see the red dirt sifting downwards into what appeared to be a small underground chamber seething with –

“ANTS!! Dammit, Eliot!! Those are friggin’ ants!!”

Eliot was too preoccupied with digging around in the small hole he had made in the top of the chamber, and then he grinned as he pulled out his hand. He was holding something, and his hand and sleeve were swarming with small, irate insects. He shook them off and then uncurled his fingers.

In the palm of his hand lay maybe a dozen insects with huge, swollen abdomens. Eliot picked one up by its front end, stuck the almost transparent abdomen in in his mouth and sucked. His eyes closed with the pleasure at the sweet flavour.

“Jesus!!” Hardison yelped and then glared at Eliot, who ate another of the ants.

Eliot licked his lips and cleaned a dribble of fluid from his chin.
“Honeypot ants,” he said. “Good eats. Want one??”

“What?? No!!” Hardison was appalled at the very idea. “That … that’s … Eliot, that’s beyond disgusting!!”

Eliot finished off his handful of ants and went back for more.

“They’ll help stop you from bein’ dehydrated, Hardison. The aborigines treat them as a delicacy.”

Hauling out more of the big-bellied creatures he held one out to Hardison. “I’m bein’ serious here,” he said, his face drawn and tired despite the grin. “The honey’s high in energy an’ should keep you goin’ for a while. C’mon, Hardison,” he wheedled. “Grow a couple, will ya?”

Hardison, thirsty as hell, gulped.

“But –“

“Just bite down and don’t worry about it. Insects are protein too, so you’re gettin’ two in one.”

Hardison stared at the ant and then at Eliot.

“Oh god … I don’t believe I’m actually doin’ this,” he moaned, and gingerly manoeuvred the ant between his forefinger and thumb. But … Eliot said they were tasty. “That is one big-ass ant!” he whined, and then opening his mouth and closing his eyes, Hardison ate the ant.

It was a combination of crunchy insect and sweet, honeyed nectar that soothed his throat and freshened his mouth, and he managed to swallow without barfing.

“See? Good, huh,” Eliot said. He held out the handful of fat ants. “These are the main nest’s food supply for the winter. Don’t worry – they’ll easy make more of ‘em,” he said. “They feed off the honey through the winter if food gets scarce.”

Hardison opened his eyes, grimacing, and covered his mouth as though trying to keep the ant down. But he held out his other hand and took the ants from Eliot. Within five minutes he had eaten the lot.

As they settled back onto Gertie and got her to her feet, Hardison shuddered.

“Eliot?”

“Yeah?”

Don’t ever … ever … mention to anyone that I ate ants, y’hear? No. BODY.”

Eliot’s devious silence didn’t bode well, Hardison thought. The nasty, beat-up, crazy-in-the-head cowboy was gonna tell everyone. He just knew it.

Muttering dire threats as he touched Gertie into a walk, Hardison looked at the horizon and knew he had to get Eliot back to the homestead as soon as he could before the man passed out, because an unconscious Eliot was an Eliot who couldn’t ride a camel, and then, Hardison knew, they were both completely up shit creek without a paddle.

To be continued …
Jo had a hard time keeping Lizzie focused. On the face of it, Jo thought, it was to be expected. Lizzie was only six years old, tired and worried about her family, and every few minutes, the little girl’s eyes strayed to the wilderness beyond the west paddock gate, as though her need to make sure that Eliot and Hardison were okay would make them appear as though by magic.

But Lizzie did enjoy helping Jo feed the dozen brood mares that Wapanjara owned. The animals were due to foal within the next week or two, and Jo kept her busy leading each mare into the yard for a feed and a quick check to see how they were progressing.

She told the child each horse’s name and about the foal’s sire, and explained that the foals would eventually become sought-after working stock horses. If Lizzie was still at Wapanjara when the foals arrived, Jo said, then she would get to name one of them.

“Really??” Lizzie said, eyes bright with pleasure. “Can Eliot help?”

Jo nodded, even as her heart clenched with concern for the man she regarded as a son.

“Of course he can, sweetie. Alec too.”

Lizzie nodded, and even as she held the lead rope of a big grey mare, huge-bellied and due to foal within the next day or so, her eyes strayed beyond the yard and towards the west paddock, studying the stunted mulgas and stringybarks, the grass and termite mounds stretching into the haze of a hot spring day. Nothing moved.

Lizzie sighed. She patted the mare’s neck, and the animal lipped gently at her fingers, hoping for more scratchies.

She turned and looked up at the water tower, and there was Parker, sitting sprawled on her chair under the sun-brolly, munching on a handful of grapes. The thief was, to all intents and purposes, relaxing in the sun, but Lizzie knew Parker’s keen vision was sweeping the homestead.

All she could hear was the occasional lowing of cattle coming in to drink at the big troughs just beyond the yards and within the paddock boundary. Here and there were the calls of galahs and lorikeets and she suddenly heard ‘boo-book … boo-book’ from a little mopoke, the tiny owl trying to sleep but now hassled by a pair of magpies, their fluting calls shimmering through the clear air.

Lizzie checked the paddock again, and seeing no sign of her family, disconsolately turned back to the big mare, who was happy to receive the attentions of this small human who gave such nice hugs and scratches.

Jo watched and fretted and smiled reassuringly, and checked the west paddock as often as Lizzie, and her heart sank at the emptiness of the landscape.

“‘It’s … it’s a good job … we’re not up in Arnhem Land …’” Eliot ground out as he hung onto Hardison, every step Gertie took jarring his side and his head.

“That right?” Hardison murmured, trying hard to make out the faint track Gertie was following in the bush. He just fervently hoped the big camel knew where she was going, because Eliot had become less and less helpful over the past hour. “How come?”
Eliot let out a low chuckle.

“Ever heard … ever heard of mangrove worms?”

Hardison grimaced.


Eliot flinched as pain hit him hard and his head swam, but he smiled grimly.

“Big, long grey things … live in the mangrove trees. Good tucker,” he added.

“You eat ‘em??” Hardison cringed internally. He thought pemmican had been bad enough when it came to survival food.

“Yeah … it’s like eatin’ a foot-long slimy grey piece of snot. It … it don’t taste like much, but it … it’ll keep you alive,” Eliot explained.

“Dear God, Eliot … I tell you now, I am never comin’ back to Australia!! Well, not unless it’s Sydney, with cars, an’ street lights, an’ … an’ … cell phones, an’-“

Eliot suddenly shifted sideways.

Hardison felt his friend’s grip slacken, and Eliot sagged and fell bonelessly from Gertie’s saddle before the hacker could do a damn’ thing about it.

“Eliot!! Oh, no–no-you-don’t, you ass-hole … koosh, Gertie … koosh!!”

And Hardison was out of the saddle before Gertie had properly sat down. He crouched beside Eliot, who lay sprawled on his back, blinking hazily in the bright light of this hot day.

“I … I fell off Gertie,” he mumbled vaguely. “Side … side hurts …”

“Of course it hurts, you moron!!” Hardison babbled as he checked his friend’s wounds, and he gritted his teeth in annoyance as he saw the fresh stain of blood on the bandage around Eliot’s ribs. “Damn-damn-damn …”

“S’okay …” Eliot said, waving a hand in Hardison’s general direction. “I … I’ll be fine … we can’t be far from home now … few miles, maybe …”

Gertie stretched her neck out and laid her great head beside Eliot, her prehensile lips nibbling at his shoulder, her concern evident by the pathetic little squeaks she gave. Eliot rolled his head to squint at her, and he gave a wobbly smile.

“Hey now, pretty girl … ‘m okay, I promise … ow! Dammit, Hardison!!” he cursed as Hardison eased a folded gauze pad from their pack beneath the bandage to try and stop the bleeding. There were no more pressure bandages, so he had to improvise.

“Well, maybe next time you’ll think twice about fallin’ off a camel, Eliot, huh??” Hardison griped, managing to work the pad into place. “Dumb-ass,” he added under his breath. Finished with the bandage, he held up three fingers in front of Eliot.

“Okay, Spencer … how many fingers’m I holdin’ up?”

Eliot scrunched up his face in an attempt to focus.
“What fingers?” he croaked.

“Shit. Well, that’s just great!” Hardison muttered, worried. “Okay, you fool, up you get … we gotta get home an’ I have to figure a way of keepin’ you on Gertie ‘cause I sure as hell ain’t carryin’ your sorry ass!”

“I … I c’n walk –“

“Eliot … you can’t even sit up on your own, man!” Hardison tried to be as gentle as he could as he lifted Eliot to his feet and half-walked, half-carried him over to Gertie and eased him into the saddle. “Okay … now listen … hey – Eliot!! You listenin’ to me??”

Eliot peered at him hazily.

“Yeah … I hear you …”

Hardison thought the situation through for a second before continuing.

“Right … here’s what we’re gonna do, alright? Eliot? Okay?”

“Uh-huh …” Eliot sounded befuddled.

“You’re head’s all screwed up, an’ you got a fever, an’ we have to get home an’ let Jo clean you up, so … you ride Gertie an’ I’ll walk. So … I’m gonna tie you to the saddle.”

Eliot let out a ‘pffff’ and grinned.

“I can … I can ride a damn’ camel, Hardison,” he scoffed and then tilted dangerously sideways.

Hardison propped Eliot back on the saddle and unclipped one of Gertie’s reins. Within minutes he had Eliot anchored to the central cantle with the pack on the seat in front of him.

“If you feel as though you’re gonna fall let me know, will ya? Lean forward an’ rest on the pack … just let Gertie an’ me look out for you, El.” Hardison patted Eliot’s good shoulder, and helped the wounded hitter lean his body and head on the pack, cushioned by the soft blanket from Gertie’s saddle. Eliot sighed with relief as the position took the pressure off his ribs and eased the pain in his head. It took no effort now to stay in the saddle as long as he kept his feet in the stirrups. “Okay?” Hardison asked, taking his hands away to see if Eliot could balance on his own.

“Yes,” Eliot whispered into the blanket. All he wanted to do was sleep and feel no pain.

“So … hang on … Gertie’s gonna stand up, an’ then we can go home.”

“Sure … sure …” Eliot muttered to himself more than to Hardison.

Hardison took a deep breath. It was now or never. He grasped Gertie’s remaining rope rein.

“Gertie … hut-hut!” he ordered.

And Gertie, still giving out tiny squeaky grunts of concern, rose to her feet, and Hardison could have sworn she did so as gently as she possibly could.

Hardison patted her on the neck.

“Good girl … you’re a good girl …” he crooned, and Gertie whiffled at his short-cropped hair. “You okay up there El?”
“I’ll live,” came the muffled reply.

“That’s cool, bro. So … let’s go home.”

And with Eliot now safe and secure on Gertie’s back and Hardison looking forward to an uncomfortable hike through the bush where there were snakes, and lizards and goddamn stuff that bit and stung, they headed along the faint track that led to Wapanjara and safety.

Parker enjoyed sitting on top of the water tower. On her first full day at Wapanjara she had asked Jo for some ribbon, and she had systematically fastened red ribbons – neatly tied into fetching bows around all of the acid-weakened joints of the frame so she didn’t have to keep checking, and Jo and Soapy had thought the ribbons charming. Effie had grunted and raised an eyebrow, but declared the ribbons useful.

So, she sat comfortably in her chair, the balmy breeze riffling her hair, and watched out for her two errant team members while also keeping an eye on the stranger loitering in the stringybarks.

Opening her chill-box, Parker lifted out a donut. Effie made excellent donuts – Eliot’s recipe, Parker knew. She had Eliot’s scope, and she studied the figure on the hill. She only saw a vague shape most of the time, but the stranger wasn’t trying to hide, just stay out of the heat and sun. She saw the roan horse’s tail swish in the shade. It took her a moment or two to seek out the figure of the watcher. The person was small … child-like small, and Parker remembered that the person Eliot though was his assailant was a Mongolian woman, Khenbish Hadan. But Parker couldn’t tell if the stranger was male or female.

She took another bite of her donut. The watcher was sitting on a rock, cross-legged, facial features shadowed by a stockman’s hat. Parker grinned. The watcher was looking right back at her. She waved cheerily at the figure on the rock and pointed two fingers at her own eyes and then at the watcher. The stranger didn’t move.

“That’s right …” Parker murmured to herself, “I’m watching you watching me, and now you know it. You and your icky horse,” she added. “Now you just stay there, so I can keep an eye on you, dumb-ass.”

And finishing her donut, she took a swig of Effie’s home-made lemonade and settled down to wait.

The sun was high in the sky with not a cast shadow in sight, and Lizzie was just about asleep on her feet. Jo had noticed that the child was flagging, and had fed and checked the last two mares herself, making Lizzie sit in the shelter of the big water trough beside the barn.

“Allright, young lady,” she said as she turned the last mare out into the small paddock beside the barn, “let’s find somewhere shady to sit and eat lunch, and then it’s to bed with you, y’hear? You can hardly see straight.”

Lizzie turned bleary eyes to this kind, gentle lady whom she had decided was her new grandparent, and shook her head.

“Not until my Eliot’s home, Grandma Jo. And Alec. ’Cause Eliot’s –“

“…hurt, yes, so you said,” Jo finished, and felt a sudden lurch of fear as she said it. She lifted the basket which contained their little picnic and took Lizzie’s hand. “C’mon, then. We’ll find somewhere nice to eat where we can keep a lookout and you can also have a little nap. Does that work?”
Lizzie rubbed her eyes, thought about it, and then nodded reluctantly.

“You’ll watch for them?”

Jo nodded.

“I will. I promise.”

And Lizzie knew she would, because Eliot belonged to Jo just as much as he belonged to Lizzie and her family, and Eliot always kept his promises. So, it made sense, Lizzie thought, that Jo would do the same.

So they wandered over to the ground where the land rose in front of the yards and the road from Wapanjara headed up the incline towards the stand of stringybarks, and sat on the ground beneath the shade of an old gum tree which marked the boundary of the homestead. There, Lizzie discovered, she had an even better view of the west paddock as it stretched into the distance, and she sat down with her back against the ancient tree and helped Jo unpack the basket.

The house was only a couple of hundred yards away, and she could see her parents on the veranda with Grandpa Soapy, looking through piles of old bits of paper and talking very seriously about something.

She checked Parker. Yes … there she was, sitting on the water tower, looking through Eliot’s scope at the stranger who was watching them from the stringybarks high above them. This person, whoever they were, made Lizzie angry. She knew her daddy thought the watcher was the one who had wounded Eliot in the fight, and nobody … nobody … was allowed to do that.

She took a plastic mug filled with lemonade from Jo and drank it gratefully. Feeding horses was thirsty work, and she could hear the tractor’s rumble from the back of the homestead where Charlie and Kip had begun stacking bales of fodder.

Jo sat down beside her and munched on a sandwich, and Lizzie took one for herself, taking a bite of the delicious bread lathered with ham and tomatoes and Eliot’s homemade mayonnaise. She felt better with a little food in her, and she peered into the basket to see what else she could eat. She was about to lift out some figs when something caught the corner of her eye.

Lizzie frowned as she peered at the expanse of the west paddock. She took another sip of the cold lemonade and swallowed it, studying the bush spread out before her. Glancing down, she grasped the figs. She must have been mistaken … there had been nothing there. But as she munched one of the figs, she glanced back at the paddock.

And deep in the shimmering haze of midday, there among a clump of termite mounds and white drifts of bindi-eye, something moved. Something big, brown and camel-shaped.

Lizzie took a sudden, sharp intake of breath. And then she dropped her food, stood up and began to run.

Alec Hardison was very, very tired. He plodded on beside Gertie, listening to the scuff of her big, flat feet over the dusty track. He carried a stick he had cut from a mulga, because only an hour earlier he had stopped to relieve himself and come face to face with a large brown snake as he stood behind a tree. He didn’t know which one of them was more agitated, and the snake – all six or so feet of it – slithered off into the undergrowth, leaving Hardison frightened out of his wits and now without any inclination to pee in the bushes.
Eliot, only half-conscious and feverish, had grinned as Hardison babbled on about the snake. He had somewhat gleefully informed the hacker that the thing was a western brown snake – a somewhat unimaginative name, Hardison thought – and that while it was highly venomous, it was a shy snake, Eliot said, whose aboriginal name – ‘Gwardar’ - meant ‘go the long way around.’

Hardison had not been convinced. He was sure the beast was hatching plans to return and bite him for the sheer hell of it, so now he carried a stick.

“Are … are we there yet?” Eliot murmured yet again from his slumped place on Gertie.

Hardison, who knew damn well that Eliot was doing this just to annoy him, scowled.

“Don’t make me come up there, Spencer. Y’hear me? An’ no, we’re not there yet!!”

They walked on for another twenty minutes or so. Hardison wiped the sweat from his face and neck with his handkerchief, and damn, but his feet hurt. He hung onto a stirrup leather and let Gertie have her head, knowing now the big camel had some sort of homing instinct as the dromedary had a determined aura about her as she strode along the faint track.

Hardison lifted his hat and shaded his eyes as he walked, gazing into the midday haze, the horizon shimmering in the heat. He narrowed his eyes, trying to focus, but he brought Gertie to a halt so that he could stop the blurring caused by every jarring footstep.

“Why … why’re we stoppin’?” Eliot asked painfully. “Are we –“

Hardison smiled then, a white, even smile full of joy. In the distance he could make out buildings and yards, and there, in the centre, was a water tower adorned with red ribbons.

He rested a hand on Eliot’s leg and patted it.

“Yeah, man,” he said, voice warm with relief. “We’ve made it.”

And even as he said it, he saw a tiny figure running towards him in the heat haze, arms flailing and curly hair flying.

Lizzie was coming to bring them home.

She flew into his arms, and Hardison lifted her, holding Lizzie close and hard, feeling the tremble of her small body and hearing the sob in her throat.

“You’re safe … you’re safe …” she whispered into his neck, burrowing into him, trying to reassure herself that Hardison was living and breathing and safely home.

“S’alright, baby-girl … it’s alright … we’re here …”

And peering past Lizzie’s arm he saw more figures running towards them, and he closed his eyes for a moment, relishing the feeling of the nightmare being almost over.

“Eliot??”

Hardison felt Lizzie lean back in his arms and reach out for Eliot, her sudden, sharp intake of breath making her body hitch.

“Eliot!!” she cried, and she touched his limp hand where it hung down Gertie’s side.
Eliot, sprawled on Gertie’s back, heard his best girl’s voice through the fog in his head, and his heart calmed, and little fingers clutched his.

“Don’ … don’ worry, ‘Lizabeth Grace … I … I’ll be fine …”

Hazy, dull blue eyes opened and studied her, and she took in the raw gash above his ear and the blood-sodden bandages around his ribs through the unbuttoned shirt. She held his hand, feeling the heat in him, and she knew then he was very sick.

“I told them,” she wailed, “I told them you were hurt … “ and she looked at Hardison, eyes full of tears. “You’re both hurt!”

“Nah, baby-girl, I’m fine, so don’t you worry. We’ll be good as new … both of us. Now … c’mon … we gotta get Eliot home an’ patched up, an’ then you can tell us all about it, okay?”

And then Jo and Parker were there, fussing and organising and Nate was reaching out for Lizzie. But she refused to be separated from Eliot so her father lifted his heavy six-year-old daughter onto his shoulders so she could be beside him as Soapy caught up with them, ribs protesting. Sophie checked Hardison, and as a family they walked Gertie out of the west paddock and swung the gate shut behind them, with Lizzie hanging onto Eliot’s hand and fretting about the blood soaking down his side and pants leg from the still-bleeding hole in his side.

“What the hell happened??” Soapy ground out as Charlie and Kip met them at the front of the house, Effie standing with Buster at the top of the veranda steps.

Hardison kooshed Gertie down and many hands reached out to hold Eliot, and he moaned as he shifted in the saddle. Lizzie whimpered as she heard the sound, and Nate lifted her from his shoulders and she bustled forward to stand beside Eliot as Sophie and Charlie untied the rope holding Eliot in the saddle.

“He’s shot, Soapy … some bastard shot him!” Hardison hissed quietly so Lizzie couldn’t hear. “We got to the bore, and we were doin’ okay and some asshole shot him an’ then shot Bomber an’ …” Hardison’s chest heaved as the memory hit him, and he knuckled tears from his eyes.

“Soapy, love … can you help here?” Jo asked, cradling Eliot’s head as they lifted him from the saddle.

“Some mongrel shot my boy???” Effie growled, fury in every word. “By God, I’ll – I’ll … “ and then she took a deep breath as she saw Eliot eased from the saddle and laid onto his back on the ground. “Bloody young boofhead’s bleeding again,” she said softly. “I’ll clear the kitchen table, Missus,” she said, and turning on her heel, headed back up the veranda steps as fast as her bunions would let her.

Lizzie was sticking to Eliot like a limpet. She knelt beside him as Jo checked him quickly, and Eliot lifted his hand to ruffle her curls.

“Hey, ‘Lizabeth Grace …” he slurred. God, his head hurt, and his side was a mass of agony, but he was safe now with his family and ‘Lizabeth Grace was beside him and –

“You got shot!!” Lizzie snapped, fury oozing from her, “You got shot and you’re bleeding and I knew you were hurt and … and you bashed your head and you’re all … all beat up and –“

“Lizzie darling,” Sophie interrupted, “let’s get Eliot inside so Parker and Jo can take care of him, okay?”
Lizzie turned hurt eyes to her mother.

“I told you he was sick, Mama!!”

Sophie felt a pang of guilt, even though she knew the decision they had taken to wait was the right one.

“I know, Lizzie … I know. But right now he needs us, so come on – off you go and keep the doors open so we can get Eliot inside, and then we can see how hurt he is. And yes, before you ask, you can stay with him for a little bit until Grandma Jo says we all have to leave while she cleans him up.” She said soothingly, even as Nate gave her a look which said Lizzie wasn’t to be so easily placated.

“Lizbeth Grace …” Eliot gasped as he was gently lifted by his family, and Lizzie stowed away her anger and walked with him as he was carried up the step and into the house which he thought of as his home.

But as Parker turned away to run to Oggie and retrieve the big medikit from its storage bin, she looked up at the stringybarks.

The watcher was gone.

To be continued …
That Brave Hearts Dare

Chapter Summary

There is much blood and infection in this one, so if you're squeamish, be warned.

The bright, scorching light of midday turned quickly to the cool dimness of the house he loved as Eliot was carried into the kitchen, gentle hands supporting him and Lizzie’s small fingers grasping his. For through the pain and fog of infection and hurt, his best girl was there and she would watch over him, and he knew he would survive this, no matter what, because his ‘Lizbeth Grace wouldn’t let him die.

The old, sturdy table awaited him, he knew. Huge and made of oak, for over a century it had been the workhorse of the kitchen at Wapanjara, and Effie kept it scrubbed and spotlessly clean.

He felt the solid surface, and he heard whispered conversation as Lizzie’s hand disappeared from his, and Eliot, alone again, suddenly began to fight against the hands, those grasping, restraining hands, holding him down and making him lie still and –

“Eliot, I’ve brought a cushion.” Lizzie’s voice cut through the fog and he felt her raise his head and a warm softness was placed beneath him so as to ease the discomfort. “Grandma Jo says to stop being silly and lie still! She wants to turn you on your side,” she added gently, and Eliot quieted, his god-daughter being the only anchor he had in this world of hurt and confusion. He opened his eyes and through the blurry dimness, there she was, staring at him, eyes large with worry.

“That’s great, Lizzie,” Parker said as she marched into the kitchen and placed the big medikit on the sideboard. “Keep talking to him while we have a look and see what we have to deal with.”

Hardison followed her in, and Nate and Sophie stood in the doorway, watching out for their daughter.

“Jo …” Hardison whispered, “the bullet’s still in there.”

“Oh … blast!” Jo muttered. “He needs a doctor, people! I can’t –“

“It’s lodged under the skin, next to a rib,” Hardison continued. “Eliot said you’d taken a bullet out of him before. This shouldn’t be too bad,” he added. “He seemed to think you’d cope with it just fine.”

Parker’s head snapped up from her job of disgorging equipment from the medikit, but Jo was already cutting Eliot’s shirt off and perusing the sodden bandage and the fresh blood. She studied the infected cut in his shoulder and the older injuries from Hadan’s knife. He was a ruddy mess.

Parker frowned at Hardison, who looked exhausted and somewhat shaky.

“When? When did he get shot? Did he tell you?”

Hardison opened his mouth to answer, but Jo, beginning to snip through bandages, answered for him.
“Years ago. He turned up one day in Darwin with two bullet holes in him … right shoulder, left leg. The shoulder wound was through-and-through, but I had to dig a fragment out of his leg. Silly idiot was bloody sick for a bit, I can tell you – oh Eliot!” she murmured, shocked.

As the bandage fell away she was faced with the ugly, suppurating wound, swollen and sluggishly bleeding once again.

“He came here???” Parker ground out. “He didn’t tell us where he went and left us worrying for nearly a month and he flew to Australia??” She stared at Eliot, absolutely furious. “Eliot … I … you …” she stuttered, and then poked him in the hip where he wasn’t hurt. “You and me … we are going to have words!”

Eliot, not too sure why Parker was angry with him, swore quietly so Lizzie couldn’t hear him, or so he thought.

“You said it, momma,” Hardison grumbled at Parker, and then swayed.

A chair appeared as though from nowhere and Effie pushed him down onto it.

“Park your arse, sunbeam,” she growled, and gave him a mug of hot tea. “Drink. Then you go and have a shower and get some sleep, y’hear me? Are you hungry?”

Hardison looked up at worried muddy eyes, and Effie’s pudgy face was creased with concern.

“Um …” he pondered, “maybe a lil’ bit.”

“Righto, my lad. Duchess?” Effie looked at Sophie fretting quietly in the doorway. “Could you take this young bludger out onto the veranda and I’ll bring him something to eat in a minute once I get the nipper settled?”

“Settled?” Nate said, a little startled.

“Yes, Einstein,” Effie said a little testily. “She’ll be staying with the Yank until the Missus gets him patched up. You seriously think she’s going to leave him? She’s only just got the daft sod back, and she won’t let him out of her sight, I betcha.”

Lizzie turned hot, teary eyes to her parents.

“Not leaving, Mama. He needs me.” Her voice turned from anger to desperation. “Please, Daddy … don’t make me go. Please.”

Effie, not one for mincing her words, ruffled Lizzie’s curls and rested a hand on Eliot’s shoulder.

“This is the life you chose for her,” she said quietly. “She understands consequences, so let her deal with ‘em in her own way. She’s a good kid. She’s bright. She’ll cope.”

Eliot groaned as Jo and Parker turned him as gently as they could onto his side, blood trickling down his stomach and his back.

“Lizbeth Grace … I … I’ll be fine … you shouldn’t see this … “ and his hand reached out to wave her away.

Lizzie was having none of it. She caught Eliot’s hand in both of hers and squeezed, and Eliot, despite his heart-felt wish for her not to see him like this … bloody and sick and … and useless … caught her small fingers in his and hung on as though his life depended on it.
“Effie says you’re nothing but a bloody pain in the arse!” Lizzie stated, loudly and very, very clearly, to her best friend and guardian.

There was a collective cringe from her family, and Eliot winced.

“Too bloody right, nipper!” Effie agreed. This was a child after her own heart, she decided.

Soapy elbowed Nate.

“Give it up, mate,” he murmured. “Effie and Lizzie. That’s too tough a combination for me. The little’un will be just fine, I’ll wager. Jo and Parker will make sure she doesn’t see anything too bad, I’m sure, and I think she’ll be concentrating on Eliot more than anything else. You can deal with any fallout later. Now’s not the time, I reckon.”

Nate and Sophie looked at one another. This was their life. Stuff like this happened, and Lizzie knew it. They had never hidden anything from her, and had never lied to her. She knew danger was part of the job.

“Oh God …” Sophie groaned, and looked at her daughter who was now concentrating on Eliot. The hitter was watching Lizzie with an intensity that made Sophie’s heart ache. She and Nate had done the right thing making Eliot Lizzie’s guardian. He was devoted to her, even as he did his job and kept his team safe. But it had never occurred to her that Lizzie could guard Eliot with equal ferocity. “Nate … leave her be. She’ll be fine.”

Nate hitched an eyebrow. Of the two of them he had always been the pragmatist when it came to Lizzie and the life they led, but now … he studied his daughter, holding Eliot’s hand in hers and talking to him quietly. Eliot’s blue eyes, dull with pain and the effects of concussion, continued studying Lizzie even as Jo began to explore the bullet hole in his side.

“You’re right, Soph. Of course you are.” He took a deep, shuddering breath. He was so proud of Lizzie it hurt. She was loyal, loving and kind, and was the sum of everything he and the rest of the team stood for … especially Eliot, one of the most dangerous men in the world. He deserved her love.

“Nate …” Soapy tapped Nate on the shoulder. “We need to talk.”

Tearing his eyes away from his daughter Nate followed Soapy into the living room. Kip was sitting at the table, eyes big and worried, his school project in front of him unheeded.

“I, uh … I’ve asked Charlie to get the rifles from the gun case in the office,” Soapy said, his voice low.

“Are you sure –“ Nate said, frowning.

“Some bugger shot Eliot and would have killed Alec too. And now that bloody woman or whoever they are watching us has gone.”

Nate wiped a hand over his face as Sophie joined them.

“I don’t like guns, Soapy … and Eliot likes them even less. But I suppose you’re right. We can’t involve the police in this. I think there must be some involvement at a political level, and who knows what’s going on.”

“I got some stuff on the tablet, Nate,” Hardison said as he stiffly wandered into the living room, his mug of tea in his hand. “There’s definitely somethin’ hinky goin’ on out there at Albany, but I need
to review the footage an’ do some research before I can say any more. I … I can’t see straight right now. I’d rather wait until El’s doin’ better …”

“Don’t worry about it, Hardison,” Sophie said, patting the exhausted hacker on the shoulder. “Come on … let’s get you some food and then rest. Kip …” She turned to the little boy watching them with wide eyes. “Would you like something to eat? Lizzie will be through in a bit, okay?”

“Is Eliot going to die??” Kip asked fearfully.

_Oh, Lord._

Sophie smiled reassuringly at the child who had already lost his mother. To lose Eliot would be … _damn_, she didn’t even want to think about it.

“I think he’ll be fine, Kip. In fact I’m positive. Grandma Jo will get him better, although I think he’ll be feeling grouchy for a bit, knowing Eliot! So … come on, let’s get some lunch. I’m sure you can see Eliot later.”

“Really?? You promise??” Kip’s black eyes brightened with relief.

“I promise. And Eliot will tell you I _always_ keep my promises.” Sophie said, and held out her hand. “Come on, Kip. Let’s go out onto the veranda and I’ll ask Effie for something for us to eat.”

Nate caught her arm before she could move.

“In here, Sophie. _Please._”

Sophie raised an elegant eyebrow.

“It’s that dangerous?” she asked quietly.

“Probably not, but seeing as Eliot’s out of commission for a bit, then …” Nate shrugged.

“You’ll be safe enough,” Soapy said. “Did Eliot tell you my history?”

“Hell, he didn’t even tell us you existed, so no …” Nate replied as Sophie moved to sit down beside Kip.

“Well … let’s just say I know how to use a rifle, so no worries about safety here at the house,” Soapy added.

Nate decided he didn’t need to know more and grinned, the tension easing. He took a deep breath and scratched his head. This was turning out to be one _helluva_ day.

Jo was impressed with Team Leverage’s extensive medikit.


Jo ran her fingers very gently through Eliot’s sweat-damp hair and winked at Lizzie.

“Now then, young Lizzie … I need your help.”

Lizzie tore her eyes away from Eliot’s ashen face and nodded vigorously.

“What do I do?” she asked, still holding Eliot’s hand in hers.
“Well … apart from talking to Eliot and keeping him still, I was hoping you and Effie could take care of that cut on his head while Parker and I sort the rest of him out. Could you do that?”

“Oh, yes!” Lizzie gasped eagerly. She was sure she could take care of Eliot.

“No …” Eliot muttered feverishly, “no … she shouldn’t be seein’ this … she’s just a kid –“

“I’m not a kid!” Lizzie retorted, her anger still bubbling. “I’m nearly seven! Effie will help, and Grandma Jo and Parker will make you better, so just be quiet!”

“Boy … she’s mad!” Parker whispered not-very-quietly.

“Parker … take … take her outta here –“

Lizzie was now beyond angry. She was incensed.

“Stop talking about me as if I’m not here!!” she ranted, and cupped Eliot’s cheek with a small hand. She leaned forward and kissed his nose. “I’m staying,” she said, her bottom lip quivering.

“Aw, ‘Lizbeth Grace …” Eliot groaned, “don’t … don’t even think ‘bout … ‘bout cryin’ –“

Lizzie’s lip gained a definite wobble.

“You’re my Eliot. And I look after you. So … so I’ll cry if I want to,” she added, knowing full well that Eliot couldn’t deal with a weepy ‘Lizbeth Grace.

“And I thought Sophie was a good grifter!” Parker wondered, and Jo had to hide a grin despite the worry about Eliot’s condition.

She nudged Parker.

“Let’s get on with this,” she said. “Any lidocaine in there?”

“Topical or injection? We have both,” Parker answered, pulling out a small vial and a spray.

“Injection,” Jo said, now concentrating on the bullet wound. “The intercostal nerves’ll make it bloody painful digging the bullet out.”

“Just … just do it,” Eliot grunted, “don’t bother with –“

“But … but it’ll hurt!” Lizzie bubbled, eyes filling with tears.

Eliot, sore and confused and feeling just a tad bullied, sighed even though the pain in doing so made his stomach churn.

“Okay … okay … I give up …” he said wearily. Lizzie grinned through her tears.

As Jo and Parker set to and placed a series of injections around the wound, Effie took through as much food as she could muster at short notice into the living room. After giving Hardison a small clip around the ear for being so tired and sore, she told everyone to tuck in, and then added that Eliot was holding his own and that everyone had better bloody well stay clear until Jo, Parker and the nipper had finished sorting Eliot out.

Nate thought Eliot didn’t have a chance in Hades of using his usual grouchy anti-social behavior to get his own way.
Effie reappeared through the kitchen doorway and stumped over to the table, studying Eliot as he lay there, battered and bleeding.

“Alright nipper … the Missus wants us to tidy up this bloody idiot’s head. Think we can do that?”

Lizzie nodded enthusiastically, happy to be doing something positive.

“Wait … wait a minute –“ Eliot murmured, not too sure what was going on, even as Jo began to mop up blood and pus before she attempted to cut out the bullet.

“Shut your cakehole, Yank – you just be still and we’ll sort out that dent you put in your noggin, you pillock!” Effie ordered, a sense of satisfaction in every word.

So Effie set the big kettle to boil and Parker handed her some antiseptic to add to the water as well as some nitrile gloves and a pack of gauze pads. No-one had any gloves small enough for Lizzie, so Effie told her to wash her hands as well as she could. With Effie’s help she scrubbed and rinsed and scrubbed again with some special pink liquid soap Parker gave her from the medikit, and then they were ready.

Effie and Lizzie sat on stools beside Eliot’s head, and Lizzie passed the little cook gauze pads when asked and told Eliot everything she was doing so that he knew she was helping.

Effie was uncharacteristically gentle. She cleaned up the raw, swollen gash and muttered to herself as she did so, and once it was as clean as she could get it, Lizzie was allowed to stick on the butterfly strips to keep the cut closed.

Eliot watched and listened and occasionally said ‘ouch,’ but he complimented Lizzie on her gentle touch and said the cut didn’t hurt much, which was a bit of an understatement and Lizzie knew it, but she loved him anyway.

The bullet wound was a different matter.

By the time Lizzie had finished her work, Jo was ready to remove the bullet.

Parker looked nervous. She had some medical skills and she had stitched Eliot and other members of the team up now and again, but removing a bullet? This was shaky ground for Parker. But Jo smiled at her and told her not to worry – the bullet hadn’t gone beyond the rib and Eliot wasn’t bleeding internally, so while the wound was messy and bloody, the infection was more of a problem.

But, Jo knew, it wasn’t going to be easy.

The lidocaine had numbed the area around the wound and done it quickly, much to Jo’s relief. But she wasn’t too sure that the entire area of the injury had been numbed, and the nerves lying deep against the bone could be difficult to get to.

“Okay … now then,” she said more to herself than anyone else, “we need you to be still, Eliot, alright? I’m using a scalpel and I don’t want any slip-ups, so Parker … Effie … hold him if I ask you to. Lizzie, you just stay put, and you can talk to him if you like, and hold his hand. But if I ask you to move, you move, hear me? I don’t want you in the way of getting hurt.”

Lizzie frowned, confused.

“But Eliot would never hurt me –“ she began, but Eliot squeezed her hand gently.

“Lis … listen, ‘Lizbeth Grace … I need you to be safe, no matter what … so do as Jo asks.”
Lizzie, seeing the grim weariness on Eliot’s gaunt face, realised then that he was serious, and she nodded wordlessly.

“Okay then, laddie … let’s get this damned bullet out of you and you’ll feel much better.” Jo said, sounding far more confident than she felt.

Eliot, hurting and exhausted, closed his eyes and felt Lizzie’s hands clasp his. He was ready.

“Do it,” he rasped, and tensed.

Jo pressed down with the scalpel and opened a two-inch incision from where the bullet entered Eliot’s flesh to run over the lump where the bullet lay. A stream of blood and pus trickled down the injured hitter’s side onto the table.

Eliot grunted and his breath hitched, but he didn’t move.

“You felt that??” Parker asked, worried, as she mopped up the blood welling from the cut.

“A … a bit,” Eliot said wanly.

But Jo had lifted the forceps and she began probing for the projectile lodged hard against Eliot’s rib. Eliot couldn’t stop himself. He let out a keening groan, and Lizzie looked up at Jo, frightened by Eliot’s pain.

“It wasn’t supposed to hurt!” she gasped, and then she saw the blood. Lizzie swallowed and looked away, focusing hard on Eliot’s face as he clenched his jaw against the pain.

“Lidocaine’s not perfect, love,” Jo said even as she carefully felt for the bullet. Damn, but it was playing hard to get. “It can’t numb bone, and we don’t have the equipment to go deeper. It’s just an awkward injury –“

She felt something hard click against the forceps.

“There you are, you little bugger!” she hissed triumphantly. “I can’t see … can you –“

But Parker was already there, wiping away oozing blood so that Jo could try and get a grip on the projectile.

“Let me …” Effie said, and handed Parker more gauze pads. “Talk to him, nipper … he needs you to talk to him,” she added, urgency in every word, and Lizzie, gulping, tightened her grip on Eliot’s hand.

“Eliot … Eliot!” she stammered, trying hard to think of something to tell her best friend.

“Y … yeah?” Eliot ground out, muscles jumping along his jaw.

“Um … oh yeah …” Lizzie suddenly remembered something. “Grandma Jo says when the foals are born I can name one!”

“Did … did she now?” Eliot’s voice was hoarse with pain. “Thought of … thought of a name?”

“Not yet,” Lizzie continued, “but I’ll have to think of one for either a boy or a girl, won’t I?”

“C’mon … c’mon, you little blighter –“ Jo muttered, probing hard, and Eliot shuddered.
“You … oh, jeez … you could ask Kip about … about a nice Warumungu name …” Eliot gasped, shaking, and Lizzie felt tears begin to prickle her eyes. But she couldn’t cry … not now. Eliot needed her.

“Or maybe a Cherokee name,” she continued desperately, and she glanced up at Jo, who was chewing the inside of her cheek as she concentrated on finding the bullet buried in Eliot’s sturdy frame.

Eliot grimaced as the agony ran through him. The lidocaine was friggin’ useless.

“When … when I’m feelin’ more like it, ‘Lizbeth Grace … we can … we can think up some great names, huh …”

Lizzie bit her lip. Jo was obviously struggling to find her quarry.

“Grandma Jo –“ she almost sobbed, her voice wavering in her distress.

“GOT YOU, you little bastard!!” Jo almost shouted, and Eliot’s battered body sagged with relief as he heard the metal clink when Jo dropped the bullet into a bowl.

“Is it out???” Lizzie demanded, her face breaking into a tremulous smile. “Is Eliot going to be alright??”

Jo, pressing gauze against the freely-bleeding wound, nodded.

“I think so, sweetie. Just let Parker and I get this stitched and the rest of him cleaned up, and then he can get to bed and heal.”

“Antibiotics?” Parker asked quietly, holding up a pack of various small containers.

Jo nodded.

“He’ll need ‘em. The infection’s pretty nasty. The silly sod didn’t take care of that shoulder wound like we told him to,” she added wryly. “But I think he’ll live to fight another day.”

Lizzie shook her head vigorously.

“Nope,” she said, gazing at Eliot. “No fighting. He’s going to sleep and do as he’s told, isn’t he, Effie?”

Effie sat down on the stool next to Lizzie and put her hand over Eliot’s, still enclosed within Lizzie’s small fingers.

“Too bloody right, nipper. We’ll keep him straight, won’t we??”

Lizzie’s face was set with determination, and when Eliot finally managed to open his eyes and squint at both Lizzie and Effie, his heart sank even as he began to drift into an exhausted sleep as he lay sprawled on his side on a kitchen table. They had a decidedly dangerous glint in their eyes as they gazed back at him.

“Aw hell … “ he said, hearing Parker’s snort of humour. “Why … why don’t you people just … just leave me alone!”

“You still have to explain to me why you didn’t tell us you were flying to Australia with two bullet holes in you!” Parker growled, and she prodded him in the leg.
Eliot understood then that if he continued he would be taking a figurative long walk off a short plank if he didn’t shut up.

Jo felt his forehead. There was still the infection and fever to deal with, and Eliot was going to have a rough time of it, and not even Lizzie’s care could prevent it.

There was also the fact that the watcher on the hill had gone. Something dire was brewing, and Eliot needed care. But they would deal with whatever came, and they would close ranks and protect their own.

Gathering her wits about her, Jo Munro began to stitch the wound in Eliot’s side, and hoped to God that nothing else would happen for a day or two. But even as she worked, she knew that it wouldn’t be long before the watcher was back … and this time the stranger wouldn’t be alone.

To be continued …
Weary and Footsore

Chapter Summary

There is mostly fluff and more fluff with a dash of angst, but there is more mention of the death of a minor animal character, so please be warned.

Charlie made his way up the veranda steps with three of Soapy’s rifles and a pump-action shotgun in a bag, and carrying as much ammunition as he could manage. Although everybody was safe for now, he didn’t know how long that would last, so he wanted the house well-protected.

Gertie honked wistfully at him as she sat patiently in the yard, bereft of the human she loved and flicking her sore ear.

“We’ll get you sorted in a minute, girly,” Charlie whispered, and he knew that something terrible must have happened to Bomber, because he had heard the horse’s name in a whispered conversation between Soapy and Hardison as he helped ease Eliot off Gertie. But he hadn’t had time to chase it up until now. He would ask Hardison, and then he would do his best to break the news quietly to Kip, who had ridden the old gelding since before he could walk, sitting in front of his father as Charlie and Alice had ridden down to the billabong for picnics. God, how he missed his wife.

Gertie flapped her lip and stretched her neck out, sniffing, trying to find out what had happened to Eliot. She knew he was hurt, and it made her fret. She gurgled unhappily to herself.

Soapy relieved him of the weapons and disappeared into his office, locking the door behind him. The pastoralist didn’t like weapons around children, so he would minimise any contact until it was needed. He would check and load the weapons alone.

“Alec?” Charlie said softly.

Hardison sat at the table tiredly finishing off a plateful of food. Everyone was trying to eat while they waited to hear how Eliot was doing, and Sophie was busy talking to Kip about Portland and how he and his father should visit someday, which Kip thought was a great idea. Seeing his son occupied and distracted, he felt he could ask Hardison about what had happened.

Hardison took a swallow of tea, and smiled wearily at the aborigine.

“Yeah, man … what’s up?”

Charlie flicked a quick glance at Kip before answering. The child was animatedly asking Sophie and Nate about animals in the Oregon Zoo.

“What happened out there? I mean … I know about Eliot … but Bomber? What happened to Bomber?”

Hardison caught Charlie’s quick check on his son, and immediately understood. Lifting his mug of tea, he cut a slice of Effie’s pecan pie, put it on a small plate along with a fork, and eased himself out of his chair.
Gesturing at Charlie with a jerk of his head, both men wandered over to the big, comfortable old armchairs surrounding the fireplace and sat down.

Hardison sighed with pleasure at the comfort of the cushions as he leaned back, and then he eased a kink out of his neck.

“I’m sorry, Charlie. I know he was your horse, an’ he took good care of me on the ride out there. But this sonofabitch came from nowhere. He shot Eliot. Knocked him right off the pump-house, an’ then he tried for me, missed, an’ shot Bomber. One shot in the head. It was quick an’ painless, at least. Then he tried for Gertie. He shot up the whole damn’ camp, Charlie … like he was tryin’ to obliterate us. If he couldn’t get El an’ me, he was goin’ to make sure we would never get out of there.” Hardison couldn’t stop the tremor in his voice.

Charlie sat silently, absorbing the information and felt his chest ache. It was more loss to deal with, and Kip had loved the old horse. Then he nodded.

“Okay, Alec … I understand.”

Hardison stared at the unlit fire.

“I covered him up, Charlie. Made sure he was taken care of. But we couldn’t bury him, bro. I had to take care of Eliot.”

Charlie smiled softly, his mobile face worn with grief.

“That’s alright. When this is done with I’ll go out there and take care of the old fella. Don’t mention it to Kip. I’ll tell him later.”

Hardison sighed.

“Yeah, well, we’ll have to tell Lizzie an’ Soph too, so I’m with you on that one.”

The both sat quietly for a minute or two, and then Charlie spoke, his tone a little raw.

“What happened to the bloke who shot Eliot and Bomber?” he asked.

Hardison’s face crumpled a little, but his voice when it came was sure and steady.

“I killed him.”

Charlie studied the hacker and saw the exhaustion in the young man’s frame and the strain on his face. He leaned forward in his chair and smiled grimly.

“Good,” he said.

Hardison had one more thing to do before he could finally get some rest. Rather than bother Jo and Parker as they cared for Eliot, he went to the bathroom and filled a bowl with hot water from the faucet. Then he found some antiseptic and cotton wool in a cupboard. Carrying the whole lot carefully in his arms, he clumped down the veranda steps and laid everything on the bottom step.

Gertie was still resting where they had left her. She sat like a huge, brown, gurgling cat, legs tucked neatly beneath her, rumbling to herself in the hot afternoon sun. Buster sat beside her in the shade of her big body, tongue hanging wetly as he panted.

Hardison looked Gertie in her good eye.
“Okay, young lady. I’m gonna see to that chewed-up ear of yours. You understand?”

Gertie flapped her lip at Hardison and squeaked.

“Hmmm … I’ll take that as a yes, then. So … let’s see if I remember how to do this …” He bent over and unfastened the girths on the heavy saddle and the buckle on the breastplate, and then removed the pack from the seat. Hauling the saddle off was a bit of a struggle. He had forgotten how heavy the thing was, but he finally managed it and carried it over to Oggie, leaving the old saddle on the stainless steel work surface the team used as an impromptu kitchen.

Returning to Gertie, he checked her over for any sore places left by the girth, but apart from her ear, she seemed to be in one piece.

“Right … you listen to me, Gertie – you don’t spit or bite or … or … do whatever camels do when they’re pissed, an’ I’ll clean you up so Eliot don’t whup my ass for neglecting his camel. Sit tight – here goes …”

Gertie harrumphed and waited to see what Hardison would do next.

Hardison soaked a large clump of cotton wool in the antiseptic-laced hot water, and standing beside Gertie’s head, he scratched her muzzle. Gertie hummed with pleasure. Then working his way up her head to her left ear, he very gently began to bathe the ragged edges of the bloody hole punched through the cartilage. Gertie flinched and she bawled a little, but she soon quietened down and the soft humming began once more.

Hardison smiled as Gertie chewed her cud, and he began to work in earnest on the injury. He soaked and cleaned and soothed, Buster sitting beside him studying Hardison’s work, and the more he tended to the big animal, the calmer the young hacker became.

Gertie’s gentle nature had worked its way through the chinks in Hardison’s urban-orientated armour. He found that he enjoyed the company of the ugly creature, and Gertie’s good humour and patience went a long way to easing Hardison’s anguished heart.

He sat down on one of the lower veranda steps next to the bowl of water, and patted his knees. Gertie dutifully laid her enormous head on his lap and grumbled happily to herself, and Hardison finished up cleaning the wounded ear. He examined it closely. The hole was clean and would heal well, but Gertie would have a ragged, scarred ear for the rest of her life.

“Well, babe,” he murmured. “It ain’t gonna improve your looks any, but who cares, huh. I’m sure any self-respectin’ boy camel will like a gal with a few scars. Eliot says scars’re sexy, so I know you’ll knock ‘em dead.”

Gertie, resting her head on Hardison’s lap and with her eyes closing as she relaxed in the heat of the day, had to agree. She chomped a couple of times and then she huffed lazily. She was very, very tired.

Hardison shifted a little so that he could lay his head against the handrail of the steps, and he closed his eyes against the bright sunlight. Rubbing Gertie’s velvet muzzle, he let the sounds of Wapanjara ease his exhaustion and his worry about Eliot, and lulled by the fluting calls of the magpies in the almond stand beyond Jo’s little garden, he began to doze.

It was late afternoon when Jo emerged from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a towel. She looked stressed, but there was relief in her green eyes.
“Okay … we need help to get Eliot settled in bed.” She took a deep breath to calm herself and then quirked a smile. “He’s tired, sore and complaining, and he’s running a bit of a fever, but I think he’ll be okay … given time.”

“Oh, thank God,” Sophie said under her breath. “Lizzie?”

Jo rolled a shoulder to ease the stiffness in her neck.

“With Eliot. She, ah … she won’t leave him – and believe me, I tried. And boy, is she giving him hell,” she added, amused.

“That’s my girl!” Nate breathed, tickled by the prospect of his six-year-old daughter ranting with impunity at Eliot Spencer, whose very name alone could make strong, very nasty men run for the hills.

Effie gimped through, easing past Jo and heading for Eliot’s room.

“I’ll get his bed ready, Missus, and he’d better bloody stay in it or I’ll kick his Yank arse all the bloody way to Alice Springs,” she muttered. “That’ll teach the mongrel to get himself shot, so it will … worrying the nipper … bleeding all over my table … not taking care of himself … young drongo …”

And so it went as she disappeared into Eliot’s room to turn the bedding back and put out a pitcher of water and a glass.

But even as Effie’s grumpy muttering continued, voices raised in argument drifted out of the kitchen.

“You didn’t tell us, Eliot!!”

“OW!! Stop … stop pokin’ me, Parker –”

“You’re sick, Eliot!! You got shot an’ now you’re sick and you didn’t take care of yourself and –“ Lizzie’s voice was shrill with anger.

There came a weak, pained growl.

“Lizbeth Grace … will you please –“

“ – and another thing!” Parker continued, “you could have died on that ‘plane!!” she ranted, “you were shot and you shouldn’t have flown and then where would we have been, huh?”

“Parker, I was just fine –“

“No you weren’t!!! We didn’t see you for nearly a month!! We didn’t know if you were alive or dead, you idiot!!” Parker poked Eliot again, this time in the knee.

“Grandma Jo says you’re going to be really sick for a bit, and if you’d taken care of that cut in your shoulder you wouldn’t be sick and Effie says you’re a stubborn boofhead and –“ Lizzie continued, now on a roll.

“Jeez, Lizzie … stop! I’ve … I’ve had worse –“

“I. DON’T. CARE.” Lizzie was getting frighteningly precise. “YOU. GOT. SHOT!” The little girl was apparently of the opinion that saying things slowly would help stupid, dumb, damaged hitters to understand what she was getting at.
“Aw hell –” Eliot’s voice now had a desperate edge to it, “will … will you two leave me alone?? I’m shot –”

“That’s the whole point, you … you … dumb-ass!” Parker blurted, slowly getting red in the face with fury.

Nate and Sophie peered around the kitchen doorway.

Eliot, lying prone on the kitchen table, looked as though he had been bandaged to within an inch of his life. Obviously Lizzie had been allowed free use of the medikit.

“Wasshappenin’?” Hardison said blearily, appearing at Nate’s shoulder. He had awoken from his doze on the veranda steps and wandered into the house looking for tea, leaving Gertie sitting half-asleep in the yard.

“Eliot’s getting a talking-to,” Sophie said matter-of-factly.

Hardison’s face slowly eased into a big grin.

“You go, girls!” he said, and his grin widened with delight. There was nothing quite like Eliot gettin’ an ass-whuppin’ from Lizzie and Parker. “That’s perfect … Mister Punchy gettin’ the butt-end of the argument for a change!”

Eliot flinched as he raised his head to say something insulting to Hardison, who was obviously taking great delight at his discomfort.

“Lie still!!” Lizzie ordered curtly. “And leave Alec alone! He’s very tired!”

“Tired??” Eliot let his head slump back onto the cushion. He was feeling woozy, shaky and feverish. His head was throbbing and his whole body was on fire, and he knew he was in for a bad night or two. “Tired?? I’m … I’m the one with the bullet hole here –“

“Yeah, and who saved you from the crocodile?” Hardison taunted.

“Crocodile? What crocodile??” Sophie gasped, horrified.

“Gertie!!” Eliot croaked, his voice beginning to fade. God, he hurt, and these people were takin’ advantage of his weakness and were intent on makin’ his life hell. “She sat on it!!”

“Skin it?” Nate said faintly. This was getting downright weird.

“Skin it!!” Hardison said defensively. “An’ I cooked it!!”

Lizzie looked at Eliot, his eyes glassy with fever, and then she studied Hardison’s smug expression.

“Crocodile? What crocodile??” she asked. “Really??”

Hardison shrugged.
“Well … just its tail,” he explained.

“You should’ve … should’ve seen his face when he ate … ate the ants,” Eliot continued triumphantly, despite the weakness of his voice. “He looked like … looked like he was suckin’ lemons.”

Parker’s jaw dropped. She glared at Eliot and then stared at Hardison, who was beginning to look more than a little embarrassed.

“Hey man!!” he hissed, annoyed. “You promised you would never mention it –“

“Did no such thing!” Eliot grumbled.

Parker shook her head in disbelief.

“There’s something wrong with you two!!” she snapped, and then stalked off to the bathroom to have a shower.

“Eliot … sweetheart … shut up,” Jo said as she began to clear up the detritus of taking care of the wounded man. “You’re going to bed and you’re going to stay there. You’ll take your antibiotics, sleep, eat and mend. If you’re very good, Lizzie can stay with you for as long as she likes … if that’s alright with her mum and dad.”

“Oh, we don’t seem to have any say in the matter,” Nate answered, sighing. “Lizzie? Is that what you want?”

Lizzie sat up straight on her stool and crossed her arms, her face grim and determined.

“Abso-bloody-lutely!!” she said.

Eliot slumped back on the table and groaned.

It took longer than the team had anticipated to get Eliot settled in his bed.

First of all he demanded to sleep in his fold-down bed on the veranda, where, according to his concussed and feverish mind, he could watch out for Khenbish Hadan.

This resulted in a rather colourful and inventive rant from Effie, who guided Nate and Charlie as they carried Eliot through to his bedroom and gently deposited him on his bed.

Eliot, stubborn to the end, tried to stand up, failed miserably and after being changed into a pair of soft pyjama pants, was manhandled very carefully into bed and propped up with pillows.

Jo decided it was time she took his temperature, and when Eliot opened his mouth to snarl something annoying at Effie, she shoved the digital thermometer in his mouth and told him to keep it there if he valued his life.

“You can come in now, Lizzie!” Jo called out softly, knowing the child was hovering outside the closed bedroom door, waiting for Eliot to be sorted out before she was allowed to see him.

Lizzie opened the door and peeped in. She carried a comforter, her school project book was tucked under one arm and a glass of orange juice was clutched in her hand. Obviously she had every intention of settling down to watch over her damaged guardian.

While Jo waited for the beeping of the thermometer, she pulled over Eliot’s huge old armchair and
left it beside his bed so that Lizzie could be close to her best friend.

“There you go, Lizzie … you can sit there. Now … he’s not up to entertaining you. He’s your responsibility, and you have to make sure he rests properly. Can you do that?”

Lizzie settled herself in the chair and carefully placed her glass of juice next to Eliot’s pitcher of water. She nodded eagerly, and tucked her book down the side of the chair just as the thermometer beeped.

Eliot eyed Jo as she retrieved it and looked at the result.

“Hmmm …” Jo said thoughtfully. “Not too good.”

Lizzie’s face dropped in alarm.

“Why? Is Eliot going to be alright? Is he –“

Jo smiled at the little girl, and held up a placatory hand.

“I’ll show you. See if you can read this …” and she held the thermometer out for Lizzie to see. Lizzie read well for her age, and she and Hardison enjoyed working with numbers, so with only a little difficulty she read out the result.

“One … one hundred and … and two … point six …” she murmured. “what does it mean?”

“Well,” Jo explained, “it means Eliot has quite a fever. Body temperature is normally about ninety-eight point six, so Eliot’s is high. It means his body is trying to fight off infection. So …” she picked up a bottle of pills from the bedside table, “that’s why he has to take these pills. They’ll knock the infection out and his temperature will come down and he’ll feel much better. But it can take a few days.”

“I … I’ll be fine, ‘Lizbeth Grace … you don’t … you don’t have to worry …” Eliot breathed, trying his best to reassure Lizzie.

“I’m not worried,” Lizzie said a little sharply. “I need to know this stuff in case you get hurt again. Grandma Jo’s showing me so I can help Parker if she’s not around, and take care of you.”

Now that made Eliot smile. Trust his ‘Lizbeth Grace to be so practical.

“Righto, boy,” Jo said, arching an eyebrow, “medication time. You take the pills with no argument, you hear me??”

“Oooh – Grandma Jo … wait a minute …” Lizzie shuffled about and brought out her project book. Pulling the pencil from its loop, she turned to the back page and rested the book on Eliot’s bed. “How do you spell temp … temp’rature?” she asked.

Jo, enchanted by Lizzie’s plan to take care of Eliot, helped her write out headings. One was ‘Temperature’, then ‘Time.’ Next came ‘Pill’ and then ‘Time.’ Jo suggested a third heading, which was ‘Notes’.

“Wait … what?” Eliot queried, a little nonplussed. “I … I’m a school project now??”

“Well,” Jo said, amused, “Sophie tells me you turn everything you can into a life lesson for Lizzie, so why not this?”

“But … but … I’m shot –“ Eliot said plaintively.
“Oh, stop the drama,” Jo scolded lightly. “She’ll practice writing skills, maths, telling time … it will help her observational skills as well as note taking. These are all useful, life-enhancing abilities which will stand her in good stead. Plus, you idiot, it’ll be a handy record of what a bad patient you are.”

Eliot couldn’t argue with that. He did, however, try a growl, but it made him cough which in turn hurt his side and head, all of which Lizzie dutifully recorded in her project book. He said a bad word under his breath. Lizzie laboriously wrote ‘Eliot swore.’

“Pill-taking now, laddie. Then try to sleep. Effie’s going to sit with you for a bit, and Lizzie … make sure he doesn’t try anything daft.”

Lizzie nodded seriously. Eliot was obviously going to be quite a responsibility, but, she decided, she was ready for anything Eliot could throw at her.

Eliot closed his eyes and felt every ache and twinge his battered body came up with. Jo had told him that the bullet had broken a rib and he now had a series of stitches in his side as well as in the injury to his shoulder. Lizzie had used just about every bandage in the medikit and he felt like an Egyptian mummy. And he felt sick and cold and the fever made his joints ache.

“M’cold,” he muttered.

Jo tucked sweat-damp hair back from his forehead.

“I know, boy … I know. Fever chills. I’ll ask Effie to bring a couple of hot water bottles for you when she comes in.”

Lizzie slowly jotted it all down, although she struggled with the spelling. Her mother would help her fix it later.

Jo studied Eliot and the child for whom he would give his life. She also had a feeling Lizzie would do anything to save Eliot. They were quite a pair.

And as she shook out a strong antibiotic pill and poured a glass of water, she knew that Eliot was in for a hard night. But maybe this time … this time … Lizzie’s presence would ease the man’s nightmares and pain.

That evening, Hardison switched on Oggie’s bank of plasma screens and sat down to review the shots he had taken of Albany Mining Company. Plugging in the memory stick, he began to study Larry’s flyover, and once more zeroed in on the strange, silo-like columns and the four filtration ponds.

He pressed the ‘pause’ button and sat for a while, chewing his lip and thinking. Then he reduced the screen and began to try and find out exactly what he was looking at.

Gertie wandered over to see what he was doing. She had been left to roam the yard, a great, big, hairy guard-camel, Buster tagging along behind her. She whiffled at Hardison’s arm, and he patted her absently.

“Yeah … I need to find out just what the hell they’re up to, babe,” he said, and Gertie gurgled. She harrumphed and then sat down beside him, her huge body almost filling the space under the canopy. Buster flopped down at Hardison’s feet and promptly went to sleep. “So … “ Hardison continued, “what are those things, huh? Because they ain’t anythin’ to do with titanium mining,” he declared.

Gertie rubbed her head on Hardison’s shoulder.
“Yeah, you’re right. They are mining, but what, exactly?” He pulled a bag of gummy frogs from his pocket and ate one. “Huh. Let’s see what dear ol’ Google can tell us.” He glanced at Gertie, who was staring at the bag of gummy frogs. He took one out of the bag and offered it to her. Gertie, very, very gently, inhaled the gummy frog and chewed contemplatively. She hummed with pleasure. Hardison grinned. *Eliot’s camel liked gummy frogs.*

So for the next hour, Hardison, with Gertie’s aromatic help and assisted by two bags of gummy frogs, delved the depths of the internet and tried to find out just what the hell Albany was up to.

When the answer came, Hardison’s eyebrows shot up.

“Well, I’ll be damned!” he said. He turned to look at the veranda, where Charlie sat reading with Kip, one of the rifles safely stowed under his seat and away from his son. “Hey, Charlie! Got a sec?”

Charlie looked up.

“Yeah, mate. What can I do for you?”

“Um …” Hardison didn’t quite know how to ask. He knew from Eliot that he shouldn’t mention Alice’s name, and he didn’t want to upset the man or his son, but this was important. “I, uh … I was wondering if … y’know … you had any rock samples from Albany,” he finished lamely.

Charlie got it instantly. Eliot must have mentioned his wife’s interest in geology.

“No idea. But Kip and I can go look, no worries!”

“Cool … cool …” Hardison muttered. “Yeah … if you wouldn’t mind, that is … if it’s not … y’know … awkward …”

Hearing Hardison’s request, Charlie knew it would be painful looking through Alice’s things, but he also knew he had to face it sometime. It would be a start.

“Sure. Now??”

Hardison thought about it, and shook his head.

“It’ll wait until tomorrow, m’man. I’m gonna turn in,” he replied.

He ate another gummy frog, fed one to an eager Gertie, and in the morning, Hardison decided, he would rummage in Oggie’s secure locker and bring out the team’s small geiger counter.

To be continued …
When the True Souls Stand like Granite

Chapter Summary

I’m no scientist or engineer, so all techno-errors are mine alone.

The homestead was quiet that night.

With Gertie and Buster on the prowl, Nate and Sophie retired back to their comfortable bed in Oggie’s big tent, and Charlie and Kip settled down in the Nipper Nest as it was safer than heading back to the nearby bungalow. Charlie took the opportunity of relative solitude to tell Kip about Bomber. The little boy was upset, and after a while, Charlie held his son close and dried his tears, and Kip tucked himself into his father’s side and fell into an exhausted sleep.

Lizzie wrapped herself in her comforter and dozed next to Eliot, curled in the big chair with her arm flung out onto the bed, fingers resting on Eliot’s arm as he lay, sweating and feverish and shaking with chills.

Effie sat silently in her old rocking chair, the perennial cup of tea beside her, and watched over both of them.

The nightmares had gradually begun as darkness fell. The fever ran through Eliot like wildfire, and the memories of times past came strong and sinister, a megrim of despair coursing through his confused mind.

The concussion wasn’t helping. Already having problems focusing, the fever made it worse, and the only thing keeping Eliot anywhere near sane was Lizzie’s small hand on his arm. Whenever the dreams became too bad or he began to struggle with what was real and what was nothing but wisps of memory, her fingers would tighten and she would waken, patting his arm as she had done all of her short life, calming him.

Occasionally he would feel the pressure of a cold compress on his forehead, blissful to his concussed brain, and he would hear grouchy murmurs as Effie took care of him. Words like ‘boofhead’ and ‘mongrel’ drifted through his delirium and he smiled even as the chills shook him to the bone.

A rota had been introduced to look after Eliot, but Effie had growled objections, saying she would look after the bloody Yank and take care of the nipper, so help her, because she was the housekeeper and it was her job. Nate did try to offer to take over for a while so she could get some sleep, but Effie, in her own incomparable way, shot him down in flames and told him he had better come up with a plan to deal with those bastard shite-heads who had shot her boy, and Nate obviously needed to rest his brain.

It was at some point in the early hours of the morning that Eliot somehow got it into his fever-addled head that Khenbish Hadan had come to take Lizzie and Kip. Of this fact, he was absolutely certain. The woman was going to take the children and hurt them, and he was the only person who could stop her, because that was his job … that was his very being. And he couldn’t protect them lying in this goddamn bed and being useless, so he decided he was going to get up, get dressed and fetch Gertie, and then he was going to take the children into the bush where they would be safe and where
Gertie would guard them. And *then* he was going to kill the murderous bitch who was threatening them or he would willingly die in the process.

The first Effie and Lizzie knew about it was when Eliot awoke with a shout. He struggled to get himself upright, and he was halfway out of the bed before Effie, who was dozing in her chair, could manage to catch him and he ended up in a heap on the floor, taking the little cook with him.

She held him close and felt the shuddering tremor in his stocky frame.

“Now then, laddie, just what the bloody hell d’you think you’re up to, hey???” she said in what she hoped was a conciliatory tone, as Eliot had a wild-eyed glare on his face and whatever was going on in his head was obviously worrying him.

“Eff … Effie … get the kids … she’s here … that friggin’ woman … she’s … she’s gonna take ‘em, Effie … she’s gonna hurt ‘em … please, jus’ … jus’ *let me go*, dammit!”

Lizzie awoke with a start.

“Eliot??? Are you –“

“‘Lizbeth Grace!! Go … go get Kip … we’re … we’re leavin’ … gotta keep … keep you safe …” Eliot ranted, his face twisted in pain and his hair damp with sweat.

“Go get the Missus, nipper. I think –“ Effie began, and then struggled to hold Eliot even in his weakened state. He was determined to protect his own, and despite his illness she realised he was still going to be a handful to deal with. “Stop it, you pillock!! The kids are safe, don’t you worry now –”

Eliot was having none of it. He fought feebly to be free of Effie’s strong arms but his body wouldn’t obey him and he slumped against her. But fight he did, with every inch of his being. He ranted and railed and he struggled, because he knew Lizzie and Kip were in mortal danger and it was his job to keep them out of harm’s way.

“Let … let me go!” he wheezed, and tried to pry Effie’s arms away from his chest. “Effie … *please* … jus’ … jus’ let me go … ‘Lizbeth Grace … she’s … she’s in danger … gotta make sure-“

Lizzie, now wide awake and alarmed, scrambled over the bed and slid down beside Eliot, and with the clarity and simplicity of a six-year-old, she caught Eliot’s fevered face in her hands and looked him straight in the eye.

“Here I am, Eliot!! I’m safe, I promise!! And Kip’s with Charlie!!” she said, her voice clear and loving. “That woman *isn’t here* … you’re sick and your mind is all mixed up!! No-one’s going to hurt us!! See??” She patted and stroked his cheek, and slowly, so slowly, Eliot stopped struggling. His best girl was here, and she was safe, and he was hurting and the fever was running riot through him. But Effie was holding him and Lizzie was … *oh thank God*, she was unhurt and Kip was with his dad and he could stop worrying for now and he was *so tired* …

“What’s going on?” Jo said as she came through the door tying the belt on her dressing gown. “I heard yelling –“

Effie looked up at Jo and grimaced.

“Silly bugger thought that that flamin’ shonky Hadan woman had come to take the nippers,” she said, and slowly loosened her grip on Eliot, who rested back in her arms, exhausted beyond belief. Effie shook her head. “His heart’s going like the clappers, Missus. Gave himself a bit of a panic there
for a moment or two. But the kiddo here … she calmed him right down.” Effie grinned at Lizzie, who was still stroking Eliot’s cheek.

Lizzie looked around at Jo.

“He’s really, really hot, Grandma Jo,” she said, worry in every syllable. “I think he’s getting worse!”

Jo knelt down beside Effie and felt Eliot’s brow. Lizzie was right – he was burning up.

“I think his fever’s peaking,” she said quietly. “Eliot … Eliot, love … we’re going to get you back into your bed and get you settled, and then see what your temperature’s doing.”

Eliot turned bright, glassy eyes from Lizzie to Jo.

“They … they’re safe, right?” he asked huskily. “‘Lizbeth Grace an’ Kip … they’re okay?”

Jo smiled tenderly, understanding his fears.

“Perfectly alright, boy. I promise.”

“Need a hand?” Hardison appeared at the door in his sweats, yawning. He was sleeping in the living room on a fold-down bed, and the commotion had awoken him.

“Oh, Alec, bless your heart,” Jo answered gratefully. “Help us get this fool back into his bed, will you?”

Hardison scratched his head and stretched.

“I seem to spend half my time haulin’ his sorry behind about, so … yeah. Let me in there, Effie …” He managed to work his way around Eliot and Effie, and leaned over, arms out. “C’mon, man … let’s get you back to bed … jeez, you’re burnin’ up –“

Eliot closed his eyes and leaned his head back as Hardison replaced Effie and held him for a moment or two so Lizzie could get out of the way.

“The … the kids … Hardison … they’re safe, right?” Eliot wasn’t letting go of the worry just yet.

“Lizzie an’ Kip are both fine, El … I promise. You, on the other hand, are a damn’ mess, bro. An’ you can’t stay here on the floor, so be still an’ let us help you, okay?”

Hardison’s soft voice helped Eliot’s pounding heartbeat settle a little, and knowing now that Lizzie was with him and that she had told him he was sick and needed care, he finally relented and allowed Hardison and Jo to ease him back into his bed.

Lizzie padded around the big bed, bare feet almost silent on the Navajo rug Eliot had brought back to Wapanjara from a road trip to Arizona, and waited as Eliot was settled under the warm blankets.

This time she had no intention of allowing Eliot to get so agitated, so she grabbed the two cushions from the chair and hauling her comforter with her, she settled in on the unoccupied expanse of bed.

“What’s she doing?” Jo whispered to Hardison.

The tired young hacker gave a wry smile.

“When she was a baby … Eliot got hurt real bad. He nearly died.”
“His back? That metal fragment in his back and that beating he took?” Jo asked.

“You know about that?” Hardison’s eyebrows hitched. Seeing Jo’s nod, he continued. “While he was down and out, the only way we could keep him still and healing was to settle Lizzie beside him.” The memories came thick and fast now. “Parker … she did his physio, an’ Eliot, stubborn cuss that he is, used to try an’ avoid it, but Parker would jus’ dump Lizzie on his chest an’ he didn’t move. Damn, but she’s good at keepin’ him in one place!”

“Well now, that’s useful to know!” Jo grinned as she saw Lizzie settle down, wrapped in her comforter and sitting cross-legged beside Eliot. She caught his hand in hers, and be-damned, Jo thought, but the man instantly relaxed as she wrapped her fingers around his.

“You stay put, Eliot!” Lizzie murmured softly. “Grandma Jo’s going to take your temp’rature and then you’re going to try and sleep. You promise??” She tried a glare, and Eliot, fuzzy and sore as he was, nodded, impressed.

“O … okay, ‘Lizbeth Grace … you sure you’re alright?” he slurred, already on the point of drifting asleep, although the prospect of more nightmares bothered him.

Lizzie just patted his hand and Eliot’s eyelids slid closed, even as Jo told him to open his mouth for the thermometer so she could check how the fever was reacting to the antibiotics.

Jo waited for the ‘beep’ and asked Lizzie for her school project book so she could see how Eliot was doing. His temperature had gone up … to be expected at night … but she also thought the fever was reaching its conclusion and she hoped it would break at some point in the near future.

When the ‘beep’ came, both Jo and Lizzie studied the result.

“103.2,” Jo said, and felt Eliot’s brow. He was sweating and pale, and Lizzie leaned forward to place a hand on his heated skin.

“He’s getting hotter,” she muttered, “and he’s so sick, Grandma Jo! He’s getting worse! Is he going to –” she gulped, she couldn’t say any more.

Jo shook her head reassuringly.

“No, sweetie, he’s not going to die. It just means his body is fighting back, and his temperature has gone up to try and combat the infection. I’m hoping his fever will break soon, and then he’ll feel a bit better. But when it does … he’ll need plenty of care and rest. Think you can help with that?”

Lizzie nodded eagerly.

“He’ll do as he’s told, Grandma Jo! Won’t he Effie??”

“Too bloomin’ right, nipper!” Effie growled. “He’ll stay in that bloody bed until we say so!!”

“You … you two …” Eliot whispered, even as he slipped into a troubled sleep, “nothin’ … nothin’ but friggin’ bullies …”

Hardison grinned toothily, tickled to bits.

“Aw, man … admit it … you’re beaten, Eliot! The great and dangerous Eliot Spencer, meek an’ mild like a fluffy little kitty-cat! Wait until I tell Parker —”

But Eliot wasn’t listening. He was sound asleep, his hand tightly held by a determined Lizzie.
Hardison yawned again.

“You folks need anythin’ else? Want me to spell you for a little bit, Effie? You’ve been up all night –”

“Nah,” Effie grumbled, settling herself back in her rocking chair. “Go back to your bed, sunbeam. Mind you …” she added, frowning, “… why the nippers? He knows what this bloody Hadan cow’s like, and in his mind she’s going after the little ‘uns. Why?”

Hardison shrugged.

“Eliot an’ kids an’ animals … his weak point. He’d go through livin’ hell to keep ‘em safe, an’ these two are so close to his heart … maybe that’s it. His mind’s just fixatin’ on that.”

Effie brooded for a moment.

“Maybe, laddie … maybe.” She gave a little shuddery wriggle, as though ants were crawling on her skin. “Blasted woman. Gives me the heebie-jeebies, so she does. Go to bed, boy. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Hardison frowned, but he was too tired to think about it. He had to tell the team about his findings in the morning, and he needed his wits about him. Explaining techy stuff to his people was always a challenge.

“’Night, Effie … Jo …” He didn’t bother speaking to Lizzie – she was too wrapped up in looking after their idiot hitter. So Alec Hardison shuffled off to his comfy bed, where he could rest and ease his sore body, and hope that the pale, shocked face of the man he had killed would not come to him in his dreams.

It was as the sun inched over the horizon, sending golden light over Jo’s garden and orchard and silhouetting the trees in the almond stand beyond it, when Eliot’s fever finally broke.

It came in a rush of perspiration and a gasp of discomfort, and Eliot’s frantic, stressed heartbeat began to slowly settle.

Lizzie, lying in a crumpled heap beside Eliot in a light doze, woke blearily and felt Eliot’s hand spasm in hers as he shuddered, muttering and disorientated.

“Effie!” she called out softly, but the little cook was already leaning forward and wiping Eliot’s face with a damp, cool cloth.

“Well, nipper,” she said, “looks like the fever’s broken. He’ll do better now.”

Lizzie’s weary face broke into a broad grin and she stroked the damp skin on the back of Eliot’s hand. Eliot murmured at her touch, knowing she was there, and the little girl knew then her guardian and best friend would, with care and love, be back on his feet in good time.

Nestling down in her heap of cushions and comforter, she curled up and went to sleep, Eliot’s hand clutched tightly in hers.

“Uranium?” Nate said, confused. “They’re mining uranium? So what’s the big deal?”

“They’re mining uranium illegally, that’s the catch!” Hardison explained.
Team Leverage were all – bar Eliot – sitting around the plasma screens under Oggie’s awning and Hardison was doing his level best to explain what he knew … which wasn’t that much, to be honest.

“I would think the restrictions and safety procedures would be enormous, given the radioactivity issue,” Sophie pondered and took a sip of tea.

It was mid-morning, and after Eliot’s bad night, they were all a little tense and weary, even though he seemed to be on the road to recovery. They had left him sleeping soundly after Jo and Effie had changed his bedclothes and got him comfortable. His wounds seemed less inflamed, and Lizzie had given him a few mouthfuls of cool, sweet orange juice before he slid into a dreamless sleep. The little girl was now dozing beside Eliot, protecting the man whose job it was to protect them all. But, Lizzie thought, he had no-one to protect him, so, she reasoned, that was her job.

Nate had cooked breakfast, surprising Effie with his skill, and he had told her to go to bed – he and the rest of the team could look after themselves for a day, he said. The little cook, grumbling and cursing, was secretly grateful for the respite, and hobbled off to her bed.

So now they were trying to figure out what was going on.

“So … why bother us,” Soapy queried. “There’s no uranium here on Wapanjara,” he added, frowning. “You saw the mineral reports, Nate – what the hell is this all about?”

“I can only give an educated guess, but I think it’s to do with your water supply, not the land itself,” Nate said.

Soapy thought about it before he answered.

“But our water is an independent artesian aquifer,” he said, confused. “Albany has no access to it, and why do they need it? They don’t have any livestock and they’ve got their own water,” he added.

“Yeah … but it isn’t an independent supply,” Hardison said, bringing up a map on the largest of the plasma screens. “See? Their water supply filters into Warumungu land to the east, and further to the west under the Barkly range and onto other stations.” On his tablet he drew the outlines of the Albany water supply and it appeared on the map. “Here …” he put a large, red cross on the map,” … is the mine. See? The water supply runs through it and off their land.”

Soapy’s face cleared.

“The buggers need the water to process the uranium ore without anyone finding out!” he breathed.

“So … This is what they’re selling,” Nate said, thinking out loud. “Chinese … are they selling to the triads? Or are the triads funding this and selling elsewhere?”

“Well, there’s a ready market,” Sophie said, her eyebrows dawn down. “Eastern Europe … former Soviet bloc … far east … not to mention that whole bloody mess in Afghanistan. North bloody Korea, for god’s sake!” she added.

“They have to hide the footprint, y’see,” Hardison continued. “Uranium minin’ is a messy business,
usually strictly controlled because of the environmental fallout. See these ponds?” He returned to Larry’s image of the mine. He pointed at the four ponds. “I thought they were filtration ponds. I was wrong. These are for the tailings from the mine. Open to the air … full of heavy metals … hellacious nasty stuff.”

“So … they want access to Wapanjara water because it doesn’t flow into anywhere else, and if it becomes tainted no-one’ll know?” Jo asked incredulously.

“In a nutshell, yeah,” Hardison said.

“But this whole business … it … it’s so complicated!” Soapy blurted.

“It appears they have plenty of money and lots of patience,” Nate said. “They want to drive you off,” he continued. “Not buy the place. That would bring too much notice from the authorities, and that’s why ‘Lady Eloise Stanton’ is such a threat.”

“But … even if we leave or die,” Jo continued, “Eliot and Charlie inherit this place. It would have to be sold to stop that. And from them it goes to … oh no. Oh no-no-no-“

“What? What is it old girl?” Soapy asked, worried.

Jo’s eyes went to the cattle yards, where Charlie and Kip were checking on the in-foal mares.

“Alice … is that why she died?”

Hardison’s face was sombre.

“She found out what they were doing, and that’s why she was killed,” he explained. “Charlie found some rock samples from Alice’s collection, taken from what had been the sheep station before Albany bought it. I checked ‘em out with the geiger counter, and although I’m no rock hound, I’d bet my last gummy frog that it’s uranium ore.”

Nate’s mind was now working overtime.

“The past few months, your stockmen left. They were being warned off … told to leave, or being told it wasn’t safe to work here. You can’t hire anybody else. The word if out. So … there are already rumours that things aren’t right out here at Wapanjara. Alice died … Soapy was hurt … and … someone knows about the inheritance. It figures! You called Eliot and he came here without a murmur. Somebody shot him because they knew that either Eliot or Charlie would check Bore Seven because of problems at the pump-house.” Nate’s face became grim. “They know. They know that if you remove the heritors, there isn’t anyone to leave the place to and when you two get scared off – or maybe even die in an accident – the place can be bought quietly and with no fuss through a shell company. Hey presto – instant independent water supply.”

Jo’s face suddenly paled.

“But there are other heritors,” she said faintly.

Parker frowned. She had a sudden feeling of dread.

“Who?”

Jo ran fingers through her silver-auburn curls.

“If anything happens to Eliot or Charlie … Lizzie and Kip inherit Wapanjara.”
To be continued …

* Told in 'Too Late the Hero'.
The Wide Horizon is Around Us Still

Chapter Summary

Tooth-rotting fluffery, this one. Sorry.

“‘Liz … ‘Lizbeth Grace …’”

Eliot awoke from a restless sleep, and opening his eyes, it took him a moment or two to figure out where he was. And then his gaze settled on familiar things…his old stetson hanging beside his stockman’s hat and whip on hooks by the doorway…the Cherokee blanket draped over the bed that had belonged to his great grandmother…and there, on the mantelpiece over the bedroom fireplace, in pride of place and displayed on an ironwood stand, was his Hanzō katana. It had a companion now…a wakizashi, also forged by the legendary master swordsmith Maeda Hanzō Mitsuyo* and as unique and as highly prized as the katana.

He was home, and now he remembered why. He checked his surroundings. He knew Lizzie had been there while he was delirious, her presence grounding and safe, and he had felt her little fingers soothing his forehead and holding his hand, and the shadows in his heart had lifted a little with her tender care. So in the midst of terrible illness, he had closed his eyes and slept quietly.

But Lizzie was gone, and he tried to sit up, as near to panic as Eliot Spencer ever could be. But a strong hand caught his shoulder and pressed him gently but firmly back down into the pile of pillows.

“Easy, Eliot…she’s okay.” Nate was sitting in Effie’s rocking chair. “Sophie took her away to get her to eat something. She wanted to eat here, but we thought you wouldn’t appreciate steak and eggs in your bedding.” He continued, smiling.

“You got that right,” Eliot croaked, his throat dry.

“Orange juice?” Nate asked, reaching for the pitcher beside the bed.

“Yeah…that’d be good…” Eliot murmured, and felt better as Nate helped him drink a glass of the delicious liquid. “Thanks.”

“How do you feel?” Nate asked, his voice rich with concern.

“Like I’ve been shot an’ someone hit me upsides the head with a baseball bat, but otherwise…a bit better. Clearer…not so fuzzy.” Eliot laid his head back on the pillows. “Don’t think I’ll be fightin’ a dozen ninjas any time soon, but otherwise…I’ll be okay in a day or two.”

Nate snorted.

“More like a week or two, man…you’ve been fighting quite the infection. You’re on the mend, though, Jo says.”

He fished around in his pocket for a moment, then pulled a small metal object out and handed it to Eliot, who squinted as he studied it.
“She dug that out of you.” Nate said quietly.

Eliot waved his other hand weakly at his bedside table where his spectacles lay.

Nate stood up and wandered around the bed, retrieved the spectacles and handed them to Eliot, who gingerly put them on, carefully avoiding the cut above his ear.

The spectacles helped the blurriness a little, and Eliot turned the bullet over in his fingers.

“Huh … .762 … probably a Dragunov or maybe a Tabuk, but unless I see the rifle, I can’t be sure.” Eliot winced as his head throbbed with the effort of studying the spent round, one side misshapen where it had skittered along his rib. “It’s the most common calibre for precision sniper rifles. If I remember rightly … and my memory’s not too clear, I gotta say … it was … it was rapid-fire, so a semi-automatic, not bolt-action. Tabuks … damn’ things are all through the middle east … they’re old but accurate within their range an’ easy to get hold of.”

“The sniper had been waiting for either you or Charlie.” Nate stated bluntly.

Eliot raised the wrong eyebrow and winced, the cut pulling painfully.

“So … it turned out it was a set-up an’ I was the target,” he said grimly. “Figures. The whole thing was intended to take me out, right? That’s one of the reasons they killed Alice.”

Nate nodded.

“Albany – well, their backers – needed you back here in Australia so they could dispose of you and Charlie, and then probably Soapy and Jo, somehow. But –“

Eliot paled suddenly, and Nate instinctively knew it had nothing to do with the Oklahoman’s injuries. Eliot, even as concussed as he was, had suddenly connected all the dots.

“Jesus, no … they are gonna go after Lizzie an’ Kip! I … I was right!” he growled feebly, and he felt the terror again … that gut-wrenching worry he had encountered during his delirium, and this time he made a concerted effort to sit up and fight his way out of the big bed. “Nate – help me out here –“ he ground out, and managed to fling back the blankets and swing his legs out of the bed in an attempt to sit up.

“Whoa-whoa-whoa!” Nate hastily put an arm out to keep Eliot off balance, and the hitter sank back onto his bed with a hiss borne of both pain and frustration. “They’re safe, Eliot … I promise you! We figured it out and we’ve got it covered, so will you just damn’ well stay put, you idiot!”

“Eliot!! What are you doing??” Lizzie demanded as she swept into Eliot’s room and bounced onto the bed, settling down cross-legged beside him. “You’re supposed to be in bed!”

“Eliot thinks he should be guarding you, Lizzie,” Nate said with a hint of smugness in his voice.

Lizzie’s brows drew down in a scowl as she studied Eliot, who was struggling to either get comfortable or make another attempt to escape the confines of his bed, she couldn’t quite decide which.

“That’s just silly!” Lizzie declared testily, annoyance in every syllable. “You can’t even stand up! You’re still sick and Grandma Jo wants you to stay in bed until you’re a lot stronger and the fection’s gone, so I’m looking after you. And that means I’m in charge … Grandma Jo says so!!” Lizzie laid a small hand on Eliot’s brow and the scowl deepened. “You’re all hot again!”
Eliot’s gaze had more than a hint of desperation in it as he glared at Lizzie – who ignored him – and then at Nate, who shifted the blankets back over Eliot after easing the frustrated hitter back into the bed.

“Hell, she’s even worse than Parker!” Eliot groused, unhappy but acknowledging he was still far from even being able to stand.

Nate’s brow furrowed. “Now, Eliot … you’ve always encouraged her to be independent and trust her instincts, so … you’ve only yourself to blame.”

Well, Eliot thought, perhaps Nate was right. He sighed painfully and settled back into his pillows, and Lizzie leaned over and dug out her project book from the chair. Opening it to the Eliot Project page, she studied Eliot, and then looked at his bedside alarm clock. She chewed her lip as she figured out the time – seven-ten in the evening – and wrote it down.

Eliot suddenly understood that Lizzie, his six-year-old ‘Lizbeth Grace Ford, hadn’t really left his side since the previous midday. He could see the tiredness in her face even as she stuck out her tongue as she concentrated on her writing. He glanced at Nate, and he could plainly see the pride in the man’s face at the tenacity and loyalty of his daughter, and Eliot once again thanked God that ‘Lizbeth Grace was in his life.

“She’s been here since –“ he whispered.

“Yep,” Nate interjected warmly. “She’s refused to leave you. Nothing Sophie or I say can sway her. She only agreed to go eat supper if I promised to sit with you.”

“It’s my job,” Lizzie mumbled as she wrote. “It’s what I do,” she added, and the echo of Eliot’s words almost broke the hitter’s heart.

“’Lizbeth Grace … go sleep, girl. I’m goin’ to be just fine, you know that, an’ –“

“Grandma Jo will be here in a little bit to take your temp’rature and give you your pill, and Effie said you should try to eat something then,” Lizzie continued as though she had not heard Eliot. “You have to eat, Effie says, or else you’ll be bloody useless.”

Eliot mentally made a plan to have words – gentle ones – with Effie about her language issues.

“If I promise to eat somethin’ will you go get some sleep –“

“I can sleep here,” Lizzie said. “I’ve got my comforter and cushions and my school project, and Effie says she’ll bring me some hot chocolate later and I found a book in Grandpa Soapy’s library that I can read, so –“

“What book?” Eliot asked. Despite himself, he was beginning to relax and the pain of his wounds was lessening. Lizzie’s chatter helped.


Eliot, still fretting about the threat to the children – indeed, to the rest of his family – shifted a little, and he held out a hand. Lizzie took it in both of hers, and Eliot rubbed a thumb across her knuckles.

“Yeah, darlin’?” he said softly.

“Grandpa Soapy told Mama and me about Bomber,” she said, and her voice hitched.
“Yeah … I’m so sorry, ‘Lizbeth Grace. I couldn’t stop it … Hardison and me, we –“

“I know,” Lizzie piped, and leaning over, patted Eliot’s cheek. “You were hurt and Alec would have been hurt too if he’d tried to do anything about it, and I know at least that Bomber didn’t feel anything. But … but you will find out who did it, won’t you?”

Eliot flinched. Lizzie didn’t know about Hardison killing the sniper. And, he decided, she didn’t need to know. Six-year-olds had no business having their lives tainted by the ugliness of violence and death.

“We’ll sort it out,” Nate said soothingly, with all of the love and certainty only a father could give. “Anyway, Kip’ll be in to see you before bedtime, Eliot. It’s the first time he’ll have seen you awake since we carried you into the house,” he grinned.

Eliot nodded and gently eased off his spectacles. Holding them out for Nate to take and replace on his bedside table, he slipped the bullet into his friend’s palm. Although he never lied to Lizzie, right now he didn’t want her worrying herself any further by seeing the battered piece of metal.

Nate’s blue eyes flickered and then he nodded.

“You gonna read to me, ‘Lizbeth Grace?” Eliot asked, as he closed his eyes and rested his head on the pillows. His head was aching, but he didn’t care.

“Really?” Lizzie asked eagerly. Eliot had read and sung to her since she was a bump in her mama’s tummy, but she had never read to him before.

“Yep,” Eliot murmured. “It’s about time you put in the work instead of me.”

Lizzie wriggled with delight and opened the well-worn book at the first page. She cleared her throat and began, slowly working her way through the words.

“Snugglepot and Cuddlepie … have a house up in a tree … it’s made of eu … eu …”

“Eucalyptus …” Eliot murmured. “That’s a tough one.”

Lizzie continued haltingly.

“ … eucalyptus leaves, so it’s very hard to see …”

And so, on a dark, breezy night that carried the scent of rain through the open window, Eliot Spencer and Nate Ford relaxed and listened to a little girl read to them of kangaroos and possums, and gumnut babies and snakes, and they were content.

The next day dawned dull and damp, a rare break from the normal spring heat. Effie was laying out breakfast on the veranda when Charlie clumped up the steps to join them, Kip and Buster in tow.

Soapy gestured at the young aborigine to sit down and eat, and Effie dumped a plate covered with steak and fried eggs in front of him. Kip snuggled next to his father and drank his orange juice before tucking in to a plate of scrambled eggs … his favourite, Effie knew.

The only people missing from the table were Eliot and Lizzie, both of whom were catching up on some sleep.
“Well, looks as though Dottie might foal today or tonight,” Charlie said, yawning. Dottie was the big gray mare who had fussied over Lizzie. “Maybe Lizzie might get a chance to see the foal being born … if that’s okay?” he asked, looking at Nate and Sophie.

“Charlie … if our six-year-old daughter can cope with watching Eliot have a bullet dug out of him, I’m sure she can deal with a foal being born,” Sophie said, reaching out to pour Charlie a cup of tea.

“Good-oh!” Kip said with relish. He had recovered a bit from Bomber’s loss, and a new foal would help. “Can I go see Eliot when he wakes up? Please, Dad? I want to tell him about Dottie!”

“As long as you don’t tire him out, son,” Charlie said, grinning. “He’s an old wreck, and he’s a bit stuffed to boot, so be gentle on him,” he added, teasing.

Parker snorted as she ate what Effie called a ‘bacon butty’, bacon in-between two slices of bread and dripping with glistening butter.


Jo nodded.

“We have lots of foals due over the next couple of weeks. Dottie’s our first, although Charlie’s mare had hers a week ago.”

Parker pondered the idea. She hated horses, or so she told herself, but a baby horse … well, that was different. Maybe. She had been intrigued when Sophie was expecting Lizzie, and Parker discovered she loved babies of all kinds, so … a baby horse. She would think about it for a bit.

Soapy buttered a slice of toast and gave a sideways glance to Nate.

They had discussed options the night before as to what they would do. Leaving wasn’t one of those options. There was livestock to care for, and the aforementioned brood mares needed close watching. And, Jo had said, where would they go?

Nate was still working his way through the situation, but Soapy had some ideas of his own. They couldn’t go to the police. Tom Reid, the area inspector and a close friend of the Munros, had retired the year before, and a new man … Spicer … had been sent from Adelaide as a cover. Jo had instantly taken a dislike to him, and Soapy wasn’t impressed.

“Alec …” Soapy asked as he finished his toast. “Is there any way … y’know … that you can check on police officers? On the web?”

Hardison, much refreshed after a good – and mostly dreamless – night’s sleep, nodded, waving a hand in the air.

“Sure, no problem. Who?”

Soapy saw Jo’s curious glance, and continued.

“His name’s Everett Spicer … Detective Inspector, originally from Adelaide.”

Jo shuddered.

“Horrid man,” she said under her breath.

Hardison thought about it before answering.
“This is why you can’t go to the police,” he said. “You don’t trust him.”

Soapy nodded.

“Creepy bugger,” he answered. “There have been a few whispers about his temper and that he’s out here to get him out of the way, but that’s all.”

“Sounds iffy,” Sophie said, sipping tea. “Bent coppers … a dangerous breed,” she murmured to herself.

“I’ve a lot to look at today, so yeah … I’ll see what I can dig up,” Hardison said quietly. “I’ve come to a few dead ends so far, but I have a couple more avenues to explore … dark web stuff,” he added mysteriously. “I can’t make my mind up yet about who’s runnin’ the show, but the triads’re in there somehow. I just can’t nail down where an’ who they’re sellin’ processed uranium to. I also want to run Larry’s footage again an’ see if they’re makin’ uranium rods on-site or whether they’re shippin’ ‘em elsewhere.” He glanced at Nate. “I … uh … I also want to run facial recognition on the shooter. See what I can come up with,” he added cautiously.

Nate nodded.

“I’d love to have a look inside the whole place,” he said, “see what they’re up to and what their weaknesses are, but we’re so damn’ far away. I have to say … this country has me struggling. I mean … it’s so remote, and we have to travel through tough countryside to get here, let alone figure out what Albany’s plans are. Is there any way you can hack into their systems, Hardison?”

The young man pondered before answering.

“I’ve been trying, and so far, no luck. This place is riddled with blind spots, although now we’ve had a look at the place … maybe I can target my tech better. I could take Bernadette up onto the ridge there,” he gestured to the escarpment east of the homestead. “I could maybe get better reception.”

Soapy shook his head.

“Can’t,” he said. “It’s sacred. The Warumungu wouldn’t be happy about it. But,” he said, brightening, “There’s a place a couple of miles further down that might work. You could try there. It wouldn’t take more than thirty minutes to get Bernadette up there. You can’t see much, but it’s free of trees and surrounding hills.”

Hardison shrugged, willing to give it a try.

“Okay. I have stuff to do today, but first thing in the morning, maybe? I want more info before I try it. Want to come with me, Soapy?”

The pastoralist grinned.

“Try and stop me, boy!”

“Take your rifle,” Jo said, putting her hand on Soapy’s arm. “No heroics, you hear?”

Soapy’s hang-dog face became grim in a moment.

“I hear you, old girl. And I’ll take the Webley.”

Jo nodded, not happy about the idea but knowing that her home – and their lives – were possibly at stake.
“I don’t like this waiting game,” Parker interjected, frowning. “I want to see what they’re up to. I feel like a duck on a plate,” she added cryptically. “Just waiting to be roasted. Why can’t we do something??”

“Yeah,” Nate sighed. “At the moment we’re waiting for Albany to show its hand, and I don’t like these S.O.Bs having the advantage. I need to even it out a bit, if nothing else. Can we push them a little?”

Everyone was silent, thinking about the problem.

Then Jo let out a giggle.

“Ethel Krapinsky,” she said with a grin.

“Bloody hell!” Soapy said, eyebrows hitching. “You’re right! Ethel! She’s perfect!!”

“Ethel-who-now???” Hardison said, mystified.

“Ethel Krapinsky. She runs the post-office in Tennant Creek, and I’ve known her all my life,” Jo said. “A very, very nice lady and very kind, but the most prolific and dedicated gossip I’ve ever known – and in remote places, gossip is almost an Olympic sport,” she continued, grinning. “I just tell Ethel we’ve sold Wapanjara! It’ll be all over the Barklys in thirty minutes! Won’t that bring Albany out of its hole?”

Nate burst out laughing.

“If that doesn’t, then nothing will!” he chuckled. “They think they’ve scared Lady Eloise Stanton off, but this should set them on the wrong foot. Unbalance them a little. We have to give them a good prod in the ribs … it might not be pretty and we might get a reaction that’ll be tough to deal with, but I think this is the time for baseball bat politics instead of convoluted plotting. They’re trying to be quiet and subtle. We need to be noisy as hell.”

“Won’t they come in with all guns ablaze, though?” Sophie said, sudden fear for Lizzie rilling through her.

Nate shook his head.

“That brings attention. They can’t afford that right now. No … I think they’ll try and wrangle a deal. It’ll give us time and also more information. And maybe … just maybe … a way to figure out how to get free of this. They’ve been either subtle or secretive so far. This country can let them do that. But we’re going to get them to bring the fight to us … we’ll have the upper hand. We can’t work the job on their terms, you know that Soph. We’re a two-hour drive on a rough road from the nearest human contact. This place has poor communication and the land isn’t the easiest to deal with. But remember … these facts hamper them too. We can make the landscape work for us … we have Charlie, Soapy and Jo who know this land better than anyone. We can do this,” he added, that spark of Nate Ford madness gleaming in the depths of his eyes.

Parker chewed her lip thoughtfully.

“I’ll scout out a watching place. The water tower’s too obvious and too risky.” Her eyes narrowed, like a hunting cat. “I’ll set up some hidey-holes … someplace we can put Lizzie and Kip if we need to.”

“I’ll help,” Charlie said. “Those drongos at Albany aren’t bush-wise, so I can figure out a few things to keep ‘em jumping!”
They were interrupted by a distant, faint rumble of thunder, miles away to the west. Soapy shrugged. “That thunderstorm might help … or hinder,” he said thoughtfully. “It won’t hit here until late tomorrow, probably, but when it comes, it’ll be a downpour. We don’t get ‘em too often in the spring, but the Wet’s*** coming and this one … it’ll bring lightning, rain … the lot. It might flood the billabong in the south paddock, but we’ll be fine. At least it might hamper anything Albany wants to do for a bit. They can’t come overland … only by air – and we don’t have a helipad or runway like some of the other cattle stations - or by way of the station road there,” he indicated the dirt road leading over the hill where the stringybarks grew. “They could trespass onto Warumungu land and come by way of the east paddock gate, but that would be risky.”

“So, in which case, we have freedom of movement and they don’t.” Nate scratched his head. He didn’t yet know what concrete advantage this was, but he knew there was an advantage. He just had to find it. He sighed. “Okay people, let’s get on with the day. Things to do, people to gossip about, doncherknow!”

Jo grinned. “I think … I think I’ll get on the radio. I feel like a chat with Ethel,” she said with relish.

Hardison glanced over to Oggie, where Gertie sat under the awning away from the breeze, happily burping to herself and chewing her cud. Apparently gummy frogs gave her gas.

“Looks like Gertie an’ me have work to do,” he said with a resigned sigh. “This is goin’ to be not pleasant,” he groaned as Gertie shifted, farting gently.

Parker leaned over and whispered in Hardison’s ear. “Serves you right for giving her gummy frogs!” she hissed, her voice containing more than a little taunting. “Wait ‘til I tell Eliot you gave Gertie gas!”

Hardison scowled. “Do that, Parker, an’ Eliot finds out who used up all of his very expensive tea tree shampoo!” he sniped.

“Ohhhh!!” Parker snarled, “Don’t you dare!” She loved Eliot’s shampoo which the Oklahoman thought he had hidden in his office drawers at Leverage HQ. He had stalked the offices in a snit when he discovered the empty bottle, snarling and glaring and watching Hardison like a hawk. Eliot had his suspicions.

“Hey,” Hardison said drolly, “All’s fair in love an’ war, babe! OW!!”

Parker grinned as she poked Hardison in the ribs with strong little fingers.

And off the pair of them went, bickering and sniping happily, down the veranda steps and over to Oggie, where Gertie greeted both of them with a couple of pungent gummy frog burps and a face-lick.

So teams Leverage and Wapanjara settled down for the day, formulated plans and laid the foundation of a scheme to rattle Albany Mining Company and its shady owners. What the next couple of days would bring, they had no idea, but they had to be ready, come what may.

And as the day grew darker and night fell, they ate dinner on the veranda and watched the lightning arc across the sky in the distance, deep, thrumming rumbles of thunder echoing in the far hills and
over the billabongs as *Namarrkun*, the lightning man of the *Warumungu*, grew angry at the interlopers who would hurt his ancient land and its people.

To be continued …

**Author’s notes:**

* Maeda Hanzō Mitsuyo never existed. I remember listening to the commentary on ‘The Ho Ho Ho Job’ DVD and heard how the creator of Eliot’s *katana* was imaginary. So, I thought I would invent a 16th century swordsmith to make Eliot’s treasured blade.

** Snugglepot and Cuddlepie – a series of books written by Australian author May Gibbs. The books chronicle the adventures of the eponymous Snugglepot and Cuddlepie, and were first published in 1918.

*** The ‘Wet’ – the wet season, which in this part of the Northern Territory begins about October and ends around April. Temperatures are high and humidity can be 80%. The countryside becomes lush and green.
Where the Flood Water Gathers

Chapter Summary

This is a fluffy chapter (mostly), but somewhat descriptive in a goopy way. If you’re not keen on birth processes (and I mean the whole, gooey mess!), then perhaps skip all that and go to the last few paragraphs. But it was fun to write. Yes indeed.

It was during the hour before dawn on the following morning, as the first fat, drenching drops of rain puffed dust from the yard surface, that Dottie decided it was about time she had her foal.

Hardison was woken from his deep slumber on the fold-down bed by a squawk from the elderly walkie-talkie beside his pillow. Eyes still closed, he fumbled for the thing, managed to find the button and pressed it, holding the device to his ear.

“Um … yeah?” he croaked dryly, “wassup?”

*Dottie’s foaling*, Charlie’s voice crackled over the connection. *Tell Lizzie, will you?*

“And without waiting for an answer, he clicked off the button, dropped the walkie-talkie on his pillow and pried himself reluctantly from his bed. He had been put on walkie-talkie watch because he knew how to work the thing properly and Soapy hated it with a passion, so Hardison, in a moment of insanity, had volunteered to let Lizzie know when the event was happening.

Hauling on pants and a warm sweatshirt, he padded out of the living room and along to Eliot’s room. The door, as always when Eliot needed looking after, was ajar, and he knocked gently and peered around it.

Soapy was sitting with Eliot and Lizzie, happily reading the latest issue of *Stock & Land*. Eliot was out like a light. Hardison thought his friend’s colour was better and he wasn’t as restless, although that could be because Lizzie lay curled up on the bed in a mélange of comforter and cushions, her hand on his bare arm and making sure her best friend and guardian was safe.

“The horse is doin’ its thing,” Hardison whispered as Soapy raised an eyebrow in query. “Lizzie? Lizzie, wake up …” The hacker touched Lizzie’s shoulder and she awoke with a start.

“Eliot …?”

“Nah, baby-girl … c’mon now … Charlie says Dottie’s havin’ her baby, so if you want to go see then get dressed an’ I’ll meet you on the veranda. Will you be okay, Soapy? Lookin’ after this fool?” He gestured at the sleeping Eliot.

“Don’t worry about me, boy …” and the pastoralist glanced at the old Webley Mark IV revolver in its holster tucked beside him out of Lizzie’s immediate sight. “Eliot and I will be fine. And don’t worry about that dratted walkie-talkie … I’ll get it when I go make tea in a minute.”

Hardison nodded and watched as Lizzie tried not to squeal with excitement and wake Eliot, and then
she slid onto the floor with a thump that Hardison was sure would have woken the gods if there were any. But Eliot never stirred. Well, Hardison thought, it was about time the man got some decent rest.

Within minutes Hardison was standing on the veranda in the gloom, now booted and dressed in a waterproof jacket, a flashlight in his hand, waiting for Lizzie to emerge from the bathroom after changing into her day clothes.

Hardison was listening to the increasing thud of heavy raindrops on the veranda roof and inhaling the perfumed scent of wet roses when Lizzie appeared beside him in jeans and jacket, her gumboots on her feet and an exact replica of one of Eliot’s beanies keeping her unbrushed riot of curls under control.

*Damn,* Hardison thought wryly, *that girl’s gettin’ more Eliot-Mister-Punchy-Spencer every frikkin’ day.*

Lizzie was almost vibrating with excitement, but just as they began to make their way down the veranda steps, she tugged on Hardison’s coat sleeve.

“Alec?” she whispered hesitantly.

“Yeah, sweetheart?” Hardison stopped and turned to look at Lizzie in the glow of his flashlight.

“Eliot … he’ll be alright if I go see Dottie, won’t he? I mean … Grandpa Soapy will tell me if he gets sick again —" Lizzie bit her lip, unsure.

The effort it took to stop his smile made Hardison twitch.

“Lizzie-girl … Eliot is not goin’ to up an’ die just because you ain’t there for a couple of hours, y’know.”

Lizzie’s eyes became round with worry.

*Die??? But … but … Grandma Jo said —"*

Hardison realised he had mentioned the ‘D’ word in relation to Eliot, and he back-tracked as fast as he could, mentally beating himself about the head with a hypothetical brick.

“No, no … what I mean is,” he said hastily, “Eliot will be perfectly fine with Soapy for a couple of hours. Besides … if he does get sick again, all Soapy has to do is call on the walkie-talkie, plus Jo’s there to look out for him … so … you’re allowed to take time out, baby-girl. And El will want to know all about the new lil’ bit when he wakes up.”

Lizzie thought about it for a second, and then nodded.

“I … I s’pose. But … but next time … I think I should have an earbud, Alec. Those walkie-talkies are just silly.”

And as the pair of them walked through the silent, ever-increasing rain to the barn, Hardison had to agree.

But neither of them noticed a slender figure drop down from Bernadette’s roof tent, clad in black and wearing a warm jacket. The shadow then followed them towards the warm glow of the barn lights and the promise of new life.

Dottie was getting a bit tired. She paced and pawed at the ground in the large stable the Munros used
as a foaling box, and her tail swished in irritation. A back hoof stamped, and she grunted as she lay down, trying to ease the contraction as it tightened through her body.

“Is it here yet?” Lizzie gasped as she and Hardison appeared in the barn and the little girl ran to Charlie and Kip, who were sitting on an unobtrusive bench quietly watching the big mare through the rails of the box.

“Shhh …” Charlie smiled, “she shouldn’t be long now. But we have to be quiet and not pester her, alright? She’s an old hand at this so she shouldn’t need any help, but she’ll try and hold onto the foal if we annoy her.”

“Okay!” Lizzie whispered, and sat down next to Kip, who grinned with excitement. He was delighted that he could share this with Lizzie … show her his world and his people and animals.

“Shove up, baby-girl,” Hardison said softly, and Lizzie and Kip shuffled along the bench to let the tall young man sit beside them. He pulled out his cell ‘phone. There was no way he was going to miss taking pictures of Lizzie and the foal.

Dottie seemed unaware of her audience. She was concentrating now, and her body tensed as she lay flat on her side and she needed to push.

Lizzie’s eyes widened as the mare’s tail lifted and she could see a thin, opaque membrane appear, slowly ballooning out, and through the membrane she just glimpsed what appeared to be a tiny hoof.

“Oh! Oh Alec!” she gasped under her breath “Look!”

Hardison’s eyes were as round as Lizzie’s.

“I can see, Lizzie!” he sighed, entranced.

Another neat, small hoof appeared, a few inches behind the first, and then Lizzie’s breathing hitched as a small muzzle, only big enough to fit in the palm of a hand, lay tucked between the two front legs.

Lizzie was absolutely enchanted.

Dottie rested for a moment or two, and then another contraction hit her and her legs became rigid with effort, and the legs and head became more visible. Dottie relaxed, panted and then began another push and Lizzie saw the elegant head begin to emerge, eyes closed and ears folded back against the neck, and the foal seemed asleep, limp as it lay still enclosed within the membrane.

But Lizzie noticed something. While the first leg and head were slowly inching into the world, the second leg wasn’t moving.

“Charlie –“ she began, but Charlie was ahead of her.

“Oh … bugger,” he said under his breath, and getting up from the bench he washed his hands and arms in a bucket beside him, full of warm, soapy water.

“What’s wrong?” Hardison asked, alarmed.

“The foal’s elbow’s caught on Dottie’s pelvic bone. I have to try and ease it over the bone before the foal gets any further out or we’ll have a bloody awful job shifting it.” He eased open the door of the foaling box and slid in beside Dottie, crouching down to check the foal’s progress. “This is where I wish I had small hands,” he muttered, running a finger around the stuck leg, trying to gauge how
difficult it would be to correct the problem.

“I have small hands,” a soft, hesitant voice said.

Hardison and Lizzie twisted around to see Parker standing behind them, eyes wide with wonder.

“Help them, Parker! Please!!” Lizzie begged, fretting now for the foal.

Charlie looked up, seeing the little thief shift uncomfortably at the proximity of the horse, but he could tell she couldn’t take her eyes off the foal. He made a decision.

“Wash your hands and arms and get in here,” he said, and Parker started as though awoken from a trance. Blinking, she stripped off her jacket and rolled up her sleeves, blue eyes constantly flicking back to the straining mare and the trapped foal.

Parker was truly terrified. The horse was enormous … a big, grey lump of quivering flesh, and Parker almost bolted with fear. But the foal … she could see the tiny head, the neat muzzle … eyes still closed and in danger of dying before it could even leave the warmth of its mother’s body.

Before she knew it she was dropping down beside Charlie, frighteningly close to big, sharp hooves and powerful quarters. But Dottie didn’t appear to notice – she was too busy trying to have her baby, and her body was tense with pain.

“What … what do I do?” Parker asked, her voice trembling.

Charlie smiled reassuringly at her.

“It’s not too hard really … we just need to ease the foal’s leg over the pelvic bone in time to Dottie’s pushes, okay? So … all I want you to do is slip in there and cup the elbow in your hand. It’s a tight fit – I’d bloody struggle with it. But you … your hands are small enough to manage it. And when Dottie pushes I’ll apply a little bit of downward pressure and you try and ease the elbow over the bone. Once it’s clear we should be fine. Think you can manage?”

Parker looked at the seemingly lifeless foal and nodded.

“I can do this.”

And taking a deep breath, she funneled the fingers of her left hand and so, so gently, eased the tips along the foal’s trapped leg. She was suddenly enveloped in wet rubbery warmth, snug and alive, and she felt along the leg and leaned her body on Dottie’s massive quarters to balance herself. The mare groaned, but didn’t move, as though knowing they were trying to help.

“Right … move your hand around the elbow … can you feel it?” Charlie instructed.

Parker nodded, gulping.

“Y … yeah … it’s … kinda icky …” she laughed shakily. She spread her fingers and was instantly cupping the foal’s bony elbow in her hand, and then the squeeze began. Contractions rippled over her hand, and Dottie grunted and gave a mighty heave.

“Ow!” Parker yelped, but hung on as the foal began to slide forward, and her hand was being pushed too, and there … there it was, the pressure of Dottie’s pelvic bone against the back of her wrist and she gritted her teeth and allowed her hand to be the cushion that teased the little elbow up and over the obstruction.
“That’s great, Parker … keep going … let Dottie do all of the work, alright? I’m just going to ease the leg forward a bit and once it’s free we can let Dottie do the rest,” Charlie muttered, concentrating on making sure neither Dottie nor the foal were damaged in the process.

And then … and then the leg was sliding forward, Charlie guiding it into its proper place and Parker’s hand came with it, gooey and slippery with fluid and Parker let out a soft shriek of triumph as she felt the foal twitch.

“Okay … we can leave her to it now,” Charlie said, and both of them slumped back against the box wall, sitting in the deep bed of straw and watching as the foal slid further out of the mare, shoulders and body and then the hind quarters, and Parker saw the front legs flop loosely and the head fling out, breaking the membrane.

A gush of amniotic fluid soaked the straw, and the foal, wet and sleek, lay under its mother’s tail, back legs still within her warm body.

Parker was completely enthralled, and then it became even more amazing as the little animal suddenly snorted and took a breath. It was as though somebody had pressed its activation switch. From a limp, floppy bundle of wet hide and spindly legs, it suddenly became a living thing, and filmy eyes blinked open and the head lifted from the straw, snorting fluid from its nose and flailing long legs in the air.

Parker, wet and sticky with amniotic fluid and smeared with blood and foal-ick, laughed with pure joy.

She could hear the soft shrieks of delight behind her from Lizzie, and Hardison’s voice rumbled with astonishment. Charlie grinned at her.

“There you go,” he said. “One foal, alive and kicking. Good job!” he chuckled.

Dottie felt the movements of the foal, and exhausted as she was, she rolled up onto her chest and bent her neck around to see her new foal. She let out a low, huffing nicker and the foal squeaked a small neigh at its dam. Dottie was instantly besotted.

The big mare heaved herself to her feet, breaking the umbilical cord and still dangling the membrane, and turned around to investigate the new arrival, licking and mumbling at the shaky foal as it lay sprawled in the straw.

Charlie eased around her for a moment and lifted the foal’s tail.

“It’s a colt,” he said.

“That’s a boy horse!!” Lizzie told Hardison, and she hugged the hacker’s arm in sheer excitement.

“Kip, can you hand me a towel?” Charlie asked, and Kip lifted one of the clean old towels folded beside the bucket of water. Kip threw the towel to his father, and Charlie began to rub the foal dry, helping Dottie as she cleaned up her new child.

Long ears flicked forward and the foal shook his head, front legs outstretched. He was dark, probably bay, Charlie thought, with a long, slender stripe down his face which tumbled sideways over his muzzle and one nostril. But what Parker found enchanting were the distinct dark grey circles around each eye.

“He’s wearing spectacles!” she said, laughing.
Charlie nodded.

“Yeah … that means he’s bay now, but when he loses his foal fluff he’s going to be grey like his mum,” he explained.

“He’s amazing!!” Lizzie said, grinning madly. She had never seen anything so magical. Kip nudged her, and she hugged her friend as the little boy gave her a brilliant smile.

“You got a name for him yet, Lizzie?” Kip asked.

Lizzie’s face fell. She had been so wrapped up in caring for Eliot, she had forgotten she had the responsibility of giving the new arrival a name. Eliot was going to help her, but he was so ill she hadn’t been able to think of anything else.

Parker gingerly eased herself to her feet and crept out of the box, not wanting to startle Dottie as she got to know the colt. She would come back later to see him, she thought, when he was dry and a bit less sticky.

She stood beside Lizzie and the two of them watched as the little colt began to try to get to his feet.

“Y’know what?” Parker said. “He reminds me of Eliot … like … when he wears his glasses,” she added, eyes narrowed in a soft laugh.

Lizzie looked up at her friend. She had an idea. She pulled Parker down by tugging on her jacket and whispered in her ear. Parker listened to Lizzie’s plan and her smile widened into a knowing grin. Eliot would hate it.

“Works for me!” she said, and patted Lizzie’s head, leaving goopy smears on the little girl’s beanie.

“So … what’s his name?” Hardison asked as he continued taking pictures with his cell ‘phone for Nate and Sophie to see.

“His name’s Sparky,” Lizzie said. “I want to call him Sparky.”

Hardison’s brown eyes twinkled with merriment.

“Man,” he said, “Eliot’s goin’ to be so pissed!”

And Hardison knew he couldn’t wait to tell him.

For the next couple of hours they all sat and watched as Sparky came to grips with first his legs and then with the problem of getting his first drink.

Parker sat beside Hardison and chattered away, completely absorbed with the new arrival. She saw him flop about as he tried to get his pesky legs under control, and worried when he kept falling over in a tangle of knobbly-kneed limbs, and asked Charlie if he needed help because obviously the little fellow had no sense of balance.

Charlie just grinned and passed around mugs of sweet, milky tea and chocolate-chip cookies. He suddenly realised with a pang that the pain of Alice’s loss eased a little as he sat with people he had only known a few days and now felt like family.

“Nah … he’ll be fine. The more he struggles the stronger he gets. Now we have to make sure he has a drink and gets his guts working.”
“We have to check he poops,” Lizzie explained to Hardison, who grimaced.

“You know weird stuff, Lizzie, sweetheart. Hangin’ out with Eliot … it’s melting your itty-bitty brain, girl!”

“She’s right,” Charlie continued. “And as for Dottie … once she’s shifted the afterbirth she should be fine, but I always worry until that happens. It’s a bit of a bastard to get rid of it if she doesn’t do it herself. But when Sparky has a drink, that should get things going – the sucking helps her insides to contract and that should bring away the afterbirth.”

Hardison decided this was too much information, and it got even worse when Lizzie piped up.

“His poop’s black to begin with, and then it turns yellow, like mustard, from the milk!” she explained eagerly. “Eliot says it’s really, really sticky, like glue!”

“Yeah,” Hardison grumbled under his breath, “an’ of course he knows stuff like that, which is downright disgustin’.” He glanced down at Lizzie, her face aglow with pleasure and unable to tear her eyes away from Sparky as he finally gained a modicum of control over his recalcitrant legs and stood, swaying alarmingly, in front of his proud mother. The little colt chuckled to himself, his eyes bright with health and his bottle-brush tail flicking.

“Why can’t you be normal, like other little girls, an’ play with dolls and do dressin’ up?” Hardison complained.

Lizzie’s face screwed up with disgust.

“Dolls … yuck! OOH, look! He’s found the milk bar!” she clutched Hardison’s arm as Sparky managed to wander along his mother’s side, nosing for her udder.

Parker poked Hardison in the neck with a sticky finger.

“Stop with the girly thing,” she warned. “I like playing with locks and stuff, and dolls are just … just … creepy.” She shuddered. “They’ve got that … that eye thing going on, and they stare at you as though you’re dead and … and … blech!”

“Huh,” Hardison grumbled to himself. “Weird women. I’m surrounded by weird, weird women … and … and I-I love you for it … all that weirdness an’ stuff … ” he waved his hands about, “… awesome much …” he added hastily as Parker sent a death-ray of a glare in his direction.

But finally Dottie fed her son and the afterbirth splattered on the straw in a gooey mess. Hardison blenched as Charlie spread it out, showing Kip and Lizzie how he was looking for missing bits. If Dottie had any left inside her, he explained, it could make her sick.

Parker was fascinated by the whole thing.

By the time Charlie decided Dottie and Sparky could be left alone to get to know one another, it was dull, wet daylight outside. The sound of heavy rain on the corrugated metal roof became louder, and thunder cracked in the distance. A flash lit up the inside of the barn moments later as lightning seared through the roiling black clouds above. It was not a day to be outside.

Pulling on hats and coats and wandering out into the rain, the little group trudged through ever-increasing puddles towards the homestead, knowing Effie would be in the throes of putting a copious amount of food on the table for breakfast. She had hungry people to feed, and Charlie knew she would be all ears as Lizzie and Kip told her about the foal, even though the little cook wasn’t too fond of horses.
Even as they hurried through the sheets of rain, Lizzie and Kip kept up a torrent of chatter, still on a high after the excitement of the birth, Hardison and Parker on each side of the children and unconsciously making sure they were protected. Charlie walked ahead of the small group. He strode on, down the slight incline from the barn and cattle yards, checking the lie of this place he called home which he had known all of his life. He checked every nook and cranny … every shadowed place and hidden space … every tree and bush, and even the skyline lurking through the rain.

He reached the corner of the kitchen extension, seeing the lights were on, but oddly there was no sound of clattering pots and pans … no soft curses as Effie went about the work she loved so that she could feed the people she adored.

Charlie frowned. Something wasn’t right. He slowed his pace and tucked himself into the shadow of the house, and creeping along the struts that supported the building, he carefully peered around the edge of the veranda and looked at the yard.

“Oh … bugger!” he said under his breath, brown eyes wide with shock.

There, sitting astride a sturdy roan gelding and gazing steadily at the veranda and the house entrance, was Khenbish Hadan.

She was a small, slight figure, and she wore no hat or waterproofs. The rain streamed down her boyish face and over her shaven head, but it was as if the storm above did not exist. She had positioned herself in plain sight, relaxed, ready … and the deadliness of her chilled Charlie’s heart.

It was obvious she was waiting for something … or someone.

Charlie darted back into the shadows, turned and silently hurried back to the others.

To be continued …
Khenbish Hadan relished the rain and the thunderstorm crashing above her. It made her blood run hot and her skin tingle with anticipation.

It reminded her of her childhood, in the gers of her family out on the steppes. She recalled watching storms roll across the landscape and the herds of small, tough horses drifting across the endless vistas. Although she was the nameless one, the one nobody wanted, she had still been able to ride before she could walk. She was never more at ease than when she was on a horse.

She had watched these people as the light came, and seen the two from the tent make their way across the yard, splashing through water under a vast umbrella. *Hah*, she thought. *Weak.* What harm could rain do to them? She sneered her disdain, and then touched the gelding into an easy walk down the dirt road to the house, even as the man and woman disappeared inside and shut the door behind them.

“On, Batu,” she murmured softly. “Let us see what these people are made of.” Batu flicked his ears back and listened.

She had called him Batu … the ‘loyal one’ … after she had slit the throat of the man she had taken him from, the man in the far south of Australia who had beaten the horse to within an inch of the animal’s life. People were nothing to Khenbish Hadan … but a good horse was life itself.

She rode easily through the downpour, and she saw lights on in the house. *He* was in there, she knew. The man she wanted … the man she would kill. Bringing Batu to a halt in front of the house, only ten yards or so from the veranda, she settled into the unfamiliar stock saddle and patted Batu’s rain-drenched neck. The gelding, obedient and stolid, immediately relaxed and stood hip-shot, resting a back hoof and ignoring the rain and the lightning as it crackled and flickered above them.

She was noticed less than a minute later.

“The weather … I have never seen anything like this!” Nate said loudly over a thunder-rumble as he burst in through the front door, guiding Sophie in past him and shaking rain off the umbrella, leaving it upside down on the veranda to drain and dry a little.

“You’ve obviously never been to Scotland in the spring,” Sophie muttered as she took off her scarf.

Effie emerged from Eliot’s room and yawned. She had sat with the Oklahoman for a couple of hours and it was ‘way past her time to begin breakfast, so she was running late.

“Mister M and the Missus are in the living room,” she sighed. “This weather’ll put a block on anything those bastards over at Albany can do, I betcha, so it’s going to be a day for plotting rather than doing,” she added. “Oh … by the way … the nipper’s over in the barn with your two young ‘uns. Bloody horse decided to foal, so they took her over a couple of hours ago, so no worries, alright? Charlie’s there along with the boy.”

Nate raised his eyebrows. Was there no end to the surprises Wapanjara could spring on them?

“Well, I have no doubt we’ll hear all about it when they come back,” Sophie sighed. “You do realise that it’s going to be difficult to leave here now?” she added. “Lizzie just loves this place.”

Effie snorted good-humouredly.
“So she bloody should. Half of it’ll be hers one day.” She rolled her shoulders and yawned again. “Righto – breakfast. We maybe under siege here, but there’s always time for breakfast.”

Sophie grinned.

“Want a hand? You must be worn out. I’m no cook but I can help –“

“Go sit down, Duchess,” Effie grumped, amused. “I’ll have coffee sorted in a jiffy and I’ll get something started for the tiddlers when they come in – they’ll be hungrier than a wombat on a diet.”

She wandered through to the kitchen, still talking. “Those kids’ll eat us out of hearth and home, so they – bloody hell!!”

Sophie and Nate hurried through to the kitchen to see Effie staring out of the window at the water-drenched yard. Following her gaze, Nate paled.

Khenbish Hadan sat quietly on her horse, gazing at them through the rain-spattered glass.

“Oh shit!!” Nate swore, and almost ran through to the living room. “Soapy – are you armed?”

Soapy, who was sitting in his old armchair gazing into a lingering fire in the hearth, frowned and stood up, his hand straying to the old Webley in its army holster buckled around his lean hips.

“What? What is it?” Jo said from her seat by the living room table, dropping her crossword and pen on the polished wooden surface. Her green eyes were instantly full of alarm.

“Hadan. Hadan’s outside in the yard.” Nate growled, and turning on his heel, headed for the front door, Soapy close behind him. They both peered through the small glass inserts beside the door. The woman and her big horse hadn’t moved.

“What’s the bitch doing?” Effie hissed as she emerged from the kitchen with Sophie. Effie was holding one of her iron skillets, and she hefted it with every intention of using it if Hadan came anywhere near her people.

“Just sitting there,” Soapy murmured, and he checked the load in his old Webley. The revolver was nearly ninety years old, but Soapy kept it in good condition and the .38 cartridge easily had the power to knock Hadan off the horse at this close range, especially if Soapy aimed for her torso. It would be the safest kill shot, he knew, and the calibre was enough to blow her heart apart.

Nate cocked an eyebrow at the pastoralist.

“Want to go find out what she wants?” he asked quietly.

Soapy shrugged.

“Why not? She’s just sitting there cluttering up the yard and looking wet. If she wanted to take us out she wouldn’t just be parked out there, now would she?”

“Soapy love –“ Jo stood in the living room doorway, fear now vibrating through her. “Don’t you bloody dare do anything daft, you old fool!”

Soapy, black eyes bright with anticipation, grinned at his wife of over forty years.

“Now, now, old girl … I won’t take any pointless risks, I promise. I think … I think she’s just here to talk.”

“We did say that Albany would probably make an offer rather than come in, guns blazing. Let’s just
find out what she has to say,” Sophie added. “Lady Eloise Stanton will be available if required,” she smiled evenly.

“Is Eliot okay?” Nate asked before he headed out of the door. “Maybe someone should keep an eye –”

“The young shite’s sound asleep,” Effie grumbled. “Don’t worry – he’ll do for now.”

Looking around at these people he loved, Nate opened the door and stepped warily out onto the veranda as the lightning ripped through the sky and the thunder sounded as though the very fabric of the world was being torn apart around them.

Eliot had awoken with a start.

He had slept most of a day and a night, and while he was still in pain and the remnant of the fever lingered, he felt better. His headache had lessened and his sight was clearer, and he shifted, managing to sit upright in his bed.

He was alone.

“Huh,” he said, surprised. No Lizzie and no watchdog growling at him to shut up and go back to sleep.

The deep rumble of thunder and the battering rain against the window told him what had woken him from a dreamless sleep. But it didn’t explain why the chair beside the bed was vacant and Lizzie’s cushions and comforter lay empty on the bed cover, along with her book and pencil.

He heard voices … voices redolent with anger and concern.

Eliot frowned, wincing as the cut above his ear burned. There was something wrong. Very, very wrong.

This time when he tried to get out of bed, he managed to get himself upright, and then he gritted his teeth and hanging onto the headboard, levered his aching body onto shaky, weak legs. The dizziness hit him like a freight train and he almost had to sit down again, but he hugged his wounded side and waited for the world to straighten itself out. *So far, so good*, he thought.

Inhaling a few deep breaths, Eliot took a chance and let go of the headboard. Surprisingly, he didn’t fall over, and within moments he was able to move over to the open door, using the wall as a prop. His bare feet made no sound, and he flattened himself against the wall and listened.

Soapy stood like a rock, the old Webley aimed and ready, his right hand cupped by his left and the revolver held close to his chest. The pastoralist had lost any hint of amiability. Right now he was a soldier, an elite sniper of the SASR, with fifty-two kills to his name. And he had Khenbish Hadan firmly in his sights.

Nate eyed the old soldier and for some reason had the same vibe from Soapy that he always had from Eliot … that aura of deadliness which brooked no opposition.

Hadan gazed almost benignly at Nate and Soapy. She didn’t look particularly threatening on the face of it, Nate thought. She was tiny … no more than four feet ten or eleven, and slightly built, almost boyish, androgynous and angular. Her eyes had the tell-tale epicanthic fold of her people, but her skin was wind-blown and tanned with exposure to the elements, and the only thing that made her
stand out was her eyes. They were a curious olive green, and even from yards away, Nate caught the
glint of gold flecks in her gaze. Her shapeless, soaking clothes were old and well-worn, and she
wore what appeared to be dull green hessian boots. Her skull shone wetly, glistening in the torrential
rain as water ran down her shaven head with its stubble of black hair.

Nate took a deep breath and spoke, loudly and clearly over the groaning thunder above.

“What do you want?” he said, standing straight and defiant in the shelter of the veranda.

Hadan smiled, showing even, white teeth. Her eyes glittered, amused.

“Don’t you know?” she replied. Her voice, unlike the rest of her, was soft and gentle, with only the
tiniest hint of an accent.

Nate’s smile had a chill to it.

“Humour me,” he said.

Hadan cocked her head to one side and studied Nate and Soapy for a moment.

“I’m here to kill Eliot Spencer,” she replied, and her eyes grew cold as she said it.

Eliot had heard enough.

It took him two tries to lift his jacket off the door hook and then it was a bit of a struggle to put it on
over his bare torso, but he managed it. Zipping it up to hide the damage to his body, he then put on
his stetson, careful of his head injury. He studied his boots for a second or two where they sat under
the washstand, but realised that he had absolutely no chance of putting them on without ending up in
a heap on the floor, so he decided he could do this barefoot. He had no choice.

He worked his way over to the window and opened it wide, and grimaced at the weather. He was
going to get soaked. But if it meant deflecting Hadan’s attention from his family, then he could bear
it.

He was about to hoist himself over the windowsill and do his best to drop to the ground without
passing out, when he had a thought. He moved stiffly over to his katana and lifted it off the

Now he felt a little better. The old katana felt solid and reassuring in his left hand, held just under the
neck of the koshirae, his fingers sensing the ancient inscription carved into the surface. Holding the
sheathed katana with the cutting edge facing upwards and ready for use, he struggled but succeeded
in working his way out of the window, and then dropped silently to the ground seven feet below.

The impact almost made him pass out with the pain of it. Leaning against the house supports to catch
his breath and to fight back the agony and black spots encroaching his consciousness, he waited for a
moment, his bare feet chilled instantly by the water-drenched earth.

Taking a couple of deep breaths, Eliot levered himself away from the house and stumbled towards
Gertie’s paddock shelter.

“Wh-what?? Hadan?? You’re kidding, right?” Hardison stood in the pelting rain and stared,
unbelieving, at Charlie. “Right??”
Charlie had stopped the little group in its tracks and pushed them back against the kitchen extension, well out of Khenbish Hadan’s eyeline, and the two children huddled together between Hardison and Parker, trying to shield each other from the rain. Both of them looked frightened out of their wits.

“No way, mate – that … that woman’s just sitting there like a bloody statue in the rain, just staring at the house!”

Parker instantly took in her immediate surroundings. They couldn’t get into the house via the veranda and front door, but there was the exterior door to the kitchen.

“We have to get the kids inside,” she hissed, “out of this rain. We either get into the house or head back to the barn.”

Hardison shook his head, sending water droplets through the air from his soaked hood.

“No – we don’t split up. There’s no sign of anyone else, right?” He raised a sodden eyebrow at Charlie.

“Not a soul. Just her, sitting there.” Charlie replied.

“So it’s into the kitchen, then,” Parker said.

“The door’ll be locked,” Charlie fumed. “Effie’s manic about keeping the house safe until she’s begun breakfast, and by the look of it she hasn’t started yet,” and in his heart he wondered why.

“Pfff!” Parker snorted. “Give me fifteen seconds.”

And before anyone could answer she was delving in a pocket and quietly making her way up the wooden back steps to the little deck in front of the kitchen door. Effie’s old wooden chair sat there, her favourite place to be on a sunny day while dinner was cooking and a hot cup of tea was freshly poured. Parker slipped the lock-pick into her fingers and began. It took the little thief precisely six seconds to unlock the door. Grinning, she turned and waved the little group up the steps, holding a finger to her lips to make sure the children were as quiet as possible.

“Where the hell’s Gertie?” Hardison hissed, annoyed. “I thought she’d be givin’ that bi … that woman … a good telling off!” he continued lamely, mindful of little ears, although with Effie about he suddenly thought such concerns were far too late.

“In her humpy, probably,” Charlie whispered as he herded Lizzie and Kip into the cavernous kitchen.

“A humpy?? What’s a –“

“Have you ever seen a wet camel? It’s not a pretty sight,” Charlie answered, silently shutting the door behind them. “Gertie hates rain and she’s frightened of thunder, so Eliot built her a humpy … a shelter … in her paddock. She’ll probably be in there, complaining to herself and Buster, silly old bint,” he added.

“Damn!” Hardison swore, quietly working his way through the kitchen to the doorway to the small hall. He listened carefully, and he could hear voices coming from the veranda. Angry voices … voices with worry running rife though them. He chastised himself – he had no idea what was going on, and Hardison hated being in such a position. And Eliot … dear Lord, Eliot was vulnerable and
“We gotta put the kids someplace,” he said urgently, his voice low. “Eliot’s room. We’ll put ‘em with Eliot, then we can find out what she wants.”

“Eliot! Is he okay? Is that woman going to hurt him??” Lizzie asked, a tremor in her voice. She started forward but Parker put a hand on her shoulder and shushed the little girl.

“You have to be quiet,” she said, “and we’ll check on Eliot right now, okay? But you have to be quiet!”

Lizzie, eyes wide and frightened, nodded, and she crowded next to Kip, who in turn clutched his father’s arm.

“C’mon now, nippers,” Charlie cajoled softly, ruffling Kip’s hair, “it’ll be perfectly alright as long as you two do as we say. Let’s go see Eliot,” he said, and smiled reassuringly at his son and Lizzie.

They worked their way along the short corridor to Eliot’s room, and as expected, the door was ajar. The trouble was, Eliot was gone.

“The stupid, stupid sonofabitch!!” Hardison cursed.

“Where’s Eliot?” Lizzie began to wail. “I shouldn’t have left him, Alec! I should have been here –”

“SHHH!” Parker insisted, and, crouching down, pulled Lizzie to her in a hug. “Don’t worry now … you know Eliot … he’s tough. Tougher than anything,” she added, eyes narrowing in a feral smile. “And besides … he’s armed,” she added.

“What?” Charlie said, confused.

“His sword’s gone,” Parker said, unwrapping Lizzie from her hug and turning the little girl around so she could see the empty place on the ironwood stand that had once held Eliot’s katana. Lizzie looked at the hooks by the door and saw Eliot’s stetson was missing. Her best friend was wounded but upright. She huffed, gulping back tears.

“He went out of the window,” Charlie said, peering out past the curtains at the blustery sheeting rain outside. “Holy dooley, he’s one silly bludger,” he added under his breath. It was a nearly seven-foot drop to the ground straight into Gertie’s paddock. How he had survived the drop and stayed conscious Charlie had no idea.

A crack of thunder drowned his words and was immediately followed by the arcing fingers of lightning stitching across the roiling clouds overhead. Pulling his head back inside before he became soaked, Charlie tugged the window shut but didn’t latch it, just in case a quick escape was needed.

“What’s going on?” he asked as Hardison crept back out to the corridor.

“Nate’s talking … I can’t hear what he’s saying though. You guys stay here with the kids – I’ll go find out what’s happenin’,” he muttered, and before Charlie could answer Hardison was gone.

“Where’s Eliot, Parker?” Lizzie whimpered, and sat down on the empty bed. “He’s sick and he’s hurt and he should be in bed! Not out in the rain where that … that woman is!! What’s he going to do?? What if she –”
“Lizzie!” Parker was being firm now, because it was obvious Lizzie was becoming distraught. “You have to have to keep it together now, because if your mom and dad have to worry about you getting upset or if Eliot thinks you’re in danger, you could put them in danger, okay? So trust them – they know what they’re doing, so you have to stay here with Kip and be as still and as quiet as a mouse! No-one is coming into the house – you’re safe. So just hang tight and we’ll wait to see what happens.”

And Parker held both children close to her, and hoped to God she was telling them the truth.

Nate was a little confused, a feeling he detested. Nate Ford was a man who organised, manipulated and controlled, and he had expected a formal visit by either Rickenbacker – or better still, the people behind the whole mining project, so he could have a look at them and see what information he could glean.

But, he knew now, something else was going on.

“I can drop her from here,” Soapy said sotto voce, “quick and clean.”

“I don’t think she’s armed, Soapy,” Nate replied. “She has nowhere to hide a weapon. She looks like a half-drowned rat.”

“Don’t care,” the old pastoralist muttered. “She’s openly threatened a member of this family, and I’ve killed for less,” he added, his face like stone.

Nate held up a placating hand, but his eyes sparkled with understanding.

“Hang on a minute, Soapy … let’s see what she has to say. We might if we’re lucky learn a thing or two,” he cautioned, and Soapy scowled.

“Fine,” he growled, “but I keep the gun on her. If she makes any kind of threatening move, I’ll bloody well blow the heart out of her.”

“Fair enough,” Nate agreed, and thought about Lizzie and Kip, and his gut churned at the very idea of this woman being anywhere near the children. But, he decided reluctantly, now was the time to return to business.

“Care to explain what Eliot did to put your nose out of joint?” Nate called out to Hadan, although he had to admit to himself that it didn’t take much for Eliot to piss people off.

Hadan allowed a small frown to creep onto her face, even as the rain streamed down and dripped off her chin in a steady, endless flow.

“His name was Rafe Eades,” she said finally, and it was then Nate knew why Khenbish Hadan was here to kill the hitter.

“Means nothing to me,” Nate shrugged. “And to be honest, I don’t really care.”

Hadan touched the gelding’s sides with her heels and moved forward a step or two, which made Soapy’s finger tighten on the Webley’s trigger.

But she halted and studied Nate, seeing the chill in his blue gaze.

“He was my lover,” she said starkly. “For seventeen years we worked together and slept together. He was …” she hesitated for a moment before continuing, “… my partner. Nearly five days ago,
Spencer broke his neck.”

Nate shrugged.

“So? Both of you had been hired to take care of Eliot and Charlie Jakkamara. This Eades was stationed at the bore specifically to kill either or both of them. But the tables were turned and he paid the price.” He grinned mirthlessly. “It’s a dog-eat-dog world out there, Ms Hadan.” The name was almost an epithet. “As far as I’m concerned it means there’s one less murdering bastard in the world.” Nate leaned back against the door jamb and relaxed, crossing his arms.

Khenbish Hadan smiled. The lines around her eyes crinkled, and but the implied humour didn’t reach her odd green eyes.

“My employers wish to speak to you,” she said, now businesslike and clipped in her speech. “They will visit you tomorrow. But after that, I will return and Spencer will be here. If he isn’t … I will kill your woman, and then I will kill the old ones. And then the girl with the quick hands and the sharp eyes … yes, I will kill her slowly … with a knife. The men will be next. And then I will kill the children. I will kill them in front of you and Spencer, and I will skin them while their hearts still beat.”

Nate heard Soapy growl with fury, but he forced himself to stay still and relaxed, and put his hand on Soapy’s shoulder, staying any reaction the pastoralist had.

“I swear to God –” Soapy fumed, and Nate could feel the tension thrumming through the man. Soapy was on the edge, and Nate knew he soon wouldn’t be able to stop him from ending Khenbish Hadan right here and now.

“You won’t touch a hair on anyone’s head, Khenbish,” came a voice through the drenching rain and pitched to be heard over the storm howling around them.

Both Nate and Hadan turned to see Eliot standing twenty yards away at the edge of the yard, Gertie beside him. He held tightly to her bosal with his right hand, but in his left was his Hanzō sword, still sheathed, but Nate saw the hitter’s thumb rest against the old sword’s tsuba, ready to free it from the koshirae.

Now Hadan’s smile was genuine, and she studied both man and camel.

“It’s an honour,” she said. “I have heard much about you. Your death at my hands will be both satisfying and fitting. Although,” she added with a little surprise, “I had heard you were dead.”

Eliot gave a feral grin from beneath his stetson as the rain pooled around the brim and trickled onto his jacket. He was freezing cold, soaked to the skin and he could barely stand, but he was damned if he was going to show it.

“Yeah … well … you were misinformed,” he countered. “I heard the same about you. Shame it ain’t true.”

“Yes. These things are sent to try us, are they not?”

But Eliot didn’t answer as he slowly made his way towards her, and she could see the white knuckles of his right hand as he hung on to the big camel, who sensed his loathing of the slight woman on the big horse. There was nothing Gertie wanted more than to charge at the hated human, but she knew Eliot needed her … he was bleeding, she could tell … and the coppery scent made her nervous, especially since she was out in this hated, terrifying rain and thunder. But she remained steady and true, and Eliot was thankful for her good sense. Without Gertie, he would be a useless
heap on the water-soaked ground.

When Eliot was just a few yards away from Hadan, he brought Gertie to a halt and managed, teeth gritted and trying to stop himself shaking, to let go of Gertie’s bosal and stand on his own two bare feet, balanced and ready.

Gertie bared her teeth and growled, chomping angrily, and the big roan gelding fidgeted nervously. He had never seen a camel before, and Hadan dropped a hand to his neck, soothing him.

She looked at the katana and raised an eyebrow in appreciation.

“I see you have brought the Sword of the Okuri-Inu®. I have heard it is exceptional … a legend, and it is certainly most magnificent. When I kill you, I will honour you by taking it as my own,” she said graciously.

Eliot shrugged, trying not to let her see how much it hurt him.

“Yeah, well … you gotta come get it first,” Eliot grunted, and Hadan heard the snick of the blade leaving the koshirae as his thumb pushed against the tsuba, loosening the weapon ready for it to be drawn in battle.

Hadan raised her other eyebrow as the world flickered with electricity, lightning making the dull day dance with energy. The thunder sounded as though it would bring the house down.

She studied this man whose reputation was as fearsome as her own, and Hadan was known throughout the underbelly of society – as well as many governments – as one of the world’s deadliest assassins.

He looked pale, and she suddenly noticed a watery red stain spreading on the hip of the thin sweat-bottoms he wore. It was only then that she saw his feet were bare. Eliot Spencer, the world’s best retrieval expert, was hurt and bleeding. Eades … her Rafe … had left his mark.

“No!!! No, you don’t touch him!!” A male voice rang out, desperate and angry.

Aw hell!! Eliot groaned internally even as pain almost took his breath away.

“Hardison!” he growled, frustrated. “Just shut up, will ya!!”

Hadan’s gaze turned to the veranda in time to see a tall young black man burst through the doorway and down the veranda steps, stumbling to a halt at the bottom. His dark eyes were alive with fear, but they also held something else. Anger, she thought. Anger and determination.

“He didn’t touch that shitty, murderin’, horse-killin’ bastard!” Hardison said as he stood straight and tall, fury evident in every inch of him. “It was me!” he shouted, defiance in each word. “I killed him, not Eliot. An’ I would do it again in a moment!”

Eliot leaned wearily against Gertie, who honked at him, worried. He sighed, irritated beyond belief.

“God-DAMMIT, Hardison!” he said.

To be continued …
Author’s notes:

* Okuri-Inu – the ‘escort’ or ‘guardian’ wolf of Japanese legend, which would make sure travellers found their way home if they showed no fear.
And Time Has Deadened Pain

Chapter Summary

No animal was harmed in the creation of this chapter – people, however, are not exempt from injury …

“You?” Hadan appeared puzzled as she studied Hardison, now standing awkwardly at the base of the veranda steps, rain streaming down his face and soaking him to the skin almost instantly. “You killed Rafe?? A … a soft creature like you killed one of the best snipers in the world? How??”

She glanced at Eliot, who was struggling now to keep upright. But the hitter had a smirk on his face.

“He may not look dangerous,” Eliot grated, “but he stopped me from gettin’ my head blown off by your asshole of a boyfriend. He did the job an’ he did it quickly … even if he is a geeky idiot,” he added under his breath.

Hardison raised an eyebrow at Eliot’s words. He honestly didn’t know whether to be pleased or insulted, but he realised that in a roundabout way Eliot was telling him that he trusted the hacker with his life, and that made Hardison stand straighter … prouder.

He grinned at Hadan, his teeth white in the gloom of the storm.

“Age of the geek, baby!” he retorted, dark eyes alive with triumph.

Hadan pondered this new piece of information for a few moments, and then she shrugged narrow shoulders.

“So … it just means he dies along with you,” she said to Eliot, whose smile widened slightly.

“Yeah? You’re a creepy little bitch, aintcha?” he answered lightly, even though he knew that he could no more take on Hadan right now than Hardison could. “I can see why your folks called you ‘nobody’, ‘cause that’s what I see sittin’ on a horse right now … nobody.”

Hadan curled her lip, unsettled more than she felt she should have been at the pointed insult. It rankled, even after all these years. Her people … her family … did not want her.

Looking at Hardison and the people ranged on the veranda behind him … the old pastoralist with the revolver … his wife, the small, slender one who had the toughness and resilience of this strange, shimmering land so unlike her own home. Then there was the dark-haired man and his equally dark-haired, beautiful woman, both of whom studied Hadan with calculating intelligence … and the old, short, fat woman with the skillet in her hand and whose muddy eyes shone with hatred at this threat to her family.

And that, Hadan thought, was the thing … family. The tall young black man was looking at her with derision. He had his family surrounding him, and Eliot Spencer, she knew, would guard them all like one of the great grey wolves that roamed the ancient steppes of Mongolia, the spirit animal of her people that was known as the Assassin, preying as it did on the flocks of sheep that were the livelihood of the tribes.
She had no family. Or rather, her family did not want her. So she had learned that she did not need a family. Family meant weakness and dependence and a cage to hold her … the wild one … the one who was known as ‘Nobody’.

Khenbish Hadan sat still and straight, her small frame at ease on the big horse, and her olive eyes turned once more to Nate.

“Chong Bun-Tsui is coming,” she said. “He will come to speak to you, old man,” she said, indicating Soapy, “and then he will speak to that woman … the one who calls herself Lady Eloise Stanton but who is no such person,” she said to Nate, but she glanced at Sophie before returning to her study of him. Her eyes wandered over him minutely, as though she was studying a laboratory rat ripe for vivisection. “I know who you are, though. I know you are Nathan Ford.”

Nate raised an eyebrow, but that was all. He still stood, relaxed, arms crossed, with a half-smile on his face.

Hadan continued.

“These are your people. When that fool Rickenbacker described you to me, I knew ‘Ellis Stone’ was Eliot Spencer. I’ve spent over twenty years doing what I do, and I hear things … see things … and the things you do, Eliot Spencer, are very distinctive.” She shrugged. “I was hired to watch you, harass you … be a thorn in your side. I don’t know what Chong wants – I learned long ago never to ask my employers questions. But whatever he does or does not do, I will return and kill your people, Nathan Ford. All of them. Because you,” she gestured with her chin at Hardison, “killed the only thing I ever loved.”

And Eliot saw her right hand drop from where it rested on her thigh to hang beside her.

“DOWN, HARDISON!!” he yelled, and with every bit of his remaining strength he lunged forward, knowing he didn’t have time to draw the blade. He hooked the katana around and under Hadan’s left knee and yanked upwards, even though the movement caused him untold agony, unbalancing the assassin and levering her from the saddle. But he was a nanosecond too late.

And the world slowed to a crawl, or so it seemed.

Hadan slid sideways on Batu’s back as Eliot’s sword, still sheathed, unbalanced her. But it didn’t stop the small, wickedly sharp throwing knife sliding from her sodden sleeve into her hand, and even as she fell, she grasped the blade and threw it underhand straight at Hardison.

It was the lightning which saved Hardison’s life.

The electricity crackled through the roiling sky above, and long, blinding fingers of lightning suddenly arced above them and rippled down to crash into the stand of gum trees beyond the yard. The nearest tree, an old, battered forty-foot monster which had stood at Wapanjara for over a hundred years, exploded at the strike, sending fiery shards of ancient wood flying over the yard, and the crack of the trunk splitting was deafening.

Soapy squeezed the trigger of the old Webley and cursed, even as the recoil from the old revolver bucked into his hand.

He saw the glitter of metal in Hadan’s grip, but the brilliant flare from the lightning blinded him for a split second, and he knew in his soul that he had missed Khenbish Hadan.

Hardison heard Eliot’s desperate yell and his eyes widened and then flinched with the sudden glaring whiteness of the lightning. Without thinking he twisted sideways, recoiling from the flying splinters,
and the knife intended for his heart instead slammed high into his left shoulder.

For a moment or two he felt no pain.

_Huh, he thought. Is that it?_

And then the sharp, agonizing impact took his breath away, and he stumbled back against the veranda steps and he couldn’t do a damn thing, and Jo was yelling and oh _God_, that _hurt_, and another gunshot echoed through his mind but it didn’t really register.

The next thing Hardison knew was that he was looking up at the black thunder clouds above and the ream of lightning spattering through the sky, his retinas aching with the brightness of it.

_“Alec!”_  

Jo was suddenly beside him, and Hardison, the rain making his eyes sting, managed to look sideways as a pair of hands caught hold of his face and turned his head so he could see a pair of green eyes and a cap of short silver-auburn curls.

_“Alec! Look at me!”_ Jo snapped, trying to keep Hardison from seeing the stubby silver-steel hilt protruding from just beneath his collar bone.

Hardison blinked, surprised. _Hell, he thought. I’m gonna friggin’ die in goddamn friggin’ Australia, an’ this is all Eliot’s fault!_

_“Jo?”_ he whispered, and his right hand came up to his shoulder and he felt slick, warm blood oozing through his fingers. _“Jo … she … she stuck me with a frikkin’ knife!”_

Jo was busy looking for something to press against the wound to try and quell the bleeding, and a hand swam into Hardison’s vision.

_“Here …”_ and the hand held a beautiful pashmina. _“This should do it,”_ a voice whispered, fear rife in every word.

_Sophie._

Hardison felt the pressure and the pain and Sophie’s steadying hand on his right arm. And then Jo muttered something nasty, and he passed out.

The explosion of the tree into a gout of flaming splinters broke Gertie’s resolve, and her terror finally got the best of her.

Bawling as a burning fragment hit her neck and singed her thick curls, she yanked her head up and jerked free of Eliot’s tenuous grip, sending him in an untidy sprawl into a muddy pool of water. He convulsed with the pain of the impact and was unable to control the yell of agony that ripped from his throat.

Confused and frightened, Gertie fixated on the one thing she knew she was responsible for all of this discomfort and upset. Her one eye set itself murderously on Khenbish Hadan as the tiny assassin neatly twisted in the air and landed firmly on her feet.

The tiny woman snarled in fury as she realised her knife had not killed Hardison, and she saw Eliot prone in muddy water, only semi-conscious now but with the _katana_ still held in his left hand.

_**His sword.**_ She would take the Sword of the _Okuri-Inu_, and with it she would take Spencer’s head
and the heads of every one of these people he held dear, and her Rafe would be avenged because there would be nothing left of these people to continue their line. They would become like her … they would become nothing.

She ran forward on light feet and knelt down beside Eliot, reaching for the katana, now held only loosely in Eliot’s lax fingers.

But the hitter somehow sensed her presence, only half-conscious as he was, and managed to roll sideways with a grunt of agony. His right fist snapped out and hit Hadan in the shoulder, knocking her back onto her rump and sending an arcing splatter of muddy water over both of them.

Growling, Eliot tried to sit up, but then Gertie was upon them both.

The camel was roaring her fear and anger, and suddenly she was between Eliot and Hadan, and her long, yellow teeth were bared as her head snaked down and she chomped her powerful jaws on Hadan’s knee and lifted the woman bodily into the air.

The little assassin yelped in pain and the pressure on the joint was fearsome and agonizing. But gritting her teeth, she managed to bend at the waist, grasp Gertie’s bosal and punch the big camel over her blind eye.

More surprised than hurt, Gertie honked and dropped Hadan, who landed with a breath-halting thud on the unforgiving, sodden ground.

Scrambling backwards, she managed to get to her feet, her injured knee buckling under her as she limped again towards Eliot, face fixed in a grimace of lethal menace.

But Gertie’s protective streak kicked in and overcame her fear, and dancing clumsily on big, flat feet, she turned her back to Eliot, her huge frame steadfast in her determination to make sure he was safe. Her friend was wounded and sick, and she was not going to let this … this … creature harm a hair on his head.

But Gertie grumbled in surprise as another shot rang out and Hadan was punched sideways with the impact of a bullet on her left arm. It was only a nick, Soapy still half-blind from the lightning flash, but the nasty groove cut into her biceps stopped her deadly move forward, and it was at this moment she decided she would be best served to return later, wounded now as she was. She would treat her injuries and then … then she knew she would have to kill the camel first, because she would not be able to get close to her prey with the crazed animal on guard.

Struggling to her feet, she limped as fast as she could towards the big gelding, and reaching up to the saddle she swiftly eased into the soaked leather seat without even putting her foot in the stirrup.

Turning Batu towards the house, she reined the horse back and stared at the people now trying to take care of the young man lying unconscious in the rain.

Wincing as her injured knee throbbed, she saw the little, round woman, pure hatred engraved on her pudgy face, stump along to the veranda doors. Hadan hitched an eyebrow in surprise as she saw Effie was holding something and now it wasn’t a skillet. It was a pump-action shotgun.

“Hurt my boys, would you, you evil little shite!!” Effie spat.

And working a cartridge into the chamber, she expertly tucked the stock of the shotgun into her shoulder, took swift aim and fired.

Hadan barely managed to turn Batu towards the road beyond the yards that led up the hill to the
stringybarks, before grunting as several pellets of double-ought buckshot hit the back of her shoulder, the impact slamming her forward in the saddle. She only just managed to keep her seat, but she straightened with a groan.

“Got you, you bloody jumbuck!!! Effie bawled triumphantly. “Go on … get lost!! If you come back here, then by crikey I’ll knock your bleedin’ block off, you doggy loafer, see if I don’t!!”

Sending Batu in a steady, mile-eating lope along the road and upwards to the stringybarks, Hadan fumed to herself. These people, for all of their quirky oddness, were a force to be reckoned with. Her knee was on fire and she could feel blood trickling down her arm and the back of her shoulder. Without Eades to help, she was going to have a difficult task digging the pellets out.

Reining in at the top of the hill, she turned Batu around and watched as more people emerged from the house … that young aborigine whose wife Rafe had killed, and the slender young woman whose ability to climb almost anything Hadan grudgingly admired.

And there … there were the children, the young ones growing up in a family who loved them and nurtured them unconditionally, guarded fiercely by their human wolf.

She spat at the ground, angry with herself for allowing this family dynamic – so unlike her own – to get under her skin. It was one more reason to end this. Without Eades, she was empty of whatever love she had been capable, and now all that mattered was finishing this nonsense.

Running a hand down Batu’s sodden neck, she turned him into the shelter of the stringybarks and melted into the storm-drenched shadows.

“Charlie!! Charlie, I need help here!!” Jo yelled even as Sophie, ignoring the driving rain, cradled Hardison’s head in her lap. Soapy holstered the old Webley and he and Nate thumped down the veranda towards Hardison, although neither could decide who to go to first – the unconscious hacker or Eliot, now lying sprawled unmoving on his back in a morass of watery mud and being nosed by a panicked Gertie.

“Help Eliot!” Sophie snapped firmly, “Jo and I have Hardison!”

“Go get him out of this weather,” Jo added, “before the silly sod catches pneumonia!”

Charlie burst through the doorway from the house, followed by Parker and the two children, the little thief now unable to control their need to see the rest of their family once they heard Jo’s shout.

“Alec!!” Lizzie yelled, eyes round and dark as she tumbled down the steps to sprawl beside her mother. “That’s a… that’s a knife!!” she gasped, horrified, but Hardison didn’t respond. Lizzie could tell by the way his head lolled in her mother’s hands that he was unconscious, or worse still – “He’s not –” she wailed.

“No, no, sweetie …” Jo soothed, still pressing Sophie’s pashmina, now soaked with blood, against the wound, careful of the knife still embedded in the young man’s shoulder. “He’s just unconscious. He’ll be better once we get him inside and that knife out. It looks worse than it is, I promise,” she added with a tight, grim smile at the little girl. “Now then,” she continued. “You’ve got your coat and hat on, so if I were you I’d go help your dad and Soapy with Eliot. He needs you now, love … your mum and I can deal with Alec.”

“Come with me!” Parker joined them alongside Charlie, and held out her hand to Lizzie. “Let’s go take care of Eliot. He’s already sick, remember? We don’t want him to get any worse, now do we?”
Lizzie was fraught with indecision. She gazed at her friend, the man with whom she played video games and who willingly helped her tease Eliot … the kind, gentle, funny soul who helped her with her sums and made learning a discipline for which she really didn’t have any aptitude so much fun. She loved Alec Hardison very much indeed.

“H… hey, baby-girl …”

She saw dark, hazy agony-filled eyes slowly open and gaze at her blearily.

“Alec!! Alec, don’t move and let Mama and Grandma Jo look after you! You’ll be okay, I promise!” Lizzie grasped his hand and squeezed.

Hardison, hurting and wet as a haddock, smiled.

“Go, girl … go … go take care of that dumb-ass camel-hugger. I … I’ll be fine …”

“Now you sound like Eliot!” Parker said shakily.

Lizzie leaned forward and kissed Hardison on the forehead.

“Be back in a bit,” she said. “And listen to Mama and Grandma Jo and Effie, because I’ll be angry if you don’t!!” she warned, and then she was gone, splashing across the yard to take care of Eliot, because, she knew, she was the only one who could make him do as he was told.

Lizzie was a whirlwind of cajoling, fussing, patting and scolding over the next hour. Eliot, soaked and filthy, bleeding and only vaguely aware of everything going on around him, just kept asking if Hadan was gone and if everyone was safe, even when he was repeatedly told she had been sent packing, bleeding and defeated.

Lizzie walked, fussing, alongside her father as Nate and Soapy carried Eliot into the house, Parker behind the injured man so as to hold him steady as he was carefully eased up the wooden steps, through the veranda and into the bathroom.

He was shivering uncontrollably, but it still took Parker three tries to get him to loosen his grip on the katana. When he finally did relinquish his hold, he tried to tell Parker how to place it back on the stand. Parker shoved his hand away and replied that she had to gently clean and dry the wet grip, blade and koshirae before placing it back with its companion.

Eliot, confused and freezing, then began an addled diatribe, concerned that Parker would manage to slice her fingers off in the process, dulling the blade and dripping blood all over the place.

“And you’re not dripping??” Parker answered, feeling snarky, and looked at the man sitting on the toilet seat, his clothes nothing but mud-soaked rags and his wet, bare feet raw from the gritty soil. His stetson had fallen off when he hit the ground, and his hair was ropey clay-filled strings.

Unzipping his jacket, Nate and Soapy were dismayed to see the hitter’s broad chest and ribcage soaked in watery streaks of blood from his side and shoulder, and the cut on his stomach was also bleeding slightly.

“Oh, for goodness sake!” Parker snapped. “Lizzie?? Out you go!!”

“What? Why?” Lizzie asked tartly. She didn’t take kindly to being removed from her patient’s presence.
“Because Eliot’s going into the shower!” Parker said, and began to strip off her clothes.

Soapy’s eyebrows hit his hairline.

“Um …” he stammered, taken aback.

Nate grinned over Eliot’s head as he propped the man upright on the toilet seat.

“You sure you can manage?” he asked the little thief.

“You think I can’t?” Parker groused as she bent over to take off her boots and socks. “Soapy, can I have a stool from the kitchen?”

Soapy, red-faced at this young woman’s complete lack of concern over the possibility of her being naked in company, just nodded before escaping from the bathroom as quickly as possible, dragging a protesting Lizzie with him.

“And more towels!” she called after him.

“You need a hand to get him in there?” Nate asked, gesturing at the big walk-in shower.

“Wasshappenin’” Eliot slurred, teeth chattering.

“Eliot, Parker’s going to clean you up and get you warm, okay? C’mon … let’s get you undressed …”

“Oh no … no you don’t …” Eliot feebly struggled as Nate managed to peel the soaked jacket off him and then he tried to bat Parker’s hands away as she helped Nate stand him up to remove the sweat pants. He made a grab for his boxers, which after a brief argument, Parker allowed him to retain. Eliot hung on to them as though his life depended on them, scowling to himself.

“You’re such a prude sometimes!!” Parker scolded, even as she took off her pants, leaving her in shorts, bra and teeshirt. She then dug out some scissors from the bathroom cabinet and snipped off the plethora of bandages wound around bits of Eliot’s battered body. He certainly was a sorry sight, she decided.

A knock at the door came and Effie peered in.

“Brought you a stool, Missy. Need any help?”

“Nate’s here, but I might need a hand when we’ve got him clean and dry. His wounds are a mess. Idiot!” she snarked quietly.

Effie grinned despite her worry for the Oklahoman.

“The nipper’s going to lose her block when she sees what a mess he’s in. Poor bugger,” she said, although she didn’t have any sympathy in her voice for him, Eliot thought through the fog of cold and confusion in his head.

“M’fine …” he muttered, stubborn to the end.

“Shut up, Eliot!” Parker said testily, and then with Nate and Effie’s help managed to haul Eliot carefully into the shower and onto the sturdy stool. But despite her annoyance at Eliot putting himself in such a dangerous situation in his condition, Parker stood behind him and leaned him back against her. “I’m going to turn the water on, Eliot … alright? Tell me if it’s too hot or cold.” He heard the smile in her voice. “Don’t worry … I’ve got you.”
And before Eliot could say anything, he was enveloped in more water, but this time it was hot and
the spray was soothing, and Parker was as good as her word as she began the job of gently tending
his injuries and washing the mud and blood from his damaged body.

“Is … is it gonna hurt?” Hardison muttered as he lay on Effie’s kitchen table, still bleeding a little and
soaked to the skin.

“What do you think, you young fool,” Jo said as she cut through Hardison’s jacket and then his
sweatshirt, removing both.

“Oh …” he said. “Um … can I have a painkiller?” he asked hesitantly. “Or … or an injection … or
somethin’ –“

“It would take too long,” Jo explained, and readying a pressure bandage she grasped the short,
stumpy grip of the knife and pulled.

Charlie had to push down hard on the hacker’s undamaged shoulder as the young man let out a
bellow of pure agony as Jo slid the knife from the wound. She immediately pressed the pad against
the freely-bleeding injury, and Hardison’s body was rigid with tension as he fought to control the
pain.

“There now … it’s all done, laddie …” Jo crooned, “now all we have to do is get you stitched up
and then you can have some painkillers, I promise.”

“Oh Geeerrd …” Hardison moaned, “that was friggin’ awful …” he babbled. “My arm … tell me I
won’t lose the use of my arm, Jo … I need my arm … I do, honestly …”

Jo laid a hand on his forehead, cool and soothing.

“You’ll be fine,” she told him gently. “It’s deep but clean, and if you take care to do some physio –
which Parker can help you with – you should heal up perfectly,” she added.

“Parker???” Hardison whispered. “Oh no … no-no-no … she’s a monster, Jo … a monster I tell ya
… she’s like … like the Spanish Inquisition on double shots of caffeine, only nastier … ‘way, ‘way
nastier … you can’t do that to me, Jo … please, anythin’ but that –“

Jo burst out laughing, which on the face of it, Hardison thought, was a little uncalled-for.

That evening, with Eliot back in his bed and under orders not to move if he wanted to see the sun
rise again and with Lizzie beside him to make sure her instructions were obeyed, everyone else
relaxed in the living room with hot chocolate and lamingtons.

Well, everyone but Hardison.

Nate sighed.

“Please remind me to never ever let Hardison have Percocet again, Soph.”

The hacker was sprawled in a long, ungainly heap on the couch, arm in a sling and propped up with
cushions. He had been talking non-stop for over an hour. Team Leverage was usually quite at home
with Hardison’s rambling, being the chatty soul he was, but this was different. Very, very different.

Happy and smiling and feeling no pain, Hardison was cheerily telling anybody and everybody who
would listen how much he loved them. And, apparently, he loved everyone a lot.

“An’ … an’ I love you, Effie … I do, ‘cause you, you’re jus’ like my Nana an’ I love Nana more than anythin’ ‘cause she, like, raised me right an’ makes the best cathead biscuits in the world an’ –“

“Cathead biscuits?” Sophie said faintly, although Kip, sitting beside Hardison on the floor looked up.

“Oooh,” he asked, black eyes wide, “they sound great!! Is your Nana coming to visit us one day? Would she make them for us?”

“Kip, my boy, my Nana would love to make ‘em for ya,” he said brightly. “An’ jerk chicken, an’ –“

“HEY! Tryin’ … tryin’ to sleep in here!” Eliot yelled weakly from his bedroom. “Somebody shut him up, will ya?” he added plaintively.

“Eliot, m’man!!” Hardison bawled back, delighted to hear his best friend was awake and with the living. “Hey El … I love ya, man!! I do!! I really, really do!!”

“Jeez!! Don’t say things like that, Hardison!!” Eliot complained, horrified. “Nate!! Tell him to stop sayin’ things like that! It … it’s just weird –“

“Oh, now,” Hardison cajoled, “don’t be like that! I took a knife for you, man …”

“No, you frikkin’ didn’t!!” Eliot insisted. “If you hadn’t butted in I’d have taken out Hadan in a second –“

Parker snorted from her place beside the fire, curled up in one of the huge old armchairs.

“Yeah, right. You couldn’t even stand properly!” she said loudly so Eliot could hear her.

“Parker, I love you, girl!! I know you’re weird an’ somethin’s wrong with you, but I love you, honest!!” Hardison insisted, all google eyes and soppy grin.

Parker giggled.

“You’re funny when you’re high,” she said.

“He ain’t funny!!” Eliot retorted feebly. “He’s deranged!!”

“Will you stop complaining Eliot!!” Now it was Lizzie’s turn. “You’re supposed to be sleeping!!”

“’Lizbeth Grace, I’m tryin’ to sleep but Hardison –“

“That’s my baby-girl!! You tell him!” Hardison urged. “I love my Lizzie. She’s so clever … she’s like you, Nate. Have I told you I love ya, Nate? Friend o’ mine?!”

Nate dropped his head in his hands. After the day they had had, this was the last thing he needed … a family argument.

And so it went on, and Jo, desperate to finish her crossword and failing, settled deeper into her chair and tried hard not to smile.

And overhead the rain drifted through the sky and drenched the landscape until it could hold no more, and the distant hills were rimmed with silver lightning and the billabongs filled with water, breaking their banks and filling the land with dark, mirrored pools.
To be continued …
The Skeleton Wraith

Chapter Summary

Fluff, angst and a little foreboding.

The rain had finally eased, and was no more than a pitter-patter on the sheets of water now lying in the yard. A fitful moon had broken through drifting clouds, and Nate Ford sat on the veranda in the early hours of the morning, gazing at the distant hills. The stringybarks, their branches outlined against the scudding clouds overhead, were gilded with moonlight.

Unable to sleep, despite Sophie’s warmth next to him on the mattress they had brought into the living room from Oggie’s tent out of the rain, Nate had eased himself out of the bed and padded silently past Hardison, snoring softly on the couch and cradling his hurt shoulder.

Kip was curled up next to Parker, snuggling into the little thief as she dozed in the roomy old armchair she had claimed as her own. Charlie had long ago headed off to check Dottie and her new foal and to make sure the rest of the mares were alright after the storm. He had Soapy’s old Webley with him, and the young aborigine was quietly stalking the homestead boundary, Gertie and Buster keeping him company now that the rain had eased.

The sudden murmur of voices had finally been the deciding factor for Nate to get out of bed.

Eliot had begun to cough, and Lizzie, sleepily alarmed, had roused Effie who in turn had fetched Jo.

Nate, wrapped warmly in his old dressing gown and glad of it, peered around Eliot’s open bedroom door and asked if there was anything he could do.

Jo, sitting on the bed beside Eliot and Lizzie, shook her head.

“Nah. The lad’s just a bit hot and this cough’s bothering him. It’s probably just a chill, so no worries for now.”

Nate thought Eliot looked a little flushed and feverish, but he was in good hands.

“You okay, sweetheart?” he asked his daughter, who was writing notes in her project book.


Nate smiled indulgently. This daughter he and Sophie had produced was going to turn into one hell of an amazing young woman.

“Maybe he’ll listen, next time, huh,” he replied softly. “Can’t sleep,” he continued. “If you need a hand with anything, I’ll be on the veranda. I need to clear my head.”

Effie glanced at him from her seat beside Eliot’s bed.

“Kettle’s just boiled if you want me to make you some tea,” she said, her voice gruff but soft.
Nate shook his head.

“You’ve done more than enough for us as it is, Effie. I’m sure I can manage to make myself something to drink, so you just relax, okay?”

Effie nodded.

“As long as you’re sure? This daft young mongrel has the nipper and the Missus, so I can –“

Nate held up a placatory hand, grinning.

“Stay put, okay? I’ll be fine.”

Eliot broke out in a fit of chesty coughs, and Effie frowned, but the coughing eased and Eliot muttered, only half-awake.

“Bloody boofhead,” she whispered gently. “Always has been … always will be,” she murmured, leaning forward to rest a hand on Eliot’s forehead, calming the man she regarded as family.

“Wouldn’t have him any other way,” she added grumpily, affection in every word.

Nate ducked his head, smiling. Eliot really did have a home and family, and, Nate thought with a pang, one day Eliot would leave them and return to this place he loved.

“He’s lucky to have you,” he said.

“Yes … well …” Effie grumped, a little embarrassed, “he’s an arse sometimes, but then, who isn’t?”

Nate thought about his own mistakes, and had to agree. He was just on the point of heading to the kitchen when Effie spoke again.

“Look in the wooden bread box … the rest of the lamingtons’re in there. Help yourself.”

Nate, who had quickly developed a taste for the rich confections, grinned.

Lamingtons. Heaven.

So leaving Eliot to the tender mercies of Jo, Effie and Lizzie, Nate made himself a large mug of tea and purloined two lamingtons from Effie’s bread box. Digging out a plate from Effie’s capacious cupboards, he carefully carried his tea and lamingtons out onto the veranda. There he eased himself into Eliot’s recliner, shifting the cushion behind his head and draping the throw rug over his body.

Now warm and relaxed, Nate sipped the fragrant tea and bit into a lamington, and then began to think about Chong Bun-Tsui.

He knew who the man was, of course, even though they had never met. Or rather, he had known Chong’s father, back in the days when he worked as an insurance investigator. Chong Zhi-huán, a man of ambition, was ruthless but traditional, dragonhead of a triad gang based in the business district of Shanghai. His second son, Chong Bun-Tsui, took advantage of his excellent education, majoring in business and politics at Yale. Then he went back to Shanghai and cultivated contacts in unstable parts of the world, principally as a snakehead … a human trafficker to the west.

When Nate had met with Zhi-huán all those years ago, it was to do with the destruction of a block of offices in Shanghai, originally thought to be caused by a gas leak. Nate knew it wasn’t, but he couldn’t prove it … one of the few investigations which had eluded a satisfactory conclusion in Nate’s mostly distinguished career. The old triad dragonhead, who owned the building, was
gracious, pleasant and smiling … and his dark eyes were as cold as tempered steel.

Nate took another sip of his tea. It appeared the son had branched out. Well, he thought … the younger Chong certainly had the contacts. He had just moved on from selling humans to selling uranium to the highest bidder. There would certainly be more profit in it, once the mine and processing plant was set up and running, and although the outlay was probably very high, the returns would be … breathtaking.

“Ah, lamingtons!” Sophie sighed as she exited the door and sat down beside Nate on one of the wicker chairs. She was wrapped in her warm dressing gown and Nate’s heavy jacket, and had Eliot’s sturdy boots on her bare feet. She also had a cup of hot tea in her hand.

“Sorry … didn’t mean to wake you,” Nate murmured.

Sophie smiled indulgently and gazed into the quiet solitude of the night.

“You didn’t wake me,” she said warmly. “What woke me, my darling, was our dear, sweet, gentle daughter who wouldn’t hurt a fly, reading Eliot the riot act because, apparently, he now has a chest cold and he’s currently trying to cough up a lung. Lizzie does not approve.”

Nate looked at his wife, who was ravishing even when she was wearing his jacket and Eliot’s boots. He grinned.

“Well, if Eliot can survive Lizzie and her caregiving, he truly can survive anything the world throws at him.”

“She gave Hardison a good talking-to before bedtime,” Sophie added, “and he looked completely terrified … although maybe the Percocet had something to do with it.” she continued, frowning. “Anyway … he’s been told – and I quote – to ‘stop whinging, keep the pillows under his elbow and support his shoulder, and to stop being such a daft bludger,’ whatever that means.” She sighed extravagantly. “Our daughter, Nate, is turning into some sort of mish-mash of Eliot Spencer and Effie.”

Nate winced, but he could certainly see the humour in the situation … and it was certainly character-building. He hoped.

Sophie reached over and lifted the second lamington, tucking into the sweet cake. In-between nibbles, she leaned back in her chair and listened. The distant, haunting howl of dingoes echoed through the air and then silence settled one more on Wapanjara.

“It’s so quiet here,” she whispered. “I know it’s been traumatic, and God knows we didn’t need Hardison and Eliot getting hurt, but … I see why Eliot thinks of Wapanjara as home.” She sighed again. “Nate … we need to sort this out, because this will be Lizzie’s one day … or at least half of it will. And she loves it here, I mean … really loves it, and not just because it’s Eliot’s home.”

Nate nodded and finished his tea.

“That’s why I couldn’t sleep. I’ve been thinking about Chong Bun-Tsui … about his plans and the situation he’s created. He’ll be here soon … today … maybe tomorrow, depending on the road conditions. He’ll try and buy you out, ‘Lady Eloise’ … and when you say no, he’ll try and force it. And with Eliot laid up and now Hardison’s out of commission, we’re two down to begin with and Chong won’t be alone.”

“Well …” Sophie said thoughtfully, “… instead of selling … how about a partnership? If Lady Eloise owns Wapanjara, she has something Chong wants. Maybe we can string him along a little
until we find out more. I prefer more of a plan, but if we have to fly by the seat of our pants, then so be it.”

Nate thought about it for a moment.

“But the kids —“

“ - will be safe enough, Nate. You know that. Parker and Charlie have some plans – and don’t ask me what they are, because I have no idea – and you and Soapy could take Hardison in Bernadette up to that place Soapy was speaking about … y’know … where Hardison thought he might be able to tap into Albany’s web access and accounts.”

“Those bastards at Albany won’t be able to get here today,” Charlie said, emerging from the darkness. Gertie plodded along beside him and Buster trotted at the aborigine’s heels. He had Soapy’s Webley in its holster around his waist. “We’re just about surrounded by water, and will be for a couple of days. The weather’s going to be too difficult for a helicopter just yet, and besides, there’s no place to land even if we weren’t flooded out. So, unless they have a bloody big boat, Albany will just have to bide their time.”

“So, we have time to put something in place plan-wise,” Nate pondered. “Will we be able to get up to –“ he waggled his fingers in the general direction of the place Soapy had mentioned.

“Munaji Ridge,” Charlie filled in. “Yeah … no worries, especially in that thing,” he gestured at Bernadette. “There’s only the creek between here and there and luckily it never fills up too much and the bridge will hold. It floods further down. We won’t manage the road out onto the highway, but yeah … Munaji Ridge? Easy.”

“What about Hadan? She’s probably still up there somewhere, licking her wounds,” Sophie murmured, gesturing at the hill above where the stringybarks grew. Her voice was steady and calm, but Nate knew better. The Mongolian had threatened their daughter and the rest of this wayward but superbly functional family.

“I think she’ll stay away for a couple of days,” Nate said thoughtfully. “She had buckshot in her and a bullet wound, and unlike Eliot, she’s on her own. She’ll be too stiff and sore to do too much for a day or two. She also won’t be able to get back to Albany, although I have a feeling her priorities have changed. But we have Parker. She’ll keep an eye out, I’m sure.”

“And earbuds,” Sophie said firmly. “I know they won’t be brilliant out here, but Hardison thought they would work around the homestead. I want all of us to wear one – and that includes Lizzie and Kip.”

Charlie trudged wearily up the veranda steps and turned to look out at the breezy moonlit night, thinking about this place he loved and about Alice, the woman who had stolen his heart and his soul. The sudden wrenching feeling of loss that he had kept under such rigid control for weeks almost made him unable to breathe.

Nate stood up and put a hand on Charlie’s shoulder, squeezing it gently, and felt the slight tremble in the man’s wiry frame.

“I’ll get you some tea, my friend. You look as though you need it.”

Charlie ran his fingers through his thick, black curls and nodded silently. To even think of Alice was just too much right now, but he found he couldn’t stop himself.

He sat down at the table as Nate disappeared inside to make more tea, and he rubbed his eyes. He
was so tired, and his heart was shattered.

Sophie studied this grief-stricken young man for long moments, and then reached out and squeezed his wrist.

“You must miss her dreadfully,” she said quietly.

“More than I can stand,” Charlie finally managed to grind out. “Now Eliot’s home, it’s been a little easier … but … it’s like someone punched a hole right through my chest,” he blurted, pain echoing in every word.

“We will find out who did this, Charlie, I promise. And if we can help in any other way … all you have to do is ask, because we’re all in this together. This place will belong to Lizzie and Kip one day, and that makes us family. You understand?”

Charlie looked up into the dark, kind eyes of this beautiful woman who had brought her family to help him find out about why his Alice had died, and finally … finally … the pain got the better of him and he gave a breathless sob.

“I miss her, Sophie … I bloody miss her and life’s just too damn’ hard, y’know? If I didn’t have Kip …” tears filled his big, expressive eyes. “He’s all I have left of her. That, and the memories. And they’re not enough. Just … not enough. I miss her laugh and I miss her bloody awful singing and … and her touch. She could make me shiver just with a look.” He grimaced. “I miss her hair spread out on my chest. It tickled, and she knew it, but she thought it was the funniest thing she’d ever seen … me twitching like an itchy ‘roo, and I hate being tickled, but I lived with it because I loved to hear her giggle.” He gave a shaky smile through the tears. “She adored Eliot like a brother, and he’d do anything for her and the boy. Did you know Eliot was home when she had Kip?”

Sophie, knowing Charlie needed to let it all out … all of the grief and pain and heartache … shook her head.

“He was a rock,” Charlie continued. “Me? I was a bloomin’ wreck. I never knew he was such a dab hand at changing nappies. With one hand. His left hand. He’s the best uncle a little boy could have, I can tell you.”

They sat quietly for a moment, allowing Charlie to gather himself a little. Then Sophie smiled at the young, heartbroken man.

“Did Eliot ever tell you that he delivered Lizzie? In a van, of all places, and in the middle of a rainstorm.”

“Bloody hell! No he didn’t!” Charlie exclaimed, surprised.

“You should have seen his face when he held her. It was love at first sight, although he’ll deny it to his dying day, no doubt!” Sophie’s eyes crinkled in amusement at the memory.

Charlie wiped tears from his eyes with the heel of his hand.

“My kumunjayi … she was besotted from the first moment she saw Kip.” Charlie patted Sophie’s hand where it lay on his wrist. “Every time I look at Kip I see her,” he said softly, his voice breaking.

A hand placed a mug of steaming tea on the table in front of him, and he looked up to see Nate, who then put down a plate with more lamingtons on it. He sat down beside Charlie and put an arm around the young aborigine’s shoulders to comfort him.
The touch of these kind people wrenched something loose in Charlie’s heart.

“She’s gone, Nate,” Charlie whispered, his voice raw with pain, “She’s gone and I love her and I’ll never see her again and I don’t know if I can live with that!”

And before Nate could say anything, Charlie crumpled, and Sophie and Nate held him tight and grieved with him on this moonlit night with silvered clouds drifting high above, and never was the loss of Alice Jakkamarra so keenly felt.

“Nope,” Eliot said weakly, wheezing and sitting up in bed with his arms crossed. His eyebrows were in ‘don’t-friggin’-mess-with-me-’cause-I’ll-rip-your-friggin’-arms-off-an’-friggin’-feed-’em-to-you’ mode. He coughed and the pain of his wounds made him flinch and the cough became even worse.

“Yes, Eliot,” Lizzie said patiently as she sat amongst her cushions and comforter, project book open on her lap. “You have to. It’s good for you. You’re poorly.” She fixed him with steady, knowing brown eyes.

“It …” he coughed, congested, “… it’s just a cold, ‘Lizbeth Grace –“ Eliot muttered, and noted Lizzie’s illness grading system had gone from ‘sick’ to ‘poorly.’ Hmmm. He’d gone up a level. Lizzie’s system started at ‘a bit wibbly’ and got progressively more descriptive. Eliot knew if he ever got to being ‘in a bad way’ he was probably doomed.

Lizzie arched an eyebrow that was pure Sophie Devereaux Ford.

“You have a chest ‘fection, Grandma Jo says, so take the medicine!”

Eliot took a deep breath, ready and more than willing to argue until the sun set, but all it did was set off another heavy bought of coughing, and he had to unfold his arms and cover his mouth. The pain almost made him curl up into a ball.

“Effie? He’s being awkward,” Lizzie sighed, gazing at the little cook as she stood above Eliot and Lizzie, a bottle and spoon in hand.

Effie, not one to tolerate Eliot in a stubborn mood at the best of times, harrumphed.

“I’ll give him bloody awkward!” She muttered, and glared at Eliot, who pointedly ignored her. “Righto, nipper – looks like it’ll have to be Plan B.” Her muddy eyes took on a nasty gleam.

Eliot, his coughing easing a little, hesitated. He studied the bottle in Effie’s hand. He couldn’t see the name, but he could read the tagline. It wasn’t very inspiring.

‘IT TASTES AWFUL – AND IT WORKS!’ he read. Dear God, what was this stuff?***

The antibiotics were one thing, but Jo had decided in her wisdom to also dose Eliot with a good cough medicine to help with the congestion, and Eliot had a choice of this decongestant – whatever it was – and the drench they used for the cattle if they had pneumonia.

“Plan B? What’s Plan B –“ he groused, feeling a bit out of his depth.

But before he could continue, Lizzie kneeled forward on the bed, clamped Eliot’s nose closed with little fingers and hung on like a terrier with a rat.

Eliot, surprised and not a little annoyed, opened his mouth to yell at Lizzie while inhaling much-needed air. Seizing the moment, Effie shoved the spoonful of disgusting-looking liquid into his
mouth and pushed his jaw shut.

“Swallow!” she commanded.

The stuff was 

appalling. Heavy with camphor and menthol, the bite of pine needle oil and other powerful herbal ingredients hit Eliot’s throat and he tried hard not to gag. He took a deep breath as Lizzie, grinning triumphantly, let go of his nose and the sudden intake of air dragged the heady, powerful vapour through his nasal passages and down into his congested lungs.

He couldn’t help himself … Eliot swallowed rather than spew the stuff all over Lizzie, which she knew he wouldn’t do, and he coughed and retched and groaned at the reaction from his injuries.

“See? Not so bad, now was it?” Effie said with great satisfaction. “And anyway … the nastier it tastes, you daft bastard, the better it is for you, so live with it,” she added, screwing the top back on the bottle.

“Effie …” Eliot croaked, eyes streaming, “Don’t you ever … ever bring that crap near me again –“

“You’ll have some more before supper,” Lizzie said, writing her notes out on Eliot’s response. “It’ll help your chest.” She studied her notes once more before adding “you don’t want to get pew-monia, now do you?”

Eliot lay back on his pillows, gasping with the effort of it all, and grudgingly had to admit to himself that the vile vapours were even now beginning to ease the discomfort in his lungs.

“I swear to God –“ he began, chest heaving, but Lizzie was having none of his nonsense.

She leaned forward, kissed his nose, and smiled at him.

“See? Don’t you feel better now? You’re poorly, Eliot. And you’re hurt.” Her smile faded, and then Eliot saw the worry for him in her dark gaze, and realised he had probably frightened the wits out of her when he had lain soaked and half-conscious in the mud and pouring rain.

He twitched a small smile.

“I’m feelin’ better already, darlin’,” he said gruffly, and Lizzie brightened. She had sat with him all through the night, watching him sleep fitfully and worrying herself witless about his increasingly bad cough. But now it was breakfast time, and her Daddy and Grandpa Soapy and Alec were heading off up into the hills in Bernadette soon. So she had quite a job on her hands to keep Eliot in his bed because he would want to be up and about, protecting his family.

“That’s good, isn’t it Effie?” Lizzie said, feeling much happier. Effie grunted to herself and stretched.

“If he behaves himself, I might let him get out of bed this evening for dinner,” she said, eyeing Eliot shrewdly. “But only for an hour or so, y’hear? And if you even begin to look shitty it’s straight back to bed with you, my lad! Understand?”

Eliot, tired and sore and full of noxious medicine, nodded.

“Please ya!” he muttered, and Lizzie squeaked with happiness.

“You up for some breakfast?” Effie demanded, bottle in hand so that she could stow it away out of Eliot’s reach.

Eliot, weary, feeling rotten and still with the taste of the Devil’s Decongestant in his mouth, shook
his head. But Lizzie drew down eyebrows in a glare, and his gesture reluctantly turned into a
resigned nod.

Effie smirked to herself. Having Lizzie around certainly made Eliot-wrangling a lot easier.

“Just a little orange juice and toast, Yank. How does that sound?” she said, almost-kindly.

“And now I can tell you all about Dottie’s foal!!” Lizzie crowed, bright and happy that Eliot was
doing as he was told for once. “It’s a boy and he’s bay, Charlie says, but when he loses his baby fluff
he’s going to be grey like Dottie, Charlie says, and he’s wearing specs like you do and Charlie says
_—_

And as Effie hobbled back to her kitchen, she could hear Lizzie cheerfully prattling on and on, and
she knew Eliot would listen and comment and be as attentive as only Eliot, damaged as he was,
could be. The little girl was good for him, Effie thought. But her smile turned into a grin as a loud,
phlegm-riddled growl of angry surprise came from the bedroom.

“You called him WHAT?? DAMMIT, Parker!!”

Lizzie’s delighted laugh made Effie’s heart sing with pleasure.

“Ow … ow-ow-ow-” Alec Hardison babbled as he was helped into Bernadette’s capacious front
passenger seat and gently strapped in, a cushion placed between his wounded shoulder and the safety
belt. “S’okay,” he said to himself, “m’okay … I’ll be fine …”

He had slept well enough on the couch, but Hardison had awoken to find himself stiff and very sore.
Bur he was determined to go up onto the ridge in Bernadette this morning, and with Soapy and
Nate’s help, he was going to do his best to hack into Albany’s software. The sky had cleared and
although it was breezy, he thought he might, if he was lucky, to be able to piggyback a signal
through a convenient coms satellite. He had hoped not to have to do this. But things had taken a very
sinister turn, and the knowledge he hoped to glean was essential to their plans.

“Are you sure about this, son?” Soapy said, worry making his forehead crease and his face look even
more like a depressed bloodhound.

Hardison nodded, wincing.

“I gotta, Soapy. We have to know what those sonsabitches are up to now, an’ they know that _we_
know what _they’re_ up to. Their cover’s blown, and ours too, maybe. We only got a couple of days to
work all this out.”

“I’ve stowed your gear, Hardison, so we’re ready to go,” Nate said, appearing at Soapy’s side.

Soapy held out his hand.

“Keys.”

Nate and Hardison looked at one another.

Soapy grinned.

“I’m driving, mate. I know the track, and I can save Alec from the worst of the bumps. It’ll only take
us thirty minutes or so.”

Nate shrugged.
“Works for me,” he said.

“Good-oh!” Soapy said, a little too enthusiastically for Hardison’s taste.

“Um … she’s pretty heavy an’ –” he began hesitantly, but Soapy held up a hand.

“I’ve driven tanks, laddie. I think this little lady’ll be a doddle!”

Hardison blinked.

“But –“

“Park your bum, Nate – it’s going to be an interesting ride!!” Soapy said, grinning manically, and he hurried around to the driver’s side, got in and inserted the key in the ignition and turned it. Bernadette’s big V8 engine purring into life. Nate got into the rear seat and fastened his safety belt.

Hardison groaned helplessly as he clung onto the safety belt with his good hand, rested his head back on the seat and closed his eyes. Damn, but this was gonna hurt.

And Soapy, grinning like a lunatic, drove Bernadette’s bulky frame out of the yard and headed along the track towards the billabong, and then he would take the rocky trail towards Munaji Ridge where they would do their best to be a few steps ahead of Chong Bun-Tsui and his plans.

Parker watched Bernadette and her cargo disappear along the track, only moving when she sensed someone beside her.

“Are you ready?” Charlie said.

Parker looked at this young man who had lost so much.

“Whenever you are,” she answered.

Charlie looked grim, she thought. His face wasn’t made for sadness. His was a face made for fun and laughter and kindness, and she felt bad for him, knowing how difficult all of this was for him and his small son.

Parker knew about loss, although she tried not to think of her brother’s death.

“We’ll stop them, Charlie,” she said softly. “I promise.”

Charlie’s smile had no pleasure in it. It was a smile borne of heartache and anger and grief.

“C’mon, Parker. Let’s go see what we can do to stop the buggers getting close to the house, hey?”

Parker’s grin was like that of a predator sighting its prey.

Jo and Sophie sat playing chess on the veranda. They hadn’t seen Charlie and Parker for a while, but they both knew that the two of them were doing their best to keep the homestead safe.

Gertie prowled the damp yard, a growly Buster in tow, and Jo had loosed the heelers in the cattle yards, the three working dogs now haunting the barn and pens. They would be an excellent warning system.

As Jo took Sophie’s rook, she rested her other hand on the rifle propped against the chair beside her.
Sophie could hear the children inside the house, chatting to a still-coughing Eliot as he lay in his bed, drowsily helping them with their projects, but she knew the hitter’s old razor-sharp Ka-Bar knife lay unsheathed under his pillow.

Effie was in the kitchen, keeping an ear open for Eliot getting too tired as she worked on lunch. She wanted to make something easy for Eliot to digest, something nourishing and tasty, so she was preparing some barramundi fillets from her capacious freezer.

But even as she worked, she would occasionally stop and listen and watch out of the window, and her hand would stray to the pump-action shotgun laid across the huge old kitchen table.

To be continued …

**Author's notes:**

* Told in ‘Military Precision’.

** ‘kumunjayi’ – a Warumungu word used as a name for those who have died, although it is thought to be originally Warlpiri and came into use in the Tennant Creek area when Warlpiri people came to live there in the 1930s. Seeing as Alice was Warlpiri, it would make sense.

*** The wonderful, evil-tasting, Buckley’s Mixture. Made in Canada, the company is no-nonsense about its product, and uses its awful taste to market the mixture, which, incidentally, is sugar and additive free and apparently extremely effective.
Charlie headed off to the barn with a single-minded determination which Parker recognised as something achingly similar to Eliot’s attitude to life, when he had a job to do and his team was on the line.

The young aborigine had parked the ute beside the barn door in readiness, and Charlie, a rifle slung over his shoulder, disappeared inside before Parker could catch up with him. By the time she had reached the vehicle Charlie was loading old but still useful rolled loops of barbed wire onto the ute’s flatbed, followed by an axe, a couple of packs of dark green baling twine and fencing tools.

“What can I do?” she asked breathlessly.

Charlie gave her a grim smile before gesturing to the office.

“Have a look in the back store room through there. You’ll find a whole bunch of old dingo traps. We don’t use ‘em any more – neither Soapy nor I like ‘em – cruel buggers, they are, but we might find a use for ‘em,” he said.

“Kay,” Parker replied, nodding. “Anything else?”

“See if you can find some high-tensile wire,” Charlie added, but Parker could see he was thinking about other items he had in mind to help protect the people he loved and the son he adored. “Oh, and there should be packs of six-inch nails in the workshop – bring as many as you can find.”

As Parker began rummaging about for the objects she wanted, Charlie went to the workbench in the barn and retrieved packs of split pins, a couple of drainage shovels and a small hacksaw, and then he found Jo’s gardening box and purloined two trowels. He pondered for a moment, and then lifted the heavy pinch-bar used to dig holes for fence posts, and added a couple of one-kilo packs of fencing staples.

Once his various acquisitions were loaded into the ute, he was sure he had almost everything he needed, but Parker appeared in the doorway hauling several loops of sturdy, high-tensile wire which Charlie added to his collection in the flatbed. Parker returned dangling half-a-dozen heavy old gin-traps in her hands.

“I checked them,” she said. “They all work and I gave the springs a squirt of oil just to make sure,” she smiled malevolently. “Oh … and I found these,” she said, and turning back into the barn, she reappeared a minute later and manhandled two big truck batteries into the ute’s flatbed accompanied by a tangle of jump-leads and several chain neck-halters for cattle.

“If we can’t cause a bit of mayhem with this lot,” Charlie said, pleased with their haul, “then my name isn’t Charlie Jakamarra!”

Parker cackled, and her face broke into a wicked grin.

“This is going to be fun!” she said.

Both of them slid into the ute seats, and then Charlie started the engine and drove around to the yard, parking beside Oggie and leaving the engine running as Parker slipped out of the door and headed into the house for a few minutes.

When she emerged Sophie was with her, and the two spoke for a moment or two before Sophie
nodded and waved at Charlie before sitting down at the veranda table next to a laptop and a half-finished game of chess. Parker trotted down the veranda steps and flung herself into the ute beside Charlie.

"Here," she said, holding something out in the palm of her hand. "Doesn’t matter which ear."

Charlie looked at the tiny earpiece Parker was offering him, and carefully lifted it, figured out which way around it went and slipped it into his left ear. He broke into a wide smile as a babble of voices filled his head.

There was Effie, muttering to herself about her herb-rich butter sauce for barramundi steaks, and overlaying her complaints was Kip, cheerfully telling Eliot about one of his classmates who lived two hundred miles away on a sheep station near Alice Springs. Lizzie’s voice giggled, and then Eliot was there, drowsy but attentive, asking if there was any orange juice left and Jo answered, saying it was time for Eliot to take his antibiotics.

*Can you hear us?* Sophie’s voice sounded as though she was right next to him.

"Just speak," Parker said to Charlie. "We can all hear you." And she slipped a tiny earbud into her own ear.

Charlie, intrigued, tried it out.

"Um … Kip? It’s Dad. Are you okay?" he asked hesitantly.

*Yeah, Dad! I’m with Lizzie and Eliot! Can you hear me?* Kip sounded thrilled.

*Hi, Charlie!!!* Lizzie joined in, delighted that Charlie and Parker were now part of their secret world.

"I can hear you … *all* of you!" Charlie said, surprised at the clarity and ease of use. "Eliot? Are you managing those two terrors?"

*No worries*, Eliot said, and coughed painfully. *I’ll keep an eye on ‘em*, he growled softly.

*We’re keeping an eye on you*, Kip said sternly, and Jo chuckled.

*Feels strange, hey, Charlie!* she said, and Charlie heard the clink of a glass as she helped Eliot take his medication.

*Will you lot keep the bloody racket down*, Effie complained, *I’m trying to bleeding concentrate and you drongos are yappin’ like a bunch of dingoes in the mating season!!*

"Eliot, mate … when Alec gets back tell him I want these for using around the place! Means I can keep an eye on Soapy and make sure the silly old bastard doesn’t get himself into trouble!" Charlie said, grinning.

*You got it*, Eliot said, and Charlie could hear the smile in his friend’s voice. *Are you guys headin’ into the bush?* Eliot asked. *Yell if you need us. I ain’t so laid up that I can’t help - *

"Eliot … just shut up and take your pills!" Parker said waspishly. "We know what we’re doing, so just be quiet and rest!"

*Dammit, Parker! You’re turnin’ into a friggin’ nag!* Eliot said with feeling.

*Shush!* Lizzie snarked. *You’re poorly! Be quiet, Eliot!*
Do you buggers want lunch?? Because if you don’t shut your cake-holes, you noisy bastards, you won’t get any!! Effie cursed grumpily.

“Don’t worry Effie … Charlie and I have lots to do so we’ll try and not bother you. But if you need us … “ Parker let the rest of the sentence hang.

We’ll let you know, Sophie said. I’m on the laptop monitoring you two, so I know where you are. Hardison’s set up the positioning software so your earbuds are pinging your location back to me. We’re covered.

“Good, you can mark where we put all of our little surprises!” Parker said and pulled on a pair of work gloves. “Okay Charlie – let’s go.”

And Charlie put the ute into gear and drove slowly out of the homestead perimeter and into the bush, where he and Parker were going to make sure that any person trying to harm their people would pay for it dearly.

Hardison was feeling every bump, lump and lurch that vibrated through Bernadette’s solid chassis, but he had to admit Soapy knew what he was doing. The pastoralist, with a lifetime of off-road driving under his belt, treated Bernadette like the princess she obviously was. Soapy had a light touch on the steering wheel, even though Bernadette was a left-hand drive, and he cajoled her over rough, lumpy ground, slippery, wet clay-pan and a deeply-rutted track up an incline which would have daunted even the most experienced off-roader.

But Hardison, despite the pain, was grateful for Soapy’s care and knew the trip could have been a great deal worse. But it was an uncomfortable half-hour for sure.

The rain stayed away, but as they climbed towards the low ridge, Nate was entranced by the spread of flood water around the homestead and through the huge, sprawling paddocks. He could see small mobs of cattle unconcernedly wading through the pools to higher grazing, and flocks of brolgas drifted in on silver-grey wings and stalked majestically through the shimmering water, dancing and trumpeting in the clear, rain-freshened air.

He understood then about the magic of Wapanjara. An urban creature himself, he suddenly grasped wholeheartedly why Lizzie loved this place. In just a few days it had gone from an exciting place that just so happened to be Eliot’s home, to somewhere she loved deeply and wholeheartedly, despite the trauma and danger she was witnessing. Like Eliot, her heart was here, and Wapanjara would now forever call to her, whisper to her in dreams, no matter where she was in the world.

And for his daughter, Nate Ford would protect Wapanjara and its people with everything he had.

“Nearly there, Nate,” Soapy said, and he carefully drove Bernadette out onto a stark ridge, not particularly high but clear of trees, overlooking the station road leading out, out into the grass and termite mounds of the south paddock towards the Stuart Highway and distant civilization.

Hardison grunted as his shoulder was jarred, but he managed to undo the safety belt after Soapy brought Bernadette to a halt, stopping on a level patch of ground behind the dip which led down to the road in the distance.

“Wait, Hardison … I’ll give you a hand,” Nate said and opening his door he slid out of Bernadette and helped Hardison ease sideways out of his seat to stand on the stony ground.

Within minutes Nate had brought out a folding chair and table for the injured hacker and made sure
he was comfortable. Soapy pulled out a large bag which turned out to contain desert camouflage netting, and Nate, the only uninjured man among the three of them, draped it over Bernadette’s dusty black bulk and used the excess to make a small shelter.

As Hardison and Nate dug out all of the tech-y stuff Hardison needed, including a small but sophisticated portable satellite dish which Nate attached to an inbuilt port in the vehicle’s dashboard, Soapy laid out sandwiches and soda as well as a flask of tea and some water from Bernadette’s 70-litre tank.

They were all set.

“Okay, mate – what can I do?” Soapy asked eagerly. This felt much better than waiting for the bad guys to come to them.

Hardison swallowed a couple of paracetamol tablets and gestured at Nate, who switched on the power supply generated from a large battery encased in Bernadette’s biggest storage bin. Booting up the two small screens and his laptop, Hardison took a swig of orange juice and grinned at Nate and Soapy.

“Now this is what I call fun, Soapy!!” he grinned happily. Even one-handed, he managed to speedily begin the process of finding the nearest communications satellite within range.

“Uhhhhh-huh,” he murmured to himself, “there we go … see, Soapy … these babies are about 26,000 feet up, so it takes a minute or two to find one with enough room in one of its transponders to carry our uplink without being noticed. I already got Albany’s server info, so … hang on a minute … yep – as I thought – the control channel is unencrypted … means all we need to do is find the password, an’ …” his fingers ran over the keys and waited for his software to do its thing. “ … gotcha!! Huh – someone’s a fan of Tarantino movies … and … we’re in!” he crowed despite the throbbing in his shoulder.

Soapy sat down on another of the folding chairs and watched Hardison, dumbfounded at the levels of technology he was sweeping aside to access the carrier he was using to piggyback his signal.

Hardison cocked an eyebrow at the pastoralist.

“Spectrum analysis,” he said smugly. “Now all I gotta do is make sure I don’t exceed bandwidth an’ stick our head above the parapet, an’ we’ll copy every damn’ piece of electronic information Albany has.”

“Alec, son, I have no idea what you just said … but I’m bloody glad you know what you’re doing!” Soapy said, shaking his head in wonder as he poured a mug of tea from the flask.

“Very little gets past Hardison,” Nate grinned. “Although his weeping St. Nicholas statues took a while to perfect –“

“Well …” Hardison mumbled, a little irked, “that’s because you didn’t EN-NUN-CI-ATE clearly enough –oh – here we go –“

And the two little plasma-screens burst into life, various reduced pages popping into being along with scrolling lists and a whole bunch of encrypted information. Hardison concentrated on the latter. He frowned, focused.

He settled into his work now, his lack of a functional left hand not holding him up for even a second.

Nate settled down and fished out a sandwich and poured himself tea. He cocked a look at Soapy.

“This might take a while, Soapy. I’d have a snooze if I were you.”

Soapy took a swallow of tea and undid a foil-wrapped still-warm sandwich full of pan-fried turkey garnished with heirloom tomatoes and laced with caramelised slices of the sweet maui onions Jo grew in her garden, the whole concoction redolent with chives, harvati and cream cheese. He loved these sandwiches, and Effie knew it.

“I’m too fascinated!” Soapy said, before taking a bite of the sandwich and murmuring his pleasure at the taste.

Hardison eyed the sandwich for a minute before his laptop gave an electronic burp and the encrypted information began to quickly translate into English. The young hacker frowned.

“Spicer,” he said. “That cop at Tennant Creek … his name … Everett Spicer … is that right?”

Soapy regretfully swallowed his mouthful of sandwich and nodded.

“Yep – that’s him. Sinister bastard,” he added, grimacing. “Always bloody smiling.”

“What have you found?” Nate asked, curious now.

Hardison shrugged and then wished he hadn’t, but he managed a pained grin.

“So … can either of you tell me why a sort-of-senior career cop is in direct contact with Troy Rickenbacker and Chinese triads via a burner ‘phone?”

Dinner that night was upbeat and thankfully earbud-less, which was a relief for Effie, who found the little things most annoying.

Eliot had rested well throughout the day, and the antibiotics were taking a firmer hold, so he had managed to get some sleep and even eaten a little lunch, much to Effie’s satisfaction. So, with Jo and Sophie helping, he had slowly dressed in jeans and a warm zip-up hoodie, and was finally allowed out of his bed for an hour for the evening meal.

His stiff, careful movements as he made his own way into the living room were sure signs of his continuing pain and discomfort, and he had to stop for a moment in the doorway as a coughing fit took him and caused a few moments of silent worry for his friends. But he held up a hand as he leaned against the door jamb, a gesture that yelled “I’m fine!!” to everyone as they watched with bated breath. And right enough, within a minute the cough had settled, and with Nate and Charlie hovering beside him in case he fell, he gingerly made his way over to his recliner which had been brought inside the house for him, his arm tight against his wounded side.

Lizzie and Kip shadowed his every movement, and both children let out relieved sighs of satisfaction as Nate helped Eliot settle into his chair.

Eliot, looking at the tight, concerned faces around him, smirked triumphantly.

“See?” he rumbled. “’M’ doin’ just fine. So stop coddlin’ me, will ya?” he added testily, glaring specifically at Effie, who had the bottle of the Devil’s Decongestant in her hand, along with a spoon. “An’ I ain’t takin’ any more of that … that … pukey crap!” he finished, scowling.
Effie raised an eyebrow.

“Hmmm … you think so, do you, you cheeky mongrel?” She hefted the bottle as though it was a sword, bracing herself for battle. “We’ll see about that!”

“GO EFFIE!” Parker prattled cheerfully. She had scratches on her arms and a smudge of oil on her nose that she had missed when washing up for dinner. “Doomed, Eliot – that’s what you are! Doomed!!”

“Can it, Parker!” Eliot growled menacingly, which made Lizzie and Kip giggle.

Nate leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms, winking at Sophie, who grinned back, amused beyond belief. Eliot really thought he was going to be left alone. Yeah, Nate mused wryly, and pigs might fly.

“Nippers!” Effie declared loudly. “Sounds like we need Plan C!”

Lizzie and Kip acquired matching looks of determination, and dropped to the floor next to Eliot’s feet. His bare feet.

“Ready, Effie!” Kip declared, far too cheerfully for Eliot’s comfort. His eyes narrowed.

“What the hell …??” Then he figured it out and the muscles along his jawline suddenly flexed with anger. “Oh, no … no you don’t … ‘Lizbeth Grace, don’t you frikkin’ dare –” he hissed in warning.

Eliot suddenly let out a strange hitching noise that sounded suspiciously like a nervous giggle.

Much as he told his team that Eliot Spencer just didn’t giggle, no-way no-how, it was a well-known fact among them that all Lizzie had to do was threaten him with tickling, and he became a twitching wreck. Mister-Eliot-I’m-invincible-Spencer was ticklish. Hardison always maintained that he could make a fortune selling this priceless bit of information to Eliot’s many enemies.

Lizzie’s brown eyes were warm with humour.

“Take your medicine, Eliot,” she said sweetly. Her fingers made crab-like motions and headed towards his vulnerable feet. Normally Eliot could just grab her around the middle and turn her upside-down until she shrieked with laughter, but in his weak and damaged state he had no chance.

His left eye tic’d.

“DAMMIT, Lizzie!!” he suddenly ranted, furious with himself for his weakness. He glared at Effie. “OKAY! Okay … I’ll take the crappy stuff!”

Effie’s muddy eyes glinted with triumph.

“Open up, Yank!” she ordered.

Eliot Spencer, renowned hitter, legendary retrieval expert, one of the most dangerous people in the world and a thoroughly beaten man, screwed up his eyes, opened his mouth and resigned himself to his fate.

One spoonful of the disgusting concoction later, and Eliot was wheezing with the impact of the
fumes, but he manned up, swallowed and Lizzie held his hand to make sure he knew she still loved him anyway despite his stubbornness.

“See?” Hardison said, drowsy with light painkillers and tired after his excursion to Munaji Ridge. “Not so bad, now was it?”

“So you friggin’ take the stuff, Hardison!” Eliot sputtered, a shudder running through his damaged frame, which made him wince. “Blech!” He stuck his tongue out as far as it would go as though airing it would get rid of the taste.

“Nah,” Hardison said airily. “I jus’ got stabbed. You, on the other hand, have a whole lot of stuff gone wonky in that muscly heap of bones you call a body! No sympathy, m’man!”

Eliot’s snarled threats were cut short by Effie, who had returned the bottle of liquid evil to her locked cupboard and was now serving dinner.

For once it was finger food. Thick, home-made burgers in freshly-baked buns, accompanied by what was left of the maui onions, tomatoes and cheese as dressing, and the food was easy, delicious and filling. The children sat on the floor with trays and the adults in their comfy armchairs with sidetables, and even Eliot managed to finish his helping, even though he wasn’t particularly hungry. But it did help to rid him of the taste of the medicine.

As they ate, Nate and Hardison filled in the rest of them on what they had found out.

“We, people, have what Sophie would call a ‘bent copper’ on our hands,” Nate said as he helped himself to another burger from the hotplate on the sideboard. “Everett Spicer, Detective Inspector of the Northern Territory Police Force and head of the investigative division in the area, is as crooked as a dog’s hind leg.”

Charlie scowled, his dark eyes sparking with grief.

“I knew it! When the forensic team told me about her* brakes, and I said they couldn’t have failed, there was a suspicion that there was something not right. Well, that’s what the sergeant in charge said. But every time I’ve asked about how it’s progressing, this bastard just says they’re ‘looking into it.’ Like hell they are!” he added, his voice hoarse with pain.

Kip, sensitive to his father’s grief, scrambled up from his place on the floor and eased himself onto his father’s lap, hugging him tightly. Charlie, eyes teary, kissed the top of Kip’s head, grateful beyond belief for the love of his son.

“I did some diggin’ into Spicer’s financials, an’ after a whole lot of hassle … “ he waited for effect and then continued, “I found at least three hidden accounts … two in the Caymans an’ one in Panama. They’re all funneled through shell companies, two associated with small Shanghai clothes manufacturers an’ the other through an import-export business in Yemen. The sonofabitch’s money’s comin’ from human trafficking,” Hardison added, his lip curling with distaste.

“Well, that’s what Chong does for a living, after all.” Nate commented, taking a sip of orange juice. “And if I remember correctly, we’re talking substantial amounts for our friendly neighbourhood crooked cop.”

“Yeah … at least a half-million in each account. That kinda money buys silence and co-operation, folks. This ass-wipe’s coverin’ up murder an’ illegal production of uranium for sale to the highest bidder. ISIL will probably be all over Chong like a rash, willin’ to pay what it takes for processed uranium,” Hardison rasped, angry to the core.
Charlie, holding his son tight to his chest, turned bleak eyes to Nate.

“I want him taken out, Nate. No, I don’t mean dead, although I wouldn’t be unhappy about it. But I want his backside in jail until he withers and dies, mate. Him and those … those people over at Albany. All of them.”

“Spicer’s walking a thin line already,” Nate answered readily. “He’s in Tennant Creek because he has temper issues, and a dubious association with a local businessman with links to prostitution and drugs. He’s got away with it because he has some hold over his big boss, who’s an old partner, but when he began getting a bit reckless he was sent out here for a while to cool off. Seems he didn’t take the hint,” Nate explained, and then took a bite of his burger.

“So …” Sophie pondered. “He could be our weak link. Has he been up to anything else while he’s been here?”

“Yes indeedy,” Hardison said, his anger turning into a glint in his eyes and a grim smile. “He has a contact in the local government offices. A nice young lady called Cheryl who thinks he’s cute, doesn’t know the bastard’s married and who has fingers in lots of pies, includin’ licensing local mining concerns and safety certification.” His smile turned into a grin. “She likes goin’ to the movies, Johnny Depp and eatin’ out in a place called Vallone’s in Tennant Creek. Spicer’s credit card records say he spends a lot of time there and payin’ for two, so I’m guessin’ that’s Cheryl.”

“Vallone’s …” Eliot said, thinking. “It’s not cheap. Sicilian cuisine. I’ve been there a couple of times. S’okay, I guess … but their pesto alla trapanese’s crap. Mine’s better.”

“Food aside,” Hardison continued, I got a firm association with Chong at Vallone’s. I tracked both Chong an’ Spicer there at the same time if their credit card records’re accurate, although Chong’s usin’ an alias … Frankie Lee. He’s a little too cocky about showin’ himself. But I got him on my radar.” Hardison’s voice was smug. “An’ he’s here. He’s at Albany. He arrived the day before yesterday.”

“So … he’s here to try and figure out what to do about us – or rather Lady Eloise Stanton,” Jo said quietly. “D’you think he’ll try and buy you out?” she asked Sophie.

The Englishwoman shrugged.

“I would think so. But Nate and I think we’ll string him along a little … make him think I’m angling for a partnership. We can come clean as to who Eliot and Nate are, and it would certainly make Lady Eloise a lady with whom Chong can possibly work, given their reputations!” she added, amused.

Nate snorted and Eliot gave a small, pained smile.

“But sooner or later,” Eliot murmured, “their patience will come to an end an’ they’ll come after us. They gotta get rid of Charlie an’ me, so –“

Eliot heard Lizzie’s breath hitch, and held out a hand. Lizzie took it and squeezed Eliot’s fingers fearfully.

“Eliot??” she whispered.

“It’s okay, ’Lizbeth Grace. Nothin’ gonna happen to either of us, I promise.” Eliot countered, blue eyes warm as he studied his best girl.

“He’s right, Lizzie – Parker and me … we’ve got the perimeter covered. We’ll drop their numbers. I can promise you. Nothing and no-one will sneak up on Wapanjara without them paying for
it!” Charlie added, his dark eyes shadowed with menace. Kip snuggled up under his father’s chin and held on tight.

Hardison, who was sitting beside Parker on the couch, wetted his thumb and reached out to rub the smudge off Parker’s nose. The little thief grinned eerily past Hardison’s fingers.

“We closed the main gate into the homestead and yards,” she said, “so whatever you do, do not go beyond the perimeter fence. You can stay on the road, but that’s about it. We’ve been … thorough,” she added gleefully.

“D’you hear, nippers?” Effie growled. “You stay close and in the house or yard. Nowhere else!! Promise??”

Both Lizzie and Kip nodded, and Effie grunted, satisfied.

“Righto, then. Eat up, you lot. I have passion fruit cheesecake for afters,” she rumbled, getting to her feet.

“Yum!!” Parker said. She sat back, smiling happily to herself.

She had had a good day.

After dinner, Eliot felt like he had to move or he would stiffen up, but he wasn’t quite ready to go back to his bed yet, despite Jo and Lizzie saying he looked tired and sore.

He was both of those things, but before he settled back into the warmth of his blankets, he decided he needed a breath of fresh air. So, with Nate and Soapy helping him up, he slowly made his way outside. They left him on the veranda for a few minutes, threatening severe repercussions if he hurt himself, but he waved them away and managed to ease his way to the veranda steps.

Taking a few deep, phlegmy breaths, he hung on to the rail, shakily managed a couple of steps down and seated himself on the edge of the veranda, leaning against the handrail. He rested the uninjured side of his head against the upright, took several more deep breaths, coughed for almost a minute as the cool air hit his inflamed lungs, and then he settled.

The fresh air was cold and a little painful for his chest, but he immediately felt better. Eliot could smell the rain-fresh scent of jasmine, and he heard the little mopoke begin to call in the darkness. God, how he loved this place.

Gertie spotted him as she ambled around the corner of the house, and she gurgled, flapping her lip with pleasure as she crowded the bottom step and reached out to Eliot, long tongue licking up the side of his face.

“Hey! Stop that!!” he complained even as he scratched her nose, the big camel giving out a rumble of pleasure.

“She’s missed you,” Lizzie said as she came out of the house and sat down beside her best friend. She looked up at Eliot, seeing the dark circles under his eyes and noticing how he held himself … tense and sore and in pain. “You should be inside,” she continued, worried. “You’re still poorly, and you could catch pew-monia sitting out here!”

Eliot lifted his head and gingerly gazed down at the little girl.

“Nah. It’s just for a minute or two. Just needed some air,” he said quietly.
Lizzie wrapped her arms around Eliot’s and laid her head carefully on his shoulder.

“Please come back inside,” she said, squeezing his arm. “You don’t look right. Gertie, you tell him!”

Gertie of course obliged, and squeaked and burbled to Eliot, who gave them both a weary smile.


The child gazed up at her guardian with brown eyes that reflected the starlight.

“More than anything!” she said softly, and Eliot knew then he had done the right thing in leaving his share of Wapanjara to Lizzie. Her heart, just like his, belonged to this place.

Eliot’s smile turned to a wince as he tried to move, but discovered he just didn’t have the strength.

“’Lizbeth Grace?”

She frowned up at him, hearing the gravelly hint of pain in his words.

“Eliot? Are you okay?” Uncurling one arm she laid a small hand on his brow. “You’re all hot!!”

“Just a lil’ bit,” he replied, trying to ease her worry. “Could you go get your Dad? I think I need a hand here … I can’t get up,” he finished, looking just a little sheepish.

Lizzie frowned.

“See??? I said you were still poorly!!” She unclasped Eliot’s arm and turned towards the door.

“DADDY!!” she bawled, and Eliot winced at the volume. “CAN YOU HELP?? ELIOT’S STUCK!!”

She turned back to Eliot, who leaned his head back against the rail and sighed, coughing slightly.

“Boofhead!” she said.

To be continued …

Author’s note:

* Charlie will never mention his wife’s name again, out of respect for the woman he still loves.
The water receded somewhat through the night, and by the time the magpies awoke in the almond stand and began their fluting cries, the mitchell grass and bindi-eye were peeking above the drift of water through the paddocks. In another day the grass would be greening up and the water would have soaked forever into the ever-thirsty land of Wapanjara.

Eliot awoke from a long, restless night of what was left of a mild fever and pain, but he had slept, and when the sun peeked in through his window, he stirred and instantly felt his breathing was better and the pain of his wounds was now evolving into that annoying, aching itchy phase that spoke of healing.

He still had to regain his strength, but given that he would need a few days more rest and recuperation, he knew now he was on the mend.

His first action was to gently ease himself out of bed. He could hear Effie clattering about in the kitchen, and she had obviously decided he was well enough to be left to his own devices.

Lizzie was sprawled amid her comforter and cushions on the big bed, snoring gently and lying with one arm draped over an equally unconscious Buster, who had somehow snuck into the bedroom in the early hours of the morning.

If, Eliot thought, he could get away with not wakening either of them, he might get a shower and dressed before anyone was awake and notice he was up and about.

He managed surprisingly well. The dizziness wasn’t so bad this time, and he eased himself upright and gathered up his clothes. His journey to the bathroom was a little unsteady, but he got there, and sitting on the toilet seat, he peeled off bandages and dressings, and checked his wounds.

His side looked ugly, but the edges of the incision were beginning to scab and knit, and the infection had almost gone. The rest of his wounds were beginning to heal, and when he looked in the mirror, the gash over his ear was still swollen but nowhere near as tender.

The shower was bliss. Ignoring the fact that he wasn’t supposed to get the stitches in his injuries wet, Eliot let the heat soothe away the stiffness and remains of the fever in his body and by the time he had washed his hair – difficult as it was with his bullet wound and broken rib pulling at him as he stretched – he felt much better.

Drying off was a little harder, but he coped and digging around in the bathroom medical kit, he found what he was looking for and taped a dressing over the bullet hole and left the rest of his other injuries uncovered.

By the time he was dressed – boots, Ka-bar knife and all – he was exhausted, but triumphant. The aura of illness which he always hated had been washed away – almost – and he slowly made his way through to the kitchen to make himself some tea.

Effie paused in her work of beating the life out of a bowl of pancake mixture, and raised an eyebrow.

“Well now,” she smirked, “look who’s got out of bed all on his own! Seems the cough medicine’s done the job, hey?”

Eliot suddenly realised he had only coughed a couple of times, and the pain in his chest that usually accompanied it was almost gone.
He pulled out a chair from the table and gingerly sat down. There was a teapot, steam curling from the spout, sitting on a trivet and Effie handed him a mug.


Eliot nodded, and for the first time since he was shot, his head didn’t feel as though it was about to fall off if he moved it too quickly.

“Yeah … guess so,” he replied quietly. “Can’t stay in bed all my life. We got trouble here,” he continued, glancing at Effie as he poured tea into his mug and added a liberal splash of milk, “an’ I can’t protect my people if I’m lyin’ in bed.”

Effie went to the huge old refrigerator and pulled out a jar of marinated peaches, unscrewed the lid and handed Eliot a fork and a small plate.

“Here. Have a couple of these, lad. They’ll give you some energy. You look pooped.” She noticed his damp hair, curling as it dried in the heat of the kitchen. “Don’t overdo it, you idiot! You’re just newly on the mend, and the nipper will have your hide if you pull another stunt like you did last night!”

Eliot smiled as he forked a couple of peach halves onto the plate. Effie’s syrupy spiced peaches were one of his favourite things.

“Yeah, well … I’d just been in bed too long an’ seized up a bit, is all. I gotta get my act together, Eff,” he said, his smile fading and grim lines appearing on his face. “Albany an’ Chong ain’t gonna wait for me to heal up, now are they?”

Effie, returning to her pancake mixture, nodded thoughtfully and glanced at the shotgun lying on the table, near to hand.

“You do know that nutso bitch up on the hill was sent packing, bleeding all over the place?” she said softly.

“Oh,” Eliot said, quirking a grin. “I heard you’re a mean shot!” He sobered again. “She’ll be up there somewhere thinkin’ on what to do next. An’ I don’t think she’s going to care about Chong an’ his cronies. She’s marchin’ to the beat of her own drum now, since Hardison killed her boyfriend,” he added, frowning.

“But she’s a bit knackered, boy! Mister M caught her in the arm and I parked a load of buckshot in her, so she won’t be in a fit state —” Effie growled.

“It’s not goin’ to stop her, Effie.” Eliot insisted. “It wouldn’t stop me. An’ she knows I’m wounded an’ not healed yet. She’ll be back sooner rather than later.” He cut one of the peach halves up with his fork and ate a piece, savoring the sweetness. He swallowed, and looked at the little cook. “I have to be ready, Eff. If I’m not … she’s gonna go after every one of you. Especially Lizzie an’ Kip. An’ you know I’ll never allow that.”

Effie stopped her whisking and studied Eliot for a moment before speaking. She saw the weariness in his damaged frame and the shadows under his eyes. He held himself carefully, trying not to let the pain show, and he was far from being well enough to face a killer. But she knew he would do it, no matter what.

“Well, you young bludger, that’ll never happen. If she gets through you, she’ll have to face me. And I’d blow the shitty little crone apart before she got anywhere near ‘em, you know that.” She tousled Eliot’s damp hair, making it stick up. “But she won’t get through you, laddie. So eat up and drink
your tea. Breakfast’s in an hour and the nippers’ll be starving, so I have work to do. Stay put and keep me company.”

Eliot, tired and sore and more than a little frustrated, ate more of his peaches and smiled.

“You an’ me, Eff. We’re friggin’ invincible!” he teased, and sipped his tea.

Effie, muddy eyes sparkling fiercely, grinned.

“Abso-bloody-lutely!” she said.

The day was a tense one.

Eliot, after a mild argument with Lizzie, sat in his recliner on the veranda. She had grudgingly agreed to his status being ratcheted back to borderline ‘sick-to-wibbly,’ and he rested while keeping an eye on his family and the place he loved. Every hour or so he got to his feet and kept moving, battling stiffness and pain, but he knew he had to get a grip on his weakness because he had a job to do.

Hardison, feeling much better and now decrying his sling, retired to Oggie and his computers, Gertie in tow so that the big camel could split her time fretting over Eliot and wandering over to try and lick his face, and fussing Hardison while getting the odd, secretive gummy frog when Eliot wasn’t looking.

Everybody else went about their business, earbuds letting Eliot know exactly where they were, and he smiled as he listened to Lizzie and Kip chatter on as they helped the adults do the regular chores around the homestead.

Soapy, still sore, finished off moving fodder in the tractor, while Charlie, Jo and the children checked the horses.

Eliot snorted as he caught Parker talking to Sparky. She had sidled into the big foaling box alongside Dottie, who had nickered quietly at the little thief in the hope of a treat.

*Hello, mommy horse,* Eliot heard Parker mutter, and he could hear the tension in her voice. *You just stay over there while I say hello to Sparky. There was a pause. Hello, Sparky! Remember me? I helped you get born. I’m Parker.*

Eliot heard the little colt chuckle and Parker giggle. He guessed the foal was busy nibbling at Parker with his toothless gums, and Parker suddenly did something Eliot had never heard her do before. She began to *coo.*

Every earbud on Wapanjara heard the gibberish Parker came out with as she scratched and petted the little colt, and the young horse chuckled back, happy at the attention. Parker was *mesmerised.*

*You go, mama,* Hardison whispered, delighted, and Eliot could almost hear the smiles of amusement from his friends.

Eliot levered himself to his feet and made his way down the veranda steps, trying to loosen tight muscles and ease the ache, and he wandered over to Hardison who was busy scrolling through information streaming in from Shanghai, where the young man was digging about in Chong’s life and career. He slipped Gertie a gummy frog as she sat beside him, resting her head on the hacker’s lap and tucking it tight against the edge of the table. Hardison felt her jaws work as she partly-sucked and partly-chewed the little, sweet treat.
“Chong … find any more about him?” Eliot said quietly so as not to disturb Parker as she communed with Sparky.

Hardison jumped, surprised. He was deep in concentration, and Gertie lifted her head and honked, happy to see Eliot back in circulation.

“Uh …” Hardison scrabbled to hide the packet of gummy frogs, but Gertie turned her head and gazed adoringly at Eliot, peering into his face and breathing on him affectionately.

Eliot scowled, puzzled.

“What the hell??” He muttered, and sniffed as Gertie hummed at him, still chewing. She farted loudly. “Jeez, Gertie!! “ He said, wafting a hand at the stench. “Dammit, Hardison! Are you feedin’ my camel goddamn gummy frogs?? Huh?? Are you???”

Hardison was the very epitome of innocence, even as he held the bag of sticky, full-of-artificial-crap confections.

“Gertie,” he said indignantly, “is a camel of excellent taste, El!”

*They make her fart!* Parker said happily, and returned to fussing Sparky. *Who’s a lil’ bit?* She murmured, *Huh? Who’s a huggy bunny?? I wish Bunny was here. You’d like Bunny … Bunny could play with you and –*

Eliot, feeling vengeful, heard Nate mutter to himself as the man emptied a bag of cattle cake into a trough in the yards for weaned calves, the young ‘poddies’ intended for store cattle sales over the next few weeks.

*So she’s a little gassy, Eliot,* Nate grumbled breathlessly. Work on a cattle station wasn’t easy. *So what? It’s not going to kill her –*

Eliot tried his best to pry Gertie’s jaws apart to retrieve what was left of the gummy frog, now well-masticated, but Gertie had other ideas. She hummed and gurgled and licked Eliot’s face, leaving gummy frog juice and saliva in a trail along his cheek, and Eliot cringed painfully. This was disgusting! He gave up battling Gertie and turned to Hardison and made a lunge for the bag of gummy frogs, which was a mistake. His side flared in agony and his muscles complained, and he had to put a hand out and lean on Gertie, who rumbled in concern even as she let loose another gassy explosion.

“Hey! Easy there, m’man!” Hardison said, reaching out his good hand, still holding the bag, to steady his friend. Eliot cursed under his breath, coughed for a minute and then took advantage of Hardison’s concern to swipe the bag.

“There’s mine, Eliot!! Give ‘em back!!” Hardison squawked.

“Suck it up, Hardison!” Eliot railed. “You ain’t feedin’ Gertie any more of this crap! She’s allowed carrots or apples as treats – nothin’ else!” His eyes narrowed dangerously. “What. Have you found out. About. Albany.” He ground out.

Hardison sniffed and rubbed his damaged shoulder, apparently greatly offended, but he dealt with Eliot’s snit as he always did – he ignored it and knew he would grab his gummy frogs back at some point.

“Well,” he said, “Chong’s been in Tennant Creek for the past couple of days … ate at Vallone’s with guess who?
Eliot, still annoyed a little, frowned, but thought about it.

“Spicer. Any idea why?”

“Well, I’m not positive yet, but I think it was to pass on information about Lady Eloise Stanton’s purchase of Wapanjara,” Hardison said. “I checked the registration database at the Town Hall, an’ Cheryl, bless her love-struck little heart, printed out copies of the proposed transfer of assets yesterday.”

Hardison had carefully planted electronic applications and legal papers days before, and obviously the news had reached Spicer almost immediately.

“So …” Eliot pondered, “Chong’ll be here soon. Maybe even today.”

_The heelers’ll let us know if anybody comes along the road_, Jo said through the earbud as she fed the mares, Sophie beside her.

_Nate and I decided we might run with the Belgravia Stalemate with a twist_, Sophie said as she led one of the in-foal mares out of the south paddock gate. _We’re going to see if we can offer a deal. The only issue is knowing how much Hadan has told Chong and Rickenbacker, but I think … I think she has a personal agenda now, and given that she’s hurt, she might have just gone to ground for now._

“If she turns up with Chong, then we know our cover’s blown, Soph,” Eliot said as he leaned against Gertie’s bulk, easing the pain in his side.

_We go with it, Nate said. However it turns out, Chong either knows or we tell him who we are. Same thing._

“It might give us another couple of days before all hell breaks loose,” Hardison said, “because he ain’t gonna be taken in for long. He’ll know we’re stringin’ him along an’ then he’s gonna –“

“Yeah, we know, Hardison! But we’re ready for ‘em,” Eliot said, cutting off the hacker’s train of thought before the children understood what he was talking about. “But we need to take out Spicer an’ his contacts at the same time,” he added.

Hardison grinned that grin he usually let loose when he had a plan.

“Well, since you ask …” he said smugly. “I gotta dig out his not-so-honest associates in the police in Adelaide an’ Chong’s crooked politician he’s gotta be pals-y with, but I’m gettin’ there. An’ then I think I got me a Cunning Plan!”

_Well, while you buggers spend time thinking up bloody confusing plans to con this bastard Chong, you’re wasting time and I’ve got lunch ready, so hurry up and finish what you’re up to and get your backsides back here before I give the lot to Buster!_ Effie grumbled, the earbud making her growls even more menacing. There was a short, sharp bark as Buster heard his name mentioned.

Eliot sighed. He was weary and he didn’t feel much like eating, but the shrieks from Lizzie and Kip as they ran down towards the house from the yards made him smile. He pushed Gertie’s muzzle away from the bag of gummy frogs as the camel tried very hard to whiffle it out of Eliot’s grasp.

“Stop that, darlin’,” he said, and then relented. “C’mon, you big moron. Let’s go get you a carrot.”

Gertie honked and then suddenly let loose a veritable explosion of gummy frog gas that made Hardison cough and his eyes water.
“Serves you frikkin’ right!” Eliot said, and grinned.

It was after lunch that Charlie decided it was time to let Dottie and Sparky outside now that the threat of further rainstorms was over for now.

Parker accompanied him to the barn, and Eliot watched from his chair, amused, as a few minutes later Charlie led Dottie down the slight incline from the yards, little Sparky awestruck by the new, big wide world now surrounding him.

Parker followed behind, and Sparky spent his time cantering around his mother, who was very patient with him, and trotting over to Parker who would reassure him with a pat and a scratch. Once he had decided it was safe enough, the colt began to buck and kick, the fresh air and open spaces emboldening him.

Charlie wanted to let Dottie get some exercise for the afternoon in Gertie’s paddock, but he brought the big mare to a halt in from of the veranda steps so that Eliot could finally see his namesake.

The hitter got to his feet, and accompanied by Kip and Lizzie, he made his way down the steps to get a better look.

“Well?” Charlie said. “What do you think?” he asked Eliot, who was a sudden object of interest to the foal. The little horse tentatively crept forward, head outstretched as Eliot let the colt sniff him. Eliot eased his fingers under Sparky’s jaw and scratched. Sparky’s eyes bugged and his head began to bob in pleasure, upper lip curling.

Eliot studied the colt’s strong quarters and good shoulders, the neat head that showed just a little of the foal’s distant arab ancestors, and nodded approvingly.

“He’ll do, Charlie. He’s got a lot of quality about him. He’ll make a helluva stock horse, I’m thinkin’,” he added.

“He’s cute!” Parker interjected, and Sparky tore himself away from Eliot’s scratching to wander over to Parker, who rested a hand on his withers. Sparky leaned on her, asking for a scratch, which made Parker chuckle.

“Parker helped him to be born!!” Lizzie said enthusiastically, “and Sparky loves her!”

Eliot looked down at his god-daughter and nodded, taking Lizzie’s comment very seriously.

“Yeah. So I see.” He saw the adoration in the little girl’s gaze, and after getting a fuss from Parker, the colt fearlessly headed over to Lizzie and nibbled at her jacket. Lizzie giggled and rubbed Sparky’s head, the foal flicking his tail in delight. There was a bond there, Eliot realised.

But before he could say anything, there was a loud, frenzied flurry of barking from the heelers, and the three big cattle dogs ranged themselves in front of the homestead gate, staring at the hill where the stringybarks grew and the rough, red-dust road led away towards Tennant Creek, two hours away. The barking quickly became hysterical.

As Nate and Sophie emerged from the house followed by Jo and Soapy, a dusty, huge sand-coloured SUV appeared on the brow of the hill and made its way down towards the homestead.

It was heavy, luxurious and armoured, and it dealt with the road as though the bumps didn’t exist.

Eliot eyed Charlie, and then spread his feet a little to balance himself, ready for whatever might
Well, people, Nate’s voice said over the earbud. Here we go.

Chong Bun-Tsui had finally come to Wapanjara.

The first big surprise came as the SUV came to a halt outside the closed gate.

The driver, a tall, skinny aborigine in a neat black suit, exited the vehicle and trotted around to the rear passenger door.

The door swung open before the man could reach it, and a slender, immaculately-dressed Chinese man stepped out, shoes gleaming in the light which also reflected off the dark glasses he wore.

Chong Bun-Tsui was everything Nate had expected him to be – sophisticated, urbane and groomed to perfection.

He scowled up at the driver, who hurriedly mumbled an apology for his tardiness, and Chong flicked an imaginary dust mote from his suit – Zegna, Sophie was sure – and he looked in distaste at the still-soggy ground by the gate.

*He’s worried about getting his Kiton derbies scuffed,* Sophie murmured, and Nate nodded, glancing at Eliot.

“‘Lizbeth Grace? Can you go get my stockman’s hat, darlin’?’” Eliot said quietly.

Lizzie, still petting Sparky, glanced up at her guardian and saw the intensity of the look on his face. Without a word, she turned and trotted up the veranda steps and into the house, Sparky skittering about in surprise, the little girl returning only moments later with the hat.

Hardison appeared from the door behind her, followed by Effie and Buster, the little terrier beginning to bark a warning when he saw the new arrivals.

Eliot heard Effie’s growl of hatred through the earbud. This was the man who had killed Alice.

But even as Lizzie appeared at his side with the hat, Eliot’s eyes widened as another figure emerged from the SUV, this time assisted by the driver, who stepped back as a tiny, exquisite woman got out of the vehicle. Beautifully dressed in a shimmering dark green silk dress, her black hair drawn tightly back in a bun, the woman came to stand behind Chong, a respectful three steps away. It was also obvious that she was heavily pregnant.

Chong did not even acknowledge her presence as he barked a few words at the driver, who ran around both of them to open the gate. But the driver stopped when he saw the three heelers run forward to the gate, teeth bared, growling and barking.

“I suppose I’d better go rescue them,” Soapy said, hand resting on the Webley at his hip.

“Take your time, Soapy. Make him wait,” Nate replied, and he clumped down the veranda steps after Soapy and came to stand beside Eliot, who was putting on his hat and adjusting it so the gash over his ear wasn’t quite so noticeable.

“Are you up to this?” he asked the hitter.

Eliot ruffled Lizzie’s curls as the little girl stood between her father and her guardian.
“Have to be, Nate.” Eliot replied, even as his side ached and his head began to throb. “You an’ Soph do your thing. I’ll back you up, although there’s only the driver, an’ he’s about as useful as a three-legged gopher. The dogs would’ve told us if there were more people comin’ in where we couldn’t see ‘em. They wouldn’t get through anyway,” he finished, thinking of Parker and Charlie’s efforts the previous day.

“Eliot??” Lizzie looked up at Eliot, eyes round with worry.

“It’s all right. ‘Lizbeth Grace. He’s only here to talk. Your Daddy an’ Momma an’ me … we’re here, an’ no-one will hurt you,” Eliot soothed.

Lizzy’s eyes narrowed a little in annoyance.

“I know,” she said, irritated. “I’m worried about you, silly!”

For some reason, Lizzie’s sharp retort eased the tension in everyone, and Eliot let out a low murmur of amusement.

“Go keep Gertie company, will ya,” he said, and gestured at the big camel, sitting underneath Oggie’s canopy staring at the new arrivals. “Keep her kooshed down – she’ll stay sittin’ if you tell her to,” Eliot added, knowing Gertie would do as she was told, even by a six-year-old.

“But –“ Lizzie’s brows were drawing down into stubborn lines.

“No buts, ‘Lizbeth Grace. Take Kip with you an’ stay put. Your Daddy’s workin’ and he doesn’t need to be worryin’ about you kids, okay?”

Do as Eliot says, my darling, Sophie said, her voice calming through the earbud. Go on now. Be safe.

“I’m always safe!” Lizzie said, and Eliot was charmed by her unbending conviction that nothing could harm her because her family was around her. Kip straightened beside Lizzie and frowned. Eliot could tell he was about to object, and was on the point of continuing when Charlie took over.

“Go on, you two! Do as you’re told, before I tell Effie –“ he began as Dottie rubbed her big head on his arm.

Tell Effie what? Effie said, disgust at Chong’s presence making her voice rumble through the earbud. Git, nippers! Look after that big bastard of a camel, and I’ll make pash ice cream for afters tonight, alright??

Kip and Lizzie looked at one another. Kip wanted to support his dad, knowing Charlie needed him now his mum had gone, while Lizzie really didn’t have any intention of leaving her father and guardian on their own without her protection. But Gertie needed her too.

The two children came to a silent agreement. The offer of Effie’s passion fruit ice cream was the deal breaker.

“Okay Dad,” Kip said grudgingly. “But Lizzie and me … if you lot get into trouble, remember we can tell Gertie to bite,” he added, a grim, determined look on his face, and Charlie’s heart broke with pride in his young son as he tried not to stare at the man who had probably ordered his wife’s death.

“Righto son,” Charlie said, looking at Chong. “We’ll remember.”

And the two children wandered off towards Gertie, both of them watching as Soapy called off the
heelers and ordered them back up the incline to the barn. The dogs, still growling, obeyed and trotted off, but all three of them turned by the yards and sat down to watch the proceedings from a distance.

Chong, now walking through the opened gate, smiled at Soapy, charm oozing from every pore.

*Crocodile smile,* Jo whispered, and the two children giggled secretively at the comment as they fussled Gertie, the camel happy about the attention but still eyeing Chong.

Sophie knew it was her turn. Casually wandering down the veranda steps, her poise and elegance shone even though she wore boots and jeans – Dolce & Gabbana – and an expensive shirt, her hair bound back by a scarf. Her skin was glowing with the fresh air and exercise and her brown eyes sparkled, and Nate thought he had never seen her look more stunning. But then, Sophie always glowed when she was grifting.

Easing off her work gloves, finger by finger, she stood still and gazed appraisingly at Chong and the petite woman who followed him, always three steps behind.

Soapy led Chong and his companion through the yard, taking his time because the young woman looked weary and uncomfortable under the make-up and beautifully-cut garb. The driver stayed by the SUV, eyeing the dogs warily.

“Hello there,” Sophie called, her tone clipped and wary. “How can I help you? Are you lost?”

Chong’s smile grew wider and he removed his sunglasses, revealing dark eyes which ran appreciatively over Sophie’s figure. He proffered a hand to shake, but Sophie just stared at it for a moment before raising an aristocratic eyebrow.

The handsome young man with the crocodile smile was put off balance for a moment or two, but he regained his composure and dropped the hand back down at his side.

“My name is Frankie Lee,” he said, using his alias, “and you must be Lady Eloise Stanton.”

Sophie stared at the man as though he was dirt on her expensive boots. She waited for a few moments until it became obvious Chong wasn’t going to introduce the tired young woman. Her eyebrow arched even more and she pursed her lips with disdain, but let the lack of manners pass for now.

“I am indeed, Mister Lee.” She felt a tiny muzzle nibble at her fingers, and she glanced down at Sparky, who was investigating her gloves. Rather than shoo him away, she smiled indulgently at the little colt, and then returned her gaze to Chong. Her stare had returned to being decidedly chilly. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Chong, a little disconcerted, went from charming to business-like. His lean face creased into a knowing, contained smile.

“I’ll get right to the point, Lady Eloise,” he said, his accent betraying his American education. “I’ve come to buy Wapanjara.”

To be continued …
Ye Sons of Sin

Chapter Summary

There is mention of human trafficking in this chapter, along with the consequences.

Sophie stared at Chong Bun-Tsui for so long that Nate thought she had blanked out – something he knew in his heart his wife had never done in her entire career. But as Chong frowned slightly and shifted, Nate realised what Sophie had done – she had un-nerved this arrogant young man, and now she was leading the interaction. She was in charge, and that was the way it would remain.

When Sophie spoke, it was with controlled, polite disdain.

“Tea, Mister Lee? I’m sure Mrs Munro can oblige?” Sophie said to Jo before turning to the young woman, who stood patiently behind Chong, arms by her side as though awaiting her next command, like a trained dog. Which perhaps was the thing, Sophie thought. “Would your wife care to sit down? I’m sure she would like to –”

“She’s fine,” Chong snapped suddenly, irritated. He understood that his position in this ‘conversation’ had changed, but he didn’t quite know how it had happened, and it annoyed him. “And she is not my wife,” he added, trying to regain his composure. He suddenly realised how he had sounded, and his tone softened, turning once more silkily charming. “This,” he said, smiling slightly and gesturing at the young woman, “is my companion, Mei-Ling.”

Sophie studied the girl more directly now, seeing as she had been formally introduced.

“You are most welcome to Wapanjara,” she said softly, and reached out a hand.

Mei-Ling glanced at Chong for a moment, and Sophie caught the sudden hint of fear in the girl’s pretty face before she smiled slightly and nodded, just brushing Sophie’s hand with her own before drawing it back as though retreating into a place of safety.

“Thank you,” she murmured in heavily accented English. Beneath the makeup, Sophie thought, she couldn’t be more than seventeen or eighteen years old.

Chong was unable to control a scowl as the girl spoke, but he forced the smile back onto his face and looked at the people around him.

“Tea would be most welcome,” he answered formally. “Thank you,” he added, almost as an afterthought.

Sophie gestured at the veranda, intending for Mei-Ling to take her time in getting up the steep steps, but Chong strode lithely up the wooden stairs and onto the veranda, where Nate waited.

Jo’s green eyes were dark with anger at Chong’s lack of manners, and she heard Effie mutter Bastard! over the earbud connection. Jo couldn’t help but agree with her, but she raised her hand slightly and Effie, seeing the gesture, ratcheted the hatred down to a silent simmer.

“I’ll get tea, Missus,” Effie grumbled, and added “I’ll bring some cool lemonade for the little miss.”
Eliot saw Effie’s face as the little cook stared at Mei-Ling, and sympathized. Effie would, if she thought she could have got away with it, have dosed Chong’s tea with ipecac just for the hell of it, but Eliot knew she couldn’t as she would jeopardize the con.

Stepping past Charlie and Parker and running a quick hand over Sparky’s soft hide, Eliot took off his hat and, ever the southern gentleman, offered Mei-Ling his arm.

“Ma’am, let me help ya there,” he said, his now-strong Oklahoma accent rich with warmth. He was back in his role of ranch manager, and he smiled as she hesitantly – and gratefully – took his arm.

“Cain’t have ya standin’ out here in the mud, now can we?” He continued, and his eyes crinkled at the corners with genuine concern, his blue eyes welcoming.

Mei Ling looked up at Chong, who was settling himself down at the table and nodding thanks at Jo and Sophie. He was not in the least interested in her, so she gave Eliot a tiny smile.

“Thank you,” she murmured, and Eliot knew then she was terrified of Chong.

“C’mon now,” he said under his breath, “you jus’ take it easy, ma’am, an’ you can sit down an’ we’ll get you somethin’ to drink.”

Mei-Ling’s tiny smile widened, and feeling more confident, she looked up at Eliot with dark, cautious eyes.

“That would be very nice,” she whispered, a little confused at the respect and gentleness in his voice. “You are so kind.”

Eliot grinned back.

“Effie makes wonderful lemonade an’ you’ll feel much better once you’ve had a rest,” he said, and holding onto the rail, Eliot carefully guided Mei-Ling up the steps, mindful of his own injuries which he was trying hard to conceal, although the healing cut above his ear was very visible. But he really wasn’t too worried about that as it could be explained away.

Mei-Ling looked at the injury and started slightly, eyes widening. She knows, Eliot thought. She knows Chong ordered Eades to shoot me.

By the time Eliot and Mei-Ling reached the veranda, Soapy had plumped up the cushion on Eliot’s recliner and put a small table beside it, and Mei-Ling was guided carefully into the chair as Jo and Effie arrived with tea and cake.

“So … Lady Eloise,” Chong began, “will you sell Wapanjara to me?”

Both of Sophie’s eyebrows arched this time. There was no small talk to be had. Chong went straight to the point, which was unusual amongst far eastern businessmen. There was always a certain amount of small talk, a traditional politeness that had to be dealt with before getting down to business.

She waited while Jo poured tea and then she added lemon and sipped the fresh brew, fixing Chong once more in her steady gaze. She had seen how it disconcerted him, even though the reaction was slight … but it was there. She shrugged.

“Why?” she said bluntly.

Chong frowned, a little puzzled. He had expected polite refusals, a bit of flattery perhaps … maybe even a willingness to do business, but this bluntness was not something he had expected, although
his team’s research had shown Lady Eloise Stanton to be a hard-headed business-woman – a woman always open to a deal at the right price. Her one-word challenge had been surprising.

Chong nodded slowly. Alright. So that’s the way this aristocratic witch was going to play it.

“Wapanjara has … attributes which would benefit my business interests,” he said carefully. He took a cup of tea from Jo and added milk. The cake was richly dark, moist and almost black, and sandwiched together with buttermilk frosting redolent with vanilla. The same frosting glistened in thick waves on the top of the cake. Chong, trying to look relaxed, lifted a slice onto a small plate, grasped a fork and tasted the cake.

Hmmm … he thought. The little cook was very talented. The cake was delicious.

“Why would my cattle station help with your mining business?” Sophie said, sipping more tea. “There is no titanium on Wapanjara. In fact, there are no mineral assets here at all,” she added frostily.

Ah. So she had done her research too, Chong thought.

“It has one asset, Lady Eloise, which makes it valuable to me.” He paused slightly for effect before continuing. “It has easier access through to the main highway to Adelaide and Darwin. I wish to build an access road from the mine to the Stuart Highway.”

Bollocks, Sophie thought. But she nodded, understanding.

“I see,” she murmured. “So … let me understand this … you wish to buy my cattle station just so that you can build a road. And what happens to the rest of the land?”

Chong shrugged.

“Nothing. Nothing at all. It can be left to the wild creatures and aborigines,” he said, and Sophie could swear she heard a hint of derision in the man’s voice. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Charlie stiffen, even as he held Dottie while Sparky took a drink.

“Mister Jakkamarra,” she called out to Charlie, hoping to nip his anger in the bud, “would you be so kind as to put Dottie and the foal out in the paddock for me? I’m very impressed with the colt … thank you.”

Charlie gritted his teeth but nodded. He knew he would have to keep his mouth shut so that Sophie could do her job, but Chong’s obvious dislike of aborigines needled him.

“No worries, Lady Eloise,” he said as calmly as he could. “I think he’ll make a fine riding horse.”

Sophie smiled warmly at Charlie, and he could see she was thankful for his understanding.

“I agree, Mister Jakkamarra, and it is thanks to your skilled eye and knowledge that the colt is as fine as I expected.”

Charlie nodded, and with Parker in tow, he led Dottie and Sparky around the house to Gertie’s paddock so that the foal could stretch his legs properly and Dottie could graze.

Sophie turned back to Chong and studied him. The man was curious now, to see Sophie’s reaction to his comments.

Sophie smiled at him suddenly, taking the young man by surprise once again.
“Do you like horses?” she asked.

Chong blinked.

“Uh … I have very little experience with them, Lady Eloise, but my father owns a string of racehorses in Macau,” he answered, wondering just where this was going.

Sophie’s face shifted to semi-boredom.

“Your father …??” she let the question hang in the air for a moment.

“That would be Chong Zhi-huán,” Nate said suddenly as he sat down on one of the wicker chairs and crossed his legs. “Dragonhead of the Shumchun triads, and you are Chong Bun-Tsui, his only living son. Am I right?”

Chong sat straight up in his chair, cake forgotten.

“And you are?” he grated out.

“Surely you know of my business manager,” Sophie said dryly. “Nathan Ford. I believe he knew your father.”

“Now, now, Lady Eloise,” Nate said smoothly, chiding her with a smile, “I didn’t know him … I only met him a few times in Shanghai years ago. The Bunyo office explosion. Maybe you remember …??” he waved a hand at Chong.

The man shook his head, his lip curling with anger.

“I did, of course, hear about it,” he ground out, “but I was in America, attending college at the time.”

“Ahh, yes …” Nate murmured indulgently. “Of course you were. Yale, I believe.”

“Yes,” Chong said, “Yale.” He was silent for a few moments and then frowned at Nate. “How did you –”

“My colleague here, Mister Hardison,” Nate said, gesticulating at Hardison who was perched in a chair munching his way through a wedge of cake. He waggled fingers in greeting at Chong. “He is a very, very able researcher,” Nate added, his smile widening.

Hardison swallowed his cake and grinned cheekily even as his shoulder throbbed.

“As you can see, Mister Chong, I have an exceptionally skilled team to further my interests, and it isn’t in my interest right now to sell Wapanjara,” Sophie said firmly.

Chong’s face darkened with anger and he opened his mouth to reply heatedly, but Sophie held up a finger, stopping the words before they were uttered, and Chong shifted uneasily in his chair.

“But …” Sophie declared quietly, “ … I may … may … be interested in some kind of partnership.”

That caught Chong by surprise.

“Partnership? What kind of partnership?” he blurted and then hated himself for showing his lack of understanding. He gave himself a few moments to gather his thoughts by scowling at Mei-Ling, who was sipping cold, delicious homemade lemonade and nibbling on Effie’s delicious cake, Eliot
standing beside her, arms crossed and looking very much like a guard dog. *Or wolf*, Chong thought.

Sophie smiled and allowed a little smugness to creep into her voice when she spoke.

“My land … your road. You rent the land, build the road, I keep my cattle station and you give me just a tiny percentage of your profits.”

Chong’s gaze darted back to Sophie.

“How much of a percentage?” he pondered, playing along.

“Only five percent,” Sophie replied casually, and topped up her teacup.

Chong thought quickly. He needed Wapanjara’s water, not a road, although the four hours travelling time each way from Albany to the nearest highway would be reduced considerably if a rough road went through Wapanjara. It would also be a good cover for their operation and rouse no curiosity as to what Albany was up to.

He finished his cake as he thought about it. It would be a starting point for further discussions, and if this forthright Englishwoman didn’t agree to some sort of purchase, then he would have to dispose of her and her team as quietly and efficiently as possible. He could not rouse too much suspicion, but Spicer and his associates could make most of it ‘go away,’ as it were.

All that was needed was for one crazy old ex-soldier to snap and kill his wife and visitors, including the children, and then turn the gun on himself. It wouldn’t be difficult to allow the information to get out that Soapy Munro was an elite sniper in his day, and that he had killed not only men, but women and children who had threatened his team. His medical records could also somehow be leaked to the press, where the obvious symptoms of PTSD were clearly noted. Chong had done his homework very thoroughly indeed.

But, he thought, if he could avoid killing, then he would do so. The results were messy and costly, leaving more people to pay well to keep them quiet. If he could acquire Wapanjara legally, it would be more secure in the long run.

In the meantime, Chong thought, he could keep this steely British aristocrat on the hook while he consulted with his financial advisors. But in the end, he needed the station’s water. It was essential to his plans. He already had buyers on the hook for processed uranium, and while they were patient, he had agreements to fulfill within the next six months. He decided he would play it by ear.

“Well, Lady Eloise … that may be a solution. I will speak to my people and look at some numbers, and then we can discuss it in a few days?”

Sophie’s brown eyes were steady and, Chong thought, a little unforgiving, but she smiled at him coolly.

“Why not? A discussion won’t hurt, and I’ll talk through the idea with my own team here. But be aware, Mister Chong … I have bought this station not only for my own use but as a financial inheritance for my ward,” she said, indicating Lizzie sitting with Kip and Gertie under Oggie’s awning. Gertie grumbled unhappily as she saw this stranger turn towards her.

Chong saw the two children, and his smile was almost shark-like.

“I can understand that, Lady Eloise,” he said, and waved a hand in the general direction of Mei-Ling, who was relaxing now in Eliot’s old recliner, still enjoying Effie’s delicious lemonade. “I too am looking to the future. When my son is born, he will inherit my father’s businesses after me.”
“A son?” Sophie murmured genteelly, turning to smile at Mei-Ling. “You know the baby’s sex, then?”

Chong’s jaw set as he studied the girl carrying his child.

“It will be a boy,” he said, eyes narrowing. “I don’t need doctors to tell me.”

Eliot’s face became even grimmer and his blue eyes glittered, but Chong didn’t notice as he continued, warming to his subject.

“I will raise him well ... he will be strong and ambitious, and he will be mine ... a dutiful son who will bear his family name with pride.” He frowned thoughtfully before continuing. “Speaking of which ... the mare and foal. I would like to buy them. My son will learn to ride when he is older and the foal will make an excellent steed for him, don’t you think? Name your price.”

Chong looked at Sophie expectantly.

Eliot’s jaw muscles jumped, but his voice when it came was soft, although his team could hear the menace oozing from every word.

“Ma’am … didn’t you promise the colt to Miss Lizzie, seein’ as she was there when the colt was born? She’s got her lil’ heart set on it, you know that.”

Sophie sighed, sounding bored.

“Perhaps you’re right, Mister Stone … perhaps you’re right. I did promise the foal to her, didn’t I? Oh well.” She smiled languorously at Chong, who bristled a little but swallowed the fact that he had been rebuffed again. “So sorry,” she added, sounding not sorry at all.

Chong forced a smile, and got to his feet. This time he didn’t bother proffering a hand.

“Mei-Ling? We must be going. Perhaps I can telephone in a couple of days, Lady Eloise, and we can meet to discuss the project further?”

“Yes,” Sophie said, already sounding bored beyond belief. “Let’s.”

And without saying another word, Chong made his way down the veranda steps and headed towards the SUV, not looking back to see if Mei-Ling was following until he was halfway across the yard.

“Mei-Ling!” he yelled. “Come!!”

She’s not a bloody mutt!! Effie snarled over the comm link. Poor kid!!

Eliot heard Effie’s angry comment, but he was too busy being the gentleman Mei-Ling appeared to now trust a little, as he helped her to her feet despite the pain it caused him.

“Ma’am …” he said quietly, still in character, “you take care of yourself, y’hear?”

Mei-Ling stood up and took Eliot’s arm, unbidden this time, and followed him down the steps and through the yard to the SUV, where Chong was already waiting impatiently. The driver opened the rear door and Eliot, ignoring both Chong and the driver, helped the girl into the vehicle. As she sat back in the luxurious seat, he glanced down at her wrist, and what he saw there made the rage begin to flow though him. But he kept it in check and nodded at Mei-Ling.

“Ma’am,” he said in farewell, and smiled at her reassuringly. Chong pushed past the hitter rudely and got in beside Mei-Ling, making Eliot flinch as his wounds were jostled.
But it didn’t stop him fixing Chong with a look that was all blue ice, chill and as deadly as a winter storm.

“*Mister* Chong …” Eliot said, his voice low and calm. “If you ever … *ever* … touch a hair on this young lady’s head, I swear to God I’ll kill you.”

And then Eliot smiled, and Chong felt a shiver run down his spine as he looked at this man who had suddenly gone from an amiable cowboy to a wolf on the hunt.

“Let’s go!!” Chong snapped at the driver, and reaching past Eliot as the American straightened, he pulled the door shut.

Eliot took a couple of steps backwards as the SUV headed up the hill and away from Wapanjara, and he sighed. His wounds hurt and his head was beginning to ache badly, but he was pleased he had made himself understood. Turning stiffly, he shut the homestead gate behind him and began to slowly make his way back to his family.

When he got back to the veranda and was making his way up the steps, he walked into a full-blown argument, not only about Mei-Ling and Chong, but also about Sparky.

“Yes, you *can’t* sell him to Chong!” Parker was ranting, “he belongs *here*, on Wapanjara!!”

Sophie had her fingers pinching the bridge of her nose, exasperation now beginning to give her a mild headache.

“Sell Sparky??” Kip and Lizzie said in unison.

“Sparky is *not* being sold to Chong –“ Sophie began, but Lizzie broke in, furious.

“Mama!!! He’s only two days old!!! You can’t sell him –“

“Lizzie … darling … he’s not mine to sell, in the first place, and it was only a ruse …” Sophie winced. She would have to explain what a ruse was. “… it … it’s a bit of a lie so the bad guys will think we are who we’re pretending to be, that’s all. Sparky is perfectly safe, and will stay here with Dottie!”

Parker narrowed her eyes, suspicious.

“You promise??”

Charlie grinned.

“I promise, Parker. Sparky’s safe here.”

“Well … he’d better be!!” Parker reiterated. Sparky was part of Wapanjara and its odd little family, and there would be trouble if he left, Parker would make sure of it.

In the meantime another conversation was going on, mostly consisting of Effie ranting about Mei-Ling and Jo agreeing with her, while Soapy fretted, wondering what on earth they could do about it.

“Shitty little oik!!” Effie swore viciously, “treating the kid like that!! She’s hardly past being a nipper and the bastard’s knocked her up! He’s a bloomin’ cradle-snatcher, that’s what he is!!”

Hardison came to stand by Effie and he wrapped his good arm around her, giving her a hug. What surprised Eliot was that Effie didn’t threaten the tall young man with a head-slap. Instead, the little
cook’s muddy eyes were swimming with tears.

“S’Alright, Effie … we’ll try an’ make sure Chong’s out of the equation soon. Maybe the girl can go home to her folks –“ Hardison said, trying to comfort Effie.

“Ain’t gonna happen,” Eliot said, silencing all of the discussions going on around the veranda table. He was very tired and his side was on fire. But what was worse was the feeling of depression that had suddenly swamped him when he saw the look on Mei-Ling’s face when he had threatened Chong. It was both terror and hope, and he didn’t know what he could possibly do to help the girl.

Nate looked at Eliot, seeing the weariness in him and he gestured at Eliot’s recliner.

“Sit, man, before you fall down.”

Eliot thought about it, unwilling to surrender to the discomfort and pain of his injuries, but common sense kicked in and he eased himself gingerly into his chair. He sighed as the cushion eased the pressure on his ribs.

Lizzie, now reassured that Chong wasn’t going to come along in the night with a gazillion ninjas and steal Sparky away, came and sat beside Eliot, frowning with concern.

“Eliot??” She whispered, and the hitter heard the worry in her tone. He held out his hand, palm upwards, and Lizzie took it, patting it gently. Eliot ran the fingers of his other hand through his hair in exasperation.

“The girl – she’s got no home to go to,” he continued. “She’s bought and paid for. Her parents probably gave her to Chong in lieu of a debt.”

Jo blanched.

“Dear God, Eliot … how do you know –“

“She’s shacklebed every night, Jo. Her right wrist’s a mass of bruises, old an’ new. Not handcuffs … shacklebed.”

“How can you tell?” Hardison asked.

Eliot winced as his side burned, and turned tired eyes on the hacker.

“Shackles leave different marks. The drag of the chains means the bruises are heavier on one side, an’ the chains give more movement. They’re very distinctive. So she can walk about, go to the bathroom … that sorta thing, an’ still be kept under control. It also means –“ he stopped abruptly and looked at Lizzie and Kip. “It means, that Chong has access to her whenever he feels like it,” he finished.

Nate face was the epitome of hatred. He loathed human trafficking, and Chong’s blatant display of his power over the girl disgusted him. But what were they going to do about her?

“We need to get her out of there,” Jo whispered more to herself than the others, but Hardison agreed.

“But how?” he said. “Albany’s pretty inaccessible an’ I have no idea how we can even reach the place without bein’ seen –“

“We don’t,” Eliot said. “We take down Chong first. The girl will have to wait. If we go in now, we blow the whole thing an’ maybe get the girl an’ her baby killed in the process. An’ I’m not about to
let that happen again,” he said under his breath. He abruptly stood up, squeezing Lizzie’s hand in reassurance before letting go. “I gotta get some rest. ‘Lizbeth Grace, you go back to your bed tonight, okay? You don’t need to look out for me now. I’m doin’ much better.”

And without another word, Eliot stalked into the house, went into his room and closed the door behind him.

Lizzie stared after him, surprised and a little annoyed.

“But … but he’s still hurt!” she said, somewhat irked.

“It’s alright nipper,” Effie said, a little mollified. “He’ll be fine. If he’s not, maybe we’ll give him some more of his medicine, hey?”

That made Lizzie laugh a little, and the tension eased.

But Hardison was puzzled.

“What did he mean when he said he wasn’t about to let a girl an’ baby get killed again? What –“ he asked, his question not posed to anyone in particular.

Jo bit her lip.

“Sierra Leone*,” she said softly.

“What? What about Sierra Leone?” Parker asked.

Jo gave the little thief a sad smile.

“He’s not told you?”

Parker shook her head, mystified.

“Well, it’s not for me to say. Maybe when he feels able, he’ll tell you about it one day.”

And gathering up the tea things, Jo left the rest of Team Leverage wondering once again just what dreadful, inhuman things Eliot had had to endure in his lifetime.

As night fell, Khenbish Hadan sat beside her small fire, miles away from the homestead at Wapanjara and deep in a woody clearing where no-one would see the meagre smoke.

She had spent the time since she was shot trying to dig all of the buckshot out of her shoulder, getting most of the pellets out apart from two which were just too far out of reach, even with her flexible joints enabling her to twist in ways most people could only dream of.

She wasn’t too worried though. The injuries were clean, and she had doused them with carbolic, so even if the pellets were never removed, the injuries shouldn’t fester.

She had stitched up the bullet wound in her biceps, and then she had drunk some tea, dosing herself with prophylactic antibiotics and painkillers.

As she rested and ate a couple of rabbits she had caught earlier in the day, she reached out to her large backpack, sitting inside the small shelter she had made with saplings and tree bark.

Sticking out of the top flap, contained within an oilskin sheath, was a sword.
Untying the oilskin, she reverently worked the sword, still encased in its scabbard, out into the flickering light of the fire.

It was, she thought, a thing of great beauty. It was a Tibetan *dpa’dam*, the straight, elegant blade gleaming in the night, the distinctive ‘hairpin’ pattern down the blade sending a river of light down its razor-sharp length. The grip was adorned with damascened silver and turquoise, and of all the things she had owned in her life, apart from Batu, this sword was her most treasured possession.

Easing herself to her feet, she slid the blade from its scabbard and began to move … stiffly at first, but as the exercise began to loosen sore muscles and burn injuries, she moved more smoothly, elegantly, the great sword flickering like quicksilver in the night. It sang its deadly song as the fireflies danced and the stars shimmered, and Hadan knew that very soon she would use this sword to kill Eliot Spencer.

To be continued …

**Author's note:**

* To find out about the Sierra Leone incident, read ‘Gertie – part One’.
The frustration was beginning to drive Eliot nuts.

After resting on his bed for a couple of hours but finding himself unable to sleep, he growled in frustration and hauled his aching body off the bed and padded through on bare feet to the kitchen, where Effie was sitting peeling potatoes.

He sat down beside her and watched her, his eyes taking in the fury that the old woman couldn’t quite hide. The fact that the potato peel was more potato than peel told Eliot that she was venting her spleen on the poor defenseless tubers.

Reaching forward, he caught Effie’s hand in his own and gently eased the peeler out of her grasp, and then took a potato from the pile. Pulling over the bowl into which Effie was dropping the skins, he began to slowly peel the potato. Effie’s hands dropped to the table surface and she sniffed furiously.

Eliot, not looking at this little woman whom he loved dearly, concentrated on the potato while Effie got her emotions under control.

“What’s for dinner?” Eliot asked conversationally.

“Beef Wellington,” Effie muttered, now a little lost without her peeler.

“Nice. Need a hand?”

“You’re already giving me a hand, you young bugger!” she replied testily, but she relented a bit. “You can do some Mediterranean roast veggies if you like,” she added reluctantly.

“You got it,” Eliot said softly, and deftly quartering the peeled potato and dropping it in the bowl of water beside its compatriots, he began another one.

They sat in silence for a few minutes, Eliot peeling potatoes and Effie brooding, and then she stood up and took a deep breath to steady herself.

“Righto … dinner,” she said, more to shake her anger away than anything else. “Can’t have the nippers starving, and I’ve spent enough time moping.”

“I’ll finish these, Eff, an’ then I’ll get the roast vegetables prepped. Anythin’ else?”

Effie shook her head as though she was trying to clear it, and she wiped her hands on her apron.

“Nah. The Wellington’s cooking and I’ve got the rest of the pash ice cream on the go with mangoes for pud, so everything’s dead-set.”

Eliot finished the last potato and put it with the others. The bowl of skins would end up on Jo’s compost heap. Pulling a handful of paper towels off the roll, he drained the potatoes, dabbed them dry and then got up and wandered over to the shelves where Effie kept her cooking utensils. He pulled out a big, two-handled roasting tin, then tossed the potatoes into it and then began sorting through the vegetable rack for tomatoes, bell peppers, garlic, eggplant, shallots and courgettes.

Finding what he wanted, he retrieved a sharp knife and began cutting up his choices into tasty chunks.
“You okay, Effie?” he asked finally as he peeled garlic cloves.

Effie took her time checking the big roast of sirloin, beautifully seasoned, topped with home-made paté and wrapped in pastry. It was cooking perfectly in the old range, so she closed the oven door and straightened, holding her back as though it ached.

“That girl …” she whispered, and Eliot barely heard her.

“What about her?” he said, slicing the eggplant into rounds.

“She’s just a bloody kid!” Effie couldn’t contain her grief. “That arse put her up the duff when she should be just beginning to make her way in the world, and he’s got her shackled! Shackled!! She’s nothing more than a bleedin’ slave to him!! And if, heaven forbid, she has a babbie girl, he’ll kill both of ‘em, I know it, the nasty little shite!!”

Effie had to grip the edge of the sink to stop herself from punching the neighboring cupboard.

Eliot had seen Effie in many moods. He’d certainly seen the gamut of her many ‘angry’ guises – happy-angry, irritated-angry and angry-with-a-hint-of-playfulness to name but a few. But in all of the years he had known Effie McPhee, he had never seen her helplessly angry.

He put down the knife and the half-sliced eggplant, and turning to Effie, pulled her into a hug.

Not one for hugging, Effie tried to gently push him away, worrying about hurting him, but she suddenly succumbed with a grumbly sigh and rested her head against Eliot’s chest.

Tightening his hold around her, Eliot placed his chin on the top of her head and felt the tremor in Effie’s round body. In the space of an afternoon, Effie’s formidable armour, never the most effective when it came to children and hurt things, had failed her and Mei-Ling and her unborn child were now firmly on Effie’s protective radar.


Effie stilled. Then she wormed her head out from beneath Eliot’s chin and stared up at him.

“What??” she asked, her voice now clear and hard.

Eliot’s mouth quirked with humour as he answered, feigning exasperation.

“I said –“

Effie scowled as she pulled away, and Eliot could see she dearly wanted to give him a head slap, but with the concussion and the cut over his ear, she just poked him in the stomach instead with a pudgy finger.

“I heard what you said, you young mongrel! D’you think I’m deaf?? And if you think you’re going to put yourself in the middle of that bastard’s world, hurt the way you are, well … just … “ Effie struggled to find the words. “… don’t.”

Eliot couldn’t contain the smile that crept onto his face.

“Eff … we’ll find a way, darlin’ … we always do.”

Effie glared at him, her eyes sparking fiercely.

“Good!” she growled. “Because that little girl and her young ‘un should be safe and away from that
shitty dead-head, and she needs to be here where we can look after ‘em both!”

Eliot nodded.

“I know. Like you looked after me all those years ago.”

Effie’s muddy eyes softened.

“You were just a skinny-arsed sick-as-a-pup young bugger back then, bleeding all over the bloody place. The Missus thought you wanted to die, but she wasn’t about to let you, was she??”

Eliot, knowing Effie was lost in memories, gave her a squeeze and a kiss on the forehead, which for once the old woman didn’t seem to mind.

“Nope. An’ you wouldn’t let me die either … none of you.” Eliot murmured. “An’ I know you want to help the girl because you know she’s got a future, her an’ her baby. So that’s why we’ll try our damnedest, Effie. That I guarantee.”

They both stood for long moments as Effie gathered her thoughts, and then Eliot let her go, Effie reaching up and patting his cheek.

“C’mon, you cheeky bludger – let’s get cooking. We’ve got people to feed!”

Eliot, feeling better than he had for days, grinned.

“Yes, ma’am!!” he said.

The Beef Wellington, as expected, was delicious, and Lizzie and Kip, both of whom were apparently starving to death, wolfed down two helpings each. Lizzie even ate all of her vegetables, including a small side serving of Eliot’s green salad with peppers, made with ingredients fresh from Jo’s garden and picked by Kip and Lizzie themselves. Wapanjara and its fresh air was working wonders, Sophie thought.

As the evening meal went on, Sophie looked around at these people she loved – and now she included the Munros, Charlie, little Kip who was Lizzie’s dear friend, and even Effie … the grumpy old woman with a heart of gold.

Despite the danger … despite members of her family being badly hurt … she did not for one moment regretting coming to Wapanjara. Sophie Devereaux Ford was a woman who had spent a lifetime on the move. She knew the world like the back of her hand … had eaten at the best restaurants and stayed in many of the most luxurious hotels, and she was used to the best of everything. But here, in a remote part of outback Australia, in a place with very little contact with ‘civilisation’ – Soapy and Jo didn’t even have a television – she felt completely at ease.

Which was why she had every intention of destroying Chong Bun-Tsui and his organisation.

Hardison, feeling the pain after a long day, looked tired and sore, but he was already making plans to go back up to Manaji Ridge in the morning to pick holes in Everett Spicer’s contacts and he needed to access one of the world’s many security satellite systems to do it.

“I want to know who the hell Spicer’s been talkin’ to,” he was saying, “an’ I need to dig about in the secure police systems in Adelaide. Can’t do it from here – sorry Soapy, but you guys live out here in the boonies with crappy access to anythin’ digital, so –“
Soapy waved a hand dismissively, grinning.

“No worries, boy. So … we go after breakfast. In Bernadette, right?” He couldn’t prevent the tone of hope running though his words.

Hardison grinned, tired but feeling as though he was making headway.

“Bernadette has stolen your heart, m’man!” he said, placing his hand over his own heart.

“Well, just a teeny bit of it,” Soapy admitted, and then grasped Jo’s hand and slipped his fingers through hers. “Because the rest of it belongs to my old girl, so it does.”

Jo smiled back at her husband.

“Well, I’m not the jealous type,” she said, amused. “I’m sure I can allow Bernadette her moment in the sun.”

The look of delight on Soapy’s face was almost child-like.

“Oh, Jo,” Sophie said indulgently, “Boys and their toys.”

Soapy rubbed his hands together, savouring the mere anticipation of driving Bernadette again.

“Good-oh!” he exclaimed, and then his black eyes sparkled even more when Effie dumped a plate of passion fruit ice cream and sliced, fresh mangoes in front of him.

“Bloody great thing,” she muttered, “sitting there … clarting up the yard … bloody camel using it like a living room …”

“Shame you can’t drive, Effie,” Charlie said. “I bet you’d love crashing through the undergrowth with Chong in your sights. He’d be flatter than a road-kill ‘roo,” he added with a smile.

The mention of Chong made Effie slam Eliot’s plate down on the table harder than was necessary, and Eliot wiped a small splatter of mango juice off his chin.

“Dammit, Effie –“ he grumbled, but lifted his spoon ready to tuck in.

“Bastard!” Effie swore, scowling. “If I ever get my hands on the drongo he’ll have his bloody scrawny neck wrung faster than an old chook’s!”

“Sit down and eat, Effie,” Jo said, her voice soothing, “before you do yourself – and the rest of us – a mischief.”

“Death by mango!” Parker chortled to herself.

But the tone of the room sobered a little as everyone’s thoughts turned to Mei-Ling.

“That poor girl …” Jo said softly. “She must be pretty near her due date by the look of her, and I bet she won’t have a doctor anywhere near to help. It’s a four-hour drive from Albany to Tennant Creek … unless they have a chopper,” she added. Helicopters were a common form of transport in the outback.

“No sign of a helipad or runway out there, Jo,” Hardison commented. “They want to keep the whole place pretty low-key … Rickenbacker obviously doesn’t want to attract any attention.”

“What about the … what-d’you-call-it … the flying doctors? Surely they can land on a field?” Nate
asked, curious.

“There’s still a lot of water about and Albany’s notorious for getting a bit swamped. All the rain will have put a hold on the mining too, I betcha,” Soapy explained, singling out a piece of mango before angling it onto his spoon.

“I checked the employee roster an’ there’s a small medical bay an’ a male nurse, but no doctor that I can find,” Hardison commented, “although I guess that there are people on the ground at Albany who don’t show up as even bein’ in Australia, let alone on a payroll.”

“Won’t matter to that shonky bastard,” Effie snarled, her dander now up, “if the girl don’t make it he can just go buy himself another one and make another baby and keep going until he gets his bloody son!”

“And we can’t help her until we take care of Chong,” Eliot said grimly, “an’ until Hardison gets his act together an’ figures out how to take the whole damn’ lot of ‘em at once, we can’t do anything …” he dropped his spoon in his desert bowl and slammed the flat of his hand gently on the table. “I friggin’ hate this,” he growled under his breath.

“I can’t ‘get my act together’ until I’ve tracked down Spicer’s contact … the one who’s coverin’ for him … and find his or her weaknesses.” Hardison grumbled. He knew Eliot was just fretting about the few options they had, and in the end their only recourse was to goad Chong into action.

But they had to be ready for him, because, Eliot knew, leaving wasn’t a choice for them. Looking back, he thought, it never had been an option. Soapy and Jo would probably have been dead by now, along with Charlie and – the thought made Eliot shudder – also young Kip.

So the fight had to come to Wapanjara, and it was on Wapanjara that they as a team had the most control.

“Look,” Nate said, thinking their situation through for what seemed the umpteenth time, “once we find Spicer’s associate we have the last piece of the puzzle, and then we can see the complete picture. We can take Chong down, along with Spicer, Rickenbacker … the whole shebang. Once we find out what hold Spicer has on whoever-it-is we can put Hardison’s plan in action.”

“Man, I can do the geeky stuff from hundreds of miles away, an’ it is goin’ to be soooo satisfyin’!” Hardison crowed, and then winced. His shoulder was very painful and he had overdone his computer-y stuff through the afternoon after Chong departed, determined to see what he could set up for the information-gathering the following morning.

Kip saw the hacker flinch as his shoulder flamed with pain, and slipping from his chair he ran over to one of the big chairs, lifted a cushion and returned to Hardison, helping the hacker rest the cushion under his elbow to ease the ache.

The relief on Hardison’s face was almost palpable.

“Ahhh, thank you, m’man!” he sighed, and held his right hand out to Kip. The pair of them went through some complicated fist-bumping which ended with an exaggerated finger-waggle.

Charlie’s jaw dropped.

“Just what the hell was that??” he said, mystified.

“Daaad!!” Kip said with a loud sigh and an eye-roll that would have impressed a bored teenager, “Don’t you know anything???”
Charlie looked at the people around the table, whose faces were a mixture of amusement, astonishment and - on Eliot’s part – irritation. Obviously Hardison and Kip were *sympatico*.

“Just be thankful Hardison ain’t showin’ him how to fight orcs on-line with lots of sad little people he’s never met …” Eliot rumbled, and finished the last of his dessert. “Gonna go to bed,” he added, slowly getting to his feet and letting out a soft flurry of coughs.

“Eliot??” Lizzie queried, brow furrowing.

“S’okay, Lizbeth Grace. It’s gonna be a busy day tomorrow, an’ I have to catch up on my beauty sleep. Can’t get by on ninety minutes a night like I used to. Gotta be about three hours these days, ‘specially when I got a bullet hole in me,” he added, hitching his Lizzie-smile, making his eyes crinkle at the corners.

Jo stood up and began clearing dishes, but as she passed Eliot she tapped his arm.

“Antibiotics, boy … they’re on your bedside table,” she murmured, and Eliot nodded wordlessly.

“And cough medicine,” Effie added, muddy eyes glittering ominously.

Eliot said something under his breath, and it was obvious that whatever it was it was unfit for Lizzie and Kip’s tender ears, but he grunted his agreement.

“See y’all,” he muttered, and the slip into the soft Oklahoman accent of his youth told his friends that he was indeed very tired and still extremely sore. “’Night.”

And with that he was gone, back to his room and – hopefully – some restful, healing sleep. But Nate doubted it. Mei-Ling was going to haunt him, along with the memories of whatever had happened in Sierra Leone all those years ago.

“Sometimes,” Sophie said quietly, “I wonder just how long he can keep taking the punishment.”

“And I wonder if he’ll ever make the decision to stop, or we’ll have to do it for him,” Nate added, running his fingers through his hair. “Provided someone else doesn’t stop him first …” he said under his breath so that his daughter didn’t hear.

Sophie caught her husband’s hand and rubbed the knuckles, but she didn’t speak. She didn’t have to. Because one day Eliot Spencer *would* have to stop giving and receiving damage, but she just prayed that it wasn’t because someone did it for him with a bullet or a knife or … *no*. She wouldn’t let the sudden thought take hold because it was just too terrible to contemplate. Sophie sighed.

“Tea,” she said. “I need tea.”

And Nate, sitting holding his wife’s hand, looked at Lizzie and wondered what would happen to their beautiful, clever daughter if anything happened to Eliot, her guardian, best friend and life mentor. Sighing, he squeezed Sophie’s hand and decided that thinking that way led to madness, and Nate Ford had had enough madness in his existence to last a lifetime.

So the team and their new family sat around the table and talked into the night, as the dingoes howled under the limpid moon and a slight breeze whispered through the gum trees, leaves rustling quietly in moon-glow.

The sudden crazed barking woke Eliot with a start.
He was dozing on top of his bed, still fully clothed, and he reached out with his right hand and lifted the old wind-up alarm clock beside his bed and squinted at the luminous dials.

Three-twenty in the morning.

The hairs on the back of his neck prickled and rose.

The rattling screech of tires and the following crashing thump of metal on wood had Eliot on his feet in a split second and he didn’t even feel the pain as he jammed his feet into his boots and moved stealthily out of his room, along the corridor and onto the veranda in less than ten seconds. He met Charlie as the young aborigine came running around the corner of the house from Gertie’s paddock, surprised by the ranting of the heelers in the middle of one of his rounds through the station homestead and barns.

Clumping down the veranda steps, Eliot broke into a trot as voices suddenly erupted in the house behind him.

Headlights glared through the night and a car horn blared, and behind the lights he could see a vehicle skewed off the dirt road and lying at an angle against the sturdy post of the homestead gate.

Holding his right hand against his bullet wound to support the broken rib, Eliot gritted his teeth against the jarring pain and sped up, knowing instantly that no matter what plans Hardison had, they had probably run out of time.

Charlie ordered away the heelers, and they slunk towards the barn, still barking, as Charlie unlocked the gate and swung it open, the station manager shining his flashlight at the vehicle now crumpled against the post. The hood was buckled and the windscreen was spider-webbed with cracks.

It was an old blue Ford ute, rusty around the wheel-arches and the doors, and Eliot grasped the passenger door and wrangled it open, not an easy task as the panel was distorted by the chassis being sprung on impact.

Charlie peered in through the broken window of the driver’s seat and swore.

“Oh shit!” he muttered, and it took him two hefty pulls to open the door. “It’s the girl!!”

Eliot managed to shimmy his way into the passenger seat and looked at the young Chinese woman sitting half-conscious in the driver’s seat, blood trickling down her forehead from impacting on the steering wheel even as her head lolled back and the blaring horn suddenly cut out. Eliot could see the shackle and chain still attached to her right wrist.

Mei-Ling moaned and tried to sit up but she cried out and clutched at her pregnant belly.

Eliot’s heart sank. Either she was hurt, or she was in labour. Either way, it wasn’t good.

“Hey … hey there,” he murmured softly, and reached out to touch her shoulder. Mei-Ling flinched visibly at the contact and she whimpered through the pain. “Easy now,” Eliot continued, “don’t move. We’ll get you out of here in just a minute, okay?”

For the first time Mei-Ling turned hazy dark eyes towards him, and it took her a few moments to recognise the kind, gentle cowboy who had told Chong he would kill him if he hurt her. And it was then, as her mind cleared a little, that she began to babble at him hysterically.

She reached for Eliot with her shackled hand and Eliot caught it, feeling the sweat on her palm and the shaking in her tiny frame, but he couldn’t make out what she was yelling at him because she was
speaking Chinese.

Eliot had a working knowledge of Cantonese and a smattering of Mandarin, but this was a dialect of the latter which he didn’t quite understand.

“Whoa now, ma’am … easy …” he squeezed her hand and Mei-Ling cried out, even though Eliot’s grip was light but firm. He looked at the shackled wrist. _Damn_. She had obviously somehow yanked the chain free, but the damage to her wrist was very visible, and blood was crusted around the shackle itself from cuts and abrasions. “Ma’am … Mei-Ling … listen to me, sweetheart … you have to relax, okay?”

The mention of her name made Mei-Ling calm down somewhat, and she let go of Eliot’s hand and returned it to her swollen abdomen. Her babbling softened a little, and as Eliot checked her over for damage, she began to rock backwards and forwards.

Now that he had the driver’s door open, Charlie crouched down beside Mei-Ling, aiming the flashlight so that Eliot could look the girl over for further injury.

“How’s she doing?” he asked urgently.

“Her legs seem okay an’ she’s not trapped, no broken bones that I can see. She’s just a bit knocked about is all. We gotta get her out of here, Charlie. I could be wrong, but I think she’s in labour.”

“Bloody hell!” Charlie grimaced, squinting past Mei-Ling and her babbling. The girl suddenly stopped and grunted, bending over and hugging her belly.

“Yep – she’s in labour,” Eliot confirmed. “We need to get her inside so Jo can take a look at her.”

“Is that who I think it is??” Jo’s voice rang through the darkness, and she materialized beside Charlie in nightgown and work boots, crouching down beside the wiry young man.

“Yeah, an’ she’s still chained, Jo – I need Parker –” Eliot said gruffly.

“Here!!” Parker rang out, and emerged past the brightness of the headlights to stand beside Eliot, who wriggled out of the passenger seat, although Mei-Ling reached out for him even as she worked through the contraction now rippling through her belly.

Parker had one of Soapy’s coats on over her pyjamas, and her feet were bare. But that didn’t stop her sliding past Eliot and into the passenger seat beside Mei-Ling.

“We have to get her out of those –” Eliot began, but Parker already had a lock-pick in her hand and she grasped Mei-Ling’s wrist as gently as she could.

“Done!” she exclaimed happily, and handed the chain and now-unfastened shackle to Eliot.

“Parker, can you unfasten her safety belt?” Jo asked, concentrating now on Mei-Ling’s discomfort and the need to get her somewhere safe, dry and comfortable.

Parker was already working on it, and it only took a couple of tries and the strap sprung clear. Mei-Ling moaned and she began a litany of Chinese words, repeated again and again and aimed at Jo, who smiled reassuringly at the young woman.

“We need Soapy,” Jo said. “He speaks Chinese,” she added as she cupped Mei-Ling’s cheek and smiled at the girl, whose face was shining with perspiration and twisted in pain.
“But she speaks English!” Parker said, now a little confused.

“Not much, I expect, and in her present condition she’s gone back to the language she’s most comfortable with.” Jo turned her attention back to Mei-Ling. “It’s alright, sweetie … you’re safe now, I promise. Do you understand? You’re safe.”

Mei-Ling glanced around at the faces surrounding her. They were concerned, kind, and trying to help. She knew that now. She tried to smile, but another contraction hit her and she doubled over. There was a sudden gush of fluid from between her legs.

“Oooh, here we go!” Jo was all business now. “Her waters just broke. It won’t be long now.”

“JO!!” Soapy emerged from the darkness followed by Sophie and Nate. “What’s – oh!” the pastoralist exclaimed as he saw Mei-Ling. “What can I do?” he asked, instantly grasping the situation.

“How’s your Mandarin?” Eliot asked, raising an eyebrow in query.

“Fair to middling,” Soapy replied. “Rusty though.” He grinned. “It’s been a long time, mate!”

“Tell her she’s safe and she can calm down now. We’re here to help,” Jo said as she rested a hand on Mei-Ling’s distended stomach. She could feel the muscles quiver as the contraction tore through the young woman.

“Here!” Parker emerged from the passenger seat and gestured at Soapy. “Keep her company.”

Soapy settled in beside Mei-Ling and the girl turned large, frightened eyes towards the ex-soldier, and Soapy suddenly understood the girl was absolutely terrified. He held up a hand in surrender and winked at her. Thinking for a moment, he began to speak.

“Um … let me see … lèngjìng … lèngjìng … nǐ xiànzài hěn ānquán. Nǐ néng shuō yīngyǔ ma?”

Mei-Ling’s eyes darted from face to face, not sure what was going on, but she nodded.

“Yes … I speak English a little.” She closed her eyes and whined at the pain for a moment. “You say … you say I am safe?”

“Yes, Mei-Ling,” Jo answered, and patted the girl’s hand. “You’re safe. We won’t let anyone harm you or your baby.”

Mei-Ling burst into tears.

“Xièxiè … xièxiè … gěnxìe nǐ de qǐngqiè …” she sobbed, and grasped Soapy’s hand, and he saw the raw, torn skin on her wrist. That bastard, he thought.

“What is she saying?” Parker whispered.

Soapy shook his head sadly.

“She just keeps thanking us for being so kind. Poor kid,” he added, and he couldn’t stop the anger in his voice from showing as he thought about Chong and what he had done to this young girl. “Well, enough of this. Let’s get Mei-Ling inside where it’s warm, hey?”

And with Jo and Parker hovering beside the young woman, Nate and Charlie eased her carefully out of the car. Before she could even attempt to stand, Nate gently lifted her in his arms, and with the greatest care he began to carry her back to the house where Effie and Hardison stood, guarding the
children who slept so soundly in their sleeping bags. He saw Effie tap Hardison on the shoulder and they both disappeared into the house. Nate knew Effie would be preparing for the birth of a new life at Wapanjara.

But Eliot stayed beside the battered old ute for a minute or two, thinking about what was to come.

However Mei-Ling had escaped, she had run to the only people she thought might help her. It was an insanely brave thing for her to do, not knowing what she was letting herself in for. All she knew was that they had been kind to her for the space of twenty-five minutes.

Pulling the gate closed and padlocking it, Eliot leaned on the top bar and gazed into the darkness.

The girl had done the right thing, he understood that. But it also meant that Chong would come looking for her … or rather, his child. His son.

The ute wasn’t from Albany, and he had no idea how the girl had got hold of it, but as soon as it was daylight, he would help Charlie haul it into the barn with the tractor. Out of sight, he thought, and out of Chong’s way.

Eliot sighed.

It didn’t matter what Chong thought, the young snakehead would come back to Wapanjara sooner rather than later, and their plans to bring down the man and his organisation were put in danger because Hardison probably wouldn’t have time to complete his clandestine research.

No matter, Eliot decided. Tonight, there was a baby to deliver and a young girl’s life to watch over, and Eliot would settle himself down on his recliner with Effie’s pump-action shotgun by his side, despite his hatred of firearms.

Tonight, under the lowering moon and a sky streaming faint meteor trails, he would keep safe the people he loved, as Chong Bun-Tsui and the deadly creature that was Khenbish Hadan came ever closer.

Eliot Spencer would protect his family, or, he knew in his heart, he would die trying.

To be continued …
To Drink The Free Air

Chapter Summary

There is mention of physical abuse towards women and children. Nothing graphic, but it’s a small mention in context with the story, so please be aware of this.

It was as the first, fluting calls of the magpies rang through the almond stand and the pale glimmer of dawn’s golden hour glowed on the horizon that the weak, angry cry of an infant rang through Wapanjara homestead.

Eliot, sitting in the shadowed veranda on his old recliner and watching for any threat to his people, rested his head back on the chair, closed his eyes and smiled that slow, rare smile his family treasured … the smile that spoke of Eliot’s heart and soul … the smile that Lizzie loved because it meant Eliot was happy.

Born in the middle of strife and danger, a new life had begun, and eased his memories of Sierra Leone, when a girl and her child had died because of greed and lust and degradation, and Eliot had been too late to do anything about it even though he had freed her from her bondage.

But even as he rejoiced at the arrival of the child, he realised how weak the cry was. Maybe … maybe it was small … premature, possibly. But the baby was alive, and Jo Munro and Effie McPhee would do everything in their power to keep it that way. He, along with everyone else not immediately involved in assisting Jo and Effie, would have to wait and see.

Leaning forward in his chair, checking the skyline and the road for the umpteenth time, Eliot lifted the chain and shackles off the table beside him and studied the free end. It was attached to a small but sturdy plate with a loop, through which the chain was fastened. The plate still carried the splintered remains of wood. Eliot thought about it. A plank, possibly … no. A floorboard. The chain had been attached to a heavy old floorboard. So how the hell had a tiny thing like Mei-Ling, heavily pregnant, wrenched the chain away from the wood, shattering it in the process?

As daylight increased, he fingered the remains of the wood, and in doing so found his answer. The edges of the wood were slightly spongy and when pressed, began to crumble.

Chong was an idiot, Eliot decided.

Albany had been a sheep station, neglected and unused for a couple of years when the owner died and the station was caught up in probate before being sold. The house was like Wapanjara’s … an old, single-storey bungalow, twice the size of Wapanjara, raised on heavy wooden props to keep it above any flooding that might occur during the Wet. Soapy and Jo had replaced Wapanjara’s century-old props with steel girders many years ago, but Albany homestead still had its ironbark props and floorboards.

Eliot ran his finger over the wood shards and smiled.

Termites. Albany had a termite infestation that hadn’t been treated. Ironbark wasn’t a termite favourite, but it still needed regular treatment to keep it from being slowly destroyed by the tenacious little insects. It would have still taken a lot of effort to pull the chain free, but Mei-Ling must have
spotted the weakness somehow and just kept working at the plate until the weakened floorboard gave way.

And Chong was an idiot because he hadn’t bothered checking the condition of the wood before having the plate attached. But then, Eliot thought, Chong probably thought a tiny, cowed young woman, heavily pregnant and with nowhere to go – or so he thought – wouldn’t even attempt an escape.

The twenty-five minutes she had spent on Wapanjara had finally given her a chance, however faint, to get out of her living nightmare. How she had escaped the house and then Albany itself was a story they still had to hear, but escape she had, and now she was relatively safe and a mother.

And as Eliot placed the shackles and chain back on the table, something else impinged on his awareness, and his eyebrows raised in astonishment.

Through the open door to the veranda, even as the child’s cries echoed through the dawn coolness, another voice joined it. This was an even weaker cry, more of a wail than a cry of anger. It was a little, breathy sob of irritation, too frail to make much noise.

*Jesus.*

*Twins,* Eliot thought with a sudden rush of understanding. That tiny slip of a girl had done the well-nigh impossible and escaped Albany while in the early stages of labour, and now she had borne twins.

But the fragility of those cries of new life cut Eliot to the bone. *No … no, not again.* He instantly thought of the 14-year-old girl in Sierra Leone, too young and too weak and too traumatised to carry a child, and her beautiful, tiny little boy had been born still and so, so silent. The young mother had died minutes later. Eliot Spencer, barely out of his teens, had grieved and buried them himself, denying all help.

Getting stiffly to his feet, he made his way into the house where the murmur of voices which had kept him company through the night were now raised in urgent concern.

Hardison met him at the living room door.

“Where’s Charlie?” the young hacker asked, cradling his arm and peering past Eliot. “Jo asked me to –“

“Doin’ his rounds. I’ll go get him. What’s happenin’ –“

Parker came barreling out of Eliot’s room where Mei-Ling had been settled in, and the little thief was both elated and deeply worried.

“Charlie has to go and fetch stuff from his house,” Parker rattled off. “Baby clothes, crib, bottles … everything he can find. Jo says he kept all of Kip’s old baby things,” she added. Her blue eyes were suspiciously moist. The baby cries were continuing, weaker now, and Eliot’s gut lurched.

“How are –“

“They’re tiny!!” Parker whispered, and flung herself at Eliot, forgetting his wounds, but he didn’t flinch and held her tight. “They’re so little, Eliot!! We have to keep them warm and Mei-Ling has no milk, so we need to find something for them to drink –“

“Okay, darlin’ …” Eliot comforted her as best he could. “How’s Mei-Ling doin’?”
Parker snuggled against Eliot’s chest, and her tears dampened his jacket.

“Tired … really tired. And Jo says she’s not been eating properly, which is why the babies are so little. The little boy’s smaller than his sister, and she’s just a tiny thing.”

So … Eliot thought fleetingly. *Chong has his son.* But he would never see him, or his daughter, Eliot vowed silently. They were part of his world now, and under his protection.

Sophie was next, carrying bloodied towels and sheets.

“Eliot … Mei-Ling’s asking for you.” She said quietly. “She wants to see the cowboy, she says.”

Eliot let go of Parker, who wiped her eyes and smiled up at the hitter.

“I’ll go find Charlie,” she said firmly, and then she was gone, out into the new day, running lightly on bare feet towards the barn.

Eliot turned to his room, but Sophie stopped him with a touch on his arm.

“Give them a minute, will you? Jo’s just getting Mei-Ling settled and cleaned up.” Sophie’s brown eyes were warm with compassion. “She’s had a tough time of it, poor thing. But she wouldn’t yell.” Her face flickered with barely-hidden ire. “She didn’t yell, because if she yelled with pain or complained when Chong used her, he would hit her. So she learned not to make a noise.” Sophie’s lip curled with hatred. “He’s quite the charmer, isn’t he?”

“Sonofabitch,” Hardison breathed.

“And,” Sophie continued, “she’s only just turned seventeen. Chong’s *owned* her since she was fifteen.”

Eliot suddenly realised Sophie was shaking with fury.

He cupped Sophie’s cheek in his hand and was about to say something when Effie stumped out of the kitchen, scowling. She was carrying two stoneware hot-water bottles wrapped thickly in towels.

“Well, Yank, I hope you don’t mind your undies dumped on the floor in a corner because clever-clogs is turning the drawer into a crib for the babbies,” she growled.

“Nate came up with the idea.” Sophie added. “A bit like a makeshift incubator.”

While Eliot mentally winced at the idea of his ‘undies’ flung onto the floor for all to see, he immediately understood Nate’s thinking. Effie would keep the old stoneware bottles at the head and foot of the drawer and the babies would be warm and cosy in the centre, away from draughts and where they wouldn’t lose precious body heat.

“Works for me,” Eliot said. “Anything I can do until I can see her?”

Effie nodded, eyes sparking with anger and compassion.

“Powdered milk, in the cupboard by the door. We have to figure out some kind of formula for the tiddlers,” she ground out. “That girl doesn’t have enough milk for one babbie, let alone two. Poor little bugger,” she added under her breath.

Eliot nodded and was about to head into the kitchen when he had a thought.

“Effie … ask Jo if we can use powdered cow colostrum,” he said.
Effie nodded approvingly.

“I should think so. Mister M ordered some just a month ago, I think. It’ll be in the –“

“–in the office next to the veterinary case,” Eliot finished. “I’m on it.”

As Sophie headed off to put the soiled sheets and towels in the laundry and Effie disappeared into Eliot’s room with her stoneware bottles, Eliot felt Hardison touch his arm.

“El, listen … I been thinkin’ … Soapy an’ me, we can head off in Bernadette as soon as it’s light enough an’ we can be back in a couple of hours. I need to do my thing before Chong gets the bit between his teeth an’ comes chargin’ in here ready for mayhem and misery,” Hardison said under his breath. His dark eyes glanced at the closed door to Eliot’s room. “Would you an’ Parker an’ Charlie be able to hold the fort until we get back? I need Nate to help out ’cause Soapy’s still a bit sore.”

Eliot swiftly calculated timing and vulnerability, especially as they now had three more people to take care of, all of them weak and two of whom would need continual care for the next little while.

“Yeah … we’ll manage. Anyone who messes with the womenfolk of Wapanjara needs their head lookin’ at.” Eliot said grimly. “You go do your thing. We’ll be waitin’ for you. But don’t stay out there any longer than you have to, Hardison, okay? No arm-wavin’ crap tryin’ to impress Soapy, or … or … any of that geeky hoo-ha -“

Hardison rolled his eyes and nodded impatiently.

“Yeah, yeah, Eliot, I gotcha,” he sighed. “Go up onto the ridge, get the info, come back … done deal.”

“An’ that’s it, Hardison! You understand?? I can’t be worrin’ about you guys any more than I need to, you got it? Huh?”

Hardison saw past the gruff scowly Eliot he knew so well and perceived the concern and care behind it all. Eliot was quickly descending into touchy-guard-wolf mode, and now wasn’t the time to piss the hitter off – especially seeing as he was injured and sore, which made him all the more of a pain-in-the-ass.

Hardison gave Eliot a toothy grin.

“We got new babies, bro! Just how cool is that?!!”

Eliot, despite himself, tweaked a smile.

“Yeah … pretty cool.” He had a tough time getting the smile under control, but he did it and settled his face back into its customary ‘I’m workin’, so don’t push me, okay?’ frown. “As soon as Soapy’s ready you get goin’.”

“An’ in return you guys wear your earbuds around the homestead, alright?”

Eliot agreed, nodding.

“Eliot, love … Mei-Ling wants to talk to you, boy,” Jo said as she peeked out of the bedroom door.

“Comin’ –“ Eliot breathed. “Hardison – can you go to the office in the barn an’ find a bag labelled ‘Calf colostrum’, okay? It’s in a cupboard beside the veterinary cabinet.”

Hardison screwed his face up, thinking.
“What the hell is colos … colos …”

“Colostrum!” Eliot snarked, “it’s special milk powder with lots of antibodies an’ everything in it! The babies’ll need it, alright??”

Hardison digested the information and hovered a bit.

“Dammit, Hardison!” Eliot hissed quietly. “Go!!”

“Okay, okay!” Hardison answered, “I’ll go an’ see if Charlie an’ Parker need a hand,” he added.

Letting Hardison go, Eliot took a deep, pained breath and eased himself quietly into the bedroom where Mei-Ling lay, looking white against the pillows and small and very frail under the warm blankets. She was watching Nate intensely as he busily lined Eliot’s ‘undies’ drawer with warm towels. She tenderly held a little, weakly squalling bundle in her arms.

Soapy sat beside her, holding a smaller bundle which wriggled against the pastoralist’s chest. Soapy couldn’t take his eyes off the little boy in his arms. Eliot knew a besotted look when he saw one.

Jo turned and smiled at Eliot.

“Sit down, laddie. You look shattered,” she added, and shooed Eliot into the other chair beside the bed.

Mei-Ling’s dark eyes lit up tiredly when she saw him, and she began to repeat just one word.

“Cowboy!” she said, thin face alight with pleasure, “Cowboy, Cowboy!!”

Eliot smiled back, but his smile faded into a grim line when Mei-Ling struggled with her next sentence.

“He … he will come here …” she said haltingly, “he will kill you … you are … you are in danger …”

Jo’s hand settled on Eliot’s shoulder, and he glanced up at her. But his answer to Mei-Ling was soft and kind.

“I’ve been in danger most of my life, sweetheart, so don’t you worry,” he reassured her.

Mei-Ling, not quite understanding, turned to Soapy, who tore his eyes away from the baby in his arms and quietly translated.

Mei-Ling’s face was drawn and exhausted, but she smiled tremulously and reached out to Eliot, who held her free hand as she cradled her daughter. She began speaking again, this time in Chinese, and Soapy murmured the words softly so as not to disturb the infant he held with such reverence.

“A man came …” he said, as Mei-Ling began to speak. “A … a policeman – hang on a mo … no, two policemen, she’s saying … arrived to see Chong right after they got back to Albany.” Soapy waited a few seconds as Mei-Ling caught up, and then he continued. “One was from Tennant Creek and she had met him before – that must be Spicer,” Soapy added as an aside, and then he continued. “The other one … he’s from Adelaide … he’s - bloody hell!!” Soapy exclaimed, sotto voce, as Mei-Ling said the man’s name.

Jo turned from her task of helping Nate make up the warm bed for the twins.

“What? What is it?” she asked, not understanding Soapy’s surprise.
Soapy looked up at his wife.

“It’s Toby Custance!” he said. “Bloody Toby Custance!!”

“What? No! It can’t be!!” Jo said disbelievingly.

“You know him?” Nate asked.

“Too right we know him!!” Jo said. “His folks used to own Albany when it was a sheep station!”

“Well!” Nate finally had the lightbulb moment he had been yearning for. “It’s all coming together now, huh! He didn’t inherit the place when his folks died then?”

“Oh yes, he inherited the place – but he hated it. Couldn’t get out fast enough and left as soon as he could,” Soapy explained. “Joined the army, but decided to leave after a few years and went into the police. He’s a bit of a big-wig in the Adelaide force, I heard. It took him a while to get sole ownership of the place, but as soon as he did he sold it. It must’ve been to Albany.”

Nate grinned. At last things were beginning to make sense. They now had a name, and all Hardison had to do was dig around and find the connection between Chong, Spicer and Custance and exploit it for all it was worth. That would save a lot of time.

He finished his job of putting together the little bed for the new arrivals, and Effie tucked in the stoneware bottles. It was ready. Now all they had to do was try and get some food into the infants.

Hardison poked his head around the door.

“Got the milk powder,” he said, and tried to peer at the babies from the doorway. “Charlie an’ Parker are just comin’ in with all of the baby stuff, includin’ bottles.”

“Righto then, sunbeam. I’ll go make up some milk for the tiddlers,” Effie said, now in fine fettle because she had something to do to help the undernourished young woman and her babies. She stumped out of the room, pulling Hardison with her.

Mei-Ling slumped a little in the bed, still clinging desperately to her daughter, but it was obvious she was struggling.

“No more talking, now,” Jo said firmly. “You, my girl, need to eat something and then get some rest.”

Mei-Ling, understanding, nodded, but before Jo could bend over and take the child from her, the new mother reached out to Eliot and gestured to him to hold the baby. This man would watch over her children, she knew.

And before Eliot realised what he was doing, he carefully cradled the tiny bundle in his arms and held her close to his heart.

He hadn’t held a baby since Kip and Lizzie were small, and gazing down at the little, elfin face blinking up at him, topped with a thatch of dark hair, he tucked her into his good side to keep her warm using his body heat. She was very, very fragile, but he would keep her safe, he promised silently, both this little one and her brother.

There was a hesitant knock on the door and a little voice asked,

“Can we meet the babies?”
Lizzie and Kip had slept through the whole thing. Not even the toing-and-froing through the night had disturbed them, but now they were wide awake, informed, and very, very excited.

But before Jo could tell them that Mei-Ling and the babies needed to rest, Mei-Ling’s eyes lit up, hollow and exhausted as they were.

“Yes!” she called out. “Yes, come see! Come, children!”

Lizzie and Kip were through the door before Mei-Ling had finished speaking, and as they saw Soapy and Eliot holding the tiny bundles, their eyes became round with wonder.

Kip snuggled up to Soapy and looked at the baby boy in his Grandpa’s arms.

“Is it a girl or a boy?” he asked, and very carefully tucked the thick towel away so he could see the child’s face.

Soapy grinned at Kip.

“This is the little boy,” he whispered back. He’s the youngest.”

“So … so what are they called?” Lizzie asked as she peered over Eliot’s shoulder. “Do they have names yet? She’s so little!” she added, unable to tear her eyes away from the baby in Eliot’s protective arms.

Mei-Ling, gratefully taking a mug of hot, milky tea from Jo and sipping it, shook her head.

“No names,” she murmured tiredly. “Not yet. But …” she continued haltingly, “my babies … they are Aus … Australian,” she added, struggling a little with the word. “Not Chinese. They … they were born here. They will be proud to be Australians!”

And once she had said it she relaxed back into the pillows and drank her tea, barely able to keep her eyes open.

Jo, making sure Mei-Ling was warm enough, smiled wryly.

“Well, Soapy – what do you think?”

Soapy looked up, his surrogate grandson at his side and the baby boy held close as though he would never let him go, and had the light of joy in his black eyes.

“I think … I think these Australians can stay for as long as they wish, old girl. Don’t you?”

“Too bloody right!!” Effie interrupted as she rolled into the room with a tray on which resided two small baby bottles filled with a yellowish creamy milk as well as a plate of scrambled eggs with toast for Mei-Ling. “Now then … let’s get our tiddlers fed, hey? See if we can fatten them up a bit.”

“Can we help??” Kip asked, delighted at the presence of the two tiny babies. Now he could be a big brother.

“Well, Kip my lad, I have to go with Nate and Alec in Bernadette up to Manaji Point, but I’m sure …”

“Off you go then, Mister M, and take clever clogs here with you. We’re perfectly capable of taking care of mum and babbies,” Effie stated firmly, indicating Nate who felt like a spare tire now he had finished his chore of making the warm bed for the twins. She placed the tray on Eliot’s sideboard and held out her hands.
Soapy, very reluctantly, handed over the little boy and stood up, ruffling Kip’s mass of blond curls.

“All right … I’m off. Kip – you look after him now, hear me? Lizzie will make sure his sis is safe, but this little man is your responsibility.”

Kip puffed out his tiny chest to the point where Jo thought he would explode, but it was Lizzie who answered.

“We will, Grandpa Soapy! We promise!”

Soapy hovered for a moment until Effie scowled at him, exasperated.

“Well??? Go on!! Out! Stop cluttering the place up! We’ve babbies to feed and you’re in the way!”

Soapy and Nate exchanged glances and took the hint, and as they closed the door behind them, Mei-Ling began her breakfast, closing her eyes in pleasure at the taste of the delicious eggs, and Effie settled into Soapy’s chair, Kip almost glued to her side.

“All right, nippers!” she said authoritatively, “get the bottles and we’ll see if these little blighters will take some milk, hey?”

So Effie and Eliot, with Kip and Lizzie’s help, fed the two infants, only an hour or so old, and they took their first mouthfuls of food eagerly despite being small and weak. Eliot helped Lizzie hold the bottle so that the baby girl didn’t take in gulps of air instead of the nourishing colostrum, and as the morning brightened and golden light streamed in through the open window, Mei-Ling lay in the warm bed with her babies safe and sound and surrounded by kind, decent people. For the first time since she had been forcibly taken from her home by Chong Bun-Tsui, she dared to be happy.

“Gone?? What do you mean, GONE!?!?”

Chong Bun-Tsui sat at his breakfast table and slammed his fist on the old, polished teak surface.

After spending long, wearying hours until daybreak discussing options with Rickenbacker, Spicer and the sly, smug creature that was Toby Custance, he was very tired, and he had demanded Mei-Ling’s presence so he could have someone to browbeat while eating his breakfast.

Derry Ryan had been duly dispatched to Mei-Ling’s small, makeshift bedroom at the other end of the house, only to find no Mei-Ling, no chain, a crumbling floorboard wrenched from the joists and a window pried open. The tiny, thin, heavily-pregnant girl had managed to drop the five feet to the ground and was gone.

Chong was incensed.

“You!!” he railed, pointing at Ryan, “YOU DID THIS!! You didn’t shackle her properly!!”

Ryan shook his head in denial.

“No … no, I fastened it securely, Mister Chong! It turns out the floorboard’s rotten! She must’ve figured it out and just kept yanking at it until she pulled the thing apart!”

Chong stared at Ryan as though he was a small, insignificant bug ready to be ground into Albany’s fine, red dirt.

“Go find her!! You search every inch of this foul place and you find her, bring her back, and make sure she’s secure this time!!” Chong gestured vaguely at the door.
Ryan nodded hurriedly. He knew how powerful this slender man was, and his view was confirmed when Chong gave the tall Ulsterman a hard slap across the face.

“Go find her – NOW!!” he hissed. “And if any harm has come to her, I will kill you! She’s carrying my SON!!” The threat, Ryan knew, didn’t really need to be said, and holding a hand to his face he turned on his heel to get some men together and then they would look in every hole, storeroom, nook and cranny throughout the place for Mei-Ling.

Chong sat down and savagely tore apart a piece of toast that the elderly cook had made for him. The toast was burnt and only partly edible, and he threw it at the old man who cowered beside the door.

“This … this is disgusting! Bring me something else!!”

The man scuttled towards the kitchen, and Chong was just about to snarl an oath when Rickenbacker slipped into the dining room, his well-fed face creased with worry.

“What do you want??” Chong snarled.

“Er … Ryan just told me what happened, an’ I was thinkin,’” Rickenbacker said, pouring himself a coffee. “Any idea when she high-tailed it?”

Chong shook his head.

“I didn’t see her from about nine last night. I had business to discuss and she was in the way, so I told Ryan to shut her away for the night.”

“Well,” Rickenbacker said hesitantly as he sat down at the table and nursed his coffee, “‘Bout midnight last night was the weekly shift change. New team comin’ in an’ the old one headin’ for Tennant Creek. D’you think she might have hid in one of the pick-ups goin’ into town?”

Chong’s lip curled as he considered this new information, and his lean face suddenly cleared.

“I know where she’s gone,” he said. “If she got to Tennant Creek, she’ll have found a way to get to Wapanjara.” He grinned, but it had no humour in it. “She’s gone to that … that … cowboy who dared threaten me!”

“I’ll tell Spicer to keep an eye out for her –“ Rickenbacker began, knowing the man and his Adelaide colleague had returned to Tennant Creek as the dawn broke.

“She won’t be in Tennant Creek,” Chong interrupted. “She’ll be long gone. It wouldn’t be difficult stealing a car on a Saturday night around the bars,” he added. “Get the team together and make sure they’re armed. Find Hadan and tell her –“

“She’s gone too,” Rickenbacker said quietly. “After Eades was killed …” his voice tailed off uncertainly.

Chong said something very nasty in Chinese.

“Alright – forget the damned woman. We go in an hour. Be ready,” Chong said and returned to his repast. Only there was nothing to eat.

“Old man!!! Where the hell is my breakfast???” he roared.

This, Chong Bun-Tsui decided, was going to be a very annoying day.
Hardison was talking to himself, which wasn’t unusual, but time was of the essence, Nate knew, and they didn’t have the spare moments for Hardison to indulge his flare for the dramatic.

“C’mon, Hardison! Move it will you? We don’t have all day –“

“Nate, Nate, Nate … “ Hardison soothed, still studying the plasma screens set up alongside Bernadette high on Munaji Ridge. “This jus’ takes a little time, is all.” He couldn’t stop himself from grinning.

“What’s so funny?” Soapy said, intrigued.

Hardison held up a finger for a moment as studied the laptop, and then he pressed a hot key and the screen suddenly became a mass of streaming numbers and letters, and just for a split second Soapy could have sworn he saw the words ‘Taizhou Securities’. But then the words were gone, and the screens became blank.

“All done!” he said, turning to Nate and Soapy as they leaned against Bernadette’s heavy side. “Let’s go!”

Nate and Soapy looked at one another and shrugged. Hardison was so pleased with himself he couldn’t sit still, although his injured shoulder prevented him from being as demonstrative as he would usually have been.

It took only seven minutes to pack everything away, and then Soapy backed Bernadette up, put her in gear and drove the big truck down the rough track towards Wapanjara and home.

To be continued …
Yáo Mei-Ling drifted slowly awake from a deep, restful sleep to the sound of children laughing and a soft, scented breeze stirring the curtains of the open window. Inhaling the perfumed air, she heard something else … the soft, sleepy wordless hum of an old lullaby.

Turning her head, she saw the tall young black man who had grinned cheekily at Chong during their visit. He was sitting in an old rocking chair, head resting back and his eyes closed, and tucked into his chest was one of her children. His other hand lay on the sleeping form of her twin, comfortable and warm in the makeshift crib.

The young man was rocking very gently, and his humming was soothing and so peaceful that Mei-Ling would have been happy to slip back into sleep and dream painlessly and sweetly, where there was no danger or hurt and her children could live safe and sound and away from the evil thing that was their father.

She smiled to herself. For the first time in what seemed forever, she felt safe. She was still very sore and tired, but Mei-Ling was also hoping she would be allowed to get up and get dressed. She wasn’t hungry for once, and she felt as though, given a little time, she would be well on the way to good health again. And she desperately wanted to get to know her children.

“Hey … you’re awake!”

The humming had stopped and the young man was watching her with gentle brown eyes and a white smile.

Mei-Ling blinked, not knowing what to say.

“My name’s Alec,” he continued. “Or Hardison. Take your pick.” Hardison glanced down at the child in his arms. “Your girl has a dose of the hiccups ‘cause she ate too fast, so we’re havin’ a little quiet time to see if she’ll settle. Your boy over here,” Hardison rubbed his thumb over the little, snoozing lump in the drawer, “likes his zees. Fell asleep halfway through his lunch an’ conked right out.”

The child in his arms twitched and a loud ‘Hic!’ was heard. Hardison chuckled.

“Here. See if she’ll settle for her momma.”

And before Mei-Ling could utter a word, Hardison gently cradled the child in big hands and mindful of his injured shoulder, passed her over to her eager mother, who smiled her thanks.

Mei-Ling studied her daughter. She was tiny, it was true, and she ached to feed her, but Mei-Ling knew in her heart she couldn’t. The deprivations she had suffered with Chong … the lack of care and decent food and attention had told on her young body. But both of her children were alive and well, thanks to the kindness and love of these people she didn’t even know.

The little girl let out another soft ‘hic!’ and Mei-Ling laughed and instinctively popped the child over her shoulder and rubbed her back. It felt good to laugh, Mei-Ling thought. She hadn’t laughed in nearly three years. It felt odd … unfamiliar.

Hardison painfully heaved himself out of the chair.

“T’ll go tell Jo you’re awake. You get to know your babes, okay? You need anything, you just yell.”
Mei-Ling looked up at this kind, gentle young man.

“Thank you,” she whispered, even as she nuzzled her daughter’s tufty hair. “You do not have to go …” she added, a little fearful at being alone.

Hardison grinned, amused and understanding what she was feeling.

“Don’t worry,” he chided, “you’ll be fine. An’ you’re not alone – you got your very own protector right there,” he added, pointing under the low, wide table set firmly against the wall which carried Eliot’s ‘undie’ drawer and its precious cargo.

Mei-Ling peered at the table, and was a little taken aback when she saw a pair of boot-black eyes and a moist nose set in a white, wiry face gazing back at her, eyebrows beetling as their owner stared at her.

“A … a dog??” she asked, a little confused. Dogs had never been a part of her life.

“That’s Buster,” Hardison replied. “The dumb mutt has been under there since the babies arrived. We kept shooin’ him out, but it seems he’s decided to make sure your babies are safe an’ sound. I doubt anythin’ bad will happen to them or you while he’s around,” he added, grinning.

Mei-Ling looked at the little terrier, and Buster’s stubby tail wagged hesitantly. He lifted his head off his paws where he lay keeping guard, and gave the young woman an ingratiating grin, lips rising over white teeth, his eyes narrowed with pleasure.

Mei-Ling had to smile.

“Hello, and I thank you, little Yong,” she said solemnly.

Buster sat up and panted happily, but he didn’t leave his post. He glanced at Hardison but then his eyes returned to Mei-Ling and the child she held. He clawed gently at the bedclothes with a scruffy paw, telling her that he was there and ready to guard the vulnerable, squeaky tiny humans. He was a terrier, fierce and protective, and he had to uphold the honour of his tribe, Buster decided. He sneezed, knowing he had made his point, and slipping back under the table he returned to his duties.

Hardison shook his head.

“Damn dog … been hangin’ about too much with Eliot …”

Jo bustled in at that moment, and was delighted to see Mei-Ling awake and looking much better.

“Well now, young lady, would you like to get up this morning? Maybe have a shower and have a bite to eat? The little ones will be fine, I promise!”

Mei-Ling felt strange. She had a choice.

“Yes … yes! I would like that!” she said before she could stop herself.

“Good!” Jo said and placed a small pile of clothes on the bottom of the bed. “They might be a bit big, but they’ll do at a pinch.”

Mei-Ling smiled, the joy shining from her face. She was free – she and her children were free. She took a deep breath and felt her daughter shift drowsily against her, and the scent of flowers overwhelmed her senses.

“Thank you … thank you so much!” she murmured, and nestled her cheek against the baby in her
arms. “The flowers I can smell … are they roses?”

Hardison laid a big hand on they little boy’s head as he snoozed in the makeshift crib while Jo nodded, pleased.

“Yes … roses. I love roses, and they grow so well here.”

Mei-Ling watched Hardison, engrossed as he watched over the sleeping child.

“My mother … she loved roses.” Her daughter smacked tiny lips, the hiccups having subsided. “She … she died … when I was a child.”

Jo’s face became full of compassion. This young woman was barely more than a child herself, and she was already a mother.

“I’m so sorry …” she murmured, and touched Mei-Ling’s arm in sympathy, but the young mother smiled up at her.

“My daughter … I will call her Rose,” she said suddenly. “For my mother,” she added.

Hardison’s dark eyes shone with delight and reached out his other hand and gently stroked Rose’s cheek with his index finger.

“Well, lil’ Rose … I think that’s a beautiful name for a beautiful girl. You got a name for this handsome fella here yet?” he asked.

Mei-Ling shook her head.

“But I will. When he is awake … I … I will say hello to my son,” she added, smiling. “They will have Australian names and … and … be free and safe … and I will be just Mei … because …” she straightened proudly, “I will be Australian too,” she added.

“I think that’s a bloody good idea!” declared Effie who stumped into the room with a pair of sand shoes for Mei.

And Jo, looking at this surprising young woman, couldn’t be happier.
word that impinged on his consciousness … words such as ‘stripped assets’ and ‘shell companies.’ That and the constant babble of voices through the earbud he wore increased the pressure in his head. While his team knew to keep the chatter to a minimum, two small children prattling on to each other – plus Charlie telling them to keep the noise down – didn’t help.

Gertie stalked the homestead burbling to herself, and Effie was busy making up more milk for the babies and muttering, as was her habit. Parker was arguing with anyone who would listen about why she should be allowed back up the water tower, and Eliot, tired to death of the racket, finally had had enough.

"Can it, Parker!! You’d be too much of a target, okay?? You’re twenty feet off the ground on a damn’ exposed metal tower!!" he growled, his voice sharper than he intended.

*I can take care of myself Eliot!* Parker snapped back through the earbud, irritated.

"It means, Parker, there ain’t no way I can stop you takin’ a goddamn bullet from here if you’re up there! So stay away from the friggin’ tower!!" Eliot snarled.

*But Eliot* – Parker insisted waspishly, not about to let it go.

Then Hardison chipped in, his voice soft and reconciliatory.

*Hey, babe … how about a compromise? There’s a bit of cover beside the chimney an’ you can still see a-ways from there on the roof. Eliot? Howzat?*

Eliot ran fingers through his unruly hair and winced as his head throbbed.

"Okay …" he sighed. "… okay. But you get down from there if I tell you, Parker. Y’hear me??"

He heard a disconsolate sigh.

*S’pose …* Parker answered glumly.

Eliot heard her grumble to herself for a moment, and then the earbud fell silent, as though everyone had realised their hitter wasn’t in the mood for rebellion.

Weapons were posted about the house at each window, and everyone – including the children – knew their place. Eliot wasn’t too sure that Lizzie and Kip quite understood how serious this was, but at least they would be safe – Parker had run them through their exit route a dozen times, and the little thief would also make sure Mei-Ling and the twins would be taken to shelter should the worst happen and Eliot was taken down.

Chong was one problem that, at least, was a little predictable. But Khenbish Hadan … *she* was the unknown quantity in the whole equation. Eliot guessed that she was now marching to the beat of her own drum, a beat of revenge and hatred, and she was completely unpredictable. The only hope he had was that she didn’t side with Chong.

Letting out a wordless grunt of frustration, Eliot finally set his plate of pancakes on his little side table and flung his fork onto it. Levering himself to his feet, he suddenly swayed, disorientated, and he had to sit back down in his chair in a hurry before he went to his knees.

"Eliot?" Soapy said, worried, and Nate turned to look at the Oklahoman, alarmed by the concern in the old pastoralist’s voice, but Eliot waved a hand dismissively.

"M’okay,” he said, just a little too forcefully. “Just tired of starin’ at nothin’ is all,” he added by way
of some sort of explanation.

A hand dropped onto his shoulder, and he squinted up to see Effie standing beside him.

“Go rest, boy,” she rumbled under her breath. “You’re done in, and a watched pot never boils, you know that.” Her muddy eyes were soft with compassion.

“Can’t, Eff. Chong’s comin’ … and sooner rather than later. Besides, Mei-Ling and the babies are in my room, an’ I don’t feel like catchin’ a couple of zees here on the recliner. If I did that I’d be as stiff as roadkill in fifteen minutes. I have to be able to move, Effie – I can’t do my job otherwise,” he added doggedly.

“My bed’s made up, you daft young bludger. Go get ten minutes in my room, then. Missy’ll be able to see anyone coming on the road from on the roof, so we’ll waken you long before they get here. And I betcha we’ll know soon enough if they come through the bush!” she grinned malevolently, thinking of Charlie and Parker’s little ‘surprises’ they had left for interlopers.

Eliot, for once, couldn’t make up his mind. He knew Charlie was lurking around the barn, shadowed by the three heelers, and Parker’s sharp eyes watched from the roof. Soapy, no matter that he was nearly seventy, was a marksman of the highest standard, and not afraid to end a life if it kept his family safe. Jo and Sophie were inside, watchful and perfectly capable of defending themselves, and Hardison, despite being wounded, was rested and alert. Nate’s mind was constantly gauging parameters and options, and he was also a mean and spirited fighter. Effie … well, Effie was more than able to look after herself and her people.

He decided he could spare ten minutes to lie down and ease his battered frame.

“Ten minutes, Effie. No more, okay?”

Effie sat down beside him and gazed into weary, slightly glazed blue eyes.

“No,” she said as patiently as she could – which for Effie McPhee was a struggle. “You sleep for as long as you can, you daft lump. And if you’re going to be arsey about it, remember we need you as fit as you can be, and right now you’re just bloody useless. So go, you pillock – sleep.”

Eliot scowled, but hesitated, trying hard to think of a reason why he should stay right where he was, but Sophie’s voice suddenly came through the earbud, mildly exasperated.

Oh, for God’s sake, Eliot! Just go to bloody bed, will you and stop being such a pain! She sighed, slightly annoyed.

Are you sick again? Lizzie piped up from the kitchen, a little alarmed.

Eliot’s scowl deepened.

“No! I’m fine ‘Lizbeth –“

Grandma Jo! Make Eliot go lie down! Lizzie demanded.

Eliot? Do as Lizzie says! Jo said sharply, making Eliot wince at the tone through the electronic earpiece.

El? You bein’ a moron? Hardison joined in as he took little Rose in his arms and wandered through to the living room to let Mei get out of bed and have a hot shower.
“Dammit, Hardison!” Eliot began, “Will you people just leave me alone –“

Give it up, mate, Charlie piped up as he checked the fence line beyond Gertie’s paddock. Eliot heard the big camel harrumph to herself as she followed Charlie and the dogs. You’re bloomin’ buggered and you know it. We’re perfectly capable of looking out for ourselves, you know. Stop pissing about!

Eliot knew then he was at an impasse. With a sigh he slowly got to his feet and nodded, although the pain in his head made him flinch.

“Ten minutes.” He said to Effie, and the old woman smirked. “Only ten minutes.”

“Go sleep, son. We’ll see you in a bit,” Effie said.

Without replying and with the various echoes of smug satisfaction humming through his earbud from his entire family, Eliot made his way into the house, through the kitchen and into Effie’s capacious bedroom.

Albany Mining Company was abuzz with activity.

Heavily armed men, over a dozen of them, were settling themselves into two open-backed trucks. Derry Ryan, followed by Chong Bun-Tsui, now dressed in boots and fatigues, headed to the cab of the foremost truck. Chong’s face was set in anger and determination.

Ryan, peering through a Soapy-induced black eye, was trying to get some sort of plan out of Chong.

“We could go overland man, through the Wapanjara fence-line and take ‘em from the west –“ he insisted, his Ulster accent raw with annoyance.

“NO!” Chong growled. “We go by road – it takes longer, but we have to make it appear as though old man Munro killed his family and then himself. Tracks through the bush and damaged fences wouldn’t look right. When we get there, you take the men and surround the place. I’ll tell you what I want when we get there.”

“What about the girl?” Ryan asked.

“I take her back, she has my son and then I dispose of her. I can get as many wet-nurses as I need,” Chong snarled, still furious that the young woman had not only defied him but left him. Nobody left Chong Bun-Tsui, heir to the dragonhead of the Shumchun triads. Nobody.

Chong slid a well-used 9mm Glock into the shoulder holster under his left arm, and slipped a couple of spare clips into his pocket. At his belt was the gun’s partner, a Glock survival knife, with its saw-edged back-blade sitting snug in its polymer sheath.

“And that cowboy …” he added, eyes narrowed with hatred, “that bastard is mine.”

Ryan slid into the driver’s seat and started the engine.

The small two-truck convoy was rolling out of the mining yard when Rickenbacker came stumbling out of the old homestead, the sweat of fear beading his forehead. He waved his arms frantically at the trucks, trying to stop them, but it was too late.

Rickenbacker slumped against the railings of the veranda and groaned, wiping a chubby hand over his perspiring face.

He had just now been trying to organise payments for supplies and was checking all of the legal –
and not so legal – bank accounts. He had sat and stared at the first account he had opened, and his heart began to pound and his gut tightened in sheer terror.

“Oh god …” he whispered, and bringing up a new tab he had checked another. And then another. And then … “oh god,” he repeated, and he began to babble. “Oh no-no-no-no … this … this can’t be happening …”

Lurching desperately from his seat he had hoped to catch Chong before he left, but he was seconds too late.

Rickenbacker managed to stumble to a veranda seat and settle into it, and held his head in his hands, rocking backwards and forwards, keening quietly. For no matter what Chong did this day, he, Troy Rickenbacker, was a dead man.

Eliot realised that in all of the years he had known Effie McPhee, he had never seen her room.

Easing wearily through the heavy old door, he found himself in a big, welcoming, light-dappled room, with its own table and chairs and a huge old oak bed almost submerged beneath a deep, comfortable mattress and a mass of pillows and multi-coloured covers. It was obvious Effie liked her comfort.

Eliot smiled when he saw the three hot-water bottles awaiting him on the quilted comforter. Effie always knew when he needed their easing heat.

His smile widened into a knowing grin when he sat down on the bed and discovered a hefty cricket bat propped against the wall beside the pillows. An aboriginal nulla-nulla club hung above the bed, and when he slid his Ka-Bar knife from its sheath at his belt and went to place it beneath a pillow, he was somewhat disconcerted to find a razor-sharp Chinese cleaver already there. Effie obviously had no intention of being taken by surprise without some kind of weaponry to hand.

Lifting one of the hot-water bottles he held it against his side, the sharp heat easing the deep ache of the broken rib. It was bliss. But just as he was about to shift himself sideways and lie down, his eye was caught by something on the opposite wall.

There was a large chest of drawers and a big, over-stuffed chair with a footstool against the wall itself, but above it … Eliot’s breath caught in his chest.

Photographs. Dozens and dozens of photographs, all pinned willy-nilly to a huge cork board and lit by a small lamp on the chest of drawers so that Effie could sit in her soft chair and read by its light.

Intrigued now, Eliot stood up, and still holding the hot-water bottle to his wounded side, he limped over to the wall to get a closer look.

It was the history of a life. Or rather, Effie’s life with the people she loved. The photographs had a sort of wayward time-line about them, and the oldest – tucked against the corner of the room so that light from the window wouldn’t fade them – were of Effie as a girl, with another girl beside her … probably a sister, if the similarity was a pointer. Both Effie and this other girl looked like mini-Effies, only less pudgy, more bright-eyed and dark-haired. And grinning like idiots, both of them.

Eliot’s own eyes creased into a smile at the joy in the young faces.

Another photograph which caught his attention was of Soapy and Jo, in stark black-and-white, and they were both young and laughing and obviously desperately in love, if the looks on their faces were anything to go by. Soapy was in uniform, his long face looking like a cheerful bloodhound, and
he was grinning at Jo with his arms wrapped around her. She gazed up at him from a mass of chestnut curls, and – oh, God, Eliot gasped … Jo was pregnant. But they had no children, Soapy had always maintained. The pain it must have given both of them every time he had said it must have cut them deeply, for Eliot knew now the child had not survived.

He wiped the unshed tear out of the corner of his eye with the back of his hand and moved on to the other pictures.

Time drove forward in monochrome and then colour, and there was Charlie as a little boy and as a teenager, working around Wapanjara and helping gather mobs of cattle or fixing one of Soapy’s elderly tractors. Sometimes there was a girl with him, and Eliot’s chest suddenly ached. Alice. Charlie’s beautiful Alice.

And then, all of a sudden, Eliot found himself looking at his own face, scowling into Jo’s camera as he marinated steaks for the crew for an impromptu barbecue not long after he arrived at Wapanjara. Eliot could see the fresh scars on his face and the shaggy hair, and there was a blur of camel behind him.

The next one he saw of himself – and Eliot was not a man who encouraged photographs to be taken of him, but he could never refuse Jo – made him chuckle ruefully. He would ask Effie if he could have a copy of this one to show to Parker.

He was lying on one of the fold-down beds in front of Jo’s garden in mid-summer, bare-footed and wearing only cut-off jeans, sound asleep. His stock hat was tipped over his eyes, a white bandage bound his left thigh and his right shoulder and chest were also swathed in dressings. Tucked against his left side was a small, snoozing white pup, one leg taped with red crepe bandaging. Gertie was sitting at Eliot’s head, her neck stretched alongside him, dozing in the sun as she shaded her friend. Eliot’s right hand rested on her curly brow.

He remembered that day. He was healing up from the bullet wounds he had gained in Washington all those years ago. When Jo and Soapy had driven all the way to Darwin to pick him up from the military airfield and finding him only half-conscious and very sick, they had also found an abandoned, injured pup by the side of the road. So Eliot and Buster had healed together, fussed over by Gertie and yelled at by Jo and Effie.

More photographs tugged at memories … Charlie, Alice and Eliot, doing a stint as rodeo clowns at a charity campdraft and rodeo in Tennant Creek, goofing it up for the camera … then Charlie, holding a newborn Kip and looking completely terrified. There was Soapy, on horseback and in mid-gallop, whooping like a lunatic as he brought in a mob of cattle … and Jo, head thrown back in pure joy as something Eliot had said made her laugh.

And there, at the edge of the mass of photographs, were several new ones, obviously printed off in high-resolution, probably by Hardison.

There were Kip and Lizzie, arms around each other’s shoulders, grinning toothily into the lens … Parker hanging upside down from the water tower, munching on an Anzac biscuit … Hardison grinning straight at the camera and feeding Gertie a gummy frog … and Nate and Sophie snoozing on the swing-chair on the veranda, wrapped in each other’s arms.

New lives became new family, and Effie treasured them all.

Eliot sighed. He reached out and touched a picture of Alice, her dark eyes alive with joy as she held Kip as a toddler in the crook of her arm. He turned back to the bed, and gingerly stretched himself on the covers. The hot-water bottles helped the pain in his leg and side, and then his head began to clear.
a little as he took one last look at Effie’s memory-wall before he drifted off to sleep, his family watching over him.

Khenbish Hadan was waiting.

She had seen the arrival of the pregnant young woman when she had returned to check on what was going on at Wapanjara, and she knew that Chong would come after his possession.

So that morning, Hadan finally tidied up her camp and packed away her belongings. She was stiff, and the remaining buckshot in her shoulder was very painful if she moved too quickly. But, she knew, she would bear it.

Saddling up Batu, she swung into the saddle and waited for the agony in her shoulder to subside before touching her heels to the big gelding’s side. She was not in any hurry. Chong could do what he wanted, she thought. Her plans had changed because of her injuries, and she knew she could not take on all of the inhabitants of Wapanjara by herself, so Chong’s hatred of these people would serve her well.

But if he touched Eliot Spencer, Hadan decided, she would kill the young snakehead. Because Eliot Spencer – and his sword – were hers.

To be continued …

* ‘Yong’ – A Chinese name meaning ‘brave one’.
Who Bears the Battle's Brunt?

Long hours in a truck with a very angry Chong Bun-Tsui, Derry Ryan pondered, was not a whole lot of fun. How the man could seethe for that length of time and not take a break from his anger was impressive, Ryan decided, but not particularly productive.

They were driving along the Stuart Highway now, when Ryan spotted a road leading to the right and slowed, indicator light blinking to let the truck behind know what was going on. Once the main highway was clear of traffic, he drove onto the asphalt road and within minutes, the trucks were rattling over the cattle grid beside the sign which read ‘Wapanjara Station.’

All Chong did was snarl.

Derry gritted his teeth, annoyed, but didn’t say a word. Two hours, he thought. Two more hours and then he could maybe kill that old bastard who had nearly choked him to death at Rafferty’s Bar.

And as the sun beat down in the midday heat, the trucks rumbled ever onwards towards Wapanjara homestead and its people.

Mei emerged into the noon sun, freshly showered and dressed in some of Jo’s old clothes and a pair of neat sandals. Her face, bereft now of the makeup Chong forced her to wear for appearance’s sake, was tired but happy. Her eyes had a little sparkle about them and instead of being encased in expensive but restrictive silk attire, she moved as freely as her sore body would allow.

And in her arms she carried her son, held tenderly against her chest. Sophie followed her outside onto the veranda, little Rose snug and safe in her arms.

She was immediately welcomed by murmurs of pleasure from the people who had taken her in as they saw her looking so much better, and she beamed a big, happy smile as Jo ushered her to Eliot’s recliner.

Kip and Lizzie, who had been allowed to go and see Dottie and Sparky in Gertie’s paddock and give them their feed, scampered around from the paddock gate and thumped noisily up the veranda steps, giggling.

Lizzie’s eyes widened with pleasure.

“Mei-Ling!! You’re awake!! Can we see the babies?”

Mei smiled, but held up a hand.

“Just Mei, little ones. I’m just Mei, now. And my daughter is called Rose,” she added.

Effie stumped through with tea, and Buster slunk after her and slithered under the recliner, keeping an eye on his charges.

“Well now, that’s as good a name as any,” Effie rumbled approvingly. “Got one for the other tiddler yet?”

Mei relaxed back in the chair and studied her son as Kip and Lizzie ranged on either side of her and peered at the little face blinking up at them.
“I don’t know,” she murmured, and the little boy yawned noisily. Despite being the smaller of the two, he seemed stronger now, and was certainly a good eater. As Hardison pointed out, he ‘liked his chow.’ “I don’t know many Australian names,” Mei continued a little helplessly, her English better now that she wasn’t so stressed.

The babies were due another small feed, and Effie returned to the kitchen to fetch their bottles. As everyone settled down on the veranda, ever-watchful and on guard because they not only had Mei and the children to protect, they had to factor in that their hitter was off-line for a few hours so that he could try and recharge his seriously depleted batteries. Only Parker wasn’t present, although she could hear everything that was said from her place beside the old, sturdy brick chimney on the rooftop where she was keeping watch.

Soapy sat on the veranda steps, his Webley to hand, and gazed up the hill towards the stringybarks. Whatever Hardison had done to Chong, it would be devastating, although Soapy would be the first to admit he didn’t understand most of what the young man had concocted.

What he did know was that Chong would be here soon. The loss of Mei would be enough to set the arrogant young snakehead on a course of delivering of pain and death, if Nate’s explanation of the Triad system was anything to go by. And if he also now knew of Hardison’s cyber-assault … well the man would be hell-bent on retribution.

Soapy Munro would kill Chong if he got the chance, and then he would deal with whatever fall-out came his way. He would kill him to protect his family – all of his family, and that included Eliot’s team, Mei and her children. And he would kill Chong because the man had ordered the death of Alice Jakkamarra, the girl he and Jo thought of as their daughter.

He sensed a familiar presence and he quirked a smile as Jo sat down beside him on the step. She wrapped an arm around his and leaned her head on his shoulder, as she had done throughout their long marriage. The soft breeze stirred her curls, and Soapy looked at his wife. She was so beautiful, he thought. Nuzzling her hair he dropped a kiss on the top of her head.

“Soapy …” Jo whispered.

“Yes, old girl?” he murmured in return, and her hand sought his, her long fingers entwining his callused ones.

Jo sighed.

“I was thinking … Mei needs a name for the boy. Perhaps …” She lifted her head and gazed into the face of this man she adored. She saw his dark, expressive eyes glisten with tears. He nodded so slightly that if she hadn’t been studying his face she would have missed it.

“How about James?” Soapy suddenly said loudly, shifting so that he could look at his family sitting on the veranda, drinking tea as Mei and Sophie fed the babies. “It’s … it’s the name of Scottish kings, y’know. Munro being a Scottish name and all that … it was …” he took a deep, shuddering breath and continued. “Our son … he was called James … Jamie.” Jo’s hand tightened on his as he tried to gather his strength to continue. “He, ah … he died when he was two days old. Premature, y’see. Jo nearly died having him. But those two days … they meant the world to us.”

Mei looked up as she fed her son and gazed at Soapy and Jo, and realised how difficult it had been for them to share such a private, heartbreaking memory. She saw the pain in Soapy’s dark eyes and the sadness in Jo’s face. She looked again at her son, suckling lustily at the small bottle of rich milk.

Jamie.
The name was perfect.

“My son,” she said quietly to the child in her arms. “My Jamie. His name is Jamie.”

And Nate felt Sophie’s hand rest on his as he remembered his own father, Jimmy Ford, dead before his time.

“That’s a wonderful name,” Sophie said as Rose shifted against her.

Rose and Jamie … born on Wapanjara Cattle Station here in the remote Northern Territory of Australia. This was – and would ever be - their home, no matter where their lives took them.

“Well done,” Jo whispered to Soapy, knowing how hard it had been for him. Their Jamie, she had instinctively understood from the moment he was born, was only to be with them for a short time, and somehow she had managed to bear it. But Soapy … the tough, deadly sniper who protected his own and would give his life for them gladly, had not coped well. For once, there had been nothing he could do. He could not protect his son against the inevitability of the child’s death. And it had broken him forever.

Jo loosed her fingers and cupped Soapy’s face in both of her hands. And then she gave him the softest, most deeply passionate kiss she could muster, and she felt him reciprocate. Her Soapy. The love of her life.

“Well, Jamie,” Nate said as he peered at the little boy in his mother’s arms. “You and your sister be good, behave and don’t worry your mother,” he smiled, and the joy on Mei’s thin face made the pain of loss in his own heart ease a little.

“Now my children are Australians!” Mei declared proudly, and Hardison chuckled.

“Yeah … and I can fix it so you all really are Australians,” he said, rubbing his hands together. “Once we got Chong an’ his cronies all tied up an’ dealt with, you can think about what you want to do. Just take your time.”

Mei nodded, completely overwhelmed by the never-ending kindness of these people on whose mercy she had thrown herself.

“Rose an’ Jamie … good names.” Eliot said, and everyone turned to see him leaning against the door jamb, hair a little unruly and his face worn with pain, but he did appear more rested than he had done for days. He was still frayed around the edges, but he seemed better.

“ELIOT!” Lizzie yelled, and then cringed as her mother shushed her. Two feeding babies didn’t need the wits startled out of them. “Oops! Sorry!” she whispered loudly, and crept over to Eliot to fling her arms around his waist, careful of his wounded side.

Eliot ruffled her curls and then scowled at Effie.

“Since when did ten minutes turn into over two hours, Eff?? Huh?? I gotta -”

“Oh, shut it, you daftie!!” Effie grouched defiantly. “You needed the rest, you silly bugger. You were out on your feet and about as useful as a bloody chocolate fireguard!!”

“Abso-bloody-lutely!!” Lizzie agreed, her face buried in Eliot’s shirt and her voice muffled.

Eliot let his Lizzie-smile creep out, that tiny half-hitch of his lips that made his eyes crinkle in pleasure. Straightening up, he rested his hand on Lizzie’s head and used her as a sort-of-a-prop to
walk to a chair and sit down, Lizzie standing straight and steady, sure she was the only thing keeping
Eliot from hitting the ground because he was sick and shot and still a ‘bit wibbly.’ Eliot, amused,
didn’t let on that he was perfectly balanced, thank you very much.

Sophie had finished feeding young Rose, so she got to her feet and wandered over to Eliot.

“Here,” she said. ‘Make yourself useful and burp this child.’

Eliot, more than happy to do so despite his scowl, took Rose and gently laid her over his good
shoulder. She promptly burped and dribbled a little milk down the back of his shirt. Well, it served
him right for not asking for a towel, he thought.

Lizzie, however, stared at the milky stain as Eliot rubbed Rose’s little back.

“Eliot! She puked on you!!” she said, just a little horrified.

“So did you when you were a baby, ‘Lizbeth Grace. An’ you were a whole lot bigger.” Eliot replied
calmly, unfazed by this sartorial disaster.

Lizzie was scandalized.

“I did not!!” she said, her eyes round with shock.

“Oh yeah, baby girl,” Hardison said as he rested back in his chair eating a lamington. “He lugged
you around so much that when we were doin’ a job it got so’s we could tell where he was without an
earbud ‘cause of the overwhelming aroma of baby. Even the marks we were tryin’ to grift began to
notice.”

“Sour, milky baby puke!” Parker yelled down from the roof.

“His shirts … there was this … this … stain on them that he couldn’t quite wash out,” Nathan
continued, relishing the narrow-eyed snarly look beginning to appear on Eliot’s face, even as little
Rose let loose a ripping fart. “Yeah … there was that, too.” Nate added, sighing at the memories.

“But you know Eliot. He became quite the baby-carrying ninja. It’s a wonder you ever learned to
walk.”

“We drew the line at him carrying that damn’ sword with him whenever he took you out for some air
though. That was just a little extreme.” Sophie smiled.

“No it wasn’t!” Eliot hissed defensively.

“An’ damn, but the ladies fell for this hippy-lookin’ man takin’ this cute lil’ baby out for walks in the
park!” Hardison grinned, eyes merry with the memory. “He always used to come home with lots of
bits of paper with ‘phone numbers on ‘em tucked under your blankets an’ a big, dumb grin on his
face.”

Lizzie took all of this information in and when Eliot didn’t refute one word of it, she poked him in
his non-baby-carrying arm. Jeez, Eliot thought – she had sharper fingers than Parker.

“Are you going to do that with Rose and Jamie??” she demanded.

Eliot frowned, puzzled.

“Wait … what?” he said, and then realised what was going on. His best girl was just a teensy bit
jealous. “Well,” he said, thinking it through, “Since they’re here, we’ll all help Mei out. Your
momma an’ daddy only had you, an –”

“Tell me about it,” Sophie said languidly, enjoying the warmth of the day. “It’s a wonder your father and I ever got to see you.”

“… and,” Eliot continued, a little tetchy even as Rose settled happily against his shoulder, “Mei’s gonna be both momma and daddy to these two, an’ needs all the help she can get.”

Lizzie thought about it. She did think the babies were cute. Not as cute as Sparky, but she did feel protective over them. She had no siblings, and she had discovered the joy of having someone her own age to play with when she met Kip. And now, she acknowledged, Kip had instantly taken on the role of big brother. Therefore, she decided, she would be a very good and very responsible big sister. Decision made, she kissed Eliot on his nose and patted Rose’s back carefully. Rose dutifully burped, and Lizzie grinned, delighted at the response.

“Nate!” Parker’s voice was sharp in the balmy air.

Nate stiffened, understanding the tone of Parker’s voice.

“Earbuds, people!” he said, his words low and urgent.

Sophie handed Mei one of the tiny earpieces and crouched down beside the young mother, who felt the sudden tension.

“Use this … just slip it into your ear,” Sophie explained. “We can hear you, and you can hear every one of us. Don’t worry,” the grifter said giving Mei a reassuring grin, “you and the babies – we will protect you. No harm will come to any of you. That I promise.”

Eliot handed Rose to Lizzie, who took the tiny baby so carefully that Eliot had to suppress a grin. Lizzie would rather die than drop the child.

“Good job, ’Lizbeth Grace. Now you just take Rose inside to my room along with Mei, Kip an’ little Jamie. I’m expecting you an’ Kip to look out for them, okay? Buster will be with you, and you do not move or leave without one of us goin’ with you. Do you understand?”

Lizzie, round-eyed, nodded.

Nate leaned over and kissed his daughter’s head.

“That’s our girl,” he said softly, pride oozing from every pore. “Your mother and I will be right here, so do as Eliot says, okay?”

Sophie ran her fingers through her daughter’s hair as the little girl followed Kip and Mei into the house, Rose safe in her arms. Buster brought up the rear, black eyes watchful and his little body taut with tension.

“What is it, Parker?” Nate asked.

Dust, Parker murmured. It’s quite a way away, she added. I can’t see any detail, even with Eliot’s scope.

“Chong,” Soapy bristled. “The ground’s dried out enough after the rain to send up a bit of dust.”

Maybe thirty minutes away, Parker said, and then she corrected herself. It’s stopped. The dust’s settling now, but why – oh … here we go. It’s started again.
“He’s dropping people off,” Eliot said. “They’re gonna work their way through the bush and around the homestead.”

*Goody!* Hissed Parker. *Charlie? Are you listening?*

*Always,* Charlie said, a little distant. *I’m out by the west paddock perimeter with Gertie, and she’s suddenly perked up. She senses something. Hey … there go the dogs!*

Soapy and Nate turned to look at the edge of the barn and they saw the three heelers trotting silently towards the homestead main gate, ears pricked.

Sound carried here in the remote bush, and even though human ears couldn’t tag onto whatever Gertie and the dogs were hearing, it was obvious something was out there and coming ever closer.

But one of the heelers suddenly turned and loped through the yard to the track beyond Jo’s garden and orchard, the track that led to the south paddock and the billabong. The dog stood quietly and gazed along the track, not alarmed as yet, but definitely alert to *something*.

Eliot wandered to the veranda steps and watched the dog for a moment before grunting something vague and chewing his lower lip.

“Be right back, Soapy,” he murmured, and he headed into the house, unbuttoning his shirt as he did so.

“What the hell is he up to now?” Hardison said, irritated as he stood up to go and lock down Oggie’s technology systems. The trailer would be more difficult to penetrate than a huge metal-armoured tortoise.

Effie grinned nastily.

“The Yank? Well,” she said, a hint of satisfaction in her voice, “he’s going bush!”

“Bush? What do you mean. ‘bush’?” Sophie exclaimed, confused. She was mentally preparing herself to be Lady Eloise Stanton, probably for the last time.

But before Effie could answer, Eliot emerged from the house, wearing a teeshirt for freedom of movement, and his katana in his hand. It was unsheathed, the blade glittering in the afternoon sun and matched only by the deadly gleam in Eliot’s blue eyes.

“Jesus, Eliot!” Hardison exclaimed. “You ain’t Rambo, an’ you’re not fit –“

Everyone could see the newly-applied bandage around his ribcage under the teeshirt, helping to hold the broken rib in place and to hopefully stop the bullet hole from re-opening.

“*You people do your thing,*” he said softly as he went down the wooden steps to the yard, and Nate wondered how the hell Eliot managed to move in almost complete silence even though he wore his heavy work boots.

Jo watched as Eliot hunkered down in the yard and taking a few fistfuls of the red dirt, smeared it over his chest and arms, teeshirt and all. More covered his worn jeans, and finally another handful powdered his face and hair, so that when he stood up he looked like a dusty wraith, a creature of the outback, walking the silent places of the world.

This was an Eliot she had rarely seen. She remembered him emerging from the shadow of an old gum tree to tackle Mason Coetzee, sent to kill him by Damien Moreau. He had been younger then …
lean and recovering from long illness, much like he was now, only he had had longer to recover back then.

She remembered another time, when he returned home from hunting Simeon Karlo, the murderous and crazed Kurdaitcha man of the southern Ramindjeri, and Eliot had looked like a phantom as he rode into the homestead on Gertie with Karlo stumbling along behind, hands zip-tied and roped to Gertie’s saddle. Eliot had just gazed at Jo, exhausted, battered and dehydrated, eyes hollow and lost like the ghost he had become.

She had hoped never to see that Eliot again.

But here he was … dark and dangerous and unstoppable, no matter that he was wounded. Her heart was in her mouth as she watched him, his sword in one hand and the other hand held loose and ready at his side, his old Ka-Bar knife sheathed at his waist.

“God … look at him …” Sophie whispered to her husband. She instinctively clutched her hand over her heart. She had never seen Eliot in this environment, a man of this land of heat and dust and shimmering horizons, as stealthy as a krait and just as deadly.

Eliot stood, head hanging for a moment as he centred himself, but when he raised his head to look at them, there was a flash of a white smile.

“I’ll be around, watchin’. Don’t come lookin’ for me. I’ll find you.” He growled.

And within seconds he had walked purposefully towards the track and melted like a wisp of smoke into the undergrowth.

“But … but what about the traps Parker an’ Charlie laid –“ Hardison began, but Parker’s voice rang through the earbud.

*He knows exactly what they are and where, Hardison, she said. He’ll keep us safe.*

“Well, I sure hope the idiot knows what he’s doin’,” Hardison muttered as he headed over to Oogie and Bernadette to do a final check and run through his lock-down routine.

“Nate … I think we ought to be getting dug in, mate,” Soapy said grimly and looked at Jo. “Can you keep an eye on Mei and the nippers?”

“No,” Jo replied, and as she headed into the house she lifted the lever-action Winchester Soapy had given her as a wedding present nearly forty years earlier.

Nate raised an eyebrow at the skill with which the slender woman handled the weapon, and Effie grinned.

“The Missus … she can shoot the balls off a flea at fifty yards with that thing,” she said gleefully. Nate thought the little cook was somewhat relishing Chong’s appearance.

“That’s a .22 magnum,” Soapy said as he checked the load on his Webley. “Hollow-point rounds enough to bring down anyone who gets to Mei and the kids.” He grinned. “Best present I ever gave her – she’s a bloody ace shot!”

*Parker – get off the damn’ roof!* Eliot’s voice suddenly came through the earbud.

*Aww! But –* Parker grumbled, but Eliot was having none of it.
Down! Now! Go help Charlie keep watch down at the yards an’ yell if you need me! Eliot rumbled, annoyed as he often was on a job and trying to keep his team safe.

Spoilsport! Parker huffed unhappily, but within seconds there was an almost imperceptible thump as the little thief dropped down onto Effie’s little deck outside the kitchen, and the quickened breathing they heard through the earbuds told the team that Parker was trotting across the yards towards the west paddock gate where Charlie waited.

For God’s sake don’t give her a crowbar, Charlie! Eliot snapped waspishly.

Why not? Charlie asked, curious now.

Believe me … Eliot groused, you don’t want to know. Just … just give her somethin’ with a bit of weight to it an’ stay out of her way if you want to stay conscious an’ upright, okay?

No need! Parker prattled happily. I’ve got Mister Zappy!

Eliot’s groan of annoyance made his team smile. Parker just loved her taser.

Charlie’s swift intake of breath let everyone know that Parker was waving Mister Zappy at Charlie to prove she was perfectly capable of taking care of herself.

Okay … you … you just stay over there, Parker, he said warily, and I’ll stay over here and -

But Charlie’s cautious comments came to an abrupt halt as the three heelers suddenly erupted into a frenzy of barking and the sound of heavy truck engines drifted through the afternoon haze.

“Well,” Sophie sighed as she made sure she looked poised, unflustered and very wealthy. “Here we go.”

Chong was speaking to Rickenbacker on his cell ‘phone, and the longer the conversation went on, Derry Ryan realised, the paler Chong Bun-Tsui became. The young snakehead didn’t say anything – he just became more and more rigid as he sat beside Ryan in the truck.

Despite being somewhat wary of Chong at the best of times, Ryan was curious.

“What’s going on?” he asked as he drove the big truck along the rough dirt road.

Chong turned harried dark eyes to the Ulsterman.

“When this is over, I want you to head for Tennant Creek, fuel up the jet and be ready to go. Mei-Ling and I will join you as soon as we can. I just have some items to retrieve from the mine,” he rasped, his voice shaking. “I will also need to speak to my father,” he added. “There are … issues –“ He suddenly held up his hand and Ryan slowed the truck and brought it to a halt, the other truck slowing behind them.

Chong guessed they were about a mile and a half away from Wapanjara homestead, and he slid out of the truck, waving at his men to get out and gather around. He gestured at a tall, lean Korean who had the air of quiet authority about him. He carried a Chinese bullpup Type 86 semi-automatic, ideal for short-range work in difficult terrain, and he had several 30-round magazines in a backpack. The man meant business, Ryan thought.

“Take your men through the bush and surround the homestead,” Chong ordered. “Pick off anyone you find apart from Mei-Ling, you understand? Do not touch Mei-Ling!!! I don’t care about anything
or anyone else, other than perhaps the old man. Yes …” Chong thought it through, “yes, leave him until last. Then he can end up with a bullet from his own gun through his head. It will look like some mental aberration and he kills all of his people before turning his gun on himself.”

The tall Korean nodded silently and looked at the terrain around him. It consisted of dense bush and stands of trees – not an easy landscape, but he had dealt with worse.

Splitting his team into two entities, he sent one group down the incline to their left, towards the gleam of a vast billabong. From there the men could work towards the homestead along what appeared to be a track, but he couldn’t see clearly from this angle. The seven men began to make their way downwards, and the Korean turned back to Chong.

He signed at the young snakehead, indicating that he would take the remaining men to the north and west, covering the barns and yards behind the house. He would have preferred to speak to Chong about it, but Chong Bun-Tsui’s father had cut his tongue out years ago for failing to kill a rival quickly enough to prevent an attempted takeover bid. The loss of his tongue had not only ensured his silence but also his loyalty.

Within seconds, the Korean and his men had eased quietly into the undergrowth and were gone.

Chong checked his watch. He would spend no more than an hour on this. He wanted Mei-Ling, and he wanted rid of these people who had now ruined him. And more than anything, he wanted the head of the cowboy who had threatened him.

“Come on,” he snarled at Ryan. “Let’s go. And when we’ve finished, you take every piece of electronic equipment in the place. I want to know how they did it!”

“Did what??” Ryan asked, mystified.

But Chong didn’t answer. He got back in the truck, waited until Ryan had got into the driver’s seat and begun to drive the truck along the last mile or so of road, and then he slid the Glock from its holster and laid it ready and waiting, on his knee.

Khenbish Hadan was back in her place by the stringybarks. But this time she sat the big gelding deep within a cluster of acacias where she couldn’t be seen, but where she had a fair view of the homestead. Her shoulder was throbbing and the wound caused by one of the small pellets of buckshot lodged under her skin wasn’t healing.

“Well, Batu …” she said to the gelding, who flicked an ear at the sound of her voice. “ … this is going to be interesting.”

She had seen Eliot Spencer bring out the katana, which made Hadan’s heart leap with desire, and then watched the man become an invisible part of this ancient land. She knew she would not be able to track him from her present position, but she would wait and see what Chong Bun-Tsui was going to do next before making any kind of move.

She studied the groups of men moving slowly through the undergrowth, and she couldn’t stop a small smile from gracing her angular features.

“Fools,” she said, a little amused. “Nothing but fools.”

So sitting comfortably on the old stock saddle, she leaned forward and affectionately pulled one of Batu’s black-tipped ears.
Now, she decided, she would relax, watch and wait. And when she made her move, she would kill Eliot Spencer and take the legendary Sword of the *Okuri-Inu* as her own.

To be continued …
Let's Fight for Things That Ought To Be

Chapter Summary

Author’s note: There will be mayhem and the trapping of bad guys, and some of it won’t be pretty, so if you are of a sensitive nature when it comes to said bad guys, be warned. It will be bloody. There is also the threat of violence towards women and children.

As the tall Korean made his cautious way along the low ridge that was the edge of the Wapanjara road, he began to notice that a slight wreath of mist was beginning to lift from the land. Looking skywards, he noticed dark clouds forming on the horizon, and the humidity was beginning to intensify.

The Wet was coming early this season. As the heat of the day hit the slightly cooler ground, drawing hidden moisture from the rainstorm of a few days before, the clumps of acacias and stringybarks began to become indistinct, and the gaunt stretch of the old mulgas peered eerily through the encroaching pale drift of the mist.

His grin was feral as he hefted his weapon, and before the mist really took a grip on the land, he waved his men into a fan as they moved through the bush. The mist was an added bonus, and their targets would not be aware of the danger until it was too late. The mist also had the benefit of deadening sound, and the calls from a kookaburra prattling happily in a nearby gum tree were oddly flat, the sound soaking into the increasing drift of mist through the trees and termite mounds.

This was going to be far easier than he thought, the Korean decided, as the tendrils crept through the land, crawling like insidious fingers among the tree and bushes, letting loose a dank, loamy smell which made the Korean’s nose twitch in distaste. But he knew what he had to do – find this girl carrying Chong’s son and kill everyone – everyone – he came across, including the children. But he would let Chong deal with the old soldier with a face like a bloodhound. That was the plan, and the Korean did not cross his boss when it came to plans.

His men walked carefully, ranged on either side of him as they began to work their way through a particularly dense copse of old, tangled acacias, and it was made more irritating as they could now not see more than twenty feet ahead of them.

He heard a sudden riot of barking, somewhat dulled by the mist, and he decided Chong had arrived at the homestead. His other group of men were probably well on their way towards the billabong and would be in place shortly. He had to trust his men to know their jobs as the area meant radios and cell phones were useless, not that he had any use for either.

The Korean checked his bearings, and then nodded, satisfied that he was on the right track. But before he headed into the copse, he had a sudden, strange feeling that he was being watched.

But that was nonsense. No-one could watch him through this fog. Shaking the feeling from his prickling skin, he moved on.

He didn’t see the ghost-like figure slide momentarily like mercury through the trees and disappear.
“What do you want me to do?” Derry Ryan asked as the trucks peaked the hill by the stringybarks. They could both see the mist-wreathed homestead of Wapanjara as it lay before them.

Chong studied the lie of the land. At the moment the trucks were above the layers of mist, and he knew his men were now working their way through the bush towards the house. Within minutes they would be in place. His actions would be their signal. He turned to Ryan.

“The gate’s shut and padlocked. Just go straight through it and stop in front of the house.”

Ryan nodded.

“What if they have weapons?”

Chong grinned.

“We have the element of surprise – if Mei-Ling’s in there the stupid bitch will be too terrified to say anything. She knows better than to tell them anything so we will have the upper hand. And that old man will want to protect his people and won’t like gunfire around the women and children, so … we can talk. Or not,” he added, grinning. He checked his watch. “My men should be in place within the next few minutes, so go – get down there.”

Chong stared through the window at Wapanjara. Come hell or high water, Mei-Ling would give him his son and Wapanjara would be his, and then he could possibly fix the mess Rickenbacker had told him about, the man’s voice shaking with terror as he spoke to Chong about the disaster with their finances. If he could dig out the information encrypted on the hacked files on that young black man’s software, perhaps all was not lost. If he had the proof, then …

He mentally shook himself and glared at Ryan.

“I said go!!” he snarled.

Derry Ryan took the hint, shifted the truck into gear and put his foot on the gas, sending the big truck careering down the hill towards Wapanjara, the second truck following belatedly behind them.

The small group of seven men eased carefully through the dense undergrowth as they headed towards the gleam of water that occasionally glinted through the increasingly thick mist.

Their leader, a short Malaysian called Sayid, wiped his dripping nose. Damn, but this humidity aggravated his allergies. He stifled a sneeze, and then stopped for a moment, listening. He held up his hand and hoped his men could see him. The sound came again. It was a soft rustling, and he slowly aimed his semi-automatic rifle at the source. But he had to let out a quiet bark of amusement as a big goanna ambled his way through the undergrowth, gulping happily to himself, his throat working as he tried to cool down.

Sayid eased back on the trigger and motioned to his men to keep moving. The bushes were getting thicker and he sighed, trying to hold back another sneeze. God, he hated this damned country. Finding what appeared to be an old, overgrown track through the bush, he headed towards it. At least this way seemed to be a little easier, he thought.

“Bloody hell!” Soapy said urgently. “The bugger’s not going to stop!!”
He, Nate and Sophie were sitting at the veranda table, to all intents and purposes having afternoon tea, when two trucks appeared at the top of the hill by the stringybarks. The mist was getting very dense, but the bulk of the trucks was unmistakeable.

They careened down the road, and it was soon obvious that Chong was going to send his lead truck straight through the padlocked gate and into the yard.

Soapy began to get to his feet and draw the Webley, but Nate put a hand on his shoulder and pushed him back onto his seat.

“Wait, Soapy – we need to control the situation and having bullets flying in all directions isn’t a good start.”

“We need to let him think he’s in charge, though,” Sophie whispered as she slowly eased to her feet, standing relaxed and curious, as the trucks headed closer and closer.

“I’m not having Jo and the kids in danger, Nate –” Soapy growled, but Nate patted his shoulder, telling the old pastoralist that the situation was under control. Well, for the next fifteen seconds or so.

“Give Sophie and I a minute,” Nate replied under his breath. “He wouldn’t have made his move if his men weren’t close. Charlie and Parker’s perimeter traps should be coming into their own any moment now. That’ll distract Chong.” He saw the fury in Soapy’s eyes. “I know, I know … it’s too close for comfort. But it’s the only way we have of tying it all together. The only wild card is Hadan, but we’ll have to leave her to Eliot.”

Soapy, not convinced but unable to come up with an alternative, nodded jerkily.

Nate grinned.

“If it all goes shitty, feel free to take Chong down, with my blessings – but I’d prefer we didn’t. The fallout might be difficult to fix.”

“Okay …” Soapy said with a breathy sigh, “ … okay … we can do this …”

Nate squeezed Soapy’s shoulder in reassurance, but didn’t reply.

“Everybody okay?” Nate added over the earbuds.

From Jo to Effie, Hardison and the children, voices filled his earbud. Charlie growled quietly to himself as he faded into the shadows of the cattle yards.

The only voices absent were Eliot and Parker.

“Parker?”

There was no answer. Eliot he knew wouldn’t reply, but Parker?

“Dammit, Parker, answer me! Where the hell are you??” Nate hissed as the trucks drove closer and closer.

“Nate …” Sophie warned.

And then the lead truck crashed through the heavy homestead gate, the post already weakened by the impact of the old Ford ute when Mei-Ling had arrived in the early hours of a spring morning, terrified and in pain.
The gate shattered dramatically under the impact and the explosion of noise, dulled as it was by the mist, made Sophie jump despite the calm she was trying to exude. The shower of splinters sent the dogs into a frenzy of hysterical barks, but the size and speed of the vehicles sent the animals scattering into the surrounding buildings out of the way. Soapy’s heart clinched, worried for his animals, but they safely made it away from the vehicles and he knew then they would probably return to bark abuse at the intruders, but they would come no closer.

But it was then he noticed Chunk, the largest and oldest of the heelers, stop and prick his ears at the outback beyond the yards. He didn’t bark, so whatever had taken his attention, Soapy knew the dog was familiar with it.

But he could spend no more time watching Chunk. The trucks slewed to a halt in the middle of the yard, and Sophie stood firm and still, Nate and Soapy ranged behind her.

Before the lead vehicle had even stopped completely, Chong had opened the door and was dropping down onto the red dust of the yard. Not bothering to shut the passenger door, he held his Glock at his side while pointing his free hand at Sophie.

“I want Mei-Ling!! Bring her to me!! NOW!!” he yelled, his lean features twisted with fury.

Derry Ryan shut off the engine and carefully eased out of the truck behind Chong, and no-one could miss the Ruger tucked under his arm in a shoulder holster. The driver of the rear truck also exited the vehicle and Nate recognised the tall, lanky aborigine who had driven the SUV on Chong’s first visit. The man was not armed. In fact, Nate thought, he looked absolutely terrified.

Sophie walked serenely to the veranda steps and made her way down to the yard, Nate behind her every inch of the way. He carried no weapon. Nate didn’t like guns ever since Eliot had stopped him from killing Victor Dubenich all of those years ago, and he trusted Soapy and Eliot to have both his and Sophie’s backs.

Chong stalked towards Sophie, and she could see the man was on the point of furious hysteria.

Ah, she thought. He knows what Hardison’s done. She would have to be careful, because the young snakehead was on the point of losing control of his emotions.

She raised an elegant eyebrow and studied the irate man.

“And just what is the meaning of all of this?” she said coolly, gesturing at the shattered gate. “You do realise you will be paying for the damage?”

Chong’s fury went up a notch, and Sophie wondered just how far she could push him.

“Where is Mei-Ling??” he hissed, spittle flying.


“She’s here, I know it!! So where is she???” he repeated, and this time the hand holding the Glock began to rise.

It was then that Hardison made his way out of the house, a cheery smile on his face, and stood at the top of the veranda steps, arms crossed.

Chong’s face went white.
“You!! It was YOU!!” he ranted.

Hardison’s eyebrows rose innocently and he placed a hand on his chest.

“You??” he asked, curious. “What did I do? Man, I think you must be mistaken –“

“MY. MONEY!!” Chong railed, the Glock now being waved about in all directions, and even Ryan twitched as the weapon pointed at him for a moment or two. “Where is my money!?"

“Oh my …” Hardison pondered, and then he apparently had a moment of profound understanding. “Oh, THAT money!” he said, nodding. “Gosh … what was I thinking … the money you got from people who want to buy your uranium. Is that the money you mean?”

He waited for an answer from Chong but the man seemed incapable of speaking because his lean frame was trembling with fury.

Hardison’s smile widened even further.

“That would be those nice, cheery folks from ISIL an’ those nut-jobs in Uzbekistan, oh … oh, an’ who else … let me think … oh yeah … Boko Haram.” He sighed happily. “Well … y’see … I gave the money away,” he said. Then he held up a finger. “Well, I’ve not actually given it away as yet, so my bad for misleadin’ you there, m’man,” he added. “I just put some of it in a bank account in your name in the Caymans, an’ more in a secure investment brokerage in Myanmar. And there’s a really, really neat cyber-trail that leads right to you and your dear ol’ daddy. They know you stole their money, an’ they know where it is. Because, you see, I told ‘em. Oh,” he added airily, “you don’t know that yet, do you? Oops.”

The look of sheer horror on Chong’s face made the hacker very, very happy. Hardison tried to look repentant but couldn’t really pull it off.

“Yeah … all you knew until now was that all of your bank accounts are a teensy bit empty. Like … nothin’ left. But now … now all of those nice, very crazy people know you cheated ‘em.” His face was the very picture of smugness. “Bummer.”

Chong almost dropped his Glock. He was having trouble breathing, but he managed to get some air in his lungs as he stared at these people who had not only ruined his life, but who had probably signed his death warrant. His ‘customers’ were not known for their forgiving nature.

He shuddered, trying to get himself under some sort of control, and then his upper lip lifted in a snarl. The Glock began to rise, and it was aimed straight at Sophie.

And it was just at that moment the screaming began.

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Sayid held back another sneeze as the mist began to wreath its way around him. His men were almost invisible as they moved through the undergrowth, and just once in a while there, ahead of them, was the tell-tale gleam of water, The track they were looking for should be around here somewhere –

The Malaysian felt a tiny, tell-tale pressure on his shin, and a soft snick reached his ears.

Sayid’s eyes widened and he opened his mouth to warn his men, but it was too late.

He was suddenly faced by a length of high-tensile wire, chest-height and taut and vibrating, and before he could stop himself he stumbled forward straight into it.
The scream he gave as the high-voltage electric shock connected with his hands and the metal semi-automatic he held was pure with agony. His muscles contracted, cutting short the scream, and he fell, shuddering and twitching to the ground even as his trigger finger twitched convulsively, letting off a flurry of shots.

To his left another man did the same, but this time the man fell forward, and his left elbow triggered the toothed dingo-trap embedded in the undergrowth. It closed with a vicious, deadly snapping crunch, shattering his upper arm bone. This time, the screaming didn’t stop.

Two more men narrowly avoided the wire, and back-pedalled as quickly as they could, swearing loudly. Another discovered the 12-volt battery attached to a cattle-prod, in turn attached to the wire turning the low voltage into something much more powerful. The man cursed and used his rifle-butt to disconnect the attachments.

Sayid and his compatriot were now out of action, so they advanced again with much, much more caution.

Chong heard the pure agony in the screams which were accompanied by what sounded like random shots. They came from his left, towards the track and the silvery billabong, but he couldn’t see a thing because of the mist. One of the screams stopped as though a switch had been flicked.

He stared wildly at Derry Ryan.

“What the hell was that??” he bawled, and gesticulated in the general direction of the noise.

Ryan shook his head, bewildered.

“I … I don’t—“

Soapy eased the Webley from its holster as Sophie was tugged backwards by Nate.

“We have to go—“ he whispered urgently.

Sophie took the hint, running up the veranda steps as fast as she could, Nate close behind her.

Soapy shoved both of them behind him, and Hardison took over, manhandling Nate and Sophie into the house. Soapy raised the Webley and took aim. He set his eye on the centre of Chong’s chest, but before he could gently squeeze the trigger, there were a couple of small explosions, like gunshots, away to his left, beyond the cattle yards. And now, the screams went on and on and on …

The Korean heard the commotion coming from the other side of the homestead and he also heard Chong’s furious, uncontained yelling.

He frowned and checked his men. From what he could see through the fog, they were proceeding with caution, especially as it was apparent something was going very wrong with Sayid’s group of men. But no matter, the Korean thought. He would continue with his orders and be more careful.

Gesturing with his rifle, he urged his men onward, and it was as he stepped forward that he felt the ground give way under his boot.

Even the slight pressure of his step was enough to unbalance the metal plate covering the hole beneath it. The plate pushed down on the .22 hollow-point round pointing upwards, held in place by three short pegs embedded in a piece of wood at the bottom of the hole. The primer at the base of the
cartridge was instantly pushed against the metal nail-point beneath it.

The cartridge exploded, and the bullet blew through the Korean’s boot and his foot, taking two toes with it before emerging from the hole and striking the metal casing of the rifle, shattering the housing.

The Korean fell without a sound as what was left of the bullet clipped the side of his head, knocking him unconscious, and he collapsed in a bleeding, useless heap.

Another man to his left let out a blood-curdling scream of agony as he did the same thing, losing part of his foot.

The remaining members of the Korean’s team just stood there, confused for a second or two, but in a moment of clarity decided that they would backtrack and leave their compatriots bleeding in the bushes.

One man, realizing that they had no idea what awaited them in this dense undergrowth, panicked.

He dropped his rifle and ran away from the group and towards the homestead. But within seconds he disappeared, as though his legs had been swept from beneath him by some beast lurking in the shadows.

Nothing else moved other than the two men already down and shot, one moaning loudly at the pain of his shattered bones.

Then there was a loud, terrified shriek and the smell of burning flesh. Then came what sounded like a soft, manic giggle.

That was when the men finally decided they had had enough. They dropped their guns and fled.

Chong seemed to become completely unhinged by the commotion. He had no idea what was going on, only that it appeared his men were under some kind of assault. He turned to Ryan, who had slipped the Ruger from its holster, and pointed with his free hand at the house.

“Go guard the back of the house!!” he yelled. “Kill anyone who comes out of there. Anyone!! You hear me??”

Ryan blinked.

“What about the girl??”

Chong’s eyes glittered.

“Grab her, cut the child out of her and then slit her throat!” he hissed.

“Jesus …” Ryan whispered under his breath, but he nodded and headed off around the side of the kitchen.

Chong swung around to see the other driver, but to his dismay the man was gone.

“Shit!!” he snarled, and raised his Glock, meaning to shoot Sophie where she stood. But when he looked back at the house, Sophie, Nate and Soapy were gone. The veranda was empty.

Chong Bun-Tsui, snakehead and sole heritor of the Shumchun Triad clan of Shanghai, threw back his head in helpless fury and howled his anger to the dull, damp sky.
In the acacias beside the yards, Charlie Jakkamarra flung the aboriginal driver onto the ground and sat across his chest, pinning the young man’s arms. He leaned forward and stared into terrified black eyes.

“You don’t like working for Chong, do you, mate?” he asked amiably.

The aborigine shook his head vigorously.

Charlie grinned.

“You want to live, brother?”

The young man nodded, eyes becoming round with fear.

Charlie’s eyes narrowed and the bleakness the man saw in the station manager’s gaze made his breath hitch. Unbuttoning his shirt, Charlie exposed the cicatrices scarring his chest.

“I am Charlie Jakkamarra. I am the *Kurdaitcha* Man of my clan.” Charlie said, his voice low, calm and suddenly very deadly. “This man … this Chong … killed my woman. If you move, my magic will kill you dead, slowly and with great pain, and the claws of the eagle will tear your heart and your liver and your kidneys. You will see the dead and the walkers in your dreams will break your bones. If you want to go back to your people, then be still, brother. Stay quiet and I will not use the magic of the emu bone to stop your heart. You understand, man of the *Gurindji*?”

The young man was now almost rigid with terror, but he managed a shaky nod.

Charlie eased himself to his feet, but the driver didn’t move.

Leaning over his captive, Charlie’s face once more more relaxed into a grin. Lifting a finger to his lips, he winked.

“Shhh …” he said.

And then he was gone like a whisper on the wind, and the young aborigine lay as still as he could, because the last thing he wanted was the *Kurdaitcha* Man haunting his dreams and the eagle’s claws tearing him asunder in the dark of the night.

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The billabong, newly filled by the recent downpour, lapped lazily against its sandy shoreline, and the unfortunate Sayid’s men worked cautiously along the line of gum trees and coolibahs until they found the paddock fence. It took them only moment to find the gate, and they slipped over it rather than spend precious time pulling back the heavy sprung latch and going through the gate itself.

Once on the other side, they found the track leading through a stand of trees towards the homestead. One of the men, an Australian ex-special-forces veteran called Bayardo, frowned and stared at the track through the mist.

Very, very faintly, he saw freshly-cut branches laid out on the track willy-nilly, as though covering something. It wasn’t obvious – it had been done with skill and cunning, but he recognised the signs.

“Stay off the track,” he whispered, and his remaining men spread out among the coolibahs. The wittering, fluting cries of magpies accompanied them as they began to move through the acacias and occasional termite mound, although the screams coming from the other side of the homestead were unnerving to say the least.
Suddenly the sound of the magpies changed to a soft, murmuring chuckle. *Something was coming.*

Bayardo glanced at his men, although he could barely see them, but they too had noticed the change in the magpies’ calls.

And there, looming through the mist and making its way along the track, strode a huge, brown camel.

Soapy closed the door behind him and peered through the glass inserts beside the entrance.

“He’s a bloody nutcase!” he said wonderingly, and Nate nodded.

“Yes. That he is.” He agreed. “Okay people, stay away from the windows. Jo? Are you all fine in there?”

Jo, Winchester in hand, was peering out of Eliot’s window, but she stood back as the screaming and yelling continued outside.

She knew that getting into the house via this particular window would be almost impossible as it looked out onto Gertie’s paddock, which was bare of cover apart from an old mulga tree and Gertie’s humpy, and the window was a good seven feet above the ground.

Mei sat on the bed with both of her babies in her arms, and Kip and Lizzie sat beside her, arms around the young woman who was obviously scared out of her wits. She had heard Chong’s order to kill her and take his son.

Effie sat silently in the kitchen, pump-action shotgun in hand and braced beside the door.

Hardison had retreated to the living room with Sophie. Neither of them were experts with firearms, and with Hardison wounded he wouldn’t be much good in a fist fight, but he had borrowed Effie’s cricket bat which he hefted with obvious relish.

A bullet sudden pinged off the door jamb and whined away, punching a hole through the veranda fly-screen.

“My men are coming for you!!” Chong bellowed, letting off another shot which slammed into the heavy oak veranda door. “You will all die!! ALL OF YOU!!” he repeated, and one more shot cracked out, this time shattering one of the glass inserts. Soapy flinched, but stood his ground.

“Come in here, you arse, and I’ll blow you apart!!” he yelled.

Chong began to laugh, a high-pitched, unfettered noise, rife with insanity.

“Yeah … nuttier than a fruitcake,” Soapy whispered to Nate.

Nate Ford ran his fingers through unruly hair, and smiled.

Bayardo grinned.

A camel. A bloody camel. It would soon tell them if the track was booby-trapped.

He and his men moved quietly through the undergrowth and they eyed the big animal, but the camel suddenly scented the air and let out a grumbling honk. The huge head swung in Bayardo’s direction, and the creature let out a growl of anger.
Now the camel didn’t seem quite so funny, and turning, Bayardo aimed his rifle at the animal just in case it turned nasty.

What he didn’t see was another scatter of cut branches at his feet. He tripped and fell, along with one of his men.

The pain as the hidden, stretched lengths of barbed wire constricted and sprung around his body was agonising. And the more both men struggled, the more tangled they became, and they rolled amid the bushes, the barbs tearing and ripping and catching in quivering muscle. One loop had strung around Bayardo’s neck, and as the loop tightened and squeezed against his skin, Bayardo was suddenly aware that if he struggled any further, the barb would slice open his jugular vein and he would bleed out in less than thirty seconds.

So he stilled, his limbs and body torn and bleeding and completely wrapped in over ten yards of high-tensile barbed wire.

His compatriot was still shrieking.

Carefully peering around and trying hard not to move, Bayardo looked for his other men.

The ground shook as the camel loped by, bottom lip flapping and teeth bared, and he heard one of his men bawl in agony as the beast caught up with him. The sound suddenly stopped, and the camel roared in triumph.

Bayardo gulped, and then noticed movement out of the corner of his eye. A pretty blonde woman dressed in black suddenly hunkered down beside him, eyes narrowed like a cat with a bag of catnip.

“Hi!” she said brightly, and then held up something which sparked cheerily. “Meet Mister Zappy!” she said, and then Bayardo’s battered body arched in spasms as the taser was pressed against his chest.

The remainder of the Korean’s men scattered through the undergrowth, not caring where they were going. They just wanted to get away from this nightmare, but two of them didn’t make it.

They stumbled into a small clearing, but didn’t notice the trip-wire of green baling twine criss-crossing the space. They didn’t even hear the snick of the split-pin coming out of the loops at the end of rope leading high into nearby gum trees.

The catch of the trip-wire made them stumble, but they didn’t go down, only to see three objects swing towards them from the surrounding trees.

The small, closely- woven baskets burst as they impacted on the two hapless men, and they were instantly swarming with thousands and thousands of very angry bull ants. The creatures were in their hair and their clothes and they stung and stung and stung, and as the two men opened their mouths to scream, they found they couldn’t because their lips were rapidly swelling and then the furious ants swarmed down their throats and the screams stopped before they were even born.

Derry Ryan hurried around the kitchen extension of the homestead.

He studied the small deck leading to the kitchen door. Maybe … maybe he could make his way in there, as Chong’s lunacy was probably keeping everyone occupied at the front of the house. He walked a little further and found the rear fence to Gertie’s paddock. If he watched from there for a few minutes, he could, he thought, see what was going on and try and work his way into the house.
He checked the load in his Ruger and was about to settle in beside the fence, when he heard a growl.

Turning around he saw Chunk, the big heeler staring at him with ears laid back and teeth bared. The animal looked bloody furious, he thought. He couldn’t shoot the dog because it would alert the people in the house, so slipping the Ruger back into its shoulder holster, he pulled out the big Razorback knife he wore at his belt. Now all he had to do was get close enough to the stinking mutt to cut its throat and then –

“What? You gonna pick a fight with a friggin’ dog, now?” said a calm, gruff voice. “Man, you got no more balls than a castrated sheep.”

Derry Ryan turned further towards the mist-ridden bushes beyond the yard and saw nothing at first.

And then, to his surprise, emerging from the mist dusty and ghost-like, he saw Eliot Spencer, and Ryan’s eyes were drawn to the deadly, gleaming sword in his hand.

To be continued …
To Share the Living Lie

Chapter Summary

Author’s note: There is mayhem, violence and screaming here. Be warned. As for the Monty Python reference … I’m sorry. I couldn’t help myself. And to be honest, neither could Hardison.

Derry Ryan studied the man before him.

He knew that this … this cowboy … wasn’t all he appeared to be. The blue eyes, shadowed in a dusty, worn face, glittered like ice, and for all that the man was a good six inches shorter than Ryan, he was all hard muscle and bone.

The Ulsterman grinned even as Eliot gestured at Chunk, ordering the big heeler back to the barn.

The American was wounded, and badly, if the heavy bandages he could see under the dust-smeared teeshirt were anything to go by.

“You’re the bastard Eades shot,” he commented easily, letting his hand gripping the big, heavy knife hang loosely by his side. “Looks like you got hit hard,” he added with malice.

Eliot hitched an eyebrow and a smile quirked his lips. He touched his injured side with his empty hand.

“What? This?” He grinned, teeth white against the dusty skin. “I’ve had a helluva lot worse an’ killed far better men than you. Damn, I’ve killed better women, who’re a helluva lot more dangerous,” he added, voice hard under the grim humour of his tone.

Ryan nodded thoughtfully.

“Well, that crazy whore Hadan is out there somewhere, looking to gut you like a herring, boyo, and she’ll do it and not even turn a hair.”

Eliot shifted, and Ryan realised that this man was hurting badly.

“She’ll have to wait,” Eliot ground out. “Because I’m going to kill you first, and then I’m gonna deal with Chong. An’ she’ll be happy to wait.”

Ryan pursed his lips and hefted his knife, knowing the movement would make Eliot’s muscles tense, which would hurt like Hades.

“Oh? And why’s that then?” he said softly.

Eliot walked forward a few steps and Ryan braced himself for an attack, but Eliot just stopped beside the steps leading up to Effie’s deck beside the kitchen door.

“See this?” he said, and lifted the katana, studying the beautifully crafted blade and the wavering line of the hamon down its length. “This sword was made in 1592. It was made by Maeda Hanzō Mitsuyo, one of the greatest swordsmiths of the Sengoku period.” Eliot smiled with affection before
continuing. “He made plenty of excellent swords, Ryan. But he made only five almost perfect swords in his lifetime, an’ this is the best of ’em.”

Eliot, perfectly balanced and without any wasted movement or apparent effort, swung the *katana* elegantly from left to right horizontally and then with both hands on the hilt he raised it above his head and brought the blade down and around in an arc of cold fire, ending with the great sword once more poised gracefully above his head, a classic *jodan no kamae*.

“This is the Sword of the *Okuri Inu*, and Khenbish Hadan will have to kill me to own it,” he said huskily, and Ryan, impressed, nevertheless didn’t miss the flinch as Eliot straightened and brought the *katana* back down to his side.

“Impressive,” Ryan murmured. “It hurts, though, doesn’t it?”

“Well,” Eliot said ruefully, “no pain, no gain, no problem.” He grinned, his point made and his blue eyes amused. “Pain I can deal with. Which means I can deal with you.” He turned and looked up at the kitchen door, closed and locked against Chong and his men. “Effie!! Hey, Effie!! You in there??” he yelled, and within moments he heard the door lock clunk and saw the door itself swing open.

Effie stumped out, her pump-action shotgun in one hand.

“By crikey!!” she growled, muddy eyes furious as she surveyed the face-off between a man whom she loved dearly as a son and another who wanted to kill him and the rest of the people she cared for. “You alright, Yank?”

Eliot’s grin widened as he looked up at her.

“I’m fine, no worries. Can you do me a favour, Eff?"

Effie turned her hate-filled gaze onto Derry Ryan, who studied this short, stumpy woman with the grey dress and hair and the flowery apron. His eyebrows rose, somewhat bemused.

“’Course I ruddy can, boy!” Effie rumbled.

Eliot made his way halfway up the steps and offered the *katana* to Effie.

“Look after my girl here, will ya? I don’t want to soil her with this asshole’s blood.”

Effie’s pudgy face broke into what Eliot knew was a smile of sheer delight, but the apparent grimace just made Ryan cringe a little. She reached out and took the *katana* with great care and respect, knowing how much the sword meant to the Oklahoman.

“Righto, you young bugger!” she declared, and her affection for Eliot was written all over her face if one knew where to look. “She’ll be safe with me while you slice and dice this shonky bastard!” For a moment her voice dropped to a whisper. “You sure about this? I’d just take the wanker’s head and be done with it!” she hissed.

Eliot dipped his head in acknowledgement.

“Yeah, I suppose,” he murmured. “But this means I can get up close an’ finish it, because he thinks he’s stronger ‘n’ fitter than me – which he is,” Eliot conceded. “But this *katana*’s over four hundred years old – a piece of shit like him ain’t fit for a beauty like her. Besides,” he grinned wolfishly, “I’m savin’ her for Hadan.”
Effie chewed the information over in her head for a moment, and then nodded. Her eyes gleamed dangerously as she hefted her shotgun.

“You be careful, Eliot. Hear me? If you’re not, and the Missus and I have to patch you up again I’m going to bloody well slap you silly!”

Eliot smirked, tickled and touched by her concern. In all the years he had known Effie, she had never ever called him by name. He had always been ‘Yank’ to the little cook.

“I hear ya, darlin’,” he whispered.

Effie shifted her focus back to Derry Ryan, who was watching all of this apparent idiocy with confusion. She glared at the Ulsterman who was becoming impatient even as he heard the shots coming from the front of the house. He had no time for this goddamn nonsense.

“Let me end him, Yank,” she continued, her voice low. “I’m up for it, and I won’t lose any bloody sleep over the drongo.”

Eliot shook his head.

“No, Eff. This has to be on me. I don’t want anyone else carryin’ his death. It marks you, Effie … believe me, you don’t come away from killin’ a person without –“

Effie’s eyes were sharp with understanding, but she stopped him in mid-sentence.

“I know what it does to you, boy. I haven’t always been a bleedin’ cook, y’know,” she murmured.

Eliot, for once in his life, didn’t quite know how to answer such a declaration, but stubborn man that he was, he had to make his point.

“This is my job, Eff. Okay? But if I look as though I’m screwin’ up, you got my permission to fill his rotten hide with buckshot. Happy now?” he muttered, one eye on Ryan who was working his way towards Eliot’s left.

Effie’s grin became decidedly malevolent and her eyes were like hard, dark bullets as she shouted out to Derry Ryan.

“YOU!! You’re the one who came to kill my nippers!!!” she snarled, and she shifted the shotgun and one-handed, worked the mechanism to pump a shell full of double-ought buckshot into the breech. “If the Yank don’t kill ya, then maybe I’ll just finish the job, you arse-faced dickwad!! My bloody oath, I will!!”

Eliot, making his way back down the steps and unsheathing his Ka-Bar, stopped and turned, looking back at Effie.

“Dickwad??” he asked, surprised.

Effie, still glaring at Ryan, shrugged.

“Sunbeam and me … we watched a couple of films on his tablet-y-thing … about some mad bastard of a copper played by that Gibson bloke. Bloody ripper they were, too!”

“Lethal Weapon??” Eliot rasped. “You an’ Hardison were watchin’ Lethal Weapon movies???”

“Yeah! So???” Effie argued. “You were out for the count and the nipper and her dad was watching over you, so I took a bloody tea-and-cake-break and sunbeam joined me. He said that Joshua bastard
in the film was a dickwad. You got a problem with that, you cheeky young mongrel?”

Eliot just gazed at her, and then shook his head.

“When all this is over,” he rumbled as he faced Ryan, who was listening to the conversation with utter disbelief, “Hardison an’ me’re gonna have words.”

“Phooey!!” Effie snorted, channeling her inner Parker. “Leave the poor bugger alone. He’s a good boy!”

 Yep, said Hardison gleefully through the earbud, you an’ my Nana’re totally sympatico, Effie!

Ryan, not sure just what the hell was going on, mentally shook himself and moved sideways, making Eliot shift with him.

Effie, now feeling confident that no-one was immediately going to come barreling out of the undergrowth with weapons at the ready, eased herself down on her wooden chair and rested the shotgun on her ample lap. The katana rested beside her, the mist leaving a slight hint of condensation on the ancient blade.

“Are you going to let that stupid old cow just sit there and watch??” Ryan said, now somewhat confused even as he settled into a knife-fighting stance, the big Razorback gleaming in the dull, fog-ridden light. “Because I’m going to slit her rank old throat when I’ve finished you,” he added.

Eliot hitched a shoulder to get the kinks out of it and worked a crick out of his neck. Lying in bed for days, seriously hurt and riddled with fever, had not done him any favours. He was stiff, very sore and far from healed up, and the broken rib pulled with every movement, making his breath hitch with the pain of it.

But studying Ryan as the Irishman flouted his knife, Eliot knew Ryan was over-confident.

“Nate?” he whispered. “You there?”

Uh-huh, Nate murmured, his voice low as it crackled through the earbud. Need any help?

“Nope,” Eliot said softly as he walked to his right, head down, keeping himself between Effie and Ryan. “Take the kids outta here while I keep Ryan occupied. You know where to go?”

Yeah, Nate replied, but I can stay with Soapy –

“Please, Nate, protect Mei an’ the kids. You said you’d follow my lead, an’ I need to know the kids aren’t anywhere near Chong an’ I need someone who’s fit an’ ready to go. Hardison, you stay with Soapy. Can you do that?”

Eliot, one eye on Ryan as he gauged distances, wiped the palm of his free hand on his pants leg. Ryan’s grin widened, taking the gesture as that of a man sweating with tension.

No probs, El. I got Soapy’s back, Hardison said guardedly, and Eliot heard the hacker walk through the house to the hallway. His wounded shoulder wouldn’t stop him from wielding the cricket bat with alacrity if Chong or his men came into the house. Nate, unhurt and with Sophie and Jo beside him, would protect the children with his life.

Okay, Nate said, we’re on our way. Eliot … I’m armed. If you need me –

“No killin’ to be done will be done by me, Nate. You know how I feel about it. Gotta go.”
And pretending to scratch his ear, Eliot removed his earbud and managed to slip it into his jeans pocket.

Nate, preparing to take the children of Wapanjara to safety, cursed uselessly, profoundly and very angrily, but Eliot didn’t hear him.

*DAMMIT!!* Nate raged, but taking a deep breath to steady himself, he did as he was asked and headed for Eliot’s bedroom to get Mei and the children out of danger.

“Are you prayin’ there, boyo?” Ryan asked, seeing Eliot murmuring under his breath, and he saw the American wiping his hand on his pants leg as thought ridding him of a sweaty palm. “A little nervous, are we? A little scared? So you should be, you stupid bastard, playing around with a bloody sword and talking as though you’re some kind of feckin’ ninja!”

Eliot, sore, weary and losing patience, grimaced.

“Oh, screw this,” he said and took the fight straight to Ryan.

Nate walked into Eliot’s bedroom to an argument, even as Chong continued to rave outside the house.

“But Grandma Jo, Eliot’s taken his earbud out!!” Lizzie ranted quietly, “He’s hiding something! Is he going to fight someone? *Is he?*” Lizzie turned to her mother, brown eyes huge with fear. “*Mama!* What’s Eliot going to –“

“Lizzie darling, Eliot’s doing what he has to do to keep us all safe, you know that!” Sophie replied, doing her best to keep her voice level and calm.

But Lizzie was having none of it, and now Kip was getting agitated.

“But Uncle Nate,” he said, arm around Mei and the babies, “Eliot and Dad … are they okay?”

Nate smiled warmly at the two children, trying to ease their concerns.

“Both of them are alive, well and know exactly what they’re doing,” he said, and hoped fervently that he was right. He knew Charlie had taken down the young aboriginal driver, and he felt the hairs prickle again at the back of his neck as he remembered Charlie’s words, softly spoken and eerie through the earbud, filled with the bone-deep conviction that went with thousands of years of living in this unique, dangerous landscape. “*C’mon now – we have to go.*”

Jo looked into Nate’s blue eyes and nodded. She would have to leave her husband - her best friend, lover and soul mate – to face Chong with only Hardison for backup, although she knew the hacker wasn’t helpless and would be a formidable opponent even though he was wounded. Effie’s old willow cricket bat was solid and heavy enough to easily kill a man.

Nate quirked a smile at her.

“We have to get going, Jo. *C’mon* – Eliot doesn’t need to be worrying about the kids, Mei and you.”

Jo took a deep breath, and stepped away from the window.

“I know … I know. We have to keep them safe.” She glanced through the door, knowing Soapy was only yards away, and she heard him say something she couldn’t quite make out through the earbud
about Sophie to Hardison. For some reason she could hear amusement in his voice, and it made her smile. “Alright, nippers,” she said, “you know what to do. Lizzie – help your mum to shift the rug, and Kip, you help Mei and the twins.”

Lizzie, angry and afraid for Eliot, began to object, but Nate lifted a finger, halting the complaints before they even began.

“Lizzie – stop now, sweetheart. What did Eliot say? Huh?”

Lizzie’s brows drew down in fury, but she kept her ire under control.

“We have to go so he doesn’t have to worry about us,” she muttered, and even as she said it she helped Sophie lift the thick Navajo rug off the floor at the bottom of Eliot’s big bed. Underneath lay a sturdy old trapdoor with a brass handle slotted flush to the wood. Jo grasped the handle, turned it and the trapdoor lifted easily, swinging upwards to prop against the bed.

A set of wooden steps led downwards to the dusty ground under the house, enclosed by what appeared to be old, weathered iron sheeting. Unless someone was looking for the steps, all that could be seen was what appeared to be an old water tank under the house.

Nate quietly led the way down the steps, making sure he didn’t touch the metal sheets as the reverberations might be heard outside. Once at the bottom, Lizzie joined him followed by Kip. Jo slung the strap of her Winchester over her shoulder and held little Jamie until Mei reached the ground, and then she passed the infant down to his mother. Jo herself was next, and Sophie handed down Rose once Jo had joined the others.

Left alone in Eliot’s room, Sophie looked around at this place which had more Eliot Spencer in it than she could have ever thought possible. At that moment she realised how precious this place was to their hitter … how much he was loved here and how much he loved in return. Within the next hour or so he could well give his life to protect his people, both the Wapanjara and Portland families he treasured.

Her eye caught sight of the wakizashi sitting alone on the ironwood stand. Reaching up, she lifted the superbly-crafted short sword and hefted it. Yes, she thought. She could handle the weapon.

Decision made, within seconds she had hidden the Navajo rug under the bed and pulled the trapdoor shut, locking it firmly behind her.

Chong fired another shot, this one smashing the window in Effie’s kitchen.

“BRING MY WOMAN TO ME!!” he screamed furiously.

Soapy winced.

“Bloody hell,” he muttered to Hardison who stood in the living room doorway, “Effie is going to be racked off at that arse breaking her window!”

“Isn’t he going to run out of ammo soon??” Hardison grumbled, as another round smacked into the front door.

Soapy shook his head.

“No way, mate. That’s a Glock parabellum. Seventeen rounds in the magazine. He’s not stopping any time soon. If he starts getting too close, I’ll drop the bastard, but Eliot –“
“-doesn’t want you takin’ the responsibility of killin’ him,” Hardison finished, sighing. “Yeah, well … that’s just the way Eliot is.”

Soapy grimaced as another round tore into one of the veranda uprights, splinters showering the table and chairs.

“Well, I’m happy enough letting him faff about out there, so the nippers and the girls are safe – not that Jo and Sophie need any protection,” he added, humour glinting in his black eyes. “They’re not women you get on the wrong side of,” he added wryly.

Too bloody right, they both heard Jo whisper. Hardison frowned as he heard clattering and then just faint sounds. No-one was talking. They also knew Eliot had removed his earbud, but unlike Nate, Hardison was not worried. Effie was with him, and if either she or Eliot needed help the old cook would let out a yell loud enough to waken the dead.

Soapy peered warily through the broken glass insert for a moment and then cringed out of the way as Chong fired another bullet into the door surround.

“Why don’t you have a go at distracting the silly bugger?” Soapy said to Hardison, who brightened, a cheery smile working its way onto his mobile features.

“Hey Chong!” The hacker yelled, his voice rich with derision. “Y’know that little bit of money you had in the Caymans? That spare million dollars or so you had put by for emergencies an’ food an’ spendin’ money?”

Chong, standing in the mist, eyes blazing with fury and his body trembling not only with anger but also the terror of what this man had done to him, took a step back as though punched in the chest.

“My … my money?? What –“ he stammered, knowing this particular account was the best hidden of all of his stashes throughout the world, for use if he had an issue that needed dealing with instantly. Nobody knew about the account - not even his father, who kept a fearsomely-talented hacker in his employ.

“Y’know I said I gave some money away? Well … I gave that money to Mei-Ling,” Hardison said triumphantly.

Chong felt his heart constrict. A tear of sheer, unadulterated frustration trickled down his cheek and he swept it away with a shaky hand.

“YOU … YOU –“ he stammered, and he fired a flurry of shots at the front door, huge splinters of old oak showering the veranda, and Chong yelled uselessly as he did so, his voice hitching with tears. He knew Soapy Munro was a sniper of the highest standard, yet not a shot had come from the house. He didn’t know why, but he wasn’t about to try and enter the house and find out. He would leave that to Ryan and whatever men he had left.

Dust settled through the fog as Chong stood, chest heaving and his Glock held in trembling hands, and then Hardison’s voice drifted from the house, warm and clear.

“Oh … an’ by the way … your mother was a hamster an’ your father smelled of elderberries!!” he paused for a moment, and Chong heard him clear his throat. “I fart in your general direction!!” Hardison finished smugly.

Chong, not quite understanding how it had all gone so terribly wrong, heard Soapy Munro burst out laughing.
Eliot Spencer charged straight at Derry Ryan.

The big Ulsterman braced himself, expecting Eliot to use his left hand to deflect the Razorback and push the Ka-Bar towards the centre of Ryan’s chest, angling it upwards to pierce under the breastbone and into the huge arteries feeding the heart and lungs. The big man rejoiced as it was a classic mistake, although deep down he was surprised that this man would make such an error, as the attack left a wounded Eliot vulnerable to Ryan’s added height and length of arm.

What he didn’t expect was the American to tuck his head down and use his body as a weapon, and Eliot charged straight into Ryan, making the man stagger back. The impact of Eliot’s head and right shoulder on his chest made Ryan let out a *whoosh* of air. As he fell backwards into the dust he saw the blue, murderous glint in Eliot’s eyes. *This madman meant to kill him.*

As Ryan hit the ground, the impact drove what air he had left out of his lungs. But he still managed to raise the Razorback and angle it to his left, intending to drive the massive recurved blade deep into Eliot’s left side, between the ribs.

But in a heartbeat Eliot was gone, rolling off Ryan’s prone body to the American’s right. As Ryan felt Eliot’s weight shift he also gasped at the agonizing pain in his left arm, and he knew with a jolt that Eliot had sliced through the radial nerve running down the inside of his triceps.

“*SHIT!*” he managed to yell breathlessly, and the pain and the lack of breath in his lungs made the words come out as a croak.

Eliot rolled lightly over on his shoulder and onto his feet in mere moments, although he staggered a little as he righted himself.

Effie hitched a breath, but didn’t say anything, mesmerised as she was by the lethal battle playing out in front of her.

Ryan was slower to get to his feet and it was obvious that his left hand was useless, no matter how the Ulsterman shook it to get the feeling back. Blood streamed down his arm and dripped relentlessly into the dust.

Sitting in her chair, Effie leaned forward and grinned despite her worry.

Eliot inhaled as deeply as he could and couldn’t help a hitch of pain as his side objected. But he didn’t let it bother him. He had a job to do.

Once again, he took the fight to Ryan, but this time he used his solid frame to try and unbalance the big man, going in low and hard and difficult to grasp.

Ryan, hurt, bleeding and with a useless arm, was nevertheless waiting for him.

The two men crashed into one another, and Eliot used sharp elbows to dig into Ryan’s *solar plexus,* making it even more difficult for his opponent to catch his breath, and he was on the point of ducking under Ryan’s knife hand when the big man lurched away and landed a kick on Eliot’s knee.

Eliot tried to stop the keening grunt of pain as his knee gave way and he put out his left hand to prevent himself sprawling in the dust.

But Ryan twisted onto his side and the Razorback opened up a shallow gash in Eliot’s leg that made the Oklahoman curse as he flung himself sideways, away from this lanky-framed asshole that had threatened to kill Effie.
The two men separated and got to their feet, both wounded and trying to catch their breath. Eliot used the back of his left hand to wipe away blood from the reopened cut in his brow that now threatened to trickle into his eye.

Ryan clenched his jaw at the pain in his arm, and had become very aware now that his left hand was useless.

_Damn this cowboy, whoever the friggin’ hell he was!_

“C’mon, Ryan!” Eliot taunted, grinning through the blood he had failed to stop oozing down his cheekbone and jaw from his brow. “Call yourself a knife-man!”

But Ryan wasn’t to be goaded, and the two men circled one another, even as another flurry of shots rang out from the front of the house.

“Looks like the Boss is takin’ care of your people!” he said gloatingly, but Eliot curled a derisive lip and ignored the comment.

The hitter stood straight and balanced, eyes dark with intent, and he lifted his left hand. He made a ‘come get me’ gesture, and once more that white, irritating grin appeared on his face. Ryan saw the man firm the grip on the old Ka-Bar knife, slender and far lighter than the wide-bellied Razorback and worn with use, although he knew the damn’ thing was as sharp as hell if his useless arm was anything to go by. He knew that the damage was bad … probably permanent. This feckin’ Yank had crippled him.

Effie was watching the altercation with her heart in her mouth, but she knew Eliot was calculating moves and reactions with whirlwind accuracy, and she couldn’t help a thrill of excitement as she watched him work.

It was then that the dynamics changed, and Effie’s heart almost stopped with fear.

Out of the undergrowth erupted two men, both armed, although one of them was covered in small nicks and cuts.

And they ran straight towards Eliot as they aimed their semi-automatics at the battered and bleeding American.

———

Parker was happily hunting down the remainder of the Korean’s men, although she had to grimace at what the bull ants had done to the two dead men lying amid broken trip wires in the clearing. She sensibly stayed away from the quivering, crawling heaps of dead flesh, and headed along a track, knowing there were still more men from both groups in the vicinity, and they could easily work their way around and head back to the homestead.

She heard thudding footsteps away to her right, and grinned. _This was going to be interesting._

———

There were two of them, making their way as quickly as they could through the undergrowth away from the homestead. Both men were of the opinion that this job wasn’t worth the hassle and the death of the two men they had found, swarming with ants, had been the final straw. They were leaving, as quickly as they could.

Working their way through a long, sprawling group of acacias, they stepped carefully, eyes darting at every sound and hint of movement, but there was nothing. Perhaps … perhaps this far away from the house wasn’t set with booby-traps? It wouldn’t make sense to set traps this far from the yards and the
old house.

The man in front stopped and turned, looking at his compatriot.

“The truck’ll be around here someplace, I’m sure of it,” he said, his soft Carolina accent eerily flat in the dense fog. If we can get to the truck we can’ just light outta here an’ get free of this shit!”

His companion nodded and tugged out a pocket compass.

“Yeah … yeah,” he muttered, gesturing vaguely to his right. “Should be over there someplace.”

So off they went, trying to avoid the denser parts of the undergrowth, and their pace quickened.

That was a mistake.

Now walking abreast they headed for a clearing, and the southerner grinned.

“Can’t be far away from here now!” he said, and the pair of them quickened their steps.

The animal track they were following was clear and easy to follow, but in this fog they had to watch the ground rather than the space ahead of them, and the sudden familiar snick of a trip-wire was as unexpected as it was terrifying.

Before they could duck or step backwards, both men were tangled in a morass of big triple fish-hooks tied in loose bunches dropped upon them. Soapy’s fishing line, intended for catching the heavy barramundi that inhabited the billabong, was almost impossible to break and both men screamed and cursed and screamed some more as the bronzed fish-hooks embedded themselves deep, deep within their flesh.

And the more they struggled, the more the agony tore at them.

Two hundred yards away, Parker grinned with delight, and she grinned even more when Charlie materialized out of the mist, a heavy, shallow-curved boomerang held lightly in his right hand.

“You ready to go back to the house?” he asked.

Parker looked at the aborigine, and noticed he had removed his shirt and she could see the scars on his chest and abdomen. She understood then that Charlie was going to deal with these men who had killed his Alice, and Parker’s face settled into grim lines, her eyes deadlier than a panther on the prowl.

“Let’s go, Charlie. Let’s go and make them pay.”

Charlie Jakkamarra of the Warumungu nodded, and with Parker following, they both disappeared into the cloaking mist.

Nate heard the screams and the shots as he worked his way along under the house, Jo behind him. Then followed the children and Mei with Sophie bringing up the rear.

He felt in his jacket pocket, and the comforting bulk of the humane killer Soapy had given him made Nate understand that he may have to use it, probably in front of his daughter and the other children. He would have to get up close to use it because the thing was intended for humanely putting down cattle and horses and it didn’t have any range to speak of, but it would certainly do lethal damage to a human being.
Behind him, Sophie crept behind Mei, and when the screaming began again in the distance she drew the old wakizashi from its sheath and held it down and away from her. She knew how razor-sharp it was, used as it was for fighting at close quarters and even sometimes for ritual disembowelment, and she knew in her heart she would use it without compunction if her family was threatened.

But suddenly the sound of semi-automatic fire came abruptly from the side of the house, and she heard Effie’s shout of terror.

*ELIOT!!* Effie bawled, and Sophie winced at the pitch, *ELIOT!!! GET DOWN!!*

And then everything stopped, and all Sophie could hear was her daughter, calling out in a voice that echoed with grief … a sound Sophie knew she would never forget for the rest of her life.

“*NO!! NO!! NOT MY ELIOT!!*” Lizzie screamed desperately, and shoving past her father, she began to scramble her way out from beneath the house.

To be continued …
The Victims of a Greed Insane

Chapter Summary

Author’s note: There is yet MORE mayhem, violence, screaming and fatal consequences here. I have not stinted on revenge. Be warned.

“Oh shit!” Nate swore out loud as he tried – and failed – to catch Lizzie as she wriggled past him, his fingers barely missing the shoulder of her jacket as she scooted past him. “Lizzie!! Get back here right now!!” he yelled as he stumbled along behind his running daughter, hampered by the lack of height room under the old house. Hunched and swearing, he saw Lizzie scramble through the uprights ahead of him and disappear, and Nate knew then that his daughter would not stop until she found Eliot.

“Go get her!” Sophie shouted behind him, “please Nate - go get our daughter!!” she wailed, even as she hefted the wakizashi.

“We’ll be fine!!” Jo hissed urgently, and Nate didn’t hesitate. He struggled along the narrow space as fast as he could, pulling out the humane killer as he did so.

Squeezing through the uprights supporting the old house he emerged into thick fog. As he got his bearings, he heard the ear-splitting squall of an infant, and to his right sounded the flat, deadly BOOM of a shotgun.

Heart in his mouth and his chest bursting with fear, he headed towards the deadened echo of the shotgun blast.

Both Ryan and Eliot paused for a split-second at Effie’s yell and Eliot turned to see two armed men heading straight for him. He knew instantly that he had absolutely no chance of moving quickly enough to even try and avoid the spray of bullets.

Right here and right now, as he tried to save the family he held so dear, Eliot knew he was going to die.

Lips curling in a defiant snarl, Eliot Spencer held his head high and welcomed death.

And as he waited, a small figure topped with a riot of curls emerged from the all-consuming mist and charged towards him, yelling his name.

Parker swore she could hear whimpering. Touching Charlie on his arm, she cocked her head to one side in query. Charlie nodded, and raising his right hand he extended his thumb and index finger, making a twisting motion.

Where? Over there? The gesture meant. He had given Parker a quick lesson in the complex and ancient sign language of the Warumungu, and had been surprised how quickly she had picked it up.

Parker raised one finger in reply.
One person.

Charlie’s black eyes glittered as he led the way towards the sound, and entering a small clearing they found the source of the noise.

A man lay sprawled on his back, his right leg bent at the knee. His foot was deep in a hole, and he keened in agony at the devastation of needle-sharp split bamboo spikes driven through his foot and ankle. His whole lower leg was a mass of blood, and the multi-angled spikes meant that no matter which way he moved his leg the bamboo was driven even deeper into his mangled flesh.

“Help … help me …” he begged, tears of pain running down his face. His semi-automatic rifle was lying yards away, flung there as the man fell to the ground in agony.

Charlie hunkered down in front of the terrified man and studied him carefully. Parker just stood to one side and watched both men, her face impassive.

Charlie tapped the man’s forehead with the end of his boomerang to get his attention.

“Did you kill my wife?” he asked quietly.

The man blinked, tears running down his dirty cheeks leaving trails in the dust there.

“Wh … what??! No!!” His eyes darted to Parker. “Help me – please!! Don’t let him kill me!!” he begged, his voice raw with pain and fear.

“Who did kill her then?” Parker said, her voice flat and expressionless.

The man began to shake.

“Eades!” he babbled, and he tried to gesture at the homestead. “Eades killed her, but Chong wanted her dead!” he continued, deciding the more he talked, the more chance he had of not being killed by this deadly, ghostly man crouched in front of him. “She knew about the mine!” he sputtered, and his head fell back on the ground as he began to succumb to the pain. “And he wants you dead too! You and that other fella, the cowboy!”

Charlie nodded calmly.

“Well, mate,” he said, gazing into the man’s pain-filled eyes. “Knowing about it makes you as much of a murderer as Eades.”

And before the man could even react in horror, Charlie cracked him alongside the head with the boomerang and the injured man slumped back on the ground senseless.

Charlie stood and perused the unconscious gunman. He was on the point of turning away when he suddenly tensed and shoved Parker hard to one side and she staggered, letting out a sharp epithet. A man erupted from a clump of Witchetty bush, yelling with what was probably part fear and part anger, rifle swinging up to aim at Charlie.

But the young aborigine, Kurdaitcha Man of his people, leaned to his right in perfect balance and with practised ease launched the heavy hunting boomerang horizontally at his assailant.

The crack as the old weapon caught the intruder on the side of the head sounded dull in the fog, but the gunman dropped like a poleaxed bullock. He was dead before he hit the ground.

Charlie walked silently over to retrieve his weapon, and wiping it on his pants leg, he returned to
Parker, who was staring at the dead man.

“When this is over,” she said, “you’re going to teach me how to use that thing!”

Charlie smiled, but there was no humour in it.

“Glad to,” he said.

The sudden crackle of rifle fire coming from the homestead disturbed the air, and Parker flinched.

“Eliot!” She whispered, suddenly afraid.

And without a word, both of them melted into the mist and were gone.

Effie got to her feet as soon as the two men charged from the shelter of the bush, the shotgun flying to her shoulder, but she was stopped dead in her tracks even as she saw Eliot straighten, head high and nostrils flaring in defiance, and she knew then he was preparing to die.

From her left came a sudden yell, followed by the figure of Elizabeth Grace Ford, running as fast as her sturdy legs would carry her, ready to save her best friend and guardian and not caring if she put her life in peril to do it.

“Oh no …” Effie whispered, dread in her heart, “Oh no, nipper … please no …”

“LIZBETH GRACE!!” Eliot roared, “GET BACK!!!” and Effie saw the desperate horror on the hitter’s face and the look of satisfaction on Derry Ryan’s lean features.

But even as she raised the shotgun again in a frantic, pointless effort to save both of the lives of these people she adored, three low, lithe shapes ran silently out of the mist and launched themselves at the gunmen.

Powerful jaws, designed to control thousand-pound bullocks by biting and nipping at lethally quick hind legs, clamped onto the first man’s body, slamming him down into the dirt. He screamed as Chunk bit into his arm. His trigger finger spasmed and a short burst of gunfire cut through the air, flying harmlessly into the fog-ridden sky.

Chunk savagely worried the man’s arm, snarling with anger, and the rifle was dropped as the man shrieked with pain, followed by a bellow of agony as Dopey, the youngest of the heelers and the most excitable, tore into his thigh. Blood spattered the red dust.

Nugget, the only bitch in the trio, set her odd-coloured eyes on the other gunman and launched herself at him, lips curled back in fury, and her solid frame hit him in the knee, almost bringing him to the ground. But she slipped before she could get a hold, and the man got to his feet, turning once more towards Eliot, the semi-automatic lifting and taking aim.

He never made it.

A shotgun boomed and a load of double-ought buckshot hit him squarely in the side, and he was slammed backwards, bouncing off the heavy fence of one of the cattle pens.

“Gotcha, ya bastard!!” Effie hissed in satisfaction.

Nugget, satisfied that the man was dealt with, turned her attention to the other gunman now screaming in terror, as Chunk and Dopey began to shake him as though trying to tear pieces from his limbs. Nugget decided they shouldn’t have all the fun, and running forward, clamped her strong jaws
on his knee. She felt bones crunch.

Lizzie, hearing Eliot’s shout and realising he was alive and upright, stumbled to a halt, unsure now what to do. She could see Ryan, useless arm hanging by his side, begin to advance on Eliot from the rear.

“ELIOT!! BEHIND YOU!” She bawled, terrified for him, but Eliot heard her. He turned with the grace and poise of the warrior he was and parried the thrust of the heavy knife Ryan had aimed at his side.

But Ryan had anticipated Eliot’s reaction and now he had the shorter man within reach he head-butted Eliot, aiming for and succeeding in hitting the cut on the side of the American’s head.

The blow was almost Eliot’s undoing. Agony burst through his head and he dropped his knife, and the only thing that stopped Ryan from ramming the Razorback into Eliot’s stomach was the hitter’s years of experience and training. He managed to sway sideways and step backwards, trying not to stumble as he attempted to clear his head and get the pain under control. He felt something give in his side and the trickle of warm blood ran down his ribcage from beneath the heavy bandage, soaking his tshirt and pants waist. The pain of the broken rib almost crippled him.

Eliot Spencer didn’t let pain get in the way of dealing with anything. His hands came up and pushing himself hard, he reached for Ryan, something the Ulsterman did not expect. He had thought Eliot would go down, or at least be so disorientated that Ryan could finish him - something the lanky man would have relished, seeing the Oklahoman die in front of this child he protected with everything he had.

Eliot knew he had to end this or die.

Using his left fist to grasp Ryan’s knife-wielding hand, Eliot used his right to punch his opponent’s chest as hard as he could, unbalancing the man. As Ryan stumbled slightly, Eliot brought around his free hand to join the other, his strong, work-hardened fingers covering Ryan’s hand itself.

Once more using his shorter, sturdier body to great advantage, he hooked his leg around Ryan’s and shoved.

The tall man let out a surprised yelp and unable to back-pedal to keep his balance, he fell once more flat on his back in the dust, Eliot falling on top of him, the knife held between their bodies.

Eliot saw movement out of the corner of his eye.

Nate. Nate was here.

But Nate was busy too, tackling the man Effie has shot. The gunman was staggering to his feet, bloody and severely damaged. But he still had his rifle.

Nate veered to the side as he ran into the yard, his one aim to protect his daughter, and slammed into the gunman who didn’t know whether to aim at Eliot, now entangled in a death grip with Derry Ryan, the six-year-old child watching everything unfold in front of her with huge brown eyes, or the old woman desperately hovering on the little deck glaring at the battle playing out in the misty yard.

Nate almost lifted the man from his feet with one hand, and pushing him back into the pen fence he snarled into the man’s sweating face.

“Think you can shoot at my family, do you?? Huh?? That’s my daughter, you shit!” he hissed, and pressing the humane killer against the man’s thigh, he pulled the trigger.
The stark crack of the shot dimly percolated through Eliot’s mind as he fought for his life. The sound was followed by relentless, agonised screams as the .32 round-nosed lead bullet shattered the remaining gunman’s femur beyond repair.

Eliot pulled back his lips in a grimace and he began to force Ryan’s hand and the knife upwards. Ryan did his best to free himself, but with his useless arm it was almost impossible.

Heaving himself upright to sprawl astride Ryan’s stomach, Eliot, worn and hurting and bleeding so badly from the opened bullet hole in his side he could feel the weakness creep into his muscles, slowly turned Ryan’s hand and knife until the blade pointed upward, heading inexorably towards the soft tissue of Ryan’s throat.

He chanced a glance sideways and saw Nate run towards Lizzie.

“Take ... take her outta this!!” he yelled, and Ryan took the moment to try and heave Eliot aside. The American struggled to keep his grip on the knife, but he could not ... would not ... allow Lizzie to see him kill a man. “GO!!” he bellowed, “take ... take her away from me!!”

Lizzie began to run towards Eliot, not sure what she was doing, but knowing her friend was in serious peril. But then Nate was behind her and swept her off her feet in one smooth motion, and he pulled his daughter tight to his chest and glared at her even as Lizzie struggled to be free of her father’s care.

“DADDY!” she yelled, “ELIOT’S IN DANGER –“

“LIZZIE!” Nate tightened his hold and Lizzie stopped struggling, suddenly realising her father was not going to let go of her. “Lizzie, we have to go, okay? Eliot can take care of himself, and he-“

“NO!!” she whispered, and her fists clenched her father’s shirt, and she was shaking with a combination of anger and fear. “No, he’s –“

But before Lizzie could say any more, Gertie came roaring into the yard at a gallop, mouth agape, and headed straight for Eliot.

Through the damp air Chong heard something. He stopped his ranting for a moment and replaced his now-empty clip with a fresh one as he listened, and then his heart swelled with need and pride.

“It was the angry wail of a baby, and it made Chong’s eyes glitter with triumph.

“My son!!” he yelled, voice cracking with emotion. “I HAVE A SON!!” He aimed purposefully at the oak door, firing a round to try and gain the attention of the occupants of the house, as though the previous shots hadn’t already done so. “BRING. ME. MY. SON!!” he screamed, froth flying from his lips.

“Listen, mate,” Soapy’s laconic voice drawled from inside the house. “You do know you’re a bit wacko, don’t you? Oh ... and you’ll never see the tiddlers. Never.”

Chong blinked in surprise, his mouth working wordlessly as he absorbed what this mad old bastard had said. Did ... did he mean there were two babies?!

Two. He had two sons.

He threw back his head and laughed until tears streamed down his face.
“Man,” Hardison muttered, “the cheese sure slid right off that sonofabitch’s cracker,” and he raised his eyebrows at Soapy.

“You said it son,” Soapy agreed with a sigh. “You said it.”

And from outside, the laughter went on and on and on …

Nate quickly hurried towards Effie, who was gesticulating wildly with one hand and still holding the shotgun in the other while growling through the earbud, telling everyone that both Nate and Lizzie were safe. She heard Sophie’s soft sob and Jo’s murmur of relief.

_But Eliot_ – Jo whispered, fear in her voice.

“Holding his own, Missus,” Effie rumbled, and watched as Gertie charged towards the two men locked fiercely in a life-or-death struggle, wreathed in swirling mist.

The big camel ignored the man being slowly being torn apart by the dogs and the other lying screaming in agony from his shattered thigh and buckshot-riddled hide. She bypassed them with nary a glance and bawled at Eliot, knowing he was fighting for his life.

She slowed to a skittery halt and began to dance around the two battling men, and she dearly wanted to get at the tall, skinny man who was obviously trying to harm her friend, but with Eliot’s body in the way, she could do nothing but roar and flap her lip, her big flat feet sending up gouts of dust which turned the mist a frightful, bloody red.

Eliot ignored her. He knew she wouldn’t attack because he was in the way, but Ryan tore his eyes away from Eliot’s blood-streaked face for a split-second and Eliot saw the quick flicker of fear on the man’s face.

Grasping Ryan’s knife hand as hard as he could, he used the last of his strength to force the knife up, up under Ryan’s chin.

The great recurved blade nicked the skin at Ryan’s throat and brought the Ulsterman’s attention back to Eliot.

Eliot smiled then … a wild smile that came from the great Cherokee wolves he carried in his heart, and his teeth were white in his blood-and-sweat stained features, and Ryan, knowing then what Eliot had planned, saw his death in those glittering blue eyes.

“This is for Alice!” Eliot growled, and the wolves howled in his chest as he used Ryan’s own hand to thrust the Razorback upwards, deep, deep into Ryan’s throat just above his adam’s apple, severing the carotid artery. The point sliced into the spinal column at the base of the Ulsterman’s skull, and the light went out of Ryan’s eyes and his body became limp under Eliot, with only residual tremors rippling through the dead man’s muscles.

Eliot didn’t move for long moments, even as the blood soaked his teeshirt from Ryan’s throat, and he couldn’t quite catch his breath.

He heard Gertie’s honks as though from far away, and he could swear he heard Lizzie yelling, but he wasn’t sure, and he shook his head to clear it.

Then he felt soft, prehensile lips wiffle his damp hair and Gertie was there, nosing at him with concern and inspecting the bleeding cut in his head.
Letting go of the knife he pushed himself away from the corpse lying in the dust, and reached around for Gertie’s *bosal*, knowing she would help him stand up, because he was pretty damn’ sure he couldn’t get up on his own.

He didn’t quite make it. His grasp on the *bosal* was tenuous at best, and although he got to his knees, his hand, soaked with Ryan’s blood, slipped and he sat back on his heels and slid sideways, ending up sitting almost cross-legged in the dirt. His side was on fire and his blood-drenched hands lay in his lap.

His awareness had improved though, and he lifted his head and squinted.

Lizzie was around here somewhere, and … oh … oh dear God, no … she had seen him *kill a man*.

Something broke in Eliot Spencer … something deep and primal and horrific, and he flung his head back and howled his anguish, because he knew she would never forgive him, and she would know that he really *was* a monster … a murderous, evil creature not fit to be part of her life. Nate and Sophie had been wrong to make him Lizzie’s guardian, because he was a killer and nothing more, and –

-and then two small arms wrapped around him and he felt a shaking body plaster itself to his back and a little voice murmured in his ear.

“Eliot … *my Eliot* … you’re alive … I thought you were *dead* or *hurt* or …” Eliot heard Lizzie’s teary hiccup and he felt her curly head burrow into his neck and shoulder. Her arms tightened as though she would never let go.

“*Lizbeth Grace* …” he managed to croak, and he rested his weary head against hers. “M’ … m’sorry, darlin’ … Nate … take her away from me … I ain’t fit for –“

Eliot felt more than saw Nate drop down beside him and a hand rested beside Lizzie’s head on his shoulder.

“You did what you had to, Eliot,” Nate whispered softly, as though knowing if he spoke louder Eliot would fracture into countless pieces because of what he had done. “Lizzie will deal with it. As long as she has you, she’ll be perfectly okay.”

*Nate – Nate, tell me our daughter is safe!* Sophie’s voice came through the earbud reeking of desperation and worry.

Effie stumped up beside them and stood staring at Ryan’s corpse.

“Good bloody riddance!” she muttered, and then turned to Eliot, Lizzie draped over his back and hugging him as though her life depended on it, and Nate crouched beside him. Before Nate could answer, Effie grinned.

“Don’t you worry, Duchess … clever clogs, the nipper and the stupid Yank *boofhead* are all just fine.”

*Oh thank God*, Sophie breathed. *Eliot …??*

She let the question hang in the air.

*Is he hurt??* Jo interrupted, and Effie could hear the wailing of one of the babies in the background.

“Looks worse that it is, Missus,” Effie replied, but was stopped from elaborating as she heard
gunshots and laughing, for goodness sake, coming from the yard by the veranda.

Eliot lifted his head and opened his eyes. The bleariness had settled, although the pain hadn’t, and he felt the slickness of blood at his side. How Lizzie could bear being near him, he couldn’t understand, but at this moment he was very thankful for her love and care.

“Lizbeth Grace … go with your dad now. I got more work to do, okay? An’ I can’t be worryin’ about you, so … so go. Nate, make sure she stays away. Hear me?”

Nate, feeling the slight tremor in Eliot’s body, nodded, unhappy about leaving the man to do what he needed to do, but understanding his intentions.

Lizzie lifted her head and gazed at Eliot, who avoided her dark, rounded eyes. He couldn’t look at her. **He just couldn’t.**

“Eliot??” she asked, and he could hear the worry in her voice. He smiled wryly to himself. She didn’t understand what he was.

“Nate, help me up, will ya?” he asked, and Effie handed him her apron so that he could wipe the worst of the blood from his hands. He could not afford to have the grip on his **katana** compromised.

It took two attempts to get Eliot up and onto his feet, but finally he was upright, somewhat battered, but rapidly recovering what strength he had left.

Lizzie stood next to her guardian, looking up at him. Her breath faltered a little as she saw the seep of blood at his side and the sluggish flow from the gash in his thigh, but she instinctively knew that now was not the time to shout at him for being hurt. **Again.** Grandma Jo was going to be **furious.**

Eliot looked towards the house and not at Lizzie. How could she not see what a foul thing he was?? But he shook the thought from his mind, and took the **katana** from Effie, who lifted a hand and cupped his cheek.

“Be careful, you daftie. And don’t worry about the nipper. She’ll love you ‘til the day she dies.”

Eliot studied Effie with a gaze of such sadness that her old, cynical heart lurched in her chest.

“Yeah, Eff …” he said, his voice a soft, weary rumble. “That’s what I’m afraid of. Because, y’see, I ain’t worth it.”

And before any of them could reply, Eliot turned, and followed by a gurgling Gertie, limped painfully towards the corner of the house and to Chong.

Then, he knew in what was left of his heart, he would become even more of a monster, because he had every intention of killing the man who had ordered the death of Alice Jakkamarra, and had taken her forever from the family who loved her.

To be continued …

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* Hunting boomerangs are boomerangs that don’t come back. The popularised, sharply-angled returning boomerangs were not used for hunting or warfare, and would be incapable of bringing down game. A hunting boomerang, larger, heavier and with a far shallower curve, is made of hard wood like mulga. When thrown with skill, flat and horizontally, it is a very capable and deadly
weapon.
Nate watched Eliot as he limped away, shoulders hunched and *katana* held low but ready, and as the thick mist swallowed the battered figure and the huge camel which followed, he looked down at his daughter and caught her hand in his.

“Come on, Lizzie. We have to go now. We have Mei and the babies to protect, and we can’t leave it all to your Mom and Jo,” he said, and as he said the words he knew Sophie and Jo were perfectly capable of protecting the new mother and children, as well as young Kip who was watching over the infants.

Lizzie frowned, confused.

“But Daddy – “

“No buts, Lizzie. We have a job to do, and so does Eliot. He’s expecting you to make sure you do that job.”

Lizzie stared at the ground for a moment, seeing the splashes of blood and Effie’s gore-ridden apron. She glanced at the corpse lying beside it, but avoided looking at the embedded knife and Ryan’s sightless eyes.

“Eliot had to do that, didn’t he?” she whispered, awed and a little frightened as though Ryan would suddenly snap back to life and tear the knife from his throat so he could use it on her. Nate nodded, his face grim.

“Yeah … he did.”

He knew there was no going back on this – it was a fact, and Lizzie would have to accept it.

“It was … it was horrible,” Lizzie whispered under her breath. “My Eliot … it’s my fault he had to kill that man, Daddy … he had to do it because of me …” she continued, her face stricken with guilt and anguish.

Nate, fidgeting with worry over his wife and the others, nevertheless crouched down beside his daughter.

“No, Lizzie, sweetheart … it is *not* your fault. Now, you shouldn’t have run away like that – and we’ll be discussing running away and straight into danger later, young lady, have no fear – but Eliot had no choice, even if you hadn’t been here. If Eliot hadn’t killed him, Ryan would have come after *all* of us, including you.”

Lizzie’s frown fell into a look of deep confusion.

“But … but he won’t look at me, Daddy! He –“
“We have to go, Lizzie!” Nate interrupted, knowing time was wasting, but he couldn’t just ignore Lizzie’s worry. “Look … Eliot isn’t angry with you. He’s angry with himself because you saw him kill Ryan. He never wanted you to see that … to see him end someone’s life. He thinks he’s frightened you. It’s not something anyone should see, let alone you. Do you understand how important that is to Eliot? Do you??”

Lizzie realised she would have to think about it when it was all over, and nodded reluctantly.

“Can I hug him later? Tell him it’s alright? That I know why he did it?” she asked, and her eyes strayed once more to Ryan’s corpse where Effie stood over it, scowling at the dead thing lying on the ground.

“No worries, nipper. We’ll sort him out, I promise!” the old cook growled.

So Lizzie, a little heartened, nodded as Nate got to his feet and held out his hand once more to his confused and shaky daughter. Taking it in her own, Lizzie followed him once more to the rear of the house where they could catch up with the rest of the group.

But as she passed the now-unconscious man being worried by the three heelers and the screaming gunman by the cattle pens, she glared angrily at them.

“Serves you right!” she shouted at them desperately, needing to let out her pain. “You tried to hurt Eliot but my Daddy and Effie stopped you!!” She took a deep breath before flapping her free hand at the heelers. “Good dogs!!” she added, and Nugget turned her broad head and barked in answer, panting happily and tail wagging.

Effie watched as Nate and Lizzie headed quickly back to the rear of the homestead, fading into the fog. She looked once more at Ryan’s corpse, and snorted.

“Stupid bastard,” she rumbled, “thinking you could kill our boy.” And spitting on the body, she turned and made her way up the steps to her kitchen deck and the solid back door, hefting her shotgun. Ignoring the ravaged men lying in the yard, one man clutching his shattered leg and the other lying in the dirt torn and bitten, the little cook opened the kitchen door.

A small, hairy blur shot between her legs and Buster, signalled by Jo to stay behind in Eliot’s room when the children were spirited away, hurtled down the deck steps, his paws barely touching the wood.

“Bloody hell, Buster!!” Effie hissed at the dog, but Buster wasn’t listening – he was intent on finding his charges, and his small, muscled body tore silently through the fog and was gone. Effie grumped to herself. Buster was well able to take care of himself, but she would still worry about the little terrier.

Well, there was nothing she could do about it now. Sighing, she stumped off into her kitchen, intent on protecting the back door to the house, and no-one – no-one – would ever enter this home to threaten this family she loved.

Eliot felt every jolting step tear through his side, and he knew he was on borrowed time when it came to being able to take down Chong and Hadan. He knew she was out there, waiting, although she probably couldn’t really see what was happening. But she would bide her time … wait until Eliot had dealt with Chong, by which time – if Eliot Spencer was still alive – he would be weary and his meagre strength depleted because of the bullet hole in him. The only thing on the hitter’s side was that Hadan herself was wounded.
The fog was becoming thicker, and he slowed down as he reached the corner of the veranda where it jutted out from the house itself. Pulling Gertie to one side where her huge bulk was hidden by the house, he put his left hand over her muzzle to silence the constant squeaks and gurgles she gave out.

Gertie knew when she was supposed to be quiet. She and Eliot had once tracked a pack of feral dogs which were killing young calves, and she and Eliot had watched them for days before determining where to put the humane cage traps.*

She licked her lips and huffed to herself, but she was now silent as Eliot figured out what to do next.

Peering around the veranda supports, Eliot managed to take a quick look at the situation, and he raised an eyebrow. He had heard the laughing, but he wasn’t quite prepared for the hysteria which had overtaken Chong. The young snakehead, face red with fury, fired another barrage of shots at the door an windows, this time sending a couple through the small window on the left side of Eliot’s fireplace in his bedroom, shattering the glass and probably scattering needle-sharp fragments over his Navajo rug and the old guitar on its stand below the window.

Eliot curled his lip. He was pretty sure that Mei, Sophie, Jo and the children were gone from the room to their safe place, but it still annoyed him.

Chong let out another screaming torrent of demands, now in Chinese, but all that garnered was a soft laugh from Hardison and Soapy’s sardonic voice came from behind the battered door.

“Bloody hell, mate … for a fella with no moolah you make more hullabaloo than a clucky chook! So why don’t you just come off the raw prawn and bloody well choof off, hey?” he taunted, and Hardison’s cackle of delight – even though he didn’t quite grasp some of Soapy’s insult - made Eliot smile grimly.

Eliot rolled his eyes. These two idiots were having ‘way too much fun with Chong, who promptly screamed a babble of words in Chinese.

“Soapy? Did he jus’ say somethin’ rude to us??” Hardison said, apparently shocked to the core.

“Y’know, Alec … I think he did!” Soapy agreed amiably.

“It’s a good job my Nana ain’t here, ’cause she’d wash his mouth out with carbolic an’ paddle his ass with a carpet beater. She don’t hold with such language,” Hardison added, affronted, no matter that his Nana could probably out-cuss Effie.

Two more bullets tore into the door frame, and Chong began to mutter to himself, stalking up and down the yard, holding some sort of manic conversation with an invisible companion … or maybe having a discussion with himself, Eliot thought.

The hitter studied the mist, and he decided it was at its densest along the track leading to the almond stand. He grinned painfully, his head hurting and his side and thigh burning. He knew that particular section of the homestead the best. He knew every tuft of Marshall grass and every lump, bump and stump in the area. He had spent so many hours there when he first came to Wapanjara all those years ago, as he slowly healed from a wound that had nearly killed him. He could move there in total freedom, even if he couldn’t see more than a foot in front of him. This fog was far better than any camouflage net.

Making his decision, Eliot waited until Chong’s back was turned as the man strode backwards and forwards in the yard, and then he and Gertie made their way silently through the fog to the other side of the open space, and faded unseen into the bush.
Mei tried her best to quieten young Rose, but her daughter had been startled by the noise of gunfire and Lizzie’s yell as she rushed to Eliot’s side, and the infant wailed her displeasure.

The three women and Kip stood at the exit of the hidden metal corridor under the house and listened to Eliot’s battle with Derry Ryan, and their hearts clenched in unison as first Effie and then Nate arrived to try and sway the odds in Eliot’s favour without Lizzie getting involved.

Then through Nate’s earbud came Eliot’s deadly growl to Ryan about Alice Jakkamarra, and after that was a pulsing gurgle as Ryan died, and then … silence. But the sound that broke Jo’s heart was the howl of anguish from Eliot, convinced he had done something so irreparable … so **damaging** … to his and Lizzie’s relationship by killing a man in front of the six-year-old he guarded and loved with his body and soul.

But Jo knew better. She knew that Lizzie understood. Many children saw worse every day, and Lizzie was no wilting flower … she was a child of Team Leverage, born of tough, resourceful people and surrounded by a pack of protective predators, one of whom was the legendary Eliot Spencer. The death of a human being was a hard, hard thing to comprehend, let alone to watch – but Elizabeth Grace Ford was made of stern stuff.

*We’re on our way,* Nate said softly through the earbud, jolting Jo from her momentary reverie.

*Will Eliot be okay, Mama? Grandma Jo?* Lizzie whispered, obviously worried out of her wits, but Jo had to admire the level tone of her voice. This little girl didn’t frighten easily.

“Don’t worry about him right now,” Sophie said firmly. “We’re at the back of the house, waiting for you, and we need to move, so come on, you two – get cracking, will you?”

*I can see you now,* Nate said, and as he spoke both he and Lizzie jogged out of the mist towards them.

“Right,” Jo said. “You nippers walk between Nate and me, Sophie in the lead. Nate – can you take little Jamie here, seeing as you’ve no working weapon now,” she added, a smile tweaking the side of her mouth. She had heard Nate’s fury at the man with the rifle and the ensuing shot as the humane killer blew apart the man’s femur. “I’ll bring up the rear and watch our backs.”

Nate’s blue eyes warmed as he cradled Jamie to his chest. The little boy seemed oblivious to the furore going on around him. Jamie smacked his lips and shifted in his sleep, and Nate allowed himself a smile of pleasure. It felt good to hold a baby again, and he glanced at Sophie, but his wife was busy studying the fog-drenched space across the space beside the upper cattle yard to the bush beyond. There, Charlie and Parker had created a camouflaged area deep within a close-grown patch of spiny acacias. Anybody coming too close would have to brave the two-inch needle-sharp spines before meeting the adults protecting the children.

Their earbuds were filled by the noise coming from the front of the house. There was a lot of yelling and gunfire, and when Chong wasn’t creating havoc, Nate heard Soapy and Hardison’s double act, the banter oddly reassuring in the maelstrom of madness their world had become.

Eliot was silent, but that wasn’t unusual - he wasn’t the chatterbox type, and he had just killed a man and had the serious intention of killing another, so now earbud-less, he had dissolved into the background like a lethal ghost.

“Let’s go,” Sophie murmured, and leading the way across the rear yard, she moved with the stealth of a panther, and Nate watched this woman he loved as she held the *wakizashi* with every intention of using it if need be.
The children and Mei followed behind with Nate and Jo bringing up the rear, and Rose slowly settled, her anger subsiding into little hiccups and whimpers, and within a minute she was asleep, held tight against her mother’s chest. Jamie never stirred, happy and content in Nate’s protective arms.

Sophie carefully moved forward, her boots silent on the dusty ground, and her dark eyes swept the misty, contained world in front of her. The hide where the children were to be secreted was twenty yards away and to her left, and all she had to do was find the path through the bush, which, she was sure, was just a few yards ahead.

But she didn’t have any more time to think about it, because Buster came tearing around the corner of the house at full speed, which was considerable for such a small, tubby dog, and he headed straight for the bush ahead of Sophie.

All she could see then was a white, wiry-haired backside with a stiff, angry tail sticking out from beneath an acacia and the little dog let loose a roar of fury, his barks deep and vicious and predatory. There was a very human voice cursing in what Sophie thought was Malay, and then came a shriek of pain and Buster’s barks stopped and Sophie heard a chopping growl.

A man stumbled out of the undergrowth.

He was short, covered in scratches and bloody nicks, and he spat epithets at the small, furious terrier hanging on to the calf of his right leg. Buster clung on, teeth embedded in flesh, and the man staggered, trying to shake Buster’s grip.

But the man wasn’t alone. Another charged out behind him, and while Buster’s victim seemed unarmed, this one was carrying a machete and he swung it straight at Buster.

Eliot worked his way around the perimeter of the yard, heading for the track and hidden by the bush and the thick fog. He had no idea how many rounds Chong had left in his Glock, but he knew Soapy and Hardison were coming under more and more pressure from the man’s assault on the front of the house, and the door shuddered with the impact of another bullet as Chong fired, this time with more intensity and control. He was becoming more focused, and he aimed for the shattered glass insert at the side of the door. Obviously he had spotted what appeared to be movement inside, and he knew one of the two men behind the door would be keeping watch.

The shot went through the blown frame, and Chong heard the ricochet and a sharp exclamation of pain and then came a stream of distinctly Australian curses.

Eliot flinched with anger. Soapy was hit!

Chong strode to his left, and turned, his back now towards Eliot.

He couldn’t wait any longer. He could have hung on until Chong ran out of ammunition but he couldn’t take the risk that the snakehead didn’t have a spare clip or two on him. Chong could reload quickly … he was young, fit and unhurt. Eliot was bleeding and debilitated from illness and loss of blood.

Eliot decided he had to take the chance.

Chong heard Soapy’s yelp of pain and laughed, this time with triumph.

“See, old man?? The end is coming!! Just GIVE ME MY SONS!!” he yelled, and aimed the Glock again at the broken window.
Eliot straightened as much as he could, and gritting his teeth against the pain, he strode out of the fog and towards Chong.

The sound of Jo’s old Winchester sounded dull in the foggy air, and the short Malayan yelped as the .22 bullet hit him in the upper chest, knocking him backwards into the spiny acacia. The bullet shattered his left clavicle and lodged in his shoulder-blade, and he screamed as the two-inch spines of the acacia pierced his back, buttocks and thighs.

Buster immediately let go, and at Jo’s stern order he scooted out of the way of the machete-wielding thug who missed slicing the little dog in half by mere inches. The terrier shot back to Mei, and standing by the young woman’s side he began barking and growling, his bloodstained jaws lending him a decidedly lethal air. He was obviously very pleased with himself, Nate thought hurriedly, before he turned back to Sophie.

Standing helplessly with an armful of baby, he could do nothing to help her, and Jo couldn’t draw a bead on him with her rifle due to being at the wrong angle, so Sophie was on her own.

It was then Nate saw the glint of hatred in Sophie’s dark eyes as she handed the wakizashi’s scabbard to Kip, who was standing protectively beside Mei.

She stepped lightly towards the man now watching her with dark, guarded eyes set in a face that would not have looked out of place in a pirate film. He bared an impressive set of rotten teeth, and what he obviously thought was fierce scowl spread over his narrow, stubby face.

Sophie arched an eyebrow in disdain, and set her slender body into a classic fencing pose, left hand on her hip and balanced over her right leg, the knee gently flexed. Her left foot was set at an angle, toes pointing sideways, the leg ready to help her move forwards or backwards with little effort.

“Soph!” Nate hissed, Jamie still soundly asleep in his arms. “What the hell’re you doing!! This isn’t goddamn Hamlet!”

Sophie smirked, and her piratical opponent’s eyes flicked from Nate to Sophie and back again. He flourished the machete menacingly.

“Oh, now, come on!” Sophie chided gently as the pirate snarled, now unsure. “You can do better than just wave that thing about, surely!”

The pirate suddenly lunged, and Sophie parried easily with the wakizashi, forcing the machete away, the man staggering slightly, unbalanced.

“Deary me,” Sophie continued, a little amused. “You’re going to have to do a little bit better than that. Try holding your weapon at a forty-five degree angle … yes, that’s better!” she added, as the confused man did as instructed.

Sophie suddenly executed a near-perfect high-seconde sabre attack, although the wakizashi’s short blade made it impossible to complete properly, but the arching thrust downwards with the back of the blade smashed into the machete and Sophie carried through to slice a long, deep cut along the pirate’s forearm.

Within a second or two she had danced backwards and was ready to attack once more, while the pirate screeched in pain and anger, blood streaming from the wound.

She smiled at Nate, but kept her eye on her enemy, who was trying to keep the blood from making the simple, roughly-made grip on the machete difficult to hold. The pirate swore loudly and
succinctly in what sounded like Jamaican patois.

The shots came again from the front of the house, and they were all distracted by Soapy’s sudden yelp of pain.

“God, no!” Jo gasped, and put her hand to her mouth. “Soapy! Soapy’s hurt!”

Nate didn’t hesitate.

“Go! Sophie and me …” he nodded, wonder on his face as he watched his wife face off this machete-wielding thug. “I think we’re going to be just fine –“

I’m okay, old girl! Soapy’s voice came over the earbud even as Hardison swore at nobody in particular. It’s just a nick. I’ll be fine –

He’s alright, Missus – I got him, Effie rumbled. Silly old bastard’s just got himself a chunk taken out of the skin on his shoulder.

Stay with the kids, Jo – please! Soapy said, and they all heard him gasp as Effie pressed something against the wound to stop the bleeding.

Sunbeam an’ me’ll be just jim-dandy, Effie continued. Please, Missus – just look after the nippers!”

Jo chewed her lip, but nodded reluctantly.

“Allright, Effie … Alec … but take care of the silly old bugger for me, will you? Until I can come back and kiss him silly?”

Jo, don’t you worry – we’ll keep him safe, I promise! Hardison said softly.

Chong let off another shot and Soapy growled with annoyance.

If he carries on the door’s going to bloody well give way, dammit! He hissed, angry with himself for getting shot.

Don’t worry, Effie said, her loathing for Chong echoing in every word, the Yank’s on his way. He’ll see to the doggy shite!

But then a thin, unearthly scream of agony came from the south side of the household, deep in the bush behind the orchards … a noise that keened and echoed dully until it suddenly wasn’t there anymore. It stopped instantly in mid-scream as though it had been switched off, and everyone from the children to Nate and the people in the house heard Parker’s voice in their earbuds. There was a tinge of deadly fury in the little thief’s tone.

Gotcha! she hissed with triumph.

Charlie said something in Warumungu that most of Team Wapanjara didn’t understand, but it was obvious by the tone in the young widower’s voice that he was garnering his revenge for the death of his beloved wife.

I think that’s the last of the dopey bludgers, he said, switching to English, but Parker and I’ll have a dekko just to make sure. Then we’ll come on in.

“Well,” Nate said, watching his wife, “we’ve got one more dopey bludger here, but Sophie’s taking care of him right now,” he added with something akin to awe in his voice.
Now that I’d like to see, Charlie said, humour in every word. Tell me about it later.

But Nate was back watching Sophie, and he realised that she was actually enjoying herself.

She lunged skilfully and the pirate parried, but suddenly found himself desperately trying to protect his groin from the ancient blade as Sophie didn’t finish her move and shifted backwards and then in for another strike. The pirate stumbled backwards, the wakizashi missing him by a hair’s breadth.

“Well done,” Sophie praised the man laconically, “well done! My Uncle Gerald would have enjoyed watching this,” she said softly, and moved lithely to her right, the pirate watching her with more than a little nervousness. This beautiful woman was no pushover.

Nate felt a tug on his sleeve, and looked down to see his daughter standing beside him, her eyes fixed on her mother.

“Daddy!” Lizzie said softly, her fist clutching Nate’s sleeve. “Help Mama! I can hold the baby –“

Nate shook his head.

“I don’t think your Mama needs any help, sweetheart,” he answered. “She’s doing pretty well on her own. Now scoot back there, Lizzie, and stand with Kip. We have to keep you all safe.”

To his utter surprise, Lizzie did as she was told instantly, and Nate didn’t know whether to be pleased at her understanding or worried about her silent compliance. He knew she was frightened for Eliot, and now her mother was facing off this hairy, piratical bad guy with only Eliot’s short sword as a weapon.

Sophie was beginning to look predatory, even as the pirate attacked, swiftly and with force, aiming for Sophie’s chest so he could split her breastbone with the heavy old weapon.

“Now, now,” she said, parrying skilfully and slamming the machete to one side she gave the man a small nick on his belly, blood soaking through his filthy shirt. “That’s just clumsy … you need a little more finesse,” she critiqued, and she glanced at Nate as she moved back out of reach. “My Uncle Gerald …” she began to explain, and then she performed the neatest set of lunge-and-parries Nate had ever seen, leaving the pirate trying to skitter out of the way and the man gaining another nick, this time on his neck, “he was bonkers, bless his heart. But he was ex-Household Cavalry … he guarded the Queen.” She wagged her free hand at her head. “Wore the bearskin hat and everything. After he retired from the army … “ she paused as she engaged in another flurry of lunges and parrying the pirate’s increasingly wild attacks, “he went a bit loopy and he thought he was one of Picton’s Forlorn Hope at Badajoz in the Peninsular War – against Napoleon, y’know.” She grinned. “When I was fourteen he taught me how to use a heavy cavalry sabre. The silly old bugger thought I was his second-in-command.”

“Well,” Nate breathed, captivated, as Sophie did a very Eliot-ish ‘Come get me’ gesture with her left hand, egging the pirate on, “god bless Uncle Gerald!”

“Well … I’m just getting bored now,” Sophie said suddenly, “he’s really not very good at all,” she added, and then pressed home her final attack.

She performed a perfect false lunge, looking at the pirate’s legs as she forced her way through his wild swings with the machete, and the man followed her gaze thinking she was going to try a cut at his thigh or knee.

The machete swung down to protect his limbs, but Sophie smoothly altered her stance, brought the wakizashi in a beautiful, glittering arc above her head and sliced downwards.
The ancient, razor-sharp blade opened a cut down the man’s right shoulder, severing tendons and muscles. Not a fatal blow, but enough to put him down in a screaming jumble of limbs on the ground.

Sophie stepped back and stared at the man, and then she kicked the machete away from his hand, although she knew he was in no fit state to even hold the thing.

“Bloody amateur,” she declared elegantly.

Nate’s eyebrows were near his hairline as he watched Sophie, his beautiful, elegant and urbane wife, wipe blood from Eliot’s wakizashi with such casual diffidence that it took his breath away.

“Remind me not to get on your aggressive side,” he murmured as Sophie came to stand by him. She reached out with her left hand, bunched his shirt in her fist and pulled him in for the deepest, longest kiss they had had for a while.

“Bloody hell,” Sophie said, her dark eyes luminous with love and her skin still carrying the bloom of excitement, “I never realised using a sword made me just a teensy bit horny!”

Nate grinned.

“Down, girl. Let’s get going – we have the kids to get to a safe place.” But he paused for a moment. “Just … just hold that thought,” he said.

“Happily,” Sophie smirked.

Turning back to the two badly damaged men before them, she glowered at both of them and then began to lead the small group into the bush where the mist and the spiny, ferocious acacias would keep their family safe.

Chong let loose another shot, his aim becoming ever steadier now that he knew he had wounded one of the occupants of the house, his arrogance oozing from every pore. He raised the Glock once more, taking leisurely aim at the glass insert above the one he had already smashed. He felt calmer now … more settled. His sons were almost within his grasp.

But as he fired his shot, the Glock bucking into his palm, he saw something just out of the corner of his right eye … something that moved … something that he knew was instinctively threatening.

Turning to his right, he was caught slightly off-balance, trying to readjust his aim and face whatever-it-was as a steady, deadly force.

He didn’t quite realise how close this new threat was, emerging from the dense fog, and as he turned, he discovered some … thing … striding towards him. A wild, blood-soaked man with a dust-and-dirt covered frame and blazing blue eyes fixed on the snakehead with such deadness of soul that Chong flinched for a second.

_The cowboy._ It was that cowboy who had threatened to kill him, and in his right hand, Chong discovered, was the most beautiful sword he had ever seen.

He suddenly decided he _wanted_ that sword with an all-consuming ache that made him almost aroused.

The man was nearly upon him, and Chong struggled to raise the Glock in time, but he did it. Just as Eliot broke into a charge, the _katana_ held low and ready, Chong fired.
Eliot was unstoppable. Even as the bullet slammed into the leading edge of his pectoral muscle and carved a deep furrow in the flesh under his arm, Eliot kept going. The sting of the new wound was unfelt, and he raised the katana elegantly and with deadly skill.

Chong realised instantly he had misjudged the distance. It should have been a kill-shot, but the cowboy didn’t even flinch. Back-pedalling desperately, he saw Eliot lift the katana and now holding the hilt with both hands, he brought the breathtakingly elegant curve of the blade down, cutting from left to right.

The Sword of the Okuri-Inu cut Chong from right shoulder to left hip.

But what should have been a killing blow, spilling Chong’s guts like a red, glistening flower, was merely skin-deep. Chong instantly knew that while it was bloody and messy and hurt like hell, it was not lethal. But the pain made him drop the Glock, and he staggered backwards, a hiss of agony forcing its way through clenched teeth.

But Eliot didn’t stop.

The pain of the new bullet wound made him flinch, and he had to let go of the katana with his left hand, pressing his free arm tight to his side to try and ease the agony from both wounds in his side and to attempt to quell the bleeding.

He kept going and as Chong stumbled backwards he aimed a slicing cut at the man’s leg, trying to cut the inside of his thigh, aiming for the femoral artery.

He missed.

He was stumbling himself, he knew that now, and he saw Chong roll away from him and towards Oggie, even as the younger man pulled his Glock knife from its sheath at his belt.

Eliot staggered to a halt, breathing hard. He was almost spent with only those first two blows, and here was Chong, fit and still fresh, and a good fifteen years younger than the Oklahoman.

Chong glanced at Oggie, and grinned painfully. Turning, he shifted the knife to his left hand and ran to the big trailer, pulling on one of the slender steel poles that held up Oggie’s awning. He wrenched it from the ground, shaking it hard to free the awning ring from its sharp, prong-like end.

He turned and lifted the pole, twirling it skilfully and bringing it to rest with the bottom end tucked under his arm.

Whatever this crazy, cruel snakehead was, he wasn’t a coward.

Eliot, bleeding and weak and hurt to the bone, sighed, wincing at the chronic, tearing pain in his side.

“Aw shit …” he said wearily. “Give me a friggin’ break.”

Flinching at the throb of his wounds and with his aching head pounding to the beat of his flagging heart, Eliot raised the Sword of the Okuri-Inu and waited.

To be continued ...

* Feral dogs are a huge problem in Australia, not only to livestock but to native species and even to humans (and there is a difference between ‘wild’ dogs and feral dogs). In NT, it is illegal to use steel-
jaw traps (quite rightly), although poisoning is allowed. I can’t imagine the Munros, Charlie and Eliot allowing poison anywhere near their livestock or dogs, as well as where it could be picked up by non-canines or even small children. Therefore Eliot used a humane cage trap where the dog is caught and then transported away from the station. If they are abandoned pets, they may be able to be rehomed. Just in case you were wondering.
Eliot rolled his shoulder and eased stiffness from his neck as Chong studied him, the man’s dark gaze dancing with insanity.

Chong appeared quite happy to stand there and let Eliot study him, even though his clothing was cut to ribbons across his chest and abdomen, and bloody with it. But the cut was shallow, Eliot knew. He had simply not had the strength for that extra inch of impetus to finish Chong.

The hitter took advantage of the snakehead’s utter belief in his own skills and strength and speedily worked through the pros and cons of this desperately dangerous situation.

Eliot moved slowly to his right, sword poised, and allowed his limp and flinches of pain to be as obvious as possible without being theatrical. It didn’t take much effort, Eliot had to concede, but if it made Chong believe that Eliot was badly debilitated, it might – just _might_ – make the lunatic take chances.

And, Eliot knew, if it gave him even a meagre advantage he would take it, for he didn’t have much left in his reserves of strength to just take the fight to Chong. This battle would be won by guile and observation, not power and strength.

He saw Chong’s eyes follow the _katana_ as Eliot raised it slightly.

_He likes the sword_, Eliot thought, his mouth twitching in an almost unrecognisable smile.

Tightening his left arm against his side to support his ribs, Eliot limped and allowed himself a small, controlled stumble as he circled Chong. He raised the _katana_ a little further so that the dull, eerie light of the fog-strewn yard caught the _hamon_ and sent a faint gleam down the blade.

Chong’s eyes widened from interest to what appeared to be a pure gaze of hunger … _almost lust_, Eliot thought.

“You like her, huh?” he grated, and let his smile widen into a grin of devilment. “Well … she’s not for the likes of you, ass-wipe.”

The younger man sneered.

“I will take her from you, cowboy – she will be mine, and I will keep her to pass on to one of my sons. But in the meantime … I will open your throat and you will see me make her mine as you die!”

And as he spoke he skilfully lunged at Eliot, the steel pole aimed unerringly for Eliot’s chest.

But Eliot, ignoring the pain it caused him, parried the thrust with his left arm, the arm Chong thought was out of commission, and pushed his damaged body forward until he was within reach of the
younger man. Lacking the energy to pull the katana back for a killing blow in such an awkward position he slammed the hilt upwards and the pommel of the katana hit Chong in the mouth, splitting his lip and breaking two of his teeth. Eliot was gone in a second, stepping backwards, perfectly balanced no matter what the effort cost him in pain and blood.

Chong cursed and stumbled away, but immediately righted himself and spat out the broken teeth along with a spattering gout of blood.

He squinted at Eliot as he brought the pole to bear once more, and he studied the American before him. He took in the blood-soaked shirt and the outline of the bandages that lay beneath, wrapped uselessly around the bullet hole he knew Eades had put there. Soulless blue eyes gazed at him from a face marred with dust and dirt, runnels of blood from a head wound lending a demonic air to this man who separated Chong from his sons.

Eliot suddenly grinned, his white teeth at odds with his grimy, blood-stained features, and despite his obvious pain and weakness, he brought his left hand to the hilt of the katana and held the sword high, ready for Chong’s next attack and purposefully leaving his broad chest vulnerable to the sharp, spear-like pole.

“C’mon, you stupid bastard … is that all you got?” Eliot taunted, and Chong snarled, wiping blood from his face with the sleeve of his left arm and once more twirling the pole before setting it back under his right armpit, the wickedly pointed tip circling slowly as though to try and mesmerise his opponent.

Eliot flinched as pain shot up his back and down his right leg, streaking from the old injury to the nerves in his back that had never quite healed right and was now beginning to protest at the effort of keeping Eliot on his feet.

But Eliot absorbed the pain and recognised it for what it was … a mere reaction of his body to stress and damage and he relished it, knowing the adrenaline and endorphins it produced would help prop up his meagre reserves.

He braced himself, and Chong made his move.

Eliot exhaled, making his body relax, and instead of looking directly at either Chong or the lethal tip of the pole, he allowed his senses to take in the scene in its entirety, focusing on the environment rather than trying to make sense of the detail. He absorbed the moment, and in his mind the world around him slowed and sharpened.

In a veritable explosion of movement, Eliot swung the katana down and away to his left and the sound of the blade meeting the pole shuddered through the air. The thrum of the impact drove along the pole and vibrated through Chong’s hand so much it made his skin and muscles tingle painfully, loosening his grip momentarily.

The same vibrations hummed along the blade of the katana but were muffled by the tsuba and the hilt, and Eliot grimaced in triumph as the shimmering, perfect blade sheered through the pole as though it was butter.

Over two feet of steel pole arced away from the two men and landed in a puff of red dust by Bernadette’s front wheel.

Using the sword to push away the rest of the shortened pole, Eliot wheeled and his left elbow slammed into Chong’s chest, powering the man backwards as Chong shrieked at the pain of the impact on his bloody, cut chest.
Eliot completed the turn and once more faced Chong, but he was unable to follow up as he would have liked. Nevertheless he managed to pull the hilt of the *katana* back towards his abdomen in a move that drew the blade along Chong’s hip as the man stumbled away.

Chong bellowed in even more pain but he righted himself, and glared at the pole. It was now shorter by at least a third of its length, although the angle of the cut left a point able to drive through flesh and leave a gaping hole in Eliot if he so much as misjudged his attacks by a fraction of an inch.

But, the snakehead knew, his advantage had been lessened. He couldn’t attack Eliot and still be out of reach of that beautiful, deadly sword he wanted with every atom of his being.

His eyes glittered as he settled himself and shook his head to get rid of the blood dripping from his mouth. The grip on the knife in his left hand tightened. Now he had to get closer to this man who looked as though he was dead on his feet … a *dead man walking*, he thought, and mentally sneered despite the injuries this American had inflicted on him.

Eliot stumbled back but regained his balance in a second, and he planted his feet apart with his left foot ahead of his right, and his head lowered slightly as he took deep breaths, trying to oxygenate his blood as much as he could without making his head swim. He needed as much power as he could muster.

Chong charged. The pole came in low, tucked under Chong’s arm like a jousting lance, and the metal point aimed straight for Eliot’s side.

At the last moment Chong veered to his left in a feint, hoping Eliot’s concentration on the pole would open up his right side as he balanced himself to parry the strike. Then Chong could slide the knife deftly between Eliot’s ribs to his lungs, leaving the man in the dirt to drown in his own blood.

Eliot, with every bit of power he could muster, stepped straight into the path of the pole and used the *katana* to deflect the lethal length of steel. Twisting sideways, which hurt like *hell*, he allowed the length of the pole to slide harmlessly along his back as he rolled away from the attack. Pivoting on his right foot he turned and found himself facing Chong’s back, but the younger man, realising he had been thwarted, swept his body around in turn, hot breath hissing through the broken gaps in his teeth as the *katana* opened up a cut along his right buttock even as his knife nicked Eliot’s arm in passing.

Both men staggered, and Eliot, desperate and in agony, charged as quickly as he could to take advantage of Chong’s lack of balance.

His powerful left hand cracked again on Chong’s breastbone, and trying to prevent the man from regaining his balance, Eliot smashed a flurry of punches against Chong’s chest and torso, driving him ever backwards and making it nearly impossible for the man to use either of his weapons.

But Eliot’s body finally betrayed him.

Chong had finally ended up on the ground. Despite his weapons, loss of blood was beginning to weaken him and for a moment he lay there as Eliot followed him down, pinning Chong’s left arm to the ground, meaning to reverse the *katana* and drive its beautiful, unrelenting blade into Chong’s heart.

Eliot reared up on his knees and raising the sword above his opponent’s supine body, he reversed the *katana*. The point quivered over Chong’s bloody chest, but Eliot’s left side, the side carrying two bullet wounds as well as a broken rib, failed him. The broken ends of the rib shifted as he reversed the sword and suddenly he couldn’t breathe and the pain was *murderous*, and he let out a yell of
pure agony.

Chong used every bit of strength he had and slammed the steel pole into Eliot’s chest.

The impact nearly made Eliot pass out. Pain exploded in his torso and his head, and it was only pure instinct that kept his grip on the katana as firm as it could be as he fought his damaged body and forced it to stay upright and not collapse sideways onto the ground. The black spots of impending unconsciousness swam though his vision, and Chong’s triumphant gaze locked onto the American even as Eliot fought with every ounce of willpower he had left to keep Chong pinned.

Eliot wheezed and tried to force enough air in his lungs so that he could move, but Chong had other ideas. He shifted the pole, sliding his hand further towards the sharp, slanted end. If he could angle it just … so … he could drive the pole straight through this maddening cowboy’s side and into his straining heart.

Eliot, sagging back onto his heels and unable to even see the katana let alone kill a man with it, let go of the sword hilt with his left hand and tried to stop himself from collapsing by putting his hand out and steadying his failing frame. All he did was encounter the steel pole.

This was the moment Eliot needed.

Blindly grasping the pole and using what little strength he had, he gripped the younger man’s hand where it held the pole. Pulling both pole and hand upwards and towards his chest, Eliot angled the blunt end of the pole over Chong’s face and slammed it downwards. The blows were feeble by Eliot’s standard, but he felt with relish Chong’s cheekbone and upper jaw break, and the next blow blinded the man in his right eye.

But even as Chong screamed his agony, Eliot lost the fight to stay upright. Unbalanced and no longer able to retain his grip on the pole, he swayed and then sprawled onto his left side.

Both men now lay in the red dust, one flailing and yelling and screeching in pain and the other trying desperately to regain some control over his damaged body.

Eliot crawled agonisingly away from Chong until he caught a little of his breath, and out of the corner of his eye he saw Chong, blood streaming down his face from his ruined eye, struggle up onto his knees.

It was now or never.

Chong lunged at Eliot, knife raised high and deadly and glittering, so Eliot gritted his teeth, rolled sideways and managed to raise himself up onto his right knee.

He raised the katana in both hands but found to his dismay that he was unable to gain any momentum or to angle the sword to take Chong’s head. So instantly shifting his aim, he targeted the next best thing. Even without the power behind it that a non-damaged Eliot would have given the strike, with one blow the ancient blade cleanly sliced Chong’s knife-hand from his wrist.

For a moment the world telescoped to the sudden spurt of blood from the severed limb and to Chong’s remaining eye as it widened in utter horror. The hand and the knife it still held tumbled away from the snakehead’s ruined body and Chong dropped the pole. He collapsed back onto the ground and clutched what was left of his wrist, trying to stop the bleeding as his mouth made a perfect ‘o’ of shock. He frantically tried to pull his sleeve down over the stump, and, Eliot knew, if he didn’t control the bleeding, Chong might very well bleed to death.

As Eliot tried his best to get to his feet, he suddenly realised that Chong was not making a sound. All
the man could do was writhe on the ground and try and scream, but the sounds just wouldn’t come.

Eliot somehow managed to stand, even though his broken rib made every movement agony, and he limped raggedly over to Chong and kicked the pole out of reach.

Chong’s face was a bloody, writhing mess of pain.

Eliot used the flat side of the katana’s blade to push at Chong’s shoulder, to get the man’s attention and to make sure he knew this was his last day … his last moment, because Eliot could not allow Chong to live.

This was an execution, Eliot knew. But it had to be done for the safety of his family, especially Lizzie, his best girl - although his heart lurched at the knowledge that she now knew what he really was. He was a cold-blooded murderer. He had always been, and, he realised now, he always would be, no matter that everyone – including himself - thought he had changed.

Chong pried his gaze away from his blood-soaked, handless wrist, and looked up at Eliot - at this dusty, bloody being that stood over him like an avenging dark angel, sword in hand, and blue eyes blazing with the soul of a predatory wolf. The snakehead knew then he was about to die.

Chong’s one dark eye was glazed in pain, but Eliot thought he could see in that eye nothing but madness tinged with confusion and utter hatred. The world would be a better, cleaner place without this insane, psychotic young man in it.

Eliot’s lips twitched in a grim smile that held no humour in it.

“By the way, Chong,” he grated. “Your kids. They’ll be nice kids … good kids. And their momma’s gonna grow into a fine young woman. They’ll know nothin’ of you. They’ll grow straight an’ true, and be good people, an’ you, you twisted little bastard, will never know their names or anythin’ about ‘em. Because, y’see, you’re nobody. Nothing.”

He raised the katana in readiness.

“Go to hell, you piece of shit,” he said, and his soft voice was Death.

And it was at that moment that a figure burst through the fog … a figure on horseback, lying low along the galloping animal’s neck and with a sword held high.

Khenbish Hadan had come to take the Sword of the Okuri-Inu as her own.

Sophie and Jo finally found the small hiding-place Charlie and Parker had created deep, deep within the crowd of tall, spikey acacia bushes. Getting through the narrow gap was tight and occasionally painful when one of the spines caught bare flesh, but it was worth it.

Surrounded by the tall bushes and reinforced with hidden strands of barbed wire around the exterior of the copse, Charlie had created two spy-holes through the bushes. The entrance was well-hidden but had accessible views around the surrounding bush.

Settling the children and Mei on the ground where they were cushioned by dry, fallen leaves, Jo checked in on Soapy.

She had been listening to the cursing, complaints and general bad behaviour coming from the house through her earbud, but had not interfered because it was pretty obvious Effie had the upper hand, even as Soapy muttered and moaned as she tried to patch up the old sniper, who was trying to
wriggle out of Effie’s care and return to his post at the door.

“Is the old fool causing you any trouble, Effie?” Jo asked, her amused voice unable to conceal her worry for her husband.

Jo!! Jo, old girl … will you – ouch!! – will you please tell Effie to leave me bloody well alone???

Soapy grumbled, exasperation in every syllable.

Missus! Effie hissed, now very annoyed, Will you tell this daft old bugger that if he don’t sit still I won’t be able to stop the bleeding properly, and I’ve told him you’ll skin his sorry arse alive if–

“Soapy –“ Jo began, but her husband wasn’t about to be ordered about.

I’m bloody well fine! He ranted, and Jo heard Effie mutter something rude under her breath.

“Hardison?” What’s happening out there? What’s Eliot –“ Nate interjected, wiping sweat from his brow with his sleeve even as Jamie snuggled into his chest, calmed by Nate’s heartbeat.

Can’t say, Hardison’s voice came back, curiously subdued.

Nate looked at Sophie and he frowned. Hardison’s cryptic words meant he couldn’t explain because the children were listening.

Sophie nodded. Crouching down, she smiled at Kip and Lizzie.

“Alright, you two – we’re safe now so you don’t need the earbuds.” She held out her hand, palm up. “Put ’em there, children.”

Kip nodded reluctantly but removed his earbud and dropped it onto Sophie’s hand, but Lizzie wasn’t about to let hers go so willingly.

“But Mama … what about Eliot??” she said, her voice soft but desperate.

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“Now then, what did your father say? We have to let Eliot do his job, sweetheart, and we can’t hear him anyway – “Because the bloody idiot took out his earbud – again, Sophie thought, “and we can wait here until everyone’s finished doing what they have to do.”

Lizzie’s lower lip began to tremble, and her dark eyes filled with tears.

“I made him angry, Mama … maybe he won’t love me anymore … what if –“ Lizzie’s voice finally broke, and she flung herself into her mother’s arms and sobbed.

Sophie held her daughter tight as though she would never let her go.

“But Mama … what about Eliot??” she said, her voice soft but desperate.

“Don’t worry, my darling … believe me when I say that Eliot certainly is not angry with you, and when this is over you two can talk and it’ll all come right, you’ll see.”

But as Lizzie wept until she thought her heart would shatter, Sophie slipped the earbud out of her daughter’s ear. Lizzie didn’t even notice when her father turned his back to them all and whispered to Hardison.

“All clear. What’s going on?” he asked.

God, Nate … from what I can see from here, Eliot’s takin’ this bastard apart, Hardison murmured.

But Chong ain’t made it easy. I got no idea how Eliot’s still standin’, he added, his voice sounding sick with worry.
“So he’s doing okay, though?” Nate insisted.

I guess so ...he’s - oh - oh, jeez! Hardison gulped, and Nate thought he heard the hacker swallow bile.

“What?” Nate hissed, “What’s happening??”

Hardison managed to stop himself from vomiting, it seemed, and he ground out a few words which made Nate’s blood run cold.

His hand! It ... it’s gone!! Hardison dry-heaved, his breath shallow and hitching over the earbud.

Effie muttered something about Sunbeam? You alright there, boy? not really hearing Hardison’s words as she struggled with a bad-tempered Soapy, but catching his stress and fear.

“Whose hand!!” Nate insisted, his heart in his mouth. The thought of Eliot missing a hand was ...

Chong! Chong’s hand!! Hardison said shakily.

Nate closed his eyes in relief, but they snapped open again at Hardison’s next words.

Oh ... Oh God, Nate! Hardison replied, his mouth suddenly dry.

“What?? What is it??” Nate rasped, his chest tight with fear.

She’s here!! Hardison croaked. Hadan!! She’s here and she’s headed straight for Eliot and she’s going to ride that goddamn big frikkin’ horse right over him!!

It took Eliot precisely one-point-two seconds to absorb the situation, calculate his options and plump for the obvious one, which was get the hell out of the way of Hadan’s big gelding and leave Chong to his fate.

Hadan extended the elegant dpa’dam sword sideways and if Eliot had remained where he was, his head would have been taken from his shoulders, which, he knew, was Hadan’s very intention.

In a desperate, twisting leap sideways, Eliot turned in mid-air and as the big horse thundered past him, Hadan’s stirrup brushing his blood-soaked chest, the katana’s blade rang hard against the straight length of the old Tibetan sword.

Hadan, surprised, was almost unseated as the power of Eliot’s blow rang through her sword-hand in a shivering echo, and she saw the American hit the ground and roll, coming up on one knee with the katana arcing around to lie tucked against Eliot’s hip as though returning to its scabbard.

Something under Batu’s hooves made the gelding stumble and Hadan lurched in the saddle, but the horse righted himself instantly and so did Hadan, straightening and dropping her sword to lie against Batu’s side as she used her knees and the slightest pressure on the reins to bring Batu to a rump-sliding halt.

Turning the big gelding, she felt him prance under her, eager to go again, his need for action singing through him.

My Batu, she thought with pride, my warrior horse with the heart of a god!

Batu champed at the bit, froth on his lips, and even though she couldn’t see his eyes she knew Batu
was wild-eyed with excitement. But he was still hers to do with as she wished, and Batu was her servant who did as he was told simply out of love for her.

She touched her heels to Batu’s side and he responded with a snort, and went straight into a gallop, hooves kicking up red dust in the fog, coating his eerie greyish hide with bloody smears .

Eliot managed to get to his feet, and he prepared to meet Hadan head-on. He glanced at Chong, and saw that Batu had galloped straight over him, and the man was a mere thing now … barely moving, his limbs twisted and bloody and broken by sharp, solid hooves. His mouth opened and shut slowly, like a fish gasping on a river bank, and his remaining eye was wide and unblinking.

Eliot felt nothing. He was a soldier now. He had an enemy to defeat or die in the trying, and he knew that this might well be his last battle. So he straightened and raised the Sword of the Okuri-Inu and grasped the hilt in both hands, holding the blade upright with his right elbow raised to bring the sword close to his bloody chest.

Steadying himself, he gazed at Hadan as she sent the big horse into a gallop.

Unafraid, he pursed his lips, and let out a piercing whistle.

And bursting from the fog-laden track came a huge brown camel, jaws agape and roaring like a bunyip.*

Gertie set her one eye on Batu and Hadan, and broke into a lumbering gallop, teeth bared.

Eliot grinned. He had noticed Batu’s nervous reaction to Gertie during the thunderstorm, and he knew the horse had been disconcerted at seeing a camel, probably for the first time in his life. He firmed his grip on the katana, and waited.

Gertie headed unerringly for Batu, neck outstretched and teeth bared, and Eliot saw Hadan shift in the saddle in surprise. She tried to avoid Gertie by steering Batu into a swerve, but Gertie wasn’t in the mood to allow either Hadan or Batu to get away.

She slammed straight into Batu’s shoulder with her chest while she snaked her head around to bite Hadan’s face, but she missed, spattering frothy slobber on the assassin.

Batu staggered drunkenly and went to his knees, sending Hadan sprawling from the saddle, although she quickly got her bearings and rolled away from Batu as Gertie swiftly turned and fixed a furious eye on the Mongolian.

Batu, unharmed but dazed, stumbled to his feet, stirrups and reins dangling. Gertie ignored him, but Batu, coming to his senses, stared at the camel and deciding that this big, hairy smelly thing might just eat him and backed off, head up and eyes wild with fear.

Hadan scrambled to her feet and was instantly on guard, but she couldn’t see Eliot for this annoying animal which had attacked her Batu. She remembered her decision that she might have to go through the camel to get to Eliot Spencer, so she turned, raised her sword and attacked Gertie.

Eliot’s eyes widened, and without a thought and not noticing the pain in his battered body, he broke into a staggering run and charged straight at Hadan.

Hadan executed a smooth, low blow intended to slice into Gertie’s neck but the camel began, much to the assassin’s surprise, to dance. Big, flat feet scuffed through the dust, and the huge animal bounced about, lower lip flapping. Gertie burbled and groaned and honked, and she bubbled frothy saliva as she danced, and Hadan, trying not to get run down by the animal, was finding it difficult to
find an angle whereby she could cut Gertie’s throat and stay out of the way of those big feet.

“GERTIE!! AWAY!!” Eliot roared even as he ran, but Gertie wasn’t listening. She had to protect Eliot with every inch of her being, and as she often did when upset, she pouched out her cheeks, gurgled, and then vomited her stomach contents, the stinking effluvia spraying through the air. Some of it spattered over Hadan, and she hissed with anger, the sting of the stinking liquid making her eyes smart.

She cursed and raised her left hand to wipe her face, stumbling backwards and away from Gertie, and it was as she managed to clear her vision that she saw a figure come at her through the mist, and Eliot Spencer crashed into her, sending her sprawling once more.

Eliot hit the ground hard and yelped, but he staggered to his feet and still holding the katana, waved it at Gertie.

“GO!!” he bellowed harshly, and this time Gertie heard him. Confused but obedient, she changed tack and decided to chase Batu, who grunted in terror and ran, with Gertie trotting, still gurgling, behind him as the gelding headed up the incline towards the cattle yards.

Eliot, hurting like hell and unable to catch his breath properly, limped backwards and away from Hadan. He stopped, swaying, and took a moment or two to gather his wits about him and settle once more into a fighting stance, chest heaving and every muscle in his body protesting at the movement.

Hadan swore softly, still dabbling at her eyes, and she felt the drip of camel vomit as it slid down her face and hands. She peered at Eliot, who grinned back despite the exhaustion visible on his face and in his stance.

Hadan settled herself and took a couple of deep breaths to calm her shaking hands, and then brought her sword to bear.

“Nice sword,” Eliot rasped, and brought the katana back to its position before his chest, both of his hands on the hilt and ready to strike in any direction.

Hadan’s eyes narrowed and she nodded.

“I told you I would come for the Sword of the Okuri Inu,” she answered, ignoring his comment, and then she spat to get rid of a fragment of vomit-covered gummy frog which slid down over her lips.

But Eliot noticed that she held her shoulder oddly, and her movement was undeniably stiff. He knew Effie had filled Hadan’s shoulder with double-ought buckshot, and Eliot guessed the tiny assassin still carried a few pellets under her hide which she couldn’t reach. She seemed a little pale, he thought, and despite the red dust now coating her face and the splatter of vomit on her skin and clothes, there was a slight sheen of perspiration on her upper lip and forehead.

Infection.

Eliot shook sweat from his own brow and took as deep a breath as he could.

It wasn’t much, and she was still fresher and a whole lot less damaged than he was, but it was a chink in Hadan’s formidable defences that he could breach.

His grin became feral.

“You want this sword?” he snarled. “So come and get it, you crazy bitch!”
And bracing himself for the onslaught, Eliot Spencer stood firm, and as a watery sun sent pale light filtering through the fog, Khenbish Hadan brought the fight to him.

To be continued …

* Bunyip – a large creature from Aboriginal mythology, said to lurk in swamps, billabongs, creeks, riverbeds, and waterholes. Eliot still hasn’t informed Hardison of this.
The Soul That None May Fathom

Chapter Summary

Author’s note: Even MORE blood, sweat and violent mayhem. Be warned.

Eliot settled himself, the *katana* held low in his right hand, and he squared off instead of offering a smaller target by standing at an angle. He stood straight and still, head lowered slightly, and allowed his senses to do the work for him … to absorb every muscle movement of this tiny woman and her magnificent, ancient sword so different from his own.

His nostrils flared for a moment and he caught the tang of sweat and a long-unwashed body, and there was a faint drift of what seemed like lemon in the air.

*Yeah,* he thought, *she’s hurting. She’s got a poultice on her … herbs … frankincense … she’s got an infection …*

He shifted and breathed as deeply as his wounds would allow, centering himself and forcing his heart to slow down and his screaming muscles to ease. He faintly heard the magpies fluting and singing in the almond stand, and he felt eyes on him.

*Hardison.*

The hacker was watching, no doubt with his heart in his mouth and relaying everything to the others. Eliot just hoped someone had had the sense to take the earbuds from Lizzie and Kip. They didn’t need to hear him speak of death, whether it was Hadan’s or his own. But at least Eliot wouldn’t be alone if he died – he knew Hardison was with him, even if the young man knew to stay out of the way. Eliot had always thought he would die alone and unsung, and now … his team … his *family* … would at least mourn his passing … even Lizzie, who thought he was a monster, and for whom he would kill Khenbish Hadan.

But right now, his death didn’t matter, as long as he took Hadan down with him.

And Eliot Spencer drew deep within himself and found his balance. He didn’t see Hadan … he sensed the swirl of the fog around her as she moved, and the kick of red dust from her old hessian boots … he felt the movement of the air as she swept towards him, and he caught the glimmer of the unique blade as it cut through the limpid light, the oblique tip sent unerringly towards Eliot’s chest.

She meant to run him through.

But he stood his ground, still and solid and calm, and he heard the ancient Tibetan sword thrum softly as the point sped towards him.

And still he waited.

“*Oh God …*” Hardison gasped as he peered through the broken insert beside the door, and he swallowed bile. “The dumb *sonofabitch* is gonna get hisself killed!”
Soapy, sitting on the huge old table in the kitchen, looked up as Effie bound the wound in his shoulder tight with a pressure bandage, trying to stop the flow of blood streaming down his arm.

“What’s happening??” he ground out, wincing as Effie growled with impatience.

“He … he’s just standin’ there, waitin’ for her to just … just … kill him!!” Hardison gasped, and his hand reached for the door handle.

“Like hell he is!!” Soapy snapped, and ignoring Effie’s attentions he slid off the table and lifted his Webley, which lay beside him, with his good hand.

Effie, not to be left behind, grabbed her shotgun and hobbled after Soapy, both of them emerging into the hall where Hardison was peering through the damaged insert.

Soapy managed to take a look past Hardison and glanced up at the young hacker, his dark eyes full of fury, but he suddenly understood what was going on.

“Hang on, Alec – give him a minute. We’ll get out there when we can do it and not distract him. We could get him killed if we go now, mate – he’s in the zone.”

Zone? What zone? Nate’s voice crackled through the earbud, but it was Jo who answered.

_He’s not seeing her any more, Alec – he can feel her every move, her every thought. Disturb him and you could get him killed_, she said, and everyone listening in could hear the desperation in her voice. _My Soapy … he understands, so follow his lead._

And then Hardison understood why Eliot had so much respect for Soapy.

“You … you’re like Eliot. Just like him,” he murmured, and saw the grim look on the old pastoralist’s face. “Black ops, right? he added with awe, and turned his gaze back to Eliot.

“You don’t want to know, son … you really do not want to know …” Soapy said softly, and all three of them watched Eliot through the broken insert and the other small glass panes, their hearts in their mouths.

Eliot seemed to have endless time to study the blade aimed at his heart as it came at him. He saw the strange striped marks within the metal of the blade and the oddly shortened hilt, so unlike the elegant curved blade of the _katana_ and the wavering ripple of the _hamon_, the border of the hardened edge of the old sword. His blade was folded metal, he knew, while Hadan’s blade was layered. _Surely_ there would be a difference in resilience.

But time had run out, and his focus was suddenly all on the quivering tip of the blade now only inches away from him.

He saw for the first time the glimmer of triumph in Hadan’s olive eyes, and Eliot twitched a smile.

In a split second he was a blur of movement, swaying to his left and not even raising the _katana_ to defend himself, and before Hadan knew it Eliot was turning away from her with a speed she could not have imagined, his icy blue eyes fixed on hers in a look of such derision that anger suddenly flared in her heart as her blade sliced harmlessly through space where moments ago Eliot Spencer had stood.

She had misjudged him. He was wounded, yes, and badly, but he had the heart of a warrior, and even as her sword missed him entirely, he was once more standing, balanced and still and _smiling_,
and she caught herself and arm extended, she wove her sword through the air and brought it back to her side.

They studied one another for a few minutes, and Hadan cocked her head, curiosity getting the better of her.

“Where did you learn to fight?” she asked, her almost-accentless voice soft and flat in the humid air.

Eliot’s smile turned into a grin.

“Here an’ there … y’know … as you do.” He nodded at the Tibetan sword. “You like usin’ that thing?”

Hadan’s eyes flicked down to her weapon, and she slowly raised the sword until her right arm was outstretched and the point was at a forty-five degree angle from her body. She looked deadly, Eliot thought.

Hadan shrugged and it was obvious the gesture hurt her.

“It is the weapon I grew up with. It belonged to my grandfather. I was eight years old when I first killed a man with it.” She paused for effect. “My father.”

Eliot showed no emotion.

“He must’ve pissed you off big-time,” he answered mildly.

Hadan nodded, agreeing with him.

“He killed my horse,” she said. “He told me I was nothing and didn’t deserve a horse, and killed my Jochi. I took this sword and then I took my father’s head.” Her eyes were hazy with memory for a moment or two, before she continued. “I stuck it on a pole outside his ger. I was somebody after that,” she added, and her lips quirked in a smile. “My family didn’t like me – but they did learn how to fear me.”

“I bet they did,” Eliot muttered under his breath, and moving slowly, he readied himself, holding the katana in both hands now, the point lowered as he took more deep breaths, his ribs tearing at his side as he moved. He couldn’t stop the flinch of pain from showing and Hadan seemed amused.

“You can hardly stand, my friend. You look bloodless, like a slaughtered beast.” She shook her head earnestly. “You will not live through this day.”

Eliot allowed his shoulders to slump a little, as though he was past exhaustion – which, he admitted to himself, wasn’t too far from the truth – and then he made a show of shifting his grip on the soft, aged silk wrapping of the tsuka, feeling the beautiful ebony carving of a wolf guarding a child bound into the grip.

Hadan lifted her right leg, both arms akimbo and perfectly balanced, and flowed towards Eliot like a ghost.

She brought her sword upwards in a slice that would have disembowelled Eliot had it landed, but he exploded into action and the katana drove sideways in a controlled, punching blow that deflected the long, straight blade of the dpa’dam and both swords clashed, sending sparks through the fog.

Eliot pushed his damaged body towards the Mongolian, and her sword was like lightning on a moonless night, all flickering death and gleaming edges, and Eliot anticipated every blow she took as
she whirled and fought and was as silent as the grave.

The Sword of the *Okuri-Inu* sang her song to the still air and her razor edge cut the mist into ribbons of smoky swirls, and Eliot suddenly caught Hadan’s left wrist and he pulled her towards and around him, her slight body slamming into his right side as he reversed the *katana* and slid it backwards.

The blade caught Hadan in the side. It was a glancing blow and merely sliced along her ribs, but blood spurted from the wound and she couldn’t stop herself from crying out with the pain of it.

But she had enough clarity left in her mind to slam the hilt of her sword into Eliot’s left side in return, and he keened an agonized groan as the blow smashed into his broken rib.

Staggering apart, one bleeding and the other breathless with pain, they turned to face one another once more.

Hadan’s free hand clutched the bloody gash along her lower ribs, while Eliot stood hunched, trying his best to catch his breath and control the pain, but he felt a fresh slickness under the bandages around his ribcage. He didn’t know how long he had now, with the blood-loss becoming more and more debilitating. Minutes, perhaps … maybe less. He just hoped he could stay on his feet long enough to deal with Hadan.

He had to end this.

Hadan finally got her pain under control and readied herself for a moment, and then raised her sword. She dodged to his left and then leapt, twisting in the air, bringing her blade down as she arced around Eliot, trying to take his head with one blow.

But Eliot rolled to one side and in turn aimed a slice at Hadan’s thigh as she wheeled past him, but they both missed, and stumbling away from one another, they staggered but stood still, breathing heavily.

But Eliot didn’t wait.

He held the *katana* before him, two-handed, and with the soul of the samurai surging through him he attacked, the great *katana* humming her song of death as Eliot wove a pattern of light about the Mongolian who was forced to stumble backwards and defend herself.

He sweated and he swore and he fought, and Hadan parried every blow he struck. She fought back, desperation in every strike, and the ring of ancient metal striking ancient metal filled both of their hearts with the need to kill.

Nate turned to Jo and Sophie.

“I … I can’t stand this,” he muttered, hands on hips and head hanging.

Jo nodded, fear in her green eyes for both her husband and Eliot.

“Mama?” Lizzie said fearfully. “Mama, can we go back to the house?? Eliot and Grandpa Soapy need us!”

Sophie shook her head.

“No, darling. We stay here. We don’t know how many more men are hanging about and –“

*None*, Parker’s voice said through the earbud.
We got the lot, Charlie added, his voice flat and grim. We’re coming to you right now, he added. Parker and me … we’ll take care of Mei and the kids, and the rest of you head back to the house. We’ll be with you in a minute or two.

Nate looked at Sophie and Jo, and they both nodded.

“We’ll do that then,” he said.

“But Daddy –” Lizzie insisted, her voice beginning to rise with fear.

Nate crouched down beside his daughter and grasped her shoulders with both hands, forcing her to look at him.

“Lizzie … Lizzie, listen to me,” he ground out. He knew there was no time for gentleness. Lizzie had to understand, and so did Kip as he sat beside Mei helping her hold the babies. “You can’t come with us. And there will be no argument, young lady, d’you hear me?? We have to be very careful and not get in Eliot’s way, and if he sees you he might get distracted and get - well … he might get very badly hurt. Do you understand???”

Lizzie stared at her father with her mother’s dark eyes, and they swam with tears.

“Eliot could die, couldn’t he? If I was there?” she whispered.

Nate, hating himself for having to do this to his daughter, nodded.

“Yes,” he said firmly. “He could die, sweetheart. Because he loves you and he would worry about you if you were in danger and he would put himself between you and anything that would harm you.” The muscles along his jawline jumped as he gritted his teeth and held his daughter so that she could see the truth in his eyes. “He’s doing this for us … and Grandpa Soapy and Grandma Jo … Effie … Charlie and Kip, and now Mei and the babies. All of us. And we can’t get in his way because he’s Eliot and this is what he does, and we let him because that is what makes him who he is. Alright? So stay here with Charlie and Parker, and afterwards we’ll talk, okay? Once Eliot’s safe.”

Lizzie, wide-eyed and shocked to the bone, nodded.

“Okay,” she said, her voice so soft Nate hardly heard it.

Nate let go of her shoulders and stood up. But before he could turn towards Sophie, Lizzie let out a hiccupping sob, and she crossed her arms as though trying to stop herself falling to pieces.

“If Eliot dies … I … I don’t want him to die, Daddy. He thinks I’m a bad person because I did something dumb when I ran away and he’s mad at me and now he’s going to die and … and … he can’t, Daddy – he just can’t!!”

Nate ran a finger along Lizzie’s cheek and caught her tears.

“We’ll do our very best to make sure he doesn’t, sweetheart. I promise. You stay here, and let us do what we can to make sure he comes back to us safe and sound.” He smiled sadly. “And believe me, Lizzie my love. Eliot doesn’t hate you. He could never hate you. He loves you very, very much.”

Lizzie scrubbed tears from her eyes and sat down beside Mei and Kip, little Buster tucked between them protectively. The young mother, holding Rose tight to her chest as Kip cuddled Jamie, put a hand on Lizzie’s shoulder, rubbing it gently with her thumb.
“He is … he is your protector, yes?” she said kindly.

“He’s my best friend,” Lizzie answered, and Kip nodded in agreement.

“He’s my uncle, too,” the little boy chimed in, “and my dad’s brother.”

“And our son,” Jo whispered to herself, and she heard Soapy’s murmur of agreement.

M’bro, Hardison muttered. Dumb-ass camel-hugger!

He’s just our Eliot! Parker added, somewhat puzzled. What’s the problem? Parker’s grasp on relationships was always a little tenuous.

He’s a bloody clueless boofhead, that’s what he is! Effie grumbled furiously. If he loses any more blood he’s going to be flat on his back for a bleedin’ week! She added, blithely unaware of the pun.

“He’s family,” Nate said finally, and smiled as Parker and Charlie appeared as though from thin air and worked their way into the hiding place.

Charlie looked grim as Kip carefully handed baby Jamie over to a slightly snotty Lizzie and stood up to run to his father and hug him.

“Are you alright, Dad?” the child asked, a tremor in his voice, and Charlie, his bare chest displaying the marks of his people, ruffled his son’s blond hair and smiled.

“I’m fine, son,” he said tenderly, and then he turned to Nate. “You lot go and make sure my brother doesn’t get his head lopped off, will you? He’s a bloody idiot.”

The tension eased suddenly, and Nate grinned.

“We’ll do our best, Charlie. And thanks. You and Parker. I have no idea what you did, but it kept our daughter and the rest of us safe.”

Parker grinned, looking very much like a cat who had stolen a whole dairy-full of cream.

“It was fun!” she said smugly. She held up her taser. “Mister Zappy had a blast!”

Kip looked up at his father, pride oozing from every pore.

“That’s because my dad’s brilliant!” he bragged happily.

And as Nate, Jo and Sophie headed off back to the house, they hoped that they could make sure that Eliot Spencer, the man who had absolutely no idea that he was so much loved, didn’t get himself killed.

The two antagonists slowly circled each other, gasping and breathless, bloody and exhausted. Eliot, his katana held before him in a two-fisted grip, razor-point dipping carefully as he gauged Hadan’s next move, could hardly contain a grunt of pain every time he inhaled.

Hadan moved a little easier, he noticed, but her side was bleeding freely and her injured shoulder was causing her a great deal of pain, if the flinch that came with each cautious step was anything to go by.

She raised the dpa’dam and touched the tip of the katana, the two blades coming together in a testing caress, the gentle clash of metal whispering in the dank air. She wondered about the man before her.
She wondered about what had made him the deadly creature he was, what had bred in him the tenacity and sheer inability to give up and die, which she had to admire. He was a man after her own heart, she decided, and in another life they may have been friends.

And as she concluded she might have liked Eliot Spencer, she forced the *katana* aside with her sword and darted to her right. The tip of her blade made its way through Eliot’s defences only for a split second as Eliot went with the movement and stepped elegantly back and circled his own blade, catching a nick from Hadan’s weapon on his flank but using her impetus against her as he twisted to his left and slid the *katana*’s razor edge along the back of the *dpa’dam*, the tiny cross-guard of Hadan’s sword failing to halt Eliot’s attack.

The *katana* opened a shallow gash along Hadan’s sword-arm from wrist to elbow.

She screamed in frustration as blood dripped from her wrist and her sword-grip became dangerously slippery. The coppery scent of her blood made Eliot’s nostrils flare and he ignored the slick feel of his own blood ooze from the new cut between his hipbone and lower belly. He had hoped to make her drop her sword, but he had underestimated her strength of character.

He backed off for a few steps and slowly corrected his stance, controlling his breathing as much as he could. The *katana* was held low once again but now to one side, Eliot’s left elbow raised and bent to help him lead his next blow and absorb the impact.

Hadan swore under her breath and Eliot allowed himself the tiniest of smiles, although there was no humour in it.

“Why did you stop workin’ for the Chinese?” he asked suddenly, his breath hitching with pain but every word as clear as a bell.

Hadan blinked even as she hissed with the sting of her new wound, and she shifted the *dpa’dam* to her left hand for a few moments as she wiped her bloody hand on her dirty shirt.

Eliot did not attack – he knew she would be as deadly left-handed as with her right, as Eliot himself was.

The Mongolian studied Eliot with a newer understanding. This man would kill her without regret. He was more like her than he would ever know.

“Politics,” she spat. “They were so happy playing games that they became confused, self-important little people full of wind and words and nothing else. I don’t play games.” She returned her sword to her right hand and seamlessly ran a few steps to her right, trying to make Eliot move to keep an eye on her, making his wounds continue their slow but steady drip of blood.

But he didn’t move. He didn’t even look at her. He knew where she was, and he knew her skills.

“Yeah,” he ground out painfully. “Politics. So … you went into business for yourself instead, huh?”

Hadan shrugged awkwardly.

“There is always plenty of work. Warlord against warlord … cartel against cartel … personal hatred and family vendettas. It’s a living,” she added as she noted Eliot’s stillness. “Why did you stop?”

Eliot closed his eyes for a moment and then opened them again, focusing on something indefinable in the depth of the mist.

“My business,” he said between gritted teeth.
Hadan nodded sagely as she began moving again, her blade poised, and now she was out of Eliot’s line of sight, even though he wasn’t watching her.

“Damien Moreau … he told me you gained a conscience,” she said, scorn in every word.

Eliot’s eyebrow twitched.

She knew Moreau. But of course she knew Moreau.

“He hired you to kill me,” he said, more of a statement than a question.

“He wanted to,” she answered as she settled herself. “But … I had another, more profitable job, so … I declined. He hired Coetzee instead*.”

And that made Eliot snort with humour.

“Yeah, well … we all know how that worked out,” he said, and his muscles relaxed a little.

“Coetzee was a fool,” Hadan said. “If I had taken the job you would not have lived.”

“Ya think??” Eliot retorted, and burst into action.

Leading with his left elbow he moved sideways and dropped to one knee, bringing the *katana* sweeping in a breath-taking sliver of light that was intended to take Hadan’s leg and dump her on the ground where Eliot could finish her off.

He nearly made it.

Hadan’s eyes widened and with a desperate, bone-aching leap she pivoted in the air, and even as she cartwheeled in the still air her own sword parried the *katana* and swept towards Eliot’s throat.

For a man slowly bleeding to death Eliot moved like a phantom. Pushing with his left foot he rolled to his right, off his bent knee and the blade whistled past his jaw without touching him, and he was up and running, not very well, it was true, but with purpose and skill.

Eliot submerged into the fog, the glitter of his sword the last thing to disappear, and Hadan landed lightly onto her feet and dropped instantly into a defensive crouch, the *dpa’dam* stretched low beside her, almost level to the ground.

The fog was thicker here near the bush, and she didn’t like the prospect of allowing Eliot Spencer to take the fight to this place he knew like the back of his hand, so Hadan slowly unfurled herself like a lethal, untidy butterfly, and allowed her sword to hang by her side.

She sighed, and walked slowly back to the middle of the yard. She hadn’t realised how much this man cared for these people he called family … all of them, including that dumpy old *xiǎo lǎopó* who cooked the foreigners’ food.

Her reverie was disturbed by the sound of the battered, bullet-hole-adorned front door opening and she looked up, squinting at the veranda.

Working his way cautiously through the doorway was the tall young black man who had killed Eades, and following behind was the tough old man who owned this huge, sprawling landscape, he and his equally tough wife. He was hurt, she could see. Blood soaked his right shoulder and the stark whiteness of the bandage glared loudly in this dull, misty world. He carried an old revolver, but she doubted he would be able to use it, wounded as he was.
But the round old woman who followed him was a different matter. Even as she gimped through the doorway, she lifted the pump-action shotgun she held to her shoulder and was on the point of taking aim when Eliot Spencer erupted from the fog.

Hadan cursed. She had allowed the people on the veranda to distract her for all of a few seconds, and Spencer had taken advantage of it.

The *katana* sliced downwards in a double-handed blow, and Hadan had to use every bit of her fast-waning strength to twist sideways in a move almost absurdly acrobatic, even as the *katana* cut a grazing blow across her back and she bit back a growl of annoyance as she powered a thrust sideways at the blur that was Eliot Spencer.

Eliot leaped like a salmon, turning in the air as he parried, and the swords clashed, the impact sending a shiver through the still air.

The two combatants separated as they fell and they both crashed to the ground, rolling apart and sprawling in the dust.

Both lay gasping, hurt and bleeding and almost finished, but first Eliot and then Hadan managed to turn over and lever their damaged frames upright, both swaying and using their swords to keep their balance.

Eliot wheezed, his breath coming in short, agonized gasps, and even as he tried to gain his balance he knew the next minute or so would mean life or death for either himself or Hadan – and right now, he wasn’t sure if he would be the one who came off best.

The mist was thickening even more, especially around the bush-line, and Eliot finally took a few deep, deep breaths, although the effort made his vision blur as his broken rib vehemently objected to the movement. He was bleeding from a dozen wounds and he could barely see. He was drenched with sweat and gore, and he was living on borrowed time, he knew it. He didn’t even know if he could muster enough power for one more blow.

Hadan turned to face him, and he saw the raggedness in her face and the dragging exhaustion in her stance. She could barely catch her breath.

Maybe … he thought doggedly … just maybe I can do this one more time.

And lifting the Sword of the *Okuri-Inu*, he set his shoulders straight, cracked the stiffness from his neck and slowed his heart.

Khenbish Hadan was the enemy. She would murder his family without a thought. She would kill his ‘Lizbeth Grace in a heartbeat. Eliot stood between one of the most lethal assassins in the world and the people he loved, and he was their protector until his dying day.

And as the fog enveloped both of them, Eliot smiled.

“What’s going on?? What’s happening?” Nate’s voice suddenly came from inside the house and startled Hardison as he stood, open-mouthed, riveted by the display of swordsmanship acting out in the mist in the yard, the clashing of swords and the indistinct shapes now being swallowed by the fog.

“Can’t … can’t see …! Hardison murmured, scared to death for Eliot but mesmerised by the battle.

Nate, Sophie and Jo had worked their way back along the hidden passage beneath the house, and
flinging back the trapdoor, they scrambled into Eliot’s room, only to find the house empty.

Jo ran past Nate and burst onto the veranda to see Soapy leaning against one of the veranda uprights, and she gasped with horror at the blood on her husband’s shoulder and flew into his arms.

Soapy winced at the hug she gave him, but Jo knew instantly he wasn’t too badly hurt and that Effie had done all she could do for now. She turned to Hardison and then peered out through the smashed fly-screen to the yard.

Sophie was beside them in an instant, and she heard the ring of sword against sword and two indistinct figures could be momentarily seen in the fog, and then they were once again hidden from view as they fought desperately, and she could see the staggering weariness of both combatants.

“Oh god …” Sophie gasped as she heard a very masculine grunt of pain echo through the still atmosphere.  “–is he –”

“He’s holding his own,” Soapy said as calmly as he could, but he felt Jo’s whole body flinch at the sound of Eliot, obviously hurting, as he battled this crazy, tiny assassin.

The fog swirled and shifted, and light from swift, deadly blades as they weaved in a beautiful, deadly dance flickered in the washed-out air, and once more there was a clash of metal on metal, and all of them, watching with desperation, gasped as a voice called out and a splatter of red sprayed through the mist.

And out of the fog, arcing high above the hidden battle, a sword flew. It hummed through the air, and plummeted downward, the point embedding itself deep, deep in the red dirt and quivering with the impact.

Hardison’s legs almost went out from beneath him.

“Oh … no-no-no …” he gasped. "Eliot!!"

To be continued …

* Read about Eliot’s meeting with Mason Coetzee in ‘Gertie – Part One.’
Gathering Truths

Chapter Summary

Angst, talking, and then more angst with a little bit of gruesome added … but not much.

The sword thrummed gently as it vibrated, standing straight and quivering in the dank earth. A weak glimmer of sunlight crept through the fog and winked off the reflected light of the turquoise and tiny coral chips embedded in its silver hilt, and the straight blade had a notch taken out of it near the cross-guard.

Blood smeared both blade and hilt.

“That … that’s not Eliot’s sword,” Jo muttered tightly, still hanging on to Soapy, who had his good arm wrapped around his wife.

Hardison blinked and stared harder at the sword.

“Wait … yeah … yeah …” he stammered, his voice turning from horror to desperate relief, “you … you’re right. That … that’s not Eliot’s sword!” He turned and grinned at the people around him.

“That’s not Eliot’s friggin’ sword!!” he repeated, as though saying it made the world a far better place to live in.

Is Eliot okay?? Parker’s voice crackled over the earbud. Hardison – is Eliot okay???

Hardison heard a sob in the background and knew Lizzie was waiting to know about her best friend … to know he was still alive.

“I … I don’t know yet,” he admitted, and tried to peer through the thick fog. “Can’t see –“

And at that moment, Eliot limped out of the swirling greyness, his katana held low by his side

He seemed more wound than man, soaked in blood as he was, and there was a collective intake of breath from his family as they saw him make his way over to the dpa’dam where it still quivered, upright and gleaming, in the dull light.

“Oh hell yeah!!” Hardison breathed, and he heard Parker’s YES!! burst through the earbud echoed by Lizzie’s sob of relief.

Nate took a few steps forward, intent on clattering down the veranda steps to Eliot, when Soapy’s voice cut through everyone’s almost palpable excitement.

“Wait!!” he growled, and Nate turned worried blue eyes to the old pastoralist.

“Soapy, he needs –“

“Leave him, Nate,” Soapy insisted urgently, his hangdog features grim and lined with pain. “He won’t see you … won’t know who you are. Give him a few minutes.”

Six pairs of eyes turned to the hitter as Eliot stopped by the dpa’dam and stared at it. He made no
move to pull the sword from the earth, and now they could hear the breath rasping from his chest and see the hard, flinching undercurrent of pain in every movement. It was obvious he was barely able to stand.

His eyes, though … when Eliot’s blue eyes flicked up at them they realised he didn’t recognise any of his family. He truly was, as Jo had explained, ‘in the zone.’ He was still attuned to any danger around him and his muscles were thrumming with tension and pain, and for the first time since he had met Eliot Spencer all those years ago, Nathan Ford fully understood what the man had been - a precise, deadly and unstoppable killing machine, and that realisation made Nate’s stomach churn.

Eliot had locked that part of him away when he left Moreau. He had come here to Wapanjara, badly wounded and ready to die, and in turn the people of Wapanjara had healed and saved him, body and soul. When he began to work with his new team, he was still the touchy, wary, deadly hitter. But his humanity, kept for so long in a place deep and still within him, began, oh so slowly, to rise to the surface. Over the years he had mellowed and learned to trust once more, and had proffered his life again and again for his team.

But never – never – had Nate seen Eliot as lost to them as he was right now.

“Nate …” Sophie’s voice came from right beside him. “Nate … we have to help him … dear god, look at him …” she whispered, the manicured nails of her right hand pinching as she clutched Nate’s arm.

But before anyone could do anything, another figure emerged from the fog. Khenbish Hadan, hunched and holding her right arm tight to her body as blood soaked her shoulder, staggered behind Eliot.

Immediately Effie raised the shotgun once more, ready to drop the assassin where she stood, but Hadan lurched to a halt and stood silently, several yards from Eliot, who turned his head slightly as though acknowledging her presence. But he did nothing.

Sophie shook her head slightly, confused.

“Wait … there … there’s something going on here …” she said quietly.

“Bugger that!!” Effie hissed angrily, “let me just blow the bitch apart where she stands!!”

Jo frowned and looked up at Soapy, who shrugged even though the movement hurt like billy-oh.

“No, Effie … Sophie’s right,” she murmured, and putting a hand out she pushed the shotgun barrels downwards.

“But Missus –” Effie was bristling like an old, angry bear, not willing to give up the fight. “That piece of shite came here to kill our nippers!!”

“Not with that arm, she isn’t,” Jo commented, studying the Mongolian’s ruined shoulder. “Eliot stuck her right through the shoulder, under the clavicle. There’s a whole bunch of nerves in there and I have a feeling he’s sliced the lot of ‘em,” she added thoughtfully. “He’s crippled her for life.”

Effie still wasn’t convinced, but Jo carefully gestured at Hadan.

“Look at her, Effie – look at the way she holds her left shoulder.” Jo’s lips twitched grimly. “I think you did her permanent damage when you filled her with buckshot.”
Effie squinted at Hadan. The evidence was slight, but it was there. Hadan was finding it difficult to hold her crippled right arm, and she seemed a little out of kilter, Effie decided, although it would be difficult to be sure given the damage the woman had taken.

Her eyes shifted back to Eliot. The line of her lips tightened and her muddy eyes glistened with tears.

“Our boy’s all bust up again, Missus,” she complained softly. “He’s bloody knackered, so he is. Why didn’t he just end the shonky cow and come back to us?”

“Don’t know, Eff,” Soapy rumbled. “He’s up to something –“

But Soapy’s words were cut short by Eliot turning slowly towards Hadan, whose olive eyes studied him bleakly.

The two adversaries gazed at one another for long moments, and then Hadan suddenly dropped awkwardly to her knees in front of Eliot. Closing her eyes, she bowed her head and waited. Eliot lifted the katana.

“Oh Jesus!” Hardison gasped. “He’s not … oh god … he’s not … is he??”

Sophie covered her mouth, shocked to the core, and Jo flinched. Nate’s face was pure stone. Effie was right – this woman had come to Wapanjara to kill his family … his daughter.

Surely Eliot wouldn’t do such a thing, Jo thought … take Hadan’s head in front of these people he loved?

But slowly Eliot seemed to emerge from the distant place in his mind, and he glanced up at his family. He let out a deep, ragged sigh, one that came from somewhere dark and deadly inside him.

“Stand up, if you can,” he ground out to Hadan.

The Mongolian frowned, unsure of what was happening, but she struggled to her feet.

Eliot dug around in his pocket and bringing out his earbud, slipped it into his ear.

“Charlie??” he said hoarsely. “Can you hear me??”

Eliot!! Lizzie yelled, sobbing, Eliot! Are you –

“Charlie??” Eliot cut in, trying to stay focused even as his head throbbed, and he was struggling to keep his mind straight. Much as he desperately wanted to settle Lizzie’s worries, he didn’t have much time left.

Hey, brother … you’re still breathing then? Charlie said carefully even as Lizzie made a little noise of confusion and distress.

“Just about,” Eliot replied, not without humour. “Can you go get that driver you frightened the crap out of? Bring him into the yard?”

Sure, Charlie answered, and Eliot could see in his mind’s eye Charlie’s eyebrows raised in curiosity. Be with you in a minute or two, mate, he added. Anything else?

Eliot wiped the sweat from his brow with his free hand. He was fading fast, and he had decisions to make before he could give in and just pass out.

“Yeah … yeah there is. Can you an’ Parker take the ute and go gather up anybody out there in the
bush that’s still alive? Bring ’em back to the house?”

“Awwww, do we have to?” Parker pouted, and Eliot had to smile, even though it was a struggle to
make his lips carry out the movement.

“*Dammit, Parker!*” he drawled, with no bite at all in his weary voice, “Just do it, will ya?”

Eliot heard Parker take a breath so she could argue more, but he kept going.

“And no, Parker, you can’t use Mister Zappy!” he said with just a hint of a growl.

*You’re no fun, Eliot!* came the waspish reply, and the whole team sighed with relief at Eliot’s retorts. Their hitter was slowly coming back to them.

But Eliot had one more thing to do.

“’Lizbeth Grace … I’m fine,” he rasped gruffly, “Just *fine.* Okay? Your momma or daddy will come
get you in a little bit an’ you can come back to the house. You an’ Mei an’ the others stay put for
now. It’s nearly over.”

There was silence for a moment, and then Lizzie spoke, her voice coming in a stammering whisper.

*Okay … Eliot … I … I’m … you’re not hurt?*

Eliot sighed, but didn’t reply.

*Eliot??* Lizzie repeated, unsure of why Eliot was so hesitant. *Are … are you okay? Grandma Jo, is Eliot –*

“I’ll see you soon, ’Lizbeth Grace,” Eliot cut in. “Now, I got more work to do, so leave me be until
I’m done, an’ then you can come back. You an’ Kip look after Mei an’ the babies. Promise?” He
asked, weary beyond belief.

There was a long pause, and then Lizzie broke the silence between these two people who had been
the best of friends since Lizzie came into the world, yelling and bawling and held gently and
carefully in Eliot’s deadly hands.

*I … I promise.*

“Good girl,” Eliot smiled genuinely then, and turned to Hadan. He could barely move, he
discovered, but he made his limbs work and he shifted uneasily, trying not to stumble as he leaned
down and wrenched the *dpa’dam* from the red earth.

Hadan glared at him, still fighting in her mind, but there was more than a hint of acceptance in her
gaze.

Eliot nodded to himself. *She understood.*

“I’m not going to kill you,” he forced out, enunciating as clearly as he could even as his voice
wavered.

Hadan straightened carefully, and she couldn’t stop a whimper of pain from passing through her lips,
and she scowled at her own weakness.

“Why?” she asked, curious now.
Eliot grimaced.

“Because you want to die an’ I ain’t gonna let you, *Khenbishi*.” He took a shallow breath. “You’re not worth it, y’see,” he continued, and his dull blue eyes suddenly sparked with satisfaction. “Because you’re *nobody*.”

Hadan visibly flinched.

Everyone on the veranda held their breath as Eliot mustered what little energy he had left, and stood strong and proud and triumphant.

“You leave here, an’ you take your sword with you … to remind you you’ll never use it again … at least, not against me an’ mine,” he added. “*On your honour,*” he finished, and holding the *dpā’dam* by its damaged blade, he held it out, hilt-first, to Hadan.

Hesitantly, Hadan let go of her wrecked right arm and grasped the hilt with her left hand. But Eliot held the blade tightly for a moment and gazed deep, deep into Hadan’s eyes.

“*You maybe nobody,*” he said softly, “*but you got honour in you. An’ I respect that. So you owe me, Hadan. You owe me a debt you can’t possibly repay, so when you leave here, you leave my people alone. *Always. Because if you do come after anyone* I care about, I *will* dishonour you an’ no-one will ever fear you again. Because I’ll put your head on a pole an’ I’ll make damn sure those wore-out boots of yours’re hangin’ from your ears. *You understand me?*”

Hadan paled, but nodded.

From Beijing to Ulaanbaatar, to declare that a woman wore worn-out shoes meant she was a woman of very loose morals, and Eliot knew this would strike hard at the Mongolian’s sense of self. The loss of face, much more than the loss of her head, would make the assassin a laughing stock in a world where reputation, living or dead, was everything - and her reputation as one of the world’s deadliest assassins was Hadan’s only vanity.

Like Eliot, she stood as steadily as she could, and dropped him a formal nod.

“I accept,” she said, clearly and with a tone of finality that Eliot understood. She would keep her word.

Eliot swayed and letting go of the sword blade, he caught the handrail of the veranda to keep himself standing, and it took all of his strength to not show his weakness.

No-one on the veranda moved or said a word. They understood that Eliot had to do this on his own, to show his resilience and tenacity, and to prove his honour. To interfere would have been anathema, and Eliot would have never forgiven them.

So, to show support to a beaten and bloody Oklahoman with a stubborn streak a mile wide and a pride in his work, they stood quiet and still while fretting themselves witless.

“Jo …” Eliot managed to croak out, “do you have somethin’ to stop her arm fallin’ off? A pressure bandage or somethin’ like it?” Eliot’s accent was getting stronger, as it often did when he was exhausted or hurt.

Jo started in surprise, and Effie growled.

“You’re not going to stop that bitch from bleeding to death, are you, Missus?” Effie snarled, but her eyes widened at the look on Jo’s face. “Missus??? She nearly killed our boy –”
Jo glanced at Effie, her face stiff with anger, but she nodded.

“It’s Eliot’s decision, Effie … he knows what he’s doing, so …” Jo ended with an unhappy shrug.

“But – “ Effie wasn’t about to let it go, but Soapy shook his head silently, and Effie settled into a muttering simmer, her shotgun still ready to go if need be.

But Nate understood.

Eliot had long ago tired of killing, and now he had been forced to kill a man not once, but probably twice in one day, if Chong had lost the battle to stay alive, however tenuous that life might be.

At some point in this last, vicious battle he had decided on another solution – to cripple Hadan and make her live with the disgrace and dishonour of it. And Nate could deal with that, he thought.

As Jo disappeared into the house to fetch a bandage, Charlie arrived, walking around the corner of the house with the terrified young aborigine who was Chong’s driver in tow, Charlie’s old boomerang dangling nonchalantly from the station manager’s grasp. In his other hand Charlie held the reins of a sweat-drenched Batu, who ambled along behind him. Gertie was a few steps further back, keeping an eye on both Batu and the driver and grumbling to herself.

“Look what I found!” Charlie called out, grinning. But the grin faded as he saw Eliot’s condition. “Bloody hell, papparti!* I’ve seen better looking corpses, mate!”

Eliot finally allowed himself his own grin, even as he desperately fought to keep upright. To sit down on the steps now would show weakness in front of Hadan.

“Looks worse’n it is,” he answered readily, although everyone, including Eliot, knew it wasn’t true.

Then came the rumble of the old homestead ute as Parker drove it into the yard and brought it to a halt. After turning off the engine, the little thief leapt from the driver’s seat and charged towards Eliot, her eyes wide with worry as she took in his condition.

But Charlie dropped Batu’s reins and caught her around the waist as she ran past, hoisting her back before setting her once more on her feet.

“Let me go, Charlie!!” she hissed, and scowled at the young station manager. But Charlie whispered in her ear and she quieted, nodding reluctantly. “Okay … okay … I get it. But when we’ve found all of those … those drongos, then I can hug Eliot??”

“Yeah … once he’s been patched up, kukkaji**,” Charlie said trying to ease Parker’s worry.

He shoved the driver towards the big truck still parked in front of the shattered gate.

“Wait over there, and don’t move, brother,” he said quietly, and as the young aborigine stumbled over to the truck, Charlie walked forward, once more leading the big roan gelding, and tied Batu’s reins to the veranda rails.

Glancing at Eliot, who nodded his thanks, Charlie stared for long moments at Hadan. When he finally spoke his voice was redolent with menace.

“There is nothing more I would like than to see you dead,” he said. “The man you worked for ordered my wife’s death, and the man you shared your bed with murdered her. They are gone now. I trust my brother … ” he gestured at Eliot, “… and I trust his wisdom in letting you live. But if you return here … “ and it was only now that Charlie’s voice deepened in grief, “then I will skin you,
and your living flesh will be left for the dingoes and the ants to eat.”

And turning on his heel, Charlie headed to the ute, followed by a subdued Parker. Sliding into the passenger seat, he said something to the young woman now seated beside him, and they drove past the truck and the terrified driver and disappeared into the mist-riddled bush.

Jo emerged from the house and ran down the veranda steps. She was holding two large pressure bandages, and stopping in front of Hadan, she gritted her teeth and gestured at the Mongolian’s wound.

Hadan stared at Jo and then at the bandage. Then she swallowed her pride and allowed Jo to strap up her mangled shoulder.

When Jo had almost finished, Hadan studied the small woman and looked into sparkling green eyes, seeing the anger in Jo’s every movement.


Jo chewed the inside of her cheek as she tied a knot in the strapping, and then glared at Hadan.

“Because Eliot asked me to help you,” she said, her voice shaky with fury. “And because he’s family and he protects us with every inch of his being, we do what we can when he asks us for help. Because that’s what real families do. And because your family let you down, you won’t understand that. Ever.”

Hadan flinched as though she had been slapped. Muscles jumped along her jawline and she had to look away from the intensity of Jo’s gaze.

And then Khenbish Hadan recognised the feeling now crawling through every inch of her body. She was ashamed.

Jerking her head in thanks, she turned away and limped over to Batu to lean against his sturdy frame for support.

Jo turned to Eliot, the other pressure bandage in her hand.

He squinted at her, his eyes now dazed, but he shook his head to stop her trying to ease the bandage under his torn teeshirt and against the bullet hole in his side.

“Not yet, Jo,” he said faintly so that Hadan couldn’t hear him. “Not yet. Wait until she’s gone. I’ll be fine until then.”

Jo frowned, not amused by his ridiculous pride.

“Eliot … son … this is nonsense –“

“If I don’t move,” he replied and winced as he said it, “I can stand it. I can manage for a little while longer. I’ll be okay.”

Jo stared at him incredulously, but Eliot just winked at her.

“Go take care of Soapy before he leaves blood all over the veranda,” he murmured warmly, and Jo knew he was only staying upright by sheer willpower alone. If she stayed, she thought, she would burst into tears. She jammed the bandage into her pants pocket and scowled.
“Alright, boy. But heaven help you when this is done. Effie’s on the warpath as it is, and she’s going
to turn you into rissoles for this!” And then she was gone, trotting up the veranda steps and herding
her still-bleeding husband into the house.

The look of hatred on Effie McPhee’s face was a sight to behold as she watched Hadan rest her
damaged body by leaning on the patient Batu. But that look melted into distress and worry as she
turned watery eyes to Eliot.

She handed the shotgun to Nate and turned to Hardison.

“No now you listen to me, sunbeam – I’m going to help the Missus patch up Mister M, so you look out
for that stupid bastard,” she said, glaring at Eliot. “You hear me?? And if he even begins to look
wonkier than he already is, you come get me. Understand??”

Hardison had a job dragging his gaze away from Eliot, as if he could keep the hitter upright and
conscious simply by staring at him, but he managed to look at Effie.

“Yeah … yeah, Effie … I hear you.” His eyes drifted back to Eliot … to the man standing hanging
on to the veranda handrail as though his life depended on it, dirty and bloody and beaten, but also
desperate to protect his people. “I’ll watch out for him. I promise.”

“Good lad,” Effie rumbled, and instead of giving Hardison a loving clip across the ear, she patted his
cheek. “You’re a bloody credit to your Nana.”

And hobbling into the house, she left Hardison, Sophie and Nate to watch over Eliot and keep an
eye on Hadan.

And not one of them moved, knowing Eliot needed to do this on his own.

It took nearly an hour for Parker and Charlie to round up the various damaged bodies littering the
vicinity, but with the aid of wire clippers, a hammer and the occasional threatening gesture with
Mister Zappy, the two of them returned to the homestead with a groaning pile of injured men
sprawled on the flatbed of the ute.

Eliot was still standing by the veranda, hanging on to the handrail of the old wooden steps. His eyes
were half-closed as though it was too much effort to keep then open, and he was shaking with the
sheer effort of keeping himself on his feet.

Before the ute had even stopped, Charlie was out of the passenger seat and trotting over to Eliot. He
jogged to a halt as he studied the hitter, chewing his lip anxiously at Eliot’s condition.

“Eliot … brother … you need a hospital, mate –“

Eliot pried open his eyes and peered at Charlie. The hitter was pale and sweating, and Charlie had no
idea how Eliot was even conscious.

“Put … put ‘em in the truck,” Eliot said with effort, ignoring Charlie’s comment, “an’ get the driver
to take ‘em to Albany.” He cracked a ghostly grin. “Don’t worry - they won’t talk. Hadan’ll see to
that,” he added, glancing at the Mongolian who seemed to be dozing, propped against the horse.

“There’s another truck up by the stringybarks,” Charlie added, eyeing the little assassin. “I, uh … I
managed to drag the dead ‘uns over to it and haul ‘em in. If you want ‘em at Albany, somebody can
drive the extra truck and I can follow on your bike. Nate, are you up for a night drive?”
“No problem,” Nate said from his place leaning against the doorway into the house, still holding Effie’s shotgun pointed at Hadan. “Jo’ll need Parker here to help with Eliot,” he added, looking at his friend. Watching Eliot over the past hour as the man stood, sick and badly hurt but refusing to give in to it, had almost been too much to bear. “Can we do the whole trip in a night?”

“No probs,” Charlie answered, and then reached out to touch Eliot’s shoulder. “It’s done, papparti” he said. “She can go now … to the Dreaming Land. She’s been avenged.”

Eliot nodded almost imperceptibly, but winced as he did so.

“Yeah. It feels …” he reached for a word and found it. “It feels better.” He glanced at Charlie. “Ryan … can you haul him outta here? And Chong? I got no idea if the bastard’s still alive, but … I just want them away from Wapanjara. Then Hardison can get to work.”

“Parker can take me up to Manaji Point in the morning, Charlie, once El’s cleaned up. I got a lot of stuff to send to lots of people. It’s going to be … interesting,” Hardison explained, a little smugly.

Charlie nodded in agreement.

“No worries. Once I get these dead people away from here, Sophie, could you bring Mei and the kids home? Eliot, Lizzie’s fretting herself silly. You’ve got to straighten out the aggro between you two, mate. Seriously.”

Eliot pried himself away from the handrail and somehow managed to stand unaided.

“Later,” he said, and let out a low, pained grunt as his battered body objected. Before anyone could stop him, he began to make his way over to Chong’s body, three pairs of eyes following every flinching, painful step he took.

Sophie sighed.

“I, ah … I’ll go get Mei and the children now. It won’t take you long to move Ryan and that … that … thing over there, will it?” she said, gesturing at Chong’s body partially hidden by fog.

“Nah. Give me a minute or two and it’ll be done,” Charlie said, feeling better than he had done since Alice’s passing. Somehow he felt he could breathe easier, knowing his beloved wife was free now to go where she needed to go, to move on to the Dreaming Land.

He took a good look at Hadan. The woman was beaten and crippled, but she was still alive. Eliot had let her live. But Charlie understood his brother’s thoughts – Hadan was a message. If she could be defeated, then word would get around that Wapanjara was protected by the best … by Eliot Spencer.

Turning away from the little assassin, Charlie headed off to collect Ryan’s butchered carcass and to remove both Ryan and Chong from Wapanjara, never to return.

Ignoring the groaning men now being moved by Parker into the truck, the young driver wide-eyed but willing to help as long as Charlie didn’t make his bones melt and his flesh rot, Eliot held in the pain and ignored the slickness of oozing blood to stand over Chong Bun-Tsui’s broken body.

Against all the odds, the man was still alive.

A dark, frightened eye stared up at Eliot, tears drying on the dying snakehead’s bruised and broken face. Eliot glanced at the handless wrist, wrapped desperately in a useless sleeve and soaked with blood. Chong didn’t have long to live, Eliot knew. He also knew that his own condition was
becoming more and more dangerous … he was very slowly bleeding to death. He knew that now. If the small but steady leak of blood from his body wasn’t halted soon, he would die.

But it would be worth it if his family was safe.

He rested the point of the *katana* on Chong’s chest as the wreck of a human being tried to speak.

“Don’t bother,” Eliot grated, his voice no louder than a gruff whisper. “You’re dyin’. It won’t be long now, although the longer you hang on the better I like it.” His eyes darkened with menace, and even as Chong’s wordless, shattered mouth tried to make words that would never be uttered, Eliot cocked his head, studying the thing that had once been a powerful, influential and deadly man. “Hey … don’t feel bad, m’man. You couldn’t help bein’ a useless, weak asshole.” The faint humour in Eliot’s voice was at odds with the icy blue eyes boring into Chong’s misbegotten heart. “Yeah … an’ it won’t be long until your daddy follows you, I reckon. Try an’ die well, shithead.” Eliot twitched a smile. “’Bye.”

Eliot turned his back on Chong and limped slowly away.

And as Charlie and the young aborigine grabbed hold of Chong’s blood-sodden clothes and heaved his wrecked and failing body into the truck, he managed a gargle of agony, even as his amputated hand landed beside him, still holding the knife.

Surrounded by his wounded men and Ryan’s corpse, Chong Bun Tsui, snakehead and sole heritor of the Shumchun Triads, stared at the sightless eyes of Derry Ryan and tried to scream.

Eliot wondered if he would even make it back to the veranda steps, but he heard someone move to walk beside him, and he felt Charlie’s hand touch his arm.

“I’m here, papparti,” the young man murmured. “I won’t let you fall.”

Swallowing dryly, Eliot jerked a small nod.

“Thanks, kukkaji,” he grunted, and was about to rest his free hand on Charlie’s shoulder for support when a small, boyish voice shrieked with delight and Charlie suddenly had his arms full of young Christopher Eliot Jakkamarra, the little boy hugging his father now that the danger had passed.

“ELIOT!!” Lizzie ran around the corner of the house, followed by Sophie and Mei carrying the twins, Buster trotting behind them.

“Lizzie, wait —” Sophie called out, but trying to stop Elizabeth Grace Ford from running to her beloved guardian would have been as difficult as stopping a speeding freight train.

Eliot stuttered to a halt, swaying, and Charlie had to use all of his willpower not to reach out a hand to help, even as Kip hung onto his father with both arms.

For a moment Eliot thought Lizzie was going to fling herself at him, and he didn’t know if he could survive the impact. But just in time, Lizzie slid to a standstill beside Eliot. She gazed up at him with horrified brown eyes, taking in the blood and wounds and dirt, but Eliot just hung his head, not looking at Lizzie’s frightened face.

Lizzie saw Eliot’s free hand clench, and stopped herself from reaching out to hold his fingers, as she had done all of her short life. *He was still angry with her.* But she swallowed her sadness and as Eliot once again began his long, painful walk towards the house, she walked slowly beside him, knowing that even though he was angry he desperately needed her, and she would never abandon
him.

Eliot, ashamed and knowing what he really was, was grateful for her care, no matter that she had seen him kill a man like the cold-blooded assassin he was.

Had an was still waiting beside the house. She had, with some difficulty, untied Batu’s reins and she stood patiently for Eliot and Charlie, with Lizzie in tow and Kip still held tightly by his father, to reach the steps.

For a few moments she studied the two men, one a father and the other a guardian, and nodded. She had made a decision.

She stepped towards Charlie, and Eliot let out a low growl, but Lizzie touched his hand.

“It’s alright, Eliot … it’s fine …” she whispered softly, and Eliot subsided but still watched Hadan as she studied Kip, who stared back with wide black eyes.

“My Rafe killed your mother, and then your horse,” Hadan said bluntly, and Charlie’s eyes darkened, but he said nothing. “My people … when a death is caused by another’s hand, have to pay restitution.”

Now Kip frowned, puzzled. He had no idea what restitution was, but this strange, tiny woman’s eyes were calm.

Hadan held out Batu’s reins and surprised, Kip took them in one hand.

“His name is Batu,” she said. “His name means ‘loyal one’ in my people’s tongue. He is a good horse. I cannot take him where I am going, and he deserves someone who will treat him well. Will you do that? If I give him to you? As a small part of my restitution for your loss? To replace the horse you lost.”

Kip looked at Batu, and then turned to his father, feeling confused.

Charlie smiled sadly at his son. A horse was no replacement for Alice, but dear old Bomber’s loss had been more undeserved grief.

“Well, Kip? Would you like to have Batu? As your own?” he asked his son.

Kip thought about it, and then Batu stretched out his neck and lipped at Kip’s fingers. Kip let loose a tiny smile.

“Yes, please!” He whispered, and rubbed Batu’s soft nose. “Hello, Batu.”

Hadan nodded to herself. She had chosen well.

And without saying another word, she walked stiffly towards the truck and climbed in, not looking back.

Charlie sighed and then set Kip on the ground.

“Dad … Batu looks like he needs some food and water. Can I take him around to Gertie’s paddock and give him a brush and something to eat?”

Charlie let a tired grin slip out.
“He’s your horse, son. He’s your responsibility.”

Kip grinned, but the joy faded from his face as he looked at Eliot.

“Are you going to be alright, Eliot? You look pretty banged up,” he said.

Eliot somehow arranged a twisted smile on his face as he studied Kip.

“I’ll be up and runnin’ before you know it, boy. Go on now – take care of your horse,” he ground out, trying to not look as though he was on the point of keeling over.

As Kip led Batu away, Sophie and Mei watched as Charlie strode back to the truck and pushed up the tailgate. Then the young man turned and shouted to Nate.

“I’ll go get Eliot’s bike, and we can head off. You ready, mate?”

Nate waved an acknowledgement and kissed Sophie on the cheek.

“I’ll be back tomorrow morning. Will you guys be able to take care of –“

“Yes, yes!” Sophie answered brusquely, “Go!” and she returned Nate’s kiss. “We’ll take care of Eliot. Don’t worry,” she muttered under her breath so only he could hear.

And knowing Sophie was as good as her word, Nate hurried into the house and retrieved his jacket, and then headed over to the truck. By the time Charlie had returned riding Eliot’s old Ducati and carrying a spare helmet hung over one handlebar, Nate was ready to go.

Sophie and Mei watched the truck and the Ducati make their way up the foggy incline to the stringybarks where the other truck awaited them. The young Aborigine would then lead the little convoy along the road away from Wapanjara and head to Albany.

Eliot could barely focus. He could make out the shape of the truck, and he could sense Lizzie standing beside him, but not much else other than the throb of pain throughout his body. He tried to take a deep breath and failed.

“Okay, Eliot … let’s get you –“ Sophie began, and still carrying little Jamie she turned to the hitter. “Eliot??”

But Eliot didn’t hear her. He tried to take a few steps, but his legs wouldn’t behave, and he began to falter. Before he knew it he dropped the katana and stumbled, trying to right himself.

The impact as he hit the ground drove what little breath he had from his lungs, and the last thing he remembered was a pair of small hands cradling his head and a little voice yelling in the distance.

“ELIOT!! Mama - Mama, help him!! Eliot’s dying!!” Lizzie cried.

And then Eliot faded into oblivion.

To be continued …

* Papparti – Warumungu word for ‘big brother’ or ‘older brother.’

* Kukkaji – Warumungu word for ‘little/younger brother’ or ‘little/younger sister’. The word is used
for either gender, which is highly unusual in Aboriginal languages where people are defined by strong familial ties.
Chapter Summary

Blood, talking and angst. And more talking.

My sincerest thanks to Anne.Ryce of FF.net for her help in sorting out blood types and emergency field transfusion procedures. Her skill and experience has been abso-bloody-lutely invaluable. This chapter is for her.

“No, Eliot … you can’t die … you can’t …” Lizzie whispered, keeping up a litany of desperate words as she lifted Eliot’s head onto her lap, trying to make him understand that she was with him and that she would not let him die because he was her Eliot … her guardian, her protector and her best friend. But he did not answer her, lost as he was in a world of distant voices and long-dead faces.

Even as Hardison tumbled in a flurry of arms and legs down the veranda steps to drop down beside Lizzie, Sophie stared in horror at Eliot’s sudden collapse. She had an armful of baby, and Eliot needed her … and her daughter was a weeping wreck, cradling Eliot’s head in her lap, patting his sweat-soaked hair and stroking his bruised and bloodied face.

“Here!” Mei whispered urgently, “Give Jamie to me – I go to Papa Soapy and he will care for them while I get help!”

Sophie took Mei at her word. The young girl managed to hold both babies, and she tripped lightly up the steps and into the house, calling for Soapy and Jo because the cowboy was dying and needed them.

Sophie dropped down in the dust on the other side of Eliot while Hardison checked his best friend’s pulse, and he nodded tightly.

“His heart’s runnin’ like the favourite for the Kentucky Derby,” he said, and his eyes fixed on Eliot’s wounds, trying to figure out where the culprit was – there was a bleeder somewhere.

Hardison knew enough about injuries, especially after hanging around Eliot for years, to look for the not-so-obvious. Eliot’s wounds were mostly superficial, bloody and painful, but most were clotting. Hardison’s main worries were the bullet holes in his side, or … he swallowed dryly … maybe Eliot was bleeding internally. Given the running battle he had been involved in and the damage he had taken, there was a serious possibility that Eliot’s rib had done something terrible inside the hitter’s sturdy body.

He heard the clatter of footsteps as Jo and Mei crowded down the steps even as he gently ran long fingers over Eliot’s bloody side. Pulling up what was left of the torn teeshirt, Hardison could see that the older bullet wound had bled. There were fresh stains, and the heavy bandaging was spongy with blood, but it didn’t appear to be bleeding right now. Frowning, he slid his hand upwards to the second wound, the tear through the pectoral muscle and the groove along Eliot’s side under his arm.

The hacker’s face became grim.
“Hey, baby-girl,” he said, touching Lizzie’s shoulder, “c’mon now … Eliot needs your help. I think I found where he’s losin’ blood, an’ I need you to help your Momma an’ I turn him a little. D’you think you can help us do that?”

Lizzie turned reddened, teary eyes to Hardison and stopped her whimpered words of grief. She nodded, even as the hiccupping sobs racked her frame.

“What … what can I do?” she asked softly, her hands still trying to soothe her unconscious guardian as he lay sprawled on the red earth.

Hardison smiled at her, trying to reassure her.

“You jus’ tell him what we’re doin’, okay? That we’re gonna stop the bleedin’ and get him all patched up.”

“But … but he can’t hear me – “ Lizzie whispered, not daring to hope that Eliot could be whole again.

“He can hear you, Lizzie …” Sophie was urgently checking out Eliot’s other side. “Eliot will always hear you, my darling, even though you think he can’t.” She pulled up Eliot’s tee on the other side and checked the nick in his flank. It was bloody, but not life-threatening. “He’s seems to be alright this side … mostly,” she said as Jo kneeled beside Hardison.

Jo noted the sheen of sweat on Eliot’s skin and the thud of his pulse as Lizzie tenderly held his head. Here we go again, she thought. Why does he do this? Why does he always have to put himself in the way of harm? And even as she thought it, she knew why. This was what Eliot did for the people he loved.

“Lizzie, sweetheart,” Jo said, all business now, “you have to lay his head flat on the ground.” She pulled out the pressure bandage she still carried in her pocket and as Lizzie very carefully slipped Eliot’s head from her lap and onto the dusty earth, Hardison and Sophie gently eased Eliot onto his right side, and there it was. Underneath the torn and bloody teeshirt was a small, inconsequential-looking hole in the muscle, through-and-through, and as Eliot was moved dark, venous blood pulsed slightly from both parts of the wound.

“Damn … every time he moved he lost blood … no wonder he’s compromised,” Jo muttered as she unfolded the bandage and pressed it hard against the wound. “The bullet must’ve nicked a vein.” She looked up at Sophie, Hardison and Mei. “He … he needs to go to hospital.”

Sophie leaned over and helped Jo put pressure on the wound, and Lizzie stroked Eliot’s cheek, whispering to him in words no-one could hear. But Lizzie knew in her heart that Eliot could hear her, unconscious as he was.

Sophie’s dark eyes glistened, but she had to ask Jo one thing.

“Jo … if we call the flying doctors … will he make it to the nearest hospital?”

Jo glanced at Lizzie as the little girl did her best to tell Eliot he was loved and she would take care of him. She shook her head.

“No,” she murmured. “The nearest RFDS* base is Alice Springs, and we’d have to get him to Tennant Creek to be picked up – either we could take him or we’d call in the emergency services from the hospital there. It’s a 2-hour drive each way, and although they’ve got acute beds … well, Eliot would never make it, no matter how we got him there.” She chewed her lip as she checked the bleeding. It was slowing, but the leak from the nicked vein would begin again if Eliot moved. In two
hours he could be dead.

“Can you fix this?” Hardison ground out as he watched Lizzie.

Jo’s green eyes widened.

“I … I don’t know … he needs oxygen right now, and whole blood … maybe plasma … we have none of those things and I don’t even know Eliot’s blood type—“

“A-positive,” Parker snapped as she joined them, jogging around the side of the house from the barn after putting away the ute. “Eliot’s A-positive.” She saw the surprise in the faces around her. “What? D’you think Eliot would put an emergency medikit together and not include a list of everyone’s blood type??”

Hardison’s smile was grim.

“Figures.” He touched Lizzie’s shoulder once again and the little girl looked up at him, wide-eyed.

“Is he going to be alright, Alec? Grandma Jo? Can you fix him like you did before?” She asked, hope in every word.

Jo swallowed.

“I have to try, don’t I? But supplies – I don’t have -“

Parker grinned, worried as she was.

“Oxygen bottles and mask coming up, plus we carry five units of FFP in Oggie,” she added. “We’d have to defrost it though.” She sobered a little. “I don’t know how to do any of this … this … blood thing. Eliot’s the one who knows.”

“Well, babe,” Hardison said softly, “when we’ve got the fool through this little escapade, we need to all damn well learn how to use all of this stuff he’s got. Dammit, he’s the one who usually uses the medikit the most, so … “

“Missus!!” Effie rumbled urgently from the veranda. “The table’s cleaned and ready. Let’s get the idiot stitched up, hey??”

It took a moment to figure out how they would lift Eliot as gently as possible and keep pressure on the wound, but with Jo and Parker taking the brunt of Eliot’s solid weight as he was carried on his side, Hardison with his good arm around Eliot’s legs and Mei tending to the wound, they managed it. Lizzie, with a maturity that both worried and impressed her mother, supported Eliot’s lolling head while walking backwards up the steps, along the verandah and into the house, talking to him every inch of the way as she studied his pale, sweat-drenched features.

Effie already had cushions ready to go, the kettle and a couple of big pots sitting on the stove heating water and a supply of clean towels to hand. Before Eliot was even settled properly on the old oak table, Lizzie had positioned a cushion under his head and pulled up a stool to sit beside him.

Parker was gone in a moment, tugging Mei with her, and both young women appeared again just as Jo, heart in mouth, began to cut off Eliot’s teeshirt so she could deal with the still-bleeding wound.

All Hardison could see of Mei was a pair of legs peeking out from beneath an armful of equipment. Considering the young woman, already in poor condition, had given birth only days earlier, she was bouncing back with alacrity.
Parker dragged in a sturdy rectangular container and with Hardison’s help she lifted it onto the nearest kitchen surface. Unclipping the lid, she pulled out a small oxygen tank and quickly fitted a regulator and mask. Mei was busy sorting through the collection of tubes and sterile packs and containers she had brought in and she suddenly let out a squeak of excitement

“Look!” she said, holding up a grey vacuum-sealed package with the words ‘FIELD BLOOD TRANSFUSION KIT’ stamped on it. “Will this help?”

Jo, peeling back the teeshirt and wincing at the sluggish bleeding still coming from the injury under Eliot’s arm, raised an eyebrow. She noticed another, smaller label which read ‘TACTICAL MEDICAL MODULE.’ How the hell Eliot had got hold of military-issue transfusion kits, she had no idea, but she thanked God for his forethought.

“Perfect!” she said with feeling, “how many are there?”

Mei rummaged in the bag she held. “Four,” she said. “Is that enough?”

Jo nodded.

“I think so … it depends if any of you are O-Neg -“

“I am,” Effie said quietly as she watched Parker and Lizzie fit the oxygen mask over Eliot’s nose and mouth and adjust the regulator. “Universal donor, that’s me.” She added, and rolled up her sleeve.

Parker seated the oxygen tank on another stool beside Lizzie, and nodded with satisfaction as she heard the sudden hiss of the regulator helping feed the gas to Eliot’s depleted system and support his vital organs. Without it, Eliot would become even more seriously compromised.

“Listen, Lizzie,” she said, and the little girl regarded Parker intently. “You have to make sure Eliot keeps this mask on, especially if he wakes up. It’s really helping him right now, so can I leave you in charge? It should last an hour or so, but we have more, so he’ll be okay for a little while.”

Lizzie gently pushed a damp curl of Eliot’s hair back from the wound alongside his ear and made sure the elasticated band didn’t irritate the damaged flesh.

“Will this make him better?” she asked tremulously.

“Indeed it will, young Lizzie,” Jo said with a little more confidence now that there was at least a chance she could help Eliot. “He’s lost a lot of blood, which carries oxygen which helps his body work properly, so … the mask will do the work his blood usually does, and it will help him feel better,” she explained, trying to make it simple for Lizzie to comprehend.

Lizzie’s face cleared as she understood, and listening for a moment, she smiled.

“I can hear him breathing,” she said, relieved, as she saw the mask fog up as Eliot took the life-giving oxygen into his lungs and thence into his bloodstream.

“You just make sure he keeps doing that then,” Jo said as she scrubbed her hands with the medical soap and hot water Effie had provided, and then she slipped on a pair of nitrile gloves. She looked up to see Sophie and Hardison also rolling up their sleeves.

“O-neg??” she asked, relieved.

“Indeed we are,” Sophie replied. “Maybe Eliot’ll develop a few less-growly traits with some healthy British blood flowing through those punchy veins,” she continued affectionately, resting a hand on
“Yeah, well,” Hardison said, “I reckon he just might get a likin’ for gummy frogs, the philistine, an’ maybe figure out that there’s more’n one way to reboot a computer other than just kickin’ it.” He shrugged painfully. “Some computer-y genius blood comin’ your way, bro,” he added, patting Eliot’s boot.

“Right … let’s see …” Jo said to herself, and unpacked a selection of vacuum-packed sterilised scalpels and forceps … “Parker … we’ll need saline … hang the bag higher than Eliot … and open up one of those transfusion packs. Effie … can you pour some water into a bowl and it has to be 45 degrees. I want two bags of FFP defrosting in there, and if you could gently scrunch them about a bit every now and again, that would be great. If we could get some blood and saline in him, it would help no end while I try and sort out this dratted bleed.”

Jo was once more the experienced nurse she had been for over thirty years, and she still treated the stockmen for injuries and illness. She had delivered countless babies, and had sat beside people during their last moments, her quiet words and smiles and gentle touches easing their passing. She had done her time in emergency and trauma care, and had even done a stint as a theatre nurse. Now she used all of that experience and skill to try and stop Eliot Spencer from bleeding to death.

“How’s he doing, old girl?” a voice came from the kitchen doorway.

Jo glanced up to see Soapy leaning carefully against the door frame, right arm heavily bandaged and supported by a sling. Her husband’s dark eyes were shining with desperation and worry.

“He’s alive, love, and we’re working to keep him that way.” Jo gestured at Sophie and pushed her down in a chair. She had Sophie rest her left arm on a cushion on Effie’s chopping-board, and then she quickly tightened a constriction band around the grifter’s biceps. Within a few seconds she had swabbed the inside of Sophie’s elbow, inserted a collection needle and blood began to flow into the sealed bag hung from a cabinet handle near her knee. Gravity and Sophie’s beating heart did the rest.

“The babes are asleep. Can I do anything?” Soapy continued, feeling a little useless.

Jo smiled at the love of her life, and then gestured to Hardison and Parker to turn Eliot onto his less damaged side. As they eased him over Lizzie made sure Eliot’s oxygen mask didn’t shift, and then stroked his cheek, letting him know she was there.

“Sit down, be quiet and behave yourself,” Jo said to Soapy and then she winced as blood pulsed from Eliot’s wound, soaking the heavy gauze pad she pressed over the injury. “I have to get this damned bleeding stopped,” she muttered as Mei handed her another pad as the first quickly became sodden with blood.

“Liz … Lizbeth Grace …” the voice was weak, but it was a very welcome sound as it made its way past the oxygen mask.

Lizzie’s gaze widened with delight as a pair of hazy blue eyes tried to focus on her face.

“Eliot!! Eliot, you’re awake! You’re not dying!!!” She breathed, and she laid a hand on his brow. He didn’t seem quite so clammy and pale. “No!! No, don’t do that!” she cried softly as Eliot lifted a shaky hand to remove the mask. “You can’t! It’s helping your blood get better!”

Eliot closed his eyes and then opened them again with the greatest of effort.

“Mouth’s dry …” he croaked, “thirsty …”
“Wait a sec, nipper … I’ll have something for him to drink in a minute …” Effie mumbled, reaching for a glass.

Soapy managed to drag out another stool and sat down right beside Lizzie, and when Effie handed the little girl a cup half-full of iced water complete with straw, he helped her with his good hand to ease Eliot’s mask down just for a moment or two as the hitter swallowed a couple of mouthfuls of the water, his Adam’s apple working as the cool fluid helped his parched throat.

When he had had enough Effie took the glass, and Lizzie very conscientiously replaced the mask and leaned forward, kissing Eliot’s nose as she had done since she was a baby. His eyes crinkled in a tiny Lizzie-smile.

“You have to be still now,” she said, so gently that Eliot almost didn’t hear her. “Grandma Jo has to stop some bleeding and Mama’s going to give you some of her blood so you’ll get better. So don’t move, Eliot. Promise?”

Eliot gazed at his god-daughter as though she was the only thing anchoring him to this world.

“You … you should go, ‘Lizbeth Grace …” he ground out as her dark eyes studied him. He frowned, even as Jo applied lidocaine spray to the wound. She needed to make a small incision to get at the nicked vein and stitch it, and she didn’t want Eliot flinching, which could be disastrous. “Go get some rest. I don’t need you coddlin’ me.”

Lizzie stroked Eliot’s cheek and frowned back. He was still mad at her, she could tell.

“Actually, right now Lizzie, it would be a good idea.” Jo said. “We need access to Eliot’s arm and hang saline and the blood bag beside him sweetie, and it’s getting a bit cluttered in here. You can come back and see him when we’ve finished, alright?”

Lizzie stared at Jo and then turned teary eyes to Sophie.

“Mama? Do I have to?” her voice wavered. “Eliot needs me –“

Sophie, watching the bag attached to her arm fill with her life-blood, the blood that would keep Eliot with them, and nodded.

“This time, darling, you have to go. As soon as he’s feeling better and we’ve finished getting fluids into him, you can take care of him, I promise. Soapy … could you …???”

Sophie let the question hang, and Soapy, sore as hell and very tired, stood up and held out his good hand.

“C’mon, Lizzie – let’s go and check on the babes and see if Kip’s finished feeding his horse. Then we’ll find a book to read until you can see Eliot again.”

Lizzie, surrounded by adults trying to save her Eliot’s life, knew when she was beaten. Her eyes filled with tears, but she didn’t object. Perhaps Eliot didn’t want her there because she had let him down by doing something dumb. She squeezed his hand, but there was no response. His eyes were closed and he looked desperately ill, and she saw out of the corner of her eye Jo swabbing betadine around the bleeding wound.

Parker was busy checking the blood bag volume and then clamping off the line. Within seconds Sophie was disconnected and her arm taped up with a gauze pad, and the blood was ready.

“Oh, Lizzie – scoop!” Parker said, waving the child out of the way. She glanced at Jo. “Wide-ass
open, right?” she asked Jo, who nodded.

“Yes please,” Jo replied. “We need the blood in Eliot as quickly as possible, so don’t worry about the valve – wide-ass open would be perfect!” she continued with a smile. She could hear Eliot’s voice echo in Parker’s … the words of a man trained in the field to keep his comrades alive.

Mei was busy hanging a bag of saline and Hardison was taking off Eliot’s boots, ready to get the hitter stripped down so Jo could clean the rest of him up. Effie was standing by with hot water and a cloth to wash blood and dirt off the man’s battered frame.

Her Mama was right, Lizzie thought. She had to go. She was in the way, and if she was in the way she could endanger Eliot. She reached out and took Soapy’s hand, and the two of them slipped silently from the kitchen where Eliot lay on the table, hovering somewhere between life and death.

“Righto,” Jo said. “Let’s do this.”

And with Parker and Mei setting up transfusion lines under Jo’s direction, Hardison breaking open another field transfusion kit so that he could give his brother some gummy-frog-infused blood and Sophie drinking a restorative tea while keeping an eye on the defrosting plasma, Eliot lay quietly as they all did their best to save his life.

In the end, it took sixty-eight stitches, three units of whole blood and two packs of plasma to at least restore Eliot’s abused body to a place where he had a reasonably good chance of surviving the night.

For Lizzie, those couple of hours felt like a lifetime.

Kip joined them after removing Batu’s old saddle and giving the gelding a good brush to get rid of dried sweat. He had cooled down enough to have a drink, and then Kip walked him over to the barn and settled the big roan into a stable, giving him hay and a feed. Batu had a good roll in the straw, shook himself and then tucked into the bran mix with gusto.

But Kip wasn’t in such a good mood when he found out Eliot had collapsed and was in a bad way. He snuggled, teary-eyed, next to his grandfather on the couch as Soapy, with a weepy Lizzie carefully propping up his shoulder with the remaining cushions, worked his way through a lifetime’s collection of photographs in old albums. He had discovered both Lizzie and Kip were fascinated with them. They saw Wapanjara as it was almost a century ago, when it took over two weeks by bullock-cart to bring supplies to the station.

“That’s my great, great grandmother,” he said, pointing to an old, creased photograph of an austere, bearded man in his Sunday best posing with a tiny, dark woman looking uncomfortable in her corsets and leather boots. Intelligent black eyes peered at the children from the past, and Kip, feeling a little better, ran a small finger over the picture.

“She’s Walpiri … like my mum.”

“Her name was Lily,” Soapy said. “It’s not really properly respectful to have a photo of her, but … she’s my great-great-gran, and I admire her a lot. She could shear a sheep better than most, and my grandfather said she was the best rider he had ever seen, even when she was in her eighties.” He sighed. “I’m lucky to have a picture of them, really,” he said softly.

“Why?” Lizzie asked with curiosity.

“Well,” Soapy said, trying to make the explanation as easy as possible for the children to understand. “Back then, white people didn’t really marry black people, let alone have their photo taken,” he said.
Keep it simple, he thought. “But they loved each other a lot and they didn’t care.”

“You and Grandma Jo,” Kip said, “you love each other an awful lot!”

“Indeed we do, nipper,” Soapy smiled. “An awful, awful lot!”

But Lizzie was confused.

“But … but why weren’t they supposed to get married?” she asked.

Soapy realised he had probably backed himself into a corner on this one, but he seized the day and ploughed on.

“Well … back then, white people thought aborigines were not the same as them. Because they lived in the bush and not in houses, they were too different … too difficult to understand … and, to be honest, they didn’t make any effort to understand them.” Soapy thought trying to explain about genocide and bigotry and child abduction was something he didn’t want to get into right now, so he focused on the photograph. “But great-great Grandpa Chester,” he pointed at the austere, bearded man in the picture, “he and Lily adored one another. He became a member of the tribe, and they were married for over fifty years.”

Lizzie studied the picture carefully. It was then she realised that Soapy’s dark, expressive eyes were staring back at her from the image, and it made her smile. If Soapy had great-great-Grandma Lily’s black eyes, then she was probably like Soapy, and Lizzie decided she would have liked this pioneering Aboriginal woman who had flouted both races’ rules and married the man she loved.

“It’s done,” said Jo, standing in the living room doorway. She had Eliot’s blood on her shirt and she looked very, very tired, but there was a gleam of triumph in her green eyes. “We’ll just get him to bed and then you can see him. But listen, children … you can’t tire him. He’s lost a lot of blood, and he has stitches all over the place, so be very, very careful, okay? And don’t keep him talking, even if he wants to.”

Lizzie stared at Jo for a moment, then flew off the couch and flung herself at Jo, wrapping arms around the small woman’s waist.

“You saved him, Grandma Jo …” she whispered, her face buried in Jo’s bloodstained shirt. “You’re awesome.”

Jo tousled Lizzie’s curls, and Kip wriggled off the couch and stumbled with weariness as he joined Lizzie.

“Is Eliot going to be alright?” he asked, knuckling sleepiness from his eyes. “He’s not going to –“

“He’s badly hurt, but I think, with care, he’ll come back to us,” Jo said quietly. She was exhausted. “Lizzie, your Mum gave Eliot some of her blood, and she’s a bit tired because she gave a little more than she should, so don’t give her any grief, you hear me?”

Lizzie peeled herself away from Jo’s side and nodded. Her mother was very brave indeed, she decided. She took a deep breath and tried to calm her heart. She heard voices and peered around Jo to see Effie, a gauze pad over the hollow of her elbow, lead the way as Parker and Mei very gently helped a semi-awake Eliot shuffle slowly from the kitchen to his bedroom.

Lizzie let out a soft sob.

Eliot’s chest, shoulder and ribs were a mass of bandages, and she could see a taped dressing peeking
above the waist of his light sweat pants. Every step was costing him immense pain, and Hardison carried a bag of plasma which was attached by a line to a cannula taped to the back of his hand. He held it as high as he could.

Jo followed Lizzie’s gaze and pried herself away from the children.

“Give me ten minutes, Soapy love, and then you can bring the children through … if you feel able. Don’t overdo it, you hear me?” she scolded the old pastoralist. Jo had a houseful of damaged people to look after, and she didn’t know if she had the strength to do it all.

“I’ll be just fine, Jo love, but you need to get some rest. You look a bit bung, to be honest. Can Parker take over for a bit?” Soapy replied, seeing how worn out Jo was.

Jo smiled wearily.

“In a while. I’ll just make sure Eliot’s resting properly and that his stitches are holding, and then I might take a nap until Charlie and Nate get back.”

“We can take care of him, Grandma Jo!” Lizzie said eagerly, but Jo shook her head.

“Not this time, nippers,” she replied, and as Lizzie’s face dropped she tried to explain the situation. “This isn’t just watching over him and taking temps this time, young lady. He’s very, very ill and he needs rest more than anything. If he feels as though he has to keep an eye on you two it could make him worse. He’s got to make more blood to replace the pints he lost, and he needs complete rest to do that.”

Kip and Lizzie exchanged looks.

“So … I could look after Grandpa Soapy and the babies and Lizzie can take care of Eliot?” Kip asked, eyes wide with eagerness.

“ … and I could just stay in my chair and help get stuff for Eliot and just make sure he’s not moving. Could I do that? If I was really, really quiet?” Lizzie asked desperately.

Jo sighed. She was too tired to battle these two children who were determined to do their bit to take care of their family.

“Okay … okay! I give up!” Jo saw Eliot through the doorway of his bedroom being so very carefully helped into his bed, and Parker suspended the plasma bag from Eliot’s coat stand which she had moved beside the bed. Eliot lay back on a mountain of pillows, and Mei fitted a new oxygen mask over his face and attached a fresh bottle.

Effie stumped wearily back to the kitchen, grumbling to herself.

“Kip … go to Effie and ask her to fill some hot water bottles. Then you give two to Grandpa Soapy for his shoulder. Lizzie, you’ll need two more for Eliot. He’s cold because of the blood loss. Now don’t upset Effie – she gave Eliot some blood too, and so did Alec. We’re all very tired and we have a long night ahead of us, so try not to get in the way. Effie’s going to make up milk for Jamie and Rose, and they’ll need feeding and changing.” Jo wiped her face with a shaky hand and yawned.

“Righto!” Kip said, and he grabbed Lizzie by her arm and pulled her after him into the kitchen, where Jo heard Effie’s rumbling complaints as she put yet more water on to boil.

Soapy patted the couch seat beside him.
“C’mon, old girl … sit down for a minute. You’re done in.”

Jo saw the concern on Soapy’s drawn face, and knew he was very sore and stiff, and other than to patch him up, he had had none of her attention. Guilt suddenly consumed her, and she blinked back tears.

“Oh Soapy … I’m so sorry!” she hiccupped, and dropped down beside him where his good arm held her close, and she could hear the beating of his heart as she laid her head on his chest.

She burst into tears.

Soapy rested his chin on her head, and patted her shoulder.

“No worries, old girl …” he murmured, “it’s all over now, and you’ve brought our boy back to us, and the kids are safe. Just sit there for a bit and get your breath back.”

And holding his adored wife close to his heart, Soapy Munro thanked God that his Jo was an abso-bloody-lute wonder.

Lizzie followed Kip into the kitchen and was about to give Effie a hug for letting Eliot have lots of her blood to make him better, when she caught sight of the big kitchen table. She gasped. Effie hadn’t had time to clean up the aftermath of dealing with an Eliot Spencer on the point of bleeding to death, and Lizzie’s eyes became round with horror as she looked at the mess.

Blood-sodden pads littered the floor and discarded blood-bags and tubing had been dumped in a large plastic bag by the window. But it was the table that shocked her to the core. There was blood everywhere. She knew that Eliot had a dozen or so wounds from tiny nicks to the two bullet wounds in his left side, but she had not quite grasped the physical evidence that constituted blood loss.

That was all Eliot’s blood.

“Don’t worry, nipper,” Effie said as she caught Lizzie’s shocked gaze, “we put plenty of the stuff back into him. He’s a bit bloody useless right now, but give him time. He’ll do alright. Here,” she continued, “hot water bottles. He’s bloomin’ cold. It happens when you lose a lot of blood, so don’t worry. Missy’ll tell you where he needs ‘em. I’ll be by in a bit with some hot chocolate. How does that sound?”

Kip had come to stand beside Lizzie, and joined her in gazing at the discarded bandages and red-stained table.

“Crikey!” he said under his breath.

But both children had jobs to do and Effie had babbies to feed so she shooed them out of the kitchen. Kip ran back to the living room to take care of his beloved Grandpa Soapy, and Lizzie headed for Eliot’s room.

But just as she reached the open door, she hesitated for a moment. She could hear gentle words of comfort from Mei and Hardison and Parker were discussing who should take the first watch. She wondered if Eliot was awake, and if so, was he still angry with her? She knew she had done an unforgiveable thing. She could have got hurt and Eliot would never have forgiven himself. And had her sudden appearance got Eliot hurt? What if it was her fault that he was so badly injured? Would he ever forgive her??

But he needed the heat right now, she knew, so taking a deep breath she quietly entered the room.
Eliot looked like a ghost. Dreadfully pale under the tan, he lay on his back, eyes closed and breathing the oxygen which has initially saved his life. One arm lay outside the warm blankets, and Lizzie saw the steady drip-drip of the plasma through the valve and into Eliot’s system via the cannula.

She handed the hot water bottles to Parker, who smiled at her reassuringly. But then, Parker didn’t know what Lizzie had done … that Lizzie had caused all of this damage to her best friend.

She desperately wanted to hold Eliot’s hand and make sure he knew she was there taking care of him, but she didn’t want to disturb him. Besides, what if he rejected her? What if he didn’t want her holding his fingers?

Lizzie didn’t think she could cope with that right now. So, she flung herself into the big old chair beside his bed, tucked her knees under her chin and wrapped her arms around her legs. She would wait and watch and hope Eliot Spencer lived.

And Eliot, now caught in the nightmares of a disturbed and uneasy sleep, missed his best girl, and for the first time in a long time, he felt utterly alone.

It was past midnight as the two trucks got within twenty miles of the homestead at Albany Mining Company.

Nate studied Khenbish Hadan by the lights of the dashboard as she sat beside him, and saw her gamin face set into grim lines. He wondered what the tiny assassin was thinking. But, Nate thought, she had given her word and Eliot had believed her, so he had to trust the team’s hitter. Hadan would do them no harm.

So he concentrated on the dusty dirt road ahead of them and shifted up a gear.

Hadan, clutching her sword and leaning against the window, peered out at the darkness. They would be at the mine soon. She thought through what she had planned next, and nodded imperceptibly. Before she could leave this place she had one more job to do, and she would carry it out once Nate Ford and Charlie Jakkamarra had left. She had a driver she could use, and the two trucks. Yes, she thought. They would do. They would do very well indeed.

And closing her eyes, she settled down to wait.

To be continued …

* RFDS – the wonderful Royal Flying Doctor Service.
Eliot had never seen Wapanjara so deserted. The day was gloomy with clouds that were dark and constant, and the silence was unnerving. Not even the magpies wittered and fluted in the almond stand as he walked down the incline from the stringybarks at the top of the hill, his shoes kicking up dank, red dust.

As he carefully strode through the open gate of the homestead, there was no welcome from the three heelers, no chopping barks or wagging tails or a daft Dopey leaping about like an idiot.

Where the hell were the dogs?

Looking to his right he tried to see if the ute was parked in the entrance of the barn. Yep. There it was. So … everyone was here, but he just couldn’t see them yet. A glance to the gate of the nearby paddock took him aback slightly. Gertie would have noticed him by now and would be hanging over the gate, honking and flapping her lip in delight, Bomber close behind, swishing his tail patiently. But no Gertie, which was odd … and Bomber was dead, wasn’t he? At least that was what Eliot remembered.

He frowned, puzzled. He didn’t like being puzzled.

Bernadette and Oggie still sat in the yard, but the trailer’s awning was torn, flapping in a breeze Eliot couldn’t feel.

He ran his fingers through his hair, and encountered a neat, expensive haircut, short and practical as befitted the work he did. He looked down at his arms and saw he was dressed in one of his favourite suits, made by a very exclusive bespoke tailor in Savile Row. Eliot, a man best at home in Henley shirts, boots and a beanie, liked to dress well if need be, and the suit was understated and beautifully cut. Damien Moreau moved in exclusive circles, and therefore so did Eliot. He did ‘well-dressed knucklehead’ very skilfully indeed, which had cost many, many people their lives when they didn’t see the highly intelligent, very deadly man beneath the easy smile and charming blue eyes.

Huh.

He looked up at the veranda.

Jo’s crossword lay unfinished on the table, and Soapy’s stock whip lay unfurled on Eliot’s recliner chair by the door. A tray set with tea and lamingtons sat beside the crossword puzzle, but Eliot was suddenly aware of the sound of buzzing flies. The lamingtons were blue with mould, and now there was a creeping, ever-increasing odour of decay and rotting flesh.

Looking up at the water tower he saw the remains of a deckchair and sun umbrella, and the cooler box beside the chair swarmed with bluebottles.
Something moved.

At last, Eliot thought, and strode over to Gertie’s paddock, a smile on his face. So that’s where the dumb-ass camel was, but his smile faded as he saw something standing under the ancient mulga tree in the paddock.

It was Moke, the old brown mare who had been Gertie’s constant companion until her death of extreme old age two years ago. Moke let loose a soft nicker of welcome, but the quiver of her nostrils shook free the maggots feasting on her decaying flesh. She was swarming with them, Eliot realised, and he stepped back in shock as Moke ambled shakily on bone-bare legs towards him, peering at him through empty eye sockets.

What the hell??

“Good job, Eliot!” a voice said, and he turned. A handsome, smiling face greeted him.

Moreau. Moreau was here, at Wapanjara. At his home.

“Damien,” Eliot replied, and his eyes narrowed. He had no idea what was going on, but maybe … maybe his old boss would have some answers, even if Eliot had to squeeze his throat a few times to make him come clean. Why here … why Wapanjara? And where the hell were his team and his family?

“Job?” Eliot asked, keeping his body attuned to the moment. He couldn’t let his guard down … not with his people missing. “And what job would that be?”

Moreau smirked and raised an eyebrow.

“Coming here … making them trust you … and then clearing the way for me. You know I want this place as my base of operations in northern Australia.”

But that doesn’t make sense, Eliot thought. Damien Moreau would no more want to base his business at remote Wapanjara than in Antarctica. He was a man of the city, of urbanity and tall buildings made of glass and evenings at the opera. Not red dust and poor communications and bad roads.

Moreau smiled, his eyes crinkling in good humour.

“Besides,” he continued, “it was a little bit of a test … you know the kind of thing … just for fun. I suppose you’ve heard the story about the Waffen SS during the Second World War? The one about every young officer being given a cuddly little puppy when they began training? And they looked after it … fed it, trained it … allowed it to become a companion until their last day of training, when their commanding officer told them to kill their dogs, and if they didn’t, they failed their training?”

Eliot said nothing, but a feeling of utter dread began to settle in his heart.

Moreau waved a hand dismissively.

“A myth, of course. But I was curious to see if it could be done.” His smile widened, dark eyes sparkling with amusement. “And, Eliot, my loyal, deadly right-hand man, you passed the test with flying colours. Well … almost.”

Eliot felt something in his hands and he looked down at them. The horror was almost a physical blow. His hands were blood to the elbows, fresh and bright, soaking into the beautiful cashmere wool suit and dripping from his fingers. His right hand held his old Ka-Bar knife, and in his left …
dear God, what had he done?? His left hand held a beautiful, bloody plait of hair, blonde and
glimmering in the dull air. Eliot knew then it was Parker’s.

But when he looked up again, his tear-ridden blue eyes seeking out Moreau, he realised the man
wasn’t alone.

Lizzie stood beside him, holding Moreau’s hand. She lifted her free hand and waved happily at Eliot.

Moreau let go of Lizzie’s hand and used it to ruffle the child’s dark, curly hair. Then he touched her
shoulder, urging her towards Eliot. Lizzie grinned up at Moreau, and set off, walking cheerfully
towards Eliot, who just watched, disbelieving, as the horror began to descend into true nightmare.

Moreau turned his benign visage on Eliot.

“Just one more to go, my friend. One more, and then you will be back in the fold as though you had
never left. A stray lamb, coming back to the shepherd. She’s all yours. Kill her.”

Eliot dropped the plait of hair and the knife.

He realised he was shaking so badly he could hardly move, but he had to save Lizzie. No matter
what he had done … and he knew now he had betrayed and destroyed the only true family he had
ever had … he could not allow Lizzie to walk into danger.

“Lizbeth Grace!!” he yelled, desperation rife in every word, “Git!! Go on!! Go into the house an’ I’ll
take care of Moreau!!”

Lizzie just kept coming, her dark eyes never wavering as she gazed at her blood-soaked guardian …
the man who was her best friend in the whole world and who had just murdered her family.

Moreau cocked his head.

“Aww,” he said, “‘Lizbeth Grace’. So very cute. And I’m not denying she’s a little sweetheart, as
children go. But … she needs to die, Eliot. You know she does. So be a good boy and slit her throat
for me, will you??”

Eliot snarled and his eyes blazed. He leaned down and picked up his knife, ready to charge Moreau
and spill his guts on the ground, but he found his feet wouldn’t move.

“No … no-no-no-“ He growled desperately, and he tried again, but his feet just wouldn’t budge, as
though he was nailed to the red earth. “Lizzie!! Stay put!! Don’t come near me!!” he roared, but
Lizzie acted as though she didn’t hear him and kept coming, her love for him shining from her face.

“GO TO HELL, MOREAU!! I ain’t touchin’ her!” Eliot swore, and even as he said it, Lizzie
reached out to hug him.

Moreau sighed and shook his head.

“There now …” he murmured, “I thought that’s what you would say. I’m disappointed, Eliot. Very
disappointed indeed.” He turned his eyes to Eliot’s left, and when the Oklahoman followed his gaze,
his heart almost stopped.

Derry Ryan stood a few feet away, his grey eyes filmy and dull. He turned his dead gaze on Eliot,
and then reached up and pulled the Razorback knife from his own throat, and watery blood and
maggots streamed from the gaping hole in his flesh down his chest and onto the ground.
Moreau nodded and gestured at Lizzie, who smiled at Ryan.

“Mister Ryan,” Moreau said amiably. “If you would be so kind …?”

It was then that Eliot knew he was in Hell.

“LIZZIE!! GET AWAY FROM ME!! GO!!!” He bellowed with all his might, helpless and unable to save his best girl from the monster that was Eliot Spencer.

And Lizzie kept walking towards him, her smile empty and loving, and the flies buzzed around her and the stench of death was all around him and he could do absolutely nothing about it until the hands held him. Hands, tight around his arms and pressing on his shoulder, and he could smell jasmine and roses on still night air.

Then … then he could fight back, and he struggled and yelled and flailed, but there were too many, and all he saw were Lizzie’s dark, dark eyes widen and flare with terror, even as the voices began.

They drifted into his mind as though through a sea-fog, and the hands became tendrils in the darkness, wrapping around his wrists and forcing his head back, and oh God, he hurt, but the hands wouldn’t stop.

The light was becoming too bright, and Wapanjara wasn’t there anymore. Moreau dissolved into the mist and Derry Ryan’s rotting face and Lizzie’s terrified eyes was all he could see.

“Eliot!! ELIOT!! C’mon, bro … relax … it’s okay, you’re safe … Lizzie’s safe …”

It was a voice he knew but couldn’t place, and he curled his left fist so he could punch the crap out of the owner of the voice, but the sudden pain in his left side and chest took the breath right out of him.

“Easy, boy … you’ll burst your stitches and then where will you be?”

It was a woman speaking now, and something in her voice settled him for some reason, and he stopped struggling because the voice made him think of silver-auburn curls and green eyes. Jo. Her name was Jo.

“I won’t go!” a voice wailed, and this time Eliot knew his best girl, and he stillled, listening, and Derry Ryan crumbled to dust. “I won’t leave him!!” the voice continued. “He won’t hurt me – Eliot would never hurt me, I don’t care what he says!! He needs me, Alec!!” Small hands tightened around his clenched fist, and Eliot tried to open his eyes, because now he knew where he was. “Eliot!! It’s okay!” the voice said, “Please, please wake up! You’ll start bleeding again, and –“

“Lizbeth Grace??” Eliot croaked, his voice hoarse and arid. “Lizbeth Grace … go, girl … get away from me. I … I’m … not …”

But Lizzie wouldn’t have any of it.

“Eliot! You’re awake!! You have to stop moving around, alright? Grandma Jo’s here and –“

Eliot pried open his eyes to see Lizzie hanging on to his fisted left hand as though her life depended on it. Shit! If he’d thrown that punch …

“I coulda hurt you!” he growled weakly, but Lizzie shook her head defiantly.

“You will never …ever … hurt me!” she declared, her bottom lip beginning to tremble.
The big hand resting on Eliot’s shoulder suddenly moved, and Hardison swam into focus.

“Damnit, Hardison!!” Eliot snarled, even though his words came out slurred and groggy. “Get her away from me! She …” Eliot reached out a shaky right hand and clutched Hardison’s sleeve, pulling the hacker close. “She doesn’t know what I am!” he hissed desperately, even as the headache began to thump behind his eyes.

Hardison frowned, puzzled, and patted Eliot’s hand where it lay.

“Listen, brother … you … you lost a lot of blood, an’ you’re confused, okay? It was just a nightmare. A NIGHT MARE. I don’t know what’s goin’ on in that punched-out head of yours, but Lizzie’s here an’ she’s worried about you. If you send her away she’ll jus’ sneak back in ‘cause you know she’s gotta take care of you. That’s the way she’s built.” Hardison’s dark eyes softened. “She loves you, you idiot!”

But Eliot wasn’t listening. His eyes darted around the room … his room, the one that held what few possessions he cared about, and his gaze settled on the windows. The one nearest his bed, the big window overlooking Gertie’s paddock, was open, allowing the rich scent of flowers to drift in on the cool air. The other one … the small one high over the left side of the fireplace … was lacking glass and open to the elements.

“Hardison … Hardison, we gotta do somethin’ about the windows. Close ‘em, will ya? It ain’t safe leavin’ ‘em open. He could get in –“ The sense of urgency in Eliot’s voice made Hardison’s brows draw down in confusion.

The wail of a tiny baby startled Eliot and he flinched, his eyes widening.

“Jesus!” he ground out and tried to sit up, but the hands returned, gently stopping him from moving, and Lizzie’s grip tightened. “The kids!! The kids ain’t safe here –“ he began to rant.

“Eliot, love, they’re fine!” Jo said, worried now. She had seen Eliot badly hurt before, but not like this. He seemed hyper-aware … tension thrummed through his damaged body, and she knew if Hardison had not been in the room to hold the hitter down, Eliot would be out of his bed and to hell with the stitches and blood-loss.

Effie appeared at the door and frowned, muddy eyes full of concern.

“Stop it, you daft jumbuck!” she growled, and stumped around Eliot’s bed to draw down the blinds on the big window. “I can’t do anything about the small window because that bastard Chong shot out the glass. Took me bloody ages to sweep up the bits,” she added grumpily. “I think some got into your guitar.”

Eliot relaxed a little, and Lizzie peered at him quizzically. She let go of his hand and felt his brow, and then his bare arms where they lay over of the blankets, one still attached to the plasma bag suspended from the coat-stand. Eliot suddenly noticed the oxygen mask was gone.

“You feel cold and you’re shaking,” Lizzie muttered. “Are you cold? ‘Cause I can get more hot-water bottles,” she said, and squeezed his hand. Effie retrieved the two luke-warm hot-water bottles from Eliot’s sides.

Eliot, still jumpy, nodded.

“Yeah … m’freezin’ …”

Lizzie patted Eliot’s arm and then padded around to her chair and lifted her comforter. Hauling it
from the chair, she draped it over Eliot’s battered torso and the instant warmth made Eliot sigh with relief.

Effie dropped a pudgy hand on Lizzie’s shoulder.

“C’mon, nipper – let’s refill these –” she held up the two bottles, both covered by ludicrously fluffy bright orange jackets, “- and bring this young mongrel some hot tea, hey? With condensed milk and a bit of sugar. Meebee that’ll sweeten him up a bit.” She paused for a second, and then scowled. “But I doubt it, the daft bugger,” she added as an afterthought.

And with Lizzie following dutifully behind, she gimped off to the kitchen, grumbling.

Jo sank down onto Effie’s rocking chair and watched as Eliot fought to stay awake, and she checked the valve on the bag of plasma.

“Last one, I think,” she murmured. “You’re doing pretty well, considering,” she added. “Eliot … who’s ‘he’? You mentioned a ‘he’ coming through the window?”

Eliot’s drowsy blue eyes snapped open for a second and drifted back to the broken window. Then he shook his head and regretted it, as the headache began to worsen.

“Nobody. I … “ He tried to relax in the warmth of Lizzie’s comforter. “Just … it doesn’t matter,” he finished lamely, and Derry Ryan’s rotting features flashed into his mind. He had a sudden feeling of maggots swarming over his bedcovers and he shuddered.

Jo pursed her lips and looked over at Hardison, standing on the other side of the bed dressed in his sleeping sweats and a warm cardigan. He had been sound asleep on a fold-down bed in the living room when Eliot had woken with a yell.

The young hacker shrugged. He had no idea what was going on in Eliot’s head, and put the confusion down to blood-loss.

Jo sighed.

“Want something for the pain?” she asked softly. “I can let you have some paracetamol. No aspirin though. We don’t want what blood you have to thin, do we?”

“I’m okay,” Eliot reassured her, dismayed at the thought of the drug making him fall asleep again. “S’not not too bad,” he said, which was a lie. His side ached like shit and his head felt like it was about to fall off. The maggots were beginning to work their way under the bedcovers and he shuddered.

There was another whimper from one of the babies somewhere in the house and Eliot tensed painfully. The memory of slaughtered women and children lying in a filthy basement and the stench of rotting flesh swamped his mind, and it took all of his severely compromised self-control to stop him from vomiting. The maggots were now working their way under his bandages, towards the blood and lacerated flesh beneath. He could feel their fat, off-white bodies writhing and forcing their voracious jaws through the wrappings, sensing the wounds below. They would soon begin eating him alive from the inside out, and he would become a heaving, revolting mass of –

“Eliot?” Lizzie had returned from the kitchen, hot-water bottles in hand and a tentative smile on her face. “Here … I hope you feel warmer now,” she continued apprehensively as Jo helped her slip the bottles, oozing welcome heat and softness, against his sides. Eliot glanced at her for a moment. She still looked scared of him. He had frightened the hell out of her, he was sure.
“Thanks darlin’,” he whispered, and Lizzie beamed. Perhaps he was beginning to forgive her for what she had done, Lizzie thought. He was still shaking though, and didn’t seem to be able to stop. But he was cold, so that was probably the reason, she decided.

Effie arrived with Eliot’s tea, and Lizzie helped her best friend slowly drink the sweet beverage, sip by small sip. She helped steady his hand and held the mug for him when the effort became too much and he needed to rest a moment or two. But not once did Eliot look at her. He seemed to fix his gaze on the old Fender guitar sitting on its stand under the broken window.

When he had finished the tea, Lizzie placed the mug on his bedside cabinet and reached for his hand. Once again Eliot flinched at her touch, but he tolerated it, and her fingers were reassuring. Slowly he relaxed, and to his immense relief, he discovered the maggots burrowing into his body had mysteriously gone. Eliot closed his eyes and before he knew it, he was asleep.

Jo squeezed Lizzie’s shoulder.

“Give him time, sweetie. He’s very confused and that’s because of the blood-loss. He’s been concussed and he’s having a wretched time, so be patient. He’ll come right, I’m sure.” Jo looked at Eliot’s alarm clock. It was just past one in the morning. “Let him sleep now. If he does this again, tell Effie and then fetch me. And don’t forget to get some sleep yourself, young lady. You promised you would be very quiet and not worry Eliot, and he’ll fret if you don’t get some rest.”

Lizzie nodded reluctantly, but agreed.

“I will, I promise. Grandma Jo … why … why won’t Eliot look at me? Is it because –”

Jo smiled down at the little girl who adored this dangerous, lethal man and trusted him implicitly. Lizzie could not even begin to imagine Eliot fearing anything. Even wounded and debilitated as he was, Lizzie was sure he could protect his family like the wolf he carried in his heart.

“Let him heal, child. And go to sleep.” Jo insisted, and as Effie, now rested, settled herself in her rocking chair and Hardison and Jo returned to their beds, Lizzie snuggled in her chair beside Eliot to quietly watch over her beloved guardian and best friend.

Albany Mining Company was as silent as the grave.

Nate had stopped a mile from the mine, on a small rise overlooking the gates. Even without Hardison’s night-scope, it was obvious the place had been abandoned. Rickenbacker had fled, taking the few men he had left with him.

As the trucks drew close to the gates, Nate saw they hung unlocked, swinging gently in a night-breeze. Security lights blared on, illuminating the whole place like a Hollywood premiere night without the bling. It was a ghost-mine.

Charlie put the Ducati up on its kick-bar and opened the gates wide enough to allow the two trucks to drive through, and they rumbled to a halt beside the offices set away from the main workshops and entrance to the mine.

Nate slid out of the driver’s seat, his body stiff and aching from the long trip, and wiped a hand over his face. God, he was tired. He wondered how Eliot was doing … wondered if the man was still alive. He had been on his feet when Nate and Charlie left, but that was due simply to sheer willpower alone. Nate knew Eliot was badly hurt. If Eliot died, he would lose a man he regarded as family … well, a man who was family, because he was Lizzie’s guardian. He and Sophie had entrusted their only child to Eliot Spencer, and there had been a bond between the two of them from
the first moment Eliot had held her, newly-born, squalling and screaming with anger, in Lucille’s cramped interior as a thunderstorm crashed overhead. Lizzie loved Eliot … she loved every grouchy, bad-tempered, song-singing, chef-y, deadly-but-gentle inch of him.

Nate hauled out his cell ‘phone and stared at it, but stuffed it back in his pocket.

“You want to call home, mate? Check on Eliot?” Charlie said in his ear, and Nate twitched in surprise. He thought only Eliot could sneak up on him like that.

Nate gave the young aborigine a bitter smile.

“Yeah … yeah I want to, but I can’t. No service.” He took a deep breath to steady himself. “This is killing me … not knowing.”

Charlie nodded, understanding.

“Eliot’s not dead, my friend.” He put his hand flat on his chest. “Eliot’s in here. In my heart. He’s my papparti … my big brother. He has been for a long time now. I’d know if he was gone. Like I knew when …” he swallowed as the pain of loss hit him, “when she died. It was like my chest exploded. If Eliot was walking the Dreaming I would know.”

And Nate believed him. He saw the truth of it in Charlie’s fathomless black eyes and the timbre of his voice, and once again he felt the ageless song of the people whose land this was.

Running shaking fingers through unruly hair, Nate nodded his thanks, and turned back to the truck to see Khenbish Hadan struggle out of the passenger seat and slide down onto solid ground, using her sword to steady herself.

The tiny Mongolian stared up at Nate with dead eyes.

“What do you intend to do?” she asked wearily. Her useless shoulder was hunched, and she was obviously in a lot of pain.

Nate glanced at Charlie, whose face was suddenly still and stony. When he turned back to Hadan, Nate was thoughtful for a second or two before answering.

“Eliot said you were free to go. That you would take care of these men,” he said, gesturing at the groaning pile of men lying in the back of the first truck.

Hadan nodded soberly.

“I will. What honour I have left will mean I deal with these men and Chong’s legacy.” Her olive eyes softened for a moment. “Perhaps I can atone for at least a small part of what has been done against you and your people.”

Nate’s jaw muscles flexed, but he controlled his hatred of this small, fragile-looking woman.

“You can’t bring people back, Hadan. You murdered a man’s wife … a son’s mother. Not you personally, it’s true, but still … you were involved. And if Eliot hadn’t stopped you, you would have killed every person at Wapanjara, including the children … our children. So don’t expect me to like you.”

Hadan shrugged and winced.

“That is of no consequence. So … now you both go. Leave the trucks and the men. I have plans for
them. And the driver. “She smiled grimly. “Do not worry – I will not kill him if he does as he’s told.”

Hadan straightened as well as she could and gestured at the Ducati.

“You should go now. I have work to do.” She was about to turn away, when she stopped and gazed at Nate one last time. “That man who killed my Rafe … he is clever, I think. I have no doubt he will have made every attempt to lead the police and others away from your people … that he will have created digital traps and information and labyrinths to lead them in an entirely different direction. And if I have guessed properly, what I do tonight will cement that information in place.” She smiled then, and it was a warm smile, lighting up her green eyes. “It will be the honourable thing to do. You and your family are safe.”

And with those parting words, she walked unsteadily away from Nate and Charlie and did not look back.

Nate felt Charlie’s hand drop onto his shoulder.

“C’mon,” he said. “Let’s go home.” He handed the spare helmet to Nate and took the Ducati off its kick bar and turned the keys in the ignition.

Nate didn’t hesitate. He put on the helmet and buckled the chinstrap, and then he swung himself onto the back seat of Eliot’s old motorcycle.

Charlie slipped the machine into gear, and sent the Ducati out of the swinging gates, leaving the lights and emptiness and the wounded assassin behind them. They headed up the hill and then they were free of the light, and Nate felt the wind cool his body and the now-starry night drifted above, cleansing his mind of the terror and danger of the past days. Now he needed to be home … to see his family and his daughter, and to see if Eliot Spencer still lived.

Khenbish Hadan limped to the back of the first truck, where the wounded men lay. She gestured at the young aborigine, still behind the wheel of the second truck, to join her. He scrambled hurriedly out of the driver’s seat and trotted over to the tiny woman. He looked terrified.

“What’s your name?” Hadan asked.

The young man swallowed dryly before answering.

“Bluey,” he croaked.

Hadan studied him for a moment or two before gesturing with her chin at the wounded men.

“Do you have a strong stomach, Bluey?” she said.

Bluey didn’t know what to say, so he shrugged.

“Dunno.”

“Well, all you have to do is hold these men still for me,” Hadan said. “Bring them to me, one by one.”

Bluey’s eyes widened.

“What … what’re you goin’ to do??”

Hadan stuck her sword upright in the dirt and winced as she rubbed her wounded shoulder.
“I cannot hold them myself, unfortunately. I need to make sure they never speak of what has happened here. Do you understand?”

“Um …” Bluey stammered.

“Well? Go on! One at a time!” Hadan snapped impatiently.

Bluey, frightened out of his wits, managed to drag one of the wounded men, still bristling with fish-hooks, out of the truck. The man yelped with pain.

“Make him kneel in front of me,” Hadan instructed.

Bluey, now shaking, managed to get the man onto his knees, holding his shoulders to keep him still.

Hadan reached down to her left boot and slid out a small throwing knife. She had not had the opportunity to use it on Eliot Spencer, but it had turned out to be fortuitous. She held it skilfully in her left hand and turned to Bluey.

“Now … pull his head back and open his mouth,” she said.

Bluey felt as though he was going to be sick, but he did as he was told.

Hadan looked at the wounded man closely and with great interest.

“I do this to save your life,” she said. “I do this so you cannot speak of this place or of Wapanjara. You understand?”

The man began to shriek, but Hadan ignored him.

“Hold him tight, I said!” she growled, and as Bluey forced the man’s mouth open, he turned his head away and closed his eyes as the screaming began.

Charlie and Nate arrived back at Wapanjara as the sun rose over the far hills, bathing the battered homestead in golden light. The fog had gone.

Nate was off the Ducati before Charlie had even switched off the engine, and stiff and sore as he was, Nate took the veranda steps in three strides, unbuckling the helmet as he went, and was met at the door by Sophie.

She saw his dusty face and his exhausted eyes and smiled before he could even open his mouth. She kissed him then, and taking his hand, led him to Eliot’s bedroom where Parker dozed in Effie’s rocking chair.

Eliot lay sprawled beneath blankets and Lizzie’s comforter, and Lizzie slept soundly on the chair beside him, her hand entangled in Eliot’s. The hitter was pale, obviously very ill, but his breathing was even and the remnants of a plasma bag still hung suspended from Eliot’s coat-stand.

“That bad??” Nate asked, shocked.

“He collapsed just as you left. It was touch and go for a while … he almost bled to death. But he’s doing better now, thank God,” Sophie whispered so as not to disturb any of the three members of her family.

She backed away quietly, taking Nate with her, and they wandered into the kitchen where Effie was beginning breakfast. A pot of tea and mugs sat on a trivet in the centre of the now spotlessly-clean
Effie raised an eyebrow at Nate.

Well?” she rumbled. “Is it over?”

Nate sank down onto a stool and tried to pour tea into a mug, but he was so tired his hands trembled. Sophie poured it for him, and he took a sip. The rich, fresh-scented tea felt wonderful as it trickled down his throat, warming his chest. He looked up at Effie, who placed a plate in front of him with a couple of lamingtons on it.

He sighed.

“I don’t know, Effie,” he said. “I honestly don’t know. I guess we wait and find out.”

And as Charlie trudged up the veranda steps and into the house to see his son, Wapanjara began to awaken. The magpies fluted in the almond stand and lorikeets and galahs flew in clouds to the billabong, ready to slake their thirst. Gertie snoozed in her paddock and Buster snored beside Mei as she slept soundly in one of the big chairs in the living room, Jamie and Rose in their drawer-bed beside her, fed and warm.

It was the dawn of a brand new day, and Nate had absolutely no idea what it would bring.

To be continued …
The Strength of Despair

Chapter Summary

Author’s note: Mostly talking, but once again, warnings of descriptive gruesome stuff, so please be aware if this.

As the sun rose early on a clear, beautiful day, Wapanjara found itself at the tender mercies of a grumpy old cook, a busy young mother and two very determined six-year-old children.

By six-thirty the babies had been bathed, fed and burped, and they fell happily asleep in their drawer, Buster beside them, eyebrows beetling as he watched Mei, Kip and Lizzie take care of the rest of his people.

Lizzie had awoken an hour earlier when Eliot stirred, in pain and disoriented. She roused Effie, who had taken over from Parker, and the little cook had quietly settled the injured man, Lizzie hovering, worried and fretting as Eliot didn’t seem to grasp exactly where he was. It took him a couple of minutes to figure it out, and Effie checked his bandages for bleeding as he muttered something about maggots, which made Lizzie blench a little. But what concerned Lizzie more was that Eliot was still shaking. It only happened when he moved, in tiny, muscle-taut tremors, but it niggled at her.

But he drank a little tea and demanded, with some of his grouch back in place, that the windows needed to be closed. So, Lizzie fixed the undamaged window. She laboriously raised the blind, which made Eliot curse a little because the light hurt his eyes, and then she closed the window properly and drew the curtains. Eliot sighed with relief. And because the room was now getting stuffy, she switched on the overhead fan. She nodded to herself. Job done.

By the time she returned to Eliot’s side, he was fast asleep. She ran through the checks her Grandma Jo had taught her, and checked his pulse, which – when she found it with her little fingers - she thought was a little fast, and his brow was cool, but according to Grandma Jo, that was normal because of all the blood Eliot had lost.

Lizzie then sat in her chair for a while, just watching her best friend. She knew he had nearly died. But, Grandma Jo had saved him, and her Eliot would live, she was sure of it. But she also knew something was out of kilter with the Oklahoman. Oh yes, he was badly hurt and it would take time for him to heal, but … he shook when he tried to move, even though he wasn’t too cold now. And then there was the comment about maggots, crawling on his skin and working their way into his wounds. But Lizzie knew that wasn’t true, so why did Eliot think the horrid things were plaguing him?

She sighed. He was sleeping now, and he had had something to drink, although he wasn’t hungry, which worried her. When Grandma Jo awoke from a much-needed sleep, Lizzie decided, she would ask her about the shaking and Eliot flinching every time Lizzie touched him, which just wasn’t right.

Lizzie had hugged, ambushed and flung herself at Eliot with abandon since before she could walk, and he had always been a rock, solid and sturdy and always there for her. He caught her if she fell,
carried her when she needed carrying and taught her to pick herself up from disappointment and keep going.

He hadn’t even complained when she was four years old and thought it was hysterically funny to wrap herself around Eliot’s leg and hang on, sitting on his booted foot with limbs clamped tight around his lower leg. He had just stoically endured it and waited her out, ignoring the child attached to him like a giggling limpet. Hardison had opened his mouth to comment but Eliot had fixed him with a Death Glare, so Hardison had wisely decided to say nothing and Eliot had carried on preparing dinner, Lizzie not hampering him in the least. He just tried hard not to drop his own spicy take on Caprese Salad on her head. His patience won out, as it always did, and when her little limbs finally lost their grip he had just lifted her in his arms and waited for his hug.

Eliot Spencer might be the grouchiest, most impatient and scowly man in the world, thought Lizzie, but with her, he had enough patience to fill the vast southern ocean he sang about on slow, calming evenings after the end of a big job.

But she had other chores to do this morning to help Effie and Mei as they took care of their family. So she lifted Eliot’s hand where it lay outside the covers and tucked it under a blanket, trying hard not to be upset as her touch made him tense, even as he slept.

By the time breakfast was ready, Kip and Lizzie had fed Batu and Gertie, and then helped a very tired Charlie feed the mares and young Sparky.

Mei sat with Eliot until the outside chores were done, and then Lizzie and Kip helped Effie lay the table for a hearty and much-needed breakfast.

Hardison and Nate had headed out an hour before to Munaji Ridge, Nate finally getting a chance to drive Bernadette, so the eager hacker could finally bring Chong and his associates down, spectacularly and with great relish.

Soapy appeared with a weary Jo in tow, both of them looking very much the worse for wear, but Lizzie thought they looked happier than they had in days. Soapy still sported a sling, but his eyes were soft and happy, knowing his family was safe.

Mei tidied the house and swept up the remains of glass, and bustled about as Jo checked Eliot, and when she sat down her thin face was aglow with the exercise. She was, even in just a few days, a different young woman … happy, peaceful and content.

They all ate at the big table on the veranda, Effie feeding them until they were stuffed, and conversation was murmured and consisting of comments about the food. Mei was planning to make some congee for Eliot, with Effie’s help, knowing the rich rice and chicken broth would help speed his recovery.

Parker scrubbed her eyes with the heel of her hands, trying to erase the gritty feeling of exhaustion from them and failing.

“Hey, Parker – stay awake, sister. We have work to do this morning,” Charlie muttered, yawning.

Parker peered at him, scowling.

“I’m so tired …” she grumbled, and worked a crick out of her neck. While Parker could happily sleep hanging upside-down from a girder high on a half-built skyscraper, she found dozing in Effie’s rocking chair somewhat uncomfortable.

“We have to get rid of those traps we laid – can’t have the kiddos walking into them, now can we?”
Charlie added, scratching his head. He hadn’t brushed his riot of curls yet, and the young aborigine looked very weary. But he flashed a white grin at the little thief. “Tell you what – once we’re finished, how about I teach you how to use the boomerang?”

Parker perked up.

“Seriously? Today?” she asked, eyes wide now.

“Why not?” Charlie continued. “Maybe for a little while. I want to cut some glass to repair the windows that bugger Chong broke, but it won’t take long to get them sorted. Bullet holes … they might take a bit longer, but we’ll get there."

“While you’re in the workshop, Charlie, can you look out some spare fly-screens? The veranda took a bit of a battering,” Soapy asked as he tried, one-handed, to butter a slice of toast. He smiled at Jo as she took the butter-knife from him and spread both butter and strawberry jam on his toast for him and then kissed his cheek. “Thanks, old girl,” he said softly. “How’s Eliot doing?” he added, asking the question unspoken by everyone else at the table.

Jo sighed, but smiled back at her husband.

“Better,” she said. “He’s had some tea this morning, and he’s sleeping, which is good. It means the daft beggar isn’t trying to get out of bed.”

“Good luck with that one,” Sophie said, pouring herself a coffee. “He has quite the reputation as an escape artist when he’s sick. Remember when he escaped from a hospital using crutches, and the only reason we caught him was because he was barefoot and trod on some broken glass?* Pillock,” she added with feeling.

“Grandma Jo?” Lizzie piped up a little hesitantly, her face wary.

Jo studied Lizzie. The child seemed fidgety, and she knew that Lizzie and Eliot had some issues, although she couldn’t quite put a finger on the problem just yet.

“Yes, sweetie?” she answered, pouring Soapy more tea.

Lizzie bit her lip. She didn’t want to upset Eliot by speaking about her worries. She knew he was a very private man, but she also knew now that he still loved her very much, even though he was still angry at her for doing something very, very dumb by putting herself at risk.

“Grandma Jo …” she repeated, and then the words came tumbling out of her. “Why is Eliot shaking? I mean … I can feel it and he seems to be upset all the time and I can’t stop him from shaking and –”

“I noticed that,” Parker mumbled around her jammy toast. “It’s like he has his engine idling all the time … especially if you touch him. It … it’s almost like he’s vibrating,” she added, her brows drawn down in puzzlement. “Eliot never vibrates.”

Jo glanced at Soapy. They had both noticed Eliot’s tension, sick as he was, and Effie let out a small huff to herself.

“She’s seen it too, Jo thought.

“Well …” Jo said thoughtfully, “you must remember he’s still recovering from concussion and he’s also confused. Blood loss will do that. He’s also a ruddy mess, so he is,” she continued tersely. “But he’s also having bad dreams – we all know that happens to Eliot, no matter that we try not to notice. Once he’s feeling a bit better, let’s see if he relaxes a bit,” she explained, although she was sure that the tension in Eliot was much, much more than the effects of losing so much blood. “Don’t worry, Lizzie. Just give him time.” She ruffled Lizzie’s curls. “Give him a few days, hey? We’ll see how he
Lizzie didn’t seem too convinced, but she nodded.

“Okay. But can I sit with him today? *Please*?” she pleaded, looking in turn from Jo to Sophie and back again. “I won’t disturb him, I promise.”

Sophie considered her daughter’s plea, and sighed.

“If Grandma Jo says you can, then that’s fine. *But …*” Sophie added with feeling, “you eat some breakfast, young lady. You haven’t touched a thing.”

Lizzie scowled.

“Not hungry …” she muttered under her breath.

Soapy raised an eyebrow.

“What if Eliot finds out you haven’t had anything to eat since yesterday? Do you think that would make him even *more* shaky?” he asked.

*Ooh, that was a low blow,* Sophie thought and couldn’t stop a slow smirk.

Lizzie was stumped. She hadn’t thought of that. Letting out an explosive sigh, she nodded reluctantly. She really, really wasn’t hungry.

“Toast, marmalade and some orange juice, nipper,” Effie growled affectionately, “and then you can sit with the Yank.” She pointed at Lizzie’s plate. “*Eat!*”

With a bout of muttering that would have done justice to Hardison in a snit, Lizzie began to pick at her toast, and shot grumpy Eliot-looks at the people around her, none of whom gave her an ounce of sympathy.

*Eliot Spencer, you have a lot to answer for,* Sophie thought, and reaching for more of Effie’s sublime scrambled eggs, she couldn’t contain a smile.

Cheryl Russo whistled cheerily to herself as she made her way along Perry Drive in Tennant Creek. She was walking the walk of shame and she didn’t care – she had spent the night with Everett Spicer, and he had told her he loved her as they lay sated on the old bed in his dingy apartment. So, now she was on the way to her boring little job at the boring old regional council offices, but she knew she wouldn’t be there for much longer. Her Everett had promised to take her to Adelaide and buy her everything she wanted.

She grinned as she crossed the road, not bothering to check for traffic – at this hour of the morning all she saw was the odd shift worker going home from the Albany mine or a drunk sleeping it off.

She had a little mission this morning. She was going to work early because she had to find the latest applications from that British lady who was buying Wapanjara, copy them and give them to Everett. He had told her they were important … part of an ongoing undercover police investigation he was conducting, and if he cracked the case, it would mean promotion, more money and a move back to Adelaide. And Cheryl had every intention of going with him.

She headed across an empty parking lot that lay alongside the low-key office block which contained her workplace. She dug out her keys and the coded bleeper for the rear entrance from her bag. It
would record the time she entered the building, and it could raise questions, but she didn’t care. She would be in Adelaide by then and away from this dead-end town and living the high life.

She hummed happily to herself, shivering pleasurably at the memory of Spicer’s mouth on her skin as she wandered along the edge of the lot. Taking a step onto the kerb, she began to walk through a small group of acacias that shaded the side of the building, designed to enhance its rather bland appearance. But she slowed as she saw a large truck sitting haphazardly in the parking area in front of the building, shielding it from the road. The logo on the driver’s door read ALBANY MINING COMPANY.

“Bloody cheek!!” she muttered, annoyed, hoping that the drunken bludger who had driven the ruddy crate hadn’t chucked up all over the bloody place. Sighing, her curiosity finally got the better of her and she walked around the truck.

She screamed. Then she vomited, and then screamed some more. She didn’t stop screaming for a long, long time, and then she collapsed on the ground, curled herself up as small as possible and rocked gently as she whimpered sobs of horror. She was still like that when the police arrived, alerted by a neighbour who had heard a woman screaming.

The first officer out of his patrol car threw his breakfast up all over the kerb.

“How’s it going?” Nate asked drowsily, leaning on Bernadette’s broad chassis with his arms crossed, allowing the heat of the newly-risen sun to warm him. Munaji Ridge certainly was the place to catch some rays.

Hardison held up a single finger as he studied the screens in front of him. He didn’t hear the lowing of cattle below him in the huge paddock, and he didn’t see the pair of friarbirds as they scolded him from a nearby gum tree.

Alec Hardison was, in his own, special, cute-but-geeky way, ‘in the zone.’

This particular job needed split-second timing, especially with the streaming of information to a multitude of servers and encrypted databanks worldwide, access to which he had patiently brokered ever since the team had arrived in Wapanjara. The Chinese security systems had been especially awkward, and Hardison had had to run everything through a highly specialised translation logarithm before re-coding the reams of information he needed to send to the secretive Xiyuan compound in Beijing. That had been a sonofabitch to crack.

The Australian side of the work hadn’t been much easier, especially the Northern Territory Police database in Darwin. The media contacts had been a doddle after that.

When he had finished, Hardison sat back on his camping chair and wiped a big hand over his face. It was done. All of it. Done.

He stretched, feeling the stitches in his damaged shoulder twinge and his joints crack. The headache he had been nursing since he switched on the screens now began to fade.

“Well,” he said, his voice gruff with tiredness, “I can’t do any more, Nate. I’ve given ‘em everythin’ I got, an’ I wiped any record of the sale to ‘Lady Eloise’ from every damn server or database I can find. There’s no way we can get in there to take out any hard copy, which means the cops might come callin’, but to be honest all they got is a few photocopies. Let’s hope the police think the stuff’s all forged. We could drive into town an’ get Parker to find whatever she can, but …” he thought for a moment, “… even if they manage to find traces of the digital trail it sure as hell won’t lead back to
us or Wapanjara.”

“But … ” Nate said working through the pros and cons, “… the police will probably have already
been through the records with a fine toothcomb by the time we got into town and sent Parker in
there. Damn, but this place is in the boondocks!” he added, shaking his head. “No matter. We can
deal with it if they come asking.”

Hardison yawned.

“Yes, well … to be honest I’m too dang tired to care,” he said, rubbing an eye with a forefinger.
“And I’m frikkin’ hungry, man! Let’s git. Effie said she was cookin’ some sort of barra … barra …
fishy-thing with garlicky-lemony-somethin’-butter, Nate, an’ my stomach’s beginnin’ to think my
throat’s been cut.” His stomach rumbled as if in agreement, and Hardison nodded sagely. “I hear
you, m’man,” he told his stomach, rubbing it gently and with affection, “I hear you.”

Nate pushed himself upright and away from Bernadette’s warming chassis and rested a hand on
Hardison’s good shoulder.

“Are you sure you got everything that we needed to do? That the Munros and their people are safe?”

Hardison’s dark eyes were suddenly sombre as he looked up at his friend.

“Nate … I think this is the best work I’ve ever done. An’ I’m good … you know that.”

Nate squeezed Hardison’s shoulder and nodded.

“You’re the best there is, Alec.” Nate’s blue eyes were warm. “Thank you.”

“They’re my family too, Nate. They’re worth it.”

And work done, the two men packed up the monitors and laptop, tucked everything into one of
Bernadette’s capacious storage bins, and headed back to Wapanjara homestead and the people they
regarded as family, leaving Hardison’s handiwork to stream unimpeded through the ether and cause
havoc in the world of law enforcement and triads alike.

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By mid-afternoon Wapanjara and its inhabitants had slowed down, mellowing in the heat and bright
light of a day edging towards more thundery rain, which Charlie reckoned would not arrive for
another day or so. The Wet was coming early this year.

The window panes had been replaced and Charlie and Nate tacked new lengths of fly netting around
the veranda, replacing the bullet-torn sections. Effie complained that the bullet which shattered the
window in the kitchen had ricocheted and left quite a dent in her big copper fish poacher, and that
the Yank would be bloody miffed about it, so he would.

Gertie followed whoever she found in the yard, somewhat bereft of Eliot’s company, and was
delighted when Hardison, full of delicious barramundi fillet, unfolded one of the veranda beds in
front of the orchard and settled his long body on it, the young hacker trying to relax in the sun. Gertie
sat herself down beside him, and squeaking pitifully, rested her huge head alongside him on the
ground. Hardison, dozing, dropped a hand on her curls and allowed the heat of the day to ease his
aching shoulder.

Eliot woke with a start just after tea. Gasping something unintelligible, he instantly tried to sit up, but
tiny hands patting his arm eased him into reality and he opened bleary eyes to find Lizzie watching
him, her eyebrows quirked in concern as she sat in her chair.
He quickly looked away and set his gaze on the *katana* and *wakizashi*, now back in their customary places on the ironwood stand. He noted with irritation that they had been set into their respective cradles upside-down.

“Wrong …” he muttered, annoyed. “They’re all wrong … I gotta fix ‘em –“ and he began to struggle upright, Lizzie’s eyes widening with fear.

“No, Eliot … no, you have to –“ she whispered, and clutched at his arm, trying futilely to stop the hitter from exerting himself.

“Gotta fix ‘em, ‘Lizbeth Grace, so don’t get in my way, darlin’ … they’re … they’re just wrong –“ Eliot ground out, eyes narrowed and focused.

He pulled his arm out of Lizzie’s grasp and with a deep groan of pain he managed to sit up and began to swing his legs out of the bed.

Lizzie, confused and not sure what to do, scrambled from her chair and over the bed to wrap her arms around Eliot’s shoulders, leaning as gently as she could on his back. Eliot almost slid off the bed in an effort to shrink away from her touch, but even as he did so, he felt the crawling, loathsome touch of the maggots return and he shuddered.

Lizzie yelled for help.

“Effie!! Effie, Eliot’s trying to get out of bed!!” she bawled and Eliot winced at the noise, but he stopped moving for a moment or two. He could feel the maggots crawling under his bandages, wriggling and searching and *burrowing* and –

“What the bloody hell d’you think you’re up to, you young mongrel??” Effie snapped as she rolled in through the bedroom door, Jo right behind her.

But Eliot wasn’t listening. Lizzie heard him let out a soft grunt of disgust, and his right hand came to his chest, covering Lizzie’s hands as they rested over his heart. His fingers began to tear weakly at the bandages, and Lizzie, horrified, held him tighter.

“Eliot?? Eliot, stop that –“ she pleaded even as Effie reached out to prevent the Oklahoman doing himself even more damage.

“Help me, ‘Lizbeth Grace!” Eliot whispered, his fingers frantically digging around for the tape strapping the bandages around his chest and shoulder. “I gotta get rid of ‘em … eatin’ me alive, dammit! *Help me take these off!!*” And even as Lizzie tried to stop him working the bandage off, Eliot began to shake, the trembling wracking his body as Lizzie caught his hand in hers.

“What’s wrong, boy?” Effie demanded, and sat down in her rocking chair placing a hand on top of Lizzie’s, and Eliot glanced up at her.

“Dammit, Effie!” he wheezed, “*Get these goddamn bandages off me!!* Friggin’ maggots –“

And then Jo was beside him, talking in a calming litany of words, telling him there were no maggots and that he would begin bleeding again if he continued to pull at his wounds.

Slowly, achingly, Eliot quieted, with Lizzie holding him tight and Jo and Effie talking to him, words loving and calming and rich with love, and the maggots faded and the pain was all that was left.

Eliot eased back into Jo and Lizzie’s grasp and closed his eyes, his breathing ragged and rasping with pain. Then Sophie and Nate were there, and his family helped him back into his bed and
wrapped him with warmth and caring, even as his eyes sought out his swords, lying misplaced on their stand.

“They … they’re wrong,” he insisted, and Jo’s gaze followed his and her eyes cleared with understanding.

“Be still, son … I’ll fix them.” Jo whispered warmly, and slipping away from Eliot’s side she adjusted the *katana* and *wakizashi*, turning them in their scabbards until they each lay with the edge placed upwards so that it didn’t blunt from the pressure.

Lizzie felt Eliot physically relax, the trembling easing to minor muscular tremors, and he sighed in relief.

The episode was over as quickly as it had begun, and Eliot lay back on his pillows and relished the warmth. His eyes seemed brighter now, less confused, and he flicked a glance at Lizzie as she busied herself tucking in his blankets.

“Sorry I scared ya, ‘Lizbeth Grace …” he murmured even as his eyes strayed back to his swords.

Lizzie concentrated on her blanket-tucking and tried not to touch Eliot so that he didn’t begin shaking again.

“M’okay,” she said, and gave him a quick, shy smile. “You didn’t scare me,” she insisted. “There … are you warm enough?” she asked.

Eliot nodded, even though the headache was beginning again.

“Are you okay, Eliot?” Sophie asked warily as she rearranged Lizzie’s comforter on the bed.

Eliot frowned and Lizzie felt the tremors even through the bedclothes.

“He’s fine, Mama,” she said quickly before Eliot could open his mouth and say anything. “It’s just ‘cause he’s still making more blood and it makes his head fuzzy. Isn’t it, Eliot?” she glanced at the damaged hitter, who frowned but nodded.

“Y … yeah, Soph … just feelin’ a bit …” he lifted a hand and made woozy circling gestures in the air.

Lizzie gave Eliot a tremulous smile and she was rewarded with the familiar crinkle at the corner of his eyes even if he was still too weak to let it drift into a proper Lizzie-smile. He didn’t seem so angry with her now.

“Mister Cowboy has to eat!” Mei said as she bustled into the room, and the tension broke. “I have congee. It will help your blood, and you will get strong again,” she said, smiling down at Eliot and Lizzie. “You will help,” she ordered, and Lizzie, taken aback, nodded.

And before Eliot knew it, Lizzie was helping him sip mouthfuls of the delicious congee from a mug, savouring the tiny shreds of succulent chicken in the rice and broth concoction. He managed nearly half the mug, and slipped into a light doze before Lizzie could even pass the mug back to Mei.

The young woman beamed with delight. She so wanted to help these good people, and Effie had been kind and helpful when she declared she wanted to help the wounded American who had saved her and her babies’ lives.

But Eliot needed to rest, so Jo herded everyone out of his bedroom, ignoring Lizzie as she saw the
little girl sneak back to curl up in her chair beside Eliot as he slept.

Jo shook her head, but closed the door behind her, leaving it slightly ajar as always so she could keep an eye on Eliot and his guardian.

The first scent of rain came as the sun sank below the horizon and the clouds began to crowd the distant hills, black and threatening. A far flash of lightning flickered echoes of light in the hollows and over the creeks, and Gertie decided it was time to retire to her humpy. Rain and lightning? It was definitely not Gertie’s cup of tea.

Supper was quiet and muted, weariness taking its toll. The only person with any energy was Mei, who was like a butterfly, flitting from place to place as she helped serve food and making sure everyone had enough to eat and drink. She was especially gentle with Soapy and Jo, one injured and the other worn out. She fussed and cajoled and made sure they didn’t have to do a thing, and Effie grinned to herself as Mei even got a little bossy with Soapy when he tried to pour himself more tea. The girl had a big heart in her, it was obvious. They had done the right thing, offering shelter to the young woman and her babies, Effie decided, because the girl was a diamond.

Eliot managed more congee before settling back into sleep. Normally, his team knew, by this stage of his healing Eliot would be a prickly, bad-tempered wounded hitter itching to escape the clutches of his carers, but this time he seemed completely wiped out. So he slept and Lizzie watched, and the imaginary maggots kept their distance.

It was nearly ten in the evening when the telephone rang.

Nate, sprawling next to Sophie on the couch, sighed.

“Here we go,” he murmured and began to sit up when Jo stood and waved a hand at Nate to stay where he was.

“I'll deal with it,” she said, and Soapy’s black eyes followed his wife as she lifted the receiver to her ear.

But it wasn’t the police. It was Ethel Krapinski, the gossipy postmistress from Tennant Creek, and Nate could hear the woman’s penetrating voice from the couch, even though he couldn’t hear what she said.

Jo listened and then she went pale, holding her hand to her mouth. But she kept her voice calm and interested, and Ethel went on and on and on, until Jo interrupted her.

“Ethel … Ethel love, I have to go … yes, I know, it’s bloody awful … look, Soapy’s still a bit wonky after that fall he took and he’s got a bit of a headache, so … yes, yes, I’ll tell him … ‘night, Ethel … g’night …” and not letting Ethel launch into a flurry of farewells, Jo eased the telephone back onto its cradle.

Jo sat back down beside Soapy, and every face was turned to her expectantly.

Jo clasped Soapy’s hand.

“Well,” she said finally. “That was unexpected.”

Soapy raised an eyebrow and then got tired of waiting.

“And??” he demanded gently.
Jo took a deep breath before continuing.

“They’ve found Chong,” she said. “Hadan … she, ah … she made a bit of a statement,” she finished.

Nate’s face was grim, and he leaned forward, interested. The rest of the team and Eliot’s family listened intently.

“Do tell,” he said, and satisfaction ran through every word.

Rain began to spatter the dirt in the yard as people retired to their beds, but Hardison had one more thing to do.

He had listened to Jo’s explanation about what had happened to Chong Bun Tsui, but she had had to be careful because Kip was listening, so she was short on detail. But Eliot would want to know when he was feeling better, so Hardison headed for Oggie.

Even though the awning flapped annoyingly and limited the room he had to stay out of the rain, he unlocked the secure storage and dug out his laptop and connected it to the power booster and mobile antenna. Seating himself at the table, he hauled out a secret pack of gummy frogs he had stuffed in his jacket pocket.

It took him nearly an hour to find what he wanted, but he wished he hadn’t done so.

As always, someone had been lurking about with a ‘cell ‘phone and managed to film about forty-five seconds of the scene in front of the council offices in Tennant Creek before being ordered away by a green-about-the-gills police officer.

The short section of video probably wouldn’t stay on line long, but he would have enough information for Eliot and their hitter would know for sure that Chong was dead.

The film was shaky and somewhat confused, so it wasn’t too detailed, but Hardison’s eyes widened as he saw five bodies lined neatly beside an Albany truck, obviously in a parking lot.

Each of the bodies was sitting neatly on a beautiful kitchen chair, hands on thighs. They looked almost normal until, Hardison realised, four of them had poles holding up their heads, propped in the forks of what were obviously trimmed branches of a tree. Derry Ryan’s dead eyes stared at the camera for a moment or two, the Razorback knife still protruding from his throat.

Two of the other men were bloated, festering corpses, riven with what looked like huge weals covering their bodies. Their faces were so swollen with poison that their features were unrecognisable.

But the owner of the camera was focusing their attention most of all on Chong Bun Tsui.

His body, like the others, sat neatly in its chair, but this time it was tied to the seat to keep it upright. The body’s clothes were neat even though a cut ran from the shoulder to the opposite hip. But blood, still sticky and bright, smothered the body from neck to thigh and spattered onto the ground.

The reason the body was tied to the chair was because it was headless.

Another pole was tied to the back of the chair, and Chong Bun Tsui’s head was impaled on it, the point of the green wooden pole driven through it from the severed neck to the top of the skull. The sightless eyes stared at the camera for a second or two, and as Hardison tried to keep down his stomach contents he noticed that a piece of paper with Chinese characters stamped on it in red ink
was stuffed in the snakehead’s mouth.

Hardison had seen enough. Switching off the laptop, Alec Hardison sat and stared at the distant thunderclouds for a long, long time, trying to make sense of what one human being could do to another.

But all he saw were dull, dead eyes and a blood-soaked pole gleaming in the brilliant morning sunshine.

In the early hours of the morning, the lightning sent fingers of light rippling through the sky as rain began to fall in earnest over the land. The magpies sat in their almond tree, hunched and silent, and the little mopoke grumbled to itself as its feathers became straggly and drenched as the rain fell.

As the household slept, the thunder rumbled, yet no-one heard it. Exhaustion had finally caught up with the house’s inhabitants, and even Hardison, his mind still haunted by death, managed to sleep undisturbed on his fold-down bed. Lizzie lay sound asleep tucked under her comforter, her hand flung onto the bed where her best friend lay.

But the bed was empty, and as the lighting flashed it illuminated the rack where Eliot’s swords rested. The katana was missing.

The next flash of lighting lit up the veranda in a blaze of silver, limning in shadow and light the figure sitting on the recliner by the door. The bandages on the figure’s torso gleamed white, and a blanket covered bruised shoulders and arms. The battered body trembled with the effort of sitting upright.

But one hand rested on a thigh and the other held the Sword of the Okuri-Inu, still in its scabbard and poised point-down on the veranda floor. Blue eyes glittered dangerously in the dark.

Here was a warrior … a wandering ronin who had finally found his place in the world, and he, Eliot Spencer, was going to protect his family until his dying day.

To be continued …

* Told in ‘A Walk on the Wild Side’
When Days Seem Dark

Chapter Summary

Author’s note: Maybe a bit of disturbing imagery but nothing graphic. But lots of talking, angst and yet more talking.

Eliot listened to the rainwater running along the guttering of the veranda above, the thunder rumbling overhead, and he could smell the rich headiness of sodden, rotting vegetation, and he felt the comforting hilt of his *katana* in his right hand.

He heard the girls in the Malay whorehouse across the street calling to him, their giggling voices taunting him as he sat on the veranda, wriggling their hips and yelling provocatively *Anda mahu fuck saya? Hanya 50 dolar amerika!!* But he ignored them. He hated the monsoon here in Malaysia ... all the dankness and sticky humidity. Even being stripped to the waist didn’t help ... it made his chest feel tight and for some reason it hurt to breathe. But he was distracted by a shadowed figure beside him.

*Why don’t you just end the child?* Damien Moreau said. *You know you have to. You can have any woman you want, Eliot. You know you can. Working for me means you can have anything your rotten heart desires –*

“*Screw you, Moreau!*” Eliot hissed, lip curling. “You touch her an’ I’ll *gut* you –“

“Eliot??”

Eliot’s eyes widened and his battle-scarred fingers clutched at the *katana* convulsively. He turned to see Lizzie wearing her kangaroo pyjamas standing beside him on the veranda at Wapanjara, eyes huge with shock.

“*Lizbeth Grace!*” Eliot lifted his free hand and pulled Lizzie to him even as he struggled to his feet, swaying, and he tried to shove her behind him. “Get back in the house, girl!! It ain’t safe, y’hear me???”

“Eliot!! You’re *sick*!! You shouldn’t be out here!!! What are you *doing*??” Lizzie reached out and caught Eliot’s fist and he couldn’t stop the shudder at her touch. She tried to gently pull him back into the house, but Eliot blinked and shook his head, trying to clear the fog from his mind and to get his bearings. Lizzie’s fingers laced through his, and the feeling of *home* suddenly hit him like a barn door and the relief was so profound his legs went out from under him and the world tilted alarmingly.

Before he knew it he was down on one knee, with only the *katana* and Lizzie’s hands as they shifted to his arm keeping him upright.

“*ELIOT*!!” Lizzie hung on, trying to support him. But his weight was too much for her and he crumpled untidily sideways, ending up propped partly on the wall and partly leaning on Lizzie, who wrapped her arms around him in a futile attempt to hold him steady.

“*Lizbeth Grace ...*” he whispered brokenly, “I can’t ... I can’t keep ya safe, darlin’ ... m’no good ...
“I’ll cut her throat, boyo ... bleed her like a stuck pig ...” Derry Ryan’s voice whispered in Eliot’s ear as clear as day.

Summoning what little strength he had, Eliot growled and shifted sideways, his bare feet feeling the warmth of the wooden slats of the veranda deck. If he could only use the wall of the house to lean on, maybe he could manage to get to his feet and kill Ryan before he could get anywhere near ‘Lizbeth Grace -

“MAMA!!” Lizzie yelled as loudly as she could, “MAMA!! GRANDMA JO!! SOMEBODY!! HELP ELIOT!!”

Eliot finally collapsed. His body gave up the battle to stay upright, and Lizzie held him tight, managing to prevent him cracking his head on the wall by cradling him in her arms.

Voices came from inside the house, confused and alarmed.

Lizzie was trying to tuck the blanket around Eliot’s bare chest and shoulder to keep him warm when Nate and Hardison barrelled through the doorway, followed by Jo and Parker.

“What the hell, bro??” Hardison muttered as he went to his knees beside Eliot.

“Get ‘way from me!!” Eliot snarled, sweat sheening his deathly pale face, “Touch her an’ you’re dead, Ryan!” He gripped the katana as though his life depended on it, and he tried to turn it so he could take a swing at Hardison, who hastily scrambled back out of the way.

“No!” Lizzie said urgently, trying to calm her protector, “It’s only Alec! You’re safe! The bad guys are gone!!”


“I am safe, Eliot!! See??” Lizzie put her hand over Eliot’s pounding heart where he could see it, and she patted the heavy bandages gently so as not to hurt him. She could feel his heartbeat thundering like a drum in his chest. “You have to let them help you! I promise I’m safe, Eliot … I promise, with all my heart!”

Eliot began to shake. Leaning into the safety of Lizzie’s arms, he put his free hand over Lizzie’s as it lay over his heart and he turned his face away as his teeth began to chatter, even though he wasn’t cold.

“Stay away, you bastard …” he ground out, speaking to empty air, “don’ come near me … gotta … gotta keep her safe … she’s all that’s left … not gonna let you have her, Ryan …” and Eliot bared his teeth as he made a last-ditch attempt to shake the katana free of its scabbard.

“What the hell’re you doing, man!” Nate said, confused, as he saw the feverish, protective glint in the hitter’s eyes. “Ryan’s dead! You killed him! He can’t hurt anyone!”

And then Eliot remembered. He saw the light in Ryan’s eyes fade as Eliot pushed the big Razorback knife into his throat, and he saw the horror in Lizzie’s brown eyes as he did so. Yet here was his ‘Lizbeth Grace, holding him tight as though he was something precious and worth her love and not the cold-blooded murderer he was. The maggots began their creeping, insidious attack on his wounds, and their touch made his skin crawl.

“He’s just confused,” Jo whispered to Nate as she crouched down beside Hardison, who wiped a
hand over his face, worried as hell. “Let him settle and he’ll come back to us in a minute or two.”

“This … this ain’t just blood-loss, is it?” Hardison whispered. “He’s someplace we don’t exist an’ what’s keepin’ him alive is Lizzie. Right?”

Jo nodded grimly in agreement.

“Yes … it’s … it’s not just the blood-loss,” she admitted.

At that moment Effie stumped through the doorway, her hair in a net and wearing her battered old slippers and dressing-gown.

“Oh, shite,” she said, painfully easing to her knees beside Eliot, who flinched at her closeness. “He’s away with the bloody fairies, isn’t he, Missus?” And ignoring Eliot’s weak growl of warning, she reached out and held his hand, the one clinging desperately to the katana. “Oi! Listen to me, laddie!” she said sharply. The tone in her voice made Eliot shift, wincing, and the shaking increased.

Lizzie tightened her grip on Eliot, and patted his chest.

“It’s only Effie, Eliot. She won’t hurt me. Honest.” She rested her head on Eliot’s, trying to let him know she was there, safe and sound.

“That’s silly. He’s always angry,” she continued affectionately, but her elfin face settled into a narrow frown. “He’s all messed up in his head, Jo. Is he sick? Does he have a fever?”

Jo felt Eliot’s brow and shook her head.

“Sick? Yes, he’s sick. But feverish? No. I don’t think so. I’ll check when we get him back in bed, anyway, don’t worry, now. He’ll be fine. Let’s get him back to his bed and cleaned up. I could do with changing his bandages out, so … let’s do that, shall we?”

“Stop, Lizzie!! You couldn’t have prevented Eliot doing a runner, even if you had been awake. It serves me right for thinking he was too buggered up to get out of bed and not sitting with him … anyway, don’t worry, now. He’ll be fine. Let’s get him back to his bed and cleaned up. I could do with changing his bandages out, so … let’s do that, shall we?”
Lizzie’s face cleared a little, but she bit her lip.

“What’s wrong with him?” she finally blurted out. “Why does he think he’s got to protect us … me … from bad guys that aren’t even here?? And I can tell he thinks the maggots are back, and there aren’t any and he’s shaking again!! Grandma Jo, why —“

Effie stepped in.

“Now then, nipper!!! Enough questions! We’ve got the Yank to take care of, don’t we, and the silly bludger needs to be back in his bed. Let the Missus have a look at him, and we’ll take it from there. Then I reckon we should all go back to bed, hey? Let’s not crowd the daft bastard.”

Lightning crashed overhead, and Eliot snapped his eyes shut and tried to turn away from the light. The arcing crackle across the sky made Lizzie jump, and Eliot managed to catch her hand in his where it lay over his heart, rubbing her knuckles with his bruised thumb.

“S’all right, ‘Lizbeth Grace … you’re safe now … Nate … keep her safe, will ya? I can’t … I’m not …” he murmured, and even as he said it he could feel the crawling mass of maggots slithering over his side, seeking out the wounds under the heavy bandages.

Nate dropped down beside Eliot even as the hitter flinched away from the gathering of people around him.

“Lizzie, you can let go now,” Nate said to his daughter as she held Eliot tight, but Lizzie shook her head.

“No, Daddy! He’s all wrong in his head and he needs help and … and I can’t leave him!”

“Yes, sweetheart, I know,” Nate said, exasperated beyond belief by his stubborn daughter while also loving her to pieces for her loyalty to her best friend. “But you have to let go so we can get Eliot back to his bed. Jo can’t take care of him out here, now can she?”

Lizzie had to accept the logicality of her father’s words, but she was reluctant to let go of Eliot.

“You’ll be careful, Daddy? You won’t hurt him? He’s still very poorly, and his head’s really sore and fuzzy and —“

“We’ll take care of him, baby-girl,” Hardison said, and reached out to help Lizzie support Eliot, but the hitter opened his eyes and they caught Hardison in a glittering gaze.

“Touch her an’ I’ll kill you, Ryan!” he growled, and once more Derry Ryan was there, dead though Eliot knew he was, whispering in his ear.

You know I’ll do it, dontcha, Yank? I’ll kill the little bastard!! I’ll bleed her out an’ you’ll watch, and you’ll not be able to do a thing –“

But a hand touched Eliot’s cheek and he turned his hate-filled eyes on its owner. Effie gazed back at him, her eyes warm with affection, despite the scowl on her pudgy face.

“Come on now, I’m having none of this!!” she groused, and with the gentlest of touches she helped Lizzie ease out from behind Eliot so that Nate could take her place. As Lizzie crouched down beside Eliot to hold his hand, Effie turned to Parker. “Righto, Missy – you and clever-clogs help get him on his feet and I’ll go sort out his bed. Missus … what do you need?”

Jo ran fingers through her soft curls and thought about it for a second.
“Just bandages and some topical antiseptic please, Effie. Oh, and a bowl of hot water and some towels.” She smiled suddenly, and shook her head. “The usual stuff. Eliot, love … one day you’re going to have to stop all of this. I can’t keep patching up holes in you. You hear me?” she said, and leaning forward, cupped Eliot’s face in one hand.

Eliot, not too sure it was really Jo but trusting Lizzie as she held his hand, squinted in the general direction of the blurry figures before him.

“I hear you,” he croaked, and even as he said it he heard Moreau’s soft, triumphant laughter, knowing Eliot was his to do with as he wished.

But Lizzie kept him anchored and he knew she was safe for now, so he finally allowed himself to be lifted gently and easily and helped to his bedroom, where Effie had straightened his blankets and plumped his pillows.

But Hardison watched as Nate and Parker eased Eliot into the house, and chewed the inside of his cheek. *Never* had he seen Eliot like this. He knew the man was dealing with the effects of blood-loss and his wounds, but this was more than just confusion and physical illness. He bent down to straighten the old cushion on Eliot’s recliner as the rain intensified, hammering now on the veranda roof. He was about to head back to his bed when he found Soapy standing beside him, gazing out at the downpour. The old pastoralist was cradling his wounded shoulder, strapped tight to his side under his pyjama jacket.

Soapy looked sad and thoughtful, Hardison decided.

“Are you okay, Soapy?” the young hacker asked, concerned.

Soapy glanced around at Hardison and then went back to his study of the torrential rain.

“Yeah, Alec … I’m doing alright, son. I … I’m just worried a bit, that’s all.”

“About Eliot?”

Soapy snorted.

“Who else?? The silly sod’s got himself into a right old pickle, this time,” he continued.

Hardison frowned, and scratched his short, shaven curls.

“I … I don’t know what’s goin’ on with him, Soapy! He thought I was Ryan, dammit! It’s as though someone drugged the crap out of him, or … or maybe he’s still got concussion. Is that it? Is he still concussed? Or is it somethin’ else?”

Soapy took a deep breath as thought to shake himself out of his reverie, and clapped Hardison companionably on his good shoulder.

“C’mon, boy – there’s nothing we can do right now, so go back to your bed. We’ll have a chat about it all tomorrow morning. Eliot should manage some sleep now that Lizzie and Jo have him under control.”

Hardison peered into the darkness, watching the streams of water pour down the edge of the veranda from the overflowing gutters, and shook his head.

“I’ll be there in a minute, man. I just gotta think this through.” And he sank down on Eliot’s recliner, easing back against the cushion. The air was chilled, so he wrapped Eliot’s discarded blanket over
his shoulders and listened to the rain.

Alec Hardison regarded Eliot Spencer as his best friend. His big brother, the grouchy asshole who teased the hell out of him yet had saved Hardison’s life so many times over the years that he had lost count.

Eliot was the deadliest, most dangerous man any of them had ever seen or known. But he was also the most loyal, protective, decent man they knew. And having Lizzie as his god-daughter and becoming her guardian and friend had been the final redemption of Eliot Spencer. But Hardison couldn’t stop his mind once more drifting back to hearing Eliot through his earbud, under cover as a homeless veteran faced by an interrogator hell-bent on triggering PTSD in ex-servicemen, being asked how many people he had killed.

The man had sneered at Eliot, taunting him, but Hardison had found an odd pride in Eliot’s stoicism, the man not being drawn into defending himself. Instead, Eliot’s voice had evened out to that calm, soft *timbre* which would have had most men backing off before fleeing in terror.

*What do you want to know?* Eliot had said quietly. *Names? Dates? Locations? What food was on their breath? Their eyes? You want to know what colour their eyes were? Want to know the last words they spoke? Want to know which ones deserved it? Or better yet, the ones that didn’t? Want to know which ones begged?*

Hardison shuddered as he remembered the chill that trickled down his spine at Eliot’s words.

*Want to know why I know these things? Because I can’t forget. So there’s nothing you can do, no punishment you can hand out that I don’t live with every day. So to answer your question, no, I never counted. I don’t need to."

And *now*, feeling something almost like a physical blow to his gut, Hardison began to make sense of what was going on in Eliot’s head as the hitter’s final words echoed in the young hacker’s mind.

“Oh *Lord*, Eliot!” Hardison whispered to himself, eyes wide with understanding. How had they not known?? How had the people who he regarded as family *not known*? How had they not understood why Eliot only slept ninety minutes in every twenty-four hours? But Hardison already knew the answer to that. Because they hadn’t *wanted* to understand. It was just a part of Eliot’s tough-guy persona he wore to hide the cracks and his team had fallen for it because it was easy and didn’t require any thought.

The hyper-vigilance … the constant watchfulness … how he would stand with his back to the wall or sometimes lurk in the shadows … how he always charged *towards* the danger instead away from it. That was the world in which he was comfortable, because it was all he knew and it was a world he could deal with, and why he had worked alone for such a long time. Eliot Spencer had spent all of his adult life living on the edge, and had seen – and possibly done – some of the most dreadful things on earth.

And not one of them had seen the cost to him. Their *friend*.

Hardison let out a wordless murmur of distress. For Eliot to commit himself to this team … to his *family* … had been the most difficult decision of his life and it had cost him dear. The raw pain they saw in him the day he admitted to having worked with Damien Moreau was just a tiny glimpse of the vulnerability that lay beneath the armour.

Hardison tugged the blanket tighter around his shoulders as he heard the voices in the house making sure Eliot knew where he was and who was caring for him.
There was a soft, growly murmur of agony, bitten back as though it was illegal to show pain, followed by Lizzie’s stream-of-consciousness words of support, and Hardison was in no doubt that Eliot was being patted gently and fussed-over by his best girl.

“Dammit, Hardison!” he said to himself. “You’re a frikkin’ dumb-ass computer wrangler, no use for anythin’! Call yourself a goddamn genius? You’re a numb-nuts, that’s what you are!!”

Hardison rubbed watery eyes and sniffed, and then his face became determined. In the morning he would do what he did best – research. And then he would speak to the Munros. Soapy was someone uniquely placed to understand Eliot, and he might be able to help. Even Effie seemed to be able to handle Eliot with impunity. Shit, even Lizzie seemed to understand in her childish way how to ease Eliot’s mind.

His own mind made up, Hardison stood up as another deep grumble of thunder came throbbing through the air around him. Yes, he thought. I can help. I know I can.

Wrapping his lean frame in the blanket, Alec Hardison shuffled back into the house, closed the bullet-hole-ridden door behind him and headed for his warm fold-down bed. He didn’t get to sleep for a long, long time.

The day began drenched in drizzle and dampness, and Wapanjara homestead was full of over-tired, grumpy people getting in each other’s way.

By the time Charlie and Kip turned up after spending their first night back in their bungalow since Hadan’s presence had become known, Nate and Sophie were dressed and ready to go and help with the morning chores. Parker was guarding a fractious Eliot, and Effie was snarling at everyone who came near her except for Mei, who was bustling around the cavernous kitchen as though she had been there all her life. There was no sign of Jo and Soapy.

Hardison looked up from his seat under Oggie’s dripping awning as he scrolled through the information he was looking for and dourly making notes.

“G’day, mate!” Charlie called out, looking rested and less strained.

“Hey, bro!” Hardison yelled back. “Watch your back in there today – Effie’s on the warpath. Eliot tried the Great Escape last night an’ scared the crap out of us! Dumb sonofabitch,” he added under his breath.

“Bloody hell!” Charlie breathed. “Is he okay?”

“Provided Effie don’t kill him any time soon, yeah. Kinda. Sorta.” He added with a painful shrug. This damp weather made his shoulder ache.

Nate clumped down the veranda steps pulling on work gloves, followed by Sophie.

“I can get started on the cattle and Soph can check the mares if you like,” he said, his smile a little pained.

Charlie lifted his stockman’s hat and scratched his head.

“No probs, mate. Kip’s got Batu to feed and turn out, and I’ve got fodder to shift. How the hell we’re going to muster fat bullocks in a few days I have no idea,” he admitted. “Eliot and Soapy are laid up, and I don’t think your soft city bums could stand sitting a horse for twelve hours a day, hey?”
Nate and Sophie looked at one another. Charlie was probably right. Sophie would have tried, but Nate’s horse-riding skills were minimal at best.

Charlie grinned.

“I’ll figure out something. Once we’re done in the yards, any chance of brekkie? I can feed Kip if Eff’s too busy –“

“I’m never too busy, you young arse,” Effie grouched as she rolled out of the house and wiped down the veranda table. “Go feed the bloody beasts and get your backsides back here for breakfast.” She stared at Sophie and Nate. “Well?? Go on!! The buggering cows won’t feed themselves now, will they??” She raised an eyebrow expectantly.

Nate looked at Sophie whose mouth twitched with humour. He looked back at Effie.

“Any chance of waffles? Eliot makes the best waffles –“

Effie instantly bristled and lifted her tea-towel off her shoulder, and then raised it threateningly as she headed to the veranda steps.

“I’ll give you bloody waffles!!” she barked, and Nate knew he was likely to get the towel flicked sharply around his ears if he didn’t move, so he did as he was told and shifted, following Charlie and Kip as they headed to the yards, Sophie in tow. The four of them would manage, but unless they got some help from somewhere, Wapanjara would be in real danger of becoming unworkable.

Eliot had had a rough night, and as a result, so had Lizzie.

Exhausted, in pain and unable to sleep properly because the whispers began as soon as he drifted into oblivion, Eliot would wake with a start, gasping and startling a weary Lizzie, who refused to be anywhere else but beside her Eliot.

Jo had decided to take a chance and replace most of the bandages with taped gauze pads, hoping that somehow it would stop the phantom maggots from bothering the wounded man. It helped a little, but Lizzie’s touch did the trick if she placed a hand on his chest or shoulder. The only bandage still in place was the one covering the stitched bullet hole beneath his arm, making sure Eliot didn’t open the wound again.

As the smell of cooking bacon began to drift through the house in the morning coolness, Eliot stirred. This time his head felt clearer, and the ache there had lessened. He had vague memories of lying on the veranda and Lizzie holding him tight, and the echo of Ryan’s voice still drifted through his mind. He tensed a little, and the tremors began to ripple under his skin.

“Eliot …” Lizzie murmured, and Eliot managed to turn his head to see the little girl sprawled on a pile of cushions beside him, her comforter covering her so that all he could see was a riot of curls and a hand resting on his side. The hand patted him even as Lizzie sighed and sank deeper into sleep.

Parker was slumped in Effie’s rocking chair, snoring.

All of them were worn out, Eliot realised, and much of that exhaustion was caused by him, he knew. They were insisting on watching out for him for some reason, when he just wanted to be left alone. He could take care of himself, and he would heal. The issue with the nightmares and the tremors he would deal with somehow. He had coped with worse, and they didn’t need to know about this new weakness in his carefully-constructed armour. He would seal the chink by making sure Lizzie was
safe and looked after, and then he would get out of her life. That way he knew she would be protected from people like Ryan and Moreau … protected from him - the man who was supposed to keep her happy and well and away from the ugly things in life. And because he loved her more than life itself, he would protect her from what he really was.

He felt better now. He had made the difficult decision, and once he was back on his feet, he would speak to Nate and Sophie.

It was for the best. It really was.

He gently lifted Lizzie’s arm and tucked it back under her comforter, and then he rested his hand on her curly head for a moment or two and closed his eyes, knowing now he would never see her grow up into the fine young woman she was destined to be. But he could make that sacrifice easily, because it was in Lizzie’s best interests. He just couldn’t bear seeing her hurting any more, all because of him. She would eventually get over his loss and carry on with her life.

Ignoring the broken thing in his chest that had once been his heart, Eliot lifted his hand from Lizzie’s curls and turned his head away, futilely attempting to go back to sleep.

And the maggots writhed and Ryan whispered, and Eliot bit his lip until it bled as he tried his best to pretend they weren’t there.

It was three more days before Eliot was allowed out of his bed to sit, wrapped up in a comforter, on his recliner on the veranda.

As Effie left a mug of hot tea and a light lunch of thinly-sliced beef with avocado salsa beside him on a small table, Eliot watched Charlie and Parker work with the boomerang, and he noted that Parker’s aim was getting pretty good – she had just demolished her third watermelon, the pink, juicy insides splattering all over the yard, much to Gertie and Buster’s delight as they vacuumed up the sweet morsels.

Nate and Sophie had gone for a walk down by the billabong in the warmth of the late afternoon, and Jo sat at the veranda table trying to concentrate on her latest crossword. She kept an eye on Eliot as she tapped her teeth with the end of her pen, thinking.

“Hmmm … clue … ‘Frost poem’… four letters,” she murmured to no-one in particular.

Eliot laid his head back and reached for his tea. Even as he lifted the mug he had to grit his teeth to control the tremor in his hand and he tried not to spill the hot liquid as he took a sip.

Lizzie, sprawled on her stomach at Eliot’s feet, propped on a cushion and reading a book, glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. She saw the tremble and the muscles jumping along Eliot’s jaw as he tried to control his movements and desperately wanted to help, but she knew Eliot needed to do this on his own. But it didn’t stop her gnawing her lip and fretting even as she returned to her story about the pack camels which had carried supplies for thousands of miles through the Australian bush in the early 20th century.

Eliot managed to replace the mug on the table and he ate a couple of spoonfuls of the salsa and beef. It was good – Effie’s food was always delicious – but somehow it turned to ashes in his mouth, or so it seemed.

Swallowing, he closed his eyes against the sun. The brightness still bothered him.

“Rime,” he said.
Jo blinked.
“Sorry, son?” she said, a little startled. Eliot had hardly spoken to anyone in the past few days as his body began to heal.

“Frost poem,” he replied. “Cryptic clue, right? The answer. It’s ‘rime.’”

Jo raised an eyebrow and filled in the clue. She chuckled.

“Smart arse,” she said.

Eliot, worn out, sore and heartbroken, smiled as the sun eased his wounds.

“I ain’t just a pretty face,” he retorted dryly, and Lizzie, feeling more settled now that Eliot seemed a little more like himself at last, returned to her book. *Maybe, she thought, maybe my Eliot’s going to be alright after all.*

And as Eliot began to doze, Ryan’s voice began to whisper in his ear, low and deadly and foul, and Eliot’s fingers wrapped around the armrests of his recliner and his bruised, swollen knuckles turned white with the effort to stop the shaking in his damaged frame.

Alec Hardison wandered up the incline to the barn beside the cattle yards, followed by Dopey who had taken a bit of a shine to the young hacker, and the dog gamboled around him as Hardison made his way to Soapy’s station office built onto the side of the barn.

He knew Soapy was busy trying to get back up to speed and keep his feed orders in some sort of shape. There would have to be a shipment of cattle cake ordered within the next week or so, and he was calculating amounts and checking remaining veterinary supplies.

The office door was open and Hardison peered in to find Soapy sitting at his desk, trying to do his calculations one-handed on an old adding machine.

“Hey Soapy!” he said, lingering in the doorway with Dopey trying hard to nibble playfully at Hardison’s fingers.

The pastoralist looked up from his struggles and grinned at the American.

“Hey, mate! C’mon in. Distract me – I bloody hate doing this stuff!” Soapy grumbled good-naturedly.

Hardison gestured at the adding machine.

“I can set you up with an automatic system to do all this stuff for ya, Soapy, if you like. We’re gonna be around for a while ‘cause of Eliot, so I can make myself useful updatin’ some of your equipment if you want,” he offered.

Soapy thought about it and scratched his ear with his good hand.

“I’m an old dog, Alec. Are you sure you can teach a daft old sod like me new tricks?”

Hardison let loose the big, toothy grin that lit up his face.

“Man, you have no idea. It’ll be easy-peasy, Soapy – I promise.” The smile faded a little, and Hardison settled himself in the one other chair in the office, an old over-stuffed armchair that had seen better days until it had been relegated to the station office. “Soapy …” he began, not sure how
to start. “Soapy … can I ask you somethin’?”

Soapy’s lugubrious face became serious as he caught the hesitant tone in Hardison’s voice.

“Sure, son.” Soapy took a deep breath and waited.

Hardison was obviously uncomfortable, but he bit the bullet and forged onward.

“Soapy … do you have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder?”

Soapy Munro sat very still for almost a minute, his wiry frame stiff and tense, and then his dark eyes shone with understanding.

“Yes,” he said, and his voice was soft and sad.

Hardison let out an explosive breath, and nodded to himself.

“Okay … okay,” he said, and felt able to ask his next question.

“Soapy … do you think Eliot has PTSD? I mean … you’d know, wouldn’t you? You’d recognise the signs. So would Jo an’ Effie, right? ‘Cause they’ve seen it in you. An’ I’ve done my research – sometimes the symptoms stick an’ while they can be managed long term without help, it can become unmanageable. I think that’s what’s wrong with El. He’s kept the whole thing tamped down deep inside his sorry hide for years, but he’s not able to keep it controlled right now – all the hurt an’ blood-loss an’ this thing with Lizzie an’ Ryan …”

Soapy studied this kind young man sitting in front of him, tied up in knots because of what was happening to his best friend and brother.

“It’s not easy, Alec. It nearly killed me when I came home. Without Jo and Effie, I wouldn’t have made it. And when Eliot came to us all those years ago …” Soapy was lost in memories of a young, badly injured man with wild, haunted eyes, “… he was ready to die, Alec. Just as I was. It took a long time for him to think about living again … going forward with his life. But in all of the years I’ve known him, he has never even considered the idea that he has PTSD. He’s just dealt with the feelings and got on with his version of living. But … but this time …”

Soapy’s voice tailed off.

Hardison’s eyes were round with shock.

“So what do we do?” he asked helplessly.

Soapy leaned back in his chair and stared at the adding machine. When he spoke, his voice was redolent with grief.

“I don’t know, laddie … I really don’t know.”

The afternoon was settling into lazy, comfortable silence as Lizzie read on, sipping a glass of Effie’s deliciously cold lemonade, and Jo dozed in one of the veranda chairs. Parker was asleep on top of the tower, sitting under her sun brolly in the heat, and Gertie snoozed under Oggie’s awning. Charlie was checking cattle, Kip ambling beside him on Batu, the big gelding carrying his small owner with gentle ease.

Eliot’s eyes snapped open.
He was stiff and sore, but he managed to ease himself upright in his recliner, and his eyes focused on the stringybarks at the top of the hill. There was a faint dust-cloud, a hint of pinkish stain in the air, although he couldn’t hear anything.

Glancing down to the yard, he saw Nate and Sophie walking away from the track that led to the south paddock, their little fingers idly entwined. They looked relaxed and very happy.

“Somethin’s comin!” Eliot ground out, and tried to get out of the recliner, but Lizzie and Jo were suddenly there, Lizzie’s hand on his chest, effectively pinning him to the chair.

Mei appeared beside Eliot holding a glass of juice for him, but her eyes followed Eliot’s, and she sucked in a sharp breath.

A vehicle appeared, driving carefully down the road still a little slick from the rain. It drove towards the homestead, and Nate and Sophie stopped to watch as the big Hilux ute passed the battered gatepost and the smashed gate itself, and drew to a halt. The vehicle was white with a blue-and-white checkered strip along its side. The word POLICE was emblazoned on both the hood and the doors.

Jo sighed.

“Oh … bugger,” she said.

To be continued …

* If you want to see Eliot’s chilling speech about the people he’s killed, you can watch it in full in ‘The Experimental Job’.
Chapter Summary

Author’s note: Lots of talking, some sadness and, I have to say, a fair amount of injury-induced self-pity at the end.

The man who stepped out of the big ute was built along the same lines as Eliot Spencer. Of medium height and with the identical stocky, sturdy frame, the similarity, however, ended there. Dress in light chinos and a short-sleeved shirt, he was in his late fifties, and he had blond hair going grey at the temples and a short, neat beard bordering on stubble. Grey eyes with a twinkle of something humorous glinted under the serious visage, and as soon as he shut the ute’s door Jo let out a murmur of pleasure.

“Tom!! Tom Reid!” she said with gladness in her heart, and tripped down the veranda steps to greet him.

Detective Chief Inspector Thomas Reid (retired) opened his arms and welcomed Jo with a hug. Reid’s face broke into an amiable grin, eyes crinkling at the corners, and he looked down at Jo, giving her a wink.

“Good to see you Jo,” he said softly, his voice a gentle, gruff rumble.

Jo pulled herself back from the hug and looked past Reid’s shoulder at the official police vehicle. It appeared the man was alone.

She frowned.

“You’re still retired, right?” she asked, and Reid quirked an apologetic smile.

“I, ah … I’m filling in for a few weeks. I’ll explain in a mo’. Actually, I’m here for two reasons, one of which is to see Charlie. I’d like to deal with that before I do some explaining."

As if on cue, Charlie walked around the house leading Batu with Kip on board.

Reid looked over at Charlie, who stopped dead in his tracks, standing beside Parker who narrowed her eyes suspiciously. She was wary, although the dogs were now milling around the ute, sniffing. They had not barked when Reid had arrived, and it told her the vehicle and its occupant were both known to the Munros. Jo’s welcome of the policeman confirmed it, but she was on her guard nevertheless.

Charlie handed Batu’s reins to Parker, whose eyes widened with trepidation, but she held them anyway and Charlie strode forward, holding out a hand.

“It’s good to see you, mate,” he said, although his face was set with grief. He had an idea about the reason for Reid’s visit. Reid shook the proffered hand firmly, and clapped Charlie on the shoulder with his other hand.

Reid turned to Jo.
“Any chance of a cuppa, Jo? I’m as dry as buggery.” He glanced up at Effie, who was standing beside Eliot on the veranda, arms crossed and looking thunderous. “I wouldn’t mind one of your delicious lamingtons, Effie, if you have one spare??” His voice was almost pleading.

Effie scowled and unfolded her arms, putting pudgy fists on her hips.

“Bloody copper!! Rolls up here after ignoring us for ruddy weeks, and then turns up demanding my bleedin’ lamingtons!!”

Reid had the grace to look apologetic.

“Well … not demanding, as such … it’s just if you had one spare … but if you don’t then that’s fine --” he said carefully.

“Of course I’ve got bloody lamingtons!!” Effie growled in disgust. “I’ve always got bloody lamingtons, Tom Reid, and you know it, you cheeky bastard!!” She turned and stumped off to her kitchen, muttering dangerously under her breath. “Do I have lamingtons?! Bloody cheek!! My lamingtons have won awards and the little bastard knows it!!” And so it went as Effie disappeared to make a fresh pot of tea and to dig out an offering of freshly-made, succulent lamingtons for her family and one policeman who had a very sweet tooth and whom she loved to feed.

Tom Reid looked around him at the loose gathering of people here at Wapanjara, a place he had known all of his professional life, and nodded at the new arrivals.

“C’mon Tom,” Jo said, taking Reid’s arm, “have a seat and we can talk.”

Reid looked up at the veranda and its people. He hesitated.

“Charlie … it’s private and official – do you want to go somewhere we can speak –“

Charlie shook his head.

“Nah, mate. They’re family. All of ‘em. I’d like ‘em around, if that’s okay.”

Reid nodded, understanding.

“No worries.” He took a deep breath, and headed up the veranda steps. “Let’s get this over with then, shall we?”

Eliot watched from his recliner. He had initially been wary when the ute had arrived, but he couldn’t stop a small smile as he recognised Tom Reid. Lizzie had got to her feet and shoved her book and pillow behind the recliner out of the way, and she stood beside Eliot, watching the policeman warily. He would harm Eliot at his peril, she thought, but then she saw Eliot relax a little.

Hmm. Perhaps this policeman wouldn’t hurt Eliot after all. She decided to be alert but friendly.

Reid made his way towards the big veranda table, but his eyes wandered to Eliot and the stocky policeman stopped in his tracks. He held out a hand and Eliot shook it carefully, trying not to flinch at Reid’s firm grasp.

“Crikey, Eliot!” Reid exclaimed softly. He took in the bandages that Eliot made no effort to hide, and he saw the pain and gauntness in Eliot’s weary face. “What the bloody hell happened to you?”

Lizzie started with surprise. This policeman knew Eliot. Knew his name, something Eliot never bandied about willingly.
Eliot twitched a smile.

“Mosquito bite,” he said, and the smile widened into a grin.

Reid raised an eyebrow and hitched a smile of his own.

“Well, it must’ve been a bloody big mosquito, mate – one with a cricket bat, by the looks of it.”

Jo walked past and squeezed Eliot’s un-bandaged shoulder, and even though he couldn’t stop the tremor, Eliot was comforted by her touch.

“Eliot’s had one of his bouts of malaria, haven’t you, Eliot?” she said firmly, as though butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth.

Eliot just said nothing, but shrugged a little, even though it hurt like hell.

Reid glanced at Mei, who stood in the doorway still holding Eliot’s glass of orange juice. She felt the grey eyes study her curiously, and she decided she would seize the day. She stuck out her free hand for Reid to shake.

“Hello, Mister Policeman,” she said brightly. “I am Mei. I am Papa Soapy and Mama Jo’s god-daughter. My father is dead and I am here to stay with them for a while so I can help. I am going to be an Australian,” she added proudly, and jutted her little chin out defiantly.

Reid shook her tiny hand, finding her grip surprisingly strong. Mei beamed up at him.

“It … it’s very nice to meet you, Ms Mei,” Reid answered faintly, a little charmed. “Welcome to Oz,” he added before finding his way to a seat, catching Kip looking at him through the veranda railing.

Kip’s eyes widened as he saw Tom Reid gazing at him, noting the big roan gelding the boy sat with confidence. The last time Kip had seen Reid was the day the police had arrived to tell his dad that Alice Jakkamarra, the love of Charlie’s life and Kip’s adored mother, had been killed in a car wreck. Reid had been asked to go along because of his friendship with the deceased’s family.

“Hello, Kip,” Reid said so softly that Eliot had to strain to hear him. “I’m here to speak to your dad, so in the meantime could you help Effie for five minutes? Would that be okay?”

Kip studied Reid with round eyes, but he nodded silently and Parker twitchily helped him slide from Batu’s saddle.

Mei carefully handed Eliot his juice and then she tapped Lizzie on the shoulder.

“Come now,” she said, “I need help with Jamie and Rose as well, so, children … come with me. We have things to do.” She raised an elegant eyebrow expectantly at Kip and Lizzie, and both children sighed but acquiesced reluctantly as Kip ran up the veranda steps leaving a discomfited Parker with Batu.

Lizzie leaned over and patted Eliot’s chest as the hitter studied her with cobalt, fathomless eyes.

“I’ll be back in a little bit, Eliot. You won’t move, will you?? You’ll be still and –“ Lizzie fretted quietly.

“I’ll behave, ‘Lizbeth Grace. I promise,” Eliot whispered, and his broken heart ached almost more than he could tolerate.
Effie trundled out to the veranda with her big teapot on a tray with milk and sugar, followed by cups and lamingtons, so when the children had gone with Mei, Reid poured himself tea and eased a precious lamington onto a plate. He studied it with great pleasure, and only looked up when Soapy and Hardison appeared and made their way up the steps, followed by Nate and Sophie. Parker hurriedly tied Batu’s reins to the veranda railing and clambered up the side of the veranda and onto the roof where she could listen in.

Tom Reid found himself facing an interested, albeit cautious, audience.

He lifted a fork as Effie began to serve tea and people drifted to the multitude of dining chairs and comfy seats on the veranda. Sophie and Nate settled on the swing seat and relaxed back onto the cushions, fingers still entwined. Both of them looked calm and interested. They knew by experience to wait and see how situations evolved, and Eliot’s relaxed demeanour told all of the members of Team Leverage to wait it out.

The forkful of lamington, rich and moist and wonderfully sweet, made the policeman close his eyes in pleasure for a moment or two, and Effie’s grunt of satisfaction at a copper well-fed made Soapy smirk.

But there was business to be taken care of, and Charlie sipped his tea and waited.

Reid came straight to the point.

“If you don’t mind, I’ll leave introductions until later.” He took a mouthful of tea, swallowed and continued, allowing the hot beverage to ease his dry throat. “Charlie … have you ever heard of a bloke called Raphael Eades?”

Charlie’s heart lurched. Was Eades the man Hardison had killed?

“Nope,” he lied, although Hadan had mentioned her lover.

Reid nodded.

Okay. Well … we think he was the man who killed your wife,” he continued. “And yes … she was murdered. It turned out that her brakes had been tampered with … probably acid, although we’ve had to wait for forensics to get on it.” He sighed. “You all know about the bodies from Albany, I expect.”

There were murmurs of assent, and Jo stared into her cup of tea.

“Ethel called me the day it happened. Bloody awful it was, too.” And it served that bastard Chong right, she added mentally and her lip curled in distaste.

“Ah,” Reid said, understanding. “Ethel’s on the ball, as always,” he said with a hint of humour. But he turned back to Charlie, whose face was lined with grief. “I’m sorry, mate – I’m so, so sorry to be bringing this up. It’s Sorry Business,* I know, but if there’s anything I can do …” he added, using the Aboriginal term for loss and grief.

Charlie hung his head, and Soapy leaned forward to rest a hand on the young man’s shoulder while shooting a look at Reid.

“How’d you find out, Tom? How did you know who …?”

Reid leaned back in his chair and eased a crick out of his back. This was one part of the job he hated, and this time it was particularly bad because he had known Charlie Jakkamarra from when the man
was a babe in arms. He had seen him grow to manhood, gain respect within his tribe and the wider community, and he had attended Charlie and Alice’s wedding celebrations. He had held Kip in his arms when the child was just a week old.

“I got called in three days ago, just to hold the fort until they could send out a permanent replacement from Darwin. There are other things I’ll tell you about in a bit, but … when we went out to Albany, the place was a deserted wreck. The only living thing we found there was a young aborigine cowering in a cupboard. The poor bugger just kept babbling on about the ‘little demon’ in Gurindji. I doubt we’ll get anything out of him, so we’ll leave him to tribal law. But when we began digging about and searching the place, we found a body.”

Hardison stared at Reid.

“Where?” he asked, and then instantly regretted it as Reid settled a calculating eye on him. He heard Eliot’s soft growl, and knew he had made a mistake. Why would someone who had only heard of the whole situation at Albany from Jo as she explained Ethel Krapinski’s gossipy description of Chong’s death, be interested in where a body was found? “I … I mean … jus’ colour me curious is all …” he finished lamely.

Reid sipped his tea before answering.

“What was left once the dingoes had had a fair go at him we found in a shallow grave about a mile away from the house. We found his rifle in one of the filtration ponds,” he added. “Whoever buried him thought the dogs and goannas would make him disappear, but there was enough left for us to get a fingerprint.”

Eliot shifted in his chair and couldn’t stop a moan of pain, but it appeared Reid ignored it and focused on Charlie. This wasn’t going to be easy, but it had to be done.

“Eades was a hit-man, Charlie. He was brought in to kill her.”

Charlie sat as still as the ancient stones of this land he loved, his face rigid and fixed with pain. He had always known the reason for Alice’s death in his heart, especially when Hardison had uncovered the truth about the uranium, but to hear it so clearly and unequivocally stated by Reid was like a physical blow.

“We found a camera in the wreckage of her truck,” Reid continued. “She had images of Albany on it. She’d been watching them, and knowing her love of geology it became obvious that she had figured out that they were mining uranium illegally. I haven’t quite figured out how Rickenbacker and Chong found out about her, but … anyway, we will, have no doubt about that. I’m so sorry, mate. But now at least you know.”

Charlie nodded, his dark eyes full of tears. He swallowed down the heart-shaped lump in his throat, and felt Effie’s hand grasp his, the fingers curled so tightly into fists his knuckles gleamed white through his dark skin.

“Easy, boy,” she said, her voice low with grief. “The bastard who killed her is dead. At least there’s that. It don’t bring our girl back, but she can walk easy in the Dreaming Land. She’s avenged.”

“Y … yeah,” Charlie ground out, and his voice cracked. “Yeah … “ and as the tears finally spilled down his face, he stared at Reid. “Thanks, Tom. Thanks for coming out here to tell me. At least I know for certain now. Kip will know his mum died doing something that mattered to us all.”

“She did that,” Effie said, and tightened her grasp on Charlie’s hands. She felt the fists uncurl and
lace fingers through her own. “Kip can be proud of her.”

Charlie took a deep breath and steadied himself, but didn’t let go of Effie’s grasp, needing the contact. The little cook squeezed his fingers, letting the young widower he was loved.

Reid took a deep breath and stared at nothing for a moment or two, giving Charlie some space. But he knew he had to continue.

“Charlie … I also have an apology to make.”

Nate arched an eyebrow. He’d never heard a police officer apologise before, so this he wanted to hear.

“Everett Spicer, who replaced me, was a crooked, cocky bastard who was recruited by Chong not long after Albany was sold off. He and Toby Custance – remember Toby?” he asked Soapy, who nodded, “well he was always one with an eye for a deal, and he had contacts abroad, so … anyway, Spicer buried the evidence. The lot. He blocked testing, he held onto reports … he did everything he could to hold up the investigation. Both he and Custance were bought and paid for by Chong. God, I hate bent coppers!” Reid breathed, suddenly angry.

“Was?” Nate asked, leaning forward now, interested. “You said he was a crooked, cocky bastard?” Reid smiled wanly.

“Three days ago, just after Chong and his cronies were found, he legged it to Alice Springs and then onto Adelaide. He had a flight booked to Shanghai, but …”

“But?” Nate insisted.

“He was found last night in a grubby little motel with his head removed. Just like Chong. Which … leads me onto my second reason for visiting Wapanjara.” Reid finished his lamington and poured himself more tea.

“And that would be …??” Soapy enquired.

“To meet you and your team, Mister Ford,” Reid said.

The silence was so profound it could have been cut by a knife.

Nate gazed carefully at Reid, and then glanced at Eliot. The hitter was sitting with a half-smile on his face, his eyes closed and his head resting on the back of the recliner. He seemed curiously unfazed by Reid’s declaration.

Nate sighed.

“And why would you want to meet us, Detective Chief Inspector Reid?” he said, his voice calm but edged with steel.

“Because I think you can help me … especially you, Mister Ford.”

Nate relaxed back into the swing seat and sought out Sophie’s hand.

“It depends what you want me to help you with,” he said smoothly.

Reid sat straight in his chair and this time his eyes were like stormy clouds.
“You knew Chong’s father. You know how the Triads work … you know their foibles, tricks of the trade … that sort of thing.” He fished in his pocket and bought out a folded piece of paper. Flattening it on the table top, he shoved it in Nate’s direction. Jo lifted it and passed it to Nate, who stared at it.

The paper was a digital scan of a red square containing a mass of Chinese symbols.

“Do you know what this is?”

Nate studied the paper minutely, Sophie peering over his shoulder. The image looked familiar but it took him a few minutes to remember where he had seen it last.

“It’s the symbol for the Red Jade Dragons,” he murmured, intrigued. “Where did you get this?”

Reid narrowed his eyes, thinking.

“Red Jade Dragons … just as I suspected, but I wanted someone outside the police to verify it for me – someone honest and unbiased.”

Nate let out a guffaw of derision.

“Now that’s something I haven’t been called in a long, long time … an honest man.” He shook his head, but continued looking at the piece of paper. “Why me? I’m sure you could speak to any number of experts.”

“Because you ate, lived and breathed the triad connection when you chased up the Bunyo Explosion case, especially Chong Zhi-huán of the Shumchun triads. You have the personal experience I need, plus, I have to admit, you were close enough for me to drive out and see you. That symbol was found stuffed in Chong’s and Spicer’s mouths. It was also found staked through Chong Zhi-huán’s chest when the Shanghai police stormed his headquarters yesterday. The old man, his entire family and a whole mob of his thugs are dead.”

“Bloody hell!” Soapy said under his breath, and shifted painfully in his chair, a fact Reid didn’t miss.

Nate blew out his cheeks and shook his head.

“Red Jade Dragons. Arch enemy of the Shumchun triads. There have been power struggles for decades … a murder here, a robbery there … a few dead thugs found beheaded in an alley … that sort of thing. I think they have connections with the Middle East, including terrorist groups who trade opium for weapons. But they just wield too much power for the authorities to tackle them.”

“Until now,” Reid said. He allowed himself a small smile. “Somehow, the Chinese and Australian authorities, the Shanghai police, Interpol, U.S. Homeland Security, M.I.6 and, for some reason, about two dozen influential websites and blogs were all sent information simultaneously that led them to everything from forged receipts for smuggled small arms, to a complete digital map of the location of every damn ISIL cell in Afghanistan.”

Nate let out a low whistle.

“Neat! Just how useful is that?” he said, a little ironically.

He saw Hardison smile despite his concern at Reid’s insight into his team’s identities.

“Useful indeed,” Reid said. “Do you think there will be repercussions here in Tennant Creek?”

Nate shook his head.
“I doubt it. Whoever did the killings will be long gone.”

Reid pondered the information, and reached out to take the paper from Nate, who stood up and handed it over.

“We have one name. Khenbish Hadan. Know anything about her?” Reid asked, turning his steady gaze on Eliot.

Eliot opened his eyes and studied Reid.

“Yeah. I know who she is,” he replied wearily.

The tension increased palpably on the veranda.

Eliot winced as he tried to sit up straight, but he waved Jo away as she moved to help him.

“M’okay, darlin’,” he said quietly, and his gaze returned to Reid. “I know of her, Tom. Mongolian assassin and one crazy bitch. I heard she hung out with Eades. Last I knew of Eades was he was workin’ out of Singapore. Good shot, lousy manners.” Eliot allowed himself a minute shrug.

“Sounds like there’s one less asshole in the world.”

Reid let out a grin before sobering again, his amiable face settling once more into the unfathomable visage of the career policeman.

“I won’t argue with that one,” he countered. “But … there is one other thing, and then I’ll leave you all alone.”

“And what would that be, Inspector?” Sophie asked calmly, her accent clipped and oozing with well-bred menace.

Reid rested his elbows on the table and laced his fingers together as he looked straight at Eliot.

“I need to know if anyone – anyone – on Wapanjara caused Chong’s death. And if you lie, I can’t help you if my people come for you.”

Eliot’s blue eyes gazed warmly into Reid’s grey ones, and the hitter smiled lazily.

“Tom … I can say in all honesty that no-one on Wapanjara killed Chong Bun Tsui. You got my word on that. I swear on my oath that Chong visited Wapanjara, and he left alive.”

Eliot was relaxed and unafraid, and Reid knew then that Eliot spoke the truth. He looked around at the people surrounding him, and he nodded.

“I know Chong was here trying to buy Wapanjara. Rumour has it that you were speaking to another buyer and turned Chong down. Is that right, Soapy?”

“Yes … well …” Soapy looked sheepish. “Rumours. Buggers of things, so they are. Jo and I … you know we would never sell Wapanjara. Chong was given the heave-ho and he left.”

Reid relaxed.

“Well then,” he said, his voice warm and kind. “That’s that. Oh … by the way …” his eyes turned to Jo. “I didn’t know you two had a god-daughter.”

Jo laughed.
“Yes … well … we agreed to it a long time ago to get a friend out of a bind. It was a bit of a surprise, to say the least, when she turned up out of the blue, but she’s a good girl and she’s settled in as though this place has always been her home. We hope she decides to stay.”

Reid glanced at Soapy and he could see the hope in his friend’s eyes.

“She couldn’t have found a better home,” he said with feeling. “Righto – I’d better be off.” He turned to Charlie and offered his hand, which Charlie took, shaking it firmly. “I’m sorry I was the bearer of rotten news, mate. But now you know.”

Charlie stood up and smiled at Reid, even as the tears shone in his dark eyes.

“No worries, Tom. I’m glad you came. It makes sense now.”

Effie heaved herself to her feet and poked Reid in the arm.

“Just you wait there, you greedy bugger!” she rumbled, and stumping off to her kitchen she returned a minute later with a bag which she handed to Reid. “Here,” she said. “You’re looking a bit scrawny.”

Reid nodded his thanks but didn’t open the bag. He already knew what it contained.

He was about to head down the veranda steps and back to his vehicle when he hesitated, turning back to Nate.

“Eliot saved my life once. He never told me about you lot, but I’m not daft. I was in Boston a few years later at a conference and met up with a bloke called Patrick Bonnano. Best copper I ever knew. I told him about this Yank who’d pulled my arse out of the proverbial fire … who’d saved my life and my reputation. Pat and I … we’ve stayed friends, and he was in Sydney on an exchange visit, when completely out of the blue he said to me that if I ever needed help, I was to contact Eliot and his people. That’s all he said.” Reid saw the smile on Eliot’s drawn face and grinned. “I keep my ears and eyes open, Mister Ford. It took me a long time, but I figured you all out. And, I have to say, it’s been a pleasure.”

Nate grinned back.

“Any time, copper. And it’s Nate. Just Nate.”

Reid looked at Sophie.

“Miss Devereaux …” his gaze wandered to Hardison. “And you must be Alec Hardison. And …??”

“Parker! Just Parker!” came a yell from overhead.

“Parker,” Reid repeated. “Yes … well. I have to go. Soapy?”

Soapy settled back in his chair.

“Yes Tom?”

Reid cocked his head to one side.

“Look after that shoulder, mate. It looks bloody sore. Oh, and by the way …” The policeman waggled a finger at the newly-sanded and painted veranda door and window frames. “You missed one.” He grinned and made his way down the steps and back to the Hilux. He lifted the bag of lamingtons in thanks, clambered into the ute, and within moments he was gone, driving the vehicle
over the hill by the stringybarks and back to civilisation.

Soapy looked at the top of the doorjamb where Reid had pointed, and there, almost hidden by the sill, was a fresh bullet hole.

“Oh … bugger it!!” he said resignedly. And heaving a sigh of relief, he poured himself a fresh cup of tea.

It was another few days before Eliot was on his feet again.

He was slow, in pain and exhausted, but he began to work his way up and down the veranda, shadowed as always by Lizzie as he began by propping himself against the wall as he took each step. He progressed to limping unsteadily from chair-back to chair-back, and Lizzie watched with her heart in her mouth in case he fell. But he improved, agonizing though it was, and he was as pleased as punch when one morning he made his way down the veranda steps. It was a little more of a problem, however, getting back up to the veranda, and to his dismay he had to have Lizzie steady him as he spent twenty long, very painful minutes taking each step and then having to rest until his heartbeat slowed and he didn’t feel as though acid was running through his veins.

Effie just stood on the veranda, arms crossed, watching the pair of them closely and making sure Eliot didn’t over-stretch himself.

Two days later, he waited until Lizzie, over-tired and stumbling, was told to take a nap, and then he slowly made his way down the veranda steps. With a delighted Gertie in tow, he walked carefully along the track to the almond stand where the magpies sang and the lorikeets chattered. Once there, he aimed for an old tree stump and eased his damaged body down onto it, wincing as his ribs ached. He still had to be careful of his wounds – if he fell, he could undo everything Jo had done to keep him alive.

At last he was away from being under constant watch. Gertie settled down beside him with a huffing gurgle, and he stretched out a hand to rub her velvet nose. She rumbled with pleasure and lipped at his hand, leaving slobbery trails on his sleeve.

“I know, sweetheart … I know. We’ve not done this in a long, long time.”

Gertie nuzzled his leg, looking for more scratchies, and Eliot obliged. God, he was tired.

But, he knew, he had plans to make.

Money wouldn’t be a problem. He had enough and more to keep him going for a lifetime. He had to find somewhere to live, he knew. The wandering life without his family would be too hard for him now. There would be no more retrieval work … it was too risky, and he might bump into the people he loved. He didn’t think he could survive if that happened. No, Eliot Spencer would just retreat from the world, and if he died sooner rather than later, at least Lizzie wouldn’t know and the pain he had caused her would fade in time.

He rubbed the bridge of his nose, fighting a creeping headache. Damn this sunlight. It drove into his skull through his eyes, and he still had problems reading anything. His side and shoulder throbbed, and there was a crawling sensation under the bandage. Maggots. He hated friggin’ maggots.

Maybe he could find a little island someplace … somewhere warm where his scars didn’t ache so much and the burgeoning arthritis in his hands wouldn’t plague him in the mornings. He could speak to Doc Toller back in Portland about his back if it caused him any worry. Eliot knew Toller would keep his location secret from his family if he asked. Hippocratic Oath and all that, he reckoned.
He sighed. This was *awful*. And it was going to get worse, because he still hadn’t spoken to Nate and Sophie about making Hardison and Parker Lizzie’s guardians. It had to be done, Eliot knew, because he wasn’t fit for the job anymore.

Here he was, a bust-up ol’ soldier in his forties, getting slower by the day and now … now he had killed a man in front of the child he was supposed to protect.

*Moron,* he thought, despising himself.

He closed his eyes and let the heat of the sun soothe his shoulder. He couldn’t let himself doze off in case he slid from the stump, and he knew he couldn’t get back on his feet if he did so. *Useless.* That’s what he was. *Useless.*

Gertie suddenly lifted her head, ears pricked. She grumbled happily in greeting.

“Eliot?? Are you okay?”

Oh … *shit.*

Eliot opened his eyes and squinted at Lizzie. The little girl had obviously sneaked out of the homestead and followed him.

“’Lizbeth Grace, you’re supposed to be gettin’ some rest,” he chastised gently.

Lizzie, standing awkwardly in the dappled sunlight, dipped her head, embarrassed.

“Couldn’t sleep,” she mumbled, and walking up to Eliot she sat down beside him on the stump. He shifted a little, giving her more room, and she felt him flinch. She dearly wanted to give him a hug, but she knew instinctively he would cringe away from her, so she kept a little distance between them so he wouldn’t become uncomfortable.

The pair of them sat quietly for a while, listening to the fluting calls of the magpies, and Eliot wondered what he could possibly say to this child he adored and who was about to lose her guardian and best friend forever.

Eliot mentally snorted. Guardian. *Yeah, right.* Some guardian *he* was. He sighed. Well … he’d better say *something* –

“’Lizbeth Grace –“

“Why did you lie to me??” Lizzie asked suddenly, her voice almost a whisper.

Surprised, Eliot stared at her. She stared back at him, dark eyes swimming with tears.

Eliot blinked and raised his eyebrows, clearly confused.

“ What??” he replied, “’Lizbeth Grace, I –“

“You lied to me,” she said again with a tiny sob in her voice.

Now Eliot had no idea what she was talking about, and it had clearly been rattling around in her mind and tying her little heart into knots. Eliot had *never* lied to her. At least, not that he could remember.

“When??” he asked. “When, exactly??”
Lizzie struggled to keep her voice level as she stood up and faced Eliot. They were almost eye to eye, and puzzled blue eyes looked into heartbroken brown, and Lizzie squared up to this deadly, dangerous man whom she loved dearly.

“You told me …” she took a deep breath and couldn’t control a hiccupsed sob, “ … I asked you if you were alright and you said you were fine and you weren’t! You were bleeding and hurt and you wouldn’t tell me the truth and … and …” tears ran unfettered down her face and Eliot was dumbfounded.

She was right. He had lied to her through the earbud, just before he had dealt with Hadan. He reached out to pull her to him and comfort her, because he was damned if he would let his ‘Lizbeth Grace continue to cry, but she tugged away from him, sobbing.

Out of his depth, Eliot tried to explain.

“Sweetheart, what would you have done if I’d told you I wasn’t okay? Huh? How d’you think that would have felt? I couldn’t let you worry about me, darlin’. How d’you think I would have felt if I’d told you I was all bust up an’ —“

“You lied to me!!” she yelled, and all of the pent-up emotions she had tried to control since Eliot had first been wounded by Hadan in the parking lot burst from her in a torrent of gabbled words and tears. “You nearly died, and you told me you were okay!! And now you shake every time I touch you and you won’t look at me properly and … and … you’re still sick and I can’t make the pain go away and I don’t know what to do!!”

And before Eliot could do anything, she turned and ran, heading back to the house, her sobs tearing apart what was left of Eliot’s heart.

He sat for a long time on the tree stump. Taking deep breaths to try and calm his shaking body, he ignored Gertie’s concerned squeaks and realised he would have to calm down before he was strong enough to be able to stand.

*Told you, Moreau said, close to his ear. I told you that you would never leave my world, Eliot. And now you have no choice but to return.*

And the whispers began and the maggots began to eat his insides and Gertie burbled and fussed, but all Eliot Spencer could think of was how his world had suddenly shattered into nothingness.

To be continued …

* ‘Sorry Business’ – a general English term used by Aboriginal communities when someone passes away, and the whole community comes together to share that sorrow. Through a process called Sorry Business (a period of cultural practices following the death of a community member), communities and individuals are able to properly mourn the loss of a loved one. Widespread ceremonies of Sorry Business are held around the bereavement and funerals for a deceased person.*
It took Eliot some time to garner the strength and the willpower to slowly make his way back to the house.

Gertie walked quietly beside him, occasionally mumbling at his arm and slowing her rocking pace so she kept level with the injured man. On a walk that would have only taken him ten minutes at most, Eliot took over twice that time, his strength drained, and only Gertie’s solid presence prevented him from collapsing. He leaned against her ribcage, and had to stop every few slow, painful steps to catch his breath.

But Gertie was infinitely patient. She stood like a rock as he leaned on her, trying to drag air into his lungs and calm his shaking frame. Her velvet lips whiffled at his sweat-damp hair and she nuzzled gently and carefully at his face, rumbling and humming to herself.

She knew Eliot was on the edge of a place from which he might not return. Gertie loved Eliot. She also loved Lizzie because Eliot loved Lizzie, and the little girl was the light of Eliot’s life. But now Gertie, in her camelish way, understood something profound had happened to Eliot. So she worried and squeaked and fussed, and Eliot, hurt and at the end of his strength, physically and mentally, was grateful for her care.

But he knew that he would have to leave not only Gertie behind and his team, but also Jo, Soapy, Effie, Charlie and Kip. He couldn’t … he couldn’t stay. His ‘Lizbeth Grace hated him. He knew it in what was left of his heart.

He stumbled and almost fell, and the maggots began again, sly and crawling, their dry, heaving mass working their writhing bodies into his chest now, heading towards his shredded heart. He could hardly keep on his feet as the shaking became so bad his teeth chattered.

But Gertie kept him going. Ever patient and ever loving, the big camel made sure he got the support he needed, and at last he emerged from the dappled shadows of the track onto the wide expanse of dirt yard in front of the homestead.

He expected uproar. How could the rest of his family ignore the sobbing little girl who had run away from the man who had been her protector and guardian? How could they ignore what he had done? He had lied to his best girl, no matter that he had vowed never to do so, because he had wanted to keep her safe. And she had seen him kill a human being. She had seen Ryan’s life wink out in a rush of blood and twitching, dead muscles and become nothing more than a slaughtered carcass in the dirt.

Eliot Spencer shuddered with the revulsion he felt for himself.

But there was no anger … no accusations or hatred awaited him as he blinked in the harsh sunshine
and his head began to pound. But through bleary, aching eyes he saw Parker and Hardison clatter down the veranda steps and run towards him, arms outstretched to catch him as he wove unsteadily, hanging desperately onto Gertie’s bosal. He was suddenly cradled in strong arms, and he heard comforting words murmured gently as he was helped towards the house.

“Easy, El … easy now … we gotcha … what happened, man?” Hardison whispered as he supported Eliot on his right, Parker gently pushing Gertie away so that Jo and Mei could hold him with gentle hands on his wounded left side.

“Lizabeth Grace … she okay?” he growled hoarsely, worried about Lizzie as he squinted at the veranda steps looming in front of him.

“Upset, unhappy … but nothing that time and understanding won’t heal, boy. We should have come and fetched you –“ Jo muttered, but Eliot fixed her with icy blue eyes.

“M’fine,” he grunted and tried to straighten his wounded body, shrugging off the hands intent on helping him make his way into the house. “I c’n make it m’self.”

Hardison glanced at Parker, whose eyes were round with worry.

“But Lizzie’s really upset –“ she began, trying to make sense of what had happened between the guardian and the child.

“Leave it, Parker!” Eliot curled his lip in irritation and reached out for the veranda hand rail, missed and nearly fell. But he shook off Hardison when he tried to help, and the hacker felt the trembling running like wildfire through Eliot’s broken frame.

Parker’s eyes glistened with tears. There was something very wrong here … her family was tearing itself apart. Nate had seen his daughter run sobbing from the old track and tackled her even as she tried to avoid him, swinging her up and into his arms. Lizzie had broken at her father’s touch. Flinging her arms around Nate’s neck she had been so distraught she couldn’t speak.

Parker touched Eliot’s shoulder as he shrunk away from her.

“Eliot … what did you do … what did you say to her??” she asked, upset.

Eliot hung onto the hand rail even as he swayed, and Hardison was shocked to see Eliot’s eyes glisten with tears.

“She’s better away from me, Parker!” he grated, hurting. “She’s got it right – I ain’t fit to be around her. I … I can’t protect her any more. I lied to her. Thought it was the right thing to do, but … she’ll never forgive me for that.” Eliot fixed Parker with a look she would never forget for as long as she lived. Eliot’s blue eyes were riven with grief, bare and raw and so filled with pain that Parker let out a sob of her own.

But the moment passed and Eliot caught his breath, gathered his wits about him and fighting the gentle help of his family, he battled his way up the veranda steps, limped unsteadily past Soapy and Effie, who stood, unable to bring themselves to force their love and support on him, and disappeared inside the house.

Everyone heard the door of his bedroom slam shut behind him.

“Bugger!” Effie said under her breath.

“Bugger indeed!” Soapy sighed, and then everyone was talking at once. Parker leaned miserably on
Hardison, an imminent snivel in progress, and Jo, fuming quietly, ran fingers through her auburn-silver curls.

“Y’know,” she seethed, genuinely furious, “sometimes I would love to just whack some bloody sense into that boy with a brick!”

The babble of voices was interrupted by Nate exiting Oggie’s big tent, his eyes sad and a little nonplussed, something his team had never seen before.

“How’s the nipper?” Effie asked, stumping down the steps to stand next to Mei, who was busy asking everyone what was going on in a confused mixture of English and Mandarin.

Nate shook his head.

“Asleep, finally. I think half of all this upset is because she’s so damn tired!”

“What the hell happened?” Hardison asked, battling against Parker’s now octopus-like grip, his shirt slowly dampening with the thief’s tears.

Nate raised his eyebrows and sighed with frustration.

“Well, from what I can gather she gave Eliot absolute hell,” he said. “Demanded to know why he’d lied to her, then she didn’t let him explain, tore a strip off him and bolted.”

Parker knuckled tears out of her eyes and frowned.

“But … but Eliot’s never lied to her. Never!” she said, “He said he did, but I can’t believe —“

“He lied, babe,” Hardison murmured and tucked a stray blond wisp of hair back from Parker’s teary face. “Thing is … I think we would have all lied under the circumstances. She asked him over the earbud if he was okay, an’ he was all beat up an’ bleedin’… just about bled out, damn him, an’ he told her he was fine. She’s havin’ trouble understandin’ he didn’t want her to worry about him. But … Lizzie thinks that’s her job. To worry about the stupid dumb-ass,” he added bitterly.

Nate rubbed tired eyes and grimaced.

“Soph’s sitting with her right now and we’ll make sure she gets some sleep. Maybe we can fix this tomorrow.”

Effie scowled.

“Well, sod that for a game of cricket,” she rasped, her eyes muddier than ever. “I’m giving the ruddy boofhead an hour to sulk and then I’m going to read him the bloody riot act!” She tapped Mei on the shoulder. “C’mon, Princess,” she said, “we need to make the idiot some congee, because by the time I’ve finished with him, he’s going to bleedin’ need it. Pillock!” she added with feeling.

Mei nodded, agreeing.

“I will put plenty of fish in this one. It will help with his blood, and …” she added with a spark of something ferocious in her eye, “… it will help his silly brain work, because he’s a wú nǎo báichí!!”

Soapy’s eyes twinkled a little.

“Well, you’re not wrong there, Mei!” he smiled.

But Jo wasn’t sure.
“He’s still badly hurt, Effie!” she warned, green eyes misty with worry for her boy. “I don’t think he can take a bollicking —”

Effie folded her arms, a gesture that always spoke of the little cook’s stubborn determination, and she snorted.

“Missus, you know as well as I do that whether he’s all buggered up or not, if we don’t let him know we understand what’s going on in his messed-up noggin it’ll only get worse.” Her voice softened for a moment. “Do you remember, Mister M?”

Soapy put his hand on Effie’s shoulder.

“She’s right Jo. You know she is. Eliot doesn’t need to be alone, no matter that he’ll argue the case until the bloody cows come home. You know how bloody-minded the daft sod can be. We need to help. He needs to know he can talk about it, and I’m damned if I’m going to hear a litany of ‘M’ fine’ for the next God only knows how long!”

Jo chewed her lip. She knew they were right. She just fretted that Eliot, sick as he was, would not deal too well with Effie’s somewhat robust version of human psychology.

Hardison nodded.

“I’ll go for that, Eff. He’s at some kind of cut-off point. We’ve seen it happen – once he makes his mind up about somethin’ it’s a sonofabitch to try and change it.”

Parker peeled herself away from Hardison and looked up at the young hacker.

“Eliot’s making his mind up about what??” she asked, her voice scratchy with emotion. “What is he going to do? Hardison?? What’s Eliot planning??”

Nate suddenly looked stricken as realisation hit him.

“What did he do when we took down Moreau? Huh? What did he do when Udall threatened to explode that briefcase? What does Eliot always do when things go ass-up and the job needs his sacrifice to make it work? What would he do if he thought his presence was upsetting Lizzie? His ‘Lizbeth Grace?? His best girl??”

Parker’s eyes became round with shock.

“He’s going to leave, isn’t he?? He’s going to leave all of us!”

Nate turned to Effie.

“We can’t help you on this one, Eff. I can’t … I don’t know how to fix this. I don’t know what’s wrong with him … what’s going on in his head.” For the first time in his life, Nate had to admit defeat. “This is more Sophie’s kind of expertise, and we’ve got Lizzie to care for right now.”

Hardison’s voice when it came was soft with compassion.

“He’s been like this since we’ve known him, Nate. We just didn’t take any notice. Why d’you think he only sleeps ninety minutes a day?”

The realisation hit Nate like a bag of bricks.

“Oh … Jesus!” he whispered. “Seriously? I mean … seriously??”
Parker, out of her depth, glanced wildly at her friends.

“What?? Will someone please tell me what’s going on??”

Soapy intervened.

“Eliot’s an ex-soldier, Parker. He’s seen and done terrible, terrible things, what with the black ops stuff and Moreau. And there’s probably more.”

Parker nodded, irritated.

“Yes, yes, I know that! We all do, and we don’t ask because if we ask he’ll tell us and then he thinks we won’t want him any more – oh God!!” she gasped, suddenly understanding. “He has that thing … that … that … thing that people get when something bad happens and their heads get all messed up –“

“PTSD, Parker.” Hardison pulled Parker into his chest again and held her, resting his chin on the top of her head. “Eliot has PTSD. And always has had since we met him. It’s just … since all this happened with Chong an’ Hadan, an’ Lizzie was threatened …”

“He’s lugged this around for years,” Soapy said, his dark eyes full of sadness. “Eliot just so happens to have a pretty bad case that he kept buried deep, deep inside him like an old claymore mine. And then Chong and Hadan came along and stepped right on it, and BOOM! This is Eliot’s Pandora’s box … and he’s having a helluva job putting the lid back on.”

“That’s why he shakes!” Parker said, stunned. “And … and the thing with the maggots, and I’ve been thinking he’s hearing weird things because he looks away all of a sudden, as though he’s trying to avoid listening to something. I thought he was just being Stubborn-And-Prickly-Eliot!”

“You got it, woman!” Hardison scowled. “Sometimes … sometimes Eliot can be a real asshole,” he muttered with feeling.

But they all knew Eliot Spencer was a very, very private man. He never spoke of his past other than to mention if something was particularly distinctive, or, in a moment of snarling indignation, that he had liberated Croatia. Quite how he had liberated Croatia, he didn’t bother to explain, although his team had absolutely no doubt that he had done so. Yep, thought Hardison with more than a modicum of frustrated affection. Asshole.

“And we put him in a situation where some bastard was trying to trigger PTSD in veterans!” Nate muttered*. He remembered Eliot’s stony resistance to the interrogations and the loud rock music and freezing conditions, designed to mentally and physically break the subjects of the experiment. How the hell Eliot had done so, Nate had no idea, and the hitter had shown no signs that the situation had affected him. But, Nate knew, it couldn’t have helped Eliot cope with the problem. “You think it’s wise to deal with this now?” he asked doubtfully.

“Listen, clever-clogs,” Effie groused, “believe me when I tell ya that if we don’t, the silly bastard’ll clam up worse’n a Coffin Bay cockle, the bludger!!” Effie’s eyes softened as she glared at Nate, who bristled slightly, but understood Effie’s point. “He’s always been a tough nut to crack, son,” she insisted, “and biding our time just lets him add another layer to the armour.”

But the whole discussion was brought to a halt by the sudden distant rumble of vehicles, the sound almost solid in the heat of the day. Turning as one, they saw two battered old utes creep into view as they wound their way over the hill by the stringybarks and slowly worked their way down towards the homestead, tackling the lumps and bumps and weaving carefully over the uneven road like a
couple of drunken old men.

Soapy couldn’t stop a grin of delight from spreading over his hangdog features.

“Well!” he exclaimed, relief in every word, “well-I-bloody-never!”

The two vehicles drove into the yard, and before the engines were even turned off, half-a-dozen men jumped easily out of each of the flatbeds.

A small, spare man with a weathered face and wearing a sweat-stained old Australian outback hat emerged from the driver’s seat and walked forward on bowed legs, relic of a lifetime on horseback. His tanned, wrinkled face creased into a sheepish smile, and he took off his hat, revealing thinning hair and a tan-line.

Soapy’s grin widened.

“G’day, Jacko!” he greeted the leathery little man.

“Hey, Boss!” Jacko said, and shifted from foot to foot, obviously embarrassed. “Um … Boss …” he stammered slightly and one of the other men, a tall, lanky man with broken teeth shoved Jacko’s narrow shoulder.

“Go on, Jacko!” he hissed. “Ask ‘im!!”

Soapy glanced at Jo, who shrugged.

“Ask me what?” Soapy urged, already guessing what the question would be but happy to let the man stew a little.

Jacko hesitated and then waved a gnarly hand at his compatriots.

“Me an’ the boys … we, ah … we was hoping you … you and the Missus were … y’know … hiring on?”

Soapy cocked an eyebrow at Jo, who despite her Eliot-fuelled frustration, gave Soapy a tiny nod of approval. But Soapy wasn’t going to let his old crew off too lightly.

“Thought you had family problems, Jacko?” Soapy pondered.

Jacko ducked his head to hide the flush of embarrassment.

“Yeah … well … the family’s fine, Boss.” But when he raised his head Soapy could see the hurt in Jacko’s bright china blue eyes. “But that bloody Ryan bloke … he … he threatened my Sis and her kids, Boss!! He said if I didn’t leave Wapanjara her eldest boy would have an accident, he said! I didn’t have no choice!”

“He told me I’d better go home to Mataranka to my old mum!” Jacko’s compatriot said. “Ryan said her heart pills might not work proper! He knew all about her, Boss! Knew what pills she’s on … everything!”

There were murmurs of agreement from the rest of Soapy’s old crew, the men who had left Wapanjara under threat and desperately wanted to come back and make their living with the Munros.

Jacko stood as straight as his bowed legs would let him and looked Soapy in the eye.

“We heard the bastard’s dead. Him and that lot over at Albany.” Jacko took a deep breath and
continued. “We was wonderin’, y’know … if you’d consider … um … lettin’ us all come back?”

Soapy rubbed his aching shoulder and looked at the bunch of stockmen standing before him, all of them eager, embarrassed and hopeful.

“Well now …” he said thoughtfully, “We do need a crew, I suppose. There’s fat bullocks to muster and haul to Alice by the end of the month, and there’s calves to tag and drench …”

Jacko’s eyes brightened with hope.

Soapy grinned.

“Go stow your swag, fellas,” he said. “Be ready bright and early for Charlie to sort out what we’re up to for the next couple of weeks. He’s in the North paddock with Kip looking over some poddies, but he’ll be back before dark.”

Grins of relief broke out through this small group of hard-bitten, tough men whose lives were spent riding the wild country and making Wapanjara one of the Northern Territory’s best cattle stations.


Jo rested a hand on Soapy’s good shoulder and rubbed the tense muscles there.

“He’s taking care of his son and hoping for the best,” she said sombrely. “But they found out who killed his girl.”

Jacko’s face twisted suddenly in surprise and grief.

“Bloody hell!” he said, and his compatriots’ faces all carried the same expression of horror. “Somebody killed the lass?? Some cocky bastard killed our girl??”

Jo nodded, but held up a hand, stopping the murmur of dire threats.

“He’s dead, Jacko. The bugger’s gone.”

Jacko, scowling, nodded.

“Well … well, that’s something, at least.” He took a deep breath and steadied himself. “Righto, Missus – we’ll get settled and sort out horses for tomorrow, if that’s alright? We can cook for ourselves for tonight, Eff.” He studied the strange faces and Bernadette and Oggie. “Is, ah … is the Yank home?” he asked.

“He is,” Jo said, “but he’s not been too well so he’s in his bed. So no bloody noise tonight, y’hear?”

Jacko grinned.

“No worries, Missus.” His lined face softened. “Tell him we’re asking for him, the lazy bludger.”

Jo’s face softened into a smile.

“I will, Jacko. And we have guests, as you can see, so I’ll do the introductions tomorrow as I have to go take care of Eliot and help get supper ready. Oh, and we have babies in the house, so no banging on the door for Soapy at 5am if you value your lives!”

The men all looked at one another.
“Babbies??” the tall stockman said. “How many??”

“Twins,” Effie rumbled. “And if you wake ‘em up, you cheeky bastard, I’ll skin you, Chalky Perkins, y’hear me??”

“What flavour?” Jacko said, now alive with curiosity. The whole crew leaned forward to hear the answer.

“One of each,” Jo said. “Rose and Jamie.”

To a man they grinned with satisfaction.

“Well now,” Jacko said, “we’ll be off. But maybe we’ll get to see the little ankle-biters?? It’ll be nice to have babbies at Wapanjara again.”

Mei stared at this group of scruffy, weathered men, eyes alight with a soft eagerness, and she was charmed by the whole lot of them.

“I … I am Mei. Rose and Jamie are my children, and I’m sure you can see them tomorrow,” she said hesitantly.

Grins broke out all around.

“That’d be lovely, little Miss,” Jacko said. “We haven’t had a babbie at Wapanjara since Kip was borned.”

But Effie had things to do, and unfolding her arms she waved at the group of stockmen.

“Right, you lot!! Bugger off! I have babbies to feed and get the Yank tended to. I’ll have breakfast ready at six sharp, y’hear? And if you’re late it’ll go in the dog!”

Jacko and Chalky grinned unrepentantly and gestured at the rest of the reinstated Wapanjara crew. They all headed back to the utes, and within five minutes they had driven to the two low, unobtrusive buildings behind the barn which housed small, individual rooms for each stockman along with a communal bathroom for each building.

Wapanjara Station was finally back in business.

It was almost exactly an hour later when Effie, a mug of Mei’s rich and nutritious congee in hand, knocked on Eliot’s bedroom door and without waiting for a reply, opened it and walked in.

Eliot, to her surprise, wasn’t in his bed. He was sitting silently on Effie’s old rocking chair. The bedside lamp was switched off so that he was in the semi-dark, his face shadowed and his eyes shut. The window blinds were still drawn down, and it was obvious Eliot’s headache had returned.

“Come on in, why don’tcha??” he drawled sardonically, but his eyes stayed shut and Effie thought she saw him wince as he spoke.

“The Princess made you some congee and she put a lot of bloody effort into it, so here – eat,” Effie rumbled and held out the mug.

Eliot didn’t move, but Effie noticed the hands gripping the rocking chair’s arms were knuckle-white.

“Ain’t hungry, so go away, Eff,” Eliot rasped.
Effie snorted.

“As if that’ll ever happen, laddie!” she said sharply and hobbling to Eliot’s bed, she sat down in front of him. “Alright. You heard me. Bloody well get this down you.” Once again she proffered the congee.

Eliot opened one eye and glared at the little cook.

“I. Ain’t. Hungry,” he grated, and Effie didn’t miss the very faint tremor that ran through his damaged body.

Effie held the mug in one hand and before Eliot could react, she reached out and grasped one of his taut, trembling fists where it lay on the chair arm. She laced her fingers in his.

“Eff – don’t …” Eliot warned, but Effie McFee wasn’t in the habit of taking any notice of Eliot Spencer’s threats. Fingers strengthened by decades of kneading bread and butchering large cuts of meat wormed their way into the hitter’s grasp, and she knew he would never hurt her, so she kept up the gentle pressure even when Eliot opened his other eye and scowled.

The shaking became noticeable now, but she knew she had won this first, tenuous round of the battle when Eliot suddenly sighed and let go of the chair-arm and Effie held his hand, wrapped in hers, and she rubbed the scarred knuckle joint of his thumb.

“C’mon, boy … try and get some food in you. You’re about as useless as a two-bob watch right now, and if you don’t want the Missus to have a meltdown cuz you keel over like a flaked-out ‘roo, then get this down yer neck, hey?” She held out the congee.

Eliot swallowed dryly. He really wasn’t hungry, but he knew he had to get some sort of food in him because Effie was right – if he tried to stand he would be a collapsed heap on the floor quicker than Effie could say ‘Zip yer gob, Yank, and eat!’

Unfurling his other hand he reached out, and Effie helped him hold the mug in both hands. God, he was friggin’ useless! he told himself as his grip almost failed him, threatening to spill the hot liquid down his bandaged chest.

But the congee was delicious, and the flakes of barramundi and the rich, rice-filled stock warmed his stomach and helped ease the shaking. He knew Effie could see how weak he was … how pathetic … but she never said a word, and Eliot cringed inwardly with embarrassment. But he slowly sipped the congee, and to his surprise he began to relax and the shaking eased, although the occasional tremor flickered through his muscles if he tried to move too much.

“See?” Effie said, her muddy eyes amused. “You were hungry, you little bastard!” Her voice softened. “Try and finish it, lad. You need the energy.”

Eliot rested his aching head against the back of the old rocking chair, and between sips he glanced at Effie. She didn’t look angry with him, which in itself was odd. Effie always looked angry. In fact no-one seemed angry. Anxious, worried … even frustrated, but certainly not angry. Didn’t they know that Lizzie hated him? He had to know.

“’Lizbeth Grace …” he began, but Effie held up a finger, telling him to shut up and eat.

“ … is over-tired, upset and in a bloody snit, but she’s alright. I hear she kicked your arse all the way to Adelaide and back - which you probably deserved, you young bugger!” she said, and Eliot could hear the amusement in her voice. “She’s tough, is the nipper,” Effie continued, “but she’s struggling a bit because the silly little sod thinks you hate her.”
Eliot nearly dropped the half-full mug of congee and Effie had to reach out and steady him, her eyebrows raised in surprise.

“Hate …. Dammit, Effie!! Where the hell did she get that from???” Eliot growled, his voice stronger now. “I could –”

“–never hate her, yes I know,” Effie interrupted, “but that’s the way her mind’s working right now.” She gently held his hands in hers and pushed the mug towards him a fraction of an inch. “Now then – c’mon – the nipper’ll be upset if you don’t eat, and she’s been upset enough, dontcha think, boy?”

Eliot, bewildered and tense, did as he was told and took some more sips of the congee, feeling the heat warm his bruised and battered hands.

The two of them sat in silence for a while as Eliot worked his way through the delicious soup, and when he had finished Effie took the mug from him and placed it on the bedside table. Then she placed her pudgy hands on her knees and studied the American.

His bare torso was a myriad of bruises and stitched cuts, and the bandage covering the bullet wound under his arm needed changing, she thought. His face was pale and drawn, and the lines of grief she saw there made her old, kind heart ache.

Parker was right, Effie realised. Eliot was planning to leave them. Only the loss of his family could etch such pain on his gaunt features.

Well … it was now or never.

“If you leave, Yank, that little girl will never recover from it,” she said bluntly.

It wasn’t often that Eliot Spencer was shocked into a blustering mess, but this was one of those moments. His eyes widened and he blinked rapidly, as he usually did when he was caught out by something.

“Leave?” he mumbled, trying to figure a way out of this hole he’d got himself into. “I ah … I don’t … it’s just …” he sighed and his broken rib objected, making him gasp. There was nothing for it. They had to know anyway, so … “Eff … it’s for the best.”

Effie scowled.

“Bollocks!” she said.

Eliot’s temper immediately began to rise.

“You don’t friggin’ understand, Effie! Lizzie, she … she knows I killed a man! She saw the whole damn thing! She saw me shove a knife in his throat to the hilt!! She saw how a man dies … the blood, the death tremors … the whole nasty, filthy, shitty process!!! That’s something no-one decent should see, let alone a six-year-old little girl, and what’s worse is – “

“-he was killed by you,” Effie grunted, annoyed. “I know, boy! I was there, remember?? I saw her face when you realised what you’d done. Yes, she was horrified! Who wouldn’t be? But she wasn’t scared, other than for you!! And then what did she do?? She hugged the billy-oh out of you, you idiot!! I didn’t see any fear in her at all. And when you buggered off to face Chong, she asked her dad if she could give you a hug later because she understood that you’d killed that nasty bastard to save her life. Hate??” Effie shook her head with exasperation, ”the nipper loves you more than anything, you prat!!”
Eliot blinked owlishly, trying to make his sluggish, aching mind do as it was told and figure out what Effie was saying, but the cook wasn’t finished.

“And another thing!!” Effie was on a roll now, “the poor little bugger thinks you’re angry with her!!”

Eliot’s confusion was escalating, and he flinched, a tremble setting itself off in his limbs.

“Angry??” he snapped weakly. “Why the hell does she think I’m angry at her??” His Oklahoma lilt was becoming more pronounced by the second. “I ain’t ever been angry at ‘Lizbeth Grace!!! She —”

“Because, you daft berk,” Effie barked, now more than exasperated, “she thinks that by running away from her dad and puttin’ herself in danger she got you hurt!! And she can’t forgive herself for that!”

Eliot was dumbstruck.

It was then Effie realised she had gone too far.

Eliot managed to wrench himself out of the rocking chair, his balance all shot to hell and his strength gone, and he stumbled badly. If Effie hadn’t caught him he would have measured his length on the hard floor and the resulting grunt of agony made Effie’s heart break.

“She … she thinks I hate her, Effie …” Eliot slurred into the cook’s shoulder, “I lied to her an’ … an’ now she thinks it’s her fault I got bust up an’ I lied ‘cause I didn’t want her to know it was her fault, an’ I gotta make it right —”

“Oh shit!” Effie cursed. She took a breath and yelled as loud as she could.

“MISSUS!!!”

And cradling Eliot’s shaking body, Effie held him tight and let him know he was loved.

It took an hour to get Eliot into his bed, his wounds checked and re-bandaged and to convince him that Lizzie didn’t hate him.

As the sun went down he settled, a little feverish but easier in himself, and Effie, feeling awful, sat with him as the hitter drifted into a restless sleep.

Jo watched both of them, and now, she realised, she had two guilty idiots on her hands.

She sighed. One down, and one more to go. Heading into the kitchen, she began to prepare her peace offering.

“Hello the tent!”

Jo’s gentle call disturbed a dozing Nate, earbuds in and listening to Vaughn Williams as he sat in one of Oggie’s comfortable folding chairs.

“Come on in!” Sophie said as she relaxed on a pile of big cushions, her daughter snuggled sleepily against her and looking at a children’s book about renaissance artists.

Nate pulled out his earbuds and unzipped the flap, helping Jo with the plate of sandwiches and pitcher of lemonade she had prepared.
Jo smiled at Lizzie when the little girl looked up from her book, and was delighted to get a smile back, although Lizzie’s eyes were red-rimmed and swollen from the floods of tears.

“Grandma Jo!” she whispered hoarsely, and she put down her reading matter before scrambling to her knees to help her father as they settled down for an impromptu indoor picnic in the tent.

“I thought you’d be hungry,” Jo murmured, and poured lemonade into the plastic cups Nate dug out of one of Oggie’s bins.

Lizzie sat cross-legged next to Sophie and took several hefty mouthfuls of the cool, tart drink, and let out an uncontrolled burp, much to her mother’s dismay and Jo’s amusement. Her Eliot would have drawn his brows down in a mock frown until she excused herself – Lizzie’s lip wobbled. She blinked a bit and then got her emotions under control. She glanced at Jo, who was steadfastly concentrating on sharing out Effie’s thick, well-filled sandwiches.

Nate watched his daughter out of the corner of his eye and hoped somehow they could sort out the rift between Lizzie and her guardian.

Lizzie ate one sandwich as she thought how to approach the subject. What would Eliot do? Well, he would just go for it. Eliot was afraid of nothing.

“Grandma Jo?” she asked hesitantly, “um … is … is Eliot –“

Jo grinned with relief. At least Lizzie was able to speak about him.

“He’s doing well enough, sweetie. A bit tired and sore, but … he’s been asking if you’re alright.”

Lizzie sat still for long moments, just staring into space. She took a deep, deep breath and let it out slowly.

“I yelled at him, Grandma Jo. I shouted at him and told him he was a liar!” she blurted, and her tiny fists grasped one of the cushions as she swallowed hard before continuing. “He … he said he was fine and he …” her voice became nothing but a whisper, “he nearly died. And I yelled at him.” She sniffed. “I ‘spect he’s really angry with me, huh.”

Jo frowned and shook her head as though puzzled.

“Now then, Lizzie, why on earth would Eliot be angry with you?”

Lizzie opened her mouth to say something but no words would come.

Eliot wasn’t angry with her. But … but he should be, because she was rude and bad-tempered and had said dreadful, hurtful things to him and … and he wasn’t angry.

Now Lizzie felt very, very small and insignificant.

“But … but I make him shake and … and he feels maggots and everything and –“

“Lizzie, darling … that has absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with you,” Sophie interjected, her voice kind and gentle. “That’s something entirely different, sweetheart … something we should have noticed long ago,” she added under her breath, and she felt the guilt surge through her.

Lizzie sat and thought about the situation for a long, long time while her parents and adopted grandmother let her stew in her own juice for a bit. It wouldn’t hurt to make Lizzie realise how her actions affected others, even Eliot, who until now had seemed impervious to just about everything.
Nate had always noticed that Eliot, the man who had done unspeakable things in his life, had always been the defender of those in most need of him, children and animals especially. When Lizzie was first born, Nate had woken one night in a cold sweat because he knew what would happen if anyone threatened Lizzie, and he had suddenly realised what kind of man Eliot Spencer would become at that moment. But it had never occurred to him that the chink in Eliot’s formidable armour would leave him open to something so insidious that it would rip the insides out of him without any effort whatsoever.

Lizzie rubbed her eyes with the back of her hands, bone-tired and cried-out.

“Grandma Jo … can I go and see Eliot? I … I have to tell him I didn’t mean it. That I’m sorry I was so nasty. I know he lied to keep me safe.”

The desperation in Lizzie’s dark eyes just about broke Jo Munro, but she shook her head.

“He’s asleep now, nipper. And I think you could do with getting some rest too.” She saw Nate’s nod of agreement. “You can see him in the morning, I promise.”

Lizzie, sad and bereft, discovered that she had to be content with waiting.

And as the mopoke muttered and the endless stars drifted in a moonless night, Wapanjara held its breath and hoped that hearts would mend and the child and her wolf would be reconciled.

To be continued …

* ‘The Experimental Job,’ Season 4, Episode 11.
While Darker Shadows Fall

Chapter Summary

Author’s note: Lots of angst and family fluff, but the beginning contains disturbing imagery. PTSD isn’t pleasant, and neither are the flashbacks. Be warned.

My sincerest thanks to AgentCK8 for unknowingly helping me to create Mooch.

“Shit-shit-shit!!” Eliot Spencer army-crawled along the side of the bombed-out, low mud building on the south-west corner of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s camp here on the Iran-Iraq border*. Behind him, a series of explosions decimated what had turned out to be a chemical factory, manufacturing ricin and cyanide, run by the vicious and deadly Ansar al-Islam, an affiliate of al-Qaeda.

Mike ‘Mooch’ Fortescue, his explosives man, had rigged a series of timed devices which would systematically eradicate the two buildings containing the insurgents’ arsenal, which suddenly erupted in a huge plume of flames and smoke, the sheer power of the explosion rocking the ground and sending a gout of dust and rubble over Eliot as he made his way towards the team’s rendezvous point.

Eliot tucked his rifle against his chest, trying to protect the scope, and hunched his shoulders as more rubble rained down on his back. Damn, but he would be as bruised as hell, but it didn’t matter. He checked his watch. He had three minutes seventeen seconds until he joined his small specialist black ops team, and he got to his feet only to become a target for a dug-in insurgent with an old AKM assault rifle as a round tore a chunk out of the wall inches from his face.

Eliot took three deep, deep breaths and then slid around the bullet-scarred low wall and let the man take a single snap-shot which missed the young soldier by a hair’s breadth. Eliot noted the barrel-flash, and settling his rifle against his cheek and the hollow of his shoulder he gauged the distance, let his breath ease out of his lungs, gently squeezed the trigger and fired.

The spray of blood and the clatter of the weapon as it fell told him he could work his way forward.

He slipped over the destroyed wall and headed in a scurrying, low run towards the perimeter fence, now in tatters from Fortescue’s somewhat explosive attentions. He heard rapid fire to his right, and saw two of his team heading his way, keeping a low profile as they worked their way out of what was left of the compound.

Eliot tried his com-link again, but the crackle was annoying and futile. He would have to rely on his five-man team to know what they were doing. He allowed himself a grim smile. This was what he was trained for … serving his country and protecting innocent people. This was what he was born to do.

Flattening his body against the corner of the fence, Eliot checked angles and sought the kill box, the lethal, exposed area he had to avoid if he was to make it back to his team. If he worked his way along the back of this shattered pile of mud bricks, he would be within a hundred yards of the rendezvous point, and from there he and his team would head for the low hill several miles away, shadowed by snow-topped, stark mountains.
Drawing his side-arm he slung his rifle over his shoulder and darted from the tenuous safety of the wall to the smouldering wreckage of a truck and thence to the juncture of the perimeter fence, a concrete pillar supporting the remains of razor wire and linked fencing. A section sparked and writhed like a dying snake.

Eliot settled down for a moment or two and made a quick reconnoitre of the lie of the land. He and his team were masters at blending into the landscape, and Eliot was a wraith with hard blue eyes, now darkened to the colour of the rare lapis lazuli smuggled through this land to create funds for al-Zarqawi’s reign of error.

Beyond the fence was a dip in the land around the compound, a ditch probably dug as an attempt to stop ABVs and armoured trucks from getting access to the walls, Eliot reasoned. If he and his team could breach the ditch, they could fade into the dust and haze of this vast land and await their contact. He squinted. The ditch seemed shallower here, less of a barrier. But he didn’t have time to ponder the anomaly because his team was here, gathering in a hollow beside the far edge of the makeshift, camouflaged headquarters, now a wrecked charnel house of electronics and corpses.

He signalled to his men and he saw Mooch sign back with a circled finger and thumb, and Eliot grinned. With one more check for enemy insurgents, he navigated the ruined fence and worked his way towards the five grinning idiots who waited for him, their work done, and just waiting for their young commander to join them. They were the best in the world and they knew it, and Eliot’s pride in his comrades knew no bounds.

But his team never saw the dying 13-year-old boy, his leg gone from below the knee, rise onto his elbows and fire the grenade-launcher he had torn from the grasp of his dead comrade.

They never heard Eliot’s bellow of warning which turned to a scream of agony as he tried desperately to twist sideways, fragments from the explosion which decimated his team slicing into his back and ripping into his side, flinging him fifteen feet across the rubble-strewn space.

He hit the ground, stunned, his head full of noise which deadened his senses and blurred his vision. He lay on his front for a second, the broken glass from his rifle scope cutting through his camouflage jacket and into his chest. He coughed blood and he knew he only had moments left of his life if he didn’t react, so he rolled over and targeted the boy, who lay in a pool of his own blood while still trying to reload.

Eliot aimed and fired more by instinct than skill, and the boy was punched sideways as the bullet took him in the side of the head.

Slumping back on the ground, Eliot tried to control the pain in his back and he could feel the rills of blood soaking his torn jacket and vest. Gathering his remaining strength, he struggled to his knees and using his rifle as a prop, Eliot checked out his team.

None of them had survived, it was obvious. Not one. His men … his team … were gone. Eliot’s breath sobbed in his chest, and he hung his head amid the carnage and death in this sweeping, arid land, and wondered how in God’s name he would tell Mooch’s pregnant wife her husband was dead.

Pulling himself together and gritting his teeth to control the pain, Eliot tried his com-link. It gave out nothing but silence. Trembling, he checked his watch once more. He had just over three hours to get to the extraction point. Somehow he managed to get to his feet, and getting his bearings, he stumbled towards his men, and amidst continuing explosions within the compound, he gently collected a dog tag from each of them, tying the small ball-chains together and leaving the main tag with their bodies. He knew they would not be left behind. He would make sure they went home to their people.
Turning away, Eliot staggered upright and his eyes fixated on the dip in the ground, even as blood oozed down his face from a cut in his forehead. Eliot knew if he could only get to the other side of the ditch, he would make it to the extraction point.

The ditch didn’t look much of an obstacle. The ground was curiously smooth, and still using his rifle as a crutch and feeling the blood trickle down his legs from his lower back, Eliot made his way down the incline and into the ditch. From this angle he could not be seen from the compound, so gritting his teeth against the pain, he reached the bottom of the ditch and tried to pick up a little speed.

The ground gave way underneath him.

Eliot lurched forward but couldn’t stop himself from falling, and then he knew why the ground was so smooth and the ditch so shallow.

It was a mass grave.

In seconds he was awash with the stinking, rotting corpses of men, women and children. Sightless eyes and bloated, oozing bodies heaving and roiling with maggots crushed in on him and he felt the sickening, moving mass of the larvae working their way into his clothes and hair and he knew if he opened his mouth to scream the maggots would be wriggling down his throat and oh, God, he had to get out of this and his arms flailed hopelessly as he sank deeper and deeper and then … oh … oh Jesus … small hands grasped his fist and laced fingers through his, and the relief almost made him pass out as the hands pulled, tiny though they were … and then she was there and she held on tight, pulling him from the stench and foulness and –

“Eliot!”

The voice was a child’s, and it was so loved and treasured that Eliot sighed even as the maggots fell away from him, and then he was hot and shivering all at once, and the small hands moved from his and immediately he felt utterly abandoned.

“’Lizbeth … ‘Lizbeth Grace …” he muttered.

But the hands returned with a cool cloth on his brow and it was delicious and soothing and so, so good, and the little hands stroked his cheek and he felt a kiss on the end of his nose.

“Hey, darlin’ … he croaked, and he could almost feel the joy in her.

His head was a mess, fuzzy and overloaded with emotion and fever, but even as he sensed another person gently tending to him he reached for Lizzie, and there she was, whispering to him, telling him she was so, so sorry she yelled at him and that he had to be still because he was very poorly and she would look after him.

“M’sorry too, sweetheart,” he rasped, and her fingers tightened on his, “I didn’t … I’m not …”

But he was too worn out to speak and all he wanted to do was sleep, but he didn’t want to face the horror anymore … he couldn’t face the horror anymore, and –

“It’s okay, Eliot,” Lizzie said, her voice as soft as autumn sunlight, “I won’t leave you. I won’t let the maggots get you, I promise,” she said, and Eliot realised then that she knew. His best girl understood that there were things in the dark shadows of his mind that he couldn’t forget, and she would stand guard so he could sleep.

Then with Lizzie’s hands in his and the coolness of the cloth on his brow easing him, Eliot finally allowed himself to relax and he drifted into a deep sleep. And for the first time in countless years, he
didn’t dream.

Elizabeth Grace Ford awoke with a start.

All was quiet, and she recognised where she was. She was in Oggie’s Nipper Nest, and she remembered why she wasn’t watching over Eliot. She had been awful to him. She had said terrible things - but she was going to tell him she was sorry for everything she had said and done, and she hoped when she did that she would stop seeing Eliot’s stricken face in her sleep. Grandma Jo had told her Eliot wasn’t angry with her, and that he had asked about her. He was worried about her.

She stretched under her comforter, and she could hear her father snoring in the bigger bedroom in the tent, masking her mother’s quiet breathing. Scrambling out of her bed, Lizzie dug out her slippers, and after checking for creepy-crawlies as Eliot had taught her, she put them on and unzipped the flap that led to the outside world.

Peering out, she discovered it was still dark. A huge, hairy bulk lay beside the tent, and she heard Gertie gurgle to herself, the big camel swinging her head around to breathe affectionately in Lizzie’s face.

Lizzie gave Gertie a hug, which made the beast hum quietly, and she scratched the dromedary’s curly head. “You look after Mama and Daddy,” she whispered. “I’m going to see if Eliot’s alright.” She frowned and Gertie lipped at her pyjama sleeve. “I think he’s feeling poorly, Gertie. My Eliot … he … he needs me.”

Gertie rumbled to herself, sensing the little girl’s worry, and Lizzie patted her affectionately.

Leaving the big animal guarding her parents, Lizzie padded across the yard under the limpid starlight, unafraid of the profound quiet of the night, only broken by the quiet mutter of the mopoke and the sudden cold, luminescent flare of fireflies.

She trod carefully up the veranda steps and opened the door into the hallway. Easing into the house, she saw the glow of light from Eliot’s room, the door ajar as it always was when her best friend needed care.

She chewed her lip. What if Eliot didn’t want to see her? What if he decided he didn’t want her help? But she couldn’t shake the feeling in her stomach that Eliot needed her right now.

Buster appeared at her side, stumpy tail wagging, and she patted him gently. But the little dog had other people to protect, so he wandered back into the living room and retired to his place beneath Eliot’s ‘undie’ drawer where the twins lay sleeping, full, happy and content, their mother slumbering beside them in one of the big old armchairs.

Lizzie stood for a moment before the door to Eliot’s room. She could hear Grandma Jo speaking quietly to Eliot, and Lizzie knew then that Eliot was far, far from well.

She steeled herself and peeked around the door.

“Grandma Jo?” she whispered so that she didn’t disturb Eliot.

Jo Munro looked up from her place beside the stricken hitter, and her green eyes sparkled in the soft light of the bedside lamp.

“Lizzie!” she said quietly, “I’m glad you’re here!”
Lizzie’s eyes widened, and she stared at Eliot who was sprawled in his bed, noticing the pale, gaunt face and the sheen of sweat on his brow. He was muttering to himself, but the words didn’t make sense … something about ‘Mooch’, whatever that was, and she saw him flinch as though he had been hit.

“What’s wrong with him??” she gasped, and now unafraid, she pattered around the bed to sit in what everyone called ‘the nipper’s chair’. “He’s poorly, Grandma Jo!! Why is he so poorly?? He wasn’t poorly this morning! He was getting a lot better and –“

Jo sniffed, frowning.

“I smell camel,” she said quietly, the not-so-faint aroma of Gertie drifting through the room. “Lizzie, go wash your hands, girl, and then you can sit with Eliot.” She smiled then, comforting the child. “Don’t worry, sweetie – it’s just bad dreams and a little bit of left-over fever. He just did too much, that’s all.”

Lizzie’s eyebrows drew down as she studied Eliot.

“Are you sure? He –“

Jo shook her head. Eliot and Lizzie. Stubborn as hell, the pair of them.

“Yes, I’m sure,” she reiterated. “Now then … you’re here to help, right?”

Lizzie’s eyes rounded with eagerness and then they returned to Eliot.

“Yes, Grandma Jo!! He – “

Jo became stern.

“Go! Wash those Gertie-stinking hands young lady, and then I have a job for you to do!”

Lizzie took a sharp breath, eyes luminous in the golden light, and she almost ran out of the room. Moments later Jo heard the faucet running in the bathroom along the corridor followed by the sound of furious scrubbing.

Amused, she turned back to Eliot and laid a cool, wet cloth on his forehead, trying to ease his befuddled head. Unfocused eyes opened and she saw the confusion in his gaze. His dreams had become nightmares, as they often did, and now … Jo sighed. Maybe … maybe Lizzie might be the key to Eliot’s problems. Maybe the little girl might be able to reach the locked away places deep in his soul where no-one else could venture.

Lizzie reappeared, both face and hands scrubbed until they glowed, and she carefully sat in her chair.

“What do I do?” she asked breathlessly.

Eliot was back to his muttering and Jo lifted the cloth from his brow, soaked it in a bowl of iced water and reapplied it, Eliot leaning into the delicious chill.

“Lizzie love … you know Eliot’s been a bit sad and shaky, right?”

Lizzie nodded vigorously.

“Ya-huh!” she said, and her eyes strayed back to Eliot. “He won’t stop shaking, Grandma Jo, and he keeps saying there’s maggots and –“
Jo held up a hand, stopping Lizzie before she began her litany of concerns about her damaged guardian.

“That’s because he has something happening in his head that makes him like that,” she said, wondering how on earth she was going to explain a complicated and often-misunderstood illness to a six-year-old child. But perhaps, she thought, Lizzie’s simple approach might be the answer.

“What’s wrong with Eliot’s head??” Lizzie asked. “Alec always says he’s been punched too much in the head and made it all scooshy. Is that’s what’s wrong?”

Jo quirked a smile at the description, but shook her head.

“No, sweetie … that’s not it. Let me think …” Jo pondered for a while as Lizzie watched Eliot like a hawk, unwilling to take her eyes off him in case something dreadful happened to her friend before she could save him.

Well, Jo thought … let’s just go with the flow …

“Lizzie … you know Eliot used to be a soldier, right?”

The little girl nodded.

“Yeah … a long, long time ago before I was even born,” she answered. “Did he get hurt?”

“Well, yes, in more ways than one. You know he has a bad leg, don’t you? From a piece of metal that was stuck in his back from when he was a soldier?”

“Mama said he had it taken out when I was a baby,” Lizzie said. She smiled. “Parker used to make him do exercises and I used to help even though I was just little,” she added.

“That’s right,” Jo said. “Well … he was a very brave soldier and saved a lot of lives. But you know when you’re a soldier you can get into some very dangerous and difficult places, and Eliot saw and did lots of tough things that he can’t forget.”

“Bad dreams!” Lizzie breathed, shocked.

“There’s that, yes,” Jo continued. “And you know he’s dealt with lots of bad people and … “ she took a steadying breath and continued, “ … done things he’s ashamed of, don’t you?”

Lizzie thought about it. She remembered Eliot telling her about his bad wolf … the one he carried in his heart alongside the good wolf he fed every day. But he had also told her he had fed his bad wolf for a long time. Lizzie hadn’t wanted to believe him, but the sadness in Eliot’s eyes had convinced her it was true. But it didn’t matter to Lizzie. He was her good wolf now, and he was everything she wanted in a best friend – protective, really clever because he knew absolutely everything, as well as being incredibly brave.

“He told me he used to do bad things, Grandma Jo … but he’s not like that now!” she said, determined to let Jo know that Eliot had changed, “he’s good! He helps people and he protects us all and –“

“I know, Lizzie … I know.” Jo soothed, worried that Lizzie would once more descend into tears. “But he remembers those bad times, whether he wants to or not, and sometimes … sometimes it can make him feel dreadful, sick and jumpy and –“

“-feel maggots!” Lizzie gasped, slowly beginning to grasp what Jo was trying to explain. “It’s like …
it’s like maybe having a nightmare while you’re awake?? Is that right?”

Jo thought about Lizzie’s deduction. She shrugged mentally. Well, it would do for now.

“A bit, yes,” she said carefully. “It means he finds it difficult to let people touch him, or he prefers to be on his own sometimes and he can react badly to things. And if something happens … it can be a noise or a smell or … or a word or even a touch … and it can make him feel awful. Do you understand?”

Lizzie pulled at her bottom lip as she thought about it. Eliot wasn’t really a hugger. He hugged her, but he rarely hugged the rest of her family even though Lizzie secretly thought he wanted to. He would get annoyed if Parker poked him, but Lizzie had put that down to Parker just being a pest. He liked space on the couch, shoving Parker along if she got too close, and he abhorred Hardison getting in his way in the kitchen … but then he didn’t like anyone in his kitchen. That was an Eliot-zone and you entered at your own risk. He didn’t like being touched, she knew, and the members of her family were okay with that. It was just Eliot’s way and they loved him anyway. He only really allowed his best girl within his comfort zone with impunity. He was more tactile with his people here at Wapanjara, but now he was having trouble letting anyone near him.

“He’s back to being a soldier,” she said finally. “He had to be a soldier to save us all, and it made him feel bad because he had to kill that man and I saw. Does he think he’s a bad man again?”

_God bless the simplicity of children_, Jo thought with relief. PTSD was fiendishly complicated, but Lizzie at least had a bit of a grasp on the issue. It would have to do for now.

Eliot suddenly began to shudder, and his eyes opened, wide and terrified and unaware of his surroundings.

“Uh-oh, here we go again –” Jo muttered, and as Eliot began to flail Lizzie started back in her chair, brown eyes wide with distress. Eliot was somewhere dreadful, she knew that now. She saw Jo grasp Eliot’s hands as he tried to shake her off, and he kept up a stream of words she mostly couldn’t make out, there was one thing he seemed to focus on … _maggots_ … he repeated over and over again, softly and desperately and with such horror that Lizzie couldn’t stop herself.

Scrambling from her chair she tumbled onto the bed beside Eliot and caught one of the flailing hands, ignoring the fact that Eliot could easily have hurt her.

“Eliot!” she called softly, and her fingers wound in his, holding tight but letting him know she was there. Then his gaunt face softened at the sound of her voice and the steady murmur of slurred curses and muttered words of disgust eased into saying her name, and Lizzie smiled through tears as she let go of his hand and reached for the cool cloth her Grandma Jo held out to her. She laid it on his brow and stroked his fever-hot cheek, and kissed the tip of her good wolf’s nose.

And then there were words of apology and sorrow, and Lizzie promised she wouldn’t leave him as she took his hand again, rubbing swollen knuckles and easing the ache there.

Jo sat back and watched and marvelled, and as the dawn grew in the east Eliot Spencer drifted back into sleep, and Lizzie knew then that the nightmares were chased away.

Eliot slept uninterrupted for nearly twenty hours.

Wapanjara ebbed and flowed around him, normality beginning to take hold as the crew headed out to muster fatstock, the dust of the mobs as they were driven down from the west paddock and into the pens annoying the crap out of Hardison as he tried to work under Oggie’s awning. The dust
played *merry hell* with his electronics.

He gave up after a while and just wandered up to the yards to watch, absorbing the noise and the crack of stock whips, the snarls of the heelers as they nipped at the hocks of recalcitrant bullocks and the curses of the stockmen as they moved the cattle in the afternoon heat. It was *fascinating*. He determined to learn how to use a stock whip because, he knew, his Nana would surely be impressed.

Parker and Charlie made it their mission to repair the water tower frame, and Charlie watched, mesmerised, as Parker studiously welded the damaged sections with skill and speed. Kip thought she was bloomin’ amazing, especially as Parker completed the whole project while upside-down.

Nate and Sophie, having found a note in Effie’s hand lying on the small table in their tent which said, in large, sprawling capital letters, ‘THE NIPPER’S LOOKING AFTER THE YANK!’, gave a mutual sigh and resigned themselves to the fact that they probably wouldn’t see very much of their wayward daughter for the next day or so. Nate took to bugging Effie, trying to help her in the kitchen saying he needed to brush up on his cooking skills.

Sophie didn’t sympathise when he complained about the little cook chasing him out of her kitchen while brandishing her largest and heaviest wooden spoon. The bruises were impressive, to say the least.

That evening, the crew decided to celebrate their return to Wapanjara with an impromptu barbecue, and as dusk fell the two big grills made from 40-gallon drums glowed red and thick steaks of beef and lamb sputtered and sizzled, and laughter drifted softly through the balmy air in the yard, the delicious smell of food wafting through the veranda.

Mei sat in Eliot’s recliner with Rose in her arms and Jamie in Kip’s old cradle beside her, and watched as songs were sung and stories were told, and every now and again one of the stockmen would stamp up the veranda steps to bring her some food and to hold one of the babbies, because, the gruff, scruffy stockmen had decided, it was about time they had some nippers to coddle.

Even Lizzie was tempted away from Eliot’s side for an hour or so, and she joined in singing ‘The Wild Colonial Boy’ with Chalky Perkins who had a surprisingly sweet tenor voice. But she missed Eliot. She missed singing songs about lost love and the hitter’s Oklahoma past, and she missed his clear voice, almost bordering on baritone when he was singing something from his heart that was lonely and lost. Effie was watching over him, but Lizzie ate some steak and salad and then headed back to her place beside him, her mother walking with her to keep her company and to read some bedtime stories.

And so it was that Eliot drifted awake to the tale of a little boy who made friends with an injured pelican**, and he lay quietly, now free of the lingering fever and bad dreams, listening to Sophie making the voices of the story come alive. She was a *very* talented storyteller.

As she finished the story and closed the book, she noticed a pair of hazy blue eyes watching her.

“Well now,” she smiled, “look who’s back with us!”

Lizzie’s face lit up like a roman candle. Sliding from the armchair where she had been snuggled against her mother, she bounced onto the bed beside Eliot and took his hand in hers.

“Eliot!! You’re awake!!” she breathed, brown eyes warm with pleasure, and she was thrilled when he gave her his Lizzie-smile, that tiny half-hitch of his lips that made his eyes crinkle at the corners.

“Are you alright, ‘Lizbeth Grace?’” he asked weakly, his voice raw with lack of fluids. “Are you –“
“I’m fine,” Lizzie whispered so that she didn’t startle him. She knew the problem with his memories made him uneasy, and she didn’t want him to start shivering again. She couldn’t bear it if he did that, because it meant that he was still sick and his head was still messed up. But to her surprise Eliot stayed relaxed, warm and settled in his big bed.

Sophie leaned forward and touched Eliot’s bare shoulder, and she was pleased to see that he didn’t flinch way from her.

“I’ll go get you something to eat,” she murmured. “Effie has some broth waiting for you.”

Eliot discovered he was hungry. Broth sounded good.

While Sophie disappeared into the kitchen, Lizzie settled down cross-legged beside Eliot and held his hand in her lap, patting it gently. Neither of them felt much like small talk, and they were content to keep each other company for a minute or two. But Lizzie had missed Eliot, so she chewed the inside of her cheek for a second.

“Eliot?” she proffered nervously.

Eliot, resting back on his cushions with his eyes closed against the light of the lamp, didn’t feel like moving, so he used as little energy as possible in answering her.

“Yeah?”

Well, thought Lizzie, he was still talking to her and didn’t seem annoyed. So far, so good.

“How are your bullet holes?” she asked.

“Oh,” he said, thinking about it. “Okay.” An understatement if ever there was one, he decided.

Lizzie nodded, happy at his reply.

“Do they still hurt?” she continued.

Eliot pried open an eye and studied her. She stared back.

“Yes,” he replied. “They still hurt.”

Oh. That wasn’t so good.

They were silent for a little while until Lizzie thought of something else.

“Eliot?”

He sighed.

“Uh-huh?”

Lizzie very gently rubbed the swollen and cut knuckles of his hand, trying to warm them as she knew they ached all the time these days.

“What’s a ‘Mooch’?” she asked, puzzled.

Eliot looked at her for long moments with his one open eye, and he could see nothing but love mixed with concern.
“Where did you hear that, ‘Lizbeth Grace’?” His voice was soft but guarded.

Lizzie glanced at Eliot’s face. He seemed calm enough.

“When … when you were poorly last night and Grandma Jo said you were remembering when you were a soldier and you were upset and talking in your sleep … you said ‘Mooch.’”

And Mooch’s round, cheerful face grinned at Eliot in his mind’s eye, and the hitter saw the sign he gave as he died, blown to pieces in that hell-hole all those years ago –

You got him killed, boyo, Derry Ryan said in Eliot’s ear, and it should have been you.

Eliot swallowed bile and closed his eye, turning away from Lizzie. She felt a faint tremor in his hand and her fingers twitched in a desperate, sudden need to comfort him.

“M’sorry, Eliot! I didn’t mean –“ she stammered, but Eliot squeezed her hand in return, and his eyes opened slowly to gaze at her.

“S’alright, darlin’,” he mumbled, “it … it’s just been a long time … and I think of all of ‘em every damn day …”

Lizzie slumped sideways onto some of Eliot’s huge mound of pillows, her eyes blinking wearily and worried that she had upset him.

“Them? Mooch is a person?” she asked despite herself. Eliot’s fingers tightened around her hands.


Lizzie could live with that if it made Eliot rest a little more. Maybe if he talked about whoever Mooch was then he might feel better. But she could wait.

Sophie eased herself into the room carrying a mug of something delicious.

Eliot brightened a little and struggled to sit upright, Lizzie suddenly fussing and straightening pillows, and as he managed to hold the mug without spilling its fragrant contents, he felt a little better. The tremor was there, but he could control it.

Things were looking up.

It took Eliot two more days before he had regained enough strength to walk around, albeit slowly and carefully, and another day before he worked his way down the veranda steps to get a little exercise. He was very stiff and sore and the tremors caught him sometimes when he least expected it. But his ‘Lizbeth Grace looked out for him, made sure he ate and didn’t crowd him.

He was on his way back from a short walk to the almond stand, Gertie beside him as always, when Charlie and Kip rode around the homestead building from the yards, Charlie astride a young chestnut mare who was turning out to be a promising stock horse. Batu, too big and now too old to train to work cattle, was nevertheless a careful and gentle mount for his young owner, and Kip sat the gelding with increasing confidence.

Charlie spotted Eliot and lifted his hat in acknowledgement.

“Hoo-roo!” he yelled in greeting.
Eliot allowed himself a grin, and Charlie and Kip patiently waited for Eliot to reach them. The Oklahoman lifted a hand to stroke Batu’s muzzle, and the gelding, now used to Gertie’s presence, nickered quietly at Eliot.

“How’s he workin’ out?” he asked Kip, who grinned with delight.

“He’s great, Eliot!! LIZZIE!!” He yelled, knowing the child was inside the house catching up on her project. She had been told by her mother in no uncertain terms that Eliot was perfectly safe for an hour and that schoolwork was lagging sadly behind.

Lizzie appeared in the doorway and quickly looked Eliot over. Satisfied he wasn’t about to fall over and expire on the spot, she grinned at Kip and trundled down the veranda steps.

“Lizzie, wanna ride with me down to the south paddock gate? Batu needs to have a drink!” Kip sang out.

“Oh yes please!!” Lizzie exclaimed, and abandoning her schoolwork to its fate, she dashed off to the Nipper Nest to get her riding helmet. Charlie dismounted and tied up the little mare and came to stand by Batu, so when Lizzie returned he lifted her up to sit behind Kip on Batu’s warm, broad back. Charlie knew that Batu would be careful and the horse had the calmest temperament he had seen in a lifetime of working with the creatures. So as he allowed Kip to ride on his own towards the gate, he made sure both children were under scrutiny. He could be beside them in seconds if need be.

Eliot watched Charlie care for his son, and it settled the faint undertone of tremors in his battered body.

“He’s a good kid, Charlie,” he said as the young aborigine turned amused dark eyes back to his brother.

“He is that,” Charlie replied, and his voice became warm with love. “Thanks to his mother.”

“Well,” Eliot teased, ‘she sure as hell kept both of us in line, huh!”

Charlie let loose a small laugh.

“She certainly did, Eliot Spencer of the Aniwaya!” he retorted with humour.

The two men watched Batu carefully meander down to the South paddock gate and they heard the shrieks of laughter as the horse dropped his head to drink from the big water tank set into the fence.

But Eliot’s smile faded as he rested a hand on Charlie’s bony shoulder.

“Listen kukkaji,” he said softly, “I need a favour.”

Charlie, surprised, raised an eyebrow.

“Name it,” he answered simply.

Eliot ducked his head and sighed.

“Could you speak to the Elders for me?” he asked. “I want to ask permission to do something.”

Intrigued now, Charlie listened carefully as Eliot outlined his request to the Warumungu elders, one of whom was Charlie’s father, and then he nodded. It seemed reasonable.

“No probs, mate. I’ll have a word tonight and Pops can take it to the council. I can let you know in a
couple of days. Will that do?”

Eliot shrugged, wincing at the ache in his side.

“I’m in no rush. Thanks man,” he added, and then the two men returned to the silent joy of watching over the children they loved.

It was one evening after a late meal of Effie’s excellent chicken parmigiana, as the Wapanjara family lay bonelessly about the veranda, gorged to the gills, that Charlie leaned over and tapped Eliot on the arm as the hitter sat in his recliner. Feeling pleasantly drowsy despite the pain of his healing wounds, Eliot glanced idly at Charlie.

“Well, brother,” Charlie murmured so that the children couldn’t hear from their seats at the table, arguing with Parker over the rules of ‘Go Fish.’ “The elders have agreed you can do it.”

Eliot nodded, thinking about it.

“I’ll thank them when I can,” he said, “and thank you, Charlie, for goin’ to bat for me.”

Charlie grinned.

“Any time papparti … any time.”

And as his family surrounded him, happy and settled and at ease, Eliot relaxed back in his seat and began to make plans to leave.

To be continued …

* The story of the raid on the chemical weapons factory near Sargat in March 2003 is true, and was a black-ops mission which included the elite 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) to take out militant Ansar al-Islam insurgents. It was a big operation, but I have scaled it right down to Eliot and his team. Therefore the whole thing is my own invention.

** ‘Storm Boy’ by Colin Thiele. A lovely story about unlikely friends and great opportunity.
A Vision in Days Gone By

Chapter Summary

Angst and yet more angst.

I must thank with all my heart Anne Ryce, who has been fantastic in helping me nail down what I wanted to say about Cherokee culture. She has answered all my questions, advised on other aspects of Eliot’s Cherokee heritage, and has, bless her, been very patient indeed!

It took Eliot several pain-ridden and slow-moving days to get everything together for his plan.

Soapy and Jo accompanied the Leverage team on a trip to Tennant Creek for the first time since the dreadful day Chong and his men had been found by the council buildings. Lizzie and Kip went along too, mainly to get them out of the house and to give both children a change of scene.

Eliot had given both of them a mission – to go to the book store and choose some new children’s books for the Wapanjara library, because the existing books were becoming somewhat tattered and some new age-appropriate additions were desperately needed. After all, both Lizzie and Kip were nearly seven, as both children never failed to remind anyone who was daft enough to ask them how old they were. Eliot had handed each of them some money, and both children had to think about how to gauge quality and content versus cost, and itemise their purchases. Any money left over could be used to buy something useful for the twins. Money didn’t grow on trees, he had told them, eyebrows pulled down in his serious-but-nice frown, explaining that when he was a boy he worked for extra dollars and saved them to buy something special. Some good home-town Oklahoma values never went amiss, Eliot was sure.

Left to his own devices - more or less - Eliot worked at gathering his belongings together, along with other items he needed. Once everything was stowed away in two back-packs, he finally pulled open his remaining drawer and dug around beyond his neatly-rolled socks. Finding what he was looking for, he slipped it into the smaller of the two packs, carefully wrapping it in the folds of a new shirt.

He was ready.

And it was just in time, because he heard Bernadette’s formidable engine as the big vehicle rumbled her way over the hill and down, down into yard, stopping beside the battered and broken main gate. He heard yells and instructions as a couple of the crew helped Nate lift a new gate out of the station’s big trailer.

Eliot wandered carefully out onto the veranda and eased into his recliner just as Effie joined him from the kitchen.

“Well, about bloody time!” she grumbled happily, and dropped a hand onto Eliot’s shoulder. He couldn’t stop the tremor and slight cringe, but Effie just gently patted his shoulder, understanding somehow that he couldn’t control his reaction. “It’ll be bloomin’ lovely to have the whole bleedin’ lot of us eating together,” she said. “Bloody marvellous.”

Eliot heard the warmth in Effie’s voice as Bernadette came to rest in her usual place beside the gum
trees. The rear passenger doors opened and two children tumbled out, shrieking with laughter and pulling Nate to the nearest storage bin so that he could hand down the bags of purchases.

The hitter sighed. He had not realised until this moment how precious all of these people were to his heart. Oh, he loved them … loved them dearly and had done so for years, but he had not understood how they were the whole of him. They were why Eliot Spencer existed. He knew that now. And, he realised with a jolt, they loved him. For all that he was … for all that he had been, Eliot Spencer was deeply loved.

*Love you, you murdering bastard?* Derry Ryan whispered. *Don’t flatter yourself, boyo!*

Eliot closed his eyes for a moment, and tried to control the faint tremble. He was doing better, but … he knew he had to try and find a way to be at peace with himself, although he knew it would difficult. He had spent over two decades dealing with his demons, but this time they had reared their ugly heads to the point where his family, especially Lizzie, had noticed them.

But demons he could control. He had done it before and he could do it again. He just needed to find a way.

And as his family made their noisy, argumentative and boisterous way up the veranda steps, he smiled as Lizzie and Kip tugged gently at his shirt sleeve to get his attention and to show him their purchases, and he allowed himself to be immersed in their love.

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Eliot drifted awake in his big bed to the warbling calls of the magpies in the almond stand. He was alone. No-one sitting in Effie’s old rocking chair … no armchair containing a snuffling, sleeping child with a hand on his arm keeping him safe. He had been deemed well enough to be left to his own devices. It was dawn, as his internal body clock had already told him, and he had plans.

Slowly easing his battered body from his bed, he managed to dress himself and lifted the two back-packs. Retrieving his stockman’s hat from the hook beside the door he put it on, wincing as the crown settled against the half-healed cut above his ear.

Charlie was waiting for him in the yard. Gertie was kooshed down beside him, already saddled and ready to go.

Eliot walked slowly down the steps and joined Charlie, who lifted his hat and wiped his forehead with his arm.

Charlie studied Eliot in the early dawn light. He looked … unfinished. The Oklahoman was lean with illness and uneasy, obviously in pain but dealing with it as well as he could. But there was a calmness in Eliot’s eyes that Charlie couldn’t ignore, and the ancient pull of this land he loved echoed in Eliot’s blue gaze. His friend … his papparti … needed this.

He handed Gertie’s reins to Eliot while also taking the back-packs from his brother’s hand and then he hooked them over the rear cantle of the old Afghan saddle, hanging them beside the food and water containers already loaded there.

“Are you sure you’re up to this, brother?” Charlie said quietly, keeping the noise down so that he didn’t wake the occupants of the tent nearby. He knew Eliot didn’t need to have to explain himself to an upset Lizzie.

Eliot’s eyes crinkled into a smile, blue eyes warm with affection.

“Yeah, man … I’ll be okay.” He scratched Gertie’s head and the camel gurgled under her breath as if
knowing to be quiet. “Dumb-ass here will keep an eye out for me.”

He managed to get onto Gertie’s back and touched her to her feet, but he couldn’t stop a groan of pain as she rocked upwards, making Charlie wince in sympathy. He wasn’t at all sure Eliot should be doing this, but he knew his friend was determined. It was Eliot’s decision and he respected that.

“You ready, hey?” he asked, and seeing Eliot’s nod, Charlie led the way down the track to the south paddock gate. As he let the big camel with her rider through the gate, he reached up and laid a hand on Eliot’s booted foot for a moment.

“Leave the saddle on her, Eliot, okay? Don’t you go bloody straining anything trying to lift it – she’ll be fine saddled up for a few days. Oh, and Auntie sent a little pack of stuff … some bush honey, medicine, and her wattleberry damper, that sort of thing. It’ll help if you feel a bit stuffed.”

Eliot grinned down at his friend and held out a hand, which Charlie shook.

“Thanks Charlie, and tell Auntie she’s a life saver. I appreciate it.”

Charlie shrugged.

“Oh yeah, well … just don’t come back looking like you got a ghost in your chest, Eliot. Because I gotta explain to your people where you’ve gone and Lizzie will never bloody forgive me if you come back with as much as an ant bite, brother, so …” Charlie left the rest unsaid.

Eliot felt Gertie shift underneath him, eager to be gone.

“I hear you, *kukkaji* …” he murmured.

He felt Derry Ryan’s dead gaze on him and saw the maggots fall from the gaping hole in his throat, and he smiled down at the young man who had lost so much.

“Look after them for me, Charlie … and tell them I’ll see them when this is done.”

They’re mine, Spencer … they’ll always be mine … Ryan’s voice whispered, and Eliot turned Gertie towards the distant hills.

And as Charlie watched Gertie and Eliot head into the early morning haze, he laid his hand on his chest where the marks of his tribe lay.

“*Mumunju nyiina* Eliot,” he whispered, “and come back to us, *papparti*."

Turning back to the gate, he fastened it behind him and walked back along the track where the scent of jasmine hung heavily in the air and the magpies called and fluted, and Charlie Jakkamarra hoped that Eliot found the peace he so desperately needed.

Gertie and Eliot hadn’t gone walkabout for a long time, and the camel rumbled happily to herself as she strode along, unhurried, but eager to begin her day.

Eliot did his best to relax in the saddle. He had to admit that he had underestimated his own level of recovery, and riding Gertie hurt with every swaying step. But he felt happier … more settled and at ease than he had for a while. Going walkabout with Gertie had always been a way for Eliot to get some sort of handle on whatever was going on with his life. The limitless horizons and great, heart-wild landscape of the Northern Territory had always spoken to him, and over the next few days he hoped this ancient land would give him some answers.
Karnanganja-Jiri. That was the place he was heading for.

It wasn’t far away … only a couple of kilometres from the homestead … a low escarpment with a few, low trees but unimpeded views. There, the horizon met the blue-washed sky and the world spread out before him in a rich carpet of dusty browns and reds and everything in-between. There, Eliot knew, he could begin to try and sort out the monsters that lived in his heart.

Turning Gertie towards the east, he gritted his teeth against the ache of his wounds and allowed the big camel her head, and Gertie lengthened her stride. And as a flock of wittering galahs drifted overhead towards the huge billabong in the South paddock and Gertie followed her nose to the distant escarpment, Eliot closed his eyes and allowed the spirit of the outback that he loved to soothe his soul.

At 6am in the morning, every day of the year, Wapanjara Cattle Station woke up.

Effie’s day began an hour beforehand, making breakfast for stockmen and jackaroos, all of whom needed a sturdy, satisfying meal to set them up for a hard day managing thousands of cattle in a huge, unforgiving land.

But this morning, as she unlocked the kitchen door and opened it to let in the cool dawn air and before the kitchen became hot and redolent with the scent of breakfast sausages, she found Charlie Jakkamarra sitting on her chair on the small deck overlooking the edge of the cattle pens and the newly-hung main gate beside the great, ancient gum tree which guarded the entrance to the homestead.

His stock hat was pulled down over his eyes and his son lay sprawled on his lap, snoring gently.

“What’re you doing here, you young bugger?” Effie whispered so as not to wake Kip.

Very carefully, Charlie lifted his stock hat and set it more firmly on his mass of raven curls, and squinted up at Effie.

“Gotta speak to the family about Eliot,” he said softly, Kip stirring at the rumble of his father’s voice deep in his chest, but the child didn’t wake.

Effie raised an eyebrow.

“The silly bastard’s gone, then?” she replied, not at all alarmed.

Charlie grimaced.

“Yep. He’ll be back, but … I’m worried he’s not as fit for going walkabout as he thinks he is. But he’s a stubborn beggar, so …”

Effie rolled a shoulder, irritated, but then she sighed and placed a pudgy hand on Charlie’s shoulder.

“Well, I suppose we’ll find out when he’s ready to come home. Want a cuppa?”

Charlie grinned.

“Too bloody right!” he said, and Effie patted Charlie’s shoulder for a second or two, and then nodded.

“I’ll put the kettle on. All bleedin’ hell’s going to break loose in a couple of hours, so … tea. Want to eat right now?”
Charlie carefully shook his head, trying not to disturb his sleeping son.

“Nah. I’ll wait and eat with everyone else. I’ll go through to the veranda, Eff, if that’s alright? I’ll put the nipper on the swing seat. He’s shattered ‘cause I woke him up before the sun was up, poor little blighter.”

Effie let loose what might be described as a grin.

“No worries, boy. Once the kettle’s boiled, you and me’ll have a cuppa and then you can tell me what that daft Yank’s up to. I can mebbe herd that bunch of lunatics he works with into some sort of order, but the little ‘un’ll be shitting bricks worryin’ about him, so she will.”

“Well, he’s coming back. So … she shouldn’t worry too much,” Charlie muttered as he began to organise the limp child in his arms.

“Yeah …” Effie grunted. “You do know he was going to leave us, don’t you?”

Charlie’s mobile eyebrows shot up.

“What? You mean … for good??”

The look on Effie’s face was his answer, and he whistled silently.

“Why? Bloody hell, Eff … why??”

Effie snorted, irritated.

“Because the stupid mongrel thought the nipper hated him ‘cause he killed that bastard Ryan in front of her,” she rasped, her lip curling at the memory of the man who had threatened her family, including Eliot.

“Shit!” Charlie whispered, and Kip snivelled in his sleep. “I take it –“

“I talked the idiot out of it.” Her lumpy face crumpled a little. “I … I was a bit hard on him, Charlie … maybe –“

Charlie smiled.

“Nah. I doubt it. Like all of us, sometimes a bit of tough love doesn’t come amiss. It’s just Eliot needs it more than most. Silly bludger,” he added affectionately. “He … he’s got a bit of an issue going on in his head, Eff … is that right? Just like Soapy?”

Effie nodded wordlessly.

Charlie managed to wrangle his apparently boneless son into a more comfortable position, and then the young station manager carefully stood up. Effie lifted the little boy’s dangling arm and tucked it in between Kip and his father’s chest. Charlie sighed.

“Yeah. Thought so. He’s always been a bit wonky that way … touchy, hard to know. The silly bastard doesn’t think we figured it out long ago. What makes me curious is why his people didn’t notice before now. But then …” he thought about it. “They maybe haven’t dealt with stuff like that before. And God help the drongo, he’s not exactly easy to love, is he? He’s worst’n a salty croc – mad, bad and bloody dangerous to know, the bugger,” and even as he said it Charlie grinned. He dearly loved the grouchy man who was the brother of his heart.

Effie herded Charlie and his son into the kitchen, glancing once more out into the dawning day. The
empty yard would soon be full of hungry stockmen and she had work to do, but she thought of Eliot, out in the bush with nothing but a camel and his own albeit considerable survival skills. He was still sick, and whatever the hell he was doing, Effie knew, it certainly wasn’t going to help his recovery.

“Be safe, boy …” she murmured softly. “Be safe …”

And retreating back to her kitchen, she set herself to her work, unable to control the tears in her muddy gaze.

Well, thought Charlie, it hadn’t gone too badly.

Emotions ran from indignation (Parker) to frustration (Nate), with more than a modicum of annoyance (Sophie) and anger (Hardison), but underlying it all was desperate worry and helplessness from every one of the Leverage team.

Added to that was quiet fretting from Soapy and Jo, both of whom were not surprised at Eliot’s decision to go walkabout when barely back on his feet. Mei was just confused as Hardison tried and failed to explain what ‘going walkabout’ meant, probably because he didn’t quite understand it either.

But it was Lizzie, sitting silently on Eliot’s recliner on the veranda, who didn’t initially react. Two weeks ago she would have been in a complete panic, worried to death about her guardian and best friend. But now she was trying her best to think about Eliot and his reasons for doing this. She was terrified for him, but she had learned very quickly these past few days to think things through first.

“He’s coming back, Charlie, isn’t he?” she finally said, and she couldn’t contain the tremor in her voice.

Charlie nodded soberly, treating the child’s question seriously and with respect.

“He is that, kukkaji. He just needs some time to work out what’s going on with his spirit.”

Hardison snorted.

“You mean the dumb-ass is on some kind of hippy-navel-searchin’-thing, tryin’ to find hisself? Is that it? No offense, man,” he added hastily.

Charlie ducked his head, smiling to himself.

“S’pose, yeah. I think it’s something called a ‘vision quest.’ Know anything about that?”

“It’s Native American,” Nate said, rubbing his chin. “Probably part of Eliot’s Cherokee heritage. I think he needs to just take time to figure stuff out. And maybe deal finally with … y’know …” he added, a little sheepishly.

“It’s called PTSD, Nate – I have it, and so does Eliot. I’m not ashamed of it. Eliot however … he’s struggling a bit, the silly sod,” Soapy said, just a little frustrated. “But maybe this is a first step, hey?”

“But he’s still sick, Grandpa Soapy,” Lizzie whispered. “He’ll take care of himself, won’t he?”

Charlie glanced at Soapy, who looked grim.

“I’m sure he’ll do his best,” Soapy said, but Charlie took a deep breath and smiled wryly.

“He’s not far away … and the Elders gave him permission to do whatever it is he’s doing at
"Man’s business??" Parker snapped, feeling a little outraged, but Charlie cocked an eyebrow at her and the little thief decided to just simmer instead. She would be having words with Charlie later, she decided, about his gender issues.

“Yeah, Parker … man’s business. The way my people live has worked for over forty thousand years, so … what is it you Yanks say? Don’t knock it.” He flashed a white grin. “You should talk to Auntie, my great-grandmother’s sister. She’ll tell you all about women’s business. I bloody well wouldn’t mess with ‘em,” he said. “It’d be more than my life’s worth!” But he instantly sobered. “Eliot’s got a lot to think about. But … I dunno … he’s still a bit crook, and I think he’ll be fasting, so …”

Sophie nodded and laid her hand on Charlie’s arm.

“Charlie … I would appreciate it very much indeed if you would check on Eliot. I … I don’t know what we’d do if … “ her voice tailed off, and Charlie patted her hand.

“I can’t, kapurlu** … I won’t interfere … I can’t interfere. This is his journey, and he would never forgive me if I took that from him.”

What remained of Team Leverage looked at one another and collectively nodded reluctantly but understanding Charlie’s point.

“He’ll be alright, Charlie? He won’t get sick again?” Lizzie asked, swallowing tears.

Charlie ruffled her curls and then squeezed her shoulder.

“Well, I think that whatever happens, Eliot will at least have some answers. We’ll take care of him when he comes back, nipper, and the ancestors’ll keep the silly drongo safe. And he has Gertie. You don’t think the daft thing will let anything happen to him, do you??”

Lizzie smiled through her tears.

“Gertie’ll look after him! She protected him from those … those … people, didn’t she?” She huffed a deep breath and nodded to herself. She knew now she just had to wait for Eliot to come back to them and hope that he was alright. She could do this. “I’ll help with the horses after breakfast if you like, Charlie. Can I?”

“And after that, I have a little surprise for you. C’mon now … get some grub in you, nipper! Wapanjara won’t run itself!!”

And Eliot’s family worried and fretted as they sat down to eat, but they knew then that Eliot was beyond their influence and that they would just have to wait it out and hope he came home to them safe and sound.

Gertie made her way up the ancient pathway, worn by the passage of bare human feet heading towards this sacred place for thousands of years, and emerged at the top of the escarpment onto a flat plateau of packed earth and rock.

Eliot was relieved to be back on level ground because his damn useless body was objecting vehemently to the effort of leaning forward on the old afghan saddle and dealing with Gertie’s rocking gait.
It was coming up to midday and the sun was high in the sky, although the humidity was not so evident here and the breeze which whispered over the escarpment was pleasantly cool.

Eliot brought Gertie around so that she faced the sharp drop at the edge of this high place, and he sensed the rise of rocks behind him while the land stretched away before him into the shimmering heat. Distant hills blurred by the haze lined the horizon like blunted teeth, and Eliot waited for a few moments, absorbing the warmth into his aching body.

But he had things to do, so he *kooshed* Gertie down and eased out of the saddle. He had to lean on Gertie for a few minutes as stiffness crippled him to the point where he could barely move, but it eased, and he walked slowly over to a shadowed hollow in the rocks.

There, shaded by a worn overhang, ancient faces gazed back at him … the Ancestors, hunting the creatures of this land they had inhabited for millennia. There they ran with atlatl and spear, surrounded by kangaroo and emu and goanna, and it was as though the round, ghost-like faces gazed back at him. It felt right to be here, Eliot thought. The *Warumungu* Ancestors would watch over him.

Walking slowly along the wall, Eliot came to the part of this place which affected him the most. Along this part of the dry, faded rock, generation upon generation, men had mixed the red earth with water and clay and pressed the flat palms of their hands on the wall. For countless thousands of years, the *Warumungu* had left their mark for their descendants to see and touch and to join their spirits with their long-dead people. Eliot was profoundly moved.

But now he had work to do, so he turned from the wall and headed back to Gertie.

It took him nearly two hours in his wounded state to set his plan in motion.

He discovered somebody had left him a pile of brushwood, enough to last him a week if he was careful, and a few flints to help start his fire. Eliot smiled. Either Charlie or one of his numerous family members had made sure he would be warm at night. He would have to visit the Elders and thank them for their kindness and understanding.

He turned Gertie loose, knowing she would forage for herself while also keeping Eliot company, and then he made himself a makeshift camp. He had a sleeping bag and plenty of water, although there was also a natural tank containing water almost all the year round just a few hundred yards away, secreted among the rocks.

It took him no time at all to start a small fire, even in the heat of the afternoon, because he needed some hot water. He used the flints to start the fire, knowing it was not acceptable on a Vision Quest to use a lighter, and filling his billy can with water, he set it on a stick over the fire.

Then using another stick from the brushwood pile, he drew a circle around his camp in the dirt. It encompassed a large, flat rock on the edge of the escarpment, and it was there that Eliot planned to spend most of his time.

Digging out Auntie’s small package, he took out the little, leaf-wrapped parcel of medicinal plants, and found the emu bush leaves which he crushed and dropped into the simmering water. The food he put back in his pack – he had not eaten since the previous evening, and he would eat nothing now until his spirit quest was over.

Walking to the flat rock he stood looking out over the landscape in the afternoon heat, and took several deep breaths, although his abused rib objected. Slowly and methodically he stripped down until he wore nothing but his shorts, the starkness of the bandage around his chest and shoulder white against his tanned skin. Then he bundled up his clothes and placed them by his sleeping bag to use as
a pillow.

His final action was to reach out to his backpack and rummage around inside, and he brought out the
object he had secreted in his neatly-folded shirt. It was a small pouch made of soft doeskin,
suspended from a thong and adorned with the stylized image of a wolf, his great-grandmother’s clan
totem. A drawstring held it closed, and he reverently placed it around his neck, the medicine pouch
coming to rest over his heart.

It was time.

Walking to the great rock overlooking the land, he stood there in silence. The sun caressed his bare
skin, and the balmy breeze felt good as it dried the sweat on his body. Eliot closed his eyes as he
stood as straight as he could, and with what was left of his broken heart he offered his spirit to this
land he loved.

Lizzie worked hard all that day. She helped feed horses and muck out Batu’s stable with Kip. Then
she did some weeding with Grandma Jo in her garden and planted some herbs in a corner of her own
for Eliot, so that he would have the same fresh herbs available as he had back home on the roof of
the brewpub. After lunch, she knuckled under and did her school work until Charlie came by with
his promised surprise for her.

“Hey nipper!” he called out as he rode the chestnut mare around the corner of the house while
leading Batu and a neat little dun gelding. “Your dad says you can go riding if you wear your
helmet!”

Lizzie, eyes wide with surprise, looked up at her mother who had been helping her with some
spelling. Brown eyes full of warmth gazed back at her, and Lizzie, despite having thrown herself into
keeping busy to try and ease her worry about Eliot, suddenly really, really
needed to ride that dumpy little dun horse.

“Mama??” She said, and allowed a wheedle to creep into her voice, and she began to jiggle in her
seat. “I’ve done my sums all on my own without Alec’s help and I’ve done all my spelling words
and –“

Sophie held up a hand, stopping her daughter in mid-flow.

“Alright … alright!! School’s over for the day!” Lizzie let out a big grin and got up from her chair,
but Sophie raised an eyebrow. “Riding hat, remember? You don’t want Eliot to come home and find
out you’ve fallen off a horse and your brains are hanging out, now do you?”

Lizzie’s eyes widened even more. Eliot would be really upset if her brains fell out, and he didn’t
need any more worry.

“Yes Mama!” she whispered, and for a moment she could hear Eliot’s voice in her head, gently
scolding her about not being careful enough. She felt a pang in her chest. She hoped with all of her
heart that Eliot was safe and well.

But she retrieved her riding hat and Charlie helped her into the saddle of the little dun and shortened
her stirrup leathers.

“His name’s Narra,” Charlie said and tugged the little horse’s ear with affection. “It means dirt,
because when he was born he was the colour of the ground. He’s really quiet, so you’ll be okay.
Let’s go get Kip, little kunapa, and then we go to the East paddock holding-pens to check the new
calves, hey?”
Lizzie gathered up Narra’s reins and waited until Charlie was in the saddle, and then she touched Narra’s sides with her heels and the little gelding walked obediently after Charlie as he rode off on the chestnut mare.

“Charlie? What does kun … kunapa mean??” She asked, puzzled.

Charlie settled his hat on his head, and grinned without looking back.

“Ask Eliot,” he called back. “He’ll tell you.”

And Lizzie had to be content with that as they set off to fill the rest of the afternoon working with the cattle.

The sun was setting, far into the west and beyond the endless hills.

Eliot sat on the flat rock with the billy can beside him containing the emu bush concoction. He carefully unwound the bandage around his chest, and bared the wound to the last of the sun’s rays and the cooling air. He dug out some gauze from his little medical kit, and he methodically began to bathe his injuries, wincing as the concoction stung. The wound in his side was healing but it would leave a scar, but that didn’t worry Eliot – what was one more scar among many?

Once finished he emptied the billy and cleaned it ready for boiling more water in the morning. Eliot hoped that fresh air and keeping the injuries clean would help their healing, as he had to be nearly naked to follow his spiritual journey.

Drinking plenty of water to keep him hydrated, Eliot sat cross-legged on the flat rock and closed his eyes. He would try and sleep later, but now he would attempt to calm his mind and let his body relax, and see what the night would bring.

Go on!! Get out, you sonofabitch!

Eliot woke with a start. He had obviously dozed off, he realised, as he sat on the flat stone overlooking the land before him. What he hadn’t expected was his father’s voice in his ear.

Get out, boy, an’ don’t bother comin’ back! I built this for you an’ I gave my goddamn soul to this place so’s you would have a livin’ when I’m gone!

Eliot, despite himself and knowing this wasn’t real despite the maggots beginning to crawl in his gut, curled his lip in anger.

“You gave your soul, Pop? Huh? Yeah, well, you gave away Momma too, didn’t ya, for this armpit of a store!” He growled under his breath.

Don’t you dare cheek me, you young bastard, else I’ll –

Eliot flinched despite himself, and his blue eyes stared into the infinite night.

“Or else what, Dad? Whup my ass? You stopped bein’ able to do that since I was thirteen, remember? The night Momma passed!” he said, his voice soft with menace.

He heard his father’s voice rumble with anger. Spencer senior was not the mild-mannered, gentle store keeper perpetuated by countless B-westerns. He was stocky and hard-fisted, a brawler like his son, but he was one helluva fine shop-keeper, Eliot had to admit. He treated his customers well and
honestly, and he knew ever hammer, bolt, nail and pail in the little hole-in-the-wall store. The business was Eliot’s dad’s pride and joy. It was small, but he liked it that way, and he gathered his reputation to his chest like his most treasured possession.

And it cost Momma’s life, Eliot thought, and once again the burn of anger roiled in his chest.

His thirteenth year had been the worst of his life until he met Damien Moreau. Sitting by his Momma’s side as she slipped away from them had been harrowing – watching her turn from a vivacious, funny woman in her thirties to a bony, hollow-eyed ghost in a matter of months had changed her sturdy, outgoing boy into a taciturn, monosyllabic loner, his one aim being to make sure his sister and father ate properly and that his Momma’s house was neat and tidy and that the household bills were paid. He did this because his father couldn’t, Eliot knew that now. His father was so eaten up by grief he switched his every waking moment into keeping the store running. He had been at the store, opening late as he always did on a Thursday, when Eliot’s momma died quietly and without any effort as her son sat beside her, holding a frail, almost transparent hand in his.

Eliot told his father his wife was dead, and then demanded to know why he hadn’t been with her as she passed from his life.

The only answer had been a vicious, hefty slap across his face that split his lower lip.

Eliot had silently hauled back and punched his father on the jaw. It was a clumsy punch, all wild and disjointed and uncoordinated, but it had landed hard and Eliot had used violence for the first time in his life to make his point. His father had staggered back, hurt and shocked, and Eliot had turned and run from the house. His fist hurt like hell, the pain helping to hold him together through the funeral and aftermath of loss, but it was at that moment he knew he had to leave.

It had taken him five years, but he had done it. The day after his eighteenth birthday, Eliot Spencer walked out of his home and into the world. But it had cost him dear.

His birthday became a war zone of silence and then recriminations and finally threats, and the argument had been one of betrayal and bitterness. Eliot would never forget that day, even though he and his family now had a tenuous, delicate but acceptable relationship. But he had never forgotten his father’s last words on the day his son had turned eighteen.

Get out, you ungrateful sonofabitch, and don’t come back!

The maggots were eating away at his insides now, and Eliot noticed he didn’t mind them so much. Sighing, he eased his stiff body to its unsteady feet, and the fire was low, nothing more than embers. Limping over to his brush pile he managed to haul a log over to the fire, but it took him a few minutes to catch his breath.

Gertie wandered out of the darkness and flapped her bottom lip at Eliot, who scratched her nose and led the big camel over to the fire and within the circle which Eliot knew he couldn’t leave until he was done. Kooshing her down, he wrapped himself in his sleeping bag and tucked his battered frame next to Gertie’s bulk. He was cold, he was sore and his wounds ached badly. But he had water, and he had Gertie to keep him company.

But as he drifted off to sleep, hungry and weary, his tried to calm his mind and ease the tremors which wracked his battered frame.

The next day was humid and wet.
Eliot awoke to dank drizzle soaking his sleeping bag, and his fire was out. To get it lit again would be difficult now that his brushwood was soaked.

So, as he had done countless times as a soldier, he ignored the weather. He walked to the huge flat stone and stood in the rain, arms spread wide, and let the raindrops stream down his bare skin and plaster his hair to his skull. Closing his eyes, he raised his face to the sky and took deep breaths to calm his shaking body. He allowed himself to feel every touch of the downpour, the water caressing his wounds and cooling his aching joints. Thunder rumbled in the distance and Eliot’s soul sang to the sound of Namarrkun the Lightning Man as he strode the land he loved.

It didn’t stop raining for two days.

Eliot awoke on his third morning shivering with fever. He was wet, curled next to an equally wet and very grumpy camel, and he was desperately thirsty.

Struggling and unsteady, he managed to drink enough water to quench his thirst, and he gazed wearily out over the sprawling land before him. Sunlight broke through the clouds in streams of gold and rose, turning the drenched landscape into a wonder of smudged, warm browns and russet.

Eliot, at that moment, wanted to go home. He wanted to go back to Wapanjara so badly his head hurt. He wanted to be with his people and he wanted to apologise to ‘Lizbeth Grace, and he knew then he would never be free of his ghosts, whispering, vile creatures that they were. He understood that he would forever feel the maggots writhing in his stomach and the tremor in his hands. He knew he could no longer do his job, and he was at the end of the usefulness of his life.

He stumbled over to the flat stone and managed to ease down onto its slippery, sodden surface. He felt the chill of the stone through his shorts and his joints were swollen and aching like a sonofabitch. What would he do now? Was this what he had come here to find out? Was this moment the confirmation of the end of his days? That his past had finally caught up with him? Maybe that’s what he should do, he thought … just sit here until the land absorbed him into its very bones, and he would walk the Dreaming Land with the Ancestors. It didn’t seem such a bad end.

He put his hand over his chest and held the small medicine pouch that guarded his heart. Maybe he would see Grandfather again.

Hell … that’s where you’re goin’ boyo! Derry Ryan sneered beside him. You’re going to the deepest, darkest pits of Hell, you bastard –

Eliot didn’t even flinch. He was so tired … so done with everything, and he felt a curious, bewitching peace begin to creep into his shivering muscles.

“Screw you, Ryan!” he muttered, and then he found he couldn’t stop himself from smiling.

Gazing out towards the west, he let himself drift, and he slowly stopped shivering. Perhaps this was an easy way to die … with no fighting or screaming or being surrounded by blood and fury and anger and –

Something moved.

Eliot blinked out of his reverie, and he knuckled the exhaustion out of his eyes. There! It moved again, whatever it was, at the corner of his right eye.

The aches had suddenly returned to his joints and Eliot shifted stiffly to look to his right.
There, sitting on the great rocks which sheltered the Ancestors, with its red tongue hanging and watching Eliot with interest, was the biggest dingo Eliot had ever seen.

To be continued …

* Mumunj nyiina – Warumungu, ‘Be safe’.

** Kapurlu – Warumungu, ‘older sister’. It has more meaning than that in a collective sense, given the strict familial structure of Warumungu names for relationships, but I’ve kept it simple.
Eliot and the dingo stared at one another. The dog was huge for a dingo, and Eliot wondered idly if the animal was the great guardian dingo of Warumungu legend.

“Hello, brother,” he murmured, knowing it was said that the Dreamtime dingo was the Ancestor of both humans and dingoes, so the animal would understand his words. “Welcome.”

The dingo’s eyes narrowed in canine laughter, and it stood up, panting. It dropped easily down from the rocks and wandered to the edge of Eliot’s circle, mere feet away from the man sitting cross-legged before it. Sitting down on massive haunches, it huffed at Eliot, who smiled, despite the ache of fever in his body.

Eliot glanced at Gertie. The big camel, feeling out of sorts due to being damp and soggy, ignored both Eliot and the dingo, and was busy flicking her wet ears in irritation and complaining bitterly to herself. Huh, Eliot thought. Gertie wasn’t the biggest fan of dingoes, and more than once he had seen her during one of their walkabouts chasing an errant dog through the bush out of irritation, honking and gnashing her long, yellow teeth. But now … she just ignored the animal.

Perhaps I’m dying, Eliot pondered, and he’s here to guide me home.

“If you want me, brother, I’m here. I’m all yours,” he said, his voice croaky with dryness. He was chilled to the bone and shivering, even though the sun was rising, and mist began to coil and drift throughout the land below.

The dingo cocked its head, curious now. Eliot saw the scars on its muzzle, and as he studied the big canine he saw more scars on the animal’s hide … along its sides and shoulders, and both front paws, big and splayed, appeared to have had broken toes at some point.

“So … you’re an ass-kicker, like me,” he said, and the dingo pricked its ears, listening. “You’re a dog-soldier,” and Eliot chuckled at his own joke. “You got the wrong tribe there, brother – dog-soldiers’re Cheyenne, not Cherokee.” His eyes narrowed in a crinkled smile. “But maybe the Ancestors sent me a dingo instead of a wolf, ‘cause I’m Aniwaya, brother. Wolf-Clan.”

The dingo shuffled around and lay down, resting its broad head on its battered paws, and it yawned, showing yellowed canines, one of which had a broken tip.

It was then Eliot straightened as well as he could, and his eyes widened in shock. He grasped his medicine pouch in one hand, feeling the object within. It was a wolf’s tooth, yellow with age, given to him by his Grandfather who in turn had been gifted the tooth by his own Cherokee great-grandfather. Eliot could feel the broken edge of the tooth’s point through the soft doeskin.
“Well, brother,” he said with wonder. “You are not what I expected.”

So what did you expect, papparti? There’s no bloody wolves out here! A voice said, soft and gentle with a throaty laugh that he would have known anywhere. Eliot’s broken heart constricted and a sudden, unexpected tear glistened in his eye.

“Hey, kukkaji,” he whispered, and he couldn’t stop a sob wrenching his chest. He sensed movement out of the corner of his eye, and this time he knew it wasn’t a dingo. He felt the slender hand as it touched his damaged shoulder, and he knew the mass of blonde-dark curls was being tossed out of the way, because Alice Jakkamarra always had her hair in her eyes.

Oh Eliot, brother … you’re a ruddy mess, sweetie! No wonder you’re crook!

“Don’t worry about me, darlin’,” Eliot answered, and felt her concern seep into his bones, soothing the fever and easing the pain. “I’ll be fine.”

That’s what you always say, you idiot! Alice whispered, and Eliot wished he could pull her tight to his chest and keep her with him so that Charlie wouldn’t have to be alone anymore. Last time, she said with just a hint of mild exasperation, it was when you cracked your head on that cattle crush and staggered about like a drunk wombat for a day or so. I’ve never heard you babble so much nonsense in my life! We didn’t know whether to laugh or worry about you wandering off down to the old creek and getting eaten by a salty!

“Nah,” Eliot scoffed, and yearned with all of his broken heart that Charlie was here so he could be with his beloved wife for one more time. “My head’s too thick for it to do too much damage, kukkaji. And anyway, I’m too wore out an’ stringy for a salty croc to bother with.”

Eliot sat in silence for a few moments and studied the now snoozing dingo. He felt long fingers tuck back the hair over the cut above his ear, and he ached to turn into the touch, although he knew the fingers would slip away into nothing.

“Charlie misses you, kukkaji,” he whispered. His voice almost cracked with the heartache. “Losing you nearly killed him, an’ I think he would have welcomed it. But he has Kip, an’ he couldn’t leave your son.”

There was a soft sigh.

I know. I miss both of them, Eliot. I miss them more than you can imagine. I wasn’t ready to go, y’know? But … at least it was quick. I think it was, anyway. But I was stuck there for a bit. Afterwards, you understand? But I’m going home now, Eliot. To my people. But I have two bits of things for you to do, my brother. Before I go home.

Eliot felt a faint shimmer in the air beside him, but didn’t turn to see what it was, because he knew she would go and he wasn’t ready for that to happen. Not just yet.

“What can I do?” he asked, and he was surprised to feel an unbidden sense of purpose threading through his fevered body.

The laugh came again, clear and full of love, and Eliot once again was part of Alice Jakkamarra’s existence, where she and Charlie made him part of their family and gave their son his name.

My Charlie. Make sure the silly beggar doesn’t mope for too long, Eliot. He’s made for love and happiness, my Charlie is, and Kip needs his dad to laugh and maybe find another woman to hold in time. Someone who’ll argue and love and hold him tight. One who’ll give him more sons and daughters ‘cause you know how much he loves kids. Eliot heard a faint, uncontrolled sob of love.
And our people need him. The tribe needs him.

“He needs you, sweetheart. He misses you an’ I can’t fix him,” Eliot insisted, desperation in every word, “and I don’t know how to -“

Don’t be a bloody dimwit, Eliot, Alice’s voice whispered close to his ear. Just be his big brother. That’s all you have to do, because you’re the best big brother in the world.

Eliot could hear the amused irritation in her voice, and despite himself he smiled wryly and nodded, tired to his very soul. But for Alice he would do what he could.

And then there’s that little girl you protect, she continued.

Eliot blinked, surprised. He shifted awkwardly and he couldn’t stop the grunt of agony as his side burned, and Alice’s touch came again, whispering over the wounds, gently trying to ease her brother’s pain.

Wanja angi murrumurru-jinta? The voice asked kindly.

Eliot snorted, which he discovered was a bad idea because his body objected.

“All over, sweetheart … I hurt all over,” he replied. He had slept during his spirit quest, which he wasn’t supposed to do as he had to concentrate on finding what he was looking for. But he knew deep down he was too sick to focus without sleep, and the pain and exhaustion sapped every atom of his strength. But, he realised, at least the tremors had stopped. He sighed. “I’m tired, baby sister. I hurt, an’ I’m so tired an’ I don’t think I can do what I do any more.”

Oh, bollocks! The voice scoffed, humour in every syllable. Sometimes, Eliot … sometimes I could smack you across the chops with Kip’s old fluffy goanna! Listen, you nerk … that little girl loves you. Lizzie loves you and you are her protector. Man up, Eliot. Speak to her. Tell her what’s hurting you inside.

Eliot winced mentally, and he saw the dingo raise his head, waiting for Eliot’s reply.

“I don’t … it’s not … dammit, I …” he stammered, angry with himself for his weakness and horrified at the prospect of finally facing the blackness inside him.

The voice next to his ear was warm and full of such love Eliot could hardly breathe.

She’ll understand. But if you don’t deal with it Eliot, it will make you a ghost, and I’m not ready to see you turn into shadows. Ever since she was born and you became her wolf, you began to live again inside. Charlie and me … we saw it happen, and it made us love you even more.

Eliot’s gaze swept the brightening land before him as the mist began to clear. A flock of brolgas drifted in to dance along the edges of the limpid pools of water, silver-grey wings outstretched, and the gossamer froth of water as they danced glistened in the burgeoning sunlight.

This is her land too, now, the voice insisted, It’s in her blood, like it’s in yours, and she will need you now more than ever. She has many dangers to face, papparti. Many. And only you can guard her.

Eliot, eyes squinting against the rising sun, frowned.

“What … what dangers? What d’you mean -“

The throaty laugh came again, and a hand slipped around his side to rest against his chest where his
wolves lay. Slim, ethereal fingers touched the medicine pouch for a moment, and then they were
gone, soaked up by the scented air.

What d’you think I am, Eliot Spencer? A bloody mind reader?

He felt a soft breath on his cheek and then a kiss was pressed against his cheekbone, and he couldn’t
help leaning slightly into the touch of this woman he adored, the baby sister he loved.

It’s time, Eliot. Watch out for my Charlie, brother, and tell the daft bugger I love him. There was a
tiny hitch in her words, but the voice was powerful with the love contained within it. And make sure
my Kip grows up strong and true.

Eliot felt a tear run down his face, but he didn’t wipe it away.

“I will,” he whispered as his voice broke. “I promise, little sister.”

The laugh came again, fainter now.

And look after yourself, you idiot. Your best girl needs you.

And before Eliot could answer, the voice was gone, thinning into the warm air and drifting into
oblivion and the Dreaming Land.

A gentle breeze ruffled Eliot’s hair, stiff with sweat and half-dry now in the coming warmth. He
turned to speak to the dingo, but all he saw was the tip of a tail disappearing beyond the rocks, and in
the distance, haunting and lonely, there came the howl of a pack of dingoes.

Eliot stared at the rocks which shaded the Ancestors for a long time.

“Well, brother,” he said. “I reckon it’s time for both of us to go home to our people.”

He sat for a while on the flat rock, still cross-legged. Eliot felt confused … fuzzy and more than a
little bemused. He was trying to take in what he was sure was just an hallucination because he was ill
and full of fever, and his quest was a failure, because he had needed to take time to sleep instead of
focusing on his quest. But once again his hand strayed to the medicine pouch and the wolf’s tooth it
contained.

His Grandfather had helped him make the pouch as his mother lay dying. Eliot knew his beloved
Agiduda was also grieving, but the old man wanted his grandson to be able to connect with his
ancestors, so together they had made the medicine pouch for Eliot. When it was finished, his
Grandfather had pressed the wolf’s tooth contained in the pouch into the boy’s hand. Here, he had
said. Hold this close to your heart. It will help you to remember who you are.

But Eliot had put aside remembering who he was for well over two decades, and while he treasured
his medicine pouch, it was not until this moment that he had finally decided he needed to know who
he really was. He had not added anything to the pouch, for in over twenty years he had been a man
who walked the shadows and felt numb, and there was nothing to treasure in his life until Lizzie had
come along. And she did not belong to him because they were not of one blood, although he was her
guardian and protector. But Alice had said Lizzie needed him because she would face danger ...

He decided enough was enough.

His head ached and his fever had returned, and he knew in his heart his spirit quest was over and
nothing made proper sense just yet in his confused mind.
It was a struggle for the Oklahoman to get to his feet. He was shivering with a combination of pain, lack of food and exhaustion, and once he was upright it was an effort to move. He had no fire to warm him and his pile of clothes was damp. He had new clothes in one of his backpacks, but he couldn’t put those on. Not yet. They were meant for something else he had to do.

Eliot turned shakily towards the Ancestors.

“Don’t look at me like that!” he growled wearily. “I ain’t Warumungu. I don’t know why I even friggin’ came here, dammit!”

But the round, ancient faces gazed back patiently, and said nothing.

Eliot held his left arm tight to his side because his bullet wounds ached and dragged at what was left of his seriously depleted stamina. He desperately needed to sleep. Maybe … maybe once he had rested, it would make more sense. Maybe then he could dare to think about the darkness he hid in his soul.

He took a few steps towards Gertie who rumbled at him, her ears flicking forward, and she heaved herself to her feet, her rumbles turning to those ridiculous squeaks she made when she was concerned about him.

“M’okay, darlin’ …” he slurred, but suddenly he began to sway. His next step turned into a stumble, and the flood of darkness took the breath out of him as though a dam had given way, and he finally, slowly, crumpled bonelessly to the ground.

Gertie honked in alarm and strode forward to the still, dirty figure sprawled within the circle, just feet from what had been a warm fire and now was nothing but a soaked pile of ash and semi-burned brushwood.

Her huge head nudged Eliot, but he didn’t move. She lipped at his chest and shoulders, and licked his face. There was no response. She knew he was alive, because she could sense the ragged breaths he took, but he was out cold.

Gertie didn’t know what to do. She wiffled at his hair, knowing it irritated him, but he remained still. So the huge dromedary did the only thing she could think of. Very, very carefully, she sat down next to Eliot, shielding him with her huge bulk. She shuffled about until he was tucked into her side, and then she swung her head around and laid it on the ground next to him, her long neck tight against his limp body.

He groaned a little, which made Gertie squeak with relief, and he shifted unconsciously into her warmth. She sighed to herself.

And being the patient camel she was she settled down to wait, and as she waited, she began, ever so quietly, to hum.

Eliot Spencer slowly roused from unconsciousness overwhelmed by the absolute certainty that he was being licked.

A long tongue curled affectionately around his neck, and then worked its way over his bare chest, and then the sound of an enormous, satisfying belch wafted over his stomach and the licking stopped for a moment as the stench made his closed eyes water.

“Dammit, Gertie!!” he wheezed, and even as he gagged the licking resumed. Now it was concentrated on his hair and right ear, and his words triggered a series of silly high-pitched squeaks
which intensified as a pair of velvet lips mumbled at his earlobe. Which, Eliot thought, was okay if it was a lovely lady doing the mumbling thing, but wasn’t quite so sexy when it was being perpetuated by a huge and incredibly smelly damp camel.

Gertie rumbled with delight when Eliot waved a hand in her general direction, trying to stop her telling him how much she adored him. He pried open his eyes and found himself staring into one huge brown orb rimmed with impossibly long eyelashes, and Gertie mumbled a slobbery lick across his face.

“Aw hell, Gert!” he complained, and gently pushed her away even as Gertie nuzzled carefully at Eliot’s wounded side. Eliot’s face softened. “I know, darlin’ … I know … you’re a good girl. Easy now …”

Wincing, he grasped Gertie’s *bosal* and she helped him sit up simply by lifting her head, Eliot leaning weakly against her side, the heavy pad of the old saddle making a lumpy but comfortable pillow for his aching head.

Gertie’s rough coat rasped agonisingly against the stitched hole under his arm, but Eliot was grateful for the pain which sharpened his dulled senses.

He squinted blearily at his surroundings, and his first discovery was that he hadn’t been unconscious for too long. By the height of the sun it was mid-morning, and the day was a warm one. His body was dry although his shorts were stuck to his skin with dried sweat and dirt, which wasn’t the most comfortable situation, Eliot decided, grimacing.

Rubbing Gertie’s face he rested his head against her, then closed his eyes for a moment and focused on his injuries and physical state.

He was *damn* sore, that was for certain. He ran a hand down his left side, testing the two bullet holes for infection. There was swelling, and Eliot couldn’t see the hole under his arm properly, but it didn’t feel too bad. In fact the only overwhelming feeling he had was weakness, a relic of the fever that had lingered on and off in his system since he was first shot by Raphael Eades.

Steeling his damaged body to take more abuse, he sat up. It hurt, but he dealt with it, and he slowly got to his feet, leaning heavily on Gertie.

He tried stretching, which was not the best plan, so he stretched bits of his battered frame that would allow it, and he felt better.

Turning his face to the sun, he basked in its warmth for long minutes, and for the first time he realised he wasn’t riddled with tremors.

“Well, Ryan,” he rasped, his voice getting stronger by the second, “I’m here, you dumb bastard. You want me? Come get me.”

He waited for Derry’s voice to whisper foulness in his ear, but there was nothing. That didn’t mean, Eliot decided, that the voice wouldn’t come again, but for now he was free of it. Right now he needed to move, loosen off stiff muscles and get something to eat and drink. His quest was over, he knew it in his heart, so he desperately needed some food in his stomach to give him enough strength to get on Gertie and ride down to the creek. He had a couple of things to do before he went home and tried to make sense of what had happened. Or what he *thought* had happened.

Gertie heaved her massive body to its feet and she reached out to Eliot, lipping at his arm, gurgling softly. Once more hanging on to her *bosal*, Eliot led her slowly over to the pile of clothing he had left
beside his backpacks and sleeping bag. The clothes would probably still be a little damp, but he could bear wearing them until he reached the creek. Carefully leaning over to shake out the shirt, something caught his eye.

Sitting on top of the pile, winking a warm blue like the shallow tropical seas of the remote northern Cape, was what appeared to be a pebble. It was polished and smooth, washed by the ebb and flow of long-gone rivers and the sands of an ancient desert. It was a piece of turquoise, rich and beautiful, filigreed with fine chocolate tracks that ran like gossamer through the blue that mirrored the depths of Eliot’s eyes.

He hesitantly reached down and picked up the mineral, which appeared to have been placed carefully and precisely in the centre of his old plaid shirt, and it was clean and unsullied by dust. Straightening, he turned it over and over in his fingers, and knew then his quest had been answered.

Turquoise was much revered by many tribes including the Cherokee, and Eliot wore the mineral often as a pendant or on his wrists set into silver or leather. But it was also found here in the Northern Territory, though rarely as fine an example as this small, breathtakingly beautiful pebble.

But Eliot had seen this pebble before.

Alice Jakkamarra had shown it to him one day, rock-hound that she was, knowing he would appreciate the beauty of this little naturally-polished mineral.

He was suddenly so overwhelmed his legs went out from under him and he had to sit down, Gertie gurgling gently as he settled on the ground and leaned his side against the rock.

He sat there for a long, long time.

It was past midday when Gertie nuzzled at Eliot’s shoulder, and the hitter started as though being awoken from a trance. The turquoise pebble still sat in the palm of his hand, the blue, smooth surface warm on his callused skin.

Eliot wiped tears he couldn’t remember shedding from his face, and his smile was full of loss. Using his free hand to lift his medicine pouch from around his neck, he carefully undid the drawstrings and reverently placed the little pebble that sang silently with Alice’s voice into the pouch, next to the wolf tooth. Tightening the drawstrings once more and tying them carefully, he placed his medicine pouch around his neck and over his heart.

Looking up, he saw Gertie gazing at him with her one good eye. She squeaked.

“Okay … okay, girl. I can take a hint. We gotta go.” He raised his hand and grasped her bosal.

“Howe me up, will ya?”

Gertie obliged and hauled Eliot up onto his unsteady legs so that he could stand for long moments, his right hand hanging onto Gertie’s ever-reliable bosal and his bad side resting carefully on the rock. But Eliot Spencer, a man who hated acknowledging weakness, forced his unwilling frame to get into gear. He had things to do.

His first chore was to drink plenty of water and try to keep his body hydrated, and then he inspected the pile of clothing. His boots were wet around the edges still, having been at the bottom of the pile, but everything else was at most slightly damp thanks to the warm breeze and the heat of the day. Eliot used a couple of handfuls of water to wash his face and feet before drying off and getting dressed. He still felt the grittiness of dust and dirt on his skin, but hell, he’d spent weeks up to his ass in swamps full of leeches before now, so this was nothing, he convinced himself. He didn’t bother
with the Henley and just slipped on his shirt, leaving it unbuttoned so that it wouldn’t press too much on his wounds.

Once dressed, he felt much better. Finding a place on the sheltering rocks on which to sit, he lifted one of his backpacks, placed it beside him and began to rummage inside. Gertie eagerly helped him to investigate the contents, and Eliot, trying to push her away with one hand, found what he was looking for with the other.

He pulled out Auntie’s leaf-wrapped parcel, and avoiding Gertie’s prehensile lips as she realised there was human food to be had if she played her cards right, he unwrapped the wattleberry damper, still reasonably fresh under the crusty outer layer. Between the two of them, the damper, rich and tasty, was eaten with relish. Gertie delicately took the crust and chomped it happily while Eliot slowly ate the flavoured bread. As Gertie licked her lips, Eliot dug around in the pack once more, and this time he brought out a couple of carrots and an apple.

Gertie was beside herself with delight. She flapped her bottom lip in anticipation, spattering drool all over Eliot, who bore it with resignation.

Gertie inhaled her carrots and Eliot ate the apple. Gertie pestered him with as much charm as she could muster, and Eliot, not really well enough to scold her, fed the camel the apple core. She thanked him with a rub of her huge head over Eliot’s already grubby hair, now imbued with the scent of damp camel.

After filling his belly with some much-needed sustenance, Eliot, using Gertie as an anchor, tidied up the site. This was an important and ultimately private ceremonial place, and he did his best to leave it as he found it. He left the brushwood pile intact, for use by Warumungu Elders at their next corroboree. The ashes he scattered to the wind, with a soft murmur of words thanking the Ancestors for their understanding.

Within two hours he was ready to go. He had rested for an hour, dozing quietly leaning against Gertie’s warmth, but now, in the middle of the hot afternoon, he had one more thing to do before he left Karnanganja-Jiri.

He found a small package wrapped in eucalyptus leaves, given to him by Charlie. Unwrapping it, he cupped the leaves in one hand and poured a little water over the red ochre contained within. Mixing the water and ochre into a paste with a finger, he walked over to the great wall where the Ancestors lived. Wandering along the wall, he came to the place he loved the most … the home of countless handprints given to the rock over thousands of years so the Warumungu could connect with those who had gone before them.

Eliot closed his eyes for a moment or two to centre himself, and then he pressed the flat of his right hand into the red paste.

With as much reverence as he could muster, he placed his palm on the warm, smooth rock and leaned the weight of his body against it. For the endless eon of a heartbeat he felt the connection. He sensed the numberless people who had stood in this place and marked the rock with their presence, and Eliot’s mind suddenly became clear and serenity slowly took hold into his soul. He was not alone. He had a family who loved him, and a home and people whom he loved in return.

Easing his hand from the rock, he studied his own handprint. He saw the lines of scars, and the swollen lump at the base of his thumb. He saw the slight swell of the beginning of arthritis in his knuckles, and he knew the lines of his life were writ large on the strong handprint which now lay with the Ancestors. He had left something of himself in this sacred place, and it felt good. It felt right.
He stood for a moment, and took a deep breath.

“Thank you,” he said, “for lettin’ me do this. My people thank you,” and his voice had its strength back. Eliot knew now he had purpose.

Returning to the flat rock overlooking this land he treasured, he scuffed out the circle and washed his hands, letting the red ochre splash over the rock where it belonged, returning to the earth which created it. Drying his hands on his shirt, he clipped Gertie’s reins onto her *bosal*, loaded his backpacks onto the rear cantle, and eased his battered body onto the old saddle.

Gertie chomped to herself and leaned her head back so that Eliot could scratch the curls between her ears.

“Okay, girl. Let’s go. One more thing to do an’ then we can go home.”

He urged the huge camel to her feet, and together they headed away from *Karnanganja-Jiri*, once more following the millennia-old track down, down onto the flatter grassland where the pools gleamed in the sunlight and the brolgas danced.

The creek was full of rainwater. The sluggish flow was still brown in places from the silt from upstream. But Eliot knew of a small pool which wasn’t affected much by the swell of the rains, protected as it was by a barrier of stone which had a small hole within it allowing the water to refresh itself. The pool was reasonably shallow, only overflowing during the torrential downpours of the Wet. Right now, even after two days of drizzle, the water was reasonably clear. Eliot could see the bottom of the pool, a warm, rocky basin flickering in the light and shadow of the rills created by a slight breeze rippling the water’s surface.

This was one of his favourite places.

It was late afternoon, and Eliot *kooshed* Gertie down beneath an old coolibah tree. He set about gathering up some dead branches of an acacia and began a fire, setting his billy can full of water on a stick over the flames. A hot mug of tea would be very welcome. He lifted down his backpacks, and studied the pool. Yes … this was the time and place for what he wanted to do.

Once the fire was glowing bright and warm, Eliot stripped naked and stood for a moment by the side of the shallow edge of the pool. He had no shaman to help him. He only knew this was the proper way to mourn the woman who had died so needlessly and left his brother and his little boy to face the future without her.

He slowly waded into the chill water until he was almost chest-deep, his wounds stinging, and faced east. He took a deep breath, exhaling gently to slow his heart and to calm his spirit. He knew he was supposed to pray but he didn’t have the words, so he thought of Alice. In his mind’s eye he saw her laughing black eyes and the unruly mass of blond-dark hair … her endearing snub nose and her slender figure. He heard her throaty, bubbling laugh, so full of mischief, and he smiled softly.

“Goodbye, sweetheart,” he said. “I promise I’ll look out for ‘em both.”

And alternately facing east and west, Eliot immersed himself seven times in the cold, clear water.

He stayed under the surface for as long as he could on the seventh immersion, and when he emerged, shivering and streaming with water, he shook droplets from his hair and slowly walked out of the pool.

Sitting on a rock he allowed the heat of the day to dry him off, and then he dug out the new clothes
he had brought with him specifically for this moment. The jeans and shirt felt a little stiff in their
ewness, but the socks and shorts were comfortable and by the time he had finished lacing up his
boots he felt almost human again.

Lifting the filthy clothes he had left in a pile, he threw them on the fire - a ceremonial cleansing of the
past.

Eliot was so occupied with poking the clothes into the embers, he was initially unaware of the soft
grumbles and slurps coming from the area near the coolibah tree. He heard a squeak of pleasure and
looked up.

“NO!!! NO-NO-NO - DAMNATION, Gertie!!” he yelled, and climbing stiffly to his feet he tried to
jog over to where his backpacks lay.

Gertie froze. The backpack now draped over her muzzle slid awkwardly off her nose, and Eliot
could plainly see the coconut and chocolate liberally smeread over her mouth and lips.

Lamingtons, Eliot thought. That goddamn camel’s eaten my friggin’ lamingtons!!!

“Get away from there, you dumb-ass!!” Eliot bawled, and Gertie tried her best to look blasé about it
all, but even as she gazed at Eliot with feigned surprise, she ate what was left of the four-day-old
lamingtons, cardboard box and all, and the cream squelched down her chin and dripped onto her
knees.

And as Eliot raged at his unrepentant camel, he could have sworn he heard Alice Jakkamarra’s
giggling laugh trill like water through the coolibahs.

In the end, Eliot managed to salvage one Anzac biscuit and some dried kangaroo meat which he
washed down with two mugs of tea.

He packed away his backpacks, scowled at Gertie who hummed at him with love and tried to give
him camel kisses, and then he put out the fire.

It was time to leave.

He sat astride Gertie, and gazed at the setting sun.

“Okay, you big moron. Let’s go home,” he said.

And ordering Gertie to her feet, he turned her head towards the family and home he loved.

To be continued …
With Heart and Soul

Chapter Summary

Author’s note: Much thinking, a bit of talking, a plethora of yelling, and Eliot ‘in a bad way’. Such is the way with errant hitters.

Eliot couldn’t remember the ride from the creek back to the South paddock gate ever being so long and difficult. From what he could recall from his numerous trips through the years it was at most a few hours, so, as he sat swaying to Gertie’s stride, he couldn’t quite understand why it seemed to be taking so long.

He had had to go out of his way to visit the creek, a favourite place to rest and recoup his energy when he was feeling out of sorts. When the demons from his past came, Eliot found the soothing presence of the water and the silence of the outback helped to push the shadows in his heart back into their box deep, deep inside his being and lock them away for a while.

But the place was quite a distance from Karnanganja-Jiri, so his trip home to Wapanjara was circuitous and the landscape somewhat lumpy, if Gertie’s careful stride was anything to go by. He couldn’t quite remember. Damn, but his head felt fuzzy.

It had been dark for a while now, and he was trusting Gertie’s ever-reliable sense of direction, because travelling through the outback at night was dangerous. Even if the landscape was familiar, it was very easy to get lost in the vastness of the bush.

Eliot was trying hard not to fall asleep as the camel strode confidently towards her home where food and cuddles and – with luck – maybe a gummy-frog or two could be had if Hardison could be persuaded with camel-kisses, Gertie was sure.

Eliot was exhausted. The food and water had helped, but his condition had been poor to begin with, and deprivation and lack of food for days on end had used up what little reserves he had.

Shifting in the saddle, he winced. The bullet wound under his arm, the one that had almost cost him his life, was throbbing, and when he had checked it less than an hour ago he had felt the swelling and the tight heat in the exit wound towards his back. Perhaps, Eliot thought vaguely, it hadn’t been the best plan to remove the bandage. It had seemed like a good idea at the time, so that the sun and fresh air might help heal the injury, but rain and dirt had not been the best environment for a newly-stitched hole in his hide.

Every step Gertie took jarred his injuries, and he really, really wished he was home where his family would take care of him.

And there’s the surprise, he thought, and raised an eyebrow, bemused. Normally he would have preferred holing up somewhere anonymous and letting his body heal without anyone bugging him. But now … now he wanted his people around him, even if they did shout at him and poke his hurt bits and tell him he was a boofhead. He grinned woozily. Effie was going to be so pissed.

But his grin faded when he thought about Lizzie. She would be upset and worried, and once again there was a whisper in Eliot’s head, telling him that he shouldn’t frighten her and wouldn’t it be
better if he left so she wouldn’t have him to worry about anymore –

Don’t be a pillock! Alice’s voice said in his heart, and Eliot flinched. He was Lizzie’s protector. To leave would be a coward’s way out, and Eliot Spencer was no coward. To his dying day, he had promised Sophie. Well, he pondered, maybe ’Lizabeth Grace and I will figure it out. I can take time while I’m laid up to think it through. An’ maybe … maybe I’ll tell her about Mooch. For some reason the thought of telling Lizzie about his long-dead comrades made him feel easier in himself. Yeah … maybe he could try.

And then he nearly fell off Gertie as she came to an abrupt halt.

They were at the South paddock gate. At last. Gertie, only having one functioning eye, hadn’t seen the gate in the dark, moonless night. She had almost piled into the gate and only just stopped in time.

Eliot grunted in pain as he clung onto the raised peak of the saddle and managed to stay on board, but he bit back a rude word and kooshed Gertie down beside the gate.

Once she had settled, Eliot slid off the saddle and almost ended up on the ground as his legs gave way. The ride had taken its toll not only on his constitution but on his limbs, stiff with sitting astride Gertie’s broad frame for hours on the old, wooden-framed saddle.

“Okay,” he muttered under his breath, “I can do this. C’mon, Spencer, you wuss … open the damn gate!”

But to his dismay, he couldn’t. The gate was heavy and sturdily-built, designed to withstand the weight of a thousand-pound bullock rubbing its backside on its thick steel bars. Six feet high, it was also rabbit and dingo-proof with strong stock-fencing attached to the gate, and the spring-loaded handle was on the other side. Eliot knew the massive wooden strainer on which the gate was hung sagged a little with the weight, and while the gate was relatively easy to open, there was a knack to it. To pull back the sprung gate handle, the gate had to be lifted a mere fraction for the handle to slide easily.

While he could just manage to slip his right arm through the bars to the L-shaped handle, he found to his cost that lifting the gate the quarter-inch it needed for the handle to move was impossible in his present condition.

What was more sinister was the sudden burning pain in the inflamed bullet hole under his arm as he tried to take the strain of lifting the gate.

He couldn’t contain a yelp of agony, and he felt something ‘give’ and a warm, slow trickle of either blood or something worse ooze down his side, soaking into his new shirt.

He let go of the gate and stumbled back, colliding with Gertie, who honked in surprise.

“OW!” he hissed, “sonofabitch!!” and he grabbed hold of Gertie’s saddle before he hit the ground. “Shit!” he swore under his breath. This was ridiculous!! He couldn’t even open a friggin’ gate!!

Gertie nuzzled at his side and squeaked forlornly. She scented at his wound and sneezed, letting him know that he was broken again, much to her dismay.

Eliot leaned heavily on Gertie for a minute or two, waiting for the throbbing pain to ease, and then he managed to reach around and pull up his shirt to check the wound. He knew he wasn’t bleeding badly, but there was obviously infection. Damn. Jo would make him suffer every which way but Sunday, cleaning up the wound and trying to make him stay in his damn bed, which was not going to happen. No way. He was sick of lying in bed. And Lizzie would have a blue fit, and Effie … well,
Effie would make his life hell on wheels for at least a week. And that wasn’t even including his team, especially Parker, who would finger-poke the crap out of him just for fun and indulge her particular version of sneaky revenge. Sophie would narrow her beautiful eyes and become an exasperated ice queen, and even Mei would probably scold him even though she only came up to his chest. The women of Wapanjara were fearsome.

And, he realised, he would get absolutely no support from any of the men because they were too scared, the bastards.

He tried standing up on his own. He was damned if he, Eliot Spencer, feared retrieval expert and a man who could take out eight ninjas with his pinky – or was that seven? No, eight, he was sure, was going to be bossed about like a child who had fallen off a chair while stealing from the cookie jar.

Eliot fell over. Landing hard on Gertie, who gurgled in surprise, he managed to slide down onto the ground beside her and ended up leaning against her solid ribcage. He grunted with the pain, but at least he was sitting up and not sprawled in the dirt this time. His balance was gone, he was sick, and, dammit all to hell, he was shot. Twice.

There was nothing for it. He would have to sit there through the night and wait until someone found him. He was less than a mile from home, and he couldn’t do anything about it because he couldn’t open a friggin’ gate.

Resigned to his fate, Eliot reached up and tagged Gertie’s saddle blanket, pulling it down over his shoulders and doing his best to wrap his damaged frame up in what had been Effie’s throw rug many years before. It was warm but smelly, but to Eliot it was a lifesaver. He wasn’t fit enough to lift his backpack containing his sleeping bag down from the saddle, and anyway, he thought, it was probably still damp.

Tucking into Gertie’s powerful shoulder, Eliot rested his head against the saddle pad and tried his best to find a position which didn’t make his joints ache and his wounds pulsate with pain.

Gertie’s big head swung around and she whiffled at Eliot’s chest, squeaking pitifully, and then she rested her head against Eliot’s wounded side, trying to keep him warm.

Eliot smiled even as he winced at the effort of resting his good hand on Gertie’s brow, tugging at her curls. Gertie hummed at his attention, and she chomped drowsily.

Now as warm as he was going to get and aching like hell, Eliot rested his head on Gertie’s saddle and gazed up into the infinity of the star-drenched sky above. As he relaxed he heard the muted night-noises of the bush … the rustle of a wandering possum … the soft boom of a pair of frogmouths in an acacia away towards the north … the stillness of this land never ceased to soothe his soul.

His mind began to drift, and Eliot closed his eyes, drowsily feeling the earth beneath him and the heavens above. Under his breath in a low, gentle voice, Eliot idly began to sing, and every now and again Gertie joined in with soft, yearning hums.

Parker was fidgeting. She was fully justified in her fidgeting, even as she sat at the big veranda table with the rest of her family, driving every one of them nuts with her jiggling knee and the occasional twitch of her lip.

She was eating her now-customary breakfast ‘butty,’ usually with bacon or sausages, as Effie called sausages, but she really wasn’t hungry.
The reason she was jiggling was because Charlie had issued a dare, and if she didn’t carry out the
dare, she would muck out the broodmares on her own for a week.

Today, Parker was going to ride a horse. A real, live horse, and she would do this because Charlie
promised if she didn’t enjoy sitting on a horse, he would never expect her to do it again. Besides, she
had become a little accustomed to having the things around. At least, she thought, it wasn’t clowns or
dolls. Parker shuddered. She detested clowns and dolls.

But at least she had the morning to herself. Lizzie and Kip were off to help Jacko and a couple of
members of the crew to count poddies in the North paddock, and it would be after they returned that
Parker was going to sit on Batu.

Lizzie and Kip finished up their breakfast and carried their plates through to the kitchen and then
reappeared, Lizzie buckling her riding helmet and Kip flinging on his stockman’s hat. Lizzie was
slightly envious. She didn’t quite understand why she couldn’t wear a stockman’s hat like Eliot and
Kip.

Her gaze wandered to the track leading to the South paddock gate. Eliot had gone walkabout days
ago, and there was still no sign of him. Lizzie was trying so hard not to worry, but she knew Eliot
wasn’t really well enough to look out for himself properly.

A hand fell on her shoulder and squeezed gently. She turned to see her father’s blue eyes studying
her.

“He’ll be back, Lizzie. He just needed some time to figure things out,” Nate reassured his fretting
daughter. Lizzie had dealt with Eliot’s walkabout fairly well, he thought, but her patience was
beginning to buckle under the strain. She was desperately worried about her guardian and best
friend.

“I know, Daddy. But I wish he’d come home. He’s still –“

“- poorly, I know, sweetheart,” Nate replied, and noted with a pang how easily Lizzie regarded
Wapanjara as her home. But he didn’t blame her. Technically, Team Leverage didn’t really have a
home. They had headquarters, it was true, and each of them had apartments – or in Parker’s case, a
warehouse – but they weren’t really homes. They were all nomadic at heart. But this place … it was
Eliot’s home, and had been for years, despite the hitter still maintaining the wandering lifestyle that
his job demanded.

Lizzie had taken to the place as though she belonged here. Which, given Eliot’s gift to her, was the
truth. One day, Wapanjara would be hers and Kip’s.

“Listen … off you go. You and Kip have work to do this morning, and your mother and I have a call
to make,” Nate ended cryptically.

Lizzie nodded, her dark eyes sad. She missed Eliot.

“Oh, Daddy. But d’you think he’ll be home soon?”

Nate knew it had to be the truth. Lizzie wouldn’t have it any other way.

“I don’t know, Lizzie. I really don’t. But I hope so. We all miss him too.”

There was a moment’s silence, and then Lizzie pulled herself together, and easing from her father’s
grip, she clattered down the veranda steps after Kip. Batu and Narra were waiting for them, held by
Jacko, and the little stockman lifted them both into the saddle. Then he mounted the white-faced bay
gelding waiting patiently beside them and turned towards the yards.  

“C’mon, nippers!” Jacko said, grinning. “Half the bloody day’s gone, and we’ve work to do!”

“Coming, Jacko!” Lizzie yelled back, and trying to keep her worry for Eliot under control she carefully touched Narra into a fast walk up the incline and towards the yards. She had a busy day counting poddies and then catching up on school work, so she focused on her chores, even though she knew they were intended to keep her mind occupied. She really couldn’t do anything useful. She was only six, after all. But there, forever in the back of her mind, was the thought that Eliot needed her badly, and she couldn’t shake it off.

Gertie had had a long night looking after her human. Eliot had slept on and off, and Gertie had made sure he was warm and guarded from dingoes. She could smell the sickness in him, and she knew wild dogs could tell when injured prey was about. So she stayed on the alert and grumbled and gurgled when she thought wild creatures lurked, but as the dawn grew, Eliot became quiet and still, other than the occasional groan if he moved. Gertie whiffled his hair which usually earned her a choice curse or two, but Eliot stayed tucked into her side and the only reaction she got was a slight cough and a moan as Eliot shifted in his sleep.

So Gertie squeaked quietly and made sure Eliot remained safe, and waited for someone to come and open the gate so they could go home.

It was mid-morning, and Parker’s fidgeting descended into bad temper and snarky remarks, so Effie took matters in hand and told her to ‘bloody well go and climb something, why dontcha!’ Jo was working on paying bills and Sophie and Nate were doing something secretive, so Parker headed off to the water tower.

It was a reasonably nice day, if a bit warm and humid, and sitting in her chair on top of the tower would afford a little bit of a breeze. But her heart sank once she got there. She could hear children’s voices as Kip and Lizzie walked their horses back to the house. Then she heard Charlie as he called out to his son as he emerged from the station office. Parker sank down in her chair and put up her umbrella. Perhaps if she slumped down in her chair Charlie wouldn’t see her. But as she settled down, tucking her feet underneath her so that they didn’t dangle over the edge of the tower, she instinctively did a quick sweep of the outlying reaches of the homestead. It had become second nature, and she watched Hardison, settled under Oggie’s canopy, talking to himself as he worked on some little project he and Charlie had been discussing. She wondered what it was. In fact, she wondered what Nate and Sophie were up to in the living room. They had had a long telephone call after breakfast with someone, and now Parker was itching to find out what it was all about.

Frustrated, she quickly checked the yards, watching several of the stockmen as they graded fat bullocks for sales in Alice Springs the following week. Parker didn’t mind bullocks. They were a bit brainless, but she liked how they could pick their noses with their tongues.

She smiled as she saw Sparky having a mad moment, tearing around Gertie’s paddock followed by his mother, who nickered to her son telling him to calm down before he lost control of his legs.

Parker ran her watchful eyes over the stringybarks at the top of the hill, but now there was no assassin and her horse staring back at her, and Parker curled her lip in triumph. Eliot had kicked Hadan’s ass. Trailing her gaze now over the old gum trees and then Jo’s orchard and garden, she saw a couple of rabbits startle themselves and dash into the undergrowth beside the old track which
led towards the South paddock gate.

For a moment she felt a pain in her chest. Eliot had gone away, riding Gertie down that track to do his spirit-thingy, and Parker missed him dreadfully. They all did, despite his grouch-‘n’-growl persona. Even after all these years, Eliot really thought he could scare them off. *Phooey!* There was something *wrong* with Eliot sometimes. Parker knew that every now and again Eliot loosened his phenomenally tight control strings and acted like a grouchy big kid. Singing in Lucille with Hardison … getting excited about the possibility of the geeky hacker creating an Eliot-signal just like Batman’s, complete with wolf logo … or the time Parker caught Eliot talking goo-goo baby-talk to Lizzie when she was three weeks old as she lay sprawled against his chest as he sat on the Leverage HQ couch. He hadn’t lived that one down for months, especially as Hardison had the whole thing on security footage.

She looked towards the billabong in the South paddock, gleaming amongst the trees. She could just see the big gate, and decided that she really must venture down to the billabong one day –

Her eyes widened and she dropped her umbrella.

“*CAMEL!*” she bawled, but even as she stood up and pointed, she saw Gertie was lying down on the far side of the gate. Why was the big animal *lying down*?? And where the hell was Eliot?? Then she saw Gertie bend her head around as she sat by the gate, and nuzzle something Parker couldn’t see. “*ELIOT’S DOWN!*” she yelled, her voice rising to a high-pitched yelp of fear even as she began to swarm down the tower.

Lizzie and Kip, thinking about lunch, stared at one another even as Charlie stopped dead in his tracks at Parker’s yell.

Kip’s dark eyes looked into Lizzie’s, and both children came to the same decision in a split-second.

“C’mon, Lizzie!!” Kip hissed, and touching Batu into a trot, he gamely set off around the house and towards the track, Lizzie in tow. Narra was a careful little horse, and he knew Lizzie wasn’t the steadiest of riders with her short six-year-old legs, but he felt her shorten her reins and drop her heels, and then they were off, Lizzie doing her best to rise to the trot.

Instinct kicked in. Lizzie had heard Parker’s words. ‘*Eliot’s down!*’ she had bellowed, and even as the house’s residents heard the little thief’s yell and emerged from the house to begin running towards the track, Lizzie and Kip were well ahead of them.

The little boy, emboldened by the need to find his ‘uncle’, urged Batu into an easy lope and Narra joined him, and both horses with their small riders aboard headed towards the big gate at the end of the track nearly a mile away.

Even as she managed to find her balance as Narra broke into the mile-eating lope, Lizzie pushed the little gelding on, her heart in her mouth. She knew Eliot was sick, or hurt again, or … she didn’t want to think about how bad it could be. All she knew was that he was waiting by the gate for his Lizzie to rescue him.

They arrived at the gate within minutes, and Kip took the lead.

Gertie swung her head up and honked at both children, but she didn’t get onto her feet. Kip brought Batu to a clumsy halt beside the gate, and instantly got a grasp of the situation. There was no way either of them could open the gate, and now they could both see Eliot sprawled on the ground, propped up on Gertie’s broad frame. He wasn’t moving.
Without a thought of waiting for the adults to arrive, both children brought their mounts alongside the gate and kicking their feet out of the stirrups, slid clumsily off their saddles, their well-trained horses standing ground-hitched as the children dropped down beside them. Before Lizzie knew it, she was joining Kip in crawling under the heavy gate, their small bodies pushing back the strong stock-wire and only just managing to clear the ten-inch gap.

The camel was delighted and relieved to see the two children, and lipped at them even as they scrambled around her in their eagerness to get to Eliot.

Kip slid to his knees beside the injured man. Eliot was sprawled against Gertie’s side, eyes closed and his face sheened with sweat. Kip’s breath hitched as Lizzie kneeled down on the other side of the Oklahoman, her eyes absorbing everything she could about Eliot’s condition even as she unbuckled her riding hat and flung it to the ground unheeded.

“Is he -??” Kip asked shakily, but Lizzie shook her head.

“Eliot?” she said as she touched his face. “Eliot – c’mon, Eliot, you have to wake up!!” She could feel the warmth of life in his skin, and she saw his chest rise as he breathed. She shook him gently. “Eliot! Eliot!!”

To her infinite relief, Eliot muttered and stirred, eyelids lifting lazily. His eyes were unfocused for a moment or two, and then he blinked a few times and smiled.

“Hey, you two …” he mumbled and Lizzie let out a sobbing breath. “I … I couldn’t open the gate …” he explained hoarsely, and lifted a hand to reach for her. Lizzie grasped his fingers and clasped them with her own, and she could sense the fever in him.

Kip checked Eliot out and gasped.

“He’s bleeding!” he said, and indicated the bloodstained and infection-ridden place under Eliot’s arm, his new shirt sticking to the injury.

“Yeah,” Eliot murmured, a little exasperated. “I bust the stitches when I tried to open the damn gate!” His eyes crinkled as he grinned. “Damn fool thing to do, huh,” he added, and Lizzie beamed back, her eyes shining with unshed tears. Her Eliot was home. Sick again, hurting, but there was something different about him. He seemed … content.

“Don’t worry Eliot,” Kip said, all business now, which Eliot found amusing. “Grandma Jo will fix you up and you’ll be all better soon!” And the little boy laid his hand on Eliot’s shoulder to reassure him.

Eliot nodded, wincing as a headache threatened.

“But I got you two to keep me in one piece in the meantime, so I’m pretty sure I’ll be just fine,” he said, tickled by the seriousness of these two six-year-olds who had come galloping – figuratively speaking - to his rescue.

Lizzie frowned, brown eyes checking Eliot over and fussing quietly so as not to put him on edge in case the tremors returned, but Eliot seemed happy enough to be still and let the two children take care of him. He watched Lizzie as she checked out the healing cut over his ear and patiently let her lift his shirt to make sure the wound in his side wasn’t bleeding.

“You took your bandages off!” she retorted, but she was very gentle as she inspected the wound, and Eliot raised an eyebrow as the little girl tsk’ed to herself.
“So,” he said, and coughed a little, which made Lizzie wince, “d’you think I’m gonna live?” he asked.

Lizzie and Kip consulted each other silently, their frowns and thoughtful looks making Eliot try not to chuckle at the seriousness of it all, but they made a decision and turned to their patient.

“Yes,” Lizzie said brusquely, “but Grandma Jo is going to be really, really angry because you went walkabout while you’re poorly!” she added, and then kissed Eliot on the end of his nose just to let him know that although he was in deep, deep trouble, she still loved him.

“And you’ve been bleeding again!” Kip said. “Grandma Jo’s going to lose her block when she sees you and my dad’ll be in her bad books ‘cause he shouldn’t have let you go!!”

Eliot grimaced. Charlie wouldn’t appreciate being dropped in the shit because of Eliot’s decision. Oh well. He’d make it up to his brother somehow.

But he wouldn’t worry about it right now, as he felt sick and he hurt all over, and his bullet holes were causing him all kinds of pain. But his ‘Lizbeth Grace was beside him looking after him and young Christopher Eliot Jakkamarra was guarding his sorry, damaged hide, so all he had to do was wait.

Lizzie settled down beside him and held his hand, and Kip was a warm, solid presence on his wounded side, so Eliot Spencer relaxed his battered and sore body and knew he was, at long last, home.

The whole thing about rescuing Eliot became a bit of a circus.

By the time Jo and Soapy arrived with the ute to haul Eliot home, Lizzie was having an argument with Nate and Hardison, who were trying to convince her that they could lift their idiot hitter to his feet and carry him back to the house. Lizzie and Kip both refused to give permission for Eliot to be moved until the ute arrived and he could be lifted onto the flatbed and carefully driven home.

Because, Lizzie informed her father and Hardison knowledgably, Eliot could burst more stitches if he was carried.

Lizzie and Kip crossed their arms and scowled. Eliot, safe behind his formidable protectors, didn’t say a word and patently enjoyed the hell out of the whole thing.

Charlie and Parker arrived seconds later, and after Charlie shifted the horses out of the way, Parker opened the gate for Jo to drive the ute into the paddock.

Then came a long, convoluted discussion about who was going to do what as Jo checked Eliot’s wounds, told him he was a right bloody berk for taking off his bandages as he obviously had got dirt in the wounds, and then tearily said it was good to have him home.

When Nate, Charlie and Hardison tried to lift Eliot, he growled that he was perfectly capable of walking to the ute if they could get him to his feet, thank you so very much. After two attempts, with Hardison cheerfully telling Eliot he was weaker than Nate’s left hook – which led to Nate and Hardison having a short but pointed discussion about Hardison getting a black eye from Nate’s apparently useless left fist – Eliot realised he wasn’t going anywhere under his own steam. So uttering a stream of soft curses, muttered under his breath so that Lizzie couldn’t hear, Eliot was very gently lifted into the ute with a couple of cushions put behind him and Lizzie and Kip beside him to keep him steady and safe.

The whole operation looked like a ‘Carnival of the Animals’ thing going on as Jo and Soapy headed
back to the house with Nate and Hardison sitting on the tailgate and Eliot safely ensconced within, his two tiny guardians making sure he was comfortable, Lizzie holding his hand and making sure he didn’t try and escape. She had had enough of Eliot Spencer’s slippery ways.

Gertie harrumphed along behind the ute, trying to peer past Nate and Hardison, flapping her lip in concern and spattering frothy saliva over both of them. Neither man was remotely amused, especially when Gertie began to gurgle and honk accompanied by belches. The stench was terrible.

That left Charlie and Parker to bring up the rear.

Parker was about to jog back to the house when Charlie caught the scruff of her shirt and hauled her back. She let out a yelp of anger, and scowled at Charlie, eyes narrowed, and she tried to wriggle out of his grip, but Charlie steadied her and looked the thief square in the eye.

“WHAT!!” Parker thundered, her ire beginning to rise like lava from a volcano.

Charlie gestured at the horses, both animals standing patiently waiting for someone to figure out what was going to happen next. Batu’s bottom lip was beginning to droop as he dozed.

“C’mon, Parker!” Charlie teased, happier now that Eliot was home, breathing, and in the not-so-tender care of his exasperated family. “Remember, you promised you’d try.”

Parker’s cat-like gaze turned into one of a mixture of horror and irritation.

“What?? Now???”

Charlie nodded, grinning.

“Yes, Parker. Now.”

Parker tried to dodge past Charlie, but he out-maneuvered her, his wiry frame grasping her around the waist and dumping her beside Batu, who blinked awake. The gelding eyed the young woman who was oozing anger and terror in equal measure.

Charlie quickly looped Batu’s reins over his neck, and then he about-turned Parker so that she faced the saddle.

“But –“ she whimpered, then Charlie placed her left hand on Batu’s neck, her right over the saddle, and before Parker could react, the young aborigine bent her left leg at the knee and hoisted her into the deep seat of the stock saddle.

Parker let out a shriek of terror and clutched at Batu’s mane, and then she realised she was touching a horse, so she let go and scrabbled for the reins. She felt Charlie lengthen the stirrups as she sat there like a living statue, rigid and completely horrified.

She was sitting on a horse.

“See?” Charlie said. “Not so bloody scary now, hey?”

Parker swivelled her eyes so that she could glare at Charlie, because, she was convinced, the rest of her body was made of stone. She couldn’t move a muscle.

Charlie took advantage of her lack of movement and slipped her booted feet into the stirrups.

“There you go,” he said with satisfaction. “Now then … shorten your reins until you can just feel a little pressure – don’t yank at his mouth though. Batu’s got a really soft mouth, and he’ll do what you
want with very little pressure.” He smiled tightly. “She may be a murdering bitch, but that Hadan cow certainly looked after him. He’s a decent sort, is Batu.”

“Can’t …” Parker whimpered through her clenched teeth.

Charlie snorted.

“‘Course you can. You’re only a few feet off the ground. How come you can fling yourself off bloody skyscrapers, but you can’t sit on a horse???” He relented a little. He knew it was Batu she was scared of, not the fall. “Okay … just relax and we’ll stay here for a bit and let you get used to him. He won’t move until you tell him to. I’ll ride Narra, and when you’re ready, we’ll walk back to the house really slowly, alright?”

Parker’s eyes bugged out, but now her stubbornness was kicking in. If Lizzie could ride a horse, so could she. Eliot could ride a horse at a flat-out gallop bareback.

*She could do this.*

She nodded to herself, and telling every one of her rigid muscles to relax, just as they did when she was about to settle into her rig and fling her slender body down the side of a fifty-story building, she took a deep breath and sat up straight. A thought struck her. So … maybe Batu was the rig that got her from A to B, she decided, and the saddle was the stainless steel edge-guard which kept her safe. The reins and stirrups were the braking descenders she used to control her fall. Okay. That worked, she thought. Her rig was her *friend.* The only difference was that *this* rig was a living thing with a mind of its own. Parker focused and then realised that her normal rigs also had a life of their own – especially when Hardison wore them – and all it took was a bit of forward thinking. So therefore, if she calculated outcomes and read the rig correctly, she could control the situation more comfortably.

She stuck out her chin in defiance, and her eyes became steely. She was ready.

“What do I do?” she ground out, and Charlie raised an eyebrow, impressed. Terror wasn’t an easy emotion to control, especially when it came to dealing with animals, which were always unpredictable, no matter how well-trained.

“Here …” he said, showing her how to hold the reins and explaining the whole horse-steering process. Once that was done, he lengthened Narra’s stirrup leathers, and fitting his foot into the stirrup he swung aboard, settling lightly onto the saddle. He turned to Parker. “Want me to lead you?”

Parker scowled.

“I can manage my own rig, Charlie!!” she grumped, and copying Charlie as he touched his heels to Narra’s sides, Batu set off at a comfortable, easy walk.

“Meep!!” said Parker, but she realised that all rigs – no matter what their design - moved through whatever environment she put them in, and Batu was just the same. He walked steadily along the track, and Parker allowed her senses to take over.

She absorbed the four-beat rhythm, and Batu’s ears pricked as he saw a goanna move sluggishly in the undergrowth. Parker remembered not to jerk at the reins and altered her balance, just as she would gauge speed within her surroundings before applying the descenders. She had finally figured it out.

“I want to go faster!” she called, and Charlie, glancing back with a grin, sent Narra into a trot. Parker touched Batu with her heels once more, and let out a yip of delight as she discovered a new beat to
her world. Now there was a breeze to absorb, and her body instinctively adjusted to the new dynamic. This rig was no different than any other – the design was just new to Parker.

Before she knew it, she had Batu heading into a canter along the track, and the feeling of speed was exhilarating. Her blonde hair streamed in the wind and Charlie’s yell of “Wait for me!!” was lost behind her as Batu decided this human was enjoying herself, and he couldn’t help giving a mini-buck which made Parker shriek with delight.

“WOO-HOO!!” she screamed, and she instinctively leaned forward in the saddle, perfectly balanced, and it was at that precise point that Parker decided horses weren’t so bad after all.

Eliot was very, very glad to be home. He was not, however, so pleased with Jo’s declaration that he needed to have his bullet wounds cleaned and the infection dealt with.

Nate and Hardison carried him into the house, and it was at that moment Eliot decided he had every right to decide how the whole situation was going to work. He was not going to spend time on that damn table, he said. He could sit on a chair in the kitchen while Jo cleaned him up. He was perfectly alright, he continued, and once the wounds were cleaned out and re-stitched, he would sit with his family and eat lunch.

He sat on one of the kitchen stools and eyed the people surrounding him. He was in battling mood, it was obvious.

“You’ll go to bed, laddie!” Effie rasped, her own dander rising, “and you’ll bloody well stay there!”

Eliot, sweating and ill, curled his lip. “Nope,” he said frostily. “Not gonna.”

“For god’s sake, El –“ Hardison grouched, frustrated.

“No way. I’ve spent enough time in that damn bed, an’ I’m fine. I just need some food in me an’ a good night’s rest. Then tomorrow I’m getting up an’ I’ll be –“

“Poorly!!” Lizzie said stoutly, and stood in front of Eliot, staring into his fever-bright eyes. “You’re poorly, Eliot!! You were poorly when you went walkabout and you took your bandages off and now you have a ‘fection!!” she finished, although her voice was soft and kind.

Eliot ignored Jo slamming the medikit down on the kitchen table and Effie’s dire threats faded into the background even as Hardison went into babble-mode and Sophie and Mei both began a list of the reasons why Eliot had to go to his bed and rest.

“Lizbeth Grace,” Eliot said, and his voice was so soft only Lizzie could hear him. “Sweetheart … I promise I’ll take it easy.” And for the first time in what seemed forever, his mouth twitched into his Lizzie-smile, and the laughter lines crinkled around his eyes. “I ain’t goin’ anywhere. And once I’m patched up, I got my best girl to look after me, right?”

Lizzie cupped Eliot’s tired face in her hands, and she searched for any undercurrent of tremors or tension. But all she saw was weary pain and the love this fierce, indomitable man had for her.

“You won’t leave?” She whispered. “You’re back and you’re staying with us?”

“’Til my dyin’ day, darlin’,” he pledged. “We’ll talk when I’m feelin’ better.”
Lizzie nodded, and tucked a curl back over Eliot’s forehead.

So the wounded man and the worried child waited quietly as Jo unpacked the things she needed and Effie, in a foul mood, began to boil water.

“Okay,” Eliot finally said. “Let’s do this.”

To be continued …
His Weary Spirit Breathes Again

Cleaning Eliot’s wounds turned out to be a thoroughly unpleasant business.

He asked for a heavy chair, so Nate brought through one of the dining chairs, and Eliot was helped to sit astride it so that he could lean forward onto the high back. Lizzie settled herself in front of him on a stool.

This time no-one told her to leave. Everyone knew it would be a pointless exercise - she would be there to look after her best friend.

“Do you need me, Eliot?” Nate asked. “I can help hold you if you need –“

“I’ll be fine,” Eliot grated as Jo sat beside him, her medical instruments on one of Effie’s steel baking trays, scrubbed with medical cleanser. Eliot gave Nate a half-smile and indicated Lizzie. “I got my girl here to keep me right.”

Nate studied Lizzie, who wasn’t taking her eyes off Eliot, but he could tell she was worried.

“Daddy?” she said softly.

Nate crouched down beside his daughter.

“Need help, sweetheart?”

“Um … can you stay?” Lizzie asked. “I don’t want Eliot hurting himself trying to be still, and you’re strong and you can help him if it gets too bad …” her voice tailed off, and she glanced at her father.

Nate nodded, trying not to smile.

“Looks like you’re outgunned, Eliot. Seriously, though – if it gets rough …”

Eliot, feeling utterly rotten, squinted at Nate and grunted in reply.

“Suit yourself,” he muttered, but secretly he was relieved that Nate was there if needed. There was no more lidocaine, so the hitter was going to just have to deal with the pain. Eliot was ‘waaay past being able to be his usual stoic self. “Pull up a stool, why don’cha?” he added, bemused. “Come watch me bleed.”

Parker suddenly appeared at the kitchen door, breathless, her eyes taking in the scene as she eased past Hardison and Sophie.

Her skin was glowing the way it had when she parachuted off that endlessly-tall tower in Dubai, but it was tempered by the concern on her face.

“What can I do??” she asked.

Jo smiled at the young woman, but shook her head.

“I’m set here, Parker. Effie and I can deal with this fool –“ she gently ruffled Eliot’s hair, careful of the half-healed injury over his ear, making Eliot smile wryly, “- but if someone can get his bed ready –“

“No bed!!” Eliot grumbled. “Strap my arm up an’ I’m good. I’m tired of lyin’ down!”
There was a collective sigh of frustration, but Sophie, ever the grifter, took the decision out of Eliot’s remit.

“Mei and I will sort out his bed, and he can take a rest if he wants to,” she insisted as Eliot began to object. “We’ll bring in your backpacks and you can sort them out when you feel like it. How does that sound?” She raised an elegant eyebrow and saw Eliot nod grudgingly.

“C’n someone take care of Gertie?” he asked as he rested his right arm on the chair-back and let his head drop onto his forearm. “She’s had her saddle on for friggin’ days an’ she must be wore out.” He coughed quietly, and Lizzie reached out to rest a hand on his weary head.

“Charlie and I will do that,” Parker said softly. “Eliot …” she added, “I rode a horse!”

Eliot peered sideways and studied Parker with one eye.

“You did?”

Parker let out a snorky giggle.

“Yeah … it was awesome!!”

Eliot gave Parker the best grin he could muster under the circumstances.

“That’s my girl!” he rasped, but had to stop speaking as Jo touched his shoulder.

“Hush now, boy,” she said. “It’s time. Out you go, you lot!”

Effie shooed everyone out of the kitchen, leaving Lizzie and Nate as Eliot’s only support. But it would be enough, the little cook knew.

“Eliot?” Jo said as she pulled up another stool next to Eliot on his wounded side. “I’ll try to be as gentle as I can, laddie. But it’s going to hurt. I have to open up that hole and scrub it out. It’s badly infected, and goodness knows what’s in there, boy! Dirt … gravel … it’s going to be messy.”

“S’okay,” Eliot sighed. “Let’s get it over with.”

Jo nodded at Effie, who handed her a pair of kitchen scissors.

“Righto!” Jo was no-nonsense now. “Let’s cut this shirt cut off –“

Eliot suddenly straightened with a jerk, letting out a hiss of pain and making Lizzie jump.

“Nuh-uh!!” he complained. “This is a new damn shirt!” And he began to try unbuttoning the soiled plaid garment.

“Stop that, you boofhead!!” Effie snapped, edgy with worry, and his hand was batted away, and between them Effie and Lizzie helped him out of the cotton shirt, sticky with blood and foul matter. Once it was dumped into a bucket of fresh, cold water to soak, Effie returned to Eliot’s side. “Righto, you daft mongrel – you be still and let the nipper here sort you out, y’hear??”

Eliot was shaking now, but Lizzie knew this was from exhaustion and pain, not from whatever had been upsetting him before he went on walkabout. She noticed the little doeskin pouch around his neck. Eliot usually wore a pendant around his neck, but this was something she had never seen before. She saw the wolf’s-head design and realised there was something in the pouch.

“Lizzie? Can you take that off for Eliot, please?” Jo asked, slipping on nitrile gloves and lifting a
But as Lizzie reached for the pouch, Eliot caught her fingers in his good hand.

“It’s okay, ‘Lizbeth Grace. Leave it.” His blue eyes gazed at her, and she heard the need in his words.

“But … but Grandma Jo says –“ she blurted, both of them now clasping the pouch

Jo frowned, puzzled. Whatever the pouch was, it meant a lot to Eliot, so she nodded at Lizzie.

“It’ll be fine where it is, Lizzie. I can work around it.” Jo studied Eliot. She saw the battered and bruised torso and the semi-healed wounds. She saw his ribs heave with every breath and the perspiration on his skin. His head dropped once more onto his forearm even as he held Lizzie’s hand, the medicine pouch held tight between them, and the little girl stroked his sweat-damp hair back from his temples.

“M’ready,” he said as steadily as he could.

Jo gestured at Effie and the cook stood by with plenty of gauze pads. The process was going to be bloody horrid, she thought.

Nate tucked himself into a corner where he could watch and support Eliot if needed, and once again he marvelled at the devotion Lizzie had for this scarred, battle-worn man.

Jo took a deep breath, poised the scalpel over the festering hole in Eliot’s side, and began to cut.

To Elizabeth Grace Ford, the process of cleaning Eliot’s wounds and bandaging them up felt as though it was taking forever.

She sat in front of Eliot and didn’t move even when Grandma Jo took her forceps and dug about in the hole and found what turned out to be a small sliver of quartz deep, deep within, covered with dirt and playing very hard-to-get.

Eliot shuddered as she probed hard in the bleeding hole, and Lizzie became really worried. What if Grandma Jo nicked that vein again, and it wouldn’t stop bleeding? Eliot began to cough, and then Nate was there, cradling Eliot carefully and keeping him still so the hitter didn’t have to make the effort.

Lizzie rested her head on her daddy’s shoulder, and Nate dropped a kiss on his daughter’s curly head, and Eliot became quiet, easing into Nate’s strong grasp.

“It’ll be over soon,” Lizzie whispered, and Eliot said something she couldn’t hear, muffled as the words were by his forearm where his head lay.

But Jo found the sliver and extracted it, cursing softly, and Effie packed the bleeding hole with gauze to slow the bleeding.

Lizzie watched Jo press hard on the open wound to stop the oozing blood, and she stroked Eliot’s hair.

“But Jo found the sliver and extracted it, cursing softly, and Effie packed the bleeding hole with gauze to slow the bleeding.

Lizzie watched Jo press hard on the open wound to stop the oozing blood, and she stroked Eliot’s hair.

“Not long now,” she whispered. “Grandma Jo’s going to clean you up, and then you can have some new bandages. And you’re not to take these ones off!” she scolded.

Eliot grumbled something under his breath which Nate thought was probably not fit for Lizzie’s
It didn’t take long for Jo to thoroughly sluice out the wound with saline and an antiseptic wash, tenderly cleaning the torn flesh where the stitches had been, now tweaked out of Eliot’s battered skin. Nate helped Eliot to sit up, and the Oklahoman, bleary-eyed, leaned forward as Jo and Effie deftly bandaged both the wound along his ribs and the newer one which was now clear of infection. Jo would keep a very careful eye on the injuries over the next few days.

And not once did Lizzie and Eliot let go of the little medicine pouch that hung from Eliot’s neck.

Lunch was a quiet affair.

Eliot, refusing to go to his bed and rest, demanded that he be allowed to sit in his recliner and eat with his family.

Now with his arm strapped to his side to try and keep him from doing any more damage to himself, Eliot had a warm zip-up hoodie draped over his shoulders, and he settled into his recliner with a sigh of pleasure.

Parker and Charlie with Kip in tow arrived back from the yards after turning the horses out into the paddock. Parker was still leery of Batu when she was on the ground, but when she was on his back and riding this ‘rig’ uninhibited by ropes and carabiners and other tools of her trade, she was a fearless and natural horsewoman.

Everyone sat scattered about the veranda as Effie brought out a quickly-thrown-together lunch of quesadillas with salad and Eliot’s huevos rancheros.

“There, you young bugger!” Effie rasped to Eliot as she laid a small plateful of food onto the table beside him, “that’ll put the blood back in you!” And before heading back into the kitchen to get him a tall, cool glass of orange juice, she dropped a pudgy hand onto his good shoulder and squeezed affectionately. The Yank was home at last, where he belonged.

It was a relaxed meal, everyone helping themselves except for Eliot, who managed to eat a decent portion even though he was deathly tired and very sore.

Parker, sitting on the veranda steps and looking out over the yard, sucked melted cheese from her fingers.

“So … what happened, Eliot? Did you see any ghosts?” she asked brightly.

“Oh, for goodness sake, Parker!!” Sophie murmured, embarrassed. “You don’t ask about things like that!”

Parker reached out and snaffled a helping of quesadillas off Hardison’s plate, which earned her a glare. She grinned unrepentantly.

“Why not?” she answered, turning and looking at Eliot, who was slowly drinking some juice helped by Lizzie as his grip wasn’t the best right now. “Does it have to do with sex? Is that why it’s private?”

Eliot choked on his orange juice, and he saw Lizzie screw her face up in puzzlement. To his dismay, the little girl’s mouth began to open to ask what Parker meant.

“No!” he said, mortified, and he glared at Parker. “No, it’s not se – that,” he snapped, “It … it’s a
spiritual thing, and not a ghost, Parker! It’s not somethin’ you speak about, okay??” he glanced at Lizzie, who still looked puzzled. Team Leverage collectively hoped to not have ‘The Talk’ with Lizzie for a while yet, mostly because Nate and Sophie couldn’t make up their minds as to who would actually do the talking. They privately hoped they could fob it off onto Eliot or Hardison, neither of whom were aware of the plan.

Eliot shifted in his recliner and grunted with pain, which effectively stopped Lizzie’s question before it was formed. She watched him like a hawk to make sure he didn’t do it again.

Relieved somewhat, Eliot continued. He didn’t know how much he wanted to tell them, if anything at all, but Parker was curious, and a curious Parker was a Parker who became an unholy pain in the ass and difficult to deflect.

“It’s somethin’ the Cherokee do when you have to figure stuff out,” he said as Lizzie eased another cushion behind his shoulder. “Thanks, darlin’,” he whispered, and Lizzie grinned.

Parker pondered Eliot’s words for a moment as she finished eating a mouthful of spicy eggs.

“So … did you figure it out?” she asked. “The stuff, I mean.”

Eliot would have liked to shrug but he didn’t dare, so he leaned his head back onto his recliner and closed his eyes.

“It’s a work in progress, Parker. I’ve still got a lot to straighten out. But I think I might have found a place to start,” he declared quietly, and Parker saw the weariness in her friend. He’d said enough, and she needed to let him rest now.

“Everything has to have a beginning,” she said thoughtfully. “I’m glad you’ve found yours.”

Nate cleared his throat, trying to get everyone’s attention.

“Seeing as Eliot’s back and patched up, we have something to discuss,” he said cryptically.

Effie poured herself a cup of tea and sat down at the table, munching on her salad and eggs.

“Is this about Tom Reid?” she asked.

Nate’s eyebrows shot up.

“I took the call, remember?” Effie grinned and nudged Mei, who was busy feeding Rose. The young woman smirked.

“Yeah … yeah, it’s about Tom. Well, actually, I think Tom has a client for us,” Nate added, glancing around at his team, most of whom sat up in interest. “He’s bringing her out here tomorrow at lunchtime.”

“When we got the call, we thought if it was okay with Soapy and Jo, we could take a client or two while Eliot heals,” Sophie explained.

Eliot struggled to sit up, and despite Lizzie’s protests he leaned forward, grimacing.

“Gimmee a few days an’ I can –“

“No, man,” Hardison snapped, irritated, “you can’t. You stay put, heal properly, an’ then we’ll decide if you’re fit enough to go back in the field!”
Eliot’s blue eyes sparked in anger.

“Dammit, Hardison —” he growled weakly.

Hardison had finally had enough.

“Don’t you dare ‘Dammit Hardison’ me, you fool!! You’re bust up an’ you won’t be anywhere near
fit for a long time, El!! An’ we’re sick of you growlin’an’ hurtin’ and takin’ off —“

—like you did in Washington, Eliot!! You scared us!!

“-like you did in Washington, Eliot!! You scared us!!” Parker said, and Eliot could hear the pain in
her voice. “You didn’t tell us where you were and you could have died and … and …we’re your
family, Eliot. You belong to us … you know that!” Parker insisted.

“So…” Nate continued soothingly, “… you stay here, eat, sleep and heal, look out for Lizzie and
let Jo, Soapy and Eff take care of you.” He gave that shit-eating grin that Sophie adored and which
made Eliot want to punch Nate in the neck.

“But I can —” the injured hitter began, and then Lizzie caught his good shoulder in her small hands
and pushed gently, making Eliot slump back into his chair because he just didn’t have the strength to
do anything else.

“No, Eliot,” Lizzie whispered with love in every word. “You can’t.”

Eliot, hurting and annoyed, looked at each member of his team. They all looked back, gloating. Eliot
knew when he was beaten, although, he thought with a certain amount of satisfaction, it was a
situation that very rarely happened.

“Anyway … where was I?” Nate took a bite of food, chewed and swallowed before continuing.
“The client’s from Alice Springs. Her dad is an independent designer of on-board computer systems
on racing bikes. His designs have been wrestled out of his control by a company which is a leader in
producing Olympic-standard road bikes. The name is Dartford Racers Inc., based in Sydney, and
they’ve claimed he stole their design. That’s all I know until Tom gets here tomorrow, so …
Hardison, see what you can find out about Dartford Racers, and we’ll get more information when we
meet the client. Okay?”

Sophie pondered the proposal.

“Does that mean a trip to Alice Springs?” she asked.

Nate nodded.

“Looks like. I suspect we may have to head out to Sydney for a few days too. Hardison can spend
some time enjoying street lights and restaurants. Eliot?”

Eliot cracked open an eye and scowled at Nate.

“What??”

“I need you to be okay with this,” Nate said. “We’ll be down a hitter – and no, I don’t want to bring
anyone else in to cover. I think for once we’ll deal with it. But we need you to be fit, Eliot. Not half-
fit, growling and hurting every time you take a step, alright?”

Eliot knew Nate was right, but he didn’t have to like it.

“Just … just don’t make a habit of it, okay,” he grunted. “I won’t be there to watch your backs, so
you damn well better not do anythin’ dumb, alright? You hear me, Nate? No crazy plans that’ll get anyone hurt because I won’t be there to haul somebody’s ass out of the fire. And …” he continued, his voice hoarse with controlled emotion, ” … you will all be careful ‘cause I do not want to have to explain to ‘Lizbeth Grace how you got hurt because one of you did somethin’ stupid.” He waited for objections but for once there was silence. “You idiots hear me?”

“Yeah, El … we hear you,” Hardison replied with a smile in his voice.

“You promise??” Lizzie said, eyes round with worry. “You’ll be safe?? You won’t do anything silly??”

Nate gestured at his daughter and Lizzie ran into his arms.

“Remember when we told you about Eliot getting hurt when you were a baby? When that piece of metal had to be taken out of his back?” he asked.

Lizzie nodded.

“Well, while Eliot was in hospital, Hardison ran the whole job out of Eliot’s room. He moved his stuff so he could watch out for Eliot and run the job at the same time. So … if we can do that, I will promise now that if we can’t do this safely, we won’t do it at all. How does that sound?”

Lizzie looked back at Eliot, who gave a nod of agreement.

“Okay. But you won’t have my Eliot to keep you safe, so you have to keep your promise, Daddy! All of you!! And … and you’ll call every night to let us know you’re okay??”

“We will, baby-girl,” Hardison said, “that we can do. No problem.”

Lizzie wasn’t at all sure that being Eliot-less was a good idea, because Eliot protected everyone no matter what, and although Lizzie knew Eliot wasn’t invincible, she knew her family was a lot safer when he was on the job. And her team kept their promises, so she would just have to deal with it.

Besides, she would have her hands full dealing with a fretting, grumpy Eliot Spencer, sure his team was doomed if he wasn’t there to herd them to safety on a regular basis. And right now he was probably feeling the need to punch someone. Hard.

“’Lizbeth Grace?” Eliot sounded very tired, Lizzie thought. “Are you sure you want to stay here?”

Lizzie had never been left behind on a job before. No matter what, she had always gone with the team on their travels, and somehow it had always worked. But now …

“I have to stay,” she said firmly. “You’re my Eliot who guards me, and you saved me from that man,” she added, thinking again about Derry Ryan. “Now I have to help Grandma Jo and Effie to look after you because you’re in a bad way, and they can’t do it all. I have to make sure you get better.” She smiled at Eliot from her beloved father’s arms. “It’s my job.”

For a moment Eliot felt the tremors begin as he thought about Lizzie seeing him kill Ryan, but the trust and love on Lizzie’s face made them disappear as quickly as they had arrived. His best girl didn’t think he was a monster. Although still horrified that he had had to kill a man in front of a six-year-old child … his precious ‘Lizbeth Grace … she understood. She still loved him, and that was all that mattered.

“So,” Soapy said, “that’s sorted! Lizzie stays here with us and helps keep an eye on Eliot and you lot go do what you have to do. It’s fine with us, so no worries!” he said with a flourish. It was obvious
the Munros relished the idea of having Eliot and Lizzie to themselves and being able to be the indulgent grandparents they had always wanted to be. A house with Eliot, Lizzie, Kip and the twins in it was to be treasured.

Eliot sighed and winced.

Lizzie kissed her father’s cheek and wriggled out of his grasp to return to Eliot’s side. She saw him shiver.

“Are you cold?” she asked quietly.

Eliot nodded.

“A bit.” He didn’t want to admit it, but he desperately needed to sleep. “I think I’ll go take a nap. Just for an hour or so. Catch up on some zees.”

Lizzie turned back to her father, who was watching her intently.

“Daddy?” she said, and Nate knew instinctively what she meant. He glanced at Charlie, who stood up and wandered over to Eliot.

“Okay, papparti … let’s go. You’re pretty bloody done in, mate. Nate and I’ll get you to bed.”

Eliot, too weary to argue, let Nate and Charlie ease him to his feet so that they could help him to his room.

But as they were about to head through the doorway and into the house, Lizzie remembered something.

“Eliot … can I ask you a question?” she said.

“Sure, sweetheart,” Eliot murmured, struggling now to stay awake. “What is it?”

“Charlie said I was a little kunapa, but he wouldn’t tell me what it meant. He said I had to ask you.”

Eliot let out his low, raspy chuckle that told his team he was genuinely amused by something.

“Did he now?” he said, eyes twinkling even though he was still so ill. “Well, ‘Lizbeth Grace … kunapa means ‘dog.’ Charlie called you ‘little dog’. But I suppose it could also mean ‘little wolf’, seein’ as they’re a kind of dog an’ you have wolves in your chest just like me.”

“Oh!!” Lizzie exclaimed, completely enchanted by the idea. “Oh, Charlie, thank you!!” she said, and clutched at her chest where her wolves lived.

“You’re welcome, little kunapa,” the young man replied, a grin on his face. “Righto – let’s get this beat-up old wolf to his bed.”

And as Lizzie, still hugging her wolves, followed behind, Eliot was carefully and oh-so-gently taken to his room.

By mid-afternoon, Wapanjara was ready for a siesta. Most of the work around the homestead was done and the stockmen had retreated to their rooms to snooze for an hour before beginning evening chores such as feeding livestock and checking the broodmares.

Gertie, now without her saddle, slept by the veranda steps as she twitched and burbled to herself, the
big camel recovering from a few hard days of looking after Eliot.

The twins were sound asleep and Mei was sitting on the veranda swing seat, humming softly under her breath. Jo was reading and Soapy, his sore arm propped by a cushion, was dozing next to her in Eliot’s recliner.

Everyone else was in various stages of somnolence apart from Effie. She sat in her kitchen and thought about the day. Eliot was home, thank goodness, hurt but resting. He would heal if he gave himself the time to do so. Her people were snoozing or reading, and, she thought as she poured a cup of tea, if there was no more angst and hassle, perhaps life would begin to return to something like normal.

But it wouldn’t be normal. That bastard Chong had cost them their beautiful Alice, and life would never be the same again for Charlie and Kip. But now they had two babbies to care for and their young, gentle mother was seriously thinking about staying at Wapanjara. So that might help their odd little family heal somewhat, she decided.

But her thoughts were interrupted by a soft, pained moan.

Settling her teacup back onto its saucer, Effie hauled her round body onto her lumpy feet and hobbled through to the hall.

Eliot’s door was ajar, so she peeped around it to see how the young mongrel was doing.

Lizzie was sound asleep in her chair, tucked under her comforter. She had one of the new books she and Kip had purchased for the library in her grasp, but it seemed she hadn’t managed to read very much before conking out in the afternoon warmth.

Eliot was restless. He had refused to be ‘put to bed,’ so he lay on top of the covers and was propped by cushions to protect his shoulder and side. He was shifting in discomfort, and his Great-Grandmother’s warm blanket had slid from his frame as he lay there. His brow was furrowed, and he mumbled in his sleep, obviously dreaming.

Effie leaned over and pulled his treasured Cherokee blanket back over him, and the man settled at her touch as she soothed his brow.

“Well, laddie,” she whispered, even though she knew Eliot didn’t hear her, “I think you have a way to go yet. Mebbee … mebbee the nipper will help. But you need to talk about it all, boy. Talk to the nipper. She’ll bloody well understand, even if you don’t. Boofhead,” she added with feeling.

And satisfied that Eliot had eased back into an undisturbed sleep, Effie silently headed back to her cup of tea and a slice of pecan pie, made to the recipe of Eliot’s much-loved and missed momma.

Eliot awoke in time for dinner that evening.

He had had a reasonable sleep, given his condition, and the dreams hadn’t been too bad. Now he was as stiff as a week-dead ‘roo, and he needed to get moving in a bid to loosen up complaining muscles.

He could hear warm voices, children’s laughter and Hardison teasing Parker. There was Charlie, joining in, and it felt good to hear Charlie laughing, and he remembered his promise to Alice’s spirit – that he would be the best big brother he could be to the man, and help him through the grief.

He heard Effie cursing at Nate, who was happily annoying the crap out of the little cook simply by
trying to help. Damn, but Nate knew how to piss people off. But he also knew Effie secretly loved every minute of it, even as Eliot heard Nate yelp. Wooden spoon handles poked into ribs *hurt*.

Now all he had to do was get his battered carcass off his bed, put on a teeshirt and wriggle into the hoodie he still had draped over his shoulders. Easy-peasy. It took him over half-an hour and left him sweating with pain, but he did it. Getting slowly to his feet, he made his shaky way to the door and fished around behind it to fetch out his walking stick.

Once he had the old ebony stick in his hand, the carved wolf’s-head handle warm and solid in his grip, he felt better. He wouldn’t have to rely on anyone to haul him around. Eliot grimaced. That just plain *sucked*. He hadn’t been able to zip up the hoodie with his left arm strapped to his torso, and he would ask ‘Lizbeth Grace to help him with that, but otherwise he was good to go.

Food was being laid out on the big veranda table when he appeared in the doorway. Heads turned and words of welcome flowed, and Eliot smiled, even as he was steered towards a chair.

A whisper began in his head, but Derry Ryan’s voice was indistinct and powerless, even as a faint tremor began in his muscles.

But Lizzie’s careful hug and kiss on his nose drove the tremble away, and Ryan’s voice faded to nothing. He hadn’t felt the insidious, writhing presence of the maggots in days.

Dinner was *wonderful*, and not just because of the food.

Effie had prepared one of Eliot’s favourite meals – whole steamed murray cod, a big, freshwater fish cooked with green onions, ginger, *soy* sauce and *shao xing*. Mei had created a number of dipping sauces and other side dishes, and between them the two women had created a feast.

So Eliot ate one-handed, drank a single beer because that was all Jo would allow for now, and relaxed as well as he could with these people he loved.

He worried about them doing this job in Sydney without him, but he knew he was no use to them right now. He would deal with it, but he would also nag Hardison to tell him the truth about how the team was working without proper protection. If he treated it as a strategic learning opportunity, Eliot thought, he could probably manage to keep himself sane while they were away without garnering any more grey hairs like the stray one he had found in a sideburn a few months previously. Now *that* had been a shock. He blamed Hardison, plucked it out before anyone could notice it and made his life hell, and promptly forgot about it.

So he teased, growled and raspy-chuckled his way through the meal, and let Lizzie fuss over him, which felt nice. There were still issues the two of them had to work out, but maybe while the team was away he and ‘Lizbeth Grace could talk and sort everything out. *And maybe … maybe he could tell Lizzie about Mooch.*

After dinner he sat in his recliner and let the conversations wash over him as he closed his eyes and rested. Once in a while he would join in briefly, but his friends were aware he tired easily and didn’t let him get growly or too involved. By the time he had decided to head to his bed, he felt better than he had done in weeks.

Charlie accompanied him to help out, and by the time the young aborigine had left Eliot’s door ajar and returned to the conversation on the veranda, Eliot was sound asleep in his bed.

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Tom Reid turned up right on time the next day.
This time he was driving a battered old ute not unlike Soapy’s, and with him was a young woman with steady green eyes, an intelligent mien and a nasty problem for Team Leverage to get its teeth into.

“My dad,” she said as she sat on the veranda with a glass of Effie’s lemonade in her hand, “is a very clever, decent man, and those ... those people took everything,” she finished bitterly.

Nate and Sophie were the first contact for the team. Hardison, Parker and Eliot sat nearby, listening but not interfering.

Jenny Burkhart was shaking with anger as she continued.

“We lost the house, our savings ... the lot. Dad’s got a heart problem and he’s now on heavy medication, and I don’t know what to do. Legally we’re stuffed. We have no legal recourse at all, and ... and I ...” her voice broke.

Reid, who had been listening quietly like any good policeman, finally entered the conversation.

“No worries, Jen,” he murmured, and patted her hand. “Jen’s dad is a very sound sort of bloke. He’s clever, hard-working, honest and does what he can for the local community. Now his rep’s buggered and he and Jen are struggling to make ends meet. All because those bastards took his invention.”

“What exactly did they steal?” Sophie asked sympathetically.

Jenny pulled herself together, and Nate admired the feisty glint in her eye.

“Dad’s a whizz when it comes to electronics and micro-systems,” she explained. “Triathlon bikes ... road bikes ... they all have micro-computers built into the frames with Bluetooth capability as well as a data transmitter.”

Nate looked mystified, and turned to Hardison for a Nate-friendly translation.

Hardison hitched an eyebrow and leaned forward, fingers interlacing.

“It means the software is chainstay integrated, and it sends wheel speed and cadence information directly to a laptop or tablet,” he explained. Nate appeared none the wiser. Hardison sighed. “It means, Nate, that information on speed, performance and so on can work with a high-tec frame, which in turn can be streamed live during a race. It can mean the difference between first and nowhere.”

Jenny nodded eagerly, happy to find someone who understood her father’s work.

“My dad’s new system is maybe five years ahead of the standard equipment now being used on the international circuit. What’s more, it’s easily adaptable to any bike design and it’s cheaper to produce.”

“No wonder Dartford’s interested. They could make a mint if they patented it. Please tell me your dad patented it,” Sophie asked quickly.

“It was pending,” Jenny said. “But when Dartford found out about it, they went on the offensive and claimed it was their design because they had commissioned it.”

“Did they?” Nate said as gently as he could.

Jenny shook her head vehemently.
“No!! This was dad’s own design and he worked on it independently. But Dartford sued, and they’ve got the whole thing tied up in legal processes that we can’t hope to defend. Dad spent every cent we had to try and keep ahead of them. Now …” She gestured helplessly.

“How are you involved, Tom?” Nate asked.

The stocky man smiled sadly.

“Laurie … my late wife … is Jen’s aunt. They’re family.”

Nate sat back and folded his arms.

“Fair enough.” He turned to Jenny. “We’ll be in Alice Springs in two days to see your dad and we’ll talk. I think we can help you.”

The relief on Jenny’s face was almost painful to see.

“We … we can’t pay you –“

Nate waved a hand dismissively.

“We, ah … we have alternative revenue streams, Jenny. We might even be able to get some capital back for you and your dad if we work it right.”

Reid gazed at Nate and Sophie and smiled.

“Is there anything I can do to help? I’m retired, my boy’s in the airforce and I’m bloody well sitting at home twiddling my thumbs. I’ve done undercover work and I can handle myself. I may be over the hill, but I’m not a write-off. Not yet, anyway.”

Nate was on the point of rejecting Reid’s offer instantly but Eliot broke his silence.

“Do it,” the hitter said, and Sophie couldn’t contain a smile. She was always amused when Nate was knocked a little off-balance. Eliot shifted in his chair. His shoulder was throbbing and he was in need of some bed-rest. “Tom’s calm, systematic but he can think on his feet. He’s no ninja, but he can pull your butt out of the fire at a pinch. Plus he’s an ex-cop and RAC Military Police. He’s mixed with some real badasses. He has balls and he can lie like hell when he needs to.” Eliot gave a tired grin. “I can’t watch your back this time, but Tom’ll do his best to make sure you idiots come home safe.” He sighed. “Make me happy, Nate.”

Reid raised an eyebrow, amused to bits, his grey eyes narrowed in a half-smile as Nate studied him for long moments. Reid knew he had quite a few years on Eliot, but he was still all muscle and bone and he could fight dirty if he needed to.

Nate checked the rest of his team. They obviously thought the idea was sound. He shrugged. Eliot wasn’t one for idle recommendations.

“Okay then. We’ve worked with outside talent before, so … what the hell. Why not? Hardison?”

The hacker, pleased at having a project to work on, grinned.

“Yeah, Nate … about Dartford. I got –“

Nate rubbed his hands together in glee.

“We can do that later,” he said. “I want to know how good you are on a racing bike!” he asked.
Two days later, Eliot and Lizzie said goodbye to their team. They were taking Bernadette and Oggie so Hardison had access to the tech he needed, and Tom Reid had left his old ute at Wapanjara for safekeeping.

The stocky ex-policeman had to admit he was a little buzzed at the idea of working with the Leverage team, but he knew he could at least give them a modicum of backup, plus his thirty-odd years of experience in law enforcement and undercover work should come in handy.

He stood on the veranda with Eliot, and the hitter was busy filling him in on what to expect.

“… an’ while Nate’s a friggin’ genius at what he does, don’t let him go overboard, Tom. Sometimes he gets that glint in his eye … y’know? And Parker – well, just go with the flow. She’s … different.” Eliot sank into his recliner with a sigh of relief. He was so frikkin’ exhausted it wasn’t real, he thought.

Reid gazed down at the man who was entrusting his team to a retired copper in his late fifties who had one helluva punch but certainly wasn’t the black-ops expert he knew Eliot to be. But he did have contacts in all sorts of useful places, both in Alice Springs and Sydney.

Eliot squinted up at the Australian.

“Hell, just do your best to bring the morons back in one piece, will ya?” he said grumpily.

Reid rested a hand on Eliot’s good shoulder.

“I’ll do what I can. I may work differently, but I hope I can help out. With luck we’ll be back in a few days.” He couldn’t help a grin of anticipation. “It’ll be fun!”

Eliot grunted sardonically.

“You won’t be sayin’ that when you’ve had Hardison babblin’ techo-crap in your ear for seventy-two hours straight,” he grumbled. He waved Reid away. “Just … just keep ‘em safe for me, Tom. Okay?”

“No probs, mate. I’ll keep you in the loop.”

Sophie wandered up the veranda steps with Lizzie in tow, and smiling at Reid, she let go of her daughter’s hand and gestured at Eliot.

“Now then, young lady – remember you have school work to do, and you have to help Charlie and Kip with the horses. Don’t be a burden to Soapy and Jo, and do not pester Effie! She has enough to do without running around after you! And last of all – “

“-take care of Eliot, yes, I know, Mama!! “ Lizzie sighed with exasperation. But even as she spoke, she sat down beside Eliot and patted his arm. “I know how to look after him. Grandma Jo will help me and I promise to do my lessons and help out and – “

Eliot reached out and took Lizzie’s hand, rubbing her knuckles with his finger and placing it over his heart.

“Go, Soph! We’ll be fine. I’ll make sure she does her chores,” he said, and his heart yearned to be with his team, doing what he was built to do. But he knew Reid would be a steadying influence. “We’ll be here when you get back.”
Sophie kissed her daughter farewell and reluctantly followed Reid down the veranda steps and across the yard to her team.

Within minutes Bernadette, with Oggie in tow, headed up the hill and past the stringybarks, where only days earlier men had died. Dust prevented Eliot and Lizzie from seeing the big vehicle disappear, but then Team Leverage was gone and would not return for a week or more.

Lizzie bit her lip. She had never really been separated from her family before, but she had Eliot, and he needed her. She felt his body thrum with tension, and she understood that he too was unhappy about not being able to protect his people.

“We’ll be okay, won’t we, Eliot?” she whispered uncertainly.

Eliot tried hard to relax a little so that he didn’t cause his little guardian any concern.

“Yeah … yeah, we’ll be fine. And Tom’ll take good care of ‘em, so don’t you worry, sweetheart.”

“He’s one of the best,” Soapy said as he came to stand by them both. “I wish –“ he began, yearning in his voice.

“No, you don’t!” Jo said waspishly as she joined the little group. “You’re twenty years too late for playing the hero, you nerk!”

Soapy grinned unrepentantly at his wife.

“I know, old girl … I know. But still …” he shrugged painfully. “It’d be so much fun –“

But Eliot sat still in his recliner, and even though he felt Lizzie’s hand gently pat his chest, he also felt the tremors begin.

*Now they’re gone*, Derry Ryan whispered right beside Eliot’s ear, *now they’re gone and you can’t protect her on your own, you bastard. She’s mine. All mine.*

To be continued …
The Old Wrong

Chapter Summary

Author’s note: Much talking, some pain and anguish, lots of triangles and a team without its hitter.

That evening, Wapanjara was quiet, the house still and a little emptier of life under the drift of stars.

Eliot and Lizzie sat with Soapy and Jo in the soft light of the veranda, Lizzie watching the bugs flutter against the fly-screens. After the noise and danger of the past couple of weeks, Eliot relished the quiet and gentle care of the Munros, and despite the pain his body was in, he was relaxed and less shaky after dealing with the stress of being left behind and not being able to protect his team.

Mei was sitting in her favourite place on the swing seat, Jamie in her arms and Rosie tucked into her side, and the young mother touched the seat into tiny movement. Her dark eyes gazed out to the star-ridden night, and she sighed contentedly. Buster snored as he lay in front of the veranda door.

“You alright there, boy?”

Effie was suddenly beside Eliot, handing him a mug of tea laced with honey.

Eliot nodded, taking the tea and smiling at Lizzie as she offered to help him hold the mug.

“M’okay, ‘Lizbeth Grace. I’ll manage,” he murmured, not wanting to disturb the quiet comfort of the people around him. “Thanks, Eff.” He blinked lazily. “Why don’t you take a load off your bunions?” he added, “you’ve been runnin’ around after Lizzie an’ me all day.”

Effie eased herself down into the chair beside Lizzie and leaned back against the cushion, sighing with the pleasure of it.

“Well, with Charlie and the boy visiting his mum’s grave and your lot buggering off, it’s bloody quiet around here. How’re you doing, nipper?” she asked Lizzie as she watched the little girl help Eliot drink his tea. The child had noticed Eliot’s tremors were back, not as badly as before, but they were there, and it worried her.

“Alright,” Lizzie replied, feeling the faint tremble in Eliot’s good hand as he clutched the mug in an effort to control it. Lizzie’s brow creased with concern. “Eliot? Can I –“

“Hey now, darlin’ …” Eliot sipped his tea, savouring the sweetness as it warmed his chest, “I’ll heal. I’m better … a little more settled.” He gave his young charge a lop-sided grin. “You worry too much, ‘Lizbeth Grace, ‘specially about a bust-up ol’ soldier like me. You should be doin’ things six-year-olds like to do, not fussin’ over me.”

Lizzie smiled back at her guardian.

“But I like fussing over you!” she answered proudly. “You’re mine. My good wolf. And I have to take care of you, because you don’t take care of yourself, Mama says, so because you keep me safe I have to make sure you’re okay, ‘cause you’re my ‘spon … ‘sponsibil’ty … “ she struggled, trying to
make Eliot understand.

“Touché,” Jo murmured as she worked through a game of solitaire on the big table. She heard Soapy snort with amusement beside her as he read his book.

Eliot studied Lizzie for a few moments and digested her words.

“Your responsibility, huh?” he asked, somewhat bemused.

Lizzie nodded firmly.

“Yah-huh. When I was born, Mama told me, you promised you would look after me if she and Daddy couldn’t, so that means I have to look after you too. That’s what best friends do.” Her face sobered. “You got hurt saving me from that man, Eliot.” Lizzie’s voice dropped to a guilty whisper. “I’m really, really sorry I got in the way.”

Eliot managed to place his mug on the side table and shifted around to look straight at Lizzie, although he regretted it when agony tore through his side and shoulder and he let out a hiss of pain.

“Eliot?” Lizzie saw him grimace and her hands reached out to press gently on his chest, trying to stop him from moving. “Stay still!” she demanded, worried, “you might start bleeding again!”

Eliot thought better of moving anymore and he made his damaged body relax, Lizzie’s hands warm on his chest, settling him.

Once he got his breath back, he dropped his head onto the padded high back of the recliner and patted Lizzie’s hands where they lay over his heart. Then he lifted his good hand and turned her face to his, gazing into her brown eyes.

“Lizbeth Grace … Derry Ryan would’ve tried to kill every one of us … Charlie … Kip … Effie …”

He heard a disgusted growl from Effie at the mention of Ryan, which warmed his heart. Effie had been formidable.

“… an’ I killed him because my job is to protect all of you. I got hurt. It happens. I’m just sorry I worry you, is all.” He took a deep breath before continuing. “An’ … an’ … I’m real sorry you had to see it. Me, killin’ a man.”

The two of them sat quietly for a minute or two, and Effie settled back in her chair and closed her eyes, resting her bunions while trying not to intrude.

Lizzie suddenly got off her chair, pushed it an inch or so sideways so that it completely abutted Eliot’s old recliner, and then scrambled back onto the comfortable seat. Snuggling against Eliot’s good arm, she rested her head on his shoulder. Eliot let loose what could almost be described as a momentary rumbling purr in his chest, almost like a big cat, but he would have vehemently denied it if asked.

“Eliot?” Lizzie murmured into his sleeve.

“Yes, ‘Lizbeth Grace,’” he replied.

“Thank you,” Lizzie’s voice was a tiny mumble.

“For what?”
“Saving all of us from Certain Death,” was the reply.

“Certain Death??”

“Yah-huh. Alec says when the good guy rescues the girl from the nasty, smelly troll who kidnapped her, he’s saved her from Certain Death. Alec says he’s saved girls from Certain Death lots of times.”

“Seriously?” Eliot asked, and stored the information away for future reference. “I’ll have to ask him about the details,” he added with just a hint of malevolence in his voice.

The ringing of the telephone disturbed the peace and quiet.

Jo was on her feet in seconds, touching Eliot’s shoulder in passing as she headed to the living room.

“Sit, son,” she murmured in passing. “I’ll get it.”

Eliot couldn’t help but twist around, knowing it was his team, but his grunt of discomfort didn’t get past Lizzie who tugged at his arm.

“Sit still, Eliot!” she demanded, and prevented the hitter from winching himself out of his chair.

“Dammit, ‘Lizbeth Grace!” he growled, but there was no bite to it.

Jo reappeared with the telephone and offered it to Eliot.

“It’s for you,” she said, biting her lip to stop the grin from forming on her face at Eliot’s need to check in with his team.

“Nate?” Eliot said before whoever was calling could speak. “Oh … hi, Soph …”

“Mama!!” Lizzie cried out, and rose to her knees as Eliot gave her the telephone, his eyes crinkled into a Lizzie-smile.

Lizzie leaned against Eliot’s shoulder, eyes shining, as she listened to her mother.

“I’m fine … yes, I did my spelling … Grandma Jo helped me and then I fed Dottie and Sparky and brushed Gertie and –” she rolled her eyes and sighed, “– no, Mama, I didn’t bug Effie … I promise …”

Effie chuckled quietly, delighted.

Lizzie listened some more, and then rested her head on top of Eliot’s, who seemed resigned to being a leaning post.

“ … he’s okay, Mama, but he keeps trying to do stuff!” She paused, listening, and then began nodding her head. “I know …” Sophie kept speaking, and Lizzie held the telephone in one hand and idly twiddled a stray length of Eliot’s hair in her fingers with the other. “Yes … I know! He never does as he’s told!!!!”

Eliot’s eyebrows went up.

“Hey!! I’m right here!!” he rumbled indignantly.

“Mama says you have to do as you’re told,” Lizzie emphasised. She kept listening as Sophie chattered on. “Uh-huh … yep … I will, Mama … Eliot? Mama wants to speak to you.”
Eliot sniffed.

“’Bout time!” he muttered, and took the telephone from Lizzie, who slid bonelessly down in her chair and flung her arms around Eliot’s biceps so she could listen in.

“Hey! I didn’t bust into your conversation, big ears!” Eliot grumbled, but Lizzie just grinned unrepentantly.

_It’s your own fault, Eliot, _Sophie said serenely. _You’re the one who turned her into a lurker._

Eliot scowled at Lizzie, narrowing his eyes.

“Cover your ears, you pest! This is grown-up talk!!”

Lizzie, giggling, dutifully covered her ears. Eliot sighed.

“Are you guys alright?” he asked Sophie.

_We’re fine, Eliot. Stop worrying! We’re in a hotel in Alice Springs, Tom is a hoot, Parker wants to go to a bloody kangaroo sanctuary tomorrow and Hardison has found a micro-brewery he wants to try out, would you believe. Nate’s gone to bed. He has a headache, _Sophie added, almost as an afterthought. _Parker hasn’t stopped talking since we left Wapanjara._

“Oh … but what about the job?” Eliot insisted.

_Oh … well, we’re meeting with Dennis Burkhart tomorrow afternoon, Sophie continued. Hardison’s in the process of doing some more digging now that we have better tech access, and we’re probably flying to Sydney the day after. We’ll give you details tomorrow night._

Eliot heard Hardison’s voice begin to prattle in the background.

_Oh … hang on … Hardison wants a word – _Sophie said.

“But –“ Eliot began, and then Hardison was on the line.

_El!!! Listen … when are Soapy an’ Jo goin’ to Tennant Creek? Wait – it doesn’t really matter, but can you tell ‘em if they go before we get back that there’s a couple of packages waitin’ for me. Can they pick ‘em up? _

Eliot frowned.

“Yeah … I guess. I think they’re goin’ tomorrow. But why –“

_Great!! Eliot could almost see Hardison rubbing his hands together, his face lit by a big grin. Look, when you get the boxes, open up the little one, okay?? Charlie an’ me, we’ve been workin’ on somethin’ that even you can manage to figure out. Take out it out an’ switch it on. That’s all you gotta do. Jus’ … switch it on. I’ll do the rest._

Now Eliot was completely confused.

“Wait … Hardison, just what the hell’re you talkin’ about?? Switch what on??”

He heard Hardison sigh the sigh which meant Eliot was an idiot when it came to tech.

_Look … if you can’t figure it out, give it to Lizzie. She’ll know what to do._
“Give what to Lizzie???” Eliot growled, annoyed.

Hey, gotta go, man! Nate’s woke up an’ we found a great place to eat!! Local brew … steaks … shrimp, even! Tom says it’s – and I quote – ‘dinky di’. Talk tomorrow, bro! Love to Lizzie an’ everybody!!

And then all Eliot heard was the click of Hardison ringing off.

Eliot glared at the telephone, wondering whether to throw it at the wall or just curse at it. Instead he sighed and handed the thing back to Jo, who ruffled his hair.

“I know, boy … I know. Family ain’t easy.” She paused for a moment and chuckled. “I heard that on a TV programme I saw when I stayed with friends last year, about some magic library or something. There was a young man in it who reminded me a lot of you. He even came from Oklahoma.” She shook her head in wonder. “It’s amazing what’s on the old telly these days,” she said, and headed off to the living room to return the telephone to its cradle.


“Eliot?” Lizzie said, removing her hands from her ears and snuggling into Eliot’s good shoulder. “When you’re all better, can we go to Alice Springs and see the baby kangaroos? Please???”

*The little sneak had heard every word.*

Eliot dropped his head back onto the padded chair back and closed his eyes, quietly fuming. Jo was right. *Family sure as hell ain’t easy.*

The next day was humid, drizzly and ideal for a day trip to Tennant Creek.

But first, Eliot had to be tended to, and he sat miserably in the kitchen as Jo and Mei changed out his bandages. Once more astride the dining chair, Eliot bore the pain and prodding with fortitude, and Lizzie was there with him, quietly helping him through the bad bits.

As Mei tidied up the stained dressings and Jo gave Eliot a kiss on the top of his head, they left Eliot alone with Lizzie for five minutes so that he could privately deal with the tremors and the pain, as was his wont.

“It’ll get better, Eliot … I know it will,” Lizzie whispered, even as Derry Ryan hoarsely spat obscenities in Eliot’s ear.

Lifting his head from his forearm which lay along the back of the chair, he squinted at Lizzie.

“What will? The pain or this damn shakin’,” he rasped, and Lizzie cupped his face in her hands.

“Eliot? The shaking … is it the pain or … or because of what’s making you all upset in your head? I thought it had all gone away when you came back from walkabout?”

Eliot closed his eyes for a moment and focused on the feel of Lizzie’s little hands, her thumbs stroking his cheeks. It took an almost physical effort to decide what to say to her. She had already been through so much, and he didn’t want to upset her any more.

*Talk to her,* Alice suddenly said from his heart, and Derry Ryan’s voice blinked out.

Eliot took a deep breath, partly to try and suppress the pain of his wounds, but mostly to see if he could manage to try and explain some things to Lizzie.
“’Lizbeth Grace … I, uh … sometimes …” he paused, gathering what little mental strength he had left so he could continue. “ … that man I killed …”

Lizzie’s eyes widened, and she stared at Eliot, seeing the uncertainty in his blue eyes.

“He can’t hurt us anymore, Eliot! We’re safe! You don’t have to worry –“

Eliot shook his head wearily.

“ … I, um … I hear him sometimes, ‘Lizbeth Grace. In my head.” He waited pensively. Surely Lizzie would think he was insane.

Lizzie pursed her lips and thought about it.

“Oh,” she said. She could see that it had taken a great deal of effort on Eliot’s part to admit to hearing a dead man’s voice. “Does it hurt? I mean … is it horrible?” She thought it must be awful if it made Eliot shake, because he was the toughest, strongest, most dangerous man in the world and he was her guardian. He had killed this man to protect his family, so why was he hearing things that weren’t there?

Eliot, waiting for Lizzie to reject his words as silliness and laugh at him, was touched when he realised she was trying to understand.

“No … no, it doesn’t hurt,” he said, “but … I can hear him say things … things that make me angry an’ even though I know he’s gone, he’s always sayin’ he can hurt the people I love … hurt you … and … and I can’t seem to shake him off. I don’t know how to get him out of my head, sweetheart. And then I damn’ well start to shake an’ I can’t even hold a friggin’ mug without spillin’ tea an’ … an’ …” Eliot ran out of words as the tremor became a full-blown shudder and his breath hitched with bitterness and grief.

Lizzie suddenly let go of Eliot’s gaunt face and flung her arms around him, burying her face in the hollow of his neck.

“It’s alright, Eliot,” she whispered desperately, her heart breaking because her best friend was in such pain, “he can’t hurt me because I have you, and you can just tell him to get lost because if he doesn’t go away I’ll biff him!!” She lifted her head and kissed Eliot on the end of his nose.

Eliot, eyes shining, gave his best girl a wry grin.

“You’ll biff him?” He said faintly.

Lizzie nodded vigorously, bristling with determination.

“Abso-bloody-lutely!” she said, and gave Eliot another kiss on the nose. He wondered what he had done to deserve such an honour as Lizzie returned her head to the hollow of his shoulder and held him tight. Lizzie did not bestow kisses lightly.

“Are you two going to be okay today? Grandpa Soapy and I will be gone all day,” Jo asked as she hovered in the doorway, not wanting to startle either of them.

“Uh-huh,” Eliot said, muffled as he was by Lizzie’s hug, “think so.”

Lizzie slowly let go of Eliot and carefully checked her guardian out. He looked very tired and she knew he was sore. She glanced at Jo.
“Grandma Jo? You’ll be back tonight? Just in case Eliot gets sick again?” she asked, her eyes dark with concern.

“We will indeed, Lizzie. Don’t worry. In fact, you can come with us if you like. I’m sure Eliot won’t mind if you have a day off—“

“Oh no, I can’t do that!” Lizzie exclaimed, even as Eliot tried to say it would be a good idea, just to give the little girl a break away from tending him. “I have things to do! I have horses to feed and I have to help Jacko count eartags and put them in the right order, and make sure Gertie’s okay in her humpy ’cause I know she doesn’t like rain, and Eliot said he’d help me with my sums! ‘Sides,” her voice softened, “he needs looking after.”

Jo, charmed to pieces, smiled.

“Alright then. But don’t overdo it, young lady – we don’t want your parents to come home to find you worn to a frazzle, now do we?”

Lizzie looked at Eliot.

“What’s a frazzle?”

Eliot, worn to a frazzle himself, let out his low, raspy laugh, and ruffling Lizzie’s curls, he unsteadily got to his feet to begin his day.

Jo and Soapy headed up the hill towards the stringybarks in their old ute, Jo still driving even though Soapy had healed enough not to have his arm in a sling. It was going to be a long day … a 300-kilometre round trip with essential things to do in town.

Soapy looked out of the ute’s windows at the bleary, wet day.

“Are you sure they’re alright to be left alone, old girl?” he asked.

Jo, not too sure herself, nodded.

“Effie and Mei will keep an eye on Lizzie, and Lizzie will keep an eagle eye on Eliot.” She paused for a moment before continuing. “The pair of them had a little chat this morning after we changed out his bandages. I don’t know what it was about, but that little girl hugged Eliot so hard … and he really needed that hug, Soapy!” Jo’s grip tightened on the steering wheel so much her knuckles whitened. “Bless her, d’y’know what she told me?”

Soapy intrigued and deeply worried about Eliot, shook his head.

Jo swallowed, suddenly moved almost to tears.

“Lizzie came to me while Mei was helping Eliot put on his shirt, and she told me she had to stay because Eliot was having a ‘Wibbly Day’. Have you ever heard such a thing?? A ‘Wibbly Day.’ And he needed her because being wibbly made him grumpy and sad. A bit like you were ‘way back when you came home. Remember?”

Soapy’s black eyes suddenly became slightly watery, and he hastily dabbled away the dampness.

“Yes … yes, love, I remember. So … d’you think he managed to let go of some of that bloody awful stuff he’s been carrying around with him all these years?”

Jo shook her head.
“Maybe. But it wouldn’t be much, seeing as they only spoke for about five minutes. But it’s a start, d’you think?”

Soapy returned to his scenery-watching.

“It doesn’t matter if it’s five minutes or five days, old girl. As Parker said, maybe he found his beginning while he was on walkabout, and that has to be good for him.”

Jo didn’t answer, but she knew Soapy was right. He had been through it. He still had his own ‘wibbly days’ every now and again, but both of them knew and acknowledged what caused them, and they worked through it.

She decided there and then that they would do their errands, get something to eat and then come straight back to Wapanjara, because, she knew, their boy needed them.

The day passed quietly.

Lizzie had a busy morning helping Jacko and Chalky feed stock, and she spent some time with Gertie who was sulking in her humpy because of the rain. Lizzie sat with her for a while and fed her some apples, a reward for being such a good camel for looking after Eliot.

Gertie cheered up a little, and gave Lizzie lots of camel-kisses and hair-whiffles.

As she sat in the deep bed of dry straw next to Gertie, Lizzie thought how strange it was to not be with her parents, and she missed them very much. She also missed Hardison’s warmth and his patience with her lack of mathematical skills, as well as Parker’s snorky laughter and her ability to help Lizzie focus on things.

“I miss them, Gertie,” she sighed, and hugged the camel around the neck. “But Tom will keep them safe because we have to look after Eliot, don’t we? You and me.”

Gertie listened carefully and then gave a small rumble in agreement.

Lizzie and Gertie thought about their situation for a bit as the drizzle dripped off the roof to lie in puddles on the ground. Lizzie rubbed Gertie’s nose.

“He’s still poorly, you know. He shouldn’t have gone walkabout really, but don’t worry – I know you did a really good job of bringing him home safe, because you’re very clever.”

Gertie thoroughly agreed with the little girl and squeaked.

Lizzie sighed dramatically.

“I have to go now. Effie’s making lunch and Eliot won’t eat properly unless I make him.” She leaned forward and whispered in Gertie’s ear so no-one else could hear. “Sometimes he’s a bit of a boofhead,” she said.

Gertie flapped her bottom lip and Lizzie grinned, feeding the big dromedary her last apple.

Standing up, she jammed her beanie over her unruly curls, zipped up her jacket and headed out into the dreary day, determined to make sure Eliot was alright.

After lunch, with Eliot being nagged by all three women remaining in the house to finish the mug of thick vegetable soup Effie handed him, the hitter and the child settled down for the one thing Lizzie
really didn’t like doing.

Mathematics was her Achilles heel. Hardison was the one who usually helped with this interminable chore, although Parker was also an excellent mathematician. But she didn’t have Hardison’s patience, and if she tried to instil her knowledge into Lizzie’s reluctant brain, both she and Lizzie became extremely confused and ended up playing rock-paper-scissors instead of tackling subtraction.

Today, Eliot and Lizzie were looking at triangles.

It took all of thirty-two seconds for Lizzie to announce that triangles were boring, silly and of no use whatsoever.

Eliot, flicking through the little illustrated book deemed perfectly age-appropriate for six-year-olds, thought triangles were boring as well, if the book was anything to go by. The illustrations were cheerful and full of bunnies, elves and funny little blue people. Eliot thought the book was a load of crap.

He looked at Lizzie. The little girl was miserable in her confusion. Then he had an idea.

“Okay, ‘Lizbeth Grace, this isn’t gettin’ us anywhere, huh.” He gestured at her pencil and legal pad she was using for her jottings. “Gimme, sweetheart.”

Lizzie, thinking Eliot was going to do her work for her, breathed a sigh of relief, but Eliot frowned at the pad and then turned it sideways. Being one-handed was a problem when it came to paperwork.

“Can you hold the pad steady for me, darlin’?” he asked. “Thank you …”

Lizzie, curious now, held the pad for Eliot as he began to sketch out a plan of Wapanjara homestead. He drew a rough floor plan of the house and then the yard, followed by the road up the hill towards the stringybarks. Next came the barn and cattle yards, and he carefully added Jo’s garden and the orchard. Lizzie recognised Gertie’s paddock, and finally Eliot drew in the track leading to the South paddock. Squiggles became trees, especially the huge old gum tree that marked the gate into the yard, and more squiggles became the almond stand, the stringybarks at the top of the hill, and a circle showed where the water tower stood.

Eliot studied his sketch, checking that he had everything he needed, and then he glanced at Lizzie. Perhaps he shouldn’t do this, he thought. Maybe it was too fresh a memory for both of them. But he knew all too well that ignoring problems didn’t make them go away, and besides, maybe … maybe it was time to teach Lizzie some basics about protecting herself.

He took a deep breath, and then drew in a stick figure with a scowly face right in the middle of the stringybarks.

Lizzie’s eyes widened.

“That’s Hadan!” she cried out, and studied the plan carefully.

“Now,” Eliot said, “I’m gonna show you how I use triangles all the time.”

Lizzie looked up at him, stunned.

“You use triangles?? How??” she gasped.

Eliot rummaged around in Lizzie’s pencil case and gave her a red crayon. Then he perused the plan, and frowned, concentrating.
“Okay … now … here’s Hadan.” He poked his pencil at the stick figure. “She’s watchin’ the homestead, right?”

Lizzie nodded, agog. Eliot drew another stick figure with a shock of curly hair, in the centre of the yard.

“That’s me!!” Lizzie grinned.

“That’s right,” Eliot agreed. “So … d’you think she can see you?”

Lizzie took only a few moments to nod her head.

“Oh yes, silly! I’m right in the middle of the yard!”

Eliot smiled, his eyes warming at her confidence, but his intentions were a little more serious.

“You think you’re safe there? Remember, she’s one bad lady,” he asked.

Lizzie frowned, thinking.

“Well, no! I … I’m right in front of her!”

“So, what do you do?” Eliot asked. “Oh … and you can’t go into the house, ’cause the bad guys are already in there. So … where do you go where she can’t see you? Here – I’ll show you. Pass me your ruler.”

Lizzie handed the ruler to Eliot, and with Lizzie’s help he placed one end on ‘Hadan’ and moved the free end to the far edge of the veranda.

“This is called a sight-line. It’s obvious she can’t see around the end of the veranda, right? She can’t look around corners.” Eliot drew a line alongside the ruler. Then he moved the ruler until it touched the edge of the trees at the beginning of the track which Hadan couldn’t oversee, creating the two long sides of an isosceles triangle. “Now … y’see, it’s beginning to look like a triangle.”

Lizzie nodded, but she didn’t quite understand yet.

“If you’re Hadan, you have sight-lines … the bits she can see, which is the inside of the triangle, where you are. She’s up high so she can see most of the homestead, but … there are bits she can’t see, and that’s where these lines come in. Look …”

He turned the pad so Lizzie could see Hadan’s perspective.

“Hadan can see everything within these two sides of the triangle. Okay? But everything outside the lines, she can’t see, or they’re pretty difficult at least, so you need to be outside the lines. All you have to do is put yourself in Hadan’s place and figure out her sight-lines. Think you can do that?”

Lizzie’s face cleared as she began to understand, and she nodded.

“If I run around the corner of the veranda, or …” she studied the plan in more detail, “… I can hide in those bushes,” she pointed at the squiggles lining the edge of Jo’s orchard, “she can’t see me!”

Eliot grinned.

“You got it, kiddo! So, here’s me …” he drew a stick wolf hiding around the corner of the veranda, “and my triangle –” He drew two lines showing his own sight-lines towards Hadan, “- and I have to find a place where she can’t see me but I can rescue you.” He ran his index finger around the outside
of both Hadan’s ‘triangle’ and his own. “If I stay outside of both my sight-lines and Hadan’s, it means she can’t see me and I can work my way around and grab you and –“

“We can go here –“ Lizzie exclaimed, pointing at the trees at the entrance of the track, “and we’re safe!”

Eliot realised Lizzie understood the basics of scoping out a situation.

“If you can think of a triangle in your head from where you’re standing, or think about it from where the bad guy is, then you can figure out if you’re safe or not. Got it?”

Lizzie nodded happily, understanding that even two sides of a triangle had their uses.

For the next hour, they practiced sight-lines. Eliot kept it very slow and simple and didn’t branch out into how sight-lines altered depending on how high or low the watcher was, but for now it was a good beginning. What he could do in a split-second took a lot of mental effort for Lizzie, even this very simplified version, but it worked.

Lizzie stood at various places on the veranda, and worked out what she could and couldn’t see and where she would be safe if someone was attacking the house. Eliot helped her map it on their makeshift plan, and it soon became a mass of lines and arrows pointing in directions and Lizzie’s somewhat lurid crayon stick-figures of imaginary bad guys.

But Lizzie suddenly realised there were a couple of blank spaces on the plan within the sight-lines. She pointed at one and glanced at Eliot.

“So, if you stand here, you’re not safe, Eliot. Is that right?”

Eliot’s face became serious.

“Yeah … those are places you avoid.” He wondered if he should explain it, but they had come so far and Lizzie had taken to the whole concept of sight-lines and the safety they could afford, and perhaps she had to understand that sometimes there were places that were deadly. “Those places … they can be seen from every angle, and once you figure that out, you just don’t go there.” He hesitated a moment before continuing. “It … it’s called a ‘kill-box.’ If you stand there, you’re dead. And that’s why triangles can save your life. Do you understand?”

The little girl nodded solemnly.

“Good!” Eliot said firmly. “You have to practice and I’ll help you, but it means that – in time - if we ever get into a tough situation, ‘Lizbeth Grace, you can use triangles and sight-lines to find a safe place until I come get you. How does that sound?”

“Ohay. Or if you get stuck or hurt, you can be safe until I come to save you!” she grinned, delighted with herself.

Eliot snorted, which made his wounds object, but he hoped she understood. These past couple of weeks and the decisions he had made during his walkabout meant that he had to keep Lizzie safe. She would face dangers, Alice’s spirit had said. So, it meant she had to have awareness at least of procedures that could save her life.

“Have you two young buggers finished yapping, because the Missus and Mister M’ll be back soon and I need the table for dinner!” Effie grumbled, and put a tray on the table with orange juice for Lizzie and a mug of tea for Eliot, accompanied by a plate of Anzac biscuits. “Here! Thinking makes you hungry.”
Lizzie let out a tiny shriek of delight. She loved Anzac biscuits.

And as Eliot eased back in his chair and sipped his tea, he realised the tremors were gone and so was Derry Ryan.

It was after dinner, as Eliot sat in his recliner drinking a mug of hot, honeyed tea, Lizzie emerged from the living room with a smallish cardboard box.

“Look what Alec sent!” she said eagerly, and flung herself in the chair next to Eliot. “Grandma Jo picked it up from town. Alec said we were to open it, didn’t he??”

Eliot eyed Lizzie, seeing the anticipation in her dark eyes. She was almost vibrating with excitement. Lizzie loved opening mystery boxes, which, Eliot decided, was a habit he had to address at some point.

“Actually,” he said, “Hardison said I was to open it, ‘Lizbeth Grace. Remember? When you were listenin’ to my conversation?’”

Lizzie’s face fell.

“Oh yeah,” she muttered, disappointed.

Eliot relented, although he gave her a narrow-eyed hitter’s-scowl just so that she understood she was in deep, deep trouble.

“But,” he continued, “seein’ as I’ve only got one good arm right now, I suppose you can open it for me.”

“Yes!!” Lizzie hissed in delight, “and anyway, Alec said if you couldn’t figure it out I could do it for you,” she added triumphantly.

Eliot opened his mouth to utter something damning about Hardison, but thought better of it. He had to admit he was exhausted. Who knew imparting hitter skills to six-year-olds was so tiring?

Lizzie had run off to ask Jo for a pair of blunt-nosed scissors, and she clattered back onto the veranda, breathless with anticipation.

With Eliot helping as best as he could and Lizzie being very, very careful as she gently snipped the tape around the box, the box was duly opened.

“AWESOME!!” Lizzie yelled, and pulled out a state-of-the-art tablet and flourished it at Eliot. There was a label attached to it with the words ‘SWITCH ME ON’ printed in a stylish Victorian script. Apparently Hardison had carried out his promise of boosting Charlie’s internet access and Wapanjara was now ‘live’.

Before Eliot could stop her, Lizzie had extricated the tablet from its inner wrappings, found the ‘On’ button and pressed it, holding it down so that the tablet kicked into life.

Eliot sighed. Hardison knew Eliot wouldn’t be able to use the tablet in his present condition, so he settled deeper into his recliner and let Lizzie take the lead.

Once Lizzie had set a password and had the tablet running like clockwork, Eliot heard a musical tinkle.

“You’d better answer that, ‘Lizbeth Grace –‘” he began, but Lizzie was ahead of him.
She touched the app opening the video link, and there was Hardison, grinning like a fool, obviously sitting at a desk in a hotel room.

“Hey there, baby girl!” he said, his voice as warm as honey and obviously very happy to see his god-daughter. “Missin’ you, sweetie!!”

“ALEC!” Lizzie yelled, making Eliot wince. “Eliot let me open the box and switch it on and —“

“Whoa there, Tex!” Hardison held up a hand and Lizzie managed to control her excitement and just grinned happily at him. “Is everyone okay?”

Lizzie, sitting in her chair next to Eliot, moved the tablet so her guardian could be included in the conversation.

“We’re fine!” Eliot rumbled grumpily. “What’s happenin’ with the job? Bring me up to speed, will ya?”

“And it’s nice to see you too, El,” Hardison said loftily. “but I’ll put that down to the lingerin’ concussion an’ spending too much time talkin’ to Gertie.” He raised an eyebrow. “We met Dennis Burkhart this afternoon. Nice guy, nothin’ hinky in his financials, as Tom said. He’s clean – and believe me, I looked.”

“Hey sweetheart!” Nate said, his face swimming into view over Hardison’s shoulder.

“DADDY!” Lizzie shouted, and Eliot was sure that he would be deaf in one ear by the end of the evening. “Eliot’s been teaching me about triangles and sightlines and kill-boxes!! I can look after myself now if we get into trouble, and I can save Eliot from Certain Death!!”

Eliot winced as he saw the look on Nate’s face.

“Seriously, Eliot??” Nate replied, unable to keep the concern out of his voice. “Kill-boxes??”

Eliot stuck out his chin and nodded.

“Yeah, Nate. I know … maybe not what you expected from a school lesson on triangles, but … when I thought it through, considerin’ what we’ve been through lately, I think it’s a lesson she needed to know an’ understand. Don’t worry – I kept it light, and she asked me about the safe places and the not-so-safe ones. She understands, Nate. She’s damn bright.” He felt Lizzie squeeze his arm in affection. “But as she grows up … it’ll help me keep her an’ the rest of you safe. I promise I didn’t frighten her.”

Nate looked at Eliot and the hitter could see the thoughts churning in the man’s head, and finally Nate nodded.

“It’s the life we lead, I know.” He sighed. “I suppose we have to start accepting she needs to know these things, and what with Ryan … yeah. I understand.”

Eliot shrugged his good shoulder.

“I know I should have run it past you, but … it was an opportunity and I ran with it. It worked out okay. Anyway … the job. Are you goin’ to Sydney tomorrow?”

“First thing,” Sophie said as she hoiked Hardison out of his chair and sat down. “Hello, my darling!” she added as Lizzie squirmed with the pleasure of seeing her mother. “Are you being good?”
“Yep!” Lizzie said firmly, “and Eliot’s being good too! He ate all of his lunch and dinner, and his shoulder’s not too bad. But I’m trying to make him stay still and he won’t!”

Sophie smiled indulgently, and turned to Eliot.

“Once we get to Sydney Parker’s going to check out the patent applications and we’ll send them to Dennis to check out the technical specs. We do have a problem, though.”

Eliot shifted in his seat, wincing. Lizzie gently poked his good arm to make him sit still.

“What kind of problem?” he asked, frowning.

Parker’s face suddenly covered half of the screen until Nate pulled her back and she was in focus. Eliot could tell she was bursting to tell him something.

“Oh, Parker – spill the beans!” he demanded.

Parker dissolved into snorkelling giggles.

“Did you know Hardison can’t ride a bike??” she shortled, delighted.

“I can too!!” Hardison’s voice rose plaintively from the room somewhere behind Nate. “But these racing bikes … I’m too damn tall! I’m all kinda over-balanced! They’re specialised, Eliot!! I can’t ride a bike where my ass is higher than my head!!”

“So Parker’s our up-and-coming cycling hotshot, and Tom’s her coach. Nate’s a businessman offering her a sponsorship deal, I’m the bitchy wife and Hardison’s my secretary. We need a high-tech bike to make Parker the phenomenon she is going to become, and we’ve gone to Dartford Racers to look at their designs. But we have one question which you might be able to help us with. Tom?”

Nate shifted out of the way to let Tom take his place.

“Tom, just what the hell are you wearin’??” Eliot rasped as Tom Reid sat down on a chair beside Sophie wearing the loudest, nastiest Hawaiian shirt Eliot had ever seen.

Tom looked down at his chest.

“It’s a shirt, Eliot. I’m in character. I need to be seen.”

“Well, that’ll do it,” Eliot murmured.

“I think it’s lovely!” Lizzie said, face alive with approval.

“Lizbeth Grace, sometimes I think there’s somethin’ wrong with you,” Eliot grumbled. He turned back to Tom, who was busy on Hardison’s laptop bringing up a snapshot on the tablet screen so Eliot could see it.

“Look familiar?” the ex-police said.

Eliot nudged Lizzie.

“Can you bring that up for me, sweetheart?” he asked. “Make it bigger?”

Lizzie toggled the view so now Eliot was looking at the snapshot while the Sydney hotel suite and its occupants were reduced to a rectangle in the upper right corner.
Eliot studied the man’s face for long moments. The hair was tied back in a ponytail although there was a hint of thinness at the temples. The face was long and bony, and there was the hint of a tattoo showing over the edge of an expensive shirt worn under a tailored dark blue suit.

“Damn,” Eliot said.

Tom’s face became grim.

“You do know him, then.”

Eliot nodded.

“His name’s Benjamin Kremic. He’s Serbian, a member of a Bosniak mafia group, and he’s nuts about cycle road racing. Where did you get the picture?”

“Alec saw him this afternoon arriving at Dartford’s offices in Sydney and got a screen cap. Apparently he can hack into their security systems all the way from here,” Tom added dryly.

An ‘Age of the geek, baby!’ drifted from the back of the room.

Eliot wiped his hand over his face.

“Oh … okay, what you do is you stay the hell out of his way, y’hear me? Or better still, wait until I’m healed up an’ then we can go after Dartford Racers, because I’m pretty sure he’ll be involved in acquiring a bike with Burkhart’s system set into the frame build. He sponsors the European champion, so he’ll want the best. I’ve dealt with Kremic before, and he’s a nasty little bastard. I don’t want you hurt – any of you, an’ that includes you, Tom. Jo an’ Soapy would never forgive me.”

Sophie turned it all over in her mind, and then came to a decision.

“We’ll still go to Sydney and reconnoitre. If we can do this without arousing Kremic’s suspicions, we’ll take it from there. If not, we’ll rethink it. Will that do?” she said.

Lizzie returned the Alice Springs hotel suite back to full screen, and looked up at Eliot, who gave her a reassuring smile.

“Tom,” he asked, “What are your thoughts on this?”

“I’m happy with Sophie’s idea. After we’ve done the first run at Dartford, we’ll rethink.”

Eliot couldn’t say no to that, so he agreed, somewhat reluctantly.

“Okay, Eliot, we have to go. It’s an early start tomorrow,” Sophie said. “We’ll check with you tomorrow night when we get to our hotel. Lizzie, look after Jo and Soapy, don’t upset Effie, hug Mei and the babies and make sure Eliot doesn’t do something he shouldn’t.”

Lizzie nodded.

“I will, Mama.”

And as farewells were said and Lizzie powered down the tablet, Eliot tried to calm his heart and tamp down the shaking in his body.

*Benjamin Kremic,* he thought. *Shit.*

And there wasn’t a damn thing he could do about any of it.
To be continued …
A Glimpse of Sydney-Side

Chapter Summary

Author’s note: More talking, more pain and anguish, and a team still without its hitter.

Warumungu language notes at the end of the chapter.

Eliot couldn’t sleep. Unable to toss and turn, he was stuck on his back in bed, and finally in the early hours of the morning, he managed to ease himself from under his blankets and padded barefoot through to the kitchen.

Putting on the kettle to boil, he sat at the big table and spent the time wriggling painfully into a warm hoodie.

The house was profoundly quiet. Lizzie was submerged in a pile of cushions and her comforter in the living room, lying sound asleep next to Buster and the twins. Eliot smiled, thinking how she had tended to him throughout his illness with nothing but love and good intentions. He would bear the scars, but he would also bear Lizzie’s love for him in his heart.

Making himself a pot of tea, he rummaged about in the old wooden bread box and pulled out the final two slices of the chocolate cake Effie had made for supper.

Not bothering with a plate, Eliot placed one slice on a piece of kitchen foil and sat down again, tucking into the cake and tea as well as he could with an arm strapped to his side. Chocolate frosting was a very unforgiving substance for a one-armed man, and he spent a lot of his time licking stray crumbs and frosting smears from his one working hand.

The tea was hot and comforting, and the faint scent of bergamot helped clear his head.

He couldn’t get his team out of his thoughts. Eliot was struggling to deal with them being beyond his protection, no matter how good Tom Reid was. And then … there was Benjamin Kremic. He sighed. Kremic was one helluva fly in the proverbial ointment. If his team could avoid any kind of contact with the man, the happier Eliot would be, but knowing how his people worked …

Easing his battered body to its feet, he wandered back to his room, dug around in his closet and unearthed his cell ‘phone. Switching it on he was surprised to see a couple of bars. Wapanjara had finally joined the 21st century. Padding through to the living room, he silently lifted the tablet from the table and made his way back to the kitchen.

Juggling the tablet, ‘phone and his tea and cake in turn, he switched on the tablet and laid his ‘phone on the table.

Lizzie had saved the image of Kremic to a folder on the tablet, so Eliot brought it up and settled down to think about the situation.

Finishing his cake, he scrunched up the foil into a pad which would hold his ‘phone steady, and he sent a text to Hardison.
HERE 24/7, he messaged. KEEP ME IN LOOP.

He grinned when a text instantly pinged back. It seemed Hardison was also burning the midnight oil. *OK bro* it said, followed by a stream of emoji hugs, which made Eliot grumble wordlessly to himself. Hardison was a *frikkin’ idiot.*

“Can’t sleep, Yank?”

Effie hobbled through from her room, hair up in a net and her dumpy body wrapped up in her comfortable dressing gown. She pulled out a stool and eased herself down to sit beside Eliot.

Eliot scowled.

“It’s drivin’ me crazy, Eff … not bein’ there for ‘em. I know, I know … Tom’s no slouch and he’s as tough as nails, but –”

“He’s not *you,*” Effie finished for him, and she saw Eliot duck his head, a little embarrassed. Sighing noisily, she helped herself to the last piece of cake while Eliot stood carefully and brought out Effie’s china cup and saucer. Handing them to the little cook, she poured herself tea and added milk. “I see you’re all connected up on the webby thing Sunbeam sorted for Charlie,” she added. “Happy now?”

Eliot shrugged painfully.

“A little. It mean I can keep an eye on ‘em … well, kinda … and I’ll make sure Hardison keeps me informed. It’s just …”

Effie cocked an enquiring eyebrow at the American.

“You don’t trust ‘em,” she said.

Eliot frowned.

“No! I mean … yeah, I trust ‘em, but …”

“You can’t keep ‘em safe, am I right?” Effie took a fork out of the table drawer and poked at her cake.

Eliot grumbled to himself, and sipped his tea. The heat helped his sore chest and side.

“That’s my job, Effie. It’s what I do. And those fools couldn’t figure out a kill-box or a sight-line if they tried. Well, maybe Parker can, but when she’s focused on her job she … well, she does her thing and needs to have the rest of the team to back her up. She did it for so long on her own, and now she has us. This ‘team’ thing –”

“Family thing,” Effie corrected, amused.

“Shit!” Eliot rumbled. “Yeah … yeah, *family* thing … it makes us all vulnerable. Parker trusts us. We watch her back so she doesn’t have to, an’ Hardison gives us a three-dimensional view of the whole damn job that we could never have done on our own. Nate and Soph … they’re usually the ones on the front line riskin’ everything, and me … I make the whole thing work, or I pick up the pieces when it all goes FUBAR, or I kick ass … and we have ‘Lizbeth Grace now. It’s … “ he struggled for the words.

“It’s *family,* boy. That’s what a family is. Vulnerable … complicated … *loving.* It’s what makes you
human. And that little girl is the best of all of you, you silly bugger. And, by God, she loves the hell out of you.”

Eliot and Effie sat silently for long minutes, sipping tea and eating cake, until Eliot shook his head.

“Did I ever tell you about the time Hardison got buried alive?” His voice was soft and pained.

Effie nearly dropped her fork in surprise.

“Bloody hell!” she whispered. “I mean he’s here … he’s alive … but … bloody hell!”

Eliot nodded.

“Yeah … in a coffin an’ everything. Of course, we found him. We got him out, but we only had seconds and when we pulled him out of that coffin he was out of air. I wanted to punch the crap out of the dumb bastard for nearly dyin’, but all I could do was hold him tight and tell the fool not to do it again.” He turned hurt eyes to Effie. “He’s my brother, Eff. Just like Charlie. He whines an’ makes really crap beer an’ messes with my menus, but he’s my brother and … and …” his breath hitched, and he had to settle himself for a few moments, but then he grinned, all warm blue eyes and hurting heart. “Parker hit me in the head with a crowbar once. She didn’t mean it. She just thought I’d somehow catch it even though she was behind me. She pokes me when I’m hurtin’ and she likes piñatas and believes in Santa Claus. But she’s … damn, but she drives me crazy. But I’d kill anyone - anyone - who even looked at her funny, Eff … y’know?”

He finished his tea and Effie silently poured him another, adding the honey he loved so much.

“As for Nate … when he drank he was friggin’ dangerous, but he’s a genius – and even better now he’s given up the booze. He an’ Soph … the greatest planner an’ the best grifter in the world. Nate made us what we are, an’ Sophie keeps us together, no matter that they retired years ago. And they gave me ‘Lizbeth Grace. They made me her guardian … her protector. An’ finally - finally – I’m beginning to think I know who and what I am. At last I can maybe deal with some of the blood I have on my hands.”

“You’ve only just figured that out, hey? After all these years?” Effie mused.

Eliot gazed at his cell ‘phone.

“Well, right now I gotta figure out how I deal with not bein’ there to keep the dumb assholes safe, Eff.”

Effie finished her tea and got to her feet, rinsing out the cup and saucer.

“Well, laddie, you’re just going to have to go with the bleedin’ flow, hey? Stop being so … what’s the phrase … ah yes … anal.”

Eliot snorted.

“Are you sayin’ I’m a control freak??” he said, eyebrows raised in disbelief.

Effie scowled, only prevented from giving Eliot a clip across the ear by his injuries.

“You? You’re so bleedin’ uptight sometimes it’s a wonder you don’t have a brain fart, you silly bastard!!” Effie scoffed. “Listen,” she said, her voice softening, “They’ve been doing this stuff for a long time – long before they had you to keep ‘em safe. Trust ‘em, Yank. They want you to heal up, get through what’s goin’ on in your thick noggin, look after the nipper, and come back to ‘em whole
and well. You matter to ‘em, you young bugger. More than you can ever imagine.”

*See?* Alice said in his heart, and Eliot almost wept with the loss of her from his life.

Effie saw the grief flicker across Eliot’s face, and she rested a hand on his good shoulder.

“I know, boy … I know. Listen,” she continued, “why don’t you go back to bed and try and get some sleep, Yank? You’re still bloody crook, and –“

Eliot shook his head stubbornly.

“Can’t sleep, Eff. Don’t worry. I’m just gonna sit for a while and do some thinkin’, okay? Maybe have some more tea. I’ll call Hardison in the morning to get an update, an’ then maybe I’ll have more to get my teeth into –“

“*Effie?*”

Lizzie wandered through from the living room, still half asleep and carrying a plushy ‘roo her Grandma Jo had brought back for her from Tennant Creek the previous day. Apparently the ‘roo’s name was Cecil.

Eliot turned awkwardly as Lizzie knuckled her eyes and yawned, her eyes still full of sleep and dreams.

Effie smiled as Lizzie stumbled into her arms, and the cook had to sit back down in her chair.

“Another bludger not able to sleep. What is it with you two?” She smoothed curls back from Lizzie’s face. “Want some hot chocolate, hey, nipper?”

Lizzie smiled drowsily.

“Yes please …” the little girl whispered, and then she realised Eliot was right next to Effie. “Eliot … m’tired …” she added, and turning she shuffled into his tenuous grasp as the hitter enfolded her with his good arm. He rested his chin on her mass of curls, and held her to his chest. She gently snuggled against him, and even as sleepy as she was, she instinctively made sure she didn’t hurt him.

As Effie made all three of them some hot chocolate, Eliot felt Lizzie’s soft breath against his chest and knew the little girl missed her parents very much.

“Miss your Momma an’ Daddy, huh?” he murmured. He felt Lizzie nod against his bruised breastbone, and she said something that sounded like ‘*n’Alec’n’Parkertotoo*, which made him smile. “Yeah … well … me too. But don’t you ever tell ‘em that, ‘Lizbeth Grace, y’hear?”

All he heard was a deep sigh, her breath fluttering against the bandages.

Effie dug out some mugs and made her delicious hot chocolate, redolent with vanilla and with dark chocolate grated on top, and Lizzie roused a little as Eliot patted her back.

“Now then, nipper – would you like a butter shortbread with your chocolate?” Effie asked. “You would? Righto, I think we can manage that. D’you think you’d feel better sleeping in your big chair where the Yank can keep an eye on you?” Effie continued, her voice gentle now with the love she had for this child of Wapanjara.

Lizzie blinked owlishly at Effie as she grasped her mug with one hand and Cecil in the other.

“I think that would be okay,” Eliot rubbed Lizzie’s back to soothe her, as he had always done since the day she was born. He looked at Effie, the round little woman digging out her melt-in-the-mouth Scottish shortbread. “Can you see to her, Eff? I … I don’t think I can put her to bed –“

“No worries, boy. I’ll go get her comforter and get her settled. I think a hot water bottle each for both of you wouldn’t come amiss either,” Effie decided, and putting some shortbread on a little plate, she eased Lizzie out of Eliot’s grasp and herded the little girl out of the kitchen, Lizzie going as meekly as a lamb.

As Effie helped Lizzie get comfortable in the old chair in Eliot’s room, Eliot returned to perusing the image on the tablet. He rubbed his eyes. This is useless, he thought. More information would hopefully come his way in the morning, but right now he wanted to do some digging of his own.

He sat for a while as he drank his hot chocolate, just staring at Kremic’s face on the tablet. He remembered the last time he had seen the man. It had been in Bucharest, Romania. It was his first job as a retrieval consultant after leaving Moreau and recovering from a near-fatal knifing, and he was in Bucharest to retrieve a rare baseball card, of all things.

Kremic, a sports fan in every way and an avid collector, was in Bucharest to buy the stolen card for his collection. Eliot had acquired the card, but the retrieval process had not gone well for Kremic, his men and the man who had stolen the card in the first place.

Finishing his drink, he was about to wash out the mug when Effie returned.

“Poor little bugger’s missing her mum and dad. I think she’ll probably settle better if she knows you’re near, Yank. Once she drinks her chocolate she probably conk out for the rest of the night, so no worries.” Effie put more water in the kettle to boil, and then sat down to drink her own hot chocolate, sighing with the pleasure of it. She eyed the tablet and the face looking back at her on the screen. “He looks a bloody nasty piece of work,” she muttered.

“That’s an understatement,” Eliot replied, rinsing his mug. “He’s turned up in Sydney, and the sonofabitch’s dealing with this bike company Nate’s meeting with. I have to figure out a way to keep him away from ‘em while they take down Dartford Racers.”

Effie peered at Eliot over the top of her mug but didn’t say anything as Eliot disappeared for a couple of minutes and returned with the charger cable for the tablet and Lizzie’s jotting pad. He looked worn, she thought. Sad and hurting and dreadfully worn. He still hadn’t grieved properly for Alice Jakkamarra, and now he was worried desperately about his team. She finished her chocolate, and when the kettle boiled she filled a couple of hot water bottles. She tapped Eliot on his good shoulder.

“C’mon, you young mongrel – to bed with you. You can hardly sit up straight. If you want to deal with this bloody bastard, you can rest in your bed while you do it.”

Eliot grunted wordlessly, irritated, but he knew Effie was right. Standing up, Eliot gathered up the tablet and cell ‘phone and tucked the pad under his arm. Effie followed him through to his room, carrying two bright orange fluffy hot water bottles and the charger.

Lizzie was a boneless, sprawling lump in her chair, sound asleep, her arms wrapped around Cecil.

Once Eliot was in his bed, Effie set the tablet to charge, and helped Eliot settle onto his pile of pillows.

“‘Night, Yank,” she rasped, and rested a hand on his shoulder for a second or two, letting him know he was loved. “Don’t overdo it, alright?”
And before Eliot could answer she was gone, hobbling back to her room and a good night’s sleep.

Left to his own devices, Eliot laid his ‘phone on the covers next to him, followed by Lizzie’s jotter. Managing - somewhat painfully - to retrieve his spectacles and a pen from his bedside cabinet, he lifted the charging tablet and gazed once more at Benjamin Kremic.

“Eliot?” Lizzie murmured, stirring in her chair, but Eliot just smiled.

“It’s alright, darlin’. Go back to sleep. I’m right here,” he said softly, and Lizzie settled again, happy now that she knew her guardian was nearby.

Eliot knew he had to remove Kremic from the equation so that his team had a chance to do the job with as little danger as possible. Pulling the jotter close, he scribbled a few notes and then he changed the pen for his ‘phone. Checking his old alarm clock, he gauged what the time would be Stateside.

He glanced at Lizzie. Well, at least she was safe. Now he had to try and do the same for his team.

Balancing the ‘phone on his raised knee, he brought up his contacts and began to make some calls.

At 5am precisely, Effie emerged from her bedroom and stumped along to the kitchen, passing Eliot’s door. As always, it had been left ajar so his family could check on him while he recovered, and Effie peered around the door for her morning check on the American.

Both Eliot and Lizzie were sound asleep. The little girl was almost submerged under her comforter, Cecil the ‘Roo peeking from her arms. Effie thought the bloody thing looked rather smug.

Eliot, on the other hand, had obviously fallen asleep mid-research. He still wore his spectacles and he loosely held a pen in his right hand. The tablet was on the bed beside him, now displaying a row of icons and nothing else. The pad was covered in Eliot’s chicken-scratch handwriting, notes neatly written and annotated here and there.

The old cook smiled, and quietly entering the room, she eased the pen from Eliot’s lax hand and slipped off his spectacles, folding the arms and putting them on his bedside table beside his now-charging cell ‘phone.

She glanced at the tablet. Eliot had unplugged it at some point, and Effie picked it up, meaning to find a way to switch the thing off. But as she studied it, she noticed an icon she recognised. She frowned, thinking. Hardison had touched that icon with a finger that time they had watched those films with that Gibson bloke in them, and she remembered there were lots of films and television programmes listed on the site.

Tentatively touching the icon with a pudgy finger, she almost dropped the tablet when a screen filled with film and television lists popped up. She glanced at Eliot. He murmured in his sleep for a moment, and Effie touched his brow.

“Sleep easy, boy …” she whispered, and Eliot settled down instantly.Returning to her study of the tablet, she noticed something, and she grinned happily.

Wandering through to the kitchen, she shut the door behind her and propped the tablet on a pile of tea-towels so that it was easily visible as she worked, and then carefully touched the icon she had chosen. A row of episodes appeared, and she chose the first one.

Cackling cheerfully to herself she began to clatter about, bringing out ingredients for breakfast muffins because Lizzie loved them, and began to watch a television series based on the Lethal
Weapon films she had enjoyed so much.

“Eliot?? Eliot!”

“Wha’??” Eliot awoke with a start to find Lizzie shaking him gently. He glanced at his alarm clock. It was nearly midday. “Damn –“ he muttered, and forced his very stiff muscles into motion, Lizzie sliding back off the bed after spending a minute or two trying to wake the hitter.

“There’s someone here to see you,” Lizzie said, quickly lifting Eliot’s pad from the covers so that it didn’t disappear under a pile of blankets. “It’s Charlie’s dad.”

Eliot, scrapping fingers through tousled hair, managed to ease his very sore body out of bed and then gestured at his hoodie which lay on Effie’s rocking chair.

Lizzie, grinning at Eliot’s bleary gaze and tufty hair, helped him put on the hoodie and zip it up.

“It’s cold today,” she said. “Socks?”

Eliot, still not quite awake, frowned and had to think about it.

Lizzie let out an exasperated sigh and dug out a pair of warm socks from Eliot’s drawer and much to the embarrassment of the world’s deadliest retrieval expert, the six-year-old helped him put them on. It was obvious he had really needed the rest.

“Ready?” she asked.

Eliot nodded. Lizzie was being very business-like, which he found endearing.

“Ready,” he replied, and letting Lizzie help even though he really didn’t need it, he got to his feet. Billy Jakkamarra would not worry in the least at seeing Eliot in his sleeping sweats and an old, warm hoodie.

A brisk wind coming in from the far west had brought rain and an uncharacteristic coolness in the air, and even wearing the warm hoodie and a pair of his work socks, Eliot shivered as he stepped out of the door and onto the veranda.

Billy Jakkamarra was an older, greyer version of his son and even bonier. He stood by the table and grinned at Eliot from beneath his stockman’s hat and reached out a hand, which Eliot shook with pleasure. He hadn’t seen Billy in nearly two years.

“G’day, Eliot,” Billy rasped cheerfully, “It’s been a while, mate!”

“Hey, man, long time no see,” Eliot said warmly, and then gestured at the aborigine to sit down while he carefully lowered himself into his recliner, Lizzie close beside him, her eyes round with awe.

Lizzie knew Billy was an Elder of the Warumungu, and was regarded very highly by his people and everyone at Wapanjara. She also noticed someone else on the veranda – the very, very old woman who had greeted both Lizzie and Eliot when they had walked to Charlie’s bungalow on that first night at Wapanjara. Lizzie remembered she was called Auntie and that she wouldn’t speak for a long time as she was in mourning for Alice Jakkamarra.

She smiled shyly at Auntie and gave her a little wave, and Auntie, her rheumy old eyes bright with delight, returned a toothless smile.
Effie arrived with tea and chocolate squares, and Billy, obviously very thirsty, sorted out mugs and filled them with tea and milk. He handed a mug to Lizzie.

“Go on, little kunapa, give that to Auntie, will ya?” he asked, and Lizzie, thrilled that this important man knew who she was, carefully carried the mug over to Auntie who was sitting happily on the swing seat. Her feet barely touched the ground. When she took the tea, she grinned at Lizzie and rested her spare hand on the top of Lizzie’s head for a second in thanks.

“You look pretty crook, Eliot,” Billy said quietly, concern in every word. “Charlie said you took on a bloody nasty bunch of bad fellas and got bashed up, but you still knocked the bastards all the way to bloody Bondi. That true?”

Eliot gave a wry grin and nodded.

“I’ll heal. And Charlie more than made his mark, Billy. Your son’s quite the warrior. He saved my life. Listen, Billy … I have to thank you and the other Elders for lettin’ me do my Vision Quest out at Karnanganja-Jiri. It meant a lot to me.”

Billy nodded as he sipped his tea.

“No probs, mate. It’s the least we could do after you took on that bastard who killed the one who’s gone to the Dreaming. Did it help? Our ancestors would look out for you, but your own spirits … did they answer?”

Eliot nodded as he watched Lizzie hand the tea to Auntie.

“In a way I didn’t expect. But I needed to work some stuff out, and it felt good to know your people were there, keeping an eye on me. So …” he put his mug of tea on the side table and placed his hand over his chest and the medicine pouch that lay there, “I thank the Warumungu for their kindness and understanding.”

Billy nodded.

“Are your bones and heart mending, kukkaji?” he asked kindly. “’Cause Charlie said your spirit was a bit bung.”

Eliot was silent for long moments, thinking.

“I don’t know, Billy. I’m better … not so ready to give in to the sickness. But … it’ll take time. It helped though, being there. Knowing the Ancestors were lookin’ out for me.”

That made Billy smile. Now the ‘man’s business’ was done.

“Good-oh! Anyway, the reason we’re here is to drop some stuff off at Charlie’s place for the boy, and Auntie wanted to bring something over for that nipper of yours. Charlie says she’s been looking after you pretty good. Hey Auntie!” he called out, and the tiny old woman’s face lit up. “C’mon – we’re done here. You’ve brought a present for the little ‘un!”

Auntie slipped off the swing-seat and still carrying her tea, hobbled over to sit next to Eliot, who reached out to hold her bird-like hand in his.

“Hey, Auntie,” he whispered, “thanks for looking after Charlie and Kip. That means more to me than anything.”

Auntie squeezed his hand, and letting go, she gestured at an old cotton bag lying by the veranda
door. Pointing at Lizzie, she indicated that the little girl should retrieve the bag.

Finishing her tea, Auntie took the bag from Lizzie and rummaged around in its capacious interior as Lizzie settled on the floor next to Eliot’s feet, watching closely.

Auntie let out a murmur of satisfaction as she found what she was looking for, and pulled out a large piece of cured hide, about three feet in diameter. She shook it out, and Eliot admired the fine texture and softness.

“’Roo skin,” Billy explained, “from the belly … the pouch. Auntie cured it herself. She made it for the one who’s gone, but she thought she would give it to the little kunapa here.”

Auntie handed it to a stunned Lizzie, who held the skin carefully, feeling the beautiful softness. It was so fine she could hardly feel it.

She looked up at Auntie.

“Thank you! Oh … thank you!” she whispered, and clutched the skin to her chest. She didn’t know what it was for, but she understood that it was an important gift from this ancient lady who had obviously taken many, many hours to turn the hide into something so soft and special.

But Auntie wasn’t finished. Turning to Eliot, she reached out and laid her tiny hand on Eliot’s chest where his heart lay and carefully held the medicine pouch through the material of the hoodie. Her dark, fathomless gaze bored into Eliot’s confused blue eyes, and she gestured at Lizzie.

Eliot suddenly understood what Auntie was telling him, although how she had known about his medicine pouch mystified him. He had never shown it to anyone, and he hadn’t worn it over his heart in over twenty years, but somehow she knew.

Smiling back at her, he placed his hand over hers and nodded.

“I will, Auntie. An’ thanks.”

The elderly woman lifted her hand from Eliot’s heart and cupped his face for a moment, tears shining in her black eyes, and then she patted his cheek and stood up. It was time to go. Bending down, she patted Lizzie on the head, and then she turned and gimped off, heading down the steps and over the yard to an equally ancient landrover. With surprising agility, she clambered into the passenger seat and waited.

Billy watched her go, and his face was lined with sudden grief.

“Losing her girl hit Auntie hard, kukkaji. I thought it would break the old tyke, y’know? But she’s had Charlie and Kip to worry about, so that’s helped a bit.” He looked down at Lizzie, still sitting on the veranda floor and hugging the beautiful, velvety kangaroo skin. “I gotta thank you too, little kunapa. You’ve been a good pal to Kip when he needed it. A boy needs a friend.” He sighed and stood up. “Well, kiwari, it’s time to head home. Me stomach’s beginning to think me throat’s been cut. You look after Eliot, y’hear?” Billy’s face broke into a cheeky grin and he glanced at Eliot. “Ngalanya kiwari pilyi!” he laughed, and laid a callused hand on Lizzie’s head.

“She is that!” Eliot countered, and managed to stand up to shake Billy’s hand in farewell.

Eliot and Lizzie stood and watched the elderly landrover rattle and bump along the road, past the stringybarks and on towards the Stuart Highway. Lizzie snuggled against Eliot’s side, and holding tight onto the beautiful tanned kangaroo skin she wondered what it was for, but she knew it was a very important gift. She would ask Eliot about it. He knew everything.
But in the meantime, the drizzle was turning into more persistent rain, and she felt Eliot shiver.

“Let’s go inside,” she said. “You’re still poorly and Grandma Jo said she wanted to change your bandages again.”

She felt Eliot twitch.

“Hell, no,” he grumbled. “Again??”

“But afterwards Effie says we can have lunch, and I’m hungry!” Lizzie persisted, and laced her fingers in Eliot’s. She tugged gently. “’C’mon. It’s getting cold and you’re shaking.” She frowned. “It … it’s not that shaking, is it? Are you feeling a bit wibbly?”

Eliot looked down at his god-daughter and gave her a Lizzie-smile, his eyes warm and crinkly.

“Nah. It’s proper shakin’, ’Lizbeth Grace, because it’s gettin’ damn cold out here an’ I’m freezin’,” he groused. “S’pose I’d better get this over with.”

“I’ll help!” Lizzie said cheerfully, and with her precious gift in one hand and Eliot being carefully pulled along by the other, Lizzie led the way back into the warmth of Wapanjara.

After a thoroughly unpleasant half-hour having his bandages changed, Eliot managed to keep down his lunch without feeling queasy. Jo dropped a capsule into his hand.

“Antibiotics, boy. You didn’t finish the last lot, so … this is fourteen days’ worth and you’ll take every damn one of ’em, you hear me? That infection’s lingering and I want it gone. And I can’t stitch it again, I’m afraid. You’re going to have a bit of a nasty scar.”

Eliot washed the capsule down with orange juice and grimaced.

“Scars I can live with. Don’t worry about it, Jo. An’ thanks for taking care of me.” He looked around at the people around him, including Mei who was feeding Jamie as Soapy held Rose. “All of you. And I know I’m not easy to deal with. So … thanks.”

He checked the time, and discovered it was getting on for mid-afternoon, and he had things to do. He turned to Lizzie, who had the soft kangaroo skin beside her.

“I have to call Hardison an’ find out how everything’s going. Want to help?”

Lizzie nodded eagerly.

“Yes please!! I want to tell everyone about my present!”

“What are you going to do with it, sweetheart?” Soapy asked, rocking Rose in the crook of his arm.

Lizzie shrugged, but she touched Eliot’s good shoulder. Somehow, she thought, Eliot would know exactly the right thing to make from the soft hide.

“Will you help me, Eliot?”

Eliot thought about it, and nodded.

“Yeah, darlin’. I think … I think I can figure somethin’ out. We’ll talk about it tomorrow, huh. You an’ me … we need to talk about some stuff anyway, so … yeah. Tomorrow.”
“If you’re going to talk to your people you’ll need this,” Effie said, dropping the tablet on the veranda table. “I charged it up for you,” she added. Eliot stared at her. “What?” she asked testily.

Eliot eyed her suspiciously.

“Ohhh … nothin’.” He was about to say more when he heard his cell ‘phone ring.

“I’ll get it!!” Lizzie yelled, and ran off to retrieve the ‘phone from Eliot’s bedside table, returning with it within seconds and handed it to Eliot, who answered the call. Lizzie flopped down in Eliot’s recliner and watched him closely.

“Yeah?” Eliot said, and listened. “Okay. Do that. I’ll be in touch later. Have to confirm with my people.” And without saying anything more, he rang off. Levering his obstinate body to its feet, he handed the ‘phone to Lizzie and lifted the tablet. “C’mon, ‘Lizbeth Grace. We’ve got things to organise. Thanks for lunch, Eff,” and before Effie could get out of the way, Eliot gave her a smacking kiss on the forehead.

“You young bastard!!” she yelled, and lifted a serving spoon and then realised she couldn’t wallop Eliot with it without hurting him, so she just waved it about for a bit until Eliot managed to avoid the spoon and escaped into the living room, grinning with delight.

Pulling Effie’s chain was always fun.

Hardison seemed to be extremely happy to see Eliot and Lizzie as his image blinked into existence on the tablet.

The flight to Sydney had gone smoothly and they were now ensconced in the Old Clare Hotel, taking over three of the hotel’s luxury suites. The art deco design appealed to Sophie’s artistic appetites and Hardison was raving about the food.

“Man, Eliot!! You should try the food here!! And it’s Sydney Beer Week!! Damnation, El – I’m a-comin’ back, I tell ya, an’ their tuna … I mean, albacore tuna with persimmon vinegar an’ –“

“-blood orange an’ shiso,” Eliot countered testily. ‘Yeah, I know, I’ve been there! It needs a little horseradish to bring out the undertones, but it’s okay. Tell me about the damn job, will ya??”

Hardison arched an eyebrow, but sighed and got to the point.

“Parker’s doin’ a run at the patent office tomorrow night. Problem is, it’s a near 400-mile round trip to a place near Canberra. So she and I are headin’ out tomorrow afternoon, do the damn job an’ then drive back to Sydney overnight. Damn, but everythin’s so spread out here –“

“Yeah, Hardison, I know. What else?”

“Okay … Nate’s seeing Hardy Bushman, the CEO of Dartford Racers, tomorrow afternoon. Bushman doesn’t know it yet, though. Nate’s heading in there with Soph an’ they’ll take the place by storm. Tom’s sourced a couple of top quality road-bikes on approval and Parker’s tryin’ ‘em out right now. I’ve seeded the internet with everythin’ the world needs to know about up-and-coming racer Darcy Birnham, and Parker and Tom’re doing 18k at Katoomba on the circuit this afternoon. I tell you, El … Tom’s okay. He’s pretty good with Parker an’ keeps her focused, just by tellin’ her really, really bad jokes. So … we’re good for now. What did you manage to do about Kremic?”

Lizzie was listening intently, but she knew to be quiet when a job was being discussed, so she tucked herself into Eliot’s good side as they sat on the old couch in the living room. Eliot was grateful for
her warmth. He felt chilled. *Damn this fever.* But he had work to do.

“Babe Ruth,” he said.

Hardison opened his mouth as though to say something, but closed it, frowning. He squinted one eye at Eliot.

“Um … baseball player. Right?”

Eliot shook his head, rolling his eyes.

“Sometimes, Hardison, I … oh, never mind. Yeah, a baseball player. One of the *greatest* baseball players! Baseball Hall of Fame … southpaw who hit 714 home runs, joined the Yankees in 1920 an’ led ‘em to four world series championships … *that* Babe Ruth! Okay?”

Hardison raised his eyebrows and quirked his mouth.

“Okaaaaay … and?” he asked tentatively.

Eliot sighed. He really wasn’t feeling up to giving a long diatribe on the hacker’s lack of sportiness.

“In 2012 Babe Ruth’s 1920 jersey from his first season with the Yankees was sold at auction for over four-and-a-half million dollars to an independent auction house, who sold it on to a private collector. So …”

Hardison suddenly got it.

“You want Kremic to think this jersey’s back on the market, right?”

Eliot nodded.

“Almost. I want Kremic to *know* this jersey’s back on the market. I’ve got a contact in the auction world who deals in sports memorabilia, an’ she owes me one. This thing really *is* for sale. She’s happy to broker the sale, so there’s no con – this is the real deal. An’ if Kremic bites, it’ll get him out of your hair for a few days. But that’s all the time you’ve got, Hardison – *a few days*. If we can pull Kremic out of the equation, it’ll give you guys some wiggle room.”

Eliot could see the cogs working in Hardison’s head, and the young man slowly began to smile.

“Yeah … yeah, I think we can do that. Send me details of your contact, Eliot, an’ I’ll take it from there, and I can let some stuff … some *rumours* … float Kremic’s way. How much is Mister Ruth’s jersey gonna cost him?”

Eliot grinned mirthlessly.

“Only 6.75 million,” he said. “The thing’s been sold on a couple of times since the auction, so that valuation is competitive. If it went to auction, my contact says, it’ll fetch more. The hook is that Kremic’ll get in on the ground floor, and avoid hefty sales premiums an’ insurance. The owner needs a quick sale.”

Eliot emailed some files to Hardison’s laptop and the hacker hummed happily to himself as he brought them up and studied the information Eliot had accumulated.

“I can work with this, no problem.” He cocked an eye at Eliot, a sly look on his face, and waggled his eyebrows.
“This contact … this Doctor Rebecca Hines … is she, y’know … a friend, or a friend friend? Like, with benefits?” he asked gleefully.

“Dammit, Hardison!!” Eliot growled, more than irritated. “Rebecca is nearly sixty, she’s one of the world’s foremost authorities in sport history and memorabilia, an’ I retrieved her daughter when she was taken by a Venezuelan warlord for ransom. Okay? She owes me, and … and …she’s a real nice lady and a friend, so don’t screw around, Hardison, alright?”

Hardison shrugged.

“Works for me, man. Leave it with me an’ I’ll get back to you tonight.”

Eliot took a deep breath, happier now that he had a plan in the works.

“Hey there, baby-girl!” Hardison smiled as Lizzie waved at him now that business was concluded. “Your Momma and Daddy aren’t here right now, but they’ll be back tonight. How does that sound?”

Lizzie was a little disappointed, but she flapped her new gift at the tablet screen to show Hardison.

“Look, Alec!!! Auntie gave me this!!” She waved the skin around happily.

Hardison peered at the thing curiously.

“It’s, ah … it’s lovely, sweetheart. Um … what is it?” he asked.

Lizzie squeaked with excitement.

“It’s a kangaroo’s tummy skin, Alec!! It’s beautiful! It’s soft and feels awesome and I can make something with it, maybe. Eliot’s going to help me!”

Hardison glanced at Eliot and mouthed Who’s Auntie?

Eliot smirked, especially when Hardison followed it up with “A kangaroo skin? How lovely!”

Lizzie was delighted that Hardison agreed with her, and draped the skin over Eliot’s chest so that Hardison could see it all.

Hardison blenched a little.

“Yeah, baby-girl. It’s … nice. I guess.”

Eliot suddenly found he was feeling worn out, and he shivered.

“Hardison … I’m signing off. I’m done for now. We’ll speak to you all tonight an’ ‘Lizbeth Grace can see her Momma and Daddy.’”

As Hardison signed off and Lizzie cheerfully said goodbye, Eliot rubbed his eyes wearily. He was desperate for rest, but he had one more thing to do. He lifted his cell ’phone and speed-dialled a number. He waited for a moment, and then a voice said Hello?

“Hey, Rebecca. Just calling to say it’s a go. One of my team’ll be in touch … Alec Hardison. You can trust him as much as you trust me. I’ll call you in a couple of days, and if you need me just yell.”

Finishing the call, Eliot rested his head on the back of the couch and closed his eyes, a headache beginning to thump in his head. But he felt better now. There was a plan in place to deal with Kremic, and hopefully keep him out of his team’s way. It was a start.
Within a few minutes, Eliot Spencer was sound asleep.

To be continued …

Warumungu language notes:

_Kiwari_ – child

_Ngalanya kiwari piliyi!_ – This here’s a good child!
Author’s note: Australia’s Intellectual Properties Office really is in Phillip, a suburb of Canberra, and is a two-building design with a glass construct and walkway between them. But that is where the resemblance ends. I have no idea about its security measures, CCTV setup or even the design of the interior, so it is entirely a figment of my imagination. Honest.

Eliot woke up coughing. For a moment he wasn’t too sure where he was. He certainly wasn’t in his big, comfortable bed. His head lay on a couple of cushions and it seemed as though he was stretched out on a couch.

Opening bleary eyes and trying to control the cough that simply wouldn’t stop, he struggled to right himself, only to find he was wrapped in a neatly-tucked-in comforter adorned with a sea of fluffy purple koalas.

“You’re coughing again!” a voice said accusingly, and he carefully turned his head to see Lizzie staring at him, brows set into a quizzical frown. She was sitting on what Effie called the ‘tuffet’, a large and over-stuffed paisley-pattern pouffe, and she was watching him so closely that Eliot almost had to cross his eyes to keep her in focus.

He narrowed his eyes at the little girl.

“So??” he groused, and then let out a couple of badly-controlled coughs, tucking his mouth into his upper arm to muffle them.

“You need Effie’s medicine!! You’re not supposed to cough! You could break your stitches and maybe you have a ‘fection again!!” Lizzie accused, not worried in the least by Eliot’s growl.

Eliot began to wrestle his way out of Lizzie’s comforter, cursing under his breath and furious at his inability to whup the comforter’s clingy, koala-adorned ass. Lizzie took pity on him and helped untuck the damaged hitter, and Eliot swung his legs off the couch and painfully sat up, hissing in pain as his wounds twinged. The resultant coughing almost bent him double.

“’Lizbeth Grace …” he ground out between coughs, “… I am not … not … going to take that godawful stuff –“

“Here ya go, Yank!” Effie said from where she stood beside the couch. Damn. Eliot realised his ‘spidey-sense’ had let him down and he hadn’t realised she was there. He must be sick. Effie grinned nastily as she proffered a spoonful of the Devil’s Decongestant, and Eliot eyed it with disgust. He glanced at Lizzie.

The child’s face had slid from a frown to incipient worry. Brown eyes were widened in concern, and damnation, but her bottom lip was beginning to wobble. Sonofabitch, Eliot swore mentally. Lizzie’s eyes began to fill with tears.

“Awww, hell!” Eliot grumped, and opened his mouth.
The spoonful of the foul concoction made him gag, but he was Eliot Spencer, world’s greatest hitter, retrieval expert and tough-as-shit all-round badass, so he took it like a man and swallowed.

Lizzie smiled through her unshed tears and kissed Eliot’s nose, happy that he had done as he was told.

 Damn, but the six-year-old was a better friggin’ grifter than her momma, he thought.

“What time is it?” Eliot wheezed through the fumes as Lizzie draped her comforter around Eliot’s shoulders in case he was cold.

“After nine,” Effie said as she screwed the lid back on the bottle of decongestant. “You slept for most of the evening, laddie, so you needed the rest,” she added with satisfaction.

“After nine?? Are you kiddin’ me???” Eliot snarled, and began the major effort of levering himself off the couch, but Lizzie was ahead of him.

“Alec already called and Effie took notes!” she announced proudly, and offered Eliot her jotter.

Eliot stared at the jotter and then at Effie.

“Why the hell didn’t you wake me?? I gotta –“

“Bollocks!” Effie replied with satisfaction as she placed the bottle of disgusting cough mixture on the table and sat down on a chair beside Eliot. She took the jotter from Lizzie and perused her notes. “Sunbeam and Missy should be in Phillip by now.” Phillip was the suburb of Canberra where the Australian offices for managing intellectual property were housed. “Tom went with ‘em … he drove ‘em there and he’ll provide backup, he says.”

Eliot simmered at not speaking to his team himself, but he listened carefully, nodding.

“Any information about where to look?” he asked.

“Hang on a mo’, you young bugger – let me just get the gist of this …” Effie squinted at her notes. “Yes … here we go. There’s this bloke … Albert Pennicuik … who’s a … a … whaddyacall’em … a patent examiner. He dealt with Dennis Burkhart as well as that company … Dartford. Apparently Sunbeam says there’s something a bit iffy about him and Missy’s going to do something to his computer to get info. Does that make sense?”

Eliot nodded, thinking.

“She’ll go in and download the encrypted files,” he said. “Hardison can’t access them externally, so Parker’ll find a way in and use a pen stick. Then Hardison can take his time and see what he can find.”

Effie’s eyebrows raised in surprise.

“She … she’s going to break into the patent offices??” she asked, muddy eyes wide with wonder. “Won’t that be dangerous? What about security and all that stuff?”

Eliot tousled Lizzie’s curls and the little girl sat next to him and snuggled into his good shoulder.

“Hardison will find a way in. He’ll disarm the security systems and Parker’ll do the rest,” he said, frowning. “My job would be to deal with any fallout.” He let out another soft flurry of coughs. “Right now I’d have trouble fightin’ off a couple of six-year-olds,” and he nudged Lizzie, who
giggled. “If you get me the tablet, darlin’, and I’ll find out how things’re going. Did you talk to your Momma and Daddy? Are they okay?”

Lizzie nodded vigorously, hugging Eliot’s right biceps.

“Well, that’s something,” Eliot thought, but he couldn’t shake off the worry as Lizzie ran through to the kitchen and brought back the tablet, sitting back in her place next to Eliot, ready to help him access the video link by holding the tablet steady. Eliot was about to look for the icon when he realised something was already playing on the tablet, and he scowled at Effie.

“Seriously?!! That ridiculous Lethal Weapon TV series, Eff? I mean … seriously?!!”

Effie looked offended, but raised a haughty eyebrow.

“Yeah!! So what!! It’s bloomin’ good, so it is!!” she replied, not in the least abashed. “An’ that bloke who plays Riggs – he’s a bit of alright, so he is!! A bleedin’ nutcase who gets the job done. My kind of fella. Him and me … we’d get on just dandy, and besides … he’s a bit ripper, too!” Effie grinned cheerfully. “Bloody gorgeous!”

Eliot exchanged the screen full of insane cops with mad moustaches flinging themselves through windows, to something more sensible as he sought the icon for the video link, all the time muttering to himself.

“Dumb-ass show … nothin’ like real life. That moron would’ve got himself blown away in two seconds inviting a bank robber to shoot him in the head … just stupid …”

His temper didn’t improve when Lizzie, tired of watching Eliot trying to manhandle the tablet one-handed, held up a single finger to stop Eliot in mid-poke and gently pushed his hand away, eerily reminiscent of Hardison at his most smug.

Eliot quietly seethed but said nothing as Lizzie organised the whole thing within several seconds, and Hardison suddenly sprang into view, obviously ensconced in the back of a moving vehicle of some sort.

“’Bout time you woke up,” was Hardison’s greeting when Eliot and Lizzie blinked into being on his laptop. Effie peered over Eliot’s shoulder and the hacker’s face broke into a grin. “Hey, precious!” he crooned, and waved.

Eliot was in no mood for Hardison’s irritating cheeriness.

“What’s happenin’?” he demanded, and Hardison gave Eliot his best Eddie Murphy cheesy grin just to annoy the Oklahoman even more. Lizzie giggled.

“We’re just a few miles outta Canberra, an’ I already found a way into their security systems,” Hardison replied with relish. “Like most public service buildings the security systems are bought centrally, an’ God bless government procurement agencies, they usually go for the lowest tendering bid. They got multi-door systems on timers an’ biometric readers, but they’ve got it all networked to an external server. Security’s good, but understaffed – only one guard at the door an’ another patrolling the two buildings, which … “ Hardison paused for effect, “are separated by a glass section with a walkway an’ stairwells on each side.”
Eliot had a sudden mental image of a vicious fight in a glass walkway just like the one Hardison was describing. The heavy punches he had taken to his back and kidneys that afternoon had hurt like shit.

“Elevators?” he asked, shaking off the memory of the day Jimmy Ford had died.

“One each building, beside the stairwells,” Hardison continued. “Parker can access ‘em from the roof. No security lockdown on the elevators, so … it shouldn’t be difficult.”

Eliot digested the information, and had one more thought.

“Are the guards armed?” he asked.

Hardison sobered.

“Yes,” he said.

“The security company is private,” Tom’s voice explained, and Hardison turned his laptop around so Eliot was sudden staring at Tom’s left ear. “They’re fully licensed to carry sidearms, but there are only two of ‘em and hopefully there won’t be any interaction.” Tom suddenly chuckled. “Bloody hell. I’m a retired policeman, and here I am plotting to break into a government building!”

“It’s for a good cause though,” Hardison’s voice said behind the laptop. “You’re lovin’ it, man! Admit it!”

Tom glanced around and grinned like a five-year-old before setting his gaze back on the road as he drove what appeared to be a big SUV through deserted streets.

“Hey Eliot!!” Parker babbled happily from the passenger seat, and Hardison shifted the laptop around so she could see Eliot. She was bright-eyed with laughter. “Listen …” she chuckled, alive with anticipation, “… a man walks into a bar …” and she began to snort in amusement, “… and guess what he says!!” She stared at Eliot intently.

Eliot used his one hand to pinch the bridge of his nose and he felt a headache treacherously waiting in the wings, ready to pounce. Idiots. He worked with idiots.

“What??” he sighed wearily.

Parker could barely contain herself.

“He … he says … ‘OUCH!!’

And Parker fell about laughing, limbs twitching, and she gave out snorky gales of hysterics.

“She’s been laughing at that one for two-and-a-half hours,” Hardison said, turning back the laptop so he could see Eliot. He was carefully deadpan.

Eliot’s headache was well on the way to making his eyes feel as though they were on the point of falling out.

Lizzie gently elbowed him.

“I don’t get it!” she whispered loudly.

Parker burbled away to herself, and Eliot heard Tom’s soft, murmuring chuckle. Reid was a dead man, Eliot vowed.
Hardison suddenly glanced out of the window and turned back to Eliot.

“Look, m’man, I gotta go. We’re only minutes away an’ –“

“Go!” Eliot ordered, and smiled grimly. “Hardison … you call me when you’re done, alright? I need … I just … “ he didn’t know how to tell his team he cared about them, so he decided it didn’t matter. If they didn’t know by now, they never would. “Just … you call me! Understand?” And as he said it he began to cough, his chest tight with concern.

Hardison twitched a smile. Eliot had no idea that his family knew exactly how much he cared.

“How soon,” he said, and then he was gone.

Lizzie took down the video link and placed the tablet on the table, putting it on charge. She knew Eliot would want it ready to go when Hardison called to let them know how everything had gone during the job.

Eliot slumped back on the couch, wincing as his shoulder objected, and he fought to get the cough under control. His eyes felt gritty with the headache now settling in behind them. He rubbed them tiredly, weary to the bone. This inactivity was killing him.

Jo suddenly appeared in the doorway.

“C’mon, boy. Let’s have a look at you and repack that wound,” she said, her voice soft but firm. “It’ll be twice a day from now on. It’s not healing as quickly as it should and I want to knock that blasted infection on the head.”

Eliot opened his eyes and squinted in the gentle light of the living room.

“Now?” he asked, feeling thoroughly drained.

“Now,” Jo reiterated, and smiled ruefully. “I know, son. But the sooner we do it, the sooner you can get a bite to eat and rest until Alec calls.”

Eliot sighed, coughed, and held his hand out to Lizzie.

“Let’s get this over with,” he grumbled. “Help me up, will you, darlin’?”

And with Lizzie and Effie helping, Eliot levered his battered frame off the comfortable couch and made his unsteady way into the kitchen.

It took Parker all of fifteen minutes to work her way onto the roof of the main building. She stood on the flat surface and breathed in the cool night air, looking at the twinkling lights of the city sprawled like a drift of glittering fireflies over the land.

Ready, momma? Hardison’s voice echoed tinnily in her ear.

“Just a minute,” she murmured, and fished out her lock picks. She waited beside the door to the roof.

“Ready.”

She heard Hardison mumbling to himself and then she heard an almost imperceptible click.

The security grid’s down girl, an’ you got no more than fifteen minutes before the guard heads back from the other building. Pennicuik’s desk is in there someplace – it’s open plan, so I can’t get you any closer than that. So scoot, Parker, an’ get out of there ASAP, Hardison said with a sense of
urgency in his voice.

*What can I do?* Parker heard Tom ask as she unlocked the door in less than three seconds and entered the building with no more noise than a wraith. Closing it behind her, she set off down the stairs to the door to the top level. The door lock sensor shone green. Grinning, she eased it open, turned left and headed to the stairwell.

*Stand by, Tom,* Nate’s voice said. Even though he was two hundred miles away, Nate was listening in via a laptop which Hardison had linked in. *Hopefully you’ll not be needed, but just keep your eyes open.*

Tom had parked the big, nondescript SUV in a bar parking lot half a block away, and Hardison was keeping a close eye via the external CCTV system for the patents office which was part of the privately-owned security package. He had discovered that there were no cameras beyond the entrance lobby. While useful in allowing Parker relatively free range of the inside of the building without being watched, it also meant he didn’t have a system he could piggyback onto to guide Parker, so she was working blind up to a point.

“How heading down the stairs!” Parker breathed as she trotted silently down to the third floor, and within moments she was through the door and out into the office space. She gaped in dismay. “God, I hate open-plan offices!” she grumbled.

There were nearly twenty work stations, all located within small booths. To Parker’s annoyance, not one of them had a name associated with each space, and she now had less than thirteen minutes to find Pennicuik’s station, download the information and get out of there before Hardison had to reinstate the alarm system. The second guard was busy walking the offices of the subsidiary building, and Hardison knew he would soon return to the main building to continue his sweep.

Parker didn’t have time to waste. She began to methodically work her way through the office. There were no lone offices on this floor, so she concentrated on the stations themselves. She immediately discounted booths adorned with fluffy animals and cacti with knitted covers for their pots. She knew from Hardison’s research that Pennicuik was in his early forties, small, bearded and single. He had lived with his mother until she died, and now did nothing other than work, eat and go to occasional lectures about things like early Dutch colonial architecture. She doubted he liked fluffy toy animals and small cacti wearing knitted sweaters.

Sophie’s voice rang in her ear.

*He’s anal … neat. Look for minimalist, Parker … not much on his desk, no photos or anything like that. Oh, and he’s left-handed. His mouse might be to the left of his keyboard, so try that first.*

Parker hummed to herself as she searched.

She found one that looked likely, the mouse lying on the left side, but the papers were messy in the person’s in-tray and on checking it for correspondence, found the employee was a woman.

It took Parker another precious three minutes to find the next likely candidate.

The desk was almost bare. The desktop computer was exactly level with the booth wall, and the keyboard was set precisely six inches from the monitor. The inbox was empty, and the stapler, pencil sharpener and pens were set in a neat row. The drawers under the desk were locked, but Parker had the top one open in seconds. It held nothing but a ruler and notepad. The next one, however, was gold. Pennicuik’s diary lay on the top, and beneath were files containing his latest projects. A quick shuffle through them confirmed that Pennicuik didn’t have the files for Dartford or Dennis Burkhart
secreted in the drawer, so Parker knew she would have to download whatever information he had on his PC.

“No laptop,” she whispered, “just an old desktop PC,” and she sat down in Pennicuik’s chair to explore the tower parked under the desk. It was obvious Pennicuik had refused to trade in his desktop computer for a laptop. *Yep, thought Parker. Anal.*

*There should be USB ports in the front,* Hardison said in her ear. *Sometimes they’re hidden under a sliding cover.*

Parker dug about in her little knapsack and pulled out a small flashlight and a pen drive. Switching the flashlight on and holding it in her teeth, she found three USB ports in the front of Pennicuik’s computer. She inserted the drive and heard the hum as the computer dealt with the new information.

“We’re in,” Parker whispered past the flashlight and she heard Hardison grunt acknowledgement.

Like many office workers, Pennicuik left his PC running, so it was quick work for Hardison’s illicitly acquired state-of-the-art software to crack the man’s password – which turned out to be what Pennicuik obviously thought was his Hogwarts house – and Parker was in. Quickly searching the PC’s operating system, Parker didn’t bother trying to find an individual file. She just downloaded everything she could find, including emails.

She checked her watch. She had less than ten minutes, but she knew if there were no hitches she could do the job comfortably. She looked at the box on the screen. 28 percent downloaded.

To fill her time, she leaned back in Pennicuik’s chair, feet up on his desk, and began to work her way through the diary. Frowning, she dug out her cell ‘phone and began to snap photographs of the occasional page for Hardison to peruse at his leisure.

There was a ‘ping’ as the download completed, and she pulled the pen drive, sliding it into her knapsack. She replaced the diary and locked the two drawers. There was one more to go. She checked how much time she had left. Two minutes. Plenty of time.

She unlocked the final drawer and opened it.

“Huh!” she said, and pulled out a small burner ‘phone, the only thing in the drawer. She wondered whether to take it or spend a little time trying to break the password and see what was lurking in the call history and sim card. She was about to remove the card when Hardison’s voice rang in her ear.

*Parker!! Get out of there! NOW!!*

She hesitated for a moment.

“I’ve found a burner ‘phone! Should I –”*

*Put it back and move!* Hardison hissed. *Pennicuik – he’s here!! It’s ten in the evening and the sonofabitch’s here!!*

Parker didn’t need telling twice. She dropped the ‘phone back in the drawer and locked it, and then she logged out of the computer. She just had to hope the screensaver kicked in before Pennicuik arrived at his booth.

What the hell was the man doing, coming back to his workplace at this time of night? *The ‘phone,* she thought. *He’s come back for the ‘phone.*
Scrambling out of the chair, she replaced it neatly against the desk, and she wasn’t a moment too soon as she heard the elevator hum out in the corridor. She didn’t have time to exit the office, so she shifted quickly to the next booth – a messy, cactus-riddled conglomeration of paperwork and sticky-notes – pulled out the chair as far as she dared and neatly folded herself into the space below the desk, pulling the chair back into place.

The office lights came on.

As she heard footsteps heading her way, Parker shrank back into the darkness and waited.

Eliot was in his place astride the chair, and he dropped his head onto his forearm, consumed by a chesty cough that just wouldn’t let go of his lungs. Jo waited patiently, gauze pads and forceps at the ready to pack the bullet hole, now cleaned and waiting for re-bandaging.

Effie looked at Jo with concern in her muddy eyes.

“Don’t worry, Effie … we’re winning, I promise,” she said, trying to let the little cook know that Eliot was on the mend. Given the damage and the Oklahoman’s stubborn ignoring of his condition, Jo was fairly sure that given time the man would heal completely. Well, physically, at least.

Her eyes dropped to the little girl sitting on the stool in front of Eliot, her hand grasping his as he held tight onto the medicine pouch. Her other hand was on his wrist, her tiny thumb rubbing the faint scars there caused many years before by wire restraints. Eliot had never told anyone about the torture he had endured in his past, but somehow Lizzie knew that the scars were relics of something dreadful.

Eliot’s cough subsided finally, and he lifted his head, fighting the urge to take a deep breath which would set him coughing again. He smiled tightly at Lizzie.

“Oh, okay now?” she asked, her voice gentle like Eliot’s always was when he spoke to children or animals.

The hitter nodded jerkily.


Jo sighed but set to work, dressing the wound by packing the hole with the antiseptic-imbued pads. Eliot just bore the pain, the muscles working along his jawline and his eyes fixed on Lizzie. He felt her grip tighten on his wrist, and he tried to give her the best Lizzie-smile he could.

Lizzie hated seeing him in such pain and having to bear it with no help, but she knew he had to, because he was so sick and he needed desperately to begin to climb back towards his usual sturdy, healthy self. She saw his knuckles whiten with effort and she felt the tremor in his frame, and he gripped the little medicine pouch as though his life depended on it.

“Eliot?” she whispered, and touched the corner of the pouch where it peeked out between his finger and thumb. “What is that?”

Eliot, teeth clenched, winced and shifted his grip on the pouch. But his eyes were warm, if full of pain.

“My … my medicine pouch,” he rasped. “My grandfather helped me make it.” And he flinched as Jo had to put pressure on the gauze to make sure the wound was properly packed.
“Nearly done, boy …” she murmured. “I’m sorry … I know it’s bad, but …” she tailed off as she concentrated on finishing before bandaging the injury.

Eliot nodded, but kept his eyes on Lizzie, whose eyes widened with curiosity. Eliot, even now, rarely spoke about his family, but when he did it was usually about his half-Cherokee grandfather.

“What’s a med’cine pouch?” Lizzie asked.

“Well … “ Eliot began, distracting himself from the pain by thinking about an answer. “It … it’s a special bag that the Cherokee an’ other tribes wear over their heart. It’s special, because …” He struggled to make the meaning simple for the child to understand. He coughed a little as he thought about it, and Lizzie rubbed his uninjured shoulder to help settle him. “It’s got things in it that mean something to me. It could be an animal tooth, a special stone or a lock of hair.” Eliot could see Lizzie still didn’t understand, her eyes full of puzzlement.

“Lean back, Eliot … let’s get this bandage sorted and then we’ll strap up your arm …” Jo said quietly, and with Effie helping, Eliot sat up as straight as he could. The ensuing coughing fit lasted for nearly a minute, but it gave Eliot time to think about the pouch and how he could help Lizzie understand.

But it was as Jo strapped his arm to his chest, his hand tucked under his right collarbone to relieve pressure on the wound and to prevent swelling, when he decided on his answer.

“When I was thirteen,” he said hesitantly, “my … my Momma died.”

Lizzie’s breath hitched with shock. She couldn’t even begin to imagine what it would be like to lose her mother.

Jo and Effie said nothing, but concentrated on finishing off Eliot’s bandage and clearing up the medical kit. But they glanced at one another, worried but understanding that Eliot had reached some sort of crossroads. He had never spoken of his mother before.

Eliot sighed as carefully as he could, and was thankful when Jo, having taped the bandage, helped him on with his teeshirt and hoodie. He was cold and weary, and the low-grade fever trickled through his joints.

“My momma … you would have liked her, ‘Lizbeth Grace.” He closed his eyes, the memory of his mother’s face making him smile. “She was a great cook. She was funny, an’ she loved persimmons, an’ man, could she shoot!! I saw her knock a rat off a barrel at fifty yards with a big ol’ Colt my Daddy had. Then … then she got sick.”

Lizzie’s sharp intake of breath was the only sound in the cavernous old kitchen as Eliot continued.

“She took a long time to die. Nearly ten months from diagnosis ‘till the night she passed.” Eliot’s gaze became stony. “My Dad … he spent his time in the store, because watchin’ Momma die was too difficult for him. My sis … she’s a few years older’n me, and she was workin’ to help pay the medical bills, so I did everythin’ else. When I wasn’t in school, I was cookin’, cleanin’ … making sure we all kept out heads above water while lookin’ after Momma. When Dad was home he spent his time in front of the TV watchin’ football and workin’ his way through a bottle of rye.” Eliot’s accent was strong now as the memories came thick and fast. “Grandfather helped, though. He would sit with Momma, or make sure I took some time out. That’s when he decided I needed a medicine pouch.”

“To help you remember stuff,” Lizzie whispered, awed. “So when you missed your Mama it didn’t
hurt so much, and you knew Grandfather loved you!”

Eliot, touched by her attempt to understand, agreed.

“That, an’ other things. So … when I had time, Grandfather and I found some soft doeskin, like the one Auntie gave to you, and we made a pouch. It took a while. It had to be done right … you understand?” Eliot asked Lizzie, who nodded. Loosening his grip on the pouch, Eliot carefully tucked it back under his teeshirt, and Lizzie noticed the wolf motif before it disappeared to lie once more over Eliot’s heart. “Grandfather … he asked me what I wanted on the pouch … what totem. So I chose a wolf, ‘cause my Momma was very proud of bein’ Aniwaya.” Eliot paused for a moment to gather the strength to go on. He had never spoken of this to anyone, but the ease was beginning to settle in his chest, and he decided he needed to tell Lizzie everything. “She died the next day. It was after the funeral … just as everyone was leavin’ … that Grandfather took me aside. I’d never thought of him as old until that moment. Losin’ his daughter almost killed him, an’ he was never the same after that.” Eliot took a hard breath, the cough threatening to erupt, but he controlled it before continuing. “But he took me aside an’ handed me the pouch. ‘There’s somethin’ inside for you,’ he said. ‘Somethin’ that belonged to my great grandfather. Now it’s yours. So you never forget who you are.’”

Lizzie was enthralled.

“What was it??” she asked, agog.

Eliot smiled as he accepted a mug of hot, sweet tea from Effie.

“Can’t tell you, ‘Lizbeth Grace. It’s personal, an’ that’s just the way it is. I wore this pouch until the day I left home to join the army, an’ I only put it back on a few days ago. But it helps. I feel … more me;” he said. “Like I should be, not what life made me.”

He sipped the tea and studied the little girl who sat so quietly before him. He knew she was digesting everything he had said. He didn’t know if she understood, but his memories had made her think.

Lizzie came to a decision.

“Auntie gave me that kangaroo skin so I could make something out of it. Can I make a med’cine pouch?”

Eliot’s smile widened.

“Thought you’d never ask, little kunapa!” he said, and thought of his Momma’s beautiful blue eyes, so like his own.

Lizzie slid off the stool, and stood on her tiptoes to whisper in Eliot’s ear.

“I think your Momma loved you very much!” she said, and dropped a kiss on his cheek. She squeaked. “You need a shave!” she said, and rubbed her cheek against Eliot’s. “It tickles!!”

You always were a diamond in the rough, Alice said from his heart, and Eliot heard her throaty laugh, and he felt the warmth of her in his chest.

And the tremors were gone and Derry Ryan was banished, and Eliot Spencer had never felt so blessed.

Parker was listening.
She heard Albert Pennicuik unlock the bottom drawer of his desk and lift out the burner ‘phone. Pulling out his chair, he sat down and Parker knew he was entering the password. Then she heard the beeps of a speed-dial, and Pennicuik waited impatiently, tapping a finger on his spartan desk.

“About time!” he snapped as somebody answered. “Look … I want this over and done with! Now!!” He waited for the unknown voice to answer, but even as Parker heard a babble of unidentified words on the other end of the line, Pennicuik interrupted, and Parker could hear the fear in the man’s pompous voice. “I don’t care!!” he said, “if I get caught –“ the unknown voice continued, but Pennicuik lost what little patience he had left. “NO!! I can’t wait!! I want my money in the next twenty-four hours, alright? No … no, you can’t do this without me, so get a move on, close the deal and bloody well pay me!!” he hissed, and unlocking the middle drawer, he pulled out something – probably the diary, Parker guessed. “I’m finishing up here,” he ranted, “I’m taking everything I have here and scarpering, okay? You have a day. That’s it. I took a risk coming back here tonight, but I don’t want to leave anything that might point in my direction. No … don’t call me. I’ll call you. Twenty four hours, you arse – and then I want my money!!”

He locked the drawers once more and headed out of the office, and as he switched off the lights, Parker let out an explosive sigh of relief.

Parker … PARKER!! Are you okay?? Hardison’s voice sounded in her ear, and Parker eased out of her hidey-hole under the desk and stood up.

“Hardison, he’s taken the ‘phone!! He’s on his way back down, and he’s taken the ‘phone!!” she said, urgency in every word. “I’ll be back with you in a few minutes, but we need the information on his burner!!”

She was running now, out of the office and up the stairs to the roof, but she could hear Hardison and Tom discussing something but the blood pounding in her ears stopped her from making out what they were saying. It didn’t matter. She had less than a minute to get onto the roof and lock the door, so she left Hardison to make up his mind and call the shots on the next move.

“Damn, damn, damn –“ Hardison muttered, but Tom suddenly opened the driver’s door and stepped out into the night. “Tom – what the hell –“

Tom Reid raised an eyebrow and calmly smiled at Hardison.

“We need the ‘phone, right?”

Nate’s voice sounded in Tom’s earbud.

No risks, Tom! Okay? We –

“Alec, is there any way we can get the info off the ‘phone before Pennicuik buggers off? Or do I just punch the silly bastard and do a runner with the ‘phone?”

Hardison blinked, and then pulled out his cell ‘phone. He fiddled with it for a moment or two and then handed it to Tom.

“All you gotta do is get close to him, Tom, alright? I need maybe ten seconds … preferably fifteen, an’ I can clone the information.”

Tom looked nonplussed, but nodded in agreement.

“I have no idea what you just said, but I’ll deal with it.” He was about to turn and go, but he
hesitated for a moment. “Do you have any pictures of girls on this?” He waggled the ‘phone at Hardison.

“’Scuse you???” Hardison was stumped and not a little embarrassed.


Hardison snatched the ‘phone back, and muttering, he scrolled through his picture files. He chose one and handed the ‘phone back to Tom, who grinned at the photograph of Parker in a Santa hat eating a toffee apple, her face sticky and obviously enjoying the hell out of the sweet treat.

“That’ll do nicely!” Tom said, and then he was off, walking quickly towards the building set behind a wall, the lights of the foyer shining brightly in the night. As he walked, he tousled his hair and then tugged his shirt until some of the tail hung outside his pants. Satisfied with his slightly dishevelled appearance, he began to jog, tucking Hardison’s cell ‘phone into his inside pocket.

Ducking under the barrier leading to the underground parking lot, he made his way to the glass-enclosed foyer entrance, and he could see the guard stand up behind the reception desk, looking alarmed.

He waved at the man, and gestured urgently.

The guard, wary, took a few steps around his desk and stared at this untidy-looking man gesticulating at him. The stranger pulled out a cell ‘phone and placed it flat on the huge glass door, screen foremost, and the guard could see it showed a picture of a girl. He took a few more steps towards the man before lifting his walkie-talkie from the edge of the desk. He pressed the button.

“Hey, Ron … I’ve got some lunatic down here waving at me through the front door,” he said.

The walkie-talkie crackled into life.

What kind of lunatic? Ron asked from somewhere in the building.

“Dunno. He’s got a picture of a girl on his ‘phone.”

There was silence from Ron for a moment. Then …

Ask him what he wants.

“What? He might be dangerous –“

Ron sighed.

We don’t have any money in the building, Fred, so just bloody ask him, will ya? Nobody’s going to rob the place, mate. There’s nothing to steal! I’ll be there in a minute, anyway.

Fred watched the untidy stranger, who was now pointing animatedly at the picture on the ‘phone. Oh well, he thought. Looks harmless enough, and off he went to find out what the man wanted.

As he got closer to the door, Fred noticed the man looked worried and very tired. He was still waving the ‘phone about, and Fred studied the picture. The girl looked a bit simple, he decided.

“What do you want??” He shouted.

The stranger looked relieved now, and his grey eyes sparked with something akin to anger.
“Where the bloody hell is my daughter?!” he yelled frantically.

*Well, thought Fred. This was new.*

Albert Pennicuik stepped out of the elevator and strode purposefully along the polished floor of the corridor, one hand in his pocket, fingers wrapped around the burner ‘phone that lay there. His small diary was safe and sound in his jacket inside pocket. Happier now that he had retrieved them, he opened one of the big doors leading to the foyer and emerged into bright lights and two security guards having an animated conversation with a rumpled-looking man who was waving his arms about and holding a ‘phone with the image of a girl on it.

“THAT’S HIM!!!” the man suddenly yelled, and lunged towards Pennicuik, who stopped dead in his tracks, unsure of what was going on. For a moment he thought that this man could be a policeman, but he decided the concept was absurd. Why would a policeman be restrained by two security guards?

“What’s going on here?” he asked Fred, who was hanging onto the stranger’s arm, doing his best to control him without hurting the man.

“YOU BASTARD!!” the man yelled, red with fury, and he struggled harder, trying to free himself.

“You sick bastard!! You seduced my daughter!! Where is she??”

“I’m sorry, Mister Pennicuik,” Ron said, hanging onto Tom Reid’s other arm, the one with the ‘phone in it. “This gentleman seems to think you have his daughter, which is impossible. Right?”

Pennicuik paled, his watery dark eyes widening.

“Of course I don’t!! I’m alone!! I … I came here alone!!” he stammered. He had no idea what was going on, but he couldn’t afford this kind of attention. Not in his present circumstances.

“LIAR!!” Tom roared, and flourished the picture of Parker under his nose. “Look at her!! She’s *under age*, you *perv*! You took advantage of my baby girl!! She left home yesterday and hasn’t come home, so *where is she??*”

“Now then, calm down!” Ron said, trying to soothe the irate man, “Mister Pennicuik just dropped by to pick up something, didn’t you, Mister Pennicuik?”

“Why … yes, yes,” Pennicuik answered hastily, realising the guards were on his side, “I came here alone. I’ve never met the young lady!! I … I don’t … I’m …”

Ron grinned, and put a firm hand on Tom’s chest.

“Well, I forgot, Mister Pennicuik. Listen, mate,” he said to Tom, who was suitably furious, “Mister Pennicuik here … he’s … he’s not into girkles,” he explained cheerily.

Pennicuik blushed, but began to relax.

“That … that’s right,” he said, his voice steadier now. “I wouldn’t have touched your daughter.” He smiled tremulously. “I’m gay.”

Tom let himself look confused, and then contrite.

“Seriously?” he asked.

“Oh yes,” Fred said. “I forgot about that.”
Tom allowed himself to relax, and Ron and Fred carefully removed their hands, letting the stocky man straighten his jacket and then stare at the picture of the girl in the Santa hat.

“So where’s my Beryl??” he asked. “My girl said she was dating a bloke called Alfred who worked here. On the third floor. When I called they said it was you, and … and so I followed you here.”

Pennicuik, feeling far more confident, arranged his face into a sympathetic smile.

“I’m so sorry,” he said. “Our admin staff obviously heard the wrong name. My name’s Albert, not Alfred. Although,” he added thoughtfully, “There’s no Alfred on the third floor.” He brightened. “Oh well. No harm done.”

Tom was by now mortified.

“Oh, bugger me!” he declared, “Oh, bloody hell! I’m so sorry, pal! But the wife … she’s going up the wall with worry, and she said our Beryl was with this Alfred bloke, and … well, you know what mums can be like. It’s … it’s because she’s under age, y’see.”

And before anyone could stop him, Tom lurched forward and wrapped his arms around Pennicuik in a bear hug.

The little man was overwhelmed, but rather than cause a scene, he patted Tom awkwardly on the back in sympathy.

Tom Reid hung on for a good fifteen seconds, and then he let Pennicuik go, wiping teary eyes and shuffling in embarrassment. He held out a hand and Pennicuik shook it limply.

“I, ah … I’m bloody sorry, mate!” Tom muttered, and stared at his feet. “I’ll be off then,” he said to the two guards, who looked at the rumpled man with a mixture of pity and the satisfaction of a job well done.

“Hope you find your girl,” Ron said, who wasn’t too sure that this Beryl was under age. She looked in her late twenties to him. “Call in by the coppers if she’s not come home by tomorrow.”

“And leaving the guards and a bemused Pennicuik behind, he stepped through the door and out into the night.

Walking away from the building, he heard Hardison’s voice in his ear.

Shit, we got the lot!! Tom, you da man!!

Tom Reid, ex-Chief Inspector of Police and newly-minted criminal, straightened, tucked in his shirt, smoothed down his hair and headed back to his team.

Eliot lay in the dark of his bedroom, shaky and feverish, and checked his alarm clock for the umpteenth time. He felt sick to his stomach, and it wasn’t just the late supper Effie had made him eat that sat leaden in his belly. The worry was killing him. The tablet lay on top of his comforter, taunting him with its silence. Hardison should have called by now.
He heard a snort and sniffle as Lizzie shifted in her sleep as she lay in her big chair. She had refused to leave Eliot when Jo told her his temperature was a little high.

Beside his bed, his cell ‘phone began to vibrate.

He reached over painfully and picked it up, swiping it with his finger and putting it to his ear. The tremors were back, he noticed.

“Yeah?” he said quietly.

“Hey, El,” Hardison said. “We got what we needed an’ we’re headin’ back to Sydney, safe and sound.”

Eliot took a moment before he replied.

“Good. You’re all okay?”

“I told you, man – safe an’ sound. All we need now is a good night’s sleep.”

Eliot could hear the amusement in Hardison’s voice, and the tremors settled. Now he could get some rest.

Ringing off, Eliot placed his ‘phone beside him, and eased his one good arm under the covers. His team had survived a job without him. He didn’t know whether to be relieved or annoyed.

Hell, what did it matter? They were safe.

*Now you can rest and heal,* Alice said, and closing his eyes, Eliot drifted into a dreamless sleep.

To be continued …
When Wapanjara awoke the following morning, the damp, windy chill had been chased away by humid, dull weather, and Eliot drifted into consciousness feeling thoroughly washed out.

His coughing awoke Lizzie, who sleepily pried herself out of her big, comfortable chair and silently sat cross-legged on the bed beside Eliot. She studied his pale, drawn features and listened to his cough, hearing the congestion in his chest. His hair was sweat-damp and his eyes were glassy, and then he sneezed, which sent him cringing sideways with a keening grunt of pain. She cupped his face, feeling the heat in him, and sucked in a breath of concern. Then he sneezed again, and Lizzie had had enough.

Slipping off the bed she headed for Jo and Soapy’s bedroom, and she knew then that Eliot was very ill when he didn’t protest. Before she could knock on the door, Jo was there, slipping into her dressing gown.

“I’m coming, Lizzie, I’m coming,” she said quietly so as not to wake Soapy. “What’s wrong?”

Lizzie looked up at her Grandma Jo, brown eyes filled with worry.

“Now he’s sneezing, Grandma Jo! He’s still coughing and he’s hot, and –”

Jo smiled down at the little girl who watched over Eliot with the tenacity of a momma grizzly.

“Now then, don’t worry, sweetheart. Let’s have a look at him, but I think the problem is simply a bad cold. He got caught up in some wet weather when he went walkabout, remember? He probably got soaked and seeing as he’s still nowhere near healed up, it got a hold pretty quickly.”

Jo and Lizzie found Effie on her way into Eliot’s room, the old cook with the bottle of decongestant in one hand and a spoon in the other.

“The young bugger’s pretty crook, Missus,” she said softly, and Lizzie gave Effie a quick morning hug, Effie growling happily under her breath. Mei appeared out of the kitchen, her hands covered in flour and a smudge on her nose.

“I will help?” she asked quietly. “He is very sick, so I help!”

“No need, Princess,” Effie murmured, keeping her voice down. The twins were still asleep in their drawer, Buster on guard beneath the table, and she didn’t want to wake them because Rose was a crotchety child before she had her breakfast. “But I think the daft bugger will need some of your congee, today, girlie. It’ll help. Shall we do that after brekkie?”

Mei’s face twisted into a grimace of disapproval, and she nodded.
“He is a silly bludger!” she announced, and looked at Jo. “Mama Jo, why is he such a daft bugger?”

Jo, if she hadn’t been so worried about Eliot, would have burst out laughing, but a voice growled weakly from the bedroom.

“Goddamn monstrous regiment of friggin’ women!”** Eliot ranted, his voice croaky and phlegm-ridden, and he began coughing again, which then morphed into a strangled sneeze. A very ungentlemanly stream of unknown words wafted through the doorway.

Lizzie frowned, curious.

“Effie, what does ‘Os … ostavi me jeb … jebeno sam’ mean?” she asked, struggling with the words.

Effie raised an eyebrow.

“I have no idea, but I really don’t think we want to know, nipper,” and without any hesitation she headed into Eliot’s room.

“Sranje jebeš patku!!” Eliot hissed under his breath, and by the time the ‘monstrous regiment of women’ entered his room, he was already out of bed and trying to stand up. He gave them a feverish glare that he hoped would make them all disappear in a puff of sulphurous smoke. It didn’t work, and Lizzie bounced onto the bed beside him, which made Eliot flinch. Reaching over to her chair, she dragged her comforter onto the bed and then over Eliot’s shoulders. He was shivering with chills, but he growled something objectionable under his breath, and this time Effie knew it was Farsi.

Eliot straightened even as Lizzie fussed, and glared at them all.

“I’m gettin’ up, havin’ a shower an’ then -“ he let out an explosion of sneezes that almost laid him out on the bed, but he got it under control and eyes watering, he continued. “ … an’ then I’m gonna call Hardison. I got work to do –“

Jo crossed her arms and smiled benignly.

“That’s fine, boy. You want a shower? Then I’ll take the strapping and bandage off and you can do that. You’ll probably feel better anyway for being clean.”

Eliot stopped in mid-rant. He narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

“Good,” he said gruffly. “Then I got stuff to do. Like … work.”

Jo nodded reasonably.

“No probs, boy. I’m sure we can get you set up in the living room. Or if you like, Lizzie can bring all you need out onto the veranda. Table or recliner?” she asked.

Eliot’s frown turned to slight puzzlement. He actually hadn’t got that far in planning his day, expecting more resistance from his guards. He coughed for a moment or two, and wiped the sweat off his face with his forearm. **God**, he felt like death warmed up. He surreptitiously pulled Lizzie’s comforter closer around his shoulders. He was freezing.

“The Cowboy is cold,” Mei said, frowning. “Mama Jo, I’ll make *congee* and get him some tea. Lemon, honey and *róuguì*. That will help. Come, little nipper,” she added, holding a floury hand out to Lizzie. “We make tea!”

Lizzie scrambled off the bed and kissing Eliot’s wan cheek, she cupped his face.
“Do as Grandma Jo and Effie say, and Mei will help you feel better when you drink your tea. I’ll be right back to take care of you,” she ordered.

Eliot snarled something unmentionable and his teeth began to chatter.

Effie sat down in her rocking chair and screwed the top off the decongestant, and then poured out a spoonful.

“Alright now, laddie,” she said softly. “Drink up. It’ll help … you know that,” she said, her muddy eyes warm with compassion.

Eliot eyed both Effie and the disgusting stuff in the spoon, the fumes already permeating his room. He waited for the nagging and badgering to begin, but Effie just watched him patiently. He glanced at Jo. She had that ‘poor young bugger’ look on her face, the one she wore when Eliot thought he was in charge of his own destiny when he was sick or hurt.

So Eliot sat and shivered and sweated and glared, and then he suddenly opened his mouth and took his medicine.

During the ensuing coughing and wheezing, Jo sat next to him and rubbed his back, and Effie made what she intended to be sympathetic clucking sounds. Eliot felt utterly miserable. He had things to do, and he wanted to feel clean and not sticky with sweat, and he wanted his head to stay on his shoulders when he moved. And God, he ached all over!

Jo tucked the comforter around his chest, and Eliot looked like a grumpy, scowling, tufty bear.

“Listen,” she said, “go have a shower and we’ll pack your wound, and then you can rest in your room and do what work you need to do. We’ll help, alright? If it makes you feel better, then okay. We’re worried about them too,” Jo rested a hand on Eliot’s good arm, “and if it helps you settle, then we’ll all feel happier.”

Eliot glanced around at the gang of women who were in charge of his immediate future, and nodded even as he scowled.

“Okay … okay,” he muttered. “A shower sounds good.” He jutted out his chin, stubborn to the end. “An’ I can do it myself! Just let me free of these damn’ bandages an’ I can –“ he coughed for a few moments and went back to glaring, “–I can have a damn shower!”

Jo nodded.

“Just let us know when you’re done and I’ll dress your wound and you can have a restful day How does that sound?”

Eliot narrowed his eyes.

“What’s the catch?” he growled, still not convinced that these harridans had his best interests at heart and just wanted to make him suffer.

“There’s no bloody catch, you ruddy fool!” Effie groused, and settled back in her rocking chair. She sighed noisily. “Listen, Yank. Stop being such a blasted arse, have a hot shower and wash off the crud, and take your time. The Missus and me’ll get you patched up afterwards, you can have your pill, eat some brekkie and relax for the rest of the day. It’s not bleedin’ rocket science!!”

The resulting Battle of the Glares was interrupted by Lizzie carefully carrying a hot mug of Mei’s special tea through from the kitchen, and the aroma of honey, lemon and cinnamon drifted through
“Here!” Lizzie said firmly, “you have to drink this, Mei says! She put some cold water in it so you don’t burn your mouth.” She stopped beside Effie and stared at Eliot expectantly.

Eliot tried to wait her out, but failed. He was still cold and his chest ached, and he could feel more coughing and sneezing on its way if he didn’t do something about it. So he tugged the comforter further around his shoulders as best as he could, coughed for a bit, and then he reached out with his good hand and took the mug.

The first sip was wonderful. The lemon and honey soothed his throat and the warmth of the cinnamon helped shift the chill in his bones. He couldn’t help a soft murmur of comfort from escaping his battered body, and that broke the stalemate.

Before he could growl another word he was briskly moved from the bed into Lizzie’s big chair and covered in Lizzie’s comforter so he could drink his tea. His bed was stripped and fresh sheets and pillows fitted, Lizzie executing a fairly decent military tuck at each corner as Effie fluffed pillows. The little girl kept a gimlet eye on Eliot as he silently watched the goings-on over the rim of his mug.

When he had finished his tea he was summarily deposited back on his bed, and before he could say something rude in Hebrew Jo and Effie very gently removed his strapping and bandage. He was poked and prodded by Jo, who hummed and haa’d at the bullet wounds, and Lizzie held Eliot’s hand because he was shaking, although it was simply because he was freezing and he felt as though he had gone ten rounds with a boomer*.

He was pronounced well enough to have his shower, but, he was warned, he had better not use his left arm and he would sit down on the stool to shower or else there would be hell to pay.

He did not appreciate the two-women-one-little-girl processional escort to the bathroom, where his clean clothes were deposited on the bathroom chair, and several big towels were left to warm through on the heated towel rack. Lizzie silently handed him his expensive tea-tree shampoo.

By the time Eliot had evicted all of them from the bathroom, he was exhausted but triumphant.

But even as he struggled out of his sweat-soaked clothing he thought back to the times he had had to take care of himself … holing up in some crappy motel in the middle of nowhere … stitching and sweating and swearing, and then the often one-armed bandaging which left him a shaking, agonised mess in a blood-smeared, grubby bathroom. Then there would inevitably follow bad nights, often fever-strewn and nightmare-ridden while his battered body struggled to heal. But those days were long gone. Now he had people who wouldn’t let him do that anymore, and though he might complain and growl and snarl to be left alone, he deeply treasured the care and love that came with it.

The next forty-five minutes were bliss. He was hurting but he was careful, and by the time he emerged, well-washed and feeling far less flu'-ridden if a little pruned in places, Eliot was ready to struggle into a soft pair of old sweat pants and a warm hoodie draped over his shoulders.

Padding back to his room, redolent with the scent of shampoo and coal-tar soap, he found Jo and Effie waiting for him, bandages and packing at the ready.

Damn.

Hardison awoke to the sound of traffic and ever-present hum of humanity that resulted from people accumulating into cities. He stretched lazily in the huge bed, enjoying the space afforded to his long limbs. It was certainly better than lying on a cramped fold-down bed. Well now, he thought, time for
a hot, luxuriant shower and a lazy walk downstairs to join his team for a leisurely breakfast and then - and only then - a discussion about the job.

He checked the time. Six in the morning. He had only managed a few hours of sleep after the return from Canberra, but he suddenly realised he was waiting for Effie to jangle the old metal triangle that hung from a hook outside the kitchen door, summoning the stockmen and jackaroos to breakfast.

“Come’n get it, you bastards, before it goes in the dog!” he murmured under his breath, and smiled. Effie never wavered from the words as she bawled them from her little deck outside the kitchen. His heart panged, and he suddenly realised he missed Wapanjara and its people. He missed Effie. He missed cuddling the twins, and feeding Gertie gummy frogs. He missed everyone and everything about the place, and for the life of him he had no idea why.

Wapanjara was remote, uncomfortable and full of things that bit you. Or stung you, just for a change. Sometimes they even ate you. But now … now he understood why Eliot guarded Wapanjara and its people with his life. It was love. And, Hardison realised soberly, he would do exactly the same and for the same reason.

“Nana,” he whispered to himself, I’m gonna bring you to Wapanjara one day, I swear. You’n Effie are gonna be awesome!”

And rolling his tall frame out of the soft, huge bed, he headed off for his shower, already making plans for the day.

Being the centre of attention was never ever Eliot’s favourite place to be, and it showed. He grumbled and snarled, became petulant and snitty, and was an all-round pain-in-the-ass to everyone except Lizzie.

Soapy, on the other hand, blatantly adored being fussed-over.

The old pastoralist was healing nicely, but that didn’t stop him sitting with Eliot as the younger man lay in his bed, propped up and wearing his spectacles, worrying and grumbling about his team as he did research and jotted copious notes. Soapy accepted every cup of tea, every delicious biscuit or cake or even a peck on the cheek that came his way. Even though his bad arm wasn’t strapped up any more and he looked fine, he winced just enough to send Mei into a flutter, the girl frowning and scolding as she hurried off to fetch him tea and an Anzac biscuit. Nothing was too good for Papa Soapy, and she brought Eliot tea as well, so by mid-morning Eliot was convinced his back teeth were awash with a sea of tea.

Now that Soapy was comfortably settled in Lizzie’s big chair, Lizzie herself took up residence on Eliot’s bed, curled into his good side and ‘helping’ him do his research. Cecil was tucked under Lizzie’s arm because apparently he was missing his good friend Bert, Kip’s old fluffy goanna. According to Lizzie, Bert and ‘Cec’ were bestest mates.

But Eliot was concentrating on making sure Benjamin Kremic stayed the hell away from his people. Hardison had sent him images of the man on a return visit to Dartford Racers, and Eliot watched streaming CCTV footage of Kremic, laughing and joking with another man as they left the Dartford offices. He knew the other man to be Hardy Bushman, CEO of the company. He looked slick, sharp and corporate.

He watched as Bushman escorted Kremic to his car, a big, top-of-the-range Lexus SUV. Eliot could tell by the way the door swung solidly shut and by the distinctive thickness of the door with its reinforced hinges, that the vehicle was heavily armoured. Kremic walked a dangerous path because
of his line of work, and the three men who accompanied him were known to Eliot.

“Who are they?” Lizzie asked drowsily, pointing at Kremic and his goons.

“People you don’t want to meet, sweetheart, believe me,” Eliot said hoarsely, his throat feeling like well-worn sandpaper, and to make the point he began to cough harshly.

Lizzie reached to the box of tissues lying beside her on the coverlet and handed a couple to Eliot, who blew his nose and dropped the used tissues into his waste bin.

“Thanks, ‘Lizbeth Grace,” he murmured, and then smiled as Lizzie retrieved a glass of orange juice from his bedside cabinet and handed it to him. The cool, sweetness of the liquid soothed his battered throat.

“Y’welcome,” Lizzie replied, drowsily nuzzling back into Eliot’s side. She and Cec were very tired.

“Are they bad guys?” she asked, returning to watching the footage on the tablet.

Eliot nodded, although his head threatened to rattle loose from his shoulders at the action. The headache was a killer.

“Sure are, sweetheart. Now … I have to make sure they leave the country so your Momma an’ Daddy can work their magic an’ take out this bad guy,” he added, poking a finger at Hardy Bushman. “We’re waiting on a call from –“

And as if on cue, Eliot’s cell ‘phone rang. Lizzie scrambled to lift it from the bedside table where it lay almost unnoticed among the orange juice, Devil’s Decongestant, menthol rub and other concoctions intended to help rid Eliot of his chest cold. She quickly swiped the touch screen and held the ‘phone to Eliot’s ear.

Eliot, not a little put out by Lizzie’s efficiency, answered his call.

“Yeah?” he grunted. He listened for a moment and checked the time. It would be after ten in the evening in New York. “Okay, Rebecca … that’s good. Listen … I don’t want you doin’ this on your own. I–“ Eliot stopped as Rebecca Hines interrupted, obviously disgruntled, but he gave her a second or two to get it out of her system and then continued. “’Becca … listen to me, okay?? You are not doin’ this without some kind of backup, so … yes, I know you can take care of yourself, but –“ There came another stream of indignant sentences, which Eliot chose to ignore. “I’m sendin’ someone to watch your back whether you like it or not, Miss Antsy-pants,”’ that made Lizzie giggle, for it was a familiar nickname from her two-year-old days – “so Shelley will be with you in the mornin’. He’s tough, knows what he’s doin’ and he won’t let anyone or anythin’ hurt you, darlin’. Alright?” He listened to Rebecca Hines’ fading complaints, and then he sighed in exasperation. “Yeah, he’s handsome, I guess … and no, I have no idea if he has a cute ass, ‘Becca! Jeez – grow up, will ya??” He heard a chuckle of amusement from the other end of the line. “I ain’t listenin’ to any more of this, you crazy woman! I’ll speak to you later!” and with that, Eliot rang off.

Lizzie placed the ‘phone beside Eliot and sat up on her knees, gazing at her best friend.

“You’re snotty,” she said.

Eliot scowled fiercely, which didn’t make any impression on Lizzie whatsoever.

“No I ain’t!” he declared, and then sneezed, waving his one good hand at Lizzie who handed him more tissues. He wiped up snot and then sniffed. “Stop fussin’, ‘Lizbeth Grace! I got more things to do, like call Hardison an’ –“
“You should have something to eat,” Lizzie said, ignoring the frustrated hitter’s complaints.

“Second that,” Soapy said, looking up from his book. He had only just finished a helping of apple cobbler. “Lunch sounds like a plan.”

The tablet ‘pinged.’

Eliot’s tart reply about eating yet more food was stopped in its tracks by the appearance of Hardison on the screen.

“Yo, Eliot!” he said by way of greeting.

Lizzie sprawled next to Eliot and lifted the tablet, grinning back at Hardison.

“Alec!!! When are you coming home??” she asked, delighted at seeing him.

“Soon, baby-girl, soon, I promise!” he chuckled, and his eyes were warm with love for the little girl who was his precious god-daughter. “It’ll be a few days more, an’ then we’ll be home.”

Eliot’s heart lurched at how easily both Lizzie and Hardison called Wapanjara ‘home’. But right now there was business to attend to.

“I was just about to call you,” he said brusquely. “‘Becca called. Kremic took the bait. He’s flyin’ out from Sydney tonight an’ll be in New York to meet ‘Becca day after tomorrow. He’s lookin’ for a deal on the jersey but ‘Becca’s going to try an’ hold him off as long as she can, but she’s built some wiggle room into the offer so she can keep him busy for maybe another couple of days. Then give him another day … mebbee two, to get back to Sydney an’ you have to be done, Hardison! He’ll come lookin’ an’ when he finds out Bushman’s been taken out he won’t be happy.”

Hardison did his sums.

“Five days … six if we’re lucky. It’s not too bad,” the hacker decided. “Should be plenty of time.”

Eliot coughed and blew his nose.

“Don’t count on it, Hardison. Kremic might just decide not to go for it – he’s a suspicious bast – person – at the best of times, and he may just decide the money’s too much. I got Shelley workin’ with Becca, watchin’ out for her, but it’s too damn’ flyin’ by the seat of our pants, Hardison!”

Hardison did an arm-wavy shrug.

“Nate an’ Soph are meetin’ Bushman this afternoon, an’ Parker’s going to try out one of their bikes.”

“Is she doin’ okay? Is she pullin’ it off?” Eliot asked, worried.

“Man, is she!!” Hardison grinned. “She an’ Tom’re doin’ some decent speed times on the road, Eliot! Tom did a helluva job cloning Pennicuik’s cell, an’ he’s really workin’ himself into doin’ the biz.” Hardison’s grin widened. “He’s okay.”

Eliot felt a twinge of envy, but he had known from the start when he had suggested Tom to back up the team that the man would do well.

“Well, at least you got someone who knows what they’re doin’ watchin’ your back –“ Eliot had to pause as an enormous sneeze began to work its way its way through his system. He did his best to control the blasted thing, and Lizzie’s eyes widened as she saw Eliot begin to squint, his breathing turning into a series of strangled, hitching breaths as he tried to beat the sneeze into submission
because he knew it was going to hurt like hell.

Hardison’s eyes grew round with concern and Soapy suddenly looked up from his book.

“Son? Are you –“

“Eliot!” Lizzie clutched Eliot’s good arm, “You can’t!” She thought quickly. Her mother would tell her to take deep breaths to control hiccups. Perhaps that would work. “Take lots of deep breaths!!” she insisted, and shoving Cec into Soapy’s unresisting arms she rose to her knees and leaned against Eliot, trying to support him.

Eliot sneezed.

It was the deep, rib-wrenching mother of all sneezes, and even as he covered his mouth with his hand Eliot let out a grunt of pure agony and he lurched sideways, keening with pain, but Lizzie caught him.

His head lay against her chest and her arms cradled him, and she felt the shudder of pain so she held him tight, and Eliot, embarrassed and hurting and thoroughly frikkin’ sick of being so useless, heard the little girl croon instinctively as she tried to ease him and was glad of it.

”Eliot?? Eliot!! You okay, bro??” Hardison’s voice bawled from the tablet, and Soapy lifted it and nodded at the young man.

“He’ll be fine, Alec. This cold’s just taking a toll, so … any chance we could speak later?”

Eliot, wheezing and trying to control the coughs that decided to arrive immediately after the sneeze, eased himself away from Lizzie and spent a minute or so spluttering himself into silence.

“Eliot, you got some nasty code in the node there, man,” Hardison said as Soapy passed over the tablet to the stricken hitter.

“Tell me about it,” Eliot croaked nastily, furious with his hapless body. “Look, call me after the meeting with Bushman, Hardison. Where are you meetin’ up?”

Hardison studied Eliot’s wan features for a moment, and then sighed.

“He’s bringin’ one of his own prototypes for Parker to try out at Katoomba. I have to see just how good this system is, an’ then, Eliot m’friend, I got vision an’ the rest of the world wears bifocals, ‘cause,” he quoted cheerfully, “I want to push Bushman to prove his system’s dinky di!”

Eliot coughed thoughtfully.

“Okay. I get it.” He rubbed his eyes, feeling the grit of weariness beginning to form. “Call me when it’s done. Remember … you’ve only got five days at the most, probably less, ‘cause I’m not puttin’ Becca in any more danger than she has to be. Kremic is not a guy to be messed with.”

Hardison nodded.

“Gotta. Go rest up, El. You sound worse’n Gertie havin’ a hissy fit!”

Eliot grumbled to himself, but had to agree.

“Call me!” he growled, and allowed Lizzie a quick wave to her favourite hacker before ending the call.
Eliot was unhappy, frustrated and feeling absolutely rotten, but he could do nothing about the situation, so, he decided, he’d better suck it up and deal with it. He saw Lizzie glance up at him, and his tired gaze softened.

“You look icky!” Lizzie declared, crossing her arms.

Eliot raised an eyebrow.

“I do, huh? Thank you, ‘Lizbeth Grace. That’s very kind of you,” he said gruffly.

Lizzie retrieved Cec from Soapy and tucked the fluffy kangaroo tightly beside Eliot, and then laid her head against her guardian’s good shoulder. She could hear the rattle of infection in his chest, and Eliot relaxed back onto his pillows.

“‘Lizbeth Grace?”

“Ya-huh?” she replied lazily.

“How about after lunch we think about your medicine pouch?” Eliot asked. “It’ll maybe help take my mind off this damn job!”

Lizzie smiled, eyes closing with pleasure.

“I think that would be bonzer!” she said.

Parker had discovered the joy of road-racing on a high-end bicycle built for nothing but breath-taking speed.

She was taking Bushman’s prototype on a short kilometre trial run, Tom keeping up with her on a small motorbike and shouting pointless instructions at Parker, who was deep, deep within her own world of pure thrills.

This was almost as good as a flat-out gallop on a horse, she decided, and she increased her efforts, the ergonomic design of the frame and the state-of-the-art wheels and computer system coming together to create a nirvana of speed for the little thief.

She had cycled all of her young life, and had enjoyed bike-stealing as a side-line before moving on to cars. With luck, Hardison could make her look good enough for a day or two to be an Olympic contender in the making, and Bushman would think he had a sponsorship deal in the works with young Darcy Birnham’s team. If he could get his system seen at international level, he would be made.

She knew her speed times would be well below any respectable cyclist in the sport, but Hardison had that in hand. Sophie had given Bushman a genteel handshake and rested her hand containing her cell ‘phone on Bushman’s arm, and within seconds the young hacker had stripped not only Bushman’s emails but also the control of his digital stop-watch from the man’s own ‘phone. He could then synchronise Nate and Bushman as they timed the trial, giving Parker the speed time she needed. And, she knew, she would look good.

As she sped past Nate and Bushman she saw the look of amazement on Nate’s face and the smugness oozing from Bushman, and she knew Hardison, secreted in their rented SUV a hundred yards away, had done her proud.

Sophie gave a twee little clap of approval before patting Bushman’s arm, smiling with delight.
As Tom slowed and stopped beside her, she grimaced. Her thighs were on fire.

“Alright?” Tom asked quietly, as he dug out a bottle of water for Parker from his motorbike’s pack, the young woman easing off the bike and catching her breath.

Parker nodded wordlessly and bent over, resting a hand on her knee and dragging air into her lungs. She was having a blast on the bike, but despite her extreme fitness, the effort was killing her. Tom cracked the cap of the water bottle and handed it to Parker, who drank a couple of mouthfuls to wet her throat and then she poured the rest over her head after taking off her helmet.

“My thighs hurt!!” she gasped, and she knew that her slim physique wasn’t quite muscular enough to be completely convincing, but she just hoped Bushman didn’t notice. Besides, she thought, he was trying to sell them his new system, so he would probably concentrate on that.

Tom grinned at her.

“Hey … what do you get when you cross a snowman with a vampire?”

Despite still gasping for breath, Parker grinned and shook her head.

Tom rubbed Parker’s back, encouraging her to relax and breath.

“Frostbite,” he said, and Parker immediately dissolved into hiccupping snorkey giggles. “C’mon, Parker. Let’s go see how well you did,” and taking the bicycle from Parker, he led the way back to Nate and Sophie, who were busy congratulating Bushman on his success.

Neither of them noticed the tall, lean man wearing sunglasses and sitting on the hood of a neat little Audi, looking at a stopwatch and frowning. He pulled out a cell ‘phone and made a call. After speaking for several minutes, he tucked the ‘phone away inside his jacket, got into the Audi and drove away.

Wapanjara lay under a miasma of stupefying humidity, the threat of a downpour lurking in the distant hills as night fell, and the drift of stars was dulled by the oncoming clouds.

But Lizzie didn’t mind. She was curled up on the spare expanse of Eliot’s bed, Cec beside her, as she sleepily discussed her medicine pouch with Eliot, who was tetchy with the pain which stopped him from sleeping. But Lizzie helped by distracting him, and the little girl had pulled out her project book, turned to a fresh page and was busy thinking about what kind of pouch she wanted.

They had looked at different types on the internet, and Lizzie was bewildered by the different designs. Did she want beads on it, or was it to be plain? Perhaps she might have tassels around the seam, or did she want it shaped like a rectangle? She drew out some ideas, and then discarded them. The decision was not to be rushed, she knew, because it was important to get it right.

She glanced at Eliot. He was bare-chested with just a hoodie draped over his shoulders to stop him getting too chilled, and Lizzie surreptitiously studied the pouch which lay over Eliot’s heart, protecting the wolves that lay there.

His medicine pouch was rather plain, with no tassels or bead decoration, and it had simple drawstrings with a single blue bead at each end to hold the pouch shut. The wolf totem was plainly stitched but obviously done with love, and Lizzie wondered what she should have on her pouch. It should mean something to her, she knew that.

“Having problems, ‘Lizbeth Grace?” Eliot asked softly. He was secretly delighted that she was
taking the project so seriously, and he silently thanked Grandfather for having spent time with him as a troubled thirteen-year-old who was about to lose his Momma. It had meant so much to him, and it seemed it had touched Lizzie in the same way.

“I don’t know what I want to have on my pouch!” she said, chewing her lip as she pondered the problem. “I can’t have a wolf because that’s your totem, right?”

Eliot nodded, patiently letting her work through the problem.

“Why not choose somethin’ that means a lot to you? Maybe … maybe somethin’ that makes you think of home. How about that?”

Lizzie thought about it.

“Does it have to be Cherokee?” she asked.

“Nope. You’re not of the People, so … your medicine pouch can just be about what’s important to you … help you think about who you are and what you should do with your life,” Eliot explained. “Grandfather wanted me to understand who I was … that I was Aniwiya – my mother’s clan – and that I needed to have her with me, as well as know where I belonged. So you can decide where you belong, maybe. Why not choose somethin’ that makes you think about who you are an’ where your heart is.”

Lizzie’s eyes widened as she thought about what Eliot was suggesting. This was far more important and complicated than she thought it would be. But she knew she wanted to do this, and so she decided that she would think of things she loved and made her smile with happiness when she thought of them.

But, she thought, it was going to be really hard.

Grabbing Cec she shuffled over to Eliot’s side and slumped onto his mass of pillows, her face thoughtful in the soft, golden light of the bedside lamp.

“Eliot?”

He shifted, coughed and winced, but settled a little and waited until Lizzie had stopped fidgeting before he answered.

“What, ‘Lizbeth Grace?”

“What was Grandfather like?” she asked.

Oh. Well, that was unexpected. If Eliot spoke of his family, it was usually about his Grandfather, but it was usually about what his Grandfather had taught him or wisdom the old man had imparted to the lonely boy who suffered his Momma’s loss in silence. Eliot had never described his Grandfather … had never told Lizzie about the man’s life and what had made him who he was.

Eliot took a deep breath, sneezed, dealt with the pain, and felt Lizzie snuggle into his side as she always did when she wanted a story.

Okay. He could do this.

“Well …” he began, and then realised he had no idea where to start. “Well … Grandfather kinda looked a little like me,” he began. “Stocky … strong hands, I remember. He had white hair even when I was a little boy, so I never knew what he looked like when he was younger. But he had hazel
eyes an’ he always wore his hair long and pulled back.”

“Like you used to do!” Lizzie said, already enthralled.

“Yeah … like I did. He didn’t say too much. He only spoke when somethin’ needed sayin’, and usually when my Dad was takin’ his temper out on me or my sis.” Eliot smiled at the memory. “Mostly me, ‘cause I was a stubborn little cuss an’ my daddy hated that in me. Said it was my ‘red injun’ comin’ out. Grandfather just used to smile an’ say the ‘injun’ was the good part of me.”

“That’s rude!” Lizzie exclaimed, unhappy that Eliot’s father could speak to his son like that. “You shouldn’t say ‘red injun’ – that’s just … rude!!” she reiterated.

“My daddy thought it would annoy Grandfather, but it never did. He and I hung out a lot, an’ he would take me fishin’ and taught me how to shoot. Now don’t get me wrong – my dad is a hard-workin’, honest man, and he sure loved my Momma, but he struggled, ‘Lizbeth Grace. He’d had a hard life an’ he didn’t deal well with hurt. So when things got bad he hit out at the people he loved, although he never said a bad word to Momma. The only thing he couldn’t do for her was watch her die. So … Grandfather was the person who kept me goin’ when Momma passed. He knew I was stubborn, an’ he knew I had my dad’s temper, so he and I were good friends.” Eliot sighed and closed his eyes for a moment, seeing his Grandfather’s lined face smiling back at him. “I miss him.”

“I wish he was here,” Lizzie murmured, and hugged Eliot’s arm.

Eliot felt his eyes prick with tears, and he nodded.

“Me too, ‘Lizbeth Grace. Me too.”

The two of them sat in silence for long minutes as voices drifted through the house, cheerful and warm, and Buster let out a huffing bark as he tried to get Mei to give him a piece of bacon. Soapy’s chortle made Eliot smile as the pastoralist began to tease Effie, and the cook’s blistering reply made Jo laugh aloud as they sat on the veranda.

“’Lizbeth Grace?” Eliot finally said. “Did I ever tell you the story about why the rabbit has a short tail?”

Lizzie looked up at Eliot, eyes bright. She loved Eliot’s stories.

“No!! Is this one of Grandfather’s stories??” she wanted to know.

Eliot shifted a little, wincing, but for the first time in a long while he felt light-hearted.

“This is a story Grandfather told me when I was about your age. Wanna hear it?”

“Oh!” Lizzie gasped. “Oh, yes please!!” And tucking Cec under the comforter, she settled down to listen.

Eliot rested his head back on his pillows, closed his eyes, and began.

“Well, ‘Lizbeth Grace, ‘way back when the world was young, tsí-s-du, the rabbit, had a very long bushy tail …”

And as the thunder clouds formed over the horizon and the first raindrops fell, Wapanjara and its people lay quiet and content under the glowering coverlet of night.
To be continued …

* Boomer – a big male kangaroo. The things can disembowel you with one kick.

** Eliot’s ‘monstrous regiment of women’ is a well-known misquote of John Knox’s 1558 polemic treatise titled ‘The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regimen of Women,’ in which the Scots reformer argued that rule by females was contrary to the teachings of the Bible. He seriously upset Queen Elizabeth I of England.
The night was stormy, the humidity intensifying as lightning crashed in the distance and occasional downpours hammered Wapanjara’s sturdy roofs. The soft whisper of the fans gave the house a breath all of its own, and the only bright lights in the house emanated from Effie’s cavernous kitchen as she clattered about putting away her pots and pans. She also stowed away steaks and other essentials for the following morning’s breakfast for the stockmen, although the weather would probably hamper the planned muster of fat bullocks from the Northern paddock.

The rest of the house was lit by small table lamps and wall-lights, giving the house a warm, welcoming aura in the dark, unsettled night.

Eliot, however, had other things on his mind. His wounds had been checked, cleaned and re-bandaged, and as a concession to his grouchy, cough-ridden complaints, Jo decided he could do without the strapping and instead wear a sling which kept his arm at the right angle to relieve pressure on the packed wound under his arm.

His cold was still running its snotty, phlegmy course, which he could do nothing about, but at least he could move a little easier. His other wounds were healing well and were now itchy and annoying, but Eliot could live with it, because it meant that as far as he was concerned, he had turned a corner and he was on the mend.

Sitting in his recliner on the veranda, warm and well-wrapped in a comforter despite the humidity and with a steaming mug of Mei’s tea beside him, he began to work his way through Hardison’s purloined CCTV footage of the team’s meeting with Hardy Bushman.

Taken by the security camera from a nearby restaurant, Eliot, now able to use both hands – within reason – managed to zoom in on the meeting, watching Nate’s enthusiastic gesticulating at the prototype bicycle now within the grasp of Tom Reid. The ex-policeman scowled at Bushman while pointing at various bits of the bicycle’s dull grey frame. Eliot knew Tom had a working knowledge of bicycle construction – he had worked for fifteen months undercover as a young officer breaking up a narcotics cartel which was using cycle couriers in Sydney to carry samples and other messages within the frames.

Tom, whose Hawaiian shirt was even more glaringly horrid than the first one, was obviously relishing every moment of his new role. Eliot sneezed and then grinned as Tom turned to Parker and berated her for what he thought had obviously been a poor performance and then handed the bicycle back to Bushman, who looked furious.

Sophie, ever the placatory trophy wife, soothed Bushman’s ruffled feathers while Nate calmed down Tom by showing him the spectacular times, and Eliot’s trained eye saw Sophie straighten Bushman’s tie and smooth down his lapels which made the man momentarily smile bashfully, his ire gone. Then Sophie clasped his arm, giggling, and suddenly the tension in the group had vanished.

Bushman signalled to a young man standing beside a glossy van sporting the words ‘DARTFORD RACERS INC.’ on the side, accompanied by the tagline ‘Speed is the name of our game’. The bespectacled man retrieved the bicycle and stowed it away carefully in the van, and then sat in the vehicle to await his boss.

Bushman, now all smiles and friendly gestures, pointed at the camera and led the group towards the restaurant, obviously intent on schmoozing the deal over a decent meal. Sophie, still attached to his arm and simpering girlishly, hung on his every word even as she knew Hardison was listening in via
the miniscule digital transmitter feed she had attached to the reverse of Bushman’s lapel. Once Bushman returned to his business day after the meeting, hopefully Hardison would be able to keep tabs on the man as well as hear what he was up to, at least while he wore the jacket.

As they sauntered off-camera, Eliot sighed and took a sip of the tea, allowing the honey to soothe the soreness in his throat while he thought about the dynamics of the meeting. Tom did a great job distracting Bushman, involving Nate and Parker and shifting the focus from Sophie. Well, at least Hardison now had access to Bushman’s cell ’phone, enabling the hacker to not only know who the man was contacting but also his location. Hopefully the tiny transmitter might give the team some idea with whom Bushman was meeting.

Setting the mug back on his side-table, Eliot decided he would now watch the footage again and study the background. This was something he did instinctively when he was on a job, but now, laid up as he was, he was on a sharp learning curve trying to keep his team safe from hundreds of miles away.

Rerunning the footage he ignored his team and Bushman, and checked for anything that made his ‘spidey-sense’ sit up and take note.

He was only seconds into the footage when he frowned. Pulling the images back to the beginning, he ran it again.

_Shit._

He took off his spectacles which were beginning to fog a little because of the humidity, wiped them on the comforter and put them back on. Managing to zoom in on the upper left corner of the screen, he slowed the footage down so that he could creep each image forward, and he swore, roundly and comprehensively, under his breath. He ran the footage back to the beginning and watched the first few seconds again, this time zooming in on his target.

A tall, lean man wearing what appeared to be svelte Ferragamo sunglasses was getting into a sporty little Audi coupé that Eliot knew was very expensive. In a split-second Eliot saw the distinctive cut of the jacket and knew there was a shoulder holster and weapon under the right arm. The man was left-handed, but that didn’t matter recognition-wise, because Eliot knew who he was.

_Shit-shit-shit_ –

He reduced the footage on the screen and tapped the video-link icon. He knew Hardison would have his laptop with him, and sure enough, within moments the hacker appeared on the screen, apparently in the middle of shovelling something delicious into his mouth.

“Hey El–“ he mumbled, and held up a finger telling the hitter to wait a minute until he had finished the mouthful. His Nana didn’t approve of speaking when one’s mouth was full.

It was obvious they were eating in a restaurant, and Tom’s face appeared from Hardison’s left.

“Eliot!! Did you get the footage?” he asked cheerfully. The patterns on his shirt were making Eliot’s eyes hurt.

“Are you all there?” Eliot hissed without preamble. “’Cause I need to talk to you!”

Tom’s amiable face became grim and reaching forward, he manhandled the laptop so that Eliot could see his team, although Sophie and Parker were at the limits and he could only see half of their faces.

The table in front of them was awash with dishes of Thai food.
“What’s up, Eliot?” Nate queried as he fished about on his plate for a large prawn.

Eliot struggled but managed to toggle the image so that they could see what he was seeing – a tall, suited man getting into an expensive car.

“Who is he?” Tom asked, putting down his chopsticks and sipping from his glass of soda. Eliot’s obvious concern made him tense up.

“That is someone I don’t want anywhere near you guys, so you get out now!” Eliot growled, “and I mean now. You pack up, leave Sydney an’ we think of another way to take down Bushman.” He took a steadying breath. “That’s Tomas Ponomarenko. They call him The Confessor, ‘cause you spend ten minutes with this asshole you’ll tell him anythin’ he wants to know.”

Hardison swallowed his food and waggled his chopsticks at the screen, seemingly not too worried as yet.

“What is it with these people?” he asked. “The Butcher of Kiev … The Confessor … what do people call you, Eliot? You got some moniker out there among all of your punchy pals, huh?”

Eliot gave Hardison his Death Glare.

“Yeah, Hardison. ELIOT SPENCER. Remember??”

Ohhh yeah … Hardison suddenly remembered the reaction of the dozen or more really, really tough bastards protecting Damien Moreau the day he and Eliot had been tasked to find a way into Moreau’s heavily guarded lair. And all it had taken for them to gain access to Moreau’s inner sanctum was Eliot quietly telling them his name. Hardison’s eyes widened slightly as he also remembered the looks of shock and even fear on the faces of the goons as they all drew their weapons as one and pointed them at Eliot. And the man hadn’t turned a hair.

“Kudos, m’man …” Hardison murmured. “Point taken.” He looked at his compatriots. “So … why is this Confessor fella hangin’ around us? I take it he’s with Kremic. But –“

“Parker. It’s Parker,” Nate interjected. “She’s competition. Kremic can’t have his competitor gaining the same advantages as his own rider. Damn,” he added, and then he added a few less savoury curses under his breath. He sighed. “My fault. I underestimated Kremic’s passion. You never get in the way of a psychopath’s passions.”

Parker was squinting at the images on Hardison’s laptop but she started a little at Nate’s declaration. Her eyes narrowed in annoyance. She would like to see this ‘Confessor’ just try and take her out.

“So, where do we go from here?” Sophie asked, swirling the delicious Australian Moscato around in its glass as she pondered the problem. “D’you think this … this … Confessor will target Parker?”

“I don’t friggin’ care,” Eliot growled, “because you are all gonna get on a plane and get the hell outta there and you do it quietly! No pretend earthquakes or … or goddamm hurricanes this time, Hardison!! You keep it so far under the friggin’ radar that even I couldn’t find you!!”

“Wait a minute,” Nate said, and Eliot, even as disconnected by distance as he was, could see the light of challenge spark in Nate’s eyes.

“No, Nate! No plottin’ or … or tryin’ to figure a way around this! I want you all safe, d’you hear me?? I got ‘Lizbeth Grace to think of, ‘cause if you idiots don’t make it I gotta raise that little girl without the family she loves, an’ I ain’t willin’ to try an’ explain that to her because you fools won’t listen!! Y’hear me??” Eliot railed, and he sat up in his recliner, hissing with pain but ready to fight his
corner. “If I gotta get on a damn’ ‘plane, fly to Sydney and haul your damn’ asses out of that bastard’s reach one by one then by God I’ll do it, so help me!!”

The effort of just sitting upright nearly took the breath out of him, but Eliot Spencer didn’t let a chest infection and two bullet holes stop him from standing up … until he tried to stand and his legs failed him.

Dropping back into his seat the impact sent him curling into himself with the pain, and he heard the murmurs of concern from his team. He coughed enough to throw up a lung, but the pain faded a little and he controlled the wheezing, so when he glared back at his team they knew he was pissed.

“Look …” he rasped, “please … just get out of there. Ponomarenko ain’t a man you cross. Believe me.” He paused for a second, trying his best to get his temper under control. “Him an’ me … we’ve met before. I beat the shit out of him … but it cost me, Nate. It cost me a lot. And I’m not easy to deal with, so he’s good. So please … get out of there.” He was trying to keep his voice low so that Lizzie, who was inside the house looking through the small but comprehensive Wapanjara library for a book to read, wasn’t disturbed by the anger and frustrated desperation in his voice. “You promised me you wouldn’t do this, Nate. You promised ‘Lizbeth Grace that you would drop it if you couldn’t be safe.”

The team looked at one another, and Eliot waited, his nerves on edge and the agony of not being with them to protect them tearing his heart apart.

Nate finally nodded.

“Look … Eliot … we can’t get on a flight until tomorrow – “

“Tomorrow night, Nate …” Hardison murmured as he checked flights on his cell ‘phone, “not unless we charter a ‘plane. An’ we’ll still have to wait until tomorrow anyways to get runway space an’ a time slot, since we don’t want to draw attention to ourselves.”

“Fair enough,” Nate replied. “Everybody okay with this?”

The returning nods, however disgruntled, made the decision unanimous.

“I’ll return the bikes I borrowed in the morning,” Tom said, and Eliot could see the man was disappointed. But Tom Reid was a pragmatist and was also a firm believer in living to fight another day. “I think we should put safeguards in place until we leave.” He raised a hand before Eliot could say anything. ‘I’ve got it. Don’t worry. I’ll keep ‘em safe,” he added with a grim smile.

Eliot knew he would have to be content with that, but he also knew Tom was very able and could handle himself. His calmness and organised thinking was a boon to a team right now, and Eliot knew he could trust the man.

“Okay … okay, that’ll have to do. Watch ‘em, Tom. It’s like herdin’ frikkin’ cats. ‘Specially Parker.”

Smiles broke through the dourness Eliot could feel oozing from these people he loved.

“I like cats,” Parker said, carefully arranging her noodles into a neat little coiled pyramid on her plate. She studied them carefully. “Huh. Looks like intestines,” she said.

“Okay, man. I’ll call when we’re on our way – oh hey, baby-girl!!” he grinned in greeting as Lizzie appeared through the doorway to stand beside Eliot. She had a book in her hand but it was forgotten as she let out a squeak of delight.
“Alec!! Mama!!” She flung herself in the chair next to Eliot, who held the tablet steady for her. “When are you coming home??” She waved at her family, and snuggled into Eliot’s good side.

“Soon, my darling,” Sophie crooned, delighted to see her daughter. “Very soon.”

“What’re you up to, sweetheart?” Nate asked, his face suddenly crinkling up with love at the sight of his precious girl. “Have you been behaving yourself? Because you have a birthday coming up, remember, and if you want a party you know you have to –”

“ – be good, yes Daddy, I know!” she sighed dramatically. She held up her book, which Eliot recognised as a hefty tome about Aboriginal symbols. “I’m doing research!” she whispered loudly, as though it was a secret, “and it’s very important! Isn’t it, Eliot?” She looked up at her guardian for confirmation.

“Yep. Pretty important,” he agreed and smiled, eyes suddenly warm and endlessly patient.

“That looks … impressive!” Tom countered, studying the little girl on the screen holding an early 20th century academic publication that would daunt any but the most bookish scholar.

Lizzie nodded eagerly.

“Grandpa Soapy and I found it in the lib’ry, and it has pictures!” she opened it at a page tagged by a bookmark and held the book up awkwardly to show Tom what she meant. Tom hitched an eyebrow at the beautifully tinted engraved plate of Aboriginal symbols with notes on their meanings. “I want to find one that helps me decide what ‘home’ means!” Lizzie added helpfully.

Sophie could see Eliot’s face turn from weary pleasure to pride, even though he was obviously very tired and in pain. She had no idea what the pair of them were up to, but she always marvelled at Lizzie’s endless curiosity and her ability to soak up information like a sponge.

“Well now,” she added, “you can tell us all about it when we get home, can’t you?” Sophie said with a smile, her dark eyes alight with love.

But Lizzie’s face became serious.

“Oh, I can’t just yet, Mama! It’s a secret and I have to decide by myself with no-one to help … not even Eliot!! It’s very important!!”

The team looked at one another and then turned back to Lizzie, who was very carefully closing the book and placing the bookmark back between the pages, because Eliot had taught her from her earliest reading days that you never ever turned over the corner of a page as a marker. That, and licking your fingers before you turned a page, was a sure way to get Eliot Spencer in a very dangerous mood, because you just didn’t do that. Respect the book was one of Eliot’s little mottos which Lizzie had taken on board very quickly.

A sudden crash of thunder suddenly made Lizzie jump, startled, and the blinding flicker of lightning several seconds later made the tablet frizz.

Eliot knew it was time to end the conversation before the link began playing up, so he raised a hand and jabbed a finger at his team.

“Okay … gotta go. But remember what you promised, y’hear?? What you promised!!” he reiterated, growling like the wolves he carried in his heart.

Nate nodded.
“We hear you.” He couldn’t keep the disappointment from his voice, but they had Lizzie to think about too, and she was far more important right now. He smiled at his daughter. “See you soon, sweetheart. Love you.”

Lizzie sent lots of kisses through the ether to her family, and switched off the tablet.

Another downpour began, and Lizzie shrank back into Eliot’s side, taking comfort in his solidity and warmth. She desperately missed her parents and team, and she dearly wanted them to come home. But she had her guardian and protector, wounded though he was, and she was glad of his love.

“Want to go inside, ‘Lizbeth Grace?” Eliot whispered, seeing the dejection in the little girl’s face.

Lizzie, her dark eyes bright with the mirrored light of the storm now fast-approaching from the distant hills, nodded wordlessly.

And so with Lizzie’s help, Eliot managed to stand without too much effort and Lizzie dragged his comforter out of his grasp so that he could more easily make his unsteady way into the house.

Lizzie tucked the book under her arm and picked up the tablet, ready to follow to make sure he didn’t hurt himself, but another rumble of thunder made the windows rattle, and she flinched. While she enjoyed watching thunderstorms, this was a little too close for comfort.

“Want a hand, nipper?” Effie asked from the doorway. She reached down to lift the comforter from its place beside Eliot’s recliner. “I’ll take this.”

“My Mama and Daddy will be home soon,” Lizzie said shakily. “I miss them, Effie. All of them. I wish they were home right now,” she stated, and wandered past Effie but not before leaning into the old cook, who held the little girl to her side for long moments, and then they both let themselves be absorbed by the love and warmth of Wapanjara.

“So … what do we do?” Hardison asked as they finished their food. “I mean … I know we gotta leave, but hell, Nate! This ain’t right!”

Nate shrugged helplessly

“Eliot has a point – we can’t risk it, Hardison. We always knew that one day we’d have to back away from a job because we can’t risk Lizzie or leave her without her family.”

“Look,” Tom said, his grey eyes dark with thought, “we have until tomorrow midday, at least. Alec? Is that about the amount of time we have?”

Hardison nodded. “Maybe a bit longer, depending on how soon we can get a charter. Unless you want to fly coach, an’ we’d probably have to split up our flights … or drive? We could drive, maybe? Tom, how long –“

“Thirty-two hours, give or take,” Tom answered thoughtfully. He raised an eyebrow. “How well would you lot manage a long drive in one car together?”

Sophie chuckled.

“I wouldn’t go there, Tom, honestly! Same with buses. I am not sitting on a bus with these three. You I can deal with because at least I get some sense out of you, but … anyway, I don’t do buses.”

There was a short burst of vehement objection from her team, but the grifter raised an elegant hand
and dismissed objections.

“Seriously, Nate – Parker on a bus?? Do you value your sanity that little??” Sophie said faintly.

Parker grinned.

“I could tell you jokes,” she crowed, delighted at the idea. “I know lots,” she added cheerfully.

Nate, secretly horrified, took the hint.

“Okay … flying it is. Hardison … do what you can, but try and do it in the morning. The less electronic footprint we have –“

Hardison’s eyebrows hit his hairline.

“’S’cuse you?? Since when have I ever left an electronic footprint?? And …” he waved a forefinger in the air, “d’you really think I’m gonna allow anyone to hack my tech?? Huh?? Since when has anyone cyber-tracked us without me lettin’ ’em do so?? I’m wounded, Nate! Wounded!!” he added indignantly even as he poked at his dessert, digging sweet sticky rice out of a section of bamboo.

Nate grinned unrepentantly, but then sobered a little.

“We need somewhere safe for tonight. Hardison, can you find us another –“

“I know somewhere we can stay,” Tom said quietly.

The team all turned to the Australian, surprised.

Tom was hesitant but he continued, his voice soft.

“I, ah … I have a little place out in the suburbs. I use it when I come to Sydney. When my boy’s home we meet up there and hang out for a while. It’s quiet, anonymous … we can stay there until tomorrow.”

Nate considered the proposition for all of a second and then nodded.

“Okay. Sounds like a plan. But we have to get our stuff – we can’t chance leaving anything behind. Hardison has his tech and –“

“Yeah … I get it,” Tom replied, a smile creasing his grey eyes. “Let’s finish up here and head back to the hotel. Keep it light, keep it relaxed. Unaware. Then I’ll go get us some transport and we leave the SUV at the hotel. I’ll be no more than an hour, and we can clear out. How does that sound?”

“Works for me,” Nate murmured. “Okay … eat up, people. Things to do, places to go.” He sighed regretfully. “I didn’t get to say it.”

Tom, finishing his coffee, frowned.

“What?” he asked.

And as one, Team Leverage replied.

“Let’s go steal a speed record!”

Eliot was gazing into the unlit fire in Wapanjara’s spacious living room. The thunder rumbled
threateningly outside, but he knew the storm would slowly move away to the east and the
temperature had dropped ten degrees, which made the humidity a little less oppressive.

As he sat sprawled on the big old couch with his comforter pulled up to his chest to keep warm, he
kept an eye on Lizzie as she sat with Jo at the dining table. The little girl was working through the
big, red-bound book about aboriginal symbolism, studying designs and making laborious, carefully-
written notes and sketches of her own in her project book. Jo sat beside her, helping her understand
the dry, academic wording of the book as well as avoiding the overtly patronising references within
the dense text.

But Lizzie was only interested in the beautiful engravings and their meanings, and Jo shifted from
her chair to go to the wall-to-wall bookshelves, running her finger along a section until she found the
book she wanted.

“Ah-hah!” she exclaimed, “this might help,” and brought the colourful publication back to the table
for Lizzie to look at.

The little girl’s eyes widened. It was a book published by the local aboriginal community especially
for children, and it was full of stories from the Dreamtime as well as legends and tales that explained
many Warumungu and Warlpiri beliefs.

“Eliot!! Look!!” she cried, waving the book in the air, and her eager eyes sought out her guardian.
“Will you tell me a story before bedtime?”

Eliot raised his head and smiled at his best girl, and for a moment he put aside the desperate worry
about his team.

“I reckon I can do that,” he said, and Lizzie squeaked with delight. “How’s the research going?” he
asked and coughed a little.

Lizzie’s face fell.

“I don’t know,” she said, somewhat crestfallen. “I know what I want – I just haven’t found anything
to describe it yet.”

Eliot nodded, understanding.

“It ain’t easy, Lizbeth Grace, trying to describe what’s inside you. You get a feelin’ you know is the
right one, but sometimes it’s tough finding the words or pictures to make it real.”

Lightning cracked outside, the sudden blinding light searing through the windows, and the lights
flickered for a moment.

“Hmm,” Jo murmured thoughtfully, “I think I’ll go and help Effie sort out our bedtime hot chocolate
before the lights go off, hey?”

Lizzie looked up at Jo, curiosity rife in her brown eyes.

“You … you mean all the lights might go out?? And everything will be dark??”

Jo smiled indulgently.

“Yes indeed, young Lizzie. We have a generator but Jacko might need it for the barn tonight, seeing
as one of the mares is due to foal. We can use storm lamps. Besides …” she added, “storm lamps are
ideal for story-telling!”
Lizzie contemplated the idea, and decided it sounded bonzer.

Jo studied Eliot for a moment. He was definitely on the mend, despite his chest-cold, but she knew he was worrying himself witless about his team. She also knew there was more he hadn’t told her just yet, but she trusted that he would do so when he could.

“Righto – I’ll just warn Mei the lights could go out,” she said. Mei was bathing Jamie and Rose in the big bathroom. “I tell you, Eliot. This house is getting far too small!” she continued, smiling. “She’s decided to stay, you know.”

Eliot twitched a tiny grin.

“I thought she would. Are you an’ Soapy alright about it? An’ Eff?”

Jo snorted, amused.

“Soapy wanted them to stay from the moment the babies were born, you know that!” she retorted, “and as for Effie? Having two more babbies to spoil? She’s in heaven.” She paused for a moment, before continuing. “And you, Eliot? What about you? Are you okay with this, because Wapanjara is your home too.”

Eliot held out a hand and Jo took it. He kissed the back of her hand and then laid it over his heart.

“Couldn’t be happier, darlin’. This house has always needed children in it. I know you got Kip an’ now ‘Lizbeth Grace, but more won’t hurt, huh.” He glanced up at Jo and stifled a cough. “What about you, Jo? Would them stayin’ make you happy?”

Jo’s eyes were suddenly wet with tears.

“Oh, Eliot - more than you can ever imagine. Although ...” she took a deep breath. “ … how we fix it legally, I have no idea.”

Eliot patted Jo’s hand where it lay on his bandaged chest.

“I can guarantee there will be no problem, Jo. Hardison’ll make it right, you’ll see.”

Jo shook her head in mild disbelief, but leaning over she kissed Eliot on the top of the head.

“No worries, boy. I’m sure we can sort something out. Now then … do you need a hand back to your bed? Soapy’ll be back in a bit and he can —“

“I’ll be fine, sweetheart. Lizzie an’ me … between us I’ll get this beat-up pile of bones off this couch. You go do what you need to do, an’ I’ll keep an eye on ‘Lizbeth Grace.”

Ruffling his hair, Jo left the hitter to his thoughts and headed to the kitchen, and Eliot let himself relax a little more. Lizzie bounced off her seat and slid down beside him for a moment before pulling the comforter a little further over Eliot’s chest.

She studied her friend. He looked better, if a little tired and worried. The lines between his drawn-down brows were a dead giveaway.

“Are you okay, Eliot?” she asked in a concerned whisper. “No wibbly feelings?”

See? She knows, Eliot, Moreau whispered in his ear. She sees your weakness, my friend. You let her in. Should’ve done what I said and cut the little bitch’s throat –
“Jus’ worried about everybody, ‘Lizbeth Grace, that’s all,” he replied quickly, shifting so that he could pull himself upright.

“No! No, don’t do that!” Lizzie caught Eliot’s good shoulder and stopped him moving, “you’ll hurt yourself!” and she sighed as Eliot took the hint from both Lizzie and his body, which objected to the pull on stitched wounds. Lizzie, relieved, cocked her head quizzically. “Why are you worried? Are they in danger?”

Eliot couldn’t lie to her … he just couldn’t.

“No more, darlin’,” he whispered. “I made sure they’re comin’ home, and Tom’ll keep ‘em safe. That’s what we were talkin’ about earlier, so you don’t need to worry.”

Lizzie bit her lip, thinking about Eliot’s words. In her short life she had seen her family in danger many times. It was the nature of the job, and she had dealt with it. But usually Eliot was with them to watch over them, and it made her feel safe to know he was there. But now he was here, with her, because he was too hurt to even get off a couch on his own.

“They’ll be home soon?” she asked.

Eliot nodded solemnly.

“Uh-huh. They’ll be on a ‘plane tomorrow, an’ Tom’ll keep ‘em safe until then. He’s good, ‘Lizbeth Grace. Very good.”

Lizzie stared at Eliot.

“As good as you?” she asked guilelessly.

Eliot opened his mouth to answer, but smiled instead.

“Well … no,” he finally said, charmed as always by her utter belief in his hitter skills, “but I trust him, sweetheart, an’ so do your folks. And I’m watching from here … checkin’ out the footage, makin’ sure I see what I need to see to keep Tom in the loop. So … we’re doin’ okay.”

“Promise they’ll be safe?” she said, as this was the first time Team Leverage had done a job without both Lizzie and their protector.

Eliot’s mouth tic’d sideways.

“You know I can’t do that, sweetheart, ‘cause then I’d be lyin’ to you, and you know what happens when you lie. I learned that the hard way, huh.”

Lizzie nodded a little reluctantly, but she understood. Studying Eliot, she saw the tension in his body and a slight tremor in his hands.

“Is … is that man talking to you again?” she said quietly. “Y’know … the one in your head?”

Eliot gave Lizzie a sideways glance and saw the understanding in her face. It was ironic, he thought, when a six-year-old understood him better than his own father.

“Yeah, a bit,” he said hesitantly. “Just a different voice is all.” He inhaled as deeply as he could without setting off a coughing fit and continued. “Moreau. It’s Moreau. But he’s nothin’, ‘Lizbeth Grace. It’s just … it’s just my head’s a bit mussed up. It’s gettin’ better, though.” He gave her his Lizzie smile, and his eyes crinkled warmly. “You knowin’ about it … it helps.”
See? Alice said from her place in his heart. *Not so hard, is it, you nerk!*

The crash of thunder and the almost instantaneous streak of lightning made the house shiver, and a flare of blinding light flooded the room through the window and the lights instantly went out.

Lizzie let out a tiny shriek of both fear and delight, clutching Eliot’s comforter in both hands.

Eliot couldn’t resist a raspy chuckle.

“It happens during the Wet, ‘Lizbeth Grace. It’s just a strike on one of the power cables. It’ll get fixed once the storm’s over. That’s why we have a generator.”

Jo arrived within seconds with a wind-up storm lamp and she showed Lizzie how to make it work. The little girl was thrilled when the living room was lit by a warm glow, Eliot’s eyes glittering in the limpid light. Lizzie managed to snuggle next to Eliot on the couch, warm and solid against his good side, and it was as they sipped their hot chocolate that Eliot drowsily began to tell his god-daughter about *Namarrkun*, the mantis-bodied Lightning Man whose lightning rods made the flashes that lit up the land and whose axes cleaved trees and shattered them in the depths of the great storms he created for his people.

And as he spoke, the tremors drifted away and Moreau vanished from Eliot’s soul, washed clean by the warmth of the little girl he guarded with everything he had.

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Hardison sat on the iron-framed veranda of a neat, turn-of-the-century house just off King Street in Newtown, four kilometres or so away from the centre of the Sydney business district.

The veranda was in shadows, the bright brassy lights of the busy street below keeping the young hacker almost invisible behind the ornate railings. Hardison was glad of it. Anonymity was the order of the night, but he also needed some air after a fraught day. Although Tom Reid had done a sterling job of watching their backs and making sure they got away from the hotel safely, they were all sorely missing their hitter.

Since the beginning of their association, Eliot had always been part of them. To do a job without him was unthinkable. But here they were, dealing with not one but two highly dangerous eastern European shitheads, and Eliot wasn’t with them. It felt odd. No, Hardison thought … it felt wrong. No growls, no snarky remarks, no ‘*Dammit, Hardison!*’ Parker didn’t have anyone to annoy and there was no-one other than Sophie to keep Nate’s sometimes over-the-top suggestions under control. Not that Sophie didn’t do a good job, bein’ married to the man an’ all, but sometimes … sometimes all it took was Eliot to stare the man down and inevitably Nate would sigh and finally understand he was pushing his luck – and the team – to beyond their limit.

As he relaxed on the comfortable padded wicker chair he idled his time scrolling through a wealth of telephone calls from both Pennicuik and Bushman as well as working his way through a multitude of emails from both men. He didn’t expect to find much in Pennicuik’s official email account, but the burner ’phone … it certainly looked promising.

He felt a presence settling into the chair beside him, and a hand offered him a cold beer.

“D’you have everything you need, Alec?” Tom asked quietly.

Hardison accepted the bottle of Foster’s and nodded before easing a crick out of his neck.

“Yeah … yeah, the broadband width’s good an’ I can access what I need easily enough.”
The two men sat in companionable silence for a few minutes as they drank their beer.

“Nate and Sophie have gone to bed,” Tom continued somewhat needlessly. “Is it normal for Parker to sit cross-legged on the kitchen surface and fill her gob with popcorn?”

Hardison gave the Australian a wry smile.

“Oohhh yeah,” he agreed, “an’ it drives Eliot crazy! But … he puts up with it these days. I guess Mister Punchy’s mellowing a little. He used to grab her, take her outside and throw her in the dumpster once in a while, but she never learned.” Hardison shrugged. “That’s Parker.”

Tom took another swig of his beer.

“You know Ponomarenko was watching the hotel?” he said softly.

Hardison’s eyebrows hitched a little, but he wasn’t really surprised.

When the five of them had returned to the hotel, Tom had disappeared, only for his voice to whisper through the team’s earbuds thirty minutes later that he had their ride and they needed to come down the back stairs and around the corner to the next door hotel’s parking lot. They were not to be seen in the Old Clare’s subterranean parking area.

Splitting up, all four members of Team Leverage made their way to where Tom waited in a nondescript ten-year-old double-cab ute. In less than a minute, they were gone. Their suites were booked for a further three nights at the Old Clare, and their rental SUV sat gleaming in the parking lot, but they would spend the night at Tom’s small house, located on the corner of a block of old buildings that would not look out of place in New Orleans.

Leaving them to settle in, Tom had made his way back to the Old Clare and pulled up a few hundred yards behind the little sporty Audi, parked across the road. He spent twenty minutes watching Ponomarenko watching the Old Clare Hotel, before brazenly driving past and noticing Ponomarenko was busy texting someone on his cell ‘phone.

Dropping the ute back at the home of one of his retired police officer friends, he walked along the block, watched his friend’s house for another half hour to make sure no-one was following, and then he had taken a taxi back to Newtown. He left the taxi in the centre of town and walked a meandering route back to the house, and arrived with late-evening pizza just as Nate and Sophie were thinking of heading to bed.

The pizza was good, the beer cold, and everyone began to relax.

But knowing Ponomarenko was watching the hotel put Hardison back on the alert.

“You sure it was him?” he asked, hoping against hope that Reid was wrong, but the ex-policeman nodded.

“He didn’t seem too attentive, I have to say,” Tom added thoughtfully. He frowned. “I don’t know … why do I get the feeling something’s not adding up?” he added, puzzled.

“Is that your extra-special policeman-y hunch-thing goin’ on?” Hardison asked a little nervously. To have some murdering S.O.B. nicknamed ‘The Confessor’ on your tail wasn’t exactly reassuring.

“Maybe,” Tom replied. “Any way we can call Eliot?”

Hardison shook his head.
“I tried. Looks like the storm’s affectin’ the connection an’ the ‘phone line’s out too. We’re on our own.”

Tom pondered the problem.

“Yeah, well … Wapanjara isn’t the most reachable place on God’s earth,” he said, smiling ruefully. “I’m sure we’ll be able to get through in the morning. One of the stockmen’ll fix the transformer and we can call them then. They’re never out of touch for long.” Tom finished his beer. “Want another?” he asked the young hacker, and Hardison nodded even as he returned to his laptop.

Hardison couldn’t get the feeling out of his bones that Tom was right. Something didn’t add up, but he was damned if he could put his finger on what it was.

As he waited for Tom to return, he began looking at Bushman’s call records, checking the numbers alongside Pennicuik’s calls from his burner ‘phone. He frowned. He ran the records again and then he grinned.

“Well butter me sideways an’ call me toasty!” Hardison muttered gleefully, and began to highlight one particular number. He paused for a second, and then checked his watch. As he began to run further call record comparisons, he lifted his cell ‘phone and called Rebecca Hines.

To be continued …
WANT OF SLEEP AND OVER-WORRY

Chapter Summary

Author's note: Some plotting, but mostly it's about a hitter and his best girl.

The thunder and lightning slowly faded away to distant Tennant Creek, and the night became swept with starlight and scudding clouds. A slight breeze stirred the rain-drenched trees and Gertie slowly emerged from her humpy, ears flicking as drops of water brushed from the edge of the roof as she hesitantly avoided the huge puddles lying in the hollows of the drenched ground.

Wandering over to the open window of Eliot’s room and reaching up her head, she whiffled at the sill and gurgled softly, hoping Eliot was awake to give her scratchies. But all was quiet. She leaned her chin on the sill instead and squeaked, but there was no reaction from within, although she knew Eliot was there.

She shook her head, sighed dramatically and decided she would go on patrol, so she headed through the open gate of her paddock and began to prowl the homestead, rumbling unhappily to herself. Perhaps, she hoped, there were bad people lurking in the undergrowth so that she could roar at them for a bit and then chase them away.

Eliot lay wide awake on his bed, unable to sleep. He heard Gertie’s squeaky entreaties, and smiled to himself. Normally he would have awoken, got out of bed and given her huge head a scratch. Then he would have fetched her an apple from the kitchen before telling her to go back to bed, but tonight he was too sore and too uptight to fuss over the big camel. He promised himself he would give her an extra fuss in the morning. Right now he was worried sick about his team.

The lights were still out and wouldn’t be fixed until Jacko could look at the transformer in daylight, so Wapanjara was truly in the dark, something Eliot never minded. He enjoyed the quiet and the shadows here in the home he loved, the one place where he could rest and heal and be with people who loved him for who he was.

Tired of the continuous tension, Eliot eased his damaged body off the bed, and deciding not to use his sling, managed to slip on a jacket. Easing himself out of his room, padding silently on socked feet, he decided he needed some fresh air. But the front door leading onto the veranda was already open, and he caught the faint sound of soft, child-like whisperings and squeaky camel-speak. A wry smile creased his tired face and he headed to the kitchen. Unhampered now by his sling, which he knew would earn him some grief from Jo and Effie, he made two mugs of hot chocolate. Snaffling an apple from the fruit bowl, he shoved it into his jacket pocket and awkwardly carried the steaming mugs out onto the veranda and into the dark.

Lizzie sat at the top of the veranda steps. She was snuggled into her comforter, and she was cupping Gertie’s enormous head with her tiny hands and talking quietly to the huge camel standing at the bottom of the steps. Gertie listened, rapt with attention. The little squeaks coming from the animal were delightfully absurd.

But Gertie’s ears pricked and she let out a huff of pleasure as she raised her head and turned it towards Eliot.
Lizzie twisted around, and even in the dark she could see how tense her guardian was as he held the mugs. Scrambling to her feet, she reached out and hastily took both mugs from Eliot’s hands before he spilled the hot contents, placing them on the small table beside the doorway.

“Eliot!” she hissed softly. “Where’s your sling? You should be wearing your sling, silly!! You could _—_”

“Shhh …” Eliot said, raising a finger to his lips and then coughed quietly as he eased himself gingerly down onto the top step. **Damn,** but he was stiff! “I’m okay, ‘Lizbeth Grace. I’m gettin’ better, so it won’t hurt me any just for a little while.” He smiled at her reassuringly, but Lizzie wasn’t convinced.

Gertie, on the other hand, was delighted to see him. She mumbled at his fingers and tried to lick his face, and then she rested her head on his lap, hoping for scratchies. Eliot duly obliged, and Gertie’s eyes closed as she began to hum.

Lizzie placed Eliot’s drink beside him on the step before grasping her own, and scrambled to sit down beside him with her own mug of delicious hot chocolate. She carefully draped her comforter over them both, and then they were set.

So the pair of them sat quietly in the dark of the night, sipping their drinks and absorbing the stillness and the starlight, hearing the slight murmur of a whispering breeze as it rustled leaves on the nearby gum trees. The occasional firefly meandered past, the sudden, brilliant luminescence flaring and then dying just as suddenly in the blackness. A pair of eyes from deep in the undergrowth were mirrored in the cold glow for a moment or two, much like the first night Lizzie had ever spent at Wapanjara. The little girl smiled this time, unalarmed, and she leaned her head on Eliot’s good shoulder.

“Possum, right?” she whispered.

“Uh-huh.” Eliot replied, enjoying the heat of the drink as it soothed his throat and chest. Gertie squeaked in reply, content to be with Eliot and Lizzie. Eliot rubbed her nose, slipped the apple from his pocket and Gertie munched it eagerly. Once she had finished she returned her head to Eliot’s lap. He rubbed her uninjured ear affectionately and then allowed his weak arm to rest on the top of Gertie’s head, easing the ache in his shoulder.

“They’ll be home soon?” Lizzie finally asked. “They promised?”

Eliot nodded.

“Yeah, darlin’, they promised. We still have to figure out a way to help Jenny Burkhart an’ her dad, but we always find a way. Don’t worry about it.”

Eliot felt Lizzie shift against him as she drank more hot chocolate, and he could almost see the sweet brown line on her upper lip. Lizzie wasn’t the best at drinking hot chocolate with decorum. He saw her wipe the dampness off her lip with her pyjama sleeve, and he mentally winced. She sighed noisily.

“Eliot?”

*Here it comes,* Eliot thought. *Somethin’s buggin’ her.*

“Yeah, sweetheart?”

She nuzzled against his jacket, no doubt leaving chocolatey smears on the sleeve, Eliot knew.
“When … when …” she stammered, unsure of what to say it seemed.

“Spit it out, ‘Lizbeth Grace, before your head explodes,” he warned.

Lizzie took a deep breath and continued, knowing full well her head wouldn’t explode.

“Well … when everyone comes home … do we have to go back to Portland? When the job’s done? And … and when your bullet holes are all better and you head’s not all wibbly and your cold’s all gone??” The desperation in her voice made Eliot flinch with the longing in it.

“You want to go home?” Eliot asked, and he turned and kissed the top of Lizzie’s head.

Lizzie lifted her head and stared up at Eliot, the starlight mirrored in her brown gaze and the longing aching through her.

“No!!” she said, obviously certain Eliot didn’t understand. “No, Eliot! I … I want to stay here!!! Here at Wapanjara! This is my home!! Portland … I mean, I know we live there and everything, and I love it … sorta … but … but …” She struggled to explain what she meant and she leaned further in and burrowed her face into Eliot’s chest.

Eliot put down his drink and rested his chin on her head, and Gertie nibbled at Lizzie’s fingers, concerned at the little girl’s obvious confusion.

“We live there, ‘Lizbeth Grace,” Eliot murmured, “It’s where we do our work an’ we have the brew pub, an’ –“

“But you could do all that from here!” Lizzie insisted, “and Alec could sell the brew pub or something and we could live here and Grandma and Grandpa wouldn’t mind and Effie would love you to all be here and -“

Eliot rubbed his cheek on Lizzie’s curls.

“‘Lizbeth Grace … sweetheart … we have to be practical. I know, I know,” he soothed, feeling Lizzie’s hitching breath as she began to protest, “Wapanjara’s my home. Has been since Soapy an’ Jo picked me up out of the dirt, healed me an’ gave me my life back. But I live in Portland. That’s where our work is, an’ people rely on us to help them.”

Lizzie hiccupped and then sighed, a little bubbly with unshed tears.

“But I don’t want to leave!” she whispered. “I have Grandma Jo and Grandpa Soapy to look after, and Effie needs me, you know!! And now Mei will need help with the twins, and … and there’s Charlie! He’s so sad, and Kip … we could do our school projects together, I promise … “she huffed wearily. “I’ll miss Kip so much!!”

Eliot nodded, feeling Lizzie tremble against his side, and he smiled even as Lizzie continued.

“And what about Gertie?? She needs you!! And I could help with the horses and feed Dottie and Sparky and the dogs, and … and …” she paused for a moment, trying to think of reasons why she should never ever return to Portland.

“It’s a problem, huh?” Eliot commented thoughtfully. “So … where do we all live? ‘Cause the house ain’t big, ‘Lizbeth Grace. An’ you can’t sleep in a chair or on a fold-down bed forever. Your Momma an’ Daddy certainly won’t like sleepin’ in a tent. An’ I have no idea where Hardison’ll sleep, ‘because he sure as hell ain’t havin’ my room,” he added testily. “Parker loves Bernadette’s roof tent, but … it’s not really the best place,” he added, although he thought Parker actually
wouldn’t mind considering she lived in a warehouse.

Lizzie frowned, thinking. Eliot did have a point. She brightened suddenly.

“Easy!” she proclaimed, obviously relieved. “We help Grandma Jo and Grandpa Soapy make the house bigger!”

That made Eliot snort with amusement which also made him wince and cough, which in turn made Lizzie start and sit up, raising a hand to feel his brow.

“You’re hot still!” she said, worried, but Eliot closed his eyes for a moment or two, basking in the warmth of his little charge’s care.

“It’s just the last of the fever, ‘Lizbeth Grace. I’m on the mend, girl, so stop worryin’.” He reached up and caught her hand in his, rubbing her knuckles. “Listen, darlin’ … you have to stop bein’ so grown up an’ feel as though you have to take care of everyone. Now, you have to know how much I love you lookin’ out for me an’ makin’ sure I’m doin’ okay. When I was really sick an’ hurt, you made me feel safe an’ … “ he took a breath, “… an’ helped me through the really bad bits. And you know I still have stuff to work through in my head, an’ you … you help me with that when no-one else can.”

Lizzie gazed at him, confused.

“But –”

“But, ‘Lizbeth Grace, I’ve said this before, you have to take time for yourself. Be a little girl. You’re only six –“

“I’m nearly seven, Eliot! I’m nearly all grown up!!” Lizzie grumbled.

Eliot had to admit his mistake.

“Okay … okay, that’s true. But you still need to loosen up, kiddo. And while it would be wonderful to live here forever, we can’t. What makes Wapanjara so special is it’s a place to rest … heal up, feel better. An’ that’s because it’s far away from cities an’ lots of people, so we can sit here in the middle of the night if we like, drink hot chocolate an’ look at the stars.”

“And hug Gertie!” Lizzie added, and rubbed Gertie’s nose.

“An’ hug Gertie,” Eliot agreed. “But we rely on livin’ where we do to help as many people as we can. How would we do that out here?”

Lizzie thought about it some more.

“We buy a ‘copter!!” she said triumphantly. “Then we could fly wherever we want!!”

Eliot shook his head. She was making it tough for herself, he was sure. He really, really didn’t want to make her miserable, but there was a reality she had to face.

“Still not gonna work, ‘Lizbeth Grace. The big cities here … Darwin, Adelaide … Sydney … are so far away even a chopper would take a long time to get there. Flying from Alice Springs to Sydney takes over six hours on a good day, an’ that doesn’t take in the trip from here to Alice. Now, I’m not sayin’ we couldn’t do it, but we would need our own ‘plane and …“ he could see the disappointment in Lizzie’s eyes, even in the darkness. “It’s just … well, it’s tough enough doing the job an’ travelling the world from Portland, and from here …”
Lizzie finally nodded, but Eliot could see she was heart-broken. She had travelled all of her short life and loved every moment of it. She had seen things most people could only dream of … wild tigers in Surinam … the soaring vaults of Saint Mark’s Basilica in Venice, and heard the evening call to prayer in the ancient, bustling streets of Marrakesh. But none of those places were home, and now, for the first time in her life, she knew in her heart she belonged.

She sniffed sadly and drank more of her hot chocolate.

“S’not fair,” she muttered under her breath, and Eliot heard the pain in her voice.

Eliot took a sip of his own drink, and nudged her gently.

“Now what do I say about things not bein’ fair?” he asked.

Lizzie wriggled unhappily before answering.

“Who said life was fair?” she quoted.

“That’s right, ’Lizbeth Grace. ‘Cause life’s not fair most of the time. But we rise above it an’ keep goin’, cause that’s what we do, huh.”

“But,” Lizzie insisted, “you get to come here all the time!! This is your home! Why can’t it be mine too??”

Well, thought Eliot, this was an entirely different ball game. Lizzie didn’t yet know that half of Wapanjara would one day be hers. He had discussed it with Sophie and Nate late one evening when the child had been persuaded to actually get some sleep while Eliot recovered. It had been decided that she would be told when she was a little bit older and could understand the implications and responsibilities that went with it, and Eliot was content to leave the whole matter in Sophie and Nate’s capable hands.

“You can always visit,” he said, and he felt Lizzie brighten beside him. “Maybe we all come on a visit now and then –“

“-or I could just come with you!!” Lizzie interrupted, thrilled at the idea. “Mama and Daddy wouldn’t mind, and you’re my guardian and –“

Eliot’s eyebrows shot up.

“Whoa there, Little Miss Trouble, who says I want company?” he said, bemused. “I might want to bring somebody else! Like a lady!!” He couldn't help teasing Lizzie a little. She knew he occasionally met women and enjoyed their company, but Eliot was very, very careful not to mix his casual relationships with the life he led with his team and god-daughter. To Lizzie they were just ladies Eliot liked to go out with once in a while.

Lizzie was mystified.

“Why would you want to come here without me?” she said, confidence oozing from every pore. “Of course I can come with you!”

Eliot finished his chocolate and placed the mug beside him out of the way of Gertie’s whiffling lips. More than once he had found her trying her best to lick chocolate residue from the inside of one of Effie’s mugs, much to the little cook’s horror.

“Well … how about we ask your Momma an’ Daddy first, huh,” he said, returning his hand to
Gertie’s curls and scratching gently. Gertie gurgled happily. “And if they think you’ll behave an’ do as Soapy and Jo say, and do as I tell you to keep you safe … then maybe. Maybe.”

Lizzie, delighted, wrapped her free arm around Eliot’s and leaned into him once more.

“They’ll say yes,” she declared cheerily. “I know they will. And they’ll want to come here on vacation too, because Alec and Parker love Wapanjara as well, and it’s just wonderful here.”

The two of them sat quietly for a while, Gertie’s head on Eliot’s lap and Lizzie curled into her best friend’s uninjured side, and Eliot couldn’t be more content.

“So … Wapanjara’s home, is it?” he asked finally.

He felt Lizzie nod sleepily.

“Ya-huh,” she replied. “I want to live here forever and ever.”

“Yeah,” Eliot spoke softly, his voice a rumble in his chest. “Me too. An’ maybe one day I will.”

“And me,” Lizzie sighed blissfully.

“And you,” Eliot replied, amused, and Gertie hummed.

And as they gazed at the endless reach of stars, a streak of light glittered through the heavens, fading to nothingness in an instant. And then there came another. And another.

Lizzie gasped with awe, and her eyes drank in the spark of light that came again and again, sometimes from the corner of her eye, but as her eyes adjusted to the star-glow she saw more and more.

“Look, Eliot!! Falling stars!!” she whispered in amazement.

“That’s a meteor shower, darlin’” Eliot said, and he looked at his best girl. Her gaze shone in reflected glory as another meteor trailed through the sky. “That’s the Draconids,” he continued. “Alice … she had a telescope an’ we’d watch out for meteor showers because we can see them so clearly out here … away from city lights. Beautiful, aren’t they?”

“Oh,” Lizzie breathed, the wonder of the night thrilling her and confirming in her soul what she already knew. Wapanjara was her home, and would be for the rest of her life. “Oh yes!”

And as young Elizabeth Grace Ford sat under the silent glory of the star-strewn sky, jewelled by the beauty of the glittering meteors, she finally knew what ‘home’ meant, and what she would place on her medicine pouch to carry over her heart.

“Pennicuik’s a double agent!” Hardison declared over breakfast, his grin widening in triumph as he poured coffee.

“A … a what?” Nate asked as he squinted at the hacker, still half-asleep and looking a little rumpled. It had been lovely sleeping in a real bed at last, but the worry about Ponomarenko was cutting into his stress tolerance level.

Hardison, looking very tired but buzzing with something he had obviously found out during his night-long internet-digging, was almost quivering with eagerness.

“Pennicuik sold the whole project to Bushman, right? Blocked Dennis’s patents, promoted Dartford
Race’s applications – *which*, incidentally, haven’t received approval yet, but it won’t be more’n a few days before that happens. *He* was the one who went to Bushman in the first place, okay?"

Nate shrugged as Sophie handed him a cup of coffee.

“I’m with you … so far,” he added, yawning. The first sip of coffee helped as his brain tried to take in what Hardison was saying. “So the furry little fellow is the mastermind on this, not Bushman?”

“You got it,” Hardison said, buttering toast. “He found Bushman’s own design when he was researching Dennis’s application, and knew Dennis’s worked and Bushman’s didn’t. He’s an expert on micro-computer systems an’ he spotted a miniscule flaw in Bushman’s ascent-descent ratio, which sent info via Bluetooth to the external computer system. Tiny … but the flaw made the system unreliable. So it was a simple thing to test the waters and see whether Dartford would be interested in screwin’ with the rules an’ Bushman took the bait.”

“How much did he sell out for?” Sophie asked, smiling at Tom as the Australian placed crisp bacon and a generous heap of scrambled eggs on the table for everyone to help themselves.

“Three-quarters of a million Australian,” Hardison added smugly. “Then …” he began before forking bacon onto his plate, “Pennicuik, the shifty little ass-wipe, discovered that Kremic was sniffing around Dartford. Obviously Bushman couldn’t help himself and had begun puttin’ out info that his new system was state-of-the-art and Kremic could get in at the ground floor.”

Tom, back in the kitchen, bodily slid Parker sideways along the granite work surface as he set the skillet in the sink to soak. Parker huffed as she sat cross-legged and eating her cereal, because Eliot had her trained to eat over the sink so that she didn’t drip milk everywhere while he cooked.

“So … Pennicuik found out and decided Bushman’s money wasn’t enough and decided to sell the system to Kremic as well,” Tom said as he rinsed kitchen utensils. “How much money this time?”

“Man, he’s a greedy, *greedy* ass-wipe. One-and-a-half million. Kremic will keep the system to himself and only for his riders’ use. Pennicuik has already slipped Kremic’s patent application into the system and will approve it as soon as Kremic agrees the deal.” Hardison finished his slice of toast before he continued. ‘But he’s gettin’ jittery. Kremic headin’ to New York to buy Babe Ruth’s jersey threw a proverbial wrench in the works by settin’ the deal back by a few days an’ Pennicuik’s gettin’ antsy.’

“So … is there anything we can do with this? Like … now?? Before we head back to Alice Springs?” Nate asked, turning variables over in his head, thinking through plans and discarding them just as quickly.

Hardison helped himself to scrambled eggs.

“Um …” he shrugged, “maybe. I spoke to Becca Hines last night. She’s met with Kremic an’ the man wants that jersey bad. He offered half a million over the askin’ price.”

Tom whistled thoughtfully as he settled himself at the kitchen table and forked some bacon onto his plate.

“Money’s no object, I see.”

“A drop in the ocean, I expect,” Sophie added thoughtfully. “I take it the sale’s going through, then?”

“Yeah,” Hardison agreed. “Becca’s free of Kremic, and Shelley said the sale’s sound. She’s safe.”
He grinned suddenly. “Becca says to tell Eliot his friend Shelley’s ass is mighty fine!”

Parker snorted happily as she rinsed her cereal bowl before sliding off the worktop and wandering over to sit beside Sophie. She poured herself a glass of mango juice and sipped it thoughtfully.

“So does that mean we have to go back to Canberra?” she asked. “To do something really nasty to Pennicuik?”

“That’s the thing,” Hardison continued. “Pennicuik’s here, in Sydney. Remember that call he made sayin’ he wanted out? The call was to Kremic. Mister Bad-McBad persuaded Pennicuik to hang on until he got back from New York, an’ they’re meetin’ at four this afternoon at a warehouse a mile from the airport. Then Pennicuik uploads the patent approval an’ heads out to Bora Bora with a couple of million dollars in an account in Panama, leavin’ Kremic with the authorised and approved patent and Bushman high and dry holdin’ a fake patent an’ a stolen design.”

Nate winced.

“Ouch. Not.” His brow furrowed for a moment. “What time do we leave?”

Hardison checked his cell phone for the information.

“I got us a private charter at three-thirty. Why?” He narrowed his eyes. “Nate, Eliot said –“

Nate held up a placatory hand.

“I know what Eliot said, Hardison, and point taken, of course, but … I think I have an idea. One which will mean we can possibly get Dennis’s patent back and not even be in Sydney while we do it.”

Sophie’s dark eyes were warm with anticipation.

“Do tell, my clever darling!” she said, her voice sharp now, eager to hear the plan.

Nate, rubbing his hands together, smiled slyly at the ex-policeman now paying attention to his breakfast.

“This is where we need your contacts, Tom. Are you happy to help with that?”

Tom Reid took a mouthful of scrambled eggs, swallowed, and leaned back in his chair, wiping his mouth with a napkin. He nodded calmly.

“Whatever it takes, Nate … whatever it takes.”

Nate’s smile widened into a feral grin.

“So,” he said. “Let’s go steal a double-cross!”

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After breakfast, Eliot bore the never-ending cleaning and packing of his wound and also garnered a very gentle finger-flick across the uninjured side of his head from Effie for not using his sling. How the little cook had found out about it Eliot had no idea, but he had his suspicions as Lizzie sat with him, her brown eyes innocently watching him for any return of his ‘wibbly-ness.’ But she held his hand in hers and soothed his cheek when the pain became too bad, although he couldn’t help the grunt of agony as the packing was pulled from the hole beneath his arm.

Once he was bandaged up, Jo left Lizzie to settle Eliot and ease his shaking. It was when he was in
pain that the whispers usually came, and Lizzie knew it. So she spoke to him and kissed him on the end of his nose, and Derry Ryan’s voice would fade to nothing and the tremors subsided. Eliot could feel Alice Jakkamarra in his heart, her laughter and warmth helping Lizzie’s love for her best friend and guardian work its magic.

But this morning, Eliot decided, was the time to begin making Lizzie’s medicine pouch. As Derry Ryan’s voice railed threats in Eliot’s head, Lizzie had told him quietly that she had decided on the design for the front of her pouch.

So with his medication taken and wearing his warm jacket and a beanie, Eliot settled stiffly at the table on the veranda as Lizzie gathered up the things she needed.

Soapy had decided to help, seeing as Eliot only had one good arm and sharp implements were being used. So he sat opposite Eliot as Lizzie placed her kangaroo skin on the table along with her ruler and a marker pen. Another trip to Eliot’s room and she returned with her project book and the old tome containing the beautiful tinted engravings she had so diligently shown to Tom Reid.

Soapy was armed with a couple of razor-sharp scalpels and a cutting-board.

They were ready.

“See? This is what I decided, Grandpa Soapy!” Lizzie said, and opened her project book to a sketch she had made of the design she wanted for the front of her pouch. It consisted of a circle with six smaller circles dotted evenly around it. She had carefully coloured the sketch in a warm golden brown, and Soapy smiled when he saw it but didn’t say anything.

Lizzie stuck her tongue out with effort as she carefully opened the old book to the engraving of the symbols, and pointed at a design almost identical to her own.

“There!” she said to Eliot, pointing at the symbol. “I decided on this one!”

“Uh-huh,” Eliot replied solemnly, and then he gave her his Lizzie-smile, his blue eyes crinkling with pleasure. “Why that one?”

Lizzie thought about it for a second, trying to figure out how to explain her choice.

“Well,” she said finally, “you told me I could maybe think about what ‘home’ meant to me, and I had to decide all by myself with no help. And it was really, really hard!”

She sat and stared at the pages for long moments.

“And?” Eliot prompted.

Lizzie smiled up at him, and he could see the wonder in her face.

“Y’see, because Wapanjara is my home, and I can sit outside at night and be safe and look at the sky, I decided that the stars made me feel like home. Wapanjara stars. Stars and meteors and the clouds that look like silver.” She pointed at the symbol. “I chose the star. The Waru … Waru … Warumungu star,” she added, struggling with the word but thrilled with her effort when she pronounced the name perfectly. “That means that Wapanjara is always with me wherever I go.”

And her eyes filled with starlight and she felt the spark of the meteors as they flooded her veins, warm and fierce with the love she felt for this place and its people.

Soapy cleared his throat and wiped his eyes, and Eliot’s blood thrummed with pride. His ‘Lizbeth
Grace had found her place in the world, and his blue eyes shone with the joy of it.

“Okay …” he rasped without a quiver in his voice, although he didn’t know how he managed it, “okay, let’s get to work. Let’s see your drawings, darlin’.”

So Lizzie talked through her ideas about the shape of her pouch. She had decided on a simple pouch, like Eliot’s, with no intricate beadwork and just drawstrings with a single bead on each one to keep it closed. It would be stitched together with fine thongs also made with the kangaroo hide, and finished with a loop long enough to hang it over her heart. Eliot suggested the loop be in two parts with a bead of some sort threaded over both lengths, with a knot placed below the bead so Lizzie could lengthen the loop as she grew bigger. Lizzie thought that was an excellent idea.

So the three of them spent the day carefully marking out the design on the hide and then Soapy very carefully cut the shapes out with a scalpel. Any irregularities were trimmed off, and by late afternoon the pieces were all ready to be assembled. The slits for the drawstrings were cut, and Lizzie sat back, satisfied.

“Will that do, d’you think, Eliot?” she asked shyly, worried in case she was doing anything wrong to upset the spirit the pouch would help keep safe. “Have I done it right?”

“Does it feel right to you?” Eliot asked, fingering the soft skin and smoothing flat the oval shapes that would be stitched together to form the body of the pouch. Then he reached out and tapped Lizzie’s chest. “It’s come from in here … from inside, where your wolves are. From your spirit. Let it guide you,” he said softly, “and it will be everythin’ you need it to be.”

Lizzie absorbed every word as she gazed at the pieces. Yes, she thought. It feels right. But another thought struck her, and she pursed her lips.

“But I don’t have any beads!” she exclaimed, and looked back at Eliot, who raised an eyebrow. “How can I get beads?? Do I have to make them? How do I make beads??” Lizzie said, now worried that her pouch couldn’t be made without them.

“I think I can help with that!” Soapy said, and shoving back his chair he disappeared into the house, only to return minutes later with an old circular tin box, much-dented and adorned with the picture of a stone bridge over a river. Soapy opened the lid and began rummaging in its depths.

Lizzie was intrigued, and it was only Eliot’s slight frown that prevented her from peering into the tin. Soapy let out a grunt of satisfaction.

He looked up at Lizzie and his black eyes shone with humour.

“Remember me telling you about my great-great-grandma Lily?” Seeing Lizzie’s wide-eyed nod, he continued. “Well, this is her tin of things that she gave to my grandfather just before she died.”

Lizzie’s eyes widened even more and she gasped. She didn’t think she had ever seen such an old tin.

Soapy fished about inside, pushing aside unseen things and rustling about, and then he brought out something hidden in the palm of his hand, now fisted tight. Putting the lid back on the tin with his free hand, he laid his fist on the table and opened it for Lizzie to see what it contained.

Lizzie found herself looking at three small, oval objects, a hard, shiny red-brown in colour.

“Beads!!” she breathed, and looked up at Soapy. “For my pouch??”

Soapy nodded.
“These aren’t really beads, I suppose. They’re Ininti seeds. Great-great-grandma Lily collected them when she was a child, oh, probably in the 1840s. She made ‘em into a necklace, and she gave them to my grandfather so he could give them to the girl he married. But down through the years the string broke, I suppose, and most of the seeds were lost. But I still have a few left. Maybe … maybe you’d like them for your mukurtu.”

Lizzie’s mouth gaped, and she took a deep breath.

“Yes please!!” she whispered, thrilled beyond belief. “Thank you, Grandpa Soapy!!” And she flung her arms around the old pastoralist, hugging him so hard he could barely breathe. By the time Lizzie let go Soapy was spluttering happily even as he carefully handed the seeds to the child.

Lizzie studied the seeds closely, seeing the hole piercing them through. They were well-worn and glossy from use, but they winked warmly at her from the palm of her hand and she knew instantly that she would treasure them dearly. She glanced at Soapy.

“What’s a mukurtu?” she asked, intrigued.

“Eliot’s Cherokee family make medicine bags, and the Warumungu make mukurtu,” Soapy explained. They’re often called dilly-bags in English, and they can be quite big and used for carrying food. But the little ones are used in the same way as a medicine pouch.”

Lizzie wrinkled her brow, trying to understand.

“See,” Eliot spoke quietly, “it’s almost like a spiritual scrapbook of your life … things you’ve done … places you’ve been that mean a lot to you … something that helps you understand who you are and where you belong.”

Lizzie fingered the seeds. They had been at Wapanjara for over 150 years and had belonged to Soapy’s beloved great-great-grandmother Lily, who was Warlpiri. The kangaroo skin had been lovingly cured by Auntie, and given to her as a gift so that Lizzie could make her pouch. Eliot had told her that when the pouch was finished, he would gift her something of his own as his Grandfather had done for him. And Wapanjara itself had told her where she belonged, and she would carry the stars from the night sky with her for the rest of her life.

The enormity of it all almost took Lizzie’s breath away.

“Are you okay, Lizzie?” Soapy asked, concerned. The child had suddenly become very still and pale.

Lizzie jumped as though surprised.

“I … I think so, Grandpa Soapy,” she replied a little shakily, and then she giggled as Eliot pulled her to him for a hug.

“I know, ‘Lizbeth Grace,” the hitter said gently. “Sometimes things get a bit hard to deal with - even the nice things. C’mon. Let’s get tided up an’ we can do the stitching tomorrow. Jo said she would show you how.”

Lizzie leaned back and looked Eliot square in the eye, and for the first time since he had been shot and returned home wounded and sick, she saw how clear they were.

So she kissed him on the nose, patted his cheek and set herself to her task. Carefully putting away the pieces of her pouch into a bag, she tidied up the remnants, kissed a surprised Soapy Munro on his leathery cheek and skipped into the house to help Effie make tea.
Albert Pennicuik was fidgeting.

Sitting in the entrance area of Sydney’s huge airport, he checked his watch. He had just over an hour before he met Benjamin Kremic in a small warehouse a mile away from the airport. His luggage was already checked in and all he had to do was meet the man, get his money transferred digitally as well as pass on the blueprints and approve the patent application. He had already collected his ‘fee’ from Bushman and handed over the useless design, so within ninety minutes, Pennicuik figured, he would be in the air and away from his boring job and his humdrum life and living the life of Riley in Bora Bora.

But this waiting was killing him. He checked his watch again. Maybe a drink would help, he thought.

As he stood up, his bag over one shoulder, a hand dropped onto his arm. Albert Pennicuik shrieked like a girl.

Turning while trying to shove the hand from his upper arm, he came face to face with a stocky, fair-haired man with a stubbly beard and wearing the worst Hawaiian shirt he had ever seen. The man grinned at him cheerily.

“Hey there, mate!!” the man said. “Remember me??”

Pennicuik blinked. Yes … yes, he knew who the man was now. He was the slobby fellow who had accused Pennicuik of seducing his daughter.

“Oh! Oh … um … yes, yes, I remember you!” he replied, and saw the man had his other arm around a tall, elegant, dark-haired woman with beautiful brown eyes. On his other side stood a slender blonde girl who grinned at him eerily. “I, ah … I see you found your daughter.”

“Too bloody right!” the man replied. “This is my wife, Elsie, and this is my girl,” he continued, gesturing at the young woman. “My Beryl!” he said, pride in every word.

“Well now,” Elsie simpered, reaching out a well-manicured hand to shake Pennicuik’s, “what a lovely soul you are for not reporting my Alf to the coppers!” she added, her broad Queensland accent making Pennicuik wince. “You’re a bloody prince, so you are!!” Pennicuik shook the proffered hand limply, not really knowing what to do but unable to excuse himself without being rude.

Alf nodded sheepishly.

“Yeah,” he muttered, dropping his eyes to his shoes in embarrassment, “What a ruddy wally I was, hey! The silly little cow was back at home all the time!! Sorry about that, mate!”

Pennicuik murmured a quick ‘no, really, I quite understand’ before glancing at his watch once more.

Alf turned to his daughter who was staring at Pennicuik with an unnerving intensity in her blue eyes.

“Beryl!! Give the nice man a hug, why doncha!! You nearly got him into a right bloody uproar with the coppers, you silly trollop!”

Beryl let out a little shriek of delight and launched herself at Pennicuik, and he suddenly found himself with an armful of wriggling blonde female. She hugged the wits out of him for what seemed a lifetime, and then she let him go and stepped back. Then she leaned forward and gave the little man a smacking kiss on the cheek, almost as an afterthought.
“Righto,” Alf said. “We’re off to Brisbane to see the in-laws. Thanks again, mate. You’re an absolute brick!”

And before Pennicuik could reply, the three of them were gone, heading for the domestic flights terminal.

Taking a few deep breaths to steady himself, Pennicuik checked his bag. His passport, paperwork and tablet were all there, as was his in-flight reading matter. Another check on the time meant he still had eighty minutes to go before he met Kremic.

Shaking off the shock of meeting Alf and his horrendous family, Pennicuik decided that a stiff drink really was in order, so neatening his tie which was a little askew, he looked for the nearest bar where he could settle down and wait.

To be continued …
Nate and Hardison were waiting in the domestic flights terminal, Nate tapping his foot in irritation. He checked his watch, but when he looked up he sighed with relief.

“There they are!” he exclaimed quietly as Tom and Sophie, with Parker dawdling in the rear, strode into view heading straight for him.

“Done!” Sophie said decisively, kissing Nate lightly on the cheek.

“I had to kiss him!!” Parker grumbled. She stuck out her tongue, giving it an airing. “Blech! Hairy!”

“Never mind, Momma,” Hardison sympathised, giving Parker a one-armed hug. “You took one for the team, girl – I’ll make sure Eliot cooks you somethin’ nice,” he continued, ignoring the fact Eliot had already promised to do so.

Tom raised an eyebrow admiringly as he watched Parker pulling faces.

“It’s done, Nate. He never felt a thing.” He gestured at Parker. “She’s bloody good, mate!”

Parker grinned mischievously.

“Of course I am! I’m awesome!!”

Nate dug out his cell ‘phone and dialled a number, marshalling his features into a scowl. Waiting for a reply, he eyed his team and let out an unexpected grin. Now this was what made living worthwhile. His scowl returned full force when a voice answered.

“Bushman, you bastard!” he hissed. “You double-crossing sonofabitch!! You tried to con me, you asshole!!”

The rest of the team could hear bluster emanating from the ‘phone, but Nate didn’t let Bushman finish taking a breath before continuing his blast of ire.

“Some moron called Kremic called me! Told me to back off … that the design was his and I’d better keep my nose outta –“ Nate paused as Bushman apparently was having a blustering hissy-fit on the other end of the line, but he didn’t allow the man to get a handle on the conversation. “You’re a thief, Bushman! A thief and a con man!! You’ve got an hour, understand! You give me the design and half-a-million or I will end you! Now, I got my man to source Kremic’s GPS in his phone. He’s sending you the location now –“ He nodded at Hardison, who pressed an icon on his tablet, “ - to tell you where he is. You fix this, you understand! You fix this and call me!!”

And with a sudden grin of relish, Nate cut Bushman off in mid-rant. He glanced at Tom, who brought out his own phone and made a call. When it was answered, he spoke only two words.

“Seventy minutes!,” he said and rang off.

Team Leverage looked at one another, and slow smiles widened on satisfied faces.

“Okay, people,” Nate said, eyes bright with a job well done. “Let’s go home.”

Albert Pennicuik was a mass of nerves. He realised now that he had bitten off more than he could chew because he knew what Kremic was, and he was a fool if he thought he could pull Kremic’s
chain and get away with it. But, he realised, astonished, he had got away with it. Against all the odds, Albert Pennicuik, mild-mannered pencil pusher, had bamboozled two powerful – and in Kremic’s case, highly dangerous – men out of millions of dollars. He felt a rush of pure adrenaline, and he couldn’t contain the wide smile as he reached his destination.

Ordering the taxi driver to drop him at the end of the street along from the warehouse and telling the woman to wait, he gathered up his bag, slung it over his shoulder and made his way along the street, checking doorways as he went.

He finally arrived at a huge roller-door with a smaller steel door beside it opening outwards into the warmth of a late afternoon. Stepping inside, Pennicuik found himself in a large, echoing space with sunlight streaming in through overhead skylights. Dust motes shivered in the still air, and Pennicuik’s smart leather shoes made a scuffing noise as he shut the door behind him and moved towards the centre of the warehouse.

For a moment he thought he was alone, until a figure stepped out of the shadows between two containers.

“Where is my patent?” Benjamin Kremic said.

Pennicuik made himself as tall as he was able, all five-six, 120 pounds of him, and he looked Kremic straight in the eye. When he opened his mouth, he tried his best to keep his voice from wavering.

“Here,” he said, placing his hand on his bag. “Printed license, dated from today, and as soon as the money is in my account the approvals and legal processes will be sent to your digital cloud. It’ll be all yours.”

Steadying himself he kept eye contact, although Kremic’s steel-blue eyes were hard and deadly.

Kremic stared at the little man for long moments, his lean face impassive as he stood, arms crossed. He appeared deceptively relaxed, but Pennicuik could see the tension in the man’s tall frame.

His answer came as a short, curt nod.

Turning, he lifted a hand and gestured towards the containers, and another man appeared. He was urbane, grey and well-suited, and he had a slim laptop tucked under one arm. He came to stand silently beside Kremic and waited.

Pennicuik blinked and then understood it was his move. Gently dropping his bag to the floor he leaned over, brought out a large brown envelope and handed it to Kremic. The man handed it to his associate, who opened it and pulled out the papers within. He riffled through them and slid them back into the envelope. He nodded. Kremic smiled.

“You have done the right thing, Mister Pennicuik,” Kremic murmured, his soft voice in contrast to the arctic blue of his gaze. He turned to the anonymous-looking man beside him. “Mister Stanley, please await Mister Pennicuik’s account details, and then transfer the money. After that, you will supervise the transfer of the patent confirmation and design blueprints to me. And then …” he smiled coldly at Pennicuik, “… we are done.”

Pennicuik almost dropped his own small electronic notebook in his haste to comply.

Slow down, he thought, don’t look too eager! He hesitated for a moment.

“What’s to stop you killing me once this is done and hacking my account to get your money back?” he asked Kremic, a little amazed at his own audacity.
Kremic let out a short bark of amusement.

“I could, couldn’t I? Very easily.” He took a short, amused breath before continuing. “However, my greedy little friend, you are far more use to me alive. Who knows? I might need your services again.”

Not in my lifetime, Pennicuik thought, but he smiled at Kremic and thought of Bora Bora.

It took less than two minutes to complete the transaction, and the glow from Pennicuik’s tablet lit the fire in his eyes as he watched the balance of his off-shore account increase substantially. Looking up, he saw Kremic in quiet discussion with his associate. They studied the laptop and Stanley appeared to understand the blueprints scrolling before him and the various legal documents and plans which popped up on demand. Then both men relaxed. Stanley snapped the laptop shut and stepped back from Kremic, who looked like an amused shark.

“Well done, Mister Pennicuik! Well done! This design will certainly give my riders an exclusive advantage. It may be, my friend, that you have opened the door to an Olympic team gold. I am … very happy.” Kremic unfolded his arms and gestured at Stanley, who walked past Pennicuik and through the small door.

Pennicuik looked at his watch. If he left now, he would have plenty of time to get through customs and security, and then board his flight. First class, he thought smugly. All the way to Bora Bora.

What he wasn’t prepared for was Hardy Bushman crashing through the small door, fury on his well-fed face and a gun in his hand, pointing the weapon directly at Benjamin Kremic.

Eliot checked the time on the old, wooden-framed clock hanging above the mantelpiece in Wapanjara’s roomy old living room.

His team would be on a flight to Alice Springs within thirty minutes, he knew, and Nate had promised to ‘phone him once they were in the air. Eliot’s shoulder and side hurt and for the first time in days the tremor was back, and creeping, snarling whispers were beginning in his head. This inability to protect his people was tying him into knots, and a headache throbbed behind his eyes, the worry eating away at his temper. But he knew the worry was fully justified – any involvement by Tomas Ponomarenko, The Confessor, was something about which Eliot Spencer was seriously concerned.

Lizzie was busy helping Effie, and for the first time he fully understood that he really, really needed her presence to keep him grounded. She was his balance when he was incapacitated like this, and it took all of his willpower not to yell out, which he knew would bring her running, worry on her face in case he was hurting or feeling unwell.

Eliot Spencer was not and never had been, a weak man. Even seriously hurt as he was he could usually defend himself, and had done so many times, often lethally. While he had long ago resigned himself to being a member of a team, he still jealously guarded his independence and relied on no-one other than his family here at Wapanjara. Even now, his nomadic life meant he didn’t see them as often as he would like, and, he was secretly ashamed to admit, he sometimes returned when he needed some urgent patching-up.

But now there was a new factor in his life. Lizzie, since the day he had delivered her, held her to his chest and promised to guard her with all of his being, was not only his to protect, but after nearly seven years, he suddenly had to concede that she was the saving of him in more ways than one. With Lizzie, he could unbuckle and let fall the heavy armour he wore to protect his heart. He could be free of the weight he had carried for most of his life.
We’ll see how long that lasts, my friend, Damien Moreau’s voice said beside his ear. You can’t protect her forever. One day … one day she’ll be mine.

Eliot snarled, and his knuckles whitened as he clutched the arm of his chair. He closed his eyes and took a couple of deep breaths to slow his heartbeat. He bit his lip as the pain hit, but he wouldn’t cry out. No, he had to control this … this … nonsense. He just had to.

Lizzie’s voice when it came made him twitch.

“Eliot,” she said, wandering into the room with a sandwich on a plate, “Effie says you need to eat more.”

“Um …” Eliot said, and he hated that his voice came out as a croak, “… ‘m not hungry, ‘Lizbeth Grace. Not really. Maybe in a little while –”

Lizzie studied him for only seconds before she placed the plate on the table and was instantly behind him as he sat, tense and shaking, in the chair. As gently as she could she wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him, resting her head on his.

“Wibbly?” she whispered.

“Maybe … just a bit …” he answered, and then he reached up with his good hand and patted hers as they lay over his upper chest. “It’s better now,” he added, and it was. Moreau faded and the tension eased, and his chest didn’t ache quite as much.

Lizzie sighed and relaxed, content to hold her wolf close to her heart. She knew he would feel easier in himself once their family returned, safe and sound.

“They’ll be home soon,” she murmured, and held him tighter, careful not to hurt him. “They promised.”

“They sure did, sweetheart. I just wish I was with ‘em to make sure of it,” Eliot grouched, feeling more able to do a little growling.

So Lizzie soothed and Eliot worried, and both knew that it would be tough until their family came home.

“You shit!!” Bushman yelled, the gun wavering slightly in his hand. “You tried to steal my design!!”

Kremic, a little surprised but unafraid, raised an eyebrow in enquiry. Then he gave a small wave with the fingers of his right hand, even as Bushman let out a faint squeak of terrified annoyance at the man’s apparent lack of interest in the fact that he was waving a gun about.

Bushman was startled as two men appeared as though from nowhere, emerging from the shadows. Both men held Glocks and both guns were pointed at Bushman.

Albert Pennicuik stood, mesmerised and petrified, as guns were pointed and unspoken threats were made, and he shrank away from both Bushman and Kremic. An unbidden thought ran rampant through his panicked brain. Just what had he got himself into?? A Mexican standoff, he thought. I’m in the middle of a bloody Mexican standoff and I’m going to die, right here, right now, in a bloody warehouse, when I should be getting on a ‘plane to Bora Bora.

“Now,” Kremic said icily, “Just what the hell are you talking about, you stupid bastard?” he snapped
Hardy Bushman’s eyes flicked nervously from Kremic to the two armed men and then to Pennicuik and back to Kremic. He was obviously on the edge of hysteria, but he fought to regain control and firmed his grip on the little snub-nosed thirty-eight held in his sweaty grip. He didn’t like to admit it, but he was not only furious but terrified.

“This idiot –“he gestured slightly at Pennicuik with his gun –“sold the design to me! Exclusively!! So how do you get off screwing up my business by telling my client to back off? Did you strike a deal with him –“ once more the gun was waved at Pennicuik, “ - and cut me out of the loop?? Huh??”

Kremic frowned.

“Ah … contact who, exactly?” Now he was a little intrigued.

“My client!!” Bushman insisted. “The patron of that skinny kid from the States … Darcy Burnham. He wanted to use the system for her bikes!!” Bushman’s voice rose slightly until it began to approach a shriek.

Kremic’s face creased in mild puzzlement.

“I have no idea what you are talking about, my friend. However …” Kremic smiled slightly. “I must tell you that I now have exclusive rights to the design, so if you wish to use it, then … sorry. I’ll have to say no.” His smile widened.

Bushman’s gun wavered. Now he was confused.

“No … no, that can’t be right …” he murmured to himself. “I have the patent. Pennicuik assured me …”

Kremic looked thoughtful, if a little amused.

“I do so hope you didn’t hurt Mister Stanley,” he said. “The grey-suited gentleman you must have encountered outside before you came barging in here waving a gun around. Because he assured me that the paperwork Mister Pennicuik here gave me was genuine and very legal.”

Bushman was becoming more and more confused. He had clipped Stanley across the ear with his gun and the man was out cold, sprawled in the late afternoon sunshine just a few feet from the warehouse door.

“But … but I have the paperwork too,” he blustered. “So … I don’t understand …” The gun in his hand sagged so that the barrel began to point at the ground.

Kremic’s face hardened.

“Bushman … I think you’ve been played. Probably by Mister Pennicuik here. I suspect your design is inoperable. I do so hope you haven’t given him any money, because I have no doubt that you paid him for a dud. I have the genuine design, and the patent to go with it. Any paperwork you have is illegal and a forgery.” Kremic gave a small bark of amusement. “Actually, it’s quite funny. I didn’t think the little fool had it in him.” He shrugged. “No matter. I have my design, bought and paid for, and I don’t really care what you do to Pennicuik.”

Both Kremic and Bushman both suddenly turned to look at the little, sparely-built man quivering with terror, exposed and vulnerable in the daylight streaming in from the overhead windows.
“Mister Pennicuik,” Kremic asked quietly, “did you give Mister Bushman here illegal and inoperable designs? Not that I care, but I am a little curious, I have to say.”

Pennicuik’s adam’s apple was working overtime as he swallowed, trying to get some moisture in his mouth so that he could somehow talk himself out of the impossible – and probably lethal – situation in which he found himself.

“Wh … who? Me??” he managed, croaking aridly.

Kremic sighed, slightly amused.

“Yes, Mister Pennicuik. You.”

Pennicuik opened his mouth and then shut it again.

“Um …” he said, eyes wide and darting.

Kremic snorted.

“Thought so.”

Bushman suddenly realised he really had been double crossed by a shitty little upstart who was a nothing but a greedy desk-jockey with big ideas.

“You … you greedy, dirty, thieving little bastard!!” he yelled, and once more the gun was pointed, but this time straight at Pennicuik.

Shaking and frightened beyond belief, Pennicuik scrabbled backwards, dropping his little tablet, which bounced and then shattered, but he didn’t care. All he saw was the ever-yawning barrel of the thirty-eight, framed by Bushman’s twisted features.

“I … I didn’t … you don’t understand …” Pennicuik stammered, and he knew … knew … deep down in his gut that he was going to die. Right now.

“I must leave you two gentlemen to your ‘discussion’” Kremic said smugly. “I have an appointment with my engineering team. Show them the designs for my new, fully-patented on-frame microcomputer.” He lifted a hand and wriggled his fingers. “Farewell, Mister Bushman.” He nodded at Pennicuik, who had backed himself into a crate and could go no further. “Mister Pennicuik.” He turned away, but then hesitated. “I, ah … I’m afraid I will have to renege on our agreement. I’ll be clawing back my money. But then … I doubt you’ll need it.”

Pennicuik let out a terrified wail.

“NO!! NO!! Please!! Don’t leave me here with him!!” he screamed but Kremic turned his back on the little man, and Bushman gave him a feral grin.

“Where’s my money, Pennicuik? You sold me a lie. You owe me!!”

Pennicuik cringed. He stared at his shattered tablet.

“I … I can fix this!!” he sputtered, “Just … just get me to a computer, and I can –“

But the world exploded into a plethora of shouts and orders and armed men in black wearing Kevlar vests emblazoned POLICE. They were all armed with Colt M4 assault rifles, and every one of those rifles was pointed at the five men in front of them. Kremic’s thugs reluctantly lowered their Glocks.
A stocky aborigine stepped forward from the group, lowering his rifle and gazing at Pennicuik. He reached out and rested his hand on the little man’s shoulder.

“Are you alright, Mister Pennicuik?” he asked.

Pennicuik, bewildered but relieved, nodded vigorously.

“Yes … yes, I’m fine, but –”

The policeman ignored Pennicuik’s words and turned to Kremic and Bushman. Kremic was seething, but Bushman just looked horrified.

“Gentlemen,” he said calmly, “I am Federal Agent Rob Munmie, SSC Financial Crimes Squad. And you are under arrest.”

“For what??” Kremic snarled as he was handcuffed. “My men have licenses for their weapons and they drew their guns in self-defence when this fool –” he gestured with an elbow at Bushman, who had been disarmed and was now protesting loudly that he had been tricked out of his patent rights, “drew a gun and began waving it around!”

“That bastard conned me!!” Bushman yelled, jutting his chin at Pennicuik and struggling against the restraint of two officers.

Munmie smiled whitely, his dark eyes amused.

“Mister Pennicuik here has been assisting us with our investigation,” he explained, his hand still firmly grasping Pennicuik’s shoulder. His other hand reached under Pennicuik’s jacket and pulled something away from the man’s belt. He held up a transmitter attached to a clip. “He agreed to wear a wire. Didn’t you, Mister Pennicuik?”

Pennicuik’s watery eyes flicked warily at Bushman, and then he nodded.

“Um … yes … yes I did,” he agreed. Suddenly, wonderously, there seemed to be a way out of this mess.

“You … you *moron*!!” Bushman screamed. “You betrayed us!!”

Kremic’s eyes were smouldering with hate, and Pennicuik shifted until he was sheltered by Munmie’s kevlar’d frame.

Munmie was handed Pennicuik’s bag, and the policeman rummaged around inside. He grinned and pulled out a small, burgundy-coloured pen-drive. He held it up and waved it at Kremic.

“Everything should be on here. Records, emails, ‘phone calls … the lot. I have you, Kremic. You and your associates as well as Bushman. We’ve been after you for a long time, and Mister Pennicuik came to us and offered us a deal in return for a reduced sentence, and, I have to say, he’s done a sterling job.”

Pennicuik blinked.

“I … I have??”

Munmie nodded, grinning.

“Without you, Mister Pennicuik, we could not have caught Kremic. Thank you. Now all you have to do is agree to make a statement and give evidence, and you could be out of prison in two years.”
Munmie was careful to make sure both Kremic and Bushman heard every word.

Pennicuik swallowed and silently agreed.

“Good man!” Munmie said.

Kremic stared at Pennicuik.

“You are a dead man,” he swore, before he was hauled away with his men.

Pennicuik had no idea what had just happened. Within minutes he had gone from Bora Bora to possible sudden death, and now he was destined to be a jail bird.

And then he got it. The girl. The horrendous Alf and his appalling family, including the clingy blonde daughter.

“Bugger!!” he said, eyes wide with shock.

Bob Munmie grinned, motioning one of his men to take Pennicuik away. As he stood in the light from one of the overhead skylights, he brought out a cell ‘phone and made a call. When a voice answered, he spoke.

“It’s done,” he said. Ringing off, he tucked away the ‘phone and turned back to his work.

Team Leverage was sitting in the domestic flights V.I.P. lounge when the call came.

Tom Reid pulled out his ‘phone and answered as he waited for Hardison to finish his mocha latte, Parker sitting beside him, her knee jiggling with impatience. Nate and Sophie turned as one and watched as Tom took the call.

“Yeah?” he said quietly. Listening for a second or two, he didn’t bother replying to the caller and he ended the call, stashing his ‘phone back into the pocket of his chinos. He looked at each member of the team who waited pensively. “Kremic, Bushman and Pennicuik are all in custody. It’s finished.” He said.

The relieved slump of four sets of shoulders made him grin.

Nate stood up and stretched, and then held out his hand to pull Sophie to her feet. Hardison grabbed his bag and unwound himself from the comfortable armchair. He was very tired. But Nate hadn’t finished with him yet.

“Hardison, as soon as we’re in the air, you’re up. You still have access to Pennicuik’s cell and his desktop. Tackle the patents first and then the money. Then we’re done.”

Hardison rubbed his eyes. They felt gritty after his overnight digging about on line, and he had a mild headache.

“Won’t take me more than ten minutes, Nate. Then I am so gonna get me some shut-eye, ‘cause Nana’s baby boy is all wore out!” he quipped tiredly.

“God, yes!” Sophie added, “and then I can go home to my daughter. Do you realise this is the longest time we’ve been separated since she was born?”

Nate kissed her, his lips soft and wanting. He desperately missed Lizzie, but he also needed to spend some down time with his wife.
“Yeah …” he murmured. “Yeah … let’s go home.”

“Yes please!” Parker grumbled, touching her toes to stretch her back muscles. “And don’t ever ask me to kiss hairy little men again!”

“Mister McCoy?” A smart young woman approached, smiling. “Your charter is ready. If you and your group would like to board now?”

“At last!” Nate said under his breath, and gathering up bags the team as one headed along a short corridor, through a door and out into a large hangar. Beyond the hangar, a Learjet 60 waited for them, the silver fuselage gleaming dully in the late afternoon glare.

Tom grinned cheerily as he walked beside Parker.

“I could get used to this!” he commented, and Parker shrugged.

“S’pose,” she answered, “but in our job the comfort’s worth the money, especially if Eliot’s a bit banged up or it’s been a tough deal. We don’t have the safety net most people have, so … what the hell?!” her voice trailed off and her eyebrows drew down as a man appeared around the side of the hangar.

Nate and Sophie wandered to a halt in front of them, and Hardison ranged alongside Nate, wary now.

The man was tall, lean and beautifully dressed, and as he came to a halt in front of them he took off his Ferragamo sunglasses, revealing warm hazel eyes.

Nate cocked his head to one side and pursed his lips.

“Tomas Ponomarenko, I presume?” he said.

The Confessor smiled, his eyes alight with humour, and he bowed slightly. He was a handsome man and he knew it.

“Mister Ford,” he replied, his voice slightly accented and soft. “We meet at last!”

“SNAP!!” Lizzie yelled triumphantly as she slammed a three of hearts down on the small table beside Eliot, covering the three of clubs sitting on top of the pile of already-revealed cards.

“Dammit, ‘Lizbeth Grace!!” Eliot growled uselessly. This was the fourth game of SNAP! Lizzie had won in a row. Granted, she was taking advantage of her guardian’s lack of a manageable left arm, but this was getting ridiculous!

Lizzie frowned for a moment, her dark eyes suspicious.

“Eliot! Are you letting me win??” she demanded as she gathered up the cards and took the remaining few out of Eliot’s tenuous grip.

Eliot was outraged.

“Hell, NO!” he snarled and glared at the child kneeling on the floor at the other side of the table. “Since when have I ever let you win, you pest! I’m just not up to par yet, is all! I’m shot, remember??”

Lizzie huffed.
“So I won fair and square then!” she declared, laboriously sorted the cards and began to shuffle them carefully.

Eliot’s eyes narrowed.

“’Lisbeth Grace Ford – are you cheating??” he growled. “Has Parker been teachin’ you how to cheat?? Huh??”

Lizzie’s eyes widened indignantly, even as her ears began to tinge red.

“NO!!” She declared, “I beat you all by myself!!”

“Show me your sleeves!” Eliot grouched. When Lizzie hesitated, he smiled evilly. “You cheated, you little rat!!”

Lizzie’s face became defiant.

“I’m practicing, Eliot!!” she explained hurriedly. “Parker says I have to practice my slime of hand!!”

“I knew it!” Eliot rumbled, happy with his deductions. “and it’s sleight of hand, ‘Lizbeth Grace, not slime! Sheesh … Parker an’ me … we’re gonna have words –” Eliot shifted and had to stop speaking as his wounds decided to remind him of their presence. He couldn’t stop a keening groan and Lizzie was beside him in seconds, peering into his eyes and touching his chest gently.

“I’ll go get Grandma Jo,” she whispered, eyebrows drawn down in concern. “You shouldn’t be moving too much. Are you in pain? D’you need your pills?”

Eliot grasped her hand in his and shook his head, trying to ease her mind.

“No, sweetheart. I just moved wrong, is all. I’m okay.” He gave her his Lizzie-smile. “Stop worryin’. I’m doing better, I promise.”

The two friends sat quietly for a few moments, but Eliot decided enough was enough. He had to make himself move, to get back on his feet and begin his regimen of exercise to regain his mobility. He knew it was too soon, but he had to do something before he went crazy. This latest debacle which had brought him to the edge of death meant he had to try even harder to keep his team safe and guard Lizzie.

“C’mon, girl – help me up,” he said.

Lizzie’s frown didn’t alter his decision one whit, and he leaned forward, hissing as the pain hit but determined.

“But –“ Lizzie objected, but Eliot was having none of it – he was going to get out of the chair and move.

“Gettin’ up, ’Lizbeth Grace. I’m tired of just sittin’ and doing nothin’, so you an’ me … we’re going for a walk along the veranda … an’ I promise not to do any more than that. I just need to do somethin’, darlin’.” He glanced for the umpteenth time at the clock. Nate should have called by now, telling him his team was safe and that they were heading home. But the telephone stayed stubbornly silent, even though Jacko had repaired the transformer and Wapanjara was once again connected to the outside world.

Lizzie thought about it and then agreed.
“As long as you don’t try and do anything silly,” she scolded. She noted his glance at the clock. “Are you worried, Eliot? ‘Cause Daddy hasn’t ‘phoned?”

Even as Eliot rested his right elbow on the chair arm so he could lever himself forward, he sighed.

“A little. There’s still time, an’ the call’s not too overdue. I’m just … it’s because I’m not there is all. Your dad knows to call as soon as they’re in the air, an’ they’ve got time yet.” Eliot saw the worry on Lizzie’s face. He grinned at her. “C’mon, you little card sharp. Let’s you an’ me do this, and Jo said now the lights are back on she can help you stitch your pouch.”

Lizzie, cheered by Eliot’s words and trusting in his judgement, helped him get to his feet. Eliot stood straight and steady, Lizzie by his side. He hurt and he was stiff and his side was on fire, but he had made it. He was healing, and he would regain his balance and fitness so he could continue to guard his team and his ‘Lizbeth Grace with all he had.

He tapped Lizzie on the shoulder.

“Lead the way, kiddo,” he urged, and as the telephone remained silent, Lizzie and Eliot made their way outside into the warmth of the sun.

“What do you want, Ponomarenko?” Nate gritted as he eyed the steps leading upwards into the aeroplane. Turning his gaze back to Ponomarenko, he noticed the almost imperceptible bulge in the man’s suit, despite the beautiful cut of the garment. The gun he carried was a very real threat.

The Confessor was relaxed, even amiable, and Sophie’s hackles rose as he perused her shapely figure appreciatively. Nate, however, allowed himself a tight smile and cocked his head to one side, waiting for Ponomarenko to decide when to speak.

Tom edged sideways a little to give him a clear view of this man who had appeared out of nowhere in what was supposed to be a secure area. He wanted to make sure the team he was here to protect was within his sight line, and where he could attract Ponomarenko’s attention without endangering his people in the process.

Ponomarenko made a small shrugging movement of one shoulder and clasped his hands in front of him before replying.

“Don’t worry, Mister Ford. I am not here to threaten or hurt any of you, although …” he paused thoughtfully as he spotted Parker, who glared at him, “… I wouldn’t mind having a little … fun … with Parker there.”

Parker’s eyes narrowed dangerously, but Hardison touched her arm and she settled a little, quivering with tension.

Ponomarenko smirked.

“Not going to come to her defence, Alec?” he taunted politely.

Hardison let loose a wide, mirthless grin before answering.

“Me? Nah,” he said, his long frame deceptively relaxed. “Parker can take care of herself, man. She don’t need me gettin’ in the way. Isn’t that right, babe?” He raised an enquiring eyebrow at Parker who looked like a panther on the prowl. Hardison could almost hear the growl. “I wouldn’t hassle her if I were you. You’re liable to lose important body parts.”
Ponomarenko waved a dismissive hand, his eyes swivelling back to Nate, although he gave Tom a quick appraisal before doing so. For all that the Australian was not young, he looked hard and dangerous. *Hmm,* he thought. *This man is not to be underestimated.*

“So …” he continued, “I’m not here to cause you any harm, Mister Ford.”

Nate guffawed, blue eyes full of menace.

“Look, Ponomarenko – will you get to the point? We have a ‘plane to catch.”

Ponomarenko’s face finally settled into a more serious mien. Team Leverage waited patiently, calm yet poised for any change in the situation.

“I have a message for you,” Ponomarenko said finally. When no-one answered, he continued serenely. “My employer has asked me to take care of a certain … situation … which has arisen involving Benjamin Kremic, which I will deal with in good time, but I was surprised to see you and your team here,” he nodded at the group of people in front of him, “somewhat involved with Kremic.”

Nate held up a finger.


Ponomarenko pursed his lips before answering with a shrug.

“Point taken. Not Kremic. However, your appearance piqued my interest. I see you are a man down.”

The only reaction Nate allowed was a clenching of the muscles along his jawline. But his attention was suddenly drawn to Ponomarenko’s hands. They were enclosed in beautifully-made black leather gloves, skin-tight and sleek. *There’s something odd there,* he thought.

Ponomarenko didn’t bother waiting for Nate to decide on a reply, and continued.

“My dear friend Eliot Spencer is not with you. That can only mean he is somehow incapacitated. He would not abandon his charges willingly, I think, so therefore …” he turned to Tom, “ … this is why you, dear Detective Chief Inspector Reid –“

“Retired,” Tom said, smiling even though his eyes were steel.

Ponomarenko gave a charmingly toothy grin.

“Of course, of course … forgive my lapse. Nevertheless …” the smile faded, “it is a shame Eliot isn’t with you, for I have a message for him. From both my employer and me.”

Nate frowned a little, allowing his puzzlement to show. His eyes returned to Ponomarenko’s hands, specifically his left hand. There was something *not quite right … ah. Now* he had it figured out.

“Is this about your hand?” Nate asked, his voice ringing clear in the hangar.

For the first time he saw anger in Ponomarenko’s eyes and he realised he had hit a nerve.

“Your left hand is missing a thumb and two fingers. They’re stiff and don’t move with the rest of your hand. Eliot’s work, I presume?”

Ponomarenko glowered for a split second before his face settled back into its impenetrable gaze.
“We, ah … we have had our differences. He detonated a nail-filled IED hoping to kill me. Unfortunately he was somewhat damaged and detonated it too soon and it ruined my hand, as well as causing other … less obvious … injuries. However, that is not the reason for my employer’s interest.”

“So what is this message?” Sophie asked flintily.

Ponomarenko studied her for long moments before answering.

“My employer wishes Eliot to know that he – and I – will be coming for him. Not now … not immediately. I am the weapon my employer has chosen to take care of this matter, due to my history with Eliot. I have other work to do first which may take some time.”

*Kremic*, Nate thought. *It has to be Kremic.*

“Who is your employer?” Sophie interrupted. “And why bother warning us – and Eliot? Surely that makes no sense?”

Ponomarenko raised his hands helplessly.

“I am not at liberty to say, Ms Devereaux. Suffice that Eliot must know beforehand. That is my employer’s wish. And I, of course, will be the instrument of Eliot’s death.”

“Jesus!” Nate heard Hardison swear under his breath, and Tom tensed, ready to do whatever he needed to do to protect the team.

But Ponomarenko relaxed and smiled genially at the people before him.

“I must go now, my friends. I will leave you to catch your flight and go wherever it is you wish to go. I know Eliot will be awaiting your arrival.” He held up a finger and scolded them as though they were children. “Now don’t forget to pass on my message.”

Ponomarenko straightened his tie and nodded his farewell, turning away and walking towards the shadows from which he came. But he paused for a moment and looked back, staring at Sophie.

“Ms. Devereaux … I do believe you and Mister Ford have a child. A daughter. Is that correct?”

Sophie’s iron resolve finally broke.

“You wanker!” she railed, furious. “If you –”

But Nate grabbed his wife and held her tight before Sophie could take any steps towards The Confessor, and the rest of the team closed ranks around both of them.

Ponomarenko smiled.

“Interesting,” he said with satisfaction.

And within moments he had gone, hidden in shadows and leaving nothing but a faint echo of expensive aftershave.

It was Tom who broke the tension.

“Nate … we have to go, mate. We only have a short window to get in the air, and I want to get out of this bloody place.”
Nate turned haggard eyes to the ex-policeman.

“Yeah … yeah, you’re right.” Lifting Sophie’s hand he kissed her palm. “Let’s go, people. Let’s … let’s go home. I want to see my daughter.”

And with Tom herding his team towards the jet, they left Kremic, Sydney and Tomas Ponomarenko behind, and wondered how they would give Eliot the message The Confessor had so deftly delivered.

To be continued …
Nate was as good as his word. Ten minutes into the flight back to Alice Springs, he called Wapanjara.

Eliot was sitting in the kitchen with Effie, carefully dolloping banana muffin mix into cases one-handed. It was a fairly easy job, but Eliot’s tendency towards OCD behaviour made him take special care, which made Effie smile.

Jo, sitting with Lizzie in the living room and showing her how to stitch the star design on her pouch with some warm golden-brown-dyed merino wool, quickly answered the call, even as Eliot managed to make his way into the living room with Effie in tow, eager to speak to his team.

“Wapanjara Station?” Jo said quietly, and she saw the lean, worried lines on Eliot’s face as she waited. Her face broke into a smile and Lizzie squeaked with excitement. “Nate! Nate, it’s good to hear your voice!! You’re safe?” She could tell Eliot was in an agony of apprehension, but he was stiffly trying to sit down on a dining chair with Effie gently making sure he didn’t strain his wounds. “Wait a mo’, “ she said to Nate, and smiled at Eliot. “Easy, boy … they’re fine. All of them. They’re on the way home,” she added as she saw the news suddenly transform Eliot’s face from strain to profound relief. “Nate … here’s Eliot.”

Lizzie scrambled up from her armchair to stand beside Eliot, listening in to his conversation and this time Eliot didn’t scold her for eavesdropping.

“Nate?” Eliot said as he put the telephone to his ear. “All good?”

Yeah … all done, Eliot. And we even managed to wind up the job while we were waiting. And before you bust every stitch you have, we didn’t endanger anyone in the process.

Eliot, chest tightening with anger, had to take a deep breath and calm himself before answering.

“Dammit, Nate –“ he rasped, his voice gravelly with dismay.

Now, now, Eliot … Nate’s voice had a soft smile to it … Hardison did his stuff, we found out a loophole, Tom, Soph and Parker made it work and we took down Bushman, Pennicuik and Kremic. We’ll tell you how when we get back. But it’s finished with, Tom kept us safe and Dennis Burkhart’s patent is legal and registered in his name, PLUS he gets his money back. Job done.

Eliot didn’t know what to say. The muscles danced along his jaw, but with Lizzie beside him he couldn’t let rip. Nate had promised not to endanger the team, and in Eliot’s opinion he had possibly done just that, no matter that he said that his team … his family … had been safe enough.

I’m putting you on speakerphone, Nate said, and then the rest of Team Leverage was joining in, voices warm and settled, the voices Eliot heard when a job went right, the bad guys were beaten and a client had justice.
And in that moment his heart eased.

“Daddy!!” Lizzie yelled right in his ear, and Eliot winced through a smile, holding out the ‘phone so Lizzie could hear her family better. “Mama, are you alright? Is Alec there? Parker!! Parker, did you get to climb anything?? Tom, did they behave themselves?? Did you have to yell at them, ’cause Eliot has to do that sometimes because they do silly things and they could get hurt and -“

And the babble of voices instantly became words of love and laughter.

I’m fine, my darling, I promise, and your father’s okay too. We’ve missed you so much –

Hey, baby-girl!!! I got somethin’ for you! But you’ll have to wait for your birthday, a-ight??

No … no climbing. And your dad made me kiss a hairy little man! Blech !!

Hey, Lizzie! I didn’t have to yell at them, and they were very good, I promise! Everyone’s safe and no-one got hurt –

Lizzie beamed and jiggled with delight, and Eliot knew he couldn’t burst her bubble of happiness. Effie stood beside him, placed a pudgy hand on his good shoulder and squeezed.

“See, you daft bludger?” she whispered. “Safe and sound. Just as Clever-clogs promised. You can stop all this bloody nonsense now and let yourself heal. Silly bastard,’’ she added affectionately.

“Yeah … well …” Eliot muttered begrudgingly, hitching an eyebrow at the little cook, “it’s just … it’s my job, Eff. An’ I should’ve been there.”

Effie ruffled his hair, careful of the healing cut above his ear.

“Well, you young mongrel, you came home to look after us and nearly bloody well died doing it, so I think you’ve done more than enough, boy. Tom Reid’s not you, but he did the job and did it well, laddie, so don’t be so bleedin’ hard on yourself.”

Eliot let out a painful sigh and nodded reluctantly.

“Yeah … yeah, I guess. But –“

Eliot? Nate said, his voice breaking through the babble of voices.

“What??!” Eliot groused happily, the scowl working its way onto his face.

Jo could almost hear the smiles in the voices of her new family as Nate answered.

We’ll be home tomorrow. We’ll stay overnight in Alice, and then we’ll drive home in Bernadette … be back late tomorrow afternoon. Nate’s voice softened. Lizzie … your Mama and I miss you so much, sweetheart. We’ll see you soon. Eliot? I promise we’ll fill you in and show you we didn’t cross the line … that I didn’t cross the line. And we need to sit down as a team and discuss some stuff.

Eliot’s scowl deepened a little, his brows drawn down into arches of concern.

“What kinda stuff, Nate? What’s –“

Look, gotta go, Nate interrupted, it’s all good. See you when we get back, Lizzie. Love you, sweetheart!

And then he was gone, Lizzie yelling goodbye and Eliot left wondering just what Nate meant by
'stuff.' The man sounded cheerful enough, as he always did after a job well done, but that didn’t mean the ‘stuff’ wasn’t a burgeoning threat. Eliot’s ‘spidey-sense’ prickled.

But there was nothing he could do about it. Lizzie was thrilled her family was on its way home to her beloved Wapanjara, and no-one was hurt. The job was done and done well, despite Ponomarenko’s presence.

So now he had to wait some more, but at least his team was safe. Eliot finally allowed himself a grudging smile. He had been right to ask Tom to watch out for them.

“C’mon, bug-a-lugs,” Effie said, giving Eliot a prod in his good shoulder, “banana muffins don’t cook themselves, now do they??”

Eliot snorted.

“Guess not,” he grumbled, and carefully eased himself out of the chair. He took a moment to let the pain settle and Effie chewed her lip as she managed to stop herself from helping him. She knew from long experience that Eliot, stubborn man that he was, needed to begin to do things on his own, to push his damaged frame into doing what he wanted it to do and to hell with the fact that he wasn’t anywhere near ready. By Effie’s estimate, after years of Eliot-wrangling, she knew he was probably two weeks too early to be pushing himself like this. But, she mentally sighed, it was Eliot Spencer they were dealing with, and Eliot Spencer marched to the beat of his own drum, no matter how difficult he made it for himself.

Eliot managed to get to his feet on his own and gave Effie a cheeky grin.

“See? I got it, Eff,” he said, the gruffness of pain still in his voice, but even as Lizzie clasped his free hand, he gave her a Lizzie-smile. “M’okay, ‘Lizabeth Grace. I’m gettin’ better, darlin’. I promise.”

“I know,” Lizzie whispered, patting his hand. “I know.” But in her heart she knew he wouldn’t be settled in himself until their family was home safe.

“Right, young lady!” Jo interrupted briskly. “Do you want this pouch decorated and stitched up or not??” She held up the half-completed star on the front of the pouch.

“Oh yes!!” Lizzie said brightly, and looked up at her guardian who raised an eyebrow. “Is that alright, Eliot? You … you’ll be okay? You won’t try to do too much?? Promise??”

Eliot’s eyes sparked blue with pride in his best girl.

“I promise,” he rasped, and the warmth in his words made Lizzie’s heart sing. Her Eliot was on the mend.

So Eliot made his slow, painful but independent way back to the kitchen followed by a hovering Effie, and Lizzie returned to the living room table where Jo had the pieces of the pouch spread out in front of her.

She flopped down in her chair as the setting sun streamed in through the window, setting Jo’s auburn-silver curls aflame like a halo, and Lizzie felt so much better now that her family was safe and coming home to Wapanjara and Eliot was finally healing.

Jo watched as Lizzie sat and gazed at the disassembled pouch on the table. The little girl arranged the various bits and pieces so that she could gauge how it would all fit together, but she could see Lizzie’s mind was elsewhere.
“Grandma Jo …”

Jo busied herself with loading the heavy needle with wool so she could help Lizzie finish the design on her pouch, but she glanced at Lizzie, who was obviously pondering something.

“Yes, Lizzie. What is it? What’s on your mind?”

Lizzie let out a deep sigh.

“We have to go home to Portland soon.”

Jo nodded.

“That’s true.”

The two of them sat silently for a moment or two before Lizzie continued.

“Can … can I come back to Wapanjara someday? With Eliot?”

The look of yearning which appeared on Lizzie’s face made Jo’s heart swell.

“Lizzie, sweetheart … you can all come back to Wapanjara whenever you want. You will always be welcome here.”

Lizzie’s face broke into a huge smile, full of hope and longing and love.

“Really?? Seriously?? You don’t mind? You and Grandpa Soapy and Effie and Charlie?”

Jo nodded, her face serious.

Lizzie blew out her cheeks in a sigh of relief.

“Eliot said we could come back, but I thought maybe … maybe I should ask you too. Eliot says he might let me come back with him on my own if Mama and Daddy say it’s okay, but … but Eliot says he might want to bring a lady instead!! Why??”

Jo had to momentarily cover her mouth to stop the laugh.

“Um … well, Lizzie … Eliot’s been coming home here to Wapanjara for years, and he hasn’t brought a lady with him so far, so … I think it’s safe to say you can come with him whenever your parents and Eliot say it’s okay.”

Jo knew very well that Eliot had no intention of getting permanently involved with a woman, and while it saddened her, she understood why. He had his team and he had Lizzie, all of whom he had to keep safe, and their lives were dangerous. He couldn’t allow more holes in his armoured heart.

“Good-oh!!” Lizzie exclaimed, happy now that her plans for frequent trips home to Wapanjara were a step closer to fruition. “That’s bonzer!!”

Delighted now, she grinned at Jo and reached out for a slice of walnut cake from the plate Effie had placed on the table for Jo and Lizzie to munch on as they worked. Happily taking a bite she suddenly flinched.

“Ow!” she said, and spat out the mouthful into her hand along with a tiny spot of blood. She paled with shock. “Grandma Jo! I’m bleeding!!”
Jo, concerned, put down the wool and cupped Lizzie’s face.

“Open your mouth, sweetie … let me see …”

Lizzie, frightened, opened her mouth so Jo could look at the damage. A large gap was blatantly evident in the upper row of baby teeth, and Jo smiled.

“Don’t worry, Lizzie – you’ve just lost a tooth. Didn’t you feel it being loose?”

Lizzie, now very relieved, nodded shakily.

“Yeth!” and then she giggled, loving the lisp. “Juthst a bit!! It wath a bit wibbly, but …” she stared at the mouthful of walnut cake, and fished out the tooth. “Look!!”

Jo nodded sagely.

“Well now, what are you going to do with it? The tooth fairy usually collects them, you know. I don’t know what the going rate is, but if you leave it under your pillow –“

Lizzie, busy probing the hole with her tongue, furrowed her brow in thought and stared at the tooth.

“I don’t know,” she said, and turned the tooth over in her fingers. Reaching out for paper napkins, she carefully wrapped the tooth in one and the mouthful of cake in another. “I’ll get a new one thoon, won’t I?”

“Indeed you will, and you’ll slowly lose all the rest of your baby teeth. You’re growing up, Lizzie, my girl!”

Lizzie grinned a gap-toothed grin, delighted with herself, the tiny, sudden pain instantly forgotten. She popped the tooth into her pocket and then slid off her chair.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” she said. “I’m gonna show Eliot and Effie my gap!!”

And carrying the wrapped cake in one hand she dashed into the kitchen.

Jo shook her head indulgently and began to study the half-finished design on the pouch, even as she could hear Lizzie excitedly show Effie and Eliot the gap in her teeth. But she couldn’t stop the pang in her heart. She knew Eliot and his team would return to Portland at some point. Eliot wouldn’t be fit to travel for a while, so she would have them all for a few weeks yet, but she always found saying goodbye to family painful. But they would be back, at least. Lizzie especially loved Wapanjara, and she would come back to them. She would come home.

With that in her mind, she turned her attention to the pouch and tried to chase away the sadness.

“We have to tell him, Nate!” Hardison insisted as he sprawled on the comfortable leather seat of the Lear.

Nate stared at the half-full coffee cup in front of him and took a half-hearted mouthful of one of the plateful of fancies supplied by the charter company’s staff. The little iced cake was good, but it wasn’t a patch on one of Effie’s lamingtons.

“Yeah … yeah, I know,” he said after swallowing the sweet morsel, and looked at each member of the team in turn. “But what do we say?” He waved his hands about helplessly. “Hey, Eliot! We finished the job, but guess what? The Confessor cornered us in the airport and says he’s going to kill you, but don’t worry – it won’t be for a little while yet? Oh, and by the way – he knows about
“Well, it’s a start!” Sophie muttered as she slumped down beside Nate, helping herself to tea and a fancy. “That bastard … he just looks at my daughter and I will end him, and believe me when I say I won’t need Eliot to do it.”

Nate reached out and grasped Sophie’s hand and squeezed.

“Lizzie’s safe, Sophie … you know she is,” he said, trying to be reassuring. “If Ponomarenko is an interrogator as Eliot says, then he’s a manipulator … he knows how to mess with people’s minds and knows where to find the chinks in peoples’ armour. Lizzie? It’s a no-brainer. You know how this works, Soph. Lizzie is just a button to press to get a reaction … to unsettle … to weaken us to get to Eliot.”

Sophie arched a disdainful eyebrow.

“I know that, Nate, for goodness sake!! His lack of bloody subtlety was nothing but crude, to say the least! Just because the moron made me angry doesn’t mean I don’t know what he’s up to. He’s trying to make me … us … a weak link.”

She paused thoughtfully as she sipped her tea, and then sat back with a sigh.

“We always knew this could happen, Nate … that Lizzie could be a target to get to one or all of us. That’s one of the reasons we made Eliot her guardian. If anyone could keep her safe, it was him.”

“But Eliot’s the target here,” Parker interjected, curled up in a seat, knees tight against her chest. “If it’s one thing Stinky could use to make Eliot crazy, it’s threatening Lizzie.”

“Stinky??” Tom said, picking up a couple of finger sandwiches.

“It’s easier to say than Ponomarenko. Duh!” Parker said. Obviously Tom didn’t grasp her logic. “Besides … did you smell his aftershave??” She shuddered.

Tom’s lips twitched with amusement, but he raised an eyebrow at Nate.

“Just tell him,” he said, “and now rather than when he’s all healed up, mate. Right now you have a chance of stopping him going on the warpath. You have until he’s fit enough to travel on his own to figure out your plan. If you’re lucky,” he added, his tone showing Nate that Tom knew exactly how Eliot worked.

“Look,” Hardison countered, “I can do some digging and at least try and figure out Stinky’s movements … see if we can find out just who the hell his employer is. If we have some sort of plan in place that Eliot can agree to, we have a chance of stoppin’ him goin’ off grid. If he does that, I won’t be able to find him unless he wants to be found, and … and I won’t know if he’s alive or not. If Eliot dies, we’ll never know.”

Nate chewed the inside of his lip and gave a jerky nod of agreement.

“Do it. By the time we get back I want enough information to force Eliot into a corner. He’s still sick enough so we can keep him confined for a few weeks, and it’ll give us time to come up with a more solid plan.” He frowned. “I still don’t understand why we … well, Eliot … has been warned ahead of time. I mean … it’ll drive Eliot crazy, I know. He’ll go into overdrive trying to figure out how to protect the team. And Lizzie …” he shook his head, puzzled. “Lizzie’s not in any official record. Every piece of paperwork Lizzie has is a forgery for her own safety and ours, but she’s not exactly invisible. She goes everywhere with us.”
Sophie sipped more tea as she thought more about the situation.

“Is there any way you can access Ponomarenko’s cell phone?”

Hardison shook his head.

“Nah. Neither Bushman nor Pennicuik were in contact with the man, so no luck there.” He scratched his chin thoughtfully. “Now if his car has GPS … but we don’t know what he drives.”

“Yes, we do,” Tom said eagerly. “Audi Spyder, R8, I think. Coupé, red, left-hand drive. Don’t know the registration, but it’s an expensive car and this one’s a foreign import. It shouldn’t be too difficult to track down. I can give an old friend a call if you like.”

Hardison was already on his laptop, busy finagling his way into the New South Wales Vehicle Registration database.

“No need, Tom … gimmee a minute … huh … here we go …” A database search box popped up, and Tom peered over Hardison’s shoulder.

“How the hell do you do that??” he asked, wonder and not a little irritation in his voice. “Is it really that easy??”

Hardison shrugged, but he couldn’t hold back a smug purse of his lips.

“Sorry, m’man – these kinds of databases are not too difficult, because there’re only a few types used worldwide. Gettin’ in isn’t too difficult –“ He stopped for a moment as he inputted the information Tom had given him. He hitched an eyebrow. “Huh.” He waited as information scrolled onto the screen.

“Got something?” Nate asked hopefully.

“Somebody should tell Stinky that drivin’ a left-hand drive bright red Audi coupé makes him kinda noticeable. There’s one on the database … a rental … “

Tom pointed at the screen and waggled a finger, telling Hardison to scroll down.

“The Rego* will tell you exactly when it came into the country, and the rental company will have had to applied for the transfer in person at head office in Sydney.”

Hardison did as Tom suggested and worked his way down the display and Tom jabbed at the screen.

“There you go – VIN number … registration details, owner and so on …” Tom squinted at the screen and brought out a pair of spectacles from his jacket breast pocket. “There’s the rental company …”

Hardison brought up a new page and did a quick search.

“Okay … come to poppa .. Collaroy Executive Car Hire …” Hardison’s eyebrows raised. “Man, do they hire out some very classy rides!”

Now Sophie was perusing the screen.

“No limos, Daimlers … hardly executive. This is more … I don’t know … flashy new money, all footballer’s wives and over-indulged Wall Street traders. Or organised crime,” she added, glancing at Nate.
Hardison frowned in concentration as he dug around for further information on the car, and he suddenly grinned in satisfaction.

“Yeah … that’s what I’m talkin’ about!” he hissed. “The car’s got a smartphone interface as part of its upgrade package.”

“Can you access it?” Nate asked.

Hardison shook his head.

“Not from here. I got go back to the factory records, so that means Neckarsulm,” he explained. “That’s Audi Böllinger Höfe … the main factory. These cars are hand-built and each component is tailor-made for each vehicle. I have to access the codes and security algorithms for the on-board computer. Then I can hack the interface and tap into Stinky’s cell.”

“How long will that take?” Tom asked, intrigued now.

Hardison, working now to track down the information he needed, didn’t take his eyes off the screen as he answered.

“How long is a piece of string? Sometimes it takes me days, or – HAH!! Gotcha!” he exclaimed in triumph. “Now all I gotta do is nail down the individual specs for the computer aaaaaand … there ya go!!” He toggled a couple of screens and downloaded the records onto a pen-drive. “I triangulate the location of the car … input the access codes … ahhh … there you are, Stinky-boy … just where I want you … here we go …”

A voice suddenly broke into the tension-filled silence on the jet.

“– delivered, as you instructed. Tomorrow I begin to deal with Kremic and his associates in Bratislava. It may take me some time, but … it will be done.” Tomas Ponomarenko’s voice was a little distant, muffled as it was by the noise of wind and the throb of a high-spec car engine.

“Good … good … I will pass on the information to her. She will be very pleased … for now, as will her partner. How long for the Kremic situation to be resolved?” An unknown male voice redolent with the warm tones of Central America answered Ponomarenko’s declaration, satisfaction oozing from every syllable.

“Two to three months, maybe,” Ponomarenko said thoughtfully, having to shout a little over the wind-rush. “If I wish to be certain that every thread is broken and then destroyed.”

There was a pause as the unknown man thought about the Confessor’s answer, and then there came a sigh.

“Very well. She would have preferred a quicker resolution, but … that is the way of these things. Do you need anything? Money?”

Ponomarenko chuckled.

“I am well provided-for at the moment, so … no. I fly out next week to Bratislava, and then on to Venice in a couple of months. Maybe I will need more funds then, as well as a couple of my associates who will help with the final stages. After that … Spencer will be on my radar. Please reassure her that this will happen, although it will take time to plan.”

The soft latin voice made a harrumphing noise, but when the man spoke again he was resigned to Ponomarenko’s proposal.
“Call me tomorrow,” he said, and then he was gone, and so was Ponomarenko.

Parker scowled.

“She??? Who’s ‘she’?? Can you track the incoming call to its source??” she asked

“Already workin’ on it,” Hardison replied, his brows drawn down in concentration. He sat muttering to himself as his team sat waiting impatiently, Parker tapping her fingers on the tabletop in front of her. Then he stopped suddenly and sat back.

“Dayum!” he snarked. “It’s bein’ bounced all over the damn place … wait … it … it’s stopped in Rio!”

“As in Rio de Janeiro??” Sophie asked, surprised.

“How about the car rental firm? Anything odd there?” Nate demanded, ignoring his wife’s comment which earned him a marked stare of disdain.

Hardison pursed his lips, dropped down the pages he was working on and brought up a whole new set and worked on them quickly, long, nimble fingers flying over the keyboard. He shook his head.

“Nah … nothin’ just yet … leave me with it. We’ll be in Alice in a few hours, so I got plenty of time.”

Nate nodded.

“Okay. We’ll decide how much we tell Eliot when we get to the hotel.”

But Sophie shook her head and grasped Nate’s arm, clutching his biceps so hard he winced.

“We tell him all of it, Nate. All of it,” she said, her voice hard with passion and fear. “Including that bastard threatening our daughter.”

“But he’ll go crazy!!” Parker interjected, her eyes wide with concern. “Eliot … even if he had no arms and legs and his head was missing he would go hunt Stinky down and disembowel him and feed him to some wolves and -“

“Babe … if Eliot didn’t have a head, he’d be dead,” Hardison said patiently even as he scrolled through files.

Parker waved her arms about, frustrated.

“Yeah! So? He’d still go after anyone who even looked at Lizzie wrong –“

“He’ll not be a happy bunny,” Tom said quietly, pondering the situation. “You know Eliot … family first. Number One on the Eliot Spencer scale of ‘Who I Kill For.’

“Well, right now he can barely walk, so he’s a bit stuck – he’s just where we want him,” Sophie said firmly. “I want my daughter’s guardian to know about that piece of shit mentioning her. And yes, Stinky didn’t threaten her straight out, but he didn’t need to,” she added with a deadly glint in her eye. “That threat will keep both Lizzie and Eliot safe … at least for now, until we can figure this out.”

Parker nodded, a grim smile forming on her elfin features.

“Yes … yes, you’re right, Sophie. Clever! He’ll be torn between staying and protecting Lizzie and us or cutting loose to go after Stinky. And, of course, we’ll win, because he won’t leave Lizzie
“’cause he’s convinced we can’t keep her safe.”

“And he’d be right,” Sophie added solemnly. “We can’t. We don’t have his skills or his contacts. Mind you, he’s hardly well enough to even get out of a chair on his own. At least if he tries to make a break for it we can tackle him before he gets too far. I think,” she added doubtfully. “However, we can’t leave Wapanjara for a few weeks yet until he’s well enough to travel, so we as a team are safer at Wapanjara than back home in Portland. We have remoteness and family to help. Thank god!” she muttered softly.

And there was their answer. Until Eliot was healed they would stay at Wapanjara with their new family, surrounded by an unforgiving land and supported by people like Soapy and Jo … even Effie, a mean hand with a shotgun and the nearest skillet. Eliot and Lizzie would be as safe there as anywhere else on earth. Now all they had to do was convince Eliot that this plan was the answer to Ponomarenko’s threat for now. Eliot didn’t care about his own safety, and Ponomarenko’s threat wouldn’t faze him. But Lizzie?? No-one … no-one … would threaten his best girl and live to tell the tale.

Nate studied his team and saw the truth in their eyes.

“So … we’re okay with this? We tell Eliot everything and just hope he doesn’t go on a one-man warpath?”

“We’ll deal with it,” Sophie said, her eyes steady and determined. “We’ll manage. Until Eliot’s back on his feet we have to protect both of them. And I want to find out more about this woman who has some sort of vendetta against Eliot … and, for all we know, against us.”

And so as Hardison bent to his task, the rest of the team settled back in their comfortable seats and tried not to think about the smug certainly that had graced Tomas Ponomarenko’s face as he turned back to the shadows and disappeared.

“I’m gettin’ damn tired of this,” Eliot rasped as Jo carefully pulled the packing from the wound beneath his left arm.

“You have to let Grandma Jo look after you –“ Lizzie began, wrapping both hands around Eliot’s arm as it lay on the back of the seat.

Eliot gave her a crinkly smile even as the packing stuck in the open wound and Jo had to carefully tease it free.

“I know, darlin’ … I know. I’m just … I’m tired, ‘Lizbeth Grace. I’ve done nothin’ all day and I can barely stay awake. An’ I can’t seem to shake free of it.” He hissed in pain as the dressing finally came free, and Jo murmured an apology. Eliot dropped his head on his arm as he sat astride the big chair, and Lizzie patted his arm sympathetically. She looked up at Jo with worried dark eyes.

Jo smiled at both of them as she began to dress the wound.

“Eliot … son … you’ve two bullet holes in you, you’re recovering from concussion, blood loss and a broken rib, and you’re wondering why you’re so tired?? So rest and stop worrying about it. And you can stop worrying about your team because they’re safe and on their way home. You’ll see them tomorrow, and we can sit down and have a celebratory dinner. How does that sound?”

“I think that thounds yummy!” Lizzie exclaimed with a little toothy whistle through the gap in her teeth.
Eliot shifted his head so that it lay sideways on his arm and closed his eyes against the bright light in the kitchen. Effie was clattering about making their late-night hot chocolate and warming some of her delicious scones, but she took the time to rest her hand gently on Eliot’s head for a moment, reassuring him.

“I’ll make one of your favourites if you like, you silly bludger. What do you fancy?”

Eliot flinched as Jo began repacking the wound, but he smiled.


Effie snorted. “Yabbies? Where the bloody hell am I supposed to get yabbies??” She sighed noisily. “S’pose I’d better send Mister M and Lizzie here to go catch some in the creek tomorrow, hey?”

Lizzie’s eyes rounded with curiosity.

“What’s a yabbie?” she said with a breathy whistle.

Eliot’s smile widened but he didn’t say anything. He just rested quietly and let his eyes gain some relief from the light.

“It’s like a crayfish,” Jo said. “Eliot just so happens to be very, very fond of yabbies.”

“Good eats,” Eliot whispered sleepily.

“And I think the nipper here should help the Yank make a cake for afters,” Effie added. “Chocolate, maybe. With pecans.”

“Can I??” Lizzie asked breathlessly. “I can do the baking thing, and Eliot can help! Can’t you, Eliot??” She patted Eliot’s arm again, but there was no response. “Eliot??”

Jo finished taping the bandage around Eliot’s chest and shoulder and studied her patient.

“Oh dear,” she said quietly, an indulgent smile on her lean face. “Now what do we do?”

Eliot was asleep.

“He’s still pretty crook, Missus,” Effie commented, and she touched Lizzie’s shoulder. “C’mon nipper – let’s see if we can get him awake enough to shove him into his bloody bed, the daft mongrel. He’s going to be pretty bung for a while yet.” Effie’s pudgy features softened into what – for her – resembled a smile.

Lizzie thought about it for a moment, and studied Eliot. When he slept as easily as this, the fierceness of his features softened and he looked younger … at peace. She didn’t want to disturb him, but he had his antibiotics to take and also try to eat something before bedtime. Jo really wanted his energy levels to improve.

“Eliot?” she whispered, tapping his arm. “Eliot! You have to wake up! You can’t thstay here, thilly!”

For a second or two Eliot didn’t respond, but then his eyelids flickered and he frowned sleepily.

“M’sleepin’. Go ‘way,” he groused.

“Get up, Eliot!” Lizzie insisted, and kissed the end of his nose, which made it twitch.
“Do I haveta?” he asked and yawned.

“Yeth!!” Lizzie said, her voice now a lot louder and more insistent. “Grandma Jo hath to give you your pillth and you have to eat thomething.” She sprayed a light spatter of saliva all over her best friend.

Eliot’s eyes blinked open and he screwed his face up in disgust. Slowly prying his damaged body upright in the chair, he wiped his face with his sleeve.

“Dammit, Lizzie!!” he rumbled and scowled at the child, who presented him with an expression of pure innocence.

“I can’t help it!” She proclaimed. “Ith my toof!! I got a lithp!!”

The next spatter hit Eliot right in the eye. He sputtered, glared and then a delighted Effie handed him a tea towel to wipe away the mess.

By the time he had cleaned himself up, Jo was standing in front of him with his pills and a glass of water, Lizzie staring at him expectantly.

Muttering dire threats under his breath he took his medication and then slowly ate his way through a scone oozing with butter and jam. He had to admit to himself the food helped settle him, and managing to get to his feet, he made his own way to his bedroom and quietly shut the door.

“He’s doing better, Effie.” Jo said as she finished putting away the medikit.

Lizzie, sitting at the huge oak table and drinking her hot chocolate, watched as Effie turned around Eliot’s chair and sat down, putting her own drink on the table before her.

“And it’s about bloody time too, Missus,” the old cook grated. “We came close to losing the silly bugger this time,” she added carefully. “Too bleedin’ close.”

Mei wandered into the kitchen and sat down with her new family. She rubbed her eyes and yawned blearily.

“Jamie and Rose are asleep at last. I’m so tired!” she added, and stretched. “Where is Papa Soapy?”

“Over at the barn with Jacko checking the broodmares. It’s just us girls left,” Jo said, smiling ruefully. She placed a mug of the chocolate drink in front of the young woman who sipped it gratefully. “I think you should get some sleep Mei. Those two little tykes will be awake in a couple of hours wanting feeding again, so …”

Mei nodded, blinking, eyes gritty with tiredness.

“I will. Is the cowboy alright?” she asked. “Is he still sick? I can make more congee tomorrow –“

“He’ll do, princess,” Effie rasped, and patted Mei’s arm. “His cold’s a lot better and anyway, I’m making a special dinner tomorrow, so he’ll manage some of that. If he doesn’t I’ll stick my gravy funnel in his gob and pour it into him,” she added, brows in full scowling mode. She let out a huffing sigh and tapped Lizzie on the shoulder. “Righto, young ‘un – it’s way past your bedtime. If you’re going with Mister M down to the creek to get me some yabbies, you’ll have to be up bright and early, so drink up and get your bum to bed. Y’hear me?”

Lizzie nodded and couldn’t control a yawn of her own.
“Ya-huh,” she muttered, and drank the last mouthful of the chocolate. “Grandma Jo? Can I put my toof thomewhere safe?”

“Here, nipper,” Effie said as Jo finished her own drink. “Put it in my bitso drawer.” She turned around in her seat and pulled out a deep drawer in her old desk where she wrote out recipes and lists.

Lizzie slid from her seat and peered into the drawer to see a wealth of odd little treasures … bootlaces, an odd napkin ring … all little things that Effie thought might come in handy one day.

“Bit-tho drawer?” She asked, curious now.

“Everybody has a bitso drawer!” Effie exclaimed. “Bits o’ this … bits o’ that. Here …” she held out a small plastic bag and Lizzie carefully decanted her tooth and its napkin wrapping into it. Then she carefully placed the whole lot into the drawer, making sure it was securely snug between a handful of chopsticks held together with an elastic band and an old, ivory-handled potato peeler. “There now,” the little cook said with satisfaction. “Safe as bloody houses!”

Lizzie helped Effie push the drawer shut and the little girl sighed. She was very tired, and missed the rest of her family. Effie held her arms wide and Lizzie melted into them, snuggling against Effie’s solid bulk.

“I mith them, Effie,” Lizzie mumbled, and Effie gave her a squeeze.

“I know, little ‘un. But they’ll be home tomorrow, hey? And you and the Yank have to help me bake a cake for your folks in the afternoon, so you’ve got a lot on. So …” Effie uncurled her arms and stood Lizzie straight. “Bed, nipper!”

As Lizzie reluctantly headed to her bed, Effie hauled her stubby body to its feet and began to rinse out mugs.

“Missus …”

Jo looked up and saw the tension in Effie’s frame and waited for the explosion. She didn’t have long to wait.

“I bloody hate this!!” Effie railed.

Jo hitched an eyebrow and listened. There was obviously more to come.

Effie slammed Eliot’s ‘Keep calm and hug a camel’ mug onto the draining board a little harder than necessary and Jo winced, expecting the mug to shatter, but like its owner the mug was made of sterner stuff.

“I’m sick of saying goodbye, Missus!!” Effie continued. “We … we get the Yank, and all he wants to do is stay, but he doesn’t!! And when he does stay we seem to spend the time plugging up holes in his carcass!! Booofhead!” she added huffily. “And now … now we got Clever-clogs and the Duchess, and … and … Sunbeam and Missy … and then there’s the nipper!! Our nipper!! It’s … it’s like they’ve been sent to us proper. So they become a part of this place, but they can’t stay!! I’m gonna miss ‘em. I’m gonna miss ‘em something horrid!!”

Effie threw her dishcloth viciously in the sink and swore under her breath. Jo didn’t say a word.

“Missus … I know we asked ‘em to come, to help find the bastard who killed our Alice. And now we got the Princess and our little babbies … but -“
“-you want more,” Jo added with a sad smile. “I understand, Effie. I really do. And Lizzie has been speaking to Eliot and me about coming back, so don’t be too sad. Our nipper will come home again. I promise.”

Effie sniffed and Jo could see the unshed tears in the muddy eyes. Effie, underneath that bristly, crabby exterior, was pure mush. The rotund little woman sighed noisily and wiped her nose on her sleeve.

“Well … that’s better than nothing, I suppose.” She began to put the mugs away, muttering to herself, still obviously upset.

Mei waved goodnight to Jo, but just as she tried to walk through the doorway, she almost collided with Soapy. She drowsily stood on tiptoe to kiss Soapy’s cheek, and smiled at him.

“Watch out, Papa Soapy,” she whispered loudly. “Miss Effie is feeling bloody terrible.”

And she was gone, leaving Soapy a little bewildered even as he hesitated, glancing at Effie complaining to herself and Jo trying to look understanding.

Soapy opened his mouth, closed it again, and raised an enquiring eyebrow at his wife. Jo shook her head and looked despondent. Realising he had walked into an Effie explosion, he did the only thing he could do. He turned around and tried to run for it.

“Mister M!!” Effie ground out, voice hoarse with anguish.

Soapy winced. Damn. He was a nanosecond too late.

“Yes, Eff?” he replied, trying to be as calm as he could.

“Six o’clock sharp, tomorrow morning!!” Effie said with a growl.

“What … what about it?” Soapy asked.

“You and the nipper! I need yabbies for tomorrow’s dinner time, so I’ll have a billy can ready and some bacon rind! I need at least twenty!! Bloody well sharpish!!”

“Yabbies?” Soapy said faintly.

Jo raised her eyebrows at Soapy. Obviously he was being a bit dense.


Effie harrumphed to herself and wiped down the sink as Soapy put the kettle on to boil for tea. Soon he would return to the barn to check a broodmare who was looking about ready to drop her foal.

“I’m going to bed,” Effie said abruptly, and stumping past Jo and Soapy, she headed out of the kitchen and along to her bedroom, slamming the door shut behind her.

Soapy stared at Jo, who sighed heavily.

“Just … don’t ask,” she said.

Soapy took the hint, stayed silent and returned to his tea.

Elliot awoke with a start, chest heaving and sweat sheening his skin. The dream had been vivid and
horrific, all blood and children screaming and the smell of burning flesh from rapidly-burning aluminium mixture stuck to human skin.

He could feel the burn on his own fingers as he tried to scrape the stuff off, but it didn’t work and the little girl he had tried to save died in his arms.

He swallowed bile and cradled his left arm with his right, trying to ease the terrible ache in his shoulder. Gradually his heartbeat slowed and he managed to sit up in bed, throwing back the covers and sitting sideways on the edge of the mattress. The night air drifting in from the open window helped, and he could see the mass of stars in the sky, silhouetting the buildings and trees that surrounded the homestead.

As his pain eased, he sucked in deep, cleansing breaths, ignoring the pull of his broken rib and the bullet holes in his side. He heard a scratching, rasping noise and then a soft squeak, which made Eliot smile.

Easing himself onto his feet he wandered over to the window and reached out to scratch Gertie’s massive head as she leaned her chin on the sill. The huge camel began to hum.

Seating his damaged body on the edge of the window, Eliot gazed at the silent world outside and was comforted by Gertie’s presence. The jasmine-scented air calmed his soul, and he felt better, Gertie solid and real beneath his hand.

*He’s coming*, Damien Moreau said.

Eliot started with shock.

*He’s coming, my friend. For you. And her.* The voice was smug with confidence.

“You gotta go through me, Damien!” Eliot growled, his heart pounding, “and no-one – *no-one* – will *ever* touch the girl!”

There was soft laughter, scornful and taunting, but even as Eliot bared his teeth and tried to shake the sound from his head, he knew in his heart that whatever had happened in Sydney, it wasn’t over.

To be continued …

* Rego – a typical Australian contraction for the document that registers a vehicle, the ‘Registration’ or Rego.
Chapter Summary

Mostly cutesy tooth-rotting fluff and talking. And bunyips.

The magpies were fluting and bickering in the almond stand when Lizzie was awoken by Jo at six the following morning. Yawning, she stretched and stuck her tongue in the gap in her teeth to check it was still there. Having a big gap in her teeth, she thought, was awesome, and she couldn’t wait to show her parents.

Padding through to the kitchen in her pyjamas with Cec under her arm, she was greeted with yells and laughter by a bunch of hungry stockmen eating breakfast. She grinned, showing her new gap, and was answered by whistles of admiration. Jacko hauled over a stool and lifted her onto it as Effie placed a plate of toast, bacon and scrambled eggs in front of her.

“C’mon, nipper, eat up! Mister M’llo be wanting away soon, so stuff that in yer gob and get your strides* on! I need yabbies!!”

“Ith Eliot alright?” she asked quietly as Effie put down a glass of orange juice beside her. She knew he was healing, but it didn’t stop her worrying.

“Yeah, no worries,” Effie replied. “The daft bugger’s still asleep, which is good. Means he’s resting easier. I checked when I got up to begin breakfast. So, eat up, little ’un. You have chores to do today!”

Lizzie, reassured, tucked into her breakfast as though she hadn’t eaten in a month. In-between mouthfuls she entertained the stockmen with renditions of ‘she sells sea shells on the sea shore,’ which sent scrambled egg morsels flying in all directions. Buster was delighted as he vacuumed up the bits, and the indulgent stockmen thought the whole thing hilarious, despite Effie’s threats of disembowelment with a spoon for encouraging a little girl to speak with her mouth full. A poke in the shoulder from Effie made Lizzie knuckle down and eat her breakfast, and then excusing herself from the table, she charged off to clean teeth – and admire her gap – and get dressed.

By six-thirty she was ready. Sitting on Eliot’s recliner on the veranda, she held a draw-string bag containing sandwiches and what Effie called a pannikin, which Lizzie discovered was a small metal cup. There were also Anzac biscuits in a bag and bottled lemonade. The bag was heavy, and she wasn’t too sure how she was going to carry it to the creek, but her dilemma was answered when Soapy rode around the corner of the house seated on a sparely-built dark bay gelding and leading faithful Narra, who pricked up his ears when he heard Lizzie’s soft shriek of delight.

“We’re riding to the creek??” she asked, thrilled.

Soapy, his Akubra hat set at a jaunty angle, grinned up at her.

“Yes indeed, young Lizzie! So go get your helmet because we have to get a move on!”

As Lizzie retrieved her riding helmet Soapy thought about the conversation he had had with Jo after the little girl had gone to bed the previous evening. The yabby-hunt, they decided, was the perfect
time for Lizzie to begin to explore Wapanjara safely and under supervision while also allowing her to understand how the outback ruled their lives. She would inherit half of Wapanjara one day, so, Jo and Soapy thought, it was about time she became familiar with this place she called home.

Within minutes Lizzie was back, helmet in place, and Jo followed her down the veranda steps. Boosting Lizzie into the comfortable stock saddle, she tied the bag onto one of the rear saddle rings, and Lizzie noticed Soapy not only had a bag of his own tied to his saddle, he had a lidded plastic bucket and several round, folded netting traps tied to the off-side ring.

Jo smiled up at her husband.

“You two have a good morning, y’hear? And be careful, you old fool,” she added, cocking an eyebrow at Soapy. “Your shoulder’s not completely healed and your ribs still aren’t the best, so don’t push yourself too hard!”

Soapy leaned down and kissed his wife.

“I won’t, old girl,” he said softly. “I promise I’ll behave. Righto, young Lizzie! Let’s get on – we have yabbies to catch!”

And touching his heels to the bay’s sides he headed off back towards the yards, Lizzie following obediently on a relaxed Narra.

Once they were through the North paddock gate, Soapy and Lizzie let the two horses amble along at their own pace.

It was a truly beautiful day. The heat would build by lunchtime, but right now it was just right, Lizzie thought. The sky was a washed-out, cloudless blue, and the air, still free of the humidity which would arrive in a couple of hours, was heady with the smell of red earth and eucalyptus. The sound of galahs wittering in a nearby gum made Lizzie laugh with joy, and then a very distinctive scent hit her nostrils.

“Grandpa Thoapy!! I … I thmell popcorn!!”

Soapy chuckled as the bay gelding picked his way along a faint track through the Mitchell grass. He raised a hand and pointed at some bushes with bright yellow, fragile flowers dotted amid slender, olive-grey leaves.

“See those? They’re wattle bushes. The flowers are the ones which give off that smell. Burnt caramel popcorn. Eliot makes great damper out of the berries.”

Lizzie let out a little gasp as a pair of wallabies broke cover, neither horse even taking notice as the marsupials bounded away. A little later, Soapy put out a hand to stop Lizzie and then he held a finger to his lips, telling Lizzie to be very quiet. Lizzie’s heart almost stopped with amazement as she spotted a spiny animal studiously digging gouts of solid earth from the side of a termite mound.

“What ith it??” Lizzie breathed, entranced.

“An echidna,” Soapy whispered. “They’re a kind of anteater. They love termites!”

Lizzie held her breath as the echidna stuck out an impossibly slender, long, sticky tongue and began to whiffle about in the hole it had made, now swarming with soldier termites doing their best to see off the echidna, biting with powerful mandibles which did no good whatsoever. The echidna lapped up termites and just continued with its hole-digging.
The ride to the homestead creek instantly became one of Lizzie’s most favourite things to do. Wherever she looked there was life and wild beauty and the fierce, uncompromising landscape that was the Australian outback. And she loved it. It flowed through her blood and sang in her heart, and Soapy knew he and Jo had done the right thing to help her understand this land she adored.

The creek was several kilometres from the homestead, water flowing through a cut in the rock from the hill beyond. It meandered through gum trees and passion-fruit, the song of the water soothing in the encroaching heat. The water still carried silt washed down from the hills by the recent rain, but Soapy rode along the creek edge for a few minutes until he found the place he wanted. It was a small, rock-strewn inlet in the side of the creek, overhung by paperbarks and shaded from the sun. A few bushes grew in between the rocks, and it was here Soapy meandered to a halt and slipped from the saddle. Lizzie slid from Narra before Soapy could even try to help her, and led the gelding to stand beside the bay.

“What do we do now??” she asked as she removed the detested helmet, and Soapy pulled down the bag from his saddle.

“Righto, Lizzie – dig out the hobbles and we can let Narra and Banjo please themselves and get a bite of grass.”

Between them they got the horses hobbled and left to graze, and then Soapy found a large, sun-warmed rock overlooking the water. Separating out the three net traps, he unfolded them so that they looked like domes with a small, narrowing funnel in the side which led into the trap. He finished the job by tying a tether made of a length of string to the trap.

Soapy showed her how to tie a lump of bacon fat to the inside of her own trap, and then he snapped shut the clips which kept the trap rigid. It took Lizzie a little time and effort, especially when it came to tying greasy bacon fat onto a piece of string, but she was finally ready.

“Okay, Lizzie,” Soapy said softly. “See if you can throw it over there,” and he indicated still water over to their left. “Yabbies like to lurk about under the overhanging bushes, where the water doesn’t move too much. They’ll soon figure out there’s bacon fat about. The little beggars usually can’t resist!”

It took Lizzie three tries to throw the trap where she wanted it to go, but finally she got it right and sat down beside Soapy, propping her back against the basket and tying the tether to a bush.

She watched Soapy prepare and position the third trap, and then they were set. Soapy tethered his own traps, and settled down beside the little girl he now regarded as a grand-daughter.

“So … now we wait,” he said. “What do you want to do? Just sit for a while, or would you like to go and explore? There’s a nice walk along the creek and a little bit of a climb, but there’s a bonzer viewpoint right over the creek and over towards the homestead. D’you want to see if we can find some bush tucker for Effie??”

“Buth tucker!!” Lizzie said breathlessly, and scrambled to her feet. “Can we go now??”

Soapy chuckled softly, and for a moment he felt a pang in his heart. How he would have loved to have done this with his son Jamie. But it was not to be, and now he and Jo had been gifted with Kip and Lizzie, even if she lived thousands of miles away in Portland. He, Jo and Effie would just have to treasure her while she was at Wapanjara.

For the next couple of hours she and Soapy wandered through the bush. They didn’t go very far, only to the rocky outcrop where they sat under a tree and looked out over the homestead and
beyond. Soapy pointed out favourite childhood haunts and the distant line of the Wapanjara road to Tennant Creek. He showed her the edge of Warumungu tribal lands and the special places she should respectfully avoid as she grew older and could ride the outback on her own.

Lizzie’s eyes widened as she realised that part of her future involved Wapanjara and that she belonged to this place as much as Eliot did. She asked questions and pointed out places she would like to ride to next, and all the while Soapy’s old heart warmed and the hole left by the loss of his son became a little less painful.

They returned to the creek laden with bags of fruit … sweet bush apples and gloriously red bush apricots, some of which had ended up inside Lizzie and Soapy. The rain had ripened Cocky-apple fruit on the trees along the creek, and as she walked Lizzie sucked on a large caterpillar-like orange flower which glistened heavily with luscious, sweet nectar. Grandpa Soapy had told her to collect as many as she could carry, because Effie would make a cordial out of the flowers which would help Eliot’s chest cold and boost his immune system.

When they wandered back to the horses, Soapy packed the now-empty drawstring bag with the fruit which Effie would turn into preserves, cordials and jam. As the sun climbed higher, Soapy made a fire and set his billy to boil water. Sandwiches were brought out and tea was made, and Lizzie dug out her pannikin and drank lemonade as she listened to the sound of the water and the calls of a pair of kookaburras scolding them from a branch over the creek.

All too soon it was time to go home.

But first they had to see if they had succeeded in getting enough yabbies for Effie’s special dinner for Eliot and to celebrate the team coming home safe and sound.

She helped Soapy pull each netted trap onto land, and she was delighted to see each one heaving with what looked like tiny lobsters, almost black in colour, each about two to three inches long. Filling the lidded bucket half-full of water, she then counted every yabbie that came out of the traps, and the total, much to her amazement, was thirty-six. More than enough, but knowing her father’s taste for shellfish, Lizzie decided, there would be none left over. Fitting the lid on the bucket full of their catch, Soapy managed to lash it to his saddle, although his wound and his ribs objected to the strain.

The ride home was mostly uneventful, with only a slight detour around a huge taipan sunning itself in the middle of the track. Soapy took the opportunity to tell Lizzie that the best thing to do with snakes was to leave them alone. If the creature had bitten Lizzie, he explained very seriously, there would be nothing he could do to save her. Lizzie, for her part, absorbed every word Soapy said and couldn’t stop a shudder of fear.

By the time they shut the North paddock gate behind them, Soapy had explained to Lizzie where snakes tended to live and how to avoid them if possible, and to also remember that snakes just wanted to avoid confrontation but they would bite if they were surprised.

When they rode into the homestead yard, Lizzie couldn’t help a yell of happiness on seeing Eliot standing on the veranda waiting for them, a smile on his face.

“We got LOTH of yabbies!!” she called out with a final gappy whistle as Eliot slowly walked to the veranda steps and carefully made his way down them to the yard.

“Have a good time?” Eliot asked as he reached out to rub Narra’s soft muzzle.

“Betht time EVER!!” she answered as she fearlessly flung herself out of the saddle and slid down
beside Eliot, whose eyes narrowed with pleasure at Lizzie’s joy. “Are you okay?” she added, her voice softer now, and she very gently touched Eliot’s sling.

“Better, darlin’,” he said quietly. “I slept easier an’ I’ve eaten breakfast, before you ask.”

“You’re looking a little less like a week-dead possum, son, that’s for sure,” Soapy quipped as he halted Banjo beside Narra. The gelding lipped at Eliot’s sleeve, looking for a fuss. Narra pulled faces at his companion, but didn’t object when Eliot transferred his affections to Banjo’s forehead.

“Did you get my bloomin’ yabbies??” Effie asked as she stomped onto the veranda, face in its usual scowl.

“Yes, yes,” Soapy replied indulgently, “and Lizzie and I even got you some bush tucker so you can make that jam Jo loves so much.”

“Can I help, Effie???” Lizzie gazed at the little cook, who glowered back. Only the amusement twinkling in her muddy eyes betrayed her. “Pleeeth!!”

Effie brooded for a moment, and then came to a decision.

“Well … you and the Yank have a cake to make, remember, and then the rest of the afternoon I have dinner to get ready, but … tomorrow. You can help make jam then. How’s that??”

Lizzie beamed with delight, and Eliot helped her untie her bag from the saddle. He winced as the weight of it in his good hand jarred his side, and Lizzie frowned.

“Let go, Eliot! It’s heavy!! I’ll take it.” She pried it from his fingers and huffing and puffing, hauled the bag up the steps and onto the veranda. Effie lifted the bag with one hand and ruffled Lizzie’s curls.

“Oi!! Take care of that nag, nipper, before you do anythin’ else. Off you go, now! Then back here, change into clothes that don’t smell of horse and then we’ll see about that cake!” Effie instructed.

Her gaze returned to Eliot. “Are you up to helping the little ‘un, Yank?”

Eliot let the sun warm his bones a little longer and nodded as Lizzie clattered back down the steps so she could lead Narra back to the barn.

“Yeah … I guess. It’ll give me somethin’ to do until those idiots get back this afternoon. I got this feelin …” Eliot shifted uneasily, but shook his head. “Nah. It doesn’t matter.” He gave Effie a tired smile. “The job’s done, they’re comin’ home safe and that’s all that matters, huh?!”


Eliot glanced at Soapy before giving Effie a tiny hitch of his expressive eyebrows. He didn’t answer. Effie nodded, and took a deep breath before continuing.

“Okee-doke, you dopey mongrel. I gotcha. Mister M? Are you up to bringing that bucket into the kitchen? I need to get started prepping for dinner. It ain’t going to make itself! And lunch’ll be half an hour, so stir your pegs, nipper, else –”

“-it’ll go in the dog!!” Lizzie yelled, happy after her walkabout and yabbie-catching triumph.

Eliot carefully helped Soapy lift down the bucket of yabbies, and the pastoralist managed to carry them up the veranda steps while Lizzie held Banjo’s reins, proud to be helping like a proper
Turning, the hitter walked back to the steps and taking a deep breath, he gritted his teeth and made his way up to the house to help Effie prep food. But even as the pain hit, he couldn’t shake off the prickle under his skin that something wasn’t right.

Bernadette rumbled down the incline from the stringybark stand just as the sun began to set, Oggie in tow. The big vehicle cast long shadows over the West paddock fence, her silhouette becoming a momentary grotesque, misshapen creature as she passed the huge old gum tree at the boundary of the homestead.

Lizzie was concentrating on piping some frosting onto a batch of chocolate chip cookies she and Eliot had made, and for long moments she didn’t hear the noise of Bernadette’s powerful engine as she rolled to a halt in the front yard.

Eliot, munching on an undecorated cookie, quirked a grin at Effie, waiting to see how long it would take for the little girl to realise her family was home, and they weren’t disappointed when Lizzie suddenly froze. He eyes widened.

“Mama?? DADDY!!” she yelled and dropped the piping bag, leaving a splurge of frosting on the table as she ran helter-skelter from the kitchen, through the hall and out onto the veranda as her family eased themselves stiffly from Bernadette’s interior.

Clattering down the steps she ran into her father’s arms as Nate crouched down to catch her. The impact knocked him flat on his back in the dirt, but he didn’t care. He had an armful of babbling child, and he laughed with joy as his heart swelled with the love he had for his daughter. Sophie was suddenly beside him and Lizzie sat up, sitting astride her father’s stomach as she hugged her mother and held her tight.

“You’re home … you’re home … “ she whispered, voice breaking and her arms tightening so much Sophie had to tug the little girl’s arms from around her neck a little just so that she could breathe.

“We missed you so much …” Sophie whispered, and held tight to her daughter. Nate tickled Lizzie’s middle and she shrieked, delighted, and letting go of her mother she sat back and beamed up at Hardison, Parker and Tom. Scrambling off her father’s prone body she launched herself at Hardison who spun her around, Lizzie yelling happily. Parker caught her in mid-spin and gathered the child up in her arms and hugged her as Lizzie squealed. Tom didn’t expect to get such an eager greeting, but as Parker put Lizzie down the little girl threw herself at Tom. He only just caught her, but Lizzie flung her arms around the ex-policeman and gave him a smacking kiss on his bearded face.

“Thank you!” Lizzie whispered. “Thank you for keeping them thafe, Tom!”

Tom, somewhat abashed, found himself blushing pinkly, echoing some of the more garish shades of his Hawaiian shirt.

“You are very welcome,” he whispered back. “And they weren’t too difficult to keep in order,” he added. “It was fun!”

Lizzie gave him a gap-toothed smile that lit up his world, and he grinned, grey eyes twinkling with delight. Letting Lizzie slide to the ground, he straightened and looked at his team. His team. Huh, he pondered. Not any more. The job was done, and he was returning them back to the grouchy care of their resident hitter, damaged though he was. Tom felt a surge of disappointment. Oh well. It was fun while it lasted.
Lizzie twirled around, laughing, surrounded by her family, and as Nate got to his feet she tugged his jacket sleeve.

“Look!!” she giggled, and bared her upper lip with a finger so that they could see the gap in her teeth.

“I gok a gak cuth I lotht a toof!!” she gargled, and then she grabbed her mother’s hand and headed for the veranda, a laughing Sophie in tow. “I MADE CAKE!” she added, “and cookieth, and Effie let me frotht them and —”

And so it went that Team Leverage followed young Elizabeth Grace Ford as she led them across the yard, up the veranda steps and into the welcoming arms of their family.

That evening the fireflies were out en masse as the veranda played host to a table heaving with food and a lot of very hungry people happy to be home.

It was a clear night, balmy and still, but the air was filled with laughter and chatter, music playing softly in the background and the smell of delicious food wafting through the air.

Nate sucked garlicky butter from his fingers and ate his fifth yabbie-tail, the meaty mouthful meltingly delicious.

“Effie …” he murmured, eyes closed with the pleasure of it, “so help me God, these … these are the best damn crawfish I’ve ever tasted.”

Effie almost blushed, but managed to settle a scowl onto her pudgy face instead.

“Well, you lot’d better eat ‘em up because the nipper and Mister M spent the whole mornin’ catching the bleedin’ things!” she grumbled, her scowl deepening.

Nate leaned over to his daughter and gave her a smacking garlicky kiss on the cheek, and Lizzie yelled happily, scrubbing the greasy bit on her skin with a sleeve.

“ICK!! Daddy, you’re all yabbie thmell!!” she grinned up at him, the gap in her teeth giving her a scallywag air. She was trying hard to eliminate the lisp now, as she didn’t want to appear childish seeing as she was nearly seven.

“Speaking of which …” Sophie murmured, feeling a little less uncomfortable, “Lizzie has a birthday in just over two weeks, and she asked if she could have her party here at Wapanjara. Seeing as Eliot’s still not able to
fly –“

“Damn, Sophie, I’ve done it before –“ Eliot rumbled, although he was perfectly happy and willing to stay at Wapanjara for as long as he could. He just felt there was a point to be made.

Sophie sighed, irritated.

“Because Eliot is unable to fly for a while yet,” she reiterated waspishly, “would you mind?”

But before Jo could answer, Effie jumped in.

“Well, Missus – how about a barbecue for the little ‘un??” she said, and Eliot chuckled to himself at the eagerness in the little cook’s voice.

“Oh, Grandma Jo – can I?? Please??” This time Lizzie managed to speak without much of a lisp, and her dark eyes widened with hope and a modicum of desperation.

Jo studied the little girl, seeing the tension thrum through every atom of her, and glanced at Soapy, who winked back at the love of his life.

“Oh,” Jo said nonchalantly, “I think we can manage a birthday party. How about spending the day at the billabong??”

Lizzie beamed, the gap in her teeth adding a charm that made Jo smile.

“Can we?? All of us???” she said, wriggling with excitement.

“All of us, for the whole day,” Soapy said, helping himself to another fillet of catfish. “Alec – could we take Bernadette and Oggie?”

Hardison shrugged.

“Why not? Then we could help Effie with the food an’ we could take as much stuff as we wanted. Make an easy day of it.” The young hacker’s face softened. “We could do with an easy day or two, after what we’ve been through the past couple of weeks.” He rubbed his injured shoulder, which still ached. “Yeah … some R and R would be cool.”


Lizzie was beside herself with delight.

“Theriously???” she gasped, forgetting to control her lisp.

Jo smiled, delighted.

“Seriously. And don’t forget to bring your bathers,” she added.

“Bathers?” Parker asked, working her way through her plateful of yabbies. She loved finger food.

“Swimming costume,” Jo said. “The billabong’s a great place for splashing about in the shallows.”

Hardison blanched.

“Swimming?? In the billabong?? What about … y’know … crocs, an’… an’ sharks an’ –“
“Ain’t any,” Eliot rasped, amused.

“Yeah, like I’d believe that, comin’ from you!” Hardison said, waving a dismissive hand in Eliot’s direction.

“Bunyips, on the other hand …” Eliot let his voice tail off, leaving Hardison’s imagination to work overtime.

“Bunyips??” Parker asked, mystified.

“They do tend to lurk in the shallows,” Soapy added. “Nasty buggers.” He made clawing motions with his fingers. “Teeth … big claws …”

“But they don’t come out durin’ the day. They’re nocturnal,” Eliot added. “Maybe not even then. Sometimes after they’ve eaten somethin’ big … like a cow … they rest up for a couple of days.”

Hardison blinked, trying to absorb what Eliot had said.

“They … they eat cows? Like in … all at once??” he asked, unable to contain the slight quiver in his voice.

“Sometimes all we find is the tail. Or a horn,” Soapy continued, shaking his head. “A bunyip can’t manage cow horn and hooves. They chuck ’em back up. Pile of puke as big as a sheep.”

“Stinks worse’n a dead skunk,” Eliot continued, shaking his head. “Bunyip. Nasty son-of-a-gun.”

“Cool!!” Parker said, loving the idea.

Hardison stared at the little thief.

“Parker – there is somethin’ seriously, seriously wrong with you!”

The evening descended merrily into gentle arguments, excited planning and requests from Lizzie and more bunyip talk which didn’t make Hardison feel any better whatsoever.

But as food was cleared away and everyone settled down to coffee and cake, Lizzie stretched out between her parents on the swing seat and fell sound asleep.

As the cicadas chirruped in the dark and the fireflies flared, Eliot shifted painfully. He knew it would soon be time to re-pack his wound, and he had something to clear up before putting himself at Jo and Effie’s tender mercies.

“Nate … you said that we needed to talk about stuff. What kind of stuff?” he said softly, keeping his voice low so that he didn’t disturb Lizzie.

Nate rubbed his hand over Lizzie’s bare feet where they lay on his knees, her head on Sophie’s lap. They had discovered when Lizzie was very small that rubbing her feet kept her calm and settled.

“Yeah … Eliot, we need to discuss something. And we need to include you too,” he added, indicating Jo and Soapy. Mei sat on one of the comfortable chairs, Jamie in her arms, and listened quietly as Tom cradled Rosie to his chest.

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Effie stumped through from the kitchen and handed Eliot his medication along with a glass of orange juice, which he took, and then she eased herself down beside the hitter with a groan of relief. Her bunions were plaguing her somewhat despite all of the help she had had with clearing away dishes.
“You okay, Eff?” Eliot whispered, grasping her hand where it lay on her lap, and Effie patted his fingers.

“No worries, boy,” she answered softly. She gestured at Nate with her chin. “See to your business. My buggered old feet just ache, that’s all.”

Eliot nodded, but hung on to Effie’s hand.

“Spill,” he said finally, and Nate nodded, taking a deep breath.

“Tomas Ponomarenko,” he said, and Eliot swore, loudly and very thoroughly.

Nate told Eliot everything. He left nothing out … the job, the conclusion, and the appearance of The Confessor. He told Eliot about the job in which Ponomarenko was engaged, and then, finally, he gave Eliot the message The Confessor had sent specifically for the hitter. The only time Nate hesitated was when Lizzie stirred in her sleep. Sophie gently carded fingers through her daughter’s mass of curls and the little girl settled back into slumber. When Nate finished, silence ruled on the veranda even as a frogmouth boomed in the dark.

Eliot eased his battered frame upright in the recliner and Effie rested her hand now on his arm, unconsciously helping him forward. Straightening, the Oklahoman’s eyes were hard and the muscles worked along his jaw.

“Who the hell is ‘she’??” he asked no-one in particular.

“We thought you could tell us,” Hardison said, pouring a cup of coffee and lifting a cookie off the big plateful Effie had placed on the table. “I tried to follow the trail from Rio, but … nothing so far.”

Eliot pondered Hardison’s confession, and frowned.

“Rio … it’s a friggin’ warren of different factions … drug cartels workin’ with the Columbians … human trafficking … political intrigue … it could be anyone. I have a couple of contacts there I can follow up, but … there are so many variables …” he sighed unhappily. “Whoever this is … they know about ‘Lizbeth Grace. And Ponomarenko made a point of mentioning her. Shit!” he added stonily.

“But in the meantime you’re safe here,” Soapy said grimly. “Even if this Confessor bloke knows you’re here, he’ll also know by now that we’re difficult to deal with. I know a little about how this stuff works, Eliot. Word will have got about. We’re hard to kill, son. We have a reputation now, whether you like it or not.”

Eliot shook his head.

“Not gonna happen, Soapy. I’m not gonna bring more violence down on my home and my people.” He gritted his teeth and stood up. “Hardison … get me on a flight to Bucharest,” and he was about to turn and head into the house when Hardison spoke.

“No.”

The atmosphere was suddenly thick enough to cut with a knife.

“What?” Eliot rasped, the menace in his voice bleeding from the word.

Hardison’s dark eyes fixed on Eliot’s blue gaze, and he sat up, folding his arms.
“I said … no.”

“You’re not leaving, Eliot,” Nate added, his hand still calmly rubbing his daughter’s feet.

“Like hell I’m not—” Eliot snarled, but Sophie interrupted the wounded man’s tirade before he could crank himself into gear.

“You’ll stay here, Eliot. We’ve already spoken to Jo and Soapy, and they agree. We have to protect Lizzie, and she’s safer here than anywhere else.”

Eliot curled his lip, obviously annoyed, and it was only Effie’s hand on his arm that stopped him heading into his room and packing his bags.

“And that’s even more reason for me to go after Ponomarenko—” he continued doggedly.

“And that’s even more of a reason for you to stay put, you idiot!” Sophie interjected, trying her best to be patient. “You wouldn’t even make it to Tennant Creek, Eliot, let alone manage a flight to Bucharest. We’ve already discussed the flying issue, so for goodness sake, think!”

“The Duchess is right, Eliot,” Effie said quietly, and it was then Eliot realised that he was outgunned. Effie using his given name meant she was serious. “You’re barely able to walk across the yard, let alone clear off to some bloody foreign place, putting yourself in danger for no sodding reason other than you think you can take this bugger who threatened the nipper.”

Eliot glared at Effie, who sat calmly and held his arm tight.

“You know I can do this, Eff!” he growled. “It’s what I do—"

“No! No it isn’t!!” Parker finally burst out, unable to control her anger. “That’s not what you do!! Not right now!!”

Eliot’s head snapped around to glare at the young woman, but she didn’t flinch at the icy stare he gave her.

“Parker, it’s my job!” Eliot spat out, but she ignored him and stood up so that she could poke him in the arm. “OW!!” he grunted, and Parker poked him again, this time with more force and Eliot staggered slightly.

“See??” Parker blurted, eyes bright with tears. “You’re hurt!! You can barely stand!! And you can’t put yourself in the way of more danger because you’d die, Eliot!! And we won’t let you die, because we need you. Lizzie needs you, and she needs you here, where you can keep an eye on her and heal up and make sure she’s safe. Tell us how to do that. Tell us how to keep you both safe, because if you leave and go after this ass-wipe you’ll break us, Eliot. And you’ll kill Lizzie inside, because you won’t come back because you’ll be dead.”

Lizzie awoke with a start. She blinked blearily and yawned before shifting onto her side and smiling at Effie.

“D’you think Charlie and Kip will be home for my birthday?” she asked, her eyes still sleepy.

Effie lifted her hand carefully from Eliot’s arm and pushed on his good shoulder, forcing him gently back into his chair, her face inscrutable.

“Sit, laddie. You’re not going anywhere.” She turned to Lizzie. “They’ll be home in a few days, nipper. Don’t worry – they’ll be back for your birthday ‘do’.”
“Good-oh!!” Lizzie breathed, and snuggled back into the arms of her parents. She was asleep in seconds.

Eliot’s gaze flicked from Hardison and Parker, both doing their best to look inscrutable, to Nate and Sophie, both looking a little smug, Eliot thought. Soapy and Jo were busy sipping tea and ignoring Eliot’s glare. Mei calmly played peek-a-boo with Jamie, who was really too young to react, but he was fascinated by the movement and the soft sound of his mother’s voice. Tom looked up from gazing at Rose and caught Eliot’s eye.

“Don’t be a pillock, mate,” he said and then he smiled, amusement in his grey eyes. “Listen to them. They’re right. Buster could take you right now with one paw tied behind his back.”

Eliot realised he was beaten. He studied Lizzie, mouth slightly open and twitching in her slumber. They were right, dammit. She was safer here at Wapanjara. He doubted Ponomarenko would come to the cattle station, and he knew he had to heal up properly and regain his former fitness. In the meantime he and Hardison could put some feelers out regarding Ponomarenko’s employer. And, of course, he could put other measures in place.

He nodded, mind made up.

“Okay. Okay, that’s what we do. But we don’t sit on our asses, Nate. We don’t just do nothin’ and wait for Ponomarenko’s next move.”

Nate smiled, and Eliot saw the gleam in his eye.

“What?” he asked, his voice guarded.

“I,” Nate said, rubbing his hands together, “have a Cunning Plan!”

Eliot dropped his head in his hand and groaned.

To be continued …

* Strides – the Aussie word for trousers or pants.

** Jillaroo – the feminine of Jackaroo, a young stock-person learning their trade on a cattle station.
Eliot awoke to the sounds of chatter and good humour, trickling into his consciousness through the door of his room, once again ajar because his family insisted on keeping an eye on him even though in his eyes he was perfectly capable of looking after himself.

His old alarm clock read ten-fifteen in the morning.

“Damn!” he muttered, and then pried his complaining carcass out of his bed one-handed, sitting on the side of the bed and screwing up his eyes against the sunlight trickling in through the new glass in the little, high window beside the fireplace. A soft whisper of fresh air drifted in through the large open window, and he could hear lowing cattle from somewhere on the homestead. He had forgotten that Jacko and the crew were sorting the fat bullocks that should have been sold days previously, but the weather had intervened. He wished with all his heart that he could join them, but he knew he probably couldn’t even manage the short walk to the yards in his present condition. He hated being so debilitated.

He sighed. Self-pity never got him anywhere, so he firmly tamped down the feelings of inadequacy in his gut and levered his battered body to its feet. His wounds ached like hell this morning, and he knew that was down to the rough night he had had.

Unable to sleep, he had spent hours thinking about Ponomarenko and his associates, and who the mysterious ‘she’ could be … Ponomarenko’s employer who had sent The Confessor to give Eliot a message that she wanted him dead.

Whoever ‘she’ was, she was powerful. Ponomarenko was the best at what he did, and he was expensive. Very expensive. Eliot had always kept his ear to the ground when it came to keeping a tab on people who still walked the world of shadows Eliot had once inhabited. Eliot knew of half-a-dozen women who would fit the bill … killers, every one, and phenomenal at what they did. But this mystery woman was something different. He didn’t think she was an assassin or anything similar.

For some reason his thoughts had drifted to Damien Moreau. This woman was like Moreau, he was now sure. Moreau had never been shy about his power. Indeed he liked to flaunt it. He was always seen in high society with powerful people and beautiful, expensive women usually from influential families, and he was a master of manipulation. Of course his darker, cruel side was kept under wraps, but Eliot had walked the glittering, lethal world that revolved around Damien Moreau. He knew how it worked and how Moreau used the people he courted or threatened.

This ethereal woman who had some sort of issue with Eliot was too amorphous … too blurry, too untouchable as yet. She was obviously very, very good at covering her tracks, and that took a lot of money.

Ergo, Eliot decided, she wasn’t a mover and shaker or her profile would be noticed. She provided a service of some kind. So where did Eliot fit in?? The Rio connection could be something … or
nothing. And he hadn’t been in Rio since before Lizzie was born, retrieving a compromising letter for a South American politician. He hadn’t run into any woman – powerful or otherwise - while he was there. He had done the job and gone straight back to his team.

Eliot had finally driven himself into a headache which bordered on a migraine, and he had switched off his bedside lamp and after a couple of hours fallen into a fitful sleep.

Getting to his feet, Eliot managed to slip on his sling, secretly relieved at the support it gave. This wound was taking forever to heal. Once he eased into a soft, cheesecloth hoodie, allowing the left sleeve to hang empty, he padded out of his bedroom door, through the hall and onto the veranda, where he walked into a cheery argument about what kind of cake Lizzie wanted for her birthday.

“I like chocolate,” Parker insisted. “Double chocolate, with chocolate frosting and sprinkles!! I love chocolate!!”

“Yeah, babe,” Hardison said as he perused his tablet, trying to lock down an elusive hint of Ponomarenko having been in Rio de Janeiro, “but this isn’t your birthday, remember??”

“I like chocolate too!” Lizzie said as she worked on her sums for the day with Soapy’s help. Soapy made working out subtraction a lot easier when he decided Lizzie had to calculate the difference between twelve stock horses and seven saddles, and how many more saddles were needed so that Jacko could muster a mob of bullocks in the North paddock. “And lemon drizzle, and butter scotch frothing, and cherrieth, and -“

“Red velvet cake?” Nate said, sipping from a large mug of coffee.

Effie, pouring herself a cup of tea, eased herself down into a comfortable chair and studied the notebook and pen in front of her. She rarely had the chance to organise a birthday party, let alone a Billabong Barbeque Birthday Bash, and it was going to be perfect. If it wasn’t, it would be somebody else’s fault and whoever it was, she would make them pay dearly.

“I got lots of people to feed, so I can do a couple of cakes if you like, nipper. Hey, Yank! It’s about time you bloody well woke up!” she added, as she spotted Eliot making his way through the door and onto the veranda.

Lizzie gave her best friend a gap-toothed grin and quickly checked him out. He looked tired, but his eyes were clear and he appeared to be more rested.

“Eliot!! I’m doing thumth and Grandpa Thoapy says I’m really good at thubtracthion!!” she crowed happily.

He was aware that everyone on the veranda was checking out how steady he was on his feet and trying to gauge how much in pain he was, and he straightened as carefully as he could even though it cost him as the pull on his healing rib and both wounds tore through his side. His eyes narrowed a little and he knew he looked pale, but he thought he had got away with it.

“I’ll have her figuring out feed orders before you know it,” Soapy murmured, and he winked at the little girl. “Then I can retire!”

Effie heaved her stubby body to its feet and tapped Eliot on his good arm.

“Sit, you young bugger. I’ll get you something to eat –“

“No, no, Miss Effie,” Mei said as she bustled onto the veranda with a steaming mug in her hand. She poked Eliot gently, gesturing with her poking hand at his recliner, telling him in no uncertain terms to
sit down and behave. “Your feets are sore. I have *congee* for the Cowboy, and he will bloody well eat all of it or I will … will …” she searched for the word she wanted and then grinned triumphantly. “I will bash him!”

Eliot hitched an eyebrow, a little bemused. The young woman was spending far too much time with Effie. Nevertheless, seeing Effie’s unrepentant, evil grin, he lowered himself into his recliner and silently took the mug. He noticed Hardison had an expression on his face that yelled ‘ass-whupped.’ He made a mental note to make sure the hacker met his doom at a moment he least expected it.

The *congee* was delicious.

Eliot sighed with pleasure and the heat spread through his chest and stomach, easing the tiredness he couldn’t seem to shake off. The discussion about cakes continued, and Eliot let it wash about him like a warm, comforting tide as he finished the mugful of goodness. He sat for a while, watching the easy familiarity of his now-bigger family, and he couldn’t even begin to understand how he had ever deserved any of this … this … whatever-it-was.

He felt a nudge on his shoulder, and Effie reached out to take the empty mug and replaced it with another, this time filled with milky tea.

“Drink up, boy. Then you can let loose with whatever’s bleedin’ bothering you. You’ve got an expression on your face that makes you look like a ruddy constipated cow,” she said succinctly.

Sophie, sitting with Nate on the recliner, arched an eyebrow and cut into the conversation, her dark eyes sparking with humour.

“I think Eliot’s still fretting himself into an early grave worrying about Ponomarenko,” she said smoothly, sipping tea elegantly from a mug. Only Sophie could make an industrial-strength ceramic mug look like a piece of delicate Meissen.

“Who’s he?” Lizzie said, her lisp once more under control. She continued working on her maths problems as she spoke.

“Bad guy,” Parker replied as she munched on a mid-morning Anzac biscuit.

Lizzie thought about it for a moment and then shrugged. Bad guys were ten-a-penny in her world, and that in itself wasn’t particularly interesting. She returned to wrestling with the issue of too many bullocks in a pen and not enough stockmen to load them onto the transporter, and how many more would she need if the ratio was one stockman to every five bullocks. It was a knotty problem, she could tell.

Eliot swallowed a mouthful of tea and eased his damaged frame into a more comfortable position.

“Security, Nate,” he finally ground out. “I know we’re remote here, but –“

“It’s in hand,” Hardison interrupted, sitting back and dropping his tablet on the table. “El … we put this all in place before we even landed in Alice Springs. I have the best security system in the world on order, designed for some of the most secret locations even governments don’t know about. And I’ll be tweaking it to raise it up to *my* standards, m’man. Ain’t nobody gonna hassle anyone here at Wapanjara and beyond.”

Eliot shifted uneasily and glared at Nate.

“Anybody think of including me in this discussion?” he growled testily.
Nate thought about it for a moment and then calmly shook his head.

“No. Not really,” he replied, still relaxed and amiable as he slouched comfortably next to his wife.

“Dammit, Nate!” Eliot began, but Jo, looking over Lizzie’s shoulder and quietly helping the little girl with her bullock problem, held up a hand, effectively silencing Eliot in a second.

“It’s done, Eliot!” she said softly so as not to disturb little Jamie, asleep in Tom’s arms next to Lizzie. “We discussed it over breakfast. And yes, we didn’t include you because you would have been a bloody pain, son. You would have muttered and grumbled and –“

“- been annoying, and whiny –“ Parker added.

“Whiny??” Eliot snapped, eyes sparking. “Whiny?? You’re sayin’ I’m –“

“Whiny, yeah …” Parker continued, and snaffled another biscuit, taking a large bite and crunching happily. “Like,” she continued around the biscuit, “I got hit by a car!!” or … or ‘you don’t throw crowbars at people, Parker!!” she parroted, making yakkety-yak motions with her fingers. She stuck out her tongue at Eliot. “Whiny!!”

“And man, when you get in a snit you’re like a pit-bull who’s had his fluffy toy taken away,” Hardison added, smirking.

“Mister Whine-a-Lot!!” Parker continued, eyes narrowed.

“So we decided you were too sick to have a reasonable, balanced and informed conversation with the rest of your team,” Nate added, smiling, “and we made the call.”

Eliot pulled out his darkest, deadliest and most intimidating glare and pointed it at the members of his team.

They smiled benignly back, and drank tea.

“So,” Hardison said, steepling his fingers and arching a knowing eyebrow at Eliot, who had lapsed into a scowly simmer, “I’m gonna try and make the tech non-intrusive but with as much cover as possible.” This was when he missed his big plasma screens so that he could explain more clearly. He sighed. Well, he would try and make it simple. “I’m thinkin’ a user-friendly, comprehensive surveillance system made up of intelligent, wireless unattended ground sensors and some high-end cameras that can make out an’ ID movin’ objects on the ground … maybe even track ‘em.”

Jo’s eyes widened with surprise.

“Sounds impressive!” she said.

“Oh, lovely lady, it certainly is,” Hardison said, smiling. “You’ll be able to carry on a normal life but have a security system that’ll make sure you’re all as safe as I can make you.”

“I want it good enough to cover vulnerable points in none-line-of-sight areas and dead ground, Hardison!!” Eliot growled, “an’ laid around fixed-location perimeters! Y’hear me??”

Hardison nodded, happy to indulge the injured man.

“Yeah, yeah, Eliot, I gotcha. The whole system is flexible, unobtrusive an’ damn good. I promise. I’d trust it with my Nana.”

Tom soothed little Jamie as the infant shifted in his sleep, smacking rosebud lips and snuffling.
“It’s a good system, Eliot,” the ex-policeman murmured, a finger stroking Jamie’s soft cheek. “The best. And Alec can make it unobtrusive so it doesn’t stick out like a sore thumb and make living a normal life difficult.”

“I have more to discuss with you Eliot, but we need to speak to Soapy, Jo and Charlie first … and Effie, of course,” Nate said with a knowing wink.

Eliot pondered the decision made without his input and had to admit Nate was right – it was the best move to make under the circumstances.

“Jo … Soapy … are you buyin’ into this?” he asked, and Jo twisted around to look at the man she regarded as a son.

Her face was thoughtful for a moment, but then she nodded.

“Yes … yes, we do. Soapy, Eff and I discussed it this morning. If it keeps all of our family safe, then we’ll deal with it and be glad of it.”

“This situation with Chong, Eliot,” Soapy continued, “it wasn’t any of your doing and it didn’t happen because of your old connections. It’s because we were in the way. We were the targets, and I never want to have that situation arise again. I know the value of good security, son. And if Alec can do this … then I for one will be very grateful.”

Eliot brooded, frowning. He didn’t like the situation. He didn’t like it at all, but he knew in his heart that it was for the best, and by the look on Nate’s face there was a lot more to the plan than he was talking about right now.

“Okay,” he said finally. “Okay, I’ll go with it, Nate. But you’d better have one helluva plan in place, because I can’t have Wapanjara in the firing line, y’hear me?? This is my home, and … and it holds the people I love, dammit – and that includes all of you idiots! So be damn’ sure you know what you’re doin’ ’cause I can’t take anyone else gettin’ hurt. I can’t have any of us dealin’ with more pain like losin’ Alice.”

Parker’s eyes glistened as she suddenly absorbed Eliot’s words.

“Wait … you love us??” she whispered, eyes wide with shock.

Eliot scowled, stood up and handed his mug to Effie.

“I’ll help with lunch,” he said, patently ignoring Parker who wiped unshed tears from her eyes with the back of her hand. “An’ we can think about food for ‘Lizbeth Grace’s party,” he added, and turning his back on his family he made his way back into the house.

“Sophie?” Parker wavered, her voice shaky. “Eliot said he loves us. Is … is that true? He’s not lying to us??”

Sophie, finishing her tea, dropped a hand on Parker’s shoulder and squeezed.

“Yes, Parker,” she said, a smile in her soft voice. “Actually, I think he has for a long, long time,” she murmured, and she winked at Nate. “So you can take it from us that he isn’t lying.”

Parker, blue eyes shining, smiled a smile that equalled the sunlight and she hugged herself gleefully.

“Eliot loves us!” she declared. “He really loves us!! Why didn’t he tell us before now??” She shook her head, amused. “He’s such a dumb-ass!!”
Effie, sipping her tea, nodded to herself.

“Of course the daft mongrel loves you, even though the pillock don’t like saying it,” she said to herself, and then she grinned. “Boofhead.”

It was as evening encroached and the wittering cries of the flocks of galahs filled the air that Nate watched Eliot slowly make his way down the veranda steps and head towards the track to the South paddock gate. He noted how the man held himself, how he tried to make sure his wounds weren’t jarred and how he supported his left arm in its sling with his right hand. Nate shook his head. Sometimes Eliot Spencer was his own worst enemy.

“He always does this,” Jo said as she came to stand beside Nate. “Pushes himself too hard. But that’s just the way he is and while we do our best to protect him from himself, we can only do so much. Silly bugger,” she added affectionately.

There was a soft, yearning honk and Gertie, still wandering the homestead, noticed Eliot as he paused for a moment to catch his breath. She broke into a slow trot and caught up with him, and the Oklahoman reached out to grasp her *bosal* as she halted beside him, squeaking quietly.

Nate could almost feel Jo’s tension bleed away, and she sighed.

“Well, that’s better. Gertie’ll keep an eye on him. She’ll keep him grounded. She always does.”

Nate chewed the inside of his cheek thoughtfully even as Lizzie wandered out of the house, glass of juice in her hand. She spotted Eliot and Gertie as they slowly disappeared along the track, and she promptly put her glass on the table and raced to the veranda steps, clattered down them to the yard and headed off at a run. Nate was about to call her back, but Jo dropped a hand on his arm.

“Leave it, Nate. She’s fine. She knows when Eliot’s feeling a bit wibbly. They’ll be perfectly alright, lad, so don’t fret.”

Nate glanced at Jo and saw the serenity on her face.

“Wibbly??” he asked, a little bewildered.

Jo gave him a fleeting grin.

“Lizzie-speak for Eliot feeling a bit out of sorts in his noggin. She’ll bring him around, you’ll see.”

Nate scratched his head.

“Only six years old and able to understand Eliot Spencer. The mind boggles,” he pondered, and looked at Jo, whose green eyes crinkled in a knowing smile.

“They’ve known each other all of her life, and he’s her protector, guardian and best friend. Understanding each other is what best friends do, Nate. And she’s the daughter of a mastermind and an actress who just so happens to be able to read people like a book. What else do you expect?”

Nate turned his eyes back to the three figures being swallowed by the light and shadow of the old track, and saw Lizzie fall in beside Eliot. She touched his arm and then quietly walked beside him. Neither of them spoke. They didn’t need to.

“Yeah … yeah, Jo. I get it. It’s just … she scares me sometimes, y’know. Okay, she’s bright – *really* bright – and she’s kind and makes my life far more joyful than I deserve, but … but *dammit*, Jo! She
scares me because she’s so friggin’ fearless, and – and stubborn and sharp as hell, and it scares me because I want her safe and out of all of the crap we deal with as a team every damn day, and I know that isn’t the way life is for us. And I love her for it. I love the fact she takes it in her stride and doesn’t let it stop her loving and sharing and being happy.”

Nate’s blue eyes shone with equal pride and fear, and Jo wrapped her arm around his and squeezed.

“She has a family who loves her and protects her, Nate, and there are countless children who don’t have that, even if they live in a safe, quiet environment with everything they need. Lizzie has this fierce circle of people around her who guard her but don’t stop her from reaching out to the world, and that in itself is amazing. And now … now she has Wapanjara.” Jo’s lean, beautiful face creased into a frown. ‘I’ve not asked you about this, and perhaps I should. Are you and Sophie alright with Eliot leaving his half of Wapanjara to Lizzie?’

Nate snorted, amused.

“Hell, yes!” he said warmly. He patted Jo’s hands where they lay on his arm. “Jo … Lizzie loves Wapanjara. It’s in Eliot’s heart, and now it’s in Lizzie’s, deep and true. Soph and I … we couldn’t be happier about it.”

Jo took a deep, deep breath and let it out slowly.

“You do know that this is your home too, if you want it. You and Sophie, as well as Alec and Parker. Yes, I know your home is in Portland, and that’s where you live. But if you ever … ever … need somewhere to rest … to heal, or just to get away from your life for a while, you have a place here. All of you. Always. Do you understand?’

Nate gazed at the little garden and orchard, and saw a flock of lorikeets as they flew in for their evening drink at the billabong and the magpies chittered and fluted in the shadows of the almond stand. Buster was happily excavating a small hole by the base of the ancient gum tree by the main gate, and he heard the neigh of a stock horse from the cattle yards.

He closed his eyes for a moment and allowed the setting sun to bathe his skin, and a tiny, balmy breeze ruffled his dark curls.

“Jo, I …” Nate hesitated for a moment, unable to grasp the enormity of what Jo was offering. “… thank you. We may just take you up on that.”

Jo chuckled and squeezed Nate’s arm.

“Well now, boy, you just let us know when and we’ll have a bed ready for you.”

Nate’s eyebrows hitched.

“But you don’t have the room!” he said, “and I can’t see Eliot giving up his bed –“

“Nah, that’s true. But Soapy and I … we have plans!” Jo said, and the twinkle in her eyes made Nate’s heart sing.

“Speaking of plans,” he replied, and gently pulled Jo towards the door, “I need to speak to you and Soapy. I want you two to tell me all you can about the land and buildings at Albany Mining.”

Wapanjara became a hive of activity.
The regular work of the station went on as usual and Soapy managed to get all of the finished fatstock sold. The final foal was born with both Kip and Lizzie in attendance, and the little filly was promptly named Pesto, because Kip had discovered that Effie’s pesto pasta was the best food ever.

Charlie was subdued when he and Kip had come home after visiting Alice’s resting place. He and his son had been met with warmth and love from these people who cared so much about him, and after a few days he became more like his old self. Eliot thought he seemed more at peace.

A week after the return of Team Leverage to Wapanjara, Hardison accompanied Nate and Sophie to Tennant Creek airport, followed by Tom Reid in his old ute. The four of them were heading for Darwin for a few days. They needed Hardison for his research skills and Tom Reid for his contacts, and Nate carried the address of Soapy’s lawyer in his jacket pocket.

Meanwhile, plans for the Birthday Bash were in full swing, and even Eliot had relaxed enough to help Effie plan the food. With the entire crew, Leverage Team and household members, plus one camel and a small white dog in attendance, there would have to be copious amounts of food and drink, and Hardison had a lengthy list of supplies to pick up from Tennant Creek on their return. Eliot had every intention of lengthening that list before Hardison returned, and the hacker was glad he had insisted on taking Bernadette with all of her storage space.

Lizzie became more and more excited as the days passed, and her family were very happy to use the Birthday Bash as a way to get her to curb her lack of caution and tendency to be headstrong. But all was finally in hand by the time her parents, Hardison and Tom returned from Darwin.

That evening, after a sumptuous dinner of shellfish, brought back from Darwin on the charter ‘plane and transported in an icebox tucked into Bernadette’s on-board chiller, everyone settled down on the veranda and discussed Nate’s Cunning Plan.

“This’d better be good,” Eliot grumbled, “an’ not some cockamamie idea you guys cooked up while I’m laid up an’ then I have to pull your butts outta the fire when I’m back on the job.”

Soapy settled into the comfortable chair beside Jo and reached out to take her hand in his, lacing callused fingers with her long, capable ones.

“It’s going to be interesting, Eliot, if nothing else,” he said, and gave the hitter a knowing wink.

“Before we talk,” Nate interjected, “I have something for you Tom, before you head home.”

Tom straightened in his chair, grey eyes puzzled, but he kept his silence and waited.

Nate delved into the inside pocket of his jacket, pulled out an envelope and handed it to Tom, who opened it and extricated what appeared to be a cheque. His eyes widened.

“What the hell …?? I wasn’t expecting to be paid, Nate – I was just along for the ride and the fun of it while helping out a family member along the way!”

Nate gave an impish grin.

“We hired a very able security consultant for an investigation, Tom. You earned every cent, man. It’s all above board, in case you’re worried, and you can pay tax on it if you want –“

“ – and if you don’t, m’man, I can help with some off-shore investments that can give you some decent return and all completely legal,” Hardison grinned, teeth flashing white in the soft light.

“Well, mostly,” he added with a chuckle.
Tom stared at the piece of paper in his hand. The six-figure number took his breath away for long moments, and then he blinked.

“Bloody hell!” he whispered.

Tom was still staring at the cheque as Nate dropped a file on the veranda table and looked around at his team and new family.

“So,” he said, “here’s the thing.” He opened the file and pulled out a glossy folder. He held it up, and Eliot could see images of a big homestead and various photographs of cattle pens and other agricultural views. There were also metal silo-like structures, and Nate dropped the folder on the table beside the file and brought out some plans. He eyed Eliot. “Albany Mining Company,” he said, and handed the plans to Eliot, who took them one-handed and gave them a cursory once-over.

“So?” he said warily. “What about the place?”

Nate grasped Sophie’s hand and leaned back in his chair.

“It’s coming up for sale, Eliot, once everything’s over and done with after Chong’s involvement, and we’ve been thinking that we should buy it. Or, the company will,” Sophie said precisely.

Eliot stared at Sophie, and then dropped his gaze back on the plans. He studied them for a minute or two, looking at the cattle station layout and the size of the enormous paddocks. The place was bigger than Wapanjara, but the land was prone to flood. But it would raise decent fatstock.

Lizzie and Kip were suddenly at his shoulder, peering at the folder eagerly. Eliot scowled.

“Hey, you two! It’s rude to read over people’s shoulders!”

Lizzie pouted but backed off, but she glanced at Kip, who nodded.

“Can we see, Eliot? Please?” she asked politely.

Eliot narrowed his eyes at both children and thought about it.

“Okay. Go get my spectacles for me, and we’ll all have a look at it,” he said, and Kip grinned. The little boy shot into the house, retrieved Eliot’s spectacles from his bedside table and was back in moments. Lizzie and Kip helped Eliot spread out the plans on a small table Hardison brought over to the hitter.

Everybody else relaxed and drank coffee, letting Eliot take his time perusing the plans, but it didn’t take the Oklahoman long to assess the huge station’s facilities. He fixed Nate in a steady glare.

“Okay, Nate. Why? What the hell do we want with a cattle station?”

Nate’s eyes had that slightly mad glitter to them as he answered.

“Leverage International Australian Division,” he said, and he couldn’t keep the hint of glee out of his voice.

Eliot had expected something crazy, but not this.

“We’re moving to Australia??” Parker asked with a breathy sigh of hope.

“Well, no,” Nate said somewhat apologetically, “we still work from Portland. But it’s an opportunity that has several benefits.”
“And what the hell would those be, Nate? ‘Cause I ain’t followin’ what’s goin’ on in what’s left of your brain –”

“It’s good, Eliot,” Hardison said as he decided which slice of Guinness cake he wanted. “Seriously, man – give it a moment. It’ll work.”

“Look, Eliot,” Nate continued. “There’s work here for a new team. Australia’s go a lot of potential –”

“New team??” Eliot growled, his voice rising a couple of levels. “What new team??”

Nate grinned, and looked at Tom who was still staring at his cheque.

“The one I’m going to ask Tom to head up,” he said with an eerily cheery hint to his voice.

Tom blinked again and frowned.

“Um … what??” he said faintly. Just what the hell was Nate talking about?

“You’re perfect, Tom,” Nate added gently. “I watched how you handled yourself in Sydney. You think on your feet, you’re imaginative and willing to put yourself on the front line. You’re cautious, you plan well and you’re a lateral thinker, and … you have years of law enforcement experience under your belt.” He grinned. “And admit it … you enjoyed the crap out of the whole thing.”

“You were buzzed, m’man!” Hardison said, lounging back on his seat, feeling lazy and full of very good food.

Eliot stared at his team and they ignored him, knowing from experience that they had to let him fester for a bit and then think it through, which he duly did.

“So …” Eliot pondered, “you said there were several benefits, Nate. Apart from expansion, why buy Albany? Why not base the team in Darwin or Adelaide, maybe? Even Alice Springs?”

Nate nodded thoughtfully.

“Fair point,” he said. “But here’s the thing. The more bad guys we annoy, the more we end up in their rifle sights, you know that. We’ve been doing this a long time now … over a decade. Albany will give us a safe haven as well as be a base for work here in Australia. It’s remote, but we can work our way around that. And this is where Soapy and Jo come in.”

Eliot sat up, slightly alarmed.

“Who the hell said you could involve them in this, Nate?” he rasped, eyes flinty.

“We did,” Soapy said softly. “In fact, when Nate first mooted the idea of a new team, Jo came up with the idea of taking on Albany as a base.”

Now Eliot was confused. A new team with Tom heading it he could understand, and even be something he would find interesting … a challenge he would relish. But why would Soapy and Jo want to be involved? There would be no doubt that there would be change in their lifestyle somehow.

“Okay – I’m missin’ somethin’ here,” he said, and Lizzie put her hand on his sleeve to settle him. Eliot realised he was riddled with muscular tremors. **Damn this … this … wibblyness.** “Explain – and you’d better not be puttin’ Jo an’ Soapy or anyone else here in any kind of harm, Nate, because
“They’ll be safe, Eliot,” Sophie insisted, her face serene and calm. “In fact, they’ll be safer than ever before, because we’ll be running both cattle stations in partnership. Wapanjara and Albany will work as a corporation. The land will pay its way raising cattle. Albany will be a working, functional station, and Eliot? We want you, Soapy and Charlie to be equal partners in that side of the business.”

Charlie shifted in his chair, suddenly realising what he was being offered. He looked at his son. His motherless son. Albany had cost Kip his mother and Charlie his wife, and while he was stunned by the possibilities, he had one request.

“I, ah … I have to think about it, Nate. You understand? And I have once condition if I do go for what you’re proposing. The place isn’t called Albany. You change the name.”

Nate looked at his team, and saw the approval in their eyes. Even Eliot, still mulling everything over in his mind, nodded.

“Works for me. I believe it used to be called Amery Downs –“ Nate continued.

Charlie held up his hand.

“Its proper name is Alinjirri. Has been for thousands of years. It means ‘flooded place’ in my people’s language. I don’t want the name Albany to ever be a part of that place again.”

Nate didn’t have to even ask his team or the Wapanjara family.

“Alinjirri.” He rolled the word over his tongue, and smiled. “Alinjirri Station.” He grinned at Charlie. “Perfect.”

“So … what do you want me to do?” Charlie asked. “I’m already pretty busy running Wapanjara with Soapy. I’m not saying I won’t do it, but …”

Soapy nodded.

“But this time, Charlie, you’ll be an equal partner. You, Soapy and Eliot have worked as a team for years. Use that dynamic to run … Alinjirri … as you would any cattle station. Just because Leverage has a team in residence doesn’t mean you can’t make a life running both stations as going concerns.”

Now Charlie was confused.

“But … what about money? Where’s the funding coming from? I can’t raise that amount of money to bloody well buy in to this –“

“You have the money, Charlie. Remember … we have alternative funding streams. The money we acquired from Chong’s accounts will pay for Alinjirri twenty times over. And before you say you won’t touch it because he took your wife from you, think about this – Chong owes you. You and Kip. And you can turn that money into something good for both of you. So … you run both stations and spend the money as you see fit to make Wapanjara and Alinjirri successful.”

Eliot studied the station plans again and looked at the layout. His mind was working overtime, well-oiled and calculating.

“Charlie … remember we talked years ago about buyin’ a small herd of pedigree black angus but we didn’t have the room or the time?” he cocked an eyebrow at the young aborigine. “How about it?”
Charlie chewed his lip.

“I want to live here,” he said. “Kip’s settled here and I don’t want to leave Wapanjara.”

“Not a problem, boy,” Soapy said. “Your home will be here at Wapanjara for as long as you want. But you’ll need to put in a station manager at Alinjirri and we’ll need to build access roads and —”

“Whatever you need to do, Soapy, the money’s there, okay?” Nate interrupted. “The place won’t be available for sale until the investigation’s over and all of the legal stuff is dealt with —”

—and that’ll be about six to eight months from now,” Tom said, folding the cheque carefully and installing it in his wallet. “I know how the legal system works and I made a few enquiries. It’s pretty straightforward because Chong and his family are dead. The place will be sold to pay for legal fees, as the family was broke, apparently.” He grinned.

“But we have first refusal,” Sophie said. “In other words, we have a price already agreed, and it probably won’t even go on the market.”

“What’s the other benefit, Nate? I take security has something to do with it?” Eliot asked warily.

“Precisely!” Nate said, pouring himself more coffee. “Hardison? Explain.”

The young hacker finished his cake and licked a crumb from his finger.

“It’s kinda simple, really. The new team will have to have the same access to high-end tech as we do in Portland. I have our HQ wrapped in the best protection I could find – it’s the best, you know that – and with Wapanjara and Alin … Alinjirri connected, so will the security system. Jo and Soapy won’t even have to monitor anything – our system will do that. All we need now is someone to lead the team.”

All eyes turned to Tom Reid.

“You’re serious?” he said, and sat up, rubbing the knuckles of one hand with the other in agitation. “You really want me, an ex-copper, to run a team that will probably spend most of its time outside the law?”

“For good reason,” Nate replied, and he grasped Sophie’s hand. “We help those people who have no-one else to turn to. You didn’t seem to have a problem with that in Sydney.”

Tom nodded, agreeing, but his eyes still held uncertainty.

“I know, Nate. And I’m grateful, and hell, it was fun, but on a regular basis?” He lapsed into silence as he pondered the problem. Tom Reid was a man who believed in the judiciary system, but he knew by bitter experience that it didn’t always work that way. How often had he seen people twist the law to save themselves simply by being moneyed and powerful. There was a difference between upholding the law and bringing justice to those who needed it. His gut roiled as he remembered cases where lethal, dangerous people had walked away free as a bird and their victims were left with nothing. He took a deep breath. “I’m in,” he said.

The veranda was witness to a plethora of relieved smiles. The only exception was Eliot Spencer. All eyes turned to the man in the recliner, Lizzie and Kip beside him. Lizzie wrapped her arms around Eliot’s biceps.

Eliot gazed back at his friends. His family. Shit. Nate was friggin’ right.
“I know this kid …” he began. “Well, not a kid, but … I met him a while ago … in Pakistan. He was with the Australian special services then … same as Soapy. Helluva shot, damn well trained and he’s an Aborigine. He’s doin’ freelance work now. I hear about him once in a while, and he’s got a decent rep. Does the job, clean an’ tidy. He’s tough, skilled and nearly as good as me. He’s also a little crazy, so he should fit right in. I can put out feelers.”

“I know a hacker who might work for you,” Hardison joined in. “He, ah … he’s also a thief, works alone and is a real ass … um … lone wolf. Asian-Australian. He likes shiny things.” He grimaced.

Parker’s eyes widened.

“You mean –“ she whispered.

Hardison nodded.

“Yeah. Him. He’s worse’n goddamn Cha0s. Only difference is he’s not so friggin’ obnoxious. He probably won’t go for it though.”

“Well, we can think about it for a while,” Nate said happily. Things were going just the way he wanted them to go. “No rush. And I’ll leave that to Tom. He knows what kind of jobs turn up here and what will work out here in the boonies. So,” he continued cheerily, “Are you with us, Eliot?”

Eliot felt Lizzie’s arms tighten around his biceps. His best girl. And he had to keep her safe, because Tomas Ponomarenko knew about her, and so did this mystery woman who was after his hide.

“Yeah,” he said finally, blue eyes glittering. “I’m in.”

Nate clapped his hands and rubbed them together gleefully.

“So, people – decision made. Now we only have one more thing to do.”

Effie frowned.

“What the bloody hell are you yapping about now, clever clogs?” she rumbled. She was busy taking in the breath-taking new plans for Wapanjara and its people. For her, even though she had no doubt that life wouldn’t fundamentally change for her. But she eagerly anticipated the challenge.

“Effie,” Nate said with relish, “let’s go steal a birthday party!”

To be continued …
Talking, Birthday Bashes and a little foreboding. And, as requested, an Eliot in nothing but cut-offs. Apologies for the delay but I had a laptop catastrophe, which is now resolved.

Elizabeth Grace Ford awoke on the morning of her seventh birthday to the promise of clear, turquoise blue skies and gentle, balmy whispering breezes.

She lay awake for a few minutes as she snuggled under her comforter in Oggie’s Nipper Nest and listened to her parents’ breathing and the soft gurgle of Gertie as she lay in front of the tent, guarding the occupants.

Today she was seven years old. Almost a grown-up. And she was going to have one of the best parties ever. Squirming out of her bed, she did her creepy-crawly check, put on her slippers, tucked Cec under her arm and set forth.

Giving Gertie a quick scratch, she headed up the veranda steps and pattered along the deck, through the door and into the house. It was still very early, and the sun was just peeking over the top of the trees. Most of the occupants of Wapanjara were still asleep, and as she quietly wandered into the hall she saw Eliot’s door was ajar. Apparently he still warranted being monitored by his family. She could hear Effie clattering around in the kitchen, but before she disturbed the little cook she carefully peered into Eliot’s room. He was finally able to sleep on his side, and he was settled under his blankets, face relaxed and at peace. For Lizzie, that was the best birthday present she could have.

For a moment she remembered Eliot lying unconscious and bleeding to death on the dusty ground, his head in her lap. She could feel his clammy skin and saw the paleness of his face under the blood and sweat. Lizzie shuddered and felt again the terror in her chest because she was convinced she was going to lose him. But Eliot was healing. Her best friend and good wolf was on the mend, and she was older now, and she knew that she would have to learn to think before she did something stupid like run straight into danger.

Leaving Eliot sleeping peacefully, she headed happily into the kitchen.

Effie was busy sorting out big containers for food, and she didn’t expect a little girl flinging her arms around her rotund middle, and the cook dropped the big plastic box to hold onto Lizzie.

“Now then, nipper!!” Effie rumbled, ruffling Lizzie’s tumble of curls, “careful!”

Lizzie nuzzled into Effie’s side and held on tight, but Effie, amused, managed to sit on a stool and hug Lizzie back.

The child flung her head up and stared at Effie, bright-eyed, and then hugged tighter.

“I’m theven today!!” she squeaked.

Effie smirked and nodded.
“So I believe, little ‘un. D’you feel any different?”

Lizzie thought about it.

“Weeeell … no,” she decided. “But I’m theven! Nearly a grown-up!!” she reiterated for the umpteenth time, face alight with love. “And I’m having a birthday party!!” she added, trying hard to keep her lisp under control.

“Indeed you are, nipper! And it’s going to be bloody ripper!” Effie added gleefully.

“Can I help?” Lizzie asked. “Cec wants to help too!” she added, waving Cec at Effie.

Effie screwed up her pudgy face theatrically, thinking about it.

“I s’pose. Righto, you little blighter – have a wash, get dressed and be back here smartish if you want your party to get ruddy sorted, hey!”

Lizzie sucked in a deep breath and let go of Effie. The excitement was almost too much to bear.

“Okay!! I’ll be back in one shake of a poddie’s tail!!” she declared. Jacko had taught her that little homily.

Reluctantly letting go of Effie, she trotted to the door but was halted for a second by Effie’s voice, soft with love.

“Happy Birthday, nipper!” Effie whispered, and Lizzie’s eyes glowed with the starlight she held in her heart. She beamed.

“Thank you, Effie!” And Lizzie looked at the stacked boxes and the mass of food-filled containers ready to be loaded into Bernadette and Oggie. “Oh, thank you!!”

“You’re welcome, little ‘un.” Effie’s muddy eyes were warm with pleasure. “Now … go on! Move your seven-year-old bum! We’ve work to do before everyone else bloody well wakes up and gets in the way!”

Lizzie didn’t need any further encouragement. One trip to the bathroom later, she was scrubbed, her teeth were clean and her curls were in some semblance of order after a cursory brush. Effie heard her run out of the house, down the veranda steps and across the yard so that she could get dressed and face the day.

Thirty minutes later, just as Effie packed up salad stuff, fresh mangoes and passion fruit in one of the chilled boxes, Lizzie clattered back into the house like a small, eager hurricane. The wail of a baby filtered through from the living room as Lizzie stumbled to a halt and put her hand over her mouth as though doing so would stop her boots making a noise on the cool Minton tiles in the hall.

“Thorry!!” she whispered, and then she smiled with relief as Rose settled grumpily and went back to sleep.

Effie snorted in amusement and then put Lizzie to work, and in less than an hour everything was packed and waiting in Effie’s enormous walk-in refrigerator. Jacko and Chalky arrived in the ute, relieved Effie of a box of freshly-cooked hot bacon rashers, sausages and fried eggs in rolls, and packed the flatbed with the chilled food after teasing Lizzie about reaching the magical age of seven. There were cases of beer and soda, juice and milk, as well as cake and other desserts. Effie’s huge old catering teapot was next, and the two enormous barbecues made from a halved 40-gallon drum were already loaded, along with wood and coals.
Chores around the station were being finished by the rest of the crew, and then they would join Jacko and Chalky at the billabong, where a fire would already be going and heating a big billy can full of water for tea. Work done, they would then tuck into their filled rolls and wait for everyone else to catch up.

It was as Jacko and Chalky drove the ute down the track to the South billabong gate that Sophie and Nate wandered from the tent to the house, making their way onto the veranda just as Lizzie carefully carried out a pitcher of juice and placed it on the table.

“Mama!!” she called softly. “See? I’m helping!! And you have to be quiet because the babies are still asleep and so is Eliot and Mei’s not awake yet, so –“

Sophie held out her arms and crouched down as Lizzie flung herself at her mother, burying her face in Sophie’s shoulder.

“Happy Birthday, my darling!” Sophie murmured, squeezing Lizzie and kissing her cheek. “Are you looking forward to your day?”

Lizzie nodded vigorously, and then pulled her father into her hug.

“I’m seven!!” she said once more, the effort of controlling her lisp causing a spatter of saliva. “I’m a grown-up! Well … nearly, and Kip’s going to ride to the billabong on Batu and Grandpa Soapy, he says if you say yes I can ride there too on Narra ’cause I’m seven now and –“

Nate, eyes bright with pleasure at the joy in his daughter, saw Sophie’s eyes smile in agreement.

“Alright, alright!” he said, warmth in every word, “Seeing as you’re seven! I take it someone’s going with both of you?” He hitched a questioning eyebrow.

“Ya-huh!” Lizzie nodded vigorously. “Charlie’s going to be with us and he’ll take Gertie ’cause she’ll carry down lots of chairs and stuff and folding beds and blankets and things for the twins and –“

Nate raised a hand and managed to stop his excited daughter’s long, long list of plans, and sighed.

“Yes, you can ride to the billabong with Charlie and Kip, okay? How does that sound?”

Lizzie was almost fizzing with joy.

“That’s ripper!!” she hissed, and she hugged her parents once more before letting go. “I have to help Effie do breakfast, and make sure Eliot’s okay and then feed the nippers and then go find my cozzie!”

“Cozzie?” Sophie whispered, mystified.

“Her swimming cozzie,” Effie said, gesturing at Nate to take a serving dish of scrambled eggs and sausage out to the veranda. “You can’t have a Billabong Barbecue Birthday Bash without having a bit of a splash about, now can you? C’mon, now – eat!”

Sophie brightened.

“Now there’s a thought!” she said. “Cozzies. Hmm … I think today’s going to be fun!!”

“I am not goin’ into the water, Parker!!” Hardison said as he ambled through from the living room, wearing cargo shorts and a teeshirt emblazoned with the words ‘I can explain it to you but I can’t
understand it for you.’ “Who the hell knows what’s lurkin’ in there, and if Nate and Soph have any sense they won’t let Lizzie anywhere near the damn water!” he continued, eyes wide and a little leery. “There ain’t no way Nana’s precious boy is gonna get ate by a bunyip! No siree!!”

“Pffff!” Parker rolled her eyes. “It’s perfectly safe, Hardison! No crocs, no sharks … you’re just afraid to get your feet wet!” She flopped down at the veranda table, snagged a sausage and munched merrily on it, fingers glistening with juice from the home-made morsel. “Hey there! Happy Birthday!” she added as Lizzie appeared from the house carrying plates.

Lizzie grinned and after placing the plates carefully on the table, she flew into Parker’s arms, adroitly avoiding the remnants of the sausage.

“Thank you!” she mumbled into Parker’s shoulder. “I’m seven, you know!!”

“Hey, little momma! Where’s my hug??” Hardison hummed as he dropped onto a chair.

Lizzie, never one to deny Alec Hardison a hug, allowed Parker to finish her sausage and begin another one as the little girl darted happily into Hardison’s long arms.

“Happy birthday, sweetheart,” he whispered, and he felt Lizzie quiver with excitement. “It’s gonna be a wonderful day, huh.”

“Yeth!” she replied, forgetting her lisp-control, “it’s going to be the beth birthday ever!!” Her dark eyes gazed into Hardison’s twinkling visage, and the hacker tucked back unruly curls.

“Sun, good food and presents – now that’s what I call a birthday, baby-girl!” he smiled, and Lizzie giggled.

“I’m going to open my presents tonight, just as the sun goes down, ‘cause I want everyone to be there, and Kip’s grandpa and Auntie and lots of the family are coming too!!”

Hardison nodded soberly, knowing Billy Jakkamarra and the rest of Charlie’s large, noisy family would join them in the afternoon for the rest of the celebration, a true family corroboree. Then there would be food and music and stories, lots of swimming and laughter, and if it all went on into the early hours it didn’t matter, because everyone would sleep under the stars except for Effie. In deference to her bunions she would take Lizzie’s comfortable bed in the Nipper Nest. Lizzie herself would, for the first time, sleep in a hammock strung between two ancient coolibahs. Eliot had promised her that she could do so, and Eliot never broke his promises, especially because now she was seven.

“Shèngrì kuàilè!! Shèngrì kuàilè!!” Mei chanted happily as she bustled onto the veranda, young Rose grumbling hungrily in her arms followed by Soapy carrying Jamie. “You are seven now! My Jamie and Rose … they have a really big sister to watch over them!!”

Lizzie grinned with pleasure, and Mei ruffled the little girl’s hair affectionately. But Lizzie was distracted by a grumpy voice from the hall.

“Dammit, Lizzie! Can’t a man get some sleep in peace??”

Lizzie’s eyes widened in delight.

“Eliot!” she breathed, and looked up to see her guardian leaning against the door jamb, eyebrows drawn down and a scowl settled onto the well-loved face. He was dressed in nothing but his old cut-off jeans and an unbuttoned soft cotton plaid shirt, his medicine pouch lying over his heart. The cut-offs were held up by a well-worn leather belt with a big, oval buckle, and Effie noticed the belt was
almost two notches tighter, hanging onto his hipbones. Eliot was thin, she thought. He needed to eat a lot more.

The taped dressing over the wound under his arm probably needed changing, but he was healing well and Jo had not had to pack the wound for almost two weeks now. But he was still tender and tired far too easily.

Lizzie very carefully wrapped her arms around her best friend’s waist and hugged him, even as he wandered onto the veranda and gingerly settled into his recliner.

Guardian and child gazed at one another as Lizzie straightened and studied Eliot.

“So …” he said with a bit of a growl, “Seven, huh?”

Lizzie nodded eagerly, curls bouncing.

“Ya-huh!” she whispered, eyes sparkling with amusement.

“S’pose you want me to wish you a happy birthday,” Eliot grouched.

Lizzie forced her face into polite studiousness.

“Yes please,” she replied, proud of her lisp-control.

Eliot’s mouth twitched.

“So … d’you think you deserve it??” he growled. His blue eyes were steady, as they were when he was facing six armed men while suffering from broken ribs and a concussion.

Lizzie sniffed, crossed her arms and arched an eyebrow. Her brown gaze was as steady and as calm as Eliot’s.

“Uh-huh. Because …” she sighed, as though explaining to a child, “I’m really working hard at my sums and I’ve read four whole books on my own and I know about sight-lines and triangles and stuff –“ she took another breath before continuing – “and I helped Grandma Jo and Parker and Effie look after your bullet holes – twice – and I made sure you took your pills, and I looked after you when you were all sick and hurt and hot, and – and – ‘specially when you needed a hug. Lots of hugs. And I made sure you didn’t hurt yourself even when you were being very, very silly and tried to get out of bed. ” Her eyes suddenly softened. “And I try to help when you’re all wibbly,” she finished, her voice warm with love.

And as she spoke, Eliot gave her his best Lizzie-smile, eyes crinkling at the corners, pride glowing from every inch of him.

Their family watched the hitter and his best girl go through their annual birthday argument, enacted on Lizzie’s birthday as well as Eliot’s in late June. It was a tradition they wouldn’t miss for the world.

“Yeah, darlin’ … you’ve been takin’ good care of me.” He lifted his good hand and crooked a finger to tell her to come closer. Lizzie, instantly dropping her attitude, leaned in and slipped her arms around Eliot’s biceps. “Lizbeth Grace,” he whispered, the words only meant for her. “Lizbeth Grace … you made me live. You wouldn’t let me go, an’ for that, sweetheart, I owe you. Happy Birthday.”

Lizzie tucked herself into Eliot’s shoulder and squeezed him tight, and then kissed the end of his
Are you okay?” she said sotto voce.

Eliot let out the soft, gruff, raspy chuckle which meant so much to these people he loved.

“Yeah … yeah, I’m gettin’ better. Now, this is your day, kiddo, and you just enjoy it without worryin’ about me. Go on, now – eat. We got a busy day ahead of us.” He mock-scowled at Lizzie. “An’ just ‘cause you’re seven, young lady, doesn’t mean you don’t take care, y’hear? You listen to people, Lizzie, okay?”

Lizzie stared at Eliot and she saw the truth in his eyes. He was deadly serious, and she knew then that he was worried about her for some reason. Something more than his usual wary concern over his team’s safety.

“I hear you,” she whispered, and Eliot knew his best girl understood.

“El?” Hardison dug around in his pocket and brought out a small cell ‘phone.

“What?” Eliot snapped testily, his worry breaking through the love he had for his ‘Lizbeth Grace Ford.

Hardison smirked, and waved the ‘phone in the air.

“I, uh … I think this is the time to give Lizzie her first present. I know, I know … she’s openin’ the rest this evenin’, but I want her to have this one now while she’s payin’ attention.” He glanced at Eliot, and the hitter suddenly knew Hardison had something planned to help keep an eye on Lizzie. “Your Momma and Daddy said this would help keep you safe, baby-girl.”

“Normally I don’t approve of mobile ‘phones for children,” Sophie said a little waspishly, “but this one’s different, and you listen carefully to Hardison, my darling. This is important.”

Lizzie looked at her parents and then at Hardison, who was busy checking the display. She realised that this wasn’t for fun – whatever her Alec had come up with, she knew she had to listen and heed everything the hacker said.

Eliot was frowning in surprise, but Hardison raised his hand to stop Eliot’s interrogation now bubbling dangerously under the surface.

“Remember when we finally nailed Dubenich all those years ago? An’ Nate wouldn’t let us have a Bat Cave?” Hardison glanced pointedly at Nate who ignored him.

“Bat Cave? What the hell are you talkin’ about, Hardison?” Eliot grouched testily.

Hardison grinned suddenly, teeth flashing white as his face lit up with the look that said ‘you people are idiots and if it wasn’t for me you’d still be using morse code.’

“Lizzie-girl … can you go fetch my laptop an’ case?”

Lizzie, intrigued, quickly retrieved the items from the living room and brought them back to the hacker, placing them carefully on the veranda table.

“So …” Hardison continued as he booted up his laptop and retrieved a connection cable from the bag, “… I been workin’ on this for a while on and off, but could never find a use for it – until now.” He connected the cable via the USB port on the laptop to the cell ‘phone and then dug around in his
hard-drive for the information he was looking for. “Now … Eliot, I need your cell.”

Eliot, frowning but understanding Hardison had something usefully devious rattling around in his geeky head, nodded, and Lizzie scooted into Eliot’s room to retrieve his cell ‘phone.

As he worked Hardison kept up a conversation, mostly with himself, and Lizzie giggled as she handed Hardison Eliot’s phone and he bepped her nose with a forefinger.

“See, Lizzie … before you were born, your dad took down a really, really nasty piece a’ work called Victor Dubenich,” Hardison’s eyes flickered as he sorted out the information he needed and clicked on an icon. “Now, we had to stay low an’ outta sight, so we set up our headquarters in the ol’ subway tunnels under Boston,” he frowned in concentration for a moment or two and then continued. “The place was awesome – I mean, we coulda stayed down there forever an’ nobody – nobody – would’ve ever found us.” He grinned at the memory. “Damn, but it was the coolest place ever.”

Now he was busy installing something on the little ‘phone, and delving into his bag he brought out a dull, burnished-gold protective cover emblazoned with a kangaroo and clipped it over the ‘phone. Then he took Lizzie’s hand and passed her thumb over military-standard recognition software he had installed on the hard-drive.

Hardison sighed regretfully.

“But your dad said we couldn’t stay there for some reason –“ he glared at Nate who grinned unrepentantly, “ – even though I told Eliot I could make him a bat signal … y’know, like the one in the movies.”

“Now that was a cool idea,” Eliot grunted, remembering clearly Hardison’s offer as they walked away from the dam where they had left a cornered and desperate Dubenich and Latimer, his associate, fighting over a gun before falling into the raging water. “I wanted a wolf, though. That would’ve been pretty damn amazing.” He added, glowering at Nate, whose grin widened.

“Well,” Hardison continued, now disconnecting Lizzie’s ‘phone and attaching Eliot’s cell to the lead. Once more he began to download information. “I never forgot, El. I just never had a reason or the opportunity to come up with somethin’ that you could use.” A flashing icon indicating the software had downloaded properly onto Eliot’s cell made him smirk with satisfaction. “So now you got your wolf signal.”

Disconnecting Eliot’s cell he handed it to the hitter, who stared at the display. A small, stylized wolf’s-head stared back at him. He was on the point of touching the screen over the icon when Hardison held up a finger.

“Just hang on Eliot. Okay, Lizzie … here …” he handed the neat little state-of-the-art cell ‘phone to his god-daughter. He indicated the same icon on the display, a red-and-gold wolf, staring at Lizzie with dark eyes.

Lizzie’s eyes widened and she gazed at Eliot, who gave her a Lizzie-smile, his own eyes warm now, knowing Hardison had come up with something special for this little girl whom they all loved. She pressed the icon.

Eliot couldn’t suppress a start of surprise as his cell ‘phone began to flash and a wolf’s howl filled the air. A larger version of the wolf’s-head filled the screen, flashing on and off and blaring howls. Lizzie giggled in delight.
“Sonofa – dammit, Hardison!” Eliot rumbled, and pressed his thumb to the flashing screen, instantly shutting off both the noise and the visuals. He blinked a couple of times, taking in what Hardison had done. “Huh!” he said, and his lips curled up at the corners. “Do it again, ‘Lizbeth Grace,” he ordered, and Lizzie pressed the screen of her little ‘phone. Eliot, prepared this time, growled in delight as the sound of a howling wolf rang across the veranda. “Damn!” he whispered, and switched it off.

“There ya go,” Hardison said gleefully. “You got your Eliot-signal.” He smiled as Lizzie stared at her new ‘phone. “If you ever find yourself in a tough spot, baby-girl, or you get lost, or … or you feel somethin’s hinky even, you can touch the wolf an’ Eliot’ll come runnin’. You understand?”

Lizzie, eyes round, nodded. She held the ‘phone tight in her hand as though her life depended on it, and, she realised, it might be exactly the case. Something was bothering her family … something about keeping her especially safe, and she could see the worry in their eyes.

“This is not for you to keep playing with, young lady, and expect Eliot to be at your beck and call,” Sophie added. “That is for emergencies only. And seeing as you’re now seven and nearly a grown-up, you have to behave in a grown-up manner. It is intended to keep you safe. Do you understand?”

Lizzie traced a finger over the case, studying the kangaroo and then returning to the wolf icon. She nodded slowly. She understood very well indeed.

Eliot nudged her with his bare foot.

“Do it again, ‘Lizbeth Grace,” he rasped, blue eyes alive with humour.

Lizzie pressed the icon.

Eliot grinned like a five-year-old with a new toy as the wolf howled and his ‘phone flashed, and Hardison had to turn away before he burst out laughing. Sometimes Eliot Spencer was worse than Lizzie.

“C’mon, you lot!” Effie groused as she hobbled onto the veranda with her reserve teapot and a pitcher of milk. “Breakfast, and then we have things to do, so bloody well eat up and clear off! I’m busy!”

Lizzie clutched her new ‘phone before flinging her arms around Hardison’s neck.

“Thank you, Alec! I love it!” she whispered, and Hardison held his god-daughter tight, happier now that she had the safety measure he had created just for her.

As everyone made their way to the table, Eliot caught hold of Hardison’s sleeve as the hacker walked past his recliner.

“Hardison?”

“Yeah, man!” Hardison looked down at his best friend.

Eliot waggled his ‘phone at the young man.

“Thanks. It’s … the wolf-signal … it’s just … thanks.”

“No-brainer, El,” Hardison replied, his voice low and warm. “We gotta keep her safe, bro. Ponomarenko … “ his voice tailed off, the threat unsaid.
Eliot nodded and got to his feet, tucking his ‘phone into his pocket. He watched Lizzie settle down between Soapy and Nate, babbling away and showing them her birthday present, and he felt Hardison drop a hand on his good shoulder.

“There’s the best GPS I could come up with on the cell, Eliot – it’s linked with all of our ‘phones, and as long as she has the thing switched on and with her, we’ll find her, no matter where she is. That I promise, m’man.”

Eliot glanced at Hardison, and he saw the worry in the dark, expressive eyes. He nodded wordlessly, but he didn’t have to utter a syllable. Hardison knew his friend far too well not to be able to understand silent Eliot-speak.

So Team Leverage settled down to eat breakfast, trying their best not to worry about Tomas Ponomarenko, and decided that the bastard could wait – they were going to celebrate Lizzie’s birthday and to hell with the rest of the world.

“Are you nuts??” Parker hissed at Charlie, horrified.

“C’mon, Parker!” the young station manager said, offering the little thief the reins of the horse standing beside him, “He’s even safer than Batu!! What the hell’s the issue, woman??”

Parker glared at Charlie and then eyed the animal patiently waiting in the morning sunshine, dozy and hip-shot. The little gelding was covered in spots, and … and … blotches and he had striped hooves and white around his eyes and the most ridiculously sparse mane and tail. Parker thought he was the ugliest thing she had ever seen.

“That … that horse is a clown!!” she spat, waving a hand at the animal, which ignored her. “I hate clowns!!” she added with a shudder. “Even more than horses!! It’s a horse-clown!!”

“He’s an appaloosa, Parker! He’s supposed to look like that!” Charlie insisted, and shoved the reins again in Parker’s direction.

“Nope!! Nope-nope-nope!!” Parker said, crossing her arms. She had decided she would ride with Charlie, Kip and Lizzie down to the billabong, but she sure as Hades was not going to ride a horse-clown. “Not gonna! I want to ride that one!” She pointed at the spirited chestnut mare Charlie was training to be a top stock horse.

Charlie sighed, and Kip, sitting astride his loyal Batu, giggled.

“But Kevin’s sweet!!” Lizzie said from Narra’s broad golden back. She was wearing her hated riding helmet. “He’s ever so gentle!!”

Parker pouted.

“Don’t care. Horrid, spotty … thing! Blech!!”

Kevin seemed unimpressed by Parker’s tirade and went to sleep, ears lopping.

Charlie was also mightily unimpressed, and lifting Parker’s hand he shoved the reins into her slack grip before she could react. Twirling her around, he hoisted her into the saddle and ignoring Parker’s indignant shriek he mounted the chestnut mare, turned her and greeted Soapy who rode around the house on Banjo followed by Sophie, happily seated on a brown mare. Soapy was leading two more horses, a small washy sorrel and a stocky grey.
Kevin woke up and bored now, turned one ear in Parker’s direction, the young woman too terrified to dismount. The old gelding huffed to himself. Another beginner.

Nate watched with amusement from the veranda as Effie and Hardison finished loading up Bernadette, the hacker finally lifting an excited Buster and installing him on the back seat. Gertie was also waiting to go, laden with everything from fold-down beds to chairs, blankets, cushions, hammocks and other things needed to make a Billabong Barbecue Birthday Bash as comfortable and homely as possible.

Eliot appeared at his side, now wearing his stockman’s hat and a pair of boots on his bare feet.

“You up to this, Eliot? You’re still not fit –“ Nate eyed the hitter, taking in the weight loss and the pink, healing wounds on the man’s sturdy torso. He could just see the edge of the dressing on the wound under his arm. Jo insisted on keeping it covered for now so that it remained clean, although Eliot grumbled about it incessantly.

“Fit enough to go to a damn’ birthday party, Nate!” Eliot retorted dryly, and before Nate could answer the hitter made his way down the veranda steps, across the yard and into Bernadette’s front passenger seat.

Nate felt a touch on his arm and Jo was beside him, smiling tolerantly.

“Don’t worry, boy – he’ll be fine. Effie’ll keep him in line and he’ll rest when he’s told to, have no fear,” she murmured.

Nate patted Jo’s hand, but he couldn’t control the worry in his voice.

“He’s not healing as quickly as I’d hoped, Jo, and I don’t know why. Normally by now he’s beating the crap out of a punch bag and pushing himself to the limit, but now …”

“Well, he’s had a rough time of it, and that damned bleeder nearly killed him. And he’s still not settled in his head yet.” Jo sighed. “I’m hoping Lizzie can draw some of the pain out of him. She’s quite a girl,” she added warmly. “Eliot did the right thing leaving his portion of Wapanjara to her, Nate. Soapy and me … we couldn’t be happier about it.”

Mei suddenly scurried out of the house and down into the yard, shoving her new Akubra hat onto her head and now dressed in denim chinos and a t-shirt, her shiny riding boots as yet dust-free.

“C’mon, Mei!!” Charlie yelled, grinning. “Move your bum! We’re ready to go!”

“Coming, Cha-lee!” she yelled back and running over to Soapy she took the reins of the little sorrel. Charlie gave her a leg up, and the young mother sat astride the horse, beaming with delight. Charlie had decided Mei needed to learn to ride, and this was her first proper foray into the outback. She could hardly stop herself jiggling in the saddle with excitement.

Hardison made his way up the steps to the veranda and stood next to Jo and Nate.

“You ready to go, pretty lady? Just got to get the twins an’ we’re set,” he added, smiling.

Jo cupped Hardison’s cheek, and the hacker’s smile widened into something warm and heart-felt.

“Let’s go, then. We have a birthday to celebrate!” She turned to Nate. “Are you up for this?” she asked.

Nate winced and then sighed.
“I promised Sophie,” he said. “Hat,” he continued, patting his pockets as though one would materialize from nowhere. “I need a hat.”

“Take one of Soapy’s from the hallstand,” Jo said, amused. Nate was trying hard to put off the inevitable. “Don’t worry – you’ll be fine,” she added as Nate jammed an old stockman’s hat on his head and then made his way down to the yard as Hardison wandered out of the house with Rose in his arms.

“You’re kiddin’ me!” he said, eyes bright with merriment as Rose waved a little arm at him. “A horse? You’re gonna ride a horse??”

Nate nodded as he took the reins of the stocky grey mare from Soapy.

“Yep. It’s been a while, and I never went faster than a walk, but my daughter dared me,” he said, a little shamefaced. He struggled a little getting into the saddle, but he finally made it and Lizzie promptly touched Narra into a walk, Kevin and a rigid Parker following on behind. Parker was squeaking.

“Come on, Daddy!” Lizzie insisted, “we have to go! The day’s half over, Jacko says! Jacko says we have to get the barbecue set up and if we want to go swimming, Jacko says, we have to set up somewhere to change -” she continued, babbling excitedly.

Nate, nervous and a little tense as the mare followed on behind Narra, thought he would be having words with Jacko about his influence on his daughter.

“- and why do I have to keep wearing my helmet, Daddy??” Lizzie continued, twisting around in the saddle as Narra happily wandered towards the South paddock track. “Nobody else has to wear a helmet! You’re not wearing a helmet, and Mama’s just wearing a scarf!! Kip’s not even seven yet and he’s never worn a helmet!! Jacko says I can’t be a jillaroo if I have to wear a helmet! Why do I have to wear one?? It’s not fair! I’m seven you know!!”

Yes, Nate thought, Jacko was a dead man. And as the group of riders rode into the dappled shade of the track, the fluting of the magpies drifting through the balmy air as Gertie followed Charlie without any need for a lead-rope, Jo collected Jamie and followed Hardison down the steps and across the yard where Effie and Eliot awaited them in Bernadette. The twins were installed in their new baby seats and Jo managed to cram in beside them, Buster panting happily from the floor. Effie was almost unable to hide her excitement at the prospect of the day. She had spent a lot of time organising the Birthday Bash, and she had every intention of it being a huge success.

Hardison slid into the driver’s seat and turned the key in the ignition and Bernadette purred into life. He peered through the windscreen and saw the riders disappear into the trees. Just for a moment or two, Hardison pondered his life. As a kid on the streets before his Nana had taken him in, he had never imagined where his life would lead him, including driving a monster pick-up through the outback with people he had only known for a few weeks and who he now thought of as family. Yep. Life was weird.

Shifting into gear, he let out the clutch and Bernadette slowly followed Gertie along the track.

Today, Hardison decided, bunyips or not, was going to be a good day.

The billabong was the largest span of water on Wapanjara. The furthest side from the homestead was a wealth of reeds, home to brolgas and waterfowl, and the landscape was a smattering of stringybarks and witchetty-bush.
But once the reeds thinned out, the edge of the billabong became sandy, almost beach-like, with a shallow slope into the crystal-clear water, rippling above sand and fine, shimmering pebbles. There was a small jetty reaching out into the deeper water. It wasn’t much used these days other than for fishing, but it was a perfect launching pad into the depths for both children and adults.

It was here that the riders came upon the ute parked beside a dozen stockmen, all sitting on fallen tree-trunks set around a fire. The burning wood was located within a circle of stones, and the tree-trunks were well polished from generations of backsides. Beyond was a stand of coolibahs, and already there were hammocks suspended between their sturdy trunks. Horses stood in the shade, swishing their tails and dozing, hobbled and left to roam behind a temporary fence intended to keep them away from the fire and sleeping area. The three heelers were ranged around the men, hoping that a scrap or two of food would come their way.

The barbecues were already lit, the coals hot and glowing, with a tub of soaked shavings from an old, lightning-struck cherry tree sitting beside each one. Eliot knew the fragrant smoke would imbue a special taste to the grilled meat. All of the men were drinking a welcome mug of tea from their pannikins, waiting to help set up the rest of the equipment and get Oggie’s kitchen functioning so that Effie and Eliot could begin cooking.

It took an hour for Effie and Eliot to get everything set up to their satisfaction. Meat was marinaded and beer and soda was put in one of Oggie’s roomy refrigerators. Salads and side dishes began to appear on a trestle table, and Gertie sat happily beside Bernadette as she was slowly unloaded by Chalky and Nate.

Charlie had wisely decided to take the children out of the equation for an hour or so, and he led them on a leisurely ride around the billabong, hoping that they would be a little tired out by the time they returned to the camp for lunch.

Effie shaded her eyes as she watched Mei follow Charlie and the children, and then Sophie touched her horse into a trot and caught up with them, Kevin and a furious Parker following doggedly behind. A small flock of galahs rose in a drift of rose-grey wings from their drinking spot in the reeds, and Effie heard Lizzie’s delighted laugh. The joy in the little girl’s voice warmed the old cook’s heart.

She turned to look at Eliot. He had toed his boots off and he paddled silently on bare feet around the sandy area, whisking a salad dressing and muttering to himself. He had removed his shirt to allow the sun to warm his scarred torso, and Effie frowned at the partially-healed wounds on his ribs and shoulder. The white dressing over the slow-healing bullet hole under his arm was stark in the sunlight. He was gaunt and he looked tired.

“When you’ve done the salad dressing, you sit down and take five minutes, y’hear me?” she rasped, indicating a fold-down bed beside the portable crib Hardison had set up for the twins, both of them now sound asleep under their huge sun-brolly, shaded and cool.

“M’fine, Eff,” Eliot murmured, but even as he said it he knew she was right. He was exhausted, even though he hadn’t done much other than prepare food. He finished the dressing and placed it in the refrigerator, then shoved the whisk into Hardison’s hand as the hacker straightened from placing a chair beside Effie. “This needs washin’,” he grunted, and then carefully lowered his damaged body onto the bed. He groaned with pleasure as his muscles relaxed in the warmth of this sunny day, and he placed his hat over his eyes and then rested his hand on the medicine pouch over his heart.

Hardison stared at the whisk and then at Eliot.

Effie tsk’d and grappled the whisk out of Hardison’s hand, and then gently clipped him across the...
back of the head.

“I’ll deal with that, you daft bugger! Now go on – the nippers’ll be back soon and’ll be wanting to go swimming. Got yer cozzie with you?”

Hardison frowned.

“What? No!” he declared, and rubbed the place where Effie had smacked him. “Not goin’ swimming, Effie! No way, no-how!! There’s bunyips out there, and I ain’t gonna get bit by a bunyip, Effie!!” He crossed his arms defiantly. “Big sonsabitches!”

Effie stared at him for a few seconds, her muddy eyes round with disbelief.

“Don’t be so bloody silly!” she snapped, and then whacked Hardison on the shoulder with the whisk, leaving an oily stain on the material of his teeshirt. “Are you soft in the noggin, boy?? Who the hell told you about bunyips??”

Hardison yelped and rubbed the whisk-poked area.

“Ow!! Dammit, Effie –”

“There’s no such ruddy thing, you berk!” Effie hissed, and whacked Hardison again with the whisk.

Hardison’s eyebrows became perfect arches of disbelief.

“But – Soapy an’ Eliot said –“

“They’re pulling your chain, you silly sod! Bunyips’re an old Aboriginal legend!! Bloody hell, son! Are you that bleedin’ gullible??”

Hardison’s lip curled and his eyes narrowed, and he glared at Eliot, now apparently sleeping soundly in the sun.

“I’m gonna kill him, Eff!” he hissed quietly. “I swear to God, I’m gonna make him pay. Mister ‘I’m so friggin’ smart, I’m gonna make Alec Hardison piss his proverbial pants!’ I’m gonna make him pay, Effie! Big time!”

“Well, do it when he’s not so bloody crook, hey? If he starts bleeding again all over the damn’ place, the Missus’ll have your guts for garters.” Effie smiled at the tall young man, and her eyes glittered with malice. “But remember … revenge is a dish best served cold.”

Hardison opened his mouth to reply, but then shut it again. Effie was right.

He cocked an eyebrow at the little cook.

“I am gonna go set up the tent for the kids to get changed in. That’s what I’m gonna do. I need to give me some thinkin’ time.”

Effie’s smile widened into a grin.

“You do that, sunbeam. You just bleedin’ well do that,” she said, and watched as Hardison stalked off with as much dignity as he could muster towards the edge of the billabong where the little pup-tent lay in its bag. The children would have somewhere to dry off after swimming and then change into their shorts and teeshirts.

Effie dumped the whisk into a bowl of warm, soapy water and dried her hands.
“Watch your back, Yank,” she said softly, laughter in her voice. “Sunbeam’s on a mission.”

“Yeah, well,” Eliot’s tired voice crept out from beneath his hat. “He can try.”

But even as he spoke he remembered Hardison making him walk all over a damn’ field in the middle of nowhere, back and forth, carrying some piece of really heavy geeky equipment to bounce a message off the moon, for God’s sake. Right, right ... two steps forward, Hardison had instructed through the earbud ... right ... right ... two steps back ... now, hop! ... it was then Eliot had realised Hardison was screwing with him. The dent he had put in Lucille’s side had been most satisfying.

Effie began splitting rolls for her homemade burgers which Eliot would begin to cook in an hour or so. But even as she worked, she hesitated.

“The nipper ... you’ll keep her safe, won’t you,” she said softly. “That bastard ... that Confessor bloke ... he won’t get near her, will he?”

Eliot’s reply was quiet, but deadly.

“He won’t touch her, Eff. That I promise. Because he’ll have to go through me, an' I’ll kill him if he tries.”

Effie nodded to herself and returned to her rolls.

“You do that, laddie. You kill the doggy shite.”

And as Eliot drifted back into sleep, Effie worked and worried and knew Eliot meant every word he said.

To be continued ...
Eliot awoke to the gentle prod of a strong finger on his arm and the sounds of shrieking, happy children. He blinked into consciousness, and realised his shirt had been draped over his bare torso to protect him from the sun, and Jo’s soft voice grounded him as he flailed a little.

“Easy, boy … take your time. You were really out of it there!”

“M’awake …” he muttered, and lifted his hat from over his face. “Time is it?”

“Midday,” Jo said as she crouched beside him. “You should eat something,” she added, and Eliot heard the snuffle of one of the babies in the crib beside him. Little Jamie had an excellent internal body-clock, and both he and his sister were waking up feeling very hungry.

Eliot stretched as much as his wounded shoulder would allow, and yawned. Normally he was awake and alert in less than a second, but right now he was allowing his damaged body to take its time and wake up at a more normal rate. He sat up and Jo had to stand and take a step back to let Eliot get to his feet on his own. It was a struggle, but he managed it, and he was about to ease into his shirt when Jo stopped him with a touch.

“I’ll change that dressing first, boy. C’mon now … sit down and it’ll be done in a jiffy. Then you can get to those burgers.”

Eliot growled to himself, but sat on a fold-down chair as Jo hauled out a small medipack and changed the dressing on his bullet wound. It was still healing and would take a while yet before the deep-rooted pain eased, and it had left a half-inch-wide scar leading from under his arm to just beside his shoulder blade.

“How’s the mobility?” she asked quietly, and Eliot winced as he flexed the muscles of his damaged shoulder.

“I’m workin’ on it,” he grumbled. “Parker’s got me doin’ some exercises that help.”

“Hmmm …” Jo pondered, and finished taping the dressing. “Still struggling to raise the arm, then?”


Eliot allowed himself a tight smile as he carefully wriggled into his shirt and then stood up and leaned over to kiss Jo on the top of her head.

“You worry too much,” he said.
Jo reached up and patted his cheek.

“That’s my job,” she replied with a wry grin. “It’s what I do,” she added, parroting Eliot’s favourite explanation as to why he was being anal about something to keep his team safe.

Eliot grinned.

“Wise-ass,” he quipped, and Jo chortled.

Eliot turned and settled his hat on his head as Jo tidied up the used dressing and dumped the remains of the small pack in a bag being used for rubbish. The yells of excitement swelled, and Eliot had to smile as he watched Lizzie and Kip running pell-mell along the jetty, flinging themselves off the end, limbs peddling wildly and sending up gouts of water as they hit the shimmering surface, screams of delight suddenly cut off until they appeared, spluttering and giggling happily.

Parker, in a plain black swimsuit, was obviously giving Charlie a piece of her mind about the horse-clown incident and poked him on his bare chest as they stood on the old wooden jetty, the station manager clad only in a faded pair of shorts. Eliot couldn’t make out what the little thief was saying, but he had often been on the business end of Parker’s pokery, and he cringed at every jab, as did Charlie. The young man flinched and complained and bore it, even as he was herded backwards towards the end of the little jetty. He suddenly jigged to one side, gave Parker the slip and dived seamlessly into the depths. Parker yelled something rude and executed a perfect double-somersault as she leaped from the jetty into the clear water.

Mei followed them in her new costume, and only hesitated for a second before pinching her nose between her fingers and jumping into the sun-warmed water. Hardison sat quietly on the edge of the jetty watching as some of the stockmen ran into the water, yelling like banshees, and Soapy, sitting on a folding chair in the shallows dabbling his feet in the water, beamed cheerfully at nobody in particular and drank tea out of a china cup and saucer.

The three heelers were having a wonderful time splashing about in the shallows trying to catch tiny fish that darted to and fro in the shade, and Gertie wandered up and down the bank honking dolefully as her family were all obviously in dire peril and she couldn’t decide which one to save first.

Eliot shook his head, amused, happy to see his family whole and well, and for now he could shut Ponomarenko away in a quiet, contemplative part of his brain to be addressed later. He knew the man was half a world away dealing with Benjamin Kremic, and Eliot felt as though he could relax a little. He would never be free of the worry, but right now, at this precious moment in time, life could be celebrated.

So, he cooked. Throwing a tea-towel over his shoulder and armed with a spatula and a battery of other utensils, Eliot Spencer allowed himself to submerge into the joy of cooking. He whisked and marinated and tasted, he growled with satisfaction when the flavours popped and textures sang, and he muttered when something needed more pepper or the balance of the dips wasn’t quite right.

Effie worked beside him, and between them they became a well-oiled machine, and not once did they speak to one another. The two trestle tables heaved with food and the barbecues were sizzling with the juices of steak and chicken, and the aroma of beautifully-cooked food drifted across the billabong.

Effie was on the point of bashing the bottom of an old skillet and yelling that the food was ready when the distant rumble of vehicle engines sounded from the track. And as the water gleamed in the sun and the reeds whispered in the balmy breeze, Tom Reid’s ancient ute drove slowly into view.
followed by Billy Jakkamarra’s equally ancient long-wheel-base landrover. Before the vehicles had even pulled to a complete halt children tumbled from the ute’s flat-bed followed by Charlie’s big, noisy family, all laughing and talking, hauling out blankets and their swag. Women called out and men joked, but the children ignored everybody and raced as a pack towards the jetty where Kip yelled with delight at the arrival of his cousins. Lizzie, a little nonplussed at the swarm of children, was suddenly surrounded, and she was then the subject of hugs and greetings, which made her laugh. Then, as one, the children shrieked, ran along the jetty and flung themselves into the shimmering billabong, sending up a gushing gout of cold water.

Hardison only got out of the way just in time but it didn’t stop him being spattered, which made him yell.

Eliot grinned and wiped perspiration from his forehead as Billy Jakkamarra ambled over carrying two big, lengthy parcels wrapped in stringybark leaves and tied with grass string.

“G’day, Eliot!” Billy called, and held up the parcels, “we brought tucker!!”

“’Day, Billy!” Eliot waved at the glowing coals of the fire surrounded by the well-worn tree trunks. “Barramundi, right? Feel free to stick ‘em on the coals in a bit.”

Billy grinned with pleasure as Charlie’s sisters and sisters-in-law wandered past carrying baskets full of fruit and damper, and Auntie stumped along behind them carrying a lidded bucket, the contents sloshing about as she walked.

“Hey, Auntie! Gimmee!” A young man trotted up to Auntie and wrestled the bucket out of the old woman’s grip. Charlie’s older brother Lanie grinned at the elderly woman and Auntie smacked Lanie hard on the chest just for being cheeky. “Hey, Eliot!” Lanie yelled. “You look like shite!”

Eliot smirked, ignoring the unrepentant grin on Lanie’s face, and waggled his spatula at the bucket.

“You brought yabbies, huh?”

Lanie nodded.

“I heard you yanks like ‘em, so … we brought a few.” He studied Eliot for a moment or two. “You okay, mate?” he asked, his voice softening with concern.

Eliot nodded.

“Gettin’ there. It feels good to be doin’ something. Cooking … it helps.”

Lanie nodded, his mobile features suddenly serious.

“Just don’t go bloody bonkers, hey? Take your time. Charlie said you nearly kicked the bucket, brother.”

Eliot shook his head ruefully even as he flipped a couple of fat, juicy steaks.

“Nah.Didn’t even come close,” he quipped, although Lanie knew he was lying.

“Well, it’s just a good job Jo knows how to plug up bullet holes, hey.” Lanie hitched an expressive eyebrow and saw the leanness in Eliot’s battered frame and the way the man held himself … with care and caution. He was obviously still hurting. Lanie dropped a hand on Eliot’s good shoulder and sighed. “Just don’t be so bloody stubborn, you blodgie! You’re still clapped out, so take it easy, mate. Y’hear?”
Eliot, amused, nodded and pointed at the fire.

“I hear you. Wanna put those yabbies on the fire to boil?”

“Yabbies!” Tom Reid said with relish as he wandered past with a case of light beer. There wasn’t enough room in Oggie’s refrigerator so he was off to dump the case in the shallows next to Soapy. The water would keep the bottles cool. “Love yabbies! How’s the birthday girl?” he asked, grinning. Eliot thought Tom’s Hawaiian shirt was the worst one yet.

“See for yourself,” Eliot retorted, and gestured with his chin at the swarm of children, Lizzie included, screaming and splashing in the shallows with Charlie and Parker right there with them. It was good, Eliot thought, to see Charlie relaxing.

“There’s nothing quite like a barbecue!” Tom continued, and headed off to see Soapy, Lanie following so that Tom could help him put the yabbies on to boil.

Grinning happily, Eliot studied his team. Nate and Sophie appeared, Sophie in an elegant bikini and Nate in a pair of swimming trunks, and to the hitter’s amusement they waded carefully into the shallow water. But Nate suddenly picked up speed and dived into the water, heading out into the depths. He surfaced, grinning and treading water, and Sophie took the hint. Letting out a yell of pleasure she joined him, swimming out to her husband with barely a ripple.

Eliot’s gaze suddenly settled on Hardison, and his face became thoughtful. The young hacker was still not joining in, and the tall young man walked aimlessly back along the jetty, looking oddly lost. Eliot watched as Hardison wandered from the jetty to lift a folding chair from the pile, and then he made his way over to Soapy, setting up the chair and lowering his long body into it. Soapy spoke to Hardison, saying something quiet and gentle, and he handed a chilled bottle of beer to his companion. Hardison gave the pastoralist a hesitant smile and took a swig of the beer.

Eliot knew then that Hardison had something bugging him, and it wasn’t the bunyip nonsense. But he saw that Hardison was speaking to Soapy and the old sniper listened carefully, so Eliot relaxed a little. If anyone could sort out whatever was going on in Hardison’s head, it was Soapy Munro.

But his reverie was interrupted by Effie lifting a heavy skillet and bashing it as hard as she could with her old metal ladle.

“COME’N GET IT, YOU BASTARDS!!” she bawled, “BEFORE IT GOES IN THE DOG!!”

Finally, Eliot thought. It’s time to eat.

The afternoon was a joy. Buster had a blast, wandering from person to person, begging in his own peculiar way … sitting poised on his haunches and waving his two front paws together, looking for all the world as though he was praying. His faith in his people was absolute – they gave him so many tidbits he had to sleep it off under a coolibah, twitching and dreaming in the cool shade.

When people weren’t splashing about in the water they were eating steak and marinated lamb fillet and countless side dishes, washed down with soda or beer or, in Effie’s case, endless cups of tea. The yabbies were cooked and cooling, ready for the evening meal alongside Billy’s two big barramundi.

Eliot cooked and rested and then cooked some more, Effie making sure he didn’t overdo it, and he helped Mei feed the twins. Holding little Jamie in his arms did a lot to heal the raw places in his soul.

He realised that he had needed this day just as much as Lizzie. Cooking for people he loved had
always been a way of showing how much he cared, uncomfortable as he was with verbalising any kind of affection. But as the afternoon wore on he began to tire, and it wasn’t long until Effie noticed the lines of weariness in his face.

“Go take a walk, boy. Clear your head. We can all manage without you for a bit, so bugger off and take a break, hey?”

Eliot gazed at the people around him, chatting, eating and laughing, and children ran about in the heat, giggling and munching on burgers. The warmth of belonging made his heart ache, but this time it was in a good way.

“Yeah, Eff. You’re right. I need a break.”

Effie’s muddy eyes softened with compassion, but she didn’t say anything. She just touched his elbow, telling him it was alright to take some time to himself.

So he quietly drifted away from the people he loved and headed towards an ancient rock that sat over the edge of the billabong amid the reeds. It was a little secluded without being too far away from the barbecue, and he settled down to sit with his bare feet overhanging the water.

It was late afternoon, and the sun was low in the sky. Closing his eyes against the golden light, his good hand drifted to the medicine pouch lying over his heart.

“I wish you were here, Grandfather,” he whispered. “To meet ‘em. You’d like ‘em, even though they can be frikkin’ idiots.”

And as if in answer, a flock of galahs drifted in to take their fill of the crystal clear water, their wittering cries calling to him, settling his soul and calming the worry that lay beneath his skin.

_He’s here, you nerk!_ Alice said from his heart, and Eliot smiled at the humour in her voice.

“I know, darlin’. I wish … I wish you were here too.”

_Always, Eliot_, she answered, the ethereal whisper of her voice making his eyes glisten, _always_. _Now_, she said, _look to your girl._

As Alice’s voice was lost in the warm air, Eliot opened his eyes and looked back towards the barbecue and the sound of laughter and fun. There Lizzie stood, apart from the people around her, gazing at Eliot. He could see the concern on her face, and he grinned, gesturing to her to come closer.

Lizzie’s face broke into relieved smiles, and she trotted over to Eliot to fling herself down behind him and give him a hug.

“Are you okay?” she asked, burying her face in the hollow of his shoulder as her arms wrapped around him.

Eliot leaned back a little into her arms, relishing the love his best girl had for her errant guardian.

“Yeah … just tired is all. Are you enjoying your birthday?” he asked. He felt Lizzie nod vigorously against his neck.

“It’s _bonzer_!” she breathed happily, and she knew her day wasn’t over yet. There were presents and stories and songs and yabbies and _cake_ to come.
She gently eased away from Eliot and settled down beside him. She had dried off and changed into her shorts and teeshirt, an old straw hat on her head that was three sizes too big for her. Eliot thought she was a perfect child of Wapanjara, looking as though she had been born to live in this uncompromising land.

But suddenly a thought came to him unbidden. *Maybe … maybe it was time.*

“‘Lizbeth Grace … did you bring your medicine pouch like I asked?” he said.

Lizzie nodded eagerly and then dug about in the pocket of her shorts, bringing out her finished medicine pouch. She showed it to Eliot, the polished red-brown of the Ininti seed beads winking in the sunlight. The star emblem was beautiful in its simplicity.

Eliot gazed at it but didn’t reach out to take it. It was Lizzie’s, and it would be rude to touch such a precious, private object.

“I, uh …” he hesitated for a moment and then gathered his wits about him and continued. “I have somethin’ for you. For your pouch,” he elaborated, and reaching into the deep pocket of his old cut-offs he pulled out two small objects. Lizzie’s eyes widened, intrigued.

“What are they?” she asked.

Eliot placed one of the objects in his left hand, and then held up the other between the thumb and forefinger of his right. Lizzie could see it was a small sliver of some sort of shiny stone. Eliot saw the puzzlement on his god-daughter’s face.

“Remember when you an’ Kip rescued me down by the South paddock gate? After I came back from walkabout?”

Lizzie nodded eagerly.

“You were sick ‘cause you took your bandages off and your bullet hole got all dirty and –“ she began, but Eliot stopped her by raising a finger.

“Yeah, well … this is what caused it. See?” Eliot handed the tiny sliver of glimmering quartz to Lizzie, who turned it over and over in her fingers. She studied it carefully, and looked at Eliot.

“This is what made you poorly? Gave you the ‘fection?” she asked.

“Yep,” Eliot replied, and studied his young charge. She was obviously puzzled, not too sure why Eliot had given her the stone. “It’s quartz. From *Karnanganja-Jiri*. A very special place for the *Warumungu*. It’s where the Ancestors live. One day, when you’re older and if the Elders let me, I’ll take you there. But that’s not the reason I’m givin’ this to you.”

Lizzie held the stone up to the light and watched as a faint blue flaw in the stone writhed deep, deep within, twisting and very beautiful. Her breath hitched with surprise.

“Yeah, darlin’. You’ve found the heart of the stone. And I’m givin’ it to you as a reminder.”

Lizzie blinked, still entranced by the piece of quartz from the special place which meant so much to the *Warumungu* people and to Eliot.

“I … I don’t understand …” she said, and her brows drew down with curiosity.

“‘Lizbeth Grace … sweetheart … when you were born, I vowed that nothin’ would ever harm you.
That I would put myself between you an’ anyone who would hurt you. But you have to understand that I ain’t invincible.” Eliot shrugged a little. “Well … I’m mostly invincible, but still … that stone is to remind you that you have to think before you run into danger, because I’m not Superman. Part of me bein’ able to protect you is you understandin’ that you do not put yourself in harm’s way. Do you know what I’m sayin’? That little stone could’ve killed me if Jo hadn’t dug it out. Somethin’ so small could have ended me. So remember … you think before you act, because I’m not bulletproof. I can’t protect you if I got holes in me.”

Lizzie blushed, embarrassed a little, although she knew Eliot was trying to be gentle with her. She was seven now, and she knew she had learned this lesson the hard way. Eliot had nearly died, and she understood that although her action in running to Eliot while he was fighting for his life hadn’t done any harm in the long run, she now understood that the outcome could have been very different.

The little stone winked in the sunlight as it lay in her palm. Her Eliot was the toughest person she knew, and was a fearsome defender, but he could be hurt, and she could have endangered her guardian. So now she had to recognise that she had to be responsible and grown-up and think of consequences.

“I understand,” she whispered finally. “I’m sorry.”

Eliot smiled then and held out his arms, and Lizzie snuggled into his chest, hearing the steady thump-thump of his heart.

“Don’t worry, ‘Lizbeth Grace. You an’ me – we’re partners. We watch each other’s back, an’ all I ask is that you be careful. You understand?” Eliot felt Lizzie nod her head and her arms tightened around him, even as she was careful of his injuries.

Eliot unwrapped her from his arms and sat her upright, and Lizzie reverently placed the beautiful but lethal piece of quartz in her pouch, and knew that if she ever felt as though she was going to do something dumb, the feel of the stone in her pouch would make her think first.

“So …” Eliot continued, “I have somethin’ else for you.” He held out his hand and dropped something in Lizzie’s palm. She studied it carefully. It was a small piece of flat metal, rectangular in shape but with rounded corners, and it had letters and numbers stamped into it. She studied the words.

“Spencer … Eliot C. …” she muttered, and then she looked at Eliot.

“That’s one of my dog tags,” he answered before she could even ask what the thing was. “From when I was a soldier,” he added. “Long before you were born.”

Lizzie returned to her study of the tag, and she saw how battered and scuffed it was. She ran her thumb over Eliot’s name, and knew instantly that it had not been easy for him to give her this part of his past.

“When I was a soldier,” he continued hesitantly, “my job was to protect those who couldn’t protect themselves. That was why I became a soldier. To serve my country and to help people who needed it.” He took a deep breath before speaking again. “When I left … when Moreau happened … I was lost. I became someone I never thought I could ever be.”

“When you fed your bad wolves!” Lizzie gasped, and she could see the tremor begin in Eliot’s stocky frame.

“Yeah,” he said, and his voice was gruff with emotion. “And I’ll never … never … be able to clear
myself of what I did. But now … now I’ve got the team, an’ your Momma and Daddy asked me to
protect you, and … and … it feels right. It’s like I can breathe again … so, I’m givin’ you this to let
you know that I will watch out for you … protect you with everything I am. Until my dyin’ day.
You understand? Until my dyin’ day.”

Lizzie clutched the dog tag to her chest and saw the pain in Eliot’s face and did the only thing she
could think of that would help. She shuffled around Eliot and flung herself at his back and held him
so tight he wondered if she would ever let him go, and he rested his head on hers and felt the sob
catch in his chest.

“My Eliot,” she murmured, and hugged him even tighter. “My Eliot … my good wolf …”

And the love in her voice helped thaw the frozen part of his soul that had been owned by Damien
Moreau all those years ago.

They sat like that for a while in the bronze-gold of the late sun as it fell towards the horizon, and
when Lizzie finally let go she snuggled next to Eliot, wrapped his arm in his and rested her head on
his shoulder.

Eliot ruffled her hair and sighed. Yeah. Maybe now was the time.

“’Lizbeth Grace?”

Lizzie petted Eliot’s arm.

“Yah-huh?” she said, content for now just to sit next to her guardian and protector.

Eliot took a deep, shaky breath.

“How would you like me to tell you all about Mooch?” he said.

And as Lizzie sat quietly and the lorikeets flocked in to drink their fill as the sun dipped towards the
horizon, Eliot began to talk.

Hardison sipped on his beer until a plateful of food arrived, delivered by one of Kip’s numerous
cousins. The child, whose name was Celie, gazed at him solemnly with huge, fathomless eyes, and
Hardison, charmed by her good manners, grinned and proffered his thanks to the eight-year-old.

Cielie studied Hardison for a moment or two, and then the girl glanced at Soapy and gestured at the
hacker, her eyes widening even further.

“Karti ama nyinta jampukurla!” she declared decisively.

Soapy nodded, agreeing.

“He is that, little one,” he said, his voice soft with understanding.

“What?” Hardison asked, eyebrows hitching. “What did she say?”

But Celie was the one who answered, patting Hardison’s knee sympathetically.

“Marnmarr,” she murmured, “marnmarr …”

Then she was gone, back to the barbecue and her cousins, and she was welcomed with laughter and
warmth, her face lighting up in the golden light of a growing sunset.
Hardison watched her go, puzzled and a little unnerved.

“What was all that about?” he asked, mystified.

“Celie said you were very quiet,” Soapy said, fixing Hardison with his dark gaze. “She says you’re a ‘poor thing’.” The old pastoralist took a bite of one of Eliot’s delicious melt-in-the-mouth marinated steaks, and swallowed. He sipped on a beer, and cocked an eyebrow at the young man sitting beside him. “Want to tell me why?”

Hardison stared at the thick, juicy fillet of lamb on his plate and was suddenly very still.

“Um …” he said.

“Talk, boy,” Soapy said, and the warm understanding in his voice helped the fear in Hardison’s chest ease a little. “You should know by now it helps.”

Hardison lifted his fork, ate a mouthful of the tender, juicy meat so he could bolster his courage, and sighed.

“I, ah … I have a bit of a problem with deep water,” he admitted. There. He’d said it.

Soapy nodded and munched a little salsa.

“How long is ‘quite a while’?” Soapy said gently.

Hardison felt the tightness in his chest ease, and he nodded, feeling a little calmer even as the terror in his heart tried to overwhelm him. But then the thought of talking about it made the fear fade a little.

“Damn, Soapy … since before Lizzie was born. It, ah … it was when we took down Moreau. Well, just before. It was when Eliot an’ me … we were supposed to find a way into his base … y’know, scope it out an’ find out what he was doin.’” Hardison smiled wryly. “What we … the rest of us … didn’t know then was that Eliot had history with Moreau. He just walked in there, told Moreau’s goons his real name an’ there we were. Eye to eye with the bastard, an’ him talkin’ to Eliot as though El had never left.”

Soapy’s eyes grew flinty. He had met Moreau only once and that was nothing but a fleeting encounter in an eatery in Tennant Creek, many years ago.

But Hardison wasn’t finished.

“I ended up handcuffed to a chair. El was standin’ there, staring at Moreau an’ it was as though he could take Moreau apart just by eyeballin’ him. But then … but then … the bastard sonofabitch … he … Moreau, he … shoved me into a swimmin’ pool. I … didn’t even have time to take a decent breath.”

Hardison realised he was shaking, and he felt Soapy’s hand on his shoulder and he was so grateful for it that he almost wept.

“I … I don’t know how long it was … I guess it was less’n a minute, but I was drowning, but I
managed to suck the air outta one of the chair tires an’ then … an’ then I saw the keys to the handcuffs drift past me an’ I got free, but …” Hardison stuttered into silence, eyes blinking fiercely.

“But what?” Soapy whispered.

Hardison knew he had to continue, but it hurt inside.

“But … but Eliot, he … he didn’t move. He didn’t come after me. He just stood there, I think, starin’ at Moreau. But he did a deal an’ Moreau threw me the keys. Eliot says he wouldn’t’ve let me drown, an’ I know he’s tellin’ me the truth, and I managed to hold it together until we got outta there, but … but it was close.” He took a deep, deep breath, feeling the air fill his lungs, reassuring himself that he was still able to breathe and live and look forward to the rest of his life.

“A deal? Eliot made a deal?”

Hardison nodded.

“Yeah. Yeah, he made a deal to prove to Moreau that he … we … weren’t talkin’ bullshit.” Hardison gazed stonily at Soapy. “Eliot killed a man. Or, at least we made Moreau think he did. But I think Eliot would’ve done it for real if he had to. Just to get Moreau. An’ while he held it together an’ promised to kill this man, I was drowning.” He licked his lips. “It scared the unholy crap out of me, an’ since then –”

“… you don’t like deep water. Or at least being out of your depth,” Soapy surmised.

Hardison nodded, and he wiped a big hand over his face.

“An’ when we fell in the billabong … I saw Eliot dying, Soapy. He was just sinking, slowly an’ so easy, an’ he was bleeding, an’ … an’ when I managed to get hold of him I thought he was dead. He felt dead. But Eliot … he ain’t easy to kill. Thank God.”

Hardison huffed to himself and managed another mouthful of lamb.

“You survived, Alec” Soapy said. “You’re still here and you’re breathing and you are one of the finest young men I’ve ever met. And it’s okay to be scared, mate. Deep water, whether you’ve had a bad experience or not, can easily scare people, so don’t feel guilty about it. Alright?” Soapy squeezed Hardison’s shoulder one last time and then reached down, lifted a beer out of the case beside him and passed it to Hardison, who took it gratefully and twisted off the top.

Soapy lifted his own beer and waved it at Hardison, who clinked his bottle on Soapy’s in an impromptu toast.

“To surviving,” Soapy said.

Hardison, still shaky but feeling more settled than he had in a long time, grinned.

“To surviving,” he repeated, and took a swig.

“No worries, son. Now then – get your laughing gear around that grub before Effie smacks you on the noggin with a ladle!” Soapy grinned back, and as the sun set in a blaze of glory, the two men settled down with good food and cold beers, and were at peace.

“Mooch … he was my best friend,” Eliot said, more to himself than to Lizzie, although the little girl sat still and content beside him, listening carefully.
“When you were a soldier?” she asked. “Before I was born?”

Eliot had to grin at how Lizzie gauged time. _Everything_ was either before or after she was born.

“Long, _long_ before you were born, ‘Lizbeth Grace,” he said, and Lizzie patted his arm, waiting for him to continue. “We met when I was seconded to Delta Force – a … a special group which went after bad guys and rescued people,” he explained simply - Lizzie didn’t need to know the details – “and he was part of my team. _Man_, but he was a pain in the butt!”

Lizzie giggled at the fond exasperation in Eliot’s voice.

“What did he do?” she asked, eager to hear more, and Eliot suddenly realised it was easier now to talk of his long-dead friend.

“He didn’t like takin’ orders from a man younger than him – he was nearly two years older than me – and he made my life hell for a while. But … we worked it out.” Eliot didn’t mention the knock-down fight in an alleyway behind a bar with Mooch finally going down and staying down, and Eliot standing over him swaying and only partly conscious, daring Mooch to get up and take another swing.

“We were in deep shi – _trouble_ over that, an’ my CO wanted to throw the book at Mooch ‘cause he was a troublemaker, but I wanted him in my team … Mooch became my second-in-command, my back-up and my best friend. And he just _loved_ blowin’ things up.”

Eliot was warming to his subject now, and the words, once hesitant, began to come more freely, and he glanced at Lizzie, who was listening intently, her mouth open and eyes wide.

“Wanna know about the others?” he asked, not sure if he could do this but for the first time since their deaths he was willing to give it a try.

Lizzie nodded so hard Eliot was sure that her brain rattled in her head.

“Oh yes!!” she said eagerly. This was an Eliot she had never known, and she dearly wanted to know about the people who were his _first_ team, before he became a part of her family’s life.

So, he told her. He told her about tall, lean Dan Pulaski, from New York’s lower east side, laconic, bad-tempered and mush when it came to animals … Joe Valdez, jazz lover, complainer, and the best communications expert Eliot had ever seen … Harold James III, an erudite African-American from Alabama with a talent for linguistics … and the oddball of his team, Janice Black, army brat and weapons expert who could out-cuss Effie and had a penchant for cryptic crosswords.

And as he spoke and his voice rasped with emotion, Lizzie listened and marvelled at these people for whom Eliot would have given his life. He told her about when Mooch had found out his wife was expecting their first child, and how the team had celebrated by going on a bender in the bars of Charleston and picking a fight with a street gang. The bruises and cuts had been worth it, but Mooch’s wife Sally had torn a strip off her shame-faced husband and then laid into Eliot for allowing her man to get into such a state. The rest of the team had stood by and sniggered until Sally, all five feet and one hundred pounds of her, had turned at the lot of them. She made them decorate the nursery as punishment.

That made Lizzie laugh. Eliot chuckled at the memory, and thought it had been one of the best days of his life up to that point, remembering Sally making them all a sumptuous dinner where they drank soda and congratulated a blushing Mooch and a delighted Sally Fortescue.

But the smile faded as quickly as it had arrived, and Eliot flinched at the memory of blown-apart
bodies and the blood and the *loss* and –

“It’s alright, Eliot,” Lizzie whispered, and she gently rubbed his arm. “You don’t have to tell me any more.”

Eliot suddenly realised his cheeks were wet with tears. He wiped them away hastily, but he knew Lizzie had seen them, and he turned away, ashamed.

“I … they …” he tried to get the words out. The words he had never spoken to anyone, the words that described the truth of it. “Lizbeth Grace … they died. They *all died* because a kid picked up a grenade launcher an’ blew ‘em to pieces. A *kid*. A boy just a few years older’n you. I only survived because I got held up by an insurgent who nailed me down for a minute or two.” He felt the tremors run through him, and the tears came more freely now. “They never had a chance, an’ … an’ they left me alone, an’ I had to leave ‘em behind because I was under orders to get out of there and I couldn’t take ‘em with me.”

“Mama said that was when you got that piece of metal in your back. The one you had taken out when I was a baby,” Lizzie said, and she let go of Eliot’s arm and sat up on her knees to look him straight in the eye, even though he ducked his head away from her.

Eliot nodded.

“Yeah. That’s right. I got caught by the edge of the blast. I was bleedin’ all over the damn’ place, and when I …” he took a deep breath and continued, “… when I got out of the compound I … I fell, an’ there were maggots everywhere an’ - *anyway* … I made it to the rendezvous point an’ the chopper picked me up. I don’t remember much of what happened next until a few days later when I came ‘round from the Doc takin’ most of the grenade fragments out of my back.”

The child and her guardian sat quietly for a few minutes, bathed in the warmth of the dipping sun, and Eliot wiped his face clear of tears. He glanced at Lizzie.

“M’sorry, darlin’. It’s your birthday. I shouldn’t –“

“You miss them, huh,” Lizzie said.

Eliot gave a half-hitch of his bad shoulder and winced.

“Yeah. Yeah, I miss them. *Every damn day*. And every damn day I feel bad because it should have been me too. They left me behind, ‘Lizbeth Grace. I *lived*. An’ I feel bad because I should’ve been with ‘em.”

“Oh no, Eliot!” Lizzie suddenly exclaimed, and cupped Eliot’s face in her hands, a thumb wiping away an errant tear. “Then you’d be *dead* and you wouldn’t be with *us* and … and … it would be *awful* and we wouldn’t have you to take care of us and … and …” she ran out of words then, unable to even grasp the enormity of not having Eliot in their lives. So she kissed him on the end of his nose instead.

Eliot’s lips twitched into a tiny smile. Trust his ‘Lizbeth Grace to ground him like nobody else.

“I’m hungry,” Lizzie said.

Eliot thought about it.

“Yeah … me too,” he answered. “C’mon, sweetheart. Let’s go eat.”
Lizzie kissed him on the end of his nose once again.

“Are you feeling better?” she asked tentatively.

Eliot thought about this as well, and nodded.

“Easier. Less … wibbly.”

That made Lizzie giggle, and she gently tugged at Eliot’s fingers. Getting carefully to his feet, Eliot rubbed Lizzie’s knuckles with his thumb, and he saw her other hand stray to the little pouch now resting over her heart. Lizzie gazed back at him, and her eyes were full of the starlight she loved.

“Thank you for my things,” she whispered. “Y’know … for my pouch.”

“You’re welcome, ‘Lizbeth Grace. And thanks for listening.”

See? Dumbass! Mooch said from Eliot’s heart, and the hitter smiled, knowing the rest of his team were safe and sound and he could think of them with less pain.

And as the light softened and became gilded glimmers on the water and the blue sky began to twinkle, the hitter and the little girl he guarded with his life walked together back to their family.

To be continued …
The fire crackled and the flames lit the camp as the sky deepened to velvet night. The moonless vista was full of the drift of countless stars, and Orion’s Belt hung overhead, winking endlessly as it had for billions of years and would ever do so over this enchanted land.

Laughter filled the air, and faces shone in the light of the fire and the lamps Parker and Mei had hung about the camp and from the coolibahs, the shadows they cast ever-moving in the still of the evening.

The food was superb. Charlie’s sisters chased the menfolk away from the two big barramundi cooking on the coals, and the children sat on the ground and ate the succulent meat from wide pieces of paperbark, accompanied by mounds of richly flavoured couscous and rice as well as endless salads and side dishes.

Lizzie had never done anything as daring as sitting cross-legged on the ground and sharing her food with her new friends, Kip’s cousins having adopted her as just another member of their mob. She giggled and joked and spoke with her mouth full, and she ate off their paperbark plates just as they politely helped themselves to her food.

Whenever her ‘plate’ approached being empty, someone placed more food on it. She ate delicately flavoured slivers of lamb fillet, and yabbies oozing with garlic butter … small new potatoes fragrant with spices and thick, succulent barbecued steak, redolent of Eliot’s Oklahoma upbringing. She even ate broccoli and potato in one of Effie’s wonderful north Indian dishes, rich with cumin and turmeric and made with love.

What made her even happier was seeing Eliot, sitting in a well-cushioned fold-down chair, eat whatever was given to him. He had wanted to help serve out the food, but Effie had poked him very gently with a spatula, told him to ‘park yer arse before you fall down, you daft mongrel!’ and pushed him in the general direction of the fire.

And so he sat there, drinking a cold beer and working his way through a plateful of food, and it was obvious to Lizzie that he was overwhelmed with the pleasure of being with his family and friends. His eyes were clearer and they shone with contentment. She touched the pouch around her neck, lying over her heart underneath her teeshirt, and felt the warmth of the love her guardian had for her. Speaking about his old team had obviously helped.

Eliot’s eyes caught hers, and she grinned.
Are you okay? She mouthed silently, and Eliot grinned back, nodded and winked. Lizzie hugged herself with glee and laughed with sheer joy.

And so everyone ate until they were at bursting point, rested and then ate some more, Buster wheedling for scraps and Gertie *kooshed* down beside Eliot who fed her tidbits of fruit and salad which she delicately ate with great decorum.

It was Jacko who finally asked the question everyone – especially Lizzie – had been waiting for.

“Hey, Boss – when can we give the nipper her prezzies??” he grinned as he took off his battered hat to scratch his head. “and dibs we go first!!” he added, looking around at the scruffy team of stockmen who murmured in agreement.

Lizzie gave a short, sharp intake of breath and her eyes widened. She was having such a good time she had almost forgotten that she had presents to come.

Soapy, seated contentedly beside Jo on one of the tree-trunk seats, gestured at Nate and Sophie.

“Don’t ask me, Jacko – it’s up to her mum and dad.”

Sophie, still working her way through her second helping of barramundi and salad, waved her fork at Jacko.

“Oh, don’t mind us,” she said, and Nate grinned at his wife as she dabbed the slight glisten of butter from her lips, “feel free.”

Jacko grinned cheerily.

“Well now,” he said, “that’s just bonzer!” He turned to Chalky. “Go on then!” he ordered. “Give the nipper her prezzie!”

Chalky rummaged around behind his seat and pulled out what appeared to be a medium-sized box clumsily wrapped in shiny green paper with a bow carefully tied over the lid. He handed the gift to the man next to him and it slowly made its way around the fire until it reached Lizzie, still sitting on the ground and leaning her back on one of the tree trunks.

She was astonished that the stockmen had been so kind as to get her a present, and when the box finally arrived in her hands she set it on the ground in front of her and looked at it with wonder. Glancing at Jacko, she could see that he and his compatriots were leaning forward expectantly, grins plastered onto weathered, squint-lined faces.

“Need a hand?” Hardison asked quietly as he looked down from his chair beside Parker.

Lizzie, a little shy, shook her head, very, very carefully untied the bow and unwrapped the box. Everybody around the fire heard her tiny cry of delight as she reached into the box and pulled out a brand new Akubra stockman’s hat, complete with chin-strap. Lizzie recognised the toggle on the chin-strap – it was one of Great-Great-Grandma Lily’s ininti seed beads, winking warmly at her in the firelight.

“It’s beautiful!!” she gasped, and instantly put on the hat. It fit perfectly.

Jacko ducked his head in embarrassed pleasure.

“It’s actually a bit big,” he admitted, “but she’ll grow into it. Chalky folded up some magazine pages and tucked ’em into the sweatband. It’ll last her a couple of years, I’d say.”
Lizzie’s eyes glistened with happy tears, but she stood up and scrambled around the fire to fling herself at Chalky and Jacko, neither of whom expected such a display of emotion, but they accepted Lizzie’s hugs and babbled thanks with as much dignity as they could muster. The entire crew felt very pleased with themselves.

“The little ‘un needs a proper hat if she’s going to be a jillaroo!” Jacko added pointedly, gazing at Nate and Sophie.

“What do we do?” Sophie whispered aghast as Lizzie showed off her hat to her family and friends. “What about her helmet?”

“Nothing, right now,” he hissed, trying to smile amiably at the stockmen who were obviously unimpressed with Lizzie’s riding helmet. “We’ll discuss it later when we won’t get lynched for saying she has to wear it!”

“Me next!!” Parker squeaked, “my turn!!” and before anyone could reply she flapped at Hardison who handed her a small package wrapped neatly in bunny-covered paper. “Here!!” she trilled, shoving the package at Lizzie, who took it carefully.

It contained a Swiss army knife.

“Oh … jeez …” Nate groaned softly as Lizzie, thoroughly delighted, began to work her way through all of the attachments.

“It’s just like Eliot’s!” Lizzie gasped, “and it has a thingy!!” she added, waving the knife in the air with the hoof-pick extended. “For feet!”

Parker was finally unable to contain herself, and gently wrested the knife from Lizzie’s grip. Knowing how Parker’s mind worked, Lizzie was happy to let the little thief show her how everything worked, and was even more thrilled when Parker gesticulated at Hardison who handed her another small package.

“Open it!!” Parker chirped and handed Lizzie the second package, which turned out to be a set of lock-picks.

“Oh bugger!” Sophie whispered, horrified. “Why the hell didn’t we vet the presents beforehand, Nate?? This is your fault!”

“My fault?? Since when is this my fault!!” Nate grouched softly, and then he quickly had to switch on a cheery smile as Lizzie, thrilled with her presents, hugged Parker and then ran over to her parents to show off her treasures. The knife and the lock-picks were each accompanied by a sturdy black leather pouch which could be worn at her belt. Each pouch was stamped with the image of a bounding kangaroo, just like the one on Lizzie’s little cell ‘phone cover.

“Don’t worry, Nate,” Eliot’s voice was soft with amusement. “I’ll make sure she knows how to be safe.”

Nate saw the smile on the hitter’s face, and sighed.

“Promise me?” he said, feeling Sophie’s fingers clasp his arm.

“Don’t worry, Daddy!” Lizzie interrupted, “I know how to use nearly all of the things!” she added, waving the knife about, “and Parker will show me how to pick locks. Mama, you said when I was born that she could! You promised!!”
“I did no such thing!” Sophie said indignantly. “Who told you that???”

“I did!” came a chorus of voices.

“Yeah, remember?” Hardison grinned, white teeth flashing in the firelight. When you were in the hospital. Parker’s actually waaaay overdue ‘cause you said she couldn’t teach Lizzie how to pick locks until she was three.”

“And now I’m seven!!” Lizzie said. “And you always keep your promises, Mama!”

“Sod it!” Sophie muttered, hoist by her own petard, and cupping her daughter’s face she gazed into happy brown eyes. “You learn how to use all of these properly, Lizzie!” she said, worried desperately and trying hard not to let it show. But in her heart she knew that the knife and its collection of tools as well as the lock-picks could help to keep her daughter safe.

Lizzie, understanding how serious her mother was, nodded solemnly, her new hat shadowing her features.

“I will, Mama,” she whispered back, and Sophie smiled.

“Hey, baby girl!” Hardison called out and Lizzie kissed her Mama’s cheek and hurried back to the hacker, who was leaning back in his chair and holding a small package. “Here,” he said, proffering the gift.

Lizzie gazed at it and then handing her knife and lock-picks to Parker she began to open it.

“But I already have my phone!” she said, but she still squeaked with pleasure when she unwrapped the contents.

It was a sturdy leather belt with a rectangular metal buckle, once again carrying the emblem of the bounding kangaroo.

“Well, you need somethin’ to hold up your pants an’ carry your knife ‘n stuff!” Hardison added, enjoying the hell out of Lizzie’s excitement.

“Oh, Alec!” Lizzie cried, “it’s beautiful!” and she wrapped her arms around him, the young man holding her tight.

“An’ as you get bigger, we can get you a longer belt an’ put your buckle on it. How does that sound?”

“Perfect!” Lizzie said in his ear, and she gave him a smacking kiss on the cheek.

“Hey Lizzie!” Kip yelled, wriggling on the tree trunk next to his father. “Dad and me … we got you something too!!!!” The little boy was holding a box, and his face was alive with anticipation.

Wriggling out of Hardison’s grip, Lizzie dropped the ground next to Kip, who handed her the box. This time the present was, in Lizzie’s eyes, really ‘grown up.’ It was a rifle scope, just like Eliot’s, contained in a padded military pouch with a strap.

“You can see forever with it!!” Kip breathed, a little envious but knowing Lizzie would be happy to share when they were out in the bush. Lizzie turned the scope over and over in her hands. She had used Eliot’s scope many times before, and knew how it worked, so she was sure it would come in handy as she and Kip checked out all of the attachments and gazing through the lens even though
they couldn’t make anything out at such close range.

Effie’s gift was the first one that was purely for pleasure and not just for keeping Lizzie safe. The photograph album was a record of Lizzie and her family at Wapanjara. Lizzie sat cross-legged on the ground next to the little cook, and each page was a memory captured forever. Much like Effie’s memory wall, it was full of moments that made Lizzie smile. There was Buster digging a hole by the old gum tree … Parker and Charlie practicing with a boomerang … Grandma Jo kissing Grandpa Soapy on the swing seat. Eliot was there, holding little Jamie as they sat in the shade on the veranda, and one of her favourites was of herself, sitting with Kip on Batu’s sun-warm back. So many memories, and she knew she would treasure them for the rest of her life.

Effie grumbled as she found herself with an armful of seven-year-old.

“I love it, Effie!! I really love it!!! Thank you!!” The words were hiccupped into Effie’s neck as Lizzie tried hard not to cry.

“Now then, nipper!” Effie rasped, utterly charmed, “there’ll be more to come. ‘Cause you’re coming back, aren’t you?? You’ll come home again soon, hey??”

“I will,” Lizzie whispered. “I promise! This is my home!”

And as Lizzie pulled back she saw the glimmer of tears in Effie’s muddy eyes.

There were more presents from Charlie’s family and the gift of a beautifully-decorated birthday cake from Mei and the twins, but it was as Chalky brought out his guitar that Eliot wandered over to Bernadette and pulled out his jacket from the back seat. Recovering a folded envelope from the inside pocket, he made his way back to his seat and watched his god-daughter look at her many gifts and laugh with pleasure as Kip investigated her new knife.

“’Lizbeth Grace,” he said softly, and his voice cut through the conversation around the fire. “I got somethin’ for you.”

Lizzie was beside him in a moment, giving him a quick once-over to check that he wasn’t in danger of falling to pieces any time soon.

“Here,” he said, and handed her the envelope.

It was large and plain white with her name written on the front in Eliot’s hand, so she turned it over and opened it. Inside was a certificate. Puzzled, Lizzie angled the paper so she could read it by lantern and fire-light, and she made out the words AUSTRALIAN STOCK HORSE SOCIETY in the upper left corner. The certificate also had diagrams of the near and off-side view of a horse, as well as the front view of a horse’s head. On it she could see, drawn on the diagram, a familiar thin stripe running down the horse’s face and over one nostril. There were lots of other sections she didn’t understand, but the name of the horse she could read.

“Wap … Wapanjara Night Spark,” she said, mouthing the words slowly, and then she understood what they meant. She gazed up at Eliot. “Sparky!! This has to do with Sparky!!” she exclaimed, her heart thudding in her chest.

Eliot smiled gently.

“Look at the bottom, darlin’,” he said, his voice soft with love. “Look at the owner’s name.”

Lizzie searched eagerly to find the section Eliot mentioned, and then everyone heard the gulp of air she took as she realised what was printed there.
“Eliz … Elizabeth Grace Ford,” she read out, voice breaking even as she struggled with the words. “Address … Wapanjara Cattle Station, Ten … Tennant Creek …” She turned teary eyes to Eliot. “Sparky … he’s mine??? You gave Sparky to me?? Really??”

Eliot nodded, blue eyes bright in the firelight.

“Yeah, ‘Lizbeth Grace … he’s all yours. I managed to talk Soapy into sellin’ him to me.”

Lizzie’s hat fell onto her back as she stood up and flung herself at Eliot, arms holding him so tightly he could barely breathe. His chest and shoulder objected, but it was worth it, he thought, as he felt rather than heard Lizzie’s sobbing words of thanks.

Eliot managed to hold her in his arms, and wondered why he had ever thought his ‘Lizbeth Grace hated him.

Silly bugger, Alice whispered.

Lizzie eased away from Eliot’s grasp and studied him with brimming eyes, and she saw his Lizzie-smile, the half-hitch of his lips making his eyes crinkle with pleasure. So she did what she always did to let Eliot know he was loved – she kissed him firmly on the end of his nose, which brought a rumbling chuckle that came from somewhere deep in Eliot’s chest.

“You sure you want him?” he teased good-naturedly. “It’s a big responsibility.”

“Oh yes!!” Lizzie said, nodding ferociously, “I’ll look after him, I promise, and when he’s bigger I can ride him and –“

“But who’s going to look after him when you’re back in Portland?” Eliot asked.

Lizzie was stumped. She knew she had to go home soon, but … she couldn’t think what to do. “Eliot! What’s going to happen when I go back to Portland??” she whimpered. “Who’s going to feed him and brush him and make sure he’s okay and –“

Eliot finally let her off the hook. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. I got it covered. He’ll stay here an’ get weaned with the other foals. Charlie and Soapy will make sure he learns his manners and when he’s old enough he’ll learn to be a proper stock horse like Narra. Then you can work with him and ride him when both you and he are a bit older. How does that sound?”

Lizzie thought about it, and then looked at Soapy. “Is that alright, Grandpa Soapy? Can Sparky stay with you and I can take care of him when I’m home?”

And Soapy’s heart swelled when he realised Lizzie thought of Wapanjara as her home.

“That’s fine, little ‘un. And seeing as Sparky’s now yours, Jo and I thought you could do with some kit. Here,” he added, and held out a bag.

Lizzie delved inside and brought out a sturdy leather headcollar with a lead rope attached. There was a brass plate attached with ‘SPARKY’ engraved on it. Lizzie ran her fingers over the leather and where the colt’s name was engraved in the brass plate. It was perfect.

“He can use one of the foal slips for now, but that’s for when he’s a bit bigger,” Jo said, and smiled
as Lizzie dug out the rest of the things inside the bag, which was a grooming kit and hoof-pick. “You don’t share brushes out here,” she said, “it stops spreading skin problems.”

Lizzie sat down on an empty space on one of the tree-trunks and looked at the people around her. Her presents lay spread on a blanket now, so that everyone could see them, and she didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. She clutched Sparky’s brush to her chest and smiled tearily.

“Thank you,” she said simply. “Just … thank you!”

“Wait a cotton-pickin’ minute!” Nate said suddenly, and Lizzie frowned at the tone in her father’s voice. “You forgot something, young lady!”

Lizzie blinked. What on earth could she have forgotten?

“I … what …” she stammered, confused.

“What about our present?” Sophie asked, pursing her lips.

Oh yes! Lizzie suddenly realised she hadn’t received anything from her parents, and she grinned, placing everything back into her bag so she could pay attention to her parents.

“Now,” Nate said, his frown back in place, “this is a present for both you and Kip. Is that okay?”

Lizzie opened her mouth, couldn’t think of anything to say, and shut it again. If her Mama and Daddy thought it was right to share this present, she was alright with it. Kip was, after all, her best friend apart from Eliot and she loved him dearly. So she nodded, eyes round with curiosity. Kip’s face was a picture, Lizzie noticed.

Nate and Charlie stood up and disappeared into the darkness for a minute or two, and when they returned each man was carrying something bulky.

“Both of you … you’d better look after ‘em,” Charlie warned as he and Nate placed a brand-new stock saddle over the rounded barrel of the fallen tree trunk. “They’ll need cleaning every time you use ‘em,” he added, and suddenly grinned at the stunned expression on each child’s face.

“Charlie thought you two could use proper saddles fit for children,” Sophie said, “so we had them made for you. By the time you’ve outgrown them, you have to promise to pass them on to the twins. And you’ll get grown-up saddles when Sparky’s bigger. How does that sound?”

Kip, astonished at the gift, looked at his father, who smiled kindly.

“Yes, kiwari – it’s all yours. You’ll be able to ride that big sod of a horse a lot easier with a decent saddle,” he said, and Kip ran his fingers over the leather pads and broad girth. Both saddles included a breastplate and crupper, and were made from the best leather.

“Can … can I ride home on it tomorrow??” Kip asked reverently.

“Me too!!” Lizzie gasped as she found the bounding kangaroo stamped into the cantle. “Will it fit Narra??”

“I’m told it will fit perfectly.” Sophie confirmed, delighted at the amazement on the children’s faces. The hugs that came next made her heart soar. “Are you having a good birthday, my darling?” she asked as Lizzie as the little girl kissed her mother’s cheek.

“Oh, Mama …” Lizzie breathed happily, “it’s the best birthday ever!”
They were interrupted by Chalky tuning his guitar, and for the rest of the evening songs were sung and laughter and more food flowed and Lizzie’s eyes were mirrored in the light of the lanterns.

Charlie had surprised Eliot by hauling out the hitter’s old Fender guitar from one of Oggie’s deep storage bins. Eliot, sore but relaxed, thought he might manage a couple of songs and checked the tuning before picking out a few notes. He glanced at Lizzie.

“Okay, ‘Lizbeth Grace. It’s your day, so pick a song,” his gaze was warm and soft.

Lizzie didn’t even have to think about it.

“The mountain song!” she decided, and grinned.

Eliot sighed.

“Again??”

Lizzie nodded, amused at Eliot’s feigned annoyance. She loved the song, and now she knew why it made Eliot just a little discomfited. The words spoke to him in a way that reminded him of where he had been before he found Wapanjara and the people he loved.

“Again. Please?? It’s my favourite.” She patted his arm. “Do you mind?”

Eliot groaned dramatically, but nodded.

“S’pose,” he said, and caught the expectant air of the gathering by the waters of the billabong, the lamps flickering in the still night.

The opening chords rang true and Eliot’s voice was clear and perfect, and all of the horror and fear of the past few weeks faded for a little while as the stars shimmered overhead.

_He was born in the summer of his 27th year,_
_Comin’ home to place he’d never been before,_
_He left yesterday behind him, you might say he was born again_
_You might say he found a key to every door._

And Jo listened and her tears fell as she remembered the young man she and Soapy hit with the ute one night … the wounded animal he was, and when they had tried to help him he had asked them to let him die.

_When he first came to the mountains his life was far away,_
_On the road and hanging by a song,_
_But the string’s already broken and he doesn’t really care_
_It keeps changing fast and it don’t last for long_

Soapy remembered Eliot slowly coming alive again … learning to trust, learning to be true to himself … learning to love again. Learning to become the man he was meant to be.

… And they say that he got crazy once and he tried to touch the sun
And he lost a friend but kept the memory …

And Charlie saw his Alice, her smile like autumn sunlight and her laughter rippling through his heart, and he knew the memory would always be in his soul.

_It's Colorado rocky mountain high_
I've seen it rainin' fire in the sky
Friends around the campfire and everybody's high ...

Lizzie snuggled into Effie’s side as the little cook listened to the man she knew was the son she had never had, and as the music died away, shooting stars trailed fire in the heavens and a pack of dingoes howled faintly in the distance, the sound sending tremors through the endless reaches of the night.

The evening drew into a long, starlit night, and Eliot awoke from a doze to sighs of wonder and little shrieks of delight from the mob of children piled in front of the fire. When he opened his eyes he saw the adults relaxing, picking at food and listening happily as Billy Jakkamarra stood in front of the fire, spear and *woomera* in hand, telling the story of the great Rainbow Serpent, creator of all things.

“… and when Goorialla awoke, the land was bare … no ‘roos, no trees, no grass … no nothin’ from here –“ he pointed east, towards the flat lands, “– to there,” he dramatically pointed the spear to the far Tanami in the west. “so off he went to look for his tribe. Slither-slither he went, and his body dug great, long hollows in the ground!”

Lizzie sat next to Effie, her eyes wide with wonder.

“What did he do, *kangkuya*??” she gasped, entranced.

Eliot hitched an eyebrow in surprise. Since when had Lizzie been allowed to call Billy ‘grandfather’?

Billy waved the spear in the air.

“Well, *kangku*, he called out the little frogs that lived in the ground, and out they came, hop-hop-hoppin’ about all over the place. But Goorialla, he tickled ‘em, and then what d’you think happened?”

But before Lizzie could answer, Kip and his cousins began to laugh and hop and croak, and Lizzie, delighted, joined in.

Billy chuckled, and continued.

“The little frogs, their mouths became full of water and they filled up the big hollows which became rivers and lakes and –“

“- billabongs!!” Kip yelled, waving his arms at the water.

So Billy told his audience about how the animals and the birds and the fishes woke up and filled the land, and how if they obeyed the rules of the Rainbow Serpent they became human beings. But if they broke the rules, they became the mountains and the rocks and the sand.

Eliot saw Mei sitting beside Charlie’s sisters, eyes wide with wonder as she fed little Jamie his supper while rapt with attention listening to Billy’s tale. Rose was in the lap of Rita, Charlie’s eldest sister, being rocked and fussed over now that she had been fed. Eliot knew both babies would be passed around the family, and he could faintly hear Rita singing softly, the words indistinct but infinitely loving and ageless. The lullaby was probably thousands of years old.

Charlie suddenly appeared at Eliot’s side and rested a hand on the Oklahoman’s shoulder.

“Just to tell ya,” he whispered, “after the next story Pops and me and a couple of my brothers are heading off for a bit of a corroboree. There’s an old meeting place not too far away, and we need to
talk through what happened here. Make our peace with it.”

Eliot nodded and gingerly began to stand, ready to join his family in this important meeting. But Charlie’s hand kept Eliot in his chair, gently but firmly.

“Nah. Not this time, Eliot Spencer of the Aniwaya,” he said, a smile in his voice. “You’re still crook, mate. Besides, I got some magic to do. We got to make sure Alinjirri is safe and a good place for your people. It needs to heal, just like you, and we got decisions to make that you can’t be a part of.” Charlie’s dark eyes were suddenly sombre. “We have to do our bit to keep you lot and especially Lizzie safe. Got it?”

Unhappy about the decision but understanding the strict social and spiritual mores of the tribe, Eliot settled back into his chair. He proffered his hand and Charlie shook it, relieved that Eliot understood.

“We’ll keep an eye on Kip,” Eliot rumbled as the children sprawled around the fire, aghast as they heard how the great serpent swallowed the two Rainbow Lorikeet brothers because he was hungry. Feeling guilty, Goorialla hid in the sky as the young men’s people chased him, so he decided to make them happy by turning his body into an arc of colours.

“Now,” Billy said, pointing at the sky, “every time, just after it rains, you can see Goorialla sharing his beautiful colours with the people here on the ground as his way of saying sorry for eating the Rainbow Lorikeet brothers.”

The children gave a collective sigh of satisfaction, and Kip called out to his grandfather.

“Another story, kangkuya!!” he wheedled, hugging himself with delight.

“Oh, yes please!!” Lizzie added, and the rest of the Jakkamarra children set up a cacophony of pleading.

Billy glanced over to Eliot and Charlie and his lean face was alight with pleasure. Charlie nodded, and his father held up a hand.

“Alright, alright, you little buggers!” he said, humour rife in every word, “one more, and then I got things to do!” He thought for a moment. “Okay,” he muttered, and then cleared his throat. “Once upon a time, in the Dreamtime, there lived a frog called Tiddalick …”

The children, thrilled, began their frog-croaks, this time riddled with laughter, and Billy grinned. He loved telling stories for nippers.

“… and Tiddalick was the biggest, fattest, greediest frog in the whole world. One morning he woke up, and what d’you think he did?” Billy asked, his black eyes alight with pleasure.

“Drank the billabong!!” the children yelled, familiar with the story, and Lizzie giggled, loving every moment of this magical night.

Eliot, tired but happy, turned to Charlie, but the young man was gone. Eliot wasn’t surprised. Charlie had to set the meeting place to rights and make sure everything was ready for the corroboree.

Hardison wandered over with his chair and a plateful of food and settled down next to Eliot, handing the plate to his best friend.

“Here. Jo says you got to eat this, bro, an’ I haveta say you need it, Eliot. You’re not carryin’ as much weight as you should, m’man.” Hardison studied Eliot so hard the hitter began to scowl. But Eliot took the hint as he was a little hungry, and he tucked into the spicy potatoes and the last of the
barramundi, washing it down with an ice-cold beer.

Hardison watched Eliot eat, and then he turned his gaze to the gathering of people around the fire. Nate was busy putting on more wood and Sophie stared contentedly into the flames, watching the dancing shapes and appearing to be miles away, content and relaxed. Parker was too busy listening to Billy tell the children about how all of the animals tried to make Tiddalick the frog laugh so that he would let all of the water out of his stomach and back into the billabong so that everyone could have a drink.

“That girl sure loves her stories,” Hardison said with a smile.

“Yeah, well,” Eliot rasped between mouthfuls of barramundi, “she didn’t have much time for a childhood. Stayin’ alive is more important than stories.” He paused for a moment, thinking of his own childhood before his momma died. “Yeah … I’m glad she’s gettin’ time to listen. Archie sure as hell never allowed her much of a childhood. He was too busy turnin’ her into a friggin’ stealing machine.”

Hardison snorted. For all of Parker’s attachment to Archie Leach, Eliot had never liked the man. Parker had been good enough for Archie to turn into a world-class thief, but not good enough to be part of his life, which bugged Eliot. He had not realized until Lizzie came along how important family was to him, and Parker was part of that family. He felt for her even though she drove him hellaciously crazy. Well, most of the time.

Eliot heard Parker’s very distinctive snorky laugh, and he shook his head, faintly amused.

As Billy finished the story with a flourish like the showman he was, the children instantly began shouting for more, but he shook his head, and a flurry of ‘Awww’s filled the air, the loudest of which came from Parker.

“Nah,” Billy shouted above the din, “I got business to take care of, so you lot shut it, hey?”

Despite the complaints from the children and Parker, Billy wandered out of the firelight and joined Eliot and Hardison, his bony frame moving easily but with not an ounce of spare effort.

“Gotta go, Eliot,” he said, unbuttoning his shirt to reveal an equally bony chest. Sliding the shirt off, Billy left it in a pile under Eliot’s chair and then he rested his hand on Eliot’s shoulder, just as Charlie had done. “You stay put, kukkaji. Let your crook bits heal. I got stuff to do.”

“I know. Charlie told me,” Eliot replied, catching the curious look on Hardison’s face as he saw the cicatrices cut into Billy’s chest and abdomen.

The Warumungu Elder smiled gently. “I’ll see you in the morning. The women’ll watch out for you.”

Eliot chuckled, and nodded.

“Yeah … I reckon they will. They’ll be more use than Hardison here,” he added snarkily.

“Hey!!” Hardison squawked, annoyed, but Billy grinned.

“Don’t knock it, wankili. They’re armed and you don’t mess with ‘em if you want to keep your noggin in one piece.” Billy gestured at Auntie, who was digging for ants at the base of a tree growing at the edge of the light. She was using a large mulga-wood boomerang to dig the hole.

But any retort Hardison was preparing to make died in his throat as a sound filled the air which made
the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

It was a low, rhythmic growl, rising and falling in the night air, resounding, echoing to the very heart of this ancient land.

Hardison jerked in surprise.

“Shit!” he ground out under his breath. “What the hell is that?!”

“It ain’t a bunyip, in case you’re wonderin’,” Eliot teased, but he saw the sudden fear in Hardison’s eyes. Eliot knew Hardison was no coward. He did, in fact, think Hardison was one of the bravest men he had known, because standing up to the people they dealt with didn’t come easily to the man. Hardison was a man of kindness and heart, something Eliot wished was part of himself, but Hardison had been through things that would daunt the bravest of people and he had survived. And that took courage – more courage than Eliot Spencer had. Eliot was all hard edges and simmering anger, deadly force and fierce protectiveness of those in need of him. But Hardison … he thought being as tough as Eliot would make him a better man, when Eliot knew in his heart that it was the other way around. Hardison made Eliot Spencer human.

“Yeah … yeah, I know that,” Hardison murmured, still leary, “but what the hell is it??”

Billy smiled and shifted his hand from Eliot’s shoulder to Hardison’s, settling the younger man.

“You seen that film *Crocodile Dundee 2*?” he asked, and the sudden film reference made Hardison blink. The hacker nodded.

“Um … yeah. So?”

“Remember when that Dundee fella made a telephone call?” Billy explained cryptically.

Then Hardison got it.

“Oh man … standin’ on that rock swinging that thing around an’ makin’ that noise!” He looked at Billy in wonder. “That’s real??”

Billy nodded.

“Mostly. Charlie’s lettin’ us know about corroboree.” He winked. “Men’s business.” He sighed and lifted his spear and *woomera*. “Bloody silly film, though,” he added with a sigh. “Righto. See you lot in the morning.” And off Billy went, fading into the darkness and the night.

Hardison watched him go, and then turned to Eliot.

“Y’know … this is the craziest, most insane, weird, creepy and frikkin’ ass-backwards place I’ve ever been.”

Eliot hitched an eyebrow and looked smug.

“Yep,” he said.

Hardison, still listening to the sound of the bullroarer in the darkness, the noise thrumming through his heart, sighed and settled back in his chair.

“You love this place, huh,” he stated firmly.

Eliot shrugged.

“Me too,” he said, and the truth of it set him free. “Me too.”

Lizzie was busy eating her way through a generous portion of Mei’s delicious, moist birthday cake, rich with the flavor of pineapple and mango and so light it melted in her mouth. She was on the point of eating the last piece when a hand touched her arm, and she looked up to see Auntie gazing at her with fathomless black eyes. The old woman lifted her hand and gestured at Lizzie, her fingers telling the little girl to follow her.

Swallowing the last mouthful of cake, Lizzie stood up and was on the point of following the old woman when Sophie stopped her. But before Sophie could say a word, Lizzie smiled at her mother reassuringly.

“It’s okay, Mama – it’s only Auntie. She’ll keep me safe.”

And Sophie, nonplussed, watched as Auntie hobbled off towards the flat rock to which Eliot had retreated earlier in the day – the place where he had told Lizzie about Mooch and his team. Lizzie dutifully followed the old woman, and Sophie began to wonder just how strong a hold this land and its people had on Lizzie. In her heart she knew Lizzie was safe enough, but each day they spent at Wapanjara, the tougher it would be to leave. And Sophie Devereaux Ford didn’t want to leave – this place was in her blood just the same as it was in the blood of the rest of the team … even Nate loved Wapanjara. She had never seen him so rested … so serene. Wapanjara was good for him.

But leave they must, she knew. Portland and jobs beckoned, and life went on. Still, she thought, they had to return to Wapanjara, because there was a new team to create and a new chapter of Leverage International was about to begin.

She smiled, and relaxed. Soon, she thought, they could come back to Wapanjara. To their home.

When Lizzie reached the rock, just at the edge of the firelight, she found Auntie sitting cross-legged on the big, flat stone, watching her with twinkling eyes. The old woman waved Lizzie down and the little girl sat opposite Auntie and waited. She remembered her manners and was patient and solemn, and Auntie nodded approvingly. The little kunapa was learning, and was worthy of what Auntie was going to do next. She unslung her bag from her shoulder and brought out a little bowl and something wrapped in a bit of paper and tied tightly with grass string. Handing the bowl to Lizzie she gestured at the still water, glittering beside them under the star-lit sky.

As Lizzie did as she was told and filled the little bowl with water, Auntie unwrapped the tiny package, and once Lizzie returned the water-filled bowl she tipped the ground red ochre it contained into the fluid and mixed it to a paste. Lizzie watched curiously, not sure what Auntie was doing, but she politely waited silently to see what was going to happen next.

Once Auntie had the paste ready, she grasped Lizzie’s wrist and pulled her closer, so Lizzie, a little confused but willing to do what the elderly woman asked, shuffled forward until their knees touched.

Auntie gave the little girl a gummy grin, and set the paste on the ground next to her. Then she waved an impatient finger at Lizzie’s hat, which the little girl hastily took off and placed it on the ground beside her.

Auntie nodded her approval, and then she swept back Lizzie’s curls, dipped her index finger in the
paste and drew a broad band of the earth red mixture across Lizzie’s brow. Before Lizzie could even take a sharp breath, Auntie drew more, along her cheeks and over the bridge of her nose and down her arms.

Lizzie blinked and sat as still as she could, sensing this was important to the old woman. The stuff felt cool and a little sticky, but she knew that the markings meant something to the Warumungu, and she suddenly felt a sense of pride that she was being allowed to wear the earthy mixture. Somehow, she realized, she belonged.

Auntie sat back for a moment to study her work, and nodded, apparently satisfied. Then she tugged at a kangaroo leather thong around her neck and pulled out a small bag, much like Lizzie’s.

Staring at the bag Lizzie remembered what her Grandpa Soapy had told her … aborigines wore what was called a ‘dilly-bag’ … what did the Warumungu call them … oh yes … mukurtu.

Auntie hummed tunelessly to herself and opening the dilly-bag, she shook out the contents into her hand. She pondered for a moment or two, and then made her decision. Picking something out of the little pile of objects, she returned everything else to the bag and closed it. Once again grasping Lizzie’s wrist, she turned her hand palm-upwards and dropped the chosen object into Lizzie’s hand.

Lizzie studied it in the half-light of the distant fire, and discovered it was a fossil shell, tiny, winking white in the starlight, and millions of years old.

Auntie tapped Lizzie’s chest where her medicine pouch lay. This is for your spirit, the whisper came in her head. This land is yours, and you belong to it. Keep this safe, and you will forever walk our Dreaming. You and your people.

Lizzie’s eyes widened in sudden understanding, and she opened her pouch and dropped the little shell into it, joining the little sliver of quartz and Eliot’s dog-tag.

Auntie nodded again. The child understood.

Lizzie held her medicine pouch close to her heart and Auntie shuffled around until they sat side by side. The two of them, separated by decades, gazed out, out over the star-gleam reflected in the water, and then Lizzie’s eyes turned to the heavens, to the stars she loved and the land she knew as her own.

Here her heart lay and her soul lived, and the thrum of the bullroarer sang to her and to her people. She was home, and the falling stars rained fire in the sky, and she could not have been happier.

To be continued …

Kiwari – child.
Kangkuya – Grandfather, or father’s father.
Kangku – grandson, or son’s son.
Wankili – cousin.
Kukkaji – baby brother, little brother.
Woomera – a spear-thrower.
And Home They Flocked

Chapter Summary

The end of a Birthday Bash, a missing helmet and a new friend. WARNING: Disturbing images of an unclothed hitter.

Eliot drifted awake to a brilliant, sunny morning and the sound of Hardison yelling hysterically. The yelps of terror were accompanied by the childish screams of a mob of young Jakkamarras who, it seemed, had swarmed the hacker and dragged him, protesting, into the billabong.

“Don’t be such a wuss, Hardison!” Parker bawled. She obviously had no patience with Hardison’s water issues.

Eliot smiled and lay comfortably in his hammock, warm and relaxed and feeling no pain. He felt something tucked against his side, and discovered one of Effie’s revoltingly orange fluffy hot-water-bottles, still warm, easing the ache in his wounds. Huh, he thought. He must have been exhausted not to waken or at least realise Effie had wisely tucked the bottle against the slowly-healing injuries.

He heard a huge, engulfing splash followed by Hardison letting out a flurry of coughing snorts as he cleared his nose, and then the young man decided enough was enough.

“Why, you lil’ pipsqueaks!!” he roared, and Eliot heard Kip shriek with laughter as Hardison lifted him up and dumped him in the water. There was a cacophony of yelling and taunts, and Lizzie let out a scream of pleasure and mock fear.

“Watch out, Celie!!” she yelled and Celie apparently tried to wriggle out of Hardison’s way but failed, and she collapsed into hysteric as Hardison did the same to her as he did to Kip. It was obvious he was out for revenge.

Eliot lay quietly and mused as he listened to Hardison slowly move from annoyance and fear to fun and laughter, and he guessed that Soapy had something to do with the Jakkamarra Mob baiting Alec Hardison. He knew Hardison had spoken to Soapy about something, and Hardison’s reluctance to enter the water, he surmised, was an issue with the man. With a pang of guilt, he knew in his heart that Moreau dumping Hardison in a swimming pool handcuffed to a chair probably hadn’t helped – indeed, the incident may well have been the trigger for Hardison’s issues. But the children, for whom Hardison would give his life to protect, could work wonders when the rest of the team couldn’t. Trust Soapy to read the situation correctly, he thought.

The smell of cooking food finally roused Eliot from his bed. It took him a couple of minutes to ease his recalcitrant body out of the confines of the hammock, and he grimaced at the resulting pain, but he dealt with it. Clad only in his cut-offs he padded over to Oggie where Effie was busy whisking eggs for French toast, a request from the Jakkamarra Mob, all of whom had a sweet tooth and clamoured for honey with their breakfast.

Eliot allowed himself the luxury of a tentative stretch, and he yawned lazily as he dug out mugs and milk and set them on one of the side tables.

“Tea?” he said, pouring boiling water from the billy can suspended over the fire into Effie’s big
teapot. Effie nodded and put the whisked eggs to one side, covering them with a cloth to protect the food from flies.

“You slept well, Yank. You feel a bit easier, hey?”

Eliot thought about it for a moment. Despite his injuries he felt rested and better than he had done since he had been shot.

“Yeah … I guess.” He glanced over to the billabong, where Charlie and Tom had joined Nate and Sophie for a morning swim, and for a second or two Eliot wished he could join them. But his wounds forbade it, and Jo would be furious if he got the dressing wet. He grinned as Hardison was harassed by the children. They had discovered his long arms could toss them further than they had expected, and he could even hold them high enough so that they could do somersaults before hitting the water. “He’s doin’ better. Not so squirly about the water,” he added thoughtfully.

“Mister M had a word,” Effie said as she checked the tea and poured two cups, adding milk and handing a mug to Eliot, who sipped it appreciatively. “And the nippers’re sorting the silly young bastard out. He’ll come around, you’ll see.”

“Yeah … well … I hope so,” Eliot murmured, and watched as Hardison’s features slowly relaxed. Well, he thought, at least for now he’s dealing with it. The mob of young Jakkamarra Jakkamarra and Lizzie were certainly loosening the young man up, and the exercise was good for his damaged shoulder.

Eliot lifted a small cleaver and set to work slicing up a thick slab of smoked bacon, enjoying the easy effort it took. His strength was slowly returning, and he was sleeping more or less dreamlessly. He would be leaving soon … he and his team. But he would be soon returning, he was sure. Smiling softly, he bent to his task, and the calls of the lorikeets rang in the sky and the scent of wattle bushes drifted through the air, and Eliot Spencer was – for now – at ease.

The only argument that morning was between Lizzie and her parents. She had helped Charlie and Kip saddle Batu and Narra, their new saddles sitting perfectly on the colourful saddle blankets gifted to the two children by Tom Reid. But when she returned from the Nipper Nest wearing her new Akubra hat and the hated helmet was nowhere to be seen, Sophie held up a hand.

“Helmet, young lady! Your hat should just fit over it, so go get it please!” she said firmly, brows drawn down.

Lizzie scowled.

“I hate that helmet!” she grumbled, and she tightened the chin strap of her hat. “It’s silly!!”

Nate sighed.

“It’s safe, Lizzie! Now do as your mother says and get your helmet!”

Lizzie’s scowl deepened, but she couldn’t bring herself to say ‘No’ to her parents. They had bought her a beautiful new saddle, and she really, really loved them very much, but … she loathed that helmet. It was hot, it made her head hurt and besides, she thought she looked ridiculous in it. Kip had good enough manners not to tease her about it, but she had seen him try not to laugh every time she had to put it on. She bit her lip.

“I … I can’t,” she whispered. Her gaze dropped from her parents’ faces and guilt oozed from every pore.
“Oh Lizzie …” Sophie sighed, exasperated. “And why is that?”

Lizzie looked at her father for support but only found a stern look on his face.

“Because I gave it to Celie,” she muttered under her breath.

“Excuse me?” Sophie arched an enquiring eyebrow. “ Celie?? But … why??”

Lizzie tried a little defiance to see how that would work.

“Because Celie needs it more than me!” she stated, chin jutting a fraction of an inch. “Her dad bought her a motor bike!”

Nate’s jaw dropped, just a little.

“A motor bike?? But … Celie’s … what … eight?? A motor bike?? Seriously???”

Lizzie nodded vigorously.

“Yeah! And it’s red and she can go really fast but Lanie can’t get to Tennant Creek until next week to get her a proper bike helmet so I gave her mine in case she fell off and –“

“A motor bike??” Nate repeated faintly.

“Just a little one. Not a big bike like Eliot’s,” Lizzie added, warming to her subject. “It’s not a new one, but it’s really cool, Celie said. She showed me a picture on her ’phone! I can ride it if I like, she says!!”

“Ride it??” Sophie whispered, horrified. “A motor bike? Over my dead body!” she gasped and glared at Nate. “This is definitely your fault!” she added accusingly, dark eyes sparking with indignation.

“I had nothing to do with it!” Nate protested, just a little confused. How was this his fault?

“I wouldn’t be riding it on my own, Mama!” Lizzie explained with just a hint of exasperation. “I’d just be sitting on the back while Celie steers!”

“Dear God!” Sophie breathed. Her daughter was fearless. Now she didn’t know whether to blame Nate or just yell for a while at Eliot.

“Don’t worry, Soph …” Eliot said with a smile as he wandered by to see what the argument was about. “I can teach her to protect herself if she falls. I learned when I was her age, an’ all the kids out here do the same. It’s not perfect, I know … but she can still do a lot to try and stop gettin’ hurt. An’ doin’ what we do … it’s a skill that’ll come in handy.”

Lizzie seized on Eliot’s offer like a lifeline, and grasped Sophie’s fingers, squeezing tightly.

“Please, Mama!!” she begged desperately, “I can learn to fall properly, I promise!! I’ll practice and I’ll practice and I’ll practice and –“

“Enough!!” Nate ground out as he glared at his wife and saw the beginning of tears in his daughter’s eyes. “Lizzie … awwwww hell!” he said uselessly. He knew he had already lost the battle before it had even begun.

Sophie studied her now-seven-year-old daughter who looked up at her with pleading eyes. The child stood there in plaid shirt and denims, her riding boots comfortably-worn and sturdy and her shirt-
sleeves rolled up to just below her bony elbows. The denim pants were held up by her new belt, and her knife was sheathed at her side. The Akubra sat comfortably on her riot of curls and her brown eyes shone from a healthily tanned face. A pair of soft cow-hide work-gloves were tucked into a back pocket of the pants, just as Eliot, Soapy and Charlie did, as did every ringer and station hand in the Territory.

Sophie turned and poked Nate in the arm.

“Look at her!” she snapped, irritated. “Look at her, Nate! Just what have we created? Huh? She’s … she’s wilful, and bloody stubborn, and clever and independent, and damnit, I love that she’s like that I suppose, but bloody hell, Nate!!! How are we supposed to keep her safe?? Our work’s dangerous enough without her falling off a horse and hurting herself!”

Nate opened his mouth and then shut it again before eyeing Eliot, who stood beside Lizzie, relaxed and smiling, his eyes crinkled in amusement.

“Eliot – you make damn’ sure she learns properly! Okay??” he growled finally, and Sophie let out a slight noise of exasperation. “And you!” He glared at his daughter. “You listen to Eliot!! Y’hear me? If you dare worry your mother and me over this you’ll be grounded until you’re thirty!”

“Forty …” Sophie whispered.

“ – forty! Until you’re forty!” Nate added hastily. “Do you understand??”

Lizzie’s face lit up with sheer delight and she hugged Eliot’s bare arm.

“Eliot’ll help me be safe, won’t you, Eliot?” she pleaded, eyes alive with pleasure.

The hitter nodded, and his face softened as he looked at his best girl.

“’Til my dyin’ day, sweetheart.” His voice was pure love. “’Til my dyin’ day.”

“Hey, nipper! Are you going to get on that horse or not!” Charlie yelled from the back of the chestnut mare as he rode over from the makeshift paddock where the horses had spent their time during the barbecue. Kip, already aboard his beloved Batu, sat his new saddle with such pride his chest was almost bursting.

Lizzie gazed up at her father as she held Narra’s reins.

“Can you help me, Daddy? Please?” she whispered. “Eliot … he can’t just yet …” she flicked an apologetic glance at Eliot, knowing he felt his lack of strength keenly, but all he did was give her a Lizzie-smile, his blue eyes warm with amusement.

Nate, sighing, gave his daughter a leg up into her new saddle, and it was obvious she was a lot more secure in the well-fitting seat with its thigh pads designed for a child’s smaller frame. That made him feel a little better, although he knew Sophie was awash with concern for their only child.

Eliot helped Lizzie to adjust her stirrups, and she was set. She gathered up the reins and was about to touch Narra into a walk, when Sophie dropped a hand onto Lizzie’s leg.

“You walk only, my girl!” she said, her voice low with fear. “No trotting or anything faster until Eliot teaches you how to look after yourself if you fall. Are you listening??”

Lizzie, eyes round, realised her mother was terrified for her, and she suddenly understood the seriousness of Sophie’s demand.
“I will, Mama. I promise.” She turned her gaze to Eliot. “Can you teach me later, Eliot? Please?”

Eliot, ever patient, nodded.

“Maybe not today, but first thing tomorrow, okay? We’ll start on Gertie while she’s kooshed down. You won’t have so far to fall. How does that sound?”

Lizzie’s excitement was almost palpable. She was eager to learn because it meant that she wouldn’t have to wear the hated helmet again, ever.

She looked down at her guardian, taking in the healing pinkness of his wounds on the tanned torso and arms, although the lean lines of his ribs made his broad shoulders appear even wider. The medicine pouch lay over his heart, and his eyes were cobalt-blue in the shade of his hat. He was looking much better, if somewhat thin. But Lizzie knew in her heart that he would be back to his usual fitness sooner rather than later, and the soft contentment in his eyes warmed her soul. Her Eliot was finally through the worst of his illness.

Turning her attention back to her fretting parents, she smiled and touched her heels to Narra’s warm sides.

“I’ll be careful,” she said quietly. “I promise.”

And then she was off, walking Narra sedately towards Charlie and Kip, and then all three of them turned around and headed off along the track around the billabong. The opportunity for another pleasure ride was never to be ignored. Surprisingly, they were joined by a muttering Parker aboard a grumpy Kevin, the old appaloosa stumping along behind the others grumbling to himself, Parker rigid but determined to deal with her horse-clown issues. Eliot was sure the two of them were trading insults.

“She’ll be fine,” Eliot reassured Sophie and Nate, even though their faces were still creased with worry. “Charlie’ll keep her safe.”

Sophie sighed with resignation.

“I know … I know he will,” she muttered, clasping Nate’s arm. “But … she’s only seven, and … oh hell - she’s so independent, Eliot! And she’s only going to get worse as she gets older! I don’t think my nerves can take it!”

Eliot gave the grifter a sideways look before heading back to Bernadette to help Effie pack away their cooking gear.

“Don’t worry, Soph. She’s got good instincts, and I’ll do my best to teach her how to look after herself. And she has the best parents in the world, so I’m not worried. You shouldn’t be either.” And after giving Sophie a final lopsided smile, Eliot turned stiffly and made his way back to Effie, still holding himself with care but moving better now.

Nate patted Sophie’s hand where it lay on his arm.

“He’s right, you know.” He said contemplatively.

“Oh, I know he is,” Sophie replied, frustrated. “She’s tough and resilient, and kind and generous and a real pain in the bum because I think she’s too confident, but … I suppose I wouldn’t have her any other way,” she admitted ruefully.

“That’s not what I meant,” Nate added, eyes twinkling.
Sophie frowned.

“What do you mean?”

Nate’s face was nothing but smug pride.

“Us. You and me. We’re awesome. We are amazing parents. And I know that because we have an amazing daughter. Now …” he grinned impishly. “Let’s go. We have a ride back to the house to get through, and my ass is already beginning to complain.”

Sophie snorted.

“Wuss,” she said.

Hand in hand, they walked back to the camp as the sun warmed the billabong and wreaths of mist drifted among the trees, and the horses were nothing but wraiths in the soft morning light.

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The drive back to the homestead was one of contentment and quiet contemplation. Effie sat between the twins, sound asleep in their car seats, and Eliot, who sat with his eyes closed, absorbing the silence. Hardison drove Bernadette along the track, Oggie in tow, followed by Tom in his old ute and Jacko driving the Wapanjara Ford filled with barbecues, fold-down beds and much more. The rest of the party were coming home on horseback, and the Jakkamarra family were heading off into the bush for a few days.

Effie eyed Eliot.

“You alright, Yank?” she asked finally.

“Uh-huh,” Eliot murmured without opening his eyes.

Little Rose smacked her lips as she slept and then settled again at Effie’s smoothing of her cheek.

“Feeling better?” Effie said.

Eliot’s lips quirked.

“Yes,” he said.

Jo, sitting in the front passenger seat with a weary Buster on her lap, grinned, but wisely kept her comments to herself.

“Talkative bugger, aren’t you, you little bastard,” Effie muttered.

Eliot said nothing but settled a little deeper into his seat, easing the ache in his side. He didn’t want to admit it, but he was very tired, but this time it was a good tiredness, not the mind-numbing exhaustion he had been dealing with for the past few weeks. It would be just a couple of weeks more and he would be fit to fly back to Portland with his team.

Portland. Not home. Wapanjara was home, and the people who lived there were his. His family. And now his team was part of that family, and they thought of Wapanjara as home too. But work meant Portland, and the brewpub needed Eliot’s input if it was to continue its success.

Eliot felt his good humour fade. He didn’t want to leave. He was happy here … genuinely happy, and there was the added bonus of being able to keep Lizzie safe. Until Ponomarenko was dealt with … but his train of thought was interrupted by Hardison, who suddenly jammed on the brakes and
Bernadette shuddered to a halt just as the track came to an end in the homestead yard.

“What the hell??” Hardison muttered, obviously surprised.

Eliot sat up and peered through the gap between the front seats.

An old Ford utility was parked right in front of the veranda steps, and hunkered down and sitting on his heels was a stocky figure, face shadowed by a battered straw Stetson and idly drawing something in the dirt with a stick.

Eliot slipped out of Bernadette’s door in a moment, despite Jo’s soft “Don’t, Eliot!”, and he calmly walked to stand in front of the big vehicle.

The figure looked up and grinned. The aborigine stood and took off his hat, showing an amiable visage with short-cropped curls and a stubble beard.

“G’day Eliot!” the figure said. “Any chance of a cuppa? I’m bloody parched!” he added.

Eliot relaxed and smiled.

“Hey, Onslow,” he answered, voice full of humour. “Long time no see.” He lifted a hand, waving at the veranda steps. “C’mon. I’ll put the kettle on.”

Charlie, Kip and Lizzie returned from their ride just before lunch. It had been an exciting ride in that they had helped a young heifer give birth to her first calf, and they lingered to make sure the baby got onto its feet and had its first drink.

But when they rode along the track to the homestead, they were faced with an unknown vehicle and a stranger sitting with their family on the veranda, drinking tea and laughing like an idiot. Everyone else was joining in other than Eliot, who was glaring at the newcomer with his ears turning pink with embarrassment.

Charlie realised that there was no danger and turned the mare towards the yards.

“C’mon, nippers – you have the horses to take care of and those saddles to clean, so get on - we’ve got chores to do. You can meet whoever that is in a bit.”

“But dad –” Kip whined, and Lizzie let out a groan of disappointment.

“Don’t ‘But dad’ me, kiddo. You know the rules. Horses first, then us. Go on – shift your bums!” Charlie added with a grin, knowing the children’s curiosity was piqued.

Half an hour later the children clattered up the veranda steps to be faced with Eliot blustering angrily and the newcomer merrily relating a rambling story about Eliot’s special ops team abandoning their leader to the tender mercies of the elderly matriarch of a Turkish family of illegal arms dealers while they dealt with her sons and grandsons.

“You should’ve seen him when we went back to get him!” the stranger said. “He was supposed to distract the old lady, but she’d had him chained to a radiator and stripped down to his bare essentials. She obviously had designs on the bod, Eliot! Funniest thing I ever saw!”

Eliot cocked an eyebrow, trying hard to keep his temper now that the children had arrived. He narrowed his eyes and scowled at his visitor.

“Yeah, well … you got the job done, an’ that’s all that matters!” he rumbled, ears still slightly pink.
“Man!” Hardison said gleefully as he helped Effie set the table ready for lunch, “Eliot Spencer, buck nekkid an’ chained to a radiator! Wait ‘til I tell –“

“There’s no-one to tell, Hardison!” Eliot hissed, and Hardison’s grin widened. “Anyway … I wasn’t ‘buck nekkid,’ you idiot!”

“That’s true,” the stranger said, trying to marshal his amiable features into a carefully-managed straight face, “you were still wearing your socks.”

Eliot gave the man a Death Glare.

“Dammit, Onslow!!” he growled, and then he noticed Lizzie gaping at him open-mouthed. “What??” he asked.

“Why didn’t you have any clothes on?” Lizzie exclaimed, not sure whether to be horrified or intrigued.

“I was wearin’ my socks!!” Eliot insisted, face like thunder. Lizzie opened her mouth to ask more questions, but Eliot nipped the whole thing in the bud just in time. “Lizbeth Grace … this is Onslow Dawson. He’s an old friend.” He turned to Onslow, who studied the little girl carefully from surprisingly blue eyes. “This is Nate and Soph’s daughter, Elizabeth. Lizzie.” He managed a smile despite his disgruntlement.

Onslow stuck out a hand and Lizzie shook it, staring into the impossibly blue eyes set in Onslow’s dark-skinned visage. She thought he was beautiful.

“Hi,” she managed, and blushed.

Eliot stared at Lizzie and then at Onslow. The latter grinned mischievously.

“G’day, Lizzie,” he said, and then shoved his hand in Charlie’s direction. “Hey, mate. You must be Charlie Jakkamarra, and this little sprout just has to be Kip.”

Charlie shook the proffered hand and nodded. The man had a decent, firm grip, and his arresting blue eyes were kind.

“Onslow … welcome, brother. Charlie Jakkamarra of the Warumungu.”

Onslow’s mobile face sobered.

“Onslow Dawson of the Ngarrabul. I, uh … I heard about your lady. So sorry, mate.”

For a long moment there was silence on the veranda, and then Charlie sighed.

“Yeah … she walks the Dreaming now. These people …” he gestured at his friends, “… they avenged her. She’ll wait for me. I’ll see her again one day.”

“Me too!” Kip said and held his father’s hand.

“Yeah,” Onslow said softly. “You will that, boy. And the Ancestors will watch over her until then, hey?”

Kip nodded vigorously and squeezed Charlie’s fingers.

It was Effie who broke the silence.
“Righto, you lot!! Lunch!!”

Eliot began to stand, but Effie smacked him on his uninjured shoulder.

“Sit! Sunbeam can give me a hand, and you!” She pointed at Onslow, who raised his eyebrows at being singled out by the old cook. “You stay put, bug-a-lugs. There’s plenty, so you’ll bloody well eat up.”

Onslow shifted in his seat, surprised by the invitation.

“Um …”

“You can sit next to me!!” Lizzie gushed, and Onslow, surprised but charmed, shrugged and winked at Lizzie.

“Now, how can I refuse good tucker and a pretty lady!” he said, and Lizzie giggled.

“Oh dear,” Sophie whispered to Nate. “I think our daughter is a little besotted.” She sighed. “Ahhh … young love!” she added, amused. “Eliot, however … not so thrilled, methinks …”

Eliot was scowling furiously, but Onslow flashed him a brilliant smile.

“Maybe over lunch I’ll tell you about the time Eliot and my team worked with a bunch of donkey smugglers in Afghanistan,” he said with a chuckle. “We were embedded in Nimruz, trying to close down arms-smuggling from Pakistan when one of the hairy little asses bit Eliot on the bum. He couldn’t sit down properly for a week ‘cause the bite got infected, and we were riding horses twelve hours a day through the mountains tracking insurgents. He wasn’t in the best mood for a bit.”

Lizzie was enthralled.

“Eliot got bitten on the bottom by a donkey???” she asked, and looked at Eliot for confirmation as Effie began to load the veranda table with food. “Is that true??”

Eliot curled his lip, ears once more a delicate shade of shell pink.

“I hate friggin’ donkeys!” he groused.

“Ah-hah!” Jo said with satisfaction. “So that’s what that scar is! I always wondered.”

Many pairs of eyes swivelled in Jo’s direction, agog with curiosity, and Jo realised what she had said. It was obvious an explanation was in order, even though Eliot was beginning to sputter, which never got old, she thought.

“Oh … well, when Eliot first came here, he was very sick,” she explained. “We, ah … we found him on the side of the Wapanjara road –“

“You hit me with the ute!” Eliot snapped, eyes full of indignation.

“Yes … well …” Soapy said, a little embarrassed, but Jo wasn’t in the least apologetic.

“Well you shouldn’t have walked in front of us!” she said, eyebrows drawn down. “And it was getting dark! Soapy tried to avoid you, but it was too late!”

Eliot snorted, but he relented a little.

“I wasn’t exactly well at the time!” he grumbled, although a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.
“Saved my life … you two findin’ me.”

Jo smiled at him fondly.

“The idiot wouldn’t go to a hospital –“

“I hate hospitals!” Eliot muttered under his breath.

“ – so, I had to patch him up. The silly sod nearly died, and I had to jab his backside with antibiotics we use for the cattle. That’s how I know about the scar.”

“So … Eliot got bit in the ass by an ass!” Parker chortled. “That’s adorable!”

“Adorable?? It’s frikkin’ hilarious!” Hardison added, grinning widely.

Eliot’s upper lip twitched.

“You won’t find it so goddamn hilarious when I rip your face off an’ shove it up your –“

“EAT!!” Effie ordered, and poked Eliot in the arm with a spoon.

And so lunch was duly eaten, with Onslow flanked by two children hitting him with a barrage of questions about Eliot and Eliot growling like a wounded bear. Everyone else listened and laughed and teased the hitter, and the food was good and the company even better, and Eliot, indignant and snarly, couldn’t have been happier with his family well and safe around him.

“So, Onslow – I don’t mean to be rude, but why the visit?” Tom said, relaxing in the afternoon heat in one of the veranda soft chairs, Jamie in his arms, the infant slumbering like a stupefied puppy. Tom, now head of a yet-non-existent Leverage team, was cautious but pleasant.

Onslow had taken his place in one of the other chairs and sipped his tea. He pointed wordlessly at Eliot, the hitter sprawled in his recliner, Lizzie at his feet on a pile of cushions. From there she could surreptitiously watch Onslow while reading a school book.

“I put the word out that we might have a job for him,” Eliot said. “Remember?”

Onslow nodded and stretched out in the comfortable chair.

“I was in Srinagar when I got word,” he murmured, comfortable and relaxed on Wapanjara’s roomy veranda. “Suzy Wu … she let me know. She sends her love, by the way. She says she still has the handcuffs.”

Eliot grinned, but said nothing, even though Lizzie looked at him expectantly.

“So,” Onslow continued lazily, “I’ve got a job coming up in Adelaide and I thought I’d call past.”

“How did you know Eliot would be here?” Hardison asked as he wandered through from the kitchen after helping Effie clear up after lunch.

Onslow ignored the question and studied the young man, head cocked on one side.

“You’re Hardison, right? I hear you’re a pretty good hacker.”

Hardison sat down next to Eliot.
“Nah … I’m not just good, m’man. I’m the best.”

Onslow pondered for a moment, and then shrugged as he saw Eliot’s nod of agreement.

“No worries, mate. So … what’s the job? I hear you don’t do retrievals anymore.”

Eliot shook his head.

“I work with these lunatics now … an’ I got ‘Lizbeth Grace to look out for,” he added, nudging Lizzie with his foot.

“Eliot’s my guardian!” Lizzie piped up. “And he’s my bestest friend ever!”

Onslow thought about it for a few moments, and then rolled his shoulder speculatively.

“What can I do for you?” he asked.

Sophie appeared with a plateful of brownies and a teapot on a tray and set it on the table before eyeing Onslow.

“You do what Eliot does. Is that right?”

Onslow took another sip of tea before answering.

“Yeah. I do. And I’m bloody good at it. Why? Who do you want me to kill?” he asked, amused.

Tom let out a low, rumbling laugh, and little Jamie huffed happily against his chest, sound asleep in Tom’s strong arms.

“Nothing like that, my friend.”

Onslow mock-wiped his forehead.

“Phew! Thank God for that! I don’t do that anymore. Well … not unless I have to,” he continued, a little bemused.

Nate, sprawled on the swing-seat with Rose draped over his chest, kept a protective hand on the little girl’s back as she slept and gesticulated with the other.

“You know what we do, right? This team?”

Onslow pursed his lips before nodding.

“I do. You’re do-gooders. You help people who don’t have anyone else to turn to. The no-hopers. I hear you’re quite good at it.”

Lizzie sat up and leaned against Eliot’s leg and gazed earnestly at Onslow.

“They save people’s lives!” she said eagerly, “and help get the bad guys and make sure people get their money back and … and … they even helped a little boy get a new heart once!! That was before I was born, but Parker told me about it, and my Daddy … my Daddy, he made the bad guy pay for what he did ‘cause he stole that little boy’s new heart, and –“

Onslow raised a hand, halting what appeared to be a possible tirade, and Lizzie gave him a winning smile.
“Okay, okay … I get it. What does that have to do with me?”

“I want you to join our team,” Tom said quietly. “The new Australian Leverage team. We need a man with your skills. Eliot thought you would be a good match.”

Now Onslow was surprised.

“Me?”

Eliot reached out and snagged a brownie before answering.

“Yes. Look … I know you, Onslow. You’re good at what you do … damn near as good as me … but I know just lately you’ve been takin’ work that doesn’t cost lives. Hell, I even heard you took a bunch of kids out of a Yemeni orphanage before they got taken by slave traders.” He pointed a finger at the younger man. “You got a heart in you, Onslow. And we want to do here in Australia what we do in Portland. We got plans for an HQ, and we have the finances to do this. You’d make pretty decent money and do some good into the bargain.” He took a bite of the brownie, munched, swallowed and grinned. “It ain’t easy, man. It could mean takin’ hits for the team and absolutely pulling their sorry asses outta the fire all the damn’ time, and thinkin’ on your feet. But hell, Onslow – you’re good. Come work with us. You won’t regret it.”

Onslow pondered the idea for a moment and then squinted at Tom.

“You’re heading up this team Eliot’s talking about?”

“Yeah. And before you ask, I was a copper for over thirty years and I followed the rules. But I’ve been working with this bunch on a job, and I think … I think that justice is sometimes more important than the law. We can do some good for a lot of people who have nowhere else to turn,” Tom said.

Onslow thought about it some more before answering, but when he did, he had only one question.

“Who else is in the team?”

“No-one as yet. You’re the first, if you decide to do this. Hardison thought Ezekiel Jones –“

Onslow shook his head.

“Won’t work, mate. He’s got himself another gig with some bunch of loonies doing something bloody secret, although they call themselves ‘Librarians.’ Probably some security code word. Nah. He’s out of the loop. But …” he thought for a moment. “… what about Richard Lyon?”

“Ooooh!” Parker said as she climbed down from the roof to the yard and made her way up the veranda steps. “He’s gooood!! Mind you, if you get Richard you get Alan as well, but they’re both very nice. I like nice.”

Tom raised an eyebrow, wondering just who this Richard and Alan were, but he would ask Parker later.

“So … what do you think?” he asked Onslow, who stood up and stretched.

“I’ve got this job to do, so … yeah. I’ll think about it and give you a call. How soon d’you need to know? And I have to say, Tom – it’ll depend on who you get for the rest of the team.”

Tom nodded, understanding.
“Fair do’s, mate. Will the Adelaide job take long?”

Onslow ducked his head, slightly embarrassed.

“Depends. It’s a kidnap-ransom situation.”

“Seriously??” Tom was slightly alarmed. “Why aren’t the police involved?”

Onslow almost didn’t answer, but he sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers.

“Because it’s not a human. It’s a bloody dog,” he explained. “A bleedin’ Shih Tsu called Winston.”

Eliot let out the rasping chuckle that meant he was highly amused.

“Dammit Onslow!! You need a change of scene, man!” he let the rumble in his chest ease. “Think about the offer. Somehow I think you’re ready.”

“Yeah, well … maybe you’re right.” Onslow stood up and stretched. “Righto. I’m off. Tom … we’ll talk soon, one way or another.” He lifted his hat and looked at Lizzie. “See you, little ‘un.” He placed the battered straw Stetson on his short curls, and grinned at everyone. “Ah-roo!”

Onslow Dawson clumped down the steps, clambered easily into his dusty ute, and drove away into the humid, bright day.

Lizzie stood up and hugged Eliot’s arm. She sighed.

“I think he’s lovely!” she whispered softly.

Eliot groaned.

It was a week later when Tom Reid called and invited the Leverage team to meet him at what was once Albany Mining Company and what would in the future – if Nate and Charlie had anything to do with it – be known as Alinjirri Cattle Station.

The place would be offered for sale in a few weeks, Tom said, after the inquest, which had been brought forward to assist the investigations of the Shanghai police into the demise of the head family of the Shumchun Triads.

The drive was a long one.

Effie decided to stay at Wapanjara with Lizzie and Mei, to help with the twins and to keep the station in hand for the day. Mei’s face had clouded when the trip had been mentioned to her, and she shook her head.

“I stay here with Effie,” she said. “That place … I hate that place. I won’t go.”

Effie had given the girl a hug, and eyed Jo.

“You go, Missus. The princess and me … we’ll be just fine looking after the nippers.”

And so a bereft Lizzie and Kip, who had been upset at not being allowed to go, watched as the rest of their family crammed into Bernadette and Soapy’s old ute and drove away. They knew their family would be back by nightfall, but still … they would miss them. Kip hadn’t been separated from his father since his mother had died.
Effie disappeared into her room, brought out her pump-action shotgun and laid it within reach on the old chest of drawers in the kitchen.

“C’mon, you little buggers! We have chores to do! Go on now – help Jacko feed the horses, and get that bloody camel her breakfast. Then you can help me make pineapple and mango upside-down cake for pud tonight, when they all come home. Your dad loves upside-down cake!” she added, tapping Kip on his shoulder.

Two small children sighed, looked up at Effie who glared at them with great affection, and went into the house to put on their work boots.

Effie checked the skyline, deemed it safe and stumped back into the house to begin her day.

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Alinjirri was huge.

The last time Nate and Charlie had been there the place had been lit up by spotlights and Khenbish Hadan had limped towards the trucks filled with injured men. But now, in daylight, it just looked abandoned.

Hardison brought Bernadette to a halt in front of the homestead, joining Tom’s old ute already parked by the veranda steps. Tom was lazing on a chair on the veranda itself, and he had a pile of papers beside him on the table.

“Hey there!” he called out, and stood up. “Are you lot ready to go over this place and understand what you’re taking on?”

Nate looked around at his team, and all of them could see the gleam in his eye. This new offshoot of their business was rousing the creative urge in him, and Sophie patted his arm, a knowing look in her own dark eyes.

“Down, boy,” she said, smiling. “Let’s see what we’re taking on before we get too excited.”

“Yeah … well … it’s just … y’know … stimulating,” Nate said, somewhat distracted as Tom dug out plans and inventories, handing each of them a copy.

“Jo, Charlie and I’ll go check out the cattle pens and outbuildings if you like,” Soapy said, studying the layout. “I want to have a look and see what we can work with and what might not be up to scratch. This place hasn’t been worked as a cattle station for a few years, so …”

“Are you sure about this?” Charlie asked, taking in the run-down house and the sprawl of mining equipment. “It’s going to be a helluva bloody job, Nate. Just getting it back up and running as a working station is going to take big money, and as for your end … I hate to think what it’ll cost.”

Nate clapped Charlie on the shoulder, and saw the worry on the young aborigine’s face.

“You and Soapy and Eliot … I know you can make this place a going concern. As for the new team … let me worry about that.” He rubbed his hands together and settled his borrowed stockman’s hat on his head. “Okay, people – you all go do your thing. Look the place over, and we’ll meet up when you’re ready and we’ll discuss.”

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They wandered Alinjirri for over three hours.

Charlie, Jo and Soapy went over the outbuildings, poking walls and testing every inch of the heavy-
duty yards and chutes for handling thousand-pound bullocks. They checked the water supply and the offices, and inspected the electrical wiring.

As Charlie looked over the station manager’s bungalow, Soapy turned around and shaded his eyes. There, standing on top of the platform of the water tower, was Hardison, wearing a harness and looking a little shaky. Parker suddenly swarmed up the tower with a heavy backpack over one shoulder. Wrapping her legs around the tower frame, she dug about in the pack and handed Hardison electronic equipment including his laptop. Then she climbed past him and hung from the support carrying the windmill mounting. Hardison handed her an extendable aerial and the pair of them got to work testing Alinjirri’s potential for connection to the world-wide web.

“House is okay,” Charlie said as he wandered out of the bungalow. “Needs a bit of work, but nothing major. What d’you think about all this, Soapy?” he continued, watching Hardison sit down and dangle his long legs over the edge of the platform as he ran his tests.

Soapy Munro smiled at his wife who was busy checking the ballcock on the big water feeder-trough in the main mustering pen in the yards. She pulled off the concrete cover and discovered the ballcock had broken away from the valve.

“This’ll need replacing,” she called, replacing the cover. She eased a kink out of her back and grimaced. “I think the water pump’s not working, so I can’t see what the water quality’s like, but … if we can fix the supply, replacing a few ballcocks won’t break the bank.”

“The land’s good too,” Charlie added, “even if it floods a bit. There’s more grass here than Wapanjara, but I think the water supply won’t be as reliable.” He shrugged. “It’ll rear good beef well enough, and we’ll do okay with Eliot’s Black Angus herd.” Charlie grinned, bemused by the whole idea. “This is bloody crazy, Soapy. But I tell you, it’s bloomin’ exciting.” He sobered for a moment, and his eyes became wistful. “She would have just loved all this,” he said softly, and in his heart he felt Alice’s throaty chuckle.

“Well, Charlie … let’s make this a go then, hey? For her.” Jo said as she joined her husband.

Charlie’s smile widened.

“Yeah … yeah, Jo. I think I’d like that.”

“So … that’s it then. We’ve decided we’re going to do this,” Soapy said, taking a deep, decisive breath.

“I’m all for it, Soapy love. I think we can do this,” Jo whispered, and kissed the love of her life on the cheek. “For our nippers.”

Mind made up, the three of them set forth to meet Sophie at the main homestead house.

“This house needs blowing up!” Sophie seethed as she sat next to Tom on the old, termite-eaten veranda, “and not just because it’s falling to pieces!”

Nate and Eliot were making their way up the steps to join them after inspecting the mining layout. Eliot was especially tired, but he leaned against the house wall and gazed out at the yard and what was left of a neglected garden.

“Yes,” he said softly. “This place is full of bad vibes, I guess. You’ll never get Mei to set foot in the place, an’ I don’t blame her.”
“I found the room where Chong had her chained up,” Sophie muttered, tense with anger. “Bastard!”

Hardison and Parker joined them, and Nate raised an enquiring eyebrow.

“Will the tech work here?”

Hardison grinned cheerily.

“Ohhhh yeah!” he answered happily, and did a complicated body wriggle as he tried to express how excited he was about the new venture. “Man … the set-up is going to be outstanding!”

“The mining operation is going to take a while to dismantle properly, but we’ve got the time.” Nate continued, and turned to Tom. “Well? Is this a ‘go’ for you, Tom? Want to do this?”

Tom Reid looked around at these people who had turned his life upside-down, and, he realised then, it was for the better. He took a deep breath and nodded.

“Yeah … yeah, I can do this. Count me in.”

Nate looked around at his team … his family.

“So … we have a plan.” He gestured at his team. “We’re flying back to Portland next week, but we’ll be back in a couple of months to take this forward –“

“Christmas,” Jo interrupted, smiling. “Come back home for Christmas and New Year, and stay on for the Tennant Creek campdraft. It’ll be fun while we get this place in hand.”

Nate thought about it for a moment, and nodded.

“Christmas it is. I’m sure Lizzie will drive us crazy until she comes back to Wapanjara.”

“Christmas!!” Parker chortled. “I love Christmas!!”

But even as Eliot walked back to Bernadette with his family, his heart ached. He would leave Wapanjara … his home … and Lizzie wouldn’t be within its protective environs. But there was nothing he could do about it. They all had to leave, and continue their work. But he had done it before, and he would no doubt have to do it again and again. But he couldn’t shake off the feeling of foreboding.

And in the back of his mind, slinking in the shadows, was the spectre of Tomas Ponomarenko.

To be continued …

* ‘Ringer’ – a Northern Territory word for seasonal stockmen.
Epilogue - And While There Is a Wrong To Right

Team Leverage spent their last week at Wapanjara in a variety of ways.

Hardison was, perhaps, the busiest of them, with Charlie as a willing assistant and Parker helping out with the high stuff. The beginnings of the new, highly-sophisticated security system was installed, and it meant a lot of gesticulating, muttering and yelling, with Charlie not understanding much of it and Parker telling him it didn’t matter because nobody really understood what Hardison was talking about.

The biggest job was the installation of a WiFi-enabled tower discreetly built behind the cattle yards, and with connection to a satellite and a bunch of smart-phones, it meant Wapanjara had high-end communications, which would be made even better by the eventual installation of a number of repeater towers throughout Wapanjara and Alinjirri.

The difficult part of it was teaching Soapy how to use a smart-phone. Jo, Effie and Mei picked it up fairly quickly, but somehow Soapy struggled. For a man who had been in the army and used some of the most complex and sophisticated equipment in the world, the simple smart-phone defeated him.

Hardison’s teaching method was just too much for the old pastoralist.

“Look … see … all you do is press your finger against this spot … here … at the back, and hold it for a few seconds, and that unlocks the phone by accessing the security logarithms using a fingerprint identification system. Then you can use it!”

Hardison looked at Soapy expectantly, holding out the phone.

Soapy stared at the ‘phone as though it had two heads and then he took it gingerly.

“How?” he said, mystified.

“Well … well … you press whichever app you want.” Hardison replied with an encouraging smile.

Soapy glared at the ‘phone and tried touching the place on the back with his finger. Nothing happened. He pressed it again. Nothing. Frustrated, he pressed it several times in quick succession, and Hardison held up a hand.

“Whoa, whoa there!” he blurted, “don’t keep pressing it, Soapy! You’ll confuse it!”

“So what?” Soapy said, frustrated and bewildered. “How the bloody hell do you confuse a ‘phone??”

Hardison turned the thing over and showed Soapy the place where he was supposed to activate the ‘phone.

“It’s a computer, right? If you keep pressing the button, the same message keeps getting sent and it tries to keep up, y’see, so it slows up and even freezes. Soooo … all you do is press and hold, and then wait. Okay?” he explained, an edge beginning to sound in his voice.

Soapy stared at Hardison.
“So why didn’t it just switch on the first time?”

Hardison pinched the bridge of his nose, took a deep breath and continued.

“Because, Soapy, you didn’t press long enough.”

“So how long is long enough?” Soapy was becoming even more bewildered. “I mean … two seconds? Three? And then what?”

Hardison bit his lip and kept his temper under control.

“You wait for it to boot up,” he said patiently.

Soapy’s eyebrows went to his hairline.

“You want me to kick it??”

Hardison sent his gaze heavenwards and he gritted his teeth.

“Why me? Just … why me??”

“It’s easy, Grandpa Soapy!” Lizzie interrupted as she called in past Soapy’s office to tell both men that lunch was ready. “Here … I’ll show you …” She brought out her own cell ‘phone, switched it off and then did the same to Soapy’s. “Alec … you’re too futzy,” she said with an impatient sigh, and handed Soapy’s ‘phone back to him. “Now,” she said, “you do what I do.” And with infinite patience, she slowly took Soapy through the intricacies of smart-phone usage.

Hardison sat back and watched his seven-year-old god-daughter teach her grandfather how to use a cell ‘phone, easily and with great care, and by the time Effie yelled and banged the triangle for lunch, Soapy was exploring a weather app he could use to plan his workdays. Hardison shook his head. Outsmarted by a seven-year-old. And he had no doubt at all that Kip would have done exactly the same.

Watching Soapy chortle with delight as he and Lizzie agreed to play a game of virtual checkers after lunch, Hardison knew he was defeated and quietly worked his way out of the office, and headed to the veranda to be consoled by Effie’s wonderful food.

It was after dinner that evening when Soapy clapped his hands together gleefully as everyone settled down on the comfortable seats dotted around the veranda.

“Alright, people! Family confab!!” he said, his lugubrious face breaking into a grin and placing a thick folder on the table. “Jo and I … we’ve been thinking, and … and we need your input.”

Nate helped himself to coffee from Effie’s big old coffee pot and sat down at the table, his curiosity piqued.

“Thinking about what?” he asked, eyeing the folder.

Jo leaned forward from her seat and began to pull papers and what looked like floor plans from the folder, spreading them out before her.

“What’s all this about?” Hardison asked, intrigued, and he wandered over to stand by Parker who was sprawled over one of the deep, comfortable old chairs.

“It’s this place,” Jo answered, waving a hand at the house, “it’s too small. We need to expand a bit
… we need room for our family. It’s growing, y’see,” she added with a happy smile, her green eyes warm in the soft light.

“We got the Princess and our babbies now, and this is their home too,” Effie rumbled as she relaxed in her chair next to Eliot, sipping her tea. “And then there’s you buggers,” she added with what was almost affection in her voice. “You can’t keep sleeping in bloody tents, can you?”

“I don’t mind!” Parker piped up. “I like sleeping on Bernadette’s roof!”

“You like sleepin’ anywhere high up, babe, let’s be honest,” Hardison murmured, and Parker gave him a cheery grin.

Lizzie’s eyes widened so much the starlight reflected in the depths of her gaze.

“Does … does that mean we get our own rooms??” she gasped. “Can I have my own room, Grandpa Soapy?? Can I?? Please??”

Soapy, tickled at the joy in his grand-daughter’s face, nodded.

“I think that can be arranged, sweetheart,” he replied with alacrity. “One of your very own, and you can decorate it however you like.”

Lizzie clutched Eliot’s hand where it lay on the arm of his recliner, and the hitter winced at the fierceness of her grip even as he smiled to himself at her excitement.

“Bookcases!!” she breathed, almost unable to speak, “can I have bookcases??” she asked. “… and … and Daddy, can I have a telescope so I can look at the stars? Maybe from Santa? I love the stars here … and Eliot can show me all the different things to look at in the sky and can I have a desk so I can do my writing and a tablet so I can do school stuff with Kip and –”

“Hey now, ‘Lizbeth Grace!” Eliot placed his spare hand over Lizzie’s and did his best to put the brakes on her flow of ideas. “Let’s wait an’ see what the plans are, okay? And if you do get your own room, it won’t be a big one because there isn’t that much space to expand, so hold your horses there, Tex!”

Lizzie giggled, and letting go of Eliot she stumbled excitedly around her father and flung herself at Soapy in an all-enveloping hug.

“Thank you, Grandpa Soapy!” she whispered, and Soapy kissed the top of her head.

“You’re welcome, my girl. And I think we can maybe manage at least one bookcase.”

“Soapy … Jo … are you sure?” Sophie asked, a little doubtful. “I mean … we live in Portland and wouldn’t that be a waste of space –”

“Nah,” Jo interrupted, contentment on her lean face. “We’ve needed more space for a while now. Eliot’s room used to be our guest room, and although we don’t tend to get many visitors, it would help if we had a bigger house. Look …” She spread a floor plan out on the table for everyone to see. “ … we can add on four bedrooms if we expand here –” she indicated the northern side of the house, “- lengthen the corridor, and extend the veranda right along the west side of the extension. Gertie would lose a bit of her paddock, but she would still have plenty of room and she could even sit out of the sun under the veranda. The only drawback is that she couldn’t reach Eliot’s window. But … if we put doors from each bedroom leading onto the veranda, she could still annoy you at three in the morning!”
Eliot snorted, but nodded.

“She’ll deal with it. But you got to think about bathrooms, darlin’. One bathroom ain’t enough, not with these nutcases.”

Jo’s face was a picture of smugness.

“It’s not an ideal solution, but we can put what I think you yanks call ‘Jack and Jill’ bathrooms between several of the rooms and enlarge the main one a little. So … thoughts, anyone?”

Over the next hour plans were pored over and discussed, pros and cons pondered and a multitude of sketches – mostly done by Lizzie – designed, added-to and then discarded.

There was a minor argument while they were discussing ideas about extending Effie’s kitchen and updating some of her equipment. While Eliot’s idea of giving Effie a walk-in freezer so that Soapy wouldn’t have to haul half a lamb from the outside freezer up Effie’s steep kitchen steps was broadly welcomed, Hardison put his life in peril when he suggested Effie get a microwave.

“A what??” Effie growled, muddy eyes narrowing.

Hardison compounded his error by trying to describe to Effie exactly what a microwave was.

“I mean, Eff, you could reheat stuff, and, y’know, save lots of time ’cause you could -“

“I know what it does, you young bludger!” Effie hissed threateningly, “and you’ll put one of those radioactive bastards in my kitchen over my dead body!”

Hardison’s brow furrowed earnestly, and he tried to put Effie’s mind at rest.

“But it’s not radioactive, seriously! It’s perfectly safe an’ –“

“Bloody thing! Leaking zappy rays all over my ruddy food?? Not bleedin’ likely, you cheeky blighter!” Effie exploded, and she pointed a stubby finger accusingly in Hardison’s direction. “I cook good, wholesome fresh food, sunbeam, and I won’t have it poisoned by some infernal blasted machine! Y’hear me??” Effie ranted, eyes sparking with ire.

Hardison was mystified. What was wrong with a bit of 21st century modernisation? Didn’t Effie realise how much easier it would make her life?

“But Eff –“ he began, and Eliot’s voice drifted laconically through the air.

“I’d stop now, Hardison, if you want to make it through the next five minutes an’ still keep your fingers.”

Hardison frowned, genuinely confused.

“But I don’t see the problem, El! I mean, I bought one for Nana an’ she loved it!” he insisted, still mystified at Effie’s objections.

Eliot grinned.

“Yeah … but have you ever seen Nana actually use the thing? Last time I looked it still had the cardboard wrappin’ over the turntable.”

Eliot had a quiet, happy relationship with Hardison’s Nana – he helped her cook, washed the dishes and kept his mouth shut. She called him ‘young man’ and Eliot called her ‘Ma’am’ and they were
content, and he learned a lot about soul food. Nana’s baked beans with maple-glazed bacon were to die for.

Hardison was about to gush about Nana’s use of her beautiful industrial-sized microwave until he remembered his last visit, just before the Qatar job. The microwave had pride of place in Nana’s homely kitchen, all gleaming stainless steel and blinking lights, and Nana never failed to tell Hardison how amazing it was. But still, she was bending over her huge old gas stove reheating her heavenly chicken soup in a big pot because she knew her boy and his team loved the stuff.

“She hates it,” Parker stated matter-of-factly, and then blew a loud raspberry to seal the statement.

“W-what?” Hardison blustered. “No, no she don’t –“

“Yep,” Parker continued. “Hate. Hate-hate-hate. With a capital H.”

Hardison winced.

“Dammit!” he whispered, and Effie chuckled nastily.

“See? Your Nana is a lady after my own heart,” she crowed, and then she jabbed a finger at Hardison. “No micro-buggering thing in my kitchen! Y’hear??”

Hardison sighed, knowing defeat when he saw it.

“I hear you.” Then he brightened as another idea hit him. “But what about –“

“You leave my kitchen alone, you young whipper-snapper!” Effie snorted, and her eyes narrowed. “Touch anything in my kitchen, my lad, and I’ll tell your Nana!! And I’m pretty bloody sure she’ll have your bum in a sling before you can say ‘see you in bleedin’ Hell!’”

Hardison looked crushed. He nodded his head, crestfallen.

Yes’m,” he murmured, and settled himself into the chair beside Parker, who stared at the hacker.

“You didn’t know??” she asked incredulously. Seeing Hardison’s gloomy expression she relented and patted him on the arm. “Never mind,” she added. “Nana thinks it looks pretty.”

Effie relented a little, and her muddy eyes softened.

“Tell you what, sunbeam – I always fancied a rotisserie. My sister Vi has one - God rot her misbegotten old soul when she finally pops her clogs,” she said viciously, “– and I always thought it would be a bloody joy to whack a couple of chooks on the rotisserie. It would be a bit different, hey?”

Hardison brightened a little. A rotisserie would work.

“Nothing too fancy, mind!” Effie continued, pointing again at Hardison. “No bleeping or … or … digi-whatsits or flashy-blinky lights!! I just want to switch it on and all it does is go around and around, laddie. Understand?”

“Keep it simple, stupid!” Parker interjected, and she gave Hardison her sweetest smile. “And if Effie likes it, maybe you could get one for Nana!”

Maybe Nana would enjoy a rotisserie, Hardison thought. What his Nana could do with a rotisserie chicken had to be eaten to be believed.
“I’ll find a few on-line an’ you can choose,” Hardison said, “an’ when we’re all back for Christmas, you an’ me, we’re gonna go pick the one you want. My treat. We could have a trip to Alice Springs, maybe? All of us?”

Lizzie’s sudden yell of delight at the idea of a trip to Alice just about deafened Eliot, but he had to smile as she babbled on about the kangaroo sanctuary Parker had told her about where she could bottle-feed an orphan joey.

Effie thought about it for a moment, and then nodded. A trip to Alice Springs might just be a hoot, she thought.

And as plans were made to change Wapanjara to accommodate its growing family, the fireflies flared pallid light and the scent of roses filled the cool night air, and Eliot’s heart ached because he would soon be leaving this place he called home.

Onslow Dawson called Eliot on his cell ‘phone the next morning.

_Hey, Eliot, _he said cheerily. _I thought about it. This ‘team’ thing._

“And?” Eliot rasped as he held up a finger to stop Hardison in his tracks. The hacker was standing at the top of the veranda steps with a stock whip curled over one shoulder. Against his better judgement, Eliot had promised to attempt to teach Hardison how to use a whip.

Onslow seemed amused and a little surprised at himself.

_Yes, mate. I think I’ll give this team thing a bit of a go._ Eliot heard the man take a deep breath before continuing, as if trying to convince himself he was doing the right thing. _It seems to suit you well enough even though you’re a bad-tempered, impatient short-arse with the attitude of a frustrated T-Rex._

Eliot opened his mouth to growl something rude, but Onslow chuckled.

_As I said before, it depends on the rest of the team, but if you get the right people I’m in. Just for a couple of jobs to see how it goes, but … it sounds a bit of fun if nothing else._

Eliot grunted a reply, pleased that the man was willing to take a chance. Onslow Dawson would be a good start to the new team. But he had something else to think about, and he hoped Onslow could help.

“That’s cool, man. Listen … Onslow … I got a favour to ask.”

He almost felt Onslow’s guard go up.

_How can I help? _Onslow’s reply was immediate, and for that Eliot was grateful as he turned back into the cool of the hall and out of the range of Hardison’s keen hearing.

“Tomas Ponomarenko,” Eliot said, keeping it simple.

He heard Onslow’s sharp intake of breath.

_The Confessor? Bloody hell, Eliot! What do you want with that creepy bugger?_

“I need an idea of where he is, Onslow. And before you ask, yeah, there’s a damn good reason why I need to know. I’m thinkin’ he’s in Europe for a little while. And Onslow … if you hear who he might be working for, that would be great. But don’t go lookin’, man. I don’t want you on that
“bastard’s radar. I just want to know what’s being said on the grapevine, okay?”

He sensed Onslow thinking about Eliot’s request, and the reply was exactly what he wanted to hear.

*No probs, mate. I’ll keep my ears to the wind and get back to you. I’m heading to Paris next week for a job, so if you think he’s around I’ll see what’s being said.*

Eliot kept his sigh of relief to himself, and nodded.

“Thanks, man. With me being laid up for now, I can’t keep tabs on the rumours. I’ll speak to you soon, and give Tom a call. He’ll be pleased to hear you’re gonna give the team a chance.”

Ringing off, Eliot felt better … more in control of the situation. Onslow Dawson was one of the best in his field, and if he couldn’t find out what Ponomarenko was up to, no-one else – including Eliot himself – could do so.

Tucking his ‘phone back in his pocket, he emerged back onto the veranda to see Hardison still waiting at the top of the veranda steps. For once, Hardison was silent. He knew better than to press Eliot on matters like this.

“C’mon,” Eliot said gruffly, and gestured at his friend. “Let’s go see how bad you are at using a whip. Heaven help me,” he added under his breath.

“OW!” Hardison yelped as for the third time the cracker on the end of the seven-feet-long stock whip touched him on the ear, and Eliot had to hurriedly duck out of the way.

*“Dammit, Hardison! What did I tell ya! Look … just … just hold it straight in front of you an’ bring it back over your head! Then … no, dammit!! Over your head, not round by your shoulder – shiit!”*  
It was Eliot’s turn to yelp as the cracker caught his arm.

“Sorry, man …” Hardison muttered, frustrated beyond belief, and once more tried his best to hold the handle of the kangaroo-hide whip the way Eliot had showed him. “So … line it up like a fishin’ rod … an’ back over the head … an’ forward like casting a line …” he talked himself through the process and tried again. After all, he was a fiend when it came to virtual fishing.

He was rewarded with a sad little *pfft* of noise as the whip flailed about like a limp piece of string.

Eliot eyeballed Hardison as he shook out his own whip, gave it a flick and brought it forward in an elegant swirl, lifted it over his head and snapped it forward. The *crack* was deafening. Hardison’s jaw dropped.

“See?” Eliot grouched. “It ain’t so damn hard!”

Hardison’s jaw set. He could do this.

Wriggling his shoulders and cricking his neck, his eyes narrowed and he gripped the handle of the whip just the way Eliot had shown him. There was no way Alec Hardison, master of the algorithm and wizard of the keyboard, was going to be beaten by a punk-ass piece of frikkin’ kangaroo hide.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, and focussed on the row of tins Eliot had set up several yards away for Hardison to apparently whup into submission. They sat there, taunting him in their tinny, smug little way.

Eliot took a few steps to the side and folded his arms, his whip now curled over his shoulder. There
was no way he was going to get in the way of an idiot with a stock whip.

Hardison flicked his whip forward in a straight line, channelled his inner Indiana Jones and went for it.

This time he knew he had done it. He felt more than heard the thrum of the whip as it rippled forwards, the sound ripping through the afternoon heat and clipping the tin on the far right of the little row in front of him, sending the tin dancing through the air, the sharp crack crisp and oh so right as the whip did as it was told for once.

“WOO-HOO!!” he yipped, and did a Hardison happy-dance, the whip now lax by his side and joining in the dance as Hardison flailed. “I da MAN!” he crowed, and beamed at Eliot.

Eliot did not beam back. Silently unfurling his own whip, he took a step forward and waved Hardison out of the way. His face settled into the zen-like place that Hardison had last seen when the man had faced Khenbish Hadan, and then, with barely a flick of his wrist, Eliot sent the whip into an arcing, cracking snake until it struck the next tin with such force it ‘pinged’ loudly and flew nearly six feet into the air. But before it hit the ground, the remaining tins were sent after it, glittering in the sunlight as Eliot wove the whip around his body, the cracks echoing through the trees and the sheer grace and beauty of it making Hardison hold his breath in wonder.

Even as the tins bounced and rattled as they fell onto the dusty yard, Hardison was taken back to the night he and Eliot had first worked together, and the hitter had taken out four men and left them unconscious before a compromised Hardison’s bag had hit the floor.

As the last tin skipped and stilled, Eliot flicked the whip to one side and gave Hardison the Look … the raised eyebrows and that shit-eating half-smile that meant Eliot had just shown everyone and their grandma what he could do and just how friggin’ good he was at his job.

“Smart-ass,” Hardison said.

Eliot grinned nastily.

“I am One with the Force,” he quipped. He pointed at the tins. “Set ‘em up, Padawan. Practice you must.”

As Eliot curled his whip and draped it over his good shoulder, Hardison retrieved the tins, setting them once again in a neat row, muttering to himself as he did so.

“An’ you ain’t no Yoda … Padawan my ass … frikkin’ no way Jose …”

And Eliot watched and smiled and felt better than he had in a long time.

All too soon, it was Team Leverage’s last day at Wapanjara. The following morning, they would head for Tennant Creek and thence to Portland, back to work and a bustling city full of light and noise and people.

Lizzie moped. She wandered around the homestead that morning, emitting explosive sighs and hugging Gertie, who wandered after her squeaking pitifully. Even as she retrieved Sparky’s grooming kit and spent some time brushing non-existent knots out of his short mane, she gave him weepy kisses. Sparky nibbled gently at her fingers and sympathised, and Gertie gave the little girl gentle camel-kisses and wiffled at her curly hair, turning it into camel-licked strings.

Sophie, finishing their packing in Oggie’s big tent, watched her daughter through the open flap and
elbowed Nate as he fastened and locked his suitcase.

“Look at her!” she whispered as Lizzie finished brushing her beloved colt and cleaned the brushes. Lizzie put everything away into her grooming kit, and flung her arms around Sparky’s neck, burrowing her face into his fluffy hide. Dottie licked her son and then gave Lizzie a few licks as well, worried about the little girl’s sadness. It was all very pathetic. “She’s going to have a bad few days, Nate, and there’s nothing we can do about it. We’ll just have to let her work through it, I think,” Sophie added, feeling for Lizzie.

Nate heaved the suitcase off the bed and sighed.

“She’ll cope,” he said, and Sophie caught the wistfulness in her husband’s tone, “and we’ll be back in a couple of months, Soph. It isn’t forever.”

Sophie leaned over and kissed Nate on the cheek.

“I know,” she murmured sweetly. “But she’s feeling the wrench, bless her. Since she’s been here – Chong and Hadan aside – she’s been more settled than ever before. Her reading’s improved, and even her maths is better.” Sophie sighed. “She’s been through a lot, Nate. She … we … nearly lost Eliot. And I’m damned sure that if Lizzie hadn’t been here he would have died. I never realised until now how much she helps him live. How much she helps all of us focus.”

Nate watched Lizzie koosh Gertie down and then wrap herself around Gertie’s long, powerful neck, snuggling into the animal’s huge head.

“One thing’s for sure,” he said.

Sophie raised an enquiring eyebrow.

“And that is?”

“She’s going in the tub before dinner tonight. The camel-stink is going to be fearsome.” Nate said, amused and not a little sad. He was going to miss Wapanjara like crazy.

Sophie poked him in the arm, and then laced her fingers through his.

“C’mon. We’re done here. Lizzie’s okay for now, so how about a walk down to the billabong? We could take our cozzies and go for a swim.”

Nate smirked.

“How about we go for a swim and not take our cozzies?” he said with a sly smile.

“Oooh, you old romantic,” Sophie replied smoothly. We’ve got an hour or two before lunch.” She leaned over and kissed him deeply, her dark eyes luminous and sparkling with hidden passion. “Let’s go work up an appetite.”

“Yeah,” Nate said, his voice now deep with desire. “Let’s.”

And wandering from the tent they headed slowly down the track to the South paddock gate, hand in hand, and the soft tendrils of the light breeze ruffled Nate’s curls, and the sound of the magpies fluting in the trees followed them as they disappeared into the dappled shade.

Parker was having a deep, meaningful discussion about her time at Wapanjara. She was sitting on the edge of the huge concrete drinking trough in the West paddock, and peering through the fence at her
companion as she sighed, feeling very out of sorts. She hated feeling like this. It made her a little
disconcerted and ill at ease.

“I mean, I want to go back to Portland - I think - but I want to stay here too,” she rambled, resting her
chin on one of the heavy wooden slats of the fence. “I miss Portland a little bit … there are museums
with lots of shiny things and stuff I can steal … but here …” she thought about how to express this
strange feeling in her stomach that was all warm and oddly fuzzy.

Kevin, dozing on the other side of the fence and not in the least interested, flicked a disdainful ear
and began to snooze.

Parker shrugged.

“I don’t know. It’s weird. And kinda cool. And nobody looks at me funny if I say something I’m not
supposed to, and it’s like … it’s like … it’s like I belong. I don’t belong anywhere. At least … I’ve
never felt as though I do. Unless it’s with the team. I know I belong with the team.” She let out a
snorky giggle, which made Kevin open one eye and glare at her. “I can breathe here. It’s not all full
of people pressing in on me, and nobody minds if I sit on the roof or the tower, and … and … it’s
just … well … nice.”

Kevin closed his eye and rested one hind foot, hipshot, and ignored this prattling human who was
disturbing his beauty sleep. His sparse tail flicked in irritation.

Parker smiled happily to herself.

“And I get hugs!” she added affectionately.

Kevin’s final comment was a loud, lingering fart.

Parker grimaced and glared at the old appaloosa.

“What do you know?” she snapped. “You’re just a horse-clown!”

But she didn’t move and neither did Kevin, and the pair of them languished in the heat and the sun
and the balmy breeze, and both of them were content.

Lizzie wandered back to the homestead and slowly clumped up the veranda steps to join Eliot, who
was stretched out on his recliner. He appeared to be asleep, but as Lizzie passed his outstretched feet,
his voice crept out from beneath the stockman’s hat covering his face.

“Are you okay, darlin’?” he asked, soft concern in every word.

Lizzie hesitated and the turned around and made for the chair next to Eliot. She flung herself down
into the comfortable seat with a noisy, expressive sigh.

“Yeah … I guess,” she said sadly. She let out a soft huff of misery. “Eliot …”

Eliot realised he wasn’t going to get the rest he wanted before the long trip back to Portland, so he sat
up in his chair, removed his hat and settled back to listen to whatever Lizzie had to say.

“I don’t want to go back to Portland!” she blurted finally, and her bottom lip stuck out. “I want to
stay here!”

Eliot, understanding but somewhat amused, took her complaint very seriously.
“I know, ‘Lizbeth Grace … I know. I felt like that the first time I had to leave here. It was hard. Really hard.” He reached out and took Lizzie’s hand in his. “But think about it, sweetheart … if I hadn’t left, then I wouldn’t have joined the team. And if there had been no team, then your Momma an’ Daddy probably wouldn’t have got together an’ had you. Then where would you be? Huh?”

Lizzie conceded that Eliot had a point, but she still felt bad. What was Effie going to do without her, and how were Grandpa Soapy and Grandma Jo going to cope?? And as for Charlie and Kip … she would miss them so much, and she couldn’t imagine not having Kip with her every day.

“But you know what?” Eliot continued, his voice dropping to the gruff rumble he reserved for children and animals.

Lizzie looked up at him with tear-filled eyes.

“What?” she whispered disconsolately.

“There’s a really bright side to leavin’, ‘Lizbeth Grace. I promise.” Eliot said warmly. “Can you guess what it is?”

Lizzie couldn’t possibly think of anything that could be good about leaving her family and the place where her heart lay.

“Nuh-uh,” she replied, heartbroken.

“The bright side, darlin’, is if you leave, you get to come home. As often as you want. And every time you do, it feels even more precious … even more sweet an’ good and full of everything that means the most to you. An’ we’ll be comin’ home in a couple of months for Christmas and New Year. You know that.”

Lizzie grasped her medicine pouch where it lay under her shirt and over her heart, and she knew Eliot was right. It did hurt to leave, but then there would be so much to look forward to. Christmas at Wapanjara. She couldn’t think of anything better.

But as she felt the objects in her pouch she remembered something, and her eyes widened.

“Wait here, Eliot!! I’ll be back in a minute!” she cried, and jumping up from her chair she disappeared into the house only to reappear a few minutes later, Eliot waiting patiently as only a wolf could.

Reaching out a hand, Lizzie caught Eliot’s fingers and tugged him to his feet, careful not to pull too hard because he was still a bit sore.

“C’mon!” she said eagerly. “We have to go to the tree stump! I’ve got something for you!”

Eliot, puzzled but willing to play along, allowed himself to be guided along the veranda and down the steps, and off the pair of them headed in the sunlight, Gertie following behind, along the track to the old tree stump.

The sun was reaching its zenith when Eliot settled his aching body onto the old stump beside the track. Lizzie fusses over him for a second or two, making sure he was comfortable and that his wounds weren’t bothering him. Gertie did as she always did – she settled down, folding her legs beneath her like a giant, smelly cat, and burped up her cud, happy to sit beside her humans and relax.

The magpies let out a whirring chunter of noise as they flitted through the almond trees, their black-
and-white livery stark in the midday light. An old goanna thought twice about wandering past the camel and the two humans sitting on the stump, and ambled off through the undergrowth, gulping in irritation.

Eliot took a deep breath and inhaled the scent of eucalyptus and jasmine, and he closed his eyes for a moment against the sudden glare of the sun through the trees. This was one of his favourite places. Here he had met Gertie, and it was here he had regained his balance as he healed from the knife wound which had almost killed him all those years ago.

But he frowned for a moment as he remembered Lizzie’s tears and anger as she accused him of lying to her, and for a second or two his heart skipped a beat.

Lizzie saw the shadow pass over his features and sat beside him, and she gave his biceps a hug.

“I’m so sorry I yelled at you,” she whispered.

“I deserved it, ‘Lizbeth Grace. There’s nothin’ to apologise for,” he replied, regret in every word.

Lizzie knew there was, but she wisely decided not to pursue the matter. She had something else to do.

“Eliot – I have a thing for you,” she said, and stood up, digging about in her jeans pocket. Pulling out whatever-it-was, she reached out to drop it in Eliot’s outstretched palm.

There, small and shiny in the light, lay Lizzie’s baby tooth.

Eliot gazed at it and then glanced at Lizzie, a little puzzled.

Lizzie looked back at her guardian expectantly.

“It’s for you,” she said. “For your pouch.”

“For my – “ Eliot began, and then his voice hitched as the he began to comprehend Lizzie’s gift.

Lizzie nodded.

“Ya-huh,” she continued, and gestured shyly at the tooth. “It’s a part of me. You look after me and protect me, and you’re my best friend.” Her eyes were warm and clear, and Eliot saw the love for him in this child he cherished with everything he had. “But you nearly died keeping us all safe, Eliot, and it made you all wibbly and you got sad because of Mooch and your team.” She paused and thought about how to say the next bit. “I … I think you get wibbly sometimes because you think you’re not good enough for us to love. But that’s not true. Because we love you a lot. Mama and Daddy and Alec and Parker. And you have Grandma and Grandpa and Effie and … and Gertie loves you too. And Charlie and Kip. Lots of people love you. So … I wanted to give you something to tell you that I love you, because you’re my bestest friend. My wolf.”

And as Eliot fought back tears, Lizzie stood behind him and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, her head resting in the hollow of his neck.

“To my dying day, my Eliot,” came the words that he never thought to hear. “To my dying day.”

And as the child held her wolf in her arms and told him he was loved, he slipped the tooth into his pouch and laid it back over his scarred heart.

That evening, as dinner was eaten on the veranda and the moon shone clear and bright in the night
sky, conversation was low but warm with laughter.

The food was fabulous. Effie and Eliot had excelled themselves, and with Mei and Lizzie pitching in to help, the courses kept coming until everyone was stuffed and stupefied, languishing on the veranda sipping tea and too full to say very much.

After clearing away and washing the dishes, Nate and Hardison joined their family, Nate slumping beside his wife on the swing seat. Sophie leaned back and gathered Nate to her, and he settled against the woman he loved with his head under her chin, stretching his length along the seat. Sophie hummed contentedly. This time at Wapanjara had finally given the two of them a break, allowing them to relax and enjoy each other’s company again, even after dealing with Chong’s demise and the threat of Tomas Ponomarenko.

Hardison lifted a lamington from the plate on the table as Mei wandered out of the house with Jamie and Rose in her arms.

Jo sat next to Soapy and gestured at the young woman, who deposited young Jamie in her grasp. The little boy gazed up at Jo and gave her the beginnings of a smile, which delighted her. Soapy leaned over and chucked the infant’s nose, and Jamie emitted a tiny squeak of pleasure.

Smiling at Mei as she sat down in her comfortable chair and cradled her daughter, Hardison finished his lamington and nodded to himself.

*It was time.*

He glanced at Effie, who gave him the minutest of nods.

“It’s in my bitso drawer, laddie. All ready to go,” Effie whispered.

Hardison grinned and wandered into Effie’s cavernous kitchen. Retrieving what he was looking for, he emerged through the door and onto the veranda, making his way over to Mei where she sat snuggling with Rose.

“Mei?”

The young mother looked up to see Alec Hardison standing in front of her holding out a folder which obviously contained some kind of paperwork. A puzzled frown creased her brow as she handed Rose to Soapy so that she could take the folder.

“This is for you and the babies,” Hardison said, and he sat down beside Parker. All eyes turned to Mei as she opened the folder and took out a sheaf of papers.

She studied them carefully, but her English wasn’t quite up to understanding the content, so she turned to Hardison, offering him the paperwork.

“Can you tell me what this is, Alec?” she said, confused and a little afraid, although she tried not to show it.

Hardison reached out and used a long finger to tap the official-looking certificate on the top.

“Remember when you said you wanted you and the babies to be Australian?”

Mei suddenly began to grasp what Hardison was saying and she nodded, eyes huge with hope.

“Well,” Hardison continued, “this bit of paper says your name is now Mei Munro, and the babies are
James and Rose Munro, natural-born Australians, born here at Wapanjara Station. These other papers—"he tugged out two more sheets, "—are their birth certificates. And here," he held up yet another document, "is the official adoption certificate making you the daughter of Theodore Alphonse Munro Junior and his wife Josephine Maria Munro, née Mulvaney, both resident at Wapanjara Cattle Station in the Northern Territory, Australia."

Mei took a hiccupping breath, her eyes shining with unshed tears.

“I am … I am Australian?? Really?? And I can stay? My children and I can stay here forever??”

Soapy reached out with one hand and rested it on Mei’s … his daughter’s … shoulder and squeezed.

“You’re home, sweetheart. This is your home. Always. You and the twins belong here, my girl. And you don’t ever need to be frightened again.”

Mei’s hands began to shake.

“Oh … oh, Papa Soapy … my Papa and Mama, and my Effie … I … I don’t know what to say …” she stammered, and she knuckled away tears.

Hardison took the paperwork from her so that she didn’t get it damp and put everything away in the folder, handing it to the young woman who murmured silent, sobbing ‘thank you’s’ under her breath.

“There’s only one thing I didn’t do, but I can change it if you want,” Hardison continued, his voice gentle and kind. “Rose and Jamie’s birth certificates … I, ah … I left the place for the father’s name blank. It means they won’t know who he is unless you want to me to put it in, or you can tell them later if you want to.”

Mei’s brows drew down and she shook her head vehemently.

“No!! No, there will be no name! Chong has no place in my children’s lives! Maybe when they’re older I will try and explain, but … but now they have a grandfather and grandmother and Effie. And all of you. They have a big family who loves them!”

“Good for you, princess,” Effie growled from her place beside Eliot. “That bastard!!” she added, her lip curling in disdain. She patted Eliot’s hand. “You did the right thing, Yank, ending that shitty little oik.”

Eliot, ever practical, knew he had had no choice and the world was better for it.

And so on this last night of their family being together, at least for a while, everybody celebrated new beginnings … a new venture, new life and a new and growing family.

The day Team Leverage left Wapanjara dawned misty and cool, as though the very land itself was sad about their going. Dampness dripped from the trees and the little mopoke complained bitterly about it as he ruffled his wet feathers in the undergrowth.

Breakfast was a quiet affair, and Effie was in a foul mood, which didn’t help to alleviate Lizzie’s unhappiness about leaving her home.

The little girl hadn’t slept well and she had been awake at dawn, trudging over to Gertie’s paddock to say goodbye to her friend and to give Sparky a last grooming before she left. She wouldn’t see him again for a while, and she was going to miss watching him grow up a little. His foal fluff was falling out, and as Charlie had told her, he was turning a dark grey underneath. When she returned,
she thought, Sparky would be a completely different colour.

Eliot had joined her, moving stiffly in the damp weather, and he told Gertie to be good and behave for Charlie, and to look after Sparky. Gertie gave them both slurpy camel-kisses, and honked sadly as they walked back to the house to eat, Lizzie grasping Eliot’s hand like a lifeline.

Parker was already on the veranda, picking at her sausages and waffles, and Effie poked her in the shoulder.

“Bloody well eat up, Missy! You’ve a long trip ahead of you and you need the energy, y’hear me? And I’m not wasting my time making food just so that you drongos can turn your ruddy noses up at it!”

Parker sighed noisily, and ate a sausage.

“Not hungry,” she grumbled, but she lifted her fork and half-heartedly began on the waffles.

Charlie and Kip arrived just after Nate, Sophie and Hardison sat down to eat.

Lizzie brightened when she saw Kip, but she was alarmed to see that his eyes were swollen with tears, and she slipped from her chair and gave the little boy a hug. It hadn’t occurred to her until now that Kip had already lost his mother, and now some of his family were leaving too. Christmas seemed a lifetime away.

“We’ll be back soon!” Lizzie whispered, and Kip nodded shakily, trying to work his way through another loss, especially Lizzie, who was his best friend.

“You promise?!” he asked, and smiled when he saw Lizzie’s vigorous nod.

“I promise!” she reassured him, and the two of them clung to each other for long moments. Letting go of her friend, Lizzie tried hard to stop her own tears and gulped noisily. “Can I ask you something?” she said finally.

Kip tried a smile and smeared tears over his cheeks as he wiped them away with the heel of his hand.

“Yeah, no worries!” he replied and waited expectantly.

“Can you look after Sparky for me?” Lizzie said hopefully. “I mean, I know Grandpa and your dad will make sure he’s okay and all that, but he really, really loves being brushed, and he’s learning to pick up his feet and he likes scratchies under his chin, and they don’t have time to do everything. Would you mind? His kit’s hanging in the tack room.”

Kip grinned through his tears and his head bobbled, his blond-dark hair a waving tangle of curls.

“Oh, sure I can!” he said enthusiastically, happy to be able to look after the colt. “Batu and I … we’ll make sure he’s bonzer, I promise!”

The two children, happier now, sat at the table and smiled at Effie, who scowled back affectionately. She placed plates of waffles in front of both of them and helped scatter fruit and syrup over the sweet treats.

Charlie sat beside his son and ruffled Kip’s curls.

“I’ll ride the Ducati back to Tennant Creek for you, Eliot. You’re not fit yet, mate. Then I can drive Bernadette home. She’ll do fine in the barn until you come home in December.”
Much to Soapy’s delight, it had been decided to leave Bernadette and Oggie at Wapanjara. Bernadette was more reliable than Soapy and Jo’s battered old ute, and with plans afoot for both Wapanjara and Alinjirri, Eliot wanted his people safe and in a trustworthy vehicle. Hardison had every expectation of Bernadette being polished to within an inch of her life.

“Are you sure about this?” Soapy asked as he sat down beside Jo and poured tea for both of them.

“Leaving Bernadette, I mean?”

Hardison nodded and attacked his scrambled eggs. Effie had put cheddar and herbs along with a tang of chili in them because she knew Hardison loved his scrambled eggs made to his Nana’s recipe.

“Yeah, no worries!” he replied, and nudged Lizzie with his elbow. “We got Lucille back in Portland, huh?”

“Lucille?” Jo asked, curiosity getting the better of her.

“Oh yes, Grandma,” Lizzie explained, “Lucille’s our van! She’s really clever! She has lots of special stuff in her that helps Alec catch the bad guys, and she’s comfy and Mama has a special chair to sit on, and there’s a couch and I was born in her and –“

Jo’s mouth quirked with amusement.

“Yes, so I heard!” she said. “Eliot told us long ago. She must be very special!”

Hardison listened as Lizzie, now a little more cheery, told Jo about Lucille. He knew the old van’s days were numbered. She had a hard life and was sometimes the target of bad people, and she had taken her lumps and bumps. She had been a couple of years old when Lizzie was born, and after nearly a decade she was showing her age, no matter that she was cared-for and maintained to the highest degree and her techy bits updated constantly. But Hardison loved her, and so did Lizzie, who was proud of being born in her, arriving into the world squalling and angry and cradled in Eliot’s gentle hands. Never mind, he thought. The old girl’s got life in her yet.

And Wapanjara and its family settled down to its last breakfast together for a while, and for an hour at least, they were happy.

“Well I think that’s it,” Nate said with a sigh as he put the last piece of luggage in one of Bernadette’s roomy storage bins.

He could hear Parker yammering on to Jo and Soapy about how they should all come to Portland on vacation and then Effie could meet Hardison’s Nana when she visited from Chicago. The young woman flung herself at Soapy, and then dragged Jo into the mix, and there was a soft snuffle of tears.

“C’mon, Parker,” Charlie said and held out Soapy’s old bike helmet. Parker was riding to Tennant Creek behind Charlie on the Ducati so that Bernadette’s interior wouldn’t be so cramped. “We gotta go.”

Parker let go of Soapy and Jo, tried to hug Effie who successfully fought her off but accepted a kiss on a pudgy cheek, and then she crouched down to gather Kip to her chest.

“We’ll be home for Christmas,” she whispered conspiratorially. “And we’ll bring presents.”

Kip hugged her hard, and then had to let go as Parker stood up and took the helmet.

Hardison clattered down the veranda steps and held out something for Effie.
“Here,” he said. “You can watch your cop show on this. An’ even video-call us. You an’ Soapy an’ Jo.”

Effie took the electronic tablet from the young hacker and gazed at it. Then she switched it on.

Hardison pointed at the rows of icons.

“See? I put Netflix on if for you, an’ there are recipe sites, an’ here,” he touched one of the icons, “if you press this you can bring up the video-conferencing software.” He pointed at a sticky-note attached to the cover. “Passwords. You’ll need ‘em. I’ll call when we get back to the States. Let you know we made it safe and sound.”

Effie, tickled to bits, looked up at the tall hacker.

“Well, look at that! My word! Look, Missus!” she added, flourishing the tablet at Jo.

“You can help Soapy and I get to grips with our new laptop then, Effie. I barely know how to switch the thing on!” Jo sighed, but smiled at the little cook’s embracing of new technology – as long as it wasn’t a microwave.

“I will help too!” Mei Munro pitched in, smiling up at Hardison. “I know how to use a computer!”

Mei frowned, puzzled.

“Nerd? What is ‘nerd’?”

Soapy murmured something in Mandarin and Mei’s face cleared. She grinned.

“I am a nerd!” she stated happily.

Hardison felt his chest warm with affection for these people he loved. Mei would never know that Hardison had located Mei’s father, who turned out to be a hopeless drunkard and who had to be threatened into signing the adoption forms, essential as Mei was still under age. The threat of being reported to the Chinese authorities for selling his fifteen-year-old daughter as what amounted to being a concubine, was enough to change his mind. Child trafficking, especially in the sex trade, could carry a death sentence, which meant a firing squad. The man had been told by the mysterious men who had pinned him to his dingy table in his equally dingy room that the proof of his crimes was absolute.

Hardison was suddenly overwhelmed as Mei flung her arms around his waist and hugged him tightly.

“I am so happy!” she whispered, and Hardison felt his shirt dampen with her tears, and he couldn’t do anything else but hug her back as a hand dropped onto his shoulder. Soapy stood beside him.

“Alec … I can’t thank you enough for everything you’ve done for us – for our girl. Our daughter. And now we have our grandchildren too. You did that for us, lad. You gave Mei a family again, and for that we will never be able to repay you.”

Hardison, eyes shining, pulled Jo and Soapy into the hug.

“It was a pleasure Soapy, m’man.” He grinned. “Age of the geek, baby!”

Lizzie, in the meantime, was saying goodbye to Kip.
Tears over and done with for a minute or two, they were discussing keeping in touch.

“… and I can do video calls now,” Lizzie was explaining, “and we can still do school stuff, can’t we? Now your dad’s got a laptop.”

Kip nodded eagerly.

“That would be so cool!” he said excitedly, the pain of parting eased for the moment by the hope of being able to chat about camels and horses and all things Wapanjara. “I can take the laptop out to Gertie’s paddock so you can see Sparky!! And we can decide what we want to do at Christmas!”

Lizzie laughed, happy now that she not only had Kip to talk to but also the ability to see her Wapanjara family, human and animal, whenever she wanted. It would gentle the ache of separation.

The farewells were difficult. There were hugs and promises and more hugs. Effie batted away hands and kisses, and then poked and whacked arms and ribs. She swore and snivelled and wiped tears away from muddy eyes that leaked treacherously, and then she took a weepy Lizzie in her arms and held her so tight she was loath to let the child go.

Lizzie kissed Effie’s pudgy cheeks, told her not to worry, and said she would be home again for Christmas. This was coupled with a request to help make a chocolate cake for Parker, because the little thief didn’t like Christmas cake. She said the fruit made her teeth squeaky.

It was time to go.

Nate and Sophie lifted a sniffing Lizzie out of Effie’s arms, and they had to gently ease her grasp away from the little cook’s sleeve. Nate didn’t know which one of them looked more distraught as his daughter wrapped her arms around her father’s neck and sobbed.

Sophie whispered a heartfelt ‘thank you’ to Soapy and Jo and then she held Effie’s hand for a moment and squeezed.

“C’mon people. It’s only going to get harder if we linger,” Nate said, and he couldn’t stop his voice from breaking.

Parker swung onto the back of the Ducati behind Charlie and put on her helmet so that no-one would see her lip tremble.

Hardison eased into the driver’s seat and Nate managed to unpeel Lizzie from his arms and put her in the rear seat.

Lizzie turned teary eyes to her father, and flapped a hand in Eliot’s direction.

“Eliot! He -“

“He needs a moment, sweetheart,” Sophie whispered softly, and clasped Lizzie’s hand. “He has his goodbyes to make.”

And Lizzie, suddenly understanding that leaving Wapanjara was the hardest for Eliot, nodded. She waved at Jo and Soapy, who waved back, Jo blowing a kiss to the little girl they loved.

Eliot had waited quietly until the goodbyes were done, but he was grateful when Nate and the rest of his team left him to say his own farewells. As Nate and Sophie clambered into Bernadette beside their daughter and closed the doors, he turned to Jo and Soapy.
“Well, boy,” Jo said, sizing Eliot up, “you’re healing. *At last.* I thought for a moment there we were going to lose you, you idiot.”

Eliot reached out and pulled Jo into his arms and smiled, amused.

“Nah. I wouldn’t do that to you, now would I? I ain’t easy to kill.” He dropped his head and nuzzled Jo’s silver-auburn locks, and then kissed the top of her head. “Thank you,” he murmured. “For savin’ me. *Again.*”

“You wouldn’t have got hurt if it wasn’t for us, Eliot,” Soapy muttered, ashamed. “It was our fault you and Alec were –”

“No!” Eliot said vehemently, “No, don’t you go there, Soapy! Don’t you dare! Y’hear me? You people … you’re mine. My family. And I protect what’s mine. You an’ those fools — he gestured at Bernadette and the people within — are all I got, an’ I’m a selfish sonofabitch. So if anyone tries to hurt my folks … then it’s worth takin’ a bullet or two.”

Jo wrapped her arms around Eliot and he reached out and caught Soapy and Effie, pulling them to him and holding them so tightly he could feel their hearts beating.

And as they stood together in the sun, listening to Mei crooning to her children in her new home, Eliot felt the pull of the outback and he heard the fluting call of the magpies, and he knew he could not stay away for long.

“I’ll be home soon,” he whispered. “We’ll be home soon. And I’ll cook!” he added, with a smile.

Easing himself from their arms, he gave Effie a smacking kiss on the forehead. She shrieked, bellowed at him and called him a boofhead, and then Eliot turned and walked to Bernadette. Opening the passenger door, he looked back and grinned.

“See y’all!” he called out.

And then he was gone, Bernadette rumbling up the incline and past the stringybarks, heading towards civilization and a flight to Portland.

The three of them stood and watched the big vehicle disappear into the distant heat haze, and Effie sighed and dabbed at her teary eyes.

“Righto, Missus,” she croaked. “How’s about some bloody lunch?”

There were more farewells at Tennant Creek airport.

Charlie stood with them for a few moments as their luggage was loaded into the big Gulfstream G650. He eyed the chartered jet, and grinned.

“That’s the way to travel, hey?” he teased, and Eliot had to agree.

“I was thinkin’ …” Eliot pondered as the rest of his team waved goodbye as they made their way into the aircraft. “Alinjirri … maybe … maybe we could use a runway. Get a small ‘plane. It’d make gettin’ about a bit easier. Onslow has a pilot’s license.”

Charlie thought about it and nodded.

“Why not? Or a chopper. Or both,” he added cheekily.
Eliot snorted, eyes crinkling with humour.

But both men suddenly stilled as they looked at one another. Charlie shuffled his feet, a little discomfited.

“Eliot … kukkaji … thanks. Thanks for being here. Thanks for making it right so my girl can walk the Dreaming.” His dark gaze was suddenly misted with memory and loss. “I miss her. I bloody miss her and it’ll never be right, but … but at least she can rest and I know she’s home and … and … just … thank you.”

Eliot straightened as much as his nearly-healed wounds would allow, and reached out a hand.

“It was an honour, brother. She’ll rest in my heart. Always,” he answered softly.

And as Charlie grasped Eliot’s hand and the two men clasped forearms, a breeze ruffled Charlie’s curls.

*Thank you, kukkaji, for taking care of my Charlie and looking after Kip. I can go now, my brother …*

And as Alice’s voice echoed in his heart, Eliot heard her throaty laugh whisper in the air and her voice drifted away to nothingness.

The two men stood quietly together, bound together in love and grief, and then they parted, lines of sadness on their faces. But at least Alice was avenged, and she was at peace.

Charlie rested a hand on his chest, where the marks of his tribe lay.

“Be seeing you, Eliot Spencer of the Aniwaya.”

Eliot solemnly laid his own hand over the medicine pouch protecting his heart.

“I’ll be home soon, Charlie Jakkamarra of the Warumungu. Take care of yourself, kukkaji.”

And they parted, these two unlikely brothers, Charlie heading home to his son and family, and Eliot turning away to join his team and the little girl he loved and guarded with all of his being.

But when he was a few yards away from the steps leading to the luxurious interior of the Gulfstream, Eliot’s ‘cell phone rang.

*Onslow. It had to be Onslow.*

“Yeah?” he said, putting the ‘phone to his ear.

It wasn’t Onslow Dawson.

“Eliot! How good it is to hear your voice!” Tomas Ponomarenko said. “I hope you’re well??”

Eliot swore silently as he stood on the tarmac, the heat making the air shimmer.

“Tomas. I can’t say I feel the same,” Eliot said calmly, cursing inwardly. Just how the hell had Ponomarenko got his telephone number? He would be having words with Hardison, for sure. “I’m doin’ great. How’s it hangin’?” he asked. “Oh … forgot … sorry, man … there’s nothin’ left to hang, now is there?”

For a moment Ponomarenko didn’t answer. The injuries he had incurred at Eliot’s hand were
substantial and prohibitive when it came to intimacy. His voice was cautious and a little on edge, but the smooth charm was still intact when he finally spoke.

“I’m just calling to say that my assignment here in Venice will be extended for a little while, as per my employer’s instructions, so you can inform Mister Dawson that his enquiries are superfluous. I’ll be more than happy to keep you in the loop, my friend.”

Eliot gritted his teeth and did his best to keep calm as he spoke.

“Why don’t we just meet up as soon as you’ve finished the job, Tomas? Huh? Then we can discuss whatever the hell is bothering you. How does that sound?”

“Oh, no, Eliot, that would never do!” Ponomarenko chided gently. “My employer would never allow that. But we will meet, Eliot. At a time and a place I will choose.”

Eliot thought about it before he answered.

“So … why call me? You know where I am. I’m ready when you and whoever’s employing you is ready. Bring it on!”

“Oh, I will … I will,” The Confessor replied lightly, and this time there was amusement in his voice. “So … to business. I will come for you when I’m ready. When we meet, you and I will be having a discussion and you will be forthcoming when I ask you about the subject matter. And then we’ll have some fun, perhaps. Well … you might not find it fun, but … there’s always a down side, isn’t there?”

Eliot grinned then. This kind of threat he could deal with.

“We’ll see how it all goes down, Tomas. That I promise. Anyway … gotta go. Places to go, people to see. Be seein’ ya.”

And before Ponomarenko could answer Eliot abruptly ended the call. Taking the sim card out, he dropped it onto the hot tarmac and ground it to pieces with the heel of his boot.

He stared at the shattered pieces for a moment, and then he pushed the ‘phone back into his pocket, and walking up the steps into the jet, he returned to the warmth and love of his family.

FINIS

Chapter End Notes

Author’s note: Many, many thanks for your support and lovely comments about this long, fluffy tale!! It has been over a year in the writing, and I’ve enjoyed every minute of it!! Soapy, Jo, Charlie and, of course, Gertie, will return in the next story – ‘Comin’ Home.’
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!