The Enemy Within Job
by Anonymous

Summary

Eliot Spencer had been waiting for this day all his life. The diagnosis came and now he had to rely on his closest allies to battle against The Enemy Within.
Eliot was aware his odds were not good, but once his number came up, he knew he had to act to save his own life. Hospital stays and liquid cash were the main troubles, but keeping Hardison and Parker in the dark was the hardest obstacle to clear.

He failed.

Johan Byrnum had started his day with a cup of coffee and a buttery croissant that his wife wouldn’t have approved of had she been with him. That was the reason he was sneaking into his office well before the consulting hours began. He happily had taken a sip of his coffee and a bite of the pastry when he heard the door open.

A young man, dressed simply in a red shirt, jeans, and work boots, was standing in the doorway. The dawning daylight caressed the man’s long hair and highlighted a small blue feather braided in below his left ear. Johan Byrnum was not a fashion critic, but he noticed the clothes were too big—at least one size over. The man took purposeful strides toward the desk and put his hands on the surface.

“Doctor, I know you are not open for business at the moment,” this young man said in a quiet yet menacing voice, as he put a couple of papers in front of his croissant. “But I’d really appreciate if you would look at these.” Then, as if he had noticed his own rude behavior, he added: “Please, sir.”

Dr. Byrnum picked up his interrupted breakfast and one of the papers and read. AFP levels are very high and CBC looked fine. High calcium, low glucose, high cholesterol… Dr. Byrnum looked at the young man in front of him. From his calm demeanor to his broad shoulders, he was the picture of good health. When this young man tried to eye the memento box where Dr. Byrnum displayed his war medals, the faintest touch of jaundice appeared in the corner of his eye.

It has been the most unconventional consultation.

“Are these yours?”

“I can’t tell.”
“I certainly can. If you want to know my opinion, I need you to hop to the examination table.”

The first overtures were tense, but finally, he managed to get his patient out of his oversized shirt and upon the table. At the first touch, Dr. Byrnum’s trained fingers felt some worrisome signs under the muscle that covered the ribcage. A healthy body doesn’t feel like that.

His new patient sucked in air in deep, controlled breaths all the time his hands poked and prodded over the tense skin of his hard belly. When Dr. Byrnum applied pressure to the right side the patient let out a muffled grunt and swept at his long hair off the face with both hands. This man had seen worse, but his insides were tender enough without Dr. Brynum’s rough handling.

“Bar brawl?” Dr. Byrnum asked, poking at the yellow bruise over his patient’s belly button.

“Something of the sort…”

“Your jeans don’t fit.”

His comment went unanswered. The left side of his patient’s belly was as taut as the right.

“Are you eating your full?”

“More often than not.”

“But you can’t keep it down. Am I right, son?”

His patient sat up in a blink, almost ready to bolt. His eyes looked so tired and haunted… Dr. Byrnum was sure he hadn’t slept well in a fortnight. This was a man looking for a second opinion because he was sure the first one was right.

“Don’t you try to scare me,” the man finally said with a thick voice that betrayed his fear. “I have been a soldier and I’ve known my share of horrors.”

The tense way his eyes closed convinced this old, veteran oncologist that each word was true.

“Well, soldier, get dressed up and I’ll draw you a battle plan and furnish you with your weapons.”

With those words, Dr. Byrnum left his patient to struggle with his confirmation; he seemed like the kind of man who needed space to sort himself out. Besides, immediate steps need to be taken in order to save or extend his new patient’s life.

He heard the soldier stepping out the examination table; his steps were heavier than when he broke into his office. Out of the corner of his eye, Dr. Byrnum watched his patient contemplate the red shirt he had removed earlier for a few seconds as if it contained all the mysteries of the universe. When that shirt returned to its place, the first arm inside the shirt was the right one. His trained medical eye registered the pain in his patient’s movements.

“You are far too young to have this kind of trouble, boy.” Dr. Byrnum commented as he opened the small cabinet he kept locked at all times. “That’s both a blessing and a curse. You are in the best place to stand the rigors of the battle, but your body will demand you to act quickly.”

“So, it’s an invasion…” The man took a seat in the patient chair. Dr. Byrnum forgave him immediately because he was taking the news far too well.

“It will be soon enough. But first things first: this will help you with your pain.” As the good doctor was writing big letters in red marker over the young man knitted his brows in distaste.
“Don’t try to act all stout-hearted. You can't help but to be in pain in your condition and the road ahead is too rough to travel it in distress. PRN.”

“Pro re nata,” the words had almost a taste of hostility in his bluegrass-born voice.

“And these will secure the borders while we ascertain the damage.” Dr. Byrnum put the whole course of supportive therapy in front of his new patient. “You’ll need to go through some minor exploratory procedures, but the main event will be surgery, of course…”

“Of course…” The repetition was almost ominous.

“I know that’s a lot to take in, boy, but you are taking it in stride.”

The young man tried to shrug and a bitter smile appeared on his lips. “I am really not.”

Dr. Byrnum nodded and patted the young man on the arm. On days like these, he wished he could have less experience breaking the bad news to his patients.

“I’ll bring you some coffee and you can take your first doses right away.”

“Thank you, doctor,” his patient said and then, in a sudden moment of vulnerability he almost whispered: “My name is Eliot, by the way, and I have a million questions.”

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Twelve days into his new reality, at four in the morning, Eliot made his way, marching double step and with his gym bag hanging off his shoulders, toward his local gym in Crestwood. Dr. Byrnum’s prescriptions had made his life a lot more manageable. His usual morning of a new job routine was a good way to steady his frayed nerves, and Eliot Spencer refused to deny himself the consolation of a good training session in dire times.

The small local gym was enough for Eliot’s needs, especially since the owner couldn’t resist his smile and had given him a copy of the keys. ‘Chefs in microbrew pubs keep strange hours’, was her only comment. Many a woman had given him keys to their homes, but this was the first one to reward his mischief between the sheets with the keys to her livelihood. Eliot felt a bit ashamed because that was not his intention, but he refused to give back a win.

Eliot turned the key and entered through the backdoor. He walked directly to her office and put his personal check on her desk. Eliot used a small box with a little souvenir he got in the last con to sweeten the deal, placing it atop the check like a paperweight. Next, he stopped at the juice bar because his prescriptions had given him an appetite like a ravenous wolf. Eliot withdrew a Honeycrisp apple and left a couple of bucks on the counter to cover it.

As he finished the apple, Eliot noticed the burner phone at the end of his locker. Vance’s phone. Eliot scowled, stashing his new bullet pendant in the locker. It was better to let him know he had one Deniable less for his side operations. Eliot put the battery in with the same expression his face would show if he were to put the clip in a gun.

“Moving out of the wire.” Eliot wrote in the instant messenger he shared with Vance. It was not safe or sensible to call in the wee hours of the morning. “Capping a Big Charlie CF. Thought U GAF.”

“WTFO!” The reply came back before Eliot could put his phone down.

What are you doing awake at these ungodly hours? Of course, there was only one possible reply to
that: “WTFO.”

“BS.”

Eliot waited a minute and exchanged his jeans for sweatpants. Vance could think on his feet, but it was better to let the dust settle. By the time Vance had processed it all, he would surely move earth and sky to get the full dossier. Eliot knew there was no way to stop him, not without Hardison's help.

“Negative,” Eliot replied, though he regretted not have other news to share. “TINS. FitRep bad. Survey ongoing. Learning SOP as we speak. No ETA yet.”

Eliot put the phone down to change his shirt. He hadn’t started to train and he was already drenched in sweat. Dr. Byrnum had explained to him that sweat was both a symptom and a side effect of his recent bad luck.

“Mayday?” The question on the screen shook Eliot. He didn’t expect Vance to offer help to his misguided criminal asset after that adventure in Washington.

“Negative.” Eliot pressed the electronic keyboard with a dexterity he thought was impossible. “Suppression fire and active defense deployed. Expected to be ratfucked by the end of Summer.”

“Unsat.”

“R,” Eliot replied and smiled without humor. “WAG who else RON AFU unsat-ing o/GFU?”

“825ID10T.” Vance kept writing. “Kinformed?”

"Positive." Eliot lied fluently. The last thing he wanted was Vance trying to explain this clusterfuck to Parker and Hardison or, worse, to his father.

"Balls to the wall."

"Dog’s chance,” Eliot looked at the reply and deleted it. He typed again: “Death is not the goal,” but it was unsat again. With a sigh, Eliot typed. "WilCo."

That should do. Eliot took out the battery and stashed his phone, clothes, and bag in the locker. There was an endorphin rush with his name waiting.

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Parker looked down from her position astride a ceiling beam. Hardison was running late and Eliot was pounding the sandbag in short rhythmic jabs. Lately, that part of the office was his favorite spot. Parker wondered why he was training so hard when he was always complaining about how tired and sore he felt all the time.

“Coming down!” She warned Eliot as she jumped down from her perch with a childish whoop of joy.

The short free fall quickened her pulse and, by the time she closed the clamps, she was feeling mischievous. She hung parallel to the ground just higher than the sandbag for a moment, Eliot didn’t shift his focus from the bag.

“We are getting buff, aren’t we?” Parker asked, reaching with one hand to squeeze Eliot’s biceps. He had always had big, kind, strong arms but now they were also rock-solid hard.
Eliot swatted her hand away and switched to a cross punch without missing a beat. He was in the zone, Parker could tell because his brow was slightly knitted, but the corners of his mouth were pulled upwards. Parker wondered how deep in he was. There was only one way to know.

Parker swung hard and got into Eliot’s personal space. Eliot grunted, annoyed when one of Parker's legs crossed in front of his face and he had to duck to avoid the other. Parker barely gave him time to jump her arm, but he kept punching. When Parker’s legs passed again under his legs he just skipped like he was jumping rope.

Parker landed on her bottom, elated to complete two sweeps and too pleased with herself to notice the heavy bag swinging toward her. Eliot tried to stop it with his arm, but the bottom carried enough momentum to bang Parker on the temple. It was a solid blow that stunned her for a second.

“Parker!” Eliot went to his knees hard, checking Parker’s head for any bump. “You and your crazy ideas, woman…”

His hands were hot and sweaty around her face. Parker felt a bit dizzy, but overall well. As always, Eliot’s kindness was the best medicine, even if it was delivered in a gruff, annoyed voice.

“…one of these days your luck will run out and we’ll not like the reckoning!”

“You’d never let anything hit me,” Parker replied with a smile. “Why are you trembling?”

“You scared me, Sonsie…”

Parker felt her eyes open. Eliot’s bottom lip was quivering and his pupils were wide. The fear was real, in spite of the childish name he’d used. The image was confusing, but Parker had no time to dwell on it. Hardison entered the room chattering almost to himself about staff turnover and the lack of loyalty in the service industry. Eliot squinted his eyes and extended his hand to help Parker up. Parker took his hand with her right and swatted the bullet hanging from his neck with her left hand.

They rushed to the stools, with the eagerness of grade-schoolers sent out to recess. Parker could feel Eliot’s disposition: he was ready for the briefing, that meant he was ready to punch someone instead of something; this was the Eliot, which Parker liked best. Hardison began to display the face of and information about their new client, but Eliot shifting by her side distracted her from their client’s predicament.

“It’s there something wrong in your tighty whities?” Parker whispered in Eliot’s ear when he shifted positions for the third time.

“I don’t…” Eliot grumbled, but he cut himself off with a huff. “Pay attention.”

“Tu n’est pas dans ton assiette, mon keum…” Parker insisted, knowing how much Eliot hated French because that was one of the languages he was forced to study.

“Am I interrupting you two?” Hardison had had enough.

“No,” Eliot jerked his head, indicating Parker and scooting his ass over the stool at the same time. “This public nuisance banged her head with the sandbag and is making less sense than usual…”

“Babe, you OK?” Hardison’s focus zeroed in on Parker in two seconds flat.

“I’m fine!” Parker felt Eliot’s words like a betrayal and retaliation was in order: “He just can’t keep his ass on his seat.”
Hardison turned his attention to Eliot with an inquisitive look.

“Just roll it, Hardison!”

Hardison shrugged and turned his attention back to the screen.

“As I was saying before I was interrupted by the peanut gallery, this is as straightforward a theft as we can ask for. Our client, Miss Sarah Ensel,” Hardison displayed the image of a young woman, “got the manuscript of their first and last novel stolen.”

“First and last?” Parker felt a rush of adrenaline.

“They rolled her when she raised a fuss,” Eliot mumbled, hooking the heel of his right boot on the footrest. “She took an unlucky tumble on a flight of stairs.”

Parker had to remind herself that client interviews were under Eliot’s purview since Sophie and Nate had moved on to greener pastures. Clients just couldn’t resist the killer combination of his caring eyes, big warm hands, and no-nonsense demeanor.

“She’s still alive but in pretty bad shape. Her sister called us.”

“Miss Ensel’s last living wish is to see her novel published under her name,” Hardison continued displaying now a building and a well-groomed man in a suit who still managed to look cringely slick. “This scumbag here, Chad Lutz, had her sign a publishing contract and then he decided the novel was too good to put the name of a nobody on the cover. The printing company is small enough for us to fix this issue in one night.”

“They can’t afford a reprint.” Eliot smiled wickedly.

“Thank you for that,” Hardison said. Parker was there to watch Eliot's grift as an auditor of the printing company's accounts two weeks ago. He had been pretty convincing with his briefcase and glasses.

“You are awesome,” Eliot replied with sarcasm, shaking his shoulders. Parker knew the grift wouldn’t have worked without Hardison’s chokehold on their accounts.

Despite all of the teasing, when Hardison offered his hand, Eliot slapped it twice before bumping it amicably. Parker loved to see her boys celebrating together.

“We only need to break into the mainframe of their server and swap some files from the hard drive they are sending to print,” Hardison explained and the screen displayed a safe schematics. “And here is where we need the best thief in the world...”

“AMSEC UL1511,” Parkinson identified the safe without trouble. “Three and a half-inch thick recessed door with a five-eights thick front built for pry resistance. Handle activated locking mechanism and steel chrome-plated locking bolts. Pretty standard. Electronic or combination lock?”

Hardison leaned over the counter with a smile. “Combination…”

The thrill of the theft and Hardison’s eyes consumed Parker’s attention for a second.

“You are spoiling me…”

“When are we going to do it?” Eliot asked while consulting his phone.
“Hold that thought,” Hardison said with a smile. “Tomorrow night.”

“Shit…”

“Schedule trouble?” Hardison asked trying to peek at Eliot’s phone screen. “We can’t really get a rain check on this one. They are putting together the printing order as we speak.”

“No.” Eliot was too quick to put the device in his pocket. “I have a thing in the morning. I’ll be ready by midday. Now, I’ll leave you to... whatever you were doing. I have a pot of black porter chili to care for.”

Parker almost noticed something, but Hardison smiled again.

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Eliot got into his designated spot on time. Parker was chatting in his ear as she got Hardison the entry he needed. Cursing his own ill-advised choices, Eliot pressed his side. The small incision was smarting and it felt like he had torn his oblique up even if the only thing he did was to walk down three flights of stairs. With a weary sigh, he took out from inside his black shirt a chain with a bullet shape pendant and twisted the end of it.

He had made the pendant from an old Kalashnikov ammo he'd kept among his things on the same day Dr. Byrnum prescribed him the drugs. Screwing and boring the thread through the old casing was exactly the kind of pointless, detailed action he'd needed to soothe his frayed nerves. In the end, it served to give him a nice, inconspicuous, hidey hole to carry around a couple of painkillers on his person. Eliot smiled remembering Hardison’s appreciation of his handiwork.

_You shouldn’t be here…_ a voice inside his head insinuated.

As it didn’t come from the communication gear, Eliot didn’t heed it. Here was where he was supposed to be: protecting Parker and Hardison with his dying breath.

Footfalls were approaching. Eliot looked at the small peach pill with worry. It was the second one of his one oh-oh bottle, the first one he took because Dr. Byrnum insisted, and it did Eliot good: that night he slept dreamlessly.

This one he should take because he was in the field six hours after he was released from his laparoscopic biopsy which he had endured without sedation.

The odds of getting his side kicked were high. It was better to take the painkiller now.

Another step approached.

Eliot turned the pill around as if it was a suspicious piece of explosives. He didn’t want to take anything that impaired his reflexes. He didn’t want the pain either.

_Bite the bullet and be done with it…_

Eliot felt like laughing a mirthless laugh. He put the pill in his mouth and prepared to take down the security guard.

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Parker, sitting on one of the briefing stools in their war room, took another bite from her cereal bowl. She watched the sofa intently as she rolled the round cereal piece in her mouth. By her right
side was an open box of Rockets O’s and by her left side was a folded shirt and a plastic box.

In front of her, Eliot slept with his arm over his eyes and his feet crossed over the arm of the sofa. The sweat spot under his armpit had grown half an inch since Parker started watching him, despite the cold air conditioning in the office.

Parker swallowed another spoonful and waited.

Fifteen minutes had passed already. A quarter of an hour that felt like an eternity, because Eliot Spencer used to be the man without naps. Parker wondered if Eliot had been taking secret naps before. Still, his breathing was way heavier than it used to be…

Hardison came into the office, saying something. Parker hardly registered the indistinct chatter before he sat by her side.

“Cereal?” Hardison asked, taking the box and shaking it.

“Eliot was supposed to make dinner tonight,” Parker said in an accusatory tone, her eyes glued to the culprit.

Parker noticed how Hardison took a handful of the cereal. Eliot was napping in the open and that was akin to seeing a double rainbow and that was the only reason why she let him have cereal without a spoon and a bowl.

“I think he’s on drugs.”

“Because he took a nap instead of cooking dinner?”

“Because I found this.” Parker passed him the plastic box covered in a leather jacket. Parker almost took it for a journal, but journals didn’t rattle when you pick them up. The wet spot on Eliot’s shirt had grown another inch. “And they were well-hidden.”

“Parker, these are no drugs…” Hardison said as soon as he saw the box, letting the fact that Parker had cased Eliot’s things slide for now. He opened the fake cover and took one of the four compartment boxes. “Nana used to use one of these to keep track of her prescriptions.”

Parker stopped chewing. “Is he ill?”

“I do— I don’t know.” Hardison was distracted with the pills as if he was trying to identify them. “But you shouldn’t be rummaging through Eliot’s things, baby girl.”

“He was bleeding and didn't tell us.” Parker was stating a fact, not justifying her actions.

Hardison was a smart boy, Parker felt his hand behind her back, reaching for the shirt. Parker had seen the shirt in the hamper of their shared bathroom at the pub, along with three drops of dried blood on the floor. Eliot was always upfront about his wounds so Parker and Hardison knew how much they could rely on him. Parker saw him stretch the fabric. The blood stain was big for a scratch but small for a wound.

Parker got down her stool. Eliot’s wet spot had spread another inch and a half. Strapped to the arm covering his eyes, a black watch. Eliot didn’t wear watches, the world moved at his rhythm and not the other way around. Parker reached out to lift the watch.

“Parker…” Hardison called out in an angry hiss.
“What?”

“Let him s…”

The watch on Eliot’s wrist went off, startling Parker. An alarm watch, it was, and one that vibrates too. Eliot scrubbed his arm over his eyes with a groan, and used the other hand to turn off the alarm. When he noticed Parker was staring at him, he almost jumped off of the couch. Any other time, that would have been hilarious.

“I found your stash,” Parker didn’t want to give him time to think of an answer. “What are you on?”

“You found what?” Eliot’s voice raised high and loud, he almost sounded scared.

Parker jumped back, Eliot didn’t pay her any attention, he was sweeping the room looking for something. Parker saw him sneer when he noticed the shirt in Hardison’s hand and the pillbox behind him.

“You went through my stuff?” The question was loaded with disapproval and was uttered in a dangerous snarl as Eliot moved to the table.

“Eliot,” Hardison tried to reason with him, his hands full of the evidence, “we are just worried.”

“Stay in your lane,” Eliot grumbled, snatching the pillbox from the table. “That’s not your job!”

“You bled, man,” Hardison insisted, showing him the spot of dried blood, “and you didn’t report it.”

“The hitter of the team bled,” Eliot barked his sarcasm while checking the contents of the box with a quick glance, before closing it again. “More breaking news later tonight.”

“Are you sassing me?” Hardison felt his anger rising.

“Of course, I’m sassing you!” Eliot got into Hardison’s personal space. “Dammit, Hardison! My job is to get kicked, punched, stabbed and shot on your behalf and Parker’s, is any wonder I bleed on occasion?”

“Why do you have those pills, Eliot?” Hardison asked in his most stern tone, one Parker hadn’t heard since the Moreau affair.

“What do you care why I have these…” Eliot asked, raising his empty hand. The alarm watch in his wrist went off again. Only then Eliot noticed the pillbox was not where it was supposed to be. “Parker!”

“What are these anyway!” Parker almost screamed holding the pillbox against her chest.

“What are they? Huh? I’ll tell you what are they…” Eliot lunged forward, “None of your business!”

Parker, startled, took a step back. Eliot brought up his hand up in the precise split-second Parker slacked her grip. Hardison saw the object shot up and he tried to reach it, barely touching the hard corner. Parker jumped to catch it. Eliot, with a quick lookup, passed by under Parker’s arm. In two strides, he snatched the shortest chip shot in history and stormed out their headquarters without a word.
Parker tried to follow, but Hardison held her in place.

“Eliot went out through the restaurant,” Hardison said as if wasn’t obvious. “He doesn’t want us to follow him, and we can’t, not without arguing in public.”

“Shrewd...” Parker couldn’t help her but show admiration for the sly strategy.

“We blew it, Parker.”

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Hardison checked the mail he just retrieved from the brewpub’s commercial postal box. A simple measure of safety to keep each of their personal hideouts out of simpleton’s reach. This batch had three postcards with messages in languages Hardison couldn’t read and a package for E. Spencer. This was the first time Eliot had received personal mail in their PO box. With a sigh, Hardison got out of Lucille and started his way toward their headquarters wondering how was he supposed to deliver this particular mail.

To say they had seen neither hide nor hair of Eliot in the last week would be an exaggeration: He had been prowling the brewpub, he was just taking the proper precautions to never cross paths with them. His presence in their headquarters had been subtle but noticeable. Each morning they had found a fresh pot of black porter chili on the stove. Black porter chili was the signature dish of the restaurant and only Eliot could get it right. The brewpub was his baby more than Hardison’s, Eliot would never let something as silly as their little infighting harm the restaurant.

Hardison used the remote to open the back door with a tired sigh. Parker was getting furious and Alec was ambivalent. For someone who had reamed Sophie pretty hard about being straight with the team, Eliot was clearly reluctant to come clean.

Firing up the control deck, Hardison felt worry stir inside him. Nana had given him a proper insight of what it was like to have a sick person close and Eliot must be very sick if he was trying to keep it—whatever ‘it’ might be—to himself. Eliot had never been shy about nursing his wounds in front of them before...

The CCTV came alive, the bar, the beer kettles, the tables were in their proper place, but the kitchen was far from spotless. Eliot was sleeping on the job. Two freezer boxes, lined with HDPE bags, filled to the brim with chili, rested on the counter. A pot was bubbling on the stove. The cutting board and knives dripped on the sink, and Eliot was asleep, his arms crossed on top of the counter, a row of beer bottles lined up in front of him. Hardison feared he had been drinking until he remembered that black porter beer was one of the main ingredients of his chili.

“What do we have here, bro?” Hardison asked, adjusting the zoom of the camera.

Eliot was leaning to the right, on his left arm, there was a couple of round band-aids. Red and yellow. Different colors meant different doses that need to be tracked for a reaction... A professional had shot him in the arm. Back alley doctors never care about safety procedures.

“Why do you need so many jabs, Eliot?” In the reflection on the bottles, Hardison noticed another round band-aid in the back of his right hand— transparent this time, consistent with IV therapy.

Hardison picked up Eliot’s mail, wishing there was something he could do to make Eliot talk to him. He crossed the restaurant, hoping to rouse Eliot with the sound of his footsteps. By the time he reached the counter, he noticed only a marching band could have woken Eliot up. With a shrug, Hardison took out his phone, and with a couple of clicks, reached over the kitchen bar to play the
bugle mail call at full blast.

“Sonova…!” Eliot cried out, shooting straight up and flailing when his back noticed the lack of support. His right hand clutched the counter at the last moment.

“You got mail,” Hardison announced, putting his mail in front of the row of beers. His eyes fixed on the transparent band-aid. There was a bruise under it, and it looked painful.

Hardison shifted his gaze to scrutinize Eliot's face, but Eliot had had time to put on his poker face.

“I’ve never seen you this tired,” Hardison commented because a man can only beat around the bush for so long. “There is something wrong with you. With your body. I can see it.”

Eliot pressed his lips, squinted his eyes and flared his nostrils. Nothing more. He was ready to roll with the punches.

“Whenever you want to come clean, I’m ready to hear you. You know that, don’t you?”

Eliot nodded and picked up his mail. He even cracked a faint smile as he read the postcards. Hardison waited, but it was obvious Eliot was not going to speak to him.

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Eliot waited across the street. The brewpub was getting ready to close, the kitchen staff was already gone and the bar had sounded last call. Parker’s bike revved up in the alley and Hardison's panicked scream sounded down the street. It must be date night.

Crossing the street and the restaurant door was the simplest thing in the world. The night manager looked at him with caution but Eliot didn’t mind him. He rushed to the office to check up on his mail and do some banking because his cash supply was getting thin. Dr. Byrnum had offered to hook him up with someone from VA services for benefits, but Eliot couldn’t find the heart to take from someone in need while he still had a couple million from his past life squirreled away in offshore accounts. If that’s not enough, well, his other options were way cheaper.

He offhandedly typed the master password, still wanting to hit Hardison for his choice.

“Mike Oscar Romeo Echo Alpha Uniform,” Eliot spelled with a dry chuckle. “Dammit, Hardison!”

The screen came alive with a faint sound of static electricity, and Eliot noticed there was a search running. Hardison had been poking at things he shouldn’t be looking into. As Eliot read the documents the search was spitting out, he felt his knees getting progressively weaker, his jaw slacking and the weight just under his sternum getting heavier and hotter.

Baby Ashley… Of course, Hardison would found them. Uncle Landon... Death certificates were easy to find if you know which database hack. Cousin Dalton... Hardison was a genius, God, Luke too? the best in his line of work. Great-aunt Lily Mae... Data are impersonal, Cousin Colton... but Eliot couldn’t afford to look at those names with a cold stare. Aunt Trinity... These were his dead kin. Aunt Ida... The casualty roll of the war he was wagging. Ma...

“I need a beer…” Eliot whispered, feeling more forlorn than ever in that dark room that was supposed to be his refuge.

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Parker was smiling when she opened the back door of their headquarters. Infiltration and recon
never failed to put her in a good mood. It was a thousand times better than movie night. Parker
turned around, relaxed and happy, the manila envelope made a crispy sound against her chest when
she leaned forward to kiss him. Hardison was happy to oblige, but as soon as he leaned forward he
noticed the monitor was on. He recalled to let it dormant.

“Did we have a breach?” He asked rushing to the keyboard. Parker followed him, confused.

“Stop shaking my family tree, Hardison,” Eliot’s voice commanded above their heads. He sounded
drunk. “It’s cancer.”

Parker was already on the metal staircase, climbing the steps two at a time. Hardison followed her,
his longer stride offsetting her lead. Eliot was sitting under the window, making a wall around him
with empty bottles. By his side, an ice bucket was chilling more beers. Eliot was way beyond the
legal limit, and stopping soon was not part of his plans.

“It’s a hepatoblastoma. Pretty rare in adults, very common in children,” Eliot volunteered the
information before they could ask. “It’s only one tumor, located in the left liver. Currently, it’s two
inches wide. The first time I got it scanned, two months ago, it was barely an inch. It’s pretty
aggressive.”

“Does it hurt?” Parker asked in a small voice, kneeling next to Eliot. For once, she didn’t try to
poke the hurting spot.

Eliot huffed and drank again. That was a question they wouldn’t get an answer for.

“Please, tell me you have been reading too many medical pages on the internet,” Hardison pleaded.
The words Eliot just threw at them were boring deep enough to shake his bone marrow.

Eliot put the bottle next to him, used his other arm to lift his butt from the ground, took out a white
paper out of his back pocket, and toss it to Hardison. The flame of the OHSU was on the envelope
and inside four pages of a biopsy pathology report. The contents might as well be written in ancient
Aramaic, the only thing that Hardison could comprehend was the patient’s name and date. This
document was recent, less than a week old.

“The rest of the papers are in the Challenger. In a safe. Under the spare wheel.” Eliot imparted the
information between sips of beer. “Sorry if it’s not a challenge, Parker.”

“You gave them your real name…”

“It would be very awkward to be brought back from sedation without the foggiest idea of what my
cover story is.” Eliot finished his beer and put the empty bottle in line with another.

“Why this doctor?”

“He’s old, a teacher, an expert in his area,” Eliot enumerated as he opened another bottle. “He’s a
veteran. He accepts pro bono work. His second specialty is in Oncology and Pharmacotherapy. He
can be paid in cash. He reminds me of my gramps, and his files are not on a computer.” Eliot
shrugged. “Any of the above.”

Eliot swung another sip of his chosen poison. If Alec Hardison wasn’t so stunned by the amount of
information he had to process without a computer, he would slap that bottle from Eliot's lips.

“Dr. Byrnum said that we have reached the limits of what we can do without surgery.” Eliot
finished his bottle and opened another. Those longnecks in a neat row were disturbing by
themselves without the news to make them worse. “There is nothing to do, then… in long-standing
family tradition, I don’t do hospitals.”

Parker shook for a second before she looked at Eliot straight in the eye, striving for a reaction either at her proximity or at her offended stare.

“Why?” Parker asked, punching the grid deck when Eliot didn’t react. She was fighting back the tears without a lot of success. “If there is something you can do, why won’t you do it?”

“I don’t do hospitals,” Eliot said again, taking a long sip from his bottle. “And even if I did, any half-assed hired muscle can take me down with a pillow a lot quicker than this beast.” Eliot put his hand in the place where his ribs ended and took a long gulp of his beer. “I know at least three countries that would gladly pay to see me killed. Right now, I’m a pretty cheap date.”

Eliot reached behind Parker’s head and pulled her close. His lips touched her forehead briefly and let her go before she even had time to think of escaping his grasp.

“It’s OK, Parker,” Eliot made his beer bottle dance between his legs. “I always dreaded this day. I knew I was my mama’s boy. It’s a fitting way to go.”

“You are not going anywhere!” Parker shouted, shivering at the thought.

“Only to an early grave,” Eliot pointed at her with his open bottle. “I’m trying to make my peace with that.”

Hardison shook his head and stood tall, even his body knew he needed some distance. There was too much to process and emotions were sapping his organic RAM way too fast.

“Do you get me, brother?” Eliot raised his eyes. There was a tic in the corner of his eye, that was his tell: he was trapped and looking for an escape route.

Hardison shook his head and noticed he was still holding the biopsy report. He started to fold it, it was better than focusing his attention on Eliot.

“It took my mom when I was eight.” Eliot drank again, slowly. “She was my age.”

“Your mom died when you were twelve,” Parker corrected him between sobs. Parker pried that detail out of him when they were surveying a target many years ago.

Hardison almost hissed at the word. That verb was hardly the best one to use in this discussion. The word slid off Eliot, he just took another long gulp.

“Those four years can’t be called life,” Eliot closed his eyes and exhaled slowly. “Sis took care of me because dad couldn’t care less. Mom had bad days and worse days when it wasn’t the drugs, it was the pain.” Eliot rested his head on his arm and let his shoulders drop. “It was bad. ‘We don’t do hospitals’ was my ma’s motto. To this day, I don’t know if she knew what was in store for her or if money was too tight, but it was ‘we don’t do hospitals, no sir, we don’t!’ until the end.”

“Times have changed, Eliot.” Hardison put the biopsy report in his pocket. “We have a ton of resources. If your prognosis is good, we need to get you into an operating room.”

“Would you do something your nana had told you not to?”

Sick or not, that was a cheap shot. Hardison had to stifle the urge to hit Eliot.

“There you have it,” Eliot concluded: “I don’t do hospitals.”
“Just one reason,” Parker pushed the envelope, “just give me one reason.”

“Because I know how this story ends.” Eliot rested his head on his arm. “With another Claywell in the graveyard…”

Parker was about to ask the question, but Hardison stopped her in time. Poking Eliot for information was a game that requires a delicate touch and none of them were in the right frame of mind to do so.

“His mother’s maiden name,” Hardison whispered into the comm. It was also Eliot’s email password.

“…At least no one is going to cry for this one.”

“I will,” Parker said and this time Hardison couldn’t stop her. “Dammit, Eliot! I’m doing it right now.”

“Stop it!” Eliot barked before he lifted the bottle again. “I know what you are doing! I did it once and it’s not going to work now.”

Parker, trying hard not to cry, got the hiccups. Her teary eyes fixed on Hardison silently begging him to help.

“What exactly do you think Parker is doing, bro?” Hardison asked, squatting down to look at Eliot’s bloodshot eyes.

“She’s using my feelings for her as a weapon, that’s what she’s doing.” Eliot stopped talking just long enough to take another sip. “My sister and I cried one day and the other too until we chipped away my mother’s resolve. We drove her to surgery and we lost her.”

Eliot stated it as if he was talking about the weather, but Hardison could tell he was holding back the tears. How long have you been carrying that burden, bro? Hardison wanted to ask. No kid should bear that kind of guilt.

“I don’t know…” Eliot spoke as if he was answering Hardison, but he was meandering inside the alcohol fog. “She might have lasted another four years. Enough to see my sister married. Not long enough to see me fall from grace…”

Eliot crossed his arms over his knees and let the empty bottle dangle from his hand, his eyes stared unfocused at the wall in front of him. He was very drunk.

“We just wanted the nightmare to be over.”

Eliot’s mouth slackened just a bit. His pupils were small and that made his eyes look big, wet, and cold. Eliot’s shoulders shook and Hardison was sure tears were near; he was not so sure if he could bear witness of Eliot crying his eyes out without losing a good chunk of his sanity. Tears didn’t fall, Eliot chuckled deeply and without humor.

“Hey, Parker!” He called out with that mocking tone he used so frequently. Parker turned around, surprised. “Keep crying. Maybe that’s your goal and you can spare us…”

Parker slapped Eliot hard before he could finish his taunt. Eliot was ready for the blow and he just darted Parker a sobering look.

“I’m dying, Parker,” Eliot said in a sad whisper, “get used to it. For your sake and mine.”
Chapter End Notes

_Totally and royally fucked up_
TACAMO

Chapter Summary

The cat's out the bag. Eliot was sure he was fighting a lost battle, but his friends, near and far, refused to let him meander through the darkest recesses of his own mind.

Chapter Notes

WARNINGS: Suicide is discussed. If that topic could upset you, please skip the story.

Translations are provided. Waver your mouse over the bits in different languages.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You find out who your friends are
Somebody's gonna drop everything
Run out and crank up their car
Hit the gas, get there fast
Never stop to think 'what's in it for me?' or 'it's way too far.'
They just show on up with that big old heart
You find out who you're friends are

-Tracy Lawrence

Hardison grumbled because he couldn’t help but cringe. It took him a lot of effort to keep his eyes on the screen. By his side, Parker was having a harder battle to keep her place or to ignore Eliot. When Eliot was the issue, Parker was generous and often forgiving. She cared for him like that, and Hardison agrees with her most of the time. But last night, after Eliot fell asleep in a drunken stupor, Parker cried for hours in the crib, that little apartment at the top of their headquarters. Hardison was not even sure Eliot could make enough merits in this life to win Hardison’s forgiveness for that little stunt.

“No, Parker,” Hardison said, holding Parker’s hand before she could leave her chair. “Let him be.”

“He has been sick all morning!” Parker cringed again at the sounds Eliot was making in the loading bay bathroom.

“He knew it was bound to happen,” Hardison replied. Of all the stupid things Eliot could do, getting blind drunk on a sick liver was the worst one he could've chosen. “Let him pay for his idiocy.”

Parker let her eyes down, Hardison knew that if he let go of that hand, she’d run to Eliot’s side to comfort him and probably to give him an earful too.

“We can’t let his bad days become our new normal, Parker,” Hardison insisted, patting her hand.

“If he’s acting out, he’s not well.” Parker swatted his hand away.
“I agree, but we can’t help him if he refuses to let us help him.”

“You just don’t care.”

“That’s not fair, and you know it.”

Parker bit her lip and kicked her feet.

“It was not fair.”

“No, it wasn’t.” Hardison took a deep breath. “Have you ever been to a hospital?” Parker’s eyes lit up and Hardison felt her pulse rush beneath his fingers. “For reasons other than a job…”

“No.” Her pulse returned to its usual steady pace.

“They are filled with people who suffer, people who are trying to get better. Sometimes, in order for them to get better, doctors need to… pile on their suffering, Parker.”

“Your nana?”

“A couple of times,” Hardison tried to smile, but his efforts weren’t enough. “We can drag Eliot kicking and screaming to a hospital, but he won’t cooperate if he’s not doing it on his damn free will. You know he won’t. And doctors will need his cooperation, believe me.”

Hardison pointed at the screen where his research on the doctor, the hospital and the treatment was displayed. This time he was the one spending too much time reading medical websites. Parker let her eyes roam the display, her eyes were big and wet, her lips trembling.

“They need to open him up to take out the tumor. They need to pump him full of drugs. There will be times when they’ll touch Eliot in ways he doesn’t like to be touched to administer his meds…”

“But we need to make him better,” Parker whispered with sobbing voice. “We need to fix him…”

Hardison didn’t notice when she started crying again. He let her hand go and held out his arms for a hug. Parker rushed to that refuge, and he drew her close.

“We can’t steal his health for him, babe,” Hardison said, wishing they could.

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The brewpub was closed, and Eliot, in his black tank top and red bandana, was cooking black porter chili again.

Hardison left at closing time, arguing he had tickets for a robot-expo event. Parker knew he was still sulking about those beers and couldn’t stand Eliot at the moment. Eliot didn’t seem to notice the cold shoulder.

“We have enough chili in the fridge,” Parker commented as a conversation starter, walking behind him.

Eliot had been churning out pot after pot of the stuff, everyone as tasty as the first. Parker knew that it didn’t matter how much Eliot trained the kitchen staff, they couldn’t find the right balance between the beer and the beans. Toby’s students had tried time and time again, but the customers had noticed there was none of Eliot’s magic in it. On those days, the black porter chili didn’t sell so well and the till didn’t ring so frequently.
“For a month, maybe,” Eliot agreed, his eyes locked on his knife and the onion he had been reducing to tiny, paper-thin slivers. “I’m planning to fill that freezer top to bottom before I get too weak to cook anymore.”

Parker felt her bottom lip tremble. Eliot was talking in his usual no-nonsense, straightforward way while preparing his exit from this world. He was thinking of them all the time and that made Parker feel wretched.

“It has to be taken off the menu once you finish the stockpile,” Eliot kept going, browning the onions directly at the bottom of the pot, “but it might last you a good six months. By then, you should have hired another chef or have found another signature dish for the bar…”

She put her arms around his torso before he noticed it and held to Eliot for dear life. Eliot grunted and hooked his thumbs to her arms, digging hard to make her desist, but Parker, resting her forehead against his shoulder, squeezed him even harder.

“Let go,” Eliot grumbled, redoubling his efforts. Parker was sure his fingers would leave bruises.

“I will never let you go,” Parker pulled him closer, forcing him to take a step back. “You can’t go. You are my friend, I need you!”

“Higher or lower, Parker!” Eliot kept trying to break her hold. “You are crushing my tumor… against my spine!”

The words made no impression on Parker, but his voice trembled and his breath was ragged. Eliot’s shoulders were trembling against his face. His arms… Parker let go because his arms were losing strength quickly.

Eliot let out the faintest whimper before falling down to his knees, panting between clenched teeth. His left hand was pressed under his sternum, but his right hand against the knobs of the stove was trying to cut off the gas. Parker found the right one and turned it off for him.

“I didn’t…” Parker mumbled because Eliot was still on his knees, shaking. That big bullet around his neck danced erratically.

That was her answer, Eliot’s tumor caused him pain, and she just had made it hurt worse than it should. She had wrecked Eliot worse with a hug than all the muscle he had faced down to protect her. None of them had kept him down long enough…


“The nausea is worse than the pain,” Eliot mumbled, still dazed by her hug. There were unshed tears in his eyes, but his hand had stopped bracing his belly.

“I’m… sorry…”

“Please, don’t cry,” Eliot whispered, caressing her cheek. “I know you are going to miss me. I know because I miss her…”

“Your mom?”

“My sister. A hopeless klutz she was, but she gave me the best hugs ever.” Eliot shook his head. “Do you want to be my sister, Parker? Huh? At least until…” he stopped the idea and changed to a more cheerful tone. “The offer comes with all the hugs you want.”
“I don’t want to miss you!” Parker was dismayed by his unfinished idea. “I don’t want to miss your hugs either!”

“Let it rest,” Eliot said, his voice was harder, but his hand on her cheek was soft. “We can’t forbid the sun from setting. If it’s my time, it’s my time.” Eliot offered him his open arms. “Come here.” Parker recoiled in horror. “I’m going to hurt you again.”

“If you put your arms around my ribs, you won’t,” Eliot promised, passing his arm over Parker’s shoulder. “Come on, I need it as much as you do…” Gingerly, Parker approached Eliot. He smelled of sweat, with a faint touch of something coppery and bitter. Parker hadn’t noticed before. She rested her head on his shoulder and felt him breathe; his arms hugged her, she felt the muscles on his back tightened. His heartbeat steady against her ribs. He was warm. Eliot felt so full of life. He couldn’t be dying…

“Parker?” Eliot called out, resting his head against hers. Parker could feel he was tired, how he was longing to take the load off his shoulders, perhaps permanently. “Rub between my shoulder blades, won’t you?”

Parker reached up and rubbed the spot in small circles, scared to hurt him again. Eliot shuddered for a moment, but he melted into the caress. His heart started to beat more slowly, and his breathing became deeper.

“Thank you, Parker,” Eliot whispered, rocking slightly.

“What for?” Parker felt baffled because she did nothing to earn his gratitude.

“You made me feel sheltered,” Eliot exhaled slowly, she could feel his breath on her neck. “For a moment, I forgot I was dying…”

Parker felt those words like she’d been struck. Sadness bubbled up her chest and she held Eliot’s tight, refusing to let him go. She didn’t try to stop the tears, there was no use.

“Don’t cry, please,” Eliot’s voice was gentle, but it faltered. “I don’t want to cause you pain. There are better reasons for your tears. I hate to go knowing that someday you’ll cry out of joy and I won’t be there to see it. Don’t cry for me…”

His soothing words were not enough. Parker held him tighter, so tight her arms ached. Eliot cupped her head, and he was gentler, but he did his best to pull her close and rub her back at the same time and the whole maneuver was awkward.

“I don’t want to make you suffer for nothing,” Eliot mumbled and Parker knew he was trying to hold the tears at bay, without success. “I promise… I swear, I won’t make my ma’s mistake…”

Eliot was trying to be comforting, but those words broke Parker’s heart.

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The box was heavy on his shoulder and Eliot, fighting to keep his balance in the fridge ladder, realized he hadn’t really thought the whole thing through. Maybe he was counting on a strength that he no longer possessed. His fingers found purchase in the boxes stacked against the wall and with a last effort, he pushed his burden in the only space available.

“That should be enough,” Eliot said to himself, resting his forehead against the frozen box in front
of him. He was not sure if he was shaking because he was tired or because he was cold. “It better be...”

Forty-eight clear polycarbonate boxes, 16 gallons each, stacked against the wall.

The reach-in freezer in the kitchen held another five.

He could still cook another month, maybe, and...

“Now, you can die whenever you fucking please.”

Eliot Spencer liked the finality of those words, but at the same time, he didn’t think of the walk-in freezer as the best place to give up the ghost. Shivering, he climbed down and walked out. As he rubbed his naked arms, he thought that next time he should wear a long-sleeve shirt and then he laughed without joy.

There would never be another time to stack boxes in the walk-in freezer. His time was getting shorter with each breath.

Eliot Spencer closed the door; the faint click made him think of a casket and he shook his head. That was another detail he had to consider...

“Leaving this world is not as easy as it seems...”

Of course, the potter’s field was always an option, but he knew he couldn’t leave those who loved him without a place to grieve. On the other hand, he was a Deniable, no one should grieve for him... or love him, since we were in the neighborhood.

Eliot pushed the door, wondering when his life had become so complicated. At least his last will and testament were in order because he had only one person he could give all the money he accrued breaking the law. His arms ached with longing for a baby he had never held.

“Eliot?” Parker called hesitantly, standing behind the bar. “Coffee?”

“Yes,” Eliot extended his arm to get the cup. Caffeine was one of the pleasures he could still enjoy. “The freezer is full.”

Parker’s usually firm pulse wavered and she splashed coffee all over the counter. Eliot wanted to punch himself. His plan was not to terminate himself immediately, but he was considering that option if he began to become a burden... more than he was already.

“Are you...? Park...” Parker couldn’t finish her question.

“Am I saying...? No! When did I say...?” Eliot knew quite well when he told her that suicide was an option, but the best strategy at the moment was to overwhelm Parker with questions to avoid another storm of tears before the restaurant opens. “I was just saying that the freezer is full. Huh? Where do you get...? The staff needs to know they don’t have enough space...” Eliot huffed. “Pass the coffee, Parker!”

Parker passed him a cup only half full, but it was a good thing: she was shaking so badly. Eliot opened his mouth. He began to close it and sipped his coffee instead. God, let me die soon... Any explanation could tip Parker over the brink and he had done enough damage. As long as I draw breath, I’m a menace...

“Are you gonna bolt?” Parker asked trying to sip her cup.
“No,” Eliot sipped his, “but I have things to do.”

“Uh-huh,” Parker mumbled.

“Parker.”

“Hmmm?”

“I’ll stay to take my pills, OK?” Eliot flashed his soft, gentle smile—the one he reserved to charm a mark—at her. “And I’ll return to take the ones before bed.”

Parker looked at him and her face looked a bit more relaxed.

“Oh, OK.” She shrugged. “If you want to, that’s OK.”

“Parker.”

“Hmmm.” This time the sound was flat. She even shook her shoulders to show her disdain.

“Wanna go and case the Pittock Mansion with me?”

Parker's face lit up like a Christmas tree as she planted her arms on the wet counter and raise to meet Eliot’s eyes.

“What are we stealing?”

Eliot let his mouth made a genuine smile for a moment, then he remembered his only reason to visit Pittock Mansion was to gawk at the Dining in the Gilded Age exhibition.

“Nothing at the moment,” Eliot sipped his coffee slowly. “But in two weeks there will be some political fundraising. What do you bet we will end up there, cloning phones and cards?”

“And lifting shinnies?”

Eliot took a deep breath.

“You have the choice, lift whatever you like, but all the money goes to charity, or you can befriend one and keep it.”

“One?”

“One.” In that word was the implicit promise of not telling Hardison. “I’m serious.”

Parker, gracefully, transferred her weight to her left arm and offered Eliot her right.

“Deal!”

“See you at sundown, then,” Eliot shook her hand and put the mug in the bar.

Parker was smiling when he turned around. That was the most slipshod attempt of comfort ever made by a man, from Adam to the date, but Eliot Spencer was not a man to let go of a win.

The bell rang and Hardison entered sorting out mail. Eliot acknowledged his presence with a short nod on his way to the kitchen. They weren't back on speaking terms yet and that made Eliot uneasy. He had to find a way to reach Hardison for the sake of the team…

“Hey,” Hardison exclaimed, tossing something his way.
Eliot caught the object without thinking. It was a letter in a slightly yellowed paper. Eliot usually gets postcards because his friends in the Service rather send letters home. There was something written between the seams and over the flap.

“Dee-ah id-ir shin og-uss on tulk,” Eliot read aloud and felt the sudden urge to sit down.

Trembling, Eliot looked for a place to rest his weight and the window booth was the first practical one. His mind didn’t register he was occupying the most sought-after spot in the restaurant. His mental resources were absorbed by that sentence written in old-fashioned copperplate. Eliot Spencer had at least two reasons to feel like his heart pounding against his tumor at the pit of his stomach.

Out of habit, Eliot surveyed his surroundings. He was sure only the Leverage party was at the local but that quick inspection brought down his pulse. Parker and Hardison were moving to the backstore, chatting happily. Eliot returned to his letter.

There was only one person in this world who would send him that sentence. A Fenian who was feared by the boldest and the strongest members of different armies. When those words are spoken, Generals pay very close attention.

That person has trained his most tuned in fighting skills, made him a well-oiled one-man army, and turned him into a single-minded sharp scalpel. The very thought of this person made Eliot’s PTSD flare-up, although he had never suffered from it. The only person who ever had Eliot Spencer curled up on the floor, begging for mercy…

Eliot turned the letter, noticing the rustle of paper, it was dry. He closed his eyes and brought it to his nose, he detected chopper oil, jungle soil, black powder, animal dung and pollen mixed with ashes. Nostalgia seized him for a couple of heartbeats.

Eliot ran his fingers over the letters; the ink was granular, the scratches on the paper were irregular. The letter was written with a worn-out iron nib, using handmade ink. Should that letter be written with a regular ballpen, Eliot would have burned it, closed at it was.

Eliot opened his eyes, E. Spencer as addressee, then Bridgeport Brewing Co. and the PO box number and the word _Momhuirnín_. B.H., as the mailer, then Address Known. The letter didn’t carry any postage stamp but it has been postmarked by the United States Postal Service anyway.

It was the real deal, with Uncle Sam’s blessings.

Eliot looked through the window, gulping. Sweat was running down his neck and his armpits were uncomfortably wet. He doubted his health was to blame this time. The street was quiet, and there were no suspicious shadows. Eliot breathed deeply.

When Blue Heart speaks, Eliot Spencer listens…

That was the easiest, less painful way to manage a situation that had put bigger men to their knees. Eliot sat straight, breathed deeply twice and squared his jaw before opening the letter.

The warm spring sun fell over him as he pored over the letter with the apprehension of a man reading his own death sentence.

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Eliot’s alarm watch drew the looks of the few early customers, but only briefly. The monotonous beep melded with the restaurant's dint. One of the servers looked at him, confused, but didn’t make
a comment. All the staff had a healthy fear of their chef, who was not in the payroll.

Hardison watched him from the CCTV, wondering why hadn’t gotten up from the booth and moved to the kitchen where he stored his pillbox. It was meds time and, going by how on the dot he used to heed that alarm, he should be rushing for his next dose.

“Come on, bro, take your pills…” Hardison whispered, feeling a sinking pull in his stomach.

Yet the watch, relentlessly, vibrated against his wrist, unattended. Eliot kept his eyes in the window, immobile as if the sound couldn’t reach him. As if the world didn’t matter to him anymore. Parker looked at Hardison from the CCTV, her eyes big, her shoulders dropped. Hardison could tell she was feeling the same dread.

“Eliot, please, bounce back…” Hardison pleaded, gripping the deck of their table.

Parker closed her mouth, squared her shoulders and walked briskly to the door. She turned the sign around, they have been open for less than an hour, but the day was over. Parker moved to Eliot’s table. Eliot didn’t stir, his eyes still staring at nothing. He didn’t seem to notice when Parker turned off his alarm or when she brushed his hair away from his eyes and tucked it behind his ear.

Hardison got up his chair and moved to the restaurant. Parker was saying something to one of the servers. The girl looked at Parker surprised, but her smile was too big. Parker was letting the staff go home for the day. Hardison moved to the kitchen making them the sign to wrap it up. Eliot had trained the kitchen well, Toby’s students started to clear out their preparation with only a slight nod of acknowledgment.

“He’s giving up…” Parker whispered almost in his ear, she was standing behind him. Her voice was a wobbly murmur.

“He gave up that night we found him drunk,” Hardison replied, but once he said those words aloud, he realized it was resentment speaking.

Eliot cried that night.

He had fallen down the scary chasm of cancer and tried to claw his way out for more than a month with only his iron will to assist his efforts; his medical record could bear witness of all the tumbles and dashes he endured alone. That night of the beer, he cried out for help and they were unable to understand him; Hardison still shivered at Eliot’s eyes, begging him for a way to escape his personal hell. Today, he finally got tired of waiting for succor that will never arrive.

Parker was right: Today, Eliot was abandoning all hope.

Staff started to go before the customers finished their food. They were discreet, instead of going out in droves, their four employees went one by one. The only exception was the kitchen help, both of them went out together, and they waved their goodbyes to Eliot, but they received no reply. Parker and Hardison waited for the last tables, it was a good way to manage their uneasiness.

“Eliot said he won’t make his ma’s mistake,” Parker said, looking at Eliot, once the last customer paid their tab.

“He doesn’t have any,” Parker replied, but she moved to the kitchen.
Hardison picked the white mugs and moved to the booth. He didn’t ask for Eliot’s permission to join, he just put the mug between his hands and slid in front of him. Eliot’s eyes fixed on him for a moment, it was a reflex. He soon closed his eyes and moved his lips in that nervous tic that only assaulted him in a con and made him look totally helpless and harmless. Parker slid by his side, Eliot’s pillbox neatly placed on her lap, under the table.

“Eliot,” Hardison called out and that was where everything went out of the plan.

Eliot’s shoulders dropped, squinted his eyes tighter and move his lips with purpose but without a voice. Probably that was the closest someone had seen Eliot Spencer pray, or maybe he was giving himself a pep talk or rehearsing his parting-ways speech. In any case, neither of them could give him the client talk to cajole him into taking his drugs. The midday sun was falling on Eliot at his most vulnerable moment and his best friends stared at him, transfixed.

“I… I do…” Eliot stuttered, his hands gripped the white mug as if he were looking for an anchor. He opened his eyes and looked at them. His pupils were impossibly big. “I don’t want to die…”

Parker was the first to extend her hand to pry Eliot’s hand from the mug. Hardison was behind only a couple of heartbeats. Eliot clutched their hands hard as if he were afraid to let them go, or worse, as if he feared they would let him go.

“We are together,” Hardison promised him, half of his voice still trapped in his throat.

“We will fight together,” Parker clarified, lost in Eliot’s eyes.

“God…” The word escaped his mouth in a huge dry sob. “I don’t want to drag you through hell with me…”

“You are not dragging us…” Hardison closed his free hand over Eliot’s before he could even think of letting his hand go. “We are pulling you out.”

“Yeah,” Parker did the same with his other hand. “Let’s steal us an Eliot.”

Eliot breathed out, hung his head and, finally, nodded his agreement.

Chapter End Notes

Take charge and move out
Chapter Summary

Parker and Hardison felt growing pains when they started to help with Eliot’s disease management; Eliot found that following doctor’s orders sometimes bring more pain, and, in the middle of it, a new case to work with got almost within grasp.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You’re gonna miss this. You’re gonna want this back
You’re gonna wish these days hadn’t gone by so fast
These are some good times, so take a good look around
You may not know it now, but you’re gonna miss this
-Trace Adkins

“You’re gonna miss this. You’re gonna want this back
You’re gonna wish these days hadn’t gone by so fast
These are some good times, so take a good look around
You may not know it now, but you’re gonna miss this
-Trace Adkins

“Your guardian angel surely has a pacemaker, brother…”

Hardison looked at the four-tier plan in front of him. He had faced complicated schemes before but this one baffled him. He needed three bottles of Squeeze Orange just to make sense of all the prescriptions Eliot had managed by himself with just a wristwatch despite that touch of hepatic encephalopathy his medical record stated. How had he kept himself alive so far was a mystery too daunting to contemplate.

With a gummy frog in his mouth, Hardison started to code at the best of his capacity. Half of those had to be taken with an empty stomach, some with food; he coded contraindications and put regular expressions to manage possible side effects.

Antibiotics, targeted pills, and cholesterol drugs had the same shape and color and different times between doses; the fact Eliot hadn’t mistaken one for the other was a clear sign that there was a Superior Power watching over them. That acid should be kept away from that agonist… That one is sublingual, not enteric, and Hardison was not sure Eliot knew the difference.

“What’s the use of prescribing something PRN if it can clash with the scheduled drug?”

Hardison wondered if he had to code some were better taken in the night, but Eliot had been surviving on naps those last two weeks. It was no wonder, at least three of the substances in his system were listed as changing the sleep patterns as a side effect.

“Because if I have to take those PRN, it’s a sign that my life has been very, very unbearable,” Eliot mumbled, walking into the office with both hands inside his back pockets. There was a new band-aid on his arm.

“More blood tests?” Hardison asked trying to fit Eliot’s corticosteroids into the schedule. Those were not negotiable.

“I swear to God that harpy draws my blood faster than I can make it.” Eliot sounded almost
resigned as he approached the control deck. “What are you doing?”

“Juggling your prescriptions,” Hardison groaned. “What’s with the hands in your pockets?”

“I just had a date with a couple of BONITAs,” Eliot said as if that sentence was an explanation.

By the discreet way Eliot kept trying to rub his butt through the denim, his female Spanish-speaking friends were into spanking a bit too much. Hardison had never suspected Eliot would enjoy having his hide tanned, but Eliot was full of surprises in normal times. Extraordinary times put extraordinary secrets to the light.

“That explains why you are late,” Hardison said wondering how he is going to fit the painkillers if the ‘steroids keep getting in the way. “You were supposed to be here half an hour ago.”

“I’m not late! I was minding my own...” Eliot bit his tongue and took in a deep breath that made the ammo hanging from his neck bounce against his chest. He started again in a deeper tone: “I was signing up into a Veterans Survivor Support group. Doctor’s orders.”

Hardison forgot the unsolvable problem of Eliot’s drugs for a moment and turned his eyes to his friend. He wasn’t sure he should be more impressed: at the doctor, for making him seek help, or at Eliot, for actually following through. Eliot looked more mortified about the support group than about the pair of Latin sadists he bagged. Alec Hardison turned his eyes to the screen without a word.

“I’ve told Dr. Byrnum my brother was coming from Chicago to help me weather the storm,” Eliot said, making a smooth change of topic. “You are hereby invited to my next appointment.”

“And that will fly perfectly because we are two peas in a pod, right?”

“It will work better than saying ‘this is my partner in crime, and I trust him because together we’ve stolen almost a billion from millionaires around the world’, I reckon,” Eliot grumbled with a tired shrug.

“I still think you should take Parker.” Hardison let the computer run the best drug schedule, his brain was not up to the task.

“Parker?” Eliot asked with a sudden rise of sarcasm. “The Parker who just this morning challenged me to a crunch competition and the one who still wrap me from behind? The Parker who doesn’t want to hear I am a mortal being? Huh? That Parker?” Eliot shook his head and raised the sting a bit. “Awesome gal, great moral support!” Eliot returned to his normal tone. “I rather have in my corner the guy who sent me a text, so I didn’t forget my MRI appointment.”

Hardison made a note to steal the MRI results from the OSHU database after he changed Eliot’s name from the document. Eliot made a crucial mistake giving his name to the oncologist: if someone was planning to kill him, they had had a full month to get the memo.

“Things are going to get messy and I need a sharp mind in the doctor’s office.” Eliot’s voice dropped. “God knows mine ain’t.”

“Look, man, I’m flattered,” Hardison turned his stool around to face Eliot. “Words can’t be enough to explain how honored I feel to be called your brother, because you’re my brother from another mother, but it won’t fly.”

“Dr. Byrnum’s more worried about me dealing with this alone that of my family history, Hardison” Eliot explained, rubbing his rear end again. “For all he knows, your mother remarried my father, or
we both were adopted, or it could be a foster home situation, and he couldn't care less as long as I’m not alone.”

“Do you really think we can sell that con?”

“Of course, we can,” Eliot replied, finally taking his hands from his back pockets. “Peachy.”

“Promise?” Hardison offered his hand.

Two quick slaps followed. The sound ricocheted on the high ceilings.

“Promise,” Eliot said before bumping fists. “I need to take a nap. I have crying circle later today.”

Hardison grinned at the disparaging name Eliot called the support group. That’s the Eliot he had learned to love. Hardison couldn’t help the smile. Eliot made his way out of the conference room, but he undid his steps in a hurry. Hardison almost turned around ready to ask what was in Eliot’s mind when he felt a piece of paper on his shoulder.

“Almost forgot,” Eliot explained when Hardison took the paper. “Check you and Parker have these up to date. If you are not, Dr. Byrnum is happy to provide.”

“Do they make vaccines against whooping cough?”

“You’d be surprised to know what they have vaccines for!” Eliot was already in his way to the crib.

“Parker isn’t gonna be happy,” Hardison replied looking at the list. “That’s a haystack of needles!”

“Ask her how she would like to kill me with a cold!” Eliot retorted, leaning over the handrail over Hardison’s head.

Hardison couldn’t deny Eliot was within reason. The situation demanded a lot from them but so much more from him. Chemotherapy, reduced to its simplest mechanism, was to poison a patient in hopes to kill the illness first. And he was going to take the poison instead of swallowing a bunch of PRNs, that choice took him some serious guts. Some harmless shots just couldn’t hold the candle.

The computer found a way to sort out Eliot’s drugs. Upon closer inspection, Hardison noticed it was, precisely, the schedule Eliot had managed with his watch. Alec Hardison groaned and fought the urge to scream to the heavens, *Wrath of Khan* style.

“And you are the one in need for a sharp mind,” Hardison snigger.

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Parker looked at the back door of Dr. Byrnum’s and smiled. The frame of the door had Eliot Spencer’s unmistakable calling card. Either no one had noticed the footprint on the door, or no one cared. She was sure his friend had used that back door at least one time. Parker worked her lockpicks and soon she was inside the small clinic.

The back door led her into the staff lounge area. Hardison told her the big room at the right was the doctor’s office. Archives were in the second exam room closest to the reception. Parker made her way there with her usual sigil. Dr. Byrnum was in his office, reading a medical journal and sipping his coffee. Parker took a moment to look at him. She liked his grandfatherly bearing.
The examination room was small and a bit cramped. One examination table next to the wall with its privacy curtain was in front of the door; one desk at the right and behind it and a line of file cabinets. To find the S and retrieve Eliot’s file was child's play. Parker looked at the amount of paper. Too many tests and notes to steal, shame she couldn’t just take it, the doctor needed that notes to help Eliot. She put the file in the desk and started scanning at the best of her speed.

The footsteps approach sounded familiar and Parker moved to the hollow of the desk. Heavy but mostly silent steps, in heavy work boots. It was either Eliot or another hitter.

“...I know I have promised you to be at the Kickoff of the season, uncle Randy,” Eliot was talking on the phone when he entered the room. “No, you’re still my uncle, I don’t care if you divorced my aunt! Did you get my letter? Yeah, just like aunt Ida... Yeah, I know... Runs in the family.”

Parker looked from her hiding spot at Eliot and felt her heart in a vise. Eliot, holding the phone with his right, walked with his shoulders slouched and his left hand hooked on a beltloop. Whoever was this uncle Randy, he was important to Eliot and sharing the grim news was difficult. He was pacing in front of the examination table, shoulders shaking, his red Sooners jersey clung to his belly in the most unflattering way. Drugs were making him put on weight around the waist, despite all the training Parker had witnessed.

“Yes, uncle.” Eliot tried to smile but failed. He heard the words on the other side of the line with polite attention. “I really wanted to be there for the Sooners vs. Owls match... Maybe next season, uncle. Yeah, God willing.” A long pause. “Yes, I’ll see someone rings you if... if I’m called up yonder. Yes, of course, thank you for that.” Another pause to listen. “Right back at you, uncle. I know, uncle, I know... I must go.”

Eliot ended his call with a loud exhalation. The phone went to his pockets and his hands to his face. Parker seized the chance to retrieve his file from the desk and continue her work. Parker was worried her phone would do too much noise, but another person entered the room.

“What can I say, Nurse?” the question was made with a cheerful, feminine voice. This person closed the door behind her. “You’re early.”

“What can I say, Nurse?” Eliot said the title like an insult. “I can’t wait to have my veins mauled.”

Parker couldn’t help but be curious about this person who could put Eliot on the defensive by coming into a room. She extended her phone and took a picture.

Eliot was standing, arms crossed, jaw squared. In front of him a young nurse with light blue scrubs and a black t-shirt with the legend ‘I’m a nurse. I’m calling the shots’, and two syringes crossed behind those words. Her short hair was slicked back and her almond eyes shone with mischief.

“Miss a rolling vein once...”

“You blew it,” Eliot accused with rancor in his voice. “It hurt.”

“And then you made it worse by jerking your hand away.” The nurse was having none of Eliot’s brass, and Parker felt a bit in love with her. “Are we going to keep bickering about past misfires or are we going to start an IV in those lovely, big veins of yours?”

“Which one will let me live pain-free a little longer? Huh?”

Parker struggled to contain the soft laughter bubbling in her belly. Eliot’s hissing and groaning covered the sound of her phone scanning each page of his file. Parker had no idea of what all those papers meant, but if Hardison said they needed them, it was Parker’s role to get them.
“I don’t need to read your CBC to know you are not eating right,” Nurse said. By the sound of her gloves, she had finished her job. “I almost missed your vein because you are not drinking either.”

“The ball is pressing my stomach. Drugs don’t help either,” Eliot said with a deep sigh. Parker wished she could be spared from that knowledge. “How long?”

“The usual two to three hours. Do you need a blanket?”

“Are you going to sing me a lullaby too?”

“No, but if you don’t have a reaction, I can give you half-a-gram.”

“No to both, but thank you.”

Parker, disregarding all precaution, poked her head out of her hiding spot. The nurse was sitting with her back to her and Eliot was on the examination table, his right hand behind his head, the IV attached to his left. After all that hostility, that small token of politeness sounded suspicious.

“I need to prepare another’s patient treatment,” Nurse said, getting up. “You know what to do if this one doesn’t agree with you?”

“Caterwaul, in case you care.”

The nurse laughed as she made her way to the door and she didn’t even turn her head toward the desk. Parker didn’t know whether she was lucky or Nurse was careless. Eliot was right, hospitals could not protect him. Should Parker be a hitter instead of a thief, he would be dead in a blink.

“Did you find whatever you were looking for, Parker?” Eliot asked in a tired sigh.

Parker ducked, wondering how on Earth Eliot knew she was there. It was silly to do that. Carefully, she crept her way to the examination table and looked at him, still surprised.

“Next time you try to take a concealed photo, disable the flash.”

“So... is she the famous harpy?” Parker asked, trying to be cheerful. Eliot looked pale and very tired. She couldn’t help but to caress him and take the hair from his eyes, in hopes that make him feel a bit better.

“She enjoys stabbing me a bit too much, right?” Eliot smiled at her, but his lips were trembling. Whatever he had running through his veins was draining him fast. “I’m going to take a nap. Be careful in your way out, please.”

“I’ll try,” Parker promised, resting her head on his belly. Feeling Eliot breathe was strangely soothing and she smiled.

Eliot was fast asleep when she lifted her head. His head slightly turned toward his arm looked peaceful, but Parker felt uneasy. Feeling him so helpless was disturbing in a way she couldn’t put in words. Once she left the office, there would be no one to keep Eliot safe.

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Eliot crossed his arms and his legs, feeling how his aching rear-end slid off from that cheap plastic chair. He was sweating like a sinner in church and he wanted a cup of coffee. His eyes wandered to the lying big clock on that basement wall. It couldn't be just ten minutes since the torture began...

“Eliot, do you want to share something?”
Eliot looked at the counselor (Nia… her name is Nia) and shook his head. The last thing he wanted was to feel more vulnerable and exposed than he already felt. Around Eliot, six other veterans—some from Vietnam, some from the Gulf—looked at him. Eliot could read the question in their faces: What’s your damage? Eliot didn’t feel like sharing.

“Eliot, this is your third session and I still need to know how your voice sounds, chile.”

*New Orleans*… Eliot could pin that distinctive accent. Nia was a big woman, she wore big bright-colored muumuus, big glasses and a smile on her face, but Eliot felt *(small)* threatened by her presence. *Please, don’t poke me*… Eliot pleaded because any fear he could have for hospitals doubled for *(Blue Heart)* psychologists.

“Give the boy a break, Nia…” Mark said, putting his hand on Eliot’s shoulder. “He had given a ton to Uncle Sam and can’t shake his training as we did.”

Eliot looked at Mark. Mark was an old Oregonian. Dr. Byrnum’s age, maybe a bit less. He was thin and wiry, spry for a man of his age. Mark was bald and use that kind of half-frame glasses Eliot always thought pointless.

“I bet he feels lost without a uniform… so cut him some slack. Danny here came for eight sessions before we knew his name, and now he can’t shut up about how to pay for his treatment.” Mark slapped Eliot’s shoulder. “The boy will talk when he’s ready.”

“I’m worried because he doesn’t ‘ave too much time, and he knows it…”

*He can hear you!* Eliot tensed up. His nostrils flared and he almost couldn’t contain the urge to bolt out the place.

“Let him move to his pace,” Bob interjected. Bob has fire scars in his arms and Eliot had heard he was an OR veteran as well. “The boy needs to learn that there is life after surgery.”

“We love you, Nia, but you don’t know—actually know—how hard it’s for us soldiers.” Otis was an African American Afghanistan veteran like Eliot, but pancreatic cancer made him look a lot older. “We are used to do things. We don’t like to have things done to us.”

Eliot looked around. His elder brothers-in-arms looked at him with understanding nods and warm half-smiles. *Don’t look at me!* He put his hands on his face and doubled over, struggling to hold back the urge to cry out in frustration.

“We know,” Mark mumbled, rubbing Eliot’s shoulders. “Incoming fire is terrifying…”

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“I was just saying…”

“I don’t care!” Eliot exclaimed, letting the back-door bang behind him, “I don’t want you there in my next appointment!”

Parker came running from the brewpub and met them halfway. Hardison noticed her hair was braided around her head. Hardison knew she had been worried out of her brain.

“You took it from the fridge!” Hardison argued as he put the drugstore bag on top of the control table. “I knew it!”

Eliot descended to the usual grunt of annoyance before Parker could get to them.
“What is it?”

“He made a scene because I took one of his soda…”

“Squeeze Orange Soda!” Hardison interrupted as if it was the point. “The Mexican version!”

“In the middle of a follow-up appointment!” Eliot retorted. “That’s not the time to bring out…”

“Eliot,” Parker called and approached him to hold his head, “you are not flushing!”

“What?” Hardison turned his head toward Eliot.

Due to her hypervigilance, Parker was right as always: Eliot was pale against Parker’s rosy hands.

“You usually turn a bit red while arguing!”

“I know.” Eliot stopped to gulp. His eyes shifted downwards, and his fist clenched slowly. Then, in a murmur, he explained: “Drugs are killing my red cell count.”

Parker let her hands down. Eliot took a step back and sat on the couch. Hardison hated to see him down, but it was always worse after a visit to the doctor. Eliot looked tired and downcast, sitting there, so different from just a few minutes ago. He was so feisty while the nurse drew out yet another blood sample and while they were bickering. Things almost felt normal again, now all of that was just gone.

“Doctor warned me it could happen.” Eliot let his head fall back as if he were refusing to look them in the eye. “I was alone, and I felt bone-tired and dizzy. I felt like fainting…”

Hardison felt the word like a punch to the gut. Eliot spoke it as if it was the worst indignity a hitter could endure.

“I took the first sweet thing from the fridge to prop me up.” Eliot confessed up to his crime with dull voice before changing the tone to an accusatory one: “I didn’t expect you to rat me out to my oncologist over a bottle of sugar water, Hardison!”

“Aw, man… sorry.” Hardison knew it wouldn’t matter. He had put Eliot in a bad spot and those wounds never heal.

Parker sat next to Eliot and put her head on his shoulder. “Are you going to be right?”

Hardison wanted to facepalm so hard that his carpal tunnel flared up for a moment, but Eliot raised his head with a disconcerted expression.

“I just need to take a whole bunch of new pills and get some shots.”

Parked winced in sympathy before she kissed Eliot on the cheek. Eliot managed to brew a half-smile just for her.

“Hey, Parker, can you do something for me…?”

Parker perked up immediately at the sound of Eliot’s voice.

“What should I steal?”

Eliot looked at Hardison who promptly looked a list on his smartphone and hand it over.
“I want you to call Toby and ask him if he could cook me something with the things on this list. Can you?”

“Pfff… Of course, I can,” Parker sauntered away. “I’ll even drive to bring it to you!”

Eliot looked her go with the smile still glued to his face, but Hardison was not buying it. After a couple of minutes, the smile waned, and they looked at each other in silence. Parker’s denial hung between them like a toxic cloud. After a while, Hardison extended his hand to help Eliot up. With a huff, Eliot pushed himself straight without his help.

“Hand me that bag.”

“Ah-ah! I heard all you said about dropping things.”

“That’s another reason for not wanting you at my doctor’s,” Eliot grunted, and his eyes closed dangerously.

“You shouldn’t jab yourself with those hands,” Hardison insisted, pushing Eliot to the crib. “Lucky you. Nana taught me how to do IMs.”

“You better be good.” Eliot conceded as Hardison pushed him forward. “Those shots hurt like the dickens just as they are.”

“Man, you are going to beg me to shoot you all your meds!”

Eliot grunted his disbelief and Hardison felt like the old days again.

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Depersonalization has been the only strategy in Eliot’s arsenal to survive the crying cycle sessions. It allowed him to focus on the rest of the group, it dulled the roar of his anger. Nia didn't seem too pleased Eliot was trying to escape to his inner world and had kept Eliot in during the break. A bad move to make, Eliot could only think of coffee and, maybe, a cookie, if the good ones weren’t gone yet.

“Do you know what's the purpose of this whole thing?”

“To make me talk.”

Nia looked at Eliot and he held her gaze. Eliot was vaguely aware of the rest of the group around the coffee table, they were talking about money trouble and that sound more interesting than health issues. Hell, it was more interesting than whatever Nia was attempting.

“Eliot,” Nia called again. There was a warm glow in her eyes. “Were you tortured while you served?”

“I can't tell.”

“You behave like someone who had endured torture…” Nia stopped and took Eliot’s hands. “Did they…?”

“Rape me?” Eliot looked at her, disinterested. Quacks always ask the same things. “I can’t tell. Beat me? I can't tell. Waterboard me? I can't tell.” Eliot suppressed a wave of anger. “Stop asking, Nia, because I can't tell.”
“You can, Eliot,” Nia insisted. Her fingers pressed his. “The limit of your loyalty's the date of your release. You don't have to carry your pain in silence.”

“I'm not in pain, ma'am,” Eliot felt reality slide just a bit. It was time to mind his Southern manners. “I took an oath and I'm bound to my word. I have nothing to say.”

“Alright, if that chapter is closed…” Nia sighed her disappointment. “Let's talk about now. You are in crisis. What’s your plan?”

“To take this daggum ball out, pardon my French,” Eliot mumbled, still minding his Southern manners. “To take the poisoned cup and to wait for the best. Is there another?” Eliot shrugged. “Praying it's all good and well, but my friends believe more in human intervention.”

“What do you believe in?”

“I don't, ma'am.” Eliot felt his mind wavering a bit more. “I either wait or act. Nothing else.”

“What's this, then?”

“This is waiting, ma'am. A very uncomfortable wait I must go through.”

“Are you from the South, chile?” Nia asked after a while as if she was trying to guess by Eliot’s accent. “Virginia?”

“Kentuckiana, ma'am.”

“Don't you mama told you not to be rude at gatherings?” Nia pulled an amused face. “I want to pull your ear like a naughty boy because you have been a sourpuss this whole time! We are restarting soon,” Nia got up, her hands were still holding Eliot’s. She patted the back of Eliot’s right hand. “I expect you to show the other side this time.”

“What other side?” Eliot clutched Nia's hand. The command wasn’t clear, his pulse was racing.

“I’m tired of seeing the gruff redneck,” Nia said with a huge smile. “Show me the Southern Gentleman I know you can be.”

“HUA, ma’am,” Eliot said, his neck bent before he noticed it.

Eliot took a deep breath, feeling his pulse steadying and his head in peace. He had his orders, and, with a slow movement, he went to turn the Southern charm on for the rest of the session.

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“Repeat me why are we cyberstalking this man in the middle of the night?” Hardison complained for the third time.

Eliot made an annoyed sound. Parker was sleeping in the crib and Eliot had to drag Hardison out of it because he couldn’t make the stupid machine behave. Eliot knew he couldn’t sleep because the members of the crying circle had told him the reason of their hardships. Uncle Sam’s shoddy bureaucracy was one of them, but the other was this Darryl Trenanow.

Trenanow had offered them to set a proper investment found, like those cooperatives Eliot had seen in South America, which in the paper are awesome, but all it came crashing down spectacularly. Eliot couldn't grasp how this Trenanow could do it—financial crimes were not his forte—, but their new friends had their healthcare benefits hijacked and rerouted to Trenanow’s accounts.
Danny hadn’t taken his dialysis in two months and Otis needed a new surgery soon, but Veteran Affairs only cover for half of his. Mark couldn’t afford his supportive therapy and he’s scared blind his leukemia would return, and Gabriel...

“Just return the money to its proper place!” Eliot mumbled, trying not to reach for the coffee. He was on his sixth mug since they went to sleep. “And tell me where I could find this utter waste of oxygen so I can rearrange his limbs in creative, unprecedented ways…”

Eliot was still running under the Southern Gentleman pretense and he had to do something; he was a guest in their circle and good manners demanded him to make anything to help. Besides, it was always better to have a nice prospect at hand.

“Slow down, man…” Hardison grumbled, stopping to take a sip of orange soda. “You can’t lay your hands in this man…”

“Do you want to see me try?”

“Hey! I don’t doubt for a second—a second, I said—you could twist this scumbag like a pretzel without… scratch that, you are already sweating. I know, even with your current problems, that you can tie his balls around his neck…”

“I like that idea.” Eliot grinned at the thought.

“If you put your hands on him. Problem is, my brother, that Trenanow took a plane to Cartagena, bought a bottle of aguardiente, and hadn’t make another purchase in four days. Either the cartels got him, or he melted away in the Caribbean summer.”

“So, we are late. Big deal.” Eliot was not about to let the news or common sense get in the way of retribution or vengeance, whichever comes first. “Transfer the money so we can at least save some old-timers’ lives.”

“No can’t do, man.” Hardison sipped his soda again.

“For someone demanding me to see the bright side every other day, you have been pretty negative so far…” Eliot caved in and reached for the coffee. “Explain to me why not, and don’t go on a geek spiral on this.”

“I’ll try to KISS it for you…”

Eliot made an incoherent noise because every time Hardison promised to keep it simple and stupid he ended up rambling for half an hour.

“Your friends’ paychecks are being deposited in a number account in an offshore in Liechtenstein,” Hardison reclined his weight against the chair. “This little tax heaven he had found…”

“We have raided tax heavens before…”

“Not in Liechtenstein, we didn’t,” Hardison contradicted. “It’s different from the jobs we did in Antigua and Belize, Eliot. Liechtenstein has a system with a digital security key that sends an opcode to validate each withdrawal of the account proprietary,” Hardison stopped to look at Eliot. “You can’t brute force something like that, not even with a million monkeys banging keys at the speed of light and prayers to stumble upon the right opcode by a happy chance. Comprende?”

“There is nothing we can do?” Eliot asked, surprised because he got the explanation and because the explanation was, in fact, short.
“We can hope this man will try to make a withdrawal so we can catch his new credit card number, and his location from that, but, if he’s a professional, it won’t be soon.”

“Can you take my accounts and make their payments from that?” Eliot asked, finishing his coffee. “Can we at least do that?”

“No without making them accomplices of your crimes. Most of your non-Leverage accounts are pinged internationally because you worked with Moreau,” Hardison put the machine to sleep. “I’m sorry, Eliot, but until we put our hands, our physical hands, on this man, our hands are tied… We need his safety key.” Hardison stopped to pass his arm over Eliot’s shoulders. “Don’t look so sad, man. We can set a small fund from Leverage money tomorrow to help them get by. I don’t think Parker would object…”

Hardison kept talking, but Eliot had stopped hearing him because he had failed them.

The only silver lining was that they were not expecting anything from Eliot, just like the rest of the world.

Chapter End Notes

_Rules of engagement_
Chapter Summary

Side effects and approaching surgery date brought a new understanding of the dire situation. Eliot Spencer learned that he still knew how to pray.

Chapter Notes

WARNING: This chapter includes suicidal ideation, please skip if that could upset you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*If only I'd have known that later on down the road*
*I'd look back and not like what I see*
*I'd have changed a lot of things*
*Startin' with me*
-Jake Owen

*Glad tidings keep piling on...* Eliot Spencer thought, sitting in the couch of the control room with a high-calorie snack. Comfort food was the right thing to look for now, it didn’t matter they were empty calories. Without thinking, he rested his right foot on his left ankle and dug into the soft mixture of rice, milk, shaved coconut, raisins, and cinnamon. His heart was beating hard against his ribs since Dr. Byrnum gave him and Hardison the news.

Parker came into the office and looked at him with curiosity; she didn't ask. She sat on the arm of the couch and made him the sign to share. For her, Eliot dug to the bottom and brought up the gooey, salty caramel. The pleasure in Parker’s face was even better than the taste of the treat.

“Toby’s students knew their way around a dessert,” Eliot commented with a favorable, soft tone. “They can hold the fort while I…”

“No.” Parker shook her head, refusing to hear the next part.

“No.” Parker shook her head, refusing to hear the next part.

“Parker.” Eliot opened his arms, inviting her to cuddle. “I have news, you need to hear them.”

A pout replied to his invitation and Parker was already standing up to walk away when Eliot held her wrist. Parker turned around, ready to give Eliot a piece of her mind, but she stumbled upon his eyes. Eliot wondered if his eyes betrayed his fear.

“Please, be in my corner...” Eliot’s voice dropped a bit. “I need you.”

Parker melted to that plea and slid into the seat. Eliot made room for her to pass her arm behind his back. Hugs were not his thing, most of the time, but Parker’s arms around his body brought a comfort he had forgotten for more than twenty years. Her name kept repeating into his mind, like a lullaby, like a prayer.
“Why do you smell like cookies?” Parker asked once she finished settling her head against his shoulder. “Do you have cookies?”

“We have a date,” Eliot whispered over Parker’s head, disregarding her questions.

“A date?” Eliot was not sure whether Parker was being willful dense or if she really wasn’t aware of the sword over Eliot’s head.

“For surgery.”

Parker squeezed him and put her head on his chest. The word scared her as much as its sound terrified Eliot.

“You were supposed to go in for surgery during summer,” Parker complained like he was doing it on purpose.

“It needs to get out,” Eliot rubbed Parker’s back with his free hand. “It had grown another quarter of an inch. If it gets any bigger…” He noticed he was going the wrong way with the words. “It’s better if they put me under the knife now.”

Parker hugged him again. She was trembling in his arms and Eliot wanted to die again, to disappear from existence without a trace, to never been born at all, anything but to hurt (Leah)...

Eliot let go the woman in his arms and sit straight, stiff and still.

“Eliot?” Parker felt it too and she was getting anxious.

Please, don’t cry... Eliot took a deep breath trying to fix his broken mushin. (The human brain can’t stand too much reality, laddie.) In absence of a clear mind, a poker face must do. I can’t stand the tears right now...

“I’m just… concerned.” Eliot chose his words carefully, still disoriented by the intrusive thoughts. “Too many balls in the air and I feel like I only have one hand.”

Eliot extended his hand in front of him. Parker, with half a smile, held it for a second.

“I’ll lend you mine.” Parker breathed out. “I’m in your corner. Come hell or high water, I’m…”

Eliot didn’t believe her. How could he? She wasn’t who she was supposed to be, but he let her wrap him in her arms. Comfort was a luxury so rare these days...

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“Boy, those nurses will have a wild time with your cute tuchus!”

Dave’s reaction completely blindsided Eliot and he almost choked on his coffee at the sound of those words. Eliot knew he was the only one to blame: he had finally surrendered to peer pressure and told them all, over a cup of coffee, that he had a long face because the date for surgery was set. When everyone around him started to make predictions about all the fun nurses will have with his backside, Eliot felt the sudden need to bid them good night and bolt like a scared colt. He covered the uneasiness with another sip of black coffee. Otis leaned on Eliot’s shoulder and laughed loud enough to stop the medical procedure forecast.

“Think well before rejecting a bed bath from a nurse, tho,” Otis said before sipping his coffee. The rest of the table replied with jeers. “Getcha mind out of the gutter, ya punks! Except for the boy, there is no son of a mother here who hadn’t felt human again after a bed bath.”
“And don’t be scared of using the bedpan,” Mark added with a nod. “Whatever shame you feel doesn’t hold a candle to the humiliation of having your bedsheets changed when you can’t move fast enough…”

“Can we change topics?” Eliot almost begged, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Of course not!” The whole table replied to Eliot’s suggestion.

“We still need to talk about the one point restraint…”

“And that lovely time in the middle of the night when they wake up for your vitals…”

“We can’t skip talking about those backless gowns…”

Eliot groaned and stirred his cup. If Eliot could escape with his life talking about something else but hospital stuff, he would be the luckiest man alive for sure. Nevertheless, as long as his survivor gang kept talking about their hospital experiences, no one was going to ask Eliot anything. The trade-off seemed acceptable, so Eliot fixed a polite smile on his face, nodded at the right times, and kept his silence.

“The most important thing, boy,” Mark said to Eliot when they started to wrap-up the post-game session, “it’s that when you wake up after surgery, feeling ratfucked and dreadful, wishing you could turn back the clock, you will take comfort in one thing only.”

“What’s that thing, Mark?” Eliot asked with his genuine smile on his face. He was not ashamed of liking Mark better than the rest.

“That now you have a fighting chance.”

Eliot nodded and let his head hang over his half-finished mug, the ammo clinked softly against the ceramic. The veterans made their way out, wishing Eliot all the luck. Eliot acknowledged and nodded to each of them. The next time he raised his mug the coffee was cold. Eliot blinked and stared at the mug, then he looked around surveyed his surroundings.

“We are closing.” The waiter, leaning on his broom, shoot daggers towards his last customer.

Eliot still blinking get up from his chair and put a twenty under the mug. The world seemed out of focus, and he patted himself, looking for a clue. His underarm piece was gone, his replacement clip was missing from his jeans. He couldn’t remember why he was waiting at the coffee shop. He was not sure whether there was still a mark to get down or he was wrapping up a done deal. In his pocket, his wallet, a phone and a keychain with a car key. An American car. Eliot looked around. An American car made no sense, he was not in America by the look of it…

“Great…” Eliot rubbed his face with both hands, trying to force his mind to recall.

Eliot walked the quiet streets, no clue what he was doing in this city. He couldn’t even name the city. Giving up, he dialed his dead drop message box with the phone in his jeans, that would either tell him if there was still work to do—clients usually are not fond of having work half-done and they have Eliot’s number to complain—or if he must look for the first flight out of (where?) here. The sounds of the connection followed Eliot as he crossed; there were no messages. That was strange. No background intel, no complaints.

For a second, Eliot got the idea that he was being (tested again) set up. The hair from his nape raised and he rushed to find a lookout spot. He refused to be (caught) put in an indefensible position. Eliot took a deep breath and tried to be sure no one was following, but he couldn’t be
Deniables had a way to conceal themselves that was almost preternatural.

Eliot got rid of the phone in the first trash can. It was better to not give them a way to track him.

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“Have you found him?” Hardison asked through the coms.

“Just his phone in a bin.”

Hardison looked at the screen again. Eliot did not report himself after the VA Support Group and didn't take his night meds. At first, they thought Eliot was just being sociable after the meeting, but hours passed fast and there was no sign of him. After midnight, there was a police report alert: Eliot’s Challenger got a parking violation. Hardison had tried to dial Eliot to crack a joke about the ticket. They both got mighty worried the third time their calls were straight to voicemail.

“Why would he…?”

“I don’t know, babe,” Hardison was opening a wide search for two topics: hospital records and hired guns. “Bring the Challenger in before they tow it away. I’m looking for him.”

“He hadn’t had his painkillers,” Parker complained in Hardison’s ear.

She was worried Eliot could be in pain, Hardison had other more urgent worries.

“He hadn’t had a lot of the things he needs,” Hardison looked at the screen, there were at least ten hired guns in Portland now and that was something Hardison could have lived happily without knowing. The good news was that none of them was around Parker's location. “He probably had his PRN with him. Don’t worry, we will find him.”

And they did. Eliot’s name appeared in a police report at four in the morning. A patrol officer found him wandering next to the river and drove him to the Veteran Affairs Medical Center because it was the closest hospital. Parker had never driven that fast in her life and Hardison had to hold back the need to hurry her up.

They split up when they arrived at the hospital, earbuds in place. Parker took to herself the task of dealing with the information desk because it would be more believable if she played the scared sister part. Hardison waited for the moment when an ambulance arrived to enter the ER. Among the sea of people, no one noticed him and, if they did, no one tried to stop him. Eliot was right when he said hospitals were not secure enough for him.

The chaotic ER imposed a hard challenge to Hardison. All kinds of liquids spilling on the floor and the constant to-and-fro between beds and the personal rushing from one side to the other were almost too much to bear, but, in his efforts to keep from being on the way, he stumbled upon the very person he was looking for. There was a patrol officer at the door, standing guard with a bored expression.

“Eliot!” Hardison exclaimed, trying not to look around the open ER room anymore. “Parker, I found him. He’s in the physician office”

Eliot was pacing behind the window of a small office, Hardison knew by his general bearings that he was searching for a way to escape. Eliot was looking at the framework of the window, arms crossed, lips pressed. Wide spots of dry and wet sweat made a pattern on his shirt. Hardison didn’t know if he should break through or ask permission to make sure Eliot was in one piece.
“Do you know him?” The patrol officer asked when he noticed Hardison’s presence. The tone of his voice proclaimed he was ready to dump this unpleasant babysitting job on someone else.

“I do, sir.” Hardison took a deep breath. “He’s Eliot and he’s my friend.” He made a pause, trying to steady his rapid pulse. “I was worried about him.”

“What’s his last name and address?”

“Spencer,” Hardison replied because that was the last name in the report. “He lives in Crestwood. Brugger street, near Wood Parkway.” Nate had taught him the right amount of information to give the police. “I don’t remember the number.”

The patrol officer nodded and put his hand on the knob.

“I found him stumbling through the street, bracing his gut. At first, I thought he was drunk. He wasn’t clear-headed. Doctors said he’s confused,” the patrol officer explained and took something from his pocket. “Here’s his wallet. I needed it to put the report in.”

Hardison nodded and waited for him to open the door.

“Hardison!” Eliot got to him in a couple of steps as soon as he saw him. His eyes were wild and unfocused, he was talking too fast and his words mashed up together. “Thank God you are here, man!”

“Eliot, are you alright?” Hardison touched Eliot’s head, looking for any wound. “Where is your jacket?”

“Where are we?” Eliot asked, swatting Hardison’s hands and returning to pace around the room.

“We are at the VAMC, Eliot. In the Emergency Room.”

“No!” Eliot shook for a moment before rubbing his face with both hands. “Which country is this? Are we...?” Eliot darted an alarmed gaze to the patrol officer. “Are we doing a job? My gut hurts. It hurts so much... Did someone beat me? I don’t remember...”

Eliot kept talking and his hand crept over his midsection, pressing down. Hardison agreed with the patrol officer that Eliot was beyond his mind, but pain management was his first concern. It had been twelve hours since he took his painkillers and ‘steroids. Visual inspection didn’t show any bulge where Eliot’s could stash his PRNs.

“Where are your drugs, Eliot?”

“I don’t do drugs! I told uncle Randy I’d never... Ugh...” Eliot stopped with a pained grimace. “It hurts. I want to lie down. I need to get out of here. I don’t want to be here!”

“Officer, was he carrying his pills?”

“The only things on him was his wallet, that necklace, and the keys in his front pocket.” The officer replied looking at the scene with professional detachment. “Maybe he took them all at once?”

“No, sir. Eliot would be in a coma if he had done so, and he’s in pain.” Hardison wondered where on Earth Parker was. “Can you find someone to help him?”

The officer shrugged and closed the door, passing the bolt. Eliot stopped and looked at the door,
nostrils flared. Hardison could read he was ready to kick down the door and approached him. Eliot cringed when he felt Hardison’s hand on his shoulder, but his expression mellowed when he recognized his face.

“Patience, Eliot.”

“Are we running a con? That’s why we are here?” Eliot let his eyes linger on the door. His breathing was quick; his eyes danced on the corners of the framework. “I don’t like this con. They poked me, man.” Eliot showed Hardison his right arm, there was a fresh injection wound inside his elbow. “I told them not to poke me, but they did…”

Hardison wondered why Eliot was not in handcuffs. He must have broken some arms when they drove a needle inside him without his consent.

“Did they give you something?”

“Nah! They took my blood. Uncle Randy warned me to behave or else. I didn’t want to make Uncle Randy mad. I told them not to poke me, but they did…” Eliot doubled over in pain, clenching his teeth. “I don’t like this con…”

The door opened and Eliot swallowed back his pain. His eyes were wide when he turned his face to the door. Hardison could tell Eliot was expecting something harmful coming his way; his left heel raised from the floor, he threw back his shoulders. Hardison didn’t have time to try to reassure him. Eliot backed out, slowly, one step at a time, until he reached the wall. A nurse with a syringe in her hand looked at Eliot warily; Hardison could see she refused to get inside the little room.

“Spencer, Eliot. Lieutenant.” Eliot babbled, forming fists and sticking to the wall, ready to pounce on the first person who dared to approach him. “Service number Romeo Papa seventy-six, one four six, three two two.” Hardison couldn’t stand the plea in Eliot’s horror-struck eyes. “That’s all you will get out of me…”

“God…” the nurse took a cautious step back. “Another one out of the meat grinder.”

Eliot didn’t mind her; he was repeating his claim with eyes big and dark. Hardison was not sure what the nurse meant about the meat grinder, but that surely didn’t sound good. The nurse was crying for help, but Eliot didn’t rush to the open door.

“Stop the nonsense, soldier!” A doctor with a military haircut shouted out, entering the room and taking the syringe from the nurse’s hand. “You’re holding up the line. Give me that arm so I can shoot you your prophylaxis and they can ship you out to Anyfuckingstan!”

Eliot swept the room with a quick glance. The fright on his face melted into a stunned, embarrassed expression; the doctor’s words had conjured a specific image in Eliot’s mind, and he adjusted his attitude so. Eliot approached, folding his sleeve over his shoulder mumbling something between clenched teeth, probably he was asking not to be poked. Hardison noticed how badly Eliot was trembling when the doctor had to aim the shot twice.

“Good,” the doctor returned the empty syringe to the nurse and exchanged it for a paper cup. “Swallow these.” He waited until Eliot obeyed before dragging the chair from behind the desk. “You look almost done in. Sit down, head between the knees, and wait until they come for you.”

Eliot, blood trickling down his arm, obeyed with a sigh of gratitude. Hardison suspected it was more for the commands than for the drugs. Eliot’s breathing became less shallow once his long hair covered his face; his hands were shaking between his knees in a way Hardison had not noticed
before. The doctor watched Eliot for a moment before he moved to Hardison and passed his arm over his shoulders. The movement forced Hardison away from Eliot.

“Hardison, Parker is dealing with the AMA discharge in your name. She’ll bring you something to sign and then you can go.”

Hardison nodded and he at once felt relief. His knees buckled, but the doctor was not having any of that. With a gruff manner, he slapped Hardison’s small back to help him stay up to hear what he had to say. “Pay attention. This is the report.” The doctor talked in a soft, hurried whisper. “We woke up Dr. Byrnum. Per his instructions, I shot Eliot something for the pain. The pills were to help him unwind and, maybe, sleep. They are magic, not miraculous. Give them half an hour.”

“I get that, but what’s happening here?” Hardison asked, genuinely worried.

“Eliot is having a confusion episode brought by hyperammonemia, a side effect of his blastoma,” the doctor explained. “It’s scary, but transient in most of the cases.”

“He doesn’t make any sense.” He could hear Eliot babbling to himself in a monotonous drone.

“He’s simply confused… Eliot doesn’t know where he is. We are lucky he knows who he is,” the doctor added cryptically before he continued with his report. “Dr. Byrnum said to suspend treatment until he had the time to see Eliot…” he consulted his watch. “In some hours and help him through this. No more pills or shots until Dr. Byrnum says so. There is nothing else we can do without bringing Eliot to a bed, and we are short of those.”

So much for Uncle Sam’s duty of care, but it was for the best. Eliot would feel better in the brewpub couch than in any hospital bed. The doctor wished them all the luck and moved to the next case. Hardison took a deep breath and returned to see how Eliot was holding.

“…Papa seventy-six, one four six, three two two…” Eliot was mumbling, both hands over his face, his fingers were still trembling. “That’s all you will get out of me… Spencer, Eliot…”

“Eliot, bro,” Hardison, crouched with his hand over Eliot’s back, tried to capture his attention. “You are safe.”

Eliot let his hands down and tried to focus on Hardison. Those drugs were not enough to dull the wild look in Eliot’s eyes.

“Where are we?” Eliot asked again, but he sounded helpless and scared. “Are we doing a job?”

“Eliot, we are in Portland,” Hardison held him closer. “You are safe.”

“They poked me,” Eliot said, trying to roll up a sleeve that was already up. Blood had dried on his skin. “I told them not to poke me, but they did…”

“I won’t let them poke you again.” Hardison made Eliot put his head on his shoulder. Eliot gripped Alec’s jacket fast. “Promise. You are safe.”

“I don’t like this con…”

“I don’t like it either.” Alec Hardison admitted with an exhausted sigh, caressing Eliot’s neck to help him rest. “Sometimes our job sucks…”

The door creaked and Hardison stood up. Eliot, still clutching Hardison’s jacket, stood with him. Parker, folder in hand, approached them with a hesitant smile. Hardison extended his hand and
Eliot took a couple of trembling steps toward Parker, with half a smile on his face.

“You are here.” Eliot hugged Parker as soon as she was within his reach. There was genuine relief in his voice. “Uncle Randy didn’t let me go. Can we go home now? Please… I want to go home.”

Parker looked at Hardison, pointing at Eliot’s back with both thumbs before rubbing small circles over Eliot’s sweaty t-shirt. Hardison was as confused as she was, but they were not as half as confused as Eliot was. It was better if Hardison signed those papers right away.

“We are going home in a minute, Eliot.”

“Why do you call me ‘Eliot’?” Eliot trembled between Parker’s arms as if his name was a cuss word. “Are you mad at me? I wasn’t trying to run away, I swear.” His voice came out in a raising, alarmed rush. “I got lost! I… I… I got... lost…”

“I was worried,” Parker reassured him, out of instinct. “So worried…”

“Please…” Eliot begged again with a tired voice. Drugs were finally kicking in. “Please… I want to go home...”

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Parker was out of her chair at the first groan and was kneeling by the couch before Eliot could open his eyes. Eliot gasped and tightened his arms around his girth under the blanket before looking at them, disoriented. Hardison noticed Eliot’s brow was wet and the corners of his mouth were tense. Eliot was not fully awake, and he was still in pain.

“You are in the brewpub,” Parker whispered, rearranging the blanket against his body when Eliot turned to his side. “You are safe.”

Parker took out that stubborn lock of hair from Eliot’s eyes for the third time. It was the third time Eliot had woken up shaken, despite the sleeping pills they gave him.

“I had a nightmare.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Eliot rubbed his face against the pillow, trying to shake his head; his fingers pinched the edge of the blanket in a repetitive manner.

“Get some shuteye, man.” Hardison looked over his shoulder, pretending to be at ease. “Dr. B wants to see you soon. You better be ready to play nice.”

Eliot groaned and turned his back to them. He was too big for the couch, and the couch was not the best place to rest, but there was no way they both could carry him to the bed in the crib. Parker pulled the blanket to cover his shaking back.

“We need a bigger couch,” Parker said, once she was satisfied with Eliot’s level of comfort.

“We need a house.” Hardison returned to the work he was doing. “The brewpub is not a living place.”

“We practically live here.”

“We don’t need chemotherapy and we can’t keep the restaurant closed while Eliot recovers.” Hardison took a micro-screwdriver from the tray. “I’m shuddering at the thought of the ton of
“Why is it an issue now?”

Hardison didn’t reply at once. His full concentration was in the delicate work of fixing a micro GPS tracker to the buckle of Eliot’s belt. They can’t risk losing sight of Eliot again.

“Dr. B is afraid chemo will destroy Eliot’s defenses. I mean obliterate them.” Hardison fastened the strap to the buckle to see if the device was visible. Hardison could tell where it was because he fixed it, but Eliot wouldn’t notice the extra stud. “A cough? Eliot might end up in the hospital. Bad food? Hospital. Touch a table someone with a rash had touched first? Hospital!”

Hardison snapped the belt each time he mentioned the H-word. Parker cringed with each crack. If this horrible night had taught them something is that Eliot couldn’t even stand a short trip to the ER.

“We need a house we can keep reasonably clean and where we can cook our own food,” Hardison already had an idea of where to look for a place with all the requirements. “A safe spot for Eliot to rest, with an alarm to warn us if he tries to go away. Someplace we can restrict people from coming and going.”

“We will find one. Close to the hospital and to Dr. B’s office.” Parker added and Hardison looked at her with both eyebrows raised. “What? Do you rather drive for an hour while Eliot’s is unwell?”

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Hardison parked Lucille in the back alley and waited for Eliot to make the first move. Eliot was not having a happy time with the last treatment. Eliot had kept the same curled position—boots on the seat, knees against the door, arms around his girth and chin tucked in—since they left Dr. Byrnum’s place. Hardison couldn’t blame Eliot. From the moment they heard the description of the procedure Hardison had been napping hard, and his body was not even the one inside Eliot’s backless gown.

“We are home,” Hardison announced, dithering about whether touching Eliot or not. Medical personnel had touched him a lot and in the most indelicate manner.

Eliot sighed, opened the door and stepped out. Hardison shook his head and followed him. The description was brutal, the actual treatment might have been even heinous. Eliot was more coherent, even if he looked worse after taking it, but Dr. Byrnum rationale was solid. Trying to be friendly, Hardison put his arm over Eliot’s shoulders and guided him inside.

“You look like you need a lie-down, Eliot,” Hardison opened the back door with a faint smile. “The crib is all yours to recover.”

“I can’t,” Eliot mumbled, looking at the stairs like the steps lead to the Everest. “I’m so tired…”

“It’s OK, bro,” Hardison assured Eliot. “Today, it has been a shitty day by all metrics.”

Eliot groaned at the comment. Hardison had hoped for an annoyed, amused half-smile, but not all his worlds could land properly all the time.

“Does the couch sound better?” Hardison steered Eliot toward the war room. “You can take a nap, maybe eat something later? I know a place where they make a mean black porter chili…”

“I don’t want to eat…”
“I mean later, for dinner?”

“I don’t want to eat ever again,” Eliot groaned, curling up on the couch with his boots still on.

“You don’t mean that, bro.” Hardison shook his head and turned around.

“Don’t go.” Eliot was gripping Hardison’s wrist hard.

“I’m just going to find you a pillow and a blanket.”

Eliot relaxed his grip and Alec looked at him. Treatment really trounced Eliot up good. Hardison tried to find the blankets he had stored in his trinket room, but Parker had taken them to the crib. Sighing his resignation, Hardison moved to the second floor. Eliot raised his head for a second when Hardison passed by his side, but let it down soon, holding back a pained sound. Lactulose promoted increased peristalsis that in turn led to what Dr. Byrnum quaintly called ‘abdominal discomfort,’ and Eliot was not a fan, Hardison could tell.

“Get yourself comfortable. Lose a button or two of those jeans and relax,” Hardison recommended, tossing Eliot a pillow. The blanket followed suit. If Eliot meant to camp on the couch, he better be comfortable. “I got your boots.”

Eliot fought like a wild cat to keep Hardison away from his feet, succeeding only in leaving him a place in the couch. Once Hardison got hold of his ankles, Eliot, grumbling, allowed the indignity of having his boots taken from him. Hardison took it as a sign that there was still some fighting spirit on Eliot. In his heart of hearts, Hardison worried more about Eliot’s potential depression than about his ammonia levels.

“I need to put some extractors here,” Hardison said, undoing the laces of Eliot’s boots. “It still smells of that buttery popcorn Parker made yesterday…”

“That’s me…” Eliot said, folding the pillow around his head.

“Say again?” Hardison took out Eliot boot and put it by the side of the couch.

“Lactulose gave me a lot of wind and for some reason…”

“Your farts smell like movie theater ‘corn?’” Hardison tried not to laugh as he unlaced the other boot. It was obvious Eliot was uneasy with this recent development. “It’s OK. There is more room out than in… Pressure must find a way out, and it’s better to break wind than to blow your tripe… It could be a lot worse…”

“Can you please shut up?” The question came from inside the pillow.

Hardison put the second boot next to the other and wrapped Eliot’s feet with the blanket. Eliot was still hiding his shame under the fabric, Hardison had never suspected him to be so bashful. Still trying to control his mischievous laughter, Hardison picked up his tablet, sat on the floor and rest his weight against the couch. It was better not to let Eliot alone in case he developed side effects or a blues worthy of Harlem's Golden Age.

“I don’t want to go back tomorrow…” Eliot mumbled and let his hand rest on Hardison’s shoulder.

Hardison put his hand on Eliot’s for a moment, wanting to tell him he won’t move from that spot. Eliot pressed Hardison’s shoulder briefly.

“You need to get rid of the ammonia before surgery,” Hardison tried to reason with Eliot because
his last blood test put his markers in the seventies. Ethically, if Eliot gained ten more, doctors couldn’t go ahead with the surgery. “Just one more, and you can switch to the oral regimen.”

“That’s not an improvement…” Eliot groaned and closed his hand on Hardison’s shoulder.

“Be brave, Eliot,” Hardison encouraged him with a bit of sardonic tone. “You had had worse.”

“I had, but…”

“But?” Hardison hadn’t expected Eliot to argue.

“I can take almost anything doctors want me to. Do you want me to take a million pills? I’ll do it. Do you want to stab me with a thousand needles? I can take it. Do you want me to stay still while you take a piece of me? Less talk, more action!” Eliot said with a bit of bravado in his voice.

“Just… please, don’t upset my gut. That’s all I ask for…”

Hardison patted Eliot’s hand in his shoulder. They both knew the future holds nothing but more gastric distress. Between surgery prep and chemotherapy… this treatment was a taste of things to come. Eliot groaned again and Hardison heard him shift positions in the couch. Another cramp…

“Ma said I was a colicky baby. She always worried about my gut,” Eliot said once the spasm allowed him to speak again. “She must be very disappointed… more than usual…”

Eliot took a deep breath. Hardison kept his silence, feigning to mind his tablet.

“It didn’t matter how sick she was. She never asked me how my day was. She always asked if I had eaten that day…”

The only good thing of Eliot’s brain fog was that it made him more talkative about his past, but that was a mixed blessing. Hardison didn’t need to ask Eliot: Eliot’s mother was too sick to cook, his sister was barely older than him… Hardison was ready to bet that Eliot went to bed hungry more often than not during those four years, maybe longer; that Eliot’s love for cooking was the product of not knowing when the next hot meal would come his way. Eliot loved food with the passion of a man who knows what’s to make do without. That was a sobering, heart-wrenching detail Alec Hardison could have spent his life ignoring.

“Upset tummy makes ma sad…” Eliot mumbled into the pillow, finally putting his main pain in words. “Don’t make me ma cry…”

Eliot’s voice sounded sleepy and utterly exhausted. His hand hung limp on Hardison’s shoulder. Hardison turned his head, wanting to ask if Eliot was feeling right. The question died on his lips.

Eliot was asleep and he was crying the silent tears only orphan children knew how to cry properly. Hardison wondered how long Eliot had been weeping by his side without his knowledge.

“Eliot…” Hardison whispered and looked how a big tear rolled over the bridge of Eliot’s nose.

Was only two months ago when Alec thought he would lose his mind if he had seen Eliot cry?

The smell of coffee woke Eliot up. There was a dish with freshly cooked oatmeal next to a white mug full of black coffee on a folding table. Next to the silverware sat a long white package that Parker had tried hard to call ‘Eliot’s Pixie Stix’ for a week. Eliot refused to call that torture device by any cute name.
With a grumble, Eliot sat on the couch, pulling the blanket over his shoulders. His belly hurt like it hadn’t since boot camp, and he tried to swallow the moan. His insides were tender enough with that ball pressing down on his intestines without the lactulose to make it worse. After a minute, with eyes closed, he reached for the coffee. The first sip made him feel human again.

Hardison was searching for something in the dark web, Eliot looked at the dance of several screens spitting data at blinding speed. Whatever Hardison was looking for was deep in the bowels of the digital world and it was more interesting than Eliot.

“Morning, bro…” Hardison called from the control table. “Hungry, I hope?”

A grunt was all the reply Eliot could provide. His treacherous body was sending mixed signals and he didn’t know which of the pains and aches he should tend to take care of first. Another sip of coffee went down, steadying his upset system.

With a tired sigh, Eliot tried to put the half-empty mug on the folding table, managing only to spill it all on the tray when his fingers lost grip. He cursed as he felt a rush of frustrated tears to his eyes. The betrayal of that body that had served him so well for more than thirty years hurt worse than the tumor sucking his life away.

“It’s OK…” Parker practically materialized by the side of the couch, holding Eliot’s shaking hand. “I’ll bring you more coffee.”

Parker smiled at him, the corners of her eyes wrinkling softly. There was no pity in her eyes and Eliot let that smile comfort him. He didn’t protest when Parker put the dish and the spoon in his hands before taking the tray away. Hardison’s eyes didn’t waver from the screen, Eliot felt grateful.

Using the spoon, Eliot toyed with the oatmeal in his dish to cover his unease. The smell of cinnamon and nutmeg tickled his nose; pleasant, but it didn’t stir his appetite. With a sigh, Eliot brought the spoon to his mouth and tasted the cooked cereal. Doctors had restricted his salt intake; oatmeal was bland but edible…

“Stop playing with your food,” Hardison chided as he turned his chair to toss Eliot another white package of his prescription. It landed on Eliot’s lap. “Don’t forget to add your medicine.”

“And spoil what little appetite I have left?”

“You know there is a way to take your lactulose without tasting it, don’t you?”

Eliot cringed at the memory and Hardison looked at him with a bit of regret in his eyes. Hardison could joke just fine, but the effect of that treatment was still too fresh in Eliot’s flesh. Never again… Eliot took the package, opened with his teeth and sprinkle the contents over the cereal, holding Hardison’s gaze.

“That came out wrong…”

“No, you meant it.” Eliot mixed the oatmeal again. “I forgot this was the less painful option…”

“You know? It hurt worse in your pride than in your flesh. I can tell…”

Eliot wanted to scream, to toss that damned dish to Hardison’s face, to punch someone… They didn’t understand… They’ll never understand… How on Earth his mother endured four years of this? Eliot couldn’t put up with the last three months… God, I know I’m an awful man, but… For a second, Eliot feared he would break down in tears.
A dark wave of despair washed over him.

Eliot wanted the torture to be over.

He didn’t want to live this way anymore.

Seven separate ways to end his life with that dish and spoon flashed behind his eyes. It wouldn’t be quick, and it wouldn’t be pretty, but it would be so easy. They couldn’t save his worthless life if he chooses to end it all right now...

“Coffee!” Parker called merrily as she entered their office with a fresh coffee mug.

Her fake cheer gave Eliot pause. Hardison's bad jokes and Parker’s canned joy were not for them. They were faking it for him. They were almost begging him to soldier on with each joyful gesture and Eliot wanted to kick himself for being a fucking self-absorbed jerk when he finally realized they were hurting as much as him.

They were with him, just starting their way out of Hell, and Eliot couldn’t quit now. Eliot figured out that, since he was already on his knees, he might as well be praying...

God, let me soldier on… Eliot hung his head, pleading like he did when he believed there was someone at the other side. Not for me, for them...

“Eliot?” Parker came to him and put her hand on his shoulder.

“Don’t bother him, baby girl,” Hardison turned his chair around. “He’s putting his mind to taking his medicine in good cheer. It will take him a while…”

“I like your medicine,” Parker said to encourage Eliot. “It tastes sweeter than a Pixie Stix and Nurse said it is good for your liver. Beats your pills any day of the week.”

“You didn’t take it, did you?” Eliot asked, taking a spoonful. He could taste the lactulose over the oatmeal and his gut protested with an agonizing grumble.

“Too many options and too little backings on their credentials…”

“We can make do with Dayan and Quinn,” Eliot commented, renouncing to take another sip of the coffee. He was sure that, if he tried to drink it, he would spill it all over his chest and lap. “Maybe Dayan alone…”

“Aww…” Parker said with a taunting voice. “He just wants to see his special friends…”

“I want Dayan and Quinn,” Eliot insisted, resting his right foot on his left one and forcing down another spoonful of lactulose-laced oatmeal. “I have slept with them.”

“We get it, Eliot,” Hardison said with rolling eyes. “You are a man. You had had sex. You have tasted all the flavors and the rainbow too.”
“It’s not about sex, dammit!” Eliot put the dish in the seat of the couch. “I literally caught twenty winks next to them in bed.”

Stunned silence replied to his declaration. The only sound in the room was the faint crackling of the big flat screen.

“In different beds,” Eliot pointed out, in case that was not clear. “At different times.”

“You can do that?!” Parker sounded so skeptic that Eliot felt inexplicably offended.

“I don’t think Eliot even knows what’s to sleep in a bed…”

Eliot felt an angry outburst bubbling inside for a second before he latched on their gist. They were being carefree for his sake again. Eliot shook his head at the good-natured ribbing, picked up the dish, and tried to get down more lactulose inside his body.

They went to Hell for him and it was about time Eliot Spencer started carrying his own weight out.

Chapter End Notes

Search and rescue
As the surgery day approaches, Parker and Hardison felt they didn't have the resources to put together all the preparation plus Eliot's care. This was the time to call for reinforcements.

Guest stars: Nate Ford, Sophie Deveraux, Mikel Dayan, Mr. Quinn, and Dr. James Robertson.

“We are poking the bear,” Hardison said with a sigh, establishing a connection with Europe.

“The bear is curled up in the crib with a fever,” Parker replied, jumping into the stool. “Eliot won’t wake up. We need help, Alec.”

Hardison didn’t know what part should worry him more: Parker calling him ‘Alec’ or Eliot having a reaction to his last cytokines therapy. But Parker was right, time was running out fast and they could either care for Eliot or get the support net ready for the surgery. They couldn’t do both.

“Is it too early?” Parker was tapping the footrest with impatience.

“It should be ten in the morning there.”

The screen showed a shaky scene in a hotel room just when Hardison was about to give up. Sophie was sitting on a sofa with her legs up the seat. A satin robe wrapped around her, her head in poetic disarray. Nate was trying to put his device in the right position, but at least he was not in his pajamas. Their call must have taken them by surprise.

“Hardison,” Nate said by way of greeting.

“Sophie,” Hardison said, touching his forehead with two fingers.

“Parker?” Sophie couldn’t hide her concern.

“Nate!” Parker extended her arms as she meant to hug them both.
“Is everything right?” Sophie asked looking for Eliot behind them. “Where is Eliot?”

“We are in trouble, fam.” Hardison said shaking his head.

“More precisely, Eliot’s in big trouble,” Parker pointed out. She bit her lip, uncertain of how to continue.

Nate and Sophie shared a concerned look. Hardison wished they had called earlier.

“Tell us about it,” Nate invited, his hand reaching for Sophie’s.

Hardison started to give them the information, occasionally showing them Eliot’s medical record. The whole report sounded like they were planning a con together. There was no gentle way to tell them how sick Eliot was, but they nodded and made the right questions at the appropriate times. Sophie looked worried, but Nate was getting paler with each piece of information.

“We have a date for surgery,” Hardison said, ending his explanation with a weary sigh.

“How is he doing?” Sophie asked, pressing Nate’s hand. She might have noticed his eyes focused more on the test results than in Hardison or Parker. Hardison wondered if he was taking distance to better endure the hit. “Mentally, I mean.”

Parker darted Hardison an alarmed look and he understood perfectly her concern. They were family, but the beers and Eliot’s plan to finish it all was not for them to hear. Even that scary, scary bout of confusion was too much to share. That vulnerable part of Eliot, they must protect it at all costs.

“It was bad for a bit…” Parker started, wishing she could tell more.

“And Eliot was reluctant to get treatment…”

“Hospitals, you know…” Parker made a short puffing sound while rolling her eyes.

“But his doctor’s competent enough to handle him right and, judging by the way he bickers with the nurses, Eliot had made his peace with the surgery, and he’s sorting out his way with chemotherapy in mind.”

“He’s solid.”

“Solid enough,” Hardison agreed, raising one shoulder. “Just no very pleasant to hang around.”

“Who would be?” Sophie sounded satisfied with their reply.

Nate was quiet and that delivered a twinge of worry into Hardison.

“Nate? What’s in your mind, man?” Hardison asked with both hands on the control deck.

“Is he in pain?” Nate looked upset when he asked the question.

Hardison consulted Parker with an alarmed look. Officially, Eliot was in pain, though he hadn’t complained when he was sound of mind. The fact was, Eliot was taking several drugs that could mask or reduce his pain. No one had been monitoring his PRN, because neither Parker or Hardison had found them. And he was Eliot, by gosh! Both of them were sure Eliot would rather walk on a broken leg than to show the world any pain that couldn’t be trivialized.

“Whatever ‘he’ feels is not of your concern, Nate.”
Eliot came to the desk from behind them and he didn’t look happy. His thumb was hooked on the waistband of his jeans, highlighting how uncomfortable tight it was around him. His shirt sported sweat spots front, back and under the arms. His hair was sleep tousled, but his eyes were wide awake and furious.

“Eliot…” Parker tried to calm him.

“Don’t!” Eliot barked and Parker flinched. Eliot flinched too and his eyes softened a bit as if he was ashamed of his short temper. “We’ll talk later.”

“Don’t take it out on Parker!” Sophie nagged Eliot with her best schoolmarm tone.

“No, it’s not her fault,” Eliot agreed, taking his hair out of his face and turning his eyes to Hardison as if he was daring him to say a thing before turning to the screen. “Who invited you to my pity party, Nate?”

Hardison sat up straight, ready to own the blame but Nate made a sign for him to stand down.

“I’ve told everyone that matters I have this thing eating me alive,” Eliot said, fixing his eyes in Nate. “Everyone! Don’t you wonder why I didn’t call you?”

“Pride, I think,” Nate said, matter-of-factly. “The great Eliot Spencer can’t stand to rely on his closest associates. I bet you’ll do it all alone…”

“Damn right!” Eliot screamed, hitting the table with both hands, the ammo around his neck bounced. “If I weren’t absolutely sure shock will kill me before I finish, I’d take this fucking thing out with a kitchen knife myself!”

Sophie jumped in her place, surprised by Eliot’s anger storm. Hardison nodded at her as if he was saying he understood her, but Eliot’s mood was so last week news that bothering was a waste. Nate was still collected and looking at Eliot the same way a father could watch his kid throwing a temper tantrum.

“And despite all of it,” Nate finally said leaning forward with both his hands closed, “you are leaning hard on Parker and Hardison…”

“I need them! They keep me going through all this hell, through each shot, study, bloodwork and each piece of bad news,” Eliot punctuated each one with a hit on the table. “They keep me alive, and I want to live!” Eliot stopped, shaking with pure, unadulterated rage. “What would you bring to the table? Huh? Why would I want you here?”

“Because I know what you are going through.”

“No, you don’t!”

“I have haunted more hospitals than the three of you together.”

“That’s it? That’s all you have to offer?” Eliot’s voice was incredulous and outraged. “You wrung your hands for your kid and that’s supposed to do me any good?” Eliot tossed his head to the left. “Parker can do that just right.”

Hardison leaned back, Sophie looked at Parker and Parker did her best to put her hands on the table. Eliot was a keen observer, even in the middle of a rage fit.

“I don’t want you here. Any of you.” Eliot grumbled; his rage receded slightly. “I don’t want you
around while I’m fighting for my life. I have more than enough people to worry about!”

“Think about it,” Nate said, sitting straight, “Parker and Hardison…”

“What? Huh? Parker and Hardison what?” Eliot exploded again. “They don’t need you around to hold their hands! They are doing just fine! Go play the martyr elsewhere! I’m not your second chance to get things right!”

“Wait…”

“My name is not Sam, Nate!” Eliot shouted to the screen before disconnecting the call. “God…!”

“Eliot,” Hardison started, rising from his chair.

“Don’t!” Eliot brushed his hair back with both hands. “I have half a mind to beat you both senseless for going behind my back, so don’t!”

Parker reached for Eliot, but she pulled away at the last moment. Eliot was still shaking with unspent rage and started to move to the back door, making a round circle over his head to tell them he was going to take a turn around the block. It was not the first time he tamed anger with exhaustion, and he’d never wandered far. Hardison activated the tracker on his belt, just to be sure he would be all right.

“Fever and all, the bear woke up, Parker,” Hardison said once the back door closed behind Eliot.

“Yeah, that was some miscalculation…”

The app signaled an incoming call from Europe and Hardison accepted it. Nate and Sophie appeared on the screen, worried but calm.

“Is he on dexamethasone?” Nate asked by way of greeting.

“Among a thousand other things…” Hardison replied, rolling his eyes slowly.

“Roid rage,” Nate and Sophie concluded with understanding nods.

Sophie looked like she was about to ask something, but Nate stopped her with his hand over hers.

“You heard him, Hardison,” Nate said and leaned forward, “Eliot doesn’t want us there.”

“Eliot’s not in his right mind,” Parker mumbled, feeling a bit helpless.

“No, no, no.” Nate waved his hand. “Eliot’s made his choice. That’s his right,” Nate said, crossing his legs. “After all, Eliot’s the one living through this and he had to manage his resources wisely.”

Nate smiled. “I think he got it right: he had enough people to worry about as it is.”

“I’m with Nate,” Sophie said, with a nod. “We can’t add to Eliot’s anxiety by being there, and it’s not a good idea to taunt him into daily outbursts of rage.”

Parker extended her arm and clutched Hardison’s hand. He felt a bit deserted by his friends too.

“That only leaves one option for Sophie and me,” Nate stated and slapped his knee. “What do you want us to do away from Portland?”

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Sophie Deveraux pulled closer her minx coat as she descended from the taxi. She had never
contacted a hitter before—most of her partners had taken care of the unsavory parts of the jobs—,
but this experience was new and thrilling. So far, she had liked Mr. Quinn’s style.

The meeting was coordinated by way of a voicemail in the digital dropbox that Hardison had
helped her to set up, the confirmation was given via a dozen of white roses with the time and place
written in invisible ink over a charming, handwritten thank you note. He even sent a small black
light device, disguised as a Swarovski charm, to make sure the message came across.

A man of wealth and taste… Sophie Deveraux thought, crossing the lobby of the Metropol Hotel in
Russia. The small, round Swarovski charm Quinn sent her, shining on her bracelet. That small
trinket was the perfect representation of this man. Eye-catching, but cheap in the end. Sophie
couldn’t blame him, a good grift was the perfect way to enhance value in the eyes of a mark. Was a
client the same for a hitter? Sophie had never worked for a client before Nate’s little crusade...

“Charlotte Prentiss,” She identified herself to the maître d’.

The maître d’ bowed, offered his hand to hold her coat and with a sharp movement of his hand he
commanded a waiter to guide her to the assigned table. The art nouveau style of the restaurant had
changed little since the restoration. Sophie sat in the red chair, wondering where this man of
mystery was.

Ten minutes later, when Sophie started to think Quinn had missed their meeting, a waiter came
with a flute full of champagne.

“With the compliments of the man next to the piano,” the waiter said looking in the direction of
the piano.

Sophie took the flute and turned her eyes to the piano. Mr. Quinn had taken pains to look inviting,
leaning over the piano in a three-piece suit, long hair brushed back and perfect Pratt knot. He had
set up the scene carefully. Sophie raised the flute in a silent salutation of his craft.

“Sophie Deveraux…” Quinn said by way of greeting a couple of minutes later when he came to her
table. “It’s a pleasure to meet again.”

“Sit down, Mr. Quinn,” she said, refusing to fall for his charms. “We must talk about business.”

“I assume the usual won’t cut with someone of your reputation,” Quinn took the time to pull up his
trousers before taking his seat. “Though I can’t imagine someone giving you grief, knowing who
do you partner with…”

Sophie sipped her drink again. Quinn was doing his best to be likable; he was displaying a
genial, helpless demeanor from his uncrossed legs to his slouched shoulders. It was an act, and
Sophie could see through it.

“Tell me who do you need rolled and consider them bleeding already…” Quinn invited with a
cordial smile as if he didn’t just offer to hurt someone.

“I’m going to mention a name,” Sophie started, tired of that false overtures, “and you are going to
tell me what had you heard…”

“I’m all ears, Ms. Deveraux.”

“Please, call me Sophie.”
“What’s the name, Sophie?”

Sophie leaned over the table, touched his arm and looked into his eyes. Quinn smiled at her and Sophie was spooked by how empty those eyes looked. Almost as if there wasn’t a soul inside. With a fake smile, Sophie mentioned Eliot’s name.

Quinn had the most peculiar reaction. In the first instance, his eyes became alive; Sophie considered the fact that the name forced humanity into his brain, tearing him away from the emotional shutdown Quinn required to perform his work. Then, he coughed and checked the knot of his tie. The smile that finally appeared in his lips was the most mendacious gesture he had made on the night.

“Do you dance, Sophie?” Quinn asked, holding the smile.

“No one is going to mistake me for Anna Pavlova...” Sophie gave a non-committal reply.

“Humor me,” Quinn pleaded, extending his hand over the table.

Sophie took his hand and raised from the chair, wondering why did they need to move from the table. Quinn was as professional in the dance floor as he was on the table, his hands were promptly placed on the classic positions. They danced a couple of bars before Quinn leaned forward and whispered an apology on her ear.

“And why should you apologize?”

“Whatever you are contacting me for,” Quinn mumbled, his eyes shifting to each corner of the place. His back under Sophie’s hand felt stiff. “I can’t help you with. I made you travel to Russia for nothing.”

Those words put Sophie on guard. Eliot was counting on Quinn and she was determined to recruit his unwilling soul for this job by whatever means necessary.

“I think I need a more comprehensive reply, Mr. Quinn,” Sophie rejected the apology with a prim and proper tone, designed to make Quinn feel ashamed of his refusal.

“That’s the hottest ticket of the season,” Quinn replied, signaling Sophie to make a turn. “I had to turn down three offers so far, each one with a long string of zeros attached. That’s more money than I’ll see in my entire life!”

Sophie turned on her axis, noticing the two FSO agents by the door. Sophie didn’t expect them to show so early, given that she left the plane just four hours ago. Oh, the dangers of having a reputation!

“I didn’t expect you to come to me with the same job after years of working by Eliot’s side.”

“I think you are operating under an erroneous premise,” Sophie corrected his perception, hugging him dramatically. The back of her hand caressing his freshly shaved face. “I don’t want you to hit the mark…”

“Don’t you?” Quinn smiled an ironic smile. He was not taking the bait.

“Are you aware of…” Sophie breathed the words right next to Quinn’s lips, “the situation?”

“Of course,” Quinn leaned forward, caressing Sophie’s lobe with his lips. “That’s the only reason the vultures are circling down... Dangerously, if I’m allowed to add.”
Sophie held his nape, closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

“Eliot is in dire straits and yours was one of the names he gave us,” Sophie whispered in his ear. “You are one of the few people he’s willing to endow his life with and hearing you, I’m wondering if you are worthy of such a hard-earned, seldom-given trust.”

Quinn missed his step at the accusation. Sophie smiled for a brief second. Your weakness is showing, Mr. Quinn…

“Are you aware you have no name recognition and, if you do, it’s more for being new in the game?” Sophie pressed the issue and let go of Quinn’s head at the same time. “Why Eliot wants you to have his back? I can’t understand.”

Quinn signaled her another turn and Sophie complied with a smile. This man was already in her hands and she was just toying as a cat would do with a mouse.

“Maybe it’s for the same reason a little boy needs a teddy bear,” Sophie commented when she returned to Quinn’s arm. “To have something harmless and cuddly to cling to.”

Sophie exaggerated a sigh. Mr. Quinn, very slowly, raised one eyebrow.

“It doesn’t matter in the end. Eliot needs protection during his surgery. Your number is up.”

The piece was over. Sophie stood in front of Quinn and grinned. Quinn’s face showed nothing, but she could feel the cogs turning inside his head because the words she didn’t say were more vital than the words she did.

Quinn was between a rock and a hard place: he would either be the one next to Eliot Spencer in his time of need—and reap heaps of gratitude from the nastiest crew in existence, disregarding the fee he would like to name—, or he would be the yellow-bellied coward that left Eliot Spencer in the lurch. Sophie Deveraux wouldn’t want to be in his expensive shoes if Mr. Quinn took the second option: Eliot was a particularly vengeful man.

“Name your price, Mr. Quinn,” Sophie recommended and kissed his jowl. It was time to leave Moscow before those FOS agents get too jealous of their job.

James Robertson pushed open the door of his favorite restaurant. It was a friendly place and the hosts had been kind to him. The short walk had always brought a smile to his face because he knew that at the end of it, more often than not, a friend would wait for him to offer him no fish. That place made his widowhood bearable.

Two of the owners crossed with him at the door. Parker’s boyfriend, Alec, held the door open for James without missing a beat of the heated argument they both had. James noticed they were talking over the other’s words, as they did often. Yet, the man who wasn’t Parker’s boyfriend was surlier than usual. James took a moment to observe before the door closed behind them. The scene was somewhat off.

“...House hunting. You don't want us in your house and you can't stay here.”

“You don't want me here... It's not the same!”

“Stop trying to fit a square peg in a round hole…”
I hate that sentence!

“Lately, you have been a ray of sunshine, man.” Alec jiggled the car keys and nodded his greeting toward James. “A regular ball of joy, word! You need to lighten up…”

“Kiss my bruised ass, Hardison!”

“Maybe tonight while I bruise it a bit more!”

After some moments, James thought he had imagined symptoms where there was nothing to see. Yet, there was something on the less friendly owner, maybe the way his clothes seemed to be too big, or the hint of ascites concealed under his loose t-shirt. Professional deformation, that’s how Emma used to call his constant assessment of the people around him.

His friend waved a distracted hello from the bar. Parker was still the same, but she looked sad. Her eyes looked at the door with an air of engrossed tragedy.

“No fish?” Parker offered him with a shadow of her usual smile.

“No fish,” James took his habitual place at the bar. ‘No fish’ was their way to ask for the usual. “How have you been…?”

“Oh, fine…” Parker tried to smile as she put a bottle of beer and silverware on the bar. “We are fine. Everything is fine…”

James Robertson looked at Parker the same way he would look at a patient who had skipped surgery prep. Parker shrugged and feigned to be busy with the order, but she gave in before his meal arrived.

“It’s Eliot…” Parker said in a whisper, folding paper towels around the silverware. “He's my friend.” She stopped and took a deep breath. “More than my friend. Eliot is the big brother I wish I had when I was a kid, and he's so sick…”

The surly owner’s name was Eliot; James found no pleasure in finally knowing the name after all those years. Parker was worried about his friend. She regaled James a tale he had heard before about an illness no one could predict falling upon them with the same demolishing strength as an avalanche.

“Eliot doesn’t like hospitals. Last week, Eliot met his surgeon and that didn’t put his fears to rest.” Parker sat at the other side of the bar, braiding a lock of her hair. “If anything, it made them worse: Eliot is having nightmares and he barely dreams on a regular basis.”

James needed to stifle the urge to ask the name of the surgeon. It was never good manners or professional to prod about other practitioners, nonetheless, these people were like his family now. They had opened their doors to him and treated them kindly. Parker, in particular, had been the kind of friend that never lets you get sad.

“Surgery is scheduled in two weeks and we don’t know if Eliot should get into the OR…” Parker looked at her hands. She had finished her braid. “He trusts his guts and we trust his guts. Eliot’s guts tell him Dr. Kegan is not trustworthy.”

“Kegan?” James reacted to the name. That was a name James knew first-hand and Parker was right to be wary of. “Eliot’s surgeon is Hamlin Kegan?”

“Yes. The name is pretty unforgettable.”
“Who’s Eliot’s oncologist?” James asked when his pan-seared chicken arrived.

“Johan Byrnum,” Parker said immediately and James’ concerns were put at rest with the same speed. Byrnum was one of the best. James had worked with him before and, although a bit traditional, his approach to systemic chemotherapy was peerless. “Eliot likes Dr. Byrnum a lot.”

“The surgery was supposed to take place in the Knight Cancer Institute?”

“How do you know?”

“I work there.” James noticed Parker had never asked where exactly he worked, but there were four hospitals within walking distance of the local. After Emma’s untimely departure, James divided his time between Knight and the Samaritan.

Parker’s reaction was a lot more subdued than James expected: She shivered and passed her hand over her eyes, before extending both of her hands to him. She looked at him with big, scared eyes; her hands trembled when James took them.

“Please, Dr. Robertson,” Parker pleaded, holding his hands over the chicken dish. “Please, help my friend…”

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Nate Ford stood corrected for all the times he had said Eliot Spencer was an uncommunicative man: It took him four days to find a broker who was willing to provide him with information about Mikel Dayan. Eliot was an open book by comparison.

Two more days were spent haunting Jerusalem’s Jewish quarter. Nate was not a stranger of the Old City, but this time he felt like a tourist. His mind was not really engaged in the hunt. Most of the time his thoughts flew, without his control, to Portland and his family, to Hardison and Parker’s plight, to Eliot’s pain. Nate Ford couldn’t care less for the ancient stones full of people when one of his was in distress.

That morning, sipping strong coffee under the merciless Israeli sun, Nate Ford was trying to convince himself that Eliot was made of the sturdiest stuff God had put on Earth. Cancer couldn’t beat his hitter and Eliot wouldn’t try any foolishness without repair while Hardison and Parker were around. Keeping his own spirits high was a thankless task because he knew there was something that no one can fix with brute force. Nate thought again of making Sophie an ill-advised proposition…

Mikel Dayan emerged from the crowded street; Nate felt wary instead of relieved. She was the same tall, young, attractive person Nate had met before, but she looked as calm and self-reliant as Eliot. The world moves at Mikel’s Dayan’s rhythm and not the other way around. He could taste the danger around her, the violence just a whim away from the quiet surface. Mikel Dayan had no reason to lash out, but Nate Ford deals with possibilities, no facts.

Nate picked up a taxi, following Mikel Dayan with a careful eye. Taking note of her red flowing shirt, Nate witnessed her climbing into a sherut and Nate instructed the driver to follow the vehicle. The taxi uttered a snide at Nate’s order, something about spy flicks. They moved through the traffic in silence, the sherut took Jericho’s wall and Nate started to think he knew the general bearings of their destination.

The sherut stop by the Mount of Olives Cemetery and Nate asked his driver to let him climb down across the street. He wasn’t being subtle, but, in his seersucker suit and his white hat, Nate
screamed ‘tourist’ and this was a historical place of interest.

Mikel Dayan went down to her knees to pick up a pebble before entering the place. Nate Ford, noticing her actions, stopped at a safe distance. He could tell a religious practice at first glance. Out of respect, he let Mikel go to that sea of white tombs, her crimson clothes were striking enough against the bleak backdrop of the necropolis.

As soon as he crossed the gates of the cemetery, Nate Ford knew he had made a rookie mistake. In rapid succession, Nate Ford noticed there was nothing red his eyes could see, learned to always look behind his shoulder, and gained familiarity with the hardness of that peculiar packed dirt path.

A few rushed words in Hebrew were all Mikel addressed to Nate before she gripped his neck and poised a small knife at Nate’s ribcage. Her eyes, fixed in Nate’s eyes, stared down at him. Nothing flickered in her dark pupils, not fear, nor doubt. Nate was sure she would plunge that blade into his flesh without remorse.

“We are in a hurry, Mikel Dayan,” Nate Ford said, disregarding the blade piercing his shirt. “Eliot Spencer needs you.”

A quick double blink. Mikel Dayan was reassessing the situation. Nate felt nearer home because that tic reminded him of Eliot. He started to smile.

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Sophie sighed and rested her weight on Nate’s shoulder in that VIP waiting room in Vienna’s airport. Their flight was delayed and there was no use to try to find a room in the city. Nate has been awfully silent as if he was planning a con. Sophie always thought he was sexier when the cogs were spinning madly inside his head. Sadly, she hadn’t seen that phenomenon as frequently since they left the crew.

“Please, promise me you won’t hate me if I tell you something,” Nate said, caressing her cheek.

“I can’t hate you.”

“They say there is nothing impossible for a properly motivated idiot.”

“What did you do now, Nate?” Sophie smiled at his attempt at self-deprecation.

“I used my earbud while I was waiting for you. Hardison had his on.”

Sophie could see Nate was keeping something, probably Nate caught them in an intimate sibling moment. That was the problem with intruding into the team’s coms: you hear more than you want to sometimes. It was not an ethical problem, Hardison could have killed their buds if they didn’t want their privacy intruded, but he didn’t; the crew had given them implicit consent. Nonetheless, Eliot, Hardison, and Parker had bonded together to each other like industrial glue. Sometimes, they live in their own world; sometimes they were too real to each other when they think the world can’t see them.

“Eliot tried to call his father,” Nate informed her with a sober voice. “He didn’t take the call.”

Sophie closed her eyes, wondering how much that rejection might have stung. Eliot had never told them about their family, not like Parker. Parker always wore her orphanhood like a badge, Eliot barely acknowledged he ever had one. The fact he had tried to reach for them was an indication of how much pressure Eliot was bearing. A cry for help, if Sophie ever heard one.
“We always thought of Eliot like the adult in the room, but he’s a kid as much as Parker is,” Nate continued, looking to the constantly changing ebb of tired travelers. Worry colored his voice gray. “A scared, suffering boy who had lost his mom and just wanted a reassuring word from his dad.”

“You are projecting, Nate.”

“Am I?” Nate’s rang with doubtful surprise. “Probably you are right, but you can't deny Eliot is in a tight spot and we could do more.” Sophie waited for the conclusion. There was always a conclusion with Nate. “Do you think there would be any damage if we try to convince Eliot’s dad to ring him?”

Sophie wanted to tell him how self-serving that action would be. By his own confession, Eliot was not Sam; Nate shouldn’t try to compensate that way. But then, Eliot came to her mind. All that self-contained, self-sufficient act he had put together couldn’t stand a crisis of this magnitude; probably Eliot could benefit from a bit of duty of care.

“I won’t deal with the airlines, Nate.”

Nate smiled at her and took his phone out. Nate was willing to deal with the airlines and that was a clear sign that pressure was on him too.

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“This is what I want for entertainment,” Eliot said, putting a dark boxed set on the bar in front of Hardison. “You don’t need to worry to get me more.”

“This title is not even pronounceable!”

“That’s the fun part,” Eliot stirred the black porter chili pot. “How else can you learn a new language?” Eliot offered him the spoon. “Taste it!”

“I'm sure it's OK…”

“Quality control, Hardison!”

Hardison sighed and tasted the chili. There was nothing wrong with this batch. Eliot had been worrying about quality control since the last month, some days are harder than others. Parker’s opinion was that Eliot was anxious, but Hardison suspected Eliot’s encephalopathy was acting up. They better bring it up next time they were on Dr. B’s office.

“It’s approved,” Hardison told, extending the spoon in Eliot’s direction.

Hardison’s approval had never given Eliot as much satisfaction as today. Eliot positively beamed and he didn’t make the slightest attempt to retrieve his tool of the trade.

“Shalom aleichem, Eliot Spencer,” Mikel Dayan greeted behind Hardison’s back.

Hardison jumped in his place when he recognized the voice. The spoon fell to the other side of the bar, but Eliot didn’t care for it, he was too busy coming out from his kitchen to meet his visitor. Hardison was not a superstitious man, he was not even a particularly spiritual man, but Eliot looked relaxed as if he was having a religious experience.

“Mikel Dayan, aleichem shalom,” Eliot reciprocated, extending his hand in cordial greeting.

Dayan kissed Eliot in both cheeks and he went with it, still smiling. Dayan touched Eliot’s belly
and said something in Hebrew with a light, funny way. Eliot chuckled and replied in the same tone. They were joking in front of the black porter chili pot; Hardison felt outraged. The next sentence out Eliot’s mouth sounded like a question. Dayan’s answer was lively but practical.

“Can we have a table and a jar of water?” Eliot asked Hardison, that smile still on his face.

“Of course, bro. What’s cooking?”

“Dayan visited the Knight Cancer Institute. She had some ideas to bounce off.”

Hardison nodded and turned around to call a waiter. The bit of cheer this woman brought Eliot was welcomed, they were in short supply. Eliot moved to the corner at the other side of the kitchen, Mikel followed him still chating lively. Hardison watched them sit and chat and, against his best judgment, he felt a pang of jealousy.

“She’s his people too,” Parker said over his shoulder. “Don’t be green or blue or whatever color works better!”

“Woman!” Hardison exclaimed, jumping in his place for the second time in the day. “I should put a bell around your neck! And what makes you say that?”

“It’s obvious you don’t like when Eliot jokes with Mikel. I could see it from the bar.” Parker slid her hand into his. “I’m jealous too, but she’s kind of his family. And Eliot sees her far less than we do,” Parker looked at the table where Eliot chatted with Mikel. “We can share.”

Hardison turned around and bent his neck. Parker validated his feelings and reassured him of some harm he never suspected it could befall him. The doorbell rang softly. Parker smiled and put her hand on his nape. They approached softly, ready to kiss. Hardison put his hand on Parker’s small back.

“For a moment, I thought I got the wrong place,” Quinn commented with a slightly sardonic tone. “I don’t want to interrupt you. Just point me in my way to Eliot, please.”

Parker broke away and pointed toward Eliot with a smile. Hardison wanted to kick in Mr. Quinn’s teeth, but he was rational enough to know his odds. Quinn patted Hardison in back with cool disregard in his way to the table, he even mumbled a distracted thank you.

“I’ll have what you are having!” Quinn said by way of greeting.

Parker tried to saunter away to get them another glass, but Hardison made her spin.

“Let’s kiss, baby.”

“Patience is a virtue…”

“But time is a commodity,” Hardison retorted with a smile, his hand on Parker’s back. “And two of the most dangerous persons we know just relieved us from our babysitting duty.” Hardison raised his eyebrows. “Now we have time to kiss.”

“Good point,” Parker agreed, smiled and kissed Hardison with her usual uninhibited way.

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Nate Ford surveyed the dusty, old-fashioned storefront. It seems like it hadn’t been changed since the eighties. Windows had been dutifully washed but without a hint of care; corners were caked
with a thick crust of packed dust. The frames demanded sanding and a new coat of paint. The name written in blue, brown and gold was as clear as this spring day.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to handle this?” Sophie asked, sitting next to him inside the car. “After all, we are talking about an old, lonely man. Those I can handle…”

“It’s an old man with a grudge,” Nate pointed out. Eliot’s reluctance to share his past made this con unpredictable and he was reticent about sending Sophie there without all the proper intel. “It’s better if we can talk father to father about sons in dire situations.”

Sophie rested her head in the headpiece of the seat with an annoyed sigh, but Nate disregarded her. If Sam were in Eliot’s situation, Nate would love to have someone give him the news.

With a huffing sound, Nate abandoned his rental car and crossed the street. He stopped for a moment, looking at the store’s normal movement. A quiet country shop. Near the till there was an old man, taking money from one of his clients. He chatted pleasantly and there was something vaguely familiar in that slow smile and those hard eyes. There was another man busy with the inventory.

Nate adjusted his coat and entered the place. The counter covered three sides around the door, leaving only a six by six space for the customers. There was a frame by the till with a picture, that was the only thing that not fulfilled any sensible function in the place. That young woman looked so full of life in that picture. The boy, not so much; that pursed lips and flared nostrils made Nate smile. That’s a face he had learned to regard fondly during those five years he had spent with the team. There was some family resemblance, but Eliot was not the young boy in that picture. Nate wondered who the lady was.

“How can I help you today, sir?” Elijah Spencer didn’t bother to look at Nate, registering the last sale in his daybook. Nate caught a whiff of stale whiskey in his breath.

“Tom Jansen, sir,” Nate slid his fake card over the counter, “I belong to CCS. We are a nonprofit foundation and we were wondering about your son…”

“It hadn’t been his address in fifteen years or more,” Mr. Spencer was quick to provide that information.

“As I was saying, the purpose of our group is to find the relatives of cancer patients who don’t have no other support network…”

Mister Spencer diverted his eyes from the accounting book to give Nate along, wary look.

“That curse runs in the family…” Mister Spencer commented, returning to his calculations.

“He’s suffering?” A bald, bearded man with a beer belly came from the back-store, carrying a box of assorted plumbing spare parts. “Good. Cancer’s less than he deserves…”

The vitriol was palpable but both men dispensed it without breaking their workflow. Nate remembered that was the same strategy Eliot was bound to use when he was set to stall, to gain time and deal with the situation in his own terms. It runs in the family...

“I’m here in Eliot Spencer’s name…”

Nate couldn’t utter another word before both men reached behind the counter and pointed him with black, short barrel over-under, pump-action shotguns. Eliot Spencer name usually gets that reaction in the seedy underbelly of the crime world, Nate didn’t expect it to be the case in his Kentucky
“Don’t go there and threat us, mister!” The bearded man cried out, ready to pump his gun.

*I forgot how much I liked these Southern welcomes*, Eliot’s slightly sardonic voice rang inside Nate’s head. Nate wondered if he had faced the same welcoming party before. To show he meant no harm, Nate presented his open hands at chest level.

“If you ever dare to speak that name again, I’ll shoot,” Mr. Spencer warned, loading the shotgun. Nate was sure he was willing to follow through.

“I’m sure we can talk about it…” Nate heard faint steps among the shelves. There was another person in the store. By the sound, the person was lighter than these two men. “If we could sit and have coffee with your wife…”

“Go inside, boy!” The bald man barked. A door closing loudly replied to his command.

Both men shared a strained look, they were getting more anxious with each word Nate uttered. Nate calculated his false assumption had triggered a protective instinct related to the young man he couldn’t even see by the way they both caressed the trigger. Nate felt like the world wasn’t making any sense.

“My Sarah is gone. God burned her alive so she could be spared from Hell’s fire,” mister Spencer said with a choked voice. The barrel of his shotgun shook and wavered. For a couple of heartbeats, Nate was acutely aware of this man’s grief and his uncontrolled drinking habits. Eliot’s wariness about Nate’s drinking made a lot more sense now. “That way she redeemed the sin of tossing that beast into the world.”

“You should go, mister,” the bald man advised with a gruff tone. His barrel was not wavering and colors were starting to mount to his bearded face. “Thank you for the glad tidings.”

Nate nodded, knowing the battle was lost. Hands still in the air, he walked backward but those shotguns followed him until he reached his car.

“Nate?” Sophie sounded confused when the door opened. She didn’t expect Nate to return so soon by the way she held her book open.

“Do you remember all those stories you’ve told me about your family?” Nate sat down. He was not scared, but deeply concerned. “Well, Eliot can give you your money’s worth with his family.”

“Do we need to try again?”

“There is no use,” Nate was sure that it wouldn’t do Eliot any good to deal with this particular family drama on top of his illness. “Eliot will have to make do with us.”

“Next step Portland, then?” Sophie sounded positively thrilled. The book was tossed to the backseat without any ceremony.

Nate nodded and turned the key.

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The gentle alarm roused Hardison and an immediate sense of dread sunk in his belly before he could notice the touch of Parker’s knee on his leg or the weight of Eliot’s head on his arm. Today was the day cancer will to take a pound of flesh from Eliot.
In the dark, Hardison took a moment to enjoy them together in that bed that reeked of surgical soap and popcorn. Eliot was asleep between them, Parker’s leg between his, his hands fist under his chin and his head resting between Parker’s shoulder and Hardison’s arm. Hardison had spooned against Eliot’s curled body almost naturally.

Yesterday afternoon, after Dayan and Quinn went on their merry ways once they have given Eliot their final strategy, Eliot had commented—half in jest, half in earnest—that bowel prep made him feel like he had been sodomized by a blowtorch. Hardison had never hazarded a guess at when Eliot was speaking from personal experience or trying to make a funny overstatement because that was an exercise in futility. In any case, Eliot had been sore and exhausted when he went to bed early, but Hardison took those fists like a good omen: Eliot was ready to fight.

Two days ago, Eliot had cut his hair short, it ended just below his ears now. Parker had stopped Eliot from getting a buzz cut, because she liked to play with his hair and, just to please her, Eliot had agreed to a longer cut. Eliot had told Parker he didn’t want to give the nurses extra work, and that was a sensible thing to do. A kind thing. The type of detail Eliot scattered around him almost instinctively: small and purposeful, but barely noticeable. Hardison didn’t notice them until Eliot got sick: half-filled sauce bottles, empty sugar pots on the tables, grease on the keyboard and dust on the screen bezel in the war room… Kind and helpful inside, rough to the touch outside, that was his friend.

Hardison sighed and extended his hand to wake Eliot up, to give him the bad news that he still had to endure another dose of his least favorite medication before they were ready to go. He also needed to shower again and...

“Let him sleep…” Parker mumbled as she caught his hand before he could touch Eliot.

“Babe…”

“I know,” Parker didn’t let Hardison finish. She guided his hand to her waist. “I know all your reasons, but…”

Parker looked at Hardison and, even in the dark, Hardison could read the plea in her eyes. Parker had a way to be very expressive without words...

Eliot had slept soundly for six hours; they hadn’t seen Eliot get that much rest ever.

Eliot had chosen his bodyguards because he had felt protected enough to sleep next to them and, right now, in spite of his discomfort, he was sleeping like a log between Parker and him. His rest was so peaceful and carefree, it broke Hardison’s heart.

Let Eliot sleep, Parker’s eyes begged him. Let him feel loved and safe for a bit longer.

Hardison understood her and nodded. Ten minutes would make no difference in Eliot’s surgery preparation; some moments of peace would let them face the day... Eliot—their steady, grumpy and dependable Eliot—was willing to exchange a pound of flesh for the chance to spend more time with them. They could wait ten minutes more.

Without a sound, Hardison rested his weight on Eliot’s body, wishing they shouldn’t have to start the day soon...
Integrated support plan
Chapter Summary

Eliot enters the operating room and his crew must face the hardest part of the ordeal.

Chapter Notes

This time there are no floating boxes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

_When you’re goin' through hell, keep on movin'
Face that fire, walk right through it
You might get out
before the devil even knows you're there_
-Rodney Atkins

Wednesday morning, two o’clock sharp, three people crossed the admittance door.

Front and center, a man was dressed in gray camo sweatpants, at least one size too big for his frame. His left arm was up, holding a black gym bag behind his back. Judging by the way he tilted his head; a careful observer could notice the haircut was recent. He was pale and looked a bit sick, nurses identified him immediately as ‘the patient’.

At his right side a slender, blond woman with a black backpack and a green fleece blanket sauntered and made a happy small talk, but her eyes without make-up didn’t wrinkle. Her sensible ponytail, sports sandals, and gymnastic suit proclaimed she was ready to stay as long as she had to.

At the left of the man, a tall African American carried a tablet and some cream color folders. Leather jacket and work boots were not the kind of clothes one wears for an extended hospital visit. A keychain hung from his front pocket.

“Good morning,” the patient greeted, approaching the counter with his ID already in hand. His voice was a slow, charming growl. “With your permission, I’m getting in.”

The pretty receptionist took the card from his hands, noticing the short nails and the overpowering smell of surgical soap. The African American man was consulting his tablet with aloof expression.

“OK, mister Sanders,” a hospital clerk said, entering the name in their database. “Let us check all the pertinent papers are in…”

“Please allow me,” the African American man put the folders in the counter with a smile.

The computer spat a list of required documentation, most of the hard copies the clerks were given matched the record with one remarkable exception.

“It seems like we lack a living will...”
“I want Alice White to make all the decisions, should I be unable to,” the man identified as Eliot Sanders smiled a small, wicked smile, signaling with his head to the woman: “She’s my sister.”

The nurses made a quick sweep between the man’s rugged, all-American features and the delicate, European face of the restless woman. They didn’t have the least family resemblance.

“It’s a foster home situation,” Eliot Sanders explained and his smile grew bigger.

The African American man huffed and Alice White leaned to rest her head in Eliot’s shoulder, struggling to keep the giggles at bay. It was obvious the trio got that a lot.

“May I have your ID, Miss White…?”

“One second,” Alice replied, rummaging through her backpack to fish out a battered wallet. She was slow to take the card out. “Are you sure?”

“I can turn around…” Eliot twisted his side a bit to point at the door they have just crossed. His taunting voice was the best evidence of their family relationship.

“Here,” Alice slapped her driver’s ID on the counter, darting Eliot an outraged look.

The name and contact information promptly formed part of their database. The hard copy was signed by both parties. The admission process was almost done.

“I just need to call for a wheel…”

“If that’s all the same to you, I rather walk.” His tone announced he would stand on his legs as long as he’s capable.

“Nancy will take you to the surgery ward, then.”

“Babe, I’ll see you in the waiting room,” the African American man said, tablet on the armpit, holding Alice by the shoulder.

Alice White hugged him. A full-body hug. So, they are a pair.

“High five, brother,” the African American man offered his hand without letting Alice go.

“Yeah,” Eliot concurred, slapping that open hand, “for morale…”

The high five and the hug ended at the same time. They stood in their place for a second before Alice and Eliot followed a young nurse into the hospital. The still-unidentified African American waited until they turned the corner.

“You got it wrong,” Parker was complaining in his ear. “Hardison is the brother, I’m the girlfriend.”

“If my life should be in someone’s hands except mine, I choose yours,” Eliot said, walking with his arm over Parker’s shoulders in a brotherly half-hug. “No one else’s.”

There was a smile on his face when he turned around. His hand was already in the keychain.

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Hardison parked Lucille and rushed to the surgery waiting room. After leaving Parker and Eliot at the admittance desk, he had returned to the brewpub and had slept for three extra hours. Now, he
was refreshed, enthusiastic and positive.

Everything was going well. Nothing was allowed to go south today.

Everything was rolling as it was supposed. Both Dayan and Quinn had been working their magic for the last week and Hardison was sure they worth every cent of their expensive fee. Yesterday, Eliot had checked all the details with them and he slept the whole night after that. That was a most excellent signal.

“Hitters ready?” Hardison asked through the earbud and he immediately got a double positive reply. They were on their toes. “Moral support ready?”

“Hardison, who are we providing moral support here?” Nate sounded grumpy, maybe the long plane travel didn’t suit him. Nate and Sophie arrived at PDX at four in the morning.

“Parker and me, of course,” Hardison was quick to answer crossing the open elevator doors. Eliot was still angry because they had called in their old partners in crime. “Eliot will be asleep most of the time.”

“Glad we made that clear.” Nate said, opening his arms to greet Hardison.

“Man, thank you for coming. Sophie, beautiful as ever…” Hardison passed from Nate’s arms to Sophies without a beat. “Babe, how are you holding?”

“I could do worse,” Parker replied with a hint of sarcasm, “I could be in a hungry tiger’s cage…”

“Door’s open, Parker!” Eliot’s voice barked in all earbuds. “You can walk out, you know?”

“And good bloody day to you, too, Eliot,” Sophie replied with an offended high note.

“Shit, Sophie… sorry.” The apology sounded forced, but it was better than nothing. “Thank you for being here for them.”

“And for you, too.”

Nate made Hardison the sign to kill the comms. Hardison obliged.

“Give me the room number. It sounds like Parker’s in need of some morale.”

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Parker sat sulking in the visitor’s chair, holding her green fleece blanket against her chest. Eliot knew he was making her anxious, but he couldn’t stop. His hands kept going to his neck to brush away the hair that was no longer there. He was pacing inside the little room without the slippers. The bathroom robe over his shoulders weighed a ton. He seldom wanted a beer more than he wanted one now. If his bladder were not empty, he would go for another...

It can’t get worse than this...

Eliot Spencer, the man who could wait for cold-blooded torture sleeping, stopped in his tracks, feeling ridiculous in his anxiety. Parker came to him and hugged him like a teddy bear. For a woman so thin, she had a mean grip.

“Stop,” Eliot demanded with a gruff tone. He was short of breath, but the touch helped him find his footing. “I don’t want to deal with a broken rib on top of all of this.”
“Stop squeezing him, Parker!” a choir of voices resounded in their ears.

“Dammit!” Eliot groaned and took out the earpiece. “Take it, Parker.”

Parker took the device and put it in her pocket. “It’s OK to be in a cold sweat.”

“Who’s in a cold sweat? Huh?”

Parker rolled her eyes and took out her earbud too. “You are. No need for the macho act, Spencer; I can see you.”

Eliot huffed and pushed Parker aside to go and sit in the bed. He hated to be so visible. Belatedly, he wished he had fought harder to spend this time alone.

“I would be in a cold sweat too if someone were to make me unconscious, rummage in my guts and rip out a chunk of my flesh…”

“You are not helping!” Eliot felt a welcomed rush of anger. Anger was good; he could handle anger better than fear.

Parker approached and hugged his waist, more gently this time. “I won’t tell anyone I have seen you quake. Promise.”

“Thank you,” Eliot said those words with all the meaning before closing his arms around her shoulders. “I really appreciate it.”

They hugged for a long time. It was good, it felt normal. It ended far too soon.

“Good morning!” A cheerful nurse knocked on the door. “Should we make ready for the big event?”

“It’s her job,” Parker whispered. She should have felt his sudden rise of pulse.

“I know…” Eliot grumbled, taking his arms from the bathrobe.

“Play nice…”

“I can’t promise anything.” Eliot passed Parker the garment and laid supine on the bed. He had rehearsed each step of the induction since they had a date for the surgery.

“How are you today, handsome?” the nurse asked, getting between them both.

“He doesn't like to be called cute names.” Parker warned, looking her put the blood pressure cuff on Eliot’s arm. “You are going to get a false positive.”

“Oh, well, let's start with something else. Please, sir, help me with your arm…”

Eliot helped her to get his right arm out of the hospital gown. Parker moved to the other side of the bed and poked Eliot to attract his attention.

“When you return home, would you make me those black noodles again?”

“I can do better things.” Eliot tried to suppress the shiver. That thermometer in his armpit was cold. The nurse was checking his pulse too. He could feel her fingers on his wrist.

“Like that forest fruits parfait.” Parker folded the blanket over the bed rail and crossed her arms
over it.

“No, I won’t.”

“Why not?”

“Last time I made it you were bouncing off the walls, that’s why.”

Parker’s happy chatter distracted him through the whole examination. The anesthesiologist came in after her and then Parker had to move out of the way. Hardison had sent them his whole medical history but they asked again about being under general anesthesia and about medical allergies. Eliot didn’t have any, as far as he knew, but he had not been under medical scrutiny for a long time and never for too much time.

“Well, we don’t expect any complications, then,” the cute anesthesiologist began to put latex gloves. “It’s time to get you under.”

“Can… can she stay…?” Eliot asked and the hesitant quality of his voice made him cringe. Parker was playing with her hair. He gulped to steady his nerves. “Just a bit longer?”

“She can,” the cute anesthesiologist accepted with a wide smile, injecting something clear to Eliot’s I.V., “but she needs to go when the drugs kick in…”

Parker approached, clutching the green blanket. Eliot tried to smile but he was starting to panic. He could feel it in his gut and in his lungs.

“Eliot…” Parker gripped his hand hard, so hard it hurt, but Eliot wanted this hurt.

“Parker, I need your help. I can’t visualize this going well if I’m under.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Take a picture and say to yourself: ‘It can’t get worse than this’. One picture, every time you feel like crying…”

“One picture…”

“Parker…” Eliot struggled to keep his eyes open, but the drugs were not to blame this time. You won’t cry, he said to himself when his eyes started smarting, don’t you dare to even think of crying! God, it can’t get worse than this… “Parker, I’m scared…”

“You’ll be alright…” Parker promised, her hand resting on Eliot’s naked shoulder. “We are here and we will get you out.”

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Parker… Parker, I’m scared…

“Oh, shit…” Hardison cut the audio feed from Parker’s comm but it was too late. Sophie was beside him and, grifter or not, she couldn’t help but cover her mouth in shock. “Nobody had heard anything.”

“Of course, Hardison,” Nate replied in his earpiece.

“If you think I have time to hear all the chatter, think again,” Quinn complained by the same channel. “This is the third Saudi rat I’ve found in this pantry and the ten-hour marathon hasn’t
“I would appreciate being informed on rat by rat basis,” Hardison demanded with incensed tone. There was a clear offense in keeping him in the dark.

“Roger, boss,” Quinn replied before another barrage of strikes came from his comm. “That was an Albanese rat, by the way…”

“Dayan… anything to report?”

“OR clear,” Mikel Dayan reported with a heavy accent. “No rats here.”

“That’s good, that’s good…”

“Hardison, pace yourself,” Nate advised, taking a peek to the chart out of Eliot’s room. Another loved one in a hospital, another one with so messed up blood work. “Mr. Quinn was right in calling this a marathon. Don’t get burnt in the first two hours.”

Hardison killed all the feeds, but Nate’s and Sophie's: “But Eliot’s scared. Do you know how many times I have pulled out the impossible because I know Eliot’s unshakeable?”

“Now you have to do all that’s possible because Eliot need you to,” Sophie said with her hand in Hardison’s shoulder.

“Eliot’s scared because he had relinquished control, Hardison,” Nate explained, feeling how the rush of the old con was running through his veins. “You need to hold the reins for him. Just hold them. Can you do that?”

“I don’t…” Hardison turned to Sophie and shook his head, “I don’t think…”

“Hardison, your goal is to keep Eliot alive until he’s out of anesthesia. Nothing else.” Nate insisted, feeling Alec slipping through his fingers. “And you have covered all the bases: You have two of the best hitters, besides Eliot, on the case; he’s in the best hospital, with the best surgeons and the best technology in the city; you even help him get the best spot to get the procedure done. Statistically, patients who get surgery early in a midweek day had better rates of survival and fewer complications. All you have to do is sit and watch the experts do their job. And that’s what you do best. You are the master in taking control of variables. Sit down, set controls, and watch it go.”

“It’s just another surveillance session, Hardison,” Sophie said with a smile, pressing the acupuncture point that blocked the suprarenal glands. It would last a couple of minutes but that might do the trick. “You have done more than a dozen of those.”

“That I can do. I’ll need a lot of orange soda.” Hardison took a deep breath and opened the channels. “Dayan and Quinn, change of plans. Radio silence unless you must report something or need support…”

“I’m going to get you that soda…”

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Nate heard the heavy steps just when he was congratulating himself for having handling Hardison right. He turned around to see a dozen of soldiers marching in perfect formation right where he was. How the U.S. Army got the news was beyond Nate’s keen.

“Nate Ford?” The one with more bars asked. There was a hint of courtesy in his voice.
“Yes?” Nate was making quick calculations about what this all could mean.

“Trainees reporting to provide executive protection, sir. All is set with the hospital administration.” The Sargent announced signaling their men to spread around the corridor. “We’d be the cavalry, sir.”

“Did he say what I heard him say?” Hardison sounded positively giddy.

“Very appreciated.” Nate finally said. Eliot must have done very good friends during his service time. Nate’s only worry was that if they were blocking the obvious entrance points that would put more pressure on the unofficial executive protection.

The stretcher-bearers opened Eliot’s room. The move to the operating room began. Parker was walking by Eliot’s side, chatting and holding his hand. Eliot was going under hard if Nate could gauge by the lack of response. Nate began walking behind them in silence, watching the trainees work like a barrier until they reached the red line.

Parker stopped there, her blanket dragging through the floor. Eliot’s hand slip from her hand.

Nate waited, ready to be there when Parker needed him.

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“I once had a nightmare that started just like this,” Eliot Spencer said with a groggy voice to the surgical nurse once they put him on the table.

“Good to see you in good spirits,” Mikel replied in Hebrew, taking a fabric cap from the side table.

“You were there, too,” Eliot insisted while Mikel gathered his hair inside the cap.

“Can you stop fighting the sedatives? You should already be under by now!”

“Trying…”

“Try harder.”

Mikel applied three drops of ocular lubricant on each eye and hurried to attach the bandages over them. Surgeons were entering the operation room, and the auxiliary personnel was getting ready. She knew every one of them and had marked them to the last detail. She had managed to secure the pivotal role of circulating nurse yesterday, to be close enough to watch over Spencer and far enough to keep the surgery going.

“Dayan, you have support outside the operating room, in case you need it.” Central command reported in her ear. “Just toss out whichever bugs you. They’ll take charge.”

“Who?” Mikal whispered, watching how the anesthesiologist lowered the headpiece to intubate Spencer. More than one killing had taken place at that moment.

“The U.S. fricking Army.”

Mikel Dayan couldn't contain an appreciative look as she felt her respect for Spencer increasing.

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The morning sun filtered through the glass curtains of the big building. The facility was new and it was a research institution. Nate and Sophie didn’t ask and Hardison was not about to tell them they
almost bribed their way to have Eliot’s procedure done there. Surgeries were not expected at that place and their waiting room looked more like a comfortable business lounge than a hospital.

People passed by them all the time, without any hint of curiosity. Everyone absorbed in their own chores, not even thinking that cluster of people was waiting on tenterhooks. The Leverage crew made their bread and butter on concealing their true feelings and they were beyond good at it.

“Now, what do we do?” Parker asked, both feet up the blue sofa in the visitor’s lounge. Her legs wrapped in that green fleece blanket she had carried along all day.

Nate, Sophie and Alec looked at her. She had amused herself for a good half hour looking at the art installation over their heads. They had been sharing pastries and hospital coffee in silence and her question took them by surprise.

“Well,” Nate said with a confident tone and half a smile. “Eliot is in OR, all the experts are doing their thing at the best of their skill, and we must face the hardest part…”

Sophie and Alec nodded slowly. Parker cocked her head.

“Now, we wait, Parker.”

Chapter End Notes

*Be on the look out*
After a long surgery, Eliot goes to ICU and things are not looking as good as everyone would like.

She tried to turn me on to Jesus, 
but I turned on to the devil’s ways
And I turned out to be the only hell my mama ever raised
-Johnny Paycheck

“Eliot’s been rolled to ICU,” Dayan informed over the comms.

Nate raised his head and Hardison followed his eyes. The city was starting to shine. Twelve hours and thirty-two minutes. Dayan sounded tired, but Quinn was positively exhausted when he replied to say he got it. Thirty-seven rats were caught that day, three of them in the operating room.

“Something went wrong there,” Hardison said, almost to himself.

“No, all liver surgery patients go to the ICU directly,” Nate said in a whisper. “It’s the largest organ inside the body after all…”

Sophie was asleep over the green blanket and Parker was trying to steal it from beneath her.

“They won’t let you in right now, Parker,” Nat said, touching her lightly on the arm. “They need to get Eliot comfortable after anesthesia first.”

“But she’ll get her perfume all over it…”

“Two and a half hours extra surgery work, Nate.”

“The guide said we shouldn’t bring perfume or cologne to ICU.”

“I know,” Nate patted Hardison’s knee. “Parker, you are going to use that blanket, not Eliot. Come here, I have some things we need to refresh…”

“For the con,” Parker said, betraying how much she rather be doing something else.

“...before you see Eliot in ICU.” Nate disregarded her interruption. “It’s harder than any con, and you must be ready.”

Parker washed her hands and used the antibacterial gel, as the nurse demanded and crossed the door of the ICU room. Everything was so bright and white and cold. Parker found the different
sounds overpowering and she had to stop to filter out all.

Nate was right. This was harder than any con.

With her eyes still closed, Parker took out her phone and shot a picture. Her promise to Eliot must be honored. The device barely made a sound, but in this room, everything sounded louder. She didn’t mean to look at the picture, but her time with Hardison had taught her that even the most horrible scenarios could be tamed by the screen.

“It can’t get worse than this,” Parker said and it felt like a plea but it was supposed to be a charm. She opened her eyes to face the image.

In the picture, Eliot was laid on the bed with the head part a bit raised. Sheets and his gown were pooling on his lap. His chest was bare. Dark sticker disks were connected to electrical cables to his shoulders and left side. Over Eliot’s head, three bags dripped blood and liquids into his body. There was a new bruise on his right hand, and a new tube inside his right arm, over the elbow. There was a clip-like device over his annular. A tube of greater caliber was inside his right nostril and another smaller one crept beneath the sheets. There was a bit of adhesive in the corner of his mouth. The great wound in his belly covered two of Parker’s hand spans and was closed with stainless staples. An even bigger tube poked out under the wound, held in place by a transparent plastic film. Eliot was looking at her. Parker almost dropped her phone.

“Eliot…” Parker rushed to the bed with the name trapped in her throat.

Eliot blinked at her as if he was trying to focus. Parker hesitated to touch him, because he could be in pain, no matter how many times Nate had told her that Eliot was getting massive amounts of painkillers and sedatives. She finally gathered the guts to cup his cheek. Parker felt Eliot shuddered slightly under her touch.

He was so cold.

“Hey…” Eliot looked at her, sleepy. He was shivering under the thin hospital blanket and his voice was gruffer than usual, but his gaze was soft.

Parker looked at her green fleece blanket, hanging over her arm, and didn’t stop to think. Eliot was colder than she, he should have it.

With the same care she avoided triggering vibration sensors and tripping on laser beams, she wrapped that blanket over Eliot’s naked shoulders, trying to not disturb any other thing attached to his body.

Eliot stopped trembling almost instantly and that settled it. He could keep her puppies dancing with bones on a field of dark green for the rest of his life. It was Eliot’s blanket now.

“Are you still scared?” Parker asked, slipping her hand under the blanket to hold Eliot’s. His words had kept her fidgeting the whole day.

When he tried to close his fingers in spite of the arm board, she remembered those same fingers slipping from her hand as they took him to surgery. His fingers were cold at that moment too. Parker felt like crying, but she didn’t want to let go of Eliot’s hand. This time, she didn’t care for a photo.

“No,” Eliot said, closing his eyes. Sedatives were gaining on him, just like Nate said it will happen. His words were almost unintelligible. “You’re here.”
Parker pulled a chair closer and sat next to Eliot, waiting for the moment when his fingers get warm.

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“... and nurses are worried because Eliot’s not filling his urine bag,” Parker reported with a cup of stale black coffee in her hand. She looked exhausted. “They certainly fiddle a lot with that. They won’t let him eat anything…”

“Parker, that’s normal.”

Sophie checked her appearance on the powder cake mirror. She as playing the role of Eliot’s self-absorbed, gold-digger aunt and that’s such a hard role to play without jewelry or perfume. The first thing Parker did, before greeting her, was to take a sniff, arguing that the perfume in her blanket had made Eliot sick in his stomach. Sophie was sure it was the anesthetic drugs, but there was no reasoning with Parker.

“Eliot will need some time…”

“...to get back to normal. I know, but it’s not normal they want Eliot cold.” Parker sipped the coffee and grimaced in disgust. “Please, don’t let him get cold, Sophie.”

“Parker, they are just doing their job.”

“But he hasn’t even got a fever! Besides, one thing is to try to cool him down, and the other is to let him shiver for hours. That’s cruelty.”

“Parker, you are tired,” Sophie said, turning her to face the elevators, “you need a nap. I’ll take charge from here.”

Parker needed a slap in her bum to get her going, but she got inside the elevator. Sophie signaled her to go to sleep and Parker showed Sophie her tongue. Sophie shook her head, breathed deep. It was time to get in character.

She closed her bag, attached the visitor badge and moved to the door. The cadets watched her and made her a sign to stop.

“ID, madame, please.”

The cadet couldn’t be older than twenty years old. Sophie doubted he would scare any weathered veteran hitman, but it was a nice touch from Eliot’s service friends. With an exaggerated sigh, Sophie opened her bag and took out the fake ID Hardison cooked specially for this occasion.

“Sorry to bother you, madam,” the cadet apologized as he returned the fake card.

“It was not a problem,” Sophie looked for the name, but she couldn’t find any indication.

“The name is Vance, madam.” Cadet Vance identified himself with a little nod. “I can only imagine what you’re going through. Please receive my best wishes for Commander Spencer’s speedy recovery.”

“I’ll relay the message, Cadet.” Sophie had to fight the urge of making a salute. That boy looked so harmless and sounded too silly to be taken seriously.

Once the urge was managed Sophie entered the ICU. Hardison had managed to find Eliot a bed in
a corner of the building. Eliot had called it a kill box where they could manage the security in
different stages. The ICU was small, four beds only and there was only one occupied, courtesy of
Doctor Robertson. It was just for the day, but this first day—everyone knows it—was of
paramount importance.

Sophie nodded to the nurses and entered Unit Two. Parker had told her horrors about the scene, but
Eliot was resting on his back, knees bent over a big pillow, covered with Parker’s blanket. In
Sophie’s eyes, he was a bit pale, but he was the same man. She almost expected him to sit and send
her to jump into a lake. All the machines in the background mattered little to her.

“Hey, Eliot,” Sophie greeted, brushing his hair from his forehead. Parker was right, he was cold. “I
know you have seen better days, but you’ll survive this one too. I’ve faith in you…”

Sophie exaggerated another sigh and leaned over the bed to put a kiss on Eliot’s brow. This was
one in a lifetime opportunity. Her lips brushed his skin lightly when she heard a soft snore and the
sound didn’t come from Eliot’s mouth. Sophie forgot the kiss and stood up to survey the room with
more care.

At the other side of the bed, in the visitor’s chair, a lean blonde man, dressed in surgical scrubs, sat
in perfect tailor fashion. His hands, clamping his legs in place, helped him manage balance. His
chin was tucked in and he definitely was asleep.

“The sleep of a laboring man is sweet…” Sophie said, recognizing their hired hitter, still playing
bodyguard in his sleep. “Expensive as it was, Mister Quinn, your support has been greatly
appreciated. Personally, I’m in debt to you.”

Sophie retracted her steps and noticed the spot was the fruit of a careful reflection. You couldn’t
see him from the corridor, not even if you approached the bed. A nurse approached with a hesitating
smile when she noticed her movement. Sophie composed her persona and tried to pretend she was
considering a photo that lit a fire under the nurse’s bum.

“Oh, ain’t they adorable, sweetheart?” Sophie exclaimed with a vapid tone, using the fingers to
frame both Eliot and Quinn. “Aw, how I wish I could keep them like this forever.”

“How did he enter?”

“He works here, darling!” Sophie exclaimed as if she were to touch the nurse but stopping short in
the right moment. “He finished his shift and rushed to meet Eli. They come a long way those two,
all the way from the 4-H poultry club…”

After that tirade, it was evident that the nurse was having trouble to keep her eyes from rolling
inside her head. Sophie knew how annoying this character must be for the long-suffering nurse and
it was better that way because Eliot does better when left to his own devices and the thought of
someone fussing over him would distress him.

Discreetly, for Parker, Sophie took a picture of the two exhausted hitters and went to finish that
interrupted kiss.

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Hardison stretched in the visitor’s couch. The data he stole was being compiled at the limited
capacity of that tablet. ICU Unit Two, noisy as it was, was a more peaceful spot than the visitor’s
lounge. Hardison found he could think clearer here. Eliot was sleeping in a sitting position and he
looked more pain-free than he had been in months.
“And I had to go and jinx it,” Hardison complained aloud because as soon as he finished the thought Eliot made a pained sound. He jumped from the couch and rushed to Eliot’s side. “Hey, bro, what’s happening?”

“Cramp.” Parker wasn’t exaggerating when she said the ventilator had left Eliot’s throat raw. He sounded like he had been eating Brillo pads dipped in vinegar.

Hardison noticed that, even if Eliot sounded in pain, he didn’t try to rub the spasming part.

“Dizzy?”

A quick—almost jerking—nod was Eliot’s reply. He was too busy clenching his jaw.


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Nate gulped, smearing his hands with antibacterial gel. Eliot’s distrust of hospitals was irrational; his, on the other hand, was completely rational and it doubled for ICU units. He waited until the nurse staff left the room to enter as the alcohol evaporated from his skin.

Hardison had reported nurses changed Eliot’s position an hour ago and the image was not as daunting as Nate expected. In another setting, Eliot would project the idea of a tired man sleeping. He was on his right side; almost all tubes and the surgical wound were hidden under the pillow where his left leg rested. Parker’s blanket was thrown sideways over his hips and under his arm; probably nurses were thinking more of his modesty than of his comfort. A rolled towel supported his back. Eliot was breathing rapidly through his mouth.

“Eliot,” Nate whispered and touched Eliot’s wet, hot arm. His touch met resistance, a sort of subdued flinch and Nate felt his brows knitting. “I know you don’t want me here. I don’t want you here either.” Nate sighed. “We are stuck, so let’s make the most of it.”

With a groan, Eliot turned his face toward the pillow. The long oxygen line got dislodged from its proper place behind Eliot’s ear. Nate consulted the monitors and since the pressure didn’t climb, he let it be. It was better to let Eliot sleep in these first critical hours.

To distract himself, Nate took the tablet Hardison had left behind for them to record all the exciting ICU news. Hardison kept scrupulous notes about drugs and liquids, both in the imperial and metric system. Eliot’s fever was declared official a couple of hours ago, nurse staff had been doing runs every ten minutes now, instead of the usual fifteen.

Supplementary oxygen was provided three hours ago when Eliot’s oximeter reported an O2 concentration of 91. Hardison even made a graphic to trace the O2 concentration, probably with hacked data stole from the nurse station. Eliot was 100—rather abnormal, surgeons had made a difficult call during the proceedings— when he left the operating room; it had been falling steadily since. Eliot was heading to respiratory failure, but the list of drugs told Nate nurses were on top of it.

“What’s happening here, Eliot?” Nate asked, looking over his shoulder.

Eliot didn’t reply. Nate was aware his question was rhetorical, but there was something unsettling about having a one-sided conversation in ICU. Nate returned his eyes toward the monitor: 102.8, 32 breaths per minute, O2 86. Fever and tachypnea usually go hand in hand…
“Afternoon,” A nurse entered, pushing a medicine trolley. “Time for treatment. Do you want to wait outside?”

“Yes, of course,” Nate said closing the tablet case, knowing pretty well they never ask you to leave if they were to check the lines only. She was here to control Eliot’s pulmonary acidosis.

In his way to the door, Nate noticed Eliot tried to resist her touch. That gave Nate pause.

“He’s a bit confused…” The nurse tried to make Eliot raise his head. Relatives usually raise complaints against nursing staff out of sentimental reasons. “There, sweetie…”

“He doesn’t like to be called cute names,” Nate replied, looking each of Eliot’s expressions. He shouldn’t be delirious with that temperature.

“No more,” Eliot mumbled, trying to tuck his chin in. His jaw was tense, his neck muscles were hard. Nate could see the muscles on his temples throb. “I can’t take it.”

“It’s the fever,” Nate reassured the nurse and left the room, without closing the door behind him. Three steps more and he was at the ICU nurse station. “Hardison…”

“Nate,” Hardison replied in the earpiece. His voice was a cautious whisper. Parker must be sleeping.

“Do you want a distraction?” Nate asked, following the hunch despite the hollow in his belly.

“Yes, please.”


“Got you. What are we looking for?”

“A death certificate or a coroner report.”

Hardison took a long time to reply. He was a quick-witted man; if he had a hacked feed to the nurse station data and he might be extracting his own conclusions by now.

“I’ll keep you posted.”

Nate took the earbud from his ear before muttering: “I’ll do the same.”

Praying, Nate was praying as he wouldn’t pray since Sam’s last hospital stay. He stood by the open door and Eliot’s pained moan hit him hard. Parker was right about the room’s acoustics. The nurse was too busy changing Eliot’s surgery dressing to survey the monitors. Nate had had the time to see the number change from 102.8 to 103.6 and to see Eliot’s heartbeat take a dip.

He could be wrong. Nate begged to be wrong. Eliot was delirious and in distress…

One case of each one hundred thousand people into surgery…

Nate closed his eyes trying to remember Eliot’s anesthetic rap that Hardison had pulled from the Army records. Eliot had been under the knife before. Nate was sure…

The earbud came back to its place the moment the monitor caught another change in Eliot’s heart. Eliot’s heart was picking up speed. “Miss Dayan?”

“Yes.”
“Make it stop,” Eliot mumbled tossing his head back. He had broken a sweat; Eliot was fighting as hard as he always does. “I'll talk…”

“Please, case the hospital pharmacy to see if they had Dantrium, Dantamacrin, or Dantrolene, and bring it to the ICU.”

There was a long pause, but she mumbled something that Nate interpreted as ‘roger.’ The nurse in the station was reaching for the phone. Someone had noticed an intervention was in order. The monitor reached 104.4.

“No more,” Eliot pleaded with a deep sigh when he couldn’t compensate anymore.

The nurse tending his dressing felt the change in his breathing and the flesh hardening under her touch and started to raise her head. Nate could see how the heat cramps seized Eliot’s right calf and his lower back. EKG reported a frighteningly erratic heartbeat.

The monitor flashed 106.3 for a second, then jumped to 107. Alarms started to sound in the room. Eliot was crashing fast. O2 dropped to 72. Nate gripped the nurse station table. Eliot was burning...

*God burned her alive so she could be spared from Hell’s fire*, Nate remembered those words he attributed to a whiskey pickled brain. *That way she redeemed the sin of tossing that beast into the world.*

Mr. Spencer got it wrong. His wife had burdened his son before he had the chance to taste sin before he even drew breath or saw the sunlight.

“Delayed onset of…” Nate mumbled, watching all the pieces of the puzzle fell together.

Nurses rushed to put Eliot flat in the bed and pull him to the headboard with a jerking motion. Nate saw them struggle to force Eliot’s mouth open. Parker’s blanket was on the floor. An AMBU bag was pressed against Eliot’s face.

“*Malignant hyperthermia.*” Hardison’s voice in Nate’s ear betrayed his panic. Hardison must be in WebMD right now. Nate knew he could hear the alarms ringing.

“I’m here, Hardison,” Nate tried to keep his voice steady as the monitor made another half-degree jump. “I have Eliot’s back.”

One nurse rushed by his side, holding several chilled bags of saline water; another crossed the main door, carrying cooling pads and cursing Eliot’s guard. A slow drip of dark blood started to pool next to the bed.

“Kill all the feeds; I’ll call when the crisis is over.”

Parker’s doctor friend crossed the door. The monitor flashed 108.2, Eliot let out a faint cry and his body became rigid before the nurses could apply the cooling pads.

“I got your back, Eliot,” Nate repeated, hearing hitter’s steps, heavy yet mostly silent, behind his back. Miss Dayan entered the ICU on cue. “Please, forgive me for being so late.”

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Parker stood in front of the glass door, phone in hand, the folded blanket over her arm. She had been there for hours, with her almost unblinking eyes fixed on Eliot.
If Nate hadn’t… Hardison refused to complete the thought.

Eliot was hooked to the assisted ventilation machine, in a medically induced coma. Half of the doctors’ work was way beyond Hardison’s ken. The only thing that he understood for sure was that CO2 was the marker and, each time the wonder drug ran its course, O2 started to drop again. Doctors were doing their best, but they didn’t know how long it will be before they could stop the cascade effect.

“No one knew that he had the bad genes from his mama, babe,” Hardison said, extending his fingers to caress Parker’s elbow. “I doubt even Eliot was aware of this mess.”

“It can’t get worse than this…” Parker said in a monotonous voice, caressing her cellphone.

“No, it can’t…” Hardison agreed because if this got any worse, they would leave the hospital without Eliot.

Hardison didn’t know how Mikel managed to secure the spot inside Eliot’s room, but she was there, watching over her mark like a dark angel. If she were not confined in a clean room, Alec would kiss her for that epic sprint carrying Eliot’s much-needed remedy. Probably Miss Dayan would appreciate a money bonus better.

Dayan looked at them for a brief moment and Hardison pointed at himself, made an O with his left hand and a U with the other one. Dayan looked at him with both hands extended and a confused look on her face.

“It’s nothing, Dayan. As you were.” Hardison mumbled into his earpiece. Dayan rolled her eyes. Hardison tried to put his arm over Parker’s shoulders, but she shook it off. “Parker, you need to rest.”

Parker shook her head, looking stubbornly at the bed, blinking slowly.

“If I go, he will take another wrong turn,” Parker muttered, caressing her phone, with her eyes wet and fixed on Eliot. “It can’t get worse than this…”

Hardison sighed, kissed her in the temple and half-hugged her. If she meant to stay, he’ll stay by her side.

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“You are going to burn sooner than Spencer,” Quinn commented, dressed in fresh scrubs, and passed Parker a cup of coffee. “Extra sugar. You need it.”

“You should be sleeping.” Parker accepted the cup, nodding her thanks. Hardison was sleeping in the visitor’s couch. “You were inside not a half-hour ago.”

“Takes me a while to unwind,” Quinn sipped his coffee. “And I can say the same about you.”

Parker didn’t reply, her eyes surveying Dayan’s grift as an ICU nurse. Quinn was not half as good as she was.

“Besides, I must be here. You are paying for my time.”

Quinn was obviously in a chatty mood. Parker had little use for anything that distracts her attention from Unit Two.
“For a hitter, you talk too much.”

Quinn huffed.

“Clients call us hitters; we conceptualize our work different. I prefer ‘Executive Convenience Officer’; Dayan advertises as ‘Crisis Suppression Expert’. Spencer is far too proficient to be a ‘Retrieval Specialist’, but if that’s his label, I won’t be the first to argue against. I was just dumb muscle for the clients until I faced Spencer. Clients don’t get us.”

Parker sipped her coffee. Against her best judgment, Quinn’s chatter was chipping away her focus.

“We are a jolly bunch of amoral fighters, bound by our word to put our bodies in the line,” Quinn took a gulp. “I’m yet to find any of us who is religious, sensible or straight. We can be ruthless for a price, but what we lack in moral, we supply generously with honor.”

“Is there any reason for this little speech?” Parker’s game as mastermind had been thrown out of whack for a while.

“Contract will be over in less than forty hours,” Quinn stated with his eyes on the glass door. “I’ll remain here even if you don’t share the windfall for those thirty rats the pretty boys in uniform took from my hands. I owe Spencer for the boost in my career. On the other hand, Dayan…”

“What’s with Dayan?”

“Dayan and Spencer are royalty in our little world; we on the bottom rung follow them pretty close. I’m sure everyone in our shared jungle vine knows Dayan is playing Florence Nightingale by Spencer’s bed. They also surely know Spencer is disabled.”

Quinn stopped to sip.

“She might have already another contract waiting at the end of the clock, and a lot of people with grudges will know she’s not playing the candy striper anymore. Dayan might honor her contract unless measures were taken to prevent her to.”

Parker let the implications sink, drinking her coffee in little sips. Due to the medical concerns, it took Parker a while to notice Eliot’s ICU stay had been hassle-free in the assassination front. Quinn was making excellent points.

“Why are you talking to me instead of Nate?” Parker was as aware of her position in the mastermind game as Quinn was of his in the hitter ladder.

“You signed the living will,” Quinn replied with a slightly confused tone. “For all intents and purposes, you are Eliot now.”

Quinn didn’t say it, but it was obviously a relief to him to speak his debt to Eliot in this convoluted way. The mind of a hitter is full of strange turns...

“What would Eliot do in this case?” Parker asked aloud, knowing she was out of her area of competence.

“Eliot would offer Dayan a dollar.”

Parker finally tore her eyes from the ICU unit and turned to Quinn with an astonished expression.

“It’s a hitter’s thing,” Quinn shook his head to cover his amusement. “I don’t know if you noticed,
but Dayan’s English is not exactly SAT-compliant. You are calling for a favor and leaving a token to repay it. You are giving Eliot’s word that he would rush to help Dayan the next time she needs him if she stays long enough to pull Eliot out of the woods.”

Parker didn’t have the first notion about what SAT compliant could mean, but the mechanics were clear. Eliot certainly wouldn’t leave Dayan in the lurch, should she ask for his help. He would say he was just being professional, but these three shared something Parker couldn’t fully grasp. That kind of structured siblinghood didn’t exist in the thieving community.

“Why a dollar?”

“Lost in the mists of time…” Quinn shrugged.

“Will it work?”

“She will be bound by honor, if she thinks it comes from Spencer,” Quinn replied with caution. By the way Quinn shifted his weight, Parker knew he was guessing. “She might as well accept, thinking the favor is yours if it suits her better. I would offer her one, but I doubt I have any value in Mikel Dayan’s eyes.”

That last part was honest. Parker nodded as a nurse passed behind her. That nurse always kept her change in the front pocket of her scrubs and was not careful at all. The dollar bill practically got stuck to her fingers.

“Here is a dollar, what now?”

“Now, the offer,” Quinn took the dollar from her hand, folded it in a form of V and returned it to Parker. “Put it against the glass. Do you know Morse code?”

“Why on earth should I?” Parker questioned, following his instructions.

“Evidently,” Quinn was obviously disappointed. “Short, short, short.”

Parker followed his lead. The sound of her knuckles rapping the glass made Dayan pay attention. Her eyes were scary.


Parker hit one last time and then Dayan signaled Quinn with a suspicious look. Quinn shook his head and Parker did the same. Dayan pointed toward Parker.

“Yes, me,” Parker said before remembering her voice couldn’t reach Dayan. She nodded with enthusiasm. Dayan mumbled something in Parker’s ears. “I don’t speak Hebrew.”

Dayan gave her the thumbs up and turned her attention to Eliot. Apparently, they had struck a deal. Parker bent her knees and slid the dollar under the door.

“Now, you can go to sleep,” Quinn said, pushing Parker away from the doors.

“I can’t…”

“Dayan won’t move from Eliot’s side.” Deftly, Quinn passed his arm over Parker’s shoulders. “You are going to take a nap in the visitor’s lounge. I’ll stand guard for you.”

“But…” Parker tried to resist, but her body was used to Eliot’s maneuvers and she took another step out of habit.
“Do it for Spencer,” Quinn whispered in her ear before he let her go, outside of ICU.

Chapter End Notes

*Very seriously ill*
Chapter Summary

Eliot survived his harrowing experience after the code, but chemotherapy proved to be a harder fight than expected.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Last night I dreamed I'd died and stood outside those pearly gates
When suddenly I realized there must be some mistake
If they know half the stuff I've done they'll never let me in...
-George Strait

Parker and Nate waited in the visitor’s couch by the empty Unit Two. The medical staff needed to transport Eliot to take an MRI. The choice was to let the highly trained cadets provide safety out of the kill box or risk not to be ready should the contingency occurs. Parker, believe it or not, knew which one was the best bet to gamble on.

Nate sipped another gulp of that horrible hospital coffee. The long waits at ICU were not getting any easier to endure. Nate thought that being Eliot a reasonably fit, well-fed adult, the task would be more tolerable. One of the sad truths of life is that once you see blood in the urine collection bag, your logical mind becomes a primitive, scared, howling beast. And that was a benchmark they surpassed five days ago.

How much more punishment could Eliot endure? That was the question in Nate’s head these days. Often, the answer was ‘enough’. This time, such answer made Nate feel hollow and afraid.

“It can’t get worse than this…” Parker mumbled by his side, holding that green fleece blanket against her chest. Apparently, they both were thinking the same dark thoughts.

Nate almost told her that things could get worse, but he checked his jaded tongue in time. Parker had traveled a long way, but right now one of her two wings was on fire.

“What does that mean?” Nate asked, finishing his coffee.

“It’s Eliot’s mantra,” Parker explained, drawing her knees close. “He can’t say it.”

Nate patted Parker’s knees. “It can’t get worse than this…”

Parker rested against him. Nate knew she was exhausted but the only way to make her leave the hospital would be dragging her away physically. Parker fell asleep in seconds. Nate froze in place, his mind trying to find a way to make this situation better. After a while, Nate conceded he could do nothing. It was not in his hand.

Parker continued sleeping as they moved Eliot to his unit. Nate fought the urge to get up. The nurses closed the privacy curtain and that helped him to sit still. After a few minutes of silence, Nate dozed off and was surprised when a nurse touched his shoulder. His movement roused Parker and they both looked at the nurse with a concerned expression.
“Eliot’s having a good day and doctor agrees it might do him good to have some stimulation. Do you want to visit?” the nurse asked in a whisper. “We can let you in for five minutes.”

“Is he…” Parker couldn’t find the word, but she was adept enough with her mimics.

“He’s breathing on his own, but he’s heavily sedated and not very talkative.”

Parker jumped to her feet, hugged the nurse and moved to the gel dispenser with her usual speed. Nate inferred, by the nurse’s expression, that grateful or expressive relatives were beyond the scope of her experience.

“Thank you,” Nate was always better with words.

The nurse nodded and moved to the nursing station. Nate followed Parker’s steps and entered the room still rubbing his hands with the alcohol solution. Eliot was resting on his back. They have changed the sterile dressing of his central line recently and one of the lumens was hanging idle; the smell of CHG clung in the room. Eliot was out of the ventilator, they just re-started the EKG, but there is no sign of EEG lines. All the other monitoring lines were in place. Steri-strips reinforced the stitches in Eliot’s arm. Nate came to the conclusion easily: doctors liked Eliot’s progress and he was being weaned-out of sedatives.

Parker was leaning over the right bed rail and extended her hand to cup Eliot’s cheek. Nate stopped his internal celebration and rushed to hold her elbow before it touched the sterile dressing over Eliot’s central line.

“Careful with the chink on his armor,” Nate whispered, holding Parker’s arm.

“What armor?” Parker withdrew her hand as if she was about to touch fire.

“That catheter is Eliot’s weakest spot at the moment, Parker,” Nate explained with a gentle voice. “It goes directly to his bloodstream. Any contamination might be very dangerous…”

Parker went white.

“Don’t worry,” Nate knew he had made a mistake but the clock was running. “It’s safer if you go to the other side.”

Parker heeded him with her usual rush. She stopped to look at Eliot before reaching for a caress on his arm.

“He’s cold…”

Nate looked at her as if he was wondering if the other option was better.

“Cold is good,” Parker replied to his silent consultation. “Better than fever, in any case.”

“You are not wrong,” Nate, attempting to calm the jitters he had put on Parker, placed his hand on Eliot’s right shoulder.

Parker slid her hand under Eliot’s and pressed his fingers. There was a bruise and a bandage where his A-line used to be.

“Eliot, I’m here,” Parker said softly on Eliot’s ear. The lack of reply had not shaken her confidence. “Nate’s here. We all wait for you to feel better. It’s hard.”

Nate saw her pass her fingers through Eliot’s hair with a gentleness he never suspected in Parker.
“I figure out it might be harder for you. You had been poked and prodded for days, and I know you hate it, but don’t give up.”

Nate was not sure whether Eliot recognized Parker’s voice or Parker disturbed his pillow with her weight, but Eliot leaned slightly to the left.

“They have taken out most of the needles and tubes, and you are breathing on your own,” Parker continued, trying to sound cheerful. Nate didn’t blame her; Eliot was having a good day after all. “You are doing great. Please endure it just a little more, Eliot…”

The lean might be a false positive, but Eliot was trying to press Parker’s hand.

“Hang in there,” Parker said and caressed Eliot’s beard, with a faint smile. “We are here.”

Nate stood corrected: Eliot was having an awesome day.

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Hardison heard the rustle of that thin hospital sheet, but he didn’t register Eliot was awake. The faint cough wasn’t an indicator either. Eliot had been dancing between sleep and wakefulness for the last two days, sometimes mumbling, sometimes snoring with his eyes half-open. The pain made him react, but others sensations didn’t. Eliot had to call his name for Hardison to notice the drugs had run their course.

“Up and at ’em, are we?” Hardison asked, stretching in the visitor’s chair.

“Did I cough up a porcupine?” Eliot asked, coughing again, bracing the surgery scar with his right hand.

Hardison was sure: a third meeting with the endotracheal tube would make that deep, hoarse voice a permanent characteristic in Eliot. That would be a shame for his singing voice. As Hardison got up he surveyed the monitors, all within normal parameters. Eliot looked weak, but who wouldn’t after a couple of weeks of sleep and food through a tube?

“Did you enjoy your sedacation?”

“I had… had the weirdest nightmare,” Eliot mumbled with a husky voice, blinking as if the soft lights of ICU hurt his eyes.

Hardison cracked the biggest smile. “Nightmare, uh?”

Bro, you don’t know what a nightmare is, Hardison thought, fighting the urge to lift Eliot from the mattress to squeeze him in a bear hug. I used to think I know what those mean fuckers are, but after the scare you gave me...

“ Weird as fuck…” Eliot coughed weakly. “Nate was a Nazi interrogator…” he let out a small wheezy chuckle. “Weird…”

Hardison passed his hand under Eliot’s just to be sure he was not dreaming, but Eliot didn’t take it as he did with Parker. Instead, he tried to slap it twice, slowly, and when Hardison, out of habit, slid his hand out, Eliot formed a half-fist. Alec Hardison wasn’t a man to leave a brother hanging: he bumped it with care.

Eliot coughed again. “I think I’m hungry… When is chow-down time around here?”
It has been months since you were hungry... Man, don’t do this to me! Hardison said to himself, not knowing whether to cheer or to cry, feeling a knot in the back of his throat. My nana always says that if you are well enough to eat, you are well enough, period. And you’ve been so unwell... you have no idea... it was dicey... We almost lost you...

“Hardison?” Eliot asked when his question went unanswered.

The lack of reply prompted something—A protective instinct? A trained response? A Pavlovian jerk? —in Eliot. Hardison saw how Eliot tried to sit on the bed. The muscles of his arms quacking under the strain. Alec was quicker this time and stronger too to force Eliot flat over the bed.

“Hardison!” Eliot complained, trying to shake Alec’s weight from him, then he felt the wetness seeping through his hospital gown and his voice raised a quarter of an octave. “Alec? What’s with the howler? Why are you crying, man?” He struggled some more. “Hardison, this ain’t fair... I can’t go away. Either let go of me or speak your mind...”

Eliot struggled to take Hardison’s weight from him, but he was weak. Hardison felt—physically felt—Eliot’s capitulation, but the meager joy it brought wasn’t enough to stop his relieved tears.

“Dammit, Hardison...” Eliot muttered, annoyed, attempting to pet his friend’s head. “At least tell me why are you crying, man...”

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Parker gripped the bed rail tight while the nurse helped Eliot to change position on the bed. Finally, doctors had allowed Eliot to get some food. Eliot even smiled at the nurse when he got the news. Hardison was right, Eliot asking for food was the best sign of recovery they could ask for.

“Thank you,” Eliot’s voice was rough, but sincere when the nurse put the tray within his reach.

“Enjoy your meal,” the ICU nurse replied with a surprised look and a gentle smile. “Dr. Robertson will come later to give you an update of your status.”

“Oh?”

The question came out of his mouth in a dismayed exclamation. Parker could see his pupils widen and his jaw clenching, but a choir of voices started to ask questions. The combined sound of her earbud and the regular dint of ICU machines was deafening.

“Too many voices!” Parker whispered and turned around. “Quiet!”

“He usually does his rounds around this time,” The nurse said, patting the bed. “You better start eating.”

By the time Parker managed to quiet the coms, Eliot got his eyes trained in the nurse leaving the room. His gaze had lost all amiability, Parker knew Eliot had closed the door behind him.

“Earbud, Parker,” Eliot demanded in a serious tone, pushing away the tray.

“But they want to know...” Parker protested, keeping herself out of his limited reach.

“Give him the earbud,” Nate agreed with sensible voice. “It’s Eliot’s right.”

“But what if I fail to remember something important?”

“Ouch,” Nate acknowledged in a dry tone; other mocking tones followed his reply.
“Doctor is coming. If you don’t give me that earbud, I’ll ask him to take you out.”

“Nice comeback, Parker,” Hardison commented with a little laugh. “Then we pass to plan B: Ask Eliot or plan D: Steal the chart or plan L: Hack the doctor’s notes…”

“Parker!” Eliot’s tone admitted no other reply.

Parker sighed and took out the earpiece. She offered the device with a sullen expression. Eliot snatched it and absconded it among the hospital blankets.

“They care.” That was the only argument she could make.

“I know.” Eliot had the decency to look ashamed, “but Dayan and Quinn have earbuds too and I don’t want them to learn if the coma left me with some irreversible damage.”

Suddenly, Eliot looked too tired, almost fragile, and Parker went for a hug. Her phone was too far to take a photo.

“They are no family,” Eliot whispered in Parker’s hair, his arms around her shoulders were trembling. “This is a family matter.”

“You need to eat…” Parker noticed she was too close to Eliot’s central line. Eliot’s weak spot...

“I’m not hungry anymore.”

Parker knew Eliot was weak, but he hadn’t let his arms drop. Parker didn’t let go; she will hug him for as long as he needed. She will make Eliot feel safe.

------------

“Hello, doctor,” Eliot greeted from his bed in ICU. He pushed his half-eaten tray away and made an attempt to sit straighter.

Fowler position, extra pillows, and a forbidden fleece blanket: someone had been taking care of his patient. That raspy voice informed Johan Byrnum that his patient had been off the ventilator less than 48 hours. To his trained eye, his patient was not doing as well as he would like him to do: his color could be a bit better, too much bilirubin.

Johan had lost the habit of visiting patients in ICU, and he had never had such an uncooperative patient as this man. Yet, Eliot had a way to make himself endearing, by lack of a better word. He wanted to live; Johan was ready to help him out.

“Anything to report, soldier?” He asked trying to keep his eyes in Eliot.

“Nothing you can’t read in my chart,” Eliot pointed at the monitor with his right hand. There was a blood spot in his bandage. “Or in those monitors.”

“What happened there?”

“My PICC got caught in the bedside rail during the emergency. They had to take it out.” Eliot explained looking at the bandage with a small smile. “The stitches came out today. I got a new one. Here,” he signaled his right shoulder, “and I think I like it better. Why are you here, doctor?”

“I assume you are not aware of the date…”

“It has been twenty days since surgery.”
That was a reply Johan Byrnum hadn’t expected and his face might have shown it.

“My brother told me the date today because tomorrow I’ll go to a regular room,” Eliot said with his half-smile. He had noticed Johan’s surprise. “I really don’t remember.”

“I can get your CBC from the files, but I don’t think your circumstances are optimal to start a course of chemotherapy, soldier.”

Eliot lowered his eyes as if he were thinking.

“You said that if we wait, we lose like—I’m spitting here—ten percent chance to dodge the bullet if we don’t start it within a month from the surgery. I’ve lost more than the third part of my liver instead of the fifth... That’s not on you, sir. Odds hadn’t been on my side lately.”

Never a truer word, but in these cases, chances were reluctant to improve. Johan kept his silence.

“If you think I can survive it, sir, despite other medical opinions,” Eliot said looking at him with that strange serenity he always displayed when hearing bad news, “I’m willing to go forward.” He nodded. “I can take it.”

“We must consider the fact that your liver and kidneys might not manage the toxicity.”

“No offense, sir, it can’t be worse than the last twenty days.” Eliot stopped, with a tired sigh. By the way his eyes danced, he was making his own calculations. His voice was slow and determined when he repeated: “I can take it.”

Johan saw that same calculation in the faces of many young ones, one 30 of January 1968. He had seen them solve the cold equation between their own lives and the greater good. For a second, Byrnum wondered what kind of greater good was in the mind of this veteran, working as a pub chef, with almost unlimited resources and a foster brother. Johan almost asked aloud, but Eliot disarmed him with his honest eyes and gruff politeness.

“I can take it, sir.”

Johan Byrnum pulled closer the visitor’s chair: “Let us talk about the grenade you are about to jump on, soldier.”

Eliot didn’t flinch at the metaphor and the good doctor wanted to have a hat to salute that courage.

“Slower, Parker,” Eliot grumbled with a tired voice. Each step made his wound hurt, but Eliot was working out his frustrations in the limited way he could and he didn’t want to stop.

Nothing was going according to plan. Dr. Byrnum was willing to clear Eliot for a modified chemotherapy run, but Dr. Robertson refused to agree until Eliot’s body behave as it should. The bout of hyperthermia had damaged the fibers of his muscles—back and shoulders, mainly; just those he hardly ever use—and his kidneys had been working overtime to clear the mess. During that last week, Eliot finally understood the old saying about racehorses.

“I think you had had enough, man,” Hardison said, holding Eliot’s right while standing side next to the door of his room. This was their eighth lap around the corridor and the parade amused the cadets. “Like Jesus, Doctor said ‘walk’, no ‘kill yourself trying’.”

“Another lap,” Eliot demanded, trying to take another step forward but neither Parker or Hardison
moved and he had not enough strength to drag them on.

“You’ve heard the man,” Parker said, holding Eliot by the hip, over keeping her hands as far as possible from his central line. “You need a bit of rest and maybe some shut-eye.”

“Let’s do another lap,” Eliot insisted but, by the look on their faces, he knew it was a tough room. He played his last card: “I need to work up an appetite.”

The word ‘appetite’ worked like a charm: Hardison and Parker exchanged a worried look and fixed their grip around Eliot.

“Just one more,” Parker agreed gripping him by the waist. “Then, you’ll rest for a while.”

Eliot wanted to tell Parker to help him with his back because his legs were perfectly serviceable and having low support in one side and high support on the other side was tiresome, but beggars can’t be choosers.

“I’ll even play nice, Parker,” Eliot promised, leaning on Parker to compensate for the lack of balance.

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Mikel Dayan, dressed in polished civvies, interrupted Eliot Spencer’s boredom the day before his first chemotherapy session. Never a distraction was more appreciated than that dangerous woman crossing his hospital room in miniskirt and high heels.

“Shalom aleichem, Dayan,” Eliot greeted in Hebrew from the comfy chair in a corner of his room, trying to keep his face straight. Dayan came to say her goodbyes. The way her steps carried her to him speak volumes.

“Aleichem shalom, Eliot,” she replied in the same language, rummaging her bag, “despite your best efforts to wreck all my hard work.”

“Nu, you have heard.” Eliot always found amusing her tic with the bag. Dayan had the same use for a lady purse than he. “You don’t approve.”

“Nu, what’s my approbation to you, kuss ima shel’cha?”

Eliot made himself comfortable while she finished sorting herself. If he had earned an earful, he wanted to have it. Mikel finally found the object she was fetching and put it in the table his chair. Eliot wondered how come she could miss that large tea tin can in her purse. The big, red W and the Hebrew letters informed him she had carried it all the way from Israel.

“You are going to need it.” Dayan hung her bag from her shoulder again. “You can thank me later.”

“I can thank you right now.”

“You can’t appreciate my gift right now.”

Eliot raised his eyebrow, conceding that she might have a point. He didn’t ask why did she carry a tin of lemon and ginger tea half a world across, the same way he didn’t ask why she has stayed beyond contract or he won’t ask who was her casualty in this war. The base of wisdom is to know when to open—or close—your mouth.
“Going against doctor’s advice won’t make you heal faster, Momhuirnín,” Mikel said with rebuking tone. She rested her high heeled foot between Eliot’s parted legs. “There is no need to make it more taxing than it should be.”

“Time doesn’t wait.” Eliot didn’t flinch at that menacing footwear; the lack of underwear was a mighty distraction.

“I won’t stay to see you go through the meat grinder,” Mikel crossed her arms over her hiked knee. She was looking into Eliot’s eyes, smiling. “I still harbor some respect for you.”

Eliot chuckled and Mikel’s smile grew wider. They were both thinking the same night and the same handcuffs: Will you still respect me in the morning, Dayan? They had a lot of fun that night; by the end of it, Eliot didn’t need to ask if Mikel Dayan knew his Fenian friend: It depends on how well you take it. The dawn light made obvious that the same merciless crucible forged them.

“Thank you for being my shield.” Eliot really meant it.

“I’ve got a dollar from your friend,” Dayan said, bopping Eliot’s nose. Eliot smiled at the silly touch. “I still don’t know how to spend it.”

“You’ll never need to give me one,” Eliot promised, leaning forward. “All you have to do is ask.”

Dayan let her fingers run through Eliot’s sweaty nape and kissed him. Eliot replied, keeping his hands to himself. For a moment their hearts beat in perfect synchrony. It was long, it was intimate, it was impersonal, and that last part made the whole caress better for both.


“HaShem between us and all harm, Spencer.”

Eliot huffed and smiled when she turned around to leave, wondering if two swords made by the same bladesmith vibrate in the same frequency when you put one next to the other.

------------

“No, Eliot,” Sophie said raising from the chair as soon as she noticed Eliot tried to get down the bed again. “Go back!”

Eliot darted her an outraged look. This time he had almost put his feet on the floor before she noticed. The chemotherapy bags danced in their pole. Nurses, doctors, and the basic human sense of logic forbade aimless strolls through the hall while having chemotherapy in certain terms. Sophie endorsed the prohibition with all her heart.

“I’m bored out of my mind!” Eliot complained, his legs still hanging from the side of the bed.

“So, I have been informed,” Sophie told blocking him and signaling him to lie down. “Multiple times, if I recall correctly.”

Eliot returned to his proper place at the center of the bed in a sullen mood. Sophie had burned all topics of conversation in the first two hours and she had nothing else to say to him. Hardison had sent Eliot a tablet; Parker, a book. Even Nate had offered to play some hands of gin or poker but Eliot was not brutally interested in anything else but in this single impossible idea: to stretch his legs.

“Sixty-two,” Eliot mumbled, looking at the ceiling.
“The number of times you’ve tried to get out of bed?” Sophie replied, faking the make an estimate. “You are off by two dozen at least. Sorry.”

“The number of drops the little bag of yellow liquid let out each minute into the drip camera,” Eliot explained with a deep breath. “That means some nurse will come with another syringe right…”

Sophie jumped when someone rapped the door. Those crepe shoes really kill all sound around them. A happy nurse in scrubs printed with cats entered the room carrying a tray covered with a sterile field.

“...now.” Eliot sat in bed with slouched shoulders, and looked at the nurse: “Bored, yes, no, no, no, and yes: I feel a bit tired,” Eliot sighed, “and very bored.”

“Excuse me,” the nurse didn’t lose her smile while she pulled the overbed table closer, “What was that?”

“The answer to your questions: How are we? Are you feeling comfortable? Any discomfort or pressure in the chest? Do you feel nauseous? Do you feel dizzy? Any change after the last injection?”

“Eliot!” Sophie slapped Eliot in the bicep.

“Ow!” Eliot flinched and covered his arm. “I was shot there!”

“Madame, if you please,” the nurse said opening the non-sterile package over the back of the sterile field. “I have other patients…”

“Of course,” Sophie took a couple of step backs mouthing ‘behave’ to Eliot.

Eliot made an exasperated movement to ask if he was to blame when nurses ask the same questions every time. The nurse as getting ready to add other doses to the cocktail. This time, clear liquid filled the syringe.

“I wouldn’t worry about boredom,” the nurse said uncapping Eliot’s central line’s the idle lumen. Her hands already on sterile gloves. “Most of my patients say this one gets them drowsy enough to sleep.”

“Yes, please,” moaned Sophie from the visitor’s chair, resting her head in her fist.

Eliot laughed without a sound and rested his weight on top of the pillows. The nurse, slowly, let the new drug enter his system.


Oh, God, let me die already...

Eliot, curled in the fetal position, tried not to moan when a new wave of nausea assaulted him. By now, the only thing Eliot had to throw up was his own battered guts. Antiemetics were doing nothing. Parker, dark circles under her eyes, put her hand on his shoulder trying to be comforting.
“Breathe through it,” Parker encouraged him, rubbing his shoulder. “Deep breaths...”

She tried to be careful—Eliot was aware—, but the touch felt like a stab because his joints were tender. Painkillers were not working either...

Chemotherapy, on the other hand, was working perfectly. Eliot wasn’t sure if it was killing the right cells, but it was working.


*Hell can’t be worse than this...*

Even crying was painful...

-------------

“A groan and a more pronounced curve in Eliot’s fetal position replied to his invitation. There was no other way to sleep for Eliot since he finished his first chemotherapy session, and sleep was the only thing he wanted to do when he was not fighting nausea.

“You need to eat, bro,” Hardison insisted, trying to rouse him as gently as he could. “You are running on fumes, and drugs can only help you so far...”

Eliot had withdrawn into himself and refused to acknowledge the world around him. ‘Passive, yet uncooperative,’ said in his chart. Hardison thought the description was very fitting. There was a continual struggle between Eliot and the nurses because Eliot won’t sit to change his dressing or to take his meds. Most of them ended going through his central line because there was no way to make him swallow anything.

“No,” Eliot groaned, trying to tuck his chin in. It was the first word out of his mouth in two days.

“What do you mean by ‘no’?” Hardison felt his patience tested to the limit. “Snap out of it already, man! You don’t have any choice, Eliot. You need to eat, and drink, and move, or else all this pain had been for nothing.”

It was the wrong thing to say, Hardison noticed immediately by how still Eliot got at his words. The faint tide of his breathing was the only sign that betrayed there was still life in him. Hardison sighed and rubbed the back of his neck, ashamed of himself. They were all at the end of their frayed ropes and the first one in that particular line was Eliot.

“Sorry,” Hardison said after a while. “This whole mess is taking a hell of a toll on all of us.”

Eliot tightened his position again without any noise. His eyes were closed so tight that Hardison feared Eliot was in pain, but the goosebumps in his arms told a different story. Another spike of fever was on the way. Hardison picked up Parker’s blanket and wrapped it around Eliot to spare him the chills. It reeked of sweat and drugs, but the blanket comforted Eliot and that was the most important thing now.

“You have spoiled us, bro...”

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Nate waited by the closed doors when two nurses beat him to the buzz and entered Eliot’s room before him. Nate, looking awkwardly to the row of cadets in sand-colored uniforms standing at ease, assumed it won’t take long. Eliot was more compliant once the doctors found a way to curtail his nausea. Parker was with him at lunchtime and Eliot had made a feeble attempt to eat. A couple of spoonsful of cream of rice were not enough fuel, but they were a good start.

The cadets bothered Nate in the same way interesting troubles would. The criminal in Nate knew there was nothing to fear from them, but the civilian inside was not comfortable surrounded by all that discipline. His mind was still trying to find who had ordered this extended executive protection around Eliot who got his honorable discharge more than ten years ago. This government seldom cares for those in active service, let alone veterans.

All these considerations, Nate was aware, were his way to keep Eliot out of his mind. One nurse was enough to give him his drugs and he couldn’t figure out why they need the extra help or why were they taking so long...

“Sir? Are you Nate?” one young nurse opened the door. Her smile was a bit hesitant. “Eliot wants to talk to you.”

Nate acknowledged and looked around. None of those soldiers-in-training seemed to care. With a small movement of surprise, he turned to the room. Nurses were clearing all the dirty sheets and, by the look of it—freshly made bed, clean linens, soap floating on the air—, the reason of their time-consuming task was to get Eliot clean.

Eliot was sitting on the right side of the bed; he had crossed his ankles and his heels were resting on the frame. Nate noticed he was wearing pajama bottoms and the nurses also clipped his beard to a short stubble. Doctors had forbidden him to shave to avoid cuts and infection. Nate noticed Eliot’s short hair—still not used to see it that short—was wet.

“A much-needed scrubbing?” Nate asked by way of greeting.

“Uh?” Eliot snapped from his inner world with a short jerk. If Nate wouldn’t know better, he could bet Eliot was meditating.

“Eliot,” a nurse intervened, touching him lightly on the arm. “You promised me to put your robe on, remember?”

“In a moment,” Eliot looked a tad more alert; he even took the robe from the nurse’s hand. “I’m feeling hot.”

“But not so hot, right?”

Nate saw the little smile on Eliot’s lips as if he were saying: ‘I see what you did there’. Following her lead, Nate let his hand rest on Eliot’s knee.

“Eliot?”

“Nate.”

Every time Eliot had said Nate’s name in the past, he put a particular tone on it. This time, his name rang hollow in Eliot’s lips.

“What can I do for you?”

“I want to go…”
Eliot stopped and closed his eyes. His brow furrowed and he pressed his lips as if he were chasing the idea. There was an unspoken plea on those words. For a second, Nate saw the shadow of that young claustrophobic boy Eliot was so many years ago.

*Home*, Nate thought. *You want to go home, Eliot.*

“I want to get out,” Eliot started again, in his usual brisk tone this time, putting his arms inside the bathrobe. His movements were clumsy and he groaned when he pulled the fabric over his shoulders. “I’m not strong enough to be discharged. I need to walk. Would you help me walk along the corridor?”

“I think I can manage,” Nate offered Eliot his hand.

Eliot squeezed his shoulders with a grimace of pain and then extended his left arm over Nate’s shoulders. His shaking hand gripped Nate’s collar before getting off the bed. Nate felt the pull in his shirt when Eliot almost lost his balance. Nate tried to pull Eliot closer.

“It works better if you hold *me* instead of holding the fabric.”

Nate followed his cue and passed his arm under the bathrobe. Eliot’s pajamas were hanging way too low his hips. He didn’t look that thin on the bed, but on his feet, it was evident that Eliot went down at least three sizes in the last month.

Eliot tried to walk; the hubs of his catheter danced against his chest. Nate noticed they took every other staple in his surgical wound. Eliot was almost as pale as the Steri-Strips holding his skin together. Nate felt the bones moving under his hand.

“You need to walk with me, Nate.”

“Was there pain in your voice, Eliot?” Nate asked and he tasted the concern in his own voice, “if this whole walking business is hurting you, you should…”

“Walk with me!” Eliot almost shouted, trembling under his fingers.

Sophie had told him about Eliot and the way some ideas got stuck in his brain. He even talked about walking while he was drowsy with chemo. If Eliot wanted to take a stroll, no amount of pain or reason would stop him from pursuing it.

“Right one first?” Nate asked finally.

“Right one first.”

Nate realized why this action it was a two-person operation once they took the first step. Eliot was doing his best, but he was too weak to carry his own weight and without a makeweight, the movement pulled the muscles in his back. They limped to the door and Nate was about to throw the towel when the young sergeant approached.

“Maybe we are a better fit, sir.”

Without waiting for an answer, he slid his arm under Eliot’s right arm. Their heights were similar and Eliot sighed his relief.

“Callahan, relieve the civilian,” the cadet ordered. Nate could gauge his familiarity with issuing commands by the tone of his voice.
“Hey! Tommy Vance,” Eliot greeted, recognizing the cadet’s voice. He didn’t miss Nate by his side when another youngster replaced him. “How are the Captain and the Colonel?”

“Both in good health, Commander,” Tommy replied adjusting Eliot’s position in accordance to Callahan at the other side. “They are praying for yours, sir.”

“Tell them I said ‘Hi’,” Eliot said with perfect congeniality. He looked comfortable between those two young men.

“I will, sir.” Tommy Vance did a visual check with the other cadet. “Shall we take that walk, sir?”

Nate watched Eliot get a bit straighter between them and starting to walk. Both young men adjusted to his stride, in silence. They performed the task with the gravitas soldiers always provide to wounded veterans. Eliot walked with his eyes fixed on the wall in front of him, panting and sweating buckets. He was too focused that he didn’t make small talk. Eliot’s reserves didn’t last, but he plowed through with his usual stubbornness.

“Another lap, sir?” Vance asked when they finished the second lap.

Eliot shook his head. He was about to faint out of sheer exhaustion by the way his legs were shaking. Vance let another cadet take care of Eliot’s right side and send them to secure Eliot in his bed without a word.

“Thank you,” Nate said. It seemed appropriate. “It was kind of you.”

“It’s the least I could do for the other only man, besides the Colonel who has seen the Captain’s hoohah up, close and personal,” Vance explained with a sly smile.

Nate kept his silence. For what he could gather the Captain and the Colonel were this kid’s parents and, knowing Eliot, this story could be more convoluted than it sounded.

“The Captain was pinned by insurgent fire in Tora Bora when I had the brilliant idea of being born,” Tommy continued, looking at the way his men fuss over Eliot with martial precision. “The Colonel and his men had to HALO down to break the attack. The Captain said Commander Spencer broke through forty men to reach her and help me born, providing suppression fire all the time.”

Nate had to resist the urge to laugh aloud. That sounded just like Eliot Spencer.

“Captain details Commander Spencer smiled at her, tossed a grenade over his shoulder and said: ‘Ma’am, we’d be the cavalry. Don’t worry, I have a dash of experience in these matters.’ Captain was lucky, she reports, because I came into this world feet first, with seven months and was a firstborn.”

Tommy Vance interrupted his narration to look at the bed. Eliot was resting on his right, properly surrounded by pillows and covered in that green fleece blanket, he looked comfortable and probably was already asleep. The cadets were waiting in perfect parade rest. Their sergeant gave them the order to clear the room.

“When Coronel Vance reached our position, he was received with these words: ‘This boy was ready to hit the ground and run should you wasted more time coming here, slowpoke.’” Tommy said as the rest marched to their places in silence. “Without Commander Spencer’s opportune help, she and I would have rest in pieces in Afghanistan. I not only would help this man walk, sir, but I’m also ready to do so much more for Commander Spencer.”
With a brief nod, Sergeant Vance returned to his post. Nate had to suppress the urge to beg him to stay and tell him more. He had his marching orders and Nate had his. With slow steps, Nate reached the bed. Eliot was breathing easily, but he was awake.

“So, there is a hero under the criminal after all,” Nate said, his hand resting on the bed rail.

“I’ll tell you a secret if you promise never to tell it to that boy.”

“Scout honor,” Nate promised with two fingers on his forehead.

“Wrong number of fingers,” Eliot pointed out and Nate obliged. “That was the first and only baby I have delivered in my life. Up to that date, I had only delivered foals.”

Nate tucked the green fleece blanket around Eliot’s shoulders, trying not to laugh.

“Try to rest, Commander.”

“With all due respect, Nate,” Eliot groaned. This time, Nate noticed his name had meaning: “Fuck you…”

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The last walk Eliot took gave him a high fever and all the personnel got busy with their tests and drugs, annoying Eliot out of his mind. He hadn’t slept much in two days.

Parker considered the return of IV fluids and the catheter in his groin bad. Mealtime was a thousand times worse, yet, that was not the worst part. The last straw was the prohibition to leave the bed until Eliot put on a couple of pounds at least.

“Please,” she repeated with a tired voice. He could read Eliot’s rejection in the way the spoon trembled in his hand, “try to eat.”

Eliot groaned, put the spoon down and pushed the overbed table away. Parker sighed and pushing it back to its place.

“That’s not food,” Eliot said, trying to push away the overbed table again, Parker was holding it in place with ease.

Parker looked at the tray where a bowl of tomato cream soup, crackers, mixed fruit juice, and strawberry gelatin sat. It certainly looked like food. She could eat the whole tray—in fact, that gelatin looked pretty tempting—but Eliot needed each one of those calories.

“It is food,” Parker said, picking up a cracker. She could read the brand in its round surface and, in her opinion, there was nothing duller under the sun. A perfectly, inoffensive piece of bread. “It’s not Toby’s food or even Hardison’s food, but it’s edible. Try this…”

Eliot let go the table and let his shoulders slouch. Parker could see he was tired; his hair was not long enough to cover the dark circles under his eyes nor his creased brow. Parker took his hand and put that insipid cracker in.

“Try it,” Parker repeated as she forced his hand up, “I know you are hungry! You swallowed the first spoonful.”

Exhausted, Eliot let her guide the biscuit to his mouth. He bit half of it and chewed slowly. Parker was sure he would swallow it this time, but Eliot groaned again and spat the wet mass on the tray
with knotted brow and closed eyes. His hand was trembling when he wiped his mouth.

“Eliot?” Parker felt scared. If he couldn’t eat even an inoffensive cracker... “You couldn’t swallow? What is it?”

“It’s not food!”

“It’s a cracker!”

“Tastes like sawdust! I cook. I know...” Eliot insisted, but Parker could see the tears of frustration in his eyes. They had ground Eliot to the bone and he was too mentally and physically worn-out to make a better argument. “I know how food should taste like...It’s not food!”

Parker breathed slowly, feeling how her bottom lip trembled. Chemo affected his taste buds, as doctors warned them. Despite the side effects, Eliot needed to eat; another week without food would land him back into ICU.

“I have an idea,” Parker said after a moment of reflection.

“Am I going to hate it?” Eliot asked and, by the way his weight shifted in the bed, he was tired of hating ideas.

“Yes, but not more than I’m going to hate it,” Parker said with a heavy sigh. She went to the closet and brought out Eliot’s spare T-shirt. “Remember that story about the rats in Myanmar? Those rats who chewed your important papers and your backpack and the explosives you were supposed to set?”

“Those were good times...”

“I need you to be a rat now,” Parker used Eliot’s T-shirt as a makeshift blindfold. “Rats are survivors. Rats eat everything to survive. Do you want to get out of this hospital? You need to eat; it doesn’t matter if you don’t like it.”

“Like a rat.”

“Yes,” Parker sat in the bed, moving the table and the tray closer. “I’m going to put something in your mouth and you have to swallow it.”

“This is goosey...”

“This is a war, Eliot, and to get out, you need to be a rat.” Parker took a spoonful of soup. “Don’t taste it, just swallow it.”

Eliot opened his mouth and cringed when the liquid touched his tongue. Parker could see he was fighting the urge to spit.

“Just swallow it,” Parker repeated, patting Eliot’s hand.

Sophie told her long ago that Eliot obeyed almost any command if you just patted his hand the right way. The touch was brief, soft, non-threatening, and Eliot swallowed obediently, like a well-trained pet. Eliot would hate to know Parker could mess up with his head the way Sophie once did. It was a cheap shot, but it’ll keep Eliot alive. Parker found she could live with that.

“Good. Another...”
Nate sat down on Eliot’s bed, looking him carry the food from the tray to his mouth. His appetite had improved overnight and he was eating like a convict: arm around the plate and almost without chewing. Eliot’s table manners might not be the best, but at least he was getting food in. Hardison was on the visitor’s chair, updating his data.

“Hardison,” Nate called from the bed.

“Nate.”

“Any news?”

“I’m here, Nate,” Eliot grumbled. He was struggling to open the plastic cup in his tray. “You can ask me how my recovery is progressing.”

“Need help with that pudding cup, Eliot?” Nate asked instead.

Hardison let out a short bark of laughter, and Eliot grunted his frustration. Nate reckoned his identification of the object was way off base.

“It’s not pudding,” Hardison put his tablet aside and extended his hand. Eliot handed over the plastic cup with a short grunt.

“It’s the most infernal human creation,” Eliot grumbled, looking at the cup with hate in his eyes.

“In a cup,” Hardison agreed, opening the tab. “You need water for that.”

Nate looked at the meal replacement drink in Eliot’s tray, wondering why he hadn’t broken the tab on that drink to sip it between spoonsful as it was his habit.

“Nate, let’s find something to drink,” Hardison invited, putting his tablet out of Eliot’s reach. “Do you want anything else, or water is OK?”

“Apple juice,” Eliot answered, stirring the thick syrup with the expression of a man mixing explosives. It was golden brown and Nate noticed it was kind of gritty.

“Be right back. Don’t try to down that without something to drink.”

“I’m trying not to down it at all…”

Eliot’s annoyed monologue followed them to the door. Hardison was already looking for spare change in his pockets.

“It’s lactulose.”

“Hmm?” Nate made a polite sound. It was obvious Hardison tried to take him out of Eliot’s room to impart some information.

“Chemo had exacerbated Eliot’s hepatic encephalopathy,” Hardison continued, beelining straight to the soda machine next to the elevators. “He simply can’t clear the toxic buildup quick enough. His liver can’t process it all and it messes with his brain. Lactulose helps to sequester the ammonia and clear the fog…”

“So, it can be helped.”

“That’s the question,” Hardison put some coins in the machine. “Some patients make a total recovery; some patients have to take lactulose for the rest of their lives. There is a lot of ground in
between. Doctors had made pretty clear that Eliot shouldn’t expect to return to his old baseline.”

Hardison squatted down to retrieve a bottle of orange soda. Nate kept his silence by lack of a proper response.

“I hope Eliot recovers,” Hardison fed more coins into the machine. “Mostly because drinking lactulose upsets Eliot’s gut from one end to the other, and the alternative route hurts Eliot even worse. Brain fog upsets everything else…”

The dull thud of the plastic bottle against the plastic tray sounded far too loud for Nate.

“Eliot can’t be on the field while fogged.” Hardison picked up the apple juice and held it in his hands. “He gets confused easily.” Hardison sighed as he got up. “Eliot loses his grip, physically and mentally…”

“What does Parker say?” Nate was cautious to give advice. This was his family, but they are not his crew anymore.

“Parker is sure that Eliot will return to his former self once the doctors discharge him.”

“Tall order.”

“In any case,” Hardison held the two bottles in his hand, “we can care for him, but we need a plan, Nate, and you are the man with the plans.”

“What do you need a plan for?”

“If Eliot’s recovery is not complete—if he’s not functional at the end of this ordeal—, he would be in danger for the rest of his life. The thirty-four separate attempts of homicide would be child’s play…” Hardison sighed. “We need a plan to keep Eliot safe.”

“Eliot alone or…?” Nate caught himself, smiled and shook his head. “Stupid question.”

“Anything to drink, Nate?”

“I’ll steal a cup of coffee from the nurses.”

“Suit yourself.” Hardison raised the bottles as a salute and took a step in the general direction of Eliot’s room.

“Hardison.” Nate waited for Hardison to turn around with a questioning look. “What’s the story with the nutritional drinks?”

“Beats me. They make Eliot violently ill—as in coming-through-the-nose kind of sick—, but the nutrition team won’t buy it. They keep sending them, Eliot keeps leaving them in the tray.” Hardison shook the bottles. “That’s why I must deliver some empty calories. It’s better than him losing his whole meal if you ask me.”

Nate nodded in acknowledgment, but his mind was already wandering. He had heard of another criminal who disliked the meal replacement drinks but placing the name and place was an interesting challenge for another day.

This kind of information habitually sneaks on you when you stop looking for it.
Doctors finally let Eliot go home two months and a half after they took him to the OR. Dr. Robertson informed them during his regular visit and Hardison knew Eliot couldn’t wait to get away, and he also knew that, after hearing the news, Eliot wouldn’t pay a quarter of attention when Dr. Robertson tried to educate him about the importance of being compliant with the care regimen. Hardison, on the other hand, took way too many notes.

Doctors had also made the mistake of giving him a date and Eliot pestered the nurses from the moment he opened his eyes that morning until the discharge papers arrived. Nate, wisely, took Eliot’s personal effects and excused himself early to go and prepare the house. Eliot was not a factor he could manage and that brought stress to a situation neither of them could help. Sophie stayed behind, sitting guard next to Eliot’s bed while Parker sorted things out with the administration. Getting out of a hospital was way harder when you do it the right way.

But they were on the way out by four in the afternoon. Eliot objected to the wheelchair, but this time the nurses put their collective foot down and they said they won’t break directives, not even for a total boyfriend like Eliot. Parker looked at Hardison with a quizzical expression. By now, they both know a ‘boyfriend’ was the less pain-in-the-ass patient on the floor and, if Eliot fit the bill, they dreaded to know what those women had seen on that floor.

Hardison had made a head start to get Lucille. A nurse wheeled Eliot out of the hospital, amused by the double security barrier of cadets preceding and following Eliot. Sophie and Parker were behind the wheelchair, ready to control Eliot’s temper in case it flared up.

They waited briefly under the awning until Lucille rolled to the curb. Sun was warm and Eliot let out a weary sigh under its glare before taking his first step out of the hospital.

“We are going home,” Parker said, her right hand on Eliot’s small back, her left one on his arm. They have trained them on how to help Eliot’s hesitant stride.

“At last,” Eliot replied with a small grumble. There was a ghost of a smile on his face.

Sophie, high heels and all, moved quickly to get Lucille’s door.

“Atten-hun!” Tommy Vance called when Eliot put his hand on the door.

“Wait,” Eliot asked Parker, who was in a hurry to get him inside.

Eliot turned around to look at the cadets. Tommy Vance nodded politely before issuing a ‘Present arms’ to his company, even when they were unarmed. Fourteen young men rendered Eliot a perfect timed salute. Parker and Sophie watched Eliot gulp and compose his expression before returning the salute at the best his weak arm allowed. ‘Order arms’ was called and the cadets disbanded in two groups.

“That was nice,” Eliot let his head hang for a moment. “I don’t deserve it, but it was nice.”

“They think you do,” Parker replied because it meant something to Eliot and that pleased her.

“We are good to go now.”

Eliot got inside Lucille, riding shotgun. Parker and Sophie took the spacious back and Hardison started their way out of the parking lot. They stopped by the barrier to use the courtesy pass he stole from the OSHU database. Eliot put his hand on Hardison’s arm to signal him to wait.

“They are training,” Eliot mumbled as two black vans, beautiful Lucille’s twins, stopped to each side to pay the parking. One of the drivers waved goodbye and Eliot acknowledged with a nod.
The vans get out the parking lot and split in different directions to mislead anyone trying to follow them. Eliot rested his weight against the headpiece with a tired sigh.

“By the way,” Parker said toying with Eliot’s hair from behind his seat. “Quinn wanted to say goodbye, but you were sleeping…”

“It’s OK,” Eliot mumbled, leaning on her caress. “Only the mountains never meet.”

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Nate waited patiently as Hardison and Parker helped Eliot to climb the short stairs. Each step was difficult, the whole process was painful. Eliot tried to be brave, but he couldn’t swallow all the winces and moans, some of them showed in his face, some escaped through his clenched teeth. Nate looked at Eliot again, he was so thin that Nate thought he could carry his friend in arms, like a sick child.

Sophie slid her hand inside Nate and pressed his fingers to distract him from the scene.

“Eliot needs to learn how to use his muscles again,” Sophie said, resting her cheek on Nate’s arm. “He will be alright as soon as he hit the bed. His doctor has said he still will need bed rest for another week.”

“I rather have him yelling at me, Sophie.”

This last month they had seen Jericho walls tumbling down in slow motion; Eliot Spencer downed by the most treacherous, unworthy foe. Nate had witnessed the battle in other times, things were bound to get worse before they could see an improvement. Nate’s reserves were almost depleted; he didn’t have the heart to think about Eliot’s.

“We can’t have all in this life,” Sophie approached the issue philosophically. “Eliot is almost safe. That must count for something.”

“Not as much as I like.”

Sophie leaned on his stiff body. They both knew so well that health was one of the few things outside of Nate’s supernatural ability to bend events to his will.

“It’s not about what we like, it’s about what we can get,” Sophie said, pushing Nate toward the stairs. Her left hand rested on Nate’s small back, her right, touching his arm. “Let’s give Eliot our love before we have to go.”

“We should stay. Help them take care of Eliot…”

“We are not trained. We are not vaccinated,” Sophie related. They were climbing the stairs slowly. “We can’t be vaccinated now. In short, we will be on their way…”

“Please, wait a bit…” Parker asked, running to the landing with a startled expression.

“…still, bro,” Hardison was saying in hushed tones. The waft of alcohol tickled Nate’s nose. “I’ll be as quick as I can. Promise…”

“…Eliot is getting his meds.”

“This house has great acoustics,” Nate commented dryly.

“I know… I know, you don’t like painkillers, but the shot will let you rest sooner… There. We are
“That’s why I had heard you come.”

“Sounds like we can go now,” Nate passed by Parker, leaving Sophie behind.

Sophie was whispering something to Parker by the time Nate crossed the doorway. Hardison was helping Eliot out of his oversized hoodie. Nate caught a glimpse of those sharp rosary beads on Eliot’s back and his heart ached again.

“Nate,” Hardison pointed at the hand rub dispenser by the door. “Please…”

Nate nodded and abided by the rules. Eliot’s system couldn’t stand an infection and Nate didn’t want to be guilty of sending Eliot to the hospital again. Hardison and Eliot were cuddling in the middle of the bed by the time Nate finished. Nate sat next to their extended legs.

“Make the note,” Eliot grumbled, resting his weight against Hardison.

“OK.” Hardison typed in his tablet. “‘Tell Nurse painkillers are too strong.’ Happy?”

“Almost.” Eliot looked very sleepy, probably his painkillers were off due to his weight.

“Parker will bring you a drink shortly,” Sophie announced as she rubbed her hands with alcohol. “Nice room. Love the French doors.”

“Better than the hospital’s,” Eliot agreed with heavy eyelids. “Are you going back to Europe?”

“We are going to Asia this time.”

“Try the *khao soi* for me…”

Eliot stopped, gulped and looked at Nate. Eliot was exhausted, but his gaze was intense; Nate could barely stand it.

“Thank you for being here,” Eliot mumbled and extended his hand to Nate.

“Don’t worry about it,” Nate said, shaking that hand, knowing very well Eliot meant it.

Nate’s eyes drifted to Hardison who gave him a negative sign. They haven’t told Eliot Nate was the one in the room when he coded, just as Nate had asked them. Eliot didn’t need that information at this moment.

“The most important thing now is to get back on your feet,” Nate looked at Eliot, feeling a rush of paternal compassion for that hardened man again. It took Nate Ford by surprise to have those feelings for anyone but Sam. “Parker and Hardison need you to recover soon.”

“I’m trying…”

“Don’t try too hard,” Sophie advised, brushing Eliot’s hair from his eyes. “Promise me you’ll have a bit of compassion for your poor body.”

Parker came running before Eliot could reply, in her hand and a small box labeled apple juice. She climbed up the bed and almost stabbed Eliot in the face with the straw in her hurry. Eliot took it from her and sipped the drink with greed. Chemotherapy had left his throat and mouth parched. Parker smiled, put a pillow next to Eliot’s leg and cuddled against him. Nate looked at them: his kids were exhausted, but content.
“Promise…” Eliot whispered and fell asleep, his head resting against Hardison and, still holding the box, his hand next to a pretty drowsy Parker.

“Give me a minute, I'll show you out.”

“Stay where you are,” Nate said, smiling faintly. “We can find the door just fine, Hardison. It's not a mystery.”

Sophie held Nate’s hand, enjoying their little family together again. Neither of them had any hurry to go away.

Chapter End Notes

More fucked up than usual
The chapter summary is as follows:

Eliot, Parker, and Hardison struggle with the realities of recovery after a hospital stay, drugs side effects, and chemotherapy. Also, Eliot gets a visitor.

The chapter notes state:

There are no floating boxes in this one, but we have a kiss!

There are also lines from Toby Keith's song:

Oh, he ain't worth missing
Oh, we should be kissing
Stop all this foolish wishing
He ain't worth missing

-Poby Keith

Parker looked at the ceiling, the house was quiet.

Hardison was sleeping without a sound by her side. Parker blinked and extended her fingers, then she did the same with her toes. She tried to crack her neck, without success. She was tired, they were all exhausted.

She sat on the bed, hugging her legs. These last days hadn’t been better than the hospital. Eliot hadn’t returned yet. Parker felt the tears in her eyes; she had been brave and hadn’t cried in the hospital, not even when Eliot almost passed away in ICU. The thought made her shudder.

“It can’t get worse than this…,” she mumbled, lowered her head to her knees and let the tears fall.

It made her good. Parker found her nose a bit runny and her face was sticky, but it was a good cry down and she must have done it in relative silence because Hardison didn’t stir at all. Parker got up and went to the hallway bathroom to wash her face in the dark. Parker never needed light anyways.

She looked at the faint beam of light on the corridor. Eliot’s light was on.

“Eliot?” Parker called, pushing the door. Maybe it was nothing, maybe he was feeling unwell, Parker had to check on him.

“Uh?” Eliot sat cross-legged on the bed, shirtless and with the blankets bunched in his lap. He sounded sleepy. After a moment he turned his eyes to Parker and his whole face changed. He had closed the door, leaving her out. “Parker…”

“Everything alright?” Parker entered the room. An angry Eliot was better than an asleep Hardison right now.

“I woke up.” Eliot messed up his hair as if he was trying to rouse himself. His hair wasn’t growing...
as fast as it used to grow. “Out of nothing. Too much sleep during the day, I suppose.”

“Anything in particular?”

“Itch…”

“Itch?”

“My back it’s itchy, Parker.”

Eliot sounded annoyed and a bit pained. Itchy skin had been recurrent trouble because his liver was damaged and chemo only made it worse. The Harpy—Dr. Byrnum’s nurse, now Eliot’s main Oncology nurse—had explained everything so well, including Eliot’s limited arm range. In Parker’s eyes, nurses were all so helpful and nice while caring for Eliot. Eliot hated them all for some reason.

Without thinking so much, Parker took Eliot’s lotion from the nightstand and climbed to the bed.

“This should help.” She sat behind him, almost over the pillows.

She put a generous dollop on Eliot’s left shoulder—no way in hell she would touch the shoulder with the plastic thing poking out—and Eliot hissed almost immediately.

“It stings!”

“Of course, it stings! Your skin is too dry.” Parker said, spreading the lotion over Eliot’s shoulder blades. “You are not drinking enough…”

“Can you spare me the lecture?” Eliot didn’t sound angry, just tired. “I rather have my itch than another lecture.”

Parker nodded and kept covering Eliot’s back with the lotion. She tried to be quick—Eliot was touch-adverse and Parker knew it—and, but the sensation of his scars and his muscles under her fingers got a bit pleasant after a while, and Eliot was relaxing under her hands.

“Sorry…” Eliot mumbled, letting his head hang. “I deserve this, but you shouldn’t be…”

“It’s OK…” Parker replied, rubbing Eliot between his shoulder blades. She could feel Eliot was fighting the drug-induced mood swing. “I kind of like this.”

“No, in the hospital…” Eliot started, but Parker can feel him trembling even worse. “I didn’t mean t-to s-s-scar-”

Parker wrapped him in her arms and forced him to lean against her. She didn’t really understand why Eliot was apologizing for almost dying, but he was trying too hard not to cry and Parker was afraid he would damage something already tender. Like his liver.

“I’m sad too,” Parker said, feeling the waterworks starting again. “Do you mind if I cry with you?”

Eliot shook his head and turned to the right; his arm was supporting most of his weight. Parker moved a pillow for him to hide his face into and she played with his hair. Her hand met his under the pillow and Eliot gripped her fingers. They both needed a good crying bout.

Parker felt like a sister again, not fake-sister or a brother’s girlfriend for a con. In the hospital, Eliot cried because he felt awful; now, he’s having a bawling fit with her. This time they were weeping together and it felt good. The reason didn’t matter. Eliot had let her in...
“We will survive this together,” Parker promised, running her fingers through Eliot’s fine hair.

It couldn’t last. Eliot, exhausted, sobbed dryly in his sleep after five minutes; Parker rested sleepily against his back, feeling her right leg trapped under Eliot’s body. She could wiggle free, but that implied the risk of getting him awake—and upset—again. The matter demanded careful consideration and her reserves didn’t allow her that luxury.

“Hey, babe,” Hardison called while she was still debating if she should let Eliot sleep alone.

“If you wake him up, I’ll kill you,” Parker warned in a hissy whisper, covering Eliot’s free ear.

“I won’t,” Hardison replied in a low voice. “At least not for three hours, you know how much he hates to be shot in his sleep.” Hardison stopped to close the lotion and pick up Eliot’s green fleece blanket from the chair. “Besides, he needs to rest before his next chemo session.” Alec tossed the blanket over them. “Keep him warm, Parker, and try to catch some Z’s.”

Parker smiled when Hardison kissed her goodnight and turned off the side lamp.

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Alec Hardison was not a man who liked to ask for help. As far as he was concerned, he was enough for any task. Today he found this whole caring-for-Eliot operation was taking its toll on things way beyond his ken. He had regrouped to the pub to sort out his options.

The four cameras in the house became alive on the huge screen. That was Parker’s idea, but that didn’t make a lot of sense if she refused to leave the house. Eliot probably would be more comfortable knowing there were cameras pointing at him 24/7 than with Parker peeking her head inside his room every five minutes, and those five minutes was an improvement.

Camera one showed Eliot, cross-legged on the bed, munching ice chips apathetically and toying with that foreign DVD. He had lost his appetite again and his caloric intake had plummeted to Mariana trench depths. Not even empty calories could tempt him.

Despite the ice chips, Eliot wasn’t even getting enough water in because his throat was raw and everything tasted off. Dr. Robertson was thinking of putting Eliot’s central line to good use if there was no perceptible change soon. Hardison couldn’t agree more, if that were the case, except for Parker. Parker, who still looked at said central line like it was an IED strapped to Eliot’s chest and got anxious every time Nurse came to check on Eliot. Hardison doubted she could stand another day with Eliot hooked to an IV pump for hours without end and the next chemo session was upon them.

Hardison took out his phone and speed-dialed a number he promised Parker he would never use. He exchanged the first pleasantries without paying them too much attention. His eyes were watching Camera three. Parker was in the kitchen attempting to encourage Eliot’s appetite again. Apparently, she found a site about survivors and high protein smoothies and she had set her mind in doing them for Eliot.

Hardison was not sure Parker had used a blender before, but he applauded her enthusiasm. She had notes on the six major Portland’s Farmers Markets and, except for the first time when she tried to feed Eliot raw pecans, she was fussy with Eliot’s diet to a fault. Hardison gulped down her first failed experiment and it was freakishly delicious.

“Archie, sir,” Hardison whispered, holding his forehead with one hand and the phone with the other, “I’m asking you this for Parker’s sake. She needs to be away by the end of the week.”
Archie was making excuses and Hardison had grunted as if he had been acknowledging them but his attention was on Parker. Three spoons of peanut butter, bananas, and beets? A risky move, considering Eliot hates beets. Hardison prayed Eliot’s taste was so off he misses the mark for the first time in his life.

“No, sir, Eliot is not dealing well with all this madness,” Hardison almost missed his cue because Parker topped her creation with a huge scoop of vanilla ice cream. “No, I’m not worried: he will bounce back like a rubber ball. That’s what he does.”

Parker disappeared from Camera three and sauntered to Camera two, carrying the mason jar like it was a Fabergé egg. *Don’t get your hopes high, baby…* Hardison pleaded. *You know in his best days Eliot could put the rat of that movie to shame.*

“I’m not sure about Parker.”

Camera one, Parker intruding Eliot’s solitude for the twentieth time in the last hour. Eliot facepalmed when Parker entered his room, but he became a deer caught in the headlights when he noticed the mason jar. Hardison turned on the audio in the lowest setting.

“Very thoughtful, but no.” Eliot tried to be polite and Hardison was grateful. In these last days, politeness was a rare commodity. “Thank you.”

“Feel with me, Eliot,” Parker invited and, by the way Eliot’s shoulders slumped, that meant something for them.

Archie was ranting and vagueing in his ear about how peerless and resilient Parker really was.

“Ooo-K,” Eliot stirred the dense liquid with the stainless-steel straw and the expression of a man mixing a bomb. He stopped and exhaled, before raising the mason jar. “To your art, Parker.”

“Just drink it!” Parker exclaimed cheerfully. Her fingers danced over his hand.

“Parker’s not a rubber ball, and you know it,” Hardison argued with that stubborn senior thief with his eyes in Camera one. Eliot’s face couldn’t hide that he noticed the beets. “No, sir, Parker is not a peerless pearl, it’s a snow globe! You know that a snow globe, once it hits the ground, can’t be put together again…”

Camera one, Eliot forced down the gulp of liquid with the expression of a man swallowing rusty nails. Parker, starting to doubt her art, extended her hand in case Eliot felt ill.

“It’s…” Parker’s voice raised a whole octave. She was nervous.

“It’s cold, Parker!” Eliot grumbled, putting the mason jar in the night table. “It’s fucking cold!”

“Thank you, sir,” Hardison said pumping his fists in triumph, “I’m in your debt, good sir.”

“I’m going to let it melt a little,” Eliot said, resting his weight in the pillows. He sounded annoyed, but not repulsed as he rubbed his surgical scar with a shaky hand.

“I’ll be in the kitchen,” Parker said, cheerful again, “shout if you need something.”

Hardison ended his call in time to see Eliot reaching for the mason jar.

“I hate beets…” He took another sip and shook his head.

Hardison killed the audio, closed his eyes and hoped for the success of his plan.
The man in the mirror looked like he had gone behind the enemy lines for months. He looked at the brink of exhaustion, resting his weight on the bathroom sink. That’s not me... Eliot thought, holding back the tears. That gaunt, bearded face couldn’t be Eliot’s, but there was no arguing with that face in the mirror. Meds time was approaching fast, he better started his slow way to bed on trembling legs.

Eliot had survived the perfect storm of painkiller constipation and chemo-induced mucositis without anyone to witness his pain, and he counted himself lucky for it. Parker was making a ruckus with the pantry door. She was arguing about a snack. Hardison was with her in the kitchen. Eliot stopped to catch his breath but restarted his way again when he heard Hardison’s steps on the stairs.

“Was it as horrible as you expected?” Hardison asked entering the room with a tray. Eliot could see a tall glass of apple juice next to the drugs.

Eliot, next to the bed, groaned. The fact he had to report such matters still vexed him, but once you closest friends—and a bunch of nurses—had seen you become a crying ball of pain, there was no much wiggle room for modesty.

“It was worse than passing pieces of broken glass,” Eliot said, sitting gingerly at the edge of the mattress. That was the most harrowing experience—except for Sophie’s performances—he could recall.

Hardison huffed and took the thermometer from the tray.

“Like you ever had passed broken glass... Open wide.”

So, the ritual began... Eliot held the thermometer with pursed lips. If he had a modicum of comfort as an outpatient was because he paid for it with constant surveillance. Hardison was waiting for the alert with crossed arms. That was a very distinctive stance: it meant there were no injections to prepare. Eliot counted it as a good day.

“98.2,” Hardison read and returned the instrument to its place.

“Are you sure?” Eliot felt slightly warmer than the reading.

“Excuse me!? I know how to read these doohickeys, especially those with a quartz screen that displays the numbers. Do you want me to take it rectally? Just to be sure?”

Eliot huffed and turned his head away from Hardison. Hardison was joking—Eliot knew it was his friend’s way to deal with frustration—, but those very words drove the fear of God into Eliot’s aching flesh. No, thank you, Eliot said to himself, minding his Southern manners.

“Here, swallow these.” Hardison put a whiskey shot glass in his hand. The contents were harder to swallow than whiskey and they came in several colors too. “And don’t go crunching them between your teeth.”

“I know how to take tablets, Hardison!” Eliot replied annoyed, fishing out a couple of capsules. Those were always harder to swallow with a swollen throat.

The shot glass was Parker’s idea and, silly as it sounds, its weight and shape in Eliot’s hand brought a measure of comfort. He chased the other four with a splash of apple juice and made a small, confused sound when he gulped the liquid.
“What is it?” Hardison asked, looking for signs of discomfort.

“How apple juice,” Eliot looked at the glass. “Not as bitter as before.”

“Parker will be glad,” Hardison took the glasses from Eliot’s hands. “She hauled four gallons of the stuff from the Farmers Market.”

“More,” Eliot muttered, still trying to sort out his new discovery, “please.”

“After these,” Hardison said, pointing at a couple of green packages of strong anti-emetics. “Do you want me to take care or are you feeling independent enough to do it?”

Hardison’s question amounted to: pick your poison. The pain was unavoidable in that choice. *I hate chemo…* Eliot thought, gulping and blinking while trying to steel himself. The gulp was almost dry… *I spent seventy-two hours in North Korea once. Most of them in a stress position or another. That part wasn’t so bad. The worst part was that North Korea guards bore easily, and they could be really creative with their methods to cause pain with bamboo sticks without leaving any external marks. I still wake up in the middle of the night with goosebumps, holding back a scream. I rather be in their hands right now. It hurts. I think I might be bleeding… please, if we can avoid poking my aching…* and the blink, too slow. Eliot saw Hardison’s face and, for a second, Eliot was sure he had spoken aloud.

“Eliot! Eliot, you are trembling,” Hardison held him by the shoulders and bending his knees to look him in the eyes. “Are you really that sore?”

Eliot nodded slowly with his jaw squared and his shoulders throbbing with tension. He shouldn’t be cowering, but ‘sore’ was an understatement; it was a birthday candle to the massive forest fire of hurt he really felt below his belly button. Hardison cursed under his breath and squatted down, touching Eliot’s shoulder with care.

“Sorry, bro, I need to learn to hear you better,” he sounded apologetic and a bit rueful before he reached for a hug. “You need to take them, though. Those will help you with your chemo’s side effects. Do you think you can manage to take them before dinner?”

“I’ll try,” Eliot promised, hugging Hardison back. It was a good hug, comforting, but he needed a heavy hitter for this job. “Where is Parker? I can’t hear her.”

“Eliot, she went to help Archie Leach last night, don’t you remember?”

“But…” *I’d heard her rummaging the pantry. You were talking to her in the kitchen. She was here!* Eliot, she cuddled with you and Bunny last night before her flight. “Hardison insisted.

“No, she didn’t.” Eliot was sure he hadn’t seen Parker’s stuffed toy in months.

“Hey, it’s OK…” Hardison whispered, trying to hold Eliot closer.

“It ain’t,” Eliot felt a growing emptiness in his belly, his other problems forgotten now. *Am I losing my mind too? I’ve already lost so much, please, don’t tell me I’m also losing my grip on reality… He was shaking so badly he felt his teeth hitting. “It really ain’t…”*

“It’s temporal, then. Chemo is messing…”

The kitchen door open, the code to disable the alarm sounded with its sequence of beeps. Eliot waited, feeling his chest tighten in apprehension. His heart took a double tumble against his
ribs. The pretty distinctive sound of Nurse’s shoes on the kitchen linoleum brought chills to Eliot’s spine.

“What is she doing here?”

“Tomorrow it’s C-day. She needs to give you your supplementary shots and to take some blood sa…”

“She was here yesterday” She really was. She took two vials of blood. It can’t be almost C-day. She was here yesterday. I know because she asked where did I want the shot and laughed when I replied I didn’t want it at all. She was here yesterday. She drove the needle too deep in my leg. My leg is still hurting. She left me bruised and I still have the bruises. She was here yesterday!

“Give us a moment!” Hardison shouted to stop the nurse from coming upstairs. With a shaky hand, Hardison tried to brush away Eliot’s tears. “Eliot… Chill, bro, you are having a panic attack.” Hardison held Eliot close, but that didn't help that feeling of utter helplessness. “It will get better. I got you, I got you…”

_God, let me die now._

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“What happened after the sweets?” Eliot asked in dream-like voice for the third time. The strap of his black tank top slipped over his shoulder. The fresh white dressing near his collarbone looked almost obscene to Hardison.

“Don’t worry,” Hardison, joining the action to the word, went back forty minutes, almost to the beginning of the episode. “I’ll rewind it.”

They have been cuddling in bed for three hours now and they haven’t managed to finish one episode of _Muhteşem Yüzyıl_, whatever that could mean in its original language. Apparently, one of Eliot’s army friends had seen it and sent it to him to waste away his time in bed. Alec was not sure that friend really knew Eliot never watched a screen for entertainment, but that soap opera had helped Eliot to stay put this time.

Brain fog Alec could deal with, but he couldn’t stand to see Eliot as miserable as he was a month ago. The first course left him so wretched that it took him three days to come back to his feet. Since the first course was too rough for him, now they were taking their time to get all the drugs in. The cocktail dripped so slowly that Alec barely noticed each drop falling. At least this time, Eliot was resting comfortably in his bed, away from prying eyes.

Alec turned his attention to his side. Eliot tried to raise the juice box from the bed and Hardison felt his heart cringe at the sight. Eliot’s fingers slipped over the glossy surface and lost his grip. Alec helped him out to take a sip of apple juice. Eliot’s cracked lips closed around the plastic straw and he barely managed a couple of gulps before rejecting the drink.

“Bitter,” Eliot managed to say before resting his hot forehead against Hardison’s shoulder.

“OK. Do you want ice chips?”

“No. I want to know what happened after the sweets…”

“All right…” Alec let his head rest against Eliot’s head.

Eliot mumbled something in Arabic and Alec hugged him closer, trying not to disturb the central
line in his friend’s right shoulder. By now, Hardison was expecting Eliot’s insightful comment in whichever language came to his mind.

With a distracted hand, Alec brushed Eliot’s hair from his eyes. The texture had changed, Eliot’s hair felt brittle under his fingertips. For a moment, Alec was sure Eliot’s eyebrows had thinned but maybe it was just a trick of the light. The one thing he was sure Alec can affirm with his hand on a Bible was that he could smell all the drugs in Eliot’s sweat. They were literally flooding his system so full of chemicals, it spilled.

Another comment in a language Alec couldn’t identify. Hardison followed through with an uninspired quip: “You are right. That Hürrem gal is up to no good…”

Two minutes later, Eliot fell asleep again. Alec considered stopping the episode, but the flickering screen made him feel less alone, even if the language was a total gibberish in his ears.

“You are going to beat it, Eliot,” Alec promised, turning in bed and hooking his fingers under Eliot’s right arm.

The ribcage under his fingers felt delicate, like old ivory. It was frightening how thin their bulky hitter had become. Eliot’s hot breath caressed Alec’s chest and that was a silver lining. In his sleep, Eliot mumbled something Alec was sure didn’t qualify as human language. Alec smiled and let the strange language from the screen and Eliot’s warmth lull him to a nap. He dozed maybe for five minutes before the rustling of Nurse’s soft soles reached the bed, waking Alec up.

“How’s he doing?” She asked, her eyes looking at the numbers on the pump. Alec Hardison never hated a machine more in his life. Maybe Cha0s’s laptop, but that’s a worthy exception.

“I think he’s warmer than last time,” Alec reported dutifully, trying to let Eliot go, but managing instead of making him move to his left to cuddle better. “No nausea, but he refused to drink anymore.”

“Any shivers?” she asked, shaking a thermometer to bring the mercury down. Her shirt read ‘Aim. STAB. Repeat.’ and that made Alec smile return.

“Not this time,” Alec replied, watching her put the instrument in Eliot’s armpit.

“Cuff is not tender,” Nurse said, applying pressure around Eliot’s central line. Eliot kept sleeping without any hint of discomfort.

“Then, it’s probably just a reaction to the drugs,” Alec concluded and that was as good news as they were going to get.

“Seems like you are right,” Nurse said checking the reading on the thermometer. “We have a perfect hundred. If it stays that way, we don’t need to bring in any doctor.”

She hooked another bag of a red solution and adjusted the setting of the pump.

“We’ll do a whole bag of saline instead of a half to flush the line at the end of the course. That should keep him going until he’s awake to drink for himself.”

“Thank you.” Alec liked that woman almost as much as Eliot hated her, but Hardison was far from being an impartial judge: she’s not using his body as her personal pincushion.

As soon as the Nurse went away to sort some other medical need in the kitchen, Hardison jumped out of the bed to take a quick leak and refill the ice chip bowl, more for his sake than Eliot’s.
In his way to the bed, he picked up the puppy blanket and headed to the bed. Eliot tried to sit up at the sound of his approaching footsteps.


Eliot nodded and tried to scoot toward the headboard. Alec, one knee on the mattress, helped him get there. Eliot nodded again and pressed Alec’s arm for a second in a mute sign of gratitude.

“You are welcome.”

“I drifted off,” Eliot said slowly as if the language was an amazing feat of will. With his brain drowning in a chemical fog, maybe it was. “What happened after the sweets?”

“Don’t worry, bro,” Alec said cheerfully, picking up the remote. “I dogeared it.”

In a jiff, Alec had the spot running, his arm behind Eliot’s shoulders and the puppy blanket over both. A quick glance over Eliot’s head informed Alec know they have at least another three hours to kill.

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Parker drove at maximum speed once she recovered her bike from the airport parking lot. Parker would be lying if she said she didn’t enjoy seeing Archie again and he needed to get rid of some of his old tools. It was sweet of him to think Parker could make good use of them. Archie was right to call her, but Eliot was getting chemo and Hardison was alone with him and that took away some of the pleasure of seeing his old mentor.

The guards on the gated community gawked at her as she breezed through the checkpoint, probably noticing her bike. The garage door opened automatically and she was home. As soon as she killed the engine, she could hear Eliot’s incoherent rambling upstairs. Parker ran to the sound, tossing her jacket away. Hardison’s voice sounded a bit angry and very tired. Parker hadn’t had time to wonder what the fuss was about: Eliot, kneeling on his bed, brought her up to speed as soon as she crossed the door, just as she had never gone away.

“He poked me!” Eliot accused with fire in his eyes. His left hand was pulling his bottoms up.

“You need to take your anti-sickness medicine on time…” Hardison tried to justify his actions before he noticed it was a lost battle. He turned to Parker with an apologetic sigh. “Eliot was sleeping and you know how little sleep he has after chemo... He woke up with my finger in…”

Parker darted him a dirty look. The urgent need to ask what was Hardison thinking almost overwhelmed her, but that was a question for another day. Eliot was upset because he got the cold bullet and help him rest was the priority. The anti-sickness medicine always made Eliot drowsy and anger only made it work faster. It was better if they settled him down now, instead of fixing his uncooperative body later.

“Eliot...” Parker sat in the bed and petted his hot head with hands still coated in alcohol rub. “It’s done. You are safe.”

Eliot was fogged, Parker could see it in the way he moved; that was not the self-sufficient man she had known for years. Parker could see that Eliot Spencer was the cutest boy back in the day by the way he acted when he was not in his right mind. She called his name again and Eliot grumbled; Parker petted him a bit more, Eliot carried his hands to his face to rub his eyes with both fists. After a moment, Eliot looked at her, his hands resting on his lap, half-knotted brow and tense jowls highlighted his big, confused blue eyes.
“Headache?” Parker asked, knowing very well that expression in Eliot’s face.

“I don’t want another…”

“You don’t need to take another cold bullet if you don’t want to,” Parker reassured him, trying to keep his hair from his eyes. She had forgotten that some medicines need to take an alternative route. “We can pull down the blinds or bring you an ice bag… You just need to…”

“Cuddle…?” Eliot interrupted with unsure tone.

Parker smiled and opened her arms. Eliot rushed to her and let her pet him in the shoulders and neck. Parker guided him to the pillows and rested her travel-weary body next to him. Her back resting over the pile of pillows, Eliot put his head on her belly and his arm around her waist, clinging to her like a kid to his mother.

“Do you want to take a nap?” Parker invited and she felt how Eliot nodded. His beard tickled her tummy through her shirt.

Hardison, with the expression of a jilted lover, picked up the trash and went out of the room. Eliot relaxed once they were alone and shimmied to snuggle closer to put his leg over Parker’s.

“He poked me,” Eliot complained again. His eyelids were heavy and his t-shirt, wet.

“He won’t poke you again,” Parker promised, picking up Eliot’s blanket.

“I know,” Eliot whispered when she covered him with the blanket. “You are here.”

Parker smiled at those words, Eliot made her feel strong like she could protect him from any harm. She played with his hair and Eliot grumbled until the antihistamines made him sleep. Eliot was feverish, but Hardison didn’t warn Parker about neutropenia. Maybe the doctors weren’t expecting Eliot to get dangerously low defenses this time. Parker closed her eyes, enjoying the faint whiff of Eliot’s sweat on the pillows. He smelled so sweet, like hot toffee.

Parker didn’t know how long she dozed off, but she could tell Hardison was in the chair next to the bed almost immediately. He was drinking coffee and a batch of fresh drinks was in the side table. The sun was low and Eliot was sleeping almost on top of her with his fist clutching her shirt. She extended her hand with a smile and Hardison held it. It was good to be home.

“Eliot has been taking his lactulose,” Hardison volunteered before she could ask. “With bad graces, but he has. Mostly to avoid the alternative…”

“Wouldn’t you?” Parker asked in a whisper. They both know Eliot loathed to have his backside touched when he was not getting pretzels. “How long has Eliot been fogged?”

“Almost since you went away.” Hardison looked away and sipped his coffee. “But the fog is thinner, he knew something was amiss. Eliot had a panic attack because Nurse was here in the ‘wrong day’, babe.” The air quotes almost made him spill the coffee. “A panic attack, if you can believe it!”

“I can’t,” Parker rebuked and made a signal for him to pass her Eliot’s apple juice. She won’t believe a word without a drink or evidence: “Do you have it on tape?”

Parker put a mason jar with her new experiment in the small table by the lung chair where Eliot
was pretending to read; in the upper deck of this prison, they called safehouse. She and Hardison agreed—very reluctantly—to give him three non-consecutive hours a day to be alone with his dark thoughts and his sour mood.

“I’ll be back in an hour sharp.” Parker turned around without waiting for an answer.

Asking to have a little solitude surely was a capital offense on Parker’s eyes; Eliot wished he had the spirit to care. Not today. Today, Eliot lacked the strength or the patience to pretend he had a positive attitude.

*I wish you wouldn’t.* Eliot thought in a surge of rage, putting his book aside. *I wish you could spend a quarter of an hour away from my case. In fact, I really believe you should return to your usual goings-on, that will keep you from micromanaging each one of my breaths!*

The door slammed the frame and soon Parker’s motorcycle sped from the house. By the way, the tires screeched in the pavement, Eliot reckoned Parker was more than upset.

“Sorry, Parker.” Eliot really meant it, but he was not ready to say those words to her face.

*There is a ton of things I can’t tell you or Hardison. I wish to say that I regret you must deal with all this cursed business. I want to tell you that I really appreciate that you are fighting so hard for me. I would like to tell you of these stupid little worries in my head about my garden in my house near Crestwood. I would like to ask you about my nephew: it has been months since I’ve known anything about him and he was having a rough time. To live without a caring mom, it’s hard for a teenager. I want to tell you about all this unproductive anger always boiling inside of me...*

Eliot closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Since the panic attack, he had been trying to regain his center through mindfulness exercises, but his mind kept returning to the same pointless ruminations. Chemotherapy had stolen his *mushin*...

*God, I’m so tired of pretending I have a fighting spirit...*

Eliot picked up a mason jar and took a long sip. He should have known better: Chemo cocktails had fucked up his sense of taste beyond recognition; each mouthful was an exciting game of ‘What did I just put in my mouth?’.

*Fun is never-ending in this new fucked up reality...*

The smoothie fell heavily into his stomach before Eliot could register the taste. Sugar was the first wave of the assault: Eliot was sure Parker used both lactulose and honey because the sweetness was two kinds of unbearable. That thing that tasted like burnt rubber was a green, probably spinach or kale. He let his tongue slide over his palate to recognize the strawberry seeds and the unctuous residue of Greek yogurt. As the cold spread over his belly scar, Eliot guessed the solid piece his teeth caught was either banana or mashed apple.

*I wonder if I will ever enjoy food again...* The thought almost made him cry.

“How are you taking the beating, Eliot?” The question tore Eliot out of his private pity-party.

Eliot turned his head slowly, feeling how his body responded to the adrenaline boost. Even his numb fingertips reacted with a new sensation of pins and needles. But Eliot’s blood chemistry returned to its levels as soon as he recognized that cruel, cherubic face.

*Son of a bitch...*
His visitor stood by the French doors of his bedroom with his red, untied tie hanging inside the black coat over a crisp white shirt. He had cut his hair short again and the waves looked lighter than the rest of his head. In his hand, he held an open green beer bottle.

“Did you get lost, Quinn?”

“I had an eight hours layover in Portland and decided to pay you a visit. Love the beard, by the way,” Quinn commented and took a sip from the bottle. “I helped myself a cold one. I hope that’s not a problem.”

Would it kill you to share, you bastard?

“I didn’t know we had beers.” Eliot took a sip of Parker’s experiment as an expiation for his greedy thought.

“You are well supplied, but I’ve never had this brand.” Quinn showed him the blue label of their microbrewery. “It’s good.”

You used to have better taste... Eliot kept his silence.

“I was asking in earnest,” Quinn insisted, approaching to the chair. He finally sat at the end, with his back turned. “I busted my ass to keep your soul inside your body at the hospital. At the very least, you owe me an update.”

What do you want me to say, Quinn? Huh? I’m sure you don’t want to hear the minutiae of this unholy mess, and I’m in the mood to bitch for hours about the long string of little indignities I endure locked between these four walls. Do you want to know I have cried more in this last month than I had in the rest of my life? Are you ready to hear each of the gross and stupid side effects I face each damn minute in order to stay alive? I know you heard what I meant to say only to Parker... you came here to goad me, so go ahead...

“Eliot?” Quinn called out with evident concern in his voice. His fingers were touching the shoulder without the central line. “Are you here?”

“Sorry. Brain fog,” Eliot mumbled and took another sip of his drink. Despite how much he hated the taste, he would never disappoint Parker on purpose. “Doctors say I’m getting better, but... Off the record? I’m yet to find the moment to be grateful.”

“Sorry, bud,” Quinn had the decency to sound a bit pained by the news. “Cancer sucks.”

You don’t have the most damned idea...

“It’s hard to disagree.”

After a moment of silence, Quinn asked: “Does it hurt?”

What? Huh? Because it hurts to move, it hurts to eat, it hurts to drink, it even hurts to breathe some days, and don’t get me started with what happens if I must go and do something no one else can do for me. I’m warning you. We can spend a whole year here, so, I ask again... “What?”

“Chemo,” Quinn said and took another sip. “The first round in the hospital was pretty gruesome.”

“No, it doesn’t hurt. Side effects are a bitch, though.”

“It can’t be worse than that...”
“It can…” Eliot said, toying with the almost empty mason jar. “Oh, boy, it can!”

Quinn turned around with a half-concerned, half-amused expression.

“I used to think wetwork was cruel, then again, when we put a bullet inside a target, they are blissfully unaware of our intentions. They are just living their best lives. I know that’s exactly four hundred, eighty-three hours, twenty-three minutes and an odd number of seconds that’s changing as we speak until another batch of drugs come my way and my gut is already knotting at the idea.”

Eliot twisted his lips because he noticed he was talking aloud. *Fuck it, you have already spilled the beans!*

“At least when we break someone’s leg, we don’t ask then which one is hurting them less. There are days I itch to hurt the next person that comes my way with a needle…”

“That’s adorable.”

“That’s fucking terrifying,” Eliot retorted, “and I’m going to be alive and well to see you realize it.”

“Thank you for your good wishes!”

Eliot took the last of the drink in one long sip.

“I’m tired of people seeing my… disease first, and then me if they do… Do you remember when doing wetwork you just fuck to feel human again? That’s the stage I’m in right now…”

“Hey, I’m free…” Quinn said and tilted his beer.

Eliot almost jumped at the global hitter mating-call. How many times had he undressed at the sound of those words, happy to have a we-got-out-alive *(You haven’t outrun the wolves yet, dumb-wit!)* fuck-partner? It has been a while since he had a romp with this handsome devil, but...

*Funny business that will be! I’m not sure I can negotiate a thrust, let alone a hard-on. And I can’t stand for five minutes without my legs giving way, that is if I don’t lose track of what I was doing on my feet, to begin with. And I’m aching to rub my new scars against yours, but I’m sure I’ll get motion sickness if we try…*

“Give me something to live for, Quinn,” Eliot pleaded, hating to feel so weak but hating, even more, to put his weakness in words. “By Halloween, I run my last course, two weeks more and I’ll be willing to take you to your word.”

*Besides, I venture you’ll taste as awful as the bottom of an ashtray. Steak tastes like that and I like your taste better than I’ve ever liked red meat. God, I hate chemo…!*

Quinn leaned forward and profited of Eliot’s distraction to steal a kiss. Eliot’s mind froze and he stopped being aware of the pain in his bones and the itch on his scar. Quinn always kissed like a pro, but this caress was slow, deliberate and tender. Eliot almost let him continue…

*More! More!*

*I need to be touched by another thing than medicine and pain.*

*I’m starving! Give me more!*

… but, with a mighty effort, he pushed Quinn away.
“It tingles…” Quinn commented, passing his tempting tongue over his lips.

“Give it three minutes and you’ll feel the burn,” Eliot said, remembering the rash on Hardison’s shoulder with the perfect print of his hand.

“I’ll bring condoms…” Quinn promised, looking into Eliot’s eyes. “And dental dams…”

Geez, Quinn! Why don’t you bring a gimp suit too since you are being so generous…?

“I don’t know if should be offended because you don’t want my cancer-killing fluids on you.”

“You should be flattered,” Quinn stood tall and amused. “I’m willing to risk second-hand chemo to jump your bones.”

Dammit, Quinn! You went and said it as if I was a microwaved corpse. Please, make me believe I haven’t changed that much. Please, don’t fuck up your offer by making it a pity fuck… Please...

“I bet you can see all of them from where you are…” Eliot felt the acid of his own words. That’s the only thing that conserved its original taste since he started the fight.

“Gallows humor, Spencer?”

Travel this way and then tell me if you have anything else to offer, Mr. Quinn.

“That’s how I’m taking the beating, Quinn.”

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“Are we going to tell Eliot we know he took a beer from the fridge and disabled the cameras?” Parker asked, putting the rest of the beers in a cooler. She still felt that empty beer bottle like a betrayal.

“Nah,” Hardison spreading cream cheese on the bagels they just bought for lunch. “In Eliot’s words: ‘I ain’t his daddy’. Besides, Dr. B. said one beer couldn’t cause too much trouble, and if it does?” Hardison shrugged. “Until then, it’s not my problem…”

“We shouldn’t leave him alone.”

“Parker, you ain’t his mommy.” Hardison sounded serious as he piled thin-sliced salmon over Parker’s bagel. “He’s a grown-up. He knew the risks.”

“We are supposed to care over him. We are his caregivers.”

“And that we do, that we are,” Hardison put tomato slices on top of the salmon, “All systems have bugs and this is what it was. A bug in the system. At the end of the day, we’ll be in the same spot if any of us dragged seasonal flu into the house.”

Parker fumbled with one bottle, but she didn’t drop it. Hardison knew he had scared her.

“I don’t say you don’t have the right to feel cheated,” he put Parker’s lunch in a dish. “I’m just saying we are human. We make mistakes.”

Parker closed the fridge and stood still for a moment. Hardison started to fix another bagel for himself. After a while, Parker picked up the cooler and moved to put it in Lucille.

“I smell fresh bread,” Eliot’s voice commented from the stairs.
“Bagels!” Hardison said with a smile. Eliot creeping in the stairwell meant he felt well enough to grab a bite. “Come down and I’ll fix you one.”

Parker reached her seat first, and it was no wonder. Eliot looked like he had just run a marathon.

“Are you feeling the low burn, bro?” Hardison asked, already wiping his hands in the apron. Neutropenic fever was always a concern one week after chemo.

“No, I just have this wicked headache,” Eliot lowered his head to his crossed arms, his face turned toward Parker’s dish. “I want mine with avocado spread.”

“You shouldn’t be that ill if you are casing my lunch.” Parker moved her bagel an inch away. Her eyes were on Hardison who was rummaging the medical cupboard.

“I don’t want yours.” Eliot stuck out his tongue.

“Indulge me,” Hardison demanded, presenting Eliot a freshly sterilized thermometer.

Eliot obliged with a long-suffering sigh and his prompt compliance triggered another silent consultation: his headache should be very bad if he was so cooperative. Eliot waited, leaning on the breakfast bar until the faint alert sounded and he passed it to Hardison before putting his head on his folded arms again.

“98.” Hardison read the instrument. “No fever.”

“Told ya. Pass the Motrin…”

“You can’t take Motrin,” Hardison rebuked because they couldn’t risk liver failure. In fact, they didn’t have anything to cure Eliot’s headache.

“Ugh…” Eliot was as eloquent as ever.

“Sorry, man. Your daily ration of painkillers should be enough to manage a headache.”

“It ain’t…”

“Be right back,” Parker said, jumping off her stool. “Watch my bagel!”

“I can’t eat salmon!” Eliot replied without getting his head up from his arms.

“You can’t have avocado either,” Hardison reminded Eliot with a smile.

“I miss avocado,” Eliot pointed out. It was impressive the restraint he showed to not bang his head against the counter. “I don’t miss salmon.”

“There you have it: something to look forward to!”

“If this fucking headache and your optimism don’t kill me first.”

“In the meantime, cream cheese or peanut butter?”

“Ugh…”

Hardison smiled. Eliot have complained before because both tasted the same. Peanut butter ended-up in his plate more often than not, because it was good protein, but that certainly didn’t make the offer any more appealing.
“Old butter and jam it is, then,” Hardison said getting to the task. Parker’s meanderings through farmers markets had kept them well-stocked of exotic jam. “Tell you what, let us ring Toby and get us a good dinner today, eh?”

“That sounds pretty awesome,” Parker said, behind Eliot’s back.

“Uh?” Eliot raised his head and Parker slapped the right side of his face with a wet towel. “Ow.”

“Ice water. It tricks your brain to think ‘cold’ instead of ‘pain’ while it constricts your carotid and relieves pressure.” Parker patted Eliot’s shoulder and sat in front of her bagel. “Give it five minutes.”

“Thanks.” Eliot fixed the towel against his neck. “Do we still have that lime and jalapeno jam in stock?”

“I finished it,” Parker replied munching happily. “I’ll get you more in my next run…”

Eliot, bundled in sweatpants and shoulders covered with Parker’s green fleece blanket, sitting on the landing of the stairs, replied to Hardison’s greeting. During the week before chemo, the boredom of his sick room was overwhelming.

“Bro, you cold?” Hardison asked, hugging Parker and passing her a dossier.

“Parker set the AC too low,” Eliot grumbled. He had been shivering all day long.

“It’s July. It’s hot,” Parker, in her way to the couch, blithely disregarded his complaints while she leafed through the dossier.

“And I have anemia, dammit!”

Hardison chuckled and adjusted the AC without a word and Eliot was thankful in the same way. Once the warmth returned to his bones, Eliot made his way to the first floor, gripping the rail to the best of his capacity. His legs were still heavy as lead and he had a case of cotton-head, but not more than the usual.

Parker was sorting the brief Hardison had just brought from the brewpub with a concerned expression. Eliot didn’t need them to say a thing: they had talked to stall all Leverage International’s activities until Eliot finished his four chemo runs, but this business was escalating too quickly for them to ignore anymore. Eliot found a spot in the corner of the sofa and picked up some papers crossing his legs lotus fashion.

Parker darted a worried look to Hardison, but that was all.

Parker and he shared, interchanged, and moved papers while they made sense of FyreDynamic’s physical security systems.

They didn’t need words; they have done it many times. Hardison looked over them, providing snacks as needed. Parker marked the facility’s blind spots. Eliot planned personnel distribution. Then, Eliot moved to personnel background and Parker to security measures. Business as usual...

“Uh-hu, this won’t fly,” Eliot mumbled over Parker’s plans. “You need five minutes to safely crack that vault.”
“Can do it in three and a half.” Parker sucked her lollipop with stubborn expression.

“You can, but the top half of these blockheads was ex-CIA and the bottom half was dishonorably discharged.” Eliot rubbed his free hand against the fleece blanket to cover a shiver. He was cold again. “Shoot first, ask later. You need a hitter.”

“Come, Eliot,” Hardison said, making him a signal to get up. “Time to take your meds.”

“I’d love to have you,” Parker put her candy in a dish to look at Eliot, “but you can’t manage a whole flight of stairs and you have been wheezing all the time since you parked your ass on the couch.”

“I’m not saying it must be me,” Eliot disregarded Hardison, as he was fully engaged on Parker’s plans with the obsession only chemo fog could give him. “You need someone to watch your back. And I’m not wheezing...”


“I can take my drugs here.” He put his foot down and turned to Parker. The green fleece blanket slid off his back. “It has been five months since I hit someone senseless and I’m aching to do it like you won’t believe it, but I’m worried for you!” Eliot was not sure if the shaking he felt was fear or cold. “I can’t be there to keep you safe!”

“I don’t need to be kept safe!”

“Yes, you do!” Even Eliot could hear his wheezing respiration now.

“Mouth, Eliot.” Hardison stayed his hand before he could get the thermometer inside his sweatshirt.

“Let me finish, Hardison!” Eliot took a deep breath, holding the thermometer away from anything. “Parker, hear me out, please,” Eliot had to suppress the urge to shake Parker’s shoulders. “I have lost my strength and my dexterity, and I have lost my taste and most of my sense of smell.” Eliot passed his free hand through his hair. “There are days when I think I’ve lost my marbles... Please, please, don’t ask me to sit here and vouch for a plan where I can lose you too!”

Silence followed his words and Eliot, regretting to have them uttered, put the thermometer in his mouth with a sullen expression. Parker picked up Eliot’s blanket and wrapped it over his shoulders to stop the shivers.

“I’m scared, too…” Parker stopped and started again. “I can’t even imagine how frustrating this whole mishap is for you. I can’t...,” Parker rested her head in Eliot’s shoulder. “I can promise to be careful and quick and silent,” she snapped her fingers to mark each word. “I’ll be the best so you don’t have to worry. I’ll return here to annoy the living life out of you.” Parker was trying hard not to poke Eliot to break the tension, then an idea came to her mind: “Do you need a dollar?”

Eliot turned his head at the mention of the dollar just as the thermometer alarm sounded. Hardison had a laughing fit. Perfect timing is everything...

“Who told you about...?” Eliot took out the thing of his mouth with a jerking movement that betrayed his surprise and his annoyance at the same time. The answer was clear after a second: Mikel didn’t have enough vocabulary to explain it. “Quinn...”

“Was I not supposed to talk to your friends?” Parker looked at Hardison as he retrieved the instrument from Eliot’s hand, still laughing.
“I’m going to hit him so hard that his clients will have nosebleed at the first thought of his name.”

“Why are you so angry…?” Parker tried hard not to giggle; Hardison’s laughter was rubbing on her a bit.

“It was supposed to be a trade secret. A hitter thing!” Hardison put his hand on Eliot’s forehead, catching him by surprise. “Stop it!”

“It’s weird…”

“Eliot’s weird?” Parker asked with a confused look.

“His breathing is getting worse, but he’s just 97.2. His skin is cold to the touch…”

“He hadn’t lost his hearing yet,” Eliot grumbled and extended his hand. “Pass the glass…”

Eliot downed the pills like he was downing a whiskey shot. Parker passed him her lemonade to wash them down. She shared a worried look with Hardison.

“I’ve lost track, what’s next?”

“White cell booster.” Hardison replying opening the sealed package.

“Lucky me!” Eliot exclaimed with cheerful sarcasm, looking with a resigned expression at those two weeks of long bone pain in a vial. “Sorry, Parker,” Eliot mumbled, as he pulled the front of his sweatpants down. “I’m running out of places to stick a needle.”

“No worries,” Parker looked in fascination how he pinched the skin between his pubic bone and his bellybutton and clean it with the alcohol pad. “I was there when they rammed a plastic tube up your…”

“Parker…” Hardison’s voice was a warning when he passed Eliot the syringe. Eliot could tell he was cringing in sympathy. “Don’t distract him while he plays with needles.”

“No, please,” Eliot told, minding his Southern manners. The needle was already inside his skin and he was ready to push the plunger down. “By all means, distract me.”

“Man, you are brave…” Hardison replied in good humor, but his eyes never wavered from the procedure. “Parker can make any man cringe with the description.”

“She’d fail with me: I was awake,” Eliot grumbled, sliding the needle into the guard with a sharp click... and someone stuck one on me without lube once. “Done?”

“Done.” Hardison agreed, picking up glasses, syringe and snack wrappers.

“Parker, I can go to the field, if you need me.” Eliot insisted, in jest. This time he could feel the shiver and his labored breathing.

“Thank you” Parker replied, kissing Eliot in the side of the head. “That’s really something, but you have just shot yourself something to fix your blood.”

“That’s what I meant. I’m good to go.”

“You are only good to go to your bed, mister.”

“I can stay with Hardison in the van.”
“Now, that’s an idea!” Parker smiled as Hardison sat in the side chair.

“Not until he clears that congestion,” Hardison protested, getting that Eliot was joking. “He’s gonna get Lucille covered in germs.”

“I’m not sick.”

“Cough,” Hardison commanded pushing his head forward a bit, issuing a simple challenge. “Just like you did in ICU. There is nothing to worry if you are not sick. You are just going to clear your chest. Come on, cough!”

“Do you want me to cough? Huh?”

“Yeah, big man. Show me a cough.”

Eliot stood up, bouncing on his feet. Parker smiled, clapping like a kid, and Hardison waited, chin in his hand. Eliot inhaled as deeply as he could and used his diaphragm to bring out the cough. Simple, he had done it a thousand times. Then, Eliot felt something move inside him. He didn’t have time to register surprise before pain exploded in the left side of his chest.

A lot of pain.

Shots and stabs Eliot had experienced before, but he had never endured this kind of blinding, disabling pain.

*Will you finally let me die, God?* Eliot thought, gasping for air, clutching his left side. His knees gave out. *Will you...?*

Parker was screaming his name, trying to hold Eliot as his legs stopped holding his weight. The dial tones of Hardison phone calling for an ambulance sounded louder than her voice. Eliot struggled to breathe, folded in Parker’s arms, but he couldn’t even get in a short, shallow gasp.

His range of vision closed. Eliot tasted the blood on his lips...

*Please...*

Chapter End Notes

*Fucked up beyond all recognition*
EMCON

Chapter Summary

Eliot enters the hospital again to pay for the most expensive kiss in the history of humanity. His family worries he would not able to bounce back another time.

Chapter Notes

Warning: this chapter deals with parental abuse and negligence and some slut-shaming in addition to hospital-related angst. If any of those topics could upset you, please skip this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Oh the lonely sound of my voice calling is driving me insane
And just like rain, the tears keep falling
'cause nobody answers when I call your name
-Vince Gill

“Leah…?”

Leah’s hands were not soft. Hard soap had spoiled them. Eliot had felt the touch of thousand hands, softer, more fragrant, more tender hands than Leah’s, but he could exchange all of them, and all the earthly pleasures they gave him, for another caress of his sister’s hands.

Leah touched him again, rousing the fiery pain in Eliot’s jaw.

“Leah…” Eliot called out, feeling the tears roll on his cheeks again. “Daddy hurt me…”

Her hands touched his shoulders. It hurt more than a lick of the belt. Eliot turned to her, hiding his face on her flat chest. He was sobbing and his chest hurt with each exhalation. His lips tasted like beet juice. His body was just a big, hurting mass. I don’t want to be here...

“Cry quietly, Eli,” Leah begged, caressing the welt on Eliot’s neck. “Ma’s sleeping. Please, quietly…”

Eliot tried to swallow his sobs, but they refused to go down. Eliot could not force himself to stop.

“It hurts…”

“I know…”

Leah cradled his aching body, warming his limbs, stiff with cold, with her own body.

“Cry more quietly, Eli,” Leah pleaded, rubbing the spot between his shoulder blades. “Please, don’t upset ma…”
Tell me he didn’t hurt her, Eliot begged, crying his eyes out. Each sob exploded inside his ribs. Tell me he didn’t make ma cry…

Leah was silent. Her hands had stopped her futile attempts to make Eliot feel better…

Leah… Eliot sobbed, curled amidst the fog, all alone again. Between sobs, he realized the taste in his lips was not beetroot juice...

------------

“…patient. Last chemo: three weeks ago…”

“Shit,” ER doctor exclaimed, twisting the cap of the proximal lumen. “Is he neutropenic?”

“…Called due to acute respiratory distress, left atelectasis and hemoptysis. No fever. The patient was breathing on his own…”

Lights over his head. Too bright, hurt his eyes. Someone was pushing air into Eliot’s lungs. It felt like pulverized glass. Breathing hurt so much…

“…drew breath once he lost conscience…”

“Must have been the shock. Looks like a collapsed lung,” the doctor stated, holding up a couple of blood vials. “STAT!”

“70/42. Just got filgrastim and sorafenib less than fifteen minutes ago…”

“Too fucking low…” The doctor moved the oxygen mask to suck some of the liquid in Eliot’s throat. “We need suction here! Push a couple of saline bags… I really need to know his ANC before I fuck it all with a thoracentesis that would…”

------------

Eliot walked home. He was going home through the fog and he was full of pride. He just had performed the first work of his life and he felt cautiously content. He was eight and just helped an old neighbor to carry groceries inside her home. He was not thinking of payment, but he got something better than money.

Leah was sitting on the porch; her dress was too short and her knees were too sharp. Eliot could see the bruise on her leg. She was such a (punching bag) klutz, always getting in the way of things. Eliot couldn’t remember a day without a new bruise on his sister.

“You are late,” Leah said with reproachful voice. She was born to be a little momma hen. “I was getting worried. Ma asked for you before she got asleep…”

“I was helping Mrs. Milliner. She gave me cookies,” Eliot said sitting next to Leah in the porch. He looked at the loot in his hands and he was so hungry he would have eaten all. Dad was getting behind with his lunch money again, and maybe with Leah’s too. With a small smile, he offered cookies to his sister. “Do you want…?”

Eliot could read the hunger on Leah’s face. Yesterday she gave him the last of the peanut butter on a hard slice of bread because he couldn’t stop crying. It was Sunday and his gut hadn’t had anything after Friday school lunch. Leah crossed her arms over her non-existing belly, Eliot felt like crying…
“Take them all,” Eliot insisted, extending his hand, feeling the needle tugging the skin of his arm. “I don’t need them.” I’m going to die soon and you are taking care of ma. You need your strength…

Leah took the package and smiled at him. It was a sad smile. I should have stolen a bag from the old bat’s groceries… Eliot looked at how Leah counted the cookies in the small package. She would have never noticed…

“They are three…” Leah took one of the cookies and put it in his hand. “You take one, I take one, and we save one for ma…”

Eliot felt joy. His work would make his ma eat. He was smiling when Leah put the cookie in his hand.

“Can I give ma the cookie?” Eliot asked, looking at Leah. He didn’t care about his cookie. The feeling in his chest rushed, he was prouder now. “She will be so happy…”

“Oh, Eli, you are the goodest boy…” Leah praised and rubbed his head.

Eliot wondered if Heaven was to feel a caress from his sister again…

------------

Eliot was in ICU again, obtunded, isolated, not even breathing on his own.

His whole system was failing.

Parker gulped again when the nurse passed the door of the isolation room and Hardison hugged her. This was the sixth transfusion for Eliot in the last two days and none of them seemed to have done him any good. They were lucky Eliot was a universal recipient or else praying would be their only resource and none of them were particularly religious.

The ventilator in Eliot’s mouth was the only risk they dared to take until all the therapy could help Eliot get better blood test results. His brain was doubly-starved of oxygen by lack of red cells and pneumonia. Eliot’s white cells were so low that he couldn’t fight the infection and his blood was not clotting right. If the doctors tried to do anything else, they could expose Eliot to worse dangers, more infection, loss of blood, brain damage…

“Are you Eliot’s family?” A young nurse asked before they closed the privacy curtain.

“What do you want?” Hardison didn’t mean to sound so snappy, but they didn’t have much sleep since Eliot collapsed.

“The doctor needs to talk to you. Please, come…”

“Are the test results back?” Parker asked, shaking like a leaf in the storm.

“The doctor will explain all,” the nurse’s neutral reply didn’t assuage their fears.

They could read the bad news in her face. Parker clutched Hardison. He brought her closer. They looked to the ICU bed and tried to be ready for the impact.

------------

Eliot heard the water running, the soft clink of dishes and the scraping sound of the hard brush. The suds were pink and Eliot felt how his stomach tumbled against his ribs. Beets for dinner made
him lose his appetite… *I never want to eat beets again*… Through the dirty window with the bleached lace curtains Gigi had sewn a long time ago, Eliot could see that shabby wild beetroot patch on their back forty. *I still want to set the whole lot on fire*… The old woodshed was next to the rickety fence that marked the end of their property.

Leah was talking about that under the counter job interview she had at the supermarket. The bruise on her arm was fresh, the one on her neck was four days old… Eliot jumped to the counter to look at her, concerned. His fear for his sister’s safety crossed the years and felt fresh.

“At the end, they gave me a sandwich and an apple,” Leah said, catching the wet dish. Sonsie was so nimble-finger and so agile. *I never wanted to see the truth before*…

“Did you enjoy ’em?” Eliot asked because Leah didn’t get even the charity lunch at school, as Eliot did.

“The sandwich was good,” Leah caressed the bruise in Eliot’s chin with a soapy hand. “I saved the apple for you because I know how much you like them apples.”

Leah took the apple from her cardigan. It was a slightly-misshapen, hail-marked, little pink lady. *Too mauled to sale, but good enough to spoil a kid looking for a job*… Eliot looked at the apple and he felt the hunger pang, so sharp that it brought tears to his eyes. Leah tossed it and Eliot caught it. *You loved me so much, Leah!*… Eliot hugged her sister before he dared to take a bite.

“Did you get the job?” Eliot asked, munching the apple, enjoying each bite as if that might be the last. God knows that was not a possibility, but a probability.

“I won’t take it,” Leah said, resting her chin on Eliot’s shoulder. “I can’t leave ma.”

“You should take the job,” Eliot said with his usual bravado, rocking her side to side. “I can take care of ma.”

*That job*… Eliot was not thinking of the long months ahead without food if her sister wouldn’t earn enough money. He was ten years; the future was still an abstract idea. That supermarket job put food on the table for the three of them until Ma went to Heaven. He could only think that his sister wanted a job and she should get it.

“You can?” Leah laughed in his ear, rubbing between his shoulder blades. “What if ma needs to go potty, huh?”

“Then I wipe her bum,” Eliot replied all serious and grave. “She wiped mine once or twice…”

Leah laughed in his ear again. It was an ascending scale with a flourish in the end. Hers was a very distinctive laughter that Eliot had never heard again in any person. Her laughter was memorable and Eliot missed it so much it hurt.

“You are the goodest boy, Eli…”

“Best,” Eliot corrected her as if he was reciting a lesson with the whole core in his mouth. “The superlative of ‘good’ is ‘best,’ Sonsie.”

“Yes, but you are the goodest…”

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“Parker, I need you to breathe deeply and organize your ideas,” Nate was trying to sound
reasonable, but he sounded just cruel to Parker.

“Nate,” Parker mumbled into a turned-off phone. She was calling from the cafeteria, pretending to have a bite. “They asked me to sign a DNR…”

People around her didn’t care, they had their own worries. The hospital cafeteria was bustling with people who cried or who eat their food as they were performing a duty. The regular dint of dishes and trays didn’t seep into her conversations or else Nate would be a lot more on the edge that he was right now.

There was silence on the other side of the coms. The direness of the situation was evident. They hadn’t shown any respect for Eliot’s only wish: to keep him out of the hospital and the guilt was hard to bear. Parker was not sure if she wanted to keep Eliot full code while he had not enough defenses to muster a fever, but the option was terrifying. Parker felt guilty and desperate in the same measure; she wanted the best for Eliot, but somehow, to let Eliot go—to let the doctors comfort him as he fades away without saying goodbye—was too hurtful to contemplate.

“The pneumonia is viral; they’re trying to find something to help him,” Parker reported, fighting hard against the tears. “We have kept him safe, secluded… We can’t figure out where he got that weird bug…”

“Weird bug?” Nate interrupted Parker’s rambling report. “How weird?”

“It’s a kind of Asian bird flu. Eliot hadn’t been in Asia in the last two years…”

“Hardison, are you there?”

“Nate, if you want me to hack the CBC database, they are already up to speed,” Hardison sounded at the brink of tears. “There is nothing more we can do.”

“Alec?” Parker asked, there was a small tremor in her voice. “Is everything all right?”

“No.”

“Hardison, talk to me…” Nate used the mastermind tone.

“They are turning Eliot’s bed,” Hardison reported, his voice was flat but his breathing was ragged. “There was a mishap… the nurses are worried Eliot had caught a GI infection.”

Gastrointestinal infection was the worst thing that could happen to Eliot. Parker looked at the wall in front of her trying hard not to think of the host of complications a new infection could bring: dehydration, kidney failure, heart failure… Hardison was not sharing details, that hinted to her that whatever was happening in Eliot’s room was serious.

“I’m going up!”

“No, Parker,” Hardison said, his voice sounded poised but emotionless. Parker didn’t know where did he find the resources to sound so reasonable. “You don’t want to see him like this. Eliot’s in pain, his gut melted and… Eliot wouldn’t want us both…”

“Parker,” Nate tried to attract her attention. “You need to sort out your resources. We can be there in eighteen hours, just say the word…”

Nate sounded so scared on her ear. It was a mistake to contact Nate when bad news struck. Parker breathed deeply; it was time to take an executive decision. She was the mastermind of their little
crew for better or worse.

“Don’t worry, Nate,” Parker said, choosing her words carefully. “We can manage. Eliot will manage to surprise us yet. That’s what he does, isn’t it?”

There was silence on the line. Parker closed her eyes and felt the drop of sweat falling down the side of her face. For the briefest moment, she hoped Nate would butt in and take control of the crew again. Then she remembered that Eliot had put his life on her hands, not on Nate’s.

“Eliot’s a fighter. He will pull through it,” Parker explained, sure that her decision was the best one. Eliot wanted to live. They would fight by his side as they promised him. “Do you hear me?”

“Eliot will survive this one too,” Hardison agreed. The sound of his voice backing her resolution sustained Parker’s spirit.

“If Eliot falls, he will fall fighting,” Nate bowed to her judgment. He sounded relieved because he was not called to man the front lines again. “Call if you need anything.”

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Eliot hadn’t had any more tears. He had cried enough to force the walls of the woodshed from collapsing on top of him. Two days ago, Leah took ma to the hospital in a cab. Such an extravagant expense… Two days ago, Eliot ran to the woodshed because dad was parking in front of the house and Eliot had been crying. Dad hated to see Eliot cry and, whenever that happens, dad could find a better reason for Eliot to cry at the end of his belt.

The door of the woodshed closed behind his back and Eliot felt safe for ten seconds. It took him ten full seconds to notice how narrow the woodshed really was. Eliot turned to the door and his hands touched the roughed wood. There was no knob, he couldn’t open from the inside. The cry bubbled inside his throat, but Eliot choked it back, both hands over his mouth and tears running down his face. Dad’s belt scared him more than the closing space.

Eliot had spent two whole days alternatively crying and punching the stacked wood and feeling sick. His heart tried to escape through his mouth whenever he couldn’t breathe enough air. His guts felt like jelly each time he feared dad could hear him. Day or night made no difference between those four walls…

It was cold, and Eliot had no more tears. Tired, breathing in short, spasming dry sobs, rested his weight against the door and his arms on his bent knees. He could hear the spiders in the ceiling and the rats outside. Eliot was sure he would die alone in that woodshed. Dad would find his corpse when winter comes. Eliot never called for his ma, but Leah’s name kept repeating into his mind, like a lullaby, like a prayer. Leah would cry for me…

Night had come, Eliot didn’t feel hunger anymore. Those last four years had been a harsh teacher. Death was a blessing and Eliot Spencer prayed hard to be blessed.

“Eli,” Leah called outside the door. “Are you there? Please, be there, Baby. Please, be there…”

The door turned on its rusty hinges. A waft of cold, fresh air flushed the woodshed, and Eliot bolted to freedom. The moon bathed their unkempt back forty with silver light. He lacked the strength to give more than five steps and he fell hard on his knees in the middle of a beetroot patch. Air was cutting his lungs to ribbons…

“Oh, thank God!” Leah rushed to him, stumbling on the uneven ground. “I have been looking for you like you won’t believe it…’’
Leah was crying when she knelt on the beetroots and cried even harder when she hugged him against her chest, rubbing his back between his shoulder blades. Eliot felt so soothed that he didn’t protest because she was babying him. Leah smelled like hospital alcohol...

“Baby… Oh, Eli…” Leah whispered in his ear. “Ma’s gone to Heaven…”

Eliot had no more tears, so he didn’t cry for his mother. She doesn’t suffer any more… Relief bathed him, he closed his eyes and when he opened them again, he looked upwards, to the place where his ma always told him Heaven was. Ma’s free! Eliot Spencer laughed with all his heart and soul. Leah looked at him as if he had gone mad but, after a while, she understood the reason for his joy.

They celebrated their mother’s liberation with laughter. If their neighbors thought it was a strange thing to do for a couple of new orphans, they never said a thing.

“After the burial, I’m gonna elope with Josh,” Leah said when the laughter died in the night.

“You are gonna leave me too??”

Eliot felt the walls closing around him even if he was under the starry sky, crushed beets under his knees. Don’t leave me!… Leah would never lie to Eliot. If Leah was planning to elope, she would carry her plan to the bitter end. Please, don’t leave me all alone with dad!… Leah hugged him. She smelled like a hospital, like a funeral home.

“I want you to come with us,” Leah said, rubbing the spot between his shoulder blades.

“Josh doesn’t like me…”

“That’s not true. And Josh’s opinion doesn’t matter,” Leah cupped Elliot’s head against her. “We can live on our own. We have been doing it for years!”

Eliot felt the tears. Leah is going away too… They took him by surprise.

“I can work. You don’t need to…” Leah pressed her lips. Eliot could hear the smack. “You deserve better than to stay with dad. Come with me!”

“I can’t…”

“We can’t stay!” Leah almost screamed. “If we stay, he will kill us!”

If we both go, he would hunt us down and kill us both… Eliot was too young to put his fear in words. Go, be happy… Their father was a violent man, there was no law, human or divine, that could stop him.

“I must stay,” Eliot said, disentangling from his sister’s arms. I’m not brave enough, you deserve better… Eliot got up, if he kept hearing her words, he would cave in.

“Eli!” Leah called his name with tears in her eyes. “You owe him nothing!”

Eliot stopped in his way to the house. I owe you everything…

Eliot knew it was the right choice, not for him, but for Leah. If his father had a distraction at home, Leah would have a chance to be (a third-rate whore) whatever she wanted to be. Leah had already paid her toll out of hell and then some.

“If he ever gave ma five minutes of happiness, I owe him something,” Eliot said, knowing well his
father would beat him within an inch of his life the moment he noticed Leah was gone. Eliot loved
Leah enough to take the punishment without a tear. “He did more than that. He gave us to ma. I
owe him.”

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The breath entering his chest hurt. The room smelled like peppermint. He was aware of the aches
of his body, but he couldn’t focus his eyes like he had been crying. A white wall in front of him…
no, it was cream-colored. The wall pretended to be soothing, but it made his heart take a tumble.
Something was making the most annoying beeping noise behind him. There were soft steps, quiet
conversations. The sound of rubber wheels on well-polished floors...

I’m in a hospital. Oh, God… a hospital… He tried to push the thought away, but the smell and the
wetness in his backside brought back memories. Did they rape me again? Am I bleeding? Did she
stop my clock again? I don’t remember… I don’t remember!

The breath leaving his chest hurt. Something moved between his ribs. There was something stuck
inside his mouth and he couldn’t spit it. He tried to raise his hand, but there was something holding
his hand down. He tried to kick, same story. Someone had tied him down a hospital bed. The noise
behind him doubled its frequency…

I’m trapped… I’m hurting… Let me go!

There was movement at the foot of his bed. A hand touched him and he wanted to scream, but the
only thing he could do was to writhe in the bed, fighting against his bonds. More hands touching…

“He’s awake,” someone said touching him again. A bright flash of light blinded him for a moment.

Let me go! I don’t want to be here! It fucking hurts!

“Eliot, please,” someone called from behind the light. The name should mean something, but he
was not sure. “Calm down, Eliot. You are in ICU. There is a tube in your mouth. Eliot! I know you
are not comfortable…”

I don’t care! You are hurting me! Let me go!

“Eliot…” Another voice called the same name.

What the heck is an Eliot? He pulled the arm to his chest, the bound bit his flesh.

“He’s getting tacky…”

LET ME GO!

“He’s not even A&O 1 and going for RASS +4. Push the B52 bolus and let him rest…”

LET!

More touching in his shoulder. Cold drops of something bitter on his shoulder...

ME!

Something cold running inside his chest that turned warm in a heartbeat. More touching… They
were touching...

go…
“We need to change the rectal tube,” someone said, parting his buttocks. “We have a leak…”

Don’t touch me…

The patch of the cream-colored wall danced in front of his eyes. Someone touched him between his legs, the catheter moved inside him. He tried to escape their touching, but he was so tired… too tired...

-------------

“Eli…” She called him, passing her thin hand over his hot forehead. “My poor baby…”

“Ma…” He called back, his eyes looking at the cream-colored wall. “I’m fine, ma. Don’t worry.”

I’m always fine. You don’t have to worry. It looks worse than it hurts. Please, don’t cry, ma.

She pulled him closer to her wasted lap, forcing his pounding head over her arm. He felt her caressing his forehead, her fingers running through his short hair.

“He beat you again,” her voice was a quivering murmur. Eliot felt the words like a punch in his belly. No matter what he did, ma always ended up crying.

“I can take it, ma,” he insisted, feeling hollow. “He never hurts me too much. He loves me better than he loves Leah. He never hurts me too much…”

“He shouldn’t hurt you at all,” she replied, kissing the welt his father’s belt left in his shoulder as it could do him any good. He was eight years; he knew mama’s kisses never could make it better. Motherlove never could take the pain away.

I can’t let him hurt Leah or, worse, hurt you. You are in so much pain, ma…

“I can take the punishment. Don’t cry, ma…”

“My poor baby…” She whispered in his ear and her hot, fetid breath caressed his jowl. She wiped his forehead; strips of her rotting flesh clung to his skin.

Am I going to die, ma? That’s why you are comforting me? Is it my time?

“I love you, Eli.” Ma rubbed his aching spots, all of them. Her hand lost some flesh on his surgical scar across his hurting belly. “You are the most special boy in the whole world.”

“I love you, ma,” he replied dutifully because the option was to laugh without joy. He was not special; he was barely average on a good day. Am I dying a failure, ma? After all those days roaming this vale of tears, he had nothing to show for. You should have aborted me, ma… “I’ll never let him hurt you. You have my word.”

“Rock of Ages, cleft for me…” His mother sang that old hymn, hugging him with arms that felt like bare bones covered with dry, tattered skin.

Her touch was so cold that it raised goosebumps immediately. Am I dying, ma? She smelled like candles and dying flowers. She reeked like the sepulcher. Please tell me, I can take it...

-------------

“Eliot,” Parker called, brushing his hair away from his eyes. “Are you with me, Eliot?”
Eliot let out an inarticulate moan. *Don't touch me.* Every inch of his body hurt, and he didn’t want to breathe anymore. Acid rushed inside his chest with each breath. Parker’s soft touch was painful. *It hurts...* The room smelled like peppermint.

“They are going to give you your meds soon,” Parker whispered, her finger tracing the edge of his oxygen mask. “They are going to inject something to your central line and they are going to touch your tushie. Please, don’t try to reach... if you do, they are going to put you in restraints again...”

“Hurts...” Eliot managed to mumble, trying to hide his face in the pillow.

“I know,” Parker’s eyes were wet. “I know it hurts. You are putting such a fight. You are pushing through... Eliot, just a bit more. Please...”

*Don’t cry.* Eliot tried to nod, to let her know he would fight. *I can stand anything but tears.* He wasn’t sure Parker understood him. *Please, don’t cry.* Eliot touched Parker’s hand to stop the petting. *Please, don’t cry...*

“Be brave.” Parker put her head closer to his. Eliot registered the faint sound coming from her ear. “You’ll be safe at home before you notice...”

Eliot sighed. *Not soon enough...* His head hurt. He caught a glimpse of someone moving behind Parker. Something cold slipped under his skin... *Am I getting chemo?*

Parker put her hand over his eyes and he tried to swat that away, without a hint of success. Alcohol hung in the air; Eliot relaxed at the smell... *Alcohol keeps the spiders away...*

“Eliot...” Parker took her hand away and caressed his shoulder. “Are you with me?”

Eliot nodded. *I’m here, I don’t want to...* Parker smiled at him. *Can I go with ma? It hurt less in ma’s bed...*

Someone touched him in the butt. *Don’t touch me!* Eliot bucked forward, trying to escape *(the electric probe)* the touch. Parker held him in place. The nurse’s fingers parted Eliot’s buttocks to have a better look. *Don’t look!*

“Easy...” The tension in Parker’s voice didn’t impart Eliot any confidence. “It will be quick...”

“You are raw,” the nurse commented. There was pity in her voice.

*You did this to me...* Eliot thought without a pause. He had no evidence, but it didn’t matter. *Don’t touch me!* If she didn’t, then it was anyone else wearing the same uniform. *You hurt me.* She touched his aching flesh renewing the pain. *You are hurting me!* Parker held Eliot’s hand against the bed. *Don’t touch me!*

“Eliot, please,” Parker whispered, petting his hair. “I know... I know...”

“Hurts...” Eliot mumbled, tears of pain and humiliation rushing to his eyes. The nurse was scrubbing him with something that smelled chemical and burned worse than his lungs.

“It will be over soon, promise.”

“No...” Eliot did his best to endure it still but another set of hands gripped his flesh. He could feel the cold air touching his hole. “Hurts...”

“I know,” Parker repeated, trying her best to be comforting and failing in the process.
Eliot tossed his head back. They were touching him and their fingers felt like fire. *Don't touch me!*

Pain consumed his whole world, the pain they were causing him.

*I'm a good boy…* The pain was bad but the nausea was coming too. *I didn’t do anything this time…* The idea of throwing up in his oxygen mask horrified him. *It's not fair…* Respite swept in for a moment; they were touching him but that awful burning pain became just a dull ache.

“It’s almost done…” Parker promised, but she was not looking at him.

Eliot sobbed when the alcohol-drenched cotton touched his skin. *Don’t poke me!* He was too tired to protest but he was expecting an insane amount of pain. They didn’t disappoint him.

“Hurts…” Eliot sobbed, too exhausted for crying and suffering too much to help it. His mind was numb and there was only one who could make the pain go away: “Leah!”

“Eliot?” Parker sounded scared.

Eliot couldn’t care, the pain was running from his buttocK to the feet. Throbbing, lacerating, unforgiving…

“Leah!” *They are hurting me, Leah! Please, please…* Leah! *I can’t take it, Leah. I can’t… It’s too much… I really can’t… Make it stop, Leah!… It “Hurts…Leah!”

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Eliot felt nauseous and it scared him blind. Dad had to pick him up from school because Eliot threw up during the sixth period. *Beets don’t taste better the second time…* Dad was as mad as a bull with piles, and he didn’t know Eliot had stolen Leah’s share from the fridge because he was so hungry, he couldn’t sleep. If dad caught wind of his theft, Eliot was sure no one would give five cents for his sorry hide…

Dad dragged him through the front door and Eliot, too scared to cry, felt those infernal beets churning inside his belly again. *I have been bad, I know…* Eliot’s belly hurt and grumbled. *God, please, don’t let me get the runs too…* Ma and Leah were on their way to ma’s room when dad pushed Eliot in. The floor was approaching too fast, Eliot let go his hurting guts to break the fall with his arms.

“Eli!” Ma called out, pushing Leah away.

Eliot felt like he was about to throw up again. This time beets had nothing to do with it. *Don’t cry, ma…* Leah looked spooked and she rushed to catch ma. Eliot looked over his shoulder, trembling. His father had his hand up, ready to hit whatever came into his way. *Ma!*

“Don’t touch me ma!” Eliot jumped in front of his father. His hurting belly forgotten in a blink. His throat hurt when the yell rushed out. “Don’t…!”

“Eli!” Ma cried when her husband’s hand touched Eliot. “Don’t hurt my baby!”

“No, ma!” Leah called out. Eliot looked at them as he was falling, Leah was pushing mom out of the room. “You can’t… Ma! Don’t!”

Eliot spat more beet juice and a bit of blood on the floor. He bounced back to his feet. Ma was safe. Leah will keep ma safe. Whatever happened to Eliot didn’t matter. *Do you want to hurt someone?* Shaking, he raised his eyes to look at his dad. *Here I am.*
Dad was so big, so strong and Eliot tried to be brave. His nostrils flared, his hand became fists, but tears fell the moment Eliot noticed Dad was taking off his belt.

The first lick of the belt landed on Eliot’s arm. I’m sorry I made you mad, dad… The leather struck him hard and pain exploded against his bone. I’m to blame… Eliot tried to suffocate the scream, but he was only eight years. I made you close the store… The next blow got him in the back. It was more bearable. I can take it…

The third blow caught him in the kidneys. Oh, God! Eliot would piss blood for a couple of days, but the only thing Eliot knew was that it hurt too much to bear. It’s my fault… He fell on his knees, warm liquid running down his right leg. I stole Leah’s beets… Eliot had never been more scared in his life and he had never felt more pain.

“Get up,” Dad demanded, pulling Eliot up by the scruff of the neck like the whimpering puppy he was. “Learn to take it like a man, boy!”

Eliot scrambled to his feet. This is my punishment and I’ll take it … “Yes, s-sir!”

Blows fell on Eliot, each one as hard as the last. The belt landed haphazardly on his back, his flank, his legs… I can take it… Eliot lost count of how many times he felt the belt. He didn’t know when his father let him go. I can take it…

Hit me all you want, Eliot thought, pleading at the same time for the torment to be over, just don’t hurt me ma…

By the time his father got tired of beating him, Eliot laid curled on the floor, protecting his head with both hands, crying his eyes out without a sound. The floor was hard and cold. He wanted to throw up again. Crying was the most painful thing in the world…

Through the tears, Eliot witnessed how his father turned around, latching his belt to the loops. He was heading back to the hardware store without checking if Eliot was badly hurt. At that moment, Eliot knew he could never love his dad with the same doting adoration he once did. That knowledge hurt more than the beating.

Eliot cried silently with the face pressed against the cold floor. He was only eight years old; his mother was dying and his father didn’t care for him. He mourned the end of his childhood until God’s infinite mercy granted him some blessed sleep.

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“Eliot, bro…” Hardison roused Eliot with an insisting shake on his shoulder.

Eliot blinked, disoriented, and grumbled something that didn’t qualify as human language. Hardison got a thrill out of the warmth of Eliot’s skin. Eliot was running a fever, a very modest one. Eliot was fighting back.

Again, Hardison thought of what a maddening roller-coaster this disease was. For months, they feared fever. Now, Eliot was feverish and Hardison wanted to kiss some doctors. Eliot was also coughing like a coal miner. Congestion made him cough violently again. Hardison picked up the inhaler and scooped up Eliot from the bed almost without effort.

“Easy…” Hardison mumbled, shaking the inhaler. “Breathe as deep as you can…”

The coughing fit was so bad that Hardison waited until Eliot had to draw air in desperation before pushing the trigger. The mist hit Eliot’s lungs hard, but the coughing took its sweet time to stop.
“Hurts…” Eliot complained, resting his lightweight against Hardison.

Nurses had been titrating his analgesics again. It was a matter of life and death: too much and Eliot would slip into the fog of his brain and he might as well not return to the living; too little and Eliot would start screaming for Leah.

Hardison could swear he could feel Eliot’s bones through his skin. Each hospital stay had chipped away a bit more of Eliot’s bulk; each new treatment made Eliot’s confused brain take a turn for the worse. Nurses had been letting them babysit Eliot because their faces brought less combative fits than the medical personal. It was no wonder: Eliot trusted them and hated nurses with a passion. Hardison believed that Eliot’s animosity had to do with the antibiotic shots that the nurses need to push inside Eliot’s almost nonexistent rear.

“I know…” Hardison held Eliot straight so his lungs could process the medicine.

‘Hurts,’ ‘no,’ and ‘Leah’ had been all the words out of Eliot’s mouth in that last month. The fog was so bad and this prolonged ICU visit was not helping in that department at all, enforced lactulose notwithstanding.

“It’s almost time to take your med…”

“No,” Eliot interrupted him, his eyebrows raised, knotted, and his pupils were big.

“Come on, bro,” Hardison tried to reason with Eliot, fully aware that it was a lost battle. “It’s just a couple of cold bullets and a shot. It will be over soon.”

“No, no, no…” Eliot was getting agitated and tried to push Hardison away. “No… Hurts…”

“I know that shot hurts,” Hardison held Eliot against his chest. “I know you don’t like when they poke you…”

They are saving your life by hurting you, but you don’t get it. Hardison forced Eliot to stay put to prevent him from pulling his central line in his efforts to escape the dreaded shot. You had a hell of a month with viral pneumonia and then that nasty gut infection and now with another pneumonia… and I know they had planned another top-and-bottom lactulose treatment later this week. Hardison sighed, rearranging the oxygen line. I know you are tired, annoyed, and sore through and through...

“It will be over soon,” Hardison promised, hoping Eliot get his drift.

Some of his words might have crossed the fog because Eliot relaxed in Hardison’s arms. His breathing became more regular and deeper. Ammonia levels were high and his hands were shaking badly. Eliot was slipping back into the fog.

Hardison heard Eliot mumble incoherently before he got suddenly tense, with his nostrils flared. In a fraction of second, Eliot’s eyes flew open, his pupils got big and his chest filled to top capacity. Hardison turned his head, the door slid in its rails and he could smell it too. A faint whiff of cat piss… the nurse must have had some drops of the antibiotic on her scrubs.

“No!” Eliot cried out in a panicked howl. “No, no, no… No!”

Hardison didn’t see the strike coming. Eliot punched him in the jaw with a strength no one could suspect in a patient as thin as he was. Hardison saw a shower of lights behind his eyes and the contact with the floor. Stunned, Hardison looked at the bed. Two nurses we’re trying to control Eliot, but Eliot was determined to not take the pain quietly.
“Hurts!” Eliot struck one of the nurses before a coughing fit started to brew inside his loaded chest. “No… No!”

Coughing didn’t stop Eliot; he was a survivor and a fighter. Hardison was on the floor, dazed and unable to get up, but he witnessed how Eliot kicked the second nurse on the chest. On one hand, it was wonderful to see Eliot so full of life after weeks of taking it all with a faint whimper and some tears. On the other, Hardison was sure Eliot just earned an afternoon on restraints.

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Eliot walked through the fog. It was a funny thing, the longer he walked amidst the fog, the less his tired body bothered him. He felt young and almost healthy. He noticed the weight in his hand, something was pulling his fingers down.

His old, battered gold football helmet hung from his fingers by the face mask.

Eliot looked around. The field was empty, people were leaving the bleachers and the night was warm. He touched his face; his fingers slipped over the thin smear of black greasepaint. He could smell the freshly cut grass. It was the first night he played with the Varsity team.

With hopeful eyes, Eliot turned his eyes to the bleachers, looking for his dad. Dad was not there, he knew it. Dad would never miss an afternoon of work, not even to celebrate his boy’s moment of glory. It’s not fair… Other fathers were there, still cheering for their less than stellar sons. I deserved at least that much…

I hate football… Eliot knew it wasn’t true. Sports were the only thing that kept him sane living with his father after his mother died. At that moment, Eliot hated anything and everything that couldn’t pry a shred of approbation from his father’s tight fist. He was sixteen again and felt deserted by the world. Why am I so hungry?

“Eli!” someone shouted from the bleachers.

Eliot shuddered at the sound of that voice. A hand was waving him, a crimson sleeve and a tuft of blond hair were all he could see among a bunch of people. She came! Eliot felt tears in his eyes, gratitude spilled from his eyes. He ran to her, pushing everyone around. In his haste, he let go of his helmet...

They met over the track. Eliot jumped to her arms, hugging her with his full body, too happy for words or even for common sense. Leah laughed, staggering under his one hundred and forty pounds of weight. Oh, to hear that laugh again!

“Great game!” Leah congratulated him, holding to Eliot for dear life. “My baby brother is a great field general!”

“You are here!” Eliot mumbled; his face buried in the crook of her neck. He was crying but his tears didn’t bring any shame. “Oh, God! You are here!”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world!” Leah rubbed that spot between his shoulder blades. Eliot could feel her caress through the shoulder pads. “They said your name on the radio…”

Eliot lost track of her happy prater. It has been two years since he had seen his sister and he missed her dearly. I miss you. I miss you… Eliot drank her smell, wishing he could keep it forever. Leah, God knows how much I miss you!

Leah brought him an apple because Eliot always loved apples better than anything. The tart, fruity
taste filled up his mouth and she passed her fingers through his hair. They were sitting in the bleachers, under the moonlight. *This is heaven…* Eliot looked at her face, she was radiant and relaxed. *I don’t deserve this…* Married life suited her and Eliot was happy for her, so happy his chest hurt.

“So, ‘fess up, Sonsie. I don’t buy you came just to see me play. Any news?” Eliot asked, munching the apple core, seeds and all. “Are you going to make me an uncle?”

“Oh, gosh, no!” She laughed again. She caressed his face with a piece of tissue, trying to get the grease out of his face. “We don’t have two quarters to rub together. We can’t even afford the pill. Kids will have to wait…”

“Oh…” Eliot swallowed the fruit. “So, you are not getting any?”

Eliot felt a rush of compassion for himself. He was so young and so innocent back then...

“We are saddle-backing,” she replied because Leah was never shy.

Ma and Dad held so many secrets that honesty was the only trading token between Eliot and Leah. Truth bonded them together. Whatever Eliot asks, Leah will answer, and that’s how Eliot knows he’s loved. Eliot would never doubt Leah’s words because Leah loved him better than their parents ever did.

“You must love him very much…” Eliot was sixteen and naïve to a fault.

“It’s as good a way as any!” Leah replied, trying not to laugh too loudly. “I want to make him happy!”

“Bake him a pie!”

Leah’s honesty was a sword with two edges. After years of personal experience, Eliot still felt ill at ease at the thought of his sister taking it up the ass.

“Oh, pooh!” Leah disregarded his discomfort blithely and punched him in the arm. “You’ll love it once you have tried it!”

Leah was right, she was always right. *How hard I was on you, Leah…*

“You make me think dad is right,” Eliot heard himself say in a sullen mumble, hating himself for those words that shattered the happiness of that night. When Eliot was sixteen, he was a first-rate asshole. “You are a third-rate whore…”

Leah would never doubt a word from Eliot’s mouth because Eliot loved her better than their parents ever did. *I’m sorry, I’m so sorry!* Eliot felt pain when her face changed expressions, *I didn’t mean it like that!* and he wanted to die when she brought her hands up to cover her hurt. *Forgive me!* Eliot never used that word against any woman ever again. *Leah…* From that day on, that word burned Eliot’s mouth.

“Great game, Eli…” Leah congratulated him again and got up. Tears were rolling down her cheeks. “I… I’ll try to come to another game if I can…”

“Leah…” Eliot felt the same sunken feeling in his gut he felt that night and he got up, stumbling upon his cleats. “Leah! Wait! I’m sorry!”

Leah was running in the field, on her way to her car. The night was so still Eliot could hear her
crying. Eliot followed her, feeling how the grass blades poked his compression stockings. *Forgive me!* Eliot called her name, stumbling. His chest ached when fresh air enters his sore lungs.

“Leah!” Eliot called again, wheezing because he was sure he would never have a chance to apologize ever again. “I was a jerk! I didn’t want to hurt you! May God smite…”

And for a moment, it felt like God had smitten Eliot before he could finish the sentence. His oxygen-deprived brain stopped working for a second and his legs gave way. He was falling…

_The human brain can’t stand too much reality, laddie..._

“Eli!” Leah called out, holding him straight against her.

“Dad said I killed you,” Eliot sobbed against his sister’s chest. The needle in his arm moved and the night breeze made his hospital gown flap against his legs. The hubs of his central line dug on his chest. “I am such a coward. I should have asked your boy a long time ago… I never wanted to hurt you… never… Never!”

“If I ever have a boy, I’m going to call him Eliot,” Leah whispered the same words she had said that night, kissing Eliot on the top of his head. Leah caressed the skin under his oxygen cannula to brush away the tears. Eliot was aware of all the plastic tubes poking his aching body, but he didn’t care. “Because Eli is the goodest boy…”

Eliot sobbed again and tried to hug his sister, but something held his hands back. _Leah!_ The padded cuffs appeared around his wrists and he desperately tried to reach out, to clutch Leah’s hand. _Please, don’t leave me!_ His fingers were touching the cold, uncaring fog.

_LEAH!

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Eliot rested his weight against Hardison. Nurses had approved Eliot’s aimless walks because his ammonia levels were within manageable ranges and they had spent enough time cajoling Eliot into feeding his neglected body. Eliot’s fragile frame had gained some new ounces and they better make sure they were functional, even if Eliot didn’t have a mind to use them.

They all worried about his confused brain. The nurses called Eliot’s epic raving ICU delirium, a condition provoked by a mixture of lack of sleep and, at the same time, an excess of chemicals and invasive treatments. They had explained that once Eliot gets enough rest, he would be ready to go home and rest some more. They said you need three or five days of rest for each day spent inside the hospital.

There had been some improvements. At least, Eliot could say who and where he was, and the reason he was staying at the hospital or some approximate. In addition to all that, Eliot was able to identify Parker and Hardison and he was not in danger to slip into a coma. Parker had said that those had been the longest six weeks in the history of humanity.

“Are you tired?” Parker asked, holding Eliot closer as he walked and turned his head in silence as if he were looking for someone. “You are breathing rather heavily…”

Eliot shook his head and, mechanically, took another step. Parker looked at Hardison, worried because Eliot refused to speak unless it was related to his treatment. Hardison assumed he was still trying to sort himself out and he couldn’t blame him. All that raving must be hard for a brain to endure.
“Let’s go to your room,” Hardison invited, moving at Eliot’s speed. “You can do your breathing exercises and try to cough up the rest of your congestion…”

Eliot looked at Hardison as if he was not sure what to reply. Coughing would scare Hardison too, if he were in Eliot’s shoes or, rather, slippers.

“You can go home faster if you humor the nurses, Eliot.”

“I bet you miss your bed,” Parker said with a big, fake smile, punching him in the arm in a playful fashion.

Eliot stopped and his lips moved without a voice. The word he had spoken was short and ended in a dry sob. Hardison noticed his bottom lip hanging, quivering, it was the first time he reacted that way to Parker’s antics. Eliot shook his head, dry sobbed again and took another step.

“Did I say something wrong?” Parker asked, following Eliot’s lead to nowhere.

“They were in the fog,” Eliot mumbled, his breath came out in a dry sob that made Hardison cringe. “They are gone…”

Eliot sounded so utterly dejected that they stopped and hugged him. Parker rested her head on Eliot’s shoulder. Eliot let them cradle him between their bodies. His body was between them, but his mind was miles away.

“I’m all alone again…” Eliot declared with a flat voice.

Hardison couldn’t fathom who else could be in the fog besides that Leah he kept calling with a pleading voice, but he understood—too late—that the fog gave Eliot a kind of comfort outside their reach when Eliot needed it most. Parker had her eyes closed and she was tearing up.

All that raving was hard for a brain to endure.

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“It’s cold outside. Yesterday we had hail,” Parker said, putting Eliot’s hoodie next to him on the unmade hospital bed. “We need to keep you warm and cozy…”

“Stop babying me!” Eliot protested, forcing down another spoonful of lactulose-laden pudding.

Eliot was sitting at the edge of the bed, legs crossed, with the heels of his boots hooked on the aluminum guardrail. The doctor’s orders were to keep Eliot in the hospital if he didn’t finish the whole dish. Parker was sure Dr. Robertson was joking, but Eliot was not taking any chances.

“It’s cold,” Parker insisted with a smile as she folded Eliot’s blanket. The black gym bag waited for them on the floor by the bed. “That’s a fact.”

“I don’t care, I want to get out of here!”

Parker smiled and pushed the overbed table away to sit next to him. Eliot scooted to the side, knocking the empty IV pole. Eliot cursed the hospital when the pole hit the wall. An hour was not enough to console him from the discomfort of his last hospital doses and he was making the most of every chance to complain.

“You’re cranky.” Food didn’t help his bad mood. “Are you having a headache? Your ass still hurt?”
Eliot choked on the medicated pudding; Parker patted his back. After all those months without something resembling privacy, Eliot was still sensitive and shy about his backside. Parker had to remember not to tell him about that GI infection and nasty rash on his rear if she could help it. Eliot’s memory was faulty due to the fog—he had no recollection of the last two months, he barely remembered last week—, Parker thought it was the only silver lining.

“Hardison must be waiting for us,” Parker said to distract Eliot’s mind. “What do you want to do when we get home?”

“Can we watch a movie?” Eliot put the empty dish on the overbed table. “I’m craving popcorn.”

“I like the idea,” Parker agreed with a smile because Eliot didn’t want to sulk alone. She picked up Eliot’s blanket from the bed. “Hardison had been talking about that werewolf movie….”

The soft knock on the door cut off Parker’s chat. Eliot became tense when he saw the tray in the young nurse’s hands. It was the same red plastic tray that nurses used to bring him his medicines. Parker, resting her head on Eliot’s boney shoulder, heard the polite introduction speech with half the attention it deserved; Eliot was breathing rapidly. She slid her hand inside his, trying to tell him there was nothing to be afraid of.

“As policy dictates, I must make sure your vitals are right before we discharge you,” the nurse said, placing the tray next to the empty dish. “Can I proceed?”

Eliot looked at the nurse for a moment with furrowed brow before taking a deep breath. Parker didn’t need to wonder what was in Eliot’s mind: he was making an analysis of the young woman. Eliot finally agreed with a tired nod and a resigned sigh. Soon, the nurse fulfilled the mandatory procedure—temperature, blood pressure, pulse—and she offered Eliot some paperwork to sign before going for the wheelchair.

“What was it?” Parker asked, helping Eliot out of the bed. He was moving very slowly but didn’t seem to be in pain.

“Did you really expect me to be a jerk to a student?” Eliot asked before putting the hoodie on.

“What was the pretty distinctive thing that gave her away?” Parker couldn’t help the smile when Eliot tried to be sneaky and rub the place of the last shot.

“The badge that read ‘student nurse’ attached to her uniform…” Eliot signed the papers without a second thought.

Parker picked up the gym bag and the fleece blanket and looked at the documents. His signature was a capital ‘E’ and a capital ‘S’ and some scribbles, Eliot had signed up the release with his real name instead of the alias. Parker had no time to comment, the nurse rolled in the wheelchair and Eliot sat in without complaint. He even made Parker a sign for her to hurry up that barely disguised his annoyance.

“Take a hit of your inhaler,” Parker said, covering Eliot’s legs with his green blanket. “We’re going home.”

Chapter End Notes
Emission control
FINE

Chapter Summary

Parker and Hardison learned that the name Eliot kept repeating at the hospital carried particular importance and, of course, there was only one sensible way to deal with that knowledge: plan a job.

Chapter Notes

No floating boxes or dark themes this time (hey, they need time for self-care!), there is still some sadness and frustration, though.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

But I won’t go so far as to say that I’m fine
Too much of what I’ve felt for you remains
I’d like to believe in the healing hands of time
But the truth is I really can’t say
If I’m gettin’ better or just used to the pain.
-Tracy Lawrence

Eliot rinsed one last time, trying to wash out the hospital’s aroma. After three weeks, he could still detect the antibacterial soap smell on his hair. For the first time since he could shower again—with his back to the spray to protect the central line—, he was enjoying bath time. His left side was still sore, but at least he could use his right arm again. Warm water was a blessing for his aching back and even the big scar on his belly felt less numb.

The plastic film taped to his collarbone splashed water against his face. The sensation drove him back to his childhood and made him smile. It was the touch of the river and of the water balloon wars. Of summer rain falling gently on the bridge of his nose while kissing...

“Hey, Eliot,” Hardison poked his head inside the bathroom.

“Hardison!” Eliot exclaimed, taking a towel from the rack to cover. “You can knock, you know?”

Eliot had conceded to shower without a curtain and without passing the bolt because his blood work was all kinds of wrong and he had scared them both blind with the pneumonia crisis. Better safe than sorry, and all that stuff, but privacy was sacred even from Hardison and Parker.

“Whatever, man.” Hardison half-closed it and spoke louder through a narrow crack between the framework and the door. “Leverage business. Parker and I need to bolt. And don’t try to tag along! We had had this discussion a thousand times…”

“I’m going to be fine!” Eliot could spot a lost battle in a heartbeat, but his capitulation needed some conditions. “Don’t send that harpy!”
“Harpy is already on her way!” Parker shouted from the other room.

“We will try to be here for chemo…”

“Dammit, Hardison!” Eliot shouted, tossing the bathrobe over his shoulders. “Go to work and leave me alone!”

“We mean it!” Parker promised with cheerful voice, but she was already running down the stairs.

Eliot stood inside the shower for a bit, half-dressed and dripping, hearing how they ran around the house, gathering stuff. The house was so quiet he could hear the snap of Hardison’s laptop and the way Parker dragged her modified harness and ropes through the side kitchen door. Parker was heading for the driver’s seat, and that meant they were in a time-constrained mission.

“Good luck, team…” Eliot whispered when he heard Lucille’s doors closing.

Without any hurry, Eliot walked toward his bedroom, enjoying the silence. He got his bottoms right and sat on the bed with a black tank top next to him to gather his breath.

His eyes fell on the prescription tray next to a landline phone used as a paperweight for Quinn’s neatly folded dollar under the glare of the sidelight. For a second, Eliot was not sure which one was more depressing: the drugs, the promised lay, or the phone that never rings.

With a tired sigh, Eliot opened the nightstand drawer and took out his battered wallet. He shuffled through the card places until he found his old First Kentucky Bank savings card. The first thing he had owned independently of his father, the place that allowed him to gather the means to escape. He pulled it out and turned it around. His most secret hidey-hole was the back of that card: Leah, his sister, smiled at him cradling Sawyer in her arms.

That was the last picture she could send him. Eliot was not with The Unit next time she wrote, and Damien Moreau didn’t run a postal service as far as Eliot knows.

Sawyer...

Eliot let his fingers run through his hair. Sawyer was not a baby anymore. They have exchanged words around New Year before Eliot noticed something was wrong below the ribcage. Sawyer wanted to spread his wings but the same albatross his uncle was able to shake was closing around his neck...

Eliot turned his eyes to the clock; it was a quarter to six. Three hours ahead…

He pushed Quinn’s dollar to the side, under the prescription tray, and dialed those fourteen digits. No amount of brain fog could make Eliot forget that One Five Oh Two were the first numbers to call home; the other ten were just muscle memory.

The line made the usual noises while it established a connection half a country away. Eliot made a visual recon of the old hardware store: he could see the dust gathering on the handles of the nails and screws drawers, the ill closed flaps of carton boxes, the coils of barbed and electric wire, the muted ring of the old-fashioned till...

Eliot tried to hold the phone between his jaw and his shoulder and the incision in his collarbone smarted. With a grunt, he passed it to the right side just in time to hear a gruff, hick-like voice barking in his ear.

“...hardware store. We are closing!”
“Damn it…” Eliot whispered wishing he could say something stronger. It was not his dad, but Sawyer’s father, Josh. He sounded drunk.

“You need to speak louder, mister.”

“Is Sawyer there?” Eliot did his best to use his non-threatening voice.


“I know who you are… When did your balls drop, Baby Eli?” There was nothing surprising in that belligerent tone, although the personal attack was new. “So, you got out of the hospital, huh?” For a second, Eliot wondered if that last sound was as annoying when he uttered it. “I guess Hell was full. Stay away from Sawyer. He doesn’t want to know of you…”

Eliot hung up and looked at the phone for a long time. He tried to gulp a couple of times, but there was something trapped in his throat and it hurt something awful. By the time the spare keys scraped the front door, his eyes were smarting.

“I’m upstairs!” Eliot shouted as soon as the first crepe shoe entered the house. He really didn’t want to deal with Nurse right now. “I know! Meds in fifteen and I’m not hungry!”

“Goodnight to you too!” She shouted back with cheerful sarcasm.

“Fuck you,” Eliot whispered as he put his old bank card inside the wallet.

Eliot laid on the bed with his wallet on top of his naked chest. His eyes focused on the unvarnished knot of the beam above his head. He felt his nostrils flared and anger building inside.

“I won’t cry,” he promised to himself as he felt rage and impotence threatening to spill. “I’ll try again tomorrow.”

His next breath came out ragged. Eliot cursed his treacherous body again.

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Parker was squirming by his side. First, she crossed her legs and then she pulled them under her bottom. Hardison wondered how did she manage to do that in this regional flight. She was now sipping soda through a straw and making more noise than she should.

“He’s in good hands, baby girl,” Hardison tried to placate her anxiety.

He didn’t need to guess why Parker was so antsy. The last chemotherapy bag should be dripping inside Eliot’s line and he didn’t have anyone to hold his hand. It wasn’t like Eliot needed any moral support, but some had to catch those hands if Nurse rubbed his fur the wrong way.

“We should be there,” Parker said and sucked a bit more of melted ice.

“We couldn’t stop the con and return later,” Hardison replied, giving his attention to the blinking screen. “It was you who made the call.”

“Because that’s what Eliot expected of me, but I hated every second.”

“It was a good call,” Hardison reassured her and turned the notebook around. “We’ll be there in a couple of hours. Now, tell me what do you make of this.”
Parker looked at the screen and got quiet for a long moment. Her eyes surveyed the list with greedy curiosity and a small smile started to appear on her lips. Her empty plastic cup rested on Hardison’s tray.

“Is that Kentucky’s code…?”

“Yes. Someone has been calling home.” Hardison said raising his index.

Parker looked at him with a clear sign of confusion in her face.

“In any case,” Hardison put both hands on the keyboard with a disappointed expression, “Eliot has been busy while we were away.”

“But why?”

“He should have made peace with his father…”

“...or maybe he has been chatting with Aimee.”

“Could be…” Hardison smiled when she put her head on his shoulder. “Hope E.’s in better humor. Fourteen calls in two days, that should be a record!”

“... and that’s the reason they are all bitching.” Eliot, legs crossed with a cup of ginger lemon tea on hand, finished his summation of the Turkish soap opera in the screen.

Eliot looked comfortable and a bit sleepy with his hair pulled back in the messiest man bun and his left shoulder covered with Parker’s puppy blanket. The bag was dripping into the central line slowly.

“That’s a better reason than the ones in my shows.” Nurse said sipping her cup. “How’s that upset stomach?”

“Tea helps.”

“It’s a good tea. Very tasty.”

“A friend brought it from Israel,” Eliot said, extending his legs. “I should thank her next time I see her.”

The movement made him notice Parker and Hardison, standing by the door and watching the back and forth with hanging jaws.

“Hey, welcome home,” Eliot positively beamed at them. “You’ve arrived just in time! They are about to see if Hürrem is going to have another boy.”

“Oh, cool!” Parker kicked her shoes on the way to the bed and went to cuddle next to Eliot.

“I’m making popcorn!” Hardison declared and turned his back to the room but he didn’t wander far. There was a question he was aching to ask.

“Another cup of tea?” Nurse asked picking up Eliot’s cup.

“Yes, please.”
“Does this thing have subtitles?”

Hardison waited until Nurse came his way to ask in a whisper: “Eliot is very agreeable today. What drug do we owe the pleasure to?”

“Lactulose in his tea, Ativan with his meds,” Nurse replied in the same tone as they climb down the stairs. “Eliot’s in a nice, cozy place. He even took his supplementary shots without a peep.”

Hardison nodded with a smile. He didn’t blame her for playing dirty. Eliot was a handful, even at his best behavior and Eliot’s prescription included Ativan PRN. If Eliot’s cantankerous behavior was not PRN enough to give him a taste of tranks, Hardison would be hard-pressed to find a better one.

“But try as I might, I couldn’t make him take the cold bullets, because my name is not Hardison,” The smile on her face stung Hardison hard. “He will be very queasy… You better don’t leave him alone once I go home. I would love to stay another night, but I'm exhausted…”

Hardison’s smile waned when Nurse reminded him of his mishandling, but it disappeared completely at those dreadful news.

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Parker looked Eliot sleep. Moonlight was enough to see him clearly. With his back towards her, Eliot laid curled, his head rested next to Alec’s. He was sweating and making short, gulping sounds. It was so weird to see him sleep.

Parker knelt and extended her hand, calculating where she should put her hand to make him awake. The central line still gave her a lot of anxiety.


“What is it, Parker?”

“You promise to answer if I ask you a question?”

“What is it?” Eliot sounded cranky.

“Why have you been calling a Kentucky number?”

“Were you monitoring my calls?” Now he sounded just pissed off.

“Only because you were alone, what’s the harm?”

“Why do you care?” Eliot sat on the bed and lit up the bedside lamp.

Light roused Hardison. “What are you two doing?”

“I’m looking for the nausea spray and Parker is bugging me about Kentucky.”

“Babe, why are you pestering him in the middle of the night?” Hardison complained as Eliot used the spray twice. “You know he needs his rest after chemo… and I need to rest too after that con.”

“How was that con?” Eliot asked with his hand over his nose before he pressed the plunger again.

“Don’t change the topic!” Parker sprang to her feet feeling indignant.
“Parker, he’s right.” Hardison sat upon the bed, blinking at the bright light. “We haven’t told him about the job.”

“That can wait until morning.”

“This Kentucky business too.”

“God, I’m going to be sick…” Eliot moaned, trying to put his head between his legs.

“Easy, man,” Hardison said, kneeling on the bed to hold Eliot. He had no qualms about the central line. “Easy. Breathe through it.”

“Is it for the chemo or for Kentucky?”

“Chemo!” They both answered between clenched teeth.

“Oh, Ok.” Parker attempted to pat Eliot’s back.

“Parker, err… Parker!” Hardison stopped her; busy as he was holding Eliot’s hair back. “Can you bring him a glass of cold water? You know that settles his gut.”

“Ok, be right back…”

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Eliot grunted again. Parker wiped his forehead with a cool rag and Hardison pulled the blankets closer. Dawn crept into the room after what felt like a very long night.

“I hate dry heaves…” Eliot complained, his eyes were drowsy.

“Try to rest, bro…” Hardison hugged him again and smiled when Parker did the same.

“I’m not sleepy, just very tired.” Eliot showed his I-think-I-might-throw-up-again smile and looked at the beam over their heads. “I was trying to reach someone, Parker.”

“Huh?” Parker sounded confused.

“That’s why I was calling Kentucky.”

“Oh… Did you?”

“No.” Eliot rested his cheek on Parker’s head. “I reckon my dad and his dad didn’t let him be near the phone.”

“Whose dad?”

“My nephew’s.”

Parker put her arm across Eliot’s chest. He was getting warmer between them.

“Your nephew…” Alec repeated, checking the collarbone bandage. It was still dry.

“My sister’s boy. I spoke to him over the phone one day when he was little and I was in Myanmar. I have been calling him on as frequently as I can.” Eliot stopped to gulp through another wave of nausea.

“How’s he like?” Parker asked to distract him.
“Sawyer’s a great kid. He’s brilliant and he wants to attend divinity school.”

“I bet he’s as tall as you now.”

“I don’t know.” Eliot closed his eyes with a tired sigh. “I’ve never seen him.”

Parker looked over Eliot to meet Hardison’s eyes. Hardison nodded. From what they know of Eliot’s family, that detail was completely credible.

“And what about your sister?” Parker asked, resting her head on Eliot’s chest.

“Leah is gone,” Eliot mumbled and there was nothing in his face that betrayed his feelings.

They exchanged a confused stare. That was the name Eliot was calling while raving with ICU delirium and high ammonia while they treated his pneumonia. Eliot was too sick to remember, but they both had haunting memories of him calling for Leah with a helpless and inconsolable voice in the middle of the night.

“She died while I was working for Moreau.”

Hardison kissed Eliot’s temple, moved by the recollection. Those words were enough to convey Eliot’s lost in the most tragic way. Eliot huffed at the caress, but he leaned toward Hardison anyway. Parker rose from the bed to close the drapes. By the time she returned to bed, Eliot was snoring gently and Hardison was looking at her with veiled eyes.

“We need to sleep, Parker,” Hardison’s observation was more than an invitation.

“I know.” Parker got under the blankets and extended her hand. “But once we’ve enough rest you know what we are going to do, don’t you?”

“Of course, girl,” Hardison took Parker’s hand and didn’t let it go. “We are going to steal us a nephew.”

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“How’s Eliot doing?” Parker asked, dragging her tools of the trade to the control table.

Hardison pushed a couple of buttons and the screen showed a corner shot of the room where Eliot sat in lotus position with his eyes glued to another screen. Camera resolution was so good that they could notice Eliot was forming words and the color of his central line clamps.

“It’s the same thing he does when we are around,” Parker said tilting her head to the right. “He sits in front of the screen and practices Turkish with that stupid soap opera. Why doesn’t he want us there?”

“He just needs his space, Parker,” Hardison replied checking four databases at the same time. “If learning a new language and watching a bit of TV is what he needs to work off the trauma, Eliot can do it with my blessings.”

“What trauma?”

Hardison looked at her with exasperated incredulity before giving up and changing the image on the screen.

“I have been looking for any Leah Spencer related to Bourbon County, Kentucky, and so far, I’ve found a Leah May Spencer married to a Joshua Aristotle…” Hardison huffed as he projected the
marriage certificate, “What kind of maniac names their boy ‘Aristotle’?”

Parker snorted as she sorted her collection of lockpicks.

“Married on... September 27th, 1996. I have a bunch of tax contributions in several countries inside the Bluegrass under both of their names, but all of those stopped around 2007. Apparently, they know about safe sex because a baby wasn’t born until 2000, but there was a massive flood and they didn’t have a reliable cloud in those days. Besides the live birth notice, I can’t confirm that’s the baby we are looking for.”

“What about her parents?”

“Good thinking,” Hardison pulled another digitized document. “Yup, that’s our gal: daughter of Elijah John Spencer and Sarah Spencer, born February 21th, 1976.”

“Can you find Eliot’s birth certificate?”

“What do we need that for?”

“Aren’t you curious to know if he has a middle name?” Parker asked with a mischievous smile.

“Eyes on the prize, baby,” Hardison replied, clicking his tongue. “We are stealing us a nephew, not a beating.”


Hardison changed the screen again while rolling his eyes. Eliot was resting against the pillows with his lips still, the soap opera was still running on his screen. “Napping.”

“Does napping counts against his free-from-us time?”

“I don’t know and you won’t believe how many Sawyers born in the naughts are in Kentucky right now… Babe, do you want to go babysit Eliot? Go, but please, I need to get in the zone if I’m to find Eliot’s nephew.”

Parker pouted and returned to her gear. Hardison turned his attention to the database and Eliot coughed on the screen.

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Eliot had been cooking since they had returned from Dr. Robertson’s office. Hardison didn’t know what was his friend cooking, but it smelled better than anything he had tasted in the last six months. Six months of hospital food and take-out can ruin a man’s appetite. The rhythmic sound of the knife against the chopping board was driving Alec Hardison crazy, besides that, it was a pleasure to have Eliot in the kitchen again.

“Hardison, come here,” Eliot barked, stirring the contents of the pot.

Alec put down the tablet, screen against the table, and approached Eliot.

“Taste it,” Eliot offered him a spoonful of a thick liquid. His breath was a little heavy.

Hardison rolled his eyes, opened a drawer and offered Eliot the small dish to pour the contents. They couldn’t risk to exchange bacteria at this moment. Eliot obliged and Hardison took the contents in one sip. His eyes opened in appreciation.
“Good?” Eliot asked putting the spoon down and resting his weight against the counter. “Not too salty?”

“This stew is awesome,” Hardison said and he meant it.

Eliot nodded and took a kitchen rag from his sweatpants pocket and coughed into it. Hardison pressed his lips with apprehension. Eliot’s chest sounded loaded.

“Vapor,” Eliot explained, but his breath was wheezing even worse. “The stew’s not ready yet and I’m done. Can you finish it?”

“Tell me what to do.”

“Fifteen minutes,” Eliot pointed at the bowl with corn and lima beans, “and then another ten. And then, it’s ready.”

“Do you want to lie down on the sofa?”

Hardison pointed at their little living room without any hope of Eliot taking him up to his offer. Eliot had said those couches were as comfortable as a pile of bricks and he has no use for the big screen that was the centerpiece of the place. The offer was made mostly to keep Eliot out of his room where he often pouts and sulks. That was not healthy for his spirit or his mood.

“I rather go upstairs and have a stretch out in my bed.” Eliot coughed again. “I think I’m warm again and it would be a better strategic place to fall asleep.”

Hardison nodded, conceding that that was a reasonable idea. ‘Strategic place’ had become their code word for those times when Eliot felt weak and might not return down.

“Use the inhaler,” Hardison told Eliot, out of habit. Eliot would do it—even without Hardison’s recommendation—because it has proved efficacy, but good advice is never wasted. “I’ll carry you a bowl when it’s ready.”

Hardison moved to the stove and Eliot walked slowly toward the stairs, but he turned around before taking the first step.

“Hardison, can you…?”

“Of course, man.” Hardison, setting the kitchen clock. He took good care of not meeting Eliot’s eyes when he accepted. “No problem.”

Heavy steps and Turkish language after that, Eliot was safe in his bed. Hardison turned on the TV to catch the news and to cover the fact that he was working hard on his tablet. They were hunting Eliot’s nearer kin and that was all shades of vexing. Alec couldn’t figure out how a teenager in this day and age wouldn’t cast out a digital shadow.

“That’s why uncle only calls you to a landline number, Sawyer,” Alec groaned when his web crawlers returned with nothing to show. “You don’t even have a Facebook page.”

The kitchen clock came alive and Alec poured the corn and beans into the pot, trying to make an inventory of the sources he had. There was a registry in Eliot’s old High School of one Sawyer with the adequate last name but the date of birth didn’t match. Hardison couldn’t get a copy of the High School yearbook because High Schools in Eliot’s neck of the woods had stopped making them due to lack of quorum and other pressing budget issues five years ago. The local walk-in clinic didn’t have digital records. All shades of infuriating.
Parker found Alec stirring the pot. Her face showed a nice flush and she looked relaxed. For a second, Hardison blessed the existence of Peggy Hurley and her catering services in Portland. Then, he remembered Parker could grift should the need arise.

“Did you have fun, Parker?”

“Yeah, uh-huh, it was awesome. Peggy sent her love and wonders if Eliot wants a job when he’s back on his feet,” Parker replied, hanging her bag from a hook next to the kitchen door before her voice raised. “What did the doctor say?”

That settled it. She was grifting.

“It’s bronchitis, babe,” Hardison said with his eyes on the spoon as if he was pouring acid instead of a stew. He still had bad memories of the time Eliot got pneumonia between the second and the third chemo session. It was scary to be in the hospital without any active hitters. “Another course of antibiotics, liquids and a whole lot of rest.”

Parker sat down in the breakfast bar and anxiety pooled around her. Hardison took out a tray and put the bowl in without a comment.

“Eliot will pull this one through too. He’s in better shape than he was last time, babe,” Hardison extended his hand to pat Parker’s. “He even made stew…”

“It’s that burgoo?”

“He’s thinking of home,” Hardison fetched a package of saltines and put them next to the bowl.

“But he has stopped calling…”

“He hasn’t stopped wanting.” Hardison moved to the fridge and took out one of those farmer’s market juice bottles to complete Eliot’s dinner.

“Give me that.” Parker extended her hand. “I’ll carry the tray up.”

“Parker, Eliot asked me to take care of the jab tonight. If you want that job, you can have it too…” Hardison waited for a second before Parker put her hand away. “No? Ok, all the ungrateful tasks come to me…” Hardison complained, mockingly, while he picked up the tray. He passed by Parker’s side and kissed her on the cheek.

“You are a hero, Alec Hardison.”

“I know, babe, and hear me well: once Eliot is out of the woods, we need to plan a trip to dip our toes in the Kentucky River.”

“Did you find anything?”

“No, and that’s the trouble…”

Chapter End Notes

_Fucked-up, insecure, neurotic, and emotional_
NOK

Chapter Summary

Tracking Eliot's nephew involved a journey to his hometown, academic misconduct, an interview with his immediate family, a mystery and coffee, but if reuniting him with his nephew was an easy task, you wouldn't need Leverage, would you?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He's gonna get in trouble. We're gonna get in fights.  
I'm gonna lose my temper and some sleep.  
It's safe to say that I'm gonna get my payback, if he's anything like me.  
-Brad Paisley

“So, this is Shawhan, Kentucky,” Parker said, resting her binoculars against her chest. “I’m totally underwhelmed.”

“I’m with you,” Hardison agreed to try to find two bars of phone signal. “The most impressive thing that came from here is Eliot Spencer.”

“The most impressive thing is that Eliot Spencer had escaped from here at all.” Parker surveyed again the little community. She had spent her younger days in places that counted their population by the thousands. “I can’t deny it has its charms if you want to live like they did a hundred years ago… What’s the population?”

“No one had cared to register it, so I assume it’s less than two hundred souls.”

Parker pulled out a bottle of tepid water from the passenger seat and took a long gulp. “So, what do we know…?”

“Eliot’s birth was registered here, but we don’t know if his family stayed here.” Hardison looked at the sky, trying to orient himself. In the end, he pointed to a gray building in the distance. “That building there is called Old Spencer’s place. It was registered to Eliot’s grandpa name, now it’s a halfway house for wounded veterans…”

Parker raised an inquisitive eyebrow. The detail was too obvious to let it slid.

“Yeah, I thought the same thing, but I couldn’t find the name of the new owner.” Hardison agreed to Parker’s deduction and moved to the driver’s door. “No one in this forgotten place has digital records I could hack on.”

“Ok. Eliot was a quarterback, which means high school.” Parker sat shotgun with her water bottle between her legs.

“The two closest ones are Paris and Bourbon.” Hardison managed the curve in the road. “Eliot was a Colonel. I bet they are sending Sawyer to the same one if that’s close to the hardware store.”
“Sawyer should be…”

“A junior, Parker.” They sped in front of the ancient building of Shawhan Baptist Church in search for Larue Road. “He’s a junior.”

“We need to recon the place, then.”

“That’s a given, babe.” Hardison kept his eyes on the road because the dirt was sticking to the windshield. “There is only one trouble: how are we going to know which one is the right Sawyer? It’s not like we can go asking: ‘Are you Eliot Spencer’s long-lost nephew, Sawyer?’ to every strapping stud we meet.”

Parker gave Hardison a stunned look: how dare he insinuate they could make that rookie mistake. “Are we properly carded?”

“We are. I’m a Reed College rep and you are a headhunter for Portland State. We have three days.”

“More than enough.”

They were part of the crew who ran the wire in half an hour after all.

“...”

“You can’t hack a hick,” Hardison repeated as he looked at the sea of paper in front of him while his laptop sucked dry the minimal, insecure and very basic scholar database. He loosened the perfect Windsor knot of his dark tie.

“Tell me about it,” Parker answered in his earpiece. “I have seen enough baby faces these past two days to make me forget how a grown-up should look like.”

“I’m starting to believe that this Sawyer is a hallucination born from chemo brain!”

Radio silence informed Hardison he made a mistake, but he had too much to deal with to attempt an apology. They could mend fences in bed tonight, hearing Eliot’s ranting voicemails. That always improved Parker’s humor. In days like these, when the number of voicemails reached double digits, Hardison thinks they didn’t pay Nurse enough to babysit Eliot.

Yesterday, Hardison dedicated it to their cover story. As a representative of a college, Hardison asked access to all the Junior alumni. Hardcopies. Sorted by registration number. At the end of the day, Hardison had pinpointed four possible candidates to invite to Reed College, all of them with all the mandatory requisites. Hardison doubted they all could muster the resources to go to the other side of the country for Junior’s Visit Day, but Parker and he were willing to pay for them if this wild goose chase proved fruitful.

Today was the Find Sawyer day. BCHS has their day to day lists and similarly connected to a local server and Hardison, without a hit of shame, sailed right into it. Hardison set aside a program to cross-reference all the information of the last three school years against a few critical keywords. Eliot hadn’t given them a lot to work with—"Brilliant" and "Religious" were of little help in the Bible Belt—, and Hardison was hoping excessive pride hadn’t tainted the information provided.

Hardison fixed the knot of his tie and went to the soda machine. The brain runs on sugar, after all. He bought one can of that regional delicacy made with real oranges and real lime. The sound of carbonated gas escaping a tight canister was sweet music to Hardison’s ears. He raised the can and his eye caught something reflecting on the plastic surface of the soda machine.
“Strange…”

He hadn’t noticed before how close Archives were from the trophy case and wall of memory of the Colonels or else, he would have gone cheering his bleak day with the image of a teenager Eliot. The memory wall spotted some tale-telling stains.

Hardison turned around and the bell rang over his head. A wave of high schoolers rushed to their next class, some of them polite enough to nod when they passed by Hardison.

The only state laws dealing with smoking in Kentucky concerns itself with the prohibition of consuming in government offices, universities, and the state capitol. Bourbon County High School was supposed to be a smoke-free campus, but Hardison had counted five e-cigs just in the last minute.

The thing about smoke it’s that its residues are airborne and they stick to the walls with relentless tenacity. Picture frame, posters, and lockers can shield the wall but the smoke stuck to the corners, leaving a line of tar and nicotine. Hardison walked among the students and touched the evidence of those rearranged picture frames.

The case had a Commonwealth Gridiron Bowl trophy won in the 98 and a couple more from the years before, but the wall lacked pictures from 1996 to 1998. Someone has rearranged the picture frames without caring a lot for the nicotine residue. The change wasn’t new, there was at the very least five years of build-up between the oldest and the newest residue, probably more if the school anti-tobacco league had been working hard.

Someone had taken Eliot’s team from the wall.

With the open can of soda in one hand and his smartphone in the other, Hardison returned to Archives. There was a nagging sensation in the back of his brain and he was scratching it with a quick web search.

As soon as Hardison crossed the door, the blinking screen distracted him from his itch. His laptop had found something interesting. The program had selected two candidates: Debate Sawyer (GPA 4.0, track team, marching band, no marks in his jacket, right last name, right year, wrong DoB) and OT Sawyer (GPA 3.2, football and marksmanship, Christian Gay-Straight alliance founder, several and severe discipline notes, right last name, interesting middle name, wrong DoB). The little rabble-rouser looked like a better fit for Eliot’s nephew role than the brilliant one, plus he sounded more interested in Divinity School.

“Let’s see… Oh-Oh-One-Seven…” Hardison rummaged the files looking for the right registration number.

“Have you found anything?” Parker asked with annoyance in her voice.

“I totally retract my last comment, though if Eliot thinks 3.2 unweighted GPA is brilliant, I really, really want to know what his GPA was…” Hardison extracted the file and found it quite light.

“Hardison?”

“Just a moment, mama…”

Hardison opened the file, there were just three papers: a grade transcript sheet, a birth certificate and a note written in old fashioned copperplate that read ‘Never file.’ Hardison turned his attention to the birth certificate. The paperweight was wrong, too light. Hardison had faked enough of them to know the difference. Reading the information, he found Aristotle and Leah together, but the date
was still wrong.

“Sawyer’s an off-the-grid baby,” Hardison mumbled when he came to the only possible explanation.

He had heard of couples wanting to firmly plant their middle finger in front of the government to unfetter their child of the burden of citizenship, but this was the first time he had proof of one. And the school was aiding and abetting the whole mess. That should be a crime. Hardison sipped his soda, trying to force his brain to make the connection between this new information and the taken down photos and Eliot’s family antagonism. Having Eliot Spencer for an uncle was the least of this non-existent boy’s problems.

“Parker, I found him!” Hardison finally said, starting to copy all the information he could. “Look for OT Sawyer, that’s our boy.”

“Thank goodness!”

Parker sat through the whole training session of the football team, observing her target. The game held no interest for her but she had picked up the habit of people watching to improve her grifting craft. It was funny, she always thought the objective of group activities was to inspire a better collectivity, but the coach had to break three fights since she had parked her person in the bleachers.

Eventually, the athletes marched to the lockers and Parker moved to a better spot. Eliot had taught her well and all his techniques had helped her to shadow the boy, but OT Sawyer was as skittish as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. Parker wondered why a small-town boy had to check over his shoulder more times that he needs to look both ways before crossing the street. Maybe a direct approach was her best choice.

Sawyer was standing in a corner, looking at the watch on his wrist, when Parker approached him. For a whole minute, she looked at him with that intense glare that always annoyed Eliot beyond his wits. She had time to study the way he closed his eyelids over his blue eyes and the peach fuzz over his upper lip. The whole set of his countenance speaks of something familiar but that only highlighted the difference—a less pronounced brow, a rounder chin, and those lovely full cheeks! —between the Spencer she knew and the Spencer she suspected. The traffic light changed but the kid stood his place for another couple of minutes, enduring Parker gaze with stoic patience. That cool demeanor amused Parker and she felt disappointed when the boy ended the game just when she was getting in the mood to poke his young face.

“Can I help you with something, miss?”

Parker smiled, that boy had managed a remarkable impression of Eliot’s fuck-off gruff, a whole octave too high. This boy who tried to be though was the most adorable thing Parker’s seen in a while and that’s counting all the times Hardison had sent her baby animals photos.

“It depends,” Parker watches the boy’s hand as he plunged it deep into his right pocket. “Are you Eliot Spencer’s Sawyer?”

“Well played, Parker,” Hardison complained in her ear. Parker almost heard the rolling eyes.

“That’s a dangerous name to utter aloud, miss.” Parker noticed the way his bottom lip came forward and the distrust of his eyes.
“He’s a dangerous man.”

“When he wants to,” concurred Hardison.

“If you know that, you understand my hurry to lit a shuck,” Sawyer said, taking a step back. Parker wondered if the cross in his chest was silver or steel, and made a mental note to look for the definition of ‘shuck’. “No offense.”

“I do take offense, Sawyer,” Parker said with a steady, gentle voice. “You’ve not let me say anything besides that. Your uncle has been trying to call you…”

“I know.”

Parker noticed the way Sawyer’s eyes mellowed for a second. She could read the hunger in his face. She had been there.

“Look, miss, I got to run.” Sawyer took another step back and his voice sounded hurried. “Pops wants me to move the new shipment… Besides, I don’t know you…”

“You are losing him, babe…”

“No, I’m not!” Parker pulled out her cell phone and selected a recent voicemail. “Do you know this voice…?”

“Hey, Parker! I know you are in a hurry with the flight tomorrow, but” Eliot’s voice poured from the device as clear as if he were standing in the same street, “can you take a quick grocery run? The fridge is almost empty and her…”

Parker cut the voicemail because a good Christian boy who wears a cross shouldn’t hear his uncle using the Lord’s name in vain while bitching viciously for a quarter of an hour about a nice woman’s cooking skills.

“But you don’t know me and it’s wise to go your way,” Parker returned her phone to her pocket while looking at the boy standing like the proverbial stone wall. Parker shrugged. “Bet you couldn’t recognize your uncle if you cross him in the street.”

Parker turned around, patted the pocket where her phone was and started to get away with long strides. Sophie had taught her well. Why chase after a target if you can make them come to you?

“Miss Parker!” Sawyer called and started to walk towards her. “Please, wait!”

With complete nonchalance, Parker continued her walk. Sawyer matched her stride, both fists inside his pockets, and a lazy, charming smile on his lips. Parker was sure she had seen that before.

“You must be a good friend of my uncle if he goes and asks you favors…” Sawyer wondered aloud. His southern drawl was trying to become seductive purr. “I was sure something went wrong, you know…? Been praying for him and all that. The longest time between calls, from when I was like four to now, had been three months. I’ve spent my summer wondering if I would hear of him again because gramps got sauced and said the beast was about to meet its maker…” Sawyer stopped and his eyes became hard but after a beat, he returned to his churlish charm. “So, if you find it in your heart to forgive my broadness…”

Parker smiled and stopped. They could make a good grifter of this lovable, rustic boy.

“I want coffee,” she said, pushing the coffee shop’s door. “Do you want coffee?”
Hardison, once he had taken the information available on BCHS records, he went to the other place where information was free. Documental information was Hardison’s bread and butter but there was something annoying with the way he couldn’t place Eliot Spencer in any list related to Bourbon County. His first thought was that Uncle Sam was protecting an asset or Eliot had been paying another hacker to erase most of his digital shadow, but the memory wall got him thinking.

The library lady was kind enough to let Alec use the microfilm to rummage information. Mostly, if not all, information about Eliot Spencer went missing ‘in a flood’ according to the librarian. That was a pretty discriminating flood, in Hardison’s eyes. There are some articles about Sawyer. Hardison started the boring job of copying everything in sight. There will be time to absorb all the information on the flight.

“Are you Eliot Spencer’s Sawyer?” he heard Parker asked in his ear.

“Well played, Parker,” Hardison complained rolling his eyes.

Hardison downloaded the information to an external disk while trying not to worry too much about Parker doing the first contact. She had proved once and again that she was capable to talk to the small fry.

“He’s a dangerous man.”

“When he wants to,” concurred Hardison, stopping the microfilm machine.

That news note was of 2004. The year Eliot stopped working for Moreau. December 2004, before the end of the year.

“You are losing him, babe...” Hardison taunted when he heard the boy’s excuses.

“No, I’m not!”

He stopped paying complete attention to Parker’s move. Apparently, before the end of the year, a group of heavily armed men broke into a house at the end of Lilly lane. They stayed for three hours. Newspapers reported a local woman dead and two local men gunned down. A local boy found alive under his mother’s body.

“There is something wrong with him,” Hardison confirmed Parker assertion, but he was not sure his words made any sense. Sawyer seemed too well adjusted to being part of that news bit. Yet, Hardison could read the Spencer name in white on black letters.

Three hours. Hardison shivered at the implications, you don’t need three hours to kill a family. Their run-in with Moreau was less bloody, but, whenever someone uttered that name, Eliot’s eyes told a different story. That’s the kind of wetwork Moreau demanded of Eliot.

“Matt seven-one?”

“Judge not lest ye be judged,” Hardison murmured without even thinking of it. Apparently, he could still recite a bit of the Scripture should the need arise.

“How do you know that?”

“I... just googled it.”
Was this the reason for this systematic erasure? As a veteran, Eliot should be among the favorite sons of this dusty town, yet they took down the photo of his team. This community was making a concerted effort to forget Eliot Spencer. What had the boy said?

*That’s a dangerous name to utter aloud…*

Alec Hardison was struggling to make sense of the situation. Either this boy was an ace to compartmentalize his life or there was really something wrong about this boy. Or maybe religion was his way to deal with the tragedy visited upon his head.

It was the moment when he noticed that he could only hear Parker slurping her iced coffee.

“Parker, you are not letting that boy rummage through your photo gallery, are you?”

Parker complacent sound told him she had forgotten the amount of information in that photo gallery.

“Take your phone now, woman!” Hardison’s commanded a little bit louder than he should in a library, but he didn’t want to be responsible for heaping harm over that boy without any need.

“Black coffee?” Parker asked with outraged incredulity.

“Yes, please, miss,” Sawyer kept his serene eyes on her, “if that’s not too much to ask for.”

“There’s something wrong with you…” Parker turned around to the cashier mumbling between her teeth: “You buy the boy a treat and he only asks for black coffee? And yes, a regular black coffee, please.”

“There is something wrong with him,” Hardison confirmed.

Parker took their drinks to an empty table and waited for the boy to make the first move. Sawyer sat with his legs a bit spread and his hands hanging between his knees. He sat there, waiting in silence. Parker started to believe that there was something in the water that reacted badly with Spencer genetic material and make them scary, or at the very least unsettling, when Sawyer cracked.

“Thank you for the coffee, miss,” Sawyer looked above Parker’s head. “May I see my uncle, please?”

Parker took out her phone once again and looked for a nice photo. Hardison had loaded her phone all the photos they had from Eliot, just in case she needed them.

“Gramps is always saying mom was a third-rate whore—sorry, miss, but he does—but that Uncle Eliot—only he calls him *that beast*—it’s the only reason he’s happy Gigi went to an early grave,” Sawyer said with his eyes on the screen of Parker’s phone. “And I don’t know… he swears a lot, but he never sounds scary…”

Parker looked at Sawyer with surprised eyes over the top of her large double extra chocolate frappuccino. If Eliot didn’t sound scary to his ears, Parker wanted to know what would be necessary to put the fear of God into this kid.

“…and he doesn’t look dangerous, does he?” Sawyer turned the phone towards Parker.
“No, he doesn’t look dangerous,” Parker nodded. It was her favorite Eliot: the one in the kitchen. “but he has been a soldier...”

“I know. He told me,” Sawyer said ruefully. “He confessed too many awful things to me over the phone, and Matt seven-one and all...”

“Matt seven-one?”

“Judge not lest ye be judged,” Hardison decoded in her earbud.

“How do you know that?”

“I... just googled it.”

“I don’t know the whole story, just the parts Gramps and Pops tell me once and again, miss. And I can’t help it, but I know they are hiding something.” Sawyer sipped his cup of joe. To Parker’s horror, he didn’t even add sugar. “I always expected him to ask our secret question when we first met but this is a passable second choice. May I see more photos...?”

Parker waved his agreement to the boy while she chased the chocolate syrup at the bottom of the cup.

“Parker, you are not letting that boy rummage through your photo gallery, are you?”

“Ah-uh!” Parked confirmed. From where she sat, Sawyer was enjoying looking at Eliot.

“Take your phone now, woman!” Hardison’s voice shrieked in her ear.

Parker, without understanding Hardison’s reaction, extended her hand to ask Sawyer to return her phone, but she was late. Sawyer was crying in silence. Her phone held precariously between his shaking hands. He bravely tried—Parker could feel it in the way his chin trembled—to stop the convulsive sob, but polite and calm as he was, he was only a boy.

A boy looking at a photo of his newly found uncle in an intensive care hospital bed.

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“... as you can see, Mister Spencer, sir...” Hardison’s voice sounded clear before Sawyer closed the door of the back office on Spencer’s hardware store and go to greet Parker.

“I’m glad Pop’s not souped and Gramps is in a good mood,” Sawyer whispered while propping his elbows on the tall table. Behind him, tall shelves bursting with hardware extended to the darkness. “Miss, I don’t want to be pushy, but you promised me...”

“Ok, but be quiet,” Parker agreed, propping Hardison’s tablet against the till.

Hardison’s work was to hook the mark, but Parker was there to deliver proof of life. No one had demanded proof of life in a rescue mission before, but Parker knew it was her fault. She needed to reassure the boy after that photo fiasco.

Sawyer made the sign of zipping his mouth. Parker checked the WIFI connection and hooked into the house feed. Sawyer put his face next to Parker’s and they both watched the grayscale live feed. Eliot was doing his slow movement exercise routine. His speed was off. Parker knew he was working out the itch to lay hands on Nurse, but she kept that information for herself.

“He looks a lot better, doesn’t he?” Parker felt Sawyer’s ear caressing her cheek. Parker pulled out
her phone and selected a number from speed dial. Eliot stopped on the screen to pick up his phone from the bed. “Hey, Spencer!”

“Parker…” Eliot’s voice sounded annoyed, but Parker didn’t take that personally. He might have a headache again. “How’s the travel?”

“Boring. Hardison’s having all the fun.” Parker lied with a smile, looking at Sawyer’s smile reflected on the screen. “We are flying back tomorrow and should be there for dinner.”

“Text me your ETA. I’ll cook you something hot,” Eliot promised, scratching the surgery scar over his shirt. Parker had to hold back the urge to yell at him to keep his hands off.

“Count on that,” Parker said, holding Sawyer’s hand. The boy was threatening to snatch her phone. “I got to go. Play nice!”

“Miss you,” Eliot said. His voice sounded warmer and, in the screen, Parker saw him do an off-hand bye-bye sign. Probably he had never registered he did it.

“There. Happy?”

“As a flea in a doghouse,” Sawyer said and his face showed it. “Thank you, miss.”

The door cracked open, Parker snatched the tablet and rushing to the door mouthing ‘See you in three weeks.’ Hardison shook hands with a bald, bearded man and headed for the door, stopping only to offer Sawyer’s his hand. Sawyer looked at the hand, looked at Hardison and nodded slightly.

“There is something wrong with that kid…” Hardison complained as he got into the car. Parker was at the wheel. “Don’t get me wrong, I like him. I like his Spencer-ness. But there is something veeeeery wrong about OT.”

“It’s the same thing that’s wrong with Eliot,” Parker said, watching how they closed the place down. Eliot’s dad was supervising the operation, Sawyer was closing the locks. “It’s this place. It’s… I can’t explain. It’s like living without an arm and thinking you still have it.”

“That is trauma, Parker.” Hardison watched three generations of messed up men walking down the street. Sawyer stopped and watched over his shoulder. “And the Spencer deal with trauma the same way a bear with a chainsaw do.”

“They can’t comprehend how they got it,” Parker nodded, “and they don’t know what to do with it. Sometimes, I think we were the lucky ones.”

“Luckier than most.” Hardison agreed. “Let’s go to the hotel. I have some news to share…”

“Hey, Eliot,” Hardison called while he dumped the freshly made popcorn in a big bowl. “Are you sure you don’t need help with that last antibiotic shot?”

“Damnit, Hardison!” Eliot yelled from upstairs. “If I’m limping tomorrow, know you are to blame!”

“Did he miss?” Parker made the signal of pushing the plunger with one hand, holding two bottles of orange soda and one of water with one arm.
Hardison nodded, his tongue between the teeth. It was such a stroke of bad luck he had distracted Eliot in the right moment. It was Movie Night, and that was not the start Hardison was looking for.

With his copy of Oshii’s *Avalon* and the popcorn bowl in hand, Hardison followed Parker to the second floor. Eliot, remote control in hand, was waiting for them in the middle of the bed. Hardison changed the DVD, Parker jumped to her side of the bed, tossing Eliot his blue water bottle, and they started the play.

Friday Movie Night was less about the movie and more about doing anything not medical-related to bring a bit of normalcy to their lives again. Eliot invariably fell asleep in the middle of it, and Parker never remembered what the last one was about, but at least all of them got two hours of mindless time together and that must count for something.

Fifteen minutes in, Hardison felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. The message was clear and he smiled. Eliot was sitting with his back straight and the popcorn bowl in his lap. Apparently, the scene got his attention. Hardison signaled Parker to look his way.

“Pass the popcorn, Eliot,” Parker said to provide a distraction, rolling to his side to look at the screen behind Eliot’s back.

“Here,” Eliot grumbled as Parker read: *BCHS in P. Drop RC2morro*.

“Thanks.” Parker stuffed her face with popcorn to avoid a smile. “Hey, we have a client meeting tomorrow…”

“Good luck,” Eliot said as if it was not of his concern.

“We could really use your input,” Hardison insisted before taking a long sip of his orange soda.

“Tempting…” Eliot sounded reluctant as he shared the bowl with Parker. “Clouds are heavy and my rear end is more bruises than skin lately. Are you sure you want me to get another infection? I don’t… Parker!” Eliot barked the name like a warning, feeling Parker’s hand near. “See? That’s one of the reasons I don’t want to…”

“Parker, don’t poke his ass…” Hardison interrupted in the tired tone of a beleaguered parent. “If you let me help with the needle, I could spare you…”

“Does it hurt?” Parker asked digging her index finger deep into Eliot’s hip.

“Parker!” Eliot jumped out of bed, missing the popcorn bowl by a miracle and messing his landing in the process. “Yes, it hurts!”

“Parker, scoot over.” Hardison knew the only way he would get to finish this movie and get Eliot’s to agree was to put his body in the line. Quite literally. “Eliot, come here.”

Eliot, looking the part of the scalded cat, rested his weight by the edge of the bed. Hardison patted Eliot’s knee in what—he hoped—was a sign of reassurance. It took Eliot five minutes to relax and reach for the popcorn. Parker was ready to hold his hand when he did.

“We mean it,” Parker pressed his fingers for a moment before she let them go. “We need you.”

“I’ll think about it,” Eliot conceded with his hand on the bowl. “Now, watch the movie!”

Parker smiled and cuddled against Hardison with a fist of popcorn close to her chest. Hardison passed his arm behind her shoulders and Eliot, eyes full of sleep, rested his head against Hardison’s
shoulder. They had their movie night all sorted out.

Chapter End Notes

*Next of kin*
Chapter Summary

Eliot got a weekend with his sister’s boy, a luxury he had never had the chance to enjoy, courtesy of his best friends.

It's not kidnapping if you return the boy, is it?

Chapter Notes

You either know your Bible for this one or you mind the floating boxes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Because he lives, I can face tomorrow
Because he lives, all fear is gone
Because I know he holds the future
And life is worth the living
Just because he lives.
-Alabama

“It’s raining cats and dogs outside,” Eliot commented while descending the stairs.

Parker smiled when she saw him. Stairs were not a challenge for their hitter anymore. Eliot sported a thick winter shirt, jeans and work boots. The bullet pendant was swinging on his chest. His hair, bouncing on his shoulders, had a bit of shine. He might be complaining, but Parker was sure he was happy to ride along with them this time.

“You need a scarf with that outfit,” Parker replied. “We don’t want you to get pneumonia.”

“Again,” Hardison pointed out, pouring Eliot a cup of hot cocoa.

“I don’t know,” Eliot replied opening the closet to take out a white keffiyeh and his jacket. “It was so much fun to almost cough out my own lungs!”

“Smartass!”

“Is that the one Vance sent you?”

Eliot nodded and wrapped it around his neck. That was his favorite scarf for the time being. A week ago, Vance had sent three fully uniformed cadets with his gift and a letter, and Nurse’s face when she opened the door was something to remember. Vance’s get-well-soon missive was heavily redacted, but Eliot got his drift.

“I don’t know why you are so set in me going to this client meeting,” Eliot grumbled as he tried to close the heavy jacket between sips of tasteless cocoa. His fingers were still numb and he struggled with the buttons. “After all these months, warning me about infections…”
“We just need your particular set of skills,” Hardison replied, putting a candy cane in Parker’s cup as he walked from behind the breakfast bar.

“And maybe some recommendations for someone to fill your spot,” Parker added, stirring the cocoa with her candy cane. Eliot’s death glare stopped her for a second. “For this mission.”

“Are you properly packed?” Hardison asked and put his hand on Eliot’s right shoulder.

Eliot looked at him with murder in his eyes. “The clamps are closed; The caps are screwed. And it’s all behind a sterile gauze patch. You can stop fiddling with my subclavian central line now, Hardison.”

Hardison raised both hands as if he was asking for peace. The central line was a sore spot because it should be out by now, but Dr. Byrnum was not happy with the results of Eliot’s latest test and ordered some more.

“Drink your cocoa,” Parker urged with cheerful voice. “We are going to be late!”

Dutifully, Eliot gulped down the rest of his cup. Cocoa probably still tasted like liquid chalk, but he kept his well-trained poker face. Then, he turned around to face Hardison with his arms wide open.

“Am I ready for the field trip, mom?”

“Is he sassing me?” Hardison pointed at Eliot with a wide grin, moving side to side as if it was amusing. “Man, is he really sassing me?”

“It seems so…”

“Isn’t he the cutest…” Hardison extended his hand to mess Eliot’s hair.

Training kicked in before Eliot could stop his reaction. He twisted Hardison’s thumb and, effortlessly, his other arm blocked the elbow. The movement felt off—too slow, too clumsy—, but he was holding Hardison on his knees by the time he noticed it.

“Hey, don’t mess up my hair,” Eliot whispered and let go.

“Eliot, my man…” Hardison said with a grin a mile wide as he sprang back to his feet. “Did you see that, Parker?”

“I’m standing right here.” Parker was smiling too with a candy cane hanging from her mouth.

“What?” Eliot wondered if there was still chemical fog twirling inside his brain because nothing was making any sense again. Parker and Hardison approached him with open arms. “Whu…”?

Eliot fought to keep Hardison away. “Hey, hey…!”

“You are really getting better,” Parker said, hugging Eliot from behind. Eliot appreciated the caress more because she didn’t hug so hard.

“Our hitter is coming back!” Hardison hugged them both.

“Let go!” Eliot grumbled but he couldn’t help the smile. If they were feeling like celebrating, he was ready to join the joy. “What about the client? Huh? We are running late!”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Parker blithely dismissed his complaint, “I’ll drive.”
“We are here,” Hardison announced once he finished parking in the visitor’s lot of Reed College. It was not raining anymore.

Eliot opened Lucile’s door and clenched his teeth again. The cold was making his long bone pain almost unbearable. The recurrent thought of biting the bullet crossed his mind again, but Eliot pushed it away. Parker was in front of him and he blinked twice, slowly, to force his mind to focus and to set his poker face in place.

“How are you holding?” Parker asked with a little, worried expression on her face.

“I’ve seen worse…” Eliot thought he had never spoken a truer word in his life.

“Did you bring something for the pain?”

“Who’s said I’m in pain?” Eliot closed Lucille’s door with a bang. “Parker, if—if, mind you!—I’m in pain, painkillers won’t do a thing if I take them now. It’s better to take them before it really hurts. And I happened to have my share three hours ago.” Eliot passed his arm over Parker’s shoulder to cover his lie. “I won’t collapse in front of a client, promise.”

Parker smiled at him, but that didn’t hide her worry. Eliot wondered what she saw in his face between those blinks to make her anxious.

“Don’t worry, babe,” Hardison said patting his jacket.

Eliot knew, by the sound of Hardison’s pocket, that he had a shot ready. *Toradol or Dilaudid, that’s the question.*

“And you, pull up that scarf,” Hardison commanded with his best mama hen voice. “You are going to catch your death.”

“Stop fretting, you two!” Eliot heeded the command. “I’m trying to look professional for the client here.”

“The client wouldn’t mind,” Parker said cryptically, poking Eliot in the side.

Eliot stepped to the side with a short, mirthless laugh. If he was not careful, Parker was bound to poke him in one of the many sore spots and professionalism wouldn’t stop him.

They walked through the campus at Eliot’s speed, stopping frequently with the most absurd excuses. *If Parker ever took a selfie in her life before today…* Eliot appreciated that they made the effort to cover for his weakness and he did his best to reach Eliot Hall in one piece and with enough breath to speak. Despite everything, the cold air and the walk worked wonders to clear Eliot’s mind of the dark clouds of his many worries.

“Don’t you need to give me the details?” Eliot asked when they set foot inside the building.

“Keep it cool, man,” Hardison said, shielding Eliot from the incoming wave of students pouring out the chapel. “Of this case you have more knowledge than Parker and me together.”

“What do you mean, Hardison?” Suddenly—and belatedly—, all kinds of alarms started to ring in Eliot’s foggy mind.

“Just what he said…” Parker smiled, pulling Eliot to the side of the corridor to avoid another wave
of rowdy college boys.

“Ow,” Eliot yelped when an explosion of pain hit his shoulder. Vitamin C shot and long bone pain, please, meet the wall, Eliot thought, minding his Southern manners and holding his hurting biceps, while trying, at the same time, to stop the wince in his face.

“You are early!” A young man called out as he crossed the chapel’s doors. He was waving his right hand over his head.

Eliot mind went blank for a second. He knew that Kentuckian accent: it sounded like home.

The world started to move slowly. Eliot noticed the hole in the wool cap in his left fist (he’s right-handed), the round buckle with scuffs (a handed-down belt), the splats of mud at the top of his working boots (country boy). His sweater was unraveling at the hem band (no one cares of his clothing). Parker moved from the way; she was speaking a greeting. Eliot noticed the threadbare spot on the young man’s right front pocket of the exact size of a pocket knife (He’s a Spencer) and his dirty knees. Hardison greeted him like an old friend. His voice sounded like he was speaking three miles from the spot. Eliot saw the small, thin scars on the youngster’s knuckles (barbed wire cuts) when he shook (twice, firm, brief, as he should) Hardison’s hand. Eliot’s eyes followed the arm: wide wrist (cheap watch), thick upper arm (tight fabric), round and solid shoulder (carries things). Dusty blond clipped short hair (good boy). Blue, honest eyes (He’s a Spencer!).

“So, Eliot?” The young man stood tall in front of him, his hand extended with gravity. “Sawyer E. Roark, sir. Pleased to meet you at last.”

“The pleasure is mine,” Eliot mumbled with a growling voice, but good Southern manners. He closed his hand over Sawyer’s, marveling on how warm it felt. The agreed shibboleth escaped from his lips without conscious thought because he had rehearsed the scene in his mind so many times. “What does the ‘E’ stand for?”

“Eliot, sir,” Sawyer replied with a twisted, endearing smile and eyes full of tears. “She named me after you.”

This is going to hurt, Eliot thought before pulling the young man closer.

Sawyer, taken by surprise, clashed against Eliot’s aching ribs, cutting Eliot’s breath short. Eliot hugged him hard, feeling how his back screamed bloody murder. Sawyer pressed his forehead against his collarbone sending sharp lighting of pain through Eliot’s core. Eliot endured all with a smile.

My broken body, meet Sawyer.

Parker sat by Hardison in the farthest corner of the Paradox Cafe. They both had agreed to give Eliot his space with Sawyer, but they were still in watchful mode. After the year they had been having, it was difficult to let go of the need to check on Eliot. Parker cuddled against Hardison and this rainy autumn seemed a bit warmer.

“Aren’t they charming?” Hardison asked pulling out his cellphone to memorialize the moment.

Eliot and Sawyer sat together, holding their respective coffee mugs with both hands, having a conversation while looking in different directions. And it was a conversation because when one spoke, the other one nodded. Eliot kept tapping his fingers against the ceramic. Sawyer kept kicking the table. The perfect picture of two men struggling to contain emotion.
“I think that if I get near those two, I’m going to get testosterone poisoning.”

“Should we tell Eliot?” Parker asked, looking how Eliot passed his arm clumsily over Sawyer’s shoulders. “About the Lillian Lane affair?”

“He has enough on his plate already,” Hardison reached for his own cup of coffee. “And we need to take another dip in Stoner Creek before we have the whole story.”

“To case the police files?” Parker asked, looking at Eliot’s shake as he put his coffee mug in the small table.

“Babe, we have poked the hornet nest too much already. As happy as he’s now, I don’t think he loves the idea of us poking in his past.”

Parker gave the idea a moment and then, soberly, said: “Yup.”

Hardison turned to her with suspicion. Parker conceded far too quickly. “What did you do?”

“That’s unfair,” Parker protested but her eyes were on Eliot, cradling Sawyer’s head against his good shoulder. The boy was crying. “Even if I did something…”

“So, you did something.”

“Only because you were asleep and I was bored.”

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Sunday morning in the pub was a strange thing to do, but Hardison can think of worse places to spend a Sunday morning.

Earlier, they had picked up Sawyer from Reed College Campus, and Eliot, properly loaded with NSAIDs, had gone to church with Sawyer. That thought had amused Parker all the ride to Reed until she heard they must wait almost two hours for them to go finish their praise celebration. They made the brewpub their rendezvous point.

Parker’s last mischief was open when the Spencer boys were at the service. She had relieved Paris County Police Department from all the evidence from the Lilly Lane shooting and they had spent those two hours trying to put the puzzle together. The conclusion was that the news and the police report didn’t match.

“Eliot’s place is full of ill-intent neighbors,” Parker commented before rushing to open the brewpub main door when they saw Eliot arrive.

That was an hour ago. Parker hadn’t returned to control room and Hardison used that time to make digital copies of all the appropriate documents. Neither of them had the intention to return the case evidence to PCPD, but electronic information was easier to hide from Eliot and easier to compare with other police databases.

Hardison made a round through the surveillance cameras. Loading-bay was clear and front door too. Parker was busy in the tables and Eliot and Sawyer were in the kitchen. For a moment, Hardison felt at home.

“When I was your age, I took Home EC as an elective,” Eliot explained, finishing to cut the carrots. His voice in the kitchen mic sounded very clear.
“I bet I know how gramps reacted to that.” Sawyer came behind Eliot and stole a carrot stick. Hardison smiled at the clean lift.

“If you are guessing ‘top stairs wallop,’ you are right,” Apparently, Eliot had let the first theft pass, but he stopped the second one with the judicious application of the spoon handle. “I’m almost done.” Eliot’s voice was a warning. “In any case, since I was going to miss some credits that would prevent me to graduate on time if I drop it, he let me be. I got my way, so he can…”

Hardison killed the audio feed. One thing was to watch Eliot in the kitchen to be ready in case anything went wrong and the other was to poke his nose in family matters.

“It’s so weird to hear them talk like that…”

“Like what, Parker?” The alert in his software distracted Hardison.

“Like they have a secret code!” Parker complained in that careful whisper they have cultivated over the years, prepping the table for their lunch. Eliot must be speaking very loud for her to hear him from the kitchen. “It’s almost like they know each other.”

“They know each other, babe,” Hardison explained, looking at Spencer’s hardware store phone bill. Either Eliot’s dad is a moron or he has a lot of overseas orders. Foreign code numbers kept popping with frightening regularity always between five and nine in the afternoon. “They are just doing the same thing they used to do with a phone… only, you know, without a phone.”

“Eliot is making one of his Asian stirs for lunch,” Parker warned. “I can smell the garlic and ginger paste.”

“Oh, boy, oh, no, no mama…” Hardison closed his session and picked up the anti-acid bottle. With Eliot’s taste out of whack, spices were a dangerous game to play.

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“Uncle Eliot…” Sawyer called that night, hoping to sit in the kitchen counter. “I’m afraid I must Matt fifteen-eighteen you before the Lord’s Day is over.”

After the afternoon service, they went to the temporal house and amuse himself fixing a Kentucky Derby pie. Sawyer’s words came out of the blue while he was putting the pie out to cool.

“And what’s my sin?” Eliot asked because this was not the first time he had to deal with Sawyer’s righteousness. He pulled out a chair and sat to hear what the bee under his nephew’s bonnet was.

“Gala five-nineteen.”

“Bold of you to go John eight-seven at me,” Eliot smiled remembering a certain Patsy and a certain Nora he had heard about over the phone.

“Romy ten-ten, but you have never tossed me a hint about…” Sawyer made an all-encompassing gesture, “this!”

“One Cory thirteen-four, so what?”

“One Tess five-twenty-two and Dew five-twenty-one, or her man, since we are in the neighborhood,” Sawyer rebuked looking at Hardison and Parker cuddling in the living room. Eliot understood perfectly that his nephew was casting Parker for the role of his new aunt.

“Jeremy ten-two!” was Sawyer obstinate reply. His bottom lip was hanging in an unflattering pout.

“Sawyer, this is me. The version of me of today, the one that counts,” Eliot said with a tired gruff. He was not about to explain his relationship with Hardison and Parker to a teenager set in seeing all filtered through his own horniness. He won’t believe it anyway. “And you can either Matt seven-five or Matt ten-fourteen.” Eliot got to his feet and moved to the stairs. “The choice is yours.”

“Hey, Eliot,” Hardison called out when he heard his steps on the stairs. “Where are you going, bro?”

“To find a more strategic place to sulk,” Eliot replied with a tense voice.

Sawyer tried to balance his peace offering while climbing the stairs. That was not a skill he ever tried in his life; At home, the rule was no food upstairs. The pie was not his idea, but miss Parker’s, who spent a lot of time explaining to him why he had been an ass earlier.

She was a good one, that Parker. It was such a shame she was already hitched…

The light at the end of the corridor was on and the door was open. That should be uncle Eliot’s room. Sawyer stood in the middle of the pass, with two dishes in the hands and regret in his heart. He closed his eyes and prayed a short prayer. Only then, he found the resolve to take a step forward.

“Easy, brother,” mister Hardison’s voice sounded calm but tense. “You are going too fast.”

“I know what I’m doing here!” Uncle Eliot replied, his voice husky and a bit belligerent. “It just slides in without effort, as it should...”

Sawyer wanted to know what they were doing there, but he noticed that he couldn’t knock with both of his hands busy.

“You can come in, boy!” uncle Eliot’s holler was quite an invitation. “… have mercy! You tread like you have spent your life in a barn!”

“And you say it like it’s any shame!” Sawyer answered back without thinking. At home, Sawyer might worry someone might box his ears, but here he felt safe enough.

(Of course, it’s not!"

Mister Hardison laughed and invited Sawyer in with a small movement of the head. Uncle Eliot was sitting on the huge bed without his shirt, his eyes trained to the tube on his chest and the syringe in his hand. Sawyer stopped, he had never suspected uncle Eliot hid something under his clothes, lest of all, something as eye-catching than that. The faint click snapped Sawyer out of his stupor.

“It’s ok.” mister Hardison reassured him as uncle unscrewed the syringe from the tube. “We are almost done.”

“We?” Uncle Eliot asked, keeping the tube from touching his skin and tossing mister Hardison the empty syringe.
“You, doing,” mister Hardison said with a smile, catching the syringe as uncle Eliot took a green cap from the tray, “Me, watching. It’s a two people operation, man. Hands and eyes. We are quite a team, are we not?”

Uncle Eliot sniggered, screwed the cap at the end of the tube, doff his latex gloves and tossed his head back. There was a small smile of pride in his face. Sawyer noticed the second striking thing his uncle had been concealing under the shirt. Sawyer had never seen a longest scar in his life or so many in one body.

“We survived another heparin flush, Hardison.”

“Ninety-four and counting, Eliot.”

Mister Hardison offered his hand. Uncle Eliot slapped it twice, and then they bumped fists. Sawyer felt how his eyebrow raised, those two were too old to play the secret handshake.

“I better leave you to your melting business,” mister Hardison said, picking up the trash.

“Oops!” Sawyer noticed the dish in his right was tilting and dripping. “I think I made a mess…”

“Nothing a mop can’t fix,” mister Hardison replied.

“These four walls have seen worse.” Uncle Eliot shrugged and pulled his legs up the bed.

“Yes, sir. Especially the week after chemo. Oof! The monkey cage at the zoo is more bearable! If I could tell you, boy…”

“Hardison.” The name came out flat from uncle Eliot’s lips.

“You left it hanging,” mister Hardison pointed out, gesticulating with his head because his hands were busy, “and besides I’m going, I’m going! Don’t you see I’m almost at the door? There are people without patience in this world, be-lieve it!”

Sawyer felt like laughing, and he could tell uncle Eliot noticed. A small tilt of the head was the invitation and Sawyer heeded it, extending the right dish in his direction.

“The one with ice cream is yours,” Sawyer explained as he passed a fork. “Miss Parker said you need to eat for three…”

“You can have it,” uncle Eliot offered, “I’m not supposed to eat pecans and I’m not hungry.”

“You better be digging into that pie by now!” Miss Parker’s voice sounded angry.

“Did you put a bug in this room?” Uncle Eliot’s voice was soft and deep. Sawyer struggled to hear him.

Sawyer stopped with a fork in the air. Uncle Eliot was counting in silence with one hand. Those fingers were going down fast.

“You are not allowed to cook anything you are not planning to eat!” Miss Parker’s reply was as loud as before but less assertive.

“Yep,” Uncle Eliot scooted toward the headboard with care to not disturb the dish next to him. “There is a bug in the room.”

Sawyer put down the fork when uncle Eliot offered his hands. He remembered to say grace this
time. Sawyer put the fork down and held those hands, before bowing his head.

“Lord, bless the food before us,” uncle Eliot recited in a soft, hesitant whisper, “the family beside us, and the love between us.”

“In Jesus’ name, Amen,” Sawyer replied with a smile because his mom has taught him the same formula to say grace. It was Gigi’s blessing of the food.

“Are you sure you don’t want the ice cream?”

“Never got to like it.” Sawyer shrugged. At home, they never eat desserts. “If you are not supposed to eat pecans, why did you bake it?

“Because it’s the only pie you like,” uncle Eliot replied with half a shrug, digging his fork into the pie without much conviction.

“That’s because she baked it all the time,” Sawyer said carrying a piece of pie to his mouth. The food tasted amazing and he meant it when he said: “Yours is better.”

“I miss her.”

Uncle Eliot sounded so sad. It was natural, he knew her longer. Sawyer took a couple of bites before he noticed Uncle Eliot had forgotten how to use a fork, apparently.

“Miss Parker is gonna get her knickers in a knot,” Sawyer observed. “Does it hurt?”

Uncle Eliot blinked twice and was slow to ask: “What?”

“That tube,” Sawyer said, tracing a wide circle in the air with the fork.

“No, it doesn’t,” he finally shoved two forkfuls and swallow them almost without chewing them.

“And that one?” Sawyer carried a bit of pie and made a horizontal line with the fork to signal the surgery scar.

“No, it’s numb.”

“But at first?” Sawyer insisted because he couldn’t believe that kind of tear without any pain.

“God bless whoever invented painkillers.”

Sawyer laughed and Uncle Eliot chuckled. They ate in silence, Sawyer trying to match his uncle’s speed, but after a while, he gave up. That pie was meant to be enjoyed at leisure.

“This situation with miss Parker and mister Hardison is not new,” Sawyer said cutting another bit. “You could’ve told me earlier.”

“It’s not new, but it’s not crystal cut,” uncle Eliot put his empty dish in the nightstand. “How could I ask for your approbation if you didn’t know them? They are part of my family now.”

Sawyer took a bite and used the time to think. Sometimes he forgot uncle Eliot belonged to the world in ways the Good Book never accounted for.

“But you could have sent them earlier,” Sawyer insisted, pushing crumbles on his dish. “I could have been here with you, in your sickness.”
“I don’t think she had had the time to tell you about the last years of me ma… I still don’t want this,” Eliot signaled the central line, “to be the image you carry home.”

“2 Cory four-sixteen,” Sawyer replied with a shrug, carrying the crumbles in a compact mass.

Sayer’s dish went to the nightstand too and he held his steel cross, asking for the words to ask his question and for the wisdom to accept the answers.

“Be honest, I can stand it. Why haven’t you call me at your side before, uncle?”

“Luke seven-six,” Eliot whispered his answer after a while before rushing to add a little louder: “with due proportion, of course. A sinner I am, Sawyer, and I’m not ready to confess.”

“Mark ten-forty-five.” Sawyer let go his steel cross, crawled to his side and passed his arm behind uncle Eliot’s shoulder to try and give him a gawky hug. “He was the Lord, uncle, but He was also a friend of sinners.”

“When you reach an age of reason, Sawyer, I’ll show you the fruits of my sins, then you can tell me about He and His divine will,” uncle Eliot said, leaning into the caress for a brief moment. “In the meantime, I think you should put on your pajamas and go to sleep.”

“I don’t want to sleep. I don’t want to return yet.”

“I don’t want you to return, either, but you need that diploma to come here.” Uncle Eliot pushed Sawyer. “Come on, Matt seven-thirteen.”

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Early morning Monday started with four happy people crossing his main door. Dr. Byrnum was never more unsettled by the sight of a happy family together. Eliot had his arm across the shoulders of a teenager and the doctor noticed the family resemblance. Behind him were his brother and his brother’s girlfriend. Their names keep escaping his mind.

“Doc, this is my sister’s boy, Sawyer,” Eliot made the introductions with a wide smile.

“Thank you for helping my uncle, doctor,” the boy offered his hand to Dr. Byrnum the same way many others did while thanking him for his service in Veterans day.

“That’s my work,” Dr. Byrnum replied. This young man has charm, that was evident. His eyes went to Eliot’s brother’s girlfriend.

“No, doctor,” Eliot caught his meaning immediately. “This is my blood sister’s boy. It’s…”

“A foster home situation.” Dr. Byrnum smiled. So, Eliot had some living relatives after all. At this rate, Johan Byrnum wouldn’t be surprised if by the time he finished his treatment Eliot turned out to have five children of his own.

“Doctor, we don’t need a chaperone today, do we?” Eliot asked without losing his smile. “We are just going to check the test results. And this boy has an appointment at Reed…”

Maybe it was better that way...

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“Fuck me sideways…” Eliot spat when he finished reading the paper on top Dr. Byrnum’s desk. Southern manners can be damned...
Eliot, elbows over knees, looked at the results with bleak expression, too familiar with the meaning of the numbers and the values. Not as low as expected. That’s code for too damn high.

“Eliot, mind yourself,” the good doctor chided. “I know that’s not the news you have expected to hear…”

Dr. Byrnum was trying to sweeten the pill talking about how early they got the tumor, about how aggressive it was, about the surgery complications, about the lack of new metastasis, and about how the drugs were still working in helping to get the markers down, but Eliot was just paying him a quarter of attention. He was too busy gathering his rage and planning how to put it to good use.

For future references, doctor: This is how I take things in stride. This is me reacting well to bad news. Last time we had a spar like this I was jaded and in a world of hurt, and the first time I was too fucking stunned to function. Please, don’t distract me, sir. I can’t mind my Southern manners right now...

“How many more?” Eliot asked, panting through the anger, and looking at Byrnum with an intensity the good old doctor had never seen before in a patient.

“I refuse to discuss this until you have had the time…”

No, doctor, you don’t get it. Three days ago, this news would have been unbearable. Three days ago, I would have considered a less painful road to travel. A shorter one, too. But come April next year, I have important things to deal with. To get there, I’ll hop through any number of fire rings you name. Hell can wait. I quit this world when I quit this world, and not a minute before, so I’m asking you, doctor… “How many more?”

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Eliot, a hand over Sawyer’s shoulder, waited for Hardison’s paid chaperone to arrive with the rest of the Bourbon County kids to PDX. Sawyer looked a bit crestfallen at the news and Eliot knew he couldn’t find the right words.

“One Cory thirteen-eleven, uncle.” Sawyer found his words first. He was still thinking of the discussion about Hardison and Parker.

“Seventy times seven, kid,” Eliot couldn’t care to remember the bible quote now.

“I like them, though,” Sawyer looked over Eliot’s shoulder. Parker and Hardison were waiting, next to Lucille. “Crazy as they are…”

“Even if I’m not sinning with them? High praise...”

Sawyer huffed and feinted going away, but Eliot held him in place.

“This change nothing,” Eliot said, gripping Sawyer’s shoulder with care. “The offer stands. You’ll always have a bed and a hot food dish under my roof too if you want them.”

“I want nothing else.”

“Get your diploma then and I’ll get my NED,” Eliot pulled Sawyer closer when he saw the van approaching. “I’ll be waiting for you. Now, give me a dollar.”

Sawyer presented a neatly folded dollar. Eliot noticed he had drawn an ichthys in one of the corners. Eliot put the dollar in his shirt’s front pocket and hugged Sawyer again. He was not as a
deft thief as Parker, but he managed to stuff two hundred-dollar bills in Sawyer’s back pocket without detection. By the time he let Sawyer go, Hardison and Parker were next to them, ready to say their goodbyes.

“Safe travel,” Hardison wished, pulling Sawyer into a bro hug and slipping two Grants into Sawyer’s inner jacket pocket.

“Be good, Sawyer!” Parker said hugging the boy before pressing another hundred against Sawyer’s chest, “Buy something nice, like a smartphone, and don’t be a stranger!”

“Miss Parker!” Sawyer protested, his hand holding the dollar bill against his chest.

“Tut-Tut!” Parker exclaimed, pushing him toward the van. “You can be offended when you return. Hurry up! You are going to miss your flight!”

“She’s crazy,” Sawyer said, walking backward. “And I really like her!”

“Then you are crazier than she is!” Eliot replied, raising his hand to wave goodbye.

Hardison and Parker flanked Eliot, repeating his movement until Sawyer reached the group.

“Do you want to know what I’m going to do when I get my NED?” Eliot asked still smiling and waving at Sawyer and the rest of the BCHS kids in their way to their flight. “I’m going to fly to San Lorenzo with the express purpose of kicking Damien Moreau’s teeth in!”

Parker and Hardison were surprised by the sudden rage explosion even if knew Eliot Spencer was prone to them. In stunned silence, they both saw the smile disappear like a mirage.

“For starters, it’s the first time I heard you use ‘when’ instead of ‘if,’ bro. Kudos for positive thinking!” Hardison offered a high five that Eliot snubbed by turning away towards Lucille 5.0. “Second, who told you?” Parker, walking in the same direction, raised her hands in defense. “And three, why just to kick his teeth in? I was expecting you to go straight for murder.”

“Sawyer told me enough…” Eliot started. His fists were clenching and unclenching to the rhythm of his step.

“It’s a very distinctive hit,” Parker interrupted, doing an impression of Eliot’s catchphrase.

Hardison shot Parker a look that proclaimed to the world that his girl liked to play with fire.

Eliot didn’t mind her and pulled Lucille’s side door open. He jumped in and held the door open for a second to reply: “I’m gonna kick his teeth in only, so I can return and kick them again since I can’t remember things right!”

“San Lorenzo doesn’t subscribe UNCAT either,” Parker informed Hardison and sauntered to ride shotgun.

“You’ve known it for three days and held all that in?” Hardison asked raising his hands to heaven. He walked in front of Lucille. “That’s not healthy, man. You need to share this kind of things. Air them up so they don’t poison you.” Hardison sat and put the keys in the ignition. “That’s how you get cancer, you know?”

Eliot’s fist contacted Hardison’s skull before he could put his head straight. Lucille’s horn let out a short, sharp honk.
“You deserved that,” Parker whispered without any hint of sympathy.

“Yer right, I did.” Hardison agreed. Lights exploded behind his eyes, but Alec was surprised to still be awake. “Sorry, bro.”

“Eliot, I just have one more question,” Parker turned around and knelt on the seat to face Eliot, “What’s a ‘top stairs wallop’?”

Chapter End Notes

_Bend over, here it comes again_
Chapter Summary

Christmas was approaching and the Leverage team wished they all had more reasons to be cheerful.

Chapter Notes

Floating boxes and all that jazz... Oh! and Shelley comes to spend his holidays.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If we make it through December
Everything's gonna be all right, I know
It's the coldest time of winter
And I shiver when I see the falling snow
If we make it through December...
-Merle Haggard

Parker didn’t wait to hear Nurse’s report, she had been expecting the news since Eliot didn’t wake up in the middle of the night to train with the sandbag he had hung in the garage. She had hoped against all hopes, but Eliot was having another infection. The silver lining was that he was resting in his bed instead of waiting to go to ICU again. Parker climbed the stairs and picked up Eliot’s blanket from the handrail at the same time. They had just washed it yesterday...

The knock on the door was for show, Parker didn’t wait for an answer. She pushed the door open and moved to the bed. Eliot lied curled up tightly under the sheets. By now, Parker knew that was not a good sign. He was far from feeling above par.

“Are you still mad because Nurse had to shoot you?” Parker asked, brushing Eliot’s hair away from his face. His hair was finally growing healthy, shiny and long again.

“No, I needed that shot,” Eliot said, tightening the curve of his body. “Kidneys are killing me…”

“If you can bitch, you are not that sick.” Parker was determined to find something to be grateful about. She extended the blanket over his shoulders to give Eliot a bit of comfort and rummaged the medicine tray in search for a cooling patch. “Christmas is coming. Do you want something for Christmas?”

“I had Christmas a week ago,” Eliot grumbled and shivered. If he felt Parker sticking the cooling patch to his nape, he didn’t complain

They have dropped Sawyer in the airport sixteen days ago, but Parker was not about to correct his time perception. Not while Eliot was running a fever and feeling poorly, anyway. Doctor Robertson had told them in the ICU that his brain hurt might get better with time because the brain makes new connections every day. Eliot hadn’t told Hardison, so Parker knew Eliot was hanging
hard onto that hope.

“That was no Christmas, that was your birthday present,” Parker insisted once he was properly swaddled. She made Eliot the little spoon and played with his hair.

“I’m a ram.” Eliot relaxed under her touch. He might be tough, but a petting session to guide him into a restful slumber was right down his alley. “Not a centaur.”

“A very belated birthday present, then.” Parker knew his birthday was in April, and Eliot didn’t say it, but his birthday sucked massively this year. “You had to want something for Christmas…”

“A day without needles?” Eliot asked and there was a hesitant hope in his voice. “Is that too much to ask for?”

“I’m afraid so.” Parker leaned on his back. His hope for respite made her inconsolable and impotent at the same time.

“How about fifteen minutes when food actually tastes like food?”

“I can’t give you that.”

Parker wished she could give him that quarter of an hour. Food was such an integral part of Eliot that watching him eat without appetite or pleasure was pure torture.

“I just want to wake up and have five minutes without anything hurting,” Eliot was almost asleep when he uttered those words. “I can settle for two if that’s your best offer…”

Parker sighed and let her fingers run through his hair, noticing Eliot smelled like cookies. It was such an impossible list to fulfill but she was determined to cheer Eliot’s Christmas.

“Hand cream?” Parker almost screamed in outrage and Hardison chuckled.

They huddled in Eliot’s bed with hot cocoa, candy canes, cookies, and liters of farmers market’s cranberry juice, because outside was nippy. Parker had finally cajoled Eliot into the Christmas spirit and they were choosing gifts for the OSHU nurses who did the heavy lifting to get Eliot through ICU, Pneumo, and Chemo. To Parker’s chagrin, Eliot dug his heels in the practical gift camp and no amount of reason could budge him.

“I pay attention,” Eliot replied with an exhausted sigh, resettling the hot water bottle against his belly for the fifth time. “ICU nurses wash their hands at least ten times each hour. Hand cream is cheap…”

“After all they did for you…”

Eliot sighed his annoyance and turned to Hardison. Parker had poked a sore spot again. Hardison was sure the last thing Eliot wanted to think was of his time in the ICU and all the chances those twelve nurses had to stare at his privates and worse.

“Eliot has a point, Parker,” Hardison sided with Eliot this time, finishing fluffing a pillow. “The hospital might have rules against expensive gifts. We can’t shower them with diamonds… Sit straight, bro.”

“But hand cream is so boring!”
“My other option was even more boring,” Eliot mumbled with a pained expression, passing Hardison the hot water bottle. “Put this against my back…”

Hardison put the bottle between the freshly fluffed pillow and Eliot’s small back. Eliot’s relieved sigh was acknowledgment enough.

“What was in your mind?” Hardison asked once Eliot settled back with Parker’s blanket over his shoulders.

“Compression socks.”

Parker choked with her cocoa at the very thought of such an appalling gift.

“Interesting choice…” Hardison felt his eyebrows raising in appreciation.

“That’s even worse than the hand cream!”

“What’s your rationale?” Hardison was more amused than offended at the idea.

“Trust me. I spent enough time looking down to notice they all wear compression socks.” Judging by the way he said those words, Eliot had bad memories of his ‘looking down’ observations. “Very colorful, too.”

Hardison was amazed Eliot had time to notice their socks, busy as he was puking his guts up. Socks sounded like a good choice; it could satisfy both Eliot’s practical sense and Parker’s whimsical needs. He put his tablet to work without a second thought.

“How do you know...?”

“It’s a very distinctive kind of socks!” Hardison and Eliot said at the same time.

“Wha...?” The stereo reply baffled Parker.

“Nana use them for her varicose veins.” Hardison explained with his eyes in the tablet.

“Try to survive ruck training without those fatigue fighters.” Eliot commented at the same time.

Hardison offered a high five and Eliot reciprocated offhandedly.

“You’re no FUN!” Parker stirred her cocoa with a pout. “I can’t believe you are teaming up for the worst present ever!”

Eliot just sipped his unsweetened cranberry juice, looking at her like she had lost her mind. Hardison noticed again how messed up Eliot’s sense of taste was: it was evident Eliot was enjoying drinking that bitter stuff by the gallon.

“Them socks are cute, babe,” Hardison tried to reason with her, passing her the tablet with the first results. “Look at them!”

“Oh, cheerful!” Parker’s eyes light up as soon as she put her eyes on the screen.

Eliot’s phone rang on the nightstand. Parker had it closer and passed it before returning to the colorful socks. Hardison looked at Eliot. His furrowed brow was concerning. Hardison knew there was no use to peer at the screen: Eliot never identified or speed-dialed his contacts.

“Unknown number?”
“No, I know this number.” Eliot answered the call. “Shelley…?” Eliot made a polite pause to hear the greeting on the other side. “Joking and smoking.”

“Shelley?” Hardison asked, feeling how the grin pulled the corners of his mouth up. That was one of Eliot’s friends he liked for real. “Is it ‘Han Solo’ Shelley?”


“Bring him in!” Hardison encouraged Eliot, pushing his shoulder and splashing cranberry juice on Eliot’s lap. “The more the merrier.”

“No, Shelly… Of course, I want to see you, but I’m getting chemo on Christmas Eve and you are a big b…” Eliot nodded and sipped the rest of his juice. “Because my ON’s wife is working on Christmas Eve!” Another short pause. “Yes, wife… GOFO,” Eliot hissed and rolled his eyes. “No, the fact you slept through the second Basra bombing does not qualify you… Just a second.”

Eliot put the phone against his chest. They watched him sigh his annoyance.

“Shelly’s mom and sisters made plans for Christmas without him. He got an unexpected libo and wants to come here. Parker? I already know what this guy here thinks.”

“If he doesn’t mind sleeping on the couch…” Parker shrugged and changed the tab of the search.

“OK,” Eliot replied and put the phone up. “I got you a couch, a blanket, and a diner. If that’s enough, you are welcome.” Eliot smiled. “HUA. I’ll text you vector.”

Eliot passed Hardison the phone for him to text Shelly the address. Parker passed him some napkins to soak the cranberry juice pooling on his crotch and showed him the discoveries she had made.

“I can live if we buy them those,” Parker said, pointing to some socks with floral designs. “And those… and those too…”

“Fine…” Eliot groaned. The wet spot was uncomfortable and was upsetting his bladder.

“And high-end hand cream,” Parker completed with a grin. “Nothing drugstore bought. I mean fancy, Eliot.”

“No. That’s too much,” Eliot refused, he really had to get up now. “Move! Nature’s call…”

Parker rushed to let him get out of bed, dropping the tablet in her hurry.

“Use the bottle, bro,” Hardison commanded in a serious tone. With the address sent, Hardison returned Eliot’s phone back to the nightstand. “We need to monitor how much you are draining.”

“Ugh…” Eliot grunted, his hand holding his small back. His shirt was wet at the armpits and the belly.

“You like to poke him too, don’t you?” Parker asked in a mischievous whisper once Eliot closed the door behind him.

“Tell me when I’ll have another chance to do it as consequence-free as now, and I’ll stop,” Hardison said, gathering the wet blankets. “Come on, tell me. I’ll wait.”

Parker smiled and shook her head. There will never be a better time and they both knew it.
“Should we tell him?” Parker asked, checking the hot water bottle.

“It’s not Christmas yet,” Hardison replied as he tossed the fabric over his shoulder. “Let’s not spoil the surprise, in case we have to table it,” Hardison shrugged and moved to the door. “Do we need another bottle?”

“This one is still hot.” Parker moved to the closet before shouting to Eliot: “Do you want a fresh shirt?”

“A hoodie!” Hardison, loading the washing machine in the corridor, heard Eliot reply.

“A hoodie it is,” Parker agreed, taking the spare blankets and a camo hoodie.

Eliot came out, shirtless and still wincing. Parker tossed him the hoodie before extending the blankets over the bed. Eliot climbed the bed, pulling down the hoodie. He was soon curling at the center, with the hot water bottle against his belly. Parker picked up the tablet and slid behind him. Hardison moved to the other side and sat before they could hoard the whole bed.

“I won’t ask,” Parker promised, looking at the open tabs and darting Hardison a cautionary look.

“Good,” Eliot grumbled, pulling the hood over his head, “because I don’t want to answer.”

“What should we get your Nurse, Eliot?” Parker opened a new tab.

“A lump of coal…” Eliot mumbled, moving to cuddle against Hardison.

“Play nice and tell me. You are the one who pays attention…”

“She needs a new med-bag. Hers is pretty banged-up,” Eliot mumbled after a moment of silence. He had his hot head resting on Hardison’s leg. “I rather get her a new t-shirt with a legend, if I have to... She likes the ones with sarcastic text.”

“That’s not a bad choice.” Hardison put his hand on Eliot’s back and his eyes flew open.

Parker looked at Hardison with anxiety painted on her face. Hardison’s expression had let out that Eliot was warm under the hoodie. Hardison had no heart to take Eliot’s temperature right now, not while they were having some semblance of normalcy, not while they were planning to spend Christmas at home. They all wanted to avoid another hospital trip with all their hearts. Hardison shook his head after a moment, Parker nodded. They will let Eliot sleep, wait for the appointed time to give him his drugs and hope he was below the threshold then.

“I like her t-shirts!” Parker exclaimed with fake joy to cover her fear.

“I don’t.” The sleepiness of Eliot’s voice couldn’t hide he meant each of his words. “I don’t like to be threatened…”

“Babe,” Hardison called with a small smile. It was better to take the pressure out of Eliot so he could rest. “Let’s choose some pretty socks…”

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Christmas Eve started with oatmeal and a layered Christmas smoothie just at the break of the day. Nurse had Eliot out of his shirt and hooked to the drug bag at eight in the morning sharp and, by midday, Eliot’s head was light.

Parker was a believer in the curative properties Christmas cheer. Eliot was not, but he felt more like
a pincushion filled with cotton candy than a Grinch. Hardison had gone to fetch Shelly around ten in the morning and Parker kept Eliot busy tying bows to the gifts for the OSHU nurses.

“How come your bows are perfect if you have pins and needles in your hands?” Parker asked, catching the hand cream wrapped in socks.

Parker was sitting on the floor, clad in her tight, black working clothes. Her hair set in a sensible bun, pinned in place by a couple of candy canes.

“I haven’t had any today,” Eliot folded the lace around his thumbs for another bow. A soothing, meaningless and repetitive task was very welcome. “Those shots must be working…”

“If they do, the pain was a good investment.”

“I had had worse,” Eliot replied tossing her another gift. It was never a good idea to discuss pain, discomfort or upset with Parker. “I should have bought you something for Christmas…”

“Are you kidding?” Parker flashed him a big grin. “This year, I’m Santa!”

Eliot shrugged. If Parker was happy making her way into the nurses' locker rooms and busting all the forty-two lockers to deliver gifts, Eliot was not about to point out that he didn’t get sick so she could have a Christmas gambol.

Parker approached the operation with the same care she planned all her heists. Hardison had hacked personal registers and printed a list with the names of each one who had touched Eliot’s bed. Gifts were piling up around her, hand cream for ICU nurses, chocolate for charge, clinical, floor and assistant nurses. Eliot wished his memory had been available during those days because the names in that list meant nothing to him and they didn’t summon any image.

“All set!” Parker looked cheerful once she had filled her backpack. She came to Eliot’s side and kissed his temple and wrapped him in the fleece blanket. “Try to be nice to Nurse. It’s Christmas Eve…”

“I can’t promise that!”

“Just try, Eliot!”

Eliot had time to nap the good part of an hour before Nurse woke him up to check his vitals and deliver another dose through his central line. Eliot rested against the pillows while she disinfected the cap and screwed the syringe. Her t-shirt was black as usual, and the legend ‘I will stab you’ was a promise more than a threat. The new shots were a challenge to endure, but they were working so Eliot couldn’t really complain.

“You look relaxed,” Nurse commented, going slow with the plunger.

“I’m tired, not relaxed…” Eliot began, but Lucille’s motor running in the driveway distracted him and made him smile.

“Did the cavalry arrive?” Nurse asked as soon as she noticed Eliot’s lazy smile.

“No.” Eliot knew he had made a tactical mistake displaying his pleasure at the arrival of his visitor, but he couldn't help it. “The Army.”

“Eliot!” Shelley shouted his name by way of greeting as he climbed up the stairs, double step style. In three long strides, he was at his door. “Merry Chris… Whoa!”
Eliot barely had time to notice Shelley’s olive green padded jacket and his washed-out jeans before he turned around as he had just stumbled upon a naughty scene. Hardison didn’t warn Shelley about the procedures or else Shelly would have made a more discreet advance.

“Easy,” Eliot said when he could stop laughing. The plunger was finally reaching the bottom of the syringe. “There is no needle.”

Nurse turned with a curious expression to see how Shelly crossed the doorway again. Her hands were working on the catheter almost absentmindedly as she assessed Shelley’s clean-cut, freshly shaved appearance.

“Shelley, a friend from service,” Eliot made the pertinent introductions. “Shelley, she’s my ON.”

“I have a name,” Nurse said, screwing a new sterile cap on the hub, “and you know it.”

“No, you don’t have a name because, if that were the case, I’d had to curse it every day. Nurse,” Eliot retorted, slipping into his native accent. “And me ma taught me well to not do that.”

She laughed, handing him the glass shot with pills. Shelley approached with the intention of showing his manners, but he stopped short at first glance of her shirt.

Eliot knew since the first week they spent on BMT that Shelley was a big baby around needles, even the drawn ones.

“Can I have a cup of tea?” Eliot asked pulling Parker’s blanket over his left shoulder. “I’m parched.”

“Anything for you?” Nurse asked Shelley.

“I’m good,” Shelley turned his eyes toward his outdoor tactical rucksack. “I’m good…”

Eliot looked at her go and turned his eyes to Shelley. A puppy with his tail tucked might look braver than his friend, and that’s a man who had kept a T-62 tank at bay with an AK-103 and limited ammo.

“Did you have a good flight?” Eliot couldn’t think of a more banal question.

“Eliot, can you cover that?” Shelley asked pointing at the central line.

“Not really,” Eliot shrugged. “Sorry if it disturbs you, but I kind of need it to keep me alive.”

“Ok…” Shelley sat at the foot of Eliot’s bed with his back turned and rummaged his rucksack. “I sent you the wrong box set…”

“I was beginning to think I got there in the middle of the story,” Eliot said, his head was getting lighter by the minute. “Put it on! We might get to see a couple of episodes before you had to clear out.”

“And why’s that?” Shelley asked taking out a disk.

“Because that harpy is going to stick me with the peanut butter shot’s evil sister in a couple of hours.”

Shelley laughed softly to cover his discomfort. Eliot was yet to find a man who served who remember the peanut butter shot fondly. Hardison made his way up with Eliot’s tea and a beer for Shelley and they made small talk for a while. Eliot sipped the hot water. Dayan was right, when she gave him the tea—a lifetime away—, Eliot was in no position to appreciate it. It was soothing
and her tea was the only liquid bearable enough to drink during chemo.

“You good, bro?” Hardison asked when he noticed Eliot was not chatting.

“Yeah, just…” Eliot made a vague gesture with his left hand.

“Foggy…?”

“Yeah. Foggy.”

“What’s that?” Shelly asked, laying back.

Eliot wanted to kick his lucky, healthy ass, and Hardison could read the urge in his face. They exchanged a look that Shelley couldn’t understand.

“Feels like being high,” Eliot finally said, after a sip, “minus the joy.”

“Ouch,” Shelley said sympathetically before sipping his beer.

“Ouch,” Eliot agreed and sipped his tea.

“I’ll bring you some popcorn,” Hardison announced, finally noticing he was on the way of their catching up.

They watched the series for a bit. Shelley nodding at his favorite parts. Eliot made some quick deductions. Shelley’s station was near Syria, that allowed him to watch the show and keep it together under pressure at the same time. Eliot wished he could be in his place, somehow warzone felt less gruesome than another chemo session.

Hardison brought the popcorn and the blue water bottle Parker forgot to bring in the morning. He stopped just a second to pat Eliot’s shoulder with care, but Eliot stopped his hand before Hardison could touch him. Nurse had shot him there and Eliot was still a bit sore. Hardison nodded his understanding and made his way out.

“The boys sent their best wishes when they learn you were biffed,” Shelley said without making eye contact. “I have a ton of letters and postcards for you. I don’t know if you want them.”

“Half of your squad doesn’t know me from Adam, Shelley.”

“Your legend lives on. Before any of our boys leave us,” Shelley stopped and tapped his beer against his leg twice. Eliot, without noticing, tapped his cup against the saucer. “They make sure the newcomers hear of Blue Heart’s Spencer.”

Eliot felt a shiver that was not related to fever running down his spine. The name caught him unaware and it rumbled through the fog in his brain. His breath stuck inside his windpipe and he had to cough to clear it out. That name had power over his body after twelve years and that was a very scary thought.

“Eliot…?” Shelley turned to see him. His face was concerned.

“Sorry,” Eliot blinked twice slowly and put the tea in the night table. His hands were miraculously steady. “Brain fog.”

“By the way… I met Blue Heart in my travels and informed her of your red star clusterfuck.”

“Ah. It was you.” Eliot punched Shelley in the pain spot of his upper arm with a short, dry hit.
“Thank you for the wall-to-wall counseling!”

“Ow!” Shelley rubbed the spot, looking a lot more worried. He knew Eliot wouldn’t hit him out of the blue without a reason. “Did Blue Heart drop out from the sky to beat some sense into you?”

“Worse,” Eliot said, stopping a second before adding: “she wrote.”

Shelley let out a small, worried whistle. They both knew that sometimes only a presidential order could make Blue Heart put anything down on a piece of paper.

“So, her advice amounted to ‘bite the bullet,’ since...” Shelley signaled the whole IV setting.

“No. ‘Bite the pillow’ was more like it.”

“That’s so like Blue Heart.” Shelley, laughing, paused the video. “You were her last pride and joy. The only one to survive her especial R2I/SERE training to the bitter end. I have never asked...”

Eliot smiled because sooner or later everyone asks that question and Shelley had waited twelve long years before succumbing to temptation. Contrary to what rumors said, that session was not part of the punishment: it was the reward. R2I/SERE training left Eliot with a twisted longing for redhead women and handcuffs that he considered too shameful to even contemplate, let alone indulge in.

“Do you want to know if the rumor is true? Huh?” Eliot picked up his cup again and sipped without any hurry. Shelley’s curiosity was objectively amusing. “That’s above your rank.”

“Oh, come on, Eliot!” Shelley pouted and gave him Bambi’s eyes. “You are back on the block!”

“I survived Blue Heart’s worst for three-fucking-hundred mandatory hours, Shelley.” Eliot stopped to sip his tea. “You need to do better than that.”

Shelley pointed at him with a big grin before snatching a handful of popcorn. Eliot knew he wouldn’t insist again. In friendly silence, they shared the popcorn and watched TV until Nurse knocked on the open door. Eliot looked at her. She was holding a tray.

“Shelley, move your ass downstairs,” Eliot said, knowing what that tray meant.

“But it’s almost time for the belly dance scene!” Shelley complained and turned his head.

“I can’t carry your ass out this time!”

“I won’t peek, promise.”

Nurse didn’t try to make small talk. She dragged the chair next to the bed and opened the pneumatic cuff. Eliot extended his arm to have his blood pressure taken without any fuss. Eliot could read in her face that she was aching to ask what kind of friendship privileges Shelley had for Eliot to let him stay, but she kept her silence in the end.

“Not too low?” Eliot asked in a whisper. He couldn’t care less for whatever had been happening in the screen, a scantily dressed red-headed woman dancing on it or not.

“Within expected parameters.” Nurse’s reply was almost soothing. “You have been eating.” There was a hint of relief in her comment. “I’m going to put the thermometer under your arm.”

Eliot considered himself lucky and let her do her job. His docility made Nurse suspicious, Eliot could read the distrust in her face. Eliot’s pulse and temperature were satisfactory and Nurse
moved to the next part of the program. Eliot watched her mix the injection. Black Luer lock meant she was going to force liquid into a muscle and, in spite of his right arm hurting, it was the farthest from Shelly. Eliot gulped, ready to make sacrifices in the name of friendship.

“This one hurts less,” Eliot said offering his right arm. Maybe she would show Eliot mercy since Shelly was in the room, but Eliot was not holding his breath.

“I know you have been working those arms. I have eyes, big guy,” Nurse said, checking the liquid on the vial before purging the bubble, “but this one is a non-negotiable BONITA.”

“Such is my luck…” Eliot grumbled and turned to warn Shelly to clear out now. Shelly wouldn’t hear his advice, even if Eliot had time to utter it. Shelly hadn’t kept his promise and his eyes were already rolling inside his head. Eliot shrugged as he watched how his comrade of yore fell backward on his bed. Nurse looked at Shelly with amused interest.

“Don’t mind him,” Eliot turned in the bed. Nurse was already keeping the lines from tangling. “He just can’t stand needles.”

“Why the toughest looking ones always faint?” Nurse asked almost rhetorically while she put a fresh, sharp needle on the syringe.


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“Eliot?” Nurse called out, shaking his shoulder slightly. “You need to take your morning pills. Wake up!”

“Morning?” Eliot blinked and hugged the wet blankets. He was sweating buckets again and his head was pounding. “What are you doing here still?”

“Yes, it was a Christmas miracle: You slept the whole night after chemo.” Nurse was cheerful as always, but Eliot noticed she was almost as tired as he was. She pulled his blankets. “Your pills, now.”

“Why are you not with your wife?” Eliot asked, trying to sit on the bed. Eliot cringed at the whiny sound of his own voice. Every inch of his body ached and he felt hot.

“Because she finishes her shift at noon,” Nurse explained, getting him comfortable against the pillows, “and you were compensating something awful by two in the morning.”

“I’m touched…” Eliot said, trying to shake off the drowsiness, and noticed a new pain inside his right arm, “and poked.”

“You were compensating. I had to set you back on the right path,” Nurse explained, handing him the glass shot. “You are welcome. Swallow these and you can get back to sleep.”

Eliot did just that. The glass in his hand was so cold that it hurt his fingertips. The splash of apple juice tasted like battery acid in his parched mouth.

“Nausea?” Nurse asked, noticing his discomfort. Eliot shook his head and she insisted. “Not even a bit?”

“Shots worked,” Eliot concluded, looking around for his water bottle. Water had a salty taste, but it
was better than juice.

“Here,” Nurse handed him the water. “Do you want something for that fever?”

Eliot emptied the whole contents of the bottle in one long swallow. It was cold, but it made him good. He thought about the offer for a moment and then he shook his head. Christmas or not, he would bear the low burn on his own.

“Can you do something for me?” Eliot asked with a deep sigh. “I forgot last night…”

“You were very confused.” Nurse shrugged it off philosophically.

“The second drawer of that one,” Eliot pointed at the closet.

“What am I looking for?”

“You’ll know when you see it,” Eliot grumbled and started to look for a dry spot to sleep in. Sheets were cold, but he was warm enough. “You're smart like that.”

Almost on cue, Eliot heard her laughter. She was pleased with his Christmas gift and that was good because he had to fight Parker over the legend of that black T-shirt.

“’Needles come in sizes and I choose’, ” Nurse read aloud, approaching the bed, “Very fitting! You certainly had given it some thought…”

“Merry Christmas to you,” groaned Eliot, pillow already hugging his head, “horrid harpy.”

“And to you too, you curmudgeon, grumpy, and combative ass,” she wished back, placing a pillow against his back to provide support.

The extra support felt awesome and Eliot felt his conscience wavered. Sleep was coming fast and, for once, Eliot refused to fight it.

“Hey!” Nurse’s complaint came to him through a thick fog of tiredness, fever and chemo drugs. There could be only one reason: she had found Parker and Hardison’s gift. “This is not my bag!”

“Don’t ask me,” Eliot yawned in the pillow, “I slept the whole night…”

“Eliot?” Parker asked, poking her head inside the bathroom. “Is everything ok?”

Eliot was standing in front of the mirror, his right hand holding his head and his left thumb hooked in the waistband of his camo sweatpants. He was confused again.

“I… I forgot…” Eliot took his hand from his face and blinked. He knew he was confused and that was a good sign. “Was I going in or out?”

Parker looked around. His hair shone, the hand towel was wet, his toothbrush was dripping slowly by the sink, the electric shaver rested next to the sink, plugged to the outlet. Eliot had finished the basic drill before the fog came down his head. The first twenty-four hours were always the worst, but brain fog had lasted less and less each run.

“You were going out,” Parker smiled and extended her hand to guide him out. “Come. We are waiting for you to have our Christmas lunch…”
“I’m not hungry…” Eliot complained, but he let her guide the way. *Call of Duty: Black Ops 4*’s fake fire was blaring full force.

“I know, but you need to eat something or, at the very least, drink something,” Parker put herself between Eliot and the wall, letting him grip the handrail. “Shelley would love to chat with you before he had to return to base.”

“I told him it was a bad idea…”

“It was not bad!” Shelley shouted from the living room. “I’m having the time of my life!”

“This brother here is a menace! A menace!” Hardison complained, his eyes glued to the screen. “He’s all over the place!”

“Come down and take a controller!” Shelley was looking at them, holding the device with one hand. “Boom! You are down, Alec!”

“No, I’m…” The explosion on the screen cut short his denial. “Yeah. You are right. I’m down and done. When did you plant that cluster grenade…?”

“Never play *Black Ops* with a real-life Black Ops…” Eliot mumbled, with a short dry laugh.

“What?” Parker asked because the sentence made no sense to her.

“What?” Eliot looked at her, bottom lip trembling and guiltless blue eyes staring.

Eliot was playing the confused one, but Parker let it slide because Eliot was getting in a good mood and they better seize it. Eliot shook his head as if he was trying to get rid of the fog and moved to the kitchen, Parker rushed to the couch and stole the controllers from their hands before Hardison and Shelley could start another match. She was already in the kitchen before Shelley noticed.

“Whoah!” Shelley exclaimed, staring at his empty hands. He sounded elated, like a kid who just witnessed a magic trick. “That was fast…!”

“Ma baby’s that good!” Hardison exclaimed, pointing each word with a downward movement. “That! Good!”

Parker hear the conversation and shook her head before putting the controllers on top of the breakfast nook. She had forgotten how much regular people can be surprised by a little sleight of hand. Eliot had already found his spot in the table—the one with the tray and the carefully measured portions—, and was pouring that vile cranberry juice in his glass. It was still a mystery how Eliot could drink that stuff without any sugar...

“Thirsty?” Parker asked just to make conversation. After a whole morning riding out a fever, it was obvious that Eliot needed all the drinks on the table and maybe those in the fridge too.

Eliot nodded and took a long sip. Parker started to turn around to encourage the slowpokes to come to the table when Eliot started to cough in a hacking, spasmodic way. Parker forgot everything else immediately. Hardison and Shelley jumped the couch in their hurry to join them. They reached the table in a couple of long strides. Parker could tell Hardison felt the memories of the hospital on his goose-bumped flesh.

“Wrong pipe?” Hardison asked once Eliot stopped to suck some air.

“Cranberry juice is spoiled…” Eliot coughed a bit more.
“Spoiled?” Parker took the glass from his hand and looked at it. The liquid was not cloudy and there weren’t any sediments.

“It tastes more bitter than death, sin and regret together!”

“That’s how cranberry juice is supposed to taste…” Shelley pointed out the obvious, taking the glass from Parker’s hand. He took a sip. “Son of a…! You didn’t even put sugar on it, you wretch?”

Parker looked at Eliot and then they both looked at Hardison and Hardison looked at them and Parker knew they collectively had had the same idea. Parker took off the cover from Eliot’s dinner tray and took his allotted portion of roasted sweet potatoes.

“Try this,” Parker invited, offering him the small bowl. Hardison was already putting a fork on Eliot’s hand.

Eliot looked at the bowl with mistrust before taking it in his right hand. Then he looked at Parker and then at Hardison. He even tossed a look to a very confused Shelley before taking the leap of faith and tasting the dish.

“I think I’m missing something…” Shelley said, raising his right index.

“Shhh…” Parker shushed Shelley. She was trying to read each of Eliot’s expressions.

The slight furrowing of the brow and the tense jaw merged into a stunned blank stare. A slow chew, followed by that little squint Eliot made when he was trying to analyze something. Eliot chewed for a long time—too long for a soft piece of vegetable—before swallowing it.

“Well?” Hardison couldn’t hold the question any longer.

“Can someone explain to me…?”

“Shhh!” Parker and Hardison silenced Shelley again. This veridic was more important to them than common courtesy.

“It was faint, but it has taste,” Eliot said a bit hesitant, taking another bite. “There is definitely rosemary…” Eliot took another forkful and tasted it. “And bacon grease.” Eliot attacked the bowl again with a weak smile. “That’s a sweet potato for sure… It tastes like food…”

Parker wanted to cheer when Eliot smiled again and focused his whole attention on the bowl.

“What is food supposed to taste like?”

“Brother…” Hardison said to Shelley with a come here gesture. “Let me explain to you how Eliot got that thin.”

“Is it any good?” Parker asked. Eliot enjoying eating was a real Christmas miracle in her book.

“Toby sends his best wishes.”

“Best food…” Eliot stopped to carry another forkful to his mouth. “…ever.”

Hardison laughed, placing a plate with more sweet potatoes on the table.

“We have more than enough.” Parker couldn’t help but to mess Eliot’s hair. “You can try most of it. Toby made sure of it.”
“Pace yourself,” Hardison advised, preventing Eliot from putting another spoonful of roasted sweet potatoes on his bowl. “You are going to make yourself sick if you keep wolfing down food at that speed.”

“It has taste,” Eliot said slowly as if that was explanation enough. Parker knew Eliot was giving in to the obsession. “It tastes like food.” Eliot furrowed his brow, trying to find words to explain. Parker pressed his arm and Eliot looked at her, confused. “Am I hungry…?”

“Eat more slowly,” Parker said, smiling at those words. “That’s all we ask for.”

Eliot nodded and put his fork on his tray. Shelley sat down, putting a glass of apple juice in front of Eliot.

“This will also pass,” Shelly promised. For a second, Parker could read the years of combat stress in his face.

“It will,” Eliot agreed, nodding sagely and looking at the food longingly. Parker was not sure they were talking about the same thing. “This will also pass.”

“Parker, give me a hand here…” Hardison called from the stove.

Parker left the table only to find Hardison had already cut the turkey breast in portions and set the garnishes around it. She looked him in the eyes wondering why did Hardison need her.

“What’s happening here?” Hardison asked in a confused tone.

“I’m a thief! How am I supposed to know?” Parker asked back, sharing his confusion. “If the new anti-nausea drug makes the food edible and gives Eliot an appetite, why are we questioning it? You know he needs to eat!”

Hardison looked over his shoulder and Parker followed his eyes. Shelley and Eliot were talking over the table, their heads almost touching, completely oblivious of them.

“Because if I’ve learned something of this whole thing is that drugs are like a blanket that is too short,” Hardison put a couple of rye bread rolls in the tray for Eliot. “If you cover something, anything else will lay bare…”

“Can we care for that once Christmas is over?” Parker asked, taking the basket bread and moving away without waiting for a reply.

Parker sauntered to the table, putting the bread between those two. Shelley looked at her a bit offended by the intrusion, but Eliot was quick to extend his hand toward the brioche.

“Try this one first,” Parker put the rye bread in his hand as he closed his fingers. “Flavor is stronger.”

Parker knew it wasn’t a lie, but that didn’t change the fact that Eliot needed more wholesome food than white bread. Eliot grumbled, but he took it anyway. The first bite consoled him. Hardison put the stuffed turkey breast and garnishes on the table. Shelley rubbed his hands together when the main dish was set on the table; he probably was thinking they all had turned to a vegan diet. Eliot almost got his hand on the wine and red fruits gravy when everyone was busy loading their dishes; fortunately, Parker was quicker than him.

“You can’t have this one,” Parker said. Eliot looked at her and he seemed heartbroken. If he had said a word, she would have stood her ground, but Eliot just sighed and cast down his eyes. “Ok…
just a taste.”

“Parker…” Hardison admonished when she poured a spoonful over Eliot’s mashed potatoes.

“Cancer can’t stop your charms, Eliot,” Shelley commented with a hearty laugh.

Parker, Hardison and Eliot cast him a look that made him choke on his laughter.

“Great way to bring up a sensitive subject,” Hardison huffed and returned to his dish.

“You are going to beat it,” Shelley said, by way of apology. “You are a legend.”

“I better beat it, ‘cause you wouldn’t catch me dead inside an operating room ever again.”

“Was it that bad?” Shelley toyed with the greens in his dish.

“Yes,” Hardison said in a dry tone.

“Worse than you can think,” Parker mumbled, pouring gravy over her turkey.

“Nothing water, Motrin and clean socks couldn’t cure.” Eliot’s voice dripped sarcasm. “After surgery I got a 108 fever, just to keep it interesting.”

“Can a body survive that?” Shelly was in awe.

“This one did.” Harrison pointed at Eliot with his fork.

“Must be a record,” Shelley munched on his turkey breast for a bit. “Did you know this legend’s call sign was Hotel Charlie for a while?”

Parker and Hardison looked at Eliot with curiosity.

“You are going to make me weep for my lost innocence…” Eliot commented digging hard on his mash potatoes portion.

“Yours? What about mine!”

“Who cares about yours!” Eliot tried to steal another squirt of gravy but Parker stole the jar from under his fingers. “I was the one getting sand sunburns!”

“Ok, bros…” Hardison started moving his hands over the food. “Either you explain what’s happening here or you change the topic, because this,” he pointed at the feast, “is supposed to be a Christmas dinner to enjoy together, not in pairs.”

“This is on you,” Eliot said and tried the sautéed greens. He chewed slowly. Parker could tell Eliot was still marveled by the flavor.

“We were just deployed in Afghanistan,” Shelley started his tale between forkfuls of food. “East of Kunduz, so you can orient yourselves…”

Parker thought he could have mentioned Berlin and that would have changed nothing for her, but Hardison was nodding and smiling. He could smell a good story.

“So, there we were. A veteran Sargent and eight bratty fresh meat just out of boot camp, loaded with sixty pounds of equipment, doing tactical desert training.”
“You were… what?” Parker asked, figuring out the situation. “Twenty?”

“We were eighteen,” Eliot replied, snatching the garlic butter before Parker could stop him. “We were brats of the worst kind if you ask that Sargent.”

Shelley tapped his beer against the table and Eliot did the same with his apple juice. Parker looked at them as if they have lost their marbles.

“We were bad,” Shelley said and he sounded slightly ashamed of them both. “Anyway… We have been marching under the sun for hours and this man, him, just fell on his side. Like a potato sack. Without any warning.”

“That’s our Eliot…” Hardison agreed, using half a piece of bread to soak the juice in his dish.

“The Sargent ran back berating Eliot in words our saint mothers never heard…”

“Maybe yours,” Eliot pointed out, snatching Hardison’s brioche under his arm.

“You were not even awake to hear what he said!” Shelley laughed heartily. It was difficult not to join him. “In any case, once he noticed Eliot was taking a vacation from Afghanistan, he started shouting orders. I was sure a sniper had gotten him good, but the orders really didn’t make any sense. They put Eliot on his face and I stood there, like a stupid…”

Parker watched Shelley shook his head. That gave Eliot the opening he needed to steal the wine, cherry and raspberry gravy right under her nose. She gave him an offended look, but Eliot was too busy stuffing the bread with the forbidden food. Eliot was smiling more genuinely that he had ever done it since the diagnose and Parker’s anger dissipated like fog at the warmth of that smile.

“I mean… There was my butt buddy. The toughest of the bunch. Flat on his face…” If Shelley was trying to save his manly status, the praise heaped upon Eliot didn’t help his case. “The Sargent turned to me and asked: ‘Are you Spencer’s battle buddy?’ I must have mumbled an affirmative because he put the silver bullet in my hands…”

Parker waited for an explanation and she could tell Hardison was too because he looked at Shelley, and then to Eliot. Eliot had his mouth full and his heart glad by the fruits of his theft.

“And there I was, standing agog,” Shelley opened his arms to mimic his confusion. “The Sargent looked like he was about to have a stroke and pushed me with these words: ‘Do the honors, boy.’ Finally, I stuttered ‘What should I do?’” Shelley took a long sip, shaking his head. “I was eighteen and really didn’t have the most fucked idea of what to do with a silver bullet…”

Hardison was trying hard not to laugh. Parker kicked him under the table.

“As I was losing time, the Sargent screamed to my face: ‘Shove it up his ass!’” Shelley actually leaned forward and shouted at them. Hardison and Parker jumped on their chairs, fighting the nervous laughter every good drill Sargent’s shout should provoke. “Now, I was the one about to have a stroke…”

“I was the one actually having the stroke…” Eliot commented between bites. Parker knew he had heard the story a thousand times. “A regular Heat Casualty.”

“Aaah,” Parker finally understood one thing of this whole story. “Hotel Charlie. HC, heat casualty, but…”

“The silver bullet is a thermometer, Parker,” Hardison explained, fighting the urge to laugh out
loud. Eliot was too close. “Eliot went down with a sunstroke…”

Parker felt the laughter bubbling inside. She couldn’t help it.

“Sorry, Eliot,” Shelley was losing it too. “I really never meant to know you that up close and personal…”

“Kapat çeneni, seni orospu çocuğu!” Eliot snapped back. He was the only one without a silly smile on his face. “Explain to me why it took you three tries to get it right… That thing only had two ends!”

That last comment made conversation impossible for the next half hour. They were having a pretty jolly Christmas after all.

Chapter End Notes

*Pure fucking magic*
Chapter Summary

When you find the perfect gif for a friend who has been under the weather, you can risk crossing international borders for it.

Of course, Eliot's nurse wouldn't approve, but Parker and Hardison weren't going ask her opinion about this Christmas gift.

Chapter Notes

No floating boxes this time, but Quinn's back like a bad penny!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Forget about your friends,
you know they're gonna say.
We're bad for each other,
but we ain't good for anyone else
-Kenny Chesney

Parker lifted that thin airline blanket to cover Eliot’s mouth and nose and tuck it behind Eliot’s shoulder. He had fallen asleep as soon as they lifted off the ground. Parker started to doubt their crazy plan, but there was no turning back now.

Hardison touched her hand to give her a bit of moral support. Parker had relinquished his favorite spot by the window to keep Eliot safe at the end of the row. A month ago, when they have planned this little escapade behind Eliot’s back, all sounded exciting, now it was just frightening. The flight was too short for Eliot to get enough rest and, despite being in first class, the number of people around them was overwhelming. Eliot looked so sick among so many healthy people...

“Surprises tire him more than bad news,” Hardison said, standing on the aisle, “and Christmas has been a chockfull of those.”

“I’m just worried.” Parker looked at Alec. “Eliot had had enough health scares this year.”

“He will be alright, Parker,” Hardison assured her with a faint smile. “We are with him.”

They have found Eliot’s fugitive, Trenanow, in Canada running another scam, this time on pier workers instead of veterans. Parker and Hardison could have taken him down at least two weeks ago, but Eliot’s tests returned with so surprisingly good values that they thought they had found Eliot’s perfect Christmas gift. Getting priority passes for the flight or persuading Eliot to hug Shelley a last time in the airport was not a problem. Eliot, still in his camo sweatpants, was game, but this sudden nap might be an indicator that his body was not up to the task.

“We have this narrow window before his white cell count plummet and the fog is not as bad as it
used to be,” Hardison sounded comforting. “Busting some heads will do wonders for his morale…”

“I hope you can have a way to explain Nurse any bruise resulting from this.”

“We have sold harder cons,” Hardison shrugged, refusing to think of a problem before time.

In the back of the rented van, Eliot pressed the plunger slowly, the heparin rushed through the distal lumen; there was no occlusion. Hardison watched the whole operation like a hawk and Parker did her best to keep her eyes shut. Once Eliot closed the clamp and replaced the cap, he wrapped the hubs in gauze and taped it to his chest. As an extra protection, he stuck a shower film over the dressing to keep it in place.

Hardison inspected the dressing and nodded his approbation before passing Eliot an undershirt to cover it all. Eliot took off his latex gloves, put the shirt on and exchanged his sweatpants for jeans.

Before pulling them up, Eliot shot himself in the leg. Dilaudid was the only of his painkiller choices that would give Eliot half an hour to act before exacerbating his brain fog and, if Parker and Hardison’s intel was right, he only needed seven minutes to clear that warehouse with Trenanow secure key. They could be at the airport before Eliot started to feel the effects.

“Put on the vest,” Parker insisted. She had made her recommendation as soon as they got in the rented van.

“I’m planning to,” Eliot grumbled, lacing his boots high. The fact they have thought of buying him a concealable tactical vest made Eliot feel strangely moved.

Eliot stood out the van, tucked his undershirt, button up his jeans and extended his hand to Parker. Parker passed him the vest and smiled the whole time while he fit the straps snugly around his girth. A heavy winter shirt untucked, and a leather jacket finished his outfit. Except for the hubs of his central line digging his chest, Eliot almost felt his illness—the whole damn year!—was a nightmare finally coming to an end.

Parker got out of the van too and put her hair in a ponytail.

“I’ll be in the roof with my taser,” Parker said, looking at Eliot as if she was warning him. “Say the word and I’ll drop on them.”

“Parker, my job is to keep you safe…”

“Not today,” Parker smiled and hugged him, “I’m your hitter today.”

Eliot had to fight the urge to push Parker away. Hugs were a thing for those times when Eliot feel down and right now, he was riding a high.

“See that he takes his meds!” Parker shouted Hardison and ran to the warehouse with a light-foot step.

“I won’t change my job with you,” Hardison warned, handing him an orange container with the night pills. “You’re genetically unable to touch an electronic device without stumbling over things you were not supposed to look at.”

“I don’t want to change mine,” Eliot replied looking at his lot. “Did we bring water?”
“Just to mix this one…” Hardison said, shaking a silver package.

Eliot took it from Hardison and looked at it for a moment. The side effects of this one would cramp his style. No hitter should have to fight his targets and nausea at the same time.

“I’ll take it after I’m done,” Eliot said, putting it in the chest pocket of his shirt without thinking.

With a shrug, Eliot turned his attention to the recipient and opened it. Swallowing pills without a chaser was an unpleasant task, but Hardison can still call off the whole excursion if Eliot refused to comply with the program. After he finished the lot, he tossed Hardison the empty recipient.

“High five?” Hardison offered, tossing the recipient to the front seat.

“Hold that thought,” Eliot said with a smile, putting his earbud on. “I’ll cash it to celebrate.”

Eliot walked to the warehouse stretching his arms over his head and pulling his elbows in. A nagging part of his brain wondered if he was not (fit for purpose) in the right condition for the job, but returning to the saddle had put him in a good mood. Satisfied because none of his movements perturbed his central line, Eliot chose to face the first two local talents using the main entrance.

His heavy boots knocked hello on that rusty metal steps. By the time, Eliot stood in front of them both men were looking at him in disbelief.

“‘Sup?” Eliot asked, jutting his chin to them.

They both went for their guns. Typical rookie mistake. Eliot shook his head and took a short run. Eliot didn’t have the intention to crash against them, but the one on the right cringed. Not much, just enough for Eliot to choose his strategy.

Since fear had half-disabled one of his opponents, Eliot focused on his partner who has already the gun halfway out his holster. Eliot stepped hard on his feet, forcing him to take the gun out without putting his finger on the trigger. Taking the gun out of his hand and tossing him on the floor was child play. A swift kick put him out of combat.

The whole maneuver in less than two seconds. **Blessed be muscle memory…**

Eliot puckered his lips in a satisfied—yet restrained—smile before tossing the gun in the air, holding it by the muzzle just enough to unload it and to eject the magazine. With his left, Eliot tossed the disabled gun out of reach and with his left he elbowed the man standing squarely on the face, he didn’t have the time to take out his gun. Eliot took it out and clear it as well in sensible precaution.

“...take the powder!” Parker was nagging in his ear when Eliot was patting the fallen men in look for spare pieces. There was none.

“I refuse to fight muscle and side effects,” Eliot grumbled, grateful because he knew Parker couldn’t get the dose without taking it from his person. “I can do one or the other!”

“Babe, it’s OK…” Hardison tried to reason with her. “Ten minutes make no difference.”

“That was not the agreement!”

“Do you want me to take my earbud off? Huh?” Eliot mumbled into the coms as he moved to the main door. Another local talent tried to check the perimeter and opened the door. Eliot caught the man by the nape and smashed his head against the doorframe without thinking. “It’s difficult
enough to keep my foggy head in the game without you two billing and cooing in my ear!”

“Ooof!” the man complained when Eliot, off-handedly, dug his knee into his belly.

“Oh, shut up!” Eliot said driving his fist down.

The coms were silent again and Eliot disabled another gun, wondering again if he was too out of shape for this kind of jobs. Three down, two more to go.

As soon as Eliot entered the main office of the warehouse, he felt something was off. Out of habit, despite the pulled down blinds, Eliot hunched and closed his eyes to hear better. Seven different footsteps, two of those militarily trained. Cigar smoke and cold air wafted around the door. Shipping bay should be open.

“This party is bigger than expected,” Eliot grumbled on the comms. “Military muscle…”

“Abort!” Parker and Hardison shouted in Eliot’s ear.

“You kidding?” Eliot felt a sudden surge of rage. “You two, the best hacker and the best thief in the world, took eight months to track this bastard’s ass. I’m not about to let him go!”

“Don’t be a hero, bro…” Hardison started.

“I’m going to kill you if they don’t kill you first!” Parker interrupted. Her voice thrilled with panic.

“...you are barely twenty-four hours out of chemo!”

“Try to stop me,” Eliot spat and rushed for the door.

Eliot knew there was no time to play it quietly. Parker could be inside the depot in twenty seconds and that could put them both at risk instead of just him. In two long strides, Eliot was facing the shipping tables where his mark was about to exchange a list of stolen identities for a briefcase of money. His old-fashioned briefcase was resting against his leg. The key hung from the handle like a cheap ornament.

“God rest you, merry gentlemen,” Eliot spat by way of greeting, identifying the first military muscle with one sweep. That was a very distinctive haircut and it helped a lot that the man rushed to block him.

Kick to the ankle. Fist to the face. Knee to the ribs. Eliot felt the rush of adrenaline and he got euphoric in a couple of heartbeats. He missed that feeling more than he ever missed food.

His opponent tried to punch him in the gut and Eliot disengaged in a fleeting second of panic. The hit connected with the vest and Eliot barely felt it. With a smile, Eliot caught the arm, twisted it, and brought the rest of the body to a kneeling position.

“That was fun,” Eliot said before kicking his opponent’s balls for a field goal.

Eliot barely had time to enjoy the way the soft tissue flattened between his own shin and his opponent’s pelvis. A flash of long bone pain made Eliot’s curse louder than he ever cursed before in his life. His howler made the rest of the muscle stop on their tracks for a second.

“Mind your language!” Hardison complained in his ear. “And your volume!”

If Eliot were not tearing up from the pain, the scene would be hilarious.
“Are you OK?” Parker shrieked in the coms.

“If you two could stop shouting in the coms that would be awesome,” Hardison chided, “This is a sensitive piece of equipment, you know?”

Eliot discovered that the only thing more sobering than the pain was an automatic gun to the head while feeling pain.

“Who the fuck are you?” The man with a suit who was making a deal with his mark asked.

“None of your concern,” Eliot grumbled, raising both of his arms and lowering his head at the same time.

The man was not ready for Eliot’s headbutt and Eliot discovered with elation his skull was not among those bones that white cells boosters make hurt, but annoyed, at the same time, because his fingers were a fraction of a second too late and the gun flew toward the loading bay.

“Great…” Eliot groaned following the gun’s trajectory.

Eliot noticed his headcount was wrong one second before a man with a light-colored suit caught the gun in the air with an open hand. The movement was smooth, like a dancer. Knees slightly bent, straight back, long fingers wrapped safely over the guard. Eliot, against protocol, felt a bit aroused by such a flawless catch.

“Eliot Spencer in the field again,” Quinn said adjusting his glove. A small sardonic smile graced his face. “Merry Christmas, pal!”

Three gunshots followed the greeting. Quinn had had enough time to choose his targets and executed his plan without any hesitation. Eliot tried to take down his mark but the bastard got the first slug. Rage superseded arousal in a heartbeat.

“Quinn is here!” Eliot shouted between the first and the second shot to warn Parker. He was busy taking down another muscle to rob Quinn a target. “Stop shooting, you maniac!”

“Don’t I deserve a Christmas greeting?” Quinn said, putting the gun down and kicking it until it rested against its original owner. “That’s cold, buddy…”

Eliot looked at him with murder in his eyes. Quinn didn’t seem to notice, he just kept taking off his gloves. There was no need for them since he had killed his target.

“Do you want to know the funniest thing?” Quinn asked approaching Eliot, full of congeniality. “I got the sneezes last time we kissed.”


Eliot’s fist connected with Quinn’s jaw while he was flat-footed. Quinn skidded through the dirty floor, cleaning a strip on his wake. At the very least, he would have to pay the dry cleaners, Eliot thought, putting his comm in his pocket, ready to start again as soon as Quinn regained his feet.

“You have recovered your speed,” Quinn commented, rubbing his jaw and looking at the ceiling. That act couldn’t fool Eliot, “and some of your strength too.”

“I’m carrying less weight and a lot more anger,” Eliot explained, approaching slowly. “Meet one of the five confirmed cases of adult viral pneumonia in the CONUS this year, and the only one who had an Asian zoonotic flu, endemic of Hong Kong, fucking his lungs.” Eliot summoned that
sardonic tone that preceded a merciless beatdown. “Tell me, Quinn, did you try to kill me or was it a happy accident?”

“I was trying to fuck you,” Quinn confessed keeping a safe distance from Eliot’s legs, “but in the regular way. Sorry to heap on your misery, pal.”

“A grifter you are not.”

“I don’t try to deceive you.” Quinn finally realized that dragging his ass to avoid Eliot was a ridiculous strategy. “I just had a layover in Portland from a work in Hong Kong in my way to a job in Galveston.”

“Hardison told me you made an heiress very happy.”

“In several ways, but the most important one was to strip her,” Quinn explained, ready to block another punch. “From her heiress title. It wasn’t so hard to kill her father in a CCU. Keeping you alive was a great study case...”

“How do you get your wick wet is not my problem.”

“It can be,” Quinn metaphorically poked Eliot’s ribs with a smile. “I’m free now.”

“Your dollar is in Portland, next to my bed.” Eliot couldn’t believe his body was reacting to the invitation. “If you want it back, that’s where you should look.”

“Oh, I’m planning to retrieve my dollar,” Quinn said, approaching dangerously, “but this one is for me. Unless you are scared…”

Eliot looked at Quinn in the eyes. That’s it, I can read it. Eliot squared his jaw. The goading. Quinn had taken his sweet time, but he was finally playing that card.

“Tell me, Eliot, are you still terrified of needles?”

“This crisis has gotten me all kinds of minor... interesting neuroses,” Eliot hesitated at the end of his reply. Quinn was too close for comfort. He huffed almost on Quinn’s face. “Blackmailing me for a fuck, ain’t you?”

“Come on, Spencer. It can’t get worse than this...”

Eliot didn’t feel when he raised his fist, but the dull thud against Quinn’s ribs was the most satisfying feeling of the night. Caught you out of guard again... Eliot didn’t let Quinn recover, he punched again.

“You messed up with my target,” Eliot started, ready to teach Quinn a lesson.

“You messed up with mine first!” Quinn replied and hesitated to punch back; Eliot could read his vacillation.

“...and made me an accessory of murder, so…” Eliot was ready to catch Quinn’s fist when he finally dared to throw a punch.

Eliot twisted Quinn’s right arm without a hint of mercy. Quinn looked betrayed for a second before Eliot forced his arm to bend and pushed him against the wall of the office with a loud thud.

“I’m only going to ask nicely once,” Eliot grunted, twisting Quinn’s arm between his shoulder blades, “What’s your game?”
“To knock boots, you idiot!” Quinn replied between pained groans, trying to peel himself off the wall. “For what other reason would I try to make you remember how damn good a fuck you are!”

“Keep talking,” Eliot encouraged with a gruff groan. Quinn felt so right against his crotch. “Come on, I dare you….”

“Promises!” Quinn protested, trying to shake Eliot from his back and performing, perhaps unwittingly, the most awkward lap dance ever.

“Squirm like that again, and I’ll nail you to that wall…” Eliot grumbled, with just half his mind engaged in the conversation. He used his free hand to pull Quinn’s hip against his own.

“Now, you are in the mood?” Quinn sounded outraged and amused at the same time. Eliot’s hand cupped his crotch a touch more roughly than usual.

“Make up your mind!” A hip thrust that drove Quinn to the wall punctuated the order. “Do you want this or not?”

Quinn used his free hand to brace against the shove. The next sound out of his lips was a tremulous gasp. Eliot felt Quinn’s cock beat against his hand through the fabric of Quinn’s chinos and an eager whine escaped through his own clenched teeth.

“Make it hurt, Spencer,” Quinn heaved with closed eyes and bright cheeks.

“My pleasure,” Eliot muttered, breathing heavily on Quinn’s neck. “Where do you have’em?”

“Have what?” Quinn’s voice sounded sincere for the first time in his life.

“Condoms,” Eliot mumbled against his ear. His fingers already on the fly of Quinn’s trousers. After five seconds of silence and stillness, Eliot had his answer. With a huff and a mighty effort of will, Eliot pushed Quinn toward the wall.

“Dammit, Quinn!” Eliot shouted, shaking from unspent rage and pent-up sexual energy. “I am immunocompromised! I can’t bareback the first hussy that offers me something!”

“Hey!” This time, Quinn was positively outraged.

“Want to be a pro? Uh?” Eliot taunted, hair flying around his head. His hand already on the mark’s briefcase he came to retrieve. He took the other briefcase too to remind Quinn what seniority means. “Next time you do wetwork, bring your own condoms!”

“For someone riding such a high horse,” Quinn retorted to his back with a spiteful tone, “I don’t see you waving yours!”

Excellent observation, Mr. Quinn… Eliot wanted to return and slap the snot off his smug face. That wouldn’t change the fact that Eliot didn’t have any in stock. If Nate Ford taught Eliot something was to never let an accusation unchallenged. Without breaking his stride, Eliot pulled the silver package of his prescription, held it between his fingers and waved it over his shoulder, taking all the care to obscure the blue line with the name and dose.

“Come on!” Quinn’s exasperated cry informed Eliot that he had fallen for the ruse.

Eliot was ready for Quinn; his footsteps were even and quick. Eliot took a step to the side and brought down his fist. Eliot didn’t mean to knock Quinn cold—just to stun him enough to go away
—, but Eliot was not aware of his own strength. Quinn fell hard without a sound, raising a small cloud of dust.

“Sorry, pal,” Eliot mumbled, patting Quinn until he found Quinn’s main and spare pieces. “Merry Christmas, by the way.”

Eliot fumbled with Quinn’s guns and both briefcases. Clips went to the industrial dumpster by the shipping bay door and Eliot tossed those guns to the vacant lot in front of the river. It was the least Eliot could do for Quinn: to give him the chance to grift his way out of this murder wreck.

“You should be ashamed of yourself,” Parker said, rappelling down the side of the building.

Eliot looked at her warily, but Parker showed him her earbud in her hand.

“I deserve praise, not censure,” Eliot counter back, gripping the handles. “I didn’t fuck him, did I?”

“I watched you both go at it. You were like ferrets in heat…”

Eliot felt the urge to ask but caught himself in time. He really didn’t want to know how Parker could make that comparison.

“I can’t talk for Quinn, but I haven’t had any since February,” Eliot laid out his defense, weak as it was. “Can you blame me for being tempted?”

Parker looked at him like he had lost his marbles as she brought down her rope.

“Strike that,” Eliot often forgot Parker and Shelley were the only persons in his circle indifferent to sex. “You can blame me ‘til the cows come home. I don’t care…”

Parker walked by his side, coiling the rope. Eliot retrieved his earbud and put it in his ear.

“...it could be really nice to give my Christmas greetings to Quinn, but anyone thought of that?”

Hardison was monologuing fast. “No. No one respects the van. That’s outrageous!”

“Hardison, there has been a murder here,” Eliot mumbled into the coms. “Several murders. It’s hardly the place for social niceties.”

Parker snatched the earpiece from Eliot’s ear.

“It’s hardly the place to get a quickie also.”

“I’m not having this conversation with you,” Eliot retorted, taking the bud back. “Target acquired. We are on our way. Get the motor running.”

Parker snatched the bud again.

“You miss it,” Parker accused to his face. “You miss having sex, don’t you?”

“What is it to you?!”

“A sign that you are getting better,” Parker looked at him with hopeful eyes. “That’s why I told Hardison you were catching up with Quinn instead of…”

Eliot didn’t let her finish. He hugged Parker and held her against his chest, feeling rotten for having misunderstood her intentions.
“I miss it,” Eliot admitted in her ear. “Thank you for caring.”

Parker hugged, no, squeezed Eliot back. Again, Eliot was grateful for the concealed tactical vest.

“You smell so sweet,” Parker said when she finally let Eliot go, taking a whiff of his sweat, “like freshly baked cookies…”

“Don’t ruin it…” Eliot grumbled, taking a step toward Lucille-for-tonight.

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Eliot changed chairs in Lucille for the fourth time, feeling like the white rabbit. We are late… The thought had been nagging him since they got into the plane. They had to wait six hours before snow let them take off and now, they were late. Nurse is going to catch us playing hooky… Eliot didn’t know why, but he felt he should be ashamed of his Christmas gambol.

“Eliot, could you sit still for a minute?” Hardison asked from the wheel. “You have been jumping from one chair to the other since we left the airport!”

“We are late,” Eliot pointed out as if wasn’t obvious. “Nurse is always home at eight. She’s going to catch us…”

“You should have taken a nap in the flight,” Parker said, stifling a yawn.

Hardison didn’t reply, but he changed to the fast lane. Eliot felt reassured because at least someone had taken precautions to avoid (being captured). Eliot blinked at the thought, feeling a bit of unrest. Unrest and avalanches work the same way, they start small and then all (goes to the dogs) gets out of control. Eliot moved to the back of Lucille to distract his mind...

“Hey!” Eliot called aloud almost immediately, “does Nurse drive a hot rod red Mirage?”

“As a matter of fact, she does,” Hardison sounded confused. “Why do you ask? And more to the point, how do you know?”

“Because she’s tailing us!” Eliot let out a dry laugh. This is just perfect!

“What?” Parker left the shotgun seat and moved to Eliot’s side. “Where?”

“Four cars down. Third lane.”

“She’s on us, Hardison,” Parker said after verifying Eliot’s intel. “And you were just looking out the window when you noticed?”

“No,” Eliot replied, already unlacing his boots. They would need to sneak into their own house to avoid (Capture!) detection. “I can feel her evil aura even through the fog.”

At the next stop, Hardison hacked the traffic lights and Eliot almost cheered aloud. Parker could see his joy and she didn’t approve. Eliot sheepishly sat down and obeyed when she started to take the leather jacket off his back. Lucille was not fully parked when Eliot and Parker jumped and moved to the cold house. We are going to get caught… Eliot chuckled and Parker pushed him toward the stairs.

“What is so funny?” Parker was pushing Eliot up the stairs like she really felt the hurry.

“House is too cold… We are going to get caught…”
“Nurse is parking outside,” Hardison informed them making an exasperated gesture because they were still in plain view.

“Stall!” Eliot shouted with a panicked tone, trying to take the winter shirt from his back at the same time. “We are so screwed!”

“Careful with…” Parker started a bit too late. Eliot crashed against the landing wall with a loud thud. “… the wall.”

“Ow!” Eliot finally disentangled himself from his shirt. Long bone pain flared up for a second, but he kept climbing the stairs.

“You are bruising…” Parker said, pointing at Eliot’s arm. There were swelling and redness over his elbow.

“Shit!” Eliot couldn’t believe his luck. After a fight with a pro and five marks, the only bruise on his body was self-inflicted and hurt like hell.

“Move, move, move!” Parker hurried him, noticing Hardison chatting in a loud voice.

Nurse was already in the house and Eliot was still in jeans and boots and out of his room. If she caught them right now, they couldn’t lie convincingly to save their lives. Eliot and Parker rushed as silently as possible to Eliot’s room, putting the training of their criminal years to good use. Eliot stopped to rest his weight against the doorframe to pull out his boots and tossed them to Parker.

“How are your fine motor skills?” Parker asked in a whisper catching the first boot and tossing it to the bed of her room.

“No clue,” Eliot mumbled, trying to keep his vertical as he was pulling his left shoe.

Parker invaded Eliot’s personal space as soon as he put his foot on the floor. Eliot almost cried out when she felt her hands on his crotch.

“Shhh…” Parker shushed him, undoing the buttons of his fly with deft fingers. “I’m quicker than you. I told Hardison to bring you the ones with a zipper, but no…”

“Thanks,” Eliot pushed the shoe into her hands. Two buttons were enough to get the denim off his hips, she didn’t need to go down the whole five.

“Geez, you are so thin…”

“Thank you, I haven’t noticed!” Eliot barked, completely oblivious of the fact that they were supposed to be stealthy.

Parker rolled her eyes and facepalmed while Eliot cursed his foggy brain, his body-image issues and his short temper in the same breath.

“Bro…?” Hardison’s voice sounded hesitant but mostly annoyed. “You awake?”

“Yeah!” Eliot stepped out his jeans and tried to pull out his socks in the same movement without success. “Wide awake!”

“Stop yelling!” Hardison grumbled. “Nurse’s here and Parker’s sleeping!”

“Who?” Eliot asked, doing his best to stall. It was never more difficult to get rid of a pair of socks.
“Good morning to you too!” The Nurse didn’t sound annoyed. She was enjoying the shouting match like it was a good soap opera.

“Ya Nurse!”

“Parker is not sleeping!” Eliot handed Parker his socks and jeans. “Who do you think I’m arguing with?”

“I can never tell!”

“This genius here bruised his arm with the bathroom door!” Parker squirreled Eliot’s clothes to her room before rushing to Eliot’s. “The dressing!” She whispered, catching Eliot before he got to the bed. “Don’t you hear it rustling?”

“Shh…” Eliot hissed and looked down as if that could make it disappear.

Parker rolled her eyes and steered Eliot to the bathroom. Eliot finally understood the hint: the dressing was the reason Parker mentioned the bathroom. His head was refusing to cooperate this morning. Eliot agreed that was the best choice—another shower dressing in the trash wouldn’t arouse any suspicion—and closed the door behind his back.

“Where did you put the vinegar?” Parker’s voice sounded far from the door.

Eliot took out his shirt and peeled the adhesive film with care. That stupid thing was clinging to his skin with a stubbornness that rivaled his own when it finally came out, it was a total relief. Eliot was still unraveling the gauze around the hubs when a knock on his door made him jump in place.

“I hope you had a nice Christmas and everything,” Nurse said, opening the door just a crack to pass him a sample cup, “but I need to assess how much damage you did to yourself with that Christmas dinner.”

Eliot stuck to the wall and took the cup. Nurse made no comment and closed the door. Filling the cup up was not a problem, the problem was to find wearable sweatpants in the hamper. After what felt like an eternity, Eliot shrugged and made his way to the bed in his midway briefs. Nurse had seen worse…

“Did you misplace your bottoms, Eliot?” Nurse asked with a small smile. Her t-shirt read: ‘your options are: swallow or bend over,’ hardly a friendly message.

Eliot shrugged and found his place in the bed. The night was catching on him.

“Mister, I need to take your vitals first,” Nurse stopped him before he could turn his back to her.

“But I want to sleep…”

“I promise I’ll be quick, OK?”

Eliot sat straight and let her take his blood pressure. He was still floating on the relief of not being caught and humoring Nurse was the best way to make her go away.

“So, I heard you had had quite the feast for Christmas…” Nurse started the conversation, her eyes on sphygmomanometer.

“Food had taste,” Eliot informed her with a smile. “Can I have those shots every day?”

“I don’t think doctor Byrnum would like that, but I’ll ask him.”
“OK. Can I sleep now?”

“Not yet,” Nurse shook down her glass thermometer. “You are very pleasant today. If I take this one under your arm, would you tell me what else did you do yesterday?”

“We mostly talk about the old days in service,” Eliot said, letting her do her job. “Shelley really knows how to tell a story.”

“He looked like a nice fellow, even if he’s a fainter.”

“A big baby, that’s what he’s.” Eliot tried to touch that strange thing under his arm. The nurse moved his hand away. “We took him to the airport.”

“What else did you do when I wasn’t around?” Nurse asked, pressing his wrist. Her other hand touched the fresh bruise. “I bet you did some mischief besides this…”

“That hurts. Walls are too hard...” Eliot complained. *Whose idea it was to make walls so hard?* Eliot looked around and, satisfied because they were alone, whispered to Nurse in confidence: “We went to Canada last night. We stopped a massive identity theft.”

“You did?” Nurse was writing something in her pad as if he hadn’t just shared the most thrilling thing that happened that week. In the whole month, even.

“We did.” Eliot insisted, but Nurse took something from her bag and that distracted him. “What’s that?”

“I need to take some blood samples to see how your chemo went.” Nurse was busy putting her sterile gloves on. “Is that OK, Eliot?”

“If you have to…” Eliot still felt let down because she didn’t react to his news. “I met Quinn in Canada, too. We almost fucked…”

“You what now?” Nurse laughed while scrubbing Eliot’s distal hub with a cotton swab drenched in alcohol.

“Fuck,” Eliot repeated, irked because she reacted to the least interesting part of the story. “You know? With a cock inside a hole?”

“And you have been so pleasant today. I knew it couldn’t last...” Nurse shook her head, flushing the line. “So, yesterday, you not only went to the airport, and traveled to Canada, but you also had a date?”

“I don’t do dates,” Eliot looked around and noticed Hardison by the door with the morning pills in the shot glass. “Tell her I don’t do dates. She doesn’t believe anything I say...”

“Eliot doesn’t do dates,” Hardison said and Eliot nodded his approval because Nurse gets annoyed if he gesticulates when she’s working the central line. “Fuck’em and duck’em is more his style.”

“I’m OK with that if Ms. Quinn agrees too,” Nurse was looking at the vial in her hand. Eliot didn’t like her expression.

“He prefers Mr. Quinn,” Eliot set the record straight, looking how she drew another test tube.

“Glad to know... Eliot, may I take another? I think we better err on the safe side.”

“You may,” Eliot felt relieved because at least Nurse believed one thing out of his mouth. “I can
make more.”

“I hope you are right.”

“Repeat.” Eliot didn’t catch what she said or, if he did, that didn’t sound right.

“I said ‘you are right’.” Nurse had a big smile when she said that. She was flushing the second saline into the lumen.

Eliot couldn’t remember when she pushed the first one. Are you going to poke me? Eliot felt alarms ringing inside his head. I don’t want to be poked today. I had a great day and you want to ruin it? Please, don’t poke me... She was still working on the central line with that creepy smile on her face. Please, don’t poke me...

“Why are you smiling?” Eliot finally asked as she screwed the cap in place. Please, don’t poke me...

“Because we are done,” Nurse said, relaxing her smile a bit, putting the shot glass in his hand. “Take your pills and get some sleep. Maybe you can finish your business with Mr. Quinn this time.”

Eliot looked at her wondering what on Earth was she babbling about and how did she know Quinn’s name. He fished the capsules from the glass, swallowed them and then the rest. Hardison and Nurse were speaking by the door, their voices mixed in one continued, nonsensical stream...the third one for... never this confused... in too dark... ammonia levels... safer to test... all right?... let him rest... Medicines were bitter. Eliot had never noticed before.

Parker sat by his side, smiling, and pressed something wet against his hurting arm. Eliot smiled back, feeling how the fog enfolded him. It was very pleasant to go numb and warm. The fog felt safe...

Chapter End Notes

Absent without leave
“You have no idea how much…” Eliot stopped, shaking when a new cramp seized his core, “how much I hate you right now!”

“While we are speaking about misaimed anger…” Nurse held him upright without effort, completely unfazed. “I didn’t write the lactulose prescription, and I didn’t ‘forget’ to take care of my business for too long.”

“I hate chemo…” Eliot took another step on shaky legs.

“You know that voiding your bowels is not optional, do you?”

“I hate painkillers…”

“Eliot, I’m sorry about your discomfort, I’m really are…”

“I hate bisacodyl…”

“But if you are well enough to hate anything, I’m doing my job right.”

“And above all, I hate you…”

“Sometimes it’s mutual,” Nurse said with a small laugh. “Don’t flush.”

“Ugh!”

“Or I can digitally check, if you prefer,” Nurse crossed her arms over the legend ‘to save your ass, NOT to kiss it’ of her long-sleeved black shirt. “It’s not a problem: I know your rear end better than
my wife’s!”

Eliot slammed the door in her face with an unarticulated, annoyed sound. The experience was horrible enough without knowing she was on the other side of the door. Eliot wanted to be angry, but he was hurting too bad. His gut was rumbling. Anger, like dignity, was a luxury he couldn’t afford anymore.

While he was tending to the pressing issues at hand, Eliot felt a sudden sense of alarm. *You just feel vulnerable…* Eliot shook his head. It was the same sensation he had felt many times during an ambush. *Breathe. Focus. Plan…* The goosebumps in his arms were not related to the events below his waist. *Breathe. Focus. Plan…* There was something wrong, outside the house.

The house was part of a gated community. There was only a wall at the end of the small backyard. *Breathe. Focus. Plan…* Eliot was sure he had heard it creak. *Breathe. Focus. Plan…* A new flash of pain in his gut distracted him, but just barely. *Breathe. Focus. Plan…* He closed his eyes and tried to place everyone in the house.

*Breathe. Focus. Plan…* Nurse was tapping her foot, probably checking her phone, while standing guard in front of the door. *Breathe. Focus. Plan…* The snow was rustling against the French doors of the deck. *Breathe. Focus. Plan…* Hardison was playing *Black Ops* and the sound of the fake fire sounded muted. *Breathe. Focus. Plan…* Parker was in the kitchen, the cereal rustled against the box. *Breathe. Focus. Plan…*

“Eliot!” Nurse called, banging the door.

The noise was loud enough to trigger his flight or fight response. Eliot barely had time enough to extend his hand to avoid a collision with the sink cabinets. His knees, legs, back, and backside became a single flash of hot, burning pain.

“You have been there a long time,” she insisted. The knocking on the door was less loud now.

There was no answer. Eliot was too busy holding back the whimper.

“Do you need help?”

“Not done!”

Panic prompted his reply. Eliot knew he had to sort himself out and he had mustered enough pride to not want her to see him bent over the sink with his trousers around his ankles.

“There is no shame…”

“I can wipe my own…!”

“Aren’t those the sweetest words you ever addressed to me!?”

“Fuck you…” Eliot blinked the tears away and cleaned up. He wasn’t bleeding.

He almost flushed but stopped himself in time. *Breathe. Focus. Plan…* The pain was manageable now, maybe he could survive the day without asking for painkillers. *And while you are on it, ignore the pain…* His sweatpants were on and his tank top tucked—old army custom. *Something is wrong in the perimeter…* Hand wash and cold water against his sweaty face made him feel better. *Breathe. Focus. Plan…* Collected, he faced the door and opened it. *Breathe. Focus. Plan…*

“You are pale,” Nurse said, she was assessing him hard. “How do you…”
“Peachy,” Eliot answered gleefully, moving to the window of his bedroom. “Bristol 2. No blood.”

“Eliot…” Nurse closed the bathroom door and followed him. “Are you having an episode?”

Eliot peered through the glass. Someone left footprints by the backyard fence. *Breathe.* *Focus.* *Plan*… The new snow was covering it fast. *Breathe.* *Focus.* *Plan*… As well as the new footprints.

“No.”

“Eliot…”

“There is someone in the backyard…” Eliot turned toward the door.

“Eliot!” Nurse tried to block him.

“I’m not hallucinating.” Eliot dip-escaped to the right. His quarterback instincts were intact.

He was already scrambling on the stairs by the time Nurse could react; she muttered something about PTSD. *I’ve been looking at PTSD in the rearview mirror for a while*… Parker gawked when Eliot rushed down the stairs, missing one or two steps and bashing the wall. *Breathe.* *Focus.* *Plan*… Hardison paused the game. Eliot was already dashing for the back door.

“Stop him!” Nurse yelled from the landing.

Eliot had time to open the back door and surveyed the surroundings before Parker hugged him from behind and pulled him inside the kitchen. Eliot struggled to take a step forward against the rush of cold wind, but Hardison got in the way while closing the door.

“There is someone in the backyard, Parker!” Eliot repeated, trying—and almost succeeding—to break her hug.

“Is it brain fog?” Hardison asked, surrounding him and Parker with the same hug.

“I’m not fogged!” Eliot exclaimed and stood still, knowing that he had to knock them both unconscious for them to let him go.

“Calm down!” Nurse ordered Eliot, finally reaching to them. “I can't cure crazy, but I can sedate it. I’ll do it without any regret, mind you!”

“Check the east corner!”

“I’ll check,” Hardison agreed, looking over Eliot’s shoulder. He was conferencing with Parker, and none of them needed words for that. He turned to Eliot: “Keep your ass inside! Where is warm!”

Hardison looked at him with a serious stare. *Breathe.* *Focus.* *Plan*… Eliot held his eyes. *I’m not crazy, bro*… Those words didn’t leave his lips, but Hardison understood them clearly. Parker let him go since he was not trying to rush into the snow anymore.

“Sit your ass down!” Hardison commanded, extending his hand toward the coat rack.

Eliot took a step back, kicked one of the chairs and landed his weight hard in the seat. He even ignored the short, stabbing pain in his backside. Hardison nodded, pulling up the zipper of his jacket, and went out. Hardison’s stance proclaimed he believed it to be a wild goose chase.

“What day is today?” Nurse asked, trying to assess his mental stability.
“I’m not…” His protest melted down to an angry grunt.

Parker made some signs to Nurse to pass her one jacket. The kitchen was cold enough and Eliot could see his breath. Nurse extended her hand with Parker’s jacket on it.

“Answer, please,” Parker asked pulling the small leather jacket over his broad shoulders.

“December 28,” Eliot said with a heavy sigh. “Friday.”

“Who was here on Christmas day?”

“Sawyer!” Eliot got up and both women tried to make him sit again.

The door open and, along with a gust of gelid wind and snowflakes, a boy entered the kitchen. Sawyer pushed Parker and Nurse aside in his way to tackle and hug Eliot him with one arm.

“He was in a heap against the garage…” Hardison explained, dragging Sawyer’s backpack.

“Don’t send me back, uncle!” Sawyer blurted, pressing his face against Eliot’s chest. His face had a cold of the grave and was shivering inside his letterman jacket. “If you send me back, they’ll kill me!”

“Jesus Fucking Christ!” Nurse whispered, looking at Eliot and the terrified boy in complete disbelief.

Parker spared a quick caress on Sawyer’s head and moved to pour some coffee for the boy. Eliot agreed that there would be time to get explanations later.

“Brother, he wouldn’t have lasted the night,” Hardison said, closing the door. “How could you…?”

Eliot looked down; his mind was spinning out of control. Sawyer was shaking, but those were not cold shivers. Eliot could feel Sawyer’s heat against his belly. Sawyer was using only his left arm. Sawyer was not wearing anything more warming than his jacket. Eliot closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The pungent smell of black powder assaulted his nose. It was there when he started to shake too.

“I kept your money,” Sawyer was still babbling, but his voice was getting uneven. Eliot knew his nephew was about to cry. “I took a Greyhound. I couldn’t stay at Gramps’ anymore…”

Eliot opened his eyes and carefully peeled Sawyer’s jacket from his right shoulder. God, let me die before I can put my hands on my father… Eliot knew, even before he could see the evidence, that his sister’s baby boy crossed the country alone with a gunshot on his back.

“You ducked…” Eliot mumbled, shaking even worse than Sawyer because the long straight wounds in his nephew’s shoulder informed him that his father was aiming to the head. “He got you at twenty-five-foot with his Mossberg…”

“What!” Parker let go of the coffee jar. It smashed between her sneakers, splashing liquid and glass across the kitchen floor.

“I just said your name!” Sawyer blurted, finally letting the tears fall. “I was praying!”

“Oh, shit…” Hardison approached to steal a quick glance, but he desisted the smell of infected flesh reached his nose.

Eliot pressed Sawyer against him with his right hand on Sawyer’s small back and his left hand on
Sawyer’s nape. His fingers noticed smaller wounds in his nephew’s neck. Iron birdshot… did your father take a shot to you too, Sawyer? Holding back the tears was almost a task beyond Eliot’s might.

“You are not going anywhere…”

“Like hell he doesn’t!” Nurse was rushing down the stairs, hauling her new nursing bag. “He needs urgent care, at the very least!”

“Running away is a crime in Kentucky,” Hardison tried to explain. “Put him in the system and you sent him back to that…”

“Being homeless is not a crime in Portland,” Nurse retorted before turning his attention to Sawyer. “Sawyer, please, pay attention.”

“Y-y-yes, ma’am…” Sawyer mumbled against Eliot’s chest.

“Can’t you learn something?” Nurse almost spat to Eliot’s face, signaling him to let go. “Sawyer, you have been very brave for so long, and I know I’m crying for the moon here, but can you be brave a little longer?”

Sawyer turned his eyes up to Eliot. The hurt in those blue eyes destroyed him utterly. Bite the bullet… Eliot’s eyes dried out and his lips trembled. It can’t be worse than this… He knew he only had one chance to get this grifting attempt right. He would have time to sort all those pesky feelings later.

“Nur… Armandina knows what she’s doing,” Eliot said, looking at his nephew, wishing he could spare the boy any and all damage. “She had kept me alive so far, hadn’t she?”

“Thank you,” Nurse whispered, she knew well how hard those words were to get out. “Sit down, Eliot. You are not helping anyone if you fall flat as long as you are,” she said with her full voice. “Let us look at that hurt, Sawyer.”

Eliot, meekly and carefully, sat down his ass. Pride and ego were not affordable now.

“Parker, bring me some of Eliot’s dressings, please,” Nurse opened her bag on the table. “Hardison, I know we still have some Toradol. Bring me one vial.”

“Uncle…” Sawyer sobbed, confused by all the activity.

“Scary, ain’t she? Don’t worry, kid,” Eliot tried to reassure his nephew, pulling Sawyer’s sleeve jacket and passing his hand over Sawyer’s right shoulder. “She’s only trying to take the wildcat off your back. She might hurt you a little with that needle, tho…”

“You are not helping!” Nurse said, shooting him a killing gaze. Their pattern of speech was rubbing on her. “Your uncle here is a big baby, Sawyer…”

“Don’t bad-mouth my uncle, ma’am,” Sawyer, loyal to a fault, said with half a smile. “I really want to like you very much…”

Eliot noticed that shirt was not the one Sawyer was wearing when they shot him. The light blue t-shirt was without a tear and the only damage was that big wet patch sticking to Sawyer’s wounds. Nurse noticed the same and her lips mouthed ‘poor baby’ without a voice. The spray of pellets covered almost all his right side and Eliot felt his killing urges boiling deep down.
“Are you attached to that shirt?” Nurse asked, putting her glass thermometer on Sawyer’s left armpit. “Because I rather cut it than to take it out.”

“Nah, I fetched it from the bargain bin…”

“Here…” Hardison put the vial in the table and gawked at the wet spot.

“Say a word, come on,” Eliot warned, looking at Hardison like he was the prime target of his rage. “I dare you…”

“I’m going to… help Parker with the dressings.”

“Nurse, we don’t have spare dressings,” Eliot said, noticing what she had done.

“I know,” Nurse said, taking out the thermometer to read it. “Sawyer, you are having a fever. I need to take you to the hospital…”

Eliot sighed, looking at the spooked expression in his nephew’s face. Sawyer was a survivor — with a shot on his back, he had been running on his own from one side of the country to the other, and had wandered in the middle of snowfall through a city he barely knew—, but he was a Spencer. We don’t do hospitals, no, sir!… His arms opened and Sawyer rushed to that shelter like he was six instead of sixteen.

“In my family, we don’t like hospitals…”

“Don’t you say?” Nurse said, breaking the vial and filling a syringe. “How odd!”

“Witch,” Eliot mouthed without sound, before whispering into Sawyer’s ear. “It’s time to shoot you… Don’t worry. It won’t hurt.”

Eliot was surprised by how smoothly the lie fell from his lips, but Sawyer believed it. Nurse undid the button of Sawyer’s jeans and pulled them down slightly. Eliot rested his head against Sawyer, feeling impotence and rage boiling.

“It’s OK, uncle,” Sawyer muttered, shivering slightly at the touch of the cotton swab. “It won’t hurt.”

Up to that date, Eliot Spencer had never regretted to have the snip when he did, but the urge lasted just a second. Eliot almost hugged Sawyer, but he remembered his nephew’s wounds at time. The only other comforting thing was childish, but it was better than nothing.

“Rock of Ages, cleft for me,” Eliot sang to his nephew, as his mother used to sing to him before she was sicker than he ever was. “Let me hide myself in Thee…”

“Let the water and the blood,” Sawyer joined and Eliot knew Leah had sung to him too, “from Thy riven side which flowed…”

“Be of sin the double cure, save me from its guilt and power…”

The song became a duet, but Eliot found it fitting. They both needed massive amounts of comfort. Sawyer barely flinched at the stab and, by the end of the song, he was nodding against his uncle’s shoulder.

“I never peg you for the religious kind…”

“My mother was,” Eliot staying Sawyer at the best of his care. Toradol was the painkiller that
totally floored him and, apparently, Sawyer too. “Sneaky thing you did there…”

“Toradol is enough to knock you out. This boy didn’t have a chance.” Nurse looked at Sawyer, sleeping like a horse. “He’s a tough cookie, but I really don’t have the heart to tear that shirt off his back. Not without proper analgesia.” Nurse paused as if she was about to ask something else, but she didn’t make it in the end. “I need to make a call.”

Hardison and Parker came almost immediately. Parker had her hair in a ponytail and a fresh sports pantsuit. Hardison moved to the garage and Parker approached them. Nurse was arguing with someone over the phone. Parker looked at Sawyer’s back and pressed her fists against her mouth. Eliot looked into her eyes and felt the sting of tears into his: Parker was horrified.

“Don’t ever let me put a foot in Kentucky again,” Eliot mumbled, pressing Sawyer against his shoulder: He felt his mind casting off from reality. “I’ll kill two men if you let me get near to any of them. One of them, my own father. With extreme prejudice. Moreau-style…”

Parker made a gesture to hug Eliot but noticed Sawyer was in the way. After a couple of thwarted attempts, Parker settled to hooking her arm to Eliot’s head and kissing Eliot on top of his head.

“I can’t even understand your pain…” Parker whispered; her fingers rubbed Eliot’s neck, “but it hurts me to see you in distress.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.” Eliot leaned to her caress, pressing his head to Sawyer’s.

“Don’t worry,” Parker reassured him, trying to put her arms around Sawyer. “It doesn't hurt much…”

“Oh, OK…”

Eliot let go of Sawyer when Parker pulled the boy toward her. Parker had time to put Sawyer’s arms over her shoulders and hook her hands under his bottom before Eliot noticed Parker had relieved him of his nephew and the sudden need to recover the boy almost made him out of his mind with apprehension.

“We need to take the bullet out, remember?” Parker asked Eliot as soon as their eyes met. “Nurse and I are taking him to the hospital…”

“Hospital?” Eliot focused with great effort. His head hurt when he tried to push the fog away.

Eliot extended his hand and did the same thing Hardison and Parker kept doing to him: he brushed Sawyer’s hair out of his face, despite Sawyer’s short hair. Eliot leaned forward, thinking of kissing the boy, but he stopped in time.

“Everything will be alright,” Eliot whispered on Sawyer’s ear.

“I’m going with them, but you are not off the hook, Eliot,” Nurse said, breaking Eliot and Parker apart. “You still need to take that enema…”

Eliot took two steps back and his eyes felt on the jacket rack. He had to go with Sawyer. Nurse and he could settle their scores later.

“I’m going with you,” Eliot said, picking up his jacket from the rack.

“Over my dead body!” Nurse took the jacket from his hands.
“Don’t tease me…” Eliot felt his feet were ready to start kicking. His hands were forming fists.

“There is no way I’m going to let you put a foot in the ER when you are sundowning hard and about to get neutropenic. No way!”

“Eliot,” Hardison forced Eliot to turn around. “You are already at risk. Bro, Sawyer’s infection has already put you at risk!” Hardison stopped and took a deep breath. Eliot had a moment of clarity through the fog, enough to notice Hardison had controlled his phobia for too long. “You know I’m right. I haven’t seen you put our hands on your face or hair since I came down…”

Hardison was right. I hate chemo… The training was easier than breathing, most of the time, and it was training that had kept him from kissing Sawyer’s burning forehead when Parker took him from his arms. The training was stronger than the fog, and that was a scary thought.

“Be sensible,” Hardison insisted, his hands pressing down Eliot’s shoulders. “You don’t need other twenty-plus infections on top of that.”

“I’m the only one in his corner…” Eliot finally said, trying not to curse his treacherous body. Why don’t you get it? Tears were threatening to spill again and his knees buckled. “I can’t desert him.”

“Sit down, bro,” Hardison commanded, guiding him to the chair, “Parker wants to talk to you.”

“Parker?” Eliot looked around, unsure of where Parker could be.

“Here,” Hardison offered him an earbud.

Eliot took the earbud and put it on his right ear. Nurse was looking at them with suspicion.

“Par… Parker?” Eliot called in a small voice.

“I’m with him, Eliot. I won’t leave Sawyer alone,” Parker whispered in his ear. “I’ll take care of him as if he was my baby boy. Stop wasting time and let Nurse take Sawyer to the hospital.”

“Don’t let them get him into surgery,” Eliot begged. Sawyer was Leah’s son, and he shouldn’t stand the same (torture) quarter of hour Eliot did. “He has my tainted blood…”

“You put your life in my hands once. Trust me with Sawyer’s. I’ll bring him back to you.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

Eliot closed his eyes, feeling how Parker’s promise covered him. Her words were soothing and the fog flood the place where his anxiety was just a few seconds ago. Eliot could physically feel his mind going numb.

“Eliot, look at me,” Nurse commanded, tearing him up from the fog’s warm embrace. “Have you taken any non-scheduled painkillers today?”

“No. It is…” Eliot shook his head, fighting the fog. “It was a good day.”

“This is what you are going to do: You will go upstairs and take a shower—as hot as you can stand it—, and you will get your comfiest pajamas on. Hardison,” Nurse looked up, Eliot could see she was looking for support, “will bring you your pills and something to drink. You will take them, as usual. We won’t take your vitals until I come back. Are you hearing me?”
Eliot nodded. He felt numb like he had taken a bunch of analgesics without a chaser.

“I want to hear your voice.”

“I’ll take a shower and I’ll take my meds.”

“Then, you’ll wait twenty minutes,” Nurse continued, placing a paper cup with two small blue pills on the table, “and you will take this half-gram. How much will you wait?”

“Twenty minutes,” Eliot repeated, still numb.

“By then, we must have time to finish the first formalities and you can use that concealed device of yours to get updates. With conditions.”

“Which conditions?” Eliot didn’t want to sound hostile; he couldn’t help it.

“Fog makes me feisty.”

“Thank you, Eliot; Sawyer needs her more than you.” Nurse was ready to go without hearing Eliot’s agreement. Her bag was already hanging by her shoulder. “You’ll stay on your bed and, when I return to give you treatment, you will behave.”

“Help my nephew, Armandina Tanahara,” Eliot said, holding her eyes. The fog was still there and he wasn’t sure he had spoken aloud. He didn’t care. “And I’ll spread them like a cheap whore for you.”

Nurse tried to choke the impulse but she laughed in the end and turned around to meet Parker on Lucille. Eliot felt left out of the loop.

“Keep calling me ‘nurse,’ Eliot, please.”

“Sorry, Dina…” Hardison apologized. Eliot felt his hand on his shoulder when he took away Parker’s jacket.

“Don’t be,” Nurse disregarded the apology before closing the garage door. “Confused patients are always the funniest!”

“Brother…” Hardison pulled Eliot’s hand. “Come, let’s take a shower.”

“I’m so tired,” Eliot mumbled, letting Hardison guide him through the fog, “and so angry…”

“I know, Eliot.” Hardison pushed him to the stairs. “A nice hot shower will help you.”

“I don’t want to shower with you.” Eliot felt the step under his foot and followed it. “You can’t wash tits on a good day. This is not a good day.”

“Good thing you don’t have any.”

“I don’t?” Eliot let go of the handrail to check his chest. “Where did they go?”

“Hand on the rail, Eliot.” Hardison chuckled. “We can go find your tits later…”

Parker led Sawyer inside the house on the last day of the year. The boy was in a good way to start a scar collection like his uncle. Doctors took one hundred and fourteen pellets from Sawyer’s back, observed him for a day and a half and sent him home, all patched up, with a prescription for antibiotics and some mild painkillers.
Hardison had kept her up to date. They should keep Eliot in his room because his ANC was almost as low as it could be without sending him to a hospital and Sawyer was still contagious. Sawyer’s vaccines should have to wait until Eliot gets better results on his blood work.

“Doctors had forbidden the harpy to poke me either with or without a needle,” Eliot had said through the coms that morning. Parker could tell he was trying to sound cheerful and he was almost successful. “Drugs can only go through my mouth or the central line. It’s almost a holiday… Food still has taste, too. I just don’t have enough hunger. Two out of three is not bad for Christmas miracles, huh? Santa thought I was a good boy this year. I should have wished for a safe and healthy Sawyer too…”

Eliot was getting white cell boosters through his central line. Long bone pain was so bad that Hardison woke up last night, hearing how Eliot whimpered in his sleep. Parker had heard it through the coms and she couldn’t believe her own ears. So far, Eliot had been surviving the pain with the help of generous amounts of Toradol, hot water bottles, and the hope of seeing Sawyer soon.

And the brat was finally home. Parker wondered if luck was part of the Spencer family tree because Sawyer got buckshot logged between the long bone of his arm and his shoulder but there was no fracture. The only sign of Sawyer’s narrow brush with the Ripper was his right arm in a sling, eight stitches and a bunch of wounds that are already half-healed. It was unsettling how little those two shotgun shots had shaken him.

“Remember, we can’t enter your uncle’s room,” Parker said, climbing the stairs one step behind Sawyer as Nurse had taught her. “He needs his rest because this last chemo session was too rough on his body.”

“Yes, Miss Parker,” Sawyer replied with polite annoyance. “You have made that very clear.”

Parker swatted Sawyer’s butt to make him put some pep in his step. Sawyer glared at her for a second and doubled his speed to the second floor. That boy was Eliot’s kin and there was no way to hide it from the world. Like his uncle, Sawyer was learning to keep Parker at a safe distance. Parker followed him slowly, she was positively exhausted.

“Uncle looks so sick, miss Parker,” Sawyer said to her as soon as she met him by Eliot’s door. The boy barely dared to cast an eye inside the room. “Am I to blame?”

“Last time you were here, almost a month and a half had passed after chemo,” Parker explained, feeling like Sawyer need a hug. “Now it’s just the second week…”

Parker passed her right arm over Sawyer’s shoulder, her left hand already petting the boy’s short hair. She followed his eyes. Eliot was sleeping heavily on top of the pillows, shirtless and sweating. Eliot’s color could be better, but Parker considered he just looked tired or very sedated. Probably they gave him something stronger to relieve his pain.

“Eliot is just…” Parker struggled to find a word to explain neutropenia to a complete newcomer to this circus. “He’s tired because chemo wears down his defenses and he needs to be kept safe. Don’t worry, your uncle is getting help and would be better in a few days.”

_The same time you will take to get rid of that golden strep infection in your wounds. Thank goodness you didn’t get MRSA, Sawyer! … I almost don’t feel bad for you dealing with all those shots…_

“Miss Parker?” Sawyer called with a hesitant voice “I don’t want to complain, but you are gripping
my shoulder… and it’s the wounded one…”

Parker let the boy go with a tense smile. Sawyer panted and pressed his injured shoulder with a wince.

“Go and take a shower,” Parker invited, steering the boy away from the door. “You’ll feel better…”

“How’s Sawyer?” Hardison said once Parker turned around, blowing a kiss through the open doorway.

“Tired and a bit sore.” Parker caught the blown kiss and put it in her pocket. “But no more than he’s going to be tomorrow.”

“And why is that, mama?”

“Doctor’s order: seven days of Rocephin shots and oral Motrin and Amoxil.”

“Roce…” Hardison whistled. “Weren’t those the nasty ones Eliot got for pneumonia?”

Parker nodded and Hardison cringed in sympathy. Even nurses kept apologizing for stabbing Eliot with that vile liquid that made him whimper and call his sister's name. Parker, as an exemption, was grateful for his foggy brain because Eliot didn’t register any detail of his stay.

“These Spencer boys are a magnet for the punishment they don’t deserve.” Hardison shook his head and smiled at her. “Parker... you need to sleep, girl.”

“Give me the bad news first.”

“What makes you think there is bad news?” Hardison let his smile drops.

“Eliot in pain is an adorable angry armadillo: all rolled up into a ball, and ready to bite,” Parker said, resting her weight against the doorframe. “If Eliot’s out cold and on his back, it means Nurse took out the big guns, so… there is bad news.”

“I was hacking Eliot's last test results while Eliot was catching up with his soap opera,” Hardison started, there was a tired smile. “I don’t think he was really paying attention. I wasn't. His pain had been a four the whole morning and there was a dose in stand by, but Eliot was trying to distract himself instead of asking for his damn painkillers. As OT says, ‘bless his heart’ for even trying…”


“Eliot had to take a leak, that happened,” Hardison said with a small groan. “Eliot paused the video, shuffled out of bed, took a step, and collapsed on a wet heap of aching bones and shaking flesh before I noticed.” Alec looked at her with scared eyes. “Pain shot up so fast that Eliot couldn’t speak for five minutes and, when he finally did, he was sure he had broken both of his legs.” Alec shook his head. “Of course, I didn’t wait for Eliot to tell me that, hell no! I called Dina. She was already on her way here…”

Dina… Parker wanted to chuckle despite the news. It’s Nurse, silly.

“Dina called it spontaneous breakthrough pain and gave Eliot a small pill of something to sleep elephants. The pain was so bad Eliot teared up until the new doses hit him. It was my fault…” Alec said and Parker dared to touch his head, in a feeble attempt to console him. “I let Eliot skip his painkillers because he was resting and I was…”
“Rest doesn’t help long bone pain.”

“I got distracted by the tests, OK?” Alec almost barked. Guilt always made him snappy. “I should have insisted…”

Parker let him rant for a second before the relevant information fell in its place neatly. The most recent lab tests were those of Boxing Day, after the last chemotherapy session. Alec had found something so important that he neglected the task he had managed the best so far.

“Why were you distracted?” Parker asked in a rush. “What did you find in those lab tests?”

“AFP and hCG are in single digits.”

Single digits… Parker felt her knees wobble. They have been waiting for months to get single digits in the markers. Hope exploded in her chest and Parker found hard to draw breath for a second. Single digits could only mean one thing…

“Is Eliot in remission?”

“With markers like that, baby,” Hardison smiled wide, turning around to look Parker in the eye, “Eliot is either on his way to remission or no longer pregnant…”

Parker let out an elated, childish cry of joy and jumped to Hardison’s arms in complete disregard of safety rules. Hardison was ready to catch her, a relieved laugh already pouring out his mouth.

Who would’ve told that the smallest amount of anything could make two thieves almost cry with joy?

Chapter End Notes

Premature voluntary release
DINQ

Chapter Summary

Eliot has been jumping the last hurdles in order to beat his worst nightmare with the addition of a nephew and a weak immune system.

The end of care step looks like a marathon.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Woke up late today and I still feel the sting of the pain,
but I brushed my teeth anyway.
I got dressed through the mess and put a smile on my face.
I got a little bit stronger.
-Sara Evans

Beth Avery was one of the family judges in Multnomah County, Oregon. She tried to be true and faithful to her job and she always was the first to arrive at the courthouse. Beth was also a grandmother and, two years ago, an angry plaintiff kidnapped one of her granddaughters. The kidnapping had the goal to change her ruling about a bitter case of conservatorship.

The work of her life would have ended two years ago, but it didn’t because she accepted to take the helping hand of people of the other side of the law. Beth wanted to be ashamed, but each time she looked at her granddaughter safe, sound and unscathed, she blessed the name of the man who returned her, with gruff voice and bloody knuckles.

Such favors always carry consequences, Beth knew it. She didn’t expect to see the man on her office that day, but he had had been expecting his return. She didn’t expect that same man to appear as a wasted, sick shadow of his former self.

“Eliot Spencer,” Beth Avery acknowledged the man, and tried to disguise her surprise. She passed by his side as if he was not a threat; that sick man couldn’t intimidate her even if that was his intention. “Time had not been kind to you.”

“No, it hadn’t, Your Honor.”

“You want to cash a favor, I assume.” Beth Avery took her place behind her desk. If corruption was the price to have her granddaughter safe at home, maybe she had to pay for it.

“I came as a petitioner, Your Honor. I want your advice.” Eliot Spencer turned around slowly. He was thin and his pain was plain to see. “If you find in your heart a way to help my case, I would be grateful forever.” Eliot smiled a soothing smile. Beth was sure that, when he was healthier, that smile made a thousand panties drop faster than the NASDAQ when the bubble burst. “Be at rest, I won’t force your hand either way.”

“Let’s hear your case, then.”
Eliot pointed at the seat in front of her, asking for permission to use it. Beth granted it with a brief nod. Eliot took out a folder from a backpack and started to explain.

“This is my nephew Sawyer, Your Honor.” Eliot put a picture on her desk. A young man in scarlet, gold and white football uniform, bent knee, fist on the helmet. “My elder sister’s child. He was born in 2002.”

Eliot took a moment to take out his wallet and show her a faded picture glued to the back of a credit card. Beth looked at the woman in the picture and then looked at Eliot. The first time she had seen Eliot his face was pleasantly round; now, not so much. Eliot now looked a lot like that thin young woman cradling a baby against her chest. There was no way to deny the family resemblance.

“My sister died in 2007.” Eliot put a death certificate on her desk. “Sawyer had been living with his father and my father in Paris, Kentucky, since that date.”

“That’s a pretty common agreement.” Beth nodded to signal Eliot she had been following his argument.

“I want Sawyer’s guardianship for the year and some months until he reaches adulthood.”

“He has a living father, right?”

“It’s no safe for Sawyer to live with his father.” Eliot closed his eyes and passed the folder, still closed to her. “Sawyer came to Portland last December 28th.” Eliot pointed at the folder as if he was asking her to review the evidence. “That was the reason.”

Beth looked inside. There was a medical report inside and a police report and roughly twenty pictures of shotgun wounds inside. Beth Avery could see why Eliot would ask for guardianship under those circumstances. Few cases were as open-and-shut as this one, if the police report was not a good forgery concocted by any of Eliot’s partners in crime.

“It’s not safe to let my nephew return to Kentucky.”

“Can you produce this nephew?” Beth asked, not because Eliot couldn’t, but because it was her duty to ask. “Can I interview him?”

“I can.” Eliot pulled a face and gave her half a shrug. “Hardison or Parker can bring him to your office at your earliest convenience. I can’t promise he will answer your questions. He’s a particular boy.”

“I assumed you were here for the interview.”

“I’m not supposed to be here, Your Honor.” Eliot made a sign to cover his whole body in one sweep. “Currently, I’m neutropenic. Chemotherapy induced. I’m supposed to be under isolation measures, but this affair can’t wait.” Eliot stopped to take a deep breath. “My nephew’s safety matters more than my own.”

“I see. Would you be in a better condition in thirty days?”

“I surely hope so, Your Honor.”

“Good. Get a lawyer.” The honorable Elizabeth Avery made a note to serve all the interested parties with the proper notifications. “I’m granting you temporary guardianship until we can properly resolve this case.”
Thank you, Your Honor.” Eliot picked up his backpack and smiled at her again. “Am I allowed to go? I would like to avoid the crowd, if possible.”

Beth Avery grunted him leave. Anything to avoid witnessing that panty dropping smile again. A grandmother like her shouldn’t witness that kind of spectacle in her place of work.

Armandina ended up her call and turned to the bed. Eliot had still his head hanging by the side of the bed; nausea had been tormenting him all morning. Armandina knew his nausea wasn’t related to chemotherapy; Eliot hadn’t had a treatment in the last three weeks, but Armandina also knew Eliot hated vomiting because that made his blood pressure drop, leaving him exhausted and dizzy. She wondered if he had even bothered to pull up his pajama bottoms after she took his temperature.

“Doctor is not worried. ‘Treat the symptoms and take some blood,’ he said,” Armandina informed Eliot.

“Lucky…”

Eliot couldn’t finish his quip before he had another emesis bout. Armandina, still cool and collected, was ready to offer her support in the form of a piece of tissue.

“You have a textbook GI virus,” Armandina offered Eliot a glass of water to wash out the taste of his mouth. “Doctor Robertson said they had a dozen of rotavirus cases just today in ER. End of winter break... it's just the season.”

Armandina took note of train Eliot’s nephews in the proper gel in-gel out technique before going home. Eliot might be out of danger, but his defenses were still low for normal.

“I think I just threw up the first milk I sucked from my mother…” Eliot mumbled in weak voice. Water brought him back to life, but just barely.

“That’s not possible.” Armandina took the bucket to empty it before Eliot could need it again. “We got rid of it the first time you got lactulose, remember?”

Eliot tried to laugh, but his efforts ended up in a pained moan. Armandina returned to the bedside under three minutes. Eliot was waiting for her, sitting against the pillows, ready to have his blood drawn. Fever and nausea had rendered him docile.

“How many shots?”

“No shots. Phenergan and acetaminophen PRN.”

“PO?”

Eliot’s misguided optimism was almost endearing. Armandina shook her head and took the blood sample kit. Eliot signed his disenchantment.

“Phenergan burns.” Eliot closed his eyes while she cleaned the lumen. He made a half-resigned gesture. “On the plus side, I’m going to sleep like a baby…”

“I’m sorry,” Armandina really meant it, but other options barely touch Eliot’s nausea.

His blood looked a bit thin, Armandina wondered if she must insist for anemia treatment, now they had brought his defenses up. Dr. Robertson wanted to give Eliot time to recover, but Dr. Byrum
wanted another round of chemotherapy. Armandina was sure Eliot wanted to kill them all, starting with her.

Eliot’s last CBC was very promising, but no one had informed him yet. If those results were right, there was a long list of tests ahead to confirm that there was no evidence of disease.

“I don’t need to like the treatment. I just need to take it.”

Armandina nodded her agreement and recapped his central line. It was time to call the cavalry because the sooner those samples reached the lab, the sooner they would be sure it was a seasonal virus. Besides, Dr. Robertson was quick with the prescriptions, Farmacy was probably already putting Eliot’s together.

She opened the door, ready to shout for Hardison, but he and Parker were already there, looking like they had been eavesdropping despite the ‘Do not disturb: Nursing in progress’ post-it Armandina always put on to protect whatever remained of Eliot’s modesty.

“Farmacy run,” Armandina said, extending the samples to them and she didn't need another word.

“I’ll take it,” Parker practically snatched the vials from Armandina’s hands. “Be back in ten.”

Armandina wanted to point out that OSHU was farther than ten minutes, but Eliot was using the bucket again. Only God knows why he had not finished yet.

“Eliot…” Armandina called, helping him to wash his mouth again. “Are you taking your NK1 blockers as prescribed?”

The prescribed NK1 blockers should be helping Eliot with his nausea, if taken right, but Eliot was not a patient expected to be compliant with regimen. This time, Armandina had hoped he was, because the side effects were a god-sent in his case.

“I have been…” Eliot stopped, frowning his brow. He was chasing a word inside his aching head. When he finally found it, he sounded defeated. “Diligent.”

Armandina nodded. ‘Diligent’ was the word Eliot used when he had been compliant despite how much he hated treatment.

“What do you think of a nice shower?”

Eliot shook his head and extended his hand, asking for water. Armandina passed him the glass with a worried frown: Eliot had never rejected the chance to get clean and fresh before.

“Don't you want to sleep fresh and comfy, on dry sheets, once you get the Phenergan?”

“I wish, but I can’t stand long enough.” Eliot made a pause and bit his bottom lip. Armandina knew that signal, Eliot was struggling to avow a weakness. “My legs still hurt.”

Armandina got worried at those words. She needed to report her patient can’t bear his own weight due to the pain… Long bone pain should be gone by now. Eliot should be replacing his bone marrow at an advanced rate now that he could eat like a human being again.

“Someday we will laugh at this…” Eliot sounded apprehensive. He knew his pain was not normal. The glass of water in his hand was shaking. “Won’t we, Nurse?”

Disease, particularly in her field, is a scary thing to face. Patients were always asking her for
reassurance. That was part of the job and Armandina was always ready to assuage their worries at the best of her ability. This was the first time Eliot asked her to put his fears at rest, and he was almost at the end of his trip. Armandina felt a stir in her chest, dense sweet and slow like honey.

“Are you giving up?” Patient’s confidence made her tender, but Eliot couldn’t deal with the usual platitudes. “Tell me now so I can find another hobby.”

“Witch!” Eliot spat and smiled wickedly at her. There was still fire under those embers.

Armandina got up with a smug grin, sure of Eliot’s will to prove her wrong. She needed to recruit Hardison’s help to get her patient comfortable.

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“God, I’m so hungry…” Eliot complained, sitting on the hospital bed and barely covered by that minimal hospital gown. He had been fasting since midnight. “I wish they could hurry up!”

Parker smiled at those words. Six weeks after his last chemotherapy session Eliot looked a lot healthier, but still far from his original weight. They were waiting their turn for the hepatic angiography Dr. Robertson ordered. They need to make sure that Eliot's liver was in working order before considering the next step in the diagnosis.

“Yes, you can’t wait to be poked.” Parker sat by his side. Her hand looking for that spot between his shoulder blades.

“I can’t wait to be out of here!”

“Where should I take you to lunch after this?”

“I’m so hungry that I would take the Dollar Menu, Parker.”

“I should wash your mouth with soap.”

“Last time I got a hospital tray, so anything else is an improvement.”

“Now, you are not alone and we can do better,” Parker chided, wondering how Eliot passed on his own through all this stress the first time. “We are going to take a good meal after this is done. So, chicken, beef, or pork?”

“Anything. Just bear with me being uneasy on my chair.” Eliot half smiled at her. “They are going to poke me in a very sensitive spot.”

Parker stopped her petting and looked at Eliot. It has been a year but she finally knew why Eliot couldn’t help but to scot his ass on the command table stool. Parker hugged him and Eliot reciprocated. It felt good, it felt normal. It ended far too soon.

“Are we ready?” A nurse knocked on the door with a big smile. She was pushing a wheelchair.

“As ready as I could be.” Eliot extended his hand for her to check his ID.

A quick check of vitals followed before the nurse helped Eliot out of the bed. Parker noticed the wince in Eliot’s face when he stood and took a couple of steps to the wheelchair. His long bone pain was still there. Parker smiled at Eliot once he took his seat and was ready to go; Eliot tried to smile back with modest success. Parker knew he was still upset about anything hospital related.

“See you in an hour?” Eliot asked with faltering voice.
I’ll be right here,” Parker reassured him.

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Hardison walked about the waiting room, checking the data in his table, waiting for the updated results to show in the database. Eliot, decked out in his camo sweatpants, was sleeping on the hospital recliner, positively exhausted. They have been wandering from one department to the other the whole day. Hardison didn’t know how Eliot had endured all; he had been off his meds for a whole week now, except for a bit of Toradol to help him sleep at night.

They had started at five in the morning. Eliot was grumpy at those hours, but Hardison didn’t know if it was due to the lack of sleep or the lack of caffeine. Sawyer offered his thoughts and prayers from the garage door, yawning like a circus lion, but he was back inside the house before Eliot could close Lucille’s door. Parker had taken the angiogram two weeks ago, so she didn’t grace them with her presence.

It was lucky their first stop was the EEG. Eliot took a nap during the second part of the test, but Hardison didn’t. He was far too worried because the technician kept marking the EEG recording.

Hardison refreshed the screen on his tablet, the EEG didn't appear in the database yet.

After the test, still scrubbing the thick paste on his scalp, Eliot had asked if he could get coffee now. Hardison didn’t miss the pleading tone of his question, but the technician, completely unaware of how vital caffeine was in this whole ordeal, refused in the most cold-hearted manner.

Hardison had to put his hand on Eliot’s shoulder to keep him from throwing a punch to that technician who, obviously, wasn’t a habitual coffee drinker.

They went to cardiology next. EKG didn’t go as smooth as EEG. Eliot couldn’t keep still, because he missed his morning coffee. A five-minute test took thrice that time; Eliot tried to focus with breathing and meditation and messed up the whole process several times, and when the technician asked him to stop going Zen, Eliot almost flew into a raging fit. Hardison didn’t know whether to laugh or to cry at the whole deal.

In consequence, they were almost late for DEXA and they had to put coffee on hold again. Eliot took precautions this time: he asked what was they expected of him, and Hardison was quick in filling out Eliot’s forms. The image of Eliot’s bone density went without a hitch and they had time to sit in a Hospital cafeteria on the ninth floor to sip the first cup of the day around ten in the morning.

“Thank God!” Eliot had exclaimed, both hands clasped around his coffee, his head bowed over the steaming mug.

“Does it taste like coffee?” He had been genuinely surprised because Eliot had complained all week long about the lack of taste.

“No, but my body knows it’s getting caffeine.” Eliot had taken a long sip with genuine gratitude.

“Headache was killing me!”

Eliot had missed his NK1 blockers again half an hour later when nausea and headache hit again with a vengeance. Eliot hadn’t been ready for his MRI when they called his name and Hardison traded their spot with the next person in line.

“Kill me now…” Eliot had said, breathing through the wave of nausea. Hardison couldn’t tell if he was jesting. “I can’t wait for the moment to take my next dose.”
That moment was still far when Eliot had finally been ready to get into the MRI scan. Doctors wanted a thorough head and abdomen series and they hoarded a good chunk of the schedule before moving to the next test in their list. When the Ultrasound scanning went without a hitch, Hardison was positively elated.

“I need a shower…” Eliot had commented, rubbing his thighs either to make the sensation of the ultrasound gel disappear or to get some relief to his long bone pain. It was difficult to say. “You know? I would rather have all of these in different dates.”

“No, you don’t, man.” Hardison had dared to disagree. “I know you want to taste your coffee only once. Chin up. One more and you can take your meds and a nap before dinner.”

“God, let that be soon…”

Hardison doubted that was a real prayer—that sounded more like OT’s mannerisms rubbing on QB—but just in case Eliot meant it for real, he added a heartfelt ‘amen’ to that wish while they walked at Eliot’s speed to the bone scan machine.

That had been two hours ago. EKG results were in the database; Eliot’s heart was strong and ticking hard. Ultrasound was up too; no soft-tissue masses in his liver or long bones. EEG was not up yet… Hardison worried a bit more in silence.

Eliot mumbled in his sleep and tried to change positions. Hardison knew the hospital chose the most comfortable chairs for this waiting room, but for someone with bone pain without analgesics, there was no place to rest in this side of the material world. He put the tablet down and moved to see if Eliot needed assistance.

“Eliot…” Hardison called, bending his knees.

“Please, tell me they’ve called my name.”

“No can’t do.”

Eliot sighed and turned on his right. Hardison knew Eliot was so tired he had forgotten they still need to inject the tracer in his blood. Maybe Eliot got it all confused: it was a long list of tests and he had more immediate worries than to keep track of each. Eliot’s brain still struggled with context. Hardison checked again if they had updated the EEG results—no luck— before he took his phone out and sent a message.

“Eliot’s in pain,” He texted to Dina. “Can I give him ANYTHING?”

Hardison noticed Eliot did his best to achieve a fetal position in the chair. Eliot was not complaining but he was having a rough time.

“I hate to know and do nothing.” Hardison insisted.

“I’m sorry.” The reply came after a while. “Hold fast. If Eliot takes anything it can mess with the results. You know what that means…”

Hardison knew very well what would the consequences be. Another week with minimal analgesics. Another week dealing with nausea and lack of taste. Another week seeing Eliot forcing himself to eat and God knows what else…

“I’ll see what I can do.” Dina promised, but the promise didn’t give Hardison any comfort.
By the time he had finished his message, Hardison felt drained. He turned his eyes to Eliot. His friend was not asleep; Eliot was wide awake with his eyes fixed in the corner of the room and Hardison felt ill-at-ease. He knows what that staring gaze meant.

“Eliot, get up,” Hardison invited because he couldn’t let Eliot get lost inside himself.

“I’m tired…”

“What you are is stiff, man,” Hardison retorted, extending his hand. “Let’s warm you a bit with a walk. Get your blood flowing, take a bit of pressure off the old bones…”

Eliot groaned and got up. Caving-in was his way to deal with Hardison when he didn’t have the resources to spend arguing. Hardison followed Eliot as he walked up and down the aisle, arms crossed over the chest. A short stroll was enough to get a bit of endorphin in his system. Hardison was happy to see Eliot still had stamina. With adequate analgesia, he might even be operative for field…

“I’ve been thinking all day…” Eliot mumbled, taking slow steps and looking at the floor, after the sixth turn. “What if it’s a metastasis? What if I got it in my bones now?”

Hardison stopped as if a bolt had struck in front of him. Eliot’s mind was wandering through darker meadows than his and he didn’t let out a breath of it until now.

“Now is not the time…”

“No. This is the time. Parker’s not around. Sawyer’s not around.” Eliot hadn’t stopped, he kept walking as straight as he could. “I can’t die now. Sawyer needs me for a couple of years more. I know you can watch over him if… if it’s a metastasis, but… Dammit! I wish I could’ve enjoyed being an uncle a bit longer…”

“Think positive,” Hardison whispered, wishing he would have carried that green blanket to cover Eliot’s shoulders. “We are here to confirm you don’t have it at all. To find out why your legs hurt.”

Hardison finally put his hands in Eliot’s shoulders, the world could be damned. Eliot needed a friend to pull his tortured soul from hell. “Dr. Byrnum is not worried you are getting a recurrence. You have heard him…”

“Then why he wants another round of chemo, if he’s not worried?”

“Because he’s an oncologist. When the only thing you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. Besides, Dr. Robertson says you are anemic, and you just came back from a severe neutropenia bout and you are certifiably undernourished. Your body needs time to recover…”

“I don’t want this to be my new normal.”

“It doesn’t have to be. You will bounce back. That’s what you do.”

Eliot laughed without humor. That was as good as a reaction as Hardison could expect, given the circumstances. Eliot finally stopped his aimless stroll, and they hugged in the middle of the aisle. Hardison had always suspected Eliot was craving for human contact, but damn if the boy wasn’t hard to confess his needs.

“Think of a hot shower and a shot of painkillers…”

“I don’t want to. We still have four hours to go.”
“Maybe less…”

Hardison had noticed a technician making them signals to come inside the bone scan unit. There was an IV pole next to one chair, with a saline bag already primed and with the tracer piggybacking the mainline. Eliot sighed his relief when he sat again and the technician smiled at him before putting an electrical warming blanket over his legs.

“Compliments of Armandina,” he said with a mischievous wink. Hardison saw Eliot positively purr when the technician turned the heat on. “Hey, do you know why cancer patient’s coffins are nailed down at a funeral?”

Eliot disregarded the question, too relieved from his pain to care for the word. Hardison groaned at the mention of their shared enemy. The technician found Eliot’s basilic vein without any trouble. Dina was right: Eliot’s veins were the wet dream of any phlebotomist.

“So?” The technician insisted, opening the package of the butterfly needle.

“Don’t know,” Hardison was regretting having texted Dina.

“Don’t care.” Eliot was enjoying the warmth.

“So, the oncologist doesn’t try to do more chemotherapy,” the technician said, pushing the needle inside Eliot’s arm at the same time.

The room was so silent Hardison could hear how the technician ripped the surgical tape off the spool. Hardison could read the technician knew his joke fell flat and was hurrying up the blood sample. Then he would only need to connect the IV line. Eliot was shaking as if he were trying to suppress a cough, but his left hand was over his eyes as if he couldn’t believe what he had heard and was having a spell of second-hand embarrassment. Hardison dipped down just to notice Eliot Spencer was grinning like a chimp.

“Are you laughing?!” The question barely conveyed Hardison outrage. He had tried to make Eliot laugh for years…

“It’s funny!” Eliot protested, letting out a small laugh. The sound ended with a small, rising flourish. That laughter made Hardison smile.

“Homestretch, bro,” Hardison encouraged, pressing Eliot’s right hand as the technician rolled down the flow control clamp. “We are almost there…”

“I can’t look at your ma’s pictures yet, Sawyer,” Eliot protested when his nephew took the battered cookie tin from their shared closet.

The boy had been waiting to sit with Eliot to look at the photos he had brought with him—instead of some sensible shoes or warm clothes (God, protect his empty head… This boy has no sense to speak of!)— for two months. Now, hooked to an IV, Eliot had no way to escape…

Eliot wondered if he was cranky because for the last three days Nurse had been pumping antibiotics and chemo drugs alternatively into his blood to fight the infection in his bones, or because he really was mildly annoyed by the boy. It was probably a mixture of both. Fever didn’t help either.

“I don’t have too many of her…” Sawyer pouted, putting out that gentle fight that he knew would
disarm his uncle.

*How much do you look like her!* Eliot wanted to cry out. The resemblance was impossible to bear sometimes.

“Pester ing the long-suffering uncle, are we?” Hardison asked when he crossed Eliot’s room door. It was a rainy afternoon and the drops against the glass distracted him from his games. “Can I join?”

“Dammit, Hardison!” Eliot didn’t need to wonder: he was annoyed by Hardison. “Don’t encourage the boy!”

“Chill out, bro!” Hardison laughed when Eliot felt the pull on his chest. He shouldn’t have tried to lunge while hooked. “That central line is reaching retirement age. Don’t rip it out before its time!”

“Are you three alright?” Nurse called out from the kitchen.

“All’s right, Miss Dina!” Sawyer moved to the bed and put the cookie tin between Eliot’s knees. “Please, Uncle. Let’s go through some. I won’t show you any of her.”

Eliot grumbled. The boy had had no time to learn from Leah, but Eliot’s soul could hear his sister’s voice in his gentle plea.

“All right, all right, but it will cost you.” Eliot almost smiled at Sawyer’s grin. “Fetch me a coffee and be sure no one pours lactulose on it.”

Sawyer ran from the room before Eliot could take the offer back. Eliot wondered for how long that boy had waited to revisit their family story; he knew his own father wouldn’t budge for any number of pleas.

Hardison made a feeble attempt to excuse himself, but Eliot saw through it. The invitation was a short grunt and a jerking movement of the head. After all those little things Hardison had done for him, this was the least he could do to have their honorary siblinghood confirmed. Eliot regretted Parker was doing some errands. The whole family should be together for this as they did when his mother was alive.

Sawyer brought the coffee, along with a gentle reminder from Nurse about meds time. Eliot rolled his eyes, took the shot glass and gulped the pills. Sawyer sat on the bed and opened the cookie tin with calm, serene movements as if he were performing a ritual. The first picture he extended Eliot was of a young boy with a big fake grin and sad blue eyes.

“Was that you?” Hardison asked Sawyer, his voice said he was feeling that boy’s sadness.

“I used to think I was, but that’s Uncle.”

“Third-grade yearbook picture. I was eight years old.” Eliot took the photo and, instead of looking at it, he turned it over. “Your mother’s handwriting was always neat.”

Eliot pointed at the message written with a ball pen: ‘Eli Spencer, 8 years old.’ Hardison darted Eliot a look to tell him he was aware of what Eliot was doing. Hardison was right: Eliot was taking distance from that hurting boy that probably was still trying to make sense of a cruel world where his mother was dying.

“She always called me Eli.” Eliot glared Hardison a cautionary stare. “Think of your teeth before you try that one out.”
“No, she didn’t,” Sawyer dared to disagree. “I used to think your first name was Baby because she kept calling you Baby Eli. You took me out of my mistake pretty quickly…”

Hardison let out a surprised peal of laughter. Sawyer was making heroic, but noticeable, efforts to disregard the need to join. Eliot felt his face hot. It was his shame to bear to had a sister that still called him ‘baby’ by the time he was fighting for his country.

“The worst thing your ma ever did to me was calling me ‘Baby Eli’ in the school playground,” Eliot mumbled those words, but his voice was rancor-free.

Hardison laughed again. Sawyer showed a shocked, disapproving expression as if he couldn’t believe how cruel children could be.

“Don’t pull that face!” Eliot smiled. “You would’ve teased me too.”

“And gleefully.” Sawyer gave up the pretense with a wide grin.

“Boy, I can’t imagine what kind of kerfuffle followed those words.”

The idea of someone calling Eliot ‘baby’ and going away scot-free amused Hardison. His smile was evident.

“Of course, you can.” Eliot sipped his coffee. “I got my share of shiners until I learn how to give them back.”

“And you haven’t stopped since.”

Sawyer grinned and passed Eliot another faded photo. Eliot couldn’t help but smile at the image of a toddler in fabric diapers using a corn stalk to stand-up on his weak legs. Behind it, a two-story country house, painted gray, with a deep veranda. The ancient shadblow trees flanked the house as they had done for a century, they were in full bloom and Eliot could taste the juneberries and felt sad for anyone who hadn’t tasted them in their lives. The photo was too old for the baby to be Sawyer or even Eliot.

“I always wanted to ask what place was that,” Sawyer asked when he noticed the smile.

“Your great-gramps Elias’s farm, in Shawhan,” Eliot replied before pointing at the window on the second floor. “I was born in that room. Your ma and I shared the room in the back until I got old enough to go to school.”

Eliot shook his head. This was not the time to tell Sawyer his great-gramps Elias had hung himself in the barn when the bank foreclosed the farm. Eliot and Leah found him one sultry summer afternoon while trying to find a quiet place to play.

“I tried to buy back the place, but someone else owns it now…”

Hardison looked at Eliot as if he was about to ask something, but something else in Sawyer's tin got his attention. Sawyer was drinking his words like parched soil does water and Eliot indulged in nostalgia for the next minute. He missed his gramps, and how safe he felt when he picked Eliot up and called him Ace. He missed the juneberries and the quiet afternoons in the veranda, sitting in the porch swing and sipping sun tea.

“This one is me,” Sawyer announced, passing Eliot another photo when he noticed his uncle was getting dewy-eyed.
Glossy paper and vivid colors only digital photos give, Eliot couldn't help but notice. This one was new. The banner read ‘Spelling bee,’ Sawyer was standing at rest. Sawyer’s hair showed a three-on-top one-on-the-side military pattern. Whoever took the picture took care to capture Sawyer’s whole stance. Someone had projected the word ‘paraphernalia’ against the wall. Sawyer looked relaxed, but his smile made Eliot’s hair stand on end.

That was not the worse detail that the picture showed Eliot. A ghost of his past materialized on Sawyer’s past and gripped Eliot’s heart with icy claws.

“Who’s the red-headed woman in the corner?” Eliot asked, trying to keep his terror from showing on his voice. He was successful because Hardison kept rummaging through Sawyer’s cookie tin without noticing Eliot’s turmoil.

“Oh, that’s doctor Erin. Do you know her? I had to see her twice a week for three years after…” Sawyer hesitated for a bit and Eliot felt his belly hurting, like when the tumor was there. Sawyer’s lips pursed and twisted like the words couldn’t leave his throat, as if those words burned when they tried to get out. “The court said so. Gramps and Pops had to see her too…”

Eliot wasn’t hearing him anymore; his brain went into a fatal tailspin. Preoperative stage First Wound… Eliot let go of his coffee to press his hands hard against his mouth. Three hundred hours… A soul-rending yowl threatened to rip his insides open when he understood Sawyer was glitching. Abnormal limbic responses…The wet warmth spread on Eliot’s lap. He hoped it was just coffee. Oh, God, please, no… Eliot’s gut churned, his heart was racing, his breath was stuck on his windpipe.

The human brain can’t stand too much reality, laddie.

“Eliot!” Hardison sprang to his knees to hold Eliot before he could double over himself.

Hardison sounded upset while he ordered in fright that Eliot must breathe, but Sawyer was standing in attention. He’s primed… Medicine, coffee and bile rushed to Eliot’s mouth at the sight of that obscenity. Oh, God… Eliot couldn’t stand it. That bitch got him… The truth was a mortal poison sometimes. Blue Heart got Leah’s baby boy… Eliot’s body was trying hard to get rid of that new, harrowing knowledge the only way it could.

The photos scattered over the wet comforter. Eliot saw himself in his football uniform, surrounded by the first brothers he found outside the paternal home before Hardison forced his head to the side of the bed.

“Uncle?” Sawyer sounded unsure. He was still working the glitch.

“Go for Dina!” Hardison ordered, gathering Eliot’s hair out of his face. He knew all the signs of an impending sickness attack. “Breathe, man! Come on! Breathe!”

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Parker smiled at the sight. She had been waiting for months to see Eliot next to the stove again. The central line under his black tank top was the only thing she would take out of the picture. Eliot was smiling and browning the onions directly at the bottom of the pot with his phone against his right ear.

“It is good to have him back,” Hardison commented when he passed by her side with a rack of glasses in his hands and a smile on his face. “Shame we must return him home soon…”

“You are such a spoilsport sometimes…”
A corporate event had rented the pub for the night and they were alone, which was ideal for Eliot’s compromised situation. Eliot had a bit of fever yesterday and looked a bit gloomy; now he looked a lot healthier—and happier—in his kitchen. So happy that he had been catching up with people while cooking, he even called Sawyer to say hello to his Uncle Randy over the phone before he added the minced meat.

Alec shook his head and Parker admitted he was right, to an extent. Using the central line delivered chemicals too quickly into Eliot’s worn out system; his body had rejected the last batch of chemotherapy drugs. The doctors had chosen to fight his bone infection with needles, painkillers and rest. Eliot was not happy, but he adhered to treatment because that infection won't clear on its own.

If Eliot was making his famous chili in the brewpub instead of resting in his bed—as the doctors vehemently insisted, he should— was because Sawyer threw a wrench into the works.

“What’s black porter chili?” Sawyer asked last night, while they were having a nice early dinner done from scratch by Eliot. “People at the brewpub kept asking if we have black porter chili…”

Eliot almost choked with the spoon inside his mouth when he understood the double news: the stashed freezer boxes were empty and his nephew was working at the brewpub behind his back. That was the end of the nice dinner.

Eliot hemmed up Sawyer into a corner immediately— in low grumbles, they both repeated the words ‘girlfriend' and ‘no football’ and ‘hate the new school’ frequently—, but Hardison, Parker, and Eliot held talks around the kitchen table after the boy was sent to bed.

Eliot wanted to get back to the Leverage International and the brewpub affairs, there and then; Hardison was ready to wrestle Eliot into submission, and Parker didn’t want to hear anything of it until Dr. Byrnum extended Eliot his blessings. The only compromise reachable was to allow Eliot to cook a couple of pots every other day to ease his concerns about the kitchen.

The boy, still angry because Eliot caught him working at the brewpub, chatted politely over the phone with the dear old-timer for a minute, and sat in the bar to watch Eliot pour tomato paste and spices into the pot. Parker noticed Sawyer’s boredom and she had to stifle the impulse to ask the boy to lend a hand with the event menus of the tables.

“I’m going to the Kickoff this season and you are going to come with me,” Eliot decreed once he finished his call, pointing Sawyer with a stern scowl. “Uncle Randy wants to hug you.”

“He just knew I exist and now he's making demands?” Sawyer asked with his most prim Southern beau tone.

“Boo-hoo, Bubba,” Eliot mocked Sawyer's prissiness. “I happen to know his house, and there's a picture of you on your ma’s lap sitting on top of his home office desk.” Eliot poured the baked beans on the pot. “He wants to see the fine boy you turned out to be, so get used to the idea of having the time of your life with your uncle, his uncle, and a bunch of retired boys in blue this summer, bucko.”

“Is that an order, sir?”

“You can bet your sweet, young ass.”

“Uncle!” Sawyer protested. Parker couldn’t tell which implication hurt his Christian sensibilities the most: the gambling or the sodomy.
“You are coming to Oklahoma with me and that’s final.”

“Fine…” Sawyer agreed with a weary sigh, “but I won’t root for the Sooners!”

“It’s a free country.” Eliot shrugged while pouring beer over the beans.

“Parker!” Hardison called out while piling the soft drink glasses on the shelves next to Eliot. “Did you notice we were not invited or even consulted?”

“I just thought you two were really tired of seeing my face…”

“And your chest,” Parker pointed out, straightening a menu card on the table.

“And your ass,” Hardison added, checking all the glasses were clean behind Eliot’s back.

“Have I spent last year in the buff without noticing?” Eliot asked with an exasperated grunt, “You want to come too? Fine. I’ll call uncle Randy tomorrow and tell him he needs to stock his pantry with goodies, chips and the sorts…”

“And Squeeze Orange soda!”

“It is included in ‘the sorts’ category, Hardison!”

Eliot and Alec argued loudly. Eliot’s spoon stirring the chili and the faint clinking of the glasses on the shelves punctuated the quarrel. Business as usual at the brewpub, Parker smiled and made Sawyer a signal for him to come near. Sawyer walked, but he was still looking at the quarrel over his shoulder. His face lit up when Parker put a bunch of menus in his hand and made a wide sign to the tables in the kitchen’s blind spot.

“We agreed you could make black porter chili and the chili pot is done,” Hardison said ten minutes later and tried to push Eliot out of the kitchen. “You need to go back home, get your shots and take a nap.”

“Geez, all of those sound super fun!” Eliot exclaimed full of sarcasm, trying to resist Hardison’s push. His shoes hindered his efforts to a great degree. “I can’t wait.”

“Stop being such a baby, Eliot!” Hardison exclaimed, trying to make Eliot move.

Parker looked at Sawyer, next to the kitchen window, getting pale almost at the same time Eliot got stiff. Hardison stopped his efforts to remove Eliot from the stove and bolted out the confined space like a spooked colt. Eliot began the chase three seconds later, but his illness had put him in obvious disadvantage. By the time Parker caught Eliot, Hardison had made his escape through the back.

“Wow, you are warm!” Parker said instead of the line about antagonizing the needle-wielder that she had thought for an occasion like this. “Are you running a fever?”

“Miss Parker is right, Uncle,” Sawyer said, coming to their side gawking at Eliot’s face. “Where did you get those apples? Even your ears are red!”

“I have been standing next to the stove for two hours, thank you very much…” Eliot grumbled, appalled by the fuss and by the possibility of going to visit Dr. Robertson if that was really a fever. “It’s not a fever. My legs don’t hurt. I’m fine!”

“Hardison, come here!” Parker shouted. Her hand rested on Eliot’s forehead in the immemorial sign of motherly care. “You are not fine.”
“Maybe it’s nothing, Uncle,” Sawyer tried to sound reassuring. His hand rested on Eliot’s right shoulder. “I’ll pray it’s nothing, but it’s better if we make sure, don’t you think?”

“Let’s go to the house, Eliot,” Hardison said, coming out the backroom. “If it’s the stove warmth, you will be within normal parameters by the time we take your temp.”

“I’ll stay with Miss Parker, Uncle,” Sawyer drove Eliot gently to the door, despite Eliot’s murdering gazes. “You need to take care of yourself. Please?”

“Stop babying me, dammit!” Eliot shouted and made wide sweeps with his arms to keep them away.

Parker, her hand now resting on Sawyer’s shoulder, looked at Eliot with a strange mixture of hurt and awe in her chest. Hardison was smiling. Eliot, his back against the glass door and looking as mad as a wet hen, breathed heavily. Thin as a beam of laser light, but alive and rowdy nonetheless.

“I’m going home because I can’t stand you fussing over me,” Eliot grumbled and extended his hand toward the knob. “You can come, Hardison, but only if you behave!”

With those words, Eliot pulled the door open and stepped outside before slamming the door behind him. Hardison let out a peal of laughter and pumped his fist into the air. Of course, Eliot’s bad mood spell was a cause of celebration, but Parker couldn’t let her worry go as easily and Sawyer looked like he agreed with her.

“See that he takes his meds.”

“Take care of my uncle, please!”

Hardison showed his surprise with a wide grin.

“I’ll do,” he promised and headed for the door.

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Armandina looked at the tray Monique, their new CNA, had laid for her. There were five vials to fill and that’s too much for her first patient this morning. Armandina sipped her coffee and read the labels. Eliot had chosen to take the DNA screening for his reaction to the anesthesia and, as an added measure, he’s testing his nephew, too.

The steps behind her announced it was time to get professional. Armandina always had conflicted thoughts when a patient walked into an examination room for the last blood draw. The end of months of care is rough on the care team too, even with a patient like Eliot Spencer. Of course, she would still see that face for months to come, and she would draw his blood often, but Eliot was in a much better place now.

Two months were enough to give him his independence back. His health had improved a great deal; his attitude, on the other hand...

“Come on, Nurse,” Eliot taunted, taking off his shirt and hopping on the table while Armandina was still putting her double gloves. “Get your kicks while you still can!”

Armandina smiled wickedly. Sometimes she felt the itch of using a blunt needle on Eliot just to teach him what a bad shot felt like, but she had made an oath. Sawyer, polite as always, found a place to look at the proceedings without getting in the way.
“Lucky you,” Armandina replied, rubbing the alcohol wipe against his skin. “Dr. Byrnum just gave me permission to use the sharp needles again!”

Sawyer let out a bray of laughter before he caught himself and put his hands over his mouth. Eliot made the usual fuss when the erythropoietin got into his deltoid and when she stuck the bandage over the puncture. Armandina shook her head and moved to the central line, doffing her outer gloves to protect the sterility of the catheter.

“Do you realize that there is a great chance that next time I draw your blood we would need a big needle?” Armandina asked, filling the third vial.

“God willing,” Sawyer sighed, looking up with arms outstretched.

“Why there is nothing made of wood in this office!” Eliot was looking up too, probably in mock imitation of his nephew. “Careful with those vials. One is for the boy.”

“Feel free to teach me how to do my job any time, Eliot Spencer.”

“You will miss me, Nurse.” Eliot had that insolent half-smile in his face again. Armandina had learned that it was Eliot’s way to show affection.

“Without any doubt. I don’t have a lot of patients as vocal as you.” Armandina recapped the central line. “Should we leave the cobalamin shot for a time when we don’t have witnesses?”

“You haven’t broken me down in a year, woman.” Eliot jumped off the table, his hands already on the buttons. “I won’t cry now.”

“You meant all that groaning these last months were you being brave?” After a year of shots, Armandina had Eliot’s landmarks memorized. She was sure she could shoot Eliot blindfolded and drunk. “You will miss me too.”

“No, I won’t!” Eliot sucked breath between clenched teeth. “Are we done?”

“For now,” Armandina pressed the dressing against Eliot’s skin. It was nice to feel a bit of fat over the muscle. Eliot had been eating.

Sawyer had rushed to fill the spot his uncle had left vacant. For a healthy guy like him, a blood draw was surely an amusing adventure. Eliot got his shirt on without a grimace.

“Before you do your job, miss,” Sawyer stopped Armandina with a polite touch in her arm before she could change her gloves. “From my uncle and me…”

In Sawyer's hand, there was a small white jewelry box with a simple silver ribbon.

“We asked Dr. Byrnum if we were allowed to give you a present, and he didn’t say no.” Sawyer gave her the same shrug his uncle used to give her. “So, I assume it’s up to you.”

It was not the first time a patient had given Armandina a token of gratitude, but most of the time it was letters or cookies. It was the first time a patient had offered her jewelry. Curiosity got the best of her and she opened the box. Inside there was a silver nurse fob watch. ‘A. Tanahara’ engraved in the pin piece with elegant calligraphy.

“I wanted to engrave ‘Nurse’ in the name tag,” Eliot said, rubbing his arm like it was still hurting, “but this boy objected.”
“Because ‘Nurse’ is not her name, Uncle.”

Armandina took the watch out to look it better. On the case back, someone engraved the legend ‘There’s always time to save a life.’ Sawyer extended his hand and Armandina passed the piece to him. With total solemnity, as if he was awarding her a medal, the boy fixed the watch to her ‘I get paid to stab people with sharp objects’ t-shirt.

“Thank you for saving my life, miss,” Sawyer said, nodding slightly before pointing at his uncle with his thumb, “and for keeping my uncle from harm.”

“You are a sweet boy, Sawyer,” Armandina broke protocol and gave the boy a quick kiss on the cheek. “Are you sure you two are related?”

“I believe we are here to find out,” Sawyer offered his arm with a big grin. He has his Uncle’s lovely, big veins. “How do you like these?”

Sawyer and Hardison had been playing a bitter battle on the game deck for hours now. Eliot had sat on the side, smiling at the shouts and laughs, sipping his coffee from time to time. Parker noticed he never spared a glance at the screen; his full attention was on Hardison and the boy. Despite his silence, Parker could tell Eliot felt very at ease with sharing his nephew with them. He had never told the words, but Parker knew she had Eliot’s blessing to consider herself an honorary aunt.

For the last five minutes, Eliot had been looking them play, mug in hand and glazed over eyes. Lately, Eliot had been paying very little attention to the people around him. Parker wondered if the doctors had been overmedicating Eliot now that his markers had been way down for two months.

Parker sat next to Eliot and poked him in the side to get his attention. Eliot snapped from his inner world and raised his empty mug to his mouth mechanically. Parker sniggered at Eliot’s surprised look when he noticed there was no more coffee to drink.

“We have a party to plan,” Parker said with a smile before he had time to make his mind about getting another cup.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” Eliot grumbled and couldn’t help but smile when Sawyer let out a sharp holler and lunged forward. “Doctors will say when this con is done.”

“Your health is not a con,” Parker chided and hit him with the elbow in the side.

“Ow…” Eliot complained, touching his ribs. His hand covered a chest tube scar. “I know my health is not a con. You would be more careful with a con!”

Parker smiled. That’s the Eliot they almost lost; his grumpy voice was celestial music to Parker’s ears. It was fun to care for Eliot and to pet him to sleep every now and then, but nothing in this world would be as satisfying as having their hitter back, bad attitude and all.

“Your last blood work was good,” Parker insisted and smiled at him. “We should celebrate.”

“I was planning to celebrate with a good shaving,” Eliot reached to put the mug on the table before scratching his hairy chin. “I’m not allowed to shave: we don’t celebrate.”

“That’s good for you. You need little or nothing, but what about us?” Parker put her legs on top of Eliot’s, that’s the only way to keep him from getting up and away from their conversation. “We
deserve a pat on the back after all these months...”

Eliot sighed, putting his mug on the coffee table, and leaned back. Parker, a smile brewing in her face, looked at Eliot stretching his back on the back of the sofa. The game was getting heated, even Hardison was shouting now. Eliot adjusted his legs, his right foot rested on his left ankle and his head hung a bit over the edge of the back pillow. A big bloodhound would make less noise than Eliot sighing again.

“Don’t jinx it, Parker!”

The words were hard, the tone was hoarse, but Parker could hear the flailing tail of hope escaping through Eliot’s clenching teeth. If Eliot was harboring even the most hesitant yearning for health Parker knew he wouldn’t show it to the world, Eliot would wrap up that little egg in a heavy mantle of caution, foster it with reluctant respect to doctor wishes, and sprinkle with seething sarcasm. Parker shimmied to cuddle him better and feed her own hope with that stolen little jewel of siblinghood.

Sawyer screamed in frustration again and Parker relished on Eliot’s lazy smile. It was a good day to dream of good news.

Chapter End Notes

*Delinquent in qualifications*
Chapter Summary

The light at the end of the tunnel shone for a brief moment before a cunning stranger
came to stir trouble.

Also, Parker tried her hand at an old craft.

Chapter Notes

Floating boxes came back and Quinn as well.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Help me make it through the night
I don't care who's right or wrong
I don't try to understand
Let the devil take tomorrow
Lord, tonight I need a friend
-Kris Kristofferson

“I… I think I need a minute…” Eliot stuttered, already putting his hands over his face.

Sawyer went down to his knees hard, his hand resting on Eliot’s thigh. Eliot couldn’t look at it, but
he could bet Hardison was pumping his fist in the air. By Nurse shocked gasp and Dr. Byrnum’s
polite objection, Parker had assaulted the good doctor with a full-body hug. Eliot couldn’t blame
any of them, he could barely breathe because the doctor uttered the most beautiful words in the
English language could provide.

No evidence of disease...

Of course, Dr. Byrnum meant no evidence of oncologic disease. Dr. Robertson should clear Eliot
from that bone infection in a couple of weeks when he finished the antibiotics run. Yet, Eliot didn’t
know whether he should laugh or cry or pray. Eliot had crossed Hell and he still had his though—
albeit a bit more pierced, scarred and ragged—skin on his back.

No evidence of disease… The beast hadn’t claimed him like so many of his kin.

Eliot suddenly felt light-headed when the idea that he was not actively dying anymore hit him hard.
Sawyer was praying in a polite rushed whisper and Parker was threatening Nurse with another big-
ass hug.

“I’m gonna call my Nana…” Hardison’s voice sounded choked and shocked. He shook Eliot’s
shoulder hard. “You are going with me to my Nana’s house. She’ll line up your bones with her food
in one week!”
“We need a party!” Parker screamed, unable to contain her emotions.

“I must beg you not to do the party here,” Dr. Byrnum sensible voice tried to rein in Parker’s exuberance.

Eliot rose from his chair, barely master of his own head again. Sawyer got up too, strangely calm. Parker looked at him and her happiness became subdued. Hardison put his phone away. Eliot didn’t mind any of them. He stood in front of Dr. Byrnum, a bit overwhelmed, but ready to show his southern manners.

“I owe you my life, sir,” Eliot said, extending his hand. “Thank you.”

“Nonsense, soldier,” Dr. Byrnum replied and extended his hand with a warm smile. “I just provide you with your weapons and sent you my best general.” Dr. Byrnum stopped to acknowledge Nurse with a polite nod. “You fought the fight. You won the war.”

Eliot turned his head and nodded to Nurse too. He knew he should thank her properly, but the memory of her ministrations was still too fresh in his flesh to utter the words in earnest.

“You have a hero’s parade waiting and I have other wars to oversee,” Dr. Byrnum put his hand on Eliot’s shoulder.

“See you in two months, then, sir.”

“I want to see an improvement in your weight by then.”

Eliot was not sure he wouldn’t collapse once they left Dr. Byrnum’s office. Out of habit, he extended his arm over Hardison’s shoulder and Parker rushed to fill the space under his other arm. They walked—right one first—in that friendly half-hug that suited them just right.

“You are a hero, sir,” Sawyer said, probably extending his hand to the doctor. Eliot could hear the smile in his voice. “May the Lord bless you.”

Sawyer heavy steps followed them out of the office.

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“Is it safe to return?” Sawyer asked, daring to poke his head through the barely open door.

“Last shots fired!” Hardison replied, capping the needle with a big smile.

“Don’t jinx it!” Eliot complained and coughed in his fist as he moved to the center of the bed.

Sawyer sniggered and moved inside. God had chosen to give Uncle Eliot his health back and Sawyer had not tired yet of praising His mercy. The doctor said that that mean cough was just a cold, that Uncle Eliot didn’t need more drugs, just rest and liquids. They had an appointment in four days’ time to take the central line out, but Uncle had to get rid of that cold first.

“Miss Parker said you should save some pillows for her,” Sawyer kicked his sneakers to a corner.

“What are we watching today, Mr. Hardison?”

“The Book of Eli,” Mr. Hardison said tossing him the blue-ray case.

“Comedy,” Eliot spat before another cough distracted him.

“Hey, man, you really need to take that cough syrup Parker brought you,” Mr. Hardison was busy
picking up all the used tissues. He didn’t look too worried by the hacking sound out of Uncle Eliot’s mouth. “I think you would like it, OT.”

Miss Parker arrived with a big bowl of popcorn. Sawyer felt his mouth watering at the smell of butter and salt. Mr. Hardison put the thrash away before he popped the disc on Uncle’s deck. Miss Parker and Mr. Hardison both cuddled in the far-right side of the bed, Sawyer extended his hand and snatched a fistful of popcorn over his uncle’s legs while the anti-piracy ad ran. Uncle tried to do the same but Miss Parker moved the bowl without giving him a glance.

“Parker!” Uncle Eliot growled and tried again.

“Nuh-huh,” Parker held the bowl away from Uncle.

“Pass the popcorn!”

“You have been coughing in your hands!” Miss Parker accused, moving the bowl farther away. “I don’t want to get sick!”

“I want popcorn!”

“Kitchen is downstairs!”

Sawyer felt like laughing because those two remind him of the brothers that always argued in the playground at his Elementary School. Mr. Hardison was taking the lion’s share of the popcorn while they glared at each other. This kind of things never happened at Gramp’s and Sawyer found he liked the rowdy, loving way they behave.

“If that’s the only way I’m going to get popcorn…” Uncle Eliot finally grumbled, moving to the feet of the bed. “I’ll remember you kicked me out of my own bed while I was sick, Parker!”

“It’s a cold!” Parker retorted and stuck out her tongue. “I’ll bring you popcorn when you’ve bronchitis or something worse!”

“While you are in the kitchen make yourself a cuppa, bro,” Mr. Hardison said off-the-cuff, picking popcorn one at the time from his hand. “If you keep coughing like a coal miner you won’t let us hear the movie!”

“May I have a soda, Uncle?” Sawyer asked before Uncle could explode.

It was funny how a simple, polite request can put Uncle’s fire out. His eyes shifted for a moment and turned around with a huff. Sawyer scooted over and leaned on Miss Parker’s shoulder. Sawyer fine-tuned his ears, Uncle’s footsteps were too faint to hear, but his weight had increased and the house was not precisely new; it creaked. Miss Parker, offhandedly, ruffled the top of Sawyer’s head and made him smile. When Uncle reached the third rung of the stairs, Sawyer snatched the control and pressed pause.

“Are we going to have a party?”

The shy, conspiratorial tone of his voice brought a smile on Miss Parker’s face, but Mr. Hardison was the one to reply and her voice followed his in hushed excitement.

“I’ll drag Eliot’s unwilling ass to the Culinary School after Dr. R. takes the tube out…”

“Toby is already aware. They will have the teacher’s kitchen ready...”
'...Dina will bring her wife…'

'...I got enough steaks for all…'

'...Dr. B won’t attend. He had a thing in Europe with his wife…'

'...Dr. R. said Eliot could get a beer if he wanted…'

'...Oh, he’s coming too, after his shift at the Samaritan…'

The microwave pinged. Uncle’s popcorn was ready. Sawyer pushed play and took another handful of popcorn. The previews rolled and gone and Sawyer started to get worried when he heard Uncle Eliot returning. The movie was starting when he sat at the left edge of the bed and passed Sawyer a can of Orange soda.

The smell of popcorn coming from Uncle Eliot’s lap caught Hardison, Parker and Sawyer’s attention. Uncle Eliot sat—smugly—, sipping hot tea from a black lidded travel cup, with a big bowl of nutty caramel popcorn over his crossed legs. The whirling smell of toasted almonds, butter, salt, and burnt sugar was both enticing and offensive.

‘Pass the popcorn, Eliot!’

‘Nuh-huh!’ Uncle Eliot said, taking a handful. ‘These are icky. You don’t want to get my cold, Parker!’

‘But yours is sweet!’ Miss Parker whined.

‘Kitchen’s downstairs!’

Sawyer sniggered and put his hand inside of Uncle Eliot’s bowl; Uncle Eliot moved it away with a growl before Sawyer could get a sample. Sawyer always suspected his dear uncle was a vengeful man; he was sure now.

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There was something profoundly calming in being back in the kitchen, worrying about four or five pots at the time, moving the big chopping knife over the cutting board at blinding speed. This is how life should feel like… Eliot felt his head swim with the aromas wafting around him. Parker and Sawyer were chatting, sitting on top of the dinner table; the boy was nodding and smiling. Hardison has gone to the lab to gawk at the new spherification 3D printer. There was a cold one waiting for the steak to be done.

Eliot couldn’t ask for a better way to return to life.

‘Look who I found wandering around!’ Hardison announced entering the teaching kitchen.

When Armandina crossed the door, Eliot smiled. When the tall redhead woman—short hair, short nails, uneasy on a skirt: works in a hospital— came in after her, Eliot applauded that harpy’s good taste. The happy couple was the first one to the party.

He came out from behind the counter while the salad swam on a disinfectant solution. Armandina extended her arm and offered her hand, Eliot got his arms wide open. She readily accepted his invitation with a smile far too wide to not be sarcastic.

‘From the bottom of my bottom, thank you for everything, Armandina.’
“Wow, that’s deep!” Armandina hugged him with care. She had guessed right he was still a bit sore from the removal of his central line.

“You should know,” Eliot mumbled in her ear, “I believe you are the only one who’ve found it!”

Armandina laughed for a good minute, enough for Eliot to introduce himself and thank his nurse’s wife for her patience on those long shifts. Upon learning her name was Dobke, Eliot fumbled with his Hebrew, just to learn she was from the Volga region, which was awesome because Eliot’s Russian flowed a lot easier than his Hebrew. Armandina took charge of the rest of the introductions and Eliot returned to the stove.

“What miracle did she perform?” Toby Heat asked as soon as Eliot took up the knife.

Eliot made the knife dance before he started to dice the potatoes for the fixings. Not even for Toby Eliot would try to explain his relationship with Armandina Tanahara and he was to blame for being so blatantly obvious in his gratitude.

“I know you don’t want to talk about your problems,” Toby said with a laugh, minding the seasoning of the meat. “You were never one to complain…”

Toby Heath was good to prod Eliot for information and Eliot knew it. That was one of the reasons he had kept Toby out of this whole mess. Eliot hadn’t cried since his mother died; this crisis made him cry like a baby. At the first sign of tears, Toby would have picked Eliot apart, piece by piece, and would have stripped him of all his wicked ways to deal with his own mortality.

“It’s OK.” Eliot selected a bunch of shallots. “I won’t say it’s behind me, because it’s not, but I can talk about it. Give me a year, maybe I could laugh at the thought of it.”

“You don’t need to.”

Last year, Eliot couldn’t afford to be hurt in more than one way at the time. Now, he was sore, but not hurting. Eliot felt he could talk to Toby Heath.

“It was a very humbling experience,” Eliot said, hanging his head and focusing on the knife. “All my life I thought I was the master of two things: my mind and my guts. This sickness and that woman,” Eliot pointed at Nurse with the knife, “taught me I can’t be trusted with any of them.”

“Was she the one who had to bear the brunt of you being sick?” Toby sniggered. If someone put a loaded pistol against his head, Eliot could bet that Toby still could remember the bad shellfish Eliot got in Belgium. “I need to set apart the biggest steak for her.”

Eliot chuckled and added the shallots to the pan. Armandina had hurt his ego the most, but, in his heart of hearts, Eliot had to admit that without her, he wouldn’t make it with something resembling soundness of mind. Those long, no-quarter given, bitching matches they held were a salve from his mauled sense of self.

“I should have sent you more food,” Toby said while brushing garlic butter on the steaks. “You are thin as a wire!”

“I appreciate the intention, but it wouldn’t have helped.” Eliot gulped to force down the groan. Toby had mercilessly poked one of his main sore spots. “I didn’t have much of an appetite.”

Toby was looking at him. Eliot could feel the weight of his gaze as he worked on autopilot.

“You were at death’s door, then.”
The words out of Toby’s mouth made Eliot shudder hard enough for him to let go of the knife. Eliot knew he had been at death’s door for a while, but denial had helped him through the thick of it. Regrettably, he was not ready to face that fact yet.

“Toby, do you have any avocados?” Eliot knew his request came out of the blue, but he didn’t care. He was not ready to keep talking about his hell on earth with Toby or with anyone else.

“Do you need them for a side dish?”

“No, but I have promised myself I’d have avocado at the earliest convenience.”

“Third fridge, second shelve.” Toby was wrapping stakes at a speed Eliot had never achieved. “Those should be ready to eat.”

Eliot moved out the counter once again and had the time to smile at the scene of Dobke admiring clinically Sawyer’s scars before taking the hallway to the fridge. That boy was too proud of his bravery marks and Eliot worried a bit more for him. His mind was wandering through a minefield, and that was the only excuse to catch a fist to the chin in a culinary school.

“That was for Canada, pal,” Quinn exclaimed before dragging Eliot into a dark teaching room.

“Glad to know you made it out in one piece,” Eliot commented, surprised by the lack of blood taste in his mouth. They were out of the light, between the kitchenware shelves.

Without another word, Quinn extended Eliot a piece of paper. Eliot understood Quinn had some information to share and read it under the dim light that poured from the hallway. That bastard was a paradigm of good health according to that SOH, dated on that very same day. Eliot gave him his paper back without any comment.

“So, have doctors given you leave for a good fuck?”

“As interest, energy and comfort levels allow.”

“Hmmm…” Quinn purred, corralling Eliot against the shelves. “Interest is present. We can check that box out.”

Quinn pushed Eliot against the kitchenware rack. The pots and pans clinked. Eliot’s back hurt for a second, but his crotch was sending enough endorphins to drown his brain. Eliot was sure that in ten seconds he would forget what pain was supposed to be. Quinn’s hand slid under Eliot’s shirt. The touch made Eliot shiver and gasp. He hadn’t expected the surge of electricity when the hem of his shirt moved.

“What’s your pleasure, Eliot?” Quinn asked with a faintly sardonic smile before bending his neck to kiss and bite Eliot’s neck.

Eliot took a deep breath, letting his hand roam Quinn’s rump. His mind shuffled all the possibilities as his fingers stumbled on Quinn’s condoms in the back pocket, his spare clip on his belt, the lines of his low-rise brief... Breathe. Focus. Plan... Eliot chided himself when his mind got distracted by the idea of biting off that sexily offensive brief.

I have been daydreaming of sucking your meager brains through your cock since June last year... and I can feel you have been doing leg work... Leg press or hack squat? God, you might be so tight and snugly... but, hey! I'm celebrating and my ass could use some TLC and a good pounding... Please, tell me I left you wanting when I let you hot dog me the last time we crossed paths in Crimea... What do you say, Quinn? Because I really want to extend you an invitation to the most
exclu exclusive spot in town… Come on… “Ram your cock up my ass…”

Quinn stopped nibbling Eliot’s neck and got stiff. His mouth slacked and his eyes turned first to the left and then to the right. He finally looked Eliot into the eye with both eyebrows raised.

“That’s not your thing?” Eliot asked, feeling the wicked pleasure of yanking Quinn’s chain. “It’s OK. I can adapt…”

“Oh, no, don’t you dare!” Quinn finally said. He bit his bottom lip before smiling like a man who just hit the jackpot. “I’d be delighted to take you up on your raunchy, yet generous, offer.”

Quinn let Eliot know he was serious by sliding his left hand between Eliot’s skin and his loose-fitting jeans. Eliot took note to buy new underpants because, if Quinn managed to get inside them with one swift pass, those were dangerously loose too.

“Fuck…”

“I’m trying, Eliot.”

“I don’t remember my last platelet count…” Eliot felt the gasp in his voice. It was a miracle he remembered his own name: Quinn was caressing Eliot’s big scar with his right hand, and that sent all kinds of pleasurable tingles through Eliot’s belly.

“And why is that relevant right now?” Quinn taunted, rubbing his chino against Eliot’s denim with slow, deliberate insistence.

“I’m going to bleed so bad if it’s too low…” Eliot pulled Quinn close to feel better the pulse of Quinn’s hard cock against his.

“By now, you must know I’m flexible and resourceful…” Quinn gasped those last words in Eliot’s ear. His warm breath made Eliot shiver in delicious, uncontrollable short spasms…

“Persistent…” Eliot hiked his right leg against Quinn’s hip to better meet his constant grind.

“And modest, too,” Quinn assured looking into Eliot’s eyes.

Eliot felt the corner of his eye tremble. Quinn’s smug smile roused two kinds of passions inside Eliot, but beating Quinn to a pulp was not on the menu. Quinn came back, ready to get down and dirty, and Eliot felt genuinely flattered. So pleased, in fact, that this supporting leg was short of giving way. His heart pounded against his ribs when Quinn leaned forward, ready to risk a kiss.

Eliot’s alarms blared inside his head. The monotonous beep of the ICU machines sounded in the background, like a dirge.

Last time they kissed Eliot almost lost his life. At the memory, Eliot’s body shook with phantom sensations of needles and malaise and excruciating pain with each breath. His whole body jolted with heat like he was running a fever. His pulse raised, erratically, Eliot could feel his carotid jerking inside his neck. The burning sensation of antibiotics struck his body once more… Despite all that, his whole body was aching for more.

Was Eliot Spencer seriously betting his life on a kiss? A kiss with this man who was only half trustworthy on a good day?

A thousand times, yes!
Eliot gripped Quinn's nape and forced him closer. His tongue tasted Quinn's mouth with hunger. His cock exquisitely crushed against Quinn's. Quinn's left hand squeezed his ass; his right hand held Eliot's head. Eliot pulled him even closer with his left. The friction of their cocks was almost painful...

The light flashed twice over their heads as the fluorescent lights went on. Quinn groaned and Eliot blinked, partially blinded by the cold light of the industrial kitchen fixtures. Eliot mumbled a curse when he heard those heavy steps. Sawyer entered the teaching kitchen, pouting and shaking his head disapprovingly. With a heavy sigh, he stopped five good feet from them. Eliot gauged it was a good distance to avoid moral contamination.

“I’m Sawyer,” he introduced himself and crossed his arms. Eliot noticed he didn’t extend his hand to Quinn. After a deep breath that made his steel cross bounce on his chest, Sawyer signaled Eliot with his head. “This is my uncle. Are you his boyfriend?”

That question left hanging the implication that he found unacceptable their situation if the answer was no. Eliot, pushing Quinn away, wondered how on Earth this self-righteous brat could nail two grown-up hitters to the wall with a simple question. Leah had told Eliot once that kids were the best birth control. Oh, God! How right she was...!

“I don’t do ‘boyfriends’...” Eliot failed to repress an exasperated groan.


“Shut up, you sinner!”

Eliot drove his elbow back and delivered quite a strike to Quinn’s ribs. Quinn, caught by surprise, doubled over a bit with a strained exhalation. Sawyer’s face registered surprise and then confusion, he probably didn’t see the hit.

“This is Quinn,” Eliot said and slapped Sawyer’s shoulder while passing by his side. That boy had had no time to recover and Eliot was thankful for small mercies. “He’s an idiot and a colleague.” Eliot crossed the doorway, but returned to add: “In that order.”

“I’ll take that boyfriend thing under advisement.” Quinn was the first to find his voice. Eliot could hear him clearly from the hallway in his way to the refrigerator.

“You are not a chef, are you?”

Eliot chuckled, adjusted his junk—one hand, through the pocket, as he should—and went to find those goddamned avocados. There was no way Eliot would renounce to all the pleasures of the night for the antics of two stupid kids.

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Parker heard the sound in the lower part of the house and sat on the bed. Hardison turned in his side and his arm hung by the side of the bed. Parker scoot to her side put on her slippers and walked to Eliot’s room. Sawyer slept sprawled on the bed in his improvised jammies. He was invading Eliot’s space. As the sound repeated, Parker noticed the alarm didn’t sound, so it probably was just Eliot roaming the house.

Since the doctors changed his painkillers, Eliot had returned to his night owl habits. Most of the time, Parker didn’t even wake up. Eliot was usually a quiet roommate. Parker made her way to the stairs because she was a night owl too.
Eliot’s blanket was in the rail, Parker picked it up and didn’t notice she carried it downstairs until she saw Eliot in tank top and pants, making coffee. Parker put the blanket on the back of the couch and moved to the kitchen. Coffee in the middle of the night was not a good sign, Eliot usually did a series of the sandbag or read a book at night.

“Morning, Parker…” Eliot greeted with his usual gruff tone.

He was technically correct—the clock on the microwave announced three in the morning—and Parker acknowledged the greeting with a small nod. The fog was thinner now that doctors cut Eliot’s drugs in half.

“What are you doing now?” Parker asked, looking at how the coffee dripped into the jar.

The look of Eliot’s face proclaimed it was self-evident.

“Pour me one.”

Mugs were gathered and coffee was poured. Parker put two sugars on hers; Eliot always brews the coffee strong enough to keep the spoon standing. Eliot, resting his butt against the kitchen furniture, drank quietly. Too quietly...

“Did you enjoy the celebration?” Parker asked, sipping her coffee.

“Thank you…” Eliot took a sip, disregarding Parker’s grimace. “It was awesome to have this nightmare officially over.”

“Sawyer didn’t seem too happy for most of it.” Parker commented while topping her coffee with whipped cream and chocolate sauce.

Eliot sipped his coffee without any comment, but Parker was not in the mood for closed doors. Her gaze lingered on Eliot until he looked back, with a murder glare.

“When I’m going to get back my private life, Parker?” Eliot demanded and refilled his cup.

“Probably when you return home,” Parker shrugged. “I’m making no promises.”

Eliot grunted and sipped his coffee and Parker poked his ribs. Eliot grunted but kept his eyes on the cup with studied obstinacy. Parker poked him again and Eliot sighed, tiredly. That was a sound Parker had heard before in their missions when they demanded Eliot to carry weight for a long time. Parker was about to back off and give him his space when Eliot opened like a ripe cantaloupe.

“Quinn crashed the party. We had a heavy kiss and cuddle session,” Eliot explained between sips of his black coffee. “Canadian Style. If Sawyer had come five minutes later, he would have found me with Quinn’s cock up my…”

“You are…!” Parker started with an amused expression.

“A slut?” Eliot suggested before Parker could end. “I’ve been called worse, Parker.”

“You miss sex, I get it, but what’s the urgency for you and Quinn?”

Eliot held his mug with both hands and sighed. He looked tired and a bit sad. Parker watched the slow way he shrugged before saying with a dull voice.

“Sometimes I dream of the ICU.”
Eliot moved behind her and rested her hand on her shoulder for a moment. Parker was not sure the next words were for her, but Eliot said them in the same voice.

“I dream of being touched.”

Parker closed her eyes. Eliot’s voice sounded like he was talking about some sort of cruel and unusual punishment. Eliot sighed because he understood she missed the clue.

“Think of it for a second, Parker: I have been touched everywhere for the last year.” Eliot gave her some moments to think before continuing. “Some touches were unavoidable. Some of them were trade-offs between pain and discomfort, or even embarrassment.” Eliot shifted his weight and sipped his coffee. “Sometimes they touched me without my consent…”

“But they needed to…” Parker felt her bottom lip trembling. Her voice came out in a rather plaintive tone. “…to fix you…”

“I know… All that touching got me out of the hospital alive and on the way to recovery, but…” Eliot looked at his coffee mug, his fingers tapping the sides. “Was it a free choice, Parker?”

The question hung between them, too terrible to contemplate and too important to avoid. Parker kept her silence because anything she could say had the potential to make Eliot clam up.

“All I heard was ‘If you don’t let us open you up, you are going to die,’ or ‘if you don’t let me stick this into you, you are going to have more pain,’ or ‘if you don’t do it, you are going to suffer’. Each day a new threat…”

Eliot stopped, closed his eyes and leaned forward as if he were to say another thing but he stopped and moved to the living room.

Parker kept her eyes on Eliot for a moment before following his wake. She took Eliot’s blanket from the back of the couch, sat by his side, and wrapped them both with it. The blanket didn’t bring any comfort. Next time Eliot spoke, his voice sounded hollow and positively exhausted.

“They threaten me with death, pain, and suffering… and I didn’t defend myself, because there was no possible defense,” Eliot looked at her. “Is that different from torture in any way?”

Parker leaned against Eliot, wishing to stifle the wave of guilt in her chest. If Eliot had… if he had followed through his original plan, he had never been put through all that things that saved his life. Parker was not sure if the balance was positive.

“It goes against everything I have been trained to… Everything I do. Everything I believe. How crazy is that…?”

Eliot didn’t look upset or angry, just extremely worn out. Parker could tell he was in a kind of pain that was different than the one he had experienced during the last month. A pain no drug could ever assuage.

“No…” The answer didn’t convey a firm conviction. With a sigh, Eliot started again. “I don’t know if I regret this whole thing, but I can’t turn back the clock, can I? I have survived so far, and Sawyer is with me… us now, but that doesn’t change the fact…” Eliot put his coffee mug on top of the coffee table. “I have been touched. In spots I didn’t want to be touched. When I really didn’t want to be touched. In ways I rather don’t be touched, ever.”
Parker wanted to hug the sadness out of Eliot. He was her best friend and seeing him wretched tore a hole in her heart, but hugging him would be touching him even more.

“And then, Quinn came around, wanting to touch me in ways I wanted… needed to be touched.” Eliot let his shoulders drop. “In ways that make me feel human and alive. He wants me.” Eliot paused. “And—lets face it, Parker—I don't precisely look like a prize…”

Parker leaned toward Eliot, wondering for how long her friend had been feeling down so badly that he needed to feel human and alive again. Her brave Eliot had suffered all of that in silence to avoid being a burden for them.

“If that’s a crime, I don’t care…” Eliot rested his weight against her for a second before getting up. “I’m already a criminal and I’m going to hit the bag to blow off steam. Want to join?”

“No, I’m going back to bed,” Parker faked a smile just for him. “Have fun!”

Eliot looked at her and faked his own smile. Parker watched him go to the garage, without any pep in his step. His spirits were so low that it was hard to behold; Parker could understand Eliot’s disappointment and frustration: Eliot just cracked the hardest vault of his life just to find inside a couple of thousands, not diamonds. His life as it was right now—still on drugs, still in pain, dreaming of the ICU— was not worth the trouble, let alone all the touching.

Her friend had played nice, as nice as he could, and he deserved a reward.

Parker get up, folded the blanket and moved to the stairs. She climbed up two steps at the time, dashed to Eliot’s room to arrange the blankets over Sawyer and closing the door. She ran in silence to the room where Alec was sleeping, swept the phone from his charger and shook the bed until Alec Hardison returned to the land of the living.

“Get me Quinn,” Parker said, tossing Hardison his half-charged phone. “Make it happen.”

“Wh...?” Hardison mumbled, looking at the phone as if it was the first time, he had seen one. “Babe, what are you talking about?”

“I need that hitter,” Parker said, jumping to the bed, “for hittin' business.”

“Ok, but that explains absolutely nothing…”

“What’s to explain?” Parker asked, looking at how Hardison rummaged through his geek information at a tortoise’s pace. He obviously required a sort of explanation. “We need to hit that hitter because he hit it off right, as he should, and he should hit on our hitter. Our hitter had hit a brick wall and I think hittin’ that hitter would hit the spot just right for our hitter. So, hit the ground running, Alec Hardison!”

Giving up all hope of making sense of Parker’s request, Hardison rolled his eyes, found the message box number, dialed it, and passed Parker his phone. As soon as she lifted the phone to her ear, Hardison rolled over and tried to get back to sleep.

“Quinn, I hope you are still in Portland. I need you to hit on Eliot Spencer…”

Chapter End Notes
Ready for inspection
Chapter Summary

Eliot is fighting to go back to his life, but complications bring unexpected grief and joy.

Chapter Notes

This is a kind of dark chapter (child abuse, flashbacks, family fights...), but we also have Quinn and Eliot in the same bed, so read at your own risk.

(Please, skip it if it could harm you.)

Also, mind the floating boxes!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Scars heal, glory fades
And all we're left with all the memories made
Oh yeah, pain hurts but only for a minute
Life is short so go on and live it
-Cris Cagle

Parker climbed down the stairs in her teddy bears pajamas. Drowsiness was always worse after her second sleep and before breakfast. March was the last month of their lease and Parker was struggling to accept the change, even if it was a joyous one. If they were leaving the safehouse was because Eliot was getting better each day.

“Morning, baby,” Hardison greeted from the kitchen. He was putting on a pot of coffee. “Did you sleep well?”

Parker nodded and pranced to the breakfast bar. Hardison moved to the fridge and took out a tall chocolate milkshake glass and put it in front of Parker.

“The bed was empty.” Parker took one of the steel straws and sat at the edge of the bar at the same time. “Where are the Spencer boys?”

“They went for a dogtrot,” Hardison smiled, looking at how Parker gulped a good portion of the milkshake. “Man, OT is surely full of energy. I was about to suggest Eliot getting a dog he must take out to walk each day, but OT would do nicely.”

They were still debating if they must have pancakes or eggs for breakfast when the back door swung open. Sawyer entered, still marching with his knees high and a beaming smile on his face.

“Morning, Miss Parker. Did you sleep well?”
Eliot, a few steps behind him, rested his weight against the doorframe. Parker knew that expression on his face: it was his I-think-I-might-throw-up-again smile.

“Hit the shower,” Eliot grumbled before Parker could answer. “We are going to be late.”

“Like it’s my fault…”

With a groan, Eliot pushed his nephew in and took a couple of steps to rest his weight against the breakfast bar. Sawyer ran to the stairs. Parker deemed that, despite his attitude, Sawyer was a good boy. Eliot let out a grateful sigh before hanging his head between his extended arms.

“Do I need to find you a bucket, man?” Hardison asked with a mocking tone.

“Too out of shape?” Parker asked once Eliot shook his head to Hardison’s question.

“I need to take my NK1 blockers before going for a run…” Eliot explained, breathing through the wave of nausea.

“Solid idea,” Parker agreed, patting his back and nodding sagely.

Eliot got nausea under control and had time to finish a cup of black coffee before he had his turn on the shower. Parker tried not to smile at Eliot’s efforts to be back to normal at an unreasonable speed. Hardison made Parker another milkshake, they shared a hug and the milkshake while the shower ran non-stop over their heads.

“We should keep the house,” Parker commented between sips. “Our family just got bigger.”

“You know how Eliot is, Parker,” Hardison said, shaking his head. “He will need his space.”

“And we will need a place to put Sawyer in.”

Hardison opened his mouth, raised his finger and stopped right there. Of course, Parker knew he would see the truth of her words. Before Alec could find the right comeback, Eliot came down the stairs, rushing like he was escaping from something. Water was still dripping from his long hair, staining his T-shirt.

“I won’t buy you a car, and that’s final!” Eliot exclaimed once he walked the last step.

“You had your own when you were my age!” Sawyer came down in Eliot’s trail, backpack already on his shoulders. “I have the picture to prove it!”

“First of all, that’s why you should never send pictures to girls.” Eliot turned around, wagging an accusatory finger in his nephew’s direction. “They keep everything!”

“Which girl?” Parker asked, putting a protein bar on Eliot’s pocket. Her fingers felt Sawyer’s new smartphone inside.

“My ma!” Sawyer took the two energy bars Parker was offering him. “Thanks.”

“His girlfriend!” Eliot barked at the same time. Apparently, Sawyer was giving him a run for his money in the flirting department. “Second, I paid for that truck! I needed it to get to work!”

“And you had to walk barefoot uphill both ways to school in the snow…”

Hardison laughed at Sawyer’s epic eye roll as he poured coffee in two thermoses. Sawyer needed his cup to get through school, and Eliot, to get through physical therapy. Parker found the squabble
“No. I drove the truck that I bought with my own money.” Eliot poked Sawyer in the chest before taking the thermos Hardison was offering him. “Thanks, man.”

“No, it’s all yours.” Eliot caught the keys of his car that Parker tossed his way. “We are running late!”

With an inarticulate grumble, Sawyer moved to the garage. Parker was sure that the fight was not over. Eliot let out his breath in an explosive manner. A clear sign that he was reading the room in the same way.

“The pleasures of being an uncle, eh?”

“Shut up, Hardison!” Parker was grinning, trying hard to hold the laughter until Eliot closed the garage door behind him; Hardison didn’t bother. Eliot turned around, taking the hair from his face and sipping coffee, probably getting ready for round two, when his phone went off. He closed the lid and sighed his annoyance.

“What?” Eliot issued his usual greeting. His hand reaching for the knob of the garage door. “Who gave you this number, Quinn?”

Sawyer looked at his uncle with suspicion. There was a new bounce in his step, he had smiled all the time while they ran, he even whistled a hymn while getting in the shower, and he had spent ten minutes more than his usual five minutes. Uncle’s mood was remarkably different from yesterday…

“Still not ready?” Uncle asked when he got out, jeans already on. A fresh brown towel hanging from his shoulder. “If you make me late for physical therapy again, I swear to…”

“Not in vain!”

“…God that I’ll make you use public transportation!”

Uncle was incorrigible, but Sawyer refused to believe him to be hopeless. After all, his ma had told Sawyer with her dying breath that Uncle Eliot was good to the core and why would she lie to her child when she was about to meet the Lord? With an annoyed grunt, Sawyer finished dressing while Uncle got his boots on.

“Is your girlfriend waiting for more half-naked pictures of you?”

Uncle opened the drawer of the nightstand. The same drawer he rushed to close last night. Sawyer had suspected Uncle Eliot was hiding something.

“Karla’s not my girlfriend,” Sawyer replied, looking over the shoulder. Sawyer was right and the Lord knew how much he wanted to be wrong. Sawyer sighed because discontent had become the usual emotion while living with his uncle and that was not a way to live. “I just did it because I didn’t want to show her the scars on my side at school.”
“Behold the miracle,” Uncle said with fake keenness as he tossed Sawyer his phone, “the boy has some sense after all!”

Sawyer caught the phone but refused to fall for it: that was Uncle Eliot’s way to give praise. Sawyer didn’t feel praiseworthy while thinking bad things about his uncle. *Luke seven-thirty-four...*

“Sawyer,” Uncle Eliot called, patting the bed. “Sit here, Buck.”

Sawyer obeyed, out of habit, though he was seething inside. Maybe Uncle had noticed something...

“I know living with me ain’t easy,” Uncle Eliot said, looking at his boots. “I’m not a delightful person on the regular. I’ve my bad habits. I’ve my vices… I wish I could promise you I’ll change, but this you see, it’s an improvement. It took me a long while to get here. This illness had tamed me another skosh, but...”

“I’m aware, Uncle…” Sawyer tried to interrupt him, without success.

“I just hope to be a better option than your gramps.”

Sawyer noticed the way Uncle twisted his lips. As if he didn’t mean to say those words aloud and, at the same time, as if the sentence had delivered his meaning, painful as it was.

Uncle’s little discourse snapped Sawyer out from his self-righteous spell because this man didn’t need to extend his hand to him when Sawyer came running. Without a question, Uncle had taken Sawyer under his wing with just a weekend and some calls to recommend him. Uncle Eliot was not perfect, but neither was Sawyer.

“You are a better option, Uncle,” Sawyer mumbled, looking at those expensive sneakers he bought with his uncle’s credit card. “I’m just trying to adapt to this new city and I’m failing.”

“I’m not making it any easier, you are not to blame,” Uncle tried to excuse Sawyer’s brattiness with a smile. “Portland it’s way bigger than Paris and I’m overprotective. Give me some time, Sawyer!”

“We are kind of late, Uncle,” Sawyer pointed out, not that he minded missing a day of school. “We can talk when you pick me up later today.”

“Pick you up?” Uncle practically sprang to his feet. “Today?”

“Yes! You promised me to take me to Pioneer Place to get new church clothes!” Sawyer looked at this mess of a man, half-dressed and confused, that was his uncle with total disbelief. “You forgot… Uncle, I can’t keep going to church in my jeans!”

“Yes, you can, dammit!” his uncle rushed to put a t-shirt on. “God sees you in your jeans six days out of seven! And sometimes without them too!”

“Uncle!” Sawyer knew that he was technically correct, but his uncle had no right to play that card to cover for his selfish mistake.

“Don’t worry, I got you,” Uncle Eliot promised and snatched the gym bag from the bed. “Hardison is busy today, but Parker’s free, and you can buy whatever you want with this,” he tossed Sawyer a card that he hastily took out from his wallet before rushing out of the room. “Wipe that look off your face! I’d say I got you!”

Sawyer facepalmed hard and let out his frustration in an angry grunt while his uncle ran to the
other room with muted steps. There would be time to pray for that misguided, heathen, randy uncle of his later; right now, Sawyer felt very human and very steamed up.

“Parker!” Uncle was practically screaming. "Parker, I need a favor!"

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“On my way.” Eliot wrote from the driver’s seat of his Challenger, parked two streets from the Silver Cloud Inn. Physical therapy had never felt longer than today. “Pit stop at the drugstore.”

“Ar U Stil imunocompromisd,” Quinn wrote back and Eliot cursed under his breath. He had not hit the bed yet and Quinn had him stark naked already. The three dots flashed on the screen before Eliot could answer. “NVM MOF came ready AF.”

“Did you bring your own condoms this time?” Eliot texted closing the car’s door, gym bag hanging from his shoulder.

“Depends.” Eliot could taste the teasing on that word. “^URS?”

Eliot crossed the street with a knotted brow. Those five characters were unreadable, at least the rest of Quinn’s messages made partial sense. Three more dots on the messenger and Eliot waited for clarification. As he walked to the hotel, the next message arrived: three pictures with no relation whatsoever. Eliot felt the need to tell Quinn to go fuck himself, then the eggplant, the left-right arrow, and the chocolate doughnut added up and anemia suddenly wasn’t an inconvenience, because any other time Eliot’s face would glow the most telling shade of crimson. Eliot had to stop and look around him to make sure no one was reading over his shoulder.


“Y. ASAP.” Eliot texted back, getting into that three-star hotel. Then, minding his Southern manners, he added: “Please.”

“2g2bt,” was the next message Eliot got in front of the lift bank. “HOIC.”

Eliot was still mulling what that string of characters could mean when the elevator door opened. He noticed a faint whiff of aftershave, but he didn’t mind it. As Eliot stepped into the elevator, another person walked by his side and Eliot felt a hand on his shoulder right when the door closed. Eliot had Quinn against the back wall of the elevator in two movements. As usual, the rascal dressed sharply in a light-color suit, his hair was longer now and Eliot couldn’t help but feel a bit jealous by how easily Quinn grows his curls.

“This is the first-time foreplay includes some rough-and-tumble,” Quinn said by way of greeting. His breath was fogging the metal panel. “Eliot.”

“Quinn,” Eliot replied, letting Quinn go. “Sneaky move you pulled there.”

“It was worth the hit,” Quinn said, fixed his suit, and turned around to the elevator with a combination of keys, “just to see you blush.”

“Did I?” Eliot, pleased to know his red cells were working again, demanded a confirmation.

“Adorable,” Quinn said, his back turned to Eliot. That was a sign of supreme confidence between hitters. “I haven’t seen that since ICU.”

“Ground rules,” Eliot said once the cage stopped. “No more mentions of ICU. Barriers between
anything that’s wet and not yours. Ask before you poke. No mawkish pet names.”

“I can work with that if we make an exception for kisses.” Quinn turned around. “No bites. No bruises. No restraints. Lube enough and to spare.”

“Agreed.” Eliot stepped in Quinn’s personal space. “Let’s make an exception…”

Eliot kissed Quinn’s lips with hunger and was ready for the moment when Quinn kissed him back. Eliot put his hand on Quinn’s small back, feeling how it curved under his touch almost offering the bulge inside his pristine pressed chinos to Eliot’s touch. Interest is present. We can check that box out… Eliot thought, disregarding the offer and cupping Quinn’s solid backside with both hands.

Eliot, breaking the kiss, looked into Quinn’s eyes with a wide smile when he figured out what that pretty distinctive sensation the tips of his fingers noticed was.

“Were you a boy scout?” Eliot asked, poking the flared base. The plug was silicone and it felt soft under his fingers.

“I know the caliber of the gun you pack,” Quinn replied, trying in vain to keep a professional countenance. Eliot’s insistent pressure on the object lodged inside him was stirring Quinn’s lust, and Eliot was close enough to feel it grow.

Eliot chuckled and got the cage moving. If they had time—and if Eliot could muster enough stamina—, Quinn won’t need to make do with rubber toys.

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“Hello, sunshine,” Parker greeted mockingly when Sawyer sat shotgun.

The boy grumbled. Parker wondered if Angrish was the local dialect of Paris, Kentucky. Eliot and his nephew both sounded perfectly fluent as if it was their mother tongue.

“Young man, I know I’m not your first choice for this excursion,” Parker warned, without losing her smile, “but I must inform you: you are gaining with the change.”

“I’m not.” Sawyer pouted. “I like you, Miss Parker, but I wanted to go shopping with Uncle.”

“I see why. Eliot has a keen sense of fashion.”

Sawyer blew a raspberry in disbelief. Parker smiled wider at the kid’s incredulity. No one would suspect Eliot’s unsparing, merciless fashion genius disguised under his jeans and flannel shirts. Parker got Lucille’s motor running and headed toward the commercial plaza. Sawyer’s lack of chat didn’t disturb her, she was accustomed to Eliot’s long silences.

“I’m fed up with dealing with Uncle in the house or the car…” Sawyer opened when they found a bit of traffic. “I want to do things I like to do with Uncle.”

“You like shopping?”

“Don’t you?”

Parker darted an unconvinced look to the boy, shopping was not an activity she had ever considered, it was always easier to lift whatever she wanted. The car in front of her moved and Lucille followed it. Hardison’s observation was still true and that was the sentence that left Parker’s lips.
“There is something wrong with you…”

Eliot, head still swimming in endorphins, mumbled incoherently when Quinn nestled against him. The doze-and-joy in the afterglow of a good fuck was one of those things that still made Eliot Spencer think that there is a God after all.

Quinn was resting by his side, his head on Eliot’s arm, tracing drowsily Eliot’s long scar. They get on to it so quickly that Quinn still had his shirt and tie on. His hair was a broken halo to this beautiful fallen cherub. Eliot realized that sappiness after a good fuck was the best proof that there is a Devil…

“So much better than I had dreamed of…” Quinn mumbled, his fingernail ran over the little scars the staples had left on Eliot’s skin.

That was a phrase Eliot had heard in the past, and he always took it as a compliment. Punches are not the only thing Eliot could take beyond the giver’s expectations. Quinn’s caresses were lulling Eliot into a nap.

“What’s that sound?” Quinn asked a couple of minutes later.

Eliot sat on the bed, trying to focus on the sound. After a while he identified the distinctive sound: it was the alarm of his watch coming from the pocket of his jeans. He moved to the foot of that hotel bed, feeling like he had lost his glamour. It was meds time.

“It’s just my watch,” Eliot replied in a low voice, fetching his jeans from the floor. “Go back to sleep.”

“Are you going to turn into a pumpkin?” His amused tone highlighted the question.

“No.” Eliot turned off the alarm and fished the package with his drugs from his gym bag with a sigh. “I need to take some meds.”

“I thought you were free of disease.”

“There is still a whole mess to clean up, like rebuilding a city after an earthquake.” Eliot made a pause to swallow a couple of pills. “I’m still going to be taking drugs for a year or more.”

Eliot looked at the NK1 blocker, the only thing left in his bag. At Christmas, Eliot got it intramuscular and it gave him the most amazing side effects of this whole ordeal. Not only stopped his nausea, there were not more headaches, food had (taste) flavor again, and his appetite returned vigorously, but it was too hard on his well-compensated liver. Dr. Byrnum and Dr. Robertson came to Eliot with the king of the trade-offs: either Eliot returned to feel wretched in a world where food was not worth living for, or he could take it in a way that bypasses his liver. Eliot had chosen to take the cold bullet.

Of course, this route was not perfect. The drug burned as it went in, and Eliot felt like liquid wax shine covered his hole, but he could eat and sleep again, and everyone around him agreed that he was a bit less of a jerk. When Eliot made his choice, he was not thinking about his sexual life…

“What’s that?” Quinn asked, hugging Eliot from behind, his knees at each side of Eliot.

“Something I need to push up my ass,” Eliot replied trying to get up. Skipping a dose was not wise because it has the meanest rebound effect. “Be right back…”
“I have this idea…” Quinn said, holding Eliot in place, with his lips so close to Eliot’s ear that he felt Quinn speaking. “How about I give it to you?”

“Are you getting a half-chub at the idea?”

“It’s a win-win situation: you get your medicine; I get to knock on your backdoor again…”

“It is oil-based. We can’t use condoms after I take it…”

“I have nitrile gloves, and we don’t always need to use a battering ram…”

“And here I was thinking you were modest.”

“So…” Quinn whispered in Eliot’s ear after a short peal of laughter. “Do you want to play doctor?”

There was something absolutely obscene in the way Quinn made his question, but that characteristic was the one that tempted Eliot to try. *Tess five-twenty-one*...

“Keep that shirt and tie on…”

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“Are you trying to max-out Eliot’s credit card?” Parker asked when Sawyer tossed another pair of pants over his shoulder.

The boy’s fingers held an impressive number of hangers with some button-up and polo shirts. Parker was already holding two packets of cotton undershirts and three bags from the other two stores.

“Uncle said: ‘buy whatever you want’ when he gave me his card,” Sawyer said with a sly smile and a shrug. “He should be here if he worries for his credit.”

Parker sighed as Sawyer sauntered to the fitting room with a ton of clothes in his arms. They could pay for the three store stocks easily, that was not the problem, but eventually, Sawyer was bound to notice Eliot was living way beyond a fry cook's means. Parker sat down, put the bags on the floor and hoped Eliot’s happiness justifies the danger.

To distract herself while Sawyer chose his purchases, Parker took out her phone and checked Eliot’s location. Hardison’s software pinpointed Eliot near Nob Hill, and he had been for two hours now. Parker wondered how Hardison would ask Eliot for his belt to remove the tracker. The idea made her smile and her eyes fell on the mic icon at the bottom of the screen. It had turned red and it hasn't been that shade before. Parker poked the screen...

“...can’t play a nurse to save your life!” Eliot grumbled inside her ear with a gasping voice.

“I was good enough to get your sorry ass out of ICU!” Quinn’s voice was playful but heavy. “Besides, I won’t buy it. You are leaking like…”

Parker didn’t know the tracker could transmit audio. That was such a cool feature.

“What are you playing with, woman?” Hardison complained over the wet noises on Eliot’s side. Hardison didn’t sound happy at Eliot’s big pretzel bowl.

The icon on Parker’s screen was still red, but now a bright yellow no sign appeared over it.

“What a wowser!” Parker complained at Hardison’s selfish action.
“How’s the sinning going?” Sawyer put his hand on Parker’s shoulder.

Parker put the phone down slowly and turned her head towards the teenager. Any answer would compromise their secrets and Eliot had set rules about his nephew and Leverage.

“How’s the sinning going?” Sawyer sat beside her with a new bag between his sneakers. “I knew he wouldn’t berate me for my sexting if he wasn’t to blame for the same sin. I just knew it!”

“Eliot had a medical exam appointment,” Parker stuck to the lie Eliot’s told the boy.

“You don’t pack condoms for a medical exam, Miss Parker.” Sawyer rebuked with a voice disappointed and cynical at the same time. “I know my uncle is fucking someone, somewhere in this city. I kept my assertion vague because I know how flexible with his morals Uncle Eliot is.”

Parker thought for a second that Eliot was right about this kid. Too bright for his own good and too sanctimonious for the rest of the world.

“So, how’s the sinning going?” Sawyer insisted as Parker put her phone away. “Are we going for coffee or do we have time to watch a movie before Uncle returns home?”

Parker put the undershirts on the other store’s bags without thinking. Old habits die hard.

“We are going to put your new clothes in the van,” Parker said, getting up, “and then I’ll give you a masterclass in how to enjoy chocolates at Verdun.”

“I don’t like chocolate, Miss Parker!”

“You’ll learn to love it today!” Parker started her way to the parking lot without waiting for the boy.

“Who’s turning into a pumpkin now?” Eliot grumbled when Quinn’s phone alerted them Quinn’s flight would lift off in about two hours.

That alarm was a nuisance. Eliot cursed Quinn’s bad habit of never sleeping in the same city he’s not doing a hit. Eliot had been in a joyous, sweaty flesh-knot with Quinn for a good half hour. The post-game had been languid, they couldn’t complain. They could have spent more time together, sweating and resting almost on top of each other. Realizing the inherent danger inside his greed, Eliot bit Quinn’s nipple lightly, and rolled to the side of the bed.

“No bites!” Quinn protested covering the bite.

“You mentioned the ICU while playing doctor!”

Quinn laughed, rubbed the bite, and rolled to the other side to pick up his briefcase. Eliot rummaged through his gym bag. They both extended a bath towel over their shoulders and faced each other with a bar of soap in hand, naked as the day their mothers had tossed them to this nonsensical world. Old wetwork habits... Eliot wondered who had told Quinn to never use the hotel soap bar; he knew perfectly well who had taught him.

“Mine is already open,” Quinn said by way of invitation. The travel soap dish in his hand was bamboo and the fouta towel on his shoulder was navy. Quinn broke out a brash smile before adding: “But you are welcome to open yours if you don’t want my scent on you…”
“A little late for that…” Eliot passed his brown bamboo towel over his shoulders to stretch his aching back. He wondered again if he would ever get over that surgery. “Do you want to shower first?”

“I’ll lather your back if you do mine…” Quinn invited, marching to the bathroom with a light step.

“If you wouldn’t have a plane to catch,” Eliot said, latching Quinn’s waist as he passed by his side, “I’d do yours all night long…”

“Promises!” Quinn shrugged with a laugh when Eliot nibbled his neck and pulled him closer. He felt Eliot meant each of those words almost immediately. “Gosh… you are not kidding!”

“You have no idea the kind of arrears I carry about…” Eliot practically pushed Quinn inside the bathroom.

Towels fell on the floor while they rubbed their scars together in their way to the shower. Quinn turned around before stepping into the tub-shower combo. The soap dish fell from his hand and landed with a loud thud. Eliot was too engrossed in Quinn’s kiss to mind it, but his feet avoided the errant soap cake deftly. Quinn, blindly, turned on the water. Steam caressed them...

Their bodies slid against each other under the gently drizzle of the shower. Eliot mumbled incoherently inside Quinn’s mouth when his occasional lover caught up with the heat of the moment. Quinn’s chamber still held one more that was begging to be shot.

“I promised myself to suck you dry…” Eliot said, taking Quinn’s wet hair from his face with his left thumb. Wet or dry, that overconfident face roused his lust in the most trying manner.

“That’s quite a challenge in the actual situation…” Quinn mocked Eliot with words only, his eager body was not as cynical as his quick mouth.

“Don’t make me regret my hankering for your cock…”

“You have been breaking my balls all afternoon about…”

Eliot raised his right hand to show Quinn the condom package between his fingers. Eliot found amusing how easy was to pull a misdirection stunt to Quinn.

“Never mind, pal. Permission granted if you still want it.” Quinn’s smile was too big despite his mean spirited eye roll. Eliot knew Quinn was being strong-armed into pleasure so badly... “I like your style. It didn’t seem planned…”

“I’m always planning…” Eliot grumbled, unfurling the latex with a deft hand over Quinn’s cock. His fingers enjoyed Quinn’s rushing pulse.

Quinn leaned back, both elbows on the wall, water running down his taut belly, head tossed back. Eliot followed the current down, kissing Quinn on the chest, the grid of his belly, the hollow of his hips until Eliot felt his knees touching the tub. Then, the smell assaulted his nose.

Eliot felt his belly sunk. The sound of the water pooling inside the tub and the waft of that soap. It smells like pain… Eliot’s breath refused to leave his windpipe. Water falling upon water. No, no, no… Eyes closed to hold back the tears. Eliot was falling back...

No, no, no… Stumbling on Grampa’s Elias staircase. No, no, no… Big hand holding his wrist, clutching so hard Eliot felt his bones grinding against each other. Please, no, no… Pulling him upstairs, belly hurting. No, no, no… There was hurt upstairs, Eliot didn’t want to go upstairs. No,
Eliot felt the water lapping against his ass. The scream of a tortured baby… Soapy water on his hands. A square peg crammed on a round hole… Vague flashes of intense pain on the bones of his hip, on his gut, on the most tender spots of his flesh. Please, no more, not again… Tears were rolling down his cheeks. Don’t hurt me… The deafening sound of rushing water falling upon still water. I’m a good boy. Don’t hurt me. I’m a good boy. Don’t hurt me. I’m a good boy. Don’t hurt me. I’m a good boy. I’m a good boy. I’m a good boy. I’m a good boy.

A wail of excruciating, unfathomable agony rattled inside Eliot’s skull.

Strong fingers dug on Eliot’s arms. The pull hurt his back; his head went light. Coldwater fell upon his hot face. Too cold. His shoulders shuddered; his knees buckled.

“...just a silly flashback, pal,” Quinn mumbled, holding Eliot under the cold shower. “We all have them in this line of work. Take your time…”

I’m broken… Eliot thought, letting the cold-water anchor him to reality. I’m so fucked up...

Two cups of coffee, four pounds of assorted chocolates and a table, Sawyer looked at Parker with a weird expression on his face; Parker could tell he was a bit frightened.

“Dig in, all are good,” Parker invited and put the example.

“I don’t like chocolate,” Sawyer repeated and toyed with his cup. “My second-grade teacher gave us chocolate when we were good and they were awful. I couldn’t even sell them for the fundraiser.”

“You haven’t sampled Verdun’s,” Parker insisted, looking for one of the grey bars. “Maybe these are better? Try this one!”

Sawyer sighed, pouted and finally extended his hand to take the candy. Parker smiled widely, thinking that this boy only hated chocolate because he never tried the good stuff. Even his uncle liked Verdun’s and Eliot was as critical of chocolates as he was of clothes. The Old Kentucky chocolates Parker tried in Paris were very different from the good things Portland had to offer.

“Did you like Portland the first time you came?” Parker asked to distract Sawyer. “That’s why you came here?”

“I knew Uncle Eliot was a safe harbor,” Sawyer said, unwrapping the piece of chocolate Parker offered him. He looked pensive. “Uncle always answers my questions and he’s not habitually drunk.”

“If I were prying, you didn’t need to answer, Sawyer,” Parker said, feeling like she had stepped on Sawyer’s toes. The boy took the smallest bite of the chocolate.

“Ma taught me you should always answer your loved ones’ questions.” Sawyer took a gulp of black coffee to wash away the taste. “That way they know you love them. Aunt Edna never gave me a straight answer. She didn’t love me.”

“Eliot always answer you,” Parker said, feeling happy because this inscrutable boy just told her he loved her as much as he loved his uncle. Suddenly, Eliot’s plea made a lot of sense: Don’t ask me that, Parker. Because if you ask me, I’m gonna tell you. “Isn’t that too much power? To ask whatever you feel like?”
“You don't ask about things you can see...” Sawyer replied, giving the chocolate a second bite.

“Like condoms.”

“Like Uncle’s leg pain,” Sawyer agreed with a nod. “If you knew them, you can see it. If you can’t see it, you must ask...”

“What if you ask something that’s hurtful?” Parker unwrapped her sixth chocolate.

“They must answer because they should know you would love them even if they did, or think, something awful,” Sawyer made the cup dance in the little dish. “And if you don’t ask, do you really love them? Aren’t you loving just what you think of them?”

“That’s deep, Sawyer...” Parker said, noticing she was getting out of her depth. “What if you can see it, but you don’t want to hurt them? Isn’t it the decent thing to do?”

“Jim five-sixteen.” Sawyer smiled a perfectly content smile before he popped the rest of the chocolate into his mouth. “Confession is not supposed to be pleasant, but it’s cleansing, Miss Parker.”

“Sawyer, I’m going to ask something,” Parker said, holding his hands over the table. “Would you answer truthfully?”

“Always, Miss Parker.”

“What do you think of Verdun’s chocolates?”

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“Well...” Quinn rested his back against the coffee shop chair. “I don’t know where did you find the drive, but you really sucked me dry.”

Quinn enjoyed the way a small smile bloom on Eliot’s face; his blue eyes, still, deep and impossible serene, looked at him over the brink of a coffee mug. That's the face of the cat that got the cream...

Eliot, still rattled from his flashback, had repeated his offer once they came out of the shower; Quinn almost gave Eliot a raincheck out of a misguided virtuous impulse.

Good thing Mr. Quinn was not a virtuous man.

As soon as the ‘yes’ tumbled from Quinn’s lips, Eliot got to the task with hunger so frightening that Quinn cringed retroactively for Eliot’s mother’s tits. Quinn had never tried sucking cock as a grounding technique before, but Eliot, evidently, was a believer. Those calm eyes were the testament of its efficacy. Forty-eight minutes and a hot shower later, Quinn had to admit that was a blowjob for the annals...

“Should I thank you...?” Eliot toyed with the yellow box over the table. He had bought enough pastries for a small army, but black coffee filled his mug.

“I should thank you!” Quinn stirred his cappuccino with an indolent gesture. “I think I should send you flowers, wash your car in short shorts, and call you tomorrow to whisper sweet nothings to your ear...” Quinn let his head lol back lazily. “I won't, but, mind you, I should!”

Eliot wrinkled his nose, closed his eyes and made a weird sound, half sneeze, half spit. His hair
dripped on his shirt when Eliot shrugged with a jerking motion. All wet and under the setting sun, Eliot’s mane looked darker than his usual dirty blond tone. Quinn raised an eyebrow in silent question until Eliot looked at him.

“The idea of you washing my car in Daisy Dukes it’s not as disturbing as I thought it might be,” Eliot chuckled and sipped his cup of black coffee. “I’m sorry you missed your flight.”

“I can take another one first thing in the morning,” Quinn said because he would rather lose the client than that mind-blowing oral sex session or the cuddling after that. “Don’t sweat it.”

Eliot had sent a message to Parker in front of Quinn after they had time to cool off. ‘I don’t feel well enough to drive,’ Eliot wrote with his left arm across Quinn’s back, his fingers caressing Quinn’s hip crest with distracted movements. ‘Can you pick me up?’ Quinn didn’t ask—it was not really his place—but he couldn’t leave Eliot alone and coffee sounded just right after that glorious afternoon.

“This place is fine,” Quinn said because it felt weird to share a table in silence. “Very Parisian tourist trap.”

Eliot chuckled and sipped his coffee. They went off-script spending time in a public space, sitting on a table, in front of people, but they were both professionals. This was not a date; Dates were not their style and they were too jaded to play that game. They were just waiting for Parker and Eliot’s nephew to come and pick Eliot up.

“They bake nice things and the boy hasn’t tried them yet.” Eliot finished his coffee and looked at Quinn a bit ashamed of his openness. “I expect confidentiality, Quinn.”

“As everyone who had ever paid me…”

“I didn’t pay you.”

“I consider myself paid in kind.” Quinn caught himself in time. The impulse to hold Eliot’s hand over the table was hard to resist. “Liberally so, if I might add.”

“Then, I’ll extend the same courtesy to you.” Eliot let his eyes roam behind Quinn’s head. “My ride’s here.”

Eliot got up and picked up his box. Their time together should have ended there, without any fanfare, but Quinn still had another thing to do. He rose from his chair and followed Eliot out, completely aware of how damp his only clean shirt felt against his chest. Eliot looked over his shoulder with an overtly confused expression.

“Here,” Quinn pressed a business card into Eliot’s hand. “The number of my therapist.”

“I don’t need…”

“She needs some hot tips from you,” Quinn pointed out before Eliot could protest even more. “Sad to report, but she’s the only person in this whole world that sucks at sucking.”

“Oh, good!” Eliot put the card in his pocket after a cursory glance. “Someone to bitch about your shortcomings with.”

“Heeey… There was nothing short today, buddy!”

“Except for your Daisy Dukes in my mind.”
Eliot grinned when Quinn fought and lost the battle against laughter. It was a good way to end this rendezvous, like friends having a good time. No goodbye words nor promises. Eliot turned around to meet those who were waiting for him, Quinn held Eliot’s hand almost without thinking.

Eliot looked at him with eyes as cold as ice. Quinn knew he had made a huge mistake.

Each move was vital in their trade; perception was everything. Eliot was not straight, that shared gymnastics in a leased bed were proof enough, but he bragged of his conquests often and brazenly. Being a cold-hearted stud was part of his legend. Eliot had a reputation to protect and Quinn, unwittingly, had put it in jeopardy. *Pride it's such a fragile part of human nature...*

“Can I keep your number?” Quinn asked because silence carried more danger than a question bound to be replied with a negative.

Eliot scoffed, pressed Quinn's fingers, and kissed Quinn on the lips in front of God, his nephew, Parker, and the whole damn crowd of St. Honoré Boulangerie. If that was not an affirmative answer, Quinn was the quivering, besotted virgin he felt like...

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Parker parked Lucille in the garage feeling at the edge and chocolates were not to blame this time. Since they picked up Eliot, Sawyer had been quoting the Bible to his uncle without a pause to breathe. Eliot had been horribly silent, taking it all with a bored expression. She had expected Eliot to explode and read Sawyer the riot act in the middle of the drive, but he had kept his eyes on the road with his lips slightly pursed.

After the garage door closed behind them, they stayed in their places in silence, hearing the engine cool off. After a while, Eliot sighed and opened the door. Parker opened hers, too relieved because she didn’t have to deal with another quarrel while driving.

“Pick up your stuff,” Eliot ordered after he opened the side door to pick his bag. “Take them to the room, and find me a photo of your ma. And don’t forget to thank Parker for taking you to the mall!”

“There is no need...”

“Uncle?”

Eliot disregarded both Parker’s politeness and Sawyer’s anxiety and opened the garage door. Black Ops soundtrack blasted and ricocheted through the whole house.

“Hardison!”

“What is it?” Hardison didn’t even pause the game.

“Maintenance shot,” Eliot grumbled. “My hands are not up to standard.”

“Roger!”

Eliot clapped twice to encourage Sawyer to hurry up on before moving to the kitchen. Parker, holding Eliot’s gift in her hands, looked at Sawyer and she could read in those big eyes that he regretted each word of censure. Nonetheless, the boy obeyed the commands and climbed up with his purchases. Hardison passed by Parker with a questioning expression. Parker shrugged and followed them to the kitchen.
Eliot was already rummaging the medical cupboard. There was a look of intense concentration as he filled the barrel and drenched a cotton swab with alcohol. He didn’t look like someone who needed a hand.

“I thought you needed help,” Hardison said in a low voice, looking how Eliot purged the bubble from the syringe.

“I needed to have you both here.” Eliot was too busy with his shot to look them in the eyes. “I’m going to tell Sawyer about Leverage unless you have another thing to say.”

Parker looked at Hardison while Eliot drove the needle into his hip. Alec jutted his chin a bit. Parker took a deep breath and signaled at Eliot with her head. Alec shrugged.

“We are going to need coffee,” Parker said finally as Eliot put the syringe inside the sharps container and button up his jeans.

Eliot, quick as in his better days, passed his arms behind their necks and brought them to his chest without a warning. Parker yelped her surprise and Hardison almost cursed.

“Thank you for dragging me out of hell, guys.” Eliot’s voice sounded warm. “I know I don’t deserve you in my life.”

“We don’t deserve a mailed, handwritten Thank-you note?” Hardison was outraged and was gesticulating with his hand behind Eliot’s back. “You are really slacking on the Southern manners, bro!”

“I thought you were angry with Sawyer!” Parker protested at the same time, punching Eliot lightly on the ribs to hide just how happy she was.

“Huh? I didn’t hear the boy.” Eliot mumbled his confusion. “I was still sucking Quinn’s cock in my mind.”


Eliot let them go with a small chuckle. Parker took a step back before jumping to Eliot’s still open arms. Eliot staggered under her weight until he found his center.

“Hardison, did you have the time…?” Eliot asked, rocking Parker a bit. Probably, he was not strong enough to bear her mass.

“Ask me something difficult, bro,” Hardison said, picking up a folder and a key chain from the top of the fridge. “Like hearing about your sexual escapades. Better not. Keep asking me these kinds of favors! Or dragging you out of hell again! That’s way better!”

Eliot let his weight rest against the kitchen counter before knocking on one of the wooden doors. Parker, in imitation, knocked on one of the upper doors before letting Eliot go. Hardison smiled at that couple of superstitious simpletons before handing Eliot the folder and the keys.

“For what it's worth,” Eliot said, moving to the living room, “I meant it.”

“Of course,” Hardison said and Parker nodded her agreement. “We know you meant it, man.”

Parker put a pot of coffee on. If Eliot meant to bring Sawyer up to speed with what Leverage did and does, that talk would take them the good part of the night and it was Friday, even Sawyer
could be up late. Hardison went with Eliot to turn off the game deck.

Sawyer came down the stairs slowly, cradling his battered cookie tin against his chest. He looked positively wretched. Parker almost told him he had nothing to fear, but Eliot called the boy with his usual gruff tone. Sawyer would never believe her, Parker followed him. Sawyer opened the tin as he walked, Parker could catch a glimpse of a much younger Eliot in full uniform in front of a flag.

“Here, Uncle,” Sawyer said, passing Eliot a Polaroid.

The picture was starting to fade, but Eliot looked at it like it was a masterpiece. Parker rested her weight on the back of the couch to steal a glance, even Hardison approached to take a gander. Eliot’s sister had a more delicate built and lighter hair, but there was a positive family resemblance. In the picture, Leah was sitting on a porch swing, a glass of tea in her hand a young Sawyer asleep on the skirt of her floral summer dress.

“She had a way of taking care of people, you know?” Eliot said, his eyes were big and wet.

Hardison and Parker felt like a ghost had touched them. Eliot had said those same words at Sophie’s fake funeral. Parker leaned forward and kissed Eliot’s head because she knew Eliot had waited eleven years to say those words addressed to their real recipient. Those were the words he was not allowed to say at his sister’s wake because no one cared to let him know Leah was gone.

“She was a sister. She was a best friend.” Eliot sighed. “All rolled into one. I'm gonna miss your ma ‘till the end of my days, kid. And you know why, don’t you?”

“You brought in the men who killed her to our lives,” Sawyer said with a small voice. “But you said that they were retaliating because you didn’t want to keep working with them.” Sawyer looked at Parker and Hardison as if he was wondering how much they knew. “Because you didn’t want to kill anymore.”

Eliot passed Sawyer the picture with a small nod. Parker could tell how difficult it was to him by the way his fingers shook. Eliot’s eyes were dry, but it was just because he was the master of his will again. Sawyer put the photo inside the cookie tin with all the solemnity due to sore memories.

“I killed your mother, Sawyer.” That was a statement to end it all, but Eliot didn’t stop there. “I’m a sinner and I’m not going to stop soon, but I pray sometimes and I believe there is a Heaven if for no other reason than that I think your mother deserves to be there.”

Sawyer tried to say something; his hand clutching his steel cross hard enough to make his knuckles white. Parker believed he was trying to convince Eliot of any of the dogmas they both grew up with. Eliot made a sign for him to keep quiet and closed his eyes with a deep sigh.

“I know I will never see your ma again. Jesus and me had that squared a long time ago. I deserve nothing else for what I did...”

Eliot stopped again. Hardison pressed his right shoulder with a sober expression and Parker felt tears sting her eyes again. Eliot’s judgment was always harsher when his past was the issue.

“I was waiting for you to be a grown-up to give you this talk but then I recalled…” Eliot stopped because his voice was becoming a great dry sob. “She was your age when she started to live on her own. If she was old enough, so you are.”

Eliot patted the couch and Sawyer sat, obedient.

“Here is the deed of my house in Crestwood and a set of keys. It’s already signed to your name.”
Eliot said, touching the folder before taking his wallet. His USAA Bankcard joined the folder. “Here it’s all the money I earned in the military service. The last honest money I’ve earned. Your mother’s birthday is the PIN. The inversion has been renewing for twelve years, so I assume there is enough to give you a good start.”

“Uncle, I know I have been a pain in the ass lately, but…”

“Sawyer, I’m not kicking you to the curb.” Eliot shook his head. “You ma did a great job in the little time she had. You are a smart, loudmouthed, stubborn, and preachy young’un.”

Parker smiled because Eliot painted a pretty accurate portrait in so few words. Hardison patted Sawyer’s shoulder to cheer him up.

“I like you just the way you are.”

Eliot’s smile was faint but genuine. Parker wished he smiled more because he almost looked young and carefree with one in his face.

“When I was your age, I was living with your gramps.” Eliot made a hesitant pause. “You know what’s like to live with your gramps. Huh? I don’t need to spell it out, right?”

Sawyer shook his head. Parker had an inkling just with Sawyer’s shotgun wounds and she didn’t want to know more.

“I was trapped and, stupid as I was, I believed that that was my place.” Eliot let his gaze drop. “I believed that I deserved it.” With a tired sigh, Eliot continued. “I even worked hard to make things work with your gramps. With time, I wised up. Uncle Randy helped me open a bank account to give me an escape route.”

Parker touched Eliot’s left shoulder when she heard that name. Eliot, absentmindedly, put his hand over hers and pressed her fingers. They both remembered the day Parker met Nurse for the first time. Parker understood better the importance of that the Kickoff meeting. Parker felt like she already loves that uncle Randy like it was hers because without him there wouldn’t be an Eliot in her life.

“When things become worse enough—when there was a top stair wallop too many—, I made up my mind to join the service.” Eliot clasped his hands and hung his head. “I took a thousand bad choices because I felt trapped. I don’t want you to feel that way with me. If we are to live together, it’s because you’ve chosen it.”

Parker darted an alarmed look to Hardison and he made a faint shook to keep her from interrupting Eliot’s speech.

“I’m giving you your freedom because I want you to make the right choices. Not right by God or by law. Huh? Right choices for you.” Eliot smiled a bit, Hardison nodded his agreement. “You are old enough to choose and to bear the consequences of your choice.”

Parker understood the roundabout way Eliot had taken. From this point on, if Eliot let Sawyer know about Leverage, the boy would be a willing accomplice of their future cons. He was offering Sawyer a clean break.

“I’m giving you your freedom,” Eliot repeated and he turned his eyes to Hardison and Parker, “because I’m going to tell you who your uncle is and what kind of criminal work he does.”

Sawyer looked at them, a bit alarmed. Parker smiled at the boy and Hardison put his hand on his
shoulder, to reassure him. Eliot let them do in silence. His eyes trained to the spot where he almost lost his life last summer.

Parker didn’t need to ask: this secret was as harmful to Eliot’s soul as the virus was for his body. Eliot needed to come clean to Sawyer to move forward. As Sawyer said, it wouldn’t be easy, but it would be cleansing. Parker put her hand on his shoulder to lend Eliot her support, meager as it was. Hardison might have noticed she was unsure because he took her hand and pressed her fingers.

“Tonight, I’m going to tell you about Nate Ford and the four lost souls he kept around to break the law.” Eliot looked squarely at his nephew. “Hear the tale. Make the right choice for you. Remember that I love you for who you are and that I don’t expect you to love me back.”

Chapter End Notes

*Morale, Welfare and Recreation*
Chapter Summary

A day in the life of Eliot post this ordeal. What else can I say?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

With a tired groan, Eliot Spencer put his phone alarm to rest. Complying with regimen had taken away the pleasure of waking up early in his own bed. Eliot kicked the blankets, let his legs hung by the side of the bed and extended his hand toward the blue water bottle. After a sip of water, he took the pill holder and took care of the unpleasant task to get the day started.

Eliot got up; the bottle still tilted over his lips. Thirst was not as bothersome as some months ago, but hydration never hurt anyone. As he headed to the bathroom, Eliot thought of Shelley. Without any doubt, his friend would call his morning routine a perfect example of hydraulic equilibrium.

After voiding his bladder, Eliot quickly made his bed—hospital corners, blanket folded, comforter rolled; any drill Sergeant would be proud—trying to shake up drowsiness. The gym bag was open, Eliot tossed in a fresh towel along with a set of fresh clothes. A quick check of the content of the wet pack and Eliot was ready to get inside his tracksuit.

Eliot stopped for a second, feeling the blood pound his temples like a secret police agent on a dissident’s door. He missed his NK1 blockers like he missed Nurse sometimes: with a jaded, masochist longing. Dr. Robertson’s opinion was that Eliot was ready to stop that part of his prescription; Eliot should endure the small drawbacks without too many troubles. Through gritted teeth, Eliot had accepted, though, in mornings like these, he could tell the good doctor of an optimal place to store his learned opinion.

Consolation came wafting out from the kitchen. The automatic coffee maker was brewing the first pot of black coffee. Dragging the gym bag along, Eliot heeded the siren call and hoped early morning nausea overslept.

Between quick sips of liquid comfort and quick peeks at Quinn’s bawdy messages, Eliot Spencer made out his mind to enjoy the day. He was alive, he was cancer-free, and he had put on three pounds of weight since the last appointment, most of it, muscle. After coffee, there was a light run and a gym session waiting, and that’s a good way to start a new day.

“Next month,” Eliot promised himself, rinsing his mug and refusing to let his eyes wander to his backyard. He still didn’t have resources enough to spare to care for the desolation of his garden. “I’ll be ready to tend to my garden next month…”

His mind was wandering on which crops to seed—two years ago squash yielded well, but maybe this year he would be adventurous and try to grow artichokes or eggplants— when he left home. The gym bag over his shoulder felt a little less heavy. He pushed the screen door and turned around to make sure the door closed when he noticed a piece of paper taped to his Navy-blue door. Eliot missed his NK1 blockers again.
Dry paper, granular ink, old-fashioned copperplate. No postage stamps this time, because that old bitch came to his door and attached it with her own hands. It was her, Eliot was sure because the tape didn’t show any telling fingerprint against his dark door.

“Have you seen me in my bed, Mother of Hounds?” Eliot asked rhetorically, extending his hand to pick up the missive.

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Eliot re-tied the bandana around his brow and picked up the weighted jumping rope. He had tried to use the weights and barbells—because he knew his body better than that annoying physical therapist, dammit! —but the therapist was right this time. Eliot was not ready to lift weights and crow pie was never of his taste.

Skipping rope used to be warm-up; nowadays, it was the whole workout. Eliot had to stop several times and he was only using the two-pound rope. Eliot groaned as he started the set again. Free… How was he ready to kick some butts last December, but now he couldn’t even…? Backward… How come he had lost his backbone? Crisscross… Dammit! Endorphins were taking their sweet time to kick in today. Backward… Shoulders complained: Suck it up, buttercup!

Eliot refused to think of the implications of the last piece of mail he received from the doctor’s office. Skip it! People shouldn’t put that kind of information should into a paper. Higher! anesthetics as killing drugs, he was his ma’s boy. Quicker! The fact that it were drugs and not cancer that took his mother from him only made her death a bit worse. Steady now… Now, his would-be killers wouldn’t even need a bullet to put him down; Eliot was not oblivious to the irony. Pick up speed… He worried a bit more, wondering if he could ever recover the strength of his back to its fullest. If I don’t, then I’ll adapt…

Bear what you can’t change…

Embrace your limitations…

Your mind is the only obstacle to clear…

The wall in front of his eyes was moving so fast that it was just a gray blur. His back burned, his eyes stung with sweat, his heart raced inside his chest. Eliot began to feel alive and satisfied…

“Whenver you get tired of polishing my concrete floor, Eliot Spencer,” Nadzjelli Cardona—called Naye for short—, owner of the place, popped his bubble. “I want to talk to you in my office.”

“Not now!”

Eliot usually loved seeing her—boy shorts and athletic bra were two good reasons to—, but she was interrupting a serious heart-to-heart conversation with the most important person in his life. He moved to the side to side, trying not to lose the endorphin rush.

“You owe me a whole year of rent!”

“Later!”

She huffed and turned around. Eliot would take care of that outrageous claim later if he could pick up the rush. Five minutes later the task proved to be impossible: the noise of the yoga class and the bitching of the gym bunnies—plus that nonsense about the rent—had anchored Eliot firmly into the unavoidable material reality.
Eliot sat, mopped the jumping rope and then his face, took a long mouthful of water, and rubbed his left shoulder. The squeaky wheel gets the oil... The clock on the wall said it was six and a half. Eliot lost more than one hour jumping rope, maybe Naye did him a favor by stopping him. Overtraining was a symptom of anxiety and Eliot cursed that piece of paper on his door again. As Eliot felt his heart returning to something resembling normal pace, he gulped down more water.

The jumping rope was back to its place, Eliot got his towel around his neck and walked toward Naye’s office. The door was half open and Eliot did a courtesy knock, from her desk Naye gave him a death glare. Babe, I have been loured by professional killers: don’t bother. Eliot tilted the head, asking for permission, and Naye reluctantly gave it.

“What’s this thing you wanted to talk about?”

“You owe me!” She accused and her Latin fire, so sexy in other times, made it sound like Eliot had left her with one in the oven.

“How can I owe you? Huh?” The spite in his voice was completely unintentional. He could pay and he will pay, but he was fighting the accusation on principle. “This is the first week I use your facility in a year!”

“You kept the key!” Naye put the hands flat on the desk and got up menacingly.

“Sorry if I wanted to keep a bit of hope!”

“What did you need hope for, hijo de la chingada?!"

Eliot noticed the yoga class was looking at them while doing the downward dog posture. He kicked the door closed. Naye looked at him with outraged incredulity: That door only closed when they were about to have sex.

“I got cancer.” Eliot lifted the hem of his shirt to show her the scar. “I didn’t have much use for a gym that year.”

Naye looked at him and then, very slowly, her face relaxed while she closed the blinds. Funny thing, Eliot felt the hair of his nape standing on end. Six years of using the same gym had taught him her good side was always the worst side.

“Ay, cosita…” Naye exclaimed with her cooing Mexican voice. Her left hand pressed Eliot’s hurting shoulder, her right hand caressed the wound. “And here I was thinking you lost a lot of weight because you were banging some vegan bruja behind my back…”

Eliot wanted to kick himself for not seeing it before. Of course, it was jealousy… Equally baffling because it was her choice to keep it casual, but at least his training place was safe. Naye put her head against his ribs and Eliot held her close. Her hair smelled like cinnamon and vanilla: She had changed her shampoo brand. Eliot liked that new smell.

“It’s a crime against God you always smell so…” Eliot could hear her purr. “sexy after training, m’hijo.” Her left hand slid down and squeezed Eliot’s junk. “¿Tronamos un palito, papi?”

Eliot passed his hand under her full Latina hips and scooped her up to get some sugar. Naye wrapped her arms around his neck and Eliot smiled. He held her weight with one hand and spread his towel over her desk with a flick of his wrist. Naye extended her hand—her generous breast almost spilled from the tight sports bra—and picked up a string of condoms from a drawer; at the sight of it, Eliot was sure he was not the only one hanging hard on to a burning nail.
That’s another thing Eliot got wrong that morning: this was not a strength-building day. Apparently, this was a cardio day.

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It had been a while… Eliot looked at the entrance of the basement, took a hesitant step toward the stairs and stopped.

With a sigh, he turned around. They probably don’t remember me… Eliot felt the warmth of the cookies seeping out the Little Red’s take-out box. He regretted his impulsive purchase because there is no way he could get into the brewery with a Little Red box and not face a ton of questions from Hardison and Parker. Eliot was still fighting to keep them out of his private life.

It’s early… Eliot closed his eyes, twisted his lips. He rocked over, wondering what should be the next step in this ill-planned, poorly executed incursion into VA territory. I could leave them on the table. A little mystery. Spice up their lives...

“Eliot?” The voice came first, Eliot tensed up. Don’t touch me! Then he felt a soft touch on his shoulder. “I almost failed to put a name on your face, brotha!”

That assertion assuaged Eliot and he opened his eyes and faced Otis. The smile wouldn’t mislead Parker, but it was a good imitation.

“Wow, you are almost as thin as Dave…” Otis’s smile was genuine. “Everything’s all right?”

“I’m in remission,” Eliot admitted with a small voice. In moments like these, assuming his luck sounded almost like bragging. “N-E-D.”

Otis pulled Eliot closer. Careful with the cookies! A friendly slap made Eliot’s lungs quiver. Stop touching me! Without his consent, Eliot’s mind began to plan how to kick this double veteran down. That settled it. Eliot endured the petting for it was meant to be: a celebration.

“How hard it was?” Otis asked, letting Eliot go after what felt like an eternity

“More than I anticipated, less than I can endure.” Eliot owned up, reclaiming his space. “I got more chemo than I cared to, and got pneumonia, but… Here I am.”

“You were missed. Nia would love to hear the whole story.”

“I bet she would.” Eliot nodded. The smile on his lips was beginning to feel authentic. “How are the rest? Any news about your money?”

“That was the weirdest thing, E.” Otis scratched his neck with care. “Remember that NGO you hooked us with? It’s still supporting us but our payments started to fell on our accounts at the beginning of the year. VA said they had nothing to do with it. The NGO said if we want to get out, we need to find another vet for their list…”

“ Weird…” Eliot agreed because that sounded just like future-attorney-in-law Randy Trent. Hardison made the right choice.

“Danny moved to California with his daughter once that little SNAFU cleared. Better and more options for dialysis,” Otis kept saying over Eliot’s comment. “David is getting another surgery. Bob is getting chemo. Nia shaved her head because she lost the bet…”

“What bet?”
“Well… She bet we will never see our money again.” Otis laughed and took out his phone to show Eliot the photo of Nia without her big hair. “You can say whatever you want of Nia, but she’s good to her word.”

Eliot looked at the screen and felt the absence before he could put his finger on it. He couldn’t even join the laughter.

“Mark?”

Otis became pale. Please, don’t… Eliot looked at how Otis’ face dropped slowly.

“Mark didn’t make it, E.” Otis’s voice was hollow. “He relapsed before he got any of the money and he was just too tired…”

Eliot felt the blow and he had to close his eyes again to stop looking at Otis’s broken-hearted face. Eliot didn’t have to ask: Mark didn’t die from his relapse; Mark offed himself, just like his gramps. EVERYONE I LOVE DIES! The voice was too loud, like the cry of a hungry baby. Eliot took a step back and covered his eyes with a hand, regretting to have returned to the crying circle on a whim. He should know better, coming to enemy territory without any intel...

“Mark always spoke fondly of you… I think he left you something in his will, I need to ask Nia.”

“I…” Eliot fumbled with the cookies and put his hand in the wrong pocket of his jeans. The situation demanded a tactical retreat. “Here. Hold this for me, would you?”

Eliot took out his phone and went through the motions of checking his messages although he knew well the screen would show a ‘No messages’ text.

“What’s the matter?”

“There was a mishap in my kitchen… shit.” Eliot sounded adequately dejected. “Hey, man. I can’t lose my job now…”

“Been there, been there…” Otis offered Eliot the box. “You got your priorities right.”

“Keep it. Share the cookies with the rest.” Eliot extended his hand and Otis shook it. “Give them my regards. I’ll try to be here next Thursday night meeting if I can convince my boss…”

“Go with God, E.” Otis smiled warmly. “Thank you for the good news.”

Eliot nodded and turned around. The retreat was always bitter after casualties.

Eliot parked at Freddie’s and pressed his forehead against the steering wheel with a guttural groan. His own blood was demented woodpecker hammering on both sides of his head with erratic force. Eliot cupped his hands over his ears as if that could stop the tightening vice around his head. Nausea was brewing in the pit of his stomach; a year was not enough to make that sensation bearable.

After what felt like an eternity, the headache fit lessened its onslaught. Eliot let out his breath in ragged gasps, feeling like someone had replaced his bones with soft rubber. These constant headaches were really hampering Eliot’s way to recovery. Groaning again, Eliot rested his weight on the seat and looked for the phone in his pocket with closed eyes and uneven breath. Eliot dialed blindly—he knew the number by heart—and approached the thing to his ear. The call went to
voicemail, as Eliot expected.

“Doctor Robertson,” Eliot said, trying to enunciate clearly. “I know you are busy, sir, but I really need to talk to you about getting my NK1 receptor antagonists back. I can’t endure the headaches anymore. Please call me back at your earliest convenience.”

*I’m broken*… Eliot told himself, forcing his breath to get deep and even. His head shouldn’t be hurting so much, not from his cancer treatment anyway. His brain would heal in time—all breaks are healable—but time was a scarce commodity these days. *Don’t waste worry on things you can’t fix.* Eliot put his sunglasses on, sliding his phone inside his pocket, and got down. Since he was at Fred Meyer, he could pick up some supplies for his home before getting to the brewpub.

He entered the store in autopilot, trying not to squint under the glare of artificial light. Squinting only made the headache worse. Bathroom tissue, glass cleaner, cumin powder, turmeric powder, mixed nuts… Eliot stopped for a second, closed his eyes and suddenly became aware of the din of the grocery store. The sound was too loud...

There was danger in the air, Eliot could almost smell it.

He wiped his glasses off and took a good look around him. Moms on yoga pants, young kids running, lonely single men beyond the productive age. Then he saw him…

That old man with the jacket.

*Jacket in this weather? Even for Portland, it has been unusually sunny….*

Eliot pretended to be interested in the pickles while he kept an eye on the man. Thin, shuffling feet, slightly bent spine. Probably a retired teacher. The man passed behind him, on his right shoulder a small flag patch.

*The stars are wrong.*

Eliot felt the rush of adrenaline before his brain could make sense of the number three in roman numerals surrounded by stars. *Man, ain’t you a bit too old for those games?* Too tight shoulder straps tied the holster, that’s why his shoulders were stiff. Eliot could tell the man was armed and itching for a fight. *Is it guilt, man?* Those hands had never held military equipment, he could wager a steak dinner on it. Eliot could tell a draft dodger in a blink: he was raised by one.

Eliot’s phone got off suddenly. It was loud, loud enough to make the man reach inside his jacket. Eliot drew his phone in a hurry, to put that unstable man on ease.

“Doctor…” Eliot said after catching only the last two numbers on the screen. “No, doctor, it’s not a drawback. The headaches are far too strong…”

The man relaxed just a tad and Eliot nodded at the doctor's explanation. That could have been the end of it. That man could have noticed how much of a nervous wreck he was. He could have gone home… Then that black kid turned around the corner and took aim at Eliot with a brightly colored gun.

“Bang!” The kid said with a grin. He had to be younger than nine years: some of his teeth were still missing, spoiling his smile.

Eliot’s attention was on the man, not the kid: the man had already his gun out. It was a split-second decision.
“Hit me!” Eliot screamed, let go of his basket and stumbled backward.

His right hand forced the man’s wrist down. That man had not the hands of a shooter, Eliot snatched his gun with ease. The kid, oblivious of the danger, laughed and ran away. The man pushed Eliot away and made him stumble forward.

“I’ll call you back,” Eliot grumbled on the phone before facing the now unarmed man. “What are you doing?”

“You, crazy son of a bitch!”

“Am I?” Eliot unloaded the gun without even thinking. His fingers danced over that American Tactical ATI HGA 9mm like it was a part of his own body. The magazine fell with a thud and Eliot kicked it away. The bullet bounced on the floor. “I’m not the one willing to shoot a small boy with a toy!”

Eliot tossed the gun to its owner with disgust, wishing he could crack that thick skull to let some light in. The man fumbled with the gun and let it drop. They both went down, Eliot needed to recover his basket. Eliot’s back burned hot—he might have pulled something there—which did little to improve his mood.

“You are not ready to carry a damn gun around,” Eliot spat, noticing a bang on his nuts jar. He was not really paying attention to the man: he had stopped being a threat. “Leave it at the range until you find your balls!”

Before the staff could come to investigate, Eliot got back to his feet and his call.

“Sorry, doc,” Eliot grumbled, checking the spice bottles and moving to the register lane. Nothing else was damaged. “There was a boy playing with a toy.”

As the doctor repeated Eliot really didn’t need more drugs, Eliot got in line on the express lane. The soccer mom in front of him smiled and Eliot tried to smile back.

“How bad are those damn headaches?” Eliot repeated the question with an outraged voice. “Bad enough that I can’t drive; bad enough to bring me to my knees. They are so bad even sex doesn’t bring any relief!”

Eliot noticed the startled, shocked expressions on soccer mom and that cute cashier. Eliot felt ashamed of his loud, complaining voice, but Dr. Robertson was surrendering to Eliot’s distress call. Any means necessary...

“Yes. Five in the afternoon.” Eliot confirmed the appointment for another blood draw in exchange for his drug. “Thank you, doc.”

“Does it help?” Soccer mom asked, passing the cashier a bunch of coupons. “With the headaches, I mean…”

“Try it, ma’am,” Eliot grumbled, taking out some bills from his wallet to speed up the transaction. “The worst thing that could happen is that you had a good time with a headache.”

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The doors of the brewpub open and Sawyer entered the shop with a very long face and didn’t reply to Eliot’s greeting. Eliot shrugged and stirred the black porter chili pot a bit more, grumbling to himself that that boy needed to brush up his manners. Parker didn’t need to hear him; she knew
when Eliot was upset. Sawyer came to the bar, kicked his backpack next to the industrial
dishwasher before tying the server apron around his hips.

“Hey, babe,” Hardison said, walking out the office with his eyes glued on the screen of his tablet.
“Pass me the ‘reserved’ sign.”

“Do we have ‘clients’?” Parker asked making big air quote signs.

Hardison looked at her side, to their hired bartender getting his prep ready for the business day.
Sawyer glared at the man and the bartender minded his own business. The Old Spencer charm was
infallible… Parker caressed the boy’s head. She liked Sawyer; it was like having a well-trained
Rottweiler puppy just for her.

“Yes, we have clients,” Hardison winked mischievously, “for a catering business.”

Hardison winked again and took the sign as soon as Parker extended it. Eliot came from the
kitchen, wiping his hands on a kitchen towel. Between steps, Eliot made the bartender a hand
signal to command him to vacate the premises. Parker didn’t know if that was a pre-arranged sign,
but the bartender almost dropped the glass he was cleaning in his hurry to go away.

“‘Catering’, huh?” Eliot approached the petit committee with a wicked smile. He pushed his hair
under the bandana with his thumbs. “Haven’t got one of those in a while. Looking forward to it.”

“The parents are in their way. Sad to report, but we are not in any hurry.”

“That bad, huh?” Eliot sighed, that information took a bit of the joy away. Hardison patted his
shoulder in his way to the client’s table. “Shame.”

“Care to explain?” Sawyer asked as he was moving outside the bar, stuffing his waiting pad and
pen in his apron.

“Don’t worry your empty head, kiddo.”

“I’ve told you: I want to be part of the family business…”

“Sawyer Eliot Roark…” Eliot said the name in a restrained, annoyed gruff. His nostrils flared and
his forehead furrowed with the sternest scowl.

Sawyer looked at him with big, scared eyes and gulped hard enough to make his Adam’s apple
jump. Parker grinned—Sawyer had finally noticed his uncle was a scary, scary man—nevertheless,
she leaned on the bar, ready to put herself between Eliot and Sawyer in the far-removed case this
little squabble got physical.

“I don’t have many rules. You can get a tattoo if you want, and you can shoot drugs if that’s your
pleasure” Eliot made a sweeping gesture, “Heck!, bring one of your classmates to fuck to the house,
just wear protection and leave a sign for me to respect your space…, but if you repeat that
obscenity to my face ever again, I’m going to tan your hide you with your own belt!”

Parker blinked in disbelief. Hardison stopped and took a double take. None of them expected Eliot
to threaten violence on Sawyer. Eliot and Sawyer were too busy locking horns to notice them. The
way they both flare their nostrils could only be genetic to be similar. As usual, Sawyer caved in
first and Parker expected a sheepish apology to come out the boy’s lips. She was disappointed in
the most astounding way.

“Gee, uncle!” Sawyer exclaimed and tilted his head back a bit. If he was scared, his face didn’t
show it. “Someone needs to be more diligent with his lactulose…!”

Hardison, behind Eliot, put his hand on his mouth, trying to stifle the mad laughter. Parker snorted, and Eliot, thrown off balance, got red, stood tall and worsen his scowl. Sawyer had managed to call Eliot weak, unruly, unhinged, and full of shit in the same breath, and they all knew it. To make things worse, he did it with a finesse only Sophie could match.

“Are we clear?” Eliot’s voice promised swift retribution if his beloved sister’s baby boy didn’t start to toe the line posthaste.

“HUA, sir,” Sawyer—brought to heel, but not defeated—replied, squaring his jaw and folding his arms below his cross.

Eliot made a gangly attempt to hug Sawyer; it was his way to his nephew that they were back in the nice territory. Sawyer put a token of resistance, but he finally submitted to the caress, rolling his eyes in typical teenage fashion. Three seconds later, he shrugged off his uncle’s arms. Eliot, parental duty discharged, huffed at Sawyer’s reaction and moved to the kitchen to mind the black porter chili pot.

“Pass me the ‘phone,” Hardison said in a whisper, still struggling to hold back the laughter. “Your uncle needs an ambulance after that sick burn!”

Sawyer almost laughed aloud. Parker looked how he tried to choke the laughter, and ended up almost spitting. Hardison offered his hand and Sawyer slapped it once, slapped it backward and, finally, shook it firmly. Parker wondered when they concerted their own secret shake.

“Dammit, Hardison!” Eliot grumbled, catching the last part of the shake “Don’t encourage the boy! I’m trying to raise him to be a good man!”

“It’s not my fault I’m the cool uncle! Shoot!” Hardison replied with a satisfied smile before moving to the back store. New clients were in their way. “Don’t hate the ticket, hate the lotto!”

“I’d rather cast my lot with the one in Luke twenty-three forty-two!” Sawyer called out, emboldened by the safe distance.

Parker extended her hand and slapped Sawyer’s scarred nape. Sawyer’s antics were amusing, but Eliot was trying his best. Since Eliot was the only one of them who had observed a father figure up close, Parker felt they should show some support to his efforts.

“Osh, Miss Parker!” Sawyer complained with a prim voice.

“Want to be the Good Thief?” Eliot’s voice sounded annoyed and muted. The kitchen really had bad acoustic. “You need training! And you are like six years too late!”

Sawyer pouted and rest his weight against the bar. Parker hugged him from behind and kissed the boy’s head. Sawyer mumbled something, but didn’t shy away from her touch.

The bell over the door rang and two middle aged people entered the brewpub. Clients had arrived. She was dabbing her eyes with an impossibly white handkerchief. He was clearly uncomfortable on his suit; Parker could tell he’s not used to it. His cufflinks were buttons sewn together; her pearls were false. Eliot got out of the kitchen, the bandana hanging from his back pocket and approached those poor parents that has lost someone dear to them. Out of respect for their grief, Parker let go of Sawyer.

“You got it wrong,” Parker corrected in hushed tones, pouring two coffees in those white mugs
they reserved for clients. “We are family because we do this business and not the other way around.”

Sawyer didn’t look at her, his eyes were in his uncle and the people at the door. Those persons, holding hands, were nodding at Eliot. Parker smiled because Eliot was smiling warmly at them. Clients never suspect that gentle, sensible man managed the most gruesome parts of the job. Parker saw how the clients were trying to rely on the information in a hurry and how Eliot, nodding respectfully, steered them to the client’s table. That’s a time-sensitive job if she ever saw one.

“If you really want to be part of Leverage International, you should start at the hardest part.” Parker put both mugs on the bar. “Go and shadow your uncle. Sit in silence by his side and learn. What he’s doing now is the most vital part of the job.”

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Sawyer, using the green puppy blanket as a pillow, sat on the sofa behind the control table while Mr. Hardison gave his uncle and Miss Parker the information gathered from the interview Eliot just had with the clients. Sawyer tried his best to pay attention to the ancient story. Well, not ancient, just three months old, but even then, it was a long time ago. Uncle had been very kind to the clients, but the information they provide was scarce and repetitive. Sawyer had tons of sympathy for them, and he will pray for them, nonetheless, he would be hard-pressed to know how to give them any kind of relief in their situation. Even Uncle Eliot’s friends couldn’t bring the dead back to life.

“So, they got rid of him,” Miss Parker said, tapping her pencil on the table.

“It’s not the first time we deal with industrial secrets,” Mr. Hardison replied, changing the image on the screen. “Although, we never had one client actually killed for them.”

“Put the room image back, Hardison,” Uncle Eliot said, uncrossing his arms. “Come here, Buck.”

Sawyer get up with a kick and walked to the table. Mr. Hardison returned to the image of the room he acquired from the police. *Is it stealing if you are not taking it?* Because this was a copy, not the original. The scene of the room that Mr. Hardison put on screen for less than a minute was up again in all it’s weird splendor.

“Do you see it? Huh?” Uncle encouraged, putting his hand on Sawyer’s shoulder.

Sayer let his eyes roam the image of the room. The unmade bed, the dark curtains, a rack full of pieces, the broken computer unit, the movie posters, the books on the shelves. It was a pretty normal room. *Needs more books... and at least one cross.* Yet, the image was off. Like those posters full of small dots of color that were supposed to show a picture but you can only see it if you squinted the right way. Sawyer almost could grasp it...

“I can feel it, but I don’t *see* it.”

“Window, bedrail, books...”

Uncle Eliot was thinner on the information side than the parents of that poor young man; Sawyer exhaled and paid closer attention. The window painted honey yellow with a darker varnish. The police had left that black dust on the windowsill and the latch, but they missed the scratch over the surface of the external glass. The flash showed it as a thin silver line. The bedrail was not the issue, it was the mattress. Someone had disturbed the sheet over the mattress. Someone with bloody fingers. One of the books was out of place, put in the wrong place: it was taller than its neighbors.
The pages were loose, they were peeking over the covers...

“Rug…”

Uncle Eliot nodded. Of course, he had noticed the dust around the rug.

“They killed him in his parent’s house,” Sawyer concluded with a shiver. *Those poor parents...* “To take whatever it was in that book.”

“Love it’s such a terrible weapon,” Uncle said, pressing Sawyer’s shoulder gently. “They took the body with them to make it look like they killed him somewhere else. That’s why the police couldn’t go any further.”

Uncle was uneasy, that’s the only explanation for his caress. Sawyer rested his head against that hand, to make Uncle know he was not going anywhere.

“To do that, they had to be professionals,” Miss Parker said and bit her lip. “I don’t want Sawyer around professionals…”

“You might need to sit this one, OT,” Mr. Hardison offered, turning off the screen.

“Matt six-thirty…” Sawyer shrugged. “I’m committed to this crusade and besides… God’s mercy! Do you think I want *any of you* around professionals?”

“Oh, you of little faith,” Uncle Eliot chuckled at their confused faces and rose up from his chair. “We need to be extra careful with this one, that’s all. I need to get my blood drawn.”

“When…” Mr. Hardison protested, but Uncle Eliot shot daggers at him. “Ok, you are right. You are an adult. You can make your own appointments.”

Uncle Eliot turned around and left through the loading bay door. Sawyer saw him go with a little sigh of apprehension. Mr. Hardison was printing something and Miss Parker ran to the little workshop to pick up all the needful things she had been gathering for a week. The challenger roared. Uncle was definitively uneasy.

“Hey, OT!” Mr. Hardison called out and the sound of his voice made Sawyer turn around. “For your cookie tin.”

Sawyer closed his fingers on a freshly printed photo. It was colorful and glossy. Miss Parker was hugging Sawyer from behind and she looked so happy. Sawyer felt the grin blooming like a spring flower in his face.

“My! How very thoughtful of you, Mr. Hardison!” Sawyer almost couldn’t rein the impulse to squirrel away his new treasure it inside a book. “Thanks a lot!”

Miss Parker came from behind and blessed the moment with a kiss on his cheek. Sawyer felt like he could lay his life for both at that precise moment.

“Hurry up and put that one away,” Miss Parker encouraged him. “I need your help with the balloons! I can’t wait to see you with a paper hat on your head!”

“I think the Lord might come before you get to see that!” Sawyer said before running around to put that photo in a safe place.
Eliot parked behind the Samaritan and looked at the small bookstore warily. The signal was there, next to the post: a forgotten orange scarf, wafting on the wind. Eliot had been waiting for it the whole day but it was a mystery to him how on Earth the Hound Pack knew of his favorite parking spot or his appointment with Dr. Robertson. Eliot put all those worries aside; Blue Heart was waiting for him and he better answers that call.

With a calm demeanor, Eliot crossed the street and tried to be aware of his surroundings. Men like him like the sunnier spots to hide in plain sight. Nothing raised any alarms, Eliot was not sure, but he entered the bookstore and smiled to the store clerk. He asked for the literature section with an even voice. After all those years, he still knew what to look for. If they had chosen this location was because they had already planted a communication device and the book. It was always a book by the same author. Somethings just don’t change. The password was, as usual, a simple substitution and Eliot would know which to use once he found the book. The device was hiding next to the spine.

“Joyce,” Eliot looked for the correct page in ‘A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man’ and read aloud, making the correct substitution. It had been more than ten years since he tried to speak Irish, but the words came to his mind without a hitch: “...died for their ideals, Stevie. Tiocfaidh an lá yet, believe me.”

“Your Gaeilge is still atrocious.”

“Who’s to blame?” Eliot replied with a gruff tone.

She had no right to complain about his pronunciation. Her teaching methods were so perfect that if she spared one hour of torture in favor of the language, Eliot would be ready to put Yeats to shame.

“You, of course.”

Eliot let out a bark of dry laughter. Some customers gave him a weird look because few people laugh while browsing Joyce, for Heaven’s sake. Eliot regained his bearings and noticed Blue Heart was not even in the bookshop, but in the coffee shop next door, barely a meter away. Eliot could see the back of her head. Her once fiery red mane showed some snow and that put Eliot on his toes. The oldest wolf is the most dangerous.

She raised her cup of tea and nodded in mock salutation. She knew he was watching her, and he knew she was doing the same.

“I got your letter,” Eliot reported. Her letter was a way to trigger some deep neuro-linguistic programs she had implanted in his brain so many years ago. He was sure. Despite his best efforts, he still needed to figure out which sentence made him go. “I couldn’t find the trigger.”

“You are rusty.”

“I’m vulnerable,” Eliot retorted because it still stings to know Sophie Deveraux could trigger him effortlessly. “You had your fun, now, kindly undo it.”

“I didn’t trigger you for fun,” Blue Heart replied. If she was upset by the accusation her voice didn’t show it. “Besides, you don’t even know what I did, so what do you want me to undo?”

Spare me the mental gymnastics, you old bitch… Eliot felt another of those killer headaches brewing behind his ear. Absentmindedly, he rubbed the spot, already resigned to spend the rest of the afternoon locked inside a dark room.

“And more importantly, how do you know I haven’t put the program to rest already?” Blue Heart
sipped her tea. “Oi, mind that anger, laddie. It will bring you to an early grave.”

That was an old trigger and she pushed it without any mercy. Eliot once had a classmate with epilepsy who told him the seizure aura ran through his brain like a wave. For a moment, he could feel the trigger firing the synapses in his brain, rushing from the nape to the forehead, making him dizzy. The headache disappeared in its wake and Eliot fought to keep his vertical for a second. The oldest triggers were always the strongest.

“You are welcome. Now, pay attention: I triggered your survival program because you are a most important asset. They don’t want to lose you yet. Why? It’s above my rank.”

“And above mine, I reckon.” Eliot found funny he had not regretted his application to Blue Heat’s Bootcamp of Hell yet. He wondered if he was allowed to.

Eliot closed the book and squatted down, in the perfect imitation of a customer browsing the low shelves. For a moment, he wanted to ask if the fail-safe was still operative, but the question could put that last resource in jeopardy. *Did Dayan earn her own fail-safe? Why did you touch Sawyer? What on earth did you do to my father’s mind? How many other Deniable are in this world? Am I still fit for purpose? Would you tell me if I ask you nicely? So many questions without hope for an answer.*

After a moment of silence, Blue Heart said: “You broke.”

“Like a Lalique,” Eliot concurred, he couldn't hide the break from her sharp eyes even if he tried. His own were busy surveilling all the reflective surfaces. This has been by far the longest no official contact between them in years. Caution was paramount. “But there is no shame on it.”

“You are stronger now.”

“I understand my limitations better.”

“Therefore, you are stronger now,” she repeated. Eliot could hear the approval in her voice, but he doubted Hardison devices could register it. “I’m glad. The world is more interesting with you around, *Momhuirnín.*”

*Deachubh, deachéan, saoi,* Eliot replied, and he meant it.

“The devil mend you!” Blue Heart exclaimed with a myrtle-less laugh. “Despite what your former president had said, broken *Gaeilge* is not better than clever English.”

“How many programs are you still running on me?” Eliot asked with a crooked smile, getting up with a new book in his hand.

“Enough to keep me amused in my old age,” Blue Heart picked up her bag, nodded away from Spencer, and bid him goodbye: “*Nár laga Dia thú.*”

“And you.” Eliot waved goodbye to nobody through the store window.

Eliot watched her go, her back to the library and her shoulders straight. The cane was a rouse and he didn’t fall for it. Blue Heart carried her weight as if she was bound to live another half-century at least. *The devil cares for his own…* Eliot wondered if he was entitled to the same blessings.

Ten minutes later, head throbbing and knowing he was late to an appointment with a needle, Eliot Spencer left the library with a copy of *Outside the Mirage*, by Sarah Ensel, and he paid for it.
Eliot parked on the loading bay and picked up the orange container of his prescription; the tablets rattled inside. Still in disbelief of how lucky he was, he slid it in his pocket and let his aching head rest for a while. Five minutes after the first dose had made the whole difference, but five minutes more couldn’t hurt. Those headaches had been a bitch. While he let his body rest, Eliot wondered why the heck he couldn’t push the same trigger Blue Heart had and how many of those lay hidden in the hurting nooks of his battered brain. Eliot wanted to kick whoever had invented neuro-linguistic programing, operant conditioning and human intelligence gathering.

“Headache?” Sawyer asked, crossing his arms on the roof over Eliot’s open window.

Eliot grumbled because he hadn’t heard the boy approaching, and that boy was as quiet as an elephant with bells around its feet. I’m broken… The healing would be slow; in the meantime, it was better if he avoided to be lulled into a false sense of security. The glaring lights of the loading bay brought back the headache.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Sawyer positively beamed, while Eliot cradled his hurting head. “Mr. Hardison wants you in because there was a problem with the electric lines and we are in the dark?”

“Did he tried to plug that stupid laser again?” Eliot asked, resigned to not having a moment of peace for the rest of the night. “I had told him for years that he has to rewire the whole damn building for that!”

“I don’t know, Uncle.” Sawyer shrugged and stepped back. “Half of the time I don’t know what he is doing.”

“I got your TP, by the way.” Eliot slammed the door so hard that only a miracle prevented it from being butt-welded shut.

“Thanks a bunch,” Sawyer had tried to wash for three days—because Eliot could make a good argument to defend his way of life,— but the concept was too foreign for the boy.

“Next time put it in the grocery list, kid,” Eliot said, pushing the back door open.

The faint light from the street poured through the high windows, highlighting the edges of the command table and high chairs. Alarm bells rang inside Eliot’s aching head when he could hear the crackling of the screen and his nose picked up the smell. He closed the door again, trying to not make any sound.

“What’s your game?” Eliot asked looking at the door. Anger already brewing inside his skull.

“Uncle…”

“Don’t make me slap the snot out of your mug, young man!” Eliot warned and turned around. His voice was a hissy murmur. “Sophie Deveraux is inside that room!”

“How!” Sawyer even took a step back because he was really taken aback.

“It’s a very distinctive fragrance!”

Sawyer raised his eyes to the twilight skies and opened his hands as if he was praying. Often, Eliot felt the need to beat some sense into that young head, this was one of those times. Finally, the boy surrendered to the glare and looked at him.
“You forgot the date, don’t you?”

Sawyer took out his phone and showed him the date on the screen with a smug double raise of eyebrows.

“Oh… that date.” Eliot facepalmed slowly. His head throbbed something fierce. “That’s a surprise party, isn’t it?”

“A birthday party,” Sawyer pointed out, returning his phone to his pocket. “Complete with cake and ice cream and balloons and those little paper hats.”

Eliot groaned and tried not to kick his feet, but he had the good sense of not complaining that he was not a toddler while behaving like a toddler.

“Sweet…”

“Now, now, Uncle. Miss Parker and Mr. Hardison took a lot of pain to put it together behind your back and Mr. Nate and Ms. Sophie came from a faraway land just for it. We can’t really disappoint them, can we?”

Kid, I don’t have a middle name, Eliot thought while trying to gather the resolve to enter that room again knowing what was in store, but if I had, I’m willing to bet it would be ‘Disappointment.’

“Let’s get inside,” Eliot turned around again, ready to face his family.

“Bless your heart,” Sawyer replied with a tone that conveyed the meaning: ‘about time.’

Eliot pushed the door open and a fully illuminated room and soft country music greeted him. Paper garlands and a ton of balloons hung from the walls and there was a big sign wishing Eliot a happy birthday with Parker’s incriminating handwriting in front of the screen. The whole gang was sitting around the command table with the pizza boxes already open. Yup, that’s my people...

“So, you decided to ditch the jumping and screaming in the dark,” Eliot noted with half a smile.

“Bah, the game was up. We knew it as soon as you’ve closed the door.” Nate put his whiskey on the table and looked at Sophie. “I told you it was too much perfume…”

“Noted.” Sophie Deveraux smiled and crossed her legs. The colorful paper hat danced on top of her head. “You have the nose of a bloody bloodhound, Eliot.”

“Come in!” Parker waved madly, sitting on top of the table with a generous helping of pepperoni pizza in her paper plate. “Pizza is getting cold!”

“It’s not fair, Miss Parker!” Sawyer complained, pushing Eliot to the side. “You promised me to let me say grace!”

“Only if you got him in!” Parker lifted a slice, ready to eat.

“He’s in!” Sawyer protested and lowered her hand before she could take a bite. “And that was no picnic, let me tell you! He was this short of scampering off like a frightened squirrel!”

“He can hear you,” Eliot grumbled, turning one chair around to straddle it. “Rude.”

“Let the boy pray, Parker,” Hardison said, putting his paper plate on top of a pizza box. Eliot huffed because, obviously, Hardison would be on the boy’s side. “It can’t hurt.”
“It’s appropriate,” Sophie said, wiping her hands on a napkin. “This is a family dinner.”

“It will be quicker than trying to convince him otherwise,” Eliot pointed out, already extending his hand with resignation.

Nate let out a burst of small laughter and held Hardison’s and Sophie’s hands, both elbows firmly planted on the table. Parker rolled her eyes and held Hardison’s. Hardison kissed that hand with a gesture so melodramatic that made Eliot and Sawyer groan in unison.

“Dear Lord,” Sawyer said as he closed his eyes, holding Eliot and Parker’s hand, “bless the food before us, the family beside us and the love between us.”

“Amen,” Eliot smiled at Sawyer’s choice. His mother’s blessing was really the most adequate one for the day. “See?” Eliot cast Parker an annoyed glance. “It didn’t hurt.”

Parker stuck out her tongue. They all picked up the paper plates. Eliot stacked three slices on his plate, noticing the hunger in his belly.

“Don’t pout, Sawyer!” Parker said, putting a paper hat on top of Sawyer’s head. “You owe me.”

“What?!” Eliot protested when Sophie poked his side. “I need to gain weight!”

“Don’t fill up with pizza, man,” Hardison was busy sprinkling chili flakes on top of his slice. “We have a chocolate ganache cake with bourbon cream cheese frosting and bacon bits waiting!”

“With banana cream ice cream!” Parker added, with the slice inside her mouth.

“Now, that’s a proper birthday cake!” Nate approved, taking the advice to heart.

And above all, Lord, if you heed this sinner, bless the love between us…

Chapter End Notes

Situation normal: All fucked up.

Author's note:

So, we get to the end of this story, my friends.

Many thanks to you for following it all these months. If you found this one after the last chapter was posted, thank you for reading it!

I also want to express my gratitude to S. who was an excellent cheerleader. I probably wouldn't manage to see this to its end without his constant support.

Please, do let me know if you enjoyed it.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!