Handful of Bad Luck
by kenzimone

Summary

Four times Eliot Spencer almost drowned (and the one time he didn't).

Notes

Written for LJ community geteven_getfic's Kink Fic challenge – prompt was "Any pairing or gen: drowning". Beta'd by the lovely pyroblaze18.

'To a brave man, good and bad luck are like his right and left hand. He uses both.'
- St. Catherine of Siena

I. North of Myitkyina, Union of Myanmar

Eliot might not speak this man's particular language, but he knows when he's being insulted.

The man in question raises a gloved hand ready to deliver another punch, and Eliot leans forward and spits a mouthful of blood in his face.
There's some cursing after that, and a few more slaps, but it was totally worth it and this is nothing Eliot can't handle.

They followed him from Europe. Or Russia. Or wherever they caught his trail. He wasn't being careful, didn't think it was that important this time around. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Jaw clenched hard and with a bloodied face, the man in front of him gestures to the two thugs he's got standing at the door. They move forward, and there's something said (sounds like gibberish, like they're gurgling water upside down while trying to recite the dialogue from the latest James Bond movie), and then Eliot's restraints are gone.

He throws the first punch, because that's what they're expecting. What they're looking for is long gone, on the way to India under the watchful eye of its rightful owner, but they don't know that and Eliot really needs to buy his employer more time.

It's not like he's gotten paid just yet.

He's easily overpowered (lets himself be, he tells himself. He could take them if he wanted to), and then they're carrying him out of the room, dragging him down a hallway. There's some shouting, and he's not moving a muscle to help them, but they make it to their destination either way.

It's a small room, with what looks like a slab, and Eliot's got the feeling he's not going to like this one bit.

They strap him in and stand back, and he blinks against the harsh light of the one lone bulb hanging form the ceiling. The gloved man steps into the light, blocking it and casting a shadow across Eliot's face. His outline is dark, and Eliot can't make out his face now.

The man pulls a handkerchief out of his chest pocket, and slowly wipes the blood off his face. Then he grabs Eliot's chin, and before Eliot can react the man stuffs the handkerchief into his mouth. Eliot sputters and tries to spit it out, but the man only tucks it deeper, until Eliot can feel it tickling the back of his throat.

One of the thugs approaches, carrying a bucket full of water that sloshes and spills over the edge with every step he takes, and Eliot closes his eyes.

There are more questions, he thinks. He can't hear them very well over the sounds of water hitting skin, and he's not really listening anyway, concentrating instead on suppressing his gag reflex (the handkerchief is heavy and wet now, pressing against the back of his mouth and trailing water down his throat).

It's unpleasant, at most, but then his head is grabbed and tilted backwards, and there is more water and when he tries to breathe it flows down his nose and oh God drowning can't breathe can't oh God make it stop.

The edges of his vision grow dark, a contrast to the white specks dancing in the middle, and he doesn't even have to tell his body to struggle against the restraints; it's automatic, he's on autopilot, he'll do anything to survive.

When the handkerchief is finally pulled free of his mouth, Eliot spends a few moment writhing against the table, sucking in enough air to last the rest of his lifetime. Which might not be very long.

The man with the gloves is standing over him, barking meaningless words and showing a row of unkept teeth. Eliot blinks up at him, wondering if the man actually expects him to answer or
understand what he's asking.

The thug with the bucket reappears at the man's side, and there is more water sloshing over the edge, and the handkerchief is on its way down Eliot's throat again, and he decides he's bought enough time. He's not willing to pay for more.

He tries to speak, but he can't seem to form any words, nothing but garbled wheezes. And then the handkerchief is back, and his head is being tilted upwards and above him the bucket looms, drops hitting his forehead like it's nothing more than a spring shower.

The gunshots are a surprise, Eliot thinks. Apparently the gloved man is of a similar opinion, because he's clutching his head and going down and Eliot's face is covered in red speckles of blood (for once, it's not his own). He manages to take a breath before the thug with the bucket drops like a stone as well, water splashing everywhere, and then there is shouting and someone's tugging at his restraints, and he's pulled into a sitting position even as the handkerchief is being pulled out of his mouth.

The Koreans. Of course.

“I totally forgot about you,” he garbles, and is rewarded with a punch to the face.

The man who seems to be in charge (no gloves, Eliot notes), pulls out his gun and let the bullets drop into the palm of his hand. He chooses one, slides it into the chamber of the gun, and let the rest of the bullets fall and scatter on the floor.

Ah. Right.

One of the Koreans set about dragging the dead bodies of Eliot's last captors out of the room. The others lean back against the wall, watching as the man with the gun comes to stand by Eliot's side. They're underestimating him, Eliot thinks. He throws himself to the side, only he doesn't – all that willpower, and he barely managed to move one of his pinkies. He's exhausted, mentally and physically.

The man screams something in his ear, and shoves the barrel of the gun against his temple. Eliot barely has time to react before the trigger is pulled, and then he breathes a shaky half laugh, half sigh as he realized that he is, in fact, still alive.

His heart is pumping, and so's the adrenaline, but the gun is unloaded and Eliot realizes a temporary advantage when he sees one. This time, he throws himself for real, and it's kind of messy and Eliot really hates guns, but he has to admit that they get the job done (whether you use bullets or just the blunt end of the handle).

It takes him far longer than he'd care to admit to make it up the stairs and out to the open. The night air is cold and makes him shiver, but it's also like a tap to the back of the head – mind suddenly clear (clearer), he stuffs the gun down the waistband of his pants and jogs down the dirt road leading away from the bunker he stepped out of.

Who'd have thought everyone would be so up in arms over a damn monkey?

II. The Chocó Department, Colombia
He spends nine days in Panama tailing a man in a white suit. It's longer than he'd usually set aside for a job, even if it's slightly more complicated than the usual smash and grab; the weather is nice, the mark is on edge, and Eliot figures he can afford a tiny vacation-within-a-job while he lets his mark think he's gotten away with it.

Two birds with one stone, if you will.

The suit is predictable – he hops a plane and touches down in Panama City on Day Seven. Eliot follows him through baggage claim ('nothing to declare'), and then on to a hotel where the mark offers the clerk cash and a fake name in exchange for a room.

Eliot hits the streets, runs into a marketplace; finds a pretty nice knife to replace the backup he lost (left behind in someone's chest cavity) in Austria the other week, and then he finds an almost as nice hotel across the street from the suit. Checks in, gets drunk, and two days later he kicks in the mark's door and lets him dangle out of a ninth story window until he tells Eliot where he hid the merchandise.

The flights are cheap, and Eliot flies straight across the Panama-Colombia border to Quibdó. He rents a truck and heads west, and they don't catch up with him until two days later just passed Campobonito.

He should have seen them coming. He didn't.

The dirt road is wide enough for two vehicles, but only just barely. He's driving as fast as he can, suspension going wild as he guns it through potholes and over dead branches. The road is wet and overhead the clouds are dark and hang low – he turns a corner and runs through a large puddle, and brownish water splash up to coat the sides of the truck.

At first they're a dark speck in his rearview mirror. The next time he checks, they're closer (much too close) – he can make out the outline of the front grill, the way the windshield wipers chase away the first few raindrops of the evening.

He doesn't like car chases. They're like guns – kill from a distance, wielded by cowards who don't have the nerve to face the man they intend to kill, don't dare look him in the eye. Eliot makes a point to look all the men he's about to kill in the eye. At first it was because he thought he had something to prove, but now it's to remind himself that he doesn't.

They shoot out the back left tire first. The steering wheel rattles in Eliot's hands, and then the carriage lurches to the side, veering off the road. He finds himself heading straight into the thick foliage that frame the dirt road; the underbrush acts as a damper, latching onto the truck and slowing its headway, and by the time it finally rocks to a standstill in the way of careening head on into a tree, its speed is low enough for it to be less of a slam and more a love tap.

Eliot is still fumbling with his belt when the passenger side door is ripped open and the barrel of an AK-47 presents itself in the opening. The man on the other side reaches over and grabs Eliot's bag (change of clothes, map, merchandise) off the seat, throwing it behind him just as Eliot manages to unsnap his seat belt. He launches himself across the truck towards the wide eyed Colombian, who soon finds himself without his weapon and instead possessing a badly broken nose.

Eliot shoves him out of the car just in time to hear the rest of the gunmen come running. Then there's shouting, more gunshots, and Eliot hunkers down low, throws the truck into reverse and guns the engine. With a groan the vehicle unwraps itself from the trunk of the tree and lurches backwards, and he shifts into first gear and spins the steering wheel, forcing the truck into a turn.
He's aiming for the road, thinks he can see it up ahead inbetween the underbrush, but with a blown rear tire the truck doesn't handle well and Eliot finds that even though he overcompensates and steers further into the turn than he should have to, the truck still veers off course.

The cliff's a surprise. And pretty bad luck, even by Eliot's standards.

He hangs suspended in the air for a moment (feels like eternity), and then he's barreling down the steep incline. No trees to spell his death, thank God, but it's a bumpy ride, and he braces himself for the worst. It comes (of course it does) when the nose of the truck suddenly dips, trapped, and the back end of the vehicle rises up and suddenly the truck's vaulting down the hill, and Eliot feels like he's in a blender, or maybe a washing machine, holding on for dear life.

Then he does a faceplant into the steering wheel, and things get a bit hazy around the edges before the lights go out completely.

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Eliot's return to the waking world brings with it the realization that he's still alive.

Which is good, because death by stupidly driving one's truck over a cliff isn't a very dignified way to go. Eliot plans to either live a long life and die peacefully in his sleep, or die young and drag at least five people with him down to Hell.

He blinks, eyeing the overhanging clouds and remains silent and still, listening for any sign that his Colombian friends are still in the vicinity. There's complete silence for a heartbeat, and then the chirping and squawking sounds of wildlife slowly begin to seep in to fill up the blankness.

Which means that there's no one else here. That's good. But it also means that the merchandise is gone, wrenched out of his car and dropped onto the ground and probably picked up and on its way back to Panama by now.

Still, it's not a bad deal. Just a minor setback. He'll get out of here and track it down again, and this time he won't pull people back in through windows and leave them with piss stained pants gasping and clutching the floor in relief.

He's just about to pull himself up and dust himself off when the first wave of pain hits. Well, crap.

The truck is a hulking, towering wreck above him. It's left a deep groove in the loose soil as it slid down the incline, and for the first time Eliot feels the coolness of the damp dirt on the back of his neck – he's lying in its wake, pinned in place from mid-thigh down. He lifts a hand, pushes against the metal of the truck. It doesn't budge.

Planting his hands by his side, Eliot braces himself and then pulls. No movement there either, just another lash of pain. The dirt shifts beneath his palms, and he slips down onto his back again.

A lone drop of water hits him point blank on the forehead, and brings with it a second epiphany: it's rain season. Taking in the walls of dirt on his side, the way the truck dug into the ground on its journey down the slope, Eliot realizes that he's lying pinned on the bottom of a glorified dirt bowl.

Another raindrop, and then another. Soon it's pouring.

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The trick, Eliot's discovered, is to not dig out more of the dirt than you'll require. At first he was just shoveling away everything within reach, but that only ended in a heart stopping moment when
the carcass of the truck groaned and buckled and Eliot thought he'd die then and there, crushed to death.

Six people, he tells himself. Five's not enough for this crap. And it's not like Hell can get overpopulated. He thinks.

After that almost-incident, he's more careful. Leans up on his elbows, claws at the dirt beneath his legs. He can feel and move his feet, can bend his legs at his knees (barely), so even though he can't see anything for the truck blocking his view he's pretty sure mid-thigh's it. Get that unpinned, and he's outta here.

The rain's not helping, though. Muddy water is licking at his legs, running down the carved out slope in tiny rivets before they pool beneath what's left of the truck. The water level is rising faster than he thought it would, and by now he's not shoveling dirt as much as he is sloshing palmfuls of mud around.

By the time the water spills over his lap, he's mildly concerned. When it reaches his chest, he starts to panic.

There should be enough room to slip out, but the soil is mud now, or at least something like it, and when he digs his elbows and fingers down and claws and pulls there's something like suction and he can't really be sure he's not caught in a sink hole.

So he digs some more, and then he slips, elbows sliding out from beneath him, and all his weight comes crashing down and his head is submerged within seconds. It's a grimy kind of water, opaque and dirty and he doesn't like it one bit.

When he tries to push himself back up his hands can't find traction, and suddenly his eyes are open and there's this brownish yellow light all around, and he thinks air. Because yeah, air would be nice.

His hands are pulling up more mud now (uselessly scraping against the slush, searching for a solid hold), and the water's shifting and growing darker, and his vision is full of tiny air bubbles trailing out of his nose and up towards the surface.

Crushed, he thinks. He'd rather be crushed by a truck than drown in a puddle of water.

And then, suddenly, his right hand is fisted deep into the mud and he's lifting himself upwards, and even as his face breaks the surface and he greedily gasps for air the rain pours and adds to the puddle (up to the middle of his chin now, maybe just below if he stretches far enough).

Things are a little blurry after that, but he kicks and pushes and pulls and suddenly his thighs and knees and feet are slipping from beneath the truck and his boots are trailing against the bottom of the mud hole, and he turns and crawls, drags himself out of the water and halfway up the slope before he dares to stop.

He stays there for a while, panting and flexing his fingers against the leaves of the forest floor. Seven people, he promises. Just for making him go through this.

When he stands, it's on shaky legs.

By the time he's reaches Campobonito the anticipated body count has risen to eleven.
III. East of Vojnić, Croatia

Eliot usually doesn't meddle in political affairs. Not unless he gets handsomely paid for it.

This job? The pay's so handsome he might be tempted to slap a wedding dress on it and take it on a stroll down the aisle.

Still, he's been watching his mark for more than a month now, and if no deal goes down in the coming week Eliot might just have to go batshit crazy. With the murder spree and the straightjacket and the whole shebang.

There's a reason politics pays well – it's *damn boring*.

Something's about to happen, though. He's sure of it. No one would visit Vojnić just for the fun of it. It's a crappy little town in a saturated backwoods of a landscape. No, there's definitely something going on.

It's only natural that as soon as Eliot finishes that thought there's the sound of a gun cocking behind him. Turning, he finds himself facing a small army of armed men. He lowers his binoculars, counts close to two dozen heads.

Well, that's no fair.

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The world tilts and then he's falling, head first, into murky darkness.

He tries to brace himself as best he can before he hits the water, but it doesn't really help; it's freezing, and even though he'd been prepared he can't help but let out a small yelp before his head goes under.

The sound echoes, bounces and multiplies and he would have cursed himself for it had he not been deaf, submerged in the darkness and cold, nothing but the pressure against his ears and the pounding of his heart.

For a moment up is down and down is up; there is no orientation whatsoever, and he twists and curls, manages to bring his hands (bound behind his back since he was spotted and manhandled and stuffed into the trunk of that car) to his front. He reaches out ahead of him, fumbling for a wall, a rock, anything to help him regain some kind of bearing. There's nothing.

His lungs are burning now, white spots dancing against closed eyelids, and there's blood pooling into the floor of his mouth (have to give them credit for a well placed punch). He thinks about swallowing, spitting, getting the taste out, but then he dismisses the notion.

Even though his fingers are stiff and chilled all the way through, the blindfold comes off easily enough. It doesn't really help, because everything is *dark*, and still he can't tell what's up and what's down – he'll have to choose a direction and hope it's the right one. His head is rolling, the darkness is *spinning*, and if he makes the wrong choice he knows that will be it.

He blinks, tilts his head and looks upwards (what he presumes might be upwards but might as well be downwards). Nothing. He tucks his chin into his chest, looks beyond where his feet are kicking, unseen, against the black. Nothing.
Or?

The tiniest sliver of light, the briefest flash of *something*.

It's enough.

He twists, tries to do a full 180 degree turn. It works. He thinks. The light is gone, but he kicks anyway, once, twice, and feels his outstretched fingers meet slippery rock. A wall. Okay, then.

He follows it, swims in what he believes to be (*must be*) the right direction, crawls vertically and feels his knees slip against the slimy surface. And then, suddenly and miraculously, he's through.

The air is freezing on his skin, much colder than the water seems to be, and he gulps and gasps and chokes on his own blood. He clings there for a while, shaking and resting his head against the wall of the well.

Up ahead, the moon peeks out from behind a cloud, large and silver.

Eliot shudders one last time, and reaches up to dig his fingertips into the cracks between the rocks of the old wall. He pulls, lifts his body out of the water.

Right.

It's time to liberate this damn country.

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**IV. The Timor Sea, North West of Australia**

He thinks they might be overreacting. Just a bit. He even tells them as much;

“Hey man, you're overreacting.” Throws it out there, casually.

The blond man in the ridiculous print shirt cocks his gun. Damn, Eliot will never live this one down.

Oh well. He sees the man's finger tighten around the trigger and throws himself forward – the shot goes wide, upwards and through one of the boat's sails. Apparently this is an invitation for everyone to jump in on the fun, because suddenly Eliot is covered in bodies, and hands grab hold of him and wrench him off the man in the shirt.

There are only five of them, and Eliot's got this in the bag – apparently the shirt thinks so too;

“Överbord! Släng fanskapet överbord!”

Eliot manages to break one man's arm before he's manhandled over the sailboat's railing and hits the water back first.

It's not cold, and even with the setting sun the view's pretty clear; Eliot's got the state of mind to override his body's natural instinct to rise and breathe, and sure enough, the shirt has retrieved his gun and proceeds to empty the rest of the clip into the water where Eliot broke the surface.

Right. Like *that's* gonna kill him.
He ignores the sting of his lungs and takes a few broad strokes forward, only to realize that there is no way he'll be able to approach the boat and haul himself up without being spotted — the sun is bright overhead, and he figures if he can see them (leaning over the railing, looking down into the water), then surely they can see him, too.

Damn.

Eliot breaks the surface fifty or so feet away from where he originally fell in and spits out a mouthful of saltwater as he observes the men scurrying around on the deck of the boat. He'd rented a small boat in Darwin two days ago and had set out to sea that morning — it had taken him a while to locate this rendezvous spot, only to realize that he'd been set up and the merchandise was drugs and not antique figurines scavenged from a shipwreck.

Never get involved with drug runners. Especially crazy ass European ones. It's a rule Eliot's been pretty clear on since that one time in eastern China (that didn't end pretty). He's not getting paid enough for this shit.

He watches the men aboard the boat arm themselves, and with the shirt at the wheel the vessel makes a slow turn to head land back to land (or maybe out to sea? Eliot has no sense of direction in this endless blue). The boat he came out on is securely fastened to that of the drug runners', and he can't really see any way to wrestle it back into his possession, not with the crew armed and the sailboat on the move.

He'd be shot dead before he made it within twenty feet.

Damn.

He watches the boat grow smaller, until it breaches the horizon (a tiny white speck), and then is gone. Kicking off his shoes he follows their journey downwards, trailing into dark blue before they fade completely, and then he rolls onto his back, blinks up at the cloudless sky and acknowledges that this might be the most helpless he's ever felt.

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The water is warm, so there's no fear of freezing to death.

On the other hand, the sun is resting on the horizon, blindingly bright even though fading, and he's growing thirsty. And while there's water everywhere, he daren't drink it. This is cruel irony if he's ever seen it.

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He sleeps in short bursts during the night, floating unstably on his back.

At times he's awakened by a rogue wave washing over his face, leaving him sputtering and coughing, trying to regain his breath. Twice he awakes and finds himself sinking, his feet teasingly touching the cool darkness below, the surface only just within reach. He pushes upwards, breaks out into the air, and blinks at the stars strewn across the black sky.

At dawn he sees a dark shadow cut through the water. It circles him, and he drops his head down beneath the surface and turns with it, follows its path. It edges closer, black eyes unblinking, and Eliot knows he's prey.

He surfaces for air, slams his hand down into the water and slaps, splashes the best he can. Goes under again, yells at the shadow, makes distorted noise and watches in disbelief as it slinks away.
into the gloom.

Eliot laughs as he breaks the surface, files his newly found knowledge and nestles it into the empty space between Snake Handling and How to Kill a Bear Using Only a Knife.

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By noon the sun is killing him. He's wearing layers, a dress shirt atop a T-shirt, and he strips out of them both before pulling the dress shirt back on – winds the T-shirt around his head like a keffiyeh (as best he can), and squints towards the horizon.

In the corner of his eyes he thinks he might see shadows swarming in the depths, but when he turns to look there's nothing there.

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It's a tiny fleck on the horizon at first, and Eliot frowns and wishes.

Three hours later, he's sure – it's a boat, a small one. And it's getting closer. He raises his arms, waves and shouts; some gestures break language barriers.

Less than an hour later and he's face to face with a battered and old hull, blue paint peeling inbetween patches of barnacle. Seven sunburned faces stare down at him from the deck, unblinking, and Eliot plasters on his most disarming smile and throws them a wave.

"Howdy."

There's stunned silence and then laughter, and a minute later several pairs of hands heft him up and out and aboard. Eliot relaxes on his back, closes his eyes and savors the feel of solid wood beneath his fingertips. A touch to his shoulder, and one of the men is holding a bucket half full of water, and Eliot cups his hands and drinks.

The men speak Indonesian, a language Eliot knows only a smidgen of. Still, with hand gestures and not so much help from Eliot's limited word supply ('Hello', 'Goodbye', 'Goods' and 'Tell me where it is'), they manage to convey the important things; they're fishermen, five days out of harbor, and they've got another few weeks before they're due to sail home.

There are dried shark fins hanging from the railings of the boat, but when Eliot points at them the man who he presumes to be the captain only shakes his head. He turns and barks a string of words to one of his crew, and the man disappears down a hatch before returning, bare feet beating against the deck, clutching something against his chest.

The captain gestures and the crewman hands him a large and beautifully cone shaped shell. The captain, in turn, passes it on to Eliot, who runs his fingers over it and thumbs the thick, white inner layer. Mother-of-pearl. He remembers large markets in Thailand, shells littered across tables. Trochus shells. None as grand as this one, though.

The captain speaks again, points at the shell and then at Eliot. Right. He'll have to earn his keep. It's illegal and backbreaking work, but Eliot thinks of the alternative (stalkng shadows and endless starry skies) and grins.

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By the time the Australian Coast Guard run across them twenty six days later, Eliot had broadened his vocabulary significantly (mostly curses and insults, but who's he to complain?) and acquired an
impressive tan.

He's also hauled a few tons of seashells off the ocean floor, cheated Raharjo out of a packet of cigarettes in a game of cards, and advised Captain Tirta that it never hurts to plead ignorance in court.

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V. Vermont, the United States

The very first thing Hardison does after opening the car door is hunch his shoulders and bury his hands in the pockets of his coat.

“Shit,” he breathes, drawing the word out like making it last longer will also make it more true.

Eliot rolls his eyes and stalks around the car to slam the door shut. He places a hand flat on the back of Hardison's coat; shoves, and is rewarded by a stumble and another curse.

“Move your ass,” he grumbles, and pulls his gloves on. Hardison sends him a glare and pops his collar, shrugs deeper into the coat.

Vermont is freezing, and the snow measures at least a foot deep. Hardison moves through the empty clearing with undignified stumbles, narrowed eyes searching the tree line for anything suspicious. Eliot slows, waits for him to catch up. This must be Nate's idea of a punishment. Not that he's done anything lately that would warrant this kind of abuse. Right?

“Death Cloth, they call it,” Hardison is saying. “Cotton, man. Nana always told me that cotton'd keep you nice and warm, and no disrespect to her, but these are professionals, y'know what I'm saying? They know their thing. Like you and punching.”

Eliot wonders if Nate's still upset about that thing with the knife and the... yeah. Probably still pissed about that.

“--cotton boxers today.” Hardison has caught up and is standing beside him. “And you know what this means? Hypothermia, that's what it means. I'll be walking along and bam!” A clap of hands, and Eliot's left eye might be twitching. “Hypothermia in my junk. Won't be pretty.”

Eliot can't really think of any words that will effectively end this conversation, so he takes a chance and goes with his usual; “I will kill you.”

Hardison frowns, and Eliot crosses his fingers and continues trudging further into the woods.

“Nah, nah, you won't. We're partners, man. Also, you need therapy. Seriously. This stuff where you threaten to kill people? It ain't healthy.”

Eliot once spent two January weeks hunched behind a makeshift shelter/mound of snow in the woods on the Swedish-Finnish border, staking out a small log cabin – the temperature was inhumane (it nearly cost him a few toes to frostbite), but in the end he retrieved what he came for and got paid well for it.

The man's dark form is easily spotted against the white of the snow. Eliot stills at the edge of the woods, listening to the sound of the snow beneath Hardison's boots.

“That him?” Hardison's voice is low, and he watches Eliot extract a pair of small binoculars from his pocket and raise them to his eyes.

“Looks like it.”

“Ice fishing,” Hardison snorts, shaking his head.

“Yeah, I don't get it either.” Eliot takes a step forward, hands Hardison the binoculars like an afterthought. “C'mon.”

“Wait, what?”

Eliot looks over his shoulder. “Let's go.”

“Um, how about no?” Hardison does not look pleased.

“What's your problem now?”

“For starters? It's damn cold.” Eliot glares, and Hardison decides to add; “Also, that guy's ice fishing. Which implies that that's a lake. A frozen lake. Nana always told me never to walk out on no frozen body of water.”

It is on the tip of Eliot's tongue to point out that Hardison's Nana had also told him to wear cotton, a fact which he had bemoaned (loudly and repeatedly) not too long ago. Sadly, such an observation would only open two rather ugly cans of worms; proving that Eliot had (subconsciously, or somewhere in the back of his mind) actually been listening to the one sided conversation, and also opening up the floor for Hardison to continue his lament over the future hypothermic state of his... stuff.

Eliot doesn't want to touch that with a ten foot long pole.

“Fine. Stay here, then.” He turns and starts walking toward the center of the lake, senses on high alert as the snow beneath his boots shift as it slides against the ice.

The man is sitting with his back towards them, hunched over as he stares down at the ice. No longer standing against the shadow of the forest edge, Eliot is out in the open and easy to spot should the man just turned to look. He doesn't.

Nate had told them the man he was sending them to find was a witness. Not dangerous, he'd said. Just... running scared. Hardison had found an old cabin in the woods just south of the Canadian border, belonging to the man's first cousin twice removed – with all other options investigated and found to be dead ends, Eliot had been quick to find the cabin their safest bet.

Mostly because they'd all been cooped up in a hotel for three days, and Nate madeHardison research and hack stuff while he would obviously much rather be doing other things (something called a 'raid' involving a purple one-handed mace with a lot of stamina. Whatever that meant), and Eliot had realized he was down to two options: leave the hotel and track down their witness, or let the blade that was resting against the inside of his wrist slide out into his hand, and proceed to relieve Hardison of his tongue.
For the sake of team spirit, he'd decided to do the former. Only, then Nate had rubbed at the bandage covering his shoulder and gotten that evil look in his eye and told him to take Hardison with him. Bastard. Eliot had apologized, hadn't he?

The man doesn't move as Eliot approaches. He sits motionless, hand auger lying by his feet, staring down into the dark water in the fishing hole. Only the tiniest occasional jerk of his fishing rod gives any indication that he is in fact not frozen solid and dead in his seat.

Sluggish, Eliot thinks. That's good. Will be easier to immobilize, then. Sophie will probably frown at him dragging another unconscious body through the door, but she'll come to terms with it. Only took Nate eight months to accept that asking Eliot to retrieve something human usually meant kidnapping in the first degree. Who says you can't make right out of wrong?

In hindsight, Eliot probably should have seen it coming.

He takes another step, closer, almost on top of their witness now, and the ice beneath his feet cracks and shifts. The witness is out of his chair in no time, staring at Eliot like he's some kind of psycho killer. Which, yeah...

Eliot drops his hands out from his body, disarming, harmless. The witness blinks, and then he turns and runs.

Biting back a curse, Eliot takes off after him, feeling the lake groan and buckle beneath him. Up ahead, the man takes a wrong step, and the ice splits in two; it's only by sheer luck (and the laws of physics, perhaps) that the he manages to jump across the black chasm and continue onwards, breaking off more bits of ice as he goes.

Eliot's not quite so lucky; he's too close and going too fast to stop without tumbling head over heels into the water, and so he braces himself and jumps, images of young Aimee Martin playing hopscotch flashing through his mind. In the water his reflection is flailing and looking absolutely ridiculous, jumping from a tiny ice floe to an even tinier one, but Eliot's far too concerned about not slowing down and losing his momentum to care.

It's a breath, and then he's safe and sound and on firm ground. The witness is gone, tracks and snowless branches leading into the woods, and Hardison is running towards him, having avoided the ice and instead circled the lake.

“Eliot!”

Eliot turns and sits, faces the lake (white spotted with black) and stretches out shaky legs before him.

“Eliot,” Hardison says again. He sounds breathless. “Man, that was too cool.”

Huh. Yeah, maybe it was.

“Dude.” Hardison looks downright gleeful. “You were like-- like, a Death Knight with Path of Frost aura! Oh, man!”

Or maybe not. No, not cool at all.

Eliot growls. “Shut up, Hardison.”
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