The Don’t Blame the Gorilla Job
by scintilla10

Summary

Later, Hardison tried to blame it on the gorilla.

Notes
See the end of the work for notes.

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It had all gone down so quickly, though, Eliot didn’t remember a gorilla being there. But even if there had been one, he was damn well prepared to put money on it being Hardison’s fault.

At least a little bit.

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Nate and Sophie were squabbling good-naturedly in the kitchen when Eliot showed up. That was par for the course so Eliot ignored them and dropped onto the couch next to Hardison, who was tapping away intently on his laptop. Which was also par for the course, really. Parker was perched on the armrest, hanging over Hardison’s shoulder. Her eyes were bright with interest, so even though Eliot was, as a general rule, uninterested in the kinds of things Hardison got up to on the internet, he leaned in too.

“I could finish this a hell of a lot faster if the two of you would back out of my personal bubble,” Hardison said grumpily.

In perfect synchronicity, Eliot and Parker leaned in closer.

“What’re you doing?” Eliot said.
“Parker is very good at getting in and out of highly secure places without being seen,” Hardison said. “But I am *astoundingly* good at ensuring that she was never there in the first place.”

“He’s giving me an alibi for the job I pulled in Cairo,” Parker explained.

“What job you pulled in Cairo?”

“Exactly,” Parker said happily. Eliot grunted and moved out of Hardison’s space to sit back against the couch. Parker seemed to take this as an opportunity to hover even lower over Hardison’s shoulder.

“Will you—” Hardison leaned forward and twisted his neck to glare at Parker. “You’re *literally* breathing down my neck here. Not cool.”

“That file was a year and a half old,” Eliot said. “Why’re you bothering with an alibi now?” He tried to ignore the way Hardison’s eyes flashed up at him in surprise. What—did he think Eliot was completely computer illiterate?

Hardison had already turned his attention back to the screen. “Well, we take care of one another,” he said absently.

*Well, yeah,* Eliot thought. *But.*

The thing was, Eliot had made a career out of taking care of people—both by watching out for his team or his client and by disposing of threats. He was damn good at it, too. But with this, with this crew, the rules were-different. And the way Hardison said *take care of one another,* like it was natural and expected and—above all—simple, made Eliot squirm a little on the inside.

Parker tapped a finger gently on Hardison’s shoulder in a rhythm apparently audible only to her and Hardison twitched and scowled under it—but he didn’t shrug her hand off either. Eliot watched the two of them, feeling for a distracted moment like he was at a distance, like he was looking in on them from the outside.

Then Sophie breezed in, Nate following behind her. Twenty minutes later, Nate declared, “Let’s go steal a zoo,” and the con was on.

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“Do you think a giraffe could beat a gorilla?” Parker asked.

“Big, naughty cats are my particular specialty,” Sophie breathed over the comms.

“In a footrace?” Hardison said to Parker. His eyes were a little wider than usual. Eliot suspected that was a direct result of Sophie saying provocative things in that breathy voice thing she pulled on clients.

Sophie was in the process of selling a white tiger named Luther, actually the property of the Franklin Park Zoo, to their mark. The mark wanted Luther for a private menagerie he was assembling—apparently bad enough that he was willing to scrape together Sophie’s astronomical price even though it would force him to access the accounts he was withholding from his daughter-in-law. Who happened to be their client.

Selling the tiger required Hardison and Parker to wander around dressed as zookeepers, keeping the public away from the tiger’s cage while Sophie made the sale. Eliot had been fully prepared to mock them for wearing stupid-looking shorts and visors or something, but the uniforms were
actually kind of—Well, he wasn’t sure what they were. They didn’t have anything on Sophie’s lion tamer outfit, but Eliot still found them a little, uh, distracting. They were both showing a lot of leg. Well, a lot of calf.

“No, not a footrace,” Parker was saying, annoyed. “A fight to the death.”

Eliot snorted and pushed his hair off his face. Parker had a tendency to get bored waiting in the van. “Under what circumstances would a giraffe be fighting a gorilla?” he demanded.

“A strong hand with the whip, and they roll over like kittens,” Sophie continued.

“I would pay to see that fight,” Hardison said contemplatively. Eliot suspected he was fantasizing about how many YouTube hits his camera phone video of the fight would get.

Probably a lot, Eliot thought.

“I would steal something to see that fight,” Parker compromised. “It would be pretty cool. An actual cage fight!” She paused. “Well, unless they escaped from the zoo first or something. Then it would be a street fight!”

“Oh, that’s nothing. Just a little love bite,” Sophie said.

“Rumble in the jungle,” Hardison added and Eliot cuffed him on the shoulder to make Hardison shut up.

Not that it worked.

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The mark pulled up to the zoo entrance with Sophie and two bodyguards. The bodyguards had a stupidly obvious lack of training, practice, and ability. One of them took the SUV over to Visitor’s Parking where he sat like a lump in the driver’s seat, obliviously reading a creased Clive Barker novel. He didn’t even notice Eliot dropping the tracer on the car. It was disgustingly easy. Eliot was almost embarrassed for him.

He was making his way back to the van, doing an automatic sweep of the parking lot, when Sophie let out a gasp over the comms—shocked, scared, real—and something sharp twisted unexpectedly in Eliot’s gut.

“What,” he barked out.

“What? What’s the matter?” Nate said rapidly in his ear. “Sophie? Is everyone okay?”

“Oh my God,” Sophie was saying, over and over, and shit, she was the lion tamer, the lion tamer, and—and Parker and Hardison were there, too. In the next instant, Eliot was running across the parking lot, vaulting over the stiles at the zoo’s entrance, darting past zoo security, heart pounding in his throat—

At first, all he could register was Hardison’s body. Hardison, crumpled on the ground with Parker and Sophie crouched over him. Eliot stood there for an endless aching moment, unable to move, unable to breathe. The three of them seemed so shockingly far away from him, so abruptly vulnerable, and Eliot couldn’t get to them, couldn’t make his feet move.

Then, suddenly, his senses kicked back in. There were spectators standing around, he realized, instead of, say, running for their lives from a loose lion or a renegade gunman. And—thank God—
Hardison was moving, was saying irritably, “I’m not a goddamn damsel in distress, thank you very much. I don’t need smelling salts or whatever the hell that is. Ow. Sweet baby Jesus. Fixing that pothole should be some very important person’s top priority because this is a public pathway, goddamn it, and people’s ankles are trying to get places.”

Something about the familiar sarcasm of Hardison’s voice jolted Eliot into moving again. He did a quick visual sweep of the perimeter—really too fucking late for that, Spencer—and a rough check over the crowd, and then moved closer, murmuring, “Parker,” into the comm. She twisted her head, spotted him, and whispered something to Sophie before walking over to him. “Broken ankle,” she said quietly. Eliot nodded and forced his eyes away from the gut-twisting sight of Hardison lying on the ground.

Then zoo security showed up and Eliot had to talk them out of throwing him out of the zoo and then organize getting the van pulled up to the gate, while Sophie and Nate distracted the mark who looked ready to ditch them all.

Things were much easier when all Eliot had to do was punch people.

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“I was just getting a look at the gorilla,” Hardison said defensively in the waiting room of the ER.

“It’s okay, Hardison,” Sophie said soothingly.

“No one said anything about not taking the scenic route back to the van, is all I’m saying.”

“We weren’t there to sightsee,” Nate said sharply. Eliot recognized the tone as Nate’s worried sick voice with a generous helping of if everyone would stop being total and complete idiots, other people could sleep a lot better at night.

Sometimes, Eliot thought grimly, he and Nate were a little too much on the same page.

“I’ll go back to the zoo with you on our day off,” Parker offered, “if you don’t make us pay admission.”

Hardison smiled at her. It was the first time since the zoo that Eliot thought Hardison’s expression was even a little bit familiar and he stared at Hardison with an almost dizzying sense of relief. Until his gaze dropped again to the way Hardison’s ankle was propped gingerly in front of him, wrapped in ice packs and swathed in Sophie’s bright red scarf, and a fresh wave of guilt swept through him like nausea.

Eliot gritted his teeth and didn’t say anything at all.

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Hardison left the hospital with a cast on his left ankle and a bottle of painkillers clutched in his hand.

Parker left with two wallets, four ID badges, a stethoscope, and an eight-month old US Weekly magazine.

“I had itchy fingers,” she said, glancing at Eliot sideways.

Eliot’s fingers had been itchy while Hardison was getting patched up, too: mind skittery, muscles tense, nerves strung tight. He’d found a gym down the street and spent forty minutes pounding a
punching bag until he felt relatively human again.

Eliot made Parker go and turn in her loot to the Lost and Found. She came back with the US Weekly still clutched defiantly in her hands.

“If y’all are done with the to-ing and fro-ing, there’s an injured person back here who’d love to get home before he falls asleep in this smelly truck,” Hardison said from the backseat.

“My truck doesn’t smell,” Eliot said, affronted.

“We’re stopping for food,” Parker said.

Knowing the likely contents of Hardison’s fridge, Eliot heartily agreed.

Pain medication seemed to make Hardison more talkative than normal, which, in Eliot’s estimation, was already too talkative by half. By the time they reached his apartment, Hardison had complained (mostly coherently) about the lack of jello at the hospital, the weather, the radio station, Eliot’s jarring driving, the slow speed of the elevator in his building, and Parker’s choice of take-out.

“Christ,” Eliot said. “You are one bad patient.”

He held the crutches while Hardison half-fell onto the couch. As he watched, Hardison let out a long sigh and the tightness around his eyes seemed to relax, just a little.

“You wanna play doctor with me, Eliot?” he said lowly, in something that was not-quite his voice.

Eliot stared until Hardison glanced up at him, eyes wide and candid.

It was the meds in his system, Eliot thought.

“Elevate your leg,” he ordered gruffly and turned away so Hardison wouldn’t see the look on his face.

“He’s always liked Thai before,” Parker said in the doorway, half-worried, half-petulant. She raised her voice so Hardison could hear her. “Last time we had Thai you ate all the springrolls.”

“He’s just cranky,” Eliot said.

“I am not cranky,” Hardison protested, and Eliot was relieved that he sounded more like himself.

“Absolutely, positively not cranky. But I am bored. Bored, bored, bored. Do you know how long I was stuck contemplating my dire fate—sorry, I mean, of course, the fate of Alexander Malcolm Whittaker—whose insurance really is top-notch, by the way—in that hospital room? And without even a basic internet connection! My God, the humanity. Let me tell you, hospitals are the essence of—no, wait, the epicenter of boredom. No, I mean the epitome.”

“I’m pretty certain that’s not true,” Parker said reasonably, settling cross-legged on the hardwood floor and opening the take-out boxes. “Otherwise, why are there so many primetime network television shows set in hospitals?”

“Oh, right,” Hardison drawled. “That’s just great. The moment I am physically incapacitated and heavily duped—dosed with drugs, you decide to start a pop culture debate. With me! Believe me, you will not win a pop culture debate against me. Even if the two of you were on a team against just me, by myself. I mean, me by myself and you on a team. You two. Together.” He paused and seemed to collect himself. “Eliot doesn’t even have TV,” he added pointedly.
Eliot frowned at Hardison, who had managed to wriggle himself into what had to be the most uncomfortable position Eliot had ever seen. “Were you not listening when the doctors said to keep your leg elevated?” Eliot growled.

Hardison blinked at him. “What?” he said.

“Here,” Parker said unexpectedly. She pushed a cushion gently into place beneath his foot. Eliot watched, feeling weirdly helpless as she helped Hardison settle his leg onto it.

“Does it hurt?” Parker said.

“Nuh uh, no way,” Hardison said, his voice sounding only a little woozy. “We call them painkillers for a reason. I think I’m going to marry codeine.”

“I’m sure the two of you will be very happy together,” Eliot said shortly, and went to make tea.

While he was in the kitchen, Parker and Hardison conspired to turn on an episode of Doctor Who. Hardison flashed a smug grin at him when he came back in, like he’d pulled one over on Eliot or something. Eliot rolled his eyes. It was true there was a hockey game on, but it wasn’t like he couldn’t catch the score in the morning. Besides, Parker’s running commentary during sports broadcasts was very, very irritating and Eliot had made it a rule to avoid watching games with her.

“Whatever,” he said out loud. He did have a reputation to uphold, after all. He added: “Drink your tea.”

“Is this that gross one with floaty bits in it?” Hardison said. He took the mug and eyed it doubtfully.

“No,” Eliot lied.

“This one has Daleks in it,” Parker told Eliot, pointing at the TV with her spoon.

“The tea has what?” Hardison said in surprise. Then he seemed to notice the direction of Parker’s spoon and started snickering at the idea of tea with Dalek bits in it. Parker wrinkled her nose and grinned, and Eliot concealed his own smirk behind a forkful of Pad Thai.

Hardison fell asleep before the end of the second episode. At least he’d eaten something.

And despite his whining, he’d had two cups of tea.

Parker followed Eliot into the kitchen with their mugs and the still half-full take-out boxes.

“We can’t let him sleep alone,” she said while they loaded the dishwasher.

Hardison’s kitchen was actually pretty nice—at least, it was pretty nice ever since Eliot had begun stealth-stocking it several months ago. Eliot had been staggered by how many basic and indispensible ingredients Hardison’s diet of junk food and take-out apparently didn’t require.

Eliot shot her a look. “I don’t see why the hell not,” he said.

“He might roll over and hurt his leg.”

“If there’s someone else in bed, he might roll over and hurt his leg and smack the other person with his cast,” Eliot pointed out.

He’d slept with a girl with a broken arm once, and getting whacked in the face with her cast was one of his more unpleasant wake-up calls. Considering that a number of wake-up calls in his life
had included guns, arson, poisonous snakes, and, on one memorable occasion, guerilla freedom fighters dropping in through the roof, that was saying something.

“Don’t worry, Hardison could never hurt you,” Parker said comfortingly.

Eliot glared at her. “No one offered to sleep with me when I dislocated my shoulder,” he pointed out. “I was fine.”

“Hmm,” Parker said, and proceeded to ignore him. “Don’t worry about Hardison rolling off the bed in the middle of the night. I’ll sleep on his other side.”

Eliot pressed his lips together. This was stupid and Parker was being ridiculous. She was taking too damn far.

“The bed can’t be big enough for all three of us,” he said flatly.

Parker grinned. “Of course it is,” she said. “This is Hardison. It’s definitely a king size.”

Eliot choked. Parker smiled serenely at him and wandered out of the kitchen, humming quietly, before he could get his coughing fit under control.

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Parker woke Hardison and then followed his hobbled gait to the bathroom, explaining in great detail how peeing sitting down would allow him to rest his leg and conserve his strength. Eliot tried unsuccessfully to hide his sniggering, and Hardison glared at both of them, emphatically refused Parker’s help, and ordered her out of the en suite.

Eliot grinned at her. She twitched her lips back at him and rolled her eyes. Then she promptly turned around and took off her shirt.

Eliot stared for a second too long at the pale unbroken curve of her spine before he abruptly averted his eyes.

That one, he thought, he really should have been expecting.

He’d only just decided it was safe to turn around again when the bathroom door opened, and he was greeted with the sight of Hardison, clad in only his boxers and his cast.

Shit. They were actually going to kill him.

Hardison stared blankly at Parker, already snuggling down on the far side of the bed, and threw Eliot a glance. There was a kind of loose, helpless swooping in Eliot’s stomach, and he said, scrabbling for a lifeline, “You said it was all right to stay here, right?”

“Yeah, man,” Hardison said, blinking. “Of course. I just never thought you’d—” He stopped as Eliot pulled back the covers on his side. “Uh.”

“Your couch has crushed Cheezies in it,” Parker said disapprovingly.

Eliot bit his tongue to keep from pointing out that Parker’s own cleaning habits wouldn’t win any freaking awards. None of them had any practice at settling in one place long enough to acquire consistent cleaning habits. Well, beyond the cleaning required to wipe fingerprints.

“You’re in the middle,” Parker added to Hardison, who obeyed her silently for once in his life.
Eliot climbed in after Hardison settled onto his back, two extra pillows propped up under his cast. Parker turned out the light and Eliot lay on the edge of the mattress, sharply aware of the proximity of both their bodies, not daring to move.

It was a long time before he fell asleep.

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Eliot made coffee the next morning and, when he heard signs of movement, started beating eggs and grating slightly stale Cheddar for omelets.

“Hi,” Parker said, padding into the kitchen on bare feet. Her hair looked all mussed, and Eliot could see her nipples under the thin T-shirt she was wearing—Hardison’s shirt, if the FRAK YOU TOASTER on the back was anything to go by. Eliot looked quickly away.

Shit, he was turning not-looking into an Olympic sport.

“Hi,” he said. He monitored her out of the corner of his eye as she opened the fridge and started eating directly from a carton of leftover Thai.

“I like it when you cook,” she said, all evidence to the contrary.

Eliot risked an actual glance. “Yeah?”

“I mean, you shouldn’t stop just because I eat other things, too.”

“Leftovers are perfectly valid breakfast food,” Hardison said, yawning, as he hobbled into the kitchen. He didn’t have his crutches, because he was a stubborn idiot, but at least the bottle of Tylenol 3 was clutched in his hand. “Even if I am more partial to pancakes and bacon than cold noodles and peas at nine am.”

“You don’t have any bacon in your fridge,” Eliot told him. “And I’m making omelets.”

“Is there coffee?” Hardison said. He fumbled in the cupboard and winced, trying to balance on his right leg.

He was a stubborn idiot apparently here just to make Eliot’s life hell.

“Sit down before you kill yourself,” Eliot said gruffly and poured a mug for him.

“I just mean, I know it’s how you take care of us,” Parker said, smoothing down her hair with her long fingers. “I like it.”

“Milk?” Hardison said plaintively.

Eliot thrust the milk carton at him and met Parker’s eyes. “Okay,” he said. “I won’t stop.”

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Eliot and Parker had to go in that afternoon to close the white tiger job, which Nate had been forced to alter on the fly what with Hardison out of commission. Not that it was all that different from how they regularly pulled jobs. Sometimes Eliot thought the way Nate seemed to thrive so close to the edge was going to do them all in.

The thing was simple enough that Hardison wasn’t physically necessary for the dénouement (as Sophie put it) but he insisted on listening in over the comms and monitoring the visuals remotely.
They left him set up on the couch. Parker warned him that if he tried to balance his laptop on his injured leg she would throw his computer off the balcony. Hardison’s half-indignant, half-terrified expression was totally worth the ten minutes Eliot had spent running all the stupid wires and cords from the desk over to the couch.

Eliot got to punch one of the bodyguards this time, which made him feel a little better about things in general. The mark flung himself off a goddamn cliff by giving up the account access codes and then implicating himself in over a dozen felonies within hearing distance of the cops. He was carted off in a cruiser while Sophie started to make some calls arranging care for the animals already in his four-car-garage-turned-makeshift-zoo.

Parker was giddy over getting to touch a flamingo and, on the drive back, she was flushed and excited and talked at greater length and higher volume than usual. It was a bit weird, and Eliot wondered abruptly if he was the third wheel and Parker just didn’t know how to tell him. Before he could properly process this humiliating and unnerving thought, Parker brushed her hand lightly across his cheek. Surprised, Eliot turned to look at her, but she just gave him a smile, enigmatic and fleeting, and changed the radio back to the country station he liked best.

It wasn’t until Eliot was turning his key in the door of Hardison’s apartment that he realized there hadn’t even been a question in his mind that they’d come back to Hardison’s.

“Thank God you’re back,” Hardison said when they came in the living room. “I need your help to take a shower. I am ripe, Jesus. You should have told me.”

They wrapped his ankle in plastic shopping bags. Then, to save him from hopping dangerously around in the shower on one leg, they made him soak in the tub with his leg propped up on the side. Eliot had to go back in once he was done to give Hardison a hand standing back up again. He kept his eyes virtuously averted and tried to think sobering, softening, unarousing thoughts. It didn’t work, not when he was so intensely aware of all that warm, slick skin and the weight of Hardison’s tall, muscled body leaning into him.

“Thanks, man,” Hardison said, when he had a towel wrapped around his waist. His hand was warm and steady where it gripped Eliot’s shoulder, and there were water droplets clinging to his abs and —and that time Eliot really did bolt.

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He told himself that he wasn’t going to spend the night again. He had a perfectly good apartment of his own just a fifteen minute drive away. But then Parker fell asleep on his arm in the middle of *The Dark Knight*, and Hardison said, low and strangely uneasy, “Look, man. Could you just—stay?”

So he found himself curled again on the edge of the king size mattress, listening to two sets of low and peaceful breathing into the night.

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When Eliot woke up, he was still facing the wall. He could feel someone’s knuckles settled against the small of his back—just resting there, warm and easy and comforting.

He rolled carefully out of bed and stood for a moment, looking at them. Parker’s face was tucked against Hardison’s shoulder and his arm was wrapped around her. Hardison’s other arm was stretched out across the bed, his hand curled into a loose fist, like he was reaching for someone who wasn’t there.
Eliot forced all of them outside after breakfast. Hardison moaned and bitched about moving off the couch but he was fine once he was actually sitting on the park bench in the sunlight. He was especially pleased once he figured out he could leave them eating his dust when he set up a good rhythm on his crutches.

Parker whistled a little in quiet little bursts and stutters and doodled with permanent marker on Hardison’s cast. She was currently in the middle of tracing the floor plan of the Louvre on the sole of his foot.

“What song is that?” Hardison said, when the whistling trailed off again. Eliot thought it was crazy to assume that it was any kind of recognizable tune whatsoever. This was Parker, after all.

“A song about us,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Money Money Money,” Hardison guessed.

Eliot snorted.

“Nope,” she said cheerfully, though she had paused the floor plan to draw a Euro sign on the top of his foot. “Just our own song.”

If anyone was likely to have a soundtrack in her own head, it was probably Parker, Eliot reasoned. Still, he was surprised how warm it made him feel when he caught her humming again as she came out of the bathroom that night, that same little snatch of almost-tuneless melody.

“We’ve got a new client,” Nate said.

He and Sophie had turned up unexpectedly the next afternoon. First thing, Nate had held out a file to Hardison and told him to start running down background info on all their leads.

“If you’re not feeling up to it,” Sophie started, intercepting the file and leveling a look at Nate.

Hardison glared at her. “What’re you—give me that,” he said. “I am more than ‘up to it,’ thank you very much. I don’t need a damn leg to operate a computer.” He muttered his way over to the desk and started calling up databases.

Sophie looked slowly around the apartment, and Eliot saw her taking everything in: Parker’s harness, rigged up near the sliding glass doors to the porch; Eliot’s copy of *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* on top of the TV; Parker’s tangled ball of knitting yarn on the coffee table; Eliot’s workout bag tossed casually by the open closet in the hallway; the remains of three breakfast settings at the kitchen table.

“Are you three all living here?” Sophie said.

“What?” Nate said.

“Yes,” Parker said.

“It’s purely a temporary arrangement,” Hardison said quickly.

“Just while Hardison is—” Eliot said, and waved his hand meaningfully at Hardison’s leg.
“Hmm,” Sophie said, and eyed them speculatively.

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Eliot wondered if maybe there was some kind of weird space-time dimensional portal thing specifically involving Hardison’s bedroom that was screwing with his head. It didn’t seem to matter what happened during the day but at bedtime, Eliot always seemed to forget he even had an apartment until it was too late.

It was probably a bad idea to mention space-time dimensional portals, though. He’d just have to sit through more Doctor Who episodes.

He didn’t stick to the edge of the bed anymore, either. Sometimes he woke up so close to them he could hear Hardison’s heartbeat, a gentle thump-thump under the sound of his breathing, and smell the citrus-y shampoo Parker used in her hair, the soft tangy-ness teasing the end of the nose.

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“I should get home soon,” he said the next morning. He’d been up since five, and he’d spent the morning sitting by himself at the kitchen table, trying not leave before they got up.

“What?” Hardison said.

“No, you don’t,” Parker said.

“I have an apartment of my own,” Eliot pointed out, irritated. He glanced down and realized he’d curled his fingers tightly around the handle of his coffee mug. It was a bad habit, a tell, that he’d dropped years ago. He unwound his fingers and forced his hand to relax.

“But you don’t have to live there,” Parker said. She looked over at Hardison appealingly.

Hardison was silent for a minute, his eyes fixed on Eliot. Eliot stared right back at him, unblinking.

“No, right—yeah,” Hardison said finally, and something in Eliot’s gut twisted. “Everyone needs to have their own space. No one’s making you stay here, man.”

“No one’s making me stay here either!” Parker said. There was an edge to her voice that rubbed Eliot’s nerves raw.

“You’re different,” he said, and ignored the way her face flattened a little when he said it.

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It wasn’t like he hadn’t been back to his apartment at all. He’d stopped by a couple of times to pick up clothes and his shaving kit and shampoo and other odds and ends.

It was different, though, walking in the door with his gym bag stuffed full of all the things that had somehow managed to migrate over to Hardison’s apartment. The familiar off-white walls didn’t seem safe and private and calm anymore. They were just—lonely.

There were three plump tomatoes in the miniature greenhouse on his balcony that were this close to overripe. He chopped them into a pasta sauce and drizzled it over penne with chopped Italian sausage and fresh basil for dinner.

He very carefully didn’t think about how many leftovers he packed into Tupperware in the fridge.

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Eliot woke up when Parker dropped in through a bedroom window he swore he’d wedged permanently shut when he moved in.

He had a hand on a pressure point on her shoulder before he woke up enough to realize who it was. She brushed impatiently at his hand, apparently unconcerned that he could have had her on unconscious on the floor in seconds.

“I’m not different,” she said, like they were still in the middle of a conversation that had ended hours earlier.

Eliot could think of any number of responses, but he crossed his arms over his chest and settled for:

“What the hell are you doing coming in my window at three in the morning?”

“Couldn’t sleep,” she said. “Hardison’s been playing video games non-stop since you left. It’s really annoying,” she added. “He won’t even wear headphones.”

“That’s why you need your own apartment,” Eliot pointed out.

“That’s why we need you,” Parker said. “He’s only being annoying because you left.”


Parker blinked at him.

That loose feeling in his stomach was back again, writhing, and Eliot took a breath, struggling to find steady ground. “When I saw Hardison lying there,” he said. “It was—I froze. And for a good minute, we were all completely goddamn vulnerable.”

“We weren’t in any danger,” Parker said matter-of-factly.

Eliot winced, thinking of that weirdly stretched-out moment when he’d stood there, totally immobile and so far away from them. Guilt gnawed at him and, behind it, fear. Fear that it would happen again, that he would let it happen again.

“Not the point,” he managed.

Parker sat down next to him on the bed. Her hair shone in the streetlight coming in the window and Eliot couldn’t look away from her.

“It can’t be just you looking out for us,” she said. “We take care of each other.”

Eliot reached for the familiar phrase like a life raft. They did that; the whole team did that. It had always been Eliot’s job and he was good at taking care of people.

Except when it came to Parker and Hardison and him, they were—it was more. It was more and it was being taken care of, too, and Eliot didn’t know what made that so damn different and so damn hard.

“We can’t sleep,” Parker said, a little plaintively.

Eliot took a deep, shuddering breath.

“Okay,” he said. He hustled her out the door, pointedly locking it behind them, and then he drove them home.
“You’re back,” Hardison said. “In the middle of the night.”

He squinted up at Eliot from where he was firmly entrenched in the couch cushions, surrounded by chip bags, gummy packages, and bottles of that gross orange soda. It didn’t look like he’d shifted his ass an inch since Eliot had left.

“Yeah,” Eliot said simply.

“Time for bed,” Parker said, and before Eliot realized what she was doing, pulled him down to kiss him, a too-quick brush of her mouth against his, wet and warm and soft. Eliot found himself reaching for her as she danced gleefully backwards, a smug grin breaking out on her face.

“No, please,” Hardison said, sounding strangled, “don’t stop on my account.”

“It’s the three of us,” she said firmly, her fingers wrapping tight around Eliot’s. “All three.”

Hardison darted a glance at Eliot and his eyes were hopeful and anxious all at once. Eliot tightened his grip on Parker’s hand and gazed steadily back at him, trying to slow his racing heartbeat. Hardison was a smart guy; he’d be able to get it, he’d know what Eliot was saying and what he was not-saying.

“Bed now,” Parker said, and added, “Doctor’s orders.”

Eliot barked out a laugh, and Hardison said, lightly, “Oh, well, in that case,” and hoisted himself out of the squalid nest he’d made in the couch.

There was something still churning restlessly in Eliot’s gut—an uneasy rumbling, a warning—but it eased a little as they went into the bedroom together. It eased even more when Hardison kissed him for the first time, slow and uncomplicated swipes of his tongue and lips.

Parker slid her hands over both of them and demandingly pushed them onto the bed. Hardison turned his head to kiss her, and Eliot couldn’t stop staring at how they looked together: the faint flush of Parker’s skin, the toned muscles in Hardison’s back, the way their hands touched one another. As he watched, Parker twisted her body against Hardison’s at just the right angle to stop him from bumping his cast, and Hardison cradled the curve of Parker’s skull gently in his hand while he kissed her.

They both turned to look at him, then, and somehow there was space for him there, too. Like a miracle or a last-second goal or a one-in-a-million shot, he slid into gap between them on the bed. Except the only thing miraculous about this was the way it felt simple and natural and goddamn inevitable, like a lock clicking, like a circle closing, like his heart easing.

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In the morning, Parker whistled a little in the shower, a familiar little snippet of not-tune, while Hardison hobbled around the bedroom without his crutches, muttering about clean underwear.

They should take Parker up on her suggestion to visit the zoo again, Eliot thought, stretching himself out lazily on the king size mattress. He found himself grinning up at the ceiling for no good reason at all and wondered how quickly he could convince them to come back to bed.

But after that, they should go back to the zoo. The three of them definitely owed that gorilla a dump truck full of bananas.
End

End Notes

A big thank you to my beta, the ever-so-lovely whuffle. All remaining mistakes are my own. This was written for spiritcrow for the 2010 Leverage Exchange, and originally posted here.

Works inspired by this [podfic] The Don't Blame the Gorilla Job by Shmaylor

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