By Paths Coincident

by honorat

Summary

The Librarians discover Leverage International. Jacob Stone and Eliot Spencer have a family past, but they aren’t the only members of the two teams who’ve met before. Expect whiplash between light and dark. Set around the middle of the first season of The Librarians and after the fifth Season of Leverage.

Notes

I know the final episode had Egypt and mummies, but I'd already written this. It's not a big part of the story, and Flynn mentions dealing with mummies to Ezekiel. So I've decided that if it's never the genie's lamp, it's often mummies!

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Chapter 1

Portland, Oregon, USA

The shuddering of the Einstein-Rosen Bridge that served as the Back Door of the Library Annex caused Jenkins to look up from his work. For a moment, the door swung open on a desert landscape before the scene was blocked by the noisy and noisome Librarians in Training as they were herded to safety by their Guardian.

Jacob Stone was lovingly cradling an amphora filled with rolls of papyrus as if it were a child.
Ezekiel Jones looked cheerfully amoral as was his wont. And Cassandra Cillian was bouncing with her usual enthusiasm.

“I can’t believe we went to Egypt!” she crowed, waving around the scarf that had been covering her copper hair.

“I know!” Stone was scarcely less excited. “These are first century Coptic scrolls!”

“That I stole for you,” Ezekiel pointed out, looking smug.

Colonel Eve Baird shut the door and wiped the unruly strands of her blond hair from her sweat-plastered forehead.

“I take it that you were successfully able to prevent any further attempts to re-animate mummies?” Jenkins inquired, in the interests of assuring himself that his sacrifice of his peace was not in vain.

“Oh, yes,” Baird groaned. “The dust has returned to the dust, as it were, and I’m pretty sure I’m wearing most of it. I need a shower and a good meal.”

“Tell you what,” Ezekiel said. “You go scrub off what’s left of old Pharaoh Whatsit, and then we can all go out for dinner at this great little brew pub I’ve heard about. They say the food is the best in Portland.”

“Are you paying?” Stone asked raising one eyebrow at the thief.

Ezekiel shrugged, “Sure. Why not? It’s not like I really had to work for the money.”

Jenkins rolled his eyes and began counting down the minutes before they left him in untroubled solitude again.

While he was constrained to allow them the run of the Annex, Jenkins had no desire to become mired down in the lives of mortals again. They were so short-sighted, so child-like, so . . . fragile. And damn it all to Tartarus, so easy to begin to care for. He had been alone for so long. Alone was best. Every minute that the Librarians in Training and their Guardian spent in his domain, they spent getting under his skin, reminding him of what he had lost—of what he had yet to lose.

Cassandra Cillian, who danced so brightly as she faced the brain tumor that would quench her light, who, with a wild brilliance, could grasp the theory behind the magics he researched. She had become a fixture in his laboratory before he’d had the self-possession to object. It had been so very long since he had been able to share his passionate curiosity with another soul. But the sand in her hourglass was already running out.

Eve Baird, NATO Counter-Terrorism Colonel, fierce protector, always the most likely to be lost due to the nature of her job, already a survivor of her own death in combat. Few humans received more than one chance. It was not safe to care about any of them, even such a valiant and splendid warrior as this one.

Jacob Stone, formerly an Oklahoma oil-rigger, equally a scholar and artificer, for whom the Library was so much his native heath that he seldom spent any free time away from it, who loved books and the knowledge they contained with the pure, clear devotion of an acolyte to the divine. Stone was a source of constant astonishment and delight, the subtlety of his thoughts so unexpected in one so practical. Of all of them, he fit most seamlessly into the routine of the Annex, as if the building had absorbed him, and he was becoming the repository of all its secrets.

With a feeling close to despair, Jenkins realized he could no longer imagine the Annex without
Stone perched aloft with a manuscript, thumping down the stairs with a tome open in hand, sharing his discoveries as though offering his listeners the most precious treasures in the world.

Even Ezekiel Jones, with his irresponsible, incorrigible, hedonistic quest to acquire anything that he fancied, was becoming less distasteful. His wizardry with technology was a pleasure to behold. And occasionally, the Korean Australian thief seemed to display an actual human feeling, as though he was beginning to care about his team members as more than just skilled backup for his escapades.

Jenkins admitted, only to himself, that he was always relieved when a dangerous mission drew to a close with all four of his charges restored to the Annex in one piece. He dreaded the inevitable day when that would not be the case.

Catching himself, once again, treading on dangerous emotional ground, Jenkins roused up his irritation by mentally enumerating the ways in which his younger colleagues irritated him beyond belief. Anger was preferable to whatever these rusty and disused feelings were. The sooner these interlopers were out of his Annex, the sooner he could regain his equilibrium.

It took longer than he had hoped before they were ready to depart.

Cassandra bounded off to check on several experiments she had in progress in the laboratory.

Stone, who had to get his precious manuscripts into the humidifier, wandered off muttering something about love being the enemy of haste. He tossed a glare over his shoulder at the irrepressible Ezekiel who was making cracks about “Moisturize me!”

Jenkins shook his head in bafflement. Technically these children spoke English, but half the time he had no idea what they were saying.

With no one left to annoy, Ezekiel gallantly acknowledged Baird’s precedence with regards to showering. Since he had scarcely a hair mussed, and she looked like she had been dragged behind a camel for a hectare of desert, this was only fair. However, just in case his lapse into politeness might rewrite any portion of his obnoxious code, he stole her chair at Flynn’s desk and kicked back to play with something arcane on his phone.

When Baird emerged, damp and scrubbed and wearing something pastel if otherwise free of feminine frippery, the remainder of the team descended in sequence on Jenkin’s shower. Thanks to Cassandra’s science and Stone’s knowledge of plumbing and one obscure magical artifact Ezekiel had retrieved from the heart of a South Pacific volcano (and hadn’t they all nearly died for that one), the Annex possessed an inexhaustible supply of hot water.

Jenkins protested this delay, but they claimed to be too exhausted to go home to bathe and change. Since they all had clothing stashed in the Annex for emergencies, he was left with no other efficacious method for ejecting them.

Finally, the lot of them were sanitized, clad in whatever garments they deemed fashionable, and ready to leave Jenkins to his own devices, although they did invite him to accompany them. Stone was satisfied that the papyrus was rehydrating nicely and would be fit to unroll the next day. Cassandra had recorded all her observations on her experiments. Ezekiel had accomplished nothing at all as far as Jenkins could tell. And Baird had made the unilateral decision that she wasn’t appearing in another restroom stall if she didn’t have to, so they would be utilizing Stone’s crew cab pickup to drive there like civilized human beings.

Jenkins heaved a sigh of bittersweet relief as the young people disappeared into the entry tunnel.
with far more racket and energy than any person had a right to possess after a full day of saving the world.

Peace at last.

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TBC
Portland, Oregon, USA

The air duct above the Bridgeport Brew Pub kitchen counter rattled ominously, as though some large creature was scrabbling against the metal.

“Parker!” Eliot Spencer yelled without looking up from the peppers he was chopping. “Get out of there! Our customers already think we have rats.”

With a screech and a clatter, the grate covering the vent landed on the countertop. A woman's rumpled blonde head with wide, slightly manic eyes appeared in the opening—the Head of Leverage International, at times the Nemesis for all corporate evil-doers, at other times, like the present, a force of complete domestic catastrophe.

Eliot glared at his colleague with all the ferocity that could turn to water the knees of hardened criminals, but Parker had always been immune to his threats.

Slithering headfirst out of the vent, she hit the countertop with her hands and arched over into a backflip that set her on her feet within half an inch of Eliot.

Eliot refused to acknowledge her abrupt presence within his personal space, although anyone else but Parker would have found themselves flying through the kitchen door head first with no consideration as to whether that door was open. He returned assiduously to the peppers.

Parker, however, was on a mission. “Eliot,” she hissed. “Are you really Eliot?”

Eliot swiveled to look at her, which brought them nose to nose. “Of course I’m . . . who else would I be? Parker, if you don’t . . .”

“Then why is there someone in the Brew Pub wearing your face?” Parker jabbed a finger at his nose causing him to take a step back to avoid losing an eye.

Eliot opened his mouth, decided there was no possible comment he could make to such a ridiculous statement, and closed it again. Scowling, he folded his arms

Parker circled him, peering closely into his face, and then leaned forward to sniff his neck.

“Stop it, Parker!” Eliot growled. “I don’t have time for crazy.”

He attempted to return to his interrupted food prep, but Parker was not to be dissuaded. She poked his arm, and he swatted her with a spatula.

“Go away. I’m busy.”

“You feel real.” Parker frowned at him suspiciously; then she reached out and tugged at a lock of his hair.

“Ow!” Eliot jumped away from her rubbing his abused scalp. “What is wrong with you?”

“I’m pretty sure it’s you,” Parker said, looming up behind him and sniffing again. “But maybe I should check out the other you.”

“What are you talking about?”
“The person with your face.” Parker frowned at him as though he was disappointing her with his density. “He’s here with a super hot redheaded girl, so maybe he really is you. And a thief. And a woman who acts like you.”

“Parker,” Eliot shook his head in exasperation and pinched the bridge of his nose, hard, as if that would drive away his incipient brain sprain, “I’m right here! In the kitchen! Talking to you. When I have other things I need to be doing.”

“I got their phones.” Parker hopped up on a high stool and spread her loot on the counter top that she’d already made unsanitary with her acrobatics.

“You can’t . . .” Eliot balled his fists, clenched his teeth, closed his eyes, and prayed for patience even though he hadn’t prayed in decades. “You can’t rob our customers!”

Parker snorted. “Not all our customers, silly!” She eyed her acquisitions with enthusiasm. “Just the ones that come in with fake you.”

“Hey, babe!” Alec Hardison breezed into the room with his brown arms full of packages and landed a kiss on the nearest part of Parker he could reach which happened to be her ear. He nodded to the other occupant of the room. “Eliot.”

Eliot did not commonly turn to Hardison for rescue, but this situation was an exception. He pointed an accusatory finger at the blonde thief. “Tell Parker she’s not allowed to burgle our customers.”

“Oh course, she’s not going to burgle our . . . Parker what have you been doing?”

“Somebody made a copy of Eliot,” said Parker. “I’m spying. I want to know why.”

“A copy of . . .? Damn, girl. You ain’t makin’ no sense whatsoever.” Hardison shook his head as though to clear his ears.

“You see?” Eliot glared at her.

Parker scooped up the phones, slid off the stool, and held them out to Hardison.

“Mama, I can’t, I got my hands full.” Hardison scanned the room and unerringly bee-lined for the last remaining clean counter.

Eliot’s outrage amped up. “What are you bringing in here? Is that some more of your useless kitchen gadgets? Don’t you . . . Dammit, Hardison!”

He was going to have to scrub the entire kitchen. Honestly, with those two around, he might as well stop pretending on cons that he was a janitor and just admit it was the truth.

“Luddite,” Hardison said, unruffled, taking the phones from Parker. “You just don’t understand the future.”

His dark, agile fingers flicked on the devices and bared their little electronic souls. “Cassandra Cillian, hmmm. Looks just your type, Eliot. Eve Baird, has pictures of Minoan art on her phone. Seriously? Fergus McPhail—Okay, that’s an alias. Jacob Stone. Whoa!” He held up the last phone so that he could compare the photo to Eliot’s face. “Now that is just creepy. You got some kinda twin you not telling us about, huh?”

Of course, as soon as he heard the name, Eliot knew. “My cousin,” he said shortly. “Our mommas
were twins and our daddies were cousins.” He shrugged at their stares of incredulity. “Tiny town in Oklahoma. People didn’t move around much. We were born about seven months apart. Gave our teachers hell.”

“Why didn’t you know this?” Parker asked Hardison, as though assuming that he spied on all of them.

Which apparently he did.

“Because I don’t go lookin’ for y’all’s faces unless we’re not together,” Hardison said. “I just figure anyone looks like Eliot is Eliot, and all that stuff about Pakistan—well a man has a right to his secrets.”

From anyone but Hardison, it seemed. Eliot scowled.

“So, I guess Pakistan was real?” Hardison asked.

“Yeah,” Eliot sighed. “It was real.”

“I also stole this,” Parker pulled a semi-automatic pistol out of the pocket of her hoodie and waved it around illustratively.

“Whoa! Gun!” Hardison levitated away from her. “Uh uh! No way! Get that thing out of here! Parker, give it to Eliot! Eliot! Get the gun!”

Giving Hardison an incredulous look, Eliot held out his hand. “Let me see that.”

Parker wrinkled her nose at Hardison, but she handed over the weapon willingly enough.

Hardison, edged back into range. “Woman, do not do that to me. Give me a heart attack.”

Parker and Eliot exchanged smirks.

“Y’all are just insensitive,” Hardison complained under his breath.

As he rotated the pistol in his hands, ejecting the magazine and unchambering the round, Eliot’s good humor evaporated. “You stole this weapon from an officer, Parker?”

Parker looked intrigued. “I did? How can you tell?”

“It’s probably a very distinctive something,” Hardison offered from a distance.

“Well, it’s a Glock 17 G4, and a lot of people carry ’em.” Eliot glared at Hardison. “Not distinctive. But look at this one.” He held out the gun towards Parker, and she bent over in curiosity. “The grip is nearly worn smooth. Means she’s had this for a long time and used it a lot. Not a weekender at the firing range. And here, she’s put an aftermarket trigger on this. Reduces the 17’s slightly mushy trigger pull.”

“I didn’t tell you I stole it from the woman who acts like you,” Parker said.

Eliot frowned. “Again, look at the wear. The person who uses this has a slim, smaller hand—likely a woman.” He turned the pistol over. “See this mark in the polymer? That’s made by a blade with a really superior edge. This weapon’s seen combat. A lot of agencies equip their personnel with these. . . . Wait a minute, what do you mean ‘acts like me’?”

“You know, walks in a door and moves everyone to the side of the frame all protecty-like, eyes
everyone in the room like she thinks they might be assassins, then picks the only seat in the room where you can see everything but there’s nothing behind you.” Parker pantomimed exaggerated paranoia.

“Well that’s just peachy,” Hardison groused. “As if law enforcement isn’t already on our asses too much of the time.”

He’d spent the gun detective lesson pulling up the Brew Pub’s surveillance. “Uh oh.” He pointed to the kitchen monitor. “You’re about to get blown.”

In the grainy picture, Eliot could see one of the wait staff approaching the table where the Leverage team usually met clients. Four people sat around it. Two women and two men. Of course, the staff were probably labouring under the delusion that Jacob was him. The resemblance was still uncanny.

Much as he didn’t want to go out there, he knew he'd better. Family was—complicated. However, the confusion was only going to increase exponentially if Jacob didn’t know Eliot was here--especially if the Brew Pub staff didn’t realize that Jacob wasn’t their chef with a haircut.

And something about Jacob’s companions was bothering him.

“Hardison, get me intel on the gun owner.”

“Will this help?” Parker pulled out a passport from God only knew where.

Hardison took the document, flipped open the page with the identity information, and yelped, “Parker, you stole stuff from Colonel Eve Baird, NATO Counter-terrorism! Are you crazy?!”

“You know the answer to that question!” Eliot snapped. “Give me that! What’s a counter-terrorism agent doing in a restaurant in Portland . . .”

He failed to finish his sentence when he saw the picture.

Eliot Spencer did not have a perfect memory for faces, but there were certain people whose faces he had tried and failed to forget. The woman looking up at him from the small photograph wore one of those faces.

Vaguely he was aware that Hardison was still rapidly researching, complaining about the illogic of a colonel being reassigned on detached duty to something called the Metropolitan Library.

Eliot threw the passport back at Parker, not surprised that she caught it out of the air, and growled. “Give those people back their stuff.”

He ignored her pout that always accompanied a command to return her spoils.

He had to go out there and meet his cousin. He had to go out there and meet Colonel Eve Baird. This was not going to go well.

“Are you okay, man?” Hardison, as always, was the one to notice.

Eliot strode out of the room without answering. Behind his back he heard Hardison tell Parker, “We need to follow him. That’s the same way he looked when Damien Moreau captured that General friend of his in San Lorenzo—like he knew he just got somebody killed.”

* * * * *
Chapter 3

Portland, Oregon, USA

It was raining as Eve Baird herded her librarian trainees out to Stone’s pickup. Cassandra was the only one prepared for the weather in a bright yellow raincoat with matching boots and umbrella. Eve was too tired to care how wet she got.

Since it was his truck, Stone would drive while Ezekiel, as the one who knew where they were going, would ride up front as navigator. That left the back seat for her and Cassandra.

Ever and unfailingly courteous, Stone handed Cassandra up the high step into his truck, held her umbrella over the doorway so she wouldn’t get wet, then folded it and gave it to her. Eve knew if she hung around her side of the vehicle, he’d show up and help her in as well. She never gave him that opportunity unless she was injured too badly to drag her own self where she wanted to go, so she hopped in the truck and settled herself next to Cassandra.

Cassandra had a funny look on her face, as if she weren’t sure how to feel about the matter.

They had to find parking several blocks from the Brew Pub and splash through the rain glittering in the street lights to get there. Ezekiel inserted himself under half of Cassandra’s umbrella while Eve and Jacob simply endured the wet.

Arriving at their destination, the team let Stone take point out of habit. Of all of them, he interfaced with ordinary human beings the best. Ezekiel had no tact whatsoever, Eve was more used to giving orders, and Cassandra had less experience, so they were all glad to let their teammate lead the way with his warm smile and firm handshake.

Tonight, the Brew Pub was crowded, with several groups of people waiting for tables. Evidently it was a popular hangout for Portland locals.

Stone approached the young woman recording reservations. Flashing her his most charming smile, he asked, “Can you tell me how long it’ll be for a table for four to be available?”

Eve would admit—in the privacy of her own head only, ever—that Stone was looking particularly dashing tonight in his dark coat and scarf with rain-jeweled hair bringing out the blue of his eyes. But surely that did not account for the behavior of the young person at the desk.

The girl’s eyes opened wide, as though the request astonished her. Then she frowned, considering, seemed to reach a conclusion, and returned her own bright smile.

“Of course, sir. We have a table ready immediately,” she said, all eager attentiveness. “Right this way. If your party would just follow me.”

Stone glanced back at his team with bemused triumph, and Eve gave him a quizzical stare. Jones looked pleased but innocuous, and Cassandra eyed the young woman skeptically. Obviously, none of them had any idea how they had achieved this precedence over all the other waiting diners.

With her habitual caution, Eve scanned the room for any potential threats, noting all entrances and egresses, cataloguing traffic patterns and scrutinizing the patrons. She also kept an eye on Ezekiel in case his itch to increase his wealth should lead him astray. Being Ezekiel’s guardian far too often involved guarding others from him.
He gave her an angelic grin that had her resolved to tip him upside down and shake out his pockets before they left this place.

After they had navigated a bit of confusion as several other patrons of the Brew Pub exited at the same time as the Librarian team entered, they were shown to a table that Eve would have described as perfect. While being set in a somewhat private corner, it yet afforded a clear view of the entire room.

The young woman who had led them to the table seemed a bit confused when Stone held Eve’s chair for her instead of taking it himself, then took the seat with his back to the rest of the room—like Stone had done something wrong or at least unexpected.

Almost . . . Eve frowned . . . almost as if he were already part of a play in which the rest of the team had no part, but he didn’t know his lines or where he was supposed to stand.

She glared at the establishment with even more suspicion. They did not need magical shenanigans on their night out.

“Your waiter will be with you right away,” the helpful employee said, eyeing Stone’s back.

“Thank you,” said Eve, drawing attention back to herself. “May we look at the menu?”

“Oh, yes, I’m sorry!” The flustered girl fumbled the folders she’d been clutching.

Cassandra smiled at her sympathetically. Ezekiel yawned. And Stone, of course, turned with his dazzling grin and said, “Let me help you with those, darlin’.”

The poor child looked like she wasn’t sure what to do, so Stone plucked the menus from her hands and dealt them out to his team.

“Th-th-thank you,” she stammered turning a blotchy red. Then she fled. There was no other word to accurately describe her precipitate departure.

“Well, that was kind of odd,” Cassandra said.

Stone smirked at her with those bright eyes that always made Eve convinced he was five years old and into mischief.

“Read your menu, Casanova!” she ordered.

“Casanova was also a librarian in the Count Waldstein's household,” Stone said, opening the folder.

“Is there any piece of historical trivia that you don't have on the tip of your tongue?” Ezekiel asked.

Stone looked at him as though he was unbelievable and shook his head. Of course not.

Eve sighed.

They had barely had a chance to glance at the Brew Pub’s menus before another of its employees materialized at their table. Eve had never before patronized an establishment where the service was quite so . . . well, servile.

“Hello there,” said the black-haired Indian girl, her smile lighting up her face. “My name is Amy, and I’ll be your waitress tonight. Can I get you something to drink?”
This one, since she was standing behind Stone, appeared immune to whatever it was about him that had the other woman so blitzed.

It had been a long day. Eve had fought a mummy. Even after her shower, she couldn’t shake the sensation that there were still mummy molecules in her lungs. “Just bring me the best single malt whiskey you’ve got,” she sighed.

“Look, Ezekiel!” Cassandra exclaimed, examining the beverage menu. “They have a drink just for you. ‘Thief Juice: It’s a mouth crime’!”

Amy snorted. “I think I should warn you—that item is something of an in-joke here at the Brew Pub. Our chef came close to murdering my boss when he put it on the menu. It’s the boss’s personal brew, so it’s probably made with lasers and the blood of an alien. It’s really quite dreadful.”

“Even better!” Stone shot Ezekiel a cheerfully homicidal grin. “He’ll definitely have that!”

“Yeah.” Ezekiel decided. “I’m the adventurous sort. I’ll give it a go.”

The minute she heard Stone’s voice, Amy froze. And when he turned to order a beer, her brown skin turned a shade paler. She didn’t stammer like the previous girl, but she backed up a step and apologized, “I’m sorry, sir. I didn’t realize it was you.”

The Librarians in Training exchanged puzzled glances. Stone appeared as baffled as the rest of them. Eve narrowed her eyes and wondered what fresh supernatural doohickey thingummy they were going to end up disarming instead of enjoying a peaceful meal.

“It’s okay, Amy,” said a voice Eve would have sworn was Stone’s, except his mouth hadn’t moved. “I’ll take this table, tonight.”

Eve had been so focused on the situation with their waitress, she hadn’t noticed the three people approaching. A rookie mistake with the potential to be fatal.

Cassandra gave a little gasp and covered her mouth with both hands, her eyes going wide.

“Whoa!” Ezekiel exclaimed looking back and forth between the man sitting at their table and the new arrivals.

One of the three looked exactly like Jacob Stone.

It said something about the life she had been leading that Eve’s first thoughts were that this was either a bizarre manifestation of some sort of magic—a shapeshifter or an illusion—or that this was actually Stone travelling from the past or the future. No, not from the past. Her mind immediately dismissed that theory. Nothing Stone was now could ever have once been the duplicate that stood before them. Her next thought was that she did not ever want to know what could turn a man like Stone into such a person as the man who wore his face.

Jacob Stone moved large and loose in the world, his features mobile, a keen enjoyment of everything sparkling off of him. For all of his strength and his exuberance in a fight, Stone was a gentle soul. There was a banked pain in his eyes, but it was the pain of a good man who cared too much, of a private man who dared too little. And life among the Librarians in Training had eased some of that. If he did not yet trust them entirely, he was infinitely trustworthy.

This man, this stranger with Stone’s face—she’d seen men like him too many times before. He moved like a predator, still and controlled, with violence seething under his skin, his face giving
away nothing, his swift gaze cataloguing threats. She saw him unerringly note the weapon she wore concealed. But it was his eyes that distinguished him the most from Stone. They were a soldier’s eyes—eyes that had recorded too much horror. She’d seen that kind of unrelenting pain in the eyes of men and women in her command, when the memories of things they had witnessed, of things they had experienced, and perhaps most of all of things they had done approached the unbearable. She had seen eyes like that in her own mirror.

But what puzzled her was the recognition she saw in his face. Stone’s double was looking at her as if he were seeing a ghost.

For a moment their gazes knotted together in a tangle of her confusion and his uncanny recognition. Then, with a professional reassertion of self-control, the stranger shifted his focus to their historian.

“Jake Stone,” he said, holding out his hand. “Ain’t that a kick in the teeth!”

Stone’s face, as he stood to take the other’s hand, was a mixture of astonishment and joy.

“Eliot! You’re alive! Guys, you remember the cousins I used to bar fight with on Christmas Eve? This is the best one of them!” He pulled the other man into an enthusiastic, if one-sided, hug. However, after a moment of stiff bemusement, his cousin raised an arm to awkwardly return the gesture.

“You left home when you were 18,” said the young black man who accompanied Stone’s cousin. “What were you doing in bars often enough to have a tradition?”

“Being a bad influence, eh Jake?”

Side by side, the resemblance between the two of them was remarkable. Stone’s cousin might have been just a touch narrower in the face and was in fighting trim, but Eve didn’t think she could have distinguished between them, separately, other than by Stone’s much shorter hair. No wonder they’d thrown the Brew Pub employees into such a dither.

“This,” Stone gestured around at the restaurant. “This is what you’re doing now?”

“In part.” His cousin tipped his head in acknowledgement. “I try to keep this idiot here from serving anchovies with pineapple, and otherwise insure that he doesn’t bankrupt the place with lousy food.”

“Hey!” The young man looked indignant. “Just because you’re a high and mighty chef don’t mean my culinary inventions are from the Dark Side.”

Ignoring his colleague, Stone’s cousin asked, “So, what brings you to Portland?”

Eve knew Stone had not told his family what he was now doing for employment.

He’d shrugged, saying, “It’s better they still think I’m working in the oil industry.”

However, the situation might become awkward if he found himself living in the same city as his cousin without admitting at least some of what he was doing here. Considering the man still enduring Stone’s arm around his shoulders, Eve decided that surely their secret scholar would feel able to admit his artistic connections to a man who dressed in a floral apron, who tossed shoulder length locks to reveal turquoise and silver beads braided in his hair, and who worked as a chef. For all that his body language shouted ex-military, Stone’s cousin’s camouflage suggested a man distancing himself from that past.
After a brief hesitation, Stone came to a similar conclusion. “I’m . . . um . . . I’m employed with a . . . with a small historical foundation archiving their collection of rare books and art here in Portland.”

“The Metropolitan Library, right?” spoke up the blonde girl who made up the other part of the trio. Both the men with her glared at her.

“That’s . . . correct,” said Stone slowly, “but how . . .”

“Oooh, rare art! Sophie likes art,” the girl said with a smile that was just a bit off.

With the ease of long practice, Stone’s cousin intervened. “I always knew you had it in you, class valedictorian! Now how about you introduce me to your colleagues? Friends?”

His smile at them all held some of Stone’s familiar charm, but Eve got the impression that he was asking the question like something disagreeable that nevertheless had to be done.

“Oh! Of course! Pardon my manners.” Stone gestured to Cassandra first. “This is Cassandra Cillian. She’s the scientific part of the team.”

“Pleasure to make your acquaintance, ma’am,” said Stone’s double, his smile now as warm as his cousin’s. He took the hand Cassandra offered, but instead of shaking it, he bowed a kiss over it. “Portland is a more beautiful city tonight than it's ever been before.”

Seriously? Two of them? Eve resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

Cassandra did not look displeased with the compliment. “Portland is certainly a more interesting city tonight,” she said.

Stone looked unsure whether to be happy or worried that his cousin was getting along so well with her. “Cassie, this is Eliot Spencer, the lost sheep of the family.”

At the mention of his full name, the minute relaxation Stone’s cousin had undergone reversed to high alert tension. Gone was any pretence that this meeting was simply a happy coincidence of relatives getting back in touch.

Eve’s reflexes had her on her feet, battle-ready, her veins running 99 proof adrenaline, all her attention on the man who no longer looked like merely a restaurant chef. Her hand instinctively hovered over the place her gun was concealed. With choking horror she realized it was missing.

Their eyes locked like the sights of weapons.

He had been the first to recognize her, because she had never before seen his face. However, that name—Eliot Spencer—was one Colonel Eve Baird, NATO Counter-terrorism, knew far too well.

Eliot Spencer, enforcer for Damien Moreau, who bankrolled terrorists and moved nuclear materials for Iran, whom no law enforcement agency could touch—if she was his ghost, he was her murderer.

* * * *

TBC
Portland, Oregon, USA

Eve was calculating possible outcomes. How was this situation likely to play out? There was no doubt that the four of them were outmatched, but Stone, as Spencer’s cousin, was likely safe, and he would protect Cassandra. Ezekiel, as always, would escape. That left her with three opponents.

She spared a fragment of her attention to evaluate the two unknown factors in her equation—the young man and woman who accompanied Spencer.

Here, her analysis hit a snag. If they were his backup, why weren’t they focused on the perceived threat? The two of them had, instead, closed ranks, moving near to Spencer, the young woman hovering at his back, the young man actually laying a supportive hand on his shoulder—as though they were a comfort rather than a defense. Their eyes were on him, not her.

And Spencer himself, while his tension was palpable, made no move that she could construe as aggressive. His body language was almost deliberately non-threatening—as though he were projecting reassurance.

She did not trust that reassurance, but perhaps she might hope that some combination of factors, whether the presence of his cousin or the other customers, might be constraining him from any extreme action.

As an experiment, testing that theory, she relaxed her stance slightly. The relief in Spencer’s eyes when she did confused her.

Ezekiel was the first to break the silence. “So, I’m taking it you two have met before?”

“Yes—and no,” Spencer said finally, his voice sounding tired. “We’ve never been introduced.”

Stone, who had been looking disturbed by the turn of events, rallied and resumed his social duty. “Eliot, this is Eve Baird. She’s security for the archive.”

Spencer did not offer his hand, nor did Eve offer hers. She was grateful. She did not think she could have let him touch her.

The last time Eliot Spencer had laid a hand on her, she had spent two and a half weeks in a coma, two years in rehab, and a third year in therapy. The last time she had met him with a team, people she considered closer than family with whom she’d been through the hell of combat and for whose lives she was responsible, she had come home with nothing but a handful of dog tags.

* * * * *
NATO Headquarters, Brussels, Belgium

Captain Eve Baird stood at attention as General Deschamps finished arranging the papers on his desk with mathematical precision. Folding his hands carefully on top of a file folder, he looked up at her.

“At ease, Captain,” he said. “Thank you for responding to my request so promptly. Please, be seated.”

Eve had not thought the message she had received had sounded like a request, but she simply nodded and complied. “Yes, sir.”

“I am sending your team to Spain,” the General said without further preamble. “We have a situation at the Port of Algeciras Bay. One of the companies financed by Damien Moreau will be shipping weapons-grade plutonium through APM Terminals at Juan Carlos I Dock within the week. Your mission will be to insure that cargo does not fall into the hands of Moreau’s customers, we suspect the Iranians, and to extract our informant who is seeking asylum and protection from Moreau’s retaliation.”

At the mention of Damien Moreau’s name, Eve felt her pulse pick up and her breath grow short. Everyone knew that no one touched Moreau. His reputation for clean, untraceable operations was mythical. There were never more than rumours about Moreau’s activities, and one could not arrest a rumour. Equally formidable was his reputation for swift, effective, and deadly reprisal when any of his empire was threatened.

“Because of the Port’s exceptional geostrategic location and its role as the main southern European gateway for products coming from emerging markets in North Africa, we must intercept the merchandise before the transaction is complete,” the General continued, handing her the folder. “If those materials transfer out of the hands of the original carrier, we have little chance of discovering their destination before they disappear into the trans-European transport network. You will need to strike at the most vulnerable moment.”

The use of the word “vulnerable” in connection with anything related to Moreau was, as far as Eve was concerned, inappropriate in the extreme, but she refrained from commenting.

“Moreau rules his empire with an iron hand. No one betrays him. He makes certain the cost is far too high. The fact that we have an informant who swears he can link this operation directly to Moreau is unprecedented, so we must move quickly.”

Eve nodded. “I understand, sir.”

“This is our first real chance to have some effect on Moreau’s organization,” Deschamps said, and there was an eagerness underlying his dispassionate words. “He is not expecting any trouble with this shipment. Our intelligence places him with his personal security forces in Panama for the next two weeks. He will have, at most, only a couple of his own guards with the merchandise. The rest of the deal will be handled by the middlemen who are working with us for a change.”

He tapped a key on his laptop, and a projected map of the Strait of Gibraltar appeared on the wall screen to the side of his desk. He zoomed in to the Spanish shore and then enlarged the satellite photo of the Port of Algeciras Bay until he was focused on the Juan Carlos I Dock.

“You can see that this operation will be complicated by the fact that the shipping company does not
know in advance at which slip their ship will berth, nor where they will be instructed to deliver the merchandise. Moreau prefers to keep all parties involved in his transactions unaware of the details until the last possible moment to eliminate just the sort of interference we are attempting. The APM Terminals are spread out along two kilometres of quay line, and their storage facilities cover 67 hectares of logistic surface, so you must be prepared to mobilize rapidly the minute we receive confirmation of the location of the transfer.”

“Will we have any support from the Port authorities?” Eve asked, frowning at the map and already selecting the optimal point from which to launch her mission.

“No. We have chosen to keep this operation undercover because we have no way of knowing how embedded in the control of the Port, Moreau is. We cannot risk him discovering our intentions.”

“Permission to speak frankly, sir?” Eve asked, aware that her nerves were jangling in ways that she had learned to pay attention to.

General Deschamps tipped his head slightly. “Permission granted.”

“The operation sounds well-planned, but still—Damien Moreau? He’s never been caught out yet. Are you sure the intel is good?”

“I understand and commend your caution, Captain Baird. I can assure you we have done all in our power to cross-check our informant’s information. We’re as certain as we can be under these circumstances. But you are right that Damien Moreau is always a dangerous opponent. That’s why we’re sending our best team.”

* * * * *

NATO’s best team, Eve thought with fond exasperation as they came boiling into the room for the briefing she’d scheduled. Selected from the most valuable operatives in the NATO forces of eight countries, they reminded her of nothing so much as a tumble of puppies.

Little Teresinha of Portugal, who looked like she could be knocked down with a dandelion, had their Viking giant Torbjørn from Norway in a headlock, because, she explained, he was deserving of much choking for taking the last crepe at lunch.

The Terrible Twosome, representing the UK, were carrying on one of their political arguments that always took place with unbelievable amounts of profanity at the tops of their lungs. As usual they were finishing each other’s sentences until they had switched sides. While not actually related, they looked as if they could be with their nearly identical mops of curly dark hair, white-toothed grins, and deceptively guileless Bambi eyes. Eve would have had to look up their actual names on her computer because they had been Two More and Two Less for as long as she’d known them.

Poptart was inflicting the latest in a series of hundreds of thousands of photographs of his wife and small son back in Canada upon the hapless Fortinsky who’d taken to retaliating with pictures of his boyfriend and parrot at home in Poland.

Derya of Turkey and Joscin of France were attempting to teach each other to Tango, an exercise in futility, since neither of them knew more than what they had seen on a single episode of badly subtitled “Dancing with the Stars”.

Lieutenant Brader, of Germany, her second in command, was the only one behaving with any restraint. As usual, he was glaring at the lot of them as though the sheer force of his will could reform them.
Looking at them now, she wondered if anyone would believe they had served together with
distinction in most of the heaviest NATO operations throughout Europe and the Middle East.

Calling the meeting to order, however, she had the satisfaction of seeing them slip into their truly
professional modes. When they were all seated, she called up General Deschamps’ graphics on the
screen and presented the mission he had given to them.

Their reactions shouldn’t have surprised her.

Poptart let out a cheer. “It’s about time somebody let us have a crack at Moreau!”

Derya’s smile was wolfish as she agreed. “Moreau is a blot on the face of the planet, and we are
the moist towlettes.”

“When do we start?” the Terrible Twosome asked in unison.

Eve grinned at their enthusiasm. “Transport leaves at 0600 tomorrow morning. Be there with your
kit packed or you’re walking. Bring your four leaf clover, Poptart. We’re going to Spain.”

“Yes, sir!” they exclaimed.

Their precipitate exit from the room resulted in a bottle-neck and a scuffle. Eve just shook her
head.

There had been no way she or her superiors could have known that one of Moreau’s men was more
than a match for her entire team. Damian Moreau had not needed his army, because he’d had Eliot
Spencer.

* * * * *

11 Years Earlier

Villa El Otro Lado, Portabelo, Panama

Eliot Spencer, wearing a loud floral hat and clashing swim trunks, sauntered out to the pavilion by
the pool near his private villa, ice-cold beer in one hand, towel over his shoulder in the other. This
job was infinitely superior to any other killer-for-hire gig he’d ever signed on for, especially the US
military.

The scars decorating his bare arms and chest were evidence that he’d bled for all the men and
organizations that had temporarily contracted for his services, but Damien Moreau was by far the
one who provided the best compensation.

Eliot’s bare feet were still undecided whether to appreciate the sun-warmed tile or object to the
near-burning sensation. Objection won, and his progress to the shade of the pavilion was
completed in the prancing dance of a man trying to walk on air.

Throwing himself onto a lounge chair, he mock-glared at the man laughing at his undignified
arrival.

“I’ll have to give you a 9.5 for that performance,” said Damien Moreau, stretching his tall form in
the other chair.

“Only a 9.5?” Eliot scowled, taking a swig of his beer. “I deserve at least a 10. That last move was
inspired, man. Inspired.”
Damien raised a glass decorated with fruit and a ridiculous paper umbrella. “I like a man who knows what he’s worth.”

The other occupants of the pavilion, male and female, feeling that permission had been granted, joined carefully in the laughter of the two men.

Eliot smirked up at Chapman, who, like the other on-duty security, was sweating away uncomfortably in a dark suit and glasses, and likely fuming that he would never dare to appear in Moreau’s presence in such a state of disrespectful undress.

Eliot had nothing to prove to any of them and didn’t give a damn how he looked.

After all, the only reason his feet were sensitive to the heat was that the man whom Damien had last sent him to take down had possessed a medieval taste for the bastinado. Eliot Spencer had single-handedly escaped captivity and burned that bastard and everything he had ever touched to the ground before returning in bloody, limping triumph with his mission accomplished in less time than he had allowed. Such a man had no need to worry that any of the lesser minions who hovered about Moreau would question his competence no matter what he chose to do.

As for Damien, he seemed to appreciate working with someone who wasn’t fawningly obsequious or abjectly terrified of him.

The two of them relaxed, sipping their respective drinks in companionable silence, listening to the inane chatter of the bikini-clad young women who were a permanent feature of Damien’s retinue and to the buzzing vibration of hummingbird wings in the heliconias overhanging the pavilion.

Chapman had used to enjoy trying to nail the little flying gemstones with pebbles for his own amusement until Eliot had pinned him to the ground and threatened to rip his arm off and beat him to death with it if he didn’t leave them alone—which wasn’t an idle threat, as Chapman well knew.

“I like them” was Eliot’s only explanation. “Better than I like you.”

Eliot set his beer down beside his chair, leaned back, and tilted his hat over his eyes. He was still not quite recuperated from that last mission, and sleep beckoned.

However, Damien’s voice interrupted his drift to dreamland.

“Gentlemen, ladies, if you would give us a moment alone, Spencer and I have business to discuss.”

Eliot tipped up his hat and squinted at Damien. Something was up.

The glare Chapmen sent him as he departed the pavilion was equal parts rage and jealousy, a heady brew that Eliot was quite willing to enjoy. He smirked cheerfully at his rival and gave a little wave. If Chapman wasn’t careful he was going to blow a blood vessel.

Once they were alone, Damien wasted no time. While he remained reclined on the lounge chair, idly twirling his drink between long fingers, his voice sharpened into the steel that his enemies had cause to dread.

“I have a little job for you, at the Port of Algeciras Bay. My informants inside NATO tell me that they are sending a team to intercept my next shipment to the Iranians. You will eliminate this team for me.”

Eliot tipped his head. Of course. “Untraceable or loud and messy?” he asked, taking a casual sip of
his beer. It was getting too warm.

“They are a message.” Damien’s smile was all shark and no merriment. “NATO may interfere with terrorist scum with my good will. They may not, however, interfere with me.”

Eliot raised his bottle in a toast. “Messy it is.”

He drained the last of the beverage, set it down on the table next to his chair, and got to his feet with none of the languid relaxation of the vacationer and with all of the quiescent power of a cannon that had just been loaded and primed.

Damien Moreau’s smile now was that of a man confident that he had superior firepower and that his enemies’ destruction was assured.

“One more thing, Spencer,” Moreau said. “The quisling transport company agent who seeks to double cross me? Eliminate him and anyone connected to him as we usually do.”

“It’s done,” Eliot said.

“You’ll find the photographs, maps, and all other intelligence encrypted on your computer in your villa. Leave tonight, but do not fly out of Panama. I leave it up to you whether you choose Costa Rica or Colombia. Fly from there to Morocco where I will have a private helicopter at your disposal which will take you across the Strait of Gibralter. Once you have taken care of business, return the helicopter to Morocco, and make your way here. Do not leave any record of your departures or arrivals either in Panama or in Spain. I do not choose that anyone else here knows that you are gone.”

“Then my absence might raise awkward questions,” Eliot pointed out.

“Ahh,” said Damien. “There will be no awkward questions because you will be spending the next three days in the privacy of your villa making passionate love to a beautiful woman.”

Eliot laughed. “Does this woman have a name?”

“She does, in fact.” Damien looked towards the pool where a variety of ladies were clustered, in and out of the water. “Siobhan!” he called.

All of Damien’s women were extremely attractive, but the young woman, with the waist-length curls as red and gold as the heliconias, who separated from the group and came their direction proved that Damien knew Eliot too well.

“Do you trust her?” Eliot asked, refusing to be distracted by the approaching vision of feminine pulchritude.

“Siobhan has proved trustworthy in the past. She only knows that she is to spend the next three days in your villa with the blinds drawn. She is to order food for two from Room Service. And she is to emerge after you return with tales of your prowess as a lover,” Damien reassured him. “For these onerous tasks, she will receive a truly shocking amount of money. Double if no rumor of your absence surfaces within the space of a year’s time.”

“For buying a woman off to tell lies about me,” Eliot scowled at Damian, “you’d better be prepared to pay me an even more shocking amount of money.”

“You have a few hours before sunset,” Damien smirked at him. “Make it the truth.”
“Has anyone ever told you you’re an evil man?” Eliot said, narrowing his eyes.

“Not to my face, no,” Damien said thoughtfully. “You are a first for many things, Eliot Spencer.”

The lovely Siobhan joined them in the pavilion in time to hear Moreau’s last words. She smiled flirtatiously at the two men.

“Aren’t you going to introduce us, Damien?”

Eliot noted that her eyes were grey, and her skin was patterned with light gold freckles. He liked that she was barefoot instead of affecting high heels and that her bikini was patterned with cartoon dinosaurs. Above and beyond the way she filled it out, the whimsy appealed to him.


“A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Spencer,” Siobhan held out her hand, her eyes traveling approvingly over him, and her lips curving in a pleased smile.

“The pleasure is most certainly mine, Ms. Byrne,” he said taking her hand and raising it to his lips. “And it’s Eliot, please.”

“Then you must call me Siobhan,” she said.

“Run along, you two,” Damien said. “And make it convincing.”

“I’ll see you when I return.” Eliot nodded to Damien.

“I’ll look forward to it,” Damien said.

Eliot slipped his arm around the lady’s waist, and she giggled and stroked her fingers through his close-cropped hair. A professional performance all around. They sauntered off towards Eliot’s villa, pausing on the veranda, for the benefit of the audience by the pool, to exchange a stage-worthy kiss that became a great deal more heated than Eliot had intended.

* * * * *

Later that night, as Eliot donned the dark camouflage that would allow him to move through the jungle surrounding Moreau’s retreat as if he were only another shadow, Siobhan propped herself up in his bed, clad only in her glorious hair.

“When Damien sends a man away in secret like this, I know people will die.”

Her pensive voice caused him to pause a moment in his preparations, but Eliot did not intend to discuss his mission with her.

His silence, however, merely confirmed her conclusion.

“Then I will wait here and pray that it is not you,” she said. “And when you return, I will stay a fourth day for which Damien will not be paying me, and nothing I say will be a lie.”

She did indeed have those charming golden freckles absolutely everywhere, Eliot reflected. And he wanted nothing more than to play connect the dots with his tongue. He smiled at her and leaned over, tipping her chin up, to give her a tender, slow kiss good bye.

“Then I will most definitely come back alive, sweetheart,” he promised.
*****

TBC
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Warning: Graphic Depictions of Violence—this chapter is a specific description of what Eve described generally in the last chapter. Steer clear if you don’t want to watch beloved characters do and experience bad things.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

11 Years Ago

Port of Algeciras Bay, Strait of Gibraltar, Spain

Captain Eve Baird parked the rented BMW SUV by the base of one of the post Panamax ship-to-shore cranes that the Port of Algeciras Bay boasted. In her side mirror, she could see headlights telling her that Fortinsky was pulling up behind with the other half of the team. NATO had no airbases in Spain, so they’d flown commercial from Brussels into Aeropuerto de Jerez late that night, acquired the vehicles, and driven the hour and a half to the Port. The night was still moonless and dark, but the Port lights cast everything into a contrast of glaring white and black shadow.

So far their cover story was holding. As representatives of Langdonne Enterprises, Inc. they were to meet an agent to negotiate the purchase of cargo loaded on the same ship as their target. The burner phone, resting in her pocket, contained a single text with cryptic numbers that translated to a time and berth at which the off-loading would occur. Forged bill of lading papers, which would allow them to depart with Moreau’s merchandise, crackled in her other pocket.

They had time to get into position before the ship would dock.

Her team members were professionally subdued in their behavior, but Joscin and Derya were staging a whispered debate about whether, when the mission was complete, they could wrangle a day’s leave to run down to Costa del Sol for some R and R.

In the shadow of the great crane, they stripped out of their bulky civvy camouflage, into the leaner silhouettes of their combat gear—Teresinha joked that it was the fastest-working diet she’d tried. Not that Interceptor Body Armor was so very figure-flattering.

Lieutenant Brader was unpacking their weapons from the suitcases, muttering under his breath about Poptart’s Mickey Mouse boxers.

“What can I say?” Poptart shrugged as he accepted his M-16 and ammunition from the Lieutenant. “Father’s Day present. My strength is as the strength of twenty because my shorts are licensed by Disney.”

“Twenty mice!” Fortinsky teased.

“Hey!” Poptart sniffed loftily. “That mouse rules half the known world.” He checked his pockets for his lucky four-leafed clover and his photographs of his wife and son. “All set.”

“All right, you chuckleheads.” Eve tried to sound like she wasn’t laughing. “Get your helmets on,
and let’s move out.”

“Yes, sir, She Who Must Be Obeyed,” the Terrible Twosome chorused, donning their helmets.

As her team split up into their designated groups and melted into the shadows where they would assume their agreed-upon positions, Eve did not feel any chill of premonition. Fate sent her no sign that she would never see her whole team alive again.

* * * * *

Perched high on the beam of the post Panamax crane, Eliot Spencer watched through his infra-red scope as the NATO team separated, crept from shadow to shadow until they had reached their positions, and established their hiding places. Even from this short observation, he was enumerating weaknesses, developing strategies for dealing with each of the individuals in the team. There was a phrase for this sort of operation. It was called shooting fish in a barrel.

In the east, the night was turning imperceptibly into pre-dawn grey, and he could see the dark blot of the ship as it approached this side of the Strait.

First he would deal with the traitor. Then he would go collect his prey from the places they had so conveniently stashed themselves. He would start with the group farthest from their commanding officer. NATO didn’t put officers in charge of teams like this because their granddaddies went to private school with the top brass. Whoever she was, she would be a formidable opponent. If he took her on first, he ran the risk of being injured and compromised in his ability to go after the others. This way, they might bust each other into pieces, but all that would matter would be that his pieces would be living and hers would be dead.

He wasn’t going to use guns—too noisy. His plan was to be long gone before the Port authorities discovered the bodies. Even his victims would not know he was there until they were in the process of dying.

* * * * *

Usually Eve Baird had a sixth sense about when she was about to lead her team into an untenable tactical situation, but her first inkling of trouble on this mission came after they had acquired the target and neutralized the security guards. Their informant had not showed. Her only evidence that he had even existed was the single text on her phone. Nor did he reply to her return text. While it was possible that he had bolted, Eve considered his disappearance an anomaly that bore consideration.

While Joscin and Derya secured the merchandise and their bound captives in the transport vehicles, Eve paced the length of the cargo container and back, trying to refine the cause of her unease. As the sky grew lighter, her worries took a more definite shape.

Derya contacted her with the news that their lookouts, Torbjørn and Fortinsky, had failed to report in.

“They’re not answering their comms, and that’s just weird,” Derya said. “One of them might have power issues, but both?”

No one else on the team had heard anything from their missing members.

“They’re not down here by the docks,” Poptart reported.

“Keep trying to raise them,” Eve ordered, scanning the area for any sign of a threat.
She could hear Derya quietly trying to make contact over comms, “Dammit, Fortinsky, Torbjørn, pick up the phone.”

The pale dawn was suddenly breathless. The air grew chill, and her heartbeat accelerated. Nervous pricklings marched up the back of her neck. There had to be another element present here which she had not factored in to her mission calculations.

“Joscin and I are done here,” Derya said, her voice tighter now and more intense. “We’ll swing around where we know they were supposed to be and see what’s going on.”

Eve concurred and gave the order.

Moments later, Joscin’s strained voice came over the comm, “Captain, we have a situation here. Someone attacked Torbjørn and Fortinsky. I think they might be dead.”

Beside her, she sensed Lieutenant Brader stiffen. Her heart clenched, and her mind frantically attempted to reject what she had heard.

In the background, Eve could hear Derya’s voice, ragged and panicked. “No, no, no, hayır! O ölmədi! O ölmədi!” and Joscin’s, gently correcting, “I can’t find a pulse. I think his neck is broken. Derya, chéri, Je suis désolé. Il est mort.”

“Captain,” Joscin addressed her. “Torbjørn has had his throat cut, and Fortinsky’s neck is broken. Their weapons are here, but the ammunition is missing.”

They had gone so silently. Eve had heard no movement, no shouts, no sounds of a struggle. It seemed impossible, as the rose and gold sunrise lit the tops of the highest containers, that two of her team, her family, had crossed death’s threshold. It was always a chance inherent in the jobs they did, but it should not have not been a mystery. It should not have been something she could not fight.

“Get back, here,” Eve ordered suddenly, not sure why she was so certain that they needed to be together. “Joscin, Derya, get back here now. Leave the bodies. We’ll pick them up later.” If there was a later, she thought. In the back of her head, a niggling worry was trying to destroy her control: Damien Moreau never loses.

For a moment, she thought Derya would object, but her team knew her well, and when she spoke in that tone, they obeyed. Time enough to fight over orders after the situation was contained. Brader was calling in the other members of the team who had been scouting for their informant down by the docks. Eve was grateful for his initiative.

However, it was already too late.

This time, she heard the fight go down when she lost the next four members of her team—muffled grunts, the thudding of fists on flesh, a cry of pain that cut off too suddenly, the sound of someone choking, the unmistakable crack of shattering bone.

Terror and anger surged in Eve’s blood. She skidded around a bank of cargo containers, running towards those sounds. Behind her, she could hear the percussion of Brader’s footsteps matching her own.

By the time they located the ruined bodies of their team mates, their adversaries had already vanished. Eve had no one to fight and everything to lose as she stumbled to her knees beside Teresinha, barely in time to feel the life draining from the young woman as she gulped for air that would never come. Her body armor had been inadequate to turn aside what must have been an
exceptionally crafted blade. The single stab wound in her chest had nicked her pulmonary artery, and she bled out, drowning in her own blood while Eve tried in illogical grief to staunch the red tide with her bare hands.

Lieutenant Brader’s rush to the other victims was equally in vain. When he returned to Eve, the hand he placed on her shoulder was shaking.

“Poptart’s already dead,” he said as though the words were knives on his tongue. “His throat is cut like Torbjørn’s.”

“The Twosome?” she asked, seeing the answer in his eyes as he gestured to where they lay together in a mangled twist of limbs, their necks identically broken, inseparable even in death.

“No,” Eve whispered. “No. This can’t be happening.”

“Captain, we need to get back to the transport,” Brader insisted, dragging her to her feet from where she was still holding Teresinha. “We have to get back to Derya and Joscin.”

“Yes, yes, of course.” Eve drew command around her like armor. She was a soldier. She’d seen men and women die in battle before. The important thing was to go on. Always go on.

She still had two other members of her team there. They needed to get to the transport vehicles and try to run. They needed to complete the mission that had already cost them too much.

Backup—they needed to call in backup. NATO had no forces in the area, but she could mobilize local law enforcement. Fumbling at her pocket with blood-stained fingers as they ran, she managed to extract the burner phone. “Spain. Emergency number,” she panted. “It’s 112, right Lieutenant?”

“Yes, Captain. Hurry!”

The five seconds it took her call to go through seemed like five thousand, but at last Eve was able to explain in Spanish from which all semblance of grammar had fled that there were assassins at the Juan Carlos I Dock and officers were down.

The dispatcher on the line assured her that help was on the way.

It would come too late. Eve heard the transports roar to life before she rounded the corner to see that the captive guards had somehow been released and had hijacked the cargo her team had died to secure.

On the ground, obscured by the cloud of dust churned up by the departing 18-wheelers, lay the bodies of Derya and Joscin, hands reaching towards each other but not touching.

Beside her, Brader gave a choked cry, and she turned to him, never having heard him express an emotion under fire before. In horror, she saw his hands clasped around the hilt of a knife in his throat. His eyes pleaded with her, but she knew she dare not let her guard down one moment to help him.

Their enemy was here, and she had to find cover. As she sprinted towards the doubtful shelter of the cargo containers, she heard Brader’s body hit the ground with a lifeless thud that broke her heart and set off such an eruption of rage and pain that she thought her body would ignite.

She needed to shoot someone so badly, to destroy whoever it was that had destroyed her team. But the dust settled over the three motionless bodies of her friends in silence. No adversary appeared on whom she could visit her wrath. Eve remained vibrating with tension against the long side of the
container that was guarding her back. She could see more than 180 degrees, and if anyone came around the ends of the container, she would have time to prepare for the attack.

Far away and faint in the unearthly stillness, she could hear the sound of sirens, still minutes from the Port. Her traitorous body demanded she react to the deaths of her team, but Eve knew she could not afford to grieve. She needed clear sight and steady hands. She had to keep a cool head. Somewhere, nearby, death was stalking her.

In the end, all her anticipation did not prepare her for the abrupt appearance, right in front of her, of her enemy—not a team, just one man, like one of the dark shadows come to life. He had dropped from the top of the containers, which had to be at least 15 feet, and landed light and balanced, poised for his attack, a knife stained with gore in his hand.

She could not see his face—this lone man who had been able to take out a NATO counter-terrorism team single-handed—because he was wearing a helmet with a face shield spattered with the spray of arterial blood. But she knew she would never forget the way he moved—catlike and predatory, inhumanly swift.

He was well inside of the effective range of her weapon making it useless, but Eve didn’t even care. Shooting him from a distance would not slake the vengeance thrumming in her blood. She wanted to crush him in her teeth, rip him to pieces with her bare hands, trample his body into the dust with her boots.

With a berserker battle cry, she launched herself at her adversary. Using the stock of her M-16 as a battering ram, she smashed it into his face shield with the entire force of her weight and momentum, hearing the crack, first of shatterproof polycarbonate, then of bone as his jaw snapped.

The two of them crashed to the earth. Eve drove her knee into his rib cage—not enough force left to break ribs, but crack them, maybe. His fist connected with the side of her head like the flash of lightning. An intense narrow discomfort troubled her abdomen. His knife, she realized. He’d stabbed her.

She had to get that knife away from him before he slit her throat like the others. She was bleeding. Way too much. Rolling free of him, she kicked out, striking his wrist and sending the knife he held flying.

Eve tried to get to her feet, but the pain in her gut was slowing her. Her opponent was faster. She would have to work with what she had. Escape was not possible, so she threw herself at his leg, gripping just below the knee and somersaulted sideways, throwing him off balance, and—there it was, that had done some real damage. If she wasn’t running anywhere, neither was he.

The sirens were louder now. Perhaps, if she could not win this fight, at least she could avoid losing long enough. If she could just keep moving . . . the loss of blood was making her light-headed.

Then he had her in a grip like jaws of iron. Eve felt her left shoulder dislocate, and then her other arm break. Her assailant followed those up with a blow, swift as a cobra, to her neck. Cartilage crushed, and her larynx collapsed.

Eve gasped in desperation, her hands, in spite of her injuries, scrabbling at the air as though she could clasp the oxygen in her fists.

She knew she was dying.

The last thing she remembered, as her final breaths rattled and gurgled in her chest yet brought no
air, and the live fire in her skull narrowed her vision to a dark tunnel, was the impassive mask of her killer, crazed fractures running through his face shield, his own blood dripping steadily off his jaw, waiting, watching with inhuman patience for her to die.

* * * * *

Eliot Spencer knelt beside the woman in a parody of tenderness, watching the life fade from the blue eyes that never left his, although he knew she could not see beyond his visor.

The first time he had seen that awful glaze turn living eyes to dead and known that Death was taking a life by his hand, he’d been sure his own life would follow it—that he could not survive the pain. At that moment in time he would have given anything to have been able to have taken it all back, made another choice, even if it was only to die rather than kill. But he had brothers depending on him, a mission to accomplish, a nation to which he had sworn an oath.

In the end, he’d bricked up and plastered over the pain again and again so that no one, especially himself, would know it had ever been there. Eventually everything that had made him human was behind that wall.

He was an asset. Used by his government increasingly to do what no one else could do, what no one would admit had been done. Eventually the distinction between good and evil blurred, because he was always brutally honest about what he did. Any organization that crossed the lines he crossed, that turned a boy into a man who would cross those lines, did not deserve his loyalty. He still worked for them, on occasion, if the price was right. But there were others willing to pay more.

Now he killed clinically, mechanically—with carefully chosen force. That was why Damien Moreau trusted him. The others, like Chapman, were vicious brutes, getting pleasure out of the violence they committed and inclined to go to excess. Eliot Spencer got the job done. No more. No less. To exact specifications.

Now the creep of eternity over mortal features was merely a marker that he had completed the job. Painless. Irrelevant.

The crescendo wail of sirens and the sound of vehicles braking fast cut short his vigil. He had to go. The stubborn woman was still refusing to die, so he aimed one last precise blow to her head.

There now. She had ceased to fight. Her hands slumped limp to the earth. On sudden, irrational impulse, he brushed gloved and bloodied fingers over her eyelids, closing them.

With deft, dispassionate hands, he searched the NATO Captain’s body and found the keys to the SUV.

“No thank you, darlin’,” he murmured through bloody teeth. “This’ll speed things up just fine.”

Getting to his feet was an exercise in the power of his will over the reluctance of his body. For a minute, his stomach nearly raised an insurrection, as pain and nausea struck with double-fisted blows. Bent over gasping, Eliot fought grimly for the control to move. Slamming all acknowledgment of his physical condition behind barricades raised by sheer determination, he straightened, turned for the docks, and moved off at a limping run.

He needed to collect his prisoner and get back to the helicopter. Fortunately, with the gift of NATO’s Beamer—he twirled the keys with satisfaction—he’d be in Morocco before the local LEOs had found half the bodies he’d left in his wake.
As the shoreline of Spain fell away behind him, and the coast of North Africa loomed ahead, Eliot let the coils of tension binding him relax slightly. The traitor was trussed up and unconscious in the back of the helicopter. He had a brief visit to make at the fellow’s home to leave Damien’s signature warning to all other potential insubordinates. It was still a long and arduous day before he would reach Panama and the lovely Siobhan, although in his current condition, he was going to be a bit of a disappointment to her. But at least now he was sure he would make it.

Damn, he hurt though. His jaw was probably going to require an actual doctor. He was going to demand a bonus from Damien for taking on that NATO Captain. She’d been a foe worthy of his talent as so few were these days. By the exertion of her valour, she had added a greater lustre to his accomplishment. No friend could have done more. He sent a mental salute in her direction.

In another life, under other circumstances, he would have liked to buy her a drink, find out what fire other than wrath could burn in those blue eyes. But Fate had decreed they meet in war, severing all chance of human fellowship, and only this subtle bond of association could remain between them—that the final testimony to the value of his victory he received at the hands of her whom he had vanquished.

* * * * *

TBC

Chapter End Notes

"hayır! O ölmedi! O ölmedi!" = No! He is not dead! He is not dead!

"chéri, Je suis désolé. Il est mort." = "dear, I'm sorry. He is dead."

* * * *
Chapter 6

11 Years Ago

Port of Algeciras Bay, Strait of Gibraltar, Spain

Doctor Mateo Villanueva Cortés, emergency physician, gripped the armrests of his seat as Jorge sent the Ambulancia de UVI móvil careening around the corner and into the Port gateway in a spray of gravel. Jorge always drove their mobile intensive care unit as if he thought it was a Formula One race car in the Grand Prix de Monaco, but he was outdoing himself today.

Mateo had been employed in the Servicios de Emergencias Médicas for sixteen years, and he had never ridden with such a Jehu of driver as this one. It was a matter of honour for Jorge to arrive on scene before the Vehículo de Intervención Rápida, and once again he had succeeded. Mateo could see the amber lights of the rapid response team’s vehicle in the side mirror. Jorge would be insufferable for a week.

Glancing back at Nadia, Mateo rolled his eyes. His emergency nurse was grinning, clearly enjoying the jolting ride in the back of the ambulance far too much. She and Jorge were terrifying.

Ahead of them several cars belonging to the policía were clearing the way, reminding Mateo that this call was not like all the others. This was not an illness or an accident. There was a killer loose at the Port, and his team would be running into a war zone.

Jorge slowed the vehicle as two police officers jogged up to them, weapons drawn. He rolled down the window and leaned out.

"Can you tell us where to go?" Jorge asked. "The VIR is right behind us."

"Right this way," one of the officers gestured. "There’s one victim still alive over behind that second row of cargo containers. The rest, I’m afraid, are very dead." He had to shout the last sentence after them as Jorge left a layer of tires on the asphalt. The VIR personnel would not be getting to the patient before Mateo and Nadia if Jorge could help it.

The ambulance screeched to a halt perilously close to a startled group of police clustered around one of four bodies Mateo could see. Vaulting from the vehicle, kit in hand, Mateo sprinted to the side of the victim. All of the officers moved away except for two, one trying to staunch the blood from a penetrating abdominal wound, the other kneeling beside the non-responsive young woman and breathing into what appeared to be a cobbled together trach tube made from a repurposed ballpoint pen. Behind him he heard Nadia and Jorge rushing in with the heavier equipment. Nadia had been an emergency nurse for longer than Mateo had been a doctor, so she set immediately to attaching cardiac and oxygen monitors to their patient.

"She’s not breathing on her own?" Mateo asked the young officer who was continuing his primitive airway management.

In between breaths, he shook his head. "No, her throat is crushed. She was turning blue when we got here. I can’t tell if she has a pulse, but since she’s still bleeding, something’s got to be moving, right?"

"I’m getting a pulse," Nadia informed him. "Extreme tachycardia and diminished blood pressure, so it’s no wonder you’re not feeling it."
“You saved her life, young man,” Mateo said. “Excellent work with the cricothyroidotomy.”

“The what?”

Mateo indicated the tube.

“Oh,” the officer said, “I read about it on the Internet.”

*Dear God*, Mateo thought, *the fact that this woman is still alive is a miracle.*

She had obviously been the victim of blunt force trauma resulting in a laryngeal fracture. He suspected unstable laryngeal cartilage and massive mucosal injuries at the least, if not disruption of the anterior commissure. The resultant severe edema and haematoma had completely blocked off her airway.

“Nadia, what are her O2 sats?”

“74 percent,” Nadia said, already busy starting an IV. “And dropping.”

The makeshift trach had kept her alive, but it was insufficient. Hypoxemia was already affecting her organ function.

“We’re going to have to perform a tracheostomy,” Mateo told Nadia. He deftly began to prep the patient for the procedure while Nadia gathered the trach tube and the ventilator. However, his patient’s airway wasn’t the only issue. Already she was exhibiting signs of hypovolemic shock. The woman had lost a frightening amount of blood, Class III, verging on Class IV hemorrhage. If he could not get her stabilized, her body was going to shut down.

“Put a second IV in,” Mateo instructed. “We’re going to have to give her enough transfusion to get her arterial pressure up to at least 40 millimetres of mercury.”

Pumping fluids into her system would be like trying to hold water in a cracked glass, but it was her only chance to survive long enough to make it to surgery.

Mateo was relieved when the Rapid Response team arrived from confirming the deaths of the other victims on site. The officers had remained, but their attention was turned outward, ready for another attack. Another pair of experienced hands was welcome. Mateo was securing the trach tube and attaching it to the ventilator while Nadia was managing the transfusion. Having the VIR doctor and nurse meant that someone was able to check for other injuries and arrange for transport.

Observing both that her helmet had nearly been ripped off her head and that her pupils were unresponsive, the VIR doctor diagnosed severe traumatic brain injury with a Glasgow Coma Score of 2T. That meant they’d also need to treat her for possible cervical spinal injury, always a complication when dealing with a trach tube. The fact that she had a dislocated left shoulder and a broken right arm seemed trivial in comparison.

Finally, their patient was receiving oxygen via the ventilator and trach; her blood supply was being augmented with saline and plasma; her neck, shoulder and arm were immobilized; and she was carefully maneuvered onto the gurney for transport. They had done all they could for her, but it wasn’t enough. His patient flatlined as they loaded her into the ambulance.

Asystole. She was dead.

Even defibrillation would have no effect, although they would try. With a feeling of despair, Mateo began CPR. “Nadia, administer 1 mg epinephrine by IV every 3-5 minutes,” he ordered. He could
only pray that they could keep her brain alive long enough to get any kind of a rhythm re-established.

It was not far from the Port of Algeciras Bay to the Complejo Hospitalario Punta de Europa, but they covered the distance in record time. For once, Mateo was grateful for Jorge’s ability to take an ambulance around a corner on two wheels.

* * * * *

Complejo Hospitalario Punta de Europa, Algeciras, Spain

The first thing she became aware of was sound. A woman weeping.

Mom?

Then everything was silence.

* * * * *

She was surfacing through viscous blackness, trying to breathe. What was that infernal beeping? Why didn’t someone turn it off?

“Don’t you dare leave us, Baby Girl. Don’t you leave. You have to fight. You’ve always been a fighter, Eve.”

I won’t, Dad, she would have said, as she stopped fighting.

It was dark inside the silence.

* * * * *

A shaft of memory, like light. She was six years old, and her father was teaching her to fire a gun. She smelled the acrid sulfur of the propellant.


She was kneeling on rough pavement. Her knees were wet with blood. Blood was pouring over her hands. Someone was dying, and she could not stop it.

The darkness was a friend.

* * * * *

A man, a stranger, speaking. “We’ve managed to repair the abdominal damage. Peritonitis is responding well to treatment. Intracranial pressure is being regulated through an external ventricular drainage system. All of her organs are functioning again. We’ve stabilized the architecture of her larynx with metal alloy plates, but as long as she’s comatose, we’ll be leaving in the trach tube and assisting with her breathing.”

Who was he talking about?

“But when will she wake up? It has been two weeks. If she’s okay now, why doesn’t she wake up?”

“Coma is complicated, and she is suffering from a skull fracture. We don’t entirely understand why the body shuts down this way, but it may be in order to give it the rest and resources it needs to
heal. Your daughter has survived a major trauma. She was a very fit and healthy person, and that gives her an advantage. Let her have the time.”

The silence took his voice.

* * * * *

A woman, a stranger, speaking in Spanish. Who speaks Spanish in Brussels?

“Hello, love. My name is Gabriela and this is Ines. We’re just going to move you so we can clean the sheets. Then we’ll give you a nice bath, so you’ll feel all fresh.”

Another voice, also a woman. “Do you always talk to them?”

“Of course. You never know what they hear. It’s a nice thing to do. I’d want someone to remember I was there if it happened to me.”

“She probably doesn’t even speak Spanish.”

“She was a NATO Captain. Of course, she does.”

Was?

There were strangers’ hands on her body, moving her, but she could not move herself. Somewhere, off in the distance she thought there was pain, but it did not seem relevant to her. Warm, wet cloth touched her as if she were a soiled child. What had happened to her?

“There you go, love. All clean again. How would you like some lotion?”

The hands again, soothing. The lotion did feel good.

She was so tired.

* * * * *

She spent her days and nights, undifferentiated, surrounded by sounds of machines monitoring her vital signs, pumping fluids and nutrients and medications into her, draining fluids out of her, rhythmically compressing her legs to keep her blood circulating. Sleeping and waking and dreaming bled into each other until she did not know whether she believed everything was real or nothing was. The only constant was the pain. The only interruptions were when people came into the room.

Sometimes their voices blended into the sounds. Occasionally she understood entire conversations. They handled her like she was a large and awkward doll, dressing and undressing her, bathing her, attending to her machines. Often they hurt her, moving her, taking blood, changing dressings. Eve began to look forward to Gabrielle, the nurse who talked to her as she worked, babbling like a brook about the weather, her siblings, hospital gossip, the local news.

Eve was so very, very bored.

* * * * *

Someone was reading to her. A romance novel? Mom? She had always been a bit of a disappointment to her mother—the daughter who wanted to be the hero instead of the heroine.
“I want the pretty dress and the sword!”

“My warrior princess,” said her dad.

She smiled at the memory and heard the novel drop on the floor.

“Eve! She’s waking up! Can you hear me? Oh, Eve.”

Her mother was gripping her hand. Eve tried to answer, but her mouth made no sound.

“She’s trying to say something! Eve, honey, you can’t talk. Can you squeeze my hand?”

What kind of a question was that? She could carry a 100 pounds of gear at a jog over rough terrain for a 12 hour day. Of course she could squeeze a hand . . . except she couldn’t.

“I can feel her trying!” Her mother was crying. “She’s going to be okay. I know it.”

The world faded to dark again.

* * * * *

Eventually the time came when she could tell it was light. Should she open her eyes? No, it was too much work. Why did she hurt everywhere?

“Ms. Baird.” A new voice. Masculine. “I’m Dr. Andrade, your urologist. It’s time to replace your catheter.”

Where was the darkness when she needed it?

* * * * *

Someone was stalking her, moving like smoke on the wind. He was dressed all in black—no insignia. His face shield was cracked and bloody, and he carried a knife. She could neither run nor fight. Her heart rate spiked as he plunged the knife into her stomach.

Alarms went off.

He vanished like a shadow.

* * * * *

The next time she awoke, she did open her eyes. Everything was a blur of unfamiliar shapes. There was nothing that she recognized. Her eyes felt like she’d been squinting through a desert sandstorm for a week, and she blinked trying to clear them of the dryness and grit. She was in a colorless room full of humming machinery. There were tubes in every possible orifice of her body and some impossible ones.

She could not move, tied down by wire leads and plastic tubing.

She needed to move. It wasn’t safe to stay here. Someone was trying to kill her.

Her struggles were setting off alarms. Why couldn’t she just jump up and flee? Why didn’t her body work?

Pain struck like the blowback from an IED. So much pain.
Voices shouting. She tried to call—to warn them.

Then the room was full of milling bodies. Hands tried to pin her down. She flailed at them, satisfied to hear them cry out, hating the fact that her arms refused to move at her command.

“Don’t let her displace the EVD!”

“We need to sedate her before she damages herself!”

No!

A sharp pinch of pain and the world faded to darkness.

* * * * *

The next time she was lucid, she could see clearly that a stranger was in the room. He wore an eye-achingly bright orange uniform with navy and silver stripes. She did not recognize the colors, but the emergency medical services patch on his chest let her know his profession.

Paramedic. No. That was Spanish labeling him “Médico”—he was an emergency doctor. Which meant she was in Spain.

He noticed her observing him, and a smile crinkled up the lines of his face.

“Senorita, you are awake!” he exclaimed. His voice sounded choked and a glint of extra moisture shone in his eyes.

Why would a stranger shed tears for her? Eve tried to greet him, to ask who he was, but no words came.

“No, do not try to talk,” he said, moving swiftly to her side and taking her hand in one of his. “You have had an injury to your larynx.” He touched his other hand to his neck, demonstrating. “My name is Doctor Villanueva Cortés. I am médico de emergencias with the ambulancia that brought you here.”

She wanted to ask him so many questions. Where was here? What had happened to her? What had happened to her team?

His hand was warm on hers, large and tanned. In contrast, her hand was so very pale and claw-like. Surely that bony, fleshless arm did not belong to her?

“I am so happy to see you alive!” he said. “We hoped and prayed, but we did not know if . . .” his voice trailed off. “It is wonderful, a miracle.”

Eve needed to talk. Her right arm appeared to be encased in a cast, but she still had her left arm. Withdrawing her hand from the doctor’s grip, she tried to pantomime writing.

“Ah!” the doctor exclaimed. “You would like pen and paper, I am sure. And you have family here who will be delighted that you are awake. I will take my leave of you and deliver your request.”

No, Eve wanted to interrogate him.

“Farewell, Senorita,” he said.

She closed her eyes, frustration alarming her monitors and exhausting her.
Sleep dragged her down before anyone else arrived.

* * * * *

TBC
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

A short chapter about what Eliot was up to while Eve was not quite dying.

11 Years Ago

Villa El Otro Lado, Portabelo, Panama

Eliot Spencer barely made it down the steps from Damien’s plane at the very private airstrip in Colombia. His knee was swollen and excruciatingly painful. He suspected a torn ACL which was going to need surgery. But he couldn’t go near a doctor until he was clear of any connection to the job that had gone down in Spain.

To make matters worse, his jaw was equally swollen and immobilized. He had been unable to take oral pain medication because the damned first-aid kit in the plane hadn’t contained anything liquid or injectable. Eliot swore he was never going to take on a job again without a stock of IV pain meds instantly available. He’d finally crushed some extra strength Tylenol with the hilt of his knife, tried to dissolve it in water, and managed to use a straw to get it down. It had all of the effectiveness of trying to put out a volcanic eruption with an eyedropper.

Not to mention he was starving. It had been nearly 48 hours since he’d last eaten.

He forced himself to hobble to the Jeep he’d left concealed by the airstrip. Managing the brake, the gas, and the clutch with his bad leg left him sweating and nauseated. The crappy roads between the airstrip and the coast jarred his knee, his ribs, and his jaw unmercifully. And thanks to the fact that he couldn’t open his mouth, he couldn’t even alleviate his misery with profanity.

The boat ride, in the dark, navigating by GPS alone, was a hellish blur. By the time he reached Damien’s private dock in the mouth of the river, out of sight of the tourist launches, he was ready to collapse, but he still had to commandeer one of the launches to make it to El Otro Lado.

He had reached the point where every step he had to take added a zero to the total amount he was going to charge Damien for this job.

When Siobhan met him just before dawn, as he slipped surreptitiously in through the tall window that opened onto the private patio of his villa, she gave a little cry of shock. He really must look terrible, Eliot thought before his bad leg gave out, pitching him headlong into her arms.

Siobhan Byrne was made of pure grit all the way through and didn’t flinch as his dead weight and bloodied filth landed on the turquoise wisp of a negligee she was wearing. Instead, she supported his sorry ass to the chaise lounge where he finished his collapse.

Eliot mentally added another zero to how much Damien was going to be paying her.

Forty minutes later, Eliot found himself with his blood-encrusted clothing cut away, his leg elevated and packed in ice, his ribs also wrapped and iced, another ice pack pressed to his jaw, and most important, enough painkillers to drop a horse coursing through his veins.
The lovely and blurred Siobhan had apparently an eclectic education in field medicine. He wondered drowsily where she had got it.

He might have proposed marriage to her if he could have talked when she brought in a basin of warm water and began washing the blood and sweat off his face. It was probably a good thing he couldn’t talk.

It had been 72 hours since he’d had more than a catnap. Eliot thought he felt Siobhan’s lips on his swollen mouth briefly before sleep ambushed him and dragged him under.

He would have avoided the sleep altogether if he could have.

They lay in wait for him behind the curtains of his eyelids, as they always did, pale stains of past atrocities, new and bloody spectres fresh from the kill. Their eyes met his in that moment before they ceased to see, frozen in fear or rage or astonishment or pain or grief. Their voices, crying and screaming and pleading and cursing and choking, echoed in his ears. Their bodies twitched, writhed, crumpled, contorted, broke and bled out, re-enacting over and over the agonies of their deaths.

In continuous replay, he was forced to watch death turn living souls into inert matter. He could never scrub away the feel of their taken lives from his hands or his heart.

This time it was the eyes of the innocents that haunted him. The elderly mother and younger sister of the traitor, bewildered, unbelieving, terrified. The man himself, beyond fear for his family, sobbing his willingness to endure any torture if it would spare them. The eyes of the young man and woman at the transport vehicles, and the way they had tried and failed to reach each other for comfort. And the eyes of the NATO Captain, like those of an avenging Fury—full of wrath and grief. She had thrown herself at death in such courage and love.

The nightmare visions drove him out of sleep, pursuing him into consciousness, shaking and sick at heart.

Eliot lay still, breathing deliberately past the knifing guilt, muting the ghosts behind those fortified mental walls. It should have been getting easier to do so, and yet each time the task seemed more impossible. The emotions he had thought dead would shamble out of the dark and into the light where they had no right to affect him.

The dawn light of the Panama sun caressed his closed eyes as gradually his physical discomfort drifted back into his notice, a welcome distraction, although the meds were managing the worst of it. He was tucked in with warm blankets to counteract all the icepacks—Siobhan must have done that after he had fallen asleep. Perhaps he could bear to get up and find something liquid to eat. In fact something painful to do might succeed in banishing his mental unease.

Opening his eyes, he discovered that Siobhan had drawn up a small table and left an energy drink with a straw in it. If his jaw had allowed it, he would have smiled. The woman was a wonder.

Fortified by the hydration and calories, Eliot attempted to move his leg. Okay. That solved the problem of thinking about anything at all. Sheer, unadulterated agony. Just what he needed. He embraced the pain and forced himself first into a sitting position, then standing, wavering, supporting himself with a hand on the back of the chaise lounge. All his injuries protested the increased activity.

Let them.
He gritted his teeth in determination and then spent the next ten minutes regretting it as his vision went black, and his body threatened to pitch him back to the ground.

No moving his mouth. Check.

Eliot was in desperate need of a shower, shivering with the desire to wash all traces of the last three days from his flesh and from his soul. With slow, hobbling steps, he made his way to the pool shower. His master bathroom had a huge tub with jets that would feel wonderful on his aching muscles, but he knew that even if he could clamber into it, he’d never get out again without the assistance of a crane.

Taking that shower was equal parts bliss and torment. When he emerged, he felt a metric tonne lighter, as though the weight of all he had been through had drained away with the dirt. He needed to get dressed and contact Damien. It would have to be e-mail, he realized. Talking on the phone wasn’t going to happen. Being non-verbal really sucked. He’d have to make an appointment to have his jaw fixed. If it had to be wired, he was adding another zero to his price.

Clad only in a towel, he made his limping way to his bedroom to find some sort of loose-fitting clothing.

Alone in the middle of his bed, Siobhan slept sprawled out on satin sheets, her face peaceful and free of makeup, her hair glittering like treasure around her. She was making funny little snores that he found completely adorable. He noted that she’d exchanged the frothy, sexy bit of fabric she’d been wearing, which he’d probably ruined with blood and grime, for a long t-shirt decorated with Elmer Fudd and the caption “Be Vewy Vewy Quiet!”

Eliot had to resist another smile. God, he could love this woman. Beauty and brains. A sense of whimsy and a kickass sense of humor. And most of all competence. Damn, competence looked good on a woman. And she already knew, at least a little, what he did for a living.

It was a good thing he had his injuries to back up his excuses for not joining her in that bed—even though his brain could think of many ways a man with a bad leg, no functioning mouth, and cracked ribs could nevertheless be extremely creative with his hands, and his body let him know it would totally be down with that idea. Even though making love to her would be the ideal way to drive away the shadows.

He reached out and gently threaded a fingertip through one of her curls, then pulled his hand away without waking her. I’m sorry, sweetheart. You’ll just have to tell those lies.

A woman like Siobhan deserved a man and not a monster.

Many men see what they fear most in their nightmares. Eliot Spencer, ever and always, awoke to find his nightmare in his mirror.

* * * *

TBC
Chapter 8

11 Years Ago

Complejo Hospitalario Punta de Europa, Algeciras, Spain

Her parents looked devastated. Which was odd, because they were smiling and so happy that she was awake.

Eve wanted to apologize for making them sad, for making them worry—again.

She was sorry for the new strands of grey in her mom’s hair, for the puffiness around her eyes that meant she had been crying a lot and often.

She was sorry for the tremor in her dad’s hands, for the way his eyes were seeing terrible memories as he looked at her. He had never discouraged her from being a soldier, but he had always known too well how precarious was the life into which she had followed him.

“I’m sorry,” she would write if she could. The paper and pen were on the table, beyond her reach.

I love you, she tried to say with her eyes.

* * * * *

Her father was the one who told her what she had already suspected from the fragments of her returning memory and the nightmares—that her team, all her friends, were dead.

She appreciated that he made it a formal occasion, wearing his uniform, and delivering to her the handful of broken identification tags, one at a time, each as unique as the person who had worn it—issued by the country in whose armed forces he or she had originally served before transferring to NATO.

With fingers trembling from more than weakness, Eve traced the DEU on the half oval that had belonged to Lieutenant Brader, her stern and utterly reliable second in command. The other half had remained with his body. The two of them had dragged each other in and out of hot spots and warzones across half the planet, but she hadn’t been able to pull him out of this one. She wondered where he had been taken, where they all were. She had not even been able to say good-bye.

Cradling the small bits of metal in her mostly immobilized right hand, she reached with her left for each dog tag her father handed her: Poptart’s I disc, the rounded rectangle broken from its twin, inscribed with CDN FORCES CDN—it would have to be returned to Canada’s National Defence Headquarters; Fortinsky’s nieśmiertelnik wz.—he’d told her that meant “immortalizer mark”; the identical, circular, non-reflecting stainless steel tags, engraved “Big 6” that had belonged to the Terrible Twosome. Each tag dropped into her hand with the weight of a millstone on her heart. Derya, Joscin, Teresinha, and Torbjørn—these scraps of metal were the last touches she would have of them all. Her fingers folded over the so very tiny handful, clenching until the broken edges scored her palm.

Eve could not weep for them. All her tears caught in her ruined throat and knotted in pain but refused to be shed. She wanted so desperately to talk about them, to tell her father who they had been, how brilliant, how close. She wanted someone to share her feelings of loss.

Instead, her father sat with her in the silence imposed by her injury, letting her grip his hand.
She wondered about their families, the ones they loved. Derya’s huge clan of brothers and sisters and cousins. Fortinsky’s boyfriend. Oh God, Poptart’s wife and little boy. Who had told them?

It should have been her, and she felt guilty that she was relieved that she had not been able to.

That night, they had to sedate her as she fought her nightmares.

* * * * *

Eve endured the interminable days with increasing impatience interspersed with extreme lassitude. She could communicate only the most basic of needs with her shaky, left-handed writing and her persistent fatigue. Anything beyond, and her head would ache even more than it already did, and her vision would blur.

Because she could not speak, many people did not speak to her. They talked to her parents or to each other as if she were not there, even when they were discussing her condition and treatment. Eve wrote a note in ragged, dark letters saying: TALK TO ME. She would thump the bed with her good hand and wave it at the person ignoring her. Generally, this resulted in an apology, and the offender would attempt to include her, but eventually old habits would take over, and Eve would find herself observing the conversation but no longer a part of it.

Some days Eve was simply too exhausted to care or even pay attention.

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Of all things, Eve hated most the helplessness, despised being dependent on others for every personal function. The day they finally helped her sit up, fighting dizziness, she refused to let anyone know how weak and unsteady she felt. Nevertheless, she did not badger them to allow her to stand. Accepting that she would be wheelchair-bound for the immediate future, she waited while all her tubes and bags and IV poles and other noxious accoutrements of illness were situated about her conveyance.

She grimly endured the drum corps marching inside her skull and the way the world spun like a carnival ride as the aide pushed her chair to the bathroom where she might hope for an actual shower. Apparently she had over-estimated her ability to overcome her body’s autonomic responses. The nausea brought about by the unaccustomed mobility overwhelmed her, and she vomited, nearly aspirating.

Not only did she fail spectacularly to achieve cleanliness, but she gained another CT scan out of her escapade.

Nevertheless, the next day, she insisted on trying again, gradually increasing her time upright. She wanted out of this hospital, and she wouldn’t be able to leave until she could travel the eight hours from Spain to New York.

The fear that she would never completely recover from her injuries haunted her during her conscious hours while her sleeping hours were increasingly disturbed by memories returning in nightmares.

* * * * *

As far as Eve could tell, she had many, many letters of the alphabet in many combinations, not one of which was an actual word. Apparently, her TBI was being complicated with CSF fistulae, which might be causing her persistent headache, and which, because it hadn’t resolved on its own, was one of the reasons she had an EVD to relieve ICP. Obviously, the medical field was as bad as the
military in its attachment to acronyms. The important piece of information in all this alphabet soup was that nothing appeared to be working, so she was likely to have to undergo a craniotomy to repair the fistula site—in other, more intelligible words, brain surgery.

Perfect. As if her brains weren’t already scrambled enough.

Brain surgery actually proved to be somewhat anticlimactic. She lost a day, but that had become a regular occurrence for her anyway. And her headaches did decrease in number and frequency. Also her neurosurgeon was a really attractive young man.

So there was that.

* * * * *

When her otolaryngologist finally informed her that they would be removing the trach tube and the nasogastric tube, and that she might resume ordinary breathing, swallowing, and phonating, Eve was thrilled.

The doctor informed her that they had repaired and reattached her vocal cords and reconstituted the anterior commissure as well as repairing all mucosal lacerations and closing exposed cartilage with mucous membrane grafts. They had then immobilized the cartilage fractures and reapproximated the strap muscles.

Eve listened to all the anatomical jargon with a blank expression and little comprehension. What she wanted to know was whether or not she would be able to talk.

This doctor, at least, waited while she laboriously printed her question: Will I be able to talk?

“It is impossible to say at this point,” the doctor told her with an honesty for which she was grateful. “Barring any laryngeal nerve injury or arytenoid subluxation, your chances of excellent voice results stand at around 61 percent. However, if the nerves have been damaged enough to cause vocal cord immobility, those chances decrease to around 17 percent.”

Since Eve knew her chances of having survived her initial injuries hovered around 10 percent, she figured 17 percent was pretty good odds. And she was so ready to begin eating again.

A plastic surgeon also visited her, but Eve was less concerned with that aspect of her recovery. If the scar on her throat was hideous enough, she’d just get a tattoo.

When Eve regained consciousness after the surgery, she was surprised to find herself afraid to attempt to speak. She had grown accustomed to believing that using her voice was forbidden and impossible, and perhaps she didn’t want to know yet if the repair hadn’t worked.

Her doctors and her parents were becoming worried that the surgery had been a failure, but Eve knew she had never tried to use her voice. She concentrated on enjoying the use of her throat—every swallow of liquid, every bite of very soft, blended food was a heavenly sensation.

It was frustration that finally cracked her mental paralysis. She was trying to reach the bathroom using her own actual legs. Since her brain surgery, the dizziness had diminished, and she was allowed to try out walking for brief intervals accompanied by a hovering aide. However, she had discovered that IV poles were possessed by the very devil. There were six wheels on the base, and each one would invariably head to a different point on the compass except toward the one for which she was aiming. The whole contraption would rotate as she tried to make it to the bathroom, winding up her tubing until it was too short once she did get there.
This day, she was so angry at the contraption which was surely designed by Torquemada, that she damned it to hell. It was a very quiet curse, and she did not recognize the voice, but it said what she was thinking.

Her babysitter squeaked in excitement. “You’re speaking!”

Eve thought it was appropriate that the first thing she said after everything she had been through was profane.

* * * * *

Eve was grateful to have any sort of voice back when General Deschamps paid her a visit. She was surprised to see him, since—since Teresinha—she stumbled mentally over the name—had developed a theory that he was physically attached to his office, like a snail.

The sight of that familiar uniform twisted a longing in her. Such uniforms had meant home and family her whole life. Aside from how treacherously immodest hospital gowns were, she felt naked without hers.

The General came to her bedside and took her hand in both of his. His face looked drawn and his eyes sad, in spite of his smile. It had been his operation, and they had been his team, and it had been an utter failure with an appalling loss of life.

“Hello, sir,” Eve said in her too quiet, strange voice.

“Hello, Captain,” he answered. “Eve. It’s good to see you.”

He couldn’t really comment on how well, she looked, Eve thought. She was only a couple of artfully applied ketchup packets away from a zombie cosplay.

“It’s good to see you, too.”

The General had never been much for small talk, so the conversation languished. He patted her hand, then withdrew his hands, returning to parade rest, taking refuge in formalities.

“I wanted to speak to you before you went home,” he said. “You have been granted a medical discharge with all honour, of course.”

Of course. There had been no other possibility. But Eve’s heart twisted to hear it spoken aloud. She would not be fit to return to active duty for—for years, likely. If ever.

“Thank you, sir,” she said, as she had to.

He cleared his throat. “I am sorry—to hear—what—happened to the others.”

Eve clenched her hands and closed her eyes. “They were the best,” she managed hoarsely.

The General nodded, but said no more.

Finally, Eve spoke. Here was someone who might answer her questions. “Were they able to find the man who did this?”

General Deschamps was silent for too long.

“We suspect it was Damien Moreau’s chief enforcer, Eliot Spencer,” he said, finally. “Spencer is certainly capable of what was done—before he went solo, he did work for the US government,
both in the military and in assorted PMCs, that is so secret even I cannot get past the red tape. In fact no one in US Armed Forces or Intelligence will admit he exists. The rest of the world—well that is a different story. There is a price on his head in five countries.”

A name. As long as they had a name, she could avenge her team. However, her look of fierce intention was shot down by the General’s discouraged head shake.

“We have no real evidence. Spencer has an alibi placing him in Panama during the incident, even though it seems unlikely that he could have torn an ACL and broken his jaw in the bedroom.”

Eve smiled grimly. At least, if she hadn’t been able to kill him, she’d made him hurt.

“So how do we go about getting this guy?” she asked, as if she could have any part in such a manhunt.

“Did you see his face? Would you be able to recognize him and testify against him?”

Eve thought about the man who had murdered her team—no identifying marks, his face hidden behind the shield. “No.”

“Then we don’t have a case,” the General said, frustration roughening his voice. “No court in the world would convict him with so little justification. There is no record of his departure from Panama nor his arrival anywhere else, and, while we know Moreau moves his people off grid all the time, that explanation will never hold up before a judge.”

Her hands were shaking, Eve noted through the red haze of rage. “So he goes free,” she said through gritted teeth. Her throat ached—with unaccustomed use or unshed tears.

“We cannot arrest a man with no evidence. We do not even have any surveillance. The Port cameras were damaged, their lenses broken out, so no footage remains of what happened.”

Eve took several deep breaths to calm herself down. If they couldn’t arrest the assassin, perhaps it would be better to go after the man actually responsible. “What about Moreau? Do we at least have something against him?”

Deschamps shook his head. “Damien Moreau covers his tracks perfectly. Our only possible link between him and the shipment you were to intercept was the testimony of our informant—who, along with his mother and sister, was the victim of a house fire, ruled an electrical malfunction, by the way. No arson suspected. But it may be years before anyone musters enough courage to turn on Moreau again.” The General sighed. “We cannot touch him.”

So there was to be no justice for her team. They had failed; they had died; and nothing could make any of it never have happened.

“Damien Moreau never loses,” Eve whispered to herself.

“I’m sorry, Captain Baird.”

Before he left, she gave him the dog tags of her team to return to their countries and families. Her heart broke as if she were losing her friends again.

* * * * *

The day finally arrived when Eve was considered stable enough to travel from Spain to the United States. She would be transported by ambulance to the airport at Jerez, flown to Madrid, and then
put on the long flight to New York where she would be met by another ambulance and transported to the hospital where she would remain until they judged her fit to be cared for at her parents’ home and to begin her rehab.

It seemed that the entire hospital staff showed up to see her off. She’d pretty much occupied time from every specialist and every department. Gabrielle was there giving her a tearful hug. Even the doctor from the ambulance was there, introducing her to his driver, Jorge, who was responsible for her most rapid transport to the hospital.

“We had to replace the tires after that ride,” Doctor Villanueva Cortés said.

Jorge grinned and wrung her hand. “Always a pleasure to participate in a resurrection. You are a very lucky lady. You must have a very special destiny.”

Eve did not feel lucky, and she did not believe in destiny.

* * * * *

1 Year Later

Fort Hamilton, New York

Back in the United States, living with her parents on the army base, going to rehab at the VA every day, doing a little teaching of new recruits to keep her occupied, Eve tried and failed to find her feet again.

With her returning health, clearer and clearer memories also crept out of the murky fog of her damaged brain, ambushing her.

Why did fictional characters get to keep their amnesia when she remembered everything? For her, returned and always returning, every scent, every scrape of boot on gravel, every fleck of blood dried on her hands, every knife-edge of terror, every pulse of soul-destroying rage, the present folded into the past. That day back at the Port fighting to save her team—and failing—was engraved in her brain. Their eyes followed her from every shadow, in every reflection, just beyond the edge of sight, accusing her for living when they had died.

Every night, her faceless opponent returned in her nightmares, forcing her to watch him murder her friends, her team, then turning on her until she awoke gasping for air, striking at shadows, and shaking so badly the bed rattled the floor.

Sleep became a memory. Eve fled it as desperately as she longed for it.

Nights found her running miles on the treadmill, sweat dripping down her body, heedless of pain. When her pulse beat so fast that her vision blurred, and her stumbling legs betrayed her so that she could run no farther, she would lift weights, working her barely recovered muscles beyond quivering exhaustion. When she could stagger to her feet again, she would beat her fists bloody on the punching bag.

Sometimes, then, collapsing on the nearest available surface, she could sleep un-tormented for an hour or two before the hell of her memory re-ignited.

She lost weight she could ill-afford to lose. Her eyes were sunken and shadowed in her increasingly gaunt face.

Her mother watched her with the tragic gaze of one who loves and who does not know how to
prevent the loss of what she loves, knowing, as the wife of a career military officer, that not all of
the dead come home in body bags.

It was her father who would stand in her doorway and call her out of the nightmares, waiting until
she knew where she was and who he was before entering and enfolding her in his arms.

Her father held her the night she finally broke down and wept like a child—the first tears she had
shed.

It was her father who convinced her to seek help.

Her dad, who at age 18 had donned his proud uniform and shipped out to the Vietnam war that had
devoured his youth, chewed up his body and his spirit, and spit him out at age 30 with rank, a
promising military career, a collection of old photographs of friends who never grew any older, and
nightmares that still visited him 40 years later.

Even though he was gone now, she could still call up the memory of him, the feel of his old
cardigan on her cheek, the scent of his aftershave, and the grieving understanding in his voice as he
told her, “Sometimes, my Eve, no matter how hard you try, you lose. You do your best, but you
just lose.”

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TBC
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Back to the present.

The Present

Bridgeport Brew Pub, Portland, Oregon, USA

Eliot Spencer allowed himself one slightly deeper breath of relief. From the moment he had seen
that Colonel Baird both recognized his name and knew that he was the one who had slaughtered
her team and done his best to kill her eleven years ago, he had not been sure whether she was going
to launch a frontal assault or stand down. For now, at least, it seemed she was willing to settle for
reconnaissance. He had no illusions that the confrontation was over.

Hell, he wouldn’t blame her if she called in all of NATO to take him out.

Perhaps it was a good thing Parker had lifted her phone and her gun.

Baird’s one hand still hovered where her Glock would have been, but the other touched the nearly
invisible scar at her throat—a scar that represented so many other unseen wounds. He did not think
she was aware of that telltale gesture.

Eliot knew exactly what he had done to this woman. He had left her not breathing, with no
detectable pulse. The fact that she was here, alive, spoke of an unbelievable will to survive in the
face of incredible odds. But he also knew that she would count all the years of recovery from such
major trauma as nothing in comparison to what he had done to her team.

He owed her a debt oceans deep in blood.

But this was not the moment, nor was he the one to set the terms.

She watched him, his victim in life rather than dreams, her eyes as beautiful now as they had been
eleven years ago—and as angry. Wrath rose off her like smoke from an inferno. And beneath that
anger, so much fear and sorrow. These were not fragments of memory and imagination excavated
by his guilt to torment him. These were her real emotions.

His responsibility.

The knowledge carved into his heart like knives.

Their frozen tableau drew out to an awkward eternity, only he and Baird understanding why, the
others merely worried and confused.

Miss Manners had provided no script for polite conversation with a woman one had left for dead
nor for how she should respond to her murderer.

It was Hardison, bless him, who unthawed first. With all the panache gained from his childhood
years sporting a bowtie door to door selling salvation, the young man flashed a brilliant smile,
extended his hand in patented Sophie-subverting-an-entire-nation fashion, and said, “Pleasure to meet you, Ms. Baird. My name is Colin Hartnell.”

Oh. Damn. Right. Aliases. At the moment, Eliot could not have told what names they were running the Brew Pub under if his life depended on it. Whatever rational fragment of his mind remained noted that he hadn’t been this shaken in . . . he could not remember how long. There had been no point in his giving a false name, since Jake would know the truth, but there was no need to blow the others’ cover stories.

As though she had to come back from a great distance, Colonel Baird drew her hand from where she had no weapon to draw and took Hardison’s hand briefly.

“And this,” Hardison continued, pulling Parker forward, “is Martha Tyler.”

Parker moved as though she had forgotten her knees bent. In situations of intense personal emotion, their thief still had a tendency to go a bit wooden.

“Oh. Yes. Of course. I’m Martha.” Parker smiled. At least her smiles no longer left people the impression that they did not ever want to meet her alone in dimly lit places—unless, of course, they really didn’t.

Jake joined in the heroic effort to diffuse the situation, shaking first Hardison’s and then Parker’s hands. “Great to meet you Mr. Hartnell, Ms. Tyler.”

“Please.” Hardison’s voice was all warmth and welcome. “It’s Colin. You’re practically family.”

“Martha, that’s me!” Parker piped up, following Hardison’s lead in her own way.

“And this is Ezekiel Jones.” Jake introduced the last member of his team, the Australian, judging by the little of his accent Eliot had already heard. “He’s in . . . um . . . acquisitions.”

He noted that Hardison and Parker exchanged glances at that name, as though it meant something to them; however, he got no sense that the recognition involved any threat.

Ezekiel, too, participated in the obligatory handshake.

By that time, Eliot had developed the beginnings of a plan. Food. Sophie always told them that sharing a meal was a way to build connections, hard-wired in the primitive part of the brain. The sanctity of the guest was not as intrinsic to American culture as it was in the Middle East where he had spent so much time, but the psychology existed. His cousin and colleagues had come to the Brew Pub to eat. Perhaps he could say to Baird with food what words could not say—that he wished them no harm, that they were safe here.

“Why don’t you finish looking at the menu,” he said to the group at the table, as they reseated themselves, even Baird, although she looked like she would rather be standing at parade attention or perhaps barricaded behind the bar and packing an M-16. “Dinner’s on the house tonight. And I have a couple of specials not on the menu I’ll throw in as well.”

“That’s mighty generous of you.” Jake grinned up at him. “But I insist you and your friends join us. That is if you have the time?”

There was nothing to be done but accept the invitation with grace. At least the resulting shuffling of chairs and adjusting of their occupants allowed Parker to un-pick everyone’s pockets. She settled into her seat with a bounce, her they’re-making-me-give-everything-back scowl replaced by a laser-focused, homicidally cheerful, unnervingly curious, tooth-glitteringly hungry smile.
“So, Jake, what was Eliot like when he was a kid?”

Eliot fled for the refuge of the kitchen. He’d just send Amy out to take orders after all.

* * * *

Jacob Stone watched as his long-lost cousin departed in what looked suspiciously like a strategic retreat. The atmosphere around their table remained stormy, but with Eliot’s exit, the lightning strikes were gone and only the far off rumble of thunder remained. Something powerful and terrible was going on involving Eve Baird and Eliot Spencer.

He had seen Baird fight off assassins with a barstool, shoot a Minotaur in the balls as she slid beneath its legs, and crash land a cargo plane using instructions off of Google, but he’d never seen her this shaken. The past was a dark cave from which monsters could crawl, Jake knew, but what was it about his cousin’s name that had called forth such creatures for the impervious Eve? Whatever it was, Eliot had known. And yet Eve had not recognized Eliot. Of course. Or she would have recognized Jake’s face months ago.

He was going to have to corner Eve and ask.

He could not ask Eliot—that or any of the questions to which he really wanted to know the answers. The one that marched in majuscule letters across his mind, reducing all others to obscurity, was Why? Why had Eliot stopped coming home? Why had he stopped calling or writing? What could possibly have been worse than letting his family wonder if he were still alive?

Eliot was family, but they were now practically strangers to each other; whereas Eve was fast becoming more than just a colleague. She was a friend.

In the new configuration, he was seated next to her, and he scrutinized her carefully for clues to what had just gone down. She looked broken, and Jake had never seen Eve break. Not when she’d been dragged backwards up a staircase by a spirit, leaving her so injured she had needed his help even to stand. Not after she’d been shattered across the planet delivering hope enough for the sorry old world to survive another year. Her eyes, fixed on the point where Eliot had disappeared, held a bleak sort of rage, but also the wounded look of a frightened child—an image he had never associated with either her uptight military persona or, lately, her more relaxed but fiercely protective mama bear side.

Her hands were clenched precisely shoulder-width apart on the table, as though she did not know what to do with them if she could not hit something.

Sliding one arm along the back of her chair, he could feel the tension vibrating in her shoulders. With his other hand, he covered her fist nearest him.

“Colonel Baird,” he said softly. “Eve? Are you okay?”

Eve seemed to come back to herself then, shaking her head as though to re-set some doomed train of thought. Closing her eyes and taking a deep quiet breath, Eve opened them again, seeing him this time.

“I’m fine,” she said, and he almost did not hear the shiver in her voice. “I’ll be fine.”

She did not look fine, but Eve was as tough as nails, and he had no doubt she would be. Even now, reminded of their existence, she was pulling herself together.

“Thanks,” she said softly, and she smiled at him.
He squeezed her hand and released it.

The other occupants of the table had remained silent, the awkwardness as thick as clay.

At this juncture, their waitress arrived bringing drinks. Everyone looked relieved at the interruption.

“Oh, good,” Martha said. “Here’s Amy.”

The table began to unfreeze as the beverages were passed around.

Eliot had apparently ordered for his friends, because Amy had something for everyone.

“Here you go, Boss,” she said, handing Colin a shockingly orange soda. Martha’s poison of choice turned out to be hot chocolate with colored marshmallows and a candy cane stir stick.

And these people ran a Brew Pub? Jake shrugged and gratefully took a swig of his beer. Eliot seemed to work with some odd people, but then who was he to talk.

The fact that Ezekiel’s drink proved to taste as bad as Amy had advertised removed a little more of the fraught atmosphere.

The look on the thief’s face as he considered which course of action was the lesser of the two evils—to spit or swallow—was worth the price of admission.

Cassandra laughed until she couldn’t breathe.

Colin pretended to take umbrage at everyone’s lack of appreciation for his art.

And Martha looked entirely too much like she was hoping Ezekiel would turn purple and go up in smoke.

At least Amy had thoughtfully provided a tankard of the regular house brew for him to wash away the taste. Jake resolved that she should receive a generous tip.

However, the easing of strain did not extend to Eve. Jake casually did not remove his arm from the back of her chair. He could feel her pressing back against him, as though steadying herself.

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Now that Eve had her whiskey, she realized there was no way she was going to be drinking it. Her feelings were already edging on a turbulence she could ill afford. Alcohol would only put her more off balance. She was grateful for Stone’s silent support. So often now, they all depended on him to be their rock in the midst of chaos.

When Spencer had disappeared, her adrenaline had spiked. That was a man she needed in her sights at all times. He wasn’t safe at any time, but he was even more unsafe when not visible.

For Eve everything had condensed to one point—extraction. Ezekiel Jones, Cassandra Cillian, and Jacob Stone—she had never meant to feel this way about a group of people again. It was the height of irony that she should cross paths with Spencer again, just when she had bonded with another team. She had to get this team, this time, out of this situation alive.

Food held all the appeal of ashes to her now, but she knew she needed to replenish her energy after such a strenuous day.
Everyone was placing orders. Since he was getting his meal for free, Ezekiel ordered the most expensive dish on the menu. Of course, he would.

Eve finally settled on a salad.

“Eliot’s chili is the best,” Martha suggested. “It’s his own version of his mama’s recipe.”

Stone raised his eyebrows, “I’m gonna have to try that. I haven’t had that chili since, well, since my aunt died.”

Colin and Martha focused on him expectantly. But Stone just gestured to Cassandra who also ordered the chili.

When the waitress had departed, Martha rounded on Stone like he was a treasure vault she needed to break into.


* * * * *
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Story time for the Librarians and the Leverage Crew.

Bridgeport Brew Pub, Portland, Oregon, USA

The blonde young woman’s eyes were wide and eager as she demanded tales about Spencer’s childhood, and for an instant, Eve was reminded a bit of Cassandra. Stone was going to be putty in Martha’s hands.

Stone smiled at her. “That was a long time ago.”

Bowing his head for a moment, he seemed to consider what he would say.

The Librarian team was scarcely less curious than the Brew Pub crew. Cassandra leaned forward and fixed her attention on Stone.

Finally, he raised his head and smiled. “I remember back when we were, oh, maybe three or four years old. Well, I don’t remember much, but everyone always told this story. We were at a birthday party at a neighbor’s, and Eliot went missing. Eliot went missing a lot.” He tilted his head and wrinkled his forehead. “Come to think of it, that was a bit of an omen. I reckon his mama would have liked to tie him up if it hadn’t been illegal in the state of Oklahoma. At first the parents just milled around calling his name as usual, but it became apparent that he really had vanished. Everyone started to panic. They called his daddy at work, because it looked like a major search would have to be made. His daddy asked if there were any animals nearby. Well, there was a stud farm next place over.”

“What’s a stud and how do you farm it?” asked Martha.


Martha shuddered. “Ugh. I don’t like horses. Is this a scary story?”

“Mama, those horses been dead for years.” Colin reassured her. “They won’t hurt you.”

“It’s not a scary story,” Stone said.


“Well.” Stone leaned back in his chair and folded his hands over his stomach, getting into his yarn. “They found him in the barn playing in the stallion’s stall, under its feet. He was petting its legs and plotting how he could get on its back. That big ole’ fellow was just standing there, not moving, like he was afraid he’d step on the little guy. Everyone agreed it was a miracle like Daniel in the lions’ den.”

“I like lions,” Martha exclaimed. “What’s that story?”

“Seriously?” Colin looked at her with a mixture of pity and incredulity. “You never heard that
“Oh, good!” said Martha.

“I just think it was Eliot,” Stone said. “He always had a way with animals.”

“Do you think Eliot would like a horse?” Martha asked Colin.

“You don’t like horses,” Colin pointed out with exaggerated patience.

“I know, but we could keep it on the roof, and I just wouldn’t go up there.”

Eve’s impression that Martha did not interface with the world quite the same as most people strengthened.

“How would you get it up there? What would it do there? Besides, you’re always on the roof,” Colin said.

Martha frowned, perplexed. “Oh. Right. Where can you put a horse in Portland that I don’t go?”

“There might be a stable somewhere you could board a horse,” Stone offered, looking amused.

Martha granted him a dazzling smile. “It can be his birthday present,” she decided, as though her every whim was a possibility.

“We’d better let Eliot pick his own horse,” Colin said reasonably. “We don’t know nothin’ about horses. We’d probably get one that was missing, oh, I dunno, a leg or somethin’.”

“That’s silly,” Martha said. “Even I know they have four legs. Hey,” she turned to Stone. “You know about horses, right?”

“A little,” he said cautiously.

“Then you can pick Eliot’s horse.” Martha settled back in satisfaction, as though, as far as she was concerned, she’d solved all the problems inherent in horse ownership.

No, they were not going to continue to be involved in Eliot Spencer’s life nor the lives of his associates nor in the acquisition of his livestock, Eve thought vehemently. Besides, if there were any justice in the universe, Spencer would be locked up like the criminal he was and the key forgotten—she was only willing to consider granting him a stay of execution for Stone’s sake.

Stone wisely didn’t push the issue. “Here’s another one about Eliot and animals,” he said, successfully diverting Martha from the subject of horses. “Our daddies took us hunting up in Minnesota when we were ten. Eliot disappeared, of course. By then nobody worried much about him. He always came back. But this time he came back with his arms full of a half-grown wolf pup. It was about as big as him. His daddy nearly had a heart attack. Eliot wanted to keep it as a pet. I thought a pet wolf would be cool; however, the adults convinced Eliot that its family would be heartbroken if it didn’t come home, so he agreed to take it back where he found it. But he was very grumpy about it.”

Martha clapped her hands. “Do you think Eliot would like a wolf? We could keep it with the horse.”

Cassandra giggled. Ezekiel smirked. Stone’s eyes widened.

It was up to Colin to point out, “The wolf would want to eat the horse.”
“Oh.” Martha sounded disappointed.

“Besides, it’s illegal to keep a wolf in Oregon.” Colin finished what he obviously thought was an unassailable argument. He underestimated his colleague.

“We could fix that, though. Couldn’t we?” Martha said brightly, as though state legislation were something anyone could change on a whim.

“Girl, we are not gettin’ a wolf.” Colin put his foot down.

“We never get to have anything fun.” Martha pouted.

* * * * *

Story time was cut short by the arrival of the food. Amy and Spencer came out carrying trays. Eve’s nerves twitched uncomfortably.

“Oooh! Black noodles! My favorite!” Martha exclaimed.

“That’s tagliolini nero con gamberi,” Spencer protested, all huffy chef. “Get it right!”

“That’s right. Black noodles.” Martha beamed at him, and Spencer rolled his eyes but unthawed a little.

“I made ‘em because I know you like ‘em,” he said.

“Eliot always cooks for me,” Martha informed them. “He makes the best Fruit Loop pancakes!”

“That sounds . . . sweet.” Cassandra said.

“How is that even a thing?” Colin complained. “And you put whipped cream and three different kinds of syrup and chocolate sauce and candy sprinkles on them. I get diabetes just watching you eat them.”

“Says the man who lives on orange soda and gummi frogs,” Spencer said, raising an eyebrow at him.

“That is food that technology made. Nothin’ better,” Colin said smugly.

“Well I ain’t cookin’ edible paper for you,” Spencer growled. “I am wasted on these barbarians,” he told Stone as he served samples of the oddly colored pasta for all of them to try.

Eve decided it was unlikely Spencer would try to poison any of them in his own restaurant—particularly his cousin—so she nodded briefly when he looked at her questioningly, and allowed him to give her a small amount.

“You just all about the stone knives and bearskins, ain’t you?” Colin complained.

“If you mean cookin’ real food from real ingredients grown in an actual garden. Yes,” Spencer said with vehemence.

Eve could almost see Ezekiel’s ears prick up and swivel.

“‘The City on the Edge of Forever,’” he exclaimed.

Colin’s face lit up. “My man! Original Trek or the reboot?”
“Definitely, the original!” Ezekiel said.

The two geeks exchanged congratulatory fist bumps.

“Oh God, not another one,” Spencer groaned. “Somebody head them off at the pass, or we are gonna hear the entire history of Star Wars from the first Doctor to the second Khan.”

Ezekiel and Colin turned identical outraged stares at him, mouths open to start in on such sacrilege.

Spencer tossed his hair, laughing. “Gotcha!” He pointed a victorious finger at Colin.

“Philistine,” Colin said, glaring at his friend.

How could a man like Eliot Spencer be this—charming, Eve wondered. He treated these people not like colleagues but like family. How could someone with that amount of blood on his hands even care about another human being?

“Eliot has an organic garden on the roof,” Martha said. “He doesn’t ever sleep, so he can grow his own food.”

“I sleep,” Eliot protested, seating himself next to his cousin. He had served only a small amount of food for himself.

“Ninety minutes a day is not sleep. That’s a nap,” said Colin.

Eve glanced at Spencer sharply. There’d been a time in her life when getting ninety minutes of sleep would have been all she could manage, too. She knew with terrible intimacy what kept a victim of trauma awake at night. She wondered what kept a villain awake.

The unlikely agricultural discussion continued above her wandering thoughts.

Colin amped up his accusatory tone. “We have chickens. On the roof! In Portland! There is chicken shit on my building! What kind of person does that sort of thing? I’m sure there’s some sort of bylaw.”

“There used to be—before you made it go away,” Martha commented with her mouth full of noodles that hung from her chin like a pirate beard.

“If you get to compost in my kitchen, I can fertilize my garden however I damn well please,” Spencer retorted.

“Hey, you use that compost.”

The argument between the two men felt like an old garment—comfortable and often worn, falling into easy and familiar lines. The affection underlying their bickering was palpable.

“These are amazing,” Ezekiel told Spencer, gesturing with his fork. “Top notch.”

“Totally yummy,” Cassandra agreed.

Stone nodded his head. “And this—I don’t remember even your mama’s chili bein’ this good.”

Spencer shifted a little, and Stone nodded his head slightly in acknowledgment of some memory only the two of them shared. But neither of them spoke of it.
Eve pushed her salad around on her plate taking an occasional desultory bite. She hadn’t touched the pasta. Her stomach was too tied in nervous knots to welcome food, even though she knew she was hungry.

For all his easy conversation with the others, Spencer never lost the tension in his awareness of her. He smiled and laughed and chatted with her team—her team! And with his people, he was affectionate, teasing. But every time she moved, even so much as shifted her weight, his eyes were on her.

She followed Spencer’s movements, too, not caring that he knew she was staring at him. Thugs with nuclear bombs could not shake her because they were no match for her training, but this man was something else entirely. He was the most dangerous opponent she had ever faced, because he was himself a weapon, one she knew was superior.

“So, Eliot.” Cassandra’s voice was eager. “What was Jacob like when you were kids?”

Eve saw the smile Spencer gave Cassandra—flirty and admiring and openly focused on her. For an instant Cassandra responded to that look on that familiar face like a flower turning toward the sun, eager and relieved and so happy. It was heartbreaking, actually. Eve had been aware of how Stone’s lack of trust was troubling Cassandra, but she had not realized how heavily that hurt weighed on the girl until she saw it ever so briefly lifted.

Spencer looked a little rocked by her response. Admittedly, Cassandra in full joy mode was stunning.

Stone frowned ever so slightly as though he were trying to decipher a particularly difficult passage in a manuscript.

“That’s right, Eve thought at him. Pay attention to what you’re missing.

“Yeah, Stone here has been ratting you out. Time to turn the tables,” Ezekiel said to Spencer.

Spencer directed his attention away from Cassandra, who had blushed and cast her eyes down in confusion. Really, it was a very good thing they were never coming near this Brew Pub again if Eve could help it.

Waggling his eyebrows at his cousin, Spencer asked, “So Jake, what should I tell ‘em?”

“This ain’t gonna be pretty, is it?” Stone’s tone was resigned.

“What do you mean?” Spencer widened his eyes. “I was the one always in trouble. You were the good one.”

“What use was that when no one could tell us apart?” Stone asked. “I seem to remember getting punished for a number of things you did.”

“You needed better alibis. Reading books don’t leave many witnesses to your innocence.” Spencer turned to the rest of his audience. “All the other guys kept Playboy stashes under their mattresses, but not Jake. He kept copies of The Odyssey and The Iliad. In Greek.”

“You snooped?” This many years later, Stone still sounded a little betrayed.

Spencer shrugged insouciantly. “Course I did. I was lookin’ for Playboy!”

At Ezekiel’s incredulous look, Spencer scowled. “What? It’s not like we had pictures on the
“Internet back then!”

“Well, thanks for not telling, I guess,” Stone said.

“I ain’t a snitch. You got beat up enough as it was.”

Cassandra’s hands went to her lips to contain a pained little gasp. Eve knew she was imagining the brilliant child Jacob Stone had been, trapped in a world that despised everything he loved and that made its rejection of him as physically and mentally abusive as possible.

“I sucked at blendin' in, didn't I?” Stone shook his head.

“You kinda did,” Spencer agreed.

"Until you taught me how to fight back.” Stone exchanged a teeth-bared grin with Spencer.

“Yeah, well, I met my own share of bullies. Finally figured out they were basically cowards. Bloody a few noses, and they’re the ones runnin’ home to mama.”

The two men contemplated those past defeats and victories.

“Did that make us bullies?” Stone asked.

“No way,” Spencer shook his head. “We never started any of it. Though I mighta had a little too much fun doin’ it.”

Stone shook his head in resigned fondness. “You were a holy terror, that’s what you were. Remember the wasp nest in the tractor?”

“No. No you don’t. You are not telling that one.” Spencer clapped a hand over Stone’s mouth.

Stone tried to peel him off, but he was no match for Spencer. The mumbles from behind the hand might possibly have been “You can’t stop me.”

Eve had to force herself to breathe. Spencer could so easily snap someone’s neck from that position. But he wouldn’t. Not his cousin. She would not launch herself across Stone to throttle Spencer. She would not. Her hands clenched in her lap.

Narrowing his eyes and baring his teeth, Spencer leaned forward until he was eye to eye with Stone. “Oh, yes I can. Three words—Firecracker. Mason jar.”

Stone glared at him. You wouldn’t.

Spencer shrugged and smiled but did not remove his hand. Oh, yes I would.

Finally Stone raised his hands in surrender. Spencer removed the restraint and sat back, brushing his hair back and smirking in triumph.

“You win,” Stone said. “But this isn’t over.”

“Mutually assured destruction, mate?” Ezekiel asked.

“You have no idea,” Stone groaned.

Cassandra, Colin, and Martha erupted in a cacophony of complaints at having the stories cut short, but the cousins exchanged significant glances and refused to say another word on the topic.
The brew pub was much emptier now. The dinner crowd had thinned down. Eve sat with her chair pushed away from the table and back against the wall, withdrawn from the group. She had eaten little and drunk even less.

Spencer was regaling the table with another story about his and Stone’s misadventures when they were children—something about trying to re-create the Wright brothers at Kitty Hawk from the roof of the shed that had resulted in broken bones for one and something called a whuppin’ for the other. The two of them had had such normal childhoods. Families no more dysfunctional than average. Somehow, she had expected a man like Spencer to have possessed some deep, dark past that would make more comprehensible the monster he had become.

Of course, if Spencer had anywhere near Stone’s tenacity for keeping himself private, he would avoid revealing anything he did not carefully choose to show strangers, friends, or enemies.

Cassandra was watching Stone and Spencer like a kitten with a pendulum, following every movement, completely fascinated with this missing piece in the puzzle that was their art historian.

Ezekiel was listening bright-eyed like a crow waiting for a shiny opportunity to make Stone uncomfortable. Sometimes Eve thought winding up Stone was one of Ezekiel’s favorite pastimes—at least when he didn’t have something to steal.

“So,” asked Ezekiel. “Did you two ever switch places?”

“Oh, yes,” Spencer grinned. He raised an eyebrow at Stone. “I think the first time was when you won that poetry elocution contest in fifth grade and were all set to go to the regional finals.”

Stone sighed, “Yeah, and my daddy refused to let me go—poetry was for sissies and mama’s boys. No son of his was gonna have anythin’ to do with poetry. I think he’d have been happier if I’d ended up in Juvie.”

“So, you forged the permission slip so the principal would take you, and I went home to your place after school.”

“And when we got back that night, I had to climb a tree and crawl over the veranda roof to get in the window,” Stone said. “My mama was not happy with the state of my best clothes the next day.”

“You think your mama wasn’t happy. You shoulda seen mine when I got home after midnight! Talk about all holy hell breakin’ loose. And my daddy . . . well, you can imagine.”

Stone looked like he could indeed. “I’m sorry. If I didn’t say it then, thank you.”

Spencer laughed, “Hey, no problem. You always tried to stay out of trouble. Everyone expected me to get into it. Most of the time I was payin’ for my own crimes. I’m sure I got away with somethin’ for which I deserved that!”

“Did you win?” Cassandra asked Jacob.

“What? The regionals? Yeah, I suppose I did. Didn’t matter. There wasn’t any way we could have pulled off a similar stunt for State.” Stone paused. “It was another thing when our football team went to State—the whole dang family on the frontlines, cheering.”

“Did you win that?” Ezekiel asked.
“No. We made ‘em fight for it, but we lost.”

“Speaking of trading places,” Spencer said, “I’d never have graduated from high school if it hadn’t been for Jake, here. He took two of my final exams for me while I hitched a ride to Oklahoma City to sign my brand new 18 year old self over to the US government.”

“Wasn’t the first time I covered for you and skipped my own classes,” Stone said severely.

“C’mon, Jake. We all knew you could’ve taught those classes.” Spencer laughed.

“Didn’t fool Aimee; did I?”

Colin’s and Martha’s attention intensified, as though they recognized the name.

Spencer grinned. “Hey, I told you, you shoulda let her give you that kiss for luck!”

“Right. Like she wouldn’t have noticed that I had only half an idea what I was doing? And I woulda had to keep meetin’ her in church!” Stone’s impatience verged on anger. “Eliot, that girl was too good for you. She waited for you to come home to stay far past reason or sense.”

“I know. It was a good thing she finally moved on.” Spencer looked pensive. “God, I was so glad to shake the dust of that town off my feet. See the world. ‘Be all you can be in the Army,’ you know. But I’d always meant to come home, eventually.” He was silent for a moment, his face clouding over. “They didn’t tell you it was also ‘Be everything you never wanted to be’ as well.”

Stone eyed him questioningly, but Spencer did not continue.

Somewhere, at some point, a young Eliot Spencer—who’d managed to escape the small town quicksand that had sucked in and suffocated his cousin—had been crushed and remade into the kind of killer who could work for a man like Damien Moreau. Eve shivered.

Spencer got up abruptly, startling Eve into fresh alarm, as though some thought his words stirred was too uncomfortable for him to remain seated.

“I’ll go get the dessert,” he said, his voice sharp.

Her eyes tracked him as he rose and headed for the kitchen, tension ratcheting up as he disappeared from sight. Her every instinct was on high alert.

The continuing conversation of her remaining dinner companions faded from her awareness. Eve felt again the still silence of that fateful Port, waiting for an inevitable attack. Her hand instinctively caressed the spot where her gun had been. Shocked, she realized it had been returned. But the weight of it told her it was no longer loaded. How had Spencer returned her gun? He had not been near her, she thought. Panic tried to rise to the surface. Anomalous incidents meant she did not have sufficient intelligence. Insufficient intelligence was how she’d gotten her first team killed.

Spencer’s return scarcely set her at ease even though he seemed to have recovered his equanimity. The corners of his mouth turned up, and the crinkles around his eyes suggested the smile might be genuine.

But her instincts were correct. Something was going wrong.

Because she was watching Spencer’s face, she recognized the moment the killer emerged from behind the façade of charming host. His pleasant expression vanished into one of wrath so cold,
Eve shuddered. His eyes must have held that same look behind that blood-spattered shield eleven years ago—merciless and predatory.

One instant, like any ordinary restaurant employee, he was carrying two heavy ceramic platters loaded with something steaming; the next, his entire body language changed. The platters were no longer food transport but potential weapons as the muscles in his arms flexed and his fingers sought out the edges, balancing and shifting like those of a discus thrower. His casual sauntering step transformed seamlessly into the honed-steel speed of a fighter. The way he moved—she had never forgotten that deadly grace. He was the very figure of her nightmares these eleven years, and her throat tightened in panicked visceral memory of pain.

Before she could even follow his gaze to his targets or make any attempt to interpose her body between them, Spencer had launched the platters with vicious accuracy at two newcomers.

Crockery smashed, knife-like shards flew, and the burning contents splattered on his victims. Their screams tore through the Brew Pub, and order fractured into chaos.

Martha simply evaporated. She didn’t go anywhere; she was just gone. Ezekiel surreptitiously disappeared under the table. Cassandra, ever hopelessly valiant, armed herself with her butter knife and fork, looking belligerent. Chairs toppled and scattered as Stone leapt to his feet and whirled to join the fray.

Colin dived to prevent Eve launching herself at Spencer. It took Eve less than a minute to shed herself of his inexpert hold, but that minute gave her time to process the fact that the two men Spencer had attacked were dressed in black and had balaclavas covering their faces. Also, they were accompanied by another eight men dressed the same and armed with knives.

Spencer had already engaged four of them, while Jake was struggling with two. The difference between the cousins was now thoroughly apparent. Jake’s assailants sent him flying over the bar. Spencer, on the other hand, hadn’t even been knocked back.

His style was viciously fast, in close and brutal, deadly—the perfect example of how to let an enemy give you the victory. The few strikes they managed to land, he turned to his advantage, letting them propel his next attack, and not many of their blows got by his blocks that were ferocious enough to crack bone. Men went down before him like rag dolls. In the time it took Eve to change trajectory and single out her own opponents, Spencer had taken out six of the ten and was slamming the heads of the two that had gone after his cousin into the countertop of the bar.

Eve realized she was seeing exactly how he could have vanquished her entire team, even though they had been armed and armored.

The thud of her own fist into the solar plexus of one enemy and the crack of her head against the face of the other filled her with a fierce satisfaction. She had been wanting to hit something all evening.

The battle was over too quickly. Eve found herself standing over the unconscious bodies of her opponents, staring at a room that was in shambles. The few remaining patrons had scattered behind tables and were emerging, most of them acting like this was something to be expected when one ate at the Brew Pub. A few were checking their phones and exchanging cash like they’d been placing bets on the outcome—as if they were spectators at a hockey game who’d been lucky enough to see a fight break out. Just how frequently did Spencer throw down with attackers in his restaurant?

Eve turned to take inventory of her charges. Ezekiel’s sheepish face appeared over the top of the
Cassandra was standing, being prevented from joining the fray by Colin, for which Eve was grateful. Her eyes and mouth were completely round, as she watched Spencer hauling his last two opponents, who had to be approaching 200 pounds apiece, one in each hand by the scruffs of their necks, and tossing them onto the pile of his other victims.

“Zip ties,” he called.

“What? Oh, sure,” Colin responded, as though those were a staple product for a restaurant. “Gotcha.”

He hadn’t killed them. He so easily could have. It was manifestly self defense. They had been armed, and he was not. Of course, that sort of body count would bring an unnecessary amount of legal attention.

Spencer brushed his hair out of his face with his hands and glanced at Eve, standing over her own conquests. His unselfconscious grin of camaraderie did not give her the least urge to return it.

“Good work,” he told her.

Eve realized that Stone was still invisible behind the bar. For him to stay out of a fight was out of character. Worried, she took a step, intending to investigate.

A familiar voice halted her.

“Hello, cowboy. I like what you’ve done with your hair.”

* * * * *

TBC
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

A little H/C

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

_Bridgeport Brew Pub, Portland, Oregon, USA_

Lamia drifted into the lit room as though she were made of the shadows out of which she stepped. Her serpent tattoo seemed to writhe upon her arm.

While Lamia carried only her katana strapped to her back, the three henchmen flanking her spread out to cover the room with semi-automatics. The Serpent Brotherhood was stepping up its game. Everyone in the room ceased moving. Eve took one step forward, but as the cold muzzle of a pistol targeted her, she froze.

Lamia ignored the Guardian, her focus on Eliot Spencer. Eve realized that the assassin had no idea that the man who leaned nonchalantly against a table, his arms folded and one leg crossed over the other, an appreciative smile on his face, was not Jacob Stone, and she had to resist the incongruous urge to laugh.

Spencer looked Lamia up and down in the most insulting manner possible, tilted his head in a sideways nod, and said, “The Serpent Brotherhood. It’s been awhile. My compliments to the recruiters.”

Wait just one damn minute. How did Spencer know about Dulaque’s cult? Was it possible by any stretch of the imagination that Lamia was expecting Spencer instead of Stone?

“So, cowboy.” Lamia’s voice was a caress. “Are you going to come with me without a fight?”

“Darlin’, you know I never go anywhere without a fight.” Spencer straightened up, still not obviously prepared to attack her, but no longer relaxed. “As temptin’ as you make that offer, I’m afraid I’m gonna have to decline.”

Eliot Spencer had the reputation to back up the utter confidence in his voice, but Eve could not imagine how an unarmed man, even one such as he, could hope to best a swordswoman of Lamia’s caliber when he had no element of surprise on his side. Whatever victory he hoped to gain, he must surely know the price would be paid in blood.

The ceiling above the man who had his gun trained on Eve rattled, drawing everyone’s eyes. Eve seized the opportunity and dropped, rolling for cover, and incidentally, giving herself a better location from which to attack the second gunman.

As the first gunman took aim at the grating, it broke loose, hitting him on the head and knocking him to the ground. In the opening above him appeared a blond ponytail followed by the demented upside down smile of Martha.
“Eliot! Sword!” she called, as she thrust a scabbard through the vent.

Spencer did not glance her direction, but he caught the weapon over his shoulder when she threw it to him.

Martha disappeared up the vent, then swung down feet first like a gymnast on parallel bars, driving her boots directly into the face of Lamia’s henchman as he was staggering to his feet. Dropping first to the table top, she leapt to the floor and finished her man with a stomp to his head.

Whirling around, Martha pulled a Taser off her belt, flourishing it with a shrill war cry. The Taser accounted for the third gunman.

Eve used the distraction to launch herself at the man she was stalking. For a moment they wrestled for control of his weapon, but the heel of her hand, striking his jaw with all of her force knocked his head back and allowed her to throw him to the ground. The pistol skittered across the floor.

She had her opponent face down, his arms pinned and her knee in his back when she found a dark hand holding something out to her.

“Zip tie?” Colin asked, as though offering her sugar with her tea.

Who were these crazy people Spencer worked with? Nevertheless, Eve took the strip of plastic and secured her captive. Then, just to be sure he did not get up and interfere again, she coldcocked him. That was cathartic.

The only two combatants remaining were Spencer and Lamia.

Eve was struck by the change in Spencer. His movements were calm, elegant now instead of brutally efficient. The motion of palm and thumb with which he slipped the scabbard off the blade of the katana was formal and precise and had the air of ritual.

Lamia raised an eyebrow and tilted her head. Eve realized that Lamia had never seen Stone fight with a blade, so she might be unsure of his expertise—the rawest of beginners, actually, Eve knew. However, if Lamia were here for Spencer, she must know what she would be up against.

They faced each other, poised for an instant of perfect serenity. Then, as though responding to the same unheard signal, they exploded into a whirlwind of cuts and parries more rapid than thought. The Brew Pub rang with the ancient clash of swords.

Eve watched in awe as Lamia and Spencer wove lightning-flash arcs of steel through footwork that seemed more ballet than battle, the two of them incarnations of beauty and power. If Lamia was all swirling smoke, Spencer was crackling flame. Together they burned the heart.

Just when it seemed the two warriors might circle forever, caught in the intimate and deadly dance of swords, Spencer locked his hilt with Lamia’s guard, switched to a single handed grip, and rotated his wrist, pushing his katana’s hilt between Lamia’s hands. Seizing her forearm with his free hand, he used the leverage of his sword to force her down.

The move was as smooth as the slide of silk, swift and fatal as the stoop of a falcon. It ended with Lamia lying on the floor, her katana immobilized, looking up into Spencer eyes as he crouched over her with his blade across her throat.

“Finish it if you’re going to,” Lamia snarled.

“Why would I wanna do a thing like that, darlin’?” Spencer smiled at her. “Now just hand me that
lovely blade of yours, and we’ll call it even.”

If glares could have ignited flesh, Spencer would have been reduced to ash. Lamia resisted for a moment as he took hold of the hilt of her katana, but the slight tensing of her muscles opened a hair-fine red line on her neck, and she subsided.

Martha bounded up to Spencer. “Want me to tase her?” she asked brightly.

Spencer scowled at her then looked thoughtful. Then he shrugged and nodded.

With entirely too much relish the young woman bent over.

“No! Wait . . .” Lamia tried to object.

But Martha just grinned and zapped her. “Nighty night!”

With Lamia no longer a threat, Eve bolted for the bar.

“Stone! Jacob! Are you all right? Jacob!”

“Oh! Oh no! Jake!” Cassandra slipped away from Colin, whose job beyond dispensing zip ties appeared to be keeping the non-combatants non-combatant, and rushed after her.

Stone lay where he had been thrown by the two Serpent Brotherhood thugs. He was stirring, but there was blood on the floor under his head.

Before Eve could make it around the end of the bar, Spencer had vaulted over the top of it.

“Dammit, Jake!”

He knelt beside his cousin, hands holding him down. “Don’t move y’daf fool.”

“’M fine,” Stone insisted blearily. “You know my head is harder than whatever I hit.”

“I know you never had the sense God gave an onion,” Spencer complained, relief mixed with the anger in his voice. “Couldn’t ever resist jumpin’ into a brawl that was none of your business.”

“Onions,” Stone said, “are very sensitive . . . sensible . . . fruits . . . vegetables . . . um, things with roots that grow . . . whatever . . .” he trailed off.

Spencer’s eyes met Eve’s as she dropped to her knees on the other side of Stone, and she thought that if those had been Jacob Stone’s eyes she would have interpreted the emotion in them as guilt.

“Here, let me see that,” Spencer’s voice was rough, but his hands were gentle as he examined Stone’s injury. “That’s a pretty deep cut you got there.”

“Head wounds just bleed a lot,” Stone protested, his voice clearer. “Is all this fuss really necessary?”

He tried to sit up again, but Spencer kept him pinned. “Miss Cillian, would you be willing to hold this idiot’s head? I’m sure if he’s lyin’ in the lap of a beautiful woman, he’ll stay put.”

Stone tried a glare at his cousin and then winced.

“Do as you’re told, Stone,” Eve added her authority. “You’re lucky you don’t have a cervical injury.”
“Yes, ma’am,” Stone said.

“Oh, you’ll listen to her?”

“Wouldn’t you?” Stone asked. “She can kick my ass.”

“I’ll tell you who can kick your ass,” Spencer growled, as he carefully supported Stone’s head while Cassandra slid under him.

“Hey,” she said, giving Stone a tremulous smile.

“Hey, Cassie.” Stone smiled up at her. “Sorry for spoilin’ your dress.”

“It’s okay,” Cassandra said. “Really, it is.”

Eve had to grant that Spencer knew what he was doing. Stone stopped trying to hop up and shake it off and submitted to being fussed over.

“Where’s the . . . ? Oh, there it is.” Spencer said as the bartender trundled up with the first aid kit, one that looked extraordinarily large and well-stocked.

“Thank you Asfar,” Spencer said, opening the top compartment and pulling out a packet of sterile dressings. Opening it without touching the contents, he applied it to the bloody mess on the side of Stone’s head. “Cassandra, if you could keep some pressure on that cut, slow the bleeding?”

“Oh, yes.” Cassandra said, startled but game, taking over holding the dressing.

Fishing in one of the first aid kit pockets, Spencer pulled out a penlight. “Just going to check your eyes,” he informed Stone. “And stop rolling them.”

Eve supposed a man with Spencer’s resume would practically have a paramedic’s experience.

As Spencer checked the responsiveness of his cousin’s pupils, Eve began the standard cognitive questions for the victim of a head injury.

“What year is it, Stone?” she asked.

Spencer snorted. “You can’t check a brain like his with a question like that—Jake, what year did that Danish guy transcribe Cotton Nero A Fifteen?”

“You people are becomin’ annoying,” Stone growled. “For your diagnostic information it is Monday, March 2, 2015. And you’re tryin’ t’ be smart, Eliot. Grimur Jónsson Thorkelin transcribed Cotton MS Vitellius A.XV, not Nero. To answer your question there is some discrepancy in the dates because Thorkelin claimed he began work on the manuscript in 1787, but personal letters recently found at the Rigsarkivet and the Kongelige Bibliotek in Copenhagen indicate his copy was actually made somewhere between 1789 and 1791.”

He seemed prepared to go on indefinitely on the topic, but Spencer interrupted. “Okay, okay. Stop! You’re within your normal parameters of insanity.”

Cassandra gave a little sniffle and smiled with relief, her free hand involuntarily barely brushing at Stone’s hair. Their obstinate art historian melted a little bit, and Spencer eyed them with a funny half-smile like he had confirmed a theory.

“Now, visual acuity,” he said briskly. “How many fingers am I holding up?”
“W,” said Stone.

“What?” Eve asked, worried because the answer should have been three.

“It’s sign language,” Spencer explained. “Useful for talking in class right in front of the teacher. All right, Jake, the blocks in your head still seem to be stacked. Let’s sit you up so I can take a better look at that wound. You’ll have to keep the pressure on it yourself.”

Stone’s hand briefly covered Cassandra’s as he took over holding the dressing. She slipped her bloodied fingertips out from under his, folding them into her other hand and twisting them nervously as Eve and Spencer helped him sit up.

“Not so fast!” Eve warned Stone. “Slowly.”

“Owww!” Stone complained. “Damn, have I got the mother lode of all headaches.”

“I bet you do,” Eve said, sliding her shoulder under his arm. “Easy there, cowboy.”

Together she and Spencer assisted Stone upright. Cassandra scrambled to her feet and continued to hover. Her skirt was now rather unsettlingly bloody.

Eve was relieved to find Ezekiel leaned up against the bar, feigning unconcern, and as usual, completely unscathed and full of snark.

“It said something about how Stone was feeling that he paid no attention to his pestiferous colleague. Eve glared at Ezekiel and made throat cutting signs with her free hand. The thief subsided reluctantly, self-preservation being one of his primary talents.

Spencer directed his cousin to a chair in good lightning, and Stone collapsed into it with a pained grimace.

Martha appeared in front of him. Eve was beginning to find the young woman’s uncanny materializations a bit unnerving. “Water!” she held up a glass. “Tylenol!” Her palm cupped two small pills.

“Has anyone ever told you you’re a goddess?” Stone asked, taking the glass in one hand and letting her tip the pills into his other. He swallowed the pills with one gulp.

“Yes,” Martha said cheerfully. “H-Colin tells me that all the time when I . . .”

“Martha!” Spencer snapped.

Stone looked like he might choke. Ezekiel looked fascinated. Cassandra looked like she was simply waiting for the sentence to finish and did not understand the problem.

“Oh!” Martha said as though recalling something she had forgotten. “I’ll just go clean up all that blood.”

“You do that.” Spencer shook his head.

Martha trotted off as if dealing with blood were an everyday occupation.

Eve could see that Colin was encouraging the departure of the rest of the Brew Pub clientele.
“Everything’s on the house tonight, folks. Sorry for the extra drama. Pick up your coupons for 20% off on your next visit at the front desk.”

These people had a system for placating customers whose meals were interrupted by violence? Once again, Eve found herself wondering just what kind of mayhem was a regular occurrence here. Certainly no one seemed to be paying any attention to the pile of bound minions of the Serpent Brotherhood. She realized she was actually hearing sirens getting closer. Apparently someone had had the good sense to call the police.

In the next moment, the door to the Brew Pub flew open and four officers with guns drawn burst in. “Portland P.D.! Nobody move!”

“Olivia! Jack!” Martha exclaimed, delighted. “I’m glad it’s you! Thanks for coming so fast.” She waved her hand around, the gesture encompassing all the unconscious or incapacitated bodies. “The ones in the zip ties are the bad guys. Everybody else is good guys.”

The officers relaxed their weapons, apparently completely familiar with the Brew Pub and its personnel. “What happened here?” asked the officer Martha had identified as Olivia.

Slipping her ID out of her pocket, Eve held it out. “Colonel Eve Baird, NATO Counter-terrorism,” she identified herself to the officers. She nodded in the direction of the captives. “Those are the people responsible—they came in armed with knives and three guns. We were able to subdue them, but I’ve got one man injured.”

The officer Martha had identified as Olivia quickly checked Eve’s ID. “I’ll have Officer Bailey take statements, and the rest of us can make the arrests. Are we going to need EMS?”

“Eliot usually damages people a bit, so you might.” Martha shrugged.

“All right, we can take care of that,” the woman said. “You people never leave us much to do except clean up.” She turned and stalked off, talking into her radio.

Apparently, Spencer was operating on the right side of the law so far in Portland. Certainly, the local LEOs appeared on familiar and congenial terms with the Brew Pub crew. Eve had to admit it was going to be amusing to see Dulaque’s crack team of assassins behind bars for armed robbery. At least they were no longer her responsibility.

Eve turned back to the group clustered around Stone.

“Shouldn’t we be getting him to a doctor?” Ezekiel asked. “Not that I care or anything, but Stone’s brain is the only useful part of him.”

The Brew Pub crew looked nonplussed, as though they had forgotten such options existed. Eve herself was so accustomed to patching up hard-headed and hard-drinking recruits that she hadn’t really considered whether the ER was the place for Stone.

Spencer contemplated his cousin. “You’re gonna need a few stitches to hold that gash closed,” he told Stone. “Now I can put ‘em in for you, or your friends here can take you to the hospital. It’s your choice.”


“All right then.”

Spencer set Colin and Ezekiel to pulling up a table where he could lay out a tray with instruments
and supplies. Once again, Eve noted that the Brew Pub first aid kit was more like an emergency first response kit. Spencer had all the materials to perform minor surgery should he so choose.

On the tray, wrapped in sterile bubble packs, were syringes, hair-fine curved needles, suture thread, a vial of local anaesthetic, gauze pads, antiseptic wipes, and surgical scissors. A large bottle of betadyne disinfectant sat next to a box of nitrile gloves.

In spite of her theory about Spencer’s proficiency in field medicine, Eve was impressed with his technique. He immediately assumed she would be the logical choice for nurse, and invited her to join him in scrubbing up and donning surgical gloves.

“If you could wipe as much of that blood as possible out of his hair,” Spencer told her, setting out a basin of warm water and a stack of clean restaurant linens, “I can shave the hair away from the edges of that cut.”

“Can I see your licenses as cosmetologists?” Stone complained.

“Come on, Stone. Your manly vanity will survive our amateur hairdressing,” Eve said, dipping a cloth in the water and wringing it out. “I’m going to have to remove that dressing you’re holding,” she warned him. “Hold still.”

The blood drying and matting in his hair had already adhered to the dressing, so Eve had to work it loose. She was careful, but as she gently detached the gauze from the site of the injury, she saw Stone’s hands clench on the sides of the chair and his knuckles go white. He didn’t move, however.

“There,” she said, dropping the gory mess on the table top, hoping that someone at the Brew Pub planned to thoroughly sanitize the place before resuming regular service. The jagged tear Stone had received courtesy of the cupboard door handle still oozed blood sluggishly.

Because she did not want to introduce any more bacteria into the cut than was already there, she avoided getting water too close to the injury, but Stone wasn’t going to be able to wash his hair for a couple of days, so she did her best to reduce the amount of blood that had soaked that side of his head as he had lain in it.

Cassandra stood by, washed and gloved of her own initiative, a little dewy-eyed, but gamely handing Eve cloths as she needed them. The pile of crimson cloths grew on the table, and the water in the basin went from pink to red.

When Spencer’s hands appeared beside hers ready to trim the hair from around the cut, Eve shied away, her mind flashing back to an image of black rather than blue gloves, and a blood-stained knife rather than shiny, sterile scissors. She noticed Stone’s eyes on her and forced her breathing back to normal, trying to make her retreat less obvious.

“Two by two, hands of blue,” Ezekiel commented. “Stone, you’d better make sure your cousin isn’t working for the Alliance.”

“I’m not at liberty to tell you that,” Spencer commented absently as he daubed the area around the wound with generous amounts of betadyne.

"Oooh, Firefly!" Cassandra focused on Eliot with interest.

Since Ezekiel and Cassandra had insisted that the whole team watch all the episodes, Eve recognized the reference.
Snips of Stone’s thick dark hair fell to his shoulders and the floor.

“Sorry about the premature baldness.” Spencer’s tone was mocking rather than apologetic as he switched to the razor. Nevertheless, Eve noted that he was careful to clear as little hair around the cut as possible, and that Stone would be able to hide most of the resultant gap with artful combing.

Although his cousin was obviously trying not to hurt him, Stone closed his eyes and his breath hissed through his teeth.

Cassandra winced in sympathy. “Are you okay?” she asked, touching Stone on the shoulder.

He did not open his eyes or answer her but reached up and gripped her hand. Cassandra’s eyes widened then softened into a tender, maternal sort of look as she let him hold her hand.

Eve backed away to keep the area less congested. If it got her further away from Spencer, that was all to the good.

“Jones, why don’t you lift Stone’s keys and go get the pickup, so we don’t have to walk to it,” she suggested. “We shouldn’t have any trouble parking in front of the Brew Pub now.”

“Aye aye, Colonel!” Ezekiel slipped in beside Spencer, and had the keys out of Stone’s pocket without either of them paying him any attention. Giving Eve a cheeky grin, Ezekiel, hurried off to do as he was bid.

Having finished his work as barber, Spencer picked up a syringe that he must have filled while Eve was cleaning Stone’s hair.

“I’m gonna numb the area now,” he told Stone. “You’ll feel a couple of pokes, but everything should improve after that.”

“Numb is good,” Stone said.

As Spencer prepared to inject the first amount of local anaesthetic, he asked, “Remember the first time I ever stitched up a cut?”

Stone laughed. “We were what? Twelve?”

“Something like that,” Spencer said, completing the injections with practiced speed and ease. He’d obviously done this before--frequently. “We were skipping school.”

“You were a bad influence,” Stone commented.

Spencer shrugged. “Your childhood would have been a trackless expanse of boredom without me.”

“We were also trespassing,” Stone said, relaxing as the numbing agent took hold.

Self-consciously, he dropped Cassandra’s hand. Cassandra blushed and withdrew her hand from his shoulder.

Spencer picked up the tiny needle already threaded with suture material. Using a sterile sponge, he dabbed the blood away from the wound so that he could see to stitch. Holding the torn flesh together, he inserted the needle and drew it through both ragged edges, joining them firmly. With a flourish, he tied a knot in the first stitch. “You have to admit the old Bowett place was a great place to play World War II!”

“And t’try to kill ourselves.” Stone frowned.
“There was that.” Spencer sponged away the blood again and set the next stitch.

“They shoulda known better than to tell us never t’go there. Like that was gonna work!”

“Parents. They never learn.” Spencer looked off into the distance briefly, tossing his hair from his eyes.

“Eliot was the Germans, and I was the Allies,” Stone explained to Cassandra and Eve. “The Bowett place was an abandoned 19th century farm house. The doors and ground floor windows were boarded up, but that didn’t stop us from clamberin’ onto the roof and riskin’ our necks breakin’ into a second story window. Man, that was fun!”

“Well, it was until I stepped through some rotten floorboards and ripped up my leg on the nails,” Spencer said dryly.

“Don’t you mean until you were bayonetted and captured?” Stone smirked.

“Right. So you got to practice your skills as a medic and ruin my shirt nearly cutting off my leg with a tourniquet.” Spencer glared at him.

“Then I hauled my prisoner of war back to the POW camp aka Uncle Saul’s place. But there was no way we were gonna admit what we’d done. So we used Uncle Saul’s fish line and Aunt Bernice’s embroidery needles to sew up Eliot’s leg.”

“What’s this ‘we’?” Spencer asked, delicately tying off another knot. “You were too squeamish to stick a needle into me. I had to sew up my own leg.”

“Hey, I knew my limitations,” Stone said. “But you have to admit I did a bang-up job of bandagin’.”

“Yeah. With Aunt B’s scarf! Was she ever hoppin’ mad when she finally got it back.” Spencer took another stitch.

“Fortunately, my tetanus shots were up to date,” Spencer agreed. “Then you had the bright idea to pour rubbing alcohol over it.”

Stone chuckled. “And after I peeled you off the ceiling . . .”

“That hurt like hell,” Spencer said. “For a long time that was my measure for how bad something could get. Flaming bamboo strips under my fingernails? Piece of cake. Nothing like that rubbing alcohol.”

Stone eyed his cousin as if he were almost sure he was joking. Eve was pretty sure he was not.

“Did your families ever find out what you’d done?” Cassandra asked.

“No,” Stone shook his head. “Eliot limped around for a few days, but that wasn’t so unusual, and nobody asked.”

“I still have a really odd looking scar.” Spencer tied off the last in his series of precise, tiny sutures.

“Wow! I couldn’t have a hangnail without a family emergency meeting,” Cassandra commented.
“If I’d ever showed up limping there would have been specialists involved.”

“And there you are.” Spencer set down the needle and thread. “All stitched up. You look like Frankenstein’s monster now.”

“Creature,” Stone corrected. “Frankenstein’s creature. He wasn’t really a monster. In fact he was an innocent until human society taught him cruelty and drove him to kill.”

“He may not have begun life as a monster, but he chose to become one,” Spencer said quietly. “That’s not a choice you can unmake.”

Stone looked searchingly at his cousin, but Spencer did not meet his eyes. Instead, he busied himself peeling off his blood-stained blue gloves.

Eve saw again black gloves with fingertips glistening crimson—with Torbjørn’s blood, with Teresinha’s, with Poptart’s, with her own. The hands of a monster.

Those hands remained deceptively gentle as they applied sterile pads to the wound on Stone’s head.

“You know the drill—any nausea, dizziness, persistent headaches, confusion—and it’s off to the ER for you.” Spencer taped the bandage in place.

“Yes, doctor” Stone said with unconvincing humility.

“And no washing your hair for 48 hours. You can get Colonel Baird to remove the stitches in 3 to 5 days,” Spencer said.

Eve nodded at him. “We’d better get you home and lying down, Stone,” she said.

Martha trotted over, bearing an icepack that Stone accepted with gratitude. At least this time Eve had seen her arriving.

“Can someone stay with him overnight?” Spencer asked. “Make sure there’s no damage we’re missing?”

“Certainly,” Eve said. “We’ll take care of him.”

Their departure was delayed by the necessity of providing their contact information to Portland PD. Ezekiel arrived back from bringing the pickup and lied to the police about every circumstance of his existence. Eve was too tired to care. The Library probably didn't want him arrested anyway.

The police did not need long statements from them because it turned out that Colin had provided them with surveillance video from every possible angle. Apparently the Brew Pub was an impossible place to attempt anything clandestine.

Finally, they were ready to go. The Brew Pub crew shook hands with the Librarian team. Cassandra added an impulsive hug for Spencer.

“Thank you,” she said. “I had a lovely time—well—before everything else.”

“You’re welcome for the lovely time part,” Spencer said. “I’m sorry the dessert ended up all over the floor and the goons. And I’m sorry for the excessive infestation of goons.”

Cassandra giggled. “But it was pretty spectacular.”
Spencer’s smile at her was wistful.

Stone looked pale and exhausted; however, he stood on his own and refused to lean on anyone. He shook hands with Colin and Martha and turned to bid his cousin farewell.

“Eliot, your food was terrific, but the floor show left a lot to be desired,” he joked, holding out his hand.

“Maybe next time, you’ll remember to stay put when you haven’t been invited to join in and let the professionals do their jobs.” Spencer’s tone was dead serious.

Stone ignored the reproof and clasped Spencer’s hand. “I’m so glad we ran into each other. Let’s do it again before another twenty years pass.”

In response, Spencer pulled him into a fierce hug. Stone looked startled, given his cousin’s first reaction to being hugged, but then pleased.

“It was good to see you, Jake,” Spencer said into his cousin’s neck. “Felt just a bit like goin’ home.”

As Spencer released him and stepped back, Stone looked as if he would have liked to ask his cousin a thousand questions, none of which he could ask.

“See you later, then?” Stone asked hopefully.

The look in Spencer’s eyes was that of a soldier saying good-bye on the docks before shipping out for a tour of duty from which he did not expect to return. “Take care of yourself,” he responded, clapping Stone on the shoulder a last time.

* * * * *

As they exited the Brew Pub, Eve wondered if anyone had noticed that she and Spencer had exchanged no farewells. She felt a small elation that she’d extricated this team alive and mostly in one piece.

Cassandra followed at Stone’s shoulder, their usual positions reversed, ready to support him should he falter. Surprisingly, Ezekiel was hovering a bit, too. Their thief would have to watch himself, or he would start losing his impervious detachment.

They threaded their way through the last of the police cars loaded with Lamia’s crew. Two ambulances were just pulling away with Spencer’s more unlucky victims.

Stone gave a sigh of relief when they reached his pickup. He didn’t even complain when Eve chivalrously assisted him with climbing in. This time Jones and Cassandra had the back seat, since Eve planned to drive so she could drop the others off before taking Stone home.

As Eve finished settling Stone in the front passenger seat, Martha appeared at her shoulder. Eve started. Once again, she had not realized the woman had followed her.

“I’m supposed to give these back to you,” Martha said, handing Eve a sealed plastic bag containing her missing ammunition.

Eve watched as Martha hurried through the rain and saw Eliot Spencer, standing shadowed in the entrance to the Brew Pub.
Quickly and automatically drawing her weapon, Eve inserted the magazine and chambered a round. For the first time that evening, she held a loaded gun.

In those seconds, however, Martha and Spencer had disappeared into the Brew Pub.

A chill slithered up Eve’s spine. The temporary truce was over.

* * * * *

TBC

Chapter End Notes

In case you didn't recognize their cameo appearances here, the Portland PD officers Olivia and Jack were the law enforcement officers Parker and Amy set up for a date at The Brew Pub in The Broken Wing Job.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Awkward revelations--The Librarians.

Eve took several deep breaths to calm the battle nerves that in the absence of discharge were making her feel as if her skin contained broken power lines, snapping and arcing. Not taking her eyes off the Brew Pub, she slowly holstered her pistol and backed up to where she could open the door of the pickup and step into the driver’s seat.

She did not relax until they were several blocks away.

In the rear view mirror, she could see Ezekiel’s face lit by the screen of his phone. Cassandra leaned sleepily against the side of the truck, the day obviously overtaking her. Beside her, Stone sat straight, staring into the night, the bandage on the side of his head standing out light over dark. Eve let herself gloat over them a little—her team, alive and mostly well. Safe, for the time being, from assassins and cults.

She would drop Ezekiel off first. Since his illegal activity significantly supplemented his income as a Librarian in Training, he had his own townhouse apartment in an upscale neighbourhood closer to the heart of Portland. Eve had no doubt the crime rate in the area was on the rise.

Cassandra and Eve had chosen economical apartments in the same building within walking distance of The Annex, so when they dropped Cassandra off, Eve would be able to dash in and grab her bag she kept packed for longer missions.

Stone had rejected conventional apartments and had found a room to rent on the top floor of an actual house.

When she informed her team of her proposed plan to spend the night with Stone, he objected, “I’ll be fine. If anything goes wrong, I can call my landlady.”

“If you are able to call her,” Eve said, “you don’t need her. Listen, you need someone to stay with you, wake you up occasionally, make sure you’re okay. Jones would irritate you to death.”

“And there is no way I’m babysitting you,” Ezekiel chimed in.

“And Colonel Baird has the most experience in dealing with injuries,” Cassandra put in.

“So, you don’t have to like it, but I promised someone would spend the night with you, and I intend to keep that promise,” Eve finished.

Stone was looking mulish, but the effort of arguing appeared to be beyond his capacity at the moment, for which Eve was grateful.

“That’s settled then,” Eve said. “I’ll just pick up my overnight bag when we drop off Cassandra.”

Stone’s only resigned comment was “How am I gonna explain you to my landlady?”
Jones laughed. “It’s the 21st century. You’re a man. She’s a woman. What’s to explain?”

Stone pinched the bridge of his nose and grimaced in more than physical pain.

“I am going to strangle you, Ezekiel Jones,” Eve said through gritted teeth. “Life imprisonment would be worth it. But no jury in the land would convict.”

Ezekiel prudently subsided into his phone again. Several more blocks went by in blessed silence before an exclamation from the back seat startled all of them.

“No! I don’t believe it! I do not believe this!”

Cassandra, yanked back from the gates of sleep, popped upright, exclaiming “What? What is it?”

“Do you know who those people were?” Ezekiel asked, waving his phone around. The light bounced around the cab, annoying Eve and making Stone wince.

“Which ones?” Cassandra asked.

“Those friends of Stone’s cousin!” he said.

“Colin and Martha?”

“Exactly,” Ezekiel said significantly.

“What do you mean?” Cassandra sounded bewildered.

“Those names—Colin Hartnell and Martha Tyler—they’re made up from the names of actors and characters on Doctor Who. They’re aliases. I’ve just been running face rec on them.”

“Wait,” Stone interrupted irritably. “So they’re lying about who they are?”

“Oh yeah. Are they ever, and no wonder!” Ezekiel sounded like—well, like Cassandra high on Christmas. “They’re really Alec Hardison and Parker!”

The cab of the truck was filled with an unimpressed and unenlightened silence.

“Alec Hardison,” Ezekiel repeated. “How can you people be so smart about things you can’t see or that happened in the Bronze Age and have absolutely no clue about the real world? Alec Hardison is only the best hacker ever! He’s been my role model my whole life. I mean, he hacked the Pentagon when he was twelve years old! I didn’t manage that until I was seventeen—um, allegedly.”

Eve could feel him eying the back of her head. “Is that a confession, Jones?”

“Not at all, Colonel Baird.”

“What about the other one,” Cassandra asked. “Parker who?”

“It’s just Parker.” Ezekiel’s enthusiasm revved up again. “She’s like the queen of thieves. No one has ever caught her. They say she could steal the glasses off the face of the Pope without anyone noticing.”

“I guess that explains how someone could have pickpocketed my gun and replaced it unloaded,” Eve mused.
“Parker lifted your gun? That is so awesome! There isn’t anything she can’t break into or out of. She’s beaten a Steranko—twice!”

“A Steranko,” Eve said dubiously. She was aware that Steranko security systems were considered unbeatable.

“I know, right?” Ezekiel gushed—there was really no other word to describe it. “Did you see her take out those Serpent Brotherhood thugs?”

“So, hands of the world’s best thief, and she does do punchy, hmmm?” Stone asked.

“Hey, Parker is insane. I am not.” Ezekiel defended his pacifism. “One time, after a heist, she BASE jumped from the top of the tallest building in Dubai to escape. That’s 828 metres! Oh. My. God. I cannot believe I’ve met Hardison and Parker!”

Cassandra was holding giggles in her mouth with her fingertips, and even Stone had a twist of half a smile in the corner of his mouth. They had never seen Ezekiel Jones humble for even an instant, so this hero worship was particularly amusing.

“You’re totally geeking out again.” Cassandra said, her voice shining with laughter.

Ezekiel shrugged.

“So, what I’m wondering is what are the world’s greatest thief and hacker doing running a brew pub in Portland, Oregon—particularly working with the world’s greatest—or worst, depending on your point of view—hitter, retrieval specialist, and general killer for hire, Eliot Spencer.”

“What?” Stone twisted around in his seat to glare at Ezekiel. “What are you talking about?”

Oh, hell. This was not how Eve had wanted Jacob Stone to learn about his cousin’s other profession.

“Jones,” she warned. “This is not the time.”

“No,” Stone said firmly. “I think it is. Explain.”

Taking Stone as the person who mattered, Ezekiel ignored Eve. “Okay, your cousin is a seriously bad dude. On a scale of one to ten of fucking scary, he’s like 18.”

“Oh.” Cassandra gave a little gasp. “Oh, no.”

“Jones.” Eve let some menace slip into her voice, but the irrepressible Ezekiel babbled on, his agile fingers flipping through information on his phone.

“I am not kidding you. The guy is a legend. He’s toppled governments! Word is, if Eliot Spencer comes for you, his is the last face you’ll ever see. He’s got a body count that looks like a phone number.”

“Jones, be quiet.”

“No, let him talk. I want to hear this.” Stone’s voice was chilled and soft.

“So I thought well, maybe it’s a different guy,” Ezekiel continued, “but no. THE Eliot Spencer was last known to be in Boston as part of Nathan Ford’s crew—they pulled some of the biggest jobs this side of the Atlantic in the last decade. And here’s the kicker. Two of the other members of Ford’s crew were Alec Hardison and Parker.”
“Ezekiel Jones, if you don’t shut up . . .” Eve’s teeth were gritted now. Jones possessed the ability to fray every last nerve belonging to every person within the range of his voice.

Their thief was still poking away at his phone. “Hey, did you know there’s a price on Spencer’s head—he’s wanted dead or alive in Myanmar for a cool 500,000 US dollars.”

“Don’t even think about it,” Eve growled at him.

“No way!” he shook his head vehemently. “I’ve better ways to score a half million. Ones that involve my surviving to enjoy it.”

“So why hasn’t someone collected it?” Stone asked.

Eve winced.

“Self-preservation. I told you,” Ezekiel said. “Eliot Spencer is the best. You don’t hit him unless you want to be very, very dead, or at least wishing you were. Did you see him in The Brew Pub? Oh, right, you were knocked out by the cupboard door. He took out eight of those Serpent Brotherhood assassins while Colonel Baird was dealing with two—without breaking a sweat.”

Stone was so very still now. Eve risked a glance at him in the flickering glare of the passing street lights, and the expression on his face made her heart hurt for him.

“Jones, someday, somebody is going to shoot you in the face, and you’ll still be asking ‘What did I say?’” she said.

“What did I say?” Ezekiel remained oblivious to the effect his words were having on Stone. “Hey, Colonel Baird, when did you meet up with Spencer? You get along better with Dulaque than with him! Must have been some kind of a show down!”

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arrived.

The neighborhood was older—tall trees, smaller houses set back from the sidewalks on lots that sloped up. Not a prosperous part of town. Eve parked the truck along the street beside a battered mailbox with the number Stone had given her glinting on its side. She turned to look at him, to ask if this was the right place, but his eyes were still closed.

“Hey,” she pitched her voice so as not to startle him. “Stone. I think we’re here.”

His instant response told her that he had not been sleeping. “Good.”

Eve undid her seat belt and started to open the door.

“Wait,” Stone said. “Before we go in, we need to talk.”

Oh, shit. Reluctantly, Eve eased the door closed and sat back in her seat. Her empty stomach gave a sickening lurch. Because she did not have anything to do with her hands, which showed a distressing tendency to shake, she held onto the steering wheel again.

She could feel Stone’s eyes on her now. But she did not look at him.

“What is it?” she asked, although she did not want to know.

“Colonel Baird,” Stone’s voice was determined. “Eve. You don’t have to tell me any details about what happened between you and my cousin. But I need to know one thing.”

Eve had realized some version of this conversation was coming. She had been dreading it from the moment she had heard Eliot Spencer’s name.

“You can ask,” she said, massaging her temples in a vain attempt to stave off a tension headache. Her grammar was very precise. He could ask, but she did not guarantee him an answer. Jacob Stone would understand the nuance. Taking a deep breath and clenching her fists at her sides, she faced him and braced for whatever he would say next.

“Eliot and I were just kids the last time I saw him, just out of high school,” he said, his face more serious than she ever remembered seeing it, his voice low and rough with emotion. “I realize now that he became a very different person from the cousin I once knew, and that person did some terrible things. So tell me true, Eve.” He reached out to her as if he might brush the back of her hand with his fingertips, but he did not touch her. “Is there anything that Eliot Spencer did to you that requires that I go back to the Brew Pub tonight and kill him?”

Eve felt her heart crack. Of course. In that moment she desired nothing more than to throw herself into the arms of this splendid, honorable man and weep. He wanted to know if his cousin had raped her. And if it were so, no family loyalty would supersede his commitment to her.

“No! Oh, no! Jacob, it wasn’t anything like that,” Eve exclaimed reaching to grip his outstretched hand. “I swear. We met as combatants, on opposite sides of both the fight and the law. But it was a fair fight. He gave me no more and no less quarter than he would a man. And I lost. I lost spectacularly, my entire team, in fact.” Tears stung her eyes now. “They all died, and I—I nearly did.”

Her voice betrayed her and ended in a sob.

“Oh, Eve,” Stone said. “I am so sorry.” And then, shifting over into the awkward gap between the seats, he drew her into the circle of his arms, warm and secure, like her father used to.
Eve clung to him as if he were his namesake, solid as granite, while the hurricane of emotions that had been building up all evening overwhelmed her. And he simply held her while she shook and sobbed, drenching his shirt with her tears.

She did not know how long he sat in what must have been extreme discomfort, rocking her gently, allowing her to break apart against him like a storm surge against a cliff. But finally, she grew still, spent and empty and numb. For a long time she simply rested there listening to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat, feeling a sort of peace slow the race of her pulse and calm the unevenness in her breathing.

Only when she started to move again did Stone shift forward and fetch a box of tissues from down beside the gearshift. Still holding her with one arm, he gently wiped the tears and mucous from her face as if she were a small child.

Suddenly self-conscious, Eve pushed herself away from him, straightening up in her seat. Grabbing a handful of tissues, she scrubbed at her face, trying to wipe away more than just the damp.

“Well, that was embarrassing.” She sniffed, not looking at Stone.

From where he had returned to his own seat, Stone’s voice came warm with his smile, “It didn’t happen.”

Once again, Eve wondered what alchemy had gone into the making of Jacob Stone. Whatever it was, she was so very grateful.

“Then, I think we should go in, now,” Eve said, realizing she was completely exhausted. She made herself look at Stone.

He nodded at her, respecting her desire to leave behind what they had just shared. “Let’s go then.”

* * * * *

TBC
Chapter 13

Cassandra closed the door of her apartment and leaned back against it.

When she had flown from Heathrow to PDX, she had left her life behind in New York. Nothing in her previous apartment had held meaning for her because that had been where she had done her best to forget who she was and who she could have been. She’d had her roommate send a suitcase with her clothes and told her to keep whatever else she wanted or give it away.

This little studio apartment was hers, in a way no other place had been. When she had told Jake that she had never had a kid’s bedroom, he had looked at her with pitying astonishment and, in spite of the awkward tension of those early days, immediately piled her and Ezekiel into his pickup and taken her shopping at every quaint or quirky interior design shop Ezekiel could find in Portland.

Instead of ignoring her synaesthesia, Jake had drawn her to talk about how the colors had sounded to her, what the shapes smelled like, what numbers she saw, what different textures made her feel. It had been such an astonishing experience for her. All her life people had treated her as though she were broken, as though speaking of her disability was painful for them, as though her very existence made them uncomfortable. But Jake had reacted as if her cross-wired brain had simply created a far greater depth and height and breadth to the ways she could perceive and appreciate art. For the first time she had tried to see herself through his eyes—as more rather than less, as a person uniquely gifted rather than horribly cursed. Like a blind man creating a masterpiece, Jake had coaxed her into describing sensations he could not feel or see or hear so that he could paint her room with them.

Cassandra found most places full of jarring and competing sensory bombardment, but this space she could now slip into like a comforting robe, her frayed nerves easing into peace, her fragmented sense of self coalescing into wholeness.

Now her room rioted with botanical murals blending into blackboard on which she could chalk math equations to her heart’s content. A light that looked like a glittering atom hung from the center of the room, and her walls were decorated with framed prints of scientific art from classical illustrations to images from scanning electron microscopes. Her bed was covered in plush versions of the weirdest animals the boys could find—an octopus, a wombat, and an iguana were her favorites. The three of them had spent a day at the Oregon Zoo before descending on the gift store like a horde of locusts.

Jake had even used his landlady’s deceased husband’s workshop to put together a set of hexagonal shelves painted to match the mural with some of them plastered with pages from mathematical textbooks. Cassandra, who had no idea what had happened to her childhood collections, had purchased a fossil to sit on one shelf as the seed for a new collection.

She had once again a desk and table for her computer and lab work. Some days she would just hold up each beaker and retort and even the lowly test tubes to watch the light glow through them and take deep breaths of cinnamon and cardamom.

In one corner she had an overly enthusiastic Boston fern that was trying to take over the room, and in another, she had a fish tank, burbling away, that she was fairly certain Ezekiel had stolen for her, with guppies and neon tetras and sword tails and one snail that had somehow become one hundred. The multi-colored fish, swirling with such complex patterns, could mesmerize her with the equations they made, each minute a new secret. Along the counter of her small kitchen, she had a parade of chubby cacti, whose protective prickles created a design that always made Cassandra
laugh when she ran their equations. Jake had looked at her wistfully and told her he wished he could hear the jokes that a cactus told.

Cassandra always felt surrounded by herself in this room in ways she never had before. Which was a good thing, because she wanted to curl up in the zebra-striped chair Jake had found for her at an antique store after the debacle of the Apple of Discord, and hug her pillow printed with the periodic table information for the element Carbon, and cry.

The evening had been a traumatic one, with the still unexplained tension between Colonel Baird and Jake’s cousin, the violent interruption of the Serpent Brotherhood, and Jake’s frightening head injury. But that wasn’t the worst of it.

Her heart was breaking for Jake, and there was nothing she could do for him. That fact hurt. She had been so grateful to Eliot for taking care of his cousin, for letting her assist. But she knew Jake would never have asked for her help. He was such a caring person, but since that time she had betrayed the Library, there had always been a thin layer of ice between them. When she had spent time in Prince Charming’s skin, she had thought that, instead of the Huntsman, the Fairy Tale could as easily have made Jacob Stone into Snow White—trapped in a glass box with his heart poisoned. But she had lost the right to be the prince who could remove that barrier.

He had told her that family wasn’t ever easy, but tonight she had seen how much he cared for his cousin, how much fun they had had as boys together. And now, just when she had thought he might have found a family member he could be himself around, he had discovered that Eliot Spencer, like everyone else in his life, could not be trusted.

Even in the shadowed interior of the truck, with only the illumination of street lights, the look in Jake’s eyes as he had listened to Ezekiel’s litany of crimes that Eliot had committed had been wrenching, moving from angry disbelief to stunned shock to coldest rage and ending in a profound and anguished horror.

Cassandra herself found it hard to believe that Eliot Spencer with his charming smile and his healer’s hands could be the cold-blooded killer Ezekiel had described. And yet she had watched him fight The Serpent Brotherhood with a skill that went beyond terrifying. Although she had to admit that, at the time, since Eliot had been defending them, it had also been rather thrilling to watch the ease with which he had annihilated their enemies.

But Colonel Baird’s reaction to Eliot had new meaning in light of Ezekiel’s information. Cassandra had never seen Baird so thoroughly traumatized. Even when she’d been a princess, their dauntless Guardian had been no damsel in distress. She might have trilled songs and batted her eyes, but she kicked off her high heels and fought fearlessly even with her curtailed skills. What then could have happened to make her respond to Eliot Spencer with more fear than she had to a Minotaur?

Cassandra was fairly certain she did not want to know.

She wished she could have volunteered to spend the night with both Eve and Jake. She had wanted so much to be able to comfort Jake. But she was sure her presence tonight would only be a reminder that everyone always betrayed him. So she had seconded Colonel Baird’s plan to send her home. No need for math in patching up broken hearts.

Still clutching the element Carbon to her chest, Cassandra tried to breathe deeply, running the periodic table through her mind, all those beautiful numbers, neutrons and protons and ions, atomic weights, and valence levels, until she disappeared into the swirl of color and music, and they flickered about her like spinning universes.
Alec Hardison sat alone in the briefing room, his laptop screen the only light illuminating his face. Windows and tabs opened under his searching touch so rapidly they flickered like a movie.

Eliot had gone wherever Eliot went when he got thunderous and surly. And Parker was . . . ah, that was a very faint rustle, far up in the vaulted ceiling. Sure enough, with the zipping hiss of rope and harness, Parker floated down over the desk like a very large and entirely gorgeous spider. She hovered just off the surface, rotating slowly, a bowl of loudly colored cereal and milk in one hand. Balancing on the rope by hooking it with her elbow, she maneuvered her spoon with her other hand.

“Didn’t you get enough to eat tonight?” Hardison asked mildly, his hands slowing their dance over the keys, but not stopping.

“Yes,” said Parker with the total lack of comprehension that still could surprise him. Parker’s out-of-phase view of the world was a constant source of delight to Hardison.

“Then why the cereal?” Hardison gestured at the bowl.

“There is no ‘why’ about cereal,” Parker said, wrinkling her nose and reversing her spin. “‘Why’ is for vegetables. Eliot knows all the ‘why’s’. Because iron, or because beta carotene, or because fiber. I just like things that have no reason.”

Hardison shrugged. When she put it that way, it made perfect sense. Parker usually did, when she explained. Sometimes he thought maybe Parker was the only sane one, and all the rest of the world was crazy.

“What are you doing?” Parker asked, landing on the desk and scooting over without using her hands to peer at the computer screen.

Hardison took a moment to appreciate the aesthetics of the wiggling that maneuver involved before answering, “Does anyone think some really weird shit went down with Eliot tonight?”

“Are you talking about the NATO Colonel, Eliot’s cousin, or that woman with the sword and her gang?” Parker asked, shovelling cereal into her mouth with rapt concentration.

“All of the above,” Hardison said. “I started with the people with knives and guns because I wanna know who’s comin’ after Eliot, and I ain’t got nothin’.”

Which was nothing but the truth, and that was baffling. “I mean they are nowhere in my world. Eliot called them The Serpent Brotherhood, but nobody’s talkin’ about ‘em, nobody’s tweetin’ about ‘em, they don’t have a webpage or anything. They got no accounts, no news articles. I’ve got searches runnin’ with facial recognition, but with Eliot’s enemies, that pretty much means coverin’ the entire planet, so I doubt I’ll get much for a few hours, unless they been operatin’ long in Portland. But if some of Eliot’s old buddies were runnin’ game here in town, you’d think he’d have said somethin’.”

Parker set down her empty bowl and launched herself into a slow swing around Hardison so that she could see what he was doing and flop her arms over his shoulders. Hardison readjusted her so that he wasn’t in danger of being strangled and continued to caress his keyboard. Things were getting a little tricky now.

“That’s the NATO person,” Parker pointed out, putting a sugar-dusted fingerprint on his screen.
“Woman!” Hardison exclaimed in exasperation. “Do not combine cereal dandruff with my laptop! Yes, that’s Colonel Eve Baird. I thought she was the next most important problem. Any time the law comes gunning for one of us, we end up burnin’ through aliases and blowin’ up offices. Now I need t’concentrate, because hackin’ NATO ain’t no walk in the park.”

Parker could be a monumental pest when she was in the mood, but she knew when to leave Hardison in peace. She patted his head, then zipped back up her rope, and for a while, he could hear the quiet clinks and swishes of her swinging about the rafters.

But then the systems put in place to prevent just such intrusions as his demanded his full attention and all background activity faded from his awareness. Several hours later, he was sweating and breathing as though he had been running, but he was in. He had all the files on one Eve Baird, Colonel. And damn. This was worse than he had feared.

He nearly jumped out of his skin when Parker’s voice breathed in his ear. “What’s wrong?”

“Jiminy Christmas, Parker! You tryin’ t’kill me, girl?”

“You found something,” Parker said. “I want to know what.”

Taking a few deep breaths to settle his pulse, Hardison transferred the view on his screen to the large bank of screens on the wall as if this were only another case.


“Ooooh! Christmas Eve!” Parker exclaimed.

“Yeah, wonder if she ever forgave her parents for that name. Anyway, she grew up on a variety of army bases. Went to West Point—transcripts are all 4.0.”

“Hot and smart,” Parker said.

Hardison rolled his eyes. Part of the problem with the pre-socialized Parker imprinting on him and Eliot was that she had a tendency to talk like she was one of them. Not that he minded if Parker actually did find girls hot, too.

“She’s too old for us, Parker,” Hardison pointed out.

“But not for Eliot,” Parker said.

“Yeah, she’s not too much older than him, and he always likes girls that can kick his ass a little, but wait’ll you see where they intersect. Now let me finish.”

Parker subsided.

“She went on to complete her Military Intelligence training at Fort Huachuca, Arizona. Then she was recruited for Delta Force counter-terrorism. From there, she joined NATO counter-terrorism. And here’s where it gets interesting. You see, eleven years ago, Captain Eve Baird was given a mission to break up a shipment of nuclear materials through Spain being orchestrated by none other than Damien Moreau.”

Parker made her disgust face. “Blech.”

“Eleven years ago.” Hardison paused significantly but Parker looked blank, so he explained. “Back when we realized goin’ up against Moreau meant goin’ up against Eliot’s past, I did a bit of
diggin’, and that would have been right in the middle of the time he was doin’ all kinds of crazy bad shit for Moreau.”

“Uh oh.”

“Uh oh, is right. Baird’s whole team was killed, the shipment was lost, and Baird herself ended up hospitalized. And get this. That team was armored and armed to the teeth, but they were taken out by one man with knives. Sound like anyone we know?”

Parker’s eyes were wide with comprehension. She nodded soberly.

“They didn’t have enough evidence to convict, but I’m guessing they must have had a pretty good idea, because Baird sure reacted to Eliot’s name.”

“What did he do to her?” Parker asked quietly.

They’d always known Eliot had a dark and violent past, but they had never met any of his victims except for General Flores and Toby, both of whom Eliot had spared. Colonel Eve Baird was a reminder that Eliot hadn’t just killed and hurt other bad guys.

“She was medically discharged after that, and didn’t re-enlist for three years. I hacked the hospital’s records, which was a damn sight easier than NATO’s, let me tell you. And Eliot left her with a coma, a fractured skull, a crushed larynx, a perforated abdomen with resulting peritonitis, and, as if that wasn’t bad enough, a couple of cases of death. She flat-lined twice before they got her stabilized. Also, her therapist bills look like the national debt, so I’m guessing a raging case of PTSD, too.”

“Poor Eliot,” Parker said even more quietly.

Hardison knew she wasn’t dismissing what Eliot had done to Baird but imagining what having that on his conscience was doing to Eliot.

“Is that why she’s just working as a security guard for an archive now?” Parker asked.

That was actually a good question, because Baird was merely on transfer from NATO. Hardison looked up the Metropolitan Library. And drew a blank. As far as he could tell, there was no such organization in Portland. And the New York library seemed to have no actual connection to Portland. Payroll taxes were being withheld, but no information was available for her place of employment. He quickly looked up the other members of the archive.

“They were all hired around the same time, in New York. But they’ve apparently only worked from here. And who the hell pays their taxes in Roman denarii?”

“And who hires a thief to work in an archive containing rare art?” Parker asked.

“Ah, yes. Ezekiel Jones. Maybe they don’t know he’s a thief?” Hardison had come across Jones’ work a few times in the last several years. The kid had game, that was for sure. “Well, if he’s on the heist, should we let them know?”

Parker shrugged. “Anyone with that crappy of background checks deserves to get robbed.”

She had a point.

“Does this mean we’re going to have to leave?” Parker asked. “If Baird knows who Eliot was?”
“I doubt she can bring a case against him now, any more than they could back then,” Hardison said. “I’m more worried about him.”

“Because he feels guilty.” Parker nodded. As always, she and Eliot seemed to understand each other.

“Yeah. And because, if she wants some kind of revenge, I’m afraid he’ll just let her. I don’t even know where he’s disappeared to right now.”

“He’s on the roof,” Parker said.

“In the rain?” Hardison asked. “Never mind. He’d probably prefer it was hail. The man missed his century—he should have lived in the Middle Ages with self-flagellation and hair shirts.”

“He let his cousin get hurt,” Parker said. “You know how he gets when one of us gets hurt.”

* * * * *

Eliot Spencer sat in Parker’s favorite spot on the roof of the building which housed the Brew Pub looking out on the jeweled loveliness that was Portland on a rainy night. It was 52 degrees out and he was beginning to feel chilled as the water dripping from his unruly curls seeped down his neck. He tipped his head back, letting the rain beat against his face, welcoming the physical discomfort because it took the edge off his mental discomfort.

Eliot did not often find himself forced to admit that he had no idea what to do, but he seemed to have arrived at that point now. He felt like a planet with three continents that had just collided—shaken to his very foundation. When the plates of the earth’s crust ground against each other, mountain ranges rose up, and he could feel their razored peaks slicing through his heart. He had sacrificed to keep his worlds separate—had given up his family, his identity—but apparently that had not been enough to appease the vengeful Furies.

How had he managed so thoroughly to fuck up everything he had ever cared about? He remembered the moment he had first known that he could never go home again, never contact anyone he had loved. For a long time he hadn’t gone home because of the fight with his father, but he had spent a couple of Christmases with Jake’s family when he got leave from the Service. Then there had been Aimee. He’d gone home to her in between jobs, until the one when he hadn’t made it out for three months, and then he’d been recovering for another three, and she’d finally tired of waiting and moved on. Eventually the work he was doing was so far over the line he hadn’t wanted to carry that shit home on his boots. But that moment when he had first accepted a contract to kill a man’s family as a warning from Damien Moreau, and he had realized what his family risked by being connected to someone in his line of work, that was when he had known that he not only would not go home, he could not.

His family. They were only safe so long as no one knew they were in any way connected to him. Jake had always been a problem, because his relationship with Eliot was undeniable, and he could be mistaken for his cousin. But Jake had been safely stuck at home in a town with one traffic light and no video surveillance, and he had seemed likely to stay there, even if he’d never married and settled down like most of his siblings and cousins, thanks to his father’s drunken unthriftiness and the resultant responsibility of supporting his family.

Eliot had had a bad twelve months when Jake had hied himself off to Alaska to work on some stupid pipeline, but at least that had been a remote location of no value to international criminals, and when the job had ended, Jake had returned, like a ball on an elastic string, to his home town, and he hadn’t left since. So what the hell was he doing working as an archivist in Portland, having
obviously filed off the shackle that was his father’s business? And how in hell was Eliot going to keep him safe now? He’d already done a piss poor job of that. Not two hours from the moment Jake had reunited with his errant cousin, he had already been caught in the crossfire between Eliot and some very old enemies.

Eliot rubbed his fingers together still feeling the phantom stains of Jake’s blood on his hands. This—this was his worst nightmare. He did not mind suffering the consequences of his own folly, but that his family should feel one minute’s worth of the pain that Eliot alone deserved? That, he could not endure.

He had known he risked such a consequence with the Leverage team, too. But the one time he had tried to leave them, for their own good, he had realized it was already too late. Somehow, that broken bunch of misfit fellow criminals had become his family, and he could find no way to take back the love that had somehow escaped and attached itself to them. He didn’t have any trouble calling it love these days, although it had taken him a few years to admit that was what it had been. So Eliot had done the next best thing to leaving. He had stayed with them. If he were always there to protect them, surely they would be safe.

It had worked. But only because Nate was a devious, manipulative bastard, Sophie was a chameleon with hypnotic powers, Parker was a bloody menace with the gift of invisibility, and Hardison... well Hardison had at least finally learned how to punch somebody, and he had to admit that the man could destroy anyone whose life in any way depended upon a computer. They trusted Eliot to take care of them, but this family could hold its own against Eliot’s enemies as they had proven when they’d gone up against the most formidable of them—Damien Moreau. God, he still couldn’t believe that they’d taken that bastard down. Although Eliot continued to check once a month to see that he was staying down.

But Jake, who had always fought with more enthusiasm than science, Jake, who had not the least clue about the kind of evil Eliot’s enemies were capable of, Jake who was likely even now being informed by his colleague of what an untrustworthy and unworthy piece of human refuse his cousin was—how in the name of God was he going to protect Jake?

He was going to have to tell Jake the truth. The only thing worse than Jake knowing what his cousin had become was for him to walk the same world as Eliot ignorant of all the vengeance hovering in wait for the perfect moment to swoop down and exact payment for his sins from Eliot Spencer or any reasonable facsimile. Even Eliot’s good deeds were now a threat to Jake, because Leverage had created an even more powerful set of enemies.

And he was going to have to talk to Colonel Eve Baird. If she was security where Jake worked, perhaps she could protect him in Eliot’s stead. At least, if she knew the likely directions from which an attack might arrive, she might stand a chance. She had the training to be a formidable opponent. But would she even listen to a man like him?

Eliot buried his head in his hands, the rain driving against his back like a scourge. He had scarcely been damaged by the fight with The Serpent Brotherhood, but his gut radiated pain as though he had been taking direct hits for hours. What could he even say to Eve Baird? He could offer her no compensation for what he had taken from her. He could not beg her to spare him whatever vengeance she felt was due. His only hope was that if she demanded his death—a life for so many other lives—she would allow him to make it as public and splashy and worthy of headlines on news services around the world as possible, so that all his enemies would call off their dogs and leave Jacob Stone in peace.

* * * * *

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Chapter 14

Eliot heard Parker scramble out onto the roof. The fact that he could hear her in spite of the rain meant she wanted him to know she was there. He would have preferred being alone, but Parker had no respect for privacy. Hell, bacteria had more respect for privacy than Parker.

“Hey, Eliot!” she called from over by the chicken coop, flipping on the area light.

Eliot squinted in the sudden glare as the world off the edge of the roof turned black, streaked with silver rain. Parker looked like a drowned creature, her hair soaked and hanging in seaweed-like strands. Just how long had she been out here before she made enough noise to alert him?

“Do you wanna help me steal the eggs?”

He was not going to be able to ignore her. City girl Parker never got tired of pickpocketing eggs from the chickens. Since she didn’t usually share this chore, Eliot knew she was worried about him, and this was her way of asking if he was all right. If it had been Hardison interrupting him, he would have had no compunction at telling him where he could stuff his concern, but this was Parker.

Eliot resigned himself to reassuring his thief that he was perfectly fine. Getting to his feet with a twinge of muscles too long inactive in the cold, he joined Parker.

She did not, of course, have a basket. Parker collected eggs like she lifted necklaces off wealthy dowagers at embassy balls—you never saw her do it, and you never saw the eggs. Eliot had honestly tried to catch her at it, but Parker could lift an egg from under a hen so that the old biddy never even noticed. She would arrive in the kitchen, and the eggs would appear. Eliot always expected to find Parker oozing yolks and broken shells, but she never lost an egg. He had about come to the conclusion that she had an extra-dimensional space tucked away in her pocket where she stashed her loot.

Eliot only kept a few hens on the roof, enough to give him eggs for personal meals and to keep the bugs off his garden while adding a little fertilizer. The Brew Pub purchased its eggs from a local farmer after Eliot had assured himself that the hens were free range. He had bought these particular chickens with Parker in mind—an eclectic mix of Araucanas and Easter Eggers, so she could find colored eggs, and a couple of Silkies because he thought their fuzzy heads and feet would make her laugh. The Silkies worked far better than he could have hoped. Not only did Parker nearly sprain something the first time she saw them, scaring the poor things out of a change of feathers with her snorts of laughter, but she had the same reaction to them every time she saw them. “They look like David Bowie in Labyrinth,” she said, and they kind of did. Her forays into the chicken coop were always punctuated by joyous cackling. Eliot never got tired of hearing her; Parker’s laugh was one of the things that let a little sunshine into his darkness.

Not having Parker’s talent for pickpocketing chickens, Eliot grabbed a basket and, making his way among the raised beds of his garden, joined her at the coop. Flipping on the low watt light, they ducked in the door. The roosting hens rustled at the interruption. Eliot could sympathize. Together, he and Parker collected the eggs, Parker stealing them and giggle-snorting at the Silkies, Eliot simply reaching under the hens and putting the eggs in his basket.

He’d done this when he was a child, with his mama. But these hens were far different from the giant black and white Plymouth Rock chickens his mama had loved. Eliot preferred not to be reminded. He didn’t really know what he believed about an afterlife, except that if there was a
hell, he was going to it, but he hoped that wherever his mama was, she couldn’t see what her son had become.

When they emerged from the chicken coop, Parker skipped off, dancing from the edge of one raised-frame garden bed to another. Eliot had visions of yolks and shells, but he should have known better.

She stopped by the bed that was hers. Parker was making an attempt to learn to garden. It had been Eliot’s idea when he had decided to transfer some of his home gardening to the Brew Pub rooftop. Both Parker and Hardison thought that real food came in boxes and plastic packs from grocery stores supplemented by things that came in cardboard and Styrofoam from restaurants. While Hardison had refused to detach from his technology or go anywhere near actual dirt, Parker had been game to try. Perhaps she would eat vegetables more often if she grew them herself.

Eliot had involved Parker from the start. She had helped him build the frameworks for the raised bed. This had proved to be a bit reckless since Parker had loved the skill saw and had destroyed several board feet of lumber cutting it up for fun. When they had filled the bed with dirt, compost from the kitchen, and peat moss, Parker had been extremely dubious that anything edible could emerge from such an environment. Eliot had selected seeds that he judged would grow fast enough to keep her attention. Parker had looked at him like she expected he was pulling her leg when he informed her that the tiny, round, dark, hard thing had a plant inside it.

Nevertheless the garden had finally been sown and all that remained was waiting. Eliot had caught Parker up on the roof several times staring at the barren soil as if she thought she could inspire it to do something.

“This is really, really boring,” she’d told him.

“It takes time, Parker,” Eliot had said, grinning at her impatience.

Tonight, she was finally rewarded.

“Eliot! Come see!” Parker called.

“What is it?” he asked.

Parker was crouched over her garden. “Something’s growing!” she exclaimed. “Look!”

Unable to resist the half a smile pulling at the corner of his mouth, Eliot joined Parker in kneeling by the wooden box, staring down at the expanse of soaked, black earth from which a green shoot was emerging.

“You got a zucchini there,” he informed her.

Parker frowned at the plant. “It doesn’t look like zucchini.”

“At least she had progressed to knowing what a zucchini was.

“That’s because it’s just a baby,” Eliot said. “It’ll grow up and make flowers, and the flowers will turn into zucchinis, but maybe we’ll make some into fried squash blossoms.”

“Really?” Parker scrutinized her future crop again. “You’re sure?”


“How?” asked Parker.
Eliot shrugged. “Just does. Add rain and sunlight, and the plant grows.”

“It’s funny,” said Parker, “how we filled that box with rotten stuff and then the chickens pooped on it, and we buried a seed in it, all covered in dirt, but look how clean and green it is now.” She raked her slim fingers through the wet soil, scooping up a handful and letting it drop through her fist. Holding out her stained hand towards Eliot, she asked. “How does something clean come out of something so dirty?”

The two of them knelt side by side in silence, watching the rain gather up the dirt and rearrange it on Parker’s hand but not wash it entirely away even when the water ran off. Finally, Parker scrubbed her hand on her leg, which helped but still left her with dirt under her fingernails. She reached out with one finger and poked at the green sprout with her thief-delicate touch.

“ ‘Weird,’” she said. Then she looked at Eliot with those wise-child eyes that always made him realize just how extraordinary Parker could be. “I think, maybe it just had to grow toward the light.”

Eliot thought he stopped breathing. Parker was the most literal person he knew, but he could not lose the impression that she was not talking about plants anymore. Parker kept staring at him, her eyebrows drawing together in a bit of a frown as though he were a lock she couldn’t quite pick, and she was searching for the right tumblers to drop.

Suddenly, she leaned in and laid her chin on his shoulder. “Haven’t you added enough rain yet, Eliot?” she whispered in his ear. “You’re awfully wet.”

Then she bounced to her feet and exited the rooftop without saying another word.

Eliot stayed kneeling there as though she had knocked the wind out of him with a two by six.

* * * * *

Eve let Stone lead the way, following closely in case he faltered, up the steps from the sidewalk, then around the side of the house.

“This,” said Stone with a brief burst of enthusiasm, “is an early 20th century American Craftsman Bungalow. It’s pretty run down, now, but the interior woodwork is good. A lot of it got painted.” His voice took on the tones of disgust usually reserved for raw sewage. It was well for the dastardly wielders of paintbrushes that they had long since departed for other parts. “But Mrs. Anderson told me I could do whatever I wanted with my room so long as I didn’t burn down the house. Took me the whole first month, all my spare time, to strip the paint and the carpet—can you believe they put carpet tacks in a hardwood floor?”

Eve couldn’t help smiling. Jacob Stone on an art-and-architecture rampage was fast becoming something she treasured. How strange that this little band of eccentric geniuses for which she had accidentally become responsible had become so woven into her heart.

They reached the back porch door, and Stone fumbled through his keys to unlock it. Holding it open, he ushered Eve inside.

The entry area was dark, but light glowed from somewhere in the front of the house. The faint sound of a television drifted back to them. A warbley, elderly voice called out, “Is that you, Jacob?”

“It is, ma’am,” Stone called back. “Things went a little late at work. I brought a friend home,
Colonel Baird, who needs a place to stay for the night. Just wanted you to know so you wouldn’t worry if you heard I wasn’t alone upstairs.”

“That’s fine, honey. Your friends are welcome any time,” the voice said.

“Good night then,” Stone said.

“Good night, dear.”

Giving Eve a conspiratorial grin, Stone bent over to pull off his boots. That proved to be a mistake, and Eve had to steady him as he aborted the maneuver.

“I think I need to sit down,” Stone said, his voice a bit breathless.

“Here’s a seat thingy,” Eve said, spotting what looked like a bench and helping Stone toward it.

“That’ll do.” Stone did not try to shake off her help which told her he must be feeling much worse than he was letting on.

“Oops, doily,” she said before he could sit, snatching the crocheted item from the seat before Stone sagged onto it.

“There are,” he said tiredly, “doilies on every possible surface of this house, a charming domestic artifact in the singular, or possibly even in the dozens, but becomin’ tedious in the hundreds. I have not yet succeeded in convincin’ the mistress of the house to set up a cottage industry and let me hawk them at the local farmers’ market, but I have faith that I may yet carry the day.”

Eve laughed. “My grandmother used to crochet blankets. Every member of her extended family had one. If she hadn’t given them away, I think she would have buried her house in them.”

“I wonder what our grandkids will say about our idiosyncrasies?” Stone asked.

Startled at the very thought of grandchildren, Eve stared at him. Although the fact that Stone made those assumptions about his own life shouldn’t surprise her. He was a deeply traditional man from a conservative part of the country. Of course he visualized a picket fence sort of future. She wondered how magic was going to factor into that.

Eve herself had always imagined she’d end up a battle axe of a Brigadier General if she survived. She’d never considered raising her own military brats. Of course, Flynn might have his own ideas . . . and if it wasn’t far too soon to be thinking about children when they’d only been around each other twice since they’d met. She was relieved that Stone did not continue the subject.

“Well,” he said. “Once more with the safety net . . .” Taking a deep breath, he started to lean over.

“Wait,” Eve stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. “Let me.”

“I don’t need t’be babied,” Stone growled.

“Look, you just clobbered your head. How about I agree to let you baby me once in the future in exchange?” Eve said kneeling in front of him and taking a hold of his boot.

Stone paused in the middle of trying to pull his foot away and eyed her consideringly, “Okay, it’s a deal, but I get to pick.”

Eve figured she was probably going to regret that bargain. She eased the well-worn boots off Stone’s feet—a much easier task now that he was cooperating instead of resisting. Then, because
she figured she’d better observe the house rules, she took off her own shoes, setting them in a neat row beside Stone’s boots.

Getting to her feet, she held out her hands. “Up you get, cowboy.”

For a wonder, he let her help him up without protest. She could tell his energy was flagging.

“One more flight of stairs,” he sighed. “If I’d’ve known what kind of a job this was, I might have picked a ground floor room.”

The entrance to the back staircase led off the entryway. The two of them padded up the slippery wooden steps in stocking feet.

“I feel like I’m fifteen and being smuggled into a boy’s bedroom,” Eve whispered.

“Little bit of a wild thing when you were a girl, eh?” He paused on the landing, where the stairs took a right-angled turn, to catch his breath, and she did not think it was because of the steepness of the climb.

He looked up the remaining stairs. “Once more unto the breach, dear friends . . .”

Gathering his determination and gripping the handrail, Stone made it the rest of the way to his door. Opening it, he flipped on the light and gestured for Eve to precede him.

Eve didn’t really know what she had expected Stone’s place to look like—perhaps something Western themed or looking like a boy’s dormitory room. But this—this was like stepping back into the past. The first impression was of wood—beautifully re-finished wooden beams spanning the ceiling, heavy wood moldings framing the doorways and windows. The windows surrounded the room on three sides, looking out over the trees and the strip of industrial buildings to the Willamette River. A set of French doors opened onto a small balcony. The walls glowed a dull gold lit by period light fixtures. The floor was also hardwood, with a threadbare, antique rug in the sitting area. The furniture was obviously second hand but was wood-framed and leather with colourful cushions—what man concerned himself with cushions?

And she thought, of course. Given the chance to create his own space, Jacob Stone would make a work of art.

The art on the walls was not as prolific as she had expected, but she realized that every piece was original. And there were books—several tall bookshelves full, as well as stacks on the roll-top computer desk. Stone had been making up for lost time. A wrought iron bedstead stood in the corner opposite the seating area, the quilt on it likely handmade. There were even a few plants.

“This,” she breathed, “this is beautiful.”

Stone smiled at her a little shyly. “It was a bit of a wreck when I started, but I kinda like how it turned out.”

Eve noticed he was looking pale. “You’d better sit down,” she said. “Before you fall down.”

“I think I will,” he agreed. He made it to a chair on his own, but basically collapsed into it.

“Can you tell me what you’re feeling?” Eve asked

“Head hurts. Just a little light headed. Maybe a little queasy. Can you turn on that table lamp and then switch off the lights. It’s too bright in here.”
“Okay, I’m going to get you some water and some more Tylenol. Can you tell me where it is?” Eve asked, just a little worried.

“Bathroom. Cabinet behind the mirror.” Stone waved a hand in the direction of the only enclosed space in the room next to where the stairs came up. Tucked into the corner next to the bathroom was a tiny kitchenette.

Eve dimmed the lights as he’d requested and hunted down the Tylenol. Two for Stone and two for her. The headache wasn’t going away. She found glasses in the single cupboard in the kitchenette and filled them with water. Swallowing her own painkillers, she set her glass back down on the counter and brought the other to Stone.

“If this doesn’t have you feeling a little better in 45 minutes, let me know,” she said as he took the medication.

Something alive came out from under the chair and wrapped itself around Eve’s ankle, startling a squeak out of her.

A large, extremely fluffy feline of the black and white persuasion leapt from her leg into Stone’s lap, butting its head under his hand and setting up a rattling vibration.

“That was the most adorably girly noise I’ve ever heard you make,” Stone said. “And I’m includin’ the princess singin’.”

Eve glared at him. “Terrorists, I’m fine with. Minotaurs, I can take ‘em. Things that grab my legs out of dark places—not good.”

“This,” said Stone, “is Thomas the Cat. Not Tom. Not Tommy. Definitely not Kitty. He has far too much dignity and insists on his full title. Thomas the Cat, this is Colonel Eve Baird.”

“Pleased to meet you Thomas the Cat.” Eve held out her hand to be sniffed and then rubbed by a deceptively fluffy, hard and insistent head. “He is certainly very large and . . . hairy.”

“Since I keep the tangles and burrs out of his fur, clean his litterbox, fill his water bowl, and provide the thumbs to operate the can opener, Thomas the Cat considers me his valet and deigns to sit on my lap and allow me to worship him.” Stone scritched his fingers along the cat’s spine as the animal arched its back and increased in volume.

“Is he yours?” Eve asked, having never wondered if Stone was the sort of person to keep a pet.

“No, he belongs to my landlady, or she belongs to him. I do chores around here to cover a bit of the rent. Taking care of the cat is one of them. I also mow the lawn, weed the flowerbeds, fix anything that breaks down around here, and take Mrs. Anderson to church, to the senior center, to the hairdresser, to the mall and grocery store, and to her medical appointments. It allows her son, who lives in Seattle, to feel a little better about her living on her own.”

“Do you have time for all that?”

“I make the time.” Stone shrugged. “Every little bit of economy helps. And if I’m going to be gone, I make arrangements for someone else to fill in.”

Eve had never really thought about the discrepancy between the income of a skilled oil rigger and that of a Librarian. Joining the Library had certainly meant a reduction in salary and benefits for her, but what did she have to spend money on anyway? She remembered that Stone had originally rejected the Library’s job offer because of his responsibilities. Just because he was no longer living
at home did not mean he wasn’t still supporting his family. How many people was he taking care of? She realized she knew next to nothing about their art historian. But now she understood why he had shown no interest in even the very moderately priced apartments such as she and Cassandra had rented.

The cat settled itself like a furry lap rug. Stone leaned his head back against his chair and closed his eyes. “You should get somethin’ to eat,” he said to Eve. “There’s sandwich fixings and milk in the fridge.”

Eve realized she was starving. She hadn’t actually eaten enough to count at the Brew Pub.

Stone’s fridge was a tiny, antique sort of thing with an actual latching handle. It was amazing that it still worked. Eve did not want to eat too much this late, but a slice of bread with peanut butter and jelly sounded like comfort food to her.

Returning to the sitting area with her snack, Eve found Stone still resting. Rather than disturb him, she ate in silence, took her dish back to the kitchen sink, washed and dried it, and put it away.

Approaching Stone’s chair again, she asked, “How are you feeling?”

“Better. I’m gonna head t’bed,” Stone said not opening his eyes. “I don’t suppose I can convince you to take the bed while I take the couch?”

“Not a chance,” Eve told him firmly.

“You’ll find the spare sheets and blankets in the armoire, bottom drawer,” Stone pointed in its direction. “You can use one of the pillows off my bed.”

Maneuvering himself to his feet, Stone evicted Thomas the Cat from his lap, for which indignity the creature stalked haughtily to the door and disappeared out the cat door installed in it. Stone followed, moving carefully as though afraid his head might fall off, in the direction of the bathroom.

By the time Eve had the couch set up to serve as her bed for the night, Stone had emerged from the bathroom clad in a pair of loose track pants and a t-shirt advertising some sort of motor oil. He made his way slowly over to his bed, turned back the covers, and slid under them. He sighed deeply as his head sunk into the pillow. “Feels good to lie down.”

Eve had to resist the urge to go over and tuck him in like a little boy. Instead she took her bag to the bathroom to change into yoga pants and a tank top and brush her teeth. Returning to the room, she thought Stone was already asleep. But when she turned out the table lamp and curled up on the couch, pulling the blankets over herself, she heard his soft voice.

“G’night, Colonel Baird.”

“Goodnight, Stone.”

Because she was so exhausted, she set her phone alarm to wake her so that she could check on Stone. It turned out she needn’t have bothered. Her nightmares were back.

* * * * *

TBC
Chapter 15

Alec Hardison was about to hunt for something worth watching on Netflix and leave his computer to its own devices as it tracked the faces of the thugs who had disrupted the Brew Pub that evening, when he was ambushed by cold, clammy wetness.

He let out what Eliot always called a pathetic bleat, like a panicked sheep, but which was really only a perfectly logical response to being attacked in the middle of a room when one thought one was alone—particularly by something that felt like a Lovecraftian horror.

“You feel nice and warm,” said the Elder God, attempting to slither her tentacles up under his shirt.

“Parker!” Hardison responded reasonably, well okay, but shrieking was perfectly reasonable when someone was tickling her icy, thieving fingers all over someone else’s stomach.

“Mmmmm,” Parker hummed, tucking her rain-drenched head between his neck and his shoulder and dripping.

Trying to pry her off of him was like trying to remove an octopus.

“Woman, do not get water on my keyboard!” he protested, attempting to detach one of her hands from its incursion upon his body heat. “Is that dirt under your fingernails? Stay away from my laptop with that stuff! You and Eliot—always playin’ in some kinda disgustin’ dirt like you're some kinda troglodytes and trackin’ it in to my very delicate electronic . . .”

“I fixed Eliot,” Parker informed him, returning her one hand the minute Hardison tried to remove the other.

He should know better than to try to escape the grip of a woman who hung off skyscrapers with her fingertips.

“What do you mean ‘fixed’?” Hardison asked, surrendering to the inevitable and just hoping Parker would warm up quickly. He leaned away from the desktop in order to keep the long, wet strands of her hair safely away from anything not water resistant.

“You know, that thing Sophie does for me whenever I don’t know what to do about us.”

“Oh, you mean giving advice.” Hardison nodded. He had long since given up feeling self-conscious that Sophie probably knew more about his sex life and relationship with Parker than he did. “Wait a minute. You gave Eliot advice?”

The mind boggled. Eliot was scary enough on his own. Eliot following Parker-advice was apocalyptic. Fortunately Eliot was a sensible man—most of the time. Although Eliot on a guilt trip might be vulnerable to Parker’s brand of brain-bending.

“I’m going to go take a shower,” Parker informed him, releasing him suddenly and bounding for the stairs that led to their apartment. From half way up them, she called back down, “Isn’t it funny to use water to wash away water?”

And then she was gone.

Apparently that was all he was going to know about her interaction with Eliot. Hardison reminded himself that he trusted both of them, if not to do the sane thing, at least to do the right one.
And speaking of Eliot, here was the man himself, equally dripping but less likely to spoil electronics.

Eliot hooked a chair with one foot and shoved it across the bench from Hardison. Straddling it and folding his arms along the back, he scowled. “Hardison, I need you to do something for me.”

Since scowling was pretty much Eliot’s default expression, Hardison did not take it personally; however, Eliot had that sort of bleak resolve about him that had made the hairs on the back of Hardison’s neck electrify every time he’d seen it since the basement of a hotel, moments before Eliot had introduced him to Damien Moreau.

Rather than write Eliot a blank check, Hardison asked cautiously, “What do you need?”

Eliot pulled a small, spiral-bound notebook out of the inside pocket of his jacket. The man was such a Neanderthal. Hardison kept him supplied with state-of-the-art smart phones, but no—pen and paper had been good enough for his grandpappy, and it was good enough for Eliot.

“I’m gonna give you a list of names,” Eliot said, handing him the entire notebook. “I want you to find me everything you can on them, only no one can know you’re looking.”

“You mean, do my job,” Hardison teased, hoping to lighten what felt uncomfortably grim.

Eliot did not rise to the bait like he normally did. His fists were clenched, and there remained nothing at all relaxed about his posture.

“I need to know where they are, what they’re doing, what aliases they’re using, if any, and what faces they’re currently wearing,” he said.

Somehow, Hardison had the feeling that last was not entirely a metaphor.

“Do not assume, just because any of them is listed as dead, that that is necessarily true.” Eliot stood up as if he was already planning to leave. As if he could just drop bombs like this and waltz off with no further explanation. “Also, get me up-to-date information on any and all contracts out for me personally or Leverage generally.”

“That’ll be easy,” Hardison said. “Already got that. What do you want me to do with this information?”

He thought Eliot might not answer, since the hitter had turned away from him and was headed toward the door. But Eliot paused.

“Print it all out. Put it in a file folder in an envelope that can be sealed.” Eliot looked back over his shoulder, his face tired now, beaten. “They say confession is good for the soul. I’m about to confess all my sins to my cousin. If Jake Stone is going to be out in the world, he needs to know who’s gunning for people with my face.”

Before Hardison could think of anything at all to say in response, Eliot was out the door and gone.

Damn.

Hardison gingerly opened the first page of the notebook. On it was a single name and a list of details in Eliot’s plain, neat writing. He flipped through the book. Every page was full, both sides. He wondered what stories lay behind those names and bits of contact information. Apparently, Jacob Stone was about to find out.
Jacob Stone’s room descended into darkness, the only hint of light coming through the windows from the street light down at the corner. Over on his couch, Colonel Baird settled further into her blankets, a comforting rustle.

Jacob was exhausted. He had begun the day on a wild chase through the streets and alleys of Cairo and had ended it more than twelve hours later with a bar brawl and a head injury in Portland. He should have fallen into sleep like a pebble into a cistern. The susurration of rain on the roof usually lulled him into the arms of Morpheus immediately. However, tonight, sleep eluded him.

His head ached only slightly less because of the Tylenol, but no pain killer was going to touch the ache in his heart. Whenever he closed his eyes, memories scrolled like old cinema film. He and Eliot, small urchins covered in dirt and mud, digging into the bank behind Eliot’s house, making tunnels for their toy vehicles and caves for their plastic animals. The two of them, a little older, panning for gold—an exercise in geologic futility—in the creek on the neighbour’s farm. Playing gospel songs on their guitars and singing together for church. Hunting through every cupboard, cabinet, trunk, and door in their grandparent’s home searching for an entrance to Narnia—his idea. Crab apple wars in the old orchard—Eliot’s idea.

When they were sixteen, they’d spent a week backpacking the Upper Kiamichi River Wilderness, just the two of them. Eliot had gone all mountain man, fishing for his meals, foraging for edible plants, working his hands bloody to light a fire with a wooden drill while Jacob had lounged casually against his pack, flicking his lighter on and off, mocking, his meal cooking on his tiny butane stove. Jacob smiled at the memory of Eliot chasing him with the hatchet. It had been so worth it. Admittedly, the things Eliot could do with a fish and an armful of plants over the fire he’d finally triumphantly succeeded in starting beat any restaurant Jacob had ever patronized since—though perhaps teenage appetites inspired by hard exercise had contributed to the flavor.

They had frozen their naked asses off in pools below waterfalls running full with meltwater, climbed cliffs without safety equipment as though they were young immortals, spent nights rolled in their sleeping bags under the entire universe of stars, picking out the constellations while Jacob had told the stories that had given them their names. They had spoken about their futures on those nights, boyhood dreams of seeing the world and making their mark in it, and when they were very nearly asleep and the guards were off their tongues, they had talked of finding love and having families. They’d made a pact to hike those same Oklahoma mountain trails when they were 80 and cantankerous old farts.

What had happened to those futures? Nowhere in what they had dreamed had been one of them burying himself in the drudgery of keeping the family business afloat. Nowhere had there been the other sinking into the depths of crime and murder for hire.

What had happened to Eliot? For all that he had been the rougher and tougher of the two of them, there had always been a gentleness and compassion about him towards children and animals, especially the injured. Jacob remembered Eliot nursing a mangy old stray dog back to health, the two of them inseparable for the remaining life of that mutt. What cataclysmic horror could have turned that boy into the man who could have done to Eve Baird and her team what he had done?

His cousin, Eliot’s oldest sister still kept a framed portrait of a desperately young, newly-minted Private Eliot Spencer in his uniform, crisp and cocky, and grinning his hell-bent smile, on her mantel at home. She always put it in the drawer whenever their daddy came over. Eliot had kept in touch with her, at first, but eventually all communication ceased. However, Eliot’s nephew, who
had been seven when Eliot had last visited, still asked God to bless “Uncle Eliot” every Christmas
as he had since he was a wee tyke, even though he now had an infant son of his own. Jacob
wondered if Eliot would let him tell them he was still alive.

Or perhaps Eliot had been right, and the brother, son, cousin, uncle they had known had died
somewhere on some battlefield, and this new Eliot had been born in blood and fire and vengeance.
Perhaps there was nothing left of the Eliot they had known.

And yet, the man he had met tonight had seemed the cousin he remembered in so many ways. His
charm, his mischief, his protective streak, his caring. Jacob would have expected the boy his
cousin had been to grow into that kind of man. However, clearly Eliot saw himself as some sort of
Frankenstein’s monster—with blood on his hands and despair in his heart. As Colonel Baird’s
briefest of stories had indicated, Eliot was right in his self-judgment. However, if that poor,
misunderstood, abused creature could repent, perhaps Eliot also had done so.

Jacob needed to talk to Eliot.

* * * * *

Sleep finally dragged Jacob down into a restless tangle of blankets and disturbing dreams,
interrupted by stretches of uncomfortable almost lucidity that left him uneasy and confused about
what was real.

Somewhere in the middle of the night, he awoke, fully alert, his heartbeat urgent, his eyes staring
into the dark, unsure what was the cause of his alarm. The room was utterly silent. Even the rain
had ceased its patter on the roof. The hush had a waiting feel to it, a tension that whispered wrong,
wrong, wrong.

Jacob lay perfectly still, trying to think past the fog of pain and sleep. What had woken him?

In the faint light from the window, he could see the couch where Colonel Baird was sleeping—
except she wasn’t. His adrenalin spiked. Without moving, he scanned the room.

There. By the armoire. The slightest shift in darkness caught his eye. She was there. Momentary
relief took a sharp turn into worry as he registered her stance. Baird was crouched, pressed in the
corner created by the armoire and the wall, as though she were hiding from some enemy. Her gun
glinted in her hands.

Atavistic survival instincts kept Jacob frozen in place. What threat was there in the room that she
could see, but that he could not?

Then he heard her voice, so quiet he could scarcely make out what she was saying. Her tone was
distressed, and her words made no sense.

“Teresinha! Brader!”

He was listening so hard now he could hear her rapid breathing, but he could hear nothing else in
the room.

“Joscin! Derya! Answer your damn comms! Poptart, where the hell are you?”

Names. They were the names of people. People, he realized, who were not in the room. And then
he knew, with no shadow of doubt. There was no threat in the present. The only danger lay in the
past. Colonel Eve Baird was calling on her dead.
Intrusive re-experiencing, his brain supplied the technical terms. Dissociative flashback. Eve Baird was not in this upper room in an elderly house in Portland, Oregon. She was somewhere far away in some zone of conflict in the past. She was reliving what had happened the last time she had met his cousin, going back to the moments just before her experience of trauma, the moments when the possibility of re-writing the ending to her story still existed.

Oh, Eve! His heart constricted with sympathy so strong it was physically painful.

How could he help her out of the trap in her mind without startling her into doing something rash?

“Colonel Baird,” he called softly. “Eve.”

Before the syllables had finished leaving his mouth, her gun was aimed at him, unwavering and incomprehending. Still trapped in her memory, she did not recognize her surroundings or him.

Very carefully, Jacob raised his hands.

He prayed that Thomas the Cat would not take it into his furry skull to descend into nocturnal madness and come thundering through the room like a herd of sabretooths intent on something only he could see.

“May I turn on the light?” he asked gently.

“No sudden moves,” she snapped, all emotionless counter-terrorism soldier.

“No ma’am,” he said. He kept his hands in the air, rolling slowly toward the bedside table, never taking his eyes off her.

He heard the click of the gun being cocked, and froze. His pulse sounded loud in his ears and terror surged in his veins.

Jacob was certain Cassandra could have told him the forces involved—the velocity of the projectile, the pounds per square inch of impact, the physics of conservation of matter and momentum, the time in seconds it would take torn arteries to spray out the critical volume of blood.

All he knew was that Eve could not fire that gun. She would never forgive herself, and he wouldn’t be around to forgive her.

The position he was in was awkward, but he did not alter it until Colonel Baird said, “Continue.”

He fumbled a bit finding the switch, but then the soft glow of the lamp transformed the room from black and white drama to dimly-lit, golden domesticity. Jacob slowly sagged back against the mattress, relief turning him boneless.

He could tell the minute Eve returned to the present. Her narrowed eyes went wide. Her breath caught in a gasp. The rock steady hands with which she aimed at him began to shake. And then she crumpled to the floor, folding in around the gun until she was huddled with it clutched to her chest in the angle between the armoire and the wall.

The gun. With her finger on the trigger and the damned thing already cocked. She could kill herself with an accidental twitch.

“No. No, no, no, no, no,” she whispered. “Not again. I can’t do this again.”

Jacob slipped out of bed, urgency warring with the need not to startle her. Cautiously he approached Eve, sinking to his knees in front of her and holding out his hand.
“Eve, please. Give me the gun.”

She looked at him with dark, lost eyes, and held out her gun without protest.

His throat tightened as he took it, because Colonel Baird would never have handed her weapon over to a civilian so easily.

Removing the magazine and ejecting the round in the chamber, he set the gun down beside her, where she could pick it up if she wished; however, she made no move to do so. She was shivering, whether with stress or cold, he did not know. He didn’t want to make any sudden moves and startle her, so he did not stand up. Instead, he slid over to the bed and grabbed the quilt, pulling it back with him.

“Here, let me tuck this around you,” he said, draping the quilt over her shoulders and wrapping her in its warmth.

She reached out one hand to clasp it to her. “Thanks,” she whispered. But her eyes darted about the room and her breathing remained too fast, still trapped in a state of hypervigilance. She needed something to ground her in this reality, to re-attach her body chemistry to the present where there was no threat, rather than to the past where the danger had been.

“Eve, listen to me. Listen to me, sweetheart. You’re safe here. Nothing is going to hurt you or anyone else now. Just concentrate on breathing. You can close your eyes, if you want.”

Eve shook her head, obviously still needing to observe her surroundings.

“No? That’s okay,” Jacob said, keeping his voice low and calm like he would with a frightened and injured wild animal. “You do whatever you need to feel safe. Now breathe in as slowly as you can. Count to four. Now breathe out even more slowly. Count to five.”


“Now, tell me, what are three things you see?” he asked.

Watching with satisfaction, Jacob saw Eve’s eyes begin to focus on her real surroundings.

“I see light, a lamp.” Eve stopped. Her eyes darted about the room, still seeking non-existent perils.

“Okay,” Jacob encouraged. “What else?”

“I see a door.” For a minute she stared hard at the door, as though expecting something to come through it.

“And?”

“And I see you, Jacob Stone.” The pitch in her voice was rising. “But I wasn’t seeing you. I could have killed you!”

“No, I’m right here. You’re all right. No one is getting killed.” He waited for her to focus on him again. “Good. That’s good. Now let’s breathe in and out again, slowly, three times.”

This time she joined him immediately, her shoulders rising and falling in deliberate echo of his.

“Now, what are three things you smell?” he asked
Eve took another breath and frowned. Jacob could tell that concentrating on the actual data from her senses was taking her attention from her memory.

“I smell . . . wood stain,” she said hesitantly, “and leather . . . and . . . is that your aftershave or cologne or something—mixed with disinfectant? Ewww.”

“All right,” Jacob smiled at her, and she looked back at him. “Now breathe, three times again.”

This time, he followed her lead, noting that she was breathing more slowly than he had been, control returning.

“That’s it,” he encouraged. “Now tell me three things you hear.”

Her lashes drifted shut as she relaxed concentrating on bringing another of her senses back.

“I can hear the radiator running—that’s old fashioned. And the wind blowing branches against the side of the house. It’s stopped raining.” Eve stopped speaking. Her eyes stayed closed, and she sat quietly.

Jacob shifted to get more comfortable.

“I hear you moving,” Eve said, opening her eyes. She was back with him almost completely.

This time when they did the breathing exercise, her huddled posture began to unfold.

“Oh, that’s right,” Jacob soothed like he usually did with Cassie. “Last one. Tell me what you feel, what you are touching, right now.”

Her eyes closed again, but one of her hands relaxed its grip and began to move gently over the quilt she was clutching. “This quilt. I can feel the stitches in it—hand-stitched. Who made it?”

“That was a gift from my grandma,” Jacob answered. “She gave it to me when I graduated from high school.”

“She loved you; I can feel it,” Eve said, stroking the fabric.

“‘Yes, she did. I miss her.” Jacob had a brief flash of memory of his grandmother—her hard, work-worn hands, her sunken eyes in a face hewn out of scrap iron, harsh and weary, a cleaver tied to her apron strings. He doubted that was the picture Eve was imagining.

“What else?” he prompted.

“I feel the floor. Why are wood floors always so cold? They look like they should be warm.”

“It’s a mystery,” Jacob agreed. “One more. What else do you feel?”

Eve opened her eyes, and if she was present with him again, it was only to grapple with a new horror.

“I feel afraid,” she whispered. “I can’t do this again. Not again. Do you know how many years I had to fight this to get my life back? Three. For three years, I couldn’t do anything I wanted to do because my brain kept sending me back to start. And I was one of the lucky ones. I got it under control. I can’t let this happen again. I could have shot you, Stone! I’m dangerous this way—to you, to the others. I can’t be your Guardian if I’m always reacting to imaginary threats.”

“You’ve just had the most complete and intense trigger possible. Go easy on yourself.” Jacob knew
she was right, but he did not know what she needed him to say. If Eliot had been in the room with them right now, he would have wrung his cousin’s neck.

“But I couldn’t stop it then, not for years; what if I can’t stop it now?” Eve dropped her head into her hands, defeated.

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TBC
Chapter Summary

I'm back!

* * * *

Eve Baird was drowning in a whirlpool of horrors. In her past, death was stalking her team, and in her present she had nearly killed one of her own. She could find no firm ground to stand on, no shore for which to strike. Her heart was beating against her ribs like a caged wild thing.

* * * *

Just breathe, she tried to remind herself. But even breathing was nearly unendurable. She had spent years where every inhalation and exhalation seemed to require a conscious act of will, a ferocious determination to bear unbearable pain. Please don’t let it happen again! a voice wailed in despair, deep inside her.

Stone was speaking to her, and her mind lunged for his voice as if for a lifeline—the only part of her world that felt solid and safe.

“If you wanna talk, I’m here to listen,” he encouraged. “Sometimes talking about an intrusive memory can help.”

Eve knew he was right. Her long ago therapists had told her that putting the experience in a new context could provide a sense of perspective and could help her mind establish that the memories belonged to a different time and place. She tried to focus on Stone’s face. He sat beside her with that infinite patience, so calming and reassuring, not crowding her, not rushing her confidence. If the whole situation had not involved his cousin, Eve would never have hesitated to trust him.

And yet, she did not have the luxury to spare him. The abyss crumbled open at her feet.

She knew just how far down she could fall. And fallen, she could not keep her Librarians in Training safe. Once again, feelings would have to take a number and stand in line behind the necessities of the job.

She opened her mouth to attempt to tell him what had happened eleven years ago, the emotions and sounds and sights of which still superimposed themselves on this quiet, peaceful room. If she could just force the memories out of her head and into the air, perhaps they would not haunt her. Perhaps, by sharing them with Stone, she could diminish their power.

But no words came. Eve’s hands flew to her throat as if she could physically pry her story loose; however, the only sound that emerged was a choked off gasp for air. Her mind was full of disjointed images, but they refused to form themselves into language. How could she describe an experience for which there were no words?

The minute she stopped trying, her traitorous voice returned. “I can’t talk about it,” she told a concerned Stone.

“That’s okay,” he said. “You don’t have to tell me anything.”
“No, you don’t understand. I want to talk about it, but I just can’t.” Shivering, Eve folded her arms across her chest. A surge of hopelessness threatened to overwhelm her. This had happened before—this inability to speak. At first, she had attributed it to her throat trauma, but then she had been unable to write about it either. “The words won’t come.”

Stone, bless him, did not even blink at that revelation. “I do understand,” he said gently. “Traumatic memories are hard to express in words alone. Right now your memories are primarily dissociated emotional, perceptual, or sensory fragments with no coherent verbal, symbolic, or temporal basis. You need help to process information symbolically.”

Eve stared at him, reminding herself that she knew very little about her LITs but that all of them were geniuses in their own ways. Nevertheless, Stone managed to astonish her more frequently than did the other two. Perhaps it was the greater gap between his projected persona and the man who hid beneath the surface. Cassandra struggled every day to overcome any perception of fragility and to reveal the strength she possessed—she wanted so badly to be seen for who she really was. Ezekiel, as the Apple of Discord had revealed, was almost entirely what he appeared to be. Both of them wore their gifts as laurels, well-earned and on display.

Stone, on the other hand, was a master of self-disguise. When he wanted no one to see anything other than a redneck oil-rigger with a high school diploma and a taste for beer and brawling, he appeared to be nothing else. Since that appearance was part of his truth, he inhabited the role with ease and at times enjoyment. Even in the Library, among people who knew something of his abilities, he guarded his privacy. However, at times like these, when necessity unearthed some thoroughly buried expertise, Eve realized that Stone was so much more than a man with an obsession for art and languages. He was a student of the source of those artifacts—the human heart and soul.

Right now, he was eyeing her as if she were a puzzling ancient inscription he needed to translate.

“I’m guessing you had just as much trouble talking about what happened when you were dealing with this the first time.” He waved his hand indicating the whole situation—her late night inability to sleep, the emptied gun—evidence of her reality slipping off the rails.

“I gave up trying for over a year.” Eve grimaced.

“You’ve done therapy before?” he asked.

Shuddering, Eve remembered gritting her teeth and forcing herself out the door to confrontations only minimally less traumatic than the nightmares she was seeking to master. “I had some—cognitive behavioral therapy, prolonged exposure therapy, stress inoculation therapy, group therapy, anger management.”

“Did any of it help?”

“Do you mean, did I recover?” Eve attempted a shrug. “I suppose, if you mean that I was able to find a way to go on living. But there was no going back to the way it was before. You don’t recover from that sort of thing. You reinvent yourself, and you go on.”

“Are you taking any medication?”

“Not right now. I haven’t been taking any anti-depressants for years.” Eve hugged her knees and buried her face in her arms. Only the pressure of her arms against her eyelids was keeping her from tears. Grimly, she concentrated on not losing that battle again.
Stone remained a silent and supportive presence for several minutes. Of course, she shouldn’t have been surprised that he was also thinking.

“Hey, I have an idea.”

Stone got to his feet, the motion drawing Eve to look up at him, still too tense to endure movement she could not see. He walked over to the antique steamer trunk at the foot of his bed and knelt beside it. Flipping open the brass latches, he continued to talk to her over his shoulder.

“Cassie could probably give you the technical details, but PTSD activates the parts of your brain that handle fear and anger as well as memory. It’s like that intense experience blasted a canyon through your mind, and now it’s too easy to follow that same path.” He lifted the lid of the trunk, raising the entire front to reveal a set of wooden drawers. “PTSD also suppresses the part of your brain that controls speech. So you get a double dose of trauma, a resurrection of both the old emotions and the old memories, plus you have no way to get any of it out of your head.”

“I guess I’m stuck in a pit, with no way to call out.”

“Kinda, a bit like that,” Stone agreed, sliding out one of the drawers. “And you climb the walls, but all it takes is one misstep, and down you go again.”

He was exactly right. Eve could feel the past pressing on her mind, drumming in her ears. Focusing on Stone’s activity as he began removing items and setting them on the shelf created by the open lid anchored her to this room, Stone’s place, Portland, the present.

“Somebody needs to send that design back to the drawing board,” she managed to say, her voice wobbling a bit.

“It probably has its uses as long as you’re in a situation of real danger—hyperactive senses, adrenalin-fueled responses, superior tactical thinking. In that situation, it could save your life. However, it’s not so useful now.” Stone beckoned her to his trunk. “Come on over here. We’re gonna try something I read about.”

Art supplies. His trunk was full of art supplies.

“I don’t care how high your I.Q. is, Stone,” Eve said, summoning a bit of spirit. “I am not sniffing anything that alters my mental state.”

“Nothing like that.” He smiled. “You see, in a way post-traumatic stress does to your brain what your immune system does to your body when it gives you allergies. All the responses that should be used to fight off disease are set off by a bit of pollen.”

Eve raised a skeptical eyebrow at him. “You’re telling me I’m having an allergic reaction to your cousin?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.” Stone looked troubled. “But I’ve learned to trust your instincts. Whatever went on back then, it might not be over. I don’t want to believe he’s still a threat to you, but I don’t know how to be sure. What I do know is that you want—that you need—to be in control of your reactions.”

“Which brings us back to the fact that I am not in control.” Eve glanced at the place where her gun lay on the floor.

“Ah! Then there’s art—also a symbolic system that accesses emotions and memories. Like language, art is a way of organizing and communicating thought. But where PTSD suppresses your
“verbal expression, it actually stimulates your visual processing—one reason for the vivid realism of your flashbacks. So unlike your ability to speak, your ability to create art is something you can use to restructure the landscape of your brain. Forget the original design team. Art lets you take charge of the drawing board yourself.”

Stone’s tone had developed the enthusiasm Eve had learned to recognize on jobs that brought them into contact with anything related to his passion.

“Art therapy is a way of focusing, of listening to yourself, to your felt sense,” he continued, his hands gesturing as though words were failing him. “Making art can help you create boundaries for your experiences, so they aren’t just hiding out in your head, ready to ambush you.” He paused and gave her a charming, lopsided grin. “And it’s fun.”

Eve narrowed her eyes at him, skeptical.

“I’m not bullshitting you,” he said, earnestly. “That’s actually important. You didn’t sound like therapy was a very pleasant time for you. Studies have shown that art therapy produces the greatest benefits in veterans with the most severe PTSD symptoms, and researchers suggest this may be because it provides a relaxing, pleasurable distraction rather than the negative side-effects of verbal interventions.”

Eve glanced at the drawer Stone was holding open. His fingers lingered on trays edged with cells containing more colors than she had known paint came in. The look on his face as he handled them was—reverent. Eve could come up with no other term. Art was Jacob Stone’s altar.

However, there was a major problem. “You do know that I am not an artist. I have absolutely no talent. In fact, I’m pretty sure I failed at stick people,” she apologized, almost sorry to disappoint him.

“This isn’t about talent.” Stone reached out, taking her hand to draw her closer to his treasure hoard. “Just because you don’t possess a particular skill, doesn’t mean you don’t have a creative side. You can still enjoy making art.”

Eve was not convinced. “So. Art therapy. If I draw something for you, you can interpret it and diagnose me?” she asked doubtfully.

“No,” Jacob shook his head, then looked as though he regretted that motion. “I’m not a trained therapist. And this isn’t a do-it-yourself inkblot test. All I can do is give you some ways to re-establish your sense of safety and reduce some of those hyper arousal symptoms that are interfering with your control. Tomorrow, we’ll contact a real art therapist who can help you use art to re-author those past experiences that have no escape except in flashbacks and dreams, so that maybe you can transform them into something you can integrate into the present.”

“I guess I can try it,” Eve said. After all, she had tried everything else, and God, she did not want to spend years digging herself out of this hole again. “But it’s not going to be pretty.”

“We’re not going for pretty,” Stone said picking up a nondescript canvas roll. “Making something to match your couch is not the object. This is art therapy. Therapy is about pain, and art is about turning pain into beauty.”

“Hmph.” Eve scowled at him. “Like beauty is so much easier than pretty.”

“Of course it is.” Stone tilted his head as though puzzled that she did not understand. “Beauty is what you are. Pretty is just what you try to be.”
He opened another drawer and shuffled through its contents still muttering, “It’s even in the language—“beauty” is a noun and “pretty” is an adjective. Why don’t people get that?”

He handed Eve a box containing bottles of strange chemicals and what looked like folded rags. “You can help me set these out,” he said. “We’ll use the table.”

Stacking the canvas bundle on another box, Stone led the way to his kitchenette where he set them down. Unknotting the ties that wrapped the canvas, he unrolled it like a scroll, revealing paintbrushes of every shape and size tucked in canvas pockets. Eve’s entire experience of paintbrushes had been the little plastic brush that came with the box of paints she’d had as a child. She supposed Stone’s brushes each had their uses, but she couldn’t fathom what they’d be. There was one that looked like a pointy stick. And was that a toothbrush?

“What are the crayons?” she asked with a wry twist to her mouth.

Stone bounced his eyebrows at her with a pleased little smirk and pulled out a box of 96 colors. “Of course, you have crayons—Jacob Stone, art historian.” Eve sighed. “Hey! I always wanted one of these,” Stone explained, setting down the over-sized box. “I had a childhood of 8 colors.” He spread a stack of stiff, rich-looking paper on one end of the table.

Going to the sink, he filled two mugs with water and brought them back to add to the collection of materials on the table.

“Can I get you something to drink?” he asked. “I’ve got hot chocolate, something called Eater’s Digest Tea that my landlady swears by, fresh organic apple juice, ginger ale, water, and blue raspberry Kool-Aid.”

“I don’t suppose beer is anywhere on that list?” Eve asked wistfully, remembering her scarcely tasted whiskey.

“Ha!” Stone said. “You and I are not hittin’ the sauce tonight. I’m pretty sure alcohol is contraindicated for both of us right now.”

Eve sighed. “You really have Kool-Aid?”

“Hey, it’s blue.” Stone looked embarrassed. “I’ve never been able to resist blue food. It never tastes as good as it looks, but I never learn. Being an artist has certain limitations. That’s one of ‘em. Blue cotton candy, blue Jell-O, blue popsicles . . .”

“Oooh!” said Eve, interested.

Stone raised an eyebrow. “Colonel Baird, would you like a popsicle?”

Moments later, the two of them were seated across from each other at the table with a box of Disney Frozen Popsicles between them. Stone had a blue one.

“I can’t help it,” he said.

Eve chose a purple one. She had to admit that as therapy went she was already feeling better. Stone underestimated himself. The man was like an emotional blotter. He absorbed turmoil and projected back calm. No wonder he was better than any of the rest of them at drawing Cassandra out of her hallucinations.
“Now we’re ready to commit art.” Stone smiled at her like that was some kind of treat.

Eve eyed the paper Stone set in front of her dubiously. “What do I do?”

“You are in control of this,” Stone said. “You choose what you’re gonna create. There’s no right or wrong way to make art in art therapy. You don’t even have to understand what you’re making. The goal is to tap into the unconscious parts of your brain using imagination, metaphor, and images to gain new perspective and solve problems in new ways.”

Oh, that was all. Right. He was so certain. Eve was far less certain. “What do you do?” she asked. “I mean, if I’m supposed to do what I want, not that I even know what that is, why have a therapist?”

Stone ducked his head as though suddenly shy. “Well, that’s kinda the problem. I’m not really an expert at this. I’m just all you got right now.” Meeting her eyes again, he said, “I guess you could say my job is to witness—to help you with the art materials and methods, something I actually do know something about, of course, but also to give you the gift of my full attention. I can observe how you go about making art—if it takes you a long time to start or if you dive in. I’ll notice the choices you make and if you react to something you’re doing or thinking—if you pause to contemplate, or bite your lip, or exhale and smile. What I’m not here to do is judge you or inject my ideas. I’m just here to be attuned to you and what you do and how you do it.”

He shrugged apologetically. “In a way, it’s a terribly intimate thing I’m asking you to try. When everyone is at their best, this creates a . . . well, a sort of sacred space that can empower you to be courageous in your art and exploration. Which is why this would be better with someone whose butt you don’t regularly have to kick into shape, someone who really knows what they’re doing and who you can trust and feel safe with.”

“No, Stone,” she reached out to touch his hand, “Jacob. I’m glad it’s you. I mean, I’ll look for a licensed therapist, like you say, but tonight . . . I’m glad it’s you, and that you’ve got my back.”

Stone nodded soberly at her. “I just hope this helps.”

“No way to know without trying,” Eve said, martiaing her determination. “Where do I start?”

Stone liberated a piece of paper from the stack. “Let’s start with something easy, just getting acquainted with the mediums.” He handed the heavy sheet to Eve and took one for himself. “If you want to express intense or overwhelming emotions, try something resistant like pencil or crayon or chalk. You can force them, and the results are predictable.” Stone demonstrated a dark, hard line slashing across the blank paper.

“Watercolor paint, on the other hand, is fluid and surprising, so it’s better for revealing emotions that are hard to pin down.” Selecting a soft, wide brush, he dipped it in the mug of water and swirled it across the paper. Switching to a round, pointed brush, he wet it, rolled it in a pan of dark paint, and touched it to the damp surface. A feathery spot of rich brown blossomed on the page. “That’s called wet-on-wet technique—you put water on the paper and then add wet paint. Change any one of those elements, and you get a different result.”

“Here.” He set the brushes in front of Eve. “You try.”

“At least you can’t mess up too much starting with water,” Eve said, picking up the broad brush, dipping it in her mug, and swishing it across her page. “Though if you could, I’m sure I’d be the one to manage it.”
Jacob watched as Colonel Baird loaded her brush with thalo green and touched the tip of it to her wet paper. The color bloomed out from the point of contact. Baird raised her eyebrows and made a squiggle.

“Hmmm,” she said. “That looks like a caterpillar.”

She swished her brush in the water and chose some yellow paint. She followed the green line with the yellow, watching the colors bleed into each other.

Jacob relaxed a little. She was focusing on her art. Sometimes that was all it took for a person—a simple invitation to make a mark on a page—and the door would open to that part of the human soul that thirsted to create, that innate birthright. He hadn’t been sure enticing materials and permission to play would be enough for her. The level of her trauma, her resistance to emotional risk-taking, all of them might have required more expertise than an amateur student of art therapy such as himself could have provided. He was still going to find her a professional who could integrate applicable art activities into an actual treatment plan, but for now, just for tonight, he might be able to help her.

Baird added some alizarin crimson dots to her caterpillar.

“Okay, I think you’re ready,” Jacob said.

“This is when shit gets real,” Baird joked, but her hands folded and unfolded in front of her in nervous repetition.

“Yeah, it is. But that’s a good thing,” he reassured her. “Promise.”

She nodded at him, all the steel in her that usually stood between her Librarians and any physical danger now faced an enemy that could not be seen, one that inhabited her own mind and body.

“First, I’m gonna ask you to shut your eyes.”

He wasn’t sure she would be comfortable enough to do that, but after taking several deep, slow breaths, Baird closed her eyes.

“Now, imagine a place where you feel safe. It might be some place you know, or it might be one you create in your imagination.”

He waited while the tension in Baird’s face eased, her attention turning inward.

“Okay.” He kept his voice quiet so she could focus on that internal picture. “Imagine yourself in that place. What do you see? What colors? What shapes? What sounds or silences do you hear? Feel it in your body—the temperature, the textures, the scents. What can you touch? Describe that place to yourself.”

Gradually, Baird’s breathing slowed, her clenched hands assumed more natural, relaxed curves. Good. She was beginning to feel less threatened connecting with her body.

“Can you feel that?” he asked. “That sense of safety within you?”

She nodded.

“That feeling? Hold on to that. You’ll always be able to find it inside you. You can open your eyes
Baird’s clear blue eyes met his, softer and less wary. “Hmmm,” she said.

Jacob smiled at her. “Now you can use any of the materials here to create an image of that felt sense of your safe place. Don’t worry about making it realistic. You’re trying to capture a feeling, not an image. I’m not gonna say anything else unless you ask me a question. You just create art, and I’ll pay attention.”

Rather than beginning immediately, Baird spent some time observing her options and then carefully selecting each item as though she were planning out the logistics of a campaign. How like her to gather intelligence even before making art, Jacob thought. Control, rather than spontaneity, was her idea of freedom. Whatever had happened in the past must have involved the loss of control.

He kept having to lock away the knowledge that Eliot was responsible for what she was going through. The dull percussion of his headache that was crescendoing as his pain meds wore off was almost a welcome distraction from that battle he kept losing. Focussing his will, he concentrated on his duty to his Guardian. Really, he was the worst possible person to be fulfilling this role for her. His connection to her trauma made dispassionate involvement impossible. He cared too much—for the woman who had suffered so much and was still suffering. For the man who had caused that pain.

No, he would not think of Eliot and why he had become the kind of person who could do such a thing. He would not think of the cousin he had loved turning into the man at whom he was so angry. The battle of grief and wrath burned and froze within him until he felt slightly sick.

It was the art that grounded him. Baird finally began to add something to her blank page, and as always, it was art that could speak louder to him than his own troubled thoughts.

She began with clear water, so watercolor paint was going to be her choice. Then she chose cobalt blue, straight out of the box. No mixing pigments for Colonel Baird. No ambiguous colors. But she had not chosen to sketch her picture first. She was going to let the painting happen however it would. An adventurous choice. Interesting and perhaps fitting for a soldier.

Baird’s image of safety contained no dark shades. Blue swirled pale and transparent, lit through with the bright white of the page. It reminded him of sky or water on a clear day with wind. Jacob could feel the calm rising off the page, and he cursed the stunted education that had left a woman like Baird convinced that because she could not draw, she had no part in human creativity, that art could not speak for her or through her.

The bottom part of her paper was still blank, less than an inch of white untouched by blue. Baird abandoned the thicker brush she had been using and selected a thin round brush. Jacob bit his tongue and forced himself not to react when she left the first brush, with its expensive natural fibers, tip down in her mug of water. If the brush was ruined, it was a small price to pay. He could buy another one.

This time, Baird took advantage of the multiple shades and hues he had of every color. The empty space filled with fine lines of yellow ochre, bismuth, lemon, and cadmium yellow, and touches of olive green.

Jacob watched the expressions flicker across her face, seeing with satisfaction the way the line at the edge of her mouth smoothed out, the way the tendons in her neck relaxed. The tense wariness about her body language eased and grew fluid like the paint. This was what he had hoped would
happen. Baird had shifted into that intensely present space where art happened, severing herself completely from the past and the future. She wasn’t just playing his game; she was letting herself enter the experience.

She was also absent-mindedly going through his popsicle stash like an unsupervised five-year-old. Once she even dipped her popsicle in the paint water instead of her brush. Jacob silently rescued her from introducing toxic chemicals into her system by trading her for a fresh one and disposing of the contaminated one.

Finally, her artwork reached completion. Baird leaned back in her chair and sighed, stretching and rotating her neck. Then she looked down at her paper as though she did not quite remember what she had done.

“I told you it would be beautiful,” Jacob said.

Her eyes flew to his, startled either by his voice or the sentiment.

“Is it a real place?” he asked to get her talking.

“Not exactly.” She adjusted the painting, moving it closer and then farther away from herself. “But it’s what I remember about the only time I really felt safe.”

“Just one time?”

“I grew up on military bases around the world. My mom never wanted to stay in the States while my father was stationed abroad, so she worked for the army wherever he went. I was five years old the first time I saw a man killed and six the first time I saw a child dead in the street.” Her fingers smoothed over the picture of peaceful blues and golds.

Colonel Eve Baird. The only person Jacob knew who could kick his ass and break his heart simultaneously. He nodded at her picture. “Where is it?”

“When I was 14, my dad had leave time, and we went to visit his aunt and uncle in Canada. They had a farm in Saskatchewan in the middle of the prairie. I’d never been in a place so flat and treeless. All I remember is fields of grain just turning gold stretching all the way to the edge of the world and everything else was sky. Every other place I’d been, clouds were way up above you. But there, you felt like you were walking among them, these huge towers sailing by.”

Her eyes moved from the painting to him. “Standing out in the middle of that—nothing could touch you. No one wanted to. Who bombs Saskatchewan? There were no targets, no wars. You could walk for miles without worrying about anyone or anyone worrying about you.”

She was talking about herself in second person, Jacob noted, the kind of thing a person might do who felt detached in some way from a memory. He could see how that place and time had influenced what she had painted. It wasn’t a realistic landscape, but it had the resonance of prairie and sky. Delving a little deeper, he commented, “You made a choice while you were painting—picked a fine brush, loaded it with black paint, looked at your work, and then rinsed out the brush. Do you remember what you were thinking?”

Baird considered his question. “I was going to put a person in the picture. But then I didn’t want anyone there. It didn’t feel right. Besides, like I said, I suck at stick figures.”

“People make things less safe,” Jacob mused. It made sense. What Baird was telling him with her art and her words was at the heart of her trauma. “If you’re alone, you don’t have to worry.”
The two of them contemplated the painting.

“No one in ambush. No one to protect,” Baird whispered. “My team.”

And there it was. Baird, with her vast capacity to nurture and care, believed she had failed the team she had lost. When she imagined a safe place, it was one where she had no one to fail.

“Then that is what you need. A safe place where you are entirely alone.” Jacob reached across the table to cover her hands in his. “When you find yourself experiencing any symptoms of post-traumatic stress, you can go there in your mind. Stand in the middle of the sky and let the wind blow through you.”

Baird took a deep, shaky breath. “I think I might like to paint some more.”

Jacob surreptitiously rescued his brush. “Let me get you some clean water,” he said.

* * * * *

Colonel Baird had fallen asleep, her head tucked in the curve of her elbow resting on the table. Her other hand lay lightly on the picture of her safe space. Tousled blonde hair mostly obscured her face, one strand fluttering with her peaceful breaths. The table around her was littered with popsicle sticks and paintings.

Jacob was not going to wake her up from that hard won repose just to find a more comfortable bed.

He got up from the table quietly, wincing at the throb of his headache at even such a minimal increase in activity, and padded over to his bedside table to get his phone. Sitting on the edge of his bed, he flicked it on and opened his list of contacts. He had a message he needed to send and some research to do.

It was far too early in the morning. He was dizzy with exhaustion and the after-effects of the blow to his head. Texting was a perilous occupation at the best of times, and this was not even a mildly neutral one. Nevertheless, for Baird, he would make the attempt and hope he didn’t mess things up.

His thumbs felt as though they had all the grace and dexterity of his elbows, but after a couple of false hits, he selected Flynn’s number.

Baird’s story was not his to tell the Librarian, but she would also never ask for help. He did not know exactly what the nature of their relationship was, but Flynn and Eve were closer than just colleagues or friends. Forcing his brain to think through reactions and consequences, and avoiding the terrifying uncertainties of text speak and autocorrect, he painstakingly typed, “We are all well, but Colonel Baird has had a bit of a rough day. If you are able, can you give her a call later this morning? I believe she would appreciate hearing from you.”

He read the message through five times, looking for anything inappropriate, unnecessarily worrying, or incomprehensible. Finally, deciding that it would not do too much damage, he hit the “Send” button.

Switching to his browser, he fumbled through typing “Art Therapists, Portland, OR.” His brain berated him for forcing it to comprehend the tiny screen by setting off jackhammers behind his eyes.

When he had narrowed down the list to three possibilities that he would recommend to Baird, he e-mailed the links to her with a note that she should schedule an appointment with whichever one of
them she could feel comfortable with.

By the time he had struggled through proof-reading that message, his head was recommending decapitation as the logical solution to his problems, and his stomach was threatening mutiny.

Nevertheless, so that he wouldn’t disturb Baird, he moved as silently to the bathroom as possible, closed the door, and blocked the gap under it with a towel before sinking down in front of the toilet to puke his brains out. He blearily noted that consuming blue popsicles made throwing up a rather surreal experience. Unlike flu-induced vomiting, headache-induced vomiting did not make him feel any better. When he could finally drag himself up from where he had slumped against the side of the tub, he clawed open the mirror cabinet and grabbed the bottle of Tylenol. He barely made it back to the toilet before his gastrointestinal system attempted again to turn itself inside out.

Wedge against the tub and the wall again, Jacob dry-swallowed the painkillers and prayed they would stay down long enough to do some good.

What little luck he had was in, and the meds did not join the popsicles. Unfolding himself with difficulty from where he had been huddling for almost an hour, wrapped in the only dry towel he’d been able to reach, Jacob staggered to the door and let himself back into the room where Baird still slept.

Settling into his chair by the table, Jacob prepared to spend the remaining hour until dawn watching over his Guardian while she slept.

* * * * *

TBC
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

There was, Hardison decided, something wrong with people who liked to get up early in the morning. Particularly when they were waking up people who had been up all night. He hadn’t actually planned to fall asleep. With Doctor Who reruns playing on one laptop while three other laptops, his tablet, and the main computer were running various searches, all more or less requiring his attention to make sure they didn’t trip any firewalls or alert any other security measures, he had thought he was good to pull an all-nighter. He was surrounded by his requisite orange soda and gummy frog fuel, and he even had a small electronics project with which he was dabbling to fend off any spare moments of boredom.

Nevertheless, he was definitely startled awake by the arrival of Eliot looking like he had already run the Boston Marathon, his T-shirt sweat-slicked to his body, and his hair, in spite of being yanked back in a ponytail, doing that frizzy thing it did whenever Eliot got near humidity. He was out of breath too, which was unusual.

Both Eliot and Parker always made Hardison feel like the most out-of-shape creampuff. Which really wasn’t fair. Hardison was in perfectly good shape compared to the rest of humanity. He just happened always to find himself in juxtaposition to Batman and Spiderwoman.

Ain’t nobody gonna look good compared to that, Hardison consoled himself.

So for Eliot to be as winded as Hardison usually was when he had been forced by his athletic teammates to over-exert, well, that meant something.

Blinking the sleep out of his eyes, he quickly checked his screens to make sure nothing was in imminent danger of melting down. Everything looked peaceful as servers continued to roll over and show their throats to his software. Hardison patted his laptop fondly.

Then he turned back to scrutinize Eliot, who was being uncharacteristically quiet, just allowing Hardison to work.

Eliot looked like hell. It wasn’t just the fact that he had obviously run himself into the ground. Mere exercise did not account for the beaten look in his eyes, an expression Hardison did not recall ever seeing on Eliot’s face. And although going for a run usually burnt off some of Eliot’s tension, this morning every line of his body remained as strained as an over-tuned violin string.

“You’re up early,” Hardison said, for something to say.

Eliot gave him one of his you-have-got-to-be-kidding-me looks. “I am not. I’m up late.”

Hardison tilted his head in an acknowledging nod. He waited to see if Eliot would say anything else, but was unsurprised when no further information was forthcoming.

Eliot had spent half his life hoarding secrets the way Parker squirreled away cash. What little they had learned of his former life had been mostly accidental revelations, bits of unsavoury expertise, hints of explanations, the occasional anecdote, doled out in miserly fragments, crushed into silence almost as soon as Eliot had divulged them. This was the man who had done his best to avoid telling his team anything about his time with Damien Moreau even when they were set to go head to head with that slime mold.
Breaking open those rusty gates to allow Jacob Stone access to everything that was most painful and sordid in Eliot’s past was going to be—well, excruciating was a word that came to mind. No wonder their most taciturn of hitters was looking like he might be sick.

Hardison was not usually at a loss for words, but he really did not know what to say to Eliot. The silence grew awkward. A string of code caught his attention and he turned back to his computer with relief.

“Mind if I borrow your shower?” Eliot asked, eliminating the necessity of conversation. He loosed his hair from the band that held it back and shook it out.

Eliot always requested permission, even though he stayed over so often that he had duplicates of all his toiletries in their bathroom.

“It’s all yours.” Hardison waved abstractedly. His work was becoming a little dicey at the moment, and since it was all he could do for Eliot, he wanted to have that information packet ready for him by noon.

By the time Hardison remembered that perhaps he should have told Eliot that Parker wasn’t up yet, Eliot had vanished and the faint sound of running water was drifting down the stairs. Oh well, Hardison shrugged. If Parker woke up and thought it was Hardison in the shower, everyone was in for a bit of a surprise. It wouldn’t be the first time.

Neither Eliot nor Parker seemed to mind. Eliot would growl at her, and Parker would laugh and leave. At least she had finally grasped the concept that leaving was the appropriate response. Hardison, who still had to remind himself not to be embarrassed when Parker came barging in on his showers, could never quite comprehend both Eliot’s and Parker’s complete lack of body self-consciousness.

Hardison was always 100 percent conscious of both his and her bodies when Parker joined him.

That thought made him smile until his computer clamored for his attention again. A screen full of data appeared that quenched his momentary lift in mood. Ah hell. How had Eliot managed to run afoul of this pile of shit? With increasing grimness, Hardison stripped the relevant data from his source. Then he did a little more digging, put together a file of revealing information, and fired it off anonymously to the relevant authorities. Might as well take advantage of Eliot’s temporary openness to shift some of the pressure he was under and maybe help send some scumbags to a fate they surely deserved.

* * * * *

Eliot bowed his head under the drill of water as hot as he could stand it, breathed deeply of the steam, and tried to relax. If it were possible to do so, Hardison’s shower would be the place. In compensation for a childhood of deprivation, hovering around the poverty line, Hardison always transformed every place he lived into the height of luxury. Eliot had rented apartments smaller than this bathroom.

This was no ordinary shower Hardison had pointed out proudly when it had been installed. This was a luxury spa. Eliot was surrounded by multiple shower heads, handheld and fixed, as well as an overhead rainfall system that covered most of the ceiling. Steam jets turned it into a sauna, as well. The bathroom also contained a two person tub that doubled as massage therapy.

Eliot had curled his lip in scorn at such extravagance and commented on the waste of water, but he had to admit that the number of times he borrowed Hardison’s bathing facilities was significantly
more than was strictly necessary.

Today, however, nothing was working. He had run miles farther than usual at a punishing pace, but he had not been able to outrace an anxiety that he could only compare to the sensation of huddling under flimsy cover while mortars exploded around him and shells screamed by his ears. His muscles refused to ease their painful coils particularly at the points where scars, like ghosts of past agonies, haunted him. He had reached the point where tears might have been a relief, but that too was denied him.

Eventually, Eliot gave up. He emerged from the shower scrubbed nearly raw but unable to shake the sensation of filth crawling across his skin. Towelling off, he padded into the massive walk-in closet that served as wardrobe for Leverage International. Passing up the racks of uniforms, annoying suits, and other costumes Hardison loved to supply, he found the selection of his own clothing kept for the occasions when he needed spares.

Grabbing a flannel shirt, he crossed to the shelves for a T-shirt, jeans, underwear and socks.

Returning to the bathroom fully clothed, he set about cleaning up the mess he’d left. Before tossing his soiled garments into the laundry hamper, he rescued his phone from the pocket of his track pants. He had only washed a phone once, but Hardison had bitched about it for two years.  Come to think of it, that was probably payback for all the other phones Eliot had destroyed in ways Hardison was unable to complain about—diving into harbours, swimming rivers, that underwater spear fight in the Caribbean.

Eliot was about to pocket the phone when he paused. Nothing else was working. It was 17 hours difference between Portland and Australia. That would make it half past 10 p.m. in Sydney.

Seating himself on the toilet lid, he scrolled through his contacts.

* * * * *

The view from the Aria at night across the Sydney Harbour to the Opera House was a wonder, but the man at the table set with the finest linen, silver, and crystal had eyes only for the beautiful, dark-haired woman seated across from him.

Her lips turned up appreciatively on the rim of her champagne flute as she sipped the ’75 Dom Pérignon. She might very well know that at $4000 AUD it was the most expensive bottle in the House. He began to calculate whether he might close more than the most important deal of his career that night, and he raised her hand to his lips for a lingering kiss. The look she gave him from under demure eyelashes ignited a different kind of avarice.

The mood was spoiled, however, when her clutch vibrated softly. “I believe I shall have to check my phone. It is très ennuyeux, but I am expecting a call,” she said.

Her Parisian accent delighted him every time she spoke, and he nodded indulgently.

Her slender fingers unlatched the jeweled clasp and drew out her cellphone. She glanced at the number on the screen, then looked up at him apologetically.

“Je suis désolé, but I must ask you to excuse me for a moment.”

“Of course,” he said, standing up and moving to assist her in rising. Daring to claim some of that promise in her eyes, he slipped an arm around her silk clad waist and leaned in for a kiss that somehow only landed on her cheek. “Hurry back,” he whispered.
“I will,” she promised.

As she moved away from him, he sat down and sipped his own champagne, admiring the view until she disappeared onto the terrace.

* * * * *

As soon as she was out of range of the mark’s hearing, Sophie Devereaux hissed “Nate! It’s Eliot. Tara, can you . . .?”

“Already on it,” came Tara’s response.

“Let me know if you need me,” Nate said, and she could hear the tension in his voice that was always there when one of their family called, particularly Eliot, who was not much given to checking in just to chat.

Reaching the safety of the terrace, Sophie pressed the receive button. “Eliot! Is everything all right?

“Everyone is fine, Sophie,” his beloved growly voice reassured her. “Well, we’re all alive and in one piece anyway.”

She sighed with relief. “They’re all right, Nate,” she said. “I’m going off coms now.”

“Tell Eliot hi,” Nate responded, and she could hear the weight lift in his tone.

“Nate says hello,” Sophie told Eliot. “We’re in the middle of a job. I had to abandon the mark to take your call, so Tara is making certain he won’t be lonely.”

“I’m sorry,” Eliot said. “If this is a bad time . . .”

“No! Oh no. I have plenty of time to talk,” she assured him.

Eliot would not have called for a trivial reason.

“How’s your security?” he asked.

She smiled at the way he could not get out of the habit of protecting her and Nate even when they were on the other side of the planet. “We’re totally safe,” she assured him. “Nothing Tara can’t handle.”

“That’s good.”

She could hear the smile in his voice, and oh, how she missed him and Parker and Hardison. After this job was over, maybe she could convince Nate that Portland was a logical layover on their way to Antwerp.

“Did you get him to pay for the good champagne?” Eliot asked.

“Who? The mark? Of course. And afterwards there will be dancing and a romantic promenade under the stars, and Nate will destroy the bastard, which will make him very pleased. Eliot, you simply must come to Sydney and dine at the Aria. The green asparagus with burrata, black olive, and nasturtium is divine.”

“I’m pretty sure, if you check the dictionary definition, what you are doing does not qualify as retirement.”
Sophie snorted, “Oh pooh! Retirement was nice for a few months, but you know Nate. If that man does not have something to bend his brain against, he would drive a saint to murder. And I am no saint. It was either take another job or homicide, I assure you.”

“I do know Nate, and I know you, Sophie, sweetie.”

“Oh, well. Once a grifter . . .” Sophie admitted. “I really haven’t any other talent. I tried. I really did. I got this darling little old man to show me how to knit, and I started a potholder, but I could never keep track of the stitches, and I didn’t know how to finish, so it just kept getting longer and longer and more terrible looking, and I couldn’t make it stop . . . Anyway, if you get a really ugly scarf for Christmas, you’ll know why. But Eliot, you didn’t just call to find out how badly I am suited for domestic bliss.”

“No, I didn’t.”

The humor drained out of his voice. Sophie felt the worry that had subsided rearing up again.

“Eliot, what’s wrong?”

“I need some advice.”

* * * * *

Cassandra was still in bed when her cellphone began to jangle the Pink Panther theme that let her know Ezekiel was on the other end. It took her several sleepy tries, fumbling on her bedside table to pick it up.

“Why are you calling at this hour of the morning?” she asked, yawning, and then as memory of the previous night rushed back in, “Is Jake okay?”

“He is, as far as I know,” Ezekiel said.

She could practically hear his shrug.

“I’m just calling to see if you want to help me take breakfast over to the invalid and the babysitter.”

“Awww. Ezekiel, that’s so sweet and thoughtful.” Sometimes their hard-shelled thief surprised her.

“Hey, you know Baird can scarcely boil water. And who knows whether Stone is in any shape to be hosting brunch. Besides, I lifted Stone’s credit card last night. Breakfast is on him.”

Well, partially surprised her.

“When are you going over?” she asked.

“I’m already on the way.”

“What?!” Cassandra squeaked, sitting bolt-upright. “Ezekiel, I’m not even out of bed!”

“Then you’d better hurry.” Ezekiel hung up.

“Oh, bother!” Cassandra exclaimed. Struggling out of the tangle of her blankets, she dashed for her bathroom.

Less than 15 minutes later, she met Ezekiel at the door, her hair tied in a ponytail and mostly
hidden under a newsboy cap. Grabbing her jacket, Cassandra followed Ezekiel to his car. She never ceased to be surprised that he did not drive a flashy, new sports car. Instead, he had a prehistoric burgundy Ford Taurus.

“I like the hat,” Ezekiel said as he clicked the unlock button on his key.

“Believe me, the hat is necessary,” Cassandra said, sliding into the passenger seat. Unlike Jake, Ezekiel left her to open her own door. Cassandra had still not decided which she preferred.

“Mmmmm. I smell cinnamon and coffee.”

“Portland’s finest,” Ezekiel said, hopping into the driver’s seat and connecting his seatbelt. Throwing the car in gear, he peeled out of the parking lot.

“Don’t spill anything!” Cassandra exclaimed, gripping her door handle, visions of vectors and momentum and force blurring her focus.

“Don’t you trust me?” Ezekiel laughed, weaving through the scant traffic on the 308 to the off ramp that would lead to Jake’s street.

“No!”

For some reason, that answer always seemed to please Ezekiel.

Determined to satisfy her increasing curiosity, Cassandra said, “I never would have guessed you’d drive such an ordinary car. I’d expect something . . .”

“As amazing as I am?” Ezekiel smirked. “Tell you what. I’ll let you in on a little secret. Pull up to a heist in one of these babies, and if anyone even notices you and mentions a car like this, the police will never be able to trace it because there are hundreds of these things on the road at any one time. An all-points bulletin for a car like this is a recipe for total confusion.”

“What about your license plates?” Cassandra asked, worrying that she was becoming entirely too desensitized to crime from associating with Ezekiel.

“I’ve got out-of-state plates I can snap on over the Oregon ones.” Ezekiel grinned at her. “Pull them, and I’m just another Portland citizen, officer. You’ll have to look elsewhere.”

“You are awful.” Cassandra tried not to smile back at him.

“Why thank you,” Ezekiel said. Unerringly, he maneuvered the streets that led to a tree-lined lane in a quiet elderly neighborhood.

“Have you been to Jake’s place before?” Cassandra asked.

“Oh,” Ezekiel said, noncommittally, “I might have.”

“Ezekiel Jones, did you case the place?”

“This is the United State. I have the right to remain silent.”

“You did.” Cassandra glared at him.

Ezekiel smirked, unrepentant. “And here we are,” he announced, whipping his car in behind Jake’s truck by the curb. “Cowboy central.”
Cassandra leaned forward, intrigued to see what sort of place Jake preferred to living in an apartment.

Solid. Old-fashioned. Sturdy. A little worn. A wide, welcoming front porch with a swing where two people could sit. Painted blue—like his eyes. Blue was five. Low eaves with brown trim. Houses always had personalities for Cassandra, and this one was genial and complacent. It had been there for a long time and didn’t worry about the frantic world that went on outside of its peaceful surroundings. There was one window she wanted to move because its proportions were off. Her hand drifted to trace its outline in the air.

Clambering out of the car, Cassandra took the bags Ezekiel had snagged from the back seat. Miraculously, the food seemed to have survived the trip. Ezekiel carried the box containing the coffee, fortuitously tightly capped.

As the two of them climbed the steps toward the house, Cassandra’s senses swirled with sounds and smells and colors, interweaving into new patterns like music. The lawn, trim and green, mottled with wild violets and patches of clover, gave off its rain-drenched petrichor, tingling her nose like the pizzicato notes of a flute. Flowerbeds of young perennials that Cassandra didn’t recognize without their blooms were accented with clumps of multi-colored tulips and the occasional late daffodil. An azalea bloomed in bursts of pink against a dark backdrop of spruce from which crows were calling. The cacophony of birdsong and insect murmuring created swathes of lacy rainbows across the parade of numbers made by the actual colors Cassandra was seeing.

How like Jake to shun the sterile repetition of low-rent apartments for this place of natural beauty.

Ezekiel steered her away from the front of the house along a broken concrete path. “Stone’s entrance is in the back,” he said.

Cassandra had to do her best to ignore her sensory overload in order to concentrate on her footsteps so that she could avoid the tardy earthworms remaining on the path in the aftermath of yesterday’s rain. She had never realized how long Lumbricus terrestris could get. There was one that must be 18 centimeters. The ones in the sun had already dried out, their odor causing her to wrinkle her nose. But the ones in the shade were still alive, inching along on the damp concrete.

Ezekiel kept bending over to pick the live ones up and flick them into the grass. Each time he’d make a disgusted face and wipe his fingers on the handkerchief that always occupied his pocket.

Cassandra made a vow not to have another nosebleed until she had her own handkerchiefs.

Noticing her expression, Ezekiel shrugged. “Just because they got caught where they shouldn’t have been doesn’t mean they should die.”

“You are a very odd sort of thief, Ezekiel Jones,” Cassandra said.

“You forgot the ‘and awesome’ part,” Ezekiel said, handing her the box of beverages and letting them in the back door as easily as if he had possessed a key. “Try not to wake the old lady.” He did not bother to take the box back.

Kicking off their shoes beside Jake’s and Colonel Baird’s, the two of them crept up the stairs.

At the door, Cassandra hesitated, not wanting to burst in unannounced. “We should knock. We should have called ahead.”

“Where’s the fun of that?” Ezekiel smirked, picking the lock. “Besides, they might still be asleep.”
“That is the problem!” Cassandra hissed. But she peered eagerly in the door to see what Jake’s home looked like.

Her first impression was of warmth, like sun on fields of ripened wheat, like the low, sweet notes of a cello that hummed in her brain. “Yellow is 3,” she breathed. Three like the petals on a lily, the sections of a banana, the bones in a finger. Wavelength 570-590 nanometers. Frequency 525-505 Terahertz. Energy was proportional to frequency. The room seemed empty, covers thrown back on the bed and couch.


At the dining table, Colonel Baird and Jake lay with their heads amidst a clutter of what appeared to be art supplies.

A yellow room in a blue house. “Blue is 5. Five raised to any power creates itself.” Blue was Jake’s eyes, Eve’s eyes. Lips. Cyanosis. Five fingers gripped a gun and pulled a trigger. Three and 5 were 8.

Eight feet to where the gun lay on the floor beside its magazine and one shot. Yellow was summer and birds singing. The gun was wrong. It didn’t fit.

“It’s not right. Not right.”

Ezekiel’s hand restrained her.


Rescuing the bags and boxes from her arms, Ezekiel set them on the kitchen counter.

Gathering her breathing and her wits back together, Cassandra recognized that Ezekiel was right. Jake and Colonel Baird were not victims of some odd assassination. Nevertheless, something had gone wrong. Baird would not have left her gun unloaded on the floor for no reason. And nothing normal would have led to their Guardian and Art Historian spending their night sleeping at Jake’s table.

As reality shivered into some sense of coherence for her, Cassandra realized that Ezekiel was up to no good. With the stealth that allowed him to outwit museum security, he slipped over to the table. Casting a mischievous grin her direction, he selected a paintbrush and dipped it into one of the mugs of water. For a moment he hesitated, eyeing his choice of colors. Then with cheerful malice he swirled the brush in the purple pigment. With a flourish, he painted a curling moustache on Jake’s unconscious face.

“Ezekiel Jones, you are horrible,” Cassandra mouthed at him.

“I know,” he mouthed back, admiring his handiwork. Rinsing his brush, he selected the green paint next.

“No! Ezekiel, don’t be an idiot!” Cassandra took a step toward him, hand outstretched to grab his arm.

She was not fast enough.

At the first touch of the brush to her face, Colonel Baird erupted out of her chair, sending it crashing to the floor. She backhanded Ezekiel across the chest with such force that he flew through
the air, slamming into the wall across the room, and sliding down it with a dull thump. His mouth opened but only a wheezing sound emerged.

Cassandra clapped her hands to her mouth to stifle a shriek.

Jake jolted awake, stared about wildly with rapidly clearing eyes, and seemed to grasp the situation. He reached out a hand toward the murderous looking Baird but did not make Ezekiel’s mistake of touching her. “Colonel Baird, it’s okay. It’s just Jones being an annoying little shit and mind-numbingly stupid.”

“Hey, little sympathy here!” Ezekiel had apparently recovered enough breath to speak.

Jake rounded on him, spluttering in wrath. “You! You are . . . unbelievable!” His finger punctuated every word. “Herr, wirf Hirn vom Himmel!”

Baird, whose glare had become less generally homicidal and more specifically focused, added with equal force, “oder Steine, Hauptsache er trifft.”

Ezekiel made a wry face.

Sometimes, around her colleagues with their international experience or, in Jake’s case, linguistic genius, Cassandra felt hopelessly inferior. She was going to have to pick up a second language if she was going to be a Librarian.

Now that Baird seemed aware of her surroundings and who they were, Jake slipped an arm around her shoulders. “You okay?” he asked.

“Yes, I will be,” she said, leaning slightly against him, her voice sounding tired and strained. “Little pro-tip, Jones. Don’t touch me when I’m asleep. . . . Just don’t. I’m supposed to be keeping you alive, and you are not helping.”

“That sounds like a perfectly reasonable request.” Ezekiel struggled to sit upright. “Yeah. I’m good with that.”

“We brought you breakfast,” Cassandra said brightly.

Jake gave her a grateful smile as he guided Baird to one of his more comfortable chairs with a hand at her back. She settled into the chair and curled her long legs up under her.

“Is that coffee?” Baird sniffed. “Give it to me now!”

Cassandra liberated a cup from the cardboard holder and carried it to Colonel Baird who gripped the cup with both hands that Cassandra could see were shaking. Surely something more than being startled awake by Ezekiel was responsible for their Guardian’s attack of nerves. Cassandra’s gaze drifted toward the unloaded gun.

“Mmmmm.” Baird inhaled the fragrant steam from her cup but made no move to drink it.

Tired of being ignored, Ezekiel gave an experimental moan of pain.

Jake rolled his eyes, but moved to his fridge and took a package of frozen peas from the freezer. “You’d better get some ice on that,” he said, weighing the vegetables like he might throw them at the thief. Apparently deciding that Ezekiel could not move fast enough to catch them, Jake walked toward him.
Ezekiel, whose ability to resist getting into trouble was nearly non-existent, fumbled in his pocket and pulled out his phone, holding it up to snap a photo of his handiwork.

“What are you doing? Did you . . . If you . . .!” Jake halted suspiciously, running his hand over his face and smearing a small drop of purple paint that had not dried. Glancing wrathfully at the stain on his fingers, he exclaimed, “Jones! I swear, if you weren’t already down, I would punch you so hard your ancestors would hurt.”

This time he did throw the peas at Ezekiel, hitting him directly in the chest.

“Owww!” Ezekiel exclaimed.

Jake widened his eyes and jerked his chin at his annoying colleague. “Ha!” Then he turned to stalk into the bathroom to remove the paint.

Colonel Baird stayed absorbed in her coffee, taking slow, small sips, her eyes closed.

Having offended everyone else in the room, Ezekiel turned to Cassandra to help him up, settle him on the couch with his makeshift ice, and hand him his coffee.

“Now behave,” she instructed the incorrigible thief, handing him a couple of art books she found on the coffee table, as Jake returned to the room, his face scrubbed clean of paint but not of his scowl.

“Some slumber party you throw, mate,” Ezekiel said, flipping open one of the books with the hand that wasn’t holding the frozen peas.

In an effort to deflect whatever unpleasantness was brewing between the two men, Cassandra asked, “Can I help clear the table for breakfast?”

She was probably more delighted than the occasion warranted to see Jake’s expression ease.

“Thanks, Cassie,” he said.

They were interrupted by a noise at the door that proved to be the arrival of a large, fluffy, black and white cat.

“Ooooh! Kitty!” Cassandra exclaimed.

Jake shook his head. “No. It’s Thomas the Cat.”

Thomas the Cat stalked around the room ignoring everyone except for the one person he should not be surprising.

“Colonel Baird,” Jake called out. “Incoming cat.”

His warning was just in time because Thomas the Cat leapt up onto Baird’s lap as she was opening her eyes. Cassandra could see her go rigid for a moment in the effort not to overreact, but then, as the animal settled into a feline lap rug, she relaxed, one hand burrowing into his furry side.

Thomas the Cat began to purr with excessive volume and enthusiasm, and the tension melted out of their Guardian who closed her eyes again.

Jake raised an eyebrow at Cassandra. “Well, that was unexpected. He’s not usually that cuddly with strangers.”

Cassandra thought that perhaps the cat knew Baird needed some comforting. And breakfast.
She led the way over to the cluttered table. “Just show me where things go.”

In this intimate, domestic space, working with Jake felt different from working with him at the Annex. As they collected the papers and paints and emptied mugs of murky water, Cassandra kept finding her eyes following him, her glance deflecting whenever he caught her staring.

His kitchen was so small that two people moving about in it necessarily had to maneuver carefully to avoid stepping on each other’s toes. Cassandra was intensely aware of the force existing in those few inches of space where they did not quite touch—like electricity or magnetism, crackling along the surface of her skin. But she was not sure whether their polarity was attraction or repulsion or different for each of them. They both reached for the same cup, hands colliding, super-colliding, beams of subatomic particles accelerating against each other, transforming . . . . She must have gasped, frozen for a moment, electrons playing arpeggios along her nerves, because she became aware that Jake had stopped moving and was watching her with concern.

She shook her head, dismissing his solicitude, ignoring the disruption to her senses that he caused, and switched her trajectory to a stack of palettes.

Unlike her, Jake seemed unperturbed by the occasional accidental moments when brushing against each other was inevitable. Of all of them, he was the most comfortable with physical contact. Cassandra had eventually concluded that he must have a number of siblings, some probably younger, and he had admitted to nieces and nephews. He had probably given piggyback rides, changed diapers, wiped snotty noses, ran along behind bicycles without training wheels, made airplane noises while wielding spoons, set small people up on high places, maybe even given baths. So he was used to touching and being touched more than she as the only child of parents who saw her as a failed scientific experiment and whom everyone else saw as a freak; or than Ezekiel for whom the touch of others usually preceded his incarceration until he could escape, and whose own contact with people was the minimal amount needed to relieve them of their valuables; or than Colonel Baird whose touch involved fighting or training others to fight or forcibly removing people from dangerous situations. Jake was the only one of them to whom touch that was meant as care and courtesy came as naturally as breathing.

When they had first met, Cassandra knew she had misinterpreted the way he held her during her seizures when the whirling of the visions in her head turned her knees to water. The unfamiliar sensation of his warm hand on the small of her back, guiding her through a doorway or making sure she preceded him out of some dangerous situation, had effervesced along her nerves as though her veins ran with ginger ale instead of blood. She had to argue her brain out of interpreting his presence, so much closer to her than anyone else had ever stayed, as some sort of romantic interest. After all, he continued to do so even after he no longer trusted her, and he treated Ezekiel, with whom he was always at odds, in the same way—an ushering hand on the shoulder, a supporting arm when something forced their nimble thief to stumble. Even Colonel Baird, who did her best never to need his help, turned to him when her injuries were too severe for her to manage on her own, or like now, when something had shaken her badly. He was a man used to taking care of people. That was all. She was a fool ever to imagine—ever to wish—otherwise.

Cassandra picked up the box of crayons and added it to her collection. And how adorable was it that Jacob Stone owned a super-sized box of crayons? He was such an amalgamation of contradictions, she could never feel she was seeing more than the surface of who he might be. Cassandra shook her head, trying to clear it of such unprofitable reflections.

Her arms loaded with art supplies, Cassandra followed Jake to the massive steamer trunk at the foot of his bed, but she gave Baird’s disarmed weapon a wide berth. The question of what had happened in the night continued to gnaw at her as they returned to the kitchenette to set the table.
Before Cassandra could evolve the courage to ask, Jake noticed the way she kept glancing over at the gun on the floor. During one of their awkward pirouettes around one another, he ducked his head close to her ear, his breath stirring her hair, so that she could just make out the words: “PTSD flashback. Everything’s okay, but Baird’s gonna be a bit off her game for a while.”

Keeping her hands busy distributing flatware, Cassandra dared to ask, “Did she tell you what happened?”

Jake’s mobile face went still.

Afraid she had inadvertently brought up something painful for him as well, Cassandra winced inwardly.

But he simply shook his head. “No. She lost a team and was seriously injured herself. That’s all she would say. Talking about stuff like that ain’t easy.”

Also, Colonel Baird, who always put herself between their team and any possible harm, would have done her best to shield Jacob Stone from any share in her past trauma, Cassandra thought. But how had Eliot Spencer been involved in what had happened to Baird? Neither Baird nor Jake would likely take her into their confidence. Sighing, Cassandra resigned herself to the realization that she would probably never find out the answer to that question.

* * * * *

Eventually, Jake and Colonel Baird had changed into their street clothes while Cassandra set out the food, and the four of them gathered around Jake’s table like some dysfunctional imitation of a family. Ezekiel was subdued rather than sarcastic, his grip on the frozen peas supplemented by a kitchen towel provided by Jake, who had grown slightly more sympathetic when it had become obvious that the thief really was in a lot of pain. Colonel Baird was taciturn and withdrawn into her own thoughts, an uncomfortable destination judging from the way her shoulders hunched as though she expected some invisible blow to descend. Jake valiantly bore his share of the conversation Cassandra tried to keep light and inconsequential, but the performance did not make it to his eyes. Occasionally he would forget himself and massage his temples, betraying the fact that his head injury was still bothering him.

Usually, Cassandra’s interactions with her colleagues bore no resemblance to her previous existence, but this breakfast was bringing back too many memories of equally awkward and uncomfortable meals she had shared with her parents after her diagnosis.

She was startled out of her depressing thoughts by Jake’s light touch on her shoulder.

“It doesn’t matter how much yellow you add to the color blue; you’re still only gonna end up with green,” he said quietly, so that only she heard. His smile this time did crinkle up the corners of his eyes. “We’re gonna be all right, Cassie. It’s just not the best day.”

Cassandra took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders, smiling back at him.

“Thanks for making it a bit more chartreuse than teal,” he added.

Ducking her head at his compliment, Cassandra felt a little less cloyed in whatever murk the others were mired.

Eventually, the good food and the resultant increase in blood sugar took some effect.

Thomas the Cat contributed his part to lightening the atmosphere by stridently demanding to be
fed, then rejecting Jake’s offering of crunchy kitty kibble with the swipe of a paw that sent little bits rolling everywhere. Fluffing up and galloping sideways, the demented animal staged a one-cat soccer match with his elusive and despised food causing Ezekiel to laugh and then wince, Jake to frown fiercely, but with a quirk to his lips, and Cassandra to giggle and clap her hands. When Thomas the Cat caromed off the refrigerator and turned a backflip, even Colonel Baird developed the hint of a smile.

Finally Jake put an end to the cat’s antics by getting out the can-opener and caving in to feline demands for squishy food. “You have completely blown your cover as a dignified gentleman,” Jake told Thomas the Cat, placing the bowl on the floor. “You are nothing but an air-headed menace.” As he swept up the mess, he promised the complacent creature retribution in the form of boxstore bulk catfood. Thomas the Cat ignored him.

By the time the meal was over and the dishes were cleared and washed, everyone had reached a more pleasant equilibrium. Jake even thanked Ezekiel for providing the food. Cassandra hoped he would never notice the charge on his credit card, although Jake struck her as the sort who went through every item on his monthly statement.

Colonel Baird was looking more herself; however, she approached her gun to reload and re-holster it like it was a venomous snake.

Jake held out to her one of the paintings that had been on his table. “Hang on to this,” he told her. “Use it to help you remember. And check your e-mail. I sent you a few links you should look up.”

Baird took the painting carefully and smiled at him. “I will.”

There was definitely a lot that Jake wasn’t saying about what had taken place during the night, Cassandra reflected. The more she thought about what it might have been, the more relieved she felt that everyone was okay.

As they prepared to depart for their day at the Annex, Jake showed every sign of accompanying them, in spite of the tired circles around his eyes and the pained lines around his mouth. Baird stopped him with a hand on his chest.

“Stone, take the day off. Give yourself some time to recuperate.”

As he tried to maneuver around her, she snapped, “That’s an order!”

“We’ll call you if anything exciting shows up in the clippings book,” Ezekiel lied.

“Cassandra, take him to the car before he digs his grave with his teeth,” Baird said, gritting hers.

Grabbing the thief by the arm, Cassandra dragged him toward the door.

Baird kept her restraining hand on Jake, the two of them seeming to converse without words.

Cassandra was out the door and heading down the stairs, towing Ezekiel, but she was still straining her ears for her colleagues’ voices.

Apparently whatever Baird hadn’t said to Jake worked, because he growled, “All right, I promise. I’ll spend the day wallowing in indolence.”

The silence returned.

“About last night . . .” Baird uncharacteristically did not finish her sentence, sounding
uncomfortable. “I’m sorry. I don’t usually . . .”

Jake’s slow, reassuring smile came through clearly in his tone. “Don’t worry. It’s okay. I know my Adrienne Rich.”

Baird’s confused “What?” echoed Cassandra’s own incomprehension.

Jake’s voice was almost inaudible to Cassandra as he quoted, “There must be those among whom we can sit down and weep and still be counted as warriors.”

* * * * *

TBC

Chapter End Notes

très ennuyeux = very tiresome
Je suis désolé = I am sorry
Herr, wirf Hirn vom Himmel! = Lord, throw some brains from the heavens!
oder Steine, Hauptsache er trifft = or stones as long as he hits the mark
Chapter 18

Sophie settled herself on one of the terrace chairs overlooking the Harbour. Fortunately it was a warm evening for early autumn, so she was not going to freeze.

“Tell me.”

“This has to do with that time when I did stuff for Damian Moreau.”

Sophie shivered. She hated Moreau for many things but none more than the way he had made Eliot look when he had confessed to working for that monster. Eliot always spoke about his time with Moreau like a man drawing knives through his flesh.

She expected long silences now. Eliot never filled the air with words to cover his reluctance to reveal anything of himself. She expected to have to ease his story out of him, like fine shards of glass from hidden wounds.

Eliot shared so little of his past with them.

He was a man of iron nerve under fire, capable of making the most appalling decisions regarding his own personal safety. If he considered it necessary to protect one of them, their hitter would face all enemies, all weapons, unflinching. When the stakes were emotional rather than physical, Eliot was even more obdurate. He gave away nothing, betrayed no weakness. Everything that had made him who he was, Eliot kept sealed in internal vaults that not even Parker could crack.

But this time he spoke as though the words were rehearsed—as though all the fight in him had been spent and his choices had been made. The gentle good humor with which he occasionally described to her his flaws, the smoldering anger with which he usually masked his self-loathing, all were in abeyance. He told his story as though it had happened to someone else.

“About 11 years ago, Moreau sent me to stop a NATO attempt to interfere in one of his shipments of nuclear materials to Iraq. At that time a woman named Colonel Eve Baird was in charge of the team I had been ordered to take down. My mission went according to plan. Her team separated into smaller groups making it easy for me to kill them. I saved her for last, judging that, as their leader, she would be the most formidable opponent, which proved to be the case. I left her with neither breath nor pulse and escaped rather badly injured, myself.”

His voice was emotionless, but Sophie could picture the look in his eyes. He never talked about actually killing people. Never. Even though they all knew he had. She wished they were not half a world apart, and that she could just hold him.

“So you can see why I was shocked when that same Colonel Eve Baird walked into the Brew Pub last night, having somehow survived, accompanied by a group of people including my cousin Jacob Stone, all of whom apparently work at a Portland Annex of the New York Metropolitan Library.”

“That’s good, then,” Sophie said softly. “That she didn’t die.”

“Yes,” Eliot said. “I’m glad to have failed, for once. But the problem is my cousin.”

Perplexed, Sophie waited for him to explain.

“We look as alike as two bookends. If you met him, you’d swear he was me.”
“A twin?” Sophie said, delighted. “There’s two of you?” And wasn’t that a picture to enthrall the imagination. Eliot had told them next to nothing about his family. Nate was really going to have no choice about that stopover in Portland. “Eliot, that’s wonderful!”

“No, it’s pretty much the worst possible luck,” Eliot growled. “Think about it, Sophie. How many people would like to collect the bounty on my head? And my cousin shares that head. Up until this point Jake was super-glued to his hometown in the middle of nowhere Oklahoma. But now he suddenly decides to do something with his life, and here he is, parading about the same world as me with a target painted on his back that he doesn’t even know about.”

“Have you spoken to him?” Sophie asked.

“I had to,” Eliot admitted. “The staff were about to blow everything in their confusion. But I think I nearly gave Colonel Baird heart failure when she heard my name. They never had enough evidence to arrest me, but they knew who was to blame.”

“Are you safe there?” Sophie asked, concerned. Eliot’s ghosts had a tendency to knock at the door with more violence than those of the rest of them.

“Leverage International is fine. Parker and Hardison are safe. No one needs to flee in the night.”

He did not answer her question, Sophie noted. But she knew better than to ask again. She realized with a chill that she was hearing Eliot Spencer surrender.

“You said ‘advice’.” Sophie went back to Eliot’s original request hoping she had any to give that might help. “Advice about what?”

“I need you to tell me how to convince my cousin to talk to me again one more time.”

“What?” Sophie was startled. That hadn’t been anything she was expecting.

“I haven’t told anyone in my family, ever, about anything I did. Jake met me last night as if I were the lost sheep, with much rejoicing. Then some old enemies of mine showed up during the dessert, and everything went to hell. Jake ended up with a head injury, and he and his colleagues left as soon as they could after that.”

Sophie could hear the guilt in his voice. Eliot hated it when anyone but him got hurt. “Why are you sure your cousin won’t want to meet you again?” she asked.

“Listen, Sophie.” The bit of impatience in his voice was, frankly, reassuring. Eliot with that unnatural calm was far more worrisome than Eliot losing his temper. “This is Jacob Stone. There’s a reason that family has that last name. They don’t change. Jake is the most moral person I know. While all the rest of us were goin’ over fool’s hill, Jake was bein’ mama and daddy to his little brother and sisters while his own mama was ill and his daddy drank himself into oblivion. We’d be out partyin’, drivin’ into the city for some nightlife, but Jake would be puttin’ kids to bed and haulin’ his daddy’s ass home from the bar where he’d passed out again. When we graduated from high school, I joined the army, and he got scholarships, acceptances to great universities, but he turned ‘em all down to do the right thing and take care of his family, running his grandaddy’s business. That company was on the verge of bankruptcy, but Jake, age 18, kept that thing barely above water for years until it finally started to turn a profit again.”

“He sounds like a good person.” Sophie did not know many good people. Usually they made her suspicious. But Eliot did not deal in false superlatives, so she would reserve judgment on his cousin.
Eliot continued, “He sent all three of his siblings to college, paid their tuitions, helped buy their first cars, threw weddings for the girls, covered medical expenses for his mama and his sister who didn’t have insurance, took in the sister that had a kid and got divorced, and never used a dime on himself. Never asked anything of life for himself.”

“How do you know all this when you never go home?” That was probably a bit nosey, but Sophie wanted to hear about Eliot more than this cousin she did not know.

“I kept track of them,” Eliot said matter-of-factly. “It wouldn’t have been a good idea for me to go back, but I’d have found a way to help if Jake had needed it. But by the time I could, he didn’t need help anymore.”

“If he is a man who cares for family like that, what makes you think he will refuse to see you?” Sophie asked.

“Back in high school, there was this girl. Jake was sweet on her, and she was startin’ to be interested in him. Then one day, he saw her being really mean to one of the unpopular girls. You know, the sort. Never had the right clothes or hairstyle. Not the right weight for the cover of Seventeen. Not very pretty. No social skills whatsoever. Anyway, this girl of Jake’s made her cry. He never spoke to her again. And he took the unpopular girl to the prom.”

There was a long pause while Sophie waited for Eliot to reach the point of his story.

Finally, he sighed. “Sophie, I’ve been a lot worse than mean to people.”

“Oh, Eliot.” Sophie’s heart cracked a little. This noble, honourable man would never be able to see what he had become, living as he did under the long shadow of his past.

Eliot did not let her say anything more. “Colonel Baird is gonna tell him something about what happened back then, about what I’ve done. It ain’t a pretty story. But he’ll have it out of her if I know Jake.”

Advice, advice. Eliot wanted her help. And if that was all she could do for him, she would certainly do her best. “What is his relationship with this Colonel Baird?” she asked, suddenly imagining even more complications.

“I think they’re pretty close friends. At first I thought it might be a something more—he had his arm around her for a bit at dinner. But that’s not it.”

“Oh really?” Sophie raised one perfectly shaped eyebrow.

“Really,” Eliot insisted. “She was pretty messed up, meeting me. I think he was just being supportive. He didn’t light up for her the way he did for that little red-headed colleague of his—who looks at him the way you look at shoes when the store’s closed. So I have no idea why they’re not together, but they aren’t.”

“All right. Friends, then.” Sophie considered. “That means it’s going to be personal, not just abstract. This is not going to be easy.”

“Look, Sophie. I don’t need him to forgive me,” Eliot said tiredly. “I’m not tryin’ to get back what we had. Having that one night before he found out what I’ve done was a gift beyond anything I ever deserved. I just need him to listen to me long enough for me to keep him safe.”

“All right, I still think you may be underestimating him, but here’s what you should do,” Sophie said. “When you ask him to meet you, find a way to connect to a shared memory of your past. That will
create a warm, nostalgic feeling to counteract any present negative emotions.”

“You want me to grift my cousin?” Eliot asked incredulously.

“You want advice about how to be honest, and you come to me?” Sophie asked. “I am the last person to help you there. But you’re right. You’re going to have to be honest if you want him to listen to you.”

“This ain’t gonna be easy.” Eliot’s wince was audible.

“Tell me about it,” Sophie rolled her eyes. “Why do you think I never do it?”

“Sophie, sweetie, that’s why your accidental moments when the truth slips out are worth ten times anyone else’s habitual honesty.”

She could hear the smile in his voice, and she would have kissed him if there hadn’t been two oceans between them.

“How much are you prepared to tell him?” she asked.

“Everything,” he said. “Hardison is doing the research. I mean, I won’t give him the details. I want him to be able to sleep at night. But he has to know how serious this is. I’m not talking about a few unpaid parking tickets.”

“I think that’s wise,” Sophie agreed. “The thing to remember when you meet is that it’s not just about you talking and him listening. He won’t hear you if you don’t let him speak, too. He may be angry, and you’re going to have to accept that. Don’t try to interrupt if he says anything wrong or unjust. He may need to attack you, and I’m afraid you’re going to have lose that fight.”

They both knew this was going to be a far more grueling encounter than that old MMA fight he’d been supposed to throw.

“Lose the fight.” Eliot’s laugh had a break in it. “Sophie, it’s already so lost, you have no idea.”

She was not going to cry. She had to go back in to the mark with clear eyes.

Moving on, then. She took a shaky, deep breath. “We all have our own narratives, and you need to validate his. Whatever happened to you, whatever you intended, may appear very different from his perspective. He is likely to hold a different set of values. It doesn’t make either of you wrong.”

“I’m pretty sure it does, darlin’,” Eliot said. “That’s the problem. But I get what you’re sayin’. I take my punishment. Jake gets his anger off his chest. He takes the information he needs to stay safe, and we walk away.”

The silence between them stretched out, bleak as a winter fog.

“Another thing,” Sophie added suddenly. “Don’t meet him at the Brew Pub. You’re setting yourself up for a very painful experience. Make those memories somewhere else, maybe some place particularly peaceful and beautiful. Outdoors, so no one feels trapped. Do you remember that little Chinese garden over on the corner of Northwest 3rd and Everett? Nate and I used to meet there for tea.”

“Yeah, I remember. That’s a good idea. Jake will appreciate the art of that place. Thanks, Sophie. Now I better let you get back to taking down that mark.”
“Take care of yourself, Eliot.” Sophie sent as much love through her phone as she could pack into
the soundwaves.

“I kinda wish I had you on coms for this,” Eliot said wistfully.

“Me too. I miss you all. Good-bye, Eliot. Stay safe.”

“Good-bye, Sophie.”

He did not promise her to stay safe. She had not really expected he would.

* * * * *

Parker woke up smelling food. Food smells meant Eliot breakfast since nothing she or Hardison
cooked actually smelled. She sniffed deeply, filling her lungs. Mmmm. There would be those little
sausages Hardison loved and something else, something different. Eliot was experimenting, which
meant he was still upset. He would be down in the kitchen making something with a strange name
that had to be done at the perfect temperature or with the perfect amount of ingredients or with
some other chef-ish magic, and if any one of those things were done wrong it would fail. Parker
was never quite sure how food managed to fail. How could you put the same ingredients in
something and have two different results? Nevertheless, Eliot seemed convinced it was possible.

He had offered many times to teach Parker how to really cook, but Parker couldn’t see the
relevance of that. She had cereal and takeout food and Eliot. Why did she need to know how to
cook? She did like helping Eliot in the kitchen, though. Particularly if there were things to stir with
things that could then be licked. Or chopping. That was fun, although every time she used a knife,
Eliot complained that he got another grey hair. Parker had tried to count them once, but Eliot had
lost patience and threatened to tell Hardison who had been responsible for that teeny tiny dent in
Lucille 4 if she did not cease and desist.

Getting out of bed via climbing up the wall behind the headboard, Parker slithered into the vent
and headed for the kitchen.

Reaching the grate on the kitchen vent, Parker decided to spy on Eliot. He knew she was there, of
course. She hadn’t tried to be quiet. But sometimes she liked to lie in the vent with her chin on her
folded arms and watch him work. Hardison called it “competence porn.” Watching Eliot cook was
like watching art—dance, or drama, or gymnastics—done really well. When he knew she was
there, he would often add an extra flare to his meal preparations, things like tossing vegetables in
the air and slicing them perfectly even before they fell back to the counter. Parker would grin at
him through the grate, and he’d crinkle his eyes at her.

There was always something different about Eliot in his own kitchen—and any kitchen in which
Eliot spent more than a week pretty much became his kitchen. Parker thought that Eliot got back
more of himself when he cooked. The tension in him relaxed and his movements altered to where
she couldn’t imagine the end of them being violent death. So much of what Eliot did involved the
deliberate restraint of that logical conclusion. But Parker could always envision the rest of the
move. In the kitchen, however, Eliot relinquished that side of himself. He never approached
Hardison’s lanky, whole-body sprawl of happiness where Hardison loved the whole world. But he
grew more peaceful—at ceasefire with the world. He would smile more frequently, laugh more
heartily. Parker pretty much loved watching Eliot in the kitchen.

Today, he was less at ease, moving with too much of the fight still in him. He had whipped up
some sort of batter and was pouring it into a round, shallow skillet. Parker was pleased that she
knew what a skillet was, now. She decided that she would forgo spying and go down to see if
Eliot wanted to teach her to make whatever those round flat things were going to be—sort of pancakes, but not. Eliot liked to teach her stuff, so that might make him happier. Setting aside the grate, Parker handwalked out onto the counter and twisted down to the floor.

“What are you making?” she asked.

Eliot gave the skillet a flick of his wrist, and the not-pancake flipped in the air, coming down on its other side.

“It’s a crepe. I’m making blintzes for breakfast.”

“Cool,” said Parker who had no idea what a blintz was. “Can I do that?”

Eliot made grumpy noises about the number of crepes that would end up on the floor, but Parker could tell he was feeling better. And none of those not-pancake thingies were going to hit the floor if she didn’t want them to.

She did let one of them go, just so Eliot could yell a bit about the mess and the loss of his precious batter made out of the eggs Parker had stolen. But all the rest turned out perfect. Her favorite part was banging the wooden spoon on the edge of the pan to loosen the crepe before she flipped it. That made a lot of noise.

Soon Eliot left her to do the frying while he made the blueberry sauce. Parker stole so many blueberries that he had to fetch another pint from the fridge. Eliot didn’t growl at her much because blueberries were a fruit, which according to him was real food, and he was always happy when she ate real food.

Eliot was showing her how to stuff the crepes with a creamy cheesy sort of filling, folding their edges to make them into little pillows, when Hardison wandered in, absently poking at the tablet in his hand and snuffing noisily.

“Smells great in here,” he said, coming over to see what Parker was doing. “Why are you still in your pyjamas, woman? Is that my shirt?”

“Because I just got out of bed,” Parker told him. “No, it’s not. It’s Eliot’s. I thought he needed an inside out hug today, so I wore his shirt.”

Eliot and Hardison did that eye-roll thing at each other that meant they didn’t quite get her but were fine with it.

Hardison stuck his fingers in the cheesy stuff to steal a taste, so Eliot got to yell at him, too. Something about salmonella and soap.

Parker was concentrating on making little pillows.

The pillows then had to be fried and baked, so Hardison wandered back to his computers.

“Call me when it’s done,” he said.

When the oven timer dinged, Parker helped Eliot make up pretty plates of crispy browned blintzes with sprinkles of powdered sugar, the blueberry sauce, and sliced bananas. She added lots of extra sausages to Hardison’s plate, and Eliot made fans of orange slices. Parker volunteered to help with that too, but Eliot said something about grey hairs and wouldn’t let her have the knife. He did let her add mint leaves to the orange slices.
It looked almost as good as Froot Loops when they were done.

Eliot shouted for Hardison to join them. “C’mon before I slop it to the hogs!"

And the three of them gathered around the table. Eliot breakfast days were the best days ever.

* * * * *

Parker and Hardison were hovering, Eliot decided. It wasn’t his imagination. They crowded into his personal space, helping with the breakfast dishes, bickering and making up, and in general being rather adorable. Hardison was in and out like a yo-yo checking on his computer searches. Parker, who had consumed an ungodly number of blintzes as well as eating all the mint leaves, was now munching on a bowl of some cereal containing colorful bits of marshmallows and watching him put away utensils. Eliot got nauseated thinking about her diet.

“They’re green,” she had said, waving a mint leaf around. “They’re leafy. Therefore, they are a vegetable.” She munched the leaf down aggressively like it was prey she had just slain.

“They’re a garnish,” he had tried to explain.

Hardison had been no help. “Don’t look at me, man. You put ‘em on a plate. She’s gonna eat ‘em.” And the traitor had handed Parker his and Eliot’s mint leaves. “Here you go, mama. Enjoy.”

Eliot supposed Parker was right. Green and leafy. Take the win. He needed to garnish with spinach more often.

He checked the time. Jake would probably be up now.

“I need to go make a call,” he told Parker and Hardison.

The two of them draped over each side of him like scarves.

“Good luck, brother,” Hardison told him.

“Maybe if you promise him some more chili,” Parker suggested.

Eliot did not know what he would do without these two idiots. He felt like a man in winter by a campfire, with frozen cold at his back, but a blaze of warmth to his face.

* * * * *

As soon as his colleagues had departed, Jacob pulled out the bottle of painkillers he had transferred to his pocket for easy access and swallowed a couple more.

Now what was he going to do? He had promised Eve he would remove himself from her list of responsibilities by staying home, but he couldn’t just sit around doing nothing. His daddy hadn’t raised him to be the sort of slacker who could nap all day no matter how little he had slept the night before. He needed work.

There was that article he was writing for the journal _Ancient Mesoamerica_. That deadline was fast approaching, and he had scarcely more than files of research and a rough outline. Employment at the Library was giving him less time to write than working as an oil rigger had. On the other hand, he had access to the most amazing collection of rare documents from which to develop his theories. He should take advantage of his unexpected day off to put a few thousand words down on that project. He also needed to get the proposal off to Brepols for his monograph on new theories about
translating Linear A based on the research he had done during the Minotaur job.

Satisfied that he could occupy his downtime, Jacob headed for his desk when his phone began vibrating in his laundry hamper. Oops. He had left it in his track pants after he had e-mailed Baird. That could have gone badly. Reversing course, Jacob dug the phone out, wondering who could be texting him—unless something serious was happening at the library.

The number was unfamiliar, but the name that glowed in stark letters across the screen was “Eliot Spencer.”

Jacob sat down heavily on the nearest chair, hit by a tangle of emotions he could not begin to sort out.

To be honest, his first instinct was to be thrilled that Eliot had not disappeared into the ether like he had 20 years ago. The thought that his cousin wanted to remain in contact seized his throat with a joy that felt like tears. But infecting and destroying that incipient happiness was the remembrance that there was a terrible reason for that former silence.

Jacob stared at the screen until it went blank again, and his reflection looked back at him as though Eliot were watching him with stricken eyes.

What did Eliot want to say to him? What could he say to Eliot? Would his cousin expect that Jacob had found out what Eliot had become? He must have a pretty good idea.

Jacob had only Colonel Baird’s story sheared to finest bone to go on. That and Ezekiel’s commentary on how deadly Eliot Spencer was reputed to be. But Baird had not contradicted Ezekiel. She had merely tried to hush the irrepressible thief, which meant that Ezekiel had not been playing fast and loose with the truth.

Last night, Baird had told him she had almost died from whatever Eliot had done to her. Her words had been impersonal, detached, but her reactions had been beyond intense. His hands clenched around the memory of her shuddering as she wept in his arms. At the time, he had only possessed the resources to deal with her immediate need, but now he could reflect on what he had learned.

Colonel Baird had informed him that she and his cousin had met on opposite sides of the law, which put Eliot fighting NATO’s Counter-Terrorism unit. That must mean Eliot had been working with terrorists, which was incomprehensible, wasn’t it? Eliot, who had given his life to his country, who had sacrificed his youth “for the ashes of his fathers and the temples of his gods.” Jacob was not naïve. He read extensively and thoroughly. He distrusted his sources, as well as being aware of his own personal biases and blind spots. He knew that American citizens committed acts of terror. He also knew that terrorists seldom defined their actions in those terms. Was it possible that Eliot had believed in whatever cause had sent him against Baird and her team? Might he, like Lord Byron in Greece, have been fighting for some alternate view of justice? If so, his actions might make some sort of rational sense.

Yet Ezekiel had spoken of Eliot as though he were merely a mercenary, an assassin for sale to the highest bidder. And Baird had not contradicted him. What if Eliot had done whatever it was he had done to Baird and her team—and what could that have been that left her knowing his name but not his face while he obviously recognized her face before he heard her name? It could not have been something distant and impersonal fought between anonymous combatants. But what if he had done those terrible deeds for nothing more than money?

Jacob clenched his fists and wrapped his arms around the ache in his chest. How could Eliot have done such evil? How could he, Jacob, face his cousin knowing what he knew, knowing how much
worse were the things he did not know?

Behind that blanked screen lay a message to which he would have to respond. Ignoring it would change nothing. Punching the home button, Jacob brushed his thumb across the screen, wiping his reflection away and replacing it with Eliot’s message. The words were heart-grippingly familiar, the ones Eliot had always used to set up a rendezvous:

*Meet me at Lan Su Gardens, 239 NW Everett Street, 3 March, 1400 hours. Eliot*

Only after he had contemplated the message for several minutes did Jacob realize that it had been written in Morse code. The two of them as boys had left hundreds of notes coded to resist prying adult eyes arranging excursions that might have lacked parental approval. Then as now, Eliot signed his message with his ham radio call sign. The two of them had been fascinated by their grandaddy’s pre-World War II telegraph equipment they’d found in the attic and had pestered their parents into allowing them to get their licenses. Soon their backyards had been strung with homemade antennas. Even after all these years, that sequence of dots and dashes read “Eliot” to him.

That version of Eliot, the real one, the one he remembered, not the changeling murderer—that man he could not refuse. It had been 20 years since the last time he had sent this message, but his fingers still knew the pattern in Morse code:

*I’ll be there. Jacob*

* * * * *

Back at her apartment, Eve was finishing tidying up her hair and face before heading over to the Annex for work when her phone rapped out, “Get out of my face while I’m reading my Keats,” which it almost never did. The Librarian errant was a texter.

“Flynn!” she exclaimed, adrenaline sending her pulse galloping.

“Hello, Guardian,” he croaked.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“I am in perfect health, well I have a bit of a rhinovirus. Just a little sinus drainage and throat irritation. A bit of mucus clogging up the bronchia. I sound a little barky.” He demonstrated with a strangled, choking sound. “It’s only a common cold. Nothing serious. And I’m sure you don’t want to hear any more about my disgusting symptoms.”

Eve breathed deeply in relief. “To what do I owe the pleasure of hearing your scratchy voice?”

Flynn said cheerfully. “Do I have to have a reason to call a beautiful woman to remind her that I exist and I miss her?”

He was answering a question with a question. Stalling. He was trying to hide something. What would he . . . Oh.

“Stone called you, didn’t he,” Eve said, her voice flat. She was going to kill him.

“No!” Flynn hastened to assure her. “Well sort of. He texted me. Said you’d had a bit of a rough time and might appreciate a call.”

His tone was apologetic, and she could just imagine the “gotta love me” puppy dog look in his
eyes. But it wasn’t going to work. “Apparently all Librarians or potential Librarians are meddling, interfering . . . “

“Kind, caring, concerned . . . “

“. . . officious busybodies!” Eve finished with a snap.

“Of course we are, my dearest love. That’s our job!”

Okay, it was going to work. “I miss you too. More than you know.”

* * * * *

Eve arrived at the Annex late, her phone call with Flynn having left her warm and relaxed where she had been tense, and to be frank, a bit tense where she was usually relaxed. She wanted that man to come home so badly.

Cassandra looked up from her notebook with a smile. “You’ve heard from Flynn!”

“How can you tell?” Eve asked, disgruntled with herself for being so transparent.

“You’re all glowy, and you were smiling to yourself but you also looked a little sad,” Cassandra said. “You don’t have to be Sherlock Holmes to read those clues. Ezekiel said he’d be in, let’s see, it’s about 48 minutes from now.”

Cassandra was always annoyingly precise about numbers.

“The clippings book has a classified ad for a garage sale in St. John’s, Newfoundland, so I imagine when he gets here, we can go on a little shopping trip to see what magical artifact has come out of someone’s attic,” Cassandra added, turning back to the notes she was scribbling.

“I’m glad it’s an easy one,” Eve commented. Her desk had, of course, set itself back to Flynn’s parameters, but she had outwitted it by stacking the books she was reading on one of the card file cabinets.

Except the blasted Annex had re-shelved those already.

“I hate you,” Eve muttered darkly, going in search of “B is for basilisk.” What? Children’s books were very educational, and a lot faster reading.

When she had recovered her book, she settled down in Flynn’s chair. She could hear Jenkins rattling about in his lab, but he did not come out to greet her.

“It must be nice,” Cassandra said.

“What?” Eve looked up from developing strategies for dis-arming? dis-glaring? a basilisk, on the off chance they ever came across one.

“Liking someone who likes you back,” Cassandra explained, still drawing patterns in her notebook.

Eve thought about Flynn and knew she was getting a goofy grin on her face. “It is,” she said. “It hasn’t happened too often for me.”

“But you’re so pretty,” Cassandra said. “Who wouldn’t like you?”

“Exactly,” said Eve, grimacing. “I’ve had plenty of people who liked me that I couldn’t stand. Also
we moved a lot, so up until I hit Westpoint, not too many of my relationships got very far before I was packing the love notes in a cargo container.”

Cassandra was quiet for a while. Then she spoke again. “It really hasn’t happened to me much. Teenagers don’t handle seizures very well, and since stress exacerbates them, I usually had more episodes around first dates rather than fewer.” Cassandra twisted up her mouth. “Lots of disasters, until I just gave up. I figured I’d never find anyone who both liked me and didn’t mind the seizures. When I got my diagnosis, that was pretty much it. Nobody wants a girlfriend who’s going to die.”

“Maybe you just hadn’t met the right person,” Eve said.

“Maybe. I thought, once . . . perhaps . . . Jake might like me a little bit in spite of the brain grape and the seizures and the hallucinations. But I screwed that one up.”

Eve knew the young woman and Stone had still not worked through their trust issues. She had consoled Cassandra with the idea that Jacob was like so many young boys she had seen come through the service, still viewing everything in black and white, and that eventually he would come to realize grey was a color, too. But lately she had begun to reconsider that notion.

“You know,” Eve mused, trying to articulate what she had been thinking. “Jacob Stone might have spent his entire life either within a fifty mile radius of his home or occasionally working in remote locations, but in books and art, he’s travelled the world, made acquaintance with thousands of people, learned hundreds of languages, familiarized himself with dead and living cultures, and been exposed to almost every idea known to the human race. Perhaps the problem isn’t that he has too rigid a moral code; it’s that he sees only the color grey. Maybe the most extraordinary thing was that he ever trusted us at all.”

That tiny, miraculous, fledgling trust, from a man who had no evidence that such a trust was ever rational, had certainly been bludgeoned to death by the events of Cassandra’s betrayal, but Eve wasn’t going to bring that up.

Cassandra looked like she was thinking it, anyway.

“Did you ever apologize to him?” Eve asked, suddenly struck by the question.

“I, I don’t know,” Cassandra wrinkled her brow, trying to remember.

“It might matter to him,” Eve suggested. “But in a way, he is right. Expecting perfection does always end badly. People inevitably let one another down, whether intentionally or by accident.”

“I suppose.” Cassandra’s smile was a bit watery.

Eve shook her head. “Isn’t it so like Stone to react to this fact by living his life striving not to let people down?”

“He really does, doesn’t he?” Cassandra looked wistful.

Even with all his distrust, Stone was a fortress of refuge for Cassandra when her medical condition turned the world upside down for her. Eve imagined that was a pretty powerful attraction for the younger woman. Even her parents had let her down. Really, where was she supposed to have discovered that people could make irrational decisions for the sake of love? Certainly not from those supremely cold and reasonable parents of hers.

“Yeah,” Eve snorted, “and then he takes exception whenever anyone else falls short of that
impossible standard. Maybe we’ve been thinking about it all wrong, Cassandra. Between black and white lie not just grey but every other color as well. What you want is for him to celebrate what you are, all the amazing colors, rather than blindly to believe you are something you can never be. None of us can.”

“If you find a way to get him to do that, you’ll let me know, right?” Cassandra asked wryly.

* * * * *

Eventually Ezekiel showed up, a couple of hours later than he had said, moving with a little less bounce than usual. Eve was really sorry she’d hurt him so badly, although he had definitely asked for it.

She decided that a garage sale was sufficiently innocuous to send Jones and Cassandra on their own to retrieve whatever item was causing the Clippings Book to make a fuss. Eve wanted to stay close by in case Stone needed anything.

With the two younger members off to Canada, the Annex grew quiet except for the occasional clink from Jenkin’s lab and the turn of pages.

Eve decided she would text Stone: r u ok?

He did not text back immediately, but that was not entirely unusual for him. Not like Ezekiel who always texted back almost while the “send” signal was still sounding. Except, of course, when he was up to no good. She always knew Ezekiel was getting into trouble if he was keeping phone silence.

When ten minutes had passed, Eve decided to skip the next stage in contacting Stone, the “pick up your phone” text, and call him directly. To be honest, she was a bit worried that he was less well than he had let on when they had left his lodging.

The call went straight to voicemail.

Eve waited another ten minutes. Perhaps Stone was on the phone. He did not usually talk on the phone, but maybe he had contacted his family.

Her second call also raised the chipper voicemail announcement.

Eve could feel her stomach begin to coil in knots. She always hated this point in an attempt to connect with someone. While nothing might be wrong, she had no way of telling.

Her third try had Eve pacing. Surely thirty minutes was too long.

Her imagination provided her with a free picture of Stone, lying unconscious on the floor, his concussion far more severe than they had believed. But surely if his phone were charged, it would ring rather than dump her straight to the recorded message.

She tried to reassure herself that he had probably let the charge run down.

Scrolling through Stone’s contact information, Eve found his landlady’s number. She hesitated, dithering. Should she bother the old lady? Finally, she decided that Stone’s health provided sufficient excuse. Before she could change her mind, she pressed the call button.

The phone rang six times before an elderly voice answered, “Hello?”
“Hello, Mrs. Anderson?”

“Yes?”

“This is Colonel Eve Baird. I work with Jacob Stone.”

“You’re Colonel Baird?”

Oh, right. Stone had not explained that his friend the Colonel was female. Drat. Eve pinched the bridge of her nose in frustration. Doubtless Mrs. Anderson was deeply shocked that the nice young man had spent the night with a woman. However, it was too late to worry about that, and Eve had too many other matters on her mind.

“Yes,” she admitted. “I was there last night. Stone had an accident at work, a head injury, and he needed someone to watch him.” Maybe Mrs. Anderson would consider Eve’s presence acceptable under those circumstances.

“Oh, my poor boy!” The landlady sounded shocked and sympathetic. “Is he going to be all right?”

“I don’t know. I hope so. I’m trying to get in touch with him to find out how he’s doing. But he’s not picking up his phone. Can you check to see if he’s okay?” Eve asked.

“I can check,” Mrs. Anderson said, “but I don’t think he’s here. He went out just after 1 p.m. I heard his truck leave. I know because “Days of Our Lives” had just started, and Abigail was arguing with Chad.

For a moment Eve could not figure out what or whom the woman was talking about. Oh. TV. Of course the old lady watched soap operas. But what could have possessed Stone to go driving on his day of bed rest?

“Is his truck still gone?” she asked.

“I’ll look out the window,” Mrs. Anderson said.

Eve heard her set the phone down and her footsteps recede. She drummed on the desktop impatiently, swearing that if Stone was not having a concussion-induced seizure in some ditch somewhere, she was going to kill him. The footsteps returned.

“I’m sorry, dear.” Mrs. Anderson picked up the phone. “His truck isn’t back yet.”

Taking a deep breath to remove the stress from her voice, Eve said, “Thank you for checking. When he comes back, could you let him know I called?”

“Of course, I will.”

After she had closed the call, Eve spent a few minutes in frustrated, futile rearranging of Flynn’s desk. The Library never let her forget it was not hers. Eventually her exasperated slamming of books and papers drew Jenkins from his lair.

“Far be it from me to enact a cliché,” he said dryly, “but Shhhhhhhhh. This is a Library.”

“You are not helping!” Eve snapped.

“I was unaware that my help had been requested,” Jenkins said, ambling over to where his tea was forever steeping. “Tea?”
“No.” Eve said shortly, then repented her brusqueness. “No thank you. I’m just worried about Stone.”

“I had noticed a distinct lack of Midwestern cowboy flavor to the Annex,” Jenkins said, pouring himself a cup. “May I assume that his absence is temporary?”

“Of course it is! I just don’t know where he has gone, and he’s not answering his phone.” Eve ran her hands through her hair distractedly. “I left him safely at home where you’d think he’d have the brains to stay, but no. I swear, Librarians have all the sense of self-preservation of a bug on a freeway. Look at all this wide open space! I think I’ll . . . splat!” She clapped her hands together to illustrate the fate of the Librarian insect delivered by a windshield at 65 miles per hour.

“That is why we go through so many of them so quickly,” Jenkins commented, sipping his tea.

Eve threw a book at him.

Jenkins had excellent reflexes for a man of whatever age he was.

“While it is unusual for Mr. Stone to be absent from the Annex during working hours, it is not unprecedented,” Jenkins observed, setting the book down firmly. “However, you seem unusually perturbed by his current dereliction of duty.”

“I told him to stay home,” Eve fumed. “But no. Less than 24 hours after he receives a concussion what does that block-headed, muscle-bound genius do?”

“I really have no idea,” Jenkins said, unruffled. “But I feel certain you are about to enlighten me.”

“He gets in his truck and drives off. Without telling anyone where he is going!” Eve glared at her phone, but it refused to ring with Stone’s perfectly logical explanation for his rash behavior.

“With his predilection for brawling, I do think Mr. Stone has sufficient experience being hit in the head to be an accurate judge of his capabilities following such an injury.”

“He probably rattled something important loose. Like his common sense,” Eve growled, but Jenkins’ reasonable attitude was having an effect on her wrath. She needed to remember that she was particularly sensitive right now to loss of control.

* * * * *

Eliot sat on the round stool beside the tiny wicker table. Since the rain had blown itself out overnight, the sun caressed his face. The patterns in the cobbles beneath his feet gave way to large stones that edged the still pool at the center of the Lan Su Garden. The air was calm and fragrant with blossoming trees, yellow and white and pink. Willows bowed low to touch their own reflections with pale green-gold leaflets just emerging from buds.

He had chosen his location carefully with a clear view of the gate and a wall at his back. Several tables away, two elderly men played mah-jong with solemn concentration. Across the garden, on the delicate porch of a traditional Chinese building, a small group of people moved through the soothing rhythms of Tai Chi. They did not interfere with his sense of solitude.

Sophie had been right. There was no way he wanted to meet Jake at the Brew Pub. This was going to be a difficult conversation. The ways in which it could crash and burn were beyond counting. Even the best possible scenario Eliot could imagine going to be impossibly painful. He did not want the memories and the emotions dredged up by this encounter to poison his home. This place was neutral territory—a place he would be under no obligation to re-visit.
He lifted the lid on the Gaiwan teaware and sprinkled leaves of the Wuyi Oolong tea into the hot water, inhaling the toasty cocoa aroma with its hints of smokiness and ripe fruit. Then he returned to waiting for the tea to steep and for Jake to appear in the gateway.

The envelope lay on the woven surface of the table like a shadow, like a black hole that devoured light into its dark gravity. Cold. Impervious to the sun’s warmth. The hellborn harvest of the seeds he had sown, fruit that tasted of ashes in his mouth.

Rather than going over what he would say, something with which he had nearly driven himself mad all morning, he sought to empty himself in calming meditation. The tea went cold. It was more camouflage than anything else, giving him an excuse to be there.

A small bird perched on the edge of his table and tilted its head to observe him, he had been still for so long.

It was two hours past his appointment with Jake when Eliot finally admitted that his cousin was not coming in spite of his message. Eliot swiped open his phone and stared at the words “I’ll be there. Jacob,” until his vision blurred. Whatever damning evidence Colonel Baird had provided about who Eliot Spencer had been and what he had done had apparently been beyond what family and childhood friendship could transcend. Eliot knew with bedrock certainty that he deserved such rejection. He would have been resigned never to see Jake again and to cherish the memory of one night being seen by one person as the kid he used to be. But Jake did not yet realize the ways in which Eliot’s wretched past was a present threat.

Eliot slowly unfolded himself from a position he had held for far too long. For several hazed moments, he considered getting in his car and trying to outdrive his discouragement, but in the end he just wanted badly to go home. And when had that term transferred itself from his apartment to the Brew Pub and Hardison and Parker?

He would get Hardison to open a safety deposit box at Jake’s bank in his cousin’s name. Eliot would put the envelope there and mail the key with an explanatory letter to Jake. Maybe he would also let Colonel Baird know it was there in case Jake decided to do something stupid and ignore the warning. He could think of nothing further to do.

Feeling empty and uneasy, Eliot left the Garden.

* * * * *

TBC
The little dot that represented Eliot Spencer on the computer-generated map of Portland had not moved for almost two hours. It just sat there, smack in the middle of the Lan Su Garden, as though it were no longer attached to a person, for instance.

Hardison had taken the precaution of getting Parker to tag Eliot’s boots before he departed to meet his cousin. So sue him. If things went all pear-shaped with that reunion, who knew what fool thing Eliot would hare off to do. But if Eliot had figured it out . . . Damn it, Eliot.

Hardison was beginning to fidget, paying less and less attention to the things he was pretending to be doing while they waited for Eliot to return.

“I found us a client,” Parker said in his ear.

Hardison levitated a good three inches off the seat of his chair. “Parker! Give a guy a little warning!”

“Is that Eliot?” Parker asked, ignoring Hardison’s reaction and pointing at the dot on the screen.

“It had better be,” Hardison growled. His growl was far less convincing than Eliot’s, but far more sincere.

“Well, I think Eliot needs somebody to hit, so I got us a job,” Parker repeated.

She had a point. Whatever the outcome of his meeting with Jacob Stone, Eliot was likely to arrive back at the Brew Pub in the worst possible mood. Distracting him with a new villain sounded like a really good plan. Much better than Hardison’s own idea of offering to let Eliot tutor them in more self defense.

“What kind of a job?” Hardison asked.

“Cattle rustling in Canada,” Parker said. “We need to buy Eliot a horse.”

“But we already been over that,” Hardison exclaimed in horror. “We don’t know nothin’ about horses, and we’re not gonna get Eliot’s cousin to help.”

“Well then,” Parker made typey fingers, “ask Google.”

* * * * *

Leaving the Lan Su Garden, still holding the envelope with its impossible weight, Eliot pulled out his phone to call Hardison. By the time he had reached his car, Hardison had located Jake’s bank, acquired his account numbers and passwords, found his mailing address, and sent that data, encrypted, to Eliot. Fortunately, if Eliot had to deal with any bank personnel who were familiar with Jake, his appearance would raise no questions. Tying his hair back and jamming a cap on his head would reduce the most obvious difference between the two of them. Eliot needed to get the information to Jake as soon as possible.

Forty-five minutes later, the key to a new safe-deposit box was on its way by registered mail to
Jacob Stone, and Eliot no longer held the incriminating evidence burning in his hands. Perhaps when his cousin understood the nature of Eliot’s need to converse with him, Jake might have enough sense of self-preservation at least to get in touch long enough to make sure he knew everything he needed in order to stay safe. With a feeling combining slight relief and a gaping emptiness, Eliot turned his car toward home.

He arrived at the Brew Pub during the dinner hour rush and decided that cooking on a large scale and at a frenzied pace was exactly what he needed at the moment. His staff welcomed him with nearly tearful relief since two of their number had called in with the flu at the last minute. Soon he was scrubbed up, hair tied back in a bandana, wearing an apron and taking out his frustrations on garlic and shallots.

It was 10 p.m. by the time the crowd had thinned enough for his remaining crew to handle. Eliot had filled in wherever an extra pair of hands was needed from food prep to waiting tables to dish washing. He had hiked mountain ranges that had left him less worn out. Since that had been the point of the exercise in the first place, he wasn’t complaining, but he made a mental note to suggest that Hardison raise everybody’s salary.

As he trudged up the stairs to Hardison’s and Parker’s apartment, he tried to remember how long it had been since he had last slept. Forty hours, perhaps? He could go longer—and probably would. Those old wounds had been harrowed up. Too many memories would ambush him should he be so rash as to close his eyes. For now, he just wanted to hunker down in an over-stuffed easy chair, put his feet up, have a cold beer, and anesthetize his brain on whatever weird-ass sci-fi thriller Hardison was likely to be watching.

What he was not expecting was to find Leverage International in full-out, con-planning mode.

“Eliot’s here!” Parker exclaimed, bouncing to her feet with an enthusiasm that made Eliot feel old. “We can get started!”

In her own way, Parker as mastermind was as terrifying as Nate with his manic obsessions.

“Hey, man,” Hardison said, holding up his fist for their traditional greeting. “You’re gonna love this one.”

Eliot ignored the fist and headed straight for the wet bar. He needed a beer.

“Okay.” Hardison raised an eyebrow at him and then turned back to his laptop. “You wanna take this here, or go down to the big screens?”

Since Hardison’s personal screens were scarcely fewer or smaller than those in the main briefing room, Eliot shrugged. “Here’s fine.”

Locating his beer hiding amidst dozens of bottles of orange soda, Eliot returned to where Parker and Hardison were waiting with disturbing anticipatory looks on their faces. Sagging into the nearest chair, he scowled at them. The two of them were up to something.

* * * * *

Eliot looked—beaten—in a way Hardison was not used to seeing him. After being pummeled by a score of bad guys whom he would then make regret they had ever been born, Eliot would sit carefully in that chair as though too many places hurt, with ice packed onto a good many of those places, turning rainbow colors and occasionally bleeding on the upholstery; however, in spite of circumstances that would have Hardison demanding round-the-clock pity and a fully-staffed ER,
Eliot would radiate an air of bad-tempered good humor (Hardison ran that one by his brain a couple of times but decided that it was entirely accurate if completely illogical) and seem relatively satisfied with his life.

This quiet despair only seeped through Eliot’s armor-plated self-control when he had too narrow a brush with his past. In the end, the only man who could take down Eliot Spencer was Eliot Spencer.

Hardison really hoped Parker’s Distract Eliot with a Job Plan worked.

Time to set the hook. In a way Eliot was as much their client as the one Parker had found.

Rolling right into his explanation before Eliot had any chance to object, Hardison brought up a photograph he’d found on their granddaughter’s Facebook page of an elderly man and women, dressed in windbreaker jackets and wearing matching baseball caps. “These are our clients Arvid and Inge Densmore,” he said. “They own a cattle ranch, The Circle Bar D, outside of Black Diamond, Alberta, in Canada.”

Parker snorted. “I told you, black diamonds aren’t anywhere near as valuable as colorless diamonds.”

“It’s not a diamond. We already been over . . . you know, never mind. Moving on.”

Hardison added the picture of a landscape—rolling green hills accented with dark evergreens set against a background of snow-capped mountains. In the foreground, a herd of black and black-and-white cows and calves grazed next to a stream. “Arvid’s grandfather began homesteading this land in the early 1900s, eventually adding to the ranch with purchases bringing it to about 1,000 acres of privately owned land. They also lease another 2,000 acres from the province. In addition, they hold a permit from the Forestry to run cows in the summer over about 20,000 acres.” He shook his head. “Those cows must eat a heck of a lot of grass.”

Eliot spoke up. “Look at that terrain. That’s pretty sparse country, in spite of the green. It actually would take that many acres of mountain rangeland to graze a couple hundred head of cattle for the three months of summer they have up there.”

Oh yeah, Parker had picked the right job. The girl was a genius. Hardison could hear the Oklahoma Heartland easing back into Eliot’s voice and see his posture transforming from exhausted to interested.

“So, client, you say. What’s the problem?” Eliot asked.

“Cattle rustling,” Parker said gleefully. “It’s like the Wild West.”

“Cattle rustling’s a crime, Parker.” Eliot frowned. “That’s a job for the RCMP, not for Leverage.”

“It would be,” Hardison said, “except for two things. One, there’s only two RCMP officers covering livestock crimes for the whole province which is almost as big as the state of Texas and has over 6,000 head of cattle stolen annually. Then ranchers with a lot of cows often don’t notice or don’t report a dozen or fewer missing. Lot of things can happen to an animal out in the wild like that. So rustling is on the increase. Blame record high prices for beef for that.”

“But there’s also record bounties for rustlers, too,” Parker said with relish. “They’ve just gone up from $1,000 to $50,000. Bagging a few rustlers is gonna bring us as much as stealing Princess Diana’s engagement ring!”

“Heifer heisters,” Parker smirked. “Who fences cows?” She went off into a peal of laughter. “Get it?”

Eliot rolled his eyes. “We get it. But the thieves would have the best chance stealing unbranded calves. You’re talking about rustling mature cattle, too?”

“That would be Manitoba’s fault.” Hardison put up a map of Canada. “The province of Manitoba has no brand-inspection requirements. It’s like a dealership not recording a VIN off a vehicle and then allowing you to trade it in. Just a huge black hole for stolen cattle. As long as the manifest says the cows originate in Manitoba, the thieves can sell them for cash. At a value of about $1,600 a head, you can actually make a pretty good living stealing a few cows in the night, trucking them across Saskatchewan, and hitting Manitoba by dawn.”

“I never stole a cow,” Parker commented. “I prefer cows when they are hamburgers.”

To be honest, Hardison agreed with her. With any luck, the only person actually dealing with cows would be Eliot.

He continued, adding several news articles to the screen, “Densmore has lost over 150 head of cattle in the last three years—45 this year alone. That’s $72,000 worth of missing cattle, and it’s only March. So far, the RCMP has no leads.”

“That’s a really high loss.” Eliot frowned. “Going-out-of-business levels of loss for an operation that size. Usually rustling is a bit of a relationship—the rustlers need the ranchers to keep them supplied with cattle and income. You don’t want to lose your source entirely.”

“These guys don’t seem to care,” Hardison agreed. “There’s more going on than just cattle theft. Densmore says he has a pretty good idea who is responsible, but he needs proof. Our job is gonna be getting him that proof.”

“It’s pretty rough terrain, that sort of country. In order to steal cattle, you’d need to get them to where you could conceal a truck and stock trailer, probably one that’d carry at least 16 head. There won’t be roads, so the rustlers must be going in on horseback, maybe with dogs. Easy for experienced herdsmen to round up the cattle and get in and out real quick and quiet. Usually rustlers are people already in the business,” Eliot said.

Hardison was not surprised that Eliot would know that.

“Exactly. Which brings us to the second reason this is a job for Leverage. We’re not dealing with ordinary rustlers.” Hardison put up his next set of windows, one of which was a handsome man with hair just turning to silver. “Meet Anders Benarden, owner of the property that shares boundaries to the north and west with the Densmores—The Flying B Ghost Ridge Ranch.”

“Seriously?” Eliot looked offended. “Sounds like a dude ranch.”

“Hey, I don’t make these names up.” Hardison defended his information.

“Maybe there are ghost rustlers.” Parker opened her eyes wide and wiggled her eyebrows. “That would be so cool!”

Eliot made his disgusted face and pinched the bridge of his nose which meant Parker was treading on one of his few remaining nerves.
Parker looked pleased with herself.

Hardison hurried on. “Anyway, Benarden runs a far larger operation than Densmore. In fact, the Flying B is one of the largest ranches in Alberta if you go by acres—over 14,000. Benarden purchased it three years ago for nearly 50 million Canadian dollars. Trust fund baby. His pop was in oil in the Athabasca Tar Sands. He runs a herd of about 1000 cattle on it as well as a couple dozen horses, mostly for working the cattle, but his daughter is also a champion barrel racer.”

“Daughter?” Eliot asked speculatively.

Parker gave Eliot her Nate-glare, and Eliot smirked at her.

Hardison rolled his eyes. “Down boy. She’s all of seventeen going on eighteen.” He brought forward a picture of Benarden with a very polished-looking woman and a younger copy, dark-haired, dark-eyed and slim, but dressed in jeans and cowboy boots rather than her mother’s business chic. “Meet the family: Cecile, wife. Yeah she’s a looker, but she’s no trophy. She’s the brains of that outfit. Law degree from McGill. And the daughter, Daphne, high school senior. Also honor roll.”

“So what’s the game, and what makes it our game?” Eliot leaned back in the chair with his arms behind his head and his feet up on the coffee table.

“I’m glad you asked,” Hardison said, putting up a map of the area. “Benarden, according to Densmore, has been looking to expand his empire and has been pressuring his smaller neighbors into letting him buy up their ranches. Since the man has a lot of dough to throw around, he’s been mostly successful. But the Densmore’s ranch has been in the family for generations, and Densmore’s son is as attached to the place as he is. Little side bit. Densmore’s granddaughter is also a high school senior and a barrel racer, and she’s been trading titles with the Benarden girl since they were 14. Bit of a rivalry there, I’d guess. The upshot of all this is that Densmore refuses to sell. He believes that Benarden is sending his men across the boundary to round up his cattle and drive them back onto Flying B land. Benarden has also been reporting significant losses due to rustling, but Densmore says that he’s just doing that to draw off suspicion and collect on the insurance.”

“So it’s fraud as well as theft,” Eliot mused.

“And a land grab,” Parker added.

The three of them contemplated the information in silence for a moment.

Then Parker shook her head. “It doesn’t make sense. That’s too much effort for the return. Why would Benarden want another 1,000 acres? Why risk so much for less than a 100 grand in profit?”

That was Parker’s talent. With Nate gone, she was the one who could picture the missing shapes in their puzzle. Even if she did not understand cattle or ranching, she understood theft.

Hardison looked at Eliot.

“There’s something missing,” the two of them said in unison.

“And that’s what we’re going to find out,” Parker said. “They are used to avoiding the police. They have no idea how to avoid us. Let’s go to Canada and steal a ranch!”

The air vibrated with the electric charge that having a con afoot always brought. They were all addicted to it, Hardison freely admitted.
“We can go right to work on this one,” he told Eliot and Parker. “I’ve already got identity documents for all of us for Canada. Extra insurance if we ever needed to flee the country for some reason.”

Parker took up the narrative, describing their first steps. “One of Benarden’s men just won an all-expenses-paid vacation to Florida, so, Eliot, you’ll go in as the new hire and try to get recruited by the rustlers.”

Eliot shrugged, looking pleased with his role. Eliot only really complained if a con put him in a suit with the top button on his shirt done up, but this one was right in his strike zone.

“We need a reason to be in town, too, so Parker’ll be your girlfriend,” Hardison said.

“Wait, what?” Eliot shook his head as though clearing his ears.

“That will give me an excuse for being on the mark’s ranch, so I should be able to break into his records and computer and get stuff to Hardison.” Parker went on as though oblivious to or ignoring Eliot’s discomfort. “Hardison will stay in Calgary until we figure out what’s going on, and then we’ll decide what role he should play.”

It really was surprising they hadn’t already run a con with that configuration. Since his gifts best served the team in the van, Hardison was often unavailable for the social side of their jobs. Parker was getting much better at the short cons where she had to attract a mark, and Eliot had always flirted with anyone who was in the least amenable to being flirted with, even if it wasn’t strictly necessary for the con. The two of them should have no trouble turning those skill sets on each other.

“I’ll also be the one keeping in touch with our clients,” he added. “This town has a 3-way stop instead of a stoplight. The fewer inexplicable people we introduce there, the better.”

Eliot gave him a questioning look, seemed satisfied with whatever he saw in Hardison’s face, and then nodded his acquiescence to the plan. “So, cattle rustler. It’s been awhile since I’ve done ranch work. Does the boss man provide the horses?”

Hardison exchanged a glance with Parker who looked like she might explode with anticipation.

“Well,” he said, “We might have . . . um . . .”

“We bought you a horse!” Parker exclaimed, hopping up on the back of the couch and perching there like a delighted and demented gargoyle.

“You . . . bought me a horse?” Eliot’s face and tone were a study in conflicting emotions. He looked like a man counting to ten backwards from 10 million. “You. Bought me. A Horse.”

Parker nodded enthusiastically. Hardison nodded cautiously.

“And where,” Eliot’s voice was softly dangerous, “did you get this horse? Dammit, Hardison! You can’t just pick up a cattle horse on E-bay or Craigslist.”

“It was YouTube,” Parker offered. “We Googled it.”

Eliot buried his face in his hands and shook his head.

“It’s a really great horse,” Parker assured him. “Aimee said so.”
Raising his head, Eliot stared at them, wild-eyed. “You . . . called my ex-girlfriend? What is wrong with you people?”

“She’s the only person we know who knows anything about horses,” Parker explained.

“We showed her the video, and she said, ‘That’s the horse you’re getting Eliot?’” Hardison added, loyally backing Parker’s play even though he had objected at every possible opportunity that they were being crazy. “We asked her, ‘Do you think Eliot will like this horse?’ And she said, ‘Oh yeah. He’ll like her.’”

“Kinda like when a fence says you’ve stolen the perfect diamond for his client,” Parker mused. “So we got it.”

“Her,” Hardison said. “It’s a girl horse.”

“The correct term is ‘mare’,” Eliot said, looking exasperated. “Parker, you don’t even like horses. How you planning on hanging out with me and a horse?”

For the first time, Parker looked a little uncertain. “Maybe I could just hang out with you and not the horse?”

Hardison laughed. “Anybody have any questions, you just tell them she might be afraid of horses, but she’s really flexible . . .”

“Don’t!” Eliot snapped. “Do not go there.”

Hardison just gave him his I-am-such-a-lucky-man grin, but he let the topic slide. “Would you like to see a picture of your horse?”

Eliot grasped the lifeline. “Yes. Do show me the horse you found on Google.”

“Parker picked her,” Hardison teased. “We found several that matched our search terms.”

“It has a good name,” Parker explained. “And it’s got spots and diamonds on its face.”

Hardison intervened before Eliot could blow a blood vessel or something. “Hey. I made sure she was the right kind of horse, too. I do know how to do research. Meet Spark of Midnight. She’s a nine year old . . .” he consulted his notes “. . . blue roan tobiano APHA mare with championships as a working cow horse and in reining which seemed to be the sort of things you’d need. Aimee agreed.”

Eliot scowled at the photo of the silvery grey horse with white legs and white patches on her shoulders and neck. Her dark face had a white patch between her eyes and between her nostrils—Parker’s diamonds—and she had both black and white in her mane and tail. “You do realize it’s still winter in Canada. You can’t expect a prima donna show horse to work like a ranch horse in the snow.”

Actually, they hadn’t thought of that, but Aimee had pointed out that they’d better make sure the horse had not been living in a stall under a blanket if Eliot was going to work her in whatever weather the north country threw at them.

“We checked.” Hardison consulted his notes smugly. “She does come from just north of Calgary, and her owner says he believes a horse should live like a horse, outdoors. He assured us that Spark regularly works cattle on his ranch and has a winter coat.”
Eliot was still looking like he was trying to resist being convinced.

“Here’s the YouTube video advertising her,” Hardison said, queuing it up. “See for yourself.”

Having already seen the video, Hardison observed Eliot instead.

As Eliot watched the animal on the screen being led about, his scowl relaxed from wrathful annoyance to thoughtful. He kept pointing out things about which Hardison had no clue.

“Look at the depth through her flank and how low her hocks are. Lots of power in her hindquarters. You can tell she can turn on a dime and stop fast and hard. Short back. Good level topline. Nice slope to the shoulder, too. She’ll have a long, smooth stride. She looks like a real athlete. How tall did you say she is?”

Hardison had the answer to that even though it made no sense to him. “The ad says 15.1 hands.”

“That’s silly,” Parker commented. “It doesn’t have any hands.”

“It’s a measurement, Parker,” Eliot explained. “See that bump where her neck meets her back? That’s called the withers. When people didn’t have ways to measure things, they’d use their hands, so if you consider the average man’s hand to be 4 inches across, it would take 15 of those hands plus one finger to reach from the ground to the top of the withers. Fifteen point one hands means 5 feet 1 inch tall.”

“Well, why don’t they just say so?”

“It’s a good height. Not too tall. Very maneuverable.”

The video switched to showing Spark of Midnight being ridden.

Eliot occasionally put in a comment. “Nice mover, but you’d expect that of a horse that spends a lot of time in the ribbons. See that jog? Horse like that can go all day at that pace, and it’s real easy to sit. Good lateral work too. Keeps her head low, well-collected.”

The animal on the screen went faster, crossing around the arena in a figure eight, and Eliot actually smiled. Hardison and Parker did a secret high or rather low five behind their backs.

“Ain’t that a pretty picture. A lope like silk. And did you see those flying changes?”

Hardison imagined this was how Eliot felt when Hardison tried to explain his enthusiasm for various electronic devices. He pasted an expression of polite interest on his face, which was more than Eliot ever did. Whatever all that cowboy-babble meant, Eliot was clearly happy with the horse. That was what mattered.

“Oh, look! It’s spinning donuts!” Parker sounded almost approving.

“Yeah, Parker, she is.” Eliot’s tone was approaching mellow.

The video finished up with some footage of the horse chasing a calf around. This also seemed to mean something to Eliot. He looked critically approving.

“So, how much is this capital expense going to set us back?” Eliot asked when the video ended.

“We thought about stealing her,” Hardison said. “Well, Parker did anyway. But she’s a pretty ‘distinctive’ horse, and you’re not taking her far from her original location. And it would have been a bit ironic to steal livestock to investigate livestock theft.”
“So we bought it.” Parker grimaced like that was some sort of moral failing.

“For 25 grand,” Hardison admitted. “That seemed to be the going rate for a horse like her.”

“Sounds about right,” Eliot agreed. “When do we head up there?”

He really was looking forward to meeting that horse. “I’ve got us tickets on Alaska Airlines leaving PDX through Seattle to Calgary in three hours. We should be there in one to clear security. That gonna be a problem?”

“No.” Eliot shook his head. “I’ve just got a couple things I’ll need to pick up. You two remember to pack for cold weather.”

“Gotcha.”

As their briefing split up, Parker bumped affectionately into Eliot. “Happy Birthday, Eliot,” she said.

“It’s not my birthday, Parker,” he growled, heading for the stairs.

“We just got you a pony,” Parker said, following him and poking at his cheek. “Pretty sure it’s your birthday.”

* * * *

TBC
The ranches involved in this plot are purely fictional although they bear some resemblance to real places. The horse picture included is that of a stallion and not a mare but is there for an illustration of Spark of Midnight's color.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

This chapter was originally part of Chapter 19 before it got too long. Back to the Librarians.

The Librarians’ job in Newfoundland had escalated to the point where Cassandra and Ezekiel had called in Eve as reinforcement. Apparently the garage sale included a collection of antique jewelry that had the power to turn its wearers into berserkers, and three of those items had been purchased before the Librarians in Training had arrived to lift the remainder. Ezekiel had managed to steal back two of the missing three with good, old-fashioned pickpocketing, but the other was a signet ring that the unfortunate buyer had slipped on her finger. Fortunately, the victim was only 4 feet and 11 inches tall, 87 years old, and roughly spherical in proportions. Nevertheless, under the influence of the artifact, she had subsequently gone on a rampage that had left a dozen people injured, three of them seriously. Local law enforcement were on the scene which was complicating matters because they were likely to proceed forcefully against the perpetrator without inquiring about the possibility of magical interference.

Ezekiel was making good use of his talent for escaping by alternately antagonizing the victim and running like hell, drawing her out of range of other bystanders as well as the police, when Cassandra arrived back with Eve in tow. The two women emerged at the public restrooms of the National Historical Site on Signal Hill, a frantic, badly-spelled text from Ezekiel having informed them that this would provide the closest door.

By the time the three of them had cornered their surprisingly spry adversary, the sunset colors were reflecting in the Atlantic. From Signal Hill, the view was spectacular; however, the Librarian team members were unable to appreciate it since the berserker woman chose to leap off the cliff rather than be apprehended. Which meant that Eve had found herself hanging on desperately to a snarling, biting, magically altered female while Cassandra and Ezekiel nearly dislocated their arms trying to drag the two of them back up onto level ground as night descended.

Eve solved the problem of how to get the ring back from the woman with a precise blow that put her out like a candle. Ezekiel removed the ring and added it to his collection.

The remaining hours that it took to settle the debacle involved Cassandra attempting to soothe the traumatized and disoriented victim with trumped up, pseudo-scientific explanations of allergic reactions to chemicals released by old gemstones and recommendations for garlic and orange juice cleanses, while Eve flashed her NATO ID at the over-awed local police while hinting at chemical warfare and terrorist threats and assuring them that everything was under control, that all illegal items had been confiscated as evidence, and that the prosecution for the violence was so far out of their jurisdiction that God himself could not locate it with a radio telescope. Ezekiel, of course, got to take the artifacts back to the Annex and go home to a good night’s sleep.

Eve and Cassandra, who had also watched the sunrise in Newfoundland, an even more spectacular sight than the sunset, arrived back at the Annex with four and a half extra hours until dawn provided by the change in location on the planet. Cassandra hauled out the first aid kit to treat and bandage Eve’s mauled arms, and the two of them walked home to their apartments together. By the
time they got there, it was starting to rain again.

It was 3:30 a.m. when Eve finally threw herself, fully-clothed onto her bed. Only then did she have the leisure to wonder if Stone had tried to contact her. Taking out her phone, she checked for missed calls or messages, but none had appeared.

Her anxiety returned tenfold. She debated attempting to contact him again, but if he were back and asleep, did she want to disturb him? She decided she would set her alarm for 6 a.m., and then sleep be damned, she was calling Stone.

Even though she had only slept with her head on Stone’s table for a few hours in the last couple of days, Eve could not fall asleep. She tried getting into her favorite, over-sized, sleep T-shirt. She tried reading something from one of the most boring books Jenkins had recommended to her. She tried resting in the dark but ended up twisting her bedding into a trap that she had to struggle to escape.

Finally she must have achieved unconsciousness because she was startled awake when her phone let out a nerve-jangling blare of music. Her bedside clock said 5 a.m. Eve patted her hand blindly around on her bedside table until she located the irritating device. Squinting at it blearily, she managed to activate its answer function.

“Hello?” she croaked.

“Colonel Baird, is that you?” a shaky voice asked.

“Mrs. Anderson?” Eve rubbed the sleep out of her eyes, her pulse picking up as she recognized the altered tones of Stone’s landlady. “What is it?”

“You told me you wanted to know when Jacob came back, but it’s morning, and he isn’t home yet. I know young people these days aren’t always the most responsible, but it’s just not like him to be gone without letting me know. I tried to call his phone, but it won’t even ring. I just get a voice telling me to leave a message.”

Oh, shit. Eve was out of bed and pulling on her clothes as she assured Mrs. Anderson, “I’ll be over as soon as I can.”

The minute she hung up with Stone’s landlady, she woke Ezekiel, grateful that she could count on his good humor even at that hour of the morning. “I need you to track Stone’s phone. He went out yesterday in his truck, and he hasn’t returned. We can’t get a hold of him.”

Ezekiel’s smirk sounded in his voice. “I’m sure you can’t decide whether you want to kiss him or kill him when you find him, right, Colonel Baird?”

The bonus points for good humor were definitely cancelled by his even more twisted sarcasm that early in the morning. “This is not the time, Jones.” Eve was pretty sure she was going to need dental work with all the teeth-grinding she was doing around her incorrigible thief. “Call me as soon as you have something.”

To give herself something to do while waiting to hear from Ezekiel, Eve distractedly finished dressing and made herself a cup of coffee. He was taking far too long to get back to her. Why did a typical day at the Annex involve her wanting to strangle at least three of her own team?

“Come on, Jones,” she growled. “Call! Now!”

Her phone rang.
Eve answered it before the first tone died out. “Jones! Where is he?”

“Umm.” Ezekiel said. “I couldn’t find him. I tried everything. I really did. Wherever he is, he’s turned off his GPS. And the last time his phone pinged a cell tower, he was still in his own neighborhood.”

A cold fear began coiling itself up her spine. That sounded a lot like Stone was trying to avoid being traced. What kind of trouble had he gotten into that he did not want her to know about? Or worse, what magical gimcrack could mess with cellphone reception?

“Traffic cams,” Eve said. “Can you see if you can locate him on traffic cams?”

“How about I meet you at the Annex where I’ve got more resources?” Ezekiel suggested.

Ignoring the irrational part of her brain that could not wait that long, Eve agreed.

* * * * *

Eve slammed through the doors of the Annex having run all the way from her apartment through the rain.

Jenkins was startled by her early arrival. He appeared in the doorway that led to his quarters wearing an old-fashioned nightshirt, bedroom slippers, and a nightcap. He was carrying an unlit candlestick. Eve would have laughed at him if she hadn’t been vibrating back and forth across the main room trying to quell her anxiety.

“To what do I owe this . . . honor?” Jenkins asked acidly.

“Stone is missing,” Eve said without preamble.

“Still?” Jenkins said, making a beeline for his tea.

“Yes, no one has seen him since yesterday around noon.” Eve knew her voice was cracking with stress but she did not care.

“Well, it was bound to happen sooner or later,” Jenkins said mildly. “I told you, we lose Librarians all the time. I must admit I did not expect it to be him who went first; however, one never knows. Oh. Oh dear.”

Eve had pulled out her gun and had it trained on his chest. “Don’t you ever say that again,” she hissed through gritted teeth. “Do not tell me he is gone. If you say one more word, I don’t care how immortal you are. I will shoot you until you are dead. We are going to find him and bring him home, and he is going to be just fine.”

She ignored the voice in her head that was lecturing her on PTSD-induced anger management issues.

Ezekiel chose that moment to come skidding into the Annex. “This looks exciting,” he commented. “Jenkins, if you are done being shot, can we get the computer screen hooked up?”

* * * * *

Ezekiel had accessed Portland’s traffic cams and was sifting through those closest to Stone’s house around the time of day the landlady had indicated he had departed when Cassandra showed up for work.
“What’s up, everyone?” she asked, her cheerful tone snagging like razor wire through the tension that had built in the Annex. Sensing the wrongness in the air, her smile faded. “Did something show up in the clippings book?”

“Clippings book?” Eve hadn’t even thought about checking to see what the mystery du jour was. “Found him!” Ezekiel exclaimed.

Eve crowded behind him trying to see the screen. “Where is he?”

“Where is who?” Cassandra asked, shedding her raincoat and hanging it on the coatrack.

“That’s definitely his pickup, and he’s headed back up the 308 yesterday at 13:12 hours 42 seconds.”

“Who?” Cassandra joined them.

Eve took a deep breath and turned to the young woman. “Stone. He’s been missing since yesterday afternoon. Jones is trying to track him.”

“Oh!” Cassandra gripped Eve’s arm. “Oh no! Is he okay?”

“We don’t know,” Eve told her.

“He made it onto the St. Helens,” Ezekiel said. “He might be heading back into downtown Portland.”

Cassandra joined Eve in watching over his shoulder.

“No, I’ve lost him. He doesn’t show up at the next camera on St. Helens. He must have taken an exit.”

“Find out which one,” Cassandra demanded.

“Do I look like a miracle worker?” Ezekiel inquired. “There have to be at least nine different exits, most of them unmonitored, most of them leading into residential areas. I’ll check out any cameras in the business districts. But some of those? They go off into the hills. If he took one of those, he could be anywhere in the Tualatin Mountains. Finding him if he doesn’t want to be found in there is going to take actual manpower. Even a satellite can’t see through those trees.”

“Or if he’s hurt.” Cassandra was panicking.

“I am trying to look at the bright side,” Ezekiel said.

Eve could feel every beat of her heart in her temples. “I promised Mrs. Anderson I’d be over right away,” she said. “I’ll check to see if Stone left any messages in his room. Meanwhile, Jones, I want you to scan all police and accident reports. Cassandra, you can call all the hospitals in the Portland area.”

“I’m going to check on Lamia and her Serpent Brotherhood thugs,” Ezekiel volunteered, his fingers blurring with haste on his keyboard. “Make sure they’re still locked up. They might have been after Stone instead of Spencer at the Brew Pub.”

“Good idea.” Eve shivered. If the Serpent Brotherhood had taken Stone, what could they have planned for him? So far, their intentions towards the Librarians had only been murderous. She could still hear Dulaque’s chilling voice as he informed them, “I’ve killed more Librarians than
you’ve seen stars.” If Lamia had succeeded in murdering Stone, Eve would personally rip her to pieces and feed her to rats.

“Yeah, they’re still guests of Portland PD,” Ezekiel confirmed. “Bail hearing is set for tomorrow. Even the ones still in the hospital check out. All present and accounted for.”

Eve and Cassandra shared a shaky sigh of relief.

“Well, people, let’s get busy and find our missing historian.” Eve headed for the exit.

Jones, who was actually surprisingly reliable in a crisis, turned back to his computer. Cassandra headed to find Jenkins and a phone book, seeming steadier with a job to do.

Eve realized she was going to need a vehicle. “Jones, keys,” she snapped.

He threw them at her without looking.

Snatching them out of the air, Eve raced out of the Annex, hopped in Ezekiel’s car and drove in a highly illegal manner to Stone’s address.

* * * * *

The numbers circled in Cassandra’s peripheral vision, snarling like predators, the way they did when she ran the statistics on the progression of her tumor. They flashed on the edges of her sight like the far-off lightning foretelling the coming of a storm. The length of time Jake had been missing. The maximum possible distance he could have travelled by vehicle. Traffic flow algorithms superimposed themselves on the backs of her eyelids. Cassandra gripped the edge of the table until she was sure she had left indentations in the wood trying to control the tremble in her hands. Focus, she told herself. But the voice in her head was his—warm and gentle and believing in her ability, in spite of everything—and oh, she could not bear it if he were suffering and alone or in trouble somewhere or . . . or anything.

Her phone lay on the table in front of her next to the thick bulk of the Portland Yellow Pages Jenkins had silently provided her, open to the letter H for Hospitals.

This was just a precaution, she told herself. Just to be thorough. There would be some perfectly logical explanation for his absence. He would return, scowling and grumpy because he was embarrassed and sorry he had made them worry. Baird would yell at him, and Ezekiel would make snarky cracks, and she . . . she would not throw her arms around him and hold him and cry on his chest telling him that he should never ever go away again.

And so she called them, at first all the hospitals in Portland, then expanding her search using the Internet as her resource—Gresham, Estacada, Vancouver—casting her net wider and wider, as far as he could have gone. Astoria, Tri-Cities, Medford, Seattle.

She did not ask the important questions. Do you have a patient who has eyes all the colors of all the skies, eyes that see beauty even in ordinary things. Does he have hands capable of building, creating, repairing anything, hands that brush the pages of books, as delicate as breath and as reverent? Does his voice contain all the passion of all the poetry in all the languages of the whole world through all of recorded time?

Instead she asked, again and again, the questions they would understand: “Do you have a patient named Jacob Stone? Male, white, 39 years old, brown hair, 5 foot 9 inches tall, blue eyes?”

Redding, Elko, Missoula, Spokane, Cranbrook. The answers, reassuring, terrifying, were
always, “No. I’m sorry, we do not.”

* * * * *

Ezekiel Jones, World Class Thief, instead of tracking something interesting such as the missing Trojan gold, for instance, was constrained to bend his considerable talents toward the location and retrieval of their backward country art historian—one who disapproved of almost everything Ezekiel did. Well, if Stone was in some sort of trouble, and Ezekiel had to rescue his sorry ass, Ezekiel did not plan to let him live it down for pretty much ever.

He glanced over at Cassandra, noting the way her hands moved, half-tracing patterns only she could see. If she slipped beyond her control of her mathematical hallucinations into a seizure, he wondered what they would do without Stone. For now, Math Girl seemed to be holding it together, speaking with urgent, iron-clad calm over her bluetooth headset. Her face was washed of all color, pale and unhappy, with a little frown line pulling between her eyebrows.

And since when had her happiness or the lack thereof become a matter of significance to him? Ezekiel shrugged and focused on the task at hand. However it had happened did not really matter. Things were what they were. Cassandra’s interests were now his own, and Ezekiel Jones always looked out for his own interests. A flatly despairing Cassandra was a crime against nature. She should be restored to smiling and bouncing around the Annex in her enthusiasm, like a kitten on speed. And until their annoying genius was back safe and sound, it wasn’t going to happen.

Yeah, Cassandra cared what happened to Stone. A lot. So Ezekiel would do his best for her.

This would not be the first occasion Ezekiel had infiltrated law enforcement. It was not even the first time he’d gone digging around in the Portland Police Bureau computers. He had established back doors into all these systems already. After all, you never knew when you might need to throw dust in the eyes of some investigator who was getting too close to nabbing a thief. But this time he would be repurposing that process and sifting through information for any clue it might provide to the whereabouts of one Jacob Stone. With the ease of long practice and some anticipation, Ezekiel extended his electronic fingers into the data networks, searching for any mentions that might indicate Stone had run afoul of the law either as victim or perpetrator.

Certainly, Stone might have been in an accident of some sort, but Ezekiel really hoped his colleague was in legal difficulties. If Stone had landed in the drunk tank, or better yet, had been booked for assault after some bar brawl pushed too far, Ezekiel wanted to be there to see him behind bars.

Of course, they’d have to bail him out, but the sanctimonious cowboy would certainly be taken down a peg or two.

Those beautiful plans ran into a snag when Ezekiel failed to unearth any evidence that Stone had come to the attention of any law enforcement agency in Portland or its environs. Ezekiel carefully modified the systems so that if Jacob Stone ever did so, they would notify Ezekiel.

“Well, Stone’s not a person of interest to the law,” he informed Cassandra.

“He’s not in any hospital either,” she said. “I can’t even feel relieved, because now we still don’t know where he is. I can’t imagine why he might have flown anywhere, but can we check the airports?”

“I can do that,” Ezekiel agreed, and proceeded to set airport security at both industrial airstrips and
PDX itself to looking for Stone’s truck in their parking facilities. A quick search revealed that if Stone had chosen to fly out of Portland, he had not done so under either of his own names.

Then, although Baird had not requested it, Ezekiel modified a search algorithm of his own devising to continue sifting through morgue records for any white, male John Does, mid-thirties to early forties, 5 feet, 9 inches tall, 180 pounds or thereabouts. He did not inform Cassandra what he had done.

* * * * *

Eve was met at the door by a distraught Mrs. Anderson who let her into Stone’s upper room—his empty room. It had been no more than 24 hours since she had said good-bye to Jacob Stone in this room, but already the place oppressed her with a sense of abandonment.

He had left it in perfect order. Not an item was out of place. The bed was made with military precision. No dishes lay out, and the tea towels were hung perfectly straight on the towel rack. All books were shelved, and the art magazines on the coffee table were exactly parallel to the edges of the table. Not a speck of dust dared to show its face on any polished wooden surface, and the lack of Thomas the Cat hair could be explained by nothing short of divine intervention.

Eve’s apartment was equally organized, but only because she owned nothing with which to make it untidy. And she only dusted when there was enough dirt to make the chore satisfying.

Nowhere in the room was anything that resembled a note or a message.

Eve checked the computer on his desk to be sure, but if he had received any e-mail that might shed light on his whereabouts, she was going to have to get Jones to hack it because the fastidious Stone had logged out.

She checked in with Ezekiel and Cassandra who had both come up with blanks. Ezekiel agreed to commandeer Jenkins’ Buick and meet her at Stone’s place to check the contents of his computer, and Cassandra insisted on accompanying him.

* * * * *

There was nothing on Stone’s computer to provide a clue to what had happened to him. It had taken Jones longer than he had expected to hack through Stone’s security.

“Damn cowboy’s not as technologically illiterate as he looks,” the thief grumbled.

Eve supposed if you were leading a secret life, having your computer safe from prying eyes would become a priority.

Ezekiel kept up a running commentary on what he was finding. “E-mails are just from publishers, academic list-serves, notifications from art history blogs, stuff like that. How stultifying! Nothing that might cause him to vanish like this. Files are all scholarly articles complete or in progress. Pictures are of artwork and manuscripts. Here’s one file labeled ‘family’.”

“Stay out of that, Jones.”

Ezekiel wrinkled his nose at being thwarted, but then he smirked. “Let’s check out his browser history. See what lies beneath the surface of Mr. Middle Class Morality.”

Eve felt a flash of guilt at that. She should not be exposing Stone to Ezekiel’s invasion of privacy.
“At least he doesn’t use Internet Explorer. Hmm. Archive, archive, archive, JSTOR, JSTOR, JSTOR for like a hundred hits. Does this man not even know about social media? Academia.edu for another dozen. Aha! Youtube subscriptions. Nope. Just stuff from like Medievalist.net and Stanford University. I’ll tell you what. Jacob Stone needs to get laid. He probably snapped from all that repression. Not one single porn site? Really?”

Both Eve and Cassandra glared at him in unison.

“Oh, look!” the sarcasm rolled off Ezekiel in waves. “About a month ago, he accessed the Portland Chamber of Commerce’s list of Cultural Events—opera, concerts, the symphony, lecture series, museum exhibits, galleries, et cetera ad nauseum. Getting a little wild out here in the West, are we, Stone?”

“Cut the commentary,” Eve told him shortly, but Ezekiel was constitutionally incapable of complying.

“Three months ago, we have more exciting events in the life of Jacob Stone—a Google Maps search for a veterinary clinic. Thomas the Cat must have horked up a hairball or something. And here’s another for a Senior Center. And that, ladies, is what Jacob Stone does for thrills here in Portland. I say, when we find him, we get him drunk and take him to a strip club.”

Eve rolled her eyes at Cassandra. “Jones, if you cannot say anything useful, just be silent.”

Ezekiel scooted the antique wooden office chair over to Stone’s printer. “I’m going to check the printer buffer, and then I think we’re done here.”

The three of them waited while the printer spat out several sheets of paper covered with what looked like an outline.

Ezekiel read the title out loud: “Id est non diaboli: An Unconventional Siren Exemplum in the Somnium super materia scismatis.” He raised an eyebrow. “Well that totally explains the not getting laid part. But it doesn’t tell us what happened to Stone.”

* * * * *

When the three of them returned to the Annex, Jenkins refused to put in his usual appearance, although they could hear him rattling around behind the closed door of his laboratory. Since Eve wanted privacy for her next task, that suited her fine.

She dispensed with the increasingly distraught Cassandra and the increasingly exasperating Ezekiel by instructing them to take the car and trace the route Stone must have taken.

“Look for anything unusual—places a vehicle might have gone off the road, especially if there might be enough undergrowth to hide it, anything that might give us a lead to follow.”

When she was finally alone and seated at her desk, Eve slow-breathed the steel back into her spine and opened the file folder that bore the label JACOB STONE across the top. Curiously, the Library could produce Charlene’s paperwork as easily as it could a tome from its other-dimensional stacks. She flipped through its contents, the standard employee personnel file documents. On top was his curriculum vitae rather than a resumé. And it struck her that Jacob Stone had an academic statement of his qualifications prepared in spite of his devotion to the family business—a quiet, private record of heretofore thwarted ambition. Next was the checklist, in Charlene’s bold hand, from new employee orientation. Eve devoutly wished the older woman were here to help her figure out what a Guardian should do when she had—lost—a Librarian. She thumbed quickly past
Stone’s relocation agreement and his employment contract. Here was her first competency report on him, back when she had started teaching her LITs to fight. Her hand clenched over the paper, and she was forced to try to smooth out the unintended wrinkles. Apologetically, she returned it to the file and picked up the next document. Ah, this was the one she sought: Emergency Contact Information.

Eve was unwilling to admit that this was yet an emergency. She was not calling to report to his family that Stone was missing. She just needed to know whether some family situation had required his presence or whether the emotional trauma that had been dredged up over the previous days had sent him running for home.

The first name on the list was Isaac Stone, relationship: father. A small flick of humor curled the corner of her mouth and then died away. The names possessed too many uncomfortable overtones—for Jacob had indeed taken the leadership of his family as his birthright but was now in exile. She was not prepared to give away his secret to his family, but she needed to know if he had contacted them.

Reminding herself that this was not the most difficult sort of call to make, Eve entered the Oklahoma number and waited as the phone on the other end rang and rang. Puzzled at the lack of response from at least an answering machine, Eve had nearly given up when a slurred voice answered, “Yeah?”

“How am I speaking to Mr. Isaac Stone?” Eve asked.

“Y’ sure are, shweetheart,” the man answered. “Waddaya want?”

Eve frowned at her phone. Was he drunk? At this hour?

“Mr. Stone, my name is Eve Baird, and I work with your son, Jacob.”

“Who is it?” a woman’s voice asked in the background.

“How are you?” Eve mumbled under her breath. “Thank you, Mr. Stone,” she said out loud. “And could you please have him contact me when you hear from him?”
“That’d be a first,” Stone’s father said, and she could hear an undertone of hurt in his drunken voice. “But, yeah, if he checks in, I’ll let ‘m know y’ called.”

After she had ended the call with Stone’s father, Eve sat at her desk with her head in her hands trying not to imagine what she would say to Isaac Stone if they could not discover what had happened to his son. She had made calls like that before—not many, but too many—since she had become an officer responsible for the lives of others, and they never got any easier. But a soldier had signed on for that sort of insecure future. Families were devastated but not blind-sided. The Stones had no idea that Jacob had exchanged a life of security and measured risk for one of unimaginable hazard.

Eve had not prayed in many years, but she prayed now. Let there be a perfectly safe and sane reason for Jacob Stone’s disappearance. Let him walk through that door astonished that we’ve made such a fuss.

* * * * *

Ezekiel and Cassandra returned to the Annex as the street lights began to glow through the steady drizzle that had fallen all day. They had found no clues as to where Stone had disappeared.

“What are we going to do?” Cassandra clasped her hands together, forcibly restraining herself from wringing them. Her frightened eyes pinned Eve to the wall, as though she expected that Eve’s job as Guardian gave her some supernatural power to protect Jacob Stone and return him to them.

Even Ezekiel watched her expectantly.

They had come through so much together in such a short time. They had survived so many heart-stopping dangers. Surely this was just one more such adventure. But Eve knew, in ways these innocents could not, that on the other side of adventure always lay tragedy.

“We do the only thing we can do,” Eve told them. “We wait. For all our enquiries to check out. For any change in the situation. And if nothing further turns up, we file an official missing persons report and hope the police have better luck than we have had.”

* * * * *

TBC
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

This chapter sort of turned into a love song to my first horse. Oops.

Portland, Oregon, USA

Eliot was back at the Brew Pub within 20 minutes looking like he’d just ridden in off the range in faded Levis, a wrinkled western-cut plaid shirt, scuffed cowboy boots, and a well-worn Stetson. No one was going to make the mistake of thinking Eliot was a n00b on a ranch, Hardison reflected. He eyed with curiosity the heavy coat and carry-on pack Eliot had slung over his shoulder. Eliot did not normally fly with any sort of luggage, so what had he decided he couldn’t live without on this upcoming job?

A zipping sound from the ceiling made both men look up as Parker landed between them. Hardison knew from past experience that the duffle she was carrying held only her rigs and ropes, a couple of changes of non-descript clothing, and a bag of cereal.

Eliot knew it, too. “Time to visit the closet,” he told a disgruntled Parker. “If you’re gonna be playing my girlfriend, you’re gonna have to dress for it. Also, what part of ‘it’s still winter up there’ are you not comprehending?”

When Parker turned to him, Hardison shrugged. “It’s either pack here or shop there.”

As the reluctant Parker shinnied back up her line, he and Eliot plodded up the stairs. Hardison’s own luggage was suspiciously light of actual clothing and contained large amounts of electronic surveillance equipment and tools. Since he did not really know what role he would end up playing, he figured that a high quality suit and accessories would be a sufficient addition to his usual wardrobe. Anything else he needed could be purchased on the ground.

When Parker’s duffle was heavier by a few pairs of jeans and shirts, a winter coat and boots, and the little number she’d danced in during the Fiddle con, they were ready to depart for the airport.

“Okay. I’ve made each of us a Canadian resident packet,” Hardison said, handing out the RFid blocking document holders. “Here are your passports, your SIN cards, and your Alberta drivers’ licenses. And Eliot, here’s your Permanent Resident card. Not gonna be able to sell that as a Canadian accent, no way, no how.”

Eliot shrugged acknowledgement of the point

“And here are your Alberta Health cards, Blue Cross cards, credit cards on the Bank of Montreal, and some Canadian cash.” Hardison dealt the items to his team.

“Oooh! Pretty!” Parker smiled, fanning out a handful of bills. “Like a rainbow. Why can’t we have pretty money?”

“Because we are a nation of soulless bureaucrats, mama,” Hardison said. “Now put that away and have some toonies and loonies for the snack machines and the parking meters.”
Eliot shoved the handful of change into his pockets. Parker made her coins disappear and then smirked impishly while pulling them out of Eliot’s hair.

Eliot scowled and ducked his head away from her. “Let’s go,” he growled.

“One last thing,” Hardison added as they headed out to Lucille 4, “because I care. Tim Horton’s gift cards for y’all in case you need a coffee or a muffin or something. Mmmhmm.”

They stopped, briefly in the Brew Pub to drop off Parker’s carnivorous plant for Amy Palavi to babysit while they were gone. Amy had become used to the sudden addition of that responsibility. The note with Parker’s care and feeding instructions was curling up on the edges with age and use. They left the plant where Amy would find it when she came in to work.

Hardison was pretty sure Amy had figured out at least part of what Leverage did. They were going to miss her when she was finished with her Arts degree. Nate had liked the Brew Pub as a headquarters because of the high turnover of restaurant staff, but somehow they’d managed to mess that up. None of their staff wanted to leave. Partly it was the exorbitant salaries Eliot insisted on paying them, but part of it was the fact that no matter how their chef grumbled and lost his temper and cursed at them over a missing ingredient or a botched technique or a sloppy presentation or an unsanitary practice, the entire crew adored him and followed him around like Mary’s little lambs. It was, Hardison grinned to himself, cute. And someday, when he didn’t value his fingers for typing, he was going to tell Eliot so.

Because Hardison wasn’t paying attention, Eliot got to drive, having outmaneuvered Parker in seizing the seat behind the wheel, for which all Portland should be grateful. They still had plenty of time to make it to the airport, so there was no need for Parker’s brand of drag racing between two points on a map.

* * * * *

Seattle, Washington, USA

Staying out of security camera footage even in airports was second nature for the members of Leverage International, Eliot reflected. Admittedly, Hardison’s ability to locate all the cameras and Parker’s skill at planning their routes ahead of time made that avoidance a lot easier than it used to be for him. And thanks to the hacker, their carefully chosen tickets had kept them clear of random TSA searches. Since Eliot never checked luggage under when flying, anything he planned to carry on a trip had to be on his person or in carry-on luggage that never left his sight. He could feel the ceramic knife he’d kept from his mile-high fight with Dan Erlich strapped to the calf of his leg just above where his boot came.

The three of them were enduring a five hour layover in the Seattle airport, and Eliot was grateful that the other two had finally fallen asleep. Parker was curled up on her chair with her head in Hardison’s lap. Eliot found himself unaccountably touched that she would let herself sleep in such a public place. Even a year ago, that would not have been the case. Somewhere about her person, she had managed to conceal an octopus clock that her sticky fingers had been unable to resist in one of the airport gift shops. Travelling with Parker was always an exercise in keeping her out of the duty free chocolate and trying to distract her from whatever shiny thing was going to take her fancy, but he hadn’t seen that one coming. Parker practicing appreciating things was having some unintended side effects. The clock had waving arms, and Parker had been enchanted. He shouldn’t have been surprised later to see it was missing from the shop wall, although how she had managed it since it was immediately behind the person at the till was a mystery.

Hardison, still clutching his tablet, was also sleeping and had gradually tilted over until he was
drooling on Eliot’s shoulder. Eliot planned to use that fact as ammunition at some point, but he did not push his friend away. He continued scanning the waiting areas surrounding them on three sides. No one had sat down in their immediate vicinity. Anyone who drifted in their direction found themselves repelled by Eliot’s fierce stare. Even the occasional crowd, pushing toward a gate, swerved away from the no-fly zone he was maintaining around his team and their carry-on luggage.

Their boarding call finally sounded over the loudspeakers, and Eliot roused his team. Parker awoke like he’d flipped a switch, instantly on her feet and alert. Hardison made protesting noises and tried to nuzzle his way back to a comfortable snoozing position, but Eliot stood up, dumping him unceremoniously, and with Parker, pulled him upright and propelled the half-asleep hacker through the boarding procedure. By the time they were stowing their carry-on luggage, Hardison had reanimated, ready to spend the remainder of their flight to Calgary amusing himself hacking into the flight information of their plane while Parker watched cartoons and Eliot divided his attention between assessing the threat level of their fellow travellers and reading a book.

* * * * *

Calgary, Alberta, Canada

The travellers identifying themselves as James McCoy, Kira O’Brien, and Michael Burton landed in Calgary at 11 a.m. local time. Coincidentally, at 11:39, a non-descript, badly rusted VW Rabbit went missing from long-term parking if anyone had been paying attention. Burton was heard to complain that there was no room for his legs, and O’Brien would have preferred to have taken the late model Mustang, but McCoy had told them to shut up and get in the damn car. The vehicle had departed the parking lot and proceeded sedately to the Deerfoot Trail southbound. Police would later find the stolen car, undamaged, with a full tank of gas, in the parking lot of a MacDonalds in Airdrie. McCoy was heard to say that the tank of gas had doubled the value of the car. Gasoline was frickin’ expensive in Canada.

In another, possibly related, incident, an ‘89 Dodge Ram pickup and a two-horse trailer disappeared from a storage facility on 114th Avenue. No cameras recorded the theft, nor was any fence cut, and the gate remained locked. McCoy was heard to threaten O’Brien that if she drove the VW one kilometer over 118 on the highway, he would wring her neck. Burton objected that the speed limit was clearly posted at 110, and shouldn’t they obey the law if they were so very illegal already. O’Brien snorted that only old people and people with guilty consciences drove the speed limit on the QEII. If they didn’t want to draw attention, they shouldn’t be the slowest vehicles on the road.

* * * * *

Caffeine was a poor substitute for actual blood in your veins, Eliot reflected as he eased the truck into the lane leading to the QEII highway. His system was currently metabolizing two cans of Coke, three cups of coffee, and a can of Red Bull, and his brain was beginning to complain with a bitter buzzing in his ears. He brought the vehicle up to speed, judging when to enter the steady traffic. Behind him, Parker and Hardison followed in the Rabbit. Hardison was occupied altering the papers for the truck and hacking into the registry for license plates in the province to change ownership of the vehicle. At least the two of them had slept some in the last two days.

Flipping through radio channels until he found the loudest, most annoying music possible, Eliot turned the volume on maximum, eliminating any chance of sleep ambushing him. They were headed back north to a little farm just west of Airdrie where they would pick up the horse Hardison had found on Youtube and Parker had chosen because she liked her name. Eliot groaned and
resisted thumping his head on the steering wheel. There was no possible way that could go badly, was there?

Nevertheless, as the city of Calgary fell away behind them, Eliot found himself growing less tense. After all the years he had been cooped up in steel and concrete and glass and asphalt, smelling nothing but exhaust and chemicals, he couldn’t help enjoying finding himself out on the surface of the earth again, surrounded by sky. Solid grey clouds hung sullen over the prairie. To the west, the distance-faded ridges of the Rockies rose along the horizon, and all around him stretched fields of barren, black earth lightly furred with golden stubble where the wind had scoured away the snow that still lay in ditches and on the northern sides of hills. This was a harsh land, still held in the grip of winter—nothing like the sweet red clay of Oklahoma where the hot wind rattling through the dry grass had whispered to his soul, but akin in some ways.

Eliot realized he was looking forward to this job for different reasons than usual. Not just for the thrill of the chase, of pitting his mind against those who deserved his wrath, with the bright, sharp chance of violence and pain at the end. Not just for the satisfaction of the win and bringing relief to their clients. But for this opportunity to return to a simpler world, one with ancient, slower rhythms. A world of livestock and weather and hard, physical labor, where the dirt on his hands was real and honest and could be washed away at the end of a day. A world that could have been his had he made a different set of choices.

“There is,” Parker’s voice noted disapprovingly in his ear, “nothing tall here. Anywhere. I wanna go back to Calgary and swing off the Tower.”

Eliot laughed until it seemed that something snapped in his chest, and he could breathe again for the first time in days.

* * * * *

Airdrie, Alberta, Canada

Eliot parked the truck on the rutted gravel drive of the ranch beside a realtor sign advertising the property for sale. Three loud, tail-wagging dogs of varying sizes met them to announce their arrival, and an elderly man dressed in heavy winter coveralls left the tractor whose engine he had been bent over and walked towards them, wiping grease-stained hands on a faded rag. He wore a broad brimmed hat and his long, iron-grey hair hung to his shoulders.

Eliot stepped out, leaving Hardison and Parker in the vehicle. This was his world, and Hardison noted the way he moved differently in it, with an ease and looseness at odds with the hyper-aware control he normally exhibited. He met the old man with a charming slow smile and outstretched hand, and the two of them spoke for a few minutes before the rancher waved his arm toward a set of outbuildings, a barn, and some fences.

Looking back toward the truck, Eliot gestured with a tilt of his head that he was heading in that direction.

“I guess, since the only reason I am not currently sleeping in a king-sized bed in a luxury hotel in Calgary is that I wanna watch Eliot meet that horse, I better get out.” Hardison shivered and made sure his coat was done all the way up to his chin. He pulled his knit cap down firmly over his ears and took an extra wrap of his scarf around his neck. Tucking his hands into bulky mittens, he squared his shoulders and prepared to venture into the elements.

To his surprise, Parker joined him. She wasn’t one to be bothered by the cold, but even though Kentucky Thunder, the racehorse they’d once stolen, had convinced her that not all horses were out
to slaughter her, she still didn’t like them much.

“You don’t want to wait in the truck?” he asked, rubbing his arms to keep his circulation circulating. Why did anyone even live in this country?

“No,” said Parker giving a little skip alongside him and blowing smoke rings with her breath. “Eliot’s getting his pony. I want to see, too.”

The two of them jogged to catch up to Eliot.

“Mr. Nepoose, these are my friends, Kira and Michael,” Eliot introduced.

“We’ve already spoken,” Hardison said, shaking the man’s hand. “Nice to meet you.”

He marvelled that anyone could have bare hands in these frigid temperatures and not have fingers dropping off.

Mr. Nepoose and his dogs led them to a shed beside a fenced enclosure where five horses stood together at the far end by a metal trough.

“There she is,” he said. “Here’s a halter and lead. And here’s some oats.”

Eliot removed his gloves and stuffed them in the pockets of his jacket. He slung the mass of rigging over his shoulder and scooped a single handful of grain from the metal bucket the old man produced from the shed.

“What’s she like to catch?” he asked.

Mr. Nepoose eyed Eliot with speculation. His stern mouth quirked up a little. “Depends.”

Eliot’s eyes narrowed as he considered that response. Then he turned and headed along the fence toward the access point.

The ground around and within the enclosure was an unpleasant mixture of still frozen earth, sodden straw, and dark brown puddles of acrid-smelling liquid interspersed with piles of horse manure in varying stages of decomposition. Hardison was sure he was going to acquire tetanus, sepsis, and possibly the bubonic plague if he took one step nearer. That mess was totally the reason humankind had invented cars and cities and hand sanitizer.

Eliot, however, let himself in the gate and strode out through the muck like he hadn’t even noticed it was there.

Well, that would be why they called those boots of his shit-kickers.

Parker ignored the condition of the ground and hopped up on the top rail of the fence. Gingerly, Hardison picked his way around the worst of the disgusting substances to stand beside her. He pulled out his phone and grinned up at the excited Parker.

“I’m videoing this so I can put it in slow motion and set it to music.”

* * * *

Eliot walked to the middle of the corral and stopped, not approaching the horses yet. Wandering into a herd of strange animals was good way to get yourself kicked. Three of them raised their heads to assess whether or not he posed a threat or an opportunity. One grey head with black points belonged to the roan paint mare Parker and Hardison had chosen.
Keep an open mind, he reminded himself. Hardison was a smart man, and Aimee had approved his choice. However, even Aimee could not be sure of an animal she’d only seen in a YouTube video of dubious origins. And Hardison’s knowledge of horses was limited to animals he’d met in video games.

Taking a deep breath, Eliot held out his hand with the grain on his flat palm. “Hey there, Spark,” he called softly, not wanting to startle any of the animals. “Would you like some oats?”

Spark’s ears twitched and her head went up a notch. She took a step in his direction. The other horses began to pay attention, too. Eliot wondered if he were about to become the center of a pile-up. He needn’t have worried. Spark pinned her ears back, tossed her thick, black forelock, and gave her companions white-rimmed stink-eyes, causing them to do the horse equivalent of shrugging nonchalantly and sauntering off muttering, ‘We weren’t plannin’ nothin’.” Apparently his mare was at the top of this pecking order. All oats were hers until further notice.

She wanted those oats, but she was not inclined to trust him, so her approach was suspicious and stiff-legged.

Eliot did not see a point in trying to mislead her. He held out the halter in the other hand. “Hello, beautiful,” he said enticingly. “How about I take you out to dinner, and we get to know each other?”

At the sound of his voice, Spark stopped, her ears pointed so sharply at him that they seemed to be lifting her head. She eyed the halter and lead doubtfully.

“I’m not offerin’ you counterfeit coin,” Eliot assured her. “You’re really something, in spite of that shag carpet you’re wearing.” He babbled on, not really paying attention to what he was saying, just letting her hear his voice and judge his character. He praised her neat muzzle with the snip of white directly between her nostrils. He complimented her slim throatlatch and the length of her canon bones. He admired her striking color and the angle of her pasterns even though they were covered in muck. The long winter hair on her left side was also matted with whatever she had last lain in, but Eliot politely did not mention that aspect of her appearance.

Spark circled him, well out of reach, her ears swivelling to follow his voice. She paused, indecisive, pawing the ground with an impatient forefoot.

“I’ve got oats,” Eliot coaxed. “Nice, yummy oats.” He held out his hand as far away from his body as it could get. “And there’s more outside the corral, if you wanna come along with me.”

Making up her mind, Spark resumed her slow, unwilling approach, interrupting it occasionally to toss her head and snort. Once, she lost her nerve and returned to her original orbit, but then she trotted several steps closer. Finally, she was in range to stretch her neck just far enough that her nose almost touched his hand. Eliot could feel the heat of her breath and the tickle of her whiskers on the tips of his fingers.

“Thatta girl,” he said, so quietly it was almost a whisper. “Nobody’s gonna hurt you.”

She took one more step, and her lips brushed his hand, soft and dry. Then she was gone, whirling so fast she practically turned inside out and bolting for the far end of the corral.

Eliot looked down at the globs of muck now decorating his jeans and jacket, kicked up by her precipitate departure. Here was some of that honest dirt he’d been so nostalgic about.

Spark was tearing around the fence line as though she were being chased by all the hounds of hell,
bucking and kicking out, shaking her head, pivoting and doing it all again in reverse. The other horses watched her with bored tolerance, as though having Spark stage a one-horse rodeo was a common enough occurrence that it no longer affected them.

Eliot observed her critically, noting her power and speed, even in this constricting space, impressed with her agility on the treacherous ground. She looked good. Unfortunately looks and even athleticism weren’t the most important aspects of a good ranch horse. Whether she had the temperament and the willingness to work remained to be seen. He wasn’t going to have time to spend an hour a day catching some will-o-wisp, elusive sprite of a horse. He needed something reliable.

He trudged back to the gate to restock his bribe.

“Yeah, you got your oats,” he told Spark as she breezed by him, “but we still haven’t got to know each other, so how do you know you won’t like me?”

* * * *

The moment Eliot’s horse went batshit insane, Parker abandoned her perch on the fence and hid herself behind Hardison. Since Hardison seldom got to be protective of Parker who never seemed afraid of anything, he was actually stunned and pleased at first. Then Parker asked in a small voice, “Is that horse going to kill Eliot?”

“No,” Hardison reassured her, “of course not.” Since Parker’s fear of horses stemmed from a strange childhood memory where she had seen a horse kill a clown, Hardison could understand why this horse’s behavior would make her anxious. But he also couldn’t help remembering the statistics he had first looked up to show Parker her fear of horses was irrational. Turned out the number one culprit in animal-related human mortality in North America was the horse. He had not told Parker that fact.

Now, as he watched the thousand pounds of iron-shod death thundering around Eliot, he was having second and third and fourth thoughts about their bright idea to give Eliot such a dangerous creature.

Eliot, of course, did not look nervous at all as the horse went kicking by him, its feet at the perfect height for caving in someone’s skull. But then Eliot never looked nervous—not when guns were pointed at his head, not when a bomb was counting down its last seconds behind him, not when surrounded by cops and sirens. Eliot was pretty much a dangerous creature himself. But when Eliot was actually nervous, he just looked angry. Hardison tried to tell whether Eliot was looking angry right now.

“Well, is that safe?” he asked the old man beside him.

Mr. Nepoose gave another of his unrevealing shrugs. “Maybe. It is good your friend does not show fear.”

That was Eliot, all right. He did not seem to possess that particular expression.

Hardison could feel Parker peeking over his shoulder while Eliot walked toward them as if he hadn’t a care in the world. However, Hardison’s moment of relief when Eliot made it safely to the gate was short-lived.

Eliot simply asked for another handful of oats. He left the rope and stuff that he was going to use to catch the horse on the fence rail and returned to confront the rampaging animal in the corral.
There was something wrong with that man.

* * * * *

Spark was running a predictable route, one she and the other horses had worn deep into the earth along the rail of the fence. She was getting bored with her antics, slowing to a trot and paying attention to him again, so Eliot simply stepped into her path on her next revolution.

“C’mon,” he told her. “That’s enough. I’ve left the halter on the fence, so I can’t catch you even if I wanted to, and I’ve got some more oats.”

Instead of slowing, Spark sped up, bearing down on him at a gallop. Eliot stood his ground. He could hear Hardison making a bit of a commotion at the gate, but he ignored the distraction. He was in no real danger, although he imagined it might look like it. Spark’s ears were up and pointing at him. If she were planning to trample him, she would be giving warnings. Horses were prey animals, not predators. Their instincts were to avoid confrontations, not cause them. He concentrated on appearing non-threatening and equally non-yielding. As he had expected, at the last minute she swerved aside, so close that he could have touched her without reaching out.

He imagined “Damn it, Eliot!” figured prominently in whatever Hardison was on about.

Spark skidded to a halt behind him, her hooves ringing on the frozen earth. Eliot did not turn to look at her. Instead he closed his eyes listening. Holding the oats in front of him, but making no attempt to stretch out his arm, he waited. He could hear the clip squelch of her steps approaching him, steady instead of tentative. She knew he had more oats, and she was determined to get them. She circled around him again and paused.

The two of them waited.

Eliot listened to her deep breaths. The wind flicked his hair across his face, but he did not move to brush it away.

Then Spark took the single step that brought her into range of the oats. Eliot felt again the touch of her mouth lipping up the kernels from his palm, but this time she did not dart away when the oats were gone. Instead he felt her whiffling breaths as she investigated him. The smell of sweet alfalfa hay and dry grain combined with the scent of exertion-heated horse brought back a burst of memory of summers on his grandfather’s farm. Eliot remained perfectly still, making no move to capture her or prolong her stay.

Spark nudged him in the chest with her nose, as if trying to figure out what sort of man he was. The second nudge was more forceful, but not enough to off-balance him. Eliot opened his eyes and met hers, dark and liquid and curious. He wondered if she understood that he represented a complete apocalypse for her—the end of one world and the beginning of another. Everything and everyone she knew would vanish. He felt a twinge of sympathy for this animal who had no choice to whom she would belong, no say in where she would be taken.

The small muscles at the corners of her mouth stood out with tension, and he slowly raised his hand to rub out the tight little line on one side. “Hey there, beautiful,” he said. “You about ready to calm down?”

Spark snorted softly and butted her hard forehead demandingly against his arm. Eliot obliged by stroking a hand up the boney ridge of her nose to scratch the white star between her eyes. He straightened her tangled forelock, then ran his hand back and forth along the crest of her neck behind her ears.
“You wanna come along now?” he asked the mare, keeping one hand on her nose and giving a little tug on her mane. “There are lots more oats out there for a sensible horse.”

Spark gave a creaking sort of sigh and then took a step alongside him. She stopped for a moment, and he thought she might pull away, but then she followed him docilely enough toward the gate where Parker and Hardison waited. Or at least Hardison waited. Parker’s distance away from the gate was increasing in direct proportion to the approach of the horse.

* * * * *

Hardison concentrated on removing his heart from his esophagus and recovering from his attack of tachycardia when Eliot did not, in fact, get murdered by that horse.

“Look,” said Parker, emerging from behind him. “It likes him.”

They watched as Spark allowed Eliot to touch her and then to lead her toward the gate.

“I am impressed,” said Mr. Nepoose, who had remained silent throughout the excitement. “A horse like that—many people are interested. Your friend is the first one she has let lay hands on her.”

“So, no one else would buy her?” Hardison asked.

“Oh, there were those who would have her for her bloodlines alone, but I tell them, ‘The horse doesn’t want to go with you, she doesn’t go.”

“Why are you selling her?” asked Parker, beginning to drift away from the gate.

The old man looked down at the dogs sitting at his feet. “She was my son’s horse. He is gone now. She needs someone else.”

“Oh,” said Parker, edging still further away.

“Sorry to hear that, sir,” Hardison said.

“These things happen,” Mr. Nepoose said, watching Eliot and Spark approach.

By the time Eliot had Spark to the gate, Parker had reached the nearest scalable structure, one of the sheds.

Spark allowed him to put a halter on her and then followed him out of the corral.

“Mind if I take her for a spin?” Eliot asked.

“You most certainly should,” Mr. Nepoose agreed. “Her tack is in the barn. This way.”

* * * * *

Spark behaved with perfect manners while having the grime curried and brushed out of her coat. Eliot did not bother doing a thorough job, just made sure that he removed the worst of the matted dirt and that there was nothing under the saddle to irritate her. He had chosen to leave her ground-tied rather than hitching her to the rings in the small barn. Something about her told him this was a horse who wasn’t big on constraints. She rewarded his confidence when he was picking the caked ice out of her feet by having them lifted and waiting for him each time.

The blanket and saddle flung on her back did not bother her, and she dipped her head and took the snaffle bit accommodatingly, allowing him to pull the bridle easily over her ears.
“She doesn’t use a curb?” he asked.

“Never needed one,” Mr. Nepoose said. “If you cannot get her to do something with a snaffle, you’re never going to get her to do it with a curb.”

Eliot led Spark past several stalls of yearling heifers, to the door opening into the larger arena that Mr. Nepoose indicated.

“Wouldn’t mind working some cattle with her if that’s all right.”

“Of course. When you’re ready, I’ll let them into the arena.”

As the barn door closed behind them, Eliot checked the cinch and tightened it a bit more. Then he gathered the reins on Spark’s neck with one hand and turned the stirrup with the other. The moment he had his foot in it, Spark sidled sideways and backwards, exactly the maneuver to make mounting her extremely awkward. Nevertheless, he managed to scramble aboard as she set off on a stiff-backed, jolting trot.

“You little stinker,” Eliot exclaimed, quickly finding his other stirrup and settling firmly into the saddle. “I do believe you’re gonna try to pitch me off, aren’t you? Well, you go ahead and try, sweetheart. I’ll have you know, I always won the calf ride at the local junior rodeo when I was a kid.”

Spark’s ears were swivelled back listening.

That was the only part of her that was listening. She ignored the bit and any pressure from his legs and gave a little crow hop.

“Is that all you got?” Eliot asked her, amused, keeping a steady contact with her mouth to encourage her to keep her head up where bucking would be difficult.

Spark let him know that she had plenty more dynamite where that came from by suddenly exploding into rodeo-quality sunfishes punctuated by powerful sideways kicks. Eliot stuck with her, although it was a near thing when she swapped ends several times in rapid succession. He was thankful for the deep swells of the pommel which were going to give him bruises but kept him in the saddle.

Spark bolted for the far side of the arena, informing him in no uncertain terms, that the reins were not only a flawed means of communication but were utterly useless as a method of control. Eliot, not having the leverage of a curb bit, could only rein her wide and hope she’d turn before crashing into the fence. He was pretty sure she wouldn’t jump it, but if she did, he was going to discover exactly why show jumpers did not use saddles with horns.

At the last second, Spark threw herself aside and slid to a halt, sending Eliot out of one stirrup and half way up her neck. If she bucked even mildly, he was going to take a solo flight.

However, Spark stood still, quivering, as Eliot maneuvered his way back into the saddle and found his stirrup again. When she made no further move, he dismounted and went to her head.

“Hey,” he said, running his hand along her jaw and then rubbing at the tight muscle next to her mouth. “What was that all about, huh?”

Spark tossed her head and pulled away from him. He still had the reins, but he did not try to draw her back.
“Look,” Eliot sighed. “I know, I’m not who you’re expecting. And I’m sorry he’s gone. But I’m willing to give this a try if you are.”

He stepped back to her side but did not attempt to remount. Instead, he massaged the crest of her neck where it joined her withers like horses would do to each other, standing nose to tail in the pasture. When Spark finally gave a vast, shuddery sigh and turned her head toward him, Eliot patted her shoulder.

“C’mon,” he said, leaving the reins slack and picking up the stirrup. “Let’s do this.”

* * * * *

From the safety of the shed roof, Parker watched Eliot talk to the scary horse. The horse seemed to be listening to him because its ears rotated to point at him. That was a neat trick. Parker concentrated on her ears to see if she could make them move; however, they remained disappointingly stationary. Too small, Parker decided, running a hand over the curve of one ear. She needed longer ears.

Parker could see that Eliot was going to get back on the horse. She tensed, wondering if it was going to go all wild again. That would have been exciting to watch except that was Eliot out there, and Parker did not want Eliot to be broken. Eliot got damaged all the time. That was what he did. But he always stayed in one piece. While Parker was pretty sure that horse could murder a clown without half trying, it had better not be planning to attempt to kill Eliot.

Parker glared at the horse. “We got you to make Eliot happy,” she thought fiercely at the animal. “So get busy and do it.”

For an instant, the horse turned its head as though it was aware of her.

Apparently Parker’s message got through because this time the horse did not go all explodey violent. It just stood quietly.

Maybe she was developing the ability to control things with her brain like Nate, Parker thought, pleased. That would be a useful talent. “Now behave yourself,” she projected at the horse, experimenting.

* * * * *

This time, when Eliot mounted, Spark stood still and waited for his signal to move. Eliot left the reins hanging loose, almost to her knees. “I’m just gonna sit here,” he told the mare. “You go wherever you want.”

She flickered her ears at him and shook her head so that her bridle jingled. Then she took a tentative step and stopped again. Eliot increased the pressure of his legs ever so slightly, giving her permission to go, and Spark stepped out in her long striding walk with more confidence. She wandered over to the fence the arena shared with the corral and spent a moment watching the other horses, then she circled the entire arena, cutting corners atrociously with one ear back to see if he’d notice.

“Nuh uh,” he told her. “Don’t look at me. I’m just along for the ride.”

Taking him at his word, Spark went to the gate, going up to it sideways to allow Eliot to unlatch it and let them through, and then performing a perfect turn on the forehand to allow him to close it behind them.
Eliot stroked the white patch on her neck. “Okay, that was pretty impressive. You figure out how to do that all on your own?” He nodded at Spark’s owner and at Hardison, who was looking rather strained, and he waved at Parker, perched on top of the shed.

Spark followed the fence line to the corral and then around it before asking to be let through another gate into a large pasture. She dropped her nose and nibbled at some of the tall frozen grasses that stuck up through the snow and wandered in the direction of a small herd of white-faced cows that surrounded a round bale of hay.

Eliot let himself relax, enjoying the sensation of having no enemies in the vicinity, no place to be in a hurry, breathing in the scents of leather and horse and cattle, listening to the creak of the saddle and the crunch of Spark’s hooves breaking through the hard surface of the snow.

Spark investigated the cattle who ignored her, took a bite of the hay, and then moved off on an exploration of the pasture. About halfway around, she broke into a jog trot that quickly became a lope, negotiating the icy ground with ease. Following the worn tracks left by the cattle, she arrived back at the pasture gate. For the first time since he’d laid them down, Eliot picked up the reins, although he still left them long, and asked Spark with his legs and hands to go through the gate.

She was an entirely different animal now, responsive to his lightest touch, and he could see where those championships had come from.

“How about you and me go chase some cows?” he suggested.

* * * * *

The shingles under Parker’s hands crumbled with the tangy scent of old wood and moss and rusted nails. So different from city roofs. The wind ran through her hair like frozen fingers carrying strange, uncomfortable scents of decaying ice and large animals. Be careful, it whispered. Don’t trust what seems safe. Parker shuddered, but not from the cold.

Hardison was actually cold. She could see him down below, shivering and stomping his feet and rubbing his arms.

Eliot and the horse were returning to the arena. The horse hadn’t tried to kill him again, but Parker had no frame of reference to judge the motivation and capacity for deception of a horse. Eliot, on the other hand, looked at ease, the way he did in his kitchen, as though he was safe from himself on that horse. Parker felt most free of herself when she was jumping through space, adrenaline rushing, life and death separated by the tensile strength of a thin line. But Eliot came closest to shedding the burden of who he was when he was creating art. Parker wondered if riding a horse was art for Eliot, too.

Eliot halted the horse next to Hardison and the old man.

“Do not hurt Hardison,” Parker thought at the horse, “or I will turn you into Puppy Chow with my bare hands.” It seemed that her mental powers were continuing to be effective, because the horse just stood there with its tail swishing and ignored Hardison.

“Hey, man,” Hardison said to Eliot. “That was some pretty intense shit out there.”

Hardison had also thought that the horse might want to kill Eliot.

Eliot shrugged. “She was just taking me out for a test drive. We’ve come to an agreement.”

He turned to the old man. “We’re ready to try workin’ those cows, if you have ‘em, sir.”
The old man nodded. “I’ll just let them into the ring.”

He sounded a lot more respectful now than he had before, like Eliot had surprised him. He headed in the direction of the barn that butted up against one end of the arena.

“Hey, Parker,” Eliot said. “You wanna get me the rope from my pack?”

“Sure,” Parker agreed. But she waited until Eliot had taken the horse away before jumping down off the roof and heading back to the truck.

The rope turned out to be different from anything Parker had ever handled. She ran her fingers over its stiff coils—not the sort of cordage she would use to rappel off a building, although probably strong enough. This rope had no give to it, hard and exacting. The rope she used flowed and bent. This one was like Eliot—it stood its ground. Parker held it up and inhaled its unfamiliar scent, nylon but with faint hints of sweat and animal hide and the powder it had been stored with. Three strand, with a firm lay, about 35 feet long, she judged. Parker loved rope, and this strange one was intriguing.

Reluctantly, she approached Eliot and the horse. Before she had to get too close, Hardison intercepted her.

“I can take that, mama,” he said, bumping warmly against her.

Parker decided to let him have the rope. Hardison was not often the adventurous one in their relationship, and so she let him take the rope from her and give it to Eliot, even though, for Eliot, she would have done it herself.

Giving the horse a wide berth, Parker jumped to the fence, and from there to the roof of the shed again. She saw that the arena now contained a bunch of young cows. Eliot was attaching the rope to his saddle with the leather strings that hung from it, and then he rode the horse through the gate held by the old man.

Now that the horse was not trying to kill Eliot, Parker decided she liked watching the two of them. They moved together easily, not like before, when they’d seemed to be going different directions. Eliot had an alert, interested look on his face. He was definitely having fun.

“Good horse,” Parker thought.

Eliot made the horse walk into the middle of the bunch of cows. At first, Parker could not tell what they were doing, but then there was one cow separated from the rest. It did not like that, so it made an attempt to rejoin the herd. Apparently the horse did not want it to do so. As far as Parker could see, Eliot wasn’t doing anything, just sitting there, holding on to the saddle while the horse did everything it could to keep that cow from going where it wanted to go. The horse spun and danced back and forth and crouched on its haunches and made the cow go away from the others instead of toward them.

Finally, the horse forced the cow through a narrow gate into a small pen at the other end of the arena and helped Eliot close the gate. Then the old man opened the barn door to let the other cows go back inside where they seemed to want to be. The cow in the pen made unhappy noises at being left behind and bumped around.

Eliot was doing something with the rope, which interested Parker.

Rope!
He was tying it to the protrusion on the front of the saddle and separating it into loops in both hands. The horse fidgeted and bounced a bit, but Eliot said something to it, and it settled down. The old man crossed the arena and opened the gate. Out came the cow, very fast, heading for the barn.

The horse followed it, going from zero to sixty instantly. Eliot swung one of the loops of rope and tossed it over the running cow. He then jumped off the horse, who slid to a stop and started backing up, pulling the rope tight so that the cow flipped in the air and landed in the muck.

That looked like fun. If she ever decided to learn to ride a horse, Parker wanted to be able to throw ropes and tip over running cows.

Eliot jogged to the cow as it struggled to its feet and slipped the noose off its neck. Once it was free, the cow bee-lined for the barn, but this time the horse didn’t seem to care. It just waited for Eliot to come back to it and get back on.

Parker looked down at Hardison, and he grinned up at her.

“I think Eliot likes the horse,” she said.

“He always does prefer a woman who can kick his ass a little.” Hardison smirked.

Parker stretched down, and Hardison stretched up, and they bumped fists in congratulations.

As Eliot dismounted and led the horse through the gate, he had on one of his “I am not smiling, but I am totally smiling” looks on his face.

“She’ll do,” he said, patting the horse on its shoulder.

Hardison laughed. “You like her. Admit it.”

“I ain’t admittin’ nothing,” Eliot said.

“Ha!” said Hardison. “Then why are there little pink hearts blipping on and off in your eyes?”

He dodged Eliot’s half-hearted punch. As Eliot led the horse away, Hardison called after him, “I now pronounce you man and horse!”

* * * * *

Portland, Oregon, USA

It was far past the usual end of the day, but no one had left the Annex.

Colonel Baird was wearing a path around the central table, pausing occasionally to adjust something on her desk. The rhythm of her footsteps and the exactness of the arcs she was following were beginning to shimmer into patterns in Cassandra’s exhausted vision. She tried to banish the glittering graphs and numbers by closing her eyes and pressing her fingertips to her ears, but the images persisted, parading on the backs of her eyelids.

Desperately, she turned to Ezekiel, wondering what he had found to do on the computer. Whatever it was had completely absorbed him, and he seemed oblivious to Baird’s circumnavigations as well as to Cassandra’s increasing agitation.

The absence of Jacob Stone filled the Annex with suffocating pressure.
Baird had told them that since there was no evidence of foul play, Stone would have to be missing 48 hours before the police would take the disappearance of a healthy, middle-aged, white male seriously—no matter how reliable he usually was. For Baird, who needed action like she needed air, waiting for something to alter in the situation, something upon which she could exert force, was obviously a torment.

The only one of them apparently unaffected was Jenkins who was seated at his desk, sipping his eternal cup of tea and reading a newspaper dated 1876. His only contribution to the search for their missing art historian had been to affirm that Jacob Stone, living or dead, was still on the planet.

In an effort to escape everything, Cassandra retreated to the laboratory, but while the solitude reduced the persistence of her calculations, none of the experiments in progress could hold her attention.

It was late. None of them had eaten in hours, not even Ezekiel. She should just go home. But even the thought of doing so made Cassandra feel sick to her stomach. Being alone was a worse feeling than numbers swirling out of her control.

Waiting for any news of or from Jake was going to drive her to desperation. If only there was something she could do.

Wandering back in to the main room, Cassandra asked, “Did anyone check the clippings book today?”

Ezekiel looked up from his computer. “I don’t think so.”

“We had other things to deal with,” Baird said softly, coming to a halt and turning her attention on her remaining LITs.

“Well, let’s take a peek.” Ezekiel rolled his chair over to the table and opened the book to its most recent page. “Only thing here is another classified ad. This one is from the Calgary Herald. What’s with the rash of Canadians selling off their magical items? This one says, “For Sale: Spark of Midnight”

2009 APHA Blue Roan Tobiano mare.
Sire: Forest Midnight Comet
Dam: CCS Fantasia

2012 APHA World Show 3-Year-Old Open Reining Challenge, 2nd
2013 Canadian Supreme Open Snaffle Bit Futurity Working Cow Horse and Cutting Champion
2014 Reserve World Champion Jr. Working Cow Horse.

This mare epitomizes the definition of versatility! At 15.1 hands, Spark of Midnight combines outstanding athleticism, correctness and durability. She is always willing to tackle any job, and her eye appeal makes her stand out in any venue. This mare will make an excellent addition to your performance or breeding stock. Requires experienced rider.

Someone paid for a pretty expensive ad.”

“A horse?” Baird asked incredulously, turning to where Jenkins was ignoring them. “The Library wants us to go get a horse? We don’t have any space for a horse. Jenkins, why is the clippings book sending us after a horse?”

“Well, it should certainly be easier than the unicorn.” Jenkins took another sip of tea and looked
“Wait. We have a unicorn?” Cassandra exclaimed, thrilled for a moment that unicorns existed. However, her thrill was instantly quenched by the hollowness of loss. The urge to turn and share that excitement with Jake was overwhelming. For Baird, unicorns would be something to categorize on an asset to threat basis. For Ezekiel, they would register either as valuable or as useful. Jake was the only one with whom she could share the sheer, giddy delight of actual unicorns.

“Yes we do, in the Library itself. And believe me, the care and feeding of a unicorn is a complicated procedure.” Jenkins shuddered delicately.

In the Library.

Cassandra felt the familiar guilt, like a punch to the chest, stealing her breath.

The Library, which she had been responsible for losing, with all its marvels and potentially useful artifacts. What if something in the Library could have helped them find Jake?

“Never mind,” Baird said. “Tell us about the horse.”

“The horse. Yes.” Jenkins cleared his throat. Standing up, he moved toward the stacks, all three of them following in his wake. “Figuring out just what you’re dealing with is going to be the complication.” He ran his index finger along the spines of a row of books, stopping and pulling out one before turning to face them. “Horses have always had connections to magic. Why do you think that no other creature has stronger ties to human history? There are hundreds of myths and legends about magical horses from cultures around the world. Add to that the fact that horses have travelled with explorers and conquerors, and we could be dealing with almost any one of them.”

He handed the book to Cassandra. “Miss Cillian, I suggest this transcription of Xenophon. His redacted works on horsemanship are readily available in mundane libraries; however, he also wrote extensively on the history of supernatural horses and techniques for dealing with them.”

Cassandra looked at the ancient book she held in her hand. Embossed on the cover were the words Περὶ ἵππικῆς, peri hippikēs “But I don’t read Greek,” she said.

“Alas, I do not believe the relevant sections have been translated,” Jenkins said, taking back the book and re-shelving it. “We are working at a disadvantage here without Mr. Stone.”

“In more ways than one,” Baird said. “You do realize that with Flynn away, he is the only one of us with any experience with horses.”

“Surely in your military escapades, you, Colonel Baird . . .”

“A camel. Once.” She made a face. “That did not go well. There were donkeys, mules occasionally, but I never handled them personally.”

“What should I do?” Cassandra asked, feeling useless. As soon as Jake was found, she was going to make him teach her a language.

Jenkins rolled his eyes. “The only research your generation seems capable of conducting. Search the Internet for horses in myths, legends, fables, tall tales, et cetera. And Mr. Jones, you’ve been given a name and a pedigree there. Use those to find out everything you can about this particular horse.”
Ezekiel nodded and turned back to his computer. As Cassandra pulled out her phone, she heard Baird speaking quietly to Jenkins.

“You do realize that this job is going to interfere with our search for Stone?”

“Colonel Baird,” Jenkins replied, equally quietly, “these are Librarians. In training, yes. But without Flynn, they are all you have. Dealing with incidents and artifacts of a magical nature is their job. During the course of doing their job, bad things happen. That does not mean they get to stop doing those jobs.”

“So you’re saying we should abandon him?”

“I am saying, well, yes, basically.” Jenkins shrugged. “There is no point in sugar-coating the truth, Colonel Baird. Jacob Stone is gone. Either he will return, or he will not. In the meantime, Librarians have responsibilities. I am sure Mr. Stone would be the first to insist that you meet those responsibilities.”

“You mean that Stone’s workaholic tendencies are something we should emulate?” Ezekiel piped up.

“A little more of a work ethic in you would not be amiss, Mr. Jones,” Jenkins said.

“Hey, I work as hard as the rest of you. I just have more fun,” Ezekiel objected. “And I’ve already found out why we’ve been sent after this particular horse. What have you been doing with your time?”

“Just tell us what you’ve found, Jones,” Colonel Baird sighed.

“We acknowledge your greatness. Now spill,” Cassandra added.

“Well now,” Ezekiel said with great satisfaction. “Spark of Midnight has been living up to the last part of her name. She’s been owned by four different people in the last four years, and she’s killed every single one of them. Ripped their throats out with her teeth. This horse is metal!”

* * * * *

TBC
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Thank you greyathena for the term "murdering death horse of doom"

Portland, Oregon, USA

Eve Baird observed her remaining LITs hunched over their research. They were in a state of suspended animation. No one wanted to leave. Stone had been missing for 34 hours now, and the worst fears were growing solidity, changing from flickers at the back of the mind into weapons with mass and volume and the ability to stab.

In the end, she had forced Jenkins to admit that he knew enough Greek to use the Xenophon to come up with a list of possible identities for the horse. Between his research and Cassandra’s web inquiries, they had compiled a list of 67 magical origins for Spark of Midnight which Jenkins had inscribed in his usual neat handwriting on the blackboard.

“Seriously? Sixty-seven?” Ezekiel asked. “How are we going to narrow those down?”

“By process of elimination, Mr. Jones,” Jenkins responded. “We shall begin with the easiest part of this identification. This horse has no extra appendages, so we can cross off Sleipner, any of the winged horses . . .”

“You mean like Pegasus?” Cassandra asked with a brief return of her enthusiasm for all things magic.

Eve saw how swiftly her light guttered out and was reminded of so many young soldiers whose eyes had gone shadowed as the persistent horror of their world crushed them. She wanted to stand between Cassandra and anything that could take away her joy, but that was a burden no one could bear for another.

“Yes, and Jabucilo, Tianma, Cholima and so on.” Jenkins rapidly drew lines through all of those names on the board. “Also we can eliminate Hippogriffs, Hippokampoi, Caballo marino chilote, Uchaishravas or Polkan,” he continued. Then he addressed Ezekiel who had turned back to something on his computer. “Do you have birth records for this animal?”


“Oooh. Baby pictures!” Cassandra peered over his shoulder. “She’s kind of pretty!”

“So are the Sirens.” Jenkins was at his dour best. “Now we know she is not one of the immortals.” He scratched off another 21 names. “She may perhaps be a descendant of one of them. However, although many of them breathe fire, none of them are reputed to be eaters of flesh.”


“I think we can eliminate any of these legendary horses with no body counts,” Jenkins continued, drawing lines through 25 names. “Which leaves us with a descendent of the Mares of Diomedes or The Man Eater of Lucknow.”
Jenkins flipped through the volume of Xenophon. “The Mares of Diomedes were named Podargos the Swift, Lampon the Shining, Xanthos the Golden, and Deinos the Terrible. Stealing them was the eighth labor of Heracles. Their diet of human flesh had made them mad, so they were kept bound to a bronze manger. Heracles cut their chains, drove them onto a peninsula, dug a trench to make it an island, killed the giant Diomedes with an axe, and fed him to his own horses to calm them. He then led the animals to Eurystheus, who dedicated them to Hera. Alexander the Great’s horse, Bucephalus, was said to be a descendent.”

Eve shook her head. “Bloodthirsty horses. Nice. What about the other one?”

“The Man Eater of Lucknow comes from the 19th century. Xenophon has nothing.” Jenkins closed the book and nodded to Cassandra.

Cassandra took up the narrative. “Oh! This is what I found. The Man Eater of Lucknow was a thoroughbred stallion presented by King George IV to the Maharajah of Oudh. It escaped to kill and eat a lot of local citizens until it was finally captured and caged. The Maharajah decided to stage a fight between the horse and his prized tiger, and the horse won with a single blow.”

“So, magic, murdering, death horses of doom, offspring of. Check.” Ezekiel rolled his eyes and turned back to his computer.

“Which do we want it to be?” Cassandra asked.

“Preferably, this mare would be related to The Man Eater of Lucknow.” Jenkins dusted chalk from his hands.

“I’m not seeing much to choose from between them.” Eve frowned.

“Colonel Baird, if what we are dealing with is a descendent of the Mares of Diomedes, the only person who will be able to survive her for any length of time is a descendent of Heracles. The fact that she has killed so few may mean that her flesh-eating instincts are masked much of the time. The more she kills, the more out of control she may become. The Lucknow horse was at least containable by ordinary mortals.”

“What are we supposed to do with her then? Shoot her? Can she even be killed?” Eve asked, not looking forward to such a solution.

“I presume so, since she is not immortal, but it will not be easy.” Jenkins retreated behind his desk.

“Is it possible the Library wants us to collect her?” Cassandra asked.

“What would we do with a carnivorous horse?” Ezekiel asked.

“We do not have the facilities in the Annex to contain livestock,” Jenkins said repressively.

“Maybe we’re supposed to rescue her next victim,” Cassandra suggested.

“Yeah, somebody is in for a hell of a surprise when they take that thing home.” Ezekiel snorted.

They might already be too late, Eve knew. The ad had been in the book all day, and they would not be able to go after the horse until the morning.

“Why now?” Cassandra piped up suddenly.

“What do you mean?” Eve asked.
“Why this particular day? Why didn’t the Library try to save the other four?”

“Perhaps it tried, but there was no Librarian to look at the clippings book?” Eve suggested.

“Or perhaps the horse is poised to become a greater threat. Now that magic is back in the world, creatures with magical natures may be growing more powerful.” Jenkins added.

Cassandra bit her lip and looked down. Eve had feared that magic would eventually take its toll in lives, and Cassandra would feel responsible for every one of them. Time to draw attention away from that unprofitable reflection.

“Jenkins!” Eve mustered an energy she did not feel.

“Hmm?” Jenkins blinked at her in owlish alarm.

“You’ve been around a long time. What do you know about horses?”


“Surely you’ve ridden a horse before.” Eve persisted.

The Annex caretaker opened his mouth and then closed it, unable to refute her assumption.

“In the absence of Stone, you are going to have to come with us. Otherwise we could all end up as horse kibble.” Eve gave Jenkins a bracing punch on the arm. “We ride at dawn, cowboy.”

* * * * *

Airdrie, Alberta, Canada

It took longer than Hardison had planned to purchase the horse and get on the road. He had not realized how much time was involved in turning a hot, sweaty, furry horse into a cool dry one in the middle of winter.

While Eliot walked the horse, Hardison dealt with Mr. Nepoose concerning payment for the animal and all of its upgrades—saddle, bridle, blankets, halters, leads, grooming tools, buckets, and what the heck all else that appeared to be necessary shit if you were going to own a horse. He was never again going to let Eliot complain about the small armada of tech that accompanied Hardison everywhere he went.

Mr. Nepoose did not even blink at being paid the $26,800 in cash.

Then the old man took over leading the horse around while Eliot stashed all his “tack,” as he called it, in the lockers at the front of the trailer. Apparently there was a right way and a wrong way to do that.

When the horse was finally dry enough to suit Eliot, she had to be put in a coat. All that fur was not sufficient to keep her warm when travelling on the highway. Hardison didn’t blame her. He was probably going to have to amputate his toes when he got back to the hotel because he had stopped feeling them half an hour ago. Hardison leaned against the stall in the barn watching Eliot messing around with his horse and hoped the ordeal would soon be over.

Eliot was crouched down, wrapping Spark’s front leg. This was supposed to keep her from accidentally damaging her legs while she was riding in the trailer, he’d explained to a bored Hardison and a nearly non-present Parker who was staying as far away as possible. The horse
already had her other three legs in the padded wraps.

Spark had her head turned and was watching him speculatively. Then she sniffed at Eliot’s hair and lipped up a few strands as if testing its edibility.

“Stop,” Eliot told her, flicking his hair away from her. “Not a food.”

The horse tossed her head, but soon she returned to nosing the forbidden hair. This time she used her tongue and gathered in a whole mouthful.

Hardison could have sworn the horse looked mischievous. From her safe place in the doorway, Parker laughed.

“Cut it out!” Eliot growled, reclaiming his now wet hair with a tug.

Spark snorted and poked his cheek with her nose. Eliot’s hat fell off.

“Dammit, Spark!”

She was, Hardison decided, totally the horse version of Parker.

* * * * *

They had finally put the horse in the trailer and filled the bed of the pickup with bales of hay and a bin of feed that Mr. Nepoose had kindly thrown into the deal, and now they were ready to depart.

Parker had wanted Hardison to sit in the middle of the pickup’s bench seat because Eliot smelled too much like the horse, but Eliot had questioned how exactly they were supposed to pass as a couple if she persisted in keeping the maximum possible distance between them. “C’mon, Parker,” he’d growled. “Get used to it.”

And so they’d all taken up their original seats, for which Hardison was grateful, because Parker could fit her flexible, less-lengthy legs in over the hump in the floor far better than he could. Before he fastened his seatbelt, he leaned over to crank up the floor heat as high as it could go. Then he snuggled his frozen and shivering self up to Parker.

“Girl, I’m just so cold, I think my toes are gonna fall off.”

Eliot laughed and threw the truck into gear. “It’s only minus 3 Celsius out there, Hardison.”

“Anything with a minus in it is too damn cold.”

Nevertheless, in spite of the outdoor temperature, Hardison felt his entire insides warm up. Eliot usually made such pronouncements with the exasperation of a man given too much to bear. They didn’t always notice how tightly wound Eliot was because they were so used to his hair-trigger frustration point. Then the last few days had put even more pressure on him, until they could practically see the cracks in that wrathful façade letting the pain shine through. But something about spending this day grubbing around with dirt and animals had released some of that tension for Eliot.

Hardison gave Parker a surreptitious kiss on her cold cheek. His woman might occasionally have difficulty figuring out other people, but she was Level 85 at understanding Eliot.

* * * * *

Eliot found a station with some half decent country music playing and settled back for the drive to
Calgary where they would drop off Hardison at some exorbitantly priced hotel. Then he and Parker would continue on south and west to Black Diamond with the horse. His horse. The one Parker and Hardison had found for him on Google. The one Hardison thought was unsanitary and Parker was terrified of and that neither of them would touch. But the two of them were just so damned self-satisfied right now that the cab of the pickup was filled with their gloating. He glanced sideways at them while he drove the endless straight Alberta highway, and their eyes were on him, soft and glad. Their grins were unconsciously a matched set. And he thought it was not just their pride in their accomplishment at finding something that pleased him. It was something like love. And God, what did he ever do to deserve these two as part of his life?

* * * * *

The man known only as Mr. Nepoose watched as the trailer departed carrying the mare, Spark of Midnight, to her new destiny. Nothing in his eons of experience had led him to expect what had happened this day.

When one of his horses needed a master again, they came, the ones with enough of the old hero’s blood in them—men and women whose families still passed down the legends, who thought the rewards worth the risk. And each time the horse would choose. Those animals belonging to the other three bloodlines, diluted through the ages, were easiest to please, going generations without the wildness of their great grand-dams rising to the surface, making their way in the mortal world as nothing more than extraordinary mounts.

But this one, the blood of Deinos ran hot in her veins, coming from both sire and dam. And knowing her deadly legacy, there were yet those who believed they could master her, who would hazard all to the trial—human and horse locked in a contest of body and will until one of them surrendered. But one never turned one’s back on a descendent of Deinos the Terrible. Inevitably, the day would come when her savage heritage would overwhelm all bounds of training and habit, and she would become a killer as her ancestors had been.

No one withstood her on that day.

Then her caretaker would come back to her, as he had always come, to return the bodies to their kin and to stay with her until she chose again, to witness, but never to intervene.

However, something had changed. This time, the man who had arrived to try his fortune with Spark of Midnight seemed to know nothing of her past. Which should have been impossible. As the Mares of Diomedes had belonged to Heracles, so their descendants belonged to his. None but they should have been able to access the advertisement much less find their way to her.

Nor had this man come prepared with rope and whip and spur to battle for possession of her spirit. He had wandered out to meet her having already conceded the contest, granting her freely the mastery others had sought to take.

Spark of Midnight’s response had been extraordinary. He had fully expected to witness either a death or the narrowest of escapes. Instead, the mare had been as puzzled and curious as he. She had made overtures of war, but had received no answering show of force from the stranger. For the first time since he had presided over the transfer of ownership of this mare, Spark of Midnight had surrendered without a fight.

He had no idea what that portended. As he watched the trailer pull out of the drive and onto the road, he murmured, “I hope you know what you are doing, daughter of Deinos.”

* * * * *
Calgary, Alberta, Canada

Eliot was being unreasonable.

They had stopped at the Cross Iron Mills Bass Pro Shop, and Hardison was trying to convince Eliot that a ranch hand needed a gun. “What you gonna do when you meet a big ole grizzly, hmm? Punch it in the nose? Discuss the philosophy of non-violence with it?”

“Yes, actually,” Eliot held up the can of bear spray that was his reason for stopping there. “Grizzlies don’t want trouble any more than I do. Besides, it’s March. They’re still hibernating.” Eliot refused to be steered in the direction of the Hunting section of the store.

“Not all winter.” Hardison had looked it up the minute he knew they’d be travelling to bear country. “Grizzlies will occasionally wake up. That’s why you’re buying that spray. And I’m betting they wake up hungry.”

“I don’t like guns,” Eliot said mildly, passing under the waving paws of a taxidermied grizzly.

Hardison halted and looked up at the creature. It was not only taller than Eliot; it was taller than him. And its claws looked fully capable of eviscerating a horse. Feeling more than a little panicked, Hardison hurried after Eliot who hadn’t paused. “Those things can run 50 feet per second. Fifty feet per second! Uphill or downhill. They’re faster than a horse.”

“No. I’m not carrying a gun. Bear spray is easier to use and less cumbersome than a firearm. That’s the only thing I’m packing, Hardison.” Eliot made it to the checkout. “In the unlikely event that I see a bear, Spark will likely be going crazy. I couldn’t aim if I wanted to. And an injured bear is a dedicated one, but a bear with a face full of pepper is a distracted one. I know which one I prefer.”

Turning Eliot aside from whatever course he had chosen was an impossibility, but Hardison still followed him back to the truck where Parker waited, muttering statistics about the number of cattle lost to bears every year in Southern Alberta.

After Eliot had checked to see that his horse was okay, and they had gotten back on the QEII, the three of them settled in to discuss their plan of attack.

“We need an excuse to stay in town for a few weeks, so the truck is going to break down on us,” Parker said.

“It’s a pretty old truck. They’ll be able to pull most parts from a wrecking yard,” Eliot pointed out.

“Not the engine control module, they won’t,” Hardison said. “I checked. The closest replacement ECM for an ‘89 Dodge Ram is Ontario, and that’ll take over a week to get here. Plus there’s only one of ‘em. If you short circuit the auto-shutdown relay, when they plug that new computer in it’ll get zapped again, and they’ll have to order another one out of the States.”

“The auto-shutdown relay was my idea,” Parker added.

“As long as you know how to do it.”

“Oh, yeah. You just pry off the cover and wrap some small wire around the two terminals of the primary circuit. Put the cover back on and just wait for the computer to complete the circuit. Boom!” Parker laughed. “Fried computer.”
“At that point, the shop’ll probably wash their hands of it and send it on to a Dodge dealership who will have to wait another two weeks for the part to be shipped.” Hardison shrugged. “And that’s assuming everyone is good at their job and does everything right. You should be stranded in Nowheresville, Canada for almost a month, minimum.”

“Are you sure the owners won’t be needing their truck?” Eliot asked.

“No, they’re snowbirding down in Yuma, Arizona, until the end of April.”

Hardison pulled up the wiring diagrams for their make and model on his phone. “Now we’re going to need an electrical charge to fry the computer. You should be able to rewire the . . .”

“Will this do?” Parker asked, holding out a taser.

“Where did you . . . never mind. I don’t wanna know.” Eliot shook his head.


* * * * *

Black Diamond, Alberta, Canada

They left Hardison and all his equipment at the most expensive hotel in Calgary. Eliot did not let himself think about the concept of a bed. He and Parker still had another 50 minutes of driving to get to Black Diamond.

Parker offered to spell him off at the wheel, but Eliot was not going to put Spark through that ordeal.

The next part of their plan was a bit of a gamble. If it worked, Eliot would have a way onto the ranch. If it didn’t, he’d at least meet the owner of the place.

The sun was nearly touching the tips of the Rockies when Eliot pulled the truck and trailer off the highway and onto the drive to The Flying B Ghost Ridge Ranch just far enough over so that they blocked access.

Parker and Eliot hopped out.

Eliot propped up the hood while Parker collected her tools. As soon as Eliot had pulled the hoses on the air intake out of the way, Parker leaned over the fender so that she could reach in and unfasten the retaining screw and remove the two connectors out of the controller.

“Goodnight, truck.” She laughed and shoved the taser into first one connector port and then the other.

Then Parker moved to the auto-shutdown relay to conduct her sabotage.

“Are you sure this guy is gonna be along soon?” Eliot asked as they reconnected and replaced all evidence of tampering. “Because it’s winter here, man. And I don’t want to stand around out here any longer than I have to.”

“Have a little faith.” Hardison’s voice in Eliot’s ear was smug. “I got you.”

For several minutes the earbuds were silent as the hacker worked his digital magic.

“Rich people make my life so much easier.” Hardison came back on, a smirk clear in his voice.
“Guy who spends over a hundred grand on a 2015 Land Rover Range Rover Sport, he puts OnStar on it. Now he has automatic emergency services, stolen vehicle assistance, remote ignition block, remote start, and turn-by-turn navigation. He can use his phone to send directions to it, lock and unlock it, and locate it. And so can I.”

“Cut the ‘behold-my-genius’ and get to the point,” Eliot growled, even more irritated because he knew he sounded like Nate.

“You’re lucky I don’t hold anything he says against a man who’s freezin’ to death.” Hardison paused just long enough to make the point that he was in control of the information. “Now the ETA of the Benarden vehicle is four minutes until you’ll be in their line of sight, so y’all better be ready.”

“We’re ready,” Parker broke in, popping out from under the hood. “Eliot, get under the truck like you’re checking something.”

“It’s an electrical problem, Parker. Lifting the hood should be sufficient,” Eliot said.

“You look more in trouble under the truck,” Parker said. “Now go.”

Grumbling under his breath about getting salt and gravel in his hair, Eliot did as he was bid.

* * * * *

It was just like her Math 30 teacher to schedule a trigonometry exam first thing in the morning after she had spent the weekend at a barrel racing clinic in Ponoka, Daphne Benarden thought. Math teachers are evil, she texted Hilde. Trigonometry was also evil. And having to wrap her brain around the concepts of sine, cosine, and tangent while curled up in the passenger seat of the Range Rover for the four hour drive home was the evilest evil of all. It didn’t help that she’d been up since 5 o’clock in the morning, and she kept falling asleep in the middle of a problem and having to start all over again when the pain in her neck dragged her awake.

She smiled at the picture of the little devil pitchforking an equation that Hilde sent back.

For about the 1000th time since they’d left Ponoka, Daphne contemplated leading a life of shameless luxury rather than battling to get the grades she’d need for scholarships and acceptance into the university program of her choice . . . whatever that was going to be. When she was awake and several metres away from her math textbook, Daphne had plenty of ambition. She just didn’t have a clue what she wanted to do with it. Hence the strategy of getting good grades in everything. Just to keep her options open.

Daphne glanced at her mother who was driving this time so that Daphne could study. If only she could be like her mom, who had known she was going to be a lawyer from the first argument she had lisped past babyhood. Of course, Mom wanted her to take law at McGill, too. Keep up the family tradition. Dad preferred the idea of her taking an MBA at the University of Calgary. Useful and close to home. Lately, Daphne’s thoughts tended to linger lovingly on the concept of majoring in Interior Design or Music or French at The Sorbonne, just to piss off her parents. Unfortunately, Math 30 was probably going to be a requirement for any of those options.

Run away with me? she texted.

Hilde sent back <3 xoxoxo NO.

Hilde Densmore was so lucky. Her parents weren’t making a bunch of plans for her, and she
already knew what she wanted to do—be a Calgary Stampede Princess and then be a veterinarian.

Daphne’s mom would be horrified to know that Hilde was her daughter’s friend. Their parents did not get along, but Daphne and Hilde had known they belonged together the first time they met as competitors on the barrel racing circuit.

It had been Andy’s fault that they had become more than acquaintances who saw each other occasionally at school. Ghost Ridge Andante, who was riding in luxury in the trailer pulled by the Rover, had a bad habit of wandering off, stepping on his reins, losing what little mind he possessed, and breaking them. Daphne had been in a panic because he’d destroyed her last set, and she needed to be ready to ride. Hilde had offered to loan her a set of reins, and she hadn’t even minded that Daphne had gone on to win. After that, the two of them were inseparable at school and rode out alone all the time intending to run into each other out of sight of either of their ranch homes.

As they crested the hill before the drive with the gates that said Flying B Ghost Ridge Ranch, Daphne was jolted from her wandering thoughts. Her mom slowed down the vehicle because a rusted, old pickup and trailer were blocking the entrance. A man was lying under the rear of the truck and a blond woman was standing in the road waving. Usually they did not stop to talk to the sorts of people who broke down on roads, but these ones were in the way of them entering their driveway, so they were somewhat forced to bring the rig to a halt. The girl came over to the drivers’ window.

Daphne’s mom reluctantly rolled the window down a crack.

“Hi there, I’m so sorry we’re in your way, but the truck won’t go. It was just gagging and choking, and we were trying to find a place to pull off, and then it just died.”

Daphne’s mom looked at the woman’s plain jacket and jeans and scuffed boots in the supercilious way she always did Daphne’s less desirable friends.

“Please remove your vehicle from our driveway, young lady.”

“But we can’t.” The woman shook her head emphatically. “We’ve called a tow truck, but James says he thinks we might have blown the computer, and we won’t be able to get it into a shop until tomorrow. Do you know any place where we can board a horse in town? We can’t leave her in the trailer.”

“I have no idea,” said Daphne’s mom just at the same time Daphne said, “There’s no reason you can’t board her here. We’ve got plenty of barn space and feed.”

Ignoring her mother’s glare, Daphne pulled out her phone and called the ranch manager, Pete. “Hey Old Man,” she said.

“Hey Whippersnapper,” he answered. “What have you done to the truck?”

“It’s not me,” Daphne said, “It’s some people whose truck broke down outside our gate. They need a place to board their horse until they can get it fixed.”

“Sure. Send ‘em down. We got plenty of empty stalls in the old barn. I’ll break open a bale of straw and get some water and a haynet in there.”

“Thanks, Pete. See ya.” Daphne grinned unrepentantly at her mom.

“Oh gosh, thank you so much,” the woman gushed. “Wow. How lucky is it that we broke down here and not out in the middle of nowhere?”
Daphne could tell her mom was all primed to say something cutting when the man under the truck rolled out and stood up.

“Will your horse load next to Andy?” Daphne asked quickly.

“I can ride her down,” said the man, brushing himself off and shaking out his hair. He had long hair, and Daphne thought for sure her mom was going to pitch a fit—what kind of criminal are you inviting home? He’s probably going to murder us in our sleep!

But the man smiled charmingly at her mom, walking up to the window. “I’m real sorry for the inconvenience, ma’am. But I’m real grateful. Spark needs to stretch her legs tonight. She’s been over 8 hours in this thing.”

To Daphne’s surprise, her mom actually blushed, smiled flirtatiously at the man, and lowered the window the rest of the way. “Oh it’s no problem at all. My husband has more barns than we know what to do with.”

“Thank you, ma’am. That’s mighty kind of you.” He held out his hand. “James McCoy. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Cecile Benarden.” Her mom was practically simpering as she shook McCoy’s hand.

Daphne died a little of embarrassment. She did her best to tune out her mom sounding like she was a teenager as she chatted with McCoy.

*Maternal parental unit is making me vomit,* she sent to Hilde.

*Uh oh,* Hilde sent back.

Daphne sent her a picture of a Chihuahua with hearts floating off it. *She’s flirting w some guy whose truck broke down @ gate I’m so embarrassed.*

Hilde sent a picture of a laughing face with horns. *Glad it’s not me jk.* She followed it with a sympathy emoji.

Daphne was relieved when she could see the yellow lights of the tow truck coming over the hill from the direction of Black Diamond.

McCoy noticed them, too. He turned to the woman with him. “I’m gonna have to stay here with Spark. You gonna be okay going with the truck into town, Kira?”

“Oh yeah,” she said. “I’ll find some sort of transport and come back for you.”

With another grin, McCoy went to the back of the trailer, opened it, and edged in beside the horse waiting inside. As he backed her out onto the road, Daphne whistled.

The truck and trailer looked like they were a prayer away from the scrap heap, but that was a quality mare. In the low light of evening, with the setting sun outlining her in gold, she was spectacular.

Happy to be out of the confining, bumpy space, the mare danced on the end of the lead, arching her neck and tossing her head. She curvetted about McCoy with her tail flagged high, and he ran alongside her.

“Now that is a beautiful picture,” said Daphne’s mom. She was not looking at the horse.
Daphne oozed down in her seat in protest at any genetic connection between herself and the woman in the drivers’ seat.

Andy whinnied from inside his trailer, and the mare stopped, head up, nostrils flaring, before she neighed back at him.

The tow truck was one of the big flatbed trucks out of Okotoks, so it had no trouble dealing with both the pickup truck and the horse trailer. During the commotion of getting everything loaded and hitched, McCoy kept his mare a good distance away. The mare and Andy occasionally spoke to each other, but she had calmed down a bit. Daphne could hear Andy thumping about in the trailer in his frustration at not being able to get close to the strange mare. Finally the whole cavalcade was on the move again. The tow truck rapidly faded into the distance, and Daphne’s mom started up the Rover again.

Because McCoy hadn’t removed any of his tack from the trailer, Daphne expected he would lead the mare down the kilometre-long drive, but instead, he vaulted onto her back with nothing but the halter and lead shank for control and followed their truck in the gate. That display of athleticism did nothing to discourage her mother from ogling McCoy.

Her mom wanted to creep along beside him, but Daphne was relieved when McCoy insisted they go on ahead so that she could get her horse put away before Andy could get all excited about a potential new acquaintance, and then she could show him around.

She should have known her mom was going to offer to help with the tour.

MAKE IT STOP she texted Hilde.

* * * * *

“That Benarden woman is looking at Eliot like he’s her favorite dish on the menu.”

Parker’s commentary to Hardison provided an annoying background to Eliot’s attempts to keep Spark calm in the midst of all the activity surrounding the tow truck.

“Just a little barbecue sauce and a steak knife, and she’d be licking him off her plate.”

“Shut up, Parker,” Eliot growled. “Easy there, Spark. It’s just a big truck with flashing lights, not a monster. You’re okay.”

“What can you say?” Hardison laughed. “He’s gifted.”

“I thought we were supposed to meet the guy, not his wife and daughter.” As much as he wanted to snap at Hardison, Eliot kept his voice low and even so as not to alarm the mare.

“Hey,” Hardison protested, “I was tracking his vehicle. How was I supposed to know he wasn’t in it?”

Spark chose that moment to break into a barely collected trot, forcing Eliot to run to keep up with her. By the time he had her back to circling him tightly, Parker was talking to the tow truck operator.

The two of them should have probably done something to sell the couple bit, but Parker wasn’t coming anywhere near Spark, and Eliot had his hands full keeping the horse in some kind of equilibrium, so her good-bye was nothing more than calling across the space between them that she’d text him when she had finished arranging for the truck and trailer and had found them a place
When the tow truck had departed, Eliot eyed all 15.1 hands of restless Spark speculatively. “I guess we’ll see if I still remember how to do this,” he told her. This trick was a whole lot easier with a saddle horn, but he needed to mount without displacing the blanket she was wearing. Placing both hands on her withers, he let her momentum add power to his vault. It didn’t hurt that he made his move when she was downhill from him. Apparently he hadn’t lost it yet because he found himself astride his horse with the blanket still roughly centered.

As he maneuvered Spark alongside the Benarden vehicle, he could tell he was still an object of interest to Cecile which was a source of acute embarrassment for her daughter. It was also a source of acute amusement for Hardison and Parker.

Eliot did his best to tune them out.

When he had succeeded in sending the Benardens on ahead, he let Spark dally down the drive hoping to give the teenager enough time to shed her parent.

She had nearly managed it, convincing her mother that the fewer people who were around to upset the new horse, the better. Eliot was able to escape after merely having to field an invitation that he come up to the house when his horse was settled. He declined politely in favor of staying with Spark until Parker arrived.

“I apologize for . . .that,” the daughter said as soon as her mother pulled away in the truck. “She can be a bit . . . relentless.”

“No problem,” Eliot assured her.

“My name’s Daphne,” she introduced herself. “That’s a nice mare you’ve got.”

“Her name’s Spark,” Eliot told her. “And I’m James, but I suppose you already knew that.”

Daphne, unlike her mother, was not interested in him in the least, but she held out her hand for Spark to sniff. “Hey, girl,” she said softly. “How’d you like a nice, comfy, warm stall and some hay?”

“Lead the way,” Eliot said. “And thanks again. I’m pretty sure I owe you for the invitation.”

‘Oh, well,” Daphne quirked a wry smile. “That was before my mom decided you were like the cowboy version of Fabio.”

The kid had a sense of humor, and she was neither painfully shy nor awkwardly clingy. Eliot decided he liked her. Too bad her father was such a bastard.

Daphne showed him the way to the building where Spark could stay and introduced him to Pete, the ranch manager, before he left for the day.

“I’ve got a math test tomorrow,” she said, making a face. “So, if you’ll be okay, I’d better head up to the house.”

Eliot assured her that he would be fine.

When Spark was installed knee deep in fresh straw, munching on a good blend of alfalfa and timothy hay, and Eliot had made certain she was watered and that her stall contained no hidden hazards, he got Parker’s text that she was on her way back with a loaner car she’d been given by
the repair shop at which she’d left the truck.

Taking his leave of Spark, Eliot headed back up the driveway.

* * * * *

Parker stopped the car in a spray of gravel causing Eliot to jump back and yell at her.

“Get in!” she called to him.

“This isn’t a high speed getaway,” he complained as he buckled in while Parker laid some borrowed rubber on the road doing a U-turn.

“Depends how fast you go,” Parker told him gleefully as she sent the car careening back towards Black Diamond. “Now let’s go find that diamond!”

“There is no diamond,” Eliot said tiredly.

“Excuse me,” Hardison interrupted over the earbuds. “But there is, in fact, a very large black diamond. I am looking at a picture of one as we speak. It is mounted on a yellow frame next to a coal cart in a postage stamp sized park on Cowboy Trail.”

“That’s near where our motel is,” Parker informed Eliot. “I want to see the diamond.”

“I would say that even you could not steal that diamond, except I’m sure you could,” said Hardison. “But why would you want to?”

They found the diamond, which was indeed very large, but not terribly exciting otherwise. Parker got Eliot to boost her so that she could climb on top of it. Hardison demanded a photograph, but the streetlight was inadequate to provide a clear picture. Having grown bored with the modest height of her perch, Parker jumped off, disdaining Eliot’s offer to catch her.

On the way to their motel, Parker pointed out the Automotive Service Centre where she had left the truck and trailer. It had already been closed when she had arrived, but the tow truck operator knew the owner, who had run over and taken custody of the truck and loaned her the car.

Across the street from the shop was a tiny L-shaped single story motel.

“That’s it,” Parker said. “That’s where we’re staying.”

She parked the vehicle in front of a shabby door and hopped out. Eliot followed.

Parker had a key, but she used her lock picks on the door because “It’s faster.”

From the exterior, Eliot had developed no very high expectations of the interior, but even so, he was a bit appalled. One of the windows was actually broken. The flooring was worn threadbare, and he would be surprised to learn it had been vacuumed in the 21st century. He only hoped that the linens were changed on the two double beds. The mattresses looked like they’d been shipped across the prairies in covered wagons. The “kitchenette” contained a broken teapot, a microwave whose dial had the numbers worn off, and a tiny icebox with someone’s leftover food in it. And the bathroom proved to be lacking such amenities as soap or shampoo as well as necessities like toilet paper.

Fortunately, Parker had managed to steal some from somewhere.
Eliot kept his temper reined in as hard as he possibly could because Parker obviously didn’t see anything wrong with this dive. She had probably spent most of her formative years living in worse places.

And he had spent plenty of nights in places that made this skeevy motel room seem like the presidential suite of the Sheraton.

Parker flipped back the covers of one of the beds and bounced experimentally on it. The resultant creaking confirmed Eliot’s suspicions that the springs were shot.

“This place only cost us $80 cash,” she said.

“Way to keep down the overhead, mama,” Hardison said over the earbuds.

“I hope you plan to steal it back,” was all Eliot had to say.

* * * * *

TBC
Chapter 23

Black Diamond, Alberta, Canada

Parker was watching Eliot sleep. The room was dark, but the faint, flickering glow of the motel sign coming through the window provided just enough light that she could see the rise and fall of his ribs as he lay on his side on the other bed, facing away from her towards the door. Even in sleep, Eliot never fully relaxed his vigilance.

He was not always willing to sleep in their presence.

Parker got that. Even now, with Hardison, she did not find it easy to sleep with someone else in the room. The sounds of movement not her own, of another person breathing, even if it was only Hardison, often set her nerves on edge, making it difficult for her to close her eyes. Occasionally, she still disappeared into the vents or even stayed in her Portland warehouse when she needed more solitude. Hardison never minded. Parker would come slipping back into their bed in the early morning hours, and he would snuggle against her all full of warm and sleep, and she would enjoy lying there awake.

Strangely enough, she usually felt safe enough to sleep when Eliot was around even if there were lots of other people.

But tonight, Parker thought Eliot needed her to watch out for him instead. She knew he had not slept since before that Colonel Baird had come back from the dead to haunt him, and although he had said nothing, she could see his exhaustion carving lines and hollows in his face. In spite of that, he had put off the moment he would have to commit to unconsciousness for as long as possible.

After they had hauled in their meager belongings, Eliot had made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to go with some organic apples they had picked up in Airdrie on the way to get the horse. Eliot had told Hardison that if he made one more comment about filet mignon and seven hundred sports channels, Eliot was going to rip out his tonsils and turn off the coms. And when Hardison had mentioned that he was splurging on Orangina instead of Squeeze, Eliot had ranted about the necessity of pairing a good filet mignon with the perfect Cabernet for a truly impressive amount of time. Parker had clocked it.

While Parker was brushing the crumbs out of her bed, Eliot, who had sat disapprovingly in a chair to eat like a civilized person, had attempted to find a game on the television. However, after 10 minutes, the elderly set had begun glitching out, so the two of them had resorted to isotonin exercises to fill the time. For a while they had held a contest to see who could stand on their hands the longest, but that had eventually grown boring since neither of them would give in, so they had called it a draw. Finally, they had done a little practice sparring, Eliot working on his speed and Parker on her blocking, and when they were tired and sweating and a bit bruised up, Eliot had grinned with all the mischief of a 10-year-old and asked if she’d ever had a pillow fight.

Parker had not even known what a pillow fight was. Who fought pillows? And why?

Eliot had not explained. He had just grabbed up one of the motel pillows and walloped her with it. Parker still hadn’t seen the point of that, but she wasn’t going to let Eliot get away with it, so she had grabbed her own pillow and thumped him back. They had chased each other around the room, up and over the furniture, and across the beds. One of the chairs might perhaps have become a bit more rickety, and one of the mattresses definitely broke another spring. Their neighbor was knocking on the wall by the time they had collapsed on their respective beds laughing like maniacs.
with Hardison complaining in their ears that he wanted to pillow fight, too. Eliot had told him that he had permission to pick up one of those fluffy hotel pillows and hit himself over the head with it as often as he pleased, and Hardison had sulked.

Eventually, Eliot had run out of delaying tactics and had emerged from the shower eyeing his bed like a man might an enemy lying in ambush.

“I’ll take the first watch,” Parker had offered, and he had not told her not to be stupid.

That had been 97 minutes ago.

Because she was paying attention, Parker recognized when Eliot’s breathing changed, speeding up and growing harsh, the lines of his body instantly taut.

He made no other sound, the habits of survival and stealth restraining him even in sleep.

Parker could smell the danger in the room.


While Eliot achieved consciousness faster than anyone else Parker knew, his reflexes were even faster, so she always stayed far enough away from him that his awareness would catch up with his speed.

This time her voice only made him flinch and pull his arms and knees in around some phantom pain.

“Eliot.” Parker crawled over and switched on the one bedside lamp that had a functioning lightbulb, then jumped back to the middle of her bed.

He was awake and up by the time she stopped moving. But this time he did not wake up fighting. He woke up broken.

Parker stayed breathlessly still as Eliot sank back onto his knees on the sagging mattress, his shoulders bowed, his forearms resting on his thighs with his hands facing up in half-curled fists, his head bent down as he stared at them, his face hidden by the curtain of his hair. He was shaking, and Parker could smell nothing but sadness on him now.

One of those dreams, then. Not the ones, like hers, where he woke up full of fight and fear, visitations of old dangers from the past or imaginations of terrible futures. These nightmares were worse, drenching him in guilt and self-hatred, taking him to a place where none of them could help him.

Eliot stayed motionless except for an occasional bone-deep shudder as some horror pursued him out of sleep into the waking world.

“Are you okay?” Parker asked, even though she knew he was not. She scooted over to the side of her bed nearest his. Sometimes Hardison would ask if he could hold her after nightmares. Sometimes it would help. A little.

“Can I touch you?” she offered, tentatively.

“No. Please don’t,” he said, his voice all wrong and not growling.

Parker wound her hands in the sheets to show him she understood and would not intrude.
He clenched his fists so that the tendons in his arms stood out like ropes under too much strain. Then he covered his face with his hands.

Parker sat across from him in mute support.

* * * * *

Eliot could feel Parker’s presence across the room like a well of comfort into which he could fall if he chose, and yet he would never do so.

Reality still wavered, superimposing the past upon the present, staining his hands, his arms, with blood. So much blood. So many lives. The voices of the dead echoed in his head.

He could not wish for peace because he deserved none.

Unsurprisingly, his dreams had returned him to the Port of Algeciras Bay, forcing him to re-enact the murders of the NATO soldiers. But this time there had been a difference. Colonel Eve Baird had accompanied him, trying to draw him back, begging him for their lives in a voice he now recognized, although it had not been her voice back then. Eliot knew what he had done to her, what reconstruction must have taken place to give her back any speech at all. In the end, when she had watched him take on her younger self, she had begged him to be just that much faster and better than he had been before. He had killed her family, and she wanted to go with them.

NATO had sent a small, elite team. Eliot had seen how close they were during his reconnaissance. What would he feel, now, for the person who had managed to take Nate and Sophie and Parker and Hardison from him? The thought sent him stumbling for the bathroom to lose what remained of his paltry meal in violent retching.

He felt rather than heard Parker kneeling beside him. And then she was holding back his hair and supporting him with her strong arms.

For a few moments, he could not help himself, and he leaned his forehead against her shoulder fighting tears.

“I heard somewhere that all the cells in your body replace themselves every 10 years,” Parker said softly, handing him one of the motel washcloths. “So it wasn’t really you who did those things.”

“That’s a myth, Parker,” Eliot told her, pulling away and wiping his face of any marks of his weakness. “There are some cells that stay with you your whole life. Here.” He touched his head. “And here.” He laid his hand over his heart. “The places that remember.”

The two of them sat on the bathroom floor in silence until Eliot was certain he had his autonomic responses back under control. Then he got to his feet and headed for the door. “I’m going for a run.”

“Do you want company?” Parker followed him, making sure he had his coat and hat.

“No. I need to be alone.”

* * * * *

Portland, Oregon, USA

Eve Baird paced her apartment, anxiety grinding sharp pain into her stomach. Every hour or so, she would detour by her medicine cabinet and swig anti-acid straight from the bottle. She was beyond
the extreme need to rest, but sleep somehow felt like a betrayal—as if she could slow down the amount of time Stone had been missing by staying aware of every minute of it.

Some time after 4 a.m., she forced herself to go to bed and at least lie down. Logically, she knew being rested would be of more use, but logic seemed a pale and insipid thing next to the blazing compulsion to stay aware and never stop moving. Lying in bed, every muscle tense, running worst case scenarios through her brain, each one a spike of horror, forming and rejecting plans of attack because they all depended on having some information beyond what they had yet been able to discover, Eve finally fell into a sleep in which she found no peace.

She was running and running through miles of cargo containers piled so high that she could only see the sky in thin grey bars far above. Her team was in terrible danger unless she could reach them in time; however, no matter how long or fast she ran, she could not find them. Finally, after she was exhausted and despairing, the containers opened into a clear space at the center of which lay the body of a man, twisted unnaturally.

Kneeling in dread beside him, she saw not a member of her NATO team but Jacob Stone. His throat was cut, and blood drenched his shirt. His mouth moved as though he were trying to speak, but as she watched helplessly, the light faded from his blue eyes. She hadn’t run fast enough to save him. It was too late.

Then there was a man standing beside her, looking down. He was dressed in black combat gear and carrying a bloody knife.

“Why did you let me kill him?” he demanded, his voice broken, accusing. “You were supposed to protect him.”

She grabbed the knife from his unresisting grip and drove it up at an angle under his sternum and into his heart. He fell to his knees in front of her, blood spurting in time with the hammer of her pulse. As he sank to the ground next to Stone’s body, Eve reached out and raised the helmet visor.

The face belonged to Jacob Stone.

Horrified and guilt stricken, she watched death cloud those blue eyes a second time.

The two Jacob Stones lay side by side, dead at her feet.

Eve began to scream.

She jolted awake, her throat raw, and found herself kneeling in the middle of her apartment, waves of terror buffeting her as if they had actual mass.

Stumbling to her feet, Eve could focus on only one thing.

She had to find that painting.

Everything else was nightmare from which she could not awaken, but she remembered there was something she needed, and she might find it there. It took her too many tries to locate the light switch and flip it on, but finally a pale glow pressed back against the darkness.

Her coat. She had left it in her coat. With shaking hands, Eve fumbled in the pockets of the coat until she felt the folds of heavy paper. Trying not to damage it, she withdrew the painting. For a moment the blues and golds blurred together. Carrying it to her dining table, Eve sat down, every muscle rigid in her attempt to find control, and stared at the painting in front of her.
The only voice she could hear in her head was Stone’s directing her to return to a place where she felt safe, and the fear that she might never again listen to his low Southern drawl nearly barred her way back.

Stone would not have wanted her to fail on his account.

What had he told her? Senses. Use them.

Eve closed her eyes and remembered.

The smell of sun-warmed grasses and earth. The tang of crushed green under her feet.

The whirring clicks of grasshoppers blending with the busy hum of bumble bees into a low vibration in the distance.

The whisper of the breeze through the harvest-ready wheat.

The scratchy prickle of tansy and vetch and red clover on her bare legs.

Running until her lungs ached through the blue of sky and the great masses of clouds stretching to the horizon.

Spinning with her arms thrown wide, until she collapsed, dizzy, with the earth dipping and swooping beneath her.

Breathing great gasps of air as the wind cooled the sweat on her skin.

Eve could feel her heart rate slowing as her nightmare receded to a dull ache.

Opening her eyes she took a deep breath.

“Thank you,” she whispered to Stone, wherever he was.

Carefully, Eve folded her painting and returned it to her pocket. Getting up from the table, she set about reheating some coffee in the microwave and filling her insulated cup. It was too early in the morning but work was all she could imagine doing. They had some poor soul to rescue from a killer horse. If she could not help Stone, at least she could continue with the job and help someone.

Showerless and still dressed in the previous days’ clothing, Eve headed back to the Annex.

* * * * *

Black Diamond, Alberta, Canada

The desiccated winter air burned in his lungs as Eliot left the empty streets of Black Diamond and, for lack of any other destination, set out to retrace the dark route to the Ghost Ridge Ranch. The descent of night had sent the mercury plunging close to 0 degrees Fahrenheit, but he had been more focused on fleeing his nearly tangible nightmare than in dressing appropriately for cold weather running or for running at all. He had neither the footwear nor the layers he should have worn for this sort of exercise. His winter jacket over the thin T-shirt and the track pants he had chosen for sleep were a poor substitute for a moisture-wicking thermal layer and wind-breaking outer layer.

Eliot could feel the frost sticking the edges of his eyelashes together and stiffening his hair. Setting a pace that would maintain his body temperature through sheer exertion, he embraced the discomfort he had sought to counteract his internal turmoil. The drum of his boots on the iron-hard ground, the rhythmic motion of his muscles, the rush of his breath expanding in clouds lulled him
into a mental space, familiar from long habit since the grueling marches of his military experience, in which his body's complaints were irrelevant, and his mind shifted into a neutral place where past and future disappeared into a weightless, meaningless present, the only goal putting one foot ahead of the other.

Eliot had no sense of how far he had run, so the appearance of the gateway to the ranch, looming out of the night, illuminated only by the mutual reflection of snow and cloud cover, startled him. His watch told him that he had been running for over an hour and a half. An hour and a half in the dry cold. If Eliot had forgotten how harsh such weather could be, his lungs were eager to remind him. A fit of coughing left him leaning against the gatepost. He needed hydration, but he had only himself to blame for his lack of preparedness.

The closest source of available liquid that was not frozen was the automatic waterer in Spark’s stall. He would also find some shelter in the barn, away from the breeze that was picking up and slicing through his sweat-dampened clothing at an alarming rate. Eliot’s feet made the decision for him. He would just drop in for a moment to check on his new horse.

His passage down the long, lightless drive appeared noted by no one and nothing. However, when he entered the old barn, he heard the mare scramble to her feet. At least she had been relaxed enough in this strange environment to lie down. He found her stall more by feel than sight, not choosing to turn on the lights. Spark had her head over the half door, waiting for him, so he had to push her back in order to let himself into the stall.

“Hey there, girl,” he said, running his hand along her neck, feeling her warm, familiar life under his touch.

Spark whickered softly, curving her head around to nudge him with her nose.

“Sorry, I ain’t got any treats for you,” Eliot apologized, stroking her forehead.

A series of coughs startled Spark away from him and reminded Eliot why he had come. He fumbled in the dark for the small basin with the lever that Spark could activate with her nose when she wanted a drink. Pressing the lever, Eliot collected the icy water in his cupped hand and lapped it up. He could feel the chill travelling all the way down. Nevertheless he forced himself to drink a little more. He inhaled deeply, seeking to control his shivering.

The scents of straw and hay and horse surrounded him with memories, drawing him into a past before everything had gone wrong in his life. Before he had gone wrong. The sounds of Spark’s feet rustling as she shifted her weight to rest one hind foot, of her deep, calm breathing soothed something raw and ragged within him. Eliot made a sudden, irrational decision to spend the rest of the night with his horse.

That decision was somewhat complicated by the fact that his sweat-soaked clothing was rapidly reducing his core body temperature to hypothermic levels in the unheated barn.

“Wait,” he told Spark. “I have an idea.”

Eliot found the door to the tack room where he remembered seeing it and broke the padlock off with a single sharp blow. By the light of the bare bulb hanging in the middle of the room, he could see it was mostly empty, but there were an old, rodent-chewed saddle blanket and a couple of light summer turnout sheets in need of mending hanging from pegs. On a nail on the back of the door, he hit the jackpot—a pair of filthy coveralls.

Quickly shucking himself out of his clammy clothes, Eliot spent a minute stark naked in below
freezing temperatures during which time every single one of his body hairs attempted to detach itself from its roots and head for Florida. He got his trembling gooseflesh into the coveralls at a truly impressive velocity, then shrugged his coat on over top. Stuffing his bare feet back into his boots, he liberated his knit cap from his pocket where he’d put it as soon as he had started to sweat and pulled it down over his ears. When it came to cold weather, no clothing was better than wet clothing. Grabbing his armload of blankets, he headed back for Spark’s stall.

Finding a corner where the straw was still dry and clean, Eliot spread out the thicker saddle blanket. He would huddle under the turnouts and likely preserve enough body heat to be comfortable. If he had any body heat left to preserve. The attempt to manufacture some had him still shivering. He hesitated and then approached Spark who had retreated to the far corner of her stall to observe his activity with suspicion.

“C’mere,” he said, wrapping his arms around her neck and pressing close to her warm shoulder.

Spark sidestepped a couple of times before submitting to being his hot-water-bottle.

The two of them stood together in the dark stall until their two hearts beat in unison and both their heads dropped in near slumber.

Eventually, Eliot knew he had better lie down before he fell down. Curling up in the corner in his makeshift bed, he felt more relaxed than he had in ages. Sleeping in the company of an animal used to being prey was a liberation he was not expecting. Spark would know if anything was approaching her, and she would alert him.

This time, when Eliot slept, his dreams left him in peace.

* * * * *

Parker usually liked to be alone, but tonight, when Eliot had fled into the dark, she wished that Hardison was there. She tried out first one side of her bed and then the other. Then she tried the middle. Stretching diagonally across the bed did not work. Neither did lying crosswise. She tried being a starfish on her front and on her back, and then she tried being a snail, all curled up.

Sitting up, Parker eyed Eliot’s bed. Maybe his mattress would work since hers was obviously defective. She stood up and jumped across the space between the beds and lay down. It was just as lumpy as hers, but she thought it was still a little bit warmer where Eliot had been and it smelled like him. She lay for a while staring up at the cracked, water-stained plaster and thought about Eliot, out there running away from himself in the cold night. Parker had tried that herself, before, and it never worked, but it was still better than being still.

If Hardison were here, she would be able to reach out and poke him with one finger. He would not wake up, which always amazed her. Sometimes he would make a funny kind of snort, and then he would roll in her direction, and if she wanted, she could fit herself carefully in between his long limbs as if he were an air duct into which she could crawl.

Reaching for the table between the beds, Parker palmed her ear bud and activated it as she slipped it in her ear. When they were on a con, Hardison never took his out.

“What? Parker? Is everything okay?” Hardison’s voice was slurred with sleep.

“I’m okay,” Parker assured him. “But Eliot is out running.”
She did not have to explain further.

“Did he take his comm?” Hardison asked, growing alert.

“No, it’s still here.”

“How about his phone?”

“Maybe. He did wear his coat.”

“Let me check.”

Parker could hear Hardison rustling around getting his tablet so he could run a search.

“I got him,” Hardison said. “He’s stopped moving. Now where are you? Checking the map. Aha! There you are, you elusive sonofa . . . Hey! That is the Benardin Ranch. Was this part of the plan? Because I don’t recall this being part of the plan.”

“Of course it’s not.”

“Maybe he decided to hook up with that Cecile woman.” Hardison chuckled.

“Eliot wouldn’t mess with our plan that way,” Parker said firmly. “So what is he doing there?”

“Let me refine this search. Hello cell towers that let me pinpoint GPS location to 10 meters. Okay. That’s weird. He seems to be in one of the barns.” Hardison sounded puzzled.

“He went to see the horse.” Parker realized.

“Aww. That is adorable,” Hardison’s grin was audible over the comms. “It must be twue wuv! Tell you what. If he stays there, we can call him in the morning.”

“It’s really cold outside,” Parker objected. “Will he be all right?”

“Mama, if there’s anyone who can survive the apocalypse or this north-of-the-49th-parallel ice age, it’s Eliot Spencer. I don’t think we need to worry.”

“I’m not,” Parker said. “Just . . . can you stay on comms with me tonight?”

“Course I can, girl. I’ll be on here all night with you.”

“Even if I snore?” Parker asked, snuggling under Eliot’s covers.

“You never snore,” Hardison pointed out. “But yeah, I will.”

Parker worked her way into the most comfortable space between the lumps. “Good night, Alec.”

“Good night, babe.”

She fell asleep listening to him breathe.

* * * * *

TBC
Chapter 24

Portland, Oregon, USA

When Eve arrived at the Annex in the pitch dark of pre-dawn, Ezekiel Jones was already there, poking at the computer with one hand while leaning sleepily on the other. An array of super-sized, caffeinated beverage containers surrounded him.

Eve blinked at him over her own vitally necessary coffee. “What are you doing here so early?”

“I never left,” Ezekiel said, beckoning her over.

“What?” Eve exclaimed, bemused. Ezekiel was not the one of her charges she expected to find pulling overtime, particularly an all-nighter—unless, of course, he was moonlighting as a thief.

“I’m working on a couple of leads on Stone that we should probably investigate.”

“Seriously?” Eve was a little too sleep-deprived to modify her astonishment. “You don’t even get along with him!”

Ezekiel shrugged and did not meet her eyes. “Hey, he’s an officious twit sometimes, well, all right, all the time, but nobody deserves to be lost and have no one at least try to find them.”

Eve sat down beside him, and probably as a side-effect of the same exhaustion-induced lack of control, gave him a hug with one arm around his shoulders.

Most likely due to his own sleep deprivation, Ezekiel took a deep breath and scrubbed his hands over his face as though wiping away some betraying evidence. “Anyway, I managed to hack into Stone’s cellphone records, and I found something interesting.” He brought up a screen filled with dates and numbers. “Most of these are calls to you, relating to something we were doing on the job. Some are to the Annex. Not too many to me or Cassandra. A bunch to his landlady, and the rest seem to be related to the work he does for her. But this last text he received . . .”

Ezekiel clicked on the record and brought up a screen that made no sense to Eve. There weren’t any words, just a bunch of punctuation marks.

“This one came in a couple of hours before he disappeared.”

Eve squinted at the screen. “If that makes sense to you, I need a lot more coffee.”

“I was kind of hoping it made sense to you,” Ezekiel said, “because the person who sent it was Eliot Spencer.”

Eve felt her heart jolt as her pulse picked up in response to hearing that name. She smoothed her hand with a suddenly damp palm over the crackle of paper in her pocket and reminded herself to breathe. What had Stone received from his cousin, and did it have anything to do with what had happened to him?

“I think it’s a code,” Ezekiel continued. “These hyphens and periods must make a pattern of some sort.”

She was an idiot. “It’s Morse Code,” Eve said. “Of course. Stone is the only one of you who knows it.”
“Can you read it?”

“Give me a pen.” Finding a piece of scratch paper, Eve concentrated on the dots and dashes. The patterns refused to resolve into sense for her eyes, but if she said them aloud, her ears, trained to sift through the “dits” and “dahs,” could translate. Rapidly, she wrote down the letters.

It was an appointment—the first clue they had as to where Stone had been heading the afternoon he had disappeared.

“Where is Lan Su Garden?” she asked Ezekiel.

Ezekiel woke with a start from where his head had gradually wilted onto the table. “What?”

“Lan Su Garden. I need a map. It’s where Stone was heading to meet Spencer.”

“Oh. Sure.”

As Ezekiel located the Garden and printed out directions, he informed Eve, “I’m working on hacking Stone’s bank records. That’s the other thing you do with a missing person. Who have they called? Where have they been spending money? I’ll let you know when I’ve got in.”

“Jones,” Eve said softly, taking the page with the map from him and putting a hand on his shoulder. “Thank you.”

“No problem,” Ezekiel said carelessly, as though there weren’t something unspoken lying behind his knowledge of the steps one follows when someone goes missing.

“I’m on my way to the Bridgeport Brew Pub.” Eve headed for the door. “I need to talk to Spencer.”

“You going to be okay?” Ezekiel asked.

“Not the question.” Eve pulled on her coat. “I need to know if Stone is okay.”

“I get that,” he said. “Just . . . take Cassandra with you.”

Eve paused, wondering at the concern from such an unlikely source. She would have expected such care from Stone, not from Ezekiel.

“Here.” Ezekiel tossed her his keys. “Use my car. I’ll text Cassandra so she’ll be waiting for you.”

* * * * *

Black Diamond, Alberta, Canada

Eliot awoke to the first gleams of daylight filtering through dusty glass and cobwebs rather than through one-way, ballistic glass. Instead of the muffled sounds of city traffic and sirens, he heard the far off lowing of cattle and a tractor chugging to life. His lungs were filled with air laden with the scents of life rather than those of manufactured petrochemicals. That air was a great deal colder than usual. He was also sharing his sleeping arrangements with a large, four-legged roommate who was currently trying to eat his hair. Again.

“Go away,” he told her. “I’ll get you some real hay.”

He wasn’t looking forward to crawling out from under his scarcely adequate bedding, but he certainly couldn’t stay there all day, and Spark did need fed.
The phone he had transferred to his borrowed coveralls chose that moment to vibrate. He fumbled it out of the pocket and looked at the identifier. Hardison. Of course. No doubt Hardison had already tracked him down. The phone vibrated stridently again. Eliot resigned himself and answered, “Yes?”

“Eliot, man, you frozen to death yet?”

“I’m fine, Hardison. Trust me, sleeping in a barn is an improvement over that motel.” Eliot grabbed the empty hay net and let himself out of the stall to go search for Spark’s breakfast. “I have to feed Spark. Go away.”

“You’re so grumpy in the morning,” Hardison complained. “Although I don’t know how I can tell the difference.”

Eliot hung up.

“Hi, Eliot,” said Parker from across the aisle of the barn. “You have straw in your hair.”

Of course Parker was here.

“It happens,” Eliot growled, brushing at his hair with his hands.

Parker pranced over, keeping him between herself and Spark, and began helping him pick his hair clean. Since he did not have a mirror, Eliot let her do so.

“I feel like a chimpanzee.” Parker laughed. “Hoo ooo oooo!” She bounced around pretending to be an ape.

“Cut it out, Parker.”

“Okay, but you’re no fun.” Parker resumed her imitation of a primate grooming his hair.

“Oh, hi!” Daphne Benarden appeared in the doorway. “I just finished taking care of Andy, and I saw your car.”

What was this, Grand Central Station? It was probably a good thing Parker was here with a vehicle. It explained Eliot’s presence nicely. And having her playing with his hair would help sell the characters.

“I can show you where to get the hay,” Daphne offered. “Then I have to run. Math test first thing, and I need to get to school in time to throw up.”

“Thanks.” Eliot grinned at the girl. “Just point me in the general direction. I think I can manage.”

He and Parker followed her out of the barn.

“You can grab a bale from over there and keep it in one of the empty stalls,” Daphne said, indicating a large pole shed partially filled with stacked square bales. “And there’s an empty corral behind the barn where you can turn out your mare if you want. I told Pete to hook up the waterer and turn it on.”

“Thanks,” Eliot said, impressed. Daphne might be the daughter of a filthy rich crook, but she was both thoughtful and efficient. As if he needed any further evidence how far from the tree an apple could fall.

“I gotta go,” Daphne said. “If you’re okay?”
“Sure. We’re fine.”

The girl turned to jog in the direction of a sprawling roofline just visible beyond a row of spruce trees. “Wish me luck with my Trig test,” she called back over her shoulder. “It’s my only hope.”

“Good luck!” Parker waved.

* * * * *

Portland, Oregon, USA

When Eve and Cassandra pulled into the space in front of the Bridgeport Brewpub, a taxi was parked at the curb. From its trunk, a tall man with unruly hair was unloading an astonishing amount of very expensive luggage. Standing on the sidewalk directing him where to place it was an elegant, dark-haired woman whose simple, tailored jacket was probably worth an entire month of Eve Baird’s salary.

“No, no, no, Nate,” she was saying in a refined British accent. “That’s the one with the gifts. Put that one on top.”

Noticing Eve and Cassandra, the woman smiled at them, all charm and good spirits. “Are we in your way? Please excuse us. We’ve been abroad, and it’s just so good to come home!”

The only possible location to which she could be applying that appellation was the Brewpub. Which meant these people were also acquainted with the owners.

“We appear to have the same destination,” Eve said, trying to match the woman’s casual friendly tone in spite of the anxiety thrumming in her veins.

“Oh?” The woman looked at them curiously. “I don’t think the Brewpub is open until 11 a.m.”

Eve and Cassandra exchanged glances.

“We’re not here for the restaurant,” Cassandra said.

“I need to speak to Eliot Spencer,” Eve told them. “Or if he is not in yet, to Alec Hardison or . . .” she strained to remember the odd name Ezekiel had told them. “. . . or Parker?”

For some reason her mention of those names seemed to convey a message to the strangers.

“Ah!” said the woman. “Of course. Come inside. The staff won’t be here for another hour, so you won’t be interrupted.”

The man possessed a key to the front door. He ushered them inside the silent, gleaming dining area and indicated the table at which they had been seated that fateful evening when her past and present had collided.

Eve did not speak, observing every aspect of the space, every potential entrance or hidden threat, her nerves painfully alert. Cassandra opened her mouth as if to say something, but then she subsided at Eve’s brief shake of her head.

When the two strangers had brought in all their luggage, the man locked the door behind them. The doors were wooden framed and filled with glass, Eve reminded herself, fighting for calm. She could kick them open if the situation demanded rapid egress.

Why had she let Jones talk her into bringing Cassandra back into Spencer’s orbit?
“Is Eliot expecting you?” the man asked, liberating some glasses from behind the bar.

“No,” Eve said.

“We’ve met him here before. We know he works here,” Cassandra added.

“Nate,” the woman said. “Look.” She was pointing to an odd plant on the corner of the bar. “It’s Parker’s plant.” Walking over to the bit of greenery in question, she picked up a note that was sticking out from under its pot. “These are her instructions for Amy.” The woman made a disappointed face. “That means Leverage is out of town.”

“I told you we should have called ahead,” said the man, filling a pitcher with ice and water and bringing it with the glasses on a tray to the table. “Drinks, anyone?”

Eve shook her head, too on edge to accept, but Cassandra nodded and took the glass he filled.

“I’m sorry.” The woman reached out to Eve. “Eliot won’t be in to work for several weeks. Is there any way we can help you? We’ve been colleagues of his for many years.”

The woman had no idea that her confession of collusion with Spencer was not a recommendation as far as Eve was concerned.

“My name is Sophie Devereaux,” the woman added, “and this is Nathan Ford.”

That last name was familiar. What had Ezekiel said? That Spencer had pulled some big jobs while in Boston as part of a crew headed by this man, Ford. Eve tried to suppress her reactions, but something must have slipped, because the Devereaux woman’s gaze sharpened and Ford frowned.

To cover up, Eve introduced herself. “I’m Colonel Eve Baird.”

“And I’m Cassandra Cillian.” Cassandra was following her lead.

To Eve’s surprise, Devereaux looked enlightened. “Ah,” she said. “Of course. Eliot has told me all about you, Colonel Baird.”

Ford looked as baffled as Eve felt. Spencer had discussed her with this woman? What possible motive could he have for doing so? But Devereaux’s polished veneer drew aside a little, and for a moment she looked as tired as Eve felt.

“He confessed what he did back when he worked for Damien Moreau.”

That name hit Eve like a blow to the solar plexus, and she was grateful for Cassandra’s warm hand gripping her cold fingers.

Eve had heard many people speak Moreau’s name with hatred, but Devereaux managed to inject a level of loathing into those syllables that exceeded all of them. Her dark eyes were sympathetic as she observed Eve.

“I am so sorry,” she said gently. “I cannot imagine what you have been through.”

If there was calculation in that expression of emotion, Devereaux was a master of concealment because Eve could find only sincerity in her face. Even Ford looked on with what seemed horrified surmise. Nevertheless, she had no intentions of lowering her guard to any associates of Eliot Spencer.

The silence drew out and became uncomfortable.
When Devereaux spoke again, her voice was uncharacteristically uncertain, almost as though she were trying to work through her thoughts out loud.

“There are very few people I count as my friends, and even fewer that I love. And Eliot Spencer is one of those.” She raised her hands helplessly, as though she realized that her admission completely compromised her ability to connect to Eve, making everything she said unreliable. “I make no excuses for him. What Eliot did for Moreau . . . well it was unspeakable and unforgivable. No one knows it more than Eliot himself.”

Spencer had broken with Moreau? Well, it might be possible because otherwise why would he be working as a chef in Portland? But that the man had transformed as much as Devereaux implied . . . No. A man did not walk into the den of Damien Moreau as an innocent. Moreau did not employ men who inhabited even the morally grey areas. Eve had seen many good men go bad, but bad men did not become good.

“No one,” Devereaux said with passionate emphasis as though sensing her resistance. “No one was happier than Eliot to hear that Moreau’s empire had fallen. And we . . . Eliot is responsible for the fact that Moreau is rotting in a cell in San Lorenzo with no hope of extradition.”

That Spencer had been involved in taking down Moreau was . . . unexpected and a bit ironic. Apparently Moreau had been playing with fire in employing a man more dangerous than himself. Eve had followed the news of Moreau’s downfall and had heard of his imprisonment with a certain amount of grim satisfaction. She had even collected the newspaper articles and burned every picture of his face in the trash bin behind her apartment. But engraved in her heart was the knowledge that no amount of ritual defacement or legal punishment for that demon of a man would ever change the past or bring back those who had died. And no amount of repentance could alter the fact that Eliot Spencer had been Moreau’s right hand to reach out and seize their lives and their futures and snuff them out.

As if in answer to Eve’s thoughts, Devereaux mused, “I think everything Eliot does now, all the people he helps . . . he’s trying to put a little good back in the world after having taken so much out of it.”

Eve could see their faces in her imagination—Joscin, Teresinha, Poptart, the Terrible Twosome, Derya, Fortinsky, Torbjørn, Brader. They were not a debt Spencer could ever repay.

Ford put his hand over Devereaux’s and shook his head very slightly. She took a deep, shaky breath.

“I’m not asking you to forgive him. Eliot wouldn’t want me to. But I am hoping that you will see him as he has become, in the way that he did not see you back then.”

Eve nodded, a plastic smile carved on her face. “Since Spencer is unavailable, we will have to come back when he is here,” she said.

“Do you want us to contact him?” Ford asked.

“No, that won’t be necessary,” Eve replied, getting to her feet.

“It was nice to meet you,” Cassandra said, shaking hands with Devereaux and Ford.

“Tell Eliot’s cousin . . . Tell Jake we’d love to meet him.”

Devereaux used the same name Spencer did for Stone, intimate, personal, as though he were already part of a family he had never met. Her tone was welcoming and warm, eager even. Her
eyes were alight with family—with holiday meals and Christmas presents and birthday cakes. It troubled Eve that these strangers would embrace their art historian, sight unseen, so completely—as though they assumed he would become a part of their lives.

And it troubled her that she had no Jacob Stone to produce or withhold. She also had no intentions of revealing that intelligence to Devereaux and Ford.

“Stone’s job is unpredictable. He may be unavailable for some time, but I’ll let him know,” Eve assured them, lying.

Once again, Devereaux was eyeing her like she’d unwittingly given something away. Eve couldn’t wait to retreat from that overly-perceptive gaze. She gathered up her wits and Cassandra and escaped out the door Ford was holding for them.

Outside the Brewpub again, Eve took her first full breath.

“Why didn’t you tell them about Jake?” Cassandra asked.

Eve was grateful that she did not ask about the past.

“Because I don’t trust them or Spencer,” she told Cassandra. “They are criminals. I don’t want them to feed information to Spencer until we know it is safe. They did not even know Spencer was away until they found that note, so they are not in his confidence at the moment.”

“What do we do now?” Cassandra asked as she got back in the car.

“Let’s go talk to the employees at Lan Su Garden,” Eve said. “We’ll ask if anyone there remembers seeing a meeting between Spencer and Stone.”

* * * * *

The Lan Su Garden had not been open to the public yet either, but Eve’s trusty NATO badge had gained them access. They had even been able to talk to an employee who remembered serving a man who looked like the picture Eve showed her.

“But the hair,” the woman said. “He had longer hair yesterday.”

Spencer, not Stone.

“He purchased tea but did not drink it, and he sat for most of the afternoon. He seemed very unhappy.”

“Unhappy angry?” Eve asked.

“No, not angry,” the woman reflected. “Just very sad.”

“Can you tell me what time he left?”

“Not exactly, but I cleared his table just before the artists arrived, so around 4 o’clock? That seems about right.”

Eve thanked her for her time and help, and she and Cassandra left the Garden. It was a beautiful place, peaceful, and Eve thought she might like to return sometime with Flynn.

“So Jake didn’t make it to his appointment?” Cassandra asked back in the car again.
“Apparently not,” Eve said. “Which reduces the likelihood that Spencer knows what happened to Stone. Nevertheless, a man like that is an expert at establishing an alibi, and spending the critical time in a public location where he would be sure to be noticed is an airtight one.”

“But he wouldn’t have done anything bad to his cousin, would he?” Cassandra sounded incredulous and maybe even a little hurt. She had obviously been well on her way to liking Eliot Spencer before they had found out about who he really was. And like Eve, she had hoped that Spencer could give them answers.

“I didn’t think so,” Eve admitted. “But that doesn’t mean he had nothing to do with Stone’s disappearance. To be honest, if he did, I think I would worry less. The two of them seemed to care about each other.” She paused. “Unless, after finding out . . . Stone did seem pretty willing to threaten his cousin after what he thought Spencer had done to . . . I don’t know, Cassandra. I just don’t know.”

They continued on in silence for several minutes.

“We can get Ezekiel to check out traffic cams around the Lan Su Garden,” Eve said. “See if we can learn anything more about Spencer’s movements after he left.”

“But we have to go after that horse, don’t we?” Cassandra asked softly. “We can’t just stay here and hope Jake . . .” She trailed off, looking down at her hands twisting in her lap. When she looked up again, her eyes were bright with unshed tears. “He’d want us to keep helping people.”

Eve took a deep breath. “You’re right. He would.”

* * * * *

Calgary, Alberta, Canada

Eve and Cassandra stopped by their apartment to pick up their cold weather gear before returning to the Annex. A call ahead assured them that Ezekiel and Jenkins would be waiting with the back door dialed up, so it was only 10 a.m. when Eve ushered her team out of a family restroom into the Calgary International Airport. Since explaining their appearance on a ranch with no visible means of transportation would be awkward, they needed to rent a vehicle to reach the horse’s location. Once they had determined the best course of action, they would arrange for any necessary conveyance for the animal.

Eve was hoping for some simple or magical solution to the problem of what to do with a murderous horse because they did not have $25,000 with which to purchase the animal. She was perhaps depending too much on Jenkins’ unknown expertise in things arcane and equine. Going into a situation with no plan was approaching a level of rashness that could be dangerous, but she did not see any other clear alternative. They needed more intel, and they would have to acquire it on the ground.

Once her team had recovered from their passage through the door, Eve sent Ezekiel and Cassandra off to the rental agency, and Jenkins . . . where was Jenkins?

She found Jenkins by means of looking for his multi-colored knit cap with the large pompom on top, standing beside a vending machine in rapt concentration as he bit into a chocolate bar.

“Jenkins, we have to go,” Eve said, exasperated.

Jenkins turned the label and squinted at it. “Coffee Crisp. Granules from the coffee bean combined with a medley of cacao sandwiched between thin wafers and permeated with extract of sugarcane.
Fantastic. Why do we not have these in the United States?"

“You can contemplate inequities in the junk food trade at a later date.” Eve grabbed him by the arm and began to tow. “We have a horse to catch.”

* * * * *

Airdrie, Alberta, Canada

An hour later they were standing beside a For Sale sign on a farm that appeared perfectly deserted. Just to be sure, Eve sent Cassandra to ring the doorbell.

“The back door!” she called as Cassandra headed for the snow-covered walk. “No one uses the front door on a Canadian farm.”

The house was empty.

“We’re too late,” Cassandra said. “If we hadn’t been looking for Jake . . .”

“We couldn’t just ignore the fact that he is missing,” Eve said, although she felt guilty, too.

The Librarian team stood in the middle of the deserted driveway contemplating the bleak, frozen landscape. Eve had known intellectually that they would be visiting the Canadian prairie in winter, but she had somehow been expecting the gold and blue summer from her past. She felt a little lost, as though a part of herself had gone forever beyond her reach.

“Not that I know anything about animals,” Ezekiel said, showing up beside them when Eve had not even noticed his absence. “But there have been some here pretty recently. The shit hasn’t even frozen.”

“Someone cleared out the livestock. Interesting.” Jenkins looked thoughtful.

“Who is that?” Cassandra pointed back down the long drive.

They all turned to look.

A solitary figure was walking toward them. He wore a broad-brimmed black hat and his silver hair curled on his shoulders.

They waited in silence for him to approach.

He was the first to speak. “The daughter of Deinos has already chosen. You have made your journey in vain.”

“Hey.” Ezekiel unsurprisingly was the first to find his tongue. “That horse already killed four people. You can’t just keep selling it.”

The old man ignored him and addressed Jenkins. “Why does the Library interfere in Hera’s business?”

“The question is, are you here as Hera’s aid for the children of Heracles or for their destruction?” Jenkins asked. “If it is aid, so far you have failed utterly. If it is destruction, you have come to the attention of the Library, and we will stop you.”

“I have never been more than an intermediary, as you well know,” the man said mildly. “I can be of no further use to you. My task here is done.” He began to walk back the way he had come.
“Wait,” Eve called. “Where is the horse now? Who has her?”

The old man paused and looked back at her. “I do not know. I did not recognize them this time, and they lied about their identities.”

“Lied? How do you know?” Eve asked.

“You mean you sold that mare to some ignorant innocent who has no idea that she is liable to turn into a monster at any moment?” Jenkins demanded, anger darkening his voice.

“The mare chooses for herself. I do not interfere.” He turned to Eve. “The names they gave me had no connection to who they were. I arranged the sale with one calling himself Michael Burton. He paid the price with the legal currency of this country. Spark of Midnight chose the one calling himself James McCoy. If he has any of the blood of Heracles in his veins that is beyond my knowledge. The men were accompanied by a woman calling herself Kira O’Brien who abhorred and distrusted the horse. They mentioned a town called Black Diamond. They also mentioned the city called Calgary.”

“Star Trek?” Ezekiel asked incredulously. “They went with Star Trek aliases?”

Eve narrowed her eyes. “What did these people look like?”

The old man shrugged. “The one man was tall, though not as tall as you.” He gestured at Jenkins. “His complexion was that of those native to parts of the African continent. The one chosen by the mare was shorter than you,” he gestured to Eve, “but of very great strength, and he wore his hair as I do. The woman was your height.” He pointed to Cassandra. “Her hair was like the silk of corn and her complexion was the milk of the tribes of Northern Europe.”

Eve turned to her team. “Is anyone else finding something familiar in that description?”

Ezekiel tilted his head. “That would be one hell of a coincidence.”

“There are no coincidences,” Jenkins said firmly, “merely patterns that we do not yet understand. What pattern are you sensing?”

“Hey,” Ezekiel held out his phone to the old man. “Do these faces look familiar?” He scrolled through several of the photographs stored on the phone.

“Those are indeed the persons who came for the mare.” The old man nodded. “It is evident that whatever drew you here drew them as well. I wish you good fortune in discerning the purpose for which you have become entangled in the fate of the daughter of Deinos, but now I must depart.”

He pivoted abruptly and set out toward the road.

“Hey!” Ezekiel called. “How do you usually find that horse, and can you do it for us?”

If he heard, the man did not choose to respond. He continued his steady pace, and for a moment it seemed as though heat waves rose up wavering around him as he walked. Then he simply faded and was gone.

“Um,” said Cassandra. “How did he do that?”

“Just a wild-assed guess,” said Ezekiel, “but I’d say magic.”

Jenkins narrowed his eyes and looked put out. “Divine magic is even less quantifiable than
ordinary magic. Best leave it alone.”

“There’s more than one kind of magic?” Eve asked. “Just when I thought I was starting to get used to our version.” She rubbed her temples. “How likely are we to be running up against—how am I even saying this?—Greek gods?”

Giving a delicate shudder, Jenkins shook his head. “I really have no idea. But the Library has sent us after one of Hera’s mares, and she—well, Hera has always had a strained relationship with Heracles, and by extension, his heirs.” He looked at the rest of them as though they should perfectly comprehend the vagaries of divine favor. Since they returned perfectly blank, uncomprehending expressions, he sighed. “Heracles was the son of Zeus and Alcmene, and Hera often takes out her wrath at his infidelities on the hapless children of such unions. His name was changed to placate her, of course, but her temper remains unpredictable. The gift of this horse may be either a blessing or a curse, but so far, evidence suggests a curse.”

“I am not sure I really care whether or not Spencer gets cursed,” Eve said, although she was actually fairly certain she was an enthusiastic supporter of the idea.

“Yes, and how do you come to know these people who have taken the horse?” Jenkins asked.

“Oh, right, you didn’t come with us to the Brewpub!” Cassandra exclaimed. “We met Jacob’s cousin there, Eliot Spencer. And he’s the one who has the horse.”

“Cousin?” Jenkins asked. “Then it is entirely possible that we received notification of this sale because Mr. Stone would also have been a candidate for being chosen by the horse.”

“So the clippings book delivers personal advertising now?” Ezekiel asked skeptically.

Jenkins frowned. “It has not done so to my knowledge, but then never before have there been so many Librarian candidates in residence. However, I do not think we can risk assuming that the Library has no more business with this horse now that she possesses a new owner.”

“How are we going to find her then?” Cassandra asked.

“Let’s head back to Calgary before we freeze out here,” Eve decided. “We can discuss our plans on the way.”

* * * *

Black Diamond, Alberta, Canada

After he had made sure that Spark was well-fed and thoroughly groomed and that her stall was clean, Eliot replaced her blanket and led her out to the empty corral Daphne had indicated. Unclipping her halter, he let her loose. Spark trotted a few steps away from him and then stood, her head held high, nostrils drinking in the unfamiliar smells. She obviously caught the scent of other horses, because she let out a piercing neigh and broke into a trot again, moving up and down the fence line. If the other horses answered her, Eliot couldn’t hear them, but the mare kept up her pacing, occasionally punctuated by another strident call.

“I’ll be back to see you this afternoon,” Eliot told her. “Give you something to eat and put you back inside for the night.”

Spark ignored him.

Eliot collected his frozen stiff clothing and headed for the car. Time for him and Parker to get on
with setting up the con. Except for where was Parker? She had disappeared shortly after she had
helped him transport a few bales of hay into Spark’s barn. Surely she hadn’t started the
investigation ahead of schedule, but Eliot could feel no firm conviction on the subject.

“Kira!” he called.

He wished he had his earbud. In the half an hour it had taken him to finish his work, Parker could
have gotten anywhere.

“Kira!” he raised the volume.

Just when he was about to call Hardison to find his missing thief, he heard Parker’s faint voice
from over in the pole shed. “I’m over here! Did you know there are mice in here?”

“Yeah, the hay makes a warm home for them,” he told her.

“Cool!”

“C’mon. We need to go.” Eliot headed towards the car.

A few seconds later, a considerably rumpled Parker tumbled down the haystack and skipped over
to him.

“You’ve got hay in your hair,” he told her.

“It happens,” Parker said cheerfully.

“We need to get back to the motel and clean up.”

“We do.” Parker wrinkled her nose. “You smell like a horse again. And somebody else’s old
clothes. Really bad.”

Eliot insisted on driving. “You can get arrested for reckless endangerment on your own time,
Parker.”

Parker snorted. “I never get caught.”

They had just pulled out onto the road to Black Diamond when Eliot’s phone vibrated. Parker
picked it out of his coverall pockets before Eliot could even react.

“Put it on speaker,” he told her.

“Eliot?” came Hardison’s voice.

“Yeah. What is it?”

“I just checked on your registered mail, and they were unable to deliver it.”

“So Jake still hasn’t got the packet.” Eliot felt the tension return to his stomach like a tidal wave.

“Looks like it. Hey. I had Parker put a GPS tracker on his pickup truck when she returned Colonel
Baird’s ammo, and I traced it to see what your cousin is up to instead of reading his mail. Is he the
sort of guy to just ditch civilization and go live in the woods? Because near as I can tell, that truck
is parked in the middle of the Tualatin Mountains on what isn’t even really a road.”

Eliot considered. “Yeah, it’s possible. The summer after we both graduated from high school, I was
in Basic, and Jake . . . well, I guess he was busy giving up everything he ever wanted out of life. He got someone to drop him off all by his lonesome at one end of the Upper Kiamichi Wilderness, and he wandered about in the mountains for a couple of weeks. Eventually, he trekked all 57 miles of the Ouachita Trail along the river to the trailhead at the other end of the Park. Then he hitchhiked home with some aging hippie Stoners who didn’t mind picking up a wild man with a backpack and two week’s worth of dirt and sweat and hair on him. Near as I could tell from what little he ever told me, he went home and turned down all his university offers and took over his daddy’s failing business. So, yeah. He mighta hightailed it to the wild if he needed to think something over.”

“I’ll keep an eye on the truck, then,” Hardison promised. “First thing, as soon as he’s back in town, I’ll send him the key again.”

“Thanks, Hardison.”

* * * * *

Calgary, Alberta, Canada

Back in Calgary, Cassandra suggested they find some place to eat while they discussed their next course of action. Eve found the thought of food slightly nauseating, but she agreed that nourishment was a necessity. Ezekiel located a small Thai restaurant with a high rating down by the river that ran through the city.

As it turned out, Jenkins had never experienced Thai food. He became so completely enamored that he kept getting distracted from the conversation, contemplating the blend of ingredients that composed his meal and quizzing their poor server on spices and methods of preparation. Eve vowed to double the poor boy’s tip.

They reached a consensus that, while Spencer’s organization typically operated in large cities, the fact that, as Eve pointed out, you could do a complete door to door canvas of every residence in Black Diamond in two days tops made it the logical place to start the search. Meanwhile, Ezekiel could narrow down their search in Calgary by places most likely to contain horses.

“Places to store horses in Calgary.” Ezekiel typed the note into his phone. “I’m on it.”

His phone gave a trill of music.

“Whoa! Okay.” Ezekiel answered his phone a bit gingerly. “Hello?”

Eve was having trouble interpreting his expression as he listened to the voice on the other end—a sort of suppressed excitement.

“Here, I’ll let you speak to my Colonel,” Ezekiel replied. He raised an eyebrow at Eve. “It’s for you.”

Eve scowled at him as he held out his phone. “Why am I receiving calls on your phone, Jones?”

“Just take it,” Ezekiel said, pressing the phone into her hands.

Tilting her head dubiously at the thief, Eve held the phone to her ear. “Hello?”

“Colonel Eve Baird?”

“Yes?”
“This is Captain Esperanza Guerrero of the Portland Police Bureau.”

Eve felt her stomach lurch in simultaneous hope and terror.

“I am calling to inform you that the pickup truck you reported stolen has been located.”

What? She hadn’t reported any stolen vehicle. Eve narrowed her eyes at Ezekiel who was looking pleased with himself. Then she focused back on her conversation. The officer had not mentioned a person, only the truck. Nevertheless, she had to ask, “And my colleague? The owner of the truck. Jacob Stone. Is he all right?”

“I am sorry, Colonel Baird. I have not spoken to Mr. Stone. The vehicle was abandoned on a road closed to motor traffic in Forest Park. Some hikers noticed it and reported its unusual location, or we wouldn’t have found it for months.”

“I see. Thank you.” Eve considered her options rapidly.

“I can get the detective who examined the vehicle for evidence to take you to it,” Guerrera suggested. “You will be free to remove it.”

What the police captain did not understand was that this was also a missing person case, not just a theft. As soon as she returned to Portland, if finding that truck did not lead immediately to Stone, she would be filing a missing persons report.

“Thank you, Captain,” Eve said. “I’ll be there immediately.”

She hung up the phone and handed it back to Ezekiel. “What do you know about Stone’s truck being reported stolen?”

Ezekiel smirked. “Well, we couldn’t report Stone missing for 48 hours, and even then, the police weren’t going to put any priority on finding a guy like him. So I figured, if I told them the truck was stolen, they might get moving a little faster.”

“That’s actually . . . not a bad idea.” Eve tilted her head and frowned at her thief consideringly.

Cassandra threw herself at the startled Ezekiel. “Oh, Ezekiel, that’s brilliant!”

Ezekiel returned her hug with a funny smile on his face. “Of course it is. I’m awesome.”

Eve looked around for their server. “As soon as we’ve paid for this food, we are going back to the Annex.”

“May I remind you, Colonel Baird, that you have a mission concerning a certain magical horse?” Jenkins said.

“Believe me. If ever there were a man that I would bet on against a man-eating horse, it would be Eliot Spencer. He can take care of himself for a day or two.”

And if the horse proved to be a match for Spencer and dined on his carcass, Eve Baird would be tempted to call it divine retribution. She brushed from her mind the image of a woman with dark, troubled eyes telling her she loved Eliot Spencer.

* * * * *

TBC
Black Diamond, Alberta, Canada

Breakfast at the local fast food joint was a combination of grease, sugar, and empty carbohydrates. Parker was thrilled. She ate like a chipmunk expecting a hard winter, overstuffing her cheeks and attempting to chew. Then she licked each fingertip with miserly care, not wasting a single molecule of frosting.

Eliot ate like a man who knew he needed to survive, mechanically determined, reminding himself that he had once spent too many weeks living off of whatever refuse his heedless captors had chosen to throw to him, supplemented by insects and highlighted by an unfortunate rat. Things could always be worse. Nevertheless, he vowed that this was their last day as motel-dwellers. Either he would have a job that included a place to stay, or they would be going apartment hunting.

He needed a kitchen.

And with that amount of sugar in her, Parker was going to need a gym. Already she was shifting and bouncing to the beat of the music blaring over the tinny speakers.

“Stop,” he growled at her as she jostled his elbow, causing him to drop a forkful of his regrettable meal onto the bench seat.

Parker turned to him, her eyes shining. “Isn’t this fun!”

She stole a piece of his approaching-stale cinnamon roll.

Eliot shook his head and closed his eyes. He leaned his chin on one hand and poked at a blob on his plate that was possibly intended to be meat. Fun. Right.

As strangers in this small town, the two of them were gathering surreptitious interest from the few locals also reduced to eating out for breakfast. Eliot catalogued them as non-threats and therefore irrelevant.

Parker noticed them, too. “So,” she said around a mouthful of pastry. “Should we be making out or something?”

“What?” Eliot made the mistake of attempting to talk, eat, and breathe simultaneously.

Parker thumped him on the back with enthusiasm as he choked.

When he had recovered, eyes watering and throat raw, she looked at him bright-eyed and innocent and eager to perform whatever absurd caper she thought might serve their con.

“Oh!” Eliot managed a hoarse whisper. “This is not the time or the place.” Never was the time and nowhere was the place. At least if he could help it.

Although you could never tell where a con might go.

Eliot was not above “taking one for the team.” There had been one particularly memorable occasion with Sophie . . . but while he and Sophie had enjoyed driving Nate a little crazy, Eliot did
not intend to ruffle Hardison’s feathers on this con unless it was unavoidable. Which it certainly was not right now.

Ever easygoing about taking his advice in social situations, Parker shrugged and re-applied herself to consuming the maximum number of calories with the minimum amount of nutrition.

Eliot realized that this was Parker’s version of being a “girlfriend.” God knows, being Hardison’s girlfriend wasn’t giving her a baseline. And most of their jobs only involved her in the initial flirting with a mark, just long enough to distract him from the con. He tried to remember if Parker had ever had to play this stage in a relationship. She and Hardison had done the married or engaged couple a few times, which mostly involved Hardison running interference for her with whatever ordinary person they were fooling—real estate agents, embassy officials, people who would turn instinctively to Hardison away from Parker’s just a little bit off performances. And occasionally they would do some version of making out to excuse their being found where they shouldn’t be. But he didn’t think the two of them had ever spent time passing for an ordinary dating couple.

Whatever Hardison might think, front row seats watching robots fight to the death was not a recognizable date. And Parker’s quest to find greater thrills by jumping off of dangerous heights would never give anyone the impression they were observing a romance in progress. About as close as the two of them had managed to come to a traditional date had been the occasional picnic. Usually, Eliot ended up making and packing the lunch because otherwise the two of them would have eaten nothing with an ingredients list that was distinguishable from the inventory of a chemical processing plant.

Damn, did he ever need a kitchen.

Finishing off the last of his congealed “grease avec ketchup,” Eliot emptied his and Parker’s trays into the garbage and recycling bins and returned to the table to collect a sticky and hyper Parker.

Okay. Boyfriend, girlfriend. They could do this if Parker would just follow his lead. Picking up her jacket from the bench, he chivalrously attempted to help Parker into it. She stared at him in puzzled astonishment.

“Put your arm in the sleeve,” Eliot hissed under his breath. “It’s for the con.”

“Oh!” Parker looked enlightened and allowed him to finish settling the coat on her shoulders with a minimum of awkwardness.

Eliot shrugged into his own coat and then held out his hand to her, intending to start with that most recognizable symbol of a romantic connection—the intertwined fingers of holding hands. He was not expecting the minute his fingers sought the interstices of hers that Parker would snatch her hand away from him as though his touch burned her.

With the ease of long practice, Eliot altered his trajectory into an arm around Parker’s shoulder, relieved that she instantly relaxed and slipped her own arm around his waist.

Outside the restaurant, he kept his hold on her and asked, “What was that about?”

Parker knew immediately what he was talking about, and she did not hesitate to confide in him. Parker kept her vulnerabilities in non-standard locations.

“I need to keep my hands free,” she explained. “I . . . there was once . . . I didn’t like him . . . I nearly sprained my wrist getting away. I just don’t like anyone tangling my fingers like that. Hardison just lets me hold onto him.”
Eliot froze with the desire to charge through time and space to rip the throat out of whoever had put that look in Parker’s eyes. She must have been just a kid then, because Parker’s hands were made of steel now. He wondered if she even realized her strength. No one holding her hand would have any advantage over her.

It was not that he could not think of other ways they could indicate their “relationship” than interlacing fingers, but something about Parker having spent her life avoiding this sort of thing, never getting to enjoy having a person she liked simply hold her hand, made Eliot’s breath ache a little.

“Can I show you something?” Eliot asked. “Kinda like a choke hold?”

“You mean where you pretend to be a bad guy so you can show me how to beat them up?”

“It’s not really pretend, but yeah, like that.”

“You’re not a bad guy.” Parker bumped against him objecting. “But okay. What do we do?”

“Hold your hand out flat.”

Eliot held his own hand out, palm up, under hers. “Now, you can put your fingers between mine.”

Carefully, her hands so steady she was still not actually touching him, Parker laced her fingers between his.

“Now fold them so you’re gripping my hand,” Eliot instructed.

Frowning in concentration, Parker curled her fingers, still only brushing his skin slightly.

“You can do better than that. Try to keep me from getting away.” Eliot pulled back

That made Parker grin wolfishly. Eliot felt her fingers tighten like she was trying to crush his. Nevertheless, he evaded her and freed his hand.

“Okay. See? That was pretty easy. Now it’s your turn. I’m gonna try to keep you from getting away.”

The familiarity of their training routines kept Parker calm as they re-threaded their fingers.

“Ready?” Eliot asked.

Parker nodded.

Eliot gripped her hand as hard as he could. Parker had no appreciation for being treated like a fragile flower. When they sparred, she left as many bruises as she took. This test would mean nothing to her if he didn’t do his best to hang onto her.

He could feel the moments she took to assess her plan of attack, and then she was gone, halfway down the block like she’d teleported.

As he caught up to her, Parker was staring at her hand as if she’d never seen it before.

“You see?” Eliot nodded at her. “It’s not a very efficient grip. You’ve become a different person than you were back then. You’re a lot stronger. But your mind forgot to adjust. Now, you can let it know there’s nothing to worry about anymore.”
“Huh,” Parker said. Then she grinned and held out her hand. “Wanna hold hands?”

This time, when their fingers knit together, Parker didn’t even react. As always, the speed at which she adapted to new information was impressive.

As they walked back toward their motel, Parker activated her earbud. “Hardison!”

Eliot couldn’t hear the other half of the conversation, but Parker gave a little skip.

“Guess what, Hardison? Eliot taught me to hold hands the real way!”

Eliot shook his head and rolled his eyes. He had known this con was going to be ten kinds of awkward, but he hadn’t guessed the half of it.

Parker swung their hands together. “As soon as we get back together, we can practice,” she told Hardison.

She turned to Eliot. “Hardison says, thank you.”

* * * * *

As she and Eliot continued holding hands on the way back to their motel, Parker escaped several times, just because she could.

Eliot merely huffed with impatience and growled at her, “There’s something wrong with you!”

Which was Eliot for “I don’t understand you, but I like you anyway.” Parker had a whole Eliot dictionary in her head, including translations for an astonishing number of growls and eyebrow twitches.

Parker was going to have fun tangling fingers with Hardison. His hands had fewer calluses than Eliot’s, and she would be able to escape even faster. But she thought she might not want to escape.

Hardison never seemed disappointed when she didn’t want to do things other people did. He loved her just the way she was; he never tried to fix her. But he always liked when they did new things together if they didn’t involve falling off a building.

Eliot, on the other hand, was always teaching her new things. But it wasn’t because he didn’t like who she was. Parker was sure of that. It was because he wanted her to be whatever she wanted to be. He wanted to give her everything.

Hardison was all warmth and hugs and acceptance; Eliot was a fierce wind at her back.

Hardison took people in and surrounded them; Eliot kept people on the outside and poured himself out for them.

In fact, Parker was sure Eliot would empty himself for her and Hardison. He gave and asked nothing in return. Eliot had no safety stops for himself.

Parker thought that might have been what had happened to Eliot before. He had given himself to the army, to Moreau, to who knew what others, and they had taken and given nothing back. And what they had wanted of him was his ability to hurt people and to kill. Every person or organization to which Eliot had offered himself had considered his talents something to be spent, exhausted, and if necessary, sacrificed.

They had made Eliot into what they would have been if they had possessed his abilities, and
because they were violent and often evil men, Eliot had been swallowed into their world. When he finally crawled back out, he could see himself only as the monster they saw him.

Then along came Nate who wanted to help people. Nate had come to see Eliot as more than a killer and had given Eliot the opportunity to use his skills in ways that fed rather than starved him.

Before Nate and Sophie had taken off on their honeymoon tour of the world, Nate had spoken to Parker about leaving Leverage in her hands. “Did you ever wonder why I told Hardison he died in Plan M, but I told Eliot that I had no plans in which he died?” he had asked.

Parker had considered his question for a long time. Finally, she had known she had the answer. “Because they both took too many risks.”

Nate had smiled at her and put his hand on her shoulder in the way he almost never did, as though he was proud of her. “Exactly. You understand, and that is why I can trust you to take care of them both. Hardison needed to know he was not immortal, that he was vulnerable, and Eliot needed to know that he was not ever, under any circumstances, expendable.”

Parker tightened her grip on Eliot’s hand, feeling the strength of his fingers between hers. She could get used to this hand-holding business. Unlike her, Eliot did not try to escape. Parker narrowed her eyes proprietarily at him. Her Eliot. Her family.

* * * * *

The next item on their agenda was checking on the state of their sabotaged truck.

Parker had gone from completely refusing to hold his hand to being attached to him like a barnacle. Eliot began to wonder if he would have difficulty shedding her.

She towed Eliot to the auto repair shop and introduced him to the owner, a genial and sympathetic young man who assured them that he would be finished the diagnosis of their ailing vehicle by that afternoon.

“I know you folks must be champing at the bit to get on your way, so I’m gonna squeeze it in. Can’t promise the parts’ll be available in town, but I’ll get you an estimate of the price and how much time it’ll take. I’m sorry I won’t be able to begin any actual repairs today.”

This was good news, since the sooner they had a solid cover story, the sooner they could set up the next stage of the con.

The accommodating shop owner was also willing to loan them his personal truck to haul the trailer with Spark’s tack and feed to the Ghost Ridge Ranch.

Of course the borrowed truck was not a match for the wiring on the trailer.

“Do you have an adapter for hooking a 7-pin truck socket to a 6-pin trailer plug?” Eliot asked.

“I’m sorry,” the mechanic apologized. “I don’t. Nearest place you can pick one up is probably Okotoks. We don’t even have an auto parts dealer here in town.”

“Do you have a circuit tester light, 3 alligator clip test leads, and some electrical tape?” Parker asked. “We don’t really need the trailer brakes working. Just the turn signals and the brake lights.”

“Yeah, I got that.” The mechanic disappeared into his shop for a moment, then returned with the necessary supplies.
Parker had Eliot operate the signals and the brake while she used the test light to figure out which pins were hot in the truck socket. Then they spent the next twenty minutes calling back and forth from the hitch to the rear of the trailer.

“Is it blinking now?”

“No, it’s on solid!”

“What about now?”

“No, it’s not on at all!”

When they finally had all the controls on the truck creating the right results on the trailer, Eliot stopped by the office to return the circuit tester and the electrical tape and to thank the mechanic again for his generosity.

“You going to marry that girl?” the man asked, startling Eliot.

“What?” he exclaimed.

“Well,” the man grinned, “any two people who can rewire a truck and trailer without getting in a fight can pretty much weather anything else life throws at ’em.”

Eliot laughed. “It helps that Kira knows more than I do about vehicles.”

“Hey,” the mechanic said, casting an admiring glance toward where Parker was hopping in the driver’s side. “If you don’t marry her, tell her to give me a call!”

“I’ll let her know you said that.” Eliot headed for the door. “But fair warning, you’ll have to get in line.”

Because Eliot hadn’t been fast enough, Parker was clamped onto the wheel of the truck tighter than a tick.

“This is a borrowed truck, Parker,” he reminded her as he got into the passenger seat. “Don’t mess it up.”

He was not reassured when Parker jammed the truck into gear and peeled out of the lot carolling in her less than tuneful voice, “It’s a rental! It’s not really your car! You can knock down Harleys in front of a biker bar! You can drag race a hearse! Get it up to ninety, and throw it in reverse!”

Because Parker was driving, they ended up at a playground deserted during school hours. She slowed down to almost the speed limit and looked longingly at the vacant equipment.

“Go on,” Eliot growled at her. “Stop the truck. Go play.”

She could burn off some of that appalling breakfast, and he could use the time to coordinate communication technologies with Hardison.

Parker pulled the truck smoothly along the curb and halted it. “Are you coming?” she asked.

Eliot flipped open the holster on his belt and pulled out a small black radio. “Nope. Gotta get this thing set up so I can keep in touch with Hardison out where cell coverage gets spotty.”

Parker eyed the stubby device. “Ham radio. That’s not a very big antenna.”
“Hey. This is a 5/8 wave base-loaded telescoping antennae.” Eliot demonstrated the expanded length. He waved in the direction of the Rocky Mountains. “There’s a repeater out there on Mount Burke at 5,000 feet that covers anywhere I’m likely to be all the way to Calgary and one with even more coverage on Hailstone Butte Lookout at over 7,000 feet. As long as I’ve got line of sight, this little thing should have enough power to reach one of ‘em, and they’ll send the signal on. There’s a whole system of linked repeaters along the foothills.”

It wouldn’t be a private means of communication, but it would do in a pinch.

Parker was looking at him oddly.

“What?” he asked. “Didn’t think I knew anything about technology?”

Parker shrugged. “That’s usually Hardison’s thing.”

“I’ve been dabbling with ham radio since I was knee-high to a grasshopper,” Eliot said. “Jake and I used to play hide and seek with ‘em. One of us would transmit, and the other would try to track the signal by triangulating it. And some of us used ‘em when I was in the military. Instant deployment instead of two hours to set up a satellite link. Gave us an edge. But Hardison wants all the fancy new digital gizmos with GPS and who knows what all.”

“That’s good,” Parker said. “I’d rather not lose track of you like we did when you and Hardison got kidnapped by that militia.”

Eliot agreed that having alternative reliable means of communication made a lot more sense than hoping he’d be able to hit a cell tower with the earbuds from out in the foothills. He pulled the radio manual out of his coat pocket. “You have fun out there.”

Parker nodded and hopped out of the truck. Then, giving a whoop, she galloped through the snow towards the collection of bars and platforms and slides. Eliot watched her for a moment because Parker never used the equipment in any way the manufacturers intended. She shinnied up the chains on the swing to the bar from which they hung, climbed up onto the narrow strip of steel and proceeded to give an Olympic quality gymnastic performance along its thin, rounded surface.

Eliot shook his head. Hardison was right. Watching Parker in her element never got old.

He turned on his earbud. “Hey, Hardison.”

“Yeah?”

“Ready to get these radios working?”

“I’m ready to help you figure out 21st century tech,” Hardison said smugly.

“Unlike you, I’m actually capable of reading print on paper.” Eliot switched on the radio and adjusted the squelch. Finding the section in the manual on programming repeater frequencies and operating tones, he quickly set up his radio to contact Mount Burke.

“Don’t you have to turn in your man card if you read the directions?” Hardison teased.

“If you have to ask if a man would do something, you don’t even have a man card,” Eliot retorted. “Now pick up your mic and transmit something.”

Hardison was operating the largest, most powerful base station he could purchase in Calgary with a surreptitious beam antennae Parker had added to the other telecommunications equipment on the
top of the hotel when they’d dropped him off. His signal when he gave his call sign was strong.

“You’re full quieting into the repeater,” Eliot told him.

Eliot’s handheld did not have that kind of power or range, but Hardison reported his signal was fully copiable with only a little white noise. At least the 5/8 wave antenna was producing an S reading. The little rubber ducky antenna the thing had come with could barely break squelch.

“Now let’s try the Hailstone Butte repeater,” Hardison said. “I really wanna see how the D-STAR works.”

“What the hell is a D Star?” Eliot asked.


“C’mon, Hardison. I don’t have time for your obscure Star Trek crap.”

“Wars. The Death Star is Star Wars!” Hardison began mumbling under his breath, “Don’t pop a nerve. Don’t pop a nerve.”

Eliot smirked.

Hardison heaved a put-upon sigh. “It’s a radio term, you Neanderthal! Digital Smart Technology for Amateur Radio. D-STAR. How is it you don’t know that?”

“Hey, I got my Extra Class Ham license before you were cooked up in a lab on the planet Zork!” Eliot said.

“And I bet your first radio had tubes,” Hardison snapped back.

“So what if it did?” Eliot was proud of the fact that he had learned on his grandfather’s antique equipment.

Hardison’s eye roll came right over the earbuds. “D-STAR gives you access to the Internet,” he emphasized, “and from there you can talk to any other D-STAR users on the planet even on two meters. I’ve already registered your call-sign for the Hailstone Butte D-STAR repeater and set up the Internet Gateway for your radio. I’m texting you your IP address right now.”

The text vibrated in Eliot’s phone as Hardison continued babbling.

“Your radio also has an integrated GPS receiver that will broadcast your current information when it receives a call addressed to your call-sign. And even if you’ve lost GPS signal it can transmit your last known position with date and time, so when you get your stupid ass eaten by a grizzly, we can find your remains.”

“When this job is over, I’m gonna take you camping,” Eliot promised Hardison as he flipped through the manual to Automatic Repeater Configuration. “A week in the woods is just what you need to whip that pansy ass of yours into shape.”

“Nuh uh. No way!” Hardison stated emphatically. “I like something between me and the cold, hard earth. Something like fourteen floors of a luxury hotel. And the only bear I ever wanna see is the one on the gummy bear package.”

Pressing the menu button and scrolling down to the DV set mode, Eliot followed the directions through a series of sub menus, changed his settings to automatic, and selected Hailstone’s output
frequency at 147.3900 megahertz. When he pushed the transmit button, the radio let out two beeps, and the repeater call sign scrolled across the bottom of the screen to confirm its configuration.

“Now stop with the empty threats, and let me help you get that set up,” Hardison said.

“Ain’t none of my threats empty,” Eliot pointed out. “And I already got it set up.”


“Told you, I can read.”

Parker materialized in the window of the pickup, popping in her earbud. “You two still talking?”

“No,” said Eliot, “we’re not.”

“I’m not talking to him, either,” Hardison retorted.

Parker rolled her eyes. “Boys!”

She pulled open Eliot’s door, and he saw that her other hand was full of snow.

“Oh, no you don’t!” Eliot tried to slam the door shut.

Parker was even faster. “Oh, yes I do!”

The snowball hit him in the face with an icy explosion.

“That does it. Parker, you’re dead!”

Eliot launched himself out of the pickup. Under ordinary circumstances, he would have had no hope of catching a fleeing Parker, but she was hampered by laughing so hard that she tripped over the melted and refrozen remains of a snowman.

With a flying tackle, Eliot knocked her into a drift.

Parker shrieked.

“Hey!” Hardison’s voice sounded concerned. “What’s going on? Guys? Eliot! Parker! Will somebody please tell me what’s up?”

Eliot couldn’t answer him because, while he might outweigh and out-muscle Parker, she was infinitely more agile, and her thieving hands were busily inserting snow down his neck.

The situation required stronger measures.

Pinning Parker, Eliot grabbed his own handful of snow and returned her facewash with interest for the nanosecond it took her to slither out of his grip. Scrambling to her feet, Parker dashed for the fortification of the playground equipment.

The war was on. Parker barricaded herself behind the slides, and Eliot went up a ladder to a platform to gain the advantage of airstrikes.

“Parker!” Hardison interjected. “Talk to me!”

“Can’t talk. Snowball fight!” Parker gasped, dodging Eliot’s barrage of snow missiles and ducking under the spiral slide.
“I just can’t leave you two alone, can I?” Hardison complained.

* * * * *

“If I have to change clothes one more time today, I’m gonna take you shopping,” Eliot threatened Parker as they stripped out of their soaked jeans back at the motel.

“Excuse me, Mr. I Never Pack Luggage,” Hardison interrupted. “Maybe next time you’ll check a suitcase under.”

“Nothin’ I own is leaving my sight, Hardison.” Eliot scrubbed at his hair with a towel.

“Eliot looks like a wet poodle.” Parker giggled.

Eliot could hear her in the main room, hopping around on one foot as she tried to pull her other pant leg over damp, chilled skin.

He scowled at his reflection in the bathroom mirror. Parker wasn’t wrong. Good thing Alberta weather called for hats.

Fifteen minutes later, dry and dressed again, Eliot and Parker headed for the Ghost Ridge Ranch to drop off the trailer. This time Eliot made it to the driver’s seat first.

Ha.

Parker sulked for 30 seconds.

* * * * *

With an entire battalion of misgivings and another vow to acquire a kitchen, Eliot watched Parker slew the rear end of the borrowed pickup around on the ice and gravel and head back up the ranch drive. Parker had volunteered to exchange the truck for their car and to do the grocery shopping while he spent some time bonding with his new horse. Eliot had carefully made up a list and encouraged Parker to use an actual credit card, but he expected a good percentage of her purchases would inexplicably transform into sugary cereal and hot produce—not in the temperature sense.

Eliot gave the trailer a frustrated thump with his fist. Not like he could do anything about it.

He was feeling better when he emerged from Spark’s barn with her halter and lead slung over his shoulder, his steps light with an eagerness he’d last felt he couldn’t remember how long ago.

Spark was on the far side of the corral when he reached the gate. She watched him for a moment as he leaned on the top rail, judging whether he might be worth investigating for a treat. Her nostrils flared as she tested the air, but the wind wasn’t in her favor, so she tossed her head and moved closer.

Eliot pulled out the apple he’d been carrying wrapped in paper towel all morning and held half of it out to her on the flat of his palm.

“What d’ya think, beautiful?” he asked. “How ‘bout a second date?”

Deciding he passed inspection, Spark trotted easily up to him and lipped up the apple from his hand while he slipped the halter over her head. Then she nudged his shoulder impatiently.

“Oh, you think I’m holdin’ out on you, do you?” Eliot pulled out the other half of the apple.
Spark devoured that bit with equal enthusiasm. Then she tried to eat his hair.

“No!” Eliot told her, pushing her head away. “You are not chewing on my hair.”

Spark snorted in disappointment.

Eliot poked at her side. “I can’t even find your ribs,” he told her. “You don’t need any more hay.”

Spark did her best to look mournfully starving. She edged towards the forbidden hair.

“Sorry, sweetheart. That ain’t gonna work.”

“Eliot, man. You’re just gonna have to admit you’re irresistible to females of all species,” Hardison cracked in his ear.

They’d agreed to have the earbuds on any time he and Parker were separated, which meant having Hardison’s director’s commentary on every single bloody thing he did. Eliot pulled his cap down a little more over his hair to conceal it from the greedy Spark.

Suddenly Spark’s attention shifted towards the drive that led by the barn. Her head went up and her ears swiveled. Eliot turned to note that he was about to have company.

“Shit!” Eliot exclaimed to Hardison under his breath. “Cecile Benarden, incoming at 6!”

If there was anything Eliot wanted less than to be alone with that woman, he couldn’t think of it at the moment.

“Eliot Spencer’s afraid of a guuurrlll!!!” Hardison sang.

“You would be too if you were in her sights,” Eliot grumbled. “Ok, sweetheart,” he told Spark. “I’m countin’ on you to get me out of this.”

Swinging up onto the top rail of the fence, Eliot slid onto Spark’s broad, fuzzy back. With just the lead shank for control, he urged the mare into a walk around the edge of the corral.

“Are you doin’ what I think you’re doin’?” Hardison asked, his pitch rising in alarm. “You’re operatin’ that horse without her controls, aren’t you?”

“You’re too late with the freak out,” Eliot told him. “Spark did fine with just her halter and lead last night when I rode her in.”

“You are aware, oh Quintessential Cowboy, that horses are the leading cause of animal-related death in North America?”

“I knew it!” Parker jumped in. “Horses are evil!”

“You are aware, oh Quintessential Cowboy, that horses are the leading cause of animal-related death in North America?”

“I knew it!” Parker jumped in. “Horses are evil!”

“Now see what you’ve done.” Eliot scowled at the disembodied Hardison. “I already can’t even get her to sit next to me if I smell like a horse.”

With a shift of his weight and light pressure with his outside leg, Eliot put Spark through a simple change of direction.

Yeah, he had no need for further equipment with this mare. Sure, a saddle would be better for working cattle and for long hours of riding because its tree would keep his weight distributed more evenly off of her spine, and it would keep her sweaty, itchy fur from giving him a rash, but for the short ride Eliot intended, the absence of layers of fiber and leather would allow the two of them
much more instant communication. And in this freezing weather, he could appreciate sharing her warmth. As for the lack of a bridle, Spark had demonstrated pretty conclusively that a bit was only as useful as she wanted it to be.

Leaving Hardison to complain to Parker something about “adrenaline junkies,” Eliot switched his attention to Cecile approaching the corral, her eyes on him like some sort of predator. Flirting with the mark was something that came as naturally as breathing to him, but that wasn’t supposed to be a part of this con. Which meant tightrope walking the line between offending Cecile and offending her husband.

“You’re not helping,” Eliot snapped. “You’re gonna have to deal with the scary lady all by yourself.” Hardison laughed.

“Parker?” Eliot asked. “You still anywhere nearby?” He could use some artificial girlfriend backup.

“I’ve already dropped off the truck,” Parker admitted. “I’m on my way to get the food.”

“How the hell did you get back to town so fast?”

“Oh, well, you know.”

Parker would be doing that fake innocent shrug thing she always did when you asked her where she got cash. She must’ve at least doubled the speed limit.

“I ain’t bailin’ you out of jail,” he warned.

“That’s okay,” Parker said cheerily. “I can get out on my own.”

As if sensing his mood, Spark broke into a trot. After a moment of adjustment that rattled his teeth, Eliot found the rhythm and relaxed. When he asked her to shift to a lope, her movement smoothed into silk, and Eliot forgot about his troublesome host. This was what he had missed about working with horses—this unity with another creature that felt like slipping free of gravity. Spark circled the corral and then obediently turned in, crossing into a figure eight with a flying change of lead that set his pulse racing.

Damn, this mare was near perfect. And Parker and Hardison had found her on YouTube?

“That’s Eliot’s happy quiet,” Parker said smugly. “He likes the evil horse.”

“Of course he does,” Hardison grumbled. “Both of you just never more satisfied than when you’re doin’ something that could kill you. ‘Cept when you’re doin’ something that could kill me! I don’t know why I put up with you all.”

Eliot supposed every perfect thing in his life had fallen out of the sky on his unsuspecting and undeserving head. At the top of the list was the day he had agreed that $300,000 was a sufficient sum to make him endure working with a bunch of criminals he didn’t know and didn’t trust.

“Hello!” Cecile called to him.

“See?” said Hardison. “Females of any species.”

“Go away, Hardison,” Eliot growled.

“You just call if you need me to send in a SWAT team or somethin’,” Hardison signed off.
Reluctantly, Eliot brought Spark back to a walk and approached the gate where Cecile now waited, observing him with the laser-focus Parker gave to diamonds.

“Ma’am.” Eliot nodded, halting Spark.

“Oh, call me Cecile.” She laughed breathlessly, glancing up at him through her lashes. “And can I call you James? Or do you prefer Jim?”

“Just James, ma’am . . . I mean Cecile.”

The woman was dressed in designer jeans that couldn’t have fit her closer had they been tattooed on, and her legs gave credit to both her personal trainer and her nutritionist. Her jacket was trimmed with real fur, and her snakeskin boots were seeing dirt for the first time in their lives.

“I was going to offer you a tour of the grounds, but since you’re already riding, I can get Pete to saddle up Caspar. We can ride together.” Cecile pulled out her phone and scrolled through her contacts. “Pete, I need Caspar ready to go immediately.” She paused to listen. “That’s really not my concern. Just have him tacked up.” Hanging up she turned to Eliot and Spark. “He hates having to leave his cushy office.”

Elliot imagined that the manager of a working ranch hadn’t been sitting in his office for much of that day at all. Nevertheless, he thanked Cecile politely for the offer of a tour. Now was as good a time as any for reconnaissance.

“Do you need to get your horse saddled?” Cecile asked.

“No.” Eliot shook his head. “She’s fine.”

Cecile reached out to pet Spark on the nose, but the mare jerked aside her head and pinned her ears back.

“She’s a bit spooky,” Eliot said. “Don’t much like to be touched.”

Actually, he decided, Spark had remarkably good judgment. Soothing his hand along her neck, he backed her out of reach of Cecile’s manicured claws.

“She’s a lovely animal,” Cecile said, “although a bit unmannerly.” She opened the gate and stepped back to allow Eliot to take Spark through.

As he walked Spark beside Cecile, Eliot made sure to keep the mare and incidentally himself farther than arms’ reach.

* * * * *

Caspar turned out to be a neat, elderly, grey gelding with a placid temperament. He ignored Spark’s attempts to provoke him into an equine flirtation.

Eliot was not ashamed to admit he had to grab a handful of mane as he rode out the mare’s antics.

Since everyone else refused to get excited, Spark settled down too. She pretended to ignore Caspar, but as soon as Cecile mounted and set him moving, Spark hurried to catch up.

Eliot laughed at her.

Cecile proved to be a perfectly competent horsewoman, so Eliot relaxed. He wasn’t going to have to worry about her or her horse. And there wasn’t much trouble two people on two different horses
could be expected to get into. Although he did have some pleasant memories about how much trouble two people on one horse could get into, back when he and Aimee . . . Eliot shook his head. Best not go there.

Cecile conducted her tour like a professional real-estate agent, showing him around the barns and arenas, then following the drive by the six residential homes on the property as well as the magnificent, sprawling ranch house that had to be 7,000 square feet if it was an inch.

“You’ll have to come in for coffee when we’re done,” Cecile invited with a smile calculated to melt masculine resistance.

Eliot returned the smile with a noncommittal one of his own. His first thought was that a house that size must have a great kitchen. His second thought was that he was going to have to make sure Parker was there to pick him up as soon as this tour was over.

“I can show you the trout pond and the lake,” Cecile offered. “Not that you can see much of them in the winter, but it’s a nice ride.”

“Sounds great,” Eliot agreed, happy to delay the moment when he’d either have to turn down or accept that coffee.

The two of them jogged their horses along a track that wound through softly curved hills fringed in places with the lavender-grey haze of winter brush and the black spikes of spruce trees. In spite of the chill in the air, the sun was warm on Eliot’s back, and he realized he was enjoying himself.

Cecile had toned down her advances, and was now chatting happily about her law offices in Calgary. Eliot paid just enough attention to respond intelligently, but he reserved part of his mind to appreciate the way the low winter light cast pure blue shadows down the northern slopes, stretching washes of color out from even the tiniest drift of snow, and creating long, angular images of the horses and riders that blended together like some mythical creature rising and falling with the contours of the land. Against the western horizon, the sharp teeth of the Rockies loomed and beckoned with their dangerous beauty.

“Is it safe to gallop the horses here?” he asked.

“Oh, yes.” Cecile tossed him a sparkling look almost entirely devoid of artifice, and urged Caspar into an easy lope.

Eliot reflected that Cecile did resemble her daughter. When she wasn’t trying to flirt with him, the woman could actually be both charming and attractive.

He held Spark back with the gelding for a few minutes, but Spark shook her head playfully, resisting his restraint, and lengthened her stride. Up until now, Eliot had only worked the mare in the confines of arenas. She had never had the chance to really open up. Suddenly he just wanted to let her go.

“Mind if I let her stretch her legs?” he called to Cecile.

“Go ahead.” Cecile waved at him. “I’ll keep old lazybones here at a pace that won’t give him heart failure.”

Eliot gave Spark her head. He was expecting her to surge forward. He was not expecting to feel like he’d just pulled the trigger on an M24. Spark nearly left him behind. The last time he’d been on a horse with that kind of takeoff, he’d been working thoroughbreds out of the starting gate for Willie Martin.
Regaining his balance, Eliot crouched over Spark’s neck, the frozen air and the whip of her mane stinging tears to his eyes. The world blurred to a stream of white and blue. His heart raced to the muffled beat of her hooves as adrenaline sizzled along his veins. One wrong move by either of them, and he risked breaking his neck. That whoop of pure joy might possibly have come from him.

Spark flattened out and went faster. Eliot was sure he couldn’t have stopped her if he had wanted to. But why the hell would he want to? He felt weightless, as though his skin was transparent and his body was dissolving into light. All his darkness fell under Spark’s trampling hooves, abandoned and powerless. Time unravelled and grew meaningless. For an instant, Eliot was that kid again, the one with the clear conscience and a life of dreams ahead of him, instead of the man with too much blood on his hands and nothing but nightmares behind.

Caspar and Cecile disappeared from sight and mind as Spark flew along the track bending around the shoulder of a hill. They were alone in the expanse of white that spread beyond them in increasing stillness.

And then Spark plunged to a halt, throwing Eliot high on her neck and back into the present. Her eyes and ears were focused on the band of trees directly ahead of them where the track curved away from the hillside.

Righting himself on her back, Eliot squinted in the direction she was staring. There was something in that copse, something that had pulled Spark out of her gallop and riveted her attention. He couldn’t see or hear anything that might have warranted such a response from the mare, but he knew her senses were far superior to his own.

Eliot relinquished all control to Spark, trusting her instincts. With one hand, he reached behind him and slipped free the container of bear spray. Smoothing the other hand along her neck, he waited for her to tell him what to do.

* * * *

TBC

Chapter End Notes

Parker's lyrics are from "It's a Rental" by Rik Roberts
For an instant Eliot and Spark remained frozen, a sculpture within a landscape. The only sound, the only motion in all that vast, still whiteness came from the rising clouds of their breath. The concealing trees gave no clue to Eliot, but he felt the vibrations start deep within Spark before she voiced a startling neigh.

From somewhere out of sight, an answering neigh rang faintly.
Spark unthawed and broke into a trot, heading off the track in the direction of the call. Her stiffness had dissolved back into easy motion, and Eliot grew less tense. Whatever lay ahead, Spark clearly expected no danger. However, he did not entirely stand down from his alert because what might not seem a threat to her might yet pose danger. The strange horse might be alone, but horses were often accompanied by riders, and any human presence added an element of unpredictability to the situation. It was his job to anticipate trouble Spark could not imagine.

Because he was entering an unknown situation, he initiated contact with Hardison. “Something’s come up. Spark’s all riled about another horse over in some trees. I’m gonna check it out.”

He got no response. Apparently, he was out of range of any local cell service. Come to think of it, it had been some time since he’d last heard Hardison chatting either to him or Parker. For a moment, he considered pulling out his radio, but then he was having to duck to avoid being brushed off Spark’s back by low-hanging branches.

The row of poplars and spruce followed the edge of a narrow gully that in warmer seasons would contain a stream. At first, as Spark threaded through the dense growth, Eliot couldn’t see the horse that had responded to Spark. Continuing to allow her free rein, he rode out the shifting jolts as she skidded down into the cut. Once at the bottom, Spark sped up again, her mood remaining interested and unalarmed.

As the two of them rounded a bend where the stream dropped even lower, Eliot pulled Spark to a halt in surprise. The last thing he expected to find, sheltered in the curve of the bank, was a young woman, kneeling in the middle of what looked at first like a medical emergency, surrounded by trampled snow mixed with blood and other body fluids and tissue.

Then, he realized that her arms were full of a slimy, newborn calf, nearly as big as she was, partially wrapped in some sort of fabric.

Eliot re-holstered his superfluous bear spray.

The horse who had attracted Spark’s attention, a sorrel mare, stood ground-tied nearby. She whickered happily at seeing another horse, and Spark answered in kind. The girl looked up at them, her round, pale brown face younger than he had at first thought. He could see the tracks of tears on her cold-reddened cheeks. Whatever had been the emotion behind the tears did not prevent her from giving him an elated smile.

“Oh!” she exclaimed. “Oh, thank God! Can you help me?”

“Happy to,” Eliot agreed, urging Spark down beside her. “What can I do?”

“Oh!” The girl’s voice was exasperated now. “That wretched Medea broke out of her pen and ran away to have her baby. And she always abandons them. She’s such a terrible mother. If she didn’t throw a champion every time, she’d be packaged in the freezer right now!” Her short, dark curls bounced from around her knit cap in emphasis. “And this little gal needs her mommy’s milk.”

As if in agreement, the calf let out a faint, rusty bleat.

“I’m afraid I don’t have any milk on me at the moment,” Eliot said.

“You have a horse,” the girl said. “Can you fetch that stupid cow back here?” She gestured toward where tracks led away out of the gully on the other side.
Eliot realized that she had used her coat to wrap around the calf and that she was shivering.

“One stupid cow, coming right up.” He grinned at the girl and slid off Spark’s back. Removing his own jacket, he offered it to her. “Here, put this on. It’s cold out here.”

“Thanks,” she said, taking the jacket and adding it to the insulation around the calf. “I’ve got my own padding.” She nodded at herself. “Baby here is just skin and bones and wet to boot.”

Eliot started to object but realized it wouldn’t do any good. The girl obviously cared more about the animal than she did herself.

“You don’t have a saddle,” she observed. “Take mine. Do you know how to use a rope?”

“Oh yeah.” Eliot led the eager Spark over to meet the sorrel. “Spark’s a pretty fair roping horse.”

“That’s Scrambler,” the girl said. “She’s not usually a roping horse, but she’s versatile. I was hoping to find Medea in time, but we didn’t realize she’d gotten out until too late.”

“Medea. Cute name.” Eliot undid the cinch while Spark and Scrambler touched noses and squealed at each other.

“Well, you know. We don’t name all our cows, but it’s the bad mama thing.” The girl cuddled the calf closer. “I’m Hilde, by the way. Hilde Densmore.”

“James McCoy.” Eliot pulled the right side stirrup and the cinch over the saddle, then lifted it off of Scrambler’s back.

“Oh, you’re the one who broke down in Daphne’s driveway,” Hilde exclaimed. “She said you had a great horse.”

Hadin’t Hardison said the two girls were rivals as well as belonging to feuding families? Settling the saddle on Spark’s back, Eliot reflected that the speed of gossip in a small community was faster than Hardison’s comms.

At that moment, he heard Cecile’s voice back up on the track.

“James? Where’d you go?”

“Oh, shit,” Hilde said dismally. “I’m going to be in so much trouble.”

“Really? What for?”

“Daphne’s mom hates me.” Hilde looked forlorn.

“James!”

Eliot glanced at Hilde apologetically. “I’m sorry. I’m gonna have to answer.”

“It’s okay,” Hilde sighed. “It’s been that kind of day.”

Before Cecile could get more impatient, Eliot called back, “I’m over here, by the stream.”

By the time Caspar and Cecile appeared in the brush above the bank, Eliot had the cinch done up and was preparing to mount again.

“Why did you . . .” Cecile started to address him, and then she caught sight of his companion.
“What are you doing here?” she asked Hilde, her voice going from saccharine to strident in a syllable. “This is Ghost Ridge land. And is that our calf? Answer me, young lady.”

Eliot intervened. “Miss Densmore’s here after a runaway cow that abandoned her calf. You and me are gonna go catch her.” He gave Cecile the sort of smile she’d been fishing for since they met and swung up on Spark at an angle precisely calculated to rivet the attention of his unwanted admirer. Pivoting Spark so Cecile couldn’t see his face, he winked at Hilde. “We’ll have your cow back here in two shakes.”

“Thank you,” Hilde said fervently, “for everything!”


Caspar begrudgingly picked his way down the bank and up the other side but not nearly as begrudgingly as Cecile.

The tracks of the cow led up over the hill above the stream. As he and Spark reached the crest well ahead of the laboring Caspar, Eliot’s earbud came alive again.

“. . . and if he doesn’t get back in range, what are we gonna do?”

“Hardison,” Eliot spoke quietly. “I’m fine. I’ve met one of our clients, the daughter. She’s stuck out here and needs some help getting milk for a newborn calf.”

“I’m almost done,” Parker said. “I’ve got milk. And cereal!”

Eliot pinched the bridge of his nose and winced. Of course she did. “I’m fetching her a cow, Parker.” He tried to keep the impatience in his voice to a minimum.

“Leave it to Eliot to find a damsel in distress to rescue.” Hardison laughed.

“This ain’t no damsel,” Eliot told him. “Farm girl. Tough as nails.”

He heard Caspar’s puffing breath and crunching steps approaching.

“Company. Gotta go,” he said.

“Honestly, why can’t she catch her own cow?” Cecile complained as she caught up to Eliot. “If it even is her cow and not one of ours. I don’t trust people like her.”

“What do you mean?” Eliot asked as he directed Spark along the set of cow tracks that now led down the hill away from the gully.

“You know. Those Native sorts.” Cecile wrinkled her elegant nose. “They should stay on the Reserve where they belong.”

Spark leapt ahead as if Eliot had just put spurs to her sides.

“Eliot,” Hardison interjected hastily, “I know this is the kind of person who makes you very angry, but please don’t beat the mark to a pulp just yet!”

“Or wring her neck,” Parker added.

Eliot had no intentions of blowing the con, but he was adding Cecile Benarden to the acceptable collateral damage. She was going down with her husband.
“Look, I don’t know how much you know about cattle,” Eliot controlled the bite in his voice with iron effort, “but newborn calves that get chilled and don’t get their mama’s first milk right away don’t survive real well. So let’s just get this damn cow back to her baby.”

He might have over-emphasized his need to get moving with his heels, because Spark gave a startled crow-hop and set out sideways at a bone-jarring trot, her ears clamped back.


He had to control his body language better, but thinking about Cecile treating that spunky kid back there as if she was something to scrape off her boots was making his blood boil.

Just breathe.

Retribution could wait.

Eliot forced himself to release the tension that was upsetting Spark. She rewarded him by straightening out and slowing down to an easy, ground-devouring jog. He didn’t look back to see if Cecile was following, but he could hear the jangle of Caspar’s bit.

What he could not hear was Hardison and Parker. Apparently the only cell coverage out here was on the tops of the hills.

Medea was keeping to a fairly straight course that eventually rejoined her tracks leading from where she had given birth back toward the Densmore land. Having rid herself of her discomfort, she was heading home.

Halting Spark, Eliot turned and waited for Cecile to catch up.

“Which direction is Hilde’s ranch?” he asked, careful not to reveal any pre-existing knowledge. “Southeast or southwest?”

“I’m pretty sure it’s that way.” Cecile waved vaguely southeast.

“Then let’s try cutting her off. She’s keeping to the valley, but that’s the long way around. We’ll go up and over as the crow flies.”

He hoped he was making the right decision. At least with all the snow on the ground, they weren’t going to lose their way.

“C’mon.” Eliot turned Spark and sent her up the slope.

Spark and the out-of-breath Caspar arrived in a flurry at the top of the hill, and Eliot called a halt while he scanned the barren landscape for any sign of a lone cow.

“There she is.” Cecile might be a pain in the ass, but she had a sharp eye.

“Okay, let’s see if we can just herd her back to her baby.”

The two horses worked their way down into the valley again, this time ahead of Medea.

Any hopes Eliot had that Medea would cooperate soon vanished. The cow refused to be redirected, lowering her head, which had actual horns, and trying to dodge around them.

“Oh, no you don’t!” Eliot told her, loosing Hilde’s rope from her saddle. “You’re not gonna get away with bein’ a deadbeat mama.”
Using an unfamiliar rope was going to be tricky.

“You and Caspar see if you can keep her from getting past us,” he directed Cecile.

“I really have no idea what I’m doing,” Cecile snapped back. “I’m not a ranch hand.”

“Use your imagination!”

Swinging the loop to widen it, Eliot approached the belligerent Medea. “You know, I’m really startin’ to dislike you,” he told her.

Medea swung her horns threateningly.

The first toss of the rope slapped uselessly across the cow’s neck. Eliot wasn’t surprised. He hadn’t worked cattle regularly in years, and he didn’t have this rope’s measure yet.

Swerving away from Eliot and Spark, Medea tried to make an end run around Caspar.

“What do I do?” Cecile squeaked.

Fortunately, Caspar was an old cow horse. He spun nearly fast enough to unseat Cecile and cut off Medea’s escape route.

“That!” Eliot shouted back, reeling in the rope and preparing to try again. “Just keep your horse between that cow and Densmore’s, and let him do the rest.”

Having a better feel for the rope, now, Eliot sent Spark plunging after Medea, swinging it and feeling the weight and tension in it. At the perfect moment, he released the loop to float out over Medea’s wicked horns and settle around her head. Spark slid to a halt and began to back up, pulling the rope taut between her and the cow.

Medea lurched back, flopped around a bit like a fish on a hook, did her best to strangle herself, and then resigned herself to her captivity and stood still.

“Y’know, this is all your own fault,” Eliot told her as he shortened up the rope. “You coulda just moseyed on back to your calf like a sensible cow. But no. You had to try to outwit us, and let me tell you now, that ain’t ever happenin’! And now you gotta choke on this oversized necktie. You let me know how that goes for you.”

Progress back to Hilde and the calf was slow, proceeding in fits and starts, as Medea occasionally cooperated and trotted along beside the horses but even more frequently resisted arrest, shaking her head and pulling back on the rope. Some of the time Eliot had Spark just drag her while Cecile and Caspar brought up the rear of their little procession.

It was with relief that they finally towed the recalcitrant animal back into the gully.

“You found her!” Hilde cheered. The girl was still where they had left her, crouched in the snow holding the calf wrapped in both their coats. “Now, if we can just get her to let her baby nurse.”

“How about we try tying her up? Is she likely to be aggressive?” Eliot asked, directing Spark so that she did most of the work hauling Medea up to a sturdy tree.

“I don’t know. We should probably hobble her so she can’t kick.”

“You got any hobbles?” Eliot hitched the standing end of Hilde’s rope around the trunk with a quick release knot. He had no faith in Medea’s good sense not to strangle herself.
“No. I didn’t think to bring those.” Hilde made a disgusted face at her lack of foresight.

This was going to suck. “Let me show you a little trick I learned in . . . well it comes in handy when you need temporary hobbles. Can I use Scrambler’s lead shank?”

“Sure,” Hilde agreed. She watched as Eliot untied the lead from around her horse’s neck and unclipped it. “Guess it’s a good thing I was in such a hurry I didn’t take off her halter.”

Eliot positioned Spark alongside the cow and dropped her lead, ground tying her so she could function as a sort of barricade to keep Medea from evading him or her calf. Giving Medea’s restless hindquarters a wide berth, he approached the cow from her other side. The soothing hand he ran along her flank did nothing to calm the nervous switching of her tail. This was going to be a shitty job, literally and figuratively. He was going to have to move fast.

“Be careful,” Cecile warned him.

It was good advice, but taking it would involve not attempting this at all.

By the time he had two loops of rope around her far pastern, the damn cow had kicked him twice, stomped all over his feet, and lashed his face with her scourge of a tail more times than he could count. Spark braced herself and refused to move as Medea heaved against her side. The mare laced back her ears, glared, and bared her teeth, and for a wonder, the cow seemed intimidated enough to avoid her.

Eliot, on the other hand, inspired no such respect. Medea was determined to do as much damage to him as bovinely possible. While Eliot struggled to twist the rope several times and loop it around the cow’s near pastern at the price of another set of bruises, he relieved his feelings by describing to Medea in detail the most elaborate dishes he could imagine making with every single part of a cow, complete with wine pairings.

She got back at him by whipping him with her filthy tail.

As soon as he had the knot tied in the makeshift hobbles, Eliot threw himself out of range.

“I take it back,” he told her balefully. “You are not worthy of being seared in olive and truffle oil! Hamburger. Greasy, fast food hamburger, overdone, with a stale bun and flat root beer. That’s all you’re good for.”

Hilde’s profuse apologies for his injuries were somewhat less convincing interspersed with her giggles at his tirade.

Cecile had a hand over her mouth that could be concealing either shock or amusement.

Eliot just gritted his teeth, sitting in the snow and rubbing at the spot on his thigh where Medea had landed her solidest kick. He’d be lucky if he wasn’t limping for the next few days.

“Okay, we need to try to get Medea interested in her calf,” Hilde said. “Can you take her off me?”

Getting stiffly to his feet, Eliot forced himself to walk steadily over to Hilde. Bending down, he lifted the calf out of her arms. She was a good-sized heifer calf, at least 70 pounds, he judged. She’d need every ounce of weight she had to counteract the cold she’d been subjected to.

“Owwwww,” Hilde groaned. “I think every nerve I own is asleep.”

The girl got to her knees with all the grace of a severely arthritic grandmother.
“Ouch. Ouch. I don’t have any feet anymore,” she whimpered. “Okay, while I figure out how to walk, can you see if Medea will just try licking her calf? That might jumpstart her mommy instincts.”

Medea could not have been less interested in licking her calf if it had been made of stone.

Hilde hobbled over and tried smearing birthing fluids on the cow’s muzzle and tongue to encourage her to lick. Medea remained impervious to her baby’s weak cries.

“The poor thing is so hungry!” Hilde was near tears again. “I don’t know if she can stand. I hate to put her in the snow, even though trying to get up would be good for her.”

“Cecile,” Eliot called. “Can you get the blanket off of Spark?”

He thought Cecile might refuse. After all, this was a woman who hired staff to saddle her horses for her. But then she gave an elegant shrug, dismounted, and crossed over to Spark.

Spark laid her ears back and rolled her eyes threateningly at the woman.

“Cut it out, Spark,” Eliot yelled. “Let her get your saddle off.”

Spark remained obdurate in her dislike.

“I’m not going anywhere near that animal.” Cecile decided, returning angrily to Caspar.

“I’ll get it,” Hilde said, wiping her messy hands on her jeans.

Spark pinned her ears again at the approach of a stranger, but Hilde kept chatting to her, moving slowly and calmly as she removed the saddle, and the mare did not carry out her threats although she never stopped looking as though she would like to.

When Hilde had the heavy blanket spread on the ground, Eliot deposited the calf gently on its insulating surface. They watched as the little creature tried and failed several times to fold her forelegs under her chest and wriggle her rear end up into the air. Eliot was about ready to give in and try to help her when she heaved up on her hind legs. It took several more attempts, but she finally stood on all four wobbly pins making pathetic, hungry noises.

Hilde pointed her in the right direction.

Medea objected strenuously, but she was pinned between Hilde, Eliot, and the calf on one side, and a furious Spark on the other, while the hobbles prevented her from kicking. However, her tail got in a few more irritated slaps as Eliot supported the calf while she nuzzled in the general direction of her mother’s milk.

“Come on,” Hilde encouraged. “You can figure it out. All that nice milk is right there.”

Finally, the calf latched on and begin to suckle tentatively.

“Yes!” Hilde exclaimed. “Go. Go. Go!”

“That’s what I’m talkin’ about!” Eliot slapped the calf on the rump.

He and Hilde exchanged high fives. Cecile merely looked bored and haughty.

Medea calmed down, because she really did want to be milked, but her disinterest in her calf continued unabated.
“Stupid cow,” Hilde muttered. “I suppose we’ll have to keep tying you up to nurse for weeks.”

The girl was pressed up against the warmth of the cow, shaking. She was really a tiny thing, coming barely up to Eliot’s shoulder in height. She didn’t look capable of the feats of endurance she had exhibited. Her jacket was soaked with the fluids from the calf so there was no point in suggesting she put it on.

Eliot sighed and shed one more layer, his plaid flannel shirt. That left him in his thermal underwear, which fit him tightly enough to renew Cecile’s interest in the proceedings.

“Here,” Eliot offered his shirt to Hilde. “Put this on yourself this time.”

“No, I can’t take your clothes.”

“Yeah, you can,” Eliot insisted. “And then you’ll put on my jacket because it’s in a lot better shape than yours. I’m gonna help you get this critter home, and you can give them back to me there.”

While the calf finished nursing, Eliot wrapped Hilde in his shirt, but she insisted the calf keep the jacket.

“What’s the worst that could happen to me?” she asked. “Frostbite? Pneumonia? I’ll be fine.”

Eliot had seen mules look less stubborn. He shrugged. He couldn’t force her to wear his coat. “I’m gonna put the saddle back on Spark. You good with riding bareback? You’ll be a lot warmer.”

Hilde nodded, her teeth chattering too much for her to speak.

There was no way the girl was going to be able to mount her horse. In fact, she probably didn’t have the coordination for a knee up, either. Eliot solved the problem by lifting her and setting her on Scrambler, as if she were his nephew back when he had been a little shaver.

“Thanks,” Hilde managed.

Dusting off the damp blanket so that at least there weren’t any bits of dirt or twigs that might rub sores, he carefully re-saddled Spark. “It’s just for a short ride,” he promised. When he had the cinch done up, he transferred Medea’s rope to the saddle horn. Getting the hobbles off her cost him three more bruises and numerous tail-lashings.

“Dogfood.” Eliot amended his previous threats. “Not fit for human consumption. You are gonna be dry, generic-brand kibble.”

“Don’t I wish,” Hilde agreed fervently.

With Medea secured for transport, that left her calf.

Scooping it up, Eliot approached Spark. “Hey girl, mind if we take on a hitchhiker?”

Spark sniffed the calf, then lost interest completely. Taking that as consent, Eliot settled the calf across the saddle and mounted behind it. The two of them made a tight fit. Eliot took a minute to adjust the calf for minimum discomfort. Then he tucked the coats securely around it.

“Let’s go,” he told Hilde and Cecile.

Cecile cleared her throat. “I believe I will head home now. You don’t need me anymore.”

Eliot supposed that for Cecile to show up at the Densmore residence would be more than
awkward. He nodded. “Thanks for the tour and your help.”

“Yeah, thank you, Mrs. Benarden,” Hilde added.

“You’re welcome,” Cecile told Eliot, ignoring Hilde. “See you later.” Giving Eliot a final come-hither smile, she invited, “Don’t forget to drop by the house for that cup of coffee or maybe something a little stronger when you get back. You must be completely frozen.”

Counterfeiting an anticipation he did not feel, Eliot smiled back. “Thank you, ma’am. I sure appreciate the offer. I will if I have the time.”

He was not going to have the time. Parker would be at the ranch to rescue him when he returned—if she hadn’t been arrested for speeding and reckless endangerment. With a farewell wave to the departing Cecile, he turned Spark to follow Scrambler.

As the rope tightened, Medea refused to budge. Spark set herself for a tug-of-war, and Hilde brought her horse around to add to the cow’s motivation. Finally the ornery beast was moving, and they clambered out of the gully. They followed neither Medea’s path nor the one Eliot had taken with Cecile. Hilde was familiar with the terrain in a way that let Eliot know she had been here more than once before. She conducted them on a direct route that led through a forested cut between two hills. Medea finally settled down and allowed herself to be driven ahead of the two horses, although Eliot left the rope on her just in case she changed her mind.

“They always let you skip school to herd cattle?” Eliot asked Hilde by way of making conversation.

Hilde gave a bitter not-laugh. “Someone has to do it, and since the accident, that someone is me or my mom. She had to take my dad to see a specialist in Calgary this morning, so . . . “ Hilde shrugged. “My math teacher was not amused. I missed a test today.”

“Accident?” Eliot asked gently. Hardison hadn’t said anything about an accident. This was new intelligence, but he didn’t want to push Hilde into uncomfortable revelations if she didn’t want to confide in a stranger.

“My dad,” Hilde said. “He was coming home late from the city, and someone came right out of a side road, ran a stop sign, and T-boned him. He doesn’t remember much, and whoever it was didn’t stick around to help or even call 911. It really broke Dad up a lot—his legs, his pelvis, his lower back. That was just after Christmas. He’s in a wheelchair now. Doctors don’t think he’ll ever walk again. He wants to, but wanting isn’t always enough, is it?”

“Yeah, I guess it’s not.” Eliot had walked away from a lot of things he probably shouldn’t have, survived when he’d been given up for dead more than anyone had a right to, but what Hilde was talking about—losing the ability to move? That had to be close to his deepest dread. Hilde’s father had to be going through hell.

“He hates having to leave all the stuff he used to do around the ranch to me,” Hilde said. “I didn’t tell him about that test.”

“So, you take care of the whole operation?”

“No. I mean, not really. Mom and Gramps help. Sometimes my uncle takes time off from his farm on the Reserve. Dad says we need to hire someone else, but people kind of like to get paid, and where’s the money supposed to come from?”

And with the ranch hemorrhaging cattle like Hardison had indicated it was doing—Eliot shook his
head. There was something about the whole situation that was ringing some fairly ominous bells in
the back of his mind. It was a good thing one of the Densmores had contacted Leverage.

Their conversation and his thoughts were interrupted by their arrival, more quickly than Eliot had
expected, at the fence line that separated the Ghost Ridge Ranch from the Circle Bar D.

Communication with Hardison and Parker also resumed. He could hear Parker singing along with
the radio in the car, although she was not singing the song that was on the radio. The resulting
cacophony made him want to smash his earbud—while it was still in his ear—with a sledge
hammer. Gritting his teeth, Eliot refrained, reminding himself that at least it wasn’t Sophie’s
acting.

Not too much further, they came to a gate constructed of poles and barbed wire.

“Someone’s going to have to open that.” Hilde scowled at the unwieldy contraption.

“Let me give it a try,” Eliot offered. Maneuvering Spark alongside the gate, he slipped the wire
loop over the fence post and yanked the gate post out of the lower loop with hands that were
growing clumsy with cold. The gate became a sagging, dragging, uncooperative collection of wire
and assorted poles. Spark delicately avoided getting her feet tangled in any of it and pivoted
allowing Eliot to keep the gate as taut as possible. When their little cavalcade had made it through,
she performed the entire operation in reverse.

“Wow!” Hilde was impressed. “She’s really well-trained.”

“Yeah,” Eliot said, patting Spark’s neck approvingly. “And whip smart, too.”

“We’re almost there,” Hilde said, sighing. “You’ll be able to see the place just over that next rise.”

As they came up over the hill, Eliot got his first view of the Circle Bar D Ranch.

Hilde waved her arm. “This place has been in my father’s family since before Alberta was a
province, and my mother’s people were here ages before that. She says our land gave birth to
Canada.”

“Your mom’s First Nations?” Eliot asked, although he had gathered that from Cecile’s comments.

“Yes.” Hilde wasn’t looking at him. “We’re Tsuu T’ina.”

Eliot wasn’t familiar with that nation. “So all this,” he indicated the land rolling up to the foothills,
“is Tsuu T’ina territory?”

Hilde did look at him then. “Yeah, but most people don’t get that a treaty isn’t the same thing as a
sale.”

“Hey, I know,” Eliot said. “My mother’s mother was card-carrying Oklahoma Cherokee. The
summer my mama died, I spent a lot of time with my Elisi, and we’d go visit her family on their
farm.” For a moment the pale landscape blurred, and instead, he was riding horses with Jake and
their cousins over gold-green hills in the warm August wind. It was a memory he usually avoided,
tied up, as it was, in so many feelings of loss.

“I’m sorry,” Hilde said.

Eliot didn’t know what his face had revealed, but it had obviously been too much. “It was a long
time ago,” he said, nudging Spark to pick up her pace. “Let’s get on down there.”
To his relief, Hilde dropped the subject and followed his lead.

Medea had ceased trying to outmaneuver them. Getting it into her skull that home and food were nearby, she trotted eagerly down the trail that led to the farmyard below.

Having just toured the Benarden spread, Eliot was struck by how insignificant the Densmore operation appeared. A small, shabby two-story farmhouse shared a yard with a single-wide trailer and a crumbling, ancient cabin. The rough porch on the trailer was grey with age, but the ramp up to it making it wheelchair accessible was still the gold of un-weathered boards. Other than the residences, only a few small outbuildings and sheds were scattered between the rail-fenced areas. The largest building on the property that might have been a shop or a barn was nothing but a pile of charred timbers. Eliot felt a shiver of sympathy. The aura of despair about this place was like a physical weight.

Hilde noticed the shiver but misinterpreted it. “You’re cold!” she said. “Let’s hurry and get you and that calf warmed up.”

As if she wasn’t freezing herself. His shirt wasn’t nearly adequate for the temperature, and she hadn’t stopped shivering herself.

Before the final drop into the valley, they crossed a level area containing the triangle of barrels where Hilde must practice her sport, and Eliot remembered the covered arena he and Cecile had visited on their tour, with its neatly harrowed sand provided by the Benardens for Daphne. These two girls led very different lives.

As they rode into the yard, they were met by an ecstatic, elderly border collie who took over the management of Medea with arthritic determination. The dog was followed by two people coming out of the house. Eliot recognized them as the Leverage clients from the Facebook photo.

“We found her!” Hilde crowed, slipping off Scrambler’s back and falling into her grandmother’s arms. “And the baby is okay. A grand little heifer calf.”

“We should probably get her somewhere warm,” Eliot pointed out.

Attention shifted from Hilde to him.

“Oh!” Hilde remembered her manners. “This is James McCoy. He helped me catch Medea and get her baby fed. Mr. McCoy, this is my grandmother Inge, my grandfather Arvid. I’m sorry. I don’t know anything else about you.”

Eliot noticed she left Cecile out of the narrative. She had also given him no indication that she knew he was here in Black Diamond to help her family. Someone was keeping the call to Leverage a secret. “I’m just passing through,” he said, leaning down to shake the senior Densmore’s hand. “Truck broke down, and the Benardens offered to board my horse while we get it repaired.”

“That was . . . kind of them.” Inge Densmore sounded surprised. “I’m sorry about your truck, but grateful you were there to help Hilde.”

“My pleasure, ma’am.” Eliot took her offered hand and bowed a kiss over it.

Inge blushed like a girl.

“We can put Medea in the small pen. There’s a shelter there, and she’ll be available to nurse her calf,” Hilde said, recalling everyone to the more pressing business at hand.
“You should go inside,” Eliot told her. “You’re practically an icicle.” He turned to Inge. “She’s been sitting in a snowdrift holding onto this calf for better’n three quarters of an hour.”

This information set Inge to clucking and fussing over her granddaughter.

“You’re practically an icicle.” He turned to Inge. “She’s been sitting in a snowdrift holding onto this calf for better’n three quarters of an hour.”

“Not until we’ve taken care of the calf,” Hilde insisted.

“I’m sure me and your grandfather can manage,” Eliot said.

“Yes, come with me, Hilde.” Inge put a shepherding arm around Hilde’s shoulders. She delivered a last bit of instruction over her shoulder as they reached the back door of the house, “After you’ve let that calf nurse again, bring her inside. We’ll keep her in the kitchen for a little bit.”

“Get one of Reidar’s coats for Mr. McCoy, here,” Arvid called after the two women.

“Of course, poor boy!” Inge popped inside and bustled back out clutching a leather coat lined with sheepskin.

Over Eliot’s protests that he was fine, and in spite of Spark’s ears-back glare, Inge thrust the coat into his arms. “My son is a little narrower than you, but I think you’ll be able to fit into this. He doesn’t wear this one anymore.”

After that, what could he say but “Thank you, Mrs. Densmore.”

She patted his hand, “You just put that on before you catch your death.”

Then she patted Spark on her ill-tempered nose. “And you, get a smile back on your ears, missy. I’m taking care of your man.”

The startled Spark snorted and threw back her head, but her ears went up.

There was really no arguing with grandmothers. Obediently, Eliot donned the coat. The shoulders were a bit tight, but he had to admit that the warm wool was a welcome addition.

“When you bring that calf in, I’ll have coffee ready. You do drink coffee?” Inge gave Spark a final nose rub. “That’s a good girl.”

Spark shook her head like she was ridding herself of a horsefly.

Coffee sounded wonderful, but Eliot needed to keep his time spent with the clients to a minimum. “Thank you, ma’am, but I’m afraid I have to get back. I’m meetin’ my girl for lunch.”

“You are?” said Parker.

“Shhhh, mama,” Hardison said. “Eliot’s busy. And he can’t hang out with the good guys. He’s supposed to be a bad guy.”

“Ever notice how hard that’s getting for him?” Parker asked.

“Yeah, that crispy burnt coating is full of gooey, soft marshmallow,” Hardison teased. “Poke him, and he goes squish. Kids, puppies, little old ladies—he’s a walking Hallmark card. You know, the most terrifyingly impressive thing about the US military is how they managed to turn a guy like that into the guy Eliot used to be.”

“Well, my dear,” Arvid said to his wife, “we’d better get this young man on his way.”
Eliot turned Spark to follow Arvid. “Hardison, I’m gonna plant a bomb in your orange soda if you don’t shut up,” he threatened sub-vocally. “What’s gettin’ hard is keeping my act straight with you two nattering in my head.”

For a wonder, Parker and Hardison piped down and let him work.

Arvid led the way to Medea’s new home with Eliot and Spark and the dog keeping the cow in line behind him.

“Just hold her here for a minute while I get the halter and hobbles,” he told Eliot.

When Arvid returned, he added a forkful of hay to the manger at the back of the shed, and Medea settled down to being tied, munching dreamily as if she were a perfectly docile beast. Spark went all envious over Medea’s windfall, but Arvid forked her some hay too, so she settled down. He also brought a small colt blanket to exchange for the coats still wrapping the calf.

Contemplating his returned jacket, Eliot figured Parker was going to make him ride in the trunk of the car. He draped it over Spark’s saddle to air it out and maybe dry a little of the calf goo in the sunlight.

While the calf rested on some straw, Eliot and Arvid got the cow kick-proofed. In the process, Eliot added two more bruises to the score he had to settle with Medea.

It hadn’t been that long since the calf had last fed, but that had been a bit of a rushed affair, complicated by the need to get her back to where she could be warmed. Now, given another chance, the calf tucked in to nurse a little more vigorously than she had at first.

Arvid eyed the evidence that those weren’t the only times Eliot had been kicked that day. “Sorry about that,” he said. “You’ve been a right good neighbor for someone who’s a stranger in town. Our Hilde’s a capable girl, but she needed a hand today.”

Eliot brushed off the apology. “No problem. Glad I could help.”

“We’ve got more cause than this to thank you for, I’m thinking.” Arvid’s gaze was sharp now. “You’re with that Leverage group, aren’t you? Ms. Parker informed me that someone by the name of James McCoy would be dropping by to sort this cattle rustling situation out.”

“It’s just Parker,” Parker mumbled in his ear.

“That’s what we do,” Eliot nodded, consigning Parker to the role of white noise and therefore to be ignored. “Although it’ll probably be best if we don’t meet again until I’ve wrapped it up. “

“I understand,” Arvid agreed. “Although I don’t know what you can do that the RCMP haven’t already tried.”

Eliot grinned. “Only everything that the RCMP haven’t been able to try.”

Arvid raised an eyebrow and shook his head. “Sounds like I’m better off not knowing.”

“Probably,” Eliot agreed. Law-abiding citizens usually found the ease with which Leverage went over the line a little too nerve-wracking.

As Arvid broke open a bale of straw to add to the insulation on the ground around the cow and calf, he confessed, “I haven’t told the rest of them. We’ve always been a proud family, and my son would never forgive me for asking for charity. But you can’t eat pride. Inge and my daughter-in-
law Gwen and Hilde do their best, but I don’t know how much longer we can hold on. And I’ll be damned if we lose this place without a fight.”

“We’re not in the business of charity,” Eliot pointed out. “We’re in the business of justice.”

Arvid looked like he was trying to decide if that answered his objections or even made sense. He frowned. “I appreciate you taking on our problems like they’re your own, but I wish you’d let me pay you something.”

Eliot gave Medea a poke in the haunch as she showed signs of trying to tread on her calf. “Leverage runs on an alternative revenue system. We really can’t take anything,” he explained.

“Forgive me for saying this, but you seem too good to be true.”

Eliot shrugged. “Way I see it, you haven’t much to lose by trying.”

“I suppose you’re right. We’ve certainly run out of other options.” Arvid gave a laugh that echoed Hilde’s in its bitterness. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m grateful for anything you can do. But we’ve kind of used up all the hope around here. And the thought of having a little again is almost worse than having none at all.”

Arvid leaned on the fence and contemplated the calf who represented something caught back from the jaws of whatever curse seemed to be swallowing his home. “I guess I haven’t told the others partly because I didn’t want to hear about doddering, naïve, old men who get taken by charlatans on the Internet, and partly because I didn’t want my son to feel I don’t believe he can manage this place now that he’s disabled, but mostly because I don’t want to get their hopes up and then have them crushed.”

“I understand,” Eliot said. And he did. It was a story he’d seen reflected in so many eyes over the years he’d been a part of this team. Being a part of retrieving people’s hope from the ruins of their despair was a gift salvaged from the lost dreams of his childhood, and he could never sufficiently thank Nate for having returned that to him.

He was really looking forward to taking Benarden down. Which involved getting back to Ghost Ridge. Eliot began unsaddling Spark. “Where can I put Hilde’s tack?”

“She’s keeping it in the trailer now that the barn’s gone. You’ll need the key.” Arvid handed Eliot a ring of keys with one selected out. “We were fortunate that’s where it was when the fire happened. And more than that, there were no animals in the barn at the time.”

“That’s still a tough break.”

“Yeah. These things happen.”

Eliot was starting to think too many things had “just happened” to the Densmores.

By the time he had Hilde’s saddle stored, the calf was done her meal. Arvid turned Medea loose in the pen, but left her hobbles on. She’d be able to move around, and no one else would have to go through the rodeo of getting them on her again.

Looping Spark’s lead over his arm, Eliot pre-empted the older man and picked up the sleepy calf a final time. When Arvid objected that Eliot had done enough, Eliot just set out for the house. “You can carry her when we get there,” he assured Arvid.

Inge met them at the back door with Eliot’s shirt and a disposable cup of coffee. “You can take it
with you,” she said.

“I think I’m in love with your wife,” Eliot told Arvid.

“You’re about forty years too late, son,” Arvid responded, putting his arm around Inge.

“Oh go on with you,” Inge laughed.

Eliot handed the calf over to Arvid, who took it into the house. Then he gave Inge back her son’s coat. “Thanks again,” he told her. Shrugging into his shirt and grimy coat, he took advantage of the steps to the house as a mounting block to make getting on Spark a little easier.

“Don’t forget your coffee!” Inge handed the cup up to him.

Eliot cradled the steaming beverage in his chilled hands. “This’ll certainly hit the spot.”

Arvid and a round ball of blankets with Hilde’s face peeking out appeared in the doorway to wave good-bye to him.

Resisting the impulse to showboat out of the farmyard at a gallop like the hero in a B western movie, Eliot turned Spark back on the path they’d come in on, keeping her to a slow jog. Before he got out of range of telecommunications, he needed to contact his team.

“Hardison?”

“Yes, John Wayne? Or is it Clint Eastwood? Or, I know, it’s Tom Mix, isn’t it?”

Eliot ignored Hardison’s pathetic attempt at humor. “What can you dig up about a hit and run accident involving Hilde’s father some time around Christmas? It may have been a coincidence, but I’m just sayin’ . . . “

“You think our mark put out a contract on him?” Parker asked, sounding intrigued instead of horrified.

“I don’t know, but there’s a pattern here I recognize, and it’s not a good one. Either they’ve got hell’s own luck, or someone’s stacking the deck. See what you can find on their barn fire, too. They may both be chance, but if I were trying to drive someone out, that’d be the way I’d do it. Take out the person in charge. Reduce the assets. If that’s it, they botched the hit, though, and I wouldn’t be surprised if they try again.”

“That’s a hell of a lot of trouble to go to for a piece of dirt,” Hardison pointed out again.

“We need to get into Benarden’s office,” Parker said. “The mechanic found the computer problem in our truck, so we have our alibi. We work on getting Eliot a job offer tonight.”

“The job.” Hardison’s voice went up a notch. “The job that was supposed to be Eliot becoming a cattle rustler but that now involves him cozying up to a murderer and arsonist? That job?”

Before Eliot could respond, Parker jumped in. “It’s not like he hasn’t done all those things himself. He’ll know just how to act.”

“Because it’s not an act,” Eliot said quietly.

“Yes it is,” Parker insisted. “Now get the man the information he needs,” she told Hardison.

“I’m on it.”
Cecile had her eagle eyes peeled for Eliot’s arrival back at the Ghost Ridge Ranch. By the time he’d turned Spark out in her corral, the relentless woman was loitering by the gate.

“Parker!” Eliot hissed. “Are you here yet?”

“Almost!” Parker exclaimed over the sound of screeching tires.

“If you get pulled over instead of saving me from this woman, I’m gonna kill you!”

Eliot pasted a smile on his face and turned to greet Cecile.

“So, you’ve met our charming neighbors, the Densmores,” Cecile said, her voice dripping with disdain.

He was the bad guy, Eliot reminded himself. He was on the same side as the Benardens. For now.

“That place is kind of a dump, isn’t it? Held together with baling wire and rotting wood.” Eliot shook his head. “I’ve seen some crummy operations, worked on a few, but that one takes the cake.”

“Oh, I know.” Cecile tucked her hand into the bend of his elbow and snuggled her unwelcome self up against his arm. “But let’s forget about them. How about that drink I promised you?”

Eliot could hear the crunch of gravel on the drive although he couldn’t see the car yet.

“As much as I’d love to,” he told Cecile, “I’m afraid I’ve promised to take Kira out for lunch.”

“Kira?” Cecile looked blank.

“My girlfriend,” Eliot reminded her. “You met her last night at the gate. And here she is!”

He did not have to fake the delight on his face as he saw Parker bouncing out of the car she had parked behind Spark’s barn.

“Oh, yes, of course,” Cecile agreed smoothly, her tone dismissing Parker as irrelevant. “Well, some other time, perhaps?”

“Count on it,” Eliot smiled at her. Slipping out of her grip, he held out his hand. “It’s been a pleasure.”

“Indeed,” Cecile shook his hand briefly then watched with calculating eyes as he hurried away from her towards his “girlfriend.”

For the sake of sending Cecile a message to back off, Eliot asked Parker, “You got a hug for me, sweetheart?”

Parker’s personal space varied wildly and erratically. Sometimes he couldn’t peel her off with a spatula, and every time he moved his arm he’d elbow her in the ribs. Other times, like with the hand-holding, Parker kept her distance as if she’d measured it and set up caution tape. Then there were the times when Parker simply disappeared, as though breathing the same air as other people was too much contact. The only constant was that Parker picked the level of formality for the occasion.

She had become far better at controlling her proximity alerts on the con, but Eliot never wanted to cause Parker any discomfort. So he made it a point to give her the choice as much as possible.
This time was one of the spatula moments. She threw herself at him like he was a hundred foot drop. Given the lack of warning, Eliot had only a fraction of a second to brace himself for the impact of her arrival.

Parker clamped her arms around him in her jaws-of-life grip and nuzzled her nose into his neck, inhaling deeply. “My Eliot,” she mumbled.

“It’s James, Kira,” Eliot reminded her under his breath, shifting his balance to adjust for her weight. Cecile wasn’t close enough to hear Parker’s mistake, but they needed to be in character at all times in public.

“I know, silly.” Parker pulled back so she could look him in the eyes. “But that wasn’t James’ hug. That was Eliot’s.”

The bubble of amusement that frequently accompanied his conversations with Parker brought an affectionate grin to Eliot’s face. “You’re starting to sound like Sophie,” he warned Parker. “What does James get, then?”

“Nose kisses,” said Parker, kissing him coquettishly on the tip of his nose. “Because James is a boyfriend.”

“Should I be jealous?” Hardison’s voice came over the earbuds.

“No!” Eliot had to resist setting Parker firmly aside—assuming he could detach her.

“Yes!” Parker giggled. “But you can kiss Eliot’s nose next time.”

“We gotta go,” Eliot growled.

“Not before I get my nose kiss,” Parker said, her eyes all mischief, her hold on him still industrial strength.

Eliot tried to hang on to some vestige of bad temper as he took Parker’s wind-chilled face between his palms, but an overwhelming tenderness nearly staggered him as he dropped a kiss on her nose. His Parker. His family.

“And who was that for?” Parker asked almost shyly as he lowered his hands to her shoulders.

“That was for Parker and Kira and Alice and the ghost in the air vent and whoever you want to be, all of you.”

And fuck the supercilious, McGill lawyer Cecile who wasn’t worthy to tie one of Parker’s shoelaces.

“Now I am jealous,” Hardison complained.

“Eliot can kiss your nose next time, too.” Parker finished her hug and unlatched her arms.

“I’m pretty sure that’s not what . . . you know what? I’m just gonna go get in the car. You two figure it out.” Eliot stomped off with Parker’s and Hardison’s laughter vibrating in his ear.

Parker skipped after him and grabbed his hand. “Hey,” she said. “You really stink. And now, so do I. We need to find a laundromat.”

* * * * *
Chapter End Notes

I wish to thank Gina, my very dear friend and member of the Vuntut Gwich'in Nation, for helping me create First Nations characters and for advice on how to handle racist characters. Any errors are entirely my own.
Chapter 27

Portland, Oregon, USA

The car wasn’t designed to travel over such backwoods, unpaved roads. It was definitely not designed to hit potholes at the speed they were hitting them. Ezekiel only slowed down on the way to the location Stone’s pickup had been found when rounding one-lane corners a fraction more prudently. Spring green foliage overhanging the road slapped the sides of the vehicle, but Ezekiel ignored the threat to his paintjob.

It said volumes about Eve Baird’s state of mind that she made no objection to his flagrant disregard of law and safety. In the back seat, Cassandra sat wide-eyed, gripping her armrest and whispering about centrifugal force.

Rounding the final bend identified by his GPS, Ezekiel rode the brake as his car slewed to a halt just before encountering the police SUV parked at the entrance to an even less well-maintained track.

The officer stepped out of his vehicle with an odd expression on his face.

Eve met him, holding out her hand, “Detective, I’m Colonel Eve Baird. These are my associates, Cassandra Cillian and Ezekiel Jones.” She ignored Ezekiel’s frown when she gave his real name.

“Colonel,” the officer acknowledged, shaking her hand and nodding at the other two. “Ms. Cillian, Mr. Jones. My name is Detective Ingram.”

Skipping all other pleasantries, Eve asked, “Can you take us right to the truck?”

“Certainly.” The detective turned and led the way along a track that had evidently been a road once but was now overgrown except where hikers had worn the ground bare.

Eve noted the broken young trees and tall grasses along the sides and between the old ruts that indicated the passage of a vehicle within the last several days. Droplets from the rain the night before still clung to leaves and stems, dampening her shoes and the bottoms of her jeans. The weather had turned clear and warm, and thanks to their brief visit to Canada, they were all overdressed, but the forest seemed chilled.

What could have possessed Stone to come here, leaving no message that he had done so?

Rounding a gentle curve, she saw the pickup truck, parked off the track at the bottom of a slight incline. Beside her, she heard Cassandra catch her breath.

There was nothing intrinsically ominous about the scene, but Eve knew they were all feeling the desolation of the spot. She tried to comfort herself that country-bred Stone would not find such a place lonely or frightening at all, but the silent, unmoving truck seemed confirmation of their fears rather than hope of resolution. Even Ezekiel had no sarcastic commentary to add.

“I will be frank with you, Detective,” Eve said. “The owner of this vehicle, Jacob Stone, is also missing, and has been for nearly 48 hours. If finding his truck fails to lead us to him, I will be filing a missing persons report.”

The detective’s glance was sharp and speculative. “I see. You realize you could have filed the report earlier. There is no minimum time.”
“Oh, sure,” Ezekiel interjected. “Middle-aged, white male leaves home in his own vehicle. Misses a day of work. Riiight. You know they’d have told us: ‘Call back after a reasonable period of time has elapsed.’” He made air quotes with his fingers, and his voice changed timber, his accent flattening in an American direction.

That had not been a paraphrase.

Detective Ingram tilted his head in wry acknowledgment of Ezekiel’s point. Then he turned back to the truck. “There is no obvious evidence of mechanical failure, accident, or foul play. The doors were unlocked, the key not in the ignition or hidden any obvious place in the vehicle, and there is plenty of fuel in the tank. If you suspect some mishap has befallen your colleague, I advise leaving the truck where it is. You can fill out the necessary paperwork at the station. At that point, we will need to begin an investigation.”

“Cassandra?”

Eve turned her attention from the detective to see Ezekiel reach out a hand to touch Cassandra’s arm.

Cassandra’s forehead was wrinkled in distress. Her eyes were wide, fixed on something only she could see. Her hands drifted as though outlining something about Stone’s pickup.

“Width 180.34 centimeters, depth 53.34 centimeters, height 53.34 centimeters.” Cassandra winced as though the numbers hurt her. “Volume 513,095.36 cubic centimeters. 0.06 corrosion resistant aluminum . . . aluminum . . . atomic number 13.” Her voice rose as if she might cry, then fell away into a whisper. “Jacob . . . Jacob Stone. Height 1.78 meters, mass 81.64 kilograms.”

“Cassandra!” Eve joined Ezekiel. “What is it? What do you see?”

Ezekiel was the one who figured it out. “Has anyone checked the toolbox?” he asked.

They all stared at the aluminum storage box in the bed of Stone’s pickup. It was, Eve noted, fully large enough to contain a body.

“No,” said Detective Ingram. “It’s locked, and there was no evidence of tampering.”

“Do it,” Eve told Ezekiel. She put her arm around the shivering Cassandra, who seemed to have found her way out of her hallucination on her own now that her message had been received.

Ezekiel pulled on a pair of gloves he just happened to have concealed on his person before hopping up onto the bed of the truck. He was already treating this as a crime scene, Eve noted gratefully. He picked the locks with such dexterity that the detective must assume he had a key.

As Ezekiel lifted the lid, Eve held her breath. Cassandra gripped her arm.

“Nothing here but cowboy tools,” Ezekiel informed them, a sunlit grin splitting his face. “All present and accounted for.”

Eve’s breath whooshed back out of her in relief. Cassandra gasped and went limp in Eve’s grasp.

Ezekiel hopped down from the pickup bed and whipped out his handkerchief, holding it out to Cassandra.

A single drop of blood trickled down her upper lip.
Cassandra hesitated.

“Don’t worry,” Ezekiel said. “It’s a fresh one. No worms.”

Eve shook her head, baffled. Sometimes her Librarians in Training made no sense whatsoever.

* * * * *

Leaving the pickup felt like they were abandoning Stone no matter how often Eve told herself that there was nothing further they could do for him here. As she herded her remaining LITs ahead of her, Ezekiel took the lead beside the detective, but Cassandra seemed physically drained in the wake of her mathematical vision. Eve slowed her own steps to keep an eye on her. In a twist of memory, she realized that caring for Cassandra had been Jacob’s gift, and without him, she or Jones would have to take up the slack—if Cassandra would let them. As they reached the first bend in the track that would remove the vehicle from their sight, Eve looked back one last time, her lips moving over a voiceless promise to Stone that they would return for him. Somehow.

Turning to continue heading towards the road, Eve found herself the object of Cassandra’s scrutiny.

“This isn’t good, is it?” Cassandra’s voice was hushed. Her face seemed to float, pale and frightened, over the dark of her jacket in which she huddled as if they’d never left the frozen north. Her hands clenched together on the scarf at her throat.

No, it wasn’t. But Cassandra was looking as though she might be sick or cry, so Eve reassured her, “At least we have something now. We didn’t have anything to go on before.”

They had all been hoping, however illogically, for some sort of answers, but all they had were more questions. When Eve slipped a supporting hand under Cassandra’s elbow, she knew it was as much for her own comfort as it was for the younger woman’s. That close, she could tell Cassandra was still trembling, and she could hear her reciting breathless strings of numbers, as though she hadn’t entirely left the hallucination behind.

What were they going to do if Cassandra lost control and Stone wasn’t there to call her back?

“Hey,” Eve said, hoping to shift Cassandra out of the world in her head. “Are you alright?”

Cassandra nodded, but she didn’t stop murmuring equations to herself.

When they reached the car, Ezekiel had the doors open and was rummaging in the trunk. “Here.” He handed Cassandra a sealed bottle of water and a small container of what looked like Tylenol for her inevitable headache.

“Thanks,” Cassandra said. But her hands, when she unclasped them, shook so that she couldn’t undo the cap.

“Let me get that,” Ezekiel said, taking the bottle back. “These things are supposed to be childproof, which means only a kid can possibly get into them. And a thief, of course.” He flicked off the cap and poured out two tablets into it. “Open wide.” He grinned and dumped the tablets onto Cassandra’s tongue. Then he took the water bottle, unsealed it, and gave it back to her.

When Cassandra had washed down the pain meds, Eve helped her into the back seat, and Ezekiel tossed her a blanket that he’d also found in his trunk.

By the time Eve finished taking her leave of the detective, Cassandra was seat-belted in, wrapped
in the blanket, and resting her head against the side of the car with her eyes closed.

While Ezekiel drove at a much more reasonable pace back to the main road, Eve considered their next steps.

It could have been worse, she tried to tell herself. They did not know what had happened to Stone, but at least they still did not know. Perhaps, due to his head injury, he had been confused and had wandered off. It hadn’t been that long. He would be suffering from exposure, but he was a healthy, adult male. He would survive.

But they were going to need some way of tracking where Stone had gone when he had left his vehicle.

Apparently Ezekiel was thinking along the same lines because while he was parking his car, he spoke up as though they had been having a conversation. “It’s going to depend on how much of a backlog the police and their Search and Rescue are dealing with. They’re going to prioritize lost kids and violent crime cases.”

Eve knew he was right. But if Stone was in trouble somewhere out in the woods, he didn’t have time for his case to languish in the queue. “I’m not willing to wait,” Eve said. “I need options, people.”

“There’s a private Search and Rescue operation just north of here in Washington. I can see if they’re available sooner.” Ezekiel held up his phone. “Their dogs are used to working cold scent, too. A lot of police dogs work more frequently with hot scent.”

Eve didn’t even hesitate. “Call them,” she told Ezekiel and was relieved to see he already had the number programmed in. Their thief was proving to be an unanticipated resource, steps ahead of the rest of them.

For several minutes Ezekiel was occupied setting up an appointment with whoever was on the other end of his connection.

“Three o’clock,” Ezekiel said when he had hung up. “They’ll meet us at Stone’s place to collect scent items, and then they’ll go with us to the truck.”

“That’ll give us time to take care of the paperwork with the police,” Eve said, satisfied. She glanced back at Cassandra. This whole business of Stone going missing was taking its toll on her. Since it made no sense to tie up the entire resources of the Library in police bureaucracy, Eve was going to pull rank. Cassandra was going to hate it, but she would be of far more use away from the reminders of Stone’s absence.

“Jones and I will take care of the Portland Police Bureau and the SAR team,” she said in her allocating resources voice. “Cassandra, you and Jenkins will continue our mission for the Library in Black Diamond.”

“What?” Cassandra grew more alert in indignation.

“No arguments,” Eve said firmly. “We can’t just let a killer horse run loose.”

After all, other people besides Spencer might be in danger. Eve tried not to focus on the danger Eliot Spencer might be to others.

* * * * *
Cassandra Cillian had never before needed to commit mitosis of her entire body so badly. She wanted to be involved in the search for Jacob, but the Library’s business could not be suspended indefinitely. And although she suspected Baird just wanted to get her out of the way, she was having a hard time objecting. Even now, the haze of calculations, all the possible permutations of time and motion and geography, snarled at the edge of her vision, closing in every time she allowed her thoughts to turn towards Jacob and where he might be. She was not going to be of much use in this state of mind.

Colonel Baird looked like she needed to be more than one person, herself. She paced the room, firing off instructions like they were her former NATO team going into a warzone. “You and Jenkins will do nothing but reconnaissance and intelligence gathering, do you understand? You will determine whether the horse is quartered in Black Diamond, and if it is, identify where it is being held. Under no circumstances whatsoever are you to attempt to make contact with Eliot Spencer.”

Baird ran distracted hands through her hair and shook her resultant disheveled locks as though she was fighting a battle in her mind. “I can’t believe I’m doing this,” she groaned.

“We’ll be okay.” Cassandra patted Baird’s arm. She had given herself a firm lecture on the logic of the situation and was determined to cooperate. Jacob would want them to keep fulfilling their responsibilities. Colonel Baird was thoroughly capable of doing everything that needed being done to rescue him.

Baird did not look comforted. Cassandra didn’t feel comforted either.

As Cassandra was putting on her coat again for the return to winter, she heard Baird saying to Jenkins, “I’m counting on you to keep Cassandra safe.”

“I’ll do my best, Colonel,” Jenkins replied.

“I can keep myself safe,” Cassandra muttered under her breath. Baird was getting a lot better at remembering that Cassandra was an adult who wouldn’t break in a brisk wind, but she still had the occasional tendency to hover that reminded Cassandra of her parents—and not in a good way.

“It would assist me in fulfilling my commission,” Jenkins continued, “if you were to enlighten me as to the nature of the threat Mr. Spencer poses.”

“Think of the most dangerous creature you’ve ever fought,” Colonel Baird said tersely. “Now think of the most intelligent opponent you’ve ever faced.”

“Indeed?” Jenkins raised an eyebrow. “I find that hard to believe.”

Baird narrowed her eyes at him. “Now, double it.”

Jenkins tilted his head skeptically.

“Worse than the Minotaur?” Cassandra asked.

“I survived the Minotaur,” Baird said. “We all did. Jenkins, you remember the team I told you about back then?” Her voice lowered with intensity. “Spencer was the reason—the only reason—I came home with nothing but dog tags.”

She and Jenkins watched each other in strained silence, and then he nodded once.

“I’m going to have to go with Colonel Baird on this one,” said Ezekiel, looking up from his phone.
“Eliot Spencer once took out eight Yakuza in four seconds using a kitchen knife.”

Cassandra did not know what exactly a Yakuza was, but Jenkins apparently did.

“How did you get to be such an expert on the biography of an assassin?” Baird asked.

“Are you kidding me?” Ezekiel looked incredulous. “The minute I realized we live in the vicinity of the Platonic Ideal of Badass, I figured I’d better know my enemy.”

Ezekiel Jones knew about Plato? For an instant, Cassandra was distracted.

“Good plan, Jones,” Baird agreed. “But our object will be to avoid Spencer as far as possible. Engaging in any type of physical confrontation with him is off the table. Once we know the situation with the horse, we can develop a strategy. Now people, we have our jobs to do. Let’s get on them.”

The discussion of Eliot Spencer had made Baird uncharacteristically uncomfortable. She kept putting one hand in her jacket pocket as though to check whether something was still there, even though that wasn’t where she kept her phone or any weapon that Cassandra knew about. Baird’s other hand sought out her gun whenever Spencer’s name was mentioned, and her eyes travelled the perimeter of the room in hyper-alert paranoia.

What had Eliot done to her? Cassandra hadn’t dared to ask. Whatever it had been, the woman at the Brewpub, Sophie Devereaux, who said she loved Eliot Spencer, had also said it was unforgiveable.

Cassandra shivered as she and Jenkins waited for the door to open in the gas station restroom in Black Diamond, Alberta. And it had nothing to do with the blast of cold air that came with the sight of piles of dirty snow.

* * * * *

Eve Baird had rarely experienced the uncertainty of having one of her team missing in action. In the past, when she had lost a team member, usually the bloody evidence remained. And she had never experienced the civilian side of searching for a missing person. Strangely enough, she found herself leaning on Ezekiel for his expertise.

After Jenkins and Cassandra exited the Backdoor, she and Ezekiel headed in his car to the headquarters of the Portland Police Bureau. As Ezekiel had predicted, they had difficulty rousing the local constabulary into any degree of professional anxiety about Jacob Stone. So the man was skipping out on work. Who had ever heard of such a thing happening? Eve could sense the unspoken sarcasm in the exchanged glances.

Exasperated to within an inch of punching someone, Eve wielded her NATO credentials like a battering ram to impress upon the police, if not the seriousness of the situation, at least the inadvisability of brushing her off, but Ezekiel was the one who made sure that the police registered Stone with the National Crime Information Center and assigned his case a department number. He also produced a neatly compiled profile of Jacob Stone containing everything from an exact description of Stone right down to the timber of his voice, to an enumeration of the clothing he was last seen wearing, illustrated by the most recent photograph Ezekiel possessed: Jacob with the purple moustache painted on his face.

Eve glared at him, and Ezekiel gave a shadow of his unrepentant smirk before producing an edited
Being irritated at Ezekiel, Eve realized, was an improvement over being worried about Stone. She eyed him considerably as he continued to hand over information to the police.

The profile Ezekiel had constructed was as thorough as a thief with no respect for privacy could make it, detailing Stone’s activities in the days preceding his disappearance and the people with whom he had been in contact. Prominent in that information was the fact that Stone had a cousin, also living in Portland, who was a physical double for him.

She could not shake the impression that Ezekiel knew these procedures from more than just his research.

He’d also compiled a log of everything they’d done since Stone had gone missing, complete with times, locations, and contact information—including her phone call to Isaac Stone, which meant he’d hacked her phone records.

“Jones!”

Ezekiel quirked an eyebrow at her. “Hey, you’ve read my FBI files. Tell me again why you weren’t expecting that?”

Eve sighed.

Having wrung an agreement from the police at least to circulate Stone’s photograph in a quest for information, Eve and Ezekiel returned to Stone’s place just ahead of their appointment with the Search and Rescue team.

Mrs. Anderson met them at the door.

“Jacob? Have you found him?” she asked anxiously.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Anderson,” Eve told her. “We’ve located his pickup, but he isn’t with it, so we’re going to see if a search dog can tell us where he went after he left it.”

“Oh.” The woman’s face wobbled like she might cry.

“Do you have someone else who can stay with you for now?” Eve asked. She wanted to promise that Jacob would be home soon, but she’d learned a long time ago not to make the kinds of promises she couldn’t keep. “Or maybe you have some family you can visit? Just until we know what the situation is?”

“We’ll keep Stone’s rent paid,” Ezekiel volunteered.

“The money doesn’t matter.” Mrs. Anderson gave a sad sniff. “You just find that boy and get him home safe. I can go visit my son and his family for a few days.”

At that moment, a silver SUV pulled up to the curb where Stone’s pickup had been parked. The three of them turned to watch as a man and woman got out, wearing red jackets with “Search and Rescue” emblazoned on them. They each opened a back door, the woman hauling out a large case, the man unclipping the safety straps and standing back to allow a black dog wearing its own red coat to leap out of the seat and prance around on the sidewalk. The woman came up the path towards the house, but the man and dog remained beside the vehicle.

The SAR woman was older than Eve, her iron-grey curls cropped close to her head, the lines in her
brown skin deeply engraved by time and weather, a pair of wire-framed glasses perched precariously on her nose, but she moved with the ease and athleticism one would expect of a person who could follow a dog over rough terrain for hours at a stretch.

Setting the case on the ground, she straightened up to her full height of about the middle of Eve’s chest, pushed her glasses up her nose, and held out her hand. “Hi there. I’m Doctor Eve Mkosi. But you can call me Eve.”

Eve returned the firm grip. “I’m Colonel Eve Baird, and you can call me Eve, too, but that might get a bit confusing.”

The other Eve laughed. “How about I call you Colonel, and you call me Doc? That way everyone knows who we’re talking about.”

“Works for me, Doc,” Eve said. “Doctor of what, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Doctor of medicine, tired and retired,” the woman responded, pushing up her glasses again. “Emmet and I volunteer for Search and Rescue because he has too much energy for a dog, and I have too much time for an old lady. And you’re Colonel of what?”

“NATO Counter-terrorism, reassigned.”

“Ah. A soldier then. Good. You’ll be able to keep up.” She peered expectantly at Eve’s companions through her glasses which were already making their way back down her nose.

“This is Ezekiel Jones, my colleague,” Eve introduced. “And this is Mrs. Anderson, who owns this house. Jacob Stone, the man who’s missing, rents a room here.”

Mkosi shook hands all around, reset her wandering glasses, and waved at her SUV where the young man was holding on to the dog. “That’s Seamus with Emmet. He’s my gofer while he’s learning the ropes. He keeps the log and does any filming that’s needed. Sometimes I let him do the heavy lifting.”

Seamus’s pale, freckled face was topped by a mop of black hair that flopped around wildly as he waved back.

“I imagine you people are eager to get started,” Mkosi said, picking up her case again. “Mrs. Anderson, do I have your permission to enter and search your house?”

“Yes, of course! Do whatever you need to do. Anything that might help.” Mrs. Anderson clutched at a handful of tangled thread that Eve suddenly recognized as another doily in progress.

“Then why don’t we go inside, and you can share with me any reports regarding the case that you’ve prepared so far?” Mkosi gestured for Mrs. Anderson, Eve, and Ezekiel to lead the way.

Once they were seated inside, Ezekiel handed Mkosi the paperwork he’d also provided for the police. She flipped through it rapidly, scanning the information and occasionally giving her glasses a futile shove.

“Well,” she said when she was done, “I can certainly see why law enforcement hasn’t rushed to your assistance. But you’re the people who know Mr. Stone best, I presume, and you have reason to believe he’s not likely to be taking some unauthorized time off?”

“Jacob Stone is the most responsible person I know,” Eve assured her.
“Annoyingly so,” Ezekiel added.

“It is highly unlikely that he would leave without making arrangements for his duties to be covered or without informing us that he was going. One possible factor that might explain his disappearance is that he suffered a head injury the night of the second. It did not seem to be affecting him the last time we saw him, but we should factor that in.” Eve took a deep breath and went with her gut instinct. She liked this Dr. Eve Mkosi. “You should also know that his job with the Library involves him in securing valuable artifacts that are sought after by people who have been known to use violence to acquire such items.”

Mkosi raised an eyebrow. “I had wondered why a NATO Colonel was involved in this matter. So you fear he might not just be lost but might also be the victim of a crime?”

Eve nodded.

“You know,” Mkosi said, reaching out to lay a comforting hand on Eve’s arm, “it’s thrilling to find a person who has been lost and needs rescuing, but I’ll take finding them stoned in a brothel, any day. I know what it’s like to have a family member missing.” Her mobile features went still with memory, but then she shrugged it off and continued briskly, “Well, Emmet can certainly help clarify the situation. May I see Mr. Stone’s room? I’ll need to acquire some scent articles for Emmet.”

With the key provided by Mrs. Anderson, Eve let Mkosi into Stone’s quarters.

“If you don’t mind waiting here, Colonel,” the woman indicated the doorway, “the fewer people involved in laying scent in this room, the better.”

“Certainly.” Eve obediently drew back. “But all of my team have been here recently.”

“Understandable. However, it’s unlikely any of you handled the items I’ll be selecting. Let me know if I’m wrong.”

Mkosi set down her case and opened it. Donning a pair of latex gloves with medical precision, she selected a worn pair of Stone’s boots, his pillowcase, his hairbrush, and his bed sheets, as well as items from his unwashed laundry. In the absence of her hands, her shoulder served to keep her unruly glasses in line. Placing each article within its own paper bag, she sealed the bags, then slipped them each inside a second paper bag. When those bags were also sealed, she inserted them in plastic bags.

“The layers of paper will keep the plastic from degrading the scent,” she told Eve.

When all the items were secure, and the chain of custody recorded in a notebook, Mkosi was ready to bring in her dog. Although Stone’s truck had been found miles from his home, the dog would begin the search at the house.

“Our bodies give off chemicals related to our state of well-being,” Mkosi explained. “Emmet’ll be able to tell if Mr. Stone was under duress or in fear or injured at the time he got in his vehicle.”

Seamus and the dog then joined them at the house.

“This is Emmet,” Mkosi said, bending down to greet her dog. “He’s six years old, near as we can tell. There’s obviously a bit of lab, a bit of shepherd, a bit of border collie, and who knows what else in his family tree. Emmet is a triple threat. He can follow air scent—scent that is carried on the breeze. And he can find someone buried under earth or snow, or even submerged in water. But he’s the best at following a trail laid on the ground which seems likeliest to suit your situation.” She
ruffled Emmet’s ears. “You ready to go, boy?”

Emmet had the sort of high tension Eve recognized from the military dogs she’d known. Dogs like that would go hard all day for the chance to play with a stinky sock at the end of it.

The SAR team began their search in Stone’s room, and continued from there. Although Stone’s scent was all over the property, the dog found no evidence that might suggest what had happened to him, nor according to Mkosi, did Emmet indicate that Stone had been in any way under the levels of stress that would suggest his departure had been coerced or that he had left in fear.

“See? His ears are up. His tail is high. He’s happy. Mr. Stone was well and unafraid when he walked to his pickup.”

That seemed to be good news. Eve was cautiously hopeful.

Seamus called Emmet and opened the SUV door, and the dog jumped in.

“Okay, we’re ready to move to the PLS,” Mkosi said, heading for the driver’s side.

“The what?” Eve asked.

“The Place Last Seen.”

* * * * *

Black Diamond, Alberta, Canada

The local veterinarian had been no help. He’d not heard that a stranger had brought a horse to town, and none of his regular customers had mentioned purchasing a horse. No one at the local barber shop had any news about their missing magic horse either, but it had cost Jenkins the price of a trim to discover that fact, and Cassandra had developed the beginnings of an algorithm categorizing tractor advertisements in heavy equipment magazines. When they left the tiny shop with its red-striped pole, Jenkins had his grumpy face in place because haircuts had increased so much in price since the last time he’d had a non-magically assisted one. Glaring at the pole with its blood and bandage imagery, he muttered, “You’re still butchers.”

For lack of any better plan, the two of them began to walk along the main street that ran through the town. When Jenkins spied a building with a huge, plastic sculpture of an ice cream cone protruding from its sign, his eyes lit up.

“A soda shop! Miss Cillian, would you like to carry out an investigation of the local confectionery?”

Cassandra laughed. That their curmudgeonly caretaker had a sweet tooth was a source of constant amusement to the Librarians in Training. Jake used to say . . . Cassandra cut off the thought with a physical pain. To escape from the gaping emptiness that swirled around her, she grabbed Jenkins’ arm and towed him toward the door.

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The faux Western front had given her no very high expectations for the interior, but the décor was a charming replica of a 50s diner—pink and turquoise with black and white checkered trim. The round stools along the counter were upholstered in red vinyl. Cassandra tamped down on the numbers her brain assigned to the colors and couldn’t decide whether she was really smelling cinnamon or not. A jukebox in the corner was crooning about blue suede shoes, the colors of the music clashing with those of the diner.
The only other customers in the shop were two high-school-aged girls sitting at the counter. The one, a tall, slender, dark-haired girl, wearing a gorgeous, tailored winter coat, a short, plaid skirt over leggings, and tall leather boots, had her face buried in her folded arms on the counter top.

“I’m soooooo doomed!” she wailed in tragic accents.

The other girl, patting her friend’s back comfortinglly, was in every way except for hair color, the opposite. She was short and round like an apple, with unruly curls surrounding her rosy brown cheeks that kept smiling into dimples in spite of her role as sympathizer. Her bright red, shapeless down jacket did nothing to diminish Cassandra’s impression of apple-ness.

“I’m sure you did fine,” she consoled her friend. “You always do better than you think.”

The lone server, dressed in an old-fashioned pink and black poodle skirt, set two tall soda fountain glasses fluffed high with whipped cream and topped with cherries in front of the girls.

Jenkins touched Cassandra’s arm to draw her attention and nodded toward the counter. “Miss Cillian, why don’t you strike up a conversation with those girls? It has been my observation that young ladies hear a great deal more about what is going on than adults assume. Also, more often than not, country girls know about horses. Perhaps they have heard news of a new horse in town, or at least know of a place where one might be lodged.”

“Mr. Jenkins, are you saying that girls are gossips?” Cassandra teased.

“The god-sibling relationship that became generalized to refer to female friendship certainly allowed for young people whose survival and happiness depended on accurate knowledge of their world to exchange information, if that is what you mean,” Jenkins said.

That was an interesting way of looking at it, Cassandra decided, eyeing the mysterious Jenkins curiously. “I’ll try to get them talking then, in the interest of acquiring some accurate knowledge.”

Joining the two girls at the counter while Jenkins made his way to one of the booths, Cassandra smiled. “That looks wonderful. What is it so that I can order one?”

“It’s a Brown Cow Ice Cream Soda,” Apple Girl said. “It’s got root beer and Coke syrup in it.”

Ugh. That sounded nauseatingly sweet. Cassandra resisted the urge to shudder. Pasting an eager look on her face, she told Poodle-skirt Girl, “I’ll have one of those.” She pointed at the girls’ beverages.

“You’re not from around here,” Apple Girl said.

“No,” Cassandra admitted. “My—uncle,” she nodded her head to where Jenkins was reading a local newspaper he’d picked up on a table, “and I just got into town.”

“I’m Hilde, and this pile of despair is Daphne.” Hilde gave her companion a bracing thwack on the back.

Daphne looked up, scowled at her friend and then put on a social smile and held out her hand. “Hi.”

“I’m Cassandra,” Cassandra said, shaking the offered hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“She’s normally much nicer to meet,” Hilde said, taking a long, noisy slurp of her soda. “But she’s suffering from an acute case of post math test trauma.”
Daphne thumped her head down on the counter hard enough to make Cassandra wince and groaned.


One set of disbelieving eyes and one set of laughing eyes met hers.

“See? It’s not just me,” Hilde said, ruffling her friend’s hair.

“Now you’re being smug,” Daphne complained. “Just because you got out of it.”

The soda arrived, and Cassandra contemplated it with inward dismay and outward enthusiasm. “This is incredible,” she said, braving a sip of the concoction. It was, indeed, sweet enough to make her teeth ache. Jenkins was going to love this place. She could see Poodle-Skirt Girl delivering an equally astonishing-looking concoction to the booth he occupied.

“Do you come here often?” she asked Hilde and Daphne, wondering how she could steer the conversation horse-ward.

“We sometimes hang out here after school,” Hilde said, “when we don’t have to race home to train.”

“Train in what?” Cassandra asked.

“Barrel racing,” Daphne said. “Hilde is my best enemy. In the ring we try to destroy each other. Everywhere else—well you see.” She waved at the diner.

Hilde laughed. “Her mother would be appalled. Our parents hate each other.”

“You’re into horses!” Cassandra exclaimed. “That is so perfect!” Jenkins was a genius.

The two girls eyed her quizzically.

“I’m looking for a horse,” Cassandra explained.

“Just any horse?” Hilde asked.

“No, a specific one,” Cassandra pulled out her phone and showed the girls the picture she’d taken of the ad for Spark of Midnight in the clippings book.

“Oh,” said Daphne. “I know her. That’s the mare that’s boarding at our place right now. Hilde, I told you she was a beauty. You almost never see a horse that color.”

“I actually met her this morning,” Hilde said. “Her owner helped me out with Medea and her calf.”

Cassandra felt her breath quicken. Was it going to be this easy? “Oh, do you know her owner then? Can you tell me how to contact him?”

“James McCoy? Not really. Their truck broke down outside our gate. But . . .” Daphne paused and looked up at the jingle of the door. “Oh, there they are! James! Kira! Hi!”

“Hello, James.” Hilde waved.

Cassandra’s entire nervous system took a hit of adrenaline. She turned and saw—Eliot Spencer. He looked so much like Jacob that her heart wrenched and her eyes stung. “Oh!” she gasped, and she knew that the smile she gave him was the one she would have given his cousin.
But when Eliot’s eyes met hers, his smile didn’t reach them. Instead, there was a silent plea.

Of course. If he was here under an alias, any revelation she or Jenkins made about his real identity and her previous connection with him would likely compromise whatever he was up to. If Ezekiel was to be believed, that was likely to be as dangerous as it was illegal.

Cassandra had no intentions of barging through those plans and risking the wrath or retribution of such a man. She increased the wattage of her smile. “Hello, Mr. McCoy. My name is Cassandra.”

The grin he gave her was equal parts admiration and relief. “It’s James, please. And this is Kira.” Slipping his arm around her waist, Eliot pulled the girl who was also Martha and Parker close to him. “Kira, this is Hilde, the girl Spark and I ran into this morning.”

Since Cassandra had received the impression that Martha was with Colin, this action puzzled her. *Don’t say anything. Don’t make any assumptions,* she reminded herself.

“Hi,” Kira said.

Although she had not noticed him getting up, Jenkins materialized at her shoulder, and Cassandra realized that there was something intimidating about the tall, grey-haired man.

“And this is my uncle,” she said, unsure what to call him. They hadn’t really expected to need aliases.

Jenkins held out his hand. “Jenkins, sir, ladies.”

* * * * *

*Portland, Oregon, USA*

For the second time that day, Eve and Ezekiel hiked the track that led to Stone’s pickup. The dog trotted ahead of his handlers, businesslike and intent. Once again they looked down on the lonely, empty place that was their last link with Jacob Stone. Eve’s hope struggled with her fear as they descended the gentle slope to the vehicle. She glanced at Ezekiel who had been chatting with Seamus but had grown silent.

“We’ll start with the interior of the vehicle,” Mkosi said, “just to establish that Mr. Stone was actually here.”

Eve nodded. The plan seemed sound.

Mkosi removed her glasses and tucked them in the pocket of her jacket. “I’m far-sighted,” she told Eve. “I don’t need these out here, and they just get in the way.”

Seamus made a notation in his log and pulled out his camera to record this stage of the search.

Ezekiel had acquired Stone’s spare set of keys, so he unlocked the driver’s door for Emmet who jumped in and began nosing around. The dog immediately began to whine and bark, his tail no longer high and waving.

Eve watched carefully from behind Mkosi, unsure what to expect.

“Emmet is telling us that Mr. Stone was definitely in both the passenger’s and the driver’s seat, and that he was under stress in both locations.”

“What do you mean ‘stress’?” Eve asked.
“Typically, Emmet responds to the scent of the hormone epinephrine.”

“That’s adrenaline, right?”

“Yes. It can be triggered by a number of things—emotional trauma or physical injury, an attack or accident, extreme environmental conditions.”

Mkosi kept her eyes on the dog as he moved to the back seats. Finding nothing there, he returned to the front seats and floorboards, resuming his restless noises.

“Is it possible that the stress might have come from the fact that Stone was injured in a fight the night before?” Eve asked.

“It’s possible,” Mkosi said as the dog jumped down from the vehicle. “We’ll see if Emmet continues to respond the same way when he picks up Mr. Stone’s trail.”

Eve and Ezekiel stood waiting as Emmet and his handler circled the pickup. The dog gave no signal. Mkosi frowned and widened the circle. Still no change in the dog’s demeanor.

“Nothing. I’m getting no reaction,” she said, finally. “Mr. Stone may have been in this vehicle at one time, but he did not leave it here.”

If Stone had not parked his pickup in this location, that meant someone else had. Now that it was no longer an option, Eve realized how much she had been counting on the dog simply following a trail straight to a disoriented Stone.

“It’s rained several times since the third. Could that have interfered with the scent?” Ezekiel asked.

Eve felt another faint quiver of hope.

“Actually, the rain helps the scent—keeps it alive and close to the surface. Moisture prevents Emmet’s nasal passages from drying out. Makes it easier for him to smell.” Mkosi shrugged apologetically. “Emmet has detected and followed tracking scent that was outside, exposed to the elements, up to a year after it was laid down.”

She called the dog back from ranging farther and farther from the vehicle, his nose now in the air rather than close to the ground.

“We don’t even begin to understand how sensitive a dog’s nose is,” she explained. “One time, Emmet found a man who had drowned in a reservoir. The unmanned submersible sent to retrieve the body discovered it 100 feet below the surface. We can’t make instruments calibrated finely enough to test such an ability much less duplicate it. A dog can’t lie, Colonel. Whoever brought this truck here, it wasn’t Jacob Stone.”

Right. This wasn’t going to be easy then.

“It wasn’t even someone who was much in contact with Mr. Stone because his scent would have transferred, particularly if this person caused him harm. The scent would travel on the driver’s clothing and shoes. Emmet isn’t getting anything here. On the plus side, that means whenever and wherever Mr. Stone left this pickup, he was still alive—injured or in distress, but still alive. Emmet would know if there had been a dead body in the vehicle.”

“So, is there any way to tell where Stone got out?” Ezekiel voiced Eve’s question before she had a chance to.
Mkosi nodded. “We don’t know where the person who brought this vehicle to this point entered it, but you’re right that if we can locate the point where Mr. Stone got out, Emmet will be able to track where he went or was taken. We’ll start here and work back to the road. Since Emmet didn’t alert on the way in, I’m not expecting he will on the way out, but we’ll make sure that we didn’t miss anything. If no sign turns up, we’ll begin working the road itself. I am confident we will be able to give you at least some answers.”

Unsurprisingly, Emmet found nothing on the track back to the forestry road. As they stood at the intersection where they’d left the SAR SUV and Ezekiel’s car, Mkosi asked, “So, which direction do you want to try first? Eventually, we’ll try all possibilities, but given your knowledge of Mr. Stone, do you think he’s more likely to have exited the vehicle between here and St. Helens, or would he have gone further into the mountains and had the truck driven back to this point?”

Eve considered. So much depended on the motivations of Stone or whoever had been with him. She hated guesswork.

“If Stone wanted to throw us off his trail, he’s okay,” Ezekiel spoke up. “So we don’t really need to find him.”

“You’re right,” Eve agreed. “Let’s go with worst case scenario. That’s the one where someone removed him from his vehicle against his will. Okay, working from that assumption, what do we know?”

“If that’s what happened, we know that whatever they were up to needed to be concealed,” Ezekiel reflected. “They came back here in order to hide what they were doing.”

This was just a case. Just another investigation, Eve reminded herself. Focus. Getting emotional wasn’t going to help anything. “The question is, why did they need Stone away from his truck? If they wanted to kill him, they could have left him in it or at least nearby.”

“Maybe they wanted to dispose of the evidence,” Ezekiel said, his voice as blank of emotion as hers. “Hard to prove there’s been a murder if there’s no body. But again, if that’s what happened, Stone doesn’t need us anymore.”

“So let’s add Stone being alive to our assumptions,” Eve agreed, praying it was so.

“But if whoever did this needed him alive, and he didn’t want to be taken, he wouldn’t go quietly,” Ezekiel pointed out with a shadow of his old grin. “Stone can put up a hell of a ruckus in a fight when he wants to.”

“There’s no evidence of a struggle in the truck,” Mkosi interjected.

“True. So they would have had to force him to cooperate somehow. Or he was already out of his vehicle when they took him.” Eve really wanted to pace, but she forced herself to remain still in spite of the scenarios her imagination was providing.

“That kind of thing really looks suspicious.” Ezekiel looked disturbed by his own imagination. “They’d have wanted to make the transfer without witnesses, somewhere deserted.”

“Don’t forget whoever parked Mr. Stone’s truck would need a ride out,” Mkosi reminded them. “Would Mr. Stone have been taken in the same vehicle?”

“Possibly. Probably. Too many vehicles out here might attract attention. I can’t imagine they would have just waited where anyone might notice them, but they couldn’t have gone far if the driver was to meet up with them.” Eve tried to visualize the terrain on the way in. “Let’s see that
map again,” she told Ezekiel.

Eve scrutinized the topographical depiction of the surrounding terrain Ezekiel had loaded on his phone.

“‘It’s a long way back to the nearest intersection with any other sort of road,’” she observed.

“Yes, and there aren’t even any trails, like this one.” Ezekiel tapped the screen, enlarging the area.

“This one isn’t even on the map,” Eve said, frustrated.

“No, but I was watching. The last pullout is a couple of miles back.” Ezekiel gestured the way they had come.

Eve turned to Mkosi and Seamus. “So, we try further on into the mountains, then. There might be more former roads that are no longer marked ahead. This road does loop back to the highway. Either direction would get them out.”

“Very well,” Mkosi agreed. “We take the right branch.”

The decision was made. Eve could only pray it was the correct one.

Mkosi knelt down and again offered the bag containing one of the scent articles she had collected to Emmet’s whuffling nose. “Find it,” she said and slipped his leash.

Emmet eagerly set off with one goal in mind—locating Jacob Stone.

If even one of their calculations was wrong, they could be searching an entirely wrong area.

Eve Baird knew that forever after this day, the young green of spring and the scent of crushed grass and the twitter of birds would be bleak and spine-chilling for her. Her senses were in overdrive. Every little detail, each blade of grass, each bit of gravel, was so much more intense, more real, somehow. As the dog ranged ahead, sifting the air with his incomprehensible nose, Eve strained to hear the tiniest sounds. Each time his head turned, picking up new scent, her heart kicked in her chest.

But each time, her hope that he might be finding some trace of Stone was dashed.

They had been walking for nearly twenty minutes when another old and overgrown track branched off from the left. The dog’s behavior shifted.

“I think he’s got something!” Seamus exclaimed, pulling out his camera.

* * * * *

Black Diamond, Alberta, Canada

Jenkins was accustomed to being dismissed as an elderly gentleman, somebody’s grandfather, a non-threatening nonentity if a bit of an eccentric. He counted on that assumption—cultivated it in fact. As a disguise, that persona allowed him to go unnoticed and unencumbered by the expectations of others. Of these newest occupants in his Annex, only Colonel Baird perceived his potential as a resource on warfare, but then she came from a world in which her superior officers would have been older soldiers. However, even for her, he was only a repository of information about the odd sorts of opponents and hazards she was now forced to confront.

The man about whom the Colonel had warned him, Eliot Spencer, made no such dismissal. On the
contrary, Spencer recognized Jenkins’ move to guard Cassandra for what it was, and his response was that of a man assessing the level of a threat and judging it to be formidable.

Spencer looked exactly like Jacob Stone—a fact no one had thought to mention to Jenkins. But this man was a warrior in a way that Stone, although he fought enthusiastically, was not.

Jenkins always carried a blade on his person—old habit, older than most, but also acknowledgment that any employee of the Library could be asked, at any moment, to face unimaginable danger. None of the current denizens of the Annex was aware of this fact.

It took Spencer a single glance to extrapolate the location of that weapon.

His move to shake Jenkins’ hand when Cassandra introduced him as James McCoy placed him in a position to defend the young woman who accompanied him, and curiously enough, also the two girls with whom Cassandra had been conversing.

Even though Jenkins loomed over the smaller man in every possible way, Spencer’s expression was merely wary, his smile a little amused. Jenkins knew the look of a fighter confident he had the skill to defeat his opponent while not for one moment underestimating that opponent. From what Colonel Baird had told him, Spencer had every reason for that confidence.

After introductions were complete, and the new arrivals had placed their orders, the young people continued to chatter, but Jenkins could tell he never lost Spencer’s wary attention.

“Cassandra is looking for a horse,” the one called Daphne was saying.

“I used to pester my parents for a pony, when I was a little girl,” Cassandra said. “I always wanted one of my own.”

“I’m pretty sure someone threw me on a horse before I was old enough to remember,” Spencer said. “I’ve always ridden.”

“Me too,” Hilde agreed.

“Pester ing my parents actually worked,” Daphne reflected.

The woman Kira made a face. “I don’t much like horses.”

The other females looked at her as though she had confessed to being an alien.

Spencer leaned his head against hers. “It’s a good thing she likes me.”

“I wish I knew how to ride,” Cassandra said wistfully. “My parents didn’t think horses were safe.”

“They’re really not,” Kira said.

“Your parents are not here,” Jenkins said, doing his best to look genially avuncular. “And you are most certainly an autonomous adult. I have always held that there is something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man—or woman as the case may be.”

Cassandra was always a quick study. She caught his suggestion immediately.

“That’s why we’re here. My uncle is buying me a horse.”

Jenkins smiled at her fondly. It wasn’t so dreadful working with mortals when they were as quick as Cassandra.
As if she were channeling her inner horse-mad preteen, Cassandra gave a bounce on the round stool. “I looked on the Internet and found the prettiest one. Unfortunately, the owner said he had already sold her. He said the people who bought her were headed here.” She gave Spencer her most soulful gaze. “These girls say that you’re the one who has her. Would you be interested in selling? Money is no object!”

Money was certainly an object, but Jenkins had no better suggestion as to how they might get close to the animal they sought.

“I’m pretty sure Spark ain’t the ideal first mount for you,” Spencer said. “You need to learn on an old nag—the kind that left to its own devices just slowly stops.”

“I rode a pony at science camp,” Cassandra protested. “Once.”

“You rode a pony at camp.” Spencer looked at her with amused sympathy. “You’re adorable.”

“I only mean it won’t be my first mount.”

“Trust me. It’s your first.”

Jenkins had to admit that he agreed with Spencer.

The girl called Hilde turned to her friend. “Daphne, what about The Armchair?”

“The what?” Cassandra asked.

Spencer looked equally unenlightened.

“My first horse,” Daphne explained. “He’s a 29 year old gelding, and he’s basically retired. He’s not really a horse at all anymore. He’s more of a piece of furniture. He’s not for sale, but if you wanted, you could try riding him. See if he’s the sort of horse you should be looking for.”

“Sounds perfect,” Spencer said. “Tell you what, Cassie. I’m stuck in town until my truck is repaired. If you’re still around tomorrow, you come by the Flying B Ghost Ridge Ranch, and I’ll give you a riding lesson on The Armchair.”

“Can I at least meet Spark?” Cassandra asked, seizing the opportunity. “She’s the most beautiful horse I’ve ever seen—in her picture anyway.”

“I’ll bring her along,” Spencer promised.

“Oh, thank you so much,” Cassandra gushed. “Here, let me give you my phone number, so you can call me when it’s a good time to come over.”

She held out her hand for Spencer’s phone, and after a moment’s hesitation, he gave it to her to enter her name and number.

That was easy enough, Jenkins thought. Perhaps too easy. He watched Spencer speculatively.

Before Cassandra could make further inquiries into the horse in Spencer’s possession, her phone played a few bars of “The Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy,” which was her indicator that Colonel Baird was calling.

Cassandra pulled the phone out of her pocket and answered the call. A small frown crinkled between her eyebrows. “It’s for you,” she told Jenkins.
Jenkins tilted his head. What could the Colonel have to say to him that could not be relayed by Cassandra?

“Hello, Colonel. What can I help you with?” he asked.

“Jenkins, we need you and Cassandra back at the Annex immediately."

“May I ask why the haste? We have been experiencing some success . . .”

Baird interrupted his attempt to discreetly inform her that they had a lead on the horse and had made unintended contact with Eliot Spencer.

“The dog found the location where Stone was taken from his truck.”

“Was taken?” Jenkins seized on her word choice.

“Yes. There is evidence of a struggle. A lot of blood. According to the dog, Stone was injured and in distress but not dead when they put him in another vehicle.” The Colonel’s voice fractured for an instant. “Jenkins, please, just come home.”

“I understand,” Jenkins said, projecting calm for whatever good it would do. “We shall be there immediately.”

He hung up the phone and handed it back to Cassandra. “We need to be going now. Good to meet you Mr. McCoy, Ms. O’Brien, Miss Benarden, Miss Densmore. Perhaps we shall run into each other again while we are in town.”

Cassandra looked at him, her eyes full of questions and objections. Jenkins glared at her, trying to telegraph the necessity of saying nothing in the present company.

“Now, Cassandra.” He nodded in the direction of the door.

While Cassandra dutifully said her farewells to the inhabitants of the soda shop, the look in her eyes promised a bombardment of questions the minute they were out of range.

Back on the street, hurrying to keep up with his long strides as they headed for the gas station and their link to the Back Door, Cassandra began the first salvo of what was sure to be a full broadside of interrogation.

“Jenkins, tell me now. What happened? Why are we leaving like this?”

Jenkins sighed and turned to face her. It wasn’t like he was going to get out of this. “Miss Cillian, Colonel Baird called to tell us that they found evidence that Mr. Stone has been forcibly abducted. She has requested that we return to the Annex at once. Ordered, actually.”

“Oh!” Cassandra’s hands flew to her mouth. “Oh no!” Then she grabbed Jenkin’s hand and began towing him with all her might towards the station. “Hurry, Jenkins! We have to get home!”

And now he was having to run to keep up with her.

* * * *

Portland, Oregon, USA

Somewhere inside her head, Eve pinned behind a wall of steel the person who wanted to scream in terror and denial.
“We need to call the police,” Mkosi was saying. “This is a crime scene, a matter for forensics.”

Focus. She needed to focus. Just breathe. At her feet, nearly trampled into the mud, a single popsicle stick lay snapped in two. The part not obscured by dirt was stained rust except for one tip that shone clean and blue.

Beside her Ezekiel stood in shocked silence.

Seamus had recorded the dog’s reactions and the site itself without disturbing anything. Now he was holding Emmet’s leash.

The rain had not removed the deep tire tracks in the soft edge of the road, tracks that matched Stone’s pickup. It had washed some of the blood from the grass that showed where a body had been dragged, heels digging up gouts of sod, back towards the road. But there was too much blood, drenched into the earth, to be completely obliterated.

A single bloody handprint smeared the trunk of a tree, as if someone had clutched there to avoid falling.

The sound of the flies. Oh God. Eve had heard that sound in Afghanistan, in Turkey, in Palestine. She’d heard it on the streets of Paris and outside a café in Bangladesh. She’d heard it, as a child, on the last Christmas she’d believed. More than anything else, that sound turned her stomach to a lead weight she could scarcely lift. But a soldier went on. And so she had.

And so she would now.

She took out her phone and mechanically reported their discovery to Detective Ingram, reading off their GPS location from the screen of Ezekiel’s phone.

She called Jenkins, the antiquated bastard who didn’t even have his own phone. Hearing his solid, dependable voice had nearly broken her. But she would go on.

“See if Emmet can tell us something about where they took him,” Mkosi was saying to Seamus.

And the dog was nosing the gravelled surface of the road on which the only tracks must have been written in scent because nothing visible remained.

“Under some conditions,” Mkosi was telling her, “Emmet can track a person even in a moving vehicle.”

But this didn’t look like it was going to be one of those times.

The dog circled, and circled, and then came back to where he had started. Suddenly, he froze, nose high in the air.

The hair along his spine spiked, his ears flattened, and his lips drew back over glinting teeth. His body stiffened, vibrating with a tension that grew audible, a low rumbling that swelled in intensity and volume.

Mkosi froze with him. “Oh shit!” she whispered softly. “We’ve got to get out of here.”

“Why is he doing that? What does it mean?” Eve asked, searching ahead of the dog for some unseen threat. The menacing growling shivered cold chills up her neck, and raised the hair on her arms.
There was nothing there.

The track and the road stayed empty. The dog’s growl edged towards a whine as he cringed against Mkosi’s leg.

There was nothing there.

Eve drew her gun and slipped off the safety.

“Go! Go!” Mkosi commanded, “Back to the vehicles. Now!”

Her terror was contagious.

Eve was not used to being herded out of danger, but this was a danger she could not catalogue and did not understand, so she grabbed Ezekiel by the collar and shoved him ahead of her back the way they had come.

The four of them and the dog fetched up at the SAR SUV, gasping for air.

“Leave your car,” Mkosi ordered Ezekiel. “Everyone in the SUV.”

“What . . . ?” Eve started to ask.

“Questions later!” Mkosi already had the dog strapped in and the engine running.

Eve and Ezekiel barely threw themselves into their seats before Mkosi whipped the SUV around and sent it careening back towards the highway in a manner that made Ezekiel’s driving look sedate.

Eve clung to the armrest, trying to buckle in, holster her gun, and catch her breath. What the hell had just happened?

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TBC
“Yeah, yeah. I’m coming,” Hardison huffed at the microwave that had been dinging at him for the past 20 minutes. Opening the door, he used a paper towel to remove the item that was offending the machine. Operation Hot Pocket was a go.

Eliot and Parker had gone off comms to grab their own food, leaving him to fulfill his part of their mission. Research, research, research. They had no idea how much work it took for him to ferret out all the information they needed for their parts of the con. They just expected him to have it dripping from his fingertips when next they checked in demanding answers.

Taking a nibble off the corner of his Hot Pocket, Hardison woke up his laptop.

Several minutes later, he had confirmed one thing: he hated small towns. At least this time he wasn’t living in one. Black Diamond didn’t even possess a news site. Their Facebook page contained information about bylaws and town events, but the news was apparently still paper. Further investigation led him to The Alberta Police Report which gave the bare bones story of the RCMP being called to a hit and run accident on Highway 22, but there was no follow-up information.

Sighing, Hardison set about hacking into the RCMP records.

* * * * *

Black Diamond, Alberta, Canada

Eliot, Parker, and the two girls watched as the door swung shut behind Cassandra Cillian and Mr. Jenkins.

Eliot exchanged a quick glance with Parker. The appearance of two new players dramatically altered the dynamic of their game. They needed to talk, but to jump up and follow the departing pair would be too suspicious. Besides, their order was just arriving, and they were both ravenous.

Parker had ordered a burger topped with peanut butter and bananas. Eliot watched with horrified fascination as she took a huge bite.

“Mmm,” Parker mumbled around her mouthful. “Thith ith good! Try thome!” She waved the abomination in his face.

It couldn’t possibly be worse than raw rat, Eliot reminded himself, allowing her to feed him the smallest possible bite.

“See?” said Parker, grinning at him with bits of peanut butter on her teeth. “Totally yummy!”

The combination of flavors was . . . interesting. Not nearly as horrible as he had feared. But he would not be adding it to the Brew Pub’s menu. Three very excellent fries removed the taste from his palate enough for him to enjoy his own ordinary cheeseburger.

“That was . . . odd,” Hilde commented.

It took Eliot a moment to figure out that she wasn’t talking about Parker’s burger.
“Those two?” Daphne asked, slurping noisily at her soda and obviously following teenage girl code better than Eliot. “Yeah, who just drives into town expecting to buy a horse that’s not even for sale?”

“Entitled much?” Parker suggested in between bites.

She was getting much better at interacting with people, utilizing Sophie’s training to guide the conversation where she wanted it to go, which was far away from having these two representatives of their victim and their villain make any connection between Cassandra Cillian and James McCoy or Kira O’Brien.

“Oh no!” Daphne shook her head. “That wasn’t entitled. I’ve spent most of my life being an entitled bitch, so I should know.”

Hilde twisted her face wryly. “Yeah, Daphne’s my special project. She spends days at a time now being almost entirely human, but wow! Three years ago when I met her?” She shuddered.

Daphne laughed. “It’s been a thankless task. Remember that Halloween dance last year?”

“You came as a ‘sexy Indian princess,’ thinking I would like it!” Hilde thumped her head down in her arms on the counter.

Daphne blushed and hugged her friend apologetically. “Yeah, and I found you in the girl’s locker room crying and raging that you weren’t a costume, and didn’t I understand Canada had made laws to keep First Nations people from wearing their own clothes, but white people always could, and that the feathers and designs meant something sacred and personal and important . . .”

Hilde popped her head up, an affectionate smile on her face. “And you didn’t get offended and tell me all about your good intentions and how I was just too sensitive. You stripped it all off, gave it to me, and told me to burn it or whatever was appropriate. And you kept saying ‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry.’”

“I just knew I’d hurt my friend, and I didn’t ever want to do that. Not ever.”

“You’d have walked out there in your underwear, I’m almost sure.”

“Who cares what those morons think?”

“By morons do you mean the teachers or the other kids?” Parker asked curiously. Having missed her own high school years, Parker always treated information about high school with anthropological interest.

Two heads turned to look at her as though they’d forgotten they had an audience.

“Take your pick,” Hilde said. “They don’t teach anything important about our history in Canadian Social Studies.”

“So what did you do for a costume?” Parker asked.

“Fortunately—locker room. We found somebody’s spare gym clothes,” Daphne said. “The guy I was with was so pissed. He ditched me and danced with all the girls in the sparkly costumes with the really short skirts.”

“I didn’t even have a date,” Hilde said. “So we danced with each other.”
“Good riddance.” Daphne scowled.

“Cool,” said Parker. “So how can you tell that Cassandra person wasn’t a spoilt rotten rich girl like you?”

It was a good thing Daphne seemed to accept her membership in that category with a sense of humor, Eliot reflected. Sometimes Parker could still be a bit blunt.

“She wasn’t here looking for something she felt she deserved,” Daphne answered after a moment’s consideration.

“Yeah,” Hilde agreed. “She was more the sort of person to have impossible dreams.”

“And that line? ‘Money is no object’?” Daphne shook her head. “That was just a cliché for her. She didn’t even know how to say it like she meant it.”

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Portland, Oregon, USA

The SAR SUV reached the busy St. Helens highway without anyone uttering a word.

Dr. Mkosi pulled into the flow of traffic and let out a huge sigh, plucked out her glasses, and settled them on her nose. The tension drained off of her. Apparently, whatever they had been running from was no longer a threat.

“Well, Doc, are you going to tell me what that was all about?” Eve asked.

“Yeah,” Ezekiel chimed in. “I’m missing a car.”

Seamus glanced apologetically and sheepishly at them and shrugged. He didn’t seem to know either.

Taking the off ramp for the St. John’s Bridge, Mkosi drove without answering until she reached Stone’s house. Halting the vehicle by the curb, she said to Eve. “You won’t understand. You can’t. But believe me when I tell you that Emmet never does that. I mean never.”

She waved aside Eve’s attempt to suggest wild animals.

“One time, when we were searching for a lost hiker in Montana, we ran into a grizzly. Any sensible animal would have been cowering and cringing. But not Emmet. He barked. He used every bad word in his vocabulary to tell that bear that his mother was a hamster and his father smelt of elderberries. I was pretty much sure that Emmet was going to be an appetizer, and I was going to be the main course. Fortunately, the bear decided we were too much trouble and wandered off. You never can tell with a grizzly.”

Mkosi grew silent. Eve waited this time for her to return from her memories.

“What Emmet did back there?—doesn’t happen. But there are stories. Those of us who work in Search and Rescue tell them to each other. Hand them down, handler to handler—about the things your dog can see that you can’t. Because if a SAR dog does that? Freaks out at the empty air? You have minutes to get out of there.”

“Or what?” Ezekiel asked.

“No one knows.”
“You don’t believe me.” Mkosi’s mouth twisted wryly. “Neither does Seamus. But let me tell you about one other time . . .” Her hands tightened on the wheel until her knuckles shone pale through her brown skin. “I was part of a team searching for a hunter who hadn’t made it home. There was a storm coming, so we had everyone out in the field. We were keeping in touch by radio. One of the other handlers checked in saying his dog was on the trail. Then his dog alerted the way Emmet just did. He described it to us over the radio, saying it was the weirdest thing because they were in the middle of a bare hillside. No trees. No rocks. No hiding places. The weather was still fine. There was nothing to cause his dog to react.”

She paused, eyes focussed on some inward vision. A fine shudder, barely noticeable, ran across her shoulders. Whatever had happened, Dr. Mkosi was reliving it.

“And . . . ?” Ezekiel prompted.

Eve elbowed him to be quiet, but Mkosi gave herself a shake back into the present and went on.

“And that was the last we heard. Understand, we were a Search and Rescue company, and he was one of our own. We tracked him to his last known position. Each of the dogs tried, and they all stopped at the same spot. And then nothing. No sign of dog or handler or even the person they were trailing. Finally, our team leader called it. They weren’t going to be found. It fit the pattern. The one some of us hadn’t believed.”

“Pattern?” Eve asked.

“Deserted location, no witnesses, fear alert from the dog, and then nothing.” Mkosi turned to look at Eve. “I’m sorry,” she said. “That’s always a part of it. They’re never found—not the dog, not the handler, not the person they’re searching for.”

The words were quiet, but they should have laid trees down with the thunderclap of their impact. For Eve, it was as though the earth shifted under her feet. Hope shattered like a wall of glass hit by a mortar blast.

Mkosi searched Eve’s face with troubled eyes. “You believe me,” she said wonderingly. “No one ever does, but you do.”

Eve was not going to discuss with a civilian the number of unbelievable things she dealt with on a daily basis. Instead she asked, “Will the forensics team be okay?”

“Yes, of course,” Mkosi assured her. “There will be enough of them. That’s why we needed to stick together.”

“Safety in numbers?” Ezekiel asked.

“Numbers. Or time. Whatever it is doesn’t stay long. You should be safe to go back for your car when the police are there or after a couple of hours have passed.”

* * * * *

Calgary, Alberta, Canada

“Hardison!”

Both Parker’s and Eliot’s voices crackled to life in unison over his comm. Hardison winced at the
volume. "You bellowed?" he asked with exaggerated politeness.

He glanced at the monitor where he was tracking his team. The two blinking blips that represented Eliot and Parker had left the soda shop and were moving rapidly towards the motel. The Parker blip was buzzing around like an untied balloon. Hardison planted a kiss on his fingertip and poked at it.

"Hardison, we have a situation," Parker said.

Rubbing the fingerprint off his screen with a microfiber cloth, Hardison asked, “What is it, babe?”

“Anyone wanna take bets on Cassandra Cillian’s appearance in Black Diamond, accompanied by a body guard, being a coincidence?” Eliot growled.

“Cassandra Cillian?” It took Hardison a minute to place the name. “The redhead from the Brew Pub the other night? Seriously?”

Parker latched onto another part of Eliot’s question. “That old man? Her uncle?”

“Are you kidding me? He might have grey hair, but he knew who I was, and he was ready to fight me anyway. If he’s her uncle, I’m a suburban soccer mom.”

Hardison shook his head vigorously. “Okay. Just give me a minute to scrub that image out of my brain.”

“What are the odds of her showing up here just when Leverage is running a con?” Eliot continued, ignoring him.

“She didn’t blow your IDs?” Hardison asked, noting that the Parker and Eliot blips had arrived at the motel.

“No, she didn’t,” Parker assured him. Her blip continued to vibrate as though she was hopping about the room.

Eliot’s blip had gone stationary.

“And that makes me wonder why?” Eliot’s voice was irritated the way it got when he couldn’t locate all the threats and pound them to dust. “Because any normal person would have. She knows more about us than she should. What is she really after? And what does that have to do with our case?”

The three of them were silent. Even Parker-blip stopped moving. Hardison contemplated the myriad of possible answers to those questions.

“You know what else is bothering me?” Eliot added. “How the hell does she know about Spark? Hardison, is it possible their thief has hacked your system?”

Hardison was offended. “Ezekiel Jones? Nuh uh! No way! He’s good, so I’ve heard, but ain’t nobody that good. I’d know if he’d been in.”

Nevertheless, he surreptitiously began running a check just to be sure. It wouldn’t do to get too cocky.

Eliot snorted like he knew what Hardison was doing. “In other words, you’ll be adding researching Jones, Cillian, and her ‘uncle’ who calls himself Jenkins to your to-do list.”
“You know. Yes. Yes, I will. But you guys need to hear what I’ve been finding out about the Densmores’ ‘bad luck.’”

“What did you find?” Parker asked.

Hardison called up the information he’d been compiling. “I’ve been looking into Reidar Densmore’s accident. Tough break. He’s lucky to be alive because he went over the bank in the dark, and no one noticed for nearly an hour. But this is the weird bit. Densmore’s truck was hit square on the driver’s side. Bent the frame like a cheese stick. There shoulda been a ton of damage to the other vehicle—broken glass, ripped off chunks of metal and plastic, chipped paint. But there was nothing at the accident site that showed another vehicle was present. Not even paint rubbed off on the scrapes in Densmore’s truck.”

“That’s easy enough to do,” Eliot said. “If it’s a vehicle of the same make and model with the same paint lot.”

Just another factoid to add to Eliot’s résumé of unsavory activities he knew too much about. Hardison was used to it by now. Mostly. They all knew and had even utilized Eliot’s ability to cause exactly the sort of damage to a vehicle that he wanted to cause.

“That means it pretty much can’t be an accident,” Parker said.

“It does take some serious planning,” Eliot agreed. “I woulda expected that sort of operation to go off without a hitch. Densmore shouldn’t be alive.”

“Unless they wanted him alive,” Hardison suggested.

“That doesn’t make any sense.” Parker was turning the problem over the way she always did, to see all its cracks and crevices. “It’s not like the medical bills are going to force them to sell. They’ve got socialized medicine here, so they get hospitals and doctors and therapists.”

“What about stuff like wheelchairs and vans?” Eliot asked.

Hardison had the answer with a swipe of his fingers. “Alberta Aids for Daily Living covered the wheelchair, and between the insurance payout, the Canada Revenue Service rebate, and the Disability Related Employment Supports, they got a modified van.”

“So, either this was a botched hit or what? They wanted to scare the Densmores away?” Parker asked. “How does that even work?”

“If—and that’s a pretty big ‘if’,” Eliot said. “they were trying to wear away the Densmores’ will to continue fighting, murder might not have been the end goal, although that kind of hit, it’s kinda hard to count on someone not dyin’.”

“That’s . . . just brutal.” Hardison wiped away the files as if he could make it not have happened. The Densmores had needed Leverage months ago.

“Yeah,” Eliot said quietly.

And what dark roads and hellish collisions was he remembering? Hardison shivered with a cold not caused by the ungodly weather in this country. Eliot had needed Leverage a lot longer ago, too.

Hardison waited to see if there were any other questions. When none came, he continued. “Then there’s the barn fire.”
“What’s the official cause?” Parker’s voice had the super-charged sound to it that she always got whenever flames and explosions entered the conversation, and her blip re-activated, caroming about the room.

“Investigator called it faulty wiring.”

Parker snorted.

“I can name you a half dozen ways to make a fire look like wiring.” Eliot sounded resigned. “Parker, my cover is blown with the Densmores, but you could go in as an investigator for the insurance company.”

“I suppose, if I wore that brown wig and glasses and a really Sophie suit,” Parker agreed. “But I don’t know what a fire does after I set it. I just like to make things burn.”

“I can coach you through it,” Eliot offered.

“I don’t think we can take the time,” Parker decided. “Benarden is exactly the sort of horrible human who would burn somebody’s barn. So it doesn’t really matter right now whether he actually did. We need to step this up. If Benarden is behind all the Densmores’ bad luck, he needs to be stopped before he does something else.”

“Parker’s right,” Eliot agreed. “This reads like an escalation in pressure. It’s already ugly enough. Anything more is gonna be worse.”

“We’re all on the same page then?” Parker asked, her blip coming to a halt beside the Eliot blip.

“Hell, yeah! Let’s get this bastard!” Hardison grinned at his computer screen.

“I’m in.” Eliot’s voice had that suppressed eagerness that meant someone was due for some serious hurting. For the first time since they’d entered the motel room, his blip moved, straight and purposeful.

“Then Eliot and I’ll go stir up some trouble tonight,” Parker said.

* * * * *

Portland, Oregon, USA

Since Eve and Ezekiel had no vehicle, Dr. Mkosi dropped them off at Eve’s apartment. She handed Eve her card in case there was ever further need for Emmet’s services, and then she and Seamus drove away. When the SAR vehicle was out of sight, the two of them walked to the Annex in silence. Ezekiel was absorbed in something on his phone, but Eve’s mind kept battering against the mystery of Stone’s disappearance. She needed to talk to Jenkins.

As the two of them exited the tunnel into the Annex, a cacophony of voices broke out.

Eve’s “Jenkins, quick question. What invisible thing could cause a SAR dog to turn into a terrified quivering jellyfish?” was overlapped by Cassandra already in midsentence, “… did you find? What happened to Jacob?” and Jenkins uncharacteristically also talking, “Colonel Baird, you should know that we have encountered and spoken with Eliot Spencer.”

Her reaction to that name was so hard-wired into her psyche that Eve’s train of investigation was thoroughly derailed.

“Wait a minute. You two made contact with Spencer after I specifically told you not to?”
“It was an accident!” Cassandra was distracted into defending her actions. “He and Martha, I mean Parker, walked into the shop where I was talking to two girls who knew about the horse.”

“I’m afraid Miss Cillian is correct,” Jenkins confirmed. “And she has arranged for him, or at least his alter ego James McCoy, to contact her again for horseback-riding lessons.”

None of them were expecting Ezekiel’s look of horror as he dived for Jenkins’ improbable computer and began frantically setting it up.

“Ezekiel?” Eve asked.

Ezekiel ignored her, focussing on Cassandra. “Let me get this straight. You met Eliot Spencer and Parker the night before last in Portland, and then they find you in the same nowhere town in Canada, where they’re obviously up to no good because otherwise why would they be using aliases, and now you’re back in Portland? And you gave Spencer your phone number?”

“That about sums it up,” Cassandra agreed.

“You don’t think they’re going to be just a wee bit suspicious?” Ezekiel glared at them, waiting impatiently for the machine to boot up. “Why is no one asking the most important question?”

“And what, in your opinion, is that question?” Eve asked with exaggerated patience.

“Where was Alec Hardison?”

The three of them stared at Ezekiel in varying degrees of non-comprehension.

Ezekiel shook his head, disgusted. “You people don’t even deserve me. This is Alec Hardison we’re talking about. He’s not in the history books of half a dozen countries, and he should be. If you think he’s not getting ready to turn Cassandra’s life inside out, you don’t have a clue the sort of havoc we . . . I mean, that sort of person can wreak.”

“What do you mean?” Eve asked.

“You’re all so worried about the big, bad Eliot Spencer,” Ezekiel widened his eyes and waved his hands threateningly, “but you have to be in roughly the same zip code for him to be a problem.” He turned back to his computer. “Parker? If you’re the owner of something extraordinary or valuable, she’ll fall out of the sky to steal it, and you’ll never catch her doing it. But Alec Hardison? He can track you down and destroy you if you’re anywhere in this solar system. You’re all freaking out about the wrong guy.”

His fingers nearly a blur on the keyboard, Ezekiel continued his rant. “You think he’s not within seconds of discovering that Cassandra just teleported from Black Diamond to Portland? How’re you planning on explaining that little feat to that crew without letting slip that magic is real and loose in the world? ‘Cause they’re not going to swallow that handwavium, blah, blah, blah, swamp gas BS we’ve been dishing out.”

Ezekiel laced his fingers together and cracked his knuckles. “Okay. I always wondered what it’d be like to go up against Alec Hardison. Now I guess I’m going to find out.”

“But what about Jacob?” Cassandra’s voice was plaintive.

“Forget Stone. The police are investigating. Nothing we can do is going to change anything in the next minute.”
“Ezekiel’s right,” Eve agreed.

Cassandra’s mouth opened to begin to protest, so Eve quickly qualified her statement. “Not that we’re going to forget him, but that we have a window of time during which we can’t do anything to help him, and we do need to neutralize this threat.”

Ezekiel looked pleased that she’d backed his play, and Cassandra looked resigned.

“So how do we go about doing that?” Cassandra bent over Ezekiel’s shoulder to see what he was up to.

“First we’ve got to get your phone out of here. That’s what he’s going to check first.” Search screens and web pages flickered rapidly by at Ezekiel’s touch. “Hotels. Black Diamond. That’s easy. There’s only two. Ouch. The reviews on this one suck. The one with the bar it is. Now what rooms do they have available? Take your pick. Apparently Black Diamond is a real tourism hot spot in March. And since all of us might have to show up to fetch that horse, I’m going to take two rooms. Baird and Cassandra can have one, and Jenkins and I will take the other.”

“Oh, joy.” Jenkins made a disgusted face.

“Get over the horror of bunking with me, mate, and fire up that door. Cassandra, get ready to run your phone in and leave it there. I’ll make the reservations after you’ve got it back in Canada.”

As Jenkins laboriously set up the globe to the coordinates of the hotel, Ezekiel muttered, “I’ve got to get that thing digitized.”

Finally, the door was open to a nondescript, generic hotel room.

“Quick,” Ezekiel called to Cassandra. “Oh, and take all our phones.” He tossed them to her as Cassandra dashed through the door.

Eve patted her pocket, wondering when he’d stolen hers.

“What am I going to do for a phone?” Cassandra asked, appearing back in the door a minute later.

“I’ll get us all burners and have our regular phones forward our calls . . . Whoa! That was close! Hardison just ran a search for your phone.” Ezekiel’s typing, improbably, got faster.

“You can tell that?” Cassandra took up her place at his shoulder, curious.

Ezekiel rolled his eyes without stopping what he was doing. “Okay. Reservations are set. Now I have to make it look like we arrived in Black Diamond the normal way.”

“At least we came through the airport,” Eve pointed out.

“Yes, that’s good. I can use that. Just have to put us on a flight we weren’t on and make it look like our passports were pinged at customs and security when they weren’t. Colonel Baird, you did not just see me do this. Damn. It’s like he’s reading my mind.” Ezekiel was actually sweating, crouched over his computer and typing like a maniac. Finally, he took a deep breath and looked up. “We’re still good. So far. Now Cassandra’s background will work as is, but Jenkins, you don’t even have a background for him to check.” He turned back to his computer. “Hmmm. Can I forge an identity faster than Hardison can trace an alias?”

“I told Eliot he was my uncle,” Cassandra put in.
“Do you have any real uncles?” Ezekiel asked.

“Yes, two. Why?”

“Because I’m about to piggyback one of their identities onto Jenkins. Names? Ages?”

“Did either of them serve in any branch of the military or in law enforcement?” Jenkins enquired. “Because Mr. Spencer will not believe I’ve had no combat training.”

“My uncle Ramsey was in the Army Reserves. Will that do?”

“And how old is he?” Ezekiel asked.

“He’s 59,” Cassandra said.

“Perfect. You’re now Ramsey Jenkins, Jenkins. You’re looking a little old for your age.”

“That will be a change,” Jenkins said acerbically.

Ezekiel dusted his hands and pushed away from his computer. “That cover will do for now. I can’t guarantee it’ll hold for long if they suspect we’re actively interfering with whatever they’re up to. Alec Hardison is a legend. But we can breathe for a few minutes.”

Eve knew that Eliot Spencer was going to be ten times as wary of their motives now that all four of them were demonstrably stalking him, but at least he wouldn’t be suspecting anything magical.

“Good,” said Cassandra, frustration boiling in her voice. “Now can we talk about Jacob?”

* * * * *

Black Diamond, Alberta, Canada

It turned out that the Cassandra person and her uncle/not-uncle were staying on the second floor of the hotel with the bar where Parker and Eliot were planning to set the next stage of their con.

And Eliot’s Colonel was there with the thief, too.

When Hardison had informed them of that fact, all the happy that the evil horse had put back in Eliot’s eyes turned sad, and all the freedom in his movement coiled back into chains. This was a danger to his team that he couldn’t fight.

Parker felt her eyes sting with an old, familiar anger.

Why couldn’t Colonel Baird have waited until Eliot came back to Portland to start chasing him? Then they could have enjoyed this little time of peace before it all went to hell.

Eliot’s cousin wasn’t here. She supposed he hadn’t wanted to be a part of taking Eliot down.

Eliot was grilling Hardison on the details of the bodyguard uncle, his face frozen into his soldiery threat-assessment look.

“What’s his military background?”

“You’re not gonna tell me?” Hardison attempted to lighten the conversation. “Nothing distinctive about his stance or his haircut or his shoes?”
“No there ain’t,” Eliot snapped. “So do your job which is giving me enough intelligence to do mine.”


“No combat service?” Eliot scowled. “Then he’s had some training on the side, because that ain’t just some weekend warrior.”

“Do we pull out then?” Hardison asked.

Even though he couldn’t see Eliot, Hardison obviously knew that this job was compromised. How badly they didn’t know yet.

“Eliot?” Parker could make the call, but this was Eliot’s past coming for them.

“Hell, no,” Eliot said, returning a little bit from where he’d drawn back inside himself. “The Densmores don’t have time for us to shake a tail before we help them. I’m gonna call Cassie and give her that riding lesson—see if I can find out why they’re here. If I have to, I’ll even tell her something about what we’re doing. Maybe they’ll give us enough time to set things right before they do . . . whatever it is they’ve come to do.”

“Okay then,” Parker said, feeling more hopeful. Maybe, if Colonel Baird could see how good Eliot was now, she would decide to let Leverage keep him. Parker was certainly not planning to give him up without a fight. And when Parker decided to steal something, it stayed stolen.

For now, she could stick to the plan, which was to find Eliot some bad guys to fight. Eliot looked like he needed to hit someone.

Luring in those someones was Parker’s job. Which meant she had to get dressed up and ugh—get her hair done. But because Eliot was unhappy again, Parker would try to cooperate about the hair.

* * * * *

Portland, Oregon, USA

Now that the time had arrived, Eve found herself delaying the moment she would have to tell Cassandra what they had seen on that deserted road.

“Let’s sit down,” she suggested. “This is going to take a while, and I’ve been walking almost all day.”

Jenkins was already in place behind his desk, and Ezekiel merely pivoted his chair from in front of the computer. That left Cassandra to pull up one of the leather-upholstered captain’s chairs next to Ezekiel. Eve chose a tall, wooden stool positioned so the four of them formed a rough circle the way they often did when briefing for a mission, a circle glaringly missing its fifth member.

Taking a deep breath, Eve started with the arrival of the SAR team, and with occasional interjections from Ezekiel, led Jenkins and Cassandra through the search up until the dog had located the point where whatever had happened to Jacob Stone had taken place. She took care to emphasize that the dog had indicated that Stone was still alive. She left out the description of the blood-soaked ground, merely stating that there was evidence that a struggle had taken place. Both Ezekiel and Jenkins stared at her. Ezekiel opened his mouth to add the gory details, but Eve froze him to silence with a look.

Before any further traumatizing information could escape, Eve brought up the strange behavior of
the dog. As she had hoped, the additional mystery drew her team off of the specific condition of the crime scene and onto a hunt for things that could make dogs and humans disappear without a trace.

“These abductions occur in broad daylight?” Jenkins asked, thumbing through a large volume.

“Yes,” Eve confirmed. “But Dr. Mkosi did not suggest that time of day was a factor, so I presume they might also occur at night.”

“Hmm. There are a limited number of magical threats indigenous to the Pacific Northwest.”

“Bigfoot?” Ezekiel suggested.

“No, actually.” Jenkins shook his head. “The Sasquatch are peaceable beings. Occasionally they have been known to assist people in trouble. There are, however, a species of deer women, creatures with the bodies of women and the feet of deer, who lure men into following them to the point of wasting away. Then there are the several varieties of basket ogresses. They scoop up children and carry them off to devour them. Not a particularly likely fate for Mr. Stone. Finally, the bukwus, not to be confused with the Sasquatch, is a skeletal, long-haired wild man, more of a ghost really, who tempts humans into eating ghostly food and thereby transforms them into bukwus as well.”

“But none of those are invisible,” Eve pointed out. “Anyone who saw one of them would surely comment. Dr. Mkosi was in radio contact with her colleague who disappeared. And we saw nothing.”

“True. And none of them would have posed a threat to a dog. It is possible you were dealing with something phase-shifted like the inhabitants of Collins Falls, or something operating under a curse or spell, possibly even an extremely powerful haunting.”

“Great. Try explaining curse, spell, or phase shift to law enforcement.”

“There might also be dangers under the earth,” Jenkins added.

“What do you mean?”

“Lava tubes, Colonel Baird. They are not, in fact, made by lava, although they certainly appear in the aftermath of volcanism. The area is honeycombed with them. Some of them have collapsed in places, leaving passages exposed to human exploration. These tend to be abandoned by any magical denizens. The Ape Caves over by Mount Saint Helens are an example of that sort. The Catlin Gabel Lava Tubes are a much older example here in Portland. But the majority exist undisturbed and undiscovered.”

“What does make them, then?” Cassandra asked.

“Dragons,” Jenkins said, raising an eyebrow. “Geothermal and volcanic activity is almost entirely attributable to dragons, and lava tubes are no exception. When dragons wake and move through molten stone in what you would call a volcanic eruption, the trails they leave behind become subterranean passages utilized by other magical creatures after the dragons have returned to their centuries of sleep. You would not know if one was underneath your feet, but it is possible that an opening exists in the vicinity of Mr. Stone’s disappearance.”

“Like the tunnel in Rome!” Cassandra exclaimed. “We couldn’t see its opening until I solved the riddle.”
“Precisely.” Jenkins nodded.

“But none of those explain Stone’s abduction,” Ezekiel pointed out. “Someone moved his truck, and it wasn’t him. Mkosi said those other disappearances were complete blanks—no evidence left behind. Not bloody handprints, puddles of blood, or tracks where bodies were dragged.”

Silence swept in behind his words.

Cassandra gave a choked gasp as if Ezekiel had just stabbed her. The color fled her face. Her hands clenched to her mouth, stifling whatever cry she might have made. She turned to Eve, anguish eyes begging her Guardian to deny Ezekiel’s statement.

Eve would have given anything to be able to do so. Instead, she gave a fraction of a nod, confirming that Ezekiel had told the unexaggerated truth. Then she glared at Ezekiel.

For once, Ezekiel looked repentant.

“No,” Cassandra whispered. “Oh, no. No, no, no.” Her voice fell away, but her lips moved over Jacob’s name.

“He was still alive when he left the scene,” Eve reminded Cassandra, holding to that knowledge herself.

Cassandra took a deep breath and crossed her arms across her body as though holding herself together by physical force.

Then she surprised Eve.

“When were you planning to mention that there is DNA at that site?” she asked, accusation eclipsing the horror in her voice.

“I trust the forensics team is capable of processing all the evidence,” Eve said, not expecting this turn. Sometimes she forgot that the girl was a scientist above and beyond all else.

“We need to go back there,” Cassandra said firmly, getting up and heading towards the Back Door. “How can they interpret that evidence correctly if they can’t even imagine the possibility of magical interference?”

“First, we need to make a plan,” Eve insisted. “We can’t just fire off in all directions. Let’s list what we know, and then we’ll have a better idea what we need to do next.”

For a minute Eve thought Cassandra was going to revolt. Then the stiffness went out of her, and she slumped back into her seat in resignation.

Since Ezekiel was the one with all the information, Eve gave him the task of marking down the major points on the evidence board using the timeline he’d developed on his phone.

“Okay, so we know that Stone left his house at approximately 1:10 p.m. on March 3. He turned off the St. John’s Bridge onto Highway 30 St. Helens at 1:17 p.m.” Ezekiel scratched down the times.

“He had a 2 p.m. appointment with Eliot Spencer that he did not meet but Spencer did,” Eve took up the narrative.

“Yes,” Ezekiel agreed, putting it down on the board. “Some time during those 43 minutes, he contacted or was contacted by someone—not by cellphone, e-mail or social media. Query: was the
contact intentional or unintentional? Did Stone know the contact? Did he turn off Hwy 30 to meet them or were they already with him? Traffic cams show him alone, but someone could have been in the back seat.”

The four of them contemplated the sparse information.

“Then Stone’s pickup was driven to the site where the struggle occurred,” Eve continued. “And afterwards, someone other than Stone took the pickup to the location where it was found. That person or persons likely rejoined whatever vehicle removed Stone from the scene.”

“And none of that takes into account whatever it was that frightened the dog,” Jenkins pointed out. “Was it summoned by the individuals involved or did it just arrive by chance in the same location? And how many ended up being its victims?”

“Or maybe it had nothing to do with Stone’s disappearance and was hunting us,” Eve suggested.

“That is just too many variables,” Cassandra exclaimed. “We have to go back there.”

“Okay,” Eve agreed, her need to know what had happened to Jacob trumping her need to keep her remaining team away from whatever had been lurking in the woods. “But we’re all going.”

Jenkins pained expression was not going to get him out of the expedition.

“You will bring along whatever equipment we have that is most likely to detect magical interference,” she told him.

Jenkins sighed and headed for his lab.

“Cassandra, get what you need for forensic analysis, magical or otherwise.”

Cassandra darted after Jenkins.

“Ezekiel . . .” Eve stared at her thief, her mind drawing a blank on a reason to haul him along.

“I’m going to pick up my car,” Ezekiel informed her.

“Right.” Eve checked her gun to make sure it was in order. “Everyone, out to Jenkins’ station wagon.”

* * * * *

Black Diamond, Alberta, Canada

Parker had never enjoyed the part of cons where she had to pretend to have fancy hair. She preferred not to have her hair touched. But Sophie had been very persuasive about how the right hairstyle completed the character, and so Parker had occasionally, reluctantly, allowed the grifter to arrange her uncomplicated locks into something more elaborate for a con. Sophie had done her best to instruct Parker in the finer points of hair care and management, but Parker, in spite of the fact that she could pick a lock with her hands tied behind her back and three of her fingers broken, had never advanced farther than a slightly sleeker, more sophisticated ponytail.

When Sophie had left them the first time, Parker had been adrift without her guidance until Sophie had suggested that Eliot might be able to help. After all, next to Sophie, he had the most experience with hair. Or as Sophie had complained bitterly, the man could swim a river, battle a team of goons, crawl through a culvert on his stomach, and emerge looking like a L’Oréal
commercial. It wasn’t fair.

Hardison had refused to have anything to do with the process. “Sure I done some little kid’s hair back at Nana’s. Braids? I’m your man. Corn rows? I got you, girl. But curls? Puttin’ hair up all rich-white-people-like? Nuh uh. No way. None of us wanna see that mess.”

So Parker had asked Eliot. Eliot had looked at her as if she had grown a second head and refused. “You gotta be kiddin’ me! No. I am not fixing your hair, Parker.”

But then Eliot had turned out to have some strongly-held opinions about hair, and what products she should use on it, and what tools she needed to get exactly the right effects, and what accessories she should add. After Parker had appeared looking, according to Eliot, like the love child of Little Orphan Annie and Edward Scissorhands, he had capitulated and agreed to perform emergency hair resuscitation.

He had sworn and growled and complained so much that Parker hadn’t minded him doing it too much.

Now, whenever a con required that Parker’s hair be styled, Eliot played hairdresser. He had, of course, dated a hairdresser. Probably more than one.

Donning the floaty, floral skirt, white camisole, and blue, button-up shirt from the Fiddle con, Parker squared her shoulders, lifted her chin, and marched without her usual complaints to the chair where Eliot waited with the curling iron hot. Plunking herself down, she sighed. “Okay. Make me into a sexy cowgirl.”

“You already sexy, mama,” Hardison said, and she could hear the way his eyes looked when he said it, all soft and wide with admiration. “Only thing Eliot can do is make you look more country.”

For once Eliot didn’t get annoyed at Hardison’s commentary. This time, he seemed less frustrated than usual, as if combing out the long strands, catching them in the curling iron, twirling them tight, and counting out the seconds he held it was some sort of meditative act that calmed him.

Eliot was going to get hit tonight if everything went according to plan. So Parker did her best to behave. And she was very good at not moving for hours if she had to on a heist. But having someone’s hands on her head, in her hair, tugging on it, even very gently, even if it was Eliot, gave Parker the sensation she had ants crawling on her scalp. She had to move.

“Stop squirming!” Eliot told her. “I can’t do this if you don’t sit still.”

She was not squirming. She was just . . . shifting her center of gravity. Or something. “That smells funny.” Parker sniffed, craning her neck to see what Eliot was doing. “Are you burning it?”

“I’m not burning your hair. But I will be burning something if you. Don’t. Stop. Moving!”

Parker sat still. Really. You couldn’t call it moving. It was just tensing her muscles and relaxing them, one at a time.

“Parker, what did I tell you?” Eliot waved the curling iron threateningly at her.

“Are you giving Eliot a hard time?” Hardison’s voice tickled her ear.

“No,” said Parker.
“Yes,” said Eliot.

“Hey, girl. You know Eliot takes hair very seriously. Better let the man do his job.”

Parker sighed. “I wish he could do it faster.”

“You can’t hurry this up,” Eliot snapped, starting on the other side of her head. “Are you gonna stop moving now?”

Okay. She wouldn’t move. But he didn’t have to be such a grouch. Parker folded her arms and stuck out her bottom lip. Then she crossed her eyes looking down her nose. She wiggled her lips right and then left and then tried to touch the tip of her nose with her bottom lip. She could almost do it. Maybe if she practiced. You never knew when something like that might come in handy. She wished the motel had a mirror in the main room. She was probably making some pretty funny faces.

One of the curls came sproinging down in front of her nose. Parker blew it straight up. That was fun. She did it again. Up it went. Sproing. Parker giggled.

“Parker!”

Parker tried to pretend she was in an air duct. This was so boring. She wanted to scratch the ants out of her scalp. Why did people even bother? It wasn’t like fancy hair was useful for anything. Next time she was bringing a wig.

Eleventy million hours later, Eliot was finally done.

He set the curling iron on the desk. “Okay, you can move,” he told her.

Parker jumped up and ran to the bathroom. “Now I look like a poodle!” Parker told Hardison, shaking her head so the spiral curls bounced. “I like it.”

“This is cowboy country, mama.” Hardison laughed. “The bigger the hair, the harder they fall.”

“What do you know about cowboys?” Eliot grumbled, sitting on the bed to pull on his boots.

“Hey!” Hardison sounded offended. “Fun little history fact: The overwhelming majority of cowboys in the U.S. were Indigenous, Black, and Mexican. The omnipresent white cowboy is a Hollywood studio concoction meant to uphold the mythology of white masculinity.”

“Ha! I’d like to see you ride Spark out after cattle rustlers, Mr. Black Masculinity.”

Hardison sniffed scornfully. “I don’t need no bigass hat and pointy boots to prove my manhood.”

“Hardison is not going anywhere near the evil horse,” Parker informed them, pulling rank. She plunked Eliot’s hat on his head. Shrugging into her jacket, she grabbed Eliot’s arm. “Let’s go find you some bad guys to punch!”

* * * *

TBC
Chapter 29

Portland, Oregon, USA

Jenkins’ Buick was the only thing making noise for the first half of the return to the last known location of Jacob Stone. Jenkins drove, looking so completely unperturbed that Eve wanted to stick a pin in him to see if he was real. Ezekiel was occupied with his phone. No surprise there. Make that two pins. Cassandra sat next to Eve in the back seat, her face making up in misery for what the others lacked. Eve wanted to hug her, but the seatbelts limited her to covering Cassandra’s hand with her own and trying to infuse comfort into the clasp of her fingers. Cassandra gave Eve a tight, pre-occupied smile that did nothing to relieve the tension vibrating off her. Having her team to take care of was the only thing keeping Eve from sliding down into her own Slough of Despond. Their morale was her responsibility. But Jenkins and Ezekiel didn’t seem to need her, and Cassandra was beyond her reach.

“That’s the turn, right up there,” Ezekiel informed Jenkins, breaking the silence and then subsiding back into it.

Jenkins turned off the highway onto the forest road. The station wagon bumped along the worn gravel on springs that had long since relaxed into retirement.

“Do we know that Jacob was the one injured?” Cassandra asked, startling them all.

“No,” Eve replied, her memory transporting her back. She shivered. “The dog tracked him there, and I saw one of his popsicle sticks broken. So he was at the scene. But I don’t think there was any way to tell for sure.”

“So he might not have been hurt? Maybe it was someone else?”

The hope in her voice was not completely irrational. They would not know for sure until the forensic analysis was complete.

“That depends on whether Stone was the victim or the villain. What?” Ezekiel took in the shocked expressions of his teammates. “Nothing to say he went unwillingly.”

“You can’t seriously think Jacob has been involved in anything criminal!” Cassandra’s voice rose in pitch.

“Who knows? The man’s entire life is a lie. He’s fooled his family for years. What makes you think he can’t fool us?”

Eve thought about the man who kept art supplies in his room, who turned that room into a work of art, who used art to heal. Jacob Stone had hidden that love, that gift, from a callous world that would have despised it. That was an act of pain and fear more than it was an act of deceit and guile. Those lies had been camouflage, protecting something tender and precious with armor plating.

“No.” She shook her head. “If Stone errs, he errs on the side of beauty, not ugliness. He would hide something soft, not something hard.”

“But the police are going to consider whether he might have been the perpetrator or at least an accomplice if that blood turns out not to belong to him.” Ezekiel shrugged.
“It would take that DNA test you mentioned to confirm whether the blood is his,” Eve said to Cassandra.

“A DNA analysis,” Cassandra mused. “That should take about 24 hours.”

“Ha!” Ezekiel snorted. “Do you know what the backup for DNA work is in Oregon? Twelve to sixteen weeks!”

“That long?” Cassandra’s voice caught between indignation and despair. “We can’t wait that long!”

Ezekiel shrugged. “I might be able to push up the priority, but that won’t buy us more than a week or two at most.”

Cassandra frowned, her eyes ceasing to focus on him or anything seen. One of her hands traced an invisible bit of data as if she were constructing a chart or graph in the air. “I suppose they have to wait to run the serology in batches . . . and then there’s the review process . . .” her voice trailed off. Suddenly she clenched her hands together and threw away her visionary work. “We need to get those DNA samples ourselves. I can do the analysis. Ezekiel Jones, world class thief, can you steal me a crime lab?”

“Cassandra Cillain,” Ezekiel offered her his hand to shake, “watch me!”

* * * * *

“I believe this is as far as we will be able to drive.” Jenkins interrupted Cassandra and Ezekiel plotting to commit any number of illegal activities of which Eve was pretending to take no notice.

The woods were no longer empty. Two police cruisers blocked the road just before the place where Ezekiel’s car was parked, so Jenkins was forced to halt his station wagon. As Ezekiel opened the door and hopped out, Eve caught the sound of voices drifting up the road from where Jacob’s truck was parked.

“Well, if numbers are what it takes to keep the scary thing away, I think we’ve got that covered,” Ezekiel commented.

“How are we going to make it past all of . . . this?” Cassandra climbed out after him, shaking out her skirt and waving her hand at the commotion.

“I don’t know.” Eve joined them, scanning the officers standing by the cruisers for a familiar face. “But there’s our detective. Let me see if he can get us in. Or at least provide a distraction so that you three can make it past the tape.”

Cassandra and Ezekiel grinned at her. Eve rolled her eyes. Working with Librarians was having a deleterious effect on her military discipline. She had just tacitly agreed to be an accessory to their crimes. Ironically, Jacob would probably disapprove.

Detective Ingram met Eve as she reached the caution tape that marked the outer cordon of the crime scene, deliberately ignoring what her charges were up to and drawing his attention to herself.

“Colonel Baird, I’m not sure you should be . . .”

Eve steamrolled right on over him. Steering him toward his colleagues with a comradely hand between his shoulder blades, she asked, “Detective, can you bring me up to speed? Hello there, gentlemen.”
Three quarters of them had that “beautiful blonde incoming” expression on their faces. The fourth one just looked irritated. Eve suppressed a sigh. Work with it, Baird, she reminded herself, breaking out her diplomatic-circus smile that she had perfected from far too many embassy dinners—the one that had the advantage of baring her teeth. “Colonel Eve Baird, NATO Counter-terrorism. What is the status of your investigation?”

* * * * *

While law enforcement was occupied dealing with Colonel Baird, Cassandra tiptoed after Ezekiel in stealth mode up the road and around the bend, out of sight of the cruisers. Jenkins magically transformed into a shadow who had no trouble matching their pace. For such a large man, he made astonishingly little noise.

The late sun caught on the tips of the trees, threading through the new leaves and heavy evergreen boughs to stitch the ground with patches of bright and dark. The stippling light and shade that chased over Jenkins’ grey jacket moving ahead of her teased at Cassandra’s senses suggesting patterns into which she could fall, far away from the tightness in her chest that had been making every heartbeat hurt from the moment she had known Jacob was missing.

Holding out her hand, Cassandra captured a bright circle of sunlight on her palm. When she closed her fingers around it, it escaped onto her knuckles.

“Cassandra!” Ezekiel hissed. “Come on.”

Oh. She’d stopped moving. Cassandra realized that she was holding back, afraid of what they would find ahead. Taking a grip on her courage, she hurried to catch up. Jacob needed them. If he could endure whatever it was that had taken him from them, she could face whatever it took to find him now.

“You okay?” Ezekiel asked when she reached his side.

“Yes, let’s go.” Cassandra grabbed his elbow and tugged him after her with sudden urgency.

Rounding the next corner, the three of them found themselves face to face with a woman in a white, hooded coverall and booties, carrying a camera.

Startled, the woman took a step back. “Who the hell are you?”

Jacob had been the one who usually answered those sorts of questions. Cassandra found she couldn’t force a single word past her throat.

Ezekiel took over, holding out his hand like Jacob would have done. The cocky smile, however, was all his own. “We’re the Librarians, and we’re here to . . . to take . . . to collect . . . data about missing persons. Yeah. That’s it.”

Cassandra held her breath.

The woman relaxed. “Oh, well. All right, then.” She held up her gloved hands and camera in explanation for why she wasn’t taking Ezekiel’s proffered hand. “Lieutenant Santiago. Let me introduce you to Investigator Rosen. He’s our primary scene responder and manager.”

As the lieutenant turned to lead them back the way she’d come, Cassandra frowned at Ezekiel.

“That worked?”
Ezekiel shrugged. “Jenkins?”

“The Library . . . has its secrets, Mr. Jones.”

And Jenkins had his. Apparently that was all the enlightenment they could expect on the topic of uncanny cooperation from law enforcement.

Lieutenant Santiago led them around another curve in the road to where a harried looking coverall-clad man with a sweating red face was directing the activities of four other people in identical white suits. The pitch of his voice itched along Cassandra’s nerves and the scent of mothballs stung her nose.

“Merino! Don’t walk over there. This is a crime scene! What do they teach at the academy these days? Hans! Bring me those cardboard boxes! I sent you for them half an hour ago! What are you doing over there? Texting your girlfriend? Come on people. It’s going to be dark soon. Get your asses moving!”

He rounded on Lieutenant Santiago before she had a chance to open her mouth.

“Why are you back here?” he roared in her face. “Who are these people, and what the fuck are they doing cluttering up my crime scene?”

Lieutenant Santiago appeared unfazed by her superior officer’s pyrotechnics. She waved her camera-free hand to indicate Ezekiel, Jenkins, and Cassandra. “These are the Librarians,” she informed him. “They’ve come to . . . what was it you said you do?”

This time Jenkins took the lead.

“We’re here to do research,” Jenkins informed the Investigator.

“I don’t have time for an audience,” he growled. “Sunset is less than an hour away, and our window is closing. It’ll be raining again before dawn. The thing about crime scene investigation is we always come too late. The only help we can give the victims is to do the best damn job possible gathering evidence. Now what do you people need that is more important than what I’m doing?”

As much as being near this man with his itchy, acrid voice was overloading her senses in ways that made Cassandra want to wrap her head in a blanket, she was glad Jacob’s fate was being investigated by someone who really seemed to care about his work.

“Perhaps we can be of assistance,” Jenkins offered. “My . . . interns are finishing graduate work in . . .”


“Oh,” Ezekiel looked startled. “Um. Criminal Justice?”

“Hmph.”

Investigator Rosen’s glare shot at them from under scowling brows like the pinpoint flame from an oxyacetylene torch—3480 degrees Centigrade. The number 5 rang in in Cassandra’s ears. She held her breath and crossed her fingers. Would the Library magic work?

“Can you follow directions? I don’t have time to babysit incompetents.”

“We’ll do exactly what you say,” Cassandra promised.
“I can vouch for their abilities,” Jenkins assured Rosen. “I guarantee they will do superior work.”

“Okay, then. Let’s get you over to the van. If you’re going to be in my crime scene, you’re going to wear personal protective equipment.”

As Rosen led them over to a vehicle where the driver and a police officer in uniform instead of coveralls lounged, observing the proceedings, Ezekiel asked, “Can you tell us where you are in your investigation?”

“A couple of my team strip-searched the area between where the vehicle was abandoned and this point, but not too surprisingly, they found nothing conclusive. The rain probably removed most traces we could have found. The tow truck is coming for the pickup. Once it’s back at the lab, Forensics’ll be doing a thorough analysis. Prints. Fibers. Chemicals. That’s not my area. I’m blood and ballistics. No need for ballistics here. But blood? I got plenty of that.”

Cassandra shivered and moved closer to Ezekiel.

Rosen thumped on the side of the van and a white-suited, be-spectacled head appeared out the back doors. “Get these people some gear, Mason. They’re helping us collect evidence.”

“Right away, sir,” said Mason cheerily, disappearing back into the depths of the van.

“Forensic science, hmm?” Rosen scowled at Cassandra. “I assume you know how to swab a person for DNA?”

Cassandra nodded.

“Good. Because I’m going to need elimination samples from you three. Can’t have you shedding your damn genetic material all over my crime scene without some way to tell whose it is. When you’re done, meet me at the main entrance to the scene, and we’ll log you in.”

Rosen wheeled abruptly and strode off down the road towards where the other figures in coveralls were at work.

Ezekiel turned to Cassandra as if he expected she knew what to do next.

His confidence was touching. Unfortunately, she had no idea. Her scientific experience up until the Library had been largely in the lab or theoretical. Fieldwork was a different matter.

Mason saved her from floundering by popping back out the door. In one hand he clutched plastic packets containing the coveralls, masks, and booties they would be wearing. His other arm was tied up in a sling. Noticing her staring, Mason shrugged. “That’ll be why I’m stuck in the van,” he said. “Broke my good arm being a stupid klutz. I’d do more harm than good out there with my left hand. So I hand out supplies, run the computer uplink, and file stuff. Here you go. Put these on while I get the DNA kits.”

Thrusting the coveralls into their hands, he vanished inside the van.

“Well,” said Ezekiel, eyeing his packets quizzically. “Time to cosplay CSI.”

The baggy garments fit Cassandra and Ezekiel just fine, but Jenkins was left holding his obviously too small suit.

“That’s the biggest one I’ve got,” Mason apologized, appearing in the door again. “Our team is a bit vertically challenged.”
“I am large, clumsy, and aging,” Jenkins said, not as if he believed any of it. “I shall wait here on terra firma and observe.”

Since he was going to be tracking magical beasties instead of scientific evidence, that actually made sense.

Mason held out the DNA kits. “You good with these?”

DNA collection was something she could do. “Yes, of course,” Cassandra said, double-gloving up with all the unthinking speed of a hospital janitor dealing with a biohazard. “Ezekiel, open wide!”

Tilting his head in acknowledgement of a fellow expert, Mason disappeared back into the van.

Ezekiel looked unconvinced. “Do I have to?” he objected.

“It won’t hurt a bit,” Cassandra reassured him.

“What part of World Class Thief are you forgetting?” Ezekiel hissed so that no one inside or around the van could hear him. “I try not to leave genetic samples lying around where law enforcement can get their hands on them.”

“Then you’ll just have to wipe the records,” Cassandra whispered back, having grown disturbingly inured to crime. “Now say ‘Ah!’” Liberating the swabs from their sterile packaging, she fixed Ezekiel with an authoritative glare.

Ezekiel wrinkled up his face and shifted on his feet, but he finally opened his mouth and let her scrub the swab around the inside of his cheeks for the 30 seconds it took to acquire a usable sample of his epithelial cells.

“There,” Cassandra said with satisfaction, returning the swab to its storage container. “That wasn’t so bad.”

“If I ever end up in jail,” Ezekiel said, “you’re posting all the bail.”

Cassandra ignored him, carefully labeling the sample. Then she stripped and replaced her outer gloves and repeated the process for Jenkins and herself.

“This should be interesting” was Jenkins only comment as his DNA disappeared inside the CSI van along with the energetic Mason.

“Here you are.” Mason materialized in the opening of the van a final time. “Evidence kit, ready to go. Don’t forget to tag samples with the bar codes when you’re done labelling and put the biohazard seals on any blood evidence. Have fun, kids.”

Cassandra pushed the kit into Ezekiel’s gloved hands. “That,” she said, “is your job.”

“You’re getting as bossy as Colonel Baird,” Ezekiel commented, but he took the kit.

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Cassandra told him, wheeling and leading the way down the road in the direction Rosen had gone.

Jenkins followed them far enough away from the van that they wouldn’t be easily overheard.

“Now can you indicate where the canine expressed objections to the non-corporeal?” he asked Ezekiel.

“It was right here.” Ezekiel waved his hand. “In the middle of the road. Freakiest thing I’ve seen,
and I’m saying that after almost a year of being a Librarian.”

“Worse than the haunted house?” Cassandra asked.

“Well, no. I’ll give you that. But the house turned out to be a good guy.”

“Very well,” said Jenkins, palming the magic spectrometer. “I shall take what readings I can and wait for your return.”

They left him fiddling with its dials.

“Ezekiel,” Cassandra whispered as they approached the primary scene cordon. “Can you help me collect duplicate samples? And not let them see we’re doing it?”

“You’re asking me if I can steal little plastic tubes from people who just handed them to me?” Ezekiel quirked the corner of his mouth.

“Okay, so it’s a little easy. But I need them labelled, and we can’t use their labels, or they’ll miss them.”

“I can use a pen, even if the technology is a little primitive.” Ezekiel flourished the Sharpie provided in the kit he was carrying.

And then they had to be quiet because Rosen met them at the single opening in the yellow and black caution tape. “Alright, you two . . . what am I supposed to call you, by the way?”

“Cassandra Cillian,” Cassandra said, “and he’s Ezekiel Jones.”

“Okay, Cillian, Jones,” Rosen nodded. “I’ve divided the area around the scene into quadrants, and we’ve done spiral searches. The photographer and sketch artist have finished recording all the evidence in situ, and I’m working on the blood pattern analysis. The rest of the team is collecting evidence for transport to the lab. That’s where I can use an extra set of hands.”

He waved to where two white-suited figures crouched over a tire-track engraved into the mud of the ditch. “The quadrants nearest the road are ready to go. Merino and Hans have got that one.”

A yellow scale marker with the number 43 on it marked and measured whatever piece of evidence they were inspecting. Cassandra could see a total of 58 markers dotting the area inside the cordon. Square metal stepping plates linked each marker to a common path of approach.

“We have evidence of passive, transfer, and projection stains,” Rosen continued, holding out a tablet and stylus for them to log their presence on the site. “At this point, nothing indicates that there was impact spatter, so we’re not looking at gunshot wounds. It’s rained since the stains were laid down, but they had a chance to dry first, so some traces remain, and there’s blood in the puddles.”

“That means whatever happened here must have taken place between 1:17 in the afternoon on Tuesday, March 3 and around 3:30 in the morning on Wednesday, March 4,” Cassandra said softly, turning the stylus in her hand as meteorological maps for the last week marched across her vision.

Rosen raised his eyebrows at her, “That’s correct. Though I must say I’m surprised you know those numbers.”

Cassandra froze, her signature wobbling off crazily.
“Numbers are kind of her thing,” Ezekiel explained.

Controlling her breath of relief, Cassandra vowed she would be more careful what she revealed she knew about the case from now on.

“That’s when the owner of the truck was last seen. And trust her to know what hours of the day it rains.” Ezekiel gave her arm a fist bump.

Cassandra smiled her thanks at him. Sometimes it was good to have a colleague so adept at thinking on his feet—and at manipulating law enforcement.

Frowning, Rosen pivoted and beckoned them to follow him through the opening in the tape.

“Come on. I don’t have all night.”

Following him, Cassandra stepped gingerly onto the first plate of the cleared path. The smell of spruce and young aspen and rich, dark, rotting vegetation turning to soil tickled the back of her nose like the beginning of a sneeze. The scents of crushed grasses and ferns and fireweed were overlaid by . . . something else.

Oh. That was blood.

Cassandra had spent enough time in hospitals and labs to have that scent burned into her synapses. The voices behind her faded as the numbers beat at her consciousness. Calculations swirled across her sight—the length of the grass, the depth of the marks where someone had been dragged, the wavelengths of the colours of dried blood staining fresh green. For a minute the hammering grew unbearable. She took an unsteady step, her hands rising not to organize her thoughts but to wipe them out.

She couldn’t do this.

She had to do this.

Jacob needed all of them, but she was the only one who could do this part.

Her anxiety for him was not helping. She felt like every single one of her nerve endings was exposed. Science was about making reliable observations, but right now her senses were such a jumble of blaring information that they were of next to no use to her.

Stop it, she commanded herself.

If only she could shut down all those useless blasts of data that had nothing to do with the task at hand. Experimentally, she tried to ignore the smells. The percussion in her head abated slightly. That was better. That might work.

Cassandra reeled in her senses, one by one, until she felt almost smothered in lack of sensory input. Ordinary scientists did this all the time, she told herself. They felt about blindly in the world, touching everything one time only, extrapolating data with scarcely anything to go on. She could gather evidence this way. She could. Just follow procedures. Do what she was told.

And then she wouldn’t have to think, to imagine, to know . . . what had happened here.

“Cassandra!” Ezekiel’s concerned voice penetrated the cocoon into which she was withdrawing. He sounded like he was mumbling through a mass of wool.

“It’s okay,” she reassured him, her own words muffled and dim. “I’m okay. Let’s do this.”
Rosen was stopping at a series of markers close to the road. “You can start here,” he informed Cassandra and Ezekiel. “This one is interesting.” He leaned down and gripped the thin branch of a small tree, manipulating it so that the silvery underside of the leaves showed. “See the fine mist of blood here? That’s expired spatter. This victim had an internal injury—there was blood in the nose, throat, or respiratory system. The pressure exerted by the lungs expelled blood mixed with air. You can see the bubble rings from air in the droplets if you look with a magnifying glass.” Glaring with professorial intensity at Cassandra, he asked, “Now what can we interpret from the fact that this pattern appears only on the underside of the leaves?”

“It tells us that he . . . that the victim was lying on the ground,” Cassandra said around the sudden taste of bile in her mouth. She took another wrench at her senses, trying to obliterate the vison of Jacob’s body crushing the grasses, of his chest straining for breath as he drowned in his own blood. Her own breath caught beneath her breastbone like a knife.

“That’s right,” Rosen said, raising an eyebrow. Taking a plastic packet from Ezekiel’s kit, Rosen opened one end and held it out to Cassandra. “Show me how you collect evidence,” he said. “Take a sample of the surrounding uncontaminated flora so that we can compare the DNA results.”

Ordering her hands not to shake, Cassandra extracted the tube containing the swab. Removing the thin plastic wand with its cotton tip, she blinked at it in a moment of confusion. It needed to be wet. She looked around about to panic, but Ezekiel whipped out the small tube of sterile water from his kit and snapped its top. Mutely, Cassandra held out the swab and let him put a drop of the liquid on the cotton. How had he known that’s what she needed?

Bending down, she selected a leaf well out of range of the blood spatter. Carefully, she rubbed the cotton tip over its surfaces. Then she slipped the swab back into its plastic tube where the desiccant in the bottom would dry it while it was transported to the lab. Handing it back to Ezekiel, she watched as he returned it to its sleeve and slid it into a tamper-proof evidence envelope.

“Label it with the scale marker number and note that it’s a control,” she told him.

Ezekiel did so with a flourish and then slapped the barcode on the envelope.

Rosen gave them an approving nod. “You’ll do,” he said. “I’m off to the next quadrant. Take that to Mason. If you have any questions, you can ask him. Change your gloves for each different sample. Don’t step off your plates.”

Pivoting, Rosen left the two of them alone with the patch of bloodied earth and the spattered leaves.

As soon as she was sure Rosen wasn’t looking, Cassandra held out her hand for a second swab. Swiftly she re-did the control test. This time when Ezekiel packaged and labeled it, it disappeared as though it had never existed. Ezekiel really was a little bit magic.

Cassandra stripped off her outer gloves and deposited them in the trash receptacle Ezekiel held out for her. Silently, he exchanged it for the box of black gloves. Taking a deep breath, Cassandra pulled the new pair over each of her fingers, mentally listing off each of the bones, tendons, and ligaments, and when that didn’t help, adding their origins and insertions. She felt disconnected from her hands. Nevertheless, she managed to take the next swab from Ezekiel and wait while he added the sterile water to the tip before he headed back to the van with the first sample.

Doing science usually rang chimes in her head, notes madly scrambling all over the scales in joyful arpeggios, occasionally swelling into a full orchestra when she was close to a solution, but today,
the music hurt in her temples like the first bars of a requiem.

No matter. She could and would do this.

Bending down, Cassandra reached out to cradle one stained leaf as tenderly as if she held Jacob’s life in her hand. Touching the cotton tip to the dried mist, she painstakingly swirled it until the leaf was clean and green again. The swab flushed from pale pink to deep red, but she couldn’t think about what that meant.

Ezekiel fetching up on the plate behind her was a relief.

“Here, take this. Quick!” Cassandra demanded.

The sooner he packaged and labelled the evidence, the sooner she could take the second sample. They needed to be twice as fast as the others if they were to avoid being deemed too incompetent to work with the professionals.

The mask over her mouth and nose hid much of her face, for which she was grateful. She didn’t want Ezekiel to guess how close she was to losing it.

* * * * *

Confined to his plastic stepping plate, Ezekiel bounced restlessly on his toes as Cassandra collected another pair of samples, the official one and their surreptitious one. He took the swabs as she handed them to him, secured them in their individual plastic drying tubes, sealed them in their envelopes, labelled them, and deposited the first one in the designated receptacle. The other disappeared up his sleeve—a praiseworthy feat, if he did say so himself.

He approved of the anonymity of these white suits. In fact, he was already plotting a scenario, hypothetical of course, in which a criminal might return to the scene of his crime disguised as part of the CSI team and remove or contaminate the evidence. However, the garment did not provide much scope for concealment of pilfered items. He was going to have to find a way to stash all the samples around his body in ways that wouldn’t betray him when it came time to strip out of his protective shell.

Ezekiel had been a fan of CSI shows a long time ago. Before so many things had changed.

Before he had changed.

Later, he’d researched the ways actual crime scene investigation differed from the shows because being the World’s Greatest Thief required not getting caught. If you knew what evidence they were looking for, you could avoid leaving it behind. Even for MI6—no—especially because of MI6—he’d learned how to avoid getting caught ever again. The best criminals knew how not to leave incriminating evidence, or how to leave misleading evidence.

He left crime scenes behind him. He didn’t hang around to watch the investigations take place.

This was his first real-time experience with CSI. He’d never had the chance to observe this stage of a missing persons hunt—the part where you found actual evidence, where you might actually get some answers. Not that the answers were looking particularly good. But knowing anything, no matter how bad, was better than never knowing wasn’t it?

With the ease of long practice, Ezekiel re-routed those unprofitable thoughts.

Anyway, it had been fascinating to watch. At least the first dozen or so times. But right now,
Ezekiel was growing bored. Boredom felt like being nibbled to death by goldfish. Ezekiel Jones needed action! High risk and higher adrenaline! And this adventure was not cutting it. He’d taken to seeing if he could slip the evidence in at his neck and stash it in his socks without anyone noticing. Unfortunately, that was too easy. The other evidence collectors were obsessively focused on whatever they were doing.

Honestly, these people called themselves crime scene investigators, but they couldn’t see a crime taking place right in front of their eyes.

Ah! Good. Cassandra was straightening up from where she had been working. They must be moving on. Maybe the next marker would be different. Mix it up a little.

As he backed out of Cassandra’s way so he could follow her to the next marker, he admitted that he was actually a bit worried about her. The little he could see of her face was so intense he scarcely recognized her. Usually, observing Cassandra doing science was like watching the whole Fourth of July fireworks show set off in a single explosion—all sparkle and eye-aching brightness. But now it was like she had disappeared inside that coverall, and he was following around an empty suit.

* * * * *

Peripherally, Cassandra was aware that Rosen was beckoning her and Ezekiel into the last quadrant of the crime scene. By now, she was merely functioning on auto-pilot, collecting over and over again samples of blood-drenched soil (thinking only once from very far away that DNA analysis on that was going to be hell), swabbing the residue of blood off of grasses and leaves and the early spring petals of *trillium ovatum*. Inside her head she was reciting the digits of pi while simultaneously calculating the locations of all the planets in the solar system with relationship to the spiral arms of the galaxy as they would move through the universe over the next thousand years. Even that hadn’t quite been enough, so she added in all known comets. Her consciousness of what she was doing narrowed to a fine, dull line of painful repetition.

Mechanically, she adjusted her trajectory. They were nearly done, and the light was failing fast. It would be over soon, and she could go. Just go.

“Cillian! Jones!” Rosen called. “I need you on the swipe stain on that tree over there. We’ve got the fingerprints, so take as much of it as you can.”

“Yes, sir,” Ezekiel answered for them, prodding Cassandra towards the tree in question.

The sight of the handprint snapped her back into her body with a crack that shivered from the roots of her hair to her heels.

It was his. She did not need to see the fingerprint analysis to know.

Pi turned into another number and blinked out. The solar system disintegrated, and the planets spun off into the dark of intergalactic space. The comets shattered into glittering dust and rained down around her.

That was the exact proportion of his index finger to his middle finger. And there was that slight inward curve in the top joint of his little finger. She could see exactly how he must have stood, not completely upright, leaning for support.

Jacob had tried to stand there, with his hand covered in blood, four days ago, and now he was gone.

Her senses, so tightly controlled moments before, were blown wide open, and Cassandra threw herself into them like a dolphin escaping a net for clear water.
The leaves of the tree rustled, calling her to trace their equations, how they moved with wind
direction and speed, the interplay of light and color and sound waves, until the world dissolved into
pure mathematics.

The entire crime scene became nothing more than angles and lines and equations.

The deeper she plunged into the natural rhythms, the more glaring were the disruptions where
human beings had barged blindly through, crushing and bending and snapping the logic lines into
new and cacophonous patterns. Mud torn up by heavy boots disrupted the lay of the grasses. Depth
of impression and length of stride transformed into height and weight. There had been three, she
could see clearly, two moving from the north and one from the south, but the fourth, she could
make no sense of the movement—there was no pattern, no consistent data. The fourth eluded her.
There was something wrong. She focused on finer detail. Her attention caught on the wavelengths.
Taken alone they made no sense, but from the right angle, the tiny shifts in color scattered on
trunks and leaves made a straight line. The wavelength indicated an absorption spectrum consistent
with . . .

Cassandra gasped for breath, wrenching back into her conscious mind. That was more blood.

The effort left her dizzy and breathless. Swaying, she clung to the arm supporting her. Ezekiel’s
quicksilver, elastic strength, not Jacob’s iron, solid steadiness.

“Cassandra? Are you okay? What is it?”

Once she knew what she was looking for, it was possible to extrapolate where the other drops had
likely landed. Most of them had left no trace, but she knew they were there.

Her head was boiling with the numbers. The surface tension and specific gravity of blood, weight
multiplied by gravity exceeding surface tension, droplets more than 3 millimetres in diameter
indicating a low velocity, 5 feet per second. Yes. She could see the angle of impact for each one.

The equation hung in the air, rotating gently:

Each drop grew longer and narrower the farther away it was from the tree with Jacob’s handprint.
The calculations for $\theta\sin$ spun frantically from her fingertips.

All the lines extending from the angles converged on a single point.

“Here,” she said holding her hands around a shape in space about 0.87 meters off the ground.
“They originated here.”

“Hey, Cillian! Jones! What’s going on over there?” Rosen strode over to where Ezekiel was still
holding up Cassandra.

“I think she found something else,” Ezekiel told him.

“Yes, you need to look at this,” Cassandra managed to gulp, shaking free of Ezekiel’s grasp. “Do
you see here, there’s a drop of blood that the rain didn’t quite get. It’s part of a whole line of drops,
but you can’t tell they’re related unless you’re at the right angle. They’re on different surfaces and
different distances so gravity had more time with some of them, and some probably didn’t hit any
surface before the ground. They originated right about here,” she indicated the position. “I did the
math.”

Rosen raised both eyebrows. “That is cast off spatter,” he said. “It occurs when an assailant draws
back a weapon at high speed from the wound it created in order to make a second blow. As the
weapon moves through the air, it flings a line of blood along the path it travels. Someone struck twice here with the same weapon. Excellent observation, Cillian. You have a gift for this sort of analysis.”

Following Cassandra’s direction, Rosen examined each of the drops that remained. Finally, he shook his head. “I don’t know how you saw these, but good eye. Judging from the smaller, more linear pattern of these drops, I’m leaning towards sharp force injury. A knife, perhaps, or something like it. Well, you’ve saved me a bit of work with the angle of origin—do you always do complex trigonometry in your head like that?”

Cassandra nodded.

“It’s like having a calculator. On feet.” Ezekiel crinkled his nose. “Without an off button.”

“Okay, then. Good work.” Rosen shook his head, jotting down notes on his tablet. “Finish collecting this evidence, and then I’m calling it too dark to do any more. Once it’s completely dark, we’ll try Luminol. That should reveal any latent blood stains and hopefully give us a better picture of what happened here.”

* * * * *

The Librarian team coalesced a short distance away from where the CSI team was tying up loose ends while waiting for absolute dark to fall. Shadows had swallowed the ground now, and banks of clouds loomed in the western sky heavy with the threat of approaching rain.

Cassandra could smell it in the wind that was picking up as day relinquished its dominion to the night without the fanfare of sunset.

Colonel Baird had joined them, informing them that Jacob’s truck had been towed away. While she spoke to them, her attention never stilled, scanning the area with military precision, focusing with laser intensity on any sudden movement.

“Jenkins, report,” she ordered.

Jenkins frowned at the magic spectrometer. “I recorded no readings that would explain what you experienced. The ley lines in this area are unremarkable and not particularly close to this exact location.” He shrugged and raised his eyebrows. “There is nothing here. I have no way of knowing whether a magical creature has been in the vicinity in the past, but there is none here now.”

“Ezekiel and I didn’t see anything that would suggest magical interference,” Cassandra added. “The tracks are all ordinary human.”

“Hmph.” Jenkins shook his head. “There are a number of beings that pass very well for human, but Miss Cillian is correct. We have no way of confirming their presence or absence without more intensive testing of the evidence.”

Baird turned to Cassandra, some hesitation apparent in her face for the first time. “And the ordinary evidence? Do we know any more about what happened here?”

“Not enough.” Cassandra crossed her arms, feeling chilled in spite of her warm coat under her coveralls. “We know that someone had an injury that resulted in blood in their airways. We know that someone further into the woods was likely stabbed more than once. We have no way of knowing if those injuries occurred to the same person at different times or to two different people.”

“But do you concur that the dog was right? No one died?”
“The human body contains about 4.7 to 5.5 liters of blood.” Cassandra said, feeling remote from the information. “You can lose just past 40 percent and still survive with adequate medical care. There isn’t enough blood here that someone died on the spot.”

“Unless they finished bleeding out wherever they were taken,” Ezekiel pointed out.

Cassandra had been trying not to think that thought, but now that it was hanging there blazing like a neon beacon, she could think of nothing else. Tension pneumothorax. Hypovolemic shock. Massive infection. As a janitor in the ER, she had cleaned up the aftermaths of too many deaths that took place far from where the fatal injuries occurred. There were so many ways the fragile human organism could hang on to life and still lose.

She needed something to do. Now.

Baird looked like she was contemplating strangling Ezekiel, but he was right. They didn’t know that Jacob was still alive.

The four of them lapsed into a silence that held no comfort. Over at the entrance to the cordon, the photographer was collecting her equipment in preparation for capturing the fleeting evidence the Luminol would reveal. In the gathering dark, the indistinct figures of the CSI team moved out along the common path, their flashlights blinking like fireflies.

The strident, unfamiliar ring of the phone Ezekiel had provided her startled a high-pitched squeak out of Cassandra. With her heart spurred by adrenaline, she fought her way through her coveralls to her pocket to pull it out. She didn’t recognize the number.

Frowning, Cassandra accepted the call. “Hello?”

“Hey, Cassie.”

The voice was Jacob Stone’s. His warm, low drawl enfolded her name like the coziest fleece blanket, familiar and comforting. Her heart gave a wild lurch of joy. “Jacob!” she exclaimed, fumbling her phone and barely hanging on. He was alive! He was alive and well enough to call! Everything was going to be all right!

She was instantly the center of attention. Eve took a step forward, reaching out her hand, her face transformed with hope. Ezekiel focused on her, expectantly alert. Even Jenkins looked less dour.

“No, this is Eliot.”

Not Jacob. Eliot. His words, still sounding exactly like his cousin, snapped the bands of pain back around her chest so hard they stole her breath.

“I was wondering if you’d like to take that riding lesson tomorrow afternoon.”

She wanted to scream. She wanted to weep. She did neither.

“Um, let me check,” she managed to choke out, muting her phone to give herself time to recover. The others could see something was wrong, but they didn’t know yet what it was. Hating herself for having given them unfounded hope, Cassandra shook her head. “It’s not Jacob; it’s Eliot Spencer,” she said.

She couldn’t bear to look at Eve’s face.

“He wants to know if I want to go horseback riding tomorrow afternoon.”
“I know we want to catch the Murder Horse of Doom, but are you sure you should be riding it?” Ezekiel asked.

“He’s not letting me ride Spark of Midnight,” Cassandra said. “A girl we met offered to loan me one of her old horses. I need to give him an answer.” She forced herself to meet Baird’s anguished glare. “This is really our best chance to get near the horse.”

Baird looked like she’d rather do anything else, but she gave Cassandra a terse nod.

This had to be hell for their Guardian, Cassandra knew. She unmuted her phone. “Okay, I can meet you,” she told Eliot, careful to keep her real emotions out of her voice, trying to counterfeit some of her former enthusiasm. “What time and where?”

“Does two o’clock sound good? I’ll text you the address.”

“Two o’clock is great!” Cassandra gushed, praying he wouldn’t notice her lack of sincerity. “Oh, I can’t wait! Thank you so much!”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

She could hear the flirty smile in his voice. Cassandra had never been farther off from feeling flirtatious, but she managed what she hoped was an eager “Me too!”

He would go away, now. Say good-bye and stop reminding her with every cadence of his words how much she wanted to see that smile on Jacob’s face instead. Except he didn’t.

“Can I ask a favor, Cassie?” Eliot sounded serious now, all the charming act laid aside.

“Sure,” she chirped. He could never know how nervous he was making her.

“Since you thought I was Jacob, I gather my cousin ain’t anywhere nearby?”

“No,” Cassandra gulped past the constriction in her throat. “No, he’s not.”

“If you’re expecting to hear from him, could you tell him I sent him the key to a security box at his bank? I left him some information he needs.”

She would give anything in the world to be able to deliver that message to Jacob. The urge to tell Eliot his cousin was missing was nearly overwhelming, but Colonel Baird hadn’t given her permission yet. Cassandra bit her tongue until she tasted copper.

“I’ll let him know as soon as I can,” she managed after a pause that went just a little too long. Eliot’s “Thanks, Cassie. I owe you” sounded tired and almost discouraged.

“No problem.” She wished he would just go away. If she had to force this brittle brightness one minute longer she was going to shatter.

With relief, she heard Eliot say, “Goodbye, then. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Goodbye,” she said, hanging up her phone like it burned her fingers.

Almost immediately, her phone chimed the arrival of Eliot’s text. When she looked up from her phone, she was the focus of her team’s undivided attention. To her relief, she was rescued from having to discuss her impending riding date with Eliot Spencer by the
arrival of Rosen.

“Cillian, Jones, whoever the rest of you are, it’s dark enough. We’re going to try the Luminol. You might want to watch this.”

For a man whose voice exuded naphthalene, he was really very accommodating and willing to educate these accidental “interns” with which the Library was saddling him. Cassandra forgave him the way he made her want earplugs.

Still in silence, the four of them followed him back to the primary scene cordon.

During the time Cassandra had been on the phone with Eliot, the last of the twilight had surrendered to the oncoming dark, a dark that pressed on her eyelids like fingertips when she closed her eyes.

“So I know what Luminol is supposed to do.” Ezekiel’s voice right by her ear made her jump. “But what is it, and how does it work?

“It’s a chemical compound, \( \text{C}_8\text{H}_7\text{O}_3\text{N}_3 \), that’s carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, and nitrogen . . .”

“Isn’t everything made out of that?”

Cassandra paused. He wasn’t entirely wrong. “That’s what’s cool about organic chemistry. Anyway, it’s this pale yellow, crystalline powder that they mix with hydrogen peroxide and hydroxide. The mixture has the potential to chemiluminesce . . .”

“To what?”

“To glow, of course.” Cassandra shook her head at him even though it was too dark for him to see the full effect. “But it needs a catalyst. That’s what blood is—the iron in the hemoglobin produces an oxidation reaction with the Luminol creating 3-aminophthalate and emitting a light photon.”

“I don’t know why I ask,” Ezekiel groaned.

“Shhh,” Cassandra shut him up with a finger to his lips. “They’re going to spray it on the area near the expirated spatter.”

Even though she was expecting it, the eerie blue glow made Cassandra gasp. Little nervous chills ran up and down her spine like fingers playing scales.

There was so much more blood than they’d seen before. But it was contained in the area of the spatter. There were traces of footprints, transfer stains where people had picked up blood on their shoes that had been invisible in daylight, but no drip trail of blood led back to the road.

“They stopped the bleeding before they moved him,” she murmured.

The crime scene photographer had set up her tripod and was rapidly snapping pictures utilizing various time exposures. The glow faded as swiftly as it had appeared.

The investigation team moved on to the next site. Luminol descended in a fine chemical mist on the ground surrounding the tree where Jacob had leaned. Invisible at first, it hit the traces of blood. Then, like magic, the blue glow of the oxidation reaction lit the dark. Jacob’s handprint shone as if he were reaching out to them.

The first drops of rain felt like tears on Cassandra’s cheeks.
The shadows of the crime scene investigator and the photographer crouched at the base of the tree where the pale light spoke of someone standing for a period of time bleeding into the thirsty soil. Had it been Jacob who was injured, or had he wielded the weapon that had left the cast-off spatter? Was it his blood that glowed in a trail of drops leading away from the tree to the place where a body had fallen?

The picture of the site in daylight superimposed itself in her mind over the ghostly illumination—the broken foliage, the clots of soil gouged from the earth. Along that track ran fine smears of blue where someone had been dragged, bleeding, to the road. The stain of light on the road showed where the victim had lain, unmoving. And then there was nothing.

Cassandra shuddered and felt Eve’s comforting arm around her shoulders.

Whoever it had been, whatever had happened, that was where it had ended. That was where persons unknown had transferred the body or bodies to whatever means of transport they had used to vacate the site. And Jacob had gone with them—either badly injured or guilty of this violence.

Cassandra refused to believe he was guilty, but that left only that he had been injured, and no one had taken him to a hospital. Somewhere, out there, Jacob was alone, hurting, and in the hands of enemies.

The thought was unbearable.

“Do you see any more evidence we need?” Baird had her Colonel voice back in place, the one that snapped your spine straight even when she whispered.

Grateful for the distraction, Cassandra considered. “No,” she concluded. “We have samples of every possible variable. The Luminol gives a better picture of what happened, but I don’t see any new evidence.”

“Then I think we should go now.” Baird decided. “This weather is getting worse.”

“Thank you,” Ezekiel said fervently. “I’ve got water running down my neck.”

“Yours is a soft and luxurious generation,” Jenkins said with a touch of disdain.

“Hey, mate,” Ezekiel tossed over his shoulder as he led the way back down the road. “Sorry your generation didn’t have the sense to come out of the rain. Mine does.”

Cassandra and Jenkins lingered to take their leave of the CSI team and Rosen and to accept his brusque thanks. Then they followed after Ezekiel and Baird.

Baird was already seated in Jenkins’ station wagon when they arrived at the outer cordon, so Cassandra joined Ezekiel in his car. As she pulled on her seatbelt, Ezekiel held up his phone.

“I’ve found us a crime lab. East Coast, so they’re already shut down for the night.”

Cassandra gave him a shaky smile. “You’re the best,” she told him. And she really meant it. She’d never have made it through this ordeal without him.

Ezekiel snorted, “Of course I am,” and sent his car careening in a spray of mud and gravel through the glitter of rain, back towards the Annex.

* * * * *
Chapter 30

Black Diamond, Alberta, Canada

Eliot flicked off his phone and slid it back into the pocket of his jeans. “So, that’s done,” he told Parker. “She’ll be there tomorrow. Maybe then we can get some answers.”

“I sure hope so,” Hardison put in over the comms, “’Cause I got nothin’.”

Some questions had better answers than others. Parker wrinkled her nose. But since they would be getting answers about Colonel Baird’s intentions whether or not they asked the questions, it was probably better to choose their own moment.

Eliot felt the horse would help. Parker wasn’t sure. Even though Cassandra had said she wanted to see it, Parker had her doubts that Cassandra would like the creature. But Eliot clearly did like his horse, so it was theoretically possible. People were weird.

Maybe the evil horse would scare some truth out of Cassandra. Parker felt a grin tug at the corner of her mouth. That, she could believe.

“I could sure use a drink.”

Eliot’s voice was so weary it gave Parker the urge to tuck her hand around his elbow and pull him in close. So she did. Maybe that would hold him back from whatever bad place he was sinking in his head. Hardison often did that for her.

“You know what? Your wish is my command,” Hardison said, his tone determinedly light. “By an amazing coincidence, this con begins in a bar.” Hardison was trying to help, too.

As they walked the couple of blocks to the other hotel, Parker kept her grip on Eliot. When he gave her a little half smile, like he was glad she was there, her chest felt kind of glowy. Eliot took care of her and Hardison a lot. So it was nice when they were able to take care of him back.

His arm was solid and radiating heat, which was a good thing because the disappearance of the sun had stolen what little warmth had developed during the day, and the icy wind was fluttering at her skirt. The air smelled of snow and spruce trees, and it tasted of cold. Parker ran her free hand along the bare skin of her leg. Those were bumps all right. She was freezing like a popsicle. Skirts were such stupid articles of clothing. Especially in the winter.

Nevertheless, she had it on Sophie’s authority that this was the best way to flush out a bad guy.

Back when she’d been taking grifting lessons, Parker had asked Sophie, “If I dress like this and act like we practiced, am I making those men go bad?”

Instead of answering, Sophie had replied, “Let me ask you something, Parker. Nate and Hardison and Eliot are going to be there tonight. Are they going to ‘go bad’ when they see you?”

“No!” Parker’s laugh had turned into a snort. “Of course not.”

“You strip off your clothes around Hardison and Eliot all the time when we’re on the con. Does that make them behave any differently?”

Parker had considered. “Well, they turn around if I’m not wearing any underwear, but that’s silly. I
don’t care if they see me.”

Sophie had smiled in that way that made Parker feel like she’d just been hugged. Sophie had the best smiles. “Exactly. They’re good men. And they don’t make you feel uncomfortable no matter what you’re wearing or not wearing. You can’t turn them bad or good. That’s something they do for themselves.”

“Then when guys get all creepy?”

“That’s because they’re already bad.”

“So then I can stab them.”

“Yes, if it won’t blow the con, or even then, if you feel afraid.”

“Okay.” Parker had filed Sophie’s advice in her brain. Men who made her feel like Nate, Hardison, or Eliot were good. If they made her feel icky and wouldn’t leave her alone, they were bad, and she could make them go away.

So, time to go trolling for bad guys, Tara-style.

She danced three steps, feeling her skirt floating out around her cold legs. Her poodle curls bounced. Parker laughed.

* * * * *

As they walked to the bar, Parker pranced beside Eliot, shaking her spirals of hair and letting off her ridiculous giggle-snorts at precise intervals until he heartily repented ever giving her those damn curls. Eliot was relieved when they arrived at their destination.

The only bar in town occupied the ground floor of the other hotel. A flickering sign advertised live music as one of the attractions. Holding the heavy, wooden door, Eliot ushered Parker in with a hand at her waist. In the dark of the entryway, Parker’s smile gleamed at him as she undid two more buttons on her denim shirt and pulled her low-cut, lacy camisole even farther down. Then she hiked her skirt a few inches higher. She’d picked up that trick from Tara, and by now she was pulling it off convincingly.

Eliot rolled his eyes. He expected she’d create exactly the sort of stir she intended among the denizens of the bar. “C’mon, Kira,” he growled, shoving through the swinging double doors that led off the entrance. “Let’s go.”

“See?” Parker said, grabbing his arm again and snuggling up to him like she’d been doing the entire way over. “Good guy.”

There was no point trying to follow whatever convoluted logic had led her to make that comment. They had work to do. Eliot swept the room with easy paranoia, observing all its patrons and cataloguing them. A number of tables were surrounded by customers, but a few of the clientele were holding down stools next to the bar. One of two pool tables in the room to the right of the bar had a game in progress. To the left, on a low stage, a band was playing with more enthusiasm than talent, and several couples were dancing to the music in the open space in front of the stage. All non-threats.

“Oooh, dancing!” Parker bumped against Eliot with enough force that he nearly had to take a step aside to keep his balance.

Parker took to dancing as fiercely as to any other physical activity. She followed no rules but her own whims, and yet somehow, she made everyone else look like amateurs with no imagination.

With her fingertips on Eliot’s hand, Parker twirled into the room, her curls flying and her flowery skirt flipping out enticingly around her gymnast legs. A significant percentage of the people in the room turned and stared.

Eliot let a bit of the beat into his movement as he spun Parker back to his side. Structuring his body language to give off the smug vibes of a man who knows he has the prettiest girl in the building on his arm, he guided Parker’s dancing steps towards a couple of empty bar stools.

Parker batted her eyes at him as though she didn’t have two thoughts to rub together in that blonde head of hers. “You know what I like, babe,” she simpered. “You do the ordering. I wanna dance!”

Eliot gave her a besotted smile. “You go on and have fun, darlin’.” He sent her off with an affectionate swat to her backside. Sophie would make a man pay for a week for that sort of thing, but Parker was always a good sport about the asshole behaviors they had to simulate on a con. He counted out the seconds as he ogled Parker’s legs. To be honest, Parker moved like music and poetry had condensed into physical form, and watching her was a pleasure. But for the benefit of whatever audience was watching him instead of her, Eliot made sure to convey a suitable amount of lust-blitzed boyfriend along with his aesthetic appreciation.

Then he turned to greet the bartender and place his order.

* * * * *

Parker sniffed. Every bar had its own smell. Since she was now part owner of a bar, Parker was curious about the differences. This one smelled of hard work and sweat overlaid by perfume and aftershave. A hint of cigarette smoke clung to clothing along with suggestions of dust and grease and cows and dogs. The faint odor of rosin from the bow of the fiddler in the band tickled her nose. That scent now meant Hardison to her. Mmmm. Memories of evenings in their apartment above the Brew Pub when Hardison would play for her on the not-Stradivarius violin she’d stolen for him put a smile on her lips.

The music the band was playing picked up her feet and sent them off in patterns. Parker followed her feet, weaving in between the tables toward the other dancers.

She could feel eyes on her body.

Sophie was right. Tara was right, too. This was easy.

Parker had spent her life avoiding being noticed. By manipulating people’s perceptions, she could turn them away, distract the marks while she stole from them. But this time what she was stealing wasn’t wallets; it was attention. Look at me! Parker said with a flip of her hair. She twitched her hips so her skirt swung to the beat.

“You your body can be a weapon in more ways than Eliot’s way,” Sophie had told her. “Men see us as prey when we’re actually the predators.”

She could move through this crowd and steal everything.

Oh.
She already had five wallets and a watch. Oops.

Oh well. Putting them back would be easy, too.

* * * * *

Eliot hooked his heels on the rungs of the barstool and leaned on the counter, his eyes on the drink in his hand. His air of relaxation was carefully counterfeited.

Starting any bar fight was always a bit of a gamble. Staging a fight in a strange bar in a foreign country when he was undercover was on Eliot’s list of really stupid things to do.

Brawling was messy. Drew too much notice. Called attention to skills he wasn’t advertising he possessed. Even if some drunk guy wasn’t gonna remember who threw the punch that knocked him down, there were still his buddies, random customers at the bar, occasional off-duty law enforcement. Any of them might be sober enough to report him to the authorities. Any of them might intervene, entangling him with more people instead of allowing him an easy exit.

And the bartender? With a business to maintain, odds were he’d side with the regulars.

Hardison had objected that people would be on Eliot’s side in this case.

Eliot had just rolled his eyes. “I guarantee you, to the average person, crippling a guy for unwanted advances is actually over the line.”

But for all of the reasons Eliot normally avoided conflicts with belligerent drunks, he was planning to throw down with one tonight.

They needed James McCoy in just a little trouble with the law.

For a few minutes nothing happened.

“You sure they’re gonna turn up?” he sub-vocalized to the non-corporeal Hardison.

“Relax,” Hardison reassured him around a mouthful of gummy frogs (It was a very distinctive sound). “I’ve done my research. When am I ever wrong?”

Eliot itched to take up that gauntlet, but there were too many ears in the vicinity for one of his typical arguments with Hardison. He settled for taking a contemplative sip of the house brew. It wasn’t half bad. The band, on the other hand—the lead guitarist’s one out of tune string was making Eliot want to take the instrument and break it over the guy’s head.

Eliot didn’t turn when the men they were waiting for came in the door, but he knew there were four of them, ranch hands from Ghost Ridge, making their nightly pilgrimage to the bar, just as Hardison had predicted.

Since Eliot had positioned himself to limit the options in available seating, one of them slid onto the empty barstool beside him. Eliot gave a polite, noncommittal nod acknowledging the other’s presence but not inviting conversation.

It didn’t take long before the man asked, “I haven’t seen you in here before. New in town or just passing through?”

Small town curiosity. Eliot had been counting on it. “Truck broke down. Shop says it’s gonna take a few weeks to get parts.”
“Tough luck,” the man said.

The two of them drank in silence for a few minutes before Eliot reopened the conversation.

“I don’t suppose you know if anyone around here could use a temporary hand? Me and my girl are stuck ‘til we get that truck movin’. We’re runnin’ out of cash, and my credit’s maxin’ out on the repairs.”

“Maybe,” the man said, noncommittally. “What kinda work you do?”

“Little bit of this, little of that,” Eliot said, setting the hook. “Done a bit of heavy duty mechanic work, been a ranch hand south of the border for a good while, done a coupla turns on the American rodeo circuits, cuttin’ and ropin’. Just picked up a sweet little mare out near Airdrie. Figure she’ll make me some money come spring, but she’s why I’m too broke to pay attention.”

“I can ask around,” his new acquaintance offered. “I know my boss’s been complaining ‘cause one of the boys just up and left yesterday for Florida. I’ll put in a word for you.”

“That’d be real kind of you.” Eliot dug in his pocket for a crumpled piece of lined notebook paper. “You have a pen?”

“Why do I even bother giving you a phone?” Hardison’s eyeroll was audible over the comms. Eliot ignored him.

The man fished a worn ballpoint out of his shirt pocket and handed it over. Eliot scratched his pseudonym and current phone number on the paper.

“James McCoy,” he said, holding out his hand. “Much obliged.”

“Rudy Garrioch.” The man gave him a quick handclasp and took the paper, shoving it into his pocket along with the pen.

Something his buddy said distracted him, and he turned away, leaving Eliot to wait until Parker kick-started the next stage of the plan.

The sound of an altercation breaking out, even though he was listening for it, hit Eliot like an electric shock, accelerating his pulse and forcing him to clamp a furious control on his reaction.

*Stay in character. Stay in character. Stay in character.* The mantra looped through his brain in Sophie’s voice even as he spun around, carefully slower than he could have, slower than Rudy did. James McCoy did not have Eliot Spencer’s reflexes.

His lightning read of the room was all his own, however. Before he’d completed the turn, he had categorized the reactions of everyone in the bar and filed them in order from most to least likely to interfere, running a half-dozen contingency scenarios in case the situation changed.

Pandemonium had erupted around Parker. A chair had tipped over spilling its occupant on the floor. Two other men at the same table had half-risen out of their chairs. Kira’s high-pitched screech still reverberated as Parker practically levitated out of their reach.

It took Eliot three strides to get to her side and wrap a worried James’ arms around her.

“Kira, what happened?”

Parker was actually shaking.
“That slimeball tried to feel up my skirt!” she hissed.

Eliot held her hard against his chest, and he knew that it looked good, like he was comforting his girl who had been harassed by the big bad drunk. But what he was really doing was gripping an armful of lethally rageful Parker. And what he was whispering in her ear was not the sweetly soothing words of a lover about to defend the honor of his lady fair, but the harried plea of a con artist trying to keep them from getting their cover blown.

“Parker. This is not the time.”

In his ear, he could hear Hardison seconding his motion.

“I know you want to stab him with a fork, Parker, and he totally deserves it. And I know you’d have fun doing it. But you need to let Eliot take him down, okay? To sell the character. Tell you what. Get me his photo. I’ll pull all his info, and after this is over we can empty his bank account, send him a thousand lifetime subscriptions to porno magazines.”

To Eliot’s relief, Parker gave a quiet breath of a laugh and settled in his embrace.

“All right, but I get to break his fingers if he tries again.”

“Oh, there won’t be enough of him left to try again,” Eliot grinned, baring his teeth against her hair. “You better take that photo before I rearrange his face. I promise, I’ll hit him so hard he shoulda skipped work for the last six months to recover.”

Eliot relaxed his grip, but kept a wary arm around Parker’s waist as he guided his “shaken girlfriend” to one of the tall bar stools. As he turned to face the jerk who’d tried to get his hands on Parker, he caught the gleeful look on her face that she and Hardison tended to wear just before he tapped on the shoulder of a clueless bad guy who was threatening them.

It always eased something inside of him to know that the part of himself that everyone else feared made them feel safe.

The sorry excuse for a man that was Eliot’s target was just lumbering to his feet from where Parker had knocked over his chair. As an opponent, he looked formidable, having a good extra six inches and a hundred pound advantage of Eliot. Probably most of the patrons of the establishment were expecting Eliot to lose any fight he started. Eliot schooled his face into the reckless fury of a man who was beyond reason. It wasn’t much of a stretch. Nobody laid hands on Parker. And while Parker was perfectly capable of taking down any man who did so, Eliot was going to enjoy coming to her “defense.”

Apparently, the look on Eliot’s face was more intimidating than he had planned.

“Hey sorry man. I didn’t know she was with you,” the guy offered in an attempt to placate Eliot.

Ugh. One of those jerks. Eliot’s lip curled up in a scornful snarl. “What the hell? You think any woman who don’t belong to some man is fair game to be pawed by a sonofabitch like you?”

“Well, maybe you shouldn’t be letting her advertise if you don’t want anyone else sampling the merchandise,” the guy retorted, gesturing rudely at Parker where she was sitting trying to look in need of rescuing.

Eliot could clock the rate at which his blood pressure was rising. He really wanted to turn this guy over to Parker’s brand of cheerful brutality. Let him get pulverized by a woman. But this was a con, and they were on script.
“Let me tell you how this is gonna go, okay?” He advanced so that his words were delivered into the man’s red face. “I’m gonna beat your ass until you figure out that, one, a woman can wear whatever she damn well pleases. And two, I don’t care if she’s walkin’ through this room in nothin’ but spangles and pasties. You don’t touch her without her permission!”

“Like you even could!” the drunken blockhead snapped, bringing up his fists.

“Wrong answer!” Eliot growled, and swung.

* * * * *

Parker perched on the seat Eliot had vacated. It was slightly sticky. Eww. Another reason skirts were useless. She shifted until she was barely touching the vinyl. She was going to need a shower to make her legs feel like her own again.

Wait. She should be focused on Eliot.

He was lecturing the drunk guy. That made Parker smirk. Eliot treating fights like teachable moments was never not amusing. But the best part would be when Eliot started hitting.

The air in the bar crackled with electric tension. Could anyone else feel it prickling along their skin? Or was it just her? Waiting for Eliot to strike was like watching a violent storm roll up. The space seemed inadequate to contain all that force. The acrid taste of lightning curled on her tongue. Parker couldn’t help bouncing on her disgusting seat

Then a table crashed over, spilling glass and ceramic and flatware onto the floor in a glorious smash, as Eliot shoved it aside and lunged for the drunk guy.

Somebody screamed, high and startled. Nothing had even happened yet. Kira did not roll her eyes, but Parker was rolling imaginary eyes as hard as she could.

Eliot’s fist thunked into the bad guy’s belly. And the fight was on.

The bad guy charged, roaring and flailing like he didn’t know he was playing T-ball in the Major Leagues. Eliot looked bored as the man literally ran his nose into Eliot’s fist.

Yay! Bloody nose! Parker wanted to cheer but Kira would be shocked, and so she gasped.

“Be careful, James!” she shrieked, clasping her hands together entreatingly.

As if Eliot needed to be. Other than the noise and the addition of the smell of blood to the background of bar scents, Parker had seen Eliot in more exciting fights. The drunk guy was so clumsy and slow. Eliot had to work to let the guy hit him, stepping into the way of wild swings so the idiot wouldn’t just go staggering on by without connecting at all. The only thing that kept the fight from being a complete one-sided slaughter was that the man made up in strength what he lacked in aim or speed. If Eliot timed it just right, one of the guy’s punches would land in a moment of pure and painful clarity.

But for every one strike that Eliot allowed through his guard, three of his own hit their target. Parker bared her teeth in satisfaction each time she heard the crunch and crack of an Eliot elbow contacting bad guy bones. Fortunately, no one was watching her.

The rest of the inhabitants of the bar lacked her appreciation for Eliot’s talents. They shouted and milled around, the ones trying to see tangling up with the ones trying to get out of the way.
“Break it up. C’mon, break it up,” someone was yelling, probably the owner of the place counting the shattered crockery and furniture.

And then it was over. The giant fell like a sack of cement, semi-conscious, curled up with one hand clutched to what Parker hoped were broken ribs, the other hand covering his smashed nose. And Eliot was being manhandled away by a person who just happened to be carrying handcuffs.

“Dammit, Hardison,” Eliot’s voice hissed over the comms. “There’s a cop here!”

“Hey, how was I supposed to know?” Hardison protested.

“He came in after the fight started,” Parker informed them. “Is Eliot getting arrested?”

“I’m being handcuffed, Kira,” Eliot grumbled. “What do you think? Get over here and show a little concern for your man.”

Parker obligingly gave Kira’s plaintive cry and rushed to Eliot. “Oh baby, are you okay? What did he do to you? You’re hurt!” She reached out to almost touch a raw mark on Eliot’s cheek.

Restraining hands took hold of her arms and pulled her away.

“Excuse me, ma’am. I’m going to have to ask you to step aside,” said another officer, this one in uniform.

Seriously!? More police?

“No! What are you doing?” Kira screeched, batting ineffectually at the hands. “Stop. Don’t touch me! You can’t arrest James! It wasn’t his fault!”

“Calm down, ma’am,” the officer said, annoyingly soothing. “Just sit down. We need people to stay out of the way.”

“Come on, dearie,” said a motherly voice, and another arm went around Parker. It belonged to a woman taller than Parker and broader than Eliot. She had long, wavy gray hair, tanned, wrinkled skin, and Parker’s favorite color of green eyes. Her leather vest showed off complex tattoos covering both her muscular arms. Lots of metal bits decorated her face and ears, and she had bright red lipstick. “Let’s go sit down,” she suggested.

All this touching by strangers was making Parker want to hop out of her skin, but she decided that Kira would probably do as she was told, so she allowed the woman to shepherd her back to the bar.

“Carl!” The woman thumped the countertop to get the bartender’s attention. “Bottle of Jack here! My name’s Arlene, by the way,” she told Parker.

That was a social gambit, Parker recognized. Sophie would say she should respond with something that made the woman feel like they were friends. Having a friend could be useful. “I’m Kira.” Parker obeyed the Sophie-voice in her head. “And that’s James. He was just protecting me. That man tried to assault me!” Her voice quavered just right. She and Sophie had practiced that in front of a mirror.

“You poor thing,” the woman, Arlene, clucked and fussed over her. “I’m sure Bob, he’s the officer in charge, will get it all sorted out in a jiffy.” She took the bottle and glasses the bartender handed her. “This’ll help calm your nerves.”

Parker didn’t think she needed any whiskey, and she was pretty sure she didn’t have any nerves,
but maybe Kira would like some, so she accepted the shot the woman poured for her and took a sip. Probably Eliot could have used the drink more than Parker.

Parker felt bad for Eliot. Being in handcuffs always made her frantic to get out of them. But Eliot made no attempt to escape the police, who had magically multiplied, and who were trying to sort out what had happened. The EMTs had arrived and were trundling the whimpering remains of Eliot’s opponent out to the waiting ambulance, while the man’s half-drunk friends were creating more chaos than clarity trying to shout each other down to the officer taking their statements. In contrast, Eliot remained perfectly still, like a cliff unmoved by the crash of the sea.

“Okay,” Hardison was saying in the earbuds. “They’re gonna try to book you on aggravated assault. Maybe take you down to the station. But Parker should be able to spring you as long as you agree to show up for your court appointment. Parker, you make sure that douchebag gets charged with assault, too.”

This was going to suck. Kira dissolved into tears. Sophie would have been proud.

* * * * *

TBC
I’ve been playing plot Tetris, and I’ve finally decided this is the chapter that needs to be here now. It’s an odd one. Lots of introspection and dialogue.

Portland, Oregon, USA

The black night was unrelieved by the glow from the dash or the glitter of rain in the high beams as Jenkins’ car bounced along the rutted road. Her senses muffled in darkness, Eve Baird was swept along the swirl and eddy of time on a river without banks. Old griefs clashed against new fears until she was unsure from moment to moment where or when she was. Her reality splintered, fragments of her past flung against the present. The pain and terror of the Port of Algeciras Bay bled out into the Tualatin Wilderness, bright red on asphalt seeping into dark stains on wet grass.

The urge to move, to fight, to rip her friends out of the clutches of whatever had taken them raged along her nerves and muscles with nowhere to go. She must not fail Teresinha, Torbjørn, Joscin, Derya, Poptart, The Terrible Twosome, Brader.

No.

She had already failed them. She had made her pilgrimages to lay flowers and tears on their graves.

She needed not to fail Jacob Stone.

The image of a broken popsicle stick forced its way past her clenched eyelids. The sound of flies crawling on drying blood buzzed in her ears. She had failed him too.

Eve hugged her arms to her stomach, feeling sick.

No. She couldn’t lose hope. The dog had indicated he wasn’t dead. There might be a chance for Jacob.

Let there still be a chance, she begged the universe.

Although warm air was blowing from the vents, Eve couldn’t stop shivering. The fingers of her right hand sought the edges of stiff paper, folded in her coat pocket.

Her painting.

That sense of safety within you? She could hear Jacob’s voice as if he were in his familiar place in the seat behind her. You’ll always be able to find it inside you.

But she couldn’t find it. Each time she sought her way to her safe space in her mind, the empty prairie sky would cut to her father calling for her to hurry, to hop in the car. They were in Western Canada, and it would be a crime not to see the Rocky Mountains right next door in Alberta. Then the harvest-ripe wheat fields would blur out the windows of the car, and they would be driving the interminable Trans-Canada, her father laughing the way he never did on base while her mother listened to a talk-show about houseplants on the radio and Eve slouched in the backseat, bored as
only a teenager on a family vacation could be. Even if this wasn’t her blue and gold memory, she should have felt safe.

But instead, her anxiety twisted her memories into something strange. She needed to stop them. To make her father turn the car around. To make them never get in the car at all. Something was wrong.

Black Diamond.

Something bad was waiting in Black Diamond.

Eve opened her eyes and stared into the night, her heart drumming in aimless panic.

For an instant, she saw a dark, helmeted figure, cracked face shield sprayed with blood, illuminated by the headlights. She gasped as Jenkins drove through it as if it weren’t even there.

It wasn’t.

Eve clamped her teeth on a scream until her jaw ached.

*Just breathe,* said the Jacob in her head. *Tell, me what do you see?*

Eve leaned into the memory of his voice and inhaled slowly, feeling her lungs expand, her ribs lift. They were on the freeway now. Ahead she could see the lights outlining the Saint Johns Bridge, haloed with rain and reflecting in the Willamette River. Almost home.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

The Gothic towers loomed over them. Eve counted each steel suspension cable as the headlights caught it. At last, Jenkins pulled into his parking space outside the Annex. They’d made it home. Eve felt shaky with relief. She needed out of the dark.

Jenkins had an umbrella in his car. An enormous black one. Of course he did. He escorted her to the Annex entrance at a sedate pace in perfect dryness except for her feet.

As soon as Jenkins stepped through the ornate doors into the main room, he had one word to say: “Tea.”

He bustled off in the direction of his kettle, leaving Eve to join her team dripping on the parquet floor in the central space of the Annex.

Ezekiel and Cassandra were staring at each other.

Eve quelled the powerful urge to lock them safely in a vault and bar the door.

“And did we just steal coveralls from Portland CSI?” Cassandra asked, holding out her drenched, white-clad arms.

“Congratulations.” Ezekiel grinned. “Not bad for a beginner. We should hang on to these. You never know when it might be convenient to impersonate an official investigation.” He began peeling himself out of soggy fabric.

Eve should probably be objecting to her criminal element’s extra-legal plans, but she could only bless him for the air of situation normal he exuded.
Cassandra’s expression went from expectant to baffled.

“Where are the samples?” she asked.

Unzipping his jacket, Ezekiel pulled out a handful of tiny slender cardboard boxes and dropped them on the planning table.

“Here you are.”

He emptied more from his sleeves and then bent over for the ones he’d worked down to his socks.

“You’re . . .” Cassandra shook her head

“Amazing? Phenomenal? Extraordinary? I know.” Ezekiel straightened up and added the boxes to the others.

“Obviously, you don’t need my compliments,” Cassandra said. Turning towards the kitchen door, she called. “Jenkins, do we have something I can use to transport these to the lab?”

The caretaker appeared, dainty floral teacup in one hand, matching saucer in the other. “I believe we have some aluminum-sided cases that should serve. You’ll find them under the astrolabe in the back cupboard.”

Cassandra whisked off to the lab and returned toting two silver briefcases.

Feeling useless, Eve watched as Cassandra and Ezekiel sorted their samples and tucked them into the foam liners.

When they were done, Cassandra paused with the lid still open. She frowned, biting at the corner of her lower lip. “There’s one more sample we need. From Jacob. We need something we know has his DNA on it.”

“His apartment is probably crawling with detectives as we speak,” Eve said.

Ezekiel raised his hand. “I’m sure I don’t need to remind you . . .”

Cassandra shook her head. “Not his apartment. Mine. He bled all over my skirt at the Brew Pub, Monday night. I sprayed some spot remover on the stains, but I haven’t had a chance to wash them out yet.” She drew in a quivery breath. “Jenkins?”

“I’ll set up the Back Door.” Jenkins nodded, moving over to the elaborate globe that calibrated their entrances and exits around the world.

“Just let me grab a few things.” Cassandra disappeared back into the lab. When she reappeared, she was carrying a tub filled with paper and plastic bags, an open box of nitrile gloves, and a package of sterile forceps.

“I’ll be right back,” she said and dashed through the glow of the doorway Jenkins was holding open.

Ezekiel slumped into a chair and pulled out his phone.

Staring down at their muddy footprints, Eve told Jenkins, “I’ll get the mop.”

* * * * *
By the time the Door lit up again with Cassandra’s return, Eve had obsessively cleaned the floor and everyone’s shoes and had gone back to the futile task of straightening her desk. One of these days she was just going to take a blow torch to it. See how the Library liked that.

Eve noted approvingly that Cassandra had changed her shoes.

In spite of traces of tears on her cheeks, Cassandra was looking every inch a scientist—hair pulled back severely into a bun, thin-framed glasses perched on her nose, white lab coat buttoned up. She was cradling in her arms a plastic bag shielding the paper bundle that wrapped her bloodstained skirt.

“That’s it,” she said. “We can go now.”

Ezekiel hopped out of his seat. “Before we head for the lab, we should check into our hotel in Black Diamond.”

Cassandra’s expression skipped right by argument and went straight to resignation. Ezekiel was right. Their electronic trail of breadcrumbs needed to become a physical trail if it was to hold up under scrutiny.

Given a task and a plan to execute, Eve martialed her wits to dispense orders. “Everyone collect your bags. We can’t walk into a hotel for an extended stay without luggage. Jenkins, you too.”

Jenkins heaved an unhappy sigh, but he and his tea departed to do her bidding. Ezekiel and Cassandra vanished in the direction of their lockers. Eve followed them more slowly.

Once again, she gathered her bugout bag that she’d taken to Stone’s place two nights ago. Already that time seemed ancient history and her past self another person. Beside her locker, Jacob’s locker stayed silent and closed. Eve laid one hand on the door.

“I hope you know we’re coming for you,” she whispered to him, wherever he was.

* * * * *

Black Diamond, Alberta, Canada

The Back Door regurgitated the Librarian team into Black Diamond with its usual disorienting abruptness. Eve found herself shepherding Jenkins and her remaining LITs out of yet another public restroom in back of a gas station. The transition from the warmth of the Annex to the biting cold of a Canadian winter night might have accounted for the chill raising the hair on her arms. But Eve was scarcely aware of the temperature.

It was like stepping back in time. Twenty-seven years, and nothing had changed.

She could almost see her father standing by the pump trying to read the map while he gassed up the car.

Twenty-seven years, and everything had changed.

From day to night. From summer to winter. From family to loss. The ache in her chest made her blink back tears.

Across the street at the hotel on the corner, parked near the bar entrance, two squad cars with lights flashing snagged Eve’s attention from her memories. An ambulance was just pulling away from the curb.
“Ezekiel.” Eve grabbed his jacket sleeve. “What sort of dive are you taking us to?”

“Hey,” Ezekiel protested. “According to Yelp and TripAdvisor, this is the best place in town.”

“And we’re not really staying,” Cassandra said, so intent on getting in and out of the hotel that she ended up leading the team.

They gave the law a wide berth on their way to the reception entrance.

Several minutes later, their reservations confirmed, the Librarian team hauled their bags up to the second floor of the hotel, about as high as one could get in Black Diamond. While Eve waited for Jenkins to re-establish the connection to the Back Door, she stood at the edge of the window where she would not be silhouetted, and looked out over the quiet streets, empty now of police cars. She shivered, searching for movement in the shadows between buildings. Somewhere in this town lurked Eliot Spencer, bent on some unknown objective. He had already crossed paths with innocent people who could have no way of recognizing the danger he represented. And here she was bringing what remained of her Librarian trainees into range of the man who had single-handedly taken out a NATO team, experienced soldiers armed with weapons and the skill to use them. What chance would Ezekiel and Cassandra have?

Her eyes turned back to where her two youngest charges were bouncing on the beds to make them look slept in.

They would be like field mice before a hawk such as Spencer.

Eve wished she could throttle a straight answer out of the Library. Why was it sending them up against Eliot Spencer? What malignant cosmic alignment had brought such a man into contact with a supernatural killer animal? And how were they supposed to stop him from doing whatever it was he meant to do?

Most of all, how was she to keep her team alive?

Eve circled the room and returned to the window. What was taking Jenkins so long?

Blue light flared.

The Back Door. Finally.

Only when Ezekiel and Cassandra were safely through did Eve allow herself to shake Black Diamond off her feet and step back into the Annex.

* * * * *

Portland, Oregon, USA

The return to the Annex brought with it no additional insight. The Library, as always, said nothing. The Clippings Book sat in its cradle, smug and silent and maddeningly vague.

Cassandra and Ezekiel soberly gathered up the cases of evidence while Jenkins adjusted the settings for the Door to connect with the lab Ezekiel had chosen.

Then they were gone.

As the glow of their departure faded, Eve was already rounding on Jenkins. If the Library had no answers, she knew someone who did.
“Jenkins,” she ordered, “tell me about Black Diamond.”

* * * * *

Jenkins had been about to return to his interrupted research when Eve Baird halted him with her baffling demand.

“Colonel?” He pivoted to face her, unsure how to respond.

Since they had returned from the site of Mr. Stone’s disappearance, the Guardian had been uncharacteristically restless, but now she was the picture of military control and resolve.

“Tell me what happened when you and Cassandra met Eliot Spencer. I need to know why he was there.”

There was something universal about a commanding officer requiring intelligence. Damming up a cascade of memories her voice and manner called to mind, Jenkins considered those few moments he had spent observing the man Eliot Spencer.

“I am afraid Mr. Spencer failed to make his purpose evident,” he told Baird. “Under the alias of James McCoy, he indicated that he was stranded in Black Diamond due to automotive troubles. However, since Hera’s agent notified us that Black Diamond was among Mr. Spencer’s intended destinations, I believe we may justifiably conclude that he was prevaricating if not outright lying. Whether that deception was for our benefit or was addressed to his other auditors was unclear. While I am certain he recognized Miss Cillian from their previous encounter, he made no mention of their acquaintance nor did she.”

“That means she’s tacitly agreed to be complicit in whatever he’s up to.” The Colonel’s calm slipped a little, and she drummed her index fingers on her folded arms. “He’s got to be wondering why.”

“Nevertheless, I believe she made the correct decision,” Jenkins said.

“Yes. She did,” Baird agreed. “Who knows what he might’ve done if he’d felt she threatened his cover story. I’m surprised he risked allowing her the choice. And relieved. There was a reason I told you not to make contact with that man.”

“I assure you our encounter was purely by chance.”

Colonel Baird’s eyes narrowed. “That you’re aware of.”

“Indeed,” Jenkins acknowledged. “However, you are attributing to Mr. Spencer an unlikely grasp of the function of the Library if you suggest he could have had any way of knowing we would be in Black Diamond on that particular day.”

“But how long had you spent in town asking questions?” Baird countered.

Jenkins tilted his head, conceding her point. Depending on the extent of Spencer’s network in Black Diamond, he could have been briefed in detail about the people who were inquiring about the magical horse he had purchased from the representative of a Greek god.

“You’d better start at the beginning,” Baird sighed, losing some of her army starch. “What were you and Cassandra doing when you encountered Spencer?”

This was going to take more tea. Jenkins retired to his desk and set about brewing another pot.
He thought Baird was going to refuse his offer of tea, but she surprised him, shrugging out of military mode and perching on a stool next to his workbench, the cup cradled between her palms. Of course, he should have realized that she was an expert in intelligence gathering. His role was cooperating witness, and she wished to put him at his ease.

Very well. He had every intention of cooperating.

In precise detail, he outlined the structure of his and Cassandra’s search of the town of Black Diamond, their failure to find anyone cognizant of the whereabouts of the horse, and their decision to enter the soda shop.

“That was the place you met Spencer?” Baird’s tone was exceeded in sharpness only by the look in her eyes.

“It was.”

In the short time she had been a part of his life, Jenkins had never known Colonel Baird to be irrational or prone to poor judgment. He had also developed considerable respect for her skill as a fighter and a tactician. In addition, she was one of the most valiant beings of his acquaintance. So her reaction to Eliot Spencer was providing negative space from which his image of the man emerged. Combined with his own observations, that image was troubling and inconsistent. Perhaps Baird would be able to shed further light on what the actions of Mr. Spencer might portend.

Jenkins continued relating the encounter with their informants at the shop, assuring Baird that the safety of her charge had been uppermost in his mind and had driven all his actions. “Since Cassandra and I had decided that she would be best suited to interrogate the young women at the shop counter, I was seated a short distance from them but well within earshot,” he told her.

“Eavesdropping, Jenkins?” Eve teased gently.

Jenkins inclined his head. “Like any good spy would,” he said. “As it turned out, both of them had been in contact with Spark of Midnight and by extension Mr. Spencer.”

He wondered idly if Baird’s grip on the edge of his desk would actually dent the wood.

“Did they appear well?” she asked. “Physically? Mentally? I know they wouldn’t confide in strangers, but you would recognize if they had been harmed, wouldn’t you?”

“It is conceivable that I might not,” Jenkins admitted. “However, the young women were in good spirits aside from some trauma related to a ‘math test’ if I recall correctly. And they gave every evidence of being fond of Mr. Spencer when he arrived.”

Baird’s eyes narrowed. “He can be charming when he chooses. Did he appear to be taking advantage of them?”

“No that I could tell. Their responses to him were familiar but not fawning. I would judge they perceived him as an interesting adult, but in no way as a possible inamorato. He was, of course, paired with Ms. O’Brien.”

“O’Brien? Martha? Parker? Whatever her name is? They were together? As a couple?”

Jenkins cast his mind back over the tense gathering. “With Ms. O’Brien, it was difficult to say, but Mr. Spencer’s body language was that of a lover.”

“That’s . . . unexpected.” Baird shook her head. “At the Brew Pub, I would have said she was with
Colin, I mean Alec Hardison. Damn, I hate aliases. Anyway, Spencer showed no signs of being other than good friends with Parker. And he flirted conspicuously with Cassandra.”

“Interesting. He evidenced no predilection for seeking Cassandra’s attention during our encounter. He was polite and obliging, but he never crossed that line.”

“And yet there is the riding lesson.” Baird couldn’t stay seated any longer. She slipped off the stool and resumed her unquiet prowling. “Jenkins, I can’t send Cassandra into that. Not only will she be going back to the same town where Spencer is up to no good, but she’ll be meeting him and a magical, murdering horse in the middle of nowhere. And you’ve told me we don’t have any way of knowing why he’s there. Which means we have no intelligence and no plan. If he sees her as a threat, he will eliminate her!”

These moments were always the hardest ones. Jenkins had seen this scenario play out more times than he wanted to remember. A Guardian’s job was to protect the Librarian, or in this case, Librarian in Training... up until the point when it was her job to send her into danger. There was no reconciliation between such diametrically opposing responsibilities.

“She is the one who has made the contact,” he pointed out sympathetically. “The fact that Mr. Spencer extended the invitation indicates he too wants this connection established.”

“That is the least comforting thing you’ve said yet!” Baird’s tone was exasperated, but Jenkins could hear an edge of panic in her voice. “You’re telling me he wants to get her alone. Picking us off in smaller increments would be consistent with his modus operandi.”

He did not have Colonel Baird’s experience with Eliot Spencer, so he would have to give more credence to her judgment than to his own first impressions, but he would not have said that the man in the soda shop had looked upon Miss Cillian as a killer assessing a victim. Nor had Spencer been the one to initiate the proposed meeting.

“To be fair,” Jenkins said, hoping to ease a little of Baird’s fear, “the offer of the school horse was made by one of the young women.”

That information had the virtue of altering Baird’s trajectory slightly. Her frown deepened. “We need to find out the nature of his relationship with them,” she said. “Is he using them in some way? Does he pose a threat to them? Are they the ones the Library is sending us to protect?”

“Those are all good questions,” Jenkins agreed. “Perhaps you can clarify one anomaly for me. When Mr. Spencer entered the shop, mindful of your instructions, I joined Miss Cillian in your stead as guardian. While I made no overtly antagonistic moves, Mr. Spencer responded to my presence as to an implied threat.”

“You don’t live as long as he’s lived, doing the things he’s suspected of doing and making the sorts of enemies he’s made, by being slow to figure out the parameters of an engagement,” Baird said wryly.

Jenkins shook his head. “That action did not surprise me. Nor did the fact that he positioned himself to interpose should I make a move against Ms. O’Brien. However, I am curious as to why he also included the young women with whom Miss Cillian was conversing in the range of his protection. It was not a move I would have expected from a man of his reputation.”

“Perhaps, if they were assets to him, he was merely warning you away.”

“I have difficulty believing that was the case,” Jenkins said slowly. “In my experience, there is a
difference between the look of a man who will kill you if you interfere with his property and that of a man who will die before you lay hands on those under his protection. I would have put Mr. Spencer’s reaction in the latter category were I not in possession of your further intelligence.”

“You mentioned they had interacted with the horse. Did they say in what way?”

“Miss Benarden confirmed that Mr. Spencer is boarding the mare Spark of Midnight on her family’s property, the Flying B Ghost Ridge Ranch. However, since she had no contact information for him, it is unclear who is responsible for that arrangement or what role that location has in any of his plans.”

Colonel Baird had begun jotting down notes with his feather pen on spare parchment as he talked.

“Miss Densmore’s contact seems more accidental.” Jenkins went on. “Mr. Spencer apparently had assisted her with a calving cow. Ms. O’Brien was, as yet, unknown to her . . . Colonel Baird? Is something wrong?”

The pen clattered on the floor.

“What did you say her name was?” Baird snapped, her grip once again threatening his woodwork.

“Miss Daphne Benarden?”

“No, the other one.”

“Hilde. Miss Hilde Densmore.”

All color drained from Baird’s face.

“No, no, no, no, no, no.” Her lips moved over the scarcely audible words. “This is not happening.”

“What is not happening?” Jenkins asked, worried.

Baird crumpled up her parchment notes and swept them off the table. “Didn’t you wonder how I knew, without doing any research, that Black Diamond was a small enough town to canvas in two days?” Her voice shook uncharacteristically.

He hadn’t wondered, but now that she mentioned it . . .

“The summer I was fourteen,” Baird went on, “I spent four days at a farm south of there. We had been visiting my mom’s brother in Saskatchewan during my father’s leave. It was a slow time on their farm, and my parents wanted to see the Rockies. Since my aunt had a brother who farmed near Black Diamond—Arvid Densmore—we stayed with him and his wife Inge and their family before heading on to Banff. I haven’t thought of them in years, but they were really lovely to us. I think my mom keeps in touch—Christmas cards or something.”

“That . . .” Jenkins shook his head. “I would say that is the most bizarre of coincidences, except that there is no such thing as a coincidence.”

“If this Hilde is related to them . . . What is going on?” Baird began to pace in agitation. “Why is Eliot Spencer anywhere near the Densmores? I swear if he does anything to harm them, I will rip out his throat before that stupid horse has a chance.”

The look in her eyes left Jenkins no doubt she could do it.
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