**Date of Expiration**

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**Date of Expiration**

by [jendavis](http://archiveofourown.org/users/jendavis)

**Summary**

The Global Frequency existed to save humanity from itself, and there was always another crisis coming. It was job security of a sort, if you managed to survive the bioenhanced supersoldiers, alien neuroprogramming, physicists who should know better, and the bureaucracy.

(Gah, I may come back to this one some day, but for now it's unfinished and not being updated)
Chapter 1

Thurs., February 27, 2014 14:38 CST (GMT-6)

"Don't get attached."

That was pretty much the beginning and end of Sophie's advice, though she'd just been Miranda Zero, then, and he hadn't even been Aleph, yet. She'd told him that for times like this.

Agent 731- Dr. Jacobson, who Alec had never met- was dying.

If asked, he'd never really met any of the agents. He just made the calls, fed them the information they needed to get the job done. He got them their exits, which were only successfully reached fifty three percent of the time. The other forty seven percent ended more or less like this. Sometimes there was a blast, and the unmistakable sound of surveillance equipment shorting out as Alec's subterranean hub plunged into near total darkness. Sometimes there was just just radio silence where an agent should've been, their absence amplified brightly through every monitor.

Both sucked, but this was so much worse, shifting uncomfortably in his chair, keeping 731 talking as the toxin progressed slowly and still too quickly throughout her body.

It had reached the language center of her brain at least five minutes ago; up until that point, she'd been reporting her findings, uploading spread and fatality data to the server while describing how it was killing her over the phone.

She'd postulated, no more than eight minutes ago, that it would spread out from the cerebral cortex and into Broca's area. Horribly enough, it seemed that she'd been right, and Alec was getting to witness the play-by-play firsthand. 731’s words weren't even words, anymore, just sounds. He didn't even know if they made sense to her anymore, just knew that soon, they too would stop.

If 731's other suspicions proved correct, her nervous system was going to shut down completely. Any minute now. It was the only blessing left in this entire shitstorm.

But she'd done what she'd needed to do, when it all came down to it. She'd managed to not only decrypt the data, but to explain it. She'd parsed it out and gotten it to the only people in the world who had half a chance in hell of fixing this mess.

The fact that they were coming up short wasn't her fault.

Alec continued talking to her anyway, though he kept watch on the screens filling nearly every available surface of the hub. It was a skill that he wasn't particularly proud of; it was just his job, sometimes, on the bad days. He told her how she'd done good, about how she was saving the world. It sounded so ridiculous and grandiose- melodramatic maybe- using terms that big when she was locked alone in a mundane corner laboratory in an otherwise insignificant suburb of Ohio.

Odds were, she couldn't understand him anymore, anyhow, and a small, guilty part of himself hated the relief that came when her disjointed muttering finally began to taper off, but he didn't stop talking. "We've got people all over the world going over what you sent us," he promised her. "We've got this."

It was a complete lie. So far, none of the experts had come up with a solution that was any better than the one Miranda Zero was working out with the National Guard in the lab's parking lot. They were circling a solution, would eventually have it, but-
"Aleph, this is Miranda," Sophie identified herself on the comms, half shouting over the noise in the complex's south parking lot. "We're just about set to go, unless you've got a very good reason to tell us not to."

-there wasn't enough time.

"Loud and clear, Miranda," he said. "Tokyo will be back on the line in three minutes."

"I've got nearly two hundred civilians wandering around the parking lot. Half are panicked to the point of shutting down completely, the other half think we're bluffing. We've got people trying to bust through the lines to go back inside for their purses and coats, because apparently you can lead office workers to a decontamination shower, but you can't make them think. Tell me you've got something better."

Alec was already dialed back into the conference call. "How close are we?"

All chatter on the line stopped. It was 624, in Jakarta, who eventually spoke, her voice weary and raw.

"I am sorry. There is nothing yet even resembling a cure."

"Right," Alec sighed, though he'd suspected as much. "Everyone? Keep on it, but be advised, I'm giving the call for plan B." Switching comms again, he glanced at the video feed from the 731's lab, switching to thermal. Hotspots in her brain and down her spine, her extremities already beginning to slide down to room temperature. She'd died, and he'd missed it.

There was no reason not to go ahead, not anymore.

"Miranda Zero, you've got operational control," he said, as if she were incapable of ordering an air strike on nearly any target, from any nation she could imagine, with nothing more than her cell phone. "We've got everything we need off their servers. Do your thing."

He wasn't surprised that a terse "ten-four" was all the reply he got. They'd already converted the building's fire suppression system into its exact opposite, cutting off the line to the external water supply and replacing it with napalm. Crude, but effective, and the fast burn was the best chance they had.

Sophie was shouting orders to the engineers and demolitions experts she'd brought out, and though Alec still could've followed the conversation, he'd known where it was going from the start.

Controlled burn. The laboratory complex's environmental sensors had initiated emergency protocols the moment the toxin's chemical fingerprint had registered, but they were programmed to keep exit doors open long enough for an evacuation. Sound enough programming from a preservation of life perspective, except for the fact that the movement of air as people fled into the parking lots, all those doors whooshing open and closed, had also served to spread the toxin deeper into the building. Most of the infection, so to speak, was confined to the second and first floors, but by the time Alec had finished the workaround to get Agent 731 into the building, it was showing up on all seven.

Alec had missed her death. But he watched her burn, until smoke was obscuring everything from view. Until the building's security cameras shorted out and there was nothing left to see, anyhow.

---

"You're probably going to want to reset the sensors on the southern approach." Agent 587, also known as Parker, eased down from the rafters, her sneaker-clad foot swinging precariously close to
the edge of his computer monitor array. Landing on the floor, she peered into his face and frowned. He only had the vaguest idea what it was she saw there.

"What's wrong with you?"

Three years, now, with literally every database at his fingertips, and Alec still had no idea if Parker was her first name or last. Sometimes he suspected it was more of a description; some bastardization of parkour, maybe, which would've explained a lot, given everything that existed in the small file they did have on her.

One thing he had figured out, though, was that she rarely tended to ask personal questions.

"Shit went down. Lost another agent." You know. The usual. Ducking her gaze, he checked the weather on his personal laptop. It was the smallest screen in here, and the only one not filled with transmission monitoring and the faces of web-conferencing generals and doctors. It was unlikely that he was about to encounter any weather, down here in the steam tunnels beneath Chicago, but if it was going to freeze up top tonight, Parker might want to grab the gloves she'd left here last time.

"Was it him?" Parker's hands couldn't decide whether to ball into fists or dive into her pockets; beyond that, she seemed frozen to the spot.

Alec didn't need to ask for clarification. People, outside of her assigned targets, rarely caught Parker's interest, but she'd worked with Agent 324 on a few ops, now, and while the two of them weren't friends- agents were never friends- 324 had earned her respect, which was as close as any of them were likely to get.

"He's good," she'd said the first time she'd gotten back from an op with him; it had either been the Big Wheel compound last year, or that extra-dimensional espionage case down in Dallas. "Not nearly as robotic as I'd thought he'd be, though."

She'd almost seemed disappointed.

So maybe he asked her about him, whenever the two of them paired up on an op. Just to have something to talk about, every once in a while, on nights like this.

324- Eliot Spencer- had come up in conversation far more often than he probably should have, given the thousand or so other agents Aleph was responsible for wrangling. And given Alec's whole...deal... the fact that it did anyway was bordering on troubling.

Alec shook his head, not letting himself get sidetracked. "No, it... It was someone else," he halfheartedly tried, not really certain how to best explain what it had been like to stay on the line while 731 died slowly, to watch her lose all understanding of the process that was killing them. "Her name was Marla Jacobson," he quoted 731's updated file- died in the line already selected from the drop down menu- as he took it off the screen.

Parker nodded. "Did she win?"

"We did," Alec corrected her. Doctor Jacobson definitely hadn't.

"Oh." Parker sat down cross-legged in her usual spot on the couch behind him, so that she was out of sight of the computer's camera if Miranda dialed in. It was nervous habit that had Alec glancing at Zero's beacon to check that she was still in Ohio, and not standing outside ready to barge in to bust the both of them- Parker for her habitual breaching of base security, Alec for allowing it.

Parker had been breaking those rules since long before Zero had brought Alec on board, though, and
it wasn't really Sophie who Parker was hiding from anyhow, merely the act of ever being filmed in the first place.

The picture in Parker's file- the only picture ever taken of her, if Alec's facial recognition software was to be trusted- was shot in this very room, against the concrete brick of the far wall. That same night, Aleph F, Alec's predecessor, had given Parker a phone, started a file on her, listing lock picking, infiltration, exfiltration, evasion, smuggling, basic hacking, and climbing as her skills. She'd been assigned the number 587, and scowled suspiciously into the camera.

Some time later, Zero had added *displays low empathy to adult civilians and agents, though very good with children* to her file. It hadn't been entered as a warning, though. Not a statement of warning or censure, just a tool to help in the allocation of resources. What made her a liability at terrorist-overrun state dinners made her a genius at retrieving tech from enemy hands, or extracting half a dozen orphans from an underground research facility.

Knowing her file, Alec again found himself wanting to ask her what she was doing here, visiting him at all. It wasn't often he swallowed his curiosity, though, and he'd been doing it for years when it came to her.

He checked the monitors- the facility was burning nicely, and the interior heat in the rooms that were still standing was registering well above the toxin's burning point. Alec interrupted Zero's argument with the Joint Chiefs and half of the UN to let her know. Sophie could handle the rest of it.

Afterwards, a few more files had to be updated, information coming in from today's crisis and several more that might yet become *tonight's* crisis, when Parker spoke again.

"Have you seen him lately?"

"No."

"Really?"

"Yes." As Aleph, it would've posed no challenge, and though Parker knew it, she never mentioned it. One day you're misusing GF resources to peek in on a hot guy on a walk in the park, then you're tapping into his calls, and suddenly, you're Big Brother. And never mind the fact that that was exactly what Alec was.

It was the principle of the thing.
Eliot zipped his jacket and put his work gloves on before leaving his apartment. The synthskin Dr. Laroque kept trying to push on him was flimsy, too easily torn, and though the texture was nearly identical to that of real flesh, the way it stretched over the framework of his left arm and hand looked anything but human. Minneapolis had long winters, though, and he'd probably be able to hide it underneath bulky gloves for another few weeks. He could slip onto the street, blend in easily with the foot traffic as he hiked down the block to his car.

Maintaining the illusion of normality only went as far as his commute down 35W. It wasn't any use pretending once he arrived at the warehouse for his shift. Even with the gloves, knowledge of his enhancements were no secret, and hadn't ever been. They'd probably been known even before the case worker had given him a name instead of a number.

The entire country had watched it on TV, but they hadn't seen everything. The cameras hadn't been there to capture the fear spreading out through his brothers and sisters when they first realized it wasn't a drill. The footage of the week-long siege of the Kansas compound had mostly been taken from helicopters patrolling from above; they'd missed the blood, and the arguments breaking out as two dozen teenagers, their parents gone, tried to strategize against the full force of the United States military.

Those strategies had mostly been in vain. Despite their training and their enhancements, they'd been outnumbered, and hadn't had half the resources of the other side. They hadn't even had their parents, any more, to give them orders.

His brothers, Alpha and Gamma, had died on the third day of the siege. His sister Beta had fallen on the sixth, making him, Delta, the oldest of his siblings, though he'd been too focused on Lambda, seizing on the floor as her malfunctioning enhancements tried in vain to shock her heart back into rhythm, to immediately notice.

He'd wanted to come up with a plan, wanted to raise his eyes to his last nine siblings and convince them that it would be okay, that they'd survive. All he'd been able to think of was the numbers, running madly through his head and refusing to improve.

*Win to loss rate is 3.33 to one. Current count confirms enemy forces outnumber allies seven to one. Current light readings 19220 lux. Secondary weapons cache cut off behind the line of M1042s and M1037s to the west; retrieval not an option. Air support is inbound. Probability of strike within next ten minutes is 97.8%. Probability of strike within next five is 82.4%.*

There just hadn't been any time to do anything.

He'd winced, expecting the painful red flash in his head that never came, but their parents had been dead for a week. Nobody had been monitoring for OD- operational directive- failures for days, and there was no one left to outrank him.

"We've got to surrender," he'd finally said, the words like gravel in his throat, and glanced up from Lambda's convulsions. Epsilon and Digamma had exchanged a wary, puzzled look between them, which turned to surprise when they realized their OD monitors, too, were offline. Neither of them had spoken, but Digamma had managed a shaky nod, crouching on the floor to try and do something for Lambda.
She'd had even less medical training than he'd had, and there hadn't been enough room for both of them. He'd turned back to the youngers, finding them crouched at the end of the hallway, their lowered heads more habit than necessity so far away from any windows. While some of them had been fitted for basic external armaments, they were all a year or more away from receiving their first neural upgrades. They'd still needed explanation, sometimes, to understand their orders, or what it meant to disobey them.

Beta had always been better at this sort of thing, more patient. But she'd fallen hours ago.

He'd crouched down, deliberately blocking Lambda from view, and tried to explain the concept of surrender, but his words, if they were heard at all, hadn't seemed to matter. The siege had been going on for days, and while the noise was of minimal importance to anyone with cochlear implants, the foam earplugs One had distributed that first night only did so much. The kids were tired, terrified to the point of numbness.

Their tears had run out days ago, but though they'd been silent, they hadn't heard a word he'd said, hadn't even been looking at him.

It had taken him a moment to realize that the bottom of the silence had dropped out. Lambda had stopped seizing, there on the floor of the hallway, when his back was turned.

The television cameras hadn't caught that part. And it hadn't made it into his file, either. What had filled it instead was the detritus of months of monitoring that came afterwards. Therapy transcripts, psychological and medical and mechanical evaluations, basic knowledge and literacy tests, trigger lists and all of the paperwork necessary to prove that he, at age seventeen, could operate as a functional member of human society.

By age eighteen, he'd mostly failed at that. The few months he spent in a public high school had been about as successful as the group home- he'd had siblings again, only they hadn't been his, but at least the discomfort had been mutual. Eventually his foray into normal society had been written off euphemistically as little more than a series of misunderstandings.

At her wit's end, his case worker had advised him that with his background and training, a career in the military might be worthwhile. She'd left out the part where the Army had an interest in the metal patchwork that comprised his arm and hands, the sensor arrays installed where his optic discs should've apparently been, and the miles of thinner-than hair wire twining along his nerves. It wouldn't have mattered anyway. He'd been frustrated. He'd still been angry.

He'd signed up immediately.

He'd been routed out of basic training after the first day, deployed inside enemy territory by the end of the first month.

He'd gone from a rank to a name and back again. It wasn't Delta, this time, the number was much longer and bore little resemblance to the soldiers who were his new brothers and sisters, but it fit in a way that Eliot Spencer, the name he'd chosen for himself for that year and a half in between, never really had.

Tues., March 11, 2014 20:03 CDT (GMT-5)

"See you tomorrow, Spencer," Gatiss nodded vaguely in his direction as he passed, his gaze never quite reaching past Eliot's shoulder.
"Boss," he nodded back, though Gatiss was already heading up into the offices with his ever-present clipboard clutched under one scrawny arm. Punching the clock, Eliot headed out into the parking lot, rubbing tiredly at his eyes - the contacts did a good enough job of masking the creepy blue glow from his fake eyes, but they itched. He was digging for his keys when his phone vibrated.

Not the cell in his coat pocket, though. It was the other one, the one he kept in his jeans.

"This is 324," he answered, his mind nearly landing on the thought that as far as the identification numbers he'd managed to collect went, at least this one was easy to remember.

"324, this is Aleph. You're on the Global Frequency."

The GF phone only ever rang when they needed to send him in to some disaster or another, but he found himself, not for the first time, grinning as he answered. He'd never really examined the reaction too closely. If there was some latent monstrosity in him that the therapists had missed, or the endless stream of case workers had missed some mechanical trigger that just sat waiting for a command code to be entered, he didn't want to know.

Maybe, he told himself, he just liked being able to use what he was to do something good.

Or maybe he just liked the sound of Aleph's voice on the line. It was never as calm as someone in Aleph's position should've probably been - he cracked grim jokes and gave Eliot his exits and asked if he was okay when they were done - but it was human.

Eliot had never even met him. He'd only ever caught a glimpse of him once, over his phone's screen, when he'd used the video function to show the state of the dead bodies he'd found in the subway car last spring. It had been just enough to see that he'd been a little younger than Eliot would've thought, and a lot better looking. The insanely bright tee-shirt stretching over broad shoulders had been a surprise; for some reason, after hearing his voice on the line on two or three ops, he'd been expecting to see an underwhelming scrawny guy in a polo shirt, like the ones who came to fix the warehouse's computers when they were down. Or maybe, given the GF's reputation, a wild-eyed slovenly lunatic in paramilitary drag.

But in that one instant, where they'd briefly glanced at each other over the phone, Aleph hadn't looked at him warily at all. He'd just smiled grimly, said "circumstances aside, it's nice to sort of meet you," and asked him to turn the camera on the bodies so that the Korean scientist Aleph had conferenced in could examine the amount of blood that had poured from their ears.

It hadn't been the first time he'd had to show someone a pile of corpses. But it had been the first time anyone had said it was nice to meet him, sort of or otherwise. Even Miranda hadn't been able to stop her eyes from darting curiously at his metal hand.

Miranda, he thought, tended to treat everyone as if they were robots.

"Aleph, hey." He buried the grin, though there nobody was here to see it, and forced himself to switch gears. "What's the situation?"

"Stay where you are. Miranda's two minutes out, she'll brief you on the way to the helicopter. Hope you like Texas." Aleph started speaking Spanish, then, too quickly for Eliot to follow; he was obviously on the line with someone else. Probably a few dozen someones, given the way these things usually went down. Diplomats or scientists or card-counters or engineers, the usual mishmash of experts the GF had at their fingertips.

"Okay, 324," Aleph's voice was louder now, "Be on the lookout for a black SUV, and move quick."
This is gonna be fast and ugly."

"Of course it is," Eliot grumbled, flexing his hand just to feel the metal shifting against his tendons, pretending that it felt like muscles being stretched for action. "Anything else you can tell me before she gets here?"

"Miranda wants to be the one to brief you," Aleph repeated, regret toning his words. "But...you're not going in solo. Ah, 587's already at the landing pad."

587. Parker.

The GF had probably found another Big Wheel house, then. Wonderful.

"Fuck." Headlights swung around the corner up the block, finding him a second later. He stepped off the curb to wait for the SUV to pull up.

"Yeah. Good luck. I'm on your frequency."

"Yeah," Eliot said. "Thanks," but Aleph had already cut the connection.

Glancing in through the windshield, he could see that the front seat was empty, so he opened the door and climbed inside. Miranda was at the wheel, talking sharply into her bluetooth.

"I've got an agent here, general. I'll contact you after I've briefed him. Stay near your phone." Pulling away from the curb again, she finally glanced in Eliot's direction.

"It's good to see you again," she said, a razor sharp smile slashing across her face for only a second.

"We've got to stop meeting like this."

"That's what they all say. I trust Aleph's already given you the big picture?"

"587's riding shotgun," Eliot said. "I'm guessing Big Wheel?"

"We found another... house, yes." She'd meant to say compound, probably would have if she'd been talking to anyone else. "Five children. Only two are old enough for enhancement installation, we think, but it's unlikely they've progressed very far with it. Last week, a sixth child, the oldest, was found by border patrol, a few miles west of Laredo. She'd run away, and it took social services two days to get her to talk. We've got the location and the layout, and what we need is a clean extraction."

Eliot frowned. Clean extractions weren't usually what he was called in on.

"Parker's taking point on getting the kids out. You're taking care of their handlers and providing cover. Whatever that may entail. And I would appreciate it greatly if the children don't see anything. Aerial's are in the glove compartment."

We don't need another Kansas on our hands. She didn't say the words, but the message was clear.

Eliot nodded, reaching into the glove compartment for the file folder and flipping immediately to the map. "What're we gonna find when we get there?"

"The power's been cut to the property already, though we suspect they've got their own generators somewhere inside. By the time you land- I'm jumping off at Fort Hood- the sky will be 7.5 and 7.8 on the Bortle scale, so at least you should have a fair amount of cover. The house is sitting on a distressingly flat plain."
Eliot flipped through the printouts. "How many windows and doors?"

"Two doors, four windows, plans are in the folder, but that's not the issue. The house is sitting on top of a half-finished fallout shelter. When the cold war ended, construction was halted and the bunker filled in, but that was a long time ago. There's every reason to believe that the tunnels have been reopened."

"Does Parker have the plans yet?"

"Excuse me?" Miranda's glance was a warning. Agents were never to use names in the field, and Eliot knew better.

"587. She seen this?"

"She's got the originals." She pauses for a beat, airing her censure. "And if you're very lucky, she might have some ideas already. If not, you've got a half hour flight to figure it out."
Chapter 3

Tues., March 11, 2014 23:07 CDT (GMT-5)

587 and 324- no, he could call them Parker and Spencer in his head, at least- had shut their phones off when they'd moved in on the bunker at 23:10. Though both were still on comms- Alec could just make out the sounds of their breathing- there was little to hear. It was too dark for visual, and filtering what limited satellite imagery there was for night vision would create a dangerous lag. Alec was having to make do with straight up thermal imaging instead.

Spencer was approaching from the south, heading towards the back of the compound, not so blatantly obvious to be immediately recognized as the distraction he was. It was a risky move, since it meant that at the moment they needed to be making Spencer, Parker would be slipping into the tunnel just thirty yards behind him with nothing more than shaggy grass and the occasional rock for cover.

The boldness was serving them well, however. Thermal imaging showed six people inside, taking up positions near the windows, obviously focused on Spencer. Two of them broke off almost immediately, moving to a room on the north side of the building, probably to keep an eye on the road. Parker got in without a hitch, and Alec finally allowed himself a sigh of relief, though he wasn't kidding himself. They might've had only two-thirds of the eyes on them, but that was still far too many. And one of them was burning hot.

The children's heat signatures weren't registering, not with as far underground as they were. Parker was going in blind.

"Okay, 587. We've got six heat signatures up top, which according to my intel means there should be two more down below deck. Seen any signs of 'em?"

Even with the bone conduction mics, Parker's voice was a whisper. "They're in the room with the kids. We need to draw them out."

"Okay. Hold on and wait for backup," Alec advised, crossing his fingers that she'd actually listen, and turned his attention back to the impending fight he could actually see.

A side effect of electronic bioenhancements was that metal tended to act as a heat sink, in order to keep the charge core from overheating and frying the components. In Spencer's case, it meant that his arm glowed brighter than the rest of him on thermal. The massive energy readings coming from the southeast corner of the complex meant Spencer wasn't the only Big Wheel enhanced supersoldier on site.

"324? You're up. Watch out- looks like you're not the only one in the game running some advanced tech." He was already zoomed in on the interior of the compound as much as he could be, but there was no mistaking the massive energy readings inside. On the screen, it looked like someone running in a circle, or a video game character trapped in the corner. But it was fading, slightly; the person it belonged to was running down the stairs. "Think the one comin' out to greet you might be running the full suite."

"I'm on it," came the terse reply. Alec watched as Eliot's heat signature began to streak across the yard, through the doorway and into the compound, immediately engaging with the enemy.

Miranda's voice came on the line with a click, the sound of engines in the background. "I've got a
green light at Fort Hood in case of any surprises, and Aleph, you've got key control. Standard protocol applies."

"Right on," Alec said, tapping the code into the keyboard to access Fort Hood's command system. With just three keystrokes, he could launch an airstrike. The power, as always was a little dizzying, and a lot terrifying.

Three taps and he could rain hell down on everyone, Parker, Spencer, and children included.

"Ground backup will be there inside three minutes," Miranda was saying. "Tell me what else we need."

"Nothing, yet," Alec swallowed, wondering if he was going to be sick. "They've just moved in."

"Standing by," Miranda said, leaving Alec to watch the standoff in the yard uninterrupted.

"324, you're going to want to consider switching to-" Alec fell mute as on screen, Spencer's metal arm glowed brighter, the electrical charge building up to a fever pitch in preparation for attack. Though he couldn't see it on the thermal, Alec knew Spencer's specs by heart, knew that hair-thin wires were about to shoot out of the detachable housing on the back of Spencer's hand, if they hadn't already.

Spencer's opponent's image was building up a similar charge, much hotter, and Alec let out a warning shout that proved unnecessary as Spencer's core discharged suddenly. The answering flash in the enemy's system told Alec all he needed to know. The shock hadn't blown out the enemy's enhancements, but it had been more than enough to stop his heart.

Alec withdrew his hand from the button that would scramble the jets from Fort Hood and rubbed a hand over his face. Spencer's enhancements were an older model, and didn't allow for that particular tactic to be used more than once without resetting. Spencer had been just that much faster than the other guy; that was the only reason this operation hadn't gone completely balls up. But they weren't out of the woods yet. They still had at least five others to subdue. Seven, if Parker hadn't taken care of things down below.

"587?"

No response, not even a whisper. No telling whether that was good or bad. Up top, the shock Spencer had administered had massively depleted his power supply. He was still moving, taking momentary cover along the southern wall to unplug the spent wire cartridge from its housing.

Or maybe he was just clicking the safety off.

Alec barely heard the small cracks of Spencer's silenced gunfire through the comms. The return fire, coming from inside the house, was deafeningly loud by comparison, close enough that the part of Alec's brain not watching the comms feed began running numbers on the alloys in Eliot's arm, as if the robotic components were an entire suit of armor.

Another body stopped moving on the screen; it's heat signature would bear out what happened soon enough. The two that had come from the front to assist were pulling back, though, retreating into the center of the house, and Alec knew what this was.

"587, they're heading down," he announced, as much for Miranda's benefit as Parker or Spencer's. "And coming your way. 324, you're-"

Spencer was already moving in. His cochlear implants had been removed years ago, when the
internal regulators had failed. A whisper being amplified enough to hear across a crowded street was useful. A gunshot at close range, amplified to the same degree, was dangerous. Spencer's ocular modifications, however, were still functional. He could read a reflection off a reflection off a drop of water ten feet away.

He hadn't needed to wait for Alec's all clear, he'd just swung in- through the window, apparently- and began clearing rooms as he followed the others towards the door in the middle of the house.

"587, report your location."

"We're back in the main tunnel, should be halfway back to the entrance. Kids are fine."

"You've got-"

"Company, I know. Not so much with the stealth, these guys."

"Closet floor," Spencer confirmed the entrance to the tunnel. "I'm going down."

"I'm not getting any isolated heat signatures, they're too far down," Alec warned. Spencer had already descended. "587, prepare for crossfire."

"Hang on, I'm just-" She broke off for a moment; Alec could hear the sound of something heavy being moved. "Okay. Kids are stashed off the main tunnel, I'm going back to heading them off."

"What's going on?"

"What's going on, is that you need to stop talking," Spencer's voice sounded strained. He was probably in the middle of punching somebody.

"You need to keep talking, both of you. Backup's moving in from either end up top, ready to gas the lines if we need to, so Parker, I hope you remembered your mask."

"Mustard? Nerve? What is it this time?"

"Knockout gas," Alec frowned in affronted surprise; Miranda's annoyed hiss told him she'd heard it, too. "Shit, Parker, who do you think we- there are kids down there."

"Stop worrying," she chided, and a scuffling noise could be heard over the line as her breathing sped up. A series of crashes and grunts could be heard, followed by a sharp cracking sound that probably didn't really echo as much as it did in Alec's head.

The ensuing silence was just long enough to be worrying.

"All clear," Spencer reported, not even sounding out of breath, but Alec hadn't heard anything at all coming over his comms line. "That's the last of them. We've cleared the area, and Parker's gone in to round up the kids again. They're pretty freaked out."

"Dangerous?"

"No," Parker growled. "Just scared."

"All right. 324? Hang back a bit, keep their six, but keep out of sight." Hearing his own words, Alec winced. Real smooth.

"Don't scare the traumatized children." If Spencer was offended, he wasn't letting on. "Got it."
"Miranda, you getting all this?"

"Yes I am. And the General will be glad to hear it." Her tone was light; though Sophie had a sense of humor, this was as close to joking as Miranda was capable of getting. The general who'd had to hand over full control of Fort Hood's operations, and who was undoubtedly fuming in resentment right next to her, probably wasn't laughing at all.

At the compound, Parker was talking to the kids, not cooing or sounding particularly soothing, just level. She wasn't making them any promises, wasn't telling them that everything was going to be all right. There were no signs of motherly instinct- Alec hadn't actually expected there to be- but going on what little he had, here, he had to wonder about the expressions on the kids's faces as she laid out what was happening and what needed to happen in a near monotone.

Still, he didn't miss the fact that she was omitting all mention of the dead bodies up the stairs and down the hall. But that was Spencer's department.

"Looks like they're New Guard, but Big Wheel through and through." There was just enough hitch in his voice to make it sound like he was moving something heavy. "Got the last of them behind the stairs, though." Keeping his voice low, he still sounded surprised Alec. "They're moving out. No problem."

"Hey Aleph," Parker's voice was a whisper. "You're going to need to follow my lead on this one. Don't disappoint me."

"What's that?"

"Tell the convoy that we're stopping for ice cream."

Alec opened up a browser, searched the area for an ice cream parlor that was open this late. It was surreal, looking up something so mundane.

"There's an all night grocery store in Laredo." This soon after the extraction, though, they couldn't afford the exposure. If Big Wheel had allies in town, there was no sense giving them the chance to catch up. "I'll send someone over, have them deliver it to the safehouse."

"Then you'd better get sprinkles, too."
Pulling his gloves on, Eliot hung back as Parker led the five children out to the waiting medics. From there, they'd pile into the van and head out. Finding the keys in the ignition already, Eliot sat back to wait. He could just make out the tail lights of the truck convoy up on the quarter section road, waiting as non-invasively as possible.

They hadn't needed the backup yet; it didn't mean they wouldn't.

There was another truck, military drab with its lights off, pulled around the front of the house. They were moving out the bodies, pulling them for examination, Eliot knew, to get what they could out of what was left of them.

Staring out through the windshield, he half-listened to Aleph talk with Sophie and whatever other experts they'd brought in to discuss the next steps. Foster care. Therapy. Deprogramming that, thankfully, was more figurative than literal this time. The five kids they'd extracted were too young, still, to have received any of the more substantial upgrades. Odds were, Eliot told himself, they'd be okay.

He didn't know if he was lying, but there were a hundred different ways this could've gone worse, could've turned into another Kansas.

Miranda Zero had conferenced in half the state's immigration officials on the call, since apparently some jackass on the line was deciding that right now was the best time to raise questions regarding citizenship status. Most of the the kids were barely more than toddlers. In another life, they might've been just starting preschool or kindergarten.

Another few hours or so, and they'd probably never see their own siblings again. He didn't like thinking about it, but nobody was giving him orders not to.

It took half an hour for the Parker to herd the reluctant kids anywhere near the van. All seemed healthy, if traumatized, though Eliot was trying not to look too closely. Once Parker won over the eldest- the girl looked to be five, maybe six at the most- the rest followed suit easily enough. Parker clambered in after them.

"No visible signs of augmentation," Parker muttered under her breath, only partially for Eliot's benefit, as he glanced back over the driver's seat.

"Good, that's good. We lucked out. Nice work, everyone," Miranda, still tuned into their frequency, sounded less relieved than usual. Eliot wondered what that meant, but she was, for once, quick to explain. "You're clear to move out. Unfortunately, I've just been informed of another extinction grade crisis, already in progress, so I'm boarding a flight for Zhoushan within the hour. Aleph will debrief you remotely once you arrive at the safe-house. Thank you, both, for all you've done tonight. Zero out."

She clicked off the line, and a moment later, Aleph's voice took her place.

"All right, guys. You're third in the convoy, and trucks four and five are taking your six to make sure you don't get your asses lost. Once the kids are settled, ping me. I'll send the chopper 'round to pick you guys up."
"Sounds good," Eliot replied.

"All right. I'm switching you over to automatic tracking and going off comms, so use the phones if you need anything."

"Will do. 324 and 587 out." Eliot switched his comms unit off and dug it out of his ear, relieved to finally be free of the faint thin screech of interference that always rang out in the background, thanks to the leftover components of his cochlear implant. As he merged into place on the convoy, he toyed with the idea of turning the truck’s radio on, if only to drown out the occasional whimpers drifting up from the back seat.

If he listened too carefully to them, he might glance back in the rearview. Might catch the eye of one of the kids. Might be reminded just a little too much of his brothers and sisters, who didn't exist anymore.

It was safer to keep the radio off. Hopefully they'd all be asleep, soon.

For the first hour or so, he drove in near silence, with only the sound of the engine offering up any sort of distraction.

When eventually the last of the crying died out, Parker leaned up from the back seat, a frown creasing her features. It was dangerous, this expression; she'd been wearing it the first op they pulled together, before she'd gotten used to finding metal where his arm should be, and that look had been all the warning he'd gotten before the questions had started.

"The medics think they're all related, like even before they came here." She kept her voice down, but Eliot heard every inflection. In the rearview, he allowed himself to notice, for the first time, that with their dark straight hair and wide faces, they bore more physical resemblance to one another than random selection would've allowed. "They're going to have to run tests to be sure, but..."

Eliot nodded, resisting the sudden urge to grab his phone and dial the GF hub. It could wait until the debrief. No need to risk waking the kids, and it was likely that Aleph was already on it, had probably already heard it directly from the medics.

But if Parker was going where he thought she was with this, it meant that Big Wheel had moved on from adopting kids who'd slipped through the foster care system's cracks to actually breeding them.

"Shit." One of the soldiers he'd taken out down in the stairwell had been a woman. Maybe she'd actually been their mother- their real mother. The fact that she'd been shooting at him didn't change that, but.. Eliot had to believe that no mother, no matter how fucked in the head, would allow her children to be raised like this. He also had to know, reality being what it was, that it could happen.

"Kids are supposed to be resilient," Parker speculated. "Right?"

"Yeah," Eliot shrugged, reluctant to state anything too firmly just now. "And these ones, they're really young. They'll adapt."

"Like you did?"

The question was irksome, not just because of her ham-fisted attempt to make this personal, but because she seemed to be looking for confirmation that her assumptions were right.

"I'm somewhere in my thirties- don't even know where- and I'm at my best when I'm moving in for the kill. I've had enough tech in me that when I enlisted, my paperwork was held up for two weeks while a panel of pencil-pushers debated if I was more man than machine. Hundreds of hours of surgery
and therapy later, I'm just barely normal enough to be having this sort of conversation. Yeah. I've adapted beautifully.

Parker was waiting for something more than that from him, though. Reassurance, maybe. He sighed, and decided to be charitable. "Like we both did, okay?"

She frowned at him through the rearview, her discomfort shifting towards confusion. She said nothing more, merely shifted back into her seat. Anyone else would've woken at least three of the kids just by moving. Hours of miles went by, and whenever he glanced in the rearview, he found her staring out the window, lost in thought.

He'd just turned off the highway and was heading down the frontage road when Parker, realizing that they were drawing near, leaned forward again.

"You think Hardison's like us?"

"Who?"

"Hardison. Aleph," she said, as if surprised that he hadn't known who she was talking about. As if everyone went around bandying the names of other agents so cavalierly.

"You already know more about him than I do," Eliot pointed out irritably, trying to compile what he knew about the man. It wasn't much. He was smart. Had a sense of humor in situations where absolutely none was called for, and the few times they'd spoken over the line, he'd been one of only a few people on the planet who'd talked to him as if he wasn't a decommissioned war machine. Eliot didn't even know how tall the guy was, but he'd caught himself trying to catalogue his features over a cell phone screen, once. Dark skin and darker, expressive eyes. Mouth that looked more used to smiling than not.

He wasn't even sure if he'd recognize the guy if he passed him on the street, but he'd caught himself scanning for him more often than he'd ever admit.

"Yeah, but..." Parker broke off. "I know how I got here, and how you got here, but I still don't know about why he does what he does."

"Yeah, but. D'you know any of the others we've worked with? You know Miranda's deal?"

"Hmm," Parker nodded, recognition stealing across her face quickly before she sealed herself off again. Whatever it was that she'd been after, she'd either decided against it or gotten what she'd wanted. Easing back into her seat again, she was apparently considering the matter closed.

Even if it rankled, if Eliot later wound up staring at the phone in his hand while wondering what it was that he'd missed out on, it wouldn't matter. Parker was weird. Regardless of what she knew about Miranda or Aleph- Hardison, apparently- Eliot knew that much about her.

Everything else was need to know, and he simply didn't. Merely wanting to didn't change anything.
June, 2011

He'd only been in Brooklyn for about three weeks when it happened. More specifically, he'd been on his way to Barcade down on Union Avenue to meet Sheila Carruthers for drinks, Tetris, and whatever came next.

That had been the last thing Alec remembered before finding himself coming to his senses on a rooftop in the middle of the night, handfuls of wire and broken radio pieces scattered all around him. He'd paced the roof for a while, trying to get his bearings, trying not to panic, and trying to figure out why on the rooftop across the street, there were three other people doing the same as him.

Eventually, the shock had worn enough for him to start making his way shakily down the fire escape. The lights from the ambulances and police cars had lit his way.

He'd been spotted before even hitting the street, by two policemen who'd shuffled him off towards the crowd of people standing on the sidewalk in front of a closed coffee shop that, try as he might, he hadn't been able to recognize. There'd been about three dozen people there, mostly standing around with shocked expressions and blood on their faces.

Alec was shocked to discover, courtesy of the coffee shop's darkened window, that his own face was smeared with blood, too.

Asking around had quickly proven futile. Nobody'd known how they'd gotten there, or what had happened. The cops cordoning off the area hadn't been able to explain anything, and the EMT's had been merely passed alcohol wipes out through the frightened, amnesiac crowd.

It hadn't occur to Alec until later, once the blood had been cleaned off, the rioting had been averted, and he'd been sent on his way, that he'd stood Sheila up. But once he'd glanced at his phone to find the series of increasingly irritated text messages from her, he'd felt no pressing impetus to contact her. He'd only called to apologize, afterwards, because his Nana had raised him right, but the action had felt perfunctory. He'd barely even tried to explain himself.

Not that he would've been able to. Apparently, waking up with bleeding eyes on a rooftop in the middle of some hackneyed electronics project brought with it one unexpected side effect, though it took nearly a month before he'd really started to face it head on.

He'd never noticed men before- not from some deep seated fear, or anything, he just hadn't noticed them- until a few hours after waking up on that rooftop. There'd been an EMT that had nice eyes, but he'd barely noted it at the time. A fluke, that was all. And there'd been the guy behind the counter at Mister Video who'd been really fun to talk to, but Alec had been convincing himself he was just on some weird retro kick- that the warm feeling in his chest was due to War Games than anything else. Then there'd been drinks with Nightwing- real name Josh- at the comics convention. It hadn't even been intentional the first night, just passing the time with a guy who'd been stood up. Alec hadn't really intended to make plans for the second night of the con, but he'd been damned if he was going to be the second person to leave Josh hanging. It wasn't until they were exchanging numbers at the end of the night that he'd recognized the pattern that had started to emerge.

Alec Hardison, suddenly and without explanation, was bisexual.

It had seemed like the most random of circumstances, even after the news got out that the Global
Frequency- the shadow organization that was becoming everyone's favorite conspiracy theory- had managed to save the city from some terrible fate. There'd been thousands of posts, comments, blog entries, tweets, and memes about the "Bloody-Eyed Bisexuals of Brooklyn," but facts had been hard to come by. Nobody'd had a clue.

But Alec had been hacking for years. He'd find it, no problem.

He'd burrowed into the police reports first. Then he'd gone deeper, down through redactions and retractions and amendments until there'd been nothing more to scrape open. The 911 dispatch call log was similarly useless- there'd just been a big hole, that night, where seven hours of calls should've been coming in. Drunks and shootings and heart attacks and muggings, the usual detritus of a night in NYC, all of these were missing.

Officially, dispatch had merely gone silent for seven hours. If that had truly been the case, however, there would've been no need for anyone to go in and zero out the archive drives. There'd been nothing left. One or two missing calls would've been less telling. The fact that there were none meant that dispatch must've been lighting up like Christmas. Besides, all those cop cars had to have come from somewhere.

On the whole, though, the police department had been wiped clean.

He'd reluctantly moved on to do some social hacking, asking around the neighborhood. After several hours, he'd found a lot of talk- and gotten two phone numbers- but nothing resembling an answer. It wasn't until he'd gone to grab some coffee and scammed wifi in an attempt to lick his wounds that he'd found the hook into the entire thing.

The coffee shop's wireless had been the first one to come up when he'd opened his laptop. There'd been nearly a dozen more, though, that were locked down, and he'd finally realized what he should've been doing in the first place.

He'd started tying ISPs to computers to users, in hopes that someone in the neighborhood would've thought to pop online to mention the psychotic whatever it was that had gone down while it actually had been going down. What he found instead, though, third network down, was a truly insane amount of activity during the hours he was missing. Someone had doing been some loud-ass hacking. The data transfer rate had been off the charts. It looked like they'd managed to access all the bandwidth for the surrounding county, over the course of an hour, and then gone silent.

It had taken him three days to backtrack his way in, and he wouldn't have found it at all were it not for the fact that a protocol had been written to relay code directly through the police scanners. Whatever they'd been doing, they'd set it up for broadcast.

The emergency address system was digital, but it wasn't a server, wasn't meant to hang on to information the way the dispatch calls were. It also wasn't meant to be used the way it had been. Though the hacker had erased all of their activity, they'd left behind changes in the operating system that hadn't yet been undone.

Reverse engineering the hack had proved impossible. He'd gone at it from every angle imaginable, but all he'd come up with was an insane jumble of code that looked nothing like anything he'd ever seen before. It didn't even look like junk- there'd been a logic to it that had left him rubbing at his eyes at four in the morning, trying to focus on the screen.

His hand had come away damp and red.

For several minutes, he'd just stared at the blood, too terrified to move. His head had been filled with
half-considered thoughts of *embolism* and *strokes* and *fatalities*. It had taken hours to convince himself he wasn't dying. Just in case, though, he needed to get word out. Maybe someone else could find the answers. Or maybe he could be a cautionary tale, and stop them from looking. Copying what he'd found, he'd laid out the steps he'd taken so far, not really certain how to explain why he was asking.

He hadn't been sure that posting it on the forum at all was a good idea, but hadn't been able to explain why not, even to himself. Forcing himself to leave it for later, he'd stood up, headed into the bathroom to get the shower heated up, needing to finally wash the blood from his face. He'd dashed back to his screens a few moments later, just long enough type one final line, and posting it before he had the chance to stop himself.

*I've been staring at this until my eyes bled. Literally.*

Two hours later, there'd been a knock on the door, and Miranda Zero had been frowning on the other side of it.
Most days, Alec woke up to a ringing phone, cursing the day that he'd first opened his door to find Miranda Zero waiting to give him an offer he really probably should've refused. Today was no different.

He slammed his phone to his ear as he sat up, silencing it on the first ring. "How bad is it?" His brain was warming up, trying to decide whether it was preparing for a new disaster, or merely some unforeseen fallout from the one they thought they'd taken care of a few hours ago. He wasn't yet firing on all cylinders though, if the angry letter he was still mentally composing to scientists in dimensions unknown was anything to go by.

...and if you'd please stop trying to open rifts in space and time, the stability of our dimension would appreciate it. Fuckers.

"It's not good," Miranda said. "We've got reports of a cyborg attacking civilians at a secure nuclear location just outside Red Wing, Minnesota."

"What?"

It was a new crisis, then, and not the hole in space-time. At least he wouldn't have to deal with Dr. Reinhold mouth-breathing all over the line on this one. Hopefully.

By the time he managed to wrench his eyes open, he was already up and moving towards the hub. His eyes were still too filled with sleep to make sense of the alerts that were coming online, but the clock on the wall glowed green and sharp. If going to bed only five hours ago hadn't been bad enough, the fact that he'd been up for the previous forty-six wasn't making it any easier.

"The Prairie Island Plant?" Tapping into the facilities security system only took eight keystrokes and a password that he'd had for years, now. What he found, though, was startling. Red alerts across all sectors; emergency response was already on their way. "Hell, the National Guard's already there."

"If he manages to gain access- which he probably will, given his enhancements and training- we're going to have a full-scale meltdown on our hands." If Miranda had missed any sleep- which she probably had- she wasn't letting on. "I'm uploading the security photos right now. You're going to want to-"

"Don't need 'em," Alec smirked. Six hours ago, he'd been wrangling a dozen physicists, trying to get them to agree on the best way to close a rift that was opening up from another fucking dimension. He'd earned the right to be contrary. "I've got full access to their system. Dialing into the feed in real time. Anyway, Prairie Island's not too far from 324, and this is totally his thing. I'll call him-"

"Aleph, you're not listening. 324 isn't our solution, this time, he's our problem."

"What?" Alec shook his head. This wasn't making any sense. "I don't get it. Why-"

"We don't know. We just know that he needs to be stopped before he drops any more bodies."

That gave Alec pause. What? "More?"

"A driver and two guards. Unconscious, not dead, but still. It's not heartening."
"All right." He wanted to protest, wanted to rail against this and point out how insane it was- they'd vetted Spencer seventeen ways from Sunday and he'd never been a liability in the field, let alone whatever this was. It had to be a mistake.

But it wouldn't've be the most insane thing to ever have happened to one of their agents. He got to work instead. The sooner Alec got on it, the sooner they'd figure out what was actually happening.

"What do we need?"

"587's got a rapport with him, and I can't believe I just said that out loud. She'll be invaluable, but-"

"She needs backup," he agreed.

"Exactly. Low profile, too. There are already two news vans heading our way."

Alec pulled up the GF roster and set up his search parameters. After Eliot, 220 was their best hitter, but Israel was an awfully long way away when looking at a potential killing spree topped with a nuclear meltdown, and she'd been called in three times in the past two weeks. Quinn, however, hadn't seen action in months, and it looked like he was currently in Milwaukee. "What about 735?"

"All right. I'll contact him, you contact Parker, then get them on flights. I want the two hitting the ground as soon as humanly possible."

"I'm on it," he said, but it sounded like she'd already hung up. He dialed Parker's number, half expecting it to ring three feet behind him, even though it had only happened that one time last August. When when she picked up, however, her voice was nearly lost in the wind. If she was hanging off the edge of another skyscraper, he didn't want to know.

"Parker? Hey. Got a problem, girl. Gonna need your expertise."

"What's up?"

"It's, ah. 324." It was easier not to use his name. "He's gone off the reservation."

"Oh," Parker said. "Oh."
Chapter 7

Thurs., April 10, 2014 19:22 CDT (GMT-5)

Eliot never dreamed much; dreams were hard to come by when one only slept an hour or two a night. But if he'd had nightmares, they would've been this. Exactly this.

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He was in the middle of making dinner when the first flash tore through him, the spasm coming on so suddenly that he flung the frying pan across the room before collapsing to the floor himself. It didn't help; the pain merely sorted itself into a signal that he could recognize.

His Operational Directive Monitor was misfiring, angrily.

When the doctors had started downgrading his tech after he'd left the service, they'd sworn that this wouldn't happen- that it couldn't. They'd assured him that they'd taken measures to deactivate the ODM permanently, and that there would be no further risk of anyone being able to upload a command sequence ever again. It had taken him years, afterwards, to even half believe them.

They'd promised.

But something was going very, very wrong. He needed to call Dr. Laroque; needed his cell phone, up on the counter. He got shakily to his feet, and found that the aftershocks were abating as quickly as they'd come on. For a moment, he felt a wild spike of hope; it was just a malfunction, nobody was giving him orders. He wasn't back there. Kansas wasn't coming back up to claw at him. Big Wheel wasn't dragging him back.

It was just a misfire. Some weird activity in his brain that had taken him by surprise. Not heartening enough, though, to not call Laroque.

Taking a breath as he reached for his phone, however, he felt the air tear from his lungs as another jolt hit. He backed experimentally away from the counter, and it wasn't until he reached the kitchen's doorway that the burning subsided.

It was several moments before he was able to catch his breath enough that he could think about anything else. Stepping back towards the counter, though, he realized that for all the screaming red agony he was still shaking off, he'd yet to feel anything remotely like fear.

Because as he reached for the phone, the pain increased again- slowly this time, in a warning wave.

Fuck.

He didn't want to. He really didn't want to, but-

His movements were hesitant as he brought his hand up to his pocket. The moment his fingers brushed against the plastic of his GF phone brought him back down to his knees.

Lying on the floor, in between labored breaths, he realized that he should've known what this was from the start. Calling for help was an operational directive failure. The ODM was somehow functioning again, preventing him from breaking orders he'd never been given, and the shocks were the cost of disobedience.
This was never supposed to happen.

*You never really believed that, did you?*

He curled into himself, focused on the cold water he'd spilled-*for the pasta,* he realized, but movement was at a premium, now. It was easier to focus on the way it soaked into the cuff of his sleeve than it was to move away.

But staying still wasn't going to be an option for long. The pain had faded, but it hadn't gone. It was just waiting for him to fuck up again.

Experimentally, he pushed himself up off the floor, moving slowly, as if the ODM wasn't in his head cataloguing every move before he made it. It spiked when he considered going for his phone again, abated as he rose shakily to his feet.

The burning eased back further, just enough to let him breathe, when he turned his eyes to the front door.

It dropped down another notch when he stepped towards it, settling into a series of mild sparks in his head; electronic signals firing to receptors that had been removed years ago, and tingling aches twinging along wires that could blaze again, at any moment.

He couldn't go outside like this. There were people out there, and if his tech was malfunctioning- The flash, this time, was blinding.

He had his orders. Whatever they were.

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Climbing in and starting his truck seemed to fit with the parameters the ODM was running, and if Eliot was very lucky, driving might just buy enough time to think of a plan. He'd only tried his to reach for his personal phones; if they hadn't been programmed into the ODM's parameter set, there was a chance that a pay phone might not trigger the monitor.

As he made his way down the road, heading for the gas station a mile and a half down the highway, he found himself warily breathing easier again.

Maybe the whole thing had just been a fluke.

Maybe he had room to hope.

As he began turning into the lot, however, his body spasmed again, his right foot slamming against the gas as he swerved around an SUV and narrowly avoided crashing into the last fueling station in the row. Panic spiking as he caught sight of the woman filling the SUV’s gas tank, he swung around the lot and floored it back out onto the road. The burning- it was radiating down his neck and into his limbs, magnified by the wiring the doctors hadn't been able to remove- began to ease back into something manageable.

He couldn't feel his left hand- hadn't really felt anything with it since he'd woken up at the compound with metal instead of flesh and blood- but his right hand was clenched so tightly on the steering wheel that he wasn't sure he'd be able to release it.

Fighting to keep himself from blasting the speed limit as, tried to gain distance. He turned on the headlights as a much-belated afterthought; the last thing he needed were cops coming after him.
It was another mile or so before realization struck.

This was what he was supposed to be doing. These were his orders.

Already he was heading eastward, passing out of Minneapolis. With the highway grinding under his wheels, he began scanning the exit signs, hoping for an idea to occur to him. A route, a destination, anything. County Road 77 sparked red behind his right eye. So did Route 5. By the time he made it to the sign for 35E he'd established the pattern. These routes were directive failures, much like reaching for the phone had been.

He'd been about twelve when Big Wheel had taken his eyes and given him new ones. Not only had he been able to zoom in on a dime form an eighth of a mile away, his parents- no, his commanders- could transmit their orders via the optical feed. When he'd woken up from the installation surgery, he'd been depressed for days. Even having his arm replaced two years later hadn't hit him as hard; he'd avoided looking at himself in the mirror whenever possible, though he'd had to admit, apart from the hairline scarring on his face, the implants looked completely human. They just hadn't looked like his eyes, which had been brown the week before. After the installation, they'd been blue, too blue. They'd been the exact make and model as the ones his older siblings had, and they'd glowed in the dark.

He'd been scared of his reflection for a week, but he'd gotten over it. At least up until he'd started giving the other kids in the group home nightmares just from looking at him.

He'd been twenty five when his stint with the Army had been coming to an end. Having no further use for his enhancements, and realizing that the aches and pains he'd been complaining about were actually symptoms of hardware that hadn't been designed to grow with him, they'd begun the process of downgrading them to an acceptable level for civilian life. Like his arm, and any of the tech they hadn't yet figured out how to get to, removing his eyes completely hadn't been an option.

His eyes were still blue, but the chip responsible for converting operational directive commands into a visual signal had been comparatively easy to get to, so they'd removed it. For the first time in years, Eliot had been able to look at the world without a statistical rundown of how it might kill him flashing in front of him. Though there'd been another half-dozen doctor's appointments awaiting him, he'd never felt so amazingly free as he had that first afternoon.

The doctors hadn't, however, managed to disconnect the ODM hardware itself; it had been too deeply buried in his brain. With nobody there to enter commands, there was no reason to risk the surgery. Apart from keeping Dr Laroque apprised of any strange sensations during his monthly appointments, any signs of breakdown or deterioration, there was nothing to be done for it. No reason to worry.

Until now. Right now, Eliot was extremely fucking worried.

The ODM was allowing him to consider turning south onto 55 without frying him from the inside out. There were no flashes behind his eyes, no stinging shocks screaming against his nerves.

He might not have had his orders, but he was managing, for now at least, to obey them.

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Thurs., April 10, 2014 20:59 CDT (GMT-5)

He wasn't sure if the guards were still breathing. Even contemplating going back to check was enough to set off another round of shocks. The door up ahead, though, that was safe.
He'd driven almost aimlessly, literally following the least painful path he could find until the Prairie Island plant was visible in the distance. He'd tried passing it by, but honestly he'd been expecting the shocks when they'd hit; that was probably the only reason he hadn't wound up driving into the ditch. Pulling into the visitor lot, well away from the main facility, he'd killed the lights and parked the truck.

He'd reached into the glove box for one of the wire spool cartridges Zero'd started procuring for him once he'd joined up with the GF; doing so had felt like an afterthought, but by that point, he couldn't have sworn it wasn't his own idea. For all he knew, the ODM could've been sending his brain instructions that he'd been too blinded by pain to notice.

In between one breath and the next, he'd known what he was meant to do. Mostly. He just hadn't figured a way around it yet.

Getting inside, though, that had been a given. The automatic gun turrets were as obviously placed as they could've been. Under normal circumstances, a rock from the edge of the parking lot wouldn't be any match against them, but Eliot's aim had been good before Big Wheel had given him an arm that made Major League pitchers look like children playing catch.

The key cards had been easily obtained; the manually entered door codes only slightly less so. The ODM didn't seem concerned with a silent entry; he'd been good at it once, but there hadn't been a need to keep up with his training when the GF sent people like Parker out onto ops alongside him. Within thirty seconds of clearing the side entrance, klaxons had started going off all over the building.

Subduing an enemy lightly enough that they were still capable of speech was harder than killing him, and right now, with the alarms echoing off every flat surface in the building, wasn't the time to puzzle over the fact that the ODM was allowing the witnesses to be left still breathing.

Then again, retinal scanners worked just as easily on the unconscious as they did on anyone else.

This far into the complex, there were only two pathways worth considering. R&D was up on the second floor, and the tunnel out to the reactor was two levels down.

He found himself holding his breath, daring to hope that maybe- just maybe, he was here for a basic smash and grab of some weird new technology.

He hoped for the shock to come as he dodged, experimentally, down the stairs.

None came.

Backing up the stairs, even one step, was enough to jolt him into stumbling- not stealing anything from R&D, then- and the second wave of jackbooted footsteps was drawing near.

Maybe it would be better to let them catch him.

The ODM's response was to flay him from the inside out; the only reason he didn't collapse was that movement was entirely impossible, but only for a moment.

Being a sitting target, as far as the ODM was concerned, was no better than surrendering. As the doorway at the top of the stairs opened- he could hear three, maybe four more guards over the alarms- Eliot ran.

The key card got him through one more door with just enough time to barricade himself in, and then he was faced with two card readers and another retinal scanner. Ignoring the activity from the other
side, the thought occurred to him that this was Parker's kind of thing, that she'd have some insane trick up her sleeve to have it opened already.

If Parker were here right now, though, she'd probably be targeting him. He struck at the fixture angrily as the door behind him was finally kicked in.

If he was lucky, one or two of the four would have what he needed. He turned around to face the rapidly filling doorway and found nothing but targets.

"Gentlemen," he said, shifting his stance, preparing to engage. "I'm awfully sorry about this."

Nobody was approaching; they, at least, no doubt had their orders organized by now, and subdue and contain had probably defaulted to exterminate by the time he'd passed through the first set of doors.

Careful not to shift his gaze away too quickly, he calculated the trajectory the wires would take. Though his core had been drained, somewhat, by the near-constant shocks from the ODM, there was more than enough left for an opening attack.

As for what came next, he'd figure it out.
Chapter 8

Friday, April 11, 2014 00:28 CDT (GMT-5)

Alec stared sightlessly at the computer monitor to his left, as if it was going to finally tell him something he could use, and reported what he’d heard over the dispatch feed. "Be advised, three more news crews are on their way to the party. Probably got notified the moment the alarms started going off. I'm on the traffic grid, slowing them down as much as possible, but there's only so much I can do from here without attracting even more attention."

"Bugger it all," Miranda's irritated eye roll was slightly delayed over the teleconference screen, because the National Guard apparently hadn't updated their communications infrastructure since 1993. "Do what you can, but don't give them any more story than they've already got."

Alec turned his attention downward, back to the live workstation he had open below, and willed what he was seeing to start making any sort of sense. Spencer hadn't ditched his phone, and though Miranda had ordered Alec not to try calling him until Parker and Quinn were in position, the GPS tracker was doing its job. By following the time-stamped trail it was transmitting and letting the predictive models do their work, sooner or later they'd manage to intersect Spencer's path. It was a little surprising that the chase had even gone on this long, but Spencer had been training to evade capture before most kids would've been learning how to drive.

And honestly, Alec was more troubled by the other reason they hadn't yet caught up to him. They hadn't been prepared for an interstate car chase, only a fight that, surprisingly, hadn't happened. There'd been no need to contain the scene, and the nuclear power experts he'd pulled from the roster were still on standby. As far as could be told, there wasn't actually anything for them to do.

Spencer had left Prairie Island over half an hour ago, after- and this was what Alec couldn't figure out- after seeming to activate every single security alarm on the first and second floor, and breaching outer containment. It wouldn't have taken much more than a password and a flip of a switch to turn Red Wing and the surrounding areas into a barren wasteland for the next few hundred years. And Spencer had the know-how to do it without anyone even knowing he'd been there.

But he hadn't done anything, really, beyond throwing a few punches. He'd gotten in. Made some noise. And then he'd just left.

Unfortunately, that wasn't enough of a reassurance for General Archer, the poor ruddy-faced bastard currently in the National Guard conference room trying to wrestle jurisdiction from Miranda. Alec hadn't been tracking most of their argument, knowing that Miranda would steer the game when it needed steering, but as Parker and Quinn gained distance on the stretch of highway that he'd cleared, he turned his attention back up to the debate.

"No, Ms. Zero, what we need to do is eradicate the threat immediately. If he we let him live long enough to make it to a populated area-"

Miranda wasn't the only one glaring back at the general, but Archer wasn't looking into the camera. "Hold up," Alec cut in, as what little sympathy he'd had for the man vanished in the space of a breath. "He's knocked a few guys out, and yeah, that ain't good, but killing him?"

"I'm not unaware of your organization's priorities, " Archer continued as if he hadn't been interrupted. "The fact that he's one of your own spells it out clearly enough."
"And what you need to understand," Miranda said smoothly, "is that we need to get an accurate picture of what's happening if we're going to be of any use. If we kill him, we won't get any of our questions answered. If we merely subdue him, we might just have a snowball's chance in hell at actually fixing the problem."

There was a weighty pause before the general mustered a response. Another GPS point popped up on the screen; Spencer had turned north onto Highway 62. Alec relayed the information to Quinn and Parker, watching their trackers jut off their paths, across what must've been several lanes of traffic, in order to catch the exit.

Over the comms, Quinn was cursing. "Seriously. Next time? I'm driving."

"There's not gonna be a next time if this grandma doesn't get her ass out of my way," Parker growled. Alec hoped he screeching tires he was hearing were only in his head.

Back on Miranda's channel, General Archer was still ranting. "...not the problem you should be concerned with. The lives of every living thing in the surrounding-"

"I know," Miranda's derisive tone cut him off sharply. "Which is why, once we've found him, we're prepared to exterminate him if there's no other option."

Alec was too surprised by her response to stop himself. "The hell we are!"

"Aleph," Miranda's tone was a warning.

Alec rolled his eyes. "Nuh-uh. We're not throwing anybody under a bus, here, you feel me? You've seen the uplinks. He infiltrated, yeah, but he didn't do anything. The entire reason we-"

"It's not plan A. But we must consider it, at least until we know that this isn't the extent of his plan." Miranda's voice dropped in frustration. "And Aleph, if your emotions are getting in the way of your judgement..."

The rage came up out of nowhere, and swallowing it down took a surprising amount of effort. He forced himself to replay her words in his head before responding, and wondered what she knew.

Probably everything, knowing her, or more than Alec himself did at the very least. The woman could deduce people's motivations from a gesture or a glance, read their intentions from the dilation in their pupils. It made her an amazing negotiator and a terrifying boss. The idea that Alec's judgement was impaired by the completely pointless crush he might have- kind of, sort of- been harboring, though, was infuriating. He'd never even met Spencer, not in person. The fact that he thought about him like he did, sometimes- and it was okay to admit it here, in the privacy of his own head, miles and a shitty internet connection away from Miranda's all-knowing gaze- wasn't any different than having a mild thing for the barista at the cafe on the corner. And just because talking with Spencer over a GF line in the middle of the operation made it just a little easier to get through the day's disaster? Didn't mean that he was fucking blind to what was actually happening, even when it looked like Spencer was the disaster.

An alert flashed on the screen. Spencer's GPS tracker was the same location twice in thirty seconds. It was as close to stopping as he'd come since they'd started tracing him, and at least he had a few seconds' reprieve before having to turn his attention back to Miranda. "587? 735? Be advised that 324's been holding at his present location for nearly a minute now. I'm sending you aerials of the surrounding area." He grabbed the five most recent satellite images and forwarded them to Quinn's phone, and switched channels again, going back to Miranda.
"My emotions, or whatever, they're not the issue," he stated, with all the calmness he could muster. Right now, he was *Aleph* instead of *Alec*, she was *Miranda* instead of *Sophie*, and they were talking about *324*, not *Eliot Spencer*. If they'd been on a closed channel, or sitting down at the cafe that she liked to frequent whenever she was actually within 500 miles of the hub, he might have explained how carefully he'd entertained all notions of the man, and enumerated the laundry list of reasons he'd had to doubt them. But this wasn't the time. "Look, 324's brain is what's important, here. And that brain has been studied, tested, and documented six ways to Sunday since his extraction from the Big Wheel compound."

"If what Ms. Zero's told me is correct, that happened a long time ago," Archer said. "Things can change."

Alec shook his head. "True, but ever since getting out of there, he's lived under a *microscope*, and that microscope's owned by half a dozen intelligence agencies about seven levels above your clearance level." He smirked into the camera, but it was clear from Miranda's expression that baiting the general wasn't the track she wanted him to take. "I'm seen his files, read all the doctor's reports, and every one of them is the same. He's assimilated. He's friendly. Hell, he's a *citizen*."

General Archer wasn't convinced. "He's also a bio-engeneered killing-"

"Bio-**enhanced,**" Alec corrected, because with this conversation going the way it was, the minor distinction felt *vital*, now, something he could hold onto. "He was born like any other kid- Big Wheel just installed the tech. It's not like they grew him in a lab."

"So what? You're saying we should trust him?"

*Yes,* Alec thought angrily, but for once, his mouth knew better. "Right now? That would be stupid." Archer's red face came dangerously close into splitting into a grin, so Alec hurried onward. "We don't know if he's doing this of his own volition, or if it's a tech malfunction that's causing it."

"His behavior *is* awfully organized for someone who's head-tech's gone on the fritz," Miranda offered, her voice strained with the effort of diplomacy. "If he'd been intent on doing any real harm, he would have. But this, it almost looks like he's fighting it."

"Or he's just testing us," Archer replied, but he looked like he was at least entertaining the thought. In any case, at least Miranda and Alec were moving onto something they could agree on.

"Believe me, the man doesn't need to test us. But going back to what you said, Miranda, about how it looks like he's fighting it. It's what I keep coming back to. When he got downgraded after leaving the Army, they were able to deactivate the hardware they couldn't manage to remove. They powered it down but in effect, they were only hiding it behind a password." He nodded over to the screen on his left, where the details of Spencer's downgrades were displayed, though it wasn't visible over the camera; Miranda and Archer wouldn't be able to see it. "And speaking from experience? Passwords can be hacked. And if *that's* the case..."

"Then we need to know who's responsible for doing so."

"Exactly."

Miranda nodded, exchanging a glance with Archer, who finally seemed to have either given in, or merely given up. After a moment, she turned back to the camera. "Aleph, I need you on a flight out here. Right now."

"What? No, there's-"
"You've said you can hack anything," Miranda smirked, but there wasn't much humor in her grin. "So I'm hoping you're ready to impress me. I'm going to need you to hack his brain."
Chapter 9

Fri., April 11, 2014 00:24 CDT (GMT-5)

Eliot drove, careful to think of nothing but the distance he was managing to gain. Heading north, he hadn't settled on a destination. Going home seemed suicidally foolish, but it would be easier to blend into the traffic closer to the Cities than it would out here in the outer suburbs. Concentrating on mileage wasn't much of a distraction, however, from the issue at hand.

What the fuck?

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Getting out of the plant had been easy—too damned easy, considering that he'd failed to achieve whatever objective he'd been assigned, and was still, somehow, miraculously, standing.

Back inside the facility, just a few scant feet from his apparent target, the guards had caught up to him. The fight had lasted only seconds, but when it had been over, he'd found himself several feet away from where he'd stood at the beginning, back in the corridor on the other side of the door they'd kicked in. He'd been back-stepping to avoid getting dragged down by the weight of the last unconscious guard, when it occurred to him that he was also, in effect, stepping back from his directed path.

Another step backwards, and no shocks had come.

The third step had been taken more deliberately. As consciously as possible, he'd concentrated his thoughts, focused on abandoning the mission.

And nothing at all had happened. The ODM had let him be. Somehow, it hadn't registered his behavior as an operational failure. It had let him go. Maybe it had finally broken. Maybe this entire mess had just been the death throes of obsolete tech in his head, wanting to take down his entire system with it.

He'd made it back to the stairwell, his pace increasing with what he'd hoped wasn't merely the illusion of freedom, though he hadn't been out of the woods yet. The ODM could've come back up online, but for the time being at least, his mind had been his own.

Limbs still aching, his first priority had been to get clear while the opportunity existed. He'd run back the way he came, taking out two more guards in the stairwell and avoiding the platoon that was priming for entry in the lobby, before slipping out through a fire escape. Staying close to the wall, he'd peered around the front of the building to find that further reinforcements- the National Guard, it looked like, were preparing to infiltrate and secure the building.

Another two minutes, and he would've had to deal with them.

There'd been a Jeep marked Prairie Island Security parked not too far from where he'd emerged, and true to form, it had proven to be the least secure vehicle on the lot. With all the activity being focused on the main entrance, it had been easy enough to slip inside, get it started, and make it the few hundred yards out to the parking. There'd been two more flashlight-armed guards walking through the lot, comparing license plates to a clipboard; they hadn't yet made it back to where he'd left his own truck, and hadn't noticed that Eliot wasn't one of their own until it had already been too late.

Clearing the main gate would've been impossible under the circumstances, not with the facility going
into lockdown, but the employee entrance down the road was too busy checking the IDs of the network-emblazoned news van that had been pulling in to give his truck a second glance. He'd swiped the stolen keycard through the reader, and waited, heart in his throat, for the gate to open.

The relief he'd felt when it did had been so overwhelming that he'd found himself laughing.

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He'd gained some ground, but Eliot wasn't getting his hopes up. He'd been caught on video, his truck had probably been logged the moment he'd gone through the gate. His head start wouldn't count for much once they called it in to Highway Patrol. Needing a moment to just stop and think, he pulled over at the first rest stop he found, bypassing the car-parking area where exhausted people were stretching their legs and blowing steam off of cups of coffee from the vending machine inside. Instead, he swung around to the back of the commercial lot, behind the semi trucks camped out for the night.

His cell phone was still on the counter back home. The GF phone, though, was in his pocket. Where it always was. It would be in his hand the moment he figured out what the hell he was going to say.

Odds were, though, Miranda had already sent out a team. This was definitely their sort of thing. He himself had hunted down more than a few maladjusted Big Wheel refugees while squashing the voice in his head that told him that, were he as well adjusted as he probably should've been, he'd see them not as targets, but as family. But he'd been trained out of sentiment at an early age, and he'd done his job, time and time again.

He was on the right side these days, he knew he was, but he'd been damned for years.

His own thoughts were useless, and he needed intel. He wasn't at all surprised when he turned on the truck's radio to find that they'd already started broadcasting.

"...described by witnesses as a mechanically enhanced supersoldier, possibly a cyborg, attacked the Prairie Island nuclear power plant in Welch, Minnesota just over an hour ago. The suspect gained entry, and though subdued immediately by the plant's security team, was able to escape. A manhunt is underway, as is the investigation into what the individual's goals were. A full review of the plant's security protocols is already underway, though the first priority of the officials has been to assure the public that there is no threat of a meltdown. However, until the suspect is apprehended, residents of the Hastings-Redwing area are warned to keep their doors and windows locked and exercise caution when traveling..."

Eliot sighed. Subdued immediately? Really? It might've been better, though, had it been true. He got out of the truck, wandering the dark corners of the lot; to anybody watching he was merely another tired driver trying to wake up. There weren't a lot of drivers out on the road, this time of night, but nobody was pulling into the lot. At least not yet.

Like it or not, he was a threat. Being in control of himself right now didn't change a thing. He didn't know why the commands stopped, or how he'd started receiving them in the first place.

Worse, though, there was no reason to believe that it wouldn't happen again. And if it did, it was unlikely that the connection would be broken so easily.

But worst of all? He had no idea who would be behind this. His identity was no secret- he'd been in the news for weeks after Kansas, and despite the contact lenses and synthskins and long sleeves, he still tended to stick out in a crowd. He'd done what he could to maintain a quiet civilian life after the Army. The guys he'd served with had been comrades, and though he hadn't remained friends, he
didn't think he'd made any enemies, either. Outside of his job at the warehouse, he only really ever talked to Dr. Laroque or Aleph. Laroque might've been as close to a friend as he had, and Aleph had always seemed friendly, nothing more.

And he hadn't seen any of his brothers or sisters since Kansas. By the end of it, by the time he'd ordered the surrender and the six day siege had come to an anticlimactic end, he'd been the oldest and most obviously altered of them all, so he'd been the one the media had focused on. And though he wore contacts to mask the too-blue color of his electronic eyes when he remembered to put them in, his own face in the mirror was too much a reminder, sometimes, of things best forgotten. His siblings, scattered if not dead, weren't any more likely to seek him out than he was them.

Big Wheel, on the other hand, seemed extremely plausible. Maybe they wanted to bring him back in the fold, or test him out before coming at him more obviously, but whatever their motivations might be, they'd had their proof, tonight, that he could be controlled. There was no other good reason for them to have stopped where they had. If they'd wanted anything more from him, they probably could've got it.

This was getting depressing. Getting out of the truck- he was going to have to ditch it here- he weighed his options. Jacking another car would only attract more attention, and he'd already made the news. Hitching wasn't a possibility, but hiding out in the woods behind the rest stop until the inevitable patrol had been and gone would probably work. But that could take hours, maybe days, and it was getting cold already, and now that the adrenaline was crashing, he was exhausted.

And the Highway Patrol wasn't actually his main problem right now.

Back on that last op in Texas, he'd seen that Big Wheel had moved on from making soldiers of teenagers to using children, maybe even breeding them outright. He was old news, and there was no reason he could find for them to come crawling out of the woodwork after all this time. He'd carefully maintained a low profile. He'd gone civilian and gone obsolete, quite deliberately. If Miranda Zero hadn't stalked into his life, however, he might actually have managed it better.

Though the GF was the worst kept secret in the world, Miranda was careful to keep them out of the media entirely when she could. With most of the population running around with camera phones, it was amazing that their profile was as low as it was. But someone had managed to track him down, well enough to get into his wiring and control him. Eliot had to wonder. If the chip behind his eye hadn't been removed, would it have been easier for them? Would he, knowing what path to take from the beginning, have opted to spare himself the shocks and jolts that came from disobedience? Would he have gotten through that last door?

He shuddered, telling himself it was just the last of the adrenaline leaving his system that caused it.

The fact that he'd been able to pull out when he had was another mystery, and again, it all came down to that damned chip. Without understanding his exact orders, he couldn't begin to guess the reasons for them. For all he knew, someone legitimate had seen fit to have him make a dry run at some new security update at the plant, though it seemed highly unlikely.

Eliot Spencer was never that lucky.

He saw the headlights slowing on the highway as the car- it wasn't the police, wasn't anything official, just a silver sedan- swung into the parking lot, slowing to a crawl as it edged towards the semi lot. It was obviously searching for him.

Maybe the woods hadn't been such a bad idea after all, but it was too late now. Checking over his shoulder to check that the nearest semi truck was at the opposite end of the lot, he nodded to himself.
This was as strategic a location as he could dare hope for, under the circumstances. He stepped out of the shadows and braced himself against the headlight's beam when it found him.

The car slowed to a stop a few yards in front of him, but the engine was still running. The glare was making it hard to make out the driver's face, but the passenger side door was already opening. There were a dozen ways he could neutralize the threat if he moved now, and as he began to move towards it, his eyes adjusted and he could just make out the blonde hair.

It was Parker. As crazy as she was, and whatever her orders were, Eliot realized suddenly that there was nobody else he'd rather be seeing. He raised his hands, not so far up that he couldn't use them if he needed to, but enough to indicate that he meant no harm.

She moved quickly, easing into his space more smoothly than anyone in this situation had a right to, but she was careful to hold back, stopping a few feet away. She regarded him with a wary expression on her face, one which, Eliot had to admit, wasn't at all surprising.

"Are you okay?"

Eliot was distracted from answering by the driver getting out of the car. He was tall, and moved with the precision of the well trained. He looked too young to be pointing a gun so unwaveringly. He might've been another Big Wheel kid refugee, for all Eliot knew, but now was not the time to ask.

"Miranda sent us," the man said, as if Parker's presence hadn't made it clear. "I'm Quinn." His apologetic shrug didn't disrupt his aim. "Sorry about the gun."

"We're on your side, Eliot," Parker's eyes never flinched, and with as bad as she was at lying- she'd never seemed the type to bother learning how- Eliot found himself put slightly at ease. Then again, she couldn't lie about what she didn't know, and Miranda's real motivations were usually played close to the chest. "Miranda thinks someone's messing with your head. We're here to help."

"Seriously? How?"

"The alert came in the moment you broke security at the plant. It would've looked less strange if you'd started dropping bodies. You've been compromised. But we can't help you unless you let us."

Maybe it was relief, but he couldn't breathe at all, so breathing easy was out. It took him a few moments to search out the words- to actually push them out. "And that's going to entail what, exactly?"

"Aleph's on his way with a doctor. Laroque?" Parker stumbled over the name, her hand suddenly shooting to the side of her face. A moment later, she was showing him her earpiece before wrapping it in her fist. "And seriously? If he came out here to find you full of bullet holes, he'd be really sad."

"What?" Eliot was still processing the fact that they'd dragged Laroque into this, though it wasn't, he supposed, surprising. Aleph showing up on the scene, however, didn't even begin to compute.

"Nothing," Parker frowned in sudden disappointment, sliding her earpiece back into place.

"So yeah," Quinn said, eyes darting confusedly between the two of them. "We come in peace. You okay with letting the geeks take a look at you, or are you going to fight us on this?"

Eliot rolled his eyes, mostly to cover the sudden drop in his adrenal levels. "You think I want to sit around here waiting for my brain to turn on me?"

Grinning, Parker took one step back, and Eliot followed, keeping his hands up as they stepped
towards the car. Quinn was watching every step.

"You can cuff me if it makes you feel better," he offered Quinn, who contemplated it just long enough to glance at Parker.

"Nah. Got a feeling you'd be out of it in half the time it takes to put 'em on." He was wrong, of course, but Parker was smirking in approval, and finally Quinn lowered his gun, if only because of the inherent problems of aiming while climbing into a car. Once they all were inside, Quinn turned around in the driver's seat and extended his hand.

His smile was deliberately easy, but he was trying not to look at Eliot's left hand.

"Anyway, fucked circumstances, but it's nice to meet you. Parker's been telling me stories." Quinn frowned, his eyes going suddenly distant; Miranda was probably shouting into his earpiece right then. Parker confirmed as much with a roll of her eyes.

"Yeah," Eliot shook the offered hand- with his right, though there was a part of him that would've loved to go with the left. "Nice to meet you, man."

Moments later, he was watching his truck swiveling out of view as they headed out of the rest stop and onto the highway. He hadn't even thought to ask where they were going.

"Did you bring your phone with you?" Parker was sitting sideways in her seat, her eyes distant as she listened to her comms unit. Flipping the gun's safety back on as Quinn passed it over, she hummed noncommittally once or twice.

"Yeah," Eliot answered, tensing against the order to disarm her that thankfully, didn't seem to be coming. The fact that it had been his first thought, as opposed to steeling himself against the flash that might come from even reaching for his phone, didn't bear close examination.

"You're about to get a call. Miranda."

That same instant, his phone vibrated in his pocket. He reached for it gingerly. Exhaled heavily when nothing happened.

"Eliot? This is Miranda Zero, and you're on the Global Frequency." He was Eliot now, not Agent 324. He wondered what it meant.

"Hey."

"Are you okay? What's going on?"

Even with Parker's warning, it was a little surprising to hear from her directly, since usually Aleph was the one who relayed all the calls. Being disappointed at the change-up was stupid, though. Completely beside the point. Even if he could've stood hearing from someone with a sense of humor right about now, for the most part, it was a relief. It meant that he could delude himself for just a while longer, let himself believe that Aleph hadn't seen the mess Eliot had made of things. He wouldn't have to analyze why it bothered him so much that he would.

"I'm fine for now, but I." It hadn't even occurred to him, before now, to feel shame. Zero, he figured, wasn't supposed to be the one voicing concern. It just didn't compute. "Someone hacked me, I think. And if they did it once-"

"They can do it again. Yes. We're going to make sure that doesn't happen. Aleph's on route with Dr. Laroque; they're going to get a handle on what happened tonight, but I'm going to want to hear it
from you at some point. Thank you for cooperating, by the way. I'd be there myself, but I'm running
damage control with the media right now."

"Look, I'm sorry about this-"

"I know you are. We'll fix this. It's what we do, okay? Now, as I was saying. I'm holding the
journalists at bay for the time being, but the story's out. The only way we're going to be able to get
ahead of this is to find the answers before they invent their own. Are you okay with that?"

"Yeah," Eliot said, closing his eyes and sinking back into the seat. He trusted Laroque, though the
thought of Aleph coming out in the field was anomalous enough to be a daunting distraction. If he
didn't ask Miranda the details, she wouldn't need to confirm them. "It's fine."
Chapter 10

Fri., April 11, 2014 02:32 CDT (GMT-5)

Lorraine, the nice elderly woman sitting next to him on the flight, had assured him that flying was safer than driving, and Alec had nodded thankfully, though that hadn't been the reason for his viselike grip on the arm of his seat.

He'd been off the network for over an hour, now, and for someone more used to being on the grid- or being the grid- the flight had quickly become his own personal hell. The plane was new enough that the shielding in the cockpit was more than enough to withstand the signal from his cell phone, but he'd have to wake Lorraine to get to the bathroom, unless he wanted to cause a scene.

If things got really bad, Miranda would just contact him through the radio up in the cockpit. She'd done it before, and it almost hadn't been worth it. Sure, he'd managed to get word out to their dirty bomb specialists out in London, but the consternation of the pilots- not to mention everyone sitting in first class, who'd heard everything- had nearly resulted in a panic at 34,000 feet.

So he'd just deal with the lack of knowledge. It was fine. The text he'd received from Parker as he'd boarded the plane had confirmed that Spencer had turned himself in without any problems. They'd be waiting at the hotel by the time he'd met up with Dr. Laroque to pick up the rental car. They were probably already there.

All that meant, though, was that Parker and Quinn were sitting in a hotel room with a bioenhanced supersoldier that could flip at any minute. Not only that, he'd chosen them specifically for the task, and was incommunicado until he landed. If anything went wrong, if Spencer-

If anyone had a chance in hell of containing him, it was Parker and Quinn.

The fact that he felt like some sort of traitor for admitting there was cause for concern hadn't gone by unnoticed, either. Shit happened in the field all the time. Explosions, nerve agents, getting sucked into minor black holes- none of these were out of the question in the course of the average operation, but his own case of neuro-reprogramming aside- which he couldn't really count, since he hadn't been working for the GF when it had happened- he'd never seen anything like this happen to one of their agents. They'd never been targeted like this before.

Hopefully, it was just a one-off, an isolated incident, which was a shitty way to think, because it meant that Spencer had been targeted, and not the Frequency, which at least had resources, connections, and enough world leaders who'd listen to them when shit went south. And while the GF looked after their own, the only backup Spencer had on the outside was the doctor who'd been assigned as his case manager after the Kansas Big Wheel fiasco.

And it didn't matter how good she was, or how good Spencer was. If the GF needed him cut out, he'd get cut out, simple as that.

And if things went really horribly tonight, Alec wouldn't just be hearing about it over their comm lines, or watching it on a feed. He'd be in the room when it happened.

He hadn't even met Eliot Spencer yet.

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Heading up the gangway towards the airport, Alec scrolled through his messages. His data mining
systems had identified Switzerland and Serbia as requiring his attention within the next six hours. Quinn was reporting that things at the hotel were quiet. Miranda was bitching about the reporters who were still nosing around the scene, though at least she'd won over General Archer and had his people running interference. It was 39 degrees outside, with a twenty percent chance of rain, the rental car was waiting for him, and Dr. Laroque's flight had already landed.

There wasn't an alert system on his phone to tell him how exhausted he was already, but he wouldn't have needed it if he'd had it. The airports sickly florescent lights were casting a greenish hue over everything, but the gate area was mostly deserted. The televisions were on, though they probably always were- and underneath the one to his left stood a weary looking woman with a carry-on suitcase by her feet and a pink and yellow tote bag over her shoulder.

"Dr. Laroque?" Alec asked, though he honestly didn't need to. Even as distracting as the horrible floral pattern on her bag was, she hadn't even changed her hairstyle since the last time her work ID picture had been taken three years ago. "Sorry to pull you away from your conference so suddenly."

"Ah... It's Aleph, right?" Her grin just managed to break past the wariness in her eyes as they shook hands. "It's good to finally meet you. And no need to apologize. The weather in Ohio was awful, and all I'm missing at this point are hotel bars full of the always-circling pharma reps."

Officially, Dr. Laroque headed up the rehabilitation clinic at the VA Hospital in Minneapolis. Her work with and on Eliot Spencer wasn't exactly unofficial, but it was handled quietly. The VA barely had any record of Spencer at all; much of what the GF had on hand had been pulled down directly from Laroque's reports to her contacts at the Department of Defense.

Her finally, though, was bringing him up a bit short. It was the usual paranoia, compounded by the realization that if she'd heard of him at all, she would've heard it from Spencer. Biting down on his tongue to stop himself asking what, exactly, she'd heard, he managed to exchange small talk as they made their way down to the car rental counters; her business trip being cut short, she was looking forward to going home a day or so early to hang out with her family. She might not have been a GF agent, but she was smart, saying nothing of consequence until they'd picked up the car and were heading out of the lot. The fact that she'd even helped sweep the car for bugs without raising a brow did more to set him at ease than anything they'd actually said had. Garish tote bag or no, she wasn't new to the top-secret game.

Now that they were on the highway, she pulled her laptop out of the bag and turned it on. "What can you tell me about the situation with Eliot?"

"I haven't heard much since we talked earlier, but our people have been reporting in. They're waiting at the Super 8 in Cottage Grove. It'll only take about thirty minutes to get there. Spencer hasn't resisted at all, and it looks like there haven't been any more, ah, issues."

"That's good," Laroque lost some of the tension in her shoulders; Alec hadn't even realized she'd been carrying any.

He let a quarter of a mile slide by before finally asking. "So. What's going to happen when we get there?"

As expected, her shoulders went rigid again. Her tone, though, was confident and clinical as she began to lay out the plan.

By the time they were pulling off the freeway, and looking for the hotel, Alec's shoulders were at least twice as tight as hers had ever been.
Eliot made a point of not watching the roads as Quinn drove. Knowing where they were going, exactly, would be a strategic advantage, but- and this was the uncomfortable truth- if he were a position where he was looking for strategic advantages, it meant that part of him was cataloguing their weaknesses with an intent on using them. It meant that, in the long run, they'd probably need to shut him down for good.

It had always been a possibility, though Laroque hadn't mentioned it for years, not since the days immediately following Kansas. The fact that she'd let the matter drop, he knew, was more about her optimism that his basic survival instinct was the one thing Big Wheel hadn't altered than it was about anything else. Not talking about it, though, hadn't changed the possibility.

Finally, they were turning off another highway. Eliot, unable to help knowing that they'd already made five turns, stared at the joints on his left hand- they'd need to be oiled sometime soon- to avoid glancing up at the street signs, and he didn't look up again until the car had stopped. They were parked next to the rear door of a hotel, the name of which he couldn't see.

He kept his eyes on the carpeting, which was stained by the ice machine and worn down to grey at the foot of the stairs, which they passed, heading towards the first room on the right. That Parker had a key card- either picked up earlier from the desk, or programmed to open this particular door in this particular hotel without anyone being the wiser- surprised him not at all.

Quinn positioned himself by the window while Parker turned the lights on, and Eliot, not knowing what else to do, sat down on a corner of the nearest of the two beds.

"How long 'til they get here?"

"Not long," Parker said, taking the chair by the table and pointing the remote at the television, switching over to cartoons.

They were annoying and distracting. They weren't nearly distracting enough, and despite Parker's assertion, it was over an hour before Quinn suddenly moved from his post, flicking the curtain shut before crossing the room towards the door. As he made to open it, Eliot realized without trying to, he'd left himself open to attack. The odds that Parker would be there in time were-

- good actually. Her eyes were focused intently on him, enough that he wondered whether she'd been watching the television at all.

It was all hypothetical, anyway.

You want to be here, Eliot reminded himself, ignoring the numbers he imagined running through his head. It was easier, knowing the moves she preferred. He hated knowing that Parker's being there would've changed nothing but the number of bodies he could've left in his wake.

You need this.

---

"Hey, Eliot," Dr. Laroque was the first one into the room, looking worried and relieved all at once, and leaning down to give him a quick hug that he was horribly slow to return. Over her shoulder, he could see Aleph easing the door shut behind him, looking as out of place as it was possible to be. He was taller than he'd expected, and clearly terrified, barely making eye contact when he said hello. Eliot found himself shifting, turning his body away to hide his arm, even though Aleph plainly knew about it. Even if he hadn't caught the movement, he'd caught sight of it on camera before, Eliot
knew, just like he knew that things tended to look *much* different in person.

Eliot didn't like the synthskins- despite what Laroque said, they'd never fooled anyone past the most casual glance- but he wished he'd had the chance to grab them before leaving earlier.

*Right. As if that had even been an option.*

After nodding to Quinn and Parker, Aleph mostly glared at the wall, which meant that he knew why he was here. Laroque had probably already filled him in on what was going to be happening, and it was clearly making him uneasy.

Laroque sat down on the bed across from him, pulling her pen light out of her pocket, but not trying to blind him with it yet. "Are you okay now?"

He shrugged, not wanting to admit that her presence- she *was*, when he thought about it, probably the closest thing he had to friends or family- probably had more to do with the relief he was feeling than anything. "I'll be a whole lot better when I know this won't be happening ever again." He sighed. It was strange, admitting this much in a room full of near strangers, but Laroque was here, she was listening. "Don't want to walk around wondering if I'm a bomb that's about to go off. Life like that ain't worth living."

He didn't look up to see if anyone else was listening, but it hadn't been entirely for her benefit.

One of the first things he'd liked about Dr. Laroque was that she never bullshitted him. The fact that she'd always made the effort to *understand* him might've been part of that, or might've been something else altogether. A few hours ago, he'd been certain that he was about to kill or be killed, and couldn't have explained it to anyone. And here she was, sitting there and looking at him like this was just another appointment.

After a few moments regarding him, she nodded to herself. "Okay." She brought up the pen light and Eliot tried not to blink at the glare; it was brighter than usual. He hadn't had a chance to put in his tinted contacts before everything had gone to hell. Thankfully, it only took a moment for the implants to do their job and reduce the input to a tolerable level as Laroque began to talk. "Aleph filled me in on the situation, but we're going to need to find out if we're looking at misfires, jostled wires, material failure, or a hack job. I'd like to start with the software, obviously, before we move onto the hardware, but if we don't find anything-"

"Just wake me when it's over, yeah?" The light finally switched to his right eye, and out of his left, he could see Aleph watching them more obviously now. "Do whatever you have to do."

"Hold your horses, cowboy," Laroque smiled, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. She was never an optimist, not really, but she'd probably been accustomed to forcing hope into her patients long before he'd become one of them. "We don't even know that we'll need to go that far. Now. I know you know the drill already, but I'm packing light, here. Is it okay with you if Aleph helps me out on this one?"

Eliot forced a nod, and thought about saying, *it's fine, I want this*, but he couldn't quite manage it. If he'd ever planned on having these two disparate parts of his life crashing together, this wouldn't have been what he'd pictured.

"Let's get this over with," he said instead and lay back on the bed, glancing covertly at Aleph to find him tapping madly at his phone. It was obvious that he wanted to be elsewhere. Eliot didn't know whether to be disappointed or relieved. Over by the windows, Parker and Quinn were watching carefully. Both smiled when he caught them looking; on Quinn it was a reflex. Parker's was a little
slower coming, a little more deliberate. It could've meant anything.

Laroque was pulling her laptop out of her tote bag. The bag had flowers painted on the side; she'd gotten it from her niece last year, and Eliot hated the sight of it. As familiar as it and Laroque were, neither were doing much to counteract the strangeness of doing this in front of an audience. But it was easier to stare at the hideous swirls of pink and yellow than it was to watch the external drive Laroque was pulling out of the side pocket, or the cable she was plugging into the computer.

It was the sleep key, and it only ever came out when there was a major operation underway and she needed him unconscious for the duration.

Every other time she'd used it, Eliot knew, he'd woken up a little bit better than he'd been before. More human, more normal.

Every other time she'd used the sleep key, though, she'd known exactly what she'd been looking for.
Chapter 11

Fri., April 11, 2014 02:19 CDT (GMT-5)

Alec hadn't known Eliot Spencer's name at all, the first few times he'd had to call him into play. He'd just been Agent 324, another contact on the Frequency's list, and according to Miranda, he wasn't too fond of talking about his prosthetic arm.

Then Washington had happened. There hadn't been any good reason for the North Korean Ambassador to the UN to even be stateside, let alone for him to be letting himself get caught on three different surveillance cameras, accepting a suspicious looking handoff from a man in a hooded sweatshirt, but by the time Spencer had caught up with him on Russell Subway line, the ambassador - and everyone else in the train car - was dying, blood pouring out of their ears from causes unknown.

Spencer had called it in, and within a minute of the discovery, Alec had been conferencing in their contacts with the Epidemic Intelligence Service, The World Health Organization, three intelligence analysts, and a translator; he'd been too busy trying to get a secure line to their Agents in Pyongyang to realize that Spencer had initiated the camera on his phone to record the scene.

Alec remembered being derailed, momentarily, by Spencer's eyes. At first, they'd seemed very blue, and it had to have been some weird light reflecting and refracting, but Spencer had been moving and, and the startling blue had moved with him. Even though they hadn't been the strangest thing Alec wound up seeing that day, they'd been stunning. Afterwards, after the containment crews had swept through, the quarantine lifted, another crisis averted, he'd gone back to Spencer's file. Started reading up on him.

Even with everything Alec already knew about Spencer, that bright, electric blue was still startling-even brighter in person than it had been on the phone- disarming him completely when turned in Alec's direction.

The moment was past, though, and Spencer was lying down on top of the bedspread, his attention again returning to Dr. Laroque. Alec could just make out his scowl as he closed his eyes with something that looked a lot like patience as Laroque pulled a small package of latex gloves out of her bag and put them on. His only concession to annoyance, if Alec was reading it right- was the glint of metal as his left hand curled itself into a fist against his hip.

Parker and Quinn had already retreated to the window to talk quietly; on the comms, he could hear them reporting to Miranda, telling her they were getting started. For the moment, Alec was the only one in the room looking at Spencer.

If he hadn't felt like he'd been intruding already, watching Laroque's hand start carding through Spencer's hair would've done it. He wasn't ready for Laroque to turn, catching his eye immediately, and gesture for him to come closer with a humorless smirk. When he did so, he could see what had held her attention. She was showing him the series of small ports set into the scarred mess of skin behind Spencer's ear, and Alec wasn't able to do anything more than stare.

He'd gone snooping through 324's file more than once, and he'd seen the pictures taken by the army doctors when they'd first started working on him. The scarring had been worse. Fresh and raw, then, and the closely buzzed hair hadn't left anything to the imagination; the ports had been obvious, out there for everyone to see. Spencer had grown his hair out deliberately, since then, and it wouldn't have taken an expert to guess why.
Alec nodded, shrugging, clueless as to what Laroque expected of him right now, but trying to swallow down his unease. But this wasn't the part she needed him for, not yet.

With as much as Alec had always loved sci-fi and cyberpunk and the rest of it, he would've liked to believe that his first reaction, upon watching Dr. Laroque plug her laptop into Spencer's head, would've been something other than horror. He would've been wrong, it turned out, but that wasn't the worst of it.

The pictures he'd seen, that glimpse over the screen, neither of them had really captured Spencer's face at all. Now, though, Spencer's eyes were closed and calm, wincing in bored recognition as the plug was locked into place because of course he was used to this- it was sending Alec reeling.

"Okay, Eliot." Laroque spoke as if she were discussing something completely mundane. "You ready?"

Spencer's nod jostled the cable sickeningly, and he rolled his shoulders, easing into a more comfortable position, but he wasn't relaxing. "Yeah."

Laroque twisted to her side, picking up the laptop again, tapped something on her keyboard, and Spencer's eyes flashed wide and unseeing, blazing blue, like lightning about to strike- before dimming and settling at half-mast. Alec hadn't even noticed the small movements Spencer had been making- fingers twitching, arms settling at his sides- until they'd stopped, completely.

He looked dead.

Alec knew that he was supposed to be following Laroque's words right now, or at least following what had to be the world's most insane coding, which was starting to scroll on her screen, but all he wanted to do was shake her and point at the corpse on the bed, ordering her to do something.

"Okay," Laroque finally leaned back, catching the expression Alec hadn't managed to bury. "His vitals are good, he's... well, he's asleep, so to speak. He's still aware of us, but at this point, can only respond to commands. For anything more than our basic diagnostics, however-"

"We'll have to put him in standby mode," Alec nodded, repeating what she'd told him in the car and risking another glance at Spencer's face, finding himself drawn again instead to the cord running behind his ear. "Does it hurt?"

"He's never reported it as such. He'll be fine." Laroque stood up and settled on the edge of the bed, keeping the cord slack. Nodding him into the chair, she angled the laptop out so he could see. "Okay. Right now, I've just begun running diagnostics. It'll only take another minute or so. If it's something simple, or a hardware failure, we'll know in a moment."

Alec nodded, leaning in, finally focusing on the screen. The system was based, at least partially, off of STRIPS, with syntax that looked an awful lot like Planner, but with refinements that varied much more than the logs on Spencer's file had originally indicated. He was starting to see the patterns, though. Thankfully, even if the programmers had been light years ahead of the competition, they'd been restricted, at least, by language, and strings of C++ were holding the programming together like glue.

The report log notification came up, and he reluctantly turned the screen back to Laroque for her closer examination. The list was relatively long, and hopefully Laroque's nodding meant she was finding the problems already, but she shook her head with a sigh. Her lips were a tense line, threatening to frown.
"Nothing?"

Shaking her head, she held up one finger, meeting his eyes, than nodding meaningfully at Spencer. 
Wait.

He didn't have to watch her hands to know what commands she was entering next.

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"Sorry. I just." Laroque sighed; her smirk was surprisingly self deprecating once Spencer had been put in standby. "He's okay for now, but I didn't want him to hear us."

Alec frowned, his suspicions gathering quickly. He raised his chin to look at her. "Why not?"

"Apparently it doesn't bother him," she leaned over and selected one of the cords from the pocket of her bag. "At least he's never admitted it. But I've worked with patients before who've overheard scary news when they're not completely out of sedation. Hearing about what's going on and having absolutely no control, not even to ask questions?"

Yeah, Alec nodded. Got it. He coughed, and tried not to watch her plugging the second cable in next to the first. It would've been easier if his eyes hadn't insisted on settling on Spencer's face instead. "So what're we looking at?"

"Well, the only thing I know is that whatever happened, it has nothing at all to do with the usual suspects. What I don't know is what's worrying. His logs all look completely normal," she said, "except they went offline for about three hours earlier this evening, then came back online. I think they were scrubbed."

Alec sighed. It was a hack job, then; it meant they'd have to go deeper than the basic diagnostic scans to find what was done. It also meant that there was no backing out now. She'd already control-alt-deletec Spencer, so to speak. There wasn't anything more for it to go in and fix whatever was wrong.

There was a cough from the corner, and though Parker looked content enough to be standing at attention next to the window, Quinn looked dead on his feet. "Zero's asking for an update once you've had some time," he said, stretching his arms over his head. "I'm going to get some coffee, you guys want some?"

Laroque nodded, and Alec followed suit, requesting orange soda as an afterthought.

It was going to be a long night, he figured, and they were just getting started.

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Fri., April 11, 2014 10:55 CDT (GMT-5)

His fingers were cramped and his eyes burned, and his mind was still racing through the data, though there was no longer a need.

Laroque was curled up on the other bed, though her only real concession to the need for sleep was that she'd kicked her shoes off. She'd been shifting often, resting only fitfully since finally accepting—about two hours ago— that he'd reached a point where her help was no longer necessary. Quinn, on the other hand, had completely lost his battle, and was sprawled out in an unconscious heap in the recliner by the window.

In the background, Alec could hear cartoons playing quietly on the television set, and despite the
sunlight creeping in through the windows, it reminded him so much of home—of his hub in the tunnels below Chicago—that it was surprising to actually glance up and find himself sitting in a hotel room with three near strangers at five minutes to eleven in the morning.

Parker was on the floor doing yoga, or something approximating it. Alec didn't ask, and she didn't look back at him.

He'd found it. Someone had hacked in and brought Spencer's operational directive monitor back online. It shouldn't have been possible, and wouldn't have been were it not for the fact that they'd also filled in the pathways that the army had deleted during the process of Spencer's decommissioning. Those too, of course, had been removed as the hacker had backed out of Spencer's head—*the system*—but the hooks on either end had been modified just enough that reconstructing the missing code had been relatively easy.

Almost too easy, Alec suspected, but now that he was out of the zone and regarding the four walls of the hotel room and the four others in it, it was nearly impossible to pinpoint why.

He sent a secondary backup of his work log to the GF system— the first had already been saved to the flash drive that looked way too small and mundane, now, for what it contained, and rolled his neck.

He nearly shut the laptop down out of habit, even reached to shut the lid before he realized what it would mean. *The disk was not ejected properly.* Shutting it down, even just letting it sleep, would cut the connection to Spencer. Would cut Spencer off from everything.

He carefully—*very carefully*—set the computer down on his chair and moved around the bed, wincing against the pins and needles and the dizziness they brought as he limped towards Dr. Laroque.

Shaking her awake quietly, he forced himself to give her a minute. His patience, he found, was wearing suddenly thin.

Confusion shot through her eyes, and was gone just as quickly as she pushed herself up. Her voice was rough, and she looked ready to murder the sun. "You find it?"

Alec nodded. "Everything's set back the way it should be," he said, wanting to start with the good news first. "But. You know. If this is goin' where I think it is..."

He really wished she hadn't just winced so plainly before nodding. She stood up reluctantly. "Full reboot." As if that wasn't bad enough, she continued, her tone confiding. "This is the part I've been dreading."

Alec had to agree, though he had no idea whether their reasons were the same. "Why?"

For the first time since they'd arrived, Laroque looked at Spencer with undisguised worry in her eyes. She shrugged. "I'm a little concerned that he'll be changed, once he wakes up."

That hadn't occurred to him. *Killing him,* yeah, that had been running through his head, but this was more obvious, should've come up first. "He turned himself in," he pointed out; it felt like he was fishing. "He could've fought."

"And he very well *might* have, were we not identified as allies."

Alec sighed, glancing quickly again at where Spencer was lying on the bed. He hadn't moved, *at all,* all night. Not even his hair had fallen back into place over the plugs.

He'd wondered about that on the flight last night; it had made entering the hotel room in the first
place daunting as hell. But even having gained a lot of insight into the programming, it hadn't been his focus. Now, standing here and looking everywhere but at Spencer, it seemed a massive oversight.

"How's that work, anyway?"

Laroque smirked, as if she recognized the procrastination for what it was, and picked up her computer, balancing it on her lap as she sat down. She nodded to Parker, who'd turned at some point to watch the proceedings, but her single-mindedness kept her from going off track.

"It's complicated, but essentially?" Dr. Laroque sighed and sat back more comfortably in the chair. "As part of his upgrades, in order to form a more perfect soldier, they actually managed to rewire the pleasure center of his brain. He was programmed for several years to feel, ah, happiest-" she hesitated, here, weighing her words before continuing, "when fighting. We were able to mitigate some of the technology, but the brain's a computer too, you know?"

"It had already programmed itself to work with the given parameters," Alec nodded. It made a startling amount of sense.

"Exactly. Parameters which included not only the carrot, the getting pleasure out of violence, but the stick as well. That's the Operational Directive Monitor in a nutshell. It prevented him from disobeying orders and rewarded him when he followed them. I've seen it in a half dozen or so cases. He's made significant progress in the deprogramming process, essentially reprogramming his own responses on a conscious level. He's got full autonomy, and though he doesn't need to consciously identify people as threats or allies, it has the same effect." Reaching over to grab her half-finished coffee from the nightstand, she forced down a mouthful and pulled a face. It was only when she spoke again that Alec realized it had more to do with the thoughts in her head than the taste in her mouth.

"I worry, you know? Eliot teases me about it every time he comes in, but this time?" She fixed Alec with an unhappy smile, the kind Alec suspected all doctors are trained in giving, for the days when they had to break the bad news. "I just have to wonder if these systems coming back online are going to undo all that work."

Alec nodded, wished for his own long-gone-cold coffee if only to have something else to focus on for a moment.

"So," Laroque said, bringing up the required command prompts. "Ready to bring him up?"

Alec hated himself for it a little bit, wished he could afford something resembling a vote of confidence, here, but he nodded for Parker to wake Quinn up first. It wasn't until they were in position, guarding the window and door, guns drawn, that he nodded to Laroque.
Chapter 12

Fri., April 11, 2014 11:17 CDT (GMT-5)

It always felt like waking up before waking up, a bit like hearing the noise outside his window before opening his eyes in the morning, but it wasn't at all like that.

For one, Eliot had no idea where he was. He just knew that if he'd been that deep down, something massive had changed. That he was about to open his eyes, different than before. Sometimes it was to find that his arm had been replaced by a machine, or that his eyes weren't his eyes anymore. Other times it was to find that the hair-thin wires that had been slowly sawing into his gastrocnemius were finally gone, or that his line of sight was no longer constantly impeded by data. Once, he'd woken up to find that his was, from here on out and finally, the only voice he'd ever again hear in his head.

Then something had gone wrong- what, exactly, wasn't coming to him, he was missing too much, missing something and-

It came at him fast. Nothing coherent or conscious, nothing immediate, but the lack he'd been missing was replaced with normality. He was waking up.

He was back online. He'd been offline?

Right.

His eyes opened quickly enough that he had to wonder if it was his own volition, but there was nothing else, no immediate input following besides what he could see right in front of him.

Two coffee cups and an empty bottle of orange soda sitting on the table in front of him. Daylight. The walls and the light was all wrong, this wasn't home this was-

Hotel.

Movement on the edge of his vision. Laroque moving into his line of sight, smiling warily.

"Good morning, Eliot. You're okay."

He blinked, and she backed up. "Take a minute, okay? Do you remember what happened? We're at a hotel."

He closed his eyes again, this time, mostly just aware of feeling tired, like his brain had taken off without him while he'd slept.

He realized, with a sudden, sweeping lurch, that it had, and buried his face into the pillow. It was stuffy in here. Too warm.

This room was too warm because there were too many people in it, rebreathing all the same, stale air, and they were all watching him; it didn't take enhancements to know that much. They were all staring because he was being brought up after repair. He'd been broken, something in his head-

The phone, last night, reaching for it. Failing.

He rolled over, back stiff, and tried to force it all into order. The flashes, the driving- lots of driving, and being driven- and the plant. The guards by the elevator, taking the stairs instead. Panicked
Headlights in a parking lot, Parker moving into his space.

Dr. Laroque entering the hotel room, Aleph slipping in behind her, not meeting his eyes.

Fuck.

He heard Laroque smother a laugh, realized he'd spoken aloud. It was time to open his eyes, actually start to deal, here. She was shoving her laptop into her tote bag. He'd only been up for ten freakin' seconds and he had to look at that godawful thing.

"So what the fuck?"

Laroque knelt in front of him again; at least he didn't have to sit up yet. He hadn't noticed the lines of tension at the corner of her eyes. Didn't know quite what to make of it, though he'd known this was coming. It was always the same, every time he woke up from a reboot, even before he'd left the Army. Protocols had been drawn up long ago, something to do with the fact that the first generation Big Wheel soldiers had been too far gone- too modified, too insane, or maybe just too well-wired- not to attack when threatened.

"Long night short? You were hacked. We found the problem, fixed it. Well, Aleph fixed it."

"Still trying to figure out who did it," a voice came from the other side of the bed- Aleph's, but Eliot wasn't sure what he'd find if he looked directly at him. Turning towards the window, he saw Quinn's silhouette. Holding a gun. Low but ready.

Eliot wasn't tired anymore, but he wasn't stupid. He forced himself to sit up, slowly, scanning the room more carefully. Parker was by the door, her face unreadable and the gun in her hands unsurprising.

Though he was keeping close to the corner, Aleph seemed intent on ignoring the potential violence about to erupt from the room's exits. Even if his voice was betraying him. "Don't worry though. We'll figure it out. World of hurt comin' to someone, that I can promise you."

Eliot nodded; it seemed the thing to do. It wasn't even worth pointing out that at the moment, his attention was elsewhere.

"First thing's first, though," Laroque sighed in resignation; she knew what this was as well as Eliot did.

Quinn's gun came up and pointed directly at him. On the edge of his vision, Parker was aiming at Laroque's chest, and there wasn't any more time to observe, or to think. He just had to move.

He sprang off the bed, moving to block Parker's shot, making a last minute adjustment to avoid catching Quinn in the crossfire as both attackers moved forward. Grabbing Laroque, he pulled her behind him and backed towards the wall, trying to keep both of them in his sight.

It was the expression on Parker's face that really drove it in. Eliot raked his hair out of his face and glared at her first. Then Quinn.

"Seriously?"

"Sorry man," Quinn replied, lowering his gun. "Zero's orders. We had to test it."

Having apparently decided that the all-clear had sounded, Aleph stepped forward, rolling his eyes. "Three years, and she still don't trust genius when she sees it. Woman needs a boss, so I can write
them a *strongly* worded letter of complaint."

Parker swiveled her head to roll her eyes right back at him. "We weren't even *aiming* at you, you big baby."

"That may be, but your vote of confidence is duly noted. Y'all satisfied?" Turning to Eliot, he raised an eyebrow. "You having any urges to kill everyone in the room right now?"

"Well, yeah," Eliot sneered, letting the tension drop from his shoulders. This hadn't been an attack, just a test, and he'd known it from the start. "But it's all me, believe me."

"He's fine," Laroque said, shoving him gently away so she could move around him, her mouth widening into a massive yawn. "And on that note, Eliot? I know we've got a lot to talk about, but I need to get some real sleep for a bit, and I'm guessing I'm not the only one."

"Zero wants me down at the airfield ASAP, we're heading out to Florida," Quinn announced, holstering his gun while brandishing his phone; other GF business, then. Eliot didn't ask, just watched him cross towards the door. "I'll tell her what I can, but she's going to want a full debrief from you," he told Aleph, who was already nodding. "Fair warning, though. She's been bitching about the press all damned night."

Parker was handing Laroque a key card. "We've got the room across the hall," she announced. "Give us two hours before checking in. I'll be up by then, at least."

"I won't. Four hours, *minimum.*" Aleph's warning would've sounded more convincing if he'd sounded like he wasn't three minutes from passing out. "And if Miranda doesn't like it, she's welcome to handle eight hours of log data analysis on her own."

"I'll pass it on," Quinn smirked over his shoulder. "Word for word."

Aleph grimaced. "Right on. Till next time, man," Aleph shook his hand, then stepped back as the three filed out of the room. As soon as the door was closed, Aleph was swerving into the bathroom.

He was taking a shower, Eliot realized a few moments later, and having little else to do, he surveyed the room, picking up what obvious trash there was and turning off the television before moving to the window. There were a few cars parked outside. Three cars lined up at the drive-through on the other side of the parking lot.

He tried not to think. The safeguards the army had installed meant nothing, apparently, and Aleph's claim to have fixed him- whatever that meant- were all he really had right now.

But he'd seemed confident, once the guns had been lowered.

It didn't have to count for anything; Eliot didn't know that much about Aleph at all, when it came down to it. There'd been another Aleph working when he'd first started, a punked-out chick who'd apparently been with the Frequency since the *first* time Big Wheel had reared it's ugly head.

He wondered where she was now. He'd heard that there'd been an attack in the hub a few years ago. He'd never asked if she'd survived it.

The shower shut off, and eventually, Aleph's footsteps came heavily back into the room. He was barefoot, wearing the same t-shirt he'd had on before, but he'd changed from jeans to garish pajama pants. There were far too many Batman logos emblazoned all over them for them to make any sort of visual sense at all. Eliot was tired just looking at them.
Which would've been great if the adrenaline wasn't shooting through his veins like fire.

"What's up, man?" Aleph's voice was rough, and he was glaring at Eliot in a manner that made it clear that if Eliot flicked the drapes open any further, his complaints would be loud and thorough.

"Nothin."

"Wired, huh? Guess you're the only one who really..." he waved his hand towards the bed. "You know. Rested and all."

Eliot shrugged. "I am and I'm not. Never really feels like I'm sleeping when I'm jacked in, you know?"

Aleph nodded, frowned like he wanted to ask something, but he settled for moving the last of his computer equipment onto the table. "Yeah, well. Me, I'm beat to hell. Do whatever, TV won't keep me up. Leave a note if you're goin' somewhere, whatever. Or you gonna crash out?"

Eliot blinked, it was just occurring to him to be taken aback. "Are you?"

"I've been up all damn night," Aleph rubbed a hand over his face, the fabric of his shirt stretching tightly over his shoulders. "Of course I am."

"Yeah, but you were up all damn night making sure I didn't go off the rails and start killing people or some shit." Aleph frowned back at him, like he wasn't getting it, and moved towards the far bed. Eliot rolled his eyes. "So you're sayin' you're okay with hittin' the hay while I hang out in here? Seriously?"

"If I thought you were about to become the Terminator," Aleph yanked the blankets back, "I would not be going to sleep right now. That is correct." Climbing under the sheets, his face already planted in the pillow, he pulled back just enough to speak. "Look, man, I know me an' you probably got some stuff to talk about. Four hours, okay?"

"Yeah. Alright," Eliot shrugged. Aleph's eyes were already closed.
Chapter 13

Fri., April 11, 2014 16:05 CDT (GMT-5)

Alec knew that he'd had a reputation for- not for getting distracted, exactly, but for thinking of too many things at once. Truth be told, that was part of the reason Zero had pulled him in, groomed him to take over as Aleph. She’d talked about multitasking, then, of being able to handle five fires at once, and for the first few weeks, he’d thought she’d been talking figuratively. In fact, she had been, if only with regard to the exact nature of the crises he'd found himself working on.

There was always another one coming, just around the corner. It didn't matter how many times a government got its wrist slapped, or how many violent alien incursions got headed off only at the last minute, some people never really learned.

Other people did, however. Right now, not only was the Prairie Island story spreading through the internet like wildfire, there was a terrorist attack brewing in Belgrade, bolstered by technology that seemed about seventy years too early for human consumption, a sudden outbreak of psychic phenomenon that seemed to have its roots in a batch of contaminated heart medication that should never have passed their first trials, much less made it to the shelves in northeastern Florida, and yet another breach in Cern's LHC facility that half a dozen GF hackers were trying to backtrack.

With all this going down all over the world, Alec figured, he should probably be a little less concerned about the goings on in his immediate vicinity. Because nothing at all, really, was happening. He was on his laptop, wishing for the more powerful system he'd left back in Chicago, and trying to moderate a communications between three different GF doctors and their translators.

Maybe it was just that for the moment, the doctors were all actually busy working, and he'd had enough time to stand up and stretch.

Spencer was asleep in the other bed, and there was absolutely no reason to be standing here watching him like this, nothing he could admit to, anyway. Not that anyone was asking. If he wanted to think about Spencer, he really could've been channeling it better. Going online, tracking down the few seconds of footage that had gotten leaked, or watching the crawlers he had running on the comment posts of every social network to analyze the damage. Miranda was going to be checking in again soon, and she was going to want information.

324 is sleeping quietly wasn't even in the ballpark of what she'd need to hear.

It was obvious that Spencer had left the room while Alec had been sleeping; there were takeout containers in the trash can and his hair was damp, slightly curled from the humidity. Alec had only been awake himself for an hour or so and if what he'd had seen in Spencer's file was true-modifications to subject's hypothalamus indicates severe alteration to circadian rhythm. Postulation supported by subject's tendency to sleep for no more than 90 minutes at a time- he'd probably be waking soon.

Maybe any minute now. It wouldn't do to be caught staring, and honestly, it felt a little bit creepy, drinking in eyefuls of plaid stretched over his broad back, or the well-past-five-o'clock shadow that curved along his jaw. Spencer's left hand was hidden underneath the flannel of his shirt, but the glint of metal comprising his wrist was, Alec decided, a safer focus point. At least if he got caught looking at that, it would probably be understandable enough. It was part of what made Spencer a supposed threat; maybe he could spin it as basic self-preservation. Under the circumstances, it was only natural to focus on the outward signs of everything he was actually supposed to be concerned about. There'd
be no need to admit that maybe he was pondering the realities of showering with a metal arm, or that his mind was starting to wander, and not going very far.

On the whole, if the gleaming jointed metal was actually making him more curious than wary, nobody needed to know; he could probably chalk it up to his childhood fascination with Robocop if he needed to.

"Yes, it goes all the way up."

Alec swallowed, eyes darting up to meet Spencer's smirk. *This* was why he'd been so careful not to avail himself of all the resources at his disposal. He could've gone full-on Big Brother if he'd wanted to- he'd been tempted more than once to search him out via ATM cameras or internet activity- but Alec was one of the good guys. He'd satisfied himself with only looking at him when they were on GF business, when he was *supposed* to be looking.

Which meant he'd never gotten caught looking when maybe he *wasn't* supposed to be.

"Hey, ah. How're you doing?" he asked, sure that he'd crossed a line here, somewhere, and guiltily reminding himself that he was very good at what he did. He'd fixed the programming in the ODM himself. There was absolutely no chance that Spencer was compromised, or preparing to attack.

That is, unless he wasn't wild about waking up to a near-stranger's ogling.

"I'm fine," Spencer sat up, brushing his hair out of his face before resting his arms on his knees, a deliberately relaxed pose. "You?"

"Ah, great, I just. I was just-"

"Staring at my arm." There was that smirk again, knowing and resigned.

"Yeah, sorry, I just-"

"It's cool, I get it." A lot, though unspoken, was heavily implied. But then Spencer's shoulders slumped just a bit, and with a shrug, he raised his left hand and pushed up his shirt sleeve up to the elbow.

His arm was actually a series of half a dozen metal beams of varying width, each ending at varying points of the complicated hinge that comprised his wrist. About halfway up his lower arm was a small box that had an exposed port; it was mounted on the largest beam, and had holes in it that allowed two of the smaller rods to tunnel through it. Without the shock cartridge locked into place and ready to be deployed, it looked merely structural.

The hand attached to the wrist joint was exactly like he'd seen in the pictures; obviously the design was based on the hand's typical skeletal and musculature system. It looked like a glove for a suit of armor. There were no exposed wires, which Alec had been wondering about, since the only pictures he'd seen of it had been taken during Spencer's various downgrades, and much of the housing had been removed. When Spencer moved his hand around, making a fist and then releasing it, the motion was just as smooth as a normal hand.

"Cool," he heard himself saying. And then, "ah, sorry." It had to be strange to be on display like this, but Spencer was probably used to it. "I'm sure you get this a lot, but that," Alec nodded stupidly at his hand, as if there could possibly be anything else in the world he could be talking about, "is some seriously awesome design, there."

Spencer laughed, his eyes crinkling in surprise. He opened and closed his fist a few times, rolled his
wrist this way and that, and Alec could see the dozens of smaller movements comprising each
gesture. "Yeah, well. For all they fucked with me, at least they didn't skimp on materials."

Alec had no idea what to say to that. There were a dozen questions he wanted to ask- how it felt, and
how it went through the process of feeling, but Spencer was pulling down his sleeve again and the
show, it felt, was over.

It was just as well that Miranda called his phone at that exact moment, a thousand miles away from
where she'd been last time they'd spoken.

"You're on the Global Frequency," he said, swiveling back to his laptop screen, to the half dozen
things in the world that actually needed his attention.

"Of course I bloody well am," Miranda said, frazzled enough that Alec's breath caught in his chest.
There was always another crisis coming.

"I need to know where we are on the Serbian situation. The Joint Chiefs are getting nowhere on their own, and if we're going to have to bail them out
again..."

"Right, right," Alec nodded, patching their field agent into the call. "Agent 104, you're on the Global Frequency and Zero is on. How's it going?"

"Can't talk long," 104 said. "I'm meeting with the Prime Minister in a few minutes; he's already
granted full access to their intel- thanks for that, Miranda, though fair warning, it'll take a call from
you to convince him there's a need to act. It looks like the EMP will be enough to take care of this
without any direct contact, but just in case, 945 is silent running. He's about five blocks out from the
base, plus a few minutes to find a suitable nest, but last I heard, he wasn't running low on options."

"All right," Miranda said. "If you get any push-back from the PM, I want you to authorize the
takedown anyway. Don't let those bastards get near the activation panel. We'll run cleanup if we
have to. Keep us apprised."

"Will do. 104 out." As the agent hung up, Miranda turned on a dime.

"Aleph, I hate to ask, but what're we looking at on the Prairie Island spread?"

"It's not pretty. The major networks are on board, minimizing coverage of the actual event and
highlighting the security upgrades the facility's undergoing, but someone at the local CBS affiliate
leaked that you'd been there to put a lid on the story. That entire mess went viral about seven hours
ago, though it hasn't gotten much play yet," Alec hesitated, glancing at Spencer, who wasn't even
hiding the fact that he was listening, "compared to the story about the actual break-in."

"It'll pick up again, though, won't it?" It was barely even a question.

"Once the other story's run it's course, yeah, probably. I already went in and backdated a few posts,
quoting an anonymous staffer from the station- who doesn't actually exist and won't likely be
searched out- indicating that the nature of your discussions were more about mitigating panic than
burying the story, but the internet's been doing its thing since late last night. One of the plant's guards
recognized 324- well, his arm, anyway- from when the Kansas story was all over the place. It was
about three this morning when the first reference to him working for us showed up in an online
newsgroup."

"Bloody hell."

"But like I said. The internet's doing it's thing. Most of the details are getting buried beneath the usual
viral noise."
"Still, I don't like it."

"Yeah, well. I'm sure he's not wild about having Kansas dredged up either," Alec said, glancing back up to read Spencer's expression. *No shit,* his scowl seemed to be saying.

"Is there anything we can do to remove that part of the story?"

"Not without deleting posts, which would only attract more of the sort of attention we don't want."

"You're suggesting that we instead let it ride?" As Alec tried to formulate an answer that went beyond the obvious, she answered her own question. "All right. I see your point. But what's the damage if we ease back?"

"Minimal, under the circumstances."

Miranda sighed. "What are the odds that it's going to be that easy?"

"Not good." Alec sat back in his chair; he could still see Spencer out of the corner of his eye and wondered where Parker was; blatantly eavesdropping was normally her gig. "Given the lack of detail- no video, no pictures other than mostly unrelated, un-sourced, and out-of-date ones that some people posted- there's no real evidence beyond what the news media's released. There's no focal point, nothing that grabs anyone enough that they'd normally bother retweeting it, and usually that's enough to drive a story into the ground within a day or so, but... I'm still seeing a lot of activity."

"Okay."

And here it came, the question he'd really been dreading. "Where are you on back-tracking the hack?"

"I don't have anything yet, but... there's something here. It's familiar. I was noticing it last night while Laroque and I were reworking the subroutines so that we'd know the moment any external systems tried making contact with 324's ODM. The stylistic indicators are there, but they're just out of reach. Like I just haven't recognized them yet. If that makes any sense." Bringing up the data mining suite he'd been running in the background, he grimaced at the lack of results. "I think I'll know more once I've managed to analyze more than ten percent of it."

"Keep on it," Miranda said. "And ping me the moment you find anything. This all feels like a trial run to me, and if last night was just the prologue..."

"I hear you," Alec agreed. Before leaving Chicago, he'd put agents on the fourteen other most likely targets, all of whom had, to some degree or another, undergone Big Wheel's enhancement program. Twelve of those had been remarkably easy to tail; an advantage, he supposed, of keeping bioengineered super-soldiers in lockdown and locked wards.

Spencer stood up, stretching his arms, and for a moment, Alec was guiltily sure that his thoughts had been heard, or maybe just predicted; Spencer's modeling and assessment software had never been completely taken offline. It was one of the reasons he'd been such a good candidate for the GF in the first place.

"Everything all right with our guest?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah." Alec wasn't sure how much he should give away. "We're cool."

"Good. You can go ahead and cut loose, but maintain level three surveillance. We'll follow up with him once we've had time to process the situation further. I want you on a plane back home as soon as we've cleared the situation in Serbia."
"I'm on it." If she recognized his reluctance, she'd probably chalk it up to exhaustion. Ending the call, he stretched his arms over his head- his back was locking up from sitting here for so long- and finally allowed himself to notice Spencer's eyes, trained on him from across the room.

"Everything okay?"

"As much as it ever is," Alec allowed, wondering briefly if it was wise to leave his laptop open for Spencer could see. He probably should've closed it already- should've done so before Spencer had even woken up.

"So what's the plan?"

"You're free to go," Alec said, dropping his hands to his sides. "I'm sticking around, got some things to handle, but we're clearing out tonight."

Spencer frowned, nodding. A strangely furtive expression crossed his face. "Listen, ah. My truck?"

Was last seen sitting in a truck stop out on Highway 62. The highway patrol could've picked it up by now; Alec would have to check.

"Shit. Right. Um. Yeah. You're stranded. Forgot." He was babbling like an idiot, and took a moment to rein his thoughts in. "I guess... if you don't mind waiting, I can drop you off on the way to the airport. Otherwise I'll see if Parker and Laroque can give you a ride."

"They left a few hours ago," Spencer shrugged, reaching under the bed and producing a box Alec hadn't noticed before. Maybe Spencer had picked something up other than takeout. The fleeting thought that it could be a weapon, though, was incongruous with Spencer's casual demeanor.

"Oh. Yeah. Okay. Well. You mind waiting?"

"It's fine," Spencer shrugged, though it obviously wasn't. "I should probably call my boss, though. No idea what I'm supposed to tell him."

"It's been handled," Alec confirmed. "Quinn called him up this morning, said you went to the emergency room after having a seizure. Looks like you've got a day or two. More if you want it."

Spencer's eyes widened in surprised relief before they turned to the floor. On anyone else, Alec would've described his expression as shy. "Seriously? Thanks."

"No problem," Alec said, because Hey man, it was the best way to cover our ass at the time just seemed rude. "I'm just going to need another hour or two, but, ah..."

"Something's going on in the field," Spencer guessed after a long moment. The fact that he didn't just say Serbia outright, though, was reassuring. "...and I probably shouldn't be overhearing it."

"Pretty much?" Seriously, Alec needed to get his head right. If he hadn't already broken a dozen communications security protocols, he'd come damned close.

"Tell you what. Soon as your phone rings, I'll take a walk."

"You sure?" For someone who'd ordered dozens of agents into life threatening situations, Alec was having a surprisingly hard time telling this one that he simply needed the room.

"Walking around the hotel beats walking all the way back to my truck," Spencer's easy shrug made it hard to reconcile this person standing in front of him with the one who had, less than twenty four
hours ago, launched a one-man attack on a nuclear power plant. Even harder to reconcile him with someone Parker'd trained a gun on just four hours ago.

"Right on," he said, sitting up as Spencer began making his way towards the door. "You don't have to leave right now, though. Think we've got a while before." He waved his hand; God, he sounded desperate. "You know."

Or, well, fuck it. It's not like Parker hadn't eavesdropped on two or three dozen ops that weren't her own. And under the circumstances, keeping an eye on him was probably the safest course of action anyway.

"Actually, you know what, man? Scratch that. Kinda ridiculous, under the circumstances. Don't worry about it."

Spencer nodded, returning to sit on the edge of his bed and setting the box on his lap. After a moment, he grasped his hands together, metal weaving against flesh. Now that his plans for departure had been temporarily thwarted, he didn't seem to know what to do with himself.

Alec didn't know what to do with him, either. He glanced at his computer, and then his phone. It would be mighty timely of them to alert him to just about anything, right now.

"So," Spencer said, once the awkwardness reached its peak. "You're name's not really Aleph, is it."

It wasn't at all what he'd been expecting. The warnings about breaking protocol were again running through his head, but they'd really only been meant for situations dealing with outsiders, and Spencer? He was at least as much an insider as Parker was, the fact that Alec didn't know Parker's first name notwithstanding.

"It's Alec," he explained after a moment. "Hardison, ah. Aleph's more of a code name."

"Yeah, I got that. Eliot." Spencer ducked his head. "Though you probably already know, but whatever. You can call me that, if you get bored rattling off numbers at people."

"Standard phone protocol. New cellular hacks are turning up every day." Alec didn't mention that it had been one of his first ideas that Sophie- he wasn't on the phone now, after all- hadn't laughed out of the room, though it had probably had more to do with the fallout of those two compromised ops back in 2011. Alec nodded, then moved to his feet, extending his hand more casually than he felt. "Well anyway. It's nice to meet you. Officially and all that."

"You too." Eliot's hand was warm, wasn't even remotely metal. Strong, though. "And ah, thanks. For last night."

"It's cool." And it was; it really was, if only because being thanked by a former target was a little bit of a rarity. It had nothing to do with that stupid thrill of excitement coiling in his gut. They hadn't done anything more than shake hands, for crying out loud.

Fri., April 11, 2014 17:17 CDT (GMT-5)

It had occurred to Eliot that he probably should've been more concerned than he was- for one thing, he'd made a run on a nuclear reactor less than a day ago, and for another, he'd could hear Hardison's side of every insane op that the GF seemed to be running.

From what Eliot had put together, there were at least two agents on the ground in Serbia, trying to stop a madman from turning Belgrade into a literal black hole, but it was all very distant, here in the hotel room, with the late afternoon sun shining in to the sound of traffic out on the highway.
Hardison's tone on the phone was, now that he thought about it, as even as it ever was. He was cracking jokes and complaints and muttering to himself when he forgot that his line was open. There'd been times when Eliot had been on the other end of those calls and thought it disturbingly casual, but it had helped, more than it hindered.

It wasn't at all like listening to his handlers in the military had been, even though most of the time they'd been offering very similar, if more professional sounding support. As nervous as all this sitting around eavesdropping was making him- bad shit was going down, and there was nothing he could do about it- it just sounded right. Familiar. With as bad as things could get- and they almost always did, long as Aleph was on the line, they seemed manageable.

He wondered which agent Hardison was talking to, which of the thousand or so agents he had on speed dial was on the ground, trying to forestall another disaster. It wasn't all that unlikely that the agent on the line thought about Aleph the same way Eliot always had, so it was probably best to stomp on that thread of jealousy that had been winding through his head ever since Hardison's phone had started going off. And it was definitely best not to keep reminding himself of the fact that Parker had known Hardison's name months ago.

Opening the box Laroque had handed him, he found oil, degreaser, two sets of synthskins and a package of the usual contact lenses. There really wasn't any reason he needed them, right now. His elbow was feeling a little gritty- all of him was, to be honest- but it would be weird, just stripping off his shirt and going to town trying to clean out the joint.

But at least he could get a shower.

The humidity from Hardison's turn hadn't dissipated yet, warm and cold all at once. As the shower warmed up, he found himself wondering how many other agents had ever been in a position to watch Hardison at work. There'd been rumors about the previous Aleph. Wilmington, the sharpshooter he'd worked one gig with early on had been especially keen on the subject, going on for hours about the chick's prowess. It had all sounded like bullshit at the time.

He washed his hair one-handed- he'd probably have to settle for combing it out with his fingers, but it was worth it- and he'd long been used to shielding the left side of his body from the spray as much as possible. It didn't take him long to get clean, but it did take a while before he felt like getting out. All this inactivity had made him twitchy.

If there were any rumors about Hardison- and he'd racked his brain trying to remember- Eliot was pretty sure he hadn't heard them yet. Then again, he usually worked alone or with Parker, who often seemed even more disconnected with the entire human race than he was.

But at least he could try to dress the part.

He toweled off the metal first, using the dry edge of the towel to soak up the water from the ports behind his ear as best he could. He trusted her, but Laroque's assurances that rust wasn't ever going to be an issue had never really sunken in.

Three minutes later, the synthskin glove was over his hand, but the tricky part was maneuvering the arm sheath up over his wrist without twisting it too tautly. There was a backup in the event that he tore it, but it would mean starting all over again. And though Eliot had never been confident that the skins did much to make him look normal, at least he was managing to get it hooked up to the bolts on his elbow.

The contacts went in much more easily with the skin on, though, since it allowed his fingers enough friction to contort the skin around his eyes to maneuver the brown lenses into place. With a blink, he
looked- and felt- almost human again. Pulling his shirt on again completed the effect.

The moment he stepped out, Hardison's voice was already filling the room.

"-and 558's tracked the contamination back to a warehouse owned by the distribution company in Newark." Not Serbia, then. Hardison had apparently moved on to another crisis, already in progress. "Yeah, we've got a few in the area we could send in, don't worry about recruitment. I'm on it."

Without stopping for breath, and glaring despairingly at his empty soda bottle, Hardison stretched his shoulders, yawning as he moved on to the next call.

"813, This is Aleph. You're on the Global Frequency..."

Eliot was tired of being so damned useless, but he could manage heading down to the soda machines at the end of the hallway, and for once, he wasn't dreading the trip. He'd had already had his fill of stares when he'd gone out for lunch. Nobody had freaked, nobody had called the police, but the woman behind the counter at the cafe had clearly been distracted by everything she'd been able to see.

He'd ordered his food to go, waiting near the coat rack as unobtrusively as a half-man, half-robot with glowing electrical eyes could be. The woman by the counter hadn't been the only one relieved when he'd taken his food and left.

In the hallway, Eliot stood in front of the machine, considering the options- there was orange soda here, same brand as the bottle Hardison had been slamming, but maybe he'd want a cola, something with caffeine. He hadn't thought to ask- maybe Hardison didn't actually want anything at all.

His palm was sweating. He was nervous. Maybe it was just standing in place so long, his back to a hallway with so many doors.

He barely knew the guy. It wasn't his job to take care of him, and if it were, he probably wouldn't be getting ready to pour more freakin' soda down his throat. This was all starting to feel like one of his old reintegration exercises, back when he'd still been living in the group home and hadn't yet had the first clue how to function in civilian society. They'd given him assignments, small tasks like strike up a conversation with one of the other patients or go to the book talk the library's putting on in the day room and ask the librarian for a recommendation. Looking back know, he could roll his eyes, but it had been daunting at the time, trying to revert to behaviors he'd managed just fine as a kid, without the aid of his ODM telling him what to do.

He'd gotten much better since then. The manners his parents- not his Big Wheel Handlers, but his real parents, the ones he only remembered as well as the smell of what he thought had been his house- had taught him had apparently stuck. But once in a while, like now, he'd get tripped up. The last time it had happened had been at the first company picnic he'd attended. Gatiss had made the invitation sound like a command, and that had gotten him as far as the park, but he'd been at a complete loss when it had come time to make small talk with the night shift and office crews. He'd bailed entirely when they'd started coralling everyone for softball.

Whatever. Alec Hardison was a near stranger. This didn't matter as much as Eliot was thinking it was; it was all in his head. He selected an orange soda and a Pepsi. Hardison could take his pick, or neither. It didn't matter at all.

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This time, entering the room, there was no need to guess what Hardison was talking about. "I know that, but the story is already out. I start going around wiping out postings, we're no better than any
other jackass with an agenda." Hardison had lost some of the humor in his tone, though he grinned, wide- don't stare- when Eliot offered him his pick of the sodas. A moment later, his eyes darted back to his screen, finding something surprising by the looks of it. "Yeah, well. They'll do what they always do. If they can't take credit, they'll point fingers. Ain't like it's the first time congress has tried shutting us down."

Eliot was settling down to throw something on the TV just to have something to stare at while pretending not to eavesdrop. What Hardison said next, though, caught his full attention. "On the other hand, yours truly has managed to pin down our hacker... what do you mean? Of course I was always gonna- I just needed some time with the- whatever. Program kicked out a match of over 97 percent for this cat, Colin Mason... Yeah, he goes by Chaos- how did you-"

Eliot's hearing wasn't quite good enough to catch all of Miranda's words, but some of them broke through. She was talking about 2011, something about considering the options, but there wasn't any context. Just Hardison's face going quickly and quietly furious as he listened. Jaws set, nostrils flaring, eyes hard.

Over the course of half a dozen ops, Eliot had seen Hardison worried, relieved, pleased and terrified. Angry, it turned out, was a good look on him.
Chapter 14

Fri., April 11, 2014 19:35 CDT (GMT-5)

"We've got to go," Alec muttered, standing up and taking in all the gear he had to pack up as if for the first time. He still had several incident reports to send out, to Miranda, to the Joint Chiefs, to two or three dozen bureaucrats of half a dozen countries, most of which he hadn't even started. The paperwork was just a distraction, anyway, something to do to stop himself from launching a half-assed attack on the entire internet, just to get at Chaos. Just to wreck his day a bit.

Because it wouldn't do much more than that, not without the hub's full tech suite.

Resolutely, he closed his laptop down. He could tap into the frequency again once he'd arrived at his gate. Check in. Maybe send out a report, run another round of the never ending bureaucratic bullshit that took up far too much of his time, these days. Nothing bold, nothing stupid. He'd do exactly what he was supposed to be doing. His work ethic wasn't exactly the stuff of legends, but it was what the GF needed.

And right now, he needed to get gone. Packing up efficiently and getting a move on quickly also happened to forestall any possible damage he was considering doing to hotel property, a fact that wasn't seeming to escape Eliot's notice.

Shaking his hair out of his face, he handed him the laptop power cord he'd just unplugged from the wall.

"Talk to me," he said with a frown. "What's going on?"

"What? Nothing. Just." He had no idea how to explain, right now, why finding out that Chaos was involved had made everything so suddenly worse. "Gotta go. Get you back to your truck, me to the airport. Sooner rather than later."

Eliot's eyebrow twitched; he wasn't buying it, but wasn't pressing. Which meant they were able to get their things together, get out of this stuffy hotel room, and get out on the road without further distractions. According to Miranda, last night's story had gone so viral that it was impossible for the major outlets to ignore it any more. There was going to be full coverage by tonight, and CSPAN had already picked it up. Congress was already rolling out their favorite anti GF mouthpieces.

Right now, Alec just didn't want to hear it.

Fucking Chaos.

Maybe Alec's work ethic wasn't as even good as he'd thought it was, because it wasn't Chaos's motives that he was trying to figure out. He could sit here with his remote access to the Frequency and try to track him down, but he'd only wind up running over the same ground again when he got back to his more powerful systems back Chicago.

God, he missed the hub.

As soon as he got back, he'd have Chaos running. For his fucking life. It was probably going to be easier than he would've otherwise thought, too, seeing as how he wasn't going to be starting from nothing. The Frequency had files on him. And why? Because at one point, Miranda had been considering bringing Chaos on as Aleph. "Chaos? Of course I know of him," Miranda had told him over the phone. "Once upon a time, he was going to be you."
As if that alone wouldn't have ended the world at least half a dozen times by now. Chaos had skills, sure, but though Alec had only crossed paths with him once or twice, he knew his reputation, knew the hacks he'd managed to pulled off. The fact that Miranda had ultimately offered Alec the Aleph gig probably should've been more of a bandage on it than it was.

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They'd been on the road for less than two minutes when Eliot's patience finally wore out.

"Seriously, man. I know there's shit going down, like, everywhere," he waved a hand for emphasis, "but if you've got something about me, about that crap last night, I need to know. Who the hell is Colin Mason?"

"He's a hacker," Alec eventually allowed, checking the rearview as he merged onto the the highway.

"You got history." Eliot was guessing; Alec could feel his eyes boring a hole into the side of his head. "And it ain't good. So what's his deal?"

"I hate him with the white hot heat of a thousand burning suns," Alec grimaced, then shook his head. "I don't know why he does what he does. He just gets bored and causes trouble, which, yeah, hacker, but..." If he wanted to, he could go off on his tirade about how the movies always get them wrong, planting black or white hats on everyone who'd ever wielded a keyboard, but there was no way to explain it without sounding defensive, maybe even sympathetic, and he wasn't going to give Chaos even that much. "He goes by the name Chaos, like he thinks he's some comic book supervillain or some shit. He's caused blackouts, skimmed cash from charities, bankrupted an entire school district because he'd gotten his ass kicked in ninth grade, all sorts of shit. Some of it's just for fun, some of it's mercenary."

"And you think he's the one that got into my system?"

"Pretty sure, yeah. Thing is, I don't know why, yet. I'm guessing it'll take a few hours, once I get back, to figure out what he's been up to. If he's acting on his own, it's gonna be bad enough. If he's getting paid, though?"

Eliot nodded; a sidelong glance was enough to catch the concern on his face, and when he spoke, there was a distance there that hadn't been there before. Probably. "Well. You mind shooting me a call when you've started getting somewhere with him?"

It wasn't a surprising question, when he stopped to think about it. If Chaos was going to try for round two, Eliot would be his most likely target. Technically, Alec wouldn't even be sharing information outside of the group. And depending on what he found, there was a good chance that Eliot could help put the rest of the pieces together- it had been his head, after all, that had gotten hacked. A little context might shake some ideas loose that Alec could use.

But blabbing it out over the phone- even a GF cell- was just asking for trouble.

"I don't know about the phone," he said, glancing at Eliot apologetically. "There's always another dude out there looking to pull down whatever they can, you know?"

Eliot nodded, eyes cutting away in quiet frustration, and it wasn't like Alec didn't get it. Knowing that information was out there, inaccessible, was probably half the reason he'd started hacking in the first place. It had been years since he'd come up against anything remotely like this, but he hadn't forgotten the feeling. Which was probably why he went on to do the stupidest thing he'd done all
"Your boss thinks you're still in the hospital," he was thinking aloud, but his brain had already moved on to timing and flight tables. "If you're down, we could get you on a flight out to Chicago. I mean, it'll probably bore the hell out of you, but I'd be able to let you know as soon as I found anything."

God, this was stupid. Reckless, only not the kind he was used to employing. This had nothing at all to do with coordinating strike forces of scientists, conspiracy theorists, or snipers in the field, and everything to do with Eliot.

Eliot, who probably had a slightly different view of what was and was not considered reckless, merely nodded.

"Okay."
Eliot blinked awake to find that the ceiling above him hadn't changed a bit since he'd shut his eyes an hour and a half ago. There was no sunlight down here- no light at all that wasn't streaming out from the dozens of computer monitors set up in an array surrounding Hardison's chair. It was bathing the mess of comic books- Eliot had fallen asleep midway through one of them, though there was no telling which one it had been- in gleaming blue light.

Hardison himself was still around the corner, sleeping. After they'd arrived in Chicago, they'd stopped for supplies- Eliot had been needing a new change of clothes for what had felt like days- and made their way down towards Hyde Park. They'd parked on the edge of the University, and from there, he'd followed Hardison across an unremarkable parking lot and into an unremarkable building.

There'd been cameras everywhere, but it hadn't been until Hardison had gotten them past the retinal scanner at the bottom of the stairwell that Eliot had been struck by their absurdity.

"Seriously? You set up shop here?"

"Back when the GF was just setting up," Hardison had explained, "The internet had barely started coming into its own. Connectivity hadn't really hit. They needed easy access to a decent library. Hence, all this."

All this had proved to be a steam tunnel, though as dark tunnels went, it had been relatively well kept, almost bland in appearance. Most of the pipes had been painted over, and the walls were a dull off-white, either by design or by age. Caged fluorescent tube lights had flickered overhead, but only one or two had been burned out completely.

As he'd followed Hardison along, taking in what he'd heard he'd been struck by the location's obviousness. And he probably hadn't been the first one to ever do so. "How do you keep- I don't know- bored students out?"

"There's still plenty down here for them to go spelunking in," Hardison had shrugged. "It's just not connected. Since I've been here, there hasn't been anyone who's made it anywhere close. Well." He'd flashed a smirk at Eliot. "Except for Parker, but if she couldn't figure it out, I'm pretty sure she wouldn't have been a candidate in the first place, you know?"

He'd continued following Hardison through four intersections- left, left, straight, right- until finally another door, unimpressive except for the combination retinal/fingerprint/breath scanner, mounted on the wall immediately to the left. Even with all that, they'd made it inside in a manner of seconds. Within a few minutes, he'd gotten the tour of the entire facility.

It hadn't taken very long; the area was shockingly small. There was the hub itself- where Eliot was waking up, now, and Hardison's small, dark living quarters. Eliot had only gotten a glimpse of them- enough to know where the bathroom and kitchen were- and they'd reminded him so much of his room back in Kansas that he'd felt his pulse ramp up to eleven.

His old room in his old bunker, though, hadn't been plastered over with nerd. There was a Star Wars poster and something that Alec had told him was the actual, original Obi Wan Kenobi costume draped over a headless mannequin in the corner. There were Star Trek posters- even a few commemorative plates. Even the kitchen was nerdy- the fridge was mostly orange soda; the freezer
mostly TV dinners. A brief scan of the cabinets had revealed lots of things that were "nacho" or "taco" flavored.

Rummaging through it now, though, Eliot managed to find a stockpile of seriously decent coffee, and was setting to brew up a pot when he heard Hardison moving around in his room, just off the edge of the kitchen.

It seemed early, maybe, though he had no real idea what Hardison's usual sleep schedule entailed. After getting his system to start tracking that Chaos guy, he'd crashed out for a while last night, until his phone went off around three in the morning. He'd been running some operation down in Florida until at least six thirty.

"Hey man," Eliot called out. "You want some coffee?"

"Yes. What?" There was a stumble on the other side of the door; Hardison opened it a moment later, eyes wide. "Oh. Hey. Forgot you were here. Yeah."

The door was shut again, quickly enough that it wasn't until Eliot was pulling another mug down from the cupboard that he realized that Hardison, apparently, slept in his underwear. It seemed the better part of valor to retreat back to the hub's couch. It was as close to a living room as there was to be found down here.

Hardison had muted the feeds before heading to sleep last night, but the remote on the desk was easy enough to understand, and Eliot was able to get the news feed monitor's audio back up on his second try. As the noise began to fill the room - lots of it, several channels all going at once - he dodged back into the kitchen and snagged himself a cup of the still-brewing coffee.

On one of the channels was a blonde reporter, walking backwards down an empty hallway that Eliot wished he didn't recognize. 'Until he ended up here.' The camera picked up a thin smear of blood on the wall. Hardly any, really, but the camera stayed on it as she continued. "And while the authorities are continuing their investigations," she said ominously, "it is left to us, for the time being, to ponder the question. What really happened here last night, and how is the Global Frequency involved?"

The camera cut back to her face just long enough for her to sign off, and then the screen went suddenly blank. The walls and the elevator control panels and the men lying on the floor were all being supplied by Eliot's brain. It wasn't particularly comforting, but they were just memories.

There was another feed going, two screens over. Talking heads, this time, discussing the event from the safety of their studio in New York City.

"I'm not saying that the Global Frequency hasn't done amazing work, but nobody's elected them, nobody's voted for them - hell, nobody even really knows who they are!" The white-haired man was leaning over his side of the desk, as if the eighteen microphones in the room weren't picking up his voice. "And yet the government is content to let them be, to let them carry on without any oversight whatsoever."

His cohost nodded. "But on some level, Mike, you've got to admit that they're doing what much of the populace wishes that they themselves could be doing."

"Most people would love to save the world. These are the men and women who enlist, who become doctors and firemen and police, all of which, I might add, are professions that require very selective screening. That's how we filter out those who'd just as soon end the world as save it, and it's a good system. And as Chuck pointed out, we have no access, no way to be sure that the Global Frequency maintains the same precautions. That's all I'm saying."
The talking head called Chuck was starting to make his rebuttal when another channel went live. The same story, all over again. There was too going on all at once, too much noise. Fighting the urge to throw something heavy at the nearest monitor, Eliot closed his eyes and focused on his coffee. The steam wafting up, the smell. The heat bleeding through the mug.

"I programmed all the commercials out of everything," Hardison said from the doorway, raising his mug in salute as he crossed to the chair in the center of the monitor array.

Eliot hadn't been startled, exactly. It just hadn't occurred to him, for some reason, to pay attention to Hardison's exact location. The thought occurred to him that Hardison had just reprogrammed his head. He could've programmed anything he wanted into the tech in his head, but Eliot knew, with blinding, painful certainty, when he was being given orders. And this wasn't it.

He didn't want to think about it. He'd had enough of that over the last few days; last night the paranoia had been a loop in his brain as he'd halfheartedly flipped through his book while trying not to watch Hardison work.

Eliot replayed Hardison's words in his head. All the monitors. All the channels, all the noise.

"Why?"

"Filters out some of the distractions. If I'm gonna be distracted, it damned well better be on my own terms, and not because some deodorant company's got a new catchy jingle."

"Fair enough," Eliot supposed, sitting up against the back of the couch for lack of anything better to do. "You on another call? Didn't hear any phones or alarms going off."

"Couldn't stay asleep." He'd thrown on jeans and a baggy, shapeless hoodie. It was a little disappointing, but the furry bear claw slippers he was wearing were worse. They muffled his footsteps as he crossed the floor. "I kept wondering if my crawlers had found Chaos yet."

He sat down at his chair and swung one of the four keyboards out onto his lap. A few of the monitors changed, but new images weren't making any more sense than the old ones had, but they were holding Hardison's attention completely.

Four or five screens were still intermittently flashing onto the news. Another one seemed to be a real time web search, scouring the net for headlines. Some of them flashed red, others, green or yellow. Eliot pretended not to notice the words Prairie Island, and because they were flashing green, it seemed that Hardison was doing the same. Eliot gave him a few minutes to work before finally allowing himself to ask.

"So. You find anything on him yet?"

"Enough to pin him down to a wifi network in Boston in the hours leading up to your arrival at the plant. I swear, it's like he wanted to be found. Anyway, the network belongs to a place called John McRory's; it's a bar. He hid himself pretty well in plain sight, the cocky bastard."

"Hm?"

"It means he knew there was a chance he was going to be tracked. This way, we can access his computer, which I'm almost positive was a burner anyway, but we can't actually use it to find where he is now. He could've gotten on a plane to almost anywhere since then."

"Crap."
"Hey, none of that. Chaos is the only one gonna be worrying right now." Hardison looked over his shoulder with a confident grin; apparently Eliot had sounded more disappointed than he'd thought. Either that, or Hardison was just showing off.

The fact that he might be bother to try impressing him was bizarrely satisfying.

"See, he's not stupid enough to use the same computer again, but he is stupid enough to hack the same way he always does. Hackers are creatures of habit, myself included." Eliot thought back to the monochromatic selection of sodas in the fridge and nodded, but apparently Hardison read the gesture as a question.

"We're always looking for the easiest way around an obstacle, and when we find it, we use the hell out of it, and old habits die hard. Now, there's a very good chance he's still hanging around Boston-"

"How do you know?"

"Because he's also paranoid. He knows that someone's probably going to be looking for him. The most obvious place to start would be the air and seaports, waiting for his passport to get dinged, but the problem with that is that his picture is going to match what he actually looks like, so he's not going to risk it when the heat's on him. All I need to do is check out surveillance footage around the bar when he was there, and I'll have somewhere to start in tracking his location."

"If he's as good as you say he is-"

"I ain't saying he's good," Hardison interrupted, before allowing Eliot to wave him off.

"-wouldn't he just avoid whatever surveillance cameras are around?"

"He could try, and probably did, but there's no way he's got all of them nailed down. There's two options. One, he tried ducking them as he left the bar, or two, he actually managed to duck all of them, which only works if he hasn't yet left the bar."

"So you're going to scroll around a billion cameras and hope you catch sight of him?"

"Did I not just say that I've got my facial recognition program? It's already been working on it for like, hours."

"So how long do we have to wait?"

"We don't." Hardison laughed, tapping a key, but the smile was gone an instant later.

Four monitors, scattered throughout the array, flashed to the same grainy image: a scruffy dark-haired man smirking directly into a camera, holding up a piece of paper. Scrawled in heavy black ink were two words.

Hello, Aleph.
Chapter 16

Sat., April 12, 2014 15:37 EDT (GMT-4)

"If you're sure," Miranda had said when Alec told her he was bringing Eliot along, but at least she hadn't argued. "Just keep an eye on him until I arrive, and don't go anywhere near the bar until I get there." She knew as well as Alec did how thin they were on the ground in Boston. There was a semi-retired linguist living out near Hough's Neck, and a cryptographer who headed up the Boston University Security Group, but most of their heavy hitters lived closer to Cambridge.

MIT was full of enough geniuses cobbling various AI, bioengineering, or GIS projects together, the results were often slightly traumatic. Espionage, too- inside jobs currently were in the lead against actions by foreign interests, but not by much- was nearly an everyday concern, even if it had been quiet for the past few months.

Alec wasn't actually expecting an attack, as he was fairly certain that all he was going to find was a whole lot of nothing, though maybe Miranda could get something useful out of any possible witnesses.

The Frequency was her baby, though. She'd started it, years ago, and was protective as hell when it was threatened. Odds were, she was just as eager for a shot at Chaos as Alec himself was.

In the meantime, though, there was another hotel room and another few hours to kill. There were situation reports and emails and nothing happening anywhere in the world that was enough to distract him from Eliot, lounging in the chair by the window, paging tiredly through the novel he'd picked up at the airport. It was so mundane that Alec wondered if he had something backwards, here.

Getting hit with a neuroprogramming meme and waking up bisexual had been blindsiding enough, but the really weird part of it, Alec figured, wasn't the shift itself- that was just part of his wiring, now. Apart from the shock of recognition, and everything the realization had entailed, he figured he'd adapted pretty well.

But the part that he still thought about, sometimes- that he was thinking about now- was that even three years later, he still had no idea how much, really, he should be folding that aspect of himself into his personality. As convenient as the comparisons between brains and computers were, the brain was always changing- it reprogrammed itself all the time, accounting for new input and experiences. That's what it was for. But it caused this irritating little thread of worry running through the back of his mind whenever he examined it too closely. Because at some point, Alec might get new input- it wouldn't be anywhere near the scope of what had happened to Eliot, or be as dramatic as waking up on a rooftop much more open to guys than he'd been before, but one day, his brain might reprogram itself to ditch the code from the last upgrade. Revert to base programming.

One day, he might wake up straight again. And while it was really mostly a hypothetical concern- his longest relationship in four years had been three dates- it was problematic. Or might become problematic. At some point.

Though on the other hand, it might not be the worst thing if he were to suddenly stop having completely inappropriate thoughts about Eliot Spencer, who seemed to have a sixth sense for picking up on Alec's glances whenever they landed on him. There wasn't any point telling himself that it was just the challenge that kept him looking. For all Eliot's apparent psychic abilities, he wasn't showing signs of having any idea why Alec would bother looking.
Then again, he probably couldn't see himself from where he sat. Didn't notice the sunlight haloing the loose strands of hair that kept threatening to fall into his face as he read. From his perspective, the stretch of his legs, the way his feet were braced against the cross-joint of the table leg, was nothing more than the basic mechanics of sitting comfortably. The denim stretching along his thigh, or the shirt collar that was a little loose at his neck, enough that the skin just below his collarbone was just was tantalizingly visible, was likewise below his notice.

Alec's eyes kept getting drawn to the span of brown leather belting Eliot's hips. The buckle was brass; Alec could barely make out the edge of it from where he was sitting, but he could imagine- all too well- the leather sliding through, opening.

Eventually, he was going to get caught. And though Eliot was shorter than Alec, he could break him with terrifying ease. It was thankfully unlikely- Alec was more concerned about mortification than evisceration at this point, but he'd done his homework. He didn't really know who Eliot Spencer was, necessarily, but he knew who he'd been, what he'd been made of.

He'd seen dozens of pictures of Eliot, starting from when he'd been young and psychotic looking, fresh out of the compound, his buzz-cut almost as severe as the look in his blazing eyes or the metal winding into his flesh. Alec could've traced the passing of years by the length of his hair, or the gradual shedding of Big Wheel's Tech. His metal arm, apparently, had served him well during his stint in the army- though the components that allowed for electrocution at near and close range were still intact, the laser and plasma array that had been built up over his shoulder had been removed. He'd had the armor plates- and their retractable, razor-sharp spikes- removed from his shins even before he'd enlisted, primarily because they'd been one of the more superficial additions and more easily handled.

He'd had the pictures taken during their removal; he kept wondering what kinds of scars the bolt holes- all the way down to the base connectors drilled into the bone- had left.

Less obvious from the pictures had been the internal enhancements. Eliot'd had amplification implants in his inner ear, and the wire spool cartridge housing midway up his left arm had originally fed a line that wound down his arm, ending in electrical contacts on his right thumb and forefinger. Though the contacts had been removed at Spencer's request, the rechargeable power core on his arm had been left intact. Once he'd signed on with the GF, Miranda had procured a startlingly large supply of wire cartridges for him to use in the field, to allow midrange defensive capabilities.

Though it had since been replaced with an inert implant, Spencer's molar had contained a capsule that would break if he bit down hard on it, releasing a compound which, upon reacting with the saliva in his mouth, created a highly corrosive acid that would've killed him- and anyone he'd managed to spit upon- in seconds. Months after reading it in the reports, Alec still thought about it every time he accidentally bit his tongue.

There'd been a series of medical shots documenting every surgery they'd done to remove the hardware, and sometimes Alec hadn't even been able to recognize Eliot in any of them. He'd thought, at first, that they'd been mortuary pictures of the bodies left behind.

And there'd been a lot of bodies left in Big Wheel's wake, and though the GF had done a lot to seriously undermine their capabilities, they'd never been able to root them out completely. There was always another election to be won, and large, vaguely worded contracts tended to find their way into so many pockets of the military industrial complex every few months. There wasn't much by way of oversight; there was even less that the public could hold them accountable for. And for everything else, Alec supposed, there was the Frequency.

He'd would be feeling a lot better about it now if he didn't know that the GF had essentially driven
Big Wheel so far to the fringe that, having no other recourse, they'd started breeding their own subjects. And while the GF made a dent, rescuing the children in Texas, they hadn't captured any key players. Big Wheel was still out there.

All he'd known when he'd first started looking into the GF's files, though, was that Spencer- it had been noted in his file that he'd not been named *Eliot Spencer* until after he'd left the Army; he'd still been going by the name Delta when he'd enlisted- had probably been taken in by Big Wheel when he was about seven or eight. Prior to that, there was no telling where he was from, or if he had any family at all, and Spencer had never indicated that he'd remembered otherwise.

He'd gone from Big Wheel to the military to a warehouse job in Bloomington, Minnesota before being recruited by Miranda Zero and joining the GF, and even if it hadn't been for the miles and miles of psych evaluations and doctor's reports, the auto-transcripts of his early conversations with Miranda had been enlightening.

"*I just figure, I've got all this, like it or not- I'm stuck with it. I can sit around and be pissed about it, but that's not going to change anything.*"

"*Are you looking for absolution?*"

"*I don't know. It's a nice thought, but I just don't see it in the cards. I can't go back and change what I've done. There's just all this, up in front of me. Life. I can ignore what I am, or I can use it to try and do some good.*"

"*That being the case, why did you not re-up your enlistment when the time came?*"

"*Same commands, different targets, and nothing was ever changed when we were through. I didn't think the things I was doing for them were any better than what I was doing back in Kansas.*"

Alec had been on the verge already, but he'd fallen, hard, the moment he'd read that, though he still hadn't actually figured out why. But he'd read the follow up reports of the other operational subjects Big Wheel had created, and one thing had really stood out.

Most of the others, even the ones who'd followed Delta out of the compound in Kansas, had broken completely, either during the process of disarmament or shortly thereafter. More than one of the survivors had gone on to short, ugly careers in the military. Most of the ones who were still were doing so within the confines of varying degrees of psychiatric care. Probably would be until their tech broke down completely, until they finally stopped breathing.

Dr. Laroque had made notes, here and there, worrying about how resigned Eliot tended to be in the face of hearing about the fates of his siblings; she'd wondered if it was something left over from his time with Big Wheel. But hell, Alec figured, life could train people too. It could grind them down into dirt.

Sometimes, though, it didn't. Sometimes, a killing machine capable of wiping out entire villages at the simplest command chose instead to join the ranks of people like Dr. Marla Jacobson, Former Agent 731. Could sign on with the Frequency, and expect to die for the world instead.

"*Don't get attached,* Miranda had told him when she'd caught him reading Spencer's files, and it had probably already been too late, even back then.

And now, there wasn't even any use pretending otherwise. Not with Eliot sitting at the table, flipping through Tom Clancy with a half-bored, half-amused smirk on his face.

Alec tried not to glance more than twice, but eventually, he gave in. "*What's so funny?*"
"Nothing. Just this." Eliot shook his head, tossed the book on the table without bothering to mark the page, and pinned him with a steady gaze that Alec just hadn't been ready for. "You glued to your computer right now?"

"No. Why?"

"Wanna go get something to eat?" He frowned, suddenly. "Are you even allowed to go offline?"

"I could run World War Three from my cell phone." His boasting was undermined, probably, by his checking the battery for the tenth time in an hour. He had spares, sure, but the middle of a crisis wasn't the time to be worrying about changing them out.

Standing up and sliding his laptop into his bag, though, gave him something to focus on, which was important, because the surge of ridiculously eager hope he was feeling was coming on too damned fast to hide.

Eliot was bored. They needed to get something to eat, needed to get away from the hotel room’s claustrophobic white walls.

This wasn't a date.

Sat., April 12, 2014 16:08 EDT (GMT-4)

There was a T.G.I. Friday's at the end of the strip mall down by the highway. Hardison drove, humming along with the radio. There wasn't much for Eliot to do besides stare out the window and pretend to ignore the laptop bag sitting on the back seat, wondering how Hardison did it. Not just the computer stuff, but being on, all the time, ready to get on the line and stop the world from ending just because it was a Tuesday, and he was the librarian whose shelves were filled with antitoxins and deployment strategies and locksmiths and mercenaries.

Eliot caught Hardison glancing back through the rearview at the laptop more than once, and whatever the answer to Eliot's unspoken question might've been, it probably wasn't as optimistic as he was hoping.

There was probably all sorts of insane shit on that computer, too. New data from one of the field ops Eliot had been pretending he hadn't heard, or an update from Dr. Laroque. Some new bit of intel, maybe, that indicated that the adjustments they'd made to his ODM weren't as solid as Hardison thought.

Eliot understood enough of what they'd done, he supposed, but mostly he'd been basing his reactions on theirs. Laroque hadn't been worried enough that she'd felt the need to stick around; she'd just handed him some synthskins and contacts, hugged him, and been on her way. He hadn't talked to Miranda, really, but it wasn't as if she'd have a hard time tracking him if she'd felt the need to. And Hardison seemed confident enough with the hacks he'd done that he didn't seem to mind his presence.

Mostly.

Because whenever Hardison looked at him, it was quick and fleeting, ever since he'd woken up that first day and caught him staring. Hardison had meet his gaze well enough- and often enough- but he'd never held it for long. He always seemed nervous, despite his bravado.

It wasn't at all unusual, but the reaction hadn't irritated Eliot this much in years.

The hostess brought them to a booth near the front windows, and Eliot tried not to be annoyed when
Hardison took the seat facing the door, slinging his laptop bag onto the seat next to him. Eliot ordered a beer and busied himself with the menu he'd been handed, resisting the urge to look over his shoulder while the waitress listed off the specials.

The menu was exactly the same, he guessed, as the menus back in the Twin Cities, or in any T.G.I Friday's in the country, though he'd never been fond enough of the chain to know for sure. He chose a burger off the list, Hardison did the same, and the waitress left. It was a very basic transaction. Nothing remarkable. But that wasn't the problem.

He had no idea at all what it was that he was doing here. Tagging along to Chicago had seemed like a good idea at the time; he'd been looking for answers and Hardison had seemed like the best way to get them. And then Hardison had booked them on a flight to Boston, and he'd boarded without question.

He wasn't here under orders. Soon, he'd have to call into work, explain things to Gatiss. It would probably help if he at least had some idea when he was going to be heading back before that conversation even began.

"Sorry, boss. Someone jacked my brain. Long story short, I'm in Boston, eating hamburgers with a guy who's staring at his phone like it's a lifeline or someone else's," probably wouldn't cut it.

He nodded at Hardison's phone. "We miss anything on the drive over?"

Hardison shook his head and setting the phone on the table, screen down. "Nope. Twenty three minutes and the world's still turning."

"Is that some sort of record?"

"Eight days," Hardison shrugged, sipping what must've been his seventh orange soda of the day as he took a casual glance around to make sure the teenagers at the next table over weren't listening in. "Last spring. We went eight days without needing to save the world from itself."

Eliot snorted. "What did you do with yourself? Head down to Miami Beach or something?"

"Played video games and tried not to stare at my phone. Ran a lot of diagnostics to make sure we weren't missing something. Jumped every time Miranda called to try and get me above ground for fresh air."

Eliot tried picturing that conversation and mostly failed. "Did it work?"

Another shrug. "I don't know if they ever talked, but Parker showed up eventually. Dragged my ass down to Navy Pier for a while. We broke onto an unattended yacht, then went on the ferris wheel. Well, I did." When Eliot didn't respond, Hardison continued, eyes widening comically. "She didn't climb on until it was already moving."

"That sounds about right. Ten pounds of crazy in a five pound bag, you know?"

"She's good, though," Hardison smothered a nervous laugh, as if crazy wasn't in the GF job description, leaving Eliot to wonder if it was actually a touchy subject. He didn't know Hardison well enough to have any insight, one way or the other. "Hell, you've seen her in the field."

"I'm not saying she ain't good. I'm saying she's the type of person who'd rather climb a ferris wheel than ride one." He shrugged. "We would've been screwed down in Laredo without her, that's for damned sure. She was actually really good with those kids."
"That's half the reason I sent her down there."

"What was the other half?"

"We needed you. She doesn't get in your way."

Come to think of it, Eliot hadn't been tripped up by the presence of idiot teammates since he left the Army. The ones he'd had in Special Forces had been more skilled than most, but he'd often found himself using half his energy fighting around them. Apparently his confusion was showing on his face, because Hardison was smirking across the table at him.

"We ran diagnostics on every op your team ran back in the day, just like we do for our own ops. You work best when you've got room to move."

"You keep stats on that sort of thing?"

"Our resources are not infinite, therefore they are best deployed in a manner commensurate with their strengths," he intoned. "Zero's words, not mine."

Their food arrived, and Hardison had already inhaled half of his burger before Eliot backtracked to the question that he probably should've thought to ask before now. The teenagers in the nearby booth were laughing, crowded around a blonde girl's cell phone, but he leaned across the table anyhow.

"So how are those kids, anyway- the ones from the Texas gig?"

Hardison finished chewing, then washed it down with more soda. "Gonna take a while, but they're getting help. It looks like it's going to be possible to keep them together, so that's a plus."

"Good deal," Eliot buried his relief. He hadn't even met them, not really. He'd just driven the truck. The similarities to their situation and his had been superficial at best.

Hardison was opening his mouth to say something more when his eyes caught something startling in the restaurant behind him. Before Eliot could turn to look, he heard a voice that was even smoother in real life than it was on the phone.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen. Mind if I join you?"

Miranda Zero was shaking her long dark hair over her shoulder and slipping her sunglasses into the pocket of her perfectly-tailored jacket before shrugging it down over her arms. The dress she wore underneath was plain and black, and looked expensive as hell. Hardison was sliding over in the booth, almost apologetically, as he straightened out his shirt.

She grinned at Eliot as she sat down, then turned to Hardison. "What?"

"Thought you were gonna call-"

"You're not the only one on the face of the planet who knows how to use GPS," she explained with a smirk, as the waitress came by to offer her a menu. "Just a coffee, please. Black." Once the waitress retreated, she continued. "I caught a bite to eat on the plane. Couldn't stomach the coffee. So." She turned again towards him. "It's good to see you; it's been what, a month now since I last laid eyes on you? How're you holding up?"

"I'm fine," Eliot shrugged. This was surprisingly awkward, and brevity seemed the route to take. "My head's still my own, you know?"

"I'm glad to hear it."
As if on cue- and Eliot wouldn’t put it past him- Hardison's phone vibrated on the table. Miranda let him out of the booth, passing him his laptop bag as he went. For the time being, it was just the two of them. Obliquely checking her own phone, Miranda set it aside for the time being. "As I’m sure you know, Aleph's been keeping me apprised of the developments. Thank you for rolling with all of this, by the way," she leaned back as the waitress returned with her coffee, nodding her thanks. "I can only imagine that the past few days have been a little strange."

"That's one way of putting it."

"Well. Hopefully this evening’s entertainment will be worthwhile, and you'll be able to go back to your regularly scheduled-" she hesitated over the word *programming*, opting for "life," instead. "At least until the next crisis."

Eliot nodded, agreeing with her even if he found himself reluctant at the idea of going home. Sure, he hadn't been doing much, here- nothing at all, really- but for as jet-lagged and useless as he felt now, at least he was in the loop.

"Looks like that mess in Florida's managed to sort itself out," Hardison returned, not looking up from the phone in his hand. "817's staying behind a few days to coordinate logistics with the FDA. Serbia's been neutralized too, but Switzerland's about ready to pop. Our physicists are on it, but they've managed to ruffle some feathers."

"I'm already scheduled to fly out in this evening."

Miranda slung back the rest of her coffee and signaled for the waitress. As they waited for the check, Eliot tried to catch Hardison's eye, but the field ops he'd mentioned had nothing to do with him, and no explanation was forthcoming.

Miranda's presence, here, seemed equally unlikely. Running recon in hopes of finding just one hacker seemed way below her pay grade. There had to be something more to it.
Chapter 17

Sat., April 12, 2014 18:40 EDT (GMT-4)

John McRory's was as unremarkable a place as Alec had ever seen. The brownstone building would've stuck out, maybe, in any town other than Boston, and the interior looked like every other mid-range Irish pub he'd ever seen. There were televisions above the bar, lots of dark woodwork, and the one concession to it's garden-level location seemed to be that every light in the bar was turned on.

It meant that any video surveillance of the joint would at least be that much easier to see. It also meant that the three of them were noticed the moment they walked through the door.

Of course, they would've been noticed, anyway. The place was quiet for a Saturday evening, though judging by the backlog of dirty dishes the redhead behind the bar was washing, they were most likely between rushes. According to her paystubs, the bartender's name was Cora; there were half a dozen customers scattered throughout the bar. Three women in the booth by the window drank wine and talked about someone's wedding. Two younger guys at the far end of the bar seemed mostly intent on watching the NASCAR race on the muted television. At the other end of the bar sat an older guy, a little rough looking, scrawling at his crossword puzzle with the air of the practiced alcoholic. He was the only one besides Cora who glanced up as they'd come in.

Alec had surreptitiously snapped pictures of all six, and was uploading them to his home drive and sending them through the GF’s facial recognition programs. The sooner they knew who they were dealing with, the better.

Eliot headed to the bar to order their drinks while Alec and Miranda chose a booth towards the back. It allowed them a view of the entirety of the bar, and though they'd be just as visible to anyone looking, Alec's laptop, open on the table before him, actually provided a kind of cover, for once. Looking at the three of them- Eliot and Alec in clothes most charitably described as casual, while Miranda, as usual, looked like she'd stepped right off the pages of a magazine. The only plausible thing the three of them could be doing together was working.

"Not that it's not good to see you," Alec said, now that the two of them were relatively alone for the moment, "but what are you doing here, anyway? No offense." It seemed a little low-rent for her, hanging out with the grunts during a surveillance job.

Miranda's smile was enigmatic, but after a quick glance at the bar, where Eliot was paying for their drinks, her expression grew serious. "I need to know for myself if he's really okay. Not that I don't trust your abilities, or Dr. Laroque's, but... I was worried about him." She sighed, leaning her elbows on the table. "And honestly? I could tolerate a few hours of just watching, for once."

Alec nodded, not pointing out how strange that sounded; at most, he'd been expecting an admission that she needed to ensure that the wheels were running smoothly.

And then he got it. She wasn't being Miranda, now, she was being Sophie. But Eliot was coming back, she was straightening in her seat, and the moment had passed.

Eliot set the drinks down before sitting next to him; the fact that he most likely just wanted to keep an eye on the door did little to quash the thrill Alec was feeling at the closeness.

Keep it cool, man. You're on the clock.
He glanced down at his computer, opening up the facial recognition and identification program, and was unsurprised to find that the younger guys watching the race only showed up in DMV files. The drunk with the crossword, though, there were red flags all over him.

"What is it?"

It was too loud to tell her, so he turned the laptop around to let her read for herself.

Nathan Ford had, up until recently, been employed as a fraud investigator by IYS Insurance. He'd been let go under circumstances that would take more than a cursory glance to unravel, but it was what he'd been doing with his time since then that had caught Alec's interest.

He was a con man, pure and simple. Son of Jimmy Ford, who Alec had actually heard of, and though his records bore fare fewer red flags than his father's, he'd probably pulled off some major jobs. From the looks of them, though, the payouts he'd gotten had been astoundingly small in comparison to what they could've been. It might've meant he just wasn't as into the lifestyle. It might've meant he was just better at hiding it.

Alec wasn't sure of what to make of the glances Ford kept sending their way, but it was becoming obvious that he was scoping them out through the mirror behind the bar. Alec shifted casually in his seat, leaning over his laptop a little more closely, but not so much that Eliot couldn't see what he was doing, should he happen to glance away from the television screen. A few keystrokes later, and he'd forwarded an auto-summary of Ford's profile highlights to Miranda's phone with a brief message:

*Only apparent connections to current situation seem locational. The player at the bar is a regular, but he might know something.*

She scanned over the profile casually, then set the phone aside, her eyes meeting Alec's, then Eliot's, in acknowledgement. It was the twitch of her eyebrows, though, that had him worried.

He redoubled his efforts on unwinding Nate Ford's story. If Miranda's grin meant what he thought it did, she was going to need everything he could get on him in very short order. As he worked, he listened to Miranda and Eliot strike up a conversation about the weather, him following her seamlessly as she began to drop details about coworkers they didn't have and a company that didn't exist. It was conversational cover, allowing him to work without attracting any undue attention, but he was careful to track what he could, rolling his eyes now and again, trying to give off the impression that he was irritated by the fact he was the only one of the three of them actually working while the two of them gossiped.

Apparently the race on the television's had been won and lost, and the two guys at the other end of the bar paid their tab and made their exit. The women in the corner booth had vacated several minutes ago. It was just them, for the time being, the Frequency and the Con Man.

Eliot was the first to finish his beer. "Another round?"

"It's my turn," Miranda said, smoothly. "Chuck?"

"I'm good," Alec indicated his glass with an irritated nod. He might have been imagining it, but he thought he could feel Ford's eyes burning into the side of his head. "Maybe after the report's, you know, actually done."

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"I was wondering how long it would take you to come up here."
Unfortunately, this was going exactly the way Eliot had worried it might. And Miranda was practically leading the charge, leaning against the bar next to Ford like that, her voice just this side of flirtatious. "Awfully certain of yourself, aren't you?"

Ford shrugged. "Certain of you, anyway." This was the moment that his eyes should've betrayed his intentions, but there was nothing besides genuine amusement and maybe one too many whiskeys as he leaned over to her, his voice dropping nearly an octave. "Are we on the Global Frequency?"

Miranda, to her credit, didn't flinch. "Not in any official capacity, no." In Eliot's estimation, she was being surprisingly upfront. Underneath the table, he tested the joints in his left arm. He'd oiled them. He was all set, if he needed to be.

Ford nodded, then looked up at Cora. "When you've got a moment, another round? Put them on my tab."

"Thank you," Miranda said as the bartender headed for the taps. "Would you like to join us?" And there it was, the undertone that Eliot had been waiting for. Just enough edge to her voice to make it more than a request but less than a command.

Ford mulled it over for a moment, stretched as he stood without putting on a show. He had a good ten years on Eliot, and another drink in his hand, but it didn't mean he didn't bear closer inspection. He had balls, though, offering her his arm like that as they headed back to the table. "Nate Ford," he said, introducing himself. "It's Ms. Zero, right?"

"Call me Miranda." It wasn't overt, but from here, she actually looked like she was enjoying herself. Flattered, at least, as she took his arm as they crossed back to their table.

"Mr. Spencer. Mr. Hardison," Ford nodded at them each in turn as they shook hands. "I'm a fan of your work."

Eliot frowned; mostly it was a reflex from being made, but Ford was putting it on a little thick.

Hardison sounded equally dubious. "A fan?"

"Well," Ford's mouth stretched into a grin, and Eliot couldn't help but think of shark teeth. "You do manage quite well, or so I hear tell. So tell me. What are everyone's favorite urban myths doing in this little hole in the wall?"

"We're looking for someone," Miranda said. "And we're actually hoping you might be able to help us."

At her nod- apparently he was used to rolling with it, where Miranda was concerned- Hardison swiveled his computer around to show Ford a few of the photos of Chaos he'd amassed. "Colin Mason. You ever hear of him?"

"Maybe." His eyes gave nothing at all away, but his next words were practically a given. "I suppose it might depend on why you're looking. Context, you know. Might help jog the memory."

"He hacked into something better left unhacked," Hardison replied. "We just want to know why."

"No you don't," Ford said, eyes not-quite narrowing in his direction. "You want to make sure he's not planning anything else."

Hardison smirked in what might've been irritation. "So you've met him."
Ford shrugged one shoulder, leaning back as Cora arrived with their drinks. "He was in and out of here a lot," Ford admitted, once she'd gone back to the bar.

Sophie nodded, but it was Hardison who spoke, without even looking up from his screen. "I don't suppose this place has a security camera?"

"It's a small bar," Ford's sidelong glance at Hardison said that he knew exactly what he was doing. "Big Brother wouldn't fit in here."

Eliot had read the exits, had already calculated the fifteen worst ways this encounter could go the moment Hardison had identified Ford. The most likely, he'd already figured, would be exactly this. Hardison's eyes flashing up in annoyance, then smirking. He was about to say something smart assed, and while it wasn't likely to lead to outright gunfire, the conversational trail was about to run very cold.

Which was probably why Miranda was rolling her eyes at Hardison and grinning apologetically at Ford, as if to say see what I have to deal with? Her eyes peered up at him through her lashes, she turned her body towards his, just a bit, giving the impression of moving closer though closing no distance.

Thing is, Eliot didn't know her well enough to tell exactly how calculated the gesture was. He'd only ever met her in person once or twice before, first in a locked room in a military compound that didn't officially exist, and again on an airstrip, five minutes before he'd gotten onto the chopper bound for the next town over. When she hadn't been barking orders, her words had been almost icily final.

This, Eliot supposed, was what she looked and sounded like when flirting. It honestly hadn't occurred to him that her doing so was even within the realm of possibility, though it was making sense in afterthought. She was a negotiator, first and foremost.

Ford, though, he looked like he knew he was being conned, and enjoying the hell out of it.

Eliot mostly kept his eye on the door, in case Ford was playing for time, and didn't actually tune out their conversation, though it wouldn't have mattered if he did. It wasn't going anywhere. They were circling each other, nothing more. Buttering each other up for some exchange of information that didn't actually seem to be coming.

He'd point it out, but making it even more obvious would only screw up whatever game it was they were playing. He glanced over at Hardison's screen, recognizing the data as bank transaction information, but he couldn't see who the accounts belonged to.

There was literally nothing for him to do here. Then Miranda's phone rang and she was answering. As Ford stood up to let her out of the booth, she passed him a card from inside her jacket. "We'll be in touch."

She nodded at the three of them, said, "Switzerland," to Hardison, and that was all they got by way of goodbye, from her. She was out the door two heartbeats later.

Hardison was already pulling up another screen. Ford was looking down at the business card and slipping it into his pocket. Since Eliot was the only one left, he was the one he spoke to, his eye darting to the synthskin on Eliot's wrist, seeing- as anyone who'd ever really looked had done- right through it.

"He's been in and out of here lately, but it's been a few days. This about that mess in Minnesota?"

Eliot said nothing, knowing that it was as good as an admission.
"Heard him on his phone in the alley arguing with someone about cash only. Might've been payment, might've been something else entirely. I'll put my feelers out, have something for you in a day or so, you mind passing it on to Aleph, there?"

Hardison glanced up at that, nodding as he looked back to his screen while dialing his phone.

Ford nodded, then downed the last of his whiskey. "I'll be in touch. You need to get a hold of me, I'll be disappointed if you can't figure it out. Nice meeting you, Spencer."

"You too," Eliot said, reaching out to shake his hand, wishing for the first time that it wasn't his left that had been augmented. There was a part of him that would've loved crushing Ford's bones until they broke.
Chapter 18

Sun., April 13, 2014 09:53 EDT (GMT-4)

"It's a small bar," Ford said. "Big Brother wouldn't fit in here."

As if Alec hadn't, by that point, already gotten three dozen hits on facial recognition with anything more than a swipe of his thumb across his phone. Like he hadn't run Nathan Ford through every local, county, state, federal and international database within the next five minutes.

Whatever, Alec decided, annoyed by his own annoyance, all thirteen hours of it.

Then again, if he didn't concentrate on the irritation, he knew exactly where his head would wind up. Because maybe, he admitted to himself, he should've taken Eliot up on his invitation. Then again, maybe he should've just kept his damned mouth shut.

"Gonna go hit the gym for a while," was all he'd said. "Interested?"

"You need to work out?" If he hadn't sounded so surprised as he'd said it, if he'd just managed to not accidentally sweep his eyes up over Eliot's legs and chest so damned transparently, it wouldn't have been so mortifying. He'd tried for a quick recovery, quickly shifting his attention to Eliot's right arm. "I mean, you've got all those enhancements, right?"

Yeah. As if that hadn't just dug the hole deeper. He'd cursed every spam email he'd ever read, because at that moment, his brain had decided to crash into the gutter at the word enhancement, Eliot had shook his head like he hadn't understood.

And then Eliot had smirked, right at him. "It don't matter what you've got if you don't know what to do with it."

Mercifully, he'd left shortly thereafter, leaving Alec to his embarrassment, but there was no way Eliot hadn't seen right through him.

What Alec kept coming back to, though? The fact that Eliot hadn't seemed like he'd minded.

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The hotel gym was small, nothing special, which wasn't really the reason why Eliot was heading back upstairs after only forty minutes. The real reason would probably fall apart under close scrutiny, though, even if it had him combing his fingers through his hair as he approached the room, trying to get it under some semblance of control.

The real reason might've been a misunderstanding. Even if Hardison hadn't been scared off by Eliot's tech, he'd been spooked, flustered. It might've been the fact that he'd just been caught checking out another dude unintentionally. It might've meant something else entirely.

"Perfect timing," Hardison said, leaning back from his computer as Eliot entered so that he could see the screen. There was no hint of his earlier embarrassment, here, and when Eliot looked, he found Miranda's face up on the computer's video relay. Any ideas Eliot might have been entertaining went right out the window.

"We were just starting to discuss the possibilities presented by our associate, yesterday," Miranda's voice was tinny; Eliot had to concentrate to hear her. Leaning over Hardison's shoulder to listen more
closely, he was suddenly aware that the sweat hadn't completely cooled from his skin. He probably stank.

"I need to grab a shower."

"I've only got a few minutes," Miranda replied. "So it'll have to wait. I'm sure Aleph won't mind."

"Uh, yeah." Hardison's voice sounded only slightly strangled. "It's cool."

It was impossible to catch his expression from here, and he wasn't turning around to make it easier for him. But Miranda's grin made him wonder what, exactly, they'd been talking about before he'd arrived. Then again, she always looked conspiratorial. It was probably nothing.

"All right," Eliot grabbed a chair and pulled it in next to Hardison to better see and hear. "What's the story, then? What do we make of Ford?"

Hardison shrugged. "I don't know. I mean. For a con guy who'd pulled the amount of crap he's pulled, you'd think he'd be better about using an alias. It's like, lookin' through it, he wants to get caught, half the time."

"So why isn't he in jail?"

"I'm pretty sure he's an informant." Eyebrows raised, Eliot's frown was skeptical. "Okay, check it. I don't have everything yet, but there's enough to establish a pattern. This is a dated list of people Ford screwed over. He's got some reach, too. Some of his targets, you've probably seen in the news, since Ford seems to have a thing for taking out corporate bigwigs." Minimizing the list, Hardison hooked into a CJIS database and entered a query. "Now it's not all of them, but most of his marks were arrested, or at least had warrants issued for their arrests, within a week of Ford taking them for everything they had."

"Yeah?"

"Going into the records, almost every single arrest report, whether it was Boston or L.A or Dallas, has the name Lieutenant Patrick Bonanno, somewhere in the record. The guy's local, but he heads up the Organized Crime Division for the State Police."

Eliot cut in. "Is he registered as an informant?"

"I'm not seeing it. Looks like whatever he's got going on, he and this Bonanno guy are handling it under the table. Also interesting, in case you were wondering..." Eliot hadn't been, but he followed Miranda's lead and nodded. "Every single one of Ford's target had, prior to ever coming into contact with him, been named as the defendant in one legal case or another, and they'd won. The people bringing the original charges, who usually at this point would be declaring bankruptcy, tend to get anonymous financial donations. Enough to make reparations, plus a little more for their troubles."

"He's a regular Robin Hood," Eliot muttered. It didn't mean he had to like the guy.

Hardison shrugged, skeptically. "Maybe more of a consulting criminal. Some Moriarty type of dude."

"Maybe he's more of a Holmes without a Watson," Miranda speculated, and her voice sounded surprisingly fond. "But we need to establish why he would be keeping an eye out for someone like Chaos."

Hardison shrugged. "So far, it looks like it's just locational. Chaos wandered into his field of view.
The bar is Ford's base of operation, so it makes sense that he'd be keeping an eye on the strangers, given his... profession? Trade?” He frowned, and glanced sideways at Eliot. "What do you call it when it's more likely to show up on a booking report than a resume?"

"Useful," Miranda said as Eliot shrugged. "I call it extremely useful."
"You're on the-"

"Global Frequency, I know, man. Only saw you like ten minutes ago."

"Are you always this grumpy when you're scoping out abandoned factories?"

"Only when we're going off a tip from a con man."

"Hey now, Miranda's an excellent judge of character. And if you're seriously telling me you're worried about your odds going up against Colin Freakin' Mason, I'm never going to be able to look you in the eye again."

"Ain't worried about the hacker. More concerned with his employers."

"Eh, I'll give you that one. How's it look in there? Got the bugs swept out yet?"

"There aren't any."

"Seriously?"

"Either that or you sent me out here with a piece of junk that doesn't work."

"Excuse me? Piece of junk?"

"You heard me. What's your ETA?"

"Just stashed the wheels. Checkin' the traffic cams. No sign of him yet."

"You think he's a no show?"

"I think he's...hang on. Yeah. Okay, I got Ford's car pulling up to the gate. Chaos is riding shotgun. You in position?"

"Just waitin' on you, man. All set down here."

"All right. I'm switching to comms and setting Zero on monitors. See you in a few."

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Zero had come on the line to monitor the operation, and she'd been multitasking while they waited, on a call with another agent 227. Eliot didn't know what 227's game was, but they kept using words like news cycle and network bleed and congress, but even though 324 came up only once, Eliot's attention kept catching on the words Big Wheel and retaliation.

Something was brewing, he'd known as much, but it wasn't a crisis yet. He was getting impatient, anyway. He'd already run through his usual waiting routines, taken inventory, and now he couldn't stop noticing the slight grinding in his elbow. It wasn't enough to be a potential problem, but it was irritating, like missing a spot shaving. He could already tell it was going to be a pain in the ass getting to it, but he still had another set of synthskins at the hotel, and this would be as good a reason as any to change them out.
"They're coming in," Hardison said, after what had started to feel like hours, as the door next to the loading dock opened, Zero ended her call.

"Oh, this is going to go well," a reedy voice complained as sunlight blazed into the mostly dark warehouse. He tapped his comm three times to signal Zero that they were now in play.

Mason was shaking his head, squinting into the darkness. He had his back to Ford, but the unease was plain on his face, though his tone was sarcastic. "Don't you think this is just a little obvious?"

"My business partners are as interested in privacy as you are." Ford's voice echoed as he shut the door behind him. The room was again plunged into shadow. Eliot tapped his earpiece, signaling the others, and watched as Nate made himself comfortable leaning against one of the rusting conveyor belts. "They should be here soon. Feel free to take a look around while we wait."

Eliot set his jaw. Though he'd assumed he'd have to move once they arrived, and has picked his hiding spot to allow for it, it was an irritation he'd hoped to avoid.

Only Chaos wasn't going very far. Either he trusted Ford, which was unlikely given his body language, or Ford's suggestion was having some sort of reverse-psychological effect. Chaos seemed content to poke at the bits of machinery and glance around at the far corners of the room as they waited.

Chaos had the look of a guy who'd been in decent shape, once, before slumping into adulthood. His lankiness was a little rounded at the edges, but his eyes were sharp, distrustful, and arrogant as hell.

"If your associates don't show, soon, I'm out of here," Chaos eventually said, and even from over here, it sounded like an empty threat. "Got better things to do than wait around all damned day."

"Payout like this, you're gonna want to hear them out."

"All right," Zero said. "Aleph, dear, it's time for your grand entrance."

Hardison'd had the car running for a few minutes, already, and now, listening carefully, Eliot could hear it coming up the block. It didn't attract Ford's or Mason's attention until it was pulling up right outside the loading dock, but then again, it wasn't supposed to.

"324," Hardison said, "Everything's all good?"

Eliot tapped his earpiece twice for yes, still wary of the warehouse's acoustics. With this much metal and concrete, it was hard to tell which noises would be amplified rather than muffled. His eyes never left Mason, though he was probably the least threatening guy he'd ever staked out. It was Ford, honestly, that had him concerned. While Hardison and Zero had seemed content to point out that he had no good reason to screw them over, the fact remained that he didn't have any good reason to help, either.

The sudden sunlight when the door opened made it hard, even with what was left of his optical enhancements, to make out Hardison's face, and it wasn't until Hardison made it halfway across the room before Mason reacted.

Eliot had been ready to move ever since he'd gotten here, he was just waiting for the trigger. If Mason was planning on doing anything stupid, he'd be getting to it right about now.

"Fucking Hardison. Of fucking course."

"Hello, Colin."
Apparently, Mason's best idea was to stare in outraged resignation.

"I see you two know each other, then," Ford said, stepping back towards the door. "That's my cue. Have a nice day."

Mason would probably be arguing with Ford, were his attention not so focused on Hardison. Neither of them watched Ford leave. Already, though, the confusion on Mason's face was clearing, leaving only the indignation.

"Don't crowd him, Aleph," Miranda warned. "Give him space."

Eliot watched as Hardison backed up a few steps. "Chaos, man. We need to talk."

"Apparently so," Mason crossed his arms, having apparently decided to hear him out. "Didn't know Ford was one of yours."

Hardison shrugged, not confirming or denying it.

"You know he ain't why we're talking. He just got us in the same room, is all."

"As him how well he knows Ford," Zero suggested, and Hardison followed her orders.

"Well enough that I'd let him offer me a job. Half the cash up front and a streamlined exit out of town."

"Yeah, but why were you still in town?"

Mason shrugged.

"The job's not done yet," Hardison's eyes widened in realization. "It's not, is it?"

Again, Mason's silence was as good as an admission, but it wasn't at all useful. He was nervous, that much was obvious, and he was probably wishing he'd made a better examination of the warehouse when Ford had given him the chance, but his searching glances were furtive and fleeting. He wasn't going to give Hardison the satisfaction of letting himself get caught searching for an escape route.

Not that there were any of any practical use.

"What do you want, Hardison?"

"I want to know who you're working for," Hardison crossed his arms. "Sooner rather than later."

Mason was scoffing even before Hardison had finished speaking, but he was starting to grin. "Yeah, right. That was stupid, Hardison."

"What?"

"You admitted you didn't know. Which means you've got no idea what you're up against."

Hardison rolled his eyes. "And you do?"

"Yes." Mason crossed his arms, smirking with intent, now. "Which means I've got a lot more leverage than you do."

That was as much as a cue as Eliot could hope for, but he held himself still, waiting to see if Mason would continue. It was Zero's voice in his ear that moved him forward.
"324? If you wouldn't mind stepping in? I don't know how much of their chattering I can listen to."

Eliot tapped an affirmative into earpiece, and stepped carefully from his post, slipping around the shelves at the edge of the room, eyes on Mason the entire time. Him catching sight of Eliot wasn't an immediate threat, but taking him by surprise wouldn't hurt.

As he stepped out behind Mason, though, Eliot noticed a certain unease. It wasn't anything that was happening in front of him- it was all in his head, apropos of nothing. Even with Zero's orders, he found himself waiting for something more.

Something like a shock to the brain that never came.

Hardison was glancing in his direction, however, and Mason was turning, and yeah, his eyes flashed in worry, but the smirk wasn't falling from his face.

"Nice try," Mason said, dismissing Eliot with a slight shrug before turning around again. "If he was half the threat you want me to think he was, you wouldn't be standing in here with him."

"Might not be getting mainlined kill commands any more," Eliot wondered, for a moment, whether or not he was tempting fate, but he didn't let on. "Then again, I don't need them. And I'm more than willing to kick your ass if you don't start telling us something useful."

"No offense, but the people I'm working for are a lot more powerful than you."

Hardison's smirk was pitying, and it was stupidly distracting, the way his eyes lit up in evil glee as he boasted. "You ever hear about anyone going up against us and winning?"

And then it was Mason's turn to smirk. "Not yet. But tell you what. You drive me to the airport, I'll give you a name. Deal?"

Eliot took a step towards him, measured and slow. "You really want to be making deals right now?"

Mason rolled his eyes at him. Knocking them back into his head would've been supremely satisfying. "Not as much as you guys want me to want to."

Zero was silent on the line, and Eliot glanced at Hardison to find the irritation set back into his features.

"Yeah," he said eventually. "It's a deal."

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Leaving Chaos under Eliot's supervision, Alec went out to get the truck from where he'd stashed it, taking the opportunity to check in with Miranda over the comms.

"He's toying with us. He knew we were coming."

"No shit. He literally sent us an invitation. You think it's a trap?"

"You think?" Eliot's sarcasm was followed by a curt, "what're you looking at," presumably directed at Chaos.

"Agreed," Miranda said. "Moving the venue is never a good sign. I'll alert airport security to be on the lookout for loiterers."

"You do that. I'll take the long way, buy them a little time to establish any behavioral patterns in the
crowd before we get there. I'm using the spray, you might want to pass it on to the locals."

Reaching the truck, he dug the microtracker spray out of the back seat, stepping back from the mist to keep it off of him as best he could. As long as Chaos was in an airport, the GF would be able to use The DHS sniffers to track the particles that rubbed off on his clothing.

Chaos might have plans, but Alec was prepared.

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"Washington," Chaos said, leaning into Eliot's window at the airport's drop-off zone, one hand on the roof.

"You got a first name?"

"That is the first. Last name, District of Freakin' Columbia. You might want to turn on the news once in a while, man. You're losing touch, Hardison." The smirk was back; he was obviously convinced that he'd won this round. It would be sitting a lot easier if Eliot knew otherwise, but neither Zero or Hardison were giving him a lead to follow, here. "I'll see you guys around, yeah?"

"Watching the news?" Eliot scowled once the window was up and Hardison had started steering carefully through the sea of cars and taxis. "The hell's he on about?"

"Oh, bugger," Zero sighed. "Bugger it all, I've got to go back to DC."

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Mon., April 14, 2014 13:00 EDT (GMT-4)

Mason was in the wind, but not nearly as much as he thought he was. Hardison was monitoring his microtrackers through the airport and had confirmed that he'd gotten on a plane to Detroit, and Zero had called in some of the locals to take over surveillance, though Eliot doubted he'd lead them anywhere interesting. As for Boston, they were nearly done here. After stopping by the tool store for supplies, there was nothing to do besides pack, clean up, and arrange a flight back to Chicago.

They weren't flying out until seven, irritatingly enough, but it meant there was enough time to take care of his elbow, if anything else. He sat down on the edge of the bed and grabbed the bag from the store, pulling out the toothbrush, some degreaser, some clean, shed-free rags, and a small bottle of oil. The unopened packet of synthskins, he set aside for now.

"Has Zero checked in yet?" He could go to the bathroom to do this, but the light was terrible in here and he didn't think Hardison would care much, anyhow. He glanced up, though it wasn't until he pulled off his undershirt that he had his attention. The skin never looked right, since the bioenhancements just didn't have the same structure as bone. But when Eliot's fingers found the seam up by his shoulder to unhook it from the anchor, Hardison dropped the pretense and started watching in earnest.

"Uh, sorry," Hardison said, once he realized he'd gotten caught staring. "Just. How often do you gotta change that out?"

"Varies. Once or twice a week, if I'm wearin' it at all." The skin caught, as usual, on the charge pack mount behind his elbow. "Depends on what I get into. Elbow's starting to grind, so I'm gonna clean it out."

"That looks like it's pain in the ass."
You don't know the half of it. Eliot, nodded, working the skin down to his wrist, then pulled it off completely, leaving the glove intact.

"Ah, you want some help with that?"

"Hmm? Thanks, but I..." Eliot glanced up at him in confusion, then back down at his arm. "Actually, I'll let you know."

Five minutes later, he still couldn't see exactly what it was that had gotten lodged inside his elbow, but dust, towel fibers, and all sorts of things could find their way into the joint given half a chance. Usually, it would stick to the oil itself, easy enough to wipe off, but today it had worked its way into the joint at the back of his elbow, in right in between the secondary piston and the charge pack mount. It was a pain in the ass, one contortion after the next, to work the degreaser-soaked toothbrush in at any useful angle or pressure.

Hardison had been watching closely enough- a fact that had kept Eliot's head down and resolutely on task- to identify the issue. "I got an air can, but I'm guessing it'll only jam it in worse." He was already gesturing at the brush in Eliot's other hand. "Want me to-"

It wasn't a great idea. He could get it himself, eventually, but Eliot found himself shrugging instead. "You mind?"

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"Hey," Eliot grumbled, "watch it, would you?"

Finding a good angle to get at the joint just wasn't happening, and Alec found himself kneeling on the bed, trying to twist Eliot's arm in ways that for all of it's design, it just wasn't meant to go. Up close, and despite the fact that he knew exactly what Eliot was capable of, the tech looked dauntingly fragile.

"Says the man who uses a toothbrush to clean several million dollars' worth of prosthetic technology. Turn that way, would you?"

"Laroque tried setting me up with these stupid little sponge things. They looked like makeup applicators and didn't work for shit." Eliot brought his elbow up behind him his hand resting against the bed next to Alec's knee. Just close enough to touch, but it could've been an accident.

"Yeah?" There was a joke there, if he could focus enough to find it. Eliot's chest had been distracting enough, but the feeling of Eliot's shoulder, under his hand, was even worse. The skin curving over his shoulder was smooth, with three jagged, raw scars radiating out from the embedded metal, and if he stopped to examine it too closely, they'd never be done. He managed to work the brush in, working carefully. "So, just wondering. Can you feel this?"

Eliot nodded, the muscles of his shoulder flexing with the movement; the feeling of the metal joining flesh underneath his hand was suddenly fascinating. "You see how the rods have those raised lines?"

"Yeah?" Upon closer examination, he found that he could make out hair-thin ridges criss-crossing over the metal. They were so faint that when brushed the pad of his finger along the main rod, he could barely feel them. Eliot, though, glanced down, startled, then away again as he went still.

"Electrical receptors. Work like nerves."

"How well do they work? Compared to your other arm, I mean."
"I dunno. Feels different, but I'm used to it."

Eliot's shoulders remained tense, and his hair had fallen into his face, so Alec got back to work, focusing on the metal and not the skin, not the fact that his hand was close enough to Eliot's throat that he could feel his pulse under his ring finger.

"Okay," he eventually said, when he thought he might've gotten it, and pulled back up to give Eliot some space. "How's that?"

Eliot extended his arm experimentally, rotating his wrist and bending it again, still not meeting his eyes. Across the room, Alec could just make out their reflection in the mirror, sitting on the bed like this, his hand still on Eliot's shoulder. He glanced away, maybe a bit too suddenly when his eyes met Eliot's.

"Better, thanks."

Eliot hadn't asked, but Alec was already opening the package of shop rags, blotting off the extra degreaser. The metal underneath his fingers was familiar, now, and it was ridiculous to think that it would break so easily. "Still good?" His heart had climbed into his throat. It was hard to get the words out.

"Huh?" Eliot blinked, handing him the bottle of oil wordlessly, and the gesture felt charged, somehow. It might've merely been a figment of Alec's imagination, but Eliot was staring at him, now.

He was watching him work, and wasn't shrugging him off, and he was starting to relax, incrementally.

Alec couldn't breathe, dripping the lube-no, the oil-carefully into the joint, watching it slick itself down into the workings. He tried to think of something to say-he'd wanted to ask about the charge pack and the cartridge clip, but he just couldn't think, couldn't form the questions.

Eliot's hand twitched against Alec's calf, and it didn't feel like flesh at all, but it did feel an awful lot like an answer.

He looked up to confirm, his heart choking him completely now. Eliot didn't look like he was breathing, either.

He didn't know where to start, how to phrase it. He only managed one word as he squeezed Eliot's shoulder. "Yeah?"

Eliot flexed his hand again, his fingers pressing more firmly against Hardison's leg. His mouth twitched a smile.

"Yeah."

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Hardison was wide-eyed and nervous, finally moving his hand from Eliot's shoulder-he'd never particularly liked being touched there, the metal was too hard to ignore-to curve around his neck, fingers scratching up into his hair. His eyes only closed when Eliot turned his head those last few degrees and kissed him.

As the kiss deepened, neither of them moved, both too aware of their precarious position on the bed. He had a grip on Hardison's thigh, now, but not tight enough to bruise. He grabbed Hardison's bicep,
pulled him in a bit closer, but not enough to send them sprawling. Not enough to jar either of them into realizing what a stupid idea this might turn out to be. There were fingers were carding through his hair, wrapping around to his ear, rubbing at the back of his neck. Despite the thrill of Hardison's fingers trailing unflinchingly over the receptors- it was intense, having someone work them so unflinchingly, and it was transmitting down into his core- the light touch felt like he was waiting for some kind of permission. Eliot shifted slightly, because if Hardison wasn't actually as into this as he was, there was no reason to let him know how hard he'd gotten. It took him a few moments to get himself under control enough to break off.

"You don't gotta be so careful."

"Ain't planning on undoing all my work," Hardison replied, smirking like he was bolder than he was, though his hand was stroking down Eliot's back and hooking into his waistband. It was what he said next, though, that nearly off-lined him completely. "Believe me, the gloves will come off when your skin's back on."

Just like that. Like the fact that his skin not being on wasn't even on his radar.

Like maybe it wouldn't turn out to be a deal-breaker.

He'd already wanted to kiss Hardison, and then some. For a while, anyway, because Hardison was always one on the line who said exactly what Eliot needed to hear. He fed him his intel, he found him his exits. And even now that he had first-hand evidence of what Eliot actually was, he wasn't looking for the door.

He did pull away, though, just enough to pass him the synthskin, and he came back when Eliot pulled, his mouth crashing easily against his own.
The scars on Eliot's skin were faint, precise things. If he concentrated, Alec could trace the straight lines to their deliberate angles, follow them anywhere at all on Eliot's body. They weren't a distraction, just a road map, though it was possible Eliot saw it differently, because he was rising up to look down at him, his hair falling forward over his shoulders, blocking nearly everything else from sight.

"You good with this?"

"Obviously," Alec smirked, grabbing Eliot's hair and pulling it back, out of the way. Though it was mostly a lost cause, it gave him the excuse and means to pull him down again. It was hard to tell if Eliot wanted him to avoid the arm, or if he honestly didn't care. The synthetic skin was just a little smooth, a little cool, but Alec had studied it enough already, and it wasn't nearly as interesting as the feeling of Eliot rubbing against his hip as they kissed, falling back into the pattern they'd lost while getting undressed.

He shifted slightly, just enough that Eliot could slide his leg in between Alec's knees, grinding down deliberately, their rhythm stumbling as fingers wrapped around flesh, and collapsing completely under the urgency. When Eliot wasn't speaking or laughing, he was quiet enough that Alec wouldn't have been able to tell whose breaths were whose were it not for Eliot's chest expanding against his own, or the way Eliot's arm, braced against Alec's side- it felt like an appliance stuck in bed with them- shifted with every inhalation.

And then it shifted. Eliot's hand moved from the bed to Alec's hip, pressing him down into place as he began hasten his strokes. Alec couldn't do more than try to follow the stars that were shooting up through him like static.

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"You want first shower?"

"Go ahead." Hardison didn't open his eyes. "I'm just gonna..."

"Hey, no dozing off."

Hardison scowled mournfully before burying his face in the pillow, then flipped him off. His hand, when it fell, landed on Eliot's hip. Figuring he'd give him a minute, he tried not to grin, but out of the corner of his eye, over on the desk, Eliot saw red.

"No, seriously, man," Eliot leaned back away; it wasn't hard to predict Hardison's reactions. "Your computer's blinking like crazy."

As expected, he bolted upright, arms splaying out, searching for his boxers. He was in front of the screen a moment later, cursing loudly, clicking through notifications faster than Eliot could track them. Eliot moved to look over his shoulder, but it wasn't making any more sense close up.

"What is it?"
"Fuck, give me a minute. Go shower, I need-" Hardison froze, startled by the sharpness of his tone, and glanced up anxiously, catching Eliot's arm. "Shit, sorry, I- crisis mode, you know?"

"No worries," Eliot reached over and grabbed the earbud from the desk, pressing it into Hardison's hand and kissing the side of his head. "Do what you got to. I'll make it quick."

In the bathroom, he checked the seal on his skin and opened up the shitty bar of hotel soap as he waited for the shower to heat up, feeling vaguely relieved. He'd been expecting Hardison to open his eyes, take one look at him, and think twice.

He'd take his wins where he could find them.

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"We've got a problem," Hardison's eyes were wide, panicked, when Eliot came back into the room. "What? Why?"

"Senator Sorenson wants to dismantle the GF," he replied, grabbing a change of clothes out of his bag. "It's all over the news. We're going to war."

Eliot turned on the television, wincing at the first news channel he found. Prairie Island, again, and his digitally rendered face on the screen.

"...branding the group known as the Global Frequency as a terrorist organization. Senator Sorenson, of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, is spearheading the investigation, a measure that's been met with unilateral support. According to an unnamed source at the Pentagon, top operatives within the organization have already been identified, and several warrants have been issued. The newscaster frowned at the camera, shaking her head slightly in confusion. "Folks, we're already getting an update on the story. It seems that the suspected head of the Global Frequency, Miranda Zero, has been taken into custody."

Fuck.

Hardison was moving back to the computer already, dropping his clothes on the table next to it before pounding out a short barrage of something into the keyboard. Eliot didn't like the way he was baring his teeth at the screen.

"If they've got warrants, they're gonna be hitting the hub."

Clearly aware of this, Hardison nodded as he thumbed at his phone's screen. "Yeah. Which is why, now that I've arranged our transport, I'm setting the self-destruct."

"What? You can't just-"

"I just did."

"It's underground, beneath a massively populated-"

Hardison's hand shot up before his eyes did. "Figure of speech. Just destroying all the data and bricking the servers. Bunch of dead computers won't do anyone any good."

"So all the GF's intel-"

"Is also backed up at the Beta Hub." When Eliot didn't say anything, he raised his head to actually look at him. "Miranda always figured something like this would happen."
It was something, at least. "She happen to set up any other useful protocols?"

"Only about five dozen that I know about." Hardison took a breath, and finally seemed to be losing some of the wide-eyed panic he'd been wearing the moment before. Apparently Eliot wasn't the only one who worked best when he had a plan. "Shutdown's done it's thing. You phone's about to ring."

Right on cue, there was a vibration coming from the table. Eliot picked it up and read the text message. "BLACKOUT. Hub shutdown complete. Report to DC: 1420 U St NW ASAP for further instructions. Tails unwelcome." As he was reading, another message arrived. "BLACKOUT. US Agents: assume you've been compromised. Evade if you can, do not resist if you can't. We've got you."

"Everyone's getting that second one," Hardison explained. "You and the other reinforcements are the only ones to get the first."

"Reinforcements?" Eliot frowned. The GF kept their agents scattered and sparse. The movement of several agents to one location was a dangerous move. "You think we need them?"

Hardison nodded, then gestured at the television. "The Feds are declaring war without reason, you're damned right I'm rounding up some generals."

"Without reason?" Eliot shook his head. "I attacked Prairie Island."

"Infiltrated, maybe." Hardison's nearly-pinching fingers were describing the hair's breadth difference. "You didn't cause enough of a crisis, drop enough bodies, to warrant this much of a response. If they were waiting on an excuse to come after us, I can think of about half a dozen cases in the past two years they could've hung us on. Instead they wait for this?" He shook his head, and Eliot found himself nodding in response. He saw his point. "I don't buy it. No. There's something else going on."

"Got any idea what that might be?"

Hardison's answering shrug wasn't particularly comforting.

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Mon., April 14, 2014 21:30 EDT (GMT-4)

Agent 518- Sheppard, to his friends- had gotten the message, and had the plane ready to go by the time Alec and Eliot arrived at the airstrip. Once they were in the air, Alec had been expecting questions, but Sheppard wasn't asking.

There wouldn't have been time to go into it even if Sheppard had been planning on sticking to his logged flight plan, which was officially slated to have him touching down outside Richmond, and that, combined with the noise from the Beechcraft's engines, was really just as well.

Of all the things Alec could be worrying about right now, how badly he might've screwed up by screwing around with Eliot should've been a lot further down the list than it was. And if the scene back at the hotel was just one time deal, he wouldn't even have to go into it. And maybe that would be for the best.

It definitely beat the hell out of telling Eliot that, were it not for an alien meme implanting itself in his brain, he probably wouldn't have given him a second glance. Or explaining that just because his brain hadn't reset itself yet didn't mean it couldn't, one day.

Based off what he'd found on everyone else living in his old neighborhood, there was a thirty percent
chance that it would've happened by now. The possibility of that percentage growing higher—of the meme's effects fading at different rates in different brains—still existed. And now, every time he found himself checking out a woman on the street, the thought would cross his mind that maybe it had.

Now, though, for the first time since it all started, the possibility actually worried him.

But he should probably at least warn Eliot, even if meant making it sound like the crush he'd been carrying for months has been nothing more than a glitch.

*Because yeah, Alec thought irritably, that won't make him feel like crap. Not at all.*

Through the headset, Sheppard was announcing their emergency landing and contacting the airstrip to request permission to land for an emergency systems check.

"I'm on course for Richmond," he was explaining, once radio communications were established. It wasn't even a lie, he'd be continuing onwards as soon as Alec and Eliot were dodging out towards the waiting truck. "My fuel gauge is all over the place- I'm pretty sure it's just the sensor, but I need to be sure."

He'd used the trick once before in reverse, touching down to grab Miranda and the Ambassador out of London before her disappearance and his escape had even been noticed.

It was even easier, it turned out, when he was dropping off instead of picking up. He'd loosened the wire he'd needed and kept the locals' attention on the plane at the end of the strip instead of the guys sprinting across the field toward the trees.

Eliot was the first one to spot the truck, and he insisted on driving. He set the radio on low—some country station that Alec would've complained about if it hadn't meant catching Eliot's attention and the possibility of having to converse. He kept his eyes closed instead. It was late enough that the need for sleep was real, anyway.

If Eliot read anything more into it, he only hummed along with the music.

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Traffic, once they hit town, was a complete and utter bitch. By the time they made it to the Beta Hub—Hardison had broken his silence long enough to explain that it was set up in the basement of an office building that had housed a GIS startup that had been mothballed in '08—the quiet had become suffocating.

Hardison was sleeping, now; he'd only been pretending up until a little while ago, when his breathing had evened out and his fists he'd been resting on his lap had eased open.

Eliot had been waiting for it, some sort of awkward, stilted conversation as the miles passed, because Hardison seemed the type to go in for that sort of thing, the kind of guy who'd need to talk about it, but apparently, he'd been wrong. It should've been a relief.

He knew what he looked like in the mirror. It wasn't like it was the sort of thing that most people could ignore. Usually, people either fetishized his bioenhancements, or tried to ignore them completely. They never just *rolled with it*, and maybe it would've been better if Hardison hadn't. At least Eliot would have some idea about what to expect next: fascination fading into awkwardness the moment the novelty wore off, and interest waning as the reality—that the enhancements didn't make him any more exotic or fascinating than anyone else-set in.

And maybe Hardison got that already.
Maybe there just wasn't anything to talk about.

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**Mon., April 14, 2014 22:57 EDT (GMT-4)**

The Beta Hub could've been any shitty basement office in any building, anywhere in the world, were it not for the three rows of servers jutting into the middle of the room or the gigantic screen running along the far wall. The screen was turned off, for now; it actually looked like it was sucking the light out of the room. Or maybe it was just the company.

Three agents were already gathered around the table; Parker was sitting furthest away from the others; she stopped glaring at them long enough to nod at Eliot, but otherwise said nothing.

On the other end of the table, wearing an expensive suit, was the evident source of Parker's annoyance. He was skinny, about five foot nine, and had this uplifted stubborn tilt to his head; he and Parker obviously had some history, and he was probably the only one amused by it. His smirk set Eliot's teeth on edge.

Eliot sat down next to Parker, but wasn't so deliberate as to lean into their field of vision. This wasn't about protecting Parker- she didn't really need it, and giving the other guy the impression that she did wouldn't do anyone any favors- but things were crazy, right now, and here at the table, Parker was the closest ally he had.

The guy seemed hell bent on not noticing him, but the blonde woman sitting across from him definitely had; she buried a smirk and glancing between Parker and the Suit as she nodded back at Eliot.

"Well, *Aleph*, are we strictly on code numbers for this job, or are you going to introduce us?"

The room brightened another degree; yet another computer screen coming to life; the florescent lights up above were practically lost in the blue, and none of the weak light quite made it back into the corners. Getting up to investigate them would've shifted everyone's attention off of Hardison, though, who was finally turning around, looking like he might actually start explaining this shit.

"Oh. Sorry, right. Forgot y'all don't necessarily, you know-" he shook himself.

"Tara Cole," he pointed at the blonde. "Did a little time in the CIA, but you're currently consulting with the DOJ on half a dozen federal cases, is that right? Strong background in cryptography, social engineering, and a little bit of hand-to-hand. Also the best grifter I know who isn't currently behind bars."

"Which basically means I'm the best grifter you know," Tara grinned, leaning back in her chair.

Hardison raised his hands, standing corrected. "This is true," he continued his meandering around the table, stopping next to Parker. "Now, moving on to our thieves. This here is Parker. Even *I* don't know if she's ever been caught, but she can get in anywhere. This gentleman over here is Apollo, and though I know he's been caught-"

"By *me*," Parker announced, practically bouncing in her seat.

"Whatever," Apollo rolled his eyes, but was prevented from saying more by Hardison.

"And yes, as far as the elephant in the room goes, they're quite the competitive little twosome, but I'm
just gonna table that entire argument for another day," he looked back and forth between the two of them, his grin becoming determined as a decision was reached. "I'm also going take perverse pleasure from forcing y'all to work together."

As their glares shifted and became a unified front against him, he stepped back, a little too quickly to be casual. "All right. Eliot Spencer. General ass-kicking, retrieval, logistics and-

"Getting caught on camera?" Apollo shrugged in mock apology.

Of course they already knew; he'd expected as much. Eliot didn't glare. Didn't react at all.

"Don't generally make a habit of it, no."

Hardison did, though, and while he didn't exactly glare at Apollo, it wouldn't have taken much to push his expression over that final degree. "Extenuating circumstances. Old news."

"That's really quite comforting," a man's voice said, followed a moment later by the man himself, stepping carefully past the end of the towers. He was short, bordering on stocky and he needed a shave. "Seeing as how every single news agency's just waiting for new footage."

Hardison's eyes were wide, but they were focused on Eliot; he hadn't even realized he'd jumped to his feet. The man, meanwhile, merely regarded Eliot with amused disdain.

"Everybody, this is Jim Sterling," Hardison announced warily. "INTERPOL."
Chapter 21

Mon., April 14, 2014 23:25 EDT (GMT-4)

Though Eliot had been the one ready to attack Sterling at the slightest push, it was Tara who seemed to be having the most trouble with Sterling's presence. She wouldn't bother to look so relaxed right now if she honestly didn't mind it. Even the thieves, who'd probably had more to worry about from his presence, seemed nonplussed. Then again, Alec hadn't been planning on pairing either of them with Sterling, at least not right away.

"Okay. First order of business is finding out how screwed we are," Alec said. "Sterling, I need you to find out how badly burned we are. I'm going to need the names of all agents that have been identified by name or handle. Especially the crew, here, since I need to know who I'm going to be able to put in play for face to face."

Tara frowned. "Pardon me for asking, and no offense, but I'm pretty sure my contacts are better positioned to actually know anything. Why are you giving this to Sterling?"

"One, he's on the Frequency for his investigating skills, and this is an investigation. Like it or not, you're too close. Your contacts could be what ends up burning you if we don't clear them first. We need to assume that we're low on access right now, and, well-"

"There's a lot to be said for immunity," Sterling finished, grinning. "Even if my own name shows up on the list of suspects, there's not a damned thing your Government's Department of Homeland Insecurities can do about it without turning it into an international crisis."

"Why would it become one?" Parker glanced at Eliot, then Alec, even though the question was ostensibly being directed at Sterling.

Before anyone could answer, though, Tara replied. "Because the US has a remarkably short memory when it comes to things like this. We- the GF- still have a better track record than the UN for worldwide crisis response. The US is the only one with an ego, or, well, military, large enough to think they'd be better off without us." She leaned over the table, her earlier concerns regarding Sterling apparently alleviated, possibly due to his nodding along as she spoke. "INTERPOL gets wind that the US is overstepping their bounds with this investigation, say, by arresting one of their agents, it might complicate things on the international scene."

Both she and Sterling looked at Parker to see if the reply had answered her question, but Parker merely stared back at them with a blank expression, but her hands were already on the table. She looked like she was ready to flee. Down the table, Apollo rolled his eyes, drumming his fingers on the table top.

Alec suddenly felt very tired. He wasn't looking forward to this next part of the discussion.

"All right. Apollo, Parker. Unless Tara and Sterling are able to somehow convince congress to drop the investigation, I'm going to need you guys ready to bust Miranda out. To that end, I need to know where they're hiding her, and five rough plans to get her out as soon as you can manage." His suggestions were met with stony glares. They weren't looking at each other, but it was probably as close to a unified front as he could hope to expect so soon. "So. Yeah. Just let me know what you need."

The answering silence was becoming awkward, and Alec took a few steps to the side, as if there was
any hope in ducking it, stopping next to Eliot's chair.

"Okay, so. Everybody? I trust all of you, you know I do, so I apologize in advance, but I'm gonna need you to run your ideas past Eliot, here." He put his hand on Eliot's shoulder, just long enough to register the warm flannel. He moved it again before he could register anything more.

Eliot had tilted his head back, not far enough to meet his eyes, waiting for an explanation with raised eyebrows. Whether he was just waiting for more information, or actually surprised, was impossible to tell from this angle.

Apollo, down at the end of the table, was the one to ask the obvious question.

"Why?"

"Because the Frequency, as it stands now, is just the six of us, and we can't afford for any of you to get burned, tailed, caught, arrested, shot, or kidnapped by aliens. Call it risk management, threat assessment, whatever you like, but-"

"Technically, it's asset protection," Sterling interjected.

"What he said," Alec amended, then looked back and forth between the thieves. "Look. I know ya'll are more than capable of getting out of a tight corner without being seen, but usually, when you're out in the field, it's a quick in and out. We could be at this for weeks, and that's a lot of attention in your general direction that I don't like."

Eliot swiveled in his chair; he was frowning. When he eventually spoke, though, his reservations weren't the ones that Alec would've predicted. "Can't you just-" he mimed typing, "all this? Safer, ain't it?"

Alec nodded. "Ideally, yeah. But we're not just looking for a booking report. Our goal here is to find out why all this is really happening, and I don't think it's just going to be filed away on a computer somewhere. But between you two," he looked up at Tara and Sterling, "We should have enough personal access to get a start. Whenever you're ready."

"Well, I do have plans to meet Representative MacAllen for lunch tomorrow." Tara shrugged, sending Sterling's eyebrows right up towards his hairline. "He's on the House committee for Homeland Security," Tara explained. "I'm highlighting some details in the Executive Summary that's coming out in three weeks, but it should be easy enough to shift the conversation around."

Sterling snorted. "Just like that?"

"Just like that."

They'd gotten through the bulk of it, now all that was left were the bits and bobs. Alec wiped his hands on his jeans and glanced around the room, trying to remember where he'd stashed the backup phones.

"What time?" Sterling was asking Tara, as Alec scanned the shelves across from the servers.

"Twelve thirty."

The phones weren't here. "Okay. Sterling, your first priority is checking up on MacAllen before she goes out to meet him. Let us know if she's burned. Eliot, you're tailing her. We meet back here in thirty six hours to compare notes and come up with a plan."
There was a drawer around here somewhere- no. He'd put the phones in the dock cabinet last month. It would take a good five minutes to get them all sorted out, updated and distributed, and then they could get out of here.

Which reminded him. And gave him the first really good idea he'd had since they'd gotten here.

"Parker. Apollo." He called out over his shoulder, initializing the first phone on the shelf to make sure it worked. "We need cash. About five grand to start. Be back in twenty."

As he brought the phones online and checked their download connections, he realized that the room behind him had gone suddenly silent. He looked up from what he was doing to three surprised stares. Parker and Apollo were already gone.

"What? Call it a team-building exercise."

The phones were all set with each other's numbers, trackers, recorders, relays, and uplinks into the usual programs before he glanced up again. Eliot, Sterling and Tara had found something to talk about in the meantime- the news, it sounded like. The situation in Libya. Wait, no. Counterterrorism *ground strategies* for the situation in Libya. It was the sort of thing that, any other week, would've been front and center on Alec's radar.

As far as the Hub's computers were concerned, it still probably was. Alec could see the alerts flashing on the screens out of the corner of his eye, but he'd look at them more closely once the others had left.

He'd have to just look, though. He couldn't send anyone out to fix *anything*, right now. Tonight, he still had to focus on catching up on Miranda's situation. The red alerts flashing in the background would have to *stay* in the background.

For the time being, until they got this handled, the world was on its own.

There was a cot in the supply closet; contemplating it only made him miss the couch in Chicago, his bedroom off the back of it all, the ability to actually *do* something, or at least have Parker drop in unannounced to keep him company while he tried. When she and Apollo got back, the six of them would go their separate ways, though. Scattering was the SOP for long ops like this, splitting up to reduce the odds of being noticed.

Eliot would be going his own way, just like the rest of them, and it was safer that way.

They'd been living in each other's pockets for days, anyhow.

And Alec needed his head in the game.

Eliot, he was pretty sure, would get it.

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_Tues., April 15, 2014 0:12 EDT (GMT-4)_

Eliot shoved the stack of bills Parker had handed him- enough for a hotel room and supplies- into his jacket's interior pocket. Her promise of *more, whenever he needed it, just say the word*, would be hard to ignore any other time, but he was deliberately trying to keep it in his head, right now.

She and the others had already split; now it was just him and Hardison, who, despite what he'd said, didn't look like he was about to crash out any time soon. He'd pulled up a chair and had parked
himself in front of the computer, already getting to work.

"Hey." Eliot wondered if he'd actually spoken aloud or just thought about it; Hardison didn't react. Given how intensely he was typing away, maybe he didn't want to be interrupted.

Getting Miranda cleared was the priority. Eliot only needed to know if the what had happened back at the hotel wouldn't be getting in the way. Actually wanting to know what Hardison thought about it, well, wants weren't needs, and now wasn't the time.

Eliot was already shifting his weight, preparing to turn towards the door, when Hardison finally looked up, eyebrows raised. It felt like being caught out, even though he'd been the one trying to get them talking in the first place.

"You need to actually sleep sometime, you know." It was an opening, not what he'd intended, but close enough. Beyond that, he was winging it.

"Tell me about it." Hardison's skin looked dead, bathed in the light from the screen, and the bleariness in his eyes was throwing Eliot off balance; he'd honestly been expecting Hardison to fight or at least prevaricate. Hardison rolled his head on his neck and winced before jutting a thumb over his shoulder. "Got a cot in the back with my name on it."

"Yeah, well. Don't stay up so late that you're useless tomorrow. I'm gonna see about a room at the joint down the block," Eliot decided. He knew he was skirting the edges of broken field protocol, so he didn't push it. "Let me know if you need anything."

Hardison regarded him for a moment, his eyes unreadable in the computer glare, then smiled. Even broken as it was by a yawn that couldn't be stifled, Eliot realized he'd kind of been waiting for that, or maybe just hoping for it.

He was gone, though, halfway down the block, before he could admit it.

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Tues., April 15, 2014 03:00 EDT (GMT-4)

The bedsheets felt like plastic. Eliot could've afforded a lot more, but the cash that Parker had given him would've attracted attention at the Hilton two blocks south, which had been out of the question anyway. Five-star hotels tended to pay their clerks well enough that they found it worthwhile to stay awake through their shifts, as opposed to the tired woman on the desk downstairs who'd been nice enough, but far too exhausted to notice- much less register- Eliot's face.

Eliot could hear the guy in the room next to his, bitching into his phone about those assholes in project management. Whoever was in the room across the hall was watching some late night talk show as they paced across the floor, back and forth. Someone was having sex upstairs, though it was impossible to tell if there was more than one person involved. Three women, down at the south end of the hall, had stumbled in drunkenly some time ago, but apart from the occasional fit of giggling, it finally sounded like they were turning in for the night.

If he'd been trying to sleep, the noise might've bothered him; now it was merely a diversion. He'd had the layout of the hotel, with every exit point and kill box noted and filed within ten minutes of arrival. His phone was charging on the table by the door, easy to grab on his way out. He'd tested the contacts on his charge pack, re-stashing them carefully in his pockets three different times. The only things worth watching on television were the news feeds, which had managed to be infuriatingly vague and too damned precise all at once.
Ditching his contacts and jeans and getting into bed had been less about sleep, and more about preventing himself from stalking out of this room, down onto the streets, looking for answers, and probably making this entire mess go critical.

On a good bad day, he'd go to work, go home, and maybe his phone would ring. Hardison would be on the other line, he'd patch Miranda in, and they'd tell him that the worst thing in the world had happened, but then they'd tell him that transport was heading his way. He'd hit the ground running, and then, usually, he'd fix it.

This week, though, he'd hung out in one hotel room or another, just waiting, and the closest he'd come to knowing what he was supposed to do next had been twelve hours ago, too aware of Hardison's hand on the metal rig of his shoulder, of how perfect his teeth were as he'd leaned in to kiss him back.

The bitch of it was that it hadn't felt like a mistake then, and that he hadn't yet managed to convince himself that it was. Maybe it was the fact that for the first time in a week- hell, less than a week- he and Hardison weren't breathing the same air. Or maybe he was finally forcing himself to just deal with it like the problem he hadn't wanted to admit that it was.

He didn't need to know the inner workings of DC backroom dealings, or have the identity of whoever it was who'd been fucking with his operational directives, to guess the worst case scenarios for this thing with Hardison.

Eliot could kill, he'd done it before, and he'd probably have to do it again. The possibility was never really off the table. The few times Frequency ops had gone so badly that it had become necessary, Hardison had been miles and miles away, only aware of it through the comm lines. His being on the ground with Eliot, the way he was now, wouldn't just expose him to it, it was practically begging for the inevitability. Hardison might've shrugged off the tech, but watching someone he'd slept with end someone's life might be a little much to handle.

And it had been nice, Eliot thought, hanging out with someone who wasn't terrified of him; he'd miss it if it happened. But it still wasn't the nightmare scenario he was worried about.

Most of the opponents Eliot had gone up against had been good- very good. It went with the territory, since two-bit nobodies rarely caught the GF's attention. Nine times out of ten, Eliot was going up against an opponent who was skilled enough to know to exploit whatever chink in his armor they could find.

The people Eliot cared about were merely hostages in waiting. He'd leaned it young- all his siblings had- and he'd never forgotten the lessons.

But he hadn't really wanted to, until now.

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If the hotel had been quieter, if there hadn't been so much noise bleeding through the paper-thin walls, he would've been aware of the footsteps in the hallway a lot sooner. He would've been on his feet before he'd even registered the quiet knocking on the door.

"Yeah?"

There was another creak from the hallway. Weight shifting. Hesitation. Someone deciding.

Hardison's voice.
"It's me. You still up?"
Chapter 22

Tues., April 15, 2014 04:08 EDT (GMT-4)

"It's me. You still up?"

The door opened a moment later, and Alec was frozen to the spot by two blight blue lights.

They flickered when Eliot blinked at him. Alec had- somehow and apparently- forgotten all about the contacts Eliot wore, though he was saved from saying something inevitable about it when Eliot grabbed his arm and pulled him inside. The overhead light came on an instant later, and while that electric blue was still obvious, at least Alec could read Eliot's face now. Already, the apprehensive scowl was fading as Eliot regarded him, though it didn't go away completely. He still might've been worried that Alec was going to fall asleep standing up. As reasons for concern went, it didn't even rate.

"What's going on?"

"The cot sucked," Alec replied, though it had been less about the cot and more about its location. Even once he'd finally shut the monitors off, he'd been able to read the hub's system's activity through the door that he hadn't been able to bring himself to close. He'd left himself a good view of the last tower in the aisle. The seven points of steady green up on top meant that the internal systems were running smoothly, and the constantly scattering blue LEDs below meant that the crypto was randomizing properly. Though the server routing emergency alerts was on the other side of the stack, he'd been able to see the red flashes of the alert system reflecting off the legs of two chairs by the empty conference table.

It had just been too damned depressing, the hints of crises firing out into an empty basement, with nobody there to see them, no resources to send, and no clear lines to send them with. He'd even been expecting as much when he'd bricked the Chicago hub and gave the burn order. He just hadn't spared a thought that he wouldn't know how to sleep, afterwards.

He was too tired, standing in Eliot's room, watching him retreat to the bathroom, to explain all that, though he knew he should probably try saying something.

"Don't gotta mess with them on my account," he said, too loudly and suddenly, as Eliot finished washing his hands before reaching for the case that contained his contacts.

"Kinda do," Eliot shrugged, leaning in towards the mirror and inserting the first lens, his words muffled. "You'll never get any sleep, otherwise."

He didn't argue, because he had hacked the reservation systems of the three hotels within walking distance just because of flickering lights in the dark. But when Eliot came back into the room with brown, lens-darkened eyes, Alec thought that maybe he would've been just fine without them. Bright steady blue wasn't never anything to worry about, anyway.

Eliot was kicking his boots off, and Alec had suddenly been standing here long enough that the implications of here were starting to sink in. They'd meant to scatter for a very good reason.

"You were really easy to find," he said, the instant before the fact that he'd been the one looking had a chance to set in. He hadn't quite latched onto the next thought in the progression- that if he'd managed it so easily, someone else might not be far behind- when Eliot forestalled it all with a glance
as he removed his socks.

"That's cause I told you where to look." Straightening, Eliot gestured at Alec's feet. "We're fine, Hardison. It's all good. Get your shoes off."

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Tues., April 15, 2014 16:05 EDT (GMT-4)

The drive-thru coffee Eliot had picked up earlier wasn't good for much more than warming his hands, but he drank it anyway, glaring out the window at the cafe across the street. He was convinced, without particular reason, that the coffee served there was far superior to the thin, watery crap he'd been mainlining all day, but actually going in would've increased the odds of someone recognizing him.

Security monitors at fast food restaurants were probably the least-watched screens in the entire country, and the girl at the drive-thru window had barely glanced at Eliot's face, which would've been ideal had the coffee she'd handed over been anything besides horrible.

His phone beeped; Tara was on the move again, heading nine blocks west of her current location, which meant it would be better if Eliot had immediate access to the freeway, but didn't go too far. Sterling, Parker and Apollo were all due to remain where they were for at least another half hour.

He really hadn't done much all day besides check the map on his phone to make sure he had clear, fast routes get to everyone, should the need arise. Sterling had reported in this morning, announcing that Tara, Parker, and himself were all cleared for outside contact, but that warrants had been issued for Eliot, Hardison, and Apollo. Hardison hadn't left the hub all day. Apollo had Parker backing him up if shit went sideways, and Eliot himself had dozens of escape routes ready if anything came his way.

Hardison had sounded like Miranda, when he'd checked in later, advising Eliot to prioritize Tara and Sterling's protection.

Eliot hadn't disagreed, but he'd laughed. "Figures. They're the only ones that don't have people looking for them."

"Which means they're our MVP's. Nothing personal. One of them gets blown, we're done for, man." Seven hours of uninterrupted sleep hadn't done him any good at all, apparently. He'd sounded frayed and stressed out.

"I hear ya," Eliot had said. He'd stopped himself from saying more, from asking anything. He was on the job, and his job was to focus on Tara and Sterling, Apollo and Tara. Hardison was fine.

Still. It was easy enough to work in the hub's location into his planning.

Eliot recalculated his routes as he drove, double checked them when he parked. Under current traffic conditions, and without making himself obvious, he could get to Tara in three minutes. It would take him five minutes to get to Sterling, and six to get to Parker and Apollo. He could still be back at the hub in four, three and a half if he pushed it.

He'd felt better when he'd only been a minute out. Hardison might not have left the hub all day, but he was in front of those damned computers, doing god-knows-what. One wrong keystroke and the place would be swarming with feds. Eliot was surveilling from the ground, which meant surface streets and rush hour between here and there.
If Eliot had been on the other side, if he'd been tasked with bringing the Aleph of the GF in, he'd use a helicopter. Land it on the damned roof, or the street out front. And, having the location, it wouldn't take long to find away around the security measures. There was always a back way in.

The Aleph would've gotten a warning out, ordered everyone to vanish and not look back, and if he was lucky, he'd have set the self-destruct. He would've known that his exits were closing in, so he'd go down, if he could, rather than up. And Eliot would be ready for it, skidding down the fire escape down to street level before ripping up the grate laid into the sidewalk. He'd be down in the sub-street maintenance tunnels before the helicopter's blades were even done spinning.

He'd have the Aleph in a kill box, corner him, subdue him if he fought. He'd look at his face and see nothing there, because he wouldn't be Hardison, who grinned easily and buried his face in the pillows when he slept, he'd be the Aleph, the target he'd been handed, and if the Aleph tripped, banged himself up maybe, on the stairs, smacked his elbow or hit his head, Eliot would have to read it as an evasive maneuver, and he'd respond appropriately.

The Aleph, under the circumstances, would only be conscious because it took less effort to get him up the stairs, and that would be Eliot's only concern. Aleph acquired, he'd report in as they boarded the helicopter. Awaiting further instruction. And Eliot would hand him off, later, to whoever wanted him, and wouldn't care, and in a week, he'd be hard-pressed to remember the Aleph's face, because he'd never really seen it.

Hardison wasn't just the Aleph, and Eliot wasn't just the enemy, but these thoughts were Eliot's job. According to the map, there was another grate at the other end of the block, down by the taxi queue; it would be a straight, following the tunnels along 4th, and if it came down to it, he'd be able to meet Hardison halfway. Even on foot, he'd be there in three minutes at the most.

When the taxi parked at the curb pulled away, Eliot moved the truck up the block, parking next to the grate, and tried to remember the last time he'd worried about someone so much without actually being instructed to do so.

Putting the truck in park, ignoring the glare from the cabbie he'd cut off, he just couldn't manage it.

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Tues., April 15, 2014 22:40 EDT (GMT-4)

Parker, with Apollo's assistance- Alec wasn't going to call it supervision- had brought back two heavy bags of takeout, and it had taken a while, once everyone arrived, to get dished up and settled in. The General Tso's was decent enough- a little too sweet, but it'd do. Nobody else seemed to be complaining, except for Eliot, who was glaring ruefully at the dumpling he'd speared on the end of his chopstick.

"Next time, I'm getting the food."

Apollo pointed his own chopsticks back at him. "Don't you live on batteries, or something?"

The rest of the table went suddenly quiet; Parker was the only one not pretending that she wasn't watching for Eliot's reaction. Whether everyone was waiting for someone to laugh, or get punched, or what, Alec didn't know. It occurred to him a few seconds too late that Sophie wasn't here to rein it all in.

That was his job now. "Or," he suggested, awkwardly, "if anyone wanted to, we could, you know, actually start talking about what we managed to accomplish today." It was the closest approximation
of his tenth grade history teacher he could manage. He could order people into a burning building, but directing people's social cues just wasn't turning out to be his thing.

"I'll go first," Tara raised her hand, gesturing her pause as she sipped her beer. "I met with Representative MacAllen, managed to get the conversation turned just enough that I had a good reason to stop in over at the DHS, but no particular orders, so I met with some of my friends in the General Council office." Tara made an unimpressed face. "Well, I say friends... I don't think Laura Monroe has any. But anyway, long story short, not only do I have access to Miranda, I'm actually heading with her defense."

"Well at least something's goin' our way," Alec said, though he was already wondering what the catch was. Eliot saved him the trouble of asking.

"You serious?"

"Don't get excited. Monroe put me on the case because she thinks I owe her one and will throw Miranda under the bus accordingly. By the time I was preparing to leave, she'd all but stated that I was to drag it out and make it look good, give the prosecution enough time to blast Miranda's image across every media venue the world's got before ensuring that the conviction happens quietly and smoothly."

"Charming," Sterling shook his head, then tilted it to the side. "But admittedly useful."

"Wait," Parker interrupted, surprised. "You're a lawyer?"

Tara shrugged. "I was two classes short of my JD when the agency recruited me. There's a lot to be said for school loan forgiveness and a guaranteed job after graduation. I signed the contract, worked the training into the last of my coursework, then went to work for them."

Eliot frowned in confusion, getting them back on track. "So why drag it all out?"

"They've been prepping for this for a year and a half now. They want to be sure that public opinion is on their side before they're through with her." Tara made a good point, but more importantly, it was ringing off all the right sorts of bells- there was a connection in there somewhere, close, Alec just had to find it. He could just make out Sterling's fingers, drumming on the tabletop on the edge of his field of vision as Tara continued. "I mean, if Miranda comes out of it a martyr, they'll have to go through something like this all over again, and the more deeply it works its way into the public consciousness, the harder it's going to be to eradicate. Long term, they'd just be setting themselves up to lose."

"Or gain something else." Sterling snapped his fingers, leaning forward suddenly and hitting on it the same moment Alec did, but muttering anyway. "Liquidation of international holdings prior to-"

"-the buyout. Yeah. Got it."

"What are you-"

"Give me a second." He'd found more than one reference to the program, but he hadn't taken it seriously.

"Okay, we've got something. There's this guy who's been trying to get a relay system together. Channels all radio, phone and internet traffic through a filter. Think of the worst offshoot of the PATRIOT act on steroids, or an invasive GF without the protections. Every communication an agency could want, right at their fingertips, as long as they buy his system."
"Why didn't you just say so right off the bat?" Eliot rolled his eyes, because apparently, he wasn't the sort of guy to go easy on someone just because they'd fallen into bed together. It was a bigger relief than Alec would've realized.

Sterling fielded the question, inadvertently buying Alec some time to stop thinking about how easily the weight of Eliot's arm had anchored him down until he'd fallen asleep. "Because on its own, it's no different than a hundred different prospective tech startups that people come up with on any given day."

"That sounds ominous," Tara said.

"Well," Apollo snorted. "It's not like they're all hip to direct TK interfacing."

"And you're not either, because it doesn't exist," Alec smirked, "and because parallel universes are only hypothetical, as are portals, as are beings from that dimension named Steven who come through and accidentally recalibrate the brains of 428 Welsh schoolkids."

Parker snorted, but Eliot was frowning, glancing between her and Apollo and dodging Alec completely. He didn't seem to like being out of the loop, but right now wasn't the time to explain. "The program's missing some major parameters," Alec continued, before realizing he'd skipped ahead. "We spent all day chasing down the details behind Miranda's arrest; the usual established chain of command type stuff. Prospective research and business deals that haven't been made yet only showed up on the edges, so I wasn't focusing on it."

Eliot's expression eased slightly, and it was suddenly much easier to continue. "The good news, for us, is that most of the people looking to land a contract don't have any idea of the actual threats they need to be responding to. Aliens showing up, or physicists ripping holes in the universe. Catching stuff like that isn't built into their systems, because the designers never seem to know much more than military coups, terrorist cells, outbreak mitigation, the usual thing. Except for this guy." He brought up the photo, bounced it to the main screen. "Victor Dubenich."

"Who's he?" Apollo leaned forward; this wasn't meaning anything at all to him.

Parker straightened in her chair, glaring accusingly at the screen. "Big Wheel."

"Not anymore," Eliot interjected, sitting up. "The way I remember it, about a month before they officially collapsed, he let the others buy out his stake in the company."

"That's right. And he did so publicly enough that Big Wheel took a massive PR hit. Weren't for that, we might not've been able to take 'em- well, not out, but down quite so many pegs." Alec brought up the article the NYT had run on the story and bounced it to the screen while he dug a little deeper, crawling through Sterling's files.

Eliot was apparently the first to finish reading; he gestured at the screen, looking around the table for answers. "So. Hold up. Was Dubenich pulling the rug out from under Big Wheel on purpose?"

"Remains to be seen, I suppose," Sterling shrugged in reply.

"Everything points to his philosophical differences with the company's MO." Alec put some of the more pertinent information he'd found up on the screen. "They were putting all their eggs in one basket with the R&D for heavy weaponry and cybernetics, and the way he saw it, the only thing that could come of it was another arms race. He thought they needed to be spending more energy on dealing with their information infrastructures. He wasn't wrong there, by the way. If Big Wheel had put a little more effort in, we might not've been able to push them down as far as we did."
Apollo leaned back in the chair. "Don't want to rain on anyone's parade, but how does all this make him our guy?"

"He made eighteen mil off of his stake in Big Wheel. Eighteen million," Eliot repeated, apparently for Parker's benefit.

"And then he used it to start up a company that did focus on information. Over the past eighteen months, he's been getting his ducks in a row with his lawyers, and getting his patents and infrastructure into place."

"So?" Apollo looked back from the screen, not quite frowning. "That doesn't seem like anything new."

"Exactly," Alec nodded. "His system is not only mean, sprawling, and surprisingly accurate with regards to the parameters it can handle, but we've seen it before."

"Where?"

"Right here."

Apollo's eyes widened in recognition, but Parker scowled. "I don't get it."

"It's ours," Tara realized.

"Exactly. Well. Not exactly. Going off his memos with R&D, it looks like it's still missing a few pieces, but he's close."

"I don't mean to be the bad guy, here, but what's so terrible about that? I mean, shutting us down and arresting Miranda aside, he's trying to do the exact same thing we are."

"He's setting himself up to make a small fortune off a contract with the Federal Government. Again. And while there's nothing illegal about that..." Sterling trailed off, glancing at Alec in hopes that he could explain it better.

"As it stands, The Feds have no control over the Frequency. We've got global reach, and global resources, and that scares the hell out of them. But. As long as we're the only game in town, and one which they don't have to pay for, they're not going to go looking to spend the cash. Take the Frequency out of play, though, and the story changes."

Tara had been quiet for a while, listening. "So, big picture. What does it matter if the Feds buy in?"

"Let's say Congress had oversight of GF operations. They're going to have to prioritize national interests, which, yay, good for those of us living here, but it'll be at the expense of every other nation on the planet. The Frequency is accountable to the entire world. We're only able to do what we do because of that. If Congress took over our operations tomorrow, I can guarantee you that we'd lose at least half of our Agents due to international law, and another 25 percent because of the personal allegiances that would come into play. We'd be cut off at the legs."

"Well, right now, we're cut off at the head," Eliot grumbled, thrusting his shoulders back in a stretch. "So what're we going to do about it?"

"Easy," Parker grinned. "We get Miranda the hell out of there."

"She's probably safer in there than she is out here," Eliot replied. "They already have her. Means there's no need to go looking for her."
Tara and Sterling were nodding in reluctant agreement, but Parker definitely looked put out. "We just spent all day figuring out seven different ways of getting her out!"

"That's good, 'cause we're still going to get in. Only thing that's changed is the size and direction of the thing we're going to be slipping past the guards." He tapped at his ear. "We need her back in the loop before we start planning phase two."

Parker sat back in her chair. "What's phase two?"

"We're going to take him out," Alec hooked a thumb over his shoulder, pointing at Dubenich. "For real, this time."

Tues., April 15, 2014 23:18 EDT (GMT-4)

Eliot wasn't sure if this was how Hardison had planned on it going, but it was impressive, the way the Apollo, Parker and Tara seemed to manage having five different arguments between themselves at once. He turned his attention instead to the desk across the room, where Sterling and Hardison were still engrossed by the files they'd managed to access. Eliot wasn't a fan of the way Sterling was hovering, but there wasn't really anything for it. When he'd gone over, earlier, to see what they were talking about, he hadn't even been able to catch the gist. He'd caught something about transfer rates, but they'd been talking about data, not money, and it had only gotten more confusing from there.

Right now, though, Hardison seemed to be hitting his limit, glaring up like he was at Sterling, batting his pointing finger out of the way. "I see it, man, okay? Just chill." It was as good an opening as any.

"You guys find anything?"

"Dubenich and his R&D department are having issues," Sterling began, but Hardison didn't take advantage of the segue he'd been given; whether or not he'd even heard it was anyone's guess. His fingers were flying over the keyboard with renewed vigor as he worked out what looked to be some sort of advanced math. He was shaking his head before he'd even stopped.

"That's an understatement," Hardison finally blinked up over his shoulder, then turned to face the room. Apparently he had heard. "See, they hit a snag with their scrubbing and relay protocol. Long story short, it means that, compared to ours, his system takes eight times longer to identify and flag a crisis. We average seven to twelve minutes, unless someone's on the ground, calling it in sooner."

"How easy is it to fix?"

"Super easy, if you're using our system., but he's not. He's been copying the Frequency systems as best he can, but since he's never gotten his hands on our code, he's just stringing it together from what he's seen and heard at a distance. Reinventing the wheel. Don't get me wrong, he's good. But he's missing one piece, and unless he rebuilds nine or twelve different subsystems first, he's not going to be able to see how to fix it."

Hardison yawned; he looked beat to hell. It was probably the only reason they were being spared the excruciating geek spiral he should've been rushing into.

"So what's that mean for us?"

Sterling gave Hardison an assessing look before taking Apollo's question. "It means we have an in. We've got something he needs, which is a rather lovely spot to find ourselves in."

If this was going where Eliot thought it was, he was going to be pissed. "So, what. You're thinking of bargaining with him?"
"No," Hardison's eyes had fallen shut. He opened them now, smiling. "Just selling him what he needs."

For a moment, Eliot was sure that the responsibility of being the first to argue would fall to him, but Tara pushed back from the table.

"You can't be serious," she said. "We should be taking him out, not proposing a merger."

"You're not wrong." Hardison stood up, stretching his back. "Even if Dubenich would be willing to make a deal, he's gotta know that making one with us would lead to too many questions he probably doesn't want to answer."

"So how do you propose we pull it off?"

"We don't," Hardison broke off; suddenly, he and Sterling were having an entire conversation using only their eyes. After a moment, Hardison nodded, as if Sterling had only confirmed something he'd already known. "We're going to need someone they don't know."

Eliot hadn't actually thought she'd been listening, she'd been so quiet, but Parker was the first to ask. "Any idea who?"

Hardison's eyes slipped briefly towards Eliot, who definitely didn't like the flash of wary apology he saw there. "Ford."

Eliot stared as he processed it, and managed not to sputter. "You serious? He's a-"

"Con man with a Robin Hood streak," Hardison finished for him, raising his hands to forestall further argument. "Miranda trusted him. It's enough for me."

"He's also, apparently, an informant for the feds. You sure trusting him's the right play?" Eliot grimaced apologetically. This, what he was doing right now, was probably exactly why the GF gave agents finalized orders instead of invitations to strategic planning sessions. Ford had helped out once; it didn't make him a vetted, trustworthy ally. AS Eliot looked around the table, he realized that his reluctance was starting to bleed. Tara was scowling at Hardison as if her own disagreement was merely moments away; Parker and Apollo were sharing wary glances. Only Sterling seemed untroubled by the suggestion. Then again, he'd never met the man before today.

"I'm sure enough to not waste any time looking for somebody else." Hardison shrugged, and the movement of tendons under the skin of his shoulder caught Eliot's eye. He'd sunk his teeth in, right there, less than twelve hours ago, and judging by his face, Hardison had tracked the source of his distraction back to the source. Standing up, he came back to the conference table, grabbing Eliot's shoulder and squeezing briefly as he passed. "Hey. We've all seen worse, all right?"

Eliot got it; he did. They were low on options and giving the group a reason to splinter would do more damage than actually winning the argument. Besides, he didn't need the pep talk, especially not with all the others here, and it was best to divest Hardison of the impression that he did.

"Yeah, but. Ford? The guy's a jackass."

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